


How People Are Persuaded to Commit Genocide

 *Genocide*, 2001

From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Mass murders such as the Holocaust cannot take place without the consensus and efforts of many people, writes Herbert Hirsch in the following excerpt from his book *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life*. Planners of genocide must create certain conditions that enable people to commit atrocities that they ordinarily would not consider and to avoid feeling guilt, pain, or empathy when they destroy the lives of others. Hirsch identifies and describes three broad types of conditions—cultural, psychological, and political—through which genocide is made possible. For example, he explains, populations targeted for elimination are dehumanized through [propaganda](#) in order to provide a rationale for their extermination.

"So you didn't feel they were human beings?"

"Cargo ... they were cargo."

"There were so many children, did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?"

"No ... I can't say I ever thought this way You see ... I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always as a huge mass."

—Franz Stangl, commandant of Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps, interviewed by Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness* (1974)

As memory is transmitted from generation to generation in the ongoing process of renewing the species, the myths, legends, and other assorted likes and dislikes that persist in a culture are also transmitted.... If memory is to serve as a warning and to act as the foundation on which to build a more humane world, it is important to understand how people become killers. The bluntest possible confrontation with the most depressing possibilities is called for so as not to disguise the realities. We must, therefore, begin with the realization that mass murder does not occur in a vacuum and is not committed by "other" people. For people to die, other people have to pull the triggers, release the gas, and drop the bombs. How they are convinced to undertake such actions knowing full well what the end result will be is a question of enduring significance. The search for answers might very well begin with a consideration of Raul Hilberg's classic work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

Hilberg notes that in order for mass murder to occur, mechanisms must be developed to short-circuit traditional concepts of individual morality. Psychologically, people must not be allowed to feel guilt or pain, or empathy, when they destroy others....

Mechanisms are developed to justify and rationalize the destruction of the targeted group. In short, the planners of the proposed massacres must motivate participation in order to bring about the desired result—extermination. To accomplish this, certain conditions must be created. These conditions, as we shall see, allow the perpetrators to successfully carry out their planned actions while at the same time providing a means to dissipate guilt and explain why such horrible acts were necessary....

[There are] three conditions under which the state will be able to motivate participation in mass murder. Lacking more descriptive terminology, I call them cultural, psychological, and political conditions.

Cultural Conditions

Cultural conditions are usually tied to the myths and ideologies stressed in a culture or a nation-state, which are used to rationalize or justify the destructive activity of the state.... Every society claims a genealogy, an explanation grounded in mythology of the origin of its people or of the state. Generally, these myths hold that the members of the group or the state descend from divine sources or are protected by divine intervention. This type of thinking differentiates the group or the state from all other groups or states and thus serves as a reason for dehumanizing those perceived as "the enemy," against whom the state wishes to pursue aggressive action. The fact that "enemies" are not protected by or descended from the same bloodlines and do not have the same pedigree may serve as a justification for genocide.

In other words, the myths and ideologies stressed in a culture or state are expressed in the language of the major authority figures and are transmitted, through the process of acculturation or socialization, to the people living within the bounds of the state. As they absorb and begin to believe these myths, they are conditioned so that when ordered to engage in acts they might not have considered moral in other circumstances, they are willing to obey the orders because of the elaborate system of justification that has been constructed. These cultural conditions for mass murder are related to psychological conditions, which focus on the explicit mechanisms through which citizens are taught to obey authority.

Psychological Conditions

The psychological conditions for participation in acts of atrocity focus directly on the possibility that, given certain circumstances, individuals might find themselves in a position in which their sense of individual morality, of right and wrong, is compromised. The basic psychological conditions necessary for mass murder involve obedience to authority; following orders takes precedence over all other considerations. Under these conditions, individuals no longer view themselves as responsible for their actions, and they define themselves as instruments for carrying out the wishes and commands of those in positions of authority. The classic example, of course, is [Nazi official and war criminal] Adolf Eichmann.

After his [1960] arrest for war crimes, Eichmann never expressed guilt or remorse for the acts he committed. His position, according to the transcripts of his interrogation, was that he had never killed any Jews: "I had nothing to do with killing the Jews. I never killed a Jew, but I never killed a non-Jew either—I've never killed anybody. And I never ordered anybody to kill a Jew, or ordered anybody to kill a non-Jew. No, never." Eichmann, however, left little doubt that if he had received such an order he would have done so. In fact, he recalled that he would have felt remorse only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do—that is, organize the transportation of millions of men, women, and children to their death "with great zeal and meticulous care," as writer Hannah Arendt states. Eichmann has become the prototype of the person whose sense of individual morality has been reoriented so that he or she feels shame or pride according to how efficiently he or she carries out orders. Efficiency in carrying out orders remains a highly desired value in contemporary society. In fact, social scientist Stanley Milgram has argued that morality takes on a different shape in the highly bureaucratized, hierarchical states that characterize our times. Morality is now defined, as it was for Eichmann, in terms of how well a person carries out the tasks assigned to him or her—no matter what they may entail.

The implications of this view are that acts of human destructiveness are not necessarily committed only by deranged psychopaths. Rather, a viewpoint that has come to be referred to as the "banality of evil" stresses that evil is most likely committed by very ordinary people. One biographer [G.S. Graber] of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS [Schutzstaffel; the elite wing of the Nazi Party that administered the concentration camps], has noted that, although it is difficult to accept, we must begin to understand that many of the great monsters of history, such as Eichmann and Himmler, were not unusual examples of their culture. They were, as he characterized Himmler, "pedestrian, unimaginative—in a word, ordinary."

Similar examples of banality or ordinariness pervade the decision-making bureaucracy in the contemporary [United States](#). For example, Thomas K. Jones, a deputy undersecretary of defense in the Reagan administration, is quoted in Robert Scheer's book *With Enough Shovels* as saying that "the United States

could fully recover from an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union in just two to four years." He declared that nuclear war was not nearly as devastating as we had been led to believe and went on to say, "If there are enough shovels to go around, everybody's going to make it." Scheer points out that the shovels were "for digging holes in the ground, which would be covered somehow or other with a couple of doors and three feet of dirt thrown on top, thereby providing adequate fallout shelters for the millions who had been evacuated from America's countryside." Jones claimed, "It's the dirt that does it."

How did Jones appear as he talked about nuclear destruction? Scheer describes him in a manner reminiscent of Arendt's depiction of Eichmann:

Do not misunderstand. There was nothing deranged or hysterical about Jones' performance that night, nothing even intemperate. Jones' manner is circumspect. His house reflects a Spartan life-style.... His looks are clean-cut, if plain, and he's trim for his forty-nine years. He seldom raises his voice and tends to speak in a drone, sometimes inaudibly. This studied, matter-of-fact style persisted even when he discussed the deaths of hundreds of millions of people, as if he were attempting by the measured tone of his voice to deny the ultimate horror of it all. I have listened many times to the tapes of this interview, and what startles me most is how easily Jones seemed to make the subject of mass death almost boring.

... The banality of evil, then, is clearly not confined to the Holocaust. In the nuclear era, contemporary bureaucrats were engaged in planning the destruction of the planet in a calm, almost disinterested, "almost boring," fashion. The individuals who program and play war games seem to be able to consider the possibility of mass death, involving millions of people, without realizing or caring that they are dealing with human flesh and blood....

The real impact of banality is to render trivial and acceptable the most horrendous acts. When responsible individuals talk about mass death as though they were discussing the weather, they are communicating acceptance and lack of concern.

But government decision makers are not the only people engaged in these processes of justification and rationalization. Citizens on a large scale appeared unwilling to confront the reality of death by nuclear incineration. As German citizens supported and did not question Hitler's orders, U.S. citizens did not question the president's orders or even his intentions. Whatever the president does is to be supported simply because he *is* the president.

These are, of course, controversial notions because they force us to focus on our own vulnerability and to question the circumstances of our own obedience. Where, for example, does one draw the line in obeying authority? Are there different types of authority? ... Does a person follow orders even if the ultimate result is evil? Such questions are tied closely to the third set of conditions—political conditions.

Political Conditions

Politics is tied to culture and psychology. The way people view politics and a political system and the way they learn to relate to authority are connected to what they learn as they are growing up. As children, we are all exposed to the cultural and political myths and legends common to our environment. These myths, which we learn through the process of political socialization, act as foundations upon which our adult views of the world and our adult behaviors are based.

Children learn and internalize the existing norms of their culture. If people are convinced that these norms are legitimate, that they are the accepted views of the majority, and particularly of political and social leaders, then they will obey those leaders who communicate the ideas that appear congruent with those norms. The cues that reinforce obedience are sent by people occupying important social, cultural, and political positions. If a strain of the national mythology emphasizes obedience, it is quite possible for leaders to attempt to manipulate that strain in order to convince potential participants that mass destruction is

justified. Hence, if people in high positions spread dehumanizing symbolizations of another state or group of people, they send a message that it is justified to act aggressively against that state or group. Many people will always be willing to act out hostile impulses if they are reinforced by those in high positions.

During the Holocaust, the continued description of Jews as vermin and bacilli was a prime example of dehumanizing symbolization. Anti-Semitism was also reinforced by the lack of opposition to the extermination of the Jews. The fact that political and religious leaders did not object seemed to confirm the legitimacy of the destruction. The commandant of Treblinka, Franz Stangl, provided a striking example when he noted that he was profoundly affected by Cardinal Theodor Innitzer's call to Catholics to "cooperate" with the Nazis as well as by the fact that many political leaders capitulated "at once" to the Nazis. Leaders, consequently, may prepare a population for genocide in this fashion.

This process is no less true today as political figures and their advisers (reinforced by social and religious leaders) discuss war as "policy" and use terminology such as "ethnic cleansing," as in the case of the Serb massacre of the Bosnian Muslims. This form of discussion contributes to the acceptance of genocide as a desirable policy to achieve the goals of the leadership. Political leaders and their advisers thus act to legitimize genocide as an instrument of policy that is not only acceptable but also likely to be used. The state, as was the Nazi state, is turned into an executioner state as the leaders engage in the process of justification and condition the people to participate in and accept the large-scale destruction of their companions on the planet.

Understanding the Past

Obedience may thus be enhanced under three broad types of conditions. The first involves the development of cultural and racial myths and stereotypes that function to dehumanize the target population, in essence identifying the victims. Psychological conditions, the second set, require obedience to authority by individuals—that is, the people who pull the triggers and carry out the orders. The third type of conditions, political conditions, combine the giving of orders with justification of the acts of destruction. Ultimately, if we view mass murder as being carried out, at least in part, in response to these conditions, we are left with the profoundly disturbing conclusion that acts of large-scale destruction of human life may be committed by any individual or nation under the "right" cultural, psychological, or political circumstances.

Understanding the conditions that promote participation in genocide does not necessarily guarantee that these acts will not occur again. Yet we must understand the past and incorporate as an integral part of our learning experience information about genocide and mass murder so that our memory is not reconstructed by the state or those in power who may wish to convince us to kill others. How individuals respond to the language of extermination, how they react to the attempts to socialize obedience, is not predetermined.

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Source Citation

Hirsch, Herbert. "How People Are Persuaded to Commit Genocide." *Genocide*, edited by Christina Fisanick, Greenhaven Press, 2007. Contemporary Issues Companion. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ3010078210/OVIC?u=rabat&xid=09248810. Accessed 27 Nov. 2017. Originally published in *Genocide and the Politics of Memory*.

Gale Document Number: GALEIEJ3010078210