The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust

Edited by
Tom Lawson · Andy Pearce

The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust

Tom Lawson · Andy Pearce
Editors

The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Tom Lawson
Northumbria University
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

Andy Pearce
UCL Institute of Education
London, UK

Preface

This collection of essays entered into its final stages of collation and production in early 2020. At that time, the news cycle in Britain continued to be dominated by Brexit. The newly formed Conservative government, buoyant after a resounding victory in the General Election of December 2019, quickly moved through Parliament the necessary legislation that would enable its leader and Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, to claim that he had 'got' 'Brexit done'. On 31 January 2020, as a giant digital clock projected onto the front of 10 Downing Street completed its countdown to 11 pm—the moment at which Britain formally left the European Union and entered into a transition period—those inside watched Johnson ceremoniously bang a handheld gong in jubilant celebration.

Hours earlier, Public Health England (PHE) announced it was 'urgently trying to trace' anyone who had possibly come into contact with two individuals who had tested positive for the novel coronavirus—which, by then, had already spread to 22 countries outside of China. As part of that announcement, the Chief Medical Officer for England, Chris Whitty, sought to reassure the public that, though this news was unwelcome, the matter was in hand: 'we have been preparing for UK cases', Whitty said, 'and we have robust infection control measures in place to respond immediately'. 'The NHS', Whitty asserted, 'is extremely well prepared'.[1]

What happened next over the subsequent four months will be the subject of scrutiny, analysis, and lament for many years, and perhaps decades to come. The coronavirus pandemic which ravaged the world in 2020 had a particularly devastating impact in Britain. Arguably, failures in government were many and multiple: from specific errors in policy to mistaken approaches to public communications, all of which appears to have led to at least a breakdown in trust between government and the governed. With tens of thousands

---

[1]Sarah Boseley and Amy Walker, 'Hunt begins for "close contacts" of the two UK coronavirus cases', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2020.

of deaths, hundreds of thousands of infections, and millions of lives dislocated by the process of shutting down daily life in order to suppress the virus, the coronavirus exacted a toll on British social, cultural, and economic life which will only truly become apparent to a future generations of historians. Even so, the upheavals, rupture, and sheer human tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 have been such that it can be described as an event of considerable historical significance. For those of us who have lived through it, experiences were on the one hand shaped by factors like class, locale, occupation and family circumstances, and on the other by totally contingent forces such as coming into arbitrary contact with infected people, the amount of viral load in any exposure to the virus, the response of our immune systems, and our access to medical supplies and foodstuffs.

In the face of a virus that we still know very little about, but which has completely overthrown Twenty-First Century ways of life, fears and uncertainties about what happens next inevitably bring about recalibrations in how we understand the relationship between past, present and the future. It says much, then, that in Britain the disorientation brought forth by the pandemic has been met in some quarters by a renewal of the nostalgic tendencies of the late Twentieth century. Whilst the likes of Prime Minister Johnson and the Queen have spoken in the cultural currency of the Second World War,[2] sections of the media have doubled-down on imaginings of the past. As the *Daily Telegraph* put it in an opinion piece to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day in May 2020:

> during the coronavirus, the Prime Minister has been compared to Churchill, the lockdown to the Blitz, and the medical battle to Dunkirk. The search for historical analogy can result in inaccuracy; some historians find it irritating…But the past is the only roadmap we have: we don't know the future and the present is clouded in fog, so we look backwards at where we've come from and draw lessons from what we can find. We return again and again to the Second World War because it was not only a formative experience but a moral one.[3]

Such recourse to memories of the Second World War would not surprise the contributors to this volume. Nor is it likely that the contributors would significantly alter the arguments they forward in light of the coronavirus pandemic. That being said, it is possible that some of the scholars gathered here may have taken a slightly different tack they were writing today. Moreover, whilst the substantive content of this collection still very much holds, the foundational shifts of 2020 do inevitably impact its complexion for a book which

---

[2] Richard Vaughan, 'VE Day Celebrations', *iNews*, 8 May 2020. Available: https://inews.co.uk/news/ve-day-celebrations-boris-johnson-veterans-spirit-of-endeavour-425980. (Accessed 25 June 2020); BBC News, 'The Queen's coronavirus address', 5 April 2020. Available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52174772/the-queen-s-coronavirus-address-we-will-meet-again. (Accessed 25 June 2020).

[3] 'The Second World War is Britain's roadmap', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 May 2020.

works to contextualise the history of Britain and the Holocaust is unavoidably itself a product of its own historical context.

Two further developments warrant noting in this regard. The first is that over the course of compiling this book, there has been a veritable growth in far-right politics across the Western world. This development has no singular genesis, but there have been significant milestone events. These have included the outcome of the UK referendum on the European Union and the election of Donald Trump in 2016; electoral success for groups such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, the Five Star Movement in Italy, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the Law and Justice party in Poland; and a general upsurge of right-wing populism, partly in the wake of the European migrant crises since 2015. As K. Biswas put it in February 2020, 'once the far right was anathema. Now it is routine. Born outside the mainstream, its parties now operate as a powerful political force, pushing public debate and often government policy across the continent. How did this happen?'[4]

It is axiomatic of course to tie an upturn in the fortunes of the far right with economic crises. In this respect, the economic instability wrought by the coronavirus pandemic and the virtual certainty of severe economic depression on the horizon carries a looming portent for what may be to come. But the connections between the far right and the coronavirus extends beyond the possibility of support for the former increasing because of the financial instabilities caused by the latter. As Europe reeled from the initial wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, various observers indicated that those on the right of the political spectrum were 'exploiting the coronavirus crisis to push their anti-minority agendas and win new support'.[5] This included promoting conspiracy theories, which were quickly becoming enmeshed with a much broader 'infodemic' of fake news and misinformation stoked, in many cases, by leading populist statesmen and their surrogates.[6]

At the time of penning this Preface, the far right remains—in most democracies—outside the corridors of power. But at a more ephemeral, cultural level, the coronavirus pandemic has certainly helped to bring about a situation where the discourse that they look to shape and deal in has become increasingly mainstream. Escalating ethnic tension and social divisions do not of course furrow the way for state-sponsored persecution or continental genocide, but the atmosphere which is brought with and by them can—and does—lead to political

---

[4]K. Biswas, 'How the Far Right Became Europe's New Normal', *The New York Times*, 4 February 2020.

[5]Jamie Doward, 'Far right hijack coronavirus crisis to push agenda and boost support', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2020.

[6]Miranda Christou, 'Is the radical right spreading coronavirus?', *Open Democracy*, 4 May 2020, available: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/radical-right-spreading-coronavirus/. (Accessed 25 June 2020); Nadia Naffi, Ann-Louise Davidson, Houda Jawhar, '5 ways to help stop the "infodemic"', *The Conversation*, 21 May 2020, available: https://theconversation.com/5-ways-to-help-stop-the-infodemic-the-increasing-misinformation-about-coronavirus-137561. (Accessed 25 June 2020).

crises which undermine collective security and increase the risk of inculcating hatreds and violence.

This brings us to the second contemporary development that demands mention—that being, the global explosion in late May 2020 of protests and demonstrations against racial injustice. The tinderbox moment was the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota: an African American who, after being arrested by police, died after an arresting officer placed his knee on Floyd's neck for 8 min 46s—despite Floyd's protestations that 'I cannot breathe'. The death of Floyd was but the latest in a long line of incidents of police brutality towards African Americans in the United States, yet the response that followed was wholly unprecedented. In America, demonstrations spontaneously spread from city to city, as Floyd's murder became the focal point for broader grievances at racial inequality. These protests rapidly acquired an edge—in part, because numerous authorities employed heavy-handed tactics to try and suppress them. With the world watching events unfold, protestors used their mobile phones to document repeated instances of unsolicited violence by police. Perhaps the most dramatic of these came in Washington D.C. in late May, when police officers and the National Guard used flash bang explosions and tear gas to disperse protestors gathered in Layfette Square—a public park—adjacent to the White House. The purpose, it emerged, was to allow President Trump to walk through the park in order to have his photograph taken by a Church damaged during the protests.[7]

The level of unrest in the United States could be gauged by how some 2000 towns and cities had seen protests and demonstrations by mid-June, with many imposing curfews and enlisting the support of the National Guard. Though the demonstrations originated within the African American community, they soon became a lightning rod for people generally disillusioned by racism in America and disaffected by broader developments in the country. Importantly tensions were further stoked by the response of right-wing media outlets and sections of the far right, who sought to depict the protestors as a threat to law and order. The authoritarian response of the Trump administration only served to further galvanise the movement, with Trump attempting to depict the unrest as the work of insurgent, left-wing anti-fascists.

The Floyd protests began as a 'local' concern and saw anger around issues of race merge with wider dissatisfaction with the Federal government's response to the coronavirus pandemic and growing economic dislocation. What was most significant, perhaps, was that this movement quickly became transnational. Soon after protests began in North America, demonstrations—initially of sympathy—took place in other cities around the world. The phrase 'Black Lives Matter'—taken from the name of one of the organizing movements

---

[7]Katie Rogers, 'Protestors dispersed with tear gas so Trump could pose at Church', *New York Times*, 1 June 2020.

involved in the protests—became a global clarion call for demonstrators advocating racial justice, with the act of 'taking a knee' in peaceful protest against racism its visual equivalent.[8]

The 'international clamour for racial equality' which swept across the world in the early summer of 2020, found different forms of expression and different degrees of success from country to country—reflecting, in the words of David Pilling, how 'what people have seen in the mirror held up by the Black Lives Matter movement has varied greatly, depending on which side of the history of slavery, police brutality and racial intolerance they are on'.[9] In Britain, where the skeletons of Empire and the booty of the slave trade have been long unacknowledged ghosts in the machine, the impact was varied.

At one end of the spectrum, the movement found dramatic, grass-roots expression in Bristol when protestors pulled down a statue erected to the slave trader Edward Colston before pushing it into the harbour waters. At the other, the government response to the groundswell of public emotion was somehow characteristically 'British': Prime Minister Johnson announced the creation of a cross-party commission into racial inequality, at the same time as asserting that people 'need to…focus less on the symbols of discrimination or whatever'.[10] Whilst the first of these measures was decried for how it duplicated previous enquiries and amounted to policy 'written on the back of a fag packet',[11] the sophistry of Johnson's argument was laid bare by his erroneous claims that protestors were trying to tear down a statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, and the decision to board up the statue to protect it during an organized demonstration.[12]

For some, Johnson's policy amounted to little more than a barely concealed attempt at a new culture war designed, in effect, to draw attention away from his government's failings during the pandemic.[13] This may well be true, but his government's rhetoric in response to the Black Lives Matter movement betrayed—amongst other things—a skewed understanding of what history and memory are and are not. Contrary to Johnson's claim that to remove statues of

[8] 'Black Lives Matter: Where does "taking a knee" come from?', *BBC News*, 18 June 2020. Available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-53098516. (Accessed 25 June 2020).

[9] David Pilling, '"Everybody has their eyes on America": Black Lives Matter goes global', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2020.

[10] Katie Devlin and Lizzy Buchan, 'Black Lives Matter: Boris Johnson says "focus less on symbols"', *Independent*, 19 June 2020. Available: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-black-lives-matter-racism-protests-statues-swing-low-sweet-chariot-a9575416.html. (Accessed 25 June 2020).

[11] Peter Walker, 'Johnson's racism inquiry plan "written on the back of a fag packet", says Lammy', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2020.

[12] Boris Johnson, 'Rather than tear some people down we should build others up', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 June 2020.

[13] Robert Shrimsley, 'Boris Johnson cannot hide incompetence with culture wars', *Financial Times*, 22 June 2020.

controversial historical figures is 'to lie about our history',[14] official narratives of British history (of which national monuments and memorials are an integral part) are, like all nation-states, consciously constructed so as to legitimise and legitimate a particular reading of the past. Accordingly, a movement which seeks to contest the nature and form of that past is not to be understood as an exercise in erasure, but rather as an attempt to engage and participate in its (re)construction.

For a book such as this, which is concerned with history, with memory, and how these entities intersect and interweave, the Black Lives Matter movement has salience for how it has surfaced fault-lines and battlegrounds in Britain's historical culture. Opening up national history to public review and debate is to be welcomed, but it is not a cost-free endeavour or one without risk. With both this and the subject matter of this book in mind, it is all the more troubling to see how movements to highlight historic racism in Britain have found their counterpoint in the actions of far-right groups. Though attempts within the far-right to mobilise so as to 'protect' statues from anti-racism protestors have not (as yet) led to large-scale confrontations and unrest, indications that this is animating both 'cultural nationalists' and 'the moderate members of the public' clearly demand close attention.[15]

Seen in this register, the cultural discourse around the past, the present and the future that some public figures are currently attempting to shape, becomes even more important. The same also applies to the role and responsibilities of academics, researchers, and educators. As this book rolls off the printing press it emerges into a world presently enveloped in uncertainty and wracked with insecurity. Whilst it cannot hope (and certainly does not attempt) to alleviate these issues, by prizing knowledge, understanding, and criticality it can—modestly—aspire to leave the reader more informed and more able to engage with the history and memory of Britain and the Holocaust specifically, and with the workings of the past and the present more generally.

The debates about the way in which we engage with the past, and in particular with racism in the past, that the Black Lives Matter protests have sparked may themselves impact profoundly on the way the history and memory of the Holocaust is written and read in Britain. It may well be that when Colston fell everything changed. In the future we may look back on that as the moment which began a British coming to terms with the role of race, and racial violence in its past. Our volume suggests ways in which such a reckoning might impact our ways of engaging with the Holocaust. Such a discourse should certainly radically alter the ways the Holocaust is understood. Or it may well be that when Colston fell nothing changed. Britain's memorial landscape may remain

---

[14] Peter Walker, Alexandra Topping and Steven Morris, 'Boris Johnson says removing statues is "to lie about our history"', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2020.

[15] Lizzie Dearden, 'How the UK's far right is trying to capitalise on the statues row', *The Independent*, 12 June 2020.

the same and the ghosts of imperial violence may return to the shadows. In which case the memory and meaning of the Holocaust will itself be unaffected. Whatever turns out to be the case, and the latter seems unlikely, we as scholars have been impacted by the extraordinary events of the first half of 2020 and this book needs to be read in that context. The future appears radically uncertain, and we hope that the essays brought together here demonstrate that the past is no more secure.

London, UK   Andy Pearce
Morpeth, UK   Tom Lawson

Contents

List of Contributors

Nigel Copsey School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

Kara Critchell University of Chester, Chester, UK

Michael Fleming Polish University Abroad, London, UK

Stuart Foster UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Michelle Gordon The Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Anthony Grenville University of London, London, UK

Andrea Hammel Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, UK

Hannah Holtschneider University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

Siobhán Hyland University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

Paul Jackson University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

James Jordan University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Tony Kushner History Department, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Barry Langford Royal Holloway, University of London, London, UK

Tom Lawson Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

Louise London Honorary Research Fellow, Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

Chad McDonald University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Andy Pearce UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Caroline Sharples University of Roehampton, London, UK

Dan Stone Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK

Daniel Tilles Pedagogical University of Krakow, Krakow, Poland

David Tollerton Exeter, UK

Sue Vice University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Russell Wallis Independent Scholar, Hertfordshire, UK

Isabel Wollaston University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

LIST OF FIGURES

Britain and the Holocaust: An Introduction

Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce

The Holocaust has become central to Britain's historical memory. It is the only specific subject which all of our children will learn about in their school history lessons for example. The government directly funds projects that enable thousands of school children to visit Poland and learn the 'lessons from Auschwitz' every year. There is a Holocaust gallery in the Imperial War Museum, which is as close as Britain comes to a national history museum. Holocaust Memorial Day is commemorated with increasing intensity each year and again is directly funded by government; and now all political parties are committed to the funding and building of a Holocaust memorial to stand next to the Houses of Parliament at the centre of our democracy. As historians of the Holocaust, we believe there is much that is commendable in the role that the Holocaust has come to play in our national life. However, we are also concerned that the Holocaust story we are telling ourselves and our children is not as complex as it might be and especially that it does not always reflect as critically as it might do on Britain's own national past. This volume of essays seeks to do that critical work, by reflecting both upon the presence of the Holocaust in the British past and indeed accounting for the role that the Holocaust plays in the British present.

T. Lawson (✉)
Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
e-mail: tom.lawson@northumbria.ac.uk

A. Pearce
UCL Institute of Education, London, UK
e-mail: a.pearce@ucl.ac.uk

And let us be in no doubt, the past matters in the present. In 2020 we may be at the beginning of a new era in the history of public discussion of the past in Britain. The violence of Britain's imperial history, in particular the central role that slaves, slavery and the slave-trade played in the shaping of modern Britain, is at the forefront of public discourse. A crowd inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests in the USA, but protesting against enduring racial inequalities in Britain, tore down the statue of Edward Colston whose riches were earned from slaves and which built much of the city of Bristol in which the statue stood. The statue of Cecil Rhodes outside Oriel College, Oxford may follow, and the Mayor has launched a review of the memorial landscape of London. What is clear from the protests and the commentary surrounding them, however, is that different constituencies and communities take sharply divergent views about who or what is commemorated in our present and the picture it paints of who we are.

Why in that context are we concerned about the presence of the Holocaust in our present? Debates around memorials to slavers see some concerned that the memory of the victims is forgotten by statues of men like Colston. The memory of the victims of the Holocaust is alive, so put colloquially—just what is the problem?

Let us begin with a discussion of the most recent developments and initiatives around Holocaust memory in the UK in an effort to flesh out some of the problems we perceive. In September 2014 the editors of this volume visited 10 Downing Street to give evidence to the then Prime Minister David Cameron's Holocaust Commission. Cameron had established the commission in order to 'investigate what further measures should be taken to ensure Britain has a permanent and fitting memorial to the Holocaust, along with sufficient education and research resources for future generations'. Such an exercise was, according to the terms of reference under which the commission was set up, necessary because 'The Holocaust is unique in man's inhumanity to man and it stands alone as the darkest hour of human history'. The terms of reference also insisted that any proposals would 'include a clear focus on the role that Britain played through, for example, the Kindertransport [and] the liberation of Bergen-Belsen'.[1]

There seemed much that was problematic in the Commission's founding assumptions, and a group of scholars, teachers and museum professionals (of which we were part) wrote to the commission to raise our concerns. We wrote:

> The Terms of Reference … make a number of assertions that are out of step with current research and debate. Statements such as the 'Holocaust is unique' and represents the 'darkest hour of human history' may adequately reflect the horror that we feel in response to this set of events, but they do not articulate the complexity of the Holocaust's history or its legacy. The foundational idea

---

[1] 'The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission: Terms of Reference', available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/275198/Terms-of-Reference-PM-Holocaust-Commission.pdf.

of Holocaust 'uniqueness', for example, is at odds with much scholarly thinking and it seems unfortunate to found an educational initiative on an assumption that is contested and highly partisan. This is especially the case when we note that the Terms of Reference take for granted that the term the Holocaust has a fixed and universal meaning. It does not. The Commission must therefore make an effort to define what it means by the Holocaust. Does this term refer only to the genocide of the Jews, or to other Nazi genocides (of the Roma and Sinti for example), and/or the regime's mass crimes against many other victim groups? If the Holocaust is extended to include all of these groups then important differences can be overlooked; if the term is used exclusively to mean the genocide of the Jews then the crimes against other groups may go unacknowledged. It is only when the Commission has adequately confronted the question of what the Holocaust was that it will be able to confront the equally difficult question of what it has become and why we need to remember. We are also concerned that the Terms of Reference seem to make assumptions which perpetuate common myths and misconceptions as to Britain's response to the Holocaust. There has been a great deal of research into pre-war and wartime refugee policy for example, and it is not at all clear that programmes such as the *Kindertransport* were representative of British reactions to the Holocaust, especially at the level of government policy. If the Holocaust Commission is to be a success then it must make an effort to review and represent the full range of British experiences and responses, including those we would perhaps prefer not to remember, and not just those we can remember positively. This is particularly important given the complexity and diversity of what constitutes Britain and Britishness today, and therefore of the audiences the Commission seeks to reach.[2]

As a result of the letter, we were invited to meet with the commissioners to discuss our concerns more fully. In the course of our meeting in Downing Street that September, one of the commissioners became evidently exasperated with our scepticism about the worth of their project. They demanded that we imagined 'what it would say about us as a nation' if we had a national Holocaust memorial, what it would say about *our* values, *our* morality if we placed a Holocaust memorial at the centre of our national life in order to state loudly and clearly *never again*. And that is what the Holocaust Commission recommended—a Holocaust memorial in the very heart of London, encapsulated as 'Britain's Promise to Remember'. Planning consent for that memorial is now being sought and it will be built next to the Houses of Parliament in Victoria Gardens. Some of the objections to the planned memorial involve it overshadowing, ironically, the anti-slavery memorial currently in the Gardens.

There is little sign that the concerns we raised have been addressed in the proposals thus far. Take for example our concern that the uncomfortable aspects of Britain's response to the Holocaust be fully investigated and acknowledged. The commission's report did recognize that 'Britain's story

[2]Extract from a letter sent to the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission, 12 May 2014. In possession of the Editors.

was not wholly positive' because 'Britain, like most democratic governments in Europe, turned a blind eye to the growing persecution in Germany'. Yet it passed over these concerns quickly stating that 'it is easy to make judgment in hindsight' before using Ian Austin's (former Labour and then independent MP) words to incorporate the Holocaust into a very familiar myth of Britain's heroic second world war:

> Whilst Britain could have done more, no one can deny that when other European countries were rounding up their Jews and putting them on trains to concentration camps, Britain provided a safe haven for tens of thousands of refugees. In 1941, with Europe overrun and America not yet in the war, just one country – Britain – soldiered on, against all odds, fighting not just for our freedom but for the world's liberty too. I believe this period defines what it means to be British. It is Britain's unique response to the Holocaust and its unique role in the war that gives us the right to claim a particular attachment to the values of democracy, equality, freedom, fairness and tolerance.[3]

Nor did *Britain's Promise to Remember* do much to complicate the original assertion that the Holocaust was 'unique' or take much trouble to define what was meant by the term Holocaust in the first instance. Instead the commissioners attempted to assert that the Holocaust was both incomparable and held resonances for our understanding of other events (while somehow remaining morally distinct from them): 'while the Holocaust was unprecedented and should never be seen as equivalent to other genocides, we see many of the same steps from prejudice to persecution in other atrocities'. What was at stake was clearly the genocide of the Jews rather than other any other victims of Nazi persecution. While the report recommended that a future memorial reflect on the memory of victims from 'the Roma community, Jehovah's Witnesses, political dissidents, homosexuals and people with mental and physical disabilities', it also stated that this would be done without impinging on 'the centrality of the Holocaust' which it defined as 'the planned, systematic, industrialised murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children during the Second World War'. For good measure the commission added that 'the Holocaust is unprecedented as the most extreme form of genocide ever planned, contemplated and executed in the history of mankind'.[4]

In some ways a book about *Britain and the Holocaust* is not really the place to discuss whether or not the Holocaust is uniquely important. However, the very act of enquiring as to British responses to that event or set of events, does itself presuppose both a shared understanding of the events in question and their importance. There is unlikely to be a Palgrave reader on Britain and the Armenian Genocide very soon for example, precisely because there exists no shared understanding of those events or their meaning in the public sphere.

[3] *Britain's Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission Report* (London: Cabinet Office, 2015), p. 24.
[4] *Britain's Promise to Remember*, p. 6.

In Britain for example, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust deliberately avoids using the term genocide to refer to what it calls the 'Armenian atrocities'.[5] Of course there is a scholarly literature on Britain and the Armenian question, but it remains a discourse largely confined to academia. Whereas the question of responses and reactions to the Holocaust has a much wider public resonance, precisely because there exists no realistic debate as to the centrality of the Holocaust as a moral, historical event. As such, the debate about the uniqueness or otherwise of the Holocaust, its importance relative to other atrocities, is really what justifies asking what were responses to these atrocities in the first instance.

However, if the editors of this collection reject the idea of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, is this exercise not just doomed from the outset? Or if not, is it just rank hypocrisy? Evidently our answer to that is a resounding no—it is precisely because there exists this debate about the meaning of the *Shoah* and its definition that this collection is so important. *Britain's Promise to Remember* the Holocaust was also founded on the assumption of the universal significance of the genocide of the Jews which the Holocaust commission proclaimed was not 'purely a Jewish tragedy; [but] a lesson and warning to all people of all faiths and lands for all times.'[6] As such these are a set of events which some, now, award with a significance that goes beyond that of 'normal' history. They are not just a set of historical events at all but a moral touchstone or 'foundational past'.[7] We may as editors balk at that rhetoric, but the very fact that others use it suggests that these are questions worth asking. And what is more, it was of course not forever thus. The Nazi genocide of the Jews was not always regarded as uniquely important or challenging. It was, for example, self-evidently not the most important event to the officials in British government departments that lampooned schemes of rescue during the Second World War. In the war's aftermath the prosecution of war criminals did not prioritise (whatever we remember now) judicial accounting for the murder of Jews; historians did not prioritise the genocide of the Jews in their reconstruction of the recently ended war in the 1950s.[8] Such an observation is crucial to the collection presented here, because we are attempting not just to chart the history of Britain and the Holocaust, as it were, but the history of the idea and conceptualisation of the Holocaust in Britain too.

It is difficult to overstate the scale of the shift that has taken place. Writing about the USA, Alan Mintz argued that the Holocaust had gone from 'silence

---

[5]See for example: https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/what-is-genocide/ (accessed 2 January 2020).

[6]*Britain's Promise to Remember*, p. 22.

[7]Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[8]See Tom Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 17–51.

to salience' and a similar process has taken place in Britain.[9] Kitty Hart famously wrote in one of her memoirs that her inability to discuss her experiences in Auschwitz meant that her first years in Britain after the war were the most miserable of her life. Of course she could not talk about her experiences because nobody wanted to listen.[10] Kitty's memory is a personal reflection on a national picture where outside Jewish communities the Nazi genocide, while known about, was not much discussed and certainly not regarded as centrally important. Fast forward to today and the experiences recounted above regarding the Holocaust commission, and the Holocaust is considered so central to our understanding of the world that knowledge of it is considered potentially transformative. Again in the words of *Britain's Promise to Remember*: 'we reach for the ultimate prize of building a nation of empathetic citizens with tolerance for the beliefs and cultures of others'.[11] These are lofty goals, and throughout this volume we subject the claims made for Holocaust education and remembrance to critical scrutiny, as on the face of it we are a long way from achieving them. Not only, after decades of the Holocaust being prominent in our education system and memory rituals, do not many people have a great deal of knowledge or understanding of the Holocaust,[12] but our troubled present is increasingly beset by racism, xenophobia and antisemitism. In recent years reports of race and hate crime have gone up, there has been an exponential increase in the prominence of the discourse of the radical right in British politics, and the UK Labour Party is currently under investigation by the Equality and Human Rights Commission for institutional antisemitism.

When the Holocaust commissioners asked what a memorial would say about us they were in fact drawing on a rich tradition of using the Holocaust as a lens through which we are invited to look at our past and our present, the means with which we see ourselves. Scholarship dealing with the question of Britain and the Holocaust—either in terms of studying British responses to the Holocaust at the time, or studying the development of British Holocaust memory and understanding—has been explicitly concerned with using the Holocaust as a mirror in which we see often sharply divergent views of the British nation, its culture and its politics. This introduction now turns to a summary of the scholarship on which this collection hopes to build and in doing so offers a brief survey of the history of British responses to the Holocaust too.

[9]Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

[10]Kitty Hart, *Return to Auschwitz* (London: HarperCollins, 1983), p. 17.

[11]*Britain's Promise to Remember*, p. 24.

[12]Stuart Foster et al., *What Do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust: Evidence from English Secondary Schools* (London: UCL Institute for Education, 2016).

Britain and the Holocaust

As the Holocaust commission and the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation show us, much of the concern for Britain and the Holocaust is actually interested in the experience of Jews long before the 'Final Solution'. A significant proportion of scholarship concerned with both government and popular responses to Nazi persecution actually looks at the period prior to the war and mass murder through the treatment of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany (or indeed those that were unable to find a way out). We will summarise that scholarship in a moment, but the level of interest in refugee policy is a good example of the methodologically complex terrain in which we are operating. British immigration policy as it pertains to Jews in the 1930s has become of prominent interest because of what came after. The moral historical question of how British officials reacted to German Jewish children in 1938 is made more urgent by our knowledge that their parents were often later murdered. In other words the very act of considering refugee policy in the 1930s in the shadow cast by the death camps is already to operate under the influence of hindsight in a way that historians might usually be nervous of. This interplay between history and memory then exists in a kind of perpetual circle: in that either positive or negative interpretations of refugee policy gain their moral potency from events that were not visible to officials at the time. The *Kindertransport* programme was no more a reaction to the murder of Jews than the refusal to ease visa restrictions after the *Anschluss* was. And yet when politicians point to the *Kindertransport* as evidence of British generosity, or when critics use it as a means to highlight the limits of that generosity, both do so using the rhetorical power of the Holocaust and their knowledge that the murder of Jews followed.

While there is disagreement as to why, and indeed what this means, it is universally acknowledged that British governments changed little about their refugee policies as a response to Nazi persecution during the 1930s. The Evian conference is often used as a symbol for the response to the refugee crisis, in that the conference participants met on the understanding that they would not be required to make policy changes.[13] This disinclination to change policy reveals a reluctance to provide a haven for Jewish refugees from Nazism based, in large part, on cultural and economic fears about their ability to absorb large numbers of Jewish refugees and the assumption that the provision of a universal haven for the persecuted would only lead to the expulsion of more Jews.[14] That said, it is also universally acknowledged that after *Kristallnacht* extraordinary measures were taken, for example in the shape of the *Kindertransport* programme which brought several thousand Jewish children

---

[13]Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Blackwell, 1994), p. 50.

[14]William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 41.

to Britain.[15] However, as Andrea Hammel and Anthony Grenville highlight in their essays in this volume, these refugee schemes were in themselves also problematic in many ways.

Regarding the war itself, historians have largely concentrated on both the continuing policies of the Allies towards refugees from Nazi Europe—notwithstanding the increased difficulties of escape—and on their willingness, or otherwise, to enact schemes of rescue. Britain worked, for example, to make Jewish emigration to Palestine *more* rather than less difficult, because this was believed to be the best way of maintaining security in the region.[16] Knowledge of the 'Final Solution' did, although originally suppressed,[17] eventually force the Allies into a public acknowledgement, on 17 December 1942, that the Nazis were attempting the extermination of the Jews of Europe.[18] Despite this however it is widely accepted that rescuing the Jews of Europe was never one of the major priorities of war, although it was often argued (self-evidently) that the defeat of Nazism was understood as the best way to ensure Jews' liberation:

> For the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States, the rescue of Jewry was not a priority … all three were concerned with the war … the entire territory behind enemy lines was viewed primarily as a complex of production, mobilisation and supply. Very little else invited Allied curiosity. The veritable decimation of populations subjugated by Germany and its partners was at best a subordinated interest … the currency of the Second World War was the bullet, shell and bomb; those who did not have these means were the war's forgotten poor. With weapons one could obtain praise and often additional arms; with plight one could buy neither care nor help.[19]

Despite this widely accepted narrative, the historiography of Britain and the Holocaust remains sharply divided. It has been traditionally split between those who wish to indict failure in the face of the moral challenge of the Holocaust, and those who have sought to rehabilitate the British government from what is perceived as both a scandalous attack and an attempt to find moral equivalence between Nazism and the liberal democracies which defeated it.

The context for history writing about the British government's response to the Holocaust was established in the USA by the approach of David Wyman and others to US reactions to Jewish plight both before and then during the Second World War. US historiography can ultimately be summarised by the

---

[15] Ibid., p. 19.

[16] Ibid., p. 102.

[17] Ibid., p. 86.

[18] Ibid., p. 126.

[19] Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–45* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 249.

title one of Wyman's works: *The Abandonment of the Jews*.[20] Such work, along with in particular accounts of the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican response, helped create the sense which has endured in some public representations of the Holocaust that the 'world did nothing' to alleviate the suffering of Jews at Nazi hands.

The first detailed study of responses in Britain was Andrew Sharf's account of the British press. Sharf argued, in an account which still influences historiography today, that British journalists feared Jewish refugees as much as they feared Nazi antisemitism. Indeed they feared Jewish refugees in part because they thought, as did officials in government, that those refugees would bring antisemitism with them.[21] Ten years later A.J. Sherman would develop one of the counter arguments that Britain's was not an entirely negative record, and that refugee policy had been 'comparatively … generous' in that more refugees had reached British shores than had reached the US.[22] It is this idea of generosity that underpins the approach of much public memory focusing on the idea of Britain as a haven for the oppressed.

In the 1980s Bernard Wasserstein and Martin Gilbert published the first book length studies of British government responses and reached similar conclusions to those that David Wyman had about the US government. They presented a pitiless picture of ministers and officials attempting to prevent Jewish immigration to Britain and British controlled territories in the face of Nazi terror. Wasserstein particularly focused on the White Paper of 1939 which restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine and symbolised the victory of strategic over humanitarian priorities in policy-making.[23] The White Paper formed the basis of Palestine policy throughout the war. Gilbert developed this further and demonstrated that it was used to argue against pursuing offers to ransom Jews in 1944. Officials suggested that if negotiations were successful this would have led to large-scale immigration to Palestine, in contravention of the White Paper.[24] By concentrating on the future Israel, Wasserstein set the policies of the British state in the context of attitudes to the wider 'Jewish problem'. Although he did find individual instances of anti-Jewish prejudice, not least Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's now famous quip that 'I prefer Arabs to Jews',[25] Wasserstein did not however seek to explain the lack of British sympathy through antisemitism. In part it was engendered by the inevitable 'xenophobia and hysteria' of war. However, in the main Wasserstein cited a culture of 'bureaucratic indifference' whereby officials were separated

---

[20] Ref Wyman.

[21] Sharf, *The British Press and the Jews*, pp. 180–85.

[22] A.J. Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich 1933–39* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 267.

[23] Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe* (Oxford, 1988), p. 28.

[24] Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London, 1981), pp. 241–42.

[25] Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, p. 34.

by an imaginative gulf from the Jews of Europe, and where crucially they could not entirely see the consequences of their actions.

Martin Gilbert also tackled the contentious issue of the potential Allied bombing of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Gilbert discusses at length the request from Jewish organisations to the British government that Auschwitz-Birkenau be bombed in an effort to halt the destruction of Hungarian Jews in 1944. Gilbert finds a merry-go-round of official correspondence looking, it would appear, for reasons not to bomb the death camp or the approach to it. A final decision to not pursue this policy was communicated in the late summer of 1944 on the grounds of 'technical difficulties'. As Gilbert notes however, a sentence had been deleted from the final memorandum that might have better summarised British official thinking: the bombing would be a 'diversion … of necessary material of vital importance at this critical stage of the war'.[26] The author of the memo was Richard Law under-secretary of state in the Foreign Office. Law was no stranger to government intransigence. He had been the British representative at the Bermuda Conference in the spring of 1943 when the British and Americans had decided that no war material could be diverted to the cause of Jewish refugees despite pressure from rescue campaigners on both sides of the Atlantic. While both British and American governments remained impervious, Law reminded the Foreign Office that there was a moral imperative at work too. He wrote: 'is it really beyond the bounds of possibility that we should find one ship [on which to transport refugees]? I know all the arguments, but I believe too, that bread does come from the waters and the story of the Good Samaritan is still valid'.[27]

In adopting a Christian discourse Law was repeating the protests in favour of rescue that came from Churches in Britain. Most famously the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, berated the government in the House of Lords that their response to Jewish suffering was inadequate. Temple also referred to the good Samaritan suggesting government responses 'neglect[ed] the opportunity of showing mercy' and suggested that they would be judged for doing so: 'we stand at the bar of history, of humanity and of God'.[28] Gilbert, Wasserstein (and Wyman in relation to the USA) demonstrate that historians have indeed judged government intransigence harshly. British and American politicians, it was argued, had *failed* in the face of the challenge of the Holocaust. All of the scholars discussed here essentially argued that liberal governments failed on their own terms, in that they failed to uphold the traditions of liberalism that ironically they had gone to war to defend.

Writing in the 1990s, Tony Kushner led a new generation of Anglo-Jewish historians, no less critical of Allied policies, that argued that this was not a failure of liberalism at all, but a *consequence* of its own inherently exclusionary

---

[26]Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, p. 306.

[27]Quoted in Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), p. 90.

[28]Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust*, p. 86.

tendencies.[29] Kushner's *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination* explained the failure to provide either a haven or rescue for Jews as a consequence of the modern liberal nation states' inability to cope with Jewish and indeed any ethnic difference. As such there was an essential ambivalence about Anglo-American responses to the Holocaust, which combined a genuine anguish at the plight of the victims with a fear that those victims would destabilise Britain and the USA if they were allowed unfettered access. Hence the oft repeated argument of officials that large-scale Jewish immigration would bring antisemitism in its wake. Such was this fear of Jewish particularity that across British society there was a reluctance to acknowledge that Jews were suffering as Jews at Nazi hands; instead the Third Reich was seen as a universal threat which of course then justified the argument that victory in war was the only conceivable form of rescue. This tendency to universalise the Third Reich, and thus deny the particularity of the Jewish experience endured in the post-war world too.[30]

That liberalism prescribed an inadequate response to the crisis of European Jewry was also the main thesis proposed in Richard Bolchover's study of the British Jewish community and the Holocaust. Bolchover found a community, and especially its leadership, which strove to demonstrate its own liberalism and thus its assimilation with the British way of life. Remarkably the Jewish leadership, Bolchover argued, was also ambivalent about schemes of rescue, lest legions of foreign Jews destabilise both the Jewish community, its relationship with society as a whole and thus social cohesion.[31] At the same time this led Jews to conceive of the conflict with the Third Reich in universal terms, as an 'attack on civilisation as a whole, not an explicit war against the Jews'. Inevitably then, Bolchover argues, many Jews supported the notion that victory was the only form of liberation and rescue.[32]

Perhaps the most forceful contribution to the field is Louise London's exhaustive study of *Whitehall and the Jews* which she continues with an essay in this volume. London repeats the arguments first developed by Wyman et al. that the reason schemes of rescue, or negotiations over Jewish lives, were not pursued vigorously by the Allied governments was because of a fear not of their failure but of their *success*. As the Home Secretary Herbert Morrison wrote to his counterpart at the Foreign Office in July 1944 'it is essential that we should do nothing at all which involves the risk that the further reception of refugees here might be the outcome'.[33] Ultimately *Whitehall and the Jews*

---

[29] Cesarani and Levine, 'Introduction', p. 18.

[30] See Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London, 1997) which highlights the struggle that Jews had to be recognised as Jews, rather than Poles or even Germans, by the British forces that took over the running of the camp.

[31] Richard Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1993), see the conclusion for a summary, pp. 144–56.

[32] Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust*, p. 146.

[33] Quoted in London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, p. 240.

goes further than many histories by explaining that the inherent inability of nation states to provide succour for the Jewish victims of Nazism was a result of the same 'Jewish problem' that haunted the Nazi imagination. Those British officials who wished to keep Jews from Britain understood the nation as a homogenous ethnic unit. Jews threatened that homogeneity. As such London suggests that while the method of the Nazi solution to the Jewish problem was alien to British policymakers or bureaucrats, their goal of a singular ethnic state was not—indeed it was the goal they sought too. This is a long way from the understanding of Britain's relationship with the Holocaust enshrined in 'Britain's promise to Remember'.

The suggestion that the British and the Nazis shared a conception of a Jewish problem has manifold implications—the British become part of the study of the destruction process itself because they helped 'create a world in which genocide was possible'.[34] This is a challenging argument, but for many scholars encapsulates the flaws of this historiography too. At face value the argument that the British were the *passive* accomplices of Nazi genocide is logically indefensible as by definition the British *actively* opposed and indeed defeated the very perpetrators of that genocide. Some critics of this historiography allege therefore that instead of recognising this essential fact, historians of the British response to the Holocaust are attempting to prove that the British were themselves, if only in part, responsible for the 'Final Solution'.[35] This was the argument put forward by William Rubinstein in *The Myth of Rescue*. Rubinstein attacks what he sees as the counter-factual arguments of Wasserstein, Kushner et al. with (ironically) one of his own that the British *could not* have rescued any more Jews from the Holocaust. Indeed he argues that they did what they could, and in pursuing military victory the Allies ensured the survival of the remnant of Jewish Europe by liberation. For Rubinstein the idea that the democracies, including Britain, did little in the face of the refugee crisis of the 1930s is nonsensical—Jews did leave Germany and Austria, Jews did find haven in Britain and the USA. The idea that Jews could have been rescued from Nazi Europe stretches the boundaries of credulity even further. Jews were slated for extermination and thus were not able to escape. As such the argument that the Allies should (or indeed could) have provided a haven for Jews is seen as absurd—Jews did not perish in Nazi Europe because they had nowhere else to go, they died because of a genocide which would not let them go: 'the Nazis and the Nazis alone, bear total responsibility for erecting these barriers to Jewish emigration, obviously in preparation for genocide'.[36]

How then do we account for the sharpness of this interpretative divide, especially over what is effectively an agreed narrative of events? This is actually

---

[34] Barnett, *Bystanders*, p. 59.

[35] This is the argument proposed in John Fox's review of Wasserstein's *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, which appeared in *International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (1980): 143–44.

[36] Ibid., p. 80.

a discourse about the past concerned with the present. It is about us and about the extent of our responsibilities to one another. From the outset these histories have had a clear political purpose. Kushner's critique of liberalism, and identification of the difficulty that the nation state has in coping with ethnic differentiation can be applied to today. Louise London's critique of British refugee policy in the past is also a part of an ongoing discourse on British refugee and asylum policy in the present.[37] London and Kushner's opponents may claim more political neutrality, but this is hardly the case. Rubinstein's defence of British and American immigration restrictions is based on his clearly articulated belief that nation states *should* limit the number of refugees that cross their borders. Rubinstein does not deny that British immigration policy in the 1930s attempted to limit entrance to those that were economically useful, indeed he believes that this was (and is) a political necessity.[38]

As such these understandings of the British past are part of a battle around values in the British present. They may say some something rather different about 'us as a nation' to that which was intended by the Holocaust Commission or the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, but they do demonstrate that this past has consistently been used as means to understand and indeed attempt to shape our present. And this interaction between past and present is at the core of this volume too.

That this volume devotes more attention to the shape and the texture of the idea of the Holocaust in Britain than it does to the responses to the destruction of European Jewry as it was being enacted is a reflection of the way that scholarship on Britain and the Holocaust has developed. Debates on British policy seemed to play themselves out in the early 2000s. In part this is of course the consequence of a discipline in which the focus has become much more about those on the receiving end of these histories. Just as studies of the Holocaust have themselves become much more interested in its victims—to the point where following Saul Friedlander historians cite a moral obligation to the write the history of the Holocaust's victims rather than perpetrators[39]—historians of the British responses to the Holocaust have begun to concentrate on the life histories of, for example, those that sought refuge from Nazism.[40] There has been some focus on other British institutions,[41] and an overwhelming interest

---

[37] See for example Louise London, 'Whitehall and the Refugees: The 1930s and the 1990s', *Patterns of Prejudice* 34, no. 3 (2000): 17–26.

[38] Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue*, p. 42. See also Pamela Shatzkes, *Holocaust and Rescue: Impotent or Indifferent? Anglo-Jewry 1938–1945* (London, 2002), p. 239.

[39] See the discussion in Jurgen Matthaus, Martin Shaw, Omer Bartov, Doris Bergen, and Donald Bloxham, 'Review Forum: Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 1–2 (2011): 107–52.

[40] See for example Tony Kushner, *Journeys from the Abyss: The Holocaust and Forced Migration from the 1880s to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

[41] See for example Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006).