

Four New Descriptive Categories of the Holocaust of Polish Jews

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Based on the current state of research on the Holocaust of Polish Jews this paper investigates terminology and its stakes. I propose introducing two descriptive categories - “the frame of the Holocaust” and “participating observers” – for depicting the place and role of the dominant Christian majority in the process of extermination of Polish Jews carried out by Nazi Germans in occupied Poland. Both of the categories are polemical in relation to the existing notions such as “the margins of the Holocaust” and “bystanders”, bystanders being understood as witnesses, onlookers, spectators or gawkers.

The social and cultural validity of antisemitism, defined in terms of a cultural pattern (Ruth Benedict) and a cultural code (Shulamit Volkov), permits a portrayal of the Polish context of the Holocaust as a panoptical reality (Michel Foucault) and a description of the dominant majority as a disciplinary society of participating observers (with observation constituting a common denominator of a wider typology of behavior). Whereas researchers have hitherto placed the responsibility of the non-Jewish majority in the third stage of the Holocaust (Judenjagd – hunt for Jews), the concept of “the frame of the Holocaust” dates the influence of the majority group on the fate of Jews from the very beginning of the occupation and in a continuum with pre-war discourses and practices. It explains how existing socio-cultural conditions determined the effectiveness of the Holocaust in German-occupied Poland.

This proposed conceptual revision results in a further revision of descriptive categories such as: Polish passivity, indifference and collective trauma of the Holocaust (a term coined by Michael C. Steinlauf), and the radical difference between Polish antisemitism and German antisemitism. Apart from a more applicable description of historical realities it enables also a better understanding of the fundamental identity stakes of antisemitism and the Holocaust – together with its representations – within Polish dominant culture.