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978-1-107-01591-3 - Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany

Robert P. Ericksen

Excerpt

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Why the Holocaust Matters in a Century of Death

This book assumes that the Holocaust represents a very important event in modern history, not just for Jews and Germans, but for all thinking people who care about human behavior, human nature, and the future of human society. The German murder of approximately six million Jews and five million other victims of the Holocaust (besides tens of millions dead in World War II) certainly represents a low point in human history, the details of which are unusually horrific.¹ From mass death in gas chambers to medical experiments with human subjects, from bullets in the brains of children to beards of old rabbis pulled out at the roots, we are left with stories that make us wonder how human beings could have been so cold and so brutal. We are also left with the pledge expressed by many survivors, “never again,” as well as the reality that genocide *has*

¹ Absolute precision on numbers is impossible, but the conclusion that Germany murdered at least 11 million innocent men, women, and children during the Holocaust is widely accepted and almost certainly not overstated. This number does not include the millions of war dead, whether military personnel killed in a war instigated by Germany or the millions of civilians killed as “collateral damage,” a figure that may include more than two-thirds of the 26 million estimated Soviet losses. Rather, the claim that 11 million were murdered by Germans during the Holocaust includes those individuals or groups determined by Nazi ideology and practice to be “life unworthy of life:” Jews, Polish intelligentsia, Soviet POWs, Sinti and Roma, the disabled, homosexuals, and a variety of political or religious opponents who questioned the Nazi state. It is assumed throughout this book that these victims were innocent. It is also assumed they were murdered because of a brutal Nazi ideology that refused to acknowledge a simple right to life for Jews, the disabled, political opponents, or any category considered “less than human.” Finally, it is assumed that enthusiastic support of and praise for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi state may or may not have been specifically antisemitic, but it always included a recognition that the Nazi state was hard-edged and brutal, both in its rhetoric and its policies. That was the constant, self-proclaimed identity of the Nazi movement, and it was apparent to all.

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happened again, more than once, since the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust.² This is a depressing topic, especially when we search out the trail of death from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Despite the depressing nature of the material, this book also assumes that the Holocaust emphatically deserves our attention. The more we know about the Holocaust, the more we might be sensitized to the horror of genocidal actions or threats in our own day. Through the Nuremberg Trials, the United Nations, and the International Criminal Court, the world has expressed its condemnation of war crimes and of crimes against humanity. This type of response to the Holocaust, although sometimes tepid and ineffectual, might offer hope for the future. More importantly, perhaps, greater awareness of the Holocaust can provide a warning set of measurements by which to consider our own actions and inclinations, whether as individuals, as nations, or as members of an international community. It is very easy to view the Holocaust as an event and a set of behaviors completely outside our reality. However, the best historical inquiry draws us closer to the complexity of the past and makes it harder for us to dismiss other peoples and ages as totally “other.”

To emphasize the complexity, I focus on two institutions – churches and universities – that usually enjoy broad respect. Churches aspire to spiritual and ethical insight. Universities cultivate intellectual acuity. In both cases, we might expect that leaders in these institutions would have seen the moral and intellectual flaws in Adolf Hitler and in the Nazi agenda, but there is little evidence of opposition and much evidence of support. Pastors and professors in Germany during the Nazi period probably never imagined that their stance could be considered contemptible; they may never have thought we would be looking back at their ideas and their behavior in condemnation. Many or most believed they were behaving morally and honorably, that they were acting out of idealism, *even as*

² The term “Holocaust” is widely used to describe the event at the center of this book: the German murder of Jews and others during World War II. This word means “destroyed by fire.” It has the disadvantage of being Greek in origin and, more importantly, of possibly including a sacramental connotation. Burnt offerings sacrificed in ancient religious rituals were “destroyed by fire.” Some prefer to use the term “*Shoah*,” a Hebrew word that connotes only terrible destruction. “Holocaust” is also sometimes used for other examples of mass killing, and during the Cold War it was used to describe a potential nuclear war. For purposes of clarity and in line with widespread usage, I will use the word primarily to describe the event perpetrated by Germans and suffered by Jews and other victims. I will often use the words “massacre” or “genocide” when referring to other examples of mass killing.

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they gave their support to Adolf Hitler. For that is the reality.³ Many or most of those we might expect to have been the “good Germans” went along with the regime quite enthusiastically, endorsed its rationale, and supported its measures; and they did so in the conviction that they were the ones committed to a better Germany. In Peter Fritzsche’s words, “It should be stated clearly that Germans became Nazis because they wanted to become Nazis and because the Nazis spoke so well to their interests and inclinations.”⁴ This book is an attempt to describe the acceptance of Nazi ideals by pastors and professors, and also to ponder the significance of their historical role.

Among genocides, the Holocaust is the one perpetrated by a nation and culture most deeply rooted in the modern West, and thus much like the United States and other Western nations today. Furthermore, pastors and professors represent categories of people we might most expect to mirror our best values. Modern, highly educated, Christian Germany produced an Adolf Hitler and perpetrated the Holocaust. Of the fourteen Germans who sat around a table at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, planning the killing process, seven held a PhD. Michael Wildt describes the leadership of the Reich Security Main Office, the people who “designed the institutions of murder themselves, offered ideological justifications for them, and personally supervised the implementation of mass murder on location” while leading *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatzkommando* killing squads.⁵ He notes the remarkably high level of education achieved by these men. More than three-quarters had passed the *Abitur*, their university entrance exam. Of the 221 he researched, approximately two-thirds earned a college or university degree and one-third earned a doctorate. In the sample of law students, one-third earned a PhD and two-thirds of students in the humanities earned that degree.⁶ This gives us a snapshot of the young educated Germans who made the Holocaust possible. I argue that we best understand the Holocaust when we acknowledge

³ This “idealism in support of Hitler” is implicit in the many statements of support described throughout this book. It was also extremely common during denazification trials for individuals to claim they joined or supported the Nazi Party out of idealism. See also Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

⁵ Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 18. See also Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, trans. A. G. Blunden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 38.

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the role of university and church, and when we acknowledge that these perpetrators were people much like ourselves. Then we can try to understand what drove them to radical measures and perhaps even recognize circumstances that could tempt us in a similar direction.

Germans faced an unusual array of crises in the 1920s and 1930s: military, economic, political, and cultural crises that many or most Germans regarded as threats to their entire future as a nation. Might modern Westerners ever face such an array of crises? Would we be able to handle such crises without giving up our belief in human rights and civil liberties or otherwise pushing aside our democratic principles? Imagining ourselves into the world of “good Germans” in the Nazi era might be our best prophylactic. “Good Germans” almost certainly did not think we would pore through their papers half a century later and label them villains. We must hope that historians half a century from now will not be trying to understand behaviors of ours that they have learned to condemn.

The Century of Death

All of us born into the twentieth century carry the stigma of death, even though some might manage to ignore it.⁷ Those who enjoyed middle-class comfort and Western affluence in the second half of the century might think it an idyllic period, and they might remember the good times, cultural achievements, human comforts, and relative safety. Europeans, especially those west of the Cold War divide, picked themselves out of the rubble of World Wars I and II and created a half-century of unprecedented peace and prosperity, capped by euphoria when the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War came to an end. Americans during that period invented rock and roll, laid down ribbons of asphalt, built bigger cars and smaller computers, and built or imported a dizzying array of gadgets with which to cocoon or communicate in comfort. Those Americans not directly impacted by wars conducted abroad or pockets of poverty at home witnessed the horrors of the second half of the century only in their newspapers, in books, or on television.

Those who experienced only the second half of the century of death, and those whose access to the most violent parts has been only secondhand, can still recognize that the horrors were considerable, from starving children in Biafra to recurring examples of genocide. The word

⁷ For one treatment of Europe in this period, see Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

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“genocide” itself was invented only mid-century, when Raphael Lemkin, who had managed to escape the Nazi Holocaust, saw the need for a term to describe what the Germans had done. He then encouraged the newly created United Nations to take a stand. That body ratified a Genocide Convention, which since 1948 has condemned any attempt to kill or destroy an entire people. However, the killing did not stop. As we look back at the entire twentieth century, we see echoing images of genocide: from the Herero massacre in the first decade to the Rwandan massacre in the last, from the Armenian massacre in Turkey to “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans, from the Jewish Holocaust to the killing fields of Cambodia.

The first half of the twentieth century provided a bloody counterpart to genocide in the form of two wars of unprecedented carnage. Europeans entered the Great War in a state of near innocence, at least in terms of understanding the horrors of modern warfare. British troops at the Somme were encouraged to kick a soccer ball across no-man’s-land as they approached the German trenches, presumably to spur them onward and perhaps in some surreal attempt to make this seem like a game. However, 60,000 of those British troops were cut down like grass on the very first day of the attack, July 1, 1916. Despite the losses and what seems in retrospect to have been the insanity of marching directly into machine gun and artillery fire, General Haig sent his soldiers across no-man’s-land again and again until the Somme offensive squished and squandered its way to a halt in the rain and mud of November. Losses on both sides totaled nearly one million men killed or wounded, with no appreciable change in the location of the front. Unfortunately, the Battle of the Somme was neither the first nor last of the interminable trench battles on the Western Front, battles fought out of wet, muddy, rat-infested trenches under the iron rain of modern, exploding artillery shells as heavy as Volkswagens. Both sides used poison gas during this war, with mustard or chlorine gas burning the soft, wet tissues of eyes and lungs, rendering victims blind, maimed, or dead, but not advancing the prospects of victory for either side.

Nearly nine million soldiers died in World War I and many more were maimed. These losses, nearly unimaginable, left few families in the participating nations untouched. Today one sees monuments in towns and villages across Germany, Austria, Russia, Italy, France, and Great Britain listing the large numbers of dead, often including several members of the same family. If we were to extrapolate the German war dead at approximately 2 million in a nation of 60 million, that would

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correspond, for example, to some 10 million soldiers from the present American population of 300 million. By contrast, America lost 58,000 dead in Vietnam, 37,000 dead in Korea, more than 400,000 dead in the European and Pacific theaters of World War II, 115,000 dead in World War I, and 600,000 dead during the Civil War, counting both North and South. Losses in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Indian wars, the Spanish-American War, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are minute by comparison. Thus the total number of American dead in more than two centuries of fighting falls well short of 1.5 million, and yet Americans rightly grieve. Imagine the grief in post-World War I Germany.

Many historians say that the twentieth century did not really begin until 1914. The outbreak of war that year ushered in the century of death, bringing in its baggage both horror and disillusionment, as can be seen in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and other literature from the war; but this horrible war proved merely a precursor to greater horrors. Twenty years after the Great War came to an end, Hitler plunged Europe into a second war, with the carnage this time reaching at least 50 million dead. Furthermore, in World War I most of the dead were combatants, even though murdered Armenians and some civilians in the battle zone represent exceptions. Relatively little death was inflicted beyond the battlefields, at least compared to World War II, in which noncombatants died in unprecedented ways and in unprecedented numbers. Aerial bombardment took a great toll. For example, the Allied bombing of German cities may have killed as many as half a million civilians, which would be more than the total number of American battle deaths suffered in World War II. The number of victims in the Soviet Union dwarfed these figures, with the total of civilian and military deaths estimated at 26 million. World War II also included the Holocaust, of course. Germans managed to murder approximately 6 million Jews and 5 million others, including (but not limited to) Soviet POWs, Poles, Gypsies (Sinti and Roma), the handicapped, homosexuals, and various categories of political opponents.

The record of death in the twentieth century also includes millions of victims of Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, each accounting for 10 million or more dead. Their victims died from starvation, from harsh treatment in prison camps, or by execution, having been selected on the basis of class and politics as determined by a dogmatic ideology coupled with raging paranoia. The depredations of Stalin and Mao should never be denied or dismissed, nor should the genocides: from the Herero massacre

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in 1906 to the Rwandan and Balkan genocides of the 1990s, as well as the Congolese and Sudanese genocides at the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite the enormity of these other crimes, however, this book claims we should reserve a special place in our panoply of twentieth-century death for the German Holocaust.

The German Holocaust and Western Culture

Growing interest in comparative genocide tells a staggering tale of death and leaves us with some controversy about definitions. Most observers now apply the label of genocide to a number of massacres besides the Holocaust, including those in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Congo, and Darfur. In a world of many grievances and in the shadow of the deadly twentieth century, it seems impossible and inappropriate to try to calibrate and compare levels of pain and injustice in each of these events. Nonetheless, I will make two claims about the nature and importance of the German Holocaust, which underlie my purpose in writing this book. First of all, there is no other genocide in which the killing process included the methodical, industrial manner by which Germans accomplished a significant portion of the deaths. This killing process employed architects, chemists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and a vast bureaucracy, both civilian and military. A clear governmental purpose undergirded the process, and it culminated in actual factories of death. This was modern, mechanized, purposeful killing, which means, for example, that many important perpetrators did not even see their victims – yet they were necessary and culpable cogs in a massive machinery of death. My second claim arises from the first: There has been no other genocide undertaken by a culture so rooted in the modern, educated, technologically advanced West.

Despite this parallel, however, the story of Nazi Germany routinely conjures up a sense of “otherness” that makes it difficult to imagine ourselves into that world. Nazis have often been portrayed as monsters or demons. It has been suggested that Adolf Hitler was a particularly evil and powerful figure who hypnotized the German people or took over the nation against its will and forced it to participate in his monstrous crimes. Daniel Goldhagen gives another version of this “otherness” point of view, one that cuts a much broader swath. He suggests that we should never think of German killers as being anything like ourselves. Rather, he argues, the German version of antisemitism was especially vicious and ultimately eliminationist. He recommends that we imagine all Germans

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to have been as different from us as those Aztecs of the fifteenth century who sacrificed and ate human flesh.⁸

I would argue that these emphases on German “otherness” are based on mistaken assumptions and inaccurate history. German universities, for example, were arguably the best in the world during the nineteenth century. Germans such as Leopold von Ranke and Max Weber invented modern scholarship as we know it. This educational foundation made Germany a leader also in the creation of modern physics, as can be seen in the careers of Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg, and it resulted in a large number of Nobel Prizes won by Germans. German education also helped establish the foundations of engineering and science, which still make that nation a leading producer of automobiles and other forms of high technology. During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, these same skills helped Germany become one of the major military powers in the world, probably the most powerful nation per capita in terms of martial spirit, military technology, and commitment to the maintenance of its war-making ability.

Germany also has a very important place in the arts, having raised up within its cultural tradition some of the greatest classical composers, geniuses such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Goethe and Schiller represent a similar level of genius in the field of literature. By the early years of the twentieth century, Germany held an acknowledged place of leadership in art, architecture, theater, and film. Berlin became a cultural mecca in the 1920s, which is one more indication that Germany’s cultural contributions to our modern world are broad and deep. If we turn to religion, it was a German, Martin Luther, who founded the Protestant tradition. German Protestants then built on the tradition of Luther and coupled it with the highly developed world of German scholarship. By the nineteenth century, German theologians led the world in Biblical scholarship and continued to exert enormous theological influence well into the following century. Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich all represent this German tradition, and the work of each continues to resonate in seminaries and schools of theology. Even Gerhard Kittel, deeply tainted by his enthusiastic support for the Nazis, still holds an important place in Biblical study through his massive *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁹

⁸ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 27–28.

⁹ See my treatment of Kittel in Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 28–78.

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When Adolf Hitler came to power, 97 percent of the German population considered itself Christian, with about two-thirds being Protestant and one-third Catholic. Less than 1 percent of Germans were Jewish in 1933, and only a slightly larger percentage registered as pagans or nonbelievers. It is true that the entire 97 percent registered as Christian did not attend church regularly or maintain a vibrant Christian identity. However, all of them agreed to pay the church tax, money they could have saved by the simple act of leaving their church. Furthermore, they received religious education in all German schools, and, of course, many of these 97 percent of the population were fervent Christians active in their faith. Germany in the 1930s almost certainly represented church attendance and a sense of Christian commitment and identity similar to that in America today, for example.

This highly educated, technologically advanced, Christian nation voted for Adolf Hitler in numbers large enough to make Nazis the single strongest party and result in his appointment as chancellor in 1933. Germans then followed his lead, both in the implementation of his vicious politics of antisemitism and in the various stages of World War II. All of these factors about Germany and its place in the modern world are worth noting as we contemplate the Holocaust. Among the many outbreaks of genocidal behavior, it is the German-perpetrated Holocaust that is most likely to reward our modern gaze with some faintly mirrored image of ourselves. Many of us, of course, are not tempted to look in this mirror, or perhaps we are unable to recognize ourselves. I will argue that this is only because we have distorted the mirror.

Our minds stop short at the horror of the Holocaust, and rightfully so. It is virtually impossible to look closely at the myriad grisly details without feelings of revulsion. Nearly every possible vile deed occurred during the Holocaust, nearly every example of human bestiality. The film footage of bulldozers pushing emaciated corpses into mass graves might be the image that pushes us to the brink, or perhaps it is the quiet testimony of a survivor describing some particularly egregious pain or humiliation. Not only are these details painful, they are also necessary to the story. We can never in retrospect fully understand the depths of horror that the Holocaust represents; however, we cannot even begin to understand if we do not at some point look closely at the details and put our noses into the stench of the camps and the ghettos.

If it is difficult to study the Holocaust, it is even more difficult to imagine that we see ourselves in that mirror. The most comfortable approach is to dismiss the Nazi killers as a small group of monsters, no matter how we choose to place them outside our world. Perhaps they were a

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generation scarred by the loss of their fathers in World War I. Perhaps they were hypnotized by the evil genius of Hitler. Perhaps they were in thrall to an unprecedentedly vicious form of antisemitism. We could even imagine they were mutants or aliens from outer space, but we would be better advised to consider another “perhaps.” Perhaps they were more like us than we would like to believe. We will be much more likely to understand the Holocaust and have a much greater chance to learn from this horror if we begin by imagining that the perpetrators were humans much like ourselves.

How Could It Happen?

For anyone exposed to the horrors of the Holocaust, the question typically arises, “How could it happen?” Historians in the 1980s argued among themselves over two broad explanations.¹⁰ “Intentionalism” placed the blame on a few individuals, especially Adolf Hitler and his inner circle of supporters, arguing that they simply set out with a plan to kill Jews and then proceeded to do so. This explanation has the advantage of identifying evil and placing blame. Specific people made specific decisions to kill, and they can be condemned for doing so. It also accounts for the reality that certain people, such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, and Joseph Goebbels, held powerful positions in the Nazi state and did indeed lead that state into genocide.

Intentionalism drew criticism, however, for claiming too much. For example, Lucy Dawidowicz in her book, *The War Against the Jews*, claims that all of World War II was essentially a cover for killing Jews or a mechanism for doing so.¹¹ It is certainly true that the Holocaust could not have produced the death of millions of Jews if Germany had not invaded Poland and the Soviet Union, where most of those Jews actually lived. Furthermore, war created an atmosphere of death and emergency in which the list of “enemies” to be killed could be broadened, even to include noncombatants ideologically defined as dangerous; and the actual killing could occur in places guarded by military force and under the assumption of military necessity. However, most historians would

¹⁰ See, for example, the treatment of this issue in Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, Canto Edition, 1995), especially 86–121; or Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

¹¹ Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).