

Ideology, Persecution and Genocide: The Gentile Victims of Nazism

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This paper gives a brief overview of the Nazi persecution and murder of Gypsies, handicapped persons, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, Poles and other Slavs and places those histories in the context of Shoah. It argues Nazi policies grew out of the drive for the racial purification and revanchist longing to restore a lost empire and were informed by racial theories and prejudices that had long histories in German culture that, like anti-Semitism, predate Nazism. Neither the Holocaust nor other genocides were conceivable without the Second World War and the supportive role of the Soviet Union.

The Polish Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz in his Nobel address in 1981 made a plea for the study of all of the victims of the genocides committed during World War II. Styling himself the “Poet of the ‘other Europe’”, he says:

“For the poet of the “other Europe” the events embraced by the name Holocaust are a reality, so close in time that he cannot hope to liberate himself from their remembrance unless perhaps by translating the Psalms of David. He feels anxiety, though, when the meaning of the word Holocaust undergoes gradual modifications, so that the word begins to belong to the history of the Jews exclusively, as if among the victims there were not also millions of Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and prisoners of other nationalities. He feels anxiety, for he senses in this a foreboding of a not distant future when history will be reduced to what appears on television, while the truth, because it is too complicated, will be buried in the archives, if not totally annihilated.”¹

The study of the non-Jewish victims of the genocidal and racial policies of the Nazi regime is a comparatively neglected topic. It is complex and at times a controversial issue. To treat them as victims of the Holocaust along with the Jews is to tread into a minefield. Even to compare the Jewish with the gentile experience can raise angry criticism in some quarters. There were, as we know, some very heated and emotional debates on this issue when the Holocaust Museum was being created.² All of the objections were rooted in the idea of the uniqueness of Shoah as an experience of Jewish martyrdom. The arguments range from the simple empirical fact that all historical events are unique to characterizations of the Holocaust in terms that are nothing short of metaphysical. I might note that I do accept the first notion of the historical uniqueness of the Jewish martyrdom during the Second World War. It was unprecedented in its scope, the ambitious evil of its perpetrators and the number of its victims relative to the entire Jewish population. As a historian I am, however, not competent to speak of the Holocaust in any spiritual or metaphysical sense or as an event that in some way transcends historical understanding. The title I have chosen for this paper thus deliberately avoids the use of the word Holocaust precisely because it is such a problematical and sensitive an issue. Whether one

agrees with Milosz's use of the word to cover the victimization of gentile groups or not, it is clear to me that the Jewish experience cannot be fully understood without a comprehension of the murderous context in which it was perpetrated and the ideology which justified it.

In so far as the genocide experience of other peoples during this period is studied at all in the United States, it is studied under the rubric of Holocaust studies. There are, for better or worse, no other places in the curriculum for it. There are, thus, very practical reasons for including this history in Holocaust programs, if we feel, as I do, that it is necessary and worthwhile to study. There are also good pedagogical reasons for including it under the umbrella of Holocaust studies, as I will try to show.³ An alternative approach is the one adopted in California as a result of strong pressure from the Armenian community to mandate the study of all genocides in the modern world. I have, in fact, prepared material for that curriculum on the genocide of Christian Poles between 1939 and 1948. The dates that frame the study signal the complexity of issues raised when non-Jewish groups are included.⁴

It is my thesis, therefore, that despite the significant differences between the Jewish experience and the experiences of the other victim groups, it is important to understand fully the nature of racism, prejudice and the policies and ideologies that drove the Nazi regime to commit genocide, to study both in tandem. Shoah and anti-Semitism are, of course, the base experience against which we view the other histories. It is, nevertheless, also clear that an understanding of the ideologies which legitimized the killing, incarceration, plundering and persecution of the other groups can also illuminate more fully the nature and development of the ideas, policies and even the machinery used to murder the Jews of Europe *en masse*. Rather than suggest equivalence, such comparative study can in the end underline the uniqueness of Shoah, as well as shed new light on it.

It is worth noting that some of the problems that attend the study of Shoah are also present in an equally profound way in the study of the experience of Poles, gypsies and others. One of the key issues is establishment of an accurate count of those Nazi victims. Despite the myth of Nazi efficiency we are left in all of our studies with large gaps, corrupted data and many questions. A significant part of the problem is the result of the chaos which enveloped all of Eastern Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the war. Poland, for example, in 1939 had about 33 to 34 million people. In 1946 it had less than 24 million people, some of whom had not lived in Poland in 1939. On the other hand, many who were counted in Poland in 1939 no longer lived within the new Polish boundaries of 1945. When we add to those facts the incomplete data on the millions of refugees and on those who were killed or deported, we realize we have only the shakiest purchase on the losses suffered during the war.⁵

As we know, despite the commonly accepted figure of six million Jewish dead, responsible scholars have a variety of well-researched estimates of between five and six million victims. There have been occasional hints that perhaps the number may be higher than the accepted figure. An article a few years ago by M. Shafer demonstrates the difficulty. He notes that estimates for Jews killed in territories under Romanian rule during the war range from 102,000 to 410,000.⁶

As teachers, we know that ascertaining the exact number is not the key pedagogical issue we face in conveying the horror, evil and inhumanity of the Holocaust to our students. Sometimes numbers obscure the human face of the tragedy, the exposing of which is, I believe, at the heart of our enterprise. Stalin, who perhaps knew about these things better than most, once remarked to Churchill “the death of one man is a tragedy; the death of millions is a statistic”. Yet in the end numbers are important to fully understand the scope and immensity of genocide. Thus, I will try as best I can to give you the range of the number of victims we have for each group I will discuss briefly.

The focus of this paper is on those groups which the Nazi regime persecuted and killed for reasons based on racial ideologies, often rooted in ancient and modern prejudices that predated the Nazi period, to enable us to see how the ideology and prejudices that doomed the Jews operated in other contexts. The conflict between Hitler and his first enemies and victims, the communists, and his struggle with Christianity especially Catholicism was, to be sure, ideological but the ideology was not racist. It should be noted; however, that Nazi obsession with racist theories did color Nazi anti-Communist and anti-Christian beliefs. Both Christianity and communism, for example, came to be equated with Jewishness. For example, in an October 21, 1939 meeting with Martin Bormann, Hitler spoke at great length about Christianity and Bolshevism and condemned them as two versions of the eternal Jewish threat.⁷

Another group persecuted by the Nazi regime for religious reasons were the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their religion forbade them to serve in the military and to give allegiance to any state or political party. They refused, for example to participate in air raid drills, to salute the flag or use “Heil Hitler” in speech and writing. During World War I, the refusal of Jehovah’s Witnesses to bear arms for the fatherland caused the development of strong negative feelings about them in German society at large. The prejudice against them was magnified by their recent American origin (the group was founded in 1884 by Charles Taze Russell) and their active and aggressive proselytizing. After the First World War, Jehovah’s Witnesses were popularly accused of having ties with Bolsheviks and other radical movements and of being philo-Semitic. The charge of radicalism carried with it the idea of association with “Jewish” revolutionary ideas. The association with Jews and Judaism in the popular mind seems to have come about as a result of their strong interest in the Jewish scriptures in the Bible and the use of a version of the Hebrew appellation for God in their name.

Although the prejudices that tied the Jehovah’s Witnesses to Judaism and Jews were abroad widely in German society, the Nazi regime did not apparently exploit this popular view to legitimize the persecution of the Jehovah’s witnesses under the umbrella of the pervasive anti-Semitism it sponsored in German society.

The major objections of the regime were the refusal of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to participate in the structures it had established to acquire totalitarian control over the life of the society, to recognize the legitimacy of the Nazi state and most certainly, to serve in the military. There were over three hundred other small sectarian groups which the Nazis persecuted to one degree or another for similar reasons, but none of the members of those sects was subjected to the kind of treatment suffered by the Witnesses. The size of the Jehovah’s Witnesses sect (there were about 20,000 in 1930), their unrelenting conversion activity and their staunch and open

refusal to accommodate themselves to the state marked them in the minds of the Nazis as a particularly dangerous group. Even before the Nazi seizure of power, the Witnesses were subject to attack by Nazi Brown Shirts and their meetings were often broken up by violence.

In April 1934, they were banned in Bavaria and soon after in other German lands. On April 1, 1935 the ban became national. Also in 1935 large-scale arrests began for refusing to be drafted or perform war related work. Many Jehovah's Witnesses lost their employment. By late 1939 more than 6,000 were in prison or in concentration camps. By war's end an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Witnesses were incarcerated. This included those from Austria, Poland, Czech lands, Alsace-Lorraine and other occupied territories. The records of those arrested, especially in non-German lands are poor and incomplete. The figures we have are only estimates. Even more difficult to ascertain is the number who died as a result of the persecution. We know that about 200 were ultimately executed for refusing military service. A small number of others were also executed for continuing to meet and conduct religious activities in defiance of the ban. These executions occurred largely during the war. The estimated number of Jehovah's Witnesses who died or were murdered in the camps range from 2,000 to 5,000. Given the size of the group, this is a very significant number of victims.

The regime did allow the Jehovah's Witnesses to recant and be freed. This made them significantly different from other victim groups who were marked for persecution and/or death by their ascriptive characteristics. If a Jehovah's Witness signed an agreement to give up his/her faith, accept the obligations of a German citizen including military service, he or she could be freed. The Nazi regime even tortured some Witnesses to accept those terms. The results were, however, negligible – very few recanted.⁸

One of the groups that were clearly marked as undesirable by the Nazi regime was the Gypsies – known as the Sinti in Germany and the Roma elsewhere in Europe. The Gypsies had been for centuries a dispersed and despised minority who refused integration into European society. The stereotype of this group was uniformly negative. They were seen as rootless parasites that lived by petty criminal activity. They were considered dishonest, lazy and promiscuous. Nevertheless, despite the very negative stereotype of Gypsies held by most Germans, there is no evidence they were considered dangerous. Interestingly enough, this is the one group of people subjected to persecution and mass murder during the Nazi period who did not appear to interest Hitler. Hitler had almost nothing to say about them and his regime never created a systematic plan to destroy them as a people. This fact is in itself instructive. It gives us an interesting insight into the entire process of genocide as practiced by the Nazi Regime, as Christopher Browning points out. He writes:

“The fact that the Nazi regime could carry out such a genocidal assault against a people who were of no particular concern to its leader demonstrates how dangerous can be the combination of pervasive popular prejudice, institutionalized racism and a bureaucratic police state that develops the habit of solving problems through repression and mass murder.”⁹

Before the war, there had been no specific anti-Gypsy legislation but Gypsies were increasingly subjected to persecution under laws passed to fight asocial behavior (begging, vagrancy, refusal to work) and to fight crime by dangerous and habitual criminals. As a result of

what we now call “racial profiling” Gypsies were the group whose members were most likely to be targeted as undesirable or dangerous persons who therefore could be put into indefinite “preventive custody”. By 1939 over 2,000 Gypsies had been sentenced to concentration camps under these laws.

The same profiling techniques made Gypsies disproportionately subject to compulsory sterilization for feeble-mindedness. As the compulsory sterilization law evolved under the Nazi regime, new categories of “moral retardation” and “disguised mental retardation” were developed. The symptoms of these states included criminality and non-conformity to social norms so the very lifestyle of the itinerant Gypsy population marked them as candidates for compulsory sterilization.

The racial theory that was developed to justify this behavior was the work of Dr. Robert Ritter who was a specialist in the “biology of criminality”. His theory defined the group into “pure Gypsies” and “part Gypsies” or hybrids who tended genetically toward being either “more Gypsy” or “more German”. Oddly enough, he considered “pure Gypsies” (about 10%) as harmless people who could be left alone. (They were, after all, pure Aryans who had originated in India) It was the hybrid gypsies especially those who were “more Gypsy” genetically than German in character who were considered the most dangerous because they were a genetically unwholesome amalgam of the lowest and most inferior elements of German society with Gypsies. By the time the war began, however, the silly academic theories of Dr. Ritter were forgotten and all Gypsies were targeted. Heinrich Himmler who was the patron of Dr. Ritter was the Nazi leader most interested in the final solution to the “Gypsy question” as he called it.

Gypsies were not mentioned in the Nuremberg laws. They were later subsumed under the category of persons of “alien blood” in those laws. When the war began the Gypsies were treated like German Jews. They were included in Eichman’s deportation plan for Jews to the newly conquered Polish territories. On October 17, 1939, the date of the deportation edict, Hitler himself told Keitel that the Reich is to be cleared of “Jews, Polacks and riffraff”. The Gypsies were included under the third category. The original plan called for deportation of 30,000 Gypsies but eventually only 500 were sent by 1941. The vast majority of those deported, though not marked for extermination, perished in Poland. Most of the Gypsies remaining in Germany were sent to forced labor during the first two years of the war. Many ended up in concentration camps where they were subjected to “extermination through work”. Because they were an exotic racial group Gypsies were also subjected to Nazi medical experiments in several camps.

In 1942 there was a mass deportation of 23,000 Sinti to a special camp in Auschwitz of whom more than 13,000 died. In 1944 almost all those remaining were gassed to relieve overcrowding and provide room for the influx of Hungarian Jews. A few healthy ones were sent back to camps in Germany for labor. The Roma who came under German rule with the invasion of Poland, the Balkans and the USSR were treated in a more uniform manner than the Sinti. They were, in the words of Guenter Lewy, targeted as a blanket category of people . . . “who were to be destroyed”.¹⁰

There is, in the end, no accurate figure for the number of Romas and Sinti who were the victims of Nazi terror. Lewy estimates that between 15,000 and 22,000 of the Sinti out of a population of about 29,000 to 30,000 in 1942 were killed. The number of victims elsewhere in

Europe is even more difficult to establish. The low estimates of Sinti and Roma victims range from 196,000 to 220,000 out of an estimated population of 831,000 European Gypsies. The Central Council of German Gypsies puts the figure of Sinti deaths at 25,000 and an overall total of Gypsy victims at one-half million

In summary, we can say that the Gypsies' fate between 1939 and 1941 paralleled that of the Jews in Germany. However, afterwards, their destinies diverged as the Jews became subject to a comprehensive and systematic final solution. Although the fate of the Gypsies during the war was indeed terrible, there does not seem to have been a comparable plan for their extermination as there was for the Jews.¹¹

In the persecution of homosexuals and the murder and sterilization of disabled and mentally ill and mentally retarded people, we see another clear example of the marriage of the Nazi obsession with eugenics, distorted bourgeois propriety and racial theories. The Nazi obsession with a "healthy society" of superior individuals took the form of seeking to eliminate those Germans who were less than perfect, who were "racial and genetic degenerates". The eugenics movement had established itself well in Germany prior to the First World War. During and after the war it divided into Nordic and anti-Nordic branches. The Nordic group, led by scholars such as Fritz Lenz, Eugen Fisher and Ernst Rudin accepted the theory of Aryan supremacy. This wing dropped the term Eugenics in favor of Race Hygiene as the name of its discipline.

The Nordic wing developed concepts that were to serve as the underpinning of the Nazi racial exclusion policy. The first idea, which evolved out of "mercy killing", was the killing of persons "unworthy of life". These people were neither terminally ill nor suffering unbearable pain but were simply judged to be unworthy to continue life. They were "useless eaters". The second concept was "physical regeneration (of the race) through eradication" (Aufartung durch Ausmerzungen). This was the basis of a policy that promoted the improvement of the Volk through the elimination of its inferior and degenerate members and racial aliens living among Germans.¹²

Hitler himself was personally attracted to these ideas. As early as 1931, the leaders of the new field of Race Hygiene were praising Hitler as their champion who, if he came to power, would implement their program. In contrast to the Gypsies, the handicapped and mentally ill repelled Hitler personally. He often spoke of them with disgust giving extreme examples of people "who perpetually dirtied themselves" or "ingested their own excrement". Christopher Browning notes that Hitler personally was deeply involved in the decisions taken to kill the handicapped and the mentally ill. The license to doctors to kill these undesirables, in violation of German law, was a personal permission from Hitler written as a letter exempting doctors from prosecution.¹³

As soon as they took power, the Nazis passed a compulsory sterilization law (July 14, 1934) to deal with the genetic transmission of hereditary diseases. It targeted the mentally ill, the developmentally disabled, epileptics, those with hereditary blindness or deafness, severe physical deformities and in some cases even alcoholism. A leading scholar estimates that during the Nazi period more than 300,000 persons were forcibly sterilized. It appears that the majority were those were persons classified as "feeble-minded".¹⁴

The second step was the mass killings of undesirables (i.e. those “unworthy of life”) beginning with handicapped children. Although the basis of the campaign was laid by 1938, the policy was not implemented until the outbreak of the war. Radical Nazis and their scientific advisors pushed to begin the murders by the mid-thirties but Hitler refused. In 1935 Adolph Hitler told Gerhard Wagner, the Reich physician leader, that he would only implement the killing of the disabled once the war started.¹⁵ The war, Hitler observed later, was to signal the beginning of the “domestic purification” of Germany. The later final solution of the Jewish Problem was also tied to the war. In 1937, Goering indicated that should a war start “we in Germany would also think first and foremost of carrying out a big settling of accounts with the Jews”. Hitler repeated this as a “prophecy” in January 1939. In a number of ways the planned killing of the handicapped presaged the subsequent development of the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. As a systematic and comprehensive program it actually predates the plan for the Final Solution.¹⁶

The killing of the handicapped led to the establishment of special centers for the killing of both children and adults – the first death camps. It also marks the first widespread use of gas to kill people on a large scale. There were 20 killing centers for children and 6 for adults. By August 1941 about 80,000 disabled people had been killed when public pressure from the families, the general public and the churches, in particular the Catholic Church, forced the program to end. The only comparable case we have of the Nazi state backing off because of internal public German pressure was the release of Jews married to gentile spouses.¹⁷

The killing program continued, however, in a more decentralized way in hospital killing wards until the end of the war. Although the program was focused primarily on Germans, it was extended to occupied areas. Almost all handicapped Poles were murdered and the hospitals were turned over to Germans. The same was true in occupied regions of the Soviet Union. Handicapped German Jews were among the victims of the program.¹⁸

This was the only mass killing that actually took place on German soil. It was carried out against a population made up largely of gentile Germans. Despite the secrecy and attempted official cover up, the word did get out to the population, initially from the handicapped themselves, to their families and the public. The protests ended the official program, but it did not end the killings which continued more surreptitiously to war’s end. We have no figures to indicate either how many more disabled people were killed between 1941 and 1945 in Germany or exactly how many were killed in Poland and the Soviet Union. Some of the killings in the east were done by Einsatzgruppen who were also assigned to kill the Polish intelligentsia. The Einsatzgruppen later became a key element in the systematic murder of the Jews.

Homosexuals were another category of “Aryans” who were subjected to Nazi persecution. Not only was homosexuality a sign of racial degeneracy, but according to Nazi propaganda, it also hurt the propagation of the Aryan race because homosexuals corrupted other men, making them unwilling or unable to beget children. Germany’s loss of men in World War I and declining birth rate made homosexuality even more dangerous. Himmler in a 1937 speech noted, “If we continue to see this vice predominate in Germany without being able to fight it, we’ll see the end of Germany and the end of the Germanic world”.¹⁹ He returned to this theme

with some urgency in the autumn of 1939 in the wake of the heavy and unexpected loss of men the German army suffered in the invasion of Poland.

It is interesting to note that many of the laws dealing with homosexuality also dealt with abortion. There was even a single federal Gestapo department for combating abortion and homosexuality. Both were made illegal in order to foster the growth of the great Germanic race. They were both linked in the minds of Nazi racial theorists with race hygiene and increase in the population of the master race. Abortion and homosexuality, on the other hand, were decriminalized for Gypsies, Jews, Poles and others. Abortion and homosexuality were not only a mark of the racial degeneracy of those subhuman peoples, but they also hastened their ultimate extinction. The only exception was punishment for Poles who had relations with Germans.

The basic German law dealing with homosexuality, which predated the Nazi regime by more than sixty years, was Paragraph 175. It was enacted in 1871 and outlawed homosexual relations. It was only weakly enforced during the Weimar period. The Nazis, on taking power, however, began a rigorous enforcement. During a six-week period in 1934, the SS arrested more homosexuals than the Weimar police did in fifteen years. All later Nazi legislation was a gloss on Paragraph 175. It is interesting to note that in its battle against the Catholic Church the law against homosexuality played a key role. Hundreds of charges of homosexuality were brought against Catholic priests. The Nazis hoped to tar the clergy as both sexually criminal and effeminate. In the end, as Richard Plant points out in The Pink Triangle, the vast majority of the charges against Catholic clergy failed for lack of proof.

The number of homosexuals arrested and sentenced between 1933 and 1944 was between 50,000 and 63,000 of whom 4,000 were juveniles. (There were also 6 lesbians arrested which is odd since lesbianism was not against the law.) The number of those arrested who ended up in concentration camps is very uncertain. Richard Plant estimates that between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were incarcerated in the camps and about 60% died from overwork, starvation or mistreatment. Thus, the estimates are in the 3,000 to 7,000 range for homosexual victims of the Nazis. There was never a Nazi plan for systematic extermination of homosexuals.²⁰

The last groups I would like to discuss are Poles and other Slavs. Most of Nazi racial theories were developed about Poles, their closest neighbors, and extended to the other groups of Slavs. There is much less commentary in Nazi and German sources about the other groups. They were all uniformly regarded as *unttermenschen*. It has to be also remembered that the direct Nazi encounter with most of the Eastern Slavs came after June 1941, almost two years after they had begun a fierce racial war of mass murder and enslavement against the Poles. The ferocity of the actions against Poles carried over and increased the aggression against the other civilian populations on the Eastern front.

Germans had a long history of relations with the Poles and had been the colonial masters of western Poland for 123 years prior to 1918. Negative stereotypes of Poles were common in the German states in the 18th century. In the 19th century they developed into a rationalization for German imperial rule over Polish lands. The independence of Poland after 1918 was considered a deep humiliation by all Germans. Christopher Browning, in his magisterial work

The Origins of the Final Solution, summarizes the effect of the end of the German empire. He writes:

“The conquest and partition of Poland in September 1939 was a major step in the creation of Nazi Germany’s East European empire and offered a propitious site for various policies of racial imperialism. As the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Freikorps campaigns and the almost total rejection of the Versailles Treaty demonstrate, refusal to accept the verdict of World War I and unquenched imperial aspirations in Eastern Europe underpinned by notions of German racial and cultural superiority were broadly held sentiments in German society. They provided more common ground between the bulk of German population and the Nazi regime than did anti-Semitism.”²¹

Browning believes that: “wartime Poland offered a time and place where Germans were more transformed by what they saw and did between 1939 and 1941 than had been their experience of the domestic dictatorship between 1933 – 1939 . . . In Poland . . . Germans were exhorted to behave as the master race over inferior native populations . . . Here the corrupting process of racial imperialism could be launched most easily”. War and conquest made possible actions that were unthinkable in peacetime at home.²²

In Germany, the Nazis tried to keep the murder of the disabled and mentally ill a secret. It was not the same for the policies of racial imperialism in Poland.

“There was little reticence over the arrest and murder of the Polish leadership and intelligentsia and the round-ups of Poles as hostages or for reprisals, expulsions or labor were even more open. The degradation rituals and public tortures aimed against Polish Jews were especially visible. In contrast to Germany, public opinion in Poland was of no interest to the Nazi regime as they proceeded to build a racial empire and destroy in the process whatever moral restraints had acted on them in the past.”²³

In the fall of 1939 Hitler and Stalin invaded and conquered Poland in about five weeks. As a result, for Christian Poles World War II is the story of martyrdom at the hands of two genocidal regimes, not one. The military losses suffered by Poland in the invasion by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are heavy: about 67,000 were killed and 134,000 were wounded. More than half a million Polish soldiers were taken prisoner, about two-thirds captured by the German army. Polish civilian losses as a result of military action were considerable.

At the beginning of the war, the Nazi plan was to inflict terror on the population and break Poland’s will to resist. As he gathered his generals, Hitler ordered them to “kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent of language . . . only in this way can we achieve the living space we need.” Mobile killing squads would follow the main body of troops, shooting prisoners and any Poles who might organize resistance. The Soviets planned a similar campaign.

The campaign against Poland was conducted with a cruelty previously unknown in modern European warfare. Polish civilians and prisoners of war were systematically shot by

German and Soviet forces. Although the Nazi SS and Einsatzgruppen and the Soviet NKVD committed the worst crimes, regular army and air forces of both totalitarian states were full and willing participants in the slaughter. The German use of Einsatzgruppen or special action units in Poland was a test run. Later these same units would play an even more terrible part in the Holocaust of East European Jewry.

The death and destruction carried out deliberately by the Wehrmacht and the police during the period of military control of the country between September 1 and October 25, 1939 was merciless and systematic. Five hundred thirty-one towns and village were burned and over 714 executions took place with over 16,000 civilian victims, most of them Christian Poles.

From the beginning of the German Occupation of Poland, it was clear that it would differ from every military occupation previously known in modern history. The murderous policies carried out against civilians during the actual military campaign had already signaled the demonic character that it would take. During the first four months of the occupation more than 50,000 civilians were executed by the new Nazi Regime. The majority of these victims – about 43,000 – were Christians. Nazi policies in Poland were based primarily on a perverse pseudo-scientific racist ideology that relegated Poles and Jews to sub-human categories.²⁴

Anti-Polish attitudes common during the period of German colonial domination in the 19th century of Polish lands took on an even more racial and virulent tone during the Weimar Period (1919 – 33) after the loss of the Polish territories and the rebirth of Poland. These anti-Polish views were incorporated into Nazi ideology, propaganda and education after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. This ideology was used by the regime to justify its murderous and genocidal actions.

Alexander Rossini, a research historian at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, notes that,

“In their schooling and social lives there was no lack of opportunity for Germans growing up in the 1920s and 1930s to absorb revanchist sentiments and develop a thorough hatred of Poland and its people.” He writes that anti-Polish claims “were expressed in vicious and derogatory terms describing Poles as ‘Asiatic’ and ‘semi-Asians’ who inhabited dens and resembled animals. In books and newspaper articles alike, German writers portrayed Polish homes and communities as filthy and decrepit, bereft of culture and barren of prosperity. These were all characteristics of so-called ‘Polish decay’, a tenuous state of existence that indicated the alleged backwardness and poor economic management skills of the Poles. According to Nazi scientists and scholars like Albrecht Penck, a Berlin geography professor, Germans had created the only culture that existed in Poland.”²⁵

These racial stereotypes of Poles were not only taught in the schools, but teachers were even instructed by textbook authors to encourage active hostility to Poland and Poles in their students. In texts used in German schools a decade before the Nazis took power Poles, in Rossini's words, “were said to be less educated, less cultured, slovenly and utterly deficient in habits of personal hygiene. Furthermore, Poles were commonly portrayed as dangerous and

aggressive, as beasts, thieves and criminals who stole territory from Germany at its moment of weakness despite all that had been done to bring them to civilizations and culture.”²⁶ Nazi propaganda took over many of the myths of the Weimer period in an even more racialized form and underlined that, in addition to their sub-human characteristics, Poles were the mortal enemies of the German Reich. The combination became the warrant for German genocidal policies against Poles during the more than five-year occupation of Poland. Ludwig Fischer, the Nazi Governor of Warsaw, summed up the attitudes of a majority of Germans when he said, “Poles we hate instinctively, Jews we hate in accordance with orders.”²⁷

The occupation of Poland targeted Jewish and Christian citizens of Poland in different ways. During the first two years it was the Christians who in many ways bore more heavily the brunt of Nazi terror as the occupiers sought to exterminate the leadership and intelligentsia, turn ordinary citizenry into slave laborers of the Reich and begin the process of replacing the rural population with German settlers. SS commanders, including Reinhold Heydrich, saw ethnic Poles as their main foe rather than the Jews of Poland during the early part of the occupation. The first task for Hitler’s minions was to eliminate any Christian Poles who could be considered leaders.

The half of Poland that was taken by Nazi Germany in 1939 was divided into two parts. The Polish Territories, which were part of Imperial Germany until 1918, were incorporated directly into the Nazi Reich. Ninety percent of the population of this area, which was slated for thorough Germanization, was ethnically Polish. After the leading citizens, clergy and intelligentsia of the region were either killed or incarcerated in camps, the Germans began a wholesale deportation of Poles from the area. Over a million Poles had their farms, homes, businesses and property seized and turned over to the Germans and many were then deported to Central Poland. Those who were left behind were subjected to de-nationalization. They were no longer to speak Polish or consider themselves Polish.

The mass deportations from the newly annexed territories took place during the winter of 1939 – 40 in freezing cold and under very difficult conditions. The deportees were shipped in cattle cars. Adequate preparations for this mass influx of people had not been made. At the journey’s end there were few accommodations or supplies for the deportees. The suffering and hunger were immense. Many died, especially the elderly, the sick and children. In addition to the deportation eastward many, especially the young and able-bodied, were shipped to Germany proper for labor.

The central part of Poland, with a Polish population of about twelve million, was renamed the General Government ruled by a Nazi functionary in Krakow. In 1941 the Nazis decided that this rump Polish administrative region was to remain in existence for fifteen to twenty years. Any Poles who survived the war and “extermination through labor” and were not subjects for Germanization were to be sent to newly conquered Siberia or liquidated. By 1961 any vestige of the Polish nation would disappear forever. In this region, although the people were allowed to be Poles, Polish culture, music, art and literature was suppressed. No Polish newspapers, except those published by the occupiers, were published. Secondary schools, universities and cultural institutions were closed. As in the annexed western territories, the Germans undertook the systematic extermination of the intelligentsia, clergy and leadership.

In pursuit of that policy in the General Government, most of the professors of the famous Jagiellonian University were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Politicians, writers, scientists, doctors, artists, teachers, Olympic athletes – none were to be spared. All Polish schools above the grammar school level were closed. “The Poles,” Nazi governor Hans Frank proclaimed, “do not need universities or secondary schools; the Polish lands are to be changed into an intellectual desert.” In keeping with this ideology, Polish libraries and archives were burned and the country’s art treasures systematically looted. In its war on Polish culture the Nazi regime made a determined and cynical effort to debase the people. The sale of alcohol was heavily subsidized and its use encouraged by the occupiers. The film and stage entertainment and popular reading materials made officially available to Polish society were largely cheap and vulgar pornography and virulently anti-Semitic propaganda. The explicit aim of the Nazis was to atomize the society, to set people against each other and to destroy the moral fiber of the nation.

It was soon apparent to the Nazi leadership that the scale of their plans to eliminate the Polish leadership would overwhelm their existing systems of prison and concentration camps, so a series of new camps were created. The most infamous of those was located near Kraków in the town of Oświęcim, known by its German name, Auschwitz. The Auschwitz camp was designed to house Polish political prisoners, and inmate labor built the initial camp out of an old army base. It opened in June 1940 and remained a place of incarceration and martyrdom, particularly for Christian Poles, until 1942 when it also became the site of the most terrible massacre of Jews during the Holocaust. It remains for both people a pre-eminent symbol of martyrdom and tragedy.

After an attack on the USSR, the Germans also attempted to create all-German colonies in the General Government part of Poland by deporting or exterminating the local inhabitants and bringing in German settlers. In late 1942 Nazi racial theorists sought to clear part of the region around Zamość of Poles and bring in ethnic Germans to create a German colony. Whole villages were rounded up, inhabitants executed, sent to concentration camps or slave labor. Over 150,000 people (30 percent of the population) were displaced from their homes. A similar attempt on a smaller scale occurred in Białystok where some 40,000 were displaced.

An ancillary part of the campaign of deportation and German colonization was the organized kidnapping of Polish children who had “Germanic” characteristics to be raised as Germans. In all, during the war, about 50,000 children were seized and deported to the Reich. Those who were found unsuitable upon subsequent examination were executed at camps such as Auschwitz.²⁸

Right from the beginning in eastern Poland Hitler’s allies, the Soviets, created their own ideological scale to determine who was to live or die. It was based not on race, but on social class and consciousness. “Enemies of the people” – those marked for liquidation – were owners of businesses, large farms and estates, managers, officials and civil servants of the Polish State, clergy and intelligentsia. The “toiling masses” of peasants and especially workers were allegedly a favored class, but even they were readily marked for re-education in gulags or even extermination if they failed to exhibit proper consciousness, i.e. they retained loyalty to faith,

nation, family and pre-war social traditions over loyalty to the Soviet fatherland and the class struggle. These primitive sociological categories functioned for the new Soviet administration in the same ways racial stereotypes did for the Nazi regime and they also served to justify terror and mass murder.

In February 1940, the NKVD began its second phase of occupation, the mass deportation of Poles from the Soviet occupation zone. Over the course of the next 15 months about 500,000 – 750,000 Polish men, women and children were packed into unheated cattle cars and sent to the gulags where many died of hunger, disease, overwork and execution. They were soon joined by many Jews, Ukrainians and Belarussians. Polish POWs who had fallen into Soviet hands met an even worse fate. Approximately 22,000 Polish officers, mostly well-educated reservists, were executed on Stalin's orders. The most notorious massacre site was at Katyn in Belarus, but there were many others. About 1,000 of the victims were Jewish. Altogether about 100,000 Jews died at Soviet hands.²⁹

World War II was a catastrophe for Poland on a scale that few other countries have experienced at any time in human history. The Nazi occupation lasted 5 ½ years. A higher percentage of Poles died than in any other country – 21 percent, more if one counts fatalities caused by war related diseases. About six million Polish citizens were killed. Of these, 3 million were Jewish. Poland's ancient Jewish community, with a history stretching back to the early Middle Ages, was virtually wiped out. The Nazis killed 2 million Polish Christians, the Soviets perhaps almost a million and about 60,000 were killed by Ukrainian nationalists. The city of Warsaw alone lost more people – 200,000 civilians died in the Warsaw Uprising – than Britain and the USA put together. One and one-half million Poles were sent to the Reich as slave laborers.

Cultural and professional elites were the hardest hit and the country itself was devastated. This does not begin to consider the number of professionals and community leaders killed or imprisoned by the Soviets and their Polish puppet government. The Soviet occupation brought a new war that continued to at least 1948 with another 50,000 deaths and tens of thousands shipped off to the Gulags.³⁰

The Slavic peoples of the USSR after the summer of 1941 suffered for over two years the same kind of violence and mass murder that was visited on Poland between 1939 and 1945. The Germans did not need to develop racial profiles of the Eastern Slavs different from those they used for the Poles to classify the Ukrainians, Russians and Belarussians as *untersmenschen*. Because they were further east, the race theorists stressed even more the "Asiatic" characteristics of the population.

The Nazi plan called for a combination of extermination and expulsion of the remaining inferior Slavic people to Siberia (along with Poles) to provide the needed *lebensraum* for the Nordic race. Many were shipped off to the Reich as slave laborers to suffer "extermination through labor".

About 2.8 million slave laborers from the Soviet territories were sent to the Reich (2.4 million Ukrainians and 400,000 Belarussians). Over 3 million Ukrainian citizens died as did 1.4

million Belarussians as a result of the war. Soviet prisoners of war were also systematically murdered. Between 2.5 and 3 million died in Nazi camps. The first victims of Zyklon B, along with Polish Christian civilians, were Soviet POWs. Many of the sites associated with the Holocaust in the USSR, such as Babi Yar, are also remembered as the sites of Ukrainian martyrdom. Babi Yar was in particular the killing place for the Ukrainian intelligentsia.³¹

In conclusion, as we look at this dreadful catalog of mass murder and persecution, we can begin to understand better the scope and nature of Nazi genocide and, in the case of the unprecedented horror of the occupation of Poland, the role of the Soviet Union as Hitler's accomplice. There is a relationship between the motives, ideologies and methods of the mass murders of gentile populations and the Holocaust that allows the stories to illuminate each other and give us a fuller understanding of one of the most terrible periods of human history.³²

I would like to underline only a few of the salient points that I see emerging from a look at the gentile experience.

- 1.) Those gentile groups targeted by the Nazis were already victims of popular prejudices, most of them of long standing in German society. Most of these prejudices had been racialized before the Nazi period – sometimes well before. The Nazis were able to take these racialized prejudices and racist ideologies and make them more extreme and murderous. They served to legitimize Nazi mass murder and genocide. Anti-Semitism emerged as the most murderous of these racial ideologies although it seemed anti-Polonism had a stronger hold on the German folk imagination.
- 2.) The role of the war in radicalizing German society and allowing the State to unleash genocide is crucial to understanding both the gentile and Jewish victimization.
- 3.) Imperialism, it is increasingly clear to scholars, is a central feature of genocide in the modern period and a major support for racist ideas. Germany's experience of imperial failure and its revanchist war in 1939 made the Holocaust possible. It was on the site of its former imperial domains that Nazi Germany carried out the Holocaust. There were no death camps in Germany proper.
- 4.) The role of the USSR in the process as a facilitator and accomplice cannot be underestimated. It is clear that in many ways the Stalinist experience served Hitler as example and legitimization of his own policies. In turn, the Nazi regime provided cover for the Soviet murders of its own and neighboring peoples (including Jews). There would have been no Holocaust and no mass murders of other peoples without the Nazi – Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939. For many of Hitler's victims in Europe the story of their martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis is irrevocably linked to their experience of Soviet oppression and occupation during the same period.

¹ Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel Address (New York: Faerar, Straus, Giroux, 1980, p 16

² For a background on the debates see Edward T. Linenthal, Preserving Memory (New York: 1995) chapter 7

³ For a discussion of this issue see my paper “The Holocaust and Polish American Identity” delivered April 28, 2005 in Washington, DC at spring meeting of the National Polish American – Jewish American Council. Copy available from author.

⁴ Thaddeus C. Radzilowski and John T. Radzilowski, “The Genocide of the Poles 1939 – 1948”. Piast Institute, Hamtramck, MI, 2006. Copy available from author.

⁵ Radzilowski and Radzilowski, p 7.

⁶ M. Shafir, “Between Denial and Comparative Trivialization: Holocaust Negationism in Post-Communist East Central Europe”. ACTA, 14 (2000) pp 35 - 36

⁷ Christopher Browning, The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy. September 1939 – March 1942 (Lincoln, NE: 2004) p 370

⁸ On Jehovah’s Witnesses see: Hans Hesse (ed), Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah’s Witnesses during the Nazi Regime 1933 – 1945, (Bremen: Edition Tennant 2004), James Penton, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Third Reich: Sectarian Politics under Persecution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), Christine King, “Jehovah’s Witnesses under Nazism” in Michael Berenbaum, (ed)., A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis, (New York: New York University Press, 1992) pp188-193. See also the excellent pamphlet The Jehovah’s Witnesses published by the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁹ Browning, p 179

¹⁰ Guenter Lewy, The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000) p 220

¹¹ On the Gypsies see: Lewy, *Passim*; Browning, pp 178-184; Sybil Milton, “Gypsies as Social Outcasts in Nazi Germany” in Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (eds), Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp 212-232, Donald Kenrich, The Gypsies During World War II, Vol I: From Race Science to the Camps (Hertfordshire University Press, 1997) Vol II., In the Shadow of the Swastika (Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire University Press, 1999) Vol III, The Final Chapter (Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire University Press, 2006)

¹² Henry Friedlander, “The Exclusion and Murder of the Disabled” in Gellatly and Stoltzfus, pp 145-148

¹³ Browning, 186

¹⁴ Friedlander pp 148-149, 150-151

¹⁵ Browning, 186-193, see also Benno Muller-Hill, Murderous Science: The Elimination of Jews, Gypsies and Others, Germany 1933-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) *passim*

¹⁶ Browning, p 429

¹⁷ Friedlander, pp 151, 157, Browning, pp 188-193, Muller-Hill, pp 62-65

¹⁸ Muller-Hill, pp 64-65

¹⁹ Richard Plant, The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals (New York: Henry Hunt & Co, 1986)

²⁰ Plant, *passim*

²¹ Browning, p 436

²² Browning, pp 430-431

²³ Browning, p 431

²⁴ On Poland see: Browning, pp 28-35; Radzilowski and Radzilowski, pp 3-28; Alexander Rossini Hitler Strikes Poland (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Jozef Garlinski Poland in the Second World War (London: MacMillan, 1985); Richard Lukas, The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation 1939-1944 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986)

²⁵ Rossini, pp 221-222

²⁶ Rossini, p 223

²⁷ Quoted in Gunner S. Paulsson: The Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940-1944 (New Haven: Yale, 2002) p 240

²⁸ Richard Lukas, The Forgotten Holocaust has the most detailed survey of the extent of Nazi atrocities in Poland.

²⁹ Jan T. Gross, Revolution for Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1988)

³⁰ For a summary of Polish losses see Radzilowski and Radzilowski, pp 28-35

³¹ On Nazi atrocities in the USSR see Alexander Werth, Russia at War (New York: Dutton, 1964); David Dallin, German Rule in Russia 1941-1945 (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1981); Ihor Kamensky, Hitler's Occupation of the Ukraine, 1941-1944 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1956); Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-1945 (New York, Preeger, 1971)

³² For a brief summary of the topic of gentile victims and the necessity of studying these experiences, see Phillip Rosen, "Beyond Anne Frank" [cchttp://muweb.millersville.edu/~haol-con/Rosen-1999.html](http://muweb.millersville.edu/~haol-con/Rosen-1999.html) access 4/28/07. Dr. Rosen is the educational director of the Holocaust Museum and Education Center, Cherry Hill, New Jersey

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