

The Holocaust and European Historical Cultures

When I was a student in the south of Sweden in the 1970s, all school journeys targeted the amusement park *Tivoli* in near-by Copenhagen, where children's life was at its best. A generation later, my children visited Auschwitz, a historical centre of suffering and death. What does this change of destination represent or manifest in a more profound sense? In a simplistic way, the idea of the research project *The Holocaust and European Historical Cultures*, carried out in the years 2001–2007 at the Department of History, Lund University, with generous support from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund, is crystallised in or based on this question.

First, the 'Auschwitz' invokation needs qualification. At the same time as we presently insist on relating the Holocaust to universal, truly human values, genocide also engenders cultural, ideological and political conflicts as never before. What has triggered particular indignation and antagonism is problems of how the Nazi genocide is understood, represented and used in society. Accusations of denial, trivialisation or silencing of genocide are used as sharp-edged instruments against enemies in national and international political life. So is the other side of the coin, which amounts to accusations that individuals, groups or states make unrighteous political capital out of genocide. Intellectually and scholarly, this Janus-faced situation has made discussions of the use and abuse of genocide a troublesome but also an urgent task to carry on.

What is more, any discussion of genocidal problems that we have studied tends to transcend temporal boundaries and touch upon the basics of our historical consciousness: What are the roots of these atrocities? From where and when originates the intention to murder an entire category of human beings, in part or in whole? What can be done to stop genocides from being perpetrated in the future? Is it reasonable that politicians and others are held responsible, apologise and promise reparations for the misdeeds of their fathers? And why do memories of genocide so often continue to haunt individuals, societies and states long after the genocide itself has been perpetrated? In fact, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of 20th century genocide and state-sponsored terror proves that it often takes several decades and two or three generations for them to be considered principal parts of public discourse. Besides, some of the genocides seem never to reach public awareness, while others become major bones of national and international contention. While the Nazi genocide on European Jewry has been omnipresent in everything from international politics to local historical commemorations in the millennium years, considerably less attention has been devoted to coming to terms with the heinous crimes perpetrated by Communist regimes during the 20th century.

One way of analysing this time-transcending mental occupation – and non-occupation – with questions of genocide that we have stuck to in the project work is to refer it to the domain of historical culture. Like other 'cultures', history culture is a sphere in which history is made sense of and is ascribed meaning, connected to values, standards and principles, providing an answer to questions of what is worth remembering, celebrating and writing about, and what is not. Historical culture is not primarily about what history *is*, as a lived past or as a scholarly interpretation of past

events, but what history *does* in our current existence and society, in clearing away temporal distance, demonstrating that the past, for various reasons, cannot and should not be left behind. The value of history as a cultural asset is related to its power to orientate life in time by helping human beings to make sense out of the past. In connection with this theoretical idea, the overall aim of the project has been to assess the position of the Holocaust within the European historical culture, alternatively, national historical cultures in Europe, during a protracted period of time from the first post-War years to the present, with a particular focus on the last quarter-century.

The principal societal framework in which a historical culture is communicated is to all probability a national one, since the nation for long has been, and to a great extent still is, the most cherished entity for history to make sense, at least in traditional historical activities such as scholarship and teaching. Therefore, questions related to the ‘nationalisation’ of the Holocaust have played a prominent role in the project: How have various European states and societies reacted to the Nazi destruction of European Jewry from the first official international response, the Nuremberg trials of 1945–1946, to the frequent and multifaceted national and European reactions at the dawn of the new millennium? What kind of historical cultures has developed over the past full half-century with respect to the Holocaust? In what ways has the Holocaust been used – maybe even abused – to satisfy various needs and further various objectives in various European countries? Into what grand national narratives has the Holocaust been written? How has this narrativisation changed the Holocaust, and how has the Holocaust changed the grand narrative? How, when, where and why have memories of the Holocaust been activated and turned into cultural, economic, political and social factors to be reckoned with among policy-making and other interest groups? And the opposite: under what circumstances have memories of genocide been collected, cultivated and preserved on the quiet, for the most part not leaving the private sphere? The countries under scrutiny have been, alphabetically, Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, and Ukraine.

Nowadays, it is as obvious that trans- and supranational historical cultures are about to develop as competitors to hegemonic national ones. This is especially the case when international phenomena such as total wars, genocides and totalitarian rules are involved. There is obviously a European historical culture in the making. Consequently, questions pertaining to the ‘Europeanisation’ of the Holocaust, especially the notion that the Holocaust has been used as a backbone of a European cultural integration, has been analysed in the project. Is the current general European Holocaust fascination related to an idea that the European Union needs a historical topic to culturally and politically gather round, a topic that carries less burdens of ethical, intellectual and politico-ideological divergencies than the ‘competing’ cases of Soviet Communist terror or the Armenian genocide? In a similar way, problems of the ‘Americanisation’ of the Holocaust have been scrutinised. Two aspects are worth underlining. The first is that Americanisation is a complex process, since the reception of history differs from one historical culture to another. Thus, when *Schindler’s List* was screened all over Europe, the reception of the Hollywood film in the Sudeten German Schindler’s ‘homeland’ Czech Republic was rather different from the Swedish reception. Another crucial ‘American’ aspect relates to the important role of North

American diaspora groups in the dissemination of the Holocaust history in European countries such as Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Klas-Göran Karlsson
Professor of History
Lund University