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Annihilation – Collection – Preservation:
The Nazi Archive of Jewish History and Culture and its effect on Postwar Memory

Questions of representation are at the core of scholarly engagement with the Holocaust. The term “Holocaust” has become globally established as a signifier of genocidal crimes, but in its own way it is problematic as a term to signify the complex historical events of the mass crimes against Jewry that were initiated by Germans and Austrians and committed with and by their collaborators all across Europe. As soon as the Nazi crimes began coming to light, the discussion started on what kind of language and imagery was adequate and, most importantly, was able to convey the multifaceted and extreme experiences of the many victims suffering from exclusion, persecution, deprivation, expulsion, deportation, ghettoization, and culminating in systematic mass murder at execution sites and specifically designed killing centers; and what kind of explanation was adequate to shed light on the perpetrators’ actions and motives without exculpating them and blurring their guilt and responsibility. The victims, when confronted with the destruction of their culture and their life, have already grappled with those challenges of representation that we still face today.

I will first shed light on the Nazi perpetrators’ politics of memory and representation, and their deliberate planning and construction of the crimes before I discuss their influence on the postwar cultures of memory, including historiography. I will concentrate on the discourse of unrepresentability and its effects for our understanding of the historical events. Many of our representations and concepts – e.g., the focus on the gas chambers as the quintessential sites of the crime – tend to obscure the act and the actors, thus still conforming to their intentions. This has become especially visible in the German and Austrian debates around the exhibition on crimes committed by the German Army in World War II (the so-called Wehrmachtsausstellung, 1995) that focused on mass shootings instead and thus on a huge number of “ordinary men” as immediate killers instead of a small group of rather faceless perpetrators. Another case in point is the recent debate on Georges Didi-Huberman’s work on the Auschwitz Sonderkommando photographs, drawing attention to the documents of the victims and their efforts to represent the crimes and make them visible – in contrast to the documentary tradition of the perpetrators that still dominates our memory.

Discourses on the Holocaust and on memory have often aroused the suspicion that the Nazi perpetrators not only planned the physical annihilation of the Jews, but also wanted to erase them “from history and memory.” The Roman practice of damnatio memoriae, whereby statues of a person found to be an enemy of the state were destroyed and the name removed from inscriptions and coins might be seen as the model for this practice. The stereotypical, albeit understandable, characterization of Jews as the “people of history” with privileged access to remembrance and
memory seems to make the intent of total destruction that transcends the physical act even more plausible. Thus, terms such as “memorycide” and “mnemocide” were coined in order to modify and strengthen the term “genocide.”

Especially with the rise of memory as a research paradigm in the humanities and social sciences, the allegation of memorycide seems to be above all an attempt to represent a contemporary construction of, and justification for, the uniqueness of the Holocaust – unlike previous arguments using the number of victims or the “industrial” way of killing. If one wants to retain the special status of the Holocaust in times when the significance and importance of memory and remembrance have become clear and have moved to the center of interest, it seems that focusing on a targeted policy of forgetting that transcends even the physical annihilation of the Jews is the solution to a scholarly unproductive comparison and contrasting of the numbers of victims. At the same time, in a period where determination of identity is often carried out by pointing to one’s status as victim, the image of a victimized memory – that has itself become a victim – is the best legitimization for this new central concept in cultural studies.

Beyond that, the assumed project of memorycide offers a negative foil for the duty to remember and for the dedication of museums, memorials, and monuments. The duty to remember thus is not only derived from the mass murder but above all from its particular character as a double homicide, which was directed both at the people and our memory of them. By mirroring it, the allegation of memorycide justifies the statement that remembrance of the crimes is a necessary precondition for the prevention of comparable crimes. The ritualized commemoration of the persecution of the Jews and their mass murder, the rhetoric of not-forgetting ultimately assumes that the committed crimes cannot be repeated as long as they are remembered. Destruction and forgetting on the one hand and remembrance and justice on the other hand are usually seen as not simply arbitrarily linked but as inseparable in their character.

The deliberate actions to erase the evidence of the mass murder at the end of the Third Reich offer factual points of reference and models for the claim of memorycide: the exhumations and the burning of the dead bodies carried out by Aktion 1005 beginning in 1942 under the leadership of SS-Standard Leader Paul Blobel at the main sites of the murders, as well as the destruction of documents by German authorities at the end of the war in obedience to an order from the Reich’s interior ministry. Traces of the racist politics of extermination were not supposed to fall into the hands of the allied forces owing to their incriminating nature. Heinrich Himmler’s so-called Posen speech, which he gave on October 4, 1943 to an audience of SS group leaders, has often been cited as evidence of the regime's memorycidal intentions. A section from this speech about the mass murder of Jews and the allegedly untarnished “propriety” (Anständigkeit) of the SS men who supposedly remained untouched after the murders is often used as a quote in this context: “This is a glorious chapter in our history that has never been written and that never will be.”
Rarely mentioned in the scholarly literature is another Himmler speech given only two days later at the same place, this time to a gathering of Reichs- and Gauleiter. This speech explicitly but even more ambivalently deals with the problems of secrecy and historical transmission in regard to the “final solution of the Jewish question.” “The hard decision had to be made,” Himmler stated, “to let this people [the Jews] disappear from this earth. […] One can consider at a much later time whether the German people should be told more about this. I think it is better that we – we as a whole – have carried this for our people, have carried the responsibility (the responsibility for a deed, not just for an idea); and then we will carry this secret to our graves.”

The question of remembrance or forgetting was, of course, becoming more and more virulent while the “final solution” was progressing. Kurt Gerstein (who, as an expert on hygiene in the Waffen-SS – witnessed gassings at Belzec and Treblinka and was complicit in providing Zyklon B for the mass murders) reports that in August 1942 the following exchange is said to have taken place in Lublin among Hitler, Himmler and his friend and confidant Odilo Globocnik, who was the leader of the SS and the police in Lublin and the head of Aktion Reinhard. Also included in the conversation was Dr. Herbert Linden of the interior ministry, who was involved in conducting the euthanasia program:

“[…] the Ministerialrat Dr. Herbert Linden then asked ‘Mr. Globocnik, do you consider it right and fair to bury the corpses instead of burning them? A generation could follow us that does not understand this!’ Globocnik replies, ‘Sirs, if we are ever succeeded by a generation that is so weak and lily-livered as to not understand our great task, then, admittedly, National Socialism has existed entirely in vain. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that we should install bronze plates that document that we had the courage to carry out this big and necessary project.’ The Führer answers, ‘Right, Globocnik, I indeed share your view.’”

Even if this was only a fleeting idea, a boast, or an invention of Globocnik’s (Globocnik is said to be the one to have told the exchange to Gerstein only a few days later) or an imprecise memory or invention of Gerstein’s (Hitler never visited a concentration or extermination camp like Majdanek), the ambivalence of the perpetrators’ situation becomes clear. For Himmler, the architect and organizer of the “final solution,” who vacillates between the self-glorification of the perpetrators and secrecy, the need for secretiveness wins out, which only confirms and underlines the elite character of the SS. In contrast, Globocnik demands a calculated form of remembrance of an act that the perpetrators interpret as heroic. The commemoration is only possible in a delayed and hidden manner because the criminal character of the actions seems to be obvious even to the perpetrators. An open and direct representation, however, is only delayed and not entirely avoided out of concern for secrecy.

In the statements by Himmler and Globocnik, the victims do not play any visible role at first, but their ongoing representation is also necessary and virtually decisive for the perpetrators in order
to re-shape the crime as a historical necessity. The murder of millions of people not only leaves traces but a blank position that is difficult to ignore. A forgetting by decree after such a crime has to be considered impossible. It can, of course, remain unexplained, but no art of forgetting can guarantee that the act of forgetting will be successful. This is true for the deed itself as well as for the victims. The attempt to seize control of memory and representation thus appears both more effective and more perfidious at the same time.

Many scholars direct their attention to the last phase of the war – to the perpetrators, who already realized that they would lose the war. The approaching armies of the Allies were understandably not supposed to find any evidence of the mass crimes. Accordingly, the works on the Holocaust and memory have dealt above all with – as has the research on genocide – the traumatic consequences of the mass murders and the process of coming to terms with them, the postwar cultures and politics of memory. The cultures and politics of memory in the Third Reich, the nature and function of memory in the very context of persecution and genocide, have – beyond the generalized hypothesis of an orchestrated memorycide – received hardly any attention.

In fact, the perpetrators themselves were the first to produce calculated representations of their own crimes – not exclusively for reasons of camouflage but to save the perpetrators from an immediate confrontation with their own crimes: with complex and highly ambivalent heroic narratives like those found in Heinrich Himmler’s speeches and a neutralizing language concealing reality but enabling the crimes in the first place; with photographic and filmed documentation of daily antisemitism and anti-Jewish persecution, of deportations and mass-shootings, of the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as well as the selection and extermination process in Auschwitz-Birkenau after the arrival of a transport. In particular the framing and setting of the actual extermination process from mass shootings in the occupied Soviet Union and executions in mobile gas vans to the installation of gas chambers at specific killing centers in the East is full of considerations about visibility and non-visibility.

At the same time, parallel to the genocide of the European Jews and the construction and representation of their crime as a necessary and heroic deed, the perpetrators again preserved the history and culture of their victims in photographs and films, shot for example in the Warsaw Ghetto, and partly used in propaganda pictures like Fritz Hippler’s “Der ewige Jude” (The Eternal Jew, 1940) to prepare the public in Germany and in the occupied countries for a radical “solution of the Jewish question.” Originally the filming was fueled by the need to document, just in time, what the filmmakers themselves were about to destroy – in museums like the “Jüdisches Zentralmuseum” (Jewish Central Museum); in the synagogues of Prague’s old Jewish quarter, operated by Jewish specialists but supervised by the Security Service (SD) of the SS; more specifically the “Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung” (Central Office for Jewish Emigration, later the “Zentralamt zur Regelung der Judenfrage in Böhmen und Mähren”/Central Office for the Regulation of the Jewish Question in Bohemia and Moravia); the Prague outpost of Eichmann’s “Jewish Af-
fairs” section in the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin. The museum absorbed systematically the ritual objects of the communities in the Protectorate when their inhabitants were deported; and scholarly research on Jewish history and culture, the so-called “Erforschung der Judenfrage” (research on the Jewish question) or in shorthand “Judenforschung” (research on Jews), conducted at specifically established research institutions and universities. The non-Jewish academics pursuing this kind of anti-Jewish Jewish Studies confiscated the entire field – material resources and even the body of knowledge and expertise from Jewish scholars and institutions all over Europe: History became the leading discipline in the field of Nazi Judenforschung because, with the “final solution” on the agenda, a historicization of the “Jewish question” seemed both possible and necessary. Studies of the history of antisemitism could serve Nazi anti-Jewish policies by retroactively constructing a tradition and therewith a legitimization. The anti-Jewish scholars even conducted research on the currently ongoing anti-Jewish politics in the Third Reich, thereby already inscribing them into history. 11

All these projects oscillate between looting, humiliation, and destruction on the one hand, and preservation on the other. Even Himmler, who wanted to preserve the process of extermination at best as an esoteric secret knowledge of the SS, supported the anatomist August Hirt at the Reichsuniversität Strassburg in establishing a collection of Jewish skulls for scientific examination. Himmler thus contributed to the conservation of the putative enemy beyond its physical destruction – the extreme case of a trophy collection and the conservation efforts of the Third Reich, which at least indirectly would have pointed to the mass murder and therefore would have contradicted the effort to conceal it.

This, however, easily evokes a concept of a calculated, coordinated, and centrally planned Nazi politics of memory. This assumption is just as impossible to prove as that of a planned memorycide and as misleading as the myth of a monolithic “Hitler state”. It underestimates the initiative of different agencies and actors within the Third Reich, the competition within the system, the role of pragmatic and situational considerations and specific local conditions, and finally the momentum within the entire process of expulsion, deportation, looting, and mass murder. There was never a consistent and uniform or even an articulated Nazi politics of memory and never was an attempt made to institutionalize or coordinate it. It remains highly ambivalent, oscillating between visibility and non-visibility, between telling and silencing. Representations of the crime and representations of the victims cannot in every case be distinguished from each other. Moreover, if one wants to reconstruct a Nazi politics of memory it is only possible to arrive at fragments and traces that will partly contradict each other to a certain degree – because of the incompleteness of the events.

But while the Jews were denounced as superfluous and useless, killed at the execution sites and murdered in the camps, they had to be preserved as “the Others.” Even though the victims were removed from the present reality – that is, murdered – they had to remain present and visible
within the bipolar Nazi ideology. The concept “judenfrei” (free of Jews), the Nazi term to designate the completion of the “final solution” in a certain area, makes that clear; it is the absence that is described and thereby kept present, the erasure/murder remains visible. A German Reich and a Europe free of Jews under National Socialist rule would have meant a constant present absence of the Jews.

Only the expropriation of the memory of the victims would have represented the climax of their humiliation and the completion of their annihilation. The attempt to seize hold of memory, to determine it, has to appear more perfidious and more effective than the pointless attempt of a deliberate forgetting. The complementary phenomenon to physical annihilation does not have to be the act of forgetting but rather the act of remembering, of preserving and constructing very specific narratives while silencing others. The “final solution” would not have been completed until even the even the memory and representation of the victims had been hegemonically defined by the perpetrators. To be sure: in contrast to today, it would have been a dead and affirmative memory without any living and dissenting counterpart, without any challenge, competition, or provocation, and – most importantly – without an authentic voice of the victims and without their perspective on the crimes. The Jews were supposed to be only “dead” history written by their murderers.

Referring to projects like the Prague museum, some scholars misleadingly talked about a “final solution of remembrance.” We, on the other hand, have to speak of the attempt to bring about an “Aryanization” of memory, a further conservation and instrumentalization for the purposes of the National Socialist ideology. From the start, “Aryanization” meant the expropriation and appropriation of Jewish property, its transfer into non-Jewish hands, and the expulsion of Jews from business and public life. This double strategy was consequently pursued until the end. Not only did the perpetrators appropriate the material assets of their victims but they tried to exploit the memory of the victims to their own advantage.

The Nazi politics of representation and memory cannot be seen as a marginal area, for it leads directly into the center of expulsion, deportation, looting and mass murder – the dynamic of the Holocaust as well as the intentions and self-images of the perpetrators. The Nazis attempted to influence and control contemporary and later images of their crimes and their victims. The perpetrators tried to establish their own structure of memory and representation which would have determined our contemporary attitude toward the crimes – their future – and that in fact extends into our present-day reality and affects it although they could not complete their objective – win the war and complete the annihilation of the Jewish people. Within this framework memory and representation must be understood both as strategies for managing the past and as plans for designing the future.

II
In a victorious Germany, contrary to the common assumption of a memorycide, a variety of “comic emplotments” about the disappearance of the Jews might have circulated, Jewish museums and research about the victims (still understood as enemies) might have existed, and memorials might have remembered the German crimes (perceived as heroic deeds) – exactly as happened after the defeat, although of course with opposite signs. The ambivalences of postwar memories and remembrance of the Holocaust seem only to reflect the ambivalent actions of the perpetrators, documenting their crimes and obliterating their traces; narrating the mass murders as morally justified and heroic deeds and knowing about their criminal character; telling and at the same time silencing and denying.

With the name of the location of the biggest complex of concentration, forced labor, and extermination camps within the Nazi empire, “Auschwitz”, the supposedly industrial method of killing became the emblem of the Nazi genocide. The gas chamber was highlighted as the specific and quintessential killing technique of the Holocaust. (That is also reflected in the Holocaust deniers’ focus on the gas chamber.) What happened inside is not only not visible but is considered to be unrepresentable and incomprehensible. The gas chamber is literally a “black box,” a hermetically closed room that renders a view of the scene inside impossible. (Therefore, a glance through the spyhole in the door and a look inside became an obsession in the popular imagination at the same time, played out, for example, in the TV miniseries “Holocaust” as well as in Steven Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List” and other motion pictures.) Furthermore, the invisibility of the killing in the gas chamber provided an argument for the general unrepresentable character of the mass murder although “only” 60% of the six million murdered Jews were killed in the gas chambers of the different killing centers. The actual and different practices of killing vanished behind the enormous number of victims – and the walls of the gas chambers. This Bilderverbot (image ban) was also widely observed in historical scholarship, especially in post-Nazi societies: Visual representations and descriptions of the crimes were equally absent. The omission could be comprehensibly justified by reference to the self-protection of the researching scholar and an understandable inability to bear the details; it could also be argued that the silence and invisibility derived from compassion for the victims and a conscious effort to avoid obscene voyeurism and lurid depictions – in any case it has prevented a confrontation with the actual violence and has concealed the concrete practice of the crimes.

In all media and formats the center of the crime is blocked out. Instead of the crime itself, usually its results were shown: photos of piles of corpses that the Allied forces found when they liberated the camps. Those pictures, presented to the Germans right after the war as proof of the crimes and their own complicity and often linked to Christian iconographic traditions, could easily be integrated into the postwar cultural-pictorial memory as “icons of destruction.” However, they did not show an image of the crime but eliminated from view the everyday practice of killing and getting killed. With the image of the suffering victims they communicated the fact that a crime
had happened but did not make explicit its specific character. The impression was rather that the
victims mainly starved to death.

Where something is described and visible, the impression of representation and visibility needs
to be contradicted with ritualized phrases, calling the Holocaust “unrepresentable” and “incom-
prehensible,” as if what was visible and describable would not be adequate. The heated discus-
sions around the so-called Wehrmacht exhibition in Germany and Austria (1995) and (partly)
Daniel J. Goldhagen’s “Hitler’s Willing Executioners” (1996) can only be understood against the
background of that particular tradition. The scandal in both cases was the pitiless transgression of
a tacitly established and generally accepted threshold – with the presentation of images of the
war of extermination in the East in the one case, and detailed descriptions of massacres in the
other.

The direct and immediate killings in the mass shootings have been eclipsed and forgotten for a
long time. Eastern Europe was the theater for those events – no less systematically than the oper-
ations of the killing centers. So the conditions of the Cold War might have had their part in
downplaying them. In Germany and Austria the exhibition “Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der
Wehrmacht 1941-1944” (War of Extermination. Crimes of the German Army) organized by the
privately funded Hamburg Institute for Social Research confronted the audience and in the end
both of the post-Nazi societies with the unfiltered brutal reality of the war in the East, with
crimes against the civilian population, humiliations, executions, pogroms, and mass shootings.

The public debate on the exhibition was a dispute over the character of the war in the East, the
complicity of German and Austrian society with the mass crimes of the Nazi regime, and the par-
ticipation of the German Army and with it of large parts of the German and Austrian population
in the politics of extermination. In particular, the many photographs on display allowed a hitherto
commonly avoided visibility of the crimes and the perpetrators, a view of average husbands,
sons, fathers, and grandfathers at their everyday work of archaic killing. The photographs shot by
the soldiers themselves, who obviously were predominantly in accord with the pictured proce-
dures, were turned into instruments of accusation and enlightenment, contrary to their original
intention.

This does not mean that the crimes and their outcome were not present in the postwar societies of
the perpetrators. Even one of the first German motion pictures after the war, Wolfgang Staudte’s
“Die Mörder sind unter uns” (The Murderers are Among Us, 1946) broached the issue of the co-
existence of a successful suppression of the past as a precondition for reconstruction and read-
vancement on the one hand, and a mental blockade as a result of experiences with violence dur-
ing the war on the other hand. How is it possible to talk about suppression, forgetting, and si-
lence in the plain sense for the postwar societies when in 1960 in Nuremberg a former member
of a reserve police battalion apologizes to the chief of police and the mayor for a parking viola-
tion by referring to an intestinal sickness contracted while participating in mass shootings in
Russia – although he maintained that he never shot anyone himself. Nevertheless, the perpetrators were very successful in facilitating a mainly non-traumatic everyday life for the German and Austrian post-Holocaust societies, without depressive and mentally dysfunctional demobilized servicemen, without sites of crimes and mass graves in their own countries, apart from the concentrations camps that tell a different story than the specific killing sites and centers – all this just by situating the killing operations in the East, at the border or outside of the Reich, and with a specific politics of memory and representation and a deliberate construction of the crimes.

“Auschwitz” as the dominating symbol with the “black box” of the gas chamber at its center produces a misleading image of the Holocaust as an anonymous and almost hygienic process. In fact, the development of the Nazi politics of extermination is also a history of designing killing techniques to spare the mass murderer: from the shootings to the mobile gas vans to stationary gas chambers. The intention was to relieve and unburden the immediate perpetrators. Especially Himmler was worried about the people who executed the crimes and the possible consequences of a brutalization of the participants in mass shootings in the eyes of the entire German society. The gas chamber provided not only an efficient way of killing; by means of the hermetically closed room and the intermediary technique, the perpetrators could dissociate themselves from their crimes. The unavoidable work of disposing of the corpses was in any case the responsibility of Jewish prisoners in the so-called Sonderkommandos, and the wage they received for carrying out their forced duties was ultimately their own execution.

Even as a postwar symbol of the Holocaust the gas chambers made possible a partial repression of the mass murder and could function as an alibi for ordinary Germans and Austrians. After all, the crime took place a long way away and was not accessible to public view; not only was it impossible to see and know, but no one killed directly – it was therefore a crime without a criminal, a murder without a perpetrator. The gas chamber fulfilled its function even in postwar memory: it represented a pictureless and unimaginable crime without any persons immediately involved, and it operated more as a blank position and blind spot (“black box”) than an actual image of what had happened. The postwar images and concepts of the deed and the actors still conform in a very peculiar way to the intentions of the Nazi perpetrators.

The entanglement of visibility and invisibility, of showing and disguising, of telling and silencing, is manifested in Stanislaw Mucha’s iconic photograph of the Auschwitz-Birkenau gatehouse (1945). Contrary to the common assumption, the picture shows the gatehouse from inside the camp, not from the outside; the tracks do not come together from all parts of Europe as is usually assumed but are split at the inside ramp that was only built for the transports from Hungary in spring 1944 to guarantee a more efficient extermination process. The photograph epitomizes paradigmatically the discourse of invisibility. Neither the crime nor perpetrators and victims are visible. The location of the Holocaust is a place seemingly not of this world – far away and totally different. Moreover, the strict central perspective pictures the assumption of a monolithic Nazi
system in which anonymous structures are held to account but individuals are exculpated. The genocide remains invisible and unreal. The gatehouse and with it “Auschwitz” function as a coulisse with nothing behind it. Therefore it makes no difference from which side it is seen. (Interestingly enough, the same “ambiguity” and blankness were used in the making of Steven Spielberg’s motion picture “Schindler’s List.” Since he was not allowed to shoot inside Birkenau but wanted to use the authentic site as background scenery, he filmed the disembarkment of a transport outside, in front of the gatehouse, simulating what it would be like inside.)

After the war, most of the self-manifestations of the Nazi perpetrators were used without hesitation and without reflecting the problems and ambivalences intrinsically tied to it. In the different cultures of remembrance they were even used to commemorate the victims. The best-known example might be the so-called “Auschwitz Album”: Some of the photographs it contains are virtually omnipresent in our pictorial-cultural memory. But they were shot by two SS men of the camp’s “Identification Service,” presumably to document the efficiency of the extermination process during the time of maximum activity at Birkenau when the Hungarian transports were arriving. But the implications of this original intention for its totally reversed postwar usage have been rarely reflected. Another case in point is the so-called “Stroop Album” documenting the brutal suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in April/May 1943. The commander of the German forces that liquideated the Ghetto prepared it as an official report and souvenir for Heinrich Himmler and his immediate superior, Friedrich Krüger, the Senior SS and Police Leader in the General-Government that the Germans created to administer occupied Poland. It is known especially for the widely used photograph of a young boy held at gunpoint. Even the photographs used in the German Army’s crimes exhibition inescapably perpetuate the perspective of the perpetrators and also the humiliation of the victims. In general, in German-speaking research the documents and information of the (former) perpetrators were used as the main base for historical reconstruction, especially since these individuals were quite talkative after the lost war – expecting they could at least influence the perception and representation of their crimes. In the Historical Division of the US Army, 328 German Army officers under the direction of former Colonel General Franz Halder could create the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht that would dominate postwar memory for decades; they may have been prisoners of war, but precisely for this reason they had a favorable working environment with privileged access to the files. In contrast to the majority of the surviving victims, they all had the advantage of speaking the same language as the German and Austrian population.

From a specific media theoretical vantage point, the French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman recently reminded us how essential it is to provide space and attentiveness for documents left behind by the victims, to disseminate them, and to let them speak. He points concretely to photographs clandestinely taken at the risk of their lives by members of the Jewish Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau – as an act of resistance, to document the crimes they suffered. A total of three pictures (the camera slipped on a fourth one and shows on-
ly the tree tops) show women waiting outside the gas chambers and the burning of corpses after the gassing (which had to be carried out outside the crematoria because they were temporarily overloaded during the murder of the Hungarian Jews in summer 1944). The only remaining photographs from the killing process in Auschwitz-Birkenau that were not shot and commissioned by the perpetrators. However, Didi-Huberman's thesis produced a major dispute when it appeared. The French culture of remembrance, under the influence of Claude Lanzmann and his cinematic masterpiece (1985), is still focused on the gas chambers as quasi-sacred spaces and as a pictureless “Shoah.” Under these conditions, Didi-Huberman’s plea for a detailed look at the testimony of the victims was denounced as voyeuristic, revisionistic, and even antisemitic although it was above all the victims who had an interest in making the crimes visible, representable, and also comprehensible as an indictment of their torturers and murderers and to preserve the memory of their own fate.

The tradition of the victims is still often unnoticed. Survivors of the gas chamber who could bear witness, of course, do not exist. In this respect it remains effectively a “black box”; nobody can attest to it from the inside. Nonetheless it is not correct that the victims left no sources that document the crimes. Even in plain view of the gas chambers and in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, members of the Jewish Sonderkommando kept records and successfully tried to pass them on although they, too, were killed in the end. They not only described the deportations, the arrival of the transports and the gassings, including their own employment, they also recorded the history of the places the victims came from. In the underground, in the ghettos, and at many other places during the Holocaust, the victims tried to document their culture and their fate. The best-known and most impressive example might be the “Oneg Shabbat” archives from the Warsaw Ghetto, created by the Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum and his numerous co-workers. Also from the war of extermination in the East, from the humiliations, pogroms, and mass shootings, accounts of victims and survivors exist apart from the perpetrators’ documents. Those sources are always a corrective to abstract concepts and appeasing phrases. They enshrine the shock of the actual experience at the time; they evoke perturbation and enforce a “dwelling on horrors” (Hannah Arendt) that are both indispensable for any insight into the events of the Holocaust but that have no place in our routines of remembrance and “concern” (Betroffenheit).

Phrases and concepts of unrepresentability and incomprehensibility are easily at hand. But in fact, there is no fundamental difference between the problems involved in depicting and representing the Nazi genocide or everyday life in the Middle Ages, the horrors of the Thirty Year’s War or of World War I, neither in historiography nor in literature. After all, the Holocaust was by no means a natural disaster as ritualized phrases and concepts in this context often suggest, but was deliberately put into practice by Germans, Austrians, and their collaborators and therefore is explicable as all human undertakings are explicable – as hard and demanding as this might be (above all to accept the outcome). The essential difference lies exclusively in the meaning and relevance of the event for our societies. This is why historiographical or also artistic rep-
resentations are often considered to be inadequate and deficient. The narrativity of historiography and the fictionality of literature seem to be precarious while an attempt at historiographic sobriety and mere factography appears to be superficial. To say that the Holocaust is unrepresentable and incomprehensible might, in fact, be an articulation of the disappointment that no specific language and no different kind of representation for the Holocaust exists.

III

The ritually and routinely claimed unrepresentability and incomprehensibility stand vis-à-vis a veritable flood of images, descriptions, and interpretations – without the possibility of mutual reconciliation. A final representation and description of the Nazi crimes that might be universally satisfactory and redemptive in every respect might never exist and may be impossible. But the accent on unrepresentability and incomprehensibility can easily acquire a relieving and exculpating momentum. Neither the overemphasis on representational and interpretational problems, nor the simplification of highly complex developments and contexts can do justice to the historical events and their relevance for us in the present day and age. The obsessive focusing on the problems of representation and comprehension simply blocks any understanding and any account of the history. An unease (Saul Friedlander) will remain. But without making an effort at understanding prejudice, persecution, expulsion, deportation, and systematic mass murder and their aftermath, without making an effort at narrating the crimes of the perpetrators and the experiences of the victims, the perspective and the intentions of the Nazis gain a new life.

German crimes during World War II have strongly called into question the possibility of remembrance, representation, and reconstruction. Remembrance is not difficult because the crimes are unrepresentable or because the Nazis attempted to eradicate the spirit that makes remembrance possible but also because of the perpetrators’ politics of memory and representation. However, they do not influence things to a degree that would prevent evading it. This is a decisive difference from the politics of extermination and its inescapable consequences. But it usually goes unnoticed how the Nazi politics of memory and representation sustainably influence and work themselves into our concepts and interpretations.

Our postwar imagery of the Holocaust is largely dominated by the perpetrators. Despite the current interest in survivor testimonies in the “era of the witness” (Annette Wieviorka) it should not be forgotten that most of the victims’ voices and with them their perspective and experiences were silenced by the genocide. The radical impossibility of testimony and the continuing forgetting of the witnesses and their perspective are integral parts of the Holocaust and unfortunately also its aftermath.

The question of the degree to which the postwar cultures and politics of memory and representation unconsciously continue the perspective and tradition of the perpetrators refers to a complex and highly delicate context, one that transcends the so-called “zero hour” 1945 that is usually
seen as the beginning of any memory and representation. Especially in Holocaust remembrance, memory is usually associated with justice and restitution; remembrance alone is already claimed as a satisfactory answer to the Holocaust. Continuities within the ranks of officials and personnel are largely known by now, even if they may not be considered with all their consequences. But the continuities on other levels have aroused little or no attention. Especially for memory and representation, for the imagery and concepts of history no “zero hour” and no clear breaks exist. The allegedly essential connection between annihilation and forgetting on the one hand and memory/remembrance and justice/compensation on the other hand – one of the fundamental principles of our memorial culture – is, in fact, unmasked as a (maybe convenient) misapprehension. History is not necessarily written by the victors on the battlefields – or it might not always be so clear who prevailed beyond the battlefields of history.

Unfortunately, the discourses about the events of the Holocaust on the one hand, and about their aftermath and representations on the other, are increasingly drifting apart so that more and more two completely separate areas of scholarship have evolved with hardly any real communication between them. But in fact, there can be no discussion of postwar representation of the Holocaust without a look at the actual crimes, their conceptualization, and the construction of a certain image of the victims by the perpetrators. Neither does it make sense to examine the crimes and end with the year 1945, as was often the case in earlier scholarship and sometimes still is, without considering the aftermath, namely, questions of representation and interpretation. One cannot be understood without the other. This is not an argument for an epistemologically naïve realism suggesting that there can be just one inevitable or adequate image of a historical event in memory. But this, on the other hand, does not mean that memory and representation are not influenced and affected by certain historical conditions. Representation was part of the crime – and a crime in itself. Therefore, the crime remains part of the representation. Our landscape of memory has a predecessor in the perpetrators’ politics of memory and representation and thus has to grapple with it, regardless of whether that happens transparently and consciously. The postwar history of coming to terms with the mass crimes of Nazism is thus not merely “the second history” of Nazism; rather it is its own second history – the second history of the representation of the crimes.

This reminds us of the heterogeneity and fragmentation of what we simply call “the Holocaust” or “Shoah” as if it were a monolithic and elementary event. It is, of course, bound together by the antisemitic intention and the will to murder all Jews in a very compact time-frame. But it happened in different settings, with different procedures employed by the Germans, different reactions on the part of the local populations, different kinds and degrees of complicity, collaboration and resistance, dealing with very different historical starting positions, different kinds of Jewish populations with different backgrounds and different degrees of assimilation and integration – and therefore different results for the postwar situation, as well as for memory and remembrance.
Thus it seems essential to bring both perspectives together: one focusing on the historical events and the other on the aftermath, memory, representation, and interpretation. Only in this way can what has often been lamented as an “intellectual kitschification” of the memory discourse be prevented.\textsuperscript{35} If – aside from an ethics of memory – an ethics of representation exists, it might include the duty not to follow unconsciously the intentions of the perpetrators in the representation of their crimes. Since representation is always governed by a multilayered interplay of visibility and non-visibility, we need to be aware of what we – sometimes necessarily, sometimes not – blot out and forget when we reconstruct history, remember, and represent.\textsuperscript{36} This should also be part of an “integrated history” that not only includes the different perspectives on the historical events but also “history and memory” reflected in the presence of commentary.\textsuperscript{37} It is important not because the Nazis planned a memorycide, a total annihilation of memory beyond the physical murder of masses of human beings, but precisely because they actually intended a complex construction and preservation of memory with totally controlled images of their crimes and victims.

\begin{enumerate}
\item For the antisemitic legacy of the term “Holocaust”, dating back to the Middle Ages, see Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Was von Auschwitz bleibt} (Frankfurt a.M., 2003), 27. Beside that, the original denotation from ancient times as a sacrifice – an animal wholly burnt – has obviously inappropriate aspects. On the other hand, especially in post-Nazi societies the competing term “Shoah” with its Hebrew origin (meaning “calamity”, or “catastrophe”, and also “destruction”) can be an easy but inappropriate way of identification with the victims.
\item See e.g. \textit{To Live with Honor and to Die with Honor. Selected Documents from the Warsaw Thetto Underground Archives “O.S.” (Oneg Shabbath)}, ed. Joseph Kernish (Jerusalem, 1986), 2–24, 703–708.
\item Heinrich Himmler, “Rede vor SS-Gruppenführern in Posen, 4.10.1943,” in \textit{IMT, PS-1919}, 64ff. See also Bundesarchiv Berlin, NS 19/4010. Beside this official, written version that was used at the Nuremberg Major War Criminals Trial and that is usually cited exists an audio recording of the whole speech. In that document preserved in the German Broadcast Archives in Frankfurt a.M. (76 U 3374-76/1) Himmler says only: “[... and this is a glorious chapter that has never been mentioned and that never will be.” Himmler usually used notes for his speeches, Translations were made after the audio recordings and thereafter revised by him. See Richard Breitman, \textit{Himmler Himmler. Der Architekt der „Endlösung“} (Zürich – Munich, 2000), 343, 424 (fn. 50).
\item During the war, Franz Neumann assumed in his work about the structure and the practice of National Socialism that the value of antisemitism for domestic politics would never allow a “complete annihilation of the Jews”: “The enemy cannot and may not disappear; he constantly has to be available as the scapegoat for all the ills that the socio-political system produces.”, F. Neumann, \textit{Behemoth. Struktur und Praxis des Nationalsozialismus} (Frankfurt a.M.,
1984), 163. About the same time, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote down the same idea in the Warsaw Ghetto: “If all the Jews were cleared out of Warsaw and out of the Government General as a whole, They would lose the Jewish argument. It would be hard for them then to attribute all their difficulties and failures to the Jews. The Jews have to remain, in keeping with the proverb: ‘God grant that all your teeth fall out, except one to give you a toothache!’”, E. Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, ed. Jacob Sloan (New York, 1958), 325. Later scholars like Erich Goldhagen came to a similar conclusion: “By murdering the Jews the National Socialists destroyed their instrument for power. Instead of preserving the scapegoat they slaughtered it.”, E. Goldhagen, “Weltanschauung und Endlösung. Zum Antisemitismus der nationalsozialistischen Führungsschicht,” Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte 24 (1976), 379–405, here 393.


21 See „Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!“. Stroop-Bericht (IMT, Exhibit USA 275, 1061-PS) (Darmstadt – Neuwied, 1960).


33 See e.g. the recent evaluations of continuities in race thinking and racial distinctions beyond the defeat of the Third Reich and its genocidal European empire: Rita Chin, Heide Feinrenchen, Geoff Eley and Atina Grossmann, After the Nazi Racial State. Difference and Democracy in Europe (Ann Arbor, 2009).

34 Cf. Peter Reichel, Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland. Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute (Munich, 2001), 199.

