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## Impossible History? Holocaust Commissions as Narrators of Trauma

*Une histoire impossible ? Les Commissions historiques comme vecteur de narration du trauma*

*הסטוריה בלתי אפשרית? וועדות השואה כמספרות של טראומה.*

Alexander Karn

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# Impossible History? Holocaust Commissions as Narrators of Trauma

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- 1 Like other papers assembled here, this essay arose from a research seminar convened in the summer of 2013 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum<sup>1</sup>. The subject of the seminar was “The Politics of Repair: Restitution and Reparations in the Wake of the Holocaust.” I was invited to share my research for what was, at the time, still an ongoing project, i.e., a comparative study of European Holocaust commissions with special emphasis given to assessing their potential for conflict mediation.<sup>2</sup> These commissions, despite certain limitations (e.g., with respect to long-term impact) and the skepticism they aroused among scholars, political elites, and ordinary members of the public concerning the objectivity of their work, were nevertheless thought to be an important development in what the seminar’s participants identified as the “second wave” of Holocaust restitution.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 This essay builds on that earlier research, but the focus is narrower. My aim here is to explore the Holocaust commissions from a *historiographical perspective*, paying particular attention to the methodological and rhetorical strategies they employed when faced with the traumatic experiences and memories of Holocaust victims and survivors. Starting out from a conviction that historical understanding depends on the intertwining of texts and events and eager to interrogate what James Young once called “the consequences of interpretation,”<sup>4</sup> I became interested in how these commissions responded, in practical terms, to the theoretical debates that arose during the 1970s and 1980s, regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the possibility of its being un-representable. The question that frames this essay is, therefore: How did the

Holocaust commissions inquire after and narrate what many trauma theorists (and others) had come to regard as the “impossible history” of the Shoah?

## Holocaust Commissions, Historical Representation, and Trauma Theory

- 3 The Holocaust commissions referred to here represent a subset of a more general historical commission model, which became increasingly prevalent at the end of the Cold War. Similar to the truth and reconciliation commissions that have been the subject of extensive academic study, historical commissions have appeared in a variety of contexts where “difficult” and shameful historical episodes cast a long shadow over contemporary society and where debates over the past have become the subject of political wrangling. In the case of the Holocaust commissions—several dozen were convened between the mid-1990s and early 2000s—these inquiries were typically launched in countries where nationalist myths and revisionist histories had stymied deep historical understanding of the Holocaust and glossed over the debts still owed to its victims. At an organizing seminar for the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets (1998), Stuart Eizenstat, U.S. undersecretary of state, highlighted both the promise of these initiatives and the obstacles they faced:

It is dispiriting that, for nearly half a century, the fate of Holocaust-era assets remained largely obscured. At the same time, it is inspiring that over the last several years, after the Cold War, and with the end of this century approaching, these issues have come to command the world’s attention and touch the conscience of humanity. There is no doubt that this is a painful undertaking: it is not easy for any country to confront periods or issues in its recent history that reopen old wounds. But I believe that this can be a healing process, which can strengthen each of our countries and bring this century to a close on a high note of justice.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 Eizenstat’s invocation of justice and healing gives an indication of the idealistic aspirations that were sometimes attached to these commissions and the hope that their work would help to support a burgeoning “right to truth.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it is important to see how these commissions, particularly those that emerged through “official” channels, served as political troubleshooters for their governments, which were still largely guided by the logic of *realpolitik*. The point I want to make is merely that any consideration of the external political factors that shaped these commissions must lead as well to a careful examination of the ways in which these same political factors entered into their work and gave their written reports a particular internal structure. By “internal structure”, I mean an ideological and moral framework that shapes and determines the factuality and the moral content of their accounts. Even (and especially) where these commissions claimed to have transcended partisanship and established an objective account of the past, we need to account for this kind of structure. By doing so, we can reveal how particular methodological choices and rhetorical formulas obscure and sometime silence fundamental aspects of Holocaust history.
- 5 Trauma’s paradoxical quality, i.e., its being both impossible to recall (absence) as well as impossible to forget (omnipresence), creates a problem for Holocaust historians and others who wish to understand its extremity and explore its meaning. In *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), Maurice Blanchot highlights this tension in his attempt to isolate and understand what cannot be forgotten (i.e., the disaster) “because it has always

already fallen outside of memory.” For Blanchot, traumatic experience cannot be encapsulated either in memory or language, yet it cannot be forgotten or ignored, since doing so would contravene the ethical basis of our humanity. Impossible to grasp or represent externally, the disaster, Blanchot contends, must be commemorated in any case: “The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience — it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated; the disaster de-scribes.”<sup>7</sup> Construed as both the “ruin of words” and the “demise of writing,”<sup>8</sup> the disaster, Blanchot says, must nevertheless remain in our sights. We are obliged to “[k]eep watch over absent meaning.”<sup>9</sup>

- 6 This aspect of Blanchot’s thinking has permeated much of the subsequent scholarship on Holocaust history and the limits of representation. Lawrence Langer, for example, recalling his experience of watching and listening to Holocaust survivors while they recounted their most painful memories of the camps and ghettos, describes: “an impassable chasm [that] permanently separates the seriously interested auditor and observer from the experiences of the [...] victim.”<sup>10</sup> This divide, which frustrates all efforts at comprehension, has led some to conclude that the Holocaust is fundamentally unintelligible. Irving Howe developed this theme in an essay titled “Writing and the Holocaust.” He notes: “Our subject resists the usual capacities of mind. We may read the Holocaust as the central event of the [twentieth] century; we may register the pain of its unhealed wounds; but finally we must acknowledge that it leaves us intellectually disarmed, staring helplessly at the reality or, if you prefer, the mystery of mass extermination. There is little likelihood of finding a rational structure or explanation for the Holocaust; it forms a sequence of events without historical or moral precedent.”<sup>11</sup> Claude Lanzmann, the acclaimed director of *Shoah* (1985) has described the Holocaust in similar terms. The Shoah is unique, according to Lanzmann, “in that it constructs a circle of flames around itself.” He continues: “[T]he limit is not to be broken because a certain absolute horror is not transmittable: to pretend to do so [...] is to become guilty of the most serious transgression. One must speak and be silent at the same time, to know that here silence is the most authentic mode of speech.”<sup>12</sup> These comments resonate deeply with what Blanchot outlined in *The Writing of the Disaster*, and they anticipate much of what Jean-François Lyotard pursues in *The Differend* (1983), particularly where the latter takes up “the negative presentation of the indeterminate.” Attempts to give this indeterminacy a fixed and final content, Lyotard warns, replicate the essence of totalitarian terror, since these are really efforts to coerce others into a common understanding of the original utterance or event. “There is no genre,” Lyotard writes, “whose hegemony over the others would be just.”<sup>13</sup> With respect to the Holocaust, therefore, nothing can be said or written, which does not somehow damage or distort the historical truth. One might stretch this to say that no historical truth exists to be distorted in the first place. Instead, we must wrestle with inexpressible feelings and frustrated desires for linkage between the words historians use to represent the past and the events of the past themselves.
- 7 All of this highlights what the Holocaust commissions were up against, in terms theoretical challenges, when they were launched in the 1990s and 2000s to “deal with” the unresolved issues connected to the Nazi past. The story of the Holocaust commissions, all too often, was a tale of competing and contravening discourses (e.g., historical, legal, economic, moral, etc.). Though their members typically described their work in terms of straightforward empirical investigation, i.e., fact-finding and truth-telling, the Holocaust commissions were, nevertheless, made to reckon with the

inexpressible feelings and desires that Lyotard highlighted in *The Differend*. What these commissions for the most part failed to appreciate, or even perceive, was the gulf of understanding that separated Holocaust survivors and their descendants, who still lived with the abject horrors of the past, from the governments of formerly complicit states, who seemed ready to acknowledge the fact of past injustices, but struggled to do so in terms that were acceptable to the survivors and their kin.

## Austria's *Historikerkommission* (Jabloner Commission)

- 8 Austria's Holocaust commission (*Historikerkommission*) was established in November 1998 by a joint decree of the government's executive and legislative branches. It arose thanks to both an inner paradigm shift (i.e., a new consciousness among Austrians regarding the conduct of their countrymen during the Nazi era) and the accrual of external pressures (e.g., class-action lawsuits and the threat of economic sanctions). Officially, the commission's task was "to investigate and report on the whole complex of expropriations in Austria during the Nazi era and on restitution/compensation [...] after 1945." Clemens Jabloner, the commission's chairman, described the work as "making some difficult and sensitive problems in recent Austrian history comprehensible to as many people as possible." The commission, Jabloner later said, was a response to Austria's need for "complete purification." In terms of its composition, the Austrian commission was quite streamlined. Besides Jabloner, the commission included Lorenz Mikoletsky, the director of Austria's National Archives, plus five other Austrian historians, and two foreign experts.<sup>14</sup>
- 9 While much of the commission's work entailed basic accounting and arithmetic, the project was shadowed from the outset by the so-called "victim theory," which the writer Hermann Langbein once called Austria's "life lie" (*Lebenslüge*). The victim theory dates back to the Moscow Declaration (1943), when the Allies, already looking ahead to the postwar order, cited Austria as the first victim of Nazi aggression. According to the theory, the Austrian state did not exist between March 1938 and May 1945; therefore, Austrians could not be responsible for crimes committed in that interval. In Austria's general population, the victim theory dominated social memory until the 1980s and 1990s, when a string of political scandals dredged up the Nazi past and threatened Austria's international standing. The first unfolded in 1985-86, when it was discovered that Kurt Waldheim, the former secretary general of the United Nations and a candidate for the Austrian presidency, had misrepresented or lied about his involvement with the *Wehrmacht* during World War Two. At home and abroad, Waldheim's past came to represent a more pervasive memory "syndrome," which was a tendency among Austrians to evade responsibility for crimes committed in the nation's name and a concern for the suffering of the national majority, over and above that of other groups. This syndrome was re-activated in the second half of the 1990s when Jörg Haider and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) vaulted to prominence on the basis of what many saw as neo-fascist rhetoric and policy planks. Arising from this context, the Jabloner Commission initially appeared to be an innovative and progressive way for Austrians to come terms with the role their country had played in the Holocaust and to demonstrate their commitment to rectifying past wrongs.
- 10 Over the course of four years, the Jabloner Commission published fifty-four volumes (14,000 pages) on various aspects of the Nazi period.<sup>15</sup> In its final report (January 2003),

Jablonek touted the commission's "multi-disciplinary approach." In reading the report, however, one of the most striking features is the commission's consistent focus on the purely economic aspects of National Socialist criminality. Despite having received a broad mandate to examine "the whole complex" of expropriation, the commission focused almost entirely on compensable material losses and the monetary value of lost, looted, and destroyed properties. At the same time, there is a consistent, and seemingly determined, avoidance of the complex moral questions that stem from these episodes. Virtually everything in the final report is couched in the quantifiable language of schillings, Reichsmarks, and dollars, while almost nothing communicates the traumatic experiences of the victims and the potent, psychological effects of the anti-Semitic violence to which they were exposed.

- 11 Perhaps the best example of this narrow interest in economic data and monetary impact is the commission's treatment of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. Over the course of two days, and with the encouragement of Nazi officials, mobs of adults and children throughout the *Reich* burned synagogues, smashed storefronts, looted homes and businesses, and subjected Jews to a raft of sadistic humiliations, while singling out some for more extreme physical violence. No less than ninety-one Jews were murdered during the rampage, while approximately 30,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps (resulting in additional deaths). Reading the Jablonek report, one quickly understands why this event is commonly referred to as "The Night of Shattered Glass." The report provides estimates for the number of Jewish businesses damaged, the number of windows broken, the total area in square meters of all shattered glass, the insured value of these panes, which of these broken windows was the subject of an insurance claim, and so on. The report emphasizes the glass, its materiality and monetary value, rather than the men, women, and children who looked out from behind these windows and suffered profoundly, far beyond any financial loss, as a consequence of their shattering.
- 12 The sterility of this approach becomes more obvious if we compare the commission's report to Marion Kaplan's treatment of *Kristallnacht* in *Between Dignity and Despair*.<sup>16</sup> Kaplan deals with shattered glass, the trope through which the event is customarily viewed, but she also uses diaries, personal letters, and medical records to document a spike in suicide among Jews immediately following the pogrom. Rich in numerical and statistical data, the Jablonek report is silent on what Kaplan calls the "public degradation ritual", which Jews endured in the course of these attacks. In the commission's narrative, broken glass and stolen furniture are depicted as compensable, whereas terrorizing one's neighbors in a naked display of racial hatred — to the point that many Jews contemplated or committed suicide — is not. This also applies to the documented instances of rape and sexual violence, which took place in spite of strict laws prohibiting "racial miscegenation". German court records show that Nazi party members were brought to trial in some of these cases, including one in which a member of the SA was alleged to have raped a thirteen year-old girl and another, taken from Linz, in which a group of drunken SA men molested a young woman in the open after dragging her out of her home and ordering her to disrobe.<sup>17</sup> One can say, of course, that history is always partial (in both senses of the word) and that historical narrative always entails the privileging of some facts over others. On the other hand, the Jablonek Commission's reprisal of *Kristallnacht* shows how the marshaling of evidence both prefigures and limits the scope of the narrative. By placing *Kristallnacht* within an economic and material discourse, while consequently shutting out and

closing off other discursive possibilities, the commission exercises the unjust hegemony that Lyotard anticipates in *The Differend*. Stringently objective and avowedly scientific, the Jabloner Commission's account is factual, but from the perspective of traumatized victims and survivors also quite unreal. Here we might recall the testimony of Philip K.: "We'll never recover what was lost. We can't even assess what was lost. Who knows what beauty and grandeur six million could have contributed to the world. Who can measure it up? What standard do you use? How do you count it?"<sup>18</sup> Inflected by anxiety and the fear of running afoul of the politics of History, the Jabloner report expunges what cannot be quantified. I have referred to this as a *forensic approach* to the past, i.e., one that strives at documentary realism through strict avoidance of anything considered subjective and utter dependence on the "factuality" of the archives. While there are some important achievements in the Jabloner Commission's final report, e.g., its unambiguous linking of looting and "Aryanization" to the arrests and deportations that led to the "Final Solution", the forensic approach is its most prominent feature. The report highlights Austrian complicity and accepts a degree of responsibility for injustices that become apparent "in retrospect," but the content and nature of these injustices, as they are presented, do not come close to uncovering the full dimensions and impact of the trauma, which, in any case, cannot be touched by "in-kind" restitution.

## Holocaust Era Insurance Claims Commission (ICHEIC)

- 13 If one were to rank the Holocaust commissions in terms of their overall performance and the quality of justice provided, the International Commission for Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC) could only appear near the bottom of the list. During Europe's interwar period, insurance policies became a popular savings strategy for Jews (and many others) seeking protection from economic volatility. Policies covered a range of events and assets, not only life and property, but also college savings funds and dowry for the betrothal of daughters. Following the war, Holocaust survivors who attempted to collect on these policies were often rebuffed by the companies who issued them, either because the beneficiaries lacked original policy documents or because the premiums had gone unpaid following the internment of the policyholder or, in some cases, because the companies turned over these accounts to the Nazis and therefore considered them as paid. When these policies became the object of renewed restitution claims in the 1990s, analysts for the insurance industry estimated the value of these unpaid claims to be between one and four billion dollars.<sup>19</sup>
- 14 The ICHEIC was established in 1998 to negotiate settlements with the six firms that wrote the bulk of these policies (or absorbed the companies which had). Among other challenges, the commission was faced with extensive loss of documentation, which necessitated a substantial investment in research. The commission contracted much of this work to independent researchers, who combed through archives on three continents looking for evidence of unpaid claims. Initially given just six months, the researchers were granted several deadline extensions to ensure that the relevant records were identified and properly evaluated. When the project finally ended, researchers had located 77,518 policies for 55,079 individual policyholders.<sup>20</sup> The researchers also identified 16,579 individuals who were listed as beneficiaries on these policies.

- 15 In April 2004, six years after it was launched, the ICHEIC released its “Final Report on External Research.”<sup>21</sup> This was an eighteen-page document, backed by several appendices that summarized the data recovered by the researchers. While we cannot review the full report here, one item from the appendix offers important insight into document as a whole. Table A-5 records the country of residence for all policyholders identified through the commission’s research. The significance of the table, for our purposes, is the way it condenses the data and refers to policies (accounts) rather than to victims (people). While there are other tables that tabulate individual policyholders, this emphasis on *accounts* and *policy records* is overwhelming. Whereas the commission’s “legacy document” includes personal testimonies given by a handful of individual victims, the research report completely ignores this data. Instead, the researchers focus on three kinds of evidence: (1) Nazi archival records (e.g., asset registries); (2) loss claims submitted after the war; and (3) insurance company records associated with these claims. There are numerous arithmetic computations aligned to these data in the research report, as well as a few cursory notes on the process by which the commission arrived at valuations for unpaid claims, but again, there is no treatment of the way these unpaid policies affected the lives of individual claimants. Nor do readers get any deep insights regarding the scope and scale of the injustices to which the beneficiaries of these policies were exposed. In 1997, for example, French newspapers reported on one Holocaust victim, who, for eighteen years, had made regular payments on the life insurance policy he purchased, before being deported to a concentration camp, where he was later killed. In 1945, his children received an insurance payout of twenty-six centimes, the approximate cost of a single subway ticket.<sup>22</sup> Other survivors complained that the insurance companies had thwarted their attempts to collect on unpaid claims or had refused to answer their queries regarding the possible existence of family policies. This was crucial information, since approximately eighty percent of potential claimants did not know the name of the company that issued their relatives’ policies. There were also complaints from claimants who received low settlement offers after being matched to accounts identified by the ICHEIC. One claimant was offered \$500 after being matched to two separate life insurance policies.<sup>23</sup> Besides drawing attention to the obvious insufficiency of these payouts, what I am asking is whether we can understand the full dimensions and moral implications of the Holocaust through the kinds of documents and data compiled by the ICHEIC? To what extent do insurance records illuminate the experiential aspects of Holocaust history, or to turn that question around, how might these sources dull our understanding of the past by pushing us away from the victims, and therefore away from the moral debts which may be owed to them?
- 16 Gerald Feldman’s work on the German insurance industry during the Nazi era serves as an important counter-example. Like the ICHEIC, Feldman searched the Nazi archives and insurance company records looking for evidence of unpaid policies. But, unlike the ICHEIC, Feldman’s research also incorporated the private papers of Holocaust victims, which the commission ignored. Describing his methodology, Feldman stated, “Periodically [...] one does find valuable and usually painful, but also very illuminating, correspondence in the policies which reveal the situation of the Jews [who] had insurance as well as the way in which [insurers] dealt with them.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas the ICHEIC considered policies and the “record groups” into which these could be most easily sorted, Feldman described the personal correspondence of Holocaust victims and survivors as “[his] primary interest.”

17 This is not to say that statistical data cannot be used to substantiate nuanced historical narratives. Nor am I arguing that the ICHEIC's research was irrelevant to the larger restitution and reparations project. Given that their mandate was "to locate and register information on Holocaust era life insurance policies and their owners,"<sup>25</sup> it makes sense that commission incorporated the kinds of sources included in the research report. But there are still important questions regarding who decides what "counts" as pertinent information and how these decisions might potentially limit the quality and scope of subsequent interpretation. What can the financial records tell us, for example, about the constraints that these unpaid claims placed on survivors in the aftermath of more than a decade of racial persecution and violence? To what extent and in what ways did non-payment exacerbate the loss of dignity, which demonization, spoliation, internment, deportation, and genocide had already produced? We can also extend the periodization here: how might the personal letters and testimonies, which are marginalized by the ICHEIC, have furthered our understanding of Jewish disenfranchisement *before* the war? For example, what could the commission have taught us about "[the] harried struggle to maintain adequate premium payments"<sup>26</sup> as Nazi racial policies spread across Europe? What choices were Jewish policyholders forced to make as the threats facing them began to multiply?<sup>27</sup> Some, as it turns out, chose to cash in their policies to pay the costs associated with their emigration attempts, while others did the same merely to cover the next month's rent. What else is obscured by the commission's methodology? The research report assembled by the ICHEIC is essentially a list of events (e.g., policy purchases, policy lapses, policy claims and settlements, etc.) sorted chronologically (or by location). It closely resembles what Hayden White has called the "annal,"<sup>28</sup> particularly for the way it lacks any identifiable "social center." The events it documents are not clearly linked to a particular point of view, nor are they imbued with any moral significance. Extreme events, the trauma theorists tell us, will always resist or elude representation. But what kind of justice can be achieved, where Holocaust history retreats into a "rhetoric of anti-rhetoric?"<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion: Two Frameworks for Understanding Holocaust Trauma

18 Historical understanding always requires simplification. General comprehension of the past hinges on episodic knowledge. The Holocaust commissions can, therefore, be forgiven if their published reports fail to escort readers through the "circle of flames," which, according to Lanzmann, surrounds the Holocaust and prevents our full comprehension of it. Moreover, if Lyotard is right, and no single discourse can fully represent the past except through the application of coercive force, then any insufficiencies in the reports prepared by the Holocaust commissions should be seen as a general condition of historical knowledge, rather than as a specific moral failing on the part of the authors. But, if the perfunctory rehearsal of empirical facts without serious reflection on the consequences of their interpretation does not constitute an outright failing in moral terms, we should at least be concerned with the moral possibilities that are precluded by this kind of approach. If we wish to understand the Holocaust in the context of historical injustice, and if we are serious about negotiating payback for the victims and survivors, then we develop our inquiry within the realms of morals and ethics, even if doing so means that our forays into the past will be tinged

by subjectivity. The best and most successful Holocaust commissions understood this clearly.

- 19 Testifying in front of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, Claire Andrieu, one of the lead historians appointed to France's Mattéoli Commission, regretted the necessity of speaking about French Holocaust history in a cold "scientific mode" that made individual victims and the immoral policies to which they were exposed difficult to fully decipher. While she felt compelled to describe France's Vichy-era failings (and the restitution and reparations programs which these necessitated) in terms of dates, figures, percentages, and assorted financial jargon, Andrieu lamented that there was no way to fully comprehend what happened between 1940 and 1944 without recourse to "a more sensitive discourse." This, I believe, was Andrieu's way of saying that France's contribution to the Holocaust entailed both material and moral dimensions. The latter, she insisted, were "clearly more important" in the Mattéoli commission's thinking and in their eventual recommendations for restitution and reparations.<sup>30</sup>
- 20 Although the Mattéoli commission did not always function perfectly, its final report outperforms most others, including the two treated above. The biggest difference, when comparing the Mattéoli report to the others, is its defense of human rights and the willingness of its authors to investigate the Holocaust in the context of a human rights discourse. Whereas the Jabloner Commission and the ICHEIC both obsessed over infringements of property rights and how these might be repaid, the Mattéoli historians began from the notion that France's crimes during the Holocaust were "irreparable." In other words, no set of financial calculations, however fastidious, could generate a sum sufficient to repay the victims or repair what French policies and the actions of the French had damaged. Between 2000, when the commission published its final report, and the *status quo ante*, anti-Semitic attitudes combined with a program of spoliation and a policy of genocide to produce an unprecedented disaster. While other commissions sought to clarify those aspects of the Holocaust that contravened the values of Neoliberalism (e.g., property rights and legal certainty for capitalist enterprise), the Mattéoli commission stuck to a human rights framework that placed victims and perpetrators within a moral community, whose repair and maintenance would require more than material compensation. What can be seen or heard or understood regarding the Holocaust and, therefore, what can be paid back to its victims, depends, ultimately, on which of these frameworks is employed to sift and organize the data. Only one of these frameworks, however, can take us closer to the traumatic experiences and memories which are the primary source of the Holocaust's agonies.

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 NOTES

1. This paper is also based in part on a talk I gave at the University of New Mexico on October 25, 2014. It also includes some of the findings presented in my monograph on Holocaust commissions. See no 2 below.
2. Alexander KARN, *Amending the Past: Holocaust Commissions and the Right to History*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.
3. “Second wave” refers to restitution and reparations programs implemented in the 1990s. “First wave” describes measures undertaken in the first two decades following World War Two.
4. See James E. YOUNG, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988.
5. Eizenstat’s remarks can be accessed online at <http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/holocaust-era-assets/eizenstat-comments>
6. Antoon De BAETS, “The Impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the Study of History,” *History and Theory* 48, 2009, p. 29.
7. Maurice BLANCHOT, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 7 [*L’Écriture du désastre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980].
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
10. Lawrence LANGER, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991, p. xiv.
11. Irving HOWE, “Writing and the Holocaust,” in eds. Berel LANG and Aron APPELFELD, *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1988, p. 186.
12. *Au sujet de Shoah : le film de Claude Lanzmann*, Paris, Belin, 1990, p. 310.
13. Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 158 [*Le Différend*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1983].
14. The full list of personnel is available at [http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at/english\\_home.html](http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at/english_home.html).
15. All of the reports can be found on the commission’s official website: [http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at/english\\_home.html](http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at/english_home.html).
16. Marion KAPLAN, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.
17. Rape and sexual violence are under-researched aspects of *Kristallnacht*. The court cases cited here are detailed more fully in Donald McKALE, “A Case of Nazi ‘Justice’: The Punishment of Party Members Involved in the Kristallnacht, 1938,” *Jewish Social Studies* 35, no ¾, 1973, pp. 228-238.
18. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, tape T-1300. Testimony of Philip K. See <http://orbexpress.library.yale.edu/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibld=982260>.

19. Adrienne SCHOLZ, "Restitution of Holocaust Era Insurance Assets: Success or Failure?" *New England Journal of International and Comparative Law* 9, 2003, pp. 297-333.
20. See ICHEIC Legacy Document:  
<http://www.icheic.org/pdf/ICHEIC%20Legacy%20Document.pdf>.
21. See <http://www.icheic.org/pdf/Research%20Report-0404.pdf>.
22. Cited in "Insurance and the Holocaust," *The Economist*, March 13, 1997.
23. Adrienne SCHOLZ, "Restitution of Holocaust Era Insurance Assets," p. 319.
24. Gerald FELDMAN, "Insurance in the National Socialist Period: Sources and Research Problems" (1998). See:  
<http://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/articles-and-papers/symposium-papers/insurance-in-national-socialist-period.html>.
25. "Legacy Document," 2.
26. Catherine LILLIE, "Researching Unpaid and Unclaimed Holocaust-Era Insurance Policies: Documentary Evidence for Claims" (1998). See:  
<http://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/articles-and-papers/>.
27. *Ibid.*
28. See Hayden WHITE, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 5.
29. Paolo VALESIO, quoted in J. YOUNG, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, op. cit.*, p. 9.
30. See Claire ANDRIEU, "Two Approaches to Compensation in France: Restitution and Reparation" in eds. Martin DEAN, Constantin GOSCHLER, and Philipp TER, *Robbery and Restitution: The Conflict of Jewish Property in Europe*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007, pp. 134-154 [*Spoliations et restitutions des biens juifs en Europe: XXe siècle*, Paris, Autrement, 2008].

## ABSTRACTS

Historical commissions have played an important role in the most recent efforts to garner restitution and reparations for Holocaust victims and their families. Several dozen Holocaust commissions were convened in the late-1990s and early-2000s in European countries where histories of collaboration and complicity with the Nazi regime were either under-documented or suppressed in the official discourse. This essay examines the Holocaust commissions from a historiographical perspective with special attention given to the methodological and rhetorical strategies they employed when confronted by the traumatic experiences and memories of victims and survivors. While the work of these commissions was shaped and influenced, to varying degrees, by external political forces and interest groups, this essay explores the ways in which "the politics of history" entered into their written reports and, consequently, obscured and silenced fundamental aspects of Holocaust history. Three commissions, in particular, are held up for scrutiny (i.e., Austria's Jabloner Commission, the International Commission for Holocaust-Era Insurance Claims, and France's Mattéoli Commission), and an assessment of their

work is given against the backdrop of ongoing debates within the field of trauma studies and in response to questions concerning the Holocaust and the “limits of representation.”

Des commissions historiques ont joué un rôle important dans les politiques récemment engagées pour procéder à la restitution ou à l'indemnisation de biens spoliés et ouvrir une ère nouvelle de « réparation » pour les victimes de la Shoah et leurs familles. Plusieurs douzaines ont été organisées à la fin des années 1990 et au début des années 2000 dans les pays européens où l'histoire de la collaboration et de la complicité des autorités locales avec le régime nazi était soit sous-évaluée, soit occultée dans le discours officiel. Cet article analyse le rôle de ces commissions dans une perspective historiographique, avec une attention particulière portée aux stratégies méthodologiques et rhétoriques auxquelles elles ont eu recours lorsqu'elles se sont trouvées confrontées à des expériences traumatisantes et aux souvenirs directs des victimes et des survivants. Alors que le travail de ces commissions a été façonné et influencé, à des degrés divers, par les forces politiques et par divers groupes d'intérêt, nous étudions la façon dont la « politique de l'histoire » s'est inscrite dans leurs rapports écrits et a, par conséquent, parfois obscurci ou même passé sous silence certains points fondamentaux de l'histoire de la Shoah. Nous nous sommes intéressés à trois commissions en particulier – la commission Jabloner en Autriche et l'International Commission for Holocaust-Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC), ainsi que la mission Mattéoli en France –, et nous examinons leur travail dans le contexte des débats en cours dans le domaine des études du trauma et en réponse aux questions concernant la Shoah et les « limites de la représentation ».

תקציר: לוועדות היסטוריות יש תפקיד חשוב בהליכים שנקטו לאחרונה למתן פיצויים לקורבנות השואה ולמשפחותיהם ולהחזרת רכושם. עשרות ועדות מונו בשנות ה-90 של המאה ה-20 ובראשית שנות האלפיים באותן מארצות אירופה, בהן שיתוף הפעולה עם הנאצים לא תועד דיו או שנמחק כליל מן השיח הרשמי. מאמר זה מבקש לנתח את תפקידן מנקודת מבט היסטוריוגרפית תוך מתן תשומת לב מיוחדת לגישות המתודולוגיות והרטוריות שנקטו נוכח החוויות הטראומטיות והזכרונות של הקורבנות והניצולים. משום שעבודתן של הוועדות הושפעה – במידות משתנות – מגופים פוליטיים ומקבוצות בעלות עניין, נבדוק כיצד ה"פוליטיקה של ההיסטוריה" המופיעה בדו"חות הכתובים גרמה לטשטושן אם לא להסתרתן של נקודות חשובות בהיסטוריה של השואה. עיקר תשומת לבנו נתונה לשלוש ועדות: ועדת יבלונר באוסטריה, הוועדה הבין לאומית לתביעות ביטוח בעידן השואה וועדת מטאולי בצרפת. נבדוק את עבודתן בהקשר של חקר הטראומה וביחס לשאלות הנגזרות מ"ייצוג השואה".

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