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Introduction

Edges of the Past

History exists only in relation to the questions we pose to it.
Paul Veyne[1]

The recognition of the pastness of the Holocaust is a novelty in a culture where the presence of the event has been entrenched in the last generation. Recognition of its pastness is not the same as forgetting it, nor is it simply a result of the passing of more than three score years since 1945. Indeed, it is actually partly a result of the very intense public and professional preoccupation with the Holocaust, the cumulative effect of which has been to make the event not only an integral part of German, Jewish, and European history but also a signifying moral event in human history.[2]

Knowledge is a key to a new understanding. We know infinitely more about the Holocaust today than we did in 1970, 1980, or 1990. The shock of Holocaust representation – think for example of Claude Lanzmann's 1985 *Shoah*, Art Spiegelman's 1986 *Maus*, or David Grossman's 1986 *Momik* – has been absorbed and given way to somber reflection.[3] The startling revelations of historical studies have made their way into mainstream historiography.[4] The Holocaust shocked and startled because it was so much part of the present. It still shocks and is still part of the present, but it is also receding into the past. This sense of pastness opens up new ways for understanding and interpreting it.

After a period of moderate engagement with the Holocaust between 1945 and 1975, Holocaust consciousness from the mid-1970s to the present has been characterized by two simultaneous trends. The first trend, prominent in history, philosophy, the arts, and literature, has

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involved a strenuous attempt to acknowledge the Holocaust and to cope with the difficulty of representing it. This attempt has been distinguished by a high degree of self-conscious reflection, as is evident in such book titles as *Admitting the Holocaust* and *Probing the Limits of Representation*.[5] The second trend, which might appear to stand in opposition to the discussion of the limits of Holocaust representation, has been manifested in the massive cultural production of the Holocaust in history books, novels, films, plays, comics, and other media. But in fact, the two trends are complementary, not contradictory. Despite their theoretical trepidations about the limits of representing the Holocaust, historians have been at the forefront of this cultural production: a lasting contribution of historical studies has been the detailed recounting of the Holocaust in works that now add up to an immense specialized historiography. The result has been a vast new body of knowledge and a level of understanding and sensitivity that, I contend, anchor the Holocaust in the past in a way that was not previously possible.

This ending of a certain period in Holocaust consciousness comes into sharp focus when we consider Saul Friedländer's 1989 essay "The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation."[6] In his doubts about the possibility of producing any kind of historical representation of the Holocaust, Friedländer reflected the public and scholarly consciousness of his time. But precisely the development of Holocaust historiography in the last generation makes us see these doubts not as inherent to the event but as reflecting a specific perception bounded in time. As Dan Stone has observed, "[I]t is not that with Auschwitz one encounters special problems of representation but rather that Auschwitz makes especially clear *the* problem of representation: the fact that there always exists a lacuna between the representation and what is represented."[7] This view opens up new ways of understanding the Holocaust. It entails a shift in historical sensibility from conceiving of the Holocaust not only in terms of the limits of its representation to conceiving of it – because of generational, professional, interpretive, and cultural changes – also in terms of the possibilities and promises of historical representation.

In attempting to make sense of current Holocaust historiography, two difficulties that are well known to historians exist – one interpretive and connected to Holocaust historiography itself, and the second methodological and largely connected to broader historical understanding. I see these difficulties not as obstacles but as challenges providing interpretive opportunities.

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The first difficulty is that the tremendously rich and complex historiography of the Holocaust has in the last decades been fragmented into varied fields of research, with varied methods, approaches, and languages. Nazism is the most written about historical subject. Separate topics (such as the decision for the Final Solution in 1941–1942) have been explored in meticulous detail and comprise in themselves developed and almost self-contained bodies of work. Consequently, no single interpretation and conceptual framework can encompass the history of the Holocaust. And yet, every historiographical body of work is part of and results from its surrounding culture and professional approaches and, as such, has often imperceptible interpretive common denominators across the various distinct topics and views. One aim of this book is to discern dominant conceptual categories that have informed, across interpretive differences, Holocaust historians' arguments and methods; such categories create boundaries of interpretive common sense. To think of possible new directions for research, it is imperative to know the often implicit assumptions that are embedded in current historical thinking about the Holocaust.

The second difficulty in making sense of current Holocaust historiography is the real or perceived limits of historical representation. For decades some scholars and laypersons alike have argued that the Holocaust faces fundamental problems of historical narration and explanation, if it can be narrated and explained at all. Many still share this view, which assumes the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust against all other events. In contrast, this book joins the work of other scholars who have considered the Holocaust to be an extreme event that remains at the limits of historical interpretation, but have assigned this view a different meaning: it sees the Holocaust not as an extreme event that faces inherent limits of historical explanation, but on the contrary as one that reveals, precisely because of its extremity, the overall limits and possibilities of historical interpretation. The difficulties of Holocaust interpretation should be seen not as intrinsic to the event; instead, as an extreme event, the Holocaust exposes difficulties of historical explanation that are fundamental to the discipline as a whole. Viewed from this perspective, interpretations of the Holocaust reveal more clearly basic elements of historical explanation, providing the potential to understand, via an analysis of Holocaust interpretations, some central components of historical reconstruction. Differently put, because the Holocaust was an extreme event that stretches the historical discipline to its limits, it makes particularly plain the problems of historical narration, explanation, and interpretation that are inherent

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to the historian's craft. This books seeks to follow the road to these edges of the past.

How are we to combine, then, a critique of current Holocaust interpretations with an investigation of the Holocaust as an extreme historical event that reveals basic elements of historical reconstruction?

I approach this question not only as a historian of Germany but also as a student of historical method and writing, interested in problems of historical evidence and narrative. To understand the Holocaust as an extreme event that uncovers general problems of historical interpretation, I have identified four such problems; they are bedrocks of historical reconstruction. My plan is to subject interpretations of the Holocaust to an investigation of these four problems:

The problem of beginnings and ends. In relation to the Holocaust, the question is how to place it, as a short, radical, and (perceived by contemporaries as) unprecedented event, within a narrative of origins and outcomes. How can we place the first experience of attempted total extermination within familiar narratives of the twentieth century? To have a perspective of origins and outcome means giving the Holocaust a chronological definition, to argue that it started at some point in time (with eternal anti-Semitism? Modern anti-Semitism? In 1933? 1941?). Problems of definition and periodization are important because they tell us about issues of causality, continuity, and rupture.

The problem of context. In relation to the Holocaust, the question is what role did the circumstances of World War II play in generating the violence of the Holocaust. There have been two debates here. One has discussed whether the extermination was a result of the circumstances of a brutalized war and Nazi policies or of long-term anti-Semitism that preceded 1933. The other has assessed the behavior of the Nazi perpetrators by asking what was the weight of motivations and agency, on the one hand, and of circumstances of the war, on the other, in the frenzy of the killing. It is important to articulate the problem of context precisely because context, which is fundamental to historical reconstruction, is often seen as self-explanatory. But what are the promises and the limits of historical context as an explanation? What can the context explain, and what can it not explain? And does the reconstruction of a historical context constitute, in itself, an explanation?

The problem of contingency. The challenge for the historian is to understand the Holocaust as neither a sheer accident nor an inevitable necessity. How can we reconstruct a narrative that, at any given time between 1933 and 1945, could not anticipate its future? Here the demand

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on the historian is to think of various possible outcomes of Nazi intentions and policies on the persecution and later the extermination of the Jews.

Finally, the problem of ideas, ideology, and culture in explaining human motivations. The notion of Nazi ideology – a more or less systematic set of ideas about racial superiority and anti-Semitism – has dominated understanding of the Holocaust. But is the concept of ideology sufficient to capture values, beliefs, and mentalities? Ideology is a part of culture, not culture itself: is it not too cerebral to embrace the elusive area of human affairs we call culture, which is neither as self-conscious as ideology nor as vague as beliefs?

These four interpretive problems make up every historical reconstruction, whether the historian is fully conscious of them or not, whether he or she discusses them explicitly or leaves them in the background. This book attempts to understand the historical reconstruction of the Holocaust via these four problems. This mode of proceeding is different from posing questions that seek an answer to a specific historical problem. Instead I ask how historians currently use the notions of beginnings and ends, context, contingency, and culture to understand the Holocaust. One advantage of this approach is that it goes against the recent fragmentation of Holocaust historiography. By reading the historiography against the grain of these four interpretive problems we are able to go beyond some of its highly specific and detailed debates and to uncover hidden assumptions that govern it.

Shortly after I began my work I came to see that I ran the danger of producing an interpretive vicious circle in which I read the historiography against itself. There was no good way to evaluate and control the importance of the arguments about historical method without an intermediary, without a body of work against which I could read the Holocaust and also think about my own methodological assumptions. Yet which body of work? An obvious choice would be to compare the Holocaust to other modern genocides, about which there is now a wide and sophisticated literature. As I read through this body of work, I realized a pitfall. In comparing the Holocaust with other genocides we compare events of a similar kind (extermination) but not of a similar degree of perceived historical significance. No other genocide constituted such a historical and epistemological break as the Holocaust. To understand the Holocaust via the four interpretive problems outlined earlier, I needed to think via another historical past that people have viewed as foundational.

But which one, and what does a foundational past mean? By "foundational past" I mean an event that represents an age because it embodies a historical novum that serves as a moral and historical yardstick, as a

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measure of things human. The foundational element is not an inherent quality of the event, but exists rather in people's subjectivity and is a historical construction. In the West, the Holocaust has become a, perhaps *the*, foundational past of our age. It appears to have taken on "the character of an icon of a now-past saeculum – something like the ultimate core event of 'our' time."[8] It is considered *the* rupture in contemporary historical time, morality, representation, and experience. The importance of the Holocaust is less pronounced in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America; it is bounded mostly to Europe, North America, Israel, and Oceania. And still, when in 2005 the United Nations agreed to observe annually on January 27 an International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, it gave a seal of recognition to the universal meaning of the extermination of the Jews.[9]

Which other past in modern European history has been viewed as foundational? I turned to read the Nazis, to let them articulate against which past they measured themselves. In a radio broadcast on April 1, 1933, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, proclaimed it clearly : with the Nazi revolution "the year 1789 has been expunged from the records of history." It was obvious to all why Goebbels compared 1933 to 1789: any contemporary, whether schooled in history or not, instinctively knew that the French Revolution was the measure of things in the modern world. "[W]e want to eradicate the ideology of liberalism and the freedom of the individual," stated Goebbels, "and replace it with a new sense of community" in which human equality and free will would give way to a racial order.[10]

Like the Holocaust, the French Revolution was a historical novum: the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and the Terror redefined politics and morality. The Revolution gave birth to ideas and practices that determined modern European and world history from 1789 onward: liberalism, socialism, feminism, human rights, *levée en masse* (mass conscription), and the idea of revolution itself. It was the first modern experience both of democracy and of state-orchestrated terror and as such was viewed as a new standard against which to measure modern history: for the British commentator Edmund Burke it was a model to be avoided at all costs, while for Lenin it was one to emulate. It was seen as a rupture in the consciousness of historical time and representation and as breaking all historical patterns. When Saint-Just declared that, with the Revolution "the eighteenth century should be placed in the Panthèon" ("le dix-huitième siècle doit être mis au Panthèon"), he

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demonstrated a historical awareness similar to that of Goebbels: an awareness of living through a rare turning point in human history.[11] (The comment evinces a tension between two meanings, and both place the Revolution as the grand event of the century: according to one the eighteenth century should live on forever in our memory, but there is also an implication of death, namely that the Revolution, by beginning a new historical period, ended the eighteenth century, which is over and done, but should not be forgotten.)

For contemporaries who lived in the 1930s and 1940s, measuring 1933 against 1789 was an obvious comparison, whether the new world created by Nazis as an alternative to the values of the French Revolution generated for them a sense of foreboding or of hope. Nazi scholars and ideologues predicted that January 30, 1933, the date when Hitler was appointed chancellor, would eclipse July 14, 1789, the fall of the Bastille, as a historical turning point.[12] The historical importance of 1789 was the idea of democracy, wrote Alfred Rosenberg, the self-designated ideologue of the Nazi Party, in a special issue of *School Letters* (*Der Schulungsbrief*) dedicated to the topic "From the French to the Ethnic Revolution": "Today we stand, however, in front of a similarly important historical fact . . . that millions and millions forsake the altar of democracy" and join the racial revolution.[13] Applauding the Nazi nationwide book burning of May 10, 1933, Ernst Bertram, professor of German at the University of Cologne, spoke "against the enemy of life – rationality, against destructive Enlightenment . . . against every kind of the 'ideas of 1789,' against all anti-German tendencies."[14] Hitler himself drew on the Revolution as a source of revulsion and admiration. Revulsion – because the Jew was the "midwife" of this Revolution, attaining equal rights in order to subjugate Aryans and others. But even Hitler could not remain indifferent to the pull of the event. The celebration of July 14, he said with a tinge of envy in 1929, "evokes the memory of historical passion." In spite of the Jews it was a "heroic" age that gave rise to Napoleon and his empire. Hitler the empire builder thus found a revolutionary legacy to embrace.[15]

Victor Klemperer made the association between the French Revolution and Nazism into a minor but recurring theme in his celebrated diary. As a scholar of modern French literature working on a major study on Voltaire and Rousseau, he was especially sensitive to the historical and linguistic affinities between the two periods. Studying Rousseau, he wrote that the Third Reich is "going through my mind. . . . Whole passages could be from Hitler's speeches. . . . [His] political model (no matter whether

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the Führer has read it or not) is the *Contrat social*."[16] He compared the Nazi leaders to Robespierre, while ridiculing the Nazi attempt to build a new society by giving German names to the months in contrast to the revolutionaries' creation of a new calendar.[17]

During the Nazi period, historians outside Germany interpreted contemporary events as marking the passing from one historical era to the next. A paper read at the December 1940 meeting of the American Historical Association by Beatrice Hyslop of Hunter College and published in April 1942 in the *American Historical Review* begins with the following paragraph:

> A little over two years ago the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the French Revolution was being celebrated. No one, even among skeptics and detractors of that movement, could have predicted the events of the following twelve months. It is possible that the era dominated by the concepts initiated by the French Revolution, embodied in the trinity of words, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," has passed forever or that a different emphasis and meaning will be given to each of the words.[18]

In 1948, Hyslop began an essay on the Revolution, published in the *Journal of Modern History*, with a tone that not so much celebrated the victory over Nazism as it recorded the terror, still felt several years after 1945, occasioned by contemplating the possible consequences of Nazism's triumph: "The greatest challenge to the 'principles of 1789' since 1815 culminated in September 1939.... Had the Nazis and their allies won the war, there is little doubt that the French Revolution and its principles could have sunk into historical oblivion."[19]

Implicit and explicit analogies between the Revolution and Nazism came up regularly in post-1945 art and history. When Peter Brook staged Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* in 1964, Susan Sontag observed that "the heart of the play is a running debate between Sade, in his chair, and Marat, in his bath, on the meaning of the French Revolution, that is on the psychological and political premises of modern history, but seen through a very modern sensibility, one equipped with the hindsight afforded by the Nazi concentration camps."[20] In 1982 François Furet, one of the greatest scholars of the Revolution in the twentieth century, chaired with Raymond Aron a conference on the Holocaust at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (ÉHÉSS) in Paris; among the participants were Saul Friedländer, Christopher Browning, Raul Hilberg, Amos Funkenstein, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet.[21]

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After 1945 the French Revolution regained its place as a compass of modern European history. The dominance of French historiography after the war kept debates over the Revolution important, even though key historians of the Annales school, the leading French historical approach originated by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the 1920s, studiously avoided writing about the Revolution in favor of such topics as total and social history and the history of mentalities, practiced by historians such as Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, and Febvre himself. The study of the Revolution was based almost entirely at the Sorbonne rather than at the ÉHÉSS (with the exception of Furet). There was some truth, even with its touch of French self-importance, in Furet's claim in 1980 that no historical argument "[is] so intense and so heated as the one which takes place in every generation about the French Revolution."[22] This claim reflected a shared idea that the French Revolution particularly mattered to modern politics, history, and morality.

It is precisely this idea that had changed. As the scope of the extermination of the Jews became acknowledged from the 1960s on, the Holocaust began taking the place of the Revolution as the event that generated fundamental questions and concerns in a world described as postmodern. It was perhaps fitting that Furet famously declared the French Revolution to be "over" in 1978, in the same period that witnessed the rise of the Holocaust into the status of a foundational past. Whereas once the Revolution was a crucial measure of things human, now it has become the Holocaust. Its global symbolic power has been such that its appropriation has been viewed as essential by groups who seek legitimacy for their suffering. Debates about the Revolution turn now for interpretive guidance to the Holocaust, which has become a field of study that sets disciplinary agendas. Recent discussion of the anti-revolutionary revolt in the 1790s in the Vendée, a region in western France on the Atlantic, and its brutal suppression has centered not on political loyalty and counterrevolution, but on whether it was a genocide like the Holocaust and with what historical and moral implications.[23] Proclaiming 1789 and its consequences as forerunners of Hitler became the ultimate weapon to tarnish the Revolution. What these studies lacked in historical value, they gained in public sensation.[24]

There has been a tradition since 1933, then, of thinking about the French Revolution and Nazism in tandem because doing so was a useful way of articulating meanings and values of modern history. In the relations between these two events I seek a tool to evaluate the current state of

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Holocaust scholarship and consciousness. Scholars know how difficult it is to talk about the Holocaust while keeping a sense of historical perspective, that is, preserving the important historical aspects of the Holocaust while not making the event into a unique, central point of history.[25] One way of addressing this difficulty is to think of Holocaust consciousness and historiography in tandem with the consciousness and historiography of the French Revolution. When Furet published his essay "The French Revolution is Over" he knew well that in France this ur-event of modern history would on some level never be over. "The Revolution does not simply 'explain' our contemporary history; it *is* our contemporary history," he wrote. But that, he added, "is worth pondering over."[26] He called for a new interpretation that would go beyond the "revolutionary catechism" influenced by Marxism, beyond the right–left political divisions in France, and that would recognize that the passing of time, of memories, and of histories now enabled a new understanding of 1789.[27]

The Holocaust is over in a largely similar way. Of course, the Holocaust *is* still our contemporary history. Some survivors are still alive, and their nightmare will never be over as long as they live. The attempt to exterminate the Jews is and will remain a moral signifier of Judeo-Christian civilization. But now that the Holocaust is part and parcel of history, memory, and the wider culture, a stage in the process of internalizing it has come to an end. It is time for new ways of historically imagining the Holocaust. This is the starting point of this book.

In the introduction to his edited book published after the ÉHÉSS conference, Furet wrote that "by its very excess, Nazism remains, forty years after its fall, a sort of enigma for historical rationality. The 'Final Solution,' which is Nazism's culmination point, remains the horrifying embodiment of this mystery."[28] This statement reflected his view about the different historical challenges posed by the Revolution and Nazism. Furet could subject the Revolution to his historical principle that "une œuvre, c'est une question bien posée," or "a study is based on a well articulated problem," but Nazism seemed to him to defy historical method. It is interesting that Furet resigned himself to the "mystery" of the Holocaust, reflecting a popular perception of the extermination of the Jews, rather than attempting to challenge its mystification with the historical tools and skills that he had used to understand the Revolution. The Holocaust seemed not to fit his historical training and approach: writing in the tradition of the Annales school and of Bloch, Febvre, and Braudel, Furet shared with them a confidence, perhaps an overconfidence, in the ability of the historical discipline to explain and interpret. One almost hears Furet's

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