

Bystanding and the Holocaust in Europe. Experiences, Ramifications, Representations, 1933 to the Present

Saul Friedländer

2021 Balzan Prize for Holocaust and Genocide Studies

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Period: 2022-2027

Saul Friedländer is emeritus Professor of History at UCLA.

Bystanding and the Holocaust in Europe. Experiences, Ramifications, Representations, 1933 to the Present continues and expands Saul Friedländer's work. Prof. Dr. Christina Morina (Bielefeld University), Deputy Supervisor, is in charge of the coordination and execution of the project. Prof. Dr. Norbert Frei (Jena University) is Senior Advisor. Morina and Frei work in close collaboration with Prizewinner Saul Friedländer, who is responsible for the research project as a whole.

Since the start of the project in the summer of 2022 the funds provided through Prof. Friedländer's Balzan Prize have allowed Prof. Morina to build a team of four researchers (a professor, Prof. Dr. Roma Sendyka from Jagiellonian University Kraków, one postdoc, Dr. Anna Strommenger, one student research assistant, Moritz Y. Meier, and herself) who have each worked on an individual project (to result in three monographs, several scholarly articles and lectures, and three M.A. theses) related to the theme of "Bystanding and the Holocaust in Europe. Experiences, Ramifications, Representations, 1933 to the Present". They have built an extensive [website](#), organized ten academic and/or public events in Germany, Poland, the Netherlands and the United States (lectures, workshops, conferences), and taken together they have produced more than two dozen lectures and publications, summarized in the following list.

Balzan Bystander Project Events

The Balzan Team organized a series of academic events and workshops focused on the theme of bystanding during the Holocaust, featuring prominent speakers and in-depth discussions. Further details on these events can be found in **Appendix 1**.

2022-2025

- **14 October 2022:** First Balzan Bystanding Lecture: *Bystanding. Majority Societies during and after the Holocaust*. Symposium in honour of Saul Friedländer. Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, in cooperation with Bielefeld University.
- **30 May 2023:** *Holocaust Diaries and the Bystander Perspective*. Workshop with Amos Goldberg on the perspective of bystanders.
- **11 September 2023:** Second Balzan Bystanding Lecture: “*A minut cu nacht*”. *The Analysis of the Experience of Jews Who Survived Mass Executions*, by Barbara Engelking. Galicia Jewish Museum, Kraków.
- **10-13 September 2023:** Balzan Bystanding Workshop at Jagellonian University, Kraków.
- **16 November 2023:** Conference at the Thomas Mann House with a lecture by Christina Morina and a discussion with Prof. em. Dr. Saul Friedländer (University of California), Prof. em. Dr. Norbert Frei (Jena University), moderated by Prof. Dr. David D. Kim (University of California).
- **29 January 2024:** Lecture for high school students: *Why Holocaust History Is More Than (German) History*, by Christina Morina, on the occasion of the Liberation of Auschwitz Remembrance Day, in co-operation with the Herderschule, Kassel. Published in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 75 (2024), No. 11/12, pp. 673–681.
- **15 April 2024:** Third Balzan Bystanding Lecture: *Beyond “Good” and “Evil”. Confronting (Historical) Responsibility for the Holocaust and Slavery in a Relational Perspective*, with Nicole Immler and Joandi Hartendorp. SPUI25, Amsterdam.
- **15-17 April 2024:** Balzan Bystanding Workshop at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam.
- **3–4 December 2024:** *The Challenge of Comparison in Holocaust Studies. Concepts, Methods, Arguments*. Second Workshop of the Bielefeld/UCL-Project *Good Citizens, Terrible Times: Community, Courage and Compliance In and Beyond the Holocaust*.

- **8 May 2025:** *Bystanding During the Holocaust in Bielefeld. Project Presentation and the Call for Handing in Private Diaries from National Socialism, “Nicht Wegwerfen!”*. Lecture by Dr. Teresa Malice, Lena Obermann, and Dr. Anna Strommenger, on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance (“Ich bin... Zukunft braucht Erinnerung”). Municipal Archive, Bielefeld.
- **3-4 December 2025:** *“Good Citizens, Terrible Times”: Notions of Individuality, Community and Responsibility in the Holocaust - History, Memory, Learning*; Final conference of the coopted DFG/AHRC Project: “Good Citizens, Terrible Times”, Bielefeld University (Christina Morina) & University College London (Mary Fulbrook)

The Balzan Bystander Project Team: The Subprojects

The funds provided through Saul Friedländer’s Balzan Prize have enabled Christina Morina to build a team of four researchers consisting of herself, Prof. Dr. Roma Sendyka (Jagiellonian University Kraków), one postdoc, Dr. Anna Strommenger, and one student research assistant, Moritz Y. Meier. Each researcher is working on an individual project, which will result in three monographs, several scholarly articles and lectures, and one masters thesis related to the main theme of *Bystanding and the Holocaust in Europe*.

Subproject 1: Christina Morina – *Citizens in Genocide. Bystanding (in) the Holocaust in Germany and The Netherlands*

The project, not financed by Balzan funds, examines the nexus between notions of citizenship and ordinary citizens’ responses to the persecution of Jews in Germany and the Netherlands. Based on a comparative (hermeneutical and digital) analysis of German and Dutch Jewish as well as non-Jewish diaries, the study tackles the role of “bystanders” by shifting focus on the social and interpersonal relations and mutual perceptions as they evolved over time. Questions about the extent to which non-Jews facilitated the persecution of Jews are as central to the historiographies of both countries as to the respective postwar memory cultures and national identities. How non-Jewish contemporaries without any formal responsibility or role in the Nazi killing bureaucracy or machinery responded to anti-Jewish measures over time (*bystanding*) should be understood as stemming from a dynamic, relational, and often ephemeral subjective position. This position, along with related sets of attitudes and options for agency, was strongly linked to the sociopolitical and self-perceived *status* of a person as citizen or non-citizen of the German Reich and the (occupied) Netherlands, and the question of this status is at the heart of Morina’s diary analysis. She examines how notions of “good” citizenship and compliance, rooted in specific visions of the self, the state, and the nation, related to levels of support for and resistance against anti-Jewish measures. The prevalence and articulation of antisemitism in this regard, and

how it was linked to individual status, political order, and communal belonging, is of particular interest. In addition, the project examines how these perceptions and experiences of (non-) citizenship shaped the political and memory cultures in (divided) Germany and the Netherlands since after the war's end. A monograph is envisioned to be completed in 2026/2027.

Subproject 2: Anna Strommenger – *Travelling Bystanders? Foreign Visitors in Nazi Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust*

Strommenger's project, financed by Friedländer's Balzan Prize funds, explores the way foreign observers from democratic countries (case studies are the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Switzerland) travelling to Nazi Germany perceived the rise of Nazism, the Nazi seizure of power and dictatorship, and the aftermath of Nazism. One central focus of her analysis is the question to what extent and in what ways different groups of visitors described Nazi antisemitism and the systematic persecution and murder of the Jews. The study analyzes different kinds of travel reports, e.g., ego-documents like diaries and letters as well as published travel accounts like newspaper articles or monographs, written by both prominent and "ordinary" travelers and temporary residents. By examining those travelogues, she aims to analyze the visitors' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to Nazism and its crimes as well as the diffusion of knowledge about anti-Jewish persecution in the 1930s, and the Holocaust, in particular by attempting to answer the following questions: How did the foreign observers describe what was happening? Did they reject or even oppose the regime or admire at least some of its aspects? How did they reflect on their position and their ability or inability to act? Did they try to intervene on behalf of the Jewish victims and disseminate the knowledge about the ongoing events back home? And how did the societies in the US and Europe react to the travel reports and news from Nazi Germany? By answering these questions, the project aims at re-evaluating the global sphere in which Nazism resonated, thus contributing to a transnational history of Nazism and the Holocaust. The resulting monograph (*Habilitationsschrift*) should be completed in summer 2027.

Subproject 3: Roma Sendyka – *Bystanding in the Holocaust in Poland. Historical Perspectives and New Approaches*

Sendyka's project is intended to produce a book (completion 2027/2028) exploring how scholars in Poland have approached and studied the concept of the "bystander". Despite occupied Poland being the primary site of the Holocaust under Nazi occupation, Polish contributions to the global discourse on bystanding behaviour have often been overlooked. This project seeks to address that gap by bringing Polish voices, experiences, and archival resources into the international conversation. The study examines how the idea of the bystander has developed in Poland, and how it has frequently been intertwined with the notion of the "witness" in Polish memory and historical writing. Methodologically, the book draws from multiple disciplines—behavioral psychology, rhetoric, and visual studies—to pose new questions about bystander

behavior. Can psychology help explain the split-second decisions made when witnessing violence? Can discourse analysis uncover what was left unsaid—or deliberately obscured? Can visual evidence reveal what testimonies might not express? These questions are explored through close work with three major archival collections in Poland. More broadly, the book introduces international readers to a rich but underresearched body of Polish research and documentation. At its core, the project invites a rethinking of bystanding—by expanding the methodological toolkit and by drawing attention to sources and perspectives that have long remained in the margins.

Subproject 4: Moritz Y. Meier – *The National Socialist Society in Theodor W. Adorno’s Experience and Philosophy, 1931-1947. A Critical Reconstruction in Dialogue with Holocaust and Bystander Studies*

Research on Theodor W. Adorno’s biography and philosophy has commonly emphasized his role as a public intellectual in postwar West Germany. Drawing on a vast amount of edited and archival ego-documents from 1931 to 1947, this study sheds new light on Adorno as a notable *Zeitzeuge* of National Socialism instead. Although his exile began as early as 1934, he not only critically theorized about the so-called “German Revolution” and its social basis, but also experienced it firsthand – e.g. by witnessing the rise of the party in Frankfurt and Berlin, by being persecuted as a so-called “Halbjude”, by frequently visiting the German *Reich* up until 1937, by corresponding with a resistance group in Germany, by helping friends, relatives, and other persecuted individuals to escape, or by repeatedly contributing to the US war effort. In reconstructing the entanglements of his experience and his theory of National Socialist society, the sources are confronted with a specific analytical interest: During the unfolding of the anti-Jewish catastrophe, did Adorno formulate a Critical Theory of Bystanding *avant la lettre*, or would he have rejected such a proposal altogether? The project will result in the completion of Meier’s MA thesis at the University of Bielefeld, foreseen for July 2025. Meier has also been the Balzan Team’s research assistant since 2022.

The Balzan Bystander Project and Its Collaborations

The Balzan Bystander Project Team’s work is structurally linked to a second team [project](#) based at Bielefeld University and University College London (funded by the DFG & AHRC, co-directed by Prof. Dr. Mary Fulbrook and Christina Morina), *Good Citizens, Terrible Times: Community, Courage and Compliance in and beyond the Holocaust*. The projects of these researchers (Dr. Teresa Malice, Dr. Gaëlle Fisher, Dr. Sandra Lipner, Lena Obermann) relate closely to the issue of bystanding and some of them also use diaries and other ego-documents such as correspondence and petitions as primary historical sources for their inquiries. A list of all these “BB-meetings” held thus far (as hybrid events) along with the respective thematic focus and, occasionally, external guests can be found in **Appendix 2**.

At the core of the Balzan Bystanding Research Project is the question of how non-Jewish contemporaries responded to the persecution of the Jews in a European comparative perspective and how Jewish men and women perceived of their non-Jewish contemporaries in those years of extreme upheaval and violence. The primary source base consists of contemporary ego-documents, most importantly diaries written by Jews and non-Jews between around 1930 and 1950. All projects combined thus aspire to accomplish a first systematic analysis of the role and relevance of the so-called majority societies in the Shoah in a comparative perspective. Building on Friedländer's pathbreaking work aimed at integrating victim, perpetrator, and bystander perspectives as well as Christina Morina's empirical and conceptual research,¹ the concept of *bystanding* serves as a heuristic device to explore the vast social landscapes in which the mass murder of the Jews unfolded across Nazi Germany and Europe. For the Balzan Team, bystanding is conceived of not as a static category or type of person but rather as an unstable subject position – a position that is dynamic, relational, and highly context-driven. People are never bystanders *per se*, they rather become bystanders to specific situations; sometimes knowingly and expectedly, sometimes without warning and out of sheer coincidence. As a result, they respond in varying ways depending on a range of personal, socio-political and cultural factors. We envision a European social history of mass violence during Nazism, and given the source base – mostly intimate, explicit and implicit, reflections on the persecution and murder of Jews – the Balzan Bystander project seeks to contribute to the scholarship on the Holocaust – and genocide more broadly – as not only a state and military crime but as a gradual social and, in fact, interpersonal process.

Thus, the project team is currently undertaking the first comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and actions of bystanders based on a systematic exploration of published and unpublished diaries written by Jews and non-Jews from Germany, Austria, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Romania, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States. Crucial in these efforts has been the localization, (digitized) collection, transcription, and analysis of hundreds of diaries from all across Europe. As stated at the outset, these records are being stored digitally within the University of Bielefeld's IT infrastructure as the ***Bystanding in the Holocaust Diary Collection*** (BHDC). This process of localization and collection is still ongoing, and the records are stored safely on the University of Bielefeld's online cloud.

Contact has been established with colleagues and institutions that have collected larger numbers of (Jewish and non-Jewish) diaries in context of their research (e.g. [Dr. Janosch Steuwer](#) (University of Halle/Germany) and his project *A Third Reich, as I See*

¹ Christina Morina, "In search of the bystander. Some reflections on the 'social turn' in Holocaust studies and its ramifications, in: Stephanie Bird u.a. (Hg.), *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond. Compromised Identities*, London 2023, p. 67–84; Dies., *Bystanders, Collaboration and Complicity*, in: Mary Fulbrook u. Jürgen Matthäus (Hg.), *The Cambridge History of the Holocaust*, Volume 2, Cambridge, Mass., 2025, p. 72–92.

It); Dr. [Marie Moutier-Bitan](#) (Caen Normandie University/France) and Dr. [Sarah Gruszka](#) (Sorbonne University/France) and their DFG/ANR [Holocaust Diaries Project](#)) to enlarge the team's own collection and to exchange experiences and expertise with regards to the collection, transcription as well as hermeneutical and digital analysis of diaries.

Conclusions

Overall, the work on these various projects and within this tremendous group of researchers supported by the Balzan Prize funds and under the supervision and in close exchange with Prof. Friedländer and senior advisor Prof. Norbert Frei has been an extremely valuable, productive and inspiring endeavour. The Team plans to gather and present the results of all subprojects in a final international conference, either in the fall of 2026 or the spring of 2027.

Both the individual monographs and journal articles written as well as the edited volume the Team will produce jointly at the end of this project will make significant contributions to keeping the field of Holocaust Studies as vibrant and relevant as it deserves to be, not least in light of rising antisemitism and disinformation about the roots and specificity of the Holocaust today. They will collectively further our understanding of the societal conditions for discrimination, persecution, and genocidal violence and – constantly fostering exchange between academia, museums and public discourses – help to address these conditions by providing cutting-edge empirical and conceptual insights to public history institutions and the wider public. The conference programs, lectures, and media outputs produced thus far (see Appendices 1-2 as well as the project website) speak to this commitment.