

Research Conference on the Bystander

Theme 1: The definition and use of the concept “bystander”. How is it related to the concept “onlooker”?

Victoria J. Barnett

Director at Church Relations, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Concept of “Bystander”

The “bystander” is a very complex concept, both historically and ethically, and yet it is crucial to understanding what happened – particularly with regard to the behavior of “ordinary people” – during the Holocaust. Particularly in pedagogy, it may be less important to understand it as a reference to a particular group of individuals or institutions. Bystander behavior is a dynamic process that includes people’s responses to events and ideas over a period of time and the changes in their self-perception and identity that result. As such, it is also the creation of a moral narrative about what is happening.

Paul A. Levine

Senior Lecturer in Holocaust History at Uppsala University and the Uppsala Programme for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

Understanding the “On-Looker” in Holocaust History and Historiography

Of the three categories long used in Holocaust studies to define relevant historical “actors”, that of the “bystander” is numerically the largest, and the most empirically heterogeneous. This makes theoretical and methodological discussion often imprecise, with these difficulties compounded because many actions and decisions taken by “bystanders” often had a morally ambiguous nature.

This paper will discuss the consequences of the historiographic progress achieved by international scholars in recent years, allowing for a new, more explanatory rubric for the category, here called “the on-looker”. The concept allows for a deeper analysis of an expanding set of persons, institutions, states and circumstances who “observed” the Holocaust as it happened. Citizens of democracies and non-democratic states had different circumstances yet similar moral dilemmas to surmount in formulating a response to mass murder which they even saw happening, had contact with in some other direct

manner, or had heard or read about. Pedagogy associated with these histories is of special interest, and teaching the responses of the “on-lookers” to the Holocaust is a signally important part of genocide prevention education.

Johannes Houwink ten Cate

Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Amsterdam.

My lecture focuses on problems of definition of the term bystander and the use of legal concepts in solving some of these problems. My second theme is the use of war diaries written by “ordinary” Gentiles. This type of research has been done in Poland (by Feliks Tych) and in The Netherlands. I wonder whether this conference could form the beginning of an international research project on Gentile war diaries, the results of which could - through transnational exhibitions and the production of educational materials - be made accessible to a larger audience.

Thomas Brudholm

Ph D and project researcher at the Department of Holocaust and Genocide studies in Copenhagen.

A philosophical perspective on historians’ responses to discourses on the ‘bystanders’

Thomas Brudholm will lecture on the question how historians and philosophers can cooperate and help each other when discussing and studying the topic of “bystanders.” Departing from concrete examples from recent discussions in academia as well as the media, Brudholm will try to pinpoint some of the possibilities and pitfalls pertaining to each discipline. More specifically, this implies attention to different notions of morality and emotion, and differing ideas as to the scholarly importance of empirical detail and conceptual analysis. The discussion will be focused on cases related to the problem of “bystanders”.

Theme 2: Different explanatory models of bystander behaviour, for example norm shifting processes.

Lars Dencik

Professor of Social Psychology, Roskilde University, Denmark.

What make people become bystanders?

Two questions regarding the phenomena of bystanders will be approached:

- 1) How do people become bystanders?
- 2) What function do bystanders serve in relation to violence towards individuals and groups?

Answers to these questions will be given from a social psychological perspective with reference to mechanisms such as perceptual categorization, the power of group norms, the comfort of conformity, blaming the victim, the spiral of de-humanization and social legitimization.

Paul Slovic

Professor, Decision Research and University of Oregon.

"If I look at the mass I will never act": Psychic numbing and genocide

The statistics of mass murder or genocide, no matter how large the numbers, do not convey the true meaning of such atrocities. The reported numbers of deaths fail to spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action. As we cannot rely upon our moral feelings to motivate action against genocide, we must look to moral argument and international law. The psychological deficiencies described here show the need to design legal and institutional mechanisms that will enforce proper response to genocide.

Theme 3: Methodological aspects of studying the bystander. How do we tell the story of passivity or inaction? How can researchers discover and interpret silence in different historical and present day contexts?

David Gaunt

Professor at Södertörn University College.

What about bystanders in the genocide on the Armenians during the 1910s?

Bystanderism is a concept developed within holocaust research. It has previously not been applied to the genocidal experiences of the Christian groups during WWI in the Ottoman Empire. The active denialism of the Turkish authorities and the lapse of nearly 100 years make it difficult to research just what the Muslim neighbors were or were not doing. What is possible is to ring in the parameters of bystanderism through looking at the events, the activities of protectors and collaborators, the actions of the government to punish helpers, etc.

Dienke Hondius

Associate professor of history at VU University in Amsterdam and Anne Frank House.

Dutch bystanders and eyewitnesses of the Shoah in the Netherlands

Recent research provides new insight in the study of bystanders, complicity and responsibility. The Project Eyewitnesses of the Shoah, initiated by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Oral History Department, has been developed in several European countries over the last ten years, coordinated by oral historian Nathan Beyrak. In the Netherlands, historians Anna Timmerman and Dienke Hondius were involved. The first results include 33 filmed portraits of Dutch 'bystanders' and eyewitnesses of the Shoah in the Netherlands, a book by Anna Timmerman, and several academic theses in contemporary history. I will present some of the results in relation to other recent historical and sociological research. A model of interpretation will be suggested for passive and active attitudes and behaviour, linking Holocaust and Genocide Studies to the wider fields of scholarship on (in)tolerance, anti-semitism, racism, anti-muslim sentiments, and human rights education.

Finally a new research project will be introduced, about the history of education about World War II in several European countries, inviting the participants of the conference to share their knowledge about what was taught (and what was not), and when, how and why this changed since 1945.

Karin Kvist Geverts

Uppsala University and the Uppsala Programme for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

Sweden and the Holocaust. An attempt to make sense of problematic categories and ambivalent actors

This lecture is an attempt to make sense of the problematic category of the bystander with a case study of Sweden and the Holocaust. The paper consists of two parts. The first part is a discussion of the concept of the bystander and the following questions are addressed: How do we define a bystander? If a state, institution or person is categorized as a bystander – to what are they bystanding? Are we talking solely of the Holocaust or also of the persecution of the Jews? This issue is also related to what time frame we are discussing – are we talking only about 1941-1945 or of the whole period of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945? In the second part of the lecture I will discuss the case of Sweden and its connection to the Holocaust. Could and should Sweden be categorized as a bystander? What do we mean when we talk about “Sweden”? Are we referring to the nation as a whole and all its actions? Or do we refer to institutions or even individuals? This is, again, a question of time frame. During what year/-s is/are this categorization valid? And do we value the Swedish actions at the end of the war more valuable than the actions before the war?

Theme 4: Pedagogical/didactical issues. How do we approach the bystander issue for an educational perspective?

Mark Levine

Department of Psychology at Lancaster University.

Individuals. Groups and Bystander Behaviour: using social identities to promote bystander intervention

In this paper I will argue that recent work on the social psychology of group processes provides important new insights into bystander behaviour. Traditionally, groups are seen as a negative influence on bystanders. However, using evidence from experiments, field studies and historical records, I will argue that group processes can also be mobilised to facilitate bystander intervention I will argue that it does not require a ‘good personality’ to do good things (just as it does not require a ‘bad personality’ to commit acts of atrocity).

I will discuss ways in which the conditions for good bystander behaviour can be created – and why thinking about the role of social identities is important in promoting bystander behaviour.

Magnus Hermansson Adler

Senior lecturer at the University of Gothenburg.

Teaching About the Indistinct Bystander

A small survey in the ninth grade of the Swedish Secondary Modern School conducted last year depicts some vital problems concerning teaching about the Bystander. Out of the pupils answers we can grasp a situation where the Swedish school is not accustomed to elaborated discussions concerning the historical moral responsibility of the Bystander. We are able to make following statements:

Primo – Probably due to the so called neutrality of Sweden during the Second World War the Swedish professional historians have had a clear tendency to avoid elaborated discussions on the subject “Bystander nation”. Just recently some Swedish historians have started to deal with this matter. But it will take some time before the results of this research become an integrated part of contemporary teaching.

Secundo – Despite some delay, the Swedish writers of text books very carefully follow the results of the researchers. Accordingly it will take some time before the text books in History give us some generating perspectives on the Bystander situation.

Tertio – In today's teacher training programs there are an extremely small amount of time spent on the scientific task of history didactics. The Swedish history teachers do not have any opportunities to develop personal skills in teaching about the Bystander.

In conclusion, the necessary discussions concerning the historical Bystander will serve a catalytic function in describing the general situation of a Swedish teacher in History. To this very moment the Bystander in the History teaching appears in a very indistinct manner.