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HOW MUCH DOES HISTORICAL TRUTH STILL MATTER?

1. In February 2007 the prestigious Italian publisher “Il Mulino” released the Italian-Israeli historian Ariel Toaff’s book *Pasque di sangue. Ebrei d'Europa e omicidi rituali* (Bloody Easter. European Jews and Ritual Murders) The book received a glowing, full-page accolade from the Italian historian Sergio Luzzatto in the *Corriere della Sera* shortly before its release. It was praised as a gesture of “incredible intellectual courage” and as a brilliant historical achievement.¹

Luzzatto nevertheless remained alone in his praise. In the days that followed the publication of the book and, as they admitted, after a merely superficial reading, prominent experts on medieval, modern and Jewish history such as Diego Quaglioni, Adriano Prospero, Giacomo Todeschini and Marina Cafiero commented in the pages of the most important (and other less important) daily and weekly Italian newspapers. Across the board the book was condemned in no uncertain terms. How can the vehement tone that marked the criticism of *Bloody Easter* be explained?

Well, in his book Ariel Toaff questioned a deeply-rooted, central assumption in medieval anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism studies, namely that the admissions by Jewish defendants to practising blood rituals were without exception made at the suggestion of Inquisition judges and elicited by means of torture. Having been subject to torture, the unfortunate victims were prepared to admit anything their judges wanted to hear. Toaff challenged this

¹ SERGIO LUZZATO, *Quelle Pasque di Sangue – Il fondamentalismo ebraico nelle tenebre del Medioevo*, in: “Corriere della Sera”, 6.2.2007.

assumption. On the basis of an impressive reconstruction of various rituals of Christian and Jewish heretic sects in which the prohibited substance “blood” played a central role, he claimed that among marginalised, sectarian groups of Ashkenazi Jews, the blood of Christians (usually acquired for a fee directly from impoverished but very much living Christians) was used for Easter rites intended to damn the Christian oppressors.

In a second article in *Corriere della Sera*, Sergio Luzzatto argued on Toaff's behalf, saying that a historian should not consider certain statements as a *priori* wrong just because they were made under torture, especially if such statements are verified in other sources. The reaction to Toaff's arguments was so vehement that the author himself withdrew the book after a week. Among others, the author's father, Elio Toaff, former Head Rabbi of the Jewish congregation in Rome, distanced himself publicly from his son's argument. Ariel Toaff's employer, the University of Bar Ilan in Tel Aviv, suffered the withdrawal of several million dollars in research money from private donors and the academic senate considered having their controversial colleague dismissed. This threat nevertheless remained unfulfilled.

In the meantime Ariel Toaff has published the volume again, after reformulating some of his arguments more precisely so as to avoid misunderstandings. His central thesis remains the same: in heretic Jewish sects the blood of Christians (sold to them illegally by people in need of the money) was used in rituals held to damn the Christian oppressor. It cannot be excluded, so Ariel Toaff argues, that in a small number of cases the blood used was that of Christian victims. He is nevertheless not in a position to say anything about the frequency of such cases. On the whole, this hypothesis of

actual ritual murder is presented much more carefully in the new edition and the focus is shifted more to the therapeutic and ritual use of human blood in both Christian and Jewish cultures during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In the introduction to the new edition Toaff writes: “The central theses presented in the first edition remain unchanged. I present them again here in this new edition and accept the responsibility for doing so.”²

In his afterward, in which he summarises the criticism of his opponents, Toaff articulates an important position on which he believes the vehemence of the reaction to the first edition was based, namely that his book challenges a dyed-in-the-wool stereotype: this consists in the assumption that victims are by definition completely innocent. That is to say, they acquire “victim status”. It is at this point that Toaff’s case, which affects the Ashkenazi Jewish communities of the 12th to the 14th centuries, touches on the central focus of this paper, in which I want to examine to what degree the currently widespread attribution of victim status to groups of people in the past could be a hindrance to an unbiased historical analysis. In other words, to what degree do historians tend to adopt in their historical narrative what I want to call here a “moral narrative”?

2. The relationship of historical writing to the “truth” is by definition an ambivalent one³. Historical practice is located in the site of tension between a critical examination of the sources and a narrative, perspective construction.

² ARIEL TOAFF, *Pasque di sangue. Ebrei d’Europa e omicidi rituali*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2008 (2), p. 6.

³ Cfr. on this point the provocative article by Hayden White: Hayden White, *Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth*, in: Saul Friedlander (ed), *probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, Harvard UP, Cambridge (Mass.), London, 1992, p. 37-53.

That the claim to the truthfulness of history can only be limited and that the science of history is unable to recreate bygone reality was already discussed by Johann Gustaf Droysen in 1852 in his lecture on “Historik”, in which he concluded that we are only able to recognise those elements of the past that are still present in one way or the other in the present.⁴ Of course the discussion of the relationship of the science of history to the past has evolved since that time and a whole palette of positions on the existence or non-existence of a past reality beyond its historical reconstruction have emerged. Most historians involved in empirical research agree even today that there is a relationship between a historical narrative and a past reality, while this relationship is denied for the most part by philosophers of history and epistemologists. Although, even Richard Rorty, one of the most prominent antirealists, commented, more as an aside at a conference several years ago, *“What harm is done when historians rely on the commonsense assumption that there is a historical reality out there to ‘get right’?”* In other words, the answer to the question of the existence of a historical reality does little to resolve the problem of the “truth postulate” or, in more modest terms, the “objectivity postulate”.

The historical sciences can hardly do away with any normative claim to truth or objectivity, without calling into question their right to exist as such. But the claim to “historical truth” is always seen in a specific context and implemented for achieving specific goals. In a cursory examination of the “Historical Abstracts” database for example, since the beginning of the 1990’s the phrase “historical truth” is used - as was to be expected - most often in

⁴ Several decades later, Benedetto Croce stressed in late Hegelian manner that every form of history is contemporary history.

connection with the revision of obsolete historical narratives in countries in transition from socialism or in connection with issues of “justice”, “reconciliation”, the repatriation of goods and compensation for injustices suffered. T. i. the definition of truth relates to phenomena or aims which lay outside the proper field of historical research.

Since "historical truth" is always dependent on the context and perspective, it is in my opinion inevitable that the contemporary “moralisation of the past”, as studied among others by Pascal Bruckner and Heinrich Lübke, also affects historiographic practice, namely in the sense that elements of the prevailing moral discourse are absorbed with little or no reflection into the historical narrative and without their being sufficiently documented in the sources. The following considerations are therefore to be understood as a contribution to the critique of historical writing in the era of a hegemonic moralising discourse (N, Payne). The point is not to try to solve the problem of the moral interpretation of historical phenomena⁵, but much more modestly to examine how historical narratives are affected by existing practices of victimisation and self victimisation.

In past times, historical writing took place mostly in interaction with national or ideological discourses; under such conditions objectivity was of course subject to distortions too. These distortions have so far been studied in the past more frequently than has been the case for the “moral narrative”, which is being for grounded today.

3. The ambivalence of many historiographic categories is something historians need to recognise, so that they can better cope with the inevitable limits to

⁵ For a criticism of the „ethic relativism“ in American historical writing see, for example, PETER NOVICK, „*That Noble Dream. „Objectivity Question“ and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1988, p. 282-288.

their own normative ideals⁶. But this certainly does not mean refraining from having any such ideals at all. As the late German historian Thomas Nipperdey once said, “that, which we are able to achieve, is not a completely objective history but a more objective history”.

The category of “understanding”, which implies that the historian does his utmost to gain the mindset of the historical subjects living in the period he is dealing with, has been repeatedly challenged because of its “epistemological relativism”⁷. The aspiration to “historical understanding”, namely, is challenged by the fact, that historians will never be able to fully bridge the gap between themselves and people acting in the past.

The moral relativism implied by “understanding” has also been challenged, albeit less frequently, by Geoffrey Barraclough, for instance, who has accused historicism of “amorality”. This accusation cannot be ignored outright. In his/her attempt to determine the motivation of historical actors for their handling in the past, the historian cannot avoid developing at least a partial justification for their acts. It is notable that avowed historicists like Thomas Nipperdey and Wolfgang Mommsen were well aware of such moral dilemmas and called for the suspension of the need to “understand” in some extreme cases such as the Holocaust (or the Armenian genocide or the Stalinist terror)⁸ (N, *History and Theory*, 2004/3). This is obviously not a methodologically satisfactory solution, since these extreme cases must first be recognised as such and defined as “radically evil”, above and beyond “normal evil”. In his important study on the Reserve Police Battalion 101 (N) Christopher Browning

⁶ cf. *Objektivität*, in: ALUN MUNSLOW, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006 (2), pp. 191-194.

⁷ MUNSLOW, pp. 141.

⁸ NIPPERDEY, *Kann Geschichte objektiv sein?*, p. 335.

states on the ambiguity of understanding: “Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving. Not trying to understand the perpetrators in human terms would make impossible not only this study but any history of Holocaust perpetrators that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature⁹”. It is nevertheless true, as the political scientist Paolo Portinaro found, that the Holocaust is also the source of the crisis of historicism (N). This is not only because it is the “extreme case” *par excellence* but because this “civilisation breach”¹⁰ also radically questioned the idea of human progress. Besides, in comparisons between National Socialism and Communism it is often stressed that Communist crimes (as for example the elimination of “Kulaks”) were committed to achieve rational aims: consequently they were “understandable” and therefore incomparable with the national socialist ones¹¹. Although, historians have not often asked about the specific elements of the Holocaust which are not comparable with other genocides or mass murders¹² (s. reader, VfZG, Probing the limits of representations, Cattaruzza, uomini comuni, storia della storiografia). Noticing this I am not arguing against the singular

⁹ Christopher Browning, *ordinary men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper perennial, New York, 1993, p. XX.

¹⁰ Dan Diner (ed.), *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz*, Fischer, Frankfurt a. M., 1988.

¹¹ Dan Diner, “Zivilisationsbruch”: *la frattura di civiltà come epistemologia della Shoah*, in: M. Cattaruzza, Marcello Flores, Simon Levi Sullam, Enzo Traverso (eds.), *Storia della Shoah. La crisi dell’Europa, lo sterminio degli ebrei e la memoria del XX secolo*, vol. 1., UTET, Torino, 2005, p. 15-37; Enzo Traverso, *Comparare la Shoah: questioni aperte*, *Ibidem*, vol. 3, UTET, Torino, 2006, p. 166-203; Omer Bartov, *Elusive Enemies*, in: Id., *Mirrors of Destruction. War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*, oxford UP, Oxford, 2000, p. 91-142, particularly p. 140-141.

¹² S. Saul Friedländer, *Mass Murder and German Society in the Third Reich: Interpretations and Dilemmas*, “Hayes Robinson Lecture Series”, 2001/5; Marina Cattaruzza, *Il ruolo degli ‘uomini comuni’ nello sterminio degli ebrei europei*, in: “Storia della Storiografia”, 30, 1996, p. 141-150. Harold Schmid has pointed astutely to the aporie between the theorem of Holocaust singularity and the contemporary universalizing discourse, in which numerous genocides or mass murders are described as “Holocausts”. Cfr. Harald Schmid, *Europäisierung des Auschwitzgedenkens? Zum Aufstieg des 27. Januar 1945 als “Holocaustgedenktag” in Europa*, in: Jan Eckel, Claudia Moisel (eds.), *Universalisierung des Holocausts? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2008, p. 174-202, here p. 177.

character of the Holocaust even compared with other genocides¹³. My point is rather that historians would need a sharper analytical distinction between the elements which made up the unique character of the Holocaust and the comparable ones. In an essay in 2006 I stated: “The ‘uniqueness’ of Shoah is ...based on the simultaneous occurrence of genocidal elements (and first of all of genocidal will) in an unprecedented radical form. However, the single murderous elements recognizable in other cases of genocide as well”¹⁴.

The German “Historikerstreit” of 1986 also has at its core the (moral and epistemological) Janus-headed nature of understanding. The scandal of Ernst Nolte’s argument was, that in his reasoning, the attempt to make Hitler’s deeds and primarily the murder of the European Jews “understandable” became recognizable. The most often quoted passage from the article “Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will” (The past, which will not pass) is, in fact, as follows: “But nevertheless, the following question must be admissible, indeed it appears inevitable: did the Nazis, did Hitler, perform an “Asian” act perhaps only because they considered themselves and their own as potential or actual victims of such an “Asian” act? Was not the “gulag archipelago” prior to Auschwitz? Was not the “class genocide” of the Bolsheviki the logical and factual predecessor of the Nazi “racial genocide”? Are Hitler’s most secret acts not also to be explained in terms of his inability to forget [the Chinese torture of] the “rat cage”? Did Auschwitz perhaps have its origins in a past, which would not pass?” The historical unacceptability of these statements has been discussed innumerable times. It was, however, rarely pointed out that the

¹³ Marina Cattaruzza, *The Historiography of the Shoah – An Attempt at a Bibliographical Synthesis*, in: “Totalitarismus und Demokratie – Zeitschrift für Internationale Diktatur- und Freiheitsforschung”, Jg. 3, 2006, Heft 2, p. 285-321, particularly p. 317-321.

¹⁴ Cattaruzza, *The Historiography of the Shoah*, p. 320.

emotional response Nolte's article met with, was based on the fear of, even for one second, identifying with Hitler's (admittedly paranoid) motives; it would have made the radically evil in some way "understandable", our distance from it shortened.

With his ambiguous and unclear formulations, Ernst Nolte had only himself to blame for the scandal that followed the publication of his theses. However, another protagonist in this historical dispute, Andreas Hillgruber, is an entirely different case. Hillgruber, a traditional historian of foreign policy and undoubtedly one of the best experts on the Second World War, had published shortly before the outbreak of the controversy surrounding Nolte's theses a booklet entitled *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Double Downfall. The Dismantling of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry). Therein Hillgruber discussed in two separate and quite disparate chapters (a) the expulsion of the German population from the eastern territories and (b) the murder of the European Jews by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Andreas Hillgruber was lumped together with Ernst Nolte and thus drawn into the "Historikerstreit". The massive attacks that he had to suffer can nevertheless only be explained in part as a result of his awkward correlation of two themes or his untimely sympathies for the German civilian population of the eastern territories. In his reconstruction of how the resettlement of millions of Germans came about, Hillgruber included not only Hitler's war crimes but also Allied foreign policy goals (including those of the Soviet Union) and the policies of the Polish and Czechoslovak governments-in-exile. On the one hand, Hillgruber focused his argument on the category of the intentionality of

historical subjects (N), which is today considered rather unfashionable. On the other hand, in his reconstruction of events he questioned the generally accepted causal link between “collective guilt” and “collective punishment”; his argument was that although the crimes of the German occupying forces in the Second World War were singular in their atrocity, they were not the main or only reason for the expulsion of the German population. In doing so, Hillgruber challenged a narrative that even today is very difficult to analyse critically, namely the historical narrative according to which, the mass violence against the German population in the last phase of the Second World War and their expulsion from the Eastern territories are attributed exclusively to atrocities perpetrated previously by the Germans.

Even today, when the state of research on the mass resettlements is much more advanced than in the mid-1980s, it is difficult to challenge explicitly such “moral coherence”, in spite of the fact that there is so little evidence for it in the historical documentation. In other cases beyond the one being discussed here (the more or less violent expulsion of the German population from parts of Eastern Central Europe) the category of “reaction” to the opposite party’s crimes is often used more or less consciously to justify atrocities against them, the “reactive” crimes of course being classified as less serious than those that provoked reaction. Such an assessment, which frequently flows into historical narratives as well, does not often stand the test of close analysis. Apparently it is not only in the public sphere but also in historical discourse difficult to differentiate between the moral condemnation of crimes and the cognitive reconstruction of historical processes. In other words, it is not easy

to resist the temptation to attribute to historical events a certain sense of justice, to use justice (inappropriately) as a historical category.

4. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a wave of new compensation negotiations for the various victims of National Socialism in the formerly communist countries have been opened. For the first time since the Second World War, victims of National Socialism who found themselves behind the “Iron Curtain” were included in such considerations by the Federal Republic of Germany. The opening of such proceedings, which were essentially a partial retribution for the victims from these countries commensurate with the payments made by the FRG to victims living in Israel and Western European countries between the 1950s and the 1970s, naturally contributed to reinforce the victim’s perspective when considering past events. Historians like Annette Wieviorka, Peter Novick, Omer Bartov and Tony Judt¹⁵ have stressed, each with their own accent, that the figure of the “freedom fighter”, which in the immediate post-war period played an essential role in social normalisation and stabilisation processes in both Eastern and Western Europe and in den USA as well¹⁶, has been replaced by the figure of the “victim”, with all its archetypal characteristics of passivity, innocence and purity.

Such a transformation is for her part related to a broader conversion of values which occurred in Europe in the time after the Second World War and which led to an emphasis of civil and pacifist virtues as a reaction to the atrocities of

¹⁵ Tony Judt, *The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe*, in: István Deák, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe – World War II and Its Aftermath*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2000, p. 293-323, particularly p. 298-305.

¹⁶ S. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, houghton Mifflin Company, Boston/New York, 1999.

both world conflicts¹⁷. History writing today also tends to emphasise the representation of the suffering of the victims in place of the historical reconstruction of decision-making processes and structural conditions that could contribute to understanding this suffering. Such an emphasis inevitably leads to historical processes being interpreted in the simple dichotomy of victims-versus-perpetrators. The Holocaust specialist Omer Bartov warned of the consequences of such a simplification a few years ago and demanded that historians not only refuse this simple model but also pointed out the effects that the use of such simplifications had produced in the past¹⁸.

Be that as it may, victimisation and self-victimisation today enjoys a great deal of popularity in public discourse, as demonstrated in how the past is being dealt with in the former communist countries. In a newer contribution on the subject, “How to Deal with the Past”, Anatoly M. Khazanov and Stanley G. Payne define the following trends: “The status of victimhood was clearly recognised immediately after World War II, with respect to the victims of the Axis, but its meaning was changed and expanded later in the twentieth century, as the new ideology of political correctness replaced the class struggle with its own categories of victimizers and victims. Meanwhile, quite apart from the “victimist ideology” of political correctness, a constant revision of national narratives has taken place, with an ever-growing concern to achieve victimhood status, even on the part of countries that historically were primarily victimizers. Whenever possible, historical perpetration is downplayed, while,

¹⁷ James Sheehan, *Kontinent der Gewalt – Europas langer Weg zum Frieden*, Beck, München, 2008, particularly p. 183-273.

¹⁸ Bartov, *Elusive enemies*, p. 137-142.

conversely, new claims of victimization of quite a different order acquire growing importance".¹⁹

In Poland, the publication of a study by the Polish-American historian Jan Gross on a bloody pogrom perpetrated by Poles in the town of Jedwabne towards the end of Second World War led to violent attacks, threats and lawsuits against the author; this is just a further example of how difficult it is for a national community to confront a deeply ingrained victim identity and to admit the darker side of its own history.

The purpose of these reflexions has been, as I have already mentioned, to point out some of the potential problems that historical research may encounter in facing the dominant victim-and-perpetrator dichotomy of public discourse. I hope that the examples have made my point clear; in the following I will briefly recapitulate my theories and conclude:

a.) Historical research has always been practised in a context marked by non-scientific, non-scholarly factors. This has been the case with national histories, the history of the labour movement or the history of variously discriminated groups. But the affirmation of counter narratives or complementary narratives was easier in those cases than in the current public victimisation discourse. This latter discourse claims a higher and more universal moral legitimacy. This makes it all the easier for historical analyses that question even partial aspects of this construct to be accused of moral unworthiness.

b.) The high moral authority attributed to the victim's perspective creates a situation in which other values, in their limited scope perfectly respectable and legitimate, such as the specific morality of the quest for knowledge, are put at

¹⁹ ANATOLY M. KHAZANOV, STANLEY G. PAYNE, *How to Deal with the Past?*, in: "Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions", vol. 9, Number 2-3, June-September 2008, p. 411-431, here p. 422.

risk. To use Max Weber's words, in the "battle of gods" (that is of competing values) the winner may be decided before the debate begins. Criteria specific to the historical sciences, such as the ideal of a nuanced reconstruction of singular historic processes, or a sceptical and relativist attitude towards received knowledge, or the willingness to reconsider and reinterpret given facts, may all be massively affected.

c.) Finally, the higher good of the creation of a common value system intended to contribute to communication in a globalized world could lead to "historic truth" being subordinated completely to other "higher" values (Maissen), thereby losing its status as a desirable scholarly ideal. Therefore I return to my initial question to which I admittedly have no answer: "How much does historical truth still matter?"