

Dieter Pohl

# Holocaust Studies in Our Societies

## Abstract

In his keynote to the public conference of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) in April 2019 entitled *Holocaust Studies and its Social Setting* [<https://www.ehri-project.eu/final-conference-second-phase-ehri-project>], Dieter Pohl, a longstanding member of the International Academic Advisory Board of the VWI, raised important questions on the future of Holocaust studies. After having given an overview on the origins, developments, and present state of the discipline, he elaborated on the twofold nature of Holocaust studies as both scholarly research and at the same time part of cultural memory. As such, he also reflected on the tension in the field between the underlying moral drive and the requirements concerning its scholarly logic. Yet he also addressed specific gaps, absences, and deficiencies that have emerged in the field over the last decade: the general lack of context, specifically the disconnection between Holocaust studies and the study of the Nazi dictatorship, war, and occupation, while only few studies address structural questions on a Europe-wide basis. Pohl came to the conclusion that the role of Holocaust studies for societies is very distinct has to cope with different contexts, though its main asset should remain a methodological and conceptual rigour as well as an openness to new and even more unpleasant findings. It can deliver the basis for societal discourses that transcend rituals of memorialisation, with painful insights. Yet Holocaust research can also identify and evaluate examples of help and rescue, of international intervention.

Finally, the most important pursuit for our understanding of the Holocaust and the lessons to be drawn from it should be an apprehension and analysis of the destruction of democratic order or of any order based on a law-abiding state.

Do our societies need Holocaust Studies? It is not easy to answer this question; what follows is the perspective of a historian of the Holocaust. Definitions first: Which societies are meant here? Are we speaking of national societies in Europe or an imagined European society as a whole, or rather a European public sphere, which includes societies which are not within the EU, but are extremely important for Holocaust Studies and remembrance, like Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, or Russia, and of course Israel. A European approach and a European project require an integrative view.

Holocaust Studies themselves are easier to define: They encompass professional and non-professional historiography and research on the Holocaust in culture, society, and human life, which use sources and apply methodologies to a certain extent. Holocaust Studies are moreover a field where not only professionalised institutions are active, but also survivor historians as well as actors from the public sphere like journalists and amateur researchers.

Holocaust Studies and Holocaust awareness in society were always closely inter-related. In fact, research on the Holocaust already started during the events themselves, around 1943, in exile and underground,<sup>1</sup> and spread to all of Europe after the

1 See for example: Institute of Jewish Affairs, *Hitler's Ten-Year War on the Jews*, New York 1943; Jacob Apenzslak (ed.), *The Black Book of Polish Jewry*, New York 1943; Eugene M. Kulischer, *The Displacement of Population in Europe*, Montreal 1943; Boris Shub, *Starvation over Europe (Made in Germany). A Documented Record 1943*, written by Boris Shub on the basis of research by Z. Warhaftig, New York 1943.

end of the war, especially in countries which had been heavily affected by the mass murder of Jews like Poland and Hungary, but also the Netherlands and France, and even in camps for Displaced Persons on German soil. The extent of these undertakings was on the decline in Europe during the early 1950s, at the same time as it was slowly emerging in Israel. All of this was related to the change of war memory in general. From the late 1940s until the mid-1950s, the war lost its significance in the public sphere, often reduced to a focus on military history or even being completely lost from sight, for example in communist Eastern Europe. Then, however, war memory returned during the late 1950s, when it was portrayed as a heroic endeavour of the people, which had allegedly resisted fascism and occupation. The Holocaust had no place in this pattern; even in Israel, the Jewish resistance was at the heart of memorialisation. Nevertheless, from the 1960s, a constant stream of publications started to flow, but few of them relied on institutions like the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie in Amsterdam, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris, or the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. As we all know, a general change occurred in the early 1980s, for several reasons: A new generation was facing up to the past, the discourse of human rights had become popular during the 1970s, and, last but not least, Holocaust awareness was triggered by the American fictional TV series *Holocaust*, which made the term popular in Western societies.

It thus took a long time after the war for such a thing as Holocaust Studies to emerge as a distinctive field, which it eventually did during the 1980s and 1990s within a new global discourse on victimisation and human rights. The Stockholm Conference on the Holocaust in 2000 signalled its international acceptance, while the accession of East-Central and South-Eastern European states to the European Union in 2004 was closely related to the politics of history in these countries.

Today, Holocaust Studies are probably the most developed field dealing exclusively with one single event or short-lived process in history, with dozens of institutes worldwide, several scholarly journals, professional organisations, and networks like the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure devoted to the Holocaust. The library catalogue of Yad Vashem lists more than 130,000 entries, books and articles, and even this is not a complete overview of the literature in the field. That is more than has been published on the First World War altogether.

Holocaust Studies are among the fields of the humanities that enjoy extensive financial support and that are closely related to societal impulses: commemoration of the victims, debates on the past, on perpetrators, collaborators, and others 'bystanders', but also on betrayal and robbery.

More than most other research on historical events, Holocaust Studies have a double nature, being both scholarly research and at the same time part of cultural memory. Moreover, we are here dealing with a very specific part of cultural memory, that of most European towns and cities, and on the national, European, and even global level. In a certain sense, the European Union tried to establish the Holocaust as a central focus of negative identity, which is now even portrayed as a universal moral point of reference.

Since the Holocaust consisted of the murder of around six million human beings, men, women and children, a crime which is considered unprecedented, research on this event is inextricably based on ethical values and moral assumptions. There is a certain tension in Holocaust Studies between the underlying moral drive on the one hand and requirements concerning the scientific logic on the other. To what degree are the guiding research questions limited by the victimisation of millions? On the other hand, if Holocaust Studies consider themselves part of the scientific world,

they are obliged to work along generally accepted conceptual and methodological frames. As far as I see it, Holocaust Studies in general and the related historiography have not developed a distinct methodology of their own, but rely on the practices of historiography, cultural studies, psychology, and other fields.

That being said, what is the potential of Holocaust Studies? It is, first of all, the identification and collection of historical evidence within a new frame, not according to countries, archives, the source production, or archival provenance, albeit with some exceptions, such as specific Holocaust record groups like ghetto underground archives or Holocaust-related collections established after 1945, especially testimonies or restitution and indemnification records. The identification and collection of all of these sources does not just provide a service to Holocaust researchers but can also be seen as the creation of some specific kind of cultural heritage, again related to local, regional, national, and European identity.

On a second level, Holocaust Studies, unlike other fields of historiography, try to reconstruct the *totality* of the Holocaust itself, an *histoire totale*, to identify all victims, all perpetrators, all acts of discrimination, persecution, robbery, and violence, all places, even all victim voices, and to add more: most consequences of the Holocaust in the post-war world, be it in the demographic, political, or cultural realm.

Biographical research is important for family history, both on the victim and on the perpetrator side, often in order to clarify the fates and activities of one's ancestors. Institutions are interested in the biographies of their former members. For example, universities try to rehabilitate their Jewish students and teachers who had been ousted in the years after 1933, while German administrations and firms want to know about the activities of the personnel of their precursors before 1945. In a sense, this also applies to the rediscovery of stolen Jewish property, which has become a major area of Holocaust Studies during the last two decades.

Professional research is not limited to mere reconstructions but seeks to analyse former (and sometimes present) structures, events, processes, and discourses. It can provide a bridge for biographical/local/regional memory, for example based on the work of local activists, schoolteachers, and grass-roots historians investigating *Heimatgeschichte* for the history of their place. On the basis of research in source repositories hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, it is possible to identify places of memory, even those which had not been marked as such after 1945, for example in Moldova. Most importantly, however, local events need to be put in context, not only in geographical contexts by establishing the directions of deportations for example, but in a general historical context. The Holocaust, even on a micro level, was always a part of a Europe-wide process, largely initiated by central German institutions and shaped by occupation administrations and Axis governments.

Research enables the regulation of historical knowledge by asking structural questions and by putting the history of the Holocaust in a variety of contexts of war, economy, or discussions within leaderships. Thus, the research provided on all of these contexts always helps to establish the frame of specific events, but also of specific discourses in time and space. Though the Holocaust is considered a universal event, it has to be historicised to achieve a valid interpretation, not only on a European level, but also for the analysis of, say, a small shtetl in Eastern Europe: What were people there thinking during the occupation and why did they act as they did? Thus, scholarly research, not only historiographical, but also sociological, cultural, and even anthropological, can help to *objectify* memory.

However, Holocaust research, particularly during the last decades, has shifted its focus to memory itself: Why do we remember mass murder and what are the politi-

cal and cultural practices involved? In a sense, national memory is an invention of the nineteenth century, while Holocaust memory in its current form is a child of the late twentieth century, serving to provide mass death with a meaning. Yet we also have to find out why Holocaust memory during the post-war decades was so different from today's forms.

A specific societal task is the input that research can give on Holocaust education, which has developed into an important field since 2000. It generally takes 20 to 25 years for new historical knowledge and interpretations to enter into textbooks for schoolchildren or even students. However, in the case of the Holocaust, this timespan has been cut down to a decade; on the internet, one can even find current state of the art Holocaust courses like the one presented by EHRI. In addition, Holocaust research can support the fight against the falsification of history, not only Nazi negationism, but also lighter forms of historical propaganda. Apparently, outright denial has been on the retreat during the last two decades, but has acquired new, 'softer' forms.

Probably the most important question behind memorialisation and education is: Can Holocaust Studies provide lessons for the future? While the slogan *Never Again* emerged right after the war, when there was a broad political consensus in the fight against antisemitism and fascism, Holocaust research only considered this question at a comparatively late point. Actually, this was more pursued by the new genocide research, which started to emerge at the same time as the new Holocaust Studies, during the 1980s and especially the 1990s, in the context of the Yugoslav Wars and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Genocide studies are now fully established, with their own institutes, journals, and networks, on a much smaller scale than Holocaust research but often tightly connected to its institutions, as can be seen in Washington or in Amsterdam at the NIOD.

Genocide studies have not only identified increasingly more instances of genocide beyond the classical cases concerning the Armenians between 1915 to 1923, the Holocaust, or Rwanda, they have also tried to identify structures and logics of genocides, like discourses of hate, agencies of violence, and structures like collapsing empires and the establishment of nation states. More than Holocaust Studies, genocide research is asked for political and legal expertise, for example during the Darfur crisis or the trials on war crimes on Yugoslavia and elsewhere.

The efforts to apply historical knowledge to current cases of mass violence is, however, severely limited. On the one hand, there is no recipe to deal with ongoing mass violence except initiatives by the international community or nongovernmental organisations to intervene indirectly. On the other hand, our understanding of current mass crimes is not so much shaped by the knowledge of the Holocaust, or by Holocaust and genocide research, but rather by the media: There was a broad coverage of the Darfur crisis, but one of the worst wars in history, accompanied by the death of millions, went almost unnoticed by the international public – the Congo wars since 1998. Media coverage of the fate of the Rohingya in Myanmar was not much better, with another 604,000 Rohingya having been driven from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017, one million now living in camps, a number comparable to the number of Jewish refugees from Europe during the war.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, there is some coverage of North Korea's Gulag, the so-called Kwanliso, with an estimated 200,000 prisoners, a number comparable to the German concentration camp inmates in 1942/1943. Not to forget the situation in Chinese Xinjiang: Since 2014,

<sup>2</sup> However, note also the exception: International Conference on the Rohingya Crisis in Comparative Perspective, 4–5 July 2019 at University College London, with the historian Mary Fulbrook.

between 100,000 and one million inhabitants have been driven into so called 're-education camps'.

So what are the lessons offered by Holocaust research in this respect? The major obstacle in providing lessons from the Holocaust to human rights policies in the twenty-first century lies in the fact that there is no consensus about the origins of the Holocaust itself. During the post-war decades, in Western research and Western societies more broadly, a common narrative evolved which saw the roots of the Holocaust in a modern biologist antisemitism of late-nineteenth-century Germany (and Austria), in the rise of the Nazi Party and its accession to power in 1933, in intentional or functional radicalisation during the Second World War, and in German occupation or German pressure on Axis countries to extradite their Jews.

Since the 1990s, this consensual narrative has been by and large dissolved. There is not even a consensus on the significance of antisemitism for the Holocaust. Of course, it is generally accepted that antisemitic stereotypes were responsible for the distinction between the in-group and the out-group, but it is unclear whether traditional religious and cultural/economic anti-Judaism or allegedly new biological antisemitism was more important. Until today, the relationship between racism and antisemitism has not been fully explored. In fact, hatred against Jews in a sense differed from general anthropological racism, which can be applied more to colonial discourses or to the Nazi attitude towards some groups of Slavs. For example, the currently omnipresent discourses on racist prejudice in some Western societies have little to do with what Holocaust history is dealing with, except of course the resurgence of antisemitism. Yet hatred against large social groups, especially if they are imagined as being dangerous or connected to foreign nations, can be clearly considered a precondition for genocide.

Other elements have entered the debate on the origins of the Holocaust, like the new cultures of violence after the First World War, the structural change of the Nazi German state, Nazi imperialism and its designs for Eastern Europe, European antisemitism beyond Nazi ideologies in general, economic drives, and so on.

Yet the most important patterns for our understanding of the Holocaust and its lessons is the destruction of democratic order or of any order based on a law-abiding state. This order is not only based on institutions and procedures, but also on a general consensus on law within society. In the current situation, it is not so much the hate crime itself which puts the general order at risk, but an acceptance by a silent majority of this kind of violence, as can be seen for example in the violence perpetrated by certain Hindu nationalist groups in India against Muslims. As the Indian example shows, hate and violence are closely connected to the falsification of history. The real dangers of the current world are not only internal, but embedded in international relations, the conflict of resources, nationalist confrontations, or the handling of the atomic bomb by radical regimes. There are moreover patterns of historical international migration which look rather familiar: the radicalisation of immigration societies during the refugee crisis in 1938 and, though in a totally different context, in 2015.

Holocaust Studies cannot supply recipes for the future, but rather identify specific patterns and mechanisms where parallels with the 1930s show up. However, this leads to some of their intrinsic problems Holocaust Studies themselves: Most obvious is the isolation of Holocaust history from its context. Only few Holocaust research institutes are working on Nazi violence in general and on crimes against non-Jews during the Second World War. This is not only a question of moral obligation towards and memorialisation of others, but also of specific importance for the inter-

pretation of the Holocaust itself. The crimes against Jews were embedded in a broader spectrum of violence, which sometimes preceded the Holocaust, but was often tightly entangled with it. This is common knowledge concerning the 'euthanasia' killings of the mentally ill, but much less so for killings of non-Jewish Poles, the so-called reprisal massacres in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the crimes against Soviet POWs. Auschwitz-Birkenau was originally planned as an SS POW camp and POWs were among the first to be killed by the toxic cyanide Zyklon B. Of course, there is abundant research on lots of these groups, not on all of them, but most of it is separated from Holocaust Studies.

More obvious is the lack of general context which is often visible in Holocaust Studies, the disconnection to the study of the Nazi dictatorship, war, and occupation. Institutionalised research on the Second World War, on military, politics, and the economy, has ceased almost completely since the 1990s. The International Committee on the History of the Second World War is set to be dissolved in 2020, right on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war. General knowledge of the war is on the decline. However, the Second World War is the most relevant context of the Holocaust; one cannot study the Holocaust and leave out the war, and one cannot teach it to students like this.

There are other aspects of Holocaust research which look problematic, but probably share something in common with other fields of scholarship. There is a lack of an overview on the current state of research on the one hand and a hyper-specialisation on the other. Important problems of Holocaust history are still underrepresented, like antisemitism during the 1930s and 1940s, or the events in Greece. There are few studies that address structural questions on a Europe-wide basis, like the history of gender, children, and so on. We do not know how many perpetrators there were during the Holocaust and what their structure was. If we want to give comprehensive answers on Holocaust-related questions, we have much less results than one would expect due to the enormous dimension of this research. Yet the media and the public are looking for comprehensive answers.

During the 1990s, Holocaust Studies started to expand, and it is not to be expected that this process will stop in the near future. However, the optimism of that period that knowledge of the Holocaust would not only be disseminated on a global scale, but also create a better world, has been fulfilled only to a limited extent. Societal interest in Holocaust history is often restricted to certain liberal milieus and to local activists, lots of whom remain isolated in their social surroundings, especially in Eastern Europe.

A new challenge has arisen especially during the last decade: the resurgence of nationalism and its effects on the politics of history. This phenomenon is not restricted to East Central Europe, which unfortunately is the area situated at the epicentre of the Holocaust. Nationalism has been on the rise since the 1990s, starting with the implosion of the Italian political system in 1992 and on a worldwide basis. In 2013, Silvio Berlusconi falsely claimed that Mussolini had saved the Italian Jews.<sup>3</sup> Yet historical revisionism goes far beyond that: The new Chinese leadership is highly nationalist and closed most of the historical archives, the Abe government in Japan is exerting heavy pressure on academics and media to whitewash the wartime past, and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India is trying to introduce a new narrative into the public and schoolbooks, with an emphasis on the alleged seven centuries of suppres-

<sup>3</sup> Berlusconi Praises Mussolini on Holocaust Memorial Day, in: BBC News, 27 January 2013, available online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21222341> (8 October 2019).

sion of Hindus, first by Muslim rulers, then by the British, and even by the Congress Party. Brazil is another example, with President Bolsonaro envisaging the rehabilitation of the country's violent military dictatorship.

Concerning Holocaust memory and research, there is a focus on the countries which were affected the most, namely Poland, the former Soviet Union, and Hungary. Russia, Belarus, and Moldova represent the traditional cases, since in a certain way they each continue Soviet politics of history, though they acknowledge the Holocaust, with some regional exceptions, as we know from the infamous scandal concerning the memorial in Rostov on the Don.<sup>4</sup> The first big shift in politics of history came in the Baltic states and Ukraine, which witnessed a break with communist history, but also an isolation of Holocaust history from general history. A second wave of this phenomenon occurred in Hungary and Poland during the last decade, with a turn from liberal or social democratic to nationalist governments.

All of these countries have only limited institutionalised Holocaust research, despite the fact that they were home to the biggest Jewish communities in the world before the war. Holocaust research is extremely important for these societies in order to re-establish a history that was distorted during communism. Furthermore, they each face a double past of both Nazi occupation and communist rule, especially Stalinist violence, some Baltic historians even claiming a long occupation history from 1940 until 1991, including a short German interregnum. This is a highly disputed concept, since it tends to reduce the Holocaust to a minor event in a long history of suppression. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge and address the specificities of these historical cultures. Moreover, the non-Jewish victims of German occupation in these countries deserve more attention by both the Western public and scholarship. In the Russian Federation, for example, many more non-Jews were killed during the occupation than were Jews.

Most problematic are the memory policies of nationalist movements and now nationalist governments like in Hungary and Poland, but also Slovakia and Serbia. Some of the debates on collaboration and the rehabilitation of antisemites and murderers originated in the 1990s, but we are now seeing an orchestrated effort to whitewash history. Especially in Poland and Ukraine, there is an enormous divide between new research on local collaboration in the Holocaust or, to be more precise, the murders committed by Poles and Ukrainians, and the institutionalised politics of history with its emphasis on the help provided to Jews in these countries.

These are areas in which the societies in question really are most in need of Holocaust research. In my opinion, it is important that this research is undertaken by local historians themselves and in the long run not predominately by Western researchers. Otherwise, we will return to the situation of the Cold War. It is the task of the EU and Western experts to support this effort, like the eminent Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw, which has produced the most innovative historiography,<sup>5</sup> and to protect researchers from attacks by nationalists like that on Jan Grabowski in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the resurgence of nationalism and its attacks on Holocaust memorialisation are, as we all know, not restricted to Eastern Europe, and it is not the only new chal-

4 See: Polina Efimova/Katerina Patin, *The Never-Ending Fight to Honor 16,000 Jewish Victims of Russia's Worst Holocaust Massacre*, in: *Haaretz*, 12 February 2019.

5 Most importantly: Jan Grabowski/Barbara Engelking (ed.), *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night Without End. The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland], 2 vols., Warsaw 2018.

6 Joseph Croitoru, *Ein solches Geschichtsbild dulden wir nicht – Eine polnische Kampagne gegen die Holocaust-Forschung*, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 March 2019, available online: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/polnische-kampagne-gegen-die-holocaust-forschung-ld.1469810> (8 October 2019).

lenge we face in the current situation. I think the cultural change we are witnessing right now is the second big problem that Holocaust memory in society and indirectly also Holocaust Studies are facing. I am talking about the lack of interest in the past, especially if it as far removed as the Holocaust. In Germany and Austria, for example, the number of history students is on the decline. The role of history changes within the context of ongoing migration, for example in Frankfurt am Main, where approximately forty percent of the population has a migrant background and thus a rather loose connection to German or European history.

Another issue is the internet. New generations of schoolchildren and students are less inclined to hear speeches on memorial days and to read big books or even bigger dissertations on Holocaust history. Their strategies of acquiring information are different from the ones we are used to. I think both research and memorialisation to a certain extent have adapted to this circumstance, having to find ways to qualify data from the internet. Visualisation is now high on the agenda, either through visual documents, maps, or other interactive tools. The larger research institutions have already realised this, but such visualisations can be very expensive. So, all in all, both memorialisation in society and Holocaust research will have to face these new challenges and undergo major changes in the near future.

The role of Holocaust Studies for societies is thus different in different contexts. Its main asset is methodological and conceptual rigour as well as its openness to new and even more unpleasant findings. It can deliver the basis for societal discourses on the Holocaust, which go beyond the rituals of memorialisation, with painful insights, predominately on the Germans and Austrians involved, but also on all other affected societies, especially concerning collaboration and the spoliation of Jewish property. Yet Holocaust research can also identify and evaluate examples of help and rescue, of international intervention. This is extremely important for Holocaust education. However, Holocaust Studies have to reinvent themselves from time to time, to open up, accept different approaches, and adapt to national or regional memory cultures. They should analytically include all victims of Nazi and Axis crimes and reconsider the fundamental basis of the Holocaust, the discourses on enemies, the destruction of law-abiding order, the systematic violation of rights, but also policies of expansion, warfare, and occupation, as well as international neglect.

Holocaust Studies are in need of a constant dialogue within the public sphere in education and memorialisation. So, the answer to the leading question is yes: Societies do need Holocaust Studies, but Holocaust Studies themselves need constant self-evaluation and opening up to all historical and societal contexts.

This paper was originally given at the EHRI Conference in Amsterdam on 3 July 2019 under the title: *Do Our Societies Need Holocaust Studies?*

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