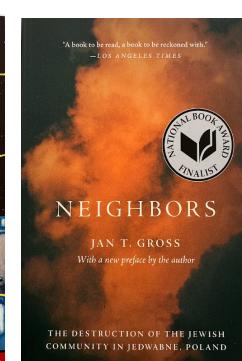
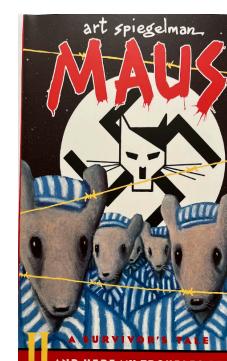
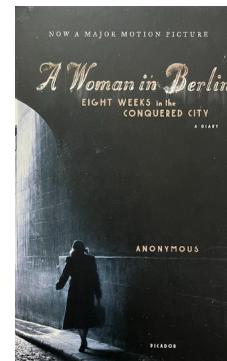
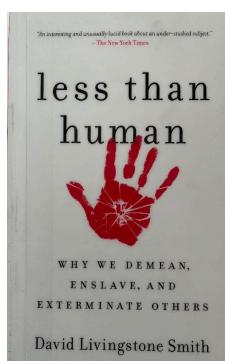
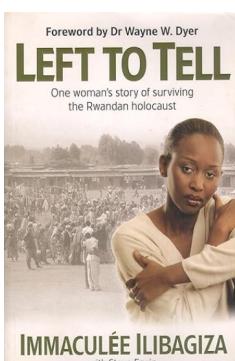
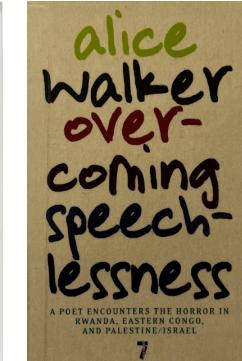
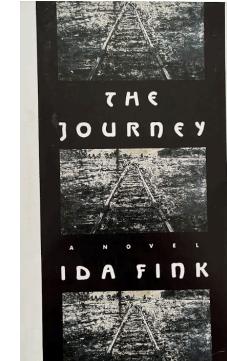
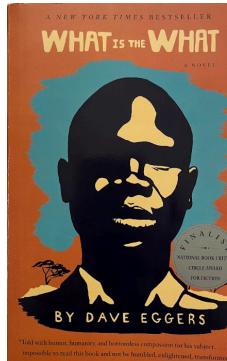
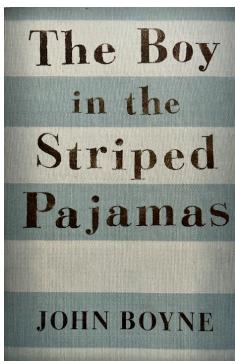
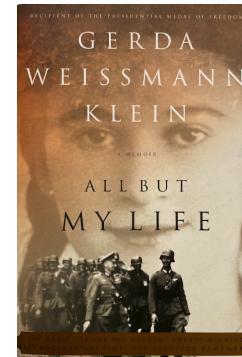
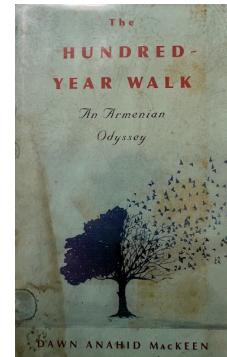
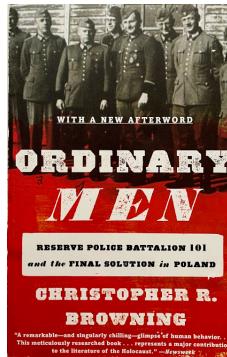
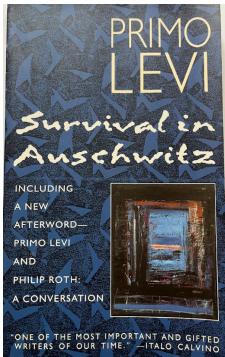
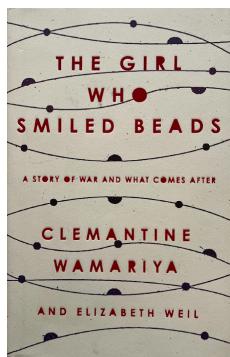
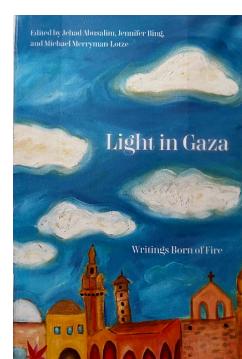
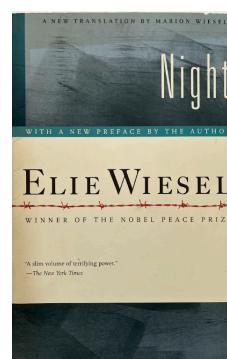
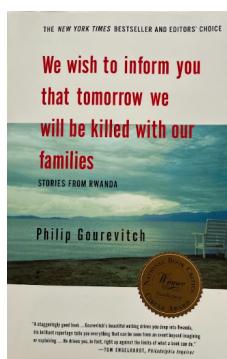
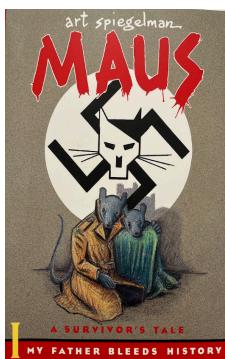
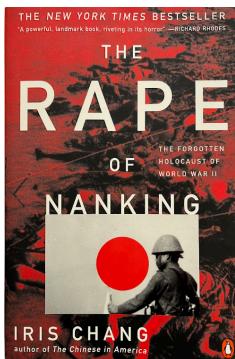


# The Devastating Cost of Silence

## A collection of books on genocide by Laura Wentzel '26



## **The Devastating Cost of Silence**

**A collection of books on genocide by Laura Wentzel '26**

Yesterday was Holocaust Remembrance Day. Eighty years ago - on January 27, 1945 - Soviet troops liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp. The boys and girls who survived the horrors of the Holocaust are old men and women now, still determined to tell their story and keep the memory of the victims alive. Today - January 28, 2025 - the US Defense Intelligence Agency “paused” the observation of Holocaust Remembrance Day, along with MLK day, Juneteenth, and other observances, in order to comply with an executive order banning all DEI programs in the military. As a US citizen, a student of history, and a future educator, this greatly troubles me because it means that the US government is helping to silence the voices of Holocaust survivors.

When most Americans think of the word “genocide”, the mass killing of Jews during the Holocaust likely comes to mind. This was certainly true for me until recently. As a high school student, I read several Holocaust memoirs. I was drawn to the amazing strength of spirit shown by the writers of these memoirs, and a small collection of “Holocaust books” began to grow on my bookshelf. Then, in the spring of 2024, I took a history course taught by Professor Robert Weinberg called “The Holocaust and the Problem of Genocide”. We approached the Holocaust from many different lenses and I added eight more books to my collection. These books ask some really important questions: Why do people who have coexisted for generations start killing each other? What causes someone to suddenly see their neighbor as less than human? How can psychology explain the transformation of ordinary people into killing machines? When are victims also perpetrators? Although this course helped me to think about the Holocaust in new ways, contrary to the course title, we did not consider any other genocides. This omission was reinforced when I walked back to my dorm after class each day, passing the pro-Palestinian encampment on Parrish beach. My fellow students were calling out the genocide in Gaza, and I realized that I knew almost nothing about any genocides beyond the Holocaust. I decided to educate myself. I sought out books to expand my collection and read about genocides in China,

Darfur, and Rwanda. My collection continues to be skewed towards the Holocaust, but it represents my goal to become better educated about the genocides that were left out of my history classes and do not often get talked about. The books that I would like to add to the collection explore genocide as a whole and specifically address genocides in the Americas, the Ottoman Empire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Palestine. I wish I could say that adding a few books would result in a collection that represents all genocides in the 20th and 21st centuries. Sadly, this only scratches the surface of attempts to eradicate our fellow humans on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion. I plan to continue adding to this collection because I feel it is my responsibility as a world citizen to know about historical genocides and to work against genocide that is happening today.

The books in this collection contain uncomfortable truths that have been hidden from society and ignored because they are unpalatable, painful, even gruesome. They reveal collaboration or complicity by individuals, groups, and governments (including our own). But I believe that it is more important than ever for people to be exposed to these truths. We must read these accounts of human evil and suffering out of respect for those who actually *lived* these experiences. However, contrary to what you might expect from a collection of books about genocide, those who read these books will not be left with feelings of doom and helplessness. This is because two powerful, universal truths permeate these books. First, humans have a tremendous capacity for evil, but also *for good*. In so many cases, the kindness of a stranger - possibly risking their own life - was the difference between someone's life and death. Second, *genocide happens because people are silent*. This truth inspired the title of my essay. Genocide does not happen suddenly or haphazardly. Classification leads to discrimination, then dehumanization, persecution, and ultimately extermination. Silence on the part of bystanders allows this progression to occur. In her book *Overcoming Speechlessness*, Alice Walker admonishes people to bring about change by raising their voice against genocide. There is no excuse for helplessness, because there is one simple thing that we can do: speak out.

### **Postscript I: A Warning**

The content of these books can be triggering for some people and therefore they should be approached with care.

### **Post-Script II: Where I got the books....**

Other than the books that I purchased in the Swarthmore College Bookstore for my History 037 course, most of the books came from the biannual book sale of my community library. I love to go to this sale because there are always fascinating books to discover, and I like the idea of recycling books through the community. I received the book *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* by Philip Gourevitch from my great-aunt at our annual family book-swap. I found the books that are not yet in the collection in my community library.

## My Collection Begins: Books that sparked my interest in learning about the Holocaust

### ***I Have Lived a Thousand Years* by Livia Bitton-Jackson**

Livia Bitton-Jackson's memoir of her survival of the Holocaust is the most powerful, captivating book I have ever read. At 13 years old, Ellie's life was upended when the Germans occupied her small Hungarian town, then transported her family to Auschwitz. The things she experienced were so profoundly horrific as to be almost unfathomable. Her detailed descriptions shed light on the everyday realities of existence in a concentration camp that people don't often think about. Sent to work at a munitions factory, Ellie struggles with the moral distress of manufacturing parts that will be used to kill Allies fighting for her liberation. She recognizes that the very things that are helping her survive, like the winter coat with another girl's name stitched inside, are only possible because of other people's suffering or death. Ellie lives to experience freedom again, but she is profoundly changed. Reading this book changed me.

### ***All But My Life* by Gerda Weissmann Klein**

I love the title of this autobiography. "*All But My Life*" poignantly captures how the Nazis took almost everything from Gerda Weissmann Klein, but she lived to tell her story and in doing so, kept alive the memory of everyone around her who didn't survive. Gerda's family was torn apart when the Nazis invaded her Polish town. Sent to different concentration camps, she never saw them again. Moved to many different labor camps - Sosnowitz, Marzdorf, Landeshut, and Grundorf - Gerda survived exhausting physical labor, meager rations, and the wrath of SS officers. In 1945, she left a camp with 4000 other girls on what would later be known as "The Death March to Volary". Out of the 2000 girls in her column, only 120 survived. Gerda credits her optimistic instinct that she would live to see liberation with keeping her alive through six years of suffering. Her story, about a part of the Holocaust that many people are unfamiliar with, is a testament to the power of hope and determination.

### ***The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne**

This is the only fictional work in my collection, a simple story - Boyne describes it as a fable - with a powerful message. Boyne chose to write the book from the perspective of a naive child because he felt that only survivors can truly understand, and write about, the horror of the Holocaust. Bruno, the protagonist, is a young German boy whose father is commandant of a concentration camp. Improbably, he befriends Schmuel, a Jewish boy in the camp. The innocence of the boys contrasts with the evil swirling around them, and in the end, evil wins.

## Trying to ‘understand’ the Holocaust and the Problem of Genocide: Books from History 037

### ***Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi**

Out of all the material I encountered in HIST 037, I was most impacted by *Survival in Auschwitz*. In his memoir, Levi provides a detailed and moving account of his personal experiences during the Holocaust as well as general insights into life in the camps. I especially appreciated that he used his book to tell the stories of people who suffered beside him. But perhaps the most valuable aspect of his memoir is the window into Levi’s mind. In writing about his hopes, fears, and motivations, he provides perspective on the concentration camp experience that can only come from an autobiography. Many Holocaust survivors saw their writing as a form of resistance and liberation. 80 years later, Levi’s memories still haunt and inspire.

### ***Neighbors* by Jan T. Gross**

The title of this book highlights a devastating truth: the Polish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne brutally murdered their Jewish *neighbors* early in the German occupation of Poland. In trying to understand the motivation for the massacre, Gross argues that it is important to consider the Holocaust as a series of discrete decisions “...improvised by local decision-makers, and hinging on unforced behavior, rooted in God-knows-what motivations” (pg 81). The bottom line: this genocide had many layers of complexity that defy full understanding.

### ***A Woman in Berlin* - Anonymous**

Unique in my collection, this primary source text exposes the little-known story of German women living in Berlin during and immediately after WWII who experienced misogyny and sex crimes at the hands of both German and Soviet soldiers. Although what these women experienced pales in comparison to other victims of the Holocaust, it opened my eyes to another side of the suffering that occurred in WWII Europe.

### ***The Journey* by Ida Fink**

As a young girl, Ida Fink survived the Nazi occupation of Poland by escaping the Zabarazh ghetto with her sister and then hiding and concealing their identities with forged papers. *The Journey* is part memoir, but blurs the line between Fink’s lived reality and her imagination. It is impossible to know, for example, if a Nazi guard really helped Ida and her sister escape or if that detail added to deepen the plot. But regardless of the details, these two sisters managed an incredible feat of survival, thanks in part to the kindness of strangers.

### ***Ordinary Men* by Christopher R. Browning**

How do 500 “ordinary men” from one police battalion become murderers of 38,000 Jews? Browning tackles this difficult question from a psychological perspective, and concludes that it resulted from a toxic mix of indoctrination and conformity. Once the men were convinced that Jews were the enemy, they could psychologically distance themselves because “The Jews stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility” (pg 59). This dehumanization of Jews as ‘the other’ helped the policemen justify the killing, allowing their need to fit in to overpower their moral convictions. This book forced me to face a painful truth: everyone has the capacity for good or evil depending on the situation they are faced with.

### ***Night* by Elie Wiesel**

In his memoir, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel recounts his harrowing story of survival in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. He reflects on how the atrocities he witnessed weathered down his sense of self and faith in God. His time in Nazi death camps left him numb, horrified by the loss and dehumanization he witnessed. As is the case with all the survivor’s memoirs that I have read, it is amazing to me that he was willing to revisit the trauma of his experience so that he could tell his story to the world - this makes it even more important to read.

### ***Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, by Art Spiegelman**

### ***Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here my Troubles Began*, by Art Spiegelman**

Art Spiegelman’s depiction of his father Vladek’s experience in the Holocaust in graphic novel form is a mainstay in any collection of Holocaust memorial literature. His choice to illustrate his father’s story by representing its ‘characters’ as animals (Jews are mice, Nazis are cats) emphasizes the dehumanization and predator-prey dynamics that were so prevalent in Nazi concentration camps. But what really makes Maus stand out to me is the generational trauma, illustrated in the scenes where Spiegelman depicts himself interacting with his father and struggling to understand his pain. This message - that trauma does not vanish after genocide or even after its survivors have died, but lives on in the emotional scars inherited by future generations - is a unique and powerful undercurrent through both books. The scenes where Vladek experiences lapses in memory or is reluctant to share certain details of his experience are especially meaningful because they emphasize just how valuable this record is.

**Beyond the Holocaust:  
Books I sought out to expand my knowledge of genocides**

***The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* by Iris Chang**

As its title suggests, this book shines light on a little known side of 20th century history. It is a well-researched book that uses a plethora of data to convey the vast scale of the genocide while still highlighting the humanity involved in the suffering that took place. A major theme is the struggle to remember history. Because of Japanese denial, the Rape of Nanking has been surrounded by a culture of silence. Many of the Chinese survivors who worked through their trauma enough to tell their story were denied legitimacy and told their stories were exaggerated. It seems like part of Chang's purpose in writing this is not just to increase awareness of this "forgotten massacre" but also to tell the stories of those who were silenced in their fight to share their experience.

***What is the What, The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* by Dave Eggers**

Eggers worked with Valentino Achak Deng to share his story as a victim/survivor of the Darfur genocide. The book recounts Valentino's childhood as a "Lost Boy of Sudan", caught up in violence of the Sudanese civil war with other orphaned children and fleeing from one refugee camp to another in extremely dangerous conditions. The story doesn't end when Valentino is finally granted asylum in the US, because a crucial part of his identity was formed as he struggled with the refugee experience. His 'new life' in Atlanta is plagued with lingering emotional and psychological trauma, survivor's guilt, and a feeling of disconnection as he is caught between his violent Sudanese past and unfamiliar American future.

***Left to Tell* by Immaculée Ilibagiza**

Ilibagiza's story is one of utmost resilience in the face of devastating tragedy. After watching her Tutsi family be murdered by Hutu extremists, she survives by hiding for 91 days in her pastor's hidden bathroom. Immobilized in the cramped room with several other women but alone in her sadness over her family's death, she turned to her faith and now testifies that it was only through prayer that she survived to tell her story. Perhaps the most profound message Ilibagiza shares is her forgiveness of the people who killed her family, not because she excused the atrocities they committed but because she wanted to rid herself of her hatred, as it was hatred and division she had watched fuel the Rwandan genocide.

### ***The Girl Who Smiled Beads* by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil**

Clementine and her sister fled Kigali and made a dangerous journey running from the Rwandan genocide through a series of refugee camps before being relocated to the US. The book is interspersed with reflections on her current adult life and experience in the US dealing with her psychological scars. The title *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* represents Clementine's journey to healing and the resilience it took even in the aftermath of the war to reclaim her life. Even in moments of intense suffering, she tried to smile and look to the small pieces of beauty that remained.

### ***We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* by Philip Gourevitch**

Author and journalist Gourevitch wrote this book based on his travels to Rwanda in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. His narrative oscillates between his own reporting on the historical context of the genocide and the testimonies of survivors who provide touching insight on the atrocities of the genocide itself. An element that I found to be especially compelling was the ethical questions Gourevitch raised about international complicity; he condemns not only the perpetrators but also the apathetic bystanders. Conversations like these are so relevant in today's world, in which genocide is still very much a problem. This book is a powerful call to action and a message that in apathy, one enables violence.

### **Inspired by Current Events: Books that I would like to add my collection**

### ***The Hundred-Year Walk, An Armenian Odyssey* by Dawn Anahid MacKeen**

I love books that explore connections, personal and global, between different times in history. This book tells the story of a genocide that was completely omitted from my history classes, the killing of approximately one million Armenians - half their total population - as the Ottoman Empire fell during WWI. Stephen Miskjian was one Armenian who survived, and his amazing story is told by his granddaughter (the author) who retraced her grandfather's courageous steps through Turkey and Syria, as she tried to fully understand what he went through. When MacKeen talks about how she came to feel so passionate about learning and sharing her grandfather's story she says, "Doing nothing felt like forgetting, and forgetting genocide seemed almost as heinous as the crime itself" (pg 7).

### ***Overcoming Speechlessness by Alice Walker***

It can be easy to feel helpless and defeated when thinking about genocide in our world today. This book is important because it is a call to action. Walker tells short stories of her experiences visiting Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Palestine, with the greatest portion of the book dedicated to the situation in Gaza. The message that this book brought home to me is that, in order to make progress, we need to speak out about the atrocities happening around the world. I find it ironic that his book is categorized as “current events”; and although it was written in 2010, there are still atrocities on the news today in Rwanda, the Congo, and Gaza.

### ***Light in Gaza: Writings Born of Fire - Edited by Jehad Abusalim, Jennifer Bing, and Michael Merryman Lotze***

Compiled in 2022, *Light in Gaza* highlights stories of Gazan resilience under Israeli occupation, even before the Israeli military operation in Gaza precipitated by the October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist attack. I was especially moved by the story “On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording”. It talks about how Palestinian people are recording their own story so it can’t be erased or rewritten: “We record to resist the labeling of our people as unworthy, if not inhuman, by the so-called ‘objective’ Western media...We record for future generations, to tell them this is what truly happened. That we stood here, demanded our rights, fought for them, and were annihilated. We record not to humanize ourselves for others, but so that future generations will remember who we were and what we did. We record our plea for humanity’s help to end this horror, which is more than our cameras can bear” (pg 30).

### ***Less Than Human by David Livingston Smith***

Why do we dehumanize others? More importantly, how can we stop? These are the critical questions raised by Smith in this thought-provoking book, subtitled “why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others”. Smith first takes a historical perspective, considering dehumanization of indigenous peoples during the colonization of the New World, the role of dehumanization in slavery, and the connection between dehumanization and genocide from WWI to the 21st century. Then he looks at the role of racism in dehumanization and finally considers cruelty through the lens of evolutionary biology. This book would be a valuable addition to any collection on genocide because it grapples with the most difficult question: Why?

## Bibliography

Abusalim, Jehad, et al. *Light In Gaza*. Haymarket Books, 2022.

Anonymous. *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City:A Diary*. Translated by Philip Boehm. Picador/Henry Holt, 2006.

Bitton-Jackson, Livia. *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*. Scholastic, 1997.

Boyne, John. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Ember / Random House, 2011.

Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final solution in Poland*. Harper Perennial, 2017.

Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. Penguin Books, 1997.

Eggers, Dave. *What is the What, The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. Vintage Books, 2007.

Fink, Ida. *The Journey*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992.

Gourevitch, Philip. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*. Picador, 1998.

Gross, Jan T. *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

Ilibagiza, Immaculée with Steve Erwin. *Left To Tell*. Hay House, 2006.

Klein, Gerda Weissmann. *All But My Life*. Hill and Wang, 1995.

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. Simon and Schuster, 1996.

MacKeen, Dawn Anahid. *The Hundred-Year Walk: An Armenian Odyssey*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Smith, David Livingstone. *Less Than Human*. St. Martin's Press, 2011.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. Pantheon Books, 2020.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. Pantheon Books, 2020.

Walker, Alice. *Overcoming Speechlessness*. Seven Stories Press, 2010.

Wamariya, Clemantine and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads, A Story of War and What Comes After*. Crown Publishing, 2018.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. Hill and Wang, 2006.