

HOLOCAUST RESEARCH IN GERMANY: CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

CURRENT STATUS

Several years ago, I wrote in the introduction to a collection of essays I co-edited on *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*:

“In light of how sophisticated and differentiated Holocaust research has become, it may come as a surprise that, in contrast to Poland, the Netherlands, or the United States, a professorship for the study of the Holocaust has only very recently been set up for the first time at a German university. The country’s first ever professorship for Holocaust studies was inaugurated at Frankfurt’s Goethe University in May 2017. While the country has multiple academic programs and researchers focusing on the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people, the new chair is the first long-term professorship with a specific focus on the repercussions that have followed the Holocaust through to the present day.”¹

22 Shortly after my co-editor and I penned those words, a second German professorship devoted to studying the Holocaust was established, namely the Chair of ‘Modern German Literature with a focus on Holocaust and Camp Literature and its Didactics’ at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen. Like Frankfurt, Giessen is located in the German state of Hesse. Unlike the Frankfurt professorship, the Giessen professorship is for the time being merely a *short-term* post, with funding secured only for the first five years (though since extended). Furthermore, though undoubtedly an expert on Holocaust literature, the professor in question – Sascha Feuchert – is not a historian; he is a literary scholar.²

This is not to say that Frankfurt and Giessen are the only German universities where the Holocaust is currently taught. Many institutions of higher education, such as the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, the Free University in Berlin or my own University of Potsdam, offer numerous courses on the Holocaust, but the range of courses offered clearly depends heavily on the involvement of affiliated or integrated institutions – such as the Fritz Bauer Institute at Frankfurt’s Goethe University or the Research Unit for Holocaust Literature at Giessen’s Justus Liebig University – and/or the commitment of individual lecturers.³ Furthermore, only one university in Germany offers a Master of Arts programme on the Holocaust; the institution in question, however, is not even a German university: it is an American private university in Berlin – Touro College. At a national and institutional level, very little has changed at Germany’s universities since the establishment of the country’s first professorship for Holocaust studies in May 2017. The same applies to the study of Nazi Germany as a whole. Only a single chair has an explicit working focus on National Socialism and bears this emphasis in its name, namely the chair of ‘German History in the 20th Century with a Focus on the Period of National Socialism’, which has existed at the Humboldt University in Berlin since 2009.⁴

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1 Kay – Stahel (eds.) 2018: 3.

2 Weitere Holocaust-Professur in Hessen 2017.

3 For instance, I taught three university courses specifically on the Holocaust and a further course on Nazi Germany in the space of less than three and a half years between October 2017 and February 2021.

4 Nägele – Kahle 2018: 30–31.

In this context, the content of university teaching on the Holocaust is also worth noting. According to a study produced by Berlin's Free University in 2018 entitled 'University Teaching about the Holocaust in Germany', only a third of the total number of courses on the Holocaust taught at German universities over four semesters between 2014 and 2016 focussed on the actual historical events. In the words of the authors of the study, the small proportion of classes dealing with the events themselves 'indicates a clear deficiency'. Of the remaining two thirds of courses, more than a quarter dealt with literary or media representation of the Holocaust. This finding demonstrates that there is no guarantee of regular and basic courses of study on the history of the Holocaust at all institutions of higher education in Germany. Even the aforementioned Master of Arts degree offered by Touro College is in Holocaust Communication and Tolerance.⁵

One result of the current state of affairs of teaching on the Holocaust at German universities is that now, as before, leading German historians who have published ground-breaking studies on the Holocaust and Nazi Germany work abroad: Christian Gerlach in Switzerland, Dieter Pohl in Austria, Wolf Gruner, Jürgen Matthäus and Thomas Kühne in the United States, Nikolaus Wachsmann, Christian Goeschel and Daniel Siemens in the United Kingdom. The list is extensive. Does the high number of German scholars abroad mean that opportunities have been created for universities to appoint non-German scholars to senior positions in the field of Holocaust studies? In a word, 'no'. The appointment of non-Germans to senior positions at German universities is virtually unheard of. The few senior positions in the field of Holocaust studies and National Socialism are firmly in the hands of scholars born in the 'land of the perpetrators'. The salient point here is that this state of affairs tends to reinforce orthodoxy and discourage debate in the field.

In an interview given in 2016, Frank Bajohr – who is director of the Centre for Holocaust Studies at the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, which was established in 2013 (more on which below) – stated: '[...] the Holocaust is, like no other topic, an international field of research.'⁶ This is undoubtedly true. But where, then, are the international scholars at German universities and research institutions? The fact that the Holocaust is an international field of research is certainly not reflected in appointments of international scholars to senior positions in the world of German academia. In this respect, at least, German universities remain parochial and inward-looking. In many university departments, 'diversity' is understood to mean that not all members of staff are white German men; there are also a handful of white German women. There seems to be comparatively little interest in introducing students in Germany to the perspectives of historians from countries occupied by Nazi Germany or those who fought against the German war machine, at least when it comes to teaching.

To be fair, if we compare the situation now with the situation ten or twelve years ago, there has been a marked improvement. At the time, the Fritz Bauer Institute for the History and Impact of the Holocaust, which had been founded in Frankfurt in 1995, was the only one of

5 Nägel – Kahle 2018: 23–24 (quote: 23).

6 Nägel – Kahle 2018: 75.

its kind in Germany. Even after its establishment, however, Germany still lacked an institution comparable to the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC or the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The last ten years have witnessed the establishment of the Centre for Holocaust Studies in Munich, the Chair for Research on the History and Impact of the Holocaust at Frankfurt's Goethe University (a post held by the director of the Fritz Bauer Institute) and the Chair of Modern German Literature with a focus on Holocaust and Camp Literature and its Didactics at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen, all mentioned earlier.

The establishment of the Centre for Holocaust Studies at, of all places, the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (*Institut für Zeitgeschichte*, or IfZ) in Munich, however, leaves a bitter aftertaste in view of recent accusations that, over a period of decades, employees of the institute systematically ostracised Jewish historians such as Raul Hilberg (1964 und 1980), Joseph Wulf (1963), H. G. Adler (1965) and Gerald Reitlinger (1954) in connection with research into the Holocaust, and hindered the investigation and disclosure of Nazi crimes, as in their refusal to publish a complete and annotated edition of the so-called Incident Reports of the Einsatzgruppen.⁷ This is all the more remarkable if we bear in mind that the IfZ was set up in 1949 under the unambiguous name 'German Institute for the History of the National Socialist Period' (*Deutsches Institut für Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Zeit*).⁸ The historians in Munich were clearly guided here, among other things, by motives of self-interest. They argued, for instance, that the publication of a German translation of Reitlinger's book *The Final Solution* would 'disrupt' the institute's own plans for a comprehensive documentation of Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish policies. These plans initially failed to materialise, however. Indeed, 37 years would elapse before the appearance of the institute's own 'comprehensive documentation'.⁹

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A further motivation in obstructing the publication of Reitlinger, Hilberg, Adler and co. was, it seems, that the historians in Munich believed that they could more objectively understand the National Socialist era and were better equipped to apply the necessary critical methodology when examining the historical sources. In 1987, the then director of the institute, Martin Broszat, even claimed that Jewish historians were not capable of writing a rational historical account of Nazi Germany because they were biased. Of course, Broszat's membership in the Hitler Youth and the Nazi Party did not stop *him* from writing on the subject. The lack of good judgement displayed by the historians from the Institute for Contemporary History in rejecting the works of Jewish historians testifies not only to their conceit, as well as an absence of intellectual sovereignty and openness, but also to a greater regard for their own self-interest than for the advancement of academic research and historical learning.¹⁰

Of course, times have changed, and the Institute for Contemporary History – once vilified by some as the Institute for the Promotion of National Socialism (*Institut für die Förderung des Nationalsozialismus*), as an employee of West Germany's domestic intelligence agency noted in 1951 – is today no longer the same organisation that it was in the 1950s and 1960s or even the 1980s. Having said that, the institute has still not investigated its own past role in shunning Jewish historians and hindering the investigation and disclosure of Nazi crimes. In response to the most recent accusations, current director Andreas Wirsching has stated that 'transparency in dealing with one's own past, too, is a decisive leitmotif' for the institute he heads.¹¹ On the face of it, this is good news. At a time when German federal ministries and institutions such as the Federal Intelligence Service are finally having their history examined by independent experts,

7 Aly 2017: esp. 1–3, 6–7, 10–12, 16–17, 20 (fn. 25) and 21–22; Schlott 2017. On the case of Wulf, see also Berg 2003: 337–345. On the case of Reitlinger, see also Berg 2002: 105–110.

8 Winkler 2018.

9 For both quotes, see Berg 2002: 107. The publication in question is Benz 1991.

10 On the motivations of the IfZ historians, see Aly 2017: 18–21. On Broszat's 1987 statement, see "The Holocaust Won't Disappear" 2007. On Broszat's membership in the Hitler Youth and the NSDAP, see Berg 2003: 615.

11 On the nickname of the IfZ in the 1950s, see Winkler 2018. For the Wirsching quote, see Wirsching 2017.

it would be prudent for the Institute for Contemporary History to also have its own history subjected to a careful *external* examination. Regrettably, though, we are still awaiting this examination. There is, then, considerable room for improvement when it comes to teaching and research on the Holocaust in Germany.

German universities and research institutes might learn from watching the work being done in a different but related field of Holocaust education, namely the preservation of historical locations of Nazi persecution and terror, and the establishment there of memorial sites. Memorial sites at original locations of Nazi crimes, especially former concentration camps, are now institutionalised as an integral part of political culture in Germany. In what was West Germany, however, this was the result of tenacious efforts on the part of civil society. Only after German reunification in 1990 did state-sponsored and institutionalised memorial policies lead to former concentration camps becoming central places of political education and public heritage in Germany. Even so, a lengthy process of recognition was required before universities began to take an interest in integrating memorial site visits into their teaching. This phenomenon is thus relatively new. An empirical examination of university courses on the Holocaust reveals that more than one fifth of such courses offered now include an excursion to a memorial site located at a former concentration camp.¹² The integration of such excursions into university teaching benefits from the sheer abundance of memorial sites throughout Germany – owing, of course, to the profusion of sites of Nazi persecution and terror between 1933 and 1945. Wherever you are in Germany, in both towns and rural areas, you are never very far from remnants of the Holocaust: former concentration camps, labour camps, Gestapo prisons, psychiatric clinics, POW camps, and so on.

Today, then, the memorials for victims of the Nazi regime are not only state-institutionalised places of remembrance and historical-political education but also places of research on the Holocaust. Accordingly, a more extensive interaction with universities has been reported. Concentration camp memorials are increasingly perceived, furthermore, as potential occupational fields for graduates of master's degree programmes such as Contemporary History, Public History or Holocaust Communication and Tolerance.¹³

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FUTURE CHALLENGES

In summarising the current status of Holocaust research at universities, academic institutions and memorial sites in Germany, I have hopefully already pointed to some areas in which there is potential for improvement and where, structurally-speaking, some of the future challenges might lie. Further challenges exist, of course, where the content, core focal points and approaches to historical research itself are concerned.

In terms of the ways in which the Holocaust is taught and researched, one of the future challenges facing Holocaust research in Germany will be to integrate it into the wider fields of genocide studies, for one thing, and research on mass violence, for another. The authors of the study produced by Berlin's Free University in 2018, mentioned earlier, conclude that, in Germany, 'comparative genocide research has so far been neither widespread nor very visible'.¹⁴ Some Holocaust scholars, such as Yehuda Bauer and Saul Friedländer, repudiate the very notion that the Holocaust can be placed 'within the framework of explanatory categories of a generalising kind'. According to Friedländer:

¹² Nägel – Kahle 2018: 80–81.

¹³ Nägel – Kahle 2018: 81.

¹⁴ Nägel – Kahle 2018: 82.

*"The absolute character of the anti-Jewish drive of the Nazis makes it impossible to integrate the extermination of the Jews, not only within the general framework of Nazi persecutions, but even within the wider aspects of contemporary ideological-political behaviour such as fascism, totalitarianism, economic exploitation and so on."*¹⁵

I disagree. We can simultaneously accept the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust on the one hand and still place it in a broader comparative context on the other. Comparing two things is not the same as equating them. If applied correctly, comparison remains one of the historian's most valuable tools, and – when applied to the subject in question – it can indeed reveal *differences* as well as similarities in the Nazi persecution of Jews and other victim groups.

For all the differences in the nature of the victims and, frequently, the ways in which they were murdered, however, they had something fundamental in common. It is no coincidence that all the major Nazi killing programmes took place during the war years.¹⁶ The commonality shared by the different victim groups is closely related to the wider military conflict. While each of the killing programmes possessed a racial (and racist) component, the logic of war was central to the rationale for killing each and every one of the victim groups, for they were regarded by the Nazi regime in one way or another as a potential threat to Germany's ability to fight and, ultimately, win a war for hegemony in Europe. From the perspective of the Nazis, then, winning the war required their ruthless destruction. This view was informed and justified by Nazi racial thinking, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate German wartime strategy from Nazi genocidal racial policies. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that in the case of the German Reich genocide itself, and mass killing policies in general, constituted a form of warfare.

The mentally and physically disabled in Germany were seen as undermining the health and vitality of the German nation in wartime, while the disabled in the occupied territories were viewed as rivals for food and accommodation; the Polish ruling classes and elites were murdered as pillars of Polish national identity and potential focal points for resistance to the German occupation; as alleged leaders and revolutionaries pulling the strings behind the scenes, Jews everywhere were believed to pose a threat to the very existence of the German people; Soviet prisoners of war and urban dwellers were regarded as direct competitors of German troops and the German home front for precious food supplies; rural populations in Eastern and Southeast Europe were suspected of aiding and abetting partisans; Roma – whether itinerant or sedentary – were considered to be potential spies and a general factor of destabilisation behind German lines. Indeed, it was the context of war that provided the necessary final ingredient that turned these programmes of persecution into programmes of mass killing.

In view alone of this intertwinement of war and extermination, it makes a great deal of sense to consider the different strands of Nazi mass killing together rather than in isolation from one another. This of course means going against the grain of most scholarship on the subject and examining the genocide of the European Jews alongside other Nazi mass murder campaigns.¹⁷ Taking an integrative approach to Nazi mass killing in no way contradicts the view – advocated here, too – that the Holocaust was an unprecedented phenomenon, not least in its comprehensive and systematic nature. Instead, it is possible to argue that the Holocaust was unprecedented yet simultaneously regard it as one part of a wider process of demographic reconstruction and racial purification pursued by the Nazi regime, first in Germany itself and then, as the war progressed and the Nazi empire grew, in each and every one of the territories occupied by German forces.

15 Friedländer 1981: 2. See also the excellent discussion in Levene 2005: 38–39.

16 On this and the following, see Kay 2021: 1–3.

17 As I do in my book Kay 2021, the first comparative, comprehensive history of Nazi mass killing.

By the same token, the Holocaust – and Nazi Germany in general – needs to be placed in the broader context of German history. Again, this does not mean denying the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust or the special place it deserves to have in German public consciousness. However, the Holocaust and Nazi Germany are still often viewed in isolation from prior and subsequent events, so that the historical circumstances in which the Holocaust took place are neglected and continuities in German history are overlooked. This allows leading scholars, such as Guenter Lewy in a recent book on Holocaust perpetrators, to claim that '[p]rior to 1933, the Germans arguably were among the least anti-Semitic people in Europe'.¹⁸ The unprecedented 'Jew census' (*Juden-zählung*) that was carried out in the German army in 1916, as well as the concealment of its results until the end of war, contradict this claim. The publication of falsified statistics in 1919 was exploited by radical right-wing parties and organisations to reinforce a massive wave of anti-Semitic propaganda. The correct results of the census – which revealed that the same proportion of German Jews as non-Jews had been drafted into the military and that 77 per cent had fought in combat operations – were not published until 1922, by which time the damage had already been done.¹⁹

The key to understanding and explaining the vision that Nazi ideology had of society and the violence it spawned – including the Holocaust – is to be found in the First World War, its outcome and, above all, societal perceptions of this experience.²⁰ According to Sebastian Haffner, one of the most perceptive contemporary commentators on National Socialism, the war years later became 'the positive underlying vision of Nazism'.²¹ Immediately after the war ended, scapegoats were sought for Germany's defeat, resulting in the stab-in-the-back myth of a betrayal by Jews, communists and pacifists on the home front. The defeat – and right-wing rationalisations for it – bred a traumatic fear of internal instability in times of war and crisis.²² Lessons were drawn from the constantly invoked crisis of 1918: a repetition was to be avoided at all costs. This called for radical preventive measures. Whatever was deemed necessary was also regarded as legitimate. Thus, in wartime, all real and prospective enemies (ideological opponents, racial undesirables, those considered unproductive, worthless or a burden, and other potential dissidents) were to be removed and eliminated with the goal, on the one hand, of preventing a reoccurrence of the defeat and turmoil of 1918 and 1919, and, on the other, of purifying and strengthening German society and, later, a German-dominated Europe in the name of the National Socialist utopia.

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But I digress. The point of these remarks is that one of the key future challenges for Holocaust research in Germany – and indeed beyond its borders – will be how to ensure a greater historical contextualisation of the event that marked a 'shattering of civilisation', as Dan Diner has termed it, while still recognising its unprecedented nature.²³

18 Lewy 2017: 124.

19 Rosenthal 2007.

20 See Keller 2014.

21 Haffner 2002: 23.

22 See Gerwarth 2020; Gerwarth 2016.

23 Diner 1988.

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