Chapter 3

THE ISSUE OF THE HOLOCAUST AS A UNIQUE EVENT

by Alan Rosenberg and Evelyn Silverman

If the Holocaust was a truly unique event, then it lies beyond our comprehension. If it was not truly unique, then there is no unique lesson to be learned from it. Viewed solely from the perspective of its uniqueness, the Holocaust must be considered either incomprehensible or trivial. A contextualist analysis, on the other hand, finds that it was neither "extra historical" nor just another atrocity. It is possible to view the Holocaust as unprecedented in many respects and as an event of critical and transformational importance in the history of our world. Using this method, we can determine the ways in which the uniqueness question both helps and hinders our quest for understanding of the Holocaust.

The question of the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust has itself become a unique question. When we approach the Holocaust, we are at once confronted with a 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. Yehuda Bauer states the problem from a somewhat different perspective:

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 where are the parallels or the precedents?1

Of all the enigmas, paradoxes, and dilemmas facing Holocaust scholarship the "uniqueness question" is surely the most vexing and divisive; it is the one question most likely to evoke partisan debate and to generate emotional heat in discussion.2 This is most recently evident in what has come to be called the "Historian's Debate" or, the Historikerstreit, a volatile
debate of German origin about which we will say more later.

The prominence of the issue of uniqueness, however, has not often been dealt with systematically in the literature. No previously published bibliography on the "uniqueness question" exists, and although many important writings on the Holocaust implicitly include the issue, relatively few writings in the vast Holocaust literature address the question of uniqueness directly. Thus the reader will find that the bibliography at the end of this introduction contains fewer annotations of articles that deal directly with the issue and many more whose main focus is elsewhere and from which the uniqueness issue has to be inferred.

In our own efforts at analysis of the issues underlying the "uniqueness question," we 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 us as peculiar about it is that the legitimacy of the question as such is so taken for granted, so readily is it 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 humankind—is simply not the subject of debate concerning its "uniqueness;" nor does it involve controversy and serious divisions of opinion. 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? 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.

Comparability or Uniqueness

According to Saul Friedländer, for example, before we can begin to analyze 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 Rapport 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 we 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 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 special sensitivity is not itself an impediment to more widespread dialogue, thus hampering the very cause of understanding that Jews support. For, as Professor Ismar Schorsch states, the Jews' "obsession" with 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."
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 "uniq-
ueness," on one of two grounds. Eberhard Jäckel, for
instance, suggests that the uniqueness issue adds little
of value to our understanding of the Holocaust. He
asserts the event's uniqueness but then states, "incident-
ly, the question of uniqueness is after all not all that
decisive. Would it change anything, had the
National-Socialist murder not been unique?" On the
other hand, Schorsch, as mentioned above, recommends
dismissal of the issue on the grounds that it only serves
to add a politically divisive element to the discussion.

2) We can attempt to account for why it is that the
"uniqueness" claim has become integral to the discus-
sion 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 we are sympathetic with those who confine
their strategy to the first option, we 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 under-
standing of the Holocaust by comparing it with other
cases of mass human destruction, it does not seem to
us that we can evade the "uniqueness question" by
simply disregarding it. The "uniqueness question" is
much too central to the literature of the Holocaust to
be ignored. The second option as listed above 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. We shall be exercising
the third option, because it builds upon the sec-
ond—depending as it does upon clarification of the
meaning of the claim of "uniqueness" with respect to
the Holocaust—although a full account of the matter
lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

Explicating the Uniqueness Question

In the end we shall try to show why explicating
the "uniqueness question" is the strategy that is most
fruitful in understanding the Holocaust itself. However,
although we shall be adopting this third option, let us
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 a
major part 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 that
is implicit in the facts so named. As those facts became
known in the aftermath of World War II they immedi-
ately gave rise to a numbing horror in which the human
mind seemed to be incapable of dealing with them, of
grappling with them in the normal fashion in which 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, we believe, that the claim to the "uniqueness"
of the Holocaust was 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 that 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 literature of the Holocaust, at least three other
substantive problems concerning the characterization
of the Holocaust as "unique" can be readily stated,
though they are not so readily solved. We must, first

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of all, be clear about what we mean when we claim an event to be unique. Second, we must be clear as to what element or elements of the event make it unique. Finally, 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.

What Constitutes Uniqueness?

Existing Holocaust scholarship, surprisingly, is of little help in determining criteria for what constitutes "uniqueness" with respect to the Holocaust, or any other historical event, for that matter. Often terms other than "unique" are used throughout the literature, words such as "singularity" or "particularity" or "unprecedented" and phrases like "without equal" or "epoch making." Sometimes these are all used interchangeably, synonymously, and other times each term seems to be selected to establish a particular focus or emphasis of meaning for the concept of uniqueness. Should we consult ordinary language, we gain even less help. 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, from the point of view of those who believe in the uniqueness of the Holocaust it would seem to trivialize the importance of 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 us, we can make sense of the question. It would seem that for many scholars the claim of "uniqueness" is intended 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."

Yet we find interpreters of the Holocaust seriously divided over the preliminary question of uniqueness. 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; because "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. Ernst Nolte, for example, has been interpreted to have reduced the uniqueness of the Holocaust to the "technical process of the gassing." Without denying the existence of unique features this group concentrates on showing that the Holocaust grew from the events that led up to it. 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 the mass destructions of the Russian Revolution, drawing analogies between the atrocities of the Gulag Archipelago and Auschwitz, and even reaching back to the genocidal near-extirmination 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 CE.

In sharp contrast to the "trivialists," those whom we 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: the "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.

Contextualists

Those reluctant to accept either the trivialist or the absolutist position may be termed "contextualists." Contextualists find that, although there may be distinct features of the Holocaust that set it apart and that might remain of more importance than its similarities and resemblances to other events, it is central to their thesis that the Holocaust always be examined within the context of history. Comparison, many state, does not preclude uniqueness. Often it is the very act of comparison, the examination of the Holocaust against the backdrop of history, that serves to highlight those features that render the event unique, but only relatively so. Other turning points in history, other great crises, they suggest, contain elements both comparable with and related to the Holocaust.

With this approach the Holocaust is neither "extra historical," in the sense claimed by the absolutists, nor just another atrocity, as the trivialists maintain. 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" that 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.

The Historikerstreit

Here we must note what has become known as the Historikerstreit [historians' debate]. In this debate, a group of renowned German scholars, most of whose essays and books have not yet been translated from the German, consider many important issues of substance and method, including those of the role of the Third Reich in German history, the place of Germany in world politics, as well as issues of German national pride. All of these works deal on some level with just how and to what extent the Third Reich and the Holocaust can be contextualized within German and world history. But from our perspective it is important to note that "of all the issues raised by the controversy, the singularity of Auschwitz is the most central and the most hotly debated." 29

It was Ernst Nolte's essay of 1986 30 together with Jürgen Habermas' 31 response that first triggered the Historians' Debate. Habermas was responding to some historians, 32 such as Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer and Andreas Hillgruber who he believed had used the contextualization of the Holocaust in such a way as either to completely eliminate or to relegate to insignificance any of its unique aspects. Nolte, for example, takes the idea of contextualization to such an extreme and so relativizes the events of the Holocaust that he renders it a rather normal happening of our era, almost to be expected when examined in the context of other historical events of our time, highly analogous in many respects to the Russian Revolution and so not even unique in the sense of being unprecedented. Peter Gay has called Nolte's approach "comparative trivialization" 33 in which the unique qualities of the Holocaust are reduced to features of insignificant implication.

The uniqueness of the Nazi crimes, their comparability to other atrocities, becomes a crucial question for German national identity and Germany's place in world history. As Charles S. Maier has explained it:

If Auschwitz is admittedly dreadful, but dreadful as only one specimen of genocide...then Germany can still aspire to reclaim a national acceptance that no one denies to perpetrators of other massacres, such as Soviet Russia. But if the Final Solution remains incomparable...the past may never be "worked through," the future never normalized, and German nationhood may remain forever tainted, like some well forever poisoned. 34

Habermas and others consider that Nolte and the conservative historians have used extreme historicization or relativization of the Holocaust and presented it with apologist intent to help Germany "regain a sense of the lost national identity." 35

Other positions regarding the uniqueness issue and the contextualization or comparability of the Holocaust and the Third Reich emerged from Habermas' confron-
tation with those he called the "conservative historians." For our purposes, the most important position is that contextualization or the comparative method need not eliminate the unique elements of the Holocaust but could highlight both its singularity and its similarity to other events. The scope of this essay precludes further exploration of this important and fascinating debate. What is significant to us here is that once again this debate puts the question of uniqueness into the forefront of our understanding of the Holocaust.

Intention Versus Methodology

It would be misleading to claim that, quite aside from the historians of the Historikerstreit, all those scholars we categorize as contextualists speak with a single voice concerning the "uniqueness question." Steven Katz and Saul Friedländer, for instance, take an "intentionalist" approach. They hold the view that it is the "intention" of the Nazis to eliminate Jewry totally that marks the Holocaust as unique among comparable pogroms and genocides. Others, such as Richard L. 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. The impact of each position can be seen by 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.

By contrast, here is Robert E. Willis representing the approach from the methodologist 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.

Some methodologists make it clear that they fully recognize the important role that 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.

Yet other contextualists unite both the intentionalist and the methodological apprehension of the Holocaust's uniqueness. It is not necessary after all that only one distinct type of feature render an event unique. Jäckel, for example, holds the Holocaust to be unique in both method and intention:

This is not the first time I argue that the murder of the Jews was unique because never before had a state, with authority of its responsible leader, conceived and announced its intention to liquidate as completely as possible a certain group of people...and to implement its decision by means of all the official instruments of power at its disposal.

These very sharply defined differences of focus on what constitutes the uniqueness of the Holocaust are responsible for serious divergences of interpretation of the event itself. For it is clear that the absolutists, trivialists, and contextualists 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 answered, the conceptual apparatus for exploring the other problems of the Holocaust.

Interpretive Grids

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, and we can see how each interpretation of the uniqueness question will have very different implications. The absolutist position, while it forces us to see the uniqueness of the event, renders the Holocaust forever incomprehensible, outside the context of our age, our language, and our capacity for understanding. While many absolutists urge that discussion of the Holocaust be continued, as Bauer asks, if the Holocaust has no universal lessons for all men, why should anyone study it? One might question the value of including an incomprehensible event in a school curricula, for example.

When the trivialist position is taken, attention is drawn away from any unique features the Holocaust might have. Unlike the absolutist view, the Holocaust is placed within the context of history, but the event becomes of no more concern to us than any other
historical event. All transformational potential is denied and no particular lessons can be derived from it.

Contextualists, as we have said, place the Holocaust as a historical event, neither necessarily beyond our comprehension nor beyond the reach of our customary tools of social analysis. Their use of contextualization can serve either to highlight or to minimize any possibly unique features with strikingly different consequences. As we have seen the contextualization of the Holocaust can lead either to trivialization or to expansion of our understanding of the causes of events like the Holocaust. Such expanded understanding may give us the knowledge that will enable us prevent any possible recurrence.

Within the contextualist debate two major emphases emerge with differing implications. The methodologists, placing the focus as they do on the technological and bureaucratic means of destruction, tend to downplay the importance of the victims of the Holocaust. On the other hand the intentionalist position places all focus of emphasis on the Jews as victims. This emphasis on the particularity of the Jewish situation tends to obscure relevant analogies with the predicaments of other groups and also obscures the more universal implications for the future of all humankind. When speaking of the Jews’ special claim to uniqueness, Geoff Eley has stated: "...to insist on the uniqueness of the event is a short step to insisting on the exclusiveness of interpretation which asserts an empathetic privilege and even Jewish proprietorship in the subject." As we have noted earlier one possible result of this approach is to yield political disharmonies with other groups who have felt themselves to have been similarly victimized in other catastrophes and who might feel that the insistence on Jewish uniqueness serves to underplay their own experiences.

Conclusion

What is important is not that the reader should accept any one approach to the "uniqueness question" as true and the others as false, but that he or she 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 type of approach does not make the task any easier.

NOTES


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8. Schorsch, 39.

9. For the significances of the issue, see Henry Friedlander, "Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust," Teacher's College Record 80:3 (February 1979): 524-525 and Rosenberg, "The Crisis in Knowing and Understanding the Holocaust," 389-392.


12. Lucy S. Dawidowicz states, "The Holocaust is the term that Jews themselves have chosen to describe their fate during World War II." The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), xv.

13. 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 2:3 (Summer 1972): 259-262.


17. For an analysis of what has been radically altered in history by the Holocaust, see Kren and Rappoport, 131-143; and Alan Rosenberg, "The Philosophical Implications of the Holocaust," in Perspectives on the Holocaust, ed. by Randolph L. Braham (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 8-16.


20. See Papazian, 14.


24. For a good brief critical discussion see Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications, ed. by John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 3-5.


37. For an excellent discussion of this position see Jürgen Kocka, "The Weight of the Past in Germany’s Future," German Politics and Society (February 1988): 22-29.


40. Friedländer, 1-6.


42. Henry Friedlander, "Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust," 530-531.


46. Jäckel, 110.


50. Papazian, 18.

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**Chapter 3: Annotated Bibliography**

*3.1*


In the epilogue of her well known book, Arendt concludes that the Nazi crimes were unique "politically and legally." She says, "...these ‘crimes’ were different not only in degree of seriousness but in essence." She sees the key difference to lie in the Nazi intention to murder all Jews worldwide, thus creating a new kind of crime that she calls a "crime against humanity."

*3.2*


Bauer confronts the dilemma of conceptualizing the Holocaust as unique: if totally unique, it lies outside historical understanding; if not at all unique, then "where are the parallels and precedents?" He places the Holocaust within the context of history as "parallel" to other acts of genocide, but claims that the Nazis’ wish to murder all Jews simply by virtue of the fact that they were Jews and not for any secondary gain.
whether political or economic, sets the Holocaust apart as a unique event. In this way Bauer establishes what we call the intentionalist approach to the uniqueness issue. He takes issue with using the term genocide to apply to the Holocaust because, according to Bauer, Lemkin, the jurist who first coined the word, never understood the term "genocide" to apply to the complete physical annihilation of an entire group—a fate the Nazis clearly intended for the Jews—but only to the destruction of a group's national or ethnic or religious identity, its "murderous denationalization." Thus the Holocaust can be seen as comparable to other genocidal events—the Armenian massacre, for instance—but unique in and of itself because of the unique intention involved: according to Bauer, the Turks never intended to murder all the Armenians.

* 3.3 *


Bauer reiterates his position that it is the motivation of the Nazis that sets the Holocaust off as a unique event in history and apart from other mass destructions and genocides. Unlike his position in earlier writings, however, Bauer now characterizes the Nazis' motivation, their desire to murder the Jews, as "a global ideology, not just a Germanic one" that involved ridding the entire world of all Jews. According to Bauer, the closest parallel in history to date is the Armenian massacre, which he calls a "Holocaust-related event." In that case, however, the motivation was primarily political; and perhaps just as importantly to Bauer, at no point did the Turks express the desire to murder all Armenians worldwide but only within Turkey's political boundaries. These differences, crucial to Bauer, still set the Holocaust apart as a unique historical event.

* 3.4 *


Bauer, in a paper presented at a world conference entitled "Remembering for the Future," again asserts that the Jewish Holocaust is a unique, unprecedented event in history. Bauer defines "Holocaust" generically as the "planned, total annihilation of a whole people...for ideological reasons." For Bauer, "the cases of the Armenians and the Jews would fit here, with the ideological factor being decisive in the case of the Jews, thus setting this Holocaust apart." Whereas the annihilation of the Armenians was limited to Turkey, the uniqueness of the Jewish destruction stems from the fact that it is the only event in history to date where the annihilation was intended on a global scale.

* 3.5 *


In this later article Bauer reinforces his idea that genocide and holocaust are two distinct kinds of events, locatable on a continuum of evil that ranges from "mass murder" to "genocide" to "holocaust." Genocide involves the destruction of a group’s national, ethnic, or religious identity and might involve mass murder. A holocaust, Bauer notes, using a lower case "h" to denote a generic class of events and not the Jewish Holocaust, involves the total physical annihilation of a group, the murder of all its members for ideological reasons. To Bauer the Holocaust—the destruction of the European Jews—is a unique form of holocaust because it is the only one that fulfilled the criteria in the extreme form. The Armenian massacre, about which Bauer now states that the Turks did in fact intend to totally annihilate all Armenians in Turkey, offers an analogous but not identical kind of event because there were ideological differences. "On the continuum the two events stand next to each other." Thus Bauer appears to be saying that the Armenian massacre fits into the general category of holocaust.

* 3.6 *


Bauer again deals with the uniqueness issue; this time he sets his discussion in a warning that de-Judaizing the Holocaust by denying its uniqueness can possibly be one of the first steps in allowing the rebirth of a more rampant anti-Semitism. He argues that the memory of the outrageous horror of the Holocaust has inhibited this potential rebirth. As in previous writings, he again states that the Holocaust is unique in intention in that the Nazis wanted to totally annihilate the Jews. He still distinguishes between genocide and the Holocaust, but now introduces the idea that the "Holocaust is both the name for a specific, unique event in recent history, and also a generic concept: The planned total annihilation of a national or ethnic group on the basis of general ideology." This differs from genocide in that a genocide would not necessarily involve the murder of a people but possibly only the destruction of a people's identity. Bauer has here included in his definition of the Holocaust the concept that a holocaust must not only be a "planned total annihilation" but that it must be powered by "ideological reasons."
and Philosophy

though not equivalent, to other events in history, and
ty of the Holocaust."

historical events does not necessarily detract from its
uniqueness, but rather serves to highlight those ele­
ments unique to it. The Holocaust remains unprecedent­
ized in both world and Jewish history for four reasons:
(1) it was biologically based; 2) it was a sustained
episode of anti-semitism; 3) it was legally sanctioned
by the State; and 4) the intention of the Nazis was to
annihilate all Jews.

Dadrian, Vahakn N. "The Convergent Aspects of the
Armenian and Jewish Cases of Genocide: A Reinterpre­
tation of the Concept of Holocaust." Holocaust and

Dadrian claims that both the Armenians and the
Jews have had similar destructions visited on them. The
Armenian massacre and the annihilation of the Jews
were both genocides carried out with similar method
and intention. But although perhaps not objectively
unique, each destruction is subjectively unique as it is
experienced by its victims. This subjective experience
of uniqueness holds for all groups towards whom
genocide has been directed.

Dawidowicz, Lucy. "Thinking about the Six Million:
Facts, Figures, Perspectives." In The Holocaust and
the Historians. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

In the context of a review of the total loss of
human life during World War II, Dawidowicz argues
that the fate of the Jews was essentially different from
other mass murders perpetrated by the Nazis. The
author states that "never before had the principles and
methods of rational organization been employed...for
purposes of mass murder," thus implying that this
aspect of the Holocaust is unprecedented. But for
Dawidowicz, the Holocaust stands as a unique event
in two other major respects. First is the Nazi intention
to annihilate all Jews, and second is the unique effect
on Jewish history of having such a great proportion
of its people murdered in so short a time. Although
the overall effect of this proportion of victims is yet
to be evaluated, the one point about which Dawidowicz
is emphatic is that the continuity of Ashkenazic Jewish
culture has been destroyed irrevocably. The danger of
universalizing the Holocaust, to Dawidowicz, is that
it can be seen to mitigate the moral responsibility of

Nazi Germany. For a similar presentation with discus­
sion, see Dawidowicz, Lucy. "The Holocaust was
Unique in Intent, Scope, and Effect." Center Magazine
14:4 (July/August 1981): 56-64.

Deutscher, Isaac. "The Jewish Tragedy and the Histori­
an." In The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays. London:

In a brief essay, Deutscher, an eminent Marxist
historian, discusses the relationship of the historian to
the study of the Holocaust. He concludes that the
Holocaust, as an event in which every Jewish person
was to be murdered, is and will remain absolutely
unique and beyond comprehension to the historian.

Eckhardt, A. Roy. "Is the Holocaust Unique?" World­

Eckhardt postulates a continuum of universality
and particularity of events. All historical events are
unique and to deny this is to gloss over real differences.
Some events, however, are so unique as to be on a
"level of incomparability (e.g., God, the Jewish people,
the Devil...)." It is in this classification that Eckhardt
places the Holocaust. He believes it is so different from
other historical events that it is discontinuous with
them, or "uniquely unique."

Eckhardt, A. Roy, and Alice L. Eckhardt. "The Holo­
caust and the Enigma of Uniqueness: A Philosophical
Effort at Practical Clarification." Annals of the Amer­
ican Academy of Political and Social Science 450 (July

The Eckhardts seek to analyze the Holocaust in
such a way as to avoid mystifying the event—making
it incomprehensible—and yet to preserve its singularity.
To accomplish this, they set out three major categories
of uniqueness. The first is the category of "ordinary
uniqueness," a category into which all events fall, for
all historical events are qualitatively different from one
another. The second is the category of "unique un­
iqueness," a category into which "epoch making events"
can be placed, events of such "singular importance"
that they transform history. The third category, that
of "transcending uniqueness," includes "events that are
held to be essentially different from not only ordinary
uniqueness but even unique uniqueness." Events in this
category have the quality of absolute incomparability.
The fields of science and history approach events from
the stances of the first two categories, whereas the third
category can only be understood by the experience of
the beholder, involving a "radical leap from objectness
to subjectness." The Eckhardts advise us that the
Holocaust must be approached from all three stances in order to avoid falsification of the event.

* 3.13 *

In a book that deals with the effect of the Holocaust on contemporary Jews and Christians, the Eckharts devote a chapter to the central issue of the event's uniqueness. Again they maintain that a satisfactory analysis of the Holocaust must dialectically include both the singularity and the universality of the event. Once again calling the Holocaust "uniquely unique," referring to it as "metanoia, a climactic turning around of the world," they explain how it is also useful to both examine those elements that imbue the Holocaust with this quality of uniqueness as well as to see the ways in which it fits into historical context, that is, to see how "the Holocaust manifests discontinuity as well as continuity with the past."

* 3.14 *

In this article, Fackenheim states that it is not useful to define the Holocaust in terms of the unique and the universal, but rather in terms of authentic and unauthentic responses. Unauthenticity must follow if the Holocaust is seen as either solely unique or universal, for calling the Holocaust unique cuts it off from other historical events, and treating it universally unduly dilutes its significance. According to Fackenheim, the unique and the universal can be united through the medium of history if the Holocaust is considered as a historical event that is a "transmutation of history."

* 3.15 *

In this earlier discussion of the Holocaust, Fackenheim strongly stresses the need to recognize the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Although he asserts that we must see the Holocaust as an event that occurred within the context of history and that we must try to explain the conditions that existed that could allow the Holocaust to happen, scholars must acknowledge that "each and every explanation is false, if not downright obscene, unless it is accompanied by a sense of utter inadequacy." He also asserts that comparisons to other somewhat similar events that have occurred, such as Hiroshima, not only serve to trivialize the Holocaust but also evade its essential uniqueness.

* 3.16 *

Fackenheim categorizes the Holocaust as a unique event, a "novum in the history of evil," and still asserts the importance of recognizing its uniqueness. The Armenian massacre, Fackenheim states, was a case of genocide, an attempt to murder a whole people. But Fackenheim finds important differences between that genocide and the Holocaust and concludes that "the Holocaust, then, is but one case of the class 'genocide.' As a case of the class: 'intended, planned, and largely successful extermination,' it is without precedent and, thus far at least, without sequel." For a response to Fackenheim's position taken in this article see Berel Lang, "Uniqueness and Explanation" Journal of Philosophy 82:10 (October 1985): 514-515.

* 3.17 *

Fackenheim here says that the Holocaust is a unique event for both Jewish and world history because it presents a constellation of features not applicable to any other historical event. These features involve the fact that a large percentage of the total Jewish population was murdered; that the Nazis intended that no Jews survive; that being of Jewish birth constituted sufficient reason to be put to death; that although the Holocaust involved extensive physical brutality and murder the majority of the perpetrators were not sadists but "ordinary job holders with an extraordinary job"; and that the extermination of the Jewish people was an end in itself—no other "pragmatic" purpose for their death presented itself. Fackenheim recognizes that other catastrophic events have their own unique characteristics and must be understood in their own uniqueness.

* 3.18 *

Feingold reviews the positions of the universalists who place the Holocaust within the context of history on a continuum with other genocidal acts, and the particularists who insist on the Holocaust's essential uniqueness. With careful consideration of the events, Feingold arrives at the idea that the meaning of the
Holocaust, a meaning with which we are still struggling, lies more in the ways in which it differs from other genocides and not in the ways it is similar. Those key differences lie in the methodology employed in the execution of the Nazis' plan to exterminate the Jews and, novel to Feingold, in the fact that in destroying such a large portion of the Jewish population it destroyed a people whose contributions had a major impact on Western culture, thus transforming the future development of Western civilization. This impact, according to Feingold, will not be equally felt with the destruction of those other groups, such as the Armenians or the Gypsies, whose thinkers did not play as significant a role in the development of European culture.

* 3.19 *

Feingold asserts the uniqueness of the Holocaust and warns against trivializing the event by using it as a metaphor for all cases of oppression. He again stresses the idea that the Holocaust was unique in that it destroyed the Jews, a unique people, who produced a great many significant thinkers without whom European society would not be the same. He also characterizes the Holocaust's uniqueness as resting on a few essential characteristics: in its radical evil, in its scale, and more importantly in that it was the first time that the modern Western industrial system—a system intended to improve the quality of human life—was systematically used for the destruction of life.

* 3.20 *

Feuer, a well known philosopher, rejects the idea that it is useful to call the Holocaust unique. A unique event, he reasons, is one that can never happen again, "that is of necessity a class with one member." And yet a major, and to Feuer appropriate, concern about the Holocaust is that we understand it in such a way that we can ensure that a similar event will not happen again. If it were truly unique, as uniqueness is defined above, then our efforts to prevent recurrence are pointless: by definition this could not happen. Therefore Feuer suggests that it is more useful to understand the Holocaust as being unprecedented and not unique.

* 3.21 *

Fox states that to gain insight into the significance of the Holocaust for humankind, we must abandon "the bitter and often pointless debate about whether, for a number of reasons, the Holocaust should be considered a totally 'unique' or 'mystical' event in the whole of human history." He feels a more correct approach must include the study of those constant conditions of humankind and society that facilitated an event like the Holocaust. It is within this context that Fox claims that "what made the Holocaust 'unique'" was the conjunction of both the presence and leadership of Adolf Hitler with "all the psychological and social features of 'man in society'...."

* 3.22 *

From the point of view of the social sciences, Freeman finds that "the debate between uniqueness and comparison [of the Holocaust] may be misleading by presenting us with a false choice." Some argue that emphasizing the differences between the Holocaust and other genocidal events better understanding; others consider that a comparative emphasis better achieves this same end. Freeman believes that both approaches may be useful in understanding any case of genocide, including the Holocaust.

* 3.23 *
Friedlander, Henry. "Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust." Teachers College Record 80:3 (February 1979): 519-542.

Recognizing that the Holocaust is increasingly being taught in American schools and colleges, Friedlander offers a rationale with which to approach the topic. In the course of his discussion he highlights the obvious importance of the issue of uniqueness in teaching about the Holocaust. Only if comparisons to other historical events can be made can we rightly and productively integrate the subject into a school curriculum. Friedlander warns that those who would make the uniqueness of the Holocaust into "sacred history" stifle serious historical discussion. Friedlander also discounts the concept that a unique aspect of the Holocaust includes the intention of the Nazis to annihilate the Jews and instead focuses on the methodology employed as its outstandingly unique feature, saying that "...in technological efficiency it was sui generis...."

Friedländer attempts to determine why, although three decades have passed, our historical understanding of the Holocaust is no better now than just following the war. One of the first topics he discusses is the issue of the Holocaust's uniqueness. He claims that the Holocaust was unique both inside Nazism and without. Inside Nazism it was unique because the Jews were the only group the Nazis intended to annihilate totally and they were the only group identified with absolute evil. In world history, Friedländer finds that "although there are precedents for an attempt at total physical eradication, the Nazi exterminatory drive was made unmistakably unique by its motivation." Although the uniqueness of the Holocaust denies our ability to use "explanatory categories of a generalizing kind," it should not prevent us from trying to identify and explain the historical trends that led up to the Holocaust.


Frey asserts that the Holocaust is a significant event for Christian theology and as such must be the concern of all denominations. In introducing his discussion, he tries to establish a rationale for determining the Holocaust’s significance and in this context confronts the uniqueness issue. To him the Holocaust’s uniqueness lies in the methodology of the event—the fact of a mass murder being carried out by a "state sponsored, technologically sophisticated system," in a thoroughly rational manner—as well as being reflected in a more intentionalist position that recognizes the Nazi attempt to murder all Jews by virtue of their being Jewish.


Friedman, a prominent Jewish historian, concludes his essay with a statement that recognizes that the methodology employed in the Holocaust—a mass murder conducted under the auspices of a full state bureaucracy—was historically unprecedented.


Goldberg, who approaches the Holocaust from the Orthodox Jewish point of view, asserts that the Holocaust only seems unique, for every major Jewish catastrophe appears so for the people who live through the experience. "The Holocaust survivors remind us of the Jewish ability to respond to watershed disasters, each seen as unique in its own time." But this uniqueness should not be seen as a reason to assume its incomprehensibility for all time with regards to Jewish theology. A new theology not yet developed, Goldberg claims, is as necessary for an adequate response to the Holocaust as it was for other previous Jewish catastrophes, but those who choose to present the Holocaust as an event qualitatively different from other catastrophic events in Jewish history encourage silence and not speech on the issue and would prevent a new theology from developing.


Throughout two sections of his book Habermas, whose response to Nolte first triggered the German Debate, repeatedly criticizes those historians who would use the relativization of the Holocaust to deny its uniqueness. Their denial, he states, is put forth for apologetic reasons, in order to relieve Germans of the moral responsibility of the Nazi crimes of the past. Habermas believes that Auschwitz was an epoch-making event in that it "altered the conditions for the continuation of historical life contexts—and not only in Germany."


Hancock, who was a special advisor to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, denies the Jewish uniqueness of the Holocaust by extending it to encompass the Gypsies as well. He asserts that both the Jews and the Gypsies suffered the same fate during the Nazi Holocaust for exactly the same reasons thereby disclaiming that the Jews were the exclusive victims of
the Nazi exterminating drive, a position frequently taken in the literature. Hancock cautions against generalizing the event beyond the Jews and Gypsies, however, emphasizing that no other groups were targeted for destruction with the same manner and intention as they were.

* 3.30 *

Heuser reviews those writers important to the Historikerstreit with respect to their positions on the uniqueness and comparability of the Holocaust. She groups them into three categories. Some believe the event to be singularly unique and incomparable. The majority hold that a comparative approach can be used to show both its singularity and its similarity to other such events, accepting that comparison does not deny uniqueness. Lastly, there are some like Ernst Nolte who seem to use the event’s comparability in an apologist manner, minimizing the unique elements of the Holocaust and thus trying to mitigate the moral responsibility of the German people for this crime.

* 3.31 *

Hilberg, noted historian and author of *The Destruction of the European Jews*, a work often referred to as a foundation for those who take a methodologist’s position on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, here explores the possible motivations of the Germans in their attempt to destroy all Jews during the Holocaust. He introduces his article with a statement declaring the Holocaust’s uniqueness: "in conception and execution, it was a unique occurrence. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, a modern bureaucracy set out for the first time to destroy an entire people."

* 3.32 *

Hilberg attempts to arrive at the significance of the Holocaust for Western civilization. He asserts his position that the Holocaust is unique by terming it *sui generis* and "irreducibly distinct" from all other historical events. The implication of this uniqueness, Hilberg says, is that "one cannot explain it in terms of anything else….It demands its own literature and its own sources."

* 3.33 *

Jäckel strongly criticizes those historians in the Historikerstreit who would seem to deny the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In an often quoted statement, he articulates a fact he considers "obvious" and "well known," that "the murder of the Jews was unique because never before had a state, with the authority of its responsible leader, decided and announced its intention to liquidate as completely as possible a certain group of people, including the aged, women, children and babies, and to implement the decision by means of all the official instruments of power at its disposal." Jäckel, however, does not consider the "question of uniqueness" to be decisive and provocatively asks, "Would it change anything had the National-Socialist murder not been unique?"

* 3.34 *

Jakobovits succinctly summarizes the response of the Orthodox Jewish community to the claim that the Holocaust is unique. They deny "the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an event different in kind, and not merely in extent and barbarity, from any previous national catastrophe." They arrive at this position by seeing the destruction of European Jews as just another event within the pre-ordained realm of God’s providence. Therefore they reject any term, such as Holocaust or Shoah, that sets it apart from previous Jewish catastrophes.

* 3.35 *

This symposium on Jewish values after the Holocaust contains within it one of the earliest discussions of the uniqueness-universalist debate. Some of the major thinkers who express their ideas here are George Steiner, Elie Wiesel, and Emil Fackenheim. Both Weisel and Fackenheim emphasize the Holocaust’s uniqueness, whereas Steiner urges a more universalist approach.

* 3.36 *
Katz tries to determine if the Holocaust is unique as an act of genocide, distinguishing first between genocide as an attempt to destroy totally the identity of a group and genocide as an attempt to murder a group as a whole. He then examines the Holocaust as an act of genocide in terms of both Jewish and world history, including in his examination such events as the Armenian massacre and the destruction of American Indians, and concludes that the Holocaust is unique in terms of the intention of the Nazis to murder all Jews, thus falling into the second category of genocide.

* 3.37 *

Kren takes issue with various scholars' positions on the uniqueness issue, including those of Lucy Dawidowicz, Emil Fackenheim, Henry Feingold, and A. Roy Eckhardt, among others. He concludes that "what differentiates the Holocaust from previous forms of mass killings is that it entailed a long range, systematically planned, bureaucratically administered decision...to eliminate population groups possessing certain characteristics defined by arbitrary, although formally rational criteria."

* 3.38 *

Kren and Rappoport approach the Holocaust as a transformational event that they conceptualize as a "new level of mass destruction." Surveying the key categories of motives, methods, and emotions, they conclude that the Holocaust was qualitatively different from all previous acts of mass destruction. The motives of the Nazis were unique. In no other case was a people slated for total destruction as state policy. The methods employed, the fact that the killing process was "conducted more like a large scale industrial enterprise," was also different from other mass destructions. Furthermore, they state that the uniqueness of the Holocaust is evident when "the focus of inquiry is shifted from historical trends to the level of personal experience." The emotions that "accompanied or followed it" are qualitatively different from those experienced in other mass destructions.

* 3.39 *

Kulka, in response to the Historikerstreit, analyzes the shift some major German historians have exhibited in their tendency to relativize or historicize the uniqueness of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Earlier writings by these same authors, Kulka shows, stressed the Holocaust's singularity, especially with respect to the importance anti-Semitism played in National Socialist ideology. He contrasts these writers with historians who have consistently considered the Holocaust to be a unique event in world history.

* 3.40 *

Kuper states that the Holocaust had many unique elements. He includes among them the global scope of the Nazi intention to annihilate all Jews. Kuper emphasizes the bureaucratic organization and systematic nature of the killing process that yielded death camps organized in much the same way as a modern industrial plant.

* 3.41 *

Lanzmann states emphatically that the Holocaust was indeed unique, an incomparable crime, that calls forth an "entirely new metaphysical-juridical concept of "crime against humanity."" Although unique, one must not consider it a historical aberration, but rather as an event within historical context, where history has provided the necessary but not sufficient conditions for its occurrence. To Lanzmann the Holocaust is "a product of the entire Western World." To submerge the specificity of the event, however unique in its methodology and in the degree of its antisemitism, is to gloss over the moral responsibility of the Nazis and the fact that the "Holocaust was the enactment of Nazism."

* 3.42 *

Marrus affirms how careful we must be in using the concept of uniqueness in relation to the Holocaust. Historians, unlike social scientists, he explains, always study unique events and not general concepts such as "a war, rather than warfare and the Holocaust, rather than genocide." To apply the concept of uniqueness to the Holocaust in such a way as to make it a "political or theological affirmation" places the Holocaust in a category that limits historical study. Within this
framework, Marrus accepts the Holocaust as unique in the sense of being unprecedented. He agrees with Bauer’s position that one of the unique elements of the Holocaust was the intention of the Nazis to murder all Jews, but he also believes that the "killing process" utilized was unprecedented.

* 3.43 *

In the preface to his book about American Judaism, Neusner, a prominent Jewish thinker, offers an interesting concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Accepting the Holocaust as "self evidently unique" to the Jewish community, Neusner focuses on the function its uniqueness plays in American Judaism. Coupled with the establishment of the state of Israel, the uniqueness of the Holocaust makes up a part of a new myth about which American Jews, a religiously and culturally fragmented group, can organize their experience about themselves—a myth of "Holocaust and redemption." Neusner questions the value of this myth as a way for Jews to understand themselves in the American context, stating that the Holocaust is simply history and not "mythic theology."

* 3.44 *

Nolte, in an essay on the place of Nazism within German history, examines the uniqueness of the Holocaust. While he admits to the fact that the Holocaust was both "singular and unique" and "without precedent in its motivation and execution," the thrust of his argument advances the idea that the Nazi Holocaust was in its essence both a reaction to and a "distorted copy" of the earlier annihilations of the Russian Revolution, making it "not a first act, not the original." Many historians have interpreted these remarks of Nolte’s as being apologist in nature for the crimes of the Third Reich.

* 3.45 *

In the article that triggered the Historikerstreit, Nolte claims that "with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing" Auschwitz was not unique. Nolte raises a series of questions, the most important of which are "wasn’t the ‘Gulag Archipelago’ more original than Auschwitz? Wasn’t the ‘class murder’ of the Bolsheviks the logical and factual precursor of ‘racial murder’ perpetrated by the National Socialists?...In its ultimate origins, didn’t Auschwitz perhaps spring from a past which indeed would not wish to pass away?" With these questions Nolte seems to imply that the atrocities of Auschwitz were not unique but merely a copy of the Gulag.

* 3.46 *

Papazian takes issue with scholars who claim categorical uniqueness for the Holocaust, where uniqueness means that an event had no precedent and can have no antecedent. The Holocaust may have unique elements, and be unique to the Jewish people, who "never before were the victims of a premeditated state policy of total elimination of a national minority," but as genocide it was not unique in history but analogous to other genocidal events such as the Armenian massacre. Insisting on the Holocaust’s uniqueness, Papazian believes, has the effect of "diminishing the gravity and moral implication of any genocide anywhere, anytime." He reviews the positions of many prominent writers whose works touch on the concept of the Holocaust’s uniqueness, including those of Lucy Dawidowicz, Elie Wiesel, A. Roy and Alice L. Eckhardt, and George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, among others, and criticizes each. See "Was the Holocaust Unique?..." below (3.56) for responses.

* 3.47 *

President Carter appointed this commission on November 1, 1978 in order to establish appropriate ways to commemorate the Holocaust. As a preface to the commission’s report, Elie Wiesel wrote a letter to the President in which he made an important statement regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust. "The universality of the Holocaust lies its uniqueness; the Event is essentially Jewish, yet its interpretation is universal." The Commission considered the uniqueness of the Holocaust to be one of the two most important elements in the philosophical rationale that underlay its work. They found the Holocaust’s uniqueness to lie in the fact that it was a "systematic, bureaucratic extermination" different in its "manner and purpose." With regards to the Nazis’ purpose, what was novel in their approach was that they claimed that "There is evidence indicating that the Nazis intended to ultimately wipe out the Slavs and other people; had the war continued...Jews might not have remained the final victims of Nazi genocide, but they were certainly its
first." And what was unprecedented was the intention to physically annihilate an entire people.

* 3.48 *

Rosenberg raises the complex issues surrounding the uniqueness question and creates a topology for the classification of the various ways this issue has been approached in Holocaust literature. He generates a critique of some of the central approaches taken about the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

* 3.49 *

Rosensaft, representing the absolutist position on the uniqueness issue, sees the Holocaust as a totally unprecedented, incomprehensible historical aberration, beyond the methods of historiography, beyond normal language, and incomparable to other historical events.

* 3.50 *

Rotenstreich attacks those historians in the Historikerstreit who try to show that the Holocaust was not unique. They claim that the Holocaust was either preconditioned by or a copy of Soviet atrocities. He argues that they have a confused notion of what it means for an event to be unique and that they generate a false analogy between race and class murder, postulating cause and effect relationships that did not exist. Rotenstreich also claims that the intent of these historians was apologetic, that their goal was to discredit the singularity of Nazism and the Holocaust for the purpose of diminishing German moral responsibility.

* 3.51 *

Rubenstein states that there were unique elements to the Holocaust, namely, that it was an unprecedented attempt at genocide carried out by a legally sanctioned state bureaucracy. This uniqueness, however, must be seen in the context of the Holocaust as "an expression of some of the most significant political, moral, religious and demographic tendencies of Western civilization in the twentieth century," as well as against the background of the extreme violence of our era.

* 3.52 *

According to Schorsch, an awareness of the Holocaust is steadily increasing among both the Jewish community and the general public. Its recollection serves the function of helping to unify the potentially divisive factions of American Jewry and has become, even more than Israel, a major part of American Jewish identity. Schorsch finds that the persistent claim of the Holocaust's uniqueness, however, adds nothing to the horrors of the Jewish genocide. He finds it to be both historically and politically counter-productive, and advises that it be rejected. The "fixation on uniqueness has prevented us from reaching out by universalizing the lessons of the Holocaust," Schorsch states, and it only "alienates potential allies from among other victims of organized human depravity."

* 3.53 *

Stein criticizes the many writers and historians who have reassessed the uniqueness of the Holocaust. He concludes that the Holocaust is in fact unique "in absolute, not relative terms" because of differences in its "motivation, method, scope, and impact." He also adds that its uniqueness stems from the uniqueness of the Jewish people.

* 3.54 *

George Steiner, the renowned literary critic, discusses the uniqueness issue within the context of the hermeneutic dilemma that the Holocaust presents to Judaism. The dilemma becomes manifest in the questions of whether there is language adequate enough in which to speak about Auschwitz, and, on a theological level, whether after the Holocaust there is any longer language adequate enough to speak to, or about, God. He denies the uniqueness of the Holocaust on quantitative and qualitative grounds, rejecting both the intentionalist and the methodologist arguments for uniqueness. Steiner, however, recognizes that the centrality of the Holocaust's "presumed uniqueness" functions
as "the cement of Jewish identity," uniting Jews of all cultures and religious leanings.

* 3.55 *

Talmon, an important Jewish historian, asserts that the Holocaust was in fact unique, different from all other earlier massacres. Its key differences lie in the intention of the Nazis to annihilate completely all Jews as well as in the systematic methods utilized for their killing. He analyzes those events and ideas that may have made the Holocaust possible.

* 3.56 *

The major writers whom Papazian criticized in his above cited article defend their positions and show where they agree and disagree with Papazian's comments on the uniqueness issue. Included are responses from Yehuda Bauer, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, A. Roy and Alice L. Eckhardt, George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, and Nora Levin, among others.

* 3.57 *

Wertham strongly asserts that in process and methodology the Holocaust was completely unprecedented. He adds, however, that, although unprecedented, it was not a unique occurrence in the sense that it cannot happen again under similar circumstances.

* 3.58 *

In examining the significance of the Holocaust for Christian theology, Willis analyzes the uniqueness of the Holocaust in terms of the uniqueness of Auschwitz. He concludes that the Holocaust was qualitatively unique and discontinuous with other evil events. The key to its uniqueness lies in the methodology employed—the "bureaucratic and technological apparatus of state" that was put into effect.