Article

Thesis Eleven
2016, Vol. 132(1) 3–16
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0725513615625239
the.sagepub.com
SAGE

Culture trauma, morality and solidarity: The social construction of 'Holocaust' and other mass murders

Jeffrey C Alexander
Yale University, USA

Abstract
Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. While this new scientific concept clarifies causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions, it also illuminates a neglected domain of social responsibility and political action. By constructing cultural traumas, social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations, not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering, but may also take on board some significant moral responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma in a manner that assumes such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships that allow them to share the suffering of others. Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the 'we' and create the possibility for repairing societies to prevent the trauma from happening again. By the same token, social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others' suffering, or place the responsibility for it on people other than themselves. Empirically, this article extensively considers trauma construction in the case of the Holocaust – the mass murder of Jews by the German Nazis – but also examines trauma processes in relation to African-Americans, indigenous peoples, colonial victims of Western and Japanese imperialism, the Nanjing Massacre, and victims of the early communist regimes in Soviet Russia and Maoist China.

Corresponding author:
Jeffrey C Alexander, Center for Cultural Sociology, Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520–8265, USA.
Email: jeffrey.alexander@yale.edu

Keywords
Cultural trauma, narrative, radical evil, solidarity

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their collective consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

As I have developed this new sociological approach with colleagues and students, cultural trauma is first of all a theoretical concept.[1] It suggests empirical-causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions. But this scientific concept also newly illuminates a significant domain of moral responsibility and political action.

By constructing cultural traumas, social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations, not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering, but may also take on board moral responsibility for it. Insofar as groups identify the cause of trauma in a manner that implies their own moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that allow them, perhaps even compel them, to share the suffering of others. Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might be, societies expand the circle of the 'we'. When the circle of the we expands, extraordinary repairs in the institutional and legal networks of society can be made.

Some of the most important social developments in the post-war world have been produced by such a trauma process. Because social actors have newly identified themselves as causal agents, social solidarity has expanded, moral universalism and social criticism have broadened, and fundamental institutional and legal changes have been made.

Most extraordinary of all these developments has been the gradual, halting – still incomplete and contested – but eventually intensely powerful identification of Christian peoples in the West with the millions of Jewish persons murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War. For millennia, Christian civilization had polluted Jews as nefarious and subhuman, excluding them from civil society, punishing them economically, persecuting them culturally and politically, and sometimes doing far worse. When the Enlightenment unlocked the gates of European ghettos in the early 19th century, the oozing anti-Semitic wound that infected modernity seemed on the mend. But the backlash against Jewish incorporation was fierce. Pogroms in the East, the Dreyfus scandal in Republican France, new quotas and old restrictions in the United States, rising anti-Jewish feelings and politics in central Europe. The Nazi monster arose out of this primordial slime. While the Nazis' anti-Semitic strategy was more ambitious and extreme than had ever before been contemplated, their anti-Semitic feeling was not. Its anti-democratic totalitarian state allowed Nazis to put into effect their 'permanent solution' to the Jewish Question, and it was the military defeat of that state that prevented ultimate success. Yet, while the Nazi state was demolished, broad anti-Semitic feelings remained, and not in post-war Germany alone.

In subsequent decades, however, the widespread Jewish hatred that had legitimated the Nazis' mass murder, allowing a blind eye to be turned to it, was sharply attenuated. The pervasive network of anti-Semitic legal and institutional restrictions that existed throughout the West was, as a result, eventually destroyed.

At the source of this *weltgesichte* reversal was trauma work. Christian peoples who had nothing directly to do with the Holocaust – Americans, British, French, Scandinavians, and Austrians among them – came eventually to feel indirectly responsible for it. In doing so, they distanced themselves from anti-Semitic feelings and practices in which they had themselves been deeply implicated. Citizens of Christian nations had restricted and persecuted Jews in their own nations; they had stood by as Germany instituted the Nuremburg laws in 1933 and created *Kristallnacht* in 1938. After learning of the death camps in 1943, Allied war leaders had refused to divert the bombing campaign to stop the quickly gathering slaughter – for even a day. Certainly, it was fear of pervasive domestic anti-Semitism that motivated the leaders' decision.

Of course, in Spring 1945, millions of Western citizens shrank in horror from the news photos from Buchenwald. But the American GIs who took over the camps often showed more sympathy for the German officials under their arrest than for the angry, emaciated, and foreign-seeming Jews whom they liberated. And in the years immediately after the war, it was Nazi barbarians – not the German people and least of all Western anti-Semitic civilization more broadly considered – who were held responsible for the Holocaust.

In the immediate wake of the trauma, the 'circle of the we' was drawn very narrowly indeed. As Bernhard Giesen (in Alexander et al., 2004) has shown, it took three generations for the German people – and, even then, only those inside the democratically reconstructed Western nation – to take on board a broader sense of responsibility, to sharply separate themselves from the self-justifying exculpations of former participants and the hate-filled collective identity of earlier versions of the German nation.

In one of the more radical cultural transformations of modern history, Germany eventually became a loyal friend of Israel, the land that Jewish Nazis victims had occupied to escape. The former Nazi nation now has the largest Jewish population in central Europe, with German Jews continually reporting high levels of acceptance and safety. In post-communist Poland, the longing for reconciliation is also palpable, at least in the cosmopolitan centers. Philosemitism is pronounced, Klezmer music revived, festivals celebrating lost memories of Jewish culture organized annually. In the USA, Jewish writers, scientists, doctors and businessmen have become incorporated into the elite core groups that had rejected them for centuries before.

This transformation of the cultural identity and social status of one of the world's most fiercely denigrated groups was the result of trauma process. The Holocaust came to occupy a central position in the collective identity of Western societies, and in the course of this deepening centrality the understanding of the Jewish mass murder subtly but decisively changed.

One vital thread of trauma process transformed the image of the victim. Rather than seeing the Nazis' Jewish victims as a depersonalized mass, and mess, popular culture began to personalize and differentiate them. Portraying Jews as recognizably human

beings allowed non-Jews, for the first time, to experience deep emotional identification with the six million Jews who were Nazi victims.

A powerful channel for this new form of cultural expression was the mémoire. In the 1950s, there unfolded a series of dramatizations of the suffering and courage of the Dutch 'every girl' Anne Frank, whose *Diary* eventually became required reading in millions of American elementary schools. In the decade after, Eli Wiesel's *Night* also achieved massive popularity, deeply penetrating the consciousness and conscience of Christian and secular citizens in the West. Another popular culture genre driving this line of trauma work was televised melodramas. In 1978, one-hundred-million Americans viewed the *Holocaust* miniseries, and so did record-breaking audiences in Germany. It was in the wake of this mini-series that the German Reichstag removed the statute of limitations on Nazi agents, whose actions were now described – note the generalization – as crimes against 'humanity'.

Such dramaturgical personalization of Jewish victims began transforming the Holocaust from an historical event into a deeply moving trauma-drama, one that increasingly engaged non-Jewish audiences in bathetic experiences of tragedy and catharsis. This cultural transformation was pushed further by a new understanding of Holocaust perpetrators. Personalization had so altered the identity of the trauma's victims as to allow them to become dramatic protagonists. Now the other central figure in the Holocaust narrative – the Nazi antagonist – was also subtly changed. 'Perpetrator' was removed from its historically specific particularity, its status transformed into a more archetypically evil role that would become a stand-in for all humankind.

The critical event initiating this reconstruction of perpetrator was the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. As orchestrated by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, Eichmann's capture and trial was intended to re-connect the new nation's citizens to the persons and places of the original crime, to Germany, the Nazis, and the victimized Jews – in Ben-Gurion's words, to 'the dimensions of the tragedy which *our people* experienced'. By its conclusion, however, the Eichmann trial had actually initiated something very different – a massive universalization of Nazi evil. The removal of the Holocaust from particulars of time, place, and person was crystallized by Hannah Arendt's insistence on the 'banality of evil'. This framing of Nazi guilt became highly influential, even as it was sharply and bitterly disputed. As a banally evil person, Eichmann could be 'everyman'. The antagonists in the Holocaust trauma-drama began to seem not so much larger than life monsters as normal human beings who were not so different from anybody else. Perhaps they were simply, as Nietzsche put it, human, all too human.

This newly emerging mentality was eloquently expressed by the British-American poet W.H. Auden in his 1965 piece 'The Cave of Making'.

More than ever
Life-out-there is goodly, miraculous, loveable,
But we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler,
Trust ourselves ever again: we
Know that, subjectively,
All is possible.

Other cultural developments also widened the circle of perpetrators. Most spectacularly, there was Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram's experiment demonstrating that ordinary, well-educated adult men would 'just follow orders' from imperious authorities, even to the point of gravely endangering the lives of innocent people whose fates they imagined to be under their control. Raising profoundly troubling questions, Milgram's findings generalized the capacity for radical evil, moving it from Nazi deviance to everyday Americanism – and perhaps to humanity as such. Decades later, Christopher Browning provided historical documentation for this broadened understanding in his 1992 book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland.* When Daniel Goldhagen challenged Browning, in *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), insisting on the uniqueness of German anti-Semitism, Browning revealingly responded by referencing Milgram, averring that the character of perpetrators should not be particularized but was universal.

What allowed the Nazis to mobilize and harness the rest of society to the mass murder of European Jewry? Here I think we need to turn to the insights of social psychology – we must ask: what really is a human being? We must give up the comforting and distancing notions that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were fundamentally a different kind of people.

As the Holocaust trauma-drama broadened the cultural identification of and with perpetrator and victim, the US government began losing political control over the telling of the Holocaust story. When the Allied forces defeated Nazi Germany in 1945, they took over control of the representation process, assuring that the Jewish mass murder would now be presented in an anti-Nazi way. In their telling, the former Allies – America most powerfully but Britain and France as well – presented themselves as moral protagonists, pure hearted, heroic carriers of the good. Two decades later, however, during the political wars of the 1960s, Western democracies were compelled to concede this dominant narrative position. This time around – as compared with 1945 – control over the means of symbolic production changed hands more for cultural reasons than by force of arms.

In the 'critical years' between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1970s, the USA experienced a sharp decline in its political, military, and moral prestige. Domestic and international opposition to America's prosecution of the Vietnam War transformed the nation into a symbol, for many, not of salvationary good but apocalyptic, anti-democratic evil. This transvaluation was intensified by revolutionary student and black power movements inside the USA and anti-capitalist guerilla movements outside it.

The USA now came to be identified, in some influential quarters, with terms that had been reserved exclusively for the Holocaust's Nazi perpetrators. According to the postwar victor narrative, only the Allies' Second World War enemies could be represented as evil. When America became '*Amerika*', however, napalm bombs were analogized with gas pellets and flaming Vietnamese jungles with the killing chambers of Auschwitz. The American army had been hailed as the liberator of death camps, and, vowing not to repeat pre-war Nazi appeasement, claimed in the 1960s to be prosecuting a righteous war against communist Vietnamese. By many Western intellectuals and a wide swath of the educated Western public, however, the US Army was now being framed as itself perpetrating genocide against helpless victims in Vietnam. Bertrand Russell and

Jean-Paul Sartre established a War Crimes tribunal that applied the logic of Nuremberg to the United States. Incidents of civilian killings, like the My Lai massacre of 1968, were represented not as anomalous but as an American policy of mass murder. The analogy between Nazi and American leaders was also made in more scholarly ways. Revisionist historians revealed that American and British leaders had known about the death camps by 1943, and had refused to bomb them, as I mentioned earlier. There also emerged new historical interest in the fire bombings of German and Japanese cities and in American's atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Eventually, this broadening of the figure of perpetrator expanded to include other Allied powers in the Second World War and those who had remained avowedly neutral as well. Charles de Gaulle had woven a narrative that purified the French nation as first the victim and later the courageous opponent of both Nazi domination and the 'foreign' collaborationists in Vichy. By the late 1970s and 1980s, young French historians were challenging this account. Seriously polluting the pre-war government of the Third Republic, and by implication its postwar successors, these revisionists documented a pattern of massive French collaboration with the Nazis' anti-Jewish activities.

As the symbolic power of the Holocaust trauma-drama intensified, it was only a matter of time until other nations who had been defeated and occupied, and even those that had remained neutral, were also forced to relinquish symbolic control over how their own stories were told. Austria, for example, had long depicted itself as the helpless first victim of Nazi aggression. When Kurt Waldheim ascended to the position of UN Secretary General, his hidden association with the Hitler regime was widely revealed, and the symbolic status of the Austrian nation, which appeared to rally behind their former president, suffered moral pollution as a result. While Waldheim's political career survived in the short term – he was re-elected to the Austrian presidency – his moral reputation did not; and the national self-criticism triggered by the 'Waldheim Affair' eventuated in Austria now accepting 'co-responsibility' for Holocaust and war. Switzerland also became subject to an inversion of symbolic fortune. The tiny republic had prided itself on its long history of canton democracy and the benevolent neutrality of its Red Cross. In the mid-1990s, however, journalists and historians documented that the wartime Swiss government had laundered Nazi gold. In return for the valuable minerals plundered from the bodies of condemned and murdered Jews, Swiss bankers gave Nazi authorities unmarked currency that could be used to finance Holocaust and war.

These processes of political deconstruction and symbolic inversion universalized the Holocaust. They allowed the so-called 'lessons of the Holocaust' – often referred to as 'post-Holocaust morality' – to be applied in less nationally specific, less particularistic ways. The Holocaust symbol came to stand for the systematic employment of mass violence against members of any stigmatized collectivity, whether defined in a primordial or ideological way – anywhere and anytime.

As a symbol of radical evil, 'Holocaust' became engorged, overflowing with badness. Now dramatized as the signal tragedy of modern times, this engorged evil became a drama that compelled eternal return, in Nietzsche's sense. As with the Greeks and their tragedies, the immersion of Western citizens in the Holocaust drama provided catharsis, moral clarification, and perhaps even grace. The Holocaust legend was told and retold, dramatized, filmed, novelized in hundreds and eventually thousands of aesthetically

compelling ways, in response not only to emotional need but moral ambition. Its characters, its plot, and its pitiable denouement allowed a heightened sensitivity to modern social evil. The trauma-drama's message reflected a modernized, more reflexive version of Greek tragedy. Evil is inside all of us and in every society. If we ourselves have the capacity to be victims and also perpetrators, then none of us can legitimately distance ourselves from the suffering of victims or the responsibility of perpetrators. This cathartic experience and its moral lessons can allow us to change, however, so that we can prevent genocides from ever happening again.

The ability to script, cast, and produce a trauma-drama about mass murder spread to other nations, to other marginalized and oppressed groups, even to such contemporary enemies of the Jewish-Israeli people as the Palestinians. 'Holocaust' became a bridging metaphor deployed by the powerless, who cast themselves in the role of suffering victim and their opponents in the role of perpetrators.

The trauma-drama of the Holocaust – the aesthetic-cum-moral resources it offered for denunciations of ethnic, racial and ideological suffering – powered a series of other world-historical transformations in the second half of the 20th century. The struggle against Western imperialism came to be experienced through this prism. Imperialism had once been viewed as a civilizing gift. In the shadow of the Holocaust and its corrosive critique of modernity's pretentions, Western imperialism became reconceived as genocide – as objectification and othering, as the cultural and physical destruction of stigmatized civilizations and peoples that were non-white, non-Christian, non-Western. Africans, Algerians, Vietnamese, Indians, Chinese – these civilizations were constructed as helpless victims, French and British armies and administrators as heinous perpetrators. In the post-Holocaust era, influential Western audiences came to understand imperialism according to the logic of that overarching trauma-drama. Seeing colonial governments as perpetrators of genocide and those colonized as abject victims, citizens not only extended sympathy and material support to the anti-imperialist movements, whether violent or not, but struggled to purge their own governments of moral pollution and to stop colonial war.

This moral inversion and narrative revision helped liberate non-Western nations from the imperialist yoke, removing centuries of Western domination over Eastern and Southern regions of the globe. In doing so, the trauma process radically reshaped the postwar global landscape, creating new legalities and sovereignties, laying down infrastructural tracks for economic globalization. The post-Holocaust story of liberation also made it more difficult, paradoxically, to identify post-colonial domestic repression and new patterns of ethnic and regional war.

Other extraordinarily significant social transformations also unfolded inside the post-Holocaust frame. Consider, for example, the African-American civil rights movement. Black leaders saw how, in the wake of the Holocaust, attacks on anti-Semitic feelings and institutions were beginning to strike strong chords of sympathy and identification among America's white Christian core groups. African-Americans projected themselves into the generalized role of earlier Jewish victims. Engaging in dramatic performances that generated traumatic violence against innocent and peaceful demonstrators, the civil rights movement depicted white Southern officials as Gestapo-like, out of control, made-in-America Nazis motivated by radical racial hatred. The contemporaneous recovery of

slave narratives about the 'middle passage' of captured victims from Africa to the New World functioned as analogy with the 'cattle cars' that transported captured Jews to death camps, reinforcing the equation of America's racial caste system with Nazi genocide. Northern white Americans increasingly identified with the black stigmatized victims of Jim Crow racism, withdrawing from the white Southern perpetrators a century of sentimental support. What flowed from this racial trauma drama were radical legal and institutional repairs in the social structure of the United States.

A similar story about analogical emplotment and institutional change can be told for the struggles of indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere. From the 1960s onward, there emerged a growing awareness that the first imperial exercises were not against developed civilizations but against peoples who were there before them. It was not, however, empirical evidence of an objective reality that put the decimation of the first occupants of the Americas on the map of the Western imagination. In 1962, in *The Savage Mind*, Claude Levi-Strauss asserted that the most dramatic genocide of all, and the most complete, was the annihilation of earth's first human residents. Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors destroyed native cultures and institutions throughout North and South America, unleashing processes of destruction that eventually resulted in the physical death of most of their peoples as well. Whether identified as Indians, Native Americans, aborigines, or first peoples, in the post-Holocaust world the populations who faced European and later American and Australian expansion have been categorized as victims, their opponents as perpetrators, and the crime as genocide. Only in the decades after the Second World War did the victims of this slow-moving mass destruction become humanized in a manner that could elicit cultural identification and empathy. Their styles of dress, their pierced and tattooed bodies, their painting, sculptures, music, and dance have recently entered into the core of the contemporary modern imagination. Their struggles for compensation have generated powerful political support, and significant institutional transformations have sometimes been made.

The qualifier 'sometimes' provides a segue to the dark other side of cultural trauma, which I will elaborate in the concluding section of this paper but will fully to explore.

As we know all too well, social groups often refuse to recognize the suffering of others; and, even when they do, they frequently place the causal responsibility for inflicting that suffering on events and actors outside themselves. What follows from such refusals is a failure to identify and empathize. Opting out of the process of trauma creation prevents the possibility of achieving a moral stance. It restricts solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone. Laws are not changed and institutions are not repaired. Strains that triggered earlier traumas are left in place, a situation that may allow the original traumatic events to happen again.

Let us continue with the postwar trauma process that centers on first peoples. Frontier societies justified and often ennobled their dominating expansion, narrating it as evolutionary progress, evoking civilizing stories about religions salvation and the secular cultivation of 'virgin land'. Four decades ago, chastened by the increasingly powerful legend of the Holocaust, Western core groups began to displace the more racialized strands of their founding narratives, weaving new origin myths – in movies, television, songs, novels, and paintings – that acknowledged the suffering of original peoples.

Australian leaders apologized and offered reparations to radically marginalized Aborigines, and the nation's intellectuals and cultural entrepreneurs transfigured aboriginal totemic drawings once thought worthless into highly valuable art. American political and cultural leaders made similar gestures to decimated Native American remnants, and legal challenges produced restoration of stolen lands guaranteed by old treaties. In Canada, the Anglican church asked the country's first peoples to forgive them for having created boarding schools dedicated to religious conversion, ruthless discipline, and forced cultural assimilation.

In recent decades, however, these broad efforts at cultural revision have attenuated and institutional repairs slowed down. The Ottawa government has turned over to native tribes effective control over large swatches of the nation's land, but these are largely outside the great population centers and remain frozen tundra for much of the year. The American government has restored significant sovereignty to tribal reservations, but the new control, unevenly distributed, has been deployed to build gambling casinos for white Americans, allowing only a small minority of the continent's surviving original settlers to thrive. When Australia's Conservative John Howard came to power 18 years ago, he publicly retracted the Labor government's apology, advising Aborigines to assimilate and become rich. It is impossible to imagine the Christian peoples of the West displaying such ambivalence about the Holocaust, much less contemporary Germans. Indeed, denying the Holocaust is a crime in most European states.

The same ambivalence and polarization has marred Western efforts to deal with their imperial histories. Since Britain's Tories returned to power five years ago, they have ordered that textbooks be revised so that the civilizing contributions of empire can be highlighted again. When Prime Minister David Cameron visited India last year, he spoke of the astonishing opportunities provided by its contemporary capitalist markets but said nothing about the British cotton industry bankrupting India's weaving enterprises two centuries before. The very suggestion that the Anglo-British should feel shame for their ferocious destruction of Irish social structure, four centuries ago, much less offer apology and reparation, would still be heatedly rejected in the United Kingdom of today.

- The French continue to offer the Baccalaureate to *les sécondaires* in their former colonies, many of which provide romantic escapes from 'serious' civilization for its wealthy bourgeoisie. French school textbooks only timidly confront the bloody wars of terror their nation conducted against Algeria and Vietnam.
- The Soviet Union lost its empire barely a generation ago, but the leaders and masses of its Russian remnant mostly feel deprived, not guilty. Their sympathy and solidarity is reserved not for the local cultures and people they dominated and sought to undermine, but for their ethnic Russian confreres left behind when the Soviet Union lost the Cold War. The effects of such restricted trauma processes are being played out before our very eyes, as Russia reoccupies Crimea and threatens eastern Ukraine today.
- And what about Russia's victorious Cold War rival, the United States? While revisionist history continues to thrive and tragic narratives about Vietnam persist, neo-imperialist historians have become celebrities for urging Americans not to relinquish their neo-colonial yoke, and overreaching military efforts to make the

> world safe for democracy have almost bankrupted the nation. Meanwhile, most Americans, intellectuals and everyday Joes alike, seem genuinely unable to recognize that their nation does often behave in a bullying and hegemonic way.

Perhaps the most consequential short-circuiting of an imperial trauma process has unfolded on the other side of the world, in the Far East. Japanese officials have steadfastly refused to acknowledge the brutal decades-long occupation of China and Korea that preceded their nation's 1945 military defeat. If the very existence of traumatic occupation is denied, the suffering of its victims can hardly be contemplated, let alone become the object of empathy; the status of perpetrator is rejected, and solidarity remains restricted. While Japan's Socialist Party and its powerful teachers' union persistently challenged such chauvinistic denials, the deeply damaging fact of it has remained.

What about the tens of thousands – possibly as many as 200,000 – Korean 'comfort women', the young women enslaved as prostitutes by the imperial Japanese army? In late 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative government sent Japan's ambassador for human rights to New York to ask a former United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'to reconsider her 1996 report on the comfort women – an authoritative account of how imperial Japan forced women and girls into sexual slavery', according to the *New York Times* (Kotler, 2014). Abe hoped to rescind the landmark apology Japan had offered 20 years earlier to the Korean victims. Such a move, according to the *New York Times*, 'would most likely draw an explosive reaction from south Korea, where the women are seen as an emotionally potent symbol of their nation's brutal early-20th-century colonization by Japan' (Fackler, 2014).

For many Koreans, the push by Japanese rightists is seen as proof of a lack of remorse over treatment of the wartime brothel workers and other victims of Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, refused even to meet with Mr. Abe until Japan showed more contrition (Fackler, 2014). In 2015, Mr. Abe finally backed down, and President Park allowed Korea to enter into negotiations. On the 50th anniversary of the treaty that normalized postwar relations between the two South Asian nations, the Japanese Prime minister formally declared that "the government of Japan painfully acknowledges its responsibility" for a policy that "severely injured the honor and dignity of many women," and expressed "sincere apologies and remorse from the bottom of [my] heart to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as 'comfort women'" (Sang-Hun 2015).

But other war-related trauma processes remained blocked, most flagrantly the Nanjing Massacre, where Japanese soldiers hacked and shot to death, over the course of just six weeks' time, one to two hundred thousand Chinese beginning in December, 1937? The Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which Prime Minister Abe has resumed visiting, depicts the Chinese as aggressors in Nanjing and Japan as reluctantly responding on the grounds of self-defense (see Alexander and Rui Gao, 2007). Suggesting a war between equal parties rather than a mass murder, the narrative display in Exhibition Hall 10 claims 'the Chinese were soundly defeated' and that, 'inside the city, the residents were once again able to live their lives in peace'. Such blocked trauma process allows Japan to refuse its earlier perpetrator role. Its East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere is framed not as imperial expansion but as an effort to confront American hegemony; its war against

America – like its military action in Nanjing – is framed as national self-defense. This restricted construction of trauma suggests that it is war-time Japan, not those it dominated and murdered, that deserves the victim role. After all, Japanese cities were fire bombed, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki experienced nuclear Holocaust.

Once again, how trauma work unfolds has institutional effects. With the cultural pathways for experiencing wider solidarity blocked, contemporary Japan cannot reach out to China or Korea. China's economic fortunes are intertwined with Japan's, but the PRC is building up its naval forces and declaring disputed islands their own. Prime Minister Abe recently compared Chinese military activity to the German naval build-up preceding the First World War, even as he works to reshape Japan's military profile and revise its Peace Constitution.

This model of abrogated trauma applies also to mass murders committed by totalitarian communist states. Mao's PRC and Stalin's USSR instigated programs that directly and indirectly decimated tens of millions of citizens. During the Great Famine that followed Mao's Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, millions perished in silence (Jisheng, 2012). In the decade following, the Cultural Revolution created many million more deaths. Decades have passed, and the revolutionary Maoist regime has disappeared, but in the contemporary PRC it remains decidedly difficult publicly to discuss, let alone to process, these traumatic events and mourn their masses of victims. Though its ideology has fundamentally shifted, the political party that perpetrated the horrors continues, not only to control the means of symbolic production but to project an optimistic narrative that makes the dark side of China's modernization relatively invisible. Moral responsibilities have not been assumed and, as a result, civil repairs in Chinese social structure have not been completed.

The Russian case seems different on the face of it – there has been radical regime change – but the effect on trauma process has been less of kind than of degree. The nationalist upsurge in post-Yeltsin Russia, Vladimir Putin's insistence that Russians take pride in their greatness again, makes it extraordinarily difficult to revisit the hundreds of thousands imprisoned and killed in the Gulag, the millions who starved during the Ukrainian famine, and the numberless victims of Stalin's other massive crimes (Applebaum, 2004). The war-time leader continues to be configured as a leading protagonist in Russia's modernizing narrative, and even the memory records of his millions of victims are hard to find. Memorial, the Moscow-based human rights organization dedicated to preserving artifacts and memories about the Gulag, is being hounded by the Putin government, along with other Russian NGOs.

****

Material forces are deeply implicated in social suffering, and the strategic calculations and practical considerations that trigger traumatic events require significant social organization. Organizational, material, and structural forces have often been front and center of Holocaust studies, for example, in Zygman Bauman's *The Holocaust and Modernity*. I have been concerned here, however, to trace the manner in which such causes and effects are crucially mediated by symbolic representations of social suffering, with understanding how a socio-cultural process channels the emotional effects of

suffering and to what effect. These discursive and emotional forces, I have shown, transform the worlds of morality, materiality, and organization.

Intellectuals, artists, politicians, and social movement leaders create narratives about social suffering, not only during but also after the fact. Creating new ideal interests, trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric. They can also instigate new rounds of social suffering in turn.

The cultural construction of collective trauma is fueled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake. Individual suffering is of extraordinary human, moral, and intellectual import; in itself, however, it is a matter for ethics and psychology. My concern is with traumas that become collective, with how they can be conceived as wounds to shared social identity.

This is a matter of intense cultural work. Suffering collectivities – whether dyads, groups, societies, or civilizations – do not exist only as material networks. They must be imagined into being. The pivotal question becomes not who did this to me, but what group did this to us? Intellectuals, political leaders, and symbol creators of all kinds make competing claims. They identify protagonists and antagonists and weave them into narratives projected to audiences of third parties.

Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and working through, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. A 'we' is constructed via narration and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. Millions of individuals may have lost their lives, and many more might have experienced grievous pain. Even then, however, the construction of a shared cultural trauma is not automatically guaranteed. The lives lost and pains experienced are individual facts; shared trauma depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation.

Lost wars, economic depressions, and mass murders can be understood according to drastically varying accounts that imply sharply antithetical social prescriptions. If traumas can be re-imagined and re-presented, the collective identity will shift. There will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, solidarity can be expanded, and much needed civil repairs can be made. Only such a full enunciated trauma process can prevent the same terrors from ever happening again.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. My most notable companion on this theoretical journey has been Ron Eyerman, who has elaborated cultural trauma in a series of research monographs devoted to slavery (Eyerman, 2001), political assassinations (Eyerman, 2008, 2011), and natural disasters (Eyerman, 2015). Eyerman and I were part of the social scientific team that developed cultural trauma theory in the late 1990s (Alexander et al., 2004; Giesen, 2004; Eyerman et al., 2011). For a collection of my essays on trauma, see Alexander (2012). For the more general cultural-sociological approach within which this trauma project is embedded, see Alexander (2004) and Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith (2012).

References

Alexander JC (2003) *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alexander JC (2009) *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alexander JC (2012) *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Alexander JC, Eyerman R, Giesen B, Smelser NJ and Sztompka P (2004) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alexander JC and Rui Gao (2007) Remembrance of things past: Cultural trauma, the Nanking Massacre, and Chinese identity. In: Yan Shaodang et al. (eds) *Tradition & Modernity: Comparative Perspectives*. Beijing: Peking University Press, pp. 266–294. (Reprinted in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 118–135.)

Alexander JC, Jacobs RN and Smith P (eds) (2012) *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Applebaum A (2004) *Gulag: A History*. New York: Anchor.

Eyerman R (2001) *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eyerman R (2008) *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Eyerman R (2011) *The Cultural Sociology of Political Assassination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eyerman R (2015) *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Eyerman R, Alexander JC and Breese E (eds) (2011) *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Fackler M (2014) Japan to revisit apology to wartime sex slaves. *New York Times*, 1 March 1: A5.

Giesen B (2004) The trauma of the perpetrators: The Holocaust as the traumatic reference of German national identity. In: Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 112–154

Jisheng Y (2012) *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kotler M (2014) The comfort women and Japan's war on truth. *New York Times*, 16 November: SR 4–5.

Sang-Hun, Choe (2015) *Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute over Wartime 'Comfort Women'*. New York Times, December 29: A1.

Author biography

Jeffrey C Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and founding Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University. He works in the areas of social theory, culture, and politics. Recent publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (2012), *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), *The Dark Side of Modernity* (2013), *Obama Power* (2014), and *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Cultural Power* (2015). He has recently held honorary chairs at the University of Cambridge and the US Library of Congress, and taught at Konstanz University, the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes in Sciences Sociales, and Goldsmiths College.