A New Schema for Cultural Memory

Andy Pearce (University College London)

Introduction

A generation ago, at the turn of the millennium, Holocaust consciousness in Britain entered a new phase. After a decade in which the presence of the Holocaust in British society had exponentially increased, the country entered its own "long 'Year of the Holocaust'" (Pearce 2014, 204) and saw the foundations of its cultural memory fundamentally transformed. Central to this development was a process of institutionalisation, by which the country acquired in a few short years its own national day of commemoration and its first permanent Holocaust exhibition in one of its leading museums. Occurring against a cultural backdrop increasingly suffused with representational activity, Holocaust Memorial Day and the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition (IWMHE) stood as veritable expressions of the new-found prominence of the Holocaust in British life.

At the time contemporaries struggled to process what was taking place. Vigorous and wide-ranging debate occurred in multiple forums. Across television and radio, and in academic journals and newspaper columns, commentators reflected on the possible reasons for the developments, their meaning for *fin de siècle* Britain, and the role that Holocaust memory should or shouldn't play in a country geographically and experientially distanced from the genocide. The heat generated was further fanned by the Holocaust politics pursued by the then Labour government, with considerable tensions around the movement to institutionalise cultural memory.

Despite this, the creation of Holocaust Memorial Day and the opening of the IWMHE in the early 2000s was a critical waypoint in the history of Holocaust-related memory work and representation in post-war Britain. Whilst they were by no means the only agents or agencies, the semiotic potency and practical ability to engage mass audiences meant Holocaust Memorial Day and IWMHE made telling contributions in heightening cultural

awareness of the Holocaust. However, it would be erroneous to presume that the Holocaust Memorial Day and IWMHE worked in the same and equal ways. In the case of IWMHE, for example, as much as it was part of the institutionalisation process, it was also proof that such processes do not "produce complete uniformity in cultural memory" (Pearce 2014, 208) for the IWMHE was different and distinct from other initiatives designed to engineer cultural memory in operation at the time.

This latter truth is especially relevant for this chapter. Here, I want to argue that with the opening of the Holocaust Galleries, the Imperial War Museum (IWM) has again made a significant intervention into Britain's current Holocaust culture. Yet if the status of museums as cultural institutions means this was to some extent inevitable, the nature of this intervention and its potential importance could not be foreseen. Stephan Jaeger has observed that in our contemporary age "the museum can mirror the stored cultural memory of its time, or it can shape the formation of new memory patterns" (2020, 9). In the case of the Holocaust Galleries, we can see that both potentialities hold true and are simultaneously in operation. Because of this, whilst the Holocaust Galleries are not without fault or beyond criticism, we can view them as representing a new schema for cultural memory of the Holocaust.

The Need for a New Approach: the IWMHE and Holocaust Culture in the Mid-2010s

To understand the significance of the Holocaust Galleries we need to know something of the contexts in which they were conceived and developed. Some of these were institutional and internal to the IWM; they included the broader context of the Museum's original masterplan for the redevelopment of its First World War exhibition, a desire to see the original Holocaust Exhibition "refreshed with new scholarship" (IWM 2014, 10), and a realisation that simply decanting and repainting the IWMHE was not sufficient. Others were more cultural, laying

beyond the immediate realm of the IWM in the representational activity, memory work, and Holocaust politics of British society.

In terms of this latter set of factors and forces, it is worth reestablishing something of the situation in the early 2000s. Some years ago, as part of an attempt to analyse how and why the Holocaust entered Britain's historical culture, I searched for a conceptual framework to capture the purpose(s) that memories of the Holocaust were being used for. I settled on the concept of Holocaust consciousness, and finding this under-theorized, I tried to develop a working idea of what this amounted to. My sense was that Holocaust consciousness had to be something like historical consciousness but fundamentally different to it: it had to "motion to the undermining of traditional, modernist conceptions of temporality and orientation, gesturing instead to the fragmented, contested, and uncertain ways of seeing and being in the world" (Pearce 2014, 10-11). With hindsight, my assertion that "Holocaust consciousness should indeed signify a new stage in the evolution of historical thinking" feels today like somewhat lofty idealism. But the principle that the Holocaust should force us to "review and refashion the ways in which we think about the past, the present, and the future" (Pearce 2014, 231) does, to my mind, still have a kernel of truth.

In the event, I found the realities of Holocaust consciousness fell somewhat short of this ideal. Instead of occasioning greater self-reflexivity or interrogation, British Holocaust culture in the early 2000s was characterised by an increasing critical mass of activity which very much ranged in quality. Some of this enterprise was admirable, progressive, and valuable. Some endeavours were driven by good intentions, but somewhat questionable in their rationale and/or approach. Much of this work was problematic – doing little to challenge the practices and mentalities thrown into relief by the Holocaust, and/or simply resulting in the production and consumption of kitsch, often for the apparent purpose of self-gratification.

The IWMHE was very much not in this latter category. In several fundamental and important respects, the exhibition made a significant and much needed contribution to improving the understanding of its visitors – which, by the 2010s, was well into the millions (Bardgett 2010). Furthermore, in its fealty to history and the historical record, the exhibition

represented a credible attempt to eschew the ineffable and ritual for knowledge and learning; a move even more necessary given the "Holocaust piety" of the 1990s (Rose 1996, 43). Thus, as much as the IWMHE was "fitting *lieu de memoire* for British Holocaust consciousness" (Pearce 2014, 132) it was still cut from very different cloth to other cultural acts of the time.

The wider contextual circumstances of the IWMHE and its approach to the Holocaust is important for how they informed the new Holocaust Galleries. Elsewhere in this volume we are given further insight into the various connections between the former exhibition and the new Galleries. From these we know, for instance, that the IWMHE's approach to historical issues, its handling of source material, and its underlying principles all fed into the vision for the Holocaust Galleries. In this manner, while the IWMHE laid foundations, the Holocaust Galleries were envisaged as being a different edifice.

Another point of contact between the IWMHE and the Holocaust Galleries is the historian David Cesarani. Described by Chad Macdonald (2020, 405) as the "key intellectual figure associated with Holocaust remembrance" in Britain in the 1990s and 2000s, Cesarani has been shown by Macdonald and others (Bardgett 2019) to have been an important influence on the IWMHE. Notably, however, despite Cesarani's contribution to the development of the IWMHE and his role in the establishment of the Holocaust Memorial Day (Century & Marks-Woldman 2019), his "optimism surrounding Holocaust remembrance receded" (Macdonald 2020, 425) in the years after 2001. This was to culminate in a remarkable broadside launched by Cesarani in the introduction to *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933-1948*, published in 2016.

In a searing treatise on the condition of Britain's Holocaust culture, Cesarani was excorticating about "a yawning gulf between popular understanding of this history and current scholarship on the subject." For him, this was engendered by misguided representations in popular culture; "ill-informed lessons at school; and "misconceptions" that were "reinforced by the edited and instrumentalized versions of purveyed by campaigning bodies and the constellation of organizations dedicated to education and commemoration"

(Cesarani 2016, xv). To Cesarani, this gap – or "divergence" – had not been closed by the advances made in public perceptions of Holocaust memory in the 1990s; on the contrary, it had become even more "acute" – partly thanks to the prevalence and popularisation of a "standardized version" of the Holocaust which bore scant resemblance to historical actuality (Cesarani 2016, xxviii–xxix). Whilst the role that he had played in Holocaust politics since the mid-1990s evidently weighed heavily on Cesarani, his positionality added but greater force and credibility to his withering analysis.

Within academic circles, Cesarani's diagnosis was met with many nodding heads, but they did not necessarily prompt significant soul-searching in the hinterland beyond. In part, this may be attributable to how Cesarani's untimely death and the posthumous nature of *Final Solution* meant its reception became unavoidably co-mixed with tributes and salutations of his achievements and life's work. Equally, however, it is likely many chose to ignore Cesarani's commentary on account of the uncomfortable questions that it posed. This was to be lamented – not least because there was a body of evidence which validated many of Cesarani's claims.

Towards the end of 2015, shortly after Cesarani's death and a few months before the publication of *Final Solution*, myself and colleagues at University College London's Centre for Holocaust Education, completed a two-year investigation into knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust among 11–18-year-olds in England. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, we employed a large-scale survey instrument (completed by 7,952 students) complemented by focus-group interviews (conducted with 244 students) in what remains "the largest and most detailed study of its kind" (Foster et al. 2016, 20). Unsurprisingly we found not a monochrome landscape but one shaded gray, yet through these shadows were several clear and arresting findings.

As we put it in our Executive Summary, "the majority of those who took part in this study appeared to lack core knowledge and understanding of key features of this history" with "student knowledge and conceptual understanding […] often limited and based on inaccuracies and misconceptions" (Foster et al., 2016, 1). Coming on the back of twenty-five

years of state-mandated teaching about the Holocaust in English secondary schools, we believed the findings showed that all was far from well in the realm of 'Holocaust education'. Accordingly, we argued it was critical that "educational spaces […] be found or reclaimed in which it is possible to critically examine, deconstruct and challenge many of the core ideas and assumptions that underpin dominant contemporary British discourses on the Holocaust" (Foster et al. 2016, 204). Tom Lawson, in his response to the research, was even more reproachful: "it is perhaps the most sustained, detailed and empirically underpinned investigation into the collective memory of the Holocaust in Britain that we have ever seen," he wrote, and it "suggests that we can learn very few of the so-called lessons because we know so very little about what occurred" (Lawson 2017, 345, 360).

Our research was familiar to Cesarani. In his capacity of Historical Advisor to the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission (2013–2015), he attended briefings where we had shared emerging findings, and he also – typically generously – provided historical counsel on several chapters in our final report. In what would prove to be his final words in this capacity he remarked in correspondence to us that "the answers [from students] are fascinating – as well as troubling" (Cesarani 2015). In this way, whilst our findings were not the cause of Cesarani's chagrin, they evidently provided grist to his mill and provided empirical confirmation of what he had suspected: that by the mid-2010s there was something quite rotten about Britain's Holocaust culture.

Importantly, Cesarani's disquiet and our student research was not lost on those charged with the development of the Holocaust Galleries. James Bulgin, Head of Content for the Galleries, has recorded for example how the arguments of *Final Solution* impacted the Galleries in various ways (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 53–54). Meanwhile, in a pamphlet produced to outline the IWM's plans for the Phase 2 development of the London site, explicit reference was made to the UCL research, with particular mention made of students' failure to connect the Second World War and the Holocaust; their belief "the Holocaust was perpetrated by Hitler and an elite group loyal to him"; and the fact "there was very little understanding of why Jewish people were persecuted" (IWM 2017, 10).

As much as the Holocaust Galleries grew out of important advances at the turn of the millennium, they were also clearly influenced by the culture that had emerged with those developments. It was a culture where, despite levels of Holocaust awareness and Holocaust-related activity being greater than ever before, there were nevertheless several systemic issues. These included a highly problematic deviation between academic knowledge of the Holocaust and popular understandings; the prevalence of troublesome myths and misconceptions in culture and society; and the growth of what might be thought of as a 'British' "rhetorical Holocaust" (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 21) – the latter of which was perhaps most visibly evident in the Terms of Reference of the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission, its *Britain's Promise to Remember* report (2015), and its resolve to construct a new national Holocaust memorial adjacent to the Palace of Westminster (Lawson & Pearce 2020; Pearce 2019; 2020; Tollerton 2020).

We know several of these trends directly informed the shaping of the Holocaust Galleries. In this way, it becomes possible to think of the Galleries as functioning from the outset *against* the prevailing historical and memory culture of the day. Critically, as problematic as the dominant Holocaust culture was in the mid-2010s, it also paradoxically helped to create this possibility because the embedded nature of cultural Holocaust memory changed the terms of the representational debate. As Emily-Jayne Stiles observes, in the late 1990s and early 2000s "the question was whether Britain should have a dedicated national Holocaust exhibition"; by contrast, in the mid- to late 2010s the Holocaust had been "wholly accepted as part of the national story" – meaning that now "questions focus on how that story should be told, not if" (2022, 202).

Toward a New Schema

This volume of essays stands as a collection of explorations of how the Holocaust Galleries tell their story. As other contributors have shown, the approach of the Galleries is creative

and innovative.[1] Through an array of representational strategies and curatorial techniques, the Galleries go about 'the how' in ways that are novel and provocative – all the while drawing on ideas and initiating practices which plough new furrows in terms of Holocaust museology and reframe the roles and responsibilities of curators and visitors alike. As this book demonstrates, there is an immense amount to be said about the Galleries and much discussion to be had about the questions that arise out of them.

For our concerns in this essay, however, I am interested in how the Galleries offer new ways for thinking about the Holocaust and how, in turn, they might provide for the construction of new cultural memories. I want to focus on what I see as three ways these potentialities are actualised. The first relates to how the Holocaust Galleries frame themselves for visitors. The second, is how the Galleries seek to close what I have called "the experiential and geographical distance between Britain and the events of the Holocaust" (Pearce 2014, 25). And the third concerns the Galleries handling of history and memory – both in the sense of addressing the "yawning gulf" observed by Cesarani, and in terms of how memory-work is treated.

Frames and Framing

In this volume and elsewhere Bulgin has offered several insights into how matters relating to experience and the experiential are approached within the Holocaust Galleries. Of particular interest is his view that museums can never be solely about "the transaction of information" (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 37) and that there is thus a need to consider the role of the experiential in the visitors' experience. Expanding further, Bulgin has explained how "we wanted to think about how to allow for a fundamental gap to remain between the familiar and the unfamiliar, while forming a relationship between the two" – the reason being that this generated an "active tension" in which "you constantly want to resolve something which is irresolvable" (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 59).

[1] #cross-reference particularly chapters Lease & Jaeger.

A useful analytical tool for seeing how the Holocaust Galleries pursue these objectives is that of “framing”. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka has explained how frames and framing bring together “public articulations” with “private makings of sense”; they are “essentially about the limits to the scope of possible interpretations” and “the likely range of meanings” within a given act or exercise. In this way, Irwin-Zarecka says that “our interpretative practices” are “patterned by the ways we define the situation at hand. And how we define the situation at hand is largely, but not totally, dependent on shared framing strategies and devices” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 4–5). At times “explicit” but also “subtle, relying on our common sense of the world for effectiveness”, Irwin-Zarecka (1994, 6–7) emphasises how the framing process is always vibrant and dynamic and because of this new meanings are able to emerge.

We should recall here that the idea of the Galleries telling visitors what to feel is something anathema to their curators and designers (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 70; Casson Mann 2024). Bulgin (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 51) has made it clear the structure of the Galleries is underpinned by a resolve “to empower visitors to make their own cognitive choices.” Frames and framing within the Galleries then is about establishing affective engagement and stimulating cognition rather than imparting emotion or thought.

One of the best places to observe framing is the entrance area. Entry points are critically important in any museum, exhibition, or gallery on account of how they perform multiple functions. As areas of orientation which inaugurate the visitor to what lies ahead, they communicate key messages, establish central ideas, and construct the codes of conduct and terms of engagement that the visitor is intended to adopt. The entrance to the Holocaust Galleries fulfils all these functions but in ways in keeping with the notion of frames advanced by Irwin-Zarecka. There is, for example, the literal and figurative framing of this space as the entrance to a *gallery* rather than an exhibition; a motif which is further reinforced through the aesthetics and configuration of this space. This tapping into the experience or expectations that a visitor might have when visiting a gallery is also activated by the sense of artistry that pervades this area – be it in the animated form of the

thoughtfully shot media film, the “Presence of Absence”, or the enveloping soundscape with its single, hammered piano key set against a haunted swirling brown noise.

Cumulatively, these aspects act to connect the visitor with referential frames of what galleries look like, what they contain, and the spectatorial role they confer on the visitors. At the same time however, this opening space also makes clear that what lies ahead is very much not an archetypal gallery or gallery experience. The clearest indicator of this is the textual outline of the Galleries’ subject matter which is projected onto one wall:

> During the early part of the twentieth century, a movement began in the centre of Europe that sought to create a new world order. Those who were part of this movement believed that some people were destined to rule the earth – and others to be destroyed. In the events that followed, millions of people were murdered and entire ways of life were shattered. Today we call this *The Holocaust*. This is an account of how this happened.

In keeping with what we have noted so far, this statement itself functions as a frame and could engender multiple readings. As much as the use of the plural in the penultimate line implies a shared understanding, the lack of specificity in this statement nevertheless draws a sharp contrast between the previous IWMHE and the Holocaust Galleries. In the case of the former, one of its major advances was that it forwarded an unambiguous description of the Holocaust that filled a cultural vacuum around the meaning of the term. Moreover, the IWMHE named the architects of extermination within its entrance space, noting “under the cover of the Second World War, for the sake of their ‘New Order’, the Nazis sought to destroy all the Jews of Europe.” By contrast, in the Galleries the visitor encounters perpetration in a far more abstract manner, with the specificity of ‘the Nazis’ replaced by the more abstruse reference to a ‘movement’.

The key to understanding this approach perhaps resides in Bulgin’s remarks on the “contemporaneity” principle underpinning the Galleries (itself another central framing strategy), with the concomitant resolve to “not use words like genocide or Holocaust in the Galleries because they are postwar ways of encoding these events linguistically and

interpretively" (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 60). Yet this ethos – as intriguing and ultimately productive as it is – does not easily explain why the term is employed at all in this entrance area. Another possibility is that Galleries seek to tap into some sort of vernacular understanding of 'the Holocaust' to then complicate it. On this Bulgin has spoken of his ambition that visitors "leave the Galleries and say, 'I have heard the word Holocaust before and had a sense of what that was, but I have never *thought* about it like that'" (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 70). What is clearer is that as much as the statement plays to the Galleries' sense of eschewing any appearance of forwarding a master narrative, it may have unwanted effects. For some, the lack of clarity about who the people being referred to in the statement may be seen as unhelpful; for others, it may accentuate identity politics that have grown up and around Holocaust memory in recent years. There is also the potential for the statement to inadvertently prove the critique offered by Cesarani (and others) that the term 'Holocaust' "is well past its sell-by date" (2016, xxix) precisely *because* there is no clarity about what it means.

On this, it is salient to note that the only other place one encounters the term 'Holocaust' is in the Galleries' final room "Living Without". Here, the visitor finds three explicit references. The first appears on the room's section text. Having explained that after 1945 survivors and their descendants struggled to process what had taken place, the narrative states: 'although these events are referred to in different ways across the world, in this country they have been increasingly known by a single name – The Holocaust.' As a statement of fact this is true. Though the etymology of 'the Holocaust' in Britain has not followed the exact same path as in other nations, it does now enjoy a virtual monopoly within the country's cultural lexicon. Yet while the Holocaust has long been understood as being associated with the fate of the Jews, what has and what remains a point of contention within British Holocaust culture is whether the term should include others, too.

How the Galleries approach this issue is intriguing. On the one hand – notwithstanding the lack of explicit reference to Jews in the opening space's projected text – a visitor to the Galleries encounters a historical narrative that is overwhelmingly centred on

the experience of European Jewry. Having journeyed through that narrative, the end space's *ex post facto* ascription of 'the Holocaust' to the events of that narrative subtly constructs an exclusive frame of reference of who the term is seen to relate to. In this sense, the end space resolves the ambiguity of the opening space. However, on the other hand, it is not true the narrative of the Galleries is *exclusively* 'Jewish'. In fact, other victim experiences are present at certain junctures – particularly that of the Roma, who have their own dedicated exhibits in rooms like "Jewish Life" and "A New Order". According to Bulgin, this was intended to reflect the many "close correlations" between the Jewish and Roma experiences (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 30).

Such intersection is, of course, true of the historical record. Yet, there is something about the signposts to the Roma experience that feels somewhat ill-fitting. Partly this comes from how the central narrative is so overwhelmingly concerned with the Jewish experience, for this potentially leaves the visitor unsure of just what to make of the brief encounters with the fate of the Roma. Whilst this may aptly capture how the relationship between these two histories is still being mined and understood, it risks visitors wondering about the relevancy of the Roma experience to a Jewish-oriented narrative which comes to be depicted as 'the Holocaust'.

Notably, the Galleries directly engage with some dimensions of this issue in the end space itself. There, placed on a shelf is a small meta-caption which notes how "the mass murder of Roma […] has been referred to by a number of different names. In recent years is has become increasingly known as the Roma Holocaust. In many countries, Roma were not acknowledged as victims of Nazi persecution until many years after the war." As important as this text is for highlighting the arch of the history and historiography of the Roma during the Nazi period, this second explicit use of the term 'Holocaust' carries with it potential complications. As much as implying a shared consensus around the appellation of the "Roma Holocaust" – which is somewhat questionable – how the text is positioned in this end space means there's a real chance many visitors may not see or read it. For those who do

not, the lingering uncertainty around just why and how the Roma experience was placed within the Galleries' narrative is likely to continue.

The issue of positionality also relates to the third explicit appearance of the term 'Holocaust' in the end space. If the section text underscores an exclusive reading of the term, another meta caption adds a different twist. For on approaching the exit doors, the observant visitor will notice a small meta-caption located on a shelf. This states:

> The word 'Holocaust' was not widely used to refer to the Nazis' programme of racial annihilation until the 1970s. Since then there have been ongoing controversies about what it should be used to define. Some countries and communities reject it and have developed their own terms to refer to these events. These conversations continue.

Appearing at the end of the Galleries, this statement is a bold move by curators for it opens the contested nature of the phrase 'the Holocaust' up to visitors. Moreover, it helps the visitor to better understand why the opening space accented what lay ahead was but 'an account' and makes concrete the self-referential aspirations of the Galleries.

The presentation of these three definitional frames – and the Galleries' movement of the visitor through them – pushes firmly against both existing Holocaust museology and established conventions in Holocaust memory culture. This disruption is to be welcomed for how it creates space for new ways of thinking. Yet as innovative as these moves are, they are not wholly unproblematic. A major issue, for instance, is that this final meta-text is positioned at waist-height for the visitor, meaning that unless one is attentive they are liable to not see it. Although it could be argued this underscores the role of visitor agency, it nevertheless leaves much to chance. Notably, however, we will see this is not the only instance where contingency plays a significant role in visitor understandings.

Closing and Mediating Distance

Questions of distance in museums concern matters of relation and connection. They can assume multiple forms. They can concern the terms of a relationship – the relationship between, for example, visitor and museum or visitor and exhibition; they can be about subject and object – about, for instance, the relation or relatedness of a visitor and the content of a specific display or exhibit; and they can relate to museological practice or pedagogical objectives – the role(s), say, of a particular artefact within an exhibition and its intended purpose vis-à-vis its viewer. Regardless of the subject matter, the cultivation of relations and connections and the management of distance within a museum is critical because it carries significant implications for visitors' experiences and the achievement of intended outcomes.

In the case of history museums and historical exhibitions, questions of distance are further complicated by diverging temporalities and the existence of experiential difference. These realities are only more acute when the subject of display is the Holocaust, for the heightened desire to reduce distance – so as to assure a sense of relevancy among visitors – is itself complicated by the sheer extremity of experiences endured by its victims. Importantly however, these considerations acquire an additional layer of complexity from the broader cultural and historical context in which such a museum or exhibition is situated.

The IWMHE is a case in point. As much as commentators remarked on how the museum's connection with ideas of British militarism and imperialism created problems for the IWMHE, the broader matter was that a Holocaust exhibition in Britain was necessarily complicated by Britain's particular experience of the Second World War and its experiential distance from Nazi occupation and genocide. Of course, this was not an exclusive problem of the IWM; rather, it is one which has been long-standing since the historical events themselves.

Though the Holocaust Galleries cannot alter this wider cultural-historical context, they do employ several strategies designed to mediate distance in ways which are productive for thinking about the Holocaust in twenty-first-century Britain. Some of these are conceptual: they include, for example, the idea of contemporaneity and the pursuit of visitor immersion;

others are more practical, centred on the use of design and aesthetics to configure space and structure visitor movement within these; others still are more tangible and visible – such as, for instance, multimedia maps and filmic landscapes that can both anchor and move visitors in space and time.

Many of these measures dilute the 'pastness' of the Holocaust as history for the typical British visitor, but they commonly do so in implicit, subconscious, or subterranean ways. More explicit work is done through the Holocaust Galleries' central narrative. Tellingly, this is achieved not through stand-out displays or panels (as with the 'News Reaches Britain' cases in the IWMHE), but rather through recurring reflections of British dimensions at various points which are weaved into the overarching structure.[2] Moreover, instead of simply clustering these around set-piece events in the history, British 'angles' appear to occur at a range of different points. Significantly, the positioning of these reflections is not random but instead designed to illustrate points of contact and connection between events unfolding on the continental mainland and Britain.

A good example of this is found in the "Fighting for Power" section of the Galleries; a space which does invaluable corrective work to misunderstandings about the rise of the Nazis and conditions under which the German electorate turned towards National Socialism. Here, set against the evocative backdrop of propaganda posters and following multimedia and displays underlining the inherent violence and instability of the early 1930s, the visitor encounters the first page of a letter encased in glass. Written from Berlin in January by the eighteen-year-old Gerda Cimbal, the letter was sent to her English pen-pal, Mollie McEvoy, just weeks before the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor. As the visitor reads – in Gerda's excellent English – of the Cimbal's activities at Christmas, the letter establishes tangible links between places in the past and the past and the present. As much reducing distance between 1930s Germany and Britain, in the letter's description of weather and school life a

[2] #possibly cross-reference interview and/or essay Bulgin in this volume.

mediated point of contact is created between life in the 1930s Germany and the visitor in twenty-first century Britain.

Elsewhere, perhaps the most concentrated focus on British connections to this history takes place in the space entitled “Seeking Sanctuary”. Having passed enlarged recreations of front pages from the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Worker* carrying news of the November pogrom in 1938 that speaks of contemporaries’ awareness of the growing threat to German Jews, the visitor encounters an area which explores issues of rescue and emigration. Importantly, the Holocaust Galleries’ central narrative avoids any sense of Britain as a faultless hero or of rescue operations as inherently redemptive. For example, it is made abundantly clear that the relaxing of immigration rules came with strict restrictions; that the experience of child refugees varied from “support and affection” to “maltreatment and neglect”; and that as well as enduring traumatic rupture and separation, some families were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts to find refuge.

The candour of the displays in this space is noteworthy. It strikes the right balance between registering the kindness and generosity of individuals and communities, conveying the sense that more might have been done, and – fundamentally – the human experiences of those who found sanctuary and those who did not. Whereas the equivalent of part of the IWMHE teetered toward “levelling out the complexities of British responses” (Pearce 2014, 122) the same does not hold true for this part of the Holocaust Galleries.

In fact, the work that the visitor undertakes in the space becomes critical for their capacity to process the “From exiles to ‘enemies’” display encountered in the next room. Described by Bulgin as “an important part of the narrative for us” (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 11), the displays here introduce visitors to aspects like the internment of so-called ‘aliens’, the expropriation of Jews on the Channel Islands, and public displays advising refugees to not speak German in public. These facets of the historical record will be likely unknown to most visitors. But they are also dimensions of Britain and the Holocaust which expunge notions of Britain’s probity and complicate ideas of British moral rectitude. This is furthered by the display’s immediate surroundings – namely, the suffering and atrocity that

came with ghettoisation – and the broader contextual frame of war of this space. With this framing, the episode of internment immediately points the visitor in the direction of the Second World War and towards events that were taking place ‘at home’ during that conflict.

The treatment of internment illustrates what Jaeger describes as “Britain’s entanglement or the embeddedness of Britishness” within the Galleries (Bulgin et al. in this volume, 11). Others include the “Appeals for Action” exhibit in the “Annihilation” room (complete with its collection of documents and presentation of individuals in Britain who sought to raise awareness of what was taking place after 1942); the transport list containing the names of Jews deported from Guernsey to Auschwitz-Birkenau; and an array of material connected to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. By virtue of this ‘entangled’ approach, the Holocaust Galleries successfully achieve two of their stated objectives: they avoid making the British dimension appear “like a discrete or parallel narrative” (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 12), and they debunk popular misconceptions that Britain knew nothing about what was taking place until the end of the war.

These are valuable advances for the condition of cultural memory in Britain. They are also important because it is debatable just how successful the V-1 rocket display is as “a helpful provocation for visitors who feel that British history has little to do with the Holocaust” (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 55). In many respects, this display has been positioned as a signature set-piece of the Galleries; taking on, in some ways, the iconic status that was previously acquired by the model of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the IWMHE. Conceptually, there is much to commend the idea: it literally acts to bridge the distances between Britain, the war, and the Holocaust, and because the role of Jewish slave labour in the production of the rockets will be unknown to most British visitors, it could prompt new ways of thinking about this tripartite relationship. And yet, for all this, it is hard to shake the sense that the poignancy and profundity of this object may well not be readily apparent to many.

This could be in part because within British cultural memory of the war, V-1 rockets are heard and talked about but rarely seen – their devastation well-known and visualised in photographs of ruined London landscapes, but their exact form less so. Or, instead, it might

be because while the ‘doodlebug’ is familiar to those who lived during or grew up immediately after the war, with each passing generation its cultural purchase has declined. To be sure, for those who read the associated captions or the object – either within the Holocaust or the Second World War Galleries – its relevance will become apparent. Without this, however, the semiotic function of the rocket to re-connect the war and the Holocaust will likely be missed.

History and Memory

Time – and audience research – will tell whether the V-1 rocket does enable visitors to consider points of connectivity between Britain, the war, and the Holocaust. What can be said, however, is that the rocket and its display bring to the surface perennial museological issues around curatorial intent and visitor behaviour. Equally, the object also animates questions related to the interplay between knowing and remembering, history and memory; in museums generally, and the Holocaust Galleries specifically.

Let us first turn to history. Bulgin has been clear that history is of prime importance for the Galleries. Speaking on a panel at a public debate on Holocaust education in 2019, Bulgin referenced the “knowledge gap in the generations above school-age children” and emphasised that “we think history is important.” Logically, therefore, Bulgin (2019) explained that “our approach is to root this in history” – and to do so in a way embraced the historical complexity of what took place. Elsewhere in this volume, Bulgin has expanded further both on the importance of “the Holocaust being re-tethered into history” (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 4) and the challenges of doing so – including the tensions between ambition and practical realities.

Setting aside matters of design strategies and representational approaches, the principal means by which the Holocaust Galleries constructs history is through its narrative. Thus, it is instructive to consider the content it selects as much as how this content is

presented. To illustrate this we can consider the Galleries' approach to the Nazis and Nazism.

In our UCL research from 2015 we found evidence of troubling misconceptions about who the Nazis were and the role of Hitler (Foster et al. 2016, 133–155), and we have established this was an area of concern for the Galleries. Valuably, then, the Galleries' narrative takes the time to position National Socialism within the volatile context of the Weimar Republic, and to present visitors with key individuals from within Hitler's "Inner Circle". Equally important is the space given to "A New Order" where the ideological foundations of Nazism and its thinking with the blood' is laid out, and connections made to wider movements, such as race theories and eugenics. Indeed, in a subtle but not insignificant gesture to Britain's entanglement with these trends, we see in one display case books authored by the British eugenicist Francis Galton and race theorist Houston Stewart Chamberlain arranged alongside books by German race hygienists like Eugen Fischer.

Instruction as to who the Nazis were also takes place at later junctures in the narrative. For example, in the space entitled "Policy", the visitor in one direction re-encounters Hitler's wartime circle of advisors at the Kehlsteinhaus (the so-called "Eagle's Nest") on the Obersalzberg and in the other is introduced to biographies of attendees at the Wannsee Conference. Meanwhile, in spaces such as "Massacre" and "Killing Centres" visitors meet those with blood directly on their hands, through pen pictures of individuals such as Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, Christian Wirth, Lorenz Hackenholt, and Hans-Heinz Schütt. Finally, in a striking display which invokes the idea of boxes of documentary evidence, visitors confront in the penultimate space yet more Nazis – this time, those comparatively few who were put on trial for their crimes.

It is hard to imagine how a visitor could pass through the Galleries and not emerge with a broader understanding of who the Nazis were – both in terms of named individuals, and their human nature. Regarding this latter aspect, Bulgin has spoken of the intent to underscore the ordinariness of these individuals (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 34) and, through tight text focused on act and action, this is broadly achieved. By way of example, we

can turn to the profile of Bach-Zelewski – a man whom, it is said "excels in the SS", "leads by example" in his role overseeing *Einsatzgruppe B*, "is hospitalised by a nervous breakdown, but in July retakes his post". What makes a man such as this is, quite rightly and quite powerfully, left for the visitor to decide.[3]

Through the Galleries treatment of the Nazis and Nazism it's narrative addresses certain myths, misconceptions, and misunderstandings that have become ingrained in Britain's Holocaust culture. In the process, the history constructed has the potential to nurture more complex and nuanced thinking about Nazism and, by extension, perpetration and complicity.[4] There are, however, potential limits to this. Though the Galleries do include recurring evidence of the role and/or behaviour of non-Nazi actors, this could perhaps have been more systemic. Arguably the most detailed exploration of this issue takes place on a multimedia presentation in the "Annihilation" room which does an excellent job of highlighting the actions of agencies like the Dutch police, the French National Railway Company and the Central European Travel Agency. However, though its positioning is wholly appropriate, it is an item that requires active engagement; something that cannot be assured in a space laden with displays.

The Galleries' historical account importantly corrects several key failings in British historical understanding. Whilst it has been crafted in response to the state of Britain's Holocaust culture, it has also clearly benefited from the input of the Galleries Academic Advisory Board – many of whom are not just world-leading experts, but who also previously forwarded apposite critiques of the IWMHE. The Galleries' history is equally valuable for how enhancing visitors' historical knowledge increases the potential for more sophisticated memory-work and thinking about memory. After all, one cannot remember something without knowing about that something in the first place. And museums of course do not only deal in knowledge. Michael Bernard-Donals offers an intriguing take here, when he suggests that from inception the modern museum was "not meant to be *historical*" but was instead

[3] #cross-reference chapter Holtschneider in this volume.
[4] #cross-reference chapter Jaeger in this volume.

intended “to create a memorial of historical *presence*” (2016, 23). It is an interesting idea, and one which would appear to chime with the stated aims and objectives of many Holocaust museums. How far we can extend this to a Holocaust gallery, situated within a larger institution centred on military history and social impact of conflict, is a matter for debate – especially when the IWM maintains its “active remit that it is not a memorial” (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 57).

It is worth recalling that the IWMHE expressly pressed against the idea of it engendering memory-work. As impossible as that was to uphold, this resolve did condition the shape and the form of remembering that took place in and through it, limiting its dynamics. The Holocaust Galleries, by contrast, exhibit a different relationship with memory. Though Bulgin makes clear he and his team were “very careful about avoiding any overt suggestions of memorialisation” (Bulgin & Lease 2024, 57), Tom Law – a Creative Director at Squint/Opera, the company that produced much of the Galleries’ audiovisuals – has said that “one creative concept we were playing with quite a bit in the exhibition was this idea of memory.” Going further, Law acknowledges “memory is something which kind of fragments over time and so we looked at different ways that we could do this.” To illustrate his point Law talks about “layering up assets and materials” in ways that mean “you can see details but some of it is also slightly blurred and becomes hazy in the background.” More broadly, he states that “this creative concept became a way for us to communicate a lot of the different ideas in the exhibition” (Law 2024).

Law’s remarks are not incommensurate with Bulgin’s position. In his interview in this volume, Bulgin speaks of his interest in memory and memory cultures whilst offering a glimpse of how he wanted to use visitor cards from the IWMHE “as a comment on the palimpsestic nature of institutional memory and then hopefully national memory. He also explains that although contemporaneity was the “decisive framework” which trumped explorations of memory, “representation in the Galleries does respond to collective memory” (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 21, 23). Taking Law’s and Bulgin’s remarks together, we sense

that although the Galleries do not actively seek to cultivate memory, their precise relationship to and with memory remains in tension.

The first time the visitor encounters this tautness is within the Galleries opening space. We have established how 'the Holocaust' text acts to frame this area, by signposting that ahead lies an account of horror. The relationship of the visitor to this horror is at once made abstract and concrete. The abstraction is found in the 'Presence of Absence' media piece. As much as it indicates the contemporaneous terms of this relationship, the lack of any detail about what took place in each of these sites creates a palpable sense of absent history. Naturally the visitor rightly connects these places to 'the Holocaust' and the account they will soon encounter, but this is the limit of their knowledge, their understanding. It is into this vacuum that the more concrete signpost intervenes. On turning away from this absence, the visitor sees Nachum Grzywacz's words from July 1942:

> I want the coming generation to remember our times…
> I don't know my fate. I don't know whether I will be
> able to tell you what happened later.[5]

Grzywacz's appeal is unequivocal and unambiguous. He wants memory. He yearns for it, and for his present to become a future past that is remembered. In the process, this need and demand for memory floods into the contemporary void created by absence of history in the media piece. The result is that the visitor exists the entrance space having internalised Grzywacz's request to remember without knowing themselves just what his fate would be. What compounds things further, is that the configuration of the entrance space and the functions of it various elements has disrupted the visitor's understanding of place and time, creating new questions about how they are to relate and make sense of their surroundings.

Standing back from the entrance space and viewing its component parts in this manner helps to identify the complicated interplay between knowledge and understanding, visitor and exhibition, and history and memory. From the vantage point of the analyst, there

[5] Nachum Gryzywacz was a member of the Oneg Shabbat underground archive within the Warsaw ghetto. It is assumed he was sent to his death at Treblinka death camp in the summer of 1942, aged 18 years old.

is much here to admire – not least the ways that this space entails the very reconfiguration of historical thinking that I once imagined should come with Holocaust consciousness. And yet – as with other moments we have encountered – this entrance space ultimately holds no guarantees. Indeed, Grzywacz's own uncertainty as to his fate and his ability to potentially communicate it to others could, in some ways, be said to verbalise how some visitors may well see themselves at this juncture, and – perhaps – how they are left feeling at its conclusion. Equally, there is also the potential for the visitor to hear in Grzywacz's words a moral injunction along the lines of 'never forget' – that maxim so often found in the very Holocaust culture the museum wishes to counteract.

The visitor's final, and perhaps most explicit encounter with memory, occurs in the last room of the Galleries, entitled "Living Without". Intended to "resist the idea of resolving history, of offering a sort of moral lesson for the contemporary world" (#Bulgin et al. in this volume, 13), the room echoes the end-space of the IWMHE with its sense of return to the present and the presence of survivor voices. That, however, is where the similarities end. For while both are in the broadest sense about an engagement with memory, "Living Without" is different by degree and by kind.

From the outset, the visitor is quite literally enveloped by memory. On the one side play the media films of survivors' family and relatives ruminating on the legacies of the Holocaust on their lives. On the other run the full and unedited testimonies of survivors recorded for the IWMHE sitting aside the multimedia screen that indicates the known fate of individuals encountered in the Galleries. There are, therefore, three constituent groups made present in this space: the victims, the survivors, and the descendants – all of whom are either themselves engaging in memory-work, or who are drawing the visitor into the act of remembering. Much of the memory here is painful; either in terms of survivors recalling their experiences, the sense of loss through those who did not survive, or family members remembering the palpable ways in which the Holocaust impressed itself on their lives. This means that whilst the visitor is surrounded by memories, they remain acutely aware of their genesis in history – and of *the* history which engendered the pain of memory. These

sensations are then compounded Marek Kellermann's tie pin: an "metonymic object" which beyond motioning to the "catastrophic extent of loss" and "unknowableness of the event", also operates as a final reprise of Britain's entanglement with the Holocaust.

The richness of the "Living Without" space means it generates much thought and dialogue about memory and history. As with other instances we have encountered, though, the realisation of this potential remains open-ended. In one direction, there are practical realities that can intrude on the visitor's work – such as, for example, the fact that the configuration of the space means someone sitting down to view the second- and third-generation media piece has their view continually interrupted by visitors heading to the exit. In the other, the space makes a demand on the visitor's time and their emotional and cognitive energy. The risk, of course, is that after the intensity of moving through the Galleries, the desire for respite takes priority.

Conclusion

I have argued that the IWM's Holocaust Galleries are to be understood as a response to the previous Holocaust Exhibition and to structural weaknesses and systemic problems within Britain's Holocaust culture in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. As such, the Galleries represent departure – from the established way of doing things, and from existing modes of thought and thinking. Departures, of course, do not just happen. They are caused by forces and factors, and they are enacted by and through human agency.[6] This means as much as the Galleries are a response to prevailing trends in Britain's Holocaust culture, they are also a reflection of it; their creation indicates that however defective much of cultural activity is, it co-exists alongside other more perceptive and thought-provoking endeavours. Endeavours such as the Holocaust Galleries.

This essay began in the past, with the state of Holocaust consciousness a generation ago. Our purpose for doing so was to prepare the ground for the idea that the Holocaust

[6] #cross-reference debate with other chapters in this volume.

Galleries amount to a new schema or template for the construction of a new cultural memories of the Holocaust and new ways of thinking about that history. Readers may decide this is too grandiose a claim to make – especially as the "staggering" pace of digital revolutions in recent years is transforming Holocaust memory cultures and eroding the degree of influence that institutions like the IWM once had (Boswell & Rowland 2023, 3). Still, even as our memory cultures change, institutions like museums will continue to operate as a medium for engagement with mass audiences.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the notion of a new schema is that many of the principal ways in which the Galleries forges new opportunities for thinking and remembering the Holocaust are highly dependent on the visitor to activate them. Obviously the variable of visitor agency is not an issue exclusive to the Galleries. But it is especially acute within them – partly because of the subject matter, partly because of their sheer density, and partly because their intelligent construction creates an experiential sense of overload. To sufficiently absorb and process the Galleries requires time and labour. For those willing and able to provide these, the reward is to emerge with new ways of thinking about the Holocaust as history and as memory.[7] To some extent then, through the Holocaust Galleries we arrive at an elemental truth: that if we really do want to acquire a better understanding of ourselves through the prism of the Holocaust, we must be prepared to make the effort. If we are unable or unwilling to do this, then we must settle for a Holocaust culture forever flawed and inadequate.

Bibliography

Bardgett, Suzanne. "David Cesarani and the Creation of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition." *The Jews, the Holocaust and the Public: Legacies of David Cesarani,* edited by Larissa Allwork and Rachel Pistol. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 297–305.

[7] Cross-reference chapter Popescu in this volume.

Bardgett, Suzanne. *The Holocaust Exhibition Ten Years On*. Imperial War Museums, 2010.

Bloxham, Donald. “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Days: Reshaping the Past in the Service of the Present.” *Representing the Holocaust*, edited by Sue Vice. Vallentine Mitchell, 2003. pp. 41–62.

Boswell, Matthew, and Antony Rowland. *Virtual Holocaust Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

Bulgin, James, and Bryce Lease. “Curating the experiential: The Imperial War Museum’s Revised Holocaust Galleries” *Staging Difficult Pasts: Transnational Memory, Theatres, and Museums*, edited by Maria M. Delgado, Michael Kobialka, and Bryce Lease. Routledge, 2024, pp. 53–70.

Bulgin, James. “Panel Debate: Has Holocaust Education Failed?” 19 March 2019. https://www.jw3.org.uk/whats-on/has-holocaust-education-failed (5 July 2024).

Cabinet Office. *Britain’s Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report*. Cabinet Office, 2015.

Casson Mann. ‘The Design of the Holocaust Galleries.’ https://vimeo.com/943565747?share=copy (5 July 2024).

Century, Rachel, and Olivia Marks-Woldman. “David Cesarani and UK Holocaust Memorial Day.” *The Jews, the Holocaust and the Public: Legacies of David Cesarani,* edited by Larissa Allwork and Rachel Pistol. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 307–319.

Cesarani, David. *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Cesarani, David. Personal email correspondence, 12 August 2015.

Foster, Stuart, Alice Pettigrew, Andy Pearce, Rebecca Hale, Adrian Burgess, Paul Salmons, and Ruth-Anne Lenga. *What Do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English Secondary Schools*. UCL IOE, 2016.

Holtschneider, Hannah K. “Holocaust Representation in the Imperial War Museum, 2000-2020.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, edited by Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 389–404.

Imperial War Museums. “Transforming IWM London: Phase 2 Second World War and Holocaust Galleries.” Imperial War Museum, 2017.

Imperial War Museums. *Corporate Plan 2014–2017*. Imperial War Museums, 2014. Available via: www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/public-document/IWM_Corporate_Plan2014-17.pdf (5 July 2024).

Kushner, Tony. “The Holocaust in the Museum World in Britain: A Study in Ethnography.” *Representing the Holocaust*, edited by Sue Vice. Vallentine Mitchell, 2003, pp. 13–40.

Law, Tom. “Making of…The Holocaust Galleries”. Squint/Opera, 2024. https://www.squintopera.com/projects/the-holocaust-galleries/ (5 July 2024).

Lawson, Tom, and Andy Pearce. “Britain and the Holocaust: An Introduction.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, edited by Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 1–34.

Lawson, Tom. “Britain’s Promise to Forget: Some Historiographical Reflections on *What Do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust? Holocaust Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 345–363.

Lawson, Tom. “Ideology in a Museum of Memory: A Review of the Holocaust Exhibition.” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 173–183.

Macdonald, Chad. “Negotiating Memory and Agency: David Cesarani and the Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, edited by Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 405–425.

Pearce, Andy. “Britishness, Brexit, and the Holocaust.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, edited by Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 469–505.

Pearce, Andy. “An Emerging ‘Holocaust Memorial Problem’? The Condition of Holocaust Culture in Britain.” *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 117–137.

Pearce, Andy. *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*. Routledge, 2014.

Rose, Gillian. *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Stiles, Emily. *Holocaust Memory and National Museums in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Tollerton, David. *Holocaust Memory and Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape: Politics, Sacrality and Diversity*. Routledge, 2020.