Holocaust Remembrance and Representation

Documentation from a Research Conference

Research anthology of the Inquiry on a Museum about the Holocaust

Stockholm 2020

SWEDISH GOVERNMENT INQUIRIES

Swedish Government Official Reports

SOU 2020:21

Exhibiting the Holocaust in countries where it didn't happen

Paul Salmons

Abstract

The Holocaust is – inescapably – a part of British (and Swedish) history and heritage. Not only in the aspects of the history that these nations have traditionally incorporated into their public memory (as places of refuge during the Nazi era, for example, or as providers of assistance to the survivors in its aftermath), but also in those aspects that are more troubling, and less reflected upon and remembered: what did the 'outside world' know and understand of the crimes committed in Nazi-occupied Europe; when was this known, and what more could have been done to prevent these mass atrocity crimes, and to rescue the victims? What does knowledge about the Holocaust mean for our understanding of genocide and can this strengthen our efforts at genocide prevention today?

Fundamentally, while being *outside* the territories where the killings took place, these countries are *inside* and *part of* the broader western tradition from which the Holocaust emerged. The Holocaust was not an aberration from the 'normal course' of western history, but rather had its roots in European history, culture and society. This is a tradition that Britain and Sweden have both contributed to and been shaped by for millennia. What does it mean for us that the Holocaust emerged out of our common European society, culture, polity and tradition?

Introductory remarks

Let us begin with Tutankhamun. This may seem a surprising place to start, but it can be a way into several of the questions that have already been raised in this conference.

I suspect that one of the reasons I have been asked to speak about exhibiting the Holocaust 'in countries where it did not happen' is because of the question of relevance. Why should people care about a Holocaust museum in Sweden or, in the case of my own country, in Great Britain?

But this concern, about the relevance of the Holocaust, takes a rather limited view of people's interests and concerns – are we so parochial that we are uninterested in events not immediately and intimately connected to our own identities and national histories? The evidence would suggest that this is not the case. 1.42 million people recently visited the *Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh* exhibition in Paris; we could also point to successful exhibitions on Ghengis Khan in the United States, or the Terracotta Warriors in London.

On the issue of relevance, then, it can be said that – even while Sweden remained neutral during the Second World War, and has no authentic sites of the Holocaust mass killings – still stronger connections and intersections exist between Swedish national history and the history of the Holocaust than they do between French national identity and the history of Ancient Egypt; twenty-first century America and the Mongolian empire of the 13th century; or British culture and the funerary art, rites and customs of Qin dynasty China. However, it is of note that the relevance of the Holocaust is so often questioned, when other subjects are not. It may be that this has to do with a reluctance to confront the Holocaust – understandable, as this is an extremely troubling and unsettling history, one that we might prefer to forget as it raises such difficult questions for our time.

With this in mind, beginning with Tutankhamun can also help us to address the issues of what a Holocaust museum has *in common* with other museums, and what *distinguishes* a Holocaust museum from others.

Traditional and Holocaust museums have much in common: both spheres are places of research, display and learning, concerned with

aspects of the human experience; both tell us something about who we are as societies, as communities; and – in my view – both can be made especially powerful and meaningful for the visitor through their display and interpretation of historical artefacts. Just as we would be disappointed to visit a Tutankhamun exhibition and not to see the things made, owned and used in the time of ancient Egypt, so too the physical remnants of the Holocaust have a special power to move and engage us. These objects give a sense of authenticity and authority to the narrative storytelling – they are the things that remain from that time, which continue in the present, a tangible connection with that ancient people and past, in the case of the Pharaohs, and with the traumatic past of a recent genocide in the case of the Holocaust. Both histories are made 'real' for the visitor through the special connection and resonance that is brought about when encountering in the present the original historical artefact.

However, while the artefacts of most museums and galleries celebrate the achievements of humankind, the wonders of art and culture, Holocaust and genocide museums instead present material evidence of our most atrocious crimes: they reveal deep flaws and fissures that allow apparently stable and peaceful societies, under certain conditions, to fracture and to descend into mass violence. This difference with traditional museums – the emotionally-challenging and deeply unsettling subject of the Holocaust – has consequences for the ethics of collection and display; challenges of conservation; the aesthetics of design; and the kinds of visitor experience and meaning making we intend, all of which a Swedish national Holocaust Museum will need to take into account, and which I am happy to discuss at more length at another time.

A special challenge of Holocaust and genocide museums is that they uncover parts of the human condition we might prefer to remain hidden. Whereas many exhibitions focus upon the exceptional, the inspirational and the extraordinary, Holocaust and genocide museums raise deeply troubling questions. How was it possible, not long ago and not far from where we live, that people across the continent became complicit in the murder of their neighbours? What did people and governments in the 'outside world' know and understand of these crimes while they were taking place, and what did they do to try to prevent them and to rescue the victims?

And what does the Holocaust mean for our view of ourselves, our ideas of progress? For, while the Holocaust was – first and foremost – a disaster for its victims, it was also a catastrophe for our notion of what we like to call 'western civilization'. This, then, is not only a Jewish story. It is part of our national and of our European stories; it poses questions about our identity, the modern world, and the societies in which we live together. Unquestionably, it makes the Holocaust profoundly relevant today, at a time when in many countries society appears to be polarising; rhetoric is becoming more extreme; nationalism and antisemitism are on the rise; there is a turn towards autocratic and authoritarian rule; and liberal democratic institutions and values appear under threat.

This, also, is a central point of relevance for countries such as Great Britain and Sweden: the museums and exhibitions need to avoid a consoling (or even self-congratulatory) narrative that they are 'countries where it did not happen'. Instead, they need to reflect on the far more uncomfortable realisation that these countries are a part of the wider European story of the Holocaust, because it is in our common culture, history and traditions that we discover the origins of the Holocaust. The factors that led to the Holocaust were not absent from the 'countries where it did not happen' and neither did they disappear in 1945, with the end of the Second World War.

The stories we like to tell ourselves about ourselves

Rather than a lack of interest in the Holocaust, a growing body of empirical research into Holocaust education across many countries and language regions suggests that there is very strong interest in the Holocaust and widespread belief that it is significant and meaningful.[1] However, this research also shows that much work remains to be done, that there tends to be broad but rather superficial knowledge about this history; many misconceptions and national myths that circulate in societies go unchallenged in the classroom; many societies do not adequately confront the dark aspects of their own national history; and that narratives tend to be very Hitler-centric,

[1] Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Monique Eckmann & Doyle Stevick (eds.), *Research in teaching and learning about the Holocaust: a dialogue beyond border*, IHRA 2017.

with little appreciation of why and how broader society became complicit.

All peoples, nations and societies have their myths, of course, that help to form the sense of identity that binds them together. As Tim Cole puts it, 'a myth is a story that evokes strong sentiments, transmits and reinforces basic societal values.'[2] For many in Britain, the history of the Second World War is an example of this – 'a good story' to tell. Its touchstones in the British collective memory are of Dunkirk, the Blitz, the Battle of Britain, self-sacrifice and common cause leading to an ultimate victory, the liberation of Europe, all of which go towards a sense that Britain fought a 'just war'. Such elements have deeply influenced some Britons' sense of national identity, so much so that warnings of the disastrous consequences of Brexit have at times been dismissed with an appeal to the 'Blitz spirit' which will supposedly see us through adversity. (Those who invoke such myths, of course, seem oblivious to the fact that no one voted for the Blitz.) But, in any case, the question remains, where does the Holocaust 'fit' into this national story?

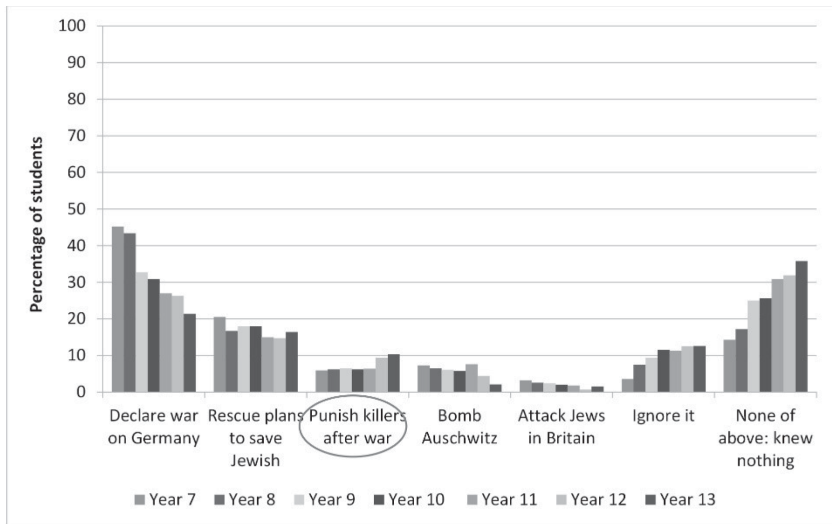
Large scale, national research by UCL Centre for Holocaust Education may help to provide an answer, as it included one question that sought to explore secondary school students' understanding of Britain's role during the Holocaust.[3] Students in Years 7–13 (aged 11–18 years old), were asked 'What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?'

From the responses to a set of multiple-choice statements it appears that the Holocaust has been subsumed to some extent into the wider (mythical) national story of the Second World War, with the overwhelming number of students believing, erroneously, either that Britain declared war to save the Jews, vigorously conducted rescue efforts (including bombing Auschwitz), or else only discovered the crimes once victory had been achieved. Very few understood that, despite good and detailed knowledge by 1942 of the wholesale mass murder of Jews, Britain did not make saving Jews a war aim and did little beyond declaring its condemnation of the crimes and promising to bring the perpetrators to justice after the war. A break-

[2] Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust. The myth of the 'Shoah Business'*, London: Duckworth 1999, p. 4.
[3] Stuart Foster et al., *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools*, UCL Institute of Education, London 2016.

down of these responses, by year group, follows below, with the historically most accurate answer circled:

Figure 1 'What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?', responses by year group (per cent)



Source: Foster, S., et al. (2016).

Reflecting both the traditional view of Britain's role in the Holocaust and, perhaps, at least an indication that a more critical period of self-reflection is needed, Prime Minister David Cameron proclaimed in 2015:

> In commemorating the Holocaust, Britain remembers the way it proudly stood up to Hitler and provided a home to tens of thousands of survivors and refugees, including almost 10 000 children who came on the Kindertransports. In debating the more challenging elements of Britain's history – such as the refusal to accept more refugees or the questions over whether more could have been done to disrupt the Final Solution – Britain reflects on its responsibilities in the world today.

How far that debate on 'the more challenging elements of Britain's history' will be a focus of the new national memorial proposed in the report commissioned by Cameron remains to be seen. Will it recount, alongside stories of the *Kindertransport* and the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, also the limitations of British refugee policy in the 1930s (including forcible deportation of Jews refused entry to the United

Kingdom); British restrictions on Jews trying to enter Mandated Palestine; British knowledge of mass murder and subsequent failure to formulate rescue programmes during the war; or the longer histories of centuries-old British antisemitism and the role of British individuals and institutions in creating the pseudo-science of eugenics?

Similarly, how far will a new national Swedish Museum of the Holocaust be prepared to explore (alongside its uplifting stories as a safe haven for refugees in the 1930s, and as a destination for the rescued Jews of Denmark) the more difficult parts of its history? Will these include the problematic aspects of neutrality in the Second World War, which saw a profitable trade with Nazi Germany and a government instruction to the central bank to ignore suspicions that gold coming into the country had been looted from victims of Nazi crimes; the allowing of German troops and weaponry to travel through its territory to Norway; or indeed its own dark history of eugenics which influenced Nazi race 'scientists', and the forced sterilization of women that continued even until 1976?

Having discussed these and other issues with Swedish colleagues and being aware of the excellent work of Swedish historians and educational institutions, I am confident that many will wish to explore these difficult questions in the galleries and educational work of the new museum. If that is the case, then the new institution will make a major contribution to Swedish public discourse on the Holocaust, and the relevance of this history to Swedish visitors will be beyond doubt.

Where we situate Holocaust museums and exhibitions

An issue that has been raised several times already in this conference is where should a Swedish Holocaust Museum be situated, and does it matter if this is in a country that has no authentic sites of mass murder from the Holocaust? Britain, also, grapples with these issues, of course, in its Holocaust memory work.

In 2000, the United Kingdom established its national Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London (IWM). What are the challenges and opportunities in situating the exhibition in Britain's national museum of twentieth century conflict? In an incisive and thoughtful analysis, Tom Lawson has argued that while the IWM's

Holocaust Exhibition avoided the triumphalism of much of Britain's collective memory of the Holocaust, still it may be difficult for visitors to come away without something of this impression as the exhibition is surrounded by other artefacts and exhibitions that speak to a traditional, even nostalgic, British representation of the Second World War.[4]

However, it may also be argued that there are real strengths in placing Britain's Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. Not only does the Museum provide a prominent site, archives, an infrastructure and the expertise to develop a major exhibition on this subject, its national and international reputation afford an authority to its telling of the Holocaust. In addition, potentially this existing institution brings a difficult, traumatic history to audiences who otherwise might choose never to enter a Holocaust museum. Many who come to the Imperial War Museum to visit its First World War exhibition, or to learn more about their grandparents' lives during the era of the Second World War may stay for, and learn from, the national Holocaust Exhibition galleries housed under that same roof. The potential impact of this on national memory and historical consciousness should not be underestimated – all museums, galleries and exhibitions should seek to reach new audiences, and the IWM has undoubtedly helped to bring the history of the Holocaust to a wider public.

It should also be acknowledged what the Holocaust Exhibition has contributed to the Imperial War Museum. Established by Act of Parliament in 1917, the IWM's remit became over the subsequent decades a social history of conflict, exploring the impact of twentieth century war on societies, individuals, communities and nations. How could it be said to fulfil such a remit without a strong focus on the causes and impact of genocide, a crime that had scarred so much of the world in modern times? When finally turning its attention to this subject in the 1990s, an early proposal was to create an exhibition exploring 'Man's inhumanity to man', a historical survey and analysis of genocide and crimes against humanity in the twentieth century. As this proposal was considered, however, it became apparent how difficult this subject would be to do justice in museum exhibition terms – each example of genocide has its own complex history,

[4] Tom Lawson, 'The Holocaust and Colonial Genocide at the Imperial War Museum', *Britain and the Holocaust, Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, Sharples, C. and Jensen, O. (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013, p. 161.

how could these multiple histories be adequately explained and conveyed to the visitor in a traditional linear exhibition? And in the artefact-led exhibition that was envisioned, wouldn't it inevitably be the case that certain genocides received more attention than others simply because of the availability of artefacts to display, and how could that possibly be justified?

The approach the IWM decided upon was to create a large, artefact-based exhibition on one example of twentieth century genocide and then another, smaller exhibition that looked more thematically at the phenomenon genocide. The case study decided upon was that of the Holocaust. This was for several reasons. The Holocaust is the most extensively documented; most intensively studied; and so best understood example of mass atrocity in human history – if you are to focus on one example, it makes sense to begin with the one we know most about. The Holocaust also held at least a marginal place in British collective memory of the Second World War, particularly regarding the British 'liberation' of Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, and to that extent it could be contextualised by other exhibitions presented in the Museum.

However, as Yehuda Bauer has since argued, if the Holocaust can be seen as the 'paradigmatic genocide' – a starting point for study, and one that can provide important conceptual understanding and insights of the phenomena, it should not be the end point of such a study. As mentioned, the Museum always planned for a second, smaller exhibition on the wider history of genocide in the twentieth century, which it opened under the name *Crimes Against Humanity* in 2002. This exhibition centred on a specially commissioned new documentary film, which allowed a thematic treatment of the history of genocide, along with touch screen interactive computers providing the opportunity for visitors to explore further and in more depth.

Looking to the future

Today, plans are being laid to redevelop the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition, to take account of the advances in historiography over the last 20 years. At the same time there are proposals for a separate, new United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial to be situated in Victoria Tower Gardens, alongside the Houses of Parliament, which

raises important issues that it may be worth the Swedish Government taking under consideration.

Proposal for a new United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens.
Source: UK Holocaust Government Memorial Foundation,
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-holocaust-memorial-foundation.

It is undoubtedly a bold statement to locate the proposed new memorial and learning centre alongside the Palace of Westminster. While many have welcomed the move, there are also those who object: some who consider new building on this green space as a kind of vandalism of a much loved park; others who see the subject of the Holocaust as an unwelcome intrusion on the existing political and cultural landscape; those to whom the link between the Holocaust, Britain and 'our history' is not at all clear; some hostile to what they see as a 'Jewish story'; others who argue that, if there is to be such a memorial, then it should be about genocide more widely, rather than only focusing upon the Holocaust.

However, these objections also reveal why the decision to create a new national memorial is potentially so important, and why the location next to the Houses of Parliament could be significant: a new memorial and education centre has the potential to deepen – even to transform – Britain's national conversation about the Holocaust. To

be successful, however, it is imperative that both the winning design of the new memorial and its educational vision are equal to this bold ambition. The new memorial must speak not only to those who welcome this new national project, but also to those who doubt it.

In my view, in order for this to be possible, the new UK Memorial (and, similarly, a new Swedish Holocaust Museum) needs to move beyond the existing national discourse on the Holocaust, or they will not reach those currently disengaged from this memory culture. A new memorial and learning centre in the UK (and a new Holocaust Museum in Sweden) should aim to speak to diverse audiences on multiple levels. It should not simply be an 'echo chamber' for the same messages that are repeated across much existing Holocaust education and commemoration. The UK memorial needs to be a space which revisits Britain's national, imperial and colonial past in the light of the Holocaust; that re-examines Britain's role during the Holocaust and what that means for our notions of identity; that authentically and honestly attempts a full reckoning with the past, and reflects upon how Britain responds today as genocides and mass atrocity continue to scar our world.

As such, the new memorial needs to eschew easy, pre-packaged 'lessons of the Holocaust', that tend to oversimplify a complex past, and instead to search for more authentic meanings – those that emerge from deeper understanding of the history itself, in all its complexity and nuance. An educational encounter with the Holocaust should not only engage the emotions but also challenge common myths and misconceptions. It needs to create a space for cognitive dissonance, where new perspectives are possible, and that allow for deeper layers of meaning.

Such an approach would, of course, need to acknowledge the many positive aspects of Britain's role, as a place of refuge for many thousands; as a nation that confronted and helped to defeat Nazi Germany and to liberate Europe; its role in the relief efforts for the survivors of the concentration camps; as a home to survivors after the war; and its role in establishing a new democratic order founded on fundamental human rights. But, it should also seek to overturn the persistent national myth that the Second World War was somehow fought to liberate the Jewish people from Nazi persecution; to ask difficult questions about what was known and when, and what

more might have been done to prevent the genocide; and what are the implications of this difficult knowledge for today?

An important consideration for Sweden, similarly needs to be how far will the national story be integrated into the representation of the Holocaust? Will the new museum be a Holocaust Museum in Sweden (a narrative of the Holocaust that might be situated anywhere in the world); a Swedish Holocaust Museum (which incorporates elements of the Swedish story at points that intersect with the history of the Holocaust); or a Museum about Sweden and the Holocaust, which takes as its departure point a reappraisal of Sweden's role, national memory, and the significance of this history for Sweden today)? These are very different kinds of approaches, with important consequences for research, collection, display, visitor experience, and so for the ensuing national conversation.

As the UK project develops, it will be necessary to reassure institutions already working in the field that the new national memorial will not compete with them, but rather will serve and support their programmes. This is important in the Swedish context, also – how will the proposed Holocaust Museum work alongside existing institutions such as the Living History Forum? If the new museum's exhibition is successful in re-examining Sweden's role during the Second World War and the Holocaust; if it does not provide the visitor with catharsis and closure, with self-contained, neat and prepackaged 'lessons', but rather it manages to inspire further reflection on difficult and contentious issues, then there is a role for others to carry on that conversation as visitors continue to search for answers to the difficult questions that have been posed.

Perhaps a strategy can be developed where existing institutions play an important role in facilitating the new conversations that should take place, not only in the Museum's building but before and after visits, in the towns and regions, online and in social media? It may be that partner institutions such as the Living History Forum, with their deep experience, expertise, and well-developed educational approaches are well placed to support the new Museum in this vital aspect of its work.

List of references

Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Jolanta, Eckmann, Monique & Stevick, Doyle (eds.), *Research in teaching and learning about the Holocaust: a dialogue beyond border*, IHRA 2017.

Cole, Tim, *Images of the Holocaust. The myth of the 'Shoah Business'*, London: Duckworth 1999.

Foster, Stuart et al., *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools*, UCL Institute of Education, London 2016.

Lawson, Tom, 'The Holocaust and Colonial Genocide at the Imperial War Museum', *Britain and the Holocaust, Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, Sharples, C. & Jensen, O. (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013.