Quantifying the Holocaust

CLASSIFYING, COUNTING, MODELING: WHAT CONTRIBUTION TO HOLOCAUST HISTORY?

International Conference
Paris—May 15-16, 2024

Organizing committee

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Submission

We invite submission of **abstracts for individual papers**. Individual submissions will be grouped into appropriate thematic panels by the conference organizers.

We welcome **researchers at all levels** of their PhD or post-doctoral work, as well as faculty members. Submission should include a **title**, an **abstract** (300 words maximum) presenting sources, methods and main questions, and a **curriculum vitae** (1 page maximum).

Send **abstracts** to quantifying.holocaust2024@gmail.com before **June 15th, 2023**.

Call for Papers

The production of numbers was central to persecution efforts and the "Final Solution." Censuses and counts linked to the identification of Jews were among the anti-Semitic measures carried out throughout Europe. The conception of the "Final Solution," as well as its actual implementation, were based on numbers. Whether in the minutes of the Wannsee Conference, the organization of the deportation convoys from Western Europe, or the work of SS statisticians—as shown by the Korherr Report from early 1943, which estimated changes to the Jewish population since 1937, as well as the initial effects of the deportation and extermination policy—counts were one of the main topics of discussion when organizing persecution. Controversies often revolved around numbers, with estimates of the number of Jews representing a major political issue. Extermination itself was accompanied by counts, whether it was shootings on the Eastern Front (Einsatzgruppen reports, Jäger Report, etc.), killing centers (Höfle Telegram), or other operations (Stroop Report). Other numbers were regularly used in the European press, with German or pro–German newspapers publishing lists of numbers during major deportation phases (France in the summer of 1942, Aktion Eichmann in Hungary in 1944). The numbers produced during the Holocaust—arguments for legitimizing and justifying policies of persecution and ultimately extermination—were brandished, reworked, sometimes overestimated or minimized, and fantasized about by many. After the

genocide, these numbers were the subject of various uses, revaluations, and reconstructions—judicial, memorial, academic—aiming in particular to establish the total number of victims.

What do these numbers represent, and what potential conflicting uses do they have? Producing a number entails producing a definition that circumscribes the thing being counted. Historical studies of quantification therefore raise questions of delimitation: who is being counted, and how? The process of aggregating individuals who were counted as being exterminated thus raises questions. What does it mean to jointly count the dead from the ghettos, mass graves, and gas chambers? Are those who commit suicide before being captured or loaded onto a train counted as victims? This also raises questions of periodization: at what point in time does the crime begin? For example, is a victim of the November 1938 pogroms in Germany a victim of the Holocaust? Is the identification of victims individually as part of a memorial process, which is the starting point for some historical research, still useful for the historian seeking to establish regularities, trends, and an overall view of the phenomenon? We do not have absolute certainties—we will never have an entirely accurate count, as the very process of destruction implies the concealment and destruction of clues. But we do have valid orders of magnitude, established proof.

Counts also give rise to criticism, which must be included among the reflections of this conference. Some criticize them for scientifically considering the identificatory logic of which the Jewish population was victim (we often speak of a "discriminating" variable in statistics), or for reinforcing the identificatory logic of the "persecutors" by grouping together a varied group of individuals under a single name (the "Jewish population"), thereby helping to confer a supposedly homogeneous existence upon it. These debates on counting are not specific to statistics on the Holocaust, but rather question all processes for the categorization and aggregation of individuals. In this case, they bear witness to the complex nature of this historiographical field, which is both rapidly expanding and highly fragmented, with each segment marked by lively controversy. While the issues at stake are universal, they are divided into highly specialized themes, such that it is sometimes difficult to master the bibliography on each issue given the proliferation of localized studies. Far from homogenizing the persecuted populations, classifying and counting can, on the contrary, build bridges between various fields—ranging from the dismantling of Jewish communities to extermination policies—via the analysis of differentiated exposure to persecution or the long-term effects of persecution on the biographies of survivors. How can we understand these numbers? What can we say about them? How can they be used? It is consequently a matter of examining the production of numbers during the Holocaust, their use during the events, and their historical circulation.

But questioning the quantification of the Holocaust also requires reflecting on the contributions and limits of quantification practices, as well as the measurement of historical phenomena in the Holocaust. The development and discussion of quantitative techniques of inquiry and analysis has impacted and renewed many fields of historical research. How does this affect Holocaust studies? This international conference will provide an opportunity to reflect on the prospects and challenges relating to different types of quantification in this specific field. Quantifying implies the construction of data: how does the transformation of sources on the Holocaust into databases take place? How do these transformations impact our understanding of the extermination? Which sources are mobilized by researchers to provide quantitative answers to certain questions? Beyond questions relating to data alone, the conference also aims to examine the analytical techniques used, their contribution to historical knowledge, as well as their limits. We will therefore be interested not only in quantitative approaches, but also in so-called "mixed" approaches combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

It is around these various questions that this conference aims to bring together international researchers in Paris for two days. The conference will be organized around three main themes that

will examine the history of how the Holocaust, persecution, and extermination have been measured: 1/ the history of numbers, which will question the practical production of statistics and counts contributing to the ordinary and scientific understanding of the Holocaust; 2/ the uses and controversies surrounding the measurement of the Holocaust; and 3/ the contributions and limits of methods for collecting and analyzing quantitative material for understanding the Holocaust.

1. Counting During the Extermination

Counts were at the core of the Final Solution, as both a means—counting the number of arrests determined the number of trains needed, for instance—and an end, for quantification was part of the killing process in itself. Produced by those who designed and organized the extermination—as shown by *sonderkommandos* who tried to count the number of victims in the killing centers—they can also come from the victims themselves, or from direct witnesses of the extermination process. Counting the extermination in the heat of the moment, as well as collecting and assembling quantified observations of the Jewish populations of Europe, were not solely instruments of extermination policies; they were also a means, during the war and at the heart of the event, of trying to understand and document what was happening for the victims. This is demonstrated by the figures that circulated from surveys in the ghettos, such as that of Warsaw, or the testimonies of "bystanders" (Sakowicz's diary about Ponary, for example), or other sources that fed into articles in the press, particularly in the United States, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

How were these figures produced? For what and for whom were they used? How reliable are they, and what are their possible pitfalls? Questioning the production of statistics in the context of persecution policies and extermination operations radically reexamines the relationship between statistics, domination, and population control, as well as revisits important questions in the historiography of the Holocaust: Who knew what? When did the extent of what was happening become perceptible? When did knowledge of the genocide in progress circulate, and to whom?

2. Counting as an Instrument of Knowledge of the Holocaust

In the immediate aftermath of the war, counting victims was one of the first attempts to account for the Holocaust, particularly from a judicial perspective. The number of "six million" victims quickly became established in the writings of historians after the end of the war. Raul Hilberg's efforts to produce precise figures were an extremely important moment in delineating what he called "the destruction of European Jews." Studying the genesis of this figure and its uses helps us understand how various counts emerged, leading not to a definitive count of victims, but rather to a situated knowledge of the phenomenon: the numerical knowledge of the destruction of European Jews has its own history. Tracing the circulation of numbers—from one moment to another, one institution to another, and one historiography to another—sheds new light on the production of postwar knowledge relating to the Holocaust, and to the debates within it. What means were used to count the victims in the immediate postwar period? How were various counts established? By whom, under what conditions, and from what sources? These questions invite us to examine the counts within their transnational and comparative dimensions. Can the comparison between the number of Jewish deportees in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands be historicized? What means are available to explain the differences in numbers and deaths from one place to another?

3. Describing and Modeling: The Contributions and Limits of Quantitative Analyses

In the historical discipline, quantification occupies a special place, linked in part to procedures for collecting observations. The transition from archival sources to the construction of variables is not without difficulties. These difficulties firstly stem from categorization procedures, questioning the very essence of the historical discipline: how to deal chronologically with the density and thickness

of historical phenomena that resist the methods tried and tested on static data corpora. They also stem from the delicate relationship between modeling and narration, marked within the historical discipline by a tension between competing historiographies, temporalities, and modes of narration. Counting and quantifying is therefore a way of reading the temporalities of the Holocaust differently, on varying scales, and of putting the question of the motives, paces, and consequences of persecution and extermination policy back on the historian's agenda.

Longstanding support for using econometric models has been based on the idea that they not only provide keys for understanding reality, but also serve as a basis for proposing ways to predict it, or even to govern and improve it. But can we reasonably reduce the choices made in tragic circumstances to the social, demographic, or family characteristics of the individuals who made them? The few attempts that have been made to determine the factors contributing to varying survival rates for Jews during the Holocaust, essentially use techniques that are similar to what Andrew Abbott has called the “standard program” of American sociology, which models causality in the form of relationships between an “explanatory” variable and an “explained” variable. But to what extent can such crucial issues be accounted for by variables such as the number of children, age, or income level? Finally, and above all, the idea that it is possible to predict or even improve the course of events has a particularly problematic tone in genocidal settings: one could implicitly be led to believe that escaping the extermination mechanism was possible provided one exhibited a particular property, or worse if one adopted a particular behavior. The heuristic contributions of the models are nevertheless undeniable, in that they objectify the differentiated nature of the Holocaust in time and space: in the face of the progressive radicalization of persecution, the skills and social support that made it possible to escape, to hide, or to survive deserve to be understood and finely weighed.

Moreover, modeling is not the only family of techniques available to study the Holocaust quantitatively. Holocaust studies have been impacted, like other historical fields, by the development of new techniques of quantitative analysis. These include the reconstruction and analysis of complex trajectories, formal network analysis, geographic information systems and spatial analysis of persecution phenomena, or the quantified analysis of testimonies by means of classical textometry or artificial intelligence tools (neural networks, computational semantics). Mixed methods that combine quali and quanti are also in full swing. These developments open up promising new research fronts that need to be submitted to collective discussion. One of the questions is to know what their use does to the analysis of persecution and extermination processes, and if their use can be easily transferred to the study of these specific phenomena. Is there a specificity of the Holocaust field with regard to quantitative techniques and new technical developments? How are these techniques applied? What are their limits and contributions to studying the extermination of European Jews?