

# The Unprecedented Nature of the Holocaust and its Implications

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Some believe that genocide began with the Holocaust, but more correctly the term *genocide* came into being due to the Holocaust. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer who lost his family in the Holocaust, created the word (*geno* is Greek for race or tribe and *cide* is Latin for killing), and spent the rest of his life lobbying for its acceptance by the United Nations. His efforts bore fruit, and in December 1948 the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted by the UN. This Convention defines genocide as the intent to destroy an ethnic, national, racial or religious group, in part or in whole, and identifies the actions that define genocide as any or all of the following: 1) killing members of the group, 2) causing physical or mental harm to the group, 3) creating conditions of life that make the survival of the group impossible, 4) preventing births, and 5) kidnapping children. Also, a genocide arises when one party is overwhelmingly powerful, and the targeted victim is nearly or totally powerless.<sup>1</sup>

Having a word to define what had happened in the Holocaust, enabled the term to also be applied to past mass atrocities as well as subsequent events of this nature, and has resulted in *genocide* being a significant area of study and investigation. This has in turn led to the establishment of actions which can be taken to intervene as well as to punish perpetrators of this type of atrocity.

That said, the Holocaust has often been positioned as a foundational event against which other genocides are compared. In doing so, it has been noted that there were aspects of the Holocaust which are common to all genocides, but also several ways it was unprecedented. These aspects have been especially useful in providing a fuller understanding of the antecedents and actions of potential future genocides and have led to the development of tools to avert and better respond to these atrocities.

While this essay focuses on the aspects of the Holocaust that were unprecedented when compared with other genocides, the commonalities should first be identified. These include mass murder, the suffering of the victims, and that perpetrators always use the best means at their disposal.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that in the case of Holocaust, the *means used* were unprecedented in that ultimately “an industry was established that produced something that had never been produced before, namely corpses. [In the extermination camps] live Jews went in at one end and corpses came out at the other end.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Bauer, HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE TODAY  
([http://www.d.umn.edu/cia/ghhrcenter/main/Holocaust\\_and\\_Genocide\\_Today-Bauer.pdf](http://www.d.umn.edu/cia/ghhrcenter/main/Holocaust_and_Genocide_Today-Bauer.pdf)) 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 6.

There are also several significant additional ways in which the Holocaust was an unprecedented event, which are presented below as five characteristics. While each is discussed separately, there is clearly overlap of specific elements across these categories.

## **1. Totality -- The stated goal was total annihilation of the targeted group.**

The Holocaust was a “state-organized mass murder of members of a targeted group, in which every single person identified as a member of that group by the perpetrator was sought out, registered, marked, dispossessed, humiliated, terrorized, concentrated, transported and killed. This applied to every single person defined as a Jew who was caught, without exception. Those who survived because they were used as forced laborers, did so only because the Germans decided that they should live, temporarily, so their labor could be utilized for the victory of a regime that was totally committed to killing them when their labor was no longer needed, or when they had been brought to a state where they could no longer work. (In other words) the annihilation was intended to be as total as possible.”<sup>4</sup> And this is what the Nazis came close to achieving among the Jewish population of Europe.

Many years later, in 1986, the German historian Eberhard Jackel wrote, “Never before had a state...decided that a specific human group including its aged, its women, its children, and its infants, would be killed as quickly as possible and then carried through this regulation using every possible means of state power.”<sup>5</sup> The various methods of murder employed to expedite the mass murder included shooting, starvation, using the Jews as slave laborers until they died from their harsh conditions or untreated diseases, mobile gas vans, and ultimately concentration camp gas chambers and crematoriums.

One explanation for the intensity of hatred that led to the goal of the Nazis that every Jew be killed was the rationalization that this was essential for the survival of the Aryan German community. Hoess, the Commandant of Auschwitz stated in a 1946 affidavit that he was told by Himmler, “The Fuhrer has ordered the final solution of the Jewish question....Every Jew we can lay hands on must be exterminated without exception. If we now fail to destroy the biological basis of Jewry, then one day the Jews will destroy the German people.”<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Universality -- The annihilation goal was universal.**

The genocide was universal in that the Nazis intended to deal with the Jews everywhere rather than simply in Germany.<sup>7</sup> In fact, compared to the rest of Europe, the Jewish population in Germany was small; “fewer than one percent of the German population when Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, and about one quarter of one percent by the beginning of the Second World War....The murder of 165,000 German Jews was....only a very small part of the tragedy of the European Jews: fewer than three percent of the deaths of the Holocaust.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Bullock, *HITLER AND STALIN: PARALLEL LIVES* (1991) 974.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 762.

<sup>7</sup> Supra note 1 at 7.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Snyder, *BLOODLANDS: EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN* (2010) viii-ix.

In Eichmann's minutes from the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, the focus of which was on a total solution to the Jewish Question, it was stated that, "In the process of carrying out the final solution Europe will be combed through from East to West."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in October of 1943, Himmler told party leaders, "By the end of the year, the Jewish question will have been settled in all the occupied territories. Only a few individual Jews who have managed to slip through the net will be left...I did not consider that I would be justified in getting rid of the men – in having them put to death – only to allow their children to grow up to avenge themselves on our sons and grandsons. We have to make up our minds, hard though it may be, that this race must be wiped off the face of the earth."<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Ideology -- The annihilation goal was based on pure ideological superstructure.**

The Holocaust "was based not on any pragmatic, economic, political, military, or other consideration but on what Marxists would call pure ideological superstructure. (While other genocides have had) pragmatic bases, on which ideologies were then built as rationalizations, there were no such pragmatic elements with the Nazis."<sup>11</sup>

This superstructure was based on the belief of Hitler, and in turn the Nazi party, that "what distinguished the Jews from other races was the fact that they possessed no territory of their own, and so could not participate in that struggle for living space that he saw as the basic pattern of history. Lacking territory, the Jews could not carry out the construction of a state but had to become parasites batten on the creative activities and work of other nations. (In other words, the Jews were) the embodiment of evil...that had undermined and destroyed one civilization after another."<sup>12</sup>

### **4. Racism -- Racial hatred was the defining construct for the target group.**

"The racist Nazi ideology was something utterly revolutionary. Nations have replaced nations, empires have replaced empires, religions have superseded other religions. But races? Never before."<sup>13</sup> The Nazis defined the world and its people in racial terms (based on their non-science based definitions) and deemed the Germanic Aryans as the elite while the Jewish race was to be eradicated.

In fact, Judaism is not a race. "Tens of thousands of German Jews were not Jews at all, in their own eyes. Some were the children of Jewish converts to Christianity. Others had grandparents who had converted. But Hitler had redefined Jew as a question of race, of purity of blood: declaring that the mere taint of a Jewish ancestor made it impossible for a person to ever be a true German, a member of the Volk."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Supra note 5 at 764.

<sup>10</sup> Supra note 5 at 809-810.

<sup>11</sup> Supra note 1 at 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Supra note 5 at 145.

<sup>13</sup> Supra note 1 at 9.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Gilbert, THE HOLOCAUST: A HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF EUROPE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1985) 46.

In both *Mein Kampf* and in Hitler's table talks with other Nazi leaders, Jews are identified "as the source of the racial contamination and social decomposition that undermine Aryan supremacy."<sup>15</sup> "For Hitler, Aryan was synonymous with pure, while Semitic was synonymous with Jew, and hence impure (with the threat being) the racial integrity of the German people, and a deliberate assault on that integrity....by permanently adulterating the blood of the individuals who make up that people."<sup>16</sup> It was this belief that led to the conclusion that the only way in which Hitler's Garden of Eden could occur was by the resurgence of one race (the Aryans) after the extermination of others (the Jews).<sup>17</sup>

This racist reasoning was what provided the underpinnings of the decisions leading to the conclusion that the Jews needed to be destroyed.

#### 5. **Jewish history, culture, and values -- Identified as being in opposition to the Nazi Social Darwinist agenda.**

The Nazis identified Jewish culture as the "only surviving remnant of the original sources from which Western Civilization developed,"<sup>18</sup> with Western Civilization defined as being based on the values emerging from the Age of Enlightenment, which led to the French Revolution. These values included egalitarianism, democracy, individualism, and tolerance, all of which stood in opposition to the Social Darwinism embraced by the Nazis; i.e., survival of the fittest which was defined by them as Aryans. The Nazis believed "that the stronger races had not only the right but the duty to rule the world and do away with the weaker ones, even to annihilate them."<sup>19</sup>

Following this line of thinking, since the Jewish prophets and culture through the ages supported the values embraced by the French Revolution and spread by its outcome, the Jews needed to be annihilated in order to put an end to the legacy of this Revolution.

Within Germany, the basis for these beliefs had been percolating for a long time. But it was the disgrace resulting from the First World War that ultimately enabled the Nazis to inflame the simmering attitudes. "The war brought to a peak the feeling among German intellectuals of separateness from the West and fused German nationalism with the repudiation of Western values: German *Kultur* (with its conviction of superiority) versus civilization, the *volkische* belief in the uniqueness of German culture as opposed to the universalism of the Enlightenment (whereby) the *volkische* ideology glorified war and renewal by destruction over internationalism and pacifism, the exaltation of national power and national unity over individual freedom, of the authoritarian state and elitism over parliamentary democracy and egalitarianism."<sup>20</sup> And, it was the Jews who were identified as standing in the way of achieving all that was truly German.

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<sup>15</sup> Supra note 5 at 725.

<sup>16</sup> Supra note 14 at 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Supra note 8 at 206.

<sup>18</sup> Supra note 1 at 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Supra note 5 at 69.

Ultimately, “National Socialism was an apocalyptic vision of total transformation, to be realized by men who believed that will and race could slough off the burden of the past”<sup>21</sup> and lead their nation to greatness based on the supposed superiority of the Volk.

### **What led to the unprecedented characteristics of the Holocaust?**

“The policy of killing certain Jews was initially grounded in the rhetoric of military necessity, and had some connection to political and economic planning. But its escalation after the military situation changed, and after those plans were discarded or suspended, reveals that the elimination of Jews was for Hitler an end in itself. . . . The original justifications for the killing of Jews gave way to the anti-Semitic incantation, always present, of a cosmic Jewish plot, the struggle against which was the very definition of German virtue.”<sup>22</sup> This belief enabled the Nazis to rationalize the need for the mass killing. “To kill another person is a sacrifice of the purity of one’s own soul, and that making this sacrifice elevated the killer to a higher moral level.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, by engaging in mass murder, the individual was sacrificing him or herself for the sake of the Volk community. In turn, it was devotion to and faith in Hitler that led to this thinking and down the path of genocidal destruction now called the Holocaust. And this is why, “when the war was lost, Hitler called the mass murder of the Jews his victory.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Why is it important to understand the unprecedented characteristics of the Holocaust?**

The unprecedented nature of the Holocaust is proof that the unimaginable can happen, and understanding these characteristics provides a warning to the world that this type of horror can happen again. It provides support for the importance of democratic institutions which endorse the rule of law. It provides a warning to those who embrace charismatic autocratic leaders. It demonstrates that everyday people are capable of committing extraordinarily evil acts given the right mix of circumstances and propaganda. It is a cautionary tale for citizens everywhere as to where hatred can lead.

It also makes very clear that a genocide in one nation should be of concern to nations elsewhere. It is proof of the necessity for recognizing that what happens in one locale can readily spill over into other places. It provides a rationale for various entities (intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, regional governmental entities, individual nations, and non-governmental organizations) to monitor and respond with structural, resilience-building interventions in the early stages of genocidal antecedents being noted.

As Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust death camp survivor and well-known Nazi hunter, noted, “For your benefit, learn from our tragedy. It is not a written law that the next victims must be Jews. It can also be other people. We saw it begin in Germany with Jews, but people from more than twenty other nations were also murdered.”

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<sup>21</sup> Supra note 8 at xviii.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 389.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 400.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 388.

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