The past is rarely if ever a closed book. Take the Holocaust. The systematic murder of around six million Jews during the Second World War continues to be an open wound, but at the same time it has come to serve as a major point of reference for the collective memory of postwar Europe. In his study Postwar (2005), the British American historian Tony Judt (1948–2010) embarked on a search for the central meaning of the Holocaust for the political leaders and citizens of Europe today. He recalled the works of the German poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), who in the early nineteenth century had arrived at the conclusion that Christian baptism was the only option available to the Jews of Europe to be accepted as full citizens of their countries. After 1945 this changed fundamentally, however, as Judt argued: “Today the pertinent European reference is not baptism. It is extermination.” The memory and recognition of the fate of the Jews in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany, in other words, turned into an “entrance ticket to Europe.” Those who doubt the history of the Holocaust or question or minimize its seriousness position themselves outside of the social consensus. Any denial or downplaying of the Holocaust is equal to excluding oneself from civilized public debate. “Auschwitz,” then, has become a benchmark of post-war European identity.
THE HOLOCAUST AS IDENTITY MARKER

The memory of the Holocaust has deeply penetrated our political and moral consciousness more deeply than any other historical episode. Keeping this event at the forefront of our recollection, it is argued, helps us to sustain the moral foundations of a democratic society. How we relate to the Jewish tragedy is decisive for the functioning of our moral compass. It becomes a “mark of honor” that needs to be “deserved.” Recognition or denial of the Holocaust now coincides with acceptance or rejection of the international political and legal order. In other words, historical awareness is more than just a noncommittal, intellectual interest in events from the past. It is about the way in which contemporary citizens position themselves and build a social, political, and moral compass. Judt formulated this as follows: “The memory of Europe’s dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the restored humanity on the European continent.”

Putting the Holocaust at center stage in our collective memory and emphasizing its unique character also comes with a few side effects, of course. Although it reveals something about the way in which we look at the Judeocide as such, it also has implications for our historical awareness regarding other historical events. Put differently, the crimes of the Nazis have become a “gold standard” and a point of reference for the way in which we look at other genocides and other forms of massive violence. Since the end of the Second World War, it has grown familiar to us, at least in the North Atlantic world, to measure genocides and large-scale violence, as it were, against the yardstick of the extermination of the Jews. The fate of human beings and population groups in times of massive violence—both before and after the Holocaust—thus is looked at through the prism of the crime par excellence: namely, a largely successful attempt at systematic extermination of a group of Europeans (Jews) by another group of Europeans (Germans).

Does this turn the Holocaust into a generally accepted international icon, vested with a universal meaning transcending historical time and place? Will the memory of the Holocaust be conceived as having to do more with morality than with historical factuality? This would imply that the Holocaust is lifted out of history, so to speak. But precisely this issue is a subject of debate and controversy. After all, should we look at the Holocaust as a kind of template that allows us to measure the size of other genocides and severe human rights violations, in the past as well as today and eventually in the future? Putting too much emphasis on the idiosyncratic character of the Holocaust may be accompanied by the risk of ignoring other genocides (and their victims in particular). The image of the Holocaust, in other words, vacillates constantly between the two poles of unicity (total incomparableness) on the one hand and universalism on the other (including the competence to compare it with and measure it against other
genocides). In both cases Auschwitz is turned into a “warning from history.” This assessment strongly influenced the Stockholm Declaration of 2000. It claimed that “the magnitude of the Holocaust, planned and carried out by the Nazis, must be forever seared in our collective memory,” and “the depths of that horror . . . can be touchstones in our understanding of the human capacity for evil.” In response to the Stockholm Declaration, many countries launched a Holocaust Memorial Day, to commemorate each year on 27 January the liberation of Auschwitz on that same day in 1945.

A CONTESTED MASTER NARRATIVE

More than seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, the mass murder by Nazi Germany of the European Jews remains solidly embedded in the historical awareness of the Western world, and this is true in both the public sphere and the lives of many individual citizens. The attention given to this episode in academia, the media, and public space is increasing rather than growing smaller. Those unfamiliar with the subject belong to a small and negligible minority. There is little doubt about the fact of the Holocaust’s prominent presence in the collective memory of the West. But what is debatable is whether this is also truly desirable. One can ask oneself if putting the Holocaust center stage in our memory is useful, and if the large attention given to it in research, education, and public debate—including public space and its many monuments, museums, and commemorative sites—is perhaps tied to particular risks as well. Some scholars, such as the British scholar David Patrick, have in fact formulated sharp criticism of the omnipresence of the Holocaust. Patrick has indicated at least four potential dangers articulated as questions: (1) Is it possible that inordinate attention to the Holocaust will be accompanied with the risk of its becoming an instrument for political or ideological reasons? (2) Is the notion of “drawing lessons from the past” not infused too often with overly large expectations? (3) Does a one-sided “overrepresentation” of the Holocaust perhaps have undesirable moral or pedagogical effects, in the shape of a decreasing sensibilization? (4) To what extent is it possible for “overrepresentation” of the Holocaust to lead to the opposite, and is a backlash inevitable? These four concerns are mainly of a pedagogical nature. But one can also, as a fifth concern, point to the epistemological implications of a certain one-sided Holocaust representation. This pertains to the issue of whether or not fixation on the Holocaust is essentially a form of historical anachronism. It must be pointed out that this kind of concern regarding the representation of the Holocaust ought not to be put on a par with a plea to ban it from collective memory or to downplay its meaning. What is at stake, however, is that Holocaust education and remembrance will benefit from critical self-reflection, and that in the end all will benefit from a careful and balanced knowledge and understanding of the past.
### Politicization

In politics, in the media, and in public space, but also in international politics, it has become a commonplace to use the Holocaust as a moral benchmark, as it were. Few will be afraid to do so, in particular when it seems politically advantageous or when it contributes to realizing loftier goals. Even wars or international confrontations are justified when considering the crimes of opponents—Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević, Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin, the “Islamic State”—as on a par with those of the Nazis. This was the case, for instance, during the civil war in former Yugoslavia, in which in particular the Serbian-Bosnian concentration camps were compared to Auschwitz, or in which fighters on the Croatian side were presented as the new Ustaša (the Croatian fascist collaborators during the Second World War). American historian Peter Novick once described the Holocaust as a “yardstick of evil,” which particularly since the collapse of the Berlin Wall was used by various actors for their own political gains, notably in efforts to convince their supporters and disqualify their opponents. The problem is, however, that a permanent reference to the Holocaust, whether desirable or not, can easily lead to a new form of trivialization. It may indeed undermine one’s line of reasoning rather than contribute to achieving its primary objective (which is to convince people of the validity of a particular argument). Whenever trying to convince another person, after all, one is likely to be more successful when staying away from demonizing the opponent in advance.

As a universal symbol of suffering and injustice, the Holocaust has increasingly evolved into an instrument for political, ideological, and moral causes. Controversial examples are the radical opponents of abortion, who describe termination of pregnancy as a “Baby-caust,” as well as radical animal rights activists, who speak of “Animal-caust,” or an “Auschwitz for animals” when they address the fate of animals in the meat industry’s slaughterhouses. And who has never been exposed to the image of a “nuclear Holocaust”? The question that arises, then, is whether labels like these, and the implicit comparisons involved, generate support for the issue at hand, irrespective of whether or not the issue itself is justified. Is the issue of animal rights or unborn lives promoted by comparing its victims with those who died in the extermination camps of the Nazis? Is it not the case that such comparisons that systematically start from the Holocaust rather lead to trivialization and, subsequently, to moral indifference? Put differently, these cases of sustained comparison with the Holocaust as the central point of reference seem in fact to detract from its power as a warning signal. When a trope is used too often or without leaving room for reflection, the argument of the speaker is undermined instead of strengthened, and its impact—contrary to expectation—will be rather limited.

A similar development may also occur in academic debates. Among activist historians it is common practice to use the Holocaust at least implicitly as a point of reference
for linking the fate of a specific group with that of the Jews during the Second World War. Another common practice is terminological extension, for instance when reference is made to an “Armenian Holocaust,” a “Black Holocaust,” or a “Red Holocaust” (violence and oppression in communist countries). Comparison between the Holocaust on the one side and other genocides on the other has always posed special theoretical and conceptual problems for historians. If the unicity and therefore the incomparability of the Jewish Holocaust are stressed, this produces an image of a history that is exclusive and enclosed within itself. It may well be the case that it is not possible to draw any lessons from the past. What is absolutely unique and incomparable by definition never repeats itself. In a sense, then, nothing is to be “learned” from history, for the future will always be new and different by definition. But if one stresses the universal character of the Holocaust, thus implicitly comparing it with other genocides, there is the potential danger of trivializing the past. Between unicity and comparability as extremes, it seems, Holocaust remembrance constantly has to steer a middle course.

“Drawing Lessons from the Past”

Is it possible to draw lessons from the past at all? Both in historical research and in history education, it is commonly observed that sound knowledge of the history of the Holocaust and its permanent remembrance are necessary in order “to be able to draw lessons from the past.” Since the end of the Second World War, many generations of young people have been reminded again and again that the example of the Holocaust must be kept in mind to develop an attitude of tolerance, as well as to stand ready whenever new violations of human rights and large-scale violence would present themselves. Yet it is questionable if this is a justified expectation. Was it possible to prevent the genocides in Indonesia, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia with the memory of the Holocaust in the back of our minds? Isn’t this rather a misplaced optimism about the power of history? Too often it is assumed that Holocaust remembrance as such provides insight. But insight alone does not necessarily lead to decisive action. By dealing with the past we are not automatically well prepared for the future, let alone does dealing with the past make us better people.

If the Holocaust is represented as the genocide par excellence, this may easily cause people to develop the illusion that genocide can only occur in that particular form, that is, by means of extermination camps and gas chambers. To many, this may turn the Holocaust into the only “genuine” genocide, so to speak. Is this perhaps the reason so many genocides have largely remained beyond the scope of international attention? One example is the killing fields in Cambodia, right at a moment when the Western world was exposed to the American TV miniseries Holocaust; another example is the
genocide in Rwanda in 1994, barely a few weeks after the first screening of Schindler’s List. This is one of the consequences of presenting the Holocaust as an absolutely unique event: this very gesture renders any “lessons from the past” well-nigh impossible. What lessons for our own era can we draw, after all, from a historical experience that could only take place in a quite specific context of the past? 30

Desensitization

Closely linked to the preceding issue is the situation identified by many that (too) much attention to the historical Holocaust may cause people to actually become less sensitive and alert to newer forms of massive violence. 31 Social sensitivity, then, in fact diminishes over time. What has been etched into our historical mind too often and too long as an extremely shocking experience, then, may no longer manage to keep our attention permanently. This might explain, for example, the rather lax attitude among Western countries regarding the events in Bosnia and Rwanda at the end of the previous century. Is there a gradual process of desensitization when genocide is involved? If one sketches an all too conventional image of the Shoah, the things that come after it may hardly be shocking to us anymore. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in Anna Karenina: “There seem to be no circumstances and conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him.” This may explain why a world in which so many images of the historical Holocaust circulate tends to respond slowly or inadequately to the threat of a new genocide. But the suggestion that the Holocaust constantly has to be compared comes with risks as well. This, too, may give rise to a form of desensitization. As noted by Novick, “the Holocaust is the emblematic horror against which all other horrors are measured,” which implies that every form of large-scale violence has to compete, as it were, with the scale and the size of the Holocaust. 32 And this renders the Holocaust, with its six million victims, basically unbeatable. Popular consensus, after all, adopted the notion that genocides need to have at least an equal number of victims. Can a fixation on the atrociousness of the Holocaust offer an explanation for why in comparable cases one actually does not intervene (or only too little or too late)? And does this perhaps explain why relative inactivity, precisely in reference to that atrociousness, can be reasoned away?

Saturation

Decreasing sensitivity may easily lead to a sense of saturation, as has been identified by many scholars. 33 Every form of attention to the Holocaust that some may experience as exaggerated can easily backfire. This is what happened for instance in Germany among conservative or right-wing nationalist politicians who were eager to show their
frustration about what they considered an “obsessional” dealing with the past. As early as 1969, the Bavarian Christian-Democratic politician Franz-Josef Strauss (1915–88) observed that “a people that has achieved such remarkable economic success has the right not to have to hear any more about Auschwitz.” Strauss was followed by Helmut Kohl (1930–2017), whose famous comment on the “mercy of the late birth” (Gnade der späten Geburt) centered on the notion that postwar German generations should liberate themselves from unnecessary “feelings of guilt” and “shame” about events for which in fact their ancestors should be held accountable. Kohl and his supporters felt that it was all too easy for those who were born after 1945—which included those on the political Left—to point reproachfully at those who actually experienced the Nazi regime. But Kohl was also fiercely criticized for this argument, because it exonerated him and his postwar generation from the obligation to think critically about the past, while he seemed to suggest that it was possible, finally and definitively, to close the black pages of history (symbolized by the infamous Schlussstrich [final stroke]). Kohl’s plea fit perfectly in the conservative Wende (turn) of the 1980s.

Politicians such as Strauss and Kohl paved the way for a development that will not be concluded anytime soon. At the start of the twenty-first century, a debate emerged in Germany on the issue of whether only those who had suffered directly under the Nazi regime had to be considered as victims (Jews in particular), or whether ordinary German citizens should also be seen as such. In particular right-wing circles began to request attention to another historical trauma: all the things ordinary German citizens had gone through during the years of the Third Reich. Accordingly, public attention also began to shift toward the horrors of the Allied airstrikes during the war, the systematic expulsion of ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe, and the mass rape of German women and girls by Red Army soldiers. Stretching this logic even further, it was finally suggested that “ordinary Germans” should largely be regarded as victims of their own regime. In this way the borders of national victimhood were pushed to the extent that the boundaries between perpetrators, spectators, and victims began to blur. This revisionist movement can best be considered as a countermovement to conventional commemoration culture, which continued to center chiefly on the Holocaust. But is this backlash an effect of a particular overrepresentation of the Holocaust, at least for Germany as the home country of the perpetrators? Much appears to point into that direction.

Anachronism

This political, pedagogical, and moral backlash could be the result of a strong fixation on the Holocaust in our collective memory. In addition, one can formulate critical concerns from an epistemological angle. Tony Judt was strongly aware of this. He specified
the uncomfortable truth that what happened to the Jews in the period between 1938 and 1945 was not at all experienced in a way we would expect from today’s perspective of contemporaries at the time. What is meant here is the following. For many years after 1945, most people in Germany and elsewhere succeeded in forgetting and suppressing the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens during the Shoah—and this had little or nothing to do with feelings of guilt or shame. Nor did it have much to do with consciously wanting to suppress unbearable memories that as unresolved traumas continued to disturb one’s peace of mind. Rather, this mainly resulted from the simple fact that for most people at the time, the war was hardly, if at all, about the Jews as such. One could perhaps make an exception here for the leading figures within the Nazi hierarchy. But this elite, namely the ideologues and architects of the Holocaust, considered the extermination of the Jews part of a much larger plan, involving, among other things, a radical geopolitical and demographic rearrangement of Europe.

It is hardly likely that the majority of the citizens in Germany and the occupied countries who embraced National Socialism did so merely because they were glad to live in a system that murdered massive numbers of Jews. It is much more likely that they did so to save their own skin and to keep up a semblance of normalcy. How Jews were treated was in most cases a matter of secondary importance or even of moral indifference. In other words, the fate of the Jewish population was in fact seen as not so relevant. Together with Judt we may now experience this moral indifference as downright shocking. But ignoring this historical fact of moral indifference and assuming that ordinary citizens during the Nazi period experienced the fate of the Jews as the victims themselves experienced it will only lead to bad history writing and is in itself a form of mis-memory. In retrospect, of course, Auschwitz is one of the most important chapters to be recalled from the history of the Second World War, but this is only the case from a strictly post-1945 perspective. Timothy Snyder has called this an example of “commemorative causality,” in particular the inclination to interpret the past according to the frames of what now seems logical and important, not on the basis of the erratic nature and the relative incomprehensibility of the past as such.

It is quite tempting and understandable to look at the events of the 1940s through the lens of over half a century later, or from the perspective of today’s knowledge and emotions. Only in this way does the Holocaust become a pivotal moment in the history of Europe, as well as a political and moral benchmark. But this is retrospective history writing by definition and therefore essentially anachronistic. What seems inevitable is the notion that history only becomes instructive when one rewrites it in the light of current decisions. But in so doing, “history” is no longer subject to the historical discipline, the scholarly study of the past, and rather enters the domain of memory studies. History becomes memory, a completely new realm with different methods and epistemologies.
COMPETING MEMORIES

The central position that the Holocaust appears to have in collective memory ought not to make us forget that for a long time this pertained to countries in the West almost exclusively. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe the situation was completely different during the communist era. In many respects, an orthodox Marxist view of history was diametrically opposed to views common in the liberal democracies. The situation in the countries of the Eastern Bloc was complex. After 1945, citizens in Central and Eastern Europe had much more to memorize than those in Western Europe; at least one might expect that. Was it not true, after all, that the Jewish population of Eastern Europe had suffered immensely more under the German occupation than the Jews in the West? Many more Jews were murdered in the East, and many more citizens witnessed the horrors of the Judeocide. Many more collaborators were complicit and played an active role in the Nazi extermination camps. At the same time, however, the Marxist view of history has tried hard to ban the Holocaust from collective memory. The war as such, including the many crimes by the German occupier, was obviously all but ignored in the Eastern Bloc. Party and state institutions in fact ensured that these crimes were extensively and ritually commemorated. But after 1945 the fate of the Jews during the Holocaust—the fact that Germans murdered Jews because they were Jews—continued to be covered by a heavy blanket of public silence.

For the German Democratic Republic (GDR) this historical representation played a crucial role in legitimating the raison d’être of both the communist regime and the state itself. The reasoning basically came down to the following. Fascism was seen as the preliminary end-stage of capitalism, and its essence could only be grasped if it was analyzed as a social and economic system. In Marxist interpretation the class structure was pivotal. All that mattered was what could be interpreted in terms of social and economic categories. National, cultural, or religious issues fell beyond that scope or were dismissed as irrelevant. Groups victimized for such reasons, Jews in particular, were automatically ignored. In addition, the responsibility for dealing with the historical burden of National Socialism was passed on to the West German state. This state was seen, after all, as the “heir of the Third Reich” because it had restored capitalism and had thus left in place the breeding ground for fascism. In the GDR it was common to present Hitler literally as a “puppet of monopoly capitalism,” a spokesman for those who had started the war to safeguard their own economic interests. The communist authorities chose to highlight in public memory not the millions of victims persecuted for their national, cultural, ethnic, or religious identity, but those who for political reasons fought “Hitler-Fascism.” And communists featured prominently in this last group. Their role better fitted the model of class struggle. Sites where Hitler-Fascism was commemorated—in particular Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen—foregrounded the suffering of those who had
persisted in their fight against Nazism, rather than the suffering of the victims of a racial war. This image of history remained basically in place until 1989: Hitler-Fascism had largely aimed to fight the revolutionary workers’ movement, while its violence was mainly targeting resistance fighters, rather than the Jews or other ethnic groups.

Roughly the same image of the past can be found in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. In Poland, the country with by far the most victims during the Holocaust, it was virtually impossible not to address the genocide. But here too many commemorative sites (Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka, Belżec) were literally gone from the face of the earth because the Germans had dismantled them prior to the arrival of the Red Army. In places where memories could linger most palpably, such as in Auschwitz, postwar communist leadership would manage to find other meanings. Although a large majority of the approximately 1.5 million murdered victims in Auschwitz were Jews, its museum identified them only in terms of their nationality, silently disregarding any ethnic or religious dimension. Yet during the era of the Polish People’s Republic the first signs could be seen of a growing competition between Jewish and Polish victimhood, which after 1989 would lead to heated and emotional debates.

In general, there was little interest in addressing the fate of the Jews in the Second World War in the various other East European countries either. Local communists who had taken the lead in resistance activities against the German occupier were again portrayed as heroes and the only people worthy of commemoration. Ethnic and religious categories were again ignored. The Second World War was presented as a major theater of anti-fascist struggle, one against the excrescences of a “monopoly-capitalist” system. If the ethnic or “racial” dimension hardly featured in dealing with the past, it is possible in this respect to identify some minor differences between East Germany, Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria (the former aggressor and its associates) on the one hand and Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia (which sided with the Allied forces) on the other. Yet in particular the first group of countries (and notably the GDR) tried hard to impose a rigid ideological frame on history that completely managed to push the Jewish Holocaust into the background.

Such a strongly politicized view of history would largely lose its relevance in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. With the collapse of “real actual existing socialism” in 1989, the Marxist interpretation of history (in its dogmatic form) had had its day. However, the end of communism in those countries gave rise to a new battle for collective memory. After 1989, fierce and emotional debates were conducted on matters pertaining to a more recent past: deportations, expropriations, ethnic cleansings, arrests and show trials, severe punishments sometimes ending in death, and the tyranny of an omnipresent secret police. In short, the dangers and challenges of everyday life under communism now lived on as painful memories. In many countries, in post-1989 Germany in particular, fierce discussions were held about what to do with the archives of the secret
intelligence and police services covering the years under communism. But much more was actually at stake, namely the question of how the old communist perception of history could be replaced by a new outlook on the past. This often led to a reversal of the old roles: what used to be official truth was now condemned as an official lie. But breaking the old taboos was not without risks. Until 1989, anti-communism had been seen as equal to fascism. Because the official pre-1989 anti-fascist doctrine had now been robbed of all credibility, it became quite tempting after 1989 to look back with some sympathy toward those who under the old communist regime were castigated as anti-communists, including the fascists of the interwar period and during the Second World War.

The downfall of communism accelerated change and gave rise to a new memory landscape. This mainly had effects on the representation of everything related to the Second World War. The old anti-fascism had lost its shine, and in particular the history of the Soviet Union came to be seen in a new light. In countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, bitter memories of the Soviet annexation again came to the fore. The history of communism turned into one of suppression, violence, and expansion. The old totalitarianism theory—the notion that communism and fascism had in fact more in common than they had differences—again grew more important. As a result, one’s “own” population was presented as an innocent victim of a dictatorial system that failed to take into account the legitimate interests of the people. This account of affairs had at least two implications. First, it caused a rewriting of history, whereby the fact was ignored that large groups of people in the past had always and with enthusiasm and conviction supported authoritarian movements and regimes. Second, there was an important political implication. If the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe, as Judt argued, no longer attributed an unfavorable role to themselves in the dark pages of their own history, and if “evil,” then, was always seen as coming from “others,” it was not inconceivable that a burdened past would be put in brackets, as it were: a phenomenon known in France as “Vichy syndrome.” History was divided into “good” and “evil,” and the latter simply needed to be as much as possible externalized.

The diminished taboo on the comparison between communism and fascism was not only found in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc; it was also noticeable in “old” Western Europe. In the 1980s, a fierce debate was waged on this theme among historians in the German Federal Republic, and in France a similar discussion erupted some years later after the publication of the controversial *Black Book of Communism.* Also for leftist intellectuals in the West, it was an uncomfortable idea that the cherished legacy of humanism and the Enlightenment had been ruined in the totalitarianism of Soviet Communism. By and large, however, the gap between Eastern and Western Europe would continue to persist. East of the old Iron Curtain the memories of at least two repressive regimes (whether or not they were comparable with each other) remained vivid, while the interrelated uneasiness was completely absent in the
West. Politically and economically, as Judt believed long before Brexit, Europe might be evolving toward an *ever closer union*, even though the memory landscapes in both parts of Europa did not necessarily follow this trend.  

Finally, the rise of postcolonial discourses further reinforced the clash of memories. Aside from the traumas of the First and Second World Wars and the many painful memories following from the modern history of Europe (e.g., experiences of flight and expulsion, civil wars, and ethnic cleansings), the long-term consequences of the slave trade and slavery caused by European imperialism increasingly began to transpire in collective memory. As a result of all these clashing memories, which are intrinsic to an increasingly multicultural society, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify a clear hierarchy of dominant historical narratives. In this respect, an artificial consensus as to *what* one should commemorate and in particular *how* one should do so—which was still common in, for instance, in the nationalist nineteenth century—is hardly realistic. Moreover, it is also, and in particular, undesirable. All these factors explain why the Holocaust in an era of increasingly clashing memories will continue to play a highly important but no longer an exclusive role.

**CONCLUSION**

Putting the Holocaust at center stage in our collective memory does not only have political, social, and moral implications. It also comes with risks, as argued in this chapter. Revisionist voices have seized upon this fact to minimize the historical meaning of the Holocaust, if not to deny it altogether. This is, again, explicitly not the intention of this chapter. What is argued here, however, is the relevance of sustained critical reflection on the possible side effects of a Holocaust representation that meets today’s political and moral sensitivities more than it agrees with the erratic realities of the past. Furthermore, it is relevant to ponder the fact that not a single representation of history is chiseled in stone. Global political and cultural developments lead to new insights and accents in commemorative landscapes. This will inevitably influence the image of the Holocaust as a moral and political benchmark of Europe.

**NOTES**

1. A range of alternatives has been used to label the mass murder of some six million Jews by Nazi Germany in World War II: Holocaust, Shoah, judeocide, Jewish genocide, etc.

4. An obvious and strong inclination in public discourse and imagination to conceive of “Auschwitz” as the definition par excellence of the Nazi genocide of the Jews is clearly at odds with growing insights from historical research since the 1990s. This work stresses the fact that only a segment of the Jewish population was killed in gas chambers, and that in Eastern Europe many Jews were in fact executed before ever arriving in a camp.


7. Judt, Postwar, 804. It should be noted, however, that newer research has increasingly and consistently stressed the interaction between German initiatives (and final responsibilities) and the participation of local populations.


18. Patrick, Keep the Truth Small.

23. See the various discussions in A. S. Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*
38. See, for example, the public discussion on the German TV miniserie *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter [Generation War]* in spring 2013.
41. Judt, Postwar, 821.
43. See also the argument in Donald Bloxham, History and Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 76–86.
46. Andreas Dorpalen, German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach (Detroit, OH: Wayne State University Press, 1985).
54. Judt, Postwar, 824.
55. Judt, Postwar, 825.
58. Judt, Postwar, 826.
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