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Should There Be One Universal Narrative for Remembering the Holocaust?

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A uniform, universal narrative of the Holocaust does not and cannot exist. This would contradict the discursive nature of historical studies and their close link with public debates. Knowledge about and perspectives on the Holocaust change over time, depending on the questions and debates in scholarship and society. Moreover, narratives of the Holocaust also differ in the various national settings, depending on the country's history during the Second World War, or other experiences.

I would like to give two examples of change in influential accounts and the perception of the Holocaust. The first is the replacement of Raul Hilberg's seminal book, *The Destruction of European Jews,* by Saul Friedländer's study, *Nazi Germany and the Jews,* as the most influential comprehensive account of the Holocaust.[1] Indeed, Hilberg's study and concepts strongly advanced research and understanding of the Holocaust. Since the late 1990s, however, it has been increasingly criticised for its strong focus on German documents and actions of the German perpetrators, and the lack of discussion of the Jews' experiences.[2] By contrast, Friedländer's narrative extensively includes testimonies and perspectives of surviving Jews.

The other example concerns the growing attention to the mass murder of the Jews in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union. In the second half of the 20th century, the gas chambers of Auschwitz, i.e. mass murder and elimination of bodies carried out with industrial rationality, was considered to be the actual

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[1] Raul Hilberg: *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961) (and several later print runs, a revised, extended edition appeared in 1985); Saul Friedländer: *Nazi Germany and the Jews, vol. 1: The Years of Persecution 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), *vol. 2: The Years of Extermination 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

[2] See the discussion of Hilberg‘s work in René Schlott, ed., *Raul Hilberg und die Holocaust-Historiographie* [Raul Hilberg and Holocaust historiography] (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019).

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"rupture in civilisation", the core event and essence of the Holocaust.[3] Over the last two decades, however, the direct mass murder in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union, mostly through mass shootings, has been attracting increasing attention in academic research and the public. For these events, in 2008, Patrick Desbois coined the term "Holocaust by bullets" to emphasise the difference from the prevailing image of the Holocaust as mass murder in gas chambers.[4] Now, apparently, no longer primarily the "sterile", impersonal, bureaucratic mass murder of Jews transported from all over Europe to Auschwitz and other extermination sites, but the direct, personal, bloody massacres at execution pits are increasingly seen as the part of the Holocaust that needed explanation most of all.

Moreover, a look at different national contexts reveals even more substantial problems for a unified narrative, as the Holocaust was not a uniform event in various countries. For example, the Holocaust is also remembered in countries whose Jews were not murdered, which results in distinct questions, perspectives, and emphases in Holocaust narratives in different countries. The remembrance of the Holocaust is usually also connected to controversies about the role and participation of one's own nation or state. Such controversies were an essential framework in which the memory of the Holocaust has gained importance compared to other aspects of the history of the Second World War since the second half of the twentieth century. These controversies address country-specific issues and have an impact which elements and questions of the Holocaust are highlighted.

In the (West) German case, the year 1933, i.e., Hitler's rise to power and its causes, were the main point of focus until the 1970s. At the same time, however, public knowledge of German mass crimes grew, not least due to an increasing number of trials against Nazi perpetrators from the SS and police apparatus since the 1960s. As a result of this, but also due to growing international attention, the Holocaust became more and more the focus of German remembrance of the Second World War, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Controversies arose here; above all about how far participation and responsibility in German society extended beyond the narrower circle of perpetrators from the SS and police, and what significance the Holocaust should have for German identity.

Around the same time, the Holocaust started attracting more public interest in other Western European countries, too. In France, for example, already in the 1970s, a renewed critical discussion about the Vichy regime and collaboration with the Germans began. In contrast to earlier discussions, soon the French participation in the deportation of Jews to the German extermination camps in Eastern Europe became the focus. High-profile court cases against former senior police officers and officials contributed to this.

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[3] See the contributions in Dan Diner, ed., *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz* [Rupture in civilization. Thinking after Auschwitz] (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1988).

[4] Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets. A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

The United States had a major impact on the development of memory about the Holocaust worldwide. Here, too, the Holocaust came to the fore over other elements of the Second World War remembrance mostly starting from the 1970s. In the broader American public, the Holocaust became perceived not only as a warning against antisemitism, but against racism in general. This American view of the Holocaust as a general admonition against ethnic prejudice, discrimination, and racist violence and murder strongly contributed to the universal relevance of the Holocaust as a central negative point of reference for an international morality and the most important element of a global historical memory.[5]

Also in the US the memory of the Holocaust provoked critical questions, for instance about the rejection of Jewish refugees from Germany, the decision not to bomb the death camps and, most importantly, about the lack of persecution, or even protection of Nazi criminals by US agencies in the beginning of the Cold War.[6]

In the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, public attention to the remembrance of the Holocaust has developed in substance only since the 1990s. In the Soviet Union, memory about the Jews as a specific group of victims of the German occupation was largely suppressed from the public sphere. This suppression was less ruthless in the other socialist states, but there too, as in the Western world, for a long time, other aspects of the Second World War were in the foreground. In addition, when Holocaust remembrance started to develop, it was accompanied by controversies about domestic involvement in crimes against Jews and lack of help. In Poland, these controversies were particularly severe during the Jedwabne debate.[7]

Three major differences of the Holocaust remembrance apply in varying degrees to Eastern European countries. They contributed to controversies, but need to be taken into account also in narratives of the Holocaust:

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[5] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). See for a comparative analysis of Holocaust remembrance in Germany, the US, and Israel Daniel Levy, Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

[6] See, for example, Richard Rashke, *Useful Enemies. John Demjanjuk and America's Open-Door Policy for Nazi War Criminals* (Harrison, NY: Delphinium, 2013).

[7] Antony Polonsky, Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond. the controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Piotr Forecki, *Od “Shoah” do “Strachu”: spory o polsko-żydowska przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* [From “Shoah” to “Fear”: controversies about the Polish-Jewish past and remembrance in public debates] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010).

(1) Especially in Poland and in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union, a very brutal German occupation regime prevailed, with a considerably higher number of victims among the non-Jewish population than in most other parts of Europe.
(2) The actual mass murder of the Jews took place in Eastern Europe – in death camps in the German-occupied territories of Poland, and mainly in the occupied Soviet territories, through mass executions. By far the largest number of Holocaust victims were Eastern European Jews. The impact of the mass murder of the Jews on societies here was much stronger than in most other parts of Europe.
(3) Eastern European societies were not only victims of crimes committed by the German Nazi regime, but also of communist crimes, especially those committed by the Soviet Union under Stalin.

The latter point is particularly relevant for Ukraine, where several million people died during the Holodomor in 1932–33.[8] Here, more than elsewhere, the question of how Soviet mass crimes should be remembered alongside the Holocaust surges in a particularly strong way.

This is also a question that gained increasing attention at the level of the European Union after the accession of Eastern European countries in the 2000s.[9] Ultimately, we see the permeation of different memories of the large mass crimes of the 20th century between East and West. On the one hand, since the 1990s, the memory of the Holocaust has become increasingly important in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, during the last two decades or so experiences of Eastern European societies with Soviet mass crimes have increasingly found their way into a pan-European memory including the questions virulent in many Eastern European societies: to what extent the Holocaust alone can be considered a negative “signature of the [twentieth] century” (Jürgen Habermas), or whether the Soviet mass crimes need to be included, too.

This permeation is an ongoing process that can be expected to intensify as a result of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Moreover, this war raises the question of whether the concern, in many western countries, that the remembrance of Soviet mass crimes could be misused to avoid a critical engagement with the Holocaust might have defeated its purpose, because it obscured the fact that a new war in Europe was not emerging from a lack of critical engagement with the Holocaust and local collaboration with the Nazi occupiers, but rather from the lack of critical examination of the Soviet regime and Soviet mass crimes in Russia.

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[8] Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine. Stalin’s War on Ukraine* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

[9] Stefan Troebst, “23 August: The Genesis of a Euro-Atlantic Day of Remembrance”, *Remembrance and Solidarity Studies* 1 (2012), 15–51.

Another recent debate concerns the relationship between colonial crimes and the Holocaust, and how both should be remembered.[10]

Overall, the various examples clearly demonstrate that there is no single Holocaust narrative, but that it is changing with new questions in historical scholarship, and under the influence of an ongoing societal debate. Moreover, the history of the Holocaust and historical experiences vary in different countries, which gives rise to different emphases and questions that narratives of the Holocaust need to address.

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[10] Saul Friedländer et al., *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen. Anmerkungen zum neuen Streit über den Holocaust* [A crime without a name. Comments about the new controversy about the Holocaust] (München: Beck, 2022).