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Global Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context

The memory of the victims of the Holocaust is a central element in present-day European, Israeli, and North American historical consciousness. Recent publications also point to its "global" and "universal" character. In order to test this assessment, the participants of the workshop "Global Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context," which convened at Augsburg University on June 10 and 11, 2011, set out to explore whether it was justified to speak of a "globalization of Holocaust memory" or whether it was not rather a western phenomenon. For this purpose, the organizers invited a number of scholars to speak about the formation and development of Holocaust memory in the nonwestern world. The Stiftung Deutsch-Amerikanische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen (SDAW/Foundation German-American Academic Relations) provided financial support for the workshop.

In their opening remarks, conveners Philipp Gassert (Augsburg) and Alan E. Steinweis (Vermont) pointed to the universal significance of Holocaust memory for historical consciousness in the West, defined as the United States, Europe, some former British colonies, and Israel. Steinweis provided the historiographical framework for the workshop by outlining three phases of scholarly engagement with the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath. The actual study of National Socialist extermination policies constituted a first phase, followed by the study of Holocaust memory, especially in those countries where the Holocaust had occurred or refugees and survivors had settled. A third phase now focuses on the consequences of "Holocaust consciousness" for the relationship between the West and postcolonial societies. The workshop "Global Holocaust?" was intended to make a contribution to this field. Steinweis further outlined a series of questions for the workshop: What have been the central themes of Holocaust memory in the nonwestern world? Do nonwestern agents see it as a uniquely European event or an event with universal implications? Which institutions have been in charge of researching and teaching the Holocaust and who has funded these activities? How has the Holocaust been contextualized in the history of oppression and genocide, taking into account examples such as Apartheid, Stalinist crimes, and the Nanking Massacre?

The first panel, chaired by Francis Nicosia (Vermont), set out to explore the role of Holocaust memory in the Middle East. GILAD MARGALIT (Haifa) analyzed the concept of the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust for historical consciousness and political discourse in Israel. While this concept is still crucial for Israeli identity today, it had become increasingly contested since the early 1980s. At that time, critical voices in Israel had begun to point to the negative consequences of Holocaust memory, which had lead to an uncompromising stance of Israel towards the rights of Palestinians and could, in a worst-case scenario, even threaten Israelâs existence. Opponents of such a line of argument had labeled attacks on the concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust as political at-

tacks on Israeli and Jewish identity. Thus, for the "Zionist mainstream," the uniqueness of the Holocaust was inextricably linked with the justification of Israelâs right of existence. Critical voices gained some momentum during the 1990s, when Jews who had immigrated to Israel from Arab countries criticized the dominant role of Ashkenazi Jews (Jews from Central and Western Europe) in Israeli society. According to Margalit, they argued that the Ashkenazis' claim for the uniqueness of the Holocaust served to silence any kind of criticism of social injustice in Israel. Despite such critical voices and very emotional debates, Margalit concluded, the political mainstream and the educational system in Israel are still dominated by the concept of the Holocaustâs uniqueness.

GÃTZ NORDBRUCH (Odense) shifted the focus to the Arab world. Nordbruch emphasized that during the Nazi period, sympathy for the suffering of European Jews under the Nazi regime and anti-Zionism were not mutually exclusive in the Arab world, but actually existed in tandem. After a long period of non-engagement with the Holocaust, this earlier differentiated attitude towards the Holocaust and the opposition to the state of Israel gained new popularity in the 1990s. The positive reception of publications by European Holocaust deniers in the Arab world in the mid-1990s caused a critical reaction from Arab intellectuals from abroad. While they chastised the oppression of the Palestinians, they also demanded that the Holocaust needed to be accepted as a historical reality. Nordbruch argued that this eventually led to a "new openness" towards the study of the Holocaust in the Arab world. Even though Holocaust denial is still widespread, Arab scholars have begun a serious investigation into the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath. In the ensuing discussion, Nordbruch stated that engagement with the history of the Holocaust has actually moved from intellectual circles to the societal mainstream, although cooperation between Arab and Israeli scholars does not yet exist.

The next panel, chaired by Lutz Kaelber (Vermont), provided an assessment of Holocaust memorial culture (and its absence) in the former Soviet Union and the Ukraine. DENISE YOUNGBLOOD (Vermont) provided an overview of the development of Holocaust memory in the Soviet Union since the beginning of "Operation Barbarossa" in 1941. It was characterized, she argued, by a state-sanctioned "collective amnesia." In official Soviet memory of World War II, German soldiers were characterized as barbaric perpetrators and the Soviet people as a whole as their victims, but the mass murder of Soviet Jews was not addressed. While no written orders about how to deal with Holocaust memory existed, a number of reasons accounted for the development: anti-Semitism, an emphasis on the unity of the Soviet people, the suppression of a specific Jewish consciousness, and the foregrounding of the Slavic role in resistance movements. Youngblood concluded with a critical assessment of the state of Holocaust memorial culture in the Soviet Union, which robbed Jews of their identity, failed to find an appropriate form of memorialization for Jewish victims, and led to an equation Zionism with Fascism.

The next speaker, Holocaust historian WENDY LOWER (Munich), moved the discussion to the largest former Soviet republic outside Russia, the Ukraine. Drawing from her own research in the Ukraine, Lower stated that while local memories of the Holocaust existed, there was no "collective memory" of the Holocaust in the Ukraine. As in other former Soviet states, this lack of memory also applied to the issue of collaboration with the Nazi regime, which was widely ignored. In addition, Ukrainian memory of World War II was overshadowed by the Ukraineâs history of victimization at the hands of the Stalinist regime during the "Great Famine of 1932-1933," also known as the "Holodomor," during which millions of Ukrainians died. With regard to Holocaust education in Ukrainian schools and universities today, a "gap between history and memory" is still apparent: while a majority of students had some knowledge of the Holocaust, they mostly perceived Ukrainians either as fighters for independence or victims of Stalinism. The discussion of both presentations mainly focused on the role of communist ideology for the formation of Holocaust memory in the former Eastern block. Yet Lowerâs presentation also pointed to the lack of awareness in the West for the defining catastrophic event of the Ukraine during the 20th century, the Holodomor.

Leaving the Eurasian continent, a panel chaired by Jacob S. Eder (Pennsylvania) dealt with the memory of the Holocaust in Latin America and South Africa. Literary scholar AMALIA RAN (Nebraska/Tel-Aviv) reminded the participants at the outset of her presentation of the multitude of approaches toward the destruction of European Jews in Latin America. As Latin American societies had their own history of violence, military coups, and civil wars, Holocaust memory needed to be located in this context. The evolution of such memory has been hindered, however, by "institutionalized anti-Semitism and political racism" in the region. Nevertheless, it constituted a crucial part in Latin American societiesâ process of coming to terms with their own history. The Holocaust has served as a universal "narration" that allowed recog-

nition of past crimes and created demands to remember. Thus, Ran concluded, Holocaust memory in Latin America has always "vacillated between the universal and the local."

SUSANNA B. SCHRAFSTETTER (Vermont) stressed the "global" character of the lessons drawn from the Holocaust in South Africa. The country houses three successful "Holocaust and Genocide Centres" and is the only Subsaharan country with institutionalized Holocaust education. While research about the formation of Holocaust memory in South Africa is still a developing field, it is safe to say that the Holocaust has become a "benchmark for assessing past injustices" since the end of Apartheid. Holocaust centers draw close parallels between Nazi anti-Semitism up to 1939 and the Apartheid regime, while Germanyâs process of coming to terms with the Nazi past served as a precedent for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The "cosmopolitan" character of Holocaust memory in South Africa is also apparent in the activities of the centers, which offer excursions to sites of genocide in Rwanda and have invited survivors of the Rwandan genocide to ceremonies in South Africa. This allowed, according to Schrafstetter, different groups of African victims to identify with the victims of the Holocaust. The ensuing discussion centered on the coexistence of Nazi perpetrators and victims in South American societies as well as the comparability of Nazi anti-Semitism and South African racism during the Apartheid regime.

The final panel, chaired by Reinhild Kreis (Augsburg), shifted the focus onto Asia. MARIA FRAMKE (Bremen) divided her presentation into two parts. In a first step, she provided an overview of Indian Holocaust historiography. The Holocaust is not an important aspect of historical research in contemporary India, and Jewish studies mostly focus on Jewish communities in India and Indian-Israeli relations. Framke also pointed to the bizarre development of a "Hitler cult" in India: not only has *Mein Kampf* been a bestseller, but also a Bollywood movie about Hitlerâs love life is currently in production, entitled "My Dear Friend Hitler"! This development clearly demands a thorough scholarly analysis. In a second step, Framke shifted the focus to the prewar period and summarized the results of her research about Indian perception of German anti-Semitism up to 1939. She stated that the Indian media had followed the fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany closely and with empathy. While early reports were often ill-informed and accepted Nazi propaganda as the truth, reports of the late 1930s were much more critical of the Nazi regime.

The last speaker, JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN (West Georgia), provided a detailed overview of the development and the current state of Holocaust studies in communist China. Goldstein stressed thatâin contrast to the other societies examined at the conferenceâChina was still a totalitarian state and thus the study of Holocaust education had to be a study of state policy. Following the Soviet example, virtually no engagement with the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust had occurred in China during the first three postwar decades. However, a seminal change took place with the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, which brought heavy losses for the Chinese army. In the aftermath of the war, China intensified relations with Israel, which it had come to consider as a model for the modernization of its armed forces. This "marriage of convenience" led to a surprising change in attitudes towards Israel, the Jews, and the Holocaust. Since thenâand with the support of American foundations and Yad VashemâHolocaust education has been an expanding field in China.

While many important questions were raised and answered, the workshop also put more questions on the agenda. For example, Holocaust education in various national contexts demands a more thorough analysis, as does the attitude toward Holocaust memory among minorities in the West, such as Turkish immigrants in Germany, Arabs in France, or African Americans and Native Americans in the United States. It also became clear that western scholars cannot fully assess the "global" dimension of Holocaust memory without engaging in conversation with experts on the nonwestern world. Building on previous cooperation among individual participants of the workshop as well as on the partnership between the Universities of Augsburg and Vermont, the workshop thus also served as the inaugural meeting of a transatlantic study group that will continue to meet to discuss the global dimension of Holocaust memory.

Conference overview:

Opening Session

Philipp Gassert (Augsburg University) and Alan E. Steinweis (University of Vermont)

Panel 1

Chair: Francis Nicosia (University of Vermont)

Gilad Margalit (University of Haifa): The Concept of the Shoah's Singularity and the Intellectual Unease it Evoked: Three Decades of an Israeli Debate

GÃ¶tz Nordbruch (University of Southern Denmark,

Odense): Facing the Enemyâs Sorrow: Arab Responses to the Holocaust

Panel 2
Chair: Lutz Kaelber (University of Vermont)

Denise Youngblood (University of Vermont): Collective Amnesia? The USSR and the Holocaust

Wendy Lower (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich): Is There a Holocaust Memory in Ukraine Today? Recent Political, Cultural and Regional Trends

Panel 3
Chair: Jacob S. Eder (University of Pennsylvania)

Amalia Ran (University of Nebraska/Tel-Aviv University): Nuestra Shoa: Memory and Post-Memory in Latin American Perspectives

Susanna B. Schrafstetter (University of Vermont): "We learn about the Holocaust so that we can become more compassionate:" Holocaust Memory in South Africa

Panel 4
Chair: Reinhild Kreis (Augsburg University)

Maria Framke (Jacobs University, Bremen): The Perception of the Holocaust in India: Preliminary Findings

Jonathan Goldstein (University of West Georgia): Holocaust and Jewish Studies in Modern China: Functions of a Political Agenda

Concluding Session
Alan E. Steinweis (University of Vermont) and Philipp Gassert (Augsburg University)

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