The Holocaust Perpetrators

Spring 2017

Professor Thomas Kühne
Time: Monday, 2:50-5:50 pm, Place: Strassler Center/Cohen-Lasry House
Office Hours: Tuesday, 1-2 pm, Strassler Center 2nd fl, and by appointment
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Killing of Soviet Civilians in the Ukraine, fall 1941
Description

This course explores how, and why, Germans and other Europeans committed the Holocaust. It examines the whole range of different groups and types of perpetrators. We will be looking at desktop perpetrators such as Adolf Eichmann, at medical doctors who used Jews for their inhuman experiments, at the concentration camp guards, and at the death squads (Einsatzgruppen) as the hard core of the SS elite. Furthermore, we will investigate the actions, ideologies, and emotions of “ordinary” Germans who served in police battalions and in the drafted army, of women who served as camp guards and in the occupational regime, and of non-German collaborators. The course investigates the interrelation of motivations and biographies, of emotional attitudes and ideological orientations, and of social and institutional arrangements to answer why “normal” humans became mass murderers.

Requirements

This course will be taught in the spirit of a tutorial: once you decided to take the class, you are expected to stick to it, come to the sessions and be well prepared.

To facilitate informed discussion, you are required to write a short paper of no more than one page (half of a page will usually do it) for each session, related the assigned books and essays. This paper articulates, and elaborates on, two or three questions you wish to discuss in class. The questions must refer closely to the readings and show that you have dealt with them. These “question papers” are due in class and must be handed in to the instructors at its end.

Each session starts with a brief oral review of the previous session presented by one student. This review summarizes the contents of our discussion, its findings and controversies in a well-organized form (not necessarily following the chronology of the discussion). You are supposed to sign up for and present one of these reviews.

Finally, a research paper of 12 pages (undergraduates) or 20 pages (graduates) plus title page and bibliography, double-spaced, is due on May 2, one day after the last class, electronically to the instructor. Think about a topic and discuss it with the instructor by the end of March, in person or electronically. A one-page outline of the paper and a preliminary bibliography is due electronically (to the email of the instructor) no later than April 15. After you have submitted the paper by May 2, wait for a confirmation within 24 hours. If you do not receive this confirmation, resubmit it. If you are not familiar with how to write and submit such a paper, you may wish to consult J. R. Benjamin, A Student’s Guide to History (10th ed., Boston, 2007) or Ch. Lipson, How to Write a BA Thesis (Chicago, 2005). They offer valuable assistance, not least regarding the formal shape of your paper. Undergraduate research papers are
based on at least two scholarly books and four scholarly articles in addition to those mentioned in this syllabus. Graduate papers include at least four additional scholarly books and six scholarly articles. Instead of a book you can choose three articles, and vice versa. Make sure that your paper deals intensely with these sources. Originality, thoughtfulness, and organization of your thoughts are appreciated, as is the proper citation of your references and sources.

Plagiarism is a capital crime in academia; be aware of Clark’s policy on academic integrity, http://www.clarku.edu/offices/aac/integrity.cfm: “Plagiarism refers to the presentation of someone else’s work as one’s own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.”

Grading and practical arrangements

The maximum of 100 points can be achieved by

- a maximum of 48 points for the twelve short (weekly) papers (4 point each). Late papers cannot receive more than 2 points
- a maximum of 35 points for the final paper (20 points for the content, 4 points for the range of consulted literature, 4 for the writing style, 4 for the organization, 3 for quotation and citation style).
- a maximum of 7 points for the oral session review
- a maximum of 10 points for continuous participation in class discussion.

You are supposed to attend class on a regularly basis. One absence will not inflict your grade. Further absences without sufficient documentation (e.g. a doctor’s note) will result in a deduction of five points each.

100-95 points=A, 94-90 points=A-, 89-85 points=B+, 84-80=B, 79-75 points=B-, etc.

All readings are to be completed on the day assigned, before you come to class. Please bring both the readings and the notes you take from the readings to class to follow and participate in class discussions.

Apart from inquiring in the perpetrators of the Holocaust this course serves to introduce students more generally in techniques of historical scholarship and in practices of academic communication. Great importance is attached to skills of analyzing both primary and secondary sources critically. The required readings are carefully chosen. However, none of them should be mistaken as comprising a final truth but rather be considered as one of many options to look at a certain topic. Thus, try to understand the basic assumptions, the main arguments, and the limitations of the texts you read. Critique is the oil of knowledge. In class, you are invited to speak up and to articulate
your thoughts and ideas, whether or not they comply with those of your classmates or the professor.

Checking emails on a regular basis and staying connected with friends and the rest of the world is very important. Do not do it in class, though. Laptops, cell phones, iPods, iPads, Gameboys, DVD players and other electronic devices are inclined to distract you or others from class discussions. They are to be switched off during class.

Clark University is committed to providing students with documented disabilities equal access to all university programs and facilities. If you have or think you have a disability and require academic accommodations, you must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS), which is located in room 430 on the fourth floor of the Goddard Library, phone number (508) 798-4368, email accessibilityservices@clarku.edu. If you are registered with SAS, and qualify for accommodations that you would like to utilize in this course, please request those accommodations through SAS in a timely manner.

Required Texts (purchase recommended)

2. Christopher Browning, Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (New York, 1992)
3. Wendy Lower, Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields (Boston, 2014)

All other required texts are available online or will be provided as photocopies.
COURSE OUTLINE

1st Session, Jan 23

Introduction
Excerpts from footage on Nuremberg Trials (1945-46) and from movies such as The Murderers Are Among Us (1946); Schindler’s List (1993), and The Reader (2008) will be watched and discussed in class.

We will be approaching the topic of the seminar by looking at popular images of Holocaust perpetrators.

2nd Session, Jan 30

The Commandant

"My conscience is clear. I was simply doing my duty...,” explained the former commandant of the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination camps Franz Stangl, when tried and imprisoned for the murder of 900,000 people in 1970. In this book, the British investigative journalist Gitta Sereny tries to make sense of the moral and emotional constitution of a ‘model’ perpetrator.

At the end of this class, we will be watching sections of the documentary movie on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem The Specialist (1999) in preparation of the following week.

3rd Session, Feb 6

The Planner
Required Reading: David Cesarani, Becoming Eichmann. Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer” (Cambridge, Mass., 2006). (Focus on chapters I to VI.)

Unlike Stangl and most of the perpetrators analyzed in this class, Adolf Eichmann was a desk perpetrator, in charge with planning and administering the Holocaust. When he stood on trial in Jerusalem in 1961, famous observers such as Hannah Arendt believed that he, although a career SS man, had not been driven by hatred of Jews but simply by the wish to be a dutiful official. Cesarani’s book offers a more complex view on the life and motives of Eichmann and allows us to discuss the basics of the Holocaust as process.

In preparation of the following week, some time of this class will be used to watch sections of the documentary movie Nazi Medicine (1997).
4th Session, Feb 13

The Doctors


Although tied to the Hippocratic oath, many doctors in the Third Reich tortured or even killed human beings. Focusing on Auschwitz and infamous Nazi doctors such as Josef Mengele, Lifton suggests that they could do so by “doubling,” by splitting their selves into two halves. In class, we will discuss the workings of this kind of compartmentalization.

Sections of BBC documentary Auschwitz. Inside the Nazi State (2005) to be watched in class in preparation of following session.

5th Session, Feb 20

The Guards


Instead of demonizing camp guards as sadists, we have to acknowledge the social dynamic of a subculture that was ruled by pure violence, suggests the German sociologist in this provocative book: “the more dead bodies” the guards “could chalk up, the greater was their fame; the more adroit and imaginative their brutality, the higher their rankings in the group pecking order.” Ruled by “absolute power,” the camp society erased agency and did not need inhuman ideologies to spread violence and brutality, says Sofsky. Do you agree?

After discussing Sofky’s and other scholars’ views on Nazi concentration camp guards, we will be watching footage from the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment, in preparation of the following week.

6th Session, Feb 27

The Police


This book tells the story of a German police unit, some 500 men, that murdered in Nazi occupied Poland in 1942 and 1943 tens of thousands of Jews. When they started doing so, their commander gave them a remarkable choice: those who weren’t up to kill Jews could opt out. But only very few took advantage of this offer. Most of them joined in mass murder. Why?
At the end of this session, we will summarize the results of the class so far and compare different explanations for why the Holocaust perpetrators did what they did.

7th Session, March 13

The Intellectuals


We will be looking at a core group of Holocaust perpetrators, those SS leaders that operated the Nazi genocide. Well educated, often boasting doctoral degrees, they not only embraced Nazi antisemitism and planned the Holocaust but eagerly volunteered as commanders of the SS death squads and took pride in spearheading the mass shooting of Jews in the East.

At the end of this class, we will (in preparation of the following session) be watching sections of a documentary movie on the leadership of Hitler’s regular army, the Wehrmacht, and its attitude toward the Holocaust and other mass crimes.

8th Session, March 20

The Soldiers


In this class, we will be exploring how ordinary soldiers (most of them drafted and not members of the NSDAP) became complicit in the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes – how they helped the SS and the police to murder civilians, how they killed or let die millions of Soviet POWs, and how they destroyed the livelihoods of Soviet and East European citizens when they were about to lose the war.

At the end of this class, the instructor will induct into the topic of the following session, the empowerment of (“Aryan”) women in the Third Reich.

9th Session, March 27

The Women

Required reading: Wendy Lower, Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields (Boston, 2014).
The first part of this class will serve to discuss the book that sheds light on those women who participated in mass murder, by typing up deportation orders, or by granting their murderer husbands a private haven, by guarding, humiliating, torturing, and killing civilians in the ghettos or in the camps, or even by joining the shooting actions in the East.

In the second part of this session (4:00 pm), we will be joining a guest lecture (with Q&A) by Professor Elissa Mailänder (Centre d’Histoire de Sciences Po, Paris), “Kinder, Kirche, Küche, and KZ? Inside the World of Female Perpetrators.”

**10th Session, April 3**

**The Collaborators**


Topic of the class is the European dimension of the Holocaust and the complicity of non-Germans. Why did the Nazis get so much support for their genocidal projects all over Europe, especially in the occupied territories in the East? Did they act against Jews on their own or only because the Nazis made them so? The book of Jan Gross is a classic one but not one without issues as you will see. We will be watching in class a few selected video testimonies of respective collaborators and their victims.

**11th Session, April 10**

**The Victims**


In this class, we will be approaching the most sensitive issue of the seminar – the ways the Nazi perpetrators, especially in the death camps, made some victims of the Holocaust complicit in mass murder. The discussion will address the question whether it is even legitimate to talk of complicity in these cases, and we will try to understand the “choiceless choices” (Lawrence Langer) these victims faced when the Nazis tried to turn them into perpetrators. In addition to the readings, we will base our inquiries on the movie *The Grey Zone* (to be shown in class).

**12th Session, April 17**

**The Germans**

My own book explores the ‘constructive side’ of mass violence. Looking at different types of perpetrators and bystanders, it shows how the Germans switched to community-based violent ethics even before the Nazis came to power, and how the Nazis used the human desire for belonging to build a genocidal society. It argues that the German nation eventually found itself through committing the Holocaust. (While reading, and thinking about this book, be reminded of the appreciation of critique that is expressed above in the section on grading.)

13th Session, April 24

The Aftermath


14th Session, May 1

Conclusion

Summary of the seminar, discussion of final papers. No response paper, but provide a short outline (and photocopies for the class) of your final paper and be prepared to summarize the results of your paper orally within five or so minutes.