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## In the Shadows of Memory: The Politics of Holocaust Memorialization and the Rise of Global Populism

Emily Josephine Bourgeois

Trinity University, [ebourgeo@trinity.edu](mailto:ebourgeo@trinity.edu)

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# In the Shadows of Memory: The Politics of Holocaust Memorialization and the Rise of Global Populism

*Emily Bourgeois*

**A** 2018 survey conducted by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany revealed that there are significant gaps in the average American's knowledge of the Holocaust, the events between 1933 and 1941 that resulted in the systematic murder of six million European Jews.<sup>1</sup> The unprecedented scale of Nazi operations required the invention of a precise term to describe the most deliberate crimes against humanity: genocide. One third of the survey respondents (31%) believe that the Jewish death toll was two million or less; fewer than half (45%) of respondents could name a single concentration camp or ghetto. These statistics reveal a frightening fact about historical narratives surrounding the Holocaust: they are subject to outside influence. A lack of education about the Holocaust leads to the possibility of a revisionist history because the general public will then lack the factual basis to refute false claims. While for many people the Holocaust remains a potent symbol of the unspoken potential for violence, misinformation and anti-Semitism threaten the integrity of its legacy. An Anti-Defamation League report published in February 2018 found that the number of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States rose by 60 percent between 2016 and 2017—the largest single-year jump on record. 2017 saw the second-highest number reports of anti-Semitic incidents (1,986) since the Anti-Defamation League began keeping records in 1979. Indeed, resurging anti-Semitism is a global issue. In early 2018, the right-wing Polish government passed a law which makes

implicating occupied Poland in the Holocaust a crime punishable with jail time.<sup>2</sup> In France, where current president Emmanuel Macron narrowly defeated far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in 2017, French Jews face rapidly rising anti-Semitism. In 2017, nearly 40 percent of violent acts classified as racially or religiously motivated were committed against Jews, though Jews make up less than 1 percent of France's population.<sup>3</sup> With the global rise of populist sentiment comes a documented resurgence of anti-Semitism and varying degrees of Holocaust denial, from complete denial of the event altogether to the formation of alternate histories surrounding the event (as seen in Poland). The danger of this sociopolitical context is enhanced by the fact that, as these things worsen, this generation will also see the end of survivor testimony. Unless the Holocaust's legacy is made omnipresent, the potential remains for the event to fall prey to nationalist narratives and anti-Semitic influence, ultimately leaving the potential for the events of the Holocaust to happen once again.

"Holocaust" as the name for the systematic and purposeful extermination of six million European Jews at the hands of the National Socialist Government of Germany and its collaborators first appeared in the English-language translation of the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence. This event, which gave a name to genocide, is now the litmus test against which we hold all subsequent human rights violations. Since then, the term "Holocaust" has become synonymous with complete human-led decimation. The Holocaust lives in collective memory as the ultimate outcome of human hatred because of the scale of its terror and the mechanisms by which the Nazi government carried out their "final solution." Beginning with Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, life for Jews in the Third Reich became increasingly oppressive. What we view as images of the Holocaust—death camps, particularly Auschwitz with its large, brick smokestacks—actually represent the culmination of nearly a decade of Nazi isolation, dehumanization, and annihilation of European Jewry. Before Auschwitz, there was the *Einsatzgruppen* (i.e., trained Nazi death squads that were responsible for lining up and shooting Jewish civilians) and *Kristallnacht* (i.e., the pogroms taking place from November 9–10, 1938, which resulted in book burnings and the destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses); earlier still, the Nazi party primed their citizens with a narrative of an insidious Jewish threat. Hitler targeted the Jewish people as the "problem" for his constituents because of their connections to Communism and growing social mobility after emancipation. He weaponized a downturned, postwar economy to propagate anti-Semitism because his citizens were complicit in and indifferent to Jewish oppression if they had food on their table and a roof over their families' heads. In the end, liquidation of ghettos and the institution of death camps were merely the last chapter of Hitler's reformed narrative for the Jewish people—the solution to his created "Jewish problem."

Only after allied liberation of the Nazi camp system did the extent of Jewish suffering and the accompanying atrocities become clear. Russian and American soldiers, upon arriving at Nazi death camps, could not comprehend what they found. Even to this day, it is difficult to put words to the scope of human suffering experienced in the camp system. It has been said that, due to its unprecedented scale, the Holocaust “tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories” and exists as “an ‘event at the limits.’”<sup>4</sup> The Holocaust forced the creation of a new reality because its events were in no way compatible with the world as it had been. Time became segmented in two: before and after the Holocaust. Language had to be created to describe the fallout of these events; words and phrases like “genocide,” “displaced person,” and “postmemory” were created to put language to phenomena that arose from experiences during the *Shoah* (the Hebrew term for the Holocaust). Survivors, then, were tasked with understanding this new world. As the first-hand witnesses to these events, many survivors felt the burden of transmitting memory, of telling the stories of what took place in these locations, events at the limits of representation. Almost immediately after the liberation of the camp system, survivors and family members of the deceased began setting up rudimentary monuments in places of importance.<sup>5</sup> Physical monuments became places of remembrance for the events they witnessed to honor the legacy of the dead with the slogan: “Never Forget.”

A major challenge of Holocaust memorialization, and specifically memorialization in the death camps themselves, is conveying the magnitude of the events that occurred there. These are, of course, especially powerful. As Janet Jacobs writes, “Among the most provocative of these memorials are those that have been established at former sites of terror where the memory of suffering, torture, and extermination is encoded in the buildings, grounds, and grave sites that mark these memoryscapes as sacred spaces.”<sup>6</sup> Under Nazi occupation, landscapes were perverted. A Polish field became a cemetery; former army barracks were transformed into killing centers; train tracks with cattle cars became tombs for the dead. After the war, the active killing in these locations ceased, but the location retained symbolic gravity. No longer was a field just a field or a track just a track: these things became postscripts to the atrocities that occurred there. Memorializing death camps is an imperative because they are the physical locations of genocide. The legacy of victims exists in the camp both physically, as their remains exist in the soil and water, and spiritually, as these locations in a way witnessed their suffering. Because of their history, concentration camps must stand as monuments, as witnesses, to the events that took place there.

The most notorious site of Nazi terror is the death camp Auschwitz, created specifically for the systemic mass-extirmination and dehumanization of

other human beings. Within six months of occupying Poland, the German army ordered the reinforcement and electrification of the fences surrounding existing army barracks in the small town of Oświęcim. After erecting guard towers on-premise, *konzentrationslager Auschwitz*—also known as Auschwitz I—opened its doors. It initially began as an internment camp for various prisoners of war and enemies of the German state; however, within a year, the Nazi regime began the construction of an adjacent camp with a far deadlier mission. This new camp, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, would become a location of unprecedented terror.<sup>7</sup> In total, Auschwitz was responsible for the execution of 1,100,000 innocent Jewish civilians, 70,000 Polish civilians, 25,000 ethnic Roma and Sinti civilians, and 15,000 other prisoners of war. The camp was incredibly effective. During its peak, Auschwitz' gas chambers were able to kill approximately 2,000 individuals every thirty minutes.<sup>8</sup> The mechanisms of death were particularly effective at distancing camp staff from their roles in the murders. Victims were collected, stripped of their clothing and possessions, and then led to the chambers. The doors were sealed, and the chambers then rapidly filled with gaseous Zyklon-B. Everyone in the room died within a matter of minutes. With such a large number of deaths occurring on-premise, disposal of bodies became a problem, leading to the construction of the most infamous symbol of terror in the camp—Auschwitz' large, brick smokestacks. Bodies were piled into the incinerators and burned, released into the atmosphere in a cloud of distinctive thick, white smoke. Workers buried the ashes in the soil and dumped them in various bodies of water.<sup>9</sup> The dead were physically incorporated into the land, water, and air surrounding the camp, and while death was the ultimate fate for most inside the camp, many were kept alive only as long as they were useful for manual labor.

After the extent of the Holocaust's destruction was revealed—that is, after the initial liberation of the Nazi camp system—reality was inverted. Governments and individuals alike were left to grapple with the knowledge that regimes were capable of causing catastrophes like the Holocaust while civilians remained complicit. Survivors of World War Two were forced to interrogate everything previously known about human nature, leaving the world to question how these events fit into a larger narrative of the history of humanity.<sup>10</sup> What do people do in the aftermath of the unthinkable? How does the unthinkable happen? The process of memorialization helps to begin to address these questions, to put events into perspective, and to attempt to create a narrative of how the Holocaust came to be. After World War Two decimated Europe, it left behind a scarred physical landscape and survivors—both Jewish and non-Jewish—who had no method of coping with the fallout of these events. Memorialization allows for societies to create built locations that stand as a

physical testament to the events of the past and to begin the difficult process of putting language to their new inverted reality.

Building these memorials involves the process of collective memory recall, allowing witnesses to testify to the events they witnessed. Collective memory recall is a social process that binds individuals together, because others' testimonies reinforce their lived experiences. In many ways, memory acts as the connective structure of societies.<sup>11</sup> Like tendons connecting muscle to bone, memories connect social identity-forming events to individuals, not only because we experience things from the point of our social location, but also because we remember experiences in community.<sup>12</sup> After a tragedy, its memory becomes common to the group that experienced it, like a communal bank on which individuals can draw. These defining events bind the group together: each member of the group has memories related to the event, whether or not they witnessed it directly. Each time the event is remembered, memorialized, or otherwise conjured, its memory becomes further detached from direct witness' conception of the event and closer to what the larger society's conception of the memory will become. It becomes abstracted, bent by additional information, and shaped by the experiences of others. Over time, the first-hand witness to the event's memory becomes less and less important, as the memory itself is shaped by the society around it. Ultimately, memories of these events live on long after the death of the event's primary witnesses. This phenomenon illustrates the change from autobiographical memory, an individual's personal memory of their past, to collective memory, an active past that informs collective identity.<sup>13</sup> In essence, collective memory joins individuals in a community because the act of deliberate, communal remembrance shapes the importance of that event within a society and ultimately leads the society-specific narrative of this event to define what it means to be a member of that community.

Like the creation of the memorials themselves, the shaping of collective memory is inherently political, because it can reflect the gradients of power and status within a defined group. Insofar as collective memory is grounded in societal values, the memory itself is shaped by the politics of that society. Images of the past reinforce narratives of political triumphs, national heroes, and collective beginning.<sup>14</sup> History becomes justification for current decisions, and since collective memories are shaped by society, they can therefore be continually shaped and adjusted to reflect the ideological values of that society. A nation's collective memory is shaped by the people who are able to erect monuments, control the rhetoric of media outlets, and establish educational curricula. They define the narrative of these events insofar as they have the power to shape public perception, and they can guide how defining events in the nation's past are remembered. In turn, these events become integral parts of a state's political culture.<sup>15</sup> Because they are so deeply tied to individual iden-

tity, events in the collective memory, once politicized, can be conjured and used to establish or reinforce dangerous political hegemony. Memory, which is fragile and easily shaped by social forces, can become a tool to redefine entire historical moments gradually as political ideology shifts over time. With each democratic election, the people of a nation decide who best epitomizes their values. As such, elected officials then become the global representatives of the nations they run. These officials create legislation that shapes the lives of their constituents, and which, in turn, shapes the nation's values and individuals' lived experiences.

It is clear enough, then, that memory of the Holocaust is vulnerable to political reshaping. Especially as general Holocaust knowledge declines globally, the individuals crafting history curricula and media representations are reshaping what populations know about these events. Not coincidentally, anti-Semitism and far-right populism continue to rise as the Holocaust fades further into the past. Holocaust memorials are more important now than ever, but the responsibility for transmitting the memory of these events should not be left solely to the governments of the nations in which they took place. The historical challenge of Holocaust memorialization is that these memorials carry the burden of transmitting a global collective memory. This is partially due to the diasporic state of the Jewish people, and it is due, too, to the way the Nazi government implicated other nations via their occupation. These two groups—the perpetrators and the victims—must both play a role in building Holocaust monuments, because it is only through honoring the full legacy of Jewish suffering that a standard global narrative can be created. Ultimately, this narrative must admonish perpetrators and stand as a testament to the potential of human atrocities perpetrated by hyper-nationalism. It is only through admonishment that we can ensure that the events of the Holocaust are not repeated.

Part of what has weakened victim-centered narratives in Holocaust memorialization is the diasporic configuration of its main victims. Jewish victims of the Holocaust are separated from other groups because of the way the Holocaust specifically targeted them, but this separation also makes Jewish citizens separate from, e.g., the Catholic Poles who died due to Nazi occupation. Groups form common identification through two general means, genealogical and geographic commonalities.<sup>16</sup> While most European nations are identified by geographic commonalities, Jewish communities are diasporic in nature. Traditionally, then, Jewish communities are held together by genealogical commonalities; more specifically, they are bound by the covenant made between God and Moses upon the latter's receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. In Deut. 5:1-4, God makes a covenant not only with Moses, but with the whole of the Jewish people, and the ambit of this covenant is typically taken to include all Jews who have ever have and will ever live. This genealogical defini-

tion, as a member of Israel in some way present at the moment of the covenant with God, indicates that all Jewish people are Jewish because of their presence in that moment. While a connection to the physical place of Israel does exist, Jewish identity is, in the first instance, based on being a member of *Yisrael*, the spiritual community.

This common genealogical bond means that the physical location of Jewish communities matters less to their continuity than the ability to practice their religion independently. Hence, at least in part, Jewish communities have been diasporic since biblical times. A history of anti-Semitism follows the communities with each new location, resulting in a group that is dispersed and part of many nations. It becomes difficult, then, to create memorials for the Jewish diasporic communities affected by the Holocaust, since the collective memory of Holocaust victims lies not in a community defined by place, but by genealogy. If the primary victims of the Holocaust had been an insulated nation, and the events of the Holocaust had occurred within that nation, then the narrative surrounding the event could be formed by the affected nation itself and adequately represent the interests of the victims; however, the Jewish people must rely on the nations that house the sites of memorialization to do justice to the narrative resulting from Jewish collective memory. In other words, because Jewish identity is distinct from Polish identity, these two groups have entered the Holocaust into their own community's collective memory in different ways, thus resulting in two different narratives. Because the terrains of memory exist within the boundaries of the Polish nation, the Jewish diasporic community, the primary victims of the Holocaust, must contend with the Polish national narrative surrounding its events.

It then becomes the moral imperative of the nations that house these sites to construct monuments that represent Jewish collective memory, since this act of construction will work to reframe the global narrative surrounding the Holocaust. By re-centering Jewish suffering in Holocaust memorials, the narrative surrounding the Holocaust may better reflect Jewish collective memory. It is not enough, though, to re-center victims. Governments responsible for these memorials, and specifically governments which were complicit in Nazi crimes, must use the memorials as a form of public admonishment for the actions of their governments. Centering victimhood serves to honor the legacies of the deceased, while the public admonishment of Nazi crimes acts as a firm warning against populism and a reminder of the precariousness of the human condition.

The most contentious case of Holocaust memorialization surrounds the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, especially charged owing to both the extent of the terrors committed there and the memorial's physical location. As the ultimate testament to the capabilities of human terror, this place also holds the

greatest (and most problematic) potential for a radical re-framing of Holocaust narratives, one that threatens to exclude Jewish collective memory. Record of Jewish life in Poland dates back a thousand years, and for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Poland acted as the central hub of European Jewish life and culture. Prior to World War Two, 3,475,000 Jews called Poland home, and, among other things, Warsaw's Yiddish arts scene gave birth to some of the most robust Jewish art consumed world-wide.<sup>17</sup> All of which made the Jewish community in Poland, which tended to live apart from the rest of the majority-Catholic Polish citizens, distinct from other Jewish communities of western Europe. The religious practice of Jews living in Poland similarly set them apart, since they tended to be more traditional. This separation and distinct "otherness" of Polish Jews led to an underlying anti-Semitism in the country, one distinct from the anti-Semitism in, e.g., Germany.<sup>18</sup> Where citizens of Nazi Germany tended to be complicit in and indifferent to the progressively mounting anti-Semitism of their government, Polish citizens were more openly and violently anti-Semitic—before, during, and after the war.<sup>19</sup> The most infamous case of blatant Polish anti-Semitism after the war is the 1946 Kielce pogrom, resulting in the deaths of 40 Jewish Holocaust survivors and the subsequent immigration of most of the remaining Polish Jewish population.

While an overwhelming majority of Polish civilian casualties in World War Two were Jewish, a large number of non-Jewish Polish civilians also perished. Many of these civilians were anti-occupation Polish nationalists who were described after the war as "martyrs to the Polish nation." Much of the Polish nationalist movement is grounded in the same Polish anti-Semitism that bred Nazi collaboration.<sup>20</sup> So, while these partisans were incarcerated and perished alongside Jewish Poles, they were not fighting for Jewish liberation. After World War Two, significant Polish territory was transferred to Soviet Russia, and the country became a communist Soviet satellite state. Poland was finally its own nation, and it developed a hyper-nationalist political culture.<sup>21</sup> The Polish nationalists who died at the hands of the occupying German government became the perfect martyrs, creating protagonists for a new national narrative. The terrain of their suffering was elevated to a place of spiritual reverence while Jewish suffering was comparatively neglected.<sup>22</sup>

In 1947, the Polish government declared that Auschwitz was to be "forever preserved as a memorial to the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other peoples."<sup>23</sup> A struggle was thereby begun between a historically accurate, Jewish-centered narrative of the events that took place at Auschwitz-Birkenau, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Polish government's determination to create a Communist (yet distinctly Catholic) national narrative beginning from the sacrifices of these Polish martyrs. The initial attempts at memorialization

included Jews as an addendum to the suffering of other groups: instead of focusing on Jewish suffering and including other groups (such as Polish partisans and the Romani and Sinti) as part of the larger narrative, the Polish government chose instead to memorialize Auschwitz as a terrain of Polish oppression under Nazi occupation.<sup>24</sup> As a minority with a thousand-year history of persecution, the Jewish survivors could not contend with the majority government's formation of collective memory and the resulting narrative. This debate continues. As noted above, in 2018 the right-wing Polish government amended the 1998 Act on the Institute of National Remembrance Law, making it illegal to implicate the Polish government in crimes during the Holocaust. This law illustrates the Polish attitude towards the Holocaust: the non-Jewish Poles were the primary victims. The case of Auschwitz reveals the frailty of collective memory and its susceptibility to outside influences. With contesting stakeholders creating contesting narratives, minority groups become the most affected by restructuring collective memory. In the case of Holocaust memorialization, the diasporic Jewish people contend with the nation's compulsion to craft a national narrative that reinforces its own ideological agenda. This contention, which is complicated by the Polish legacy of anti-Semitism, results in a memorial that neither holds the perpetrators of the Holocaust responsible for their crimes nor honors the full legacy of its victimized groups, thus maintaining the potential for these crimes to be repeated. Ultimately, the only way for the legacy of Jewish victims of the Holocaust to be fully memorialized is for the current government to acknowledge the part of the former Polish government and its people in perpetrating the Holocaust, and for the agency to craft the historical narrative around what occurred in the camp to be transferred to the Jewish people and descendants of Jewish survivors. The resulting memorial would act as a material testament to the admonishment of the Nazi party and its collaborators, on one hand, and, on the other, would serve to honor the legacy of the nearly three million Polish-Jewish citizens who perished at their hands.

As global anti-Semitism, nationalism, and the threat of fascism rise, the legacy of the Holocaust looms all the more prominently. Nazi crimes did not begin with death camps; rather, they began with a revised historical narrative that glamorized a fictional German historical greatness. The physical locations of the Holocaust—the death camps, ghettos, and ruins of early twentieth-century Jewry—stand as physical testimonies to the dangers of manipulating history for political benefit. Eventually, physical structures will be all that remains of the crimes. These landscapes, which bore witness to Nazi crimes against humanity, carry the history of the Holocaust in their soil. As the final human witnesses to the Holocaust pass away, so too do their autobiographical memories of its events, leaving in their place the collective memory of this event and

the ruins of their personal histories. In Holocaust studies, the ultimate goal of uncovering the events of history is to ensure that the *Shoah* is not repeated in the future. The goal always will be to never forget. Memory, though, is fragile and easily bends under ideological influence. Governments must therefore accept responsibility for historical transgressions, and they must make these transgressions plain in their memorials. Because the terrains of terror—the settings to stories of the most unfathomable human hatred—remain scarred in the landscape, it is the responsibility of humanity to represent what happened there accurately, as the bodies of its victims lie just below the surface.

*Emily Bourgeois is a senior majoring in English. She prepared this essay as part of Professor Jason Johnson's seminar on the History of the Holocaust (HIST 3338) and revised it in Professor Victoria Aaron's seminar on Advanced Exposition and Argument (ENGL 3414), both in Spring 2019.*

#### NOTES

- 1 The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany commissioned Schoen Consulting to conduct a comprehensive national study of Holocaust knowledge and awareness in the United States. The report was compiled from 1,350 interviews with participants ages 18+ in February, 2018.
- 2 For example, referring to Auschwitz as a Polish death camp would be considered a crime. It seems that the law has yet to be enforced to its fullest extent, but its passage caused diplomatic strain between Poland and the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom.
- 3 Adam Nossiter, "'They Spit When I Walked in the Street:' the 'New Anti-Semitism' in France," *New York Times*, July 27, 2018, A1.
- 4 Saul Friedlander, "Introduction," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–21, at 3.
- 5 See James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). For the purposes of this essay, I use Young's definition of a memorial, which distinguishes broadly between a memorial and a monument.
- 6 Janet Jacobs, "Sacred Space and Collective Memory: Memorializing Genocide at Sites of Terror (2010 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture)," *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011): 154–65, at 154.
- 7 See Young, *Texture of Memory*.
- 8 Figures are taken from the Yad Vashem website, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution/auschwitz.html> (accessed April 10, 2019).
- 9 See Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 10 This question became especially important in the 1960s, when the term "Holocaust" was coined, the Eichmann trials occurred, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement made

- discussion of historical violence more common in the West.
- 11 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
  - 12 See further Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
  - 13 As discussed by Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.
  - 14 See Young, *Texture of Memory*.
  - 15 See Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105–140.
  - 16 See Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 693–725.
  - 17 See Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
  - 18 Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
  - 19 One must also acknowledge the number of Polish civilians who harbored and aided Jews during Nazi occupation. Unfortunately, these stories are less common than the stories of anti-Semitic Poles.
  - 20 As discussed by Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*.
  - 21 See further Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*.
  - 22 See Andrew Charlesworth, "Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994): 579–93.
  - 23 Quoted in Young, *Texture of Memory*, 130.
  - 24 See especially Young, *Texture of Memory*.