

Dying for the Country

Richard A. Koenigsberg

INTRODUCTION

Insofar as human beings have engaged in armed political conflict throughout recorded history, war often is thought of as an immutable cultural institution, even a natural occurrence. In my view, however, the persistence of warfare as a social institution should be interrogated rather than taken for granted. War represents an idea or form of activity created by human beings. We transform war into a problematic by posing the question: “Why?” Why has war been a recurring element of human social life and history? Why have people embraced war in spite of the fact that its consequences invariably are destruction and death?

Hitler was a human being, even if we prefer to think that he was not. We would like to separate Hitler from the human race by pretending he was exceptional; an anomaly. We want to rescue our self-esteem, that is, that part of our self-esteem derived from identification with civilization and belief in the beneficence of society. We prefer to draw a contrast between violence and killing, on the one hand, and civilization on the other, as if these were separate and distinct phenomena.

It would appear, however, that the massive brutality of Hitler’s war against the Soviet Union—and the Holocaust—were not separate from the ideals of society, but rather were intimately bound to them. Hitler declared: “We may be inhumane, but if we rescue Germany, we have performed

Dying for the Country

the greatest deed in the world.” The violence that Hitler generated grew out of his desire to save Germany by wiping out an enemy whose continued existence, he believed, would result in the destruction of his nation and Western civilization.

War grows out of military institutions that are significant elements of society. People debate about whether particular wars are good or bad, right or wrong, necessary or unnecessary, etc. But most people see the military as a necessary—if perhaps unfortunate—dimension of society. In the darkness of a movie theater, however—witnessing the chaos, mayhem and absurdity of battle—people frequently whisper to themselves, “War is insane.”

Genocide like warfare is a collective or societal rather than individual form of violence. Unlike war, however, genocidal behavior usually is viewed as transgressing society’s norms; an aberration. Had Hitler simply waged war—and not been responsible for the Holocaust—people today might view him as a failed military leader rather than as a monster, someone like Napoleon who caused the death of millions of people as he failed in his attempt to conquer the world.

Nine million men were killed and over 21 million wounded in the First World War. The Generals who directed the war and were responsible for the deaths of millions—men such as British General Douglas Haig—are sometimes called stupid because of their failed military strategies. Yet rarely are they accused of being mass-murderers, or called evil.

In Hitler’s mind, warfare and genocide were not separate phenomena. The Final Solution grew out of Hitler’s ideas on

Dying for the Country

the nature of warfare. If society gave him the right to sacrifice his own soldiers, Hitler reflected, why did he not also have the right to destroy the mortal enemy of the German people? The logic of genocide grew out of the logic of war.

WHY DID HITLER WAGE WAR?

People often assume that war has a rational purpose; that it revolves around motives like conquest, territorial expansion, defense of one's nation's borders, the pursuit of economic interests, etc. A standard historical account of the Second World War states that Hitler dreamt of building a "vast German Empire sprawling across Central and Eastern Europe;" that his objective was to wage a war of conquest against the Soviet Union in order to make Germany the "most powerful state in all of Europe."

Based on 40 years of research, I have discovered that there are "hidden narratives" operating beneath the radar of political history. Do we really understand why Hitler waged a war that resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of people and destruction of his own nation? Do we know why he felt it was necessary to kill every single Jew on the face of the earth?

Instead of believing that we know the answers to these questions, I suggest that we begin with the assumption that we do not know the answers. We begin to discern or to understand what Hitler had in mind by listening closely to what he said—by paying attention to the words that he uttered. What Hitler *did* followed closely based on what he *said*.

Dying for the Country

Hitler declared war on September 1, 1939—as German airplanes and troops crossed the Polish border in a devastating Blitzkrieg. The following passage is from the speech that Hitler delivered to the Reichstag (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 says that he is entering the fight inspired by “faith in his people” and asks every German to do what he was prepared to do: to lay down his life at any moment. Anyone, however, who thought that he could evade this national duty—to lay down one’s life—would “perish.”

This passage constitutes a prophecy—a prediction of everything that was to follow. The fundamental template for the war—its master plan—was set forth right at the beginning. Hitler states that what will be required in this war is for Germans to sacrifice themselves—to lay down their lives for their country.

On the other hand, Hitler insisted that people who thought they could evade the duty to lay down their lives for the country—would perish. In the Second World War,

Dying for the Country

unlike the First, there would be no shirkers. Hitler's mission in waging war was to try to get *everyone* to die.

IDENTITY OF SELF AND NATION

Nazism asserted an absolute identity between self and nation. Hitler's ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft*—the community of the German people—required overcoming “bourgeois privatism” in order to unconditionally “equate the individual fate with the fate of the nation.” The Volk, according to Hitler, encompassed and embraced each and every German. “No one is excepted from the crisis of the Reich,” he said. “There may not be a single person who excludes himself from this joint obligation.” Nazism insisted that everyone partake of the life of the community. “This Volk,” Hitler declared, “is but yourselves.”

Nazism revolved around worshipping the German nation. Hitler said: “We do not want to have any other God, only Germany.” Hitler was a fanatic preacher, obsessed with his god, imploring and exhorting the German people 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.

Nazism represented negation of individuality in the name of the community. “You are nothing, your nation is

Dying for the Country

everything,” Hitler proclaimed. Morality or virtue entailed abandoning one’s own desires in the name of the collective. According to Nazi ideology, one could not choose to devote one’s life to one’s nation or choose not to do so. Rather, renunciation of individual interests in order to devote oneself to the community was a sacred obligation from which no one was exempt.

The ultimate act of self-renunciation was willingness to die for Germany. Reflecting on the loyalty and devotion of his comrades, Hitler 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.” Hitler glorified the idea of “dying for one’s country,” building his ideology on this commonplace idea and carrying it through to an extreme, bizarre conclusion.

ARYAN WILLINGNESS FOR SELF-SACRIFICE

We think of National Socialism as the quintessence of brutality and immorality. The Nazis did not see it this way. Goebbels stated that to be a National Socialist meant to “subordinate the I to the Thou, sacrifice the personality for the whole.” He defined Nazism (Rhodes, 1980) as “service, renunciation for individuals and a claim for the whole, fanatic of love, courage to sacrifice, resignation for the Volk.” A U.S. Department of State booklet (Murphy, 1943) explicated Nazi ideology as a conviction that “consecrates its whole life to the service of an idea, a faith, a task or duty even when it knows that the destruction of its own life is certain.”

Dying for the Country

Goebbels contrasted the creative, constructive philosophy of National Socialism—with its idealistic goals—to the Jewish philosophy of “materialism and individualism.” *Hitler’s Official Programme* (Feder, 1971) inveighed against 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 Jews was that they lacked the capacity to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the community.

The popular concept is that the Nazis were intent upon producing a race of supermen. Hitler did believe in the “superiority” of the Aryan race, but his idea of what constituted Aryan superiority is quite different from what is commonly assumed. Further, what made Aryans superior did not necessarily guarantee victory in war. On the contrary, Hitler feared that the Aryan trait that made them superior as culture-builders might lead to the downfall and extinction of the race rather than to its triumph and survival.

According to Hitler’s theory propounded in *Mein Kampf*, what was unique about the Aryan was his willingness to abandon self-interest and transcend egoism in the name of surrendering to the community. What was most strongly developed in the Aryan, Hitler said, was the self-sacrificing will to “give one’s personal labor and if necessary one’s own life for others.” The Aryan was not “greatest in his mental abilities as such,” but rather in the extent of his willingness to “put all his abilities in the service of the community.” The Aryan, according to Hitler, willingly “subordinates his own ego to the life of the community” and “if the hour demands it” even sacrifices himself.

Dying for the Country

The Jew by contrast, Hitler believed, represented the “mightiest counterpart to the Aryan.” Whereas Aryans willingly sacrificed themselves for the community, in the Jewish people the will to self-sacrifice does not go beyond “the individual’s naked instinct of self-preservation.” The Jew lacked completely, Hitler believed, the most essential requirement for a cultured people, “the idealistic attitude.” The Jew’s “absolute absence of all sense of sacrifice” expressed itself as “cowardice.”

HITLER’S EXPERIENCE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Hitler was one of the 65 million men who fought in the First World War, an instance of mass-slaughter in which 9 million men were killed and nearly 30 million wounded or reported missing. During the period of 1914-1918 across Europe and the wider world, men were killed at an average rate of more than 6000 per day. Like many men who fought in this war, Hitler suffered in the trenches, endured the wet and cold and scarcity of food, the rats and bedbugs, and the endless artillery barrage. He witnessed the death and dismemberment of hundreds of his comrades and experienced the stench of their decaying bodies.

It is miraculous that Hitler himself was not killed. According to Walter S. Frank’s study (2004) of Hitler and the First World War, the chance that a 1914 volunteer in Hitler’s regiment would be killed or maimed was almost guaranteed. Because of replacements, Hitler’s regiment—that consisted of 3600 men in 1914—suffered 3754 killed before the war ended. Hitler told an English reporter (Frank, 2004) that on one occasion while eating, he moved from

Dying for the Country

one spot in a trench to another 20 yards away. Only a few seconds later, an artillery shell exploded on the very spot from which he had moved, killing every one of his comrades.

One might expect that his trench experiences would have humanized Hitler—sensitized him to the suffering and destruction wrought by war. One would think he would have become highly critical of the leaders of his nation’s war effort such as Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, whose military strategies led to the deaths of 2 million German soldiers. Yet astonishingly, Hitler rarely complained or expressed regrets about what he had gone through. Nor did he cease to admire and support Germany’s military leaders.

WILLINGNESS TO DIE FOR ONE’S COUNTRY

Why did Hitler’s experiences not lead him to critique the ideology of warfare? More broadly, why are human beings unable to abandon war, which is the source of profound suffering, degradation and death? The problem is the relationship between the ideology of warfare and attachment to one’s nation. War is waged in the name of a sacred ideal from which people refuse to separate: one’s beloved country.

Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*: “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?” Hitler refused to complain about the death of his comrades in battle—felt that it was a “sin” to do so—because they

Dying for the Country

had *died for Germany*. One's own nation represents an absolute that allows and justifies anything and everything.

Hitler asserted that any man who loves his people proves it "solely by the sacrifices which he is prepared to make for it." He stated that National Socialism meant acting with a "boundless and all-embracing love for the people," and if necessary "to die for it." Giving one's life for the community, he proclaimed, constituted the "crown of all sacrifice." Within the framework of Hitler's radical nationalism, in short, dying for one's country represented the apogee of love and devotion. Nazism was an ideology of martyrdom revolving around "laying down one's life for one's people and country."

Hitler glorified war and the death of the German soldier in battle. In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote that in 1914 his young volunteer regiment had received its baptism of fire. With "Fatherland love in our heart and songs on our lips," Hitler said, his young regiment had "gone into the battle as to a dance." The most precious blood there sacrificed itself joyfully, in the faith that it was "preserving the independence and freedom of the fatherland."

In July 1917, Hitler reports, his regiment set foot for the second time on the ground that was "sacred to all of us." This ground was sacred because in it the best comrades "slumbered." Most of them were "still almost children" who had run to their deaths with "gleaming eyes for the one true fatherland." Hitler and his fellow soldiers stood with respectful emotion at this shrine of "loyalty and obedience to the death."

Dying for the Country

WHY DO THE BEST HUMAN BEINGS DIE IN WAR WHILE THE WORST SURVIVE?

This is not to say that questions and doubts had not arisen in the mind of Hitler and other Germans after their nation's defeat in the First World War. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler conveyed his feelings and reflections upon learning that Germany had surrendered and signed the armistice:

And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations; in vain the hunger and thirst of months which were often endless; in vain the hours in which, with mortal fear clutching at our hearts, we nevertheless did our duty; and in vain the death of the two millions who died. Was this the meaning of the sacrifice which the German mother made to the fatherland when with sore heart she let her best-loved boys march off, never to see them again?

What had been the purpose of the war? Why had 2 million German soldiers been killed and 4 million wounded? What had been the meaning of the monumental sacrifices? These questions cried out for an answer.

Hitler responded to questions about the meaning of German sacrifices by deflecting it into another one. The question, "Why had German soldiers died?" transmogrified into the question: "Why had German soldiers died while other Germans had not died?" Hitler observed that for each "Hero who had made the supreme sacrifice" there was a "shirker who cunningly dodged death." Hitler became

Dying for the Country

obsessed with the idea that while many men had died, some had avoided fighting altogether. Contemplating the idea that many had sacrificed their lives while others had not, Hitler became deeply disturbed and enraged.

We have noted that Hitler judged the worth of a human being based on this human being's capacity and willingness to sacrifice for the community. He stated that during the First World War, one extreme of the population, which was constituted of the best elements, had given a typical example of its heroism and had "sacrificed itself almost to a man." Whereas the other extreme, which was constituted of the worst elements of the population, had "preserved itself almost intact." While for four-and-a-half years the best human material was being "thinned to an exceptional degree on the battlefields," the worst material "wonderfully succeeded in saving themselves."

Thus a conundrum arose that would preoccupy Hitler for the rest of his life: Why in war do the best human beings die while the worst survive? Our ordinary expectation is that if we perform in accordance with morality or virtue, we will be rewarded; whereas if we act immorally, we will be punished. Hitler discovered that what occurs in war is the opposite of what we feel should occur. In war, those who adhere to societal norms by enthusiastically performing their duty are killed. While those who behave immorally—by evading their social responsibility to fight for their country—are rewarded by survival. Hitler was alarmed and agitated by this profound unfairness or injustice.

JEWISH “SHIRKERS”

Upon returning home from the front, Hitler reports in *Mein Kampf* that what he discovered was that all of the offices were “filled with Jews.” He claimed that “nearly every clerk was a Jew and nearly every Jew was a clerk.” Hitler was amazed at this plethora of “warriors of the chosen people” and could not help compare them with their “rare representatives at the front.” Thus, the question of why some had died in the war and others had not—why the best had been killed while the worst survived—mutated into the question: “Why, while German soldiers were dying at the front, were Jews safe, comfortable and secure at home?”

Hitler claimed that during the time German soldiers were fighting the war, Jews at home—men who had avoided joining the army—fomented revolution and took over the government. He became filled with fantasies of revenge, putting forth an enigmatic idea linking the death of German soldiers at the front with the murder of Jews. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler said: “If the best men were dying at the front, the least we could do was to wipe out the vermin.”

He declared that if at the beginning of the War and during the War “twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas,” as happened to hundreds of thousands of German soldiers, then the sacrifice of millions at the front “would not have been in vain.” It would appear that Hitler tried to come to terms with the First World War by suggesting that the death of millions of Germany’s soldiers would become bearable only if Jews too were compelled to die.

Dying for the Country

Hitler's vision of war and genocide constituted an ideology of death insisting that no one should be exempt from the obligation to sacrifice one's life for the national community. The Holocaust grew directly out of Hitler's experience of the First World War. Hitler and his comrades had been subjected to poison gas in the trenches during that war. In the spirit of "Do unto others as has been done unto you," Hitler would subject Jews to poison gas during the Second War.

The Holocaust expressed Hitler's idea that no one should be allowed to escape or evade the obligation to sacrifice one's life for Germany. Hitler believed that the best human beings had been killed in the First World War while the worst had survived. In the Second World War, the worst human beings would not be spared. Just as German soldiers were required to give over their bodies and lives to the nation-state, so Jews also would be required to do so.

AS GERMAN SOLDIERS DIE, SO MUST JEWS

Hitler joined the army in 1914 at the behest of his nation and its leaders. By 1939—25 years later—he was Germany's leader. Now it was his turn to declare war and to ask young men to enter the battlefield. Hitler's familiarity with war did not deter him. He knew that Germany's soldiers would die and be maimed. However, now that he was commander-in-chief, why should he waver? Had the German leadership hesitated to declare war in 1914 and to send young German men to die at the front? Was a soldier not obligated to do his duty: to enter into battle when asked to do so, and if necessary to make the 'supreme sacrifice'?

Dying for the Country

As the attack against Russia began, German General Gerd von Rundstedt in an article entitled "Sacrifice for Germany" (Baird, 1974) 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." 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." German soldiers did not rebel against the duty to fight and die. They went like sheep to the slaughter.

The Final Solution or systematic extermination of the Jewish people began before the construction of death camps and gas chambers. As the German army moved eastward into the Soviet Union in late 1941 and early 1942, they were followed by the *Einsatzgruppen* or mobile killing units. Approximately 1.5 million Jews were shot and killed, many of them buried in gorges that bear a striking resemblance to the trenches of the First World War.

Hitler professed to be undisturbed by the extermination of men, women, and children, providing the following rationale: "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, 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.

Hitler appears to be saying that if he had no compunctions about sending German soldiers to die in battle, then why should he have compunctions about

Dying for the Country

sending Jews—mortal enemies of the German people—to their deaths? The logic of genocide derived from the logic of war. Hitler declared that if German soldiers had to die, so too must Jews. No one was exempt. Everyone had to die for Germany.

What disturbed Hitler about the First World War was that some had died, whereas others had not. The best men had been killed, while the worst men survived. Hitler was enraged when contemplating the idea that many Germans had sacrificed their lives, while others—shirkers, war deserters, and Jews—had avoided fighting entirely. In the Second World War, things would be different. This time, Hitler insisted, everyone would participate equally. Jews also would have to lay down their lives.

Ronald Hayman in his biographical study of Hitler (*Hitler and Geli*, 1997) reports an encounter between Hitler and his friend Henny von Schirach. She had returned to Germany in April 1943 after visiting friends in occupied Amsterdam and became aware that helpless women were being taken away and transported to camps. After dinner at Obersalzberg, Hitler turned to his friend and said “You’ve come from Holland?” She replied, “Yes, that’s why I’m here, I wanted to talk to you. I’ve seen frightful things. I can’t believe that’s what you want.”

“You’re sentimental, Frau von Schirach,” Hitler replied. Then he jumped to his feet and formed with his hands two bowls, which he moved up and down like scales as he said loudly and insistently:

Look—every day ten thousand of my most valuable men are killed, men who are irreplaceable, the best.

Dying for the Country

The balance is wrong; the equilibrium in Europe has been upset. Because the others aren't being killed: they survive, the ones in camps, the inferior ones. So what's it going to look like in Europe in a hundred years? In a thousand?

Hitler undertook the extermination of the Jewish people, it would appear, in order to balance the scale of death. As the best human beings—German soldiers—were dying in vast numbers on the field of battle, so it would be necessary to make certain that the worst human beings—Jews—died as well.

Members of the Aryan race—loyal and obedient—willingly sacrificed their lives. The German soldier, as General von Rundstedt put it, would go “happily and as a matter of course to his death.” He would be prepared at any moment as Hitler stated in his declaration of war to “lay down his life for his people and his country.” Jews on the other hand, according to Hitler, were a race incapable or unwilling to sacrifice for the community. In the case of Jews, it was necessary that they be compelled to die.

SACRIFICIAL DEATH STRIPPED OF HONOR

The Second World War and Holocaust were two sides of the same coin. War provided the occasion for Hitler to sacrifice his own people. Once again the German soldier would demonstrate “loyalty and obedience unto death.” The Holocaust represented another form of sacrifice or “dying for the country.” The norms of war define soldiers—one's own and the enemy's—as the class of people that must fight

Dying for the Country

in battle and—if necessary—die. Genocide represented an extension and expansion of the logic of warfare, enlarging the pool of sacrificial victims.

We speak of Hitler's extermination of the Jews as the Holocaust. This word derives from the word *olah* in the Hebrew Bible, which has the religious meaning of a burnt-sacrifice. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament the word became *holokauston*, an "offering wholly consumed by fire" (Meltzer, 1976). What Hitler did added another meaning to the dictionary definition: "A complete or thorough sacrifice or destruction, especially by fire, as of large number of human beings."

Use of the term Holocaust to describe what happened suggests we understand that the extermination of the Jews was a form of sacrifice. However, we hesitate to articulate the precise meaning of this sacrifice. Perhaps we do not wish to acknowledge that—with regard to the fate of the Jewish people—Hitler accomplished what he set out to achieve. He sacrificed Jews to the god that he worshipped, Germany.

In the First World War, German soldiers died in massive numbers. Hitler believed that Jews had acted deviously in order to avoid fighting and dying. In the Second World War, German soldiers again would be expected to "lay down their lives for their people and country." In this Second World War, however, unlike during the First, Jews would not be allowed to be "shirkers".

Hitler had stated in his Declaration of War that if anyone thought that he could "evade the national duty" (to lay down one's life for the country), that person would "perish." The Final Solution was undertaken in order to make certain

Dying for the Country

that Jews—like German soldiers—would perish. They too would be required to hand their bodies over to Hitler and Germany—and to die.

The Holocaust reveals the abject and degrading fate of a body that has been given over to—taken over by—the state. A soldier is required to enter into battle at the behest of his nation, often dying a brutal, ugly and horrific death. However, in spite of the brutality and ugliness of his death, the soldier's sacrifice—dying for his country—frequently is viewed as noble and beautiful.

It is impossible, however, to view the death of a Jew in the gas chamber as noble and beautiful. The Holocaust depicts the ugliness, futility and meaninglessness of submission to the nation-state: sacrificial death stripped of words such as honor, heroism and glory.