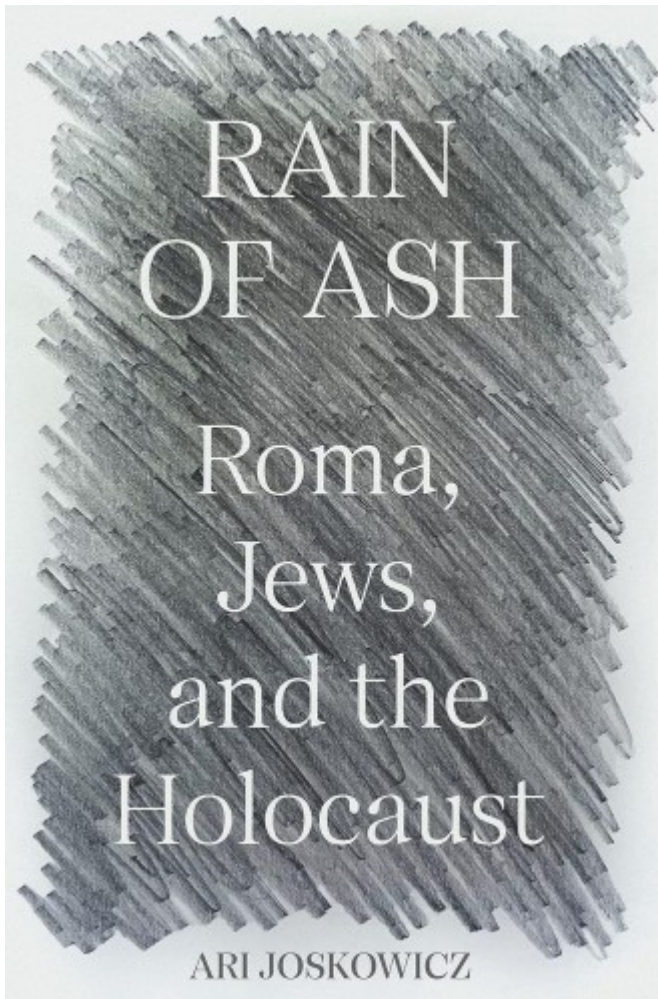


The forgotten victims of Nazi genocide

Jewish historian Ari Joskowitz tells the story of Hitler's attempt to wipe out the Roma people.

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue
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In Review



Rain of Ash

Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust

By Ari Joskowitz

Princeton University Press

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Memory of the Holocaust is fading in US culture. It has now been nearly 80 years since the end of World War II. Teaching about the Holocaust to today's 20-year-olds is equivalent to teaching about World War I in 1998. It was so long ago. As someone who has been teaching about the Nazi genocide against the Jews since 1990, I can feel the difference as I engage students today.

Moreover, memory of the Holocaust has become politicized, deeply entangled with attitudes toward the modern state of Israel and its policies. After the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, which took 1,200 lives, news services declared it to be the worst loss of life for Jews in a single day since the Holocaust. That story soon faded out, however. It was replaced by the daily coverage of Israel's invasion of Gaza, which as of the time of this writing is estimated to have taken more than 39,000 lives. If anything, it is even more difficult to address the Holocaust today than it was before October 2023.

Historian Ari Joskowitz finished writing *Rain of Ash* before these recent events. One wonders how many general readers will now be interested in this exhaustive scholarly exploration of the Nazi genocidal campaigns against both the Jewish people and the Roma during World War II. But as one who believes it is essential to keep the memory of Nazi crimes alive, I am deeply grateful for the contribution that this fine young historian makes in this groundbreaking book.

Contrary to what one might initially expect, this work is not fundamentally about documenting what happened during World War II. Joskowitz devotes just one chapter to Roma and Jews in Nazi Europe, and in that chapter he focuses heavily on how the two groups perceived and experienced each other as they both struggled within the grip of the Nazi concentration camp and murder machine.

To this day, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum offers relatively little attention to the Romani genocide.

The Nazi regime arrived at policies toward Jews and Roma via different paths, involving different German agencies for a long time, but in the end both groups

ended up at killing sites like Auschwitz and Treblinka. Jews and Roma show up in each other's accounts of what happened during the war, but mainly as strangers to each other and sometimes as enemies. Some Holocaust scholars have asserted that of all the populations that the Nazi regime persecuted, only Jews and Roma were targeted for complete annihilation, and thus the scope of their victimization as peoples was more like each other's experiences than that of any other Nazi-targeted population. Joskowitz never makes (or denies) this particular claim. But his work is clearly driven by the desire to offer a much more complete account than has ever been rendered not just of the Nazi attack on the Roma but of the postwar Romani "quests for historical justice and self-representation" (as the book's marketing materials put it).

Roma and Jews both had suffered long histories of marginalization and mistreatment. Both had been treated as outsiders in historically "Christian" Europe. But before the rise of the Nazi regime, Jews had made massive strides toward inclusion in much of Europe, especially Western Europe, while the Roma had not. The Roma were viewed as dwelling at the very bottom of society and were treated across the continent as a social problem best handled by the police, in a pattern that continued for decades after the war. But both Roma and Jews found themselves, and each other, in the Nazi grip during World War II, with atrocious consequences.

Joskowitz offers a "relational history" of Jews and Roma during and after the Holocaust. He goes behind the scenes to explore not just what happened during the war, but afterward—in postwar resettlement efforts, early documentation projects, war crimes trials, the development of historical archives and centers, history writing, and long-term remembrance activities.

The basic pattern is that Jews always had more access to the resources needed in each of these areas than did Roma. War crimes trials focused on Jews rather than Roma; if Roma were mentioned, it was almost exclusively in the testimony of Jewish survivors. Documentation efforts and scholarly research were led mainly by Jews—as well as by non-Jews who mainly focused on Jewish suffering. Major commemorative and research sites like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum were funded minimally by the US government and mainly by the US Jewish community. The way the story of Nazi crimes is handled at that museum to this day offers relatively little attention to the Romani genocide.

Major Jewish figures like Simon Wiesenthal and Elie Wiesel argued vociferously over whether memory of the Holocaust should attend seriously to the “other victims” outside the Jewish community. Wiesenthal was a pioneer in pressing for memory of the Romani genocide, as Joskowitz shows. Joskowitz also tells the stories of other Jewish scholars and activists who pressed hard for attention to the Romani genocide. Their efforts helped, but the imbalances of power continually led to imbalances of memory and memorialization.

Joskowitz asks, “What does it mean for members of one minority group to control a large part of the archives and, thus, the history, of another?” This is not merely an abstract question: “Romani history is thus filtered through Jewish history.” While describing the perhaps inevitable clashes between Jews and Roma in the “memory debates” over many decades, Joskowitz ends with more encouraging news of cooperation among younger generations of Jews and Roma, not just in genocide memory but in activism motivated by the shared history of victimization.

Is this book relevant to the concerns of readers in 2024? It is indeed, and not just for Holocaust studies. *Rain of Ash* is acutely relevant to anyone who thinks today about the significance of competing narratives of victimization among peoples of different identities, and of the role of power—in its many forms—in determining whose stories are told, by whom they are told, and how they are told.

Solidarity can take the form of caring enough about others to elevate to attention the victimization of human beings who are not part of one’s own group or tribe. Joskowitz, who describes himself as the grandchild of four Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, offers his scholarship in solidarity with the Romani people—whose victimization under the Nazis has never been given adequate justice, documentation, or representation in historical commemoration. His book is a magnificent achievement.