

Handout 1

The Holocaust as a unique event

That the Holocaust should be treated as a unique event was argued by such scholars as: Steven T. Katz, Deborah Lipstad and Daniel J. Goldhagen, Georg Kren and Leon Rappoport or Lawrence L. Langer. In their opinion, the Shoah is the mass slaughter of 6 million Jews, and the uniqueness of the Holocaust is twofold. Firstly, this is manifested by the qualitative difference between the Nazi attack on the Jewish nation and the aggression towards other nationalities. Secondly, they recognise the basic difference between the Shoah and all other (former, concurrent and subsequent) genocides.¹

According to Steven T. Katz, it is the genocidal intent which proves the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Katz explains that, until the Shoah, there had never been such an attempt to murder all people of a certain nationality.²

Daniel J. Goldhagen suggested the following indicators of the uniqueness of the Holocaust: anti-Semitism, no history of former conflicts (either territorial, class, ethnic or religious), wide geographic range of the Shoah or the extent and intensity of cruelty and brutality.³

Deborah Lipstad, on the other hand, claims that each person who does not grant the Holocaust the uniqueness is anti-Semitic and compares them to those who deny the Holocaust.⁴

Another scholar, Daniel Grinberg, is willing to consider the Holocaust as a unique event provided that its definition would be narrowed down to that of a well-planned extermination action which was using modern methods. The range of such an action would involve the whole of the community (defined as, simultaneously, a nation, a race and a religion), including its cultural artefacts. Grinberg admits that so understood extermination was experienced in the modern history only by the Jewish, however, at the same time indicates the necessity for further investigation into the Armenian Genocide (1892-1915). What makes the Holocaust unique is not merely the scale, bureaucratisation and mass murder. The Shoah was in fact an outcome of a never-before used propaganda resulting in dehumanisation of Jews. Grinberg believes that the debate on the issue of uniqueness of the Holocaust would be considerably less heated if not for the incorporation of the argument that the Shoah is a logical consequence of ages of anti-Semitism, and at the same time the end of a period in history. The Holocaust in such an approach refers to Judaism rather than the epoch in human history in which it occurred as it is regarded as an accumulated, almost ultimate

¹ A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 13.

² A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 16.

³ D. J. Goldhagen, *Gorliwi kaci Hitlera. Zwyczajni Niemcy i Holocaust* (original title *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*) transl. by W. Horabik, Warszawa 1999, pp. 380-381.

⁴ A. Ziębińska – Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*. Lublin 2005, p. 21.

calamity (in Hebrew *Churban*), the last of the series of tragedies, from the Egypt and Babylon exile to Khmelnytsky Uprising and pogroms of Jews in Russia.⁵

George Kren and Leon Rappoport consider the Shoah as a personal experience rather than a historical phenomenon. In their opinion, such an approach proves the uniqueness of the Holocaust. They hold the view that distinguishing camp experiences from the normal reality is in fact the main theme of the Shoah, therefore, this event cannot be approached or analysed as any other historical event.

Eberhard Jäckel claims that the Holocaust ought to be regarded as a unique event because never before has any state or state authorities decided to declare that a particular social group, including women, children and the elderly, should be entirely exterminated. Moreover, no state or authority had begun to implement its decision by every possible means. Jäckel emphasises the importance of the official state anti-Semitism linked with state-funded systematic policy of extermination directed towards entire Jewish nation.⁶

Tadeusz Kotłowski accepts a similar stance when discussing the uniqueness of the Holocaust and provides two supporting reasons. Firstly, unlike in the case of other genocides, the Nazi attempted to exterminate every Jew, regardless of age, gender or profession. It was supposed to be achieved by their modern bureaucracy. Secondly, the Nazi maintained that extermination of the Jewry will prove highly beneficial for Germans and whole humanity, based on the claim that Jews constitute a threat. This claim was rooted in racist ideology considering Jews as the destructive race. According to Kotłowski, it was predominantly this ideology which led to practical application of Final Solution to the Jewish Question (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) policy.⁷

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⁵ D. Grinberg, *Holokaust w perspektywie i refleksji historyków*, [in:], *Myślenie po Zagładzie. Głosy z Polski*, (*Thinking after Holocaust. Voices from Poland*) ed. by S. Rejak Warszawa-Kraków 2008, pp. 12-13.

⁶ D. LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, London 1994, p. 49.

⁷ T. Kotłowski, *Holokaust – geneza, przebieg i skutki*, [in:] *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania (Shoah. Contemporary Problems of Comprehension and Representation)*, ed. by P. Czaplinski, E. Domańska, Poznań 2009, p. 30.

Handout 2

The holocaust as any other historical event

The second trend includes such scholars as Paul Novick, Finkelstein and Daniel Stannard. For them, the Holocaust cannot be referred to as a unique event because it cannot be proven; in addition, it would be socially, morally and politically harmful. According to the aforementioned scholars it is impossible to find a rational proof which would indicate that the Holocaust was a unique event. Moreover, they consider the claim of the uniqueness of the Shoah unethical, as it diminishes the suffering of victims of other genocides.⁸ Ziębińska – Witek argues that “Stannard openly admits that the idea is “racist and violence – provoking.””⁹ Invoking Norman Finkelstein Ziębińska – Witek draws the attention to the fact that the approach arguing the uniqueness of the Holocaust indicates uniqueness of Jews. According to Finkelstein the Shoah serves as manipulation of the present rather than understanding the past.¹⁰ Ziębińska – Witek claims that “according to Finkelstein there is a thin line between admitting the uniqueness of the Holocaust and claiming that it cannot be rationally perceived and explained. If it is unique it is above history and cannot be grasped by it.”¹¹

William V. Spanos shares a similar stance and claims that the conviction of the uniqueness of the Shoah may contribute to indifference towards other instances of genocide.¹²

Walter Wurzbürger, on the other hand, while siding with opponents of treating the Holocaust as a unique event, offers a different viewpoint and claims that no historical event can be ascribed a particular meaning since “Historic events have the meaning ascribed to them by historians. Since there is no objective meaning naturally ascribed to any historical event waiting to be discovered, the meaning is created rather than given. The meaning of any given event is not a function of its objective properties but depends on the selection of the category for its interpretation.”¹³

Jerzy Topolski indicates two sources of questioning the thesis of uniqueness of the Holocaust: the nationalism and conservatism of Ernst Nolte and his followers and methodological inspirations resulting from modern tendencies in historiography. The former source’s aim was to diminish the responsibility on the part of Germans by indicating at Stalinist crimes and the latter, to

⁸ J. Muchowski, *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warszawa 2006, p. 49.

⁹ A. Ziębińska – Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 19.

¹⁰ Finkelstein writes „I sometimes think that American Jewry “discovering” the Nazi Holocaust was worse than its having been forgotten” N. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, Verso, London-New York, 2000, p. 6, found in: A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 21.

¹¹ A. Ziębińska – Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 20.

¹² A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz. Nowoczesność i filozofia*, (original title *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy*) transl. by L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Warszawa 2003, p. 105.

¹³ W. S. Wurzbürger, „The Holocaust Meaning or Impact”, *Shoah 1980*, vol. 2, No.1 (spring - summer), p. 15. Qtd. in, A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz. Nowoczesność i filozofia* (original title *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy*) transl. by L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Warszawa 2003, p. 97.

understand the Shoah and draw valid conclusions.¹⁴

Young, in turn, highlights the fact that proving the uniqueness of the Holocaust is difficult because at the moment of attempting to understand and interpret it, it is perceived in relation with other well-known events, which deprives it of its uniqueness.¹⁵

Lang suggests that the issue should be approached bearing in mind that if the Nazi genocide is not regarded as an aberration, madness or a gap in history – while there are both historical and logical arguments that it shouldn't – the only alternative is to place this event in relation to historically antecedent ones.¹⁶ Whereas elsewhere he adds that for Jews genocide was not a novelty of the 20th c. They had been long living in the shadow of it, as a matter of fact, it was a part of their original idea of themselves, how they described and perceived themselves. If the conditions were to be taken literally, the conclusion would be that the Holocaust is a yet another instance of many holocausts, which have shaped Jewish history.¹⁷

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¹⁴ J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej*, (*How to Write and Understand History: The Secrets of Historic Narrative*) Poznań 2008, p. 330.

¹⁵ A. Ziębińska – Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 24.

¹⁶ B. Lang, *Nazistowskie ludobójstwo. Akt i idea*, (original title *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*) transl. by A. Ziębińska-Witek, Lublin 2006, p. 199.

¹⁷ B. Lang, *Nazistowskie ludobójstwo. Akt i idea*, (original title *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*) transl. by A. Ziębińska-Witek, Lublin 2006, p. 122.

Handout 3

The Holocaust as a universal event

The third approach in the discussion is an attempt to combine the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its universal meaning. The Shoah should be treated as a lesson for future generations. World War II events are to warn and remind people about the presence of evil in the world. They should make people realise how the ideas of the Enlightenment were transformed and manipulated, and to prove that progress and science are not positive on their own merits as this is thanks to them that the Shoah was possible.¹⁸ Jakub Muchowski in his work *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych* claims that Theodor W. Adorno's words saying that we must "think and act in such a way that Auschwitz will not repeat itself"¹⁹ are used by some in the debate on the Holocaust to build a model which will ensure that the memory of the Shoah will live on, because owing to its open character it demands constant reflection.²⁰ Marcin Kula claims that the conclusion which should be drawn from the atrocities of the Holocaust is the acceptance of the fact how easily people can turn evil. Kula does not advocate the uniqueness of the Shoah²¹, although he recognises the necessity to talk about what happened to Jews in World War II. He does not postulate that all genocides should be treated equal, however, admits that the heritage of the Shoah is universal for all people. He is convinced that it should be treated as an event of world history rather than Jewish or German²². Then there are Milchman and Rosenberg who perceive the Holocaust as a transformational event, which is also, in a sense, a universal one. According to them, the effects of the Shoah consist in not only total destruction of a former socio-political order of the world but the creation of the death-world as well. They see the need to approach the Holocaust not only from the level of a retrospective but perspective as well, claiming that the Holocaust, which introduced the death-world into modernity also left the prospect of new exterminations, the possibility of future holocausts²³.

The aforementioned Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg divide participants of the discourse of the uniqueness of the Holocaust into three groups: trivialists, absolutists and contextualists. The first group comprises those arguing that it is impossible to approach the Shoah in terms of uniqueness because, in their opinion, *every* historical event is in a sense unique.

¹⁸ A. Ziębińska – Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin 2005, p. 15.

¹⁹ T. W. Adorno, *Dialektyka negatywna*, (original title *Negative Dialectics*) transl. by, K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 1986, pp. 512-513. Qtd. in J. Muchowski, *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warszawa 2006, p. 14.

²⁰ J. Muchowski, *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warszawa 2006, p. 14.

²¹ M. Kula, *Co chciałbym rozważyć w wykładzie o Holokauście?*, [in:] *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania (Shoah. Contemporary Problems of Comprehension and Representation)*, ed. by P. Czaplinski, E. Domańska, Poznań 2009, p. 56.

²² M. Kula, *Co chciałbym rozważyć w wykładzie o Holokauście?*, [in:] *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania (Shoah. Contemporary Problems of Comprehension and Representation)*, ed. by P. Czaplinski, E. Domańska, Poznań 2009, pp. 64-65.

²³ A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz. Nowoczesność i filozofia*, (original title *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy*) transl. by L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Warszawa 2003, pp. 13-14.

Absolutists hold the view that there exists no other event in the history which could, even slightly, be comparable to the Shoah. The non-repeatability of the event means that it is incomprehensible and placed beyond historical explanation or evaluation. The supporters of this approach, including e.g. A. Roy Eckardt and Alice L. Eckardt, refer to the Holocaust as a “uniquely unique” event, which "stands alone in time as an aberration within history" (e.g. Menachem Rosensaft).²⁴ Contextualists, in turn, admit that there might be certain distinctive features of the Shoah which are more important than similarities with other genocides. They, however, to a greater extent emphasise the claim that the Shoah cannot be analysed without considering its historical context. The Holocaust cannot be, therefore, approached as a universal event, as claimed by absolutists, neither can it be regarded as another atrocity, as advocated by trivialists; contextualists postulate that absolute uniqueness of the Shoah should not be preconceived.²⁵

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²⁴ A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokaście. Auschwitz. Nowoczesność i filozofia*, (original title *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy*) transl. by L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Warszawa 2003, pp. 100-101.

²⁵ For further reference see: A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokaście. Auschwitz. Nowoczesność i filozofia*, (original title *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy*) transl. by L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Warszawa 2003, pp. 98-102.