

**Jewish Historical Studies**  
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

---

Review

**Review: The Holocaust Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London,  
permanent exhibition**

Simone Gigliotti<sup>1,\*</sup> 

**How to cite:** Gigliotti, S. 'Review: The Holocaust Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, permanent exhibition'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2024, 56(1), pp. 159–161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2025v56.o8>.

Published: 9 April 2025

---

**Peer review:**

This article has been through editorial review.

**Copyright:**

© 2024, The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2025v56.o8>.

**Open access:**

*Jewish Historical Studies* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

\*Correspondence: [simone.gigliotti@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:simone.gigliotti@rhul.ac.uk)  
<sup>1</sup>Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

## PUBLIC HISTORY REVIEWS

---

### The Holocaust Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, permanent exhibition

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/events/the-holocaust-galleries>

---

The Imperial War Museum's (IWM) Holocaust Galleries, which opened in October 2021 after an overhaul of nearly £31 million and six years of planning, represent a milestone in museum storytelling. Since then, the Galleries have become the leading exhibition on the Holocaust in the UK and are likely to remain so, even if the proposed new Holocaust memorial and learning centre, which is mired by delays, eventuates. Led by the Head of Content, James Bulgin, and guided by an outstanding academic Advisory Board chaired by Dan Stone, which includes Tim Cole and Richard Overy, with an expert curatorial team, the Holocaust has undergone a radical rescaling and retelling in terms of the places of persecution, and the entanglements of perpetrators, victims, and witness communities. Indeed, this exhibition, as I interpret its storytelling as an argument, follows Saul Friedländer's method of "integrated history" by advancing the intertwined narrative of perpetrator, victim, and local witness perspectives in a museum setting. This is an example of the exhibition as a historiographical text. It also repositions much of the visual canon that is typically found in museum storytelling, and which draws on Raul Hilberg's chronological and operational model of persecution, expropriation and concentration, and annihilation. This post-canonical exhibition acknowledges the impossibility of comprehensive representation, and in doing so, prioritizes recent trends in the historiography of the Holocaust for extensive attention, namely the spatiality of the Holocaust, the micro-historical turn, and the rediscovered history of Eastern Europe's non-camp genocide locations. These emerge across exhibition walls that are bathed in a blue palette that returns the visitor to the daytime streets of Nazi Germany and eventually Europe, with its visual culture of policing and segregation, and the quickly diminishing options for Jews who remained there.

The storytelling in the Holocaust Galleries is loosely chronological, emotionally austere, and progressively, a multi-sensory experience, intending to evoke the outdoor locations (woods and beaches) where genocide occurred. These impressions are evident from the first room, where the diversity of Jewish communities worldwide is reflected in life-size stands with individual biographies, demonstrating a societal assimilation, if not co-existence with non-Jews. This sense of integration is carried forward selectively into subsequent rooms which focus on the Nazi leadership, again in a similar positioning (Hitler, Goering, Himmler, Goebbels, and others), who confront the visitors head on as both people and genocidal politicians. This curatorial choice is probably antithetical to some visitors who may prefer pathology as a narrative explanation of perpetrator intentions. As expected, Britain's role in the Second World War is highlighted through the stories of intelligence activities and the relocation of Kindertransport children and Jewish refugee adults from Europe. A wide range of objects, including suitcases, toys, letters, and newspaper advertisements plastered as wallpaper, tells the story of this often reluctant migration and the difficult journeys of the new immigrants to acceptance.

One of the virtues of this exhibition is the careful use of photography. The curators' choice to position photographs – unearthed from the IWM's collections and other archives – directly in the path of visitors to encounter, on the wall but also to touch and connect with, returns us to everyday experiences of Jewish individuals from small towns and large cities across Europe about whom we still know so little. The photographs, too, are decoratively enlarged as visitors move through the exhibition space and read about how policies of persecution intensified, and deportations began. That the Holocaust is so available as archive and artefact is conveyed through the exhibition's principal provocation: that although the Holocaust's people, places, and polemics can be narrated and designed in the manicured spatiality of a museum floor, the pathways and practices of genocide occurred in outdoor natural environments.

That inference is most evident in what is the most atmospheric room in the exhibition which integrates the killing fields of Eastern Europe and the beaches along Baltic coastlines. This room is installation-as-evocation, a place to linger and imagine the function of landscapes in enabling and concealing genocide and pondering the memory of these sites today (and their rediscovery using forensic archaeological methods). The visitor's immersion in the natural and marine environment then

shifts, if not jarringly so, to the cold mechanics of genocide, namely the mass deportations by train of Jews across Europe to concentration and extermination camps. Those transnational historical transport routes are shown through a forty-minute film that draws on the work of scholars at Yad Vashem. The geography of three million Jews who were deported east is localized through photographs, objects, stories of attempted escapes, and through the physical artefact of a deportation train car, albeit only a half (on one side is the familiar façade, and on the other an open bare carriage made of wood and iron without enclosures). Displaying the carriage continues a global curatorial mainstay of museums, such as Washington DC's and Houston's. The inclusion of the half carriage seems to encourage visitors to reflect on the visibility/invisibility of deportations by witnesses and in the historiographical record. This carriage is less convincing in evoking the sensory dimensions of transport confinement.

Notwithstanding the relegation of survivor testimony to the end of the exhibition, the curatorial team is to be commended for its collective achievement. Visitors would be well advised to consult the accompanying book, *The Holocaust* (by James Bulgin, IWM, 2021), which draws on the content of the Holocaust Galleries. Reading that book underscores the intellectual depth of the Galleries' approach to curation, which includes historiographically anchored storytelling, the rejection of pastiche in spatial design and narrative emphases, the elevation of empirical records and life stories, and a sensitive depiction of Jewish and non-Jewish victims. The representational challenge of curating the Holocaust and its complex perpetrator-persecutor-victim-witness societies, of selecting which histories to narrate and marginalize, of whose biographies and communities to prioritize, and to retell the prejudiced responses of governments and leaders, has been aided by an impressively judged dispersion of 4,000 photographs and 2,000 objects across the exhibition floor. That embedding of evidence produces a refreshingly bold landscape of post-canonical curation, and one that both advances and challenges the public understanding of the Holocaust.

Simone Gigliotti  
Royal Holloway, University of London