

The Holocaust and Antisemitism

A SHORT HISTORY

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ONE WORLD
OXFORD

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
Introduction	1

Part I: THE HOLOCAUST AND ANTISEMITISM: THEORETICAL ISSUES

1 THE HOLOCAUST AND ANTISEMITISM	15
Introducing the problem	15
Approaching the Holocaust	18
The role of antisemitism in the Holocaust	21
Hitler's antisemitic worldview	23
Explaining Hitler	27
Recalling the Holocaust	28
Ways of retelling the Holocaust	30
Historiography of the Holocaust	37
The Intentionalists and the Functionalists	44
No Hitler, no Holocaust	48
The Jewish–Christian relationship as a cause of the Holocaust	49
The great abstractions	51
Hitler's willing executioners	55
A counter-explanation	59
The uniqueness of the Holocaust	61
The Holocaust and apartheid	64

2 APPROACHING THE STUDY OF ANTISEMITISM	68
Antisemitism: the baffling obsession	68
The emergence of the word “antisemitism”	70
Using the term “antisemitism”	73
Antisemitism’s contradictory nature	75
Theories to explain antisemitism	77
The historical approach to antisemitism	83
How old is antisemitism?	85
The search for the “prior” negative image	87
The Holocaust: a “twisted dependency” on Christian teaching	93
Allosemitism	94
“Justifying” antisemitism	95

Part II: PRE-CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM

3 JEWISH HISTORY AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING	99
Introduction: why Judaism?	99
The “mythical” as a dimension of religion	103
Judaism’s understanding of history	105
The essentials of biblical history	109
The meaning of the Exodus	110
The Jews in exile	112
The backlash against Hellenism	115
Second temple Judaism	116
A revealed pattern of history	118
Rabbinic <i>midrash</i>	119
Other forms of <i>midrash</i>	122
The hallowing of the everyday act	124
Rabbinic responses to hostility	125
The conflict between Jacob and Esau	127
4 PAGAN ANTISEMITISM	129
Is pagan animosity “antisemitism”?	131
The irresolvable dispute	133
Pagan perspectives	135
Government antisemitism	138
Popular antisemitism	141

The antisemitism of the intellectuals	142
Antisemitism of Egyptian provenance	144
The wider tradition of Hellenistic antipathy	147
Gnosticism	150
The charm of Judaism	152

Part III: INTER-RELIGIOUS RIVALRY AND ANTISEMITISM

5 THE DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM	157
Punishing the Christ killers	158
Christian theologising of Jewish history	161
The three foci of Christianity's teaching of contempt for the Jews	164
A brief review of the scholarship on the Christian roots of antisemitism	169
Ruether's influence	173
Broadening the conversation in early Christian times	174
6 THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM	178
Reconstructing early Christianity	178
The gospels as "history"	181
Jesus	182
Finding the historical Jesus	184
Jesus the Jew	186
Risking the truth	190
The influence of Paul	192
The traditional understanding of Paul	193
Reinterpreting Paul	195
Paul and the Jews' blindness	200
Is the New Testament antisemitic?	201
The legalisation of the teaching of contempt	205
The "golden" mouth	209
The First Crusade	211
Martin Luther	214
The stereotype in literature	216
Why was the "Old Testament" retained?	217
What if Marcion had won?	220

7 ISLAMIC ANTISEMITISM	222
The emergence of Islam	222
The 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism	223
Islam: the youngest of the world's major faiths	225
Jews under Islam	228
The <i>dhimmi</i>	229
Muhammad and the Jews of Medina	232
Jews as peripheral	236
Islam's ascendancy and decline	237
Islam invaded	239
The Jews' return to sovereignty	240
Anti-Zionism and antisemitism	241
Third World attitudes	244
Fundamentalist Islam and antisemitism	247

Part IV: THE SECULARISATION OF ANTISEMITISM

8 THE SECULARISATION OF ANTISEMITISM	253
The background	253
The emancipation of the Jews	256
Internal changes	259
The process of emancipation	262
Napoleon Bonaparte	265
The last embers of theological denigration	267
Rationalist antisemitism	268
Voltaire	269
Race and antisemitism	272
The development of racist antisemitism	273
Czarist Russia and <i>The Protocols of the Elders of Zion</i>	281
Soviet antisemitism	285
Post-Soviet antisemitism	288
France and the Dreyfus affair	290
Prelude to genocide	292
Was the Holocaust inevitable?	296

EPILOGUE	299
Antisemitism now	301
Denial of the Holocaust	305
Antisemitism on the internet	307
The Holocaust in Jewish self-consciousness	309
What can anyone do?	313
<i>Notes</i>	319
<i>Bibliography</i>	325
<i>Index</i>	337

Introduction

Near the beginning of the Jewish ceremonial meal on Passover, the *seder*,¹ the youngest child present asks the question “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The gathering – led usually by the head of the household – then recounts the story of the Exodus, God’s wondrous intervention on behalf of the Jewish people, who were brought from slavery to freedom, and, as God’s “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5) were called upon to live life according to his commandments. Each *seder* participant is meant to feel as if he or she personally was redeemed from Egyptian bondage, the eating of unleavened bread, *matzah*, the bread of affliction, reaffirming God’s power and compassion. He had taken the Jewish people out of Egypt in so great a hurry that their bread had had no time to rise. The entire evening is dedicated to an exploration and commemoration of freedom to live life based on the gift of the Torah. The annual recounting of this “master story”,² in a ritual setting, from a special book called the *Haggadah*,³ keeps Judaism alive by reinforcing it in the memories of adults and introducing it to succeeding generations of Jewish children.

At almost the same time, each year, Christians commemorate the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, the messiah, who was born, lived and died among the Jews, God’s chosen people. As both faiths take their authority from the God of Abraham, Easter has historically been a dangerous time for Jews because, though Jesus’ cruel death was necessary for the salvation of the world, it was blamed on the Jews. As the decide people, who had been blind to the real meaning of God’s promises and to Jesus as the messiah, they were depicted as wilfully repeating the passion

in various forms. The most common slander was the Blood Libel, which asserted that Jews needed the blood of innocent Christian children for use in their rituals, especially in the production of their *matzah*.

All religions have master stories, which scholars call the “mythological dimension”. In this context the word “myth” has a meaning very different from the way it is employed colloquially. Although we generally use it to denote something that is *untrue*, scholars take a neutral view to the truth or falsity of the story, seeing “myth” as the charter of a religious community which gives believers the ultimate meaning and purpose of their faith. Myth, the importance of which will be made clear as this book progresses, gives people their understanding of important issues, such as their place in the world, their code of behaviour and their ideas about death and the hereafter. Christianity’s mythical dimension is largely dependent on Judaism’s, but departs from it in very important ways, seeing Jesus as God incarnate, and offering individual salvation, based on faith in his redeeming death. Judaism is centred on the collective, the *people* of Israel, and seeks not so much salvation, but the hallowing of the everyday act. Both religions are historical, in that Judaism, as we will see in chapter 3, was the first religion in the world to root its mythical dimension in history. Islam was, later, to be founded upon another master story, based on the same tradition, seeing Muhammad as God’s last and most perfect prophet. These conflicting stories were decisive in fostering a negative image of the Jews, or antisemitism, and this book will look at each of them, bearing in mind that for almost two thousand years Jews lived as a minority people under either Christian or Muslim hegemony.

As will be made evident in chapter 2, antisemitism is almost impossible to define, but it differs from other forms of group hatred in that it not only dehumanises the Jews, but demonises them. It also endows them with cosmic powers for evil. This kind of hatred, I shall argue in this book, arises out of the rivalry between Judaism and Christianity but, more particularly, out of the way in which the story of Jesus has been told in the New Testament, a story whose repercussions were evident in the Holocaust. Whatever theory is used to explain antisemitism – whether it be psychological, economic or other – there is always a prior negative image of the Jew that requires explanation, and that explanation can only be found in the realm of religion. As William Nicholls (1995, p. xxviii) put it, “The original Christian hostility toward Jews went through a number of formations down the course of western

history, acquiring different rationalizations. But all its forms shared one element, the most important – Jews were bad”. The basic problem is not Jesus, however. Rather, as Robert McAfee Brown (1983, p. 172) asserts, “it is what Jesus’ followers have done with him. Indeed, if Jesus is to be faulted, it would be primarily for not having seen clearly enough that his life and death would be distorted by his followers in ways inimical to his own understanding of his mission”. Without the antagonism that was preached in the Christian church about the Jews, the Holocaust could never have happened.

An atrocity that could never have been carried out had not so many ordinary people helped to perpetrate it, the Holocaust has transformed our understanding of antisemitism. Antisemitism can no longer be seen as a marginal problem that has occurred from time to time and from place to place without catastrophic implications. Its deadly potential – now fulfilled – has made abundantly clear how immoral and reprehensible it is, bringing study of it from the margins to the mainstream of scholarship. This led to a revolution in Christian theology, in which Christian scholars, themselves, began to acknowledge that Christianity’s “teaching of contempt”⁴ for the Jews had to be honestly confronted as a causative factor of the Holocaust. Genocide could never have been accomplished in the absence of European culture’s universal understanding of the Jew, and would have been a lot less easy to achieve had the Christian world outside protested. Scholars focused on the negative aspects of the historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and the New Testament itself was examined for its culpability in fostering hatred for Jews. Based on their study, I emphasise the positive aspects of Jesus’ relations with Jews, indicating how, why and when the picture of a conflictive relationship may have emerged.

How, then, is this book different from the many other books on antisemitism? I believe that it is a difference of emphasis, and arrangement of material. The book has a three-fold thrust. The first is to explain the complex relationship between antisemitism and the Holocaust. The second is the search for the origins of antisemitism, and the tracing of its development. The third is the book’s emphasis on a historical approach to antisemitism. This means that each instance of Jew hatred has to be examined within its specific religious, political, social and economic context. Such analysis reveals that the Holocaust was not an inevitable or even logical outcome of Christian antisemitism, in that the church had never wanted to destroy the Jews physically. It was

also not a predictable outcome of prior forms of antisemitism. My focus, however, is on *religion*, which offers the only convincing explanation why it is so often the Jews who are the butt of people's hatred.

My particular interpretation can best be explained by telling my own story and that of the genesis of the book itself. Every author approaches his or her work with a history that determines the nature and direction of that work. I lectured on world religions for over twenty years at the University of the Witwatersrand – one of South Africa's most prestigious liberal universities – and always tried to impart to my students the values of the various religions, by putting myself as closely as possible into the shoes of their adherents and emphasising religion's positive influence on the world. But it is impossible to paint a true picture without referring to the negative dynamics between faiths, particularly when they are related to one another. Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the three Abrahamic religions – share a tradition, but differ fundamentally on the way that tradition should be interpreted, and how the promises in it have been, and will be, fulfilled. Though Judaism's basic worldview was adopted, as were some of its prior claims, differences developed, that Judaism found itself unable to share. It began to be viewed as either in error, or inferior, Jews as blind or stubborn, and their degraded status as *deserved*. Over time, an ugly stereotype of the Jew was formed, whose influence endures today. A substantial portion of this book will examine that inter-religious friction.

In the late 1970s, I began research into the thought of Richard L. Rubenstein, Judaism's only "death of God" theologian, which was to be the subject of my Ph.D. thesis. He had come to his radical conclusion in response to the Holocaust, and was later included in – though he had worked independently of – a movement of Christian death-of-God theologians, whose thought hit the scholarly and popular headlines in the mid 1960s. While the Christian death of God theologians celebrated the new era, Rubenstein mourned God's death with a cry of agony. It was a source of pain to Jews that none of those Christian theologians saw fit to include the Holocaust as a reason for God's demise.

As part of his analysis of the question of God and the Holocaust, Rubenstein had focused on the tragic, Antigone-like conflict between the mythic structures of Christianity and Judaism. His insights sharpened perceptions I had already formed, and I was deeply impressed by his discomfort with the Jewish doctrine of chosenness, and the way it relates to antisemitism. He had called for Jews to

demythologise it, yet realised how difficult this would be, since both Judaism and Christianity were so dependent on it. As he laconically put it, without the doctrine of chosenness, “the Christ makes absolutely no theological difference”.⁵

But Rubenstein’s thought took me beyond the question of God and the Holocaust and, indeed, beyond antisemitism itself in the search for causes of the Holocaust. Whereas he had been intent during the 1960s, to examine the Holocaust’s implications for Jewish theology, in the mid 1970s, though not abandoning his earlier views, he turned to analysis of the Holocaust’s more global implications. He was able to hold in tension antisemitism – as one of the Holocaust’s most decisive causes – and “functional rationality”, mass killing as a modern problem-solving exercise. He saw this new, modern mindset as the “night side” of biblical thinking. He was, at this stage, working less as a theologian and more as a social theorist. He spoke of God’s death in terms of the godless universe in which we live. Jews were targeted by Hitler because of their place in religious history, but they had been *defined* as superfluous, by people who had arrogated to themselves godlike power. Their murder was a strictly modern enterprise. Jews were Hitler’s primary victims, but not his only ones, which leads to the question: What exactly *was* the Holocaust, and can we ignore the millions of others who were enslaved, degraded and murdered by the Nazis?

It is with this background that I began this book, which was, originally, to be a book on the history of antisemitism. My overriding instinct was to start with the Holocaust, since it was the ultimate expression of antisemitism in action, and then go back to seek its roots and trace its history. Having barely begun, I was, not so much side-tracked, but lured into the complexities of Holocaust scholarship and the conflicting ways in which the Holocaust is interpreted. We are not always aware of the fact that we only know about the Holocaust in the ways in which it has been told to us, and that every telling – whether it be by a historian, or a survivor, or in the form of a popular film or novel – involves an interpretation. These interpretations give our understanding of it form. Some will emphasise the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy, with antisemitism as a central causal factor, whereas others – though not denying the importance of antisemitism or the genocide of the Jews – will emphasise the Holocaust as a world tragedy, moving beyond antisemitism in their attempts to explain it. Historiography of the Holocaust is complicated, and in its infancy, and historians, as this

book will show, find it difficult to pin down the Holocaust's exact essence.

I was also troubled, not only about the exact meaning of the word "antisemitism" but also about the problematic link between it and the Holocaust. I was struck by the inadequacy and imprecision of the designations we give to these two phenomena that met so tragically in the twentieth century. Though we will elaborate on the semantic problems in the body of the book, the word "Holocaust" is generally used to stand for the brutal and systematic murder of two-thirds of Europe's Jews during the Second World War. The word "antisemitism" has become the popular word for all forms of Jew hatred. The usage of both is hotly debated. Some scholars regard antisemitism as an entirely modern phenomenon and use the word very specifically to denote modern, racially based Jew hatred, whereas others use the word very broadly, to cover all forms of anti-Jewish expression. I shall adopt the latter approach in the conviction that it is too late to attempt to change people's usage of the word, and that most people understand what we mean when we use it, recognising that it is never directed at anyone but Jews. The distinctions implicit in the word "antisemitism" will be clarified in chapter 2 when we discuss the various approaches to this concept. We will see there that, because there is no such thing as a Semite, to whom people could be opposed, the hyphen in the word "anti-Semitism" has largely been dropped in scholarly usage.

The word "Holocaust" is also questionable. First, the designation has been extended to all sorts of social evils – some quite trivial – and, second, its association with religious sacrifice suggests that the Holocaust has some religious meaning. In fact, before the 1960s, there was no name for the tragedy that had befallen the Jewish people. The word "Holocaust" was coined in the early 1960s, by Jews, to denote the murder of six million of their people, who were targeted for destruction for no other reason than that they were Jewish, their murder doing nothing to enhance the German war effort. On the contrary, it hindered it, suggesting to some scholars that Adolf Hitler might have been fighting, in addition to the Second World War, a separate, and for him more ideologically important, war against the Jews.

A biblical word, "Holocaust" derives from the Greek word *holokaustos*, meaning "fully burnt", and was used in the first major translation of the Bible into Greek, the third-century BCE Septuagint. It translated the Hebrew word *olah*, something "brought up" to God in a

sacrificial offering made exclusively to him. Selection of it was probably based on the Jews' particular understanding of history as God's chosen people, which will be explained in chapter 3. Focusing particularly on the victims, "Holocaust" was meant to separate this massacre from all other historical instances of murder or genocide, to endow the catastrophe with a religious significance and to point to its incomprehensibility. It implies a universe in which God had a role in – even if it was one merely of allowing – the slaughter of six million of his chosen people, something that many people find repulsive. The murder of Jews had meaning only for the Nazis, who used the term *die Endlösung* "the final solution", for what was to them a mundane solution to a problem. Thus, many now prefer the Hebrew word *Shoah*, meaning "catastrophe" in the sense of a destructive windstorm or other natural disaster.

Shoah stresses the enormity of the event and, also, that its primary victims were Jewish. Use of this designation, as Gabriel Moran (1992, p. 33) suggests, is a strategy to protect the particularity of the disaster, so that it is seen as an atrocity against *Jews* and not as a crime against humanity in general. He warns, however, that this may, in the end, be counter-productive. Isolating the term from English speakers may dilute the relevance of the disaster. In any event, *Shoah*, too, is a biblical word and has, therefore, religious implications. However, it introduces an element of randomness and, maybe, despair. Some people prefer to use the symbol "Auschwitz" to stand for the genocide of the Jews, but, since there were many death camps, this is seen as unfairly selective. Also, as we will see, the Holocaust was more than about death camps, as morally repugnant, final and cruel as they were. It was also more than about Jews and antisemitism. These were part of a wholesale, paranoid restructuring of the world, an important part, but still a *part*. Since no single word is adequate to encapsulate the tragedy, I will employ the generally accepted word "Holocaust" throughout the book. In chapter 1, we will attain a clearer view of what the word "Holocaust" has come to mean to both Jews and non-Jews.

It became important to discuss the elusive way in which the Holocaust relates to antisemitism, and to reveal their complicated relationship. There could not have been a Holocaust without antisemitism, but antisemitism had existed for over two thousand years, and there had never been an attempt to completely obliterate the Jews. What had turned antisemitism into a systematic programme of annihilation? There is a qualitative difference between antisemitism and genocide. Something else had come

into the equation that made mass killing of the Jews possible. It became obvious to me that there should be a dual focus in this book. Although it is about antisemitism and its history, it also discusses these other factors. Hence the title: *The Holocaust and Antisemitism: A Short History*.

The first chapter of the book, therefore, considers the various debates that have arisen around the Holocaust, a catastrophe that has thrown up so many problems and so many profound questions, that no one approach is adequate and no final answers are possible. One of the functions of this book is to raise the questions, bearing in mind that in fifty years' time scholars may be posing very different ones. By considering these questions, in no way do I mean to minimise the danger of antisemitism, or to dilute its fundamental immorality; rather, I intend to put it into its historical perspective. The historical approach looks at issues like antisemitism's first manifestation in time – a moment in history that is extraordinarily difficult to locate – and its persistence and continuity, while also noting its protean nature. It indicates the changes that have occurred throughout antisemitism's history, while also pointing to those aspects of it that have remained constant.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into four broad sections. The first, comprising of chapters 1 and 2, looks at the theoretical issues underlying antisemitism and its relationship to the Holocaust, as well as discussing the various approaches to the study of antisemitism.

The second section, made up of chapters 3 and 4, deals with pre-Christian antisemitism. Unlike most books on antisemitism, chapter 3 looks at Judaism itself, because it is impossible to understand antisemitism unless we know the basics of what Jews believe about their place in the universe. The way Jews see themselves plays an important role in how others – particularly those who share the fatherhood of Abraham and the promises God made to him – see them. Jews' understanding of their place in God's plan for the world also laid the basis for their particular lifestyle, to which others have responded in various ways, both positive and negative. Chapter 4 considers how the pagan world responded to Jewish claims. Despite intense antagonism, Judaism exerted a profound attraction to gentiles, or non-Jews.

The third section focuses on religiously inspired antisemitism arising out of the inter-religious conflict between the three Abrahamic faiths.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the emergence of Christian antisemitism, chapter 5 concentrating on its dynamics, that is, the way it tends to present itself, and chapter 6 on tracing the way it emerged historically. Important here are the implications of Christianity's adoption of the Jewish view of history, which resulted in the Jews becoming the "secret centre" of Christian theology. In reconstructing Christianity's beginnings, in chapter 6, I emphasise the importance, for the future of antisemitism, of an exciting new trend in New Testament scholarship, the reassertion of Jesus' Jewishness. He is increasingly being seen as an observant Jew, who was *not* against his own people, and was executed not at the instigation of the Jews, but by cruel Roman imperial power, on a Roman cross, for a Roman offence. Furthermore, neither he nor Paul is seen as intending to formulate a new religion, the negative image of the Jews in the New Testament being the product of a later period.

Chapter 7 examines the traditional Muslim view of the Jews and Judaism, showing that its antagonism was much milder historically than that of Christendom. The challenge of modernity has, however, resulted in radical changes, so that the current Islamic image of the Jew now rivals its Christian counterpart. This is particularly so among "fundamentalist" Muslims, a contentious designation that will be touched on in that chapter. We also look at anti-Zionism and the interplay of antisemitism with a number of issues, notably the Middle East conflict and Third World ideologies.

The fourth section of the book, chapter 8, covers the secularisation of antisemitism. Religiously inspired antisemitism never resulted in genocide. For that to happen, antisemitism had to be secularised and fused with ideologies like racism. There were moral constraints in Christianity – and later Islam – that disallowed mass killing. Jews had been deemed practitioners of an inferior or incomplete faith, and they had had to live in demeaning conditions as a sign of their stubbornness and error, but they were still seen as *equal* in the eyes of God. Conversion to either Christianity or Islam was always open to them. In fact, Christianity determined that Jews should be kept alive. With the new racial antisemitism, the Jews' evil was now thought to be "in their blood", and conversion was rendered ineffectual. Chapter 8 discusses the amalgamation of the religiously inspired stereotype with new ideologies, like nationalism and romanticism, in the context of a modernising world. It shows how, in accordance with new views about human equality, modern thinkers wanted to make amends to the Jews, but refused to

allow them to remain Jews as a collective, thus contradicting those thinkers' own values of freedom and equality.

In the epilogue, I briefly consider the importance of remembering and learning about the Holocaust, and its impact on Jewish self-perception, particularly as it affects the Middle East conflict. I also look at the implications of viewing all of Jewish history through the prism of the Holocaust. Most importantly, I point out that, despite alarming new signs of antisemitism, individuals are *not* doomed by their religions or cultures to antisemitism. Individual choice can make a vital difference.

THE ELUSIVE AND EMOTIVE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

The reader has probably, at this early stage, perceived how difficult it is to pin down the nature and meaning of the two major phenomena that will be addressed in this book. It may seem flippant to start so serious a work with the advice of the king in *Alice in Wonderland*: “Begin at the beginning . . . and go on till you come to the end; then stop”. But this was the quotation that constantly popped up in my mind as the work progressed. To this subject, there are neither clear beginnings nor a clear terminus. As I researched and wrote, I barely ever found myself on solid ground. My arguments always seemed to proceed in circular fashion, arriving back at the point at which I had begun. Even the names given to the phenomena are, as we have seen, questionable and misleading, and the phenomena themselves are as elusive as quicksilver. An investigation into either one – on its own – is not only difficult, but emotionally charged. Together, they open a minefield, and misperception, misconception and hurt often ensue. I have tried to keep the text as unrepetitious as possible, and hope that I have succeeded in conveying a highly emotive subject fairly and unemotionally while, at the same time, not giving the impression that the phenomena it involves are any less repulsive.

Covering so broad a canvas, I have had to be selective. Other authors might have chosen other factors in their portrayal of the history of antisemitism. I have tried, throughout, to give the reader a clear idea of the literature that has emerged on the subject over the years, particularly the secondary literature that will make the issues more accessible, and hope that this introductory book will whet the reader's appetite for further reading. I have also shared the way my own South African experience has shaped some of my conclusions, and hope that the examples I have used provoke further thought.

CONVENTIONS

Besides my decision to use the designations “Holocaust” and “anti-semitism” throughout the book, there are other usages that require clarification. “BC” and “AD”, indicating the period before and after the birth of Jesus, are replaced with the more neutral notation, “BCE” and “CE”, which denote “before the common era” and “the common era”, respectively. As will become clear in chapters 5 and 6, the term “Old Testament” has a denigratory ring in that it implies that the “Old” has been superseded by the “New”. I have therefore used the title “Hebrew Bible”, retaining the term “Old Testament” only when used in a Christian context, where I have generally placed the term in inverted commas. In the light of the negative consequences of the term “Old Testament,” there is considerable debate about what the two holy scriptures should be called, some scholars offering totally new designations. Mary Boys, in her valuable 2000 book on Judaism as a source of a new Christian self-understanding, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, suggests that we should replace them with “First” and “Second Testament”. Harry James Cargas (1988, p. 305) recommends that we use the terms “Inherited Testament” and “Institutional Testament”. The first would acknowledge the Christian debt to Judaism, and the latter would make clear the church’s sole role in establishing this particular canon.

I have used the Harvard system of referencing, and elaborated, where necessary, with end notes. Because I have referred to a great number of books, to give the reader an indication of the trends in the various fields of scholarship covered in the book, some of them have not been included in the bibliography. There is enough information, however, for the interested reader to follow up.

I have tried to be consistent about using the New English Bible’s translations wherever possible, but have occasionally used more familiar translations where they seem applicable.

1

The Holocaust and antisemitism

One can do without solutions. Only the questions matter. We may share them or turn away from them.

Elie Wiesel

The really pertinent question is not why the Nazis were antisemites but why they committed murder. There is no direct line from antisemitism to the Holocaust for the very simple reason that antisemitism had existed for centuries and yet had never before led to such murderous destruction.

Eberhard Jäckel

INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

The word “Holocaust” was coined during the 1960s – probably by the survivor and writer Elie Wiesel – to denote the brutal, systematic attempt by the Nazis to annihilate the Jewish people during the Second World War. A word from the Hebrew Bible, “Holocaust” emerged in a specifically Jewish context to denote a pointedly Jewish catastrophe. Its original intention, therefore, was to stand for the murder of two-thirds of Europe’s Jews. Immediately after the war, there was a stunned silence. The Jewish people were too shocked by the intensity and universality of the hatred that had allowed such savagery to befall them, and too bereft to speak. It took twenty years to gather enough distance from the event to look back at what had happened and begin to analyse it.

Soon, the word “Holocaust” began to take on other meanings. The Second World War was an enormous and complicated disaster, which

unfolded in a global arena. Whole areas were destroyed, and tens of millions had died, not only as the normal lamentable consequence of military activity, but as a result of deliberate murder. Adolf Hitler's particular ideology had led to the enslavement, degradation and death of millions. Many had been callously left out to die by the ravages of weather, overwork, starvation or illness. The six million Jews were the primary victims, but there were millions of others whose fate we cannot ignore. People began to wonder, therefore, whether the word "Holocaust" should not be extended to include all those who had suffered or been murdered during the Second World War. It did not take long before the word began to be used for all sorts of disasters or attempts at social engineering, some of them quite trivial.

With this, it became necessary to remind the world of the central place that Jews had occupied in both Hitler's worldview and the killing machine that he had set up to bring it to fruition. Although many millions of non-Jews also died, Jews saw what happened to them as unique. Never before had there been an attempt to systematically destroy an entire people simply on the basis of their birth and apparently for no practical reason. Attempts at comparison were thought to understate the Jewish tragedy, to trivialise Jewish suffering, and to supplant the memory of what had happened to the Jews with other – and what seemed to be lesser – catastrophes. Such seemed, to Jews, to be a subtle form of antisemitism.

It was only in the 1960s that real analysis of the Holocaust, in the wider context of the Second World War, began. Historiography of the Holocaust emerged as historians began to find ways of explaining the event in terms of its causes, its course and its implications. It became difficult to separate the particularly Jewish aspect of the war from its wider context. Theologians began to ask the questions: "Where was God?" "How had he allowed six million of his chosen people to be so mercilessly destroyed?" "Is there anything in the Jewish-Christian relationship that could have caused so disastrous an outcome for the Jewish people?" Psychologists began to deliberate about Hitler's personality, or the factors that allowed an entire nation to participate – even if it was only by silent consent – in genocide. Sociologists began to look at the kind of world in which such atrocities could be accomplished.

In the early stages, antisemitism, or Jew hatred, seemed to be the primary cause of the Holocaust, and new attention was given to it. Whereas, before, Jews had been persecuted, humiliated and even

massacred, there had never been an intention to destroy them utterly. The Holocaust was a *novum* in both Jewish and world history. Yet, the Holocaust had also demonstrated antisemitism's most devastatingly logical outcome. Study of it could no longer be relegated to the sidelines, and it could no longer be viewed as an occasional outburst of hatred that arose from time to time and from place to place. Thus, the Holocaust put the study of antisemitism into the mainstream of scholarship. Realising the contribution that Christianity had made to antisemitism by the negative portrayal of the Jew, both in the New Testament and later, Christian and Jewish scholars began to address the problem. The painful realisation that Christianity, the religion of love, could be linked with so atrocious an outcome led to a revolution in Christian scholarship.

With all the study that was taking place, it soon became clear, however, that antisemitism was not the only cause of the Holocaust. It may not even have been the primary cause. Antisemitism, which had existed for at least two thousand years, had never before ended in genocide of the Jews. There is a qualitative difference between even severe forms of antisemitism – including murder – and an intention to annihilate the Jews, completely. What *was* it, then, that came into the picture to alter it so radically? Was the culprit, perhaps, the modern ethos itself, and did it utilise antisemitism to achieve its aims? Are there other prejudices that could, in other instances, be used in antisemitism's place? Since the Holocaust, there have been other genocides.

From the 1970s, scholars began to look more closely at other developments in the modern world, like bureaucracy, the advance of technology, and a new and brutal kind of rationality that, in seeking to attain specific ends, will stop at nothing – including mass murder – to attain them. Indeed, mass murder might be the most efficient of means. Historians also began to ask whether Hitler intended from early on in his life to destroy the Jews. Those scholars who think that he *did* – known as the Intentionalists – see antisemitism as a primary cause of the Holocaust. Those scholars who hold that he did *not* – known as the Functionalists – give other factors greater weight. They do not deny Hitler's antisemitism. No one could. Even a cursory glance at his autobiographical *Mein Kampf* leaves no doubt of his intense hatred and distrust of Jews. But the Functionalists argue that what he said there does not prove his *intention* to destroy the Jews. He would, they suggest, have been satisfied with their emigration. The decision to murder the Jews came about piecemeal, as the war progressed and new, unforeseen

problems emerged. He turned to genocide only when all other methods to get the Jews out of his domain failed.

The link between antisemitism and the Holocaust is, therefore, far from clear. There could have been no Holocaust without antisemitism, but antisemitism does not necessarily lead to genocide. In other words, the Holocaust was not the inevitable outcome of antisemitism. In this chapter, I will flesh out the considerations raised above, and explain in greater detail the various debates that have arisen around them, basing my account on the contrasting viewpoints of a host of scholars. We will see that we know about the Holocaust only in the way that it has been handed down, or told, to us. As each telling is different, we are left with a number of interpretations of it. Some accounts emphasise its specifically Jewish nature, whereas others see it in broader terms. How the Holocaust is defined will determine the place of antisemitism as a causative factor. If the Holocaust is seen as a specifically *Jewish* tragedy, then antisemitism is central. If it is seen as a wider, global catastrophe, then what happened to the Jews presages ominously what can, and does, happen to others. Factors other than, and in addition to, antisemitism will, therefore, assume greater weight. By the end of the chapter we will appreciate that, though there are endless questions, there are no final answers. This should not deter us, however. Given the enormity of the disaster, and the kind of world that we now inhabit, it remains crucial that we continue to pose appropriate and responsible questions, while we grope our way towards understanding.

APPROACHING THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust – the systematic murder of one-third of the world’s entire Jewish population during the Second World War – was the ultimate manifestation of antisemitism in action. To achieve it, Jews were stripped, by the Nazi government, of their citizenship, their human rights, their dignity and, ultimately, their lives. Discriminatory legislation rendered them totally powerless to change their fate, and the world at large abandoned them. Only a tiny minority of people, at considerable risk to themselves and their families, spoke out for them or helped to save them. Many of these have been honoured, by the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, with the distinction “Righteous Gentile”,¹ and one may, today, walk down the peaceful Avenue of the Righteous between the olive trees planted in their name to commemorate their humaneness.

For the most part, ordinary people either participated in the slaughter, or stood by, acquiescing to it by their failure to protest. People both inside Europe and elsewhere had fallen prey to antisemitism, the most ancient and persistent group hatred known to history, a hatred that this book sets out to explain.

Ending little more than a half a century ago, the Holocaust still casts a long shadow over human consciousness. Had Hitler won the war, there is a strong possibility that the Jewish people may not have survived at all. The Jews were targeted for annihilation for the simple reason that they were born Jewish. Their destruction did not aid the Nazis in their war effort. Rather, it impeded them. But, as Nazi power began to crumble in 1944, the programme of annihilation was intensified. Murder of the Jews, at that point, seemed to be the only end that remained for the Nazis. The Nazi act against the Jews, as Michael Berenbaum (1990, p. 32) points out, was unparalleled in its methodology, leaving six million dead, one million of them children, an entire world destroyed, a culture uprooted and humankind with new thresholds of inhumanity.

Given the high profile of the Holocaust in the public consciousness, it is not always obvious that *we only know about it in the ways it has been passed down to us.*² It is also not realised that interest in the Holocaust has not always been as fashionable as it is today and that Holocaust historiography is a very young discipline. Little emerged in the first twenty years after the Holocaust. The work of early Holocaust historians, like Raul Hilberg and Yehuda Bauer, constituted a “revolt against silence” (Hilberg 1998, p. 5). Perpetrators did not want to hear what they had done, bystanders did not want to be told of their complicity, and the Jewish community was too shocked to speak. The subject was also deeply sensitive because of some of the accusations against Jewish leadership that were emerging from historical probing. Jewish leaders were seen as having unwittingly collaborated with the enemy through compliance. The early analysts failed to realise the total powerlessness of the Jews under Nazi domination. Historical analysis is offering increasing insight on such issues.

Since the late 1960s, attempts to represent and understand the Holocaust – from historical treatises to popular films and novels – have grown from a trickle to torrent. Although retelling of it is essential in order to keep the memory of the tragedy alive, the growth in coverage has led to suggestions that there is “too much” about the Holocaust. There has also been so much profiteering that the judgement “there is no

business like Shoah business” seems hardly out of place. Some accounts of the Holocaust are more responsible and sensitive than others, but every telling is *subject to the interpretation of the teller*. These interpretations, provided they are not denials of the important part that the slaughter of Jews played in the catastrophe – an element of the conflict that has left so much grim historic evidence in its wake – should be given a hearing in our efforts to understand what occurred. As we shape our own picture of the Holocaust, some interpretations will acquire more prominence in our view than others. The idea of differing interpretations of the Holocaust is an important one to the subject of this chapter, because the link we establish between antisemitism and the Holocaust is itself dependent on interpretation.

I refer here – and through most of the book – to the specifically Jewish dimension of the tragedy. But millions of other people were subjugated, tortured, enslaved and killed by the Nazis. The deputy leader of the Nazi Party, Rudolf Hess, once said, “National Socialism is nothing but applied biology.”³ The Nazis were attempting to create an “ideal” social order, by remodelling the pure and noble race of Germans on the basis of new values such as racial purity, racial hygiene, and “good” “clean” living. Some members of “inferior” races had to become slaves to establish and maintain German superiority in Germany’s new, expanded domain, and others, who threatened the “wholesomeness” of German life, were deemed to be “unworthy of life” (*unwertes Leben*) altogether. These – among whom the Jews were the prime victims – were targeted for death. Jews, the most hunted and persecuted, constituted one part of an entire “mosaic of victims”, to use Michael Berenbaum’s apt phrase (1990). Victims included Soviet prisoners of war, Jehovah’s Witnesses, mentally retarded, physically handicapped or emotionally unstable Germans, Gypsies (the Roma and Sinti), German male homosexuals, trade unionists, political dissidents, and clergymen who dared to speak out against Nazi policy. We may never know the number of men, women and children of all ages killed by the Nazis in their orgy of violence, said V. R. Berghahn (1996). They left behind a trail of blood and tears – particularly in Eastern Europe – that defies human imagination, hardened as it is by the pictures of cruelty and destruction, flashed across our television screens, of other genocides in places like Bosnia and Rwanda. And this, Berghahn says, “is *before* we contemplate the systematic murder of six million Jews from all over Europe” (*italics mine*). Jews ranked the lowest in Hitler’s racial hierarchy. They were to

be hunted down and destroyed without mercy. When the war ended in 1945, fifty to sixty million people were left dead in its wake. The Jews were the primary victims, but not the only ones.

Before the Second World War, antisemitism had, for the most part, been of secondary, or marginal, interest. Despite its periodic intensity, it had never resulted in a programme of genocide. Something new had taken place. Antisemitism now had to be taken seriously because the world had seen its horrible denouement. But was it a question of antisemitism alone? Is there not also a sense in which those particular factors that helped transform antisemitism into active genocide against the Jews were part of a wider trend of human destructiveness?

THE ROLE OF ANTISEMITISM IN THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust, as Michael Marrus in his excellent and now classic 1987 overview of Holocaust historiography, *The Holocaust in History*, points out, seems both qualitatively and quantitatively different in kind from other massacres that punctuate history. This has led to the assertion that the Holocaust is unique and that antisemitism should be seen as its chief cause. Although these assertions have some substance, they do not, he says, sit well with the wider community of historians. Informed theories about the centrality of antisemitism in Nazism do *not* claim that anti-Jewish ideology was a predominantly German doctrine or even a constant preoccupation of the leaders of the Third Reich. Research, he avers, suggests the very opposite. Furthermore, antisemitism, on its own, was not enough to cause the Holocaust. Other historic factors determined the way in which antisemitism could be exploited.

If one were asked to name the most antisemitic country in Europe in the 1890s, several scholars suggest, the answer would probably be France, with Czarist Russia coming a close second. The map of European antisemitism then looked different from that of the 1930s and 1940s and, even in the 1930s, though Germany would be a strong contender, it would certainly not be the only one. At the end of the nineteenth century, France, with its severe pogroms,⁴ and the trumped up accusations of treason against a Jewish military officer that led to the Dreyfus affair, looked potentially a lot worse than Germany, which had accorded fundamental rights to Jews and where there were no pogroms. Scholars, Marrus suggests, no longer insist with assurance on the “Jewish question” in pre-Nazi Germany. There was undoubtedly antisemitism

there, but it is difficult to ascertain its exact source and location. Though the influence of antisemitic parties may have been on the decline, antisemitism had become pervasive in public life. It had become, as Shulamit Volkov (1988) argued, part of a “cultural code”, a convenient abbreviation for a broad cluster of ideas, values and norms. Antisemitism was indicative of a broader ideology, of which it was but a part.

Though there was a general tide of antisemitism in Europe in the late nineteenth century, some scholars, like Uriel Tal, and, more recently, Daniel Goldhagen, have made a case for the special intensity of *German* antisemitism. Tal, in his 1975 book, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1879–1914*, argued that there were two strands of anti-Jewish thought in Germany, the traditional and the radical. The first strand was rooted in Christianity and its relationship to Judaism. It was religiously inspired opposition to the Jewish rejection of the Christian majority faith. (An explanation of this sort will constitute much of this book.) The second was a more modern manifestation. It was violently anti-Christian in inspiration, pagan in its models for the ideal society, and *racist* in its definition of Jews. This blend, as we shall see in chapter 8, was much more virulent and uncompromising than the earlier Christian form, and it was this amalgam, with the addition of new ideas, that was to form the basis of Nazi antisemitism.

There is no certainty about the extent to which antisemitism was, from the beginning, a driving force behind the Nazi party. Rubenstein and Roth, in their comprehensive and insightful 1987 introduction to the Holocaust, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, claim that, when the Nazis came to power in 1933, their commitment to antisemitism was clear, but their practical policies towards Jews were not. It is one thing to have antisemitic feelings and quite another to make those feelings effective in a political regime. Hence, it took time for the Nazis to work out a coherent anti-Jewish programme. But this is the nub of the problem. What were the *exact* circumstances that caused genocide to occur, and for the Holocaust to start in Germany and not elsewhere? Antisemitism, as Marrus (1987, p. 9ff) points out, played an uneven role among Nazi leaders and in voting patterns, and it is not even certain how important it was for members of the Nazi party. He suggests that the Nazis shared very few clearly articulated goals, and this applied even to antisemitism. There were times when the Nazi leadership made a determined effort to make the party socially acceptable, by toning down antisemitic rhetoric. At other times, hatred of

Jews was shouted from rooftops. Antisemitism was utilised if viable, and played down or abandoned if not, depending on how politically advantageous it was at any given time or place. Many, Marrus says, were drawn to antisemitism through Nazism and not the other way around. Hitler's antisemitism, on the other hand, formed the very core of his worldview and Jews were a factor in everything that ever concerned him.

It should be noted here that most historians do not see the Holocaust as an inevitable outcome of antisemitism, or even of German antisemitism. A particular set of historic circumstances resulted in its occurrence and it is the weighting of individual components of the broader historic situation that leads to different opinions on what caused the Holocaust. What distinguishes the Holocaust is not antisemitism, but the Nazi programme to annihilate the Jewish people. Without the latter, there would have been a severe case of antisemitism, but no more. Not the least among the factors that enabled the Holocaust to occur was the personality of Hitler. Let us look then at Hitler's antisemitic worldview within the context of European antisemitism at the time. The precise nature of his intentions and his exact role in the Holocaust are subject to dispute, but no reliable historian questions the fact that Hitler had a determinative role.

HITLER'S ANTISEMITIC WORLDVIEW

Hitler, as Robert Wistrich in his well-known 1991 book on the history of antisemitism, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred*, pointed out, was heir to an age-old tradition of Christian antisemitism which had, by his time, been transmuted into biological racism. Hitler formulated his own amalgam, however, in a new secular and political "faith" called National Socialism. Although he was anti-Christian, and contemptuous of Christianity, he borrowed motifs freely from Christian precedents that conceived of Judaism as a demonic force. In his early years in Bavaria, he often evoked the myth of the Jews as Christ killers, but claimed messianic status for himself as the militant saviour of the German people. "Thus," he said in *Mein Kampf* (1939, p. 74), "I believe I am acting today in the spirit of the Almighty Creator: by resisting the Jew, I am fighting for the Lord's work". His animus against Christianity was aimed ultimately at Judaism. For example, he disapproved of the fact that Martin Luther had translated the Bible into German, because that had allowed the "Jewish spirit" to permeate the German population.

Jews were an essential part of Hitler's understanding of the historical process, which was, he believed, driven by struggle, hence the name of his frenzied and repetitive autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, or *My Struggle*. He saw his own personal struggle as analogous to that of his people. "The idea of struggle is as old as life itself," he said in a 1928 speech, "for life is only preserved because other living things perish through struggle . . . in (which) the stronger, the more able, win, while the less able, the weak, lose." Adopting a crude perversion of Darwin's ideas about biological evolution, natural selection and the survival of the fittest,⁵ Hitler conceived of history as a global arena in which peoples, in order to survive, are forever engaged in ruthless competition. The struggle, which is "often very bitter", he said in *Mein Kampf* (1939, p. 36), "kills off human sympathy. One's own painful struggle for existence destroys his feeling for the misery of those it left behind".

He was deeply impressed by the idea that racial mixing would lead to the destruction of civilisation. "Mingling of blood", he said (1939, p. 288), "with the decline in racial level that it causes, is the sole reason for the dying out of old cultures". He saw as the ultimate pollutant the Jew, who was the "most extreme contrast to the Aryan" (1939, p. 292). "Historical experience," he suggested, "offers countless examples" of the fact that the "mingling of Aryan blood with inferior races" will result in the end of the "sustainer of civilization". Such mixing would cause both physical and intellectual retrogression, and mark the beginning of a "slow but sure wasting disease" (1939, p. 279). The "iron logic" of nature, he said (1939, p. 279), was its will to breed life upwards (1939, p. 278). To oppose this was to seek destruction.

For Hitler, Jews were an anti-race with no culture of their own. "The Jew," he said (1939, p. 295), "possesses no civilization-building power; he has not and never did have the idealism without which there can be no upward development of man. Consequently, his intellect is never constructive, but destructive". The Jew, he claimed (1939, p. 293), "has never possessed a culture of his own, the basis for his mental processes has always been furnished by others. In every age his intellect has developed by means of the civilization surrounding him. The reverse of the process has never taken place". Everything Jews had, therefore, like parliamentarianism or democracy, they had taken over from other "sound" races, and perverted. In the process, they weakened these societies and undermined their capacity for struggle, thus becoming the sinister enemies of humankind. "Whatever sham civilization the Jew

possesses today is the contribution of other peoples, mostly spoiled under his hands” (1939, p. 294).

By their constant mingling with other peoples, the Jews had corrupted their positive qualities, and poisoned their institutions. Insinuating themselves into other societies, Jews aimed to dissolve them. Marxism was one means they used to achieve this, and capitalism another. Jews were thus seen as a constant threat, both to the world in general and to the German people in particular. As the latter’s prophet, Hitler promised to save them from degeneration and lead them to a glorious future. Hitler’s beliefs had nothing to do with real Jews, and transcended any real “racial” categories that people may use. Jews, as Steven Katz (1998, p. 61) points out, were the negative pole, the embodiment of evil. In Hitler’s myth of a new world, the Jews personified the devil, the vampire, the parasite upon the nations.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, Germany’s economy was in crisis, unemployment was rife and the people’s national self-confidence was at a low ebb. Hitler diagnosed Germany’s degeneration as being directly proportional to the triumph of Jewry, which, as it spread its tentacles, was threatening the world. From early on in his life, he had been deeply influenced by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the counterfeit minutes of a meeting of the so-called secret Jewish world conspiracy. It had been forged by the Czarist police in 1905, and has since become the “bible” for antisemites. The more it was asserted that these were a forgery, the more this became “proof” for Hitler that they were genuine (1939, p. 299).

The *Protocols*, one of the most sinister and destructive forgeries ever fabricated, achieved worldwide distribution through the motor car magnate Henry Ford’s popularisation, *The International Jew*. Serialising it for seven years in his weekly newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, Ford helped to spread its nonsensical argument that Jews were conspiring to rule the world. This made the *Protocols* as Norman Cohn (1967) put it, “a warrant for genocide”. So impressed was Hitler by Ford’s work that he had it widely distributed in German translation, and even had a portrait of Ford in his private office. If the Jews should succeed, Hitler warned, the world would be smothered by “filth and offal” (1939, p. 294). They were a typical parasite, “spreading like a harmful bacillus wherever a suitable medium invites it. And the effect of his existence is also like that of parasites: wherever he occurs, the host nation dies off sooner or later” (1939, p. 296). This being so, Hitler wanted the Jews

removed from his ambit. Some suggest that his desire for their removal was so absolute that their physical annihilation would not have been enough. Hitler wanted the destruction of the Jewish angle of vision and the Jewish understanding of history. This was to be replaced by a Nazi reconstruction of Jewish history. Jews would survive only as a museum piece, created in the Nazi image.⁶ “Anything in this world that is not of good race,” said Hitler (1939, p. 288), “is chaff”.

To create a new and “ideal” Nazi world, Hitler needed to expand Germany’s territory eastward in order to secure *Lebensraum* (living space) for a perfectly homogeneous German race. To effect this, he had to put up an unrelenting fight against Bolshevism, which for him was a “Jewish” invention. Germany’s decay and decadence, he believed, resulted from the triumph of Jewry in the First World War, and the “stab in the back” they delivered to Germany. As they were ready to pounce again, he saw his battle with the Jews in cosmic terms, as a titanic struggle between two races fighting for world domination. It was an either-or situation. Jews represented the totality of evil, and their eradication was the condition for the future development of the German people and the world. This was, as Saul Friedländer (1997) put it, “redemptive antisemitism”.

Karl Schleunes, in his lucid and beautifully written classic 1972 book that was to inaugurate what became known as the “Functionalist” position, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, explained how Hitler used the Jews as a weapon in his fight for power. It was “the Jews” who helped to hold Hitler’s system together – on the practical as well as the ideological level. The Jew was cast into a variety of different roles, each playing on the fears of a particular social group in Germany. For the working class, he was the wicked financier, responsible for its economic misery. For the bourgeoisie he was the rabid Bolshevik revolutionary about to destroy the foundations of society. Once in power, Hitler had to reconcile the various spectres he had created. But, by steering attention away from genuine economic and social grievances towards the Jews, he was able to ignore the promises he had made to the German people. An ideological retreat would have been impossible.

Antisemitism seems to have been the glue that held together the various elements of Hitler’s worldview. He believed that three pillars lay beneath the German people’s self-understanding and capacity for struggle: nationalism, the *Führer* principle and militarism. These could be undermined by their opposites, however, and the German people destroyed.

In one of his sudden flashes of insight, Hitler “discovered” that the three opposing features – internationalism, democracy and pacifism – had been invented and carried by Jews. If the Jews were left to their own devices, not only would they smother the world in filth, but they “would then exterminate one another in embittered battle”. With their “lack of willingness for self-sacrifice”, however, which Hitler saw as expressed in their cowardice, “they would turn even this battle into a sham” (1939, p. 294). The role Hitler attributed to the Jews, fusing, as it did, the various facets of his worldview, enabled it to constitute, in Eberhard Jäckel’s opinion (1972), a blueprint for massacre. If Hitler annihilated the Jews, he would restore meaning to history, give vitality to the German struggle and find living space. If he failed, and there was no struggle for living space, there would be no culture, and all nations would die out.

EXPLAINING HITLER

There have been many attempts to explain Hitler and find the root of his obsession with Jews. Extremely instructive, for our purposes, is Ron Rosenbaum’s 1998 book, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. Here Rosenbaum attempts, through interviews with a number of scholars who have tried to explain Hitler, to discover the real Hitler, to penetrate his evil and to determine whether it resides in germ form in all of us, or whether Hitler is completely off the human grid. Allied to this is the question of whether Hitler is explicable or not. The real Hitler has been buried beneath a mountain of theories, offered by historians, philosophers, writers and theologians. Rosenbaum identifies three levels of despair of ever being able to explain him. The first is represented by the Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, who believes that Hitler is explicable in principle, but that we no longer have enough material to do so. The second may be seen in the work of the Jewish theologian Emil Fackenheim, who suggests that Hitler is beyond explanation. The third is encapsulated in the attitude of the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who rejects the very idea of trying to explain Hitler. He forbids such attempts, seeing them as obscene. Lanzmann was particularly outraged by being presented with a picture of Hitler as an infant – an “innocent” Hitler, a Hitler without victims.

The picture each explainer drew of Hitler was different, so different that Rosenbaum jocularly wondered whether the various Hitlers would be able to recognise one another enough to be able to say “*Heil*” in hell.

Each scholar looks at the facts through his or her own personal lenses. Rosenbaum examines these lenses, looking at the factors that constrain or influence the explainers. He thus finds himself “explaining the explainers” and offering, in the process, a valuable and unusual synthesis of Holocaust scholarship, as well as a comment on Western culture. Alan Bullock, for example, sees Hitler as a mountebank, whereas Hugh Trevor Roper believes him to have been “convinced of his own rectitude”, that is, genuinely believing that he was killing the Jews for the ultimate benefit of his own people. The philosopher Berel Lang argues that Hitler *wanted* to perpetrate evil, and that he pursued the art of evil. Rosenbaum suggests that the diverse explanations reveal something about our culture’s problems in confronting evil. We can hide behind explanations and thus avoid looking down the abyss of absolute evil. Explanation becomes exculpation. For this reason, Rosenbaum rejects many – especially the psychological – explanations. The latter tend to blame irrevocable forces behind Hitler rather than Hitler himself.

Many of the explanations of Hitler have been too rigid, and have allowed no room for evolution in Hitler’s ideas. Historians, Marrus points out, tend to be uncomfortable with theories that imply no changes of ideology, or a psychological consistency that lasts for decades and is extended to the whole population. Historians look for change and record it. They prefer to interpret Hitler’s personality in interaction with his environment. Hitler was applying his ideas in a real historic situation, promising solutions to real problems. Herein lay Hitler’s attraction, and it is in understanding the wider reality in which he operated – the historic context – that the historian’s quest lies.

The way Hitler is explained, particularly his exact role in the Holocaust, varies considerably. The more Hitler is distanced from the decision-making process, the more antisemitism seems to be shifted from the centre of the explanation for the Holocaust. Yet, as we know, the fate of the Jews cannot possibly be overlooked. There is no doubt about Hitler’s antisemitism. What *is* in doubt is whether he was driven by an insane passion to annihilate Jews, at any cost, or whether antisemitism was part of a cold, calculating search for absolute domination.

RECALLING THE HOLOCAUST

Since we only know about the Holocaust in the ways it has been passed down to us, we are dependent for our knowledge on the way people have

told it to us. Because the disaster was one of such enormous proportions, no single account can encapsulate it. Each is conditioned by limitations – like the lapse of time, the circumstances and interests or inclinations of the teller, the fragility of memory, and the message that the teller wishes to convey. This is the case whether the accounts are memoirs of survivors, diaries of victims, historians’ interpretations, or even popular works of art, like novels or films. Depending on the interpretation, then, the centrality of the Jewish dimension of the Holocaust shifts from one account to another.

A pertinent example is the contrast between two films on the Holocaust, Alain Resnais’ thirty-minute *Night and Fog*, and Claude Lanzmann’s nine-and-a-half-hour meditation on the Holocaust, *Shoah*. One of the features that unites them is that both filmmakers achieve their effect by juxtaposing the timeless visual beauty of nature with the Nazi outburst of savagery that cruelly tortured and killed innocent people. The breathtaking loveliness – and innocence – of the countryside of Poland (where the major death camps were located) forms the backdrop to the story of the death camps. Both filmmakers depict the brutality of the perpetrators and the fear, suffering, humiliation and wholesale death of the victims. Both are driven by the moral impulse that post-war generations are obligated to remember a crime that is both unimaginable and inexpressible. Both are telling us of the same event, interweaving the past with the present, and using a technique that shocks us through the use of contrast. Both, as Ilan Avisar (1988, p. 13) put it, make the viewer realise that today’s rich green grass rises from soil fertilised by the grey ashes of millions.

But Resnais – though his film uses archival material that obviously contains film clips of Jews in their degradation – does not mention the word “Jew”. Lanzmann, on the other hand, focuses solely on the genocide of the Jews – without using any archival material at all. Resnais wants to portray the event as a crime against *humanity*. Lanzmann – largely through the medium of interviews with survivors – concentrates on the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy. He focuses on the process by which two-thirds of Europe’s Jews were destroyed. Both films have become classic records of the Holocaust but, with their different emphases, they leave the viewer with very different messages.

In addition to the problem of individual interpretation, and the limited nature of any single account to do the Holocaust justice, a third problem arises. The events described are so extreme in their horror that

they almost defy description. Most of us have been separated from the events by time or historical circumstance. They are so totally outside our experience that their full horror cannot be penetrated or their ultimate significance grasped. The systematic massacre of so many innocents, Marrus points out, is bound to escape our understanding in some profound sense. The Holocaust will, therefore, always be to some extent “unimaginable”, and no amount of interpretation or theorising should be permitted to detract from its awesomeness.

Theo Adorno, in his now famous dictum, that “After Auschwitz” the writing of poetry is “barbaric”,⁷ was using poetry as a metaphor for imaginative literature. He seemed to be saying that we do not have the linguistic conventions through which we can grasp or convey the meaning of the scientific murder of millions, and that it may be obscene to extract aesthetic pleasure from such suffering. There is an intolerable gap between the aesthetic constructions we devise and the loathsome realities of the Holocaust. Thus silence may be the better option. Adorno was pointing to the sheer difficulty and moral peril of dealing with the Holocaust in literature. Lawrence Thomas (1991, p. 371) echoes this difficulty. To speak about the evil suffered by the millions of victims, he says, is profoundly humbling. If we do anything more than reporting the facts, we run the risk of trivialising and distorting and, thereby, desecrating the memory of those who suffered so. Yet, the very telling of the Holocaust involves more than just reporting the facts. So we always have to be aware that we may fail to do it justice. If we do not talk about the Holocaust, however, it will be lost to memory. What we may be able to learn from the dimensions and scale of the tragedy will forever be obscured. Daniel Schwarz (1999, p. 22) suggests, therefore, that “it is barbaric *not* to write poetry” after Auschwitz, because those who perished “rely on us to speak”.

WAYS OF RETELLING THE HOLOCAUST

I have divided the various forms of retelling of the Holocaust into five groups. The first category is to be found in diaries and other testimonies of victims who wrote during the war. The second is the constantly growing collection of survivor testimonies – whether on audio or videotape, on film, or in written form. The third lies in the all-important work of historians and the way in which they have reconstructed and explained the Holocaust. These, from the point of view of establishing

the link between antisemitism and the Holocaust, constitute the most important category, so we will return to them in greater detail later in this chapter. The fourth consists of popular works of art in which the Holocaust is portrayed either as a primary subject or as forming the historic background to the story told. Novels like André Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* give us accounts of the Holocaust which emphasise the Jewish aspect of the tragedy, and thus focus on the centrality of antisemitism, whereas William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* has a more universal focus. The last category of recall lies in monuments and museums that, on the one hand, commemorate the event – remembering its victims – and, on the other, serve to convey a message or “lesson” to the public. Let us turn, in a bit more detail, to these five categories.

Victims' testimonies

Diaries and other forms of testimony of victims – like poems or paintings left by the children of Theresienstadt (Terezin) – are often regarded as the truest and purest form of Holocaust testimony. Theresienstadt offers an interesting example of individual reactions because it was ostensibly “better” than other camps. It was a place where the Nazi art of deception was at its highest. Serving as a sort of way station to Auschwitz and other extermination camps, fifteen thousand children passed through its gates between 1942 and 1944. It was a “model” camp that the Nazis used to show foreigners how ostensibly “well treated” Jews were, and was euphemistically called a “ghetto”, though every one of its inhabitants was condemned in advance to die. One poem by a child, Pavel Friedmann, conveys the sense of entrapment and pain through the image of a butterfly.

The last, the very last,
 So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
 Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing
 Against a white stone . . .
 Such, such a yellow
 Is carried lightly 'way up high.
 It went away I'm sure because it wished to
 Kiss the world goodbye.

For seven weeks I've lived here,
 Pinned up inside this ghetto
 But I have found my people here.

The dandelions call to me
 And the white chestnut candles in the court.
 Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
 Butterflies don't live here
 In the ghetto.⁸

This poem falls into the same category as diaries – like those of Anne Frank, or Moshe Flinker – giving us insight into the conditions to which children and young adults were responding. Anne's and Moshe's diaries give us systematic accounts of how two young Jews were forced to live, and how they handled the onslaught against their people emotionally, spiritually and practically. Anne Frank reflects the predicament of a secularised, fairly assimilated Jewish family in hiding from the Nazis. Moshe Flinker's diary, on the other hand, conveys the innermost thoughts and fears of a young religious Jew during the Holocaust. Together, they help us to form a more comprehensive picture of the Holocaust – even though each is but a fragment of the whole. However, we must remember that neither of them survived. Neither had an idea of what the outcome of the war might be, and whether they would survive to tell the story. This may have moderated their pessimism. We, today, read their accounts, and look at the poems and pictures of the children at Theresienstadt, in the sombre grey light of hindsight.

Survivor testimonies

A second category of Holocaust retelling is survivors' testimony. An increasing number of memoirs are being published and there are several active programmes to record survivors' experiences. The fact that time is passing, and many survivors are no longer alive, has led to a sense of urgency in capturing the recall of those who are left.⁹ To the survivors has fallen the frightful task of having to bear witness, to reapproach the unapproachable, to speak of the unspeakable. The systematic attempt to round up every last Jew, the sense of ensnarement as the noose tightened around various communities, the way individuals were caught in the net, their responses and the miraculous ways in which they – the few – escaped their fate are the stuff of these accounts.

They tell of another universe, where madness was sanity, where human compassion was punished and cruelty rewarded. They tell of

betrayal by people who had been neighbours for a lifetime. They tell of courage and resilience, but also of the urge to self-preservation, sometimes at the expense of others, and the guilt that is inevitably borne by the survivor in the face of the death of so many others. The memoirists' representation of the full range of human responses is important, because the Jewish victims of the Holocaust need to be seen not as saints, but as people of flesh and blood, who had been degraded and reduced to ciphers. They were ordinary people, with the full range of human emotions, both positive and negative. Victims of the Holocaust are often called martyrs, *kedoshim*. As Bauer points out, however, this implies their death had some meaning, and obscures the fact that their deaths had meaning only for the Nazis. Whereas some of the victims' ancestors had had the "luxury" of choice, and had chosen death instead of forced conversion, thus dying to sanctify God's name, here the element of choice was missing. "They were ordinary people", Bauer (1998, p. 15) insists, "victims of murder; this does not make them holy, it makes them victims of a crime".

But, again, there is no single account of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel, in his famous memoir, *Night*, mourns the loss – and maybe even the death – of God, whereas for Jerzy Kosinski, in his 1972 book *The Painted Bird*, the Holocaust has nothing to do with God, who, in any case, does not exist. The Holocaust owes itself entirely to human savagery. In addition, each testimony is tinged by the limitations of memory and also by the fact that its content has, perforce, been organised retrospectively. Thus, the event has no clear boundaries. For example, when did the Holocaust begin in a particular survivor's account? With Hitler's rise to power in 1933? With the outbreak of the war in 1939? With the first intrusion of Nazi brutality into his or her own personal life? When did it end? Was it with the liberation of the camps? With entry into a new haven – such as the USA, Israel or South Africa? In the case of recorded interviews, was it when the interviewer felt that the story had been adequately told, or when the tape ran out? Each survivor's account will give different outlines and different meanings to the event. One will emphasise specific details that another does not recall. These differences do not make the one account "right" and the other "wrong". They display the problems confronted by memory when it has to recall a traumatised past. But collectively, these testimonies all confirm the same reality, each one offering a fragment that will help us understand the whole a little more clearly.

The accounts of historians

The third category of retelling is the account of the historians. As far back as the late 1940s, Leon Poliakov, in his book *Harvest of Hate*,¹⁰ gave a reasoned account of what happened during the Holocaust, and an explanation of why it happened. This was to be followed by comprehensive works by Gerard Reitlinger – *The Final Solution: The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945* (1953) – and Raul Hilberg – *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961). Hilberg’s book is widely regarded as an unsurpassed survey of the killing process and still represents a milestone in Holocaust studies.

Until the 1960s, there was little public awareness about the Holocaust. Following the trial, in Jerusalem, of Adolf Eichmann, however, world attention was focused on Jewish vulnerability. The Six-Day War in 1967 – with the accompanying worldwide Jewish fear that Israel could possibly be annihilated by the many Arab enemies that encircled it – re-evoked the Holocaust. Since then there has been a torrent of scholarly works, so many, indeed, that it is now impossible for any one scholar to have a full grasp of all of them. Some of the better known ones in the English-speaking world are Nora Levin’s 1973 book, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933–1945*, Martin Gilbert’s 1978 book, *The Holocaust*, and Yehuda Bauer’s 1982 book, *A History of the Holocaust*. Bauer is universally acknowledged as one of the doyens of Holocaust history.

The Holocaust presents us with peculiar problems. Some people resist the very idea of subjecting it to historical inquiry. Its vast scale and exceptional dimension, they feel, render it “beyond” history, and they fear the effect of the debates that would automatically ensue from such inquiry. It is also felt that dispassionate scholarly attention might diminish the horror evoked by the Holocaust, or threaten the special place that the trauma of the event has in Jewish experience. It may trivialise the fundamentally evil nature of Nazism. Conversely, there are those to whom the Holocaust is an embarrassment, either because of lingering antipathy towards Jews, on the one hand, or because they believe that extensive historical investigation might lead to accusations of partisanship, on the other. Though these attitudes still prevail, there has been a change, and such inhibitions are losing their force. Marrus’s book, *The Holocaust in History*, describes those changes. Elsewhere he points out that Holocaust historiography has since become so sophisticated that

it can be used to reveal problems in the historiography of other fields more acutely.

The Holocaust in the popular media

The fourth category of Holocaust recall is the attempt to tell the story through the popular media. Popular films, like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Gerald Green's 1978 tele drama *Holocaust*, give us their own individual interpretations. Spielberg centres his account of the Holocaust on the ex-Nazi, Oskar Schindler, who ended up saving Jews and becoming a "righteous gentile". Green bases his rendering on the intimate story of two families, one Jewish and the other German. But there are popular films with yet other agendas. The German film *Heimat*, by Edgar Reitz, mentions the Jews only in passing. It thus bracketed out the trauma of Auschwitz in an attempt to normalise German history, and was designed as an answer to Green's series. Reitz felt that *Holocaust* had robbed the Germans of their own history. Lanzmann's *Shoah* came two years later. His single-minded focus on the destruction of the Jews was, in part, answering Reitz.¹¹

There is a great deal of debate as to whether popular representations like *Schindler's List* should be regarded as authoritative. The film provoked controversy for a number of reasons. First, it seemed to defy the accepted limits of representation by making the unimaginable imaginable. Second, being centred on the life of Oskar Schindler, an ex-Nazi who saved about a thousand Jews from Hitler's relentless grasp, it focused on survival rather than on death. Third, Spielberg used actors to re-enact events. Claude Lanzmann, who made no attempt to visually represent the horrors of the Holocaust, condemned Spielberg's approach, maintaining that no actor could conceivably have portrayed, for example, the hunger and emaciation of the camp inmates. A re-enactment is, therefore, by its very nature a falsification. While immortalising the Holocaust in public consciousness, Spielberg had also, through the depiction of a "good Nazi", skewed its entirely malevolent nature. Spielberg was thus seen as taking liberties in representing history. Nevertheless, *Schindler's List* was the first Holocaust film to appeal to a worldwide public audience, and, as Yosefa Loshitsky (1997, p. 7) points out, has since attained the status of a historical document. It has become "the final and undeniable proof of the ultimate catastrophe endured by the Jewish people".

Because of its wide influence, *Schindler's List* has sharpened the debate on whether history – in this case of the Holocaust – should be seen as being the property of professional historians only, or whether there are other, more popular, ways of retelling the past, and of focusing them in public consciousness. Barbie Zelizer (1997) suggests that, in the cultural setting of the West, we tend to give privilege to the voice of historians over that of the creators of popular culture when we shape our history. This, she points out, is out of step with the general trend of the academy, which has been to diversify history-making by listening to voices other than that of the historian. Public discourse has grown more complex and multidimensional, and is dependent on a variety of media technologies. Other spokespeople, she points out, such as politicians, journalists, and the creators of popular culture – including filmmakers, novelists and television screenwriters – have increasingly tried to address events of the past. The images they have created so pervade popular culture that their voice needs admission, because it will allow a better understanding of the variety of ways in which we can relate to the past through its representation.

The distinction, according to Zelizer (1997, p. 30), should be made not so much between the voices of historians and popular culture, but between “the event-as-it-happened and the event-as-it-is-retold”. The latter is as far as we can come. Suffice it to say that *Schindler's List*, for all its limitations, has become a milestone in the public memory of the Holocaust. Lawrence Thomas (1991, p. 378) seems to agree with Zelizer. We make, he says, a surprising distinction between fact and fiction. The genocide of the Jews was the supreme aim of the Nazi regime, and fiction serves as an invaluable vehicle for incorporating new judgements into our understanding of this. Though, in Holocaust writing, fact is prior to fiction, we desecrate memory if we treat the Holocaust as a stagnant set of facts. Facts sometimes need a voice, and fiction is of inestimable value in giving them one.

Monuments and museums

The last category of recall is to be found in monuments and museums. This is the area in which the tension between the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish tragedy and as a world tragedy becomes most obvious. The symbols used to commemorate the Holocaust, and the spaces in which these symbols are placed, raise the question of whether there is any

legitimacy in comparing the Holocaust with other genocides or other forms of social engineering. They also raise the question of the message that such symbols are meant to convey. Important examples of this are the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was opened on the Mall in Washington, DC in December 1993, and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Both have vibrant research and teaching centres associated with them. But, though in both cases the Jews are clearly the primary victims, the museums have different emphases. Yad Vashem's full name is "Yad Vashem Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority". Being in the Jewish homeland, it focuses on the Jewish fate within the spectrum of Jewish history. It counterpoises the extreme powerlessness of the Jews under Nazism with the heroism of those who resisted, and the long years of diaspora homelessness with the Jewish return to national power. The Washington museum, being on the nation's Mall, has to give a specifically American message, instructing its various minorities through a universal message.

The way we memorialise the Holocaust says much about the way we define it. The word "Holocaust" stands for the genocide of the Jews, but it has since become a symbolic word connoting mass murder and destruction whatever the magnitude. It is now used in a way that includes not only non-Jewish victims of Nazism, but victims of murder – and even oppression – everywhere. Does that dilute the Jewish tragedy? Does the comparison of the Holocaust with other atrocities trivialise it? We will return to these questions later when discussing the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Let us now turn to the formal histories of the Holocaust.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE HOLOCAUST

One would assume that with formal histories one would be on more certain ground, but this is not the case. Study of the subject is fraught with emotion. Histories are based on the belief that the Holocaust is explicable and not beyond history or human understanding, something that many people deny. There are also fears, especially in the Jewish community, that the ultimate trauma of Jewish history will be misrepresented. Marrus (1987) points to three reasons for this. First, the work of the historian is, by its nature, incomplete and always subject to revision. Its provisional nature may make it ring false as a portrayal to those who have experienced the events the historian attempts to describe. Second, there is a fear that even minor inaccuracies serve to "poison" a

historian's account, making it a flawed representation of the past. Third, revision of traditional interpretations of Nazism, or the assault on European Jewry, could open the door to apologists for the Third Reich, and thus trivialise the evil nature of the regime. Survivors, Marrus points out, feel especially violated by historians' efforts. These difficulties are inescapable. But, Marrus assures us, once pointed in a scholarly direction, most scholars will forge ahead, hoping to navigate safely, using the customary tools of the trade. Historians do their best, knowing their efforts are imperfect, incomplete and inadequate.

In the same way that the two filmmakers, Resnais and Lanzmann, offered different interpretations of the Holocaust, historians place different weighting on to the almost limitless individual factors that constitute the Holocaust. Histories are an attempt to offer an account of what happened, the steps of procedure, a beginning, an end, and what the present implications of the event may be. They are an attempt to place an event – or series of events – within some framework of meaning. History is, therefore, not a mere catalogue of happenings. The individual historian ranks incidents in importance according to his or her own broader understanding of them. Therefore, every history is also an interpretation and can only be seen as a partial explanation of a complex and far-reaching catastrophe.

In the various histories of the Holocaust, there is a constant tension between the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy and the Holocaust as a world tragedy, between the decisiveness and adequacy of antisemitism as a causative factor, and the impact of more global forces. Historians' accounts present the problem more acutely, perhaps, than other media, because we rely on historians to give us a balanced, logical and objective account of the Holocaust. Whereas one historian will emphasise the centrality of the genocide of the Jews, another will see this as part of a far wider picture, in which antisemitism plays only a limited role. Some German historians have tried to dilute the unique criminality of the Nazis. There is, as Saul Friedländer (1988) pointed out, an incompatibility between German and Jewish memories. The Nazi past is too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the normal narrative of memory. So there is a yearning among German historians to normalise the German past. Ernst Nolte, for example, tries to abolish the singularity of the camps by seeing their origin in the Soviet Gulag. The opposite is happening among Jews. In Jewish eyes, the Holocaust is becoming more central – almost a symbol of identification.

Neither Jews nor Germans, says Friedländer, can relate to their own memory without relating to the other's as well. However, whatever centrality the genocide of the Jews is given, no responsible historian would deny the Jewish dimension of the Holocaust. Rather, it is a matter of weighting. When historians try to account for what happened, antisemitism does not always take centre stage. So, although the relationship of antisemitism to the Holocaust is obvious, there is no straightforward link.

To elucidate some of the problems, let us turn to an essay by Dan Michman, in a 1995 edition of the journal *Modern Judaism*, on the methods used by Holocaust historians. Looking back from the vantage point of the mid 1990s, he suggests that Holocaust historiography – though it is still a young discipline – has reached a sufficient state of maturity to allow examination of the manner in which historians look at the past. Because of the complexity of the Holocaust – placed as it is within the Second World War – and the vast body of data, coming out of a seemingly infinite number of relevant documents, Michman uses the Holocaust as representative of the way in which historians analyse other events. He perceives some immediate problems. First, the historian must define what it is he or she is examining. With regard to the Holocaust, definition is particularly problematic. What was the Holocaust? Was it an event in itself, or a detail of a far broader happening? Second, what is the Holocaust's characterising essence – that which makes it distinguishable from other phenomena, like the Second World War? Third, what is its exact time period? Once the answers to these questions have been reached, the historian must offer some sort of explanation of the event and why it occurred. For example, where are the Holocaust's roots to be found? What were the exact historical circumstances that made its happening possible?

Michman chose seven historians on whom to base his study, all of whom were Jewish, and all of whom produced comprehensive studies of the Holocaust.¹² He sees Leon Poliakov, Gerald Reitlinger, Joseph Tenenbaum and Raul Hilberg as constituting the first phase in Holocaust historiography, 1948 to 1961, and Lucy Dawidowicz, Leni Yahil and Arno J. Meyer as constituting a second phase, 1975 to 1991. The second group had far greater access to secondary material and, therefore, more scope for interpretation. Space permits only some of the considerations Michman outlined to be raised. The time period that the various scholars allocate to the Holocaust as a distinct event, for example, differs.

Poliakov and Reitlinger place the dates at 1935–45, starting with the Nuremberg Laws, whereas Hilberg dates the beginning to Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Dawidowicz takes the start back to the late eighteenth century, with the emancipation of the European Jews – the final phase being from 1933 to 1945. Tenenbaum takes the start back to the mid nineteenth century, with the emergence of racist doctrine. Thus, there is no agreement on the time span of the event. The further back it is taken, the less it assumes the form of a discrete event.

The essence of the Holocaust, too, is seen differently. Poliakov, for example, sees the Nazi onslaught in terms of Hitler desiring a new, racist, German religion – with Hitler as its high priest – that would come to fruition through the ultimate destruction of a Satanic Judaism, its polar opposite. The annihilation of the Jews was the culmination of a psychological phenomenon – antisemitic hatred – which Hitler manipulated to provide a scapegoat in order to achieve his ends. The stage of annihilation began with the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which Poliakov saw as laying the “sacral” basis for Hitler's new faith. Hilberg, on the other hand, though seeing the essence of the Holocaust as the wholesale destruction of the Jews, looks primarily at the bureaucracy that drove the perpetrators. For him, the direction of the process of destruction was already known, and it intensified in a succession of stages – definition, expropriation and concentration. Only with the final phase, annihilation, did the process become irrevocable. The administrative machine, which is the mark of the modern state, was guided by its own logic. It was self-propagating, taking on a life of its own, so that Hitler's role became secondary. Once the process was in motion, Hitler was no longer its centre, nor had he been its prime mover. His coming to power in 1933 simply activated the machinery of destruction. Hilberg does not ignore antisemitism and points out the earlier precedent of Jew hatred in Christianity, drawing parallels between the canon law of the church in restricting Jews, and the Nuremberg Laws. But his analysis suggested that Germans who were part of the machine did not need to hate Jews in order to perform their tasks. Antisemitism has an important place, but it is not central.

Most historians, Michman suggests, look at the Holocaust in terms of what was done *to* Jews. Jews are not seen as playing an active role in the chain of causality. Lucy Dawidowicz, he points out, is an exception. Unlike Hilberg, who examines the Holocaust through the deeds of the perpetrators, she looks at it from the point of view of the experience of

the victims. Dawidowicz sees the Holocaust in terms of an active – though negative – interaction between the Jewish and gentile worlds, a clash between Jewish uniqueness and the gentile unwillingness to accept this. She thus perceives a confrontation between Jewish history and general European history. This kind of approach is sometimes used in literary work, a notable example being that of George Steiner. His play *The Portage to San Cristobal of AH*, for example, suggested that Hitler derived some of his ideas, like chosenness, from Judaism. Though Steiner makes some valid points, because he gave Hitler the last word, the ultimate effect was to lay blame on the Jewish mythic structure. This caused an enraged controversy. Such analyses can be, and often are, perceived as “blaming the victim” and shifting the focus to the wrong quarter.¹³ But, in all cases, the intentions of the author need to be examined. If these are honest, this can be a valuable approach, and, for all its limitations, is the one used in this book.

All of the historians cited by Michman note two phases of the Nazi policy towards the Jews. The first was the emergence and growth of a clear anti-Jewish policy and the progressive action against and humiliation of Jews, accompanied by the acceptance of emigration as a solution to the “Jewish problem”. The second took place only after 1941, when a programme of destruction was implemented. The difference between these two phases is important when we try to pin down the essence of the Holocaust. It is generally perceived as “the Nazi genocidal enterprise as focused on the Jews or Jewish people”. But the seven scholars cited do not agree on this basic definition. The fact that genocide emerges only in the later stages of the Third Reich raises other problems that are important to the theme of this book. Was the antisemitic persecution in the early years of Nazi rule – which did not involve genocide – part and parcel of the same “event” as the genocidal enterprise of the 1940s? Is there a common essence in the two stages, or do they differ so basically that they cannot be included as part of the same event? If there is a common essence, what is it, and why was the resulting fate of the Jews so different in the two stages? If there is *no* common essence, how is it that both stages occurred under the same political regime, and within a very short overall period? There is, Michman emphasises, no legitimate debate about the facts of the genocide of the Jews, that Hitler played a role, or of the existence of racism and antisemitism. Rather, the debate centres on the relative weight given to each factor, and its relation to other factors. Reflections

on what may be called “the Holocaust era” are so varied and elusive – and perhaps especially so for the historians – Michman concludes, “that we are still distant from a true understanding of this abhorrent episode in Jewish and world history. In other words, we still have not reached a definitive answer to the question: ‘What exactly was the Holocaust?’” Without the second phase, we must remember, there would have been little that was qualitatively different from earlier forms of antisemitism.

It seems that Michman could have introduced a third wave of historical reconstruction. Since 1977, there has been a new curiosity on the question of how such a horrific event could actually have been carried out. Issues like the decision-making process in the Third Reich, and the chain of command, have assumed great importance. According to Jäckel (1998, p. 24), it was, for a long time, taken for granted that antisemitism had produced the Holocaust, and that antisemitism must have been particularly severe in Germany. Consequently research was focused on antisemitism. He sees a marked change from 1977, when other causes began to be explored, especially in terms of the decision-making process.

A debate about Hitler’s exact role in the process was, ironically, provoked by David Irving,¹⁴ who, in his 1977 book, *Hitler’s War*, denied that Hitler ordered the extermination of the Jews. He argued that the programme of annihilation was carried out, behind Hitler’s back, by his subordinates, until at least 1943, a view that reverberated in a two-fold direction. His shocking new thesis led, on the one hand, to the questioning by reliable historians of Hitler’s precise role in the Holocaust, which resulted in the emergence of a new school of Holocaust historians, known as the “Functionalists”; on the other, it was exploited as “evidence” by Holocaust deniers that there was no programme for annihilating the Jews. A brief excursus on Irving at this point will not be out of place, because it relates to the question of misuse of historical sources and the resultant falsification of history.

By the time *Hitler’s War* was published, Irving had already developed a reputation as a maverick historian, who provoked controversy by turning events on their head,¹⁵ and he still, as we will see below, had enough credibility to provoke a scholarly response. He was, however, to move from questioning Hitler’s direct role in the murder of the Jews to denial of the Holocaust. This became clear when, in 1988, he issued, under his own imprint, the *Leuchter Report*, a “pseudo-scientific farrago”, as David Cesarani (2000b) put it, “proving” that no poisonous

gas was used at Auschwitz, a claim that placed a huge question mark over Irving's reliability as a historian. He was not merely interpreting evidence differently, but violating the evidence.

In 1993 Deborah Lipstadt, in her book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, discussed Irving among several Holocaust deniers, regarding him as the most dangerous of them, because he knew how to use historical sources, wrote well, and had established a reputation as a historian. He represented the "respectable face" of Holocaust denial. The 1994 publication of Lipstadt's book in Britain by Penguin, and Irving's crumbling reputation, were what probably prompted him to sue Lipstadt and her British publishers for libel. In Britain, the onus of proof is on the defendant.

Irving's writings, as Cesarani (2000b) points out, had been characterised by three features: a sympathy for Germany accompanied by a minimisation of German crimes; an antipathy for the Allied leadership accompanied by a maximisation of Allied misdemeanours; and the questionable use of historical evidence. Thus, the defence team focused, not on the question of whether or not the Holocaust *occurred*, but on what constitutes reliable interpretation of historical sources. Irving's less than objective motives and his misuse of historical evidence were exposed during the trial and, losing his libel suit, he was branded by Judge Charles Gray as "antisemitic", "racist" and a "neo-Nazi polemicist", engaged in the "vilification of the Jewish race and people". Irving, Judge Gray found, had seriously misrepresented Hitler's views on the Jewish question, which he achieved, in some instances, by misinterpreting and mistranslating documents and, in other instances, by omitting documents or part of them.

When *Hitler's War* first appeared in German, in 1975, the publishers suppressed the more outrageous passages. Irving's reading of Hitler became widely known only in 1977 with the English translation of the book. It provoked a sharp response from Germany's leading historian, Martin Broszat (1977), who completely refuted Irving's ideas about Hitler's innocence. He offered a scathing critique of the way that Irving "normalised" Hitler, reasserting the Hitler of traditional historiography – a man with a fanatical will to annihilate. He did, however, concede that there was no single decision by Hitler. Rather, the murder of the Jews was a policy that developed bit by bit. Thus, the debate was launched that was to grow into two distinct schools of Holocaust historiography, the Intentionalists and the Functionalists.

THE INTENTIONALISTS AND THE FUNCTIONALISTS

The Intentionalists, as their name suggests, believe that Hitler was the driving force behind the Nazi antisemitic policy and that he intended, at an early stage, the destruction of the Jews. They hold that there was, from the beginning, a blueprint for the programme of destruction, a coherent line of thought. Hitler is seen as the sole strategist, with the authority and will to work towards the implementation of the destruction of the Jews. This was his primary aim, and was, therefore, one of the main motivating factors behind the Second World War. Antisemitism in such analyses is an all-important causative factor.

Members of the other school, the Functionalists, suggest that, while antisemitism was always a factor, Hitler's policies against the Jews were worked out piecemeal, as the war progressed and as the Germans faced unforeseen problems. Karl Schleunes was the first to adopt this position, and gave it its clearest articulation; the title of his book *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* encapsulated his argument. Although Hitler was deeply antisemitic, the programme to make Germany – and indeed the world – *judenrein* (cleansed of Jews) was not charted in advance and there was no straight line leading to annihilation. Annihilation was arrived upon only after the failure of other methods, such as boycott, emigration, legislation and Aryanisation. Proponents of the Functionalist view argue, for example, that the Nazis were content to be rid of the Jews through emigration until as late as 1941. The refusal of most of the rest of the countries of the world to take in the Jews gave Hitler the green light. There is no doubt that, judged from this perspective, antisemitism retains an important place in the Holocaust. The indifference of the world to the Jews' fate must be associated with the negative image people had of Jews, and hence with antisemitism. David Wyman's 1984 book, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, gives a lucid account of the way the United States, for example, failed to mobilise any real opposition to Germany on the question of the Jews. This indifference can be understood only in the light of a widespread negative image of the Jew, or antisemitism.

Christopher Browning was the first to use the word "Functionalist" to describe this school of Holocaust historiography. It sees the Holocaust as resulting from a maze of competing power groups, rival bureaucracies, opposing interests, and ceaseless clashes. Hitler is seen as a brooding, distant leader, ideologically obsessed, but lazy – a man incapable of making long-term plans. The murder of the Jews became a function of

the chaos of the system. Hitler's precise role, it is argued, remains hidden in the shadows. Though he was important in the process, and fanatically antisemitic, the murder of the Jews was the result of improvisation rather than deliberate planning. What finally led to the decision of genocide remains a mystery. In the fevered atmosphere that characterised the later phase of the war, a mere nod from Hitler could have sent millions to their deaths. He did not have to give an order. The effect of this type of scholarly approach is to distance the operational importance of the *Führer* and, thus, to broaden the range of culpability. Hilberg, as we have seen, already pointed in this direction when he spoke of the machinery of destruction, whose awesome power ground unrelentingly towards the destruction of its victims, engaging, in the process, an ever-widening circle of perpetrators.

The broadening of responsibility has led to questions about whether there was ever a written order by Hitler to proceed with the annihilation programme. Though the absence of such a document undergirds the claims of the Holocaust deniers, we should not lose perspective. "The Holocaust", Berel Lang reminds us, "was about the extermination of the Jews". Nearly everyone in the Nazi hierarchy, he argues, fully intended the genocide of the Jews. The best evidence we have of a person's intention is not a written expression of it, but the great lengths to which he or she goes in order to perform it and to hide its performance from others. The demand for documentation of intent to exterminate the Jews is, therefore, a charade. Such a document might be helpful, but it is not necessary.¹⁶ Bauer (1998, p. 21) points out that a lot of the most important decisions were *not* written down, because that was the way the Third Reich operated. They were handed down orally and, only by chance are they sometimes corroborated by documentation.

David Bankier (1998, p. 49ff.) gives an interesting explanation of why the intention to destroy the Jews was shouted from the rooftops, whereas the details of their elimination were kept secret, resulting in the need for euphemisms and code language. Germans had to be convinced of the real danger that the Nazis believed the Jews to constitute, but they should not be put off by the gruesome practicalities of the annihilation process, or by Christian morality. Nothing should be allowed to impede the success of the programme. In the last phases of the war, as the Germans increasingly faced the spectre of defeat, a new focus of loyalty was needed. If Germany lost the war, it was argued, the Jews would carry out unspeakable acts of revenge. The Nazi promise to kill all the Jews,

therefore, galvanised the people. “There are two things which can unite men”, he quotes Hitler as saying in a 1923 speech, “common ideals and common criminality”. The promise to exterminate the Jews served to cover up military defeat and divert public attention on to a “positive” aim, while spreading the blame by enforcing collective responsibility. Just enough of the crime was revealed to galvanise the population, enforce adherence and loyalty, and prevent desertion. In the end *all* Germans were responsible, and no one took responsibility for the actual killing.

Lucy Dawidowcz, in her 1975 bestseller, *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945*, encapsulates most clearly the Intentionalist position. The name she gave her book itself implies her conviction that Hitler’s most important aim was to rid the world of Jews and Judaism. The war against the Jews was as important ideologically as the war against the Allies and possibly more so. With both scholarly precision and passion, she insisted that Hitler determined as early as 1918 to destroy the Jews. He conceived it as his mission to murder the Jews at the moment he learned of Germany’s defeat in the First World War. In one fevered moment, while in a sanatorium in Pasewalk, suffering hysterical blindness after a mustard gas attack, he made up his mind. He was not going merely to drive the Jews out of Germany, nor to expel, harass, exile or defeat them. He determined, at that moment, to annihilate them.

Dawidowcz emphasises (1975, p. 32) how Hitler had, in *Mein Kampf*, dramatised his first confrontation with East European Jews in Vienna. “Once, as I was strolling through the Inner City,” he said, “I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought. For, to be sure, they had not looked like this in Linz. I observed the man furtively and cautiously, but the longer I stared at this foreign face . . . the more my first question assumed a new form: Is this a German?” Looking for answers, he turned to books, buying his first antisemitic pamphlets. But he claimed to have found them unsatisfying, judging their “dull and amazingly unscientific arguments” unconvincing. He thus resorted, he says, to his own slowly rising insights. This picture of the Jew in a black caftan, he says (1939, p. 35), opened his eyes to the connection between Marxism and Jewry and was to become the “rock-ribbed foundation” of all his acts. “I have had to learn a little beyond what I then created; there was nothing I had to change” (p. 35).

One of the important points of departure between the Intentionalists and the Functionalists is the way they interpret Hitler’s famous speech of

30 January 1939. “If,” he warned, “the international Jewish financiers outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevisation of the earth, and the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe”. The Intentionalists see this as prophetic, while the Functionalists place it in a wider context. They point out that, though one had to take Hitler’s statements seriously, so-called “unalterable decisions” were sometimes altered. Furthermore, this was only one small part of a speech – on mainly economic matters – that had rambled on for hours. Only a few minutes were devoted to the Jews (Marrus 1987, p. 37).

Ron Rosenbaum argues that the Functionalists’ distancing of Hitler from the annihilation process, in effect, absolves him of the horror of his crimes. There is, Rosenbaum claims, a current fad – for which he particularly indicts Christopher Browning – to represent Hitler as a dithering, Hamlet-like pawn, subject to the forces of the “great abstractions” – like bureaucracy, demography or technology. Rosenbaum opts for Dawidowicz’s approach as being the closest to encapsulating the real evil of Hitler, as he deliberately and wilfully – and even laughingly – ordered the destruction of the Jews. He is impressed by Berel Lang’s assertion that Hitler had pursued a conscious art of evil. Though Rosenbaum regards antisemitism, itself, as one of the great abstractions, he makes a convincing case for the argument that, as Hitler’s intentions are questioned and he is removed from the central decision-making process, antisemitism, as a factor, is minimised.

Despite the extensive debate about Hitler’s exact role in the Holocaust, there is no doubt about the importance of his influence. There are conclusions, says Marrus (1987, p. 17f.), that even the outright sceptic must draw. First, Hitler intensely hated the Jews throughout his political career. Jews were seen as a mortal threat to civilisation. Second, he was the principal driving force behind the Nazi movement from the earliest period, setting the ideological tone, and raising his personal antipathy to an affair of state. He alone defined the Jewish menace with the authority, consistency and ruthlessness needed to fix its place for the party and later the Reich. Whether there was a blueprint for the murder of the Jews, or an ill-defined goal, it is widely agreed that he set the course. Antisemitism was central because Hitler determined that it should be so. Opposition to the Jews became a *leitmotif* of the regime, whatever the priority assigned to it in a tactical sense, because, for Hitler, ideological questions were of crucial importance, and they were treated

seriously. Beyond this, nothing *required* the killing of the Jews. Antisemitism may have been a necessary condition for the Holocaust, but it was not a sufficient one. In the end, it was Hitler, and his own determination to realise his antisemitic fantasies, that made the difference.

NO HITLER, NO HOLOCAUST

Both Marrus and Rosenbaum were profoundly swayed by a hard-hitting article that was written by Milton Himmelfarb, in *Commentary* magazine (March 1984), to counter the various attempts to distance Hitler from the Holocaust. Himmelfarb's position was summed up in the title he gave the article: "No Hitler, No Holocaust". Hitler killed the Jews not because he had to, but because he wanted to. He might have been moved by a variety of factors, including antisemitism, but he need not have killed the Jews. Although he was affected by antisemitism, he was not determined by it. Hitler, Himmelfarb claims, has been disappearing behind abstractions like geography, demography, technology, socioeconomic stresses and strains, political backwardness, group psychology, religious hatred, racism and new mentalities. None of these, he avers, could have resulted in the Holocaust without the personal will of Hitler, who wanted the Holocaust, ordered it and was obeyed. He was not the sufficient cause, but he was the necessary cause. Although antisemitism, too, was a necessary condition for the Holocaust, it was not a sufficient condition. There was just too great a leap between Christian and Nazi antisemitism. We find it awesome that the power of one man can make such a difference, and would rather conceal this reality from ourselves by hiding behind abstractions and seeing Hitler as a pawn moved by deeper, more profound, forces of history and society that made the Holocaust inevitable. Rosenbaum sees this as resulting in Hitler becoming a product rather than an (im)moral agent.

Himmelfarb directs his polemic against those, like Hyam Maccoby and Henryk Grynberg, who believe that Christian antisemitism led inevitably to the Holocaust. Maccoby, he says, makes Nazi antisemitism indistinguishable from a timeless, unchanging Christianity. Himmelfarb disagrees with Maccoby's conclusion that, because it had for centuries been virtuous for Christians to persecute Jews, the step to genocide was a short one. He is equally insistent that it was not Christian morality that kept Jews alive. No, says Himmelfarb, it was Christian *mythology* that

saved the Jews. Under Christianity Jews knew subordination, expulsion, even massacre, but not Holocaust. If one sentence can summarise church law and practice it was: “The Jews are to be allowed to live, but not too well” (1984, p. 38). Christian mythology kept the Jews in a degraded and subordinate position, but kept them alive. It is not Christianity, but its weakening that lies behind the Holocaust. Himmelfarb points to the pagan antisemitism that the Nazis adopted in an attempt to throw off Christianity. Anti-Christian antisemitism, he avers, is descended ideologically from pagan disdain for Jews and emotionally from Christian hatred of Judaism and Jews. Himmelfarb raises points that will be analysed in the rest of this book. In his attempt to expose Hitler by drawing away the veil of the abstractions that have hidden him, he possibly makes another abstraction out of pagan antisemitism.

THE JEWISH–CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP AS A CAUSE OF THE HOLOCAUST

It is appropriate, at this point, to briefly introduce another important strand of Holocaust scholarship that will be taken up in greater detail later. That is, the examination of the role that the relationship between Jews and Christians was to play in promoting antisemitism, and the way in which the negative image of Jews became a necessary precondition of the Holocaust. There are several important works in the field, the most prominent being Rosemary Ruether’s 1974 book, *Faith and Fratricide*, in which she traces the murderous relationship back to Christian theology itself, namely its Christology, or doctrine about Jesus as the Christ. If Jesus was the messiah promised to the Jews, this constituted, as James Moore (1994, p. 164) put it, a “fulfilment theology”, whose immediate implication was the belief that Christianity had supplanted Judaism in God’s plan. That Jews continued to exist *as Jews* called this claim into question. Another challenging work is Franklin H. Littell’s *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (1975), in which he confronts the credibility crisis facing Christianity in the post-Holocaust world. How was it possible for so many Christians to turn their backs on European Jewry, he asked, and what does this say about Christianity today? Littell was one of the first voices of conscience raised in the post-war period.¹⁷

Religion, as this book will make clear, was an important underlying factor in the development of antisemitism. Rubenstein and Roth (1987, p. 6) have pointed out that, in any sound approach to the Holocaust,

religion must occupy a central place. But it must do so from a perspective that incorporates history, politics, economics and sociology. Such a perspective, they insist, can be developed only by taking very seriously what men and women have, in fact, believed about themselves, their people and their destinies. This, in turn, is intimately associated with what Ninian Smart has termed the “mythical dimension” of religion, to which we will return in chapter 3.

The Holocaust forces us to try to understand the Jewish claim of uniqueness, and the fact that Christianity saw itself as heir to this uniqueness. This resulted in a history of volatile anti-Jewish sentiment in Christianity, which was to become the majority faith in Europe. Without this, the Holocaust could not have happened. The effects of the tragic conflict between Judaism and Christianity escalated, as Rubenstein and Roth (1987, p. 8) point out, until the world reached Auschwitz. The Final Solution is thus a story that is millennia long. Religion has marked it indelibly, creating the makings of catastrophe. One of the main ingredients of the Holocaust was the tension between two groups, one spawned from the other, both of whom see themselves as God’s chosen people. Auschwitz has had an indelible impact on the way Jews and Christians – and later Muslims and Jews – think about themselves and one another today. Because of the importance of the religious underpinnings of antisemitism, chapters 5, 6 and 7 will deal with the development of Christian and Muslim antisemitism, and chapter 3 will outline the Jewish mythic structure and Judaism’s understanding of history.

It is essential to point out, however, that Jews had lived in Christian Europe for nearly two thousand years and, though they had suffered a great deal of antisemitism – accompanied by persecution, massacres, expulsion and degradation – there had never before been an attempt to annihilate them. On the contrary, there was a theological need, in Christian Europe, to protect the Jewish people and ensure that they were kept alive. This results in two impenetrable questions, which will recur throughout the rest of this book. Was the Holocaust a logical continuation of traditional antisemitism, or was there a radical break with the past? Put differently, did Nazism represent a continuation of Christian antisemitism, or was it a radical overthrow of that outlook? This presents us with a second conundrum: the Holocaust could not have taken place without antisemitism, but was it the inevitable outcome of it? If, as Himmelfarb suggests, Christian antisemitism was one of the “great abstractions”, what are the others?

THE GREAT ABSTRACTIONS

Raul Hilberg, as we have seen, focused his attention on the perpetrators rather than on the victims, studying mountains of train schedules and other dry documents to uncover how bureaucratic processes rendered the annihilation of the Jews possible. Once in motion, Hilberg asserted, the bureaucratic machine took on a life of its own. Although his work on the Nazis is unsurpassed for its thoroughness and for the understanding of the death machine that it has given us, his interpretation of German motives and Jewish responses has been questioned. He implies that the Germans did not need to hate Jews, and that the Jews, themselves, unwittingly collaborated with the Nazis as a result of what he sees as the compliant behaviour patterns they had learned over two thousand years of diaspora existence.¹⁸ Hannah Arendt had offered a similar approach. In her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – which grew originally from her reports on the progress of the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker* – Arendt significantly diminished the moral responsibility of Eichmann – and hence of other perpetrators – by seeing them as mindless automatons who were “only following orders”. Numbed by bureaucracy, they became desk-based killers who performed their grisly tasks without feeling and without any real identification of their victims as human beings. Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil”.

She was also deeply critical of the Jewish leadership, the *Judenräte*; more so than Hilberg had been. In her account of how they played into the hands of the Nazis she, herself, fell victim to using the antisemitic stereotype. Jacob Katz faults Arendt for “blaming the victims” in a situation in which she, personally, had not been tested. Exploiting the wisdom of hindsight, she failed to appreciate the historic context of the time, and thus assumed a stance of moral superiority. Katz points out that people responded in individual ways to the disaster. Education, religiosity and social and political aspirations made some Jews passive and others active, particularly in the earlier phases of Nazism. He also points out the power of group mentality. People’s rootedness in Jewish traditional consciousness helped them to adjust to the new situation and to protect them from despair. The suicide rate was, for example, high in assimilated circles, the orthodox and the Zionists tending to make the best of things. The Zionists were looking to a solution of the “Jewish problem” outside Europe, and were on target in their analysis of the situation that faced European Jews (1975, p. 44).

Arendt's work aroused heated debate. It is germane to our discussion about interpretation to note that a very different picture of Jewish responses to the Nazi onslaught was drawn by the historian Martin Gilbert. In his 1978 book, *The Holocaust*, he emphasised the courage of the victims, and the extent of Jewish resistance under very difficult conditions. There is a problem here of how one should define the term "resistance". Notwithstanding the bias of much of Arendt's work, however, she offers some valuable insights on how economic factors serve to render people superfluous in a social system, and how antisemitism emerges under such conditions.

If we compare Dawidowicz's emphasis with that of Hilberg and Arendt, we see that only for Dawidowicz is antisemitism central. For Hilberg and Arendt – though they do not ignore antisemitism – other forces, like the economy, the advance in technology, and the banality of evil assume more explanatory importance. As the years went by, the focus on antisemitism seemed to diminish. Hitler's personal role in the whole process was questioned. The debate about whether Hitler intended, from the beginning, to annihilate the Jews, or whether genocide was a functional by-product of the war as it developed, tended to shift antisemitism from the centre to the periphery. But there are other "great abstractions". An important one is the human mindset that became dominant in the twentieth century.

Scholars of history, politics and the social sciences have noted that, with modernity, there has been a shift in human thinking patterns and the way human beings evaluate one another in the broader context of the universe. A new way of rationalising, which tends to evaluate human worth in monetary terms, made the Holocaust possible. Issues like the numbing force of bureaucracy and the development of technology are but part of a wider development. That development only came into force in modern times and must, therefore, be seen as a fruit of modernity. Antisemitism was a necessary cause of the Holocaust, but it could not, on its own, have produced it, and was not, therefore, a sufficient cause. A new form of state-inspired problem solving had entered the picture.

Richard Rubenstein, who is intent on exploring the full implications of the destruction of European Jewry for understanding contemporary civilisation, sees the Holocaust as a distinctly *modern* enterprise. Whereas he had in his 1966 work, *After Auschwitz*, focused on the Jewish theological implications of the Holocaust – examining God's complicity in the event – in his 1975 book, *The Cunning of History*, he

looks at the Holocaust's more global implications. The Holocaust, he now believes, was not an accidental aberration of modern civilisation, but *part* of it. It was an intrinsic expression of our modern civilisation's problem-solving methods.

He argues that the Holocaust was made possible by the triumph of functional rationality, which, in turn, is based on the biblical way of understanding creation, in which God is not part of the created world and has no rivals. Human beings were given dominion over the world of nature and, because it contains no rival spirits, can feel confident in subduing or harnessing it. This is sometimes referred to as the "demystification" of the world of nature. Taken a step too far, though, God can seem too transcendent. When this happens, human beings lose sight of God's presence and arrogate to themselves godlike decisions such as who is to be allowed to live and who should be allowed to die. What Rubenstein calls "the triumph of functional rationality" is, therefore, the "night-side" of biblical thinking.

Basing his views on the theories of Max Weber, Rubenstein claims that, when governments are confronted with problems raised in the modern period and try to solve them, they use rational means to calculate the value of all things, including people, evaluating everything in monetary terms. When such considerations are paramount, there is no recourse to human dignity or appeal to the sanctity of human life. One of the major problems facing the world since the Industrial Revolution is population explosion, which has resulted in population surplus. Because, in the modern way of reckoning, people have ceased to have human value as children of God, and people themselves are part of the mathematical equation, governments intervene to "solve" the problem, in practical affairs generally, and economic enterprises (whether capitalist or socialist) in particular. *They* decide who is useful and who is not. Methods range from segregation and incarceration, through eviction and expulsion, to outright extermination. These methods have been facilitated by modern means, like technology, and are one of the unanticipated consequences of the growing rule of reason, which Max Weber identified as the central attribute of modernity.¹⁹ The Nazis simply capitalised on these conditions.

They created an ideological campaign against the Jews as enemies, who were seen as causing all of Germany's problems. Jews were thus defined as unnecessary, unwanted and undesirable. This led them to be designated as a surplus population. Most Jews were not impoverished,

uneducated, unskilled or unproductive. But they were the group targeted as superfluous. Any population can be defined by a government as superfluous if, for any reason, it can find no viable role in the society where it lives (Rubenstein and Roth 1987, p. 5). In the case of the Holocaust, millennia of anti-Jewish teaching, the particular antisemitic worldview of Hitler, and the historic situation of Germany, along with global forces that brought to power those who found state-sponsored population elimination programmes expedient for solving problems, came together. The Jews occupied such a central place because of the way they have been portrayed in Christian civilisation.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his prize-winning 1989 book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, echoed Rubenstein, emphasising the global forces that were a precondition for the Holocaust. The Holocaust was, indeed, a Jewish tragedy, he says, but Jews were not the only population subjected to special treatment by the Nazi regime. They were, however, the only people marked for total destruction and allotted no place in the new order that Hitler intended to install. Nevertheless, according to Bauman, the Holocaust should be regarded neither simply as a Jewish problem, nor as a problem for Jewish history alone. The Holocaust, he argues, was born and executed in our modern rational society, at a high stage of our civilisation, and at the peak of human cultural achievement. For this reason, it is a problem of *that* society, civilisation and culture.

It is an easy way out, he says, to blame the Germans for their particular bestiality. “The more ‘they’ are to blame, the more the rest of ‘us’ are safe, and the less we have to do to defend this safety”. The overall effect is to pull the sting out of Holocaust memory. By blaming the Germans, we shift the focus away from the real problems of our society and become complacent. We should, instead, be analysing the ethos of modern Western civilisation – the quality of the institutions we rely on for our safety, the validity of the criteria by which we judge our own conduct, and the patterns of interaction we accept as normal. After all, the Nazis legislated Jews into the position of subhumans, thus denying them any human rights. Had the Nazis been victorious would anything they did have been regarded as technically “illegal”?

Bauman insists that, though considerations such as these may be discussed by scholars, in their ivory towers, they have not entered seriously into contemporary consciousness. They cannot, therefore, affect contemporary practice. The Holocaust was not an aberration of

modern society. It was not a failure, but a product of modernity. We have, therefore, to become aware of what social and political mechanisms are capable of when they intersect with antisemitism, or any other inter-group antagonism. On this type of analysis then, emphasis on antisemitism alone is too optimistic and misses the mark. Our society, such scholars believe, has disclosed to us its heretofore unsuspected capacity for violence. We have been taught to respect and admire technical efficiency, good design and material progress, but, in this adulation we are missing something, sorely underestimating modernity's true potential. Citing Rubenstein's *The Cunning of History* (1975, p. 91), Bauman (1989, p. 32) points to the Holocaust as revealing the progressively intensifying night-side of the Judaeo-Christian civilisation. Civilisation may mean medical hygiene, elevated religious ideas, beautiful art and exquisite music, but it *also* means slavery, wars, exploitation and death camps. It is a mistake to imagine that civilisation and savage cruelty are an antithesis. Creation and destruction are inseparable aspects of what we call "civilisation".

HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS

With this kind of argument – valid though it is – there has been an inevitable distancing from the peculiar Jewish dimension of the Holocaust. Jews feel that their suffering is shunted to the sidelines, their near annihilation ignored, and that the main thrust of Hitler's killing orgy is being obscured. Against this backdrop, and as one of the counterweights to this trend, in 1996, a young Harvard assistant professor, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, published his Ph.D. thesis under the title *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. In it, he put antisemitism back on the centre-stage as the primary, if not sole, cause of the Holocaust. According to Samuel Kaplan (1996), some of the great abstractions, like Arendt's "banality of evil", have so penetrated the lay and scholarly mind, that we have lost sight of the importance of antisemitism. Goldhagen's single-minded concentration on it was a timely reminder of its important place.

Believing, as a historian, that the Holocaust is historically explicable, Goldhagen analysed three hitherto relatively uninvestigated agents of the Nazi killing process: police battalions, the camps and the death marches. Exposing the wanton and deliberate cruelty that took place – perpetrated by ordinary men who had been given the choice to behave differently,

and would not have suffered unduly if they had refused – he made an excellent case for the argument that ordinary Germans killed and humiliated Jews because they wanted to. They wanted to because they hated them. Germans had become willing participants in mass murder because they were animated by what he called “eliminationist antisemitism”, which, under specific conditions, was easily transformed into “exterminationist antisemitism”. Besides their hatred of Jews, they genuinely believed them to be a danger to the well-being of Germany. Ordinary Germans, therefore, tortured and killed Jews without scruple and, indeed, with sadistic enjoyment, often going beyond the call of duty in performing their tasks, and photographing their obscenities for the later amusement of friends and family. Antisemitism had allowed them to treat Jews as vermin.

This particularly virulent form of antisemitism, Goldhagen claims, was unique to Germans and had for a long time pervaded German political culture. By the time Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, the antisemitism of the German people was “already pregnant with murder”. Hitler served merely to unleash this antisemitism into practice. Himmelfarb’s “No Hitler, no Holocaust” was converted by Goldhagen to “No Germans, no Holocaust”. He takes the position, as Jeremy Noakes puts it, of an unreconstructed Intentionalist. Hitler, Goldhagen argued, intended the elimination of the Jews from the start. The German Jews, and all Jews who came under Germany’s power, were to be disposed of according to an eminently coherent and goal-directed plan, coordinated from above.

Goldhagen’s book was a direct response to Christopher Browning’s important 1992 book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Browning, the first after Hilberg to consider the motivations of the rank and file rather than focusing on the command structures, argued that ordinary middle-aged men had killed not out of fear of punishment or authority, but primarily because of careerism and peer pressure. Like Goldhagen, he emphasised that they had been given a choice of whether to participate in the mass shootings of Jews, and only a few refused. But Goldhagen’s book countered Browning’s conclusion, while also arguing against the great abstractions. The killers were not ordinary men, said Goldhagen. They were ordinary *Germans*.

Hitler’s Willing Executioners became an immediate bestseller, thus penetrating widely into public consciousness. It presumably confirmed what a great many lay people already believed about German attitudes

during the Holocaust. But it provoked a furore in the scholarly world. Despite Goldhagen's disclaimers to the contrary, it seemed to raise antisemitism as the sufficient cause of the Holocaust, thus challenging the several important interpretations that had emerged. Primarily in the footnotes of the book, Goldhagen mounts a polemic against the interpretations of Hilberg, Marrus and several others.

The reviews of the book were mixed, but among them were many extremely hostile ones. Franklin H. Littell, for example, who questioned Christianity's credibility in the post-Holocaust era, regarded the book as out of step with the tenor of our time and the growth of interfaith dialogue. He also saw the book as a hindrance to the growing understanding between Jews and Germans. Littell pointed out that Goldhagen had ignored the most important questions that continue to occupy scholars of the Holocaust. This, indeed, was probably the underlying reason for much of the animosity. Goldhagen had turned on its head decades of responsible historical scholarship. Claiming simultaneously that there was no single cause of the Holocaust and that antisemitism was its sole motivating factor, Goldhagen called for a rethinking of our views on the Holocaust, particularly in its relation to the perpetrators. German antisemitism and German society during the Nazi period, he suggested, need to be looked at afresh if we are to understand the Holocaust. What has already been written about it, and issues that have "generally been considered as settled" need radical revision. "This book," he says, "is that revision" (1996, p. 9).

As we have seen, little has been "settled". Thus, several reviewers have remarked on Goldhagen's arrogant dismissal of the scholars who preceded him and his unnecessary slights on their work. He does not, they point out, demonstrate why previous scholars are wrong. His attack on them, his emotional tone, and the fact that his book became a bestseller – an unusual fate for an academic work – led to a highly emotional attack on Goldhagen, an event that Ron Rosenbaum (1998, p. 337) calls the equivalent of a scholarly "wilding". Shortly after the book's publication, a symposium of major Holocaust scholars was set up at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC to discuss it academically. It soon turned into an "impromptu tribunal – with Goldhagen on trial", where not only Goldhagen's thesis but also his character were subjected to an unrelenting assault.

The most valuable part of Goldhagen's book is his considerable research into the attitudes of the perpetrators. Had he acknowledged his

undoubted indebtedness to previous scholarship, there is no doubt that his seminal contribution to our knowledge on the Holocaust would have received the scholarly accolades it deserves. His extensive research on various genocidal agencies, said Gordon Craig, should be a model for future scholars working on the Holocaust, but it does not transform our view of the Holocaust. For those who have followed the literature on the subject, he points out, three conclusions are not disputed. There is no doubt that a great many Germans wanted to get rid of the Jews before Hitler came to power, that no one stood up in defence of the Jews when the extermination began, and that the number of participants in the killing is greater than originally supposed. But, as he and other reviewers point out, Goldhagen's theory of antisemitism is not new, and has been better treated by a host of other scholars.

Noakes points out that Goldhagen's focus on one motive, to the virtual exclusion of all other explanations, has produced a reductionist argument. Perhaps the majority of Germans did have negative views about the Jews, and these were strengthened by Nazi propaganda and indoctrination. But, for most, the "Jewish problem" was not, in reality, an issue of great significance, particularly in the middle of the war. People responded to what they knew about the Holocaust in a variety of different ways. Most were uneasy or indifferent – but not enthusiastic, as Goldhagen so boldly asserts. Only within a particular institutional context – governed by its own particular institutional culture and priorities – were people liable to engage in genocidal activities. It was because the regime itself knew this that they kept their operations secret from the general population. This is probably why Himmler, in October 1943, told Nazi leaders, "Later perhaps we can consider whether the German people should be told about this. But I think it is better that we – we together – carry for our people the responsibility ... and then take the secret with us to our graves." Goldhagen's book is *important* but, according to Noakes, is deeply flawed. It is like a case for the prosecution and is written with a barely controlled anger that sits uneasily in a work of scholarship.

By drawing a simple line from antisemitism to the Holocaust, and by offering an all-powerful, all-explaining central model, Goldhagen dulls our sensitivity to the questions raised above, the elusive nature of the event, and the evil that inspired it. Ironically, as Rosenbaum points out, it also has the effect of absolving Hitler, which Rosenbaum finds to be the most dangerous implication of Goldhagen's thesis. Goldhagen's view of antisemitism is so crudely deterministic that Hitler's role is reduced to

that of a midwife. Although Goldhagen may narrow the cause of the Holocaust, he does not, according to Rosenbaum, narrow things enough, in that his “eliminationist antisemitism” virtually eliminates Hitler, the really evil force behind the Holocaust. It also has the effect of absolving the German people, who, if they were so beguiled by antisemitism, acted mechanically and therefore did not have to make ethical choices. The surprisingly warm reception of the book in Germany seems to reinforce this view. When the book was translated from English to German, sentences were softened and changed, including in the title itself, where “executioners” became “executors”, thus suggesting a far less inflammatory vision of the role of ordinary Germans.

A COUNTER-EXPLANATION

The historian Leon Jick, in a 1998 essay in *Modern Judaism* entitled “Method in Madness”, offers a direct counter-explanation. Examining the motivations behind the mass murder of the Jews, he suggests that we misread the Holocaust when we see it as the result merely of hatred or passionate antisemitism. Hitler, he insists, pursued his goals in a cold and calculating way. He aimed at world domination through expansion, annexation and conquest. This would be accompanied by ruthless exploitation. Antisemitism merely served to oil the machinery by which he would bring about his ends. Surplus population acquired in the process of expansion had to be eliminated through forced emigration. Madagascar was seriously considered for the Jews, but the war took a course that precluded them from being sent there.

Had the war ended in 1940, with Germany victorious, Jick seems to suggest, the Jews may have been forcibly deported. Only when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, in Operation Barbarossa, was there total war. Hitler envisaged a complete transformation of Europe along racial principles and the exploitation of entire populations as potential slave labourers. As there was no place for Jews, they would now have to be murdered. But, as they could also be exploited for slave labour, policy was changed when and where Jews were needed. Jick argues that even the death marches – which many historians see as Germany trying to conceal its crimes – were aimed at returning slave labourers to Germany to work on its V2 rocket, a last-ditch attempt to subdue Russia. So, in 1944, Jews were brought back to a *judenrein* Germany. He concludes with the warning that, whenever the sanctity of human life is

compromised and whenever exploitation supersedes humaneness, any evil becomes possible. The Holocaust can be transformed from something unique, into a pattern of history.

According to David Cesarani, the main problem with Goldhagen's book is that it does not make any attempt to consider antisemitism in other countries. Comparisons, he stresses, *are* important because, whether we like to admit it or not, the Holocaust is frequently used as a yardstick by which to measure other atrocities in the hope that we can gain some insight into human motivations. It was not only the Germans who were cruel to Jews. Other perpetrators, too, were heirs to Christian Jew hatred and the Germans found helpers everywhere. The neutral powers and Allies did very little to stop the Germans. How can this be explained in the light of Goldhagen's thesis?

Equally important, why are there continuing genocides? Although Goldhagen's book may give an insight into the role of antisemitism – and that is its greatest achievement – its greatest failure, according to Cesarani, is that it throws no light on the reasons for human cruelty. The Holocaust may be unique in the sense that, as an instrument of state policy, it was prosecuted over an entire continent for a long period of time. Other genocides may be less comprehensive, more erratic and confined, but Germans are human beings and therefore there must be a universal explanation of their actions. To seek this explanation does not derogate one bit from German iniquity or the unique fate of Europe's Jews. By abjuring this quest Goldhagen has compromised his otherwise stupendous achievement and produced, says Cesarani, a mirror image of the demonisation that he so brilliantly exposes.

Consideration of Goldhagen's book serves to illustrate some important aspects of my own book. First, it indicates that with the Holocaust or antisemitism, we are dealing with opaque and emotionally charged subjects. It is difficult to be dispassionate about either, and emotions tend to run high even in academic circles, where objectivity normally reigns. Second, the relationship between the Holocaust and antisemitism, though definite, is not entirely clear. Goldhagen's book, because it is so widely known, has become a benchmark around which current thinking on this relationship can be examined. Third, it highlights the impossibility of arriving at final answers about the Holocaust, a tragedy that throws up greater challenges than any other historical catastrophe. Fourth, it helps to illustrate that there is a difference between events and the recounting of them. The best we can

hope for is that we make an adequate distinction between events as they were and events as they have been retold.

Historians of the Holocaust, as we have seen, have reached no agreement on a variety of issues. The current state of play is revealed by an important 1998 collection of essays that arose out of the first conference that took place in conjunction with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in 1993. Its name, *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined*, should alert us to the fact that we have no final answers on the Holocaust. Michael Marrus, in one essay in the volume, cautions us that future studies of the Holocaust will not be driven by new sources, but by new questions. “The last thing we would want for Holocaust history is its becoming a broken record, repeating the same agendas over and over again . . . theses will generate antitheses . . . one way of looking at matters will be challenged by a new approach. Nothing could be worse for Holocaust history than stalling argument and producing an official orthodoxy . . . So long as our historical culture is pluralistic and open, so long as our intellectual life is free and challenging, new questions will rain down on Holocaust history. Count on the next generation to frame different problems even for the sources we have already examined . . . they will wonder why we even bothered with our own quarrels of any given moment” (1998, p. 34).

We must remember, however, that the Holocaust was about murder and, as Marrus reminds us, *no amount of imaginative reconstruction* will ever change that fundamental reality. “Nevertheless,” he continues, “there is a sense in which our view of the matter has altered, has become more shaded, and our vision has acquired greater complexity” (1998, p. 6). But, as time progresses and academic inquiries increase, we may be forced to demystify the Holocaust, and though this might serve to inflict new pain, the alternative is silence. Before leaving this troubled terrain, it is necessary to look at one last issue, the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and to what extent it is valid to compare it with other atrocities.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST

The debate about whether the Holocaust is unique arises out of a justifiable Jewish anxiety that, if the murder of the Jews is not singled out, it will disappear under the general heading of “crimes against humanity”, and be forgotten. The uniqueness debate is, therefore,

inextricably linked with the role of antisemitism in the Holocaust. People who insist on the Holocaust's uniqueness fear that, by comparing the Jewish fate with any other atrocity, or by extending the meaning of the word "Holocaust" to other groups who suffered during the Second World War, what happened to the Jews will be trivialised. They tend to see such comparison, itself, as a subtle form of antisemitism. The debate centres on three interlinked axes. The first is whether one can include under the event "the Holocaust" the suffering of other peoples during the Second World War. The second is whether one can compare the fate of the Jews with that of other genocides, or even lesser categories of brutality and oppression, like apartheid in South Africa. The third is the extent to which victimhood has become a marker for cultural identity.

There is no doubt that, as the word "Holocaust" enters more widely into public discourse, it will be likened to all sorts of things. For the media and other interest communities, as Hilberg (1998, p. 11) points out, the word "Holocaust" has opened the door to any killing, direct or indirect, of any group, including animals. One of history's most terrible and complex events, as Eva Hoffman (2000) puts it, has become the world's "short-hand for atrocity". The word is used to refer to issues like the availability of abortions or the oppression of the Cubans under Fidel Castro. As a result, there have been attempts to prove the Holocaust's uniqueness.

The most comprehensive argument for the Holocaust's uniqueness is Steven Katz's *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (1994). The first volume in a proposed three-volume treatment of the subject, it is widely acknowledged as a profound work of scholarship, supported by a vast range of carefully researched material. It will, undoubtedly, become a classic in Holocaust scholarship. The method Katz uses is to offer a definition of genocide, and then test whether other catastrophes in history qualify under his definition. He compares the fate of the Jews with a whole range of historical events that people have regarded as genocide, and finds them all wanting. In no other instance was the intention so specific as the Nazi plan to annihilate the Jews. The Jews, alone, were the "victims of genocide". The Holocaust is unique by virtue of the fact that never before had a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualised policy, to annihilate every man, woman and child belonging to a specific people. Whereas for other scholars there have been several genocides, but only one Holocaust, Katz argues that there has been only a single genocide, the Holocaust.

This raises the question of what exactly we mean by the word “uniqueness”. We have already seen that scholars are not entirely sure about what exactly constitutes the Holocaust, and whether it is a specifically Jewish tragedy. The word “uniqueness” is also elusive and ambiguous. In a monograph devoted entirely to this concept, Gabriel Moran has shown that the word “uniqueness” can mean two opposing things. It can describe something that is an entirely isolated monad and displays no similarity to anything else. But the question arises, if this thing is so separate, and there is nothing to which it compares, how do we know that it is unique? And if it is unique, what difference does it make, since it is so outside our experience? The word “unique”, Moran suggests, can also describe something that shares most of its characteristics with other things. The more closely it shares characteristics with other events, the more that which is different stands out. The thing’s uniqueness becomes one of inclusion rather than of exclusion. Moran believes that the Holocaust cannot be isolated from other atrocities and genocides. In order to define it, we need to examine to what extent it is like other genocides and to what extent it differs. The more inclusive our sense of uniqueness, the more pertinent the message we can derive from the Holocaust. This inclusiveness is important because the Holocaust is an abiding challenge. Moran suggests that the Jewish preference for the Hebrew designation, *Shoah*, though it may separate the Holocaust from all other genocides and preserve its uniqueness, might also remove the event from people’s consciousness, thus obscuring the lessons that may be learned from it.

Several scholars oppose the idea of insisting on the Holocaust’s uniqueness. Cesarani (1996), for example, points out that comparing the Holocaust with other acts of genocide in no way diminishes what happened to the Jews and that we need to make such comparisons to find commonalities in human cruelty. Berel Lang agrees. “So what,” he asks, “if the Holocaust is unique? ... Nothing in the enormity of the Nazi genocide would change if that series of acts turned out to be the second – or fifth – instance of its kind.”²⁰ Peter Novick (2001, p. 9) regards the whole attempt to assert the Holocaust’s uniqueness as both fatuous and offensive. Any war or catastrophe, he points out, will have some features that it shares with others and some that differentiate it. Insistence on uniqueness ends up by trivialising the features it shares and elevating those it does not. The assertion that the Holocaust is unique – like the claim that it is singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable – is, he

suggests, deeply offensive in practice. What else can all of this possibly mean except “your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible, unlike ours is representable”? What we are doing, he says, is wringing acknowledgement of superior victimisation from another contender.

THE HOLOCAUST AND APARTHEID

The issue of the Holocaust’s uniqueness is pertinent in South Africa today, as people come to terms with the country’s racist past. There are, understandably, frequent attempts by black South Africans to compare the atrocities of apartheid with the Holocaust. Jews, equally understandably, point out that there was never an attempt to annihilate the black community. Although comparisons are valid up to a point – in that both were systems of degradation based on race – apartheid stopped far short of genocide. The acrimony that emerges from these claims erupts from time to time in letters to the editor in local newspapers or on radio chat shows. Jews see this comparison as an attempt to universalise and “steal” the Holocaust, and as a slight on their suffering. Though millions of others were killed during the Second World War, they argue, and though millions of others have suffered since, the thrust of the Holocaust was against the Jews. If we regard the Holocaust as a crime against humanity at large, the persistence and continuing threat of antisemitism may be forgotten. Blindness to the specificity of the victims of genocide may allow a similar fate to befall another people earmarked for destruction by a ruling elite. So, universalising the Holocaust is seen to diminish, rather than enlarge, its significance.

But it is precisely at this point, or at the refusal to compare the Holocaust with other calamities, that South African blacks are riled. The assumption drawn is that, because Jews claim that the Holocaust is unique, they also claim a monopoly on suffering – something that in the light of history is unwarranted. To gain insight into the bitterness of the debate, we need to take a look at the South African context.

The Nobel Laureate Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu frequently compares the Holocaust with apartheid: “We don’t have gas chambers,” he said, “but if you put people in . . . resettlement camps where they will starve and children die every day, it’s the same sort of thing . . . maybe less tidy”.²¹ As a result, he has often been accused of being antisemitic. But, when South African blacks use the Holocaust as an analogy to their

suffering, they usually do so to emphasise the enormity of that suffering rather than to trivialise or undervalue it – the very opposite of Holocaust denial. The intention of the apartheid regime was never identical to that of Nazism, but there was a basic parallel in that both were systems of humiliation based on race. The suffering, indignity and death brought about by apartheid might have been less intentional than that of the Nazi programme, but its effect was devastating. Critics of the comparison are generally not sufficiently sensitive to this. Barry Rubin (1990, p. 90) has suggested that, from a Third World African perspective, praise even of Hitler may not seem as horrific as it does from a Western viewpoint. The Holocaust's uniqueness may seem alien to those who have, themselves, endured centuries of persecution. Suffering and genocide may be part of their own newly emerging self-image.

This means that we have to hold in tension the Holocaust as the particular fate of the Jews and the Holocaust as a world problem. Human suffering, wherever it is, can legitimately be measured against the Holocaust insofar as the Holocaust's uniqueness embraces it. It is worth noting that the South African Jewish Board of Deputies tacitly allows apartheid to be identified somehow with the Holocaust. Holocaust exhibitions that come to South Africa contain references to apartheid and black schoolchildren are bussed in to see them.

This problem also arises in other contexts elsewhere in the world. One of the most obvious foci is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Some, as Michael Berenbaum has pointed out, opposed its establishment because they saw the "alien tale" of Jewish suffering in Europe as a possible magnet for antisemitism. Others felt that, by placing the genocide of the Jews in the context of a wider set of victims, the specific fate of the Jews was trivialised and denied. Being a government project, Berenbaum avers, the museum cannot be insulated from the political context in which it operates. Its message has to be a universal, and not an exclusively Jewish, one. There are, he points out, private memorials, like the New York Holocaust Memorial (The Museum of the Jewish Heritage). Together, these will define the Holocaust for the American public. We cannot prevent people from conceiving of the Holocaust in the way they choose to. Once it entered international consciousness, it became fair game for all those who wish to use it. Some will be bound to dilute and misrepresent it. But Jews cannot have it both ways, says Berenbaum (1990, p. 25). They "cannot simultaneously maintain that the Holocaust was a horribly sanctified and

inviolable topic while complaining that the world is ignorant of its occurrence”.

Berenbaum (1990) suggests an inclusive definition of uniqueness, in which the Jewish experience is contrasted with the horrendous plight of others. Whereas the Poles were consigned to subservience, and their intelligentsia was annihilated so that Polish culture could be dominated, *all* Jews were condemned to death. Whereas Gypsies shared some of the horrors assigned to the Jews, others were not imposed on them. They were killed in some countries, and not in others. Those in the rural areas suffered a different fate from those in the urban environment. Murder of Jews was a priority in every country. These comparisons are made not to diminish the suffering of any of the groups, but to isolate those dimensions of the Holocaust that are unique. It is intellectually, historically and pedagogically necessary, says Berenbaum, to make such comparisons in order to arrive at the truth. They should serve to unite ethnic minorities who wish to remember their dead together with the Jewish survivors.

Berenbaum cites *The Other Holocaust: The Many Circles of Hell*, by Bohdan Wytowycky. Like the hell described in Dante’s *Inferno*, the hell of the Holocaust was made up of concentric circles with the Jews at the centre. We need to study the ripple effects of their specific place in the Nazi orgy of cruelty and death. Such inclusion will serve to unite rather than divide. World indifference to the Armenian genocide, for example – when the Young Turks, under cover of the First World War, found that the most cost-efficient way to homogenise a modernised Turkey was to annihilate a minority group – facilitated the Holocaust and enabled Hitler to move without too much opposition. The Holocaust needs, according to Berenbaum, to become *the* symbolic orienting event that could prevent a recurrence. Provided that our analogies retain relevance, the Holocaust will be neither trivialised nor de-Judaised.

Yosefa Loshitzky (1997, p. 7) explains that the frequent jibes by African Americans against the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC or against films like *Schindler’s List*, should be seen in terms of frustration. The high-profile emphasis on the Holocaust seems unfair because it seems to eclipse the black experience of suffering and this can cause resentment. Racism should be confronted head on, and not as part of a “victim contest”. Citing Charles Maier, Loshitzky points out that, in America, victimhood has become part of ethnic or post-ethnic identity, and the Holocaust has been transformed into a new focus of identity.

Closing the circle and bringing us back to both antisemitism and religion, Richard Rubenstein (1990, p. 11) points out that when the question of uniqueness is raised, very few deal with the one aspect of the Holocaust that was absolutely unique. “In no other instance of genocide in the twentieth century,” he says, “was the fate of the victims so profoundly linked to the religiomythic inheritance of the perpetrators.” In Christianity, the Jews are not simply one of the many peoples of the world. They were, we are told in the Christian scriptures, the people in whose midst God incarnated himself and who, instead of being the first to recognise this supreme act of God’s grace, rejected Christ and were blamed for his painful death. “Alone among the victims of genocide, the Jews are depicted as the God-bearing and God-murdering people par excellence. No other religion is as horribly defamed in the classical literature of a rival tradition as is Judaism.” In response, Jewish suffering has been interpreted as just punishment of a sinful Israel. The practical consequence of this, to use Helen Fein’s apt phrase, has been the removal of the Jews from the common universe of moral obligation.

Jacob Katz (1983, p. 44) warns us, therefore, that, although comparisons with other people’s suffering and other genocides are legitimate up to a point, the suffering of no other nation can compare with the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, and not just in the Nazi period. It is not merely the amount of suffering, but its frightening recurrence over time, which lends it the quality of inescapability. To close our eyes to the peculiar, historically conditioned fate of the Jews is tantamount to ignoring its lesson for the present – the realisation of Jewish vulnerability, which seems to be the unavoidable legacy of the Jewish past. With these cautionary words in mind, let us turn to a discussion of the problems relating to the study of antisemitism.