

## Clio's Lament: Yehuda Bauer, the Historian

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When we turn our attention to a historian in a specific field, it is important to set this scholar within the methodological framework and the historiographic traditions that guide their research. Specifically: When we are dealing with a quintessential historian of the Holocaust—as Yehuda Bauer was—the traditions and broad frameworks, including the methodological frameworks, to which he referred, played an important role in understanding his teachings. Furthermore, by branching into additional subjects of Bauer's research, we may gain insight into both the general framework and what emerges from it with regard to the particular topic around which his professional career revolved.

It was not by chance that Yehuda Bauer noted his affiliation with the school of thought of our shared teacher (albeit at different times), Jacob Talmon. Talmon was an epitomic representative of the history-of-ideas school, which lost its primacy in historiography in the second half of the twentieth century. At first glance this reference seems neither to add nor detract when one discusses Yehuda Bauer's field of research. But this is not the case. The debate over the specific topic of the Holocaust fits into the sweeping confrontation that took place between social history, the school that became dominant, and the history of ideas, the one that was marginalized. Those who continued to prefer the primacy of ideas over that of social structures in historiography found themselves in a genuine struggle. The debate back then between intentionalists and functionalists in reference to the Holocaust was one specific expression of the tension between these two schools of historiography. With Talmon, as with Bauer, one cannot ignore, of course, evenemental history, social structures and economic conditions, but these are secondary to the role of ideas, ideology, and *Weltanschauung* (worldview).

In 1998, Yehuda Bauer was invited to address the Bundestag on

the occasion of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism. It was the third time since the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, was declared a Memorial Day in Germany, and Bauer became the first Jewish speaker to deliver remarks on the occasion. Despite his point of departure as a pessimistic historian (“People seldom learn from history”<sup>1</sup>), he took advantage of the stage (like other stages on which he appeared) to send a methodological message to the descendants of the murderers as well as those of the victims. He defined the war that claimed the lives of some forty-nine million people, most of them civilians, as “The war, which was instigated by National Socialist Germany, mainly for ideological reasons”;<sup>2</sup> otherwise, such broad support among the German public could not have been mobilized. “This was a universalistic ideology,”<sup>3</sup> a sweeping one that subverted the values that had been accepted since the French Revolution and, ultimately, the traditional values of humanism. This ideology, Bauer argued, was the foundation for the consensus that emerged under the Third Reich regarding the distinction between friend and foe and that led to the genocide not only of Jews but also of Poles, Roma/Sinti, and others. The most extreme consequence of this ideology was the Shoah, a genocide of a unique (so far) and unprecedented event of its kind. “The motivation was ideological... Nazi antisemitism was pure ideology, with a minimal relation to reality,”<sup>4</sup> a brand of antisemitism grounded in postulates two millennia old that were swept into Christianity.

This approach also guided Bauer in writing the entry on World War II in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*. In this encyclopedic text, which relates to the military campaigns and political developments in the manner that encyclopedia entries customarily adopt when they deal with any war, the main document quoted is one meant to demonstrate the essentiality of an ideology, an idea: The war broke out “not [for] economic, military, or political reasons...the Holocaust was contained in Nazi ideology, which was the motivating force leading to war.”<sup>5</sup> Thus,

1 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 262. The original (*Menschen lernen selten aus der Geschichte*) can be found in “Gedenkrede von Prof. Dr. Yehuda Bauer,” *Deutscher Bundestag*, January 27, 1998, <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/bauer/rede-247412> (accessed February 6, 2025).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid, p. 263.

4 Ibid, p. 266.

5 Yehuda Bauer, “World War II,” in Israel Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*

it was not antisemitism but the Nazi ideology as a whole that drove a vision in which “the ideals of *Lebensraum* and antisemitism were closely linked.”<sup>6</sup> It is within this framework, Bauer wrote, that one should view the Holocaust. The document quoted in the entry was dictated by Hitler in 1936, and presented to Göring as an order to prepare for war within four years. One should take all measures, it stated, to thwart the annihilation of the German people by the agents of “international Jewry” who have been active since the French Revolution. The document, published and interpreted in the journal of the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich already in 1955, left its impression on Yehuda Bauer from his first acquaintance with it in 1977, for the rest of his career.<sup>7</sup> In the last debate in which Bauer and I took part on the topic of World War II on Dr. Yitzhak Noy’s radio program, Bauer found it important to return to this formative document of Göring’s four-year plan and its role both in the outbreak of the war and in creating the infrastructure for the fate of European Jewry.

Bauer’s reference to Nazi ideology and not to antisemitism alone was part of his comprehensive, universalistic-perspectivistic approach to history, in which the inquiry takes place deductively. Even Jewish history is exceptioned from an a priori conceptualization of *sui generis*. I expect articles in this volume that relate to Yehuda Bauer as a Holocaust scholar, to have drawn much attention to the outer shell that goes by the name of “genocide.” Given the comprehensive nature of his perspective, he saw fit to deal with the history of the Holocaust, too, within this frame—a unique (so far), unprecedented kind of genocide but essentially one of several forms of genocide. The key word that Bauer used in connection with his methodology was the contextualization of the historical object. Bauer’s grievance as a historian, as expressed in his speech at the Reichstag, is that, “We are trying not to recognize the dark side of history—the mass murders, the agony, the suffering that is screaming into our faces from all of history. We do not hear the wailing of Clio.”<sup>8</sup> Then came the lesson: Historical investigation of the specific episode of the Holocaust is meant to prevent future lament and suffering, be the sufferers whom they may. Nor is this a story of Jews and Germans alone, or, as he said

(New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 1661–1662.

6 Ibid., p. 1661.

7 Wilhelm Treue, “Hitlers Denkschrift zum Vierjahresplan 1936,” *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 3 [2] (1955), pp. 184–203.

8 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, p. 262.

in his speech at the Reichstag: “We have no way of determining who will be the Jews and who might be the Germans the next time.”<sup>9</sup>

By applying perspectivism and considering comparison as a historical method, as one of the pillars of historical inquiry, Bauer was also able to see the treatment of the non-Jewish victims of the Nazi policy generally, and of the Roma particularly, as a parallel branch of genocide, without sacrificing the ability to find the peculiarities of the genocide against the Jews as the outcome of the comparison. It is no wonder that Bauer wrote the “Gypsies” entry for the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.<sup>10</sup> But precisely because as a historian he was subject to attack by those who wished to expel the Holocaust from the fields of history (and of genocide), Bauer felt unjustly assailed by the president of the Central Council of the Sinti and Roma in Germany and considered “competition over victimhood” between the Jews and the so-called Gypsies “a totally superfluous...discussion [*Diskussion...völlig überflüssig*].”<sup>11</sup>

Given that the point of departure for historical research in the case before us is the history of ideas, it is no wonder that the so-called history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) also became an object of intensive attention. Thus the concept of genocide became a challenge, as did that of racism. Once Bauer set the Holocaust within the framework known as genocide, he felt it necessary to contend with the understanding of this concept, both according to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948 and according to Raphael Lemkin’s original proposal. Pursuant to this he broadened the ambit of the discussion by adding the concepts of politicide (when a political group is added to the target groups of genocide) and of “mass atrocity crime” to include cases that remain outside the frame of the accepted interpretation of the Genocide Convention. The examples that Bauer used began with Ukraine in the 1930s, continued with Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and all the way to contemporaneous China.<sup>12</sup>

When one probes the approach and the role of Yehuda Bauer the historian, one finds special added value in his contribution as a public historian that goes beyond the arena of monographs and scarcely read

9 Ibid., p. 266.

10 Yehuda Bauer, “Gypsies,” in Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, pp. 634–638.

11 Yehuda Bauer, “Es galt nicht der gleiche Befehl für beide,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 11 (1998), pp. 1380–1387.

12 Yehuda Bauer, “Genocide and Genocide Prevention,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 16:3 (2022), pp. 388–403.

articles in scientific journals. As a public historian Bauer could digress from the Holocaust theme, or, to put it better, could leverage it in order to take a stance on historical and political matters that are not necessarily in the arena of Holocaust studies. Most of the examples that follow are from a foreign-policy journal that, surprisingly, he adopted as a platform on which he spoke out as a historian on matters beyond the Holocaust, antisemitism, and the like (with which other contributors to this issue will deal) at a level of elaboration and beyond what an opinion piece in *Haaretz* could accommodate. In such articles he could afford to make a statement such as “Humans are herd animals who seek a leader and follow him or her because they want security and order”<sup>13</sup>—an assertion that explains why he did not foresee a rosy future for liberal democracy in the Western countries, the Arab lands, or Israel.

By dint of his stature as a public historian, Bauer assumed the role of an examiner of global processes.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he was well versed not only in the history of the West but also in that of the so-called Global South in varied contexts, such as the menaces of genocide, Muslim antisemitism, or anti-liberal tendencies. For this very reason he could also vehemently reject the fad that strives to draw a connection between the murder of Jews and colonial exploitation. As a public historian he felt free to venture all the way to virtual history. Discussing the question of whether American Jewry could have acted earlier to save the victims of the Holocaust, he resorted not only to the facts that he presented in detail in his book on who helped and who contributed less, but also posed the “what if” question—what would have happened had American Jews and their leaders acted differently or earlier to gear up for the struggle? His answer, based on his acquaintance with the unfolding of events in the war, was that, either way, “They could not [!] have stopped the Holocaust.”<sup>15</sup> Counterfactualty as a historical method. This conclusion, too, supported his dogged efforts to oppose the signs of contemporary genocide in order to thwart disastrous future outcomes.

The public historian that Bauer had in mind, not only in the case stated in the previous paragraph, sees history as a useful, applied science.

13 Yehuda Bauer, “Internationalizing the Arab–Israeli Conflict,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 8:1 (2014), p. 66.

14 Yehuda Bauer, “Global Trends in a Complex World: A View from Jerusalem,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 13:3 (2019), pp. 315–327.

15 Yehuda Bauer, “The Holocaust, America, and American Jewry,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 6:1 (2012), p. 67.

“I struggle, therefore I exist,” he used to say. Accordingly, his occupation with the history of the Holocaust yielded conclusions that are applicable to much broader circles, such as those relating to Europe’s refugee and migrant problem that showed its face fiercely in 2015. He offered a comprehensive and painstaking analysis of the history of migration from the dawn of history, with emphasis on its determinants and the host society’s problems. Bauer, the practical historian who was aware of genocidal tendencies, came to the following conclusion: Unless the politicians find the solution at the global level, “Europe will embark on a period of protracted violent and revolutionary change, as will the rest of the world.”<sup>16</sup> About a decade after he offered this evaluation, it proved spot-on. So did his analysis of the state of liberalism in the world<sup>17</sup> shortly before and after Joe Biden’s slender victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 US elections. After a thoroughgoing survey of liberal countries, those that retreated from liberalism and those “wavering” (including Israel), Bauer reached a conclusion that found support in the 2024 US elections: Do not entertain illusions. Biden’s victory only slowed the trend somewhat; the world is marching toward the success of the illiberal forces. Biden’s win was “a victory in a battle, not a war,” he ruled correctly.<sup>18</sup> From his point of view, liberal democracy traces its burial to radical nationalism and the radicalization of religions.

Yehuda Bauer passed away about two weeks before Trump’s electoral victory, in a year when the far-right rang up successes in additional countries. All of these proved, sadly, that his historical analysis had hit the mark. His definition of Trump’s method as “right-wing anarchism,”<sup>19</sup> which appeared en passant in his review of global trends in our times, is noteworthy—a telling and original characterization based on the opinion of a historian immersed in the history of anarchism since the nineteenth century. The interlude between Biden’s victory and Trump’s comeback saw the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war, to which Bauer also addressed himself as a historian. True to form he made detailed reference to the historical background of Russia-Ukraine relations from the Middle Ages to 2022, in order to clarify the context of the war, which

16 Yehuda Bauer, “Moral and Political Aspects of Migration Challenges in Europe,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 9:3 (2015), p. 394.

17 Yehuda Bauer, “Liberals, Illiberals, and Waverers: The Struggle of Our Time,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 15:2 (2021), pp. 245–255.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

19 Bauer, “Global Trends in a Complex World,” p. 321.

terminated the era that began with the toppling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, or, perhaps, as far back as the day after World War II. In this broad historical context, Bauer reasoned in the very first months of the war that Ukraine's policy on outreach to the West was "a poke in Russia's eye," making the brutal Russian response foreseeable. At this point, however, he concluded modestly: "As a historian, I have great difficulties in predicting the past; regarding the future, sadly, I am totally at sea."<sup>20</sup>

This contextual perspectivist view also allowed Yehuda Bauer to position Israel's place in the current global historical struggles on a *longue durée* continuum. This may have been the real purpose of his universalistic-perspectivistic reviews. In each of the articles cited above, he also presented indicators that set Israel within the framework of a general historical phenomenon or processes. Nor did Bauer forgo the additional step, relating directly to the Israeli topic, the march of Jewish history, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a "general" historian would. Bear in mind that Bauer's first appointment at the Hebrew University was as a lecturer in Zionist history. His two books about the "contrary" people,<sup>21</sup> insofar as they relate to the Holocaust, definitely attest to a historian who is out of his "comfort zone." So are his opinion pieces in *Haaretz* and other newspapers. Here I find his article "Internationalizing the Arab–Israeli Conflict" especially eye-opening.<sup>22</sup> It was 2014, the year of the last effort in the foreign policy of US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry to conclude an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Bauer detected genocidal tendencies in both of these camps, reviewed the great powers' role in attenuating them to the extent of allowing the conflict to be settled, and explained why the United States was interested in succeeding in this arena after having failed in others. Yet he also diagnosed the level of illusion and Quixotic dreaming that typified the Americans. Basing himself on the parameters that he examined, Bauer found internationalizing the conflict the preferred alternative and stressed: "The only relative guarantee of [Israel's] security is peace"<sup>23</sup>—countering the automatic Israeli approach

20 Yehuda Bauer, "The Russo-Ukrainian War through a Historian's Eyes," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 16:1 (2022), p. 18.

21 Yehuda Bauer, *The Jews: A Contrary People* (Zurich and Berlin: Lit, 2014); Yehuda Bauer, *Haam Hamehutsaf Ba'kefar Haglobali* (Hebrew) (Binyamina: Nahar Books, 2019).

22 Bauer, "Internationalizing the Arab–Israeli Conflict," pp. 63–72.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

that sees only force and more force as the path to security. Given the Israeli insistence on this automatism, it is no wonder that Bauer's analyses led repeatedly to pessimistic conclusions. As a historian who tracks ongoing processes, Bauer was under no illusion that a settlement would solve the problem of Arab or Muslim antisemitism (about which he wrote elsewhere). He did postulate, however, that this menace would abate once a settlement would arrive.

Just as Bauer was aware of the role of ideology in the Nazi policy, so was he mindful of its role in the case of Hamas. As a historian, he concluded back in 2014 (after testing the exceptions) that a conventional army could not defeat an ideological enemy unless this enemy's supply lines were severed from its civilian hinterland, and, for this reason, the struggle against Hamas stood no chance of success. The following summation shows how systematic and sober his approach was: "From a long-term Israeli perspective, the alternative [to internationalizing the conflict] is international isolation, accompanied by an increase in the already dangerous radicalization of antisemitism."<sup>24</sup> He also took the contribution of the Greater Israel ideology into account in foreseeing disaster.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, what has happened since October 7, 2023, would not have surprised him.

The extent of Bauer's discipleship to Jacob Talmon surfaces again in one of his last articles, published in 2023 "On Israeli Democracy," written in response to the coup against Israel's constitutional foundations.<sup>26</sup> Not only did Bauer go so far as to define, correctly, one of the government's constituents as "fascist-like,"<sup>27</sup> but he also admitted that his conscience as a historian overrode the rule adopted among Yad Vashem staff to refrain from participating in political debates even if the fundamentals of the debates are historical. Above all he used two quintessentially Talmonic terms to define the Israeli phenomenon that he found objectionable, from a global perspective, of course—the ascendancy of totalitarian democracy and political messianism, derived in the latter case from the

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Yehuda Bauer, "On Israeli Democracy," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 17:1 (2023), pp. 7–11.

27 In the interest of full disclosure, thirty years ago, in response to remarks published in my name, Yehuda Bauer wrote to me: "The Hebron settlers' behavior, inspired by Meir Kahane and associates, carries racist nationalistic freight, to put it mildly. The roots of the phenomenon endanger us all and it is important to sound the alarm" (letter to the author, May 1, 1995).

Jewish religion and not from a vision inspired by the French Revolution. Here the historian tendered his opinion on the process, the problem, and the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but expressed doubt about the ability to put the brakes on this messianism and thus rehabilitate liberal democracy. What has happened since he wrote that article, in the post-October 7 era, merely reinforces the doubt.

I will conclude, however, in a different tenor. In his speech at the Bundestag, seeking to deviate from the tiresome pursuit of historical interpretation, Bauer said: "The way I see it, a historian is one who not only analyzes history but also tells true stories."<sup>28</sup> Yehuda Bauer told such stories prodigiously, orally and in writing, and they voice Clio's lament in a way that needs no mediation.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood*

28 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, p. 270.

