

THE SACRIFICIAL MEANING OF THE HOLOCAUST

Richard A. Koenigsberg, Ph.D

Presented at the [20th Annual Holocaust Conference at Millersville University, April 3, 2000](#)

The fundamental distinction in Hitler's thought was between those willing to surrender their lives, submit to the nation and community, and those not willing to do so. The Aryan or good Nazi represented an individual who was willing to sacrifice unconditionally, while Jews represented persons who were unwilling to sacrifice. Jews symbolized for Hitler the negation of Nazism and its ideology: lack of faith in Germany, the persistence of individuality, and refusal to bow down to the sacred community. The Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that Jews would not be exempt from the obligation to submit to the nation-state. They too—like the German soldier—would be obligated to sacrifice themselves—to die for the country.

Hitler said, "We do not want to have any other God, only Germany." Nazism was religious worship of the German nation or people, *Das Deutsche Volk*. Hitler was a fanatic preacher, obsessed with the idea of Germany, imploring, beseeching others to devote their lives to the god to which he had devoted his own life:

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 life.

The foundation of Nazi totalitarianism was the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*, the community of the German people. Hitler insisted that every German was obligated to abandon individuality, personal desire and a sense of separateness in order to partake in the life of the nation:

Volksgemeinschaft, overcoming bourgeois privatism, means
unconditionally equating the individual fate and the fate of the nation. 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 totalitarianism was a form of radical nationalism affirming *absolute identity* between self and nation. In Nazism, there could be no private sphere. The identity and

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interests of the individual were conceived as being identical with the identity and interests of the nation.

The German nation was a jealous god that would brook no opposition. No one was exempt from the obligation to worship, bow down to her. Genocide was religious war against infidels, “death to the non-believers,” but also a way of compelling Jews to submit to the German god. The Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that no one could evade the wrath of Germany. Everyone was obligated to submit, give over one’s body to the nation-state, and to sacrifice one’s life.

Nazism required absolute, total commitment. Hitler experienced “others”—those who were not bound to the German Volksgemeinschaft—as intolerable. He could not bear to contemplate the idea that an individual might exist in a condition of separateness or separation from the nation. The Jew symbolized precisely this idea of separateness or separation, a state of being that seemed to shatter the dream of “oneness,” 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?

The German word *zerzetzung* is commonly used in chemistry and biology, meaning decomposition, decay, putrefaction. When used in relation to Jews, the word suggested that they worked toward the destruction of all “genuine values,” of everything that was sacred to Germans: Germanic tradition, culture, patriotism, patriotic symbols, etc. Goebbels stated 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.” The Jew symbolized that which was working to disintegrate, decompose or tear apart the German nation.

Our idea of the Nazi evokes brutality and cynicism. The Nazis did not see themselves this way. 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.” Americans often interpret Nazism according to the idea 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 explicated the Nazi ideology as that force and conviction which

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“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 for Nazism symbolized the opposite of the heroic, self-sacrificing German who willingly surrendered to Hitler and the Reich. Goebbels contrasted the creative, constructive philosophy of National Socialism with its idealistic goals with the “Jewish philosophy of materialism and individualism.” *Hitler’s Official Programme* published in 1927 inveighed against the leaders of public life who all worshipped the same god, “individualism,” and whose sole incentive was “personal interest.” The essence of the Nazi complaint against the Jew was that he lacked the capacity for self-sacrifice, mocked and spoiled German idealism through his unwillingness to surrender to the community.

War may be viewed as a kind of sacrificial ritual, the way in which citizens prove their devotion to the object that they worship: their nation. Death and mutilation on the field of battle function as proof of sincerity, demonstrating the depth of devotion. In war, the most virile, vigorous men are sacrificed in the name of proving the reality of the ideal. War often is conceptualized as “aggression,” a manifestation of biological tendencies serving an evolutionary purpose. However, it is perhaps more accurate to characterize the institution of war as an anti-biological or counter-biological phenomenon. Waging war constitutes the victory of spirit over flesh. The body forswears its “instinct for survival” in the name of giving itself over to the sacred ideal. Steven Kull observes that in the military ethos the soldier is expected

to be willing to sacrifice himself to fulfill the abstract purposes of the group. The emergence of this 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 develops a form that intentionally sacrifices itself in the name of abstract principles. We may assume that these behaviors are generated by the activity of the cortex overriding the more primitive tendencies of the lower brain.

When young men got out of trenches and ran into machine gun fire and artillery shells for four years, 1914-1918, they were demonstrating devotion to their nations, willingness to abandon their own bodies in the name of sacred bodies politic. Hitler was

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among the sixty-five million soldiers who fought in the First World War and he himself barely escaped being killed. On several occasions, it is reported, he moved from a certain spot only to have an artillery shell explode on that very spot a few moments later. He was wounded and in a hospital bed when the war ended, temporarily blinded in a poison gas attack. Later, he would unleash poison gas: Do unto others as others have done unto you.

Glynne Dyer in his masterful video series on the nature of war concludes, “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.” Joanna Bourke, writing about the First World War, notes that the most important point to be made about the male body during that war is that it was “intended to be mutilated.” The great protest movements of the Twentieth Century revolve around the complaints of workers against capitalist, colonialists against imperialists, women against men, etc. Isn’t it astonishing that there is barely a peep, a word of protest from or about the young men who have been sent to their deaths in such prodigious numbers during the Twentieth Century? Why this silence?

Perhaps when students yelled, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” in the Sixties, they provided for a brief moment insight into the deep structure and meaning of 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, we say that the French killed them. Wouldn’t it be more parsimonious to say that the leaders of these nations, by putting men into such untenable situations, were killing their own soldiers? One may suggest that in the First World War, France and its leaders killed French soldiers, and that Germany and its leaders killed Germans soldiers. We disguise the sacrificial meaning of war by delegating killing to the *other nation*.

War represents a massive, desperate psychopathology at the core of civilization. At a distance, it seems noble and beautiful. P. H. Pearse, founder of the Irish Revolutionary movement, was thrilled in 1916 to observe the carnage of the First World War:

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

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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.

The nationalist Maurice Barres, writing in 1917, had this to say about the French soldiers 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.

The Aztecs believed that the sun arose each morning because it was fed with the heart and blood of sacrificial victims. The structure of thought articulated in the previous passages is identical: Nations arise by virtue of being fed with the blood and bodies of soldiers. Barres stated that France was to be rebuilt from the souls of dead soldiers, which were like “living stones.” Even before the First World War ended, the French government began creating cemeteries, with their endless rows of crosses. To this day, they are cared for meticulously, attended to with much greater care and consideration than the soldiers who were so promiscuously thrown into battle.

Hitler was among the greatest devotees of the sacrificial religion of German nationalism. In *Mein Kampf* he stated that in the First World War, “The most precious blood sacrificed itself joyfully, in the faith that it was preserving the independence and freedom of the fatherland” and observed that “More than once, thousands and thousands of young Germans have stepped forward with self-sacrificing resolve to sacrifice their young lives freely and joyfully on the altar of the beloved fatherland.” Apparently, the sacrifices of World War I were insufficient. World War II represented an extension and perpetuation of the slaughter.

The Second World War and genocide arose out of the First World War. Germany did not exactly “lose” World War I. Each nation seemed to be willing to continue to send young men into the cauldron of battle. However, when the Americans entered the war some German leaders, seeing that the Allies had many more bodies than the Germans, decided that the cause was futile. Hitler experienced the ending of the war as a betrayal

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of the fighting men by the government. The politicians who negotiated the surrender in 1918 were called “November criminals.” Hitler held Jews responsible for this “stab in the back” which he neither forgot nor forgave. He could not bear to acknowledge that the sacrifices had been in vain, that the war had been lost in spite of two million Germans killed and two million more maimed or wounded.

Tens-of-thousands of books have been written about Hitler, Nazism, the Holocaust and World War II. However, few scholars take the trouble to listen to Hitler carefully in order to understand what he had in mind and thought he was doing. Here is what Hitler said on September 1, 1939, speaking before the Reichstag as German planes and troops crossed the Polish borders in a devastating Blitzkrieg:

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. We are acting only in accordance with our old principle. Our own life matters nothing, all that matters is that our people, that Germany shall live.

In this passage, Hitler tells us quite clearly what the war is about and predicts its outcome. He asks every German to do what he was prepared to do (and eventually did): To lay down his life for his country. He quite unambiguously puts forth the idea that the war is being fought in order to provide the occasion for Germans to die for Germany.

Hitler goes on to say that if anyone thinks he can “evade this nation duty,” that is, escape the obligation to lay down one’s life for his people, he will “perish.” In short, Hitler is saying that either one demonstrates one’s devotion to Germany through a willingness to fight and die for her, or that one will be killed; either die for the country, or we will kill you. Hitler imagined that there were some persons who *refused to embrace the sacrificial imperative or obligation*. Jews symbolized such persons. Jews represented in Hitler’s mind the idea that it was not necessary to devote one’s life to Germany—that sacrificial submission to one’s nation is unnecessary and meaningless.

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Contemplation of this idea enraged Hitler. He could not bear to imagine, could not tolerate the idea that some human beings might be exempt from the sacrificial obligation. Hitler was saying in effect: "There shalt be no other god than Germany." The violence and aggression that Hitler initiated, domination that he imposed upon other nations and peoples, functioned to force *others* to submit to the god to which he had submitted. Hitler was saying to the world, in effect: "As I have sacrificed my existence to Germany, so you will be obligated to sacrifice your existence."

The term "Holocaust" has the religious meaning of "burnt sacrifice" or "an offering wholly consumed by fire." World War II constituted a holocaust for the German people and the world. The Final Solution was undertaken in order to make certain that Jews would sacrifice their lives. They too would experience the might and wrath of the German nation and its leaders. They too would experience death and degradation, would be obligated to die at the behest of Germany.

It is clear that Jews died as a consequence of actions undertaken by Germany and its leaders. However, we do not often focus upon the fact that the German soldiers and people also were victims. As the attack against Russia began, German General von Rundstedt admonished the soldier of the Second World War to emulate the examples of their 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." As war on the Eastern Front progressed, Goebbels was satisfied to note that "The German soldiers go into battle with devotion, like congregations going into service." With rare exceptions, German soldiers did not rebel against the duty to fight and die. They went like sheep to the slaughter.

The following passages, excerpted from letters depicting unimaginable horror and suffering, 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." "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

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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 descriptions of the death camps written by Jews. Actually, they are letters written by German soldiers fighting in Russia—freezing, starving, wounded and dying in places such as Stalingrad. One may suggest that the primary sacrificial victims for Hitler were his own people, in the first place the loyal soldier who was devoted to his nation, willingly gave his life to Germany, and who did not struggle against the obligation to fight and die.

Hitler apparently had no compunctions about sending millions of soldiers into battles where death was probable. Writing in *Mein Kampf* about his experience of World War I, he wrote: "When in the long war years Death snatched so many a dear comrade and friend from our ranks, it would have seemed to me almost a sin to complain. After all, were they not dying for Germany?" If German leaders did not hesitate to send young men like him to fight and die in the First World War, did he not have the right to do the same in the Second World War? Is this not the prerogative of the Commander-in-Chief of a great nation?

Contemplating the logic of warfare, Hitler and other Nazis were confronted with a paradox: If a leader has the right, indeed often is obligated to send its best citizens to their deaths, why should other "inferior" types of persons be spared such a fate? Dr. Pfannmuller, a major figure in the euthanasia movement, said 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." In a docudrama based on transcripts of the Wannsee Conference—where Nazi leaders planned the Final Solution—an official says: "Will the Jews be in luxury, in warm concentration camps while our soldiers freeze on the Eastern Front?"

As the *Einsatzgruppen* murdered millions of Jews in late 1941 and early 1942 east of the Soviet border, Hitler professed that he was undisturbed by the extermination of men, women and children: "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," he said, "then I have naturally the right to destroy millions of men of inferior races who increase like vermin."

Here we approach the crux of the matter and the meaning of the Holocaust. Hitler was suggesting that if he as national leader had the right to send German soldiers to their deaths, then certainly he had the right to send the mortal enemy of the German

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people, Jews, to their deaths. Hitler and the Nazis conceived of Jews as a disease whose continued existence would lead to the demise of the nation. The Final Solution was undertaken according to the logic, "The Jew must die so that Germany might live." However, the death of the German soldier, patriotic sacrifice, was justified on the basis of an identical logic: "The individual must die so the nation might live."

In his study of the First World War, Denis Winter writes about the experience of German soldiers as they were transported to battle in cattle 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 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.

Human beings have not wished to make the "disconcerting" connection between the Holocaust and the First World War. As German leaders willfully sent massive numbers of Jews to their deaths in the Holocaust, so did they send massive numbers of soldiers to die in World War I. Approximately 9 million soldiers were killed and 21 million wounded in the First World War. Sophisticated technologies evolved in order to kill human beings *en masse*. As soldiers were sent to the Western front where they were slaughtered in vast numbers during World War I, so were Jews transported to the death camps in order to be slaughtered in vast numbers during the Second World War.

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." Death camps functioned to make certain that *Jews would not exempt from the obligation to suffer and die for Germany*. If German soldiers had been forced to submit to the leadership and undergo a horrible, painful ordeal, Jews would be obligated to undergo an even more horrible, painful ordeal. Primo Levi observed that in many of its painful and absurd aspects the concentration world was "only a version, an adaptation of German military

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procedure,” the army of prisoners an “inglorious copy of the army proper or, more accurately, its caricature.”

Another scholar writes: "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 German soldier had been portrayed as an aggressive warrior, a conqueror. However, in the battlefields of Russia, he became a pathetic victim, starving, freezing, and dying in the snow. Jews in the death camps, I hypothesize, symbolized or depicted *the repressed reality of the experience of the German soldier*. The death camps portray the abjection and degradation that is contained within the idea of “dying for the country.”

The Nazis glorified willingness to surrender absolutely to the nation and its leaders. The fate of the dead German soldier was conceived as the apotheosis of noble submission. The Holocaust shows surrender to the nation-state, dying for the country, *stripped of honor and glory*. The death camps constituted a massive enactment, permitting us to witness *the horrible, degrading fate of a human body that had been put at the disposal of the state*. Jews in the Holocaust, like soldiers in both World War I and World War II, were obligated to suffer and to die when the leaders of Germany asked them to do so.

As German soldiers were required to die for Hitler and Germany, so Jews would be required to do so. The Holocaust affirmed the totalitarian principle that the state is all encompassing and has the right to control the bodies of individuals. During the early years of Hitler’s rule, Jews had been split off, separated from the German body politic. By virtue of their selfish individualism, Jews were deemed unfit to participate as members of the community. In the Final Solution, Jews are brought back into the fold. As German soldiers and civilians were suffering and dying, so Jews would be forced to suffer and die with them. In the end, the Jews joined the German people—sacrificial lambs on the altar of the nation-state.

We return to the words uttered by Hitler in his declaration of war on September 1, 1939. He began by asking every German to do what he was prepared to do: To lay down his life for his people. Then he said: “If anyone thinks that he can evade this national duty directly or indirectly, he will perish.” True to his word, this policy was carried out. Stephen Fritz in his study of war on the Eastern front notes that German soldiers

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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 the 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 say that the war was lost. He continued to require them to lay down their lives “for Fuhrer and Volk.” He fulfilled 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 soldiers found themselves, as Helmut Altner wrote caustically, 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.