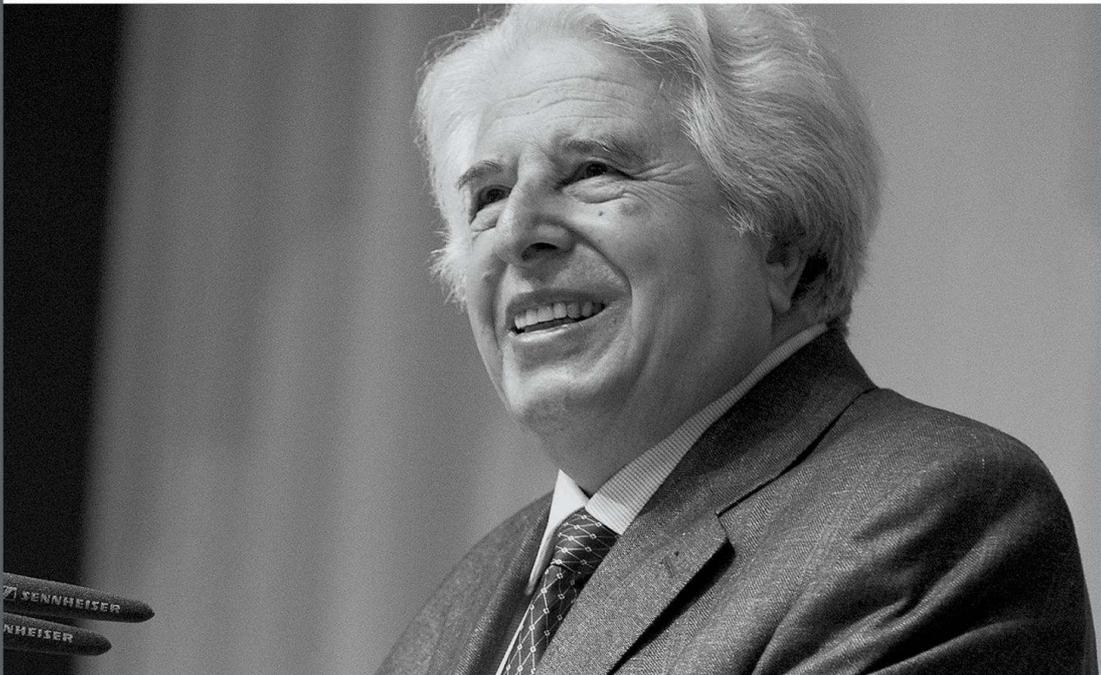


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History and Memory:
Lessons from the Holocaust

Saul Friedländer

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This ePaper, *History and Memory: lessons from the Holocaust*, presents the original text of the *Leçon inaugurale* delivered by Professor Saul Friedländer on 23 September 2014 at the Maison de la Paix, which marked the opening of the academic year of the Graduate Institute, Geneva.

The lecture highlights an original analysis of the evolution of German memory since the end of World War II and its consequences on the writing of history. Generations of historians have been particularly marked in a differentiated manner, depending on their personal proximity to the war, but also on collective representations conveyed by film and television in a globalised world.

Saul Friedländer is Emeritus Professor at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). He won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for his book *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*. In 1963, he received his PhD from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, where he taught until 1988.

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History and Memory: Lessons from the Holocaust

Opening Lecture, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Geneva, 23 September 2014

- 1 On 28 June of this year, as could be expected, all major media outlets mentioned that exactly a century earlier a young Serb nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, shot and killed the heir to the Hapsburg imperial throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, during the latter's state visit to Sarajevo. The murder unleashed a series of events that, within a month or so, led to the opening salvos of World War I. In its front page article, the *New York Times* commented: 'With the death of the last veterans, World War One [...] has moved from memory to history. But its resonance has not faded [...] on land and geography, on people and nations, and on the causes and consequences of modern war.'
- 2 Indeed, the lingering memory of that war is no longer an aggregate of individual recollections; what remains is a narrative — or rather a series of narratives — each socially necessary for a different group and important for that group's identity. Hence, as long as such collective memory is 'alive', it fosters emotional residues that impinge — often very subtly — on the writing of history, even if individual historians may be convinced that their work is entirely independent of constraints. Such an impact may last for generations. This was implicitly recognized by the pre-eminent historian of the French Revolution, François Furet, when he declared in 1989 that, on its 200th anniversary, the Revolution had finally passed into history.
- 3 The extermination of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War represents a singular aspect of contemporary collective memory. Its peculiar character derives first and foremost from the extreme nature of the crimes committed and from the vast number of perpetrators involved all over the continent. That peculiar character stems also from the presence, for a few decades, of individual memories aside of, contrary to, or integrated into a collective memory surfacing over the years in each and every European country.

- 4 From the late 1940s, and during the following fifteen years or so, memory of the extermination was repressed by all (even by the surviving victims, of course for reasons opposite to those of others). Historiography also remained essentially mute. In the ensuing years however, both memory and historiography of the Holocaust moved from amnesia to increasingly fierce debates leading to what is considered at times to be an excess of memory.
- 5 Given the scope of this lecture, a discussion of the general interaction between memory and history of the Holocaust would be impossible; instead, I will examine the evolution of German memory and its impact on the writing of that history.
- 6 Three factors among many contributed to this evolution: age groups, the function of specific images in Germany and beyond, and the globalization of memory.

Age Groups

- 7 The self-imposed amnesia about the Reich's criminal policies, which descended on Western Germany during the 1950s and early 1960s, is notorious. In the East, the Soviet line, which identified the Nazi crimes with fascism in general and fascist West Germany in particular took hold until the reunification of 1989. In the West, the general public was given all the necessary pretexts to turn away from the past: Germany was now a democracy, it stood against Soviet totalitarianism, and it was paying reparations to the Jewish victims of Nazism, and mainly, it was argued, putting debates about the past to rest was the only way to rebuild the country and look ahead.
- 8 An oral history research project, conducted by Lutz Niethammer at the end of 1970s among older 'blue-collar' workers from the Ruhr who were raised under Weimar — many of them from a socialist and anti-Nazi background — led to an unexpected result. They remembered their life as a steady progression from the misery of the Great Depression to ever better material conditions under the Nazi regime, and, after a short hiatus during the immediate post-war period, into the abundance of the Federal Republic. When asked about the war in the east and the bombings of German cities, they remembered it as a very short interval between the two phases of constant progression.
- 9 In short, for a significant segment of the West German population, the memory of the Third Reich remained a positive one. If Auschwitz was ever brought up, the bombing of Dresden generally followed as an example of similar Allied crimes against Germany. And, the vast majority of the population in the Federal Republic communed in the memory of the heroic fighting on the eastern front. This, incidentally, created a problem for official discourse, as commemoration of the dead could not include the Wehrmacht or the Waffen SS. Ultimately, a plaque was unveiled in the Royal Garden in Bonn dedicated to the victims of wars and tyranny, without further identification. Genuine feelings of guilt or shame were rarely expressed in public, except here or there in literature. Rather, as Guenther Grass put it in *Dog Years*, Germans assembled in clubs to eat onions and shed some tears...
- 10 The West German historians of the 1950s and the 1960s were all adults in the Nazi era. During those twelve years, they were either outright Nazis like Werner Conze and Theodor Schieder, or conservative nationalists like the grand old man of the profession, Friedrich Meinecke, the right-wing Gerhard Ritter, or the Jewish émigré and former monarchist Hans Rothfels. Whatever the differences in the individual attitudes of these historians towards the Nazi years may have been, they were not about to proclaim

German guilt, even if they knew of the regime's worst crimes. Abundant details of the exterminations were available of course, thanks to foreign historians such as the Swiss Walther Hofer, from trials that started again at the end of the 1950s (Ulm), from the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and the two Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt in 1963 and 1965. It was a beginning of sorts.

- 11 In terms of age, the group of historians that followed were barely a few years younger than their predecessors. They had been about 16 to 18 years old when the war was coming to an end, perhaps first year draftees or helpers in anti-aircraft batteries; almost all had been socialized in the Hitler Youth. Nonetheless, following the war they were young enough to start from 'zero' so to speak, without having to carry the responsibility that could have been attached to their older 'siblings'. Young enough to adopt the new set of values brought by the Western Allies, they were nicknamed 'the skeptical generation' by the sociologist Helmuth Schelski. From among them arose the historians who dominated the West German scene until the reunification of Germany in 1989.
- 12 In the Federal Republic, this cohort undoubtedly recognized the criminal nature of the Nazi regime. Yet their early socialization left traces, identifiable by outsiders but not necessarily by themselves. They occasionally expressed deeply rooted resentments. In other words, this cohort carried a split memory of sorts. In terms of historiography, the impact of that split memory appears in an interpretation of the Nazi past that tended to limit the singularity of Nazi crimes or exonerate most Germans from any true adherence to the regime.
- 13 On the Right, these historians generally followed a common Cold War approach, by using 'totalitarianism' as a central explanatory concept. It created an implicit (at times explicit) comparison with the Soviet Union and its crimes, thus erasing the singularity of the Nazi case.
- 14 On the Left, two new interpretations prospered. One explained the extermination as a quasi-automatic result of the chaotic structure of the Nazi system.
- 15 Competing against each other for influence and power, various agencies and their leaders attempted to interpret Hitler's 'wishes' — often expressed in nebulous terms — leading to a 'cumulative radicalization' for which nobody was specifically accountable. Thus, responsibility for the extermination policies lay not with any particular individual but with the system itself.
- 16 The murder of millions disappeared in a dense institutional fog.
- 17 The second approach focused on 'everyday life' in the Third Reich. It argued that the vast majority of Germans remained untouched by Nazi ideology and propaganda and that, ultimately, the support of the masses was mobilized by the social mobility and material advantages offered by a regime that embraced intense modernization. Thus, most Germans pursued their normal existences and fulfilled ordinary obligations, unaware of the murderous campaign launched by a small, hard-core group. Both approaches 'exonerated' the vast majority of their compatriots.
- 18 A new twist surfaced on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war, in 1985. Conservative Germans, in search of a redeemed national identity, demanded an end to the mention of Nazi crimes. The far-right historian Ernst Nolte defined the issue as that of 'a past that refuses to pass away.' Left-wing historians, following the stand taken by the philosopher Juergen Habermas, affirmed the need to keep the memory of that past alive for the sake of an entirely new German identity.

- 19 From the outset, the confrontation, the 'historians controversy' as it became known, centred on the Holocaust: while the right, faithful to its historiographical tradition, stressed the comparability of Soviet extermination policies with those of the Nazis, even giving precedence to the 'Bolsheviks', the Left, arguing against its own historiographical tradition, affirmed the singularity of Nazi criminality.
- 20 When the publisher Ernst Piper published the texts of the controversy, the volume carried the following subtitle: *The Documentation about the Controversy regarding the Singularity of the national-Socialist Extermination of the Jews*. It also indicated the date of birth of the participants: all, except for two younger ones, were born between 1928 and 1932. The 'historians controversy' was in fact the last hurrah of the Hitler Youth cohort. By the end of the 1980s, it was gradually leaving the public scene.
- 21 The new and ascending age group was truly a new generation, that of the sons and daughters of the adult contemporaries of the Third Reich. Born during the war or at the end of it, they were the first cohort without a personal memory of the Hitler years. They were the rebellious students of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To all the other themes of rebellion brandished all over the West, the German students gleefully added the Nazi past of their parents, creating a subculture under the slogan 'Father, where were you?' Families were torn apart by the refusal of the parents to share their memories and the children's demand to know. The Leftist wing of the rebellion argued that the Federal Republic was but a continuation of the Nazi regime, led by the same reactionary capitalist elites.
- 22 This overall stance quickly reduced the original attack against the Nazi fathers into an assault on 'fascism' past and present. Much of this initial fervour finally merged with the left of the Hitler Youth cohort that, in large measure, also adopted the interpretation of Nazism as fascism, in opposition to the totalitarianism concept of the right. This generation of 'rebels' often left its specific imprint on the historiography of Nazism and of the Holocaust by giving it a strongly Marxist hue that, in and of itself, had no ready interpretation for the extermination of the Jews.
- 23 It is only from the late 1990s on that a deeper change took place as the result of a twofold distancing from Hitler's Reich. The new generation now coming into its own — that of the grandchildren — is twice removed from its parents' and grandparents' struggles with the memory of Nazism and at a safe distance so to say, allowing for a more dispassionate perception and for a much greater readiness to look at all aspects of that past. Moreover, the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic were being smoothly replaced by a unified Germany and thus the Third Reich was not the immediate past anymore: the interim years created a buffer zone protecting the new Germany from direct contact with the Hitler period. In principle, both memory and history could unfold on a more even keel.

The Function of Images

- 24 Memory, both individual and collective, is a story we tell and images we keep. Over centuries, visual representations of the past did contribute to individual and collective memory of notable events or of daily life. But in the age of film and television the influence of visual representation has broken through all limits and the new media can create any past at will. All such renditions may be partly invented, partly twisted. The simplest method is omission.

- 25 From the mid 1940s through the early 1950s, Nazi crimes filled European and American screens in newsreels, documentaries, and fictional films. The mounds of corpses filmed in Bergen-Belsen, of hair, prosthetic limbs, glasses, or suitcases shown in Auschwitz, became iconic images of German criminality. The filming of the Nuremberg trials completed the picture. There was no difficulty in pointing the finger at Germany. The identity of the victims, however, was hazy and local collaboration in occupied or satellite European countries remained a taboo for decades. Amnesia was not a uniquely German specialty.
- 26 The most important documentary production of the 1950s, a stunning film about the sites of extermination, Alain Resnais and Jean Cayrol's *Night and Fog*, did not mention the word 'Jew' even once, as both the director and the scriptwriter were communists who followed the orders of the Party – that is to say, of the Soviet Union: the specific Jewish aspect of the extermination was not to be mentioned.
- 27 Another widely seen film of the 1950s was a quintessential Hollywood production, a melodrama based on Anne Frank's diary. Anne Frank's Jewish identity could not be hidden but the diary, partly censored by her father and, even more so, the film focused on her belief in the ultimate good in humanity rather than on her fate as a Jew. An Anne Frank cult spread among West German youth and 'pilgrimages' to Bergen-Belsen, where Anne perished with her sister Margot, became common, while her diary turned into a worldwide bestseller. In short, for millions of readers or viewers, she represented the epitome of a wise, young, wistful, and innocent universal victim, an image that Western society of the 1950s was all too eager to accept.
- 28 From the late 1960s on, German film entered a new era, ideologically close to the student movement: anti- governmental, anti-American, at times anti-Semitic. Simultaneously though – but independently – West German, French, and Italian films about Nazism produced during the 1970s were a weird mixture of nostalgia, irony, and playfulness and dubbed the 'Hitler Wave' in Germany, 'La Mode retro' in France, something else again in Italy. This strange phenomenon may have been a reaction to the heightened moral imperatives regarding the representation of the Nazi years that followed the trials I have mentioned. It may also have derived from the moralistic stance of the student movement on the one hand and its rebelliousness on the other, as well as from the playfulness inherent in postmodernism in the arts. The immediate trigger may have been the publication of Albert Speer's memoirs, a clever mixture of fascination with Hitler and nostalgia for the power and the glory of those years, with but a vague mention of the criminal dimension of it all.
- 29 During this period, historiography influenced films that, in turn, were echoed in historical writings. Thus, Joachim Fest's hugely successful biography of Hitler (Fest was Speer's ghostwriter) led to Fest's film *Hitler: Eine Karriere*; in the two hours it took to narrate Hitler's titanic rise and fall, two minutes or so dealt with Nazi crimes. The film was taken off German screens after a very short run: it was too much. No such qualms surfaced in France. In Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, the sexual attraction between an SS camp officer and the film's female Jewish victim flares up again when, years after the war, the two meet in a hotel where she is a guest and he the night porter. Today, all of this is forgotten, as is Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*, Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*, and mainly the most insidious production of all: Hans-Juergen Syberberg's *Our Hitler*. The Hitler wave vanished at the end of the 1970s. It was then, however, that the real visual bombshell exploded.

- 30 In 1977, *Holocaust*, a simplistic and artistically worthless NBC television miniseries aired in the US. The Hollywood production followed the parallel stories of a Jewish and a Nazi family and of their contrary fate. The public impact of *Holocaust* was hardly believable; while tens, probably hundreds of millions of people saw it worldwide, in Germany many of its around thirty million viewers publicly wondered why they had never heard of the events described...
- 31 Historians of the Holocaust suddenly found an eager readership and over the following three decades interest in the topic, whether in its scholarly rendition or otherwise, grew exponentially. Hollywood had created a memory that now demanded completion and interpretation.
- 32 This general demand was, in part, the ground from which the previously mentioned historiographical debates emerged. The world of film itself did not remain immune to controversy.
- 33 In 1984, the German director Edgar Reitz created a remarkable TV series entitled *Heimat* ('homeland' or rather 'motherland' in terms of its emotional connotation.) It describes the everyday life of the inhabitants of Schabbach, a fictional village in the Hunsrueck, in the west of Germany — in fact describing Reitz's own place of birth, childhood, and adolescence. The chronicle begins on the morrow of World War I and follows the life of several families through the Depression, the Third Reich, and the American occupation, into the Federal Republic and on into the sixties. Two further parts, produced later, carry the story forward in time.
- 34 The years of Nazism have had no significant impact on the everyday routine of Reitz's villagers who continue to live their traditional existence and maintain the age-old relations between the few local families. In Reitz's view, it was the arrival of the Americans and the modernization that followed which destroyed the villagers' essentially rooted world. This was the real catastrophe. In and of itself, Reitz's message would have been problematic enough; it became a manifesto when, in a major interview, he declared that his series was meant to restore a German memory stolen by Hollywood's 'Holocaust' (often, 'Hollywood' meant the Jews.) A year after the screening of that first part of Reitz's series, the French-Jewish director Claude Lanzmann released *Shoah*, a nine-hour film based on interviews, mainly with Jewish survivors, Poles, and some Germans, all of it centred on the extermination as such. Thus, on the screens as in historiography, a confrontation of sorts marked the years immediately preceding the unification of Germany.

The Globalization of Memory

- 35 A few years before the turn of the twenty-first century, as economic globalization and its social and cultural ripple effects spread, Hollywood, once again, produced a story of the Holocaust that reached hundreds of millions of people, adding another worldwide layer of artificial memory to the pre-existing representation of these events. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* — launched to great acclaim in 1993 — became the trigger of what may be called a 'Holocaust culture'.
- 36 Other now well-known films on the subject appeared in short order, as did a growing number of museums, memorial sites, and commemorative dates and rituals. The holocaust culture may have produced a surfeit of memory. By the end of the twentieth century, 'Auschwitz' emerged as a common topos in the Western public sphere, used for

every imaginable cause. Thus, tossed around across contemporary global media and electronic communication, the memory of the Holocaust has often been vulgarized and misused.

- 37 These developments led to a major shift in the relation between memory of and history of the Holocaust. Since the turn of the century, history has been growing increasingly independent of the vagaries of public memory. And, as mentioned earlier, the sense of distance from the actual events, inherent in the passage of time, greatly contributed to the autonomy of historical writing.
- 38 Another major change that reflected more directly the globalization trend took place in contemporary historiography of the Holocaust: the endeavour of some historians, mostly on the Left, to eliminate the notion of the singularity of the Holocaust (a 'singularity' that ironically was defended by the German Left in the 'historians' controversy' of 1986-7); it implied the historicization of the Holocaust within the context of European imperialism, particularly in its racist foundations, or within the genocides of the twentieth century including, first and foremost, Stalinist crimes. There is nothing to be said against this trend; however, more often than not, its comparative methodology uses categories so general that they may be applied to any set of historical events, as has been the case, in previous years, with the interpretation of the Holocaust in the context of 'modernity'.

Some Open Questions

- 39 Couldn't it be that seventy years after the end of the war, in the wake of the globalization of Holocaust memory, the typical controversies about historical responsibility would have disappeared from Western, particularly German, public debate? It may be so in general terms. Yet, when one of the most famous German novelists, Martin Walser, declared in 1998, during an official ceremony, that Germans had the right to be sick of the moral 'cudgel' of the Holocaust, the whole audience — the German elite, including the President — applauded. The exception was Ignaz Bubis, chairman of the Organization of Jews in Germany.... All in all however, the debate has moved to a different sphere.
- 40 In 2010, the sociologist Harald Welzer published a disturbing study about what young Germans knew of their grandparents' support for the Nazi regime. None of these grandchildren denied the crimes of Hitler's Germany but all were convinced that their own grandfathers had nothing to do with the regime. The title of the study said it all: 'Opa war kein Nazi' (Grandpa wasn't a Nazi). What the grandchildren heard from their grandparents were tales of personal ignorance, non-participation, even of help to the victims.
- 41 Welzer's study did not change the fact that notwithstanding Martin Walser and other contemporaries of the Nazi years, German public discourse had thoroughly admitted Nazi crimes. The vast amount of historical work about the Holocaust, the large-scale official commemorations of its victims, and the frequent dealing with these issues in the German media demonstrated that, in the public sphere, an ongoing 'working through' was taking place.
- 42 Then, in early 2013, the second German TV channel released the highly successful miniseries *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* or, in its English title 'The Generation War'. Possibly against the producers' intention, the story confirmed Welzer's findings: The five friends described in the series' three episodes were all non-political young people, called up and sent to the eastern front (two as soldiers, one as nurse, one as entertainer; the odd

man out is a Jew whose story is linked to that of his friends but not emblematic of the issue). Age wise, they are the grandparents of Welzer's study. At the outset, the regime's brainwashing pushes two of the youngsters to take thoroughly bad, even criminal decisions, but very soon each of them recognizes that they have been fooled and led astray. Two pay for the mistake with their lives. In short, not only did these ordinary young Germans not support the Nazi regime, they ultimately became its victims. "In other words, while most Germans accept the public discourse on the Holocaust, the exoneration strategy that we noticed over decades remains alive, albeit in the safe haven of family mythology.

- 43 This leads to the following open alternative: either the passing of the grandparents' generation will extinguish the familial private memory of grandpa's non-participation or, on the contrary, the current disappearance of taboos, also due to extraneous events, will turn the private memories of innocence into counter-memories of the extermination that may impinge on the writing of its history.