Conflicting Disciplines, Conflicting Narratives: On Semantic Crises in Holocaust Studies-A Personal Statement

Carlos Gustavo Halaburda

This essay explores some of the challenges of Holocaust research today. A discussion of the current literature addressing historiographical problems pertaining the German genocidal crusade against the Jews and other groups deemed sub-human will shed light on an urgent debate on how to approach the Holocaust as a human phenomenon.¹ I argue that part of the aporia of the extermination of millions of people lies in the semantic crises originated within the Nazi regime and its bureaucracy. Such is the legacy that Nationalsozialismus left for scholars who desperately attempt to find a language to construct an “accurate” story of the past.

Indeed, the Shoah is an event that resists the totalization of a master discipline that could own its history. Conflicting narratives have proved that the Holocaust is a story without a story. This is a problem that history as a discipline of inquiry is rather uneasy to recognize. Famous historians of the Holocaust today refuse to see it as an inexplicable event. Moreover, they have claimed that adding a mystical element of inexplicability ultimately justifies the Shoah.²

The Holocaust is a historical phenomenon that proved traditional ways to write history to be insufficient to cover its complexity. I will not discuss the full literature on German atrocities in this essay. However, I examine what I consider perhaps the most influential academic voices of the Shoah. I do this through the lens of philosophy, cultural studies and museology. I chose to discuss these works since I consider their authors to be influential voices not only in academia but also in mainstream Holocaust references. Despite their experience and reputation, I think their approach can be insufficient and problematic.

First I discuss the weaknesses of current historical debates on the German genocide against the Jews by exploring how Nazism provoked such destruction of language that Holocaust history cannot be written as any other. Second, I argue how literature, philosophy and museology are necessary venues to be integrated into a new way to tell
the story of the extermination. I situate the relevance of this discussion within the very
debate on what constitutes the task of the Holocaust scholar, that is, not to find
satisfactory answers within one discipline to tell a past marked by aporia.

The Utopia of History or the Impossibility of “Getting it Right”: Aporia, the Archive
and the Narratives of Heroism

The problem of language in historical research on the Holocaust posits the ultimate
challenge. Historian Micheal Marrus holds that “getting it right is what [he] tries to do as
a historian of the Holocaust.” Now, is it possible? In order to relate a faithful chronicle of
the Shoah, is it enough to have “the greatest care in research?” Marrus acknowledges that
objectivity is a “methodological challenge for the historians of the Holocaust.” Moreover
he argues that historical analysis should be the objective of any scholars with historical
conscience. Ultimately Marrus claims that it is necessary to balance traumatic
testimonies of survivors with historical examination. In other words, for Marrus,
“testimony is not substitute for historical inquiry.

Marrus’s and Friedlander’s postures hold a profound faith in the discipline, which is
seen as a protector of the public memory. However, the production of Holocaust history is full of
“extraneous features” just as memory is.

Historians of the Holocaust are sometimes skeptical to navigate the waters of
philosophy. Particularly when philosophy can problematize a history of good vs. evil.
Historian Ian Kershaw argues that the Holocaust is often perceived as “the result of
forces of evil, which is a metaphysical notion that cannot play a part in historical
inquiry.” This position illustrates the work of historian Yehuda Bauer. In his Rethinking
the Holocaust, Bauer delivers a comparative analysis of genocides throughout history in
order to find what makes of the Shoah an unprecedented event. Using jurist Raphael
Lemkin’s definition of genocide, Bauer claims that the Holocaust is the most radical
version of mass murder because the Nazis attempted to destroy every single individual
belonging to a nation, the Jews. This is the most important contribution of the analysis. The rest has several inconsistencies.

A comparative analysis, as cultural anthropologist Bozena Karwowska argues, may be an insufficient method of inquiry since a comparison between similar categories usually delivers a self evident response: the elements compared are similar but not the same. Indeed, Bauer displays an encyclopedic knowledge of genocides throughout history such as the Spanish Conquest, the Armenian Genocide and the events of Cambodia and Rwanda. His conclusion is that what makes the Holocaust unprecedented is the issue of racial ideology taken to an extreme whose result was the radicalization of killings. Other genocides, according to Bauer, were not fuelled by ideology but by pragmatic reasons: political and economic power. In sum, in order to prove that the Holocaust is the most radical version of genocide, my question is: Was the comparison with others necessary when it has been proved in a rich body of scholarly work written since the 1980s that never before so many people had been killed in so little time? Clearly, besides being a piece of cultural recycling since Bauer’s review of genocides dwells upon an extensively documented historical data that requires little further elaboration, Bauer’s analysis lacks the most important issue brought by philosopher Primo Levi in the 1980s regarding the unprecedented nature of German crimes: turning victims into perpetrators. Levi holds, “conceiving and organizing the squads [of victim-perpetrators] was National Socialism's most demonic crime.” However, Bauer makes a clear distinction between one and the other. His approach to see the Holocaust as an explainable event refuses to acknowledge any semantic crisis or gray zones.

Even though Holocaust scholars have indicated that “getting it right” also means desisting to see the victim with a “special aura of heroism”, Bauer idealizes the victim:

The common use of the term dehumanization would leave perpetrator as the “human” and the victim as less than human. That, indeed, was the intended outcome, but in fact the Nazi treatment of those interned in camps and ghettos showed the opposite, because it was the Nazis who lost the characteristics of civilized human beings. When that minority of inmates who survived was liberated, they returned to their civilized ways of life; it is highly doubtful whether their torturers did, unless they repented, which apparently very few of them did. In other words, the Nazis remained dehumanized even after the nightmare ended; those of their victims who survived did not.

Writing a history of the Holocaust means to challenge all philological assumptions because the biggest crime of Nazism is to have destroyed the linguistic sign. In the 1950s,
historian Nachman Blumenthal warned historians about the problem of language in Holocaust history: “Research into Nazi terminology must constitute an introduction to historical research. This is necessary in order to avoid wholesale deception and confusion [...]”. Indeed, Bauer’s use of the words “victim”, “civilized human beings”, “civilized ways of life”, “repenting” and “dehumanized”, though in his book are clearly politically charged conventional words, in the context of German crimes, are all signifiers without conventional signifie
ds. Blumenthal argues: “The borders distinguishing the linguistic vocabulary and the real vocabulary (Real-Lexicon) were blurred over. The two are closely related, so closely, that one cannot be investigated without entering into the bounds of the other.” Disregarding Blumenthal’s approach, Bauer’s historical fiction attempts to explain an event with a conventional linguistic category and within Friedlander’s “accepted lines” of historical analysis. In other words, what I claim is that Holocaust history is not “like all history in this respect.” In order to write a history of ambulances in the 20th century one does not need to ask what is meant by ambulance. But, as Blumenthal notes, “[i]n Auschwitz–Birkenau the asphyxiating gas was delivered in vans of the Red Cross.” Ultimately, what I argue is that to claim that no language has yet been devised to write Holocaust history is not to see the event as “something mysterious that cannot be explained.” Acknowledging the difficulties to write about it is to recognize that the most consulted historians of the Holocaust today have left aside Levi’s thought and Blumenthal’s warning on the aporia of the Shoah.

Secondly, having discussed the problem of semantic crises, let us go further in the analysis of historical fictions. I explore in this section the problem of the archive through Ian Kershaw’s views on Holocaust research. I claim that even though Kershaw is an experienced historian of WWII, his arguments contain serious pitfalls at the moment of approaching the Holocaust story. Due to his fierce confidence in history as a discipline of inquiry of the past, Kershaw holds that “[...] there are no grounds for claiming that we are intellectually and emotionally baffled by the genocide of the Nazis against the Jews.” He argues that the victims are the ones unable to understand what happened. He holds [he] never carried out research of any systematic kind on the experience of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution of extermination policy.” He believes that “only Jews themselves can feel the extent of the suffering.” Moreover Kershaw affirms: “I think I can
rationally understand [the Holocaust].”

Testimonies, according to him “beyond the awfulness in their descriptions,” cannot address the problem of how genocide happened.”

In the following lines I will address the problems of this historiographical thought as well as the challenges of privileging the official archive.

A position like Kershaw’s not only disregards the voices of survivors but also tends only to dwell upon the remains of German sources. So much emphasis on the archive assumes that the voice of the perpetrators can rationally, not emotionally, explain the past. Let us hear Blumenthal’s voice again regarding the language of German documents:

Another peculiar aspect of Nazi style was its sentimentality. The Nazis of course, had little regard for logic and rational processes. They preferred credulity and sentiment. It was these that Hitler stimulated and it was upon them that he relied in his speeches. The same tone […] was retained in phraseology, in official reports – in direct contrast to established practice in other countries and in other periods. Those responsible for the drafting of such documents preferred to introduce a personal note. […] Quite frequently we come across expressions in official letters like, “I am very happy.” The subject is the dispatch of a transport of Jews.

Blumenthal brings about the problem of how to read the archive and what history can be written from it. The head of the Research Department at Auschwitz- Birkenau State Museum historian Piotr Setkiewicz holds that indeed one of the major challenges he found in the many years of his research on K.L Auschwitz is the deceptive language of the documents in the archive. Most of the time, it generates more questions than answers. Setkiewicz explains that sources such as the registration forms in the Auschwitz State Museum Archive depict the German mind. For example, of the prisoners who were registered in Auschwitz I, how many were approximately killed, for years, was the main objective of Auschwitz historians. However, when studying the topic of extermination, the historical approach is even more complicated.

Setkiewicz argues, for example, that the death certificates of Russian prisoners dying by thousands during the period of 1940-1942 posit a problem. When did they precisely die? The certificates would never say it because being deceitful was precisely the job of the SS. One example is the overwhelming case of death certificates of Russian POWs dying of heart attack, when is clear, due to testimonies of former prisoners, that Russian POWs were shot in the death-wall or gassed in block 11.

In other cases the German bureaucracy’s paper work was produced for
inspections. Guards would show their supervisors punishment reports. Reports would be written, confirmed by the Lager Fuhrer, sent somewhere else for signatures, stamped, and returned to Auschwitz so formal punishment could be inflicted on the prisoner.

Lashing, according to German law had to be accepted by Berlin. However, Setkiewicz explains, most of the time, the report would be sent to Berlin after the prisoner had been lashed to death. But, How do we know this? We do precisely because of prisoner testimonies and survivors’ memoirs.31

Coming back to Ian Kershaw’s argument “The Nazi genocide against the Jews, far from being historically inexplicable is, regrettably, only too easy to explain,” I want to review his 5 pages essay where he articulates the ways to write and understand the Holocaust. Modernity, the rise of social Darwinism, anti-Semitism, the harsh penalties of the Pact of Versailles and the German economic crisis during the Weimar Republic caused the rise of a genocidal elite with Hitler as the head of the Nazi racial territorial project thus materializing the Shoah. Finally he concludes: “The analytical tools of the historian have proved largely effective in dealing with the Holocaust.”32 As for the issue of German responsibility, he holds, it's a generalization to argue that the German public shared “the radical and dynamic ideological anti-Semitism of the Nazi leadership.”33 But how does Kershaw reach this conclusion? I think that, as a historical question, it is clearly irrelevant and impossible to respond. An argument like that refers more about how to deal with the Holocaust today in German society than to reflect attitudes towards the Jews in the past.

In sum, Kershaw’s historiographical approach disregards testimonies for being “emotional”, non-“rational” but he concludes that not all Germans were radical Nazis wishing all Jews dead. My questions for historians whose political correctness define their work on Holocaust studies are 1) What are the tools to be used to reach this conclusions on German attitudes towards the Holocaust other than postwar testimonies? and 2) If there were exceptions in Germany, it is important for the future of the integrity of history to understand that the exception does not make the rule.

Another serious problem of the current historiography on the Holocaust, I think, is the narratives of heroism. Even historians with a deep sense of historical responsibility sometimes imagine fictions of Holocaust heroes that, in my view, constitute a serious
issue. Historian Deborah Dwork is more cautious at the time to reflect on Holocaust history. She acknowledges, “the history of the Holocaust was born into a vacuum of denial. The Nazis themselves-as well as millions of Germans who were not members of the party- were the first Holocaust deniers.” She recognizes that “traditionally historians have used written documents for their primary evidence in reconstructing and analyzing the past but that “in the case of the “Final Solution” […] the documentary evidence is at best indirect.” Dwork does explore the problem the archive posits. However, she addresses the question of testimonies in historical research within the same lines than the historians I have explored so far: “The essential problem is the relationship between memory and history, how memory informs history, and how history corrects memory.”

Again, the faith in the discipline is indisputable. Thus my question is, Who corrects history? Let’s analyze Dwork’s most important contribution to a referential literature of the Shoah. Her co-authored book with Robert van Pelt Holocaust: A History is a textbook read in many North American universities for history courses on the Holocaust. In what I consider perhaps the most important chapter of the book “The Concentration Camp World” Dwork and van Pelt argue:

For the British and Americans, the camps proved that the war effort had been justified. Soldiers had not died in vain. Churchill had proclaimed that Hitler’s victory would usher in “a new Dark Age made more sinister by perverted science.” Bergen-Belsen [concentration camps] proved that the new Dark Age was not mere figure of speech. For a moment it seemed as if the Allies had fought the war to save the Jews.

The ultimate task for historians of the Holocaust, I think, is to be very careful with these narratives of heroism. There is no heroism in the Holocaust.

Historian John Merriman notes that the American and British government “had no official reactions” to the news in 1942 and that the British intelligence, for example claimed that “the Jews and the Poles were exaggerating ’in order to stoke [them] up.’” Birkenau’s crematorium worked until November 2, 1944. By visiting Poland today, the land where Germans carried out the genocide, one can see that to argue in a history book that the European Jewry was “saved” is unacceptable. There are less than 4,000 Jews living in Poland today. From the 3.5 million Jews who lived in Poland before 1939, approximately 300,000 survived because they managed to move to the Soviet Union. Of those Jews who could not move, an estimate of only 40,000 survived; little more than 1% of the 3.5 million.
However, when it comes about narratives of heroism, not only historians imagine them. When visiting the Russian exhibition at Auschwitz State Museum, pictures of Soviet generals displaying their medals can be seen hanging from the wall. The current Russian government chose to commemorate its heroes in this way. Mirosław Obstarczyk, a inspiring and very eloquent historian of the museum, asked my colleagues and me, “What is this supposed to mean?: That the Soviets “liberated” Auschwitz? Indeed, in complete agreement with Obstarczyk, I think that exhibitions should put emphasis on the victims not on the Russian “liberators”, whose nation happened to invade Poland along with the Germany in September 1939. I cite this example because Dwork and van Pelt do not mention the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz in the end of their chapter. In other words, history books can also suggest who the “liberators” were. Dwork asks in her historiographical reflexion, “Could I –could others-write a comprehensive history that conforms to the conventions, rigors, and standards of the discipline based on the particular and existential memories of individuals? […] What do we know about the accuracy and reliability of memory? Perhaps, the questions should be, What do we know about the accuracy and reliability of history?

**Testimonies: Narratives of Courage and Faith**

So, What do we have left? Indeed, as a cultural historian in training is not easy for me to challenge the work of the most experienced voices of Holocaust history today. But there is something unparalleled that 1) a strong education in literary studies and 2) being a graduate of The International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust provided to my prospective career: a method to work with testimonies and memoirs. For example, Mieczysław Koscielniak is one of the most famous artists who were imprisoned in Auschwitz. In one of his sketches called “A return from Work” (1942) he recreates through a visual text prisoners carrying dead inmates after a workday. Many written testimonies held in the archive match with Koscielniak visual depiction. This is the way the narratives of the prisoners challenge the deceptive language and the silences of the official German archive.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that memoirs and testimonies do posit problems. As Primo Levi noted, memories “are not carved in stones.” When I visited The Birkenau Memorial, cultural anthropologist Alicja Bialecka brought about the case
of Elie Wiesel’s famous book *Night* (1958). When in his memoir Wiesel recalls the moment of selection in which the SS chose prisoners fit to work and the rest to go the gas chambers, he writes: “Two steps from the pit we were ordered to turn to the left and made to go into a barrack.”\(^5\) When I was standing in the same ditch Wiesel is talking about, Bialecka made me note that considering the architecture of the camp, the ways the barbed wires were placed and the location of the barrack to which the SS called “Sauna” building were prisoners were registered, Wiesel could not have turned left but right. Turning left would have meant he would have gone to death.\(^6\) In a lecture at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, historian Paweł Śpiewak explained that the problem of testimonies is that very often survivors develop a crystalized narrative of the event, a narrative that becomes also a zone of comfort. Often, survivors would not answer questions whose responses are outside the boundaries of the story they made for themselves.\(^7\)

Having noted the intricacies of memory, it is important to note something about testimonies. These sources of historical inquiry, especially the ones created illegally within the confinement of the camps, were made by the ones who suffered the atrocities at the hand of the SS. Works of art that were hidden in the barracks, testimonies of the *Kommandos* buried beneath the ground of German camps were made by persons whose life was at ultimate risk if discovered. These testimonies were made for the world to bear witness of the horror.

**Conclusions**

I have argued in this essay that historical writing, when it comes to the Holocaust, is as unreliable as memory is. The *Shoah* is a historical phenomenon that proved history to be an insufficient discipline to cover the complexity of the Holocaust story. The weaknesses of current historical debates on the German genocide against the Jews can be found in the skepticism to recognize the aporetic characteristic of the Holocaust story. Nazism provoked such semantic crises that Holocaust history cannot be written as any other. By exploring Yehuda Bauer’s work, it could be seen that comparative approaches for genocide studies is a category full of inconsistencies. By analyzing Ian Kershaw’s classic approach to the method of historical writing and Deborah Dwork’s narratives of heroism I showed the objectionable features of some historical production.
Indeed, memory can be fallacious. But when dealing with the Holocaust, the questions scholars will need to ask will have to be asked within a certain element of integrity. Before discussing potential problems of Holocaust memoirs, scholars need to address the challenges of historical writing in an increasingly conservative academic milieu. I think that too many scholarly agendas serve to reinforce a history of criminal anti-Semites versus martyrs by leaving aside the most serious crime committed by the Germans in WWII: to cause a semantic crisis and blur the line between the meaning of victim and perpetrator. These historiographies understate the significance of aporia by calling it “emotional bafflement” in their eagerness to see the Shoah as an explainable phenomenon that can be understood as any other event in human history. Conditioned by political correctness, nationalistic discourses, and traditional postures, the views of the experiences of Jews and other groups under German persecution are distorted and idealized by narratives covered by an aura of sacredness over the targeted subjects of Nazism, the Jewish people. By doing this, an essential unprecedented feature of the regime is left aside: the fact that hundreds of Jewish individuals in the German camps were deprived of all honor and integrity by being turned into collaborators of the genocide against their own people. It is essential to see the gray zone as the landmark of the Holocaust. It is in the gray zone, in the semantic crisis, in the hybridity of historical actors where Holocaust history becomes unique.

Therefore, as scholars of the Holocaust perhaps we will need to start asking different questions other than “what do we know about the accuracy and reliability of memory.” Perhaps the approach of Holocaust scholars confronted with memories of the Shoah will need to ask, What other things can testimonies tell us about the human experience? I want to finish this essay relating the story of a collection of drawings found in a bottle hidden in one of the barracks of Birkenau. It is one of the few proofs of the existence of the Alte Judenrampe, from where Jewish people were directly taken to the gas chambers from the spring of 1942 to May 1944. The artist risked his or her life to leave these drawings as a visual testimony of the horrors so future generations know about the destiny of these people murdered in Birkenau. Nothing is known of the artist’s fate. Not even his or her name. Thus I think that the most important question for scholars of the Holocaust perhaps is, What made the prisoners of German camps believe
that someone would care about their testimonies? In other words, in spite of the ultimate and most horrific experience at the hands of Nazism, what made the prisoners have so much faith in humanity? In us? The answer is yet to come.

Notes

1 The term Holocaust traditionally applies to the murder of approximately 6 millions Jews during Germany’s assault to Europe. However, there were other groups targeted. During the Holocaust Sinti-Roma people, homosexuals, Slavs, communists and physically and mentally disable people were systematically killed. The purpose of this essay is to focus on the Jewish case and the current literature addressing the Judeocide. For a study on the extermination of Sinti-Roma people, see Voices of Memory 7. Roma in Auschwitz. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświecim 2011. For a study of German extermination policies against Poles, see Auschwitz 1940-1945. Central Issues in the History of the Camp. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświecim 2000. For Nazi policies against homosexuals see Heger, Heinz Men With the Pink Triangle: The True, Life-And-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps. Alyson Books, 1994.


4 Michael Marrus, “Getting it Right: A Historian Thinking of the Holocaust”, 26

5 Ibid.,27

6 Ibid.,24

7 Cited in Michael Marrus, “Getting it Right: A Historian Thinking of the Holocaust”, 32.

8 I borrow the words “extraneous features” from philosopher Primo Levi cited in Micheal Marrus, “Getting it Right: A Historian Thinking of the Holocaust”, 24. Moreover, I would like to stress that he purpose of this essay is to explore the question of how to tell the story of the Holocaust. It is important to bear in mind that this essay does not explore necessarily the question of why the Holocaust happened. This is a question that has been explored by the most authoritative philosophers of the 20th century. For a wide-range discussion on the topic see Adorno, Theodor W. Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Standford, CA: Standford University Press, 2003.

9 In The Gray Zone, Primo Levi explores perhaps the most controversial issue of Holocaust history: the victim-functionary in the Lager (prisoners used by the SS to administer the concentration and death camps). Levi explains: “The network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors. Anyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the Lager reveals the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ’s gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates. The young above all demand clarity, a sharp cut; their experience of the world being meager, they do not like ambiguity. See Primo Levi, The Drowned and The Saved, (New York :Summit Books, 1988) 37

10 Ian Kershaw, "Working on The Holocaust." The Holocaust: Voices of Scholars, (Cracow Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Jagiellonian University, Centre for Holocaust Studies, 2009), 43.
However, the intersection of racial ideology and genocidal praxis is a very complex one. Even though in many cases ideology did happen to play a role in mass murder such as the German case, in many others did not. For example, anti-Semitism was notorious in Poland and Russia before 1939. Russian Jews faced pogroms in Tsarist Russia in several occasions. Racial ideology also had a role in societal relations in the 20th century in many Western countries. However, ideology did not become praxis in nations that also faced economic crises like Germany. In other words, to argue that the Holocaust is the result of ideology seems to be an insufficient argument.
camp, which is an illegal prison, a zone where all laws are suspended, there is no technical way to prove which of the sources are telling the “truth.” This is what cultural anthropologists, philosophers and literary critics mean by aporia in Holocaust history. This is definitely another side of Holocaust history that needs to be researched immediately. See the question of the witness in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive.* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 15-17.


33 Ibid.


35 Ibid., 192.

36 Ibid. 198.


38 One of the most compelling examples of challenges to the narratives of American “liberation” can be found in Tadeusz Borowski’s short story “The January Offensive.” Borowski writes “These boys had come like the crusaders to conquer and convert the European continent [and] to instill in [the German bourgeoisie] the principles of profit-making by exchanging cigarettes, chewing gum, contraceptives and chocolate bars for cameras, gold teeth, watches and women.” See Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for The Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.* Trans. and edited by Barbara Vedder. 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 164-165.


42 When I use the word testimony I refer not only about written sources but also other types of texts, such as visual sources. For a study on art in German concentration camps see Agnieszka Sieradzka. “Examples of Illegal Art from the Auschwitz Museum Collection." *Forbidden Art: Illegal Concentration Camp Prisoners.* Oswiecim : Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012.


47 Paweł Śpiewak, "On Testimonies of Jewish Survivors of The Holocaust," Lecture, from Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, May 2014.

I call this prisoner an *artist* because his or her work is the only testimony left by this person for humanity to bear witness. See *The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, concept. Agnieszka Sieradzka. (Oswiecim: Auschwitz State Museum Press), 6-7.