Editors' Introduction

The middle ages and the Holocaust: Medieval anti-Judaism in the crucible of modern thought

Hannah Johnson^a and Nina Caputo^b

^aDepartment of English, Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

^bDepartment of History, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

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The common declaration *never again* evokes justified moral outrage at the atrocities of the Holocaust. It has been well enough integrated into our collective consciousness – in North America, at least – that its subject requires no elaboration or contextualization: never again will such wholesale destruction befall the Jewish people. And the world must never forget. This phrase establishes the Holocaust as historically unique, but also marks the Nazi persecution as the culmination of a millennium-long cycle of escalating collective suffering with its beginnings in the Middle Ages. Debates about this paradoxical trajectory have a long history. Already in the 1930s, scholars who sought to comprehend the virulence of Nazi antisemitism found a corollary in medieval Jewish history. In this context, ‘medieval’ represents primarily a psychological and emotional state, not a chronological timescape. The term ghetto may be an invention of the sixteenth century, and the Black Hundreds were inciting anti-Jewish pogroms in the early twentieth, but it is the medieval period that is strongly associated with

origins of all kinds – not least of religious violence, mass incitement and legends of Jewish perfidy and evil.

While there are always potential pitfalls in making historical comparisons, in the wake of the Holocaust the Middle Ages have nevertheless served as a useful hermeneutic in the struggle to find a precedent for a historical and ideological process that seemed thoroughly *unprecedented*. But if such associations operate as powerful engines for prompting historians' continued reflections on the arc of Western history, and Jewish history in particular, they can also be damaging when mobilized for other ends. The Nazis themselves sought to bolster the legitimacy of their regime by invoking medieval exemplars – though, unlike their victims and opponents, they did so in order to glorify an 'Aryan' past they revered and wished to resurrect. The malleability of such medievalisms has long been recognized as part of their ideological, as well as heuristic, utility, but the urge to invoke the Middle Ages when contextualizing the Holocaust in the broad sweep of European and Jewish history speaks to a longstanding problematic of historical understanding.

When the distinguished historian Salo Baron testified at the trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961, he did so as an expert in Jewish history, but also, crucially, as a medievalist. In being called upon in his professional capacity to account for the long history of Western antisemitism, he acted as but one scholar in a formidable tradition that has sought to understand phenomena which are at once temporally specific, and united by uncanny features of continuity and repetition. Writing after the trial concluded, Poliakov stated that Baron's task had been 'to describe the background against which the destruction took place' (Poliakov, 1962, 59). However, Baron's later writing on the subject and the questions asked of him clearly indicate that this 'background' was not simply a matter of accounting for the years just prior to the war, but involved questions of deep time, and the long history of Jewish life in Europe. While the Middle Ages are often taken as a kind of ground zero for a virulent strain of antisemitism, efforts to understand the Holocaust not only reach back to medieval 'precedents,' but also view medieval history through a uniquely modern lens.

In this issue of *postmedieval*, we concern ourselves with this difficult dialogue between past and present. What is the historiographical and philosophical consequence of self-consciously examining the Middle Ages through the filter of the Holocaust? Why is the impulse to turn to medieval examples so enduring? Do such comparisons compromise the effort to preserve the integrity of the medieval (or, for that matter, the modern) as a distinct historical era? Baron's testimony is significant, not only because it represents a moment when such questions converge in the person of one historian, but also because Baron himself struggled with the tension between a narrative of the Holocaust as a singular event and one that frames it in the broad context of recurring Jewish persecution.

Later recapitulating his testimony in print, Baron appeals to varied examples, from Roman statutes protecting synagogues to the migrations and common

career paths of early modern Jews in Amsterdam, and population statistics and government regulations affecting Jewish life in countries from Tsarist Russia to Republican France in the interwar years. Calling attention to the diversity of factors that give any particular historical moment shape, Baron deployed precisely the analytical methodology he had urged upon readers of the *Menorah Journal* in 1928 when he implored them to ‘break with the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe, and to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth’ (Baron, 1964, 63). The ‘lachrymose’ approach, he warned, produced a model of the Jewish past in which Jews’ role was receptive, rather than active, emphasizing the endurance of persecution more than Jewish communal life or values. In 1961, at a moment of heightened tension and concern with the recent history of unprecedented woe, Baron nevertheless emphasizes what was creative, vital and remarkable about Jewish life in Europe before Hitler. It is this flourishing community that should be remembered, he seems to say. If we might expect the medievalist to take the long view, he does so in a way that resists hopelessness.

Reflecting on his testimony, Baron felt compelled to call to mind the Jewish experience in medieval Europe as a historical analogy that might begin to render the monstrosity of Nazi Jewish policy, and ultimately the Holocaust as well, at least marginally comprehensible. The structure of medieval European society, which classified people according to criteria far beyond their control – religion, disability, nationality, ethnicity and so on – rather than individual achievement, offered a useful point of comparison. It takes very little effort, for example, to read the imposition of identity badges under Nazi rule through the historical prism of badges legislated for pre-modern Jews. But he also reminded his audience that the comparison was imperfect, and, at some level, even deeply problematic:

[T]hroughout the 1930’s one frequently heard that the Nazis wished to turn the clock back to the ‘dark’ Middle Ages. Such assertions maligned the Middle Ages, which tried to establish the reign of morality and order. The medieval system certainly had many shortcomings and was guilty of many injustices, particularly against the Jewish minority. But there is a fundamental difference between the medieval corporate society – consisting of a variety of corporate groups enjoying a diversity of rights and subjected to a gradation of duties, with Jews being but one of many such corporate entities – and the Nazi legislation, which singled out one minority, of one per cent, and put it outside the frame of an otherwise uniform society.

(Baron, 1962, 37)

For Baron, the medieval period was a time when Jews as a group were subject to restrictions of various kinds, but they were hardly alone in this; what is more, they still had the capacity to fortify their own communities and respond creatively to changing conditions. Emancipation and modernity provided a legal framework in which individual Jews could act in their own interest. However, the corporate voice was rendered proportionately less effectual.

But if Baron insisted on attending to the specificity and unique circumstances defining each historical period, he was also aware of an unmistakable dilemma of repetition marking the history of the Jews.¹ And in the courtroom, he was not the only participant to understand that the ‘context’ of the Holocaust was a far-reaching one. Eichmann’s defense attorney, Robert Servatius, faced with the thankless task of defending one of the world’s most reviled men, understood this too, and attempted to turn the question of context to his client’s account. If we think of history on a grand scale, as a product of powerful abstract forces, can any one man matter? Servatius had not questioned Baron very long before the defense attorney turned to large questions that hint at problems of fate or destiny. ‘Do you not think that nonrational factors, beyond human understanding, are responsible for the fate of the Jewish people?’, he asked, then, shifting registers, turned to what he called ‘a question of philosophy of history’ (Baron, 1962, 50). Servatius remarked, ‘Hegel and Spengler ... say that there is a spirit in history which drives forward through necessity, without the cooperation of human beings .... Should we not see here a similar phenomenon, working through necessity, without being influenced by any particular person?’ (Baron, 1962, 50). Though Servatius does not express himself in terms of a ‘lachrymose’ conception of Jewish history, the attorney nevertheless raises for consideration a question that has bedeviled historical thought since well before the Holocaust, but has become only more pressing in the wake of that catastrophe: How are we to explain the long march of Western antisemitism, what Baron refers to in his testimony as ‘immemorial antisemitism and opposition to the Jewish people’ (Baron, 1962, 50)? With his question, Servatius hopes to suggest that the ambitions or moral weaknesses of one man – even a man such as Eichmann – must pale in the face of such a force, however it might be defined.²

In Baron’s carefully modulated responses, we find a succinct and powerful vision of historical processes. ‘According to my opinion,’ Baron says,

history develops by reason of causes and changes within society, many of which are unpredictable. Accident is very important. Personality is very important. Together all these things create history. Of course, there are also basic movements and there is tradition. ... History does not hop on one foot, but marches on a hundred feet. Each foot is part of the historical process. (Baron, 1962, 51)

Baron refuses the idea of a destiny of suffering for the Jewish people, and implicitly distinguishes between metanarrative – the bird’s eye viewpoint of abstract forces – and specific, local causality. The ‘causes’ of the Holocaust have everything to do with specific circumstances. Baron is clear about the implications of his answer: ‘every man and every group of men are responsible for what they do and cannot plead that they are only carrying out what history demands of them’ (51). The hundred feet of history’s continuous movement cannot be invoked as a cover for murder.

1 For a recent discussion of this tension within historiography see Nirenberg (2013), esp. 468–472.

2 Indeed, he says as much a little later: ‘You must certainly know that Hitler often relied on Providence, but nevertheless failed. If even a political leader could not do anything against the current of history, must we not regard what an ordinary man does as insignificant?’ (Baron, 1962, 51).

But if metanarrative and the parameters of cause and effect may sometimes appear to be in tension with one another, they are also linked in undeniable ways. Servatius' questions tap into a long tradition (and not only in the philosophy of history) of emphasizing tragic continuities in Jewish history, visible within historiography, but also across a spectrum of writings, from theological arbitrations of meaning to Zionism's insistence that only a homeland could protect Jews from the predations of diaspora life. In this tradition of interpretation, too, medieval examples prove vitally important. In Raul Hilberg's exhaustive *Destruction of the European Jews*, published in the same year that Baron took the stand, medieval history functions in a decidedly instrumental fashion. Hilberg presents Jewish policy in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages as the precedent and foundation for the systematic isolation, dehumanization and annihilation of the Jews by Nazis (Hilberg, 2003, 1–27). What Hilberg sees as an administrative precedent in medieval law codes pertaining to Jews, Baron identifies as something less radical, less brutal, than later history has led us to imagine. Nevertheless, while Baron may take a different view, he, like Hilberg, identifies a Middle Ages capable of answering to the present in meaningful ways. For Hilberg, historical contingency operates as the handmaiden to deeply ingrained historical processes that escalate over time. In his view, clear patterns of Jewish persecution were established already in Late Antiquity (with the inculcation of a formal orthodoxy in the fourth century), whereby Christians worked to eradicate Jews and Judaism, first through conversion (whether attained by coercion or persuasion), followed by expulsion, when efforts to encourage conversion proved largely unsuccessful, and finally annihilation/extermination as adopted by the Nazis. Each step in this process, he argued, developed organically from the one preceding it. So he assumes there was a certain historical necessity or determinacy unique to the history of the Jews by which the premodern precedent set the stage for the final outcome. But he does not entirely deny contingency. The unique qualities of modern society – modern German society – provided the fuel that drove the Nazis to escalate from 'expulsion' to 'annihilation.'

If Baron's testimony at the Eichmann trial offers a significant opening onto questions of historical understanding that include both the Middle Ages and the Holocaust, it is also a reminder of how these conceptual challenges continue to trouble Jewish and European historiography. The historian's difficult balancing act – managing contingency and continuity, immediate circumstances and the long view – is a besetting one for scholars of Jewish history. Such questions also have significant implications in the broader cultural sphere, inflecting political rhetoric, challenging historical interpretation and even infusing our common speech with dilemmas of expression and communication. The essays in this volume address themselves to the diachronic quality of the effort to fit the Holocaust into a continuum of Jewish and European experience. These authors explore issues related to scholarship and politics and the politics of scholarship, problems of communication, and the impact of the Holocaust on understanding

the Jewish and Western past. What is more, their concerns and questions overlap and speak to one another in sometimes surprising ways. Together, they remind us that the Western millennium of Jewish history that runs up against those familiar words of ethical refusal – never again – is far from a settled historical picture, but part of a continuing conversation.

Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman open the volume by explicitly confronting the diachronic nature of tropes related to the medieval knight. An adaptation of the final chapter in *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, this reading of the modern-medieval in Nazi propaganda and in later neo-Nazi adaptations of the same images challenges the reader to recognize that these fascist impulses are deeply rooted in the western religious and political tradition. Turning to a moment when medieval history is specifically contested, Mitchell B. Hart shows that, like Baron, Guido Kisch, the great expert in medieval German law, understood Nazi appeals to the precedent of medieval Jewry law as a perversion of the medieval past, while he presented objective historical scholarship as a powerful mechanism for accessing and preserving the truth. Kisch understood the medieval German jurist Eike von Repgow to be one who, inspired by his Christian tradition, represented the justice of true German law by marking a clearly delineated space for Jews in German society. If these two articles highlight, in part, how the Middle Ages were instrumentalized for comparative purposes by the Nazis even before the Holocaust, Daniel Wollenberg demonstrates how their rhetoric, and their tactics, have been taken up in the wake of the catastrophe, as the European New Right argues for the distinctiveness of a pan-European identity rooted in the Middle Ages. These new ideologues eschew the language of racial science even as Muslims are implicitly and explicitly excluded from their imagined ‘Judeo-Christian’ Europe. In this ‘clash of civilizations’ vision of history, some of the names have been changed, but the politicized search for origins remains constant.

The philosopher Jean-Claude Milner takes up such questions precisely here, among the layered strata of European history. Addressing the question of names – particularly the name ‘Jew’ – and the tensions inherent in our efforts to name and to claim an identity, he argues we must wrestle with the idea of a ‘difficult universal’ that resists the resort to simplistic, ‘massive’ descriptions and categories. In Robert Kawashima’s introduction to his translation of an interview with Milner from *Clartés de tout: de Lacan à Marx, d’Aristote à Mao*, he illuminates some of the far-reaching implications of these claims, which undergird Milner’s argument that the structural, political and conceptual uniqueness of the Holocaust spawned a new era in which the limitlessness of human vulnerability became undeniable.

The following essays take up the challenges of adequate language and problems of conceptualizing medieval contexts in the wake of the Holocaust that remain potent and challenging. Heather Blurton reminds us of how easily our interpretations can become back readings colored by modern assumptions if we do not attend to historical specificities. When Agamben reads Richard of Devizes, he

seizes upon Richard's use of the word 'Holocaust' to make an etymological argument that misses the deeper resonances of the word's meaning in its medieval context, which hints at a multi-layered commentary on medieval Jewish-Christian relations. Richard Cole takes up what he calls the 'Jewish massed body' as it appears in Old Norse literature, where Jews appear as an undifferentiated mass, thinking and acting as one. While this might seem like an early harbinger of the tropes of conspiracy and threat haunting the imaginations of many later antisemites, Cole demonstrates how such themes resonated differently in a cultural context where there was not any significant or settled Jewish population until much later in time. Finally, Fred Evans' closing essay, on the 'multi-voiced body' and the need for an ethical spirit of generous listening and engagement, captures the mood and tone of the volume, as well as its urgency. Reflecting on the challenge scholars face in the effort to listen courageously and attentively to the past, Evans also draws attention to our collective impulses both to amplify quiet voices and to silence them as well. The stakes of such an argument are clear in the debates about the medieval roots of the Holocaust. The half-century long disjuncture between interpretations of the Holocaust either as singular and without parallel or as the most extreme persecution in a centuries-long process tests our resources and definitions of ethical witnessing. Where politics and historiography are inextricably intertwined, as was the case at the Eichmann trial, we struggle with questions of justice as well as meaning. As Engel (2009) notes, our perception and understanding of history – in this case, medieval history – necessarily changes when we look back through the prism of the Holocaust. If the memory of medieval brutalities continue to speak to modern fears and imaginations, the memory of medieval cultural achievements has and continues to be used to mobilize ideas of identity and stable tradition. In both visions, the Middle Ages continue to speak back to us.

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About the Authors

Hannah Johnson is the author of *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (2012), and a recent recipient of a Collaborative Research Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, with colleague Heather Blurton, for work on *Chaucer's Prioress and the Jews: Ethics, Criticism, and Antisemitism*. She is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh (E-mail: hrj4@pitt.edu).

Nina Caputo is Associate Professor of History at the University of Florida. Her publications include *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, Messianism* (2007) and, with Andrea Sterk, *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity* (2014). She is currently working on a study of Petrus Alfonsi and the medieval figure of the convert (E-mail: ncaputo@ufl.edu).

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