



Racism remembered and forgotten: From Nuremberg to California

by Tony Platt

“And so they are ever returning to us, the dead.”

(W. G. Sebald, 1993)

Prologue

The book *Bloodlines* was conceived serendipitously. I happened to be doing scholarly research with Cecilia O’Leary at the prestigious Huntington Library in San Marino, California, in the summer of 1999 when the Library announced to the world that it owned a rare, original copy of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, signed by Hitler. Given the significance of the Laws as an important first step in the segregation and marginalization of Jews under Nazism, the event was covered by media from around the world. Hitler’s signature on documents is not unusual, but so far historians have not discovered a signed order that personally ties Hitler to the Holocaust. His signature on the Nuremberg Laws imbues the document with the symbolic importance of a racist icon.



Memorial at the place in Nuremberg where the racial laws were approved by the Reichstag in 1935

(Photo: Susanne Rieger)

The Huntington's announcement reported that the Library had received the Laws from General George Patton in 1945. Patton had a close relationship with the Huntington: his father had been a business associate of Henry Huntington, the founder of the Library, in the early twentieth century; and Huntington played a key role in getting Patton's military career initiated at West Point. When Patton died unexpectedly in December 1945, the Huntington asserted its title to the Laws, which Patton claimed had been presented to him by his troops in "a great public presentation."

The Huntington and Patton families played significant roles in California's economic, political, and cultural history, enjoying the prestige of local royalty. General Patton, who figures prominently in national and regional history and folklore, was known as "The Liberator" for the military role that he played in rescuing democracy from fascism, and in freeing prisoners held in concentration camps. Little did I realize when I started the project that Patton shared many of the same racial assumptions that motivated the Nazi architects of the Nuremberg Laws.

If the Huntington Library was so proud of its relationship with General Patton, why did the Library keep the Laws secretly and off the books for 54 years, from 1945 to 1999? It was this question that led me on a winding journey through German and American history. The book is a detective story, a cultural critique, and an exploration of the complexities of my own Jewish identity. Moreover, I discovered some interesting connections between anti-Semitism and racism, and fascist sympathies between California's elite and their Nazi counterparts.

A prominent theme in the book is remembrance and its close partner, forgetting. That is the subject for this essay.

A few months ago I attended two national conferences, one on the topic of racism, the other on the Nazi Holocaust. I was struck by the absence of conversation and translation – that is, the ability to cross over into another's worldview.

At the conference on Ethnic Studies, I was on a panel with an African American professor who claimed the slave trade as "the greatest tragedy. We lost tens of millions of people," he said. "They, the Europeans" – he didn't use the word Jews – "only lost six million."

At the conference on the Holocaust, there was a similar desire to make a competition out of suffering. In my talk I raised, quite reasonably so I thought, the need to acknowledge the resemblance between the genocide of Jews in the Old World and the "war of extermination," as one California governor put it, against indigenous peoples in the New World; between po-

groms against Jews in Eastern European shtetls and the ethnic cleansing of Chinese immigrants in the United States' rural West during the late nineteenth century.

But the conference quickly divided into opposing camps, with no common ground. One well known writer, hackles raised, accused me of being a "Holocaust minimizer," while a local history professor sought me out over lunch, not for discussion, but to call me a "nihilist."

You would think that there are enough human-made tragedies to go around without having to fence them off like private property, guarded against interlopers.

How did we get to this impasse and, more importantly, how do we move beyond it?

Three reflections on generations of memory.

1. Forgetting

When writer-to-be Primo Levi survived the concentration camps, his first instinct was to "get rid of everything" – raze the buildings and ovens until there was nothing left to remind the world of Nazism.

The German-born writer W. G. Sebald made a metaphor out of the story of the hundreds of Bosnian children captured by the Nazis during World War II who ate their own identity tags when they faced starvation. "In their extreme desperation," he writes in *The Rings of Saturn*, they "eradicated their own names."

A comparable insight was expressed by the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, who famously observed that no poetry would be possible after Auschwitz, "There is no collapse of meaning like that of genocide," notes the Jewish-Polish-American writer Eva Hoffman. During his visit to Auschwitz on May 28, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI similarly announced, "Words fail."

My own childhood experiences echoed this tendency to selectively forget history. As a war baby of secular Jews in northern England and the first grandchild of Romanian and Polish Jews fleeing pogroms in the 1900s, the Holocaust loomed silently large during my youth. I can remember my parents' response in the 1950s when images of the concentration camps appeared on television: my mother, her lips pursed, rhythmically clicked her tongue; my father, who always had something to say about everything, sank silently into his chair. As Eva Hoffman observed about her own parents' "huddled hiding" from the Holocaust, "the whole wretched, shameful, unspeakable business went underground."

This tendency to forget is understandable. Who wants to relive the recollection of tormented pain and suffering? Witnesses and survivors generally do not give voice to their experiences in the immediate aftermath of human-made catastrophes. This is true in the case of witnesses

to and survivors of the genocide of six million Jews, of the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas, and of the genocide of the close to one million Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. We also find this silence in the United States among the victims of the ethnic cleansing of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century and of the imprisonment without trial of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Governments have their own reasons for “scrupulous forgetting” – to use a term coined by the German historian Jörg Wollenberg. In the case of post-World War II Germany, the politics of the Cold War justified a “move-on mentality,” promoted with great enthusiasm not only by German elites, but also by the United States. Similarly, after the death of the Spanish dictator Franco in 1975, the government issued a “collective pact of forgetting” (*pacto de olvido*), again in the name of moving forward as a united nation. It is only now, seventy years after the Spanish Civil War that the Spanish government has agreed to finally make available to the public millions of documents from the Franco regime.

Guilt, sorrow, and denial all play their part in the aftermath. It is understandable why people want to look forward, not back; why they want to protect the next generation from the horrors of memory; and why political leaders emphasize the future over the past. It is understandable given history’s wrenching pain.

But the suppressed past, notes Eva Hoffman, always “rankles and returns.” The decision to forget is an act of remembering. And the response to genocide as an event beyond understanding is itself a meaningful decision.

2. Remembering

Primo Levi, of course we now know, changed his mind. “These [the concentration camps] are not mistakes to efface,” he wrote, and then devoted his life to remembrance.

Similarly, words did not fail Pope Benedict on his scripted visit to Auschwitz, as the world parsed his every comma and assiduously prepared text.

Usually it is the generations who are the indirect victims of genocides that demand memory and memorials. At the individual level, this is an enormously difficult undertaking, requiring extraordinary investment in psychological energy, and the revisiting of sorrows past. Most survivors and witnesses of the Shoah were initially reluctant to break the silence, while most of their children and children’s children are hungry to vicariously experience and commemorate their ancestors’ tormented memories.

They share the view of Rudolf Vrba – an escapee from Auschwitz who told the world what he knew – that “the strength of the Final Solution was its secrecy, its impossibility.” Breaking this secrecy enables us to understand its possibility.

However difficult it is to remember personally and to confide in one’s family and friends, it is even more difficult to remember socially. Not surprisingly, states and governments have a tendency either to bury any past that interferes with glorious stories of national origins and developments, or to reinvent a past that is suitably heroic and inspirational. Consider, for example, the recent statements of the president of Iran denying the Holocaust; or the current government of Turkey’s efforts to deny the 1915 genocide of 1.5 million Armenians; or the efforts of some groups in Africa to recast the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda as a civil war.

In California, where I live, the government and public institutions have done very little to remember one of the bloodiest chapters in American history. Statehood was founded on unprovoked war against Mexico, Indian wars, genocidal policies against indigenous peoples, and white settler violence against Latinos. The development of California into one of the most prosperous economies in the world involved ethnic cleansing of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century, racist segregation of housing and education between the world wars, and the disenfranchisement of Japanese Americans during World War II (comparable to how the 1935 Nuremberg Laws robbed Jews of civil rights in Germany).

Yet, with the exception of the Japanese American National Museum and the now defunct Southwest Museum of the American Indian in Los Angeles, there are no public institutions in California devoted to remembering and understand the state’s long history of conquest, racism, and militarism. “The future always look good in the golden state,” observed Joan Didion, “because no one remembers the past.”

Remembrance of the Holocaust by Israel in its early years as a state and by Jewish organizations in the United States until the 1960s was also marked by selective amnesia. For many, memory of the Nazi Holocaust suggested shame associated with defeat and submission, its survivors better forgotten. The decision to remember, whether made personally or socially, is always a selective process and “ongoing activity,” as geographer David Lowenthal has noted. Moreover, official memory of genocide and other human-made horrors can easily be turned into commercial kitsch. For example, visitors to the recently opened National Underground Railroad museum in Cincinnati can pick up a poster that proclaims “Never Lose Your Thirst for Freedom,” illustrated by a flickering candle in a Coca Cola bottle.

It requires influence, resources, political clout, and the stamina of a long-distance runner to institutionalize memory into everyday life. Without the generous donations of a handful of now wealthy American Indian communities, there would be no Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. It has taken almost 150 years since the abolition of slavery to break ground for the Smithsonian's African American Museum and, still to this day, there is no official celebration of Emancipation, one of the most significant events in American history.

Consider, also, the extensive debates, discussions, and arguments that took place in Berlin as a prelude to creating its "memory district," including the Jewish Museum, the Holocaust memorial, and the Topography of Terror. As geographer Karen Till notes in her book on *The New Berlin*, "to create a national memorial that represents a violent history of state and social perpetration is a triple crisis: a crisis of memory, legitimation, and representation."

Given that the struggle to institutionalize painful memories is long and difficult, it is understandable why people are defensive and territorial, why we put up symbolic fences around our historical tragedies and guard our unique experiences from interlopers.

3. Translating

But there is much to learn from each other's experiences and much to gain by finding common ground without sacrificing the uniqueness of our historical tragedies.

I appreciate the importance of specificity, of understanding the particularities of ethnic and national identities. But as a historian and activist, I also look for commonalities in the human experience. And when it comes to the modern history of nation states, of racism, of anti-Semitism, of inclusion in and exclusion from the rights of citizenship, I am struck by what historian Tom Bender calls "family resemblances" between, for example, the assumptions of Nazi "racial science" and American eugenics, used in both countries to hold back the struggle for social equality; and the resemblances between the destruction of eighty percent of Europe's Jewry and seventy-five percent of the indigenous peoples of the Americas; between the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which reversed the gains made by Jews in Germany during and after World War I, and apartheid policies of the American South, which reversed the gains briefly made by African Americans during Reconstruction in the aftermath of the Civil War; and between the perverse logic of race that guided the Nazi demonization of Jews in the 1930s and assumptions about the "Yellow Peril" that guided California's attitudes to the Chinese in the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to pogroms against tens of thousands of immigrants.

My own research for *Bloodlines* also led to some surprising connections. Not only did I find that General Patton had stolen an original copy of the Nuremberg Laws and that the Huntington Library covered up their acquisition of war loot. But also that Patton and a circle of California notables shared with their Nazi counterparts a belief in the existence of distinct biological races; a commitment to the superiority of “Anglo-Saxon” stock as the bedrock of modernity; and advocacy of social policies of segregation and apartheid. “The heritage of fascist rule,” observes sociologist Paul Gilroy, “survives inside democracy as well as outside it.”

The insight into the “family resemblances” of racism and anti-Semitism has practical, as well as historical consequences. In the same way that genocide requires the mobilization of broad sectors of society as participants and supporters, so too the struggle against genocide requires a broad-based, popular movement in which we recognize our common humanity. The primary targets and victims of genocide cannot defeat agents of genocide alone.

“The road to Auschwitz,” says historian Claudia Koonz, “was paved with righteousness.” By this she means that what ended as the Holocaust began as a populist movement that engaged millions of people in its political cause. Racism has its own morality and code of values.

While it required a visionary like Hitler to imagine a racially purified society, it also required a massive bureaucracy on the ground to transform the fear of racial degeneration into everyday commonsense, as historian Zygmunt Bauman has noted. After all, the Nazi regime started by imprisoning political radicals and sterilizing thousands of “social inadequates,” including Gypsies and the descendants of French colonial troops from Africa who participated in the temporary occupation of western Germany after World War I, before moving on to the selective murder of hundreds of thousands of the mentally and physically ill, and finally in 1941 the mass butchery of Jews, homosexuals, and non-conformists.

If genocide is to a certain degree a popular enterprise, its resistance too must be popular and broad-based.

When I came to the United States in the early 1960s, my inspirational models were the white students, more than half of whom were Jewish, who went to the American South in 1964 to fight with African Americans against white supremacy. We felt a kinship beyond color.

Similarly, when Leon Bass, an African American sergeant, entered Buchenwald in 1945, he came to realize that “human suffering is not relegated to me and mine. I now knew that human suffering could touch us all. [What I saw] in Buchenwald was the face of evil, ... of racism.”



Civil rights demonstration in Washington, D.C. in the 1960s

(Source: Amerika Dienst, AD)

We need to remember this kinship now because genocide is not only a matter to be preserved in memory. It is in the present and unfolding into the future. Yesterday in Rwanda, today in Darfur, tomorrow where?

A few months ago I attended a Catholic mass in commemoration of the twelfth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. My friend Mathilde, who lost dozens of family members and friends during the genocide, said, “I am more concerned by what our friends did *not* do than by what our enemy did.”

On a recent visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., I was encouraged to see its Committee on Conscience mobilizing and educating people about the genocide in Rwanda, the subsequent war beyond Rwanda that has taken close to four million lives, and the genocide unfolding in Darfur.

I am reminded of what the poet Maya Angelou wrote in 1993: “History, despite its wrenching pain,/Cannot be unlived, but if faced/With courage, need not be lived again.”

“Each new hour holds new chances/For a new beginning,” she wrote. “Do not be wedded forever/To fear...”

“The horizon leans forward,” she said, “offering” us “space.”

I came of political age at a time of this space, when we were convinced that human beings are not fixed by our biology, genes, or ancestral origins; that we have the capacity to shed our pasts and grow new skins. I did not think it was a transgression of racial etiquette, for example, to write a biography of E. Franklin Frazier, an African American intellectual who grew

up in the segregated United States, his life as the working class grandson of slaves so different from my own privileged background. When I went on a speaking tour of universities to discuss the book, white audiences invariably wanted to know what motivated me, a white guy, to write about “Black issues,” whereas African American audiences wondered how I could expect to get “inside the Black experience.”

I felt then, and still do, that the “issues” belong to us all, and that as members of a single human race we share profound commonalities. It is the socially created differences, not the bodies we are born into, that make us perpetually different in the eyes of others, as Sartre reminded us in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946).

Recently in the United States, we have seen people on the streets demonstrating against the unfolding genocide in the Sudan and against immigration policies that dehumanize millions of our sisters and brothers in the United States. Now we have an opportunity to see the connections between there and here, between global and local racisms, between African and Mexican, between Jews and other victims of genocide. It is an opportunity to envision our interdependent humanity.

The horizon leans forward, offering us space to find common ground.

To never again, I add, never alone.

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