

## **THE FORCES BEHIND KILLING**

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As long as there has been mankind, there has been violence. Sometimes between individuals, sometimes between large groups or nations. There is no question that humanity has a high capacity for violence towards its fellow man. However, in some cases, that violence is almost completely one sided against a group who lacks the ability to defend themselves, and the Holocaust is often viewed as the epitome of that type of violence. Why do many people passively sit back while terrible events occur, while others decide to participate as cogs in the murder machine? Using primarily the Holocaust as a case study, it is apparent that the “otherness” of the victims, propaganda, and social pressures were the main drivers for the Nazis to commit genocide.

It is impossible to enter into a discussion on genocide without first defining the term. The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin around the end of the Second World War, and it was defined in 1948 by a United Nations convention as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.”<sup>1</sup> Some authors have dubbed the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the century of genocide, and for good reason.<sup>2</sup> One of the defining moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, World War II, was driven by the Nazi ideology. The Nazis rampant anti-Semitism pushed the German people to view Jews as inferior beings, sub-human cretins not worthy of sharing Germany with them. This mentality and the fact that the Jews were dubbed as “others” made it easier for Germans to justify the actions that they were taking.

The “otherness” of the victims is essential to understanding why people perpetrate genocide. Genocide is rarely an overnight decision made by a government or by individuals. Genocides are often preceded by a process where a group of people are identified as separate (usually with preexisting labels, i.e. Jews, Hutu, etc.), with a gradual escalation to genocide. Many authors have taken different approaches to understanding the otherness that is readily apparent in many genocides. Colin Tatz and Winton Higgins suggest that a “scientific racism” set the stage for future

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<sup>1</sup> Samantha Power, *“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2001), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Reading on the topic is not necessary to see examples of this: the title of Totten, Parsons, and Charny’s *Century of Genocide* makes the claim without opening the cover.

classifications by creating a series of categories, defined by physical characteristics, which further allowed for an idea of “biological determinism” which provided “German racists of the... Nazi periods... what they were looking for.”<sup>3</sup> Without an identity of who “we” are, it is equally impossible to assign an identity to who “they” are. Therefore, “consciously or unconsciously, the insiders reshape their own identities in ways that justify the exclusion of the outsiders.”<sup>4</sup> Establishing an identity for the outsiders and insiders is only the beginning.

There are obviously many methods in which an identity of an “other” can be created or assigned to a target group. One reason is simple: because that target group has a longstanding tradition of being outsiders to a society. One study suggested that “most people agree with the ideas of their own social group; they are conditioned by the people with whom they live.”<sup>5</sup> This argument is also used by Daniel Goldhagen when he argues (as summarized by James Waller) that “virtually all Germans had come to believe... that Jews were different from Germans... [that they were] evil and powerful, had done great harm to Germany, and would continue to do so. Thus, for Germany to be secure and prosperous, there had to be an elimination of Jewish influence or of Jews themselves from German society.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that over an extended period of time, the German people had relegated the Jewish people to a status of something other than German, which made it easier for them to commit the atrocities that they did. If an idea of a “them” has been established already, then when “we” meet “them”, “attention is focused... upon the ‘self’ and the ‘other and... the distinctive identity of the self is typically reaffirmed and accompanied by assertions of... superiority.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a historical tradition of excluding a specific group encouraging a genocide helps feed into another idea: propaganda. Merriam-Webster defines propaganda as “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution,

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<sup>3</sup> Colin Tatz & Winton Higgins, *The Magnitude of Genocide*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria J Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 100.

<sup>5</sup> E Cooper & M. Jahoda, “The Evasion of Propaganda: How Prejudiced People Respond to Anti-Prejudice Propaganda,” *Journal of Psychology*, 23, (1947): 24.

<sup>6</sup> James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, “The Impact of Technology on the Mind”, in *Man and Civilization: Control of the Mind*, ed. Seymour M. Farber (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 261.

a cause, or a person.”<sup>8</sup> During the 1900’s, the advent of mass communication such as film and radio allowed people such as Hitler to reach a much wider audience, while simultaneously capturing charisma that could never be portrayed in mere words in a newspaper. Words are extremely powerful, and viewpoints can easily be passed into younger generations. “The socialization sequence through which children...pass...is so organized that... a simple reminder, to memorize and repeat the Declaration of Independence or passages from the Bible is rewarded by affection, respect... and by a continued flow of other benefits.”<sup>9</sup> Indoctrination, if it begins early, can create a mindset that a child will carry throughout their life. The Nazi party was particularly effective at this. They had a system where films and slides would be preceded by lectures and followed by examines to apply “visual education as a shortcut to an understanding of political as well as general themes,” and that “Germany’s school-film propaganda had infected many children with Nazi ideas.”<sup>10</sup> Mass media made it easier for the Nazi propaganda machine to reach their people, and the people of other captured nations.

There is little doubt that the Nazi party used propaganda as a tool, especially considering that a part of its government was the “Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment.” The Nazi party understood that “the carefully built lie, big or little, has been of much importance in political persuasion and control” and did everything in their power to exploit their carefully built lies of Jewish inferiority.<sup>11</sup> The carefulness upon which lies were built is no accident, as Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, recognized that “the moment propaganda becomes known, it becomes ineffective.”<sup>12</sup> With the coercion and terror that the Nazi party used when it gained power, “the insidious use made of propaganda in a ‘closed’ environment was enough to ensure at least

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<sup>8</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, “Propaganda”, accessed 31 OCT 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Lasswell, “Impact of Technology,” 256.

<sup>10</sup> John Altmann, “Movies’ Role in Hitler’s Conquest of German Youth,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1948), 379.

<sup>11</sup> William Porter, “The Impact of Technology on the Mind,” in *Man and Civilization: Control of the Mind*, ed. Seymour M. Farber (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 239.

<sup>12</sup> Christian W Hallstein, “‘Ohm Krüger’: The Genesis of a Nazi Propaganda Film,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2002): 135. It is interesting that he stated this, given that he was the head of the “Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment.” How he was able to overcome this contrast could be a focus of further research.

‘passive’ support for the regime.”<sup>13</sup> Without that support of the individual players within the regime, the Nazi party would have had little chance to execute the genocide against the Jews.

Propaganda has the capacity to be extremely powerful in shifting a populace’s mentality, while sometimes it simply strengthens and solidifies an existing point. If the German people were as pliable as suggested by Goldhagen, then when Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* and “called for a solution to the Jewish problem, he was preaching to the converted.”<sup>14</sup> Waller pushes back against Goldhagen’s argument, arguing that “it is hard to find widespread evidence that eliminationist anti-Semitism” was the norm prior to the Nazis’ rise to power. Yet other authors believe that, in order for propaganda to be effective, it “must, in a sense, preach to those who are already partially converted.”<sup>15</sup> Only a few years after WWII concluded, psychologists were arguing that “those who are prejudiced are more apt to misunderstand a message than the unprejudiced.”<sup>16</sup> Propaganda only serves to amplify and increased prejudices which already exist within a society.

Nazism itself can be viewed as a form of propaganda. As the party gained power, it became practically a necessity to join the party in order to achieve any position of prominence in Nazi Germany. Yet as people became members of a group, “individuals not only conform, but actually define themselves according to the attitudes and goals of the group; this, in turn, shapes their perceptions of reality and their behavior.”<sup>17</sup> Information was being spread from within the party, encouraging the members of the bureaucracy to follow the beliefs of the party simply by membership. Although this may not have been visible to the members of the Nazi party, Americans noticed that “the effect of Goebbels eloquence at home is in a large but undeterminable measure the effect of state and party power. The very existence of this power affects action, speech and attitude.”<sup>18</sup> The power of the party helped to shape the people’s actions to support the institution and the cause. This is, by definition, propaganda.

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<sup>13</sup> David Welch, "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 214.

<sup>14</sup> Waller, *Becoming Evil*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Welch, "Nazi Propaganda," 214.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper & Jahoda, "Evasion of Propaganda," 15.

<sup>17</sup> Victoria J Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Speier, "Nazi Propaganda and Its Decline," *Social Research* 10, no. 3 (1943): 358.

The person who is delivering it has a strong influence on the effectiveness of propaganda. One key factor that psychologists have explored is the effect of receiving instructions from a person in a position of power. This type of social effect can also drive people to commit acts that they would not normally commit, in much the same way that propaganda can. Psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a famous experiment that examined how people would respond when ordered to provide a physical shock to another person who answered any of a series of questions wrong. What Milgram found was that all of his participants continued to a level of 300 volts (marked as “danger”) and that 65% of people continued to the highest level of voltage allowed (450 volts). What his experiment showed was that, when instructed to conduct an action by an authority figure in a position of power, all people were willing to continue to a level that was categorized as dangerous.<sup>19</sup> His experiment provided strong evidence that some ordinary people were able and willing to follow instructions that their superior provided, regardless of the effect that their actions had on other people. The mentality of “just following orders” is not only used in cases of genocide. United States soldiers massacred an entire village in Vietnam, and later claimed that their officers “told me to start shooting. So I started shooting.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that people use that reasoning not solely in the case of genocides helps strengthen Milgram’s argument that it is a normal human occurrence. This experiment provides, at the very least, a starting point for the investigation as to why people participate in acts of genocide.

Milgram conducted his experiment repeatedly, altering some of the conditions to see how those changes affected behaviors. When forced to put the subject’s hand onto the shocking mechanism, only 30% of people were willing to continue with the experiment.<sup>21</sup> He discovered something extremely important, if intuitive: the closer the perpetrator is physically to his victim, the less likely he was to inflict pain and suffering to the subject. If pain or suffering is inflicted, it will have a much greater effect on an observer who is nearby. Historian Raul Hilberg discusses this, telling a story about a policeman who shot a young girl in a ghetto, and then “the policeman, deathly pale, took [an observer] by the arm, pointed to the dead body, and ordered the blood to be washed away, all the while

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<sup>19</sup> Saul McLeod, “The Milgram Experiment,” 2007, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html>, accessed 30 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> M. Wallace, *New York Times* (November 25, 1969), page unknown, in David G. Myers, *Social Psychology* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2013), 202.

<sup>21</sup> McLeod, “Milgram Experiment.”

explaining that the shooting was not his fault and showing the woman a piece of paper that he said contained his orders.”<sup>22</sup> The policeman executed his “duty”, but struggled with the aftermath of his actions.

One area this is applicable is in the fact that the “responsibility” of genocide can be distributed to people who are physically removed from the killing. “The lower-order functions of the state... continued to function and contributed massively to the Holocaust... Individual moral responsibility is displaced onto the higher-ups who set the institutional goals.”<sup>23</sup> It is easy for people to participate in the perpetration of genocide when they are uninvolved in it, and merely see themselves paper pushers. Milgram investigated this idea in his studies, finding that if the participant only had to instruct someone else to shock the subject, then 92.5% of all participants were willing to reach the 450-volt level.<sup>24</sup> When people were able to remove themselves from the execution of the task, they had a greater willingness to participate, because they no longer feel that they are perpetrating the action (in Milgram’s case, the shocking. Within genocides, the actions are obviously much more severe). The propaganda set the stage, as “the result of Nazi propaganda was that the bitterness and anger of the dispossessed middle classes... came to be expressed in terms of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism.”<sup>25</sup> Once armed with the anti-Semitism that the propaganda provided, the middlemen could then go on to do their daily jobs, removed as they were from the actual execution of the genocide their paperwork helped create. “Their location at some distance from the sights, sounds, and smells of mass murder underpinned their detachment from the human consequences of their work.”<sup>26</sup> The combination of the propaganda, which provided the disregard for the welfare of the Jews, and the distance from the actual killings, as explored by Milgram, helps explain why the middlemen could easily conduct their jobs.

This concept is essential to the study of genocide, because as Scott Straus states in *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*: “without such mid-level actors, the local organization of violence would not occur.”<sup>27</sup> The bureaucracy is necessary to perpetrate a genocide, yet

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<sup>22</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1992), 57.

<sup>23</sup> Tatz and Higgins, *Magnitude*, 74-75.

<sup>24</sup> McLeod, “Milgram Experiment.”

<sup>25</sup> Sabby Sagall, "The Nazi Holocaust," In *Final Solutions: Human Nature, Capitalism and Genocide*, 183-221 (London: Pluto Press, 2013.), 188.

<sup>26</sup> Tatz and Higgins, *Magnitude*, 75

<sup>27</sup> Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), 93.

participation in that bureaucracy helps people believe that they are not to blame for the genocide. The bureaucracy's distance from the killing helps support the mid-level actors who have that sentiment. This helps people to not believe that they are perpetrators of a genocide, but rather the middle man: going about the same jobs that they held before the genocide began. "These people were so ordinary that, with few exceptions, they were readily absorbed into civil society after the killings."<sup>28</sup> These bureaucrats, although driven to anti-Semitism by the Nazi propaganda, were able to reacclimatize once the propaganda was removed.

What then drives people to commit genocides? There are many reoccurring key elements that are apparent within the Holocaust. First, the "othering" of the Jews played a key role in allowing the Germans to stop caring about the Jews and what happened to them throughout the Second World War. This also helped fuel the propaganda machine that the Germans were driving. Without preexisting prejudices (or at the very least indifference) that the German people already had, the German propaganda against the Jews would not have been nearly as effective. Finally, social pressures and psychology played a part. Pressure is more effective when coming from a position of power, which helped strengthen the Nazi propaganda within Germany. The systematization of mass killing and deportation further allowed individual Nazis to displace their moral culpability, at least in their own eyes, due to their distance from the actual events of the genocide. Individually, none of these items can explain why the Nazis were able to perpetrate the Holocaust; together, they help fill in the picture a little more.

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<sup>28</sup> James Waller, "The Ordinarity of Extraordinary Evil: The Making of Perpetrators of Genocide and Mass Killing," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers*, eds. Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian Szejnmann (Houndsmill, England: Palgrave, 2008), 147.