

The Logic of the Holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

By delineating the mindset of Hitler and the Nazis, it is possible to reveal the logic that was the source of the Holocaust. We begin by conceptualizing the Final Solution as a collective project that was consciously undertaken by and profoundly significant to many people. To understand the Holocaust, therefore, is to reveal the meaning of the project that Hitler conceived and put into action. The question of motivation grows out of the issue of meaning. What was the purpose of mass murder? What did Hitler believe he would accomplish by exterminating the Jews? What did Hitler and the Nazis aspire to achieve through the Final Solution?

I conclude that the Final Solution grew out of a coherent structure of thought. In *Hitler's Ideology* (Koenigsberg, 1975) I analyzed the central metaphors in Hitler's writings and speeches. Hitler's perception of reality grew out of a coherent fantasy. This fantasy supported and sustained the ideology that dictated action on the stage of history.

JEWISH DISEASE WITHIN THE GERMAN BODY POLITIC

At the core of Hitler's ideology lay his conception of the German nation as an actual body politic imagined to be under attack. The life of this organism was threatened by Jewish bacteria—whose continued presence within the nation would

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lead to the death of Germany. Hitler described the Jew typically as the “demon of the disintegration of peoples, symbol of the unceasing destruction of their lives.” In order to rescue Germany—to save the life of the body politic—it was necessary to eliminate from within the nation those forces that threatened to destroy it. Genocide grew out of Hitler’s conviction that in order to prevent the death of Germany, it was necessary to exterminate the Jewish people.

Hitler’s project was to rescue his nation—to “prevent our Germany from suffering, as Another did, the death upon the Cross.” Hitler believed that his project was the most significant one that a human being could undertake. In the name of rescuing Germany, everything was deemed permissible:

We may be inhumane, but if we rescue Germany we have achieved the greatest deed in the world. We may work injustice, but if we rescue Germany then we have removed the greatest injustice in the world. We may be immoral, but if our people is rescued we have once more opened the way for morality.

Hitler stated that the purpose of National Socialism was to “maintain the life of Germany.” He conceived of Germany as a living organism with the German people constituting “cells” of this organism. Jews constituted pathogenic cells (bacteria or viruses) whose continued presence within the national body would lead to disease and death. In *Mein Kampf* (1962), Hitler stated that Germans would choose as their leader someone who “profoundly recognizes the distress of his people” and who, after he has attained “the ultimate clarity”

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with regard to the nature of the disease “seriously tries to cure it.” In Hitler’s mind, he was that unique politician who possessed the insight to diagnose Germany’s disease, capacity to prescribe a cure, and determination to carry out the necessary treatment.

Hitler posed the question: “Could anyone believe that Germany alone was not subject to exactly the same laws as all other human organisms?” In his diary on March 27, 1942, Goebbels described the process of extermination as “pretty barbaric and not to be described in detail,” but overcame his compunctions noting that Germany’s actions reflected a “life-and-death struggle between the Aryan race and the Jewish bacillus.”

In his 1935-6 propaganda booklet, Himmler observed (Padfield, 1990) that the battle against peoples conducted by Jews had belonged “so far as we can look back, to the natural course of life on our planet.” Therefore one could calmly reach the conviction that the struggle of nations against Jews—of life against death—was quite as much a law of nature as “man’s struggle against some epidemic; as the struggle of a healthy body to eliminate plague bacillus.”

Why did Nazi leaders use these biological metaphors? What did Hitler have in mind when he stated that Germany was subject to the same laws as “all other human organisms?” What was the “law of nature” that led Himmler to conclude that the struggle of nations against Jews represented the struggle of a healthy body against “plague bacillus”? Hitler and Himmler were referring, I believe, to the law of the immune system: that biochemical mechanism or system operating within organisms that works to destroy each and every cell identified as “not self.”

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Jews in the mind of Hitler represented a foreign microorganism within the bloodstream of Germany. Since Jews were pathogenic micro-organisms within the body politic, it was necessary that they be destroyed. Indeed, each and every one of these Jewish bacteria or viruses had to be removed from the body politic, lest they begin again to divide and multiply. SS-men functioned as if “killer cells” within the German body politic, assigned the task of identifying, tracking down and destroying Jewish micro-organisms.

On the evening of February 22, 1942, Hitler met with Himmler and a Danish SS major and expounded his conviction (Wistrich, 1985) that:

The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that has taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus! We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew.

Hitler conceived of the Final Solution from the perspective of immunology. As “Doctor of the German people” he would act to save Germany’s life by destroying pathogens that were the source of the nation’s disease. Nazism revolved around the idea or fantasy that Germany was an actual body whose life was endangered by foreign cells within its bloodstream. The Final Solution represented a systematic effort to remove alien cells from within the body politic, thereby destroying the source of disease and saving the nation’s life.

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The central fantasy contained within or articulated by Hitler's ideology was that of Germany as an organism containing Jewish bacteria and viruses whose removal was necessary if the nation was to survive. However, what is the meaning of this extraordinary idea? Nations are not bodies and Jews are not bacteria. Why did this metaphor resonate with the German people? Let us approach this question by viewing Nazism as a religion.

DEVOTION TO GERMANY

“Das deutsche Volk, das deutsche Volk, das deutsche Volk” were words echoing throughout Germany in the early Thirties (Holt, 1936). Hitler's religion of Nazism permitted the German people to worship themselves; to bow down to their own nation and nationality. In the United States we say, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God...”

The oath of the SS-man was: “I swear to you, Adolf Hitler, as Fuehrer and Reichschancellor of the German Reich, loyalty and bravery. I swear to you, and to those you have named to command me, obedience unto death, so help us God.” Nazism was a pledge of allegiance in its most radical form; the apogee (or nadir) of Western nationalism.

A great deal has been written about the Holocaust from the perspective of “obedience to authority.” However, it is misleading to conceptualize Nazi willingness to follow orders as passive acquiescence. Rather, what commentators characterize as obedience was understood and experienced by the Nazis as duty, loyalty, faithfulness and a willingness

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to sacrifice for the community. This quality of active devotion lay at the heart of the Nazi revolution.

Hitler himself was the greatest devotee of his own religion. He declared, "We do not want to have any other God—only Germany." He inspired others to worship the god that he worshipped, indeed insisted that they do so. Though cynical and devious in his pursuit of power, Hitler's devotion to Germany was sincere and profound. He proclaimed:

Our future is Germany. Our today is Germany. And our past is Germany. Let us take a vow this morning, at every hour, in each day, to think of Germany, of the nation, of our German people. You cannot be unfaithful to something that has given sense and meaning to your whole existence.

Hitler explained: "Our love towards our people will never falter, and our faith in this Germany of ours is imperishable." He called *Deutschland ueber Alles* a profession of faith, which today "fills millions with a greater strength, with that faith which is mightier than any earthly might." Nationalism for Hitler meant willingness to act with a "boundless, all embracing love for the Volk and, if necessary, to die for it."

Hitler stated that *Volksgemeinschaft* meant "overcoming bourgeois privatism, unconditionally equating the individual fate and the fate of the nation." Every single German was obligated to unite with the community; to embrace and share the common faith. According to Hitler, no one was "excepted from the crisis of the Reich." The Volk, he explained to the German people, is "but yourselves. There may not be a single person who excludes himself from this joint obligation."

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Hitler's totalitarianism insisted upon absolute identification with the community. Not a single person was exempt from the obligation to devote one's life to Germany and make enormous sacrifices in her name.

Hitler declared: "We are fanatic in our love for our people. We can go as loyally as a dog with those who share our sincerity, but we will pursue with fanatic hatred the man who believes that he can play tricks with this love of ours." Hitler's rage was directed toward people whom he imagined did not share his faith. He experienced these people as mocking his own belief and sincerity:

Our aim is the dictatorship of the whole people, the community. I began to win men to the idea of an eternal national and social ideal—to subordinate one's own interests to the interest of the whole society. There are, nevertheless, a few incurables who had never understood the happiness of belonging to this great, inspiring community.

Calling people who refused to subordinate personal interests to the interest of society "incurables" suggests that Hitler conceived of those who did not wholeheartedly wish to belong to the community as people suffering from a disease. Those who did not believe in and wish to devote themselves to Hitler, the Nazi movement and the German community were somehow "sick." Thus, the "disease within the body of the people"—to which Hitler so often referred—symbolized disbelief in Nazi ideology or lack of faith. It was precisely the disease of disbelief or lack of faith that Hitler sought to eradicate.

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JEWISH INDIVIDUALISM AS NEGATION OF THE GERMAN COMMUNITY

If Nazi ideology was based on profound attachment and devotion to Germany, Jews symbolized the opposite of attachment and devotion to Germany. The metaphor that appeared with greatest frequency in Hitler's speeches as a description of Jews was *Zerzetzung*, translated as "force of disintegration." This German word—widely used in chemistry and biology—means that which breaks things down into their component elements; decomposition, decay, or putrefaction.

This term suggested that the Jewish race worked to destroy all "genuine values." Jews symbolized negation of everything sacred to the German people—their traditions, culture, position in the world, patriotism, and patriotic symbols (Blackburn, 1984). Goebbels declared in January 1945 that Jews were the "incarnation of that destructive drive which in these terrible years rages in the enemies' warfare against everything that we consider noble, beautiful and worth preserving."

Jews symbolized that which called into question the fundamental beliefs and values of the German people. The Aryan was conceived by Hitler as someone willing to sacrifice for the community, while Jews stood for individualism—unwillingness to sacrifice for the community. If the good German was characterized by idealistic devotion to a cause, Jews represented the inability to become devoted to a cause. Goebbels contrasted the "creative, constructive philosophy of National Socialism with its idealistic goals" to the Jewish

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philosophy of “materialism and individualism.” Jews were seen as lacking a soul—the precise opposite of the heroic, self-sacrificing Aryan.

Hitler bluntly told his audiences, “You are nothing, your nation is everything.” The fundamental premise of Nazi ideology was that the individual achieved identity only by virtue of his or her relationship to the nation; that the individual found fulfillment only by virtue of subordination to the community. The essence of morality, according to this conception, was willingness to sacrifice personal interest in the name of one’s nation.

Hitler’s Official Programme published in 1927 (Feder, 1971) put forth as its central plank: “The Common Interest before Self Interest,” stating that “The leaders of our public life all worship the same god—Individualism. Personal interest is the sole incentive.” Within the framework of National Socialist morality, the fundamental “sins” were individualism and the pursuit of private, personal interests. National Socialism sought to teach or compel people to overcome the sin of individualism.

The psychological dynamic that generated the Holocaust grew out of conflict between the ideal of *Volksgemeinschaft*—the community of the German people—on the one hand, and ideas of individualism or individuality on the other. The fundamental characteristic of Jews according to Nazi ideology was their “free-floating” quality: inability to form an organic tie to a national community. The Jew was compelled by his very nature to pursue private, selfish interests. The Jewish tendency toward individualism, Hitler believed, acted to shatter or

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“disintegrate” the human being’s tie to a national community.

The following judgment by the Cologne Labor Court (January 21, 1941) denied the claim of Jewish employees to a vacation (Noakes & Pridham, 2001):

The precondition for the claim to a vacation—membership of the plant community—does not exist. A Jew cannot be a member of the plant community on account of his whole racial tendency, which is geared to forwarding his personal interests and securing economic advantages.

By virtue of his racially inherited tendency toward “forwarding personal interests and securing economic advantages,” Jews were imagined to be incapable of participating in the life of a community. Hitler called Jews the “ferment of decomposition in peoples,” which meant that the Jew “destroys and must destroy.” Therefore, Hitler said, it is “beside the point whether the individual Jew is ‘decent’ or not. In himself he carries those characteristics which Nature has given him.”

Hitler stated that the Jew completely lacked the “conception of an activity which builds up the life of the community.” Nazi scholarship declared (Aronsfeld, 1985) that the peculiar characteristic of Judaism was its “hostility to human society,” which is why there could be “no solution to the Jewish question.” A true understanding of Jews and Judaism “insists on their total annihilation.”

The Jewish tendency toward selfish individualism (fixed by heredity according to Hitler) meant that they were unable

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to comprehend the meaning and necessity of national self-sacrifice. The Final Solution was intended to punish Jews for their anti-social unwillingness to participate in the life of the community; to demonstrate that sacrifice was required of everyone; and to show Jews (and everyone else) that it was impossible to escape, evade or resist the embrace of the nation-state.

WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE?

Hitler's ideology was intimately bound to the idea of national self-sacrifice. Writing about the First World War (in which 2 million German soldiers were killed and over 4 million wounded), Hitler said: "When in the long war years Death snatched so many dear comrades and friends from our ranks, it would have seemed to me almost a sin to complain—after all, were they not dying for Germany?" It would appear that Hitler accepted—did not rebel against—the monumental sacrifices that had been made by German soldiers.

Nevertheless, after the war, questions arose in the mind of Hitler and some other Germans. This questioning took the form of reflections upon the following paradox: Why had some people died in the war, whereas others had not? Specifically, why had the best Germans—patriotic young men in the prime of life—been sent indiscriminately to their deaths, while other "inferior" people had not participated in battle, and survived.

This kind of question was the basis for the "euthanasia" movement that began to take hold subsequent to the First World War. In their influential book, *Permission for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life* (1920; see Noakes &

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Pridham, 2001) two eminent German scholars—lawyer Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche—wrote as follows:

If one thinks of a battlefield covered with thousands of dead youth and contrasts this with our institutions for the feebleminded with their solicitude for their living patients— then one would be deeply shocked by the glaring disjunction between the sacrifice of the most valuable possession of humanity on one side and on the other the greatest care of beings who are not only worthless but even manifest negative value.

On the battlefields of the First World War, the state had squandered the lives of healthy young men. In mental hospitals, on the other hand, the state showed the greatest solicitude and devoted the greatest care toward assuring the survival of human beings who were not only worthless, but who manifest “negative value.” If the state was willing to sacrifice the lives of its soldiers, why should so many resources be expended to keep mental patients alive? Why did the state devote so much energy to caring for mental patients while it was so promiscuous with the lives of soldiers?

Based on the logic of ideas like this about life that was unworthy of life, the euthanasia movement gained a foothold—and led to mass-murder when the Nazis took power. In August 1939, psychiatrists began (with Hitler’s authorization) to kill defective or disabled children. In 1939—two years before the beginning of the Final Solution—

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a program for the killing of adult mental patients was put into practice, leading to the deaths of nearly 100,000 people.

A major figure in the euthanasia movement, Dr. Hermann Pfannmueller, declared (Lifton, 1986) that the idea was unbearable to him that “the best, the flower of our youth must lose its life at the front in order that feeble-minded and irresponsible asocial elements can have a secure existence in the asylum.” What was unbearable was that the state had no qualms about sending its most valuable members—healthy, devoted soldiers—to die in war, while it took great pains to preserve the lives of feeble-minded and asocial people who did not contribute to the community.

The killing of mental patients appears to have grown out of the logic that inferior people had to be killed in order to “balance things out.” If the state did not hesitate to send its healthiest stock to die in war—vigorous, young men—then surely it should have no compunctions or misgivings about killing the mentally ill—people who were unhealthy and made no contribution to society. Mental patients were one of several classes of people whom the Nazis defined as “parasites on the body of the people”; human beings who consumed national resources, but did not create or produce them.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler raised the question—Why do the best die while the worst survive?—in moral terms. The best human beings were those who willingly abandoned personal interests in the name of serving the community. The very best human beings were people like Hitler’s comrades in the First World War: those who did not shrink from making the “supreme sacrifice;” who were willing to be obedient unto death and to die for Germany.

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According to our ordinary sense of justice, moral virtue is rewarded, while the absence of moral virtue is punished. Hitler observed that in warfare the opposite was the case. Those who were the most virtuous—willing to fight for their country—were punished (with injury or death). Whereas those who lacked moral virtue (*e.g.*, war deserters or shirkers)—unwilling to fight for their country—were rewarded (were not injured and did not lose their lives). If those who were morally virtuous had to surrender their bodies to the nation-state and to die in war, why should others—people who lacked moral virtue—be spared such a fate?

JEWS TOO SHALL DIE

The extermination of the Jews—the Final Solution—began in late 1941 prior to the development of death camps and gas chambers. As the German army waged war and penetrated into the Soviet Union, they were followed closely by the *Einsatzgruppen* or mobile killing units. It is estimated that more than 1.5 million Jews were killed on the Eastern Front.

By the end of the winter of 1941-42, more than 90% of the Jews trapped by the Germans east of the Soviet border had been killed. The extermination of men, women, and children apparently did not disturb Hitler. “If I don’t mind sending the pick of the German people into the hell of war without regret for the shedding of valuable German blood,” Hitler declared, “Then I have naturally the right to destroy millions of men of inferior races who increase like vermin” (Meltzer, 1976).

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The logic of extermination or genocide is contained within this statement. Hitler knew that as commander-in-chief of the army he would not be faulted if he sent young Germans into battle. This was his prerogative as leader of the armed forces. If Hitler had the “right” to send German soldiers to die—had no compunctions or regrets about doing so—why then should he not also have the right—have no compunctions or regrets—about sending Jews to their deaths? If a national leader is allowed to send its best people—its soldiers—to die, why would a national leader not also be allowed to send the worst people—mortal enemies of one’s nation—to die?

A sign at the entrance to Auschwitz appeared to mock or taunt the Jews as they entered the camp: “I bid you welcome. This is not a holiday resort but a labor camp. Just as our soldiers risk their lives at the front to gain victory for the Third Reich, you will have to work here for the welfare of a new Europe” (Hellman, 1981). This message may appear cynical, but it contains logic: “Just as our soldiers are sacrificing our lives for Germany, so you will be required to die when Germany asks you to.”

The Final Solution was intended by Hitler to convey the following message to Jews—and everyone else: “Do not think anyone is exempt from the obligation to sacrifice their lives for Germany. Just as our soldiers are suffering and dying in battle, so you too will be compelled to suffer and die in the camps.” Jews—like German soldiers—would be required to give over their bodies and souls to the German nation-state.

The Final Solution came into being in order to teach Jews a lesson by punishing them for their “selfish individualism.” Jews symbolized the idea that it was possible to evade the

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German nation-state; to exist in a condition of separateness from the community. The Final Solution demonstrated that it was impossible to separate from the national community; that the nation-state controlled the lives of each and every human being within its boundaries. The obligation to submit to the nation—to sacrifice one's life for Germany—could not be evaded.

The logic of the Holocaust followed from the logic of domination and sacrificial death that constituted the essence of National Socialism. Hitler's ideology glorified the nation-state at the same time that it diminished the significance of the individual. Hitler explained to the German people, "You are nothing, your nation is everything." The nation or national community constituted an "absolute." The individual attained significance only insofar as he could contribute to the national community.

On the other hand, Hitler believed that some people were incapable or unwilling to sacrifice for or contribute to a national community. This was the symbolic significance of the term "Jew:" A human being that wished to exist in a condition of separation from the national community and had no desire to contribute to the well-being of this community.

The idea that some people believed they were exempt from the obligation to submit to the national community—sacrifice for Germany—enraged Hitler. Why were some people required to give over their lives—to die for Germany—whereas others were not? Why in the First World War had German soldiers died in massive numbers while Jewish "shirkers" had avoided fighting and dying? Jews symbolized

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people who believed that it was unnecessary to—possible to avoid—sacrificing for the national community.

Hitler could not bear to contemplate the idea of freedom; to consider the possibility that people are not required to surrender their lives to the nation-state. German soldiers and SS-men had vowed “obedience unto death.” Why should some people be allowed to get off “scot free”? In a docudrama on the Wannsee Conference (where on January 20, 1942, high-ranking Nazis and German government leaders gathered for the purpose of discussing the “final solution to the Jewish question in Europe”), a Nazi official argues in favor of the Final Solution by posing the question: “Will the Jews be in luxury in warm concentration camps while our soldiers freeze at the Eastern Front?”

The Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that no one was exempt from the obligation to suffer and die for Germany. No one would evade the sacrificial obligation. Everyone would be required to submit. If German soldiers were suffering and dying in massive numbers on the field of battle, so Jews would be required to suffer and die in massive numbers in the camps. If the German nation could compel its best people to die, surely it had the right to send the worst people—Jews, enemies of the German people—to their deaths. The logic of genocide was based on the logic of warfare.

Warfare requires that soldiers give over their bodies and souls to the nation-state. They are required to suffer and die when their nation and its leaders ask them to do so. The Holocaust represented an extension of the logic that allows the nation-state to compel people to die. Jews—like German soldiers—were required to give over their bodies and souls to

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the nation; compelled to die when Germany asked them to do so. The Final Solution enacted the idea of “dying for the country”—stripped of words such as loyalty, honor and duty.

Unless otherwise noted, citations of Hitler are taken from Baynes (1942), *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler* and De Roussy de Sales (1941), *My New Order*.