

Nation-Building through Genocide: Hitler's Community and the Holocaust

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This paper summarizes and excerpts my book *Belonging and Genocide. Hitler's Community, 1918-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), which includes more detailed references.

Genocide is the destruction of a “national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” as the United Nations declared in 1948, or, as scholars argue more recently, of any politically, socially, or culturally defined group.¹ Conceptualized as an essay on why and how the Germans committed genocide against Europe's Jews, *Belonging and Genocide* draws attention to the contrary—the creative rather than the destructive side of mass murder. Perpetrators and bystanders energized social life and built collective identity through committing genocide. The desire for community, the experience of belonging, and the ethos of collectivity became the basis of mass murder. Perpetrating and supporting the Holocaust provided Germans with a particular sense of national belonging: the German nation found itself by committing the Holocaust.

The feeling of national belonging based on genocide was not unspoiled. The happiness of a grand community was marred by the moral ambiguities and physical fears characteristic of total and genocidal war. It was a diverse German citizenry that maintained an exclusive solidarity in the midst of murder and destruction. Not all Germans experienced belonging based on mass murder in the same way. I am concerned with the different ways Germans felt about and dealt with nation-building by mass crime, with the breadth of a perpetrator society that enabled and facilitated the Holocaust not least by inaction and inattention. Sadistic perpetrators as well as

¹ “The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” 9 Dec 1948, in Samuel Totten and Paul R. Batrop (eds.), *The Genocide Studies Reader* (New York, 2009), 31 (Article 2).

unwilling bystanders, SS killing units and regular army units, well-educated lawyers and blue-collar workers, men at the war front and women on the home front—all participated in community building through mass crime. Why did the German nation never break asunder but remain united in the midst of mass murder and mass death until it was defeated? My answer is: the act of practicing mass killing and mass murder and the suffering from mass death mutually reinforced each other. Both processes fueled an engine of intensified togetherness. Physical death propelled social life.

This view of Nazi Germany takes up questions and results of previous scholarship. Through the late 1980s, social and political history of the Third Reich was, in crucial respects, disconnected from the history of the Holocaust perpetrators. Third Reich history rightly stressed that German society, despite powerful and constant propaganda and the coercive machinery of Nazi terror, never stood united behind Hitler. Although this scholarship asserted that German defiance, nonconformity, and opposition had little effect, it didn't explain why solidarity or social action did not exist on a broader basis on behalf of the Jews. Why could the Holocaust be executed so smoothly, so effectively, and so successfully? Holocaust history, on the other hand, sought an answer to exactly this question and proffered two conflicting arguments. The "Intentionalists" limited responsibility to Hitler and the Nazi elite who had planned the murder of the Jews. The "Functionalists" saw the Holocaust as the result of a political radicalization that was driven by competing power agencies within the Nazi state, such as the Nazi Party, the state bureaucracy, and the occupational regimes in the conquered territories. Each explanation, however, marginalized the social dimension of the Holocaust. Masses of ordinary Germans supported or actively perpetrated it. Thus, in the 1980s both Third Reich history and Holocaust history obscured the agency of ordinary Germans during the Holocaust.²

Not until 1990, with demographic, cultural, and political changes, did scholars start to question these blinkered views. Between 1990 and 1995 the last Germans that had experienced and shaped the Nazi period as young adults or adolescents retired, and younger people who had never been personally entangled in the Nazi society would determine which topics and views

² Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (4th ed., London, 2000); Richard Bessel, "Functionalists versus Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years On, or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?" *German Studies Review* 26 (2003), 15-20.

would be presented in books, classrooms, newspapers, and TV shows. Only then was the subject of ordinary Germans' propensity to violence addressed openly. At the same time, the "Americanization" of the Holocaust drew public and scholarly attention to how ordinary Germans behaved, and to the choices they had. In 1992 Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men* left no doubt that even the members of Himmler's murder troops were never completely denied the option of refusing to kill civilians. In 1993 Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List* showed that Germans had options for rescuing Jews—if they wished to do so. Beginning in 1992 the return of mass violence, even genocide, to the heart of Europe—in the former Yugoslavia, until then known as a lovely tourist country—reminded everyone, including Germans, of the potential for cruelty that lies behind the façade of civilization. People perpetrated, enjoyed, and applauded brutal atrocities against those with whom they had lived peacefully together for a long time. These atrocities were watched in living rooms around the world and also inspired a renewed scholarly interest in the roots of war and genocide.³

As a result, in the 1990s the Holocaust became the paradigm of inquiry in the Third Reich. Only by shifting the focus to the theaters of genocidal war were historians able to assess ordinary Germans' involvement in the Holocaust and hence distinguish different types of initiative, enthusiasm, compliance, complicity, shared knowledge, qualms, and choices. Furthermore, scholars no longer compared Nazi Germany only to other fascist regimes or to Stalinism but rather saw it as the climax of a powerful continuity of ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence that ran through the "long" twentieth century and had victimized American Indians, indigenous Australians, south African Herero and Nama, Armenians, Ukrainians, Cambodians, Tutsis and Hutus, and Bosnians and other groups in the former Yugoslavia.

Euphemistically introduced by Serb nationalists, the term "ethnic cleansing" made historians aware of the utopian power of genocide. Genocidal regimes derive their dynamic from fears of the "pollution" of the social body and desires for regaining "purity." The only way to rebuild "Us" is to eliminate "Them." To reassure one's own collective identity, it is necessary to

³ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York 1992); Thomas Kühne, "Der nationalsozialistische Vernichtungskrieg und die 'ganz normalen' Deutschen. Forschungsprobleme und Forschungstendenzen der Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs. Erster Teil," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 39 (1999), 580-662; Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2001), 68-118; Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2004).

get rid of the “Other.” Recent scholars have taken seriously the social impact of Manichaeic utopias of salvation through extermination; anti-Semitism serves as precisely such an ideology. While Daniel Goldhagen’s assumption of an all-German “eliminationist” anti-Semitism has been refuted by most historians, he was certainly right about the crucial role of popular anti-Semitism in the Holocaust. Saul Friedländer has convincingly analyzed the Holocaust as a consequence of a “redemptive anti-Semitism,” a messianic vision that made Germans believe that the elimination of the Jews as the most lethal and active threat against the German *Volk* would lead to a grand national salvation.⁴

Although there is no doubt regarding the large role of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust, *Belonging and Genocide* does not focus on Germans’ and other Europeans’ hatred of Jews. Nor is it primarily concerned with analyzing anticommunism or the German contempt of Slavs, though the impact of these stereotypes is obvious. Rather it considers the flip side of hatred—love. Love and hatred are two sides of a coin. Genocidal violence, the destruction of Them, can also bolster the love between Us. When Germans carried out genocidal war against the Jews and other “undesirables” in order to realize the utopia of a purified nation, they did more than destroying what they considered to be dirty and dangerous. They experienced togetherness, cohesion, and belonging, and they deluded themselves into believing they would attain a homogenous and harmonious social body, cleansed of pollution, conflict, and inner enemies. The Nazis called this social body a *Volksgemeinschaft*,² a people’s community. The entire nation would feel as a family or a group of friends, providing closeness, safety, and warmth. Nobody would be alone, everyone would be taken care of, all would feel connected to each other—and all would act in concert. Through committing the Holocaust, Germans gained a feeling for this grand utopia of belonging.

Historians have often deemed this vision nothing more than propaganda. In fact, they have argued, German society never really changed its class and religious cleavages, at least not

⁴ Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide. Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, 2003); Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy. The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York, 2007); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York, 1997), 73-112; idem, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York, 2007); Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung. Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz, 1919-1939* (Hamburg, 2007).

during the Nazi period. Although this view carries some truth, it leaves one question unanswered. If German society really was so divided, if its unity had been only a façade, why, then, did it not fall apart, especially after 1942, when Germany's downfall became obvious? My answer is that the Nazis managed to include and utilize even strong anti-Nazis to support a grand brotherhood of crime—one that left practically no back door for escape. Its crucial social dynamic made complicit even those who did not want to become complicit. And although understood as a community based on criminal conduct, complicity, and cognizance, it was yet presented as morally sacrosanct. The regime propagated a revolutionary ethos that assured Germans that their murderous activities were morally good.

We are used to timeless definitions of moral behavior. Illusions of timeless stability offer us certainty in an uncertain world. However, human culture, including guidelines for what are good and evil, is socially constructed. The guidelines depend on time and space. They can change. And indeed, they do change. Nazi terror was embedded in an “ethical” framework of its own. Contrary to modern universalistic ethics, the Nazis “believed that concepts of virtue and vice had evolved according to the needs of particular ethnic communities” and “promoted moral maxims they saw as appropriate to their Aryan community”—this according to the historian Claudia Koonz. Repudiating the Judeo-Christian traditions of mercy toward the weak and the Enlightenment principles of universalism, individualism, and egalitarianism, Nazi ethics demanded that charity, kindness, and pity be restricted to Aryan Germans.⁵ Koonz and other historians have focused on the exclusionary side of pre-1939 Nazi ethics. By contrast, I show how these racially limited ethics worked within the in-group and propelled powerful sentiments of belonging, togetherness, and community even more during the war and genocide that started in 1939.

Longing for Community

The Nazis perfected community-building through violence and racist ethics, but they did not invent it. Rather they built on, and radicalized, cultural traditions that already had become

⁵ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 1-6.

powerful earlier in the twentieth century and had been envisioned even before. In 1807 the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel had written about what made the modern state. In his view, the state, the “whole,” as he put it, embodied the engine of all human progress. Yet individuals, Hegel lamented, go “adrift from the whole, striving into inviolable self-existence and personal security.” Families and other private communities are inclined to “break up the whole into fragments and let the common spirit evaporate,” thus sinking back “into merely natural existence.” To fight these centripetal and regressive forces, Hegel believed that from time to time government has “to shake them to the very center by war.” In war, the individual feels “the power of their lord and master, death”—the life-threatening enemy. To fight the enemy, individuals reestablish what they had neglected: solidarity, or “common spirit.”⁶

In the age of nation-states, Hegel’s war wisdom would never lose its appeal. In war, the various societies within a nation stick together. The more they feel threatened by a mutual enemy, the more likely they are to ignore their internal conflicts. Though this idea was by no means limited to Germany, German politicians and thinkers were particularly fascinated with it when it came to building the German nation. “It is only through war that a nation becomes a real nation,” Heinrich von Treitschke, an influential historian of Prussia’s German mission, taught his students and fellow citizens in the 1890s. “Only acting together makes a people really stick together.”⁷

In summer 1914 the vision seemed to become true, when mass marches in favor of the war spilled onto streets and throngs of volunteers joined the army. In truth, however, it was panic, anxiety, and lethargy that caught the majority of Germans. The official propaganda conjured a truly united nation but could not undo the deep social, religious and political antagonisms. The longer the war went on and the more the lower classes suffered from its consequences, the stronger the dissenters became. The attempt to conclude German nation-building by means of war led to disaster in 1918. Decomposition rather than national unity was the consequence of the First World War.

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York, 1977), 474.

⁷ Ute Frevert, “Nation, Krieg und Geschlecht im 19. Jahrhundert,” in Manfred Hettling and Paul Nolte, eds., *Nation und Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Munich, 1996), 151-170, 151 for the Treitsche quotation.

To be sure, there was no single lesson Germans took from the crucible of 1914–18. No one-way road led from 1918 to 1939 or 1941, or from the 1919 Versailles Treaty, which many Germans perceived as but an unbearable national humiliation, to the 1942 Wannsee Conference, which sealed the fate of European Jewry. After World War I, many Germans marched, voted, and spoke against warmongers who promoted another war as the way to regain Germany's lost power and prestige. By the mid-1920s it was not yet clear who would decide Germany's future--the leftists, pacifists, and democrats, or the rightists, militarists, and fascists. Germany's history was open, not least because the boundaries between these two camps were porous. In some regions of Germany, Jews suffered anti-Semitic violence, but in many places, in particular in the big cities, they also felt welcome and at home. *Contingencies* did matter, and so did *continuities*. It was the unexpected economic crisis of 1929 that facilitated the rise of the Nazis, but the age-old desire for community did so as well--the utopia of a national community that would overcome all internal conflicts and cause that community to feel like a family, a group of friends, or a peaceful neighborhood. How could this utopia be realized in a modern society that necessarily created different and often conflicting interests, classes, ideals, and lifestyles? Precisely the ambiguities of this utopia allowed different and opposing political camps to subscribe to it--or to parts of it. Nationalist and rightist Germans were the most eager to promote the utopia of a Volksgemeinschaft, but Catholics and socialists found it attractive as well.

Though diverging about how the Volksgemeinschaft should appear, Germans developed some consensus about its nucleus, the kernel that was supposed to create the nation-community. They invented the myth of comradeship.⁸ According to the myth, soldierly comradeship in the trenches of 1914–18 had anticipated the Volksgemeinschaft. Small groups of comrades, thrown together by fate, had fought and suffered together, come what may. The good comrades had taken care of each other, shared each other's food, each other's worries, and their common mortality. Civilian differences and conflicts had evaporated.

At the end of August 1925 some 5000 World War veterans and 6000 further visitors assembled on one day in Constance for a veterans' meeting of the Baden infantry regiment

⁸ Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006).

‘Kaiser Friedrich III’ No.114. The “day of the 114th” was intended to indicate to “the whole fatherland” the path out of the “unspeakable hardship” into which it had descended as a result of the recent war. The old soldiers seemed destined to show the way. The typical soldier had been, as the town’s Protestant vicar put it, “sneered at by the horror of all the mass deaths, despised, and degraded.” But he had been pulled from this hell by “the supporting, compensating, alleviating counterweight of his comrades” “It was they who had loyally shared with him all the suffering and the meager joys as well. [...] That was comradeship – that is comradeship.” The “secret of comradeship,” so the Catholic vicar added, lay in the “enduring awareness of what is human.”⁹

It was thought necessary to revive this comradeship if the hardship of the present was to be overcome. “We need,” demanded the Catholic vicar, “to steep and cleanse our whole public life in the spirit of comradeship,” so that the Germans could again attain national greatness. At the same time the new nation, unlike German society in the war and afterwards, should be united, free from class and other internal splits. The “day of the 114th” represented precisely this ideal. It was a comradely “people’s community in miniature.” Even the deepest political gulf dividing Germany – that between supporters and opponents of the Weimar Republic as a democratic state – seemed to be bridged. Other public gatherings often saw disputes over which flag to hoist – the black, red and gold of the Republic, or the black, white and red of the former Empire. But on the veterans’ gathering both flags were flying “peacefully together.”¹⁰

However, this picture of peaceful togetherness was deceptive. The people’s community in miniature did not fully reflect the nation. The two Christian denominations were represented on the regimental day along with all the non-socialist parties - the conservatives, the Catholic Centre Party, the Liberals and the nationalist veterans’ associations - but not the Social Democrat workers’ movement and their veterans’ association, the Black, Red and Gold *Reichsbanner*, nor the Jews. The festival committee had denied the Jews’ former field rabbi the honor of giving an address to the fallen. The Social Democrats took a dim view of the whole event anyway. As they saw it, the “fine title of ‘comrade’” was only employed by the “so-called comrades” who as

⁹ Special page of the *Konstanzer Zeitung* marking the 1925 regimental day, and *Deutsche Bodensee-Zeitung*, celebratory supplement on ‘the day of the 114th’. Both 31 Aug 1925.

¹⁰ *Konstanzer Zeitung*, 31 Aug 1925.

officers had found ways of tormenting their subordinates and treating them like ‘pigs’ on the parade ground, and often ‘financially exploiting’ them too.¹¹

The events in Constance were not peculiar to this locality, they followed a pattern of public remembrance of the First World War prevalent everywhere in Germany. In the war the German nation had been more split than ever before. In the end the revolution on the Left had installed the republic and swept away the monarchy and with it the rule of the Right. Whilst the Left celebrated this outcome of the war and condemned the monarchy and the military as the instigators of vast mountains of corpses and of economic disasters, the Right used the stab in the back legend to castigate the Left for its alleged responsibility for the military defeat, for the political chaos and the economic misery.

The crux of this dispute was, however, that beneath the surface a consensus was developing. Militarists and pacifists were working on a myth of comradeship which, whilst not glorifying war, at least made it bearable. Those on the Left were not satisfied merely with repudiating the comradeship myth of the Right. They were constructing a counter-myth. You had to keep alive, as the Reichsbanner saw it, the memory of the “breach of comradeship” by the officers, who did not keep to “the unwritten laws of comradeship,” but filled their bellies at the expense of their “hungry comrades.” But that type of person did not deserve to be called comrade. By contrast there were the “real comrades” and real comradeship.¹² The comradeship of those below was directed against military authority. Comradeship thus denoted standing shoulder to shoulder against your superiors. The “four infantrymen” in Ernst Johannsen’s anti-war novel of the same name take revenge on a sergeant who “threatened to shoot a man who didn’t want to go over the top” by shooting at him from behind. This deed had been carried out by a new member of the group, who precisely because of this subversive act “was found to be worthy of their comradeship.”¹³

But in this as in other anti-war novels comradeship on the battlefield had the effect which the officers wanted. In all such cases comradeship operates as the motor of military violence, by

¹¹ *Konstanzer Volksblatt*, 12 May 1921.

¹² *Das Reichsbanner*, 26 Sept 1931, 310.

¹³ Ernst Johannsen, *Vier von der Infanterie* (Hamburg-Bergedorf, 1929), 11, 13f., 48f.

carrying the individual soldier along and thus relieving him of personal responsibility. Nobody mutinies, nobody deserts. And after 1918 comradeship was invoked in all political camps as the essence of humanity, altruism and solicitude. Even the National Association of Disabled Soldiers, Veterans, and War Dependents (Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen), a Social Democrat organization, tightened the “old bonds of comradeship” and exhorted every disabled veteran to remember the comrade “who had once borne him out of the fire, when he himself was lying there helpless and with broken limbs.”¹⁴ Those who had proved themselves as comrades in the war could not be inhuman.

Killing was presented, in both revanchist and pacifist remembrance of the war, as a collective act determined by fate. Comradeship produced, in the accounts of veterans on both Right and Left, a pull from which the individual could not escape.¹⁵ Erich Maria Remarque’s anti-heroes act outside of individual responsibility. “Beside me a lance-corporal has his head torn off. [...] If we were not automata at that moment we would continue lying there, exhausted, and without will. But we are swept forward again, powerless, madly savage and raging; we will kill, for they are still our mortal enemies ... and if we don’t destroy them, they will destroy us.”¹⁶

The myth of comradeship transformed individual dismay into group conformity in warfare. The myth of comradeship thus responded to an onus placed on the Germans, namely the moral burden engendered by the piles of corpses the First World War had left behind. That burden had been intensified by the guilty verdict implied in the Versailles Treaty. After 1918, the experience of the horror of an industrialized war and your own participation in the immense violence of the war could no longer be ‘categorized’ as individual guilt and responsibility. The collective memory of these orgies of destruction concealed the ‘I’ in the ‘we’. Individual responsibility was dissolved in that ‘we’. Communities of comrades, resigned to their fate, neutralized their aggression toward those outside of the community through altruism and harmony within it.

¹⁴ *Mitteilungen des Reichsbundes der Kriegsoffer und Kriegsbeschädigten*, 6 Dec 1918, 5.

¹⁵ See e.g. Joseph M. Wehner, *Sieben vor Verdun* (Munich, 1935), 40f.

¹⁶ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York, 1982), 115.

What happened around 1930 in Germany might best be understood as a change of ethics. For longer than historians, cultural anthropologists have been examining different moral settings. In a broad range of research they have dealt with the opposites of shame culture and guilt culture.¹⁷ Guilt culture is seen as the moral paradigm of Western modernity. A society shaped by guilt culture trains its citizens to be responsible for their own actions. The question of morals is here a case for introspection. Guilt is experienced individually. It is dealt with in dialogue with God or with the superego. In shame culture, on the other hand, the controlling gaze of the community sets itself up as the highest moral authority. Shame is grounded in the fear of exclusion, exposure and disgrace, which the community allots to the individual who does not submit to its rules. Shame culture trains one to be inconspicuous, to conform, to participate – and to be happy through doing so, through being in good hands with the group, through enjoying security and relief within the community. Both moral paradigms arise, in variable proportions, in every society. The point is: in what ratio do they do so? In the military, shame culture is always more important than in the civilian areas of modern societies. That distinction evaporated in Germany after 1918 and even more during the Nazi era. At that time shame culture attained broad societal significance, which is otherwise most unusual in industrial societies.

Ethics and Practice of Exclusion

Before 1933, the myth of comradeship was primarily a matter of stories and visions. Yet a number of associations and organizations started putting it into practice. The veterans' movement with its gatherings that attracted people of different social backgrounds was one of them. Another important factor was the youth movement that in various ideological branches worked on anticipating in their camps the utopia of a Volksgemeinschaft united by comradeship. Sitting around a campfire or staying overnight in a barn, they enjoyed communal life on a voluntary basis; everybody was free to join or leave a group or to start another one. Of course, the risk of death did not challenge them as it had the trench soldiers, but even so, duties had to be

¹⁷ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston, 1946). On Benedict's shortcomings see M. R. Creighton, 'Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures', in *Ethos*, 18 (1990), 279-307.

shared on a fair basis. Whoever preferred to look for some solitude instead of joining the crowd was seen as uncomradely and was shunned. Mommy's boy, the "chicken" who was solely concerned with his "private" longings, was destined to be an outcast. The community would always "recognize the outsider and know how to defend itself," threatened the *Reichsbanner*, looking to its own socialist youth associations. The tone of such language is very much to the point. The youth movement succumbed to the pressure of the mythical community, which required subordination and denied individual freedom. Before 1933, nobody was forced to join the young people's communities. Many youths, however, wanted to be "pressed" into a "community which was afraid of neither death nor devil."¹⁸

The activities of these groups were seemingly harmless—boyish games and tests of courage—but in the broader political context they were part of the obsession with enforced community-building in Germany around 1930 that was far from harmless. Only the Nazis, though, put into practice what had been envisioned before: to build a nation along the model of trench comradeship. The Nazis did not invent the myth of comradeship or the vision of a *Volksgemeinschaft*. But they radicalized these and other preexisting ideas. They tied inclusion to exclusion; they replaced voluntariness with pressure; and they wove the myth of community into a revolutionary, racist, dichotomous morality.

When Germans in the Weimar period talked, wrote, and read about comradeship, or when they thought about the *Volksgemeinschaft*, they sensed fellowship, connectedness, harmony, security. Inclusion rather than exclusion shaped the ideas of community in Weimar Germany. Nazi Germany, though, brought to the warm and inclusive side of community its cold and dark brother: exclusion. There was no Us without Them. While the nation in pre-1933 Germany had been defined in terms of culture, language, or citizenship, the Nazis allowed only one understanding: the nation was to be racially and also ideologically exclusive. If Germans wanted to be included, they had to engage eagerly in excluding others--above all the Jews, but also a broad range of groups deemed to be "alien" to the community. To guarantee that "good" Germans would never forget the brutal side of social harmony, they were asked to spy on their

¹⁸ *Das junge Deutschland*, 1930, 599; *Arbeiterjugend*, 1926, 108; *Reichsbanner*, 17 Oct 1930, 336f.; *Arbeiterjugend*, 1928, 174-176; *Das junge Deutschland*, 1931, 224, 303; Franz Strebin, *Jugendbewegung und politische Erziehung* (PhD diss., University of Heidelberg, 1958), 88f.; *Der Bannerträger*, no. 10 (1923), 103f.

colleagues, neighbors, and even family members to identify and denounce any kind of deviation or defiance.

To conclude their radicalization of the community discourse, the Nazis revolutionized the moral foundation of the society. Germans were to replace the Judeo-Christian tradition of universal humanity and individual responsibility with a dichotomous morality that revolved solely around the needs of the Us. In the Third Reich, only the We of the Aryan Volksgemeinschaft was recognized as “good,” whereas They could not be other than “evil.” “Our ethics,” declared Heinrich Himmler in a speech in January 1939, “comply solely with the needs of our people. Good is what is useful for the people, evil is what damages our people.” Nazi propaganda had spread this message since 1933, denouncing “false humanity” and “exaggerated pity,” the essentials of Christian (and Jewish) ethics, as a crime to the German Volk. But nobody put it as drastically as Himmler in his infamous speech to SS generals in Posen on 4 October 1943. Looking back on the successful course of the murder of the Jews, he outlined the moral grammar that invalidated both the Judeo-Christian tradition of human compassion and pity for the weak, with its the command of mercy for a defeated enemy and the notion of natural, equal, and universal human rights. The “holiest laws of the future,” he said, were that “our concern, our duty, is to our people, and to our blood.” And, he continued, “It is basically wrong for us to project our whole harmless soul and heart, all our good nature, our idealism, onto foreign peoples.”¹⁹

The Nazi morality conceded material and immaterial benefits--gratitude, security, pity, mercy, tenderness--only to the Aryan Volksgemeinschaft, the combat unit, and the camp comrades. He who displayed pity or compassion for Them--Jews, other non-Aryans, “subhumans,” “asocials,” dissenters, enemies--revealed weakness and lack of community spirit. He would be either excluded from the Us altogether or downgraded to the bottom of social hierarchy. That hierarchy no longer relied on economic status, birthright, or academic credentials; it relied on the ability to perpetrate brutality against Them.

¹⁹ Heinrich Himmler, Speech at the meeting of SS generals (SS-Gruppenführertagung) in Posen, 4 Oct 1943, Document No. 1919-PS, Nuremberg Trial, German original in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof* (Nuremberg, 1947–49), vol. 29, 110–73, quotes 122f; my translation differs slightly from *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. IV (Washington, D.C., 1946), 616–34; Himmler, speech to SS generals, 23 Jan 1939, quoted in Josef Ackermann, *Heinrich Himmler als Ideologe* (Göttingen, 1970), 141.

Putting this new morality into practice was not easy. The Nazis encouraged Germans to harass, boycott, and isolate Jews beginning in the spring of 1933. But many Germans remained reluctant and uncertain. They avoided contact or severed relations with Jewish neighbors, friends, and colleagues, but only a minority joined in violent anti-Semitic politics. Some even cultivated contacts with Jews. Although solidarity with the Jews was rare and barely eased the Jews' terror and fear, the regime wasn't satisfied with Aryan Germans' anti-Semitic performance, even after Kristallnacht. The regime's racist ideology did not suffice to make enough Germans act according to the new morals. It needed the training camps and the barracks--the military and paramilitary service--where they learned the basic lesson on how to "purify" their fatherland from its supposed "enemies" and from "aliens." The lesson was about comradeship. Comradeship radiated belonging, togetherness, and security, but only the one who conformed, joined in, and was ready to trade his individual identity for a collective identity gained the benefits of comradeship. Comradeship meant searching for, identifying, and excluding the Other. The moral grammar of comradeship obeyed one rule: anything was allowed that intensified the group's social life and secured its cohesion. The best way to unite people was to make them commit crimes together, as Hitler knew well. Once in 1923, he presented the sociology of crime as a political prescription. In a public speech he declared that there were "two things which can unite human beings; shared ideals and shared roguery."²⁰

Youth in Nazi training camps and young soldiers in barracks usually did not commit real crimes. What they did learn was to break the norm; it didn't matter which one. Whether transgressing civilian norms of decency and politeness or violating the military norms of obedience through little conspiracies against the drill sergeant, it all served the same goal--to endow the group with a sense of social sovereignty, of independence from and elevation above the rest of the world. Camp social life did not focus on Nazi ideology. It rather served to train offending civil morality and violent harassment, on a seemingly trivial level. Boys or adolescents would recite lewd songs and jokes to vilify bourgeois love, middle-class ethics and in particular the female world at home -- family, mothers, sisters. The point was to join in doing things which otherwise were not allowed but provided fun and generated conformity. The "bad" guy was the one who did not participate, who did not conform, who did not join in sexual jokes, for instances.

²⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Reden* (Munich, 1925), 89.

Sebastian Haffner, who after 1945 became one of the most popular Hitler biographers, was a leftist law school student when he had to join a Nazi training camp in 1933 for six weeks. Six years later, after having left Germany with his Jewish fiancée, he reconsidered his experience in that Nazi camp and said: “comradeship relieves men of responsibility for their own actions, before themselves, before God, before their consciences. ... Their comrades are their consciences and give absolution for everything, provided they do what everybody else does.” The absence of personal responsibility guaranteed the “happiness of comradeship.... We floated in a great comforting stream of mutual reliance and gruff familiarity.”²¹

Military and paramilitary service was the drilling square for shame culture. Comrades educated deviants into comradeship and assimilated themselves into the community. A comrade was someone with whom “you could get up to something now and then.” So Lieutenant Gerhard Modersen put it in his diary in 1943. For countless soldiers, getting up to something together meant one thing above all: adventures with women. Modersen was married. But it was precisely adultery, which along with his comrades he constantly practiced, which for him represented the attraction of life as a soldier.

It was not only a matter of sexual needs. At least as important was to boast of sexual adventures to your circle of comrades. Doing so demonstrated the social sovereignty of the leagues of males, their independence from real women, their superiority over the family and home – over civilian society and civilian morality. The moral grammar of comradeship always obeyed the same rule: anything was allowed that enriched and intensified the group’s social life, its bonds, and its cohesion. Such cohesion played out when the soldiers got together for having fun or when they did their duties, whatever these were.

From late 1929 on, the Nazi Stormtroopers (SA) waged civil war on communists and socialists. Dance hall battles, brawls, and knife fights became a daily routine in German cities. Unleashing brutality in bar brawls, fighting together furiously in the streets and committing murder together served as social “cement,” as Joseph Goebbels said. It was not just standing together against an enemy as soldiers in battle do that created this type of comradeship. Moral

²¹ Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler* (New York, 2002), 288-291.

transgression forged bonds as well. SA men did not hide murder; they staged it. Inflicting ruthless violence guaranteed public attention and established community. When they marched in Charlottenburg, a Berlin suburb, they sang “We are the Nazi guys from the murderer unit of Charlottenburg.” Participating in collective violence was the entrance ticket to the group. When they met in “storm bars” to enjoy themselves, they dwelt on war stories, and granted the most brutal comrade the greatest respect.²²

The Pleasure of Terror

Such was the social fabric of the Gestapo in Nowy Sacz, or, in German, Neu-Sandez, Poland, located fifty miles southeast of Krakow in West Galicia. There, the German Border Police Station spread terror from late 1939 on and managed to murder thousands of Jews and send another 15,000 or more to Belzec and other death camps. In the evening of April 28, 1942, the Germans were having a hot party in the local Gestapo casino. About twenty of them, members of the Gestapo, some Wehrmacht soldiers, civil service officers and alike gathered to enjoy a boozy evening. Most of them had concluded a nasty but, as they saw it, necessary job only a couple of hours before. On the Jewish cemetery, they had killed 300 Jews. It had been a chaos. Although most of these men were used to torture, humiliate and murder, they had never organized a mass shooting action. Sometimes, the executioners hit the aortas of their victims, so that their blood poured forth over the hands and weapons of their murderers. Or they did not hit their victims lethally, so these died only slowly. Some SS men felt nauseated of their own deeds and those of their comrades and tried to dodge away. Repeatedly, SS men started quarrelling with each other about how to do their job most efficiently or, as they put it, in more “human” way.

²² Joseph Goebbels, *Das erwachende Berlin* (Berlin, 1934), 126, quoted in Sven Reichardt, „Fascist Marches in Italy and Germany: Squadre and SA before the Seizure of Power,” in Matthias Reiss, ed., *The Street as Stage. Protest Marches and Public Rallies since the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2007), 185; idem, „Vergemeinschaftung durch Gewalt. Das Beispiel des SA-,Mördersturms 33’ in Berlin-Charlottenburg zwischen 1928 und 1932,“ in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland* 7 (2002), 23 (song), 30; J. K. von Engelbrechtchen, *Eine braune Armee entsteht. Die Geschichte der Berlin-Brandenburger SA* (Munich, 1937), 85 (storm bars).

The point is: the group did not fall apart but concluded what it considered as its job. These men stuck together and experienced themselves as a community – not least by coping with their internal disputes. Eventually, when the job was done, the Germans marched back to the Gestapo station, singing the Horst Wessel song, the most popular Nazi song, which glorified one of the first martyrs of the early Nazi movement, called for revenge, and promises “freedom” and “bread,” that is the paradise on earth, only for one’s own community that has cleansed the earth of its enemies: “Flag high, ranks closed, / The S.A. marches with silent solid steps. / Comrades shot by the red front and reaction / march in spirit with us in our ranks. // The street free for the brown battalions, / The street free for the Storm Troopers. / Millions, full of hope, look up at the swastika; / The day breaks for freedom and for bread.”²³

The Gestapo of Novy Sacz did not content itself with conjuring a utopia of togetherness and community; it rather anticipated that vision through boozy gatherings as well as through collective violence. The uncrowned king of Novy Sacz was the head of the local Gestapo station, SS-Obersturmführer Heinrich Hamann. When gathering his men in the Gestapo casino, he loved to perform toughness und brutality by biting on a glass or pulling a safety pin through his cheek. In the casino, he and his men lived up. So they did in the evening of April 28, 1942. For a while, the crowd enjoyed themselves with shooting at a series of glasses on the bar. At midnight, such boyish pleasures did no longer suffice. Hamann suggested to “kicking up a fuss.” He wished to check on his “lambs” in the Jewish ghetto, as he put it. Would they be doing well or were they about to moan of what had happened the afternoon before? The entire circle had to come with him to make a racket in the ghetto. Excuses were not accepted. In the ghetto, they stormed houses, forced their ways into apartments, kicked in doors and windows, and shot down whoever stood around or dared to show up. The police officers entered bedrooms and shot randomly couples sleeping in bed. The fuss, Hamann’s men kicked up, ended in an orgy of brutality.²⁴

²³ Modern History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/horstwessel.html>, accessed 3 Dec 2009.

²⁴ Trial against Heinrich Hamann and others, judgment Landgericht Bochum, 22 July 1966, Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg 162/14273, fol. 169-183.



Close together: sexist and racist cartoons—togetherness in the German casino of Nowy Sącz²⁵

What happened in Nowy Sącz on April 28, 1942 cannot be explained solely by sadism, by hatred of Jews, by obedience or by group pressure—the established explanations of Holocaust perpetrator actions—although this all mattered. What is at stake here is group pleasure, collective joy, the experience of togetherness and belonging. It would be wrong to assume that all men equally enjoyed such cruel collective joy. Many of them despised Hamann’s brutality. The German crowd in Nowy Sącz was comprised of men of different ideological, social and generational backgrounds, just as the entire German society was. Some acted willingly, some refused to take part, and some stood aside. They were involved on different and even opposing levels of the death machine. But the wholly diverse attitudes were neutralized by a sociological

²⁵ Courtesy of Yad Vashem Archive, Jerusalem, photos #3043/20 and 3043/22. See Thomas Kühne, “The Pleasure of Terror: Belonging through Genocide,” in Fabrice d’Almeida, Corey Ross, and Pamela Swett, eds., *Pleasure, Power and Everyday Life under National Socialism* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2011).

mechanism that merged collective joy and collective crime. The latter one has been well described by Primo Levi, with reference to concentration camp society and to the role of uncertain individuals and collaborators who wavered between refusal and participation. From the Nazis' point of view, the collaborators, Levi said, "betrayed once and they can betray again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back. This way of proceeding has been well known to criminal associations of all times and places. The Mafia has always practiced it."²⁶

Heinrich Hamann was used to cite an order from Himmler according to which "everyone" had to carry out executions, and he actually tested the readiness of new members of his detail to obey to murder orders. So community building through crime worked in other units as well.²⁷ Bruno Müller, head of Einsatzkommando 11b began a mass execution in Southern Russia in August 1941 by picking a two-year old child and shooting it, then killing the mother. Having set the model, he asked the other officers to follow.²⁸ Everyone, he said, had to shoot at least one person. To become one of "us," you had to kill at least once. As Hannah Arendt said in her essay on violence, only through an "irreversible act," that burned "the bridges to respectable society" could you be trusted and "admitted into the community of violence."²⁹

Freedom of action still existed in most police and SS units. The crucial point is that those who indeed dissented and refused to murder actually supported the hegemonial genocidal culture they tried to escape. Talking to comrades who joined in, or to their superiors, they did not claim to be "too good" to kill. They would rather say, "I am too weak."³⁰ They did not question the genocidal morality of the community. They rather booked their own constitution as abnormal. Thus, they provided an essential part of the internal structure of the group. In a culture of 'tough' masculinity, of brutality and mercilessness, they represented the in-built other of the group, thus helping to bring the hegemonial ideal into sharp focus. Bullies as Hamann could not

²⁶ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1988), 43.

²⁷ Judgment Landgericht Bochum, 22 July 1966, BAL 162/1374, fol. 1313-1317.

²⁸ Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord. Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941-1943* (Hamburg, 2003), 188, 434.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, 1967), 67; cf. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 2004), 45.

³⁰ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 185f.

have performed alpha-maleness without the weaklings. This was the basis of an exchange deal that guaranteed even the dissenters a place within the group. Thus, they got a chance to belong as well. And many took the chance. When the perpetrators of Nowy Sacz stood on trial in the 1960s, it turned out that none of them had ever made any effort to get away from Nowy Sacz. One of those men, who had despised Hamann's brutality and thus was considered by him a weakling, admitted why that had been so, why they all stuck to the site of murder and torture. "Life in Nowy Sacz wasn't too bad. I felt at home in Nowy Sacz," he said. What he wanted to say is: through committing murder and spreading terror, they fabricated a rare good: belonging and collective identity.

Male bonding through sexual boasting and committing crimes was not unique to Nazi Germany. Some of its features could be observed in the military, in Boy Scout camps and college fraternities in America, or in youth gangs and criminal associations there and elsewhere. Before and after the Third Reich, anthropologists studying tribal cultures have found patterns of male bonding, initiation rites, and liminality. What distinguished the Nazi version of male bonding from tribal cultures or modern gangs was not its internal grammar, but rather its social and political context. Modern gangs, fraternities, and camps as well as tribal liminality constitute an "anti-structure," in the words of Victor Turner.³¹ They constitute exceptions to the rule, whether they are welcomed, tolerated, ignored, or criminalized by the "structure," that is, the dominant society. In Nazi Germany, though, liminal groups no longer embodied an anti-structure; they acted as paradigmatic for the structure.

Nation-Building through Mass Crime

Although the Nazis actively persecuted the Jews between 1933 and 1939, essentially the program of getting rid of them came to fruition outside of Germany--by occupation, exploitation, and terrorization of most parts of Europe beginning in September 1939. Overwhelmingly the worst was in East Europe, where millions of German men and tens of thousands of women engaged in a gigantic project of conquest. Its seductive magnitude derived in part from the size of the occupied

³¹ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, 1977).

territories, the amount of expropriated goods, and the number of subjugated people, but even more from the permission to do with them whatever the occupiers wanted. Conquering the East, Germans got a sense of the grandiosity of the Nazi utopia. With the Wehrmacht troops invading Lithuania, Private Albert Neuhaus, a Westphalian grocer, was sure that “the impetuous German advance cannot be stopped. Such an advance has never been seen in the world.” Hitler’s Volksgemeinschaft was at its peak. A soldier known only as Lieutenant Otto D. bragged, “What a divine people we are! Could the Führer’s claim of German leadership in Europe be better justified?”³² In the East Germans realized what the Nazi revolution was all about: infinite possibilities, unlimited expansion, exceeding all the limits set by tradition, civilization, and conventions.

In the East, the Volksgemeinschaft--the racially cleansed nation of the Aryan “master race”--came into being by suppressing, terrorizing, and killing all who did not belong. Of fundamental significance were the criminal orders which were issued to the Wehrmacht under the seal of secrecy during the preparations for the attack on the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, but which could not remain secret and were not intended to do so. According to these orders, the so-called “political commissars” of the Red Army were not to be treated as prisoners of war according to international law, but were to be “seen to” either at once or after further “checking over.” The war jurisdiction decree went much further. It suspended “obligatory prosecution” for offences against members of the subjugated civilian population by Wehrmacht personnel, even if it was a case of “military crime.” *De facto*, the two commands together declared open season on both prisoners of war and the civilian population of the occupied areas.³³

These orders, crassly contrary to international law as they were, were not carried out in all Wehrmacht units with equal consistency.³⁴ Not all soldiers and not all Germans joined in the pleasure of terror to the same extent. Many refused to take part or stood aside. But the wholly

³² Karl Reddemann, ed., *Zwischen Front und Heimat. Der Briefwechsel des münsterischen Ehepaares Agnes und Albert Neuhaus* (Münster, 1996), 221; letter of Lieutenant Otto D., 30 July 1941, Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Stuttgart, Sammlung Sterz.

³³ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944. Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg, 2002), 43ff.

³⁴ Christian Hartmann, „Verbrecherischer Krieg—verbrecherische Wehrmacht? Überlegungen zur Struktur des deutschen Ostheeres 1941-1944,“ *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 52 (2004), 1-75; Felix Römer, “Im alten Deutschland wäre solcher Befehl nicht möglich gewesen.’ Rezeption, Adaption und Umsetzung des Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlasses 1941-42,“ *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 56 (2008), 53-99.

diverse attitudes and variations in conduct in themselves oiled the machinery of genocidal warfare. Lieutenant Fritz Farnbacher, a Protestant, although he took part in the Russian campaign from day one and served at the front, was probably never involved personally in the murder of Jews or other defenseless persons. He instead tried to keep his distance. Three days after the attack on the Soviet Union the fact that the troops were feeding ‘off the land’ was already giving him a headache, for ‘all manner of things are being “pinched”’. But staying away was not always easy. Though shocked by the greed of his comrades—“you have to look into their eyes and at their hands, how they yaw and grasp”—he “willingly” kept a piece of soap that “is brought to me.” Soon after, when the neighboring battery “received” a barrel of pickles, Farnbacher decided, “I accepted a couple of them and enjoyed them. We aren’t really that bad off!”³⁵

Farnbacher and most of his comrades were well aware of international law. But in the threatening scenarios of the partisan war, dramatized by rumors and propaganda, the scruples about criminal warfare gradually dissolve. “What we’ve come to!,” he remarked at the end of 1941 on hearing that some 30 Russian prisoners had been simply “bumped off” because it was so far to the assembly point: “Five months ago we wouldn’t have even said that, let alone dared do it! And today it’s a matter of course, of which every one of us approves on reflection. No mercy for these predators and beasts!”³⁶

At the same time enthusiasm grew for shared experiences and adventures which reminded the troops of trips with boys’ leagues and which occurred during the requisitioning forays and campaigns against partisans in the locality in spring 1942. You didn’t run into partisans, but the booty in a village was all the more sumptuous: potatoes, greens, 50 chickens, grain, three sucking pigs, “and above all a cow,” were loaded on to 30 sledges. “Then I put myself at the head of my forces, once I have assured myself again that they’re all present [...] and march off homewards. The evening is as beautiful as the morning before it. The wind is at our backs and we race along.” The mood is one of elation, not least due to the ordinary soldiers’ sense of humor: “On our expedition, when I asked whether the cow had been paid for, they just said ‘Yessir!’ To my question, how had they paid, came the answer ‘With cigarette cards!’”³⁷ Another Wehrmacht

³⁵ Fritz Farnbacher, War Diary, 1941-48, typescript owned by the author, 23 June 1941, 2, 19 July 1941.

³⁶ Ibid, 30 Dec 1941.

³⁷ Ibid., 27 March 1942.

lieutenant, Werner Groß, drove ‘around the area’ in a cart and horses with his men in the spring of 1943. They had, he proudly wrote: “searched villages, combed woods and cleared the area of gangs ... We lived like gypsies and tramps.”³⁸ The magic potion which enlivened these cleansing campaigns and plundering trips came from the awareness of being above civilian society. Soldiers like Farnbacher or Groß may not have entirely abandoned this morality. The regular troops of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS did not murder defenseless opponents. That reflected the traditional understanding which the military had of themselves. In practice things looked different. The “gangs” which Gross fought were a synonym for partisans, and Nazi propaganda equated partisans with Jews.

Group pleasure based on terror on murder was experienced ambivalently. Pleasure and qualms were close together, and the latter dominated the longer the war went on and the darker the visions about its end became. Farnbacher and Groß served as officers in the Wehrmacht and thus enjoyed privileges and prestige, which the rank-and-files missed. Most of the latter had been drafted, thus entered the army involuntarily. Only slowly, they discovered the pleasures of comradeship—a special kind of pleasure, embedded in and restricted by a community of fate, which you were forced in, but couldn’t just leave if you didn’t like your comrades or if they didn’t like you. Although never “alone” in the army, private Willy Peter Reese felt “a stranger among strangers.” Drafted when he was about to pursue a decent career as clerk and to establish a family, he was annoyed of soldiering. But joining in seemed the only option, if you didn’t want to be ousted. After a while, Reese “felt at ease in my company, one of many who shared the same destiny.” They drove away homesickness together with a “barrel of beer,” sitting around a campfire and singing melancholic soldiers’ songs. “Our shared privation and distance from home,” he said looking back, “made us comrades.”

The pleasure of such comradeship, however, could not compensate the loss of privacy and the permanent threat of losing one’s life at all. The pleasure of comradeship was soaked with moral apathy and blatant cynicism. “Individuality went under in a vast ocean of apathy and never took shape,” Reese realized. Serving on the Eastern Front, he was well aware of the

³⁸ Werner Gross (Pseudonym), letters to his parents from his time in school, in the Hitler youth, and in the war, 1930-45. Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz, 700,153, no. 286-291, 4 April 1943.

ongoing war against civilians. “Two hanged men swayed on a protruding branch. ... Their faces were swollen and bluish, contorted to grimaces. ... One soldier took their picture; another gave them a swing with the stick. We laughed and moved off.”

In the retreat that began in 1943, the troops covered Eastern Europe with marauding, murder, and plunder. The policy of “scorched earth” concluded the destruction of half of a continent. “Russia was turning into a depopulated, smoking, burning, wreckage-strewn desert,” Reese stated in early 1944, at the end of a distressed 140-page-long “Confession” of his own complicity. “On the way we torched all the villages we passed through and blew up the stoves. ... The war had become insane, it was all murder, never mind whom it affected.” Outbursts “of rage and hate, envy, fistfights, sarcasm, and mockery” replaced “whatever may have remained of comradeship,” he wrote, sentimentalizing the warm side of soldierly togetherness. As the Germans were forced to retreat further and further, a new, very different collective identity emerged, based on “heroic nihilism” and pure cynicism. Yet already in 1942 Reese had depicted in a poem a gang of soldiers guzzling and whoring, boasting and lying, cursing and crowing. “As a bawling crowd,” they had “marched to Russia, gagged people, butchered blood,” and “murdered the Jews... We wave the banners of the Aryan ancestors, they suit us well ... We rule as a band.” The band was the Wehrmacht, the spearhead of the Volksgemeinschaft, the German nation.³⁹

These verses do not transpire simple pleasure. They radiate crapulence, the emotional consequence of the pleasure of terror, that is, the bad conscience of a society that was aware that it had, as a nation, perpetrated and supported a monstrous crime, decidedly as planners, scientists, killers, or guards, or somewhat passively by gazing, by applauding, or just by looking the other way. Wehrmacht Captain Wilm Hosenfeld was one of the very few German soldiers who did not stand by but took action on behalf of the persecuted Jews and Poles in Warsaw, where he served almost the entire war with the occupation regime. He allowed Polish wives to visit their husbands in the POW camp he was responsible for, befriended persecuted Jewish and non-Jewish Poles and saved some of them from the SS’s death machine. During the last months

³⁹ Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself. The Inhumanity of War: Russia, 1941-1944*, ed. Stefan Schmitz (New York, 2005), 7f, 12f, 17f, 23, 44, 51-53, 135; idem, *Mir selber seltsam fremd. Die Unmenschlichkeit des Krieges. Russland 1941-44*, ed. Stefan Schmitz (Berlin, 2004), 242f (poem, not in the English edition.).

of 1944, he helped the Jewish pianist Władysław Szpilman to hide and survive in the ruins of Warsaw. “I try to save each one I can,” he said to his wife in August 1944, when he, unwillingly, was in charge of interrogating members of the Polish Armia Krajowa during the Warsaw uprising. He acquired comprehensive knowledge. In spring 1942, he heard of the gas chambers in Auschwitz and found that, “notwithstanding all secrecy,” in Poland such knowledge was no longer exceptional but rather widespread. Two years later, he accepted “the extermination of a couple of millions of Jews” as a fact. Privately, he sometimes blamed the “current rulers” for betraying “the German people,” contrasted SS “turpitudes” with the “honor” of Wehrmacht officers, or clung occasionally to the illusion that “we as Wehrmacht have nothing to do with that.” In truth even he, now a Righteous Among the Nations, knew that “horrible blood guilt” burdened the entire German people and thus him as well, and be it only because he wore the uniform of a German officer. In fact, he knew that his and even more his fellow citizen’s generated that guilt. “What cowards we are . . . that we let this all happen.”⁴⁰

Such confessions were rare, during the war and even afterwards. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the Holocaust, in particular of the mass shootings in the East, was widespread among Germans already during the war, despite all efforts to look the other way, to escape into myths of Germany’s own victimization, first by the Versailles Treaty and the national humiliation after 1918, then by an alleged threat of world Jewry, of the Slavic hordes, of the Communists, of the Stalinist Soviet Union. And it was precisely this knowledge that united the German nation and worried the Germans toward the end of the war, notwithstanding all tendencies toward isolation in the landscapes of mass death at the battle fronts and at the home front. It was these very worries that Hermann Goering and other Nazi leaders addressed, when from 1942 on, they reminded the Germans in public speeches what the entire German people (and not only the SS or the Nazi elite) had done to the Jews. “The Jew,” said Goering in a speech of 4 Oct 1942, “is behind all, and he has declared to kill all of us. And nobody”—he meant no

⁴⁰ Wilm Hosenfeld, “*Ich versuche jeden zu retten.*” *Das Leben eines deutschen Offiziers in Briefen und Tagebüchern*, ed. Thomas Vogel (Munich, 2004), 286 (letter to his wife, 10 Nov 1939), 302 (note, 14 Dec 1939), 455 (letter to his son, 7 March 1941), 607 (17 Apr 1942), 626-28 (diary entry and letter to his wife, 23 July 1942), 641 (diary entry, 13 Aug 1942), 714 (letter to his wife, 9 May 1943), 799f (letter to his wife, 25 March 1944), 834 (letter to his wife, 23 Aug 1944). On Szpilman *ibid.*, 108-13, 972-74, and Władysław Szpilman, *The Pianist. The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945* (New York, 1999), 209-22, epilogue by Wolf Biermann.

German—“should think, he might say afterwards: ‘I always have been a good democrat against these mean Nazis.’ The Jew will treat all [Germans] equally. He will take revenge on the whole German people.”⁴¹

The soldiers got the message. They knew that Goering was right in conjuring a collective German responsibility for the Holocaust. Wehrmacht Private Franz Wieschenberg, having served in the Eastern Front from the beginning on, pointed out to his wife in August 1944: “We Germans are the nation which decisively started this war and which has to endure its consequences.” Three years before, in August 1941, this same soldier had reported to his wife, then fiancée: “I just saw how the Jews in a town we previously conquered had to move out of their party offices and march through the streets on their way to the stake, carrying photos of Stalin in front of them—that was a sight for sore eyes, what fun!”⁴² Wieschenberg had joined in the terror in the East as a spectator of a collective entertainment as many of his comrades had done. In Zhitomir in summer 1941, SS Einsatzkommando 4a was in charge of mass shootings in the area. Jews were to be publicly hanged. It was said they had ill-treated the Ukrainians during the Russian occupation. “The execution was arranged as a form of popular entertainment” and announced all over town ahead of time by a Wehrmacht vehicle loudspeaker, recalled a former Wehrmacht soldier, Herbert Selle in 1965. “There were soldiers sitting on rooftops and platforms watching the show.”⁴³

Photos taken at such events do not reveal as ashamed spectators as amused ones. They celebrated their splendid community. The “Us” had triumphed over “Them,” the “Other.” Kept like trophies, photos of atrocities illustrated, and were intended to illustrate, the dichotomous social reality of genocide. On the one hand, we see the triumphant group of perpetrators, enjoying themselves committing or watching cruelty. They stick together, they act together, and they feel together. They experience belonging, the epitome of “humanity”—a special notion of

⁴¹ Goering speech, 4 Oct 1942, in Walter Roller and Suanne Höschel, eds., *Judenverfolgung und jüdisches Leben unter den Bedingungen der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft*, vol. 1, *Tondokumente und Rundfunksendungen, 1930-1946* (Potsdam, 1996), 217f.

⁴² Letters of Franz Wieschenberg, Kempowski-Archiv Nartum, Nr. 3386, 3 Aug 1941. On German soldiers’ antisemitism see Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army. Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991).

⁴³ Trial testimony of Herbert Selle, 1965, quoted in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds., *The Good Old Days. The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York, 1991), 108. See *ibid.*, 109, photos of the Zhitomir execution.

“humanity,” to be sure. On the other hand there are the isolated, humiliated, naked victims—frightened and freezing, robbed of the signs of their personal identity, all looking alike, no longer retaining their humanity. “Dissociation” of the victims enhanced “association” of the perpetrators.⁴⁴

To be sure, the perpetrators and spectators did not constitute an as uniformed and homogeneous mass as some photos and testimonies suggest. Herbert Selle, testifying on the Zhitomir spectacle in 1965, did not do so without stating that he “had been an opponent of the National Socialist Jewish policy” right from its beginning on. He also addressed the discomfort his superiors felt about masses of Wehrmacht soldiering enjoying themselves by watching the murder of civilians. Whatever Selle’s private sentiments toward Nazi racism had been, there is no doubt that not all parts of the Wehrmacht performed equal enthusiasm about the soldiers’ support of criminal and genocidal warfare. Nor did all Germans, not least women, at the homefront applaud to what they heard about it by rumors or eyewitnesses, what they read in letters from their men serving in the East, or what they saw on photos the soldiers sent or carried back home. They knew that they were not supposed to openly talk about what they had heard. They did so anyway. In December 1941, a woman in a bakery in Rhenish Emmerich spoke compassionately about the Jews in Russia whom, as she had heard, the Germans drove into the woods to gun them down. She did so in front of various clients; one of whom denounced her to the Gestapo. In January 1942 during a vacation in Austria, a staff judge from Berlin mentioned to a waitress in a coffee shop that the Jews in Germany would be notified of their deportation and would then be shipped to Poland where their graves were already prepared. Asked not to talk about such things, he said, “this is an open secret, any intelligent person knows about it, only the fools don’t.”⁴⁵

The cult of secrecy radiated monstrosity, uneasiness, qualms—and curiosity. The secret, asserts the sociologist Georg Simmel, is “the sociological expression of moral badness.”

⁴⁴ Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror. The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, 1997), 9; Cf. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), 135f, 168ff, 327ff.

⁴⁵ Bernward Dörner, *Die Deutschen und der Holocaust. Was niemand wissen wollte, aber jeder wissen konnte* (Berlin, 2007), 336-40; cf. Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten* (Munich, 2006); Peter Longerich, “*Davon haben wir nichts gewußt!*” *Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933-1945* (Berlin, 2006).

Employed as a “sociological technique,” wrote Simmel, secrecy fosters inclusion and exclusion; it separates those who know and are included from those who do not and who are excluded. Secrecy is the glue of conspiracy based on breaking the norm. Thus, fraternities and brotherhoods throughout history have embedded their cohesion in a cult of secret symbols and rituals. Initiation rituals force the novices to break normal taboos and sacrileges, to separate themselves from mainstream society and become members of counter societies of sorts, and to keep the brotherhood’s secrets for ever.⁴⁶ In the Holocaust, the cult of secrecy worked accordingly. It enhanced the social cohesion of the perpetrators’ network and underscored the difference between the perpetrator society and the rest of the world.

It is impossible to estimate how many Germans, whether men or women, whether at the battle front or on the home front, knew about the Holocaust, and what exactly they knew. Probably only few Germans knew about the entire monstrous dimensions of the death machinery of Auschwitz or Majdanek. Multifaceted research, though, into a broad variety of different sources, ranging from Gestapo files and reports to private letters, diaries and memoirs, has left little doubt that Germans, men as well as women, who wanted to know were able to acquire at least rough knowledge of the ongoing mass murder. Some Germans knew even more. Victor Klemperer, who as a Jew living in Dresden in a mixed marriage was always afraid of deportation, was one of them. On 24 October 1944 he noted in his diary that “six to seven million Jews ... have been slaughtered (more exactly: shot and gassed).” It is worth to note whom the Jew Klemperer owed his knowledge. It was the “reports of Aryans,” as he repeatedly stated. Long before, Klemperer had grasped the cement of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft. In 1937, he had seen a picture in the *Stürmer*, the radical anti-Semitic Nazi news paper, which showed “two girls at a seaside resort. Above it: ‘Prohibited for Jews,’ underneath it: ‘How nice that it’s just us now!’” Klemperer, who strongly identified himself as a German and had long taken pride in being a World War I veteran, understood the “horrible significance” of these words. “I have not only outwardly lost my Fatherland.... My inner sense of belonging is gone,”

⁴⁶ Georg Simmel, *The Sociology* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), 331f, 346f.; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1965), 150-74; Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge, U.K., 2001), 36-39; Jean La Fontaine, *Initiation. Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge across the World* (New York, 1985).

noted Klemperer in his diary. To Germans, the delight of being “just us now” meant to live without Jews—at a vacation resort as well as over the entire country.⁴⁷

The gender bias, typical of all modern societies, prevailed in Nazi Germany as well. Women did not engage in genocide in the same way as men. Yet the gender gap lost its significance when the racial gap between Aryans and non-Aryans took precedence. The new society excluded Jews of both sexes, placed various groups of slaves on the bottom, and positioned Aryans of both sexes at the top. It was this seductive social advancement, experienced as progressive that made women complicit in the genocidal morality.

Yet there is no reason to disavow the massive and manifold inner frictions that shaped the German society at the end of the war. Social isolation in the rubble, loss of faith in Hitler, and collapse of war morale spread all over Germany. What united soldiers or civilians, men or women, young or old, war enthusiasts and war resisters, Nazis and anti-Nazis, the hangmen of the Gestapo and the few hidden or open opponents of the regime was a new sense of national belonging, the knowledge of being part of a grand community of crime. There was no belonging outside of the perpetrator society. The German nation had shackled itself to mass crime, and the Germans knew it. It was the knowledge of the nation’s responsibility for the murder of the Jews that fueled the sense of belonging to a community of fate that left no choices.

According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is “an imagined community.” Whereas belonging in, say, a “primordial village” or a modern sports team is based on face-to-face interaction, the “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” National belonging is based on shared ideas of similar interests and affinities. In modern nations, these ideas derive from collective memory of glorious or disastrous events in the past, and from common visions, fears, and hopes. Mass media often play an important role in spreading these ideas throughout the entire nation. Their suggestive and often destructive power

⁴⁷ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness. A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1942-1945* (New York, 1999), 371 (24 Oct 1944), 377 (26 Nov 1944); idem, *I Will Bear Witness. A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941* (New York, 1998), 233f, 17 Aug 1937.

originates from the way this kind of belonging is perceived--“as a deep, horizontal comradeship,” regardless of “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail” in it.⁴⁸

The basis for the “deep, horizontal comradeship” of the Volksgemeinschaft went well beyond ideas of national citizenship, and it was not primarily mass media that spread them. State-organized face-to-face communities propelled national belonging as well. Small communities like the Border Police Station in Nowy Sącz, Police Battalion 101, the Auschwitz camp guards, Einsatzkommandos, Lieutenant Farnbacher’s requisitioning corps, the bawling and murdering crowd of rank-and-file Willy Reese--all these communities provided evidence that the Volksgemeinschaft really existed on a daily basis. In these communities, men and sometimes also women experienced togetherness as they had rehearsed it in barracks and training camps--by terrorizing others and by transgressing moral conventions on behalf of the Volksgemeinschaft.

Even under the Nazi dictatorship, Germans had choices. Embarrassed about their regime, they could have left their country. By doing so they would have deprived the regime of its mass support. But only very few Germans did emigrate. Sebastian Haffner, not a Jew, was one of them. Most Germans instead made their peace with the Nazi regime, if they didn’t actually revere it. Numerous Germans joined in anti-Jewish ostracism, approved terror against them, and applauded their deportation and extermination during the war. These Germans may have constituted only a minority, although it certainly was a large minority. A much smaller minority performed symbolic gestures on behalf of the Jews; but they did so only occasionally, and seldom in public. Most Germans were ambivalent and their actions ambiguous. They broke up with their Jewish friends and neighbors, not in a mood of grandiosity but in one of indifference. They looked the other way when Jews were publicly humiliated, or they stared blankly as the deportations began. And when they heard the rumors about the mass shootings in the East or about the gas chambers, many Germans probably were uneasy. But they knew how to reassure themselves: it was only the Jews.

The heinous acts of Hitler’s soldiers may be compared to the actions of other soldiers perpetrating mass atrocities in war, for instance a small minority of American soldiers in

⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London, 1991), 6–7.

Vietnam. These atrocities, however, never grew into genocide. American soldiers always knew that, if they survived, they would return to an intact civilian society. This cannot be overemphasized; it applies to most other wars of industrial societies in the twentieth century. The Nazi war was different. Whatever the outcome of the war, Hitler's soldiers could not expect to return to a civilian society. An extremely militarized society, which eventually became a genocidal one, had burned all bridges to the rest of the civilized world.

Simply being German--and knowing what was going on--was enough to establish a grand "imagined" community of crime that encompassed millions of ordinary soldiers serving all over Europe as well as Germans at home, including women, youth, and even younger children. What bound them together and made them feel as a nation was not only the pleasure of terror, which didn't last long, but even more a bad conscience, which persisted. Morality cannot be changed within a few years. Justifying and even demanding mass murder, Nazi morals certainly fueled and facilitated mass support for genocide. Shame culture undermined guilt culture. But it did not annul it. Germans, perpetrating or supporting mass murder, were still aware of how immensely they and their country violated the most basic values of their civilization. The terror of seeing their fatherland threatened by the Jews or overrun by Slavic hordes supported Germans' ability to compartmentalize crimes and cohesion, but it did not erase Germans' sense of guilt about what had been done to the Jews. The Nazi genocide was thus doubly paradigmatic: it developed the logistics necessary to spread mass murder over an entire continent, and it made an entire, civilized nation feel complicit in that mass crime. It was the knowledge of having perpetrated or supported the Holocaust that launched a completely new kind of nation-building. Its outcome was the national brotherhood of mass murder--Hitler's community.