



# HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

## History & Policy case study

### War crimes, holocaust memorial and antisemitism

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My first experience of involvement in public policy making came in 1986 when Greville Janner MP, asked if I could do some research in the Public Record Office (PRO, now the National Archives) to determine whether it had been possible for Nazi war criminals or Nazi collaborators to have entered the UK after the Second World War. I was then a senior research fellow and lecturer in the Politics Department at Queen Mary and Westfield College. Greville Janner was the moving force behind the recently formed All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group, which was following up on revelations that emerged from war crimes cases in the USA and elsewhere that suspects had passed through or resided in the UK.

I started out on my own and produced a brief report revealing evidence that this had occurred and that the PRO contained a mass of documents illuminating policy and its consequences in the 1940s. This led to the formation of a team of researchers which I led, along with members of Janner's staff, and about one year of intense research. It was a terrific team effort. The report, most of which I wrote, was published in 1988. Its evidence was compelling enough to enable the All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group to edge the Government into mounting an official inquiry. The Hetherington-Chalmers Report confirmed and expanded our findings and led directly to the introduction and passage of the 1991 War Crimes Act. It was a long hard slog to get the Bill passed and I had the experience of writing frequently for the press and speaking often on radio and TV in its support. I was totally comfortable moving from a research role into advocacy because I was sure of the evidence and wholly in sympathy with the desired policy outcome. The research also led to my first book, *Justice Delayed!* (Heinemann, 1992)

During the late 1990s, I found myself arguing the case for a Holocaust Museum in London. I made a TV programme with the BBC Community Affairs unit on this subject in 1995. The [Imperial War Museum](#) had decided to initiate a permanent [Holocaust exhibition](#) and issued a consultation document, which arrived on my desk at the [Wiener Library](#), where I was director of London's oldest and largest library and archive connected with the Nazi years. My response was rather critical, but it led to the IWM inviting me to join the advisory board for the proposed exhibition. It was a fascinating experience because every aspect involved complex and sensitive policy issues, even if the question of whether London needed such a museum had been

settled. The IWM did a truly remarkable job and it was a privilege to work with their staff. I gained a priceless insight into the realities of building a museum and curating an exhibition which, I fear, many academics who write about museums and 'representation' do not have.

The exhibition opened in 2000, and that year the UK Government announced its intention to establish a Holocaust Memorial Day. I had been amongst those calling for such a memorial event. Thanks to my position at the Wiener Library and my involvement (first as an observer and then as a member of the official UK delegation) since 1998 in international conferences on Holocaust-era assets, the Home Office asked if I would join a group advising on how to establish an official, annual memorial day on 27 January. This led to several years of intense involvement with various sections of the Home Office dealing with community relations, ethnic and faith groups, and community cohesion. Again, this was an invaluable insight into policymaking and, more importantly, how policy is translated into action, including how resources are obtained and retained, how consultation exercises operate and how warring factions are handled. The academics and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) advising the Home Office saw Home Secretaries come and go, but the questions remained the same: How to define genocide? How to be inclusive? How to stress the universal implications of genocide while respecting the particularities of each separate atrocity? How to involve and be sensitive to survivors of genocide?

As an historian the greatest challenge I faced, and still face, is reconciling the grey areas that characterise our knowledge of events in the past, the sheer complexity and finely grained nature of things that happened, with the need felt by campaigners and advocates for simple, hard hitting 'lessons' and 'messages'. Historians are trained to be sceptical, to see both sides of a question, but policymakers and activists get impatient with such nuances. So do survivors of titanic historic events and throughout this work I have experienced the tension between the supposedly detached scholar and the eyewitness to the past. Any process of devising policy and turning policy into action that involves working with other agencies, NGOs and community groups will involve compromises. I suspect that sooner or later any historian involved in the business of official commemoration and communal remembrance will face a tough call choosing between their 'integrity' and the need to get things done by keeping as many people as possible on board the policy train.

Recently I was invited to give evidence to The Parliamentary Committee against Antisemitism. I was asked to provide historical background on anti-Jewish trends in British history. I submitted a report in writing and gave evidence at the Committee's opening session. In both the written and verbal submissions brevity was at a premium. This made the task hard and often frustrating. But the [final report](#) [pdf 431kb] was very good and it showed how MPs and their research staff can be acute at gathering and sifting evidence.

**See also:**

David Cesarani's book *Justice Delayed!* (Heinemann, 1992)