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Assessing the historian's silence

A statistical analysis of Holocaust research in the years 1946-1960

→ Fabian Van Samang

RESEARCH QUESTION AND SELECTION OF THE WORKING MATERIAL

It is a widely held belief that until the mid-sixties, hardly anyone showed any interest in the history of the Holocaust. A lot of Holocaust survivors lamented this wrenching, persisting silence (Beer 1992, 99). Survivors decried the lack of public empathy for their suffering – and more than one historian readily copied and repeated their elegies. Even Jewish survivors chose to remain silent, the argument continues:

[s]ilent about the fact that 75 percent of the roughly 150,000 Jews living in the Netherlands in 1940 did not survive. Silent about the mere five thousand who returned from the camps. Silent about the assistance given to the Nazi killers by Dutch bureaucrats, policemen, and jurists. Silent about the silence, while the deportations went on, train after train after train. (Buruma 2013: 135-136)

The assumption of an enduring postwar silence has recently been criticized by a number of scholars (Azouvi 2012; Gelber 2011; Laqueur 2005; Stone 2010). But even if the notion of a general silence on the part of the victims and the public is liable for readjustment, what about the academic interest in the topic? Was there also more scholarly activity in the late forties and fifties than has been assumed or acknowledged thus far? More than half a century after the war, the late Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg remembered how in the early fifties, he was about the only historian studying the destruction of the European Jews (Hilberg 1996, 69-80). Peter Novick (2000, 103), Gerald Reitlinger, Leon Poliakov, Otto Dov Kulka (1989) and Donald Bloxham (2010, 303, 306) confirmed this assertion.

Was there indeed a postwar “silence of the historians”? Neither Hilberg’s, Novick’s, Kulka’s or Bloxham’s assessments were grounded in quantifiable data. Could their interpretation possibly be flawed? In addition, if there was any historical interest in the topic, where did that interest go? To which geographical regions did

most of the attention go? On what kind of social groups did historians and other scholars focus? Which language (English, German, Hebrew, French) did scholars prefer? In which countries did historical research take off? Did one state present itself as a dominant Holocaust researching country? And if so, when and – more importantly – why did this happen?

In this article, we try to give a quantified, rather than a qualitative answer to these questions, using the bibliographies of major Holocaust studies. Since it is very hard to assess which Holocaust study is major and which one is not, and an injudicious selection of the working material could bias the results of our analysis, we adopted a dual-staged approach. This means that we first made an analysis of 47 articles, that were brought together in a recent composite volume (*The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, Hayes & Roth 2010), written by a younger generation of Holocaust scholars, affiliated to renowned universities or research centers and possessing a demonstrable expertise in their fields of research. In the bibliographies attached to those articles, we found 1562 references to other studies, mainly single-volume books (in almost 67% of the cases) of primarily American origin (50.51%) and of very recent date (about 40% of all references date from the decade 2001-2010). Based on these data, we were able to determine (the second stage of our selection process) which studies are most frequently referred to by their authors. The bibliographies of these selected Holocaust studies served as working material for our analysis.

Unsurprisingly, more than one fifth (21.28%) of all scholars mention Raul Hilberg's groundbreaking study *The Destruction of the European Jews* in their bibliographical lists. Following at a large distance (17.02%) is Saul Friedländer's two-volume monograph *Nazi Germany and the Jews: the years of persecution* (I, 1997) and *The years of extermination* (II, 2007). Michael Wildt's *Generation des Unbedingten* (Hamburg, 2002) is the first and only non-English book that is referred to by seven authors (14.58%), along with Christopher Browning's *The origins of the Final Solution* (Lincoln, 2004). Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (*Nazism*, 2 volumes, Exeter, 1988), Christopher Browning (*Ordinary Men*, New York, 1992), James Young (*Texture of memory*, New Haven, 1993), Christian Gerlach (*Kalkulierte Morde*, Hamburg, 1999), Claudia Koonz (*The Nazi conscience*, Cambridge, 2003), Alexander Rossino (*Hitler strikes Poland*, Lawrence, 2003), Schlomo Aronson (*Hitler, the Allies and the Jews*, New York, 2004) and Donald Bloxham (*The Final solution, a genocide*, Oxford, 2009) made it five times to the lists (10.64%).

In sum, 5060 different titles (for clarity's sake, in this article, these titles are referred to as "entries"; the references by an author to one of those entries will be called "references") are mentioned in the bibliographies of these fourteen selected scholarly works. We will call this body of data the Selection Group (SG). In addition, we randomly picked 21 more studies, dealing with the Holocaust in general, serving as a Control Group (CG).¹ These more than one thousand pages of bibliography, distilled from both the SG and CG, are our primary working material.

(1) Poliakov 1986; Breitman 1998; Dean 2000; Kershaw 2000; Browning 1997; Dwork & van Pelt 2002; Longerich 2003; Burin 1991; Dawidowicz 1990; Aly 1999; Roseman 2002; Wistrich 2002; Wette 2011; Cüppers 2005; Angrick 2003; Goldhagen 1996; Longerich 2010; Schleunes 1990; Yahil 1998; Gilbert 1985.

THE HISTORIAN'S SILENCE QUANTIFIED

The 35 studies from the Selection Group (SG) and Control Group (CG) bring together 8731 different entries, adding up to 305,585 points of reference. More than 13 percent of all entries date from the period 1756 to 1945 (670 entries, or 13.24%, with only a minor share – 2.61% – referring to the years covering the war). An even smaller part is connected to the era relevant for the present analysis: 486 titles, representing no more than 9.6% of all entries, date from the fifteen years following the Second World War. This is definitely smaller than the subsequent decade and a half (1961-1975, 607 entries or 12%) and considerably smaller than the following 15 years (1976-1990, with 1530 entries or 30.24%). This is remarkable, since our era of interest covers almost a quarter of the total postwar years (15 of the 63 years from 1946 to 2008, the most recent entry in our SG-database), and since there is a bigger chance and possibility of being referred to when the books or articles were written many years ago.

– Graphs 1-2. Share of entries (dark grey) and references (light grey) per fifteen years, in %.

Selection Group (SG)

Control Group (CG)

Is it possible that, although the number of titles in the first fifteen postwar years is very small, their intrinsic value is so great that they are often mentioned and referred to by subsequent scholars? Our data doesn't seem to support this assertion. Only a small portion of the entries from 1946 to 1960 is mentioned by more than one author. As a consequence, whereas the number of titles in this era represents 9.6% of all entries, their relative share decreases when we look at the total number of references by subsequent authors (9.16%). From 1961 to 1975, the number of entries represent 12 percent of the total number, while the share of the entries in that era is 13.88%. The difference is less marked in the subsequent decade and a half, but even then we see an increase from 30.24% (the share of the entries) to 30.80% (the share of the references). The CG shows similar results (see graphs 1-2).

NO SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN THE HOLOCAUST IN THE POSTWAR ERA?

Despite the modest portion of Holocaust related entries in the decade and a half following the Second World War, the format of the publications doesn't suggest a lack of interest on behalf of their authors. Most of the entries weren't one or two-paged newspaper articles (43.21% of all references to newspapers date from the thirties, and another 10.33% from the forties); the considerable amount of references to newspapers in the SG is particularly due to Raul Hilberg (out of 136 newspaper articles dating from 1945 to 1960, 131 were mentioned in *The destruction*). Still, most of the entries in the Selection Group, as well as in the Control Group, are single-volume books (40.91% on average). Combining both groups, we see that the single volume books of Gerald Reitlinger (*Die Endlösung*, 42.86% of the references), Alexander Dallin (*German rule in Russia*, 40%) and Hannah Arendt (*The origins of totalitarianism*) were held in very high esteem by their fellow historians. About one fifth of all entries in the SG and CG are references to historical sources – notably the transcripts of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (referred to by 21 out of 35 authors, or 60%), Rudolf Höss' autobiographical notes (54.29%) and the *Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Amt* (37.14%). More than 16 percent of all entries refer to articles in journals, notably to the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (23 references, 14.65% of all references to journals) and *Yad Vashem Studies* (20 references, or 12.74%). Almost ten percent of all entries refer to articles in composite volumes, most notably Karl Dieter Bracher's *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung*, referred to by 28.57% of the authors. In short, although the scholarly output in the decade and a half following the Second World War was relatively small, historians who started their research in the early sixties could already rely on a sound scholarly basis, consisting of over five hundred books, articles and published sources, written by as many different researchers. Moreover, a rather considerable share of these books and articles definitely stood the test of time – 43.42 percent of all entries (SG) was still referred to by authors who published their works in the past two decades (1991-2010), and over thirty percent was still mentioned in the most recent scholarly works (published from 2001 to 2010). This puts the assumption that before 1961 almost nobody worked on the topic of the destruction of the Jews (as Raul Hilberg claimed) in quite a different perspective.

This is especially true when one considers the subject of the historical research. To be sure, not all entries in our database deal specifically with the Holocaust. There are references to Jewish cultural history, for example, to ecclesiastical policies, philosophy or financial measures taken by the Nazi government. However, when a distinction is made between various-sized social subgroups, 43 different subgroups are mentioned in 258 out of 586 entries (this is 53.09%, SG). Almost 15 percent of these entries refer to "Jews", and 9.69 percent of the entries is clearly Holocaust related. In addition, 15 entries refer to ghettos, 11 to concentration and extermination camps, and about 30 out of 91 biographical outlines are clearly Holocaust related.

This means that at least 36% of all entries in our database, referring to at least one social group, deals specifically and directly with the destruction of the European Jews. As a consequence, our data do not confirm any claim, according to which references to the 15 postwar years are only marginally dealing with the Holocaust. On the contrary, the matter has been addressed by historians in an in-depth and substantial way. This is confirmed by the data in the Control Group.

AN "AMERICANIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST"?

Other aspects of Holocaust historiography should be addressed as well. In which countries did the interest in the Holocaust start, and what is the present center of scholarly attention for the Holocaust? Starting in the nineties, there has been some mounting dismay about the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust, referring to the (supposed) US-efforts to monopolize historical research and remembrance of the Nazi-genocide (Broder 1993).

However, if anything of an "Americanization" of the Holocaust ever existed, it certainly did not occur in the first decade and a half following the Second World War. Although more studies were published in the US than in other major publishing countries (Germany, the United Kingdom and Israel, to mention only the most important ones), the US's dominance decreased dramatically from 1945 to 1960 (see linear trend, graph 3), making way for Germany as early as 1958 [CG: United States (25.19%), Germany (24.22%), the United Kingdom (13.28%) and France (4.3%)].

This also holds true for the most important languages in which Holocaust studies were published. During the first postwar decade, English was incontestably the lingua franca of Holocaust research. In that period, almost twice as many studies appeared

– Graph 3. Number of Holocaust related studies following language of publication (1911-2008).

– Graph 4. Number of Holocaust related studies following language of publication (1911-2008).

in print in English as in German (SG). A turning point came in 1954; the ratio was finally overturned in 1957, with German becoming the major language. Overall, the number of English studies decreased after 1945, while the amount of German publications kept growing. The CG-data confirm these findings. Our database from the entire postwar period (the SG and CG combined) shows that 4243 entries (48.6%) were written in the German language, while only 3820 titles appeared in print in English (43.75%). Although the two languages were rivals of a more or less equal strength in the period 1955 to 1980, German unquestionably took the lead from the late eighties until now. These findings also suggest that the alleged “Americanization of the Holocaust” is a myth, rather than a historical reality.

THE POSTWAR FOCUS ON GEOGRAPHICAL LOCI AND THE IMAGE OF THE VICTIM

Even before Nazi Germany invaded Europe, preconditions for the extermination of the Jews were remarkably dissimilar in most European countries. Did scholars in the immediate postwar decade notice this variety? Did they take all involved countries into account, or did they focus on specific geographical regions, on capital cities in Europe, on infamous places of destruction?

In the Selection Group, 126 out of 486 entries (25.93%) refer to at least one country. Germany is mentioned most frequently (49 entries), followed by Israel (15), the United States (11), the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom (7). In most cases, the books and articles describe decision making processes (as far as major actors in the international political field are concerned) and the handling of postwar phenomena (e.g. the administration of occupied German territories or the prosecution of former National Socialist functionaries). There are hardly any references to Belgium or the Netherlands (they are both mentioned only once), to the Baltic States (one reference

to Lithuania), to Scandinavia (one entry for Sweden) or to Greece (one entry). In most cases, references to the state of Israel are short articles in newspapers, dealing with German-Israeli relations and the way Israel handles the history of the Shoah within its own borders. 75 titles refer to at least one city, most prominently German (36 entries), Polish (25 entries) and Austrian (6 entries) cities. 31 titles deal specifically with places of concentration or extermination, especially the Warsaw ghetto (8), Auschwitz (7) and Treblinka (4). It should be noted that resistance in ghettos and camps was hardly a topic of interest in the immediate postwar era. Most entries referring to those places are eye witness accounts (Olga Lengyel, Gisella Perl, Rudolf Höss) or scholarly reconstructions of the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau (Philip Friedman, Jan Sehn), Chelmno (Wladyslaw Bednarz), Czestochowa (Benjamin Orenstein). Only 3 entries deal specifically with Jewish resistance. In our entire database (SG, 1946-1960), the words “uprising” and “resistance” figure only twice and thrice respectively. Entries dealing with resistance refer mainly to the “Onkel Emil”, “Weisse Rose” and military (non-Jewish) resistance movements. Marie Syrkin’s book *Blessed is the match* is the only entry in our SG dealing explicitly with wartime and postwar Jewish resistance. This adds some nuance to the claim that the status of victim “in the forties and fifties [...] evoked at best the sort of pity mixed with contempt”, and that “postwar Jews’ repudiation of the status of victim [...] was largely spontaneous and tacit, [but] also the result of strategic calculation” (Novick 2000, 121). Moreover, when we look at the postwar database in its entirety (SG and CG combined), the word “victim” (and its French and German equivalents) appears no more than 51 times. The word is used more frequently in the forties and fifties (21.57%, while the entire share of entries for this period is only 11.77%), less in the three following decades (31.37%, compared to an overall share of 46.86%), and again more frequently in the last decade of the twentieth century (over 45%, while only a quarter of all entries date from this period). The wording of the titles may be too rough an instrument to analyze shifting perceptions of victimhood. But as far as our data are concerned, we cannot confirm the claim that the image of the Jewish hero was replaced in the sixties and seventies by that of the Jewish victim because of the internal and foreign political agenda of the state of Israel (Finkelstein 2003, 11-38).

GENOCIDES IN COMPARISON – THE JEWS AND THE OTHERS

Nothing in our databases indicates that scholars showed a lot of interest in comparing the Holocaust with other cases of mass destruction. In his seminal work on the historiography of genocide, Dan Stone (2010) referred to 12 historical cases of genocide: the Americas in the 16th and 17th century, the Australian aboriginals, the German massacres in South West Africa, the Armenian genocide, various instances of mass extermination under the Stalin regime, the 1947 partition of India, Mao’s China, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Guatemala and the genocides of indigenous peoples. In our entire set of data (8731 titles, SG and CG combined), there are no entries referring to the Spanish empire in the Americas. Only 2 entries deal with

Australia, 1 with Namibia (the words “Herero” and “Nama” do not appear in our databases) and 7 with the killings of Armenians during the Ottoman rule. India is mentioned twice (in two books, dealing with strategy and war, not with genocide), and China only once (in Skocpol’s 1979 study of states and social revolutions). Nicolas Werth (2010, 400-419) distinguished between 4 different acts of genocide under the Stalin regime: the mass execution of about a million so-called “counter-revolutionaries”, the gulag system (where approximately 1.8 million people perished), the forced deportation of about 6 million people and the Great Famine (the starvation of 5.5 million people in the early thirties and of about half a million civilians in the mid-forties). Although Stalin’s name occurs 36 times in our databases (apart from the references to “Stalingrad”), most references deal with political decisions and military strategies (Arno Lustiger’s 1998 *Rotbuch: Stalin und die Juden* being an exception). The word “gulag” is referred to only twice – in the title of Solshenitsyn’s famous novel (only mentioned in the bibliography of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen), and in an article written by Holocaust scholar Steven Katz (“Auschwitz and the gulag: a study in dissimilarity” from 1992). There are no references to the Great Famine, nor to the persecution of the kulaks. Guatemala and Bosnia-Herzegovina are not mentioned a single time. The 8 entries referring to Croatia deal only with the Second World War era, not with the civil war that devastated the country and left its peoples killed in the early nineties. 12 entries deal with the Serbian case, but only one of those (James Ron’s *Frontiers and ghettos. State violence in Israel and Serbia*, 2003) focuses on the crimes perpetrated by the Serbian regime in the nineties. One recent book (Scott Straus’ 2006 *The order of genocide*) and one recent article (Luke Fletcher’s “Turning interahamwe”, published in the distinguished *Journal of genocide research*) deal specifically with the massacres in Rwanda. In addition, there are no references to “native Americans”, “Khmer rouge”, “Cambodia”, “blacks” or “negroes”. Slavery is a major theme in Paul Gilroy’s book *Black Atlantic*, but it focuses on the cultural consequences, rather than on the genocidal character of the transatlantic slave-trade. 12 entries deal with colonization, 8 of those with racial policies, the persecution of the local population or genocide.

In a recent, thought-provoking essay, the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand referred to the gradual disappearance, not only of all non-“Semitic” victims of the National Socialist regime, but also of all victims of other genocidal massacres in the last quarter of the twentieth century. After its decisive victory in the 1967 war, Sand argues, when the West started to perceive the state of Israel as an occupying aggressor rather than as a democratic oasis in a totalitarian desert, the Zionist government created the image of the Jewish victim, who had the right to defend itself against a hostile environment. “The industrial murder became an exclusive Jewish tragedy”, Sand wrote:

The remembrance of the concentration- and extermination camps in the West was almost entirely emptied from all other victims – the mentally disabled, Sinti and Roma, members of the communist and socialist underground, Jehovah’s witnesses, Polish intellectuals

and Soviet commissars and officers, among others [...]. From now on, any comparison with other genocides was prohibited. (Sand 2013, 96, 100)

Yet, our data seem to suggest quite the opposite. In sum, only 30 entries (0.34%) deal with cases of mass destruction or genocide other than the Holocaust. Moreover, not a single case is mentioned in the era that concerns us here (1946-1960). Apart from 3 entries pre-dating the Second World War, there are no references to comparative genocide research in the forties, fifties or sixties. To be sure, this doesn't imply that the Armenian or Herero massacres were not a topic of interest at that time. It only indicates that this research was not integrated in the preparatory work of Holocaust scholars. A cautious start was made in the seventies and eighties (with 3 and 2 references respectively). Only in the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, comparative genocide analysis came to fruition – albeit at a very modest level in absolute numbers and with a special emphasis on the colonial experience, Rwanda and the mass-killing of the Armenians.

Scholars paid considerably more attention to other (non-Jewish) victims of the National Socialist regime. 28 books and articles, related to the persecution of the Sinti and Roma (gypsies), made it to the bibliographies. 9 entries refer to homosexuals, 2 to a group the Nazi's defined as "asocial" and 1 to Jehovah's witnesses. By far the largest social segment is the group of the mentally and physically disabled (66 entries). But again, apart from an occasional document dating from the twenties or thirties and one single article in the right-wing Jewish magazine *Commentary* dealing with "Hitler and the gypsies" (1947), there are no entries in the forties and fifties referring to victimized subgroups other than Jews. The first major increase in interest dates from the seventies (10 references) and eighties (32), while the focus on non-Jewish subgroups clearly peaks in the nineties (52 or 48.18% of all entries). Women, churches and children were not persecuted as such, but even here the data are telling: out of 26 postwar entries referring to women, 25 were written after 1970, and not a single one appeared in print in the era 1946-1960. 62% of all entries related to churches (as persecutor as well as persecuted) were written after 1980, and only 7 (4.79%) date from the era 1946-1960. There is only 1 reference dealing with children in the forties and the fifties, compared to 10 from 1961-1980 and 20 in the eighties and nineties. These results corroborate Stargardt's observation that "scholarly interest in children as protagonists in the Holocaust is also relatively recent, having risen markedly during the last two decades with the publication of a number of diaries, memoirs, and historical studies" (Stargardt 2010, 220). It may be that shortly after the war, individual Jews did not want to be regarded or treated as different from other victims of National Socialism. When studying contemporary newspapers and ego-documents, one could even conclude that the whole spectre – from wanting to be just like other victims, to wanting to be clearly distinct – can be discerned (see Azouvi 2012, 37-42). But in any case, according to our database, these accounts did not make it to the bibliographies of subsequent scholars. In contrast, studies

depicting Jews as a distinct group figure prominently in our database. Out of 877 titles referring specifically to Jews, 74 (8.44%) were written in the 15 years following the Second World War (slightly less than representative, compared with the share of entries for these fifteen postwar years). ■

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