



After the Holocaust: Facing the Nazi Past in British and International Perspective—An Interview with David Cesarani

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This interview was conducted with David Cesarani in Washington D.C. during his tenure as a J.B. Maurice C. Shapiro Senior Scholar-in-Residence at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).¹ The focus of the interview was international developments in Holocaust research, remembrance and education in the 1990s and 2000s, including the Stockholm International Forum (2000) and the expansion of Holocaust Memorial Days globally. However, much was also said about David's role in war crimes research, the creation of the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) Holocaust exhibition in London (2000) and the politics of Holocaust memory in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. Short extracts of this interview have been published in *Holocaust Remembrance between the*

¹David held this Fellowship from September 1, 2008–May 30, 2009.

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National and Transnational (2015),² but the vast majority of this interview has never been made public before.

The national and international politics animating Holocaust memory have shifted dramatically since David's passing in 2015. Testament to this is the critique of Europe's refugee policy by Kindertransport survivors Lord Dubs and Harry Jacobi in 2016;³ US President Donald Trump's passing over of the Jewishness of Holocaust Memorial Day in January 2017;⁴ the continuing resurgence of the radical and extreme right across America, Israel and Europe,⁵ as well as Brexit, Corbyn and Labour's anti-semitism crisis.⁶ Against this backdrop, David's discussion in this 2009 interview of the everyday workings of European integration within the UK Foreign Office and his optimism in relation to Poland's tackling of the difficult legacies of the Third Reich's occupation feels like a different world to the aims of UK Brexiteers to unravel Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU) as well as the Polish Law and Justice Party's passing of controversial Holocaust remembrance legislation in 2018. However, as David's interview also shows, even when liberalism seemed to be at its height in the late 1990s and early 2000s, fears surrounding amnesia in relation to the Holocaust and the growth of the radical, populist right were always present. Nonetheless, as we move towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, economic dislocation, welfare cuts, the refugee crisis, anxieties over migration and the nostalgic longing to preserve the mythologized social order of more 'stable times' have catapulted radical right, populist parties into an unsettling and startling prominence across the Western world.

² Larissa Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance between the National and the Transnational: A Case Study of the Stockholm International Forum and the First Decade of the ITF* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 67, 97 and 104.

³ Dan Stone, "On neighbours and those knocking at the door: Holocaust Memory and Europe's Refugee Crisis," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52, 2–3 (2018): 232.

⁴ Abby Phillip, "Trump's statement marking Holocaust remembrance leaves out mention of Jews," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-statement-marking-holocaust-remembrance-leaves-out-mention-of-jews/2017/01/27/0886d3c2-e4bd-11e6-a547-5fb9411d332c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.546cae04b21e.

⁵ Jens Rydgren, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Pippa Crerar, "Timeline: Labour, Jeremy Corbyn and the antisemitism row," *The Guardian*, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/01/timeline-labour-jeremy-corbyn-antisemitism>.

David's interview also powerfully illustrates his tripartite public role. He was a historian of twentieth-century Jewish history; a Holocaust research, education and remembrance activist as well as a commentator on and chronicler of Holocaust memory politics in the twilight years between the liberal post-Cold War thaw and our current age of right-wing populism and the reassertion of territorial and imaginative borders. This interview captures the complexity of David's role and his astute ability to be both a participant in and critic of these intellectual, diplomatic and institutional processes. It also shows his intelligence and honesty; his incredible recall and occasional forgetfulness.

In addition, it illustrates my youth. At the time of this interview, David was not yet involved in the supervision of my doctorate,⁷ although he had been present at my PhD upgrade meeting. This was the first semi-structured interview that I ever conducted, and I methodically went through my list of questions and offered an informed consent form. I also hand transcribed every word of the resultant interview (a wide-eyed and naïve postgraduate yet to discover the joys of commissioned transcription!). It almost goes without saying that I miss David very much as an intellectual mentor and friend.

Returning to 2009, I was in Washington D.C. as part of a visit to the USHMM's permanent exhibition. It was an ideal opportunity to interview David who would not be returning to Royal Holloway until later that year.⁸ To set the scene, it was 9.00am Monday 30 March and we were in the plush lounge of Renaissance M Street Hotel, adjacent to a Cafe Illy on 1143 New Hampshire Avenue. Despite a hectic schedule for the week ahead which included preparing a lecture for the USHMM and journeying to New York for a Claims Conference meeting, David found the time to meet me before my flight home to the UK. He was bristling from an early morning visit to the gym, yet he appeared in a suit with a dark check jacket and shirt. I questioned him, or rather, given my rookie interviewing technique and his age and experience he spoke to me, as we drank cappuccinos. Initially, reluctant to speak on tape for fear of having to be more 'boring,' David soon came round to the idea and delivered informed and astute insights on the development of Holocaust research, remembrance and education in the 1990s and 2000s. Arms folded, gently resting on the

⁷David supervised my PhD during my supervisor, Zoë Waxman's maternity leave (September 2009–September 2010).

⁸David was a Professor in the History Department at Royal Holloway between 2004 and 2015.

table and eyes focused on the microphone, David spoke as ersatz mood music swirled, espresso machines whirred and clients swept up in caffeine blood rush chatted in the background. This is the edited transcript of our 50-minute conversation.

Larissa: David, before we proceed with some questions on Stockholm, I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your background in Holocaust research?

David: I was asked by Greville Janner, MP to do some research for the Parliamentary War Crimes Committee in I think, 1986.⁹ And that was because I had been involved in a controversy about a play called *Perdition*,¹⁰ which was an anti-Zionist play, it was based on events during the Second World War, and this must have come to Greville Janner's notice. He wanted someone to do research, in the British archives and records office, as it then was, to see whether Nazi war criminals had entered the UK. For some reason he thought that I might be an appropriate person, probably because I was then a graduate student and cheap and that I had some historical training. I did that research and it was surprisingly productive. I then put together a research team and helped to guide that research team leading up to the publication of the All-Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group's *Report on the Entry of War Criminals ... Nazi War Criminals ... into Britain*.¹¹ That was I think 1987. I was then involved in war crimes issues, I'll put it that way, for a number of years, and published a book called *Justice Delayed*,¹² which I think came out in 1992. In the 1990s, the Imperial War Museum [in London] announced its plans to create a Holocaust exhibition, a perma-

⁹At the time, Greville Janner was MP for Leicester West (1974–1997). He had been President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews (1979–1985) and in 1997 was made The Lord Janner of Braunstone QC.

¹⁰Jim Allen, *Perdition* (London: Pluto Press, 1987). For an article on the controversy surrounding the play's cancellation at the Royal Court, including a quote from Cesarani see: Ed Lion, "Jewish Group Hails Plays Cancellation," January 22, 1987, *United Press International*, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/01/22/Jewish-group-hails-play-cancellation/9759538290000/>.

¹¹All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group, *Report on the Entry of Nazi War Criminals and Collaborators into the UK, 1945–1950* (London: House of Commons, 1988).

¹²David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed: How Britain Became a Refuge for Nazi War Criminals* (London: Heinemann, 1992).

ment exhibition. They circulated a discussion document. At that time, I was Director or the Director of Studies at The Wiener Library ... I can't remember which ... I became Director of Studies in 1986 and later on the Director. In any case, partly because of my involvement in the war crimes issue and partly because of my position in The Wiener Library, the Imperial War Museum approached me for an opinion which I gave and it was a very negative opinion of the first plan that they had drafted for an exhibition on man's inhumanity to man, dealing with I think, 11 million victims of the Holocaust. It was really not very well thought out. But as a result of my very negative comments, or because they thought that I might have something to contribute, or a combination, they invited me to join the advisory committee along with Tony Lerman, Martin Gilbert, Ben Helfgott, and there may have been others. I was involved with the Imperial War Museum exhibition development, at a very minimal level for a number of years until it opened in 2000.¹³ Before I should say, in 1998, I asked ... did I ask? ... I'm not quite sure how I did it, but I was an observer at the so called Nazi Gold conference in London.¹⁴ I think I was invited to go along but I'm not absolutely sure, I'd have to check that ... I'm not even sure if I could find out ... But I think because I was Director of The Wiener Library and because I'd been involved in the Imperial War Museum, I was invited to attend as an observer, which I did, it was very interesting. And then, I was approached rather more formally to take part in the UK delegation to the 1999 conference which was in Washington and which dealt with a wider range of issues as well as gold, reparation, restitution and artworks.¹⁵ And I think that the Foreign Office wanted some-

¹³See Suzanne Bardgett's account in this volume of the role played by David in the development of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition. Since 2011, the institution's five branches have been referred to as Imperial War Museums. One of these branches is IWM London. In addition, The Wiener Library Institute of Contemporary History has undergone a number of name changes, including The Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide, and since 2019, The Wiener Holocaust Library.

¹⁴Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Nazi Gold: The London Conference, 2-4 December 1997* (London: The Stationary Office, 1998).

¹⁵Stuart E. Eizenstat, William Slang and Greg Bradsher, *U.S. and Allied Efforts to Recover and Restore Gold and Other Assets Stolen or Hidden by Germany during World War II* (Washington: US Department of State, 1997).

one who had certain expertise, I think they wanted to bring along someone who they could point to as being an expert and I was the best that they could get. But I think they also wanted to involve an institution like The Wiener Library.

The American delegation was to a very great extent constructed around the senior staff from the Holocaust museum in Washington and other national delegations also included members, directors of museums, archives and memorial institutions which were extremely important because the diplomats really had no idea about the issues or the history. So, those figures were terrifically important. I think the Foreign Office asked me ... and I can't remember [long pause] ... whether at that point they asked anyone from the Imperial War Museum. They certainly asked Ben Helfgott, who was involved from the very beginning and he of course straddled a number of different institutions. And I think it was in late 1999, before the Stockholm Conference that I was introduced to Neil Frater from the Home Office and asked if I would like to be involved with the exploration of the possibility of having a Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain. And I think that approach was made at a reception at the Swedish Embassy, if I am not mistaken. It was connected with either the Stockholm Conference or the launch of a book that I had co-edited with Paul Levene on bystanders. I can't remember which was which they all happened at roughly the same time. In 2000, I went to Stockholm with the British delegation as more or less an official member.

Larissa: And, what were your impressions of the Stockholm International Forum?

David: It was *extremely* cold. I remember it being extremely cold. And everywhere I stood to give interviews with radio or television involved me standing in a very cold puddle of water. It was also very boring for long stretches. All of these conferences involved plenary sessions in which politicians and diplomats would make very long and very inconsequential speeches and you would have to sit through them and pretend to be awake. The Stockholm Conference was of a different order to the one in London and Washington because there were far more countries represented at a senior level.¹⁶ So the plenary sessions were

¹⁶ Eva Fried, ed., *Beyond the 'Never Again's'* (Stockholm: Swedish Government, 2005).

extraordinary because you had one Prime Minister, one President after another getting up and making speeches. It was also extraordinary because Prime Minister Persson, who was then Prime Minister of Sweden, was clearly dedicated to making people aware of the persecution and mass murder of the Jews. He had been shocked by surveys conducted in Sweden that showed a very high level of ignorance about this history, a very high level of antisemitism and other kinds of prejudices. This disturbed him very greatly. He was very disturbed by evidence that far right groups were active in Sweden. And at a personal level he felt he had to do something. And he mobilized the resources of the Swedish government in a way that was really quite extraordinary, unprecedented and hasn't been repeated anywhere else in Europe. He put funding into the production of very effective booklets about the history of the Nazi era, the persecution and mass murder of the Jews which was distributed to schools and I think pretty well every home in Sweden. Had an enormous impact and was then translated into different languages, for example, into Russian and was then distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies all over Europe. He was also the leading force behind the Conference and inaugurated a Holocaust Memorial Day in Sweden, which in a sense, I think and again, I'm not sure about this, but I think set the ball rolling for other states. Holocaust Memorial Day had been under consideration in Britain. The British government had already issued a consultation paper earlier in 1999, I think in October or November, I'm not absolutely sure. The process gained momentum as a result of the Stockholm Conference which of course, adopted various principles, international principles and also resulted in the formation of the international, intergovernmental, Task Force for International Cooperation in Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research [ITF] ... I think is its full title.

Larissa: What do you think the historical significance of the founding of the ITF and Stockholm is? Do you think it can be related to certain historical trends in Europe at this time?

David: I really don't know ... [Long pause] ... All of the different countries that came to Stockholm had different agendas which were nothing at all to do with what we call 'the Holocaust'. The Baltic States all wanted to get into North Atlantic Treaty

Organization [NATO], get into the European Union [EU], and get into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. And they had to meet certain kind of, benchmarks, political and social. One of these became the so called, ‘reckoning with the past’, or dealing with revanchist right-wing groups that had appeared since the end of Communism. How important these benchmarks were is very hard to judge. I wouldn’t imagine that they were deal-breakers at all. But certainly some countries felt that it was important to make certain gestures and to do certain things, such as join the International Task Force. There were some political leaders who rather like Persson had a personal engagement which is interesting. The President of Latvia for example, whose name I cannot remember and if I could I most probably wouldn’t be able to pronounce it correctly. She was a woman who had spent much of her life in North America, was extremely savvy and understood very well how sensitive North Americans, Canadians, how sensitive they had become about the history of the Second World War. And she understood that the kind of rhetoric that was quite common in Latvia and other parts of the Baltic region would not be tolerated and that it was very important to make certain reparative gestures.¹⁷

But as I say, every country had its own agenda, and that goes all the way back to 1999 and the Nazi Gold conference. The early conferences ... people ... representatives of different states came along ... to well ... the bottom line was they all wanted to get money. They came along, victim nations, with great long shopping lists recording the alleged human and material losses as a result of German occupation, and they wanted money. Some of the more intelligent included, or simply specified the losses for the Jewish populations but some didn’t even bother to do that. The Turks, for example kept on coming along to demonstrate (a) that they had always been nice to Jews; (b) that there had never been genocide in Armenia and therefore they had never had anything to do with the Holocaust in any way, shape or

¹⁷ Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was the President of Latvia between 1999 and 2007. In 2012, the ITF changed its name to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

form, in the past, present or future; and also there to dispute whether they had traded with Nazi Germany etc. So I don't think that the participation of individual states had anything to do with a European wide movement, it had everything to do with domestic politics, international politics, particularly bilateral relations between those individual states and the United States of America, which absolutely everyone perceived as being the driving force behind the so-called Holocaust-era issues. And indeed, it was the case that America was the driving force. Had it not been for President Clinton assigning Stuart Eizenstat to deal with restitution issues in Eastern Europe ... Not Jewish restitution issues, it all started off with property that had been confiscated by the Communists, often involving property that had been confiscated by the Communists after it had been confiscated by the Nazis etc. The whole business starts in 1993 with the appointment of Stuart Eizenstat to deal with issues in Eastern Europe and particularly, to work on the construction of legal codes and the reform of property law to essentially make post-Communist Eastern Europe a safe place for American capital. And it was in the process of doing that, that Stuart Eizenstat stumbled across all of the Jewish restitution issues, and the survivors, and compensation issues.¹⁸ And the Americans then pushed that agenda relentlessly, as they do once they get their teeth into something. And everybody more or less, well they didn't fall into line because what was interesting of course was that ... [long pause] ... every one of these issues in a sense spiralled out of control and sucked in one country after another. Nazi Gold, well that involves a dozen countries that have been in receipt of, so-called Nazi Gold. And then there were the issues of trading with Germany and being paid in gold. There were the issues of which countries the victims had come from. The same was true of all the restitution questions and reparations and compensation, the slave labour, artworks. Artworks were looted from one country and sold in another, ended up in a third, looted from one place, sent to another, bought, sold etc. All these issues became extraordinarily ramified and would

¹⁸Stuart E. Eizenstat, *Imperfect Justice: Looted Assets, Slave Labor and the Unfinished Business of World War II* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

have developed a momentum that engulfed very large parts of the civilized world. In any case, I don't think it was due to any movement, there was nothing in the zeitgeist. In fact it was the other way round. The discovery that the Tripartite Gold Commission was still in possession of several million dollars worth of gold which had not yet been distributed but which involved the claims of half a dozen, a dozen countries in Europe created an issue that affected most of Europe and was of extraordinary interest to the rest of the world because it was an extraordinary story. And that then helped to create interest, although of course it built on layers of previous awareness. I think what is rather interesting about all these so called Holocaust-era issues is that they develop their own momentum. They quite often develop innocuously out of some minor legal problem, economic problem, and very quickly people discover that it is a huge and complicated business that involves something that happened sixty years ago. Which is very good for historians who were employed in vast numbers to try and sort these things out.

Larissa: Excellent. And you say that there were all sorts of national agendas operating. So I was wondering, what was the specific British national agenda in involving itself in the Stockholm project?

David: Well, I don't know, you'd have to ask Neil Frater who is now retired from the Home Office. He'd know much more about it, than I would. He's a senior civil servant. In the Foreign Office, the people who dealt with Holocaust-era issues were ... aha ... they were in the West European division, they were responsible for, they were usually ... partly working within the remit of EU issues, the OECD also. I'm not quite exactly sure, but they were certainly Western Europe and they usually had a portfolio of issues, they were dealing with OECD, they were dealing with human rights issues in Eastern Europe and then they had this bolted onto their responsibilities. With a bit of research I could find out the names of all of those concerned. There were in the time that I was involved, between 1998 and 2005, there were about four senior civil servants. They came and went with extraordinary rapidity.

Larissa: We've spoken a lot about the political and diplomatic aspects of restitution but from looking at the Stockholm documents there was also quite a degree of space at the conference dedicated to

academic discussions of research, remembrance and education. How significant do you think those discussions were within the overall framework of the Forum? Were you present at any of them?

David: I can't remember exactly which workshops or break-out groups I attended. I'd have to look that up. I was involved with the International Task Force for about two and half or three years. And I stopped being involved for a number of reasons. One is, it was extremely time consuming and the agenda ... [long pause] ... the scheduling was not convenient for me. It was convenient to go to meetings that took place in January because it was during college vacation, but then they started scheduling meetings in the middle of term. Also, after 2004, I left The Wiener Library and went full-time at Southampton University. Whereas The Wiener Library had been prepared to cough-up my expenses to go to these conferences and these meetings, two or three times a year sometimes, it was not appropriate for me to bill Southampton University.

And also I became very sceptical of the work of the ITF because it kept growing bigger and bigger and admitting members who signed up to a kind of pro-forma, the Stockholm Declaration and a few other bits and bobs, and threw in twenty thousand dollars or Euros into a pot, but which actually didn't commit them to very much in practice. And when it came to countries like Austria when Jörg Haider and his party were in government and Romania when they were re-naming streets after Antonescu, I just felt that this was farcical. Now, others who have been involved for longer than I have ... [long pause] ... argue on the basis of their experience that the Task Force has done very important work in Eastern Europe, and certainly there were places like Czechoslovakia which I experienced myself, in which there was a very high degree of receptivity, but even then it didn't really overflow into the treatment of the local Roma population. There have been important educational initiatives in places like Ukraine. I think that the atmosphere in Poland was extremely receptive and the ITF has done a huge amount of very good work there—largely by bringing people with a great deal of expertise and experience from Western Europe, largely from America it has to be said, but not exclusively. Paul Salmons

at the Imperial War Museum made a huge contribution. So, I think there is a case to be made that the Stockholm Conference did set in motion a number of important educational initiatives which in some countries had a real and significant effect.

The work of the Academic Committee divided into a number of parts, one of which was to try and foster the development of research at a scholarly level, but much more importantly became involved in opening and maintaining archives. Paul Shapiro who was involved with the American delegation to the Task Force through the museum became instrumental in opening access to the documents of the International Tracing Service at Bad Arolsen. And he is unequivocal that without the ITF, without the backing of the American government which rallied other governments to press the German authorities who were the dominant force in the international committee maintaining Bad Arolsen, that without that international pressure, then the archives at Bad Arolsen would not have been made accessible to the public, outside the circle of the descendants of survivors, or academics. And certainly wouldn't have been micro-filmed, or digitized, or distributed to appropriate repositories around the world. And nor would the facilities of Bad Arolsen themselves have been properly maintained with an assured future, all of which is now in train. So the work of the International Task Force and the international coordination has been extremely important in the area of archival resources.

I wasn't that involved with educational matters, so I really couldn't say how successful it's been, again, I think you should talk to Paul Salmons who is at the Institute of Education in London. Or contact Steve Feinberg who is at the Education and Outreach division of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. He has travelled the world for the International Task Force, setting up educational projects working with local educators, and Steve Feinberg, whose work I respect enormously, whose judgement I value, he assures me that the ITF has had a huge impact in many countries, in Central and Eastern Europe, in Holland, in the Czech Republic, in Hungary, I think are the places, and Romania more recently. Those are the places that he's worked, and I myself have been involved quite deeply in Latvia, and I think that great strides were made in Latvia.

Although, I'm not sure whether that was due to the ITF or whether that was due to an internal dynamic. And that is a very hard thing to research. It is really very, very difficult to apportion responsibility for progress in the areas of education, remembrance or scholarly activity because most of the countries concerned already had some expertise, there were some people, usually quite remarkable individuals who were doing research, or they were doing teaching. And it is possible that they would have been empowered, in any case, for other reasons, we simply don't know, but there were one or two instances, where I think you can say unequivocally, and Bad Arolsen is a very good example, that the work of the ITF, which was set in train by Stockholm was essential for a successful outcome.

Larissa: So, how were you specifically involved in Latvia?

David: Well, I was asked to become a foreign member of the Latvian Historical Commission into the Second World War. That grew out of my involvement with the war crimes issue really, because the 1987 All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group Report had contained information about alleged Latvian war criminals in Britain and because I had dealt with that in my book *Justice Delayed*, I had come to the notice of the Latvians and I can't remember again, exactly when the approach was made but I think it was 1999 or 2000, that I was invited to become a foreign member along with a really rather extraordinary group of people. George Farb, who was then on the American Council of Foreign Relations, a survivor of the Jewish population of Liepāja, a town on the coast near Riga; a very old friend of his, a survivor of Latvian Jewry and Norman Naimark, a very fine American historian of Eastern Europe. And for a period, Don Levin, a survivor of the partisans who had written about events in the Baltics.

So because of my involvement with the Latvian Commission I was invited to go to a number of meetings in Latvia. I wasn't able to attend all the meetings and conferences over, probably, a three or four year period. They were very supportive, they paid expenses, they put us up in nice hotels, and all of the meetings usually involved a visit to a significant site connected to the Nazi occupation, the mass murder of the Jews. I also got to meet a very, very interesting German academic his name was

Oberländer, Professor Oberländer. When I met him, his name rang a bell, and I couldn't quite pin it down. But later on I realized that he was the son of, I think his name was Theodor Oberländer, who had been involved with Ukrainian volunteer units that served under the auspices of the SS during the invasion of the Ukraine. And clearly for him this was a kind of work of expiation. He was a very fine historian of medieval, the medieval Baltic area, the Kurland under the Germans, a very fine historian. He was supervising a number of PhD students working in the archives in Latvia.

So these visits to Riga were absolutely fascinating. I got to see killing sites, prisons, Gestapo headquarters. I met with outstanding historians, established historians, young researchers and members of the Latvian Jewish community. And got to see the remnants of that community, the social facilities, cultural facilities, the life they were trying to preserve. I also learned a great deal about the rather unpleasant side of Latvia, the activities of the far right, of the veterans of the Latvian SS divisions. I had a memorable visit with members of the Commission to the Latvian Historical Museum—the Museum of Martyrdom, or something like that. There are museums like this all over Eastern Europe now, the most notorious one is the Museum of Terror in Budapest. They essentially tell the story of Soviet domination and occupation and construct the population as the sole victims of totalitarianism, with maybe some small acknowledgement of the fate of Jews under Nazism. But usually Jews come into the story as the spearhead of Communism. And these are very controversial and unpleasant places, unless you happen to be Latvian, or Hungarian or whatever. So those were extremely interesting visits. I think that they did achieve something. The Latvian Historical Commission mounted about half a dozen major international conferences. They brought in foreign experts, there was a guy called Ezergailis, an American Latvian, who has written about the German occupation.¹⁹ He was at the time and to some extent still is the number one expert. He was

¹⁹Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Centre* (Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia; Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996).

rather popular with the Latvians because he said, more or less what they wanted to hear. Then there were some Scandinavians who had worked on the German occupation. But increasingly over recent years, the best work has been done by German historians, presenting a rather different picture of the occupation and the role of local Latvian volunteers.

Larissa: So, we've talked a lot about Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, but I was wondering how do you think the ITF impacted on the British context specifically? Or were those things like the Imperial War Museum and Holocaust Memorial Day in motion before Stockholm and it just continued afterwards, or did Stockholm accelerate the process in the UK in anyway?

David: There is someone involved in all of these matters in Britain who I should have mentioned earlier and that of course is Stephen Smith from ...

Larissa: Beth Shalom.

David: Yes, the Holocaust Centre, at Beth Shalom.²⁰ Again, I can't remember exactly when Stephen became involved, or when I met Stephen, but certainly it must have been round about 1999/2000. I don't remember him being at the Nazi Gold Conference, I'm not sure he was at Washington, but he was certainly very involved in Stockholm. He was very involved and afterwards became a central figure in the British delegation to the International Task Force [long pause] ... In some ways, certainly I began to be less involved ... The British contribution revolved around Stephen Smith, Paul Salmons and Ben Helfgott.

Larissa: So, without Stockholm and the ITF, do you think that Holocaust Memorial Day would have been established in Britain anyway?

David: Well ... that's a hypothetical question. I think a much more sensible way of examining that issue is to look at the process. And it's quite clear that to several important members of the Labour government elected in May 1997, the events of the

²⁰In 1995, Stephen D. Smith and James Smith co-founded the Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre in Nottinghamshire and in 2000 they set-up the Aegis Trust. In 2009, Stephen D. Smith became Executive Director of the USC Shoah Foundation. Since October 2013, he has also served as the UNESCO Chair on Genocide Education. For more information about the establishment of Beth Shalom see: Stephen Smith, *Making Memory: The Story of the Holocaust Centre* (Newark: Quill, 1999).

Second World War were ... [long pause] ... a crucial part of their historical awareness. And I would say that I would sometimes call them the ‘Anne Frank generation.’ These were people born after the Second World War, who had read Anne Frank’s diary at school, who’d seen films, perhaps visited certain places and for whom the events of 1939, and not just the destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe, but the activities of their fathers and mothers were extremely important, in a very, deeply emotional way. And I think it’s no mistake, it’s not just simple coincidence that something equivalent to the idea of the ‘Greatest Generation’ developed in Britain, similar to the notion of the ‘Greatest Generation’ that attains in the United States. The government is considering special privileges for veterans of the Second World War—the ones that survived. The anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the anniversary of D-Day in 2004 ... All of these were moments of enormous emotive power because the generation in their late forties/fifties, whose fathers, mothers had been through that, and they had studied, grown up with it at school, and seen it in the movies, connected with it in a very emotional and personal way.

For many members of the first Labour administration, the Second World War was a defining event in Britain’s history. I don’t think they mythologized it in the way that it was mythologized during the postwar years. I don’t think that they had an unmitigated Churchillian vision. But they nevertheless, as I said, saw the role of their fathers and mothers as being akin to the ‘Greatest Generation’ and wanted to honour them. And there were a lot of people in that Labour government who had degrees in History, even PhDs in History, who were historically minded. And they didn’t have the same kind of baggage, that some of their predecessors had, maybe they had a rather more ambivalent relationship to some of the issues of the Second World War.²¹ In any case the consultation process was initiated

²¹For an alternative account of New Labour’s Holocaust politics and what came after, see Andy Pearce, “In *The Thick of It*: ‘high politics’ and the Holocaust in millennial Britain,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 53, 1 (2019): 98–100. For an essay on how Brexit supporting politicians have politically appropriated the history of the Second World War, see Richard J. Evans, “How the Brexiteers broke history,” November 14, 2018, *New Statesman*, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/11/how-brexiteers-broke-history>.

in the autumn of 1999, I think. Now the decision to embark on that process must have been made months beforehand. Clearly, the Nazi Gold Conference which Britain arranged and held in London was a crucial moment. What the connection is between that and Holocaust Memorial Day is ... I don't know. But the affairs of the first Labour administration were to some small degree preoccupied with the events of the Second World War, constantly—and—you'll have to find documentation or other ways of working out to what extent all of those things crystallized in the decision to go for a Holocaust Memorial Day. And also to what extent it was not simply the result of an interest in Second World War issues, but also of a historical tidying up. You must remember that it's during this period that Tony Blair apologizes for the Irish famine, that the Queen makes an apology for the incarceration of women and children in South Africa during the Second World War. There was a lot of 'reckoning with the past' going on and not just in Britain, it was in the air and of course Elazar Barkan has written an interesting book about this and a great deal has been written about the culture of apology,²² the politics of apology.

Larissa: And, how successful do you think Holocaust Memorial Day has been in the UK since it was announced?

David: Well ... again it's very difficult for me to give any kind of objective judgement about that having been involved for quite a long time. And I can assure you that being involved gives you no privileged access to feedback or information. If only it did. If only the people responsible for Holocaust Memorial Day had any kind of real data about the impact that it has had.²³ But unfortunately polling and any kind of market research is so hugely expensive that the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Home Office have never been able to afford any kind of major survey, an impact study. I—and a group of Southampton

²² Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

²³ See Olivia Marks-Woldman and Rachel Century's chapter in this edited collection. For a recent analysis of British television and radio coverage of Holocaust Memorial Day between 2002 and 2016, see: John E. Richardson "Broadcast to mark Holocaust Memorial Day": Mass-mediated Holocaust commemoration on British television and radio," *European Journal of Communication*, 33, 5 (2018): 505–521.

students did an impact study as a skills project, which was very exciting for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust because it was the first thing of its kind that had ever been done. Since I've been at Royal Holloway also, Humayun Ansari, the Director of the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies, conducted an impact study, much more qualitative than quantitative. I'm not quite sure whether that's published but you could certainly ask him, if he could let you look at the report. I think you'd be best off asking Stephen Smith. I find it very difficult to judge. I think it also depends on what you mean by success. At one level there has been success, if you enumerate the number of events, if you count the number of newspaper articles, column inches given over to considerations of that history, every time Holocaust Memorial Day comes around, then it has been ... successful. But, against what benchmark do you judge that, if you were to compare the amount of coverage of Holocaust Memorial Day to the coverage accorded to say, Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*,²⁴ it most probably has fewer column inches, less people have been involved and probably for a much shorter time. Millions and millions of people sat for two and a half hours watching *Schindler's List*. Did that have an impact on them? I think it probably did. Did it have as much or more of an impact than Holocaust Memorial Day, well that would be an interesting question to try and analyze.

- Larissa: Holocaust Memorial Day provoked some controversies relating to the Armenians and the Muslim Council of Britain [MCB]. Did you expect any controversies when the Day was launched or were those quite unexpected?
- David: The consultation exercise revealed a number of sensitivities—primarily from Armenians and Turks and also from Britain's former service men and women who felt that it would eclipse the Remembrance Day on Remembrance Sunday and other remembrance activities. From members of the exile émigré groups of Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians who thought that it might turn into a kind of hate-fest directed against them. And also from those groups in alliance with certain anti-Communist people, who objected to the exclusion of consideration of the

²⁴ *Schindler's List*, Dir. Steven Spielberg (California, USA: Amblin Entertainment, 1993).

crimes of Communism. They wanted the victims of Stalin remembered at the same time and in the same way. All of those issues were on the table then before 2000. The one issue that became important later on that was not concerned Muslim opinion and I think that's interesting. But in some ways the escalation is glaringly obvious. The Muslim communities in Britain had become very well organized and politically active by the end of the 1990s, but of course it was the attacks on the United States in September 2001 and similar events in Europe, that made Muslim, 'so-called' Muslim opinion, it's not monolithic, the Muslim communities, the focus of much anxiety and provoked in them a certain political response to what they considered to be Islamophobia and unjustified attacks on their communities.

I think that the Home Office, the Foreign Office were well prepared to deal with the sensitivities of the two main groups, the two groups who had been stroppest, who had registered the most ... [long pause] ... who had been most strenuous, that is to say the Armenians over the issue of exclusion, and Turks over the issue of inclusion. And the record is quite clear on how those issues were handled. In the end, the Armenian community obtained a measure of recognition and seemed to have accepted that and the Turks more or less backed off. As for the Muslim Council of Britain, well, that's a different, a different story altogether, and again the attitude of the Muslim Council of Britain, which is not by any means representative of all Muslim opinion in the United Kingdom, its position is well documented and the reasons they give are very clear.²⁵ And the response of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Home Office are also very clearly articulated. I've gone on record in articles so you know what I think about that.²⁶

I think that the MCB unintentionally or wilfully misunderstood the whole point of Holocaust Memorial Day, they exposed themselves in a way that was very unfortunate, they alienated a great number of people, including within the Muslim communities and

²⁵ Iqbal Sacranie, "Holocaust Memorial Day Is Too Exclusive," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2005.

²⁶ David Cesarani, "A Way Out of This Dead End," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2005.

I think in the end they recognized that. And it looked as though they had turned a corner, until last year when the events in Gaza [2008], which are absolutely nothing to do with the events of the Second World War, but they see a connection, caused them to boycott, yet again. But I thought it was really quite astonishing and wonderful that Ed Husain and a colleague of his, very demonstratively took the seats allotted to the Muslim Council of Britain at the National Ceremony in Coventry. And Ed Husain subsequently wrote, I think, for *The Guardian* about why he had done that.²⁷ He made it quite clear that you can express outrage and disgust about the behaviour of the Israeli government towards Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied territories of the West Bank, you can condemn that, you can fight against it, it's got absolutely nothing to do with remembering the victims of Nazi racism, persecution and mass murder. The two things can be carried out simultaneously. And I wish good luck and more strength to Ed Husain and all of those within the Muslim communities who share that perspective.

Larissa: Thank-you. And one final question. Recently, the United Nations [UN] has established an international Holocaust Memorial Day,²⁸ what do you think the significance of that is for the memory of the Holocaust?

David: Well, I don't really know very much about it ... I met the woman diplomat at the UN responsible for it at an international conference about two or three years ago. I get occasional bulletins about their activity and I know that members of the Holocaust Memorial Museum at Washington have been invited to New York to talk about ... the Holocaust. I think that it always creates a bit of ... a bit of a controversy at the United Nations, but I really don't know how successful it has been or the way in which it is conducted. And I think all that happens every year is that the kind of controversies that you encounter at a national level are replicated at an international level. So really

²⁷ Ed Husain, "Let us remember together," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2009.

²⁸ United Nations, "The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on the Holocaust Remembrance (A/RES/60/7, 1 November 2005)," accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/docs/res607.shtml>.

it's just a sounding box for complaints and commiserations that have already been expressed elsewhere.

Larissa: Excellent, thank-you very much for that interview.

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