

On Paradigms and Their Limits: Reflections on Efforts to Write Histories of the Holocaust in Poland and in The Soviet Union

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The experience of participating in two projects currently in progress — one to produce a single-volume history of the Holocaust in Poland as part of Yad Vashem's series of country-based studies, the other to incorporate the period of the Second World War into a comprehensive history of Jews in the USSR — have prompted critical reflections on certain analytical concepts that have framed discussions of the Holocaust in those two countries for the past several decades. Three such concepts in particular have proven to constrain analysis of data that, when considered outside of such conceptual frameworks, can yield important insights into factors driving both German decisions about how to deal with Jews in the territories occupied in the course of Operation Barbarossa and the development of interethnic relations in the region. Two of them — “pogrom” and “collaboration” — encourage lumping together of phenomena that German planners tended to split into narrower categories for planning purposes. The third — the nation-state — also ignores German analytical divisions, leading to the deployment of units of analysis that obscure at least as much as they reveal, and arguably more. Ironically, exploring the Holocaust as part of two projects defined by state boundaries drawn before 1941 has undermined confidence in the usefulness of those boundaries for understanding the history of the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews of Eastern Europe.