

CHAPTER 23

The Holocaust

In the ancient Near East it was common for the leader of a community, who was often a priest, to make a confession of the sins of the whole community. While doing this he would hold his hands over a live animal, normally a goat. It was believed that the sins that were confessed were passed to the goat. The goat symbolically took on the sins and the guilt for the sins. The goat was then killed, and the sins and guilt were considered destroyed with it.

More recently the term “scapegoat” has come to mean a person or group of people who are singled out to blame when things are going badly. Often this person or group is different from everyone else in some way. In July 64 AD, when a rumor arose that Emperor Nero had started the fire that destroyed much of Rome, the worried Nero tried to shift the blame onto a religious sect called the Christians, thus initiating a period of bloody persecution and martyrdom. He singled out the Christians because they were new and many strange rumors about their lifestyle were circulating. For example, Christians met secretly for a communal meal, called *agape* or “love feast.” While their practice was based on brotherly love, rumors began to emerge that they were practicing sexual orgies in dark and secret places. Another story distorted the Christian tradition of consuming bread and wine, which symbolized Christ’s body and blood, as a practice of cannibalism – the consuming of real flesh and blood.

Throughout history similar events have recurred with different groups. In this chapter we examine in more detail what has come to be called the Holocaust, the most horrific example of the attempt to make a whole people a scapegoat and to blame them for the troubles of a nation.

Adolf Hitler, the leader of Germany from 1933 to 1945, made the Jews scapegoats to be blamed for Germany’s economic collapse following the nation’s defeat in the First World War.

During the 1930s the German government had printed extra money to pay its debts. This led to such terrible inflation that a wheelbarrow full of money was needed to buy a loaf of bread. People’s savings were depleted and many prominent families were reduced to poverty. Hitler convinced those who were willing to be convinced, that the economic crisis was the fault of the Jews, who had formed a conspiracy to ruin and control the country. If the Jews could be eradicated (as many thought they deserved to be), everything that was preventing national success would be eliminated.

The word “holocaust” originally meant “whole burnt offering” but has come to refer to the mass murder and near destruction of the Jews in Europe by Hitler’s Nazi regime during the Second World War. During the years of Nazi rule in Europe, an attempt was made to deliberately destroy the Jewish people. Over a few years, six million Jews were killed simply because they were Jewish.



How could this happen? The Nazis believed that they were members of the Aryan “master race” which was destined to rule the world. They were entitled to purify the world of “subhumans” such as the Jews. Jews were said to be contaminating the purity of the German nation. The Nazis convinced people that the Jews controlled the economy and were the source of all Germany’s problems.

Thus, the mass destruction of Jews, and the elimination of their music, religion, history, and traditions, became the state policy of Hitler’s regime. Even during some of the most difficult periods of the war, trains that were needed for defense were diverted to the transportation of Jews to extermination camps.

Three months after Hitler came to power in January 1933, he organized the first concentration camp in Dachau. He filled it with all those who opposed the Nazi regime, such as communists,

Social Democrats and religious minorities such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses. New laws deprived Jews of their legal and economic rights. Jews had to wear badges with a Star of David to reveal their identity. In a far-reaching propaganda campaign designed to isolate the Jewish community, many lies were circulated. Children at schools were taught that Jews were enemies of the German nation; books and music by Jews were burned. Some citizens fought for the right of their city to have a signboard at the gates saying, “*Judenfrei*” (free of Jews). New and humiliating laws were issued, according to which many Jews, including Albert Einstein, were deprived of their German citizenship. Mobs attacked Jewish businesses and synagogues and beat up and murdered Jews.

The war started in 1939, and in January 1942 Adolf Eichmann made public his plans for “the ultimate solution to the Jewish problem” — the extermination of all 14 million Jews living in Europe. Part of this plan included the creation of death camps such as Auschwitz, Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Treblinka, where tens of thousands of Jews could be destroyed every day. In accordance with this plan, Jews from all the occupied countries were brought to the concentration camps in sealed, overcrowded cattle wagons, in which many died from hunger, disease and suffocation before they ever reached the camps.

This prayer was found scribbled on a piece of wrapping paper near the body of a dead child at Ravensbrück concentration camp.

O, Lord,
remember not only the men and women of
good will,
but also those of evil will.
But do not remember all the suffering they
have inflicted upon us;
remember the fruits we have borne thanks to
this suffering —
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,
our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart
which has grown out of all this;
and when they come to the judgment,
let all the fruits that we have borne
be their forgiveness.

When the people arrived at a camp they were divided into groups. The old, the sick and small children were sent straight to their deaths in gas chambers. The others were expected to do heavy labor for twelve hours a day on a very poor diet. When they became too weak to work, they too were gassed. Enormous furnaces kept burning 24 hours a day were used to dispose of the bodies.

As the German armies invaded and occupied Europe, more and more Jews came under their control and were rounded up. Many Jews in the Soviet Union did not escape such a fate. In the occupied cities, the Nazis confined Jews to walled neighborhoods, called ghettos, in which all Jews were required to live. Later, the entire population of the ghetto could be killed. In Kiev, in the ditch called Babi Yar, 34,000 Jewish men, women and children were murdered in 1941. Before the end of the war the Nazis tried to hide what they had done, but the enormity of their crimes could not be hidden. One-third of all the Jews in the world had been murdered.

Those who knew what was right

Perhaps the most puzzling issue for us today is the question "How could other human beings have allowed millions of people to be shot, burned, and poisoned in the gas chambers? Could the fascists really have concealed their crimes so well that nobody could guess what was happening? And if people knew, couldn't they do anything?"

In general, the Jews received very little support. The Allied nations restricted emigration and did not do as much as they could have done. Although many people were aware of what was happening, they said nothing and did nothing. They felt as if what was happening did not concern them. The Protestant clergyman Martin Niemoeller summed it up:

In Germany, the Nazis came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then

they came for the Catholics and I was a Protestant, so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me ... by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone.

There were a few courageous individuals who did provide help, often at great personal risk. Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, arranged for Swedish passports to be printed and distributed to members of the Jewish community. Through his action about 30,000 people were saved from the gas chambers. He was later accused of



In 1994 Steven Spielberg made the movie *Schindler's List*, which is based on actual events. This movie tells about Oskar Schindler, a German member of the Nazi party who during the war saved 759 Polish Jews from death.

Due to one person, 759 people destined to die were given life — the opportunity to feel joy and sorrow, to look at the sun and the stars, to raise children and grandchildren. By now six thousand people owe their lives to Oskar Schindler — that's the number of the descendants of those whom he saved during the war.

being a spy, and is thought to have perished in a Soviet labor camp. In Jerusalem there is a street where a tree is planted in the memory of each person who helped the Jews during the years of the Holocaust. But behind the thousands who were saved, millions were murdered.

During the years of the Nazi regime, it was considered normal to hate Jews. The mass media, teachers and professors, people in the streets, family members — all supported the official policy regarding the Jews. Under such circumstances it was not hard to doubt one's own moral principles, to have the courage to resist such social pressure and in spite of everything still follow the voice of conscience, to defend those who were persecuted. Difficult, but still possible.

Could it happen again?

For many years historians have looked for answers to this question. And only one thing is clear: Humanity was not prepared for the fact that such events could occur in the mod-

ern world. Surely such savagery belonged to an earlier time, to uncivilized peoples. People who saw it coming couldn't believe it. And when they did realize what was happening, it was too late.

Those who managed to live through the horrors of the Holocaust thought that humanity would never forget this lesson. But only a few decades have passed, and in many countries again the same problems are appearing: alienation, intolerance, and the persecution of those who think or look different. Again, most people just passively observe, failing to recognize the danger. The following question was raised by Mikhail Gefter in April 1994 at the Moscow conference "Lessons of the Holocaust and Present-day Russia":

Fascism is a problem not only of yesterday but today as well. Under what conditions do fascists become a force so dominating, imposing itself and finding support by sympathy and fear, that it can bring devastating changes into our life?

For even if we ourselves don't take part in the persecution of those who are different from us, we often allow it by our indifference. Are we ready to recognize the beginning of fascism, including that being born in our own hearts?

Nazism was not the product of an uncultured society. Germany is famous for its culture, its education system, its poets and scientists. Fascist ideology was not developed and accepted by illiterate barbarians, but by well-educated people. Nor was it only a few madmen like Hitler and Eichmann who were to blame. In Germany alone there were 700,000 members of the SS who were charged with carrying out the Final Solution. Over a million people worked on the railways along which the Jews were transported, and countless others were involved in one way or another. After a day devoted to the extermination of prisoners, a camp commandant might go home and spend the evening reading Schiller or Goethe or even going to the opera. Just because one is an intellectual doesn't mean one is morally superior to others. An intellectual, on the contrary, is more responsible because he should know better.

There was an American school principal who used to send each new teacher who came to his school the following letter:

Dear teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp.
My eyes saw what no man should witness:
gas chambers built by learned engineers
children poisoned by learned physicians
infants killed by trained nurses
women and babies shot and burned by high school
and college graduates
so, I am suspicious of education.
My request is: help your students become human.
Your efforts must never produce learned monsters,
skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if
they serve to make our children more human.

Just think for a moment: If at the very beginning of fascism more people had had the inner strength to oppose, instead of following blindly, ideas that seemed so attractive; instead of submitting themselves to the voice of the crowd — instead of silently observing the development of an anti-human ideology — then perhaps the horrors of World War II never would have happened.

That is why we have no right to forget the past — for the sake of the present and the future.

Something to
think about



- How do groups of people or individuals become isolated from the rest of society?
- Why did ordinary people participate — either actively, as members of the army or camp officials, or passively, as bystanders?
- When it might cost them their very lives, many Jews remained faithful to their religion. Why was that?
- Could the same thing happen again? Could it happen here?
- Why were the countries that knew what was happening so unwilling to help?

"Babi Yar"

by Anatoly Kusnetsov

From an article in the magazine *Youth*, Moscow, 1966

Here is the story of a woman, a mother of two children, an actress in the Kiev Puppet Theatre, Dina Mironovna Pronicheva. I am presenting it in the way she told it, without adding or changing anything:

All the Jews of Kiev and the vicinity must come on Monday, September 29, 1941, at 8 a.m. to the corner of Melnikovskaya and Dochturovskaya Streets. Bring documents, money, valuables, warm clothes, underwear, etc.

Jews who disobey this order and are found in some other place will be shot.

Citizens who break into Jews' flats and take the things left behind will be shot.

Many people were walking along Turgenevskaya Street, but Artyom Street was really crowded. People with sacks, baby carriages, various kinds of carts, sometimes even trucks, were standing, moving a bit, stopping again. The noise of the crowd was very loud and it looked like a demonstration, but without flags, orchestras or celebration.

Like many others, Dina thought there was a train in front. Some shots were heard nearby. A plane was circling low in the sky, and the atmosphere was one of anxiety and panic.

Fragments of conversation in the crowd could be overheard:

"It's the war, the war! They are taking us to some other place where it is safer."

"But why only Jews?"

Some half-witted old woman was uttering absolute nonsense:

"It's because they are a nation related to Germans. So they are being taken away first..."

Pushing through the crowd, Dina worried more and more. Then she saw that the people in front were putting their things aside. Clothes, sacks and suitcases to the left, food to the right. And the Germans sent them ahead in groups: first one group, then a pause, then the next group. "Count them, count. ... Stop!" They usually let a line of a dozen pass.

Dina was afraid. This was nothing like a railway station. She did not know what it was yet, but she felt that it was not an evacuation. Anything but an evacuation.

What was especially strange were those machine-gun bursts. She still could not allow herself to think it was shooting. Firstly, why such a great mass of people? It couldn't be. But then — why?

The city was quiet. Everybody seemed stupefied as they walked between the lines of fascists on both sides. In front they saw lines of soldiers with dogs on leashes. Dina heard behind her: "Children, help me to pass, I am blind."

She took the old man by the waist and they walked together.

"Where are they taking us, Grandfather?" she asked.

"Child," he said, "we are going to pay our last debt to God."

At that moment they entered a path between two lines of soldiers and dogs. The path was narrow, about a meter and a half. The soldiers were standing shoulder to shoulder, their sleeves rolled up, all of them holding rubber clubs or big sticks. They rained blows down on those passing.

It was impossible to hide or duck. Cruel blows fell on their heads, shoulders and backs from the right and from the left . . .

The dazed people stumbled to an area encircled by troops. It was something like a grass-covered square. All the grass was covered with underwear, shoes, and clothes.

The police grabbed people rudely, beat them and shouted: "Undress! Quickly! Quickly!"

Drunk with anger and in a sadistic rage, they kicked and beat with clubs those who were too slow.

Of course, it was done so that a crowd couldn't form. There were many naked people covered with blood.

Dina says some people were laughing hysterically, and she saw the hair of several people go completely gray during the time they undressed and went to be shot.

The naked people were arranged in small lines and taken to the ditch dug in the steep sandy wall. Nobody saw what happened, only shooting was heard.

Mothers were fussing over their children. Sometimes a German policeman angrily grabbed a child and threw him over the wall like a piece of wood. ...

The wall was on the left. On the right was a ditch. The ledge must have been dug especially for the shooting. It was so narrow that people instinctively pressed themselves to the sandy wall in order not to fall down.

Dina looked down and was dizzy; it seemed to her very deep. Below her was a sea of bloody bodies. On the opposite side of the ditch she managed to see the machine-guns and several German soldiers. ...

Dina did not see but felt the bodies fall down from the ledge, and that the bullets were approaching her. She thought, "Now ... now ..."
Without waiting, she clenched her fists and jumped into the ditch.

