

Annihilating – Preserving – Remembering: The “Aryanization” of Jewish History and Memory during the Holocaust

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Repeatedly since the end of the war, but especially in the course of the last two decades’ debates about memory and representation the suspicion was entertained that the National Socialists had planned not only to annihilate the Jewish people physically, but also to obliterate it from history and memory – together with the traces of the persecution and the mass murder it had to suffer from. Thus, the notion of genocide was occasionally modified and reinforced by concepts that attempted to denote an obliteration and “murder of memory”, with terms like “mnemocide” and “memoricide”. This suspicion of memory-murder – fostered further by the stereotypical image of the Jews as a people with privileged access to remembrance and memory – seems to serve not only as an argument for the unique character of the mass murder of the European Jews beyond questions of quantity and industrial quality but rather for the necessity of remembrance after the fact of the Holocaust.

In contrast, projects and phenomena that openly oppose the attempt to render the victims totally forgotten have been considered only inadequately and in isolation. These are projects that would instead argue for an attempt at a more advanced functionalization that goes even beyond extermination. The apparent question of a calculated “politics of memory” of the National Socialist perpetrators vis-à-vis their crimes and their victims with its wide-reaching implications has scarcely been posed by historical research, although such a question necessarily arises with an utopian project like the “Final Solution”.

The Jewish Central Museum in Prague, the activities of collecting and exhibiting Jewish religious objects under the supervision of the SD/SS during the years 1942-1945, present just one, albeit a highly significant example of such a “memory policy”. The continuous exhibition of Judaica in other museums during the Third Reich, the efforts of the National Socialists in the area of scholarly research on Jewish history and culture from an antisemitic point of view, and myriad photographs and film documentations of the victims and the crimes committed against them point in a similar direction.

Projects of this type were not, however, coordinated or centrally administered, in fact they depended on the local situation and were decentralized measures responding to a problem that must have become evermore apparent as anti-Jewish policies developed: how to legitimate one's own actions and world-view in the future when the ideological opposite has been annihilated? The response to this problem represented not a "Final Solution of remembrance" but rather an "Aryanization of memory", a further conservation and instrumentalization for the purposes of the National Socialist ideology.

From the start, "Aryanization" meant both, the expropriation and appropriation of Jewish property, its transfer into "Aryan" hands, and the dispelling of Jews from business, society and life. This double strategy was consequently pursued until the end. Not only did the National Socialists appropriate the material assets of their victims but they tried to appropriate their memory. The goal was the appropriation of Jewish history for their own purposes, together with their objects, while murdering the bearers of this history and the owner of the objects at the same time. The exhibition in museums, scholarly research and visual documentation had to compensate for the mass murder and served to perpetuate the necessary image of an enemy for the bi-polar National Socialist ideology.

The Holocaust is thereby seen not only as the point of reference for memory in the post-war period, rather the function of memory and remembrance is investigated parallel and in direct connection to the policies of expulsion, expropriation, deportation, and extermination. Furthermore, this "politics of memory" affects and prefigures strategies and forms of remembrance and representation in the post-war period. They arise after 1945 not only as a response to the crimes but they find themselves already in a continuity of measures and projects of the perpetrators.