

DYNAMICS OF ATROCITIES FROM INDIVIDUALS TO NATIONS.

Perpetrators Forum

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Holocaust Centre

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I am very grateful to Prof Kwiet and Dr Foster for their enlightening talks. I want to share with you something of my own journey.

Personal Journey

My first instinctive response to being a Holocaust victim and survivor was to want to escape my persecutors and a desire that they would disappear. Later, over the years I agonised at the injustice of the persecution and what punishment the perpetrators deserved. It took many years to achieve the distance necessary to ask who were my persecutors and how come they attacked me.

In fact for many years I had followed the director of the film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzman's warning: "To understand is to empathise." To empathise is to see them as human beings like us. Then we lose our moral compass and betray our dead.

I had a problem. Professionally and intellectually I saw that there were reasons why people were violent and that understanding the reasons could prevent further violence.

But what about emotionally? Well, I look at the little boy that I was. And I look at me now. I hold the psychological tests of Nuremberg defendants in my hands. That is my revenge. I dissect their minds in order to understand the murderousness inside them. I do so for a purpose diametrically opposed to those minds' intentions. If that understanding requires empathy, so be it. If the understanding contributes to prevention of future murders the cost of empathy will be worth it.

Now I want to share with you what I've learned about violence in individuals, groups and nations. I will suggest three types violence common to those social levels. Lastly, I will hint at possibilities of preventing genocides.

Individuals

Unlike in films, killing is not easy. Police who kill are traumatised. In combat only one in six soldiers shoots to kill. Crossing the line is difficult. It involves a different mindset, a different world.

A Hutu killer in the Rwandan genocide described the different worlds thus:

In truth, it came to me afterward, I had taken the life of a neighbour. I mean, at the fatal instant I did not see in him what he had been before.. He was the first victim I killed; my vision and my thinking had grown clouded.. For my part, I offer you an explanation: it is as if I had let another individual take on my own living appearance, and the habits of my heart..This killer was indeed me..but he is a stranger to me..I fail to recognise the wickedness of the one who raced through the marshes on my legs, carrying my machete..seems to belong to another self.. But perhaps someone outside this situation, like you, cannot have an inkling of that strangeness of mind. '

The line to the other mental world can be crossed in three situations.

First, *when life is in danger*. Imagine seeing through the window a man holding a gun to your child's head, about to pull the trigger. You have a gun. It take 20 milliseconds for an instinctive response to shoot.

Second, when *training, brainwashing and coercion* shape people into killers.

And third, when killing becomes part of a *larger narrative* of goodness and salvation.

An Austrian policeman wrote to his wife,

I kept in mind that I have two infants at home, whom these hordes would treat just the same, ten times worse. The death that we gave them was a beautiful quick death,

compared to the hellish torments in the jails of the GPU
[Soviet secret police].

Killing can become a callous routine. A member of an Einsatzgruppe wrote in his diary,

12th July 1941. The death candidates assembled with shovels to dig their own graves. Strange, *I am completely unmoved. No pity. Nothing..* Six of us had to shoot them. That's the way it is and then it's all over.

But when perceptions of victims as dangerous, or the narratives of salvation fail, killers suffer.

A German Order Policeman said:

The shooting.. was so repugnant to me that I intentionally missed the fourth man. I ran away into the woods and vomited..My nerves were totally finished.

I'll never forget the following case. Working in Israel after the Six Day War I was asked to treat a suicidal Israeli soldier.

In civilian life this reservist soldier was an ordinary religious accountant with a wife and two children. On orders, he took part in killing a group of Egyptian prisoners. Worse, because this he had done spontaneously, he took part in looting their bodies. He kept remembering pictures of a dead soldier's family he had found in a prisoner's wallet.

If killing can cause madness, is killing itself mad?

I mentioned that in my professional experience ranging from explosions in emergency departments to interviews of murderers, I always found reasons for violence. The reasons were perceptions of threats to physical or psychological survival.

But people often misread their circumstances. They were triggered into states of mind that resembled past traumatic experiences of danger and

humiliation and their violence was to prevent becoming victims once more. When violence is predicated by past trauma and is enacted on innocent scapegoats, it is irrational or mad.

The Holocaust was irrational, delusional. But when a madness is national, it is not deemed to be a psychiatric disorder.

Over a million Jews were killed by Einsatzgruppen in Eastern Europe. Many adjusted to what they called “dirty work”. Some were sadists. But the mental dissonance of killing, the brutalisation and the many breakdowns among killers so affected morale that a different way of killing had to be found. Death camps were the answer.

Groups

Groups make killing easier. They confer power and omnipotence that individuals lack. At the same time they take away individual moral responsibility through demands for conformity and obedience. That can include individual members’ own lives. When ordered, soldiers go over the trenches knowing that they will die. When the cult leader Jim Jones ordered his followers to commit suicide, hundreds did so.

Gangs can give respect and power to disaffected and powerless individuals. Hitler formed gangs from boxing gyms and disaffected World War I soldiers. He gave his gangs uniforms, guns, and licence to violence.

A special extended gang was the SS. Himmler imbued them with a sense of superiority, honour, mythical Germanic brotherhood, and sacred duties that included killing. In return they had to be blindly obedient.

Terrorist gangs have similar group, ideological and religious motivations. When gangs and terrorists assume power, state terrorism becomes especially lethal and gang psychology is spread through the population.

Crowds draw on and expand emotions of groups. Hitler’s crowds revelled in their power, superiority, comradeship, patriotism, excitement, and exhilaration of being part of a large mysterious force led by a demigod.

Nations

Germany became a gangster state. To harness its large population, the top gang required a vertical hierarchy of power and a horizontal glue that cohered the nation. Hierarchical concepts of obedience, duty, order and systems were already established. Cohesion was achieved by force, ideology, and propaganda.

Nazi ideology took four forms- racism, anti-Semitism, Nationalism, and the Fuehrerprinzip.

Racism was based on a false neo-Darwinism in which the superior German race would surge to its destiny after enslaving and exterminating the others. On the ladder of racial evolution Jews were not even on the first step. They were subhuman.

Anti-Semitism The churches had traditionally taught that Jews were Satanic God-killers. In addition, Hitler now blamed them for having stabbed Germany in the back in World War One. Whether Bolsheviks or capitalists, they conspired to devour Germany and rule the world.

Nationalism held that the German Volk had to appropriate space-*Lebensraum* and resources. Like an organism, it needed to expand its limbs, and luxuriate in the sun.

The Fuehrerprinzip held that Germany was a body whose head was Hitler. He couldn't be questioned any more than an arm could question the brain that tells it to move. Hitler's will required total obedience.

Why did Germany, a centre of civilisation, go bad and mad? Some blame Hitler and the top Nazis, others the German character, some say the Nazis highlighted evil in general human nature, yet others that evil circumstances produce evil deeds.

Nazi Leaders

Hitler

Who was Adolf Hitler, without whom there would have been no World War Two and Holocaust?

Hitler's father Alois was the illegitimate son of a woman servant in a Rothschild household. Alois was quite likely fathered by a Jew. He badly abused Hitler's mother, and pitilessly belted and humiliated Hitler.

Hitler was a sickly child, cruel to animals. When he was 18 his mother died of cancer having been treated by Jewish Dr Bloch. Hitler blamed Jews for not being accepted into the Academy of Fine Arts. He drifted until on his second attempt he was accepted by the German Army. When he recovered in hospital from a gas attack after Germany's defeat he had an epiphany that the Jews had stabbed Germany in the back and that Providence gave him a special mission to rehabilitate Germany.

Hitler was no superman. He had to wear glasses, suffered rashes, gastric crises, skin lesions, hypochondria, mood swings, paranoid rages, and Parkinson's disease. His sexuality was abnormal. In his earlier life he spent much time with homosexuals, and many early Nazis were homosexuals. Of Hitler's 5 female relationships 2 committed suicide, including his young niece, and 2 attempted suicide. He was variously rumoured to be homosexual, asexual, and deriving sexual satisfaction from being punched, humiliated, urinated and defaecated upon by women.

How did this distorted figure become dictator? He had inordinate self-belief and belief that a small ruthless group could change the world. He was intelligent, had photographic memory, organisational skills, and hypnotic-like powers of theatre and rhetoric.

Strasser, a prominent Nazi till Hitler had him murdered, said, 'His words go like an arrow to the target. He touches each private wound..liberat[es] the unconscious, exposing its innermost aspirations.'

Hitler's rhetoric consisted of a set series of themes: first, losses, defeats, German suffering and humiliation. Next came blame, especially of Jews. Then declaration of megalomaniac power under his leadership; and finally, with every wrong righted Germany would be paradise.

Hermann Goering

Was Hitler's number two. He grew up in a castle owned by a Jew Herman von Epenstein. He was Goering's godfather, and in the knowledge of Goering's father, he was having an affair with Goering's mother.

Goering was a stubborn, difficult child, of whom his mother said, “He’ll either become a great man or a great criminal.”

The adolescent Goering was fond of playing knights and legends. He dressed himself in uniforms, and watched himself in mirrors and films. When he was in power he collected titles, decorations, and covered himself in medals. He indulged his greed in food and loot on a grand scale.

After World War One in which he was an ace pilot, he found purpose in Hitler. “I was devoted to him body and soul.” He also said, “I have no conscience. Hitler is my conscience.”

During the Nuremberg trials Psychiatrist Douglas Kelly found him to be “..brilliant, brave, ruthless, grasping, shrewd.” In his Rorschach test he demonstrated high intelligence, grandiosity, and a rich fantasy life associated with ambition and aggression.

Heinrich Himmler

completed the top gang of three. His father was an authoritarian teacher with intense aristocratic ambitions. He succeeded to become tutor to Prince Heinrich of Bavaria.

Himmler was enamoured of Hitler, the Nazi movement, and German mythology. From being in charge of Hitler’s personal safety, he graduated to head the SS and police. His organisational skills made the SS a pervasive force in every aspect of German life. The SS provided Einsatzgruppen and personnel for concentration and death camps.

Himmler understood the traumatic nature of mass murder. In his Posen speech he told his top SS officials:

I also want to refer here very frankly to a very difficult matter. We can now very openly talk about this among ourselves, and yet we will never discuss this publicly.. Most of you here know what it means when 100 corpses lie next to each other, when there are 500 or when there are 1,000. To have endured this and at the same time to have remained a decent person.. has made us tough, and

is a glorious chapter that has not and will not be spoken of.

Himmler acknowledged that mass murder sacrificed the purity of an ordinary soul. But such sacrifice elevated the souls of SS killers to a higher level.

Of the 22 Nuremberg accused Streicher and Hess demonstrated mental instability on psychiatric interviews and Rorschach tests. The others did not warrant psychiatric diagnoses but they did demonstrate flawed characters.

German characteristics

said to facilitate German atrocities were emotional coldness and obedience without thought. Psychologist Alice Miller saw these characteristics arise from particularly authoritarian and loveless upbringing of German children.

Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, said to psychiatrist Gilbert during the Nuremberg trials:

I am entirely normal. Even while I was doing this extermination work, I led a normal family life..Don't you see, we SS men were not supposed to think..it never occurred to us. And besides it was already taken for granted that the Jews were to blame for everything...It was not a pleasure to see those mountains of corpses and smell the continuing burning. But Himmler had ordered it and even explained the necessity and I really never gave much thought to whether it was wrong. It just seemed a necessity..For me as an old fanatic National Socialist, I took it all as fact- just as a Catholic believes in his church dogma.

Douglas Kelly, the psychiatrist who examined the Nuremberg trial defendants and whose Rorschach tests I hold in my hands, concluded that in the 1920s Germans and Americans were not very different. But in the 1930's a frighteningly high percentage of the German population were like 10-year-old children under the rule of Adolph Hitler.

Still, the problem with German character as cause of genocide is that Russians, Chinese, Rwandans, Cambodians don't have German characteristics. Is evil ubiquitous?

Evil in human nature

If evil is ubiquitous, Americans, Jews, Australians can be perpetrators.

Indeed, Americans have genocided the Indians, they had slaves, performed atrocities in Vietnam and Abu Ghraib. Experiments in American universities demonstrated that Americans also tended to conform and obey authority.

Of Jews, Israel has an average murder rate. But further, Melbourne Holocaust survivor Emanuel Wajnbblum wrote in *My Destiny* that one should not forget the 'Numerous ruthless Jewish men,' who in the Holocaust robbed, tortured, and killed. Another Melbourne survivor, Abraham Biderman, described Rumkovski the head of Lodz ghetto, as a medieval despot with power over life and death.

In Australia racist attitudes led to atrocities against Aborigines. Current Australian governments have rejected Holocaust and current asylum seekers, whom they have incarcerated and dehumanised in harsh remote areas.

Circumstances conducive to genocides

The argument runs that had circumstances in Germany been different, Hitler would have continued his harangues in flop houses, Himmler would have become a bureaucrat, and Goering would have stayed a self-absorbed dreamer.

Ervin Staub in *The Roots of Evil* noted that feelings of existential danger and inability to live meaningful lives preceded the Holocaust, and the Armenian and Cambodian genocides.

In 1932 when the Nazis received more votes than any other party, Germany was reeling from the defeat in World War I, the French annexation of the Ruhr in 1922, the Great Depression, inflation, a third of the population on welfare, an unstable government, and the Communist threat. The Nazis promised stability and honour.

Two more factors need to be considered. The first is power.

Power

In 1971 Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment at Stanford University in which he randomly assigned roles of prisoners and guards to students. The guards quickly abused their power and the prisoners succumbed to the extent that the experiment had to be abandoned. Zimbardo concluded that power without constraints leads to abuse.

On a much larger and ominous scale, Rudolph Rummel in *The Statistics of Democide* concluded that power kills and absolute power kills absolutely. In the 20th century between 170 and 330 million civilian deaths resulted from state violence. Democracies were least guilty, authoritarian regimes more so, and totalitarian regimes exponentially more so.

The second factor is

Systems

To kill masses of people requires efficient systems. The Nazis captured and perverted every organisation of civilisation: the government, bureaucracy, and the legal, educational, police, and military systems to the goals of murder.

Even more, the government perverted systems of thought, language, symbols, relationships, emotions and ethics. For instance, Hitler said, "Conscience is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish like circumcision." The ministry of enlightenment and propaganda, a German invention, disseminated the new values.

The dehumanisation of Jews was procedural, conscious, verbalised and bureaucratised. As Professor Kwiet has said, Jews were first made incrementally socially dead. Then they became subhuman, then inanimate Stuecke meaning pieces, and finally smoke, nothing. Slaughterhouses became factories of death ruled by ideals of ruthlessness and efficiency.

I believe that the Holocaust was unique in the total and cynical capture of one people's minds bodies and culture for the purpose of eliminating the human essence, physical being, and culture of another people.

Conclusion

Genocides involve a compound of threatening circumstances, flawed leaders, and frightened followers. The mix is held together by force and ideology.

Within the mix, at their instinctive core, three types of threats can evoke specific types of violence. Deprivation can evoke appropriation and robbery; powerlessness and humiliation can turn into oppression and dehumanisation, and being devoured to hunting others.

Each of these perceptions of threat, real or imagined, can evoke violence in individuals, groups and nations in different proportions. Each violence is accompanied by a package of justifications, belief systems, and ideologies. Each type of violence can be directed on scapegoats.

Prevention of genocides

On an individual level, early identification and treatment of aggressive individuals, of bullies in schools, homes, work, and politics, perhaps using Dr Foster's perpetrator profile can be useful.

On a group level, cesspools of poverty and prejudice that lead to gang and ethnic violence require rectification.

On national levels democracy, prosperity, love and respect for children, liberal education, and election of wise leaders prevent genocides.

When circumstances become difficult and frightening, beware of charismatic leaders and fervent ideologies.

- Beware of an out-group being defined as different, dangerous, and harmful.
- It being dehumanised and demonised
- Registration and ejection of the out-group
- Deportation, incarceration, given numbers
- Establishment of extrajudicial killing squads

Finally, I believe that perpetratorhood can be examined, understood, and potentially prevented.

It is not easy task, but I hope that today's forum may be a contribution to that goal.