The Holocaust as Genocide:
Integrated History and Scholarly Integrity

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Historical trajectory

When I came to Oxford in 1980 to write a thesis in Modern German History, the genocide of the Jews did not feature as a topic there. At the time, that did not bother me in the least. My goal was to research the indoctrination of German combat troops and its impact on their conduct on the Eastern Front. Having grown up in Israel, at a time when it was saturated with personal traumas and state mobilization of the Shoah, I was skeptical about the Holocaust’s potential as an academic field of inquiry. While people had strong opinions and emotions about the Holocaust, ignorance of its general historical outline and context was pervasive.

To be sure, some scholarship on the Shoah was available. But by and large it was taught and studied in Jewish studies rather than as part of European history. At Tel Aviv University’s History Department, where I studied in 1976-1979, I was fortunate to benefit from the presence of Saul Friedländer. He lectured to large audiences of undergraduates about European intellectual history and taught seminars on Nazism. I fondly recall several gatherings between with him and a group of eager young women and men outside the university, where we discussed literature, philosophy, and yes, also the Holocaust. At the time he was writing his
extraordinary memoir about survival as a child during the Holocaust. But the Shoah did not feature prominently on the history curriculum.

I completed my D.Phil. thesis under the supervision of Tim Mason and returned to Israel in 1983, where I joined the history faculty at Tel Aviv University. I did not teach, and was not asked to teach any courses on the Holocaust; I felt that my students, some of whom were older than me, already “knew” too much to be open to actually learning about the “final solution.” But that may have been an excuse. I taught and wrote about the brutalization of German soldiers, the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war and citizens, the visions of a demonic Judeo-Bolshevik enemy that permeated the minds of the soldiers, and the vigorous attempts by German veterans and historians to suppress the war of extermination on the Eastern Front behind the myth of the Wehrmacht’s “purity of arms.” My research was based on a “view from below,” an attempt to understand the mentality and conduct of troops in a number of selected formations. This entailed empathy – an effort to delve into the minds, grasp the daily experiences, and understand what motivated those young German men who had internalized such views, committed these crimes, and themselves eventually died in large numbers on the battlefields of the Soviet Union. But I was not yet ready to study or teach the Holocaust.

Indeed, I have never felt comfortable with the description “Holocaust scholar.” My own sense – and that is what I tell my students – is that one cannot begin an academic career as a Holocaust historian. The Holocaust was an event that, like any other, cannot be understood outside its historical context. Hence, historians writing
about it must first, I believe, be trained in a larger historiography. That historiography will inevitably influence their understanding and interpretation of the event, although not necessarily in any predictable manner. Conversely, studying an event only from within – particularly an event of such abysmal inhumanity – can distort one’s understanding of the event itself and of the context within which it occurred: hence the need to contextualize, as in any other historical research.

But there was more to it than that. From the very beginning of my engagement with history, I was always interested in the fate of the individual: not the grand narrative of decision-making and action, viewed from the lofty heights of rulers and historians; but rather the unique, singular experience of the individual subjected to these unrelenting external forces, but also at times benefiting from them. This single, unique individual, at times a victim, often a complicit actor, who at the same time stands for and represents legions of ignored and forgotten men, women and children, always motivated my work. Writing history from below, from within, without sacrificing the specific historical context and yet knowing that at its core, the human experience is both intensely personal and universal; making full use of the historian’s privilege of knowing how it all ended and having access to the records of the time, but never forgetting that history is, in the end, the collective experience of individual human beings: this was the project I took upon myself from the beginning of my academic career to this very day.

I came to the United States in 1989. By then I had published my first monograph, and soon thereafter completed a second, more wide-ranging study of Hitler’s army
and its crimes in the East. But I had become increasingly interested in the wider context of war crimes and genocide in the twentieth century. My next book, largely a collection of previously published essays, analyzed the links between the industrial killing of World War I and the industrial murder of World War II, especially as individual experience and its subsequent representation. I was particularly struck by the manner in which representations of the seemingly incommunicable experience of 1914-18 were the only available model for representing the Nazi genocide a quarter of a century later. I subsequently expanded on an aspect of this work with a study of cinematic representations of the “Jew” as stereotype and individual. I devoted a large section to representations of second generation Israelis’ – my peers – coming to terms with the legacy of the Holocaust, a topic that I also engaged in a lengthy essay in 1997.

In the meanwhile I had become disenchanted with representations of the Holocaust in the popular media and college courses in the United States. As I wrote in 1996:

There is a common tendency to view the Holocaust as a well-ordered plot, in which antisemitism led to Nazism, Nazism practiced genocide, and both were destroyed in a spectacular, ‘happy’ end. This is a tale that most university students and filmgoers, book readers and television viewers would like to believe. It breeds complacency about our own world. It refuses to acknowledge that the Holocaust is a story without a clear beginning, and with no resolution... Ultimately, the world we live in is the same that produced (and keeps producing) genocide.
One aspect of contemporary representations that I found especially troubling was the tendency to ignore the involvement of such professions as lawyers and doctors in the legitimization and implementation of genocide, especially in the linked cases of the handicapped, the Sinti and Roma, and the Jews. I was also disturbed by the ongoing “competition of victimhood” and the reliance on past victimization as a reference point for individual and collective identity. This led to a wide-ranging essay in the American Historical Review, where I argued that “the victim trope is a central feature of our time. In a century that produced more victims of war, genocide, and massacre than all of previous recorded history put together,” I noted, “it is both a trope and a reflection of reality. Yet, at the same time, it is a dangerous prism through which to view the world, for victims are produced by enemies, and enemies eventually make for more victims.” While the essay focused primarily on German-Jewish relations, I observed that “this is merely a single, albeit especially pertinent, example of the pernicious effects of the discourse of victimhood in many other parts of the world.” I then proceeded to examine several other cases, including the Armenian, Cambodian, and Rwandan genocides, and the mass murders in the former Yugoslavia, in this light.

This insight was further expanded upon in my study of modern war, genocide, and identity, published in 2000. Conceived as an intervention in the “ongoing discussion” on “the violent legacy of Western civilization and especially... European imperialism, the world wars, the crimes of Communism, and the Holocaust,” the book argued that “within the European context” the Holocaust was “an event of unparalleled importance.” But as I stressed, “my main argument is that we cannot
understand the manner in which individuals; ethnic, religious, and ideological groups; and nations perceive themselves or interact with others, without considering the impact of our century’s preoccupation with violence.” Furthermore, I insisted that while my book “refers extensively to the Holocaust, this should in no way be seen as an attempt to diminish the importance of other genocides and cases of mass murder or their role in defining individual and group identities.” Ultimately, as I wrote then and still believe today, “I find debates over the ‘uniqueness’ of the Holocaust unhelpful. A historical event can only be understood within its context, just as its significance can be grasped only at some historical distance.”

I should note that my interest in the larger genocidal context of the Holocaust was always linked with an urge to examine and comprehend individual experience in times of extreme violence, which I continued to perceive as both unique and representative of the human condition. That was one reason for a lengthy discussion of the work of Auschwitz survivor Ka-Tzetnik (Yehiel Dinur) and its impact on Israeli youth, and several other essays I have written on this topic over the years.

Consequently, upon coming to Brown University in 2000, I devised a course titled “modern genocide and other crimes against humanity,” which I have since taught to hundreds of undergraduates, with the specific intention of contextualizing and comparing such events across the twentieth century. I have also been teaching a freshmen seminar on “the Holocaust in historical perspective,” whose goal is to contextualize the “final solution” within several bodies of scholarship and historical settings. In other courses I have sought to examine interethnic coexistence and violence in a comparative mode, albeit with a focus on East-Central Europe. Most
recently I have begun teaching a course on “first person history,” which examines links between diaries, testimony, memoirs, and historical fiction, on the one hand, and History with an uppercase “H” as a narrative of events, on the other. These foci of my work have also led to the production of co-edited volumes on genocide and religion, war crimes, and interethnic relations.14

My interest in the links between personal experience and collective violence is also the focus of my current research. Having first explored the politics of memory in contemporary Western Ukraine (previously known as Eastern Galicia),15 I am now writing a book that employs the notion of “a view from below” over an extended period of time in one site, what I refer to as a “biography of a town.” My goal is to investigate how the Galician town of Buczacz, in which Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews lived side-by-side for several centuries, was transformed from a community of coexistence into a community of genocide in World War II. The correlations with numerous other cases of communal massacres around the world are obvious.16

For almost a decade a half I have served as general editor of a series on war and genocide published by Berghahn Books. Over the years the series has built a significant list of titles on war, genocide, and massacres around the world. In recent years, Dirk Moses has joined the series as a second general editor and has brought his expertise to bear on expanding the range of topic in the series. We have collaborated well together and I have always assumed that he was as familiar with my work as I am with his.
Uniqueness compulsion

Considering the nature and foci of my scholarship over the last thirty years, I was startled to find myself described recently as a throwback to the defenders of the Holocaust’s uniqueness. In trying to understand why I would be presented in such a false light, I have come to realize that a peculiar kind of uniqueness compulsion has come to dominate the thinking and define the discourse of a small but influential segment of genocide studies. This compulsion implies obsessively repeated references to, indeed reliance on, a chimera: by conjuring imaginary foes those subjected to this delusion produce a distorted prism through which they perceive and present Holocaust scholarship and genocide studies. Such compulsion also sacrifices careful analytical thinking for heated engagement. In my specific case, it appears that my abiding interest in the relationship between the uniqueness of personal experience and historical events has been misconstrued as adherence to a narrow-minded insistence of the uniqueness of a particular event.

In what follows I will discuss the criticism aimed at me by Donald Bloxham and Dirk Moses, triggered by a keynote address I delivered in June 2010 at a symposium in London, and a longer version of the same paper I read later that year in the United States. I shared the text of this paper with Bloxham and Moses, and a much-abridged version of it was published in the Journal of Genocide Research, one of whose editors was Moses. A different, also significantly abridged version was published in a German volume. The full text will be published soon.¹⁷
I opened the paper with several critical remarks about Donald Bloxham’s book, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*. Bloxham had decided to focus on the perpetrators because “it would be beyond the physical capacity” of his study “to consider the myriad genocides, ethnic cleansings, and other murders” he examines “from the diverse perspectives of tens of millions of victims of different backgrounds.” This choice did not reflect “a lack of interest in those victims as human beings.” But Bloxham also did not wish to replicate “those books on Nazi genocide that pride themselves on ‘integrated history,’ on bringing out the voices of the victims,” but in fact “only tend to do so for select groups, primarily Jews.” His reference was to Saul Friedländer’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, and in that sense, Bloxham’s book was presented as both a historiographical and a moral correction to such Judeocentric perspectives. As he put it, “the intellectual purpose of looking at the full range of people and peoples killed and expelled for political reasons in the broadest sense in and around the Nazi period is complemented by the conviction that recognition of their often-undescribed fates is itself a moral statement.”

It thus appeared to me that the moral impetus of Bloxham’s undertaking was to “correct a perceived historiographical imbalance, whereby the Jewish victims of the Holocaust have displaced all other victims of genocide,” and “the study of the Holocaust – meaning here the specific murder of the Jews – presents an obstacle to a larger understanding of genocide, blocks our moral vision and obstructs our ethical sensibilities vis-à-vis all other victims of human criminality.” In order to avoid any misunderstanding that my criticism had anything to do with an assertion of the
Holocaust’s uniqueness, I clearly restated my position, which, as I have shown above, I had articulated on many previous occasions:

Now it should be said at the outset that, like any other historical event, the Holocaust had both unique features (such as the extermination camps) and features common to many other genocides (such as communal massacres). It is also obvious that like any traumatic national event, the Holocaust is unique within its national context: to the Jews and to some extent to the Germans. Related to this, certain theological and philosophical interpretations also view it as a unique event. But for historians, the notion of the Holocaust as entirely unique extracts it from the historical context, and converts it into a metaphysical and metahistorical event, a myth and a focus of religious or national identification, thereby sacrificing its status as a concrete episode in the annals of human history.20

As will be seen below, this did not suffice to dispel the suspicion that I was a crypto-Holocaust-uniqueness advocate, and nothing I have said in this regard would get me off the hook.

In his book, Bloxham expresses dismay about “the ‘surprise’ that registers in so much of the scholarship” on the Holocaust, “since Europe had not only witnessed other genocides, it had inflicted them on its colonial peripheries well before the continent erupted at its own core in the twentieth century.”21 In response to this comment, my paper suggested that just as “Europeans were shocked by World War I more than by colonial wars because serial killing of each other was more
traumatizing to them than killing non-Europeans,” so too the killing of Jews “in Europe by a ‘civilized’ European state in a modern, bureaucratic, industrial manner... was and should have been shocking.”²² Clearly, I was not endorsing the widespread racism in Europe, on account of which the killing of indigenous peoples was less troubling to most Europeans than the killing of white Europeans. Indeed, even in the case of the Holocaust, popular antisemitism made the “disappearance” of the Jews more easily acceptable during the Holocaust, even as it subsequently contributed to the urge to universalize it rather than viewing it as a specifically anti-Jewish undertaking.

Conversely, Bloxham’s book insists that the Holocaust’s alleged “claim to uniqueness,” which he relates both to “Jewish identity politics,” and to “a long tradition of the West’s attempts to universalize its own values,” links it directly to “those very claims to universalism” that “have themselves been at the heart of Europe’s violent interaction with the rest of the world.”²³ It was this that I found most disturbing, since Bloxham implied that those alleged to make this “claim to uniqueness” were complicit in the discourse that had been at the root of European colonial violence. In other words, Holocaust uniqueness (somehow associated with Jewish identity politics) equals justification of all other genocides. The echoes of conspiracy theories were difficult to dismiss. For if the alleged insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust sanctions or obscures Europe’s colonial violence, and if such insistence on the genocide of the Jews emanates from and serves Jewish interests and politics, this would seem to suggest that “the Jews” are “at the heart of Europe’s violent interaction with the rest of the world.” And if we add to this the
assumption that the State of Israel is the main promoter of this uniqueness discourse – as argued for instance by Moses below – then we may conclude that the Jewish State is in some way an instigator of or at least provides a convenient façade for universal crimes against humanity.

My paper also made a few fleeting references to Moses. In particular, I referred to his statement that the “benign view” of “colonial and imperial wars” and conflicts “precludes the question of genocide by equating it with the Holocaust of European Jewry,” so that, “where no death camps can be found, genocide cannot be said to have happened.”24 This, I noted, was simply false.25 While no other modern genocides had Nazi-style extermination camps, most scholars agree about an array of colonial and post-colonial genocides, each with its own particular characteristics and historical context.26 As Bloxham noted, the Rwandan genocide, for instance, has become “a benchmark case in terms of popular participation.”27

To this comment I added my view that “the differences between what happened in Poland in 1939-44 and, say, German Southwest Africa in 1904, are so vast that putting them both in the same explanatory framework of genocidal colonialism does not appear particularly useful.”28 Obviously I was not denying that various connections might be traced between colonial genocides and the Holocaust, even though scholars have found it difficult to establish direct links.29 And I have certainly never written that the genocide of the Jews was of a different quality, more genocidal, so to speak, than, for instance, that of the Herero. Indeed, the genocide of 1904 has the distinction of being the first such case in the twentieth century and in
that sense was clearly a precedent. Yet in line with other specialists in the field, I argued that a systematic comparison between colonial genocides and the Holocaust reveals more differences than similarities.

This statement was met with vehement criticism. To Bloxham it meant that I “decree that there is no relevant connection” between colonialism and the Holocaust, which is of course not at all what I was saying. He also provided me with a reading list of “intellectuals who have made the case over the last 60 years and more,” adding that “none has created a complete co-identity of the Holocaust with any other genocide.”30 And indeed they have not. As Jürgen Zimmerer, one of the foremost experts of the genocide of the Herero has astutely written, “there are no monocausal explanations for Nazi crimes, nor is there a linear progression from German colonialism to the murder of the European Jews.” Rather, “the colonial example illustrates the genocidal potential already present in parts of the bureaucratic and military institutions of Germany.” Furthermore, “colonialism produced a reservoir of cultural practices that the Nazi thugs could appropriate for themselves,” or could at least “legitimize their actions by pointing to similarities with colonial time.” Hence, “of the numerous routes that fed the criminal policies of National Socialism, one originated in the colonies, and that path was neither minor nor obscure.”31 I could not agree more. As Moses has written, “the Holocaust was no colonial genocide in the common understanding of the term.”32

So why all the finger-wagging and self-righteous indignation? Moses has correctly observed that there are good reasons to eschew “hasty generalizations based on
insufficient research and reflection on the methodological rigor of comparing certain cases.” But he firmly believes that “these are not the objections made by Omer Bartov.” My objections to such “hasty generalizations based on insufficient research and reflection,” according to Moses, are rooted instead in the fear that pointing “to the presence of imperial logics in the Holocaust” might “suggest that it is ‘just like any other genocide in world history’ – the dreaded and feared relativization of the Holocaust.” What I apparently fail to understand is that genocides “share some recurring features,” and that it is necessary “to advance immanent rather than metahistorical explanations” in order to understand the occurrence of genocide.33 What baffles the mind is why would Moses attribute to me a fear of relativization that I have never expressed and a predilection for metahistorical explanations that I have always opposed. Is this simply because without setting up a straw man he would be exposed as rehashing old ideas and well worn clichés without putting anything new on the table?

Metaphysics and hard facts

There is a strange circularity to this debate: the more Bloxham and Moses charge me with paranoid insistence on uniqueness, the more they appear locked into their uniqueness compulsion; the more vehemently they condemn my alleged metahistorical interpretations, the more deeply they descend into a fantasy in which they liberate world history from the destructive universalizing values of the West and its ethno-centric demons. In the process facts are bent beyond recognition and
unsubstantiated allegations are hurled on the pages of academic publications, all with the purpose of elevating the denouncers’ profiles. For students of the twentieth century this is a valuable lesson in demagogy.

Take, for instance, Moses’s above-cited 2011 essay, “Revisiting a Founding Assumption of Genocide Studies.” Moses optimistically identifies “signs of convergence between the fields of genocide studies and Holocaust historiography and studies.” Yet this happy development is marred by “the Israeli-American historian Omer Bartov’s 2010 keynote lecture and publication,” which signals “disquiet with the direction of genocide studies: there is ‘no room in the broad sketches of comparative genocide studies and the generalized overview of event,’ [Bartov] lamented, for ‘the uniqueness of [victims’] experiences as individuals, as members of communities, of groups, of nations.’” As far as Moses can see, this clearly proves that “Bartov is trying to update the Holocaust-uniqueness claims of previous decades that genocide studies left behind for pluralist research agendas. In this way, his project is regressive as well as empirically unsustainable.”

Curiously, Moses never cites my keynote address, of which he has a copy, nor the version of it he published in the Journal of Genocide Research, preferring the even shorter version published in Germany. Whichever version he was consulting, his quotation from me is a deliberate hatchet job, turning my meaning on its head. Note the complete passage:

> From the local perspective, it does not matter much which genocide one writes about; we will often encounter the same ethnically and religiously
mixed communities, external forces triggering outbursts of communal massacres, and many instances of complicity and rescue, collaboration and resistance. But the witnesses of such events will also bring out the uniqueness of their experiences as individuals, as members of communities, of groups, of nations—a uniqueness that was denied them by the killers and that finds no room in the broad sketches of comparative genocide studies and the generalized overview of events. Since the goal of genocide is to destroy groups as such, it behooves the historian to rescue these groups from oblivion, even if only in history and memory. And for that, we must listen to the survivors of genocide, not least because invariably they demand to be heard; we must write down their stories and integrate them into the historical picture. We should never again write the history of genocide with the victims left out.36

How this could be construed as a “Holocaust-uniqueness claim” boggles the mind; but Moses’s excisions make it appear that I was writing about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, whereas I refer to precisely what has been always at the center of my work, that is, the importance of including the unique personal experience of the individual in the grand scheme of history. One can disagree about the importance of integrating the victims’ experience into the historical reconstruction of genocide; but to describe this as a “regressive as well as empirically unsustainable” project is simply malicious nonsense. For what I clearly say in this passage is that one way to oppose the génocidaires’ attempt to obliterate the existence and the memory of their victims is to let the victims speak. I am not the first make this point, but I have been
deeply engaged in an attempt to integrate personal accounts into the larger story of

genocide: both because we owe it to the witnesses and for the sake of a fuller

reconstruction of the event.37

In my paper I further suggested that historians could “learn a great deal about large

historical events such as genocide by focusing on their unfolding in a single locality.”

This would enable them to examine “the complex dynamic of relations between
different ethnic and religious groups under extreme conditions of war and genocide
– in one town, and by extension, in an array of similar small communities
throughout the region and, to some extent, also in many other parts of the world.”

Conversely, I noted that “relying primarily on the reports of the perpetrators
provides a highly distorted picture of reality on the ground,” and “blocks the

historian from empathizing with the victims,” to the point that she may become

“complicit in the depersonalization, not to say dehumanization of the victims sought
by the perpetrators.”38

But none of these nuances affected Moses’s view that I see “the relationship”
between genocide and the Holocaust “in simplistic, linear terms.”39 Similarly, my
critical comment that “in recent years, a growing number comparative studies of
genocide” have begun to “employ the Holocaust as a template against which other
genocides can be measured and assessed,” is turned on its head to imply that I
approve of this practice. No wonder that this series of misquotes leads Moses to the
false conclusion that here “Bartov’s desire to have his cake and eat it too comes
unstuck, for it is illogical to suppose that the Holocaust is singular, unprecedented,
special, and so forth,” none of which I have ever said, “and maintain its use as a template,” which I do not do and have always opposed.40

So what is going on here? Is this sloppy reading, intentional falsification, or a sincere, if perplexing inability to understand what I am actually writing? Moses suggests that “we dig beyond the usual clichés” and refers readers to Jeffrey Alexander’s observation that in the immediate aftermath of the war western “publics were appalled by Nazi crimes, but regarded them simply as a very large atrocity and identified with the Allied soldiers rather than the liberated Jewish survivor inmates.”41 Has he read the paper he so vehemently attacks? I write: “The public first learned about the camps through... American and British reports” that “rarely mentioned Jews, so that the horrors of Nazism and the fate of the Jews were not clearly linked. In the early postwar years, Nazi camps came to represent a crime against humanity in the literal sense, perpetrated upon representatives of all nations of the world, even as victims were also depicted as nameless wretches.”42

Notwithstanding, Moses asserts that “Bartov... cleaves to the heroic narrative of Holocaust memory by attempting to discredit, without refuting, those who complicate this simplistic morality tale.”43 Had he consulted my book Mirrors of Destruction, which devotes an entire section to saying precisely the opposite, he would have realized that ignorance is no excuse for slander.44 He proposes that I inquired into why “there was virtually no research on” genocide until the later 1990s and 2000s, ignorant of my 2006 essay on the topic.45 He complains that I am “eliding” the “combatant/civilian distinction within”46 groups subjected to genocide for alleged resistance, unaware of my writing on this a whole generation ago.47 And
finally he launches the original idea that genocide "is governed more by fantastical security imperatives than by the aesthetic of racial purity," which could be easily lifted from many of my writings over the years. 48

Moses’s own pretension of offering a grand interpretive framework for the relationship between colonial genocide and the Holocaust ends with a whimper; it is also based on misreading. Ostensibly relying on Mark Mazower, who was allegedly “inspired by [Aimé] Césaire’s insight,” Moses contends that “many Europeans were prepared to participate in the Nazi anti-Bolshevik reconfiguration of the continent and were only pushed into non-cooperation or resistance by the Nazis’ policies of plunder, which... were experienced as colonial”; they were “only shocked by Nazism when it treated them – including Jews – as colonial subjects to be exploited, enslaved and murdered.” 49 In fact, Mazower makes crucial distinctions between “the European overseas empires,” which “had generally grown up over long periods of time, in what were still largely rural societies... involved complex accommodations and compromises with local and native rulers, and... were themselves coming under strain in the interwar period from emergent colonial nationalist movements”; and the Germans, who “imposed their rule very suddenly in the midst of a war and... chose to inflict this on urbanized societies which had powerfully shaped and already formed senses of their own national identity. What was striking,” stresses Mazower, “was not that Europeans resisted, but that they were mostly so hesitant to do so.” 50

Mazower does quote Césaire, but only to indicate his different position. Césaire, he writes, argued that Europeans “had needed Nazism, in a sense, to bring home to
them what racial prejudice produced. They had failed to grasp the true nature of colonialism because racism had prevented them sympathizing with the plight of those they oppressed. They tolerated ‘Nazism before it was inflicted on them... because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples.”51 But as Mazower observes, “while Victorian international law legitimized colonial rule, it did so by holding out the promise of liberation,” even if this was “a theory that was generally honoured only in the breach.” Conversely, “it was this promise of eventual (if always tenuous) political redemption that Nazism decisively rejected,” since it was “based upon the immutable truths of racial hierarchy,” and “the only alternative it envisaged to domination was oppression and national death.” In this sense, the Nazis were “tearing down the whole noble façade of nineteenth-century international law.” 52

From this perspective we can say, as Mazower also suggests, that many Europeans, who were in fact treated by the Nazis neither as badly as certain colonial subjects nor, much more visibly, as their Jewish neighbors, gradually came to the conclusion that once the Jews were gone, they could be next.53 This might have applied to certain Slav populations (but not, for instance, to the Croats), but was unlikely to affect western and northern Europeans. And of course the growing resistance to collaboration with the “final solution” was largely fueled by the rising fears of Allied retribution following what appeared to be an increasingly likely German defeat.

But Moses is again not really interested in any of this. For him the main point to be made is that the alleged equal treatment of all Europeans, “including Jews – as
colonial subjects to be exploited, enslaved and murdered,” which is simply false, “was screened out by depicting the Nazi genocide of the Jews as a massive hate crime.” This focus on the Jews, he asserts without providing a shred of evidence, “promoted blindness to genocidal episodes around the world because they did not resemble the Holocaust.”54 In other words, first the Jews were treated no differently from other groups under Nazi occupation; and second, saying that they were treated differently was the reason for Western indifference to post-1945 genocides. How are we to end this pernicious cycle? Moses issues a call for the Holocaust “to be deprovincialized from its signification within an exclusively Jewish and Western Narrative about the achievement of human rights and genocide prevention, the sentimental narrative expressed and enjoined by Bartov.”55 Obviously there is little hope that I will support this agenda, considering that my “intervention represents a backlash against the pluralization of research questions by attempting to return to the Holocaust-uniqueness assumptions prevalent between the 1970s and 1990s, albeit” – thank goodness! – “in a more genteel version.”56

It is difficult to tell where precisely Moses is coming from. But some inkling of his worldview may be gained from a book chapter he published in 2012, “The Holocaust and World History.” As it turns out, Moses’s uniqueness compulsion is related to his view that at least since the mid-nineteenth century, Jews had viewed themselves as unique, especially as unique victims. The assertion by “scholars in Jewish studies, Holocaust historiography and genocide studies,” he writes, “that the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry is unique, unprecedented, unparalleled, or singular,”
has in fact “roots that long precede the genocide of the 1940s.” In other words, at least for Jews, the Holocaust was unique even before it happened.

This view seamlessly translates into the observation that Holocaust uniqueness is now “the official Zionist and even United Nations position,” an assertion based on one quotation from David Ben Gurion and another from Shimon Peres. Ostensibly, writes Moses, the Holocaust is “an episode in the unique Jewish mission to ‘sanctify life and prevent murder and discrimination’” and to “impart the universal yet characteristically [?] Jewish values of human rights and minority protection,” and its “historiography is as much an ethical discourse, indeed a political theology, as a secular investigation.” But this throwback to Martin Broszat’s notorious assertion in his mid-1980s exchange with Saul Friedländer, that the Jews were writing the history of the Holocaust as myth, now gets a new twist. For in fact, as Moses asserts, there is nothing truly universal in this Jewish-Zionist discourse, whose “uniqueness claims betray the generally ethno- and western-centric matrix from which they stem,” so that “any listener would naturally wonder what a Palestinian would think when Peres brandishes Israel’s ethical mission and behavior.” To put it plainly: for Moses Holocaust uniqueness equals covering up for Israeli occupation policies.

Having clarified his position, Moses takes up the role of an umpire and sets up “two rival narratives about the meaning of the Holocaust and the course of modern global history.” The first “insists on its uniqueness” and “links Holocaust memory both to the universal values of human rights and the particular geopolitical agenda of
Israel.” The second “regards the Holocaust less as a racially-driven genocide against a helpless minority than the logical outcome of imperial-racial conquests that it holds Zionism to embody.” To be sure, it would be hard to find a serious scholar defending either narrative. But no matter; for Moses these polar perspectives serve merely to repeat his mantra that the Holocaust must be “deprovincialized from its signification within an exclusively Jewish and western narrative about the triumphant achievement of human rights and genocide prevention”; that is, that it should be taken out of the hands of the Jews, finally belong to everyone, and thereby be put in its place. Such “a world history gaze,” he pontificates, “does not ‘diminish’ the Holocaust – to name the anxiety of those who insist on its uniqueness.” It would merely liberate the genocide of the Jews from its “metahistorical significance.”

One work that “has successfully deprovincialized Holocaust scholarship,” observes Moses, is Bloxham’s *The Final Solution: A Genocide*, which comes to the astonishingly original conclusion that the Holocaust “was, ultimately, a multi-causal event,” even as it “disposes of the uniqueness myth that the Nazis intended the total destruction of the Jews.” And, indeed, Bloxham came close to making that argument in his book. But meanwhile he has changed his mind. In a recent essay, “prompted,” as he notes, “in particular” by my criticism of his book, Bloxham writes: “I have always recognized the extremity of the Holocaust relative to other genocides... the extreme fervor of the Nazi pursuit of Jews across national boundaries, and the totality of the desire... to murder all Jews on whom hands could be laid.” He further concludes that “the extent of the ‘final solution’ was... shaped by an antisemitism that was colored by a different element over and above the racism and ethno-nationalism that
explains the murder of other groups by Nazi Germany – that element being the view of ‘the Jews’ as an implacable, collective world enemy.”

Case closed? Not a bit of it. Bloxham quickly winds his way back to Moses’s position, using as his leitmotif a statement by Israeli scholar Anita Shapira, who observed in reference to the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem that if one puts “the spotlight... on the suffering of the Jews... then the Holocaust is a unique event, ‘Jewish’ in its very pith and essence.” This is of course the same point I made in my paper, namely, that from the Jewish perspective, the Holocaust is indeed unprecedented and unique: nothing like it had ever happened to the Jews before; only “metahistorical” and theological narratives would view it as just one more episode in an eternal history of persecution. But Bloxham employs Shapira’s statement as representative of a “rhetoric of ‘uniqueness’” that “irritates” and “offends” him. Indeed, even if the Holocaust is studied “in and for its own sake and intrinsic meaning,” he argues, it is always set “in relation to other genocides.”

Curiously, Bloxham’s main objection is that the very empirical differences he had outlined between the Holocaust and other genocides “have been used to mandate quasi-philosophical claims about the radical difference of the Holocaust in toto,” creating “a hierarchy that hinders the integrated study of genocides.”

Who has issued such mandates? For details, Bloxham refers us to a “seminal article” by Moses, published over a decade ago, which simply reiterates the same truism that “underlying this asymmetry” between research on “the genocides of indigenous peoples” and “the genocide of European peoples” is “the claim that the Holocaust is
‘unique,’ ‘unprecedented’ or singular.” This is a classic example of the circular argumentation that characterizes this uniqueness compulsion syndrome.

This compulsion also means that even if no uniqueness advocates exist, they must be invented. Hence even as Bloxham concedes that “less ink is spilled these days than a few decades ago on uniqueness” – a time when there was not much Holocaust scholarship to speak of in the first place – he jumps right back into the fray, insisting that “challenges to the idea of uniqueness have brought forth not abandonment but reassertion of the claim.” As proof he cites my keynote speech that, as should be clear by now, says nothing of the sort. But Bloxham has discovered a peculiar way of getting around this dilemma. To his mind, “uniqueness” need not be asserted, and may even be denied, while it still continues to lurk in the dark recesses of its proponents’ texts. In his words, “insofar as ‘uniqueness’ has become common sense within Holocaust studies and many popular spheres, it does not need to be explicitly invoked, and proponents can even disavow the name while tacitly subscribing to the idea of the Holocaust’s special difference.” Hence he commands “all scholars who use what may be taken for a synonym to make their subject position clear. This will provide scholars who think Uniqueness an obstacle to scholarship a basis to know whom to disagree with, and who is just inadvertently using ambiguous terms.” In Bloxham’s Orwellian universe, your very denial may prove your culpability, for he knows your subject position better than you do.

In view of such warped thinking, it is hardly surprising that Bloxham goes on to misconstrue precisely the same passage in my paper already mishandled by
Moses. In his compulsion to unveil me as a uniqueness ideologue, Bloxham excises my statement that “the Holocaust should not stand in the way of understanding other genocides; and studies of other genocides should not prevent historians from historically reconstructing the mass murder of European Jews.” Instead, he makes the preposterous argument that by pleading to include the voices of the witnesses, Bartov “explicitly disavows the very sort of perpetrator-centric work on which he built his reputation.” At best, this simply indicates that he has never read my earlier work, which was based, as I noted above, on precisely the same concept of a “view from below” that I advocate in the passage he quotes. But it also means that, just like Moses, he is incapable of grasping the difference between my plea to integrate the unique voices of the victims of genocide in the reconstruction of the event, and the red herring of Holocaust uniqueness.

All this is not to say that I disagree with some of Bloxham’s more general observations, but rather that I find his tactics of misrepresentation highly objectionable and not in line with scholarly norms of discourse. Quite a few years ago I pointed out the need to examine the links between the Holocaust, Eastern Europe, and other genocides, which he has also now recognized. Similarly, his observation that “the real or perceived difference between the Holocaust and other cases of mass murder” had allowed “the international community to legitimate non-intervention,” parallels my earlier argument that “the focus on past genocides... diverted attention from the crimes that could still be stopped,” and that “the obsession with the phenomenon of genocide came simultaneously with the proliferation of actual genocides.”
Integrated History

I have never subscribed to the term “Holocaust studies,” which seems to mean studying anything and everything that has a relationship to the Holocaust. Some scholars, be they historians, political scientists, sociologists, or specialists in other related disciplines, write about the Holocaust; others write about other genocides, or compare several genocides, or analyze the phenomenon of genocide more generally. The only distinction one should made here is of the quality of their scholarship. There is no room for any other hierarchy. The Holocaust was one of several major genocides in the twentieth century. It was, as Bloxham writes, particularly extreme; it had aspects that were then unprecedented and have fortunately not been repeated, most especially the extermination camps. It had other aspects that were remarkably similar to other genocides, and have repeatedly occurred, such as communal massacres. As an event, it was indeed highly complex and transpired in a variety of very different contexts – the killing of Jews in a little town in Galicia, the transport of Jews from Paris to Auschwitz, the Romanian massacres of Jews in Transnistria, the starvation of Jews in the Ghettos of Poland, were all part of the same genocide but also vastly different, as were the Jewish communities that experienced these atrocities.

To my mind, the history of the Holocaust, which was a European genocide in the middle of the twentieth century, is quite different from that of the Herero genocide in German Southwest Africa at the beginning of that century, or that of the Rwandan
genocide toward its end. They were of course connected in various ways, although often these links are difficult to establish. But they were also related to their own particular histories, and must be analyzed and understood within their specific historical and geographical contexts. For this purpose, they need to be studied not just by scholars of “Holocaust Studies” or genocide Studies, but by African, or Asian, or European specialists, who know the languages and histories of the perpetrators and victims. I still believe, as I did at the beginning of my own scholarly journey, that historians should not start off by specializing in an event but rather in a place and a time. Most importantly, they should be careful and meticulous with their facts, especially when these facts concern the mass murder of millions.

Personally, I find it a bitter irony that after decades of writing about the need for an integrated history of modern violence, I find myself being charged with advocating what I had always opposed, the notion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In my writing, I have always sought to identify the individual human being upon whom History is enacted, but who, at the same time, is also its maker. I have never believed in unique events, but always highlighted the singular, personal experience that, collectively, makes up the fabric of human history.

But much more gravely, I admit to being astonished at the degree of distortion and misrepresentation in the essays I analyzed. It is a discredit to the labor and commitment of the many scholars who have engaged with the worst cases of inhumanity in modern times. It is high time to put an end to this compulsive obsession with a mythical Holocaust uniqueness narrative and to move on the
serious research and reasoned, informed exchange of findings and ideas, with the goal of creating a truly integrated history of modern genocide and other crimes against humanity.


12 Ibid., 5-6.


19 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 2; “Genocide and the Holocaust/GuG,” 381; “Locating the Holocaust,” 121.

20 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 2; slightly modified in “Locating the Holocaust,” 121.

21 Bloxham, Final Solution, 318.
22 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 3; “Locating the Holocaust,” 122.

23 Bloxham, Final Solution, 318.


25 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 4: “Indeed, many other genocides lacking that unique characteristic of the Holocaust [i.e., extermination camps], have been recognized as such both by historians and the international community, and fall under the definition of the United Nations 1948 Convention on Genocide.” The two paragraphs referring to Moses in the original paper were excised from the abridged version published in the JGR; they would have appeared on p. 122 of “Locating the Holocaust.”


27 Bloxham, Final Solution, 296.

28 “Genocide and the Holocaust”: L&L, 23; precisely this sentence was excised from the JGR version; it would have appeared on p. 128 of “Locating the Holocaust.”


32 Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 40.

34 Ibid., 287.

35 Ibid., 288.

36 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 24; “Locating the Holocaust,” 128-9; much abridged in “Genocide and the Holocaust/GuG,” 393.


38 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 22-3; slightly edited in “Locating the Holocaust,” 128; much abridged in “Genocide and the Holocaust/GuG,” 392.


40 Ibid.


42 “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 22-3; slightly edited in “Locating the Holocaust,” 123; much abridged in “Genocide and the Holocaust/GuG,” 384.


45 Bartov, “The Holocaust as Leitmotif of the Twentieth Century,” esp. 3-8.

46 Moses, “Founding Assumption,” 293.

47 For just one of many examples, see Omer Bartov, *Germany’s War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 3-32.

48 One example: Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction*, 148-165. Moses even has the temerity of suspecting my citation of Leo Kuper’s view of “the UN’s criminalization of genocide” as “the product of a ‘western liberal worldview,’” writing that it is “questionable whether Bartov’s conscription of Kuper into such a Western-centric perspective is plausible.” “Founding Assumption,” 291. He could have easily consulted Kuper, who writes: “Buried within the title of this chapter, ‘Warrant for Genocide,’ is a liberal assumption as to the nature of human nature or of man in society.” Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 84.
49 Ibid., 296.


53 Ibid., 414-15.

54 Moses, “Founding Assumption,” 296.

55 Ibid., 297.

56 Ibid., 291-2.


58 Ibid., 272.

59 Ibid., 274.

60 Broszat writes: “Among the special features of the scholarly-scientific investigation of this past is the knowledge that this period still remains bound up with many and diverse monuments of mournful and accusatory memory, imbued with the painful sentiments of many individuals, in particular of Jews, who remain adamant in their insistence on a mythical form of this remembrance... Respect for the victims of Nazi crimes demands that this mythical memory be granted a place.” This is juxtaposed with “German historians and students of history” who are “operating only in scientific terms.” Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, “A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism,” in *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 106, citing letter by Broszat dated September 28, 1987.

61 Moses, *The Holocaust and World History*, 274.

62 Ibid., 275.

63 Ibid., 281.

64 Ibid., 285-6.

65 Bloxham, *Final Solution*, 245-6.

Ibid., 63.


Ibid., 63.


For an analysis of Moses’s attacks on Yehuda Bauer and Steven Katz in that article and other publications, see Steven T. Katz, “A. Dirk Moses’ Misrepresentations: His Criticism of the Work of Steven T. Katz” (forthcoming).

Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies and Genocide Studies,” 64. Bloxham sends us again to an article by Moses to buttress his assertion, even though that essay in fact does not support his point. A. Dirk Moses, “The Canadian Museum for Human Rights: the ‘uniqueness of the Holocaust’ and the question of genocide,” *JGR* 14/2 (2012): 215-238. Moses concludes that the Holocaust uniqueness narrative had actually failed to reassert itself: “At the time of writing [March 2012], the CMHR’s prospects appeared as grim as a Winnipeg winter; a project foundering on its contradictions and misjudged political calculations.” Ibid., 234.

Ibid., 64-5.

Ibid., 65.

Ibid., 66.

Ibid., 66; “Locating the Holocaust,” 128; “Genocide and the Holocaust/L&L,” 23, where the full citation reads: “[Just as the Holocaust should not stand in the way of understanding genocide more generally or a specific genocide in particular, so, too, studies of genocide should not divert historians from fulfilling the task of historically reconstructing the specific event of the mass murder of European Jews.”


Bartov, *Eastern Front*; Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*.


Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies and Genocide Studies,” 73.

83 See notes 26, 29, and 31.