

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Hitler's ideology is the idea that the capacity for self-sacrifice constitutes the foundation of civilization. Hitler distinguished between those willing to surrender their lives to the community—submit to the nation—and those unwilling to do so. The Aryan or good Nazi represented an individual who was willing to sacrifice unconditionally. Jews, on the other hand, represented people who were unwilling or unable to sacrifice for the community.

Jews were conceived as people intent on tearing down Nazi ideals: selfish individualists who lacked faith in Hitler and Germany and refused to sacrifice in the name of the sacred community. Hitler became enraged when contemplating the idea that some people—like German soldiers in the First World War—were required to sacrifice their lives for the nation, whereas other people seemed to be exempt from this sacrificial obligation.

The essential characteristic of the Jew from Hitler's perspective was his unwillingness or incapacity to renounce individuality in the name of the community. The Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that no one was exempt from the obligation to submit to the nation-state. Jews too—like German soldiers—would be compelled to die when Hitler asked them to do so.

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

WORSHIPPING GERMANY

Hitler proclaimed, “We do not want to have any other God, only Germany.” Nazism was a form of religion and Hitler a fanatic preacher, obsessed with the idea of Germany, imploring and beseeching others to worship and devote their lives to the god that he worshipped. Hitler explained to his people:

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.

The foundation of Nazi totalitarianism was the ideal of *Volksgemeinschaft*—the community of the German people. *Volksgemeinschaft*, Hitler said, meant “overcoming bourgeois privatism” in order to “unconditionally equate the individual fate and the fate of the nation.” Everyone was required to participate:

No one is excepted from the crisis of the Reich. This Volk is but yourselves. There may not be a single person who excludes himself from this joint obligation.

Nazi ideology represented a radical form of nationalism affirming *absolute identity* between self and country;

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

insisting that there was no such thing as a sphere of existence *separate* from the life of the national community.

Germany was like a jealous, wrathful god that would brook no opposition. No one was exempt from the obligation to worship and bow down to her. Genocide represented religious war against infidels—“death to the non-believers”—compelling Jews to acknowledge the power of the German god. The Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that Germany was omnipotent and could not be evaded. Everyone was required to submit, that is, to give over one’s body to the nation-state.

Jews symbolized the idea that it was possible to exist separately from the community, thus shattering Hitler’s fantasy of an omnipotent community that embraced everyone and contained everything within its boundaries. Hitler characterized the Jew again and again as a “force of disintegration” working to destroy Germany. What did this mean?

JEWISH DESTRUCTIVENESS

The German word *Zerzetzung* is a term used in chemistry meaning the “act or process of simplifying or breaking down a molecule into smaller parts.” The word is commonly translated as “decomposing” or “disintegrating” or “causing to decay”. When used in relation to the Jews, this term suggested that the Jewish people worked toward the destruction of all “genuine values” and of everything that was sacred to Germans (Blackburn, 1984): their traditions, culture, patriotism, patriotic symbols, etc. Goebbels stated that Jews were the “incarnation of that destructive drive

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

which in these terrible years rages in the enemies' warfare against everything that we consider noble, beautiful and worth preserving."

Nazism evokes violence, cynicism and brutality. The Nazis did not conceive of themselves in these terms. Goebbels stated that to be a socialist meant to "subordinate the I to the Thou, sacrifice the personality for the whole." He defined Socialism as "service, renunciation for individuals and a claim for the whole, fanatic of love, courage to sacrifice, resignation for the Volk." National Socialism, according to Goebbels, was based upon willingness to sacrifice and to abandon individuality in the name of devoting one's self to the community.

Scholars often interpret Nazism according to the concept of "obedience to authority." Germans who followed Hitler did so, however, in a spirit of active devotion rather than passive submission. Rudolph Hess said, "We know nothing but carrying out Hitler's orders—and thus we prove our faith in him." A U.S. Department of State booklet written during the war (Murphy, 1943) explicated Nazi ideology as a force or conviction that "consecrates its whole life to the service of an idea, a faith, a task or a duty even when it knows that the destruction of its own life is certain."

Jews were conceived as people who refused to sacrifice for the sake of a national community. Goebbels claimed that the Jewish philosophy of "materialism and individualism" stood in stark contrast to the creative, constructive philosophy of National Socialism and its idealistic goals. *Hitler's Official Programme*, published in 1927 (Feder, 1971), inveighed against the leaders of public life who all worshipped the same god—"individualism"—and

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

whose sole incentive was “personal interest.” The essence of the Nazi’s complaint against Jews was that they lacked the capacity for self-sacrifice. By virtue of his unwillingness to surrender to the community, the Jew seemed to mock and spoil German idealism.

WAR AS A SACRIFICIAL RITUAL

Steven Kull (1984) discusses the military ethos, which revolves around the willingness of the individual to sacrifice himself in order to fulfill the abstract purposes of a group:

The emergence of self-sacrificing behavior in humans represents an extraordinary deviation from previously established patterns. It is awesome that after billions of years of producing life forms that adhere tenaciously to the goal of survival, evolution suddenly developed a form that intentionally sacrifices itself in the name of abstract principles.

Kull hypothesizes that these self-sacrificing behaviors are generated by the activity of the cortex “overriding the more primitive tendencies of the lower brain.”

Gwynne Dyer in his classic study *War* (1985) quotes General John Hackett: “You offer yourself to be slain: This is the essence of being a soldier. By becoming soldiers, men agree to die when we tell them to.” Writing about the First World War, Joanna Bourke (1996) notes that the most important point to be made about the male body during

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

that war is that it was “intended to be mutilated.” In the First World War, the nations of France, Great Britain and Germany asked soldiers to get out of trenches and to run toward opposing trenches, where they frequently were cut down by machine-gun fire and artillery shells. It is estimated that 9 million men were killed and over 21 million wounded in the First World War.

In our conventional way of thinking, we say that when a soldier dies it is because the enemy killed him. When French soldiers in the First World War got out of their trenches and moved into No Man’s Land to encounter artillery shells and machine-gun fire from the opposing side, we say that Germans killed them. Likewise when German soldiers moved forward *en masse* to be slaughtered by machine-guns and artillery shells, we say that they were killed by French soldiers.

Wouldn’t it be more parsimonious to say that these nations and their leaders—by putting young men into such untenable situations—killed their own soldiers? One may suggest that during the First World War, France and its leaders killed French soldiers; Germany and its leaders killed Germans soldiers; and Great Britain and its leaders killed British soldiers. Of course, we’d prefer not to say it this way. We disguise the sacrificial meaning of warfare by holding the *other nation* responsible for the death of our soldiers.

Yet commentators at the time often did conceptualize this war from the perspective of sacrifice. Writing in 1916, P. H. Pearse (Martin, 1973)—founder of the Irish Revolutionary movement—was thrilled to observe the carnage of the First World War:

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

The last sixteen months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. Heroism has come back to the earth. It is good for the world to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this—the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country.

In a similar vein, the French nationalist Maurice Barrès (1918b) had this to say about his nation's soldiers who were dying on a daily basis during the First World War:

Oh you young men whose value is so much greater than ours! They love life, but even were they dead, France will be rebuilt from their souls which are like living stones. The sublime sun of youth sinks into the sea and becomes the dawn which will hereafter rise again.

Claiming that it is “good for the world to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield,” Pearse characterizes slaughter as a form of “august homage offered to God.” Barrès claims that France will be rebuilt based on the souls of dead soldiers, which are like “living stones.” Each of these men—as well as many others political leaders at the time—conceived of the First World War as a form of sacrifice.

Even before the war ended, the French and British governments began creating enormous cemeteries memorializing soldiers who had died. The French lavished meticulous care upon these cemeteries—showing more

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

endless concern for the lawns with their rows of crosses than they did for the young men that had been so promiscuously thrown into battle.

THE DUTY TO LAY DOWN ONE'S LIFE

Hitler fought in the First World War throughout its duration and witnessed the perpetual slaughter. In spite of the horrors he experienced and observed, he idealized warfare—viewing it through the prism of sacrifice. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated that in the First World War the most precious blood had “sacrificed itself joyfully,” in the faith that it was “preserving the independence and freedom of the fatherland.” He observed that more than once, thousands and thousands of young Germans had stepped forward with “self-sacrificing resolve to sacrifice their young lives freely and joyfully on the altar of the beloved fatherland.”

Germany did not exactly “lose” the First World War. Like other nations, she seemed willing to continue to send young men into the cauldron. However, after the United States entered the war, some German leaders recognized the futility of continuing to fight. The Allies had many more bodies than the Germans—that they could continue to throw into battle. Germany surrendered and signed an armistice agreement with the Allies on November 11, 1918.

Hitler was traumatized by Germany's defeat. He could not bear to acknowledge that the sacrifices had been in vain—that Germany had lost the war in spite of 2 million Germans killed and 4 million more maimed or wounded. Hitler experienced the ending of the war as a betrayal of the

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

fighting men by the government. Politicians who negotiated the surrender in 1918 were called “November criminals.”

Hitler held Jews responsible for this “stab in the back,” which he never forgot nor forgave. He initiated the Second World War, it would appear, as a continuation of the First World War—in order to reverse the previous outcome. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that Hitler generated the second war in order to perpetuate—and to *expand upon*—the sacrificial slaughter of the first war.

On September 1, 1939, Hitler declared war. How may we understand Hitler’s motives and intentions? The most productive method, I have found, is simply to pay close attention to Hitler’s words. The following is an excerpt of what Hitler said as he spoke before the Reichstag as German planes and troops crossed the Polish borders in a devastating Blitzkrieg (Snyder, 1961):

As a National Socialist and a German soldier, I enter upon this fight with a stout heart! My whole life has been but one continuous struggle for my people, and that whole struggle has been inspired by one single conviction: Faith in my people! I ask of every German what I myself am prepared to do at any moment: to be ready to lay down his life for his people and for his country. If anyone thinks that he can evade this national duty directly or indirectly, he will perish.

Hitler speaks in this passage not of conquest, but rather of a “struggle” based on “faith in his people.” He asks every German to do what he is prepared to do (and eventually

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

did): to “lay down his life for his people and country.” He goes on to say that anyone who thinks that they can “evade this national duty” (to lay down one’s life for Germany)—would “perish.”

Hitler appears to be saying that in the war that was to follow, everyone would be required to demonstrate devotion to Germany through a willingness to fight and die for her. On the other hand, those seeking to evade the duty to fight and die for Germany—they too would perish. The ideology of totalitarianism required that everyone participate. No one was exempt from the sacrificial obligation: “Either die for Germany, or Germany will kill you.”

Hitler imagined that some people did not wish to devote themselves to Germany and National Socialism. The existence of such people acted to shatter Hitler’s fantasy of a united *Gemeinschaft*. The idea that some people did not wish to embrace the national community enraged Hitler. He could not tolerate the idea that some people might have no desire—might be unwilling—to sacrifice their lives for Germany.

The Second World War was an extension of the First World War. Once again, Germans would be asked to lay down their lives for their nation. In the Second World War, however—unlike the First—the German leadership would not tolerate shirkers or war deserters. No one would be permitted to escape the sacrificial obligation. Jews too would be compelled to submit: to die when Hitler and Germany asked them to do so.

SOLDIERS AS SACRIFICIAL VICTIMS

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

People continually write and reflect upon the Holocaust. We are well aware of the fact that 6 million Jews perished. Much less has been written about—and we rarely reflect upon the fact—that well over 9 million Germans perished as a result of actions undertaken by the Nazi leadership (Sorge, 1986).

As the attack against Russia began, German General Gerd von Rundstedt admonished the soldier of the Second World War to emulate the examples of his brothers in the First World War and to “die in the same way”: to be as strong, unswerving and obedient; to go “happily and as a matter of course to his death” (Baird, 1974). As war on the Eastern Front progressed, Goebbels was satisfied to note that German soldiers went into battle “with devotion, like congregations going into service.” With rare exceptions, German soldiers did not rebel against their duty to fight and die. They went into battle “like sheep going to the slaughter.”

The following passages—excerpted from letters depicting unimaginable horror and suffering (Fritz, 1997)—sound familiar:

We were crowded together like sardines in the cattle car. There were moans, groans, and whimpers in that car; the smell of pus, urine, and it was cold. We lay on straw. The train waited for hours.

Food was our most difficult problem. Our eyes gleamed, like the eyes of famished wolves. Our stomachs were empty and the horizon was devoid of any hope.

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

We stood in interminable lines, to receive a cup of hot water infused with a minute portion of tea. We had too much food in order to die, but too little in order to live.

The inability to bathe led to incredibly filthy conditions, which inevitably resulted in a plague of lice. We felt like livestock rather than human beings.

There is only anxiety, fear, and terror, a life without return along with terror without an end. The heart is overwhelmed at the unbearable thought that the smell of dead bodies is the beginning and end and ultimate sense and purpose of our being.

Of course, these passages sound like they were written by Jews—describing their experience of the death camps. Actually, they are letters written home by German soldiers fighting in Russia—freezing, starving, wounded and dying in places like Stalingrad. Having vowed to be “absolutely obedient” to Adolf Hitler and to be prepared to “offer his life at any time,” the German soldier did not struggle against his obligation to die—to sacrifice his life.

THE RIGHT TO DESTROY MILLIONS OF MEN

According to the logic of warfare, a nation and its leaders have the right to send young men into battle, where they may be killed or wounded. Hitler was well aware of this fact. It led him to reflect upon the following paradox: If the nation-state is allowed to undertake a project that causes

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

its best citizens to perish, why can it not also undertake a project that causes its worst citizens to die?

The murder of Jews began on the Eastern Front in the Soviet Union before the establishment of death camps and gas chambers. The *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) followed the German army into Russia and murdered 1.5 million Jews in late 1941 and early 1942 east of the Soviet border. Hitler professed to be undisturbed by the extermination of men, women and children, declaring: “If I don’t mind sending the pick of the German people into the hell of war without regret for the shedding of valuable Germany blood, then I have naturally the right to destroy millions of men of inferior races who increase like vermin” (Meltzer, 1976).

Here we approach the crux of the matter and meaning of the Holocaust. Genocide, it would appear, grew out of Hitler’s meditations on the nature of warfare. He reflected: “If society gives me the right to shed the blood of Germany’s most valuable citizens, why would I not also have the right to destroy its worst citizens?” “If in my role as commander-in-chief I have no compunctions about sacrificing the lives of my soldiers, why should I feel guilty about killing Jews—enemies of the German people?”

In his study of the First World War, Denis Winter (1979) writes about the experience of German soldiers as they were transported to battle in box cars:

After the stint at base, the railway took the men toward the front line. To a generation with visual memories of the railway lines running into Hitler’s death camps, tense faces peering from cattle

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

trucks, there is something disconcerting about the imagery of this journey from base camp. The soldiers went in waggons of the same type, forty of them in each waggon, kit hanging from hoods in the roof. Death was a high probability for both generations of travelers in these cattle trucks.

The cattle trucks that took Jews to death camps were the same cattle trucks that transported German soldiers to the Western Front during the First World War. We have not wished to draw attention to this “disconcerting” similarity between Holocaust victims and German soldiers—each transported *en masse* to a site of slaughter.

DIE FOR GERMANY—OR BE KILLED

A sign at the entrance to Auschwitz read, “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 for the welfare of a new Europe.” Hitler imagined that Jews had been “shirkers” during the First World War—had acted to avoid their obligation to fight and die for Germany. This time, Jews would not be exempt. Just as German soldiers were suffering and dying at the front, so Jews would be required to suffer and die. If German soldiers were forced to submit to the nation-state and its leaders—to undergo a horrible, painful ordeal—Jews would be forced to undergo an even more horrible, painful ordeal.

Primo Levi notes (1986) that in many of its painful and absurd aspects the concentration world was “only a version,

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

an adaptation of German military procedure,” the army of prisoners an “inglorious copy of the army proper or, more accurately, its caricature.” Similarly, Leon Poliakov (1979): “Dressed in rags, the slaves had to march at parade step and with a martial air when going off to work; while other slaves played military marches. Crippled by disease, their feet running with sores, the prisoners were forced to make their beds with geometric precision.” The Jew in the death camps represented a perverse version of the German soldier. It’s as if prisoners were performing a *satire* on military discipline and basic training.

Although soldiers are portrayed as aggressive warriors, the actual condition of the German soldier during the First World War was one of abject submission. Jews in the death camps, I hypothesize, symbolized the German soldier in the First World War. The death camps enact the condition of a human being whose body has been taken over by the nation: compelled to be obedient unto death.

The Nazis glorified duty: willingness to surrender to Hitler and Germany. Absolute submission was conceived as honor, loyalty and faithfulness; the death of the soldier in battle as noble self-sacrifice. Newspapers reported the death of the soldier by declaring that he had died “for Fuehrer and Reich.”

The Holocaust depicts suffering and death at the hands of the nation-state without sugar-coating: stripped of honor and glory. The death camps portray submission to the nation-state as abjection and degradation, enacting the horrific fate of a body that has been put at the disposal of the nation: given over to—taken over by—the state.

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

As Hitler asked his soldiers to sacrifice their lives for Germany, so did he require the death of Jews. The Holocaust affirmed the totalitarian principle that the state is all encompassing. During the early years of Hitler's reign, Jews had been split off—separated from the German body politic; deemed unfit to participate. The Final Solution brought Jews back into the fold. They would be included in the sacrificial ritual that Hitler brought forth.

We return to the words or prophecy uttered by Hitler in his declaration of war on September 1, 1939. Hitler began by asking every German to do what he said he was prepared to do: To lay down his life for his people. Then he went on to say: "If anyone thinks that he can evade this national duty directly or indirectly, he will perish." True to these words, Hitler carried out this policy. German soldiers who attempted to desert or civilians who tried to surrender (for example, by waving a white flag out of an apartment window when Soviet troops entered Berlin in 1945) often were shot by the SS.

Stephen Fritz (1997), in his study of war on the Eastern Front, observes that German soldiers suspected of desertion were often executed and left dangling from trees or poles with placards around their necks that read "cowardice in the face of the enemy." Sixteen-year-old Hans-Rudolf Vilter never forgot the picture of chaos in Berlin in 1945, especially the deserters and apprehended soldiers that one saw hanging on lampposts and trees with the sign, "I hang here because I am too cowardly to defend my fatherland."

To the end, Hitler refused to allow his people to surrender—to acknowledge that the war had been lost. He continued to require that his people "lay down their lives,"

The Sacrificial Meaning of the Holocaust

fulfilling his prophecy that one would either die in the process of fighting for Germany, or perish. One soldier, according to Fritz, recalled with bitterness that in the fall of 1944, armed German officers gave his unit no choice but to attack enemy lines. The other option was clear: be shot by your own leaders.

Units established special formations whose instructions were to “make immediate use of their weapons in order to enforce obedience and discipline.” The situation in which many German soldiers found themselves, said Helmut Altner, himself a soldier, was devilishly simple: “There were only two possibilities: Death by a bullet from the enemy, or by the ‘thugs’ of the SS.” Thus did Hitler fulfill his dream of war and enforce the sacrificial obligation: Either die for Germany, or be killed.