UNAM

THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS CULTURAL MEANINGS:
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Course Description:
A person can only hope to begin to comprehend the Holocaust if provided with multidisciplinary approaches which would allow a more complete viewing of its multidimensional complexity. The aim of this course is to introduce students precisely to those perspectives more often and more traditionally missed by the majority of such courses – the sociological, anthropological, and cultural points of view, the Jewish and non-Jewish points of view.

The Shoah needs to be understood as something more than a historical or political event stemming from wholly unique circumstances. It was a sociocultural phenomenon originating out of, taking place within, and rendering apart European culture and civilization. The Holocaust was committed by, witnessed by, and suffered by European peoples. After World War II had ended, its refugees were spread across all of the continents of the globe; their experiences and their stories went with them and also infected, as it were, other cultures and civilizations descended from and related to the European. One of the goals will be to demythologize accounts of the Holocaust to enable a critical, analytical, nuanced, and detailed understanding of Europe and Europeans (Jews and non-Jews) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, before and after the Shoah. Another aim will be to treat the Shoah holistically, investigating it through the prism of various fields of study.

The course will include 6 meetings; each will comprise a lecture/seminar with student participation expected and encouraged.

Course Requirements:
The minimum requirements for all (credit or audit) students are: 1) attendance (no more than 1 absence), and 2) active participation.

Course Outline
Class One – 18 February
Defining and Decoding Terms:
Holocaust, Genocide, Antisemitism, Racism

How have the pertinent keywords been defined in different languages, in different countries, at different times? What do these definitions have in common, and how do they differ? Why do these disparities appear and what shifts and discrepancies in sociopolitical ideologies and interpretations do they reflect? Specifically, how has the Shoah influenced definitions and connotations of “old” terms; what are the connotations of the new terminology – genocide, Holocaust, Shoah. For the social scientist, what fixed definitions are possible? What are the differences between pre- and post-WWII definitions of holocaust, antisemitism, and racism? What do these dissimilarities tell us about what society feels is important now, what lessons it feels it has learned from the Holocaust?

Definitions taken from pre- and post-war dictionaries and encyclopedias, published in the USA, Western Europe, and Central and East Europe.

Online: *UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)*

**Class Two – 20 February**

*Was the Holocaust Inevitable? Is It Unique?*

Are there differences between social, religious, economic, and political antisemitism; are there differences between national versions of antisemitism? Did all of these contribute equally to the Shoah? Are secular and religious Judeophobia, anti-Judaism, or antisemitism distinct, identifiable types? Was it antisemitism or general xenophobia which played a primary role in the prewar years; was it the same during the war? From a sociological point of view, were the mechanisms which caused the Holocaust so unique that such an event could never happen again? Noting genocides which preceded the Shoah, as well as the over 40 such occurrences in the decades following (including Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Yemen, and others), how can we perceive the Holocaust as unique? Does it belong to the Jews or to the entire human species? Can the Holocaust teach humanity how to avoid genocide? Can it teach reconciliation?


Online: Protest (Zofia Kossak-Szczucka), *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican) and *Dabru Emet* (Jewish Scholars Project)

**Class Three – 21 February**

*The Sociocultural Roles of the Perpetrator, Witness, and Victim*

In the initial post-World War II years, the divide was drawn between perpetrators and victims; now a third category has been added of the (helpless or pitiless) witness/bystander. How sharply can the lines be drawn between these three groups? Are perpetrators, survivors, and rescuers extraordinary or ordinary people? How should we deal with “good Germans”, Jewish police and members of the *Judenräts*, or Polish (or other) rescuers, ambivalent bystanders, and denouncers? Can we understand the behavior of individuals; can we justify their behavior? What are the ethical and moral issues linked to these three roles? Would it be possible to hold antisemitic feelings and yet be a Righteous Among the Nations? Moreover, how “neutral” were the neutral states of Europe during the Holocaust and in its wake?

Online: Yad Vashem: I Am My Brother’s Keeper (online exhibition)
Documentary Films: Jabłoński’s *Fotoamator*; Łoziński’s *Birthplace*
Class Four – 25 February
Ways of Telling the Tale, Ways of Representing the Unthinkable

The Holocaust provoked the writing of poetry, fiction and non-fiction prose (some of these created as the Shoah was taking place), as well as comics, documentaries, Hollywood films and even operas. How should we interpret these works in general; how should we interpret the tales they tell of the different players (perpetrators, witnesses, victims)? Should we only read memoirs and (auto)biographies, or are fiction and feature films about the Shoah also valuable resources in representing and retelling the tale? What of Holocaust museums and monuments: what information do they relay about perpetrators, victims, and witnesses – and about us today? Is the aim to teach, to warn, or to remember?

Borowski, T., This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen
Frank, A., The Diary of Anne Frank
Krall, H., Sheltering the Flame
Lanzmann, C., Shoah (script published by Shucken Books)
Film: Lanzmann’s Shoah versus Schindler’s List, The Train of Life, The Pianist, etc.; Semel’s And the Rat Laughed (opera)
Online: USC Shoah Foundation Video History Archives; Holocaust memorials; homepages, online exhibitions/virtual tours, Facebook pages of Holocaust centers.

Class Five – 27 February
An Attempt to Heal the Wounds: War Crimes Trials

Why were World War II crimes considered unforgivable and unforgettable? Is a war criminal ever too old to be tried; is it ever “inhuman” to try someone who acted inhumanly? How have post-Holocaust war crimes definitions been introduced into our understanding of and emphases on law and human rights? What have been the repercussions of war crimes trials — appearing on the scene in nearly every decade since the war — on European and global society? What does this tell us about how contemporary societies see themselves and understand morality? Has the Shoah established a new standard of measure for right and wrong? Do we want and get “justice” and “truth” or “revenge”?

Arendt, H., Eichmann in Jerusalem, ch. 8, Epilogue and Postscript.
Press articles and discussions regarding Holocaust war crime trials in Western Europe, extradition of criminals to Central & Eastern European countries, General Pinochet case, Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Operation Last Chance.
Class Six – 28 February
Cultural Memory and Social Consciousness of the Holocaust: Jewish and non-Jewish Perspectives in Central Eastern Europe

How does the Shoah figure into Jewish and non-Jewish collective memories today? At various times in various countries today, about 20% of the general population does not know or is not sure if Jews were targeted during WWII. What, in fact, do today’s non-Jews around the world know and not know about the Holocaust? What are the real dangers of revisionism and other forms of Holocaust denial? For the purposes of the imagined community of Israel, what is being forgotten and what is being emphasized there? What are the different memories and histories taught inside Israel and among the Jewish diaspora outside the homeland? How do events like the March of the Living, and “death camp pilgrimages” to Central Eastern Europe by secondary school pupils shape a young person’s consciousness of the Shoah as well as of the states they visit? What problems in dealing with the Shoah are more specific and unique for Central Europe? What effects have the shifts to political democracy and economic capitalism had on feelings towards Jews? How have Jewish foundations and agencies (international and national) affected discussions of the Holocaust in Central Europe? Why have the stories of Righteous Among the Nations of the World (e.g., Wallenberg, Schindler, or Karski) emerged and become more prominent?

Online: Institute for Historical Review, www.hdot.org; Jolanta Dylewska’s Po-lin (documentary)

Recommended internet sources:
http://www.auschwitz.org/
http://www.ushmm.org/
http://www.yadvashem.org/
http://www.hdot.org/
Auschwitz Museum facebook page

All readings supplemental