

The Holocaust and the Problem of Human Evil

Canon Albert Radcliffe

The popular view that some people are monsters by nature and act out of a monstrous character and psychology does not stand up to the evidence. It is as wrong as it is comforting.

Nothing brings the problem of human evil, that is, *'the deliberate and large-scale harming of human beings'*, before our minds in so devastating a way as the Shoah or Holocaust: those murderous events that Laurence Rees, the historian of World War II, called *'the lowest act in all history'*. Between 1941 and 1945 six million of Europe's eleven million Jews were systematically rounded up by the Nazis, robbed, herded like cattle, appallingly mistreated and then put to death by shooting, gassing and neglect or worn down by relentless brutalisation. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, has the names of over 4 million victims.

We remember them because as Elie Wiesel (b. 1928), the Nobel prizewinning holocaust survivor, reminded us: *"To forget is to kill twice"*.

The Greek word *Holocaust* refers to the 'whole burned offering' of the temple sacrifice but, in Israel, it is no longer thought appropriate. There, the Hebrew word *Shoah*, *'catastrophe'* or *'calamity'*, is preferred. To avoid confusion both will be used in this paper.

History has seen many genocides but none as calculated, thorough and cynical as the Shoah. Human beings have often inflicted massive, hate-inspired suffering upon entire communities but this targeting of Europe's Jewish communities was different. It was something designed to be total and was as organised as a modern industry. However, all that this continent-wide business (it was partly run as a profit-making business) produced was suffering and death – death subsidised by mountains of cast-off clothing, hair, gold teeth and confiscated property.

I will explain the Holocaust as an *'organised convergence of ordinary human weaknesses, vices and capacities for wrongdoing, across a number of wickedly contrived and extreme political and social situations'*. How could the Shoah have happened? How could ordinary people be guilty of such atrocities? How were people like you and I turned into monsters who created and operated the extermination or death camps?

Before attempting an answer let us remind ourselves of what sheer heartlessness and calculated suffering these places represented. *Concentration camps* were places in which people were collected together for convenience and, if death occurred, it was chiefly through brutal mistreatment. *Extermination or death camps*, on the other hand, were created solely with the purpose of killing all prisoners through gassing or slave labour. Camps with this purpose had never existed before in the history of the world. They define the Shoah as a unique evil. There were six such camps dedicated to organised mass murder: Auschwitz-Birkenau with 1.1 million victims; Belzec with 500,000; Chelmo with 150,000; Majdanek, with 800,000; Sobibor with 150,000; and Treblinka with 850,000.

The job of running these camps was entrusted to Himmler's elite *Schutzstaffel*, the SS, who contrived a trouble-free passage, from arrival to death, of the Jewish men, women and children who passed through their hands. When the victims arrived in obscenely overloaded trains, riots and stampedes were prevented by the simple expedient of



The gates of Auschwitz

enough to be worked to death and those who were to be sent unsuspectingly to the gas chambers.

These were told that for health reasons they were going to the camp showers and should remember carefully where they had left their clothes. In order not to panic them, SS personnel were polite and helpful as their victims entered the supposed shower room. The doors were locked, the gassing and the screaming began, and within half an hour their bodies were ready for cremation. Józef Paczyński, a Jewish Polish survivor, said of Auschwitz: *"You become indifferent. A human being can get used to anything"*. It is an important insight. Then the next trainload was on its way.

The death camps have become the ultimate face of human evil. To understand them we begin with the realisation that complex evils do not happen all at once. They are incremental, evolving from modest beginnings as moral restraints are progressively abandoned. The roots of the Holocaust must be traced to Germany's loss of the First World War and specifically to the discharge from the army of the previously homeless, failed watercolour artist Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). For Hitler, and the majority of soldiers, Germany did not lose the war fairly; its army, the best fighting machine in the world, had been betrayed, stabbed in the back from within by a worldwide conspiracy of Jewish-controlled capitalist financiers and Communist revolutionaries hellbent on the destruction of Germany.

In his book, *Believe and Destroy, Intellectuals in the SS War Machine*, Christian Ingrao, a Belgian historian working in France, shows how these erroneous and widespread ideas came together to comfort and mislead even the most educated Germans. Among these beliefs were the pseudo-sciences of racial theory and racial superiority which made history a Darwinian struggle between the strong and the weak, a war between races, in which the Aryan super-race would triumph over the inferior Jews and Slavs who surrounded Germany and threatened it with annihilation.

The seeds of evil grow slowly, but to grow at all they need power. The greater the evil the more power it needs, especially psychological, spiritual and political power – which Hitler eventually acquired. When Germany surrendered in 1918 Hitler was in hospital recovering from the effects of mustard gas. On his release he moved to Munich and found himself in a chaotic Germany torn between the politics of left and right. He joined a small, extreme right wing, Workers Party which, in 1920, changed its

falsely reassuring them that the worst was over and that from then on their lives would get better. As the victims stepped from the train it was as if life was normal again. Survivors report seeing flowers on the platform and blossoms on fruit trees, while slogans like *Arbeit Macht Free (Work Makes Free)* at Auschwitz hinted at nothing worse than compulsory hard labour. But, after arrival, things moved quickly, giving the victims no time to think. SS doctors divided them into two groups: those fit

name to the *National Socialist German Workers Party*, Nazi, for short. The programme of this small, anti-Jewish, anti-communist, marginal political group appealed to him. It called for the revision of the unjust Treaty of Versailles, the return of the territories lost to France and Poland, and the unification of all ethnic Germans, whether in Austria, the Sudetenland, Poland or the USSR into a single Reich in which all Jews would be excluded from citizenship.

As a new member Hitler discovered a gift for oratory and an ability to inspire personal loyalty. Then, on November 8th 1933, he overplayed his hand, took part in a failed coup d'état and was imprisoned. In jail, he wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) in which he set out his political beliefs and agenda: that western culture was created by the superior Aryan race, but imitated and carried on by lower races until, with the Jews, the destroyers of culture, Germany would be totally corrupted and destroyed. If Germany was to survive then the Jews must be defeated and the purity of the Aryan race maintained.

Few inside or outside Germany took the Nazi Party or *Mein Kampf* seriously, as together they set out an absurd political programme, one that under normal circumstances and in any other country stood little chance of being implemented.

But in Germany all institutions were in crisis and therefore malleable. There was a widespread belief that democracy had failed and that what was needed was 'a strong man'. Against all the odds, and in under nine years, Hitler had been propelled into absolute and total power, and with that power he would put his extreme fantasies into practice. He was sworn in as Chancellor on January 30th 1933. On March 11th Nazi storm troopers attacked Jewish department stores; and on the 26th an emboldened Hitler called for a boycott of all Jewish businesses.

When, on November 7th 1938, a Polish-Jewish student shot Ernst vom Rath, the third secretary in the German Embassy in Paris [he died two days later] Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, instigated a two-day pogrom in which 267 synagogues were destroyed, 7,500 shops looted, 30,000 Jews sent to concentration camps, and 91 Jews were killed. The entire community was then fined 1 billion Reichsmarks; its children could no longer go to German schools and Hermann Goering (1893-1946) was put in charge of the 'Jewish Question' and issued his *Decree on Eliminating the Jews from German Economic Life*. In all these actions, Nazi anti-Semitism had greatly expanded 1900 years of Christian anti-Judaism in which Jews were discriminated against and wrongly blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus.



Joseph Goebbels

For Jews evil then began to take even greater strides. Hitler had long planned a land empire in the east, expelling native Slavs to make room for his Greater Germany. It was why he invaded Poland in September 1939. But immediately he had a problem:

what to do with Poland's 2 million Jews? Three days after the invasion, special SS Einsatzgruppen, or 'Task Forces' began, on local initiatives, the mass coldblooded shooting of Jews in Krakow.

Human evil is human violence; it grows incrementally from small beginnings and needs power, yet if it is to operate on any significant scale it needs to be organised, which was why, in 1929, under Heinrich Himmler, Hitler had set up the elite, black-uniformed *Schutzstaffel* to carry out his dirty work. SS men were 'political soldiers' drilled to be hard, to despise compassion as weak and to obey without question. Their cult flourished on the widespread German culture of obedience and unquestioning respect for authority. Even so, the strange truth about human evil is that its perpetrators need to believe that what they do is morally justified. Hence John Milton's Satan saying in *Paradise Lost*, "Evil be thou my good"?

After Poland's surrender ghettos were set up and Jewish councils organised to run them. Things could now only get worse. Jews were condemned to forced labour and made to wear the yellow star. For a while there were wild ideas about deporting all European Jews to Madagascar but it came to nothing. The only hint about how bad things might become was when the Nazis began gassing Jewish mental patients in Brandenburg.

Long before this happened the Nazis had set up a secret euthanasia programme for the killing, by lethal injection or gas, of disabled German adults and, later, disabled children. The programme's justification was the genetic health of the Aryan race and to save feeding 'useless mouths'. Although public pressure caused Hitler to cancel the programme an important moral line had been crossed. The systematic killing of the unwanted was now accepted within party ranks.

The Nazis saw the mere existence of Jews as their biggest problem; yet every general solution so far had failed, though thousand had died through maltreatment. With overcrowded ghettos and their millions of 'useless mouths' to feed what was needed was some 'Final Solution' to the 'Jewish Problem'. One began to take shape with the invasion of Russia on June 22nd 1941. The Germans' advance was so rapid that within months the Wehrmacht found itself responsible for millions of Soviet prisoners of war and countless Jews, Communist officials and others, all needing to be fed and cared for. It was a logistical nightmare! Within two days Jews were being systematically killed by the Einsatzgruppen assisted by Lithuanian volunteers. By August 31st the death toll amounted to 150,000 and kept rising. On September 29/30 33,771 Jews from Kiev were shot at Babi Yar. Of the 4.8 million Russian Jews in 1941 over 2 million were eventually murdered.

When Himmler saw for himself the demoralising effect on the SS of these slow, man to man executions, he searched for a more efficient method. Inefficiency, however, was not the problem; it was emotional distress among the SS and this could not be openly admitted. Ordinary human empathy and compassion were interfering with the programme and needed circumventing. In most human beings there is a powerful taboo against personalised killing even among trained soldiers.

In the Shoah, every human faculty and institution was corrupted and dedicated to murder. With the death camps we see the corruption of reason and logic with genocide as the rational outcome of Nazi political thinking. The Nazis were not mad nor were they automatons. Given that the Nazi premises, or starting points for their arguments,

were 'morally crazy', arguments built upon them, though vile, were nevertheless logically sound, a reminder that you and I need to keep our rational faculties morally and spiritually in good health. Nazi racial ideology, justified intellectually by contemporary science, was at root pure fantasy – an emotionally-backed illusion.

In a world described as post-religious you and I are faced today with the argument that religion is dead, slain by reason and science, and that from now on reason and science are humanity's best hope. But if the Holocaust has convinced me of one thing, it is that from a moral point of view reason and science by themselves are not enough. Human reasoning is like Euclid's geometry, or what mathematicians call *Formal Axiomatic Systems* – it begins with what is self-evident, or can be convincingly demonstrated, and builds up logically from there. Everything then depends on the rightness or otherwise of the axioms on which reason builds.

Given that Jews were what the Nazis believed them to be, then the death camps followed rationally from Hitler's anti-Semitic rants in *Mein Kampf*. The Holocaust reminds us that, as rational beings, you and I need to keep our rational and moral faculties in good health.

The man in charge of corrupting the moral premises of the German people was Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), Minister of Propaganda. Goebbels was a master of media manipulation which he used to direct ancient Christian and secular prejudices against the Jews, portraying them as Germany's nemesis. Goebbels then presented Hitler as the genius whose clear-sightedness was Germany's road to salvation. At the time the 'Final Solution' got under way in 1941, after 8 years of anti-Jewish propaganda, the Germans were winning the war. It was not important then that every German agreed with what was being done for few would risk unpopularity in championing the Jews.



The end of the line at Birkenau

Corrupted reason was one way the Nazis overcame our human capacity for the compassion that could have made the Final Solution impossible. In his book *The Moral Molecule* the neuroscientist Paul J. Zak has shown that our capacity for trust, love, empathy, and compassion is connected with the release in the brain of the hormone and neuro-modulator *Oxytocin* popularly known as 'The Love Hormone'. Zak rechristens it 'The Moral Molecule' and argues for its involvement in human decision-making. He points out that all social animals have distress calls which act as triggers for oxytocin production. So what blocked oxytocin production in the response to all those distress calls in the death camps, especially from children? Part of the answer lies in another hormone, *Testosterone*, which is associated with the desire to punish. Again it is an effect that can be measured.

Oxytocin is also involved in social bonding. It is what helps hold societies together by engendering empathy and trust on a massive scale. It creates the willingness to sacrifice for the common good; however, it can also encourage hostility to foreigners and outsiders. Darwin argued that the function of religious ecstasy was to help a

society outperform its rivals, even on occasions justifying genocide. Zak points to the role of the ecstatic rituals of Goebbels' Nuremberg Rallies in this. Overall however, the most effective SS strategy for inhibiting empathy and compassion was 'distancing', separating executioners from their victims, geographically, organisationally, personally, emotionally and situationally.

In 1934, instead of swearing allegiance to the Constitution, members of the armed forces swore an oath of allegiance personally to Hitler instead. The result was to strengthen the power of Hitler over the armed forces who were now simply carrying out his orders. In an authoritarian society, the effect was to distance the soldier morally from his actions enabling those running the death camps to believe that moral responsibilities had been passed to the Fuhrer. With compassion inhibited, they could believe they were only doing their duty. A strong code of honour made disobedience difficult.

To be a good German now meant submission to a regime in which the will of the Fuhrer was what finally counted. In any totalitarian regime, the human capacity for altruism is corrupted. We should always be careful what we submit to. It is invariably the beginning of some idolatry. In the death camps the SS were further able to alienate themselves from suffering and compassion by appointing selected prisoners, known as *kapos*, to manage their fellow victims at almost every stage of their extermination. *Kapos* were granted a few privileges, such as extra rations and a longer life, higher status and power over other prisoners.

In addition, language itself had become a distancing mechanism. The murder of Jews was only ever spoken of obliquely. *Endlösung*, the Final Solution, was a euphemism, as was the expression 'sent east', east being where the death camps were located. Euphemism was an effective defence against thinking and moral awakening. It was why Hannah Arendt in her controversial study of Eichmann's trial argued that his 'remoteness from reality' was linked to his inability to think.

Whenever they could the SS had Jewish victims do their dirty work for them as another distancing mechanism. In the overcrowded, sealed-off ghettos of Eastern Europe, the Nazis appointed Jewish Councils, *Judenrat*, to run them. The *Judenrat* controlled the Jewish police who kept the ghettos in order. Their job included selecting Jews for emigration, then for forced labour and lastly for transport to the death camps; where a 'special unit', the *sonderkommando*, another euphemism, composed entirely of Jews, was forced by death threats to dispose of corpses from the gas chamber.

As the *Sonderkommando* needed to be physically fit they had better food and conditions; and as *Geheimnisträger*, 'bearers of secrets' they were kept apart from other prisoners. On average they enjoyed four months of extra life before the next 'special unit' disposed of their bodies. With this kind of cumulative 'distancing' as few as two SS supervisors were required.

At Auschwitz, in April 1944, two Jewish barbers from Greece were given, by the SS Economic Division, the task of cutting the hair from corpses so that it could be spun into thread to make 'felt socks for submarine crews'. Jewish dentists were to extract gold teeth from Jewish bodies. The *Sonderkommando* also stockpiled victims' clothing and valuables. Nothing was wasted, corruption was inevitable so that Auschwitz had a thriving black market, loot from the dead being traded for delicacies and luxuries.

In his infamous speech at Posen in October 1943 Himmler, the Nazi moralist, boasted

that throughout all this his SS killers had 'remained decent'. "That has made us tough", he said, "we have taken nothing for ourselves". Though responsible for the deaths of millions Himmler worried that his honour-bound SS might actually descend to petty pilfering. Indeed, they had! The Final Solution was not only mass murder, it was also grand larceny. Through it Hermann Goering built up the best private art collection in the world. Eventually Auschwitz had 28 sub-camps selling slave labour at vast profit. Prisoners were sold to drug companies as human guinea pigs. Many died. Evil as deliberate harm to fellow human beings had become the moral norm as well as a profitable industry.

In the end the Nazis had constructed an enormous, impersonal, machinery of death with Heinrich Himmler in overall charge. In that vast apparatus of hatred and extermination everyone was trapped. For the victims, the Holocaust was personal, for the perpetrators impersonal. Few of those caught up in it had the moral and spiritual transcendence to rise above it or escape it. Its scale was such that everyone felt powerless.

We owe to the experiments of the social psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo the realisation that unquestioned authority in situations of comparative helplessness can radically transform the behaviour of otherwise good people. Unquestioned authority and situations defined by arbitrary power were the very fabric of the Nazi state. The survivor, Toivi Blatt, when asked what he learned in the death camps replied: "*None of us know ourselves*". He said later, when someone somewhere was really nice to him, he found himself thinking: "*How would they be in Sobibor?*"

If any non-Jews think that they could have survived the Nazi propaganda machine with their character intact I suggest that they are almost certainly fooling themselves. Few of us are so strong. It was the very human characteristic of self-deception that created the Nazi state.

For more than ten years now at study days I have given papers on the Holocaust and on each occasion I have felt uncomfortable in even tackling the subject. In writing this latest paper, the reason has become clear. My own formative training was not in theology but science, and today the lingering scientist in me always takes a detached, impersonal view. To gain the objectivity he needs the scientist must distance himself from his subject, and that very distancing and objectifying is uncomfortably like the distancing strategies that turned people into objects and made the Shoah possible.

There is a paradox here. Somewhere along the line all our thinking ends in paradox. Mathematicians and logicians know this. It is the moralist in us that prefers things to be in the black and white of non-paradox. Unfortunately our world is paradoxical through and through and nowhere is this more evident than in the difficulties we have with the reality of evil. We owe to the French mathematician and spiritual writer Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) the paradoxical and uncomfortable insight that: *To understand is to forgive*.

My own meditations on the Holocaust have taught me that the popular, tabloid view, that some people are monsters by nature and act out of a monstrous character and psychology does not stand up to the evidence. It is as wrong as it is comforting. The paradox of writing about the Holocaust, is that on the one hand we need to empathise with the horrendous suffering it involved while, on the other, we must distance ourselves from it in order to understand it.

My old college Vice-Principal when faced with irreconcilable standpoints like this would advise his students to "hold these things in tension". He said that was the best

he could offer. Faced with the Shoah and the problem of human evil it is also the best that I can do.

This article is based on a talk given to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle of the Newman Association in November 2013. Albert Radcliffe, an Anglican, is a retired Residentiary Canon of Manchester Cathedral. He was for many years Chairman of the Manchester Council of Christians and Jews.

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Obituary of Alison Grady (1927-2013)

Alison was a long-time supporter of the Newman Association, first in Coventry and then in Hertfordshire. Alison was a good friend to many in the Circle, especially to Eileen Durie and later to Judi George. She was a great traveller and indomitable on Newman Pilgrimages. She virtually saved the Herts Circle on one if not two occasions when Committee enthusiasm declined. Alison took the chair, giving the programme new energy. She also served on the national Council during the 1990s and was an auditor for the Westminster Archdiocese Marriage Tribunal. Latterly Alison suffered a period of declining health, supported especially by Judi, and sadly died in September. Her funeral Mass at Enfield was full, with a good number of the Circle present. May she rest in peace!

Anthony Baker

NOTE FOR YOUR DIARIES

Annual General Meeting 2014 – Wimbledon

The AGM of the Newman Association will be held in the Parish Hall of the Sacred Heart Church, Edge Hill, Wimbledon SW19 4LU on **Saturday June 14th 2014 at 11AM**. There will be Mass after the business meeting, followed by lunch. In the afternoon, at 3PM, there will be a talk by **Quentin de la Bedoyere** entitled 'The Natural Law'.