

How was the Holocaust Humanly Possible?

Zeev Mankowitz

(Yad Vashem, 16 July 1986 – notes taken by Colin Tatz)

We need to attempt an overview. In the Holocaust our focus is on the Jews. But what of the killers? Why did they kill? How was the Holocaust humanly possible? That should be the *primary* question—it is the one that allows us no rest, and to which there is no satisfactory answer.

In 1964 Hilberg wrote an article in *Midstream*, which he has since disowned. Zeev says it is a worthwhile piece. It starts with the simple, then becomes vague, then metahistorical—then come hypotheses and guess—then it becomes metareligious. The constant theme is “we can’t explain it”. Zeev says we won’t come up with a satisfactory answer. But the journey is important, and there will be questions along the way.

There are several possible explanations:

- 1) that the kind of destructiveness is inherent in the human system;
- 2) that man has *evil* impulses;
- 3) man’s fall from grace
- 4) man’s unruly nature (Hobbes);
- 5) the psychoanalytic thing (Anthony Storr)
- 6) Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, which he says is weak.

Zeev says we can’t answer the question about man’s human nature. Here we have a problem about assumptions. Fromm assumes that man is evil. So does Kosinski in *The Painted Bird*. In that work:

- 1) except for mention of railway lines and a few bodies, there is no mention of the Holocaust;

Auschwitz is a product of the impersonal 20th century in which there is always a distortion of human nature.

2) If we go back to the unspoiled, peasant society, there *human* nature will reside. But it turns out that the child is no better off there than in Auschwitz!

3) Kosinski allows the communists to arrive—sadly, they behave in the same way.

A powerful book, he says, because it allows no redemption—there is no way that man can overcome his darker nature. The book provides us with a potentiality from the Holocaust—that evil is universal. But if that is so, then we should witness Holocaust episodes around us, all the time. Even if man is basically evil, it explains everything—and nothing. The evil thing doesn't explain WHY at that time and at that place. In short, *man's nature doesn't provide the answer*.

What of the context of WAR? Several writers have said that we must see the Holocaust in the context of world war. War entails turmoil, vast armies, huge movements of people—an ideal context for the final solution. Here one can keep secrets and there is vast civilian suffering. Suffering, paranoia, betrayal and treason are rampant in war. During mobilization the intellectuals and leaders are loath to dissent while fighting is on. Thus the war context is argued as being significant. Zeev says this view carries some important lessons, but it doesn't get to the essence of the question.

Why? It helps us on the periphery of the Holocaust, within Germany and on the European edges. If not for the war the Croats, Latvians and Ukrainians would not have been able “to settle accounts” with the Jews. They could exploit the Holocaust.

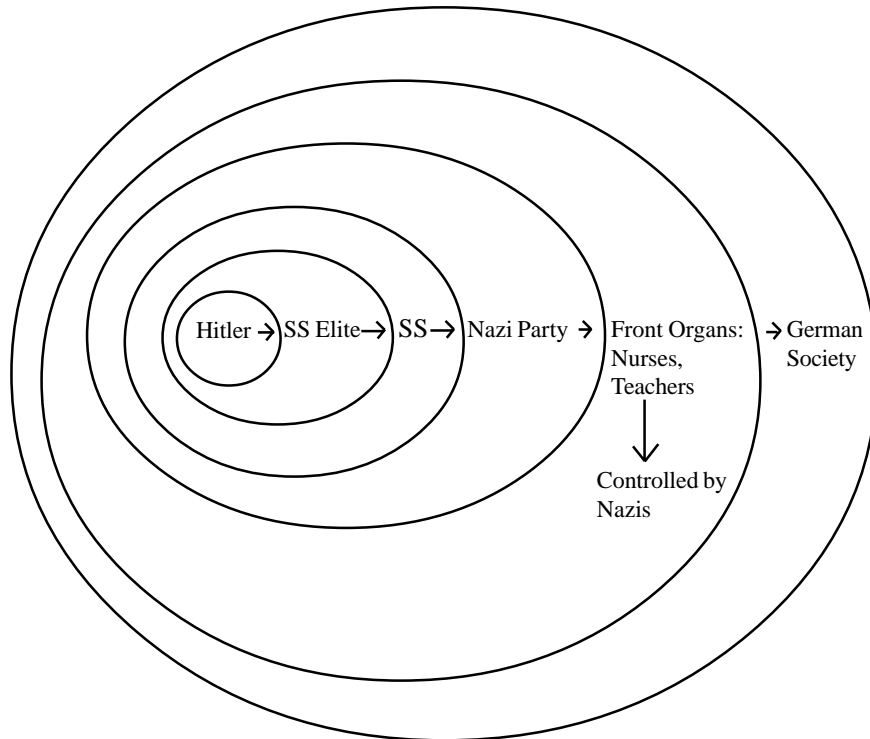
The Poles were the most uncompromising opposers of the Nazis: they were abnormally anti-German but they were equally pro-Nazi in their antisemitism. In Germany, the leaders, priests and intellectuals did not intervene. The war context explanation does seem to suggest that the Holocaust was a by-product of WWII. Germany wanted raw materials, wanted to settle other accounts—then saw there were Jews around and this could become a focus. (Compare with Russo-Japanese War of 1904. The Czar had long engaged in pogroms—with war came solidarity and the pogroms stopped). BUT, by the time the saturation bombing of Germany STARTS, three-quarters of Europe's Jews are dead! There is a confusion of dates, and of cause and effect here. Eichmann was lying when he said the Jewish killings were somehow a response to Germany's being bombed.

So, says Zeev, there is a relatively simple answer: the murder of the Jews was the *ideological* heart of the war. One war was fought as a conventional one; the other, against the Jews, as an ideological one. In short, *two* wars were fought simultaneously. The Holocaust is not a product of the war, but its heart and essence. From 1941 on, the war against the Jews was primary.

[Holocaust is tied into bourgeois normality. See Mosse's book, *Toward the Final Solution*, for a synopsis of this view. He ties the whole thing into respectability and decency.]

So, we have what he calls the peripheral ones: the ones who didn't start it but who didn't fight it; and those who capitalised on it, used it. But *who* did it, *initially*?

The onion of totalitarianism (after Arendt):



Our sense of reality is based on our conversation network. Hitler guides and talks to the SS Elite. They direct the SS and get feedback. The SS influences the Nazi Party and the front organisations. At the centre, murder becomes part of the new morality. Does this provide the explanation?

Look at some of the bureaucrats involved. Hilberg sees 1) repression/rationalization at work—the cog-in-the-machine stuff. 2) a distancing of oneself—“we only took them out of houses, put them on trains” ... then the Zyklon B crystals? “No, that was done by the Ukrainians”!! This is the receding-line-of-responsibility approach that ends nowhere. 3) the superior orders stuff.

Maybe one can argue that the Holocaust was possible because antisemitism was a means to an end—

- 1) that it was used to create coherence among disparate Nazis;
- 2) that it provided a scapegoat for assorted ills;
- 3) that a movement based on respectability can have a revolutionary strand—

So: to attack capitalism is to attack Jews, which is to attack their culture, then their books etc;

4) that is was used to paralyse the opposition and to establish alliances;

5) that is provided spoils and largesse;

6) that information on the mass murders was used as an instrument of terror.

Until 22 June 1941 this was a useful framework of understanding. But at that time its instrumentalism fell away. There was no of such from June 1941. The terroristic argument? No—the Holocaust was a state secret. The camps were not a public terror. Dachau was a “re-education” centre but Sobibor and Treblinka were totally secret. But Majdanek was located in a suburb of Lublin, in order to terrorise the Poles.

We are dealing, he says, with people who saw murder as an end in itself, not as a means to an end.

Then we come to the bridge to his next section: Bauer’s elite 40 Nazis. Zeev says they alone couldn’t make it happen. Something had to be there to allow it to happen. We come to the “idealism of decent people” and Hitler’s crucial role. Without Hitler there would have been no Holocaust—and without WWI and the Bolshevik revolution there could be no Hitler. His magic and hypnosis could only work in a certain context. None of his ideas were original. Singular to him was his transformation of ideas into reality: but for that reality to occur you need millions of accomplices and hundreds of thousands of workers.

How does Hitler communicate his idiosyncratic view and make it plausible to millions?

- 1) through the long-term assumptions of cultural antisemitism and the power(s) attributed to Jews;
- 2) through the middle-term phenomenon of *völkisch* ideology;
- 3) through the short-term means of communication created by totalitarianism.

So—the charismatic leaders, driven by a totalistic ideology, unlocks the secrets of history (blood and race), supported by a mass party of believers who use terror against the recalcitrant and so educate the masses. All that, with control of the mass media, creates a new morality. This totalitarianism reversed right and wrong—it reversed Eichmann’s world. “The mark of sin is temptation,” said Hannah Arendt. So Germans would, in the new morality, sin if tempted to help Jews. Germans were dutiful so they weren’t tempted. When the totalitarian shells cracks, people can’t explain what they did.

There are certain preconditions for the Holocaust; technology and bureaucracy. It is nit high

technology: it is basic technology but it extends man's capacities to make for conveyor-belt death. (See Suchomel's evidence in the *Shoah* film). Railways, furnaces—all this was primitive modern technology. The communications network was newer, perhaps.

Behind the technology there are technicians—see Robert Jay Lifton's article "the Role of Doctors in the Final Solution" (compare with Turkish doctors during the Armenian Genocide). Lifton talks about the Nazi biocracy—what he calls medicalised killers and killing. The doctors were the handmaidens of the Aryan racists, keeping the race pure.

So now the question is sharpened: technology is not the explanation of the Holocaust.

The bureaucracy: efficient, impersonal, one that responds to orders.

Bureaucracy has behind it bureaucrats: but look at the man, the men, such as the man in the railways who railed football teams and circuses before the war and then rails Jews to their deaths. He knew what was going on. So decent, family people became part of the system. But there is no one person controlling it all: it is happening right across Germany—it is a diffused undertaking. There was no budget, no single controller. Yet it happened. Perhaps, he says, the Nazi bureaucracy's efficiency is overrated. Most of the "work" came from below—not from on high.

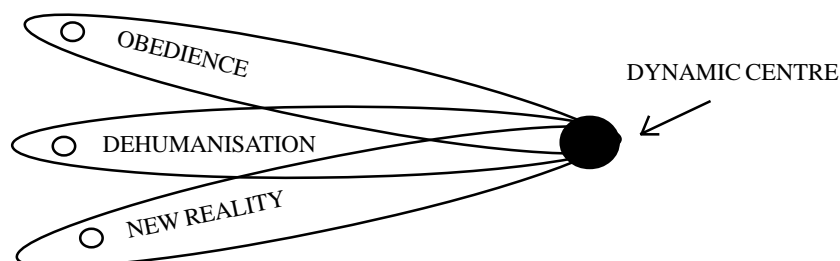
Zeev says that technology and bureaucracy explain how it was possible—but not how it was humanly possible.

Another receding line—this time to be found in language. Words are used to neutralise reality. But we know that in the Einsatzgruppen everyone—including the cooks and mechanics—had to kill: they insisted on total complicity.

As to the people at the centre of the murder machine—maybe they wanted to keep reality at bay and the way to do this was to affirm the goodness of what they were doing.

Zeev says Arendt is correct when she deals with the new morality as it related to Hitler, the SS Elite, the SS itself. But large numbers of Germans were not committed Nazis and didn't have this new morality.

Look at the "clumsy" model of Saul Friedlander:



These are transmission belts that turn on their own axes: they are autonomous, they don't belong to the world of the new morality but they are part of the death machine.

BELT NO. 1: OBEDIENCE, particularly at the lower levels. See Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*. Obedience is a fundamental human mechanism. But there are difficulties with it.

- 1) Joining the SS was a voluntary matter—a member could resign until the end of 1942. There were long periods of initial training. Within the SS one could evade orders: one always agreed ideologically but could argue against action. See the Daniel Goldhagen article "On Disobedience in the SS". The new morality said that they had to be supermen. For those who were weak and couldn't perform their duties it was not a criminal thing. Obedience occurred all the way down the line and most often crises of conscience didn't arise. Post-war records show only 13 cases of SS disobedience.

BELT NO. 2: DEHUMANISATION—all through society. This has to be seen in two contexts: historical and situational. Historically the removal of Jews from the rest of humanity goes back a long way. The parasite/spider notions go back a long way. Zeev had his eye-opener—in Johannesburg. Even coming from a family of liberals, he was stricken by he and his family's response to a semi-naked black in the streets late at night. History and circumstance conspire to make you act illiberally. One can become depersonalised in one sector of one's being.

Situational? Strange, but in South Africa he said he saw black *crowds* coming off the trains, never individuals. One can do all this and still be a good father!

BELT NO. 3: THE NEW REALITY—important at the upper echelons. This is where we try to understand the uncommitted murderers. He prefers the term new reality to new morality. Says the new reality was seen dramatically in the German Foreign Office. (See Browning's book *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office*). He says they hated what they were doing but while they were involved they were involved efficiently. This was the acid test of integrity, of belonging.

THE DYNAMIC CENTRE

As we move ahead we reach the mystical: the most adequate terms to deal with the Nazi essence is to see it as a political religion. The late Uriel Tal's book *Jews and Christians in the Second Reich*: his starting point is that Nazism was a political religion because it reversed absolutes. It sanctified politics, the state, the leaders as absolutes, it secularised traditional faith and made relative traditional reality. It made a political party an absolute end—and made faith a means of popular modernization. What we have then is an attempt to use outward structures of Christianity to provide a new content: God is Aryan man, the highest representative is Hitler, to communicate with him is communion—he is the Father of the State, to be worshipped.

To sin to is deviate from ideology. So, Nazism used the traditional forms but with a totally antithetical new content. Nietzsche: said we must detach the world from God. Therefore, in the new content,

the killing of men is separating the world from God. Embracing war is virtue and peace is vice. Democracy is deviation. Such is the philosophy of true believers. Our morality hinges on human beings having a special standing. We say the unequal are unequal because of our moral precepts. We are, in that sense, beyond nature. Nazism places man in nature. So we arrive at survival of the fittest. Hence their attacks on compassion and the sanctity of life. Under Nazism the vehicle of morality becomes the new morality, namely, a mobile death chamber posing as an ambulance.

Many see Himmler's speech in Posen in October 1943 as the new morality par excellence. "A glorious page in our history that will never be written ... we have remained decent ...".

The heart of secularisation is man's bid for sovereignty of this, his world. The scientific understanding of nature is needed so man can manipulate it—and not be a victim of his environment. Nationalistic self-determination is an expression of this view.

There is a constant push for "self-infinetisation"—than pushing beyond the boundaries that limit him.

Zeev's hypothesis: through torture men gain control; through murder they become absolute. How do you become a God? Through murder, as the most perverse form of human creativity (!!). The dead don't get up—so you have an absolute, an act that cannot be undone. So, this SS became a priesthood, Auschwitz the temple, the gas chamber an altar. Hence, said Himmler, a glorious page in our history.

How is all this connected to the Jews? It is, in one critical sense: Jews in the western world represent the world before their (German) transformation, the world of the old morality. The only way open is to destroy them, utterly.

But his thesis is that this portrait doesn't fit into a neat cause and effect equation. [I'm convinced: it doesn't have to].

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