

3 Why the Germans? Why the Jews? The Perennial Holocaust Question

“Why the Germans? Why the Jews?” is the title of a very recent book by the stimulating and always controversial maverick German historian, Götz Aly.¹ I shall momentarily delve into his answer, but his are not new questions. These perplexing and complex issues have accompanied us since that series of events – variously, and each problematically, called “the Holocaust” or the “Shoah” or the “Final Solution” – became known. The attempted answers have been so numerous, often contradictory, at times so richly deep, and a few so absurdly simplistic that to conclude that one day we will “know” the ultimate answers to these questions would be foolish. Still this does not relieve us of the responsibility to probe as deeply as we can into these questions. In a chapter of this length, there is no possibility of a comprehensive review. Rather I will limit myself to some important examples.

First, we must realize that at issue here is what Leszek Kolakowski calls “ideological” genocide, one which – at the very least at the decision-making top – conducted mass killings not merely for self-enrichment (although it was also that), but grounded in a “philosophy” insisting that “the victims *deserve* annihilation for metaphysical, historical or moral reasons.”² In the history of genocides, this was not always the case. The mass murders of the Armenians during World War I was supported by little or no ideological or worldview considerations, nor were the massacres of Indians in North America. The European conquest of South America occasionally rationalized that the natives had no soul, but this was not the reason for their mass killing. Most genocides, Kolakowski adds, have proceeded without the killers bothering to construct theories justifying their actions. Simple power, land greed, domination and wealth were the main-springs here. Perhaps the “otherness”, the purported alien nature of the victims helped overcome inhibitions, but it was not the reason for the murders. Of course the mass exterminations in religious wars *were* ideological, but at least

¹ The full title is *Why the Germans? Why the Jews? Envy, Race-Hatred, and the Pre-History of the Holocaust* (New York, 2014), translated by Jefferson Chase. The original German appeared in 2011.

² Leszek Kolakowski, “Genocide and Ideology” in his collection of essays, *Is God Happy?* (London, 2012), especially p. 75.

Note: This chapter is based upon a lecture given and developed between November 2015 and October 2016 at Central Michigan University, Trinity College, Dublin and the Institute of Jewish Studies, University of Antwerp respectively.

heretics had the option to renounce their errors and convert to the proselytizing, conquering religion. The Nazi case was different: Extermination was to be total and an ideological duty. Given that the horrors occurred in a putatively civilized mid-twentieth-century Europe, justification was not only necessary, but at the core of the project. How to understand this shocking eruption remains deeply perplexing. Here I will try to enumerate just some of the more influential attempts at explaining it.

We begin, then by looking at some answers to the question, “why the Germans?”. The very question, of course, assumes a kind of specifically “collective” mentality or peculiarly “national” answer, an essentialist anthropology, a group psychology and/or a peculiar history that especially predisposed Germans and Germany towards Nazism and the killing of Jews. Early approaches and explanations can variously be characterized under the general umbrella of the so-called “*Sonderweg*”, the notion that Germany underwent a special and distorted path of development, one that was intrinsically different from the West. Only an aberrant, pathological, past it was held could spawn such a monstrous outgrowth.

Of course, in embryonic stereotypical form these ideas were already current amongst Germany’s adversaries in the late nineteenth century and World War I. There was a pre-existent image of Germans as intrinsically militaristic, authoritarian, obedient, rapacious, block-headed – and murderous. But it was only in the 1960s and after that more respectable, sophisticated scholarly versions appeared. These theories held that – unlike in the West – Germany was characterized by a disjunction between successful economic development, on the one hand, and backward social and political spheres, on the other. Thus, so went these narratives, Germany never underwent a successful bourgeois revolution that ensured rational liberal-democratic regimes in France, England and the United States.

According to *Sonderweg* proponents, the ideological result and expression of these characteristics was a new, particularly Germanic, regressive form of nationalism: *völkisch* ideology with its metaphysic of national rootedness, its symbolism of blood, soil, and will, its anti-urban, anti-liberal bias, its rejection of modernity and its anti-Semitic view of the Jews as both symbolizing and physically embodying all these evils.³ Any number of works were written with titles like “From Luther to Hitler”,⁴ “From the Romantics to Hitler”⁵ which regarded Nazism as almost genetically programmed into German culture. “The Nazis”, as one commentator put it, “say that might is right; Spengler said it, Bernhardi said

³ The classic work of this view is George L. Mosse’s, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964).

⁴ William McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Philosophy* (Boston, 1941).

⁵ See, for instance, Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York, 1941).

it: Nietzsche said it; Treitschke had said as much: so had Haller before him; so had Novalis.”⁶ (Surprisingly, Wagner did not appear in this list. He did, however, in many others).

Many of these ideas have by now been rejected. The idea of a *Sonderweg* presumes a norm, a series of suppositions as to what constitutes “normal” or “proper” development, using Western liberal democratic states as the ideal. The fact that popular democracy in Western countries was typically achieved *against* the bourgeoisie rather than by it, constitutes only one obvious weakness in the argument. As an answer to “why the Germans”, however, I want to point out three serious pitfalls of this approach. The first concerns teleology, where an inevitabilist, linear reading of the origins of Nazism is said to reside deep into the recesses of the German past. It is tempting, but too easy, to portray the past, as if it were the mere preparation, the prologue of what was to come later. Secondly, ideas are not transmitted in literal, unmediated fashion, no single chain of meaning and intention can be found; interpretations and influences are always multiple. Thirdly, these presentations lose all sense of contingency, reducing unique historical processes to their known – and thus in principle, predictable – results. As Peter Gay has put it: “To say the Third Reich was grounded in the German past is true enough; to say that it was the inescapable result of that past, the only fruit that the German tree would grow is false.”⁷ 1933 was not inscribed in every past event of German history, culture, tradition and politics.⁸

This leads to an even more serious deficiency in such approaches: To the degree that these theories have at least some explanatory power and validity, they account perhaps for the breakdown of Weimar democracy, the authoritarianism and illiberalism, the aggravated nationalism and a degree of anti-Semitism, but hardly for the unprecedented, radically transgressive dimensions of Nazism and certainly not for a globally oriented genocide of the entire Jewish (and other) people totally removed from Germany’s geographical borders. For that more specific and novel ingredients, the triggers, and mechanism of transmission, must surely come into play.

There has been, of course, one such famous (and for some notorious) attempt to do precisely this within the *Sonderweg* paradigm. Daniel Goldhagen’s 1996 *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, views the

⁶ R. Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism* (London, 1941), pp. 277 ff.

⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (New York, 1978), p. 9.

⁸ For an overview of these issues see “Nazism, Normalcy, and the German *Sonderweg*” in my collection of essays *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans and Jews* (Madison, 2001).

Shoah exclusively through the prism of a uniquely *German* anti-Semitism, as the almost inevitable unleashing of a long-brewing national project of “the Germans” (and not just the Nazis), and in opposition to more general or universalizing explanations (evasive academic abstractions, as he calls them) and to which I shall return presently. For Goldhagen, the “Final Solution” represents the logical outcome of a peculiarly lethal and singularly German “eliminationist” anti-Semitism, deeply built into the country’s political culture and its social and religious institutions. Already in the nineteenth century, he claims, the overwhelming majority of Germans had internalized this view of the world. With the rise of Hitler, this eliminationism almost seamlessly melded into its racist, exterminatory form, and the overwhelming majority of Germans thus either “understood” or willingly engaged in the killing of Jews, usually in the most cruel and humiliating ways possible. The Shoah thus reflected the authentic sentiments and the popular will of the majority of the German nation.

But surely this is all too easy – the major interpretive issues and problems are simply dismissed. Of course, anti-Semitism disfigured and was clearly evident in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. That it was deeply bound – certainly as a necessary if not sufficient condition – with the decision to exterminate the Jews is common coin. But anti-Semitism was not a majestically autonomous, disembodied force. Jew-hatred clearly existed, but at issue is the question of its relative weight as a causal agent amidst a welter of other exclusions, prejudices, forces and factors that brought about a continent-wide, meticulously orchestrated genocide. If German *continuity* of Jew-hatred is a crucial factor, then one needs to explain the fact that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-Semitism was far stronger not only in Eastern Europe, but also in enlightened, democratic France than it was in Germany at that time. Under Nazi rule, in these countries there were, to be sure, many active and especially brutal accomplices to the killings, but they were not the conceivers or systematic planners of this demonically grandiose project. (Indeed the *Generalplan Ost* essentially conceived of most East European populations as enemies or slaves). Moreover, if popular anti-Semitism was so deeply ingrained in Germany, why were the Nazis constrained to *mute* their anti-Jewish rhetoric from 1929–1933? Indeed, we know that for many of its adherents, militant, ideological anti-Semitism was often the result of being won over to Nazism rather than the cause of the attraction.

The cultural signals and the political, social and economic reality – especially for German Jews – were always far more mixed and complex than the simple statement that all Germans were just anti-Semitic (not to mention potential blood-thirsty murderers). How else does one explain the remarkable rates of intermarriage during the Weimar Republic?

It is crucial to realize that the combination of integration and assimilation with rejection and hostility constituted the more dense reality. Even under the Nazis, as Eric A. Johnson has insightfully demonstrated in his work on the Gestapo, it was precisely these mixed messages sent out by the authorities themselves, and a degree of kindness and friendship shown by “ordinary Germans”, that proved to be a *trap* for many German Jews.⁹ In any case, if popular assent was so great, this does not jell with the fact that the *Endlösung* was supposed to be kept secret. (The fact that much information regarding the atrocities leaked out is beside the point here.)

For some time then, the prevailing scholarly view has not been with Goldhagen, but rather with Ian Kershaw who argued that while latent-anti-Semitism was clearly present, apathy, passivity and indifference – characteristic of behavior in general towards minority “outsiders”, especially in crisis situations – were the predominant factors. It was this, he argues, more than active hatred, that allowed the ideological elite to propel and radicalize anti-Jewish policy into genocide.¹⁰

Nevertheless, unlike earlier *Sonderweg* approaches, more recent attempts to answer the question “Why the Germans, why the Jews”, have sought to concretely identify genocidal potential by emphasizing its underlying material and emotional bases. Thus in his new book the aforementioned Götz Aly *Why the Germans? Why the Jews? Envy, Race Hatred, and the Prehistory of the Holocaust* (2014) relates the development of a specifically German anti-Semitism to the (in many ways correctly perceived) astonishing and rapid economic and cultural success of German Jewry during the course of the nineteenth century and after. The key, he argues, was simply envy: Christians became obsessed with how quickly the Jews were bettering themselves. Aly locates this envy within a specific political context: Germany was a divided polity and thus, more than elsewhere, it was characterized by a deep and ongoing collective insecurity, leading to an ever more insistence on an exaggerated sense of national identity. Self-doubt linked to envy inevitably produced aggression and a xenophobic “hypersensitivity to minorities”. Jews were seen to be more successful, wealthy and intelligent than the non-Jews around them – an intolerable datum.

The novel twist in Aly’s treatment is that he links this envy to the development of race-hatred (the later basis of Nazi rationalizations) and – perhaps more importantly and interestingly – to a kind of “democratic” longing for a new and

⁹ Eric A. Johnson: *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (New York, 1999).

¹⁰ “German Popular Opinion and the ‘Jewish Question’, 1939–1943: Some Further Reflections”, in (ed.) A. Paucker, *The Jews in Nazi Germany, 1933–1943* (Tübingen, 1986).

homogenously defined national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) that promised collective security in an uncertain world. In this sense, Aly argues, envy resulted in an anti-Semitism of “social mobility” for it underlay and justified the massive project of Jewish dispossession: Germans profited from Nazi policies by taking Jewish jobs, businesses and possessions. It thus explains their silence about the State’s persecution of Jews and why they ultimately became active or passive participants in the Holocaust.

There is, of course something to all of this, but its reach is rather severely limited.¹¹ Aly’s earlier work assumed a kind of rational utilitarian motivation behind the killings.¹² The desire for material gain is also present here, but the underlying explanation – envy – consists of an essentialist national *Sonderweg* psychology. The delayed circumstances of national formation and internal fractures produced “an innate insecurity of national identity”. This insecurity and the *ressentiment*, the pent-up aggression, regarding their perceived disadvantage rendered the Germans potentially murderous. Aly’s new tack appears as a near one-dimensional variant of the fashionable “history of emotions” – one that threatens to smuggle the older, discredited psychohistory in through the back door.

Aly’s answer to “why the Germans”, then, is ultimately reductive and simplistic. Certainly when it comes to the killing fields themselves – indeed, to the innumerable acts of mass murder – the limits of the envy paradigm become acutely clear. Envy, to be sure, exists in all class and ethnically differentiated societies, but neither expropriation nor genocide generally follow from that. I may envy my neighbor’s swimming pool, but as a rule I do not go out and murder him. More concretely, given the continent-wide scale of their genocidal aims, jealousy and envy can hardly be said to be the ways in which the vast majority of the victims, the masses of Eastern European Jewry, were seen. They were rather regarded as primitive, carriers of dirt and disease, dangerous and distasteful creatures of the ghetto, reviled, sources perhaps of fear, but not envied. Envy, moreover, hardly accounts for the – still enormously difficult to grasp – genocidal obsession that moved Nazi murderers, even very late in the war, to travel to remote Greek islands and deport babies and hunt little children. (I will return to this perplexing issue at the very end of this chapter). The forces underlying the attempted (and nearly successful) destruction of all the Jews in

¹¹ See the insightful review by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “Why the Germans?”, *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter 2015).

¹² On Aly’s previous work in this spirit see the critique in the chapter by Dan Diner, “On Rationality and Rationalization: An Economistic Explanation of the Final Solution”, in his *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley, 2000).

Europe (and elsewhere) were surely more variegated than that. Is it necessary to restate that in the explanation of such complex, multi-dimensional developments, no single factor suffices?¹³

But we must move on. For at the same time as these particular *Sonderweg* theories were being developed, there have been (and continue to be) parallel, more “universal”, explanations questioning both the centrality of the specifically “German” factor and qualifying the exclusive animating force of anti-Semitism in these events. In their stead, they posit more general social and contextual factors – the Holocaust as a “human possibility”. Chillingly, they imply that all of us in similar circumstances may well have become perpetrators. These theories, too, operate at various levels from the motivations of elite decision-makers, through bureaucrats, onlookers, down to individual killers. All these need, of course, to be distinguished.¹⁴

The earliest counters to critical *Sonderweg* approaches came respectively from rather apologetic German conservative thinkers, Marxists or Jewish émigré’s (most influentially, Hannah Arendt).¹⁵ The framework and viewpoint of these conservative German historians, such as Gerhard Ritter and Friedrich Meinecke, remained determinedly national, but they disavowed all notions of German abnormalcy.¹⁶ For them, German development had been essentially healthy. Its natural unfolding had been upset by the importation of alien and corrupting Western practices and the practice and ideologies of modernity. World War I and its disastrous aftermath had destroyed Germany’s fabric of stability and opened the way to demagogic chaos in a mass, permissible age. If for them, “modernity” was the culprit, for most Marxists, Nazism was merely a

¹³ See my review of Aly’s book in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (Volume 30, Number 2, Fall 2016), pp. 365–368.

¹⁴ As Michael Wildt writes: “The more the persecution and extermination of European Jews is understood not as a deed committed by Hitler or a set of specific bureaucratic agencies, but by numerous groups and institutions within German society, the more differentiated our analysis of the perpetrators must be. Future research on the subject will be guided not by the presupposition of a single, predominant perpetrator type, but by the analysis of different actors and institutions, of intentional will to exterminate and structural conditions, of ideology and function, as well of individual premeditation and the dynamics of situational violence.” See his *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, translated by Tom Lampert (Madison, 2009), p. 8.

¹⁵ Here I must request the reader’s indulgence. Some of the figures discussed in the following section also appear in my discussion of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Given the difference in focus and context of that and this present essay, they are meant to light up rather different issues.

¹⁶ Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe* (Boston, 1950), originally published in German in 1946. See also Ritter, *The German Problem: Basic Questions of German Political Life, Past and Present* (Columbus, 1965), originally published in German in 1962.

variant of “Fascism” and had little to do with German national character but had to be grasped as part of the dynamics of capitalism under pressure.¹⁷ Neither of these approaches gave much weight to anti-Semitism or the genocide of the Jews; when it was discussed by the conservative historians, the Jews seemed to be culpable as agents of instability. In his otherwise very intelligent 1942 (!) analysis of Nazism, *Behemoth*, the Marxist Franz Neumann wrote that “the internal political value of anti-Semitism will never allow for a complete extermination of the Jews. The foe cannot and must not disappear; he must always be held in readiness, for all the evils originating in the socio-political system.”¹⁸

Hannah Arendt also rejected any emphasis on specifically German developments to account either for Nazism or the genocide, but, unlike the others, took anti-Semitism and the exterminations extremely seriously. I will deal with this momentarily, but first need to examine her dismissal of any German-centered kind of explanation. For her it was the uprooting dynamics of modern society as such, its tendencies towards nihilism and superfluity that provided the key. Her classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) work is virtually devoid of any reflections on the specific nature (normal or otherwise) of the German mind and polity. Nazism, rather, was conceived as one extreme instance of a general, radically novel, peculiarly modern, political project of total domination called “totalitarianism”. Its genesis was not integrally bound to any particular historical culture. It incarnated a potential latent in the twentieth century itself. Its deadliness derived from its generality, not its nationality. Indeed, Nazism, she insisted, was “actually the breakdown of all German and European traditions, the good as well as the bad.” Even more critically, already in 1945 she entirely exonerated German culture: “Luther or Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche, have not the least responsibility for what is happening in the extermination camps”,¹⁹ she proclaimed. Continuity could not account for the emergence of an entirely new genocidal mentality. Rather, it was the breakdown of older stabilizing frameworks, the emergence of radical new social and political structures and unprecedented imperialist expansionary drives, the transgressive urge to go beyond all previous limits and to render “everything possible” that constituted the key.

A dis-emphasis on continuity also marked Arendt’s analysis of anti-Semitism. Those who relied on the notion of an “eternal” Jew-hatred, she argued, would be at a loss to explain the unprecedented nature of this event, why this

¹⁷ For an overview of Marxist approaches see Pierre Aycoberry, *The Nazi Question: An Essay on the Interpretations of National Socialism* (New York, 1981). See chapters 4,9.

¹⁸ *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York, 1944), p. 125.

¹⁹ “Approaches to the German Problem” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954* (New York, 1994), especially pp. 108–109.

occurred only once and at a particular time. But, quite unlike other anti-*Sonderweg* theorists, Arendt not only spent considerable time analyzing anti-Semitism, but indeed rendered it at the very storm-centre of world politics and the Nazi drive at total domination.²⁰ To be sure, like much of her thinking in general, her historical treatment of anti-Semitism was both controversial and idiosyncratic. Her depiction of early Jewish power, its privileged functions and unpopular alliance with the absolutist State seemed to hint at some kind of Jewish responsibility for the hate it evoked. This was similar to her later allegations in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that during the Holocaust the Jewish Councils collaborated with the Nazis. Both these narratives have been roundly attacked and criticized.²¹

Yet what remains pertinent for our present discussion, is that both in terms of the origins and disposition of Nazism and its anti-Semitism and, indeed, the exterminations themselves, Arendt was not only doggedly against *Sonderweg* approaches, but always leaned towards explanations couched in more general frameworks and “universal” categories. She insisted that Jew-hatred was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for genocide. “Neither the fate of European Jewry nor the establishment of death factories”, she wrote, “can be fully explained and grasped in terms of anti-Semitism.”²² There was an inner logic and dynamic to the extermination drive itself.

Quite unlike Goldhagen, she refused to portray these extreme events in terms of a simple dichotomy between wildly anti-Semitic German killers and Jewish victims. She was impelled by the conviction that the method and nature of the killings went beyond essentialized anthropological distinctions and insisted that the Holocaust raised explanatory and moral issues of *universal* concern. She would have been appalled by Goldhagen’s later advice “that the study of Germans and their anti-Semitism before and during the Nazi period must be approached as an anthropologist would a previously unencountered preliterate people and their beliefs, leaving behind especially the preconception that Germans were in every ideational realm just like our ideal notion of ourselves.”²³

²⁰ Part I of *The Origins* is entirely devoted to that subject. For her many other reflections on the topic see her *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York, 2007).

²¹ See the critiques of Leon Wieseltier, “Understanding Anti-Semitism”, *The New Republic* (7 October 1981) and Shlomo Avineri, “Where Hannah Arendt went wrong”, *Haaretz* (3 March 2010).

²² Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps”, in *Essays in Understanding*, op. cit., p. 235.

²³ *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), p. 45.

(Here, I may add, in parentheses, that the shock we still experience with regard to this event is the exact opposite of Goldhagen's statement. Although this does not do us much credit, we are somehow less shocked by the barbarism of preliterate peoples. It is precisely the fact that the Holocaust was carried out by one of the most literate societies in the world – indeed, many members of the Einsatzgruppen possessed doctorates and were primarily students of the humanities²⁴ – that constitutes our shocked outrage. The huge reflective literature on the topic flows to a great degree from this fact and the – rather Eurocentric – perception that this was an event in which cultured perpetrators murdered cultured victims.)

But let us get back to Goldhagen. He was in fact responding not just to Arendt but to a wide tendency amongst a host of other scholars to resort to what he called their scholarly reductions and evasions into universalizing abstractions such as “modernity”, “bureaucratic murder”, “banality of evil”, “obedience to authority” and so on. Both in terms of its ongoing interpretations and the purported lessons and “messages”, this event is supposed to convey, the tension (or possible synthesis) between the “particular” “German” and “Jewish” factors and the general or universally “human” dimensions, lies at the very heart of how we are to understand the great problem at hand. (Many chapters in this book delve into different aspects of this ubiquitous “particularist-universalist” tension).

Those who seek to widen the scope of interpretation stress that the event was not only carried out by “Germans”, but by people in almost every country under German occupation. Indeed, in some cases, such as France, the authorities initiated the expulsion of foreign Jews before any such German or Nazi order was issued. Even more generally, we know from countless unfortunate historical examples, that indiscriminate killing within Europe has apparently not been limited to one or other ethnic or national group. *Before* the Holocaust, commenting on the Spanish Civil War Simone Weil incisively wrote that none of the participants even on the Left

expressed [...] repugnance [...] or even only disapproval of unnecessary bloodshed. Men would relate with a warm, comradely smile how they had killed priests or “fascists” [...] whenever a certain group of human beings is relegated, by some temporal or spiritual authority, beyond the pale of those whose life has a price, then one finds it perfectly natural to kill people. When one knows that one can kill without risk or punishment or blame, one kills, or smiles encouragingly at those who kill. If one happens to feel some revulsion, one hides it, one stifles it fearing to be seen lacking in virility. There seems to be some impulse of intoxication which it is impossible to resist [...] I have not found it in anyone. On the

24 See Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, op. cit, especially p. 79.

contrary, I have seen sober Frenchmen who on their own accord would never have thought of killing anyone – plunging with obvious relish into that blood-soaked atmosphere.²⁵

The disturbing cumulative effect of these studies that emphasize either non-German or local or the more universal springs of murderous action, is to argue that for those who operated the “machinery of destruction” (from the decision-makers to middle echelon desk-murderers to ideological SS officers down to the “ordinary” men – and women – who did the dirty work at the lowest part of the hierarchy) could do so out of a variety of motives of which anti-Semitism was always either latently or explicitly present, but which was not the only one and not necessarily always the most crucial one. In the first place we know how many non-Germans took lusty part in these operations. In almost every occupied country “willing executioners” were found. There have been numerous attempts pointing to alternative ways of understanding the atrocities without over-emphasizing either the role of anti-Semitism or particular “German” characteristics. Thus Raul Hilberg has argued that often anti-Jewish sentiments functioned as rationalizations, rather than causes, of the atrocities perpetrated.²⁶ Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banal bureaucrat thoughtlessly engaged in mass murder has become virtually common coin,²⁷ and only slightly less familiar is Stanley Milgram’s chilling demonstration of the deep human tendency to obey authority regardless even of one’s own disapproval of the act.²⁸

The best known proponent of this view obviously is Christopher Browning. In his 1978 study behind the motivations of the bureaucrats of the anti-Jewish bureau of the Nazi Foreign Office he found neither anti-Semitism nor, even, fanatical obedience but simply old-fashioned careerism and the desire not to tarnish one’s progress as a conforming civil servant.²⁹ In his famous study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution, Browning demonstrated the incremental processes by which “ordinary men”, middle-aged, mainly working class men from Hamburg became mass murderers, rounding up and killing Jewish men, women and children in 1942 Poland with increasing ferocity, facilitated not so much by virtue of ideological conviction as by pressures of group conformity, deference to authority, the dulling powers of alcohol, processes of dehumanization and routinization (simply getting used to the killings) and a

25 Weil to George Bernanos, quoted in Alfred Kazin, “A Genius of the Spiritual Life”, *New York Review of Books* (18 April 1996), p. 21.

26 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 653–662.

27 See *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963).

28 *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York, 1974).

29 Christopher R. Browning, *The German Foreign Office and the Final Solution: A Study of Referat DIII of Abteilung Deutschland* (New York, 1978).

series of chilling rationalizations. (Goldhagen's ordinary *Germans* was written explicitly against this view).

Let me be clear about the implications of this more general view. For those involved it is not as if anti-Jewish sentiment and stereotypes played no role – Jews, after all, “stood outside their circle of obligation and responsibility” (p. 73) – but rather that this factor became integrated into a complex cluster of additional dehumanizing processes that ultimately facilitated such actions.³⁰ Of course, the Holocaust was an anti-Jewish project. Is there any need to state this? It could be carried out, however, precisely because its murderous impulses operated above all within an ever brutalizing war, an informing *Ostpolitik*, particular local and political contexts and interests, and modes of behavior that rendered it a “human” possibility. “Not trying to understand the perpetrators in human terms would make impossible [...] any history of Holocaust perpetrators that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature” writes Browning and adds: “Ultimately the Holocaust took place because at the most basic level individual human beings killed other human beings.”³¹

Working from within a different context, in his *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, Timothy Snyder has most recently argued that “Antisemitism cannot fully explain the behavior of the members of the *Einsatzgruppen*. The *Einsatzgruppen* sent into Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 did not kill Jews. The *Einsatzgruppen* sent into Poland in 1939 killed far more Poles than Jews. Even the *Einsatzgruppen* sent into the USSR killed others besides Jews [...] the disabled, Gypsies, communists, and in some regions, Poles. There were for that matter no Germans (or collaborators) whose only task was to kill Jews [...] The people who killed people, killed people.”³² Indeed, he writes, that while we “rightly associate the Holocaust with Nazi ideology”, he writes, “we forget that many of the killers were not Nazis or even Germans.” Multiple nationalities who had previously come under Soviet rule took part in it, not only for traditional anti-Semitic reasons but for a host of local and political motivations. Most prominent amongst these was the evil that proceeded from the slogan of “Judeo-Bolshevism”. This separated Jews from other Soviet citizens and many Soviet citizens from their own guilty pasts. The murder of Jews and the transfer of property and goods created a class of people

30 The most disturbing study of this process is to found in the words of the commandant of Treblinka, Franz Stangl. See Gitta Sereny's disturbing study *Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (New York, 1974), especially pp. 200–202.

31 See Browning's “German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, Historical Reconstruction”, in Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 27 and *Ordinary Men*, op. cit., p.xx.

32 New York, Duggan Books, p. 147.

who had gained from the German occupation, and seemed to promise relative social advance in a German future. The politics of mass killing Snyder writes, was thus “a joint creation”, a meeting of those nationalities previously under the Soviet yoke combined with Nazi expectations.³³

This being said – and adding that while both indifference and conventional anti-Semitism allowed the destruction process to proceed relatively unimpeded – it is important, indeed crucial, to insist that none of these factors were responsible for conceiving or orchestrating the Final Solution. They do not tell us anything about the underlying motivating factors, the level of ideology and policy-making at the very top, the driving force of a small elite that set these events in motion and which made the very idea of killing all Jews thinkable, conceivable in the first place. This has always been the blind spot of what is known as the “functionalist” school which – correctly – stressed the polycratic nature of the regime and its contingent, largely non-ideological groping towards the “Final Solution”. But, by and large, such accounts paid only lip service to the informing broader background, the larger contextual and mental structures that shaped the choices made, guided action and created the atmosphere in which decisions proceeded and which permitted radical, previously tabooed, atrocities. What, in other words, rendered this entire project thinkable, conceivable, a possibility? This, surely, must be regarded as the most decisive issue and level of analysis.

There is virtual consensus today about the centrality of Hitler’s obsessional and demonic view of the Jews as *the* animating force. This of course fitted into a wider picture he had of the world: an overall racial outlook, an anti-liberal, anti-rationalist view of existence as eternal racial struggle requiring *Lebensraum*, the conquering of the East for its food and resources and ruthlessly subjugating and enslaving its peoples. Timothy Snyder’s *Black Earth* (2015) somewhat controversially (and perhaps too fashionably) calls Hitler’s global, even planetary, ideology “ecological”, one in which Jews played an extraordinarily destructive role. Jews represented a “wound of nature”, an essentially anti-natural force. Their total extermination was necessary in order to save the planet, for the Jews with their abstract, rational and ethical insistences, were a kind of “anti-race”, disturbing the natural racial order, a threat to the species nature and the struggle for racial domination and superiority.

Hitler’s Reich Security Main Office internalized and over time radicalized this view into exterminatory action. These men were no longer simply servants of the State; their job, uniquely, was to protect the Volk. The job of that institution, as

³³ Ibid., pp. 185 and 163 respectively.

Werner Best put it, was to carefully monitor “the political state of health of our German Volkskörper, that recognizes every symptom of disease in a timely manner and that identifies the destructive germs [. . .] and eliminates them with every suitable means.”³⁴

These fanatical beliefs were, to be sure, extraordinary. However, the materials out of which Hitler and his elite concocted such an ideology did not come out of nowhere. Its longer-term and necessary building blocks were to be found in many strands of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European – as well as German – high and popular culture and political practice. This informing background may help, at least partially, to account, not only how such murderous conclusions could be reached but also how and why such a worldview could become accepted – or at least vaguely plausible and not resisted – to millions of people.

Of what did these new building blocks consist? We cannot enumerate these forces in detail – a task that would require volumes – but merely provide some suggestive directions and outlines. These would include Social Darwinism and its related ideas of struggle, degeneration and regeneration; stereotypes of health and disease, beauty and ugliness, normalcy and the abnormal³⁵; the ruthless cultures of colonialism and imperial domination; the emergence of Life-philosophy with its rejection of “unnatural”, rational intellectuality; transgressive Nietzschean insistences that “everything is permitted” and the accompanying experimental imperative to go beyond all limits; the rise of varieties of racism; the science of eugenics; the breakdown of the bourgeois and civilized order in World War I and its aftermath in Weimar; the cult and practice of violence as not only a necessary but redemptive act, and the accompanying idea of the creation of a radical new Man (or Woman) and New Society; and of course, anti-Semitism in all its numerous guises.

Hitler and the Nazi elite, the decision-makers and the officers in charge of implementation, uniquely forged these elements into an ever increasingly radicalized overarching project. These ingredients provided the enabling context by which traditional Jew-hatred could be transformed into total genocide. Certainly demonological anti-Semitism was the animating centre of this project. Only the Jews were targeted for total extermination, but that operation occurred within a general eugenic (or ecological, as Snyder would have it) framework of German renewal and resettlement, with exclusionary measures that included mass

³⁴ Wildt, op. cit, p. 9.

³⁵ On this, see the pioneering and still pertinent work by George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985).

sterilization and the killing and gassing of Germany's sick and insane, the mass murder of Gypsies, the virtual extermination of the Polish intelligentsia, the persecution and killing of various homosexuals, and, between 1941 and 1944, the death of seven million civilians in Russia. It was not the autonomous strength of traditional Jew-hatred that impelled it to assume its entirely novel, systematically genocidal apotheosis, but rather its integration under conditions of total war within a radically transgressive vision of Aryan mastery, racial servitude and destruction. The Holocaust must be seen within the context of this taboo-breaking, bio-political continuum – of which it represented the ultimate, extreme edge.

All these as Timothy Snyder puts it, in a slightly different context, “generated new sorts of destructive politics, and new knowledge of the human capacity for mass murder.”³⁶ Raul Hilberg articulated this picture of “new” knowledge thus: “Blood was to be shed. This act – this work – was never to be undone. A landmark in history, it was cast in ‘monumental’ proportions. This was no episode. It was a deed. In the middle of the end, a final cognition was felt. The perpetrator was gazing upon a forbidden vista. Under the murky huts of Auschwitz [...] these guards were living through something ultimate. Experience, *Erlebnis*, was reaching its outer limits. The act had become knowledge, and that knowledge was unique, for the sensation of a first discovery is not repeatable.”³⁷ And as Saul Friedländer, never one to underplay the crucial importance of anti-Semitism, described it, the staggering dimensions of the mass murders were also facilitated by a quite non-ideological intoxicated (*Rausch*) state of mind. The perpetrators, he writes, were “seized by a compelling lust for killing on an immense scale, driven by some kind of extraordinary elation in repeating the killing of ever-huger masses of people.”³⁸

This is about as far as we can go. Historians are obliged not to regard these obscene events – as many do – as somehow “beyond” history, an inexplicable metaphysical mystery, that took place metaphorically on “another planet”. On the contrary, because the Final Solution was a secular, human event that occurred at a particular identifiable time and within concrete – and very fragile – spaces, it should be equally amenable to the rules and methods that govern our increasingly refined and self-reflexive practice of historiography in general.³⁹

³⁶ Timothy Snyder, Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Duggan Books, 2015), p.xiii.

³⁷ Raul Hilberg, “German Motivations for the Destruction of the Jews”, *Midstream* (June 1965), p. 36.

³⁸ Friedländer, “‘The Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Explanation”, in his *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, 1993), p. 110.

³⁹ See my essay “On Saul Friedländer” in *History and Memory* (Volume 9, Numbers 1/2), Fall 1997.

We may, indeed, have arrived at an ever-deeper understanding of “how” this happened. To grasp “why” it transpired, of course, is a different matter. However close we seem to get – and we must never stop trying to do so – it seems to finally elude us. Perhaps we have arrived at the limits of understanding⁴⁰ such human motivations and actions – those which in other words we deem “evil” (a category with which historians are uncomfortable).

If there is indeed such a limit, a “black box” of inexplicability, it is surely trying to understand something approaching an organized and modern hunting obsession which, for instance, motivated the Nazis, as late as June 1944, to deport 2,200 Jews of all ages from the remote island of Rhodes over a distance of over 2000 kilometers to Auschwitz – at a cost, moreover, of their military effort.⁴¹ Together with this, it is the mass killings of babies that threaten our powers of comprehension.⁴² The rationalizations for mercilessly hunting down and determinedly seeking and murdering children are literally mind-blowing. As one killer later reported (without noting the irony of his so-called “compassion”): “I made the effort, and it was possible for me, to shoot only children. It so happened that the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer. It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience, to release children

40 Here my argument refers more to what Friedländer called “the unease in historical explanation” than the problems raised in the famous volume he edited *Probing the Limits of Explanation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992) which mainly dealt with the “post-modernist” notion that “reality” is essentially a function of narrative emplotment and rhetorical choices. Against this, Friedlaender asserted that it was the reality and modern significance of catastrophes that generated the search for a new voice and not the use of a specific voice which constructed the significance of these catastrophes. Here I am claiming that even with “new voices” and strategies a certain incomprehension will remain (perhaps that is ultimately true for all historical explanation – but that is a complicated discussion which will require a different forum).

41 See the chapter “On Rationality and Rationalization: An Economic Explanation of the Final Solution” in Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable*, op.cit., pp. 147–148.

42 Killing of babies is of course not unique to the Holocaust. Its latest incarnation has been in the Myanmar’s atrocities against its Rohingya Muslim minority. To be sure, the dimensions have been less great, but reports of babies being flung into bonfires and setting children aged 15 on fire are plenty enough. See Nicholas Kristof, “Did genocide destroy this village”, *New York Times* (December 16–17, 2017), p. 9. Not everyone will agree with this point of view. One colleague commented that from the perpetrator’s point of view, while children would pose a threat in the future and would thus seek revenge, this would not be true for the aged. Killing them indiscriminately, he argued, would be even more incomprehensible.

unable to live without their mothers.”⁴³ Others held that if every last child would not be killed, the next generation would rise and take revenge.

Whatever the twisted reasoning, it is also the compulsive hunting drive, the peeking into little corners, the great urgency (and often pride) in the catch, which remains so shockingly difficult to explain. Perhaps this sly, determined, obsessional hunting – has been best portrayed in the entirely fictional first scene of Quentin Tarantino’s popular movie, *Inglorious Bastards*. Having reached our limits perhaps we must turn to art, to literature and film, to portray levels of both humanity and inhumanity that logical and rational categories of explanation, cannot reach.⁴⁴ Even then we would still have to sadly accept Primo Levi’s dictum that at such moments – and not only for victims – there ultimately really “is no why”.⁴⁵

⁴³ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992), p. 73.

⁴⁴ The portrayal may be convincing but it is also true that, unlike the historical craft, Art itself does not interrogate and incorporate into its creations, its own limits. A recognition of both the possibilities, but also the limits, of understanding, are necessary in this context. I owe this insight to Moshe Lapin.

⁴⁵ Actually, the gulf between the “how” and the “why” may not be as great as it seems. As Raul Hilberg put it: “In all of my work I have never begun by asking the big questions because I would come up with small answers. I have preferred, therefore, to address these things which are minutiae or detail in order that I might be able to put together, in a gestalt, a picture, which, if not an explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired.” Quoted in Aaron Cutler’s, “Site of Memory: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah Project”, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (April 8, 2014). See <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/site-memory-claude-lanzmanns-shoah-project>