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Psychohistory and the Holocaust

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Leon Rappoport and I started some years ago to study the Holocaust. This led us to psychohistory, because it became more and more apparent as we examined this material that the traditional modes of interpretation whether drawn from Rankean historicism, Parsonian functionalism or political science, were totally inadequate to comprehend the dynamics and origins of the Holocaust, much less explain these events in any meaningful way.

The traditional and most popular response to the Holocaust has been one of massive denial. Historians cite numerous precedents as proof that the Nazi Holocaust was in no sense really unique. Classical history indeed supplies examples—such as the Athenian destruction of Melos, forever immortalized by Thucydides; the eradication of Carthage by Rome; in the medieval period of European history, not only the horrors associated with the crusades, but also the ferocious extermination of the Albigensian heretics by Innocent III; and the Turkish massacres of the Armenians are today in everybody's catalogue of horrors. These events are dragged out to show that the Nazi horrors are not all that new. And for a specific example of genocide the treatment by the white settler of the American Indian may be cited. The Holocaust is seen then as a modern, technologically more sophisticated version of the old horrors, one more mass slaughter of a kind which makes up so much of the subject matter of history. One variant of this position is the view that the



Holocaust is essentially the expression of a modern totalitarian disregard for human life, and that it parallels in nature and extent Stalin's extermination of the Kulaks and his treatment of potential dissidents in the purges of the 1930s. This view has the additional virtue of eliminating any differentiation between the left and the right.

In 1945, Dwight MacDonald was one of the very few to recognize the moral crisis of the Holocaust. "The Nazis," he wrote, "have not disregarded human life. They have taken it for the pure disinterested pleasure of taking it. There was no ulterior motive behind it, no possible advantage to its creators beyond the gratification of neurotic racial hatred. What had previously been done only by individual psychopathic killers has now been done by the rulers and servants of a modern state. This is something new."¹

In contrast to the attempts of historians to assimilate the Holocaust into the mainstream of European history by normalizing it, are the religious-metaphysical interpretations which perceive the Holocaust as a transcendent experience, mysterious and beyond human comprehension. Elie Wiesel has approached the Holocaust from this viewpoint, articulating such themes as the trial of God for his failure to intervene, and raising such questions as "Where was God in Auschwitz?" Here the unknowable meanings of extreme sufferings take on the proportions of a massive testing of faith. Such views lead their authors towards critical dialogues with God, fate, or whatever mystery is posed as being responsible for the human condition. The ability of some to rise above the physical situation and to achieve serenity or some form of personal salvation in the midst of terrible suffering is endowed with a transcendent meaning.

What psychohistory—as ideology rather than technique—brings to the Holocaust is the view that *homo sum humanum nil a me alienum*—nothing human is alien to me. Just as Freud expanded the range of acts that could be labeled "human" by including infant sexuality, "perversion," and other "unmentionables" among human attributes, so psychohistory permits the terrible events of the Holocaust to be confronted as human acts, acts to be faced and worked through. It teaches us to gaze into the abyss—not necessarily without fear, but without permitting what we see, no matter how horrifying, to distort our comprehension of ourselves and our history: either by trivializing it with such statements as that Auschwitz was only another My Lai, or by removing it from the realm of the human by shrouding it in theological mystification.

Confrontation with these events cannot fail to evoke anxieties. Study of the Holocaust creates new feelings of personal vulnerability, following from the knowledge that these things are possible. One learns that the victims and the executioners are no different from oneself, and that



PSYCHOHISTORY AND THE HOLOCAUST

411

under the right circumstances one could become either a victim or an executioner. If it could have happened on such a scale in the very heart of European civilization, then it could happen anywhere. Auschwitz has expanded the universe of consciousness no less than the Copernican revolution. These events demand a radical reformulation of previously comfortable views of human nature that had perceived man in a Rousseauian way as fundamentally kind but corrupted by an evil external society. The Enlightenment view of human nature now has become totally unacceptable.

Psychohistorians have dealt with several components of the Holocaust. As early as 1941 Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom* attempted to place national socialism into a broad perspective, eschewing the then popular Vansittart view that National Socialism was simply the result of some indigenous German aggressiveness.² Instead, Fromm maintained that capitalism had shifted the context of European life—in the useful typology of Toennis—from one of community to one of society; that whereas in the Middle Ages numerous institutions existed which mediated between the individual and society—the guilds and the church, for example—now the individual had to confront an impersonal market economy alone. Much in the same manner, Protestantism eliminated the role of the priest as mediator between man and God, and destroyed the advocate role of the Virgin Mary: now man had to confront God directly, in “fear and trembling.” The result, Fromm argued, was that individuals experienced unbearable tensions and an unacceptable sense of being alone, and sought to escape their unbearable freedom. Thus they sought refuge in mass movements, subordinating their individuality to the mass and voluntarily abandoning their freedom to subordinate themselves to a charismatic leader.

Peter Loewenberg later argued that the psychological sources of National Socialism could be found in the generational experience of those German children who lived through the First World War as children. Food deprivation and absence of fathers traumatized that generation—a trauma that was reinforced when fathers came home from the war defeated and unable to provide for their families.³

In the post-World War II world, still under the influence of the experience of Fascism, a team of researchers published *The Authoritarian Personality*,⁴ a work which combines a psychoanalytic approach with survey-research techniques, and which concludes that certain personality types are attracted to authoritarian movements—in other words, that there is such a thing as an authoritarian, i.e., fascist, personality. It is a work flawed both in its methodology and in its very dated definition of authoritarianism. For example, a negative attitude towards labor unions, or a critical stance toward the Soviet Union (at a time when the USSR was allied to the United States in the war against Germany), suggests, the



authors believe, fascist inclinations. It fails to recognize that authoritarianism may also be present on the political left. Yet at the same time it shows interesting relationships between authoritarian political attitudes and attitudes towards women, child rearing, racial minorities, etc., and raises important questions about the connections between personality and political attitudes.

In the 1960s, under the impact of the revulsion with the American Vietnam experience, a shift in outlook took place. Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist, sought to demonstrate experimentally that ordinary Americans would obey orders to inflict terrible pain on helpless victims (as of course they had done in Vietnam).⁵ His experiments contradict the findings of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Indeed, in a sense, they legitimize the frequently heard statement by Nazis that they were “just following orders,” and they permit the conclusion that the Germans were by no means unique. The experiments (and others patterned after them) also raised the question of whether personality factors are useful in explaining destructive and cruel behavior done in the service of an organization.

While dictatorships triumphed in many European countries, only Germany initiated the Holocaust. What distinguished Germany from other countries was not primarily a unique German character, nor even intense anti-Semitism. (Anti-Semitism was more popular for example in Poland and Roumania than in Germany.) The necessary prerequisites for the Holocaust were the conjunction of two elements: the person of Adolf Hitler with his fantasies of a Jew-free world, and the availability of the SS to translate his fantasies into reality.

Leon Rappoport and I have previously argued in this journal that one major liability of psychohistory is its concentration on individual biography, its apparent revival of a “great men make history” view, which tends to ignore the lessons which have been so painfully learned from Karl Marx and Max Weber.⁶ While we still maintain this general viewpoint, the longer we study the Holocaust the more central the role of Adolf Hitler appears to us. Anti-Semitism was popular in Europe and in Germany and was a major program of almost all parties of the political right. (The major exceptions are Italy and Spain.) Many, perhaps most Germans, favored the reduction of Jewish influence and the expulsion of Jews from Germany, and confiscation of their property was certainly “in the cards.” But physical extermination? It appears that almost everyone, from Himmler on down the hierarchy, was surprised and shocked to hear the order for “the final solution.” There was no inevitability to it. Indeed, most anti-Semitic actions of the Nazi government before 1941 were designed to force Jewish emigration. In Vienna, as elsewhere, Adolf Eichmann helped Jews to leave Germany. And it is clear, David Irving arguments notwithstanding, that the source of the decision to kill the



PSYCHOHISTORY AND THE HOLOCAUST

413

Jews of Europe was Adolf Hitler.

We now possess a number of important psychohistorical studies of Hitler, most notably those by Gertrude Kurth, Walter Langer, Rudolph Binion, Robert Waite and Helm Stierlin.⁷ Setting aside the polemics that these have engendered, what emerges is that the events in Hitler's private life did indeed energize his anti-Semitism, and that the experiences of his childhood and adolescence are more relevant to our understanding than all the methodologies of traditional political science. All Hitler biographies emphasize the unsatisfactory relationship of Hitler to his father, and contrast this to his deep love for his mother. It is very clear that the description in *Mein Kampf* of fathers coming home and acting brutally after having drunk away their wages refers to Hitler's father. None of the biographies mentions any contact with Jews before Vienna—except for references to the treatment of Hitler's mother by Dr. Eduard Bloch. These references are central to both Kurth's and Binion's interpretations. Binion attempts to connect what he defines as the two central traumas in Hitler's life—the death of his mother and his blindness following a poison gas attack in 1918—to the trauma of the German people, arguing that the German trauma and Hitler's personal traumas resonated together on a subconscious level, and that a tongue-and-groove fit existed between Hitler and the German people which made him a charismatic leader. By analyzing the German people in terms of traumas and reaction formations, Binion seeks to dissolve the dichotomy between political events and private, personal ones, and thereby transcend the strictly biographical.

Given the preponderance of biography in psychohistory, it is strange that so little has been done with other key Nazi figures. Both G. M. Gilbert and Douglas Kelley, who were prison psychologists at Nuremberg, have written psychological sketches of their prisoners, though these were never intended as serious studies.⁸ Recently, Miale and Selzer sought, on the basis of an examination of the Rorschach protocols of the Nuremberg defendants, to conclude that these were all, in some sense, not normal.⁹

The only important psychobiographic study of a Nazi leader is Peter Loewenberg's essay on Heinrich Himmler.¹⁰ Himmler was an obedient child, more rigid than most, afraid of his own sexuality and obsessively concerned with duty. It is doubtful that an American school psychologist observing young Heinrich would even have suggested the need for counseling, much less therapy. What emerges in Loewenberg's analysis is that the Nazi directly responsible for the death of millions was not a sadist in the sense of the Marquis de Sade. For that, Himmler was much too repressed—and perhaps even to squeamish. Rather, the dynamics of his acts may be found in the readiness with which he suppressed his impulses and feelings in order to please authority figures whose values he



had internalized at the expense of his own. Loewenberg is quite correct when he sees the source of the adult Himmler in the adolescent. In the modern world it is, of course, the bureaucrat who carries out orders while suppressing his own feelings and who becomes the one responsible for extreme destructiveness. Yet both in the popular and in the scholarly literature it is so frequently the person who cannot master his own passions of rage and cruelty who symbolizes the essence of Nazism. In that sense, the character of Dorf in the recent “Holocaust” TV production is quite correctly portrayed.

To the question of how people can do such things as run death camps, shoot people day after day, and engage in the systematic execution of torture, the answer has almost always been given in terms of the individual pathologies of the individual members of the SS. The late Henry Dicks interviewed SS officers imprisoned for mass murder and attempted to find an explanation for their actions by looking at their upbringings and characters.¹¹ Elie Cohen, in one of the earliest books about the camps, was not alone in speaking of an SS criminal superego.¹² These attempts remain unconvincing. In a regrettably unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Tom Segev demonstrated the absence of pathologies among commanders of Nazi concentration camps.¹³ The question to which psychohistory must now provide an answer is: How can an organization so transform individuals that they readily commit atrocities?

Segev documents how, for many individuals, the SS became a way of life. The organization gained its identity as an elite group within Nazism just *because* it contained men who were able and willing to prove their total devotion to Hitler by turning, if necessary, against their own comrades and killing them, and just *because* its members were able to perform difficult and unprecedented tasks like running the KZ's in a highly disciplined form. Brutality was controlled. Theodor Eicke, who commanded Dachau in the early 1930s, vigorously punished those among the SS who would not conform to the demands of the organization.

Beneath the popular demonic imagery which already surrounded the SS by 1934 was the psychological reality of a young organization with a core leadership of men who could accept strict discipline and operate with ruthless efficiency in the service of the ideas personified by Adolf Hitler. The bedrock identity of the SS formed by the end of 1934 (after the Roehm putsch) had comparatively little to do with atrocious behavior against revealed enemies of the new state, such as Socialists, Communists, Freemasons or Jews. These actions could be performed rather easily; many hands were available for the work. There were relatively few, however, even among the old fighters, who could be relied upon to act without mercy against ordinary Germans, or against former comrades, and who could translate the spontaneous brutalities of the concentration camp into a sustained, routine program of deadly repression.



PSYCHOHISTORY AND THE HOLOCAUST

415

After the outbreak of the war, Heinrich Heydrich organized the *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland, which had as its task the killing of Polish lawyers, doctors, and priests—in short, the whole Polish elite. The killing operations in Poland, to which not only some army generals but even party activists objected, placed the SS on the other side of a psychological threshold. The organization now had moved far beyond any conventional military or security function. Himmler was aware of this when he argued that “in many cases it is much easier to go into battle with a company of infantry than it is to suppress an obstructive population of low cultural level or to carry out executions or to haul away people or to evict crying and hysterical women.” In the speech from which I quote, Himmler also spoke of the special toughness required to shoot defenseless people. From there, it was only a short step to the mass shootings in the USSR and the establishment of death camps.

The psychohistorical analysis of the SS shows that it has much in common with other paramilitary and nonconventional military formations of the twentieth century—for example, the French Paras, the Green Berets, the CIA and other various police organizations in the USSR, Chile, and other countries. There is a seemingly never-ending supply, everywhere, of men willing to volunteer to serve in special formations as self-proclaimed elites. There is an increasing accumulation of psychological and historical evidence indicating that, when ordered to do so, otherwise average individuals will brutalize or kill defenseless people—at apparently only slight psychic costs. It bears restating that the *Einsatzgruppen* and the SS which operated the death camps were not composed of men especially selected for personality traits predisposing them to brutal behavior. The available evidence is that the vast majority of the SS were not characterized by any symptoms of gross pathology. One notes, also, that after the war SS men who had participated in the worst brutalities lived ordinary, productive lives: Eichmann had a quiet family life in Argentina, Franz Stangl (of Treblinka) in Brazil; while in command of Auschwitz, Hoess traveled back and forth to his family in much the same way as any other commuter. These men had loving wives and were good to their children.

What the history of the SS demonstrates is not pathology but evil. Like Faust, it traded its soul for power, for glamor and for visions of superiority. It appeared as a technical-industrial embodiment of pure evil, an evil made doubly potent by the fact that its human instruments were not conspicuously different from other men.

Yet few commit evil with the intent to do so or the knowledge that they are doing so. And few SS men or officers thought then, or think now, that they were doing anything wrong, much less committing crimes. On the contrary, they believed that they were carrying out a heroic mission. In their ability to consider their murderous actions as good, they were



helped by the dominating mentality of modern science. From its dim origins in the concentration camps and the euthanasia program, to its final industrial actualization in Auschwitz, this scientific mode of thought and methodology provided an essential psychological foundation for the Holocaust. It was the rational, abstract form of conceptual thought required and promulgated by science which produced the basis for abstractly categorizing people according to the concept of race. Science has made it easy to accept generalizations about races and other groups, particularly when these fit culturally determined predispositions. By thinking in terms of racial characters, individual lives were simply not seen as valuable.

The scientific orientation of western civilization requires and encourages individuals to split off emotions from rational intellect; education is tantamount to the ability to be dispassionate and detached, to suppress spontaneous feelings in favor of reason. Mobs may kill individuals in anger, but it required a scientific mentality to seek to remake the demography of the world by systematically killing individuals identified on the basis of abstract criteria.

The splitting of reason and emotion is deliberately inculcated by modern culture in order to get people to repress or suspend reflexive emotions that might block achievement of abstract, distant goals. (Freshmen make bad lab assistants because they treat the rats as pets.) The ability to categorize objects, and then to transform the meaning of the objects into something other than what one started with, is fundamental to modern science. Yet this very capacity for scientific intellectual functioning is what can make horrors possible. By exercising this capacity, we make judgements that some people are better than others, that some are not people at all. The Holocaust started in the minds of those who thought not of Fagin or Shylock, but of the class of Jews, and who arranged operations not against individuals but against a concept. Thus there was no need to feel bad. The abstract thought patterns associated with science are distinct from more reflexive modes of thinking, and indeed require a new language system which serves to prevent the evocation of feelings.

While the scientific mode of thought is opposed to irrationality and barbarism, it is not at all opposed to efficient, dispassionate actions designed to make the world conform to ideas developed by reason. And we know how little it took to demonstrate to Germans and to others that the destruction of certain groups was necessary, rational, and in the best interests of all.

Freud, expressing a strongly felt view of his time, saw civilization as the overcoming of instinctual feeling by reason. He was one of the first to recognize the price of civilization, yet he appeared to have little doubt about the superiority of reason over feeling. Perhaps the time has come



PSYCHOHISTORY AND THE HOLOCAUST

417

when we should recognize that reason also has its demonic and destructive components. It may be the task of psychohistory to redress the balance between feeling and reason and to again help legitimize rationally guided feeling as a basis for judgement.

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