

# Is the Holocaust different from other genocides?

Dan Michman

## The issue at stake

What is the relation between the Holocaust and other genocides? Is the Holocaust *a* genocide? Is it the ultimate case of genocide? Is it only/just a genocide?

British historian Donald Bloxham has emphatically stated that:

Between 5,100,000 and 6,200,000 Jews were murdered during the Second World War, an episode the Nazis called the 'final solution of the Jewish question.' The world today knows it as the Holocaust. The subtitle I have chosen for this book – *A Genocide* – uses the indefinite article not to diminish the magnitude of the Holocaust but to encourage the reader to think of it as a particular example of a broader phenomenon.

For Bloxham the lay and historiographical term 'Holocaust', the Nazi administrative term 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' and the historical act of the murder of close to 6 million Jews mean the same – a genocide. American historian Timothy Snyder, in his best-selling book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (published in 2010), claims that the murder of the Jews occurred together with, and in the context of, a broader scale of spiralling mass-killing actions carried out by the Hitler and Stalin regimes in a clearly defined time period (the 1930s and 1940s) and in a geographical area – the 'Bloodlands' – stretching from western Poland to the Black Sea. In this interpretation, 'the Holocaust' is not exceptional and does not stay apart, but is a sub-chapter of a bloody epoch occurring in precisely those 'Bloodlands' and not elsewhere because it resulted from 'the Germans and the Soviets... [provoking] one another to ever greater crimes.' 'These atrocities,' says Snyder, 'shared a place, and they shared a time: the bloodlands between 1933 and 1945. To describe their course has been to introduce to European history its *central event*' [my emphasis]. That is, the Holocaust is *not* an event by itself, but part of a much greater murderous event.

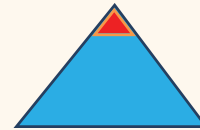
In fact, these recent interpretations challenge the understanding that has developed over decades of research, that the Holocaust was exceptional in its nature, 'unique', unprecedented, or the ultimate and most extreme case of genocide (Yehuda Bauer is probably the most outspoken favouring this approach.) Australian historian A Dirk Moses expressed the critical stance bluntly by saying (in 2002): 'Whether similarities [between the Holocaust and other genocides] are more significant than the differences, is ultimately a political and philosophical, rather than a historical question... Uniqueness is not a category for historical research; it is a religious or metaphysical category.' In 2011 he and Bloxham added, regarding the atmosphere in the scholarly community, that 'the relationship between study of the Holocaust and study of genocide warrants reflection, because it has been both negative and positive, characterised variously by synergies, processes of self-definition by mutual exclusion, and occasional resentment.' Australian genocide scholar



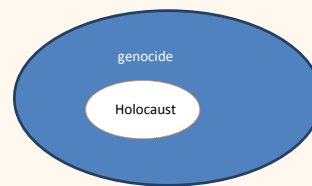
(l-r) Warren Fineberg, Dan Michman, Johnny Baker and Michael Cohen

Colin Tatz even described the situation as follows: 'Our maturing discipline [of genocide studies] needs to find a sense of collegiality, consensus on terminology, and yardsticks with which to measure scales, dimensions, and degrees of the crime... *Foremost is the challenge of finding a space for encompassing and embracing the Holocaust with some comfort. The judeocide is an ally, not an enemy, and not on the margins!* That is, Tatz discerns an enmity in the camp of genocide scholars towards the status of the Holocaust and a tendency to marginalise it. This is, of course, amazing, not to say alarming.

*Illustration 1: Yehuda Bauer's view – the Holocaust is the most extreme case of the genocide phenomenon*



*Illustration 2: The view of many genocide (and some Holocaust) scholars – the Holocaust is one case of genocide, perhaps bigger, but not essentially different*



## Shoah, Holocaust, Churban and more: some remarks on the terminology

*Shoah*, meaning 'catastrophe' or 'disaster' and, to a lesser extent, *Churban* (in Hebrew) or *Churban* (the Yiddish pronunciation of the same word) meaning 'destruction', are the Hebrew words that have remained in use over the past seven decades in the internal Jewish discourse designating the fate of the Jews during the Nazi era; they had already been used in internal Jewish discourse from 1933. More terms arose during the period itself and immediately after 1945. *Holocaust*, a Greek word meaning 'entirely burnt sacrifice', originally relating to pagan sacrifices, was used in the Greek version of the Bible to translate the Biblical *korban* 'ola. It gradually entered the

discourse as the leading term for Jews' fate in the Nazi era towards the late 1950s, precisely when the cumulative results of the first wave of scholarly research on the perpetrators, first and foremost carried out by German researchers, concluded that antisemitism and anti-Jewish policies had not just been one of the many facets of the Third Reich but were central to its totality. In other words, the 'Jewish' ingredient of the Nazi period was recognised as having special, pivotal importance and *that* fact raised the quest for some clear designation, that is, an epithet.

## Approaching the issue methodologically

One should pay methodological attention to the above-mentioned fact, that the terms *Shoah*, *Churban* and *Holocaust* (as well as the other ones that faded away) were *existing* words that were picked up in the discourse relating to the fate of the Jews during the Nazi period, not originally coined to represent this event. Additionally, they are vague and do not indicate what exactly happened and when. The term 'genocide', on the contrary, was newly coined in 1943 and made public in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, with the purpose to designate – in a universalising mode – crimes such as the murder of the Jews. Although the mass killing of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915 had been the starting point for Lemkin's contemplation (as early as 1933), the Nazi crimes with the murder of the Jews as their peak served as the final catalyst for his initiative. He defined genocide as follows:

... a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.

Does 'The Holocaust' fit the definition proposed by Lemkin or the varying definitions proposed later – in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) or by scholars?

## Conceptualisation of 'the Holocaust'

Over the years, scholars have proposed differing conceptualisations of the Holocaust; they can be found in comprehensive histories of the event and in encyclopedias and dictionaries. Yet in recent years it has become gradually common to identify the Holocaust with the systematic murder of the Jews – a misconception which led to the understandings quoted in the beginning of this article.

A thorough examination of the Nazi enterprise will show that the core of what we should use the term Holocaust for is the attempt to eradicate the 'Jewish spirit' from the universe. Hitler and his adherents believed in the idea that Jews and Jewish ideas polluted and haunted the world. SS-man Dieter Wisliceny, one of Adolf Eichmann's aides, explained in 1946 that in Nazism's view,

the world is directed by forces of good and evil. According to this view, the principle of evil was embodied in the Jews... This world of images is totally incomprehensible in logical or rational terms [because] it is a form of religiosity that leads to sectarianism. Millions of people believed these

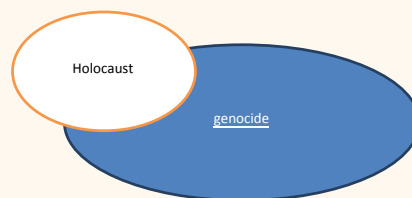
things... something that can be compared only to similar phenomena from the Middle Ages, such as the mania of witches (Hexenwahn).

In other words, the Jewish spirit had to be exorcised though the removal of its human-like carriers – the physical Jews – as well as through the sisyphian *Kampf* (struggle) against all expressions of 'Jewishness'. Yet Jewishness was not what Jews perceive as such, but all kinds of ideas and political systems which are based on and promote equality. The *jüdischen Geist* was worldwide and polluted the universe; among the many enemies of Nazi Germany, the Jews were the only group to which the terms 'world' or 'international' were attributed (*das Weltjudentum* or *internationales Judentum*). Jews were described as being everywhere in the world; moreover, they were the 'binding element of the obstacle front of all adversaries of National-Socialism.' For Hitler, within his grand version of restructuring the world on the basis of the racial principle, the war against the Jews became a central obsession, accompanying his political career throughout; indeed, his September 1919 expression '*Entfernung der Juden überhaupt* (the total removal of the Jews)' was and remained the guiding principle of his endeavor. This extreme vision was not only Hitler's, important as that was: it was shared by many lower echelon functionaries 'working towards the Führer,' but also outside the bureaucracy, within and outside Germany. Nazi antisemitism took the lead, but it radicalised other types of antisemitism too, and thus could become a European enterprise.

The attempt to exorcise Jews and Jewry was not simple at all. For that purpose the Jews, who were scattered, with multiple identities and often unidentifiable, had to be cast out. This was done through a variety of means: legal definitions, visual marking, expropriation, expulsion and finally – well-organised wholesale murder. But the all-embracing campaign against the Jewish spirit also included self-purification – an *Entjudungskampf* (battle for de-judaisation) of the German language, legal system and the like. As such, 'the Holocaust' went *beyond* the typical pattern of one group aiming at the disappearance of another one: it was the attempt to exorcise the Jewish destructive spirit, and this included a genocidal chapter – the murder of the carriers of that spirit – as well as the erasure of its imprints wherever they could be identified.

My conclusion is that the murder of close to 6 million Jews was the *partial* result of the Final Solution, which itself was only one chapter of the Holocaust.

*Illustration 3: The Holocaust as an event going beyond the genocide model*



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