WAS THE HOLOCAUST UNIQUE?: A PECULIAR QUESTION?

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The question of the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust has itself become a unique question. However, when we approach the Holocaust we are at once confronted with the following dilemma: if the Holocaust is the truly unique and unprecedented historical event that it is often held to be, then it must exceed the possibility of human comprehension, for it lies beyond the reach of our customary historical and sociological means of inquiry and understanding. But if it is not a historically unique event, if it is simply one more incident in the long history of man's inhumanity to man, there is no special point in trying to understand it, no unique lesson to be learned. Of all the enigmas, paradoxes, and dilemmas facing Holocaust scholarship, the "uniqueness question" is surely the most vexing and divisive, the one question most likely to evoke partisan debate and to generate emotional heat in discussion.

In my own efforts at analysis of the issues underlying the "uniqueness question" I have been struck by the very oddity of the question itself, for it is strange that there should be argument about it at all. What strikes me as peculiar about it is the fact that the legitimacy of the question as such is so taken for granted, that it is so readily assumed that the uniqueness of the Holocaust is not merely a fit subject for analysis but is a problem of the very first rank in importance. The anomaly here is just that the "uniqueness question" itself is taken to be crucially relevant to an understanding of the Holocaust although it is relevant to few—if any—other landmark events of history. One finds little discussion, for example, of the "uniqueness" of the Protestant Reformation or the Industrial Revolution. The atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—surely qualified as "unique" and "unprecedented" in terms of
their implications for the future of mankind—is simply not the subject of debate concerning its "uniqueness" involving controversy and serious divisions of opinion. While scholars often draw comparisons and mark the contrasts of the American and French revolutions, little time is spent in analysis or discussion of the "uniqueness question" with respect to either. If the "uniqueness" of such events as these, events that have radically altered our world, is not in question, why is it that the "uniqueness question" has assumed such prominence in the context of Holocaust studies? Why is the question itself so hotly contested? Why do some authorities on the history of the Holocaust go so far as to claim that the stance that one takes with respect to the "uniqueness question" determines the way in which one relates the Holocaust to the rest of human history, influencing every dimension of one's interpretation and evaluation of the event itself?

According to Saul Friedländer, for example, before we can begin analyzing any number of the central issues surrounding the Holocaust we must first deal with "a preliminary issue of crucial importance for every aspect of the Holocaust: are we dealing with a phenomenon comparable with some other historical event or are we facing something unique not only within any traditional and historical context, but even within Nazism itself?" George Kren and Leon Rappoport call the "uniqueness question" very important, for, "depending upon how it is answered, the general orientation of interpretive analysis will obviously vary a great deal." And again, insistence upon its historical uniqueness may, according to Yehuda Bauer, render the Holocaust irrelevant except as a specifically Jewish tragedy. Here is the thrust of Bauer's argument:

If what happens to the Jews is unique, then by definition it doesn't concern us, beyond our pity and commiseration for the victims. If the Holocaust is not a universal problem, then why should a public school system in Philadelphia, New York or Timbuktu teach it? Well, the answer is that there is no uniqueness, not even of a unique event. Anything that happens once, can happen again: not quite in the same way, perhaps, but in an equivalent form.

In what follows I shall be addressing the problems and issues that are raised by texts like these, texts cited here simply as evidence that—for Holocaust studies—the "uniqueness question" is at once paramount and problematic.

It is clear, moreover, that the "uniqueness question" has become a matter of concern to the Jewish and Christian lay community as well as to the professional scholars in the field. One need only think of the public debate over the issues of the inclusion of the Holocaust in the social studies curriculum of the New York City school system or the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council to see how sensitive the issue has become, especially within the Jewish community itself. We may ask if this spe-
cial sensitivity is not itself an impediment to more widespread dialogue, thus hampering the very cause of understanding which Jews support. For, as Professor Ismar Schorsch states, the Jews' "obsession" concerning the uniqueness claim "impedes genuine dialogue, because it introduces an extraneous, contentious issue that alienates potential allies from among other victims of organized human depravity. Similarly, our fixation on uniqueness has prevented us from reaching out by universalizing the lessons of the Holocaust."

Considerations such as these clearly imply that, if we are to widen and deepen our understanding of the Holocaust, we must deal with the claim of "uniqueness" by developing a strategy that will free us from the conceptual muddles that presently cloud the issue. We must be clear as to the meaning of the claim itself if we are to escape the mystification that frequently has surrounded it. We appear to have three principal options: (1) We can dismiss the whole question of "uniqueness," as Schorsch suggests that we should, simply on the grounds that it adds nothing of value to our understanding of the Holocaust. (2) We can attempt to account for why it is that the "uniqueness" claim has become integral to the discussion of the meaning of the Holocaust while it has been treated as merely peripheral to the analysis of other historical events of major consequence. (3) We can concentrate our analysis upon how the "uniqueness question" helps as well as hinders us in our quest to elucidate the meaning and significance of the Holocaust.

Though I am sympathetic with those who confine their strategy to the first option, I shall reject it as unrealistic. For, while it is true—as Schorsch points out—that the claim to uniqueness sometimes does pose a difficulty for those who would gain a better understanding of the Holocaust by comparing it with other cases of mass human destruction, it does not seem to me that we can duck the "uniqueness question" by simply disregarding it. The "uniqueness question" is much too central to the Holocaust to be ignored. Since, as I shall go on to show, an adequate strategy for dealing with the "uniqueness question" will include—rather than preclude—grounds for developing comparative historical analysis and evaluation, the second option is of decisive import, for it is always helpful to understand what lies behind any particular perspective on an event, and especially so when the range of perspectives on the event is so much a part of the event itself and gives rise to so much controversy. Although I shall be exercising the third option, since it builds upon the second—depending as it does upon clarification of the meaning of the claim of "uniqueness" with respect to the Holocaust—so it will be necessary for me to say something about this issue, though a full account of the matter lies beyond the scope of this chapter. In the end I shall try to show why "unpacking" the "uniqueness question" is the strategy that is most fruitful in understanding the Holocaust itself. However, although I shall be adopting this third option, let me first
sketch some of the factors that have tended to make the "uniqueness question" itself a part of the problem in understanding the Holocaust. Before we can see how it can be treated as part of the "solution," so to speak, we must see why it has become "part of the problem."

It seems to be beyond question that the peculiar role that the "uniqueness question" has come to play in relation to the historical accounts and understanding of the Holocaust is largely due to the insistence of the Jewish community that the Holocaust must be viewed as unique. It was a segment of the Jewish community, in fact, that devised and accepted the very label "Holocaust" in order to express the uniqueness of the event, literally defining it as such by the name that they gave it. The process by means of which a series of historical incidents becomes known as an "event" is well known, for it is only by gathering into meaningful clusters the apparently separate and unrelated facts of historical happenings that we are able to form coherent concepts of what has happened in the past. The naming of such a cluster is but one step in the process of self-understanding, and so it is easy to see why a segment of the Jewish community has come to view the naming of the Holocaust as an attempt to capture and preserve the uniqueness of meaning which is implicit in the facts so named. As those facts became known in the aftermath of World War II they immediately gave rise to a numbing horror in which the human mind seemed to be incapable of dealing with them, of grasping them in the normal fashion that we deal with the factual materials of history. The awful depth and scope of these "incidents," of these particular historical facts, were of such horrible dimensions as to seem completely incomprehensible. It is from this response that the claim to the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust is generated. And it is in the context of this response that the search for those characteristics and traits that mark the Holocaust as unique must be understood. For it is precisely this search, and the various proposals which have issued from it, that is responsible for making the "uniqueness question" a part of the event which the "Holocaust" names: it has become part of the problem of the understanding and comprehension of what happened. The peculiar question of "uniqueness" may not have been an inevitable component of the problem, but it is clearly, at this point, an inescapable one.

Quite aside from the origins of the "uniqueness question" and its integration into the total problematic of the Holocaust, there are at least three other substantive problems concerning the characterization of the Holocaust as "unique." They can be readily stated, though not so readily solved. We must, first of all, be clear about what we mean when we claim an event to be unique. Secondly, we must be clear as to what element or elements of the event make it unique. And, lastly, we must at least try to be clear about the implications of the decision to classify the Holocaust as unique and try to understand how that decision may affect our interpretation of the event itself.
Existing Holocaust scholarship, surprisingly, is of little help in determining criteria for what constitutes "uniqueness" with respect to a historical event, whether it be the Holocaust or any other. And, should we consult ordinary language, we are helped even less. The *American College Dictionary* gives three possible definitions of "unique": (1) "of which there is but one"; (2) "having no like or equal"; and (3) "rare and unusual." In such terms, every event can be called unique, for no event of history is ever literally duplicated or "happens" twice, or is exactly "like" any other event, or its "equal." Moreover, it would seem to trivialize the importance of an event such as the Holocaust to call it simply "rare" or "unusual." In order to avoid such trivialization we must look at the actual use of the claim itself, we must analyze the intentions of those who have insisted upon the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, and we must try to grasp the point of the claim. In this way, it seems to me, we can make sense of the question. For it is clear that what the claim of "uniqueness" is intended to do is to set apart from other historical events just that singular event that has the potential of transforming a culture, or altering the course of history, in some profound and decisive way. If the Industrial Revolution, for example, is said to be a "unique event" in the history of the West, it is because it is viewed in this transformational light; it changed our Western culture, altered its values, and so can be viewed as a cause of a major "turning point in history." Such a way of defining the "uniqueness" claim corresponds closely to the definition offered by Emil Fackenheim, for his "epoch making event" is just what is meant by terming an event as actually—or potentially—"transformational" of the *status quo ante*, as radically altering the course of history. Given such a definition we can see how it is possible to claim that the Holocaust, as well as other events, such as the atomic bombing of Japan, can be classified as "unique."

And yet we must be cautious about such claims. I have used the words "see how it is possible to claim" since it must be emphasized that no historical event comes with its meaning already attached. As Walter Wurzburger has said:

Historic events possess only the kind of meaning which historians assign to them. Since there is no objective meaning inherent in any historic event that awaits discovery, meaning is not given but is created. The meaning of any particular event is not a function of its objective properties but hinges upon the choices of categories selected by a given subject for its interpretation. Hence, history teaches only the lessons that people choose to learn.

For my own part, even Wurzburger's statement puts the matter too weakly and accounts for only a small portion of the process whereby meaning accrues to a historical event. For it is not merely the ascription of meaning by "historians" that counts, but the *construction of meaning*
by the culture that matters. It is by means of those processes that we have come to understand, after Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, as the "social construction of reality," that the past can become meaningful. It is not the ascriptions of historians that make certain events rather than others "transformational" events or "turning points" in history. It is only through the actions of the individual members of a culture and the consequences of those actions—both intentional and unintentional—that any event becomes transformational of meanings and values. Only through those practices which Anthony Giddens has called acts of "structuration" can events of transformational potential become actual transformations of culture. And yet, while these are undoubted features of the historical process of change and the acquisition of meaning, we find interpreters of the Holocaust seriously divided over the preliminary question of uniqueness—a question that must surely be resolved if the event itself is to be transformational.

In the first instance, there are those who view the whole issue of uniqueness as unimportant, for there is, as we have seen, a trivial sense in which all historical events are unique. They see the Holocaust as unique only to the extent that every historical event is necessarily different from every other historical event; since "history never repeats itself"—contrary to what has sometimes been popularly believed—it follows that the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust is affirmed. But such an affirmation is clearly a "trivialization" of the "uniqueness question."

There is yet a second group that falls within the camp of the "trivialists." They are quite willing to see the Holocaust as an event of major importance, but they nevertheless agree that the claim of uniqueness cannot be sustained in any non-trivial form. They argue that too much has been made of what have been called the "exceptional" features of the Holocaust. Without denying the existence of these features, this group concentrates on showing that these features are just what might have been expected to follow from the events leading up to the Holocaust as such. In their view the Holocaust may simply be regarded as just one more incident—albeit a flagrant one—of man's inhumanity to man, one more horrible atrocity in a century filled with them. They cite such precedents as the destruction of the Armenians by the Turks and pogroms in Poland and Russia, even reaching back to the genocidal near-extinction of the American Indians for parallel cases. Some of these critics grant that whatever uniqueness the Holocaust may possess can only be seen within the context of Jewish history. But some Jewish intellectuals, Jacob Neusner and Arnold Eisen for example, go so far as to hold that even within the context of Jewish history the Holocaust cannot be viewed as unique. They contend that the Holocaust should be understood as one event in a succession of events, one link in a long chain of events aimed at the elimination of the Jews as a people commencing with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.
Was the Holocaust Unique?

In sharp contrast, those that I have called "absolutists" are certain that no other event in history even remotely resembles the Holocaust or furnishes a precedent for understanding it. Its singularity is such that it exceeds the power of language to express; its meaning is such that it belongs to "another planet." It is incomprehensible, completely outside the normal dimensions of our terrestrial history, beyond all historical explanation and appraisal. It is, they say, not merely unique; it is, to use the Eckhardts' phrase, "uniquely unique."25

Menachem Rosensaft sums up this view succinctly: "Holocaust stands alone in time as an aberration within history."26 And Elie Wiesel writes that "the universe of concentration camps, by its design, lies outside if not beyond history. Its vocabulary belongs to it alone."27 In Bauer's striking characterization, the Holocaust is viewed by these writers as an "upside down miracle."28 These absolutists see the Holocaust as unique simply because it happened, and concerning their view nothing needs to be added.

Those reluctant to accept either the trivialist or the absolutist position may be termed "relativists." Other turning points in history, other great crises, they suggest, contain elements comparable to and related to the Holocaust. Accordingly, they view it as "relatively unique," for there will always be distinct features of the Holocaust that set it apart and which remain of more importance than its similarities and resemblances to other events. Approached from this angle the Holocaust is neither "extra-historical," in the sense claimed by the absolutists, nor yet just another atrocity, as the trivialists maintain. It is central to the relativist thesis that the Holocaust must be viewed contextually. This means that it is possible to view the Holocaust as unprecedented in many respects, that it is an event of critical and transformational importance in the history of our world, and yet it is still an event that must be addressed as a part of that history. It can and should be compared to other genocidal incidents, described and analyzed in language free from the "mystification" which only blocks our understanding, and made as accessible to explanation as possible. It should not be assumed, on a priori grounds of its absolute "uniqueness," that what caused the Holocaust is forever beyond the reach of the tools of historical analysis, or that the consequences cannot be explored by means of social theory. For, if we fail in our efforts at historical comprehension, and if our social theories are inadequate to the task of explaining such events, we are almost sure to experience similar catastrophes in the future. Indeed, if our conceptual tools and analytical methods are baffled by the Holocaust, we must devise new concepts and new methods.

It would be misleading to claim that all those scholars that I have categorized as relativists—possibly the term "contextualists" would be more appropriate—speak with a single voice concerning the "uniqueness question." Steven Katz29 and Saul Friedländer,30 for instance, take an
"intentionalist" approach. They hold the view that it is the "intention" of the Nazis with respect to the total elimination of Jewry that marks the Holocaust as unique among comparable pogroms and genocides. Others, such as Richard Rubenstein and Henry Friedlander, take a more "methodological" point of view. They see the uniqueness of the Holocaust more in terms of the distinctive bureaucratic and technological methods of destruction employed. These very sharply defined differences of focus on what accounts for the uniqueness of the Holocaust are responsible for serious divergences of interpretation of the event itself. For it is clear that both the intentionalists and the methodologists employ their respective views of the "uniqueness question" as interpretive frameworks for understanding the Holocaust itself. The preliminary question of uniqueness helps to determine, by the way in which it is solved, the conceptual apparatus for exploring the other problems of the Holocaust.

Some idea of how decisively this preliminary step figures in the eventual perspective upon the character of the event itself can be gained from comparing the following texts. In "Whose Holocaust?" Yehuda Bauer takes the intentionalist approach:

The uniqueness of the Holocaust does not...lie in numbers. It does not lie in the method of mass murder. ... What makes it unique is the existence of two elements: planned total annihilation of a national or ethnic group, and the quasi-religious, apocalyptic ideology that motivated the murder.3

By contrast, here is Robert E. Willis representing the approach from the methodology standpoint:

For whatever similarities are present between Auschwitz and other cases—and there are many—the former is distinguished by being the first instance of a situation in which the full bureaucratic and technical apparatus of the state was mobilized for the primary purpose of extermination.34

With these very different approaches to the Holocaust locked into the different interpretive grids through which the event itself is to be viewed and interpreted, from the preliminary stage on, it is small wonder that the eventual interpretations that are reached should themselves be widely variant.

What concerns me here is not that we should accept any one approach to the "uniqueness question" as true—and the others as false—but that we should try to discover which of these approaches yields the most coherent and intelligible results, which framework elucidates the problems of understanding the Holocaust most clearly and is the most promising for understanding its historical and moral significance. It is not a simple matter to decide, and the fact that there are subtle differences within each of the two basic types of approach does not make the task any easier. Some methodologists, for example, make it clear that they fully recog-
nize the important role which the intentionalists ascribe to the "uniqueness" of the Nazis' emphasis on "total extermination," while insisting that the special bureaucratic and technological means employed in that destruction are the more decisively unique feature of the event. Both forms of relativist interpretation have great appeal owing to their common stress upon understanding the Holocaust in contextual terms, and the great illumination that results from such analysis of the "uniqueness question" leads to a preference for both over either the trivialist or absolutist stands. And yet between them, I lean most to the methodologist explanation as providing the framework that most clearly helps in comprehending both the uniqueness of the event and the event itself. For it is the emphasis upon method in the apparent "madness" of the event that helps us most to grasp the significance of the event for our own lives and for the world we live in. After all, we do live in a depersonalized bureaucratic world, a world in which almost every facet of public and private life is subject to the mindless influence of bureaucratic methods.

But it is not merely that the methodologists appear to shed more light upon the relevance of the Holocaust to our own situation that leads to my rejection of the intentionalist approach. For there are internal problems with the intentionalist position itself, problems of internal coherence, as well as problems with the facts and assumptions upon which it is predicated. In order to show the dimensions of some of these difficulties, I have chosen to analyze them in the context of Yehuda Bauer's position, for he is clearly the strongest exponent of the intentionalist view and the most popular of its recent defenders. It is not my purpose to refute Bauer—for both "proof" and "refutation" are hardly apposite when we are dealing with frames of reference such as these—but I do intend to show how Bauer's insistence that it is the intention of the Nazi state—the policy of total annihilation of the Jews—that determines the uniqueness of the Holocaust can be more of a hindrance than a help in dealing with the meaning of the Holocaust.

Bauer's argument is most forcefully presented in his important book, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, in which he devotes his second chapter to an analysis of the various implications of the "uniqueness question." Titled "Against Mystification: The Holocaust Phenomenon," this chapter puts the central dilemma of uniqueness this way:

If what happened to the Jews was unique, then it took place outside of history, it becomes a mysterious event, an upside down miracle, so to speak, an event of religious significance in the sense that it is not man-made as that term is normally understood. On the other hand, if it is not unique at all, then what are the parallels and precedents?

Bauer wants to escape the dilemma by developing a conception of the Holocaust that will account for its uniqueness by placing it within the
context of history. He argues that the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust does not consist in the fact that it involves the practice of genocide, for he acknowledges that there are precedents and parallels where genocidal practices have been politically instituted. He does, however, find that there is something unique and unprecedented in certain special features of the genocidal policies and practices of the Holocaust. These features, he claims, show that what happened to the Jews is different from what befell other victims of mass murder, both within the Nazi "universe of death" and outside it. For it is clear that Bauer wants to give full weight to the fact that mass murder as practiced by the Nazis—as well as by others—has not been confined to attempts specifically aimed at the elimination of the Jews as a people. But he also wants to claim that there is something quite different about the Nazi policy with respect to the Jews. Bauer argues that only the Jews were the victims of a deliberate policy of total extinction.

He acknowledges that some two and a half million Soviet prisoners of war were killed by Nazi practices and policy, by ill-treatment in the prison camps, malnutrition, and starvation. He points out that "tens of thousands of Poles were brutally murdered as resistsants, real or imagined." But he goes on to argue that the policies which sponsored these atrocities, while "genocidal" in character, were not aimed at the total extinction of either the Poles or the Soviets. Bauer cites Raphael Lemkin, coiner of the term "genocide," in order to support his contention that "clearly, what was happening to quite a number of people in Nazi Europe was genocide." But he goes on to distinguish such general Nazi practices from the intentions embodied in the Holocaust:

The difference between that and the Holocaust lies in the difference between forcible, even murderous, denationalization, and wholesale total murder of every one of the members of a community. Contrary to legend there never was a Nazi policy to apply measures used against the Jews to other national communities.

In short, Bauer's contention is that the only group that the Nazis intended to totally annihilate was the Jews. Accordingly, he concludes, the term "Holocaust" should only be used with reference to the extermination of the Jews so that its uniqueness does not become blurred and the Holocaust confused with other mass murders committed by the Nazis, murders to which the term "genocide" also applies.

It is this last contention that weakens Bauer's argument by introducing into it an element of conceptual confusion and incoherence. When Raphael Lemkin first introduced the term "genocide" he intended that it should be used to denote only those instances of mass murder directed at the total extermination of a people, and not merely intended to bring about their "denationalization." Lemkin states:
Denationalization was the word used in the past to describe the destruction of a national pattern. The author believes, however, that this word is inadequate because: (1) it does not connote the destruction of the biological structure; (2) in connoting the destruction of one national pattern, it does not connote the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor; and (3) denationalization is used by some authors to mean only deprivation of citizenship.

Bauer does not appear to recognize that Lemkin himself was fully satisfied that the Nazi policy of genocidal destruction was aimed at total annihilation, whether directed at the Jews or at the Czechs or the Poles. Lemkin specifically stated that "genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of a national group." Genocide is instituted, Lemkin argued, as "a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves."

The incoherence of Bauer's use of the term "genocide" as applicable to the policies aimed at less than total annihilation is made even more perplexing when it is recalled that, in an earlier work, he employed the term—as Lemkin did—to denote the intended total destruction of a people. There he stated: "The Holocaust was a crime of genocide—that is, an attempt to exterminate all members of a particular national or racial group simply because they were members of that group." It is clear that in this statement the "Holocaust" and "genocide" are not seen as denoting two different types of event. One can, of course, argue, as Bauer does, that the Holocaust was a unique event, distinguishable from other events of Nazi mass murder. One might even be able to argue that the Nazi intention was different in kind, with respect to the Jews, from what it was with respect to other national groups. But one cannot, as Bauer has done, cite Lemkin as sponsoring authority for such arguments. For it is undeniable that Lemkin views what happened to the Gentile populations that fell victim to Nazi genocide as more, rather than less, like what happened to the Jews. Lemkin sees the Nazi intent in all such cases as the same, i.e., total destruction.

On the factual side, Bauer's argument is similarly weak. He argues, for example, that the Nazis' intention with respect to the Gypsies and other groups was very different from that toward the Jews. Although debate over this matter cannot be entered into here, there is substantial evidence to indicate that the Nazis did indeed intend the total elimination of the Gypsy population. As Bauer himself had earlier acknowledged: "History records other actions which qualify as genocide by the strictest definition. Hitler himself sought to annihilate the Gypsies as well as the Jews."

Assuming that my criticism has cast doubt upon the adequacy of
Bauer's thesis as to the "uniqueness question" and shows that there are serious difficulties to be overcome in the intentionalist position, we now have to ask about the alternative methodological view. Is it, perhaps, a more adequate perspective in terms of which to approach the "uniqueness question," and from which to proceed to the substantive interpretation and understanding of the Holocaust itself? Can it be said, for example, that the Holocaust is a unique form of genocide—using that term, indeed, as Lemkin originally defined and used it? As we have seen, Lemkin treated genocide as the intentional attempt to destroy a group in its ethnic and biological totality. With that definition in mind are there discernable features of the Holocaust that distinguish it from other such genocidal events?

I believe that these questions can be answered affirmatively. Although I cannot deal with the evidence here in detail,45 I can suggest at least four kinds of evidence that can be offered as showing how and why the Holocaust should be understood as a unique genocidal event, genuinely unprecedented in the annals of our world and its history. First, there is evidence of uniqueness in the simple fact of the size and scope of the destruction, in the enormity of the numbers alone, which are of an entirely new order of magnitude when compared with other genocides. Second, there is the far more complex fact of the means employed in the Holocaust, for no other genocidal event has so deeply involved the entire structure of the legal and administrative machinery of a government in its implementation. There are simply no similar instances of a legally constituted government adopting anything like the extensive bureaucratic and technological apparatus that was created to carry out the genocidal intention of the Holocaust. Third, the Holocaust is unique in the varied physical and psychological qualities used to reduce the intended victims to their barest physical qualities as "objects" in order that they might be more efficiently processed in the mechanical production line of the death camps. And, finally, the Holocaust is unique in the vast and determined attempt by the Nazis to transform the victims into the image that the Nazis had of them. The scope of this massive effort at creating an "image" of the intended victims of genocide is such that it vastly exceeds similar efforts; its scale is literally unprecedented.

It will be evident, then, that I am among those who believe that it is the various processes, techniques, and methods of destruction characteristic of the Holocaust that justify the ascription of "uniqueness" to it. And it is because of these same features of the Holocaust, features that help us to understand not merely why the Holocaust is unique but also features that help us to understand how it was possible that such an event could occur in our history and in the context of our age, that I reject the absolutist view. That view, I believe, tends to render the Holocaust incomprehensible by putting the event outside of our history, by treating it as outside the context of our age, our language, and our capacity for
analysis and understanding. This rejection of the Holocaust as something that could occur in our time, and which could clearly occur again for much the same political and sociological reasons, seems to me simply unacceptable. It virtually amounts to the denial that it did occur, a denial that seems to me almost an invitation for it to happen again. For if we are to avoid such an event in the future we must surely attempt to grasp its meaning in political and sociological terms. If the Holocaust seems somehow to be beyond the grasp of our usual categories of political and sociological analysis, to be beyond the reach of our normal concepts of historical interpretation and explanation, the lesson is not that we should give up the attempt at analysis and explanation. The lesson is that we must develop more adequate categories and concepts.

Finally, it is for this last reason that I reject all forms of trivialism with respect to the "uniqueness question." By drawing attention away from just those novel features of the Holocaust process that are unprecedented, by trivializing them, the trivialists divert our attention from the very features of the Holocaust that we ought to be trying to understand and explain, features that we must be able to cope with if we are to avoid such events in the future. By taking the view that the Holocaust is just one more atrocity, we are unlikely to see its deep and unique significance as an event with potential transformational consequences for our culture and our age. We are unlikely to see the possible implications of the Nazi abuse of science and technology, the application of bureaucratic techniques, principles of managerial efficiency and "cost-benefit" analysis, and all such unique features of the Holocaust process for our own situation, our own lives. For there are analogies to be drawn between our own situation and that of the victims of the Holocaust, analogies that depend upon understanding as clearly as possible how such things as science and technology, bureaucracy and managerial "efficiency" were employed in the destruction of the Jews and how they might well be employed for our own destruction somewhere down the road. Moreover, as I have emphasized, we cannot accept the simple situation of the Jews and the special "intention" of the Nazis with respect to their total extinction. Not only does this emphasis on the particularity of the Jewish situation tend to obscure relevant analogies with the predicaments of other groups—possibly even with our own situation as hostages to the threat of nuclear war—but it also obscures the more universal implications for the future of all mankind that the Holocaust raises. For, as even Bauer himself once asked, if the Holocaust has no universal lesson for all men, why should anyone study it? In the end it is those who emphasize the uniqueness of the methods, processes, and techniques of the Holocaust that best enable us to draw the analogies and explicate the event itself. In the end it is possible that by understanding those methods, techniques, and processes by means of which an oppressed population can be destroyed we can avoid such destruction in the future.
If we can succeed in this purpose, the Holocaust will truly have been a transformational event.

NOTES


9. For the significances of the issue, see Henry Friedlander, "Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust," Teacher's College Record 80, no. 3 (February 1979), pp. 524-25; and Rosenberg, "The Crisis in Knowing and Understanding the Holocaust."


12. For a brilliant historical analysis of how the term "Holocaust" became the name for what happened to the Jews under Hitler, see Gerd Korman, "The Holocaust in American Historical Writing," *Societas* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1972), pp. 259-62.

13. Rosenberg, "The Problematic Character of Understanding the Holocaust."


22. Ibid.


38. Ibid., p. 35.
39. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 79.
42. Ibid. In a paper published some two years after *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, Bauer attempted to respond to this criticism. He argued that Lemkin's "definition" of genocide "contains a contradiction," for if it is total annihilation that is intended it makes "no sense" for Lemkin to talk about such methods as "interfering with the activities of the Church," or the "debasement" of morality through dissemination of pornography and the encouragement of alcoholic consumption. The fact of the matter is that Lemkin mentions such factors as these as constituent elements of planned total destruction because he recognized that such planning "does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation." (Emphasis added.) By failing to acknowledge Lemkin's carefully drawn distinctions in the body of his text, and by limiting himself merely to the outline of Lemkin's thesis in the preface to the book, Bauer once again distorts Lemkin's position. (See Bauer, "Whose Holocaust?," p. 43-44, and Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe,*
It is clear that the elements that "make no sense" to Bauer in Lemkin's description of genocidal techniques are all part of the "coordinate plan" to weaken "the essential foundations" of various groups with the long-run "aim of annihilating the groups themselves."


44. Ibid., pp. 11-12. See also Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *The Destiny of European Gypsies* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), pp. 76-100, and Leon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), pp. 263-80. Bauer also claims in *The Holocaust and Historical Perspective* "that the Holocaust is unique in intent when compared with the Armenian Massacres" (pp. 36-37). For a refutation of this position, see Papazian, "A 'Unique Uniqueness'?," pp. 14-18; and for Bauer's response, see "Was the Holocaust Unique?: Responses to Pierre Papazian," pp. 19-20.


47. See note 6.