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## Coming to Terms with the Past: Reading and Writing Colonial Genocide in the Shadow of the Holocaust

Tom Lawson

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The question of how the Holocaust is located within wider histories of mass and especially colonial violence is once again at the forefront of Holocaust and genocide studies. This article surveys this debate asking whether the lens of post-colonial studies might offer greater mutual understanding in what is an often intemperate debate. This article argues that the protagonists in the debate are united by a common desire to respond to what appear to be, from their very different vantage points, the ethical demands of the Holocaust. Ultimately such a debate reveals the instability of the past and the need for scholars to accept the provisional and political nature of their narratives.

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The vexed question of how to situate the Holocaust in a wider history of violence, either within the context of the other Nazi genocides or a more expansive context of violence throughout European or indeed global history is once again at the forefront of both Holocaust and genocide studies. Recent efforts to contextualise the Holocaust from scholars such as Donald Bloxham, Mark Mazower, Timothy Snyder and Jürgen Zimmerer have drawn furious reactions from others such as Doris Bergen, Omer Bartov and Dan Michman.<sup>1</sup> Countless other scholars have been drawn into commenting on such debates, if not directly engaging the antagonists.<sup>2</sup> The question of whether the Holocaust can be meaningfully written about within the history of European colonialism and imperialism has been particularly fraught – and is frequently bound up with another debate surrounding the state of Israel and the legitimacy of its occupation of Palestinian territory. In a 2002 essay, A. Dirk Moses attempted to offer a way in which some of the anger which had defined such

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of efforts at contextualisation include: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: a genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire* (London: Penguin, 2009); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2011). For responses see Dan Michman in this volume and 'The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust in Dire Straits? Current Challenges of Interpretation and Scope', in Norman J. W. Goda, *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches* (New York: Berghahn, forthcoming); Omer Bartov and Doris Bergen et al, Omer Bartov, 'Review Forum: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vol. 13, Nos. 1-2, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Thomas Kühne, 'Colonialism and the Holocaust: Continuities, Causations and Complexities', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vol. 15, No. 3, 2013), pp. 339-62.

debates might be calmed. More than ten years later, his observation that ‘rancour sets the tone’ of these exchanges still regrettably holds true.<sup>3</sup>

What follows isn’t, I hope, just another contribution to the rancour – but is an effort to stand back and ask what these debates reveal about the nature of Holocaust studies and our efforts to write its History. The observation that all History is politics certainly appears borne out by extended reflection on this discourse (not that this is at all problematic), as does the observation that the shifting interpretations of History are rather more determined by changes in the present than they are by documentary (or any other type) of discovery from the past. More particularly, I want to raise some questions about the relationship between Holocaust and post-colonial studies which is frequently commented upon in these debates – with the latter sometimes constructed as little more than an attempt to deny the validity of the former.<sup>4</sup> I do not wish to repeat that accusation – but wish instead to explore whether in actual fact we might fruitfully understand these debates through the lens of post-colonialism itself, and whether to do so might help scholars to understand and indeed listen to one another more and to recognise that we are all united by a common ethical project to come to terms with the Holocaust past. How we go about that, I suggest, is rather determined by the contexts in which we write – something I will try and illustrate by thinking critically about my own development as an historian, which has taken me from writing about the Holocaust (and particularly its links to Britain) to trying to investigate, in the light of those investigations of the Holocaust, the role of genocide in British history. As a consequence, it is also clear that mine does not represent a neutral voice in this debate – as I am convinced that the Holocaust can and must be contextualised within a wider history which includes colonial violence.<sup>5</sup>

First, what are the propositions that cause such angst? Broadly speaking this is a debate about how we contextualise the Holocaust, but what that contextualisation might mean varies widely. Alongside the more traditional ‘suffering Olympics’ in which scholars argue for

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<sup>3</sup> A. Dirk Moses, ‘Conceptual blockages and definitional dilemmas in the ‘racial century’: genocides of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust’, *Patterns of Prejudice* (Vol. 36, No. 4, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Efraim Sicher, ‘The image of Israel and Postcolonial Discourse in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A View from Britain’, *Israel Studies* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2011), pp. 1-25.

<sup>5</sup> See Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

the relative importance of any particular incidence of mass violence or genocide in relation to the Holocaust,<sup>6</sup> there have been an increasing number of attempts to place the Holocaust itself within longer term continuities of violence and extermination. These fall into three rather loosely defined and overlapping categories. First, there are scholars such as Jürgen Zimmerer and more recently Carrol P. Kakel III who situate the Holocaust within the history of European colonialism outside Europe, and who argue for both comparative and causal links between the murder of Europe's Jews and the extermination of indigenous communities elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Linked to this, but slightly different are scholars who seek to analyse the Nazi empire and as a consequence produce accounts of the Holocaust within the colonial paradigm (and thus by implication render it comparable). Most recently these would include the works of Shelley Baranowski and Mark Mazower. And finally there are those scholars who insist that the Holocaust needs to be explained within a wider context of violence on the European continent and as part of a broader phenomenon linked both locally (in terms of violence within broadly the same territory) and globally (in terms of the global propensity for genocide in the twentieth century). This category would include Donald Bloxham and Timothy Snyder.

While all of those scholars mentioned above bring to bear new and nuanced arguments, their collective project is not a new one. As Thomas Kühne wrote these authors are contributing to the 'never-ending controversy about the causes of the Holocaust and its place in modern history'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed the relationship between the Holocaust and other forms of violence is perhaps the longest discussed question in Holocaust studies. Hannah Arendt and Aime Cesaire were both, famously, grappling with the links between the Holocaust and colonial violence in the immediate post war era for example. Arendt in particular found the Holocaust both new and situated within the history of European colonialism after which the 'stage seemed to be set for all possible horrors'.<sup>9</sup> And of course the relationship between Nazi and more general totalitarian violence was also a preoccupation of the first generations

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.???

<sup>7</sup> See for example Carrol P. Kakel, III, *The American West and the Nazi east: a comparative and interpretative perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Kühne, 'Colonialism and the Holocaust', p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> This is a quotation from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* cited in Richard H King and Dan Stone, 'Introduction' in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007), p. 3.

of historians of the Nazi regime – think for example of Eugen Kogon's *The Theory and Practice of Hell* first published in 1946. Equally the precise relationship between Nazi anti-Jewish and other National Socialist destruction policies was the major preoccupation of scholars of these events in the 1950s too. What we call the Holocaust was much more likely to be subsumed within accounts, for example, of Nazi population restructuring than it was to be treated in isolation. And of course Raphael Lemkin's efforts to conceptualise genocide saw the Nazi attack on Jews very much within the context of a broader will to destruction.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the slow development of a Holocaust studies that treated the persecution and then murder of Europe's Jews as both a discrete subject for study and a distinct Nazi project is perhaps the defining feature of early historiography. In those exchanges the argument was frequently made that to subsume the Final Solution within more general accounts of Nazi barbarity was to misunderstand the creative role of antisemitism in the Nazi will to violence. Similar arguments then dominated the critical reaction to universalist explanations of the perpetration of the Final Solution such as Hannah Arendt's delineation of Adolf Eichmann's criminality. As such, critical reactions to modern efforts at contextualisation which stress precisely that such arguments ignore the unique role of Nazi anti-Jewishness have a rather familiar ring about them. There is therefore a feeling on both sides of the recent interpretative divide that we have covered this ground before.

Recent critical responses to efforts at contextualisation have tended to make two main but related claims which echo quite closely the first efforts to conceptualise the Holocaust that I described above. The first is the need to emphasise the particularity of the Nazi campaign against Europe's Jews, second the attempt to do that through an analysis of its peculiar ideological core. Dan Michman argues (both in this volume and elsewhere) that analyses of the Holocaust which compare its violence to either European colonial adventures or other forms of violence closer to home ignore its essential characteristic – a peculiarly paranoid, millenarian antisemitism. That ideology, Michman argues, is what drove the destructive logic of the Holocaust which was an evolving attempt to expunge the 'spirit' of Judaism. In a nod to Saul Friedlander's conceptualisation of 'redemptive antisemitism', Michman argues

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of early Holocaust history writing see Tom Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 17-51.

that Nazism's essential violence (towards Jews) came from this ideological mania which defined the removal of Jews as a service to the survival of humankind.<sup>11</sup> What is more, Michman argues that scholarly attempts to situate the Holocaust in alternative contexts frequently do this by divorcing the violence of 1940s from the earlier persecutions of the 1930s. In doing so they find only superficial comparisons (for example lethal violence) while ignoring the most salient features of *anti-Jewish* persecution. Omer Bartov too, in a response to Donald Bloxham's *Final Solution*, suggests that to situate the Holocaust in contexts other than its anti-Jewishness is 'historically wrong' because it ignores the centrality of antisemitism, as witnessed by its Jewish victims, and as such disallows any understanding of the Holocaust from the inside.<sup>12</sup>

I am not concerned here as to whether or not this identification of the essence of the Holocaust is correct or not. I will note however that it is in keeping with the tradition in Holocaust history writing that seeks all encompassing causal explanations for destruction. The ritualistic and unhelpful 'intentionalist and functionalist' debate was, for example, nothing else if not a competition between two closed narratives that promised to hold the key to understanding the singular Holocaust and there are echoes of that here too. It is also worth noting that the argument that the anti-Jewish essence of the Holocaust ensures its singularity is somewhat circular, after all it is that very anti-Judaism that it is argued separates out the Holocaust in the first instance. Notwithstanding these observations, I do wonder however why it necessarily follows that a Holocaust defined and explained in part or even in whole by antisemitism cannot be usefully compared or contextualised. Even if maniacal and essentially revelatory antisemitism is the most salient feature of the Holocaust, it is not the only feature after all. One of its features was for example, the application of extreme physical violence against an unarmed population. The relentless recurrence of that kind of violence and an apparent will to exterminate populations other than Jews – both inside the Nazi empire and within entirely different historical contexts – suggests a certain urgency to such comparative work. In other words the fact of Nazi antisemitism appears to have little bearing on the contextual or comparative project.

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<sup>11</sup> Michman, 'The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust', p. 23. The pagination comes from a draft that the author kindly allowed me to see prior to publication.

<sup>12</sup> Omer Bartov, 'Review Forum: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vol. 13, Nos. 1-2, 2011), p. 128.

### *Colonial Discourses and Antisemitism*

Some of that comparison might even work towards greater understanding of the Nazi antisemitic project itself. Let us consider the relationship between racialised colonial discourses and the antisemitism which formed the destructive core of Nazism and drove the Holocaust. Saul Friedlander self consciously peppers his *Years of Extermination* with the antisemitic rhetoric of the foot soldiers of Nazism. This method is a deliberate and determined effort to link those ordinary Germans to the exterminatory project as a whole. Thus he records the 'utter contempt' with which Germans interpreted the *Ostjuden* communities they discovered after the invasion of Poland in 1939: 'the appearance of these human beings is unimaginable ... they live in such inconceivable dirt'.<sup>13</sup> Friedlander notes that such views were somewhat at odds with the understanding of Jews as an active threat, but does not suggest how we might understand them other than in relation to and as evidence of a wider antisemitism. Yet one might suggest that such attitudes have much in common with the colonial mindsets with which Europeans approached some alien indigenous populations during their colonial expansion. The British encountered indigenous communities in Australia which they believed to be the 'lowest possible scale of human nature'.<sup>14</sup> Their 'savagery' was represented across popular culture, and by the 1850s characterisations of them had become genocidal. Charles Dickens refused to apologise for the decline in indigenous populations in the settler colonies arguing 'he passes away before an immeasurably better and higher power than ever ran wild in any earthly woods, and the world will be all the better when his place knows him no more'.<sup>15</sup> At the very least then it would seem to me apparent that Nazi antisemitism, whatever it represented at its most phobic end, was in some incarnations comparable to the kind of colonial thinking that defined so much more of the European continent. If nothing else this seems to tell us something about the violent potential of such discourses.

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<sup>13</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-45* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Mrs A Prinsep, *The Journal of a Voyage from Calcutta to VDL, comprising a description of that colony during a six months' residence* (London, 1833), p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Noble Savage', *Household words*, 11 June 1853.

Alon Confino's recent analysis of the Holocaust warned against too rigid a comparison between colonial characterisations of indigenous peoples and Nazi characterisations of Jews and Judaism arguing that 'the European colonial empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ... viewed the colonised as unprepared yet to enter history as independent agents ... [whereas] the Nazi empire was based on the radical idea that others were not worthy of leading a meaningful historical life or even in some cases, of living at all'.<sup>16</sup> Of course he is correct, but at the same time this should not mean that we misunderstand the degree to which especially European settler colonialism was, not uniformly but significantly, based on exterminationist mindsets. First, Europeans developed the idea that indigenous societies were slated by providence to disappear – that somehow the entry of Europeans on to the historical stage in, for example, Australia would lead inevitably to the dying out of indigenous communities there.<sup>17</sup> Second, significant elements of those European societies believed that the disappearance of indigenous communities was a positive benefit for mankind. Hence Anthony Trollope's call for genocide: when he argued that 'of the Australian black man we may certainly say that he has to go'.<sup>18</sup> Such an observation of course has no bearing on our efforts to explain, in a causal sense, the Holocaust. Yet, returning again to the work of Saul Friedlander, when Nazis reflected in the midst of their occupation of Poland that 'when one looks at these people [the Jews] one gets the impression that they really have no justification for living on God's earth'.<sup>19</sup> Or when at a dinner in May 1941 'everybody agreed in the end that the Jews have to disappear completely from the world'<sup>20</sup> – it is surely worth noting that such ideas had been circulating (in relation to 'other' peoples) for over a century. Antisemitism may be part of a broader explanation for Europe's descent into violence. It is difficult to escape the comparison with Dickens' and Trollope's rhetoric after all.

There seems nothing 'historically wrong' or inherently distortive about the above discussion. There is nothing in the observation that the antisemitic rhetoric that underpinned the

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<sup>16</sup> Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of this extermination discourse see Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races 1800-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1873), p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Quotation from Private E in November 1940, cited in Friedlander, *Years of Extermination*, p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> Quotation from Corporal WH in May 1941 cited in Friedlander, *Years of Extermination*, p. 159.



violence of the Holocaust can be situated within other violent, exclusionary and colonial discourses that denies the creative role of that rhetoric in the destruction of Europe's Jews. The idea that antisemitism was the essence of the Holocaust is perfectly compatible with the idea that such antisemitism can also be understood as related to colonial ideologies and therefore tells us something about the wider tendencies to violence in modern European history. This even seems to be the case if we accept the reasoning that such antisemitism was itself qualitatively different from other exclusionary ideologies. Indeed Dan Michman admits as such when he acknowledges that the Holocaust has (in his mind superficial) 'connections with other developments'.<sup>21</sup>

But Michman also contends that it is the job of the historian to study what was *exceptional* about Nazism (or any other issue). Michman explicitly rejects that such exceptionality has a moral or theological content and argues that it is simply a historical observation. But if there is no moral content to such an observation, then there would seem to be no serious scholarly objection to placing the Holocaust in a more comparative framework – seeking to ask what its other salient features had in common or otherwise with other exclusionary episodes in European history. But it is that very will to comparison and contextualisation (other than in the history of antisemitism) that is being objected to. One might add that one of the exceptional features of modern European history is the violence that European states have visited on other parts of the world and on the continent of Europe itself. Seen from one point of view the Holocaust is an example of that violence and thus requires a more encompassing explanation than antisemitism.

### *History and Politics*

However to view this as a debate concerned with the location of Nazi antisemitism within an explanation of the Holocaust is, to use Bartov's phrase, to ignore the view 'from below and from within' the debate itself. It is only on the surface that it appears a controversy about the interpretation rather than the use of the past. All of the criticisms of contemporary efforts at contextualisation accuse the protagonists, somewhere along the line, of both political motives and misjudgements. Dan Michman suggests rather gently that

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<sup>21</sup> Michman, 'The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust', p. 13.

at times these scholars appear motivated by 'political attitudes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'.<sup>22</sup> Others are more forthright. Robert Rozett for example suggested that such histories are deliberate attempts to distort or to diminish the profundity of the Holocaust, and more specifically the position of Jews as the primary victims of National Socialist aggression. The central aim of the project is to be able to 'point an accusatory finger at Israel' by drawing parallels between the Holocaust and the conflict over Palestine.<sup>23</sup>

How do we get from a discussion about the best contexts for understanding the Holocaust to a discussion about the state of Israel? It is after all not immediately obvious that a debate about our understanding of the role Nazi antisemitism in the explanation of the genocide of the Jews has any bearing on how we understand the history of Israel / Palestine or indeed any other territory. However, the argument that the Holocaust can be situated within a colonial context has allowed scholars to draw links (conceptually rather than causally) between the genocide of the Jews and the treatment of Palestinians at Israel's foundation. After all, if the Holocaust was in part an example of colonial genocide then it implies a rather more elastic definition of genocide in the first instance. The examples of colonial racism that I cited above were contributors to the depopulation of Aboriginal communities in Australia. If the devastation of those communities is to be understood as genocide, then it necessarily requires a definition which encompasses both the attritional and cultural destruction those communities have been subjected to as well as mass murder. And of course it might therefore encompass the kinds of ethnic cleansing that were witnessed in the Nakba.<sup>24</sup> Martin Shaw's recent efforts to apply the term genocide to Israel / Palestine rely explicitly on a similar conceptual elasticity to that which he sees in the efforts at contextualising the Holocaust recently witnessed. What is more such arguments explicitly rely on the role of antisemitism in a causal matrix for the Holocaust – not only in the most obvious way. So a contextualised Holocaust was, Shaw argues, not the result of simply 'exceptionally monstrous men' (with a monstrous ideology) but as the 'nadir of an era in which policy

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<sup>22</sup> Michman, 'The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust', p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Rozett, 'Diminishing the Holocaust: Scholarly Fodder for a Discourse of Distortion', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012), p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2007) for the most comprehensive analysis of the applicability of that term to the foundation of Israel.

driven mass social destruction had become almost normal'.<sup>25</sup> And the forced movement of Palestinian communities during the Nakba, and the attendant massacres, are simply another example in this formulation of 'policy driven mass social destruction'. John Docker's 2012 essay in which he argued for 'seeing Israel as a genocidal settler-colonial state' also relied explicitly on scholarly efforts to contextualise the Holocaust. By applying the term genocide to Israel's past, Docker claimed that he was simply 'see[ing such] ideas through' while citing the works, among others, of scholars such as Donald Bloxham and Jürgen Zimmerer.<sup>26</sup>

As such the contextualisation of the Holocaust has been used to challenge Israel by associating its past with the history of genocide – that much is clear, even when this is not the primary motivation for any argument for contextualisation in the first instance. By this I am not commenting on these arguments themselves, just highlighting that it is impossible to deny that contextualisations of the Holocaust are used for that purpose. That said, the use to which that scholarship is put is not enough to justify the accusation that contextualisation is simply a contemporary political project. After all, the argument that the Holocaust was driven by a particular, singular, even 'unique' antisemitism and thus resists contextualisation can be and long has been politicised in the other direction. Gavriel Rosenfeld identified convincingly the 'politics' of claims as to the Holocaust's uniqueness in the late 1990s. And this argument can still be applied today. Consider the example of Jeffrey Herf's *The Jewish Enemy* in which he argues for the centrality of antisemitism in any analysis of the causes of the Holocaust. Herf's book ends with a chilling prediction of the future in which he suggests that the Final Solution is a warning about the power of antisemitism as an idea: 'in the first decade of the twenty-first century the demented discourse of radical anti-Semitism and totalitarianism has returned in different idioms and cultural contexts. It would be complacent to assume that variants on the narrative explored in this work will not play a part in the future as well'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Yaacov Lozowick's argument for the causal centrality of antisemitism in the motivation of the perpetrators of the Holocaust was also utilised by

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Shaw, 'The Question of Genocide in Palestine, 1948: an exchange between Martin Shaw and Omer Bartov', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vol. 12, No. 3-4, 2010), p. 249.

<sup>26</sup> John Docker, 'Instrumentalising the Holocaust: Israel, Settler-Colonialism, Genocide (Creating a Conversation Between Raphael Lemkin and Ilan Pappé)', *Holy Land Studies* (Vol. 11, No. 1, 2012), pp. 2, 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) p. 277

Lozowick in his 'moral defense of Israel's wars'.<sup>28</sup> Neither side in this debate then can deny that their analyses of the Holocaust have wider political implications.

### *The Holocaust as Rupture: a Colonial story?*

Returning to the protagonists in this contemporary debate, the argument proposed by scholars such as Michman and Bartov, is that in the headlong rush to contextualise our understanding of the centrality of the Holocaust is compromised. One is inevitably reminded here of the fears expressed by Saul Friedlander during the 1980s in his famous exchange with Martin Broszat that the 'historicisation' of National Socialism threatened to move Auschwitz from the centre of such historiography.<sup>29</sup> In the context of the *Historikerstreit* Friedlander was engaged in a discussion regarding several (contradictory) efforts to contextualise the Holocaust, either in terms of the history of everyday life in the Third Reich or of course more problematically within the history of the Second World War and particularly the conflict with the Soviet Union. In constructing such an argument Friedlander relied on the idea (familiar to all students of the Holocaust) that the murder of Europe's Jews represented a profound rupture which in itself shifted the way in which we ought to narrate the past. There could be no normalisation, no contextualisation that did not recognise the exceptionality and indeed uniqueness of the Jewish experience under the Third Reich – which should therefore be placed at the centre of historical understanding. In order to make such a point Friedlander quoted Jürgen Habermas at length: 'something took place here [in Auschwitz] which up until that time no-one had even thought might be possible. A deep stratum of solidarity between all that bears a human countenance was touched here. The integrity of this deep stratum had, up until that time, remained unchallenged, and this despite all the natural bestialities of world history'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Yaacow Lozowick, *Right to Exist: a Moral Defense of Israel's Wars* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003). For an analysis of the relationship between this text and Lozowick's *Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2002) see Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust*, p. 210-17.

<sup>29</sup> See Martin Broszat and Saul Friedlander, 'A Controversy About the Historicisation of National Socialism', *New German Critique* (Vol. 44, No. 1, 1988), pp. 85-126.

<sup>30</sup> Habermas cited in Friedlander and Broszat, 'A Controversy', p. 106.

It is in the reading of this kind of claim proposed by scholars arguing for contextualisation that we see further fissures in contemporary Holocaust studies. In many ways the idea that Habermas, and by implication Friedlander, were arguing for in the 1980s is today simply a statement of fact. They desired that Auschwitz be placed at the centre of historical consciousness – and now (especially in relation to wider public memory) it does indeed sit at the very centre of our understanding of modern history. To use Alon Confino's phrase it has become a 'foundational past' – defined by a kind of ritualised agonising over the impossibility of representation alongside a bewildering number of the historical representations that are rhetorically declared impossible.<sup>31</sup> And this rhetoric is important, because it is itself evidence of the apparent intellectual impact of the Holocaust, which is widely interpreted as representing an 'epistemological break'. This idea of the Holocaust as rupture is not in and of itself problematic. Yet it is commonly accompanied by an implicitly comparative observation. To return to the example of Jürgen Habermas discussed above, he did not simply claim that the nature of humanity was changed in Auschwitz, but that it was unprecedented. Again as Confino writes, when we compare genocides 'we compare events of a similar kind ... but not of a similar degree of perceived historical significance. No other genocide constituted such a historical and epistemological break'.<sup>32</sup>

Again I am not concerned here with whether or not the Holocaust does indeed represent a greater *tremendum* than other moments of historical trauma – rather just the content of such a suggestion – although I ought to declare that I am sceptical about such a proposition. After all, the destruction of indigenous cultures could at times entirely prevent the narration of the history of that destruction within those cultures and therefore claims that these events too represented an epistemological break would be entirely justified. The British occupation of Tasmania, for example, destroyed all functioning communal units within indigenous society and left only traces of indigenous language and culture. These events were then quite literally placed beyond narration. But to return to the Holocaust, on one level, of course, it is nonsensical to claim the absolute significance of one set of events for our species in comparison to others, because in order to make such a claim we would need to be in full knowledge of the entirety of human history. Yet even when not making such an

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<sup>31</sup> Confino, *Foundational Pasts*, p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Confino, *Foundational Pasts*, p. 5.

explicitly comparative claim, such statements are problematic. Take for example the idea that the Holocaust was somehow unimaginable. Notwithstanding the observation that the Final Solution, both in terms of the attritional destruction of the ghettos, the murderous activities of the Einsatzgruppen or the industrial factories of extermination in the death camps was self evidently imagined (in great detail) by its perpetrators, such a claim does obscure the histories of violence that the Holocaust might profitably be understood alongside. As Sarah De Mul argued in a thoughtful essay about the means of narrating the experience of colonialism in the Congo alongside the Holocaust, the idea that the Holocaust is a fundamental point of departure ‘speaks by and large to a Western readership that is already convinced of the significance of the Jewish Holocaust to twentieth century history (in Europe)’.<sup>33</sup> Consider again Habermas’ idea that something that took place in Auschwitz that hitherto ‘no-one had thought might be possible’. Such a claim only makes sense if a western perspective is prioritised – after all Auschwitz came at the end of what A. Dirk Moses has characterised as the ‘racial century’ in which the extermination of indigenous peoples was viewed as inevitable and indeed keenly anticipated.<sup>34</sup> We might take another example from my own research into the destruction of the indigenous population of Tasmania. The ‘total’ extirpation of indigenous communities in Tasmania was both celebrated and regretted in equal measure in the metropole. *The Times* of London for example, reported in the 1860s that ‘We have exterminated the race in Van Diemen’s Land’ in a tone which lamented indigenous peoples’ exit from history at the same time as discussing the power of the Empire in awestruck tones.<sup>35</sup> The possibility of racial extermination was thus familiar in European culture.

Similarly to De Mul, Donald Bloxham argues in his *Final Solution* that claims like those discussed above which set the Holocaust apart are evidence of ‘western-centrism’ and can be seen within the ‘long tradition of the West’s attempt to universalise its own values’.<sup>36</sup> This claim has drawn particularly stinging rebuke from critics. Omer Bartov claimed that Bloxham, and one presumes therefore all postcolonial readings of this discourse, effectively

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah De Mul, ‘The Holocaust as a Paradigm for the Congo Atrocities: Adam Hochschild’s King Leopold’s Ghost’, *Criticism* (Vol. 53, No. 4, 2011), p. 592

<sup>34</sup> Moses, ‘Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas’.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, 30 December 1864.

<sup>36</sup> Bloxham, *Final Solution*, p. 318.

constructed the Holocaust as a 'puzzle to be solved' or as an 'obstacle to understanding ... and distraction from other, greater issues'.<sup>37</sup> In making such a claim Bartov suggests, I think somewhat illogically, Bloxham was himself situating the Holocaust in a hierarchical relationship with other incidences of mass violence – and arguing that it was somehow *less* rather than more important than other cases. This is an odd accusation to level at a book the primary purpose of which is to attempt an explanation for the Holocaust. Doris Bergen went even further in her criticism of Bloxham's (and by implication others) analysis by suggesting that he 'verges on blaming the victim' and that the logical corollary of his thesis was that any attempt to write the history of the Holocaust was itself an exercise in imperialism.

I do not share such sentiments, and Bergen's accusation is especially unjustifiable. Nevertheless, it is worth considering why it might appear that to discuss the problematics of the dominance of the Holocaust in our understanding of modern History is akin to denying the validity of efforts understand it or worse still to denying space for the victims' story of their persecution. How have we arrived at the stage where such an accusation is even possible. First, I think we need to think about the development of Holocaust history writing, and the original role of claims that the Holocaust needed to be understood *sui generis*. As already stated above, the story of Holocaust history writing in its early development is a story of the gradual insistence that the treatment of Jews needed to be understood on its own terms. An insistence that to subsume the Holocaust within a general sense of Nazi barbarism was to misunderstand something about the Nazi project. That was an argument about the nature of Nazi antisemitism, but it was also an articulation of the perspective of the victims. Jews suffered as Jews under the Nazi regime, and as such the development of the Holocaust narrative was an important way of articulating that essential truth. Doris Bergen writes now that the most important challenge in writing the history of traumatic events like the Holocaust is to construct a version of them that is meaningful to those on the 'receiving end of persecution and abuse'.<sup>38</sup> And certainly many histories of Nazi destructiveness in the immediate postwar decade did not do this because they failed to recognise the essential difference of the Jewish experience in the Third Reich. And of course

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<sup>37</sup> Bartov, 'Review Forum: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*', p. 122.

<sup>38</sup> Doris Bergen, 'Review Forum: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*', p. 134.

as many scholars have recently observed, Jewish communities themselves believed that they were being subjected to a uniquely barbarous experience under the Third Reich.<sup>39</sup> As such, many of historians arguing for the uniqueness of the Jewish experience were, as well as mounting a plea for recognition, articulating a communal understanding of anti-Jewish persecutions. At the same time, such language also spoke to and articulated ongoing trauma.<sup>40</sup>

In these terms, many of the claims as to the uniqueness of the Holocaust can be understood as originating as a defence of the powerless. The Nazis sought to expunge Jews from history, and as such by the writing of that History those victims were articulating (however small) a victory over the Nazi regime, they were articulating their agency in world in which such agency had been denied.

Although it came long after the Holocaust had emerged as a discrete subject for study, and after it had begun to be fixed in popular memory, when Jürgen Habermas wrote about the centrality of Auschwitz, and indeed when Saul Friedlander cited Habermas, it could also be argued that this was also an attempt to protect the powerless, the victims of history. Especially in a German context, a history which insisted on the absolute importance of antisemitism and ideology had hardly established itself in causal analyses of the Holocaust which often relied on impenetrable levels of abstraction. Equally, the identification of Jews as a specific form of victim in Nazi Europe, whilst established was not embedded. Habermas and Friedlander wrote in response to the contextual narratives of the *Historikerstreit* that threatened to conflate Jewish victims of the Holocaust with all victims of totalitarianism – including of course some perpetrators of anti-Jewish destruction. As such their insistence that Auschwitz must stand at the centre of the history might usefully be seen as part of this ongoing project to give voice to the victims of history.

I expect it is obvious where this argument is going, but the above account reads very much like the narrative of any colonial liberation movement and its relationship with history writing. In such a formulation the articulation of uniqueness of the Holocaust can be seen as

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<sup>39</sup> Michman, 'The Jewish Dimension', p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> Moses, 'Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas', p. 12.



an attempt to claim agency and power on the part of the victims, in this case the Jews. In this story, the idea of uniqueness is in effect a subaltern view of history. With that in mind it is rather easier to see why such offence might be taken at the idea that the uniqueness narrative might somehow disrupt the consciousness of the dispossessed. Uniqueness was a narrative of the dispossessed – hence Bergen’s accusation that Bloxham was blaming the victim.

Yet the problem with Bergen’s logic is that I am not convinced that uniqueness can still be understood, today, as a narrative of the dispossessed or to put it another way uniqueness cannot be understood *now* as subaltern. The simple fact is that the context has, in a variety of ways, changed. First, despite the fears of some of the scholars discussed in this article, the Holocaust *is* established in a global historical consciousness in a way that was previously unimaginable. It is truly a ‘foundational past’ – enshrined for example in the symbolic heart of Germany’s democracy, similarly memorialised on the Washington Mall and in the memory rituals of the European union. School children, from Britain to Australia, compulsorily learn about the destruction of Europe’s Jews in their classrooms. History writing about the Holocaust is so voluminous that it is far beyond the capabilities of an individual scholar to truly keep abreast of. If the original discourse of uniqueness was concerned with rescuing Jewish victims from the black hole of History, then that battle has been won. Second and partly as a consequence of this galloping Holocaust memory, it is now difficult to interpret Jews as, in the contemporary West, the dispossessed. To borrow from Amos Goldberg’s analysis of the museum at Yad Vashem, it is difficult to interpret Jews any longer as ‘the victims of History’.<sup>41</sup> We must also acknowledge that antisemitism has, unless you interpret any and all criticism of Israel as antisemitic, largely been excised from formal mainstream political discourse throughout Europe and the USA. At the same time it is not to subscribe to any myths of Jewish power to point out that Israel, despite rhetorical existential enemies, is a powerful member of the international community. Again to quote Goldberg, looked at from that angle Jews have become part of the West’s ‘collective ‘we’ and are no longer the ‘other’”.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Amos Goldberg, ‘The ‘Jewish Narrative’ in the Yad Vashem global Holocaust museum’, *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vo. 14, No. 2, 2012), pp. 187-213.

<sup>42</sup> Goldberg, ‘The ‘Jewish narrative’ in the Yad Vashem global Holocaust museum’, p. 204.

Such observations tend towards a straightforwardly post-colonial reading of Holocaust history and memory. Something that began as a subaltern discourse is transformed into a defence of the powerful and the status quo. As Efraim Sicher put it in his critique (although he was deploring this development) 'in excluding Jews from this chain of subaltern status, other than as a discursive figure, the Jew is displaced by the Moslem and the Black as the archetypal victim of a revised history of imperialism and neo-colonialism'.<sup>43</sup> By insisting on the singular importance of the Holocaust – and arguing therefore that Jews are the victims of History we can conveniently avoid the investigation of what Jürgen Habermas described as the 'natural bestialities of History'. If the idea that the Holocaust was unique and or uniquely important began life as a critique of a colonial understanding of the past, then it has become transformed into a colonial discourse which does not raise up the powerless but protects (in metaphorical terms) the powerful.

Superficially I am attracted to such a thesis, and as such I think that the idea that assertions as to the centrality of the Holocaust are a form of western centrism hold great weight. But there are a number of contradictions which remain to be solved. First the idea that Jews are part of the Western 'we' rather than 'other' is only partly the case. In a British context one only needs to observe the treatment of the current Leader of the Opposition Ed Milliband in the media to be confronted by the enduring ambivalence towards the Jew in liberal cultures. Milliband is the son of Jewish immigrants, and is often characterised as somehow foreign or at least not fully English.<sup>44</sup> Equally while Europe's political elite may eschew antisemitic rhetoric, Europe's Jewish communities perceive a present and growing antisemitic threat.<sup>45</sup> This perception exists despite Europe's acknowledgement of Holocaust memory which calls into question how far global memories of the Holocaust are really about Jews at all – in part because actually a globalised and embedded Holocaust discourse can and does coexist with an enduring liberal ambivalence and understanding of Jews as

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<sup>43</sup> Sicher, 'The image of Israel and Postcolonial Discourse', p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> 'The man who hated Britain', *Daily Mail*, 27 September 2013.

<sup>45</sup> European Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Discrimination and Hate Crime Against Jews in Member States: Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism* (2013) – available at [http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2013-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews-eu-member-states\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2013-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews-eu-member-states_en.pdf) (accessed 02/04/14).

somehow 'other'. Kara Critchell has argued convincingly, for example, that the ubiquitous Holocaust survivor is actually de-judaised in the era of the witness, in order to make the Holocaust safe for a culture unable to properly accept Jews.<sup>46</sup>

And of course globalised Holocaust memory has become both safe and, it might be argued, distances us from the reality and the meaning of the events themselves.<sup>47</sup> One is reminded of Raul Hilberg's memorable claim that the Holocaust should leave us with a sense that our evolution has outpaced our understanding, and as such we should, in the shadow of the death camps think critically about ourselves and our institutions.<sup>48</sup> Again, thinking in a British context, prevalent Holocaust consciousness does little, for example, to engender critical thinking around the discourses of race and nation. Contemporary fears of Romanian immigration in the UK for example are very similar to fears of Jewish refugees from Nazism in the 1930s. Of course these kind of observations were central to debates about the 'Americanization' of the Holocaust that were live in the 1990s – the modern world has manufactured a Holocaust which is the antithesis of all that 'we' are. It is in that sense a universal Holocaust that has little room for Jews and Jewishness.

We are therefore confronted with an uncomfortable paradox. The ambivalence of the Jewish presence in western culture, and the ambivalence of the Jewish role in dominant western Holocaust memories all sound like arguments for reasserting the importance of a unique antisemitism in our understanding of the Holocaust, not arguments against it. If the challenge remains to articulate a history of mass violence that is meaningful to those on the receiving end of it, then perhaps the dominant Holocaust history writing does not do that and we need precisely the kinds of History proposed by Dan Michman and Omer Bartov which I discussed at the beginning of this article. And yet the fact remains, that the History of the Holocaust that identifies a Jewish essence and as such renders that history incomparable, begins a discourse around mass violence that does exclude the memories of

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<sup>46</sup> Kara Critchell, 'Holocaust Education in British Society and Culture', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Winchester, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Imre Kertesz describes the Holocaust receding 'ever more into distance, into history, the more memorials to it we construct'. Cited in Alvin H Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Raul Hilberg cited in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 83

victims of both the other Nazi genocides and indeed other genocides. And precisely because of the globalised Holocaust that sits so comfortably at the heart of Western culture – it is rendered a colonial discourse that militates against understanding the critical implications of the *Shoah* for the modern West as well as acting as a reason for the non-investigation of other, by implication less important, historical traumas. Hence we also need the attempts to place the Holocaust into other contexts that Bartov and Michman have reacted so caustically against, in order to mitigate against a self satisfied version of the destruction of Europe's Jews that asks very few challenging questions for the world in which we live.

### *The Relationship between Holocaust and genocide studies*

Omer Bartov attempted to evade this contradiction by arguing that the notion that the Holocaust is a blockage to understanding of other moments of historical trauma can be empirically tested, and disproven. It was the Holocaust he suggests, that brought other genocides to the attention of scholars and a wider public. Furthermore, he argues that from the outset there were understood to be clear differences between 'European genocide' and colonialism.<sup>49</sup> In other words Bartov suggests that genocide as a category of analysis was never supposed to apply to the excesses of colonialism and the Holocaust, but anyway it was an understanding of the Holocaust that helped lift the veils of silence that surrounded the crimes of European colonialism in the first instance. In making such an argument Bartov in some ways echoes Michael Rothberg's thesis for 'multi-directional memory'. Rothberg contends that it is not necessary to see the memory of the Holocaust and colonial genocide in competition, and indeed that the emergence of Holocaust consciousness was contemporaneous and linked to the emergence of colonial liberation movements and post-colonial consciousness. Rothberg argues that history is an 'echo chamber' in which memories of traumatic violence can serve as a means for remembering other moments of trauma. It does not automatically follow therefore that memories of the Holocaust have to displace or screen memories of other tragedies.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bartov, 'Review Forum', p. 122

<sup>50</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 224.

Rothberg's thesis is a wonderfully enticing manifesto for how memory might work. But the superficial similarities to Bartov's argument for how memory *does* work are themselves a sign that it is a manifesto that at present remains a matter of hope rather than reality. After all Bartov's argument for the interaction of memory valorises the Holocaust by awarding its conceptualisation causal priority. In doing so, Bartov embeds the sense of the Holocaust as an archetype, which revealed other events. This is in itself an argument for a competitive collective memory, because it posits with certainty which event is, in this sense, *first*. I find this argument problematic, not least because it seems (to use Bartov's phrase) to have its 'history wrong'. Conceptualising the Holocaust did not in turn allow the conceptualisation of other atrocities, on the contrary as I discussed above the destruction of Europe's Jews was originally constructed in the context of greater violence. As such it was in those contexts that understandings of the Holocaust took shape.

It is the most obvious example, but let us consider Raphael Lemkin. It is a slightly false exercise, but if one wanted to give any particular set of events causal priority in his formulation of the idea of genocide it would have to be the Armenian case which Peter Balakian describes as 'a moral threshold moment in life ... which jolted the young Lemkin into a vision of what would become his life's work'.<sup>51</sup> It was within a model based both on the experience of Armenians, and Lemkin's understanding of colonialism that he then placed the experience of occupied peoples under the Nazi regime. He neither separated the Holocaust from the other Nazi genocides or other incidences of genocidal destruction.<sup>52</sup> Indeed Lemkin wrote specifically of the German intention to 'colonise' Europe, and his understanding of genocide was itself 'intrinsically colonial'. It is an often quoted passage but it bears repeating here: Lemkin argued that 'genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group: the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor'.<sup>53</sup> Typical of the time in which he was writing, Lemkin also did not

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Balakian, 'Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction and the Armenian Genocide', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (Vol. 27, No. 1, 2013), p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Dan Stone, 'Raphael Lemkin on the Holocaust', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Vol. 7, No. 4, 2005), p. 546

<sup>53</sup> A. Dirk Moses, 'Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History', in Moses (ed), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York, Berghahn, 2010), p. 9.

award priority to antisemitism in his efforts to explain the murder of Jews which he saw as just a part of the 'anti-Christian idea of the inequality of human beings'.<sup>54</sup>

Moving forward in time, Bartov's claim that the Holocaust actually helps the conceptualisation of other genocides does not work for more recent events either. It can hardly be a coincidence, for example, that Holocaust historiography turned to face the question of perpetrator motivation, especially in terms of intimate killing during the 1990s. After all, events in the former Yugoslavia and especially in Rwanda seared a rather different image of genocide into western consciousness than the image of clean industrial murder hitherto most associated with the Holocaust. As I wrote in my *Debates on the Holocaust*: 'Brutal, bloody, even primal, genocide became associated not with the clean processes of a modern 'garden culture' but with bestial and bloody hatreds and violence'.<sup>55</sup> You might also argue that the shift in Holocaust historiography to the face to face violence of the Eastern European killing fields has itself led to a further comparison between the Holocaust and colonial violence – in that it remains easier to place the murder of Jews on the frontier into a longer term colonial chronology than it does the deportation of French Jews to Auschwitz. Ironically however it is also out of that focus on face-to-face killing that the recent historiography that insists on the absolute centrality of Nazi antisemitism also grew. As such, the insistence on the incomparability of the Holocaust may itself owe something to understandings of violence in other contexts. Perhaps this is Rothberg's echo chamber at work.

#### *Abandoning the stability of the past*

So where does this leave us? What I have been trying to demonstrate is that none of the perspectives reviewed here are free from their contemporary political contexts. This observation applies across the spectrum: from the idea that the Holocaust needs to be situated in a wider context to the idea that it can only be explained through engagement with the particularly toxic antisemitism that underpinned it. I am not however convinced that such an observation needs to be particularly troubling, especially if we are prepared to understand the work of historians not as some sort of noble search for the truth of the past

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<sup>54</sup> Lemkin, cited in Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust*, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust*, p. 212.

but instead as part of the memory work that simply seek usable narratives from the chaos of the past. The apparent contradictions and paradoxes revealed here only become disabling when we begin to insist that they are the *only* contexts from which the past can be reached.

To explain further. Saul Friedlander's *Years of Extermination* project, which is routinely hailed as the culmination of historical scholarship on the Holocaust, argued for an integrated history. Integration was defined here as the incorporation of the perspective, and indeed the voices, of the victims. His use of testimony, which could be radically destabilising, enables a view of the Holocaust from both inside and outside. It is Friedlander's history that Bergen and Bartov have in mind, especially when the latter calls for a history that is meaningful to its victims. Friedlander's history is acknowledged as a triumph. Yet as Donald Bloxham points out, there is more than one context in which the Holocaust can be integrated.<sup>56</sup> A history of the Holocaust which, for example, has no room for the voices of the victims of the Euthanasia programme does not meet Bergen's identification of the moral imperative for historians. Imagine then a history that does include the perspective of victims, or the family's of victims, of the T4 programme. Those individuals may not unreasonably demand a history which acknowledges them as victims of the same will to destruction that claimed Jewish lives and Friedlander's integration does not provide it. What is more it cannot provide it if we regard history as a zero sum game. We can expand this further. Imagine a member of an Aboriginal community that had been devastated by settler colonialism in Australia. Their ancestors had been murdered on the frontier, their community and culture, even potentially their language had been destroyed. These are people who are to use Bergen's phrase on the receiving end of history, and I think it not unreasonable to ask what a history of the Holocaust that declares the murder of Europe's Jews to be a particular and unprecedented rupture in history means to them as they survey the devastation of their own communal past. Henry Reynolds reports for example the realisation of Wadjurlarbinna of the Gungalidda people of Northern Australia that she had been the victim of 'barbaric acts of genocide ... a deliberate plan to deny me my true

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<sup>56</sup> Bloxham, 'Review Forum', p. 139

identity and try and destroy my place within a system of law and religion which connects me spiritually to the land, sea and creation'.<sup>57</sup>

If history is a trade in certainty, and if Friedlander's is the only integration we may tolerate then Bergen's moral imperative to allow the voices of the powerless to speak is quickly transformed into a discourse of enforced silence. It denies Wadjurlarbinna's right to assert that she is a victim of genocide. It is in that sense an imposition of power. Yet if we simply understand that the scenarios I sketched above can exist alongside one another then such a problem melts away. The same logic can be applied to Omer Bartov's argument regarding the relationship between Holocaust and genocide studies. If we claim, in a closed historical narrative of causation, that the conceptualisation of the Holocaust bequeathed an understanding of genocide then the Holocaust is constructed as the meta-genocide and is placed at the top of a hierarchical understanding of a fixed past. The consequence can only be the marginalisation and denigration of other acts of genocide and their memory. If however we offer a more open narrative which rejects the need for an absolute account of causation, and say that the Holocaust *can* bequeath an understanding of the wider (and by this I mean more general) problem of genocide then again the problem melts away. After all the latter is still to acknowledge the profound urgency of the questions raised by the *Shoah*.

#### *Coming to terms with the Past: A Holocaust historian in Britain*

If we jettison the idea of a single, stable, past then we can see that efforts to place the Holocaust in context and efforts to assert its incomparability, its contextlessness, are both attempts to come to terms with the burden of this traumatic past. As I argued above one of the problems with the evident safety of Holocaust memory today is that within some contexts (perhaps all) it does not seem to demand the urgent questions that we require answers too. From within some quarters in Israel for example, I imagine a failure to deal with a contemporary radical antisemitism (such as that coming until recently from the government of Iran) might look like a failure to live up to the challenges of Holocaust memory. Whereas in contemporary Europe, communal mourning for the victims of the

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<sup>57</sup> Reynolds, *Indelible Stain*, p. 11.



Holocaust sits uncomfortably alongside the failure to acknowledge fully the crimes of our imperial pasts.

Jürgen Zimmerer has followed such an observation through with his investigations of genocide in German 'South West Africa', and its (non) presence in the German memorial landscape. From a personal point of view, I have found it hard to square mourning for the victims of the Holocaust in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain with a willingness in the public sphere to celebrate the imperial past. Nowhere was this contradiction better symbolised than in the draft proposals for a History national curriculum in 2012 which contrasted the 'unique evil' of the Holocaust with a pride at Britain's imperial achievements.<sup>58</sup> It seemed to me that we had a memorial culture which identified genocide as the ultimate atrocity, yet at the same time an imperial past in which the British engaged in genocide was not confronted.

As a consequence I have turned, as a Holocaust historian and in response to the ethical challenges of the Holocaust, to the study of genocide in the British Empire. I began this project, naturally enough, with a case of genocide inside the British Empire – in the destruction of the indigenous population of Tasmania. This is a set of events which is in many ways utterly unlike the Holocaust – not least in terms of scale. The British came into contact with an indigenous population of somewhere around 9,000 when they arrived on the island they called Van Diemen's Land in 1803. By 1830 – after a period in the 1820s known as the Black War that indigenous population was reduced to a few hundred, the vast majority of whom were then deported to an outlying island over the next few years. In a settlement on Flinders Island, indigenous peoples were subjected to a crude form of transformation. They were taught to farm the land in the European mode and introduced to the twin religions of Christianity and commerce. There were very few survivors, and by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century the indigenous population were declared extinct. This was itself a myth, and ignored the presence of a mixed race population on Tasmania, but the British to an extent revelled in their role as the destroyers of an entire people.

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<sup>58</sup> *The National Curriculum in England: a framework document for consultation*, available for download from Department for Education Website (<https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm?action=conResults&consultationId=1881&external=no&menu=3>) . Accessed 08/01/2014.

Obviously this is on a different scale to the Holocaust entirely, and there are clear points of difference (not least in the British conceptualisation of their indigenous enemy who they sought to protect and transform). Yet there are some points of moral comparison – not least in the sense that genocide in Tasmania is an example of the attempt by the agents of the British Empire to define anew what it meant to be human and indeed to attempt to alter the racial make-up of mankind. If the Holocaust was an attack on what it meant to be human (at the level of the species) then so too was genocide in Tasmania.

In the book that I have written on the subject, I detail the role that the British government played in the violence against and then the deportation of the indigenous Tasmanian community, pointing to a genocidal consensus in which there was no future for the indigenous population. I also point to the role that the destruction of that population played in British culture too – finding that some of the assumptions of British culture, most notably the idea of progress, were in some ways founded on the genocide of indigenous peoples. Tasmanian human remains were for example displayed in British museums usually in displays on the racial development of man which emphasised indigenous backwardness. The destruction, that is, the genocide, of indigenous Tasmanians was employed as the ultimate example of their racial failure.

Of course you might argue that this research project has little to do with recent scholarship on colonial genocide which seeks to contextualise the Holocaust within an on-going history of colonial violence. But it is as I say a response to the contemporary trends in Holocaust memory – and argues that there is, within Britain, no comfort to be found in that memory. By prioritising the Holocaust within historical consciousness, we have identified genocide and the effort to redefine what it means to be human as the ultimate atrocity. Yet, in a British context (and this can of course be extrapolated to the West more generally) genocide has always been a part of our identity – as such genocide is not just an example of what we are not, or what we aspire not to be, *but who we are*. Western progress did not just save us from genocide, it produced genocide too. These are hardly novel arguments – but it is important to recognise that they come from an effort to grapple with and face up to the implications of the Holocaust rather than the other way around.

It is also, to return to the theme of this article, a history written from a specific context. I would not have written it were it not for my experiences of British Holocaust memory today. Allowing for other contexts, or for the validity of other interpretative positions proposed from within contexts that are different from our own is difficult. The history of the Holocaust, genocide and the traumas of colonialism is – perhaps more than other subject of historical study – an ethical project. ‘We are obliged to memory’ and sometimes, as has been shown here, those memories clash.<sup>59</sup> But it is important that we remember that none of the perspectives reviewed here, those with which I agree and those with which I don’t, are attempts to evade the obligations placed on us by the Holocaust. They are simply different articulations of what those obligations are, different understandings of the questions that we need to ask in the shadow of Auschwitz. Cognisance of this will not solve the problems identified here, but it may mean that we can continue this never-ending debate in a manner that does not allow ‘rancour to set the tone’.

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<sup>59</sup> De Mul, ‘The Holocaust as Paradigm for the Congo Atrocities’, p. 589.