Dan Stone

Thinking Europe's Catastrophe

Essays on Fascism and the Holocaust

Volume 1

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

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Thinking Europe's Catastrophe

R.G. Collingwood, the Oxford philosopher and ancient historian, ended his autobiography, completed in 1938, with a furious and now famous diatribe against his colleagues:

> It is not the business of this autobiography to ask how completely the country has in fact been deceived, or how long the present degree of deception will last. I am not writing an account of recent political events in England: I am writing a description of the way in which those events impinged upon myself and broke up my pose of a detached professional thinker. I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of a coming Fascism. I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth, I shall fight in the daylight.[1]

It is unsurprising that, as Stephen Toulmin noted in his 1978 introduction to the autobiography, Collingwood's words 'have been slow to be forgiven'. At the same time, Toulmin observes that if some of his comments were harsh, Collingwood stood out for 'his refusal to use the academic life as a refuge from the larger world of politics and international affairs.'[2]

In 1939, Collingwood was one of a small number of thinkers who foresaw where fascism and Nazism would lead; indeed, he had been saying so for years, making him exceptional in the British context, outside of the small circles of émigré writers who had experienced Hitler's regime at first hand. In 2025, one would have to be quite bold to make similar predictions, especially writing as a historian and not a journalist, political philosopher, or critic of the contemporary

1 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 167.

2 Stephen Toulmin, 'Introduction' to Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, xi, xviii.

scene. Yet it is hard to escape the sense that what is happening in the world today has an air of familiarity about it. This time around it would be both tragic and farcical, if full-fledged fascism or something like it were to return. We have had enough warnings already, and anyone wanting to understand the present is well advised to read Collingwood, Theodor Adorno, Aurel Kolnai, Sinclair Lewis, Sally Carson, Phyllis Bottome or others who diagnosed the meaning of fascism and Nazism with such keen insight in the 1930s and 1940s.

Perhaps the strange sense of déjà-vu can be explained by Hannah Arendt. In a very striking essay from 1946, one of the preparatory studies for what became *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she argued that the combination of the elite and the mob, that in her eyes characterised the modern age of imperialism and racism, was by no means at an end. The 'fundamental feeling of insecurity', Arendt argued, 'was the strongest ally Hitler found in Europe at the beginning of the war, and it will not disappear merely with the downfall of Hitler-Germany.'[3] It takes us aback today that someone writing in 1946 could refer to the 'mere' disappearance of the Third Reich and its apocalyptic drives, but Arendt understood the causes of Nazism to lie in a state of affairs that reached far beyond 'ideology' and concerned the fundamental structures and characteristics of the modern world. In particular, the continued existence of imperialism, in which the state as protector of human beings gave way to the state as promoter of an 'all or nothing' view in which individuals disappeared into mobs, created the conditions for all-out wars

3 Hannah Arendt, 'Imperialism: Road to Suicide. The Political Origins and Use of Racism', *Commentary*, 1 (1946), 34.

on groups perceived as threatening outsiders and, as the Nazis' war against the Jews had shown, would end in their extermination. Here it is worth citing Arendt at length:

> The military defeat of fascism, though a prerequisite for a normalization of politics, cannot prevent new experiments which will hardly differ from fascism in essence or result. They will inevitably take the same course: first, organization of the mob and terrorization of the people; then, mobilization of an 'elite' ready to sacrifice everything to the greatness of events, the efficiency of a system, success 'as such'; and at last all will culminate in extermination and suicide.
>
> The organization of the mob will again find its essential dynamic in the transformation of nations into races, for there is no other unifying bond now available between individuals who have lost all natural connection with their fellow-men. If we should prove to lack the force to escape from the endless process of accumulation of power in which we seem imprisoned, then we will indeed face the real Downfall of the West.[4]

'Cold War liberals', Samuel Moyn tells us, assumed that Hitlerism was dead and therefore that one could look forward to 'the eventual if still highly partial deracialization of world order and an end to hierarchical visions of humanity.' But, he adds, 'the early Cold War liberal theorists did not get the memorandum.' Arendt, as he explains, 'advertised more clearly the neo-imperialist and racist entanglements of the defence of Western freedom in the era that go entirely unnoticed in promotional accounts of Cold War liberalism even today.'[5]

In these references, there is a clear link between British and European history, between European imperialism and fascism, and between the past and the present. These connections have been central to my work over the last 25 years. The essays in this collection span the years 1999-2025, a

4 Arendt, 'Imperialism', 35.

5 Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 117.

quarter of a century in which the historiography of the topics covered here has changed massively. Yet there are some constants: a treatment of ideas in the British context that sees that country as fundamentally tied to European (and wider) patterns of thought; a concern to find connections in the past between Nazism and the widespread ways of thinking which it drew on, radicalised, and combined into such a toxic brew; and a desire to make connections, to investigate different contexts, without losing the specificity of what happened in the Holocaust. When investigating eugenics, for example, I do not assume that the Holocaust was the logical outcome of fantasies about breeding 'better' human beings. And when writing about genocide, I do not assume that all cases of genocide can be reduced to a typological unanimity. Rather, I regard all of these approaches as resources that can be put to work as ways of considering, in Arendt's terms, the 'origins' of the catastrophe, which together 'crystallised' to create the Holocaust. At the same time, I do not forget that the decision-making process for the genocide of the Jews was made by specific people—the Nazi leaders—who were driven by certain ideological notions; they were not 'products' of pre-existing ideas, and nor were they 'fated' to follow this murderous path. Their 'thinking with the blood', as Collingwood put it, was not the only possible consequence of the Great Depression in Germany.[6] The combination of structures and ideas is what creates 'history', in my view. The idea is not anti-structural, just as the structure does not nullify the idea.[7]

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6 R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan, or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*, rev. edn., ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 377: 'What Nazis call thinking with your blood is a much quicker way of thinking than the old-fashioned way of doing it with your brains.'

7 Here I paraphrase Marshall Sahlins's argument that the combination of structure and event creates history. See Sahlins, 'The Return of the

As the two volumes show, my interests have always been both interpretive and archival. Many of the essays approach a problem through the works of a single writer (Perec, Bataille, Malinowski, Arendt, Monnerot, Gardiner, Lorimer, Salaman, Federman), but always with an eye to their wider intellectual and social contexts. Here, following the Cambridge School of history of ideas, I have sought not just to look for 'ideas in context', but to show how thinkers of different sorts, sometimes seemingly marginal or neglected figures, tell us something about the temper of their times, often in ways that speak more centrally to the era's fundamental concerns than do 'great figures' of thought (although Arendt, at least, is the exception). This is an approach that I set out most fully in my books *Breeding Superman* (2002) and *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939* (2003).[8] Other chapters use the work of specific historians (Friedländer, Mayer, Weinberg, Cesarani) and psychoanalysts (de Wind, Micheels, Cohen) to open up wider vistas on problems in historiography, not just looking at trends and new research questions, but thinking more broadly about what their work tells us about the many ways in which history can be written. The focus on theory of history and historiography also aims to historicise Holocaust historians' work, to show how what we do is timebound, inescapably influenced by contemporary issues, but also shaped by a desire to practice professionally, to research and

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Event, Again', in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 293-351, e.g. 294 where he says that in the Annales school and others critical of narrative history: 'The event was conceived as antistructural, the structure as nullifying the event.' Or as Sahlins paraphrases Ricoeur (303): 'history unfolds as a synthesis of the heterogeneous.'

8 *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002); *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

write according to important disciplinary norms.[9] Hence chapters that delve deeply into empirical questions (especially on the International Tracing Service): not just with the aim of unearthing 'interesting facts', but with a view to asking epistemological questions about how archives and what they hold shape our access to the past, and control what we can know and the limits to that knowledge.[10] The 'archival turn' in historical studies does not mean that historians have discovered archives; rather, it means that historians understand that historicising archives, which are not neutral repositories of information, is important for understanding what can be written about the past and how it can be written.

The history of the Holocaust is, as I have argued elsewhere, unfinished.[11] That is to say: for the survivors, the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945 did not mean the end of their suffering, which for most remained a lifelong pain.[12] And for everyone else, the aftermath of the Holocaust shaped the postwar world—in terms of postwar human rights architecture or research into trauma, for example)—as it does to this

9 See also: *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003); *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); 'Introduction: The Holocaust and Historical Methodology', in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1-19; 'Excommunicating the Past: Narrativism and Rational Constructivism in the Historiography of the Holocaust', *Rethinking History*, 21:4 (2017), 549-566. See also Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and Kuukkanen (ed.), *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

10 See also *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), for greater detail about the ITS.

11 *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Penguin, 2023).

12 *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); *Psychoanalysis, Historiography and the Nazi Camps: Accounting for Survival* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

day. Several countries involved in the commission of the Holocaust have yet to recognise the extent of their crimes: Romania exemplifies the issue.[13] The intersection of the Holocaust and the Cold War—in terms of competing trials in east and west Europe, allegations of harbouring Nazis, or the revival of fascist movements in the postwar decades—are still under-appreciated.[14] The ways in which 'Holocaust memory' has been put to use in the post-Cold War years, from framing a cosmopolitan, human rights-oriented conception of human solidarity on the one hand, to an Islamophobic, ethnic exclusivist argument, on the other, reveal that debates about the meaning of this particular past still resonate very deeply. Moscow's claim that Kyiv is run by Nazis is not merely opportunist, justifying an act of illegal aggression, but brings to light longstanding ideas in nationalist Russian culture and speaks to the significance of the Great Patriotic War in the post-Soviet Russian Federation, even as its memory is turned on its head in the claim that Russia is still fighting fascists.[15] And nothing indicates the extent to which Holocaust memory can be instrumentalised than the Palestinian claim that Gaza is akin to the Warsaw Ghetto, or members of Benjamin Net-

13 See *The Forgotten Holocaust: Romania 1940-1944* (London: Allen Lane, forthcoming 2027).

14 Dan Stone and Johannes-Dieter Steinert (eds.), *Britain and Holocaust Consciousness in the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2026). See also Anna Koch and Stephan Stach (eds.), *Holocaust Memory and the Cold War: Remembering across the Iron Curtain* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024); Shirli Gilbert and Avril Alba (eds.), *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019); Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (eds.), *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

15 See, for example, Evgeny Finkel, 'In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe', *Global Society*, 24:1 (2010), 51-70; Paula Chan, 'Documents Accuse: The Post-Soviet Memory Politics of Genocide', *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 1:2 (2021), 39-57.

anyahu's cabinet talking of eradicating Nazis in Gaza and using biological metaphors reminiscent of Nazi depictions of Jews to talk about Palestinians and to justify the massive Israeli response to Hamas's October 7 attacks.

History's complex epistemological position as a discipline stems from the need to negotiate a path between radical historicism and unavoidable presentism. The notion of unmitigated immediacy is a positivist fantasy, yet asserting that there is no escape from presentism leads to an unprofessional position that prevents meaningful discourse between past and present. The questions that we ask the past, and about the past, are always changing—writing the history of the Holocaust is a different enterprise now than it was in 2000 or 2010. Historians cannot avoid their own subjectivities intruding on those questions, and this is to the good, for the range of questions that historians ask about the past has become much broader as the demographic makeup of the profession has changed and become less monocultural. At the same time, the affective power of the past means that the historical discipline can be considered not just an intersubjective discussion, but an 'interobjective' one, insofar as historians are acted upon by the past (or by the sources that we have which come to stand in for 'the past'), by each other, and by the wider cultural discussions in which we participate.[16]

It is in this context, of history as an intersubjective and interobjective field, walking a delicate tightrope between past and present, staking out arguments that speak to the present, but doing so on the basis of disciplinary norms, that Holocaust Studies continues apace, claims about the field

16 I am indebted to Mario Telo for the idea of 'interobjectivity'; see his discussion with Judith Butler at the Freud Museum, London, 3 November 2025.

being in crisis notwithstanding. Yet there is no doubt, in the wake of the conflict in Gaza, especially amidst claims of Israel committing genocide, that the discipline—if we extend it to cover genocide studies—faces some challenges.[17] At the very least, there is a growing mismatch between scholarly approaches and popular memory, the roots of which are addressed in one of the last chapters in this collection.[18] Scholars should not abandon the field of popular representations to simplifiers and partisans, but should find ways—through exhibitions, public forums and so on—to engage with this problem. Otherwise, the siloing of academic Holocaust Studies will result and the already marginal influence that scholars have on public affairs will be further narrowed. However, in the longer run, it is also likely that scholarly approaches to the Holocaust, however the relationship with the heritage sector or Holocaust-related charities will develop over the coming years, will not just exist but will thrive. There are many reasons why it should do so, not least that the Nazi genocide remains emblematic of the dangers of an overmighty state in times of crisis—and that is something with which we are becoming increasingly familiar once again. Holocaust Studies is not a 'safe' topic for western elites, but should be engaged in a politics of solidarity with minority and victim groups across the globe. It is with this universalising approach in mind that I have gathered these essays, which

17 See, among many contributions, the *Journal of Genocide Research* forum: 'Gaza and Genocide Studies' (online first, September 2025), and the same journal's ongoing forum: 'Israel-Palestine: Atrocity Crimes and the Crisis of Holocaust and Genocide Studies'; Raz Segal, 'Settler Antisemitism, Israeli Mass Violence, and the Crisis of Holocaust and Genocide Studies', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 53:2 (2024), 50-73.

18 See also Doris L. Bergen, 'Never Again Is Now! Holocaust History and Public Memory at a Turning Point', *German Politics and Society*, 43:2 (2025), 14-26.

aim to show that the Holocaust was, and remains, a defining event of the twentieth century for everyone who cares about the future of humanity.