

# Where to Begin? Framing Continuity Arguments about the Holocaust

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**M**Y SECOND-LEVEL UNDERGRADUATE TOPIC DEALS NOT ONLY WITH THE HOLOCAUST, but with Nazi Germany more broadly. More specifically, it is an 'origins and nature of Nazi Germany' topic, which lends itself not only to a discussion of the nature of Germany under the Nazis, but also a broader discussion about where Nazism came from. It attracts around 90 to 130 students per semester, depending upon which other history subjects are being offered.

At Flinders University, where I teach, there is a dedicated third-level topic on the Holocaust, which provides students with an opportunity to reflect on the significance of the Holocaust beyond its immediate historical context. Rather than focusing on postwar commemoration and memorialisation, the main focus of my teaching, is to attempt to overcome an increasingly evident problem; namely, that students lack the skills to deal with competing historical accounts of the same event, something that is particularly prevalent in the study of the Holocaust and which has generated an extensive literature.

Given the breadth of the topic, my teaching is deeply contextualist in nature. I begin by reminding students that Nazi Germany is not the entirety of German history and that the Holocaust, while of course enormously important, is not the only aspect of Nazi Germany that warrants our attention. I also point out that in a secular age, the history of Nazism risks being taught theologically, as an

ahistorical morality tale of the triumph of absolute good over demonic forces. I also explain the risks of psychohistory—the ahistorical narrative of the mesmerising power of Hitler, who ostensibly hypnotised a nation, which then woke as if from a bad dream in 1945 (see in this context Waite; Machtan).

Historiographically, I approach the question of the Holocaust as an anti-Goldhagen, Mommsenite functionalist. That is, I stress the cumulative radicalism of the Nazi regime and attempt to offer a sense of the complexity of Jewish life in Germany before 1933. I also emphasise the developments apparent in the history of anti-Semitism in Germany by charting the shift from Heinrich von Treitschke's (and Theodor Mommsen's) liberal assimilatory demands in 1879, through to Hitler's own radical shift from his original demand for a 'planned and lawful' reversal of Jewish emancipation followed by the 'removal' (*Entfernung*) of the Jews from Germany in his Munich letter of 1919. The class examines the material history of plans for the removal of European Jewry during the Third Reich and, finally, studies the shift to genocide (*Vernichtung*), which I present as a product of the course of World War II and the rejection of other less radical anti-Semitic measures by leading Nazis as insufficient (Mommsen, 'Hitlers Stellung'; Mommsen, 'Die Realisierung'; contra Goldhagen). I also follow historian Christian Gerlach by noting the shift from the practice of murdering Eastern European Jews to a decision (largely coinciding with the American entry into the war) to include the murder of German Jews as well—a radical shift in the scope of the genocide that I have in my research (following Julia Kristeva) termed an 'abject response', a mutilation of the body politic rather than a conflict between the German self and a Jewish other (Gerlach; Fitzpatrick).

Alongside this, I also cover the *Porrajmos*—the genocidal campaign against the Roma and Sinti (so-called Gypsies), as well as the shockingly high rate of murders committed against Poles and Russians. At the same time, I also cover the Nazi T4 euthanasia campaign. This is not so much an attempt to decentre the Holocaust, as to point to the multiple strands of mass killing that were simultaneously underway alongside it, which I think is necessary for students to learn if they are to move away from a decontextualised misunderstanding of the conditions within which the genocide of European Jewry took place.

All this offers the context for discussing the issue of framing continuity arguments in the classroom. For pedagogical reasons I argue to students in early lectures that I consider the *Sonderweg* debate—the debate about the peculiarity of German history—to be an open one, still up for grabs. This is despite the fact that, to my mind, the *Sonderweg* line of looking for unique continuities in German history to explain the Holocaust has proved to be a dead end, albeit a heuristically very useful dead end. It still has its defenders, however, which

means I am not entirely misleading the students when I say that the debate still frames the field (Kocka; Smith).

Nonetheless, I still find myself in the predicament of presenting continuity arguments that I think lack explanatory power, for largely pedagogical purposes, because I want my students to become historiographically adept, and the literature surrounding and contesting continuity arguments is the most obvious point for training this particular skill. I do this in a couple of ways.

One is by looking at the most recent incarnation of the continuity debate by covering Jürgen Zimmerer's 'From Windhoek to Auschwitz' colonial continuity thesis, particularly as most compactly presented by Benjamin Madley's article, 'From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe'. Personally, I find this line of argument entirely unconvincing and in many ways unsettling. I do not want to use the colonies as a place to test the theory of whether German colonialism was a dry run or laboratory for genocidal technologies that would find their full expression in Nazi Germany. The assumption that the experience of German rule in Africa (or elsewhere) only matters in terms of what it reveals about the Nazi era undervalues both the history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany, and the too often obscured histories of African (and other) ex-colonies. As I've argued elsewhere, the empirical basis for this continuity argument seems to me to be quite thin. Beyond this, the attempt to connect the genocidal dots between Southwest Africa and Nazi-occupied Europe approach also forgets the colonial atrocities and genocides of other European powers (Britain, Spain) in an attempt to construct an argument for a particularly genocidal form of imperialism that was uniquely German. Pedagogically speaking, however, it is not in my interests as an educator to offer a one-sided attack on the colonial genocide continuity thesis in the lectures and tutorials, making up students' minds for them. It's a serious, ongoing debate and I present it as such. I frame the debate in lectures and tutorials with articles from both sides (Grosse; Kundrus; Madley) and ask students to make an intellectual choice based on the balance of evidence as they read it. I also flag the difficulties and debates that beset comparative genocide studies and the difficulty posed by the paradigmatic centrality of the Holocaust within that field.

It is not only the colonial continuity thesis that I present as a potential site for historiographical testing. I try and follow this historiographical approach to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust most weeks. Another prominent example is the tutorial on the question of women as Holocaust perpetrators, where I wheel out the (in many ways exhausted) debate between Gisela Bock (who positioned women as one of the key victim groups of Nazism) and Claudia Koonz (who saw them as co-perpetrators alongside German men). I then offer them Adelheid von

Saldern's rather elegant synthesis of the two (Bock; Koonz; Saldern). For teaching purposes, I even return to the Daniel Goldhagen vs Christopher Browning debate, which, while more or less settled for researchers, is nonetheless fruitful for pedagogical purposes as an example of a recent dispute (Browning 191-223; Goldhagen 416-54; see also Bauer, 'On Perpetrators'). Here I explain that the discipline as a whole was critical of Goldhagen's claims and approach, but that there are others who have argued in a similar direction, but far more carefully, such as Helmut Walser Smith.

With regard to the genocide of the Roma and Sinti, I frame the historiographical debate between Guenter Lewy, who argued that the Roma and Sinti were massacred, but not victims of a genocide, and Ian Hancock who lambasts Lewy (rightly, to my mind) for deliberately obscuring the planned and systematic nature of those murders. Again, I present this as a debate, despite disagreeing with Lewy's assessment of the *Porrajmos* (and the Armenian genocide for that matter).

This sounds like a largely historiographical approach to the Holocaust, and it is fair to say that the tutorials are designed so as to foreground the debates in the field. But it is worth pointing out that the lectures operate as a kind of preliminary briefing for this historiographical heavy-lifting. The lectures give students the basic factual information they need to come to some sort of understanding of the period before they attack different scholarly responses to it. In my first lecture I point out to the students that the topic will operate on two levels: finding out 'what happened' and engaging with how historians have argued about the meaning of what happened and how it has been represented. Most students are quite able to deal with the two simultaneously, although it is not uncommon for a large number (in round figures about a third of the cohort) to remain stubbornly fixated on 'events'. Pleasingly, the topic seems to set students up for thinking about historiography in other classes as well, meaning that their critical skills have switched up a gear over the semester. But it doesn't always work, particularly if students skip lectures. One tutor commented that he had a student who complained that she understood the functionalist/intentionalist debate very well, but was still unsure just how Hitler died.

Obscuring or burying my own historiographical judgement when teaching is something I am deeply ambivalent about, as it risks students coming to conclusions that I consider to be false (albeit still within the realm of accepted historiographical discourse). I always feel a little disconcerted when a student argues in their essay, for example, that there are clear lines of genocidal continuity between the colonial warfare of Southwest Africa and the Holocaust, because it doesn't reflect my best judgement of the issue. But, given that these

are positions held by respected scholars in the field, I feel that it is more important that students be taught to make their own way through the material (even at the cost of making what I consider to be mis-readings of that material) than to be handed an official version of history, approved by me.

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