

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 69 (2013)  
**Heft:** 4

**Artikel:** The Impact of the Eichmann Trial in the United States and Israel :  
Piercing a [Non-Existent] Depth of Silence?  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877689>

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## The Impact of the Eichmann Trial in the United States and Israel: Piercing a [Non-Existent] Depth of Silence?<sup>1</sup>

It is often said that the Eichmann trial pierced a veil of darkness about the Holocaust in Israel, North America, and many other parts of the world. Tom Segev typifies this assertion with his comment that in Israel, until the Eichmann trial, there was a «depth of silence about the Holocaust. Others believe that it was the Eichmann trial which wedded the word Holocaust to the *Final Solution*».<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship has shown this assessment to be, at the least, exaggerated. This paper will examine some of those early developments and ask, if there was so much attention to the topic prior to the trial, what impact, if any, did this trial have on discussion and study of the *Final Solution* and why do so many serious observers, including those who attended the trial, argue otherwise?

### *The Word Holocaust*

Though it is often suggested that the word Holocaust was introduced by the Eichmann trial, the word had actually been in use long before the trial. It was, in fact, used in the official English translation of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. However it was written in the lower case and modified, the «Nazi holocaust.» Similarly Chaim Weizmann wrote, during the war itself, of «this holocaust.»<sup>3</sup> It was not, however, the only word used in the initial decades after the war. In the English speaking world other terms were commonly relied upon including, among others, holocaust, catastrophe, *hurban*, destruction of the Jews, and the *Final Solution*.

In 1949 the Conference on Jewish Relations, an arm of the New York School for Social Research, a university which hired many scholars who had to escape from Germany and other parts of Europe, convened a conference on «Problems of research in the Study of the Jewish Catastrophe, 1939-1945.»

<sup>1</sup> Portions of the arguments made in this paper are drawn from D. Lipstadt: *The Eichmann Trial*, New York 2011.

<sup>2</sup> T. Segev: *The Seventh Million*, New York 1991, 361.

<sup>3</sup> Chaim Weizmann, letter to Israel Goldstein, December 24, 1942; Zachariah Shuster, Commentary, December 1945, 10, all found at <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/faq/details.php?lang=en&topic=01#02>; H. Diner: *We Remember with Reverence and with Love*, New York 2010, 125.

In his opening remarks the Columbia University historian Salo Baron made frequent referral to the «great Catastrophe.» In 1951 the Jewish National Fund, in an effort to raise funds for a «Martyr's Forest» in Jerusalem (it was to have six million trees), called for contributions to commemorate, not the Holocaust, but «the six million Jews who perished in Europe.»<sup>4</sup>

In Israel as well there was no consensus about the appropriate English term. In 1955 the newly created Yad Vashem announced that the study of the annihilation of the Jews would be divided up under the following headings: «The Approach of the Disaster, 1920-1933», «The beginnings of the Disaster, 1933-1939» and so forth. Two years later, when Yad Vashem published the first edition of its research journal, the word «Disaster» had been replaced. The journal was entitled: *Yad Vashem Studies: On the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance*. Hebrew speakers used the word *shoah*, a word with Biblical roots meaning total devastation.<sup>5</sup> Medieval Jewish writers used it as a synonym for an utter destruction.<sup>6</sup> The Yiddish speaking world used the term *hurban*, a word with deep roots in Jewish history and literature. It first entered the Jewish lexicon in association with the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.

Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, despite the absence of a consensus about what to call this genocide, scholars seemed to recognize that it stood apart from other catastrophes and demanded some specific nomenclature. By the late 1950s the word *holocaust*, with both a capital and lower case H, was increasingly being used by both scholars and journalists. In 1957 at the World Congress of Jewish Studies a number of papers had Holocaust in their title. Yad Vashem also began in the late 1950s to occasionally use the term.<sup>7</sup> But as late as 1960 it still did not yet have the singular connotation it has today, certainly not in the United States. This was evident in 1960 when NBC broadcast the Broadway production of *Peter Pan*. Captain Hook gleefully proclaimed that the children were going to have to walk the plank and there would be a «holocaust of the children.» No one seems to have noticed, much less protested.

<sup>4</sup> Diner (ibid.) 42.397 n. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Isa 47:11; Ps 35:3; Job 30:3,14; 38:27.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center/the\\_holocaust.asp](http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/the_holocaust.asp).

<sup>7</sup> G. Korman: The Holocaust in American Historical Writing, [Electronic version], *Societas* 2 (1972) 261.

Eichmann's capture, his subsequent trial (1961), and execution (1962) do seem to have brought the word into more common usage and the topic into the mainstream. The Israeli translators used the term and, consequently, it was to be frequently found in American press stories on the trial. It was frequently the term upon which television broadcasters relied. That alone may not, however, have been what cemented the term in the popular imagination. It is possible those greatly responsible for reinforcing the common usage of this word in the post-Eichmann trial period, at least in the Jewish community, were Elie Wiesel and a number of other popular lecturers. During the 1960s Wiesel, who covered the trial for the Yiddish daily, *The Jewish Daily Forward* and whose book *Night* had been published in 1960, began to emerge as a commanding voice on this topic. He traveled to synagogues and Jewish Community Centers throughout North America talking about «the Holocaust.» He began a yearly series of lectures at New York's iconic 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. Other lecturers spoke at synagogues, JCCs, and Jewish educational facilities about «the Holocaust.» All these served to enhance interest in the topic in general and the use of the word in particular among middle class Jews who were neither scholars in the field nor survivors of the event.<sup>8</sup>

*The Holocaust: A Singular Event or a Link in the Chain of Anti-Semitism?*

There was another discussion about the destruction of the Jews that did not begin with the Eichmann trial but was intensified by it. It did not concern what to call this tragedy but how to define it from a historiographic perspective. In the iconic first paragraph of his opening speech at the trial, Gideon Hausner, Israel's Attorney General, described the Nazis' crimes against the Jews as a link in an age old chain of anti-Semitic outrages. The history of the Jewish people, he declared, «is steeped in suffering and tears. Pharaoh in Egypt decided to «afflict them with their burdens» and to cast their sons into the river.» Haman's decree was «to destroy, to slay, and to cause them to perish.» Chmielnicki «slaughtered them in multitudes; they were butchered in Petlura's pogroms.» Hitler and his cohorts were the scions of Pharaoh (Egypt), Haman (Shushan/Iraq), and Chmielnicki (Poland). All of them had the same objective for the people Israel: to wipe them from the face of the earth. While the *Final Solution* may have differed in scope and degree, it was a distinct link in this chain.

<sup>8</sup> G. Samuels: When Evil Closed In, New York Times, November 13, 1960.

As early as 1949 Salo Baron, who would testify at the trial, took a different stance on this issue. He believed the Holocaust was different from previous acts of Anti-Semitism. It was unprecedented, he contended, because of the large geographic area it included, greater loss of a percentage of the Jewish population, plan to eliminate *all* Jews, and «finality and immutability of the fate of Nazis' victims.» In contrast to other acts against the Jews, the action was both supported and directed by the state. Speaking at the same conference as Baron was Hannah Arendt, who would eventually brand Hausner's depiction of the Holocaust as a link in the anti-Semitic chain as «cheap rhetoric and bad history.» She expressed the view that this was an unprecedented action because it had no utilitarian criteria and none of the characteristics usually associated with other aggressive wars. It was not done to conquer a hostile people, enslave the victims, turn them into forced laborers, or further Nazi world rule. Moreover, Arendt contended, these actions against the Jews were anti-utilitarian in that they often hampered the conventional war, e.g. they diverted men and materiel from the war effort and assigned them to kill Jews, many of whom were or could have become accomplished slave workers to aid the war effort.<sup>9</sup>

While Arendt seemed to minimize the centrality of the legacy of anti-Semitism, she correctly grasped that what had been done to the Jews was unprecedented. Never before had there been state sponsored genocide with a goal of annihilating an entire group (men, women, children, old and young) irrespective of whether they lived within the state or outside of it or possessed the means to harm the state. Some of the people who took her to task in the 1960s for arguing for uniqueness and thereby seeming to minimize the role of anti-Semitism eventually changed their stance. They became fierce advocates of the uniqueness theory for which she laid the groundwork.

*Holocaust Studies: Accelerating the Growth of a Fledgling Field*

The trial did precipitate a major spurt in the academic study of the Holocaust. Yad Vashem reported a significant jump in the publication of memoirs and books on the Holocaust in the years immediately following the trial. However, it would be an overstatement to argue that the trial created the field of Holocaust studies. During the immediate post-war period and through the 1950s

<sup>9</sup> S. Baron: Opening Remarks, JSocS XII (1950) 13-15; H. Arendt: Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps, *ibid.* 50-51.

research was actively being conducted. The European born Philip Friedman who had immigrated to the United States had been studying the history of the Holocaust since the end of the war. According to Baron, during the 1950s Friedman found little support or response to his work «even on the part of leading Jewish organizations.» In fact, his initial support came from a non-Jewish source, Columbia University.<sup>10</sup> There were some venues, particularly those with ties to either the academic community or the Yiddish speaking world, which were interested. During the 1950s important papers were published by *Jewish Social Studies*, *YIVO Bleter*, and the Jewish Labor Committee. In the wake of the trial, as increasing numbers of students became interested in the topic, books by Raul Hilberg, Philip Friedman, and Gerald Reitlinger, all of which were written well before the trial, were there to help them begin to make sense of this event.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is important to note that, even as historians of the Jewish people began to delve into this event, historians who studied the broad sweep of World War did not consider the Final Solution central to the larger story of World War II and the Third Reich. Hilberg experienced this when, in the early 1950s, he chose the destruction of European Jews as the topic for his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. His adviser, a noted scholar, warned him to stay away from the topic because he would be «separating» himself from the «mainstream of academic research» and entering waters that had been studiously avoided by both the academy and public. When this senior academic saw how determined Hilberg was to proceed, he warned him using a rather macabre choice of words, given the topic at hand: «It's your funeral.»<sup>12</sup> Years later Hilberg explained this «taboo» as emanating from a desire by Germans not to «hear what they had done», and by the «bystanders», i.e. the Western world, «not to be told what they had done.»<sup>13</sup> In fact, the academics' opposition may have emanated from more than just that.

<sup>10</sup> S. Baron: Introduction, in: P. Friedman: *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, Philadelphia 1980, 5.

<sup>11</sup> G. Reitlinger: *The Final Solution*, New York 1953. Friedman: *Roads to Extinction* (n. 10), 525-39.

<sup>12</sup> R. Hilberg: *The Politics of Memory*, Chicago 1966, 66.

<sup>13</sup> R. Hilberg: *Sources and Their Uses*, in: M. Berenbaum and A.J. Peck (eds.): *The Holocaust and History: The Known, The Unknown, The Disputed and The Unexamined*, Bloomington 1998, 5.

His advisor may have shared the view of other leading social scientists that Jewish history, including that of the Holocaust, was peripheral or a «side bar» at best, from the broader sweep of history. This attitude is evident in the writings of a number of leading social scientists during this period. Andreas Dorpalen, in his *Journal of Modern History* review of Hillberg's *The Destruction of European Jewry*, berated Hilberg for his general and «wholesale condemnation of the German bureaucracy.» In short, Dorpalen argued, Hilberg was treating Germany too harshly.<sup>14</sup> Other social scientists tended to obliterate the Jewish nature of the tragedy. As Gerd Korman observes, the 1962 edition of Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commanger's classic work, *The Growth of the American Republic* dealt with the topic in a strangely universalized fashion. Describing the Allies push across Europe in World War II, they wrote:

«As the Allied armies drove deep into Germany, Austria, and Poland they came upon one torture camp after another – Buchenwald, Dachau, Belsen, Auschwitz, Linz and Lublin – and what they reported sickened the whole Western World. These atrocity camps had been established in 1937 for Jews, gypsies, and anti-Nazi Germans and Austrians; with the coming of the war the Nazis used them for prisoners of all nationalities, civilians, and soldiers, men, woman, and children and for Jews rounded up in Italy, France, Holland, and Hungary. All were killed in the hope of exterminating the entire race.»

Based on Morrison and Commanger's rendition, the Final Solution was, not something designed to annihilate the Jewish people, but was a series of generalized acts of terror against a broad swatch of peoples. Their subsequent observations on the topic indicate that this de-Judaization of the Final Solution was not happenstance. «And the pathetic story of one of the least of these, the diary of the little German (sic) girl Anna Frank, had probably done more to convince the world of the hatred inherent in the Nazi doctrine than the solemn postwar trials.» One cannot help but wonder, not just why they chose this description for Anne Frank, but why they thought a *German* girl would have to be sequestered in an attic. (In the 1968 edition of their book Anna became a Jewish girl.)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A. Dorpalen: Review of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jewry*, *The Journal of Modern History* XXXIV (June 1962) 226-27 as cited in Korman: *The Holocaust in American* (n. 7), 259, n. 19.

<sup>15</sup> S.E. Morrison and H.S. Commanger: *The Growth of the American Republic*, 2 vols.; New



This inclination to see the Final Solution as something separate and apart from the rest of the history of the Third Reich and World War II was exemplified by a review essay in *The American Historical Review* of thirty recently published books on World War II. In the essay military historian Louis Morton made one brief reference, almost as an aside, to the fate of the Jews. While it is true that most of these books did not address the fate of the Jews and, instead, focused on military issues, Morton himself did not seem at all troubled by the fact. Neither Morton nor the authors of this array of books acknowledge that in the *Ostkrieg* (the war in the East) the fate of the Jews was closely connected to – if not inexorably intertwined with – the so-called conventional war.<sup>16</sup> For these authors the fate of the Jews during World War II belonged in the far narrower – if not parochial – field of Jewish history. It was something separate and apart from the greater history of Nazism, the Third Reich, and World War II. According to these authors one could fully understand Nazism and World War II without addressing Nazi anti-Semitism and the *Final Solution*.

Gordon Wright exercised the same sort of myopia in *The Ordeal of Total War 1939-1945* (1968). He lauded the Polish people for having organized a secret resistance and an uprising against the Germans in 1944 and described it as one of the «most heroic chapters in the history of the European resistance.» He neglected, however, to make any mention of another Warsaw uprising which took place a year earlier. It could be argued that the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising, the first instance of an organized armed uprising against the Nazis in Europe, was even more heroic given that it took place long before it was completely evident that the Germans had lost the war and were just trying to stymie their losses. Moreover, the conditions of the ghetto fighters were more severe than those of the Polish resistance.<sup>17</sup>

Though there was a discernible rise in the number of books, memoirs, and dissertations relating to the Holocaust in the years after the trial, it would take a long time, as is evident from these examples, before the topic was integrated

York 1962, II, 605-06 as cited in G. Korman: Silence in American textbooks, [Electronic version]. *Yad Vashem Studies*, 8 (1970) 183-202 (190); Korman: *The Holocaust in American* (n. 7), 270.

<sup>16</sup> L. Morton: *World War II: A Survey of Recent Writings*, *The American Historical Review* LXXV (December 1970) 1987-2008.

<sup>17</sup> G. Wright: *The Ordeal of Total War, 1939-1945*, New York 1968 as cited in Korman: *The Holocaust in American* (n. 7), 265.



into the academic and scholarly mainstream of work on World War II. To some degree, one could argue, that this has only begun to take place in recent years.

*What This Trial Did Not Do*

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, various scholars, among them David Cesarani, Dalia Ofer, and Hasia Diner, have shown that in Israel, the United States, and much of Europe there was no «black hole» about the Holocaust prior to the trial. Had there been such a lack of interest and information would-be publishers of Wiesel's *Night* would not have repeatedly rejected it with the argument that too much had already been written on the topic.<sup>18</sup> In addition, one need only look at the various events on the Israeli political agenda in the 1950s in order to shed considerable doubt on the idea that there was a dark silence in that country about the Holocaust. In 1950 the Knesset debated and then passed the law for the prosecution of Nazis and their Collaborators. In 1954 the trial in which Israel Kasztner sued a Hungarian Jew who blamed him for the death of his family was the cause of much discussion and debate. Throughout the decade there was intense debate in Israel about the date for observing Yom Hashoah and about what to call it. Among the suggested names were «*Holocaust and Ghetto Uprising*,» «*Holocaust, Uprising, and Bravery Remembrance Day*,» and, the one which was finally adopted, «*Yom Hashoah v'hagevurah / Holocaust and Heroism Day*.»<sup>19</sup> There was also the very public debate about accepting German reparations. Clearly the Holocaust was on the Israeli public agenda during those years.

In America the Holocaust was commemorated in a broad array of venues including synagogues, schools, Jewish community centers, and camps. Jews

<sup>18</sup> R. Franklin: *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, New York 2011, 69-87. For a history of the publication of *Night* see R. Donadio: *The Story of Night*, New York Times, January 20, 2008; D. Ofer: *The Strength of Remembrance: Commemorating the Holocaust During the First Decade of Israel*, JSocS 6 (2000) 2:24-55; H. Yablonska: *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann*, New York 2004; A. Shapira: *The Holocaust: Private Memories, Public Memory*, JSocS 4 (1998) 2:46-58; D. Cesarani: *After Eichmann: Collective Memory and the Holocaust since 1961*, London/New York 2005; D. Cesarani and E.J. Sundquist (eds.): *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*, New York 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Divrei HaKnesset (Records of the Knesset), vol. 9, 1655-57; vol. 26, 1386-88; vol. 31, 1264, 1306; vol. 80, 564-66. [http://www.knesset.gov.il/shoah/eng/shoah\\_memorialday\\_eng.pdf](http://www.knesset.gov.il/shoah/eng/shoah_memorialday_eng.pdf).

who were connected to organized Jewish life were quite likely to encounter discussion references to the *Final Solution*. The Holocaust was also to be periodically found in the sphere of broader American cultural agenda. Popular television shows such as *This is Your Life* and *Queen for a Day* aired episodes dealing with Holocaust survivors.<sup>20</sup> Novels such as *The Wall*, *Mila 18*, and *Exodus* found large audiences. By the time of the Eichmann trial *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a best seller and had been transformed into a Broadway production and Hollywood film.

### *The Conundrum of the Supposed Black Hole*

We are left then having to explain why, if there was so much attention to the Holocaust prior to the Eichmann trial, the common assumption is that the trial precipitated a change in attitude about and attention to the Holocaust. It is important to note that contemporary observers and respected Israeli pundits – and not just those writing twenty years later – believed the trial caused, in the words of Haim Gouri, a «major upheaval.» So too, the editorial board of the leading Israeli newspaper, *Davar*, was «amazed» by what it heard at the trial. Even the poet, Natan Alterman, who, at the time, was Israel's unofficial poet laureate, described the «sudden and clear realization» that came upon as a result of the trial.<sup>21</sup> Holocaust historian and Warsaw Ghetto survivor Israel Gutman and Israeli High Court Justice Moshe Beisky, who was a witness at the trial, believed the trial had a profound impact.<sup>22</sup>

The question then remains: if there had been no «black hole,» if the *Final Solution* was so broadly discussed in Israel and much of the Western World, why is there the common perception that the trial had such an impact? Why were so many well informed observers convinced that it profoundly change the public's interest in and attitude towards the Holocaust?

Similar questions can be raised about America. If, as Hasia Diner argues, there was so much attention to the topic in the 1950s, why do so many people

<sup>20</sup> J. Shandler: *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, New York 1999. For a broad sweep of Jewish commemorations see Diner: *We Remember* (n. 3).

<sup>21</sup> H. Gouri: *Facing the Glass Booth*, Detroit 2004, 324; S. DeKoven Ezrahi: *By Words Alone*, Chicago 1980, 206ff. See also Lipstadt: *The Eichmann Trial* (n. 1), 188-202.

<sup>22</sup> The recollections by Beisky, Gutman, and Wigoder are in: *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* [video recording] (Burbank: PBS Home video, 1997); <http://remember.org/eichmann/participants.htm>.

believe the trial has a tremendous impact? The answer may lie in the difference between *speaking* and *hearing*. While survivors, their children, and strongly identifying segments of the Jewish community were speaking about the Holocaust and commemorating it, it seems that many people were not listening. And, even if they were listening, it had not penetrated as deeply as it eventually would. That may explain why in the 1961 *Commentary* magazine symposium, «Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals» only two of the thirty-one participants mentioned the impact of the Holocaust on their lives. If the topic was fixed in the American Jewish agenda why would the twenty one participants in *Judaism* magazine's symposium «My Jewish Affirmation,» have almost completely avoided mentioning the Holocaust?<sup>23</sup>

At the trial over 100 survivors gave testimony. What they said in the witness box transformed, in the words of Moshe Shamir, the novelist and literary editor of *Ma'ariv*, the topic of the Holocaust into a «personal, moral problem.» «Abstract knowledge became real» and «history [was] turned into collective memory.» The story may have been *told* before. But as a result of the trial it was *heard* in an entirely new way.

#### *The Reification of the Holocaust in the Jewish Imagination*

Let me be careful not to overstate the case. Even though the trial made people decidedly more aware of the events related to the Holocaust, it would still take many more years for more of the world to fully grasp its dimensions. It would take, not just the passage of time, but the coming of age of a postwar generation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a generation which felt no sense of survivor guilt or bystander responsibility. Events in the decade that followed further served to cement this topic into the popular imagination. The Six Day War and the Yom Kippur war played a major role in making the Holocaust part of the American Jewish communal agenda. The first demonstrated to American Jews that the «Holocaust was over,» i.e. that «Masada would not fall again.»

<sup>23</sup> Peter Novick argued that the Holocaust was forced unto the American Jewish agenda by Jewish organizations which wanted to enhance support for Israel. Novick's mistake was that he examined the files of major Jewish organizations and assumed he was getting an accurate read of the Jewish community. He failed to look at what was going on «on the ground level» of the American Jewish community. P. Novick: *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston 1999; S. Whitfield: *The Holocaust and the American Jewish Intellectual*, Jdm 28 (1979) 394-95; E.T. Linenthal: *Preserving Memory*, New York 1995, 8.

Then, six years later, the Yom Kippur war reminded them that the Jewish state was still quite vulnerable. The 1967 war gave Diaspora Jews a sense of pride in Israel that they had not had before. With it came an increased willingness to speak of why an Israel was so crucial to them. The Holocaust was an essential part of that. By this point in time, the baby boom generation had come of age. Carrying no sense of guilt for what was and was *not* done by American Jews during the Holocaust and looking for a tool to rather self-righteously differentiate their activist response to the persecution of Jews from what they perceived as their parents' passive response, they delved into the topic.

In the 1970s the struggle on behalf of Soviet Jewry became a central element on the American Jewish communal agenda. It was something about which Jews of all religious and political persuasions could agree. Much of the rhetoric used in the Soviet Jewry movement related this struggle to the Holocaust. Speakers at rallies frequently analogized, falsely of course, the situation of Soviet Jews to that of Jews during World War II. A different comparison concerned the response of the bystanders, i.e. North American Jews. In a rather hyperbolic and somewhat ahistorical fashion, one speaker declared: «You were silent then. Do not be silent now.»<sup>24</sup>

But it was an American television show which offered the best proof that, not only had the word Holocaust become fixed in both American political and popular culture, but more importantly, that the topic was now of broad concern to many people. In April 1978 NBC broadcast the mini-series *Holocaust*. Despite being a rather cheesy soap opera, the show enthralled audiences throughout America. Over 120 million people watched it. It is noteworthy that NBC did not feel the need to explain to the American public what the word meant and saw no need to give the show a subtitle, e.g. Holocaust: the Nazi Destruction of the Jews.

The second event which demonstrated that the topic had moved from the periphery of the American political consciousness to a more central position was President Carter's creation of a Holocaust commission. The initial motivation for this action was clearly an attempt to heal the rift between Carter and the American Jewish community. It is important to note that in her memo to the President advocating the creation of a national memorial, White

<sup>24</sup> In 1972 I was invited to address a Soviet Jewry rally at Boston's famed Faneuil Hall. In my speech I drew exactly that analogy. This was how I exhorted the audience to act.

House staffer Ellen Goldstein observed that there was «no U.S memorial to the victims of the *Holocaust*.» [emphasis added]<sup>25</sup> This commission and its subsequent incarnation as the United States Holocaust Memorial Council would lay the groundwork for the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in America's most prominent public «square,» the Washington Mall. Long before the museum opened its doors to the first visitors in 1993, the very idea of such an institution generated a series of passionate scholarly, political, and ethnic debates. Despite the great success of the museum and its having won over many of the skeptics about – if not opponents to – its existence, these debates continue to roil many waters.

### *Abstract*

What impact did the Eichmann trial have on knowledge of the Holocaust among people in Israel, North America, and many other parts of the world? Had there been a «depth of silence» about the Holocaust prior to the trial and was it broken by the trial? This paper examines this question by looking at the adoption of the word Holocaust as the term for the Third Reich's annihilation of approximately six million Jews. The paper argues that the application of a singular word for this historical episode can be used as a marker to measure when knowledge of it and a willingness to grapple with it was evident in the scholarly world and beyond. As part of tracking the application of this word to this historical event, the paper also examines how the Holocaust was treated by various historians during the 1950s and 1960s. It explores how the Holocaust was initially treated as an historical event, e.g. as a link in a chain of antisemitic events or as something *sui generis* and unprecedented. Finally, it traces the initial growth of Holocaust studies as an integrated field of study about the annihilation to the Jews and examines some of the fundamental questions that arose at the outset of the creation of the field among them, who were the victims: Jews, disabled, political opponents etc. or just Jews?

*Deborah E. Lipstadt, Atlanta*

<sup>25</sup> Linenthal: Preserving Memory (n. 23), 18.