

## Histories of the Holocaust

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Florin Lobont

The Holocaust, which caused so many resignifications and dissolutions of post-war cultural forms and paradigms, from the deconstruction of grand historical narratives to the shattering of the idea of progress, has not exhausted its capacity to urge reflection or attempts at explanation, as well as fascination, obsession, hypocrisy and often despair. The last two decades witnessed the opening of the archives in post-communist countries and, consequently, the appearance of new directions of enquiry and the exponential growth of historiographical research. The overwhelming quantity and diversity of publications and perspectives has constantly increased the need for their systematization. The year 2010 marked the appearance of such a synthesis. Although he announces, modestly, that his book *Histories of the Holocaust* is primarily conceived as a supplement to Michael Marrus' remarkable *The Holocaust in History* published in 1987 (1) – in other words, a historiographical guide of the last 20 years of research and its outcomes – in fact Dan Stone examines critically and insightfully the post-1989 literature in question, together with the schools of thought and areas of debate. The impressive range, quantity and diversity of the material discussed makes Stone's book the first interpretive guide to this vast literature.

Although he establishes the Holocaust's victims primarily in terms of the perpetrators' own definition of their Jewish 'enemies', and, intimately connected to this, as an important component of Germany's war effort, Stone repeatedly stresses that the Nazi genocide also had large numbers of victims belonging to other ethnic communities or groups, including Roma, Poles, Ukrainians and Soviet prisoners of war, as well as, to a smaller extent, Jehovah's Witnesses, Black Germans and homosexuals. Far from reducing the Nazi genocide to the annihilation of the Jewish population, he examines, in terms of comparative genocide, the significance of the extremely brutal Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe and of the Third Reich's general racial and demographic visions. In the context of recent debates about Nazi genocidal ideology, Stone gives a philosophical dimension to the centrality attributed to the Jews within the Nazi genocide. Thus, their significance was 'metaphysical' both in general-ontological, and human-ontological, essentialist terms:

They were not just considered as racially inferior (like Romanies), deviants (like homosexuals), or enemy nationals standing in the way of German colonial expansion (like Slavs). In the Nazi *Weltanschauung* (world view), history was understood as the struggle between good and evil, represented by the 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' races, in particular Germans and Jews... They were not mere *Untermenschen* (sub-humans) to be contrasted with the Nazi dream of the *Übermensch* ('overman' or superman), but were regarded as a *Gegenrasse*, a 'counter-race', that is to say, not really human at all (p. 2).

Based on the vast bibliographic research material surveyed, Stone examines in detail the various ways in which the Nazi *Weltanschauung* regarded history as the titanic clash between Aryans and Jews. Throughout the book, but especially in one of its central chapters, 'Race Science: the basis of the Nazi worldview?' (chapter four) Stone unveils the racial character of The Third Reich and analyses in depth a wide range of forms in which its racialized view of the world permeated the realms of public and private life under Nazi rule.

The Nazi regime encouraged and supported race science and constantly based its legitimacy on it. Yet, Germany was not a première or an isolated case of cohabitation between fascism and race science. It is not a secret, writes Stone somewhere else (2), that in the two decades that preceded the Holocaust, calling oneself a fascist was far from inviting the stigma this notion bears (or should bear) today; fascism appeared convincing especially to large numbers of intellectuals who were easily captivated by its verdicts and message.

The importance of eugenic ideas for the development of fascism is widely acknowledged; apparently paradoxically, this has not hindered the seduction exercised by eugenics upon intellectuals, including socialists and even communists. Race science has copiously nurtured extremist movements from South America to Germany, from Scandinavia to Romania, which were built around the biologizing concept of the 'social body'. And even though the sweeping destruction caused by the Holocaust was not the direct outcome of race science, the latter was one of its important conditions.

Stone deepens the cut between eugenics and Nazi ideology by demonstrating convincingly the false compatibility between the Nazis' apocalyptic view of racial struggle, on the one hand, and biology (even under the flawed form of the study of racial difference), on the other. His inquisitive scrutiny of an impressive amount of relevant literature shows that eugenics and antisemitism were not necessarily related and that the Holocaust was motivated more by the latter than by the former. Behind the Nazi anti-Jewish actions Stone finds not the trumpeted triumph of modern eugenics, science and technology, but mystical antisemitism and political conspiracy theories.

Stone consistently argues that this metaphysical-anthropological and mythological-political grounding of the Nazis' (and their ideological allies') attitude towards the Jews renders the Holocaust its distinctive character as the genocide of the Jews. He also stresses repeatedly that this finding excludes neither the fact that other

groups – primarily Gypsies and Slavs – were victims of the genocide, nor its devastating consequences. On the other hand, he argues, even the mass murder of Jews cannot be studied without understanding the Nazis' general demographic view.

The complex radiography carried out throughout *Histories of the Holocaust* points out, as main characteristic of Holocaust literature, the central place occupied by race – regarded either from scientific, or mystical points of view – and grasps the change in contemporary historical studies, that is, the shift from social history to the study of 'ideology' in general, and that of 'race' in particular. At the same time, Stone detects the recent indicators that signal the beginning of the latter's marginalisation too. He opposes those who reject the literal approach but also queries the coherence of Nazi discourse which places race at the core of the Third Reich.

The philosophical-anthropological scrutiny of documents and archival material leads Stone to the conclusion that, despite all historiographic trends, the analysis of antisemitism qua ideology remains essential to the understanding of the Nazi program of total extermination and detects a strong support of this approach in works belonging to the 'voluntaristic turn', according to which the Nazi rule was exercised by consensus, rather than terror (pp. 4, 162, 285).

Unlike many previous approaches to the Holocaust, Stone focuses mostly on the perpetrators—without neglecting their victims—arguing that the examination of the former is crucial to the understanding of the Holocaust and the beliefs that motivated the Nazi decisions (pp. 244-275).

[B]ureaucratic rationality, polycratic competition, division of labour, and technology alone cannot account for the [Holocaust]. The mission to kill the Jews was the prerequisite for this massive effort, not a product of it' (pp. 156-7)... [Those who carried it out], the perpetrators on the ground were not automatons who simply followed instructions from Berlin: they were much worse—active agents who drove the murder process at every stage. Yet ... the leadership... [provided the] process [with] perspective... [T]he development of the radicalizing dynamic that ended in a continent-wide genocide against the Jews provides a broader canvas for understanding the unfolding of events (pp. 111-2).

The relatively recent Holocaust literature also endorses this perspective, as Stone's comprehensive review of the most significant writings belonging to the so-called *Täterforschung* (perpetrator research) demonstrates.

At the same time, Stone refers often to the necessity of 'modernizing' the 'victim research' – still predominantly descriptive and insignificantly influenced by the terms of recent cultural history (pp. 277–83); he brings to the reader's attention the few historic-cultural studies of victims and salutes them as innovatory applications of cultural theory and anthropology, able to provide insights into many traumatic dimensions of the horror. Yet, he stresses,

I wanted my historiographical account to accord with Saul Friedländer's ambition of creating an 'integrated' history of the Holocaust, in which the perpetrators and victims are discussed side by side. Nevertheless, ... in understanding any genocide our most urgent task as historians is to try to understand those who carried out (p. 5).

In this context, Stone insists on the necessity of in-depth study of Nazi culture, regarded not as a self-defined subject or just as one of Nazism's facets. If we want to deepen our understanding of the Holocaust, we have to treat it as a problem of cultural history as well (chapter six), and thus try to understand the symbolic 'webs of meaning' created by the Nazis in order to allow their values to interact with longer-established German narratives in a way that rendered exclusion and then genocide meaningful and possible (p. 247).

The author warns us that his book cannot offer a comprehensive survey of the literature on the Holocaust or on National Socialism (the standard bibliography of the latter already numbered over 37,000 titles more than ten years ago, whereas Holocaust literature is even vaster): ‘What I have covered in this book gives an indication of the main lines of inquiry, but is still necessarily only a starting point’ (p. 285). But, despite his modesty, what the historian-philosopher Stone generously provides us with is an original way – elaborated mainly with the help of history, anthropology, and cultural-philosophical criticism – of examining the various approaches of the Holocaust.

This ... obviously requires history to be painted with a broad brush, but I hope to show in my overview of the historiography that the Holocaust developed differently in different places; the extraordinary geographic spread of persecution cannot be understood if one thinks in terms of a blueprint for genocide. I show too that although there was no clear plan for genocide until as late as 1941–42, nevertheless the logic of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* ... [was] inherently genocidal. (p. 6)

Although it was a ‘purifying’ programme devised by the Nazis, the ‘Holocaust’ is presented by Stone as a generic term that circumscribes local ‘versions’ of persecution directed against the Jews. He analyses the Nazi (especially SS) vision of Europe’s demographic future via the terms of a multi-layered ‘pan-European racial community’ with the Germans and their racial allies at the top and the Slavs, turned into slaves, at the bottom. This picture does not include any Jewish element, which implied, ultimately, their disappearance (pp. 62–3).

Another merit of the book consists in the lucid and extremely well-informed analysis of the key interpretative disputes in historiography, mainly those between ‘intentionalists’ and ‘structuralists’, and those between ‘modernity’ and ‘ideology’ theorists (chapter three). Stone does not subscribe to the views of the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust put forward most notably by Raul Hilberg, Detlev Peukert, Götz Aly Susanne Heim, or Zygmunt Bauman. For instance, the latter, in his much-discussed book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (3), borrowing a rather schematized version of Weberian terminology, argues that the Holocaust was the product of a bureaucratic and rationalized world. It was ‘one of its hidden possibilities’, an attempt to replace spontaneity (p. 121), and it was carried out without hatred, representing the finest example of the modern tendency to devise blueprints for the world, designed to purify the world by removing unaesthetic or unassimilable elements. That argument is seen by Stone as valuable, in particular its closeness to ‘functionalist’ historians who analyze the history of race-thinking, eugenics, and medicine in Germany and elsewhere, and in its implication that the Third Reich did not represent an aberration in an otherwise enlightened world. In fact, argues Stone, Bauman’s book is so effective because it asserts that the world that created Auschwitz is basically still with us; indeed, the possibility of even greater genocides is real because our world is even more rationalized and technologically administered.

Bauman’s argument is deconstructed by Stone who shows that it does not suggest why only some modernities end in genocide. Along the same lines, Stone criticizes Bauman’s failure to account for ideology. ‘Why the Jews?’ is a question that is not satisfactorily answered by the claims about modernization. But most importantly, Bauman’s theory does not account for the non-purposive aspects of hatred and genocide. His theory suggests that increasing domination over nature (the Enlightenment) has led inexorably to the domination over human beings through the ‘biopower’ of the modern bureaucratic state and that the murder of the Jews could have been the extreme outcome of bureaucratic culture (p. 122). But the evidence Stone finds has justifiably led him to the conclusion that antisemitism and genocide are never implemented coolly, without passion. Rather, irrespective of the use of ‘factory-line killing methods’ (something that accounts for only half of the Holocaust’s victims anyway), Stone argues that antisemitism in the 20th century has been a product of modernity for a different reason, and that the genocide of the Jews is an indictment of modern society, but not for the reasons Bauman points out. Stone does not dispute the existence of biopower, or the history of race-thinking and eugenics which, in fact, are crucial to his analysis.

At the same time, although he examines approvingly the structuralist argument that denies the existence of a model of genocide or an ‘untwisted road’ to Auschwitz (p. 69), Stone does not fail to add and demonstrate that a genocidal fantasy lay at the core of Nazism from its very beginning:

[T]he more we discover about the penetration of Nazi antisemitic indoctrination into every sphere of life in the Third Reich, the more it becomes clear that whilst policy-making and individual decisions may have been made on an ad hoc basis, they were made within a framework of vicious, paranoid Jew-hatred... The Holocaust was ‘modern’ insofar as it took place in a ‘modern’ society, was organized bureaucratically and relied in part on technological killing methods... [Yet] the deep essence of the Holocaust was an outburst of transgressive violence that owed more to fantasy-thinking than to the logic of reason, ‘biopower’ or the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’. But, as I show, thinking about the Holocaust in these terms does not exculpate modern society altogether; rather, the rationalized structures of modernity not only channelled but created the fantasies of Nazism (p. 7).

Following the logical consequences of these debates, Stone examines race science and its impact on the Holocaust. Although it fully benefitted from the ‘respectability’ cast by academic race science onto the mystical theories about the Jews, the Nazi regime started to distance itself from it, as its empirical findings, classifications and distinctions – such as that between ‘race’ and ‘*Volk*’ – threatened to undermine the Nazi racial-mystical propaganda.

As a consequence, Stone argues, the essence of the Holocaust cannot be unproblematically viewed as a consequence of race science. He insists that, despite the numerous non-rational presuppositions identified by historians as forming the basis of race science, it would be a mistake to overestimate its importance to the Nazi leaders. He demonstrates at length how the modern themes of race science, technology and bureaucracy coalesced with the transgressive ideological violence of conspiracy theory, mysticism and ‘thinking with the blood’. In this context, Stone criticizes another, major recent study, Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (4). Agamben’s ‘sacred man’ has the status of an outsider who can be killed by anyone, but is not subject to sacrifice or homicide. Like Bauman, Agamben relies on a Foucauldian notion of ‘biopower’ which sees the Holocaust as the culmination of the gradually increasing power of the modern state to decide on the life or death of its citizens (pp.115-6). As Dominick LaCapra—to whom Stone refers repeatedly and approvingly in a number of his writings—notes, this approach, whilst highly stimulating, does not do justice to certain aspects of the Holocaust that cannot be subsumed within the logic of modernization conceived in these (essentially Weberian) terms. LaCapra writes that Agamben’s work ‘coincides with an often exaggerated emphasis on confined, positivistic, relatively antiseptic notions of biology, medicalization, and eugenics’ which echoes Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. Whilst this certainly accounts for one important strand that drove the impetus to genocide, it ‘does not account for Nazi quasi-ritual horror at contamination, elation in victimization, regeneration or redemption through violence, fascination with extreme transgression, and equivocation or even at times ambivalence with respect to the Jew (who was seen as abject — even as a germ or vermin — but to whom erotic energies and incredible powers of world conspiracy were also imputed)’. (5) His careful analysis of a vast material regarding the genocide of the Roma population, the sterilization laws or the Euthanasia project, leads Stone to the conclusion that these actions possess, from the perspective of negative eugenics, much more coherence and sense than the genocide of the Jews. Further, he shows how the dynamic of cultural stereotypes about the Jewish race had gradually transferred the responsibility of their ‘scientific’ confirmation from the natural sciences to the social sciences (p. 198).

Further, Stone’s analysis places the Holocaust within the context of comparative genocide studies (chapter five). To the ‘uniqueness of the Holocaust’ thesis, which was for a long while indisputable within academic circles, Stone suggests an alternative perspective: although it does not represent an appropriate ‘ideal type’ for reflecting on genocide in general, the Holocaust was a genocide, albeit a radical one, sharing many features with genocides that occurred in the past and on other continents:

What remains clear, however, is that the murder of the Jews was not a total break with what had gone before but was a radical version of experiences that have taken place throughout modern history, especially in the European overseas colonies (p. 8).

His argument acknowledges the main theories by which in recent years a new generation of scholars started to demonstrate their ability to respect the extremity of the Holocaust as well as the specificities of other genocides. Stone surveys perspectives that encompass the history of racism, colonialism, imperialism and nation-building, as well as anthropological and sociological theories of violence. He agrees with the increasing number of scholars from outside Europe who have vehemently protested against European scholarship's tendency to view (albeit implicitly) European forms of genocide, including the Holocaust, as paradigmatic, archetypal, or more 'authentic', due to their being committed 'in the heart of civilized Europe'.

The last chapter of the book represents a convincing application of cultural history as a way of understanding victims and especially perpetrators. The author demonstrates that recent approaches to the Third Reich as a 'consensus dictatorship' represent a remarkable development in the historical study of the Holocaust as it reveals deep historical connections between the Holocaust and previous periods of anti-Jewish persecutions; this perspective contributes, writes Stone, to a deeper understanding of Nazi fantasies about the Jewish existential 'threat' to the security of the 'Aryan race'. By shifting the accent from 'modernity', 'rationality', and 'race science' to the study of such fantasies the author concludes that the main dynamo of the Holocaust was the Nazis' capital insistence on what, inspired by R. G. Collingwood, he calls 'thinking with the blood'.

By using a complex interdisciplinary perspective – informed mainly by philosophy, literary theory and anthropology – Stone's intellectual history ultimately puts forward a convincing plea in favour of a deeply reflective historical practice focusing on 'methods, sources and style'. He entitled his book *Histories of the Holocaust* not only as an acknowledgment of the numberless (complementary or rival) historical narratives on the Holocaust, but also as an assertion of the impossibility (and the necessity of this impossibility) of a total historical narrative, or a 'final historiographical solution'. The 'unfinishing' with the past by its constant 'renewal' via fresh meanings, is regarded by the gifted and original historian from Royal Holloway as 'the historian's contribution to the variety of ways of being human and thus of promoting freedom' (p. 11).

Stone does not leave aside the tremendous impact of the Holocaust on Western culture, our obsession with memory, or the post-war hypocrisy and fascination toward the genocide of the Jews. His impressive number of books and articles already recommends him as an authority in the field, a remarkable analyst of what he calls, following Dan Dinner, the event that 'shattered the elementary bases of civilization and culture' (p. 286).

As a conclusion, the author warns us that, instead of increasing our optimism and comfort (entailed by deepening the knowledge of human condition), reflection on the Holocaust should 'chill us to the bone' as we increasingly realize that the resources employed for the 'final solution' are similar to those so familiar to us today – 'censuses and the categorization of people, technology, medicalization, "biopower"' – and that our 'rational' lives are in fact impregnated with 'magical' thinking which 'under the right circumstances can be put to terrible use: fear of immigrants and disease, hygiene fetishism, body-culture obsession' (p. 287).

The six chapters of the book, "'The final solution': a German or European project?' (1); 'The decision-making process in context' (2); 'The Holocaust: child of modernity?' (3); 'Race science: the basis of the Nazi world view?' (4); 'Genocide, the Holocaust, and the history of colonialism' (5); and 'The Holocaust as an expression of Nazi culture' (6) converge to a conclusion ('Into the abyss') revolving around the idea that, ultimately, efforts to understand the Holocaust will entail the confirmation, constantly deepened and explicated, of its definition given by Hannah Arendt as early as 1946: that of 'an organized attempt to eradicate the concept of the human being' (p. 287).

## Notes

1. Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (London, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 1989).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD, 2001), p. 128, n. 14.[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

### Other reviews:

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