

Probing the Limits of Categorization: The 'Bystander' in Holocaust History

Ort	Amsterdam
Datum	24.09.2015 - 26.09.2015
Bewerbungsschluss	31.01.2015
Veranstalter	German Studies Institute Amsterdam; Jena Center 20th Century History; Center for Holocaust Studies at the Institute of Contemporary History, Munich; NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam
Url	http://www.duitslandinstituut.nl/index.php?go=home.showHomeNav&pagenr=26&lng=de

Von
Christina Morina

Among the three categories used to analyze the role of individuals in the Holocaust, the 'bystander' is the broadest and vaguest. According to Raul Hilberg, who coined the term, it refers to all those who were 'once a part of this history.' Generations of Holocaust scholars have used Hilberg's triangulation or variations thereof to analyze, systematize and narrate the wealth of historical experiences under Nazi rule. Whereas it seems relatively easy to define who belonged to the category of perpetrator and victim, analyzing the thoughts and actions of the other contemporaries remains a challenging task for international historiography. In recent years, increasingly sophisticated studies have introduced various intermediate categories and concepts referring to 'onlookers', 'auxiliaries', 'accomplices', 'Mitläufer', 'ordinary people' or 'profiteers' to describe the various attitudes and actions of contemporaries during the persecution of Jews and other minorities in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.

Yet, a sense has emerged that the conventional triangular categorization, even in its most refined versions, has certain limitations. A close look at the daily experiences and interactions of those who can be seen neither as perpetrators nor as victims of systematic persecution reveals that these peoples' thoughts and actions, attitudes and decisions cannot be categorized and pinpointed easily. Often they took on malleable, context-dependent, changing social roles, shifting between active and passive participation in the events that they lived through and adapting to circumstances in various and varying ways.

Without deploying basic theoretical concepts and analytical categories, however, it seems impossible to grasp the Holocaust as a complex social process. They are needed to analyze and explain the ensuing dynamics of segregation, disintegration, and brutalization on the one hand, as well as continuities in 'ordinary' peoples' lives, and perhaps even the persistence and growth of new forms of social cohesion, on the other.

The aim of the conference is thus to thoroughly review the stereotypical 'bystander' and to think beyond the existing scholarly approaches in Holocaust historiography. It is intended to encourage the formulation of innovative concepts, which might enable historians to consider hitherto overlooked or marginalized aspects of historical reality or to view familiar processes from entirely new angles. Bringing together scholars of Nazi Germany and German-occupied territories across Europe, we invite papers addressing one of the following themes:

1) Concept History

Invention, genesis and uses of the concept/term 'bystander', including its national adaptations and translations within the historical, cultural and social sciences as well as in literature and art dealing with the history of the Holocaust.

2) Concept Revision

Alternative concepts and theories aimed at exploring the thoughts and actions of those many other contemporaries who cannot be clearly categorized as victims or perpetrators, how these thoughts and actions might have changed over time and how they relate to one another. Are there new methods that could be employed, and (hitherto neglected) types of sources that could be consulted? Interdisciplinary approaches adapting theories and methods from disciplines such as sociology or psychology are especially welcome. Papers can also address the integration or conflation of the 'bystander' concept with other concepts and theories about the societal dynamics of the Holocaust, such as Volksgemeinschaft, exclusion/ inclusion, brutalization or normalization. Does the 'bystander'-category remain useful if combined with other approaches stressing the social, structural and/or individual dimensions of Nazi extermination policies and practices?

3) Concept Adaption

General reflection on the potential and limitations of the categorical system in light of the various tasks Holocaust historians see for themselves: if the aim is to narrate and thus represent the Holocaust as a complex historical event and human experience, which categories and concepts are up to the task? Are concepts and categories needed at all? If the Holocaust is taken as the most extreme case of genocide in history, a genocide that is still not fully understood and explained, can we deduct a typology from it? Could historians move towards a historical behavioural science, daring even to formulate socio-psychological and anthropological assumptions? Could the Holocaust thereby be related to or compared with other genocides in the past and present?

Since the focus of the conference is on conceptual and methodological issues, it has no regional focus and papers can span the pre-war era, the war years, as well as – if relevant – the immediate postwar years. Conceptual papers should refer to specific examples in order to illustrate the proposed approach yet pure case studies will not be considered if they lack a conceptual dimension. Publication of the conference papers is intended. The conference language is English.

Programme

Confirmed speakers are Frank Bajohr, Mary Fulbrook, Norbert Frei, Jan Grabowski, Ulrich Herbert, Peter Romijn, Tatjana Tönsmeier, and Abram de Swaan.

Kontakt

Dr. Christina Morina & Dr. Krijn Thijs
German Studies Institute Amsterdam
Prins Hendrikkade 189 B, 1011TD Amsterdam, The Netherlands
0031-(0)20-525 36 90
0031-(0)20-525 36 93
bystander-dia@uva.nl

Zitation

Probing the Limits of Categorization: The 'Bystander' in Holocaust History, 24.09.2015 – 26.09.2015 Amsterdam, in: H-Soz-Kult, 21.11.2014, <<http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-26511>>.

Copyright (c) 2014 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.