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Holocaust Consciousness and the Cold War in Latin America

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Can one speak of the “Latin-Americanization” of the Holocaust? Scholars have studied the “Americanization” of the Holocaust, by which they mean that Holocaust consciousness has taken on particularly U.S. forms different from the Holocaust consciousness of other countries. This paper will propose, experimentally, that the same holds true for Latin America: a recognizably distinct Holocaust consciousness has existed in the region since the 1970s. During that time and in the decades that followed, intellectuals, community leaders and political activists who faced state repression in Argentina, Mexico and Guatemala saw themselves reflected in Holocaust histories and used Holocaust terms to describe the atrocities that happened in their own countries. In this paper I will choose selected examples from these countries to illustrate my broader thesis and draw out the main features of this “Latin Americanized” Holocaust consciousness: its emergence out of the shattered cultures of left-wing mobilization; its commitment to testimony as a political act; its eventual link to human rights discourses; and its connection to anti-colonial indigenous thinking surrounding the 1992 anniversary. For many people the main connection to the topic may be limited to knowledge about the Nazi perpetrators who fled to South America after WWII. The paper is part of a project that seeks to deepen our understanding of Holocaust consciousness in different parts of Latin America by examining diverse Jewish and non-Jewish voices. Moving beyond an over-simplified “uniqueness debate,” the paper poses some of the questions and implications that arise when we find the Holocaust invoked in unexpected places and in relation to other events.