

# Raul Hilberg, a Historian and his Century

## Writing the History of the Holocaust Then and Now

International Conference in Paris

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### Organizers:

- Florent Brayard, Groupe Histoire et historiographie de la Shoah, Centre de recherches historiques (EHESS-CNRS)
- Jürgen Finger, German Historical Institute, Paris
- Julie Maeck, Mémorial de la Shoah
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### Description:

The eminent Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg was born exactly a century ago, in 1926. This centenary provides an opportunity to celebrate and discuss the work of the man who is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in the historiography of the persecution and extermination of European Jews by the Nazi regime.

His seminal work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in 1961, was for a long time the only systematic and detailed history of the structure and policy of this genocide. Translated two decades later in French and German in revised and expanded editions, it is now available in several languages (Italian, Spanish, Polish, Hebrew). Its significance in comprehending the history of the Holocaust, both for the general public and the academic world, is of paramount importance. This is also true for his subsequent thematically focused publications, particularly for *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* (1992).

The objective of the symposium is to reexamine Raul Hilberg's professional trajectory and oeuvre from a multitude of vantage points and assess its impact on current and future research on the Holocaust and, more general, on genocides. We have identified three major areas of interest: Hilberg's life and career, the production of knowledge about the Holocaust in his seminal work on *The Destruction of the European Jews* and in later studies, and his impact on Holocaust research, but also the occasional lack of recognition.

A study of Raul Hilberg's biography can provide insights on the way he understood, produced and transmitted history. We suggest to look back on the major stages in Hilberg's life: encompassing his emigration from Austria in 1939, following the Anschluss and anti-Semitic persecution; his return to Europe in U.S. uniform and his experience on the European stage; the post-war years in the United States as part of the "War Documentation Project"; his academic career and his intellectual influences; his role as a public historian – be it in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in the establishment of institutions such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, or in trials against Holocaust deniers; and his impact on the memorialization of the Holocaust.

The discussion around *The Destruction of the European Jews* is at the center of our conference and warrants several angles of inquiry, which should encompass but are not limited to the following:

How and based on what sources was the book written? In what ways did access to (German) sources as well as Hilberg's way of working and selecting sources shape his narrative of the Holocaust? How did his opinion of integrating victims' sources into Holocaust research evolve over the years? How was this aspect challenged by other historians? Why for the most part did he disregard early *kehruhn-forschung* in his studies? Looking at Hilberg's intellectual sources and inspirations, we can also address the question of disciplinary roots in political science, history, sociology, and philosophy, and examine Hilberg's borrowings from these different disciplines as well as the reception of his work in each field.

What did the process of constant rewriting and updating during translations and new editions entail? This process of updating is undoubtedly a distinctive feature of the book making it a work in constant progress. Hilberg's writing can be examined, whether through the question of style, narrative, and exposition or through the lens of the various literary genres he produced, ranging from exhaustive description to thematic essays and source publications.

How was the work received in different countries and what impact did it have on different national historiographies? We suggest returning to the major controversies Hilberg sparked and examine their relevance today such as the role of the *Judenräte* in the Holocaust, the reactions of Jews to their persecution, and the functional tripartite division between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. We will also inquire into Hilberg's rather vague position in the argument between intentionalists and functionalists.

Finally, Hilberg's influence on the field has been immense, and as such, we would like to include papers on his legacy. We are particularly interested in papers that explore the impact on historians from diverse generations and perspectives who have followed in Hilberg's footsteps, as well as those who have challenged his approaches. What does Hilberg's work offer the present generation of (younger) researchers and to which extent can it inspire future research? It would be of particular interest to examine how the interpretative and descriptive matrix developed by Hilberg for the destruction of Jews has been adopted or amended in historiographies relating to other genocides. More generally, Hilberg's focus on these resurgent genocides could be scrutinized.

The questions suggested here are not exhaustive, and any original proposals will be considered.

### **Call for Papers**

We welcome paper proposals for the conference (2 500 characters maximum) and a short CV **before 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2026**. Please send your proposal and CV in ONE pdf per mail to [florent.brayard@ehess.fr](mailto:florent.brayard@ehess.fr).

Dependent on funding, accommodation costs will be covered by the organizing institutions. Speakers are asked to cover their own travel expenses, but assistance may be provided if necessary to junior researchers or those without institutional affiliation.

The conference language is English.