

Alexandra Garbarini, “Victim Testimony, Mass Violence, and Trials in Interwar Europe”

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Eyewitness testimonies provide descriptions of mass atrocity and genocide that fill the gaps left bare by the limitations of official documents and legal records. They provide victim perspectives that enrich historical narratives by bringing humanity and an individual lens through which to understand systematic violence and oppression. Alexandra Garbarini, Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Williams College, an expert on the interpretation of testimonies, diaries, and letters, discussed the cultural history of testimony and testimonial strategies developed in response to mass violence during the two world wars.

Garbarini analyzes the transnational process of documenting mass violence as part of her upcoming monograph, tentatively titled *The Era of Atrocity and Its Witnesses*. This study examines victim responses to the Armenian Genocide and to the pogroms perpetrated against Jews in Ukraine during the Russian civil war. Her work encompasses the Nazi period, considering documentation produced by Jewish Holocaust victims and their advocates.

Garbarini’s lecture highlighted the interwar murder trials of Soghomon Tehlirian and Scholem Schwarzbard which, according to Hannah Arendt’s description in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, established justice for mass crimes that legal frameworks had previously failed to address. These trials also fascinated Raphael Lemkin who wrote about their importance in his biography.

Ground-breaking Jewish legal thinkers, whose lives were similarly shaped by Nazism and the Holocaust, Arendt and Lemkin described the moral and cultural importance of victim testimony

as central to these cases, yet Garbarini's research demonstrates that victim testimony was largely renounced and discredited in these trials.

Garbarini focused on Schwarzbard's 1927 Paris trial in which he stood accused of murdering the Ukrainian politician Symon Petliura in revenge for his role in widespread anti-Jewish pogroms. Although the defense had prepared eighty witnesses, only nine testified. Schwarzbard's defense attorney, Henry Torr s, famously rejected calling more witnesses to the stand on the seventh day of the trial. Among other reasons, he worried about straining the attention of the court. The Jewish community reacted with dismay to the muting of survivors' voices and the missed opportunity to expose the savagery of the pogroms.

Haya Grinberg, a 29-year-old Jewish medical student who had been visiting her family during the pogrom in Proskurov, was one of only two survivors to share her story. Torr s defended Grinberg's testimony from those who wished to discredit her and presented her testimony as representative of the entire victim group. In presenting her words as symbolic of all Jewish victims, Garbarini argues that she became the collective individual, a metonym. While testimony played an important role in the trial, it was not what the Jewish public had anticipated nor did it prove as central as Arendt or Lemkin observed. Although Torr s succeeded in presenting a case for Schwarzbard that resulted in acquittal, he spoke in place of the many survivors who were present in the courtroom whose voices were silenced and merged.

A scholar of witnessing and record-keeping during the Holocaust, Garbarini's research deepens our understanding of how Jewish testimony was received prior to the Nuremberg Trials and

during the Nazi prosecutions that followed. Given the cultural shift in the post-war period that has brought with it a social demand regarding listening to victim testimony, Garbarini provides valuable insights into the status of Jewish testimony from the interwar period and how it differs from subsequent decades. Her analysis reveals what public reactions to testimony tell us about perceptions of mass violence and attitudes towards victims, more specifically Jewish pogrom victims and Jews more broadly, in the years prior to the Holocaust. While Garbarini provided a glimpse of how testimony and responses to it functioned during the interwar period, we will have to read her forthcoming book to gain further insight into the evolution and status of Jewish testimony.

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