

What Was the Holocaust?

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The objectivity of the historian becomes an issue with subjects besides the Holocaust, but a historian dealing with the Holocaust cannot avoid the issue.

Following upon some ideas put forward by Karlheinz Deschner, among others, it is important to start by denying the possibility of an "objective" stance. Many have said this before: we are the product of our environment, tradition, education, prejudices, and so on. The influence of our environment can be disastrous, for we may be swayed by a regime and its consensual impact, or even by a consensus created by our fellow-historians, and hence write what is "politically correct," even knowingly suppress what we feel should be said. Worse, we sometimes really believe that what we say is our own view, even when it is nothing but a reflection of the views of a majority, or a group, or a charismatic individual, or some other outside source. We need to be aware of our biases, our subjective approach, in order to formulate an interpretation of facts that will be legitimately rooted in the atmosphere and the context of whatever period we describe. We must be aware of the obvious truth that the very decision to deal with some facts, some aspects of reality, rather than with others, is a subjective choice. Goethe said, "Every fact is already a theory." Johann G. Droysen, the nineteenth-century German historian, said, "Only a mindless person is objective"—and indeed, objectivism is basically uninteresting, because it reflects the chaos of an infinite chain of events, a chaos that in itself has no meaning.

Do we then conform to a subjectivism that dictates the rewriting of history in every generation? In a sense, we do, partially. After all, people in every period look at past events from a different perspective: the historians of 2089 will look at the French Revolution differently from the way the historians of 1789, 1889, or 1989 looked at it. Yet the knowledge and self-perception that accompany an approach whose biases are articulated can neutralize those biases to a considerable degree—never completely, but sufficiently to enable the historian to draw what may be termed "legitimate" conclusions from his or her study. Such conclusions would avoid the traps of a mindless objectivism, a solipsistic subjectivism, and an endless relativization of facts. A legitimate conclusion is one that not only avoids identification with known outside pressures or interferences but also reflects an attempt to understand the period under discussion from its own perspective and in its own terms. We realize that another age will reinterpret the same events in its own distinct way; hopefully, our own findings will become part of any future analysis, if we state, to ourselves as well as to our public, what our biases may be.

Let me state my biases. I think that the planned total murder of a people was an unprecedented catastrophe in human civilization. It happened because it could happen; if it could not have happened, it would not have done so. And because it happened once, it can happen again. Any historical event is a possibility before it becomes a fact, but when it becomes a fact, it also serves as a possible precedent. And although no event will ever be repeated exactly, it will, if it is followed by similar events, become the first in a line of analogous happenings. The Holocaust can be a precedent, or it can become a warning. My bias is, in a sense, political: I believe we ought to do everything in our power to make sure it is a warning, not a precedent.

My second bias is that I am not neutral as between Nazism and anti-Nazism. I detest Nazism. I am against antisemitism and racism of any sort. I am not neutral there, either. I believe, on the strength of the historical evidence, that the Nazi regime was just about the worst regime that ever disfigured the face of this earth. Worst from what point of view? From a basically liberal point of view that, in line with Jewish and other traditions, sees human life as a supreme value. In all this I am not being "objective"; but an objectivity that would reject these starting points would be nonobjective, besides being totally unacceptable to me because it would run counter to what I assume—another clear bias—to be the understanding that most people have of morality. Morality, in this context, is based on the idea that acts or intentions that run counter to the right of individuals and groups to exist, to live fully, also run counter to the existence of human life altogether, hence their unacceptability. Morality as here presented is an absolute value, then—absolute, that is, as long as one posits the continuation of the human race as a desired condition.

Now that I have stated my biases, and before we deal with the definition of *Holocaust*, we have to sidestep what appears to be another pitfall, namely, our propensity to say that because something happened, it had to happen. The American Revolution happened, but it did not have to happen. If British politicians had understood the importance of the tax issue to the American colonists and the danger of a successful rebellion, they might well have turned events toward a Canada-like resolution. Likewise, it was the obstinacy of the French royalist regime that led to the storming of the Bastille. World War II might well have been averted, in their own best interest as it turned out, by Britain, France, and the USSR, as late as June 1989 (when military delegations of the three Powers were discussing a possible alliance against Germany), had they overcome their mutual suspicions.

The scourge of determinism, Marxist or otherwise, is very much in evidence in discussions of the Holocaust, and I must say clearly that the Holocaust happened but that it did not have to. It was, to be sure, one of the possibilities inherent in the European situation, but not the only one. True, from a certain point onward—and one could perhaps, with some effort, establish that point—the annihilation of the Jews

became inevitable, given Nazi ideology, the development of German society and bureaucracy, and German political and military superiority in Europe. Or perhaps it became inevitable that annihilation should be attempted. But if we retreat in time from early 1941 to the beginning of the war in 1939, or before that, then the Holocaust was not inevitable. AngloFrench-Soviet talks in the late spring of 1939 might have prevented German expansion, at least in the form that it ultimately took. Equally, a different coalition of Powers around the Sudeten issue in 1938, coupled with the disaffection of the German military group led by Ludwig Beck, might have prevented the development toward war and thus the opportunity for the Nazis to act upon their murderous ideology.

Intentionalist historians, such as Eberhard Jäckel, Helmut Krausnick, Gerald Fleming, and Lucy Dawidowicz, have argued that Hitler's intentions, and therefore his role, in the process leading up to the Holocaust are central because of the godlike position he occupied in the regime; the other Nazis were an indispensable supporting cast. The entourage of Hitler, according to Jäckel, was rather uncomfortable about the developing decisions to mass-murder the Jews. Heinrich Himmler, for instance, did not envisage mass murder before 1941, as his memorandum of May 25, 1940, on the treatment of aliens in Poland, shows; he says there that the idea of physically destroying a nation was a Bolshevik concept unacceptable to Germans. Structuralists or functionalists, such as Hans Mommsen and Goetz Aly, have explained the factors bringing about the Holocaust by concentrating on the development of social and economic structures that led to impasses that more or less forced the Germans to take the most radical solutions. They do not believe that ideology or decisions by central authorities were at all crucial, but even they would agree that without approval by Hitler and his closest circle the murder would have been impossible.

A new finding in the Moscow archive, published in Germany in 1999, puts this discussion—which in any case has been superseded by analyses that combine the two perspectives—in a new light. A part of Heinrich Himmler's appointment notebook has come to light, for December 1941. On the 18th he notes that he discussed the "Jewish question" (*Judenfrage*) with Hitler and that the result was "*als Partisanen auszurotten*"—"to exterminate [them] as partisans," which probably means to exterminate them on the pretext that they are partisans. It cannot refer to the countries outside the occupied areas of the USSR, because in 1941 it would not have made any sense to accuse German or Czech or Italian Jews of being partisans. In the occupied Soviet areas extermination had been going on for months already, and Hitler had been receiving the detailed reports of the *Einsatzgruppen* (murder squads). The Himmler note may indicate approval by Hitler of a propaganda line that had been pursued in the East vis-à-vis the German soldiers and that could be used for Germans generally. This alone already indicates that Hitler was involved as the central decisionmaker. It also,

and incidentally, indicates that Reinhard Heydrich occupied a subordinate position; the person who discussed these things with the dictator and received his instructions was Himmler. Six days before that, on December 12, as Joseph Goebbels's diary shows, Hitler spoke in front of some fifty top Nazi officials, Gauleiters and others, and reminded them that he had warned of the coming annihilation of the Jews if a world war broke out (initiated by the Jews, as he put it on January 30, 1959). On December 11, 1941, Germany had declared war on the United States in the wake of Pearl Harbor and the American declaration of war on Japan. The situation that he had "predicted" in 1959 had come about, and the time had come to do what he had told the Jews he would do: *Vernichtung* (annihilation).

We probably do not have before us a Hitler "decision," because Hitler rarely operated that way. But we may well have here a statement that Hitler intended as a general guide to action, in effect a call to his minions to get to work and to show initiative in implementing the guideline. Most historians do not think that such a guideline had ever been uttered in any formal way, perhaps only in private discussions. But on December 12, 1941, there was a clear expression of what was known in the Third Reich as "the Führer's wish"—a euphemism for the way he ordered things to happen. On the face of it, the intentionalists have it; on closer examination, however, we see that without the readiness of the party and state structures to accept and execute this "wish," Hitler would not have formally expressed it. Plainly, *some* of the historians' debates are now out of date: Hitler *was* the decisive factor, though by no means the only one, and he was not the weak dictator that some historians have posited. He was directly involved. He pointed out the direction in which he wanted things to develop. German society was involved, too, both at the top and at the middle, and the lower ranges became part of the consensus.

Another recent and important correction to our understanding is that added by a group of young German historians working with Ulrich Herbert, of the University of Freiburg. Herbert and his coauthors present examples from eastern Galicia, Lithuania, Belorussia (Belarus), the "Generalgouvernement" (Poland), and France that show how local initiatives led to the mass execution of Jews in late 1941 and early 1942. The perpetrators rationalized these murder campaigns by practical considerations, such as the "need" to find lodgings for Germans, or to carry out resettlements of Germans and Poles, or to do away with superfluous mouths to feed, or to avenge the killings of German soldiers by the French underground movement in Paris. In fact, behind all these rationalizations lay an ideological motivation in the form of a consensus developed prior to the war by a radicalized, antisemitic intelligentsia, who found it natural to adopt the ever more radical solutions that the Nazi core elite expected them to. Neither the Berlin center nor the local groups could have acted without the other. Herbert talks of mutual understanding and of constant communication between central

authorities and the periphery. The Berlin leaders, he says, were motivated by racist political ideology when they insisted on large-scale "solutions" involving population transfers. These transfers were planned around the "green table" at the Berlin center. There the strategic decisions were made, so Hitler was undoubtedly present. I shall return to the Nazi decisionmaking process later, but it is clear that the explanation has to be multicausal, that the old rift between intentionalists and functionalists is outdated, and that ideology is the central determinant of the Holocaust.

Just as the murder of the Jews was not inevitable, it was not inexplicable, as I will argue in the next chapter. An aspect of that discussion belongs here: the inclination of people who take refuge in mysticism to argue that an event of such magnitude—a "tremendum," as they sometimes call it—cannot ultimately be explained. This retreat into mysticism is usually reserved for the Holocaust, whereas all other events are deemed liable to rational explanation. I am afraid I cannot accept that exception to the rule. The murder was committed by humans for reasons whose sources are found in history and which can therefore be rationally analyzed. The mystifiers, with the best of intentions, achieve the opposite of their presumed aim, which is to achieve identification and empathy with the victims. You cannot identify with what is inexplicable. True, the depth of pain and suffering of Holocaust victims is difficult to describe, and writers, artists, poets, dramatists, and philosophers will forever grapple with the problem of articulating it—and as far as this is concerned, the Holocaust is certainly not unique, because "indescribable" human suffering is forever there and is forever being described. In principle, then, the Holocaust is a human event, so it can be explained, because it was perpetrated for what were unfortunately human reasons. This does not mean that the explanation is easy. On the contrary.

In a brilliant statement (in Jerusalem, on December 24, 1997), in the course of a discussion of his latest book, Saul Friedländer explained that the Holocaust presents problems that have so far not been solved. In the past he himself had used the expression "the unease of the historian." He did not mean that these problems cannot ultimately be understood, but that tremendous difficulties stand in the way of understanding them. He did not want to imply a mystical interpretation of the Holocaust events; but because convincing explanations are still unavailable or are being argued about, he wanted to avoid what he called "closure" of the argument, as though we historians had found satisfactory answers to our questions. He advocated a certain open-endedness whenever we put forward our views: we might, he implied, be wrong—there is nothing terrible about that—and, in any case, others will come along and present new findings and insights.

On the face of it, this argument is almost self-evident and would hold true for any historical (and many other) investigations, but it is especially apposite regarding the Holocaust. Because I basically agree with Friedländer's approach, all I am trying to

say in these chapters should therefore be taken as obviously subject to discussion and change.

We now come to the problem of definitions. Is the Holocaust definable? Is it desirable to define it? After all, definitions are abstractions from reality and are useful only insofar as they help us to better understand the world around us. Any historiographical definition is designed to help us understand the event or events being defined. Because life is infinitely more complex than any definition, definitions, *by definition*, can never be fully adequate to the events they are supposed to define. We can but hope that they approximate descriptions of reality. Inevitably, our definitions are selective—they deal with parts of a phenomenon. That makes it even more important for our definitions to be as precise as possible in defining at least those parts of the phenomenon that they claim to define. And if experience shows that the definition does not fit reality, then the definition has to be changed, not the other way around. In order to define the Holocaust, it *must* be compared to other events if it is, as I have just argued, a human event. It is only by comparison that we can answer the question of whether it is unprecedented and has features not found in similar events.

The term *genocide* was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a refugee Polish-Jewish lawyer in the United States, in late 1942 or early 1943. Lemkin's definition is contradictory. On the one hand, he defines *genocide* as the "destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group.... Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." (It seems that he intends to say "the groups as such," not necessarily all the individuals in them.) Yet in the preface of the same book he says that "the practice of extermination of nations and ethnic groups ... is called by the author 'genocide.'" The destruction of the essential foundations of national life includes, according to Lemkin, the destruction of the national economic structure, its religious institutions, its moral fiber, its education system, and, always, selective mass killings of parts of the targeted population. What he describes are two distinct alternatives: one, a radical and murderous denationalization accompanied by mass murder, which destroys the group as an entity but leaves many or most of the individuals composing it alive; the other, murder of every single individual of the targeted group. It may perhaps be argued that partial mass annihilation leads to total extermination. But this is not what Lemkin says, though such a possibility certainly cannot be discounted.

The discussion here is not just academic. Lemkin's definitions were adopted, in large part, by the United Nations. In the Genocide Convention, approved on December 9, 1948, *genocide* is defined as "any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical or religious group, as

such." Again, both meanings are included, and the phrase "in whole or in part" indicates that what is meant is not the development of partial destruction into total murder but two variations that do not necessarily follow one upon the other.

The historical context for Lemkin's work in early 1943 consisted of the information he possessed as to what was happening to Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Russians, and others. Horrifying information had been received concerning the fate of the Jews, but decent human beings evinced an understandable reluctance to believe that the accounts were literally and completely true. What was happening to some of these people, mainly perhaps the Poles, fitted Lemkin's description of denationalization accompanied by selective mass murder. It seems that he made his definition fit real historical developments as he saw them; the vagueness with which he contemplates the possibility of murdering all Jews reflects the state of consciousness in America of the Jewish fate.

We then come to 1948. The United Nations is not a symposium of scholars—far from it. Documents emerging from that quarter are less than perfect, because they reflect political pressures and horse trading between states. Thus, unsuccessful pressure was exercised in 1948 to include, for instance, the destruction of political groups within the definition of genocide. The inclusion of religious groups—not a part of Lemkin's definition—was accepted after a long struggle. The lack of consistency in the U.N. convention is apparent the moment we continue the quotation: Genocide, it says, means any of the following acts: "(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." We again see inclusion of both partial and total destruction.

The conclusion to draw is that one ought to differentiate between the intent to destroy a group in a context of selective mass murder and the intent to annihilate every person of that group. To make this as simple as possible, I would suggest retaining the term *genocide* for "partial" murder and the term *Holocaust* for total destruction. I will argue that *Holocaust* can be used in two ways: to describe what happened to the Jews at Nazi hands and to describe what might happen to others if the Holocaust of the Jewish people becomes a precedent for similar actions. Whichever way *Holocaust* is used, it and *genocide* are clearly connected; they belong to the same species of human action, and the differences between them remain to be seen, beyond the obvious one of partial versus total destruction.

The next point to consider is crucial: which groups to describe when we talk about genocide. Lemkin talked only about national or ethnic groups, and he would probably

have agreed to extend his category to include so-called racial groups. The U.N. convention adds religious groups. A number of scholars have added political groups as well. Neither of these last two additions makes much sense. People persecuted because of their religious beliefs can, in principle if not always in practice, go over to the persecutors' religious faith and save themselves. The persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages is an excellent example: accepting baptism usually—not always—meant rescue. During the Nazi regime, Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted in Germany because they refused to recognize the supreme authority of the state and objected to being recruited into the army. But those few members of the group who yielded and joined the army or who acknowledged the Nazi state as having authority over them were no longer persecuted, and if they were in concentration camps, they were usually released.

The same applies to political persecutees. Even in Soviet Russia, joining the Communist Party was often—not always—a way of avoiding stigmatization as "bourgeois." Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the Russian aristocracy, became a leading Bolshevik and served as Soviet ambassador to Sweden. Most of the leading Bolsheviks were originally "bourgeois" intellectuals and sometimes former aristocrats. In Nazi Germany, millions of Communists became loyal Nazis.

For both religious and political groups, membership is a matter of choice—again, in principle, if not always in practice. One can change one's religion or one's political color. One cannot change one's ethnicity or nationality or "race"—only the persecutor can do that, as the Germans did when they "Germanized" Polish adults and children. Without such action, there is absolutely no way out for the member of a targeted ethnic or national group: that person is a Pole, or a Rom ("Gypsy"), or a Jew, or a Serb. Hence my conclusion that the term *genocide* should be used only for attacks on the groups specified by Lemkin.

Genocide, then, is the planned attempt to destroy a national, ethnic, or racial group using measures like those outlined by Lemkin and the U.N. convention, measures that accompany the selective mass murder of members of the targeted group. Holocaust is a radicalization of genocide: a planned attempt to physically annihilate every single member of a targeted ethnic, national, or racial group.

How important is such a definition? It may help us differentiate between different crimes against humanity, the ultimate purpose of such analyses being to help lessen, and in some future perhaps do away with, such horrors. In the end, as I have pointed out, reality is more complicated by far than our attempts to describe it. I would therefore suggest that these definitions be used to describe a continuum of human mass destruction. One could even use the term *self-destruction*, because by destroying other humans, the perpetrators very radically diminish their own humanity. Such an

approach may well use the paradigms proposed by Rudolph J. Rummel in his books *Democide* and *Death by Government*.

According to Rummel, between 1900 and 1987 close to 170 million civilians (and disarmed POWS) were killed by governments and quasi-governmental organizations (political parties, etc.), the overwhelming majority of them by nondemocratic regimes. He calls this phenomenon "democide" (killing of people). He says that 38 million of the people killed were victims of genocide (he uses the definition of the U.N. convention), and close to 6 million of those were killed in the Holocaust. There is no reason not to expand Rummel's paradigm to include wars, which are reciprocal mass murders committed by opposing groups of people, usually males, distinguished from one another by funny clothes called uniforms; such mass murders, too, are committed at the instigation of governments and quasi-governmental organizations. Adding wars gives us a continuum of human actions of deadly violence ranging from wars, via the murder of civilians for a vast variety of reasons, to genocide and Holocaust. This does not mean that wars are "better" than genocides, nor that the mass murder of civilians is less reprehensible than genocide; it does mean that there are obvious connections between all these, and that occasionally one form merges into another.

No gradation of human suffering is possible. A soldier who lost a leg and a lung at Verdun suffered. How can one measure his suffering against the horrors that Japanese civilians endured at Hiroshima? How can one measure the suffering of a Rom woman at Auschwitz, who saw her husband and children die in front of her eyes, against the suffering of a Jewish woman at the same camp who underwent the same experience? Extreme forms of human suffering are not comparable, and one should never say that one form of mass murder is "less terrible," or even "better," than another. The difference between the Holocaust and less radical genocides lies not in the amount of sadism or the depth of hellish suffering, but elsewhere. It is now time to turn to comparisons that will clarify the difference.