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## Holocaust Remembrance and the Ethics of Comparison

JANUARY 26, 2024 - BY MICHAEL ROTHBERG



(Photo: Jewish Voice for Peace) Affiliates and allies with Jewish Voice for Peace at the Statue of Liberty on Monday, November 6, 2023.

A recent scandal in Germany, for instance, concerned the New Yorker journalist [Masha Gessen](#), who compared the situation in Gaza to a Nazi-constructed ghetto and wrote that Gaza was now being “liquidated.” This reference almost cost Gessen the prestigious Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought.

Such comparative evocations of the traumatic past have, by no means, been used only by critics of Israel’s war on Gaza. Defenders of Israel have played the Holocaust card repeatedly as well: think of the Israeli ambassador Gilad Erdan, during a UN session, wearing a [yellow star](#) with the words “Never Again” printed on it, or the mayor of Berlin, who had the words “[Never Again Is Now!](#)” projected onto the Brandenburg Gate, as a sign of solidarity with Israel. The list of such comparisons, references, and analogies is endless and often very crude. Even if rhetorical conflict does not claim lives as missiles and machine guns do, memory wars can have real consequences for public opinion and thus for the mobilization of support for more violence—or for peace initiatives.

Not all comparisons involving Hamas or the attack on Gaza have referenced the Holocaust—we have also seen frequent allusions to 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden. Conversely, not all references to the Holocaust concern Israel/Palestine—just think of Putin’s talk of “[denazifying](#)” Ukraine or [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#)’s reference during the Trump years to “concentration camps” at the US/Mexico border. Still, across the decades, the charged association between ongoing violence in Israel/Palestine and memories of National Socialism and the Holocaust has remained particularly salient.

Many of these comparisons quickly fall by the wayside, but some—like Gessen’s or Ocasio-Cortez’s—become the objects of extensive and vituperative public debate. I call these kinds of debates “[comparison controversies](#)”: a genre of impassioned public argument that emerges from provocative historical comparisons or from the use of historical analogies to describe contemporary crises. At stake in such comparison controversies are both sensibilities regarding the past and evaluations of the present. If phenomenon X is “like” the Holocaust or person Y is “like” Hitler, some definite form of action is supposed to follow: a policy should be shut down, a politician should be voted out, a war should be waged—or prevented—by any means.

Gessen’s comparison of Gaza to a Nazi ghetto in the New Yorker article was certainly provocative—deliberately so, it would seem. The analogy, however, was primarily meant to function as a warning and a call to action. As Gessen later wrote, in the [speech](#) they gave for the prize ceremony, those who responded to the ghetto comparison by claiming “there are no death marches out of Gaza and no death camps waiting for its inhabitants” were actually making the case for comparison: “[T]his is why we compare. To prevent what we know can happen from happening. To make ‘Never Again’ a political project rather than a magic spell.”

If historical comparisons are an omnipresent part of our public discourse—as, for better or worse, they appear to be—then we need to take them seriously. But we also need to be able to evaluate them with what I call an “[ethics of comparison](#).” Instead of giving us a set of pre-formed answers ready to be wielded against opponents, an ethics of comparison might provide us with a flexible set of guidelines for evaluating—but not banning or “canceling”—provocative historical juxtapositions.

Comparisons can be appraised by raising at least two sets of questions. First, we need to ask: to what extent does a comparison erase differences between different histories and to what extent does it allow for the perception of distinctions? I call this the “axis of comparison”; it stretches from the equation of different histories, through an appreciation of how events may resemble each other without “repeating” history, to absolute distinctions between “unique” events.

Second, we should inquire: for what reason is the comparison being made? What emotional argument does the comparison facilitate? I call this the “axis of political affect”; it runs from comparisons that foster conflict and divisiveness to those that seek to build solidarity between different victim groups. By plotting acts of comparison on these two axes, we are led not to classify comparisons as simply “good” or “bad”; rather, we start to gain clarity about how comparisons function in public debates, why people make comparisons, and why some seem to be more troubling than others.

In the context of the Gaza war, it is easy to find examples that erase the differences between histories of violence and that seek to pit Jewish and Palestinian victims against each other. When the Israeli ambassador wore a yellow star to the UN, he was implicitly both equating the Holocaust with the Hamas attacks and using the rhetoric of Jewish victimization to justify a military operation that has led to the killing of thousands of civilians in Gaza. This comparison, in other words, offered equation in order to foster further conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Other examples minimize the differences between the Holocaust and the attack on Gaza, but gesture toward solidarity between Jews and Palestinians. For instance, in late October the American political theorist Corey Robin [tweeted a pre-Holocaust picture](#) of an 11-year-old Anne Frank on a beach and asked his readers to “make the connection to Gaza, knowing there are children there, too, just on the brink of maturity, just as lovely, facing catastrophe.” Here different victim groups are brought powerfully into proximity but at the cost of stripping away historical particularity. While both the ambassador and Robin mobilize comparison as equation, they do so to radically different political ends.

What is harder to find, but in my opinion all the more urgent, is what I call “differentiated solidarity”—a vision that promotes common cause without collapsing particularities of experience and inequalities of power. Differentiated solidarity is, I believe, exactly what Gessen is after in defending comparison. Gessen recognizes “essential differences” between Nazi ghettos and Gaza but seeks to mobilize the affect associated with the Holocaust to prevent further atrocity in the present. As a descendant of Holocaust victims, Gessen mourns those Israelis and foreign nationals killed by Hamas, but their act of comparison is motivated by an urgent desire to stop the violence that is unfolding right now in Gaza.

I have been following debates about the uses and abuses of Holocaust memory for decades. Without doubt, comparisons invoking the Holocaust in relation to Israel/Palestine are more present and more contested today than they have ever been. Critical intellectuals have the opportunity and, I would emphasize, the responsibility to bring our expertise to bear on the anguishing realities and traumatic memories that are all around us. We can use our knowledge to show just how entangled human histories are, and just how ubiquitous comparative memory is—and should be—as a response to political violence.

Most crucially, we can offer conceptual frameworks and ethical principles that help us confront political scenarios that often seem apocalyptic—and not only in the Middle East. More than ever, we need careful, open-minded scholarship that is not afraid to take strong stances. We also need visions of differentiated solidarity that recognize all civilian victims and speak forthrightly about the conditions that produce continuing cycles of violence.

As regional war ratchets up, genocide debates continue, the death toll of women and children mounts, and information about what a [UN economist](#) calls the “unprecedented” hunger that Gaza residents are facing continues to emerge, the tendency to reach for analogies and comparisons with the most tragic histories of recent times will only increase. Whether or not the mass killing of civilians amounts to genocide, it still calls out for our intervention.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, as on all days, we need to think carefully—but boldly—about the lessons of the past for the present. Surely those lessons cannot stop at the borders of ethnic and religious identity: an ethical remembrance of the Shoah must encompass [all of today’s civilian victims](#), even if their suffering troubles our narratives of innocence and redemption.

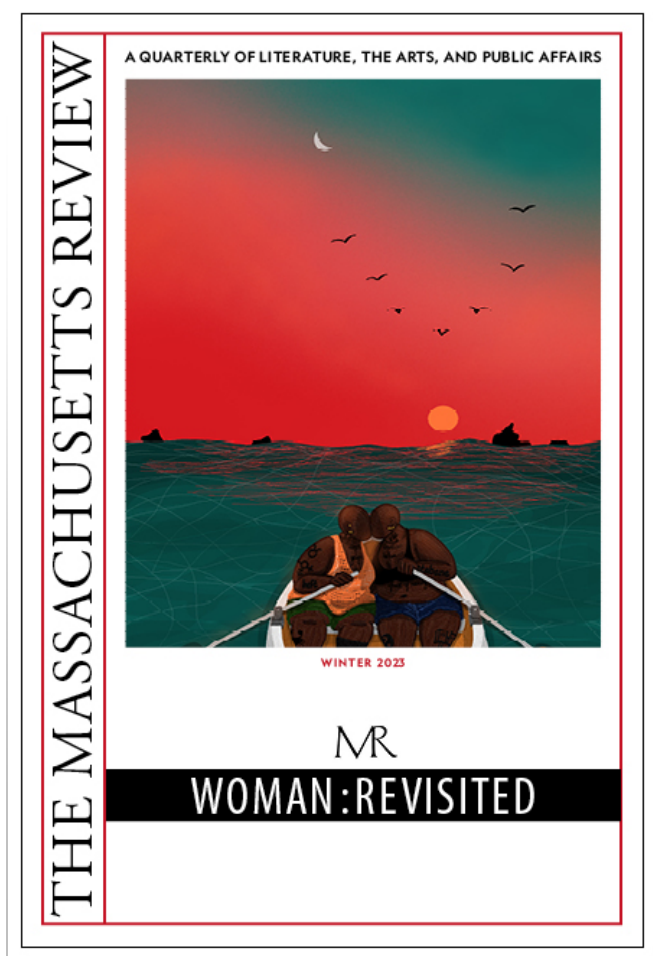
MICHAEL ROTHBERG is the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at UCLA. The author of *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* and *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, he received a 2024 Guggenheim Fellowship to write a book on “comparison controversies.”

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