

Wendy Lower

A Response to Dan Stone's "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History"

In Dan Stone's provocative essay, he argues that Holocaust historians have resisted cultural studies in their explanations of Nazism and the genocide, to the detriment of the field. Have they, and if so, why? Much of what an individual historian produces is determined by one's sources, interests (bias) and intellectual skill. For many, cultural studies' vague terminology and boundless methodology discourage exploring its applicability. We can hardly define what is cultural let alone agree on how to study it systematically. Stone correctly acknowledges these interpretive challenges, citing the doyen Peter Burke who mapped out the possible pitfalls in the terrain of cultural history. Many of Burke's concerns, such as reductivism, extreme voluntarism, minimization of more traditional approaches to history are well founded. Furthermore the polarization of the empirical and the theoretical have all too often prevented what most are working toward in Holocaust studies: a fruitful exchange of sources and analytical tools that will expand and deepen our knowledge of genocide.

Stone is a pioneering scholar of genocide and cultural studies. Besides editing outstanding collections on Holocaust and genocide historiography, he has authored studies on race and eugenics, Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, and intellectual responses to Nazism in Britain, to name a few. His grasp of cultural studies has yielded interesting insights into representation, imperialism, memorialization, bureaucracy, atrocity, bio-power, and the carnivalesque. In this essay on Holocaust historiography and cultural history, Stone does less of his own original analysis of history and instead sketches the basic contours of cultural studies in relation to Holocaust historiography, particularly Nazism. He starts with Burke's notion of cultural history as history from a "symbolic point of view," as a multi-layered analysis of meaning in all its various forms and definitions, as symbols and hierarchies of power, social practices and gender.

As for Holocaust history, one key to unlocking the Nazi mindset, Stone purports, is to be found in a new examination of Nazi *Weltanschauung* studies, with a stress on the role of fantasy. He contends that we should "willingly suspend our disbelief and assume for the moment that the Nazis

meant what they said".¹ To comprehend the Holocaust, one must understand it not only as the outcome of situational, multi-causal factors but also "as the outcome of a German narrative through which the perpetrators made sense of the world".² To his credit he distinguishes this approach from a "naive" intentionalism or traditional linear study of ideological causation. He shows (by drawing heavily from the example of Alon Confino's work) how traditional, empirical studies on decision making have fallen short by not getting us closer to answering "the all elusive 'why'?"³

Stone argues for a return to ideology in order to explain the Holocaust and link it with more current cultural trends in German historiography. Biographical accounts of ordinary perpetrators and prominent ones (Peter Longerich's study of Himmler, Michael Wildt's generational analysis)⁴ have grappled with the relationship between agency, structure, individual and group mentality. This, coupled with the renewed, post-Goldhagen interest in antisemitism is leading perpetrator research back into the realm of ideas. But I concur with Stone that this latest turn to ideology has not gone far enough. Though perpetrator historians agree that there was widespread cross agency consensus on the Final Solution, the actual ideological elements of this consensus have not been adequately explored, and the focus here should shift to the period prior to the mass murder, when this ideological transformation took shape and root in the minds of those who eventually carried out the criminal deeds in the East and elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe. Furthermore, given the Europe-wide involvement in the Holocaust, I would not limit this ideological turn to Germany. The anti-Semitic fantasies of Romanians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians, among others, should be studied as a form of *Transfargeschichte*, in its rational and irrational forms across time and space. One could certainly start with a study of the German case, as Stone suggests, but this would ultimately prove insufficient, since Nazi fantasies did not develop in a vacuum and their dynamic realization within an imperial context across Europe should be taken into account. Such a study however demands knowledge of several languages, and may not be feasible.

So why, in Stone's view, have Holocaust historians not been more open to cultural studies until very recently? For one, he shows that Holocaust history has been "the trump card" in attacks against postmodernist scholarship. If, as Hayden White claimed, history is fiction, then can one effectively refute Holocaust deniers who assert that the Holocaust is a myth? Fear of Holocaust deniers is operative for some scholars but not most, and this fear has not limited the burgeoning historiography in North America, Europe

1 Dan Stone, "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History," *Dapim*, this ed., P. 67.

2 Stone, p. 68.

3 Stone, p. 64.

4 Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Berlin, 2008); Michael Wildt, *Die Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002).

and Israel. The astounding growth of Holocaust scholarship especially in the last decade has solidified the field as well as made it intellectually porous.

Stone argues that “most historians of the Holocaust would find the de-emphasis of political history intolerable... one has to understand the circumstances in which the victims found themselves and this necessitates political history of a sort”.⁵ The role of agency in genocide history is important: as Stone writes, perpetrators had the power. Victims responded in various ways, they were not entirely passive, but they could not control their ultimate fate. Does cultural history necessarily distort or minimize defining features of the genocide, such as the dominance of the perpetrator, thereby discouraging its use?

Here Stone might have explored the significant role of “evidence” in shaping Holocaust historians’ work on the genocide as essentially a massive crime. The documentation of the Holocaust is voluminous. True, the trend has been to depend on the official records penned by agents in the government institutions that sponsored the genocide, and in doing so to confine oneself to reconstructions of the political structures and its powerful actors. But a steady rise in social histories of the Holocaust is also indicative of an underlying consensus on the centrality of political, but not necessarily an intolerance of cultural, theoretical approaches. A general understanding of the primacy of German political leaders and institutions has encouraged students and scholars to venture into other research areas, not seeking to minimize the significance of Nazi agency intentionally, but perhaps taking it as a given.

I am not sure if one can attribute the lack of cultural studies in traditional perpetrator analysis to a “fear” on the part of authors who do not want to “entering too deeply into the Nazi mindset” or who would rather avoid “non-measurable factors”.⁶ Here again I would return to the issue of sources and the limited manner in which some, but not all historians use them or were trained to use them. Psycho-biographies have attempted to get into the heads of extraordinary and ordinary killers, but this can be an elusive exercise not because one does not want to understand Nazi thinking, but because of the types of sources that have dominated the historiography. Perpetrator studies have relied heavily on court documents and German records to reconstruct the crime, hence the focus on the theme of implementation and the obfuscation of ideology (self-exculpatory postwar testimonies downplay motivation). Many perpetrator scholars, whose work has become foundational, crossed the professional realms of academia and the justice system by serving as expert witnesses in trials or by providing research for investigations (Raul Hilberg, Christopher Browning, Konrad Kwiet, Dieter Pohl). Many were involved in the processing of the captured

5 Stone, p. 54.

6 Stone, p. 66.

German records, or served on official historical commissions. Writing Holocaust history occurred in these various juridical and political contexts in which getting the facts down, establishing the role of individuals within a criminal system, held a particular urgency and relevance, and this too may have discouraged cultural approaches that appeared by comparison less serious or consequential in the immediate aftermath of the genocide.

Stone's evaluation of the impact of cultural studies should not be limited to the historiography of Nazism and selected topics in Jewish studies. The field of Holocaust historiography is much wider than that which Stone presents here and includes some variants of cultural history (he has analyzed this in depth in his other publications). Holocaust historians working on interethnic violence, rescue, resistance, testimony, memorialization, fascism and other topics are conducting research in and about most countries that were impacted by the Second World War in Europe. They are increasingly influenced by comparative, trans-regional analyses in genocide studies, literary studies in German, Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Polish, and French, including work on gender and the body, and constructions of criminality (for example recent studies of Joanna Michlic, Alf Lüdtke, Kai Struve, Michael Berkowitz, Thomas Kühne and Elissa Mailänder Koslov).⁷ More field work is being done beyond the archives, at sites of mass murder, including studies of the genocidal landscape in the ruins of ghettos and killing fields, and applying concepts of spatiality and anthropology.⁸ Victim studies have engaged cultural and postmodern themes to a greater extent than perpetrator studies, for example examining the history of emotions and literary tropes found in Jewish sources.⁹

Recent work on testimonies has been largely shaped by the cultural turn, even if most historians using testimonies do not engage in a direct dialogue

- 7 Joanna Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880–present* (Lincoln, 2006); "Who am I? Jewish Children's Search for Identity in Postwar Poland, 1945–1949," *Polin* 20 (2007): 98–121; Alf Lüdtke, "'German Work' and 'German Workers': The Impact of Symbols on the Exclusion of Jews in Nazi-Germany—Reflections on Open Questions," *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism*, ed. David Bankier (New York and Oxford, 2000) 296–311; "Gewalt und Alltag im 20. Jahrhundert," *Gewalt und Terror: 11 Vorlesungen*, eds. Wolfgang Bergsdorf, Dietmar Herz and Hans Hoffmeister (Weimar, 2003) 35–52. (available at <http://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-1316/luedtke.html>); *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, eds. Kai Struve, Elazar Barkan and Elizabeth Cole (Leipzig, 2007) 390; Michael Berkowitz, *The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality* (Berkeley, 2007); Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006); Elissa Mailänder Koslov's *Workaday Violence: Female Guards at Lublin-Majdanek (1942–1944)*, diss.
- 8 Tim Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (New York, 2003); Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present Day Ukraine* (Princeton, 2007).
- 9 Amos Goldberg "If This Is a Man: The Image of Man in Autobiographical and Historical Writing During and After the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies* 33 (2004) 381–410; Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2006).

with cultural theorists, or have failed to develop a critical methodology for its use. Also in the last five years there has been a noticeable postcolonial influence in Holocaust historiography; the global and local contexts of “ideas, symbols and narratives”¹⁰ that shaped Nazi occupation policy in the East are viewed as a colonial phenomenon and placed within a broader historical narrative of western imperialism.¹¹ Recent regional and micro histories have tended toward a thick Geertzian description of the implementation of the annihilation process, as Stone notes. Often overly graphic in their reconstruction of the violence, perpetrator histories of the killing in the East, although empirically solid, can be analytically narrow. Furthermore, the fact that Holocaust history perhaps more than any other, has been the subject of museum exhibits and spawned new directions in museology is also worth considering. Holocaust-related artifacts have become part of our historical consciousness and narration of this past. Scholars, historians among them, have and continue to integrate artifacts, film and photographs in their analyses.¹²

It is clear that the cultural approach offers a new way of questioning and interpreting the Holocaust, but the cultural approach alone is not sufficient to answer some of the bigger questions. It should, in Stone’s words, “complement rather than supersede other historical approaches”.¹³ But how? At this point doing cultural history or integrating it seems like an optional tool, one of many modes of questioning and interpreting that will reveal yet another facet of the history. New features of the history come into sharper relief, knowledge is altered as a result, but it remains to be seen if the “opacity” of the Holocaust will be resolved by more cultural approaches.

Today one could reverse Stone’s argument by showing how an earlier resistance to new cultural history was brief, and that the broader field of Holocaust studies may be changing its position from being a caboose on

10 Stone, p. 60.

11 Stone is aware of these sources as well as others in these footnotes, he has dealt with them elsewhere but not in this assessment of cultural studies in Holocaust historiography. See David Furber, *Going East: Colonialism and German Life in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2003; “Near as Far in the Colonies: The Nazi Occupation of Poland,” *International History Review* 26 (2004) 541–579; Jürgen Zimmer, “The Birth of the ‘Ostland’ Out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39 (2) (June 2005) 197–219. Elisabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East* (New Haven, 2003); Dirk Moses and Dan Stone, eds., *Colonialism and Genocide* (London, 2007).

12 See the late Sybil Milton’s research on the camera as weapon and voyeur, which inspired essays in Barbie Zelizer’s *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, 2001); Alexander Rossino, “Eastern Europe Through German Eyes: Soldier’s Photographs, 1939–1942,” *History of Photography* (Winter 1999) 313–321. See also work by Janina Struk, Gertrud Koch and Bern Hueppauf on the Nazi gaze, David Shneer on Soviet Jewish photojournalism, and Oren Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst, 2003).

13 Stone, p. 64.

the cultural train to a locomotive. In fact one could argue that the field has become so cultural that it has fallen into the pit that Burke warned against, into near incoherence and disintegration. Of course there should be more integration and cross fertilization across the disciplines working on the Holocaust. Historians have lagged behind other disciplines by remaining skeptical about cultural theory's utility. Yet the growing proliferation of scholarly work on the Holocaust and the variation in interpretive methods are impressive. For many historians working in the field today, the decision making debate is passé. The focus on a central conspiracy has shifted to regional studies, where the stereotypical Nazi is marginal, in many cases unrecognizable. Notions of culpability have spread across the social, cultural, and political spectrum of occupied Europe. The urgent moral imperative that seemed to drive earlier, Germanocentric perpetrator studies is diminishing, as is the sense of shock over the events.

The research agenda for Holocaust historians remains extensive, despite the outpouring of publications. The opening of the International Tracing Service Archive represents another major flow of documentation in the wake of the flood of material from the former Soviet Union. Empirically traditional archival studies will continue to be written, as they should. However unlike the doctoral students of the early 1990s, the next generation of researchers is better versed in the interpretive concepts of cultural studies. If, for example, they follow Stone's lead by exploring how cultural representations can advance our knowledge of genocide, and I hope that they will, they will find an appreciative audience within the growing, interdisciplinary field of Holocaust studies. Studying the inherent methodological challenges that have been usefully outlined by seasoned cultural historians such as Burke and Stone would be a good place to start.