

Introduction

The “Latin Americanization” of the Holocaust

My grandfather tells the following joke: “A person says to a friend: ‘It’s been reported that all Jews and barbers are to be rounded up and deported.’ The friend asks, puzzled, ‘Why the barbers?’”

What makes some kinds of violence seem normal? Holocaust consciousness in Latin America during and after the Cold War can be said to operate in a way similar to my grandfather’s joke: signaling a situation of violence that needs to be “denormalized” and brought under scrutinizing judgment. We might rewrite the joke as follows in reference to Latin America during the Cold War period: “‘It’s been reported that all Jews and political subversives are to be rounded up and eliminated.’ The friend asks, puzzled, ‘Why the Jews?’” This version falls flat, of course, because we don’t have the luxury of innocent perplexity with regard to the fate of the Jews, who can never realistically occupy the position that the barbers occupy in my grandfather’s joke. This new, unfunny non-joke instead doubles down on memory, asking, “Because we have not forgotten the fate of the Jews, how can we let this happen to others?” This is the question that guides the Latin American instances of Holocaust consciousness that will be examined here. The question is couched rhetorically, as if it were already a settled matter, but the answer to it is far from straightforward. It presumes that Holocaust memory resonates in the present and has a moral lesson to impart, and it presumes consensus about what that lesson is or should be. These presumptions will be repeatedly tested across the stories and interpretations I offer here.

Starting in the 1970s, references to the Holocaust began to appear in order to denounce the atrocities committed by Latin American governments against their own citizens under the guise of anti-Communism. In

the aftermath of these events, from the 1990s onward and in the context of polemical “memory debates” about how to remember Cold War violence and whom to hold accountable, the Holocaust has taken on an even greater significance. This book is about the Latin American conversations behind these Holocaust references. It explores the contexts that have made the Holocaust meaningful and the debates over its meaning. It focuses on Argentina, Guatemala, and to a lesser extent Mexico, three very different countries that are hardly representative of Latin America in its entirety. Across these distinct national scenarios we can perceive shared patterns and sharp divergences in how Holocaust consciousness has unfolded since the 1970s, variations on a common theme.

In the wake of the social revolutions of the 1940s and 1950s—Guatemala’s in 1944, Bolivia’s in 1952, Cuba’s in 1959—Latin American elites undertook efforts to stabilize or regain their ascendancy. Supported by the United States, these national oligarchies deployed “national security” obsessions to defend their interests. They forged alliances with military forces in order to crush liberation and social equality movements and spread a demobilizing fear across the general population. In countries across the region, military men adopted the counterinsurgency techniques developed by their counterparts in the United States, France, and England to repress the anti-colonial rebellions in Vietnam, Algeria, and Northern Ireland.¹ Their targets included armed revolutionary organizations but did not stop there. Student activists, labor organizers, teachers and intellectuals, religious leaders, rural community groups—a host of movements for social change—became the victims of national security crusades.²

How did Holocaust consciousness arise in these places and during these Cold War times? What are the conversations and questions that have arisen around this process? What does this “Latin Americanized” Holocaust consciousness look like, compared to its counterparts in other parts of the world, and what does it do in this region? That the Holocaust would be evoked in order to think about Cold War violence is far from given. Indeed, the historical differences between these two events create a vast field of disparities in the scale of the atrocities, the methods used to carry them out, the contexts in which they took place, and the ideological reasons that motivated them. These differences pose immense challenges to comparative thinking. Yet as I will describe in this book, such thinking can be found across the Latin American archive. When we delve into sources such as newspapers, personal memoirs and testimonies, literature, essays, and scholarly works of the past fifty years, we find repeated use of references to the Holocaust to

talk about the terrifying realities of state repression.³ We also find dialogue and debate about the validity of those references and about the nature and strength of the connection between such disparate histories.

Conversations within local Jewish communities and interventions by local Jewish thinkers, activists, and survivors were key drivers of Latin America's Holocaust consciousness in this era. So too were the outreach and protest work of political exiles, human rights groups, and victim-aid organizations—Jewish and non-Jewish. Each of these was shaped in turn by global developments in Holocaust consciousness across the 1960s. Holocaust testimony by Jewish survivors began to reach a larger transnational audience during this period, due especially to legal proceedings against Nazi perpetrators in Israel and Germany, when the voices of Jewish victim-witnesses took center stage. Latin American authors and activists linked those testimonial practices to projects of political solidarity and national self-determination. This in turn sparked a connection between Holocaust testimony, human rights testimony, and revolutionary *testimonio*. The growth of Holocaust denialism in the late 1960s also had an impact. From the perspective of Latin America, this form of undermining or silencing the voices of the victims converged with the censorship policies of antidemocratic regimes. It lent urgency to a memory work that was increasingly inspired by Holocaust memoirs and, eventually, by mass-media representations such as the television miniseries *Holocaust*. Meanwhile, the presence in Latin America of Nazi perpetrators and of an active Nazi-inspired right-wing anti-Semitism brought the connections home more forcefully. Following these various pathways, across which global and in-country developments are so deeply intertwined that it is practically impossible to tease them apart, the Holocaust threaded into conversations about places and events otherwise distant from it.

My term of choice, “Holocaust consciousness,” is a capacious one. The consciousness whose presence is signaled by diverse sources should be taken in the sense of knowledge or awareness. I use the term purposefully to avoid specifying whether that knowledge has been gleaned from memory or history or personal experience or something else. The idea of Holocaust consciousness is similar to the idea of collective memory of the Holocaust, but without the implied methodological preference for memory over history, and without the problem of having to define or name the collectivity whose memory is being examined. Holocaust consciousness may be vaguer, more fragmentary, and less defined than a discourse; and it may not be a memory or be historical in any meaningful sense of these terms. But Holocaust consciousness should be taken to imply that, regardless of

whether it is based on history or on memory or on vague ideas or images about the past, an awareness of the Nazis' industrial extermination of the Jews has been internalized to some degree and thereby rendered available for reflection on the killing zones of Cold War violence.⁴

What happens to our understanding of global Holocaust awareness once we put Latin America on the map? Holocaust consciousness has spread across the globe to places far distant from its original setting to shape the thinking of people whose experiences are different from those of the Jewish victims of Nazism. But it is not everywhere the same. Although the Holocaust is now almost universally known as a symbol for genocide, its universalization has been accompanied by particularization and localization in different situations, as Andreas Huyssen notes.⁵ This means that, although there may be an established or conventional set of pre-given meanings that shape how we approach the Holocaust, it is by no means a fixed template. Its legacy is multifaceted and has evolved in complex ways over the years. "The stories and meanings it entails can vary," note Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznajder.⁶

Thanks to the work of scholars in the field of Latin American Jewish studies, our understanding of how Latin Americans think and talk about the Holocaust has grown tremendously in recent years. We know how Latin American governments and Jewish communities reacted to the rise of Nazism and responded—or failed to respond, in the case of most governments—to the needs of Jews fleeing persecution in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷ It is estimated that over 110,000 European Jews made their way to Latin American countries in the period 1933–1945.⁸ We know more about Latin American intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, who mobilized in defense of Jews and to call attention to events in Europe.⁹ There is a growing body of work on the experience of Jewish Holocaust escapees and survivors who emigrated to Latin America¹⁰ and on the memorial efforts undertaken by Jews in Latin America whose families perished in the Shoah and who waited for "the letters that never arrived" from Eastern Europe.¹¹ Creative writings by Jewish Latin American authors such as Marjorie Agosín, Sergio Chejfec, Eduardo Halfon, Liliana Heker, Michel Laub, Mauricio Rosencof, and Moacyr Scliar, to name just a few, provide insight on Holocaust memory.¹²

Scholars have spoken of the "Americanization" of the Holocaust, by which they mean that Holocaust consciousness has become a feature of U.S. life and taken on particularly U.S. forms, for better or worse, that distinguish it from the Holocaust consciousness of other countries.¹³ Can one speak in turn of the "Latin Americanization" of the Holocaust resulting

from the region's experience of the Cold War? Perhaps not. The term excludes those facets of Holocaust awareness in Latin America that have no anchor in Cold War experiences and no "Latin American" frame of reference. It also overstates the commonalities across and within a diversity of national contexts. Yet there is something to be said for holding on to the idea of a "Latin Americanized" Holocaust consciousness. It captures an essential element of the period after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, namely, the revitalization of a nineteenth-century idea about the unity of the region in its difference from "Anglo America," the United States. The revolutionary, anti-colonial aspirations of the moment converged in this other America, shaped the cosmopolitan educations of the voices that will be heard in this book, and left an imprint on their notions of what makes the Holocaust meaningful to future generations.

When we step back to observe patterns across the sources I examine here, three core features stand out. One, this Holocaust consciousness is comparative; it compares Holocaust violence to Latin American state violence. Two, the comparisons it wields are not very historical, tending rather to involve parables and paradigms rather than historical analysis, although not exclusively so.¹⁴ Three, this Holocaust consciousness is deeply politicized. It consciously takes itself to be a form of political critique and grapples with the legacy of the national liberation struggles that were defeated in the Cold War. Let us examine each of these features more closely, before moving on to situate them with respect to global trends in Holocaust consciousness and then to address the dilemmas and controversies to which they give rise.

Latin American Holocaust Consciousness— Comparative, Paradigmatic, Political

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the Holocaust consciousness described here is that it is comparative—the Holocaust is compared to other events—and instrumentalist—"used" to make a point about something unrelated to the historical events of the Holocaust. Consider some brief examples. In 1979, Argentine journalist and Peronist militant Jorge Luis Berneti, from his exile in Mexico, wrote of "the holocaust of thousands of Argentines" and of "the justice for them and for the millions of survivors" that was surely to come.¹⁵ This use is similar to the one we see a few years later in 1984, when Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, an American who worked in Argentina for many years as the head of a Jewish congregation and founded Latin America's

first rabbinical seminary, declared in a public speech in Buenos Aires, “We Argentines lived through a mini-holocaust during the dictatorship years.”¹⁶ There is also this one, from 1982: a group of Native American activists from the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Guatemala denounced the atrocities against Maya in highland Guatemala, noting:

Remember that when neighbors of the death camps of the Nazi holocaust were asked how they were able to deal with horror so close, many replied, “We shut the windows.” We urge all who read these words to read all the rest. No one can say, “We didn’t know what was happening.”¹⁷

We can see a reference to the Holocaust regarding Chile in 1974, when Hernán Valdés published his “Diary of a Chilean Concentration Camp,” describing his detention in a camp just outside Santiago in the months following Pinochet’s coup and accusing his fellow Chileans of the same false innocence claimed by German citizens under Nazi rule.¹⁸ All of these examples use the Nazi machinery of genocide in Europe to help us understand state terror in Latin America in the era of anti-Communist counterinsurgency campaigns, and do so in order to highlight an element of that situation rather than to inform us about the historical events of the Holocaust. These references intend for the key word “Holocaust” and associated phrases to bring us closer to the visceral horrors of the torture centers, detention camps, and extermination sites and to the shameful indifference of the surrounding world.

The sound-bite style of these particular references hides the layers of history that make comparisons such as these possible and meaningful. We would need to delve into their contexts to perceive them as multifaceted utterances. Most of the materials I will address in this book involve more complex and extended interweavings of the Holocaust and Cold War violence than these rhetorically simple ones. These are useful, however, because they illustrate the extent to which the Holocaust operates as what Tzvetan Todorov calls “exemplary” memory. Exemplary memory works as follows: “Without denying the singularity of the event itself, I decide to use it . . . as one instance among others in a more general category, and I use it as a model to understand new situations.”¹⁹ The past event then becomes a “key” to understanding the present or the future. He contrasts it to “literal” memory, which tends to view past events as “absolutely singular, perfectly unique.”²⁰ In Latin America, the Holocaust has been interwoven as an “exemplary” story that helps us pay attention to other stories.

It bears noting that, although Todorov's distinction between literal and exemplary memory is a useful one, in practice the lines between the two kinds of memory are far less defined than he implies. He argues that these two kinds of memory do not go together, that "it is impossible to affirm at the same time that the past should serve as a lesson and that it is absolutely incomparable with the present."²¹ However, much Holocaust memory involves literal and exemplary forms together in a kind of unresolved dialogue.

We can see this in the work of two Auschwitz survivors, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. In 1976, in a short essay about the genocide of the Aché people in Paraguay, Wiesel wrote:

I always forbade myself to compare the Holocaust of European Judaism to events which are foreign to it. Auschwitz was something else, and more, than the Vietnam war; the Warsaw ghetto had no relation of substance with Harlem—deplorable and misplaced comparisons which often reveal the ignorance, the arrogance of those who formulate them. I found these offensive, revolting. The universe of concentration camps, by its dimensions and its design, lies outside, if not beyond, history. Its vocabulary belongs to it alone.²²

But he has changed his mind, he writes, in view of the extermination of the Aché: "I am compelled to this comparison, even though reluctantly." He continues:

I read the stories of the suffering and death of the Aché tribe in Paraguay and recognize familiar signs. These men, hunted, humiliated, murdered for the sake of pleasure; these young girls, raped and sold; these children, killed in front of their parents reduced to silence by pain. Yes, the world impregnated with deliberate violence, raw brutality, seems to belong to my own memory. . . . There are here indications, facts which cannot be denied: it is indeed a matter of a Final Solution. It simply aims at exterminating the tribe.²³

The parallels with the Holocaust, created by flashes of personal memory as well as a more factual assessment of genocide, were further cemented for Wiesel by the fact that Josef Mengele had fled to Paraguay and was living there "as an honored guest."

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi made this observation: “Up to the moment of this writing, and notwithstanding the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shame of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam war, the Cambodian self-genocide, the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, and the many atrocious and stupid wars we have seen since, the Nazi concentration camp still remains an *unicum*, both in its extent and its quality.”²⁴ It is a strong statement for the Holocaust as “absolute” crime, existing in its own category. Yet almost in the same breath Levi communicates his fear that the concentration camp may come back, if it has not come back already, and wonders, “What can each of us do, so that in this world pregnant with threats, at least this threat is nullified?”²⁵ His testimony will be offered, at least in part, as an instruction against the repetition of that which logically cannot be considered absolutely unique. Almost unwillingly, he returns to an understanding of the Holocaust as exemplary and, therefore, as a lens through which to see other events.

The second feature of the Latin American Holocaust consciousness described in this book is its paradigmatic nature. By this I mean that it tends not to be anchored in deep or rigorous historical knowledge of the Holocaust. Many of the Holocaust references to be discussed here operate at the level of paradigm, offering models that help us understand other events, or at the level of parable, as highly condensed tales of moral instruction. The Holocaust references used by Jorge Luis Bernetti and Rabbi Marshall Meyer to describe the “dirty war” in Argentina, or by Four Arrows Press and Elie Wiesel to describe the genocide of Indigenous peoples, call on emblematic scenes or images from the past: the neighbors who shut their eyes to the death camps, the justice eventually meted out to Nazi perpetrators, the destruction of a people. Brief, allusive, rhetorical, these invoke the Holocaust on a symbolic plane. Such a gesture is not at all uncommon. David Roskies notes that symbolization has been a core feature of Jewish collective memory of the event: “When Jews now mourn in public . . . they preserve the collective memory of the collective disaster, but in so doing fall back on symbolic constructs and ritual acts that necessarily blur the specificity and implacable contradictions of the event.”²⁶ Latin American Holocaust consciousness is constituted by such paradigms, parables, symbols, and icons, that is, by historical events of the Holocaust that have gained an abstract meaning “applicable” to other historical events. This process of transposition inevitably involves a degree of blurring of the specificities of the Holocaust, as Roskies notes, and also of historical and semantic dispute

as terms deeply associated with the Holocaust are brought to bear on other situations and events.

If we go back to my grandfather's joke, we note that it relies on a knowledge of history in order to work as a joke. Knowledge of the Nazi Holocaust prompts the question "Why the barbers?" instead of "Why the Jews?" But the joke shows us the limits of this knowledge of history, which has tricked us into normalizing a past that should not be normalized. We know about the Jews already, but what's this about barbers? It is for this reason that, as the joke would have it, historical knowledge is not sufficient; it must be shattered by irony and then cede to a moral awareness, which ultimately has the last word. The Holocaust consciousness that will be discussed here works on this double level. It is the result of a historical awareness of the Holocaust, an awareness of it as a specific event: the Nazi crimes that constitute the Shoah. Yet it also takes leave of that history when it brings the Holocaust to a new situation in a new place to draw attention to a different history.

The third feature of the Latin American Holocaust consciousness described in this book is its political nature. This Holocaust consciousness emerges among the vanquished of Latin America's brutal Cold War scenarios and develops out of the shattered cultures of left-wing mobilization. It is borne by militants and former militants, by their allies and sympathizers, by those who were not self-professed militants but were deemed "subversive" by the state. In some cases, this Holocaust consciousness manifested initially during the period of state terror in order to denounce it. This was the case, for example, for the clandestine news agencies, led by militant Peronists, who published underground during the first years of the Argentine dictatorship and used terms like "concentration camps" and "final solution" to describe the actions of the military junta.²⁷ But Latin American Holocaust consciousness is more common in the aftermath of state terror, carried by those who remember the dead and disappeared. It is a piece of the memory debates that shape the stories we tell about the political violence of the past.

The memory and human rights work of this period is sometimes examined under the aegis of trauma, or of mourning and loss of the certainties of an earlier age that were guided by the heroic project of realizing a modern, liberated Latin America.²⁸ Indeed, it is often to those elements of post-Holocaust art and philosophy that speak to the trauma of the Jewish catastrophe and the destruction of faith in modernity that Latin American thinkers turn in grappling with the past, as I will demonstrate in this study.

But trauma and mourning tell only part of the story of Latin America's Holocaust consciousness during the late-period Cold War and beyond. The other part of the story centers on anger and the activism it galvanizes, on the memory of the Holocaust wielded as a rallying cry that echoes through the emblematic "Nunca más" and beyond it toward the horizon of justice.²⁹ The Holocaust consciousness described here belongs to witnesses and survivors, family members of the dead or disappeared, solidarity and human rights activists, artists and intellectuals. It marks a critical, hostile approach to attempts to close the book on the past. It takes up questions of moral and criminal responsibility for state crimes, confronts enduring structures of impunity and social inequality, and endows acts of memory and testimony with political force.

Latin American Holocaust Consciousness in Global Perspective

To apprehend Latin American Holocaust consciousness, we must be open to a field dominated by comparative, paradigmatic, and political approaches. We must also address its complex position in a global field. Latin American Holocaust consciousness develops its own shapes and forms out of disparate national histories, but it also fits into and participates in global patterns of Holocaust consciousness. It dialogues with cosmopolitan intellectuals from other parts of the world for whom the Holocaust sparks a profound critique of Western modernity. Recent years have seen pioneering scholarly work on the circulation of this kind of Holocaust memory around the globe. Many scholars now recognize that the trend has been toward a "dislocated" and "decontextualized" understanding of the Holocaust, terms used by sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider to describe how the Holocaust "is dislodged from its historical framework and thereby rendered more 'accessible.'"³⁰ Critic Debarati Sanyal refers to this as the Holocaust's "unmooring from its historical occurrence," which is "the condition of its relevance for other histories of violation and victimization."³¹

Michael Rothberg has proposed the term "multidirectional memory" to describe this aspect of globalized Holocaust memory; his concept provides an alternative to the model of "competitive memory" characteristic of memory cultures in the United States, which operates on the principal that "the remembrance of one history erase[s] others from view" in a kind of "zero-sum struggle for preeminence."³² "Multidirectional memory," in

contrast, emerges through “ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing.”³³ Rather than seeing one group’s memories cancel out or infringe on another’s, Rothberg suggests that a dialogue can emerge when different histories of violence are brought into proximity. This is particularly true of the Holocaust: “Far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories.”³⁴ Rothberg has demonstrated that this has been a feature of Holocaust memory practically since the end of war. He shows that a host of writers, including Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, brought the Holocaust into the intellectual archive of the “age of decolonization,” a period during which the “emergence of collective memory of the Nazi genocide in the 1950s and 1960s takes place in a punctual dialogue with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism.”³⁵

Other cosmopolitan intellectuals have also facilitated these processes of decontextualizing the Holocaust and recontextualizing it elsewhere. Levy and Sznajder identify the work of thinkers Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman as especially important because of their focus on “structures of modernity” as the origin for Nazi violence rather than on its emergence in a particular country or culture.³⁶ They note that Arendt, in her famous chronicle of the 1961 Eichmann trial, opened an avenue for universalization through her concept of “the banality of evil,” which focused on the impersonal bureaucratic structures that allowed Eichmann to implement the Final Solution; this “allows one to remove the perpetrators of the Holocaust from their original cultural and national contexts . . . This is one more step in decontextualizing the Holocaust.”³⁷ Martin Jay points, in a similar vein, to the philosophical work of Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, and Jean-François Lyotard, whose accounts of history and language in the post-Holocaust West turn Auschwitz into “a kind of symbol of historical unintelligibility and radical unrepresentability. . . . The Holocaust became a kind of rebuff to the very belief in historical meaningfulness or the ability of contextualization to make sense of traumatic events.”³⁸ For these thinkers, Jay explains, “the lesson is not ‘never again’ but ‘always already.’”³⁹

Many of these globalizing-universalizing intellectual endeavors have played a role in the Holocaust consciousness developed in Latin America to reflect on Cold War violence, as will be seen throughout this book. Arendt is a frequent point of reference for Argentine thinkers who examine the bureaucratic and social-structural elements of state violence. Latin

American authors have likewise taken up Lyotard and Adorno but have also questioned and repurposed them with a view to rethinking or rebuilding the shattered cultures of the left, rather than holding them over the abyss of meaninglessness. The thinking of Frantz Fanon was influential to the anti-colonial rewriting of national history in 1970s Guatemala and reappears two decades later in Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil's condemnation of the "third Maya holocaust." More to the point, however, beyond the influence of individual post-Holocaust thinkers, is that the Latin American authors and activists to be discussed here, who decontextualize and recontextualize the Holocaust, are participating in an established comparative and cosmopolitan tradition.

This "unmooring" of the Holocaust, in Sanyal's suggestive words, its transformation from a historical event that affected particular people and places into a symbol and idea that speaks to the experience of people in so many other places—does it mean that the significance of the Holocaust has become variable? Yes and no. Levy and Sznajder follow the work of sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, who has argued that the Holocaust has become "the master symbol of evil," one that works as a "powerful bridging metaphor to make sense of social life."⁴⁰ The Holocaust as "evil" suggests an underlying bedrock stability to its significance, since no matter where it appears, the Holocaust symbolizes "the abstract nature of 'good and evil.'"⁴¹ To name something a "holocaust"—or "Holocaust"—builds on a shared global awareness that the Nazi genocide of the Jews happened and that it has been universally condemned.⁴² "The Holocaust is always in the background," note Baer and Sznajder.⁴³ The word "holocaust" presupposes a common language of history and addresses a global audience. To use this word is to enter into conversation with a world perceived as shamefully indifferent to local reality and to consciously evoke the idea of a crime of global proportions, one that concerns all of us.⁴⁴ Unmoored from its original history and dislocated from its original geographies, the Holocaust is not an empty signifier; it is used to point to evil in the world.

Yet scholars also remind us that "the Holocaust does not become one totalizing signifier containing the same meanings for everyone" and that the globalization of the Holocaust should not be taken to mean its homogenization.⁴⁵ Rothberg warns of the risks of centering Holocaust memory on a vague idea of evil that is "too singular and abstractly universal," ignoring "the active role [of] other histories and memories."⁴⁶ We need to know more about these other histories and memories, to speak about a recontextualized Holocaust consciousness rather than simply a decontextualized one and study the complex patterns of light and shadow that result.

Seen from a global perspective and with respect to global trends in Holocaust consciousness, Latin America is not an outlier. Nevertheless, its comparative, paradigmatic, and political approach to the Holocaust raises a series of interpretive problems. As an object of study, Latin American Holocaust consciousness lies somewhere between two fields that rarely speak to one another: Holocaust studies and Latin American studies. As a result, its features are apt to be misrecognized by one side or the other and taken for something they are not. The cultural codes of Holocaust memory can easily be misread. From the perspective of scholars of the Holocaust, Latin American forms of Holocaust consciousness may look like Holocaust trivialization or mild forms of denialism. From the perspective of Latin Americanist scholars, the use of Holocaust paradigms may look like a depoliticizing revision of the Cold War past, one that places victims at the center of history and in so doing marginalizes or “forgets” the role of leftist political activists. My argument throughout this book is that these concerns are largely though not entirely misplaced. Holocaust consciousness in Latin America is primarily an anti-denialist discourse, and it contains a political force that carries something of the ethos and aims of prior liberation struggles.

Holocaust Comparisons and the Shadow of Denialism

Comparative historical and sociological analysis of the Holocaust has grown exponentially in the past two decades.⁴⁷ Yet comparative approaches remain polemical. Holocaust comparisons in the United States have been perceived—and sometimes misperceived—as a form of minimizing the Holocaust, and in Western Europe since the 1970s, comparisons have furthered the aims of Holocaust denialism. It is important, therefore, to explain how and why Latin American comparative approaches are not inherently denialist.

In the United States the nonexemplary form of Holocaust consciousness has been fiercely defended in public discourse. The existence of polemical debates about the “uniqueness” of the Holocaust, which came to a head in the late 1990s, testifies to the fear that a comparative approach will diminish the enormity of the event, profane the suffering of its victims, or negate the determining role of anti-Semitism in Nazi ideology.⁴⁸ These debates in the United States were particularly inflamed around the question of the United States’ own “Native American Holocaust.”⁴⁹ The predominant approach has been to treat analogies with great suspicion, even hostility, as expressions of partisan self-interest or careless historical reasoning,⁵⁰ or as a form of

theft from the Jewish people, as in Edward Alexander's essay "Stealing the Holocaust" and Yehuda Bauer's early work on the Holocaust.⁵¹ According to historian Kirsten Fermaglich, the U.S. anxiety about comparison was not always as strong as it is today. In her study of American social scientists working in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she demonstrates that the use of Holocaust images to create analogies between Nazi Germany and American society was generally perceived by readers in this period as "thrilling and instructive."⁵² Roughly speaking, it is only in the late 1960s that analogies linking the Holocaust to disparate experiences of oppression and to other genocidal events came to be seen, by many U.S. Jews and by scholars of the Holocaust, as illegitimate, trivializing, and false. Polemical debate on this point has diminished since the 1990s, yet the issue continues to be contentious.⁵³

In Europe there have also been criticisms of a comparative approach to the Holocaust, primarily because these have been linked to efforts to minimize or deny the existence of Nazi crimes. More so than in the United States, the Holocaust comparisons that have circulated in Europe since the 1970s and 1980s are tainted by "historical revisionism," that is, Holocaust denialism. The Holocaust analogies that appeared in public discourse in France and Germany provoked enormous debate because they sought to lessen, if not outright evade, the criminal responsibility of Nazi perpetrators and the moral responsibility of collaborationist societies. Critiques of comparative, paradigmatic, and political uses of the Holocaust have therefore rested, in part, on the connection between such uses and Holocaust denialism.

Two events from the 1980s in Europe, the "historians' debate" in Germany and the trial of Klaus Barbie in France for crimes against humanity, gave rise to strong concerns about how comparisons can be used for the purpose of relativizing Nazi crimes in order to exonerate Germans morally or acquit Nazi perpetrators of their crimes. During the historians' debate in 1986, German historians offered new interpretations of World War II that focused on Soviet atrocities and therefore seemed to relativize or ignore Nazi crimes; they were accused of "apologetic tendencies" toward Nazism.⁵⁴ U.S. historian Dominick LaCapra explains that the German historians' comparisons of the Holocaust to other crimes, such as Stalinism, serve as "mechanisms of denial" through normalization, especially those that "evenhandedly show the distribution of horror in history."⁵⁵ That is, when Germans place the Holocaust as one on a long list of historical atrocities, they run the risk of normalizing it or of evading a confrontation with it.⁵⁶

Something similar occurred in France during the 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie, the notorious “Butcher of Lyon,” when lawyer Jacques Vergès defended Barbie by comparing Nazi crimes in occupied France to the actions of the French in colonial Algeria.⁵⁷ The analogy was intended to acquit Barbie and relativize his crimes. In this case, the comparison offered by Barbie’s defenders may in fact have been illuminating; many French intellectuals, including Jews, had thought the comparison was correct for the Algerian war. French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, in his extended analysis of the Barbie trial, was highly critical of Vergès’s comparative strategy and rebutted most of the analogies on historical grounds, yet recognized that the visibility given French colonial atrocities in the context of the trial gave rise to “some unbearable contradictions from which no one quite managed to extricate himself.”⁵⁸

It is important to stress that these reservations about Holocaust comparisons by LaCapra and Vidal-Naquet are based on the fact that the comparisons lack historical rigor, not on the fact of comparison itself. Most historians refute the “uniqueness theory” of the Holocaust as antithetical to the discipline of history. “A historian, by definition, works in relative terms,” writes Vidal-Naquet.⁵⁹ The position is not one to which it is easy for him to commit, given that at the time of his writing, revisionist historians were offering comparisons between Nazi crimes and the crimes of other states like France and the United States in order to relativize Nazi crimes in an exculpatory vein. He considered these comparisons odious, yet even so, he reiterates the fundamentally comparative nature of historical inquiry and dismisses what he calls an “absolutist” approach to specificity that would remove the Holocaust entirely from “the movement and trends of history,” even if he recognizes that such an integration into history “is not always a matter of course.”⁶⁰ He notes that to insist on the specificity of the Holocaust “does not mean that . . . the genocide of the Jews should not be inserted into a history that would be simultaneously German, European, and worldwide, and thus compared, confronted and even, if possible, explained.”⁶¹ LaCapra says of Nazi crimes: “They will be compared to other events insofar as comparison is essential for any attempt to understand.”⁶²

Vidal-Naquet found the Holocaust comparisons offered in Barbie’s defense to be historically indefensible. This is also the argument he advanced against Holocaust uses in contemporary Israel, where Holocaust memory has been especially politicized. He noted that the Holocaust had become a “commonplace tool of political legitimacy” rather than “a historical reality,” and in regard to how the Nazi years have been “used” in Israel, he wrote:

“Their permanent exploitation toward extremely pragmatic ends deprives them of their historical density, strips them of their reality, and thus offers the folly and lies of the revisionists their most fearsome and effective collaboration.”⁶³ We can see here the historian’s attempt to counteract revisionist history on the grounds of historical inquiry itself. He does not say that the instrumentalization of the Holocaust in Israel is itself revisionist, but he does charge it with unwittingly providing revisionism with ammunition because it normalizes an approach to the past that is not based on historiographical understanding.

The “use” of the Holocaust in Latin America necessarily raises similar questions. How does Holocaust discourse here compare to the examples that Vidal-Naquet and LaCapra deplore from France, Germany, and Israel in the 1970s and 1980s? Are these Latin American uses of the Holocaust pragmatic? Do they thereby strip it of its historical density and reality? Yes, undoubtedly. The Latin American examples are highly instrumental. They are rhetorical tools used to make a point about something else: to stake moral claims, advance arguments, identify political positions. As such, they have an air of expediency. They teach us little about the Holocaust as a historical event.

Yet is this paradigmatic approach to the past truly the problem? We remember that, as demonstrated by the historians’ debate in Germany, even rigorous historical analysis of the past risks normalizing and relativizing Nazi atrocities. In contrast, the not-very-historical use of the Holocaust in Latin America is neither revisionist nor relativizing. It is true that these analogies are not necessarily good tools for instructing students about Holocaust history. But such uses do not minimize or deny it and should not be simply dismissed as false. These Holocaust analogies are wielded to provoke a moral, political, and eventually legal confrontation with state violence. In this regard, they operate very differently in Latin America from how Holocaust analogies operated in Europe in the 1980s, where the point was to exonerate, morally or criminally, German perpetrators and their collaborators.

When an Argentine intellectual refers to an infamous Buenos Aires detention center as “our Auschwitz,” he does so to lend added weight to the past, not to lighten its load on the present.⁶⁴ When Native American activists denounce the genocide of the Maya as similar to Nazi crimes, they do so to highlight its horror, not to turn away from it. Whereas in Germany claims for the Holocaust’s uniqueness aim to force Germans to confront their own responsibility, in the United States the same talk, notes Novick, “performs the opposite function: it promotes *evasion* of moral and historical respon-

sibility. The repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or others pales in comparison to the Holocaust is true—and evasive.”⁶⁵ Evasive, Novick argues, because the denial of comparison seeks to free Americans from the burden of confronting the violence of their national past. The same might plausibly be said for some of the Holocaust references that circulated in Guatemala during the 2013 trial for genocide of General Efraín Ríos Montt, the military dictator who oversaw the most brutal phase of the counterinsurgency war. Such Holocaust references were intended to show that the extermination of Maya in the early 1980s by the Guatemalan army was not like the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and therefore not a criminal offense. “Would They Vote for Hitler?” asked one Guatemalan commentator in reference to the Jews, implying that Mayas, many of whom had indeed voted for Ríos Montt when he ran for president in 2003, would not have done so if he had committed genocide against them.⁶⁶ In this instance, the author denies comparison to the Holocaust in order to deny a confrontation with Guatemala’s own grim past—that is, to relativize the violence committed against the Maya as “not that bad.”

The Holocaust analogies discussed in this book work in precisely the opposite direction. They are attempts to confront Cold War violence, to lend it due weight and magnitude, and they do so by presupposing the due weight and magnitude of the Holocaust as a settled question. Whether or not that presupposition is a correct one, and whether or not these comparisons work on a historical level or even on a rhetorical and emotional level, are debatable—certainly Latin American thinkers and their U.S. interlocutors have subjected these analogies to debate, at times polemically, as this book intends to demonstrate. But the question of historical analysis should be separated from the question of denialism. Whatever their shortcomings, most Latin American uses of Holocaust paradigms, parables, and symbols are not denialist.

Latin Americanism after Eichmann: Cold War Victims and Holocaust Victims

French historian Annette Wieviorka calls our age “the era of the witness.”⁶⁷ It began its global reach after the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann in 1961, which drew increased global attention to the survivors of the Holocaust and their testimonies. Eichmann had escaped capture immediately after

the war and settled in Argentina in 1950. Israeli special forces kidnapped him there in 1960 and brought him to Israel to stand trial. These events had an immediate and direct impact in Argentina because his extrajudicial kidnapping by Israeli special forces constituted a violation of Argentine national sovereignty, creating a political crisis in the country and setting off a wave of serious anti-Semitic attacks against Argentine Jews. The Eichmann kidnapping drew heightened attention to their complex identity positioning along an Argentine-Jewish hyphen, rendering Argentine Jews newly vulnerable to nationalist pressures and forcing them into defensive postures.⁶⁸

The legal proceedings against Eichmann, meanwhile, had a broader and longer-term impact on developments in Holocaust consciousness. Eichmann was tried in a national court and for crimes against a particular group (“the Jewish people”), yet the event was decisive in terms of globalizing and universalizing the Holocaust. Coverage of the trial made it accessible to a wide public. Novick writes about its impact in the United States, noting that “it was the first time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism.”⁶⁹ Wieviorka deems it “a pivotal moment in the history of the memory of the genocide,” and she points to several features of the trial that were to have global repercussions. One, the Holocaust became linked for the first time “to the themes of pedagogy and transmission,” because the Israeli prosecutor used the trial to provide the world with a history lesson.⁷⁰ Two, through the trial, “the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify,” meaning that the Holocaust’s victims became available as models for victims of other atrocities but also for victims of very different kinds of suffering.⁷¹ Three, Holocaust survivors were given a central role in teaching history. The prosecutor placed the survivors’ testimony at the heart of the trial, such that for the first time their words “attained a social dimension”; the truth they spoke was acknowledged by the state and “relayed to the world media as a whole.”⁷² Wieviorka credits the trial with “creat[ing] a social demand for testimonies” and granting the survivor-witness a “new function” as “the bearer of history” and the bearer of “a memory rich in lessons for the present and the future.”⁷³

However, in the post-Eichmann period, the acquisition of an ever more central role played by the Jewish victims and their testimonies in narrating Holocaust history is not without its problems. The increased dominance of a historical narrative structured by victims and perpetrators was initially greeted with ambivalence by Jews. If we look to Jewish ideas in the 1960s about

the figure of the Holocaust victim, we see how strongly Jews tried to escape this connotation and expressed an aversion to victim-centric interpretations of the catastrophe. Wieviorka cites Wiesel's words from 1967: "I do not like to think of the Jew as suffering. I prefer thinking of him as someone who can defeat suffering—his own and others."⁷⁴ Novick reminds us that among U.S. Jews during the Eichmann trial, "there was widespread reluctance to seeing Jews portrayed as victims."⁷⁵ Historian Raanan Rein describes Argentine Jews' refusal of a victim identification in their responses to the surge in anti-Semitic attacks in Argentina after Eichmann's kidnapping and trial; Jews formed self-defense groups and organized a strike.⁷⁶

Scholars of the Holocaust have also expressed ambivalence about a victim-centric, testimony-based view of history, for several reasons: that it may lead to an overly simplistic view of complex and multivalent historical events; that in privileging direct witness testimony, it may lose some of the benefits of more distanced historical analysis; and that in centering national history on the figure of the victim, it may contribute to a depoliticized understanding of a conflict that had an ideological dimension. Novick criticizes "the cult of survivor as secular saint," and A. Dirk Moses, in a similar vein, points to the problems that arise if victim narratives are not subjected to the same critical scrutiny as other narratives about the past.⁷⁷ Wieviorka worries about the "power struggle" between the role of the victim-witness and the role of the historian: "Each person has an absolute right to her memory, which is nothing other than her identity, her very being. But this right can come into conflict with an imperative of the historian's profession, the imperative of an obstinate quest for the truth."⁷⁸ Historian Enzo Traverso has also greeted this development with ambivalence, fearing that the figure of the victim-witness has displaced the figure of the anti-fascist militant in the stories we tell about Europe's past. He argues that in Europe since the 1980s, the memory of the Holocaust has erased "the legacy of liberation struggles," and notes: "The victims of violence and genocide occupy the stage of public memory, while the revolutionary experiences haunt our representation of the twentieth century as 'larval' specters. Their vanquished actors lie in wait of redemption."⁷⁹

Latin America, too, has seen a marked turn toward victim-centric and testimonial accounts of the past, and as in the case of Holocaust memory in Europe and the United States, this development has been the subject of sustained critique. This book focuses on the era of defeat and rally, meaning the period when popular movements for social equality and national liberation were decisively defeated by U.S.-backed governments in the region and

solidarity and human rights activism emerged to denounce state violence. Across the region this activism has focused on the victims of state atrocities and the criminality of state violence. It has attempted to center national Cold War histories on the victim-witnesses and on their testimonies about their experiences of victimization, testimonies it has endowed with moral, legal, and political authority. These efforts have been criticized by a range of thinkers in ways that closely parallel criticisms of Holocaust memory.

Sociologist Elizabeth Jelin holds that in Argentina in the immediate post-dictatorship period, the trials of military perpetrators “strengthened the figure of ‘victim’ of state repression as the central figure of the period, regardless of his or her ideology or actions,” and that the victim figure acquired an utterly depoliticized connotation: “A victim is a passive being, harmed by the actions of others. The victim is never an agent, never productive. He or she receives blows but is construed as incapable of provoking or responding.”⁸⁰ Historians Steve Stern and Scott Strauss, writing about contemporary human rights discourses, point to the stories of political commitment that tend to get left out of human rights narratives once these circulate on the global stage; these stories of “class and ideological fractures” become a silent trace that a casual observer cannot perceive behind the more conventional portrayal of “innocent victims.”⁸¹ Anthropologist Carlota McAllister’s arguments about testimonial genres in post-genocide Guatemala express similar concerns. She tracks the demise of testimonial forms that looked forward to a future that would have made suffering meaningful in favor of therapeutic forms of testimony that search for collective healing but do not speak of struggle against social oppression.⁸² In view of these reflections, we might say that Latin America has its own post-Eichmann debates, extending beyond Latin American Jewish concerns, and venture to postulate a “Latinamericanism after Eichmann,” so strong have been the lines of concern about the status accorded to the figure of the victim and to victim testimony in contemporary memories of the Cold War past.⁸³

This concern about creating a depoliticized understanding of Cold War violence extends to Latin America’s Holocaust consciousness, the predominant tendency of which is to establish parallels between Cold War victims and Holocaust victims. The prevailing view is that this will lead to a collective forgetting of the ideological stakes of state terror in Latin America, which was implemented to eliminate those who held political ideas deemed to be subversive. Many thinkers fear that Holocaust testimony and the figure of the Holocaust victim should not be taken as models for the Latin American context, because these will displace narratives that grant agency to