

A Comparative Analysis of the Discourse on the "Bystander" in the United States and Israel

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Abstract

A large focus of Holocaust Studies has been dedicated to spreading awareness of the Holocaust in hopes that this awareness will help to prevent more genocide. At the root of this issue is the "bystander" – the onlooker, witness, collaborator etc. This thesis asks how the term "bystander" is used in Holocaust discourse to reflect larger, national aspects of Israeli and American narratives of the Holocaust by closely analyzing the two national Holocaust museums from these countries, Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It explores how the term "bystander" became popular in relation to the Holocaust by examining its development in social psychology, historiography of the Holocaust and practical applications in international law policy. By examining the main exhibit, museum book and website of both Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum this thesis shows how these two institutions' use, or omission, of the "bystander" in their most popular materials reflects national ideas about the Holocaust in their respective countries. This thesis argues the idea of the "bystander" is in fact presented differently in Israel and the United States, and that neither narrative presents a understanding of the term that can help encourage its museum visitors to engage with the topic in a meaningful way. While other scholars have compared national narratives and explored the theme of the "bystander" this thesis is the first research that examines how utilization of the "bystander" theme reflects larger aspects of national narrative of the Holocaust.