

Identity Theft

The Nazi Third Reich did not introduce the world to race-based theories of superiority. Darwinistic theories were popularized around the world in the 18th century, and were taken as scientific fact and evidence that drove colonialism and imperialism. However, the NSDAP took this ideology of the “volksgenosse” and “lebensraum” to a new and atrocious level with the Jewish Holocaust. To begin, the Holocaust was not a side effect or collateral of World War II. The Holocaust was masterminded by the leaders of the NSDAP Nazi Party, and carried out disjointly from the warfront. The timeline for the Holocaust is debated widely, did it begin before the war began? Was it set in motion with death camps? Concentration camps? I assert that the Holocaust began when the Jewish communities were targeted under Nazi controlled Germany in not only a physical way, but a social, economic, and psychological manner as well. The word Holocaust and genocide are many times used interchangeably, however there are stark differences between the two horrific events, and a certain uniqueness that pertains to the Jewish experience under the Third Reich as opposed to other groups experiencing genocide and genocidal acts. When discussing the Holocaust, there are intentional measures taken by the Nazis to differentiate the Jewish experience from other groups that suffered by their hand. While there were many atrocities that the Nazi Third Reich undertook, the Jewish Holocaust was unique in contrast to other targeted groups due to the psychological manner of attack on the community and identity of the individual Jew.

To clarify, there is no ranking system for human suffering, and no act deemed more worthy of sympathy or tribute than another. Atrocities of any kind and intention should be

studied, discussed, and taught with utmost respect and regard for all those who were victims and whom the effects still reach today. There are heroes, victims, names, faces, and life in each case that is studied. One should be remembered not as a victim of what was imposed upon them, but with integrity, respect, and reverence to the life they lived, the person they were, and the community to which they belonged, no matter which “group” they were considered a part of in the eyes of the oppressive regime.

The Jewish community was not the only group that suffered underneath the Nazi government. Homosexuals, disabled citizens, ethnically Polish persons, and Roma and Sinti were targeted. These groups were targeted as “asocials” and outside of the vision that Adolf Hitler had of his “Aryan” pure Germany. The first group of people to be put in concentration camps early in the timeline of the Third Reich were Communist Party members and men accused of homosexual relations and activities. Hitler gained power and confidence in the Reichstag by finding a common enemy, Communist Party members, and this support would allow him to consolidate his power, and later use similar tactics for his own agenda with the Jewish community. After time passed and death camps and mass executions were occurring within the occupied territory of Poland, millions of people were killed, not all of the Jewish. However, I argue that the “Final Solution” truly applied to only the Jews, where the other groups killed in genocide were murdered with the intention of creating living space for ethnic Germans under the separate entity “General Plan East”. All groups of people suffered under the Nazi plans for greater land and space for their “race”, however the Jewish community was targeted in a different way. Not only were they targeted, like others, as an inferior race to the Aryans, but they were not even considered a human group at all. Use of rhetoric like “vermin”, “parasites” and “extermination”

classified the Jews as a category lower than human, and differentiated ideology more severely against the Jews in contrast to other groups. As early as 1920, the *Volkischer Beobachter* published statements discussing “The Ostjuden must be got rid of without delay, and ruthless measures must be taken immediately against all other Jews”.¹ The Nazi party had early and clear intentions that they were going to have specific ideology about Jews as opposed to rhetoric about other groups. The events that set aside the Jewish Community as unique in the context of the Holocaust was not death camps and the mechanics behind the Final Solution, yet rather the manner in which it was carried out through psychological attacks on their identity.

All groups targeted for extermination suffered physically under the Third Reich, especially toward the end of the War, there was open policy for work camps and death camps to physically annihilate groups of people. However, one might miss the earliest forms of psychological attacks that were set specifically on the Jewish Community. In order to survive and thrive, people are formed by their community, careers, lifestyle routine, and education. Family, relational connections, and roots in their community establish a person’s identity, and in the earliest phases of the Holocaust the Nazi Party was set to destroy the Jewish sense of identity. In 1933 the Nazi Party officiated a boycott of Jewish stores for one day to test public interest in marking the Jewish population as the “other”. In this Boycott the first visible symbols for Jewish “otherness” came about, which was a yellow star on a dark background displayed in Jewish shops to single them out for the boycott. The Jewish community was being singled out, created as the image of the alien, or the one that does not belong, establishing a rift in their economic and

¹ *Do a Proper Job on the Jews!*, in *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 19.

business community. While the boycott was only for a single day at this point, the psychological effects sunk in. In an article in the *Judische Rundschau* Robert Weltsch declares,

“Many Jews suffered a crushing experience on Saturday. Suddenly they were revealed as Jews, not as a matter of inner avowal, not in loyalty to their own community, not in pride in a great past and great achievements, but by the impress of a red placard with a yellow patch. The patrols moved from house to house, stuck their placards on shops and signboards, daubed the windows, and for 24 hours the German Jews were exhibited in the stocks, so to speak. In addition to other signs and inscriptions one often saw widnows bearing a large Magen David, the shield of David the King,. It was intended as dishonor. Jews take it up, the Shield of David, and wear it with pride!”²

The Nazi's not only attempted to economically hurt the Jewish community, but it was more symbolic than economics. Twenty-four hours would not have hurt the stores, it would not have destroyed economic life, or even had really any long term business effects on the shops, but this was not the real intent. The singling out of Jews, attributing their “otherness” with religious and iconic symbols as a badge of shame, rather than of history or pride was an intended blow to the community. The Nazi SS guard did not, in 1933, go door to door rounding up the Jews, rather they systematically destroyed their sense of self identity, and attempted to create a negative connotation as the “other” in their community with the boycott based off of visual symbolism. This is where the uniqueness in the Jewish Holocaust begins. From 1933 forward, the psychological attacks on the Jewish identity only intensified.

² Robert Weltsch, *Wear it with Pride, the Yellow Badge*, in *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 46-47.

In 1935 legislation through Nuremberg Laws established that the Jews living in Germany were no longer citizens of the Reich. While it is true that this was a tactical and political attack on the rights of Jews, it was also another terrible blow to the German Jews and their identity. These laws not only attacked the citizenship rights of German Jews, but also attacked their right to marriage, employment, civil service jobs and positions, and even the flying of the German flag.³ Why would the Nazis care about the German flag, if the Jewish community was banned from all other rights? They were intentional because a nation's flag symbolizes patriotism, loyalty, community, all of which the Jewish community was determined to show for Germany in the face of their oppression. The Nazis were not determined to ban the Jews only from influence within the government, but to alienate them from society. Genocide is the targeting and the destruction of a people group. Nazi Germany began their intentions of genocide long before the trains or the camps, it began with the attempt to destroy the identity and community of all Jews under the influence of the Third Reich. This intentional destruction of identity and psychological attacks made the Jewish experience unique. It was not only a fight for life and body, but for mind and spirit as well. The attack on the humanity of Jews was intentional from the beginning.

Systematic execution of Jews in Europe was well in place by 1941, and officialized by the Wannsee Conference in 1942. By this time, the Third Reich put full time and energy into making sure that the Jews were stripped of all identity in business, economics, community, and relational. In 1941 the Reichskommissar for Ostland created a list of directives in which Jews were excluded from,

³ *Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor*, in *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 78.

“c) The following is forbidden to Jews:

1. To move from their locality or change their place of residence without permission [...]
2. The use of sidewalks, public transportation...and automobiles.
3. The use of recreational facilities and institutions serving the public (resort areas and bathing facilities, parks and open spaces, playgrounds and athletic fields.
4. To attend theaters or movie houses, libraries, or museums.
5. To attend schools of any type.
6. To possess automobiles or radios.
7. [Kosher] slaughtering.”⁴

Before establishing the systematic, mechanical construction of genocide, the Nazi party was intent on destroying the last remaining identity to the Jewish population. Any sort of act that would establish them as part of a community was taken away, education and accessibility to artistic and academic expression was banned, and even an attack on religious rights and values were banned as well. This was the attempt to utterly destroy the community before actually taking public measures to kill the population. To intentionally and systematically murder millions of people is a distinct version of evil, but to strip those of their identity, community, and attack them psychologically before the attacks begin, the evil reaches a new depth. The Nazi controlled Third Reich did not commit only genocide, the Holocaust was unique for the Jews that

⁴ Hinrich Lohse, *Provisional Directives by Lohse, Reichskommissar for Ostland, Concerning the Treatment of Jews*, in *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 380.

suffered due to this depth of evil. They were not only sentenced to death, but everything that built their humanity was stripped from them before the point of death.

The Third Reich, however, did not prevail. To reiterate, they never succeeded in their intent. Millions of Jews were murdered, generations of Jews were brutally killed in systematic genocide, but the community, the identity, did not die. Never in the face of the brutal regime the Jewish community let their identity die. It lives on today, and I argue, it lived on then through the suffering Jewish community. The Nazi Party attempted to take away Jewish humanity, and they might have succeeded politically, but never in the psyche of the Jews. “Wear it with pride!” was declared early on in the struggle, but I believe this rang true for the duration.⁵ Reports of survivors, and testaments to the dead proclaim this sense of identity and community worth. The Jewish community withheld the psychological attacks on their identity, even in the face of brutal mechanized genocide. The responsibility of the Jewish identity is not solely placed on those who endured the suffering of the Holocaust, or those who perished, but it is the responsibility of those who remember and study the events today. There is no ambiguity when looking through the victim-perpetrator lense that the Jews were victims of Nazi brutality and evil ideologies, yet the remembrance of those Jews should not be as victims. To affiliate only victimhood to those who perished only enhances the Nazi goal of stripping the identity from the individual and the community. The Jews who died as a result of the Holocaust need to be remembered in their identity. They were teachers, students, business men and women, they were artists, mothers, fathers, and children. They were members of the community, they were German citizens, Polish citizens, Soviet citizens, and citizens of many other countries. They died with their identity, their

⁵ Robert Weltsch, *Wear it with Pride, the Yellow Badge*, in *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 46-47.

beliefs, their passions, skills, connections and relationship to their community. These were not numbers, and not solely victims, they were voices that were intentionally silenced. It is our job to never forget the identity that they fought for and kept under the evil that tried and failed to strip it away. Therefore their legacy as they recognized themselves, will continue to live on and be a reminder of the courage, valor and steadfast strength of the Jewish community.

Bibliography

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