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Introducing more “Cultural History” into the Study of the Holocaust: A Response to Dan Stone

In his paper, Dan Stone rightly observes that the study of the Holocaust is dominated to a large extent by the positivist approach, and within the latter by political and bureaucratic history which places a strong emphasis on facts recorded in archival documents. This type of research pays little attention to the theoretical issues of historical writing and their implications for modes of writing (as an exception to the rule, Stone mentions – and here, too, correctly – the uniqueness of *Probing the Limits of Representation*, edited by Saul Friedländer and published in 1992),¹ at the same time as these theoretical issues were rocking the very foundations of other historical research.² There were doubtless very good reasons for this. Firstly, there was the fact that the study both of the Germans (the “persecutors”) and of the Jews began already during the Holocaust and developed further immediately following the end of World War II, rather than being distanced by the passage of time. At that stage, the comprehensive picture was not yet clear so that at first, scholars had to gather laboriously, the basic details of the development of the event itself. This need arose once again in view of the spreading phenomenon of Holocaust denial during the 1990s and in the early years of the new millennium. In this context Christopher Browning observed on one occasion—following the Irving vs Lipstadt trial in London in 2000—that historians are charged with a responsibility “to get the facts right,” in order to silence the deniers.³ Thus positivistic meticulousness is actually perceived as a necessity in the study of the Holocaust.⁴

1 Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). The volume is based on lectures given two years previously at a conference held at UCLA.

2 For my own attempt to address issues of conceptualization, construction of causality etc. see my book *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London, 2003).

3 “There is a need particularly for Holocaust scholars, insofar as possible, to get the facts right, because there are people who do not wish us well. They stand malevolently prepared to exploit our professional mistakes and shortcomings for their own political agenda. I do not wish to make their dishonest tasks easier.” Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge, 2000) 33.

4 Stone addresses this issue, yet claims that relativism need not necessarily result in surrender to Holocaust deniers, when it is accepted at the level of a well intentioned academic debate

A second fact that played an important role in promoting positivism was the enormity of the Holocaust which placed moral questions of right and wrong at the very center of both scholarly and public discussions from their very beginning. On one hand, such questions as "who was personally responsible for the murder?" bothered the Allies as well as governments and societies in Germany and in the occupied countries enormously, both during and after World War II, when they had to deal with the trying of war criminals and with the reconstruction of post-war societies. On the other hand, Jews too were deeply keen to deal with questions such as "who were the Nazis' accomplices," i.e. Jewish collaborators, who allegedly assisted the Nazis, or "who were the combatants, the heroes?"

Raul Hilberg's 1961 book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*,⁵ which adopted a bureaucratic model for describing the Holocaust, further promoted the dominance of positivism. This book had an enormous influence on perceptions that became entrenched in Holocaust studies, as in the eyes of many it became the essential introductory text. Hilberg's study is positivist, bureaucratic and archival documentation-oriented *par excellence*.

Lastly, the dominance (and enormous research productivity) of the functionalist approach in the study of the "perpetrators" between the 1960s and the 1980s, an approach similar to Hilberg's positivist, bureaucratic and archival documentation-oriented approach, left an indelible mark on research directions.

I therefore regard Stone's call to introduce cultural history (or better still, the history of culture) into Holocaust studies as an important *hors d'oeuvre* to an historiographic discussion of what is extant and what is possible in this field. The question is, to what extent is he correct in his evaluations of existing research, and in what way can the achievements of recent cultural history (see below) be added to the study of the Holocaust?

What, indeed, does the term "cultural history" encompass? Stone discusses the question at the beginning of his article, and it is also addressed by my fellow respondents. I, too, would like to contribute to this discussion, to focus and clarify it further. Since his opening paragraph refers to the writings of cultural historian Peter Burke, I would suggest a thorough reading of Burke's book (whose second edition was published recently), which offers a comprehensive perspective on the cultural history approach. Whereas Stone's article suggests that cultural history is rather new, dating to recent decades, Burke stresses that its roots can be traced back to the nineteenth

and refrains from an in-depth discussion of the practical problem. Browning was called as a witness in the Irving vs Lipstadt trial, and in court one can hardly discuss the niceties of historical relativism when malevolent intentions are on the agenda. Unfortunately, in the current, international, public arena, one has to contend as well with the statements of Iran's president Ahmadinijad, attempting to cast doubt on the very occurrence of the Holocaust.

5 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1961 [as well as later editions]).

century, and that it therefore already has a considerable history. What Stone presents as cultural history is defined by Burke as **New Cultural History** (NCH), dating to the late 1970s and characterized by a rapprochement with anthropology and a tendency to borrow its concepts and terms. In the process, the boundaries of what is perceived as part of cultural history have been greatly expanded. Burke claims that the word “new” serves to distinguish NCH – like the French *nouvelle histoire* of the 1970s, with which it has much in common – from the older forms already discussed. The word “cultural” distinguishes it from intellectual history, suggesting an emphasis on mentalities, assumptions or feelings rather than ideas or systems of thought. The elder sister, intellectual history, is more serious and precise, while the younger is vaguer but also more imaginative.⁶

Whereas Moshe Rosman offers the following definition:

[In cultural history] the historian reads texts and other historical sources and artefacts not so much as discursive expositions, but rather like an anthropologist studying live behaviour. By doing so, the historian seeks both to discover the ways in which people in the society in question construed meaning, and to develop a catalogue of the fundamental concepts that mediated interpretation of reality and ordered experience for them. Cultural history might be summed up as “a history of meaning and feelings broadly defined, as embedded in expressive practices widely observed.”⁷

These definitions are rather different and richer than Miri Rubin’s (cited by Stone), and I would like to take them into account throughout the discussion. Stone’s claim that the cultural history approach is absent from the entire body of Holocaust research, is fundamental and all-embracing. However, a look at his literary sources reveals that he is referring only to English and German language research, and mainly to texts written during the last two decades.⁸ Doubtless the research carried out in these languages forms a considerable part of the research in the field, yet one should stress that there is another, considerable body of research written in numerous languages: Polish, French, Dutch, Hungarian, Slovakian, Czech, Danish, Italian, Greek, Serbian and more, not to mention studies (mainly earlier ones) in Yiddish and a significant body of work in Hebrew.

Most research written in these languages indeed addresses local issues of resistance, collaboration, rescue and so on, which are not part of cultural history. Yet when examined in the light of the above definitions, existing

6 Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge [2004], 2008) 51–52.

7 Moshe Rosman, “Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History”. In *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford, 2007) 131. The text quoted by Rosman is J. C. Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1988) xii.

8 For the division of Holocaust research into several fields, dictated by principal “cultural languages” (English, French and German) see Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective* (London, 2003) 357–388.

literature reveals that the study of the Holocaust, in its widest definition, mainly in recent decades—and especially studies examining the Righteous Among the Nations phenomenon—includes important aspects that can be understood as cultural history. Thus, for example, the motivations of many of the Righteous Gentiles were deeply rooted in their religious-cultural, Christian perceptions of Jews, which would explain why most rescuers of Jews came from ecclesiastical organizations (mainly Catholic or Protestant, but a few from other Christian sects). Since the treatment of Jews was often determined by popular, rather than elitist religious perceptions, previously existing study of the Righteous Gentiles should be assigned to the New Cultural History.⁹ Yet, since the scholars addressing this issue never ponder history's theoretical issues (as mentioned above), they do not use the terminology common to this discipline.

A further question should be raised, regarding the comprehensive validity of Stone's claim: what does study of the Holocaust include? Stone writes that "cultural history is finally and valuably starting to make inroads into how the history of the Holocaust is written"¹⁰ and afterwards explains that cultural history in the context of the Holocaust is much more than traditional research on Nazi ideology. I concur with the latter statement, and yet would like to stress that Nazi ideology entailed a transposition of earlier symbols and patterns of thinking, taken to extremes and forged together into a single, comprehensive package of ideas, goals and values. It is commonly accepted that antisemitism and its history occupy a central place within this package which is why I disagree with much of Stone's first statement. If a study of the history of antisemitism, as one of the major factors leading to the Holocaust is a part of Holocaust research and Stone suggests that tools of cultural history should be employed in this field in particular, it should be said that cultural history, in its contemporary sense, has been a highly important component of Holocaust research from its earliest beginnings. Stone feels it is important to follow the path that examines changes in "culture methods," and employs "cultural patterns to make sense of the experience".¹¹ Here we see that the study of pre-Holocaust antisemitism – both Christian and the nineteenth century kinds – was already a central field of research during the

9 Here one should point to a significant difference between the majority of scholars who have studied the Righteous Gentiles, who do not come from a historical discipline and tend to focus on the psychological or social personality of the Righteous Gentiles and offer an "altruistic" explanation for their actions (see Nehamah Tec, Samuel and Pearl Oliner, Mordechai Paldiel, Eva Fogelman, Martin Gilbert – for a detailed bibliography see Michman 84, note 58), and the minority, historians who place an emphasis on political and cultural motives (Israel Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* [Bloomington, 1982] 264–266); Dan Michman, "Historical Introduction," *Encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations: Belgium* (Jerusalem, 2005) xix-xxviii.

10 Dan Stone, "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History," *Dapim*, this ed., P. 58.

11 *Ibid.*, *Ibid.*

very period that the Holocaust took place. One of the earliest books on the subject is Joshua Trachtenberg's *The Devil and the Jews*,¹² followed by others, most prominent among them Léon Poliakov¹³ and Shmuel Ettinger, who stress the pervasiveness of Jewish stereotypes throughout the generations, especially "in the behavior of the masses."¹⁴ One of the most recent studies in this line of research is Jeffrey Herf's book on Nazi propaganda, regarded by the author as an "intellectual and cultural history, and the related endeavor of the history of political culture."¹⁵ This study is mentioned by Stone as apparently belonging to the new wave (although differing from what Stone aspires to), while I situate it in continuity with a long-standing approach.

Stone is unacquainted with research in the Hebrew language, although the three historians he cites as significant contributors to cultural history are indeed Israeli: Saul Friedländer, Uriel Tal and Alon Confino. Their contribution is substantial, yet one should mention that among the earlier Israeli scholars there were several others who devoted considerable space to cultural issues, although they did not use the specific terminology of cultural history. Nachman Blumenthal and Shaul Esh discussed "Nazi Vocabulary" and the cultural background of various of its concepts in the 1950s and 1960s; during the 1980s, Zvi Bachrach discussed in detail the issue of the human image as seen in Nazi ideology and recently Boaz Neuman has suggested a synthesis of the Nazi worldview according to cultural perceptions.¹⁶ With regard to the Jews, Esh and later Israel Gutman, together with others, discussed in detail the traditional Jewish concept of *Kiddush Hashem* (the sanctification of God's name through martyrdom) and the emergence of a new perception of *Kiddush Hahayim* (the sanctification of life).¹⁷ One should note in general that an emphasis placed on cultural (and social) aspects is common in so called Zionist historiography, precisely as a tool used to highlight overall Jewish

12 Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New York [1943], 1966). Trachtenberg, a rabbi and an American scholar, tended in general towards cultural studies; his previous book was *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (Cleveland [1939], 1961).

13 Léon Poliakov, *Histoire de l'Antisemitisme* (Paris, 1994) 1–4.

14 For a detailed discussion see Itzhak Conforti, *Modern Antisemitism in the Light of Jewish Historiography Before and After the Holocaust* (MA thesis, Jewish History Department, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1997) 81–106, and in particular 103 (Hebrew)

15 Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA, 2006) 365.

16 Nachman Blumenthal, "On the Nazi Vocabulary," *Yad Vashem Studies* I (1957): (Hebrew) 49–66; Shaul Esh, "Words and Their Meaning". In *Studies in the Holocaust and Contemporary Jewry* (Jerusalem, 1973) 187–211 (Hebrew); Zvi Bachrach, "Man's Place in Nazi Perception", *Masuah* 14 (1986): 25–31. (Hebrew); Boaz Neuman, *The National Socialist Weltanschauung: Space, Body, Language* (Haifa, 2002) (Hebrew).

17 Esh, *Studies in the Holocaust and Contemporary Jewry* 238–252; Yisrael Gutman, "Kiddush Hashem and Kiddush ha-Hayim," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 185–202; Gutman's article was first published during the 1970s in *Yalkut Moreshet* and provoked a lively discussion – see there.

cohesion and solidarity throughout the long periods in which Jews did not have political independence.

Subsequently, Stone suggests that

where the history of the Holocaust's victims is concerned, cultural history permits not just a reconstruction of the experiences of the Jews, but a way of trying to understand how their experiences were given meaning, or—as one might expect—were opaque to meaning-production.¹⁸

Stone is right in his claim that it is here that cultural history can play an especially important role, yet is wrong in his assumption that so far no research has been done in this field. On the contrary, much has been done, although here too, cultural history terminology has not been employed. The study of the behavior, response and interpretation of Jews in general, and observant Jews in particular, is the subject of research carried out by numerous writers, from Pesach Schindler in the early 1970s, through the works of Gershon Greenberg, Eliezer Schweid, Nehemiah Polen, Esther Farbstein, Amos Goldberg and others on the Holocaust period itself, not to mention the studies—by these scholars as well as many others – that examine the shaping of memory of the Holocaust in the post-1945 years.

I am therefore of the opinion that cultural history is in fact far more widespread in Holocaust studies than Stone's description would lead us to believe. He is not very familiar with studies of Jewish society during the Holocaust, and even less so with Hebrew language research of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, one must admit that, as I have said, not all of these studies identify themselves as studies in cultural history – because cultural history has not been overly accepted and popular in historical research in general and in Jewish history in particular.¹⁹ Awareness of a certain discipline can provide additional insights, as well as rich scholarly contexts, however, so that today's cultural history of the Holocaust would have a different awareness than its earlier incarnations.

Moreover, even if cultural history has been more prevalent than Stone assumes, there nevertheless has been a fundamental change in Holocaust studies which should impact on the need for more cultural history. Studies carried out in earlier decades of Holocaust research were mostly undertaken within the context of the so called intentionalist approach. They therefore tended to examine the roots of images and perceptions prior to Nazism and up to the emergence of the Nazi regime and its world view. The assumption

18 Stone, p. 60.

19 In this respect, Murray J. Rosman has called recently for a wider integration of cultural history into the study of Jewish history in general: Moshe Rosman, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History," *How Jewish is Jewish History?* eds. Murray Jay Rosman and Moshe Rosman (Oxford, 2007) 131–153.

was that as soon as these images and perceptions were accepted, they became fixed and thus there is no reason to investigate what became of them under the Nazi regime. However, study of the Holocaust has evolved: functionalism, as opposed to intentionalism, has presented its claims, and today we have moved beyond this controversy too. The study of German society (as well as the occupied countries) under Nazi rule has already turned to social matters that are far wider than a mere examination of the organs of the regime and the party. Stone rightly relates to these issues, but still speaks about the more general cultural concepts held by Germans. I would like to emphasize that in my view, today's cultural history of the Holocaust should examine the micro dynamics – i.e. the changes – in cultural perceptions and concepts throughout the period between 1933 and 1945 with a magnifying glass. A close look at the meaning of words such as *Auswanderung*, *Ghetto*, and even *Vernichtung* shows that their semantics changed between 1933 and 1935, then again between 1935 and the end of the 1930s. In this respect I join Stone's call – as well as Confino's statement, cited by Stone, that “we cannot understand why the Nazis persecuted and exterminated the Jews unless we are ready to explore . . . Nazi fantasies, hallucinations, and imagination.”²⁰ A cultural history can aid in deciphering whatever issues in the study of the perpetrators that extant approaches have so far failed to resolve convincingly,²¹ and provide a richer understanding of the functioning of Jewish communities and the many – local, national, international, religious, political and other— Jewish organizations in Europe and North Africa.

20 Confino, cited in Stone, p. 63.

21 This is precisely the path I have taken in my most recent book. Dan Michman, *The Jewish Ghettos During the Shoah: How and Why Did They Emerge?* (Search and Research series 11, Jerusalem, 2008) (Hebrew), where I prove that the ghettos were not the result of rational planning aimed at separating Jews from non-Jewish society, but rather a response stemming from the Germans' deeply internalized fear of the *Ostjude*, whom they physically encountered for the first time upon the invasion of Poland.