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## The dominance of the national: on the susceptibility of Holocaust memory

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## The dominance of the national: on the susceptibility of Holocaust memory\*

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BILL NIVEN AND AMY WILLIAMS

In a highly influential article from 2002, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder argued that “shared memories of the Holocaust . . . provide the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory, a memory transcending ethnic and national boundaries”.<sup>1</sup> Yet the authors simultaneously acknowledged that “ethnic memories are transformed in the age of globalization rather than erased”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while positioning their theory of cosmopolitan memory against what they see as the “methodological nationalism” prevailing in much of the social sciences,<sup>3</sup> Levy and Sznajder nevertheless believe that frames of national memory retain their influence. They imply that such memory frames undergo a synthesis with global Holocaust memory patterns, in what one might describe as a process of glocalization. Although the authors explore this by example of responses to the Kosovo crisis in the 1990s, the precise relationship between national and cosmopolitan frameworks remains unclear in their analysis. The editors of *Transnational Memory* (2014), Chiara de Cesare and Ann Rigney, also take issue with a tradition of what they term “methodological nationalism” in memory studies. Seeking to distinguish their arguments from those of Levy and Sznajder, they draw attention less to the possibilities of a world-

1 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002), 88; see also Levy and Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

2 Levy and Sznajder, “Memory Unbound”, 89.

3 *Ibid.*, 103.

\* This article is a developed version of a blog first published on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance website: Bill Niven and Amy Williams, “The Role of Memory in the Negotiation of the Refugee Crisis”, IHRA Blog, 20 Nov. 2018, <https://holocaustremembrance.blog/2018/11/20/the-role-of-memory-in-the-negotiation-of-the-refugee-crisis/> (accessed 30 June 2019); see also Amy Williams and Bill Niven, “Britain remembers the Kindertransport but is in Danger of forgetting its Lessons”, *The Conversation*, 10 Sept. 2019, <https://theconversation.com/britain-remembers-the-Kindertransport-but-is-in-danger-of-forgetting-its-lessons-123227> (accessed 17 Nov. 2019).

wide human rights consensus and more to the “interlocking social fields connecting the ‘local’, the ‘national’ and the ‘global’”, which they see not just as sites of “convergence and agreement”, but also to a degree as sites of “dissensus and differentiation”. Ultimately, however, there is little to separate their concept of transnational memory from cosmopolitan memory. And in a way that echoes Levy and Sznajder, they acknowledge the continued significance of the nation, arguing that transnational memory dynamics operate in conjunction with the presence and agency of the national.<sup>4</sup>

What remains underinvestigated in these studies, however, is the degree to which the national in many cases does not so much enter a complex reciprocal relationship with cosmopolitanism as seek to adapt it to its own ends or, in a contrasting process, to negate or counter it. In this article, we wish to demonstrate this in relation to Holocaust commemoration, which features prominently in discussions of cosmopolitan and transnational memory. Sharon Macdonald has already pointed to the presence of nationalism in Holocaust commemoration, in the case, for instance, of Israeli Holocaust commemoration in Poland and of the UK’s first Holocaust Memorial Day.<sup>5</sup> Building on Macdonald’s insights, we propose the following argument. While Holocaust memory has undoubtedly reached iconic status in many countries, it is often deployed, whatever the rhetorical noise around humanitarianism as its lesson, to bolster well-established and self-interested national narratives which in effect undermine its universal message. We demonstrate this through a case study of the relationship in the public realm between memory of the Holocaust and responses to the current Syrian refugee crisis. While this relationship can indeed operate in a manner which increases empathy for today’s refugees – in the sense of a “multidirectional memory” as elaborated by Michael Rothberg<sup>6</sup> – frequently, it operates in quite the opposite way, by implicitly or explicitly discouraging empathy. Sometimes, the universal applicability of the ethical lessons of the Holocaust is refuted, its uniqueness is emphasized, and comparisons are resisted for fear of relativization. Sometimes, its lesson – act against oppression – is used in

4 Chiara de Cesari and Ann Rigney, eds., *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), “Introduction”, 2, 3, 6.

5 Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 203.

6 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

an ethnicized “national interest” as an argument to ward off “outsiders”. Even where empathy is unequivocally present – where, in other words, nationalist protectionism has not infected Holocaust memory – such solidarity fails to contend with countervailing nationalist discourses, which remain dominant. There is a danger, in fact, that paying homage to the victims of the Holocaust can (at best unintentionally) take on the function of a smokescreen or alibi concealing ethical indifference and even racism.

If ever a contemporary event deserves our sympathy, then surely it would be the long-running Syrian civil war. Several hundreds of thousands of people have died in this war to date, though numbers given vary; many were civilians – not just civilians caught up in the bitter fighting between Assad’s troops, the rebels, and Islamic State but also civilians brutally tortured and murdered by Assad’s regime. The murderous use of chemical weapons against civilians by Assad,<sup>7</sup> most notoriously in opposition-held areas around Aleppo, as well as the near-starvation of civilians in besieged towns in Syria have been universally condemned.<sup>8</sup> The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, set up by the United Nations, has regularly branded the crimes of the Assad regime as genocidal.<sup>9</sup> Such genocidal interpretations are supported by understandings of sectarian conflict in the Syrian civil war as basically ethno-religious (Shia against Sunni). Comparisons have also been drawn between Assad and Nazism. In December 2014, Stephen Rapp, the US State Department’s ambassador-at-large for war crimes, declared photographs of atrocities committed in Assad’s prisons to be “solid evidence of the kind of machinery of cruel death that we haven’t seen, frankly, since the Nazis”.<sup>10</sup> The former British cabinet minister Andrew Mitchell likened attacks on Aleppo to the Nazi bombing of

7 See “Syria: Coordinated Chemical Attacks on Aleppo”, *Human Rights Watch*, 13 Feb. 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/13/syria-coordinated-chemical-attacks-aleppo> (accessed 3 Jan. 2018).

8 Russell Goldman, “Assad’s History of Chemical Attacks, and Other Atrocities”, *New York Times*, 5 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/syria-bashar-al-assad-atrocities-civilian-deaths-gas-attack.html> (accessed 3 Jan. 2018).

9 See the reports on the Commission website, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>, accessed 3 Jan. 2018).

10 Tamar Pileggi, “FBI says Europeans tortured by Assad Regime”, *Times of Israel*, 15 Dec. 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/fbi-says-europeans-tortured-by-assad-regime/> (accessed 3 Jan. 2018).

Guernica.<sup>11</sup> Assad's treatment of his victims sometimes seemed to invite direct comparison to the Holocaust. In May 2017, the US State Secretary for the Middle East declared that Assad was using crematoria to burn bodies, prompting a spate of Holocaust analogies. In the previous month, President Donald Trump's Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, made the bizarre claim that Assad was worse than Hitler because the latter had not used chemical weapons – apparently overlooking the use of Zyklon B in the Nazi gas chambers.<sup>12</sup> In Europe and America, it has been particularly the plight of the Syrian refugees which has prompted comparisons to the Nazi period – not surprisingly, given the fact that the Syrian civil war has to date caused more than ten million people to flee, many of them seeking refuge in the Western world. Any understanding of the term “Holocaust” must also encompass the experience of Jewish refugees both before and during the Second World War – an understanding we place at the heart of this article. In a famous 2015 speech, Barack Obama claimed that “in the Syrian seeking refuge today, we should see the Jewish refugee of World War II”.<sup>13</sup> Some commentators have argued that it was precisely because of the Nazi persecution of Jews that Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, allowed so many refugees into Germany in 2015. Her famous remark in reference to absorbing the influx, “We can do this!”, was interpreted as “a declaration of German resolve tinged with enduring national guilt over the crimes of the country's Nazi past”.<sup>14</sup>

Comparisons, then, between past and present can arguably serve to

11 “Boris Johnson: Russia Risks Becoming Pariah over Syria Bombing”, BBC News, 11 Oct. 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37614554> (accessed 2 March 2019).

12 See e.g. Karen DeYoung, “U.S. Says Syria Built Crematorium to Handle Mass Prisoner Killings”, *Washington Post*, 15 May 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-accuses-syria-of-mass-executions-and-burning-bodies/2017/05/15/b7b66c86-3986-11e7-8854-21f359183e8c\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.05faa5c1127a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-accuses-syria-of-mass-executions-and-burning-bodies/2017/05/15/b7b66c86-3986-11e7-8854-21f359183e8c_story.html?utm_term=.05faa5c1127a) (accessed 3 January 2018); see also Mahita Gajanan, “Read what Sean Spicer said about Adolf Hitler and Chemical Weapons”, *Time*, 11 April 2017, <http://time.com/4735224/sean-spicer-hitler-chemical-weapons-transcript/> (accessed 3 January 2017).

13 Toi Staff, “Obama compares Syrian Refugees to Holocaust Survivors”, *Times of Israel*, 16 Dec. 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/obama-compares-syrian-refugees-to-holocaust-survivors/> (accessed 4 Jan. 2017).

14 Isaac Stanley-Becker, “In Germany, Merkel welcomed Hundreds of Thousands of Refugees: Now Many are suing her Government”, *Washington Post*, 26 July 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/merkel-welcomed-hundreds-of-thousands-of-refugees-now-some-are-suing-her-government/2017/07/20/2d9e13aa-68a7-11e7-94ab-5b1f0ff459df\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/merkel-welcomed-hundreds-of-thousands-of-refugees-now-some-are-suing-her-government/2017/07/20/2d9e13aa-68a7-11e7-94ab-5b1f0ff459df_story.html) (accessed 16 Nov. 2019).

prompt or support positive political action. This can be motivated by a sense of the need to expiate guilt – as also seemingly demonstrated by the case of the Canadian President, Justin Trudeau, whose apologies for the Canadian government’s failure to admit Jewish refugees on board the *St. Louis* in 1939 has accompanied his officially open policy towards admitting Syrian refugees.<sup>15</sup> And it can be motivated by the wish to live up to a tradition, as happened when the former Kindertransportee and Labour politician Alf Dubs successfully tabled an amendment to the UK’s Immigration Law designed to facilitate the immigration to Britain of unaccompanied child refugees.<sup>16</sup> The lesson appears to be that learning from the past, either from the mistakes one made or the things one got right, is possible. This can go for charities, too. The London-based World Jewish Relief, which as the Central British Fund played a significant role in helping Jews persecuted by Nazism during the 1930s, understands its history as a call to action in the present. It is actively involved in a number of humanitarian ventures and in 2018 secured a European Union grant of a million pounds to help resettled Syrian refugees secure employment.<sup>17</sup> Global charities have also not hesitated to draw attention in their advertising campaigns to similarities between Jewish experience under Hitler and the experience of Syrian refugees, in the hope that this would trigger donations to help with the relief work these charities undertake. In 2017, UNICEF, the United Nations International Children’s Fund, produced a video setting side by side the stories of a Jewish victim of Nazism, Heinz Hirschberg, and a Syrian-born boy called Ahmed, both of whom had been forced to flee persecution.<sup>18</sup> Museums and artists, too, sought to mobilize public sympathy through comparisons. In December 2017, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) opened

15 See e.g. “Trudeau apologizes for turning away Jewish Refugees fleeing Nazi Persecution in 1939”, *Haaretz*, 8 Nov. 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/americas/trudeau-apologizes-for-turning-away-jewish-refugees-fleeing-nazi-persecution-1.6634621> (accessed 2 March 2019).

16 Alf Dubs, “On Holocaust Memorial Day, let us remember our Duty to Child Refugees”, *The Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/27/holocaust-memorial-day-child-refugees-Kindertransport> (accessed 6 Jan. 2019).

17 “World Jewish Relief awarded £1m Grant to help Syrian Refugees find Jobs in UK”, *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter JC), 7 Sept. 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/community/community-news/world-jewish-relief-awarded-1m-grant-to-help-syrian-refugees-%EF%AC%8Ind-jobs-in-uk-1.469534> (accessed 2 March 2019).

18 Jenni Frazer, “Twin Stories link Holocaust and Syrian Refugees in UNICEF Video”, *Times of Israel*, 16 Feb. 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/twin-stories-link-holocaust-and-syrian-refugees-in-unicef-video/> (accessed 2 March 2019).

a new exhibition on the conflict in Syria. The very location of “Syria: Please Don’t Forget US” within the USHMM underscored parallels.<sup>19</sup>

But there are grounds for questioning the actual effectiveness of Holocaust memory – even in Germany, arguably the country in Europe that has done most to come to terms with its past. Certainly, when Merkel decided to open Germany’s borders to refugees stranded in Hungary in September 2015, the impression made on her when she experienced racism first-hand in the town of Heidenau was still fresh on her mind: she had visited Heidenau following anti-refugee violence there and was exposed to racist heckling.<sup>20</sup> And she reacted to the initially positive welcome shown to the arrival of the refugees by reading it as a response to Germany’s negative history.<sup>21</sup> That the much discussed “culture of welcome”, or “Willkommenskultur”, which seemed to inform German responses to the incoming refugees represented the outcome of a process of learning from the Nazi past is surely a reasonable interpretation: Germans turned Jews and others into refugees in the 1930s and were now rescuing refugees. This was how the Holocaust survivor and author Ruth Klüger saw things. In her 2016 address in the German Bundestag on Holocaust Memorial Day, she said: “this country, which eighty years ago committed the worst crimes of the century, has earned worldwide praise for its opened borders and the generosity with which it has taken in the flood of Syrian and other refugees”.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, when images of Germans offering support to refugees arriving in Munich in the autumn of 2015 were broadcast round the world, some cynical voices suggested that today’s Germans were trying to salve their bad historical conscience – a view expressed by the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, who accused Merkel of “moral inebriation”.<sup>23</sup> Germany, it seems, cannot get it right. It is constantly

19 “New Exhibition on Syria opens Today”, Preventing Genocide Blog, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 6 Dec. 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/genocide-prevention-blog/new-exhibition-on-syria-opens-today> (accessed 2 March 2019).

20 “Polizei ermittelt gegen Merkel-Pöblerin”, Spiegel Online, 28 May 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-in-heidenau-hetzerin-beschimpft-kanzlerin-a-1050458.html> (accessed 16 March 2019).

21 See Robin Alexander, *Die Getriebenen: Merkel und die Flüchtlingspolitik* (Munich: Siedler, 2017), 71.

22 “Redemanuskript von Ruth Klüger: Zwangsarbeiterinnen”, Deutscher Bundestag 2016, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2016/kwo4-gedenkstunde-rede-klueger/403436> (accessed 30 Jan. 2018).

23 Georg Blume, interview with Alain Finkielkraut, “Ich habe Angst vor Merkels Gesinnungsethik: Frankreichs meinungsführender Philosoph Alain Finkielkraut über die deutsche Wehrlosigkeit im Krieg gegen den Terror”, Zeit Online, 10 Dec. 2015, <https://>



judged on whether it has confronted its past and, when it appears to be doing so, it is then suspected of having questionable psychological motives. Responding to Finkelkraut, the German journalist Bernd Ulrich accused him of “paternalizing” and “pathologizing thinking”.<sup>24</sup>

In the same article, Ulrich, arguing against the “historical-pathological” view, contended that, while Merkel might have been thinking of many things when she made official policy of the “culture of welcome”, one of these was actually not Auschwitz. Ulrich suggests instead that Germans’ responses generally were far more pragmatic: they have learnt to put their past, or learning from it, to good use, for instance by applying anti-authoritarianism to school teaching, by using ecological thinking to gain a competitive advantage – or by discovering the advantages of “their ability to deal with newcomers from abroad”. The “culture of welcome”, in other words, is an “investment for the future”.<sup>25</sup> Of all Germany’s chancellors, Merkel’s personal biography has been marked more by the former East Germany (the GDR) than by Nazism or its legacies. For her admirers – and perhaps not a few cynics – Merkel was a modern-day Mother Teresa, drawing inspiration from her family background: her father was a Lutheran pastor in the GDR.<sup>26</sup> Others spoke of a “second fall of the Wall”. On this reading, it was Merkel’s memory of the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 which prompted her to open Germany to the refugees trapped in Hungary.<sup>27</sup> Merkel was horrified that the country which had helped the GDR population in 1989 was now turning against refugees in 2015, a situation she felt bound to rectify.<sup>28</sup> Still others saw in her reaction nothing but a sober *realpolitik*: the refugee crisis was threatening to destabilize the EU, so that Germany had to step in to defuse the situation.<sup>29</sup> Ulrich might well be right to assume that the Holocaust

[www.zeit.de/2015/48/terror-deutschland-frankreich-angela-merkel-alain-finkelkraut/komplettansicht](http://www.zeit.de/2015/48/terror-deutschland-frankreich-angela-merkel-alain-finkelkraut/komplettansicht) (accessed 17 March 2019).

24 Bernd Ulrich, “Wir sind seltsam, aber nicht verrückt”, *Zeit Online*, 10 Dec. 2015, <https://www.zeit.de/2015/50/willkommenskultur-fluechtlinge-vergangenheit-deutschland-schuld> (accessed 17 March 2019).

25 *Ibid.*

26 “Merkel’s Refugee Policy divides Europe”, *Spiegel Online*, 21 Sept. 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/refugee-policy-of-chancellor-merkel-divides-europe-a-1053603.html> (accessed 29 Jan. 2018).

27 Georg Blume et al., “The Night Germany lost Control”, *Zeit Online*, 36 (2016), <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2016-08/refugees-open-border-policy-september-2015-angela-merkel> (accessed 28 Jan. 2018).

28 See Alexander, *Die Getriebenen*, 54.

29 Thomas Jäger, “Warum Merkel die Flüchtlingskrise zum ‘deutschen Problem’



– a term that rarely features in Merkel’s vocabulary – played little part in her decision to open the border. Memory of 1989 and 1990 was fresher. Within Germany as a whole, explicit comparisons were rarely drawn between the Syrian refugee crisis and the experience of Jews under Hitler. More were drawn with the flight and expulsion of Germans from eastern Europe after the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> Thus in 2015 the town of Leipzig placed a banner on the outside of the New Town Hall setting flight from Danzig (Gdansk) in 1945 in relation to a photograph of a Syrian woman and her child in the ruins of Kobane.<sup>31</sup> Where sympathy for refugees did not seem forthcoming, it was to memory of German flight and expulsion that appeals were directed. Even before the opening of the border with Hungary, the historian Andreas Kossert had argued that those protesting against immigration are “suppressing their own history of migration”, given that millions of German refugees and expellees had been integrated into West and East Germany, and that Germany had benefited from them.<sup>32</sup>

As we were writing this article, a colleague suggested that the reason the Holocaust had been referenced so rarely in Germany during the current refugee crisis was because it was obvious that Holocaust memory was a decisive factor in mobilizing German empathy – so obvious that it did not need to be explicitly mentioned. This interpretation preoccupied us but in the end it does not convince. Holocaust comparisons are not taboo in Germany but they remain mentally off-limits for many, especially when memory of German flight and expulsion appears to be a strong alternative reference point. It is true that Joschka Fischer famously insisted in 1999 that Germany should become militarily involved in Kosovo because of Auschwitz<sup>33</sup> but the comparison was deeply controversial at the time and, if anything, served to discourage further such comparisons. In German memory, the Holocaust remains singular. When Franco Berardi’s art

machte”, Focus Online, 16 Oct. 2015, [https://www.focus.de/politik/experten/jaeger/die-motive-der-kanzlerin-warum-merkel-die-fluechtlingskrise-zum-deutschen-problemmachte\\_id\\_5018945.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/experten/jaeger/die-motive-der-kanzlerin-warum-merkel-die-fluechtlingskrise-zum-deutschen-problemmachte_id_5018945.html) (accessed 29 Jan. 2018).

30 Andreas Kossert, “Böhmen, Pommern, Syrien”, Zeit Online, 12 Feb. 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/2015/05/fluechtlings-boehmen-pommern-nachkriegszeit> (accessed 30 Jan. 2018).

31 Stadt Leipzig, “Banner am Neuen Rathaus thematisiert Flucht 1945 und heute”, <https://www.leipzig.de/news/news/banner-am-neuen-rathaus-thematisiert-flucht-1945-und-2015/> (accessed 26 March 2019).

32 Kossert, “Böhmen, Pommern, Syrien”.

33 “Joschka Fischer: Rede zum Nato-Einsatz im Kosovo”, in Thomas Schirren, ed., *Herrschaft durch Sprache: Politische Reden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 157–8.

performance *Auschwitz on the Beach*, which compared the plight of refugees on Mediterranean beaches to Auschwitz, was due to be staged in Kassel at Documenta 14, it was cancelled following protests. “Freedom of art is a fundamental value”, said Boris Rhein, the Culture Minister for the state of Hesse, only to add that “any comparison to the Holocaust cannot be allowed, as the crimes of the Nazis were unique”. To suggest that Europe, let alone Syria, might be exposing Syrian citizens to Nazi-like treatment was clearly unacceptable.<sup>34</sup> Given rising levels of antisemitism, sensitivity to the concerns of its growing Jewish community, and diplomatic concerns for its image abroad, Germany’s political class exercises particular caution in its handling of Holocaust memory in this context: most Syrian refugees are Muslims, and some of them at least are deeply antisemitic. This was confirmed in a survey of Syrian and Iraqi refugees carried out by Günther Jikeli (of Potsdam University) on behalf of the American Jewish Committee in 2017.<sup>35</sup> Jewish newspapers in Germany have warned against comparing refugees from the Middle East with Jewish refugees from Nazism: “the horror of the Holocaust is unimaginable”, writes Michael Welner in relation to the issue of comparison:<sup>36</sup> what is unimaginable clearly cannot be compared. The leading fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld, by contrast, did not shirk from making comparisons – between Nazis and contemporary refugees: “one cannot . . . kill millions of Jews so you can bring millions of their worst enemies in their place”.<sup>37</sup>

It bears repeating: Germany, it seems, cannot get it right. The world, and Germany itself, expects Germans to remember the Holocaust and act on Holocaust memory, yet comparisons, without which such action is constricted, are often out of bounds because of another expectation: that

34 Melissa Eddy, “Refugees suffering ‘Auschwitz on the Beach?’ Germans say No”, *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/arts/auschwitz-on-the-beach-documenta-14-controversy.html> (accessed 2 March 2019).

35 Sebastian Engelbrecht, “Befragung zu antisemitischen Vorurteilen unter Migranten”, *Deutschlandfunk*, 14 Dec. 2017 ([https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/syrische-und-irakische-fluechtlinge-befragung-zu.1773.de.html?dram:article\\_id=405971](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/syrische-und-irakische-fluechtlinge-befragung-zu.1773.de.html?dram:article_id=405971)) (accessed 26 March 2019).

36 Michael Welner, “Wir dürfen Nahost-Flüchtlinge und Holocaust-Überlebende nicht vergleichen”, *Jüdische Rundschau*, 26 March 2019, <http://juedischerundschau.de/wir-duerfen-nahost-fluechtlinge-und-holocaust-ueberlebende-nicht-vergleichen-135910404/> (accessed 26 March 2019).

37 Cited in “Karl Lagerfeld evokes Holocaust to bash Germany’s Angela Merkel on Refugees”, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 Nov. 2017 (<https://www.dw.com/en/karl-lagerfeld-evokes-holocaust-to-bash-germanys-angela-merkel-on-refugees/a-41368478>) (accessed 26 March 2019).

Germany, as the key perpetrator with a particular responsibility to the Jewish people, respect the victims of the Holocaust through upholding the tenet of Holocaust uniqueness. This conundrum existed before the current refugee crisis but has been intensified by it. So even where memory of the Holocaust indeed informed responses to the refugee crisis, this was not something which could be volubly talked about, especially in the light of increasing antisemitism. For Germany, then, any universalization of Holocaust memory, any application of its lessons in the context of other incidences of human-made suffering, is fraught with complications.

The situation for Great Britain seems to be easier: Britain bears no specific historical guilt for the Holocaust. In theory, then, there appear to be no barriers to its universalization and indeed in Britain, especially in recent years, Holocaust Memorial Day's remit has broadened to include memory of other genocides. David Adjaye's proposed new Holocaust Memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens will also include a Learning Centre with sections on other genocides. Its closeness to the Buxton Memorial, erected in 1865 in memory of the abolition of slavery, opens up the prospect of also linking Holocaust memory with a critical memory of Britain's role in the slave trade, but this prospect is currently endangered by objections to the choice of site for the Holocaust Memorial – not least on the grounds that it would “eclipse the existing listed memorials”, according to the Royal Parks, currently responsible for caring for the garden.<sup>38</sup> The underlying fear, one might suspect, is that the Buxton Memorial would be drawn into the orbit of Holocaust memory and become a conduit for a condemnation of Britain's role in the slave trade, rather than remain what it is: a self-congratulatory celebration of its abolition. To date, Britain has singularly failed to confront its role in the slave trade with anything like the openness that Germany has shown in confronting the Holocaust. It is telling that in February 2019 the Treasury informed its followers on social media that they had helped to pay off, compensate for, the slave trade with their taxes – right up to 2015.<sup>39</sup> What the Treasury neglected to mention was that this compensation had gone not to the

38 Michael Powell, “Plans to rip up a Historic Park next to the Houses of Parliament and build a £50million Holocaust Museum are branded ‘unworkable’ by Royal Charity”, *Mail on Sunday*, 10 Feb. 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6687213/Plans-rip-park-build-50million-Holocaust-museum-branded-unworkable-Royal-charity.html> (accessed 29 March 2019).

39 David Olusoga, “The Treasury's Tweet shows Slavery is still misunderstood”, *The Guardian*, 12 Feb. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/12/treasury-tweet-slavery-compensate-slave-owners> (accessed 3 April 2019).

slaves but to the slave-owners. In Bristol, the name of local philanthropist and slave-trader Edward Colston permeates the cityscape to this day; plans to link the Colston memorial with the history of slavery are making slow headway.<sup>40</sup> Holocaust memory in Britain has done little to create a “multidirectional” pull towards a self-critical memory of British history: any critical multidirectionality is generally towards memory of crimes in other countries (such as Rwanda, which features regularly in British Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations).

To a significant extent the problem lies in British memory of its relationship to Nazi antisemitism and the Holocaust. Since late 2018, events all round the country, from commemorations to re-enactments, have been recalling the rescue to Britain of about 10,000 mainly Jewish children on the Kindertransport between 1938 and 1940.<sup>41</sup> Lord Dubs (himself a Kindertransportee, as noted earlier), among others, has not hesitated to voice the need to draw lessons from this act of historical rescue: Britain, in other words, should act today as it did then, by supporting the immigration of young Syrian refugees.<sup>42</sup> But Dubs’s words have largely fallen on deaf ears and his amendment to the immigration law had little effect: by November 2018, only 20 of the 3,000 Syrian children originally envisaged for resettlement had actually been admitted.<sup>43</sup> Britain, by December 2018, had resettled a mere 15,000 Syrian refugees overall.<sup>44</sup> Of course, where there is little political will to take in refugees, then it might seem unreasonable to expect references to the historical rescue of Jewish refugees to change this. At the same time, the very celebratory character of the way Britain remembers its response to the persecution of Jews – namely in terms of rescuing children or liberating Bergen-Belsen – generates a

40 See Helena Horton, “Edward Colston Plaque listing his Links to Slavery scrapped after Mayor says Wording isn’t Harsh Enough”, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/25/plaque-acknowledging-slave-owning-history-edward-colston-scrapped/> (accessed 10 April 2019).

41 See e.g. “Harwich Kindertransport Events mark 80th Anniversary”, BBC News, 1 Dec. 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-esssex-46269774> (accessed 11 April 2019).

42 “Lord Dubs: Allow 10,000 Child Refugees in to mark Kindertransport Anniversary”, *Jewish News*, 26 Nov. 2018 (<https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/lord-dubs-allow-10000-child-refugees-in-to-mark-Kindertransport-anniversary/>) (accessed 11 April 2019).

43 Mark Townsend, “UK admits only 20 Unaccompanied Child Refugees in Two Years”, *The Guardian*, 3 Nov. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/03/uk-admits-only-20-unaccompanied-child-refugees-in-two-years> (accessed 23 March 2019).

44 See the Refugee Council’s figures, “Latest Immigration Statistics Published for 2018”, [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/5481\\_latest\\_immigration\\_statistics\\_published\\_for\\_2018](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/5481_latest_immigration_statistics_published_for_2018) (accessed 23 March 2019).

self-satisfaction, a sense of having “done one’s bit”, that leads to ethical inertia rather than action.

Not that this memory has not been challenged. Writing in 2000, Louise London referred to the myth “that Britain did all that it could to help Jews between 1933 and 1945”.<sup>45</sup> Scholars have frequently made the point that the British and American governments did far too little to protest against the annihilation of the Jews (the facts were certainly already known to them in 1942).<sup>46</sup> The historian Tony Kushner, in a particularly critical piece on what he calls the “big Kindertransport myth”, has also pointed out that the Kindertransport was not a government scheme and that the British state “restricted rather than aided the entry of child refugees”.<sup>47</sup> That focus on rescue, argued another critic, masks the fate both of those who were not admitted to Britain and “the fates – including internment and deportation – which befell some of those ‘lucky ones’ who did”.<sup>48</sup> Yet none of this has fundamentally changed the popular image of Britain as noble rescuer. Over 2018–19 for the eightieth anniversary commemorations of the Kindertransport, media reporting has tended to swing from the positive to the critical, then back to the positive, but the popular media have remained largely positive throughout.<sup>49</sup> Thus in 2018 the *Daily Mail*

45 Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

46 See David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (1984; Lexington, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 2018).

47 Tony Kushner, “The Big Kindertransport Myth”, *JC*, 15 Nov. 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/news/news-features/the-big-Kindertransport-myth-kindertransport80th-anniversary-1.472542> (accessed 26 April 2019).

48 Robert Philpot, “Does Britain’s Focus on the Kindertransport hide a Guilty Conscience?”, *Times of Israel*, 26 Nov. 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/does-britains-focus-on-the-Kindertransport-hide-a-guilty-conscience/> (accessed 16 Nov. 2019). See also Dan Stone, “The Kindertransport was Controversial too: It teaches us that Hostility can be overcome”, *OpenDemocracy*, 21 Nov. 2018 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/Kindertransport-was-controversial-too-it-teaches-us-that-hostility-can-be-overcome/> (accessed 27 June 2019)); Andrea Hammel, “The 1938 Kindertransport saved 10,000 Children but it’s Hard to describe it purely as a Success”, *The Conversation*, 22 Nov. 1918, <https://theconversation.com/profiles/andrea-hammel-600266/articles> (accessed 27 June 2019).

49 E.g. Carl Yapp, “When Kindertransport arrived in Llanwrtyd Wells”, *BBC News*, 18 Nov. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-46230748> (accessed 30 June 2019); Amie Gordon, “Their New Horizon: From the Kindertransport Jews to Windrush-era Migrants”, *Daily Mail*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7086195/Pictures-Windrush-era-migrants-sanctuary-Britain-1938-1956.html> (accessed 30 June 2019).

proudly published an “incredible black and white photograph” of smiling Jewish children in a train bound for Britain in December 1938. The article as a whole celebrates the rescue of children from “Nazi atrocities”.<sup>50</sup> What the *Daily Mail* does not do is recall the fact that in 1938 it was warning against the influx of Jews to Britain. It reportedly approvingly in that year, for instance, on the magistrate Herbert Metcalfe’s warning against the “outrage” that “stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country”.<sup>51</sup> The recent spate of events in honour of the Kindertransport have largely served to bolster the image of British solidarity towards refugees, an image cultivated at the highest level – as when Prince Charles chatted away to ageing Kindertransportees at a reception in London in November 2018.<sup>52</sup>

A self-laudatory memory which resists critical perspectives discourages us from feeling any obligation to be guided in our responses by the need to learn from past mistakes. In 2000, Louise London even expressed the fear that Britain’s “durable myth” that it had done everything possible to help Jews persecuted by Hitler was being used to support claims that Britain has always admitted “genuine refugees” and that “harsh measures against asylum seekers are merely designed to exclude bogus applicants”.<sup>53</sup> Supposed generosity in the past can be mobilized to justify restrictions in the present. In other ways, too, British perspectives on the Kindertransport serve to encourage exclusive rather than inclusive thinking. Thus Allison Pearson, in an article for *The Daily Telegraph*, roundly dismissed the viability of comparisons between the plight of Syrian refugees and that of Jews fleeing the Nazis, arguing that the former were already safe in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, and that encouraging an (in her view, presumably unnecessary) journey on to Britain would merely expose them to risks. But Syrians are not safe in such camps.<sup>54</sup> Take the case of Lebanon.

50 Zoie O’Brien, “Incredible Black and White Photograph shows smiling Jewish Children”, MailOnline, 24 Nov. 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6423597/Incredible-black-white-photograph-shows-smiling-Jewish-children-escaped-Nazi-Germany.html> (accessed 26 April 2019).

51 “German Jews pouring into this Country”, *Daily Mail*, 1938, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:German\\_Jews\\_Pouring\\_Into\\_This\\_Country.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:German_Jews_Pouring_Into_This_Country.jpg) (accessed 26 April 2019).

52 “Prince Charles serenaded by Kindertransport Refugees”, ITV News, 20 Nov. 2018, <https://www.itv.com/news/2018-11-20/charles-given-birthday-serenade-by-Kindertransport-refugees/> (accessed 26 April 2019).

53 London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 13.

54 Allison Pearson, “The Plight of Syrian Refugees is not on a Par with Jews fleeing



The risk of the Syrian civil war spilling over into the area is high, Syrians have been pressured to return to Syria, which certainly exposes them to risks, and Syrian children have been used as child labour in Lebanon or even forced into child marriages as Syrian refugee families struggle to pay off debts.<sup>55</sup> Pearson's belief that the term "Kindertransport" has "been bandied about in a lazy and dishonest way by commentators" reflects a will to restrict comparative thinking in a manner which directly contradicts the cosmopolitan spirit of memory of the persecution of Jews under Hitler.<sup>56</sup> Also not helpful in this regard are the *Paddington* films, based on the books by Michael Bond, who was inspired in his fiction about refugee bears by the Kindertransport.<sup>57</sup> *Paddington* awakens fond memories of our childhood love for teddy bears and, of course, appeals to children. Inspirational yet always modest, *Paddington* is the refugee as we would like him or her to be: grateful, self-effacing, and resourceful. He is hardly someone to learn from when it comes to developing solidarity for helpless and dependent, and perhaps slightly less cuddly real-world refugees, who probably do not speak such excellent English – if any. It has been observed that the tale of *Paddington* resembles a Christian morality tale: "he turns selfishness into altruism".<sup>58</sup> When Marks & Spencer used the figure of *Paddington* for Christmas advertising in 2017 and 2018, it made of him a Christian icon, implicitly excluding Muslim children from any associative orbit.

One might argue, of course, that, whatever the nature of Holocaust memory in Britain, it can do little, when it comes to Britain's low refugee intake today, to counteract the confluence of lack of political will and widespread popular prejudice, the latter stoked by far-right politicians and pseudo-intellectual publications. The UK Home Office's "hostile environment" policy – specifically designed to encourage those without

the Nazis", *Daily Telegraph*, 29 Jan. 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/12130175/The-plight-of-Syrian-refugees-is-not-on-a-par-with-Jews-fleeing-the-Nazis.html> (accessed 4 May 2019).

55 "Child Marriage and the Syrian Conflict: 7 Things You need to know", *GirlsNotBrides*, 16 Aug. 2018, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage-and-the-syrian-conflict-7-things-you-need-to-know/> (accessed 4 May 2019).

56 Pearson, "Plight of Syrian Refugees".

57 See Gabe Friedman, "'Paddington Bear' Author found Inspiration in Jewish Refugee Children", *Jerusalem Post*, 2 July 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Paddington-Bear-author-found-inspiration-in-Jewish-refugee-children-498526> (accessed 4 May 2019).

58 Charles Foster, "Paddington Bear and the Evangelicals", *Practical Ethics: Ethics in the News*, 29 Nov. 2017, <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2017/11/paddington-bear-and-the-evangelicals/> (accessed 4 May 2019).



legal right to remain in Britain to leave but often interpreted as expressing principled hostility to refugees of any kind – reflects a distrust of outsiders. Books such as Douglas Murray’s *The Strange Death of Europe* (2018) conjure up apocalyptic visions of the destruction of Europe at the hands of immigration and particularly Islam (such visions of course are not a purely British phenomenon, as recent publications by the German politician Thilo Sarrazin demonstrate).<sup>59</sup> Hostility towards outsiders (European Union citizens but also refugees) fuels support for “Brexit” – yet, as one study recently found out, the more contact people had with immigrants, the more they were likely to vote to stay in the EU.<sup>60</sup> Also not helpful is the rise of antisemitism in Britain,<sup>61</sup> with many Jews now thinking of leaving or having left because they no longer feel welcome.<sup>62</sup> It is particularly Germany, despite growing antisemitism there, that has recently seen a marked increase in citizenship applications from British Jews.<sup>63</sup> It is, to say the least, shortsighted to celebrate Britain’s role in the Kindertransport while elderly Jews or their children and grandchildren are thinking of returning to the country from whose antisemitism they or their parents or grandparents once fled – all because Britain is no longer the “haven” it once was. There exists a general mismatch, not just in Britain, between the universal message of Holocaust memory – that we should reach out to all victims of war, persecution, and flight – and a grumbling groundswell of ethnic and cultural nationalism. Universalizing Jewish experience under Nazism, a process hampered within Holocaust memory by tropes of uniqueness, is undermined within society by antisemitic feelings which

59 Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018); Thilo Sarrazin, *Feindliche Übernahme: Wie der Islam den Fortschritt behindert und die Gesellschaft bedroht* (Munich: FinanzBuch Verlag, 2018).

60 See Rose Meleady, Charles R. Seger, and Marieke Vermue, “Examining the Role of Positive and Negative Intergroup Contact and Anti-immigrant Prejudice in Brexit”, *British Journal of Social Psychology* 56, no. 4 (Dec. 2017): 799–808.

61 Harriet Sherwood, “Antisemitic Incidents in UK at Record High for Third Year in a Row”, *The Guardian*, 7 Feb. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/07/antisemitic-incidents-uk-record-high-third-year-in-row-community-security-trust> (accessed 18 May 2019).

62 Daniel Boffey, “British Politics has Worst Record for Antisemitism in Europe, Poll says”, *ibid.*, 10 Dec. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/10/britain-has-worst-record-for-antisemitism-in-europe-says-report> (accessed 18 May 2019).

63 Toi Staff and agencies, “Germany sees Dramatic Rise in Citizenship Applications by British Jews”, *Times of Israel*, 19 Oct. 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/germany-sees-dramatic-rise-in-citizenship-applications-by-british-jews/> (accessed 18 May 2019).

desensitize those who bear them to the genocide of the Jews and make it difficult for them to see or accept parallels.

In the end, all the hard work invested by Lord Dubs in an effort to change the government's rather reluctant stance to admitting more refugees by recalling the Kindertransport seems to have had little effect. The government backtracked on the plan to allow three thousand refugee children to enter Britain under the terms of the amendment; instead, only some 480 were accepted.<sup>64</sup> It is alarming that the political leaders arguably at least in part responsible for fostering a climate in which hostile feelings towards refugees can grow, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, have also laid claim to the Kindertransport to bolster their own ethical credibility. May did so indirectly, when, in her resignation speech in May 2019, she claimed that Sir Nicholas Winton, who had organized the Czech Kindertransports in 1939, had taught her the value of compromise.<sup>65</sup> Yet it was under May's stint as Home Secretary that the "hostile environment" towards immigrants became official policy, even if, as David Olusoga has recently shown in his television documentary *The Unwanted: The Secret Windrush Files* (2019), hostility had begun decades before with the Attlee government in 1948.<sup>66</sup> Corbyn, for his part, referenced the Kindertransport in a video issued on World Refugee Day. He attacked the far-right rhetoric of division and hatred, while expressing disappointment at the failure of the government to honour the Dubs Amendment: "this isn't the approach we've taken in the past", he said, when "we welcomed Jewish

64 Tom Peck, "Government backtracks on Pledge to take Child Refugees", *The Independent*, 8 Feb. 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/only-350-syrian-refugee-children-will-be-allowed-to-settle-in-britain-thousands-less-than-promised-a7569691.html> (accessed 7 Jan. 2018).

65 May Bulman, "Theresa May accused of 'blatant hypocrisy'", *ibid.*, 24 May 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/theresa-may-speech-child-refugees-nicholas-winton-syria-Kindertransport-resigns-immigration-a8928771.html> (accessed 22 June 2019).

66 Amelia Hill, "'Hostile Environment': The Hardline Home Office Policy tearing Families apart", *The Guardian*, 28 Nov. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart> (accessed 22 June 2019); see also the interview "David Olusoga: Racism, Windrush and the Hostile Environment", *The Times*, 22 June 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/david-olusoga-racism-windrush-and-the-hostile-environment-px5mzfcfh> (accessed 27 June 2019); David Olusoga, "Windrush: Archived Documents show the Long Betrayal", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/16/windrush-scandal-the-long-betrayal-archived-documents-david-olusoga> (accessed 26 June 2019).

children escaping the Nazis who arrived on the Kindertransport”.<sup>67</sup> The sentiment here is in itself laudable but Corbyn, like May, can be accused of hypocrisy given the antisemitic climate within some parts of the Labour Party, his hesitant approach to trying to eradicate this, and the arguably antisemitic animus behind his anti-Zionism.<sup>68</sup> Mentioning the Kindertransport, then, was for May and Corbyn a way of papering over anti-immigrant and antisemitic attitudes. Thus it is that memory of British acts of rescue through the Kindertransport is evoked to create an impression of tolerance and openness behind which intolerance and exclusion can continue to thrive. This is certainly not in the transnational humanist spirit of Holocaust memory.

That remembering the Holocaust in connection with the current refugee crisis can actually discourage empathy with these refugees is demonstrated by the case of Poland. If Britain’s self-celebratory relationship to its memory of the Holocaust is problematic, Poland’s reluctance to accept any suggestion of even low-level complicity in the Holocaust is much more so. In January 2018, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) passed legislation making it a criminal offence to accuse the Polish state or people of any kind of complicity in the Holocaust – a reaction not least to the publications of the Polish historians Jan Gross and Jan Grabowski, whose research revealed that, following the Nazi occupation, Poles had indeed been involved in the exploitation, denunciation, plunder, rounding up, and murder of Polish Jews.<sup>69</sup> Following criticism from the EU, Israel, and the United States, and clearly because Poland wanted to strengthen economic and security ties with the West, not jeopardize them, the PiS watered down the legislation a few months later.<sup>70</sup> But clearly the reaction of nationalist circles in Poland

67 Mathilde Frot, “Corbyn Video calls for Rejection of ‘Language of Hate’, citing Kindertransport”, *Jewish News*, 20 June 2019, <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/corbyn-video-calls-for-rejection-of-language-of-hate-citing-Kindertransport/> (accessed 22 June 2019).

68 See “A Guide to Labour Party Anti-Semitism Claims”, *BBC News*, 28 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45030552> (accessed 22 June 2019).

69 Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Tara John, “Poland just passed a Holocaust Bill that is causing Outrage”, *Time*, 1 Feb. 2018, <https://time.com/5128341/poland-holocaust-law/> (accessed 25 June 2019).

70 Pawel Sobczak, “Poland backs down on Divisive Holocaust law after Anger from Israel and US”, *The Independent*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/poland-holocaust-law-nazi-israel-us-mateusz-morawiecki-a8419481.html> (accessed 25 June 2019).

to the message of cosmopolitan, Western-style Holocaust memory, namely that states must take responsibility for an open confrontation with antisemitism past and present, has been an allergic one – principally because such a confrontation would call into question the national myth of Polish victimhood, which is being politically instrumentalized by the right in Poland, not least in its relationship with Russia and Ukraine. In such a context, and given increasing antisemitism in Poland, it is not surprising that, in the nationalist imagination, Jews quickly become identified as the group setting out to sully the moral reputation of the Poles.<sup>71</sup> On Holocaust Memorial Day, the Polish Independent Movement staged an antisemitic protest at Auschwitz. A far-right activist, Piotr Rybak, objected to the “official narrative” that millions of Jews were murdered with the active collaboration of Poles and asserted that “it was time to fight against Jewry and free Poland from them”.<sup>72</sup>

Rybak is a notorious figure. In November 2015, he took part in an anti-Muslim demonstration in Wrocław against the intake of refugees. During the event, he set fire to an effigy of an Orthodox Jew supposed to represent George Soros, a Hungarian-American Jewish billionaire and philanthropist who actively supports and campaigns for the immigration of Syrian refugees. Rybak, an extremist maverick, was sentenced by a Polish court following this incident.<sup>73</sup> If concerns about Muslim antisemitism can undermine empathy when memory of the Holocaust is evoked in the context of the current refugee crisis, antisemitism can also enter a reciprocal relationship with Islamophobia,<sup>74</sup> blocking both empathy for Jews as historical victims and for Syrians fleeing civil war today. At the same time, in June 2017, the then Prime Minister of Poland and PiS politician Beata Szydło used the occasion of a speech at

71 Michel Viatteau, “Polish Anti-Semitism festers on the Internet”, *Times of Israel*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/polish-anti-semitism-festers-on-the-internet/> (accessed 25 June 2019).

72 Tim Wyatt, “Holocaust Memorial Day: Far-right Polish Group leads anti-Semitic Protest at Auschwitz”, *The Independent*, 28 Jan. 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/holocaust-memorial-day-auschwitz-antisemitism-far-right-poland-nazi-a8749816.html> (accessed 25 June 2019).

73 JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency), “Polish Court sentences Man in burning of a Jew in Effigy”, *Times of Israel*, 14 April 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/polish-court-sentences-man-in-burning-of-a-jew-in-effigy/> (accessed 25 June 2019).

74 James Renton and Ben Gidley, eds., *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe: A Shared Story?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

the Auschwitz memorial site to defend her party's stance on refugees by drawing parallels between Nazi victims and Poles living in contemporary Poland. "In today's troubled times", Szydło said, "Auschwitz is a great lesson that everything must be done to defend the safety and the lives of citizens".<sup>75</sup> Szydło was referring to Poland's decision to resist its allocation of refugees under the EU solidarity plan. In this scenario, the EU, and perhaps particularly Germany, is seen as pursuing an invasive and destructive policy similar to that of the Nazis at Auschwitz. Refugees are construed as a threat to the Polish nation today, just as Nazism was once a threat to Poles and Polish Jews. Ironically, Szydło did not seem to realize that Nazi ideas underpinned her comment, which implicitly defended the idea of ethnic homogeneity against "miscegenation". Szydło, as a representative of a Polish nationalism opposed to multiculturalism, used memory of Auschwitz and the Holocaust to warn against the admission of refugees, not to support it.

Some commentators have seen antisemitism and even a form of Holocaust denial in the PiS's recent reluctance to confront Polish involvement in the Nazi genocide; the refusal to take in refugees also reflects an unabashed xenophobia or, more specifically, Islamophobia. In Poland, the Holocaust is now certainly remembered much more than in communist times, both at grassroots level – where local groups are working to recover Jewish cemeteries – and at national level, as exemplified by the establishment of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews.<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, too, memorials and museums commemorating Jewish history and suffering have emerged since the fall of communism, such as the impressive Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial in Budapest. But powerful tropes of what one might call victimhood nationalism compete with this memory; while Holocaust memorialization means remembering complicity, recalling such participation undermines narratives according to which Poles, Hungarians, and Latvians, for instance, were hapless victims of totalitarianism under Nazism and Stalinism. The tensions resulting from this conflict between the self-critical impetus of transnational Holocaust

75 See "Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło uses Auschwitz Speech to defend Refugee Retention", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/polish-prime-minister-beata-szydlo-uses-auschwitz-speech-to-defend-refugee-retention/a-39263465> (accessed 25 June 2019).

76 See the Polin Museum's website <https://www.polin.pl/en> (accessed 25 June 2019).

memory and the wish to protect myths of national victimhood surfaced clearly in protracted debates about Hungary's new Holocaust Museum (although as at time of writing it seems that this museum will actually include Hungary's role in the Holocaust).<sup>77</sup> Holocaust memory can, in this particular context, serve to fuel antisemitism, which can then merge with hostility towards incoming Muslims to trigger a behaviour that, far from reflecting a process of learning from the Holocaust, actually appears to replicate aspects of it. When Hungary responded in 2015 to the refugee crisis by erecting barbed-wire fences along the border with Serbia and Croatia, and sending refugees in trains to unknown destinations, there were many who felt reminded of Nazi practices.<sup>78</sup> In 2017, in another example of conflating antisemitic and anti-Muslim sentiment, Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, started up a campaign against Soros. The campaign strongly appealed to traditional images of Jews as financial backers of shady international politics.<sup>79</sup> On this view, incoming Muslim refugees represent a form of infiltration, spearheaded by Jews, designed to import Western values of multiculturalism into a Hungary whose national existence depends on an ethnic and religious monoculture. The blatant contradictions within this argument have done nothing to undermine its appeal.

While one should be wary of identifying the views of Poland's PiS, or Hungary's Fidesz Party, with those of all politicians or citizens in those countries, there can be no doubt that these views are essentially populist – that is, designed to appeal to broad sections of the population. Holocaust memory presupposes a sympathy towards Jews and a concern for their historical suffering, which in turn can inspire sympathy towards other

77 Ofer Aderet, "Budapest Holocaust Museum vows to include Hungary's Role in Nazi Genocide", *Haaretz*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/budapest-holocaust-museum-vows-to-include-hungary-s-role-in-nazi-genocide-1.7354101> (accessed 25 June 2019).

78 See e.g. Rick Lyman, "Treatment of Migrants evokes Memories of Europe's Darkest Hour", *New York Times*, 4 Sept. 2015; "Österreichs Kanzler vergleicht Orbans Flüchtlingspolitik mit Holocaust", *Spiegel Online*, 12 Sept. 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/werner-faymann-ueber-ungarn-fluechtlingspolitik-erinnert-an-holocaust-a-1052448.html> (accessed 16 Jan. 2018).

79 Sam Meredith, "George Soros decries Hungary's PM Orban for Anti-Semitic Attacks 'Reminiscent of the 1930'", *CNBC*, 20 Nov. 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/20/george-soros-decries-hungarys-orban-for-anti-semitic-attacks-reminiscent-of-the-1930s.html> (accessed 27 January 2018).



groups. Yet this sympathy is not a given. On the contrary, centuries-old hostilities towards Jews still thrive, despite knowledge of what happened in the Holocaust. And when antisemites peddle these traditional prejudices, they often combine them with other longstanding prejudices, towards gypsies, homosexuals, or, particularly important in the refugee context, Muslims: as a recent volume reminds us, antisemitism and Islamophobia have in many respects a shared history.<sup>80</sup> When antisemites “remember”, it is the supposed conspiratorial and imperialist history of Jews that they remember, quickly linking this to a “memory” of the seditious influence of Islam. Holocaust memory in other countries is also undermined by lingering antisemitism, or at least by a palpable lack of sympathy for Jews which sits uneasily with the message of Holocaust Memorial Day. In fact, that message itself is being gradually diluted, as far as its connection to the Jews is concerned. What Levy and Sznajder have called “cosmopolitan memory”, that is, thinking of the Holocaust as a universal symbol for “what can happen to anyone, at any time”, can become a way of decoupling memory of the Holocaust from its victims: the Jews.<sup>81</sup> In 2019, in Britain, not one of the leaders of the three main political parties referred to the Jews in his Holocaust Memorial Day address. Nor did Britain’s Chief Rabbi.<sup>82</sup> This came one year after Trump notoriously left Jews out of his Holocaust Memorial Day statement.<sup>83</sup> Of course, broadening its message renders the Holocaust relevant for all manner of human rights’ issues and different minorities today, but omitting mention of Jews is hardly a prerequisite for such broadening, and it plays into the hands of Holocaust denial.

In 2016, Oxfam produced a “fair-share” table calculating the number of Syrian refugees that countries across the world should have been able to take in, based on their wealth. Britain took in only 18% of its fair share. The USA rated even worse at only 10%. Spain managed only 2% of its fair share, while Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Russia, Greece, Japan, Korea were evaluated as having taken in 0% of their fair share. Canada fared best,

80 Renton and Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*.

81 Levy and Sznajder, “Memory Unbound”, 101.

82 Michael Moran, “Social Media Storm breaks over Corbyn’s ‘Jew-free’ Holocaust Memorial Day Statement”, *JC*, 26 Jan. 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/social-media-storm-breaks-over-corbyn-s-jew-free-holocaust-memorial-day-statement-1.457496> (accessed 28 Jan. 2018).

83 Eric Cortellessa, “Trump’s Holocaust Day Statement fails to mention Jews or Anti-Semitism”, *Times of Israel*, 27 Jan. 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/omitting-jews-and-anti-semitism-trumps-holocaust-day-statement-causes-stir/> (accessed 28 Jan. 2018).



reaching 248%, with Norway at 144%, Germany at 118%, Australia at 95%, Iceland at 59%, Finland at 56%, and Sweden at 48%.<sup>84</sup> The numbers of refugees since accepted by Britain and the USA remain extremely low. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate to what extent Holocaust memory impacts on refugee intake. It may be striking that Canada not only has a high intake of refugees but has also over recent years begun to confront seriously the turning away of the Jewish refugee ship *St. Louis* in 1939, culminating in a recent apology by the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau.<sup>85</sup> But even if there has been no such apology in the USA, critical attitudes towards the US refusal to take in the *St. Louis* refugees have also been voiced recently (for instance, on a Twitter account with some 65,000 followers that hopes to inspire positive attitudes towards refugees today by recalling the failure to help the *St. Louis* passengers) with no palpable effect on refugee numbers.<sup>86</sup>

What we have set out to argue in this article is not that Holocaust memory has or does not have an effect but to point out blockages to the power of memory inscribed into that memory itself – usually along national and sometimes nationalistic lines. The reluctance to compare the Holocaust with other forms of catastrophe is certainly a reluctance with a strong international pedigree, resisting the transnational flow of Holocaust memory as a universal symbol of human suffering. Only recently, in June 2019, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a stern warning against Holocaust analogies in the wake of the US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s controversial claim that refugee camps on the Mexican border resembled concentration camps<sup>87</sup> – a curious anomaly given that the USHMM has been hosting

84 “The UK has taken just 18% of its ‘Fair Share’ of Syrian Refugees, Report shows”, *The Independent*, 16 Dec. 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/syrian-refugees-uk-fair-share-report-a7478891.html> (accessed 27 June 2019).

85 Catherine Porter, “Trudeau apologizes for Canada’s turning away Ship of Jews fleeing Nazis”, *New York Times*, 7 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/world/canada/trudeau-apology-jews-st-louis.html> (accessed 27 June 2019).

86 Twitter account [https://twitter.com/StL\\_Manifest](https://twitter.com/StL_Manifest) (accessed 27 June 2019).

87 “Statement Regarding the Museum’s Position on Holocaust Analogies”, USHMM, 24 June 2019, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/statement-regarding-the-museums-position-on-holocaust-analogies> (accessed 27 June 2019); see also, in strong opposition, “An Open Letter to the Director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum”, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/07/01/an-open-letter-to-the-director-of-the-holocaust-memorial-museum/> (accessed 6 Nov. 2019).

an exhibition on the civil war in Syria, which invites analogous thinking. But in Germany, this reluctance is part of the fabric of national Holocaust memory, woven into it for fear that comparing means relativizing. In Britain, the nationalization of Holocaust memory takes the form of a laudatory memory of the Kindertransport, one which can become so self-satisfied as to anaesthetize against empathy in the present. And in Poland, remembering the Holocaust is defensively decoupled from an acknowledgment of complicity, helping to preserve a myth of national victimhood which can quickly be mobilized in “defence” of an “invasion” by refugees. The national trumps the transnational when it comes to Holocaust memory.