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CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

**Future Challenges to Holocaust Scholarship  
as an Integrated Part of the  
Study of Modern Dictatorship**

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

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J.B. AND MAURICE C. SHAPIRO ANNUAL LECTURE  
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The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies annually appoints a distinguished specialist in Holocaust studies to pursue independent research and writing, to present lectures at universities throughout the United States, and to serve as a resource for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Center, government personnel, educators, students, and the public. Funding for the program is made possible by a generous grant from the J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Charitable Trust.



ON THE THRESHOLD of a new century and a new millennium, we are confronted anew with an important task: to situate the Holocaust as political legacy and to claim attention to it from future generations. Will this legacy be kept by those who are far from the experiences of World War II and of the emergence of fascist and communist dictatorships, events the principal inheritance of which has been the consequences of deliberate murder, of the killing of hundreds of millions of people for the sake of utopian visions that had to fail? The destruction of European Jewry certainly stands apart even in this era of unparalleled carnage that in large measure defines the twentieth century. All of us fervently hope that, as our civil calendars turn to the year 2000, we will start a more peaceful global epoch, not least because of the memory of the horrors of the Holocaust.

It is a great honor for me to speak at the opening of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies' inaugural conference on Holocaust research and Holocaust studies in the twenty-first century. I also am grateful for the opportunity to serve as the J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Senior Scholar in Residence for this academic year. The conference assembles an impressive selection

of outstanding researchers in the field of Holocaust studies, including pioneers such as Raul Hilberg, Christopher Browning, and Michael Marrus, who are widely known for their irreplaceable contributions. Given our forward-looking topic, it is at least as important that we also have here a number of younger historians who, with their new insights and approaches, will sustain Holocaust studies well into the coming century. Scholars are here from Israel, from Germany, and from many other countries besides the United States. Their presence underlines the international cooperation in this field, which is now being further enriched by the contributions of scholars from formerly communist countries. Part of the task of the newly founded center is to enlarge international cooperation and exchange in view of a veritable globalization of Holocaust studies. Simultaneously, extended Holocaust research covering hitherto less-analyzed regions, particularly those in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, is one of its foremost targets. This goal can be attained only through extended cooperation between individual researchers.

The present conference is a part of a series of smaller and larger enterprises of this kind, but there is one outstanding forerunner, which I was similarly privileged to attend: the December 1993 conference held shortly after the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. That conference, “The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined,” succeeded both in presenting a balance of previous research and raising the question of what the future of Holocaust studies was to be. The frame of reference of the present conference continues this discourse and examines the challenges as well as the possible impact of Holocaust studies into the twenty-first century. At the 1993 conference, Yehuda Bauer argued convincingly that the Holocaust, different from other parts of the historical reminiscence, is “a past which will not go away.” Michael Marrus drew the comparison with the history of the French Revolution, arguing that it is less the access to new sources than the change of the historical perspective that will signify future Holocaust research. Raul Hilberg pointed to the abundance of newly accessible sources, but argued that these could not replace the necessary historical contextualization. He pleaded for “an understanding of the era and the multiplicity of events in which the Holocaust was embedded.”

In the meantime, Holocaust studies have expanded, finding expression in the

establishment of numerous Holocaust centers in the United States and in many other countries, and distributing information about the origins, implementation, and possible consequences of the Shoah for future generations. Simultaneously, the Holocaust, being a fundamental challenge to the inherited value patterns of Western society, has expanded into literature, the arts, and philosophy as well as into the media. Sometimes one gets the impression that its legacy could survive independently from the historical fundament and ongoing historical research that is shedding new light on the manifold causations and repercussions of the process of destruction. In some respects it is possible to trace a trend to isolate the scholarly advances from the somewhat simplified instruction provided to the public through the media. Therefore, the issue of bridging the gap between public perception and scholarly research increases in importance, and is actually reflected in the necessity to keep alive the fruitful cooperation between the Museum itself and its research center, which is, I am convinced, an indispensable part of this institution.

The following observations evaluate the present state of Holocaust research. I will then accentuate the impact of the centrality of the Holocaust, exemplifying this by offering an overview of the role of Holocaust studies in Germany. Finally, we will consider an outline of the directions future research may take.

An exhaustive evaluation of ongoing projects, discussions, and publications in Holocaust studies would be almost impossible. We may distinguish between the enlargement of the research areas on the one hand and the intensification of its depth on the other. The first is related to the increasing number of case studies, especially covering the events in the former Soviet territories, such as the Baltic region, Belorussia, the Ukraine, and Eastern Galicia, as well as the events in the Balkans, in Hungary, Slovakia, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Vichy France, and the Benelux countries. These case studies, as some presentations in this conference will illustrate, shed new light on the second stage of the Holocaust, on that almost silent but terribly systematic liquidation of the still surviving parts of the Jewish population in the areas occupied by Germany as well as within the satellite countries.

This further underlines that the perpetration and support of mass murder were not restricted to the SS, the Order Police, and auxiliaries recruited, forcibly or otherwise, from the



indigenous populations, but included the German administrators, the civilian representatives of the labor offices, and of Organization Todt, and especially the Army as well. From this perspective, the recent public debate about the reliability of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research exhibition on the atrocities of the Wehrmacht appears to be rather superfluous. Although one has to admit that the photo documentation contained some painful mistakes, we would be misled to gain the impression that German public opinion is reverting to its previous exoneration of the armed forces. Elements of those forces did actively participate in the genocide, and most Germans now understand that.

The other dimension of recent Holocaust research is typified by its focus on analyzing the motivations and the biographical backgrounds of the perpetrators as well as on the administrative background of the implementation of the genocide. This refers to the rank and file of the SS and police apparatus, the role of party affiliates in Eastern Europe, and the impact of the economic exploitation of Poland and the Soviet Union. It also refers to the role of the so-called “East research” (*Ostforschung*) promoted by a group of historians who later would fill prominent positions in their profession in West Germany. In many respects, access to former Soviet archives has prompted this research, which is performed mainly by younger historians who do not shy away from depicting shocking atrocities committed primarily against the autochthonous Jewish population.

As a consequence of these efforts, our knowledge of the preparations for and implementation of the genocide in the occupied territories has been significantly enhanced, for example the role of the implicated organizations and bureaucracies; the participation of non-German auxiliaries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe; and the responsibility of the local police forces in Vichy, in Belgium, and in the Netherlands. The great number of newly opening research fields is impressive and sometimes bewildering. Only a very few experts are able today to take an informed overview of the entire field of Holocaust studies. The same phenomenon occurring in other scholarly fields—that scholars tend to report and to publish only to their colleagues—also holds true for Holocaust research. This situation is partly an inevitable consequence of methodological sophistication, but one of the challenges for Holocaust studies is thus the need to

integrate the different aspects into a universal picture that is transmittable to people not working in the field. The ordinary visitor to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, therefore, presents a continuous challenge for the translation of historical research into communicable information.

If we look into the future, we have to be aware that we no longer will be able to rely on the testimony of living survivors who act as interpretative transmitters. We will not have them to connect past events to the experience of coming generations who will not know much about the specific conditions under which the murder of European Jewry was accomplished. Historians will finally have to live up to their responsibilities and cannot or should not delegate their function to the ever-present media that tend to adapt the material to prevailing interests and predilections.

Hence, conveying not only the monstrosity but also the complexity of the Holocaust will remain as a future challenge, because the contours and main structures of the historical process could potentially vanish in a flood of details. As a result of this, Raul Hilberg has warned against a trend toward overspecialization that would remove the subject from the historical context. Actually, the trend towards a mythologization of the Holocaust, isolating it from the adjacent historical conditions, is widespread, especially in Germany, where the talk of the uniqueness of the Holocaust tends to deflect attention from the historical context and, thereby, to diminish the moral responsibility of the nation.

Since the centrality of the Holocaust can no longer be denied by any serious researcher or interpreter of the history of the Third Reich as well as of World War II, it becomes increasingly important to put it into its specific historical context. In this respect, I want to speak out against the continuously repeated assumption that the Holocaust cannot be sufficiently explained by the historians and that, as Dan Diner has stated, there remains an unexplainable “black box” that is to be deciphered only by means of theological and philosophical reflection and that the perspectives of perpetrators and of victims cannot be reconciled by the historical narrative. This kind of historical agnosticism usually does not take into account the enormous research efforts to analyze the specific ideological, political, socioeconomic, administrative, and psychological conditions under which the systematic mass murder occurred. Notwithstanding the contributions of

philosophers, social scientists, writers, and artists to add to and enhance our understanding of the Holocaust, to depict and explain it are and remain the primary tasks of the historical profession.

If we do not succeed in placing the Holocaust within a vivid framework of historical events and structures, students who no longer have any notion of the conditions of World War II will fail to comprehend how an unprecedented system of terror could have emerged. Instead, they will ask why that generation, including the Western powers, were so stupid as not to prevent Hitler from attaining unlimited power and pursuing his central target: the elimination of European Jewry. In addition, the impetus to learn more about the mechanisms that led to the genocide will wane despite the fact that this knowledge is crucial to preventing similar events in the future.

Moreover, as Raul Hilberg has remarked, the over-accentuation of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, implying the impossibility of historical comparisons, leads toward a problematic de-historization. In fact, stressing its uniqueness supports the perspective that the Holocaust is something alien to the course of twentieth-century European and world history. This would fulfill in retrospect the Nazi intention to keep the murder of the Jews secret and make its vestiges disappear, as Heinrich Himmler himself proclaimed on October 13, 1943, that the liquidation of the Jews had been “a never written *Ruhmesblatt*, ‘document of glory’.” Conversely, the elements of continuity throughout the interwar period are more frequently addressed by the recent scholarly publications.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the necessity to describe the Holocaust as a political process and not as a rather mythical event seems to be even more important. Its origins as well as its consequences should appropriately be recognized as embedded in the diversity of factors that led to the ever escalating, but not initially deliberately planned persecution of the Jews, a process that nevertheless was the inevitable culmination of the destructive nature of the Nazi regime, not only in ideological but also in political terms.

The foci of the destructive power of the regime certainly encompassed, or would have encompassed, other ethnic, denominational, or social groups, such as Gypsies and Slavs as well as so-called asocials, the disabled, and persons suffering from genetic diseases. The murder of the

European Jews eclipsed these other murders because of the specific anti-Jewish mentality of the Nazi hard core amalgamated with the inherited prejudices against Jews that were symptomatic of Christian society. Prevailing traditional value patterns yet slowed the development of Nazi radicalization and annihilation policies toward these other groups. Any predetermined perspective, such as Daniel Goldhagen's assumption of an ever active eliminatory antisemitism in Germany, tracing back to the Enlightenment period, does not reflect the varieties of antisemitism in Germany. Such a perspective cannot convince because of its monocausal approach.

The explanatory function of historical analysis consists in presenting a logical narrative that integrates the variety of conditions and influencing factors and basically follows an evolutionary approach. In the case of the Holocaust, the classical means of applying mainly a political but also an ideological approach do not suffice. The analysis must include a study of the mentalities, specific interests, social factors, and also those additional elements that may appear to be trivial but may help to explain why the multitude of perpetrators as well as bystanders did not protest or even harbor serious reservations about the atrocities and crimes with which they were directly and indirectly involved.

Obviously, the extreme moral indifference of the German elite, traceable back to the revolution of November 1918, as well as the destruction of the social fabric through the Nazi mobilization strategies, had decisive impact on the de-evolution of the entire society into a system of unlimited terror against Jews and other subjugated groups. These factors have to be interpreted in conjunction with the repercussions within the bureaucratic establishment and the increasing anonymization of responsibility.

The study of the history of the Holocaust has been, in recent years, a period of extremely fruitful research that has had an unexpectedly broad resonance. This is manifested by the growth of Holocaust research centers as well as the establishment of chairs dedicated to the exploration of the Holocaust. This happened primarily in the United States but also abroad. What had been in the 1950s and 1960s a marginal phenomenon in the historical sciences, today is a broad stream that is continuously gaining interest among the students and academics, as well as among the general public.

This, however, may not continue indefinitely. The background for the public resonance of Holocaust history, which is mirrored in the very existence of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and its sustained high number of visitors, is a reflection of the specific American context. The much-discussed Americanization of the Holocaust is to be regarded as a shift in the self-definition of the American nation. This new notion embraces the legacy of the Holocaust as paramount symbol of the irrevocable obligation to defend human rights worldwide, especially with regard to oppressed minorities, whether ethnic or denominational groups.

But Americans are not alone in such matters of conscience. Today, more than half a century after the destruction of European Jewry, many other nations, including those who were either actively or indirectly involved in the Holocaust, also have learned the lessons of the most shocking experience of the period that has come to be symbolized by the name Auschwitz. In particular, the Germans—and you will permit me to comment on this issue somewhat more extensively—seemingly have become more and more aware of the ethical implications of the mass murder committed against European Jewry. This stems from the fact that Germany's nation-state inheritance has been blurred and that the nation's fall into atavistic terrorism after 1933 has resulted in a lasting break with its previous heritage.

Theodor Adorno's famous phrase, which he later modified, that one never again could write poems after Auschwitz, still contains some truth. Any attempt to return to the pre-Nazi pattern of German nationalism appears to be abortive. Hitler's exploitation of the national loyalty of the German citizens and the almost inconceivable number and depravity of crimes to which they became accomplices, has resulted in an extended erosion of former nationalist feelings and a lasting national indifference in that regard. This is reflected in the fact that most younger Germans feel a deep-seated apprehension against the use of traditional national symbols, just as they abjure any nationalistic zeal.

The controversy that emerged in October 1998 over the projected Berlin Holocaust memorial and that is closely connected with the names of Ignaz Bubis and Martin Walser is symptomatic of an attempt by some representatives of the older generation to purge the Holocaust legacy from German national consciousness. These "sanitizers" would do so in order to revert to

an unbroken historical continuity tracing back to the nineteenth-century nation-state tradition or rather to an idealization of it. These attempts, however, are precluded by the psychological changes in the self-concept of those generations who grew up in the years after the Second World War and for whom the legacy of the Bismarck Reich tradition has lost any nationalist significance. A minor recrudescence of this conflict is reflected in the recent attacks against the Hamburg exhibition on the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht, mirroring a certain trend toward more conservative positions in the historical profession and the media.

These and other attempts to revive the German historical consciousness and to regain former national self-esteem notwithstanding, it is significant that the legacy of the Holocaust has shifted into the center of today's German national self-perception. What the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has called constitutional patriotism apparently is a rebuilding of a new national consciousness based on the experience of the Third Reich and the Shoah as starting point.

This is a rather recent phenomenon, however. During the 1950s and 1960s, German historians as well as German public opinion still were preoccupied with the different stages of Jewish persecution up to 1939, but widely ignored the escalation during the Second World War. The abominable events of the Reich Crystal Night in November 1938 found intensive attention, particularly with regard to the prosecution of Nazi crimes during the earlier years of the regime, whereas the later atrocities were left to the Allied criminal courts. In contrast to the period up to 1939, the Holocaust appeared as a set of events the responsibility for which lay with Heinrich Himmler and his underlings, who were deemed solely responsible, while the German Army was perceived to have had no involvement at all and the German people no clear understanding of the annihilation process.

This distorted and incomplete picture was reflected in the development of historical research that for a long time was restricted to the period up to 1939 but would not cover the Second World War itself, and especially neither the German occupation policies in the East nor the Holocaust. The classic works of Gerald Reitlinger and Alexander Dallin, for instance, were written by non-Germans and did not find much public attention. The same was true with respect to Raul Hilberg's pioneering work *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which was not translated into German until 1982 and even then was rather neglected.

As we learn from Michael Marrus' *The Holocaust in History*, the professional study of the Holocaust did not really begin until the mid-1960s, and was met with strong reservations, and even apprehension in some Jewish circles, to the effect that "the dispassionate rethinking" might "end up by trivializing the fundamentally evil nature of the regime." This distrust was above all articulated by Elie Wiesel, who argued "Auschwitz defies imagination and perception; it submits only to memory." This has not prevented historians from exploring exactly this field and responding to the challenge of the unprecedentedness of the Shoah.

With respect to Germany, the first break with this historical self-abstinence from dealing with the cruelties of the war period and its atrocities was the widely regarded translation of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It provided an additional impetus for pushing forward with war-crimes trials that comprised the Holocaust complex, initially with the Ulm killing-units murder trials of 1960. However, the trials were then still widely disregarded by the historical profession.

In Germany, the relative disregard of the Holocaust as a subject of historical research was overcome mainly in conjunction with the intergenerational change. In particular, from the early 1990s onwards, a younger cohort of historians would cover this field that had been almost completely neglected by their predecessors and peers, who would not engage in Holocaust studies despite the efforts of the Munich Institute for *Zeitgeschichte* to familiarize university students and a broader public with the history of the Third Reich. Today, that has completely changed. An extended group of younger historians, among them Götz Aly, Dieter Pohl, Thomas Sandkühler, and Ulrich Herbert for the Germans, and Hans Safrian and Walter Manoschek for the Austrians, and many others have taken up the challenge that emerged from the availability of new source material in the former Soviet Union. These efforts helped fill the gap that existed in previous German Holocaust studies.

This historiographical development accompanied a fundamental shift in the leading historical paradigms concerning the Nazi period. The theory of totalitarianism that originally predominated was rather blind to the unique events of the Holocaust, and it did not contribute much to its explanation. The same was true for its neo-Marxist counterpart, which explained Nazi dictatorship as a desperate attempt of the capitalist class to restore its shattered supremacy.

A new approach to Nazi history eventually gained ground in the 1970s, one that no longer focused on the events around the seizure of power and the failure of the German conservative-authoritarian elite to stop Adolf Hitler. Instead it aimed at analyzing the internal structure of the regime and at explaining its ever-accelerating radicalization that culminated in the systematic liquidation of the Jews under German rule. The focus of the overall interpretation of the history of the Third Reich has incrementally shifted toward the Holocaust and the preceding events that laid the groundwork for the deliberate mass murder of millions of men, women, and children.

What originally had been regarded as a by-effect of Hitler's murderous dictatorship gradually became the center of historiographic interest and the leading paradigm. Since then, the study of the Holocaust has formed an integral part of the study of modern dictatorship. Whereas comparable mass killings have been conducted by modern dictatorships even in the post-Holocaust epoch, the unprecedented Nazi war against the Jews signified a fundamental break with the legacy of European civilization and its basic value patterns and ethical standards.

The Nazi Judaeocide comprised a new variety of politics that could not easily be equated with Stalinist terrorism, and thus it gained a quality of its own. Cynicism, loss of any sense of reality, absence of rational policies, psychological compensation, visionary thinking are all ingredients of this variety of "racial" terrorism, the significance of which lay in the fact that there was no point of satisfaction or exhaustion of the murderous rage. The anti-Jewish furor raged until the very last moment of the regime's very existence.

The centrality of the Holocaust in every interpretation of the Nazi past that has gained wide acceptance in recent years, however, does not preclude the tendency to insulate it from the historical events. One may justifiably speak of its unprecedentedness regarding the combination of a specific atavistic ideology with the immense destructive capacity of the modern industrialist state and the spiraling technological development resulting in total control of the individual citizen as well as in the extreme refinement of suppression mechanisms. Rather than ideological indoctrination, this phenomenon enabled the Nazi regime to pursue the total annihilation of the Jews under the fictional pretext that their very existence weakened the Aryan nation and especially the war effort. But the combination of political and ideological factors that culminated in the systematic mass murder was not without precedent and specific historical ramifications.



Therefore, one should only cautiously proceed with the assumption of the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust.

The former view that only a small group of fanatical perpetrators had been responsible for the genocide while the majority of the nation was not involved at all is no longer viable. Recent research has expanded the circle of those whom we know to have been either directly or indirectly committed, including also a considerable number of professional historians. Revealing the cooperation of industry, of banks, of insurance companies, and of other commercial institutions that indirectly supported the Holocaust, either by financing SS constructions—as in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau—or by providing economic or technical support—as in the case of Degussa—the network of those proven to have been involved in the Holocaust is continually expanding.

This, however, raises the problem that individual liability is less discernible. There are not only no heroes in Holocaust history, as Raul Hilberg pointed out, but also no demonic villains, as the Eichmann case made obvious. The considerable degree of trivial factors propelling the annihilation process does not alleviate the task of the historian to depict the chain of events as a meaningful process in which the meanest desires of individuals are systematically mobilized and the excesses of violence and even sadism are almost indescribable. In this respect, it appears to be insufficient just to isolate the ideological factor or to return to a Hitler-centrist interpretation.

Recently, functionalist historians have been criticized for disregarding the biographical factor. That criticism is only partially valid, however, because their objection to the inherited Hitler-centric approach paved the way toward a detailed analysis of the destruction process and its bearers. But it is true that the increasing efforts to present biographical studies of the individual perpetrators will not be of great help in answering the question of why the Holocaust came about. It is doubtful whether one can draw useful generalized conclusions from individual perpetrators' biographies, especially of the leading figures in the SS and Gestapo. Apart from the fact that most of the leading Nazis came from socially unstable conditions, it was the systemic conditions that were responsible for their socialization into true believers, who were typified by

an unbelievably high degree of moral indifference and who would not hesitate to indulge hatred through use of violence against any juridical procedure and institutionalized structure. The

obvious criminal traits of men like Adolf Eichmann or Odilo Globocnik emerged from the specific social climate within the SS. Thus, the prosopographical biographical approach, while increasing our knowledge of the individual events, will not explain the mechanism of systemic perversion.

Berel Lang has stressed the loss of professional values among the German elite, especially physicians, lawyers, and academicians. The breakdown of professional ethics, which was symptomatic of the Nazi regime, became endemic after the end of the First World War, but it was not restricted to the German academic elite. Rather, it was symptomatic of the German upper and upper-middle classes in general. The rise of National Socialism was possible because of its ability to exploit the moral and ethical vacuum that expanded during the post–World War I years, and that was reflected in the growth of irrationalism and extremist nationalism in the Weimar Republic. The fact that most members of the functional elite, although not supporting the radical antisemitic policy of the Nazi party, did not hesitate to draw advantages from the Jewish expropriation and deportation, was another factor that engaged them in the overall anti-Jewish radicalization that eventually turned into deliberate mass murder.

After this excursion in the development of the research regarding the Nazi period, let us return to the issue of possible challenges and responses to Holocaust studies within the twenty-first century. First of all, the classic controversy between a functionalist and intentionalist interpretation seems to be overcome by a growing consensus that, while its direction was destined by Hitler's visionary goals, the Holocaust as an overall program of the liquidation of European Jewry did not spring from a predetermined plan but followed a course of trial and error. There is unanimity that the regime first pursued a policy of emigration up until 1940, followed by a series of preliminary reservation projects, with the annihilation policy emerging from an interaction between local and central agencies and developing gradually, not even being completely fixed in the weeks after the Wannsee conference in January 1942.

The experts differ on the issue when, somewhere between March 1941 and April 1942, the crucial turning points occurred, but this question is of minor importance because there is consensus that the progression to the implementation of the overall program was a process of interaction. The question of whether the declaration of war against the United States possibly

provided the decisive shift to an all-embracing deportation and liquidation policy, therefore, is appropriately one of secondary relevance.

Instead of focusing interest on the perpetrators and the mechanisms that stood behind them, future research should, according to the advice of Yehuda Bauer, put more emphasis on the victims and their depiction as truly human beings. To overcome the one-sided accentuation on the perpetrators and to gain an understanding of the victims—which may be purported by regional studies—future research has to try to reveal the anonymization of the victims that was a declared policy of the Nazi regime. This, certainly, cannot be a new idealization, as in the case of Anne Frank, and cannot submerge the atrocities, but should clarify the long-term repercussions of the genocide for those countries and regions where the murdered Jewish people lived.

Returning to the issue of possible future challenges of Holocaust studies, our problem is not so much the vast amount of hitherto insufficiently exploited sources facing us. Rather, it is our need to explain why no significant moral protest arose inside Germany and why the overall majority of the population tended just to ignore the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens or to suppress any concerns of conscience they may have had. In respect to this, many factors have to be analyzed further. The regime's strategy of indirect co-opting of the population by allowing it to partake in the redistribution of confiscated Jewish housing and other assets was carried out on an extended scale in conjunction with the settlement projects in the East. Recent studies also try to determine the extent to which the unremitting process of antisemitic indoctrination particularly influenced the younger generation, who never had any immediate notion of Jewish life. But above all, one has to take into account the barbarization of warfare that apparently functioned as an effective smoke screen behind which the mass liquidation was concealed.

In this respect, an important question is how the perpetrators themselves regarded their task, and how men, who were not specifically destined to support the Nazi system, were suddenly ready to act as mass murderers, as Christopher Browning's fundamental case study on Reserve Police Battalion 101 from Hamburg has impressively shown. Not only the mentality of the perpetrators but also that of the bystanders has to be explored in order to comprehend the totality of the annihilation. But most crucial is the bureaucratic momentum through which the

executions were completed even by persons who did not act primarily on the basis of “racial” hatred. In

conjunction with this, the mentality of the auxiliaries in the East as well as of the collaborators in France, the Benelux, and the satellite countries should be examined.

All in all, the variegated and multicausal picture painted by the historian will be drafted against a common depressing background that consists of the truth of how easily normal men—normal Germans and normal non-Germans—could be induced to commit crimes against their neighbors. Any cursory examination of current world events proves that this is anything but exceptional, and the catastrophe of the Holocaust should serve as a *mene tekel*, as a burning writing on the wall, admonishing us to do whatever is possible to prevent any comparable escalation of public crime.

The lessons drawn from the experience of the Holocaust are manifold. I believe that it provides the most impressive and depressive example of the dangers lingering in modern industrial society when value patterns are eroded, when the judiciary and other public institutions are undermined, and when the people fall victim to a populist ideology in conjunction with the determination of a small ruthless political movement to acquire and exert unrestricted power. In the Nazi case, it is misleading to assume that the course of its policy had been rationally envisaged by the party leadership and Hitler himself. The ideological and political dynamisms that were aroused by the emerging political structures leading towards continuous cumulative radicalization were not the result of a master plan, but the necessary outcome of the “cult of the will” and of mobilization as an end in itself. If we study Holocaust history, thereby memorializing the destruction of millions of innocent people, we also hope to prevent the emergence of any comparable disruption of humanity and civilization.

HANS MOMMSEN is one of the most distinguished experts on contemporary German history. From the 1970s to the recent “Goldhagen controversy” and beyond, he has been actively involved in numerous scholarly and public debates on the interpretation of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Widely regarded as the most outspoken exponent of the “functionalist” school, Professor Mommsen’s work has been of crucial importance for the education of an entire generation of historians. From 1968 until his retirement in 1996, he was Professor for Contemporary History at the Ruhr University in Bochum. He is the author and editor of many books and articles, including *Beamtentum im Dritten Reich* (Civil servants in the Third Reich), 1966; *Herrschaftsalltag im Dritten Reich* (Every-day rule in the Third Reich), 1988; *Widerstand und politische Kultur in Deutschland und Österreich* (Resistance and political culture in Germany and Austria), 1994; *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (The Volkswagen plant and its workers in the Third Reich), 1996; and *Von Weimar nach Auschwitz: Zur Geschichte Deutschlands in der Weltkriegsepoche* (From Weimar to Auschwitz: A history of Germany in the era of the world wars), 1999. Professor Mommsen has been a Fellow at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, and at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.

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“On Studying Jewish History in Light of the Holocaust,” by David Engel, 2003; web version [www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/engel\\_02/engel.pdf](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/engel_02/engel.pdf)

“Past Revisited: Reflections on the Study of the Holocaust and Contemporary Antisemitism,” by Steven J. Zipperstein, 2003; web version [www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/zipperstein\\_03/zipperstein.pdf](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/zipperstein_03/zipperstein.pdf)

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