



rethinking the **holocaust**

Yehuda Bauer

Yale University Press • New Haven and London

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preface

Historians, when they present their books, normally start by thanking the institutions, archives, and colleagues who helped them and aided their work. This is what I did, too, in my previous books. But this time, only my wife, Elana, knew what I was working on. Yad Vashem, where I work almost daily as director of the International Research Institute, and the director of Yad Vashem, Avner Shalev, who, with my colleagues, was and is supportive and helpful in everything I do, knew I was doing something, but all were blissfully unaware of exactly what. They deserve my sincerest thanks. That goes for the Yad Vashem archive as well, which I used to find material for some of the case studies presented in this book, even though my book is mostly based on secondary sources.

Many colleagues influenced my thinking, although I did not consult with them explicitly. First and foremost is my closest friend and associate, Yisrael Gutman, with whom I share the basic conviction that it is best to look at the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective, which both of us

do, without in any way disregarding the history of the perpetrators and the “bystanders,” as will be clear from reading this work. I have learned a great deal from David Bankier, Christopher R. Browning, Ian Kershaw, Dov Kulka, Franklin H. Littell, Michael R. Marrus, Dalia Ofer, and many others, all of whom were innocent of any knowledge of what I was going to write. Especially fruitful is my friendship with Raul Hilberg, whose integrity, straightforwardness, commitment to truth (“we are in the truth business,” he is wont to say), and vast knowledge have always been an inspiration, despite our disagreements on a considerable number of issues.

The people who are really behind this book are my students at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University. I am supposed to be a retired professor, but I continue to teach, and they have forced me to think and rethink, to go back to the sources, to argue and defend, or to retreat from positions on a large number of problems.

Finally, as with every writer, there is the family—my two daughters, Danit and Anat, and their children, who gave me peace of mind, and Elana (“Ilaniki”), who pushed and sustained me.

introduction

This is not another history of the Holocaust. Rather, it is an attempt to rethink categories and issues that arise out of the contemplation of that watershed event in human history. True, I make the occasional regression into a historian’s professional deformation and camouflage my research in case studies that illustrate some of the more general points I am trying to make. But my case studies have another rationalization. A historian, in my estimation, has to do two things, especially when dealing with a subject such as this: one, research and analyze; and two, remember that there is a story to be told, a story that relates to people’s lives. So a real historian is also a person who tells (true) stories. This does not mean that the main task lies outside documents and their interpretation—anyone who has ever heard my friend and colleague Raul Hilberg pronounce the word *d-o-c-u-m-e-n-t* will know what I am talking about—but a historian must also be a teacher, and teachers have to remember that their pupils, and indeed themselves, are just like the people they talk about in their telling

of history. Hence the case studies; hence the occasional testimony; hence the stories in the Conclusion.

Has the time come for a historian to present the Holocaust as a whole, or at least from one of many possible wide angles? I believe so. These lines are written in early 1999, after a few years of radical progress in understanding the events of the Holocaust on the part of historians and sociologists, especially those in the younger generation. We the historians and storytellers have been down in the cellars digging for facts, developments, connections, contexts. We still are, and we will be there for a very long time. We tremble with excitement, and very often with horror, at what we discover in archives or hear in testimonies. We would frequently like to run away from the abyss that opens in front of us time and time again. But we must overcome that temptation; we must tell the story. Occasionally, too, we have to view the Holocaust from an angle that may give a broader view. The trees are vitally important. The forest is no less so.

The idea came from Elana, as most good things in my life do nowadays. "Why don't you reprint some of the articles and chapters you wrote over the past fifteen years or so?" she said. Marvelous idea, I thought, and I sat down to make selections. Out of the question, I found. I had to rethink all I had ever written; then I had to rewrite everything—no, I had to write anew. I had to ask the big questions and hope that I would come up with answers that would not be too small. I sometimes disagreed with what I had written in the past; new findings had opened up new, not necessarily more comfortable, vistas. The more I knew, it seemed, the more I felt the compulsion to be as humble about it as I could.

The Holocaust was a genocide, but of a special and unprecedented type. In the past two decades or so, an amazing phenomenon happened: The Holocaust has become a symbol of evil in what is inaccurately known as Western civilization, and the awareness of that symbol seems to be spreading all over the world. A museum near Hiroshima com-

memorates Auschwitz; a Chinese university has translated a summary of Holocaust literature into Chinese. When people want to liken "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans or other mass murders to a similar event, they often compare it not with another mass murder somewhere else but with the Holocaust, whether such an analogy stands up to analysis or not (it doesn't). Not a month passes without the appearance of Holocaust-related books, films, musical works, theatrical productions, and so on. The press, the serious and the less serious alike, is full of debates on Holocaust-related topics. Politicians mention it constantly. The television industry presents shows, documentaries, and conversations about it again and again. Why?

Because, it seems to me, the realization is sinking in that the Holocaust says something terribly important about humanity. It is, on the one hand, a genocide and must be compared with other genocides; that universal dimension of comparability should concern everyone, from Kamchatka to Tasmania and from Patagonia to the Hudson Bay. On the other hand, it is a unique genocide, with unprecedented—and, so far, unrepeated—characteristics. There is a third element: the Holocaust concerns one of the core groups in what used to be the Christian-Muslim area of civilization, namely the Jews, whose culture, influenced by the context of their original Middle Eastern habitat, was, in turn, crucial in the development of Western civilization. The Holocaust has, therefore, become the symbol for genocide, for racism, for hatred of foreigners, and, of course, for antisemitism; yet the existence of rescuers on the margins provides a hope that these evils are not inevitable, that they can be fought. The result is the beginning of international cooperation to educate as many people as possible—to warn them and at the same time provide a realistic hope for a possible change of direction in human affairs. That the impact of the Holocaust is growing, not diminishing, is a major motive for the writing of this book.

I am a Jewish historian, living among Jews in a Jewish state; I have to take such preconditioning into account. Israeli Jewish society and

Jewish society generally are traumatized societies. Generations after the catastrophe, the realization that one third of the Jewish people were murdered for no political, economic, or military reason is sinking in; the consciousness of the loss has permeated those societies, but the reasons for it are unclear, and the fear that it might recur is pervasive. Beneath the simple fact of that consciousness is the usually unconscious rebellion against that realization, the attempt to compensate, to "learn lessons," usually wild ones. Israeli politicians instrumentalize the Holocaust for political purposes, often without realizing that they are doing so. Right-wingers see all Arabs as Nazis (Arafat in Beirut in 1982 was compared to Hitler in his Berlin bunker). Left-wingers accuse the Israeli Army on the West Bank of being a kind of German *Wehrmacht* in an occupied land. Government ministers dream of Jews immigrating to Israel by the millions—the millions who were killed in the Holocaust. Jewish politicians accuse each other of antisemitism and compare opposing political parties to the Nazi party.

But elsewhere, too, the horror has penetrated: a person stopped by a traffic policeman objects to "Gestapo" tactics. A Chief Rabbi calls what the Reform Movement in Judaism is supposedly doing to the Jewish people worse than the Holocaust. Literature, theater, music, television and, of course, the press—there is hardly a day that an Israeli newspaper (*any* Israeli newspaper) does not have an article or a news item touching the Holocaust, and this is more than fifty years after the event. There are calls, sometimes even from Holocaust survivors, to cease the coverage, speculation, extrapolation, comparison, but to no avail—the trauma is stronger than all such pathetic exhortations.

The only way we can deal with a trauma is to face it, to confront the facts, to ponder them, to do what the Jewish people could not do at the time: weave the Holocaust into their historic memory. First we must work through the mourning, the loss. Millions from among the victims vanished in the smoke of crematoria, and there are no cemeteries where we can conduct mourning ceremonies. Ways have to be found to mourn; otherwise the survivors and descendants will never have peace. The

Holocaust has to be incorporated into life, into the present and the future, to give it a meaning that it did not have when it occurred.

In doing all this, Jewish society has to open up to the world, especially to Christianity, because the murderers and the societies from which they and the so-called bystanders sprang were baptized in churches to worship a loving God who had been a Jew. The Holocaust poses a basic problem for Christianity as well as for Judaism, hence the convoluted and often unfortunate, but genuine, efforts of the Catholic Church and of other churches to confront the Holocaust. As the awareness of the universal implications of the Holocaust spreads, the Holocaust becomes—again—two things: a specifically Jewish tragedy and *therefore* a universal problem of the first magnitude. Human beings who were Jews were murdered for one reason only: because they were Jews. The murderers also tried to dehumanize their victims—a matter for all humans to ponder. It is we today who have to deal with the Jewish tragedy as a general human tragedy. People of all persuasions, but especially Jews and those who call themselves Christians, need to find a language that will enable all of them to deal with this universal issue. The warning to humankind is written on the wall: beware and learn.

Learning is crucial here, not only for Jews but for everyone, children as well as adults. We need the politicians for the education effort to succeed—people who, in democratic countries, are elected not because they know something about the Holocaust and genocide but because they promise to lower taxes. The politicians have to be taught first, and that will be a long process—not a hopeless one, but a very difficult one, the accomplishment of which is not guaranteed. The United Nations does have a Convention Against Genocide, but genocide is with us. We need more than a convention. Life on the planet is growing uncomfortably close; we are increasing in numbers, and we don't have the space around us to feel at ease and friendly. We need political tools, international tools, to at least limit and then perhaps, in a more distant future, eliminate the threat of massive mutual slaughter.

This book consequently has a political aim in the sense that I wish to

contribute to the work of those who would stop, even reverse, a murderous trend. Too many humans have been murdered, and the time has come to try and stop these waves that threaten to engulf us.

All of the above is implied, though not spelled out, in the chapters of this book. Obviously, I have to define the subject, deal with alternative interpretations, and then address some—by no means all—of the issues. I therefore start with definitions, then continue with *historiosophy* (“Is the Holocaust explicable?”), in order to confront the central issue of comparisons with other genocides. In recent years, important historians and sociologists have tried to provide overall explanations of the Holocaust, and I try to analyze such attempts, by Zygmunt Bauman, Jeffrey Herf, Goetz Aly, Daniel Goldhagen, John Weiss, and Saul Friedländer, so that my own interpretation will become more precise. I do not claim that what I have to say is more correct than what they say; we live in a world in which competing interpretations vie for the support of readers and listeners. Nor do I claim that the last word will ever be said on this subject. Mine is one such interpretation. Naturally, I find it convincing; others may not.

To show how such interpretations may work, I present issues that I have found interesting or important or crucial. The core of my interpretation appears in Chapters 6 and 7, where I deal with Jewish reactions during the Holocaust. I do not contribute to the discussion so dear to my German and American colleagues, about the decisionmaking process in Nazi Germany: Who, if anyone, gave the order to murder the Jews, and when? Not that I do not appreciate the importance of this intensive and productive research effort—I participate in it myself, attend meetings, and read the material. But, when all is said and done, what is the essential importance of this quest? If we, at some future date, know the exact way the murder was implemented, what will that knowledge give us? We will know who, what, and when, but we will not have asked the really important question: Why? Once my colleagues address that question, and some of them have already done so, the next question will be, What role do the victims play in that story?

In my opinion, there will always be more victims than perpetrators. In fact, all of humanity is likely to be a victim, given the current state of possibilities of destruction and unrest. Victims are not passive, except in their last moments. We must know how the Nazis' victims behaved, what cultural baggage they had to start with, and whether their behavior or their baggage was useful in any way. We must know what they thought, how they reacted, what they did. Therein lies a lesson, possibly, or a warning, possibly, or an encouragement, possibly. Therefore my predilection is to deal with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust—they are of tremendous universal import, as well as important for the Jewish societies of today. Two chapters in this book are devoted to the reactions of Jews in Nazi Europe to persecution.

Are contemporary gender studies pertinent to the Holocaust? I analyze one case study that may have implications for the whole field, from both the Jewish and the universal angle. Does theology have any answers? Again, I deal with Jewish theology—Christian theology is undoubtedly equally important, but its contributions have to be considered by those more knowledgeable in the field. Then comes the question of rescue attempts, with a case study to illustrate my approach. Finally comes the vexed issue of the impact of the Holocaust on the establishment of Israel—seemingly a local, or perhaps a Jewish, question but in fact a universal one: I examine the immediate impact of a tragedy on the world immediately after it occurred.

After some hesitation, I decided to include in an appendix my speech to the German Bundestag on January 27, 1998. I hope I will not be accused of an ego trip; I included it because it says in a nutshell all I have to say on the subject. The stories told there have a subtext: I myself, the storyteller, was not in Europe during the Holocaust; my parents had the good sense to escape in 1939, and I grew up in Mandatory Palestine, where I went to school and played soccer while my relatives and everyone else in my former home were being murdered. I studied in Britain, participated in the Israeli War of Independence (and a few other Israeli wars, as all my friends did), and came to the study of the Holocaust

because I wanted to be a historian of Jews. The Holocaust was unfortunately, I soon realized, the central event in modern or perhaps all Jewish history. And when I said to my friend and mentor Abba Kovner, survivor, poet, and fighter, that that realization scared me, he answered that being scared was an excellent basis for studying the Holocaust. The Bundestag speech, then, is a summary and a conclusion to this attempt at rethinking the Holocaust. And I am still scared.

chapter one

What Was the Holocaust?

The objectivity of the historian becomes an issue with subjects besides the Holocaust, but a historian dealing with the Holocaust cannot avoid the issue.

Following upon some ideas put forward by Karlheinz Deschner, among others, it is important to start by denying the possibility of an "objective" stance.¹ Many have said this before: we are the product of our environment, tradition, education, prejudices, and so on. The influence of our environment can be disastrous, for we may be swayed by a regime and its consensual impact, or even by a consensus created by our fellow-historians, and hence write what is "politically correct," even knowingly suppress what we feel should be said. Worse, we sometimes really believe that what we say is our own view, even when it is nothing but a reflection of the views of a majority, or a group, or a charismatic individual, or some other outside source. We need to be aware of our biases, our subjective approach, in order to formulate an interpretation of facts that will be legitimately rooted in the atmosphere and the

context of whatever period we describe. We must be aware of the obvious truth that the very decision to deal with some facts, some aspects of reality, rather than with others, is a subjective choice. Goethe said, "Every fact is already a theory." Johann G. Droysen, the nineteenth-century German historian, said, "Only a mindless person is objective"—and indeed, objectivism is basically uninteresting, because it reflects the chaos of an infinite chain of events, a chaos that in itself has no meaning.²

Do we then conform to a subjectivism that dictates the rewriting of history in every generation? In a sense, we do, partially. After all, people in every period look at past events from a different perspective: the historians of 2089 will look at the French Revolution differently from the way the historians of 1789, 1889, or 1989 looked at it. Yet the knowledge and self-perception that accompany an approach whose biases are articulated can neutralize those biases to a considerable degree—never completely, but sufficiently to enable the historian to draw what may be termed "legitimate" conclusions from his or her study. Such conclusions would avoid the traps of a mindless objectivism, a solipsistic subjectivism, and an endless relativization of facts. A legitimate conclusion is one that not only avoids identification with known outside pressures or interferences but also reflects an attempt to understand the period under discussion from its own perspective and in its own terms. We realize that another age will reinterpret the same events in its own distinct way; hopefully, our own findings will become part of any future analysis, if we state, to ourselves as well as to our public, what our biases may be.

Let me state my biases. I think that the planned total murder of a people was an unprecedented catastrophe in human civilization. It happened because it could happen; if it could not have happened, it would not have done so. And because it happened once, it can happen again. Any historical event is a possibility before it becomes a fact, but when it becomes a fact, it also serves as a possible precedent. And although no event will ever be repeated exactly, it will, if it is followed by similar events, become the first in a line of analogous happenings. The Holo-

caust can be a precedent, or it can become a warning. My bias is, in a sense, political: I believe we ought to do everything in our power to make sure it is a warning, not a precedent.

My second bias is that I am not neutral as between Nazism and anti-Nazism. I detest Nazism. I am against antisemitism and racism of any sort. I am not neutral there, either. I believe, on the strength of the historical evidence, that the Nazi regime was just about the worst regime that ever disfigured the face of this earth. Worst from what point of view? From a basically liberal point of view that, in line with Jewish and other traditions, sees human life as a supreme value. In all this I am not being "objective"; but an objectivity that would reject these starting points would be nonobjective, besides being totally unacceptable to me because it would run counter to what I assume—another clear bias—to be the understanding that most people have of morality. Morality, in this context, is based on the idea that acts or intentions that run counter to the right of individuals and groups to exist, to live fully, also run counter to the existence of human life altogether, hence their unacceptability. Morality as here presented is an absolute value, then—absolute, that is, as long as one posits the continuation of the human race as a desired condition.

Now that I have stated my biases, and before we deal with the definition of *Holocaust*, we have to sidestep what appears to be another pitfall, namely, our propensity to say that because something happened, it had to happen. The American Revolution happened, but it did not have to happen. If British politicians had understood the importance of the tax issue to the American colonists and the danger of a successful rebellion, they might well have turned events toward a Canada-like resolution. Likewise, it was the obstinacy of the French royalist regime that led to the storming of the Bastille. World War II might well have been averted, in their own best interest as it turned out, by Britain, France, and the USSR, as late as June 1939 (when military delegations of the three Powers were discussing a possible alliance against Germany), had they overcome their mutual suspicions.

The scourge of determinism, Marxist or otherwise, is very much in evidence in discussions of the Holocaust, and I must say clearly that the Holocaust happened but that it did not have to. It was, to be sure, one of the possibilities inherent in the European situation, but not the only one. True, from a certain point onward—and one could perhaps, with some effort, establish that point—the annihilation of the Jews became inevitable, given Nazi ideology, the development of German society and bureaucracy, and German political and military superiority in Europe. Or perhaps it became inevitable that annihilation should be attempted. But if we retreat in time from early 1941 to the beginning of the war in 1939, or before that, then the Holocaust was not inevitable. Anglo-French-Soviet talks in the late spring of 1939 might have prevented German expansion, at least in the form that it ultimately took. Equally, a different coalition of Powers around the Sudeten issue in 1938, coupled with the disaffection of the German military group led by Ludwig Beck, might have prevented the development toward war and thus the opportunity for the Nazis to act upon their murderous ideology.⁵

Intentionalist historians, such as Eberhard Jäckel, Helmut Krausnick, Gerald Fleming, and Lucy Dawidowicz, have argued that Hitler's intentions, and therefore his role, in the process leading up to the Holocaust are central because of the godlike position he occupied in the regime; the other Nazis were an indispensable supporting cast. The entourage of Hitler, according to Jäckel, was rather uncomfortable about the developing decisions to mass-murder the Jews.⁴ Heinrich Himmler, for instance, did not envisage mass murder before 1941, as his memorandum of May 25, 1940, on the treatment of aliens in Poland, shows; he says there that the idea of physically destroying a nation was a Bolshevik concept unacceptable to Germans.⁵ Structuralists or functionalists, such as Hans Mommsen and Goetz Aly, have explained the factors bringing about the Holocaust by concentrating on the development of social and economic structures that led to impasses that more or less forced the Germans to take the most radical solutions. They do not believe that ideology or decisions by central authorities were at all crucial, but even

they would agree that without approval by Hitler and his closest circle the murder would have been impossible.⁶

A new finding in the Moscow archive, published in Germany in 1999, puts this discussion—which in any case has been superseded by analyses that combine the two perspectives—in a new light. A part of Heinrich Himmler's appointment notebook has come to light, for December 1941. On the 18th he notes that he discussed the "Jewish question" (*Judenfrage*) with Hitler and that the result was "*als Partisanen auszurotten*"—"to exterminate [them] as partisans," which probably means to exterminate them on the pretext that they are partisans. It cannot refer to the countries outside the occupied areas of the USSR, because in 1941 it would not have made any sense to accuse German or Czech or Italian Jews of being partisans. In the occupied Soviet areas extermination had been going on for months already, and Hitler had been receiving the detailed reports of the *Einsatzgruppen* (murder squads). The Himmler note may indicate approval by Hitler of a propaganda line that had been pursued in the East vis-à-vis the German soldiers and that could be used for Germans generally. This alone already indicates that Hitler was involved as the central decisionmaker. It also, and incidentally, indicates that Reinhard Heydrich occupied a subordinate position; the person who discussed these things with the dictator and received his instructions was Himmler. Six days before that, on December 12, as Joseph Goebbels's diary shows, Hitler spoke in front of some fifty top Nazi officials, Gauleiters and others, and reminded them that he had warned of the coming annihilation of the Jews if a world war broke out (initiated by the Jews, as he put it on January 30, 1939). On December 11, 1941, Germany had declared war on the United States in the wake of Pearl Harbor and the American declaration of war on Japan. The situation that he had "predicted" in 1939 had come about, and the time had come to do what he had told the Jews he would do: *Vernichtung* (annihilation).⁷

We probably do not have before us a Hitler "decision," because Hitler rarely operated that way. But we may well have here a statement that Hitler intended as a general guide to action, in effect a call to his

minions to get to work and to show initiative in implementing the guideline. Most historians do not think that such a guideline had ever been uttered in any formal way, perhaps only in private discussions. But on December 12, 1941, there was a clear expression of what was known in the Third Reich as "the Führer's wish"—a euphemism for the way he ordered things to happen. On the face of it, the intentionalists have it; on closer examination, however, we see that without the readiness of the party and state structures to accept and execute this "wish," Hitler would not have formally expressed it. Plainly, *some* of the historians' debates are now out of date: Hitler *was* the decisive factor, though by no means the only one, and he was not the weak dictator that some historians have posited. He was directly involved. He pointed out the direction in which he wanted things to develop. German society was involved, too, both at the top and at the middle, and the lower ranges became part of the consensus.

Another recent and important correction to our understanding is that added by a group of young German historians working with Ulrich Herbert, of the University of Freiburg.⁸ Herbert and his coauthors present examples from eastern Galicia, Lithuania, Belorussia (Belarus), the "Generalgouvernement" (Poland), and France that show how local initiatives led to the mass execution of Jews in late 1941 and early 1942. The perpetrators rationalized these murder campaigns by practical considerations, such as the "need" to find lodgings for Germans, or to carry out resettlements of Germans and Poles, or to do away with superfluous mouths to feed, or to avenge the killings of German soldiers by the French underground movement in Paris. In fact, behind all these rationalizations lay an ideological motivation in the form of a consensus developed prior to the war by a radicalized, antisemitic intelligentsia, who found it natural to adopt the ever more radical solutions that the Nazi core elite expected them to. Neither the Berlin center nor the local groups could have acted without the other. Herbert talks of mutual understanding and of constant communication between central authorities and the periphery. The Berlin leaders, he says, were motivated by

racist political ideology when they insisted on large-scale "solutions" involving population transfers. These transfers were planned around the "green table" at the Berlin center. There the strategic decisions were made, so Hitler was undoubtedly present.⁹ I shall return to the Nazi decisionmaking process later, but it is clear that the explanation has to be multicausal, that the old rift between intentionalists and functionalists is outdated, and that ideology is the central determinant of the Holocaust.

Just as the murder of the Jews was not inevitable, it was not inexplicable, as I will argue in the next chapter. An aspect of that discussion belongs here: the inclination of people who take refuge in mysticism to argue that an event of such magnitude—a "tremendum," as they sometimes call it—cannot ultimately be explained.¹⁰ This retreat into mysticism is usually reserved for the Holocaust, whereas all other events are deemed liable to rational explanation. I am afraid I cannot accept that exception to the rule. The murder was committed by humans for reasons whose sources are found in history and which can therefore be rationally analyzed. The mystifiers, with the best of intentions, achieve the opposite of their presumed aim, which is to achieve identification and empathy with the victims. You cannot identify with what is inexplicable. True, the depth of pain and suffering of Holocaust victims is difficult to describe, and writers, artists, poets, dramatists, and philosophers will forever grapple with the problem of articulating it—and as far as this is concerned, the Holocaust is certainly not unique, because "indescribable" human suffering is forever there and is forever being described. In principle, then, the Holocaust is a human event, so it can be explained, because it was perpetrated for what were unfortunately human reasons. This does not mean that the explanation is easy. On the contrary.

In a brilliant statement (in Jerusalem, on December 24, 1997), in the course of a discussion of his latest book, Saul Friedländer explained that the Holocaust presents problems that have so far not been solved.¹¹ In the past he himself had used the expression "the unease of the

historian."¹² He did not mean that these problems cannot ultimately be understood, but that tremendous difficulties stand in the way of understanding them. He did not want to imply a mystical interpretation of the Holocaust events; but because convincing explanations are still unavailable or are being argued about, he wanted to avoid what he called "closure" of the argument, as though we historians had found satisfactory answers to our questions. He advocated a certain open-endedness whenever we put forward our views: we might, he implied, be wrong—there is nothing terrible about that—and, in any case, others will come along and present new findings and insights.

On the face of it, this argument is almost self-evident and would hold true for any historical (and many other) investigations, but it is especially apposite regarding the Holocaust. Because I basically agree with Friedländer's approach, all I am trying to say in these chapters should therefore be taken as obviously subject to discussion and change.

We now come to the problem of definitions. Is the Holocaust definable? Is it desirable to define it? After all, definitions are abstractions from reality and are useful only insofar as they help us to better understand the world around us. Any historiographical definition is designed to help us understand the event or events being defined. Because life is infinitely more complex than any definition, definitions, *by definition*, can never be fully adequate to the events they are supposed to define. We can but hope that they approximate descriptions of reality. Inevitably, our definitions are selective—they deal with parts of a phenomenon. That makes it even more important for our definitions to be as precise as possible in defining at least those parts of the phenomenon that they claim to define. And if experience shows that the definition does not fit reality, then the definition has to be changed, not the other way around. In order to define the Holocaust, it *must* be compared to other events if it is, as I have just argued, a human event. It is only by comparison that we can answer the question of whether it is unprecedented and has features not found in similar events.

The term *genocide* was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a refugee Polish-

Jewish lawyer in the United States, in late 1942 or early 1943. Lemkin's definition is contradictory. On the one hand, he defines *genocide* as the "destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group. . . . Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves."¹³ (It seems that he intends to say "the groups as such," not necessarily all the individuals in them.) Yet in the preface of the same book he says that "the practice of extermination of nations and ethnic groups . . . is called by the author 'genocide.'" The destruction of the essential foundations of national life includes, according to Lemkin, the destruction of the national economic structure, its religious institutions, its moral fiber, its education system, and, always, selective mass killings of parts of the targeted population.¹⁴ What he describes are two distinct alternatives: one, a radical and murderous denationalization accompanied by mass murder, which destroys the group as an entity but leaves many or most of the individuals composing it alive; the other, murder of every single individual of the targeted group. It may perhaps be argued that partial mass annihilation leads to total extermination. But this is not what Lemkin says, though such a possibility certainly cannot be discounted.

The discussion here is not just academic. Lemkin's definitions were adopted, in large part, by the United Nations. In the Genocide Convention, approved on December 9, 1948, *genocide* is defined as "any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical or religious group, as such." Again, both meanings are included, and the phrase "in whole or in part" indicates that what is meant is not the development of partial destruction into total murder but two variations that do not necessarily follow one upon the other.

The historical context for Lemkin's work in early 1943 consisted of the information he possessed as to what was happening to Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Russians, and others. Horrifying information had been received concerning the fate of the Jews, but decent human beings evinced an

understandable reluctance to believe that the accounts were literally and completely true. What was happening to some of these people, mainly perhaps the Poles, fitted Lemkin's description of denationalization accompanied by selective mass murder. It seems that he made his definition fit real historical developments as he saw them; the vagueness with which he contemplates the possibility of murdering all Jews reflects the state of consciousness in America of the Jewish fate.

We then come to 1948. The United Nations is not a symposium of scholars—far from it. Documents emerging from that quarter are less than perfect, because they reflect political pressures and horse trading between states. Thus, unsuccessful pressure was exercised in 1948 to include, for instance, the destruction of political groups within the definition of genocide. The inclusion of religious groups—not a part of Lemkin's definition—was accepted after a long struggle. The lack of consistency in the U.N. convention is apparent the moment we continue the quotation: Genocide, it says, means any of the following acts: "(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."¹⁵ We again see inclusion of both partial and total destruction.

The conclusion to draw is that one ought to differentiate between the intent to destroy a group in a context of selective mass murder and the intent to annihilate every person of that group. To make this as simple as possible, I would suggest retaining the term *genocide* for "partial" murder and the term *Holocaust* for total destruction. I will argue that *Holocaust* can be used in two ways: to describe what happened to the Jews at Nazi hands and to describe what might happen to others if the Holocaust of the Jewish people becomes a precedent for similar actions. Whichever way *Holocaust* is used, it and *genocide* are clearly connected; they belong to the same species of human action, and the differences

between them remain to be seen, beyond the obvious one of partial versus total destruction.

The next point to consider is crucial: which groups to describe when we talk about genocide. Lemkin talked only about national or ethnic groups, and he would probably have agreed to extend his category to include so-called racial groups. The U.N. convention adds religious groups. A number of scholars have added political groups as well.¹⁶ Neither of these last two additions makes much sense. People persecuted because of their religious beliefs can, in principle if not always in practice, go over to the persecutors' religious faith and save themselves. The persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages is an excellent example: accepting baptism usually—not always—meant rescue. During the Nazi regime, Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted in Germany because they refused to recognize the supreme authority of the state and objected to being recruited into the army. But those few members of the group who yielded and joined the army or who acknowledged the Nazi state as having authority over them were no longer persecuted, and if they were in concentration camps, they were usually released.

The same applies to political persecutees. Even in Soviet Russia, joining the Communist Party was often—not always—a way of avoiding stigmatization as "bourgeois." Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the Russian aristocracy, became a leading Bolshevik and served as Soviet ambassador to Sweden. Most of the leading Bolsheviks were originally "bourgeois" intellectuals and sometimes former aristocrats. In Nazi Germany, millions of Communists became loyal Nazis.

For both religious and political groups, membership is a matter of choice—again, in principle, if not always in practice. One can change one's religion or one's political color. One cannot change one's ethnicity or nationality or "race"—only the persecutor can do that, as the Germans did when they "Germanized" Polish adults and children. Without such action, there is absolutely no way out for the member of a targeted ethnic or national group: that person is a Pole, or a Rom ("Gypsy"), or a

Jew, or a Serb. Hence my conclusion that the term *genocide* should be used only for attacks on the groups specified by Lemkin.

Genocide, then, is the planned attempt to destroy a national, ethnic, or racial group using measures like those outlined by Lemkin and the U.N. convention, measures that accompany the selective mass murder of members of the targeted group. Holocaust is a radicalization of genocide: a planned attempt to physically annihilate every single member of a targeted ethnic, national, or racial group.

How important is such a definition? It may help us differentiate between different crimes against humanity, the ultimate purpose of such analyses being to help lessen, and in some future perhaps do away with, such horrors. In the end, as I have pointed out, reality is more complicated by far than our attempts to describe it. I would therefore suggest that these definitions be used to describe a continuum of human mass destruction. One could even use the term *self-destruction*, because by destroying other humans, the perpetrators very radically diminish their own humanity. Such an approach may well use the paradigms proposed by Rudolph J. Rummel in his books *Democide* and *Death by Government*.¹⁷

According to Rummel, between 1900 and 1987 close to 170 million civilians (and disarmed POWs) were killed by governments and quasi-governmental organizations (political parties, etc.), the overwhelming majority of them by nondemocratic regimes. He calls this phenomenon "democide" (killing of people). He says that 38 million of the people killed were victims of genocide (he uses the definition of the U.N. convention), and close to 6 million of those were killed in the Holocaust. There is no reason not to expand Rummel's paradigm to include wars, which are reciprocal mass murders committed by opposing groups of people, usually males, distinguished from one another by funny clothes called uniforms; such mass murders, too, are committed at the instigation of governments and quasi-governmental organizations. Adding wars gives us a continuum of human actions of deadly violence ranging from wars, via the murder of civilians for a vast variety of reasons, to genocide and Holocaust. This does not mean that wars are "better" than

genocides, nor that the mass murder of civilians is less reprehensible than genocide; it does mean that there are obvious connections between all these, and that occasionally one form merges into another.

No gradation of human suffering is possible. A soldier who lost a leg and a lung at Verdun suffered. How can one measure his suffering against the horrors that Japanese civilians endured at Hiroshima? How can one measure the suffering of a Rom woman at Auschwitz, who saw her husband and children die in front of her eyes, against the suffering of a Jewish woman at the same camp who underwent the same experience? Extreme forms of human suffering are not comparable, and one should never say that one form of mass murder is "less terrible," or even "better," than another. The difference between the Holocaust and less radical genocides lies not in the amount of sadism or the depth of hellish suffering, but elsewhere. It is now time to turn to comparisons that will clarify the difference.

chapter two

Is the Holocaust Explicable?

It has often been said that if the Holocaust is totally inexplicable, utterly mysterious, or "uniquely unique"—in a sense that the author of the phrase, A. Roy Eckardt, did *not* mean—then it is also outside history and therefore irrelevant to rational discourse.¹ Absolute uniqueness thus leads to its opposite, total trivialization: if the Holocaust is a onetime, inexplicable occurrence, then it is a waste of time to deal with it. Some authors take good care to state that when they talk about its inexplicability, they do not mean the processes that led to the establishment of the Nazi state, or the irrational rationale of establishing ghettos or concentration camps, but some inner quality, expressed by the senseless brutality of the perpetrators, the silence of the bystanders, the stunned reaction of the unsuspecting victims, the vastness of the crime, and the allegedly inexplicable involvement of very large numbers of civilized people.² How do cold bureaucratic decisions become machine-gun bullets and crystals of poison gas? The reply offered is, not infrequently, that we will never know.

I have written on this topic before, more than twenty years ago, in a statement against mystification.³ Then, as now, I disagreed with some good friends, chief among whom was, and is, Elie Wiesel, whose work and words I greatly admire. Wiesel's stand is contradictory, but I think he sees no harm in paradoxes. On the one hand, he says that there are aspects of the Holocaust, mainly the suffering of the victims and the brutality of the perpetrators, that can never be fully grasped or understood, and that therefore the Holocaust is ultimately inexplicable. On the other hand, he does everything in his power to transmit those experiences and make people understand them. His readers see the Holocaust shrouded in irrationality and mystification and consigned to an impenetrable mist—from which they inevitably run away. He often expresses his fear that in future generations no one will remember the Holocaust—a prophecy that might be fulfilled if the mystification spread by him and many, many others wins out. Yet by his great literary work, he actually does the opposite of mystifying: he explains. The mystifiers, fortunately, act against their own predilections.

My own response is that of a historian. From the historical point of view—and history, after all, is not a science but a post facto reconstruction of the course of human events in accordance with certain rules for sifting facts and analyzing sources—several aspects should, I think, be considered. First, is the Holocaust comparable to other historical events? Second, if it is comparable, what are the differences from, as well as the similarities with, such events? Third, are there possible models of explanation to apply to the baffling problems that the Holocaust presents? Lastly, are such models convincing enough to make the Holocaust explicable in principle, even though we may have to grapple with alternative explanations for a very long time to come?

If the answers to these questions were that certain "internal" aspects of the Holocaust are ultimately beyond the reach of human explanation, we would still have to contend with the argument that, in that case, the Holocaust is beyond human history and can be explained only by the intrusion of forces beyond human comprehension and hence external to

human experience. Terms such as *devilish* for the Nazi mind and *holy* for the victims might point to such conclusions, although they may also be a *façon de parler* to indicate the moral quality of perpetrator and victim. If some God or some Devil, or a combination of both, or some mysterious force that is neither, were drawn in to explain the inexplicable, or if the event were simply left unexplained, then again we would be removing the Holocaust to an ahistoric sphere where it could not be reached by rational thinking, not even by rational explanations of the irrational.⁴ The inevitable conclusion must again be that if we label the Holocaust as inexplicable, it becomes relevant to lamentations and liturgy, but not to historical analysis.

Some historians (including myself), social scientists, theologians, and other specialists have come to the conclusion that the Holocaust can be repeated, even though it is in some ways the most extreme form of genocide known to us to date and the first known occasion for certain types of murderous crimes or criminal thinking, as I will try to show later. We live in an age in which Holocaust-like events are possible. Obviously, the Holocaust could have been avoided by forces that had little to do with the Jews. I have already mentioned the abandonment by France, Britain, and the Soviet Union of their military discussions in the summer of 1939, which were to have led to a military alliance against Nazi Germany. This outcome was in their own worst interest, for they could well have avoided many millions of casualties. Other examples could be cited to show the lack of determinism in the development of a situation that made the Holocaust possible. Had there been no such event as the Holocaust, would we have been able to say that a Holocaust was avoided? Surely this is absurd, because we would not have known what a Holocaust was. Once it has occurred, however, we can say that we live at a time when the elements that produced the Holocaust are with us. Because historical events never repeat themselves exactly, that is, they are not clonelike in all their details, we should say that Holocaust-like events are possible if conditions similar or equivalent to those that produced the Holocaust in World War II were to arise.

The difficulty could be expanded but, paradoxically, eased as well by arguing that all of human history is in a sense inexplicable and must be guided by some extra-historical forces, good or bad or both, or by forces lacking in values we call human. The Holocaust would then be only an extreme form of this essential inexplicability of human destiny. It is very hard to argue with such a metaphysical explication of inexplicability, but one might put forward the argument that we are dealing, in all cases, with human actions, performed toward or against or in favor of humans. The assumption is that humans are related in makeup, and actions performed by any one individual could in principle be performed by others as well, so the explicability of such actions is a prerequisite for human relations. Human attitudes in any society at any period are distinct and recognizable; and given their interrelatedness, they must be understood in order to have meaning for anyone—hence the accessibility, in principle at least, of the actions of one individual or a group of individuals by others.

Of course, no individual can feel the pain of another. When your child scratches its finger, the pain is the child's, and however much you empathize, the pain is not yours to feel. But you know how it feels because of your own similar experiences. This trivial example becomes less trivial when we consider criminal actions. We can understand the motivations for criminal actions because we have experienced similar or equivalent motivations ("temptations"), although we may reject the conclusions that bring the thieves or murderers to their crimes. Occasionally, as in the Holocaust, the capabilities of humans to act in a certain fashion expand, capabilities that were not suspected before. The very fact, however, that a certain action occurred means that human beings, in their souls, instincts, drives, whatever, contain the seed of such possible actions. This holds true for all types of actions—whether we define them as evil, good, or neither.

Indeed, the basis of intelligible historical writing is this comparability of human experience. If there are recognizable patterns in the unrolling of human history, then there is a point in examining them. They