

Holocaust day

The inauguration of a Holocaust Memorial Day in the UK on 27 January 2001 was a belated recognition of the central trauma of the twentieth century, and of the suffering of the (relatively few) Jewish refugees and survivors who came to Britain before and after the war, members of a generation now beginning to die out as a new century begins. The genocide of the Jews and other groups defined as unworthy of life by the Nazis has come to be seen, in the West at least, as a rupture in historical continuity and a radical challenge to our sense of ourselves as human. Perhaps because the British were not direct victims of the Holocaust, there seems to have been a reluctance in the UK to accept the implications of this: the mainstream British wartime narrative is a heroic one, commemorating – perhaps understandably – Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and VE Day, and downplaying the sufferings of those who endured or died in the Blitz. The decision to hold a Holocaust Memorial Day does seem like a very belated recognition of the centrality of this historical trauma and an acceptance of the UK as part of the Europe which suffered the Holocaust, not just as the brave island which defeated Hitler.

In recent theories of postmodernity and in psychoanalytic theories of trauma the Holocaust has been used as an ‘extreme limit case’ of memory and also of representation: the Holocaust as the event – like the earthquake which destroys the instruments intended to measure it, to use Lyotard’s analogy – which problematizes all memory and all representation. Lyotard speaks of the ‘limitations of all historicisms and “monumental” or memorializing histories that “forget” by having certain, too definite, too representative, too narrativized (too anecdotal) a “memory”’. The film *Schindler’s List* – the popular representation of the Holocaust with which people are perhaps most familiar – can be criticized on these grounds as it tells the comfortable story of the exceptional German and the salvation of several thousand Jews, as could a ‘day’ on which we are reminded to remember, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz. Lawrence Langer has analysed first-person Holocaust testimony in terms of the tendency of the listener to impose comforting patterns of redemption and salvation on the fragmented and painfully narrated accounts of those for whom the trauma is by no means over: the choice of a day of liberation (which does follow the pattern of commemoration in many other countries) clearly affirms a moment of hope.

In the case of the UK, not only the day but the year of the inauguration of the day seems significant. In the first month of the new millennium (according to some calculations), perhaps the barbarities of the previous century – including, more recently, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo – can be put behind us, and we can start again with a clean slate (although the recurrence of violence in the Middle East indicates the unfinished legacy of the conflicts of sixty years ago). The Home Office explains the decision to hold a yearly Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain in terms of the universality of the lesson to be learnt, and the continued relevance of an event which was, historically, caused by the policies of Nazi Germany but which could occur again, in any time or place, if we are not vigilant against all forms of racism. The Home Office envisages a ‘living ceremony’ on the day, a high-profile public, inclusive and secular event with music, readings, survivor testimony, the lighting of candles and the involvement of young people, with a focus on the Holocaust not just as a historical event but on its implications and continuing relevance. A consultation document asked for ideas about what activities would



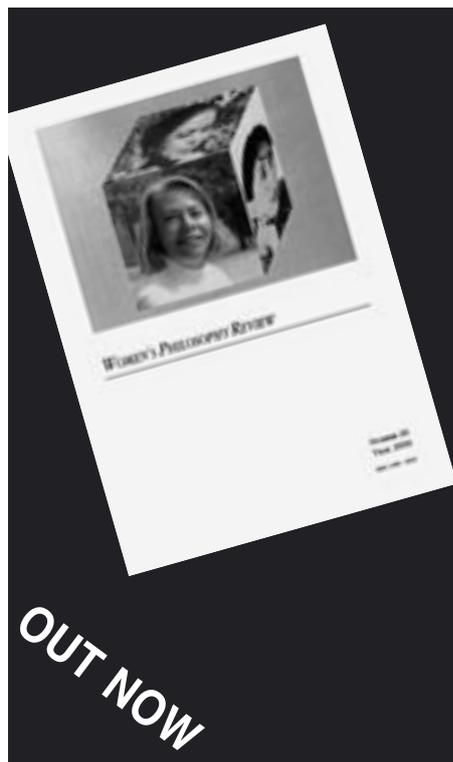
be appropriate and how best to promote human rights on the day. Local authorities and community groups are also being encouraged to develop their own commemorative events, and educational material is being provided for schools and on a website – the intention being to involve as many people as possible and not to impose something from a remote governmental level. The Home Office is attempting to negotiate the difficult ground between historical specificity – particular social and economic forces led to the rise of the Nazis and the implementation of the genocide against the Jews – and universal applicability. The consultation document quotes Santayana – ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’ – but remembrance, as I am hardly the first to point out, does not in itself prevent repetition, and repetition, in any case, is always repetition-with-a-difference, sometimes meaning that the tendency to repeat is not noticed until too late.

Tony Blair was instrumental in the decision to inaugurate the day because of the echoes of the extermination of the Jews which he – and others – saw in the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo in 1999 and thereby add legitimacy to Britain’s military intervention. In Britain, the extent of the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews was not recognized whilst it was happening, and both during and after the war there was a reluctance to acknowledge that the Jews were the particular victims of the Nazis – ironically, for fear of arousing anti-Semitism, according to the historian Tony Kushner. Some members of the Jewish community are uncomfortable with the decision to hold a public memorial event because of similar fears of drawing attention to difference and making themselves targets for racism once again. (Leon Greenman, a British Jew who was imprisoned in Auschwitz and whose wife died there, used to speak openly at political meetings about his experience: he stopped doing so and fortified his house in the East End because of neo-Nazi attacks.) It now seems necessary both to acknowledge British reluctance to accept the suffering of the Jews in particular, and to recognize that the extermination began with the mentally handicapped, communists and other political opponents in the East, and extended to the Roma and Sinti peoples, to homosexuals and to other ‘socially undesirable’ groups. Although some Jews were given refuge by Britain in the 1930s, they were hardly encouraged or welcomed with open arms, except perhaps for the children on the *Kindertransports*: even so, the myth of British welcome to ‘genuine’ refugees during the war is still hauled out with depressing regularity in the debate over asylum-seekers. The Home Office stresses the importance of education (the Nazi period has been part of the National Curriculum for

some time), the involvement of young people, and the message that the Holocaust should not be seen as an aberration peculiar to Germany, but one wonders whether specific links will be made between the treatment of 'others' by the state then, in another place, and now – will educational materials include analyses of how the right-wing press stirred up hatred against asylum-seekers? And will there be an acknowledgement of the fact that British wealth was largely created through the slave trade? A day of remembrance for those who died under slavery would be even more belated, but an acknowledgement of direct responsibility, which is not the case for the Holocaust.

Thus, perhaps one of the most insistent issues raised for the future of the day as a 'living ceremony' is how it negotiates its commitment to universalize the lessons of the Holocaust. Controversies over Israel's treatment of Palestinians or the inclusion of the commemoration of Turkey's massacre of Armenians in 1915 (recently raised by the formal decision of France's national assembly to recognize the massacre as a genocide, leading to Turkish threats of sanctions on French imports) evokes memories which continue to inform contemporary international relations. Similarly, awkward challenges to domestic policy simmer beneath the commemoration of these 'past' events. One of the objectives of the day, according to the Home Office website, is to confirm a continuing commitment 'to oppose racism, antisemitism, victimisation and genocide': the list is interesting, not only for the order in which the categories appear, but because whilst genocide is easy to define, victimization is a lot less clear-cut. The government and the Refugee Council might disagree over whether asylum-seekers are currently being victimized by government policies, for example. Home Office pronouncements on the sufferings of those who are still experiencing ethnic cleansing, on ensuring 'that our society is vigilant in opposing racism', and on the need to foster a tolerant and diverse society based upon the notions of universal dignity and equal rights and responsibilities for all its citizens', are not, then, just ironic but hypocritical, whilst the government introduces policies which humiliate and marginalize those seeking refuge from racism and ethnic cleansing, and which seek to prevent their becoming citizens.

Nicola King



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Full details: Alessandra Tanesini, Philosophy Section,
University of Cardiff, PO BOX 94, Cardiff CF1 3XB, UK
ATanesini@compuserve.com