

SECOND EDITION

Is the Holocaust Unique?



PERSPECTIVES ON
COMPARATIVE GENOCIDE

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76. Götz Aly, "The Planning Intelligentsia and the 'Final Solution,'" Michael Burleigh (ed.), *Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 140–153, 153; see also Aly/Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 492.

77. Johannes Heil/Rainer Erb (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit: Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998).

78. See for example Ludolf Herbst, *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), especially 374 and 397.

79. The symbolic, generational change of the guard was theatrically enacted at the Historikertag of 1998 when the new generation did not directly attack their just retired teachers but instead exposed the collaborative behavior of the teachers' teachers during the Third Reich. Kansteiner, "Mandarins in the Public Sphere," 102–109.

80. Sofsky, "KZ-Forschung," 1154.

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Uniqueness as Denial: The Politics of Genocide Scholarship

DAVID E. STANNARD

Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.

—Jean Baudrillard

*I have tried to keep memory alive, I have tried to fight those who would forget.
Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.*

—Elie Wiesel

I

Recently, the world marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Not a week passed in 1995 without the commemoration of some significant event that happened somewhere on the planet five decades earlier—from the fire-bombings of Dresden and Tokyo to the Yalta Conference and the death of Franklin Roosevelt, from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the opening days of the Nuremberg trials—and much more.

But in the minds of many people the most hideous and stirring images of 1945 are those associated with the opening up of the Nazi confinement and extermination centers. With the evacuation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the liberations of Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen, the world finally got to see up close what many Allied leaders had long denied or appeared indifferent to: the almost unimaginable magnitude and hideousness of the Nazi genocide campaign.¹

No one will ever know with precision how many people died in the Second World War. The estimates of Chinese deaths, for example, have ranged from 2.5 million to 13.5 million. But, overall, the numbers total in the neighborhood of 50 million people—of whom more than 5 million were Jews. Put another way, by the time the war was over, almost two out of every three Jews in Europe (and one out of three worldwide) had died either in the concentration and death camps, in the ghettos, or at the hands of mobile killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*.²

So huge was the carnage that even today it defies comprehension. But it was all too real. And in response to that reality—and to the possibility that something similar could conceivably happen again—many nations both within Europe and beyond have made it illegal to disseminate the hateful idea that the Germans' attempted destruction of European Jewry is an exaggeration or a myth.

Such malignant ideas have, of course, been propagated for many years by extremist groups and individuals. Some have argued that the whole story of the Holocaust is a fabrication. Others admit that it happened but claim that the number killed has been greatly exaggerated. Still more acknowledge that large numbers of deaths occurred but deny that they constitute genocide by claiming that the Jewish deaths, like all others at the time, were merely wartime casualties. Some claim that it was diseases such as typhus, along with the natural deprivations occasioned by war and forced relocation, that killed the Jews—that their deaths were real yet unintentional. Even the genocidal intent of Hitler has never been fully documented, claim others; and without hard proof of his intent the *Führer*, at least, cannot be implicated in whatever extermination effort may have occurred.

Recognizing that these assaults via the pages of history constitute forms of antisemitic cultural violence against Jews in the present, and portend serious danger for the future, the nations of the world have mounted a variety of defensive responses. Some European governments have forcibly prohibited anti-Zionists from speaking in public. A California court has awarded \$100,000 to a survivor of Auschwitz for the pain and suffering he endured in an effort to prove untrue the claims of an antisemitic organization that the Nazis did not kill Jews in gas chambers. In Austria the publishers of magazines attempting to minimize Jewish deaths during the Holocaust have been indicted and convicted for their efforts. A professional antisemite who publicly denied the reality of the Holocaust has been sent to prison in Canada. German law states that "denial of the Holocaust" is punishable by up to five years in jail. And the United States has prohibited people who have expressed similar beliefs from entering the country. Other examples abound.³

One can imagine, then, the world's reaction if, in 1995, in a sudden eruption of outspoken antisemitism, the most prominent political figures in Germany, including leaders of the German parliament, had publicly ridiculed the Holocaust commemoration ceremonies. Or if they had denied that the Holocaust even happened and threatened to cut off government funds for a film project on World War II unless the word "genocide" was deleted from any references to the Nazis'

treatment of the Jews. One can also imagine what the reaction might have been if, throughout that year of somber remembrance, Germany's most important and established newspapers and magazines—across the political spectrum from right to left—had repeatedly mocked the Jews and either denied that the Holocaust ever happened or, conversely, celebrated it as a beneficent event.

Now, clearly, although antisemitism remains far from stamped out in Germany, or anywhere else in the world, such events did not and are not happening in that country. Indeed, they would be illegal there. But they *did* happen in the United States only a few years earlier, when the native peoples of the Americas attempted to commemorate the ghastly destruction that had been visited upon them by European and, later, by white settler military invasions—invasions that brought in their wake wanton slaughter and massive population collapse on a scale and of a duration that dwarf anything that happened in Europe under Nazi rule.

It wasn't *German* politicians who insisted that the word "genocide" not be used in reference to the mass killing of Jews but members of the *U.S. Senate* who threatened to cut funds to the Smithsonian Institution if a film it was partially funding used that word, even in passing, to describe the destruction of the Western Hemisphere's indigenous peoples. And it wasn't German newspapers and magazines that either doubted the reality of the Nazi assault on European Jews or, conversely, admitted and celebrated that genocide. No, it was American publications that routinely denied, or even applauded, the genocide that was carried out against the New World's native inhabitants.

Consider just three examples that represent the "respectable" political spectrum. Scores of other writings—and radio and television presentations—could just as easily be called upon to make the same point.

First, Charles Krauthammer, one of *Time* magazine's regular political columnists, used an entire column to lambaste as "politically correct" opportunists anyone who dared express regret over the killing of millions of innocent people and the destruction of entire ancient cultures in the Americas. What happened in the wake of the European invasion was only what has always characterized human history, Krauthammer claimed, citing the Norman conquest of Britain as an apt (though actually absurd) comparison. "The real question is," he noted, "what eventually grew on this bloodied soil?" For, regardless of the level of destruction and mass murder that was visited upon the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, it was, in retrospect, entirely justified because in the process it wiped out such alleged barbarisms as the communally based Inca society (which really was only a "beehive," Krauthammer said) and gave the world "a culture of liberty that endowed the individual human being with dignity and sovereignty."⁴

Krauthammer, of course, is a conservative political pundit. But his approach to apologizing for mass murder was not limited to those on the right. Soon after, for example, historian and cold war liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr. weighed in with much the same argument. Schlesinger, however, was not content to build his case on the purported shortcomings of the ancient indigenous societies of the

Americas. No, he gazed into his crystal ball and asserted, in *The Atlantic*, that without the European conquests and slaughter at least some New World societies *today* might be sufficiently unpleasant places to live so as to make eminently acceptable the centuries of genocide that were carried out against the native peoples of the entire Western Hemisphere.⁵

And in the person of Christopher Hitchens, writing in *The Nation*, the political left then sounded its voice. To Hitchens, anyone who refused to join him in celebrating with "great vim and gusto" the annihilation of the native peoples of the Americas was (in his words) self-hating, ridiculous, ignorant, and sinister. People who regard critically the genocide that was carried out in America's past, Hitchens continued, are simply reactionary, since such grossly inhuman atrocities "happen to be the way history is made." And thus "to complain about [them] is as empty as complaint about climatic, geological or tectonic shift." Moreover, he added, such violence is worth glorifying since it more often than not has been for the long-term betterment of humankind—as in the United States today, where the extermination of the Native Americans—the American Indians—has brought about "a nearly boundless epoch of opportunity and innovation."⁶

One possible exception Hitchens allowed to his vulgar social Darwinism, with its quasi-Hitlerian view of the proper role of power in history, was the Euro-American enslavement of tens of millions of Africans.⁷ But even then, Hitchens contended, those centuries of massive brutality only "probably" left Africa worse off than they found it." Clearly, however—as with Krauthammer's and Schlesinger's moral codes—if it could be shown to Hitchens's personal satisfaction that Africa was in fact "better off" following the enslavement and simultaneous mass killing of 40 million to 60 million of its people, he would celebrate the abominations of the slave trade with the same vim and gusto that he did the genocide against the native peoples of the Americas.⁸

These are, of course, precisely the same sort of retrospective justifications for genocide that would have been offered by the descendants of Nazi storm troopers and SS doctors had the Third Reich ultimately had its way: that is, however distasteful the means, the extermination of the Jews was thoroughly warranted given the beneficial ends that were accomplished. In this light it is worth considering again what the reaction would be in Europe and elsewhere if the equivalent of the *actual* views of Krauthammer and Schlesinger and Hitchens were expressed today by the respectable press in Germany—but with Jews, not Native Americans, as the people whose historical near-extermination was being celebrated. And there is no doubt whatsoever that if that were to happen, alarm bells announcing a frightening and unparalleled postwar resurgence of German neo-Nazism would, quite justifiably, be going off immediately throughout the world.

Of course, nothing of the sort happened when those three writers—and the countless others for whom they here stand as establishment representatives—proclaimed their delight in the historical destruction of millions of non-

Europeans. And therein lies an apparent paradox: How can we account for this extraordinary difference?

Several answers to this question come immediately to mind, the most obvious of which is the deeply embedded Euro-American ideology of white supremacy. White supremacy of the same everyday sort that some years earlier led prominent British commentators to deride as a topic of inconsequence a detailed published account of genocide against the Brazilian Indians—who have been liquidated into near nonexistence, from a population of at least 2.5 million to barely 100,000 at last count. Such human carnage is unimportant and not worthy of serious attention, one critic put it, because "the tragedy of a civilization's demise is commensurate with the value of what it achieved" and "the Brazilian Indians created nothing durable in building or in art." [Not only unimportant, added another writer, but genocide in this instance was wholly justified, because "the money garnered from the lands, and the unwilling labours, of several million bewildered Indians" had made possible the creation of so much fine European culture—including even an admittedly "modest" Portuguese opera he said he recently had "greatly enjoyed."] Presumably, men of such refinement (like their American counterparts) would reject the appropriateness of this same criterion in evaluating the justness of enslaving and killing millions of *white* people—say, those Jews who may not have created much that was durable in the way of building or art but who certainly brought benefit and comfort to the citizens of Nazi Germany with their slave labor and consequent mass deaths in the I. G. Farben chemical plant at Auschwitz or in the coal mines located nearby.

For those who might find such overt racial distinctions distasteful and preferably avoided, however, a more "reasonable" explanation exists for the grossly differential responses that are so commonplace regarding the American and the Nazi holocausts. This explanation simply denies that there is any comparability between the Nazi violence against the Jews and the Euro-American violence against the Western Hemisphere's native peoples. In fact, in most quarters it is held as beyond dispute that the attempted destruction of the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe was unique, unprecedented, and categorically incommensurable—not only with the torment endured by the indigenous peoples of North and South America, but also with the sufferings of any people at any time in any place during the entire history of humanity.

This rarely examined, taken-for-granted assumption on the part of so many did not appear out of thin air. On the contrary, it is the hegemonic product of many years of strenuous intellectual labor by a handful of Jewish scholars and writers who have dedicated much if not all of their professional lives to the advancement of this exclusivist idea. And it is the work of these people that I shall be addressing in most of the rest of this chapter. For not only is the essence of their argument demonstrably erroneous, the larger thesis that it fraudulently advances is fundamentally racist and violence-provoking. At the same time, more-

over, it willingly provides a screen behind which opportunistic governments today attempt to conceal their own past and ongoing genocidal actions.

Before turning to the specific arguments of the Jewish uniqueness proponents, however, something must be said about the ad hominem impugning of motives that almost inevitably is encountered by those who choose to dispute the so-called uniqueness assertion. Indeed, anyone who even raises questions about the alleged uniqueness of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust is, by virtue of that fact alone, immediately in danger of being labeled an antisemite. For example, when President Jimmy Carter once gave a speech commemorating the victims of the Holocaust he mentioned the fact that others besides Jews had died. Because Carter did not limit his commemorative statement to the deaths of Jews, Yehuda Bauer, a professor of Jewish history at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, accused him of attempting to "de-Judaize" the Holocaust, an action, Bauer wrote, that was nothing less than "an unconscious reflection of antisemitic attitudes."¹⁰ To Bauer, the simple acknowledgment of the suffering of others constituted Jew-hating.

But on this matter, Deborah Lipstadt, professor of modern Jewish and Holocaust studies at Emory University and the author of what probably is the most popular book on this topic, holds a place of particular distinction. Lipstadt regards as her enemy anyone who expresses doubt about the utter singularity in all of human history of Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis, an enemy situated intellectually and ideologically at one place or another along a posited antisemitic continuum stretching from those she calls Holocaust "deniers" to those she labels Holocaust "relativists." In Professor Lipstadt's considered opinion, a "denier" is someone who flatly rejects the very historical existence of the Holocaust, whereas a "relativist" is someone who recognizes that the mass killing of Jews in Hitler's Germany occurred and was a hideous act of genocide yet who also considers the Holocaust to be, in her words, one among "an array of other conflagrations in which innocents were massacred."¹¹

In other words, you are to be considered in the same general category—as an antisemite, as a creator of "immoral equivalencies," as someone trying "to help the Germans embrace their past"—if you are either a neo-Nazi or a comparative historian. For, to Lipstadt, even someone who has no doubt regarding the ghastly horrors of Jewish suffering and death under Hitler—but who has the temerity to dissent from her insistence regarding the unquestionable uniqueness of the Jewish experience—is, in her phrase, merely a *not yet* denier. And "not yet" denial, she writes, is "the equivalent of David Duke without his robes." In short, if you disagree with Deborah Lipstadt that the Jewish suffering in the Holocaust was unique, you are, by definition—and like David Duke—a crypto-Nazi.¹² Needless to say, such intellectual thuggery usually has its intended chilling effect on further discussion.

Mention should also be made of another preliminary difficulty encountered by anyone who takes on the argument regarding the uniqueness of Jews as victims of suffering: locating the actual components of the uniqueness argument itself.

Not only do different advocates of the uniqueness thesis disagree among themselves over the bases for their belief, but the general trend of the argument has shifted over the years and likely will continue transforming itself as new criticisms of specific assertions (such as those contained in this chapter) are raised. This is because, rather than proceeding along a path of open inquiry, virtually all proponents of the uniqueness argument have for years sought out and put forward only those data that appeared to support their own *preexisting* conviction regarding the uniqueness of Jewish suffering—a conviction that in large measure was and is itself an outgrowth not of true scholarly analysis but of straightforward religious dogma. I shall return to this later. But first let us take a look at the arguments themselves; then we can consider the likely motives for advancing them, along with the damage to others that they do.

II

For years it was assumed in many quarters that the sheer size and scope of the mass killing of Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe were unprecedented, and that alone was sufficient to mark Jewish suffering during the Holocaust as unique. As time passed, however, an accumulating body of research began to show that this assumption was false. For example, within the Holocaust itself the Romani people—Gypsies—suffered the same inhuman death camp conditions and probably lost a proportion of their prewar European population equal to that taken from the Jews, a conclusion that now has been accepted by many Jewish students of the Holocaust, including Simon Wiesenthal.¹³

In addition, in just two years between 1915 and 1917, the Armenian population of the Ottoman empire suffered near-obliteration from a Turkish genocide campaign, only two decades after suffering an earlier pogrom in which at least 100,000 Armenians, and probably closer to 200,000, were killed. No one knows for certain how many Armenians died in the second and far larger of these storms of mass killing, but estimates of the pre-genocide population of Armenians have ranged from 1.5 million to 3 million; the actual number of those killed has been put by some writers at under 1 million and by others as high as 2 million, with most serious scholars content to say that at least 1 million and probably closer to 1.5 million people died.¹⁴

Whether those numbers constitute a proportionate death rate equal to that of Jews in the Holocaust will remain an open question until better statistics become available, but there is little doubt that at least half of the pre-genocide Armenian population was destroyed, and it may have been substantially higher than that. The estimate in one recent analysis—between 50 and 70 percent—is roughly commensurate with the 60 to 65 percent rate of destruction suffered by European Jews during World War II. Moreover, contrary to the assertions of Jewish uniqueness advocates such as Lucy Dawidowicz who claim that "no other people anywhere lost the main body of its population and the fountainhead of its cultural

resources," in fact the very hearts of both the Armenian and Gypsy populations were cut out by the genocides waged against them. In the process, the Armenians were also ruthlessly uprooted from 3,000 years of deep cultural relationship with the traditional land of their ancestors. And even today Gypsies remain the targets of ever-mounting racist discrimination wherever they live—including Germany, which recently deported 20,000 Gypsies to Romania, where they predictably have been met with terrorism, violence, and murder.¹⁵

Yet even if the field of genocide studies must necessarily remain one in which many questions will always go unanswered, there is no question at all regarding at least one matter: that the pre-twentieth-century destruction of native peoples at the hands of European invaders—from Australia to the Americas and elsewhere—frequently resulted in population collapses proportionately much higher than those experienced by any group, including Jews, during the Holocaust. Moreover, not only were *proportionate* losses routinely much higher among indigenous peoples (up to 100 percent in many cases—that is, total extermination—and between 90 and 95 percent generally), but the *gross number* of people destroyed by what I have elsewhere called the "American Holocaust" exceeded by many times over the number of Jews who died under the Nazis and, indeed, was even greater than the number of people of all nations killed worldwide during the entire duration of the Second World War. Even in specific locales—central Mexico and the Andes in particular—the deaths of culturally and ethnically distinct indigenous people in the wake of the European invasions vastly exceeded the mortality figures for Jews during the Holocaust, both in terms of proportional population loss and overall numbers killed.¹⁶

Most of these facts had become well known by the early 1980s, and thus quantitative criteria quietly began disappearing from the writings of proponents of the Jewish uniqueness argument. To be sure, they did not go away easily. Although acknowledging that, in general, mortality rates or counts could no longer be used as sufficient measures unto themselves to establish uniqueness, some proponents of the uniqueness argument continued to resort to quantification, but only selectively, when it worked to their advantage in establishing differences between the sufferings of Jews and others. Thus, for instance, Lucy Dawidowicz, in *The Holocaust and the Historians*, used the numerical difference between the deaths of Jews in the Holocaust and the deaths of Japanese civilians following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as one way of dismissing the possibility that the nuclear destruction of hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives might be termed genocide.¹⁷ When the subjects of comparison are different, however—that is, when discussing other populations that experienced a numerically and proportionately larger loss of life, such as certain huge communities in sixteenth-century Mesoamerica—Jewish uniqueness proponents, of course, now reject any use of quantitative criteria.¹⁸

Other writers have used the absence of complete extermination among a comparison group, such as Armenians, Gypsies, and Native Americans, as a way of

denying that genocide was actually perpetrated against the respective non-Jewish group. Michael R. Marrus, for example, distinguishes the suffering of the Armenians from that of the Jews as arising in part from the fact that "however extensive the murder of Armenians . . . killing was far from universal." And, he notes, "the fact is that many thousands of Armenians survived within Turkey during the period of the massacres." Yehuda Bauer concurs, noting that neither the Armenian nor the Gypsy genocides were comparable to the experience of the Jews because "in neither case was the destruction complete." Adds Steven T. Katz: though the mass killing of New England's Pequot Indians was no doubt lamentable (and it is true, he concedes, that their government-sanctioned white killers did act "with unnecessary severity"), at most the destruction of the Pequots can be described as "cultural genocide" since, after all, "the number killed probably totaled less than half the entire tribe."¹⁹

This, to say the least, is a peculiar bit of historical reasoning—since Europe's Jews themselves were far from totally exterminated by the Nazis, with at least 80,000 Jews surviving in Germany alone; since the worldwide population of Jews was "only" reduced by about one-third during the Holocaust; and since the deaths of Jews in Germany, Romania, Hungary, and the USSR, though totaling about 1.3 million people, represented less than 30 percent of those countries' prewar Jewish populations.²⁰ But it does at least demonstrate the eagerness of some uniqueness advocates to make their case at any cost to logic or probity. In fact, one prominent writer on this topic occasionally defies all connection with reality by proclaiming that "total physical annihilation . . . is what *happened* to the Jews," contending, in a breathtaking somersault of deduction, that the complete extermination of the Jews by the Nazis is a historical *fact*—the survival of one-third of Europe's Jewish population notwithstanding—because those Jews who survived did so despite the "desire" of the Nazis to kill them.²¹

With the exception of this sort of inanity, however, even the most determined uniqueness proponent is today forced to admit, as Steven Katz has acknowledged, that "what might be thought the most acutely self-evident, the most blatantly incontestable grounds for establishing the novelty of Hitler's 'Judeocide'"—that is, the proportions of population destroyed and/or the total numbers killed—do not in fact support the case for Jewish uniqueness.²²



If the quantitative criterion does not establish the uniqueness of Jewish suffering, particularly when compared with the far more destructive experiences of numerous indigenous peoples, some have then argued that it was the way in which the Jews died—that is, the relative speed with which the killing was accomplished—that makes their experience unique. This contention holds that whereas Jews were slaughtered in death camps by the most modern and expeditious methods of mass destruction available at the time, previous and subsequent victims of

genocide have been destroyed by far cruder and more prolonged means. The Holocaust, it is said by proponents of this standard, "was unique in quantitative terms" because it destroyed more innocent people "per unit of time" than has any other mass killing event. Even uniqueness advocate Katz now rejects this claim, however, noting the counterexamples of the Soviets under Stalin and other twentieth-century genocides in such places as Bangladesh and Cambodia. More recently, between April and July 1994, as many as 850,000 Tutsi people were slaughtered in Rwanda, primarily with handguns and machetes. This is a rate of about 10,000 per day, a figure equal to the maximum ever achieved during a single 24-hour period at Auschwitz.²³ Surely, though, if speed is to be a criterion, no one has come close to matching the achievements of the United States in killing at least 100,000 people in a matter of hours with the firebombing of Tokyo and the subsequent vaporizing, in virtually a single nuclear instant, of more than 200,000 innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Moreover, beyond the clear factual incorrectness of the assertion that no people have ever been killed in large numbers as efficiently or as quickly as were the Jews under Nazi rule, there is the question of whether the claim itself—correct or not—is especially meaningful or noteworthy. Why, after all, is a genocide campaign that lasts for, say, three years (the approximate duration of the Final Solution) more momentous than one that proceeds at a slower pace but lasts twenty or fifty or a hundred times as long? Might it not just as cogently be argued that the very opposite is the case—that the quantitatively lower level (in the short term) but far more enduring suffering and extinction fear of many generations intrinsically is worse for its victims than the more acute but far briefer agony experienced by only a single historical generation? Who is to say? Who, really, has the right to say? Indeed, as Phillip Lopate observes, the very making of the so-called efficiency claim reveals more than anything else its authors' own "narcissistic preoccupations" with Western technology. As he puts it:

Does it really matter so much if millions are gassed according to Eichmann's timetables, rather than slowly, crudely starved to death as in Stalin's regime, or marched around by ragged teenage Khmer Rouge soldiers and then beheaded or clubbed? Does the family mourning the loved one hacked to pieces by a spontaneous mob of Indonesian vigilantes care that much about abuses of science and technology? Does neatness count, finally, so damn much?²⁴

In addition to the claim for distinctiveness based on the rate of extermination, uniqueness advocates often point to differences in the means of destruction. This is a nuance that appears to take on particular force when Jewish deaths during the Holocaust are contrasted with the historical eradication of the world's indigenous peoples. For native societies fell victim, so the customary argument goes, largely to unintentionally introduced diseases that were simply a by-product of Western imperialism. Steven Katz goes even further than this, contending

that not only was the mass destruction of the Western Hemisphere's native peoples by disease "an unintended tragedy," it actually, he claims, was "a tragedy that occurred despite the sincere and indisputable desire of the Europeans to keep the Indian population alive." Thus, not only are the Jewish and Native American experiences not comparable, but the alleged good-heartedness of the European conquerors eliminates altogether the charge that the destruction of the aboriginal peoples of the Americas and elsewhere constituted genocide.²⁵

Actually, though, the purported means-of-extermination distinction between the deaths of Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe and the deaths of indigenous peoples in their European-invaded homelands is nonsense. Despite frequent undocumented assertions that disease was responsible for the great majority of indigenous deaths in the Americas, there does not exist a single scholarly work that even pretends to demonstrate this claim on the basis of solid evidence. And that is because there is no such evidence, anywhere. The supposed truism that more native people died from disease than from direct face-to-face killing or from gross mistreatment or other concomitant derivatives of that brutality such as starvation, exposure, exhaustion, or despair is nothing more than a scholarly article of faith. It seems quite possible that deaths from disease may have exceeded those deriving from any other single cause, but the plain fact of the matter is that we have no way of ever determining individual degrees of responsibility for the many and various and overlapping factors that were involved in the native peoples' destruction. Because the devastation was so enormous and so complete, few technical demographic details of this sort exist in the historical record. Indeed, if anything is certain regarding this matter it is that most of those tens of millions of deaths—from the islands of the Caribbean to the high country of Mexico, then north and south throughout two huge continents—were in fact caused by intertwined and interacting combinations of lethal agents, combinations that took different forms in different locales.

Throughout the Americas, military invasions resulted in the direct massacres of huge numbers of people and the unleashing of bacteria and viruses for which the natives had little or no acquired resistance. In most of what is now the United States—excluding California and the Southwest—the dynamic interaction between military and microbial destruction (in different combinations from time to time and from place to place) was sufficient to lay waste almost an entire continent's indigenous inhabitants. In California and the Southwest, however, as in the Caribbean and Meso- and South America (where at least 90 percent of the Western Hemisphere's population lived) another deadly factor was added. There, survivors of the mass murders and the epidemics commonly were herded together into densely populated congregations where they either starved in squalor or were worked to death as hired-out slaves in labor camps, in mines, or on plantations—all of which, of course, were hotbeds of pestilence and fatal violence. It was under these constantly interacting conditions of direct slaughter, disease, and forced labor—combined, as in the Nazi concentration and death camps, with

the consequential reduction of live birth rates to far below replacement levels—that the indigenous populations of what are now Chile and Peru, for example, were reduced collectively by 95 percent or more, from somewhere between 9 million and 14 million people to barely 500,000, before the holocaust subsided.²⁶

But perhaps the best way to recognize the bankruptcy of this component of the Jewish uniqueness claim—the outright denial that genocide is an appropriate term to describe what happened to the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere because of the way in which the devastation occurred—is simply to imagine how people like Yehuda Bauer and Steven Katz and Deborah Lipstadt and other advocates of this position would describe the centuries-long experience of the Americas' native peoples if that experience instead had been endured by Jews. Consider, then, the following highly compressed but fully documented historical chronicle, drawn from my book *American Holocausts*, in which the only departure from reality is the substitution of "Jews" for "native peoples."²⁷

At the end of the fifteenth century a huge island in the Caribbean, twice the size of Switzerland and inhabited by at least a million and perhaps as many as 8 million Jews, was invaded by Spanish military men in search of gold. The Spaniards also were carriers of deadly diseases that the Jews had never encountered before, diseases that killed them en masse. But in their hunt for gold the Spaniards also rounded up and, under force of arms, enslaved whole communities of Jews, beating and torturing and working them in mines and on plantations with barely enough food to survive until they dropped. And all the while that this was happening (and the Jewish population was plummeting toward zero), the Spaniards' own documents today reveal that their soldiers took great delight in skewering Jewish babies on yard-long rapiers; of hacking off the breasts of Jewish women just for fun; of burning to death entire towns full of Jews. And more.

After the total population of Jews on this immense island—plus the hundreds of thousands of Jews on neighboring islands in the Caribbean—had finally been exterminated in a matter of decades, the horrifying violence then spread to an entire continent. And now still more Jews, numbering by this time in the tens of millions, died from the Spanish onslaught. Scores of Jewish cities were reduced to rubble. Synagogues beyond counting were crushed. All the religious books that could be found were burned. Jewish women and children were enslaved and branded on the face with their owners' initials. Armies of Jews were force-marched to labor in mountain-top silver mines where they could consider themselves lucky to survive for six months—while other whole communities of Jews were driven to toil on plantations in tropical forests where the life expectancy was even shorter. In central Mexico more than 20 million Jews died before it was over. And there, as elsewhere in Meso- and South America, those huge numbers of deaths from violence, disease, starvation, and slave labor represented the destruction of fully 90 to 95 percent of the Jewish population.

Everywhere, entire Jewish towns were obliterated—their residents hacked to death or burned at the stake—because their leaders did not renounce their religious traditions quickly enough. And all of this was justified by the common and often expressed belief of the murderers—including the wisest and holiest men in the Spanish

realm—that the Jews were semi-human beasts created by God to be the slaves of Christians; that it was the divine right of Christians to hunt Jews down as animals of the forest for no other purpose than to feed their carcasses to dogs.

But the bloodbath didn't stop there—and didn't end with the Spanish. Rather, it was taken up by other Europeans, and with particular delight by the British. Jews were also the original inhabitants of North America in this scenario, and English adventurers and settlers, having decided that Jews were too beast-like to deserve the land that they had cultivated for centuries, launched full-scale extermination campaigns against them—campaigns that, over and over and over again, resulted in the deaths of 19 out of every 20 Jews who happened to live where the English wanted to live. And as the English hunted down and shot and chopped and burned to death every Jew who could not escape into the forest, pious Christian ministers celebrated what they believed to be the imminent extinction of the Jewish people, routinely exclaiming (to quote just one of the most esteemed such leaders) that "it was a fearful sight to see the Jews thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and we gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for us."

And, again, it didn't stop there. For years and decades and centuries, Jews were stalked and killed like the animals that the British—and later the Americans—said they were. All the residents of certain Jewish communities, each one numbering in the thousands of people, were herded together and forced to embark on refugee death marches that commonly killed half of their victims—leading at least one hardened veteran and death march overseer to remark that "I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by the thousands, but the Jewish removal was the cruelest work I ever knew." And even after the death marches were over typically another 50 percent and more of such violently dispossessed Jews perished in the concentration camps that were the death marches' established destination points.

During the nineteenth century, meanwhile, the governors of individual states, such as Colorado and California, officially urged the citizenry to exterminate all the Jews they could find, using state funds to finance the actions of mobile killing squads; Jewish children could be—and routinely were—legally taken from their parents and enslaved; and Jews had no legal standing in court to protest against any horrors that were perpetrated against them or against their children. It was during this time as well that a man who was to become President of the United States proudly boasted of personally killing Jews and mutilating their bodies, of supervising the slicing off of Jewish noses and the stripping of flesh from Jewish bodies to be tanned and turned into bridle reins. He also gave specific instructions to kill all the Jewish babies that could be found, pointing out that true extermination could not be accomplished unless all the children as well as the adults were butchered.

Another President of the United States during this era referred to Jews as "beasts of prey," and ordered his military commanders to attack and "lay waste" all the Jewish communities they could find, demanding "that they not be merely overrun but destroyed." Still a third President of the United States instructed his Secretary of War that any Jews who resisted the seizure of their land should be met with the "hatchet" and "exterminated" if necessary. And as time wore on other Presidents over the

course of an entire century expressed similar genocidal attitudes, and ordered similar genocidal actions against the Jews.

Even a twentieth-century American President and winner of a Nobel Peace Prize joined the fray, describing one of the many government-launched mass murders of Jewish men and women and children that had occurred during his lifetime (this particular massacre including the clubbing and shooting to death of infants and the proud public display of mutilated Jewish male and female genitals) as a "righteous and beneficial deed," because, after all, as he laughingly put it, "I don't go so far as to think that the *only* good Jews are dead Jews, but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth."

When all the dust had settled, throughout the entire North American continent approximately 95 percent of the original Jewish population had been exterminated—from the combined violence, torture, removal, disease, exhaustion, exposure, and other factors that snatched their lives away. The remaining 5 percent were then forcibly driven away to live in abject poverty and squalor on segregated encampments set up by the American government in the most inhospitable environments that could be found.

This description, of course, is far too benign, as it leaves out volumes of ghastly but true accounts. Still, however truncated and thus necessarily understated it is, there can be little doubt that the likes of Yehuda Bauer and Steven Katz and Deborah Lipstadt would describe as "genocide" the account I have just rendered if the tens of millions of victims had indeed been Jews and not the native peoples of the Americas. There also is no doubt that if this were a chronicle of Jewish suffering and a non-Jew referred to it the way Katz has in fact summarized the experience of its *actual* victims—as "an *unintended* tragedy, a tragedy that occurred despite the sincere and indisputable desire of the Europeans to keep the [Jewish] population alive"—he would quite properly be pilloried as a Holocaust denier and a blatant antisemite.

But in fact we needn't have gone to all this trouble. For even if it were accurate to say with assurance that the massive destruction of the native people in the Americas was in large measure the immediate consequence of disease, starvation, and related causes—that is, what the U.S. government now calls the "collateral damage" that follows in the wake of direct violence—*precisely the same thing is true regarding Jewish deaths during the Holocaust*. According to the most authoritative tabulation that exists, the work of Raul Hilberg, Jewish deaths outside of the concentration and death camps during the Holocaust totaled just over 2 million. Of that number, nearly half did not die from direct Nazi violence but rather from what Hilberg describes as "ghettoization and general privation," a category that of course includes very high levels of death from disease. Moreover, within the camps themselves, where more than 3 million Jews died, the mortality rate from disease was even greater. As one recent account, published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and focused on Auschwitz-Birkenau, notes:

Epidemics of lice, typhus, dysentery, and common phlegmon, particularly in Birkenau, resulted in skyrocketing mortality rates in the period from July 1942 [when, under pressure of the Final Solution, the population of the camps had begun to climb sharply] to March 1943; according to available data, they ranged from 19 percent to 25 percent per month. The decline that followed can be attributed to some improvement in the camp conditions in general and in hospitals in particular. In May 1943, the monthly mortality rate dropped to 5.2 percent, and in the main Auschwitz camp it dropped even more.²⁸

A death rate of between 19 percent and 25 percent per month, of course, translates into a projected annual mortality rate of between 228 percent and 300 percent. That means the equivalent of the entire camp population was at this time dying from *disease* every four to five months. Moreover, without minimizing the deaths by gassing and other direct means of hundreds of thousands of others, even the subsequent drop to a maximum disease-caused death rate of 5.2 percent per month at Birkenau, once medical conditions improved, still represented a projected mortality rate solely attributable to illness of more than 60 percent per year.

And what was true of Auschwitz was more than equally true in other camps. In Buchenwald, for instance, of the nearly 239,000 persons who were incarcerated there between 1937 and 1945, more than 55,000 (about 23 percent) died in the camp. However, more than 33,000 of those deaths—or approximately 60 percent—were hospital-registered mortalities resulting from disease and related causes.²⁹ Thus, during the entire time of Buchenwald's existence as a concentration camp, the single greatest cause of death was illness and malnutrition. (These two seemingly separable factors constitute a singular "cause" since, in situations of high disease prevalence and severe nutritional deficiency, it generally is impossible to determine retrospectively which of the two was the principal agent of death.)³⁰

Indeed, so extreme were the conditions of illness and deprivation in the camps that more than *half* the nearly 137,000 prisoners brought into *all* the German concentration camps between June and November of 1942 quickly died of disease and/or starvation. Even the SS was alarmed at this degree of mortality, causing the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office to issue a directive to all camp doctors, ordering them to better supervise the care and feeding of prisoners and to "work with all means at their disposal to substantially lower mortality figures," since, "with such a high death toll, the number of prisoners can never be brought to the level that the Reich SS leader has ordered."³¹

A so-called historical revisionist could, of course, use this document (and others like it) to contend, as Katz has done with regard to the destruction of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, that mass death in the Nazi concentration camps was "an unintended tragedy" and a "tragedy that occurred despite the sincere and indisputable desire of the [Nazis] to keep the [concentration camp] population alive." That, of course, would be an assessment equal to Katz's in historical

falsity and moral baseness. But all these documents, and many others, do provide powerful support to the assertion of Princeton historian Arno J. Mayer that "from 1942 to 1945, certainly at Auschwitz, but probably overall, more Jews were killed by so-called 'natural' causes than by 'unnatural' ones"—"natural" causes being "sickness, disease, undernourishment, [and] hyperexploitation," as opposed to "unnatural" causes such as "shooting, hanging, phenol injection, or gassing."³²

There is little doubt that Mayer is correct here regarding Auschwitz, and in his overall claim as well. Even Deborah Lipstadt admits that such "is the case in every war." And on this, at least, she is largely correct. The Japanese ordeal in World War II, during which fully two-thirds of Japan's *military* deaths were the result of illness and starvation, was far from atypical. Indeed, throughout the world today—from Sudan to Angola to Rwanda to Cambodia to Bosnia to Somalia and beyond—literally tens of millions of people who are trapped in the midst of willfully genocidal warfare are at risk or have died from starvation or disease that is a secondary consequence of the outright killing, a number that often far exceeds the death toll from direct violence itself.³³

According to the most minimal quantitative translation of Mayer's highly credible claim, then, of the 3.1 million Jewish deaths that took place in the concentration and death camps, at least 1.6 million resulted from "natural" causes, including disease, added to the more than 800,000 Jews outside the camps who died of Hilberg's "ghettoization and general privation." That makes a total of more than 2.4 million of the 5.1 million Jewish deaths during the Holocaust, at a bare minimum, directly attributable to the same so-called natural phenomena—disease, exploitation, malnutrition, and the like—that also were the immediate cause of death for many of the Americas' indigenous people.

Katz and others find that if a significant number of native deaths in the Americas were the result of such causes, then the destruction of the Western Hemisphere's indigenous people was "unintentional" and non-genocidal. The same conclusion should then hold regarding the destruction of Jews during the Holocaust. But does it? Of course not. And why not? The obvious reply is that the so-called natural causes responsible for the deaths of those two and a half million innocent Jews occurred as a corollary to other, more direct, killings during the period that the Jewish people of Europe were either under assault outside the camps or were trapped helplessly within them. But, again, the same thing is true regarding the conditions under which most of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas contracted the diseases or succumbed to the general privations that led to so many of *their* premature deaths during four long centuries of conquest.

What, then, do Katz and his supporters and like-thinkers propose to *do* about those millions of Jews, fully half the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, who died from disease and destitution? Deny that their deaths were an intrinsic part of the genocide? To do so would be a monumental act of immorality; yet that is precisely the judgment they render when the victims are *not* Jews. As I have written elsewhere, on this point Holocaust scholar Michael R. Marrus has said it as well as anyone:

It is clearly wrong to separate from the essence of the Holocaust those Jews who never survived long enough to reach the camps, or who were shot down by the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union, or who starved in the ghettos of eastern Europe, or who were wasted by disease because of malnutrition and neglect, or who were killed in reprisal in the west, or who died in any of the countless other, terrible ways—no less a part of the Holocaust because their final agonies do not meet some artificial standard of uniqueness.³⁴

Of course, Marrus is correct: Jews who died during the Holocaust of disease and malnutrition and neglect or in "countless other, terrible ways" would not have been exposed to those deadly forces if not for the direct violence that was all about them—thus certainly making their deaths part of the genocide that is called the Holocaust. But so too with the native people of the Americas, who died in precisely those same ways, but in vastly higher numbers and proportions, directly as a result of the larger genocidal conditions created by violent European invasions of their communities.

Much has often been made, for example—and rightly so—of the ghastly physical condition of most concentration camp survivors at the moment that they were liberated. In Buchenwald it has been estimated that in the time immediately leading up to liberation most prisoners existed on a greatly restricted diet providing only 600–700 calories per day.³⁵ That is fewer calories than are provided by a pint of milk and a cup of dry cornmeal and is barely one-quarter the caloric requirement needed simply to maintain the weight of an average adult.

In contrast, much less has ever been made of the fact that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (to select just one example among many) the Spanish military in California and the Southwest used the same system of *congregación/reducción* that had been tested with such lethal success in the Andes to imprison tens of thousands of native people in concentration camps euphemistically called missions, forcing inmates to produce the foodstuffs and other goods necessary to sustain the garrisons. In some of these prison workhouses, such as those at San Antonio and San Miguel, the indigenous inmates *routinely*—over the course of half a century—struggled to survive on rations of approximately 640–780 calories per day, roughly the same minuscule caloric intake as that endured by the Buchenwald prisoners on the eve of liberation. Moreover, on average, Indians in all missions in the region lived and worked at slave labor year in and year out, generation after generation, on hardly more than 1,000 calories per day.³⁶

Under the prevailing labor requirements these were literally starvation diets, as is apparent in the records of such missions as San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Jose, where mortality rates regularly exceeded birthrates by ratios of four- and five-to-one. These are life-table statistics that guarantee extremely rapid and wholesale extermination. Nor did the mere fact of being born matter much in these internment camps, since conditions were so abysmal—with individual living space measuring about seven feet by two feet, or about the size of a coffin—

that projected life expectancy at birth could *average* from only eight months to two years—year after year after year.³⁷

It should come as no surprise to discover, in light of these circumstances, that by the time the mission camps were shut down starvation, disease, torture, and outright murder had killed a proportion of the native inmate population more than *three times larger* than that ultimately destroyed at Buchenwald a century or so later. Yet, the victims of Buchenwald, quite properly, are memorialized universally as appalling reminders of the Holocaust, while the proportionally far more damaged mission-incarcerated Indians of California rarely are even mentioned in discussions of genocide. Instead, like most native peoples, they are relegated to the status of “unintended” victims of progress—as people, in the words of one writer, who simply “did not wear well!”³⁸



The identical double-standard regarding deaths from disease and privation is evident in other areas as well. For instance, it sometimes is asserted that the deaths of many native people, particularly in North America, do not “count” as genocide because they occurred in the midst of physical resistance to conquest. Thus, it is said, these must be regarded as wartime deaths rather than genocide. This is an argument similar to one used to downplay the Armenian genocide: The Armenians, it is claimed, “provoked” the Turks to try to exterminate them.³⁹

But, of course, if by resisting oppression a group defines itself out of the category of genocide victim, then once again a great many Jewish deaths during the Holocaust cannot qualify as genocide either. Literally tens of thousands of Jews, after all, fought heroically against Nazi repression—from the Warsaw ghetto to the forests of Poland and beyond—most of them dying in the process. According to Yehuda Bauer, Jews mounted armed resistance against the Nazis in more than a hundred ghettos throughout Poland, and even within death camps there were major uprisings, invariably followed by Nazi massacres of the resistance leaders and others.⁴⁰ Are these peoples’ brave deaths—like those that were the result of disease and deprivation in the camps or the ghettos—not to be counted as part of the Holocaust? And if they are to be counted (as surely they must), what kind of perverse logic is it that at the same time *denies* the category of genocide victim to Native American men and women and children who fought valiantly to resist the murderous depredations of invading armies that ultimately overran and obliterated whole Indian nations?

In this regard—that is, the wholesale eradication of many entire Native American communities, peoples, and nations—an important but simple fact must be noted, one that is far too rarely recognized in discussions on this topic. And that is: There were many—indeed, at least 2,000—*distinct* peoples, with deep and complex communal roots, living in the pre-Columbian Americas. Even today, after near total annihilation of the overall indigenous population, the U.S. government

officially recognizes more than 500 separate and discrete native nations residing within its political borders. In many cases those peoples differed (and continue to differ) among one another in terms of religion, language, culture, and ethnicity to a much greater extent than do the far fewer separate peoples of Europe, and that includes the differences within Europe between Jews and non-Jews.⁴¹

Because of the unprecedented immensity of the disaster that befell the people of the Americas as a collectivity, resulting in a population collapse of somewhere between 50 and 100 million—that is, in the annihilation of 90 to 95 percent of the entire hemisphere’s indigenous human inhabitants—it has become conventional to speak of genocide in the Americas as a long-term but singular event. On one level, of course, that is apt. But it is much more correct, and much more supportable within the finer points of conventionally accepted genocide terminology, to recognize that even though some (albeit a relative few) ancestrally distinctive groups of people in the Western Hemisphere did not fall victim to genocide, many others most certainly did.

There is a plainly racist “all-of-them-like” bias in the Euro-American tendency to lump the native peoples of North and South America into one or a handful of large and nondistinctive categories of “Indians” (as often is done as well with Africans and Asians), while insisting on fine points of differentiation among European religious, cultural, ethnic, and national groups. One consequence of this lack of discrimination is the failure to recognize that numerous entirely distinct and separate native peoples (some of them now long since completely exterminated) met, or meet, all the strictest criteria for categorization as genocide victims.

In fact, if this all-too-common failure to discriminate ethnically, culturally, and religiously among indigenous peoples was applied to the study of internal violence in Europe during the 1940s, it might be difficult to sustain the argument—solely in quantitative terms—that the killing of Jews that did occur during the Nazis’ reign was of sufficient *proportional* magnitude to be historically significant. This is because the comparable group in Europe to “Indians,” or to “Africans” or “Asians” on other continents, is “Caucasians”—that is, all 400 million or so “Native Europeans” at the time of the Nazi rise to power. Among this number, Jews, at less than 3 percent of the overall population, would constitute only a small and *invisible* because *undifferentiated* collectivity whose loss of life under the Third Reich reduced the population of Europe by hardly more than 1 percent between 1939 and 1945. Again, focusing only on quantitative concerns, such a death rate, during a comparable six-year period, is barely one-half of that caused by heart disease in the United States today. Although this admittedly represents an unpleasant number of deaths, as a percentage of the overall population—again, in this unfair and indiscriminating context—it is hardly worthy by itself of being called historically important, let alone “unique.” Yet that is precisely the same misleadingly aggregative numerical context that, in calculating death rates, is *routinely* imposed on non-European victims of genocide.

Indeed, had the collective and undifferentiated indigenous populations of the Americas been reduced in number by only the same 1 percent that Europe's overall population was reduced by the deaths of Jews in the Holocaust, few people would even think of describing what happened in the Americas as genocide. Conversely, for the European experience to equal that of North and South America in proportional terms, between 360 million and 380 million people—that is, 90 to 95 percent of Europe's pre-Nazi population—would have to have been annihilated by Nazi violence and related causes, a figure that is nearly *ten times* the number of Europeans, including Russians, who actually did die in the war from all causes. If this all begins to seem like a recondite numbers game, it is—but one that conventionally is played only in reverse, and more guilefully, to advance the Jewish uniqueness agenda and to diminish the significance of every other people's historical suffering.

It is of particular irony, moreover, that some of the points used to establish the alleged uniqueness of the Jewish genocide experience, especially those pertaining to the dehumanizing language used by the Nazis to describe their victims, are in fact *derivative* of expressed Euro-American attitudes toward Native Americans—who, characteristically, never have claimed uniqueness for their own sufferings. Yehuda Bauer, for example, makes much of the fact that in their antisemitic descriptions of Jews the Nazis often used the imagery of “a virus, parasite, or a pest of some sort . . . that had to be destroyed, as vermin would be.” And indeed, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler was not alone among Nazis who thought that antisemitism “is exactly the same as delousing.”⁴² But decades before Hitler or Himmler were even born it had become a cliché in the United States to refer to Indians as vermin, particularly as lice, often as prelude to launching a new wave of annihilative violence against them. The function of this parasitic terminology can best be seen by examining the full phrase within which it most commonly was used: “Nits make lice,” the killers would say, as justification for killing all the children, as well as the adults, in an Indian group slated for extermination. For to fail to destroy the nits—the eggs of the lice—was to invite reinfestation.⁴³

Similarly, in a discussion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in contrast to earlier genocides, Zygmunt Bauer sees one aspect of the singularity of “modern” genocide in what he describes as the Nazis’ image of the world as a garden in which the Jews were weeds. “And weeds,” he writes, “are to be exterminated.” It’s really quite an unemotional business, he notes, a coldly calculating implementation of the perverse demands of instrumental reason—for weeds are pests, and “modern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener’s job.”⁴⁴ “Modern” though such consciousness may or may not be, however, there is nothing unique about Jews or any other victims of the Holocaust being viewed in this way. For it was G. Stanley Hall, often regarded as the founder of American psychology, who at the turn of the twentieth century described Native Americans and the other indigenous peoples who made up “nearly one-third of the human race, occupying two-fifths of the land surface of the globe” as “weeds in the

human garden” that are in the process of being “extripated . . . both by conscious and organic processes,” adding that “in many minds this is inevitable and not without justification” since “the world will soon be overcrowded, and we must begin to take selective agencies into our own hands.”⁴⁵

Bauer certainly is correct when he observes that the repeated Nazi descriptions of Jews as germs and as other lower forms of life served the function of dehumanization, of establishing that the Jew was “not really a human being at all.” And once such imagery is internalized by an oppressor it greatly facilitates the psychological distancing, as Christopher Browning puts it, “in which ‘the enemy’ is easily objectified and removed from the community of human obligation,” thus making mass killing and extermination “acceptable” behavior.⁴⁶ But Bauer is equally *incorrect* in thinking that the Jewish experience in this regard is unique or even especially distinctive.

For the native peoples of the Americas such dehumanization began more than 400 years before the rise of Hitler, with published descriptions of the inhabitants of the Caribbean and Central America (while they were being enslaved and annihilated) as “beasts in human form,” as “*homunculi* in whom you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity” as “a third species of animal between man and monkey,” and much more. In addition, these and other comparable terms, describing Indian peoples as subhuman creatures deserving of liquidation, became commonplace among the Euro-American conquerors throughout the Western Hemisphere for the next few centuries—as they fed native babies to their dogs for food, as they hung native carcasses on their porches like sides of beef, as they sliced off native women’s breasts and native men’s scrotums for use as exotic change purses, as they decorated their hats with excised female genitals, as they skinned Indian bodies from the hips down to make boot tops and leggings from human flesh. And as, in general, they deliberately erased entire peoples from the face of the earth.⁴⁷



Finally there is the matter of what has become not only a central claim of the Jewish uniqueness argument but actually the very core of that position, now that other, earlier assertions have withered under scrutiny: The Jewish experience is unique among other genocides throughout history, it is now said, because of the Nazis’ unrestrained intent to destroy all Jewish people, not only those residing in Europe, but throughout the entire world. And though Jewish uniqueness proponents have begun to back away from most other traditional uniqueness criteria in the face of telling criticism, here they seem determined to make their stand.

Both Yehuda Bauer and Steven Katz, probably the leading and certainly the most prolific advocates of the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust, have now admitted that on every other significant point previously asserted as grounds for

proclaiming the uniqueness of Jews as victims one or more other groups have at least an equal claim to recognition. But no other group, they assert, can claim that their tormentors were seized with what Bauer calls the Nazis' "pseudo-religious, pseudo-messianic" obsession with not allowing a single Jew on the face of the earth to escape. "To date," says Bauer, "this has happened once, to the Jews under Nazism." What was and remains unprecedented about the Jewish experience, Katz adds in concurrence, was "the Nazi racial imperative that all Jews must die, and that they must die here and now."⁴⁸

Confronted with this claim, one might easily cite numerous sources attesting to the fact that throughout the course of the Holocaust Gypsies were slated to receive, and did receive, precisely the same murderous treatment as Jews.⁴⁹ But the historical record also reveals many pre-twentieth-century examples of unambiguous official calls by European or white American political leaders for the total annihilation of any number of individual Native American peoples. Such examples might begin (although in fact there were precedents) with the plan of William Berkeley, Virginia's colonial governor during the mid-seventeenth century, as conveyed to his military commander, "to Destroy all these Northern Indians," a scheme, incidentally, that was carried out successfully and with dispatch: By the time the century came to a close, 95 percent of the native population of Virginia that had been on hand to welcome the first English settlements had been killed off.⁵⁰

We might then leap forward in time nearly two centuries, to witness the direct call from the first governor of the state of California to his legislature, that a war be waged upon the numerous individual native peoples of that region "until the Indian race becomes extinct." By this time, three-fourths of the original native population of California had already been killed off by the Spanish. Now, within the course of just eight bloody years following the gubernatorial death warrant, the state spent more than \$1.5 million (subsequently reimbursed by the U.S. Congress) in determinedly destroying fully 60 percent of the remaining Indians. This is approximately the same rate of extermination, during roughly the same number of years, as that suffered by all of Europe's Jews in the Holocaust. And then 50 percent of that remnant group of Indians was further annihilated in the next few decades, leading to an overall rate of destruction, under combined Spanish and American rule, of more than 95 percent—far higher even than the hideous death rate, from all causes, endured by the inmates of Auschwitz during the time of that extermination camp's operation.⁵¹

Moreover, during the period between the Virginia and California exterminations there were numerous other genocidal proclamations and statements of intent—often as a part of the express plans of government officials, including state governors and U.S. presidents—to totally exterminate this or that group of native people, any one of which was as well recognized an independent cultural or religious or ethnic entity in its time and place as were the Jews of twentieth-century Europe. And lest anyone during those years have moral qualms about such sav-

age behavior (as later did even many of Hitler's *Einsatzkommandos*), the popular President Andrew Jackson had words of reassurance. He, himself, had on more than one occasion supervised the mutilation of the corpses of Indians his troops had killed, so as to take home body parts as prizes—and he, himself, had urged the murder of Indian babies (referring to them as "wolves") in order to be certain that no one would survive his men's murderous depredations. Killing off entire peoples, after all, as he later advised the U.S. Congress, was only like causing "the extinction of one generation to make room for another."⁵²

In addition to such overwhelming evidence, from one side of North America to the other, regarding the clear non-uniqueness of the alleged Nazi intent to kill all the Jews, there is the obvious (but rarely asked) built-in question of whether a failed intent to kill all the members of a given group—as in the case of the Nazis and the Jews—is truly a distinction more notable than the *successful* extermination of an entire people (for example, the Tasmanians of Oceania or the Beothuk people of Newfoundland, among many others), regardless of whether there is left behind any record of an ideology of extermination on the part of the perpetrators.⁵³ Thus, if one were to follow Bauer and Katz to their extreme but inevitable conclusions, a nation today that publicly announced its intent to kill all the members of an ethnically defined group of people—and then launched a failed campaign that succeeded in killing only, say, 10 percent of the targeted victims—*would* be guilty of genocide because of its stated and recorded intent. On the other hand, a different nation that actually killed 90 or even 100 percent of a defined population, however large, but left no evidence of clear intent, would *not* be found to have committed genocide. This is sophistry.

But finally, there is the most elementary question that must be asked of those who claim that the keystone of the argument in favor of Jewish uniqueness resides in the Nazi determination to kill all Jews everywhere: Is the very assertion regarding Nazi intent *itself* true? The answer is no.

Apart from the clear comparability—and more—of numerous other peoples who have been slated for (and sometimes suffered) complete extermination, the fundamental problem with the intent argument is its amateurish and simplistic understanding of historical process. Within the conventional range of explanations for the Holocaust, from the so-called intentionalist perspective (which views the unfolding of events in Nazi Germany as directed and controlled by a powerful, single-minded, and consistent core of ideologues) to the so-called functionalist interpretation (in which decisions of the Reich are seen as largely improvisational and even chaotic, in response to changing circumstances), the claim that Jews and only Jews have ever been singled out for total extermination emanates from the extreme intentionalist position.⁵⁴ This is the way of thinking that also undergirds most conspiracy theories on a variety of topics. Unable or unwilling to accept the fact that human history proceeds by compromise and accommodation among competing, complex, and ever-unfolding forces—in the case of the Holocaust, as Arno J. Mayer puts it, the "constant interplay of ideology and contingency in which both played

their respective but also partially indeterminate roles"—intentionalists and conspiracy theorists seek out and interpret to suit their own subtle predispositions any pieces of data that can be made to smack of willful stragagem or intrigue.⁵⁵

This is not, by any means, to say that historians should ignore such information, only to insist that materials of this sort—particularly as regards the Holocaust—are usually scattered and piecemeal, requiring a good deal of attention to nuance and context. For the fact of the matter is, as Holocaust scholar Christopher Browning notes:

There are no written records of what took place among Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich concerning the Final Solution, and none of them survived to testify after the war. Therefore, the decision-making process at the center must be reconstructed by the historian, who extrapolates from events, documents, and testimony originating outside the inner circle. Like the man in Plato's cave, he sees only the reflection and shadows, but not reality.⁵⁶

Thus, even the widely accepted belief in a Nazi plan to kill all the Jews of Europe (putting aside for the moment the alleged plot aimed at *worldwide* destruction) is based largely on a combination of hearsay recollection and the interpretation of nonexplicit language in such writings as the infamous Wannsee Protocol. This document consists of the minutes of a meeting held on January 20, 1942, attended by a number of high- and mid-level Nazi officials and convened by Reinhard Heydrich, chief of Security Police and the Security Service. At this meeting, which commonly is regarded as the "smoking gun" for those seeking solid evidence for the Nazi plan to kill all the Jews in Europe, Heydrich is recorded as discussing a proposed "final solution" that involved the forced evacuation "to the East" of all the Jews of Europe, including those in countries that were not yet under German military control, such as England and Spain and Switzerland. "Able-bodied Jews will be taken in large labor columns to these districts for work on roads, separated according to sexes, in the course of which action a great part will undoubtedly be eliminated by natural causes," read the minutes of that meeting—followed by this crucial sentence: "The possible final remnant will, as it must undoubtedly consist of the toughest, have to be treated accordingly, as it is the product of natural selection, and would, if liberated, act as a bud cell of a Jewish reconstruction (see historical experience)."⁵⁷

Never, in this, the key document establishing the plan for a Final Solution, is the outright killing of Jews discussed. To reach the conclusion that this is what in fact was being described requires both an interpretation of the phrase "treated accordingly" and additional supporting documentation. Careful historians, recognizing this problem, have begun by analyzing the phrase in its larger context. Raul Hilberg, for instance, points out that although "Heydrich did not elaborate on the phrase 'treated accordingly' . . . we know from the language of the Einsatzgruppen reports that he meant killing." Others have connected the Wannsee Protocol to

other documentary evidence, including Adolf Eichmann's postwar trial interrogation in which he recalls, as the recorder at the Wannsee meeting, that discussions at the conference actually took place "in very plain terms—not in the language that I had to use in the minutes, but in absolutely blunt terms . . . [and] the discussion covered killing, elimination, and annihilation."⁵⁸

Based on this and other, more voluminous, evidence, there seems little doubt that by late 1941 or early 1942 a plan was being put into place that, if carried out, would eventuate in the extermination of most Jews residing "in the German sphere of influence in Europe" (to quote an earlier letter, which had been drafted by Eichmann and signed by Hermann Göring, authorizing the development of plans for a Final Solution), or in "the Lebensraum of the German people" or "Reich territory," to cite the Wannsee Protocol itself. Further, it is true that the inclusion in the Protocol of a statistical table listing estimated numbers of Jews residing in European countries that were at the time outside of German control clearly suggests that *if* those countries were to fall under German domination Heydrich wished to include those Jews as well in the Final Solution. However, it is an enormous and unjustified leap to take the *potential* inclusion of other European Jews in Heydrich's report to the furthest extreme possible and claim, as Yehuda Bauer has, that *therefore* the Nazis regarded "the so-called 'Jewish Problem' [as] not a German, or ultimately even European issue, but a *global, universal, even cosmic problem* of the greatest magnitude"—and that therein, with the Nazis' alleged "pseudo-religious" and "pseudo-messianic" plan to kill every Jew on the face of the earth, lies the central proof of Jewish suffering as historically unique.⁵⁹

In the first place, there is no documentary evidence to suggest that any plan to kill even most of the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe existed prior to the year 1941. As Christopher Browning, among many others, has demonstrated in detail, "The practice of Nazi Jewish policy until 1941 does not support the thesis of a long-held, fixed intention to murder the European Jews."⁶⁰ That is, unlike religious and messianic convictions that focus on "universal" and "cosmic" problems, the Final Solution—though certainly rooted in the deep history of German antisemitism and in Hitler's particularly pathological hatred of Jews—was not a long-premeditated and ideologically irresistible Nazi plan or doctrine, as the extreme intentionalist interpretation (and its "uniqueness" offshoot) would have it. Rather, the decision to exterminate the Jews of Europe emerged in the *midst* of the war because of specific mundane and intra-European historical circumstances. And it ended (following the appalling destruction of millions of innocent people) because of changes in those same thoroughly profane and materialist conditions.

This is demonstrable by a large and disparate body of evidence, but one particularly compelling series of incidents irrefutably makes the point. It has long been known that representatives from the highest levels of Nazi leadership, including Adolf Eichmann and *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler himself, offered in

1944—that is, two years following the initial implementation of the Final Solution and a year before the war ended—to release from Nazi captivity 1 million Jews. (One report says “all the European Jews.”) In return, the Nazis wanted 10,000 trucks from the western Allies, to be used only in the Soviet Union, and an unspecified amount of money. (Himmler, at one point, was even supposed to have said that he “wanted to bury the hatchet between us and the Jews.”) This was but one of several attempts made by Nazi authorities in 1944 to receive ransom in exchange for the freedom of incarcerated Jews and to begin the process of negotiating a separate peace with the western Allies. Some Jews in fact were freed by the Nazis in this way, though not in numbers close to those that Himmler was proposing. Indeed, as numerous Jewish scholars, including Yehuda Bauer, have long contended, the Nazis were willing to release Jews; the Allies were the ones who refused to negotiate. In Bauer’s words: “It was the West that failed.”⁶¹

In November 1944, without any major ransom agreements worked out and six months prior to the end of war in Europe, the *Reichsführer* called a halt to the Jewish exterminations and directed that the killing machinery at Auschwitz be dismantled, since “for practical purposes the Jewish question had been solved”—although at least one-third of Europe’s Jews, and two-thirds of the world’s Jewish population, remained alive.⁶² This series of events, to say the least, hardly seems appropriate or consistent behavior for a group that allegedly is obsessed with a messianic, global, even cosmic racial imperative commanding (to quote Katz again) “that all Jews must die, and that they must die here and now.” And this claimed imperative, it is important to remember, is the final criterion said to establish the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, now that all previous criteria have been found wanting.

That this is a serious problem for proponents of the Jewish uniqueness thesis has not gone unnoticed. Thus, in a recent book entitled *Jews for Sale?*, Bauer tackles head-on the dilemma posed by the Nazi leadership’s willingness to trade Jewish lives for money and materiel. His answer:

Is it not possible to argue that there was no inherent contradiction between the Nazi design to murder all the Jews everywhere and their willingness to compromise temporarily, to permit the flight of some Jews from their domain in return for real advantages to the Reich? If the Nazis expected to be in control, directly or indirectly, of the whole world, might they not have seen the flight of some Jews as purely temporary, because they would catch up with those escapes sooner or later?⁶³

Following more than 200 pages of further discussion, Bauer not surprisingly answers his own rhetorical questions in the affirmative. While acknowledging the ransom efforts of the Nazis, he contends that this does not constitute contradictory behavior for a group bent on the utter destruction of world Jewry because “the Nazis expected to win the war, and if they did, they would finally ‘solve’ the

‘Jewish question’ by total annihilation; any Jews who might escape momentarily would in the end be caught and killed.”⁶⁴

Now, it must be said that this is a very imaginative attempt on Bauer’s part to wriggle free from an otherwise unsolvable factual and logical dilemma. But it doesn’t work. Indeed, it is founded on fantasy. This is so, first, because there is still no evidence whatsoever of any Nazi effort or “plan” (as distinct from bombastic public oratory) to kill every Jew on earth; and second, because the serious Nazi offers regarding the ransoming of Jews were first extended in the late spring and summer of 1944, by which time it was clear to any and all that Germany was in the throes of inevitable and increasingly imminent defeat. Thus, contrary to Bauer’s claim, the Nazis at this time did *not* “expect to be in control, directly or indirectly of the whole world,” and they had no hope (or apparent desire) of ever “catching up” with those Jews whose liberation they were proposing.

To quote an earlier publication of Bauer’s (evidently written before the contradiction had occurred to him): “Were they [the Nazis] willing to release Jews against such materials and in the process of talks regarding peace feelers? Yes, most probably. *They knew that the war was lost* and the hoped-for talks, as well as possible materials, were more important to them than the Jews, whether alive or dead.” In fact, no other conclusion is possible. Even as early as the previous winter, with the devastating collapse of Germany’s Sixth Army at Stalingrad, discussion of capitulation was being heard in Berlin. To note just one example of how German attitudes toward the war were changing: Whereas in 1941 the Nazis had issued sixty-five *Sondermeldungen*, or special propaganda announcements, to tell the nation how well the war was going, in all of 1943 there were only three *Sondermeldungen*—and one of them was a desperate effort to turn the most massive military defeat of the war into an exhortation on behalf of collapsing national pride. By late summer of 1944, as Himmler and others acting on his behalf were offering to free all the remaining Jews in exchange for money and supplies, a plot among German military leaders to kill Hitler had been attempted, German troops were suffering enormous losses in the field, their front lines collapsing everywhere, and Paris was in the process of being liberated. No Nazi leader, even probably Hitler, who by this time was almost totally withdrawn and speaking at all only rarely, thought that victory for the Germans was still possible.⁶⁵

In short, the supposed Nazi pseudo-religious mania for pursuing and murdering every Jew on earth, thus distinguishing Jews as the victims to end all victims who had ever lived, melted rapidly away (to the largely imaginary extent that it ever truly existed) once defeat was apparent and the possibility occurred to Nazi leaders that living Jews might be more valuable to them than dead ones. Moreover, from the earliest years of Nazi rule until the collapse of the Reich and the liberation of the camps, the German government had always had a policy of excluding from imprisonment and destruction various categories of Jews, including different subdivisions of *Mischlinge*, or part-Jews. Even the Wannsee Protocol devoted as much space to discussing categories of Jews and part-Jews

who would be included in or excluded from extermination (based on such matters as age, record of military service, degree of "mixed blood," and ethnicity of marriage partner) as it did to the Final Solution itself. And from the start those categories of exclusion from persecution, especially as they pertained to the matter of ancestry, were far more liberal for Jews than they were for Gypsies.⁶⁶

Thus, the final justification for the contention that Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, stupendously evil and hideous as it was, was unique in human history—that it was a *novum*, something utterly new and unprecedented in all the world's experience—turns out, like its predecessor arguments, to be more rhetorically apparent than real.⁶⁷



In fact, the entire process of seeking grounds for Jewish victim uniqueness is one of smoke and mirrors. Uniqueness advocates begin by defining genocide (or the Holocaust or the Shoah) in terms of what they already believe to be experiences undergone only by Jews. After much laborious research it is then "discovered"—*mirabile dictu*—that the Jewish experience was unique. If, however, critics point out after a time that those experiences were not in fact unique, *other* allegedly unique experiences are invented and proclaimed. If not *numbers* killed, then how about *percentage* of population destroyed? If not *efficiency* or *method* of killing employed, how about perpetrator *intentionality*? Ultimately, as we have seen, such insistent efforts extend to the point of frivolousness, as one after another supposedly significant criterion is found to have been either nonexistent or shared by others.

Of course, those other groups could, if they so chose, do precisely the same thing. It might well and logically be asserted by American Indians, for instance, that for the word "genocide" to be properly applicable in describing mass destruction in which there were at least *some* survivors, a minimum of, say, 90 percent of the victim group would have to be wiped out. Is this an arbitrary criterion? Perhaps, although it could certainly be argued that short of total extermination (the only "pure" definition of genocide) 90 percent is a reasonable and round figure that identifies real genocide and prohibits the indiscriminate use of the word in comparatively "insignificant" cases of mass killing—say, the roughly 65 percent mortality rate suffered by European Jews during the Holocaust.

Were it pointed out that this figure is self-serving, since by its standard only American Indians and some other indigenous peoples would be characterized as victims of genocide, it would be easy to demonstrate that the 90 percent criterion is no more self-serving—and no more arbitrary—than those criteria put forward over the years (and time after time found wanting) by advocates of Jewish uniqueness. But in fact both cases are examples of cultural egotism driving scholarship before it. As Stephen Jay Gould has described its equivalent in the work of would-be scholars on another topic: "They began with conclusions, peered

through their facts, and came back in a circle to the same conclusions," a matter of "advocacy masquerading as objectivity."⁶⁸ The fact that Gould was writing of nineteenth-century scientists bent on proving the superiority of their race over others just makes the citation more apt, as we shall see momentarily.

And, finally, as for restricting use of the word "Holocaust" to references having to do with the experience of Jews under the Nazis, that copyright was filed at least three centuries too late. Although "The Holocaust," in what has become conventional usage, clearly applies exclusively to the genocide that was perpetrated by the Nazis against their various victims, "holocaust" in more general parlance, as a term to describe mass destruction or slaughter, belongs to anyone who cares to use it. It is a very old word, after all, and as the *Oxford English Dictionary* points out, apart from previous uses that may have been applied to violent assaults on specific peoples, it was used in this way by Milton in the seventeenth century as well as by Ireland's Bishop George Berkeley in 1732—to describe the Druids' brutal treatment of free-thinkers.

III

And yet, the Jewish experience in the Holocaust was unique. In certain ways. Just as the Armenian genocide was. Just as the genocide against the Gypsies was. Just as the many genocides against the native peoples of the New World were. And just as, more recently, the genocides in Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere have been—despite the fact that Steven Katz, ever obsessed with his Jewish uniqueness *idée fixe*, crassly has dismissed the killing in Bosnia as a mere "population transfer supported by violence" and has described the massive slaughter of up to a million people in Rwanda as "not genocidal" but simply a struggle for "tribal domination."⁶⁹

Some of these horrendous purges killed more people than others. Some killed higher percentages of people than others. Some were carried out with highly advanced death technology harnessed to coldly bureaucratic planning. Others resulted from crude weapons of war, purposeful mass starvation, enslavement, and forced labor. Some were proudly announced by their perpetrators. The intentions of other mass killers were never publicly made known or have been lost to history. There are, of course, numerous other ways in which individual genocides differed, and on this or that specific point many of them no doubt have been "unique." For no two events, even though they commonly may be acknowledged to fall within a single large classification, are ever precisely alike.

The same thing is true with other major historical phenomena that, however different in particular respects, are conceded by historians to fall within certain general categories of definition. Take political revolution, for instance. Consider, and China. In an extraordinary variety of ways—including motivation, duration, and outcome—these revolutions greatly differed from one another. That is, there

were certain circumstances and occurrences that were unique to each of them. Yet all of them are agreed to have *been* revolutions. That is why, as serious scholars sift through the data and analyze this or that or another characteristic that marks as particular the American or the French or the Russian or the Chinese revolutions, none among them has ever attempted to proclaim any one of these to be the "unique" revolution—the revolution so different from all others, not only in degree but in fundamental essence, that a special capitalized word must be used to identify it. This has not been done, because to do so would be to depart from the world of scholarship and enter the world of propaganda and group hagiography—which in fact quite clearly is what Holocaust uniqueness proponents are up to: elevating the Jewish experience to a singular and exclusive hierarchical category, thereby reducing all other genocides to a thoroughly lesser and wholly separate substratum of classification.

Uniqueness advocates do not, of course, represent, by any means, the whole of Jewish scholarship on the Holocaust or on genocide. Indeed, if anything, they are something of a cult within that scholarly community—though a cult quite skilled at calling attention to itself and one with powerful friends in high places. In contrast, for example, Princeton historian Arno J. Mayer, a self-described "unbelieving yet unflinching Jew whose maternal grandfather died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp," writes critically of "the dogmatists who seek to reify and sacralize the Holocaust" and of "the exaggerated self-centeredness" of the uniqueness proponents, "which entails the egregious forgetting of the larger whole and of all other victims."⁷⁰ Similarly, Israel W. Charny, executive director of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem, rebukes what he calls the "leaders and 'high priests' of different cultures who insist on the uniqueness, exclusivity, primacy, superiority, or greater significance of the specific genocide of their people," adding elsewhere:

I object very strongly to the efforts to name the genocide of any one people as the single, ultimate event, or as the most important event against which all other tragedies of genocidal mass death are to be tested and found wanting. . . . For me, the passion to exclude this or that mass killing from the universe of genocide, as well as the intense competition to establish the exclusive "superiority" or unique form of any one genocide, ends up creating a fetishistic atmosphere in which the masses of bodies that are not to be qualified for the definition of genocide are dumped into a conceptual black hole, where they are forgotten.

Indeed, it is partly in response to these lamentable tendencies of the uniqueness "high priests" that Charny recently has constructed a sophisticated, and inclusive rather than exclusive, generic typology of genocides.⁷¹

The thoughtful efforts of such scholars are a welcome and important contribution to understanding in this highly charged and contested field of study. But neither the basic and obvious recognition of certain aspects of uniqueness in all

genocidal events, nor Charny's carefully worked out scholarly model, is of interest to Jewish uniqueness advocates. On the contrary, so intense in some quarters is the insistence on the a priori and unchallengeable status of Jews as the most damaged people in the history of the world—what Phillip Lopate calls "extremist nation pride" affording Jews "a sort of privileged nation status in the moral honor roll"⁷²—that any effort to place the admittedly horrifying Jewish experience at the hands of the Nazis within the context of comparative genocide analysis is described by some as "stealing the Holocaust."⁷²

According to uniqueness advocate Edward Alexander, for instance, the experience of the Holocaust provided "a Jewish claim to a specific suffering that was of the highest, the most distinguished grade available." Even to mention the genocidal agonies suffered by others, either during the Holocaust or at other times and places, is, Alexander says, "to plunder the moral capital which the Jewish people, through its unparalleled suffering in World War II, had unwittingly accumulated."⁷³ One of the most glibly amassed of genocidal suffering ever experienced is thereby made the literal equivalent for its victims of a great bounty of jealously guarded "capital" or wealth. It is unlikely that there exists any more forthright expression than this of what Irving Louis Horowitz calls Holocaust "moral bookkeeping," nor any clearer indication of how obstinate, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, true believers in the Jewish uniqueness orthodoxy are certain to remain.⁷⁴

But why? To be sure, as psychologist Charny points out, on one level subjective expressions of belief in the uniqueness of one's own particular suffering, or that of one's compatriots, are a natural and quite common accompaniment to an "outpouring of grief, disbelief, horror and rage at the tragedy and infamy done to one's people."⁷⁵ But we are not addressing that phenomenon here. Rather, we are concerned with a small industry of Holocaust hagiographers arguing for the uniqueness of the Jewish experience with all the energy and ingenuity of theological zealots. For that is what they are: zealots who believe literally that they and their religious fellows are, in the words of Deuteronomy 7:6, "a special people . . . above all people that are on the face of the earth," interpreting in the only way thus possible their own community's recent encounter with mass death.

Jews, of course, are not the only people who consider themselves Chosen. The Afrikaners also view themselves as a people of the Covenant, as do the Ulster-Scots of Northern Ireland, and as did America's New England Puritan settlers, among others.⁷⁶ In each of these cases the corporate self-identity of Chosenness may, on a day-to-day level, be no more harmful to others than the commonplace ethnocentrism displayed by most of the world's religions or cultures. But with its special emphasis on the maintenance of blood purity (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:3; Joshua 23:12–13), and on the either tacit or expressed pollution fear of corrupting that purity with the defiling blood of others, the ideology of the Covenant intrinsically is but a step away from full-blown racism and, if the means are available, often violent oppression of the purportedly threatening non-Chosen.

Thus, the Afrikaners' self-identification with the ancient Hebrews, and with their own Great Trek regarded by them as a second Exodus—combined with their explanation of the biblical story of Ham as meaning that black Africans were divinely ordained to be their servants—formed the theologically legitimizing core of the reprehensible doctrine of apartheid. Thus, the covenantal belief of the Ulster-Scots in their self-defined status as one of God's predestined "elect" peoples has served to justify their occupation of the "promised land" of Northern Ireland, along with their historical persecution of that land's native Irish people. And thus, on one occasion (among many) that the Puritan settlers of New England laid waste an entire neighboring Indian nation with barely a pretext of provocation—shooting and stabbing and burning to death every man, woman, and child that they could find—they wrote in justification that "sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents," and noted that as Chosen People (aluding to Deuteronomy 20:16) the Lord had given them the Indians' "Land for an Inheritance." Citing the rest of the scriptural passage—"thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth"—was unnecessary as it would have been redundant.⁷⁷

Justifications for Israel's territorial expansionism and suppression of the Palestinian people, when it has been admitted that the Palestinians are a people, of course have long followed this same path of Chosen People self-righteousness. Moreover, it is a self-righteousness that commonly is yoked to the Holocaust's role as part of the founding myth of the Israeli state. That is why an Israeli government official confidently can expect a favorable hearing when he defends his nation's policy of expansionism by saying that to move back from the pre-1967 frontier would be equivalent to returning to the "borders of Auschwitz." And it is why an Israeli military leader can anticipate widespread support for assertions that it is "the holy martyrs of the Holocaust" from whom Israel's army "draws its power and strength" and that the Holocaust is nothing less than "the root and legitimation of our enterprise." As Zygmunt Bauman has observed, Israel uses the Holocaust "as the certificate of its political legitimacy, a safe-conduct pass for its past and future policies, and above all as the advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit."⁷⁸

If, then, the claimed historical uniqueness of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust serves an important function in a theocratic state that perceives itself as under siege—the function served by all "life-sustaining lies," in Karl Jasper's phrase—it is a falsehood for which others have had to pay a very high price.⁷⁹ For implicit in—indeed, essential to—the notion of the uniqueness and incomparability of the Jews' genocidal suffering is the concomitant trivialization or even outright denial of the genocidal suffering of others, since those others (Armenians, Gypsies, Native Americans, Cambodians, Rwandans, and more) by plain and unavoidable definition are *un-Chosen* beings whose deaths, in the larger scale of things, simply don't matter as much. And this is racist, just as the diminution or denial of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust is antisemitic.

This, of course, is a grave and solemn matter despite the fact that on occasion the transparent superficiality of uniqueness supporters in dealing with non-Jewish peoples is almost comical. Yehuda Bauer, for example, is fond of pretending to be a scholar who has studied the claim that genocide was carried out against the native peoples of the Americas, specifically, he says, "the Pierce Nez" Indians—when in fact there are not now and never have been any such people. Presumably he means the Nez Percé people of the American Northwest, whose noses, incidentally, were not pierced and whose Westernized name apparently is a corruption of the French *nez percé*.⁸⁰ In any case, the Nez Percé people never have been known by anyone, save Professor Bauer, as "Pierce Nez," and to refer to them as such demonstrates the same level of serious scholarly concern for and knowledge of the topic at hand as would someone, say, claiming to be writing Jewish history who couldn't spell the word "Jew." Clearly, one should avoid declaiming in feigned seriousness on the historical experiences of people whose very name one does not know. For to treat the Nez Percé and others in this way is only to confirm Jean Baudrillard's insight that "the deepest racist avatar is to think that an error about earlier societies is politically or theoretically less serious than a misinterpretation of our own world. Just as a people that oppresses another cannot be free, so a culture that is mistaken about another must also be mistaken about itself."⁸¹

Deborah Lipstadt provides another variant on this sort of thing when she declares a statement by a Holocaust denier who makes claims for moral comparability between the United States internment of Japanese-American citizens during the Second World War and the Nazi "internment" of Jews. She is quite correct in rejecting this comparison, of course (Manzanar and Tule Lake were outrages, to be sure, but they were not Treblinka or Sobibór), but in doing so she contends that, however improper it was to intern the Japanese, the attempted comparison breaks down because "the Jews had not bombed Nazi cities or attacked German forces in 1939."⁸² No, but neither did those Americans of Japanese ancestry who were interned by the U.S. government bomb American cities or attack American forces. Indeed, by equating Japanese-American citizens with the armed forces of the nation of Japan, Lipstadt betrays in herself the very same racist sentiment that led the United States to intern Americans of Japanese ancestry in the first place.

And then there is the case of Rabbi Seymour Siegel, former professor of ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary and executive director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. When asked if room might be made on the council for a representative of the Romani, or Gypsy, people who had suffered so horrendously under the Nazis—side by side, in the same death camps and gas chambers and ovens as the Jews—Siegel described such a proposal as "cockamamie" and expressed doubt that the Gypsies even existed as a people.⁸³

If such examples of intellectual or moral malfeasance, demonstrating at best willful ignorance and racist disdain for the non-Jewish group whose sufferings allegedly are being compared with the Jewish experience, are legion among upholders of the Jewish uniqueness persuasion—and they are—further evidence of

callous scorn for and *organized* denial of the sufferings of others are even more insidious. For example, for many years now the Turkish government has employed an extraordinary range of strong-arm tactics to prevent international recognition of the Armenian genocide. It is understandable, if still detestable, that perpetrator governments would deny their own complicity in mass murder. It is quite another thing, however, for a group that itself has been terribly victimized by an extermination campaign to collaborate with a historically murderous state in denying that state's documented participation in genocide.

Yet that is precisely what happened only a few years ago when Turkish and Israeli government officials together pressured the White House, which was then involved in planning for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to reject any mention of the Armenian genocide in the museum's exhibits. It is what happened on another occasion when the head of the Jewish community in Turkey, Jewish lobbyists in the United States, and Israeli officials of the Foreign Office conspired with the Turkish government to prevent the United States from holding an official Armenian day of remembrance. And it is what continues to happen today, when, among many other examples, a documentary film on the Armenian genocide remains banned on Israeli television, and when an effort by people in Israel's Education Ministry to produce high school curricula on the Armenian and Gypsy genocides recently was quashed by an oversight committee of government-paid historians.⁸⁴

All this, of course, did not happen without some quid pro quo. So the Turkish government has repaid these generous efforts on its behalf by publicly stating not only that (as their Jewish friends obligingly have confirmed for them) there never was an Armenian genocide but that the Nazi assault on the Jews was indeed historically unique. This is the process, aided in the current instance by the complicity of Holocaust uniqueness proponents and the Israeli government, that Roger W. Smith has called "denying genocide by acknowledging the Holocaust."⁸⁵

For a government with the blood of genocide on its hands—such as Turkey or the United States—to deny the presence of that blood is disgraceful enough. But in certain ways it is worse, because it is so gratuitous, for former *victims* of genocide to befriend such nations and promote their lies purely in the interest of preserving one's own fabricated self-image as history's Victim of victims. For whether it is Israeli government officials conspiring with the Turkish government to conceal the Armenian genocide or Jewish-American Holocaust scholars ridiculing the idea that Native Americans were or are victims of genocide, the damage and the dangers are the same.

The damage done by such actions is what international peace scholar Johan Galtung has called "cultural violence,"⁸⁶ the systematic degradation and denial of a group's sense of dignity or self-worth and the concealment (by "normalization" of their reduced status) of past and ongoing direct and structural violence that they have suffered. Building on a previously elaborated typology of "direct violence" (straightforward maiming and killing) and "structural violence" (the insti-

tutionalization of gross inequality), Galtung demonstrates some of the ways in which cultural violence resides and operates in the intellectual and symbolic infrastructures of certain societies. (For instance, in their manufactured and self-serving but subsequently taken-for-granted history and ideology that use the socially constructed notion of a group's allegedly inborn degeneracy to legitimize continuing direct and structural violence against it.) As Galtung puts it: "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong."⁸⁶

Jews, of course, have long suffered from all three types of violence, and few better examples exist of attempted cultural violence than the ongoing actions today of neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers. "The general public tends to accord victims of genocide a certain moral authority," observes Deborah Lipstadt, adding, in a good capsule description of one of the things that cultural violence does: "If you de-victimize a people you strip them of their moral authority"—and you thereby make more acceptable whatever the amount of their past or present suffering that you cannot simply conceal.⁸⁷ Lipstadt understands this quite well, of course, precisely because she sees discussion of genocide as a competitive endeavor and devotes much of her work to de-victimizing and thus stripping of their possible moral authority any and all victim groups other than Jews.

In addition to the damage that is inherent in the cultural violence of genocide denial, there is the matter of the future dangers that it promotes. As Roger Smith, Eric Markusen, and Robert Jay Lifton recently have written regarding the continuing denial of the Armenian holocaust:

Where scholars deny genocide, in the face of decisive evidence that it has occurred, they contribute to a false consciousness that can have the most dire reverberations. Their message, in effect, is: murderers did not really murder; victims were not really killed; mass murder requires no confrontation, no reflection, but should be ignored, glossed over. In this way scholars lend their considerable authority to the acceptance of this ultimate human crime. More than that, they encourage—indeed invite—a repetition of that crime from virtually any source in the immediate or distant future. By closing their minds to truth, that is, such scholars contribute to the deadly psychohistorical dynamic in which unopposed genocide begets new genocides.⁸⁸

This, of course, is one of the great and justified fears that Jews long have harbored regarding the threat of Holocaust denial—that it invites repetition of anti-Jewish mass violence and killing. But when advocates of the allegedly unique suffering of Jews during the Holocaust *themselves* participate in denial of *other* historical genocides—and *such denial is inextricably interwoven with the very claim of uniqueness*—they thereby actively participate in making it much easier for those other genocides to be repeated. And, in the case of genocides against the native peoples of the Americas, not to be repeated but to continue. As, indeed, they are at this very moment. For never, really, have they stopped.

Elie Wiesel is one of the few proponents of the Jewish uniqueness idea who has ever examined with care and seriousness any documents on genocide in the Americas. Those materials, which he studied in the 1970s, related to the Paraguayan government's then ongoing effort to exterminate the Aché Indians. Wiesel was stunned, horrified, and overwhelmed; he said: "Until now, I always forbade myself to compare the Holocaust of European Judaism to events which are foreign to it." Yet, he now conceded, "there are here indications, facts which cannot be denied: it is indeed a matter of a Final Solution. It simply aims at exterminating this tribe. Morally and physically. So that nothing will remain, not even a cry or a tear. Efficient technique, tested elsewhere."⁸⁹

But why hadn't this acclaimed student of genocide spoken out on these ghastly events earlier? "I didn't know," was all he could say. "But is that only an excuse? I can't think of any other." Of course he was not alone in his ignorance, as he was more than ready to point out. After listing some of the horrors he now knew that the Aché people were experiencing—"men hunted, humiliated, murdered for the sake of pleasure . . . young girls raped and sold . . . children killed in front of their parents reduced to silence by pain . . . ghettos, collective murders, manhunts, tortures, and agonies"—he concluded:

Our society prefers not to know anything of all that. Silence everywhere. Hardly a few words in the press. Nothing is discussed in the U.N., nor among the politicized intellectuals or the moralists. The great consciences kept quiet. Of course, we had an excuse! We didn't know. But now, after having read these testimonies, we know. Henceforth we shall be responsible. And accomplices.⁹⁰

That was written twenty years ago in a book that has long been out of print. How many Americans today have heard of the Aché Indians? Or of the scores of other separate and independent indigenous peoples of Central and South America who have been totally exterminated, under equally ghastly conditions, during our lifetimes? Or of those who are being destroyed in the same way even now? Who knows of the many more still—tens of millions of people from Alaska in the far north to Tierra del Fuego in the far south, and on the 16 million square miles of land between—who were liquidated by outside invaders and settlers during past centuries? There is nothing left of most of them. Not a trace. Others cling on to existence, their numbers tiny fractions of what they were before the waves of violence swept over them.

The willful maintenance of public ignorance regarding the genocidal and racist horrors against indigenous peoples that have been and are being perpetrated by many nations of the Western Hemisphere, including the United States—which contributes to the construction of a museum to commemorate genocide only if the killing occurred half a world away—is consciously aided and abetted and legitimized by the actions of the Jewish uniqueness advocates we have been discussing. Their manufactured claims of uniqueness for their own people are, after

all, synonymous with dismissal and denial of the experience of others—others much weaker, more oppressed, and in far more immediate danger than they. Further—and this would be ironic were it not so tragic—in their denial of genocide victim status to other groups, Jewish uniqueness advocates almost invariably mimic *exactly* the same pattern of assertions laid out by the antisemitic historical revisionists who deny Jewish suffering in the Holocaust: The number of people killed is said to be exaggerated, the deaths that did occur are labeled as provoked or wartime casualties, most of the victims are claimed to have succumbed to natural causes such as disease, there is alleged to be no evidence of official intent to commit genocide, and so on. In this way, narcissistic, false claims of uniqueness are joined with brutal, racist denials of the sufferings of others, becoming two sides of the same debased coin.

But as uniqueness proponents never tire of reminding anyone who will listen, denial encourages more violence against those who truly are its victims. Jews suffered horrendously during the reign of the Third Reich—to say nothing of the millennium of oppression and exile and pogrom that led inexorably toward the Holocaust—and so all people of conscience must be on guard against Holocaust deniers who, in many cases, would like nothing better than to see mass violence against Jews start again.

By that same token, however, as we consider the terrible history and the ongoing campaigns of genocide against the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere and other peoples elsewhere, there no longer is any excuse for maintaining the self-serving masquerade of Jewish genocide uniqueness—the endlessly refined and revised deception that serves equally to deny the sufferings of others, and thus, in murderous complicity with both past and present genocidal regimes, to place those terribly damaged others even closer to harm's way. It is a moral issue. And a serious one. As Elie Wiesel has said: "Now we know. Henceforth we shall be responsible. And accomplices."

NOTES

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1. See, among other discussions of the Allies' wartime denial and indifference, David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); and Christopher Simpson, *The Splendid Blond Beast: Money, Law, and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995).