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Debates on the Holocaust

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Author:
Tom Lawson
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Dan Michman

Scholarly research on the Holocaust, carried out in many disciplines but especially in the field of history, is dynamic and-- constantly progressing; several giant leaps in its expansion can be discerned, mainly since the end of the 1970s. Testifying to the vibrancy and ?the sheer scale of contemporary Holocaust historiography? (as Tom Lawson rightly points out in his introduction to the book reviewed here) is the fact that the library of Yad Vashem, Israel's research and memorial institution for the Holocaust, has in the last two decades enriched its collection with some 4000 titles every year! Consequently, historiographical overviews of the interpretational debates, schools, stages in the development and the impact of political, social and cultural developments on research etc. are much needed ? both for scholars in, and students entering, the field, as well as for the growing audience interested in the topic, both laymen and educators (Lawson states that ?this book is primarily designed as an introductory text for students and teachers? (p. ix)). Nevertheless, the number of such overviews, especially analytical ones, has remained limited (1), perhaps as a result from the fear by scholars ?that any attempt to interrogate its history can only be partial and incomplete? (p. 1). Therefore, first of all, Lawson should be lauded for his courage in attempting this challenge; but then he has also succeeded in writing a quite comprehensive ? though not unproblematic ? analysis of most of the major debates in the field, while colligating an abundance of literature into his most readable narrative.

Lawson's book is part of a series called *Issues in Historiography*, which takes on diverse historical ?events?

(the Norman Conquest, The French and English Revolutions) and processes (the American Civil War era, the rise of the British Empire, black civil rights in America). As such, by showing ?the ways in which the Holocaust has been rendered and represented as History?, that is, by revealing ?the complexity of historians efforts to uncover the Holocaust past?, the field of Holocaust research is used as a test-case ?to demonstrate that historians and history-writing have an enduring social and political relevance? (p. 2); Lawson emphasizes this point because he believes that the Holocaust has been left outside the notion which is by now a historical consensus in the West, that ?past and present collide in their markedly provisional narratives?. He is right to a considerable extent in stating this point and it is justified by both in the need to explore the vast area of ?sub-events? in the Holocaust (i.e. in establishing what should be included in it) and in the quite unique accompanying phenomenon of Holocaust denial; nevertheless, since the end of the 1980s there are definitely enough Holocaust historians who deal with the topic while subscribing to the above-mentioned historiographical consensus. In this context, it would have been rewarding for the readers if Lawson had dedicated in the introduction at least a paragraph to the path-breaking conference organized by Saul Friedländer in 1990, later published in the volume *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992): it dealt extensively with these issues, and most of the articles in that volume are still of relevance today.

The book consists of eight chapters, each dealing with a major challenge of Holocaust historiography which led to debates and controversies. The chapters follow a certain chronology, from the mid-1940s through to recent years, because different challenges became dominant in different periods. This issue is important for emphasizing the varying relevance of the Holocaust in different contexts, yet the analysis of each such challenge often moves freely between earlier and later periods when the author felt that it suited the argument being made.

Chapter one deals with the first post-1945 attempts to conceptualize the understanding that the persecution of the Jews during the Nazi era had some special characteristics which made them stand out among the many other atrocities carried out by that regime.(2) Lawson rightly refutes the quite common observation that there was an ?absence? of historiography ?or at least a silence? (here he quotes historian Dan Stone and refers to others, among them Michael Marrus). He shows convincingly that much was written already at the time; however, the scholarly studies were mostly written by social scientists and legal theoreticians (some had been written already during the war itself, for example by Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term ?genocide?,), not by historians; the prosecution of Nazi war criminals also served in shaping first depictions of the Holocaust. However, these methodologies generalized about psychological motivations and the social and historical context, thus trying to universalize the Jewish suffering. Lawson explains that the tendency to render universal meaning to the persecution of the Jews ? thus starting in fact a first debate about ?the universality or specificity of the genocide of the Jews? (p. 24) ? had already begun during the Second World War, and resulted from the policy developed by Jewish leaders and intellectuals to try to draw the attention of the leaders of the free world to the Jewish fate and to encourage them to undertake rescue activities by showing that these atrocities were of relevance to humanity in general.

This interesting insight might be true for the wartime period, but does not explain the universalist approaches explored by scholars during the first decade after 1945 ? and Lawson does not elaborate on this further. This reviewer believes that it had to do on the one hand with the social scientific methodological tools used (as it is their nature to generalize and develop models), but also with the fact that many of these scholars were Jewish refugees of assimilated German Jewish origins, some of them belonging to the Frankfurt School, who shied away from emphasizing the specific Jewish aspects of the atrocities. Lawson also deals in this chapter with the important volume of historical works written by survivor historians, focusing on the activities of Polish Jewish survivors ? in Poland, the USA and Israel. This phenomenon, however, was much broader and varied than presented by Lawson, going far beyond this group and these countries.(3) Similarly, Lawson does not deal with the historiography that emerged in Germany, especially around the Institute for Contemporary History (*Institut für Zeitgeschichte*) in Munich, established in 1952 (this institution is mentioned in chapter two, but in a different context), and the Centers for Political Education (*Zentrale für politische Bildung*), which were established as a result of the Allied demand from West-Germany on its inception in 1949 to embark on the re-education of the German people.(4)

Chapter two takes the Eichmann Trial, conducted in 1961 in Israel, as its starting point, claiming that ?approaches to the understanding of the Holocaust *did* change around the time of the Eichmann trial? (p. 53). Lawson subtitles this chapter ?war crimes prosecutions and the emergence of Holocaust narratives? and interprets the account presented by the prosecution in the Eichmann trial, and Hanna Arendt's famous counter-account *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) as presenting and even shaping to a large extent the two interpretational poles of Nazism and anti-Jewish policies nicknamed later intentionalism and functionalism by historian Tim Mason. Lawson contends that ?the former emphasized Nazi ideology in its explanation of both the emergence and then prosecution of genocide; the latter was more concerned by the cultural and structural preconditions and determinants of mass violence? (p. 53). The intentionalism/functionalism debate has been described and analyzed by many historians (and Lawson comes back to it in a later chapter), but the way Lawson presents its basics is ? though challenging - not convincing in my eyes. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* cannot be detached from her 1951 path-breaking study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; her approach fits in neatly with the universalizing approach so well-presented by Lawson in chapter one. Arendt emphasized the disastrous impact of the totalitarian state on the conduct of the individual, while the functionalists emphasized the escalating effect of structural bureaucratic rivalries and fights over competencies. Arendt attributed much of the power of the totalitarian state to modern anti-Semitism, while for the functionalists this was of minor importance. In Arendt's totalitarianism approach the leader also plays a role, while in the view of extreme functionalists such as Hans Mommsen Hitler was a weak dictator and in fact of minor importance in the unleashing of the Holocaust, which bubbled up and crystallized thanks to the bureaucracy. Although starting with the Eichmann trial, Lawson is obliged to chronologically go back into the 1950s and even into the 1940s in order to find the origins of the prosecutions of war criminals and the metanarratives created by them and in historical works of that period (such as Leon Poliakov's *Harvest of Hate*, 1951). Here he includes also Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published at the same time of the Eichmann trial (1961) but written in the decade before.(5) Thus the weight of the literature published before that trial is so important, that the question arises why the trial was chosen at all as a starting point for this chapter. Moreover, this pre-1961 literature overlaps with the literature analyzed in chapter one, thus undermining the chronological division between these periods as presented by Lawson. Another problem in this chapter is that throughout it Lawson uses the term ?genocide?, which in those years was hardly in use. When he then emphasizes ?that the label 'Holocaust' helped fix the genocide of the Jews in popular memory ? There is seldom any need to describe the Nazi genocide of the Jews as the Jewish Holocaust?, he is definitely right; but when he states that ?there is no doubt to what one is referring when one uses the word? he is not, because both historiography and popular discourse grappled with the problem of the exact periodization and the precise nature of the Holocaust.(6)

Chapter three focuses on the ?bystanders to the Holocaust?, rightly starting with German playwright Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* (*Der Stellvertreter*) first staged in 1963. This play accused Pope Pius XII of having known of the tragedy that befell the Jews and refraining from serious action. The deliberately

controversial play paved the way to a path of research which examined the role of those who were neither the perpetrators nor the victims. Lawson focuses on ?the Pius [XII] Wars? and ?the Allies and the Holocaust? and gives an excellent comprehensive analysis of these issues (though missing some important studies such as Shlomo Aronson's *Hitler, the Allies and the Jews*, 2004), but entirely leaves out of the discussion the bystanders inside Nazi-ruled Europe. Lawson explains that he disagrees with Michael Marrus' questioning if bystander historiography, which is often tainted by ?political, theological and moral immanence?, is history-writing at all. Lawson argues ?almost the opposite, that it is in this immanence, in the reality that the bystander debate is a discourse about now, that we may find ? the ?meaningfulness of history?? (p. 113). I agree with him. But for those who do not look upon the Holocaust only through the angle of the English sphere of language but also through the scholarly and popular literature written in Europe, especially since the end of the 1960s (after the students revolts), the lack of an overview and analysis of the debates in Europe is a major flaw: it is precisely in Europe, first in the West and since the 1990s in the East, that the local ?bystander? attitudes to the persecutions of the Jews, have been and still are the major reason behind the ever-expanding interest in the Holocaust; coping with this historical chapter has been the prism of self-evaluation and soul-searching for entire societies (especially in The Netherlands, France and Poland). Lawson relates to these countries (and others) briefly in chapter five, when focusing on the 1990s and suggesting a breakdown of metanarratives into (among other things) ?National Holocausts?, yet there the focus is on active collaboration and that does not cover real 'standing by?. In this category of ?bystanders? also Jewish bystanders should have been included, that is the Jewish communities and leaders in the Free World. The fierce debates inside these communities, especially in Israel (since the 1950s) and the United States (since the end of the 1970s), have sometimes been the dominant issues in their entire discourse on the Holocaust (such as in the so-called ?Post-Zionist Debate? in Israel in the 1990s).(7)

Chapter four returns to the intentionalism/functionalism debate at its height, in the 1970s and 1980s. The analysis here is helpful in general, yet one finds a somewhat strange inversion of the development: usually functionalism is seen as a reaction to intentionalism, which had emerged after 1945 as the first major interpretational tendency; yet Lawson deals with intentionalism as a reaction to functionalism. In reality, the development was complicated: early intentionalism preceded functionalism, and is alluded to as such in chapter two; a later, more sophisticated version of intentionalism?(the leading scholar of this approach being Eberhard Jäckel) emerged vis-à-vis the functionalist challenge, and it is with this intentionalism that Lawson deals in this chapter ? but he does not clarify this distinction.

Chapters five and six deal with perpetrator history of the 1990s and the beginning of the first decade of this millennium. Chapter five, which is subtitled ?the end of the Cold war and the breakdown of Holocaust metanarratives?, rightly sees in the downfall of the communist bloc in 1989?90 a major turning point in the historiography. Indeed, ?during the 1990s a group of younger German scholars working in the archives of the former communist bloc challenged the metanarratives which had dominated the study of the Holocaust since the 1960s? (p. 154). They enriched knowledge about the Holocaust with a real wave of studies, pointing to possible additional motivations for the mass murder, to tensions between centre and periphery and the problematic nature of decision-making, to the involvement of local populations in the implementation and sometimes even the initiation of murder campaigns (8), and hence questioned the role of ideology. However, did this really mean the breakdown of metanarratives as Lawson suggests? It is precisely towards the end of the 1990s, that ? on the basis of the broader knowledge gained by the newly uncovered sources ? several major metanarratives emerged in the form of comprehensive studies: by Saul Friedländer (in part one of his *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1933-1939: The Years of Persecution*, which came out in 1997; part two, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* was published ten years later, in 2007), by Peter Longerich in his *Politik der Vernichtung* (1998; recently translated into English and updated: *Holocaust*, 2010), and by Ian Kershaw in his two-volume magnum opus on Hitler (*Hitler, 1889?1936: Hubris*, 1998; *Hitler, 1936?1945: Nemesis*, 2000; amazingly, Lawson does not analyze this integrative and influential study by Kershaw). All three attribute, though in different ways, a central place to anti-Semitism, that is, to ideology and cultural images (Friedländer coines the term ?redemptive anti-Semitism?) as well as to Hitler. All three also identify the relevant period as 1933?45, that is, they identify the entire period of the Nazi regime with its destructive anti-Jewish policies, not limiting ?the Holocaust? to

the comprehensive murder campaign of the Jews since 1941.

Chapter six is called ??Ordinary men?: rethinking the politics of perpetrator history?. In this chapter Lawson takes Christopher Browning's well-known study from 1992 on Order Police Batallion 101 and its murderous itinerary as the starting point. The chapter follows that on the assumed breakdown of the metanarratives in the wake of the collapse of the Communist bloc. However, it becomes clear after several pages that here too the origins are to be found in a much earlier period (the 1970s), with the emergence of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life). Lawson?s analysis in the first part of this chapter is excellent, though I would have placed it earlier in the book, precisely because this approach started in the 1970s. In a *tour de force*, and under the heading of ?The politics of modern perpetrator history?, Lawson combines the historiography of the idea of political religion and ? in a much too short and uncritical mode ? the more recent interpretational courses of colonialism and genocide. Lawson, according to his introduction and the formulations in this sub-chapter, seems to embrace these interpretations. He writes that ?to some scholars ? comparison with colonial genocide is anathema because it seems to lessen the particularity of Jewish suffering? (p. 225). He does not deal with what should have been pointed out in a book emphasizing the interwoven-ness of history-writing with current contexts, namely how politicized the field of genocide studies has become, and how indeed this course of explanation in fact detracts major parts of the understandings of the Holocaust so meticulously built up over decades. It therefore does not ?lessen the particularity of Jewish suffering?, as Lawson formulates it, but lessens ? or even (sometimes intentionally!) downplays the scope and enormity of the Nazi anti-Jewish project (such as for instance the importance of the Holocaust in western Europe; it also provides no convincing explanation of the Nazi obsession to deport to Auschwitz, by means of boats and trains, at a late stage such as August 1944, a remote and tiny Jewish community as the one of Rhodes). Moreover, the evolution of genocide studies since the beginning of the 1980s and its current relationship with Holocaust studies deserves a chapter by itself: genocide studies started as an offspring of Holocaust studies and so to say under its auspices, but has developed in recent years into an independent field, sometimes even clashing with Holocaust studies; this parting of ways was recently demonstrated by the fact that in the series of Oxford Handbooks two separate volumes appeared, one of *Holocaust Studies*, the other of *Genocide Studies*. (9)

Chapter seven changes the focus to debates on Jewish responses to Nazism. Lawson touches upon some of the major issues (resistance, ghettos, Jewish Councils), but it is in many respects the weakest chapter of the book. He states that ?the historiography of Jews and Jewish behavior under the ?Final Solution? has therefore developed problematically since the end of the war ? this is an historiography defined almost by its absence?. This is a gross misrepresentation: although less voluminous then perpetrator history, a lot has been written on issues not only of resistance and collaboration, but also about the fate of emancipation, questions of Jewish solidarity (or not) and social cohesion (or not), class struggle, religious life and theological responses and much more. Indeed, the major part of studies on these aspects is to be found in Hebrew, Yiddish and European languages; once again, the absence of non-English studies in this chapter is most striking.

The last chapter (eight) shifts to the debated role of testimonies and *memoires* (Lawson does not really differentiate between the two genres) in Holocaust historiography and memory. His is a fair representation of some of the dominant approaches and challenges in this field ? the issue of the blurring of fact and fiction, and the stands taken by scholars against and in favor of using these as historical sources ? but much more can and *should* be said. Lawson rightly concludes that ?whichever way we turn, we are brought back to the position that using testimony is problematic? (p. 299). However, it is of major importance to emphasize that witnesses claim in their testimonies and *memoires* to present historical reality, sometimes even expressing their anger that ?historians do not really understand? the reality of the time. Therefore, there is not only a question of how to use these sources, but there is often a clash between ?memorial history? and ?academic history?. On the other hand, the volume of oral and written Holocaust testimonies and memoiristic literature is so vast and has been so much studied in the last three and a half decades, that sophisticated use of this kind of source material has been developed by Holocaust historians and scholars from other disciplines, and has consequently become a model for similar use in other fields of history, especially in genocide studies.

As can be understood, this book has left me with very mixed feelings. On the one hand, Lawson has taken up an enormous challenge and his is the only attempt to write a comprehensive overview of Holocaust historiography in one narrative since Michael Marrus's *The Holocaust in History* (1987); his awareness of the aspects of historical writing and actual relevance is similarly most important, although the declared goal to contextualize the debates is not upheld throughout the entire book. On the other hand, and as pointed out above, the analyses are often problematic (even if thought-provoking) from chronological and thematical points of view, and omit important debates and aspects. The lack of an in-depth discussion of the emergence of the terminology Shoah (actually: *The* Shoah), Holocaust, cataclysm, *Khurbn*, Judeocide and genocide itself, and the competition between the terms as representing both conceptual debates on the nature of the event and the importance of the media (cinema, TV) and politics (such as the Middle East peace process as a catalyst for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum) in promoting understandings and images, is in my eyes a major deficiency. Add to this the almost complete disregard of non-English research literature (except for what has been translated into English), the slovenly proofreading (10) and some factual mistakes (11) ? and one will understand my deep reservations too.

Notes

1. The most notable ones are: Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman and Gideon Greif (Jerusalem, 1988); Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (London, 1989); Ulrich Herbert, ?Vernichtungspolitik: Neue Antworten und Frage zur Geschichte des ?Holocaust??, in *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939?1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (Frankfurt, 1998), pp. 9?66; Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London, 2003); *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke, 2004); *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem, 2008); and most recently: *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford, 2010). Of course, there are more overviews of Holocaust historiography in different countries (such as West Germany, East Germany, The Netherlands and Israel) and on certain issues (such as ghettos or rescue), sometimes in the form of introductions to studies or in encyclopedias; short overviews are sometimes given also in literature on the historiography of Nazism and the Third Reich. Nevertheless, altogether the volume of this genre is meager.Back to (1)
2. I regret the fact that Lawson chose to skip the period of the Nazi state itself (1933?45) as a first period of research and debates (although he makes several observations on pp. 23?6): in fact, scholarly attempts to document and analyze what was happening started as early as 1933: the Wiener Library, mentioned by him as one of the post-war institutions, started its activities already in 1933 in Amsterdam, as part of the Dutch Jewish ?Committee for Special Jewish Interests?; surveys were made by refugee committees throughout; and articles were published in scholarly journals such as *Jewish Social Studies*

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3. See *Holocaust Historiography in Context*.Back to (3)
4. For an extensive and penetrating analysis of this historiography see: Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen, 2003).Back to (4)
5. Unfortunately, although Hilberg's book was published in 1961 and is dealt with by Lawson as a product of that period, he used a much later edition of the book, in which Hilberg altered several formulations; see one quote on p. 73.Back to (5)
6. See *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective*, pp. 11?40.Back to (6)
7. Only in two notes on p. 264 Lawson refers to this issue.Back to (7)
8. Lawson entirely disregards the importance of the European unification process on this issue.Back to (8)
9. *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*; *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Oxford, 2010).Back to (9)
10. There are many typos and misspellings - for instance, on p. 21: Musselman, instead of Muselmann; p. 41, sentence without an end; p. 50, note 111: Zbiniew instead of Zbigniew; p. 202 ? missing word in a sentence 22; p. 313: book by Mosse misses place of publication; and more.Back to (10)
11. For instance: Yad Vashem was not established in 1957 (p. 32) but officially by a Knesset bill in 1953, and had already a first incarnation in the period 1946?1950; the SS rank *SS- und Polizeiführer* is never written in the documentation as *Schutzstaffeln- und Polizeiführer* (p. 21), although SS is an acronym for *Schutzstaffeln*; Raul Hilberg and Ernst Nolte are defined as historians, although both were political scientists; etc.Back to (11)

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