

Entering that Darkness: One Canadian Professor's View on Studying the Perpetrators of the Holocaust

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After reading a short account of Anne Frank's life, my 9 year old son asked me the most enduring question of Holocaust studies: "Why did the Nazis hate the Jews so much?" It is a question that my university students pepper me with whenever we start our study of the Shoah. This most persistent and perplexing of queries is one that educators still struggle to answer satisfactorily both for students and ourselves.

In spite of our failings to fully explain why the Nazis' virulent strain of antisemitism resulted in the industrialised murder of millions, the students I encounter are usually utterly convinced of Hitler's role as the sole agent of the Holocaust. They have made up their minds before they have taken any university-level courses. There is, however, a certain comfort in not fully understanding the mindset of the Nazi leader and his inner circle. I freely acknowledge to my classes that there are aspects of the perpetrators' psychology that we can never grasp. One of the judges of the Eichmann trial, for example, had this to say:

'I know the facts and the events that served as their framework; I know how the framework unfolded minute by minute, but this knowledge, as if coming from the outside, has nothing to do with understanding. There is in all this a portion that will always remain a mystery; a kind of forbidden zone, inaccessible to reason. Fortunately, as it happens.'

This is one of the ongoing dilemmas of teaching about the Holocaust: we can analyse and examine the events but comprehension of the perpetrators' motives remains elusive. If a judge at the Eichmann trial lacks a satisfactory explanation for this atrocity, I doubt that my students and I will plum these recesses to better effect. Yet as historians who seek to make the past comprehensible to ourselves as well as to future generations, we can never really leave the matter alone. This takes us repeatedly into the dark tour of the mental world of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

While we can retrace the history of antisemitism, analyse the toxic cocktail of Social Darwinism, racial pseudo-science, and ultra-nationalism, may consider the bitterness created by the Treaty of Versailles and the desperation of the Depression, scholars, educators and students alike have difficulty dissecting the unrelenting hatred and irrationality of the Nazis' racial policies. We encounter such ugliness that I can appreciate why some try to take the "easy way out" and ascribe it all to the work of a madman.

In Christopher Edwards and Siobhan O'Dowd's article ['The Edge of Knowing: Investigating Students' Prior Understandings of the Holocaust'](#), they found that some of their students began their exploration of the Holocaust with the assumption that "Hitler was a nutter".² While their students were in Year 8 (age 12 to 13), many university students also hold this view when they arrive in my classroom and some seem hesitant to be persuaded otherwise. It is difficult to know how much this has to do with their previous Holocaust education or perceptions formed by extra-curricular forces, but even the most basic examinations of the Holocaust should help students push past this simplistic explanation of causality. Demonizing Hitler is too easy; to place all the blame on his shoulders fails to convey the true horror of these events and frees us from having to examine the wider circle of complicity. It is the involvement of the multitudes that is most disturbing.

In order to divest students of the notion that the Shoah was merely the handiwork of a madman, I point out that there is no “smoking gun” which connects the Fuhrer to the “Final Solution” of the so-called “Jewish Question”. Empirically speaking it is much easier to link him to the Aktion T4 program, for example, given his written authorisation of “mercy killing” in the autumn of 1939.³ This is not of course to suggest there is the slightest doubt that Hitler was the prime mover in the annihilation of the Jews, and his last political testament demonstrates that he was proud of his legacy even as the Red Army closed in on his bunker. However, it is important to at least wobble the underpinnings of the students’ existing paradigms in the hope they will create a new - or at least a more complex - structure as the semester progresses. As Wolf Kaiser suggests, this new understanding should acknowledge that the Holocaust ‘is a product of rational planning and cynicism and this is more disturbing than insanity.’⁴

Diagnosing Hitler’s mental health is not nearly as compelling or significant as why so many Europeans endorsed and carried out his genocidal policies. After all, one man – sane or insane - could never have identified, contained, transported and annihilated millions of people without a vast cadre of “willing executioners”. What of the other leading Nazis, then? Can we understand their motives easier than those of the Fuhrer? When studying other perpetrators, Lieutenant-Colonel Adolf Eichmann continues to provide a contentious and interesting case study. Eichmann was a much smaller fish in the Nazi pond although his impact is undeniable. While Eichmann’s role in the Holocaust is not at issue, analyzing the man behind these actions has proven to be far more contentious, as discussed in Cesarani’s “Polychronicon” feature.⁵ My students find the historiographical debate surrounding Eichmann’s motivations both confusing and instructive: it reinforces the lesson that such debates are the heart and soul of a scholarly understanding of the past and there are seldom easy explanations.

Many Holocaust educators are no doubt familiar with Hannah Arendt’s seminal work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt argues that ‘the trouble

with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.⁶ Fifty years on, I am uncertain if we are more able or willing to embrace the notion of the “banality of evil”. It is much easier to conceive of Evil when it appears with horns and a pitch fork than the Rule of Nobody in a homicidal bureaucracy. Even harder to stomach is Arendt’s assertion that there were thousands of Eichmanns. My students and I prefer to think of it as a rarity that this nondescript, unrepentant genocidaire might come from any “normal” background.⁷ Eichmann provides proof that hatred is not an essential ingredient in genocide and analyzing motivation is a problematic and complex business.⁸

Most of my students have taken some Psychology courses and are familiar with Stanley Milgram’s and Philip Zimbardo’s landmark experiments on obedience (1961 and 1971). The notion that most humans follow whatever orders they are given supports Eichmann’s defence at his trial - the loyal SS man who obeys unquestioningly.⁹ As we move through the course and students are more willing to adapt their previous Hitlerist view, most will still bristle at the notion that people do horrible things simply because they are ordered by those in authority to do so. They are much more willing to accept the argument of Albert Breton and Ronald Wintrobe that the “bureaucracy of murder” functioned at high efficiency because men such as Eichmann tried to outdo each other in their haste to please their superiors and impress in the competitive pool of Nazi underlings.¹⁰ Bureaucratic competition and ambition are concepts which the students have no trouble with, even on this scale: they can begin to process that people killed to advance their careers as opposed to killing because of racial hatred or because they were ordered to do so. That they seem to find killing for advancement more understandable as a motive for mass murder has much to say about our own times and the students’ damning opinions of the bureaucratic/corporate culture in post-Enron North America. Perhaps the fact they cannot conceive of racism being that venomous bodes well for the current generation.

There are several perpetrators like Eichmann who attempted a post-war defence of their conduct by emphasizing that they followed orders from above. This is in startling contrast to survivors' accounts that emphasise agency; even if in their case this often involved "choiceless choices". Surely if there were alternatives for the victims, there was also freedom of choice for men like Eichmann.¹¹ Had Germany won the war, doubtless these same men would have exalted their role as victors and architects of the New World Order. With this in mind, an undiscerning reader must be careful not to be seduced by the "skilful apologetics" of perpetrators like Albert Speer.¹² In his autobiography, Speer claims he fell under Hitler's charismatic spell; even though he was a part of the Fuhrer's inner circle, Speer states that he was ignorant of at least some of the atrocities. His apparent contrition in the postwar years has earned him more public sympathy –rightly or wrongly - than someone like Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, who also left his own account for posterity. Although he lacks the charm of Speer, Hoess is more open about his involvement while still trying to make a case for his basic humanity. In their crafted testimonies, these former "supermen" are anxious to convince readers of their redeeming qualities. The uninitiated thus need to tread warily lest they be duped by the perpetrators' claims that they had little or no agency in the Shoah. Instructors can use such case studies to illustrate how the past is constructed and distorted.

Few students have any problems assigning blame to the Nazi hierarchy and their zealous subordinates. However, they become visibly disturbed when we study the role of the German physicians in the T4 programme who laid the groundwork for genocide in terms of their methods and some of the personnel.¹³ This is also true when we explore what the German people knew about the Holocaust.¹⁴ Such moments are formative: in these instances, students feel betrayed by respected professionals who violated the Hippocratic oath, and dismayed by the extent of the average German citizen's involvement or indifference. That said, I am cautious that students who cling to monocausal explanations do not simply move from a "Hitler was a mad man" position to one that simply says "blame all the Germans." It is also important to widen the circle of complicity outside of

Germany, and to include consideration of what was known and done about the Holocaust in the “free world”. I do not want my students to think the Holocaust was an issue “over there” that had little connection to Canada.

Canadians like to think our nation is well regarded by the international community. Real or imagined, we see ourselves as peacemakers and peacekeepers in the global arena. We strive to form a cultural mosaic. Yet Canada played its own dishonourable role on the periphery of the Nazi genocide and its current ideals of toleration and inclusion were nowhere to be seen. Even the most cursory examination of Canadian immigration policy towards the Jews will reveal that we ranked with the most exclusionist of countries in the 1930s and ‘40s. The Canadian government pursued a “none is too many” policy towards admitting European Jews.¹⁵ The most dramatic illustration of this occurred in 1939 when Canadian officials refused entry to 900 Jewish refugees aboard the SS *St. Louis*, forcing many of them to return to a grim fate in Europe. If this was not evidence enough of Canada’s role in failing to assist the persecuted, I cite an example even closer to home. Growing up in New Brunswick, I was aware that there had been an internment camp in a rural part of the province during World War II. It had been one of several Canadian internment camps under the Ministry of Defence during the war years. However, I laboured under the misperception that only a few German prisoners of war were kept there. The reality is that during 1940-41, the vast majority of men held there were European Jews. At the behest of Britain, European Jewish civilians who had fled to England to escape the Holocaust were imprisoned here as “enemy aliens” whose loyalties were uncertain. The camp in Ripples, N.B was featured in an episode of CBC television’s “Land and Sea” last year¹⁶ as well as being the subject of scholarly research.¹⁷ While captivity in such camps was very different from those in the Nazi *lager* system, the deeds of our Canadian forbearers, whether in the nation’s capital or closer to home is instructive: we cannot simply see the deaths and mistreatment of Jews as the murderous rage of a dictator nor blame the German people without examining Canadians’ and more specifically, New Brunswickers’, roles in this global tragedy. Such national and local

connections expose a little-known dimension of the Holocaust to students - many of whom have not thought about Canadians as having any link to the persecution and slaughter of European Jews. Furthermore, such examples illustrate the complexity of the past beyond simple categories of “good” and “evil”, “bystander”, “rescuer”, and “perpetrator”.¹⁸

Just as we must struggle to analyse the motivations and actions of the perpetrators as well as the societies ‘that generated, supported and tolerate’ them,¹⁹ so should we examine those who inadvertently aided and abetted them in our own backyards. While this ever-burgeoning list of perpetrators, or at least, enablers, is a challenge for students to confront, confront it they must if they are to reach an understanding of the scope and implications of the Holocaust. In this way, the ripples from the genocide of European Jewry spread to the faraway forests of Ripples, New Brunswick.

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- ⁷ Cesarani, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.
- ⁸ Salmons, P. (2010) 'Universal Meaning or Historical Understanding? The Holocaust in History and History in the Curriculum' in Burn, K., Chapman, A., Counsell, C. (eds.), *Teaching History*, 141, p. 60.
- ⁹ Though of course as Cesarani points out, 'his demeanour...fooled many observers into thinking that he was a banal little man who was...a cog in a bureaucratic machine and just a faithful civil servant obeying orders' – Cesarani, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
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