

MEMORIAL ESSAY FORUM

Eric Weitz: Mensch and Menschenrechte: The Internal Logic of a Life Well-Lived

Omer Bartov

Had Eric been allowed to live the long life that he deserved, he might have looked back and recognized the retrospective logic of his scholarly work. By then, I am sure, he would have produced more pathbreaking and important books and essays. Indeed, following the publication of his magnum opus, *A World Divided*, Eric was already at work on a study of Ralph Bunche, featured in *A World Divided* and one of the most prominent African Americans in the United States in the immediate aftermath of World War II who went on to have an influential role as an advocate of human rights in the newly established United Nations.¹

Many of us, I think, when reaching a certain age, try to understand why we chose to spend years of our lives on particular topics of research and to divine whether these were merely a series of haphazard choices or were driven by some sort of rationale, an intellectual coherence, a question that we had posed to ourselves early on in our careers and that we had, consciously or not, striven to answer or at least to approach from a variety of different perspectives, benefiting perhaps from growing academic maturity and accumulating life experiences. Perhaps Eric was already having these thoughts in the last years before his shockingly untimely death. I do not recall talking with him along these lines, perhaps because I, too, have begun thinking back in this manner only recently, not least under the impact of his loss. But let me try to sketch out here what I see as Eric's intellectual journey and how it reflected his enduring interest in all that is extraordinary and all that is terrifying in humanity, even as it demonstrated his own qualities as a human being, his ability for empathy and trust in the human potential for goodness and accomplishment, combined with a critical, analytical gaze that never strayed toward nostalgia or sentimentality.

I met Eric for the first time in late September 1998, when I came to St. Olaf College, where he was teaching at the time, to deliver a talk on “War, Genocide, and Modern Identity,” which eventually developed into a book published two years later.² What I recall most vividly is that following the lecture, Eric and I spent a fair amount of time talking about our mutual, and in some ways overlapping interests, nursing our very first glass of cognac together, a tradition we established and held on to for the next two decades whenever we met. Eric had just published his first book, on German communism,³ which my fellow-contributor Hanna Schissler so eloquently describes as focusing on “the real lives of workers” and “the shaping of gender roles” by the precarious interaction between “the militant masculinity” of a movement heavily reliant on male industrial labor and the tendency to ascribe traditional family roles to women, while at the same time rhetorically insisting on their emancipation. As Schissler emphasizes, Eric's approach was intensely annoying to the old West German professoriate, for whom issues of gender were of entirely marginal

¹ Eric D. Weitz, *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

² Omer Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Populist Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

import at the time and were troubled by this apparent foreign assault on their hegemonic hold on the profession in Germany.

Having similarly began my career as a German historian, I had much sympathy with Eric's predicament. My own work on the crimes of the Wehrmacht in World War II also initially met with rejection by the leading German historians of the Third Reich, partly for the same reasons as Eric's, namely, as a history "from below" that applied a methodology similar to that of a history of everyday life and partly because it similarly challenged certain axioms among the historical "guild," in my case concerning the "purity of arms" of the Wehrmacht's frontline troops.⁴ As non-Germans, Eric and I had perhaps less to fear from the wrath of the German historical establishment; as entirely secular but self-aware Jews poking some of the most sensitive nerve ends of the Federal Republic's self-perception, we might have made matters more difficult for our critics in ways that neither they nor we were entirely aware of at the time.

But by then Eric's interests were shifting in a new direction, and although I do not remember him mentioning that during our conversation in 1998, I suspect that he invited me to *St Olaf* because of my own writing on genocide. Eric's masterful 2003 study, *A Century of Genocide*, once again cut against the grain of several historiographies and moved beyond what had become arid political and professional disputes over comparative genocide and the uniqueness of the Holocaust.⁵ Once again, although I did not agree with some of Eric's interpretations of the role of race in genocide, especially in the case of the Soviet Union (an issue on which he was taken to task by some Soviet specialists),⁶ the book demonstrated his qualities as a scholar who could venture far outside his comfort zone, delving into several rich and complex historiographies while at the same time being able to write clearly and forcefully and propose an overriding interpretive framework that linked all these episodes of horrifying inhumanity to a particular dynamic in the twentieth century across the world. Having by then also attempted to locate the Holocaust within the larger context of the world wars, and to link its representation to the first case of industrial killing in 1914–1918, I was in even greater sympathy with Eric's measured, always balanced and well-informed, yet for many scholars of the Holocaust also somewhat disturbing, underlying assertion that the "final solution" was but one of a series of modern genocides in which the notion of blood and nation had triggered a homicidal frenzy.⁷

With his 2007 book on Weimar Germany, Eric returned to his old field, but with a very different slant. I imagine this book as a product of his need to move away from inhumanity back to humanity, from destruction to creativity, from despair to hope.⁸ But in choosing the Weimar Republic, he could have also told a story of failure, rising violence, radicalization, and final collapse. Many such histories of Weimar have been written. Instead, he chose to write about these fourteen years as a period of innovation and liberation, beauty and accomplishment. Just like those who were living at the time, Eric does not anticipate Weimar's catastrophic end but rather celebrates its achievements. In this sense, the book is counterintuitive and a response to his own interpretation of genocide; things could have proceeded differently, and the horror was neither inevitable nor foreseen.

Looking back, I am surprised to see that I too had decided to step back from the realities of war and genocide at precisely the same time, writing instead a study that, so to speak, took me to the movies for an extended break from the actual documentation of violence

⁴ Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London: Macmillan, 1985); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁵ Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ See the debate in *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 1–65.

⁷ Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction*.

⁸ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

to cinematic representations of the figure of the Jew.⁹ To be sure, as in Eric's case, this was not a step entirely away from the sordid realities of the twentieth century because just as one can never forget that Weimar was bracketed by World War I and Hitler's "seizure of power," so too the recycling of the stereotype of the "Jew" in the movies played into successive bouts of violence. But cultural products, as those produced in Weimar or in film studios everywhere, must also always be about humanity and about individual human beings and their endless capacity for love, empathy, and creativity, which must all, in some way, work against the relentless logic of genocidal violence. It is that, I think, to which both Eric and I were attracted through this interlude.

It was at that time, too, that Eric joined me in directing the multiyear project "Borderlands: Ethnicity, Identity, and Violence in the Shatter-Zones of Empires, 1848–Present," at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, which culminated in the hefty volume we coedited.¹⁰ This was an opportunity for me to see Eric in action as a convener and participant in the many workshops we hosted. What struck me repeatedly was the rare combination of wide-ranging knowledge, acute analytical abilities, and personal charm. As many others have noted, Eric never suffered from the common disease of the professoriate, that tendency to self-importance and condescension that so many succumb to as they climb up the ranks. Both of us were moving at the time into what was for us uncharted territory, those vast eastern borderlands of Europe and their multiplicity of religions, ethnicities, and nationalities, along with long-standing traditions of competing historiographies. It was an important journey for the two of us, which taught us a great deal that we had not known and directed us to new research ventures.

At the end of that journey, after much arduous work on our coedited volume, I could tell that we were now about to methodologically move in the opposite direction, albeit with what I think was the same fundamental question in mind. The borderlands project was ultimately about the transformation of eastern Europe from a region ruled for centuries by multiethnic empires to one that, following the collapse of those empires in World War I, came under the rule of much smaller nation states, each of which had large ethnic and religious minorities. Ultimately, the violence of 1914–1918, which tore the great empires apart, lay the groundwork for the genocidal violence of World War II, driven by the urge to create politically, ethnically, or ideologically uniform political entities by way of population policies, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, a goal that was largely accomplished, at the price of millions of lives, by the late 1940s.

For Eric, I think, the encounter with that reality, whereby what had been seen as progress, namely, the toppling of anachronistic empires and the liberation of peoples, had produced unfathomable destruction of human lives, spurred him to seek a more comprehensive analysis, across a wider geographical space and a longer chronological time span, of the relationship between the emergence of the concept of human rights and the establishment of nation-states with a habitual propensity for extraordinary violence in the name of their nations' rights. If human rights are the main marker of what we perceive as progress (moral, ethical, political), how is it that they have become inextricably identified with nation-states often obsessed with ridding themselves of those undeserving of such rights? Eric's interest in this fundamental question of modernity was not only theoretical. As a historian, as a scholar always curious about the complexity of different societies, and as a gifted storyteller, he wanted to trace this development as a global phenomenon. As he had done in his study of genocide, but painting an even vaster and more intricate canvas, he set out on what was sadly his last journey, from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, from Europe and its empires to the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, from democracies

⁹ Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, ed., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

to Nazism and the Soviet Union, and from the right to have rights to the urge to eradicate groups and erase their memory. It is a tragic, heart-wrenching story. But Eric is not simply a historian of the “dark side of modernity.”¹¹ In fact, he is a believer in humanity, which is perhaps why some of those writing on human rights have been somewhat critical of his book. As he writes at the end of this magnificent tome:

For all the partial advances, for all the contradictions, all the sheer opposition—human rights remain our best hope for the future . . . Human rights provide a powerful affirmation of the human spirit. They require that people be respected and afforded recognition . . . that all people have access to the basic necessities of life, and have the freedom to express themselves, to work and build and create as they wish, to join with others as they desire, and to be free of the scourge of violence and forced displacement. Those *are* our fundamental rights. We should demand nothing less from the world we inhabit.¹²

A World Divided was published in 2019. In describing, as the subtitle reads, “the global struggle for human rights in the age of the nation-states,” the book is clear-eyed, rich, often depressing, yet optimistic. Thinking back, I am again surprised to find that my own very different journey from the borderlands project we undertook together culminated in a study that attempted to trace the microhistory of what Eric had accomplished on a vast, universal canvas, seeking to understand how a single community of interethnic coexistence can be transformed into a community of genocide.¹³ And although I did not write about human rights, but rather about human beings, at the core of the violence were individuals who time and again felt that they had been deprived of their rights, whether by their various governments and occupiers, or by their neighbors. For its part, Eric’s account of human rights was, as I see it, ultimately a history of the unquenchable desire of human beings to have those fundamental rights he so eloquently describes, and of the numerous occasions on which they were betrayed. Eric, I think, was more optimistic than I am. To the end, he did believe that the struggle for human rights would and must lead humanity forward. Perhaps, this had to do with the trajectory of his own life. I recall him telling me why he was happy to come to City University of New York as dean. His father, he said, was among those of modest means who could, at the time, get a college education at that institution. He believed that now new generations of young immigrants and children of immigrants of modest means could similarly be offered that opportunity. That hope did not come true, and his disappointment led to his resignation from that position. The world we live in now offers few opportunities to those who have the desire but lack the means. But Eric did not lose hope.

So, is there a logic here? In writing about Eric, I have come to understand something about myself. I think that what propelled Eric from the very beginning was a belief in the spirit of humanity and a clear-eyed understanding of its proclivity for causing pain and destruction. He was ultimately interested in the interaction between the two and maintained a belief that although it can never be won, this struggle must continue despite repeated setbacks. His was not simply a theoretical faith in humanity. He was a humane human being, a mentor, a father, a partner, and a friend. He loved people and he loved life. That is a good starting point for writing about anything, not least about communism and genocide, but most of all, for writing about human rights. Whenever I lose hope, which happens all the more often these days, I think of Eric and cherish our friendship.

¹¹ J. C. Alexander, *The Dark Side of Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

¹² Weitz, *A World Divided*, 429–50.

¹³ Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

Learning to Think History in the Present Tense: Eric Weitz as Teacher and Mentor

Miranda Brethour

Late in the spring of 2020, our class on the literature of modern European history—a group of six graduate students and our professor, Eric Weitz—gathered on Zoom to discuss the rise of nationalism and the nation-state in nineteenth-century Europe. The graduate students initiated the conversation by delving into the theories and arguments in our assigned readings for the week; tackling the different elements of John Breuilly’s typology of nationalism in *Nationalism and the State* and John Connelly’s discussion of nationalism and language in his recent book *From Peoples into Nations*.¹ Having spent a week reading and reflecting on these books, we felt prepared to demonstrate our understanding of these complex theoretical ideas through the impending discussion. However, Eric slowed down this line of thought and, as he frequently did, pulled us back to consider a set of historical questions: Who creates nationalism? Where did it come from and who disseminates these ideas? How do nationalist movements command power? These types of questions, simple only in formulation, elicited silence from the group. Through his unique line of questioning, Eric quelled the tendency of graduate students to pose theoretical and methodological questions without first grounding ourselves within the worlds inhabited by historical subjects.

Reflecting his pedagogical approach, Eric’s own articles and books are especially attuned to the sensory environment of the street scene as a point of entry into questions about the form and meaning of modernity and the relationship between political structures and daily life. In *German Communism* Eric characterizes the history of the German Communist Party as developing out of the mutual exchange between the fabric of everyday experiences and the evolution of organized politics, drawing readers’ attention to quotidian places such as factories, markets, mines, households, and, above all, the streets where political mobilization and struggle occurred. Eric’s care for the “logic of the streets” appears again in a brilliant chapter in *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, where he brings the reader along for a walking tour through Weimar-era Berlin and muses on how politics and modernity are lived in the city:

To walk the city is to “feel” politics through the sight of street demonstrations, campaign posters, and party headquarters draped in banners. . . . To walk the city is, above else, to sense modernity: the sight, smell, and taste of traffic congestion, industrial smog, polluted rivers and canal; the press of crowds jostling one another on the streets, train platforms and subway cars; the relief of the cool breeze and clean water of the Wannsee, a weekend’s escape by tram or railroad or auto with thousands of others; the glittering lights of movie theaters and restaurants, automobiles and traffic signals, illuminated advertisements, as night descends on the city; the seductive appeal of fashionable clothes elegantly displayed in shop windows.²

From revolutionary-era Russia to Weimar Germany to many times and places beyond, the theoretical richness of Eric’s work on self-determination, political movements and power, nations and nationalism, and human rights was drawn from his deep attentiveness to everyday life and the lived environment.

¹ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982); John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

² Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 42.

During our meeting on nationalism and the nation-state, Eric was not satisfied by simply posing questions about the mobilizing power of the nation and expressions of nationalism without first grounding us in a political and social space that could serve as a case study. Imbuing levity into a pandemic-era Zoom course, Eric proposed the imagined community of Morovothenia as our example. He urged us to creatively consider questions on the impact of local political actors, the flowering of eastern European languages, the development of national celebrations and rituals, and the creation of borders from the mid-nineteenth century to the Paris Peace Conference by imaginarily figuring ourselves as members of this fledgling nation in eastern Europe, uncomfortably nestled within and between strong empires. This was a fun exercise in historical creativity, but also one that was immensely useful to myself and my colleagues. Over the next few classes, our discussion kept returning to the invented community of Morovothenians as an exciting and productive way to consider the interaction between theory and practice of nationalism and the rise of the nation-state, the lived process of creating and building something new, and the appeal of mass politics—all without the possibility of appealing to retrospection. And although this polity may have been imagined, Eric urged us to give serious consideration to the perspective and experiences of historical subjects to understand how, for instance, new modes of political identification could command so much power and meaning.

When we began our week on the Russian Revolution, Eric prompted us again to adopt this mindset in order to evaluate how the lived experiences and identities of the Russian revolutionaries shaped the early stages of the revolution. Scribbled in my notebook from our class on the Russian Revolution are the questions Eric asked us to consider on the Old Bolsheviks: Who are these people? What do they read? What do they learn? What are their experiences before the revolution? By formulating these questions in the present tense, the class was compelled to consider the mentality and perspective of the Old Bolsheviks leading up to and during October 1917. The ensuing conversation on the Old Bolsheviks' experiences in Tsarist prisons and exile abroad tackled change and continuity in the Russian Revolution, the relationship between pre-revolutionary and revolution-era political actors, the origins of violence and terror, and, most significantly, in considering Eric's canon, the idea of utopia and what it meant to create something new.

While considering the emotions of the Old Bolsheviks in the early days of the Russian Revolution, Eric drew our attention to Yuri Slezkine's portrayal of their excitement, anxiety, stress—bound to their awareness of the revolution's novelty. By presenting this initial period of the revolution as one of—as Eric phrased it—“creative construction and creative disasters,” he rooted us in the mentalities of revolutionary actors rather than a retrospective reflection on the meaning of 1917 in the arc of the Soviet Union. The themes of creation, creativity, and working toward utopia are pervasive throughout Eric's work; in the very title of *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* and interwoven throughout works like *Weimar Germany*. Describing the legacies of November 1918, he writes that “the hyperactive vitality of Weimar culture, of its music, theater, film, photography, derived its intensity from the act of revolution, from the psychological sense of engagement, the heady enthusiasm, the notion that barriers had been broken and all things were possible.”³

The particular course I took with Eric was the final half of a year-long survey in the literature of modern Europe, which concludes with an eight-hour written exam at the end of each semester. Owing to the nervousness of our class in preparing for the exam, one student recorded some of our class meetings, which comprise a precious archive of Eric's impact as a teacher and mentor. Opening the recordings, I first listened to our class on the Russian Revolution—recalling Eric's excitement during the discussion of the assigned books, especially Slezkine's *The House of Government*.⁴ I quickly became caught up in the recording of

³ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 26.

⁴ Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

us discussing the Old Bolsheviks and their lives before the revolution. Approximately one hour into the recording, sirens punctuated our meeting. This is, of course, not abnormal for New York City, but an unsettling reminder of the reality in which our conversation was taking place. Up until the sirens interrupted the recording, I had not considered the context of our meeting; a devastating phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, which had brought us, only a few weeks prior, to exchange our seminar room for Zoom tiles and disperse our class across the globe. Yet, while we were in class, the pandemic was usually far from my mind. Our meetings sometimes felt like the only two hours in the week that bore resemblance with pre-pandemic life, and I know my classmates likewise cherished the stability of our time together. Listening to the recordings without the visual reminder of Zoom, it is truly difficult to tell that these conversations were not being held in our old seminar room at the Graduate Center. It is a tribute to Eric's teaching and mentorship that our class was such a wonderfully warm environment in which, in April 2020, a group of six graduate students and their professor could disappear into the lived experiences of revolution-era Russia while our own realities were utterly changed.

Eric's guiding voice remains with me as I research, write, and teach. One of the most resonant parts of our course two years ago was the devotion and passion Eric expressed about our craft at a moment when students are, from the day we enter graduate school, presented with the crisis of higher education and the near impossibility of securing a job in the humanities. In this context, it felt almost indulgent to be able to immerse ourselves into the canonical works of modern European history and hold such rich conversations about these books. These conversations even extended outside of the bounds of the semester; in June 2020 my classmates organized a meeting to review the literature in the final days of preparation for our exam and Eric graciously accepted our invitation to join us. We did not know then that ours was the last graduate class he would teach.

When I reflect on the many ways in which Eric's pedagogy and scholarship continue to guide my work and teaching, I think about his work on the origins of modern human rights discourse, the evolution of self-determination from Enlightenment idea to political practice, and the relationship between minority rights and forced deportation, which, in his absence, helped guide me through my first experience teaching and attempt to draw narrative coherence through a multi-century global survey course. I also remember his many, carefully formulated and always encouraging, comments on my writing. Most of all, I return to the chapter on "Walking the City" in *Weimar Germany*, and the explicit invitation it offers to the reader to join the author for a walk: "We will start our walking tour at Potsdamer Platz. . . . We will try to make our way quickly, but like any Berliner, for that matter, any tourist, we might get diverted by the sites and attractions around us."⁵ Eric was inviting; he approached the classroom as a shared intellectual space where we were invited to tackle the most challenging of questions and historical puzzles. A balance of warmth and unstoppable intellectual rigor, he was a teacher and mentor who utterly changed the way that his students think and write, all the while showing us how much he valued our time together and the conversations we had.

Acknowledgments. I extend my gratitude to my colleagues at the Graduate Center for our many conversations about Eric's teaching as well as their reflections on this piece.

⁵ Slezkine, *The House of Government*, 42–43.

Eric Weitz and the Old History of Human Rights

Samuel Moyn

Eric Weitz's premature death is a great loss—for those who knew him and those who did not. It makes sense in this memorial forum for me to assess and praise Eric for his contributions to the historiography of human rights. It was a topic on which he not only wrote his extraordinary last book, *A World Divided*, but on which he also curated an important book series for Princeton University Press. Indeed, Eric was present at the creation of the field from the first.

In 2007, the first volumes in Eric's series began appearing. That was the same year I began publishing on human rights, first with a piece in *The Nation* that made enough of a splash to bring Eric to Columbia University, where I was teaching, to explore possibilities.¹ Accompanied by Brigitta van Rheinberg, Princeton University Press editor (and Eric's future spouse), it may not have been our first meeting, but it is the first one I remember. And although I had already signed with another publisher, it was the beginning of an intense phase during which Eric and I were frequently in touch.

In June 2008, Eric and I were both present at a landmark Berlin conference, which ultimately led to a volume that helped launch human rights history.² I saw him in 2008–2009 more regularly than before or after. On leave from his long-time post at the University of Minnesota, Eric served that year as a visiting professor in the Princeton history department, while I was on sabbatical nearby at the Institute for Advanced Study writing what became *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*.

It was an essential year for both him and me. Even as I drafted my book, Eric organized a series of talks on human rights history, which anticipated many later volumes in his series, and he thought through the terms of his own ultimate intervention. In 2009, while *The Last Utopia* was in press, Eric published a programmatic article that in retrospect looks like the clearest early statement of the thesis of his own eventual study. Entitled “Why It Is Time for a Much More Critical History of Human Rights,” Eric claimed that “crimes and rights are not polar opposites, but are conceptually linked.” This was because establishing citizenship meant exclusion—or worse. “The humane and the lethal are intertwined,” Eric arrestingly claimed.³

As in my earlier piece in *The Nation*, in *The Last Utopia* I began with a comparable starting point but reached a very different destination than Eric did. As a political project, natural and later human rights in their earliest political articulations, I argued, accompanied the politics of modern state citizenship, beginning in the American and French Revolutions. Quickly, they became associated not just with state construction but also with national emancipation as the most appealing and influential early “rights of man” movement.⁴

Both Eric and I cited Hannah Arendt on the priority of membership to the enjoyment of rights. It is worth noting, however, that Arendt never *defined* political citizenship in terms of

¹ Samuel Moyn, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” *The Nation*, March 17, 2007.

² See Lasse Heerten and Natasha Wheatley, “Human Rights in the Twentieth Century: Concepts and Conflicts,” *ZfZ Bulletin* 43–44 (2008): 65–73; Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Eric didn't appear in the volume because he presented his then-forthcoming *American Historical Review* article on the rise of deportation regimes. See Eric D. Weitz, “From the Vienna System to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions,” *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 1313–43.

³ Eric D. Weitz, “Why We Need a Much More Critical History of Human Rights,” *History News Network*, November 26, 2009 (<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/120358>).

⁴ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

that particular form of entitlements. Her point was, rather, that anyone interested in human rights must understand their basis in membership. From this fact, it did not follow that all membership, even all modern membership, *has to be* constructed around the idea of human rights. There was probably a minor difference between Eric and me in that I followed Arendt more slavishly than he did in this regard. Although the historical meaning of human rights was forged in their alliance with citizenship, it was also crucial that citizenship could be articulated in other idioms—indeed, increasingly was so.⁵ I don't think Eric ever really accepted this point. The reason is what he wanted to do on the basis of the alliance of citizenship with human rights: to trace crimes to them.

If Arendt didn't define citizenship (even modern citizenship) in terms of human rights, she plainly rejected articulations of citizenship that saw the sovereign state or civic or ethnic nation as philosophically essential. But Eric and I were modern European historians enough by training that there was no disregarding the fact that most who struggled for citizenship have wanted it within the very sovereign state and through the liberation of the very nation that Arendt philosophically disdained. It was also obvious to Eric and me that statehood and nation—like the political tools for advancing both, including the most violent practices—arose in and through decolonization of empire, through its global climacteric in decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century. Both Eric and I therefore made (national) self-determination central to the history of modern politics.⁶

But on the basis of this common agreement, I focused controversially and predominantly on how modern citizenship was displaced or supplemented in the late twentieth century by human rights in a new sense. This was the major divergence between Eric and me. For I assumed that the *entire point* of isolating the beginnings of early human rights politics in citizenship was to distinguish the contemporary era of inter- and transnational human rights. That event allowed, not for blaming rights for crimes, but for the *identification* of crimes as (international) crimes in the first place and as a violation of international rights.

Notoriously or not, *The Last Utopia* pursues the claim that the historiography of human rights should focus on this displacement or supplementation, in which human rights were reinvented for a new project in recent decades. A sometime language of state sovereignty and national citizenship, after decolonization human rights became cosmopolitan not just in frame but also in the primary relationships they set up, which were precisely *not* ones of fellow citizens working out the term of their lives together. Instead, they have worked by setting up weaker identification and new technologies, for “fellow Europeans” from diverse nations under regional human rights arrangements or more commonly for “fellow humans” accorded or claiming the perquisites they could get from a nonviolent activism or a world spanning legal regime. Both the activism and the regime aimed to protect the basic decencies of life (beginning with life itself), a more minimalist project than the struggle over the terms of citizenship for which human rights had been one language of justification.

⁵ Indeed, as Arendt herself insisted, the importance of human rights to citizenship politics *declined* over the nineteenth century in credibility because human rights began as a rationale for revolution while legislation then had to articulate them as policy. The rights of man, as Arendt phrased it, were “treated as a sort of stepchild by nineteenth-century political thought and . . . no liberal or radical party in the twentieth century . . . saw fit to include them in its program. . . . If the laws of their country did not live up to the demands of the Rights of Man, they were expected to change them, by legislation . . . or through revolutionary action”; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968 [1951]), 293.

⁶ Eric alone contributed to a now burgeoning literature on how self-determination was articulated as a norm since I was more interested in the fact that, notwithstanding early notions of a *Selbstbestimmungsrecht* that Eric traced to J. G. Fichte, in international law it was a major departure after World War II to make self-determination the first international human right. Compare Eric D. Weitz, “Self-Determination: How a German Enlightenment Idea Became the Slogan of National Liberation and a Human Right,” *American Historical Review* 120 (2015): 462–96, and other work by such authors as Edward Kolla on the early period and Adom Getachew and Brad Simpson on the later.

In 2012, Eric published an essay entitled “Samuel Moyn and the New History of Human Rights.”⁷ It was an extraordinary honor to attract his attention, especially when he said so many laudatory things about *The Last Utopia* along the way. Eric called it “the first *critical* history of human rights”—even though I was proposing, through my focus on this recent phase of its history, to take the field in a rather different direction than he had intended three years before in calling for a “much more critical history.” For that reason, Eric went on to raise serious reservations about my approach.

One serious reservation, to which I will return at the end, was that I depreciated the accomplishments of the new era of human rights politics—precisely relative to the earlier one, the point of which was agency among citizen equals, notwithstanding its exclusions and violence. Correspondingly, Eric wanted to recognize the breakthroughs and uplifts of contemporary human rights less judgmentally. But most important, Eric wanted to strive for a more “critical” account of the earlier era of human rights politics, focusing on the crucible of state and nation. One might say, in other words, that as an alternative to my goal of identifying a “new” phase in their history, Eric aimed to renovate the “old” history of human rights.

A World Divided, Eric’s answer to his own call, concentrates on the politics of citizenship and its exclusions—including violence. For sure, Eric is right to emphasize this connection. The establishment of the privileges of citizenship (in terms of human rights or not) has been anything but a bloodless affair. After clearing lands for the new community of citizens, it allows noncitizen membership or tiers of citizenship but—all too often—devolves into exterminatory violence against those not cleansed at the start and those who become new enemies along the way. *A World Divided* mounts a chronological tale about how modern citizenship has a dark side. And there is no doubting that Eric’s finished story fed his aspiration from the first to connect “rights and crimes,” whose interrelation he had suggested in the title of his series and underlined in his call for a critical history of human rights.

At a book manuscript conference at City College (where Eric had moved from Minnesota) and as one of the referees for the press for *A World Divided*, I asked Eric some questions about his concentration on the obverse of rights in crimes, questions that are worth repeating, I believe. Aren’t all membership schemes—not just ones where modern citizenship is founded on the basis of appeal to human rights—exclusionary and violent? The dialectic of inclusion, which means exclusion or worse for nonmembers, makes up the history of the world from its beginning. If so, are states with rights-based citizenship distinctively exclusionary or violent? Most important, if they are, is there any reason to think that the fact that they are founded on human rights is the culprit rather than the particular way the exclusions or violence is justified? After all, it is not very easy to find examples in which human rights have been cited by political authorities as the justification for exclusion and violence. Finally, even if rights and crimes are inextricably bound up with one another, aren’t there significant differences between the extent to which rights-based citizenship schemes engage in exclusion and violence? How would one classify and distinguish the differential possibility for crime in the establishment and pursuit of rights-based membership?

A World Divided answers these kinds of questions more or less well in its extraordinary panorama of cases around the world and across modern history, showcasing the horrendous violence of nation-states, whether in their creation or in their crises and expansions. No doubt, the results are marvelous. Most interesting for my purposes, though, is what Eric ended up doing with the recent period of international human rights and of the internationalization of ethics that challenged or forbade the kinds of crimes that have come to be understood as such—precisely in and through the rise of a cosmopolitan and international understanding of human rights. In heroically insisting on exploring the “old” history of

⁷ Eric D. Weitz, “Samuel Moyn and the New History of Human Rights,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 12 (2012): 84–93.

rights, documenting the crimes of state and nation, what was Eric's account of the "new" history?

I confess I am not completely sure. Eric broaches the topic most of all in his chapter on the Soviet Union, emphasizing its contributions to articulations of international norms, as well as the outbreak in later years of its dissident human rights movement. On one hand, Eric is very clear that he intends to avoid the excesses of "withering" accounts like mine of the era of global human rights.⁸ But on the other hand, *A World Divided* doesn't really treat the later twentieth or twenty-first centuries directly, so one could pose many questions about the grounds for his conclusion. The era closes with a globalization of the nation-state through the completion of decolonization. Yet it also involved the ironic victory of novel and often unrecognizable forms of empire, restoring aspects of the status quo ante before the era of state and nation. Some of those forms advanced American hegemony, but others were neoliberal, and merely advanced in the name of American interest and through American agency. Not covering such final transformations, Eric doesn't really engage with the relation between human rights and the social question in his history, deciphering the economic entanglements and ramifications of the norms whether within state and national projects or on the global stage.

I don't mean to criticize omissions, though they are crucial for coming to a provisional judgment about the meaning of human rights history. Rather, my point is to highlight that, down to the end, Eric was acting to realize his original vision. He set out to renovate the old history of human rights, by exploring the interrelation of rights and crimes in an age of nation-states. And persuasively so—for, as Eric remarks laconically after his brief concluding treatment of the features of the era of the new human rights: "Amid all these developments, the nation-state remains."⁹ There is no doubt about it: Eric was correct about this fact. And as long as the nation-state remains the primary formal entity for the political organization of humanity, Eric's old history of human rights will endure.

⁸ Weitz, *A World Divided*, 431–32, n. 4.

⁹ Weitz, *A World Divided*, 429.

Taking on the Big Questions: In Memoriam, Eric D. Weitz

Hanna Schissler

Eric Weitz defied a common trend among historians toward narrow specialization in just one field. He was a historian of German communism and of Weimar Germany. Over time he delved into ever bigger questions and historical topics. He compared the most gruesome aspects of modern history in the genocides of the twentieth century, and eventually explored with profound knowledge and passion how this world became what it is now in his masterpiece on the global struggle for human rights.

His and my scholarly interests intersected in questions of gender, the strive for understanding the modern, globalized world in as many aspects as possible, and also methodological issues, including the different academic cultures in Germany and the United States. Our personal interests covered family, friends, politics, as well as more mundane things like the spectacular meals that he provided and I enjoyed.

When I first met Eric, he was still teaching at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. At the time, I was the DAAD professor of history and German studies at the University of Minnesota, where we met in seminars and on other academic occasions. Already in his first book, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990*,¹ Eric displayed his innovative talents. He avoided the trampled paths of restricting the history of the communist movement in Germany to disputes among factions of communists, the influence of decisive figures, to party programs, ideology, and organizations. Instead, he had a keen understanding of everyday history—the real lives of workers and the shaping of gender roles: on the one hand, there was the militant masculinity—that signpost of life in the communist movement—which heavily relied on male industrial labor. On the other hand, there was the ambiguous situation of women, who were ascribed traditional family roles but at the same time were objects of emancipatory attempts by the Communist Party. His multi-faceted approach put him at odds with some representatives of German historiography at the time. He defended himself against one excessively critical German reviewer of his book, Heinrich August Winkler, writing that “(der) nicht das geringste Verständnis für andere akademische Kulturen (zeigt), solche, in denen man deutlich offener gegenüber einer Vielzahl methodologischer und theoretischer Ansätze ist” (“who did not show the slightest understanding for other academic cultures where people were much more open toward a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches”).² That was at a time when debates about gender history as well as *Alltagsgeschichte* were raging in Germany. Striving for interpretive hegemony belonged to the pastime of (male) historians in Germany since time immemorial—but was particularly pronounced since the new guard of social historians challenged national history writing starting in the 1960s and 1970s. It was thus right on target when Eric countered Winkler’s obviously very Germanic review with this remark: His critic “will der Erzengel der historischen Zunft sein, der darüber entscheidet, wer Zutritt ins Allerheiligste historischer Deutung erhält und wer draußen zu bleiben hat” (His critic “wishes to be the archangel of the historical profession, deciding on who will have access to the inner sanctum of historical interpretation and who will have to stay outside”).³ That was, indeed, the gist of it.

I remember Eric’s excitement when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, paired with a deep sigh that now, in fact, he had to rewrite his dissertation on German communism, not only because communism in Germany needed to be reevaluated after the demise of

¹ Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

² Eric D. Weitz, “Erzengel der Historiker-Zunft,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 1, 1997, number 254, p. 13. My translation.

³ Eric’s response in Winkler, *Erzengel der Historiker-Zunft*. My translation.

the German Democratic Republic, but also because he now had access to the files of the *SED* (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*). After much additional research, his book was eventually published in 1997.

It was Eric's matter-of-fact approach to issues of gender and the history of everyday life—the reality and the weight of lived experience—that impressed me most. Having been socialized into German academic culture, I was surprised that new approaches in history could be followed without the kind of fierce strife for hegemonic power of interpretations that I knew from Germany; fights that forced historians like myself either into a combative mode or muted me, ultimately sidelining me and others in the fights of the giants, displaying their own “cult of masculinity.” Eric understood, as no other male historian whom I have ever met, the systemic advantage through social positioning that men in history and society (including male historians) enjoyed and thus the systemic disadvantage of women, particularly pronounced since the emergence of industrial society—the juridification of men's prerogatives and women's disempowerment. The easy ways in which Eric combined class, gender, and everyday history never stopped amazing me. He was immune to the kinds of fights that tested the survival skills of young female scholars in Germany.

The ease of covering different aspects of history and combining historical methods, never being dogmatic about anything but using every promising approach in order to make sense of the complexities of history, can best be experienced in his book *Weimar Germany*.⁴ Here Eric takes the reader on a fascinating tour and unfolds a whole array of historical topics covering politics, the economy, everyday life, philosophy, literature, architecture, art, popular culture, music, and photography. Particularly perceptive are his depictions of working-class life and of the “new woman,” of sex and bodies, and his taking the reader on a walk through the Berlin of the 1920s. When Eric describes the Tiller Girls' high kicks and their mechanical movements on stage as the embodiment of rationalization, the reader can develop a deeper understanding of how cultural manifestations are interconnected with and in fact mirror the transformation of economic life.

When Eric was working on the architecture chapter of his book, he asked me to take him to the famous settlement of more than 1,900 apartments and small houses built by the famous architect Bruno Taut between 1926 and 1931 in Berlin Zehlendorf. This settlement, as well as the adjoining subway station, is called—as every Berlin visitor will recall—Onkel Toms Hütte. Eric and I walked through the neighborhood so he could take pictures. “Is this really called Onkel Toms Hütte?” he asked in amazement. At this time we did not know that the name had little—or only indirectly—to do with Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel. The story goes as follows: in 1885, a pub opened in the vicinity of what now is the subway station Onkel Toms Hütte. It belonged to a man with the name of Thomas. So, he named it Onkel Toms Hütte—pun intended.⁵

The most readable and enjoyable description of the unfolding of modernity as well as the workings of revolution and counterrevolution and the deplorable end of the Weimar Republic had in some way been a break and some kind of recreation from the agonizing topics of Eric's previous book.

Over time, Eric developed an equanimity and a certain distance to morally charged debates and squabbles. This might have been a result of writing *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*.⁶

When the arguments about the uniqueness and supposed incomparability of the Holocaust unfolded, a debate that agitated the German historical profession and had the

⁴ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*.

⁵ About two years ago when postcolonial modes of thought started to become more influential in public debates in Germany an Afro-German man demanded that the name *Onkel Toms Hütte* be changed because of its demeaning connotation for Black people. He thus organized civil protest. People who had lived in the neighborhood forever asserted that it always had been *Onkel Toms Hütte* and the name was dear to them—and it was not to be changed. They were not willing to let their traditions be destroyed, they claimed, by “wokeness.” So it goes. Predictably.

⁶ Weitz, *A Century of Genocide*.

tendency—which has ever so often been the case in Germany—to be morally charged and to divide people into the “good” and the “bad” guys—Eric just did it: he compared five cases of persecution, displacement, and ultimately mass exterminations of entire populations and groups of people in the twentieth century: the Armenian genocide, the great famine in the Soviet Union, the German mass extermination of Jews and other minorities, the mass killings under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the killing of Muslims during the Bosnian war by ethnic Serbs. Eric did so without getting into those tormented debates of the *Historikerstreit* that forced (nearly) everybody to position him or herself—at least if you were German.⁷ Eric refused to get sucked into this subconscious strife of “Who was the worst? the most unique?”—a special kind of competition, indeed—only to be followed by “Who does the best job of coming to terms with the past?”—a competition that hardly anybody among the contenders in Germany were aware of at the time and might not be to this day, I dare say.

When I invited Eric in 2003 to be the keynote speaker at a conference called “Learning and Remembering—Holocaust, Genocide, and State-Organized Crime in the Twentieth Century,” organized by the Georg Eckert Institute in Braunschweig, he gave an unforgettable talk, in which he not only acknowledged the suffering of all groups that were persecuted and murdered, but also guided quite an emotional audience to some important insights into what developments in history led to the exclusion of entire groups of people and eventually the persecution and even extermination of those who “did not belong.” He earned a standing ovation because everyone felt he or she had gained a higher and more complex understanding of the mindsets and mechanisms at work.

“Who belongs and who does not?”—or as Hannah Arendt had phrased it “the right to have rights”—then became the leading question of his work on the history of human rights: *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States*.⁸ I clearly remember how thrilled I was reading Eric’s preceding articles in the *American Historical Review*⁹ and understood how ambiguous minority rights actually were in the age of nation-states. (Once you identify and define a group of people to protect them, other and less benign things also come into reach.) Human rights has a complicated history and by no means is a straight trajectory toward ever greater humanism and progress. Ever since having read this article with the somewhat mysterious title “From the Vienna to the Paris System,” I was in close conversation with Eric about the framework as well as the historical cases of his book (which he graciously mentioned in the acknowledgments).

It was this never-ending struggle to make sense of the world, of seeing its complexities and yet, in spite of all the difficulties, trying to understand; it was this skill of doing close-ups and simultaneously engaging in “second degree observation”—meaning his ability to step out of the historical material and provide a conducive interpretative framework even for the most horrendous historical occurrences, crimes, and tragedies—that was the hallmark of Eric’s scholarship.

Eric was passionate about the world that we inhabit and he took on the big and difficult questions in history.

He was a most valuable and reliable source for my own attempts to make sense of the world that we live in.

He embraced life and tried to make it a better place.

He was the opposite of pomposity.

He understood why I liked to be a historian in the United States but not in Germany.

He made a mark in my life as a much-admired colleague, but even more so as a reliable and caring human being (and a *saveur* of good food).

⁷ The best summary of this debate is Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and the German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁸ Weitz, *A World Divided*.

⁹ Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System,” and Weitz, “Self-Determination.”

He was my best friend.

Acknowledgments. *CEH*'s editor wishes to thank the four contributors to this memorial essay collection, and Omer Bartov especially. His idea for a collaborative memorial essay helped inspire the forum, which draws on relationships Eric Weitz had with scholars and friends across the length of his intellectually expansive and marvelously variegated career. As such, the journal hopes that it pays the tribute so properly due to a much-missed colleague who, as Omer beautifully and poignantly recalls, "loved people and . . . loved life."

Cite this article: Bartov O, "Eric Weitz: Mensch and Menschenrechte: The Internal Logic of a Life Well-Lived," *Central European History* (2022): 55, 410–424. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938922000693>