

## *Holocaust*

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In the 1940s, when rumors of the mass murder of Jews throughout Nazi-occupied Europe leaked across the front line, the biblical term **holocaust** was recalled and redeployed to name it. That act had no precedent in recorded history and thus no established vocabulary name. A new name had to be coined for the act of categorial murder – the physical annihilation of men, women, and children on the ground of their belonging or having been assigned to a category of people on which the death sentence was summarily passed. By the 1950s, the old/new term **the Holocaust** came to be widely accepted as the proper name of the meant-to-be-total destruction of European Jews perpetrated in the years 1940–5 on the initiative of the Nazi leadership.

In subsequent years, though, the usages of the term have been extended to cover the numerous cases of mass murder aimed against an ethnic, racial, or religious group – also the cases in which a disempowering or expulsion, rather than the total annihilation of the targeted group, was the proclaimed or tacit objective. Due to the enormous emotional load of the term and an almost universal ethical condemnation of the actions it stood for, the range of damages inflicted by one human group on another has been stretched over the years much beyond its original field. It has, accordingly, become an essentially contested concept, used in numerous ethnic and other violent group conflicts as a charge raised against the conduct or intentions of the adversary to justify one's own group's hostility.

In popular speech originally most strongly associated with the notion of **nuclear holocaust**, these days "holocaust" tends to be interchangeable with "genocide" – another linguistic novelty of the C20. In 1993 Helen Fein noted that between 1960 and 1979 "there were probably at least a dozen genocides and genocidal massacres – cases include the Kurds in Iraq, southerners in the Sudan, Tutsi in Rwanda, Hutus in Burundi, Chinese . . . in Indonesia, Hindus and other Bengalis in East Pakistan, the Ache in Paraguay, many peoples in Uganda" (Fein, 1993: 6). Since those words were written, the list has been considerably extended; as these words are being written, the list shows no signs of nearing the end. Genocide, in Frank Chalk's and Kurt Jonassohn's definition, "is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrators" (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990: 23). In genocide, the power over life intertwines with the power to define. Before the wholesale extermination of a group comes the classification of the group's members, and the definition of group membership as a capital crime.

In many an orthodox war the number of casualties exceeded many times the numbers of many a genocide's victims. What sets genocide apart from even the most violent and gory conflicts is not, however, the number of its victims, but its monological nature. In genocide, the prospective targets of violence are unilaterally defined and denied a right to response.

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The victims' conduct or the qualities of the condemned group's individual members are irrelevant to their preordained fate. The sufficient proof of the capital offence, of the charge from which there is no appeal, is the fact of having been accused. "Holocaust" conveys much the same meaning. When used in lieu of "genocide," suggesting the similarity of a particular case of mass murder to the destruction of European Jews as the archetype, it is mostly to express the unilateral and premeditated character of the odious and repulsive atrocity and the thoroughness of intended extermination of the doomed category.

This current meaning of "holocaust" bears only oblique relation to the meaning carried by the term appearing in the Leviticus chapter of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, from which it has been derived. That ancient term was recalled, and invoked as a metaphor of the Nazi extermination of the Jews, probably because of conveying the thoroughness of destruction. The Gk term *λόκαυστος* was a literal translation of the Hebrew "wholly burned," a requirement that the offerings brought to the Temple must be destroyed by fire in their entirety. But the "burning whole" referred to by the ancient term was full of religious meaning: it was meant to express the completeness of the human surrender to God and the unconditionality of human piety. The objects of sacrifice were to be the faithful's most valuable, proud possessions: chosen young bullocks or male lambs, specimens without blemish, as perfect in every detail as was the human reverence to God and the dedication to divine command. Following this other track of metaphorical extension, "sacrifice" came to mean the "surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having a higher or more pressing claim."

If this is what the sacrifice is about, the Holocaust was anything but sacrifice. The victims of genocide are not people sacrificed in the name of a greater value. The object of genocide that follows the pattern introduced by the **Nazi Holocaust** is, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, *homo sacer* – "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed." The death of *homo sacer* is devoid of religious significance. What is annihilated is a "bare life," stripped of any value. "In the case of *homo sacer* a person is simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law." He is an object "of a double exception, both from the *ius humanum* [human right] and from the *ius divinum* [divine right]" (Agamben, 1998: 8).

We may say that before they were rounded up, deported to the death camps, shot or suffocated, the Jews of Germany and other countries of Nazi-occupied Europe (alongside Roma and Sinti) had been declared a "collective *homo sacer*" – the category whose life is devoid of all positive value and whose murder has no moral significance and commands no punishment. Theirs was *unwertes Leben* – life unworthy of living – like the lives of Gypsies, homosexuals, or those classified as mentally ill and retarded. What all those categories had in common was their unfitness for the *Neue Ordnung* – the social order purified of all undesirable admixtures, blemishes, and imperfections that the sovereign Nazi rulers of Germany set out to build. The vision of a perfect order supplied the criteria setting apart

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the “fit” from “unfit,” subjects whose life deserved to be preserved and enhanced from those who could render no conceivable service to the strength of the new order but instead impaired its harmony; while the sovereign power (a power exercised over humans reduced to “bare bodies”) enabled the builders of the new order to admit their subjects into or to exempt them from that order at will. Claiming the right to include or exclude from the realm of legal rights and ethical obligations was the essence of the modern state’s sovereignty – and the Holocaust (like the massive purges of “class aliens” in Stalinist Russia) was the most extreme and radical manifestation of that claim.

Mass murders accompanied human history throughout. But the peculiar variety of categorial mass murder called “the Holocaust” would be inconceivable outside the frame of modern society. A systematic murder, conducted over a long period of time, required an enormous amount of resources and frequent adjustment of procedure. It would be hardly possible without the typically modern inventions of industrial technology and bureaucracy, with its meticulous division of labor, strict hierarchy of command and discipline, neutralization of personal (also ethical) convictions, and the managerial ambition to subordinate social reality to a rationally designed model of order – innovations that happened to be as well the prime causes of the modern era’s spectacular successes. As John P. Sabini and Mary Silver observed:

Consider the numbers. The German state annihilated approximately six million Jews. At the rate of 100 per day [this was the number of victims of the infamous *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi-organized pogrom of German Jews] this would have required nearly 200 years. Mob violence rests on the wrong psychological basis, on violent emotion. People can be manipulated into fury, but fury cannot be maintained for 200 years. Emotions, and their biological basis, have a natural time course; lust, even blood lust, is eventually sated. Further, emotions are notoriously fickle, can be turned. A lynch mob is unreliable, it can sometimes be moved by sympathy – say by a child’s suffering. To eradicate a “race” it is essential to kill the children. (Sabini and Silver, 1980: 229–30)

To eradicate a “race,” in other words, it is necessary to suppress human emotions and other manifestations of human individuality, and submit human conduct to the uncontested rule of instrumental reason. Modernity made the Holocaust possible. It was totalitarian rule that implemented such a possibility.

It was hoped half a century ago that the gruesome knowledge of the Holocaust would shock humanity out of its ethical somnolence and make genocides impossible. This did not happen. The legacy of the Holocaust proved to be a temptation to try final solutions as much as the repulsion such solutions inspire. The problem of making society immune to genocidal temptation stays wide open.

### **Zygmunt Bauman**

See: *COLONIALISM, FUNDAMENTALISM, MEMORY.*