

# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Stefanie Rauch (ed.):

*Multidirectional Memory? National Holocaust Memorials and (Post-)Colonial Legacies*

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 42, No. 1  
(May 2020), pp2-25

## ROUNDTABLE

### *Multidirectional Memory? National Holocaust Memorials and (Post-)Colonial Legacies*

Tom Lawson (Northumbria), Yasmin Khan (Oxford), and Avril Alba (Sydney), edited by Stefanie Rauch (UCL)

(How) do British colonial history, the Second World War, and the Holocaust intersect in history and memory? As the UK embarks on the creation of a National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre, whose precise shape and content are still in flux at present, there have been calls to establish a memorial to and a museum of Britain's historical involvement in slavery, its colonial past, and their legacies. Meanwhile, Michael Rothberg has argued that Holocaust remembrance has the 'multidirectional' potential to open up routes for commemorating other contested national pasts.<sup>1</sup>

This roundtable continues a conversation that started as a podium discussion co-organized by the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies and the German Historical Institute London as part of the GHIL's Contested Histories seminar series. Its aim is to foster dialogue between scholars of the Holocaust, the Second World War, colonialism, and the British Empire to consider national and transnational histories and their legacies. Organized as an exchange, the roundtable will begin with Tom Lawson, Yasmin Khan, and Avril Alba addressing intersections between colonial history, the Second World War, and the Holocaust, and the extent to which the engagement with these contested pasts constitutes 'multidirectional memory' in Britain and Australia, before responding to one another and widening the debate.

The event on which this roundtable was based, 'Multidirectional Memory? National Holocaust Memorials and (Post-)Colonial Legacies', co-organized by the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies and the German Historical Institute London, was held on 11 June 2019 at UCL Institute of Advanced Studies. A podcast is available at <[ghil.ac.uk/podcast.html](http://ghil.ac.uk/podcast.html)>.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, Calif., 2009).

## ROUNDTABLE

Lawson problematizes the role that Holocaust memorialization plays in Britain today, and the lack of critical engagement with the country's imperial and colonial pasts. He highlights the similarities—and differences—between Nazi antisemitism and colonial racisms, between different, often lethal, imperial regimes of food policies towards colonized people, and between the structures of the British and Nazi empires. Lawson further questions Holocaust Studies as a discipline more generally, and, in particular, the field's uniqueness and archetype paradigms, both of which assign lesser importance to other atrocities before or since. He concludes that in Britain's public sphere, greater Holocaust awareness has not corresponded with a greater understanding of Britain's colonial and slavery pasts. This phenomenon is not, of course, limited to Britain. Other European countries with a colonial past, including Germany, have been slow to reckon with the atrocities committed in former colonies, rarely connecting them to, for instance, the 'race science' which underpinned them, and which would link them to Nazi racial policies. Rather, Germany's focus on the Second World War and the Holocaust tends to eclipse an engagement with its colonial history.

Khan highlights historical intersections, such as Britain's fight against Nazism and for global freedom while trying to maintain its place as an imperial power, or the colonial resources—human and material—without which Britain's war effort would likely have failed, but which were written out of official history after the end of the war. Instead, a narrative around 'standing alone' has deeply entrenched itself, while the colonial past is viewed through a celebratory or nostalgic lens. Analysing Churchill's role, and that of British rule more generally, in the Bengal famine, Khan insists on historical specificity rather than simplified equivalence of imperial crimes and Nazi violence, highlighting a lack of genocidal intent on the side of the British, and the complex nature of the British empire. The histories and legacies of European imperialism and racism, among which the Nazi state is but their most extreme form, are yet to be fully confronted. While memorialization would benefit from looking beyond the frame of the nation-state, this is rarely the case. More recently, important work has begun to address some of these issues, such as the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership project and local and regional initiatives. To this we can add a string of exhibitions, such as 'The Past is Now' at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

2017–18, and increasingly vocal calls for the ‘decolonizing’ of museums and their collections. Other material connections, which link and illuminate the transnational histories of slavery and the Holocaust, include a former British plantation site in Kingston (Jamaica) in the West Indies, which later served as a refuge for Sephardic Jews.

Taking the complex case of Australia, Alba demonstrates how the culturally sensitive approach of the Sydney Jewish Museum’s ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Holocaust and Human Rights’ exhibitions, in which she was involved as project director and consulting curator, became a conduit for engaging with the country’s colonial past. Generational change compelled a new approach to Holocaust commemoration in Australia, shifting from a focus on survivors’ experience to making explicit historical connections to other instances of mass violence, including against Indigenous Australians. Alba further charts a productive route to engage with Indigenous perspectives on fraught questions around forgiveness and reconciliation, and the repatriation of human remains. She maintains the necessity to balance present needs and the imperative to remember with doing ‘good history’, and argues for the potential of commemorative practices to unsettle us and shift our thinking. The provenance of human remains and objects held at European museums raises difficult issues of ownership, responsibility, and restitution. Recent efforts to identify and return objects looted during Germany’s colonial and Nazi eras even point to complex connections between the two, where an object looted under Nazism might have previously been plundered from a German colony.

As these debates and conversations are moving from the margins into the mainstream, this roundtable engages with the developments within and outside of academia, and the role museums and memorials play in either preserving or pushing mnemonic boundaries. Diagnosing the political (mis)uses of the past, Lawson, Khan, and Alba argue for more history: exploring specificity and inviting critical reflection through comparisons, writing complex histories, and practising transparency about our positioning. Their debate speaks to three interrelated themes: first, the historical, transnational intersections of Second World War and Holocaust with the history of the British Empire. Second, academic debates around the place of the Nazi empire as dislocated from or part of a long history of European colonial and imperial expansion and conquest; in other words, ques-

## ROUNDTABLE

tions as to the purpose and limits of historical comparisons. Third, the complex, manifold, and contested ways in which the two former issues find public use and expression – or, indeed, omission – in the present.

\* \* \*

**Tom Lawson:** I have been asked to confront a number of questions that help us reflect on the relationship between Holocaust memories and memorialization and colonial legacies. I have done that very much from my own position as a Holocaust scholar who has become interested in other genocidal pasts, especially in colonial Australia.

First, I was asked to think about how colonial history and histories of violence in the Second World War interact, both in scholarly terms and in terms of wider public engagement. The answer to the second half of that question is easier, in that in terms of wider public engagement in the UK at least they simply don't. I have first-hand experience of this, in that my suggestion that the proposed UK Holocaust Memorial needed to be at least cognizant of Britain's imperial history as an exporter of genocide (arguably within the British Isles, in Ireland, North America, South Africa, and Australia) was met with incredulity by the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission in 2015. The proposal for the memorial to be built next to the UK Houses of Parliament will not consider in any way the violence of Britain's imperial history. The irony of a memorial to the victims of German imperialism built next to Britain's imperial Parliament should not be lost on anyone.

That, of course, there exists no memorial in Britain to the victims of British imperialism suggests something potentially problematic about the role that Holocaust memorialization plays in British national life. The new Holocaust Memorial, Holocaust Memorial Day, and other initiatives to remember the victims of the Nazis are supposed to say something positive about the British present – we are told that they help articulate our values as a nation, about our morality and especially our attitudes to race and racism. But they do not lead to critical investigation of the British past. First, they don't lead to our critical investigation of the Holocaust past, in that there is not much reflection within the context of Holocaust memorialization on the

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

parlous record of British refugee policy during the Second World War and immediately before. We are, to put it bluntly, happy to remember the children saved by the *Kindertransport* without asking too many questions about the fate of their parents who could not access a visa. Happily, that also means that Holocaust memorialization does not force us to ask too critical a set of questions about our present either, and an increasingly parsimonious and problematic attitude to matters of migration and refuge.

Importantly, however, such a focus on Holocaust memorialization also might not force us to ask critical questions of our imperial and colonial pasts. The prominent place of the Holocaust in our national life (the only mandated historical subject on the national curriculum, a prominent memorial day, the construction of a publicly funded memorial) could be seen as establishing an agreed standard of historical atrocity. To put it colloquially, we can all agree that the Holocaust was a bad thing, and as such we can also therefore agree that other historical acts of dispossession and destruction are not, as it were, as bad as that.

Of course, in more scholarly terms the relationship between Nazi violence and colonialism is contested too. In some senses it is the longest-standing debate in Holocaust Studies, namely, asking what context we wish to see the Holocaust in? Do we simply understand it in the context of German history, in the history of anti-Jewish thought, or do we attempt to locate it in the wider tendency towards violence both on the Continent of Europe and in European expansion? Some scholars would, of course, deny the validity of any wider context, because they would argue, as Dan Michman does, that to do so is to undermine or to deny the essential anti-Jewishness of the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> From my own perspective, History is not a zero-sum game and events can be understood in multiple contexts. Nazi antisemitism itself might be understood along with colonial racisms, in that it shares some of the characteristics of the way in which colonized peoples were understood. Colonized peoples in Australia, for example, were understood as barely human, savage, and as in some way barriers to human advancement. The genocidal ideology that saw the need to clear the

<sup>2</sup> Dan Michman, 'The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust in Dire Straits? Current Challenges of Interpretation and Scope', in Norman J. W. Goda (ed.), *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust* (New York, 2014), 17–39.

## ROUNDTABLE

Indigenous population out of the way of colonial development (it was Anthony Trollope who wrote: 'of the Australian black man we may certainly say that he has to go'<sup>3</sup>) is clearly comparable with some forms of Nazi antisemitism. At the same time, of course, obsessions about Jewish power meant that in some form the Nazis saw themselves as the victims of Jewish colonialism, in a clear distinction between the Holocaust and colonial violence.

But, of course, genocide is not just a matter of ideology; it is a matter of deliberate and violent transformation at the level of policy. Again this allows for points of comparison between colonial development and its victims and Nazi efforts to transform Eastern Europe economically—links which senior Nazis themselves were able to identify.

There is also, it seems to me, and as I have written elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> something almost colonial about Holocaust Studies too. It is possible to see the development of Holocaust scholarship as a colonial story. To put it crudely, in the first instance claims such as that the Holocaust was unique were made by victim communities which felt themselves somehow written out of history. Accounts of the Second World War that buried Nazi anti-Jewish violence within general arguments and failed to acknowledge the specificity of the Nazi anti-Jewish project led to a cry of despair that what had happened to the Jews was different, was somehow unique. In that context such ideas were essentially subaltern. But that is not the context that we are operating in now. The Holocaust is not written out of, but is front and centre in, understandings of the Second World War. At this point then, the claim of uniqueness, when it is made, is a claim of the powerful and not the powerless. What is more, it can become (as I have already said) a reason not to acknowledge the suffering of others. In other words, in a Holocaust conscious world, to argue that the Holocaust is all important might prevent other atrocities being seen as important too.

This rather leads me to the second question I was asked: is the idea of multi-directional memory useful? My answer would be that Michael Rothberg's thesis is a tantalizing manifesto for how memory

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand* (1873; London, 2005), vol. i.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Lawson, 'Coming to Terms with the Past: Reading and Writing Colonial Genocide in the Shadow of the Holocaust', *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 20/1 (2014), 129–56.

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

might work, but it is not, in my experience, an account of how in some contexts it does work (as what I have already written suggests). And again I will use my own particular perspective to illustrate that. First, the idea that understanding the Holocaust might help us to understand other acts of atrocity might be seen as valorizing the genocide of the Jews and establishing it as the archetype that revealed other events. This is morally problematic, but is hardly the case in practice, and, indeed, ignores that other violent events have themselves at times impacted on our understanding of the Holocaust. It can hardly be a coincidence, for example, that Holocaust historiography became much more interested in the motivation of perpetrators, particularly in face-to-face killing, in the 1990s. After all, this was the decade in which events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia seared a very different understanding of genocide into western consciousness. But, of course, Rothberg's thesis is not about scholarship but about public memory. And here we are led back to where we started. Has the increasing focus on the Holocaust in British consciousness led to a greater degree of awareness or understanding of other violent aspects of the British past? For that would be multi-directional memory in action. In my own experience this is not the case. Take, for example, my effort to do just that and understand more about genocide in the British past as a result of my interest in the Holocaust. As one reviewer said of my resulting book, *The Last Man: a British Genocide in Tasmania*, 'the purpose of colonialism was not atrocious and many of the colonies witnessed nothing at all that could remotely be described as genocidal'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is nothing to see here. And it is a Holocaust Memorial that will be built next to Parliament, not a memorial to the victims of British imperialism. So Brexit Britain will have a Holocaust Memorial while its politicians speak apparently without irony of Empire 2.0.

\* \* \*

**Yasmin Khan:** 'However unjustly England might be organized it was not at any rate torn by class warfare or haunted by secret police. The

<sup>5</sup> Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London, 2014), reviewed by Bernard Porter, 'How bad are we', *London Review of Books*, 31 July 2014, 36-7.

## ROUNDTABLE

Empire was peaceful as no area of comparable size has ever been. Throughout its vast extent, nearly a quarter of the earth, there were fewer armed forces than would be found necessary by a minor Balkan state.<sup>6</sup>

George Orwell wrote this in 1941 in *England, Your England*. He must have known it was bunkum even as he wrote it. It is a curious statement for its use of the past tense, as if the empire was already something of the past. But the Indian Army in 1941 was one of the largest standing armies in world history. Orwell, born in Bihar in India and having served in the imperial police in Burma, knew far more about colonial oppressions than he was letting on. He was writing at a crucial moment in the Second World War, when Britain faced aerial bombardment by Nazi planes; it was a time when statist propaganda took precedence. All sorts of ideological contortions and outright lies were employed to reconcile the problem of anti-fascism and imperialism in the 1940s. The paradox was that Britain was supposedly fighting the Second World War for global freedoms, while also (and especially in Africa and the Far East) fighting to retain and restore imperial possessions, based on radical inequalities. How could this circle be squared?

The whole Second World War operation drew on colonial resources and armies staffed by men and women, digging coal, running factories, from Africa to the Caribbean and South East Asia. Allied armies were multi-national and drew on global resources. But there was after 1945 a post-war amnesia about this, or an 'asphasia' (as Ann Laura Stoler has described relationships to colonial memory), an impairment of speech, an inability to find the words to talk about something.<sup>7</sup> Or as Bill Schwarz has expressed it, the re-racialization of whiteness occurred after 1945, as English identities retracted to form around white, islander identities. Today, in the context of Second World War memory, this means the establishment of the myth of 'standing alone' in the 1940s, and the insistence on a British narrative of island heroism against Nazi Europe.<sup>8</sup> This mythology is

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, *England Your England* (1941; Penguin edn. London, 2017), 32.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is used throughout Stoler's recent work, see e.g. Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, vol. i of *Memories of Empire* (Oxford, 2011).

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

the animating spirit of English nationalism, and underpins its newer, anti-European forms to the present day, tropes which return again and again to 'the Dunkirk spirit'. Concurrently, there persists in Britain a deeply uncritical and celebratory feeling about empire, tinged with nostalgia and a sense—ultimately—of a moral, civilizing mission, which is much unchanged since the nineteenth century. A YouGov Poll in 2016 found 44 per cent of British people believe that the empire is something to be proud of. The British past is depicted, in this narrative, as a continuous line, unbroken by modern revolution or fascism, Whiggishly moving towards universal freedoms. There has been a de-linking in the British collective memory of imperialism and anti-fascism.

One case that proves particularly touchy in this respect, then, is the Bengal famine. In 1943 approximately three million people died in Bengal on the British watch as a result of a mixture of crop failure, cyclone, and rampant wartime inflation. This was all exacerbated by directing food to troops stationed on the borders of Burma rather than towards civilians. There was a complete lack of wartime rationing in India. Churchill, furious at Bengali resistance to the war effort during the Quit India movement of the previous year, was in a punitive frame of mind. He described Indian people as breeding like rabbits in a racialized letter, just one of many in which he also decided against sending aid or food relief. Over a number of months Churchill blocked food aid, as Madhusree Mukerjee has shown in devastating detail.<sup>9</sup> Viceroy Wavell's letters pleading for relief (and his threats of resignation in the face of Churchill's intransigence) are easily available to see. It is an egregious and obvious example of the crimes of empire.

The temptation is strong to invert old narratives and make moral equivalences here. Churchill as villain rather than hero, imperial crimes on a par with the Nazis. To echo the simplifications of conservative champions of Churchill, to counter one set of myths with another. This is, indeed, one way in which such historical moments can be leveraged in public debate, as staking a claim to educational and public spaces. As a corrective to the past. It is ever more tempting when politicians such as Jacob Rees-Mogg and Boris Johnson are

<sup>9</sup> Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York, 2010).

## ROUNDTABLE

hastily knocking out their own trade books, pushing their own skewed narratives of the British past. And yet, there are important things to note: Churchill never deliberately planned an extermination of the Bengali people, the most major crime was the failure of relief, the inexcusable failure to send food aid when it was available.

The British empire and the Nazi state are *not* directly comparable as blocs. In the most basic way, the empire was not one thing or one state. It was a way of organizing territory and peoples, it lasted over 350 years, and dominated a quarter of the world's population. The British empire was far less coherent than the Nazi state and more deeply varied across places and times: race operated differently in Africa than in Asia, moments of atrocity stood on a spectrum from the massive crimes of disease and destruction wrought by settler colonialism in Australasia and the Americas, and the impact of slavery, to more routinized, daily inequalities of racial oppression and casual oppression. The British empire was less intentional, less systematized, and less orchestrated by a set of identifiable actors. We have to remain careful with our terms and definitions, most especially with the terms Holocaust and Genocide. At this political moment in particular, I believe that we historians should be careful and responsible with our use of language, and with our use of generalization.

Nonetheless, as Hannah Arendt recognized long ago, the imperial impulse was a modern European phenomenon, and rooted in western development of racial scientific thought, social Darwinism, and militarism. The Nazi state was the fullest and most extreme example of modern European expansionism and racism. But these are histories which all of us in Europe still need to reckon with – and that includes Britain.

\* \* \*

**Avril Alba:** My work as a scholar and curator in Holocaust studies has been increasingly influenced by the Australian context within which it has been undertaken. Australian Holocaust museums have a somewhat unique history as private museums that were funded, developed, and, at first, largely run by survivors. The context and content of these spaces were thus (in the words of the Sydney Jewish Museum's first curator, Sylvia Rosenblum) 'personal, private and

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

Jewish',<sup>10</sup> and focused on telling the survivors' stories against the backdrop of a historical exhibition. Given Australia's considerable survivor population, such an approach was possible in the early 1990s and nearly every visitor, general and student, would hear from a survivor as part of their tour.

While deeply personal and powerful, the focus on survivor experience in the first decade or so of the museum's existence meant that historical and empathetic connections with 'other histories' of mass violence were limited, or left up to the visitor to infer. Many of the museum's survivor volunteers either did not feel that their experience connected with other histories of genocide, or simply did not see this as part of their mandate, or within their capabilities to explore. For some, there was reluctance or even outright refusal to see connections between their experience and those of other genocide survivors, including Indigenous Australians. In this regard, Australian survivors were neither unusual nor alone in relation to the broader Australian population, who, mired in the so-called 'History Wars' of the 1990s and early 2000s, were still debating whether Australia's colonial history could rightly be labelled 'genocidal'.

In 2012 the Sydney Jewish Museum began the process of re-developing its permanent Holocaust exhibition and exploring the possibility of an additional Holocaust and human rights exhibition. As project director/consulting curator for this project, I was keenly aware that through our work we were also enacting a process of intergenerational change. While survivors were consulted as part of the development process, the curatorial teams for each exhibition were comprised of descendants, non-descendants, Jews, and non-Jews, all of whom had professional experience across a broad range of historical, museological, curatorial, and design disciplines.

With intergenerational change came the recognition that the Holocaust could serve as a powerful conduit to other experiences and stories in the Australian context. While the decision and process to actualize this connection was not uncontested, nor completely realized and resolved, it has, to some extent, borne 'multidirectional' fruit.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Rosenblum, 'Are Museums the Best Place for the Memorialisation of the Holocaust?', *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide*, 11 (1996), 16-18, at 17.

## ROUNDTABLE

The curatorial decision to explore and make explicit in the exhibition intersections between Australia's colonial history and the Holocaust was undertaken where a direct connection could be made either historically or thematically. For example, by exploring Austrian SS Leader Ernst Kaltenbrunner's little-known plan to solve the 'Jewish Question' by sending European Jewry to live with the 'Austral Niggers',<sup>11</sup> and sending Australia's Aryan population back to Europe, we were able to demonstrate how deeply racial thinking permeated the Nazi world view, and how closely Jews and Indigenous peoples were related within this racial thinking. This historical connection then provided a basis for thinking about race science in the Australian context more broadly, and while differences were duly noted with regard to the harnessing of these ideologies in the German and Australian contexts, making this link explicit produced a powerful context for self-reflection on the Australian, as well as European, past.

Engaging memory in the converse direction, by bringing the commemoration of the Holocaust and other forms of genocidal violence to bear on emerging forms of Indigenous memorialization in Australia, has also proven generative. The visual arts workshop, Representation, Remembrance and the Memorial,<sup>12</sup> staged in Melbourne in June 2018 and led by the Wiradjuri-Celtic artist, Brook Andrew, took as its focus the question of how best to memorialize the frontier wars in Australia. The workshop was conceived and implemented in an explicitly comparative and international perspective, bringing Australian Indigenous experience into dialogue with international developments with invited guest scholars and curators from a variety of countries dealing with colonial and genocidal pasts including Cambodia, North America, South Africa, New Zealand, and the Scottish Isles.

As participants conveyed the particularities of each instance of mass violence, questions relevant to all case studies emerged. Discussion of these questions did not, however, always bring consensus. For example, whether forgiveness was possible in the context of genocide became a question about which the group could not

<sup>11</sup> Kaltenbrunner proposal to Himmler, Germany, 20 Apr. 1938, (replica) courtesy Bundesarchiv Berlin, BDC collection.

<sup>12</sup> Representation, Remembrance and the Memorial (RRM) <<http://www.rrm.memorial/introduction>>, accessed 6 Mar. 2020.

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

come to agreement. Rather, it provoked ongoing discussion as to its role and effectiveness. Was forgiveness an essential part of the healing and reconciliation process? Who could legitimately offer, and who could grant, forgiveness? Did forgiveness entail an acknowledgement of guilt, and if so, how was that guilt to be accounted for and redressed? Could memorials become conduits for facilitating the dual processes of forgiveness and reconciliation? Or do they serve to obscure or 'screen' the difficult work that forgiveness entails from both perpetrator and victim groups?

Understanding the specifics of each group's cultural practice was therefore a common theme throughout the symposium. Differences were welcomed and much was learnt from contrast as well as confluence. Despite, or perhaps in some ways because of disagreement, the most consistent factor in the discussions might be described as 'solidarity'. A solidarity not based on a dogmatic sense of allegiance, but one which emerges rather from a deep and shared understanding of the complexity of the commemorative process, and a commitment to its ultimate value, despite its proximate difficulties.

One of the most poignant topics that was discussed in several sessions was the repatriation of human remains, particularly those of Indigenous Australians whose remains are held in a variety of museum collections worldwide. There is no agreement among Indigenous groups in Australia as to how these remains should be cared for once back in Australia, but there is certainly a strong desire for their return. One idea is the creation of a National Resting Place in Canberra, in which remains would be cared for by Indigenous communities until they were able to be identified and returned to their Country (clan group area). The question of how to identify and bury those who were subject to this particular form of violence cannot be answered definitively – each case will present different challenges. Yet surely the initiatives that other persecuted groups have brought to bear to afford victims in death the dignity that was denied them in life, hold resonance despite these differences? For those involved in the difficult work of researching, commemorating, and displaying difficult pasts, it is when we are confronted most starkly with examples such as the need for a National Resting Place that we can harness the power of multidirectional memory. For while our histories contain their differences, our work also displays a fundamental similarity – the desire and necessity to remember the victims and restore to

## ROUNDTABLE

them their dignity. Surely this is work we can, and must, undertake together.

\* \* \*

**Tom Lawson:** First, may I thank my colleagues Avril Alba and Yasmin Khan for their beautifully written and thought-provoking responses to the questions we were asked. There are a number of points of overlap with my own thinking, and both have made me think further about the relationship between our efforts to remember the Holocaust and our imperial past, and about how we can (and cannot) think both through together.

Yasmin Khan is absolutely right to point to our responsibility to use precise language and not just to exchange one set of myth-making for another in our efforts to complicate some of the simplicities of public memory. So Churchill was neither absolute hero nor villain, but a nuanced and complex politician with a complex legacy. And the Nazi state and the British Empire were certainly not equivalent. But that does not mean they were not comparable. We must remember, too, that the Nazi empire was, like Britain's empire, no monolith. It also encompassed a number of differently administered territories, with a complex and dynamic relationship between the centre and periphery. Not all imperial violence was directed from London, and nor was all Nazi violence directed from Berlin. Some of the most radical policies against Jews were developed at the periphery in the context of vague policy instructions from Berlin and centrally imposed problems in a way that was reminiscent of other European empires. At the same time, trains did run from around Nazi Europe to Auschwitz in a way that is not comparable to any form of violence in the British Empire (although the relationship between technology and violence surely is).

Similarly, we must not caricature Nazi violence to set it absolutely apart from other forms of imperial subjugation. The example of famine is instructive here in that the forced confiscation of food, and associated famine deaths, was a hallmark of German imperialism in the Nazi era, just as British policies were exacerbating the Bengal famine. German hunger policy had manifold links with the evolution of genocidal anti-Jewish policy too, for example, in the ghettoization

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

of Jewish populations in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the question of how to feed Jewish populations led in some cases directly to planning for genocide, with the desire not to 'waste' food on so-called 'useless eaters'. Again, the Nazi state may have been the most extreme example of European imperial food policies but it is not, I think, in a category all of its own. To ask the question how European imperial regimes managed the food supply in a way that contributed to famine for Indigenous populations would involve writing about the British and Nazi empires.

Yasmin Khan also points to the extraordinary distance between the simplicities of British memories of war and the complex reality of this history. That Britain stood very well alone against the Nazi state is literally, it would appear now, the officially sanctioned narrative of the British past. I learned from Twitter this week, for example, that the Life in the UK test for applicants for British citizenship contains the following question: 'Is the statement below true or false: Britain and the Empire stood almost alone against Nazi Germany until the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.' Incredibly the correct answer is 'true'. Now one might argue that the inclusion of the Empire in this is at least something, in that it acknowledges the contribution to this conflict made by subjugated peoples. But in the main this is a bewilderingly simplistic reading of a complex history that rather writes out, for example, the experience of the civilian populations that actually bore the brunt of Nazi violence. Not to mention the degree to which it writes out of the narrative any of the complex moral compromises that the British government made during that conflict, not least to its many refugees.

And yet, as Avril Alba reminds us, the representation of the past in the public sphere is a complex matter. That question in the Life in the UK test is probably the result of many compromises and efforts to satisfy various institutional agendas. We historians and critics often, I think, read the output of those representations without thinking about the complexity behind them. Take the example that Avril Alba uses of the Sydney Jewish museum – the visitor there might know little of the community that museum serves and, as such, the constituency that has a stake in the narrative that it puts forward. The visitor will not know the complex compromise in the story that museum has to tell, to provide a narrative that is both meaningful to the survivor community that supports it and meaningful in a wider Australian con-

## ROUNDTABLE

text—including the suffering of Indigenous populations. That the museum is able to confront its visitors with a complex contextualization of the Holocaust within the wider history of human rights abuses is a testament to the skilful work of the team behind the exhibition, and, as Avril Alba writes, the careful selection of historical evidence that allows these complex and overlapping pasts to be explored.

What I think is important about the Sydney Jewish Museum and other museums, such as the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre, is that they remind us that the question of where we are standing when we try and remember the Holocaust is important. I experienced this very personally myself when I first visited the Sydney Jewish Museum and was struck by the declaration to the former Indigenous owners of the land and the different responsibilities and complexities of thinking through the Holocaust in a place that was the site of another form of dispossession and dislocation. It is equally the case in South Africa that the apartheid regime means one is forced to think through the Holocaust along with (and potentially through the lens of) another form of racial violence. This does not mean that either the dispossession of Indigenous Australians or the racial politics of South Africa are equivalent to the Nazi genocide of the Jews. It just means that where we are standing has an impact on how we see the past, or, indeed, on the bits of the past that we can see or look for.

I think one of the striking things about the UK, however, is that we never seem to be able to consider ourselves as an exporter of violence, and to consider how that impacts or should impact on how we think through the past, including with the Holocaust. It is clear that we live in a world that is conscious that the Holocaust represents the very worst of what humans and the societies they build are capable of. When we think about the Holocaust in Britain it might serve us well to consider how the societies and institutions that we have built have also been involved in historic injustice and violence from the slave trade to imperial genocide. That would be to follow the multi-directional path that Avril Alba talks about. And yet we do not. As Yasmin Khan outlines, we view the past through the prism of ‘very well alone’, and the Holocaust past can be used to further embed that narrative. It is the job of historians to continue to advocate for more complexity, for more History.

\* \* \*

**Avril Alba:** I am not a scholar of British imperialism, the history and practice of which form central concerns in both of my colleagues' pieces. Yet both of their reflections on imperial and Holocaust history, their similarities and differences, provided me with much food for thought in my own work as a scholar primarily concerned with Holocaust memory and a practitioner in related, commemorative initiatives.

Both pieces point to fundamental questions in the practice of history, and in particular Holocaust and colonial history. First, how and to what end do we undertake comparative historical work? What do we seek to illuminate in so doing, and how do we do so while remaining 'true', so to speak, to historical specificity? Second, how are these histories then leveraged in public space, that is, what is the 'work' that they do in the present?

The two enterprises are, of course, inextricably linked. There is no compelling account of the past that does not, in some way, give us pause in and for the present. Yet it is a mistake to assume that in making these links we do so through a consideration of the history alone. Commemoration has as much to do with the needs of the current moment as it does with our understanding of the past. But does this recognition of the centrality of the present in our desire to remember mean that doing 'good history', in the end, simply does not matter?

To attempt to think through these issues while in the throes of a 'post truth' era adds further layers of complexity. Rather than acting as some kind of 'quick fix' to the dilemmas of the present—if we had only known *that* we wouldn't have done *this*—'good history' reveals to us just how complex and contradictory human behaviours, circumstances, and responses were and are. History's radical promise is to teach us that others *have* thought and acted differently, and that understanding (not excusing) these actions is a multilayered and iterative task that requires both rigour and doubt. Rigour with regard to our approaches and doubt as to our ability to reach a conclusive understanding. Indeed, rather than affirming our existing prejudices, the practice of history can and should disarm us.

So, too, when we engage in the work of commemoration, a similar level of rigour should be harnessed. Commemoration can and

## ROUNDTABLE

does provide relief but should also provoke reflection; ideally, it should shake rather than confirm our convictions. The questions the preceding pieces ask, therefore, are *can and do* the links and/or comparisons between Holocaust and British imperial history generate and provide space for such sustained critical reflection?

It seems evident to me that while they can and have done so, it is not inevitable that they will. In a political environment where the past is increasingly harnessed for sectarian and largely self-congratulatory visions of the present, critical reflection can become collateral damage. Hence, the questions of whether we can think through and between these histories is deeply informed by the context within which we undertake this work. A recognition of historical context and, just as importantly, of our own 'historical moment' is essential.

But these are ideas in the abstract. What do they mean in actuality? To take but one example: Yasmin Khan makes the astute observation that 'There has been a de-linking in the British collective memory of imperialism and anti-fascism.' An attempt to understand the forces that have led to this separation of historical memories should compel us to ask why? Is it, as Tom Lawson suggests, a desire to whitewash the violence of Empire, to domesticate it within a paradigm in which the 'unique' genocide of European Jewry remains the only legitimate, and therefore non-replicable, yardstick of genocidal violence? The inevitable conclusion of such explanations is that the fight against fascism was a fight against genocide, but de-colonization was, at best, a fight against foreign oppression and occupation. In such a paradigm, colonialism was not, *per se*, genocidal. If Lawson is correct in his explanation (and even if not), critical reflection on such 'de-linking' tells us a great deal about the shape and 'work' of Holocaust memory in the present.

Indeed, to my mind, it is precisely in recognizing contingencies such as these that the work of history and the work of commemoration are at their most instructive. For if the connections between histories of violence are used to occlude rather than illuminate, to obfuscate rather than reveal, we are one step further away from understanding, challenging, and, perhaps, ultimately changing, the work that is done by these pasts in the present.

Yet is it possible to recognize contingencies while maintaining historical rigour? In challenging these memory cultures, is there not a danger that we are simply replacing one set of political commitments

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

with another, more palatable to our own? Khan correctly and importantly notes: 'The British empire and the Nazi state are not directly comparable as blocs.' Lawson further reminds us that 'History is not a zero-sum game and events can be understood in multiple contexts.' So what do such varying observations ask of us as producers and consumers of history, and as active participants in commemorative cultures that shape, and are often shaped by, our deepest emotional and political commitments?

To my mind they require us to commit anew to historical rigour, but equally to acknowledge and interrogate the political commitments that are so often inspired by our understandings of, and relationship to, the ramifications of that history. If imperial and Holocaust history are not the same, but if both the British Empire and the Nazi state (as Khan notes) harnessed and developed ideas of race, social Darwinism, expansion and militarism, does this not compel us to look deeply at how these ideas played out in each historical context, and give us pause to reflect upon their ongoing ramifications? Can such diverse yet connected histories not be held together through the deployment of an exacting but also expansive historical imagination? And what new understandings of these pasts and their reverberations in the present might emerge from exploring these histories through an alternate and perhaps more capacious lens?

The 'History Wars' of Germany and Australia have clearly demonstrated that reflections on 'difficult pasts' have increasingly become the arenas upon which sectarian political battle lines are drawn. Some may posit that it was ever thus. Yet perhaps a return to history can also provide some solace. Those Jewish intellectuals who fled Germany in the wake of fascism more often than not displayed a solidarity with non-Jewish victims of Nazi oppression, and many even drew parallels between their own experiences and those of marginalized and oppressed peoples across the globe. They did so with the full knowledge of the distinctiveness of Nazi oppression, as well as its antecedents in the *longue durée* of the violence inherent in the modern project. They also did so in light of passionate and long-standing political commitments undeterred by, and often held in opposition to, prevailing social and political norms. Perhaps a consideration of such models of expansive historical thinking can reinvigorate, rather than domesticate, the commemoration of historic violence today.

## ROUNDTABLE

\* \* \*

**Yasmin Khan:** Reading Tom Lawson and Avril Alba's considered reflections on the integration of Holocaust methodologies and studies of violence in the colonial empires, including in Australasian contexts, prompts a number of thoughts. Most obviously, these are sharp reminders that the recent centuries of European modernity and European imperial expansion have coincided with extreme acts of violence and racial subjugation, more often than not enacted by nation-states against extremely vulnerable populations, causing massive destruction, dispossession, and death. The state-centred violence of the past three centuries, and the military and policing capabilities of European nation-states, have transformed the capacity for human destruction, and genocidal intentions have been ever more readily transformed into action.

Multidirectional memory, it seems to me, needs to be two things at once, and these things are paradoxical. In one way, 'good' history as Alba writes, needs the investment and care in detail, enriched case studies, archival attention, and acuity of vision, which only occurs through very focused and detailed understanding of past events such as the Holocaust, or the genocides against aboriginal peoples, or histories of slavery, or the violence of imperial famines in Asia. But also, and far more rarely achieved, memorialization benefits from looking beyond the frame of the nation-state. Those campaigning for memorials might aspire to less rather than more investment in national and ethnic particularities (and the identifications which this entails) and more attention to the core impacts of violence and deprivation and inequality on all human lives. In short, an emphasis on humanity as a historical category, which goes beyond the boundaries of the nation or the ethnic group. Judith Butler's ethics of grievable lives is instructive here, and her insistence on an understanding of what makes certain lives grievable, whereas others are lost both to history and commemoration. At root this seems to me a very simple and democratic ethic of placing equal value on every human life. As she writes:

One way of posing the question of who 'we' are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungriev-

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

able. We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An un-grievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and un-grievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others – even if it means taking those latter lives.<sup>13</sup>

We are still so often bound by the nation-states (in the titles of our books and courses) and by the national frame that engendered ‘professional’ history-writing itself in the nineteenth century. Indeed, in teaching, research, and memorialization, the nation-state is still the dominant and normative framework, and it tends to creep into historical narratives even when we guard against it. And similarly our commemorations and museums have a tendency to reify and follow these nationalist frames. In the British context, for example, I think there are complicated lines of connection between resurgent nationalism, the strength of British militarism, and support for the contemporary armed forces, and Second World War histories and commemoration. Communities are invested in identifying their own dead, and grieving ‘their own’, and as the generations change, these kinds of memories can slide into instrumentalization and political claim-making. And this can even include well-intentioned attempts at broadening the scope of memory. I think here, for instance, of the rush by community groups to identify soldiers from the Second World War as Sikh, Muslim, Indian, or British Asian. Undoubtedly inspired by a need to rectify an unbalanced history and memorialization which ‘forgot’ these participants, and which had retrospectively racialized the war as a white effort, these new efforts to memorialize can unwittingly end up reinforcing the boundaries of contemporary political communities, or pitting different ethnicities against each other in what starts to look like a zero-sum game.

So the injunction to ‘think global, act local’ might be a good one for historians too. This is why Alba’s experience, and the way in which her work in Holocaust studies was influenced by her Australian context, is striking. As she describes, the exhibition at the Sydney

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London, 2010), 38.

## ROUNDTABLE

Jewish Museum raised many questions and meant different things to various generations, and wasn't without controversy or difference, but has also proved generative and creative. Challenging the idea of what (for some) seemed to fall within the Museum's original mandate, and what stories the museum was able to tell, in this instance proved a powerful instance of multidirectional memory in action. Connections with other histories of mass violence—once limited or left up to visitors to infer—became in the museum a fruitful space for reflection about Australian histories of violence.

How progressive this seems compared to British political attempts to cordon off or discuss imperial responsibilities, and to segment memorialization. And how rarely in British discussions of imperialism does the violence against the populations of America and Australasia make any sustained appearance. Although I am a historian of British India myself, I would increasingly argue that India's centrality to memories of imperial violence (in the shape of Amritsar, or the Partition of 1947) may well be overblown when placed in the global context of histories of indigeneity and slavery, and is ripe for reappraisal in that context. And unfortunately I agree with Lawson that the prospect of any major reappraisals of the imperial past in contemporary Britain look unlikely to arrive at the national level. Memorials may well be the last place where this will happen. Yet there are glimpses of change, sometimes inspirational. Lively British local and regional reflections on histories of slavery have been gathering pace, and ways of telling the histories of slavery have changed considerably since 2007 and the bicentenary of abolition, often as a direct result of the work of Catherine Hall and the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership project. There has been increasing awareness of the idea of beneficiaries from slavery—interestingly, the most effective investigations of the beneficiaries often look to the institutional and familial rather than the national—and the new emphasis on reparative histories of slavery that interrogate our responsibilities in the present, give reasons to be hopeful about the future.

About the contributors: **Tom Lawson** is Professor of History and Pro Vice-Chancellor for the Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences at Northumbria University, Newcastle. He is the author and editor of

## MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY?

several books concerned with the Holocaust, genocide, and memory. These include (with James Jordan) *The Memory of the Holocaust in Australia* (2008); *Debates on the Holocaust* (2010); and *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (2014). He is co-editor of the journal *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, and of the series Palgrave Studies in the History of Genocide. Tom is currently researching a history of genocides across the British Empire. **Yasmin Khan** is Associate Professor of British History at the University of Oxford. She has published on the decolonization of South Asia including refugees, war, and the Partition of 1947, most recently *The Raj at War* (2015). In 2018 she presented a short series, *A Passage to Britain* on BBC2. **Avril Alba** is Senior Lecturer in Holocaust Studies and Jewish Civilisation in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney. She teaches and researches in the broad areas of Holocaust and modern Jewish history with a focus on Jewish and Holocaust museums. Her monograph, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space*, was published in 2015. From 2002 to 2011 Avril was the Education Director at the Sydney Jewish Museum, where she also served as the Project Director/Curator for the permanent exhibitions 'Culture and Continuity' (2009), 'The Holocaust' (2017), and 'The Holocaust and Human Rights' (2018). She is currently working on an ARC Discovery project, 'The Memory of the Holocaust in Australia'.

STEFANIE RAUCH is a Research Associate at the Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL. As part of the collaborative AHRC-funded project 'Compromised Identities? Reflections on Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism', her current research explores what it means to ordinary people to have stood on the 'wrong side of history' once the moral and normative parameters have shifted.