

**Remembering Across the Iron Curtain.
The Emergence of Holocaust Memory in
the Cold War Era**

Veranstalter: University of York, Institute for the Public Understanding of History; Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Science

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Holocaust remembrance and the Cold War have never been hermetically separated research areas. Yet the points of overlap or intersection have rarely been subjected to systematic scrutiny. The organisers of this two-day conference sought to redress this. One of their aims was to question dichotomization between a Western world embracing Holocaust commemoration and a communist sphere which repressed or at least tightly controlled it, like every other aspect of social and cultural life.¹

The conference opened with an original approach. DAVID SHNEER (Boulder, Colorado) gave a performance, *Art is my Weapon*, which presented the life story and songs of Lin Jaldati. The Dutch Jewish, Yiddish singer and Holocaust survivor journeyed between communism and Zionism, settling in East Germany after the war. She devoted her artistic life, to reconciling Holocaust memory with antifascism and the performance provided an excellent introduction to the conference.

The conference organisers, ANNA KOCH (York) and STEPHAN STACH (Prague), outlined their wish to look more closely at the impact of the Cold War on emerging Holocaust Memory. Stach stressed the need to reassess the assumption that historiography had been suppressed and the memory of the Holocaust erased or falsified in Eastern Europe. In his own research on Poland he found many cases, where debates on the Holocaust were turned into Cold War battlefields. Koch came across similar cases on the other side of the Iron Curtain (in Italy and West Germany). These common interests had led to the idea of a conference aiming at exploring the influence of Cold War thinking about Holocaust Memory, both East and West of the Iron Curtain.

The conference opened with ARKADI ZELTSER (Jerusalem) arguing powerfully that the Soviet regime was sometimes a less efficient totalitarian system than the West and Israel had assumed at the time. He gave some striking examples of the deletion of Jewish references (Vladimir Belyaev's account of the Lviv/Lemberg ghetto (*Light in the Darkness*) but also argued that a (limited) space for Jewish commemorative activity emerged from the regime's anti-Western mobilisation.

Zeltser also discussed how the Holocaust was instrumentalized for Soviet attacks on West German 'revengism'. His point was echoed in several other papers, for example KAI STRUVE's (Halle), that presented new empirical results on the 'Oberländer affair': Adenauer's minister had been an officer in a Ukrainian *Wehrmacht* battalion but had in fact not been guilty of the crimes he was accused of. At the same time the Soviet and East German press suppressed all information about the mass murder of prison inmates by Soviet units in Eastern Ukraine. Struve concluded that even though initial Eastern reports had made little or no mention of Jewish victims, the campaign did overall increase awareness of Nazi mass murder. The question of whether Oberländer was in any case unfit to hold ministerial office was left open.

The remembrance of US Jews, as analysed by ELI LEDERHENDLER (Jerusalem), provided - at least partially - a mirror-image of Zeltser's analysis. Survivors, were 'encouraged' (not forced) to set aside their trauma in the interests of the larger Western struggle. Lederhendler stressed the diversity of US Jewry and pointed out that it had other concerns than Holocaust remembrance; the welfare of survivors and above all the admittance of Jewish DPs into the USA. Some non-Jewish DP applicants were suspected of being war criminals but in the end Jewish organisations mostly turned a blind eye. Moreover, they were encouraged to go softly on criticism of West Germany.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann, as Struve showed, was used by the GDR to attack West Germany. That applied even more to

¹See also the workshop: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6519> (24.10.2018)

the Auschwitz trial, which opened in Frankfurt soon afterwards (December 1963) and, as MATTHEW TURNER (Deakin) explained, reflected the heightened tensions of that period of the Cold War. The defense strategy was to focus on motives, since the prosecution needed to demonstrate the 'base motives' of the accused. Fritz Bauer, the legendary Hessian Attorney General, sought to give the trial a didactic dimension while historians from the Munich Institute of Contemporary History, provided expert testimony on the structures of Nazi rule – without mentioning the defendants, or even Auschwitz. Both German states sought to use the trial for propaganda purpose, with the East German lawyer Friedrich Kaul and the prominent East German economist Jürgen Kuczynski, pointing to the continuities of German capitalism and its role in the Holocaust.

Some of the efforts of the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discredit the Federal Republic of Germany, were also discussed by JONATHAN KAPLAN (Berlin). GDR diplomats distributed incriminating material about West German diplomats and organised press conferences in their host countries. The ministry also cultivated contact with Jewish Nazi-hunting organisations, yet the Third Reich remained a fundamental presence in GDR politics.

Another point of German-German interaction was touched on by DANIELA WEINER (Chapel Hill), who questioned the assumption that East German text-books had presented an unchanging view of the Holocaust. She argued that narratives about resistance and Jewish victims changed over time, due to internal shifts within the regime, and in response to West German shifts. For example the 1944 July plotters, initially ignored or dismissed as reactionary, were later given more prominence, in order to boost the popularity of the East German army.

JENNY WATSON (Sheffield) examined a discussion outside Germany, as part of a renaissance of German literature in Romania as the post-war generation began to challenge the fascist tendencies of their parents. Despite Ceaușescu's repression some information could be gleaned from West Germany, as well as from Jewish testimony and from

writers like Herta Müller. Some literature reflected frustration of the lack of any discussion of locally organized killings. Watson saw the literature of memory which resulted as a subterranean dialogue with the Western culture of commemoration.

Outside the German-speaking context the commemorative practices of French Jews were discussed by SIMON PEREGO (Paris), who clearly brought out firstly, their great heterogeneity, with French Jews, survivors from Eastern Europe and migrants from North Africa and secondly their different political allegiances. Culture and language (the use of Yiddish) was another important dividing point. The fragmentation between competing 'commemorative blocs' was well illustrated in 1950 when the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was commemorated in Paris at three separate ceremonies.

For Britain, in a later period, SIOBHAN HYLAND (Northampton) examined the anti-fascist organization and magazine *Searchlight* (founded in 1964), shedding light on British attitudes in the detente period. In the 1980s the organization's investigations into war criminals living under cover in Britain, received material from the Soviet Department of Justice. The British Home Secretary Douglas Hurd was reluctant to use it but the US Office of Special Investigations was more willing to do so, showing the shift in US attitudes since the 1950s. *Searchlight* contributed to the passing of the 1991 War Crimes Act, allowing prosecution of those who had committed war crimes outside the UK.

Several speakers questioned the assumption that Holocaust remembrance had been put on the back-burner in the interests of the Cold War. OLOF BORTZ (Stockholm) scrutinized Raul Hilberg's autobiographical account (*The Politics of Memory*, 1996) that he had written in isolation in the face of pressure to remain silent and cultivate West Germany as an ally. For Bortz Hilberg's subjective sense of isolation was also part of his interpretation of the Jews' fate during the war, so the Cold War continued war-time indifference to it. But Bortz argued that contemporary sources suggested a more complex picture. If the Holocaust was not yet at the centre of attention, then partly because it had not been immedi-

ately recognized as historically significant in the sense that Hiroshima was. Hilberg's work could be seen a part of a wider 'push-back' against the political landscape of the 1950s in itself.

ANNA POLLMAN (Jerusalem) brought the discussion back to the central fear of the Cold War, the danger of nuclear annihilation, as discussed by the Jewish philosopher and activist Günther Anders. Anders developed a critique of technology which incorporated both Hiroshima and the Holocaust as an unprecedented event of industrial murder. Starting with his anti-nuclear journal *Das Argument* Anders reformulated his interpretation in dialogue with Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and later, controversially, as a member of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal. Likewise focusing on West German memory culture, MANJA HERRMANN (Berlin) discussed an early initiative of the West Berlin government, *Unbesungene Helden* (Unsung Heroes) (1958-66), which honoured activists who had helped Jews during the Holocaust. She highlighted how Cold War considerations shaped the selection of these 'heroes' – members of communist resistance were excluded.

Turning from philosophical to artistic attempts to grapple with remembrance of mass murder IRINA TCHERNEVA (Paris) discussed *The Last Way*, a famous painting of the Babi Yar massacre by the Latvian painter Yosef Kuzkovski. The fact that it was painted from 1944-48 once more underlined that Soviet painters, film-makers and other artists had not ignored the Holocaust. Even after the noose of censorship tightened in the late 1940s, it would not be accurate to speak of a blanket censorship. The state's deployment of visual images of Nazi atrocities formed a visual framework for judicial proceedings, acting as magnets for commemorative groups. In the 1960s the function of the picture changed, it exposed a gap between alternative constructors of Holocaust memory and activists in Israel for the return on the one hand, and the Soviet authorities on the other.

Moving from painting to film, VANESSA VOISIN (Paris) discussed the 1963 Soviet documentary of the war crimes trial of members of the *Sonderkommando* 10a in Rostov. A memorial tribute was included in the

film but without naming the Holocaust. The book on the trial (Lev Ginzburg's *The Abyss*) was far more explicit. Another film, Zoltán Fábri's 1966 film *Late Season*, was the subject of MÁTÉ ZOMBORY's (Budapest) paper. He interpreted it as an attempt to deal not only with Hungarian responsibility and guilt but also with the moral and aesthetic questions of Holocaust representation. On the one hand the film explored the aesthetic role of modernism, on the other it used archival footage and surrealism. Zombory also explored the domestic and international reception of the film. In Hungary the discussion revolved around three topics: the grotesque tone, the stylistic eclecticism and the question of 'bystander guilt'. The film also triggered a huge international debate because before returning 'voluntarily' to Hungary from Argentina in 1956, the main actor of Antal Páger had been convicted *in absentia* for war crimes after the war.

MARTA ZAWODNA-STEPHAN (Poznań) discussed the actions taken towards the remains of concentration camp victims, which she argued both reflected and shaped the images which specific nations have about their roles. In that sense the political lives of dead bodies act as a lens through which both Cold War narratives and the production of these narratives can be viewed. She showed the changes at Auschwitz in the 1960s, focusing on the languages used to designate the victims and the international (Polish-German) discussion.

Of the many issues raised in the round table discussion on the first day, two in particular may be worth mentioning here: can similar patterns of remembrance be seen on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and what are the implications of the comparability of the two systems? At this point it is hard to avoid mentioning the totalitarian model, which sometimes wavered rather uneasily between the role of a solid epistemological political science tool on the one hand and a historicised product of the Cold War itself on the other. Lederhändler agreed more with the second interpretation, as a key point of difference within the Jewish left in the US. JEFFREY HERF (Maryland) on the other hand argued for the fundamental difference between West-

ern and the Eastern discussions of remembrance; on the one hand the US post-war commitment to the defence of Western Europe had ensured West German society to be rigorously denazified and later neo-Nazi infiltration to be blocked. Herf's *ex cathedra* judgments contrasted with the powerful call by NADÈGE RAGARU (Paris) for an interpretation of the Cold War that gives more weight to its ambiguities and nuances. She also rejected the assumption that there had been 70 years of silence in Eastern Europe. She wanted to recover the complexity of multiple intertwining commemorations, including transnational exchange. Similarly, DAVID SCHNEER (Colorado) opposed the assumption that state agency was only relevant to Holocaust commemoration in communist systems and called for historians to move beyond the Cold War paradigm when researching Holocaust Memory. Finally, ISABEL WOLLESTON (Birmingham) discussed the changing contexts of Holocaust Memory in Poland and highlighted the difficulties of teaching this complex history to British university students.

One refreshing aspect of the conference was that these and other discussions largely avoided the kind of historiographical trench warfare which was themselves such a central feature of so many years of Cold War academic discourse. In that sense the conference helped to open up promising new perspectives. Not only did it give a strong sense of the complexities, nuances and confusions beyond the East-West-divide, but it also showed that there will clearly be much to discuss in the future.

Conference Overview:

Opening Event

David Shneer (Boulder): Art is my Weapon: the Radical Musical Life of Lin Jaldati

Geoff Cubitt (York) / Stephan Stach (Prague) / Paulina Gulińska-Jurgiel (Halle): Welcome

Anna Koch (York) / Stephan Stach (Prague): Introduction

Panel 1: Jewish Efforts to Remember the Shoah in East and West

Arkadi Zeltser (Jerusalem): The Cold War and Memorialization of the Holocaust in the USSR

Eli Lederhendler (Jerusalem): The Politics of Memory and the Shadow of the Holocaust in America in the Cold War Era

Simon Perego (Paris): „The Communist Schism in Jewish Life“ - Transnational Politics and Holocaust Commemorations among Parisian Jews during the Cold War, until the end of the 1960s

Panel 2: Remembering Perpetrators and Rescuers across the Iron Curtain

Kai Struve (Halle): The case of Theodor Oberländer in 1959/60 – an Entangled History of Propaganda, Politics, and Holocaust Memory in East and West

Siobhan Hyland (Northampton): *Searchlight* – Campaigning against Nazi Perpetrators in Britain

Manja Herrmann (Berlin): Transnational Holocaust Memory and the case of Rescue: Kurt R. Grossmann and the Early Berlin Initiative *Unsung Heroes* (1958-1966)

Panel 3: Memory staged in the Courtroom

Matthew Turner (Deakin / Munich): Politicising the Holocaust in the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963-1965)

Vanessa Voisin (Paris): From the courthouse to the screen: Holocaust history made memory in Cold War USSR

Roundtable Discussion

Jeffrey Herf (Maryland) / Nadège Ragaru (Paris) / David Shneer (Boulder) / Isabel Wollaston (Birmingham): How did Cold War shape our understanding of the Holocaust?

Panel 4: Scholarship and Holocaust Memory

Olof Bortz (Stockholm): Raul Hilberg, the Cold War and the history of the Holocaust

Daniela R.P. Weiner (Chapel Hill): Educational Entanglements – East and West German History Textbooks' Narratives about the Holocaust and the Second World War

Panel 5: Artists and Intellectuals' Efforts to shape Memory

Jenny Watson (Sheffield): 'No gas chambers. No crematoria' – Romanian-German Authors of the 1970s-80s and the Insufficiency of Inter-

national Memory Discourse

Irena Tcherneva (Paris): The Arts Judge Crimes against Humanity. Social and Political Usages of the Painting *The Last Way* by Yosef Kuzkovski in Soviet Latvia (1944-1970)

Anna Pollmann (Jerusalem): Atrocities without their Own Reality. Günther Anders and Holocaust Reception in the West German Left

Panel 6: Memory and Morality

Jonathan Kaplan (Berlin): Ambassadors of Memory: the Struggle of Guilt and Responsibility in the GDR

Máté Zombory (Budapest): Moral Universalism in the East – Holocaust and Memory in Zoltán Fábri's film *Late Season* (1966)

Marta Zawodna-Stephan (Poznań): Moral Universalism in the East – Let the Dead Serve the Living. Dead Body Politics in the Former Nazi Camps on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain

Closing Remarks

Anna Koch (York) / Stephan Stach (Prague)

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