THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS CONTEXTS

Series Editors: Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann

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COMICS, THE HOLOCAUST AND HIROSHIMA

Jane L. Chapman, Dan Ellin and Adam Sherif

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1
Introduction

Abstract: *This chapter provides the context for discourse on how cultural historians may further include comic strip references and comic books on the Holocaust and Hiroshima in their corpus of representations. Should the obliteration, devastation and institutionalised violence of these events impact on the nature of cultural record used? How can such history be appreciated using comics? The chapter posits a role for comics as cultural record, introducing the methodological connections that the book makes between trauma and transference with historiography.*

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The tenets of democratisation and widening of debates and sources imply an extension of the range of cultural record relating to persecution, genocide and the atomic bomb from 1939 to 1945, with comics connecting new cultural history, historiography, memory and trauma studies.

The Holocaust and Hiroshima are both episodes in history that involved obliteration, devastation and institutionalised violence. Should this impact on the types of sources historians are able to consider? How can such history be appreciated using comics, and how should their potential contribution be included in our palette of sources for writing about the past? The purpose of this study, taking comics as cultural record, is to further a case for their serious assessment as historical evidence and to demonstrate how they might be incorporated into processes of historical narrative construction, speaking to specific live areas of historiography (Chapman et al., 2015).

The debates of new cultural history have called for a widening of sources, topics and content, and a recognition of the democratising effect of such approaches to extend the historian's boundaries (Burke, 1992; Hunt, 1989; Jordanova, 2006; Zemon Davis, 1984). This book follows in this expansive vein, in this case exploring and thereby extending the range of record relating to National Socialist persecution and genocide in Europe, and the US use of the atomic bomb against Japan – aspects of extreme trauma that took place between 1939 and 1945. How well do comic books published contemporary to events capture and address these particular breaches of humanity in the Second World War, and can the form act as an appropriate source? How effective is the medium when presenting historical narratives of trauma as memoir?

These questions are addressed here by engaging with relevant historiographies, memory and trauma studies, and in the process, by bringing these disparate fields together. The principal focus, following the theory and methodology set out in *Comics and the World Wars*, is on the use of comics in furthering and complementing historical analysis. At this juncture, it is necessary to affirm that although it deals with the sequential art form, this is a work of history with the stated intention of considering comics in terms of evidence. As such, this study is generally not concerned with their critical appreciation as art objects, or how they function as art, but rather with the determination and utility of their content to the historian, how they function as record. Although this study certainly benefits from the legitimisation of comics as a valid academic pursuit in both art history and comics studies, the methodological

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traditions of those disciplines, established and effective as they undoubtedly are for their fields, are not inherently appropriate for our purposes here. The way we read comics is a deliberate choice for the assessment of historical value, different by design and intention than methods for critical or artistic analysis. What may be a fresh contribution for comics studies is the call for more comprehensive incorporation of the medium in another discipline, history, and the clear provision of an approach for doing so.[1]

First, the existence and validity of comics as primary historical sources needs to be established, by exploring how text and sequential image can record narratives and detail of traumatic historical events. Chapter 2 starts this process through an analysis of the American anthology comic books of the Quality Comics Group published during the Second World War, arguing that these are primary documents whose narratives both capture and reflect the contemporary events and developments with which their publication was concurrent. Most of the stories in these books consciously feature the global conflict as a constant and inevitable backdrop. The challenge is to decode, present and categorise the historical content resident in these comics, illustrating how they function as records of different aspects of National Socialist persecution and genocide during the war within the context of public awareness in the United States.

Chapters 3 and 4 both examine deliberate retrospective record of children's experience as victims – firstly of the Holocaust in *Paroles d'étoiles* ('Words of the Stars'– a 'double entendre' reference to the star of David, and also to stars in the sky, hence death) and subsequently of the bombing of Hiroshima at the close of the global conflict in *Barefoot Gen*. These provide a popular interpretative insight into the very elements of human experience that academic history does not often emphasise. Comics can fulfil that function; Rocco Versaci has previously discussed the importance and power of comic books at representing autobiographical narratives (Versaci, 2007: 26, 36), and Brandy Ball Blake applies trauma theory to the graphic novel *Watchmen* (Blake, 2009). Versaci examines *Maus* as a Holocaust memoir and compares the medium to the 'text' of photographs (Witek, 1989, Versaci, 2007: 81–108). Of course, *Maus* is not a primary source in that recollections of a survivor were interpreted and subsequently communicated by his son, using animals as a symbolic rather than a more direct attempt at the representation of reality.[2] *Paroles d'étoiles* and *Barefoot Gen* are different: unlike *Maus* they are more

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