HOLOCAUST AWARENESS AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Experimentation in Holocaust education began in American schools in the mid-1970s. After construction of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the subject gained momentum. The last two decades have seen continuous development. In five states, Holocaust education is required at all school levels; in sixteen others, it is highly recommended. Serious teaching of the Holocaust started in earnest only after World War II, when the horrors were at a distance and survivors started breaking the silence. Only then did systematic research begin. Teaching about the Holocaust developed as a result of Holocaust consciousness and of the growing feeling of its relevance to American culture. Such instruction also developed against a background of ongoing public debate concerning the Holocaust’s uniqueness, a controversy that has found its way into various teaching programs.

Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, some three and a half decades after the end of World War II, the Holocaust was not being studied in the schools or universities in the United States. Much progress has been made since then.¹ Holocaust studies are available in many high schools and in quite a few universities. In New York, New Jersey, Florida, California, and Illinois, such study is a legal re-

¹ In her article in Dimensions (1996), Karen Shawn surveys the increased teaching of the Holocaust in recent years. She mentions that fifteen states have advanced-education departments preparing curricula and teaching guidelines on the subject. While only twenty-five organizations in 1985 studied and taught about the Holocaust, there are now 130. Shawn notes that teachers now have numerous opportunities to study the subject both in the United States and in Israel.
quirement, while in sixteen additional states it is highly recommended. Outside the schools, too, educational activity is varied: the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in Washington in 1993, is just one example. One of its declared goals is to bring the Holocaust story to people’s attention, “so that they may see and fear.” The museum operates extramurally, too, with activities designed to reach as wide a national audience as possible. Besides the permanent and special exhibitions at the museum itself, visited by millions each year, there is an in-service training department for teachers, which prepares curricula and maintains an education center that brings together, from throughout the United States, information on teaching the Holocaust. It stores curricula written by outside organizations and supplies them in response to the numerous requests for teaching materials. The museum’s traveling exhibits are shown nationwide.

Because it is a national museum, the Holocaust Museum is considered a central and highly authoritative agent for education in its field. At the same time, it is not unique. Other organizations and institutions, some established in the past and some new, deal with the study and teaching of the Holocaust. Some of these last institutions belong to universities, and others to the educational authorities in different states. There are also private research institutes financed by different organizations and other groups, operated by volunteers, that are closely involved with the subject. The demand for information and guidance keeps all of them busy.

LANDMARKS IN AMERICAN AWARENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST

The many changes in the status of Holocaust studies in the United States can be understood only against the background of developing Holocaust awareness in the fifty years since the end of World War II.

The soldiers who liberated the concentration camps and the death camps tried hard to suppress memories of the horrors they saw. On one hand, they were shocked and overcome by rage and guilt, and they also felt compassion for and identified with the victims. Their distress made them vow to tell the world what they had seen. But at the same time there was an opposite reaction—a desire to distance

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2 There are more than two million visitors each year, and the directorate notes with pride that it the second-most-visited museum in the Pennsylvania Avenue area.
themselves from sights they found incomprehensible, so that they could return to normal life after the long and bloody war. American society in general was sated with war and stories about war. In the desire to return to everyday routine as soon as possible, society encouraged people to "forget" the horrors of war.

In his book documenting the establishment of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Edward Linenthal (1995, 5) notes that the horrors described by the camps’ liberators were not understood at the time for what they actually were. The world related to these horrors as if they were merely evidence of the cruelty of war, not understanding that they were different qualitatively from anything humanity had ever seen. Because of this misconception, horrors were kept more easily from the public agenda. Moreover, Jewish survivors who made their way to the United States had no inclination to talk about their horrible experiences. Years later, many of these survivors did open their hearts and speak about feelings of isolation in their first years in a new country, and of the silence they had had to impose on themselves. The Jewish community did not welcome them warmly, and American society saw them as refugees whose main duty, if they wished to become part of the society around them, was to forget the past. The survivors could not cope with this expectation and suffered psychologically, but American society ignored this turmoil. Within the walls of silence that surrounded them for many years after they reached the United States, the survivors shared their memories and their grief over loved ones whose murders they may have witnessed, their guilt and private nightmares, only with fellow survivors, their companions in misery. All others were strangers who could not understand. Their silence in the early postwar years fulfilled the wish of all concerned—survivors, liberators, idle and indifferent bystanders, and the German persecutors—that the past be forgotten and that survivors, instead, concentrate on the future. American society, according to Linenthal (1995, 7), "forgot" the Holocaust for many years after World War II. If the memory surfaced from time to time, it was because of fears of another mass murder, this one by atomic attack, the results of which had been demonstrated in the nuclear bombing of Japan.

But Holocaust memories were suppressed not only because people wanted to normalize their lives, but also because of postwar global politics. Wartime alliances lapsed; former allies became opponents, and former enemies became allies. The Soviet Union became the arch-enemy, threatening democracy and the position of the United States,
standard-bearer of democracy; overnight, Germany became “a different Germany”: peace-loving, democratic, and an ally against the USSR-led Communist domination. Linenthal notes lapses in the “legal memory” of the free world, as a result of which the prosecution of war criminals early on came to a halt. The United States believed it important to normalize relations with Germany and declared she would not repeat the mistakes of the Treaty of Versailles, which many felt was the leading factor in the Nazi rise to power. In surveying movies and television films in the first two decades after the war, Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt\(^3\) notes that, from the 1950s onward, films produced in the United States showed Germany in a positive light. The German general Rommel was shown as heroic strategist and good German, while the word Nazi does not appear in the film. Very few Americans expressed disgust over this distortion of history and this offense to the memory of those who had died in the war. No doubt the indifference resulted in meager historical research. As for American Jewry, it had an additional reason to keep a low profile: the Rosenbergs were on trial for their lives for spying for the Soviet Union. Other Jews were also suspected of Communist ties, and the anti-Communist hysteria in the United States in the late 1950s made silence seem the best defense against possible anti-Semitism.

General indifference to the Holocaust continued until 1960, when Adolf Eichmann was kidnapped in Argentina and brought to Israel. Public interest in his trial was intense; the trial was covered so extensively that 87 percent of the American public, according to polls, knew of Eichmann’s capture. But more than the historic trial in Israel, held in the name of the entire Jewish people, Hannah Arendt’s commentary in the *New Yorker*, and her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published later, made Americans aware of the Holocaust. The unconventional ideas Arendt presented were the subject of innumerable discussions in the media. Jewish reaction to her writing was sharp. Many Jews, both Americans and Israelis, were angry with the way she criticized the trial and with her remarks on “the banality of evil,” which implied a diminution of the Holocaust, so that it no longer seemed an unprecedented historical event. The main significance of the trial was that it made possible for the first time, nearly twenty years after the

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\(^3\) In “From the Newsreels to Schindler’s List—The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish American Identity,” her lecture at a conference, “Jews and Mennonites and the Search for Identity in America,” at the University of Maryland in April 1997.
war's end, intellectual discussion of the Holocaust. Emotional reactions to the trial also showed it to be a landmark: there was a change in the way American Jews coped with Holocaust memories. The stories and testimonies from the days of the Holocaust brought long-repressed feelings to the surface, and survivor memories went through a process of crystallization. Among the factors that encouraged the survivors to open their hearts was American legitimization of difference in the mid-1960s. In an atmosphere that encouraged ethnic groups to take an interest and pride in their particular histories, it became easier for Jews to discuss the Holocaust in public, and thus the Holocaust gradually filtered into the American consciousness.

The turning point in American awareness of the Holocaust, according to both Linenthal and Lipstadt, came in June 1967 with the Six-Day War, and particularly in the waiting period before it. Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president, called up his forces for a war that he said (on May 26, 1967) would wipe the state of Israel off the earth. Fear for the nation's existence made many people talk of a new Jewish Holocaust and, in Western countries, reawakened dormant Holocaust memories—the memories of millions of victims and memories of the indifference the free world had shown their fate. Linenthal and Lipstadt differ as to the extent to which Holocaust awareness preceded the 1967 war. While Linenthal maintains that, apart from a few central events that occasionally brought it to public attention, the Holocaust was almost completely absent from the American agenda before the war, Lipstadt claims that, before the 1960s, Holocaust awareness did exist in American culture. She cites instances in literature and the cinema, and from 1950s' television programs. For example, in 1959, CBS presented Look Up and Live, a film about the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto; a religious program on ABC described a Passover Seder in Bergen-Belsen; there were programs on the Nuremberg trials, which also aroused public interest. William Shirer's Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, published in 1960, explained the rise of Nazism within the logic of German history, and saw it not as a nightmarish idea born in the diseased brain of Adolf Hitler, but as an event arising logically in German history, in the period from Martin Luther at the end of the sixteenth century to the present day. The Shirer book attacked the German people and attained a circulation that few other books have exceeded.

The interest it awakened in American society heralded the beginning of a more critical attitude toward Germany. Signs of the change
in the late 1950s and early 1960s, according to Lipstadt, included The Diary of Anne Frank, first presented as a Broadway play and then as a Hollywood movie. This development was significant since, in 1956, the U.S. State Department had prevented the play from being staged at a festival in Paris, so as not to embarrass America's German allies. Because of their disagreement over the fate of divided Berlin, 1962 was a stressful time in relations between the United States and Germany. In 1961, Ship of Fools, by Katherine Anne Porter, was made into a film, which was also critical of wartime Germany. Lipstadt does not think that the Holocaust's emergence into the public eye should be attributed to the many Jews in the American movie and television industries. She states that the Holocaust had aroused interest in many circles even before that. What was lacking, in her opinion, was serious public discussion of the type going on today. This created the impression that the Holocaust was deliberately ignored, forgotten, or repressed.

Until the mid-1960s, the American public was not ready to confront the Holocaust: many Army veterans admitted later that they had preferred not to talk about the war and its horrors, but to concentrate on getting an education, establishing a family, and advancing professionally. These were prosperous years in America, with a high birth rate and flourishing economy; more than at any other time, achievement held the attention of an entire generation.

Other significant events in the 1960s and 1970s increased public awareness of the Holocaust. One event was the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Like the war in 1967, it initially evoked concerns as to the state of Israel's fate, and at the same time dispelled the myth that Israel's army was invincible. The term Holocaust began to be used in this context and in other contexts unassociated with the original European events, for example, related to the massacre of children and women in My Lai (March 16, 1968). The United States had, for ten years, been fighting a war in Vietnam, and was regularly charged with racism and genocide by critics of the war. These attacks grew more vehement until, finally, the revelation of the massacre at My Lai undermined America's traditional belief in the morality of her fighting men. American activity in Vietnam was presented as the climax of a series of traumatic historical events, all of which seemed to indicate that there was no such thing as justice; the most extreme and most famous of the events cited was the by then acknowledged Holocaust of the Jews. Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg attributes the sudden
popularity of university courses on the Holocaust to this mind-set. After the stress and confusion of Vietnam, students, not necessarily Jewish, sought to investigate the issue of good and evil. In Hilberg’s opinion, mentioned in Linenthal’s book (1995, 11), the Holocaust, in which good and evil played the main roles, became the standard for all subsequent cases. Thus the Vietnam War was an important factor in the creation of future Holocaust memorials.

A decisive year in the development of Holocaust awareness was 1978, during which Americans witnessed a group of neo-Nazis parading through a Jewish neighborhood in Skokie, Illinois. Ordinary consideration of the feelings of Holocaust survivors conflicted with the American right to freedom of expression. This event, widely covered by, and disputed in, the media, dealt directly with the Holocaust, and brought American society into contact with the world of the survivors. Is it a coincidence that this was the year that NBC-TV broadcast the series Holocaust? The ground must have been prepared, as the estimated 120 million viewers attest. Some critics disliked the series, mainly for what they considered a superficial presentation; others praised it as the single factor awakening ordinary Americans to interest in the Holocaust. The powerful impression the series left on the American consciousness has been compared to that made by Schindler’s List, produced and directed by Steven Spielberg, some fifteen years later. Spielberg’s film, too, was received enthusiastically by the American public, and acclaimed a landmark in the development of Holocaust awareness in the United States; it was both harshly criticized and greatly praised.

From the screening of Holocaust, in 1978, to the recognition of its subject as a legitimate component of the collective American memory, was but a short step. On May 1, 1978, at a festive gathering in the White House Rose Garden to mark Israel’s thirtieth anniversary—attended by Israel’s prime minister, Menachem Begin, and a thousand rabbis—President Jimmy Carter announced the establishment of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust. The commission, set up six months later, was to examine suitable ways to commemorate the Holocaust. In his address, President Carter announced that he had made his decision because of the need to establish in the public’s memory the six million who lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis. Specific mention of the number “six million” was, even if Carter was unaware of it, an incentive to embark on the effort to define the Holocaust as a Jewish event. (I discuss this issue in detail later.) Histori-
ans and political scientists maintain that President Carter's main motives for setting up the committee, while he was running for a second term, were political. Be that as it may, the decision to establish a Holocaust memorial seemed a gesture of reconciliation toward Israel and the American Jews who had shown their disapproval of White House policies; the United States was at last ready for such an act. According to Linenthal (1995, 19), Stuart Eizenstat, then chief of domestic policy, reported to the president that there was greater public support (and not only Jewish support) than ever recorded for an official Holocaust memorial. He cited the television series Holocaust as the most influential factor in creating this attitude.

The president's commission examined many proposals, but favored what it called "a living memorial." In practical terms, this meant a building to house a museum, archive, research center, and educational center. In this spirit, the American memorial to the Holocaust, the Holocaust Memorial Museum, was built in a place of honor in Washington, among outstanding monuments memorializing the nation's experiences. It was dedicated on April 22, 1993. As part of the memorial an ethics committee was proposed, with the purpose of studying moral imperatives connected with civil rights in the United States and throughout the world.

**DEFINING THE LIMITS OF THE HOLOCAUST**

There was a good deal of soul-searching among those who were to determine the form the memorial would take. The main points of this soul-searching must now be summarized, because it is essential to know them if we are to understand the treatment of the Holocaust in American education. The same arguments that preceded the establishment of the museum, and the struggle over its form, reflect the broad range of American opinion that later found expression in differing approaches to teaching the Holocaust.

The main argument was about definition of the term Holocaust. Is it one particular event in a chain of genocides perpetrated against ethnic groups in the twentieth and other centuries? Or should it be seen differently, as something with no parallel, with no similarity to any event in history? Accepting or rejecting the idea of the Holocaust's unique nature had far-reaching implications for the content of the memorial. Other calamities discussed included whole populations
persecuted and mass-sacrificed before World War II—the Armenians by the Turks, for example—as well as populations persecuted by the Germans at the same time they were annihilating the Jews: ethnic groups like Gypsies and Slavs and others such as war prisoners, homosexuals, the handicapped, and the retarded. The argument seemed to many a dispute over ownership of the Holocaust. Each minority group that suffered from the mass murders saw and sees its fate as of equal importance, and demanded appropriate representation in the national memorial.

In declaring his intention to set up a memorial to the six million murdered by the Nazis, President Carter implied that the Holocaust related to the Jewish people only. Other groups reacted speedily, and a later presidential address formulated the issue differently—this time there were eleven million innocent victims, of whom six million were Jews. This phrasing angered those who maintained the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust. Once again, after pressure from other groups, the president divided the number eleven million into two parts, and spoke of the annihilation of six million Jews and five million others by the Nazi war machine. The difference in the way Carter presented the number of victims was not without intent. The numbers represent different perceptions of the Holocaust, and indicate pressure from those of varying opinions. The arguments took place during the museum’s planning stages, and they have remained on the academic agenda to this day.

The dispute in intellectual circles and in education as to the uniqueness of the Holocaust has led researchers to formulate precise definitions of the concepts Holocaust, genocide, and mass murder. The terms earlier had been used interchangeably to characterize the catastrophes that befell humanity in the twentieth century, among the worst the murder of six million Jews. Many books and innumerable articles have been devoted to the issue of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, among the most recent, Is the Holocaust Unique? edited by Alan Rosenbaum (1996). Both unique and uniqueness have more than one meaning in the discussion. The question the book considers is not merely the way in which the Jewish Holocaust differs from the calamities of other groups caught up in the Nazi murder machine, but

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4 On the declarations and their interpretation, see Linenthal 1995.
5 Some individuals even distinguish between the English word Holocaust and the Hebrew term Shoah.
also whether the persecution of the Jews is different from other genocides. There is also debate as to whether the Holocaust is an event outside history—beyond human comprehension—as some writers maintain. Seeing the Holocaust as an event outside history suggests the inability to understand or explain it by means of human intelligence. This approach takes the Holocaust outside the realm of historical conclusions, making it meaningless historically as well as educationally. Michael Berenbaum, who deals extensively with the uniqueness of the Holocaust, mentions that Elie Wiesel compares it to night and treats it as a *mysterium tremendum* (a sacred mystery) that can be approached but never understood (Roth and Berenbaum 1989, 84).

Rosenbaum's introduction to *Is the Holocaust Unique?* tends to "normalize" the Holocaust, and, despite the extreme difficulty in accepting it in every sense as a human creation and historical event, to bring it down from mystic heights to earth. He suggests discussing other genocides in the same breath, examining them closely to see the many ways they differ from the Holocaust. Any society that has sustained the trauma of mass murder is entitled, according to Rosenbaum, not only to express its suffering, but to insist that it be part of world history. His book sets an educational goal: examining historical events, explaining and presenting them in a program that will give future generations an accurate picture as possible, and thus enabling these students to draw conclusions relevant for their own times. This educational program analyzes an event by means of comprehensive criteria and from varied points of view, within the context of the calamity itself; its reach, the ends and means of the murderers, their guilt and responsibility. Rosenbaum maintains that this is the way to study both mass murder and the Holocaust, and to memorialize both. To explain the Holocaust with platitudes like "human nature," or to deny its uniqueness by saying that every historical event is unique, is to trivialize it. This is the first step toward denial and in supplying arguments for those who would deny it.

As to the central issue of whether to give the Holocaust a special place in the history of persecutions, genocides, and mass murders, Rosenbaum's answer is "yes." One must take into account the scale of the murders, the ideology behind them, the planning of the German government, and the perfection and efficiency with which law enforcers, doctors, businesspeople, industrial establishments, academic in-
stitutions, and military and civilian forces made unprecedented use of bureaucracy and of technology to carry out the genocide directives.

Historians' views of the Holocaust lie along a continuum; at one end is the view that it is one in a series of mass murders, that there is no real difference between the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis and the murder of cripples, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, Poles, Soviet war prisoners, or other groups that the Nazis persecuted. Those who take this position further maintain that the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, the murder of native peoples in America, the genocide in Cambodia, and even the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are all the same type of event, and that there is no uniqueness to be discerned in the Jewish Holocaust.

At the other end of the continuum lies the view that the Holocaust is utterly and in every sense a unique event. Among the holders of this position are, notably, Yehuda Bauer and Lucy Davidowicz, who are uncompromising in their view that the Holocaust is unique. Their theories are based on meticulous comparison, at every level, of the Holocaust with the catastrophes that befell other peoples. They conclude, unequivocally, that the differences are such that the Holocaust cannot be compared with any other genocide. Further, Roth and Berenbaum (1989, 5) distinguish two groups among those maintaining the idea of uniqueness, the intentionalists and the functionalisists. The intentionalists, like Lucy Davidowicz, view the Holocaust as unique mainly because the Nazi ideology behind it was unique. The Nazis sought to destroy the Jewish people utterly, and thus to change society. The functionalisists, on the other hand, though not denying the "contribution" of criminal ideology, believe that the unique feature of the Holocaust was the Nazi "machine," the way this machine worked, and that its sole purpose was to carry out legally sanctioned murder.6

Between these two extreme views lies a range of opinions that more or less attempt to reconcile them. Most agree that the Holocaust was a deviant historical event. At the same time, most maintain that, today, many years later, too much scientific detail becomes offensive—all the more so because it is of no help to the dead and se-

6 Roth and Berenbaum comment that "this debate is not to be confused with the Functionalist/Intentionalist debate currently rampant on Holocaust historiography, in which the Intentionalists attribute the Holocaust to a deliberate ideology present in Nazism from the very beginning, and the Functionalisists see the Holocaust as an evolving policy that responded to new, unanticipated conditions" (1989, 5).
verely hurts the feelings of survivors. Here, very briefly, is a synopsis of these views.

Yehuda Bauer devotes his article, “The Place of the Holocaust in Contemporary History” (1989), to dispelling the haze around the several terms Holocaust, genocide, and mass murder, which are often used interchangeably in the debate. He finds clarification essential for the sake of accuracy, so that each event he interprets and classifies might be given its rightful place in history. He says one cannot possibly speak of the massacre at My Lai or the bombing of Dresden by the Allies in the same breath with the Germans’ slaughter of the Jews and of other populations.

Not only laypersons, but scholars, tend to use the general term genocide for all the mass murders of the twentieth century. As his point of departure, Bauer refers to the term genocide as defined in the United Nations General Assembly resolution of December 9, 1948 (1989, 19). According to this definition, genocide in its most extreme form is designed to annihilate an ethnic, national, or religious group entirely. Bauer remarks, however, that the attempt to wipe out an entire group does not necessarily mean killing every individual who belongs to it. According to him, then, the calamity of the Jewish people goes beyond genocide; this additional component makes it qualitatively different. For instance, the fate of the Czechs, Poles, and Serbs persecuted by the Nazis corresponds to genocide, since the Germans slaughtered them mercilessly, but did not attempt to wipe them out to the last man. This was not the case with regard to the Jews.

But the principal distinction between the Holocaust and genocide lies primarily in the motives of the murderers, in this case what the Germans hoped to accomplish. By means of a propaganda machine of unprecedented dimensions, the Nazis publicized their ideology: Jews were designated as subhuman, the antithesis of the race of Aryans that was declared to be the human ideal. The Jews, eternal enemy of the superior race, were not even part of humankind, but a manifestation of Satan, and were compared to bacteria contaminating mankind and endangering world peace, because they were alleged to control both Western capitalism and Russian Bolshevism. The Germans had a twofold purpose in going to war: to ensure German rule in Europe and to annihilate the Jews, who controlled the world. Since their first goal, as they understood it, could not be achieved without the second, they exterminated the Jews with unheard-of determination and ingenuity.
Bauer discusses the fate of the Gypsies in World War II in great detail. Many see the fate of the Gypsies as the same as or very similar to the fate of the Jews (1989, 25–27). He admits to many similarities. The Gypsies, like the Jews, did not have their own territory and were widely dispersed among peoples whose culture differed from their own. The way the Nazis treated them, bureaucratically and ideologically, was similar. However, while to the Nazis the Gypsies were an inferior race, the Jews were a “non-race.” The result of this distinction was that the Jews were doomed to complete annihilation, not only in Germany but everywhere the Germans could lay their hands on them; they had no right to exist. Those Gypsies who met certain German criteria retained the right to survive.

The Armenian genocide (1915–16), according to Bauer, is the event which comes closest to what befell the Jews some three decades later. The Turks strove to wipe out the entire Armenian population under their rule, just as the Germans sought to wipe out the Jews. Their plan was to establish a pan-Turkish area extending from Asia Minor, where the Armenians lived, to central Asia. The mass murder of the Armenians arose from the geopolitical ambitions of the Turks and therein lies the main difference between what befell the Armenians and what befell the Jews in the Holocaust. The Armenians, living where they did, hindered Turkish expansionism; thus, the frightful means the Turks chose to achieve their political objectives doomed the Armenians to extinction. The Jews, however, were not exterminated for anything that they did or the place they lived: their sole crime was existence. Another difference was the way the murderers related to their deeds. Both Turks and Germans “explained” what they did in terms of national ambition, which overrode all other considerations. The Young Turks did what they felt they had to do for ideological and political reasons, yet they also knew that their actions were immoral, and they acknowledged the shame that it brought on them and their country. The Germans, however, regarded the annihilation of the Jews as a moral imperative, as a distinguished chapter in their history. Himmler’s famous speech in Posen on October 4, 1943, in which he referred to the period as one of glory, fully represented the German attitude toward the Jews.

The tragedies of the twentieth century have common characteristics in that they involve mass murder, but each has its special features. To extricate the reader from the maze of definitions, Bauer proposes a “continuum of evil,” with the Jewish Holocaust at one end, and other
mass murders ordered according to the intensity of the genocidal act. He emphasizes that this is merely a means to differentiate one event from another, and the arrangement should by no means be regarded as a judgment about the moral differences among them. Such an arrangement clarifies that the Holocaust is indeed unique in the characteristics discussed above. But its uniqueness does not mean it has no universal implications. It is a subject for study in every society, for it could happen again, to other groups, given the right circumstances.

Like Bauer, Lucy Davidowicz also regards the Holocaust as unique. Some, though not all, of her reasons are similar to those already mentioned. She, too, stresses that it is not the sheer number of victims that differentiates the Holocaust from other mass murders, but rather the number of fallen victims relative to the affected population. This makes the calamity of the Jewish people unique. In her lengthy report, Davidowicz estimates that from thirty-five million to fifty million people were murdered, killed, or simply died in the course of World War II (1989, 52–59).7 The numbers show that other nations suffered many more casualties than the Jews. Some estimates place Soviet casualties at twenty million soldiers and civilians, including about a million and a half Soviet Jews and three million war prisoners whom the Germans appear to have murdered at Auschwitz. More than six million Poles died in the war, and other peoples, too, suffered casualties in the hundreds of thousands. However, the number of deaths in relation to the total population makes it clear that no other group of people was hurt as severely as the Jews. Two-thirds of the Jews of Europe were annihilated, a third of world Jewry as a whole. Sources of Jewish culture were lost forever—a culture at least a thousand years old, created by the once-vibrant communities of Eastern Europe, the culture of most of the Jewish people in the countries of their dispersion. Other European peoples suffered heavy losses under the Germans but managed to rebuild their lives—some more, some less—in a relatively short time, and to return to normal life. But Jewish life in Europe was destroyed forever. True, the state of Israel rose on the ruins of the war, but the lives and the material and cultural heritage that perished in the Holocaust can never be retrieved. As far as we know, this decision, in which one people assumed that another national group had no right to live—and then acted on its decision—is

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7 The difference in numbers arises from the different sources that researchers used.
without precedent in recorded human history. Davidowicz quotes the philosopher Karl Jaspers: “Anyone who on the basis of such a decision plans the organized slaughter of a people or participates in it, does something that is fundamentally different from all the crimes that have existed in the past” (1989, 60).  

The intentions in themselves were innovations in the history of evil. But added to this was the determination the Germans displayed in carrying them out, harnessing their national resources—of industry, technology, science, art, education, and religion—for the perpetration of murder. This too makes the Holocaust qualitatively different from any other genocide. As Davidowicz indicates, the Jews were persecuted not simply out of blood lust: these persecutions were deliberate and were directed, planned, and organized to wipe out this specific population.  

The universal aspect of the Holocaust, according to Davidowicz, lies not in its links to the past but in its implications for the future. The National Socialist state, which succeeded in mass murders based on racist anti-Semitic theory, is of interest to the world. This was a turning point in human history, because it showed the world that what was considered implausible could, in fact, happen. The educational implications are universal, and the world must heed them. Here, too, Davidowicz quotes Jaspers’s instructive remarks: “What has happened in the past is a warning for the future. It is a sin to forget what happened. . . . If it could happen once, it may happen again, the possibility is there at every moment. Only through knowledge can it be prevented” (1989, 60).  

Michael Berenbaum also supports the view that the Holocaust is unique. His opinion, however, moderated in principle and for pragmatic reasons, sounds less decisive. He explains the characteristics of the Holocaust along a continuum of Jewish history and compares it to the fate of the Poles or the Gypsies, whom the Germans also marked for mass destruction, but emphasizes the difference of the Jewish case (Roth and Berenbaum 1989, 94–95).  

The Holocaust has no precedent even in the long history of persecution of the Jews. There were attacks in the past, but they were generally sporadic and of short duration, illegal, and carried out on a religious rather than a biological basis. Jews were persecuted for their

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beliefs, but they could take refuge in emigration or conversion. Nazi anti-Semitism was a new historical phenomenon, not only because of the ideas behind it and the way it was put into practice, but because its basis was biological and it was driven by government policy. In the Nazi era, the policy not only had legal backing, but was actively supported by the judicial system. The Jews were not persecuted for their opinions, beliefs, or the way they lived, but simply because they were born Jews. Unlike earlier anti-Semites, the Germans were not content to destroy “the Jewish spirit.” Their purpose was the physical destruction of every Jew, with no exceptions: no emigration was possible, no conversion. Even Jewish martyrdom was denied, since Jews lacked the essential element of choice (Roth and Berenbaum 1989, 94).

To show how zealous the Germans were, Berenbaum stresses their persistence in wiping out the Jewish people throughout the twelve years of Nazi rule. In the midst of a bitter war on several fronts, the Germans invested their resources in carrying out anti-Jewish policies. The German railways, instead of transporting soldiers to the front, or evacuating the wounded to the rear, served principally to transport Jews to the death camps; this is just one example of the German obsession with annihilating the Jews. Discussing the fate of other populations—Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals—Berenbaum clarifies the qualitative differences between what they and the Jews suffered. Berenbaum is not the only one who sees the need for comparison with other catastrophes to reach an understanding of the Jewish catastrophe. Others see the need, too, but they view the Holocaust as completely unique and shrink from making comparisons lest they hide that uniqueness (Roth and Berenbaum 1989, 96). To these people, Berenbaum says that a comparison with the calamities of others does not conceal what is unique about our own. His position implies that it is not sufficient to understand the differences between our fate and that of other nations: to understand the special fate of the Jews one must understand the fate of others, and identify with their suffering.

Berenbaum was connected with the founding of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. As to its content, he remarks that including and memorializing the fate of the Armenians, far from diminishing the uniqueness of the Jewish calamity, contributes to a deeper moral sensibility and to sharpened perceptions of the Holocaust even among those who steadfastly maintain that it was unique. One may assume that Michael Berenbaum’s involvement in the President’s Commission on the Holocaust and in the United States Holocaust Memorial
Council had some influence on his opinion. Having to deal with the issue in a context that was not purely academic, he came to realize that, in the United States, it was not wise to separate the Holocaust completely from the calamities of other nations. A national museum with extraordinary educational implications was to be established, one through which the Holocaust story would be passed to future generations. The federal government authorized it, and the American taxpayer was to finance it. It was only natural, then, that other ethnic groups who saw themselves as victims should claim the right to tell their stories in the museum. Telling the Holocaust in entirely Jewish terms, Berenbaum realized, would defeat the museum’s educational purpose: it would not address the wider public for whom the Holocaust was so alien. Presenting the Holocaust’s Jewish context only, as Elie Wiesel, Yehuda Bauer, and others wanted to do, would have destroyed its relevance to the broader American public. Berenbaum supported “Americanizing” the Holocaust, not cheapening or commercializing it, but taking into account the background and needs of the target population the museum was to serve. His proposal was based on the concept that historical memory is composed not only of events as they happened, but of the stamp that society puts on what is remembered (Roth and Berenbaum 1989, 85).

DEVELOPMENT OF HOLOCAUST STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Early attempts to teach the Holocaust in American schools date, as I have said, to the late 1970s and early 1980s, following the conclusions of the President’s Commission that “study of the Holocaust should be part of the curriculum in every educational system throughout the country” (Wiesel 1979, 12). Sporadic and local initiatives had existed earlier. One of the most developed was produced by Margot Stern Storm and William Parsons, social studies teachers in a Massachusetts secondary school. Their professional and moral integrity did not allow them to avoid the Holocaust, the most traumatic event in modern history, in their classes. Their curriculum, “Facing History and Ourselves,” developed, expanded, and broke through the boundaries of their schools and state. Slightly revised, it is still in use.

See Glenn S. Pate’s survey (in Braham 1987, 233–321).
There are both universal and specifically American reasons that study of the Holocaust was postponed for more than thirty years after World War II ended. First, it was a calamity of incomprehensible dimensions, unspeakably cruel and evil, comprised of events that could not be grasped any more than their causes and results—all these were formidable barriers to discussion. Moreover, language—all languages—lacks the words and constructs required to discuss the Holocaust. The first group to respond publicly were the writers who survived, who described what they had been through but who frequently fell back on symbols and metaphors to communicate even the smallest part of their horrifying experiences.

Holocaust research, too, was limited in the first years after the war. Real development began only thirty years later: distance and perspective were required to attain a general view, to the extent that this is possible, of something incomprehensible, and to analyze it with accepted academic tools. Scientific analysis, description, and an understanding of the Holocaust’s implications for future generations had not been available to educators before. Without such a foundation, it is impossible to devise any educational program and certainly not one on a subject so tremendous, complex, and fraught with emotion.

Mary Glynn and others surveyed several Holocaust studies curricula. They maintain that, given the scope and nature of the subject, it is no wonder that teachers did not know how to cope with it and waited more than thirty years before they attempted to include it in their teaching programs (1982, 8).

Another reason for the protracted delay is linked to the development of Holocaust awareness in the United States, discussed earlier. The establishment of the President’s Commission by President Carter marked a turning point in awareness of the relevance of the Holocaust to American society and, consequently, to American education. This development had implications for social, political, and moral values on several planes.

The Holocaust turned out to be a suitable background for moral education in the schools, since it was a monstrous catastrophe caused by violation of all the values American cherish. The Declaration of Independence states: “We believe these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator

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10 There had been university courses, particularly on Holocaust literature, years earlier. Initiative came mainly from teachers researching the field.
with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty
and the pursuit of happiness."

The Nazis violated every principle that American democracy sancti-
fied. American education can find no better example than the hor-
rors of the Holocaust of what might happen if basic American values
are destroyed. Teaching equality as a value is no theoretical matter in
America today. Stereotypes, prejudices, unequal opportunities, rac-
ism, and discrimination are still current and painful subjects, and suit-
able episodes from the Holocaust can serve as examples of the dangers
that may lurk in social and moral lapses. Such episodes have impor-
tant implications for American education, which seeks to impart sen-
sitivity to human dilemmas; respect for human life and the other;
rejection of prejudice and racism; belief in pluralism and personal
responsibility; and so on. Further, basic American values brought be-
fore students studying the Holocaust gain additional validity. The events
happened, not long ago in some violent, primitive society, but recently,
in what was thought to be one of the most progressive and cultured
societies in the West.

The Holocaust story can also put repentance for past sins into
critical focus. In American society there is deep regret over evil done
to native peoples and to black slaves. The post-Holocaust view is to
designate these events as mass murders, of which the Holocaust is the
most conspicuous example, and to characterize them in the same way
as the mass murder of the Jews.

Another cause of remorse in contemporary American society is
the way the country stood idly while the Jews of Europe were being
massacred. This remorse arises when the United States weighs the
need to intervene in the catastrophes that the world still witnesses.
The relevance of the Holocaust to American moral conduct emerged
clearly in the international conference that the United States called in
Geneva in 1979, following the crisis involving the Vietnamese boat
people. This conference on refugees brought to mind the Evian con-
ference in 1938. Walter Mondale, the U.S. vice president, recalled in
1979 the guilt of the world and of his own country in the 1930s, when
it did not respond to the pleas of Jewish refugees for a safe haven. The
United States, at the more recent gathering, showed its determina-
tion not to repeat the sins of the past. Other nations followed its lead,
offering shelter, security, and a decent life to nearly two million Viet-
namese refugees. Irving Greenberg, in his introduction to Mary Glynn's
book (1982, xx), notes that memory of the Holocaust clearly has raised the moral awareness of various countries. The importance that American society attaches to personal involvement, and its criticism of indifference to the fate of others, appears in numerous social studies curricula. Greenberg emphasizes the importance of educating for social and political involvement. In this connection, he states that life offers the individual fewer opportunities to choose between roles of aggressor and victim than it does to decide how to act as an observer: here is where education should provide direction.

The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington takes the observer step-by-step through events. The accusing finger pointed at the Nazis does not spare visitors, most of whom are Americans. The position of the United States as an indifferent onlooker, according to many Holocaust scholars, significantly increased the dimensions of the calamity.

Awareness of the relevance of the Holocaust to contemporary American society and, hence, to the education of its youth, was the pre-condition for teaching the Holocaust in the United States. However, even after the basis existed, it was a long time before actual teaching and studying began. Teachers were not ready to deal with a subject involving so many difficulties. There were technical problems, such as the lack of appropriate curricula, limited time, and the absence of suitable teachers. Although the subject was recognized as relevant, it was perceived as relating to only one minority among many; this aroused controversy that to this day has not been sufficiently addressed. Some obstacles to teaching the Holocaust have been removed over the years, but others remain.

There are emotional difficulties both for teacher and student. The subject presents one long chronicle of boundless hate, evil, discrimination, unbridled cruelty, and human suffering, which human intelligence could not grasp and human language cannot express. To present such a subject for study, and at the same time to teach values that are to be cherished—kindness, equality, justice, respect for human life and the law—seems an essential pedagogical task, but one which is also impossible. The attempt to resolve this dilemma is virtually certain to lead into other dilemmas that are no less difficult. But relating to the Holocaust as something entirely deviant, as an event that took place "on another planet," ruled by other laws, destroys its relevance to our society and to our world.
Teaching the Holocaust in the United States raises still other difficulties, as teachers who have had to deal with them indicate. Some mention the difficulty maintaining the balance between emotional reaction and academic discussion. Although teaching the Holocaust should engage students’ emotions, it should not preclude an attempt to discuss it in intellectual terms. Others fear that teaching the Holocaust may lead some students to veer from moral questions the curriculum is supposed to raise, and cause them to identify with the criminals. This has been known to happen, as Karen Shawn reported in her survey of current topics in Holocaust studies (1996, 18). Greenberg, too, relates to such dangers, saying that presenting Nazi violence could inspire students who lean toward violence themselves (Glynn et al. 1982, ix–x).

There were, moreover, difficulties regarding curriculum quality and the nature and ability of the teachers. Curriculum was a problem until the mid-1980s, but appears to be so no longer. In recent years, dozens and possibly hundreds of curricula, produced by universities, state education departments, schools, organizations, and institutions concerned with research and teaching of the Holocaust, have been created for all scholastic levels. Besides these curricula, teachers have at their disposal a wide range of research and documentation on almost every related subject. There are documentary and commercial films, traveling exhibits, and teaching aids such as maps, posters, computer programs, and audio disks.

As Karen Shawn sees it, teachers continue to be the cardinal problem. While surveys show that thousands of teachers work in Holocaust studies, the regrettable reality is that most, through no fault of their own, lack the knowledge and basic skills to teach the subject. The states which have made the subject compulsory, and those that strongly recommended it, did not set teacher training requirements

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11 See, for example, the reactions of those who teach Holocaust literature and those who do not, investigated by Jane Vogel Fischman in her doctoral thesis (1996). See also Irving Greenberg in his introduction to the book edited by Glynn on the same subject (1982).

12 A survey by Glenn S. Pate appears in Braham 1987. Pate’s purpose was to examine how the Holocaust was represented in history and social science textbooks. He found that it was virtually absent. Most American history textbooks avoided mentioning it; others devoted just one line to it, and others did little more. The relevance of the Holocaust to American society was not sufficiently clear. In world history texts, the subject was treated more extensively, although there, too, only token amounts of material were presented.
either in Holocaust literature or in strategies to cope with difficulties at different academic levels. Recently there have been training workshops throughout the country, but these generally respond to immediate needs, and are neither systematic nor comprehensive. The universities, too, offer a disappointingly small quantity of Holocaust studies, as Vogel Fischman’s thesis states (1996), and the universities, after all, are the main source of teaching cadres. The universities must make it possible to put legislation about teaching the Holocaust into effect.

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