Understanding the Holocaust: Ernest Becker and the "Heroic Nazi"

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Understanding the Holocaust: Ernest Becker and the “Heroic Nazi”

A Thesis

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in
History

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the power and limitations of historical analysis in regards to explaining the Holocaust and in particular the widespread consent to the Nazi program. One of the primary limitations that emerges is an inability of historians to fully engage other social sciences to offer a more comprehensive explanation as to why so many Germans engaged in what we would consider an “evil” enterprise. In that regard, I offer the work of Ernest Becker, a social anthropologist, whose work provides a framework for understanding history as a succession of attempts by man to create societies that generate meaning through various heroic quests that defy man’s finite existence, yet often result in carnage. Combining Becker’s theoretical framework with the rich historical evidence specific to the Holocaust provides a much richer understanding of both Becker’s work and why the Holocaust happened.

Keywords: Ernest Becker, Holocaust, Otto Rank, Escape From Evil, Denial of Death, immortality project, explaining evil
Introduction

The Holocaust was a watershed in modernity. Highly educated Germany, one of the most “enlightened” and “civilized’ Western powers at the time, mobilized all the machinery at the disposal of a mid-twentieth century state, including many of its technocrats, bureaucrats, military, education, medical, transportation and even its artistic community, on its own heroic, racial mission, which included the quest to exterminate Jews everywhere in the world - and almost succeeded.¹ Perhaps not surprising is the number of scholars who explicitly or implicitly support the view that this mobilization was outside the normal flow of history, an anomaly, precipitated by an evil madman and his small group of henchmen. As Zygmunt Bauman described in the preface to his book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*:

Like most of my colleagues, I assumed that the Holocaust was, at best, something to be illuminated by us social scientists, but certainly not something that can illuminate the objects of our current concerns. I believed (by default rather than by deliberation) that the Holocaust was an interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity. Thus I could paint for the use of my students a picture of normal, healthy, sane society, leaving the story of the Holocaust to the professional pathologists.²

Bauman metaphorically describes the classical view of the Holocaust as a picture, neatly framed to set the painting apart from the wallpaper and the other furnishings, in essence holding it distinct from its surroundings. Bauman’s exploration of some of the reasons that there has been a tendency to cordon off the Holocaust from an analysis of contemporary society hints at some of the limitations inherent in traditional historical analysis. Yet he is also effusive in his appreciation

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¹ The question of whether the Third Reich was “modern” is not the primary issue here, though one that has stirred considerable debate. In *The Racial State, Germany 1933-1945*, Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann contend that to call the Third Reich “modern” is absurd, a relativistic construction that masks the truly unique racial nature of the Nazis. My point is simply that Nazi Germany emanated from one of the leading Western powers at the time and mobilized all facets of its society in its mission.

for the work of historians over the last twenty years. “The evidence amassed by the historians was overwhelming in volume and content. Their analyses were cogent and profound. They showed beyond reasonable doubt that the Holocaust was a window, rather than a picture on the wall...”

Bauman’s apparent ambivalence towards past scholarly approaches to the Holocaust is at the heart of this work. Even with such an incredible volume of work, there have been considerable limitations and factors which have impacted the historiography of the Holocaust. My approach is to examine one of many intriguing central questions regarding the Holocaust, why was there such widespread consent to the Nazi program, and comment on the power and limitations of historical analysis. This work posits that the historians have done a brilliant job documenting the nature and pervasiveness of consent, but are limited in explaining why. One of the primary limitations of historical analysis that emerges is an inability to engage other social sciences to offer a more comprehensive explanation of why so many Germans engaged in what we would consider an “evil” enterprise. In that regard, I offer the work of Ernest Becker, a social anthropologist, whose work some have described as offering a “science of evil”. Becker attempts to explain the phenomenon of evil, without invoking theological constructions, though his work is predominately theoretical and lacking in example. Becker offers a new interpretation of history as a non-teleological succession of attempts by man to create societies that generate meaning through various heroic quests that defy man’s finite existence. In pursuit of these heroic quests, which represent man’s yearning for power, meaning, or immortality, in this instance interchangeable goals, man creates societies that are willing to make any sacrifice that threaten

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their overall project, and as a result great carnage can result. The Nazis provided one such heroic quest in their vision for a racially pure *Volk*, and the thousand year Reich. Though he won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*, Becker’s work has been largely ignored by historians. The combination of Becker’s theoretical framework with the rich evidence recently produced by historians provides a much richer understanding of why the Holocaust happened.

This work is divided into four chapters. Chapter one attempts to explain how historians have limited their field of inquiry in their examination of the Holocaust which has constrained their ability to offer explanations as to why it happened. Chapter two outlines other basic limitations in Holocaust historiography. Chapter three briefly describes where the historians shine in documenting the degree of consent to the Nazi program. Chapter four is a brief examination of Ernest Becker’s work which following the other sections demonstrates by its quick summation how it might be powerfully used in conjunction with historical analysis to overcome some of the limitations described and offer a deeper explanation of why the Holocaust happened.
Chapter 1 : Historians’ Limited Perspective On Explaining “Why?”

Considering the question of German consent, an impartial jury examining the evidence unearthed by historians would be able to reach a verdict with a fair amount of confidence, a testament to the power of historical evidence. They could hear expert testimony from Raul Hilberg on the mobilization of a vast bureaucracy that involved a wide cross-section of Germans, Robert Proctor on how the medical profession, part of the intellectual elite, led the racial charge, Omer Bartov on how there was widespread support in the Wehrmacht for Hitler’s racial vision, and Christopher Browning on how typical Germans became killers under the Nazis without a great deal of direct coercion, among many other potential witnesses. There is not an unequivocal answer, of course, but reading many of the specialists and their evidence, one senses that there is at least a strong potential that many Germans were drawn to the Nazi message, not coerced, not even just passive. With that possibility the natural next question is why, and on this score, historians are relatively silent. Not totally silent, Hilberg certainly addressed the power of the bureaucracy, the banality of evil, with its compartments, distancing and inducements to repress; Bartov discussed the Fuhrer cult among the soldiers; and Browning attempted to explain normal men becoming killers referencing Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiments and the importance of situational factors, along with Milgram’s famous experiments on authority, and the allure of conformity amidst potentially deadly isolation. Yet these explanations are relegated to final chapters, afterwords, or commentary not fully developed. For quite some time after the war, the conventional wisdom was that the German people had a special disposition to authority that
compelled them to follow orders, hardly comprehensive (though that was the explanation my father, a WWII veteran provided when asked).⁴

This silence from historians is understandable, perhaps, as this question tackles broader issues of man’s motivations and in a post-Freudian world, many would claim that those motivations are often not clearly known even by the players. So how is a historian equipped to develop evidence regarding motivation; where are the archives that reveal men’s cultish attractions? Certainly, historians’ examinations of diaries is illuminating, and one of the primary sources for Omer Bartov’s influential work, Hitler’s Army was his analysis of soldiers’ diaries and letters to glean their views of the Reich, but there remains the problem of the soldiers’ degree of self-awareness.⁵ One of the most fascinating approaches is Claudia Koonz’ attempt to trace the historical development of a special Nazi conscience, a cross between nationalism and religious fundamentalistic devotion that the Nazis, and Hitler in particular, attempted to inculcate. Koonz begins her work with the assumption that many Germans were drawn to the Nazi program and then develops her evidence of how that transpired. After previewing her theory in the first introductory chapter, she began her book with the provocative, “Although it may strain credulity to conceive of Adolf Hitler as a prophet of virtue, therein lies the secret of his immense popularity.”⁶ Koonz is so interesting because she documented the circumstances and attraction of Nazism, much as one would chronicle the rise of a new religion.

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⁴ This theory was greedily accepted by a public searching for explanations that absolved themselves, according to Bauman. Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School’s publication of The Authoritarian Personality immediately after the war, which located the problem of the Holocaust with this special personality that was susceptible to authority was as shallow an interpretation as William Goldhagen’s explanation in his more recent best seller, Hitler’s Willing Executioners that the Germans had a special anti-semitism.

⁵ As an interesting side-note, two of the most prominent early Hitler biographers, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Alan Bulloch expressed their disdain for psychohistory, due to its lack of clear evidence, a related problem.

Koonz aside, many historians have answered the question posed earlier regarding motivations and passions with silence. No direct historical evidence, no archives, no comment. In regards to the Holocaust, that abdication has the repercussion of creating the paradox Bauman alluded to. Much of the popular historiography of the Holocaust presents the Holocaust as a tragic other-worldly event, outside the normal current of history, while historians continue to present some incredibly creative and detailed analyses on the mobilization of most segments of German society around the Nazi program.

One solution is for historians to embrace other disciplines and incorporate these into their work, or for other specialists to embrace some of the powerful analytical methods of historians. Robert Jay Lifton is a psychiatrist by background that wrote a penetrating study of medical killing under the Nazis, *The Nazi Doctors - Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. His book includes case studies of several Nazi doctors, including extensive interviews with many of them, and rich historical evidence of how these otherwise unremarkable doctors were socialized to an ideology of “therapeutic killing”. He chronicled the “problem” that confronted Nazi technocrats was that shooting men, women and children in the back of the neck tended to demoralize the Einsatzgruppen. Their “creative” solution, the death camp, distanced the executioner from the victim. Lifton interviewed a neuropsychiatrist who treated a large number of these “killer troops”, as the doctor described them, who developed symptoms, most notably related to shooting children, such as an severe anxiety, nightmares, tremors and various bodily complaints, which he described as similar to combat reactions of other troops though, “he estimated that 20 percent associated their symptoms mainly with the *unpleasantness* of what they
had to do...”\(^7\) The Nazis’ awareness of such psychological difficulties and their search for a more “surgical” method of killing is well known, according to Lifton, but he says, “But there is another perspective on medicalized killing that I believe to be insufficiently recognized: killing as a therapeutic imperative.”\(^8\) He quotes survivor/physician Dr. Ella Lingens-Reiner who pointed at the smokestack in Auschwitz and asked Nazi doctor Fritz Klein:

How can you reconcile that with your {Hippocratic} oath as a doctor?

His answer was, “Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind.”\(^9\)

Lifton goes on to quote Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, “Anyone who wants to cure this era, which is inwardly sick and rotten, must first of all summon up the courage to make clear the causes of the disease.”\(^10\) For Hitler the disease became the Jews, and of course, this was not just figurative language. As Hitler told Himmler in his famous *Table Talks*, published by Hughes Trevor-Roper:

The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus...We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew.\(^11\)

How the Nazis categorized the Jews as a cancer or a virus that should be eliminated has been extremely well documented. Within our own current frameworks, we think of this as figurative language, yet Lifton documents the literalness with which the Nazis equated Jews to disease.


\(^8\) Ibid., 15.

\(^9\) Ibid., 16.

\(^10\) Ibid., 17.

Lifton’s background, his familiarity and willingness to address the theories of why that imagery was realized, not just rhetorical, and its hold in the medical community, support a richer analysis of the Nazi state and how medicine was corrupted in the creation of what he terms, a “biocracy.” “The model here is a theocracy, a system of rule by priests of a sacred order under the claim of divine prerogative. In the case of the Nazi biocracy, the divine prerogative was that of cure through purification and revitalization of the Aryan race...”12 Language, like society, is a symbolic creation and Lifton shows the Nazi corruption of both. He also offered a compelling analysis of the motivations of genocide near the end of the book, after first examining the corruption of doctors and the Nazi vision, which he describes as, “a vision of absolute control over the evolutionary process, over the biological human future.”13

Lifton’s theories on Genocide, which included analyzing the appeal of Nazism for many Germans, are provocative and parallel in many ways to the work of Ernest Becker. The more general point is that Lifton accessed historical analysis, psychological theory, and sociology to powerful effect. One is also left with the distinct possibility, but certainly not proof, that a broader examination of the Holocaust, employing deeper penetration into the motivational appeal of the Third Reich, yields a more frighteningly familiar phenomenon. As Lifton concluded an interview with a successful Jewish dentist who had been forced to remove gold fillings from the teeth of gassed fellow Jews in Auschwitz, the dentist said looking around at the beautiful, lush gardens surrounding his veranda, “The world is not this world.” And Lifton remarks, “What I think he meant was that after Auschwitz, the ordinary rhythms and appearances

12 Lifton, The Nazi Doctors, 17.

13 Ibid.
of life, however innocuous or pleasant, were far from the truth of human existence.”14 Said another way, Bauman comments that, “like it or not, Auschwitz expands the universe of consciousness no less than landing on the moon.”15

14 Ibid., 3.

15 Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust, 11.
Chapter 2: Further Limitations to Holocaust Historiography

Holocaust historiography exposes the potential politicization of historical interpretation, if not through explicit state pressure, then at least through public pressure and the influence of scholars’ own self-image and views of man’s nature. Omer Bartov argued that in the aftermath of the war, “Germans saw themselves as victims of destruction, perpetuated on them both by Hitler and by his enemies.” Part of the challenge of dealing with genocide is the inability of the perpetrators to view themselves as evil. Bartov posited that the Germans immediately disassociated themselves with Hitler and the now dreaded Nazi – who ironically, became an elusive evil perpetrator, just as Nazis had portrayed the Jew. Now the Nazi was the “un-German” outsider. As the society rebuilt itself and West Germany allied with the West in the Cold War, this image enabled “Germany to forge a new identity both related to its past and cleansed of responsibility for its crimes.” This new identity impacted the writing of history after the war, downplaying the degree of consent prevalent in German society for the Nazi program. The popular image became that Hitler and his henchman were responsible for genocide and those that perpetrated atrocious acts were either following orders without full knowledge of their impact, under tremendous coercion from evil Nazis, or defending Germany in a time of war from the ravages of the Russians. Few were willing to address the possibility that an entire Western society was complicit in genocide. Hanna Arendt, a victim of the Holocaust, said in the 1950’s that an, “iron band of terror held Germany in its grip,” but as Claudia Koonz points out, “archival

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17 Bartov. Outcasts in War and Genocide, 300.
research of the 1990’s cast doubt on the omnipotence of terror and propaganda…Not mindless obedience but selective compliance characterized Germans’ collaboration with evil.”\(^{18}\)

Shortly after he published The Last Days of Hitler in 1947, Hugh Tevor-Roper received a death threat from the Stern Gang, a underground Zionist guerrilla group that succeeded in assassinating Mideast mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte. Ron Rosenbaum writes in Explaining Hitler, that The Last Days was one of the most famous and influential of the Hitler biographies, and it was certainly one of the first.\(^{19}\) The background of its publication, including the subsequent death threat, revealed the stakes and pressures of Holocaust scholarship. According to Rosenbaum, in September of 1945 Soviet officials, at the direct orders from Stalin, began to spread the lie that Hitler was still alive and being hidden in the British zone of occupation.\(^{20}\) Dick White, then Deputy Director of MI6, sent Hugh Trevor-Roper to meticulously document the final months, days and minutes of Hitler’s time in the bunker. Trevor-Roper interviewed all the officers that were there in the bunker, including those that soaked Hitler’s dead body in kerosene and set it on fire. It was also during this time that Trevor-Roper discovered Hitler’s famous final testament, in which Hitler extorts his followers to continue the war on “Jewish world poisoners”, before he killed himself.\(^{21}\) What is significant is that even in one of the first, influential biographies of Hitler, British intelligence exerted influence.

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\(^{18}\) Koonz, Nazi Conscience, 13.


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
The death threat illustrates the stakes of Holocaust explanations. Trevor-Roper has been criticized for his description of Hitler’s genius, his ability to almost mesmerize others. His overdone language included:

Hitler had the eyes of a hypnotist which seduced the wits and affections of all who yielded to their power...This personal magnetism remained with him to the end; and only by reference to it can we explain the extraordinary obedience which he still commanded in the last week of his life, when all the machinery of force and persuasion had disappeared... and only his personality remained.22

The Stern Gang objected to Trevor-Roper “immortalizing” Hitler. Rosenbaum points out how ironic it is that Trevor-Roper contributed to the Hitler myth, including the belief that Hitler, the evil hypnotic genius, was alive somewhere, when his purpose on behalf of British intelligence was exactly the opposite.23 Also evident from the start were indirect attempts to explain the allure of Nazism, which the Hitler myth also tapped.

Early after the war, much of the historiography was a battle over the various biographies of Hitler. Alan Bullock released *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny* in 1952 and immediately galvanized critics with his portrait of Hitler as “an opportunist who was solely concerned with acquiring power.”24 Trevor-Roper was convinced, as he stated in an interview with Rosenbaum, that “Hitler was convinced of his own rectitude.”25 This question of whether Hitler truly believed in his mission was furiously debated. While this is an interesting question, it is significant that in the early decades after the war so much debate and discussion centered on Hitler and his beliefs - to some extent avoiding the question of general consent, and of course, guilt. This debate also

22 Ibid., 66.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 69.
25 Ibid.
immediately enraged many who thought that the opportunist portrait of Hitler somehow lessened the significance of the extermination of the Jews as being the centerpiece of the Holocaust.26

Another limiting factor of Holocaust historiography is that for many it is seen as Jewish property. Bauman rightly points out that the Holocaust is a Jewish tragedy, but its victims were certainly not limited to Jews and some of its implications are lost when limited to this more narrow perception, certainly the discourse is restricted. He describes this “ownership” view as a widely held belief that the Holocaust was:

a tragedy that occurred to the Jews and the Jews alone...Time and again it had been narrated by Jews and non-Jews alike as a collective (and sole) property of the Jews, as something to be left to, or jealously guarded by, those who escaped shooting and the gassing, and by the descendents of the shot and the gassed...Some self-appointed spokesmen for the dead went as far as warning against thieves who collude to steal the Holocaust from the Jews, christianize it, or just dissolve its uniquely Jewish character in the misery of an indistinct humanity.27

It is important to draw distinctions to aid in understanding, but the intensity of the debate over the degree of the Holocaust’s “uniqueness” reflects the loaded emotional and political significance embedded in the topic and at some point is a distraction to its other implications. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg point this out when they state, “in a bizarre twist the very uniqueness of the Holocaust, on which most historians have insisted, and with which we agree, has militated against drawing the unlearned lessons of this event.”28 Yehuda Bauer founded the International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at Hebrew University, and is an esteemed

26 This naturally leads to the continuing fervor in the debate between the “internationalists” and the “functionalists”. There are quite a number of Holocaust scholars still pre-occupied in proving the exact minute Hitler, or the Nazi functionaries below him, reached their decision(s) on the Final Solution.

27 Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust, viii.

scholar who has written eight or nine books on the Holocaust, yet in his most recent re-appraisal of his own work, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Henry Friedlander points out, “Bauer’s central argument, covering the first five chapters, deals with the way the Holocaust should be defined. Bauer has always insisted on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and that it involved the murder of the Jews and of no one else.”29 Such a preoccupation with the boundaries of definition are at least suspicious of other interests than merely drawing distinctions in the quest for knowledge.

For many, the Holocaust has become a specialist topic of Jewish history, complete with an entire world of specialists. Bauman contends that these specialists have produced some impressive work, but it rarely finds its way into the mainstream and in some ways works to isolate the discussion. As with the criticism of the deepening specialization in history, the Holocaust specialists are seen to increasingly develop a dialogue among *themselves*.30 As he states in the preface to his book:

> And so we see that while the volume, depth and scholarly quality of specialist works in Holocaust history grow at an impressive pace, the amount of space and attention devoted to it in general accounts of modern history does not; if anything, it is easier now to be excused from a substantive analysis of the Holocaust by appending a respectably long list of scholarly references.31

Edward O. Wilson in his book *Consilience*, made a strong case for greater integration of the social sciences (and the physical sciences). The isolation and limitations to the general dialogue from increasing specialization, replete with separate experts, conferences and jargon are well known. David Cannadine warns in the preface to his collection, *What is History Now?:*

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31 Ibid, xi.
So much history is now being written that very few scholars can keep up with more than a tiny fraction of what is being published; all of us know more and more about less and less. The rise of so many sub-specialties threatens to produce a sort of sub-disciplinary chauvinism, where some practitioners insistently assert the primacy of their approach to the past and show little sympathy with, or knowledge of, other approaches.32

Some political factions of Israel have tried to use the Holocaust for the purposes of promoting certain state interests. In *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Idith Zertal devoted a chapter, “From the People’s Hall to the Wailing Wall,” which chronicled how Ben Gurion created a spectacle out of the Eichmann trial in order to mobilize memories of the Holocaust to further Israeli interests and demonize its Arab enemies. He also wanted to claim ownership of the Holocaust for Israel, when he commented on the trial that it, “is not so much the punishment of a particularly odious criminal, as the exposure of a sacred experience in the history of Israel.”33 With the publicity of the trial, Ben Gurion attempted to link certain Arab leaders to the Nazis and use the Holocaust to provide greater scope and legitimacy for any aggressive actions on its part. As Zertal summarized, Ben Guiron attempted to define that, “the dangers which Israel confronted and still confronts are Nazis in essence and scope, and any military threat or apparent threat to Israel means another Holocaust.”34

Explaining the Holocaust as a manifestation of some unique German personality, culture, path, or brand of anti-semitism, has been largely discredited by most of the respected scholars in the field, but Daniel Goldhagen’s book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, has been immensely popular and illustrative of the forces on Holocaust historiography. With great fanfare, supported


34 Ibid., 114.
by the marketing muscle of Knopf, Goldhagen claimed to have “solved” the problem of the Holocaust. He claimed the Germans possessed some special anti-Semitism that could be traced through German history throughout the nineteenth century. He claimed that by the time Hitler came to power, the racial anti-Semitism of Germany was already “pregnant with murder.”

Dismissing Hilberg and Arendt’s banality of evil (and hardly acknowledging much of the decades of scholarship preceding him) Goldhagen claimed that the German people wanted to kill the Jews; Hitler in this explanation, for example, was hardly necessary.

Rosenbaum discussed the “scholarly wilding” Goldhagen received from scholars immediately after publication when he and a panel addressed his book at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The proceedings began with a letter from Hilberg, who Rosenbaum described as normally mild mannered, who wrote, “I take exception to Goldhagen’s thesis, which is worthless, all the hype from Knopf notwithstanding.” Yehuda Bauer, who was spending a year as a fellow at the museum, followed and cited all the historical work that Goldhagen ignored, which showed that Germany was not the most anti-Semitic country. He dismissed Goldhagen’s book as the work of shoddy research of a below average graduate student and then berated Harvard and its history department for doing such a poor job of training its students!

There was certainly an element of resentment at Goldhagen’s instant bestsellerdom, but he was not helped by his arrogant claims to have solved the mystery of the Holocaust with a poorly supported, simplistic explanation and “in the packaging of unremarkable ideas into mainstream marketability as some dazzling, breakthrough reconception of the past.” Zygmut Bauman took great pains to examine and attack Goldhagen’s book because he believed this

35 Rosenbaum, Explaining Hitler, 339.

36 Ibid., 341.
manifesto tracing the Holocaust almost exclusively to an evil, demonic German people was distracting from the Holocaust’s wider implications. He believed that this type of argument is part of cordonning off the discourse since it relegated the Holocaust to having been a German problem. More interestingly, he analyzed why Goldhagen’s book has been so popular with such obvious flaws, which he attributed to the political interests of maintaining Jewish solidarity. He quotes Tom Segev of the Israeli daily Haaretz as being right on target when he wrote:

The Jewish establishment embraced Goldhagen as if he was Mr. Holocaust in person. This is absurd, since the critiques raised against Goldhagen are well founded... This is nevertheless understandable since what is at stake is the “Zionist character” of Goldhagen’s thesis. What truly matters in the end, “not just the Germans but all Gentiles hate the Jews.” Hence also the need of ever more numerous books on anti-Jewish hatred, and the more simplistic and superficial they are, the better.37

While there may be many other limitations and interests which have limited the historiography of the Holocaust, one last obvious limitation is the stereotyping so easily accomplished through Hollywood. As Bauman pointed out, most depictions of the Third Reich somewhat understandably depict all Nazis as revolting, degenerate, sadistic monsters marching “upright, dignified, and morally unscathed, doctors and their families (just like your Brooklyn neighbors) to the gas chambers... These images pleasantly resonate with public mythology,”38 and as a result a deeper understanding may be lost.

37 Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust, 243.

38 Ibid., ix.
Chapter 3: The Historians’ Strength - Documenting Consent to the Nazi Program

There is a compelling mass of evidence, much of it the result of relatively recent scholarship, attesting to the high degree of consent in support of the Nazi program. That does not imply that there were not pockets of resistance or that there was not significant terror imposed by the Nazi regime. The Nazis certainly exerted terror tactics, establishing an elaborate concentration camp system for the enemies of society that they specifically made public. But similar themes run throughout a number of influential works that paint a picture of Nazi Germany as a community recreated out of the defeat of WWI, the perceived disgrace of Versailles, the economic turmoil of the Depression and the anxiety of modernity, into a community of shared Nazi values. These books primarily address how this was achieved, all making the point to different degrees that Germany was not on a special path that led to Auschwitz, rather the Nazis transformed society in their glorious quest of a racially pure Volk, which much like Ahab’s mission, destroyed all it touched.

Claudia Koonz is unequivocal in her belief that most Germans were aware of what was happening. She quotes a Viennese journalist who wrote in 1947:

The methodicalness of the killing must certainly have become visible even to the totally blind...There is no doubt whatsoever that there was not a single person in Germany who did not know that the Jews were being harmed. In bomb shelters, Germans’ awareness of their culpability emerged in anxieties that bombardments were reprisals and in fears that invading Soviet troops would wreak savage vengeance. Knowledge about genocide was available to anyone who cared to find it.39

In The Nazi Conscience Claudia Koonz attempted to show the appeal of the new Nazi “morality”. She stressed the positive draw Nazism held for many Germans and argued against

the notion that Germans supported Hitler simply because of a sense of hopelessness resulting from massive unemployment, inflation, the loss of the war and fear of modernity and change, so well analyzed by Peukert in *The Weimar Republic*. While Koonz acknowledged that this backdrop certainly set the stage for Hitler, she argued that Nazism, as an ideology, provided “answers to life’s imponderables, provided meaning in the face of contingency…It also defined good and evil, condemning self-interest as immoral and enshrining altruism as virtue.”

More specifically, Koonz described how Nazism coupled aspects of religious fanaticism with the appeal of ethnic nationalism in a term she defines as “ethnic fundamentalism”. While she described this in detail, her concept is that Nazism had a religious basis in that it “claimed to defend an ancient spiritual heritage against the corrosive values of industrialized, urban society”

As Ian Kershaw demonstrated in his biography of Hitler, one of the basic themes running throughout all of Hitler’s speeches is his vision of an idyllic, rural pure German *Volk* – which modern society and World Jewry were attempting to destroy. In this racial conception, the very salvation of Germany was at stake – thus the very religious, Armageddon-like images he used, where immortality in terms of the future of all German people was in jeopardy. As Koonz described in her book, Hitler played the part of the evangelical preacher where one’s soul is at stake. Kershaw also detailed the emotional aspects of Hitler’s speeches and discussed how the staging of the mass rallies evoked religious settings, with Hitler at the alter. The emotional appeal was so strong because the stakes were set so high – one’s immortal future in heaven or hell, or in this case, the survival of German people. This brinksmanship was reminiscent of the justification of the burning of heretics, done to preserve the heretics’ immortal soul and protect

40 Ibid., 2.
41 Ibid., 13.
the community from eternal corruption. Against the stakes of immortality, what is the burning of one person? This is similar reasoning to the medical professions’ acceptance of “therapeutic killing”, contradicting all their medical training, that Lifton explored.

In describing these aspects of the appeal of Nazism, these historians unwittingly documented key aspects of Becker’s theory. Becker, as will be explored in Chapter 4, explained man’s innate longing for immortality, a symbolic need for meaning which was often manifest in “heroic” quests. Morality, according to Becker, is not innate, rather man creates culture, religion, art, civilization, in an attempt to give his life meaning, as an expression of power and then these death defying symbols become all important. In the chaos, confusion, disappointment and frustration of Weimar Germany, the Nazis provided the people a vision of a glorious future. For Becker, the Germans, or any people, will sacrifice or kill any perceived enemy to “save their soul,” another way of saying for their own vision of immortality.

In the new Nazi morality, Koonz described how virtue became redefined as the strength to destroy ones enemies even when they were disguised as the innocent. Individual rights paled against the salvation of the Volk, the individual’s highest function was to further this racial vision. Accordingly, in this new morality, all outsiders were isolated and destroyed. Civil society was stripped away and reduced to this singular cause.

The ethnic portion of Koonz’ definition “summons followers to seek vengeance for past wrongs and to forge a glorious future cleansed of ethnic aliens.”

Nationalistic appeals have a similar, powerful appeal as the religious, yet the term is really as elusive as the concept of race.

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42 Eric Voegelin similarly attempted to describe the crisis of modernity in the fifth volume of his series, History and Order, how when man creates his own path to salvation, in substitution for God’s transcendental purpose and the humbleness that implies, he will kill the entire world to save his soul.

43 Ibid.
In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defined nations as imagined political communities, imagined because a member of the community can hardly know the rest of the community, but there is a sense of shared history, culture, language and memory. And the community is limited, which implies a difference of us versus them. The Nazi’s certainly created a vision of a common, imagined community, with imagined enemies threatening their destruction, but their imagined ethnic community was defined by race. Anderson’s chapter, *Patriotism and Racism* was an examination of the subtleties of nationalism versus racism and an attempt to answer a question posed at the beginning of his work, “Why people are willing to die for these inventions?” For Anderson, nationalism implied a historical destiny, while racism “dreams of eternal contamination, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history.” Brain Porter echoes this sentiment in *When Nationalism Began to Hate*. He states, “the locating and relocating of the nation within time, and eventually (fatally) outside of time, made it possible for nationalism to begin to hate.” Koonz contends that Nazism appealed to both nationalistic and religious conceptions of a shared community, created outside the normal historical progression, appealing to powerful, emotional ideologies of identity and immortality. Becker’s work addressed the dynamics of these creations of identity and meaning in great detail, which is why it is applicable to understanding the Holocaust.

Ian Kershaw chronicled Hitler’s rise to power, and though not his primary intention, documented his widespread support as he addressed Hitler’s appeal and the creation of the

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45 Ibid., 149.

“Fuhrer Cult.” He explained that conceptions of “heroic” leadership were part of the culture of the right, which disdained the Social Democrats, parliamentary government, and Weimar’s perceived effeminate ineffectiveness, still associated with German impotency and humiliation. Resonating with Protestant middle class and romantic intellectuals, and harkening back to grandiose images of Imperial grandeur, the idea of a heroic leader who would lead Germany out of its morass became vested in Hitler. As Kershaw points out:


48 Ibid., 181.

49 Ibid.


the devastating war and the subsequent “idealization of the “community of fate” in the trenches and the “great deeds” and heroism of “true leadership” in the struggle for national survival – undermined, according to the legend, from within – provided a mass of new potential adherents to the coming of a “great leader” and the Nazi vision.48

Within the Protestant Church, there were many, according to Kershaw, that were looking for a great Leader to bring about “spiritual and moral revival,” someone to re-invoke “true Christian values.” Likewise, Bartov traced the almost fanatical, semi-religious belief in Hitler that was a prominent part of Nazi propaganda aimed at the soldiers combined with a demonization of the Eastern hordes. As he states, “the Fuhrer was thus presented as the creator of the new German nation and guardian of its ancient traditions, its source of power and prosperity, of fertility and purity.”

Hitler and the Nazi’s exploited this yearning, often contrasting the leaderless democracy of Weimar with the concept of the true heroic leader, a man born to destiny, not bound by conventional rules and laws, “embodying the will of God” who would lead the Volk to salvation.
“Devotion, loyalty, obedience and duty were the corresponding values demanded from followers”51 – which was part of Hitler’s call for glory and sacrifice. Becker in his work *Escape from Evil* quotes Hegel, “Men create evil out of good intentions, not out of wicked ones.”52 Koonz likewise states in her work, “The road to Auschwitz was paved with righteousness.”53

In *Racial Hygiene*, Robert Proctor examined how the medical community actively served the needs of the Nazis by legitimizing their racial science. As Michael Foucault examined, all ideologies are about power relationships. He contended that the structure of society is really about serving those in power. Though many consider science objective and value-free, Proctor showed in this thorough examination of how many in the medical community mobilized around Nazi theories of race and eugenics, and served the regime. They not only followed Hitler, according to Proctor, they led the way. “Physicians, and the body of intellectuals associated with them, did not follow blindly, but actually helped cast the light to clear the path.”54

Robert Gellately in *Backing Hitler, Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* made clear that the Nazis did not need to use coercion, they cultivated public opinion and the new society enforced the ideology. The regime conducted public executions, with no protest, people were well informed of the extensive camp system and supported such law and order tactics. As he stated in his conclusion:

The Nazis did not need to use widespread terror against the population to establish the regime…Many Germans went along, not because they were mindless robots, but because

51 Kershaw, *Hitler*, 182.


they convinced themselves of Hitler’s advantages and the “positive” sides of the new dictatorship.\textsuperscript{55}

His methodology included an extensive analysis of media reports in regards to the rapid expansion of concentration camps showing the degree of public knowledge. He searched existing police records to determine the extent to which the Gestapo originated arrests with the statistical conclusion that the Gestapo was spread exceedingly thin and that \textit{citizens} were responsible for initiating the majority of police actions and persecutions. He also examined how political opposition became synonymous with criminal acts, and public support for persecuting both, through analysis of the court system, media reports, and very public news releases regarding concentration camps.

Raul Hilberg, in his three volume masterpiece, \textit{The Destruction of the European Jews}, exposed the vast bureaucracy mobilized in the destruction of the Jews, as well as the wide cross section of Germans employed. As he states:

\begin{quote}
The bureaucrats who were drawn into the destruction process were not different in their moral makeup from the rest of the population. The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German. What we have to say about his morality applies not to him specially but to Germany as a whole. How do we know this?

We know that the very nature of administrative planning, of the jurisdictional structure, and the budgetary system precluded the special selection and special training of personnel. Any member of the Order Police could be a guard at a ghetto or on a train. Every lawyer in the Reich Security Main Office was presumed to be suitable for leadership in the mobile killing units, every finance expert to the Economic Administrative Main Office was considered a natural choice for service in a death camp. In other words, all necessary operations were accomplished with whatever personnel were at hand. However one may wish to draw the line of active participation, the machinery of destruction was a remarkable cross section of
\end{quote}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{55} Robert Gellately, \textit{Backing Hitler, Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany} (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001), 257.}
the German population. Every profession, every skill, and every social status was represented in it.\(^{56}\)

Hilberg’s meticulous work is one of many primary sources for the awareness that so many “ordinary” Germans participated in the Final Solution. Though this is still debated, much of the recent historical scholarship has strongly illuminated this point with its rich detail on the actual mechanics of the Nazi bureaucracy and various other segments of society at the time. As he stated and attempted to show, “every segment of organized German society was drawn into the destructive work.”\(^{57}\) Furthermore, Hilberg made the terrifying contention that these ordinary Germans were not essentially different from any of us, a point Hanna Arendt stressed in her work on Eichmann, the common bureaucrat. Lifton described his own internal struggle throughout his intensive study of Nazi doctors as he realized, “the disturbing psychological truth that participation in mass murder need not require emotions as extreme or demonic as would seem appropriate for such a malignant project. Or to put the matter another way, ordinary people can commit demonic acts.”\(^{58}\) Becker explains this chilling insight further in great detail.

In *Ordinary Men*, Christopher Browning documented the activities of a specific police order battalion in Poland. As Browning pointed out, these were not men specially trained or chosen, rather a cross section of predominately lower, middle class police officers who executed mass murder of civilians. The men were given an opportunity to opt out of the killings if they were not “strong” enough to proceed, but very few took that option, despite the difficulty some initially had in shooting men, women and children hundreds at a time. In one testimony, a man


\(^{57}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{58}\) Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 5.
justified how he would shoot small children because his comrade had just shot the child’s mother and he didn’t want the child to live as an orphan. In no cases were there serious repercussions for any of the men that opted out. Interestingly, even in testimony years after the war, no one stated they opted out due to moral outrage, rather they viewed themselves as too weak or squeamish to participate. In many cases, while the men were disturbed by their “duty” in the beginning, they acclimated over time.

As Browning acknowledged, the men were killing Jews who, “stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility.”\(^{59}\) They adapted to this new morality with amazing ease, able to shoot children in the back the head. At no time did any of these men see actual combat, so it is hard to say they were brutalized from vicious fighting, they were never fired upon. Becker explains how societies mobilize around their vision and mission, a vision that gives meaning to its members. Morality is formed around this mission, according to Becker, it is not an innate quality.

Much recent scholarship has detailed the process of how Jews were isolated, legally, socially and then physically. Bauman referred to how the Nazis created a hatred for the abstract Jew; according to him, the Nazis had to overcome the specific feelings of community that existed for a great number of Jews generally well integrated into German society (contrary to Goldhagen). He states:

Nazi legislation, propaganda and management of social settings took care to separate the one and only “abstract Jew” from the many “concrete Jews” known to the Germans as neighbors or workmates; and to cast all “concrete Jews” through exclusion, deportation, and confinement, into the position of abstract ones.\(^{60}\)


Himmler expressed the same concept in more chilling terms when he complained to his men how even his most ardent Nazis had a few “decent” Jews they wanted to protect. He said:

The Jewish people is to be exterminated, says every party member. That’s clear, it’s part of the programme, elimination of the Jews, extermination, right, we’ll do it. And then they all come along, the eighty million good Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course the others are swine, but this one is a first-class Jew. 61

In *Hitler’s Army*, Omer Bartov striped away the common misconception that the German Wehrmacht was independent from the racial mass killings of the Nazis. In this book he showed how the army and the Einsatzgruppen were intertwined. The German tradition of organizing the army into primary units comprised of men from the same districts in Germany so they shared a local history and served together over time and built strong bonds was commonly held to be the reason the German army held together so well, even in the face of disaster late in the war, often fighting to the last man. Bartov documented how the war in the East quickly obliterated these primary units and what held the men together was their belief in the Nazi mission.

Bartov argued that the Nazis cast the war in the East in terms of an ideological, demonic struggle, a literal life and death fight to the end, where the future of civilization was at stake. Bartov also discussed that one of the things that held the army together was belief in the Nazis’ pseudo-religious mission on behalf of civilization that demanded extreme sacrifice. Both of these contentions, which Bartov supported with historical evidence, fit Becker’s framework of the significance of the heroic for man. Many letters from soldiers describe their sacrifice in terms of a heroic struggle for purity and goodness, often in nihilistic terms:

61 Ibid., 187.
I see the whole nation in the process of being recast, in a storm of suffering and blood, that will enable us to reach new heights.\textsuperscript{62}

Or another typical example:

We are trying to change the world, hoping to revive ancient virtues buried under layers of filth…this operation must be brutal, and if it fails, those of us still alive will be judged without mercy…\textsuperscript{63}

One of Bartov’s themes was that the army was not somehow removed from the Nazi agenda, as others have argued. All of the historians discussed in this chapter illustrate how the Nazis mobilized the major sectors of society around their grand project. Becker’s point is that is exactly why man creates society - to create a system of meaning through an heroic quest that defies man’s terror at his insignificance. As Becker elaborated in his work, cultural creations become so important because they represent life’s meaning to man. The Nazi’s raised their project to literally a life and death struggle, worthy of any sacrifice.

While this is certainly not an exhaustive review of recent scholarship, it highlights many important works that demonstrate with convincing evidence the degree of mobilization for the Nazi project across a cross-section of German society, including the medical profession, the army, and the vast governmental bureaucracy. These works are extremely well done, and their historical methods are impressive. Nevertheless, the overall understanding of the Holocaust could be enhanced by using this evidence in conjunction with work from other fields that might illuminate some why the Holocaust happened, not just how it happened. Ernest Becker’s work, described below, is one example of work that could be powerfully coupled with the historical analysis already completed.

\textsuperscript{62} Bartov, \textit{Hitler's Army}, 117.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
Chapter 4: Ernest Becker and the “Heroic Nazi”

Ernest Becker was born in 1924 in Massachusetts. Both of his parents were Jewish immigrants. He served in the army during WWII and helped to liberate a Nazi concentration camp, though he did not address any of his personal history in his books. After his military service he attended Syracuse where he completed his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology in 1960. He spent most of his academic career at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. He generally avoided specializing in any one social science and wrote about man’s condition in the world as a conscious being that is aware of its finite existence and yet able to creatively construct meaning through the creation of culture, art, and religion, just to name a few examples, to combat his conscious and subconscious terror of death, drawing particularly on Kierkegaard, Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Norman Brown, Erich Fromm and particularly Otto Rank, who was a close associate of Freud. Partly due to his lack of a specific academic discipline he was largely ignored by academics for many years after his untimely death at fifty in 1974, though he is increasingly being recognized in Genocide studies and by a school of thought labeled Terror Management Theory, which follows his ideas about the impact of man’s inability to cope with the terror of death. He provocatively addressed evil as the carnage man is willing to inflict resulting from the need to justify his existence and give his life meaning by dedication to some seemingly heroic ideology. It is our “heroic” conceptions, according to Becker, that often result in so much pain and suffering.

“Heroic” naturally implies a positive connotation for most, though Becker contends in *Escape from Evil* that man’s greatest evil arises from his need for heroic meaning when faced by a limited, finite existence. To accomplish his “heroic missions” man will sacrifice anything.
Becker, building on the work of psychologist, Otto Rank, said man cannot deal with his own insignificance, he is only too aware of his inevitable death, so he obsesses with demonstrations of power that symbolize immortality. Applying Rank and Becker’s work to understanding historical change, Robert Jay Lifton, (also the author of Nazi Doctors, discussed earlier), in Revolutionary Immortality, Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution offered a framework for understanding the potency, violence and appeal of the Chinese reordering of society in the context of mass psychology. Lifton proposed the concept of symbolic immortality in explaining the Chinese revolution that is applicable to understanding the widespread consent of Germans for the Nazi program. Lifton described symbolic immortality as “man’s need, in the face of inevitable biological death, to maintain an inner sense of continuity with what has gone on before and what will go on after his own individual existence.”

Lifton’s work detailed the compelling attraction to group identity for many in society. He described how people express their need for immortality, which is a need for meaning, through a number of modes including, biologically, living on through their family, theologically, living on after death, creatively, through their works, or through an identification with nature, “with its infinite extension into time and space.” In the Nazi Doctors, Lifton posited that the Nazi’s ideology, a utopian vision of a pure, eternal German Volk, tapped this core need for meaning and historical continuity.

As Becker described in his work, man uses his imaginative powers to create symbols of purity that confer power, just as he creates enemies that represent decay and death whose destruction affirms the immortality of the group. Koonz’ work on the creation of a Nazi mortality

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65 Ibid.
and Bartov’s chronicle of the “mantle of evil” created in the Eastern campaign around the Bolshevist/Jew each jive with Becker’s theory, and their examples make it more powerful.

In *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab is consumed by his “heroic” mission to destroy the white whale that he imagines represents all evil. A moral of the novel is the fantasies of good and evil man is capable of creating, and the destruction Ahab brings down upon all involved in his “heroic” quest. In a chapter entitled, “What is the Heroic Society?” Becker described the allure of the hero and the need for groups to create identity and meaning amidst a threatening world where death is certain. He says, the hero:

kills those who threaten his group, he incorporates their powers to further protect his group, he sacrifices others to gain immunity for his group. In a word, he becomes a savior through blood. From the head-hunting and charm-hunting of the primitives to the holocausts of Hitler, the dynamic is the same: the heroic victory over evil by a traffic in pure power. And the aim is the same: purity, goodness, righteousness – immunity. 66

Though she is unfamiliar with his work, this is the same theme that Claudia Koonz stressed in *The Nazi Conscience*. Becker devoted an entire book to this dynamic, which could have enhanced the specific historical detail Koonz uncovered.

Anti-Semitism remains such a powerful topic because its most heinous exemplification, the Holocaust, occurred in the modern world. For many, the Holocaust represents the depth of evil possible in man. In terms of cultural history, the Holocaust is the disappointment of the Enlightenment, the final collapse of any remaining confidence in Western progress, and certainly the backdrop for a postmodern age of anxiety and nihilism, later confirmed by the failure of communism around the world. As one historically reviews the dead resulting from the secular ideologies of the twentieth century, either in Hitler’s concentration camps or Stalin’s gulags, both

the products of Western scientific thought, one almost yearns for the religious certainty of the
Inquisition and the Dark Ages of superstition – though the record of killing by religious societies
is just as bleak. For Becker, history is merely a succession of man creating different societies,
different cultural symbols of meaning to deal with his fundamental knowledge and fear of his
own insignificance. Or in other words, Becker saw history as a succession of ideologies that give
man some purchase over death, a sense of immortality, not some teleological progression which
many want to see:

History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death. Or,
more momentously, all cultural forms are in essence sacred because they seek the
perpetuation and redemption of the individual life...Culture means that which is
supernatural; all culture has the basic mandate to transcend the physical, to permanently
transcend it. All human ideologies, then, are affairs that deal directly with the sacredness of
the individual or the group life, whether it seems that way or not, whether they admit it or
not.67

Escape from Evil, Becker’s last work before his death, was his examination of the root
causes of evil. As if that is not ambitious enough, all of Becker’s work was an attempt to develop
a systematic approach to understanding man’s condition in the world. Many of the themes and
explanations that Becker develops in Escape from Evil could use examples from the work done
by historians on the Holocaust as examples. Prominent in his analysis were discussions of
scapegoating, society’s need for sacrifice, the nature of social evil, and the psychology of crowd
behavior.

Becker describes man in Escape from Evil as an animal, similar to all living organisms,
that feeds off of other life. As he says, “Darwin so shocked his time-and still bothers ours-
because he showed this bone-crushing, blood-drinking drama in all its elementality and

67 Ibid., 64.
necessity…”68 In similar brutal fashion he described the living spectacle that would appear if the lifetime consumption of a typical person were presented - flocks of chickens, a herd of cattle, etc. As he said, “each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.”69 At the level of any organism, there exists an almost frantic urge to survive. “We are amazed, as we try to club a cornered rat, how frantically he wants to live.”70 The difference with man, however, is that he is conscious of the process, he knows what will inevitably happen. He is conscious that he will die, that in the end, he is food for worms.

This is the paradox of the human condition, according to Becker. As an animal, man is driven by the same craving to consume, to continue to survive, yet he is conscious that he will die. “Wanting nothing less than eternal prosperity, man from the very beginning could not live with the prospect of death.”71 As a result, man creates cultural symbols which do not age or decay to quiet his fear of his ultimate death; moreover they provide enduring meaning. Man creatively erects some immortal purpose that can comfort him, such as God’s purpose for his life, duty to family, something to enrich mankind.

Tolstoy lamented in *Confession*, “What will become of my whole life…Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”72 Man, according to Becker, does not fear extinction, so much as he fears insignificance (or extinction with insignificance – obliteration). This motive, he believed, is the drive behind religion, one of mankind’s most culturally unique features. In Becker’s final analysis, all culture is a defense

68 Ibid., 2.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 148.
72 Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, 22.
against man’s dread of insignificance. All of culture is supernatural, to the extent it is created by
the mind, and has the same goal, “to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways
their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count.”

This creative fantasy of culture is not harmless, however. After setting this background in
much more elaborate terms, Becker posited that this creation of culture raises the stakes of these
symbols. Since they represent man’s attempt to overcome his greatest fear, man tenaciously
defends them. As he states:

Since men must now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society
in which they live, onto the immortality symbols which guarantee them indefinite duration of
some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. And this anxiety is precisely what
spills over into the affairs of men. In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more
evil into the world than organisms could ever do merely by exercising their digestive tracts.

The rest of Becker’s book was a discussion on how this is played out in society, which is
germane to considering the widespread consent to the Nazi program which the previously
mentioned scholars have documented in their work, but not fully explained.

Almost a third of Evil was devoted to analyzing scapegoating and sacrifice, both of which
Becker traces back to rituals in primitive societies. Drawing on work of Lewis Mumford, Becker
showed how the predominant form of scapegoating is magical in origin. In the ritual sacrifice of
a goat in some cultures, the tribe transfers its uncleanness to the animal which is sacrificed,
leaving the village clean. While much has been written in sociology journals about the
scapegoating of the Jews, clearly evident in the Nazi quest for purity, this has not been fully
integrated with the works of historical analysis.

73 Becker, The Denial of Death, 4.
74 Ibid., 5.
Guilt is another complex topic of *Evil* that ran through his work. Becker believed that guilt arises out of man’s knowledge that he is basically an animal that will die, yet he aspires to be like God. In primitive societies, man watched nature claim other lives as well as provide crops and food for his survival. Man has to give back to the Gods in return for these gifts and for the fact that he is still healthy while others are consumed as prey. As man succeeds it is a sign that he is blessed, even if it is at the expense of others. Even in modern society, Becker believed there is this dynamic of competition and the creation of envy because any time one is out-shined there is diminishment, which reflects on the individual’s project of immortality, and these symbols are psychically imbued with tremendous importance. “Every conflict over *truth* is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over...immortality. If anyone doubts this, let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes.”75 This was evident in the way the Nazis literally framed their project into a life or death struggle.

Detlev Peukert in *The Weimar Republic* captures the undercurrent of resistance to modernity by elites whose traditional power structures were being overturned. Any power structure has almost religious significance for Becker, who traces the rise of kingship communities to the modern nation-state. The basis of kingship and the basis of the nation-state for Becker is the identification of the people with some transcending belief in immortality (a heroic mission, for example that gives their mortal lives meaning) that the leader, or culture, represents. As Becker states, “the nation represents victory and immortality or it has no mandate to exist.”76 Almost all the historians reviewed touch on the rhetoric of the Nazi vision for a racially pure society, the “thousand year Reich”, the demonization of Jews and Bolsheviks as

75 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, 64.
76 Ibid., 117.
enemies, examples that would fit Becker’s theory and would be interesting to explore within that framework. Kershaw and Bartov both documented the “Fuhrer Cult” and their explanations would have benefited from an examination of Becker’s theory of man’s need for the heroic.

Society, according to Becker, uses sacrifice and heroic endeavors, such as war, to counter internal discord, to unite the community and to relieve the society’s guilt. Robert Gellately, (and several of the other historians discussed), detailed the positioning of the Jew as an outsider. The attacks on the Jews made justice a matter of triumph over an external enemy, much the same as war attempts to do. Quoting Mumford, Becker observed the “joyful release that so often has accompanied the outbreak of war…popular hatred for the ruling classes was cleverly diverted into the happy occasion to mutilate and kill foreign enemies.”77 In Crowds and Power, Elias Canetti described how at the outbreak of World War One, Hitler fell on his knees and thanked God. “It was his one decisive experience, the one moment at which he himself honestly became part of the crowd.”78 One cannot help but notice the religious overtones of the Nuremberg rallies with Hitler at the alter, working the crowd as high priest and ruler. This is exactly to Becker’s thesis that these cultural creations are by their very nature sacred.

Primitive man, according to Becker, would subjugate themselves to kings, who represented prosperity and immortality because of their success in battle; modern men readily gives themselves to the nation-state which, manipulated by politicians, embodies some heroic mission. In William Reich’s book, The Mass Psychology of Fascism, he termed these politicians “political plague-mongers.” “They are the ones who lied to the people about the real and the

77 Ibid., 98.
possible and launched mankind on impossible dreams which took impossible tolls of real life.”

As Becker stated, “rapists do not do the damage that idealistic leaders do.”

Having an enemy one can overcome demonstrates the heroic mission and is a natural manifestation of many societies, according to Becker. The theory of the German superman (the misreading of Nietzsche) had for Becker its basis in the desire for this heroic quest and to disassociate man from his animal (mortal) nature. The German was positioned as pure, eligible for the heroic life, while the Jews were animals infecting them- a plague. Not surprisingly, the Jews were represented as a virus infecting the youth. In some of the infamous pages of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler talked about Jews in alleys who wait for German virgins who they can infect with syphilis.

Freud believed that when it came to strangers and enemies, the ego had no problem with the killing of others. “Modern man lives in illusion”, said Freud, “because he denies or suppresses his wish for the other’s death and for his own immortality”. When others are sacrificed, or die, the specialness of the living is validated, according to Becker. He quotes Aristotle as saying, “Luck is when the the arrow hits the other guy.” War becomes a sacred struggle whereby the Gods show who is blessed. Many of the historians reviewed, Bauman, Koonz, Hilberg all express almost surprise (understandably) at the ease with which “regular” men do demonic acts.

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80 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, 156.
81 Ibid., 109.
82 Becker, *Denial of Death*, 56.
On a cultural level, the Jews of Germany, were in some ways different from the general public. They had different practices, they sometimes dressed differently, and historically they had been separate. In the chaotic, threatening world of Weimar, however, many were thriving. As Peukart describes:

The establishment of the Weimar Republic completed the process of Jewish emancipation in Germany. The formal and informal barriers which had effectively excluded Jews from higher positions in the public service and academic world under the monarchy were removed. The Jews now assumed an important part in post-war life, in the liberal parties and parties of the left, in universities, and the mass media, and in branches of business, especially commerce.\^83

In one of his most interesting chapters, \textit{The Nature of Social Evil}, Becker discussed how cultural symbols are sacred, they are created out of the fears and needs of man, thus differences can convey deeper challenges than might be superficially apparent. He quotes Alan Harrangton, from his book \textit{The Immortalist}:

\begin{quote}
Cruelty can arise from the aesthetic outrage we sometimes feel in the presence of strange individuals who seem to be making out all right…Have they found some secret passage to eternal life? It can’t be. If those weird individuals with beards and funny hats are acceptable, then what about my claims to superiority? Can someone like that be my equal in God’s eyes? Does he, that one, dare hope to live forever too-and perhaps crowd me out? I don’t like it. All I know is, if he is right I’m wrong. I think he’s trying to fool the gods with his sly ways. Let’s show him up. He’s not very strong. For a start, see what he’ll do when I poke him. \^84
\end{quote}

Nietzsche observed, that “whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to revenge himself therefore; we others will be his victims…”\^85


\^84 Becker, \textit{The Denial of Death}, 113.

\^85 Ibid., 115.
Browning explained heinous acts by groups of ordinary people as the need for conformity. Arendt and Hilberg reference the depersonalization of modern life. Becker has a much more elaborate explanation that takes as its starting point the work of Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. The simplistic summary of Becker’s thesis in this regard it that to individuals all power is sacred; it symbolically represents immortality and some victory over insignificance. There is then the heightened sense of power from numbers, the thrill of the spectacle that is proof that nature favors such a cause. He also weaves into his crowd theory the idea that man views other faces as divine, they are uniquely human, they show the miracle of creation and confirm his own heroic destiny. As he states:

This miracle has deep in its eyes and in its head the same beliefs as you, gives you the feeling that your very beliefs are supported by natural creation. Little wonder that the sight and feel of thousands of such miracles moving together with you gives such absolute righteous conviction.86

This is further supported by Becker’s theory that all men are insecure about their animal nature (death) and are searching for transcending symbols, a heroic quest (which often leads to real evil, in Becker’s analysis).

In the final analysis what is so provoking about Becker is his examination of how men build meaning through their cultural creations and the “evil” men will perpetrate in defense of these immortality symbols. The historians surveyed have chronicled the Nazi “evil” that was pervasive in a so called modern enlightened society, without exploring the dynamics. (Evil is in quotes because at the time, many viewed the Nazi program as virtuous). As Becker states, men usually kill under a banner of some kind of fight against evil, yet most analysts are then tempted

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86 Ibid., 138.
to blame the banner, instead of realizing that, “banners don’t wrap themselves around men; men invent the banners.” Germany embraced fascism, and most scholars now believe, and to a fair extent have demonstrated, that the great cross section of Germans who embraced the Nazi program were not somehow radically different from most others.

A limitation of Becker is that most of his work was stated as theory, without much actual evidence. The pairing of Becker’s theory, some of which I have tried to summarize to give some sense of its scope, with the rich historical analysis of the Third Reich could be meaningful for both understanding the Holocaust and illuminating Becker’s work. An active debate continues about whether the Holocaust was a function of modernity, as Bauman, Millman, and Hilberg to some extent believe, or was it fundamentally reactionary, a rejection of progressive modern society and a throwback to man’s barbaric ways before civilization. Becker’s explanation of how man creates society points to a different understanding of civilization. As Becker states:

If history is a succession of immortality ideologies, then the problems of men can be read directly against those ideologies--how embracing they are, how convincing, how easy they make it for man to be confident and secure in their personal heroism.87

Becker, therefore, offers a third option, one reflected in the growing number of scholars who are studying the history of genocide, documenting how the phenomenon has occurred throughout history.88 They argue the Holocaust may be unique in its characteristics but is certainly not a unique phenomenon. Becker likewise believed the Holocaust is not a function of modernity but rather reflects the basic condition of man, a limited animal that cannot accept his own mortality.

87 Becker, The Denial of Death, 190.

88 Mark Levene and other scholars put the number of twentieth century deaths by genocide at 187 million.
so is willing to sacrifice the universe, if need be, in the creation of heroic quests that provide him some meaning in a finite existence. The Nazis provided one such “heroic quest”.

Today the public likes to believe that the Holocaust was a function of Hitler, one demonic man, or perhaps a function of a core group of evil henchman, outside the normal scope of history, without realizing, as Becker would point out, chillingly, that it represents an expression of man’s condition. As Becker states, “evolution has created a limited animal with unlimited horizons.”

Mark Levene has argued that in the twentieth century alone, “187 million is the figure, the now more or less accepted wisdom for the number of human beings killed as a result of political violence.” Perhaps the Holocaust is not as unique as we would like it to be.

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Bibliography


Vita

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