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The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989/90 led to a new round of efforts to come to terms with the consequences of the Nazi past that resulted in a major shift in the paradigms of restitution and compensation. The newly revived debate over restitution and compensation that took shape after 1989 focused on compensating individuals rather than nation states, as had been the case in the immediate postwar period. As a result, the postwar restitution regime experienced a crisis of legitimacy, as Jewish organizations, in particular, called attention to its many deficits. In addition, the restitution debate challenged traditional historical narratives and meta-narratives of the postwar period. For decades, the strategic alliances of the Cold War had ignored the material demands of individuals. The renewed debate raised questions that most of the affected countries had regarded as resolved for fifty years. Challenging many countries’ national postwar myths, it publicized aspects of war looting and economic collaboration with Nazi Germany that societies had repressed in the postwar era. Within the framework of concrete demands for restitution, the United States developed an action-oriented politics of history that played a central role in the process and greatly determined its course. The debate about the so-called Holocaust-era assets1 was not only important in relation to clarifying open questions of compensation and restitution. It also formed a context wherein the U.S. politics of history helped to decontextualize and universalize Holocaust remembrance on both the transnational and state levels. Thus, the U.S. politics of history in the 1990s is not only important as a central aspect of restitution and compensation history but also for the associated transformation in the politics of remembrance.

In the following, I will sketch the background and the first approaches of the U.S. politics of history in Eastern Europe. Then I will demonstrate how and why the U.S. politics of history aimed its lens at Western Europe, and, particularly, Switzerland. Finally, an analysis of the three major conferences on restitution policy will explain the consequences that the U.S. approach had and how the debate

1 The use of the term “Holocaust-era assets” makes it clear that the inadequacies of restitution and remembrance policies during the Cold War were regarded as highly significant in the recent debate. However, the injured parties do not necessarily have to be Jews. Rather, the term manifests the fact that the murder of European Jews had become a fixed point from which the entire era was to be regarded.
increasingly turned from purely material questions to those related to the politics of remembrance.

Restitution after the End of the Bipolar World Order

The fall of the Berlin Wall not only represented a break in the Cold War; it was also the precondition for renewed discussion of the restitution question, which originated in the 1990s in the dispute about Jewish assets that had been stolen and then nationalized in Eastern Europe. Only in the second half of the decade, when the dispute spilled over into Western Europe, did it become a global issue. The World Jewish Restitution Organization, which was founded in 1992 as an umbrella organization for various Jewish groups with a special focus on Eastern Europe, had a mandate to pursue restitution for Jewish assets that had been nationalized after 1945. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the question about the so-called uninherited or unclaimed assets and the lack of resolution since 1945 became relevant agenda items. This issue was especially important in Eastern Europe on account of the tremendous extent to which the Nazis carried out their extermination policies there. Yet, by the later 1990s, it would also profoundly affect Switzerland as an international center of finance.

Especially in the United States, there was soon broad political support for these restitution efforts, which extended well beyond the Clinton administration and the State Department. Already in the early 1990s, relevant political circles in the U.S. acknowledged the legitimacy of the restitution demands and consistently advocated that they be fulfilled in the context of general re-privatization. But the question of restoring Jewish assets was only one facet of a much broader process, representing only one part of what the U.S. was demanding. The strong focus on restitution, particularly of Jewish assets, was characteristic of this paradigm shift. This unprecedented support for Jewish restitution demands meant that the United States now recognized that it represented an historical injustice for these asset issues to have remained unresolved for half a century. At the same time, the attention the topic now received heightened American society’s awareness of the extent to which the Jewish population had been robbed, as well as the close connection between plunder and extermination. The Clinton administration integrated the process of restoring stolen or nationalized Jewish assets into a discourse characterized by respect for private property as well as adherence to human rights—in this case, particularly those of minorities. The
administration underscored that Eastern European governments needed to acknowledge and return stolen or nationalized property before they could successfully transform their societies. This U.S. government approach was fundamentally different from that of many Western European states, which insisted on introducing private property in Eastern Europe but had not allowed the economic plunder of the Jewish population and the resulting demand for restitution to become a central topos of the economic transformation processes of the 1990s.5

The United States conducted the debate about restitution in Eastern Europe under the paradigm that this was a specifically Eastern European issue deriving from the legacy of both Nazi and Communist rule. Thus, there was talk of “double victims.” However, it seemed no one had yet perceived that this issue was a fundamental problem of all postwar societies extending beyond the question of the type of government or its economic policies. Only the State Department’s willingness to generally address unresolved asset issues made it possible for the restitution debate to spill over into Western countries.

The Dispute Extends to Western Europe
In the later 1990s, the restitution issue burst out of the confining framework of Eastern Europe and became a global issue. The limited goal of resolving restitution issues for the Eastern European states expanded into addressing the omissions and denials that occurred after 1945. This larger framework brought Western European countries under critical fire, as well. The issues of plundered gold and so-called unclaimed bank accounts, in particular, became central to the debates about the Nazi era, Switzerland becoming the first Western country to be scrutinized. The unclaimed accounts held by Swiss banks that had not been paid out showed that the insufficient resolution of demands for victims of National Socialism in the postwar era was not limited to Eastern Europe but constituted a general problem of postwar societies. Just as the restoration of private property in Eastern Europe had heightened awareness of assets and therefore reanimated the restitution question, the expansion of the issue to Western Europe transformed the question of how the demands of victims of National Socialism had been dealt with in the postwar period to a general issue of the 1990s that pulled in ever more states.

The extension of the restitution issue to Switzerland substantially altered the nature of the debate. For one thing, the number of U.S.

5 See also “Jewish Restitution – WJRO Brussels Conference Looks to Germany, Switzerland and Western Europe,” September 1995, National Archives / Maryland (NARA), RG 59, Entry ZZ-104, Box 20, Folder HF 1 of 2, HF 02.
actors increased tremendously. Now, alongside Jewish organizations and the U.S. administration, senators, states, Democratic and Republican members of Congress, and private attorneys stepped onto the stage of restitution politics. Although they were united in their aim, there were profound differences concerning how restitution should be made. As a result, there was a great deal of friction among these various camps. The other actors in the restitution movement were particularly suspicious of the private attorneys, whose motivation they distrusted. The tone of the debate grew less diplomatic, especially concerning the conflict of the assets Switzerland. Instead, media campaigns took on great significance. Whereas the Clinton administration always took its bilateral relations with Switzerland into account alongside its aims for restitution policy, other actors, such as the World Jewish Congress and the private attorneys, were interested in waging a media battle designed to bring the accusations to a head. The individual American states, likewise, cared little about possible international repercussions. Instead, they challenged Washington’s foreign policy monopoly, just as they had during the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s. The threat that individual American states might impose sanctions put more pressure not only on Switzerland but also on the U.S. administration, with the threat often more effective than the sanctions themselves in spurring crucial advances in negotiations. In general, this led to a new configuration totally unlike the quiet backdoor diplomacy of the restitution debates of the postwar years. In the controversy of the 1990s, the idea of government as a central and solitary actor had lost its validity, resulting in a less controlled debate with less predictable consequences. A variety of actors had to ratify any agreement that was made in order to become viable, and this heterogeneity made the conflict explosive and intense. Yet, in spite of all the U.S. administration’s complaints, this intensity undoubtedly made the U.S. actors more effective and put more pressure on Switzerland. For a long time, Switzerland counted on the supposed status quo of the Cold War era being maintained and imagined, falsely, that the country was safe with regard to restitution policy. This not only cost Switzerland its moral legitimacy but also dramatically raised the price of an agreement with U.S. actors.

The U.S. Politics of History in the 1990s

The expansion of the restitution debate to include Western Europe led to a drastic change in U.S. policy: Whereas the U.S. support for Jewish restitution demands in Eastern Europe aimed to generally transform economic policy, once the issue spread to Switzerland,
U.S. involvement turned from pure restitution politics to a more comprehensive politics of history. It no longer aimed just to have stolen property restored to its owners but also to critically revise the historical narratives of the postwar period. This shift would profoundly influence the self-image of the affected states, as well as how they would choose to remember the murder of millions of Jews and integrate the Holocaust into their national historical narratives.

In 1995, President Bill Clinton appointed Stuart E. Eizenstat as special envoy for property claims in Central and Eastern Europe and later made him special envoy for Holocaust issues. This step made clarifying the unfinished business of World War II restitution claims a central component of the Clinton administration’s political agenda. In May 1996, Clinton promised the president of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, in a letter that he would provide the full support of the U.S. government for restitution demands in Western Europe, arguing that it was a question of justice and an issue of great moral consequence. In October 1996, Clinton then announced the launch of an investigative report on the restitution policies of the U.S. and its Allies in relation to the transfer of wealth within German-controlled territory, as well as on Switzerland’s role as a financial hub. With the Eizenstat Report, which was published in 1997, the behavior of the United States and its Allies also came under fire. This not only broadened the conflict over the “shadow of the Second World War” but also qualitatively transformed it, particularly in relation to Holocaust remembrance. This was because Eizenstat’s programmatic orientation for the report went beyond criticizing restitution policies during the war and the postwar period and demanding financial resolution of the open asset issues. Eizenstat aimed to conduct a “Crusade for Justice” that would not only resolve these issues but also problematize the national historical images of the war and postwar period. Thus, he entered into the contested field of historical-political narratives. Eizenstat’s declaration that “We must not enter a new century without completing the unfinished business of this century” became a leitmotif of U.S. policy.

The Eizenstat Report and the Crisis of National Postwar Myths

There were two reasons the Clinton administration opted not only to work to restore material assets but also to address historical omissions. First of all, the societal amnesia of the postwar period concerning Nazi looting practices had actually resulted in inadequate...
information about the looting and the deficits in restitution policy for that time. The rush to the National Archives in Washington in the mid-1990s revealed how rudimentary the state of historical knowledge actually was. The conflict within the Tripartite Gold Commission concerning the commingling of stolen gold with gold from Holocaust victims exemplifies this issue. Consequently, it was necessary to reconstruct and work through these matters in order to clarify the open restitution questions, as the Clinton administration demanded, by the end of the twentieth century. In the context of addressing these historical issues, the United States pushed to get international sources opened to research and national historical commissions established.

The second reason for the Clinton administration’s approach to the politics of history was the programmatic orientation of the “Crusade for Justice.” Establishing justice was seen as only partly a financial matter; it also included the moral and political task of working through one’s history and responsibilities. Within this orientation, the aim of the restitution debate was to draw the nations into a process of reconciliation. The national investigative commissions would have a great responsibility to raise awareness for their nations’ histories and omissions. Thus, the Clinton administration regarded the “unfinished business” as an encumbrance on international relations. Each nation’s working through its postwar history and establishing foundations was to foster a reconciliation that also had an important foreign policy component. On a general, strategic level, this approach could be observed in the development of a New Transatlantic Agenda in 1995. The Western world was supposed to step into the twenty-first century after the catastrophes of the twentieth without the burden of the unfinished business of the postwar period. Of central importance for the U.S. administration was the affected countries’ willingness to acknowledge their historical mistakes and shortcomings, although the present governments were not to be blamed for these. The process of clarification was also supposed to lead to a new cohesion of Western states to replace the dissolving glue of the Cold War confrontation. In other words, the United States was also finding ways to continue with the project of the American century and to remain an “indispensable nation” (Madeleine Albright) in the new geostrategic configuration.

“Building a Framework for American Leadership in the 21st Century” was the practical political task that the United States had set itself in

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the 1990s, and not only in its foreign policy objectives.\textsuperscript{15} As Madeleine Albright put it in 1997, “The great divide in the world today is not between East and West or North and South; it is between those who are prisoners of history and those determined to shape history ... That is the same choice America faced 50 years ago in the aftermath of World War II.”\textsuperscript{16} In this context, the gradually developing awareness of the murder of the European Jewish population took on special significance—not only within the historically specific framework of particular victims, perpetrators and crimes but, more importantly, as a moral-ideological guideline that forged a link among nations in the system of Western values after the end of the Cold War. This orientation shows that the aim of drawing conclusions from the crimes of the Second World War also impacted the course of U.S. foreign policy, making Holocaust remembrance a component of the discourse of legitimation during the Clinton era. However, this was not a linear process but involved a highly contested field upon which various groups tried to occupy Holocaust remembrance for themselves.

Both the historical reconstruction of Nazi looting policies and the collaboration it involved, as well as concern about new Western cohesion after the end of the Cold War, motivated the United States to work through the shortcomings of restitution policies from the postwar period from the perspective of a new politics of history. Significantly, this approach strengthened and accelerated the gradual process, begun in the 1980s, of challenging Europe’s national postwar myths. The U.S. insistence on challenging these myths deeply influenced the self-image of the affected states; U.S. criticism brought about a paradigm shift that delegitimized the great narratives of restitution policy and made a new perspective on these myths possible. This gave more weight to interpretations primarily of a younger generation of historians that criticized national meta-narratives and pointed to blind spots in the writing of history.\textsuperscript{17} The Cold War image that divided nations into perpetrator countries, victim countries, neutral observers and, in the case of the United States, rescuer countries began to break apart. The dichotomies of the Cold War period dissolved. In their place, a debate about the various types of collaboration and different countries’ share of the guilt led to a new perception of the Holocaust as a phenomenon that affected the entire Western world. This, then, was the debate the U.S. pushed on the European states, powerfully propelling the process of internationalizing remembrance and decontextualizing the Shoah and radically changing the self-perception of the Western countries in relation to Nazi crimes.

\textsuperscript{15} This is the title of an essay by Madeleine K. Albright, “Building a Framework for American Leadership in the 21st Century,” United States Department of State Dispatch, No. 2 (February 1997): 3-5.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{17} It should be noted that the U.S. administration did not instigate the crisis about national postwar myths but merely gave it greater weight and made it more politically relevant. In postwar Western societies, a critical rewriting of history that criticized self-legitimating historical national images was already underway before the 1990s. However, such perspectives were marginalized both in the sociopolitical realm and academia.
The U.S. politics of history transformed and expanded Holocaust remembrance in three crucial ways. First, the perception of Shoah victims changed—not least because of the internal dynamics of this U.S. politics of history—after all, it was the shortcomings in restitution and compensation policies toward individual victims that comprised the core of the so-called unfinished business. If it appeared at first glance as though the United States would, in the 1990s, take a restitution approach similar to that of the immediate postwar period, a closer examination revealed a fundamental difference. It was no longer national interests in restitution that stood in the center but rather the fate of individual victims and the way they had been ignored during the Cold War. The previous practice of forcing Western integration to the detriment of the interests of individual victims became obsolete when the Eastern Bloc imploded. Thus, the U.S. shift in restitution policy corresponds to a changed view of the victims of National Socialism that puts them in the center after a long period of relative marginalization. Only when the Cold War ended did societies become aware of the inadequacy with which questions concerning assets of individual victims had been addressed.

Second, in the course of overcoming what Avi Beker called the “conspiracy of silence,” a new perspective on the Second World War and the annihilation of European Jews emerged. This perspective viewed the Holocaust not only as the largest systematic and planned murder of human beings but also placed it in the context of one of the largest looting and expropriation campaigns in history. Eizenstat’s statement, “The Holocaust was not only the worst genocide in history but also perhaps history’s greatest theft,” describes this shift toward integrating the systematic plunder into remembrance of the Shoah. This achieved in Shoah reception and in the sociopolitical conflict about restitution and compensation what Raul Hilberg had already worked out in his three-volume standard work on The Destruction of the European Jews in 1961: the interweaving of plunder and extermination. This demonstrates, too, that the restitution policy debates of the 1990s did not really have to do with new knowledge but with the reappropriation and dissemination of what had long been ignored. This perception reflects the dynamics of the 1990s debate: after all, it was primarily concerned with the material consequences of National Socialist looting policy, which now came to be understood as an integral part of the Nazi policy of genocide.

Third, this reception of the Holocaust, which sought to rectify the lack of individual restitution and stressed the role of looting as an
integral aspect of the extermination of European Jews, led to a new perception of the relative weight and relationship of the Holocaust and the Second World War. The Independent Commission of Experts in Switzerland commented on changes in Second World War historiography in its concluding report: “A historical presentation that integrates the Holocaust leads to different interpretations than one that is limited to the challenges of the war.”

This corrected the dominant perspective of the postwar period in which historical questions focused on the war, and restitution policy concentrated on the nation-states. This new view was especially important to Western European countries in the context of European rapprochement.

Memory and Restitution: On Historical Memory and the Material Conflict about Holocaust-Era Assets

The reanimation of the restitution question in Eastern Europe after the end of the bipolar world order and its extension to Western European countries lead not only to a large number of material funding decisions and new foundations. Whereas the first restitution debate in the immediate postwar period put material issues front and center, a key characteristic of the 1990s debate was its close connection to the politics of historical memory. How to remember these crimes, what to emphasize, and, above all, what consequences they had for the present and future—all became crucial to the discussion. The development of this link between restitution and historical memory, that is, the movement “from money to memory,” can be clearly discerned in the three principal conferences of the restitution debate in London in 1997, in Washington in 1998, and in Stockholm in 2000.


on who owed what to whom but rather to compile empirical and historical information on the whereabouts of the Nazi gold. In addition, this gathering was expected to imbue the issue with momentum.\textsuperscript{23} Strictly speaking, it was not intended to be a restitution conference; no concrete political steps were planned. Rather, the conference aimed to prompt research on Holocaust-era assets and to anchor the topic in a broader international discussion. For this to happen, each affected state had to be ready to critically assess its role in the Second World War as well as its postwar restitution efforts.\textsuperscript{24}

At first, the British government was not enthusiastic about an international conference. Although British Foreign Minister Rifkind declared that he was not principally opposed to such a meeting on stolen assets, he doubted that it would be productive.\textsuperscript{25} Whereas Great Britain wanted to limit the conference to Nazi gold, the U.S. government sought to include other Holocaust-era assets, including insurance policies and looted art, in the discussions.\textsuperscript{26} Great Britain, in return, expressed concern that a host of countries would be extremely sensitive about expanding the discussion, which would endanger the conference’s chances of success.\textsuperscript{27} Britain’s reservations clearly showed how great international worries about further restitution demands were and how cautiously diplomatic circles approached the issue. Therefore, in the run-up to the conference, the British government asked the U.S. government not to associate the upcoming conference with any demands for restitution.\textsuperscript{28}

The public was largely excluded from the proceedings, which attested to the great explosive political power the issue continued to have. The transparency British Foreign Minister Robin Cook spoke of—“We must be open”\textsuperscript{29}—was just lip service. As Gerard Aalders, a Senior Researcher at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) in Amsterdam, noted, a “wall of silence surrounded the discussions about what was probably the greatest gold robbery in the history of humanity.”\textsuperscript{30} In his opening statement, Stuart Eizenstat demanded that the London Conference make a moral gesture as well as a material contribution to justice for victims and survivors.\textsuperscript{31}
The conference consisted primarily of reports by the various countries on the status of investigations into Nazi gold. These reports revealed a wide range of perspectives on the issue but yielded little new knowledge. Switzerland’s Bergier commission’s report was an exception, presenting new figures for the amount of Nazi gold transferred to Switzerland. These figures were of great political importance, especially to the Clinton administration, because they supported the basic statements of the first Eizenstat Report from May 1997. As a result, the United States singled out Switzerland for praise at the Nazi gold conference, noting that the Bergier commission and its investigation of the Swiss past attested to Switzerland’s willingness to address the unresolved questions of its history. By praising Switzerland as pioneering, Eizenstat demonstrated one of the characteristics of the 1990s restitution debate: The Clinton administration’s “Crusade for Justice” was not about assigning blame. Rather, it aimed to initiate a process of clarification that, as explained in the preface to the Eizenstat report, would not burden the present and the future of the affected countries but relieve them of a historical burden. The majority of European countries did not understand this approach; instead, they regarded the entire process and its implicit exposure of guilt and responsibility as a threat to be avoided.

One step the United States demanded from the beginning was the opening of archives. This was part of its political directive to examine war and postwar history particularly from the perspective of failures and omissions and thus to take care of any unfinished business. However, the U.S. had difficulty getting this demand fulfilled because the topic was still so explosive that many countries were reluctant to cooperate. France and Great Britain, for example, opposed the release of the Tripartite Gold Commission’s files, thus violating the principle of openness they themselves had advocated.

A key issue at the conference was what to do with the remaining gold of the Tripartite Gold Commission now that Albania, the last claimant, had received its share in October 1996. The Clinton administration favored a solution that would benefit individual victims; this would involve creating a fund comprised of the Commission’s remaining gold stocks. Eizenstat and British Foreign Minister Robin Cook officially presented this solution at the London conference, and Eizenstat declared that the United States would deposit $25 million into the fund. The country delegations present responded very positively to this idea, with pledges for payments far exceeding U.S. expectations. Eizenstat closed the conference with a reminder
that set the tone of his entire involvement in the restitution question: “We must not enter a new century without completing the unfinished business of this century. We have a collective responsibility to leave this century having spared no effort to establish the truth, and to do justice.”

As Aalders put it, however, “the results of the conference were rather sparse.” The London Conference did not yield binding agreements. To be sure, it had shown how the issue of Nazi gold had attracted increasing attention internationally and could no longer be ignored. Restitution of Nazi gold, it had become clear, was an international problem that was not yet resolved. This heightened awareness constituted a success for those who had advocated clarifying these open questions. Yet most delegates took a wait-and-see approach and were reluctant to take action. The British delegation came under pressure because it had kept a completed report on Great Britain secret in order to avoid negative headlines in the press. Delegates were similarly hesitant to take up the U.S. suggestion to coordinate international research efforts and open archives. Conference Chairman Lord Mackay’s statement that the Nazi gold conference had not been convened for making concrete decisions and resolutions feebly papered over the explosiveness of the subject of Nazi gold restitution and the reticence of many states.

Nonetheless, the U.S. government was quite satisfied with the achievements of the conference. “The London Conference on Nazi Gold greatly strengthened international momentum for further measures to compensate victims of Nazi persecution,” the State Department declared in its first internal assessment. The conference had actually made the expansion of the debate about unresolved asset questions a broad international issue that ever fewer countries could evade. Under the slogan “Completing Work This Century,” Eizenstat announced a follow-up conference in Washington in 1998 at the end of the proceedings. This conference was supposed to broaden the spectrum of Holocaust-era assets to be discussed beyond gold. This planned follow-up ensured that the London conference would not remain a mere episode. Thus, the conference increased pressure on the various states to critically examine their history and question national myths about collaboration and restitution. In terms of its concrete results, the London Conference on Nazi Gold was not as Eizenstat claimed in his closing speech, a “landmark event,” but it did become a central component in U.S. government efforts...
to address postwar myths and restitution issues by the end of the twentieth century.

The 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets

The conference on Holocaust-era assets that took place in Washington DC from November 30 to December 3, 1998, was conceived as a follow-up to the London conference. Fifty-seven delegations from forty-four countries and thirteen non-governmental organizations took part. The subject of Nazi gold was only addressed marginally; instead, previously neglected Holocaust-era assets such as insurance policies and stolen art stood at the center of the conference. This expansion of the issue had caused the date of the conference to be postponed several times. Although the conference was originally planned for early 1998, the State Department and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum ended up holding a series of smaller preparatory conferences to discuss details of various assets over the course of the year. The Art Loss Registry, especially, was supposed to help galleries and museums ensure they did not acquire stolen artworks. These preparatory meetings attest to the meticulousness with which the Washington conference was planned. The meetings not only provided substantive preparation on the issues but also drew the various states into an intensive preliminary exchange and discussion that mooted strategic policy options for the restitution of stolen assets ahead of the conference.

Like the London Conference, the Washington conference was not intended to be a forum for individual governments to make decisions but rather a gathering of various governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Concrete material and monetary demands for restitution of stolen assets were not supposed to figure as part of the conference. Instead, according to Eizenstat, the conference was supposed to contribute to creating a non-binding international consensus on principles and procedures for dealing with restitution demands concerning these types of assets and thus to give restitution policy new momentum at the century’s end. The exploration of unresolved Holocaust-era assets was intended, as in London, to function as a catalyst that would draw ever more countries into the debate.

As James D. Bindenagel, the U.S. Official Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues from 1999 to 2001, explained, the social and political significance of the conference extended far beyond the concrete question of restitution of Holocaust-era assets. Rather, an open and consensual resolution of these long repressed questions constituted
a key condition for Europe’s successful transition from the historical Europe of the twentieth century to the transatlantic community of the twenty-first—a project that was supposed to give the Western world a new geopolitical structure after the collapse of the bipolar world order.\footnote{49} That leading representatives of the Clinton administration contextualized the Washington conference in this way reveals the extent to which the administration’s “Crusade for Justice” was also part of a programmatic foreign policy reorientation after the end of the Cold War. The U.S.-led debate thus had the function of creating a new coherence for the Western world now that the geostrategic binding agent of the postwar era had been lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union.\footnote{50} In this context, the preservation and restoration of property titles assumed central importance. In her keynote address to the Washington conference, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that reestablishing justice was one of the key aims of the U.S. government, but that the participating states’ commitment to resolving resolution issues had a two-fold purpose: First, the unresolved material questions pertaining to Holocaust-era assets were to be openly aired and resolved. Second, the memory of the Holocaust, research on the Holocaust, and the dissemination of knowledge about it must be advanced. The first process, though painful, would have a cathartic effect on the affected countries, but the second aim constituted a continuing task that each generation would have to take up anew.\footnote{51} With these words, Albright pointed to a central feature of the conference: Although the conflict about material questions still stood at its center, the U.S. government also wished to anchor the issue of Holocaust memory in the international debate. Consequently, the Washington conference can be interpreted as the turning point at which the agenda began to shift from restitution policy to the politics of historical memory.

Since the issue of Nazi gold was regarded as largely settled after the 1998 global agreement with Switzerland, the Washington conference changed the focus from Nazi gold to other looted assets.\footnote{52} It did not deal with reparations for forced laborers, even though this subject played a central role in public debates at that time. This exclusion reveals the diplomatic strategy behind the conference: The Washington conference was not to interfere with negotiations then underway with Germany on this issue. Whereas the London conference had mainly focused on material issues, the Washington conference addressed questions concerning the politics of historical memory. As a result, the Washington conference marked the transition in...
the politics of history from “money to memory.” The conference thus initiated a shift toward questions of education and the politics of history, accompanied by attention to Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. The backdrop to this development was the founding, in 1998, of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. The Task Force was officially presented to a broader public at the Washington conference in December 1998. Already in the opening speeches of the conference, speakers mentioned the Task Force and called for increased efforts in the areas of Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. Although the Washington conference was clearly focused on restitution policy, the issue of Holocaust memory and education thus had a strong presence. In his concluding statement, Eizenstat asked participating states to accept the Swedish government’s invitation to attend a conference on precisely these historical-political issues in Stockholm in 2000. Consequently, with the close of the Washington conference, the subject of restitution moved from direct political debate to the realm of culture.

The Holocaust as a Cultural Code: The 2000 Stockholm Holocaust Conference

The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000 saw the emergence of a new kind of cultural memory in which the Holocaust became an emblematic memory for the twentieth century. This first major conference of the new century consisted of a discussion of values among Western states that was centered on the Holocaust as a negative historical example.

The various restitution funds and foundations that were set up under substantial pressure from the U.S. in the 1990s had brought conclusion to the material and legal aspects of the restitution debates. The Clinton administration now strove to shift the perspective from material questions to questions of memory for the new century. As Eizenstat stated, “[a]s we proceed with addressing Holocaust-related issues, it is important to move from money to memory. The last word on the Holocaust should be the memory of its victims and the teaching of its enduring

53 See Interview Bennett Freeman, Interview James Bindenagel.
lessons.”\(^5^9\) This implied a transformation in Holocaust remembrance that would involve a considerable amount of conflict over the use and representation of the past. Made ever more universal, Holocaust remembrance came to be closely associated with human rights policy—a sort of template applied to present conflicts, as Eizenstat illustrated in this remark: “The horrors of the Holocaust provided a lesson applicable to contemporary events ... The focus on human rights violations from Chechnya to China resonates with Holocaust-related issues.”\(^6^0\) Whereas the period 1945 to 1989 was characterized by disagreements over facts, now the debate shifted to the use of the Holocaust and its memory for the present. As the Holocaust was interpreted as the diametrical opposite of a society based on human rights, Western democratic societies began to appear as embodying the lessons of the destructive tendencies of the twentieth century. The Holocaust remembrance that established itself at the Stockholm Holocaust conference thus seemed to resemble the historical-political function of the Americanization of the Holocaust.

In the context of this conference, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider note that avoidance of a new Holocaust became a fundamental principle underlying an official European Holocaust memory. The pattern of legitimation for this official memory would then apply to both military and non-military interventions in the future. On the pragmatic consequences that this decontextualized Holocaust remembrance would have on politics, Levy and Sznaider write: “The way a state treats its citizens is now of concern to all of humanity, and the conflict between international law, which guarantees state sovereignty, and human rights, which challenge this sovereignty, is reflected in the latest developments in world politics. The key question in this conflict of memories is to whom the Holocaust ‘belongs’ in the final analysis.”\(^6^1\) The Stockholm conference witnessed the emergence of a Holocaust memory that placed the Holocaust and its lessons in the context of human rights policy and the notion of limited state immunity, which implied the possibility of military intervention when human rights are not upheld. This perspective gave the Nazi practice of looting and extermination new importance as a negative historical example that had been overcome. However, similar to the development of Holocaust remembrance in the United States since the late 1970s, the Stockholm conference exhibited some ambiguity in Holocaust interpretation: Whereas Jewish NGOs, in particular, pushed for more intensive engagement with and teaching of the Shoah, the official state approach was to implement a transnational,

\(^5^9\) Stuart Eizenstat, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury and Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Holocaust Issues, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, April 5, 2000, at http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/2000/000405_eizenstat_holocaust.html.

\(^6^0\) Ibid.

Western Holocaust narrative that did not primarily present the Shoah as a historical event but used it to legitimate certain political options and policies.

The Stockholm Holocaust conference illustrated how the U.S. politics of history of the 1990s transformed the Shoah into a central point of reference for the destructive tendencies of the twentieth century while also granting Nazi victims a central position. Yet this transformation—which was necessary and long overdue for raising awareness of historical shortcomings in restitution and reparation policy—at the same time also led to the Shoah becoming decontextualized and abstracted, particularly in relation to how the victims are perceived. This is because it was marked by a turn away from the perpetrators because this new narrative of remembrance focused on the victims rather than the perpetrators. Michael Jeismann describes this shift as follows: “Remembrance thus loses its specificity because it is not the perpetrators but the victims who are being remembered ... In other words: Although it [Holocaust remembrance] is still about a specific, German past, this past serves primarily as an example of genocidal tendencies that can break out anywhere in the world.” 62 In this new narrative of remembrance, the individual fates of the victims represent a generalized, universal victim. Any persecuted group can take the position of the victim within it. Levy and Sznaider therefore speak of the Holocaust as a universal “container” that can serve the remembrance of a variety of victims. 63 This shift in the politics of memory, which the Stockholm conference exemplified, made it possible to generalize the lessons of the Holocaust and apply them to current cases in the political realm.

In the 1990s, in the course of the crisis of national postwar myths, a culture of admitting guilt developed in which addressing the failures and shortcomings of the postwar period became a badge of moral rectitude. 64 This process was furthered by the Clinton administration’s political approach, which judged countries not on past deeds but on their present willingness to address these historical issues. Even as the historical-political debates of the 1990s showed how Western postwar societies’ view of the Second World War had been distorted by myths, the debates about politics of memory surrounding the Stockholm Holocaust conference laid the groundwork for a new founding myth. The central reference to the Holocaust in Western discourse that took shape in Stockholm did not reflect a sustained engagement with the extermination of European Jews but the emergence of what Ronit Lentin has called the “Auschwitz

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62 Michael Jeismann, Auf Wiedersehen Gestern (Munich, 2001), 56.
63 Levy and Sznaider, Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter, 223.
the real, historical event grew blurry, was trivialized and
dehistoricized. Collective memory was forced into public rituals and
ceremonies. In this new narrative, the break in civilization known
as "Auschwitz" no longer represented a stain on Western modernity
and a basic philosophical dilemma that cast serious doubt on the
progress-oriented optimism so deeply ingrained in Western En-
lightenment culture. Instead, official remembrance of the Holocaust
became a part of a "Western progressive narrative" that was proac-
tively oriented toward the future. Linked with a discourse on human
rights, this narrative constituted a negative point of reference for the
Western canon of values, representing the antithesis of democracy
and human rights within a new, post-Cold War transatlantic order.

At the Stockholm conference, heads of state warned of societies
sliding back into barbarism, and the prevention of genocidal crimes
was declared a moral imperative. The concrete historical event was
no longer the point of departure for historical memory, but the Ho-
locaust became merely a discursive negative point of reference—at
least until the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Similar to the Americanization
of the Holocaust, this development—which prompted an analogous
Europeanization as Europe sought to catch up—gave the Holocaust
mainly a legitimizing function.66 The Holocaust served as a global
lesson. The Shoah in its reception was now no longer a German
and Jewish question but became, through the internationalization
of its remembrance, a universal point of orientation, though it had
a variety of different functions. Thus Gerd Wiegel has argued that
the Holocaust is serving as a new master narrative for the Western
world.67 The Holocaust narrative was torn from the various national
narratives and transformed into a universal moral imperative.

The break in civilization "Auschwitz" became a cautionary tale of
evil. As Ronit Lentin has argued, "[n]o society can 'remember' the
extermination outside the discourses used to narrate, or 'memorize'
it. The Shoah has been 'remembered', 'forgotten', 're-interpreted',
and 'historicized' in different historical periods and different so-
cial and political climates."68 The U.S. politics of history, therefore,
can be understood as instigating a process that transformed the
postwar Holocaust narrative and embedded it in a new, transnational
meta-narrative wherein the lessons of Auschwitz lead to universal
moral responsibility for human rights. This reference to the Holo-
caust had the pragmatic political function of legitimating actions—
including military ones—directed against circumstances that could
be discursively associated with Auschwitz.

65 See Ronit Lentin, "Postmem-
ory, Received History and the
Return of the Auschwitz Code," Mietekeg 36, no. 4 (2002), available online at Eurozine:
66 On the so-called European-
ization of the Holocaust, see
Dan Diner, "The Irreconcilabil-
ity of an Event: Integrating the
Holocaust into the Narrative
of the Century," in Remember-
ing the Holocaust in Germany, 1945–2000, German Strategies
and Jewish Responses, ed. Dan
Michman (New York, 2002),
95-107.
67 Gerd Wiegel, "Globalisierte Er-
innerung? Die Universalisie-
zung der NS-Erinnerung und
ihre geschichtspolitische Funk-
tion," in Erinnern, Verdrängen,
Vergessen. Geschichtspolitische
Wege ins 21. Jahrhundert, Klundt
et al. (Giessen, 2003), 123.
68 Lentin, "Postmemory," 5.
In conclusion, the dehistoricization and decontextualization of the Shoah has allowed it to serve as a point of orientation in central social and political debates, especially on issues of human rights, with important foreign-policy implications. This transformation in Shoah remembrance occurred at the very moment when the number of historical witnesses who could testify and thus influence the nature of this remembrance rapidly declined. The U.S. politics of history of the 1990s is relevant not only because it influenced the restitution debates of the 1990s but also because it provided the discursive foundation for a new era in the politics of history and remembrance. The dehistoricized and decontextualized Shoah became the focal point of a new narrative of remembrance that influenced the entire Western world.

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