

# 1 Introduction

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“Never Again.” That is the Jewish response to the Holocaust. It is the response of many non-Jews as well. It is also the response that motivates this book. The Holocaust refers to the extermination of over six million Jews and millions of others by the Nazi government of Germany between **1941** and **1945**. Elie Wiesel has said that today the Jew must stand as a witness before humanity that the Holocaust occurred so that by that witnessing, it may never happen again.

To vow “Never Again” in response to the Holocaust implicitly assumes that it could happen again, that the Holocaust is in principle a repeatable offense. And yet there is a problem here. There is a tendency to treat the Holocaust as a unique event, an event so beyond the pale of ordinary human transgression that nothing can ever compare with it. This tendency is an understandable and, to an extent, an appropriate response. The Holocaust was a crime of almost transcendental proportions. To equate it with ordinary human crimes threatens to dilute its horror, to make it mundane and so once again thinkable. This is the danger that many seek to avoid by holding up the Holocaust as a unique event.

There is, however, a parallel danger. If the Holocaust is intrinsically unique, then it cannot happen again. Thus, there is no need for the vow “Never Again,” and we can all rest easy. There is nothing we need do; the Holocaust im-

poses no obligation on us. But the Holocaust does impose obligations on us. There is the obligation to remember it and the obligation to confront our capacity for evil that the Holocaust reveals. Above all, there is the obligation on each of us not to let anything similar happen again. That is what we owe most to the victims of the Holocaust. The danger is that if we treat the Holocaust as something that is incomparable with any other event, then we have no way of knowing whether something similar is under way again. Thus, we will take no steps to stop it.

After the Holocaust, the meaning of our lives cannot remain unchanged. The Holocaust must be incorporated somehow in each of our lives as a reference point for action. It has been said that all of the souls who have ever lived were present at the Holocaust, either as executioner or as victim. To the extent that we idly stand by today and allow comparable atrocities to go unchallenged, we must count ourselves as one with the indifferent multitude who kept silent while six million Jews were put to death.

Many Americans will respond to this by saying that there is no danger of anything similar happening in this country, so we do not have to worry. But how do we know that there is no such danger unless we know how to morally generalize from the Holocaust, that is, unless we have some idea of what would count as a similar event? History repeats itself, but it never repeats itself exactly. Thus, there are always distinctions between any two events, and those distinctions can always be appealed to in order to claim that the two events are not similar. The truth is, without the ability to morally generalize from the Holocaust, we cannot know whether we have been, are, or will be a party to something similar. Without such knowledge, we will inevitably forsake our obligation to act that we owe to the victims of the Holocaust. As incomprehensible as it is that the Holocaust hap-

pened once, how much more incomprehensible that something like it should happen again.

In light of these reflections, one major objective of this book is to develop the concept of a *Holocaust-like event*, an event similar enough to the Holocaust that it compels us to rise in challenge in the name and memory of the Holocaust. What is it that we vow never to let happen again? Is it only that we must never let there be another attempt to exterminate the Jewish people? This is one possible way to interpret the vow "Never Again." It is the interpretation that constitutes one of the primary justifications for the state of Israel. Many Jews and non-Jews believe that only if the Jewish people have a nation of their own can they prevent future attempts at their annihilation. One important lesson advocates of a Jewish state have drawn from the Holocaust is that many people outside of Germany knew what the Nazis were doing to the Jews and were in a position to do something about it but instead did nothing. Accordingly, the advocates of a Jewish state draw the conclusion that no one will ever come to the aid of Jews in times of trouble and so Jews must defend themselves from some home base.

But is it just of another attempt to exterminate the Jewish people that we must beware? Was it just because the primary victims of the Holocaust were Jews that no one came to their aid? Might it not instead be true that no one is likely to come to the aid of any such victims under similar circumstances? This last question raises another problem with the tendency to treat the Holocaust as a unique event. One of the greatest tasks before us is to reach an understanding of the processes that made the Holocaust possible. That cannot be done adequately by remaining with the examination of a single case. Comparative analysis is necessary.

Without comparative analysis, there is a danger of misidentifying the processes that eventuate in Holocaust-like events and thus of failing to recognize those processes when

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they operate again. For example, an exclusive focus on the Nazi Holocaust may lead us to suppose that it was certain unique characteristics of Germany or of the German personality that made the Holocaust possible. Such a conclusion would tend to make those of us in other societies less watchful than we actually need to be. Likewise, an exclusive focus on the Nazi Holocaust may lead us to suppose that anti-Semitism or, more generally, any form of ethnic or racial hatred is a precondition for a Holocaust-like event. Indeed, much of the literature on the Nazi Holocaust interprets it as a natural culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism.

Things are not that simple. Recent historical research strongly indicates that the Nazi Holocaust cannot be explained as the outcome of a nationwide frenzy of anti-Semitism. In fact, as we shall see, current research indicates that the mass of Germans who allowed the Holocaust to occur actually did not support Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. Even in the literature that examines other cases of genocide directed at non-Jewish groups, there is too strong a focus on racial or ethnic hatred and on totalitarian forms of government. But people get exterminated even in the absence of racism and by democracies as well as by dictatorships. Unless we carry the comparative analysis further, not only will we be unprepared for our own potential for Holocaust-like events but we will not even fully comprehend the processes at work in the paradigm case—the Nazi destruction of the European Jewish population.

Whereas one major objective of this book is to develop the concept of a Holocaust-like event, a second objective is to examine how even a democratic society can be capable of something on the order of a Holocaust. These objectives will be pursued simultaneously by comparing the response of the United States public to what its government did in Central America between 1979 and 1987 with the response of the German public to what its government did during the

Nazi era. By and large, the responses of these two populations were the same: indifference.' I shall argue that such indifference about the fate of other peoples is one of the primary conditions that make Holocaust-like events possible. Accordingly, I shall be very concerned in this book to reach an understanding of how such moral indifference is socially created.

Can what the United States did in Central America between 1979 and 1987 really be compared with the Holocaust?<sup>2</sup> Although I must ask the reader to reserve judgment on this question until after we have more closely examined both the Nazi Holocaust and the United States involvement in Central America, I can state in a preliminary way the general argument I want to make.

Between 1979 and 1987, the United States armed, trained, and financially backed the military forces of the government of El Salvador, which over the same period carried out a policy of ongoing, systematic murder against the Salvadoran population. I am not speaking here of military actions taken against guerrilla combatants. Instead, I am speaking of the systematic murder of over seventy thousand men, women, and children who were noncombatants—journalists, priests, nuns, teachers, labor organizers, students, political figures, and others. Roughly 1 percent of El Salvador's population was so destroyed. Also as a direct result of United States actions, another seventy thousand civilians were similarly murdered during the same period by the military government of Guatemala. Finally, and again during the same period, the United States created a force of counterrevolutionaries (the "contras") to overthrow the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The contras rarely confronted the Sandinista army in open battle. Nor, in contrast with other guerrilla armies, did they focus their attacks on military targets. Instead, they deliberately at-

tacked defenseless civilians, including old people, women, and children.

It is true that the United States did not itself carry out the systematic murder in any of these countries. Yet it put the bullets and guns in the hands of the murderers, trained the murderers how to use them, and organized them for that end. The United States might just as well have pulled the triggers of the guns itself. What concerns me is that the people of the United States, like the people of Nazi Germany, allowed their government to do such a thing. I am all the more concerned because, unlike Nazi Germany, the United States is a democracy in which protest is considerably safer.

One immediate objection I frequently hear about the comparison I am attempting to draw is that the United States was not killing its own people in Central America. That is true, but it is neither historically nor morally relevant. It is not historically relevant because, as we shall see, Nazi Germany did not kill primarily its own citizens either. Only 160,000 of the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust were German.<sup>3</sup> For the most part, the Nazi government of Germany murdered the Jews of other Eastern European countries. More important, the objection is not morally relevant, and I am amazed that people even raise it. It is no less immoral for a nation to murder the innocent citizens of other countries than for it to murder its own citizens. A human life is a human life, and murder is murder. The very idea that such a distinction might be morally relevant is itself revealing of the mind-set that makes Holocaust-like events possible.

I specifically do not say that what happened in Central America was another Holocaust, because “the Holocaust” is the term coined by the Jewish victims of that singular event. I do dare to use the term “Holocaust-like event” partly because the term Holocaust has gained general usage but more importantly because the event so named by its

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Jewish victims does not belong solely to them. It is as much the legacy of the executioners as of the victims. While the right to name the event may properly belong to the victims, the event is something that the rest of us must come to terms with as well. This book is an attempt to do that. My aim is to demonstrate that despite the differences between the Holocaust and what happened in Central America, there are also important similarities, strong enough similarities that we can say, without claiming that what happened in Central America was as bad as the Holocaust, that it was a Holocaust-like event.

I interpret the vow “Never Again” in response to the Holocaust as our collective commitment never again to allow the governments that serve us to engage (directly or indirectly) in ongoing, systematic murder of any group of people. That is a commitment that we, the people of the United States, have forsaken. The comparison I want to draw between the Holocaust and the outrage in Central America is that in both cases, governments pursued policies of ongoing, systematic murder and in both cases, the populations served by those governments allowed it. I call what happened in Central America a Holocaust-like event because, as I will argue, it is the type of event that we should resist in the name and memory of the Holocaust. My hope is that in referring to the Holocaust in this way I will not dilute its significance but will instead make it a living principle of action.

One important result of the recent historical literature on the Holocaust is the essential confirmation of Hannah Arendt’s thesis of the banality of evil.<sup>4</sup> According to Arendt’s thesis, the Nazi Holocaust was not really the result of an unprecedented level of moral depravity within Germany but instead the result of something ordinary, mundane, even banal: moral indifference. Arendt’s point is that despite the control over the German government exercised by a few depraved men around Hitler, the Holocaust could not have

happened without the complicity of countless others who were not depraved or even very anti-Semitic but who only did not care or did not know or did not care to know what was being done to the Jews. In the course of this book I will review the literature that has come to support Arendt's thesis. In addition, I will discuss at length the factors that help to explain a similar moral indifference to the suffering of others on the part of contemporary Americans.

Although there were appallingly few cases of overt resistance to Hitler within Nazi Germany, resistance was not totally absent. Among the most noble of the resisters was a group of university students and their faculty advisor who went by the name of the White Rose. In fall 1942, the members of the White Rose did something that would hardly be daring in the United States. They distributed leaflets—ten in all—that called on their fellow citizens to awake from their apathy, to assume responsibility for what Germany was doing, and accordingly to take action against it. They were a light in the midst of darkness, and for that they were put to death. By the end of 1943, they had all been executed as traitors to Germany.

When we realize the extent of the role that simple moral indifference played in permitting the Holocaust to happen, perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned is expressed in the first sentence of the first leaflet of the White Rose: "Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as allowing itself to be 'governed' without opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to base instinct."<sup>5</sup>

As we know, the citizens of a democracy can also exhibit a lack of knowledge and a moral indifference about the behavior of their government. A democratic government as well, no matter how benign in other respects, can also yield to base instinct on certain matters. When it does so and the citizens of that democracy fail to hold their government to



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account, they become complicit in whatever crimes that government commits and share in its guilt.

What is the duty of the individual citizen to his or her country or government? Is the duty to one's country identical with the duty to one's current government? Consider that in Nazi Germany, those who went along with Hitler's government were considered good patriots, whereas those, like the White Rose, who criticized or resisted the government were considered traitors. Yet the former brought Germany eternal shame, whereas the latter, like the ten good men of Sodom, afford Germany whatever redemption it may hope to find. *So* who—the supporters of the government, or its critics—were the better patriots in the end?

It is easy to say that because the Nazi government was a dictatorship, it would have been more patriotic to be a critic there and then, whereas because the government of the United States is democratic and therefore incapable of the things the Nazi government did, it is more patriotic to be a supporter here and now. But can we really be *so* certain that our own government is incapable of crimes comparable with those of the Nazi government? Is not such complacency itself a dangerous sign of what we may allow? Most of us realize that our government is engaged in things we would prefer it were not involved in. But our inclination to object is dissolved by our uncritical acceptance of our government's perpetual rationale for such things. We are told after all that the United States is locked in a cosmic struggle with communism; in the end, this seems to justify everything.

Here, we find a further similarity with the Nazi case, for the rhetoric of anticommunism was also one of the principal factors that led the German people to acquiesce to Hitler. In the introduction to the second English edition of *The White Rose*, Dorothee Solle writes,

*I have changed my mind about the so-called youthful "ideal-*

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*ism” of the White Rose, and I would like to explain to the North American reader why it is now in 1983, forty years after these events, I think differently. When I read their material again, I was surprised to find a clear political analysis in the writings of the White Rose. Their leaflets repeatedly underscored the issue which was to be decisive in delaying the downfall of Hitler’s Reich — Nazi anti-Communism. Along with anti-Semitism, to which it was linked in many ways, anti-Communism was the most virulent force in Nazi ideology. Millions of “good” Germans did not like the Nazis, yet thought that they were the lesser evil compared with Communists. These good middle-class Germans, persuaded by 1933, of the threat of Communism, voted for Hitler, thereby bringing him to power via legal and democratic channels.<sup>6</sup>*

If, as I hope to show in this book, the principal lesson of the Holocaust is that we must assume responsibility for the behavior of the governments that rule us, it follows that we must necessarily also assume responsibility for being informed about both the behavior of those governments and the validity of the justifications those governments provide for their behavior. For better or worse, this responsibility to know, to be informed, is a never-ending task.

The United States has been described as an anti-intellectual culture, as a culture where intellectual pursuit is considered to be the exclusive occupation of inactive, ivory-tower academicians. Intellectual reflection holds little interest for the majority of United States citizens, who tend to accept uncritically whatever beliefs have been handed down to them. I shall argue that such lack of interest in critical reflection is one of the factors that make Holocaust-like events possible. Right actions require right beliefs, for if our beliefs are mistaken, our actions can be right only by accident. Often, the actions guided by mistaken beliefs will be mistaken as well. For example, if we are mistaken in our belief that communism is the ultimate evil to be countered in the world today, then we will be mistaken when we act

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to support our government in its promotion of anticommu-  
nist but genocidal regimes throughout the world.

We cannot expect all of the beliefs that have been handed down to us to be correct. We all differ so markedly in our beliefs that we cannot all be right about everything. Thus, particularly when our beliefs are socially consequential, we have a moral obligation to take responsibility for our beliefs, to constantly scrutinize them in light of new evidence, and if need be to refine them, modify them, or even outgrow them altogether. In the end, the quest for truth cannot be left to an intellectual elite in their ivory towers. It is a quest that each one of us is morally obliged to join. That may be the most important lesson of the Holocaust.