Violence and the Nation-State

Prof. Minna Rozen
Department of Jewish History, University of Haifa
minnarozen.co.il

The period between August 1914 and May 1945 is engraved in the world's memory as a time of endless violence—in particular against civilian non-combatants—and the extermination of entire populations based on their ethnic, religious, or ideological affiliations. It was a time marked by economic exploitation of conquered populations and their resources, the emergence of heretofore unknown forms of violence, and loss of life on an unprecedented scale.

In this lecture, I wish to weave the violence of the period under discussion into a broader thematic and chronological tapestry. Lethal assaults against civilian populations in times of war or crisis by groups in a position of superiority have been a deliberate policy

throughout human history. The notion that war is the business of armed men fighting for lofty goals is a romantic invention created in medieval Europe—and even then, it had no basis in reality.

Man is by nature evil

Violence and aggression are part of human nature. Man curbs these tendencies only because he understands that in the short term they are liable to work against him, whether directly or indirectly. He unleashes them in situations where he is given to understand that violence is permissible, and even desirable. This is not a universal truth, but it certainly applies to a substantial portion of mankind. In the 1960s and '70s, two well-known social psychology experiments were conducted on the inflicting of violence.

The first was that of Stanley Milgram from Yale University, in which a "teacher" was supposed to administer an electric shock to a "learner" if the latter gave a wrong answer. The voltage was increased for each error. The experiment was conducted in 1961, concurrently with the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in an effort to examine whether ordinary people would carry out criminal acts in response to instructions from a perceived authority figure. Milgram planned to conduct the experiment first in the U.S. and then in Germany in order to examine if cultural conditioning played a role in the results; however, the findings in the U.S. were so disturbing that he decided to forego the next stage and focus instead on processing the results. The study findings were subsequently criticized, but it was generally conceded that at least 60 percent of the participants were willing to commit extremely painful

and potentially lethal acts of violence against another person within the framework of the experiment, in which they were instructed to "punish" the learners who had failed.

The second experiment, which tested behavior under simulated prison conditions, was conducted at Stanford University in 1971 by a team of researchers led by the psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Volunteer psychology students were divided into two groups: guards and prisoners. The guards were forbidden to touch the prisoners, but they were allowed to do anything else to them. The experiment, which had been planned to last two weeks, deteriorated to such a level that Zimbardo was forced to terminate it after only six days. It emerged that one third of the "guards," who were completely "normative" individuals, had quickly descended to a state of sadistic enjoyment of their roles. Many of the guards

participated in cruel and dehumanizing treatment of the prisoners, and stated that they were sorry to see the experience end. And Zimbardo himself admitted that he had become so enmeshed in the experiment that he had turned from a researcher into part of the trial he himself was conducting.

Zimbardo's experiment, like Milgram's, drew criticism of various types, the crux of which—I believe—was actually alarm at this troubling revelation about human nature.

To return to our subject, both experiments indicate that with ideological support, and permission on the part of a higher authority, even individuals who are ostensibly "ordinary" can degenerate into extreme violence. Further, the violence intensifies more readily if it is allowed to escalate gradually.

Hannah Arendt made use of the results of Milgram's experiment in formulating her theory of the banality of evil, as did Christopher Browning in profiling "ordinary men" who sunk to the level of mass murderers in German-occupied Poland. Browning applied Arendt's thesis to Reserve Battalion 101 of the German police, who perpetrated mass executions of Jews in Eastern Europe. He presented them as a group of law-abiding citizens who found themselves in a situation where they were expected to behave in a non-normative manner and who fulfilled these expectations. Daniel Goldhagen utilized the same group and the same thesis to argue that Germany's cultural history conditioned its citizens to act in precisely the same way as the members of Battalion 101. In effect, his theory is that every German citizen, when placed in the situation of this Battalion would have participated in the atrocities that they committed. We

will not go into the academic scandal that took place in the wake of his book's publication, or the onslaught of criticism it evoked from various sources. Instead, we will cite only the argument that is relevant to our thesis, namely, that the portrayal of German society as a prisoner of its own culture and history negates the notion of free choice—a subject I will be returning to later on.

Authority as a motivating force for mass violence against stigmatized groups: a broad perspective

I would like to shift now from the specific to the general, and the scope of our discussion. In my opinion, an overview of human history will show that the notion of authority is much broader than that posited by Milgram or Zimbardo. It can easily be demonstrated that any ideologically based directive that justifies violence will cause a large portion of the indoctrinated to engage in

violent acts toward those whom that ideology rationalized as "deserving" such treatment. Religious ideology was, and is, a powerful force conferring legitimacy on acts of slaughter and brutality on a massive scale. Various forms of social ideology compete with religious ideologies with considerable success. Ideology is a source of authority. The Crusaders did not require their leaders' authority to massacre the Jewish communities they passed through. They drew their authority from the very raison d'être of the Crusades—the physical elimination of anyone who was not Christian. The annihilation of the Albigensians in southern France initially required papal authority, but the cause was taken up with great enthusiasm by the French monarchy and its armies. The massacre of the Tutsi by the Hutu in Rwanda derived its justification from an ideology of social injustice cloaked in a form of racism

imported from Europe. To carry out these atrocities, it was necessary to have a religious ruling elite to explain the necessity of the action to its perpetrators.

Beginning in the late 18th century, religious ideology—which had been the major driving force behind widespread violence throughout the Middle Ages—was gradually replaced by the "national idea." From this point onward, wherever nationalism gained a foothold, it led to a situation where the nation fighting for self-determination would do everything in its power to assimilate other groups, expel them, or destroy them. We see this phenomenon at work in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nation-states on its ruins. Likewise, it is evident in the processes that accompanied the establishment of nation-states in Europe on the remnants of the Tsarist, Austro-Hungarian, and Prussian empires following the Treaty of Versailles. The concept

of nationality—encompassing religion, language, ethnic origin, and race—was disseminated to the masses, becoming a source of authority for acts of violence. The magnitude of the loss of civilian and military lives during this period stems from technological developments in the Western world, which evolved hand in hand with the concept of nations. The extermination of European Jewry was exceptional only in that it did _not_ take place against the backdrop of violent conflict between the Jewish population and the host states. The combination of religious antisemitism, which had existed since the dawn of Christianity, and the inability of the new nation-states to accept a population seen in certain places until the early 19th century (and in most of Europe, until after Versailles) as inferior and undeserving of civil rights, was fueled by the worldwide Depression and access to sophisticated technology, leading to the horrific results.

National movements and the proliferation of European antisemitism in the 19th and 20th centuries

Religious antisemitism remained alive and well throughout Christian Europe from the Middle Ages onward. But until the start of the 19th century, its imperialistic, autocratic structure largely prevented it from becoming a catalyst for wide-scale violence against Jews. Empires and autocratic states, like all other states, strive for stability, peace, and tranquility. In an autocratic structure, mass violence toward certain groups can reach the point of implementation only with the consent of the ruling power. And in most case, such measures are the last resort of rulers who seek to stamp out rebellion or deflect the fury of the masses over their own failings onto various minority groups. It is important to note the clear difference between a license to kill for religious

reasons and that granted in response to real or imagined

rebelliousness or as a way of channeling popular anger.

In the first instance, individuals from the minority group,

or the entire group, can save themselves by converting to

a different religion. In the other cases, however—and this

includes large-scale violence for ideological/nationalistic

reasons—the minority group is abandoned to its fate,

without hope of rescue.

The flourishing of nationalist ideologies placed the

Jews in Christian lands in an extremely hazardous

position. Although Jewish existence was not secure or

comfortable even before the late 18th century, it was

governed by the well-known 4th-century maxim of St.

Augustus, based on the Book of Psalms, chapter 59: "Do

not slay them **lest my people forget; by Your might,**

make them wander and cast them down..." In the

Augustine interpretation, the Jews have the right to an

existence—albeit a wretched, downtrodden one—as an eternal testament to the Christian truth. But nationalist ideology merged all the stereotypes associated with the Jew with the notion that he had no place in the new family of nations and must therefore be banished from it in any way possible.

This prejudice stemmed initially from the infuriating situation of a group that knew Christian truth but continued to deny it—despite being forced to pay for its obstinacy with a life of misery, humiliation, and scorn. From here, it was only a short leap to ascribing demonic traits to the Jews that endangered the true believers and their faith. This emotional and cultural "baggage" fed into nationalist ideology, making it much more dangerous than religious bigotry alone.

The modern national idea saw land and blood as intertwined. In the early 19th century, the prevailing

illusion was that nations were pure, homogeneous entities. The Jews could in no way meet this criterion. The same intellectual milieu that gave rise to the principle of nations also spawned modern-day antisemitism.

Along with the imperative of resisting foreign occupation, the Napoleonic wars brought the Russian national idea to the Tsarist empire. Somewhat absurdly, the Russian intelligentsia of the time enlisted the Bible to generate the necessary enthusiasm for going to war against the occupiers. The spread of the Russian translation of the Bible, and its use during the Napoleonic wars, led to an interest in Jewish history that the Russian leadership perceived as threatening. This was because, as a result of the divisions of Poland and the Napoleonic wars, Russia acquired huge swathes of territory where Jews resided, and for the first time, the

Jew was transformed from a marginal consideration to an entity that could no longer be ignored by the state. In 1825, when biblical inspiration was no longer needed to repel the invader, all the Russian translations of the Bible were collected and destroyed. The masses of Jews who became part of the Tsarist Empire upon the division of Poland were confined to area known as the Pale of Settlement. There were ostensibly rational reasons for establishing the Pale in the western part of the Empire in 1791: encouraging the migration of Jews to these new territories annexed by Russia in the south and west, and developing these frontiers; "reforming" the Jews, integrating them into society and turning them into loyal subjects; and protecting the Russian population from having their livelihood "stolen" by the Jews. But in practice, the Pale of Settlement limited the area where Jews could live and work and "exiled" them from

Russian society. It was considered necessary to distance

them due to their dangerous traits. And indeed,

throughout the 19th century, the Tsarist censors did not

allow the Jews to be portrayed in a positive light in

Russian works of literature: The Jews cannot, and should

not be seen as have good qualities. Such pillars of

Russian culture as Turgenev and Ryleyev joined the

effort to create a repulsive portrait of the Jew as a spy,

usurer, smuggler, miser, and possessor of inhuman traits.

A leading figure in shaping the image of the Jew in the

first half of the 19th century was Jan Tadeusz Bułharyn

(1789–1859), a Pole educated at the military academy in

St. Petersburg. Bułharyn took part in the war against

Napoleon, and was an author, journalist, critic, and

publisher who had a major influence on those who

followed in his footsteps. Here are a few examples of his work:

In the story "Esterka" (ЭСТЕРКА), Bułharyn describes a "the fearsome court—the Sanhedrin" gathering at night in the forest and sentencing the heroine to death for transgressing Mosaic law. At its core, this is a love story between a Polish king and young Jewish maiden of fourteen. The author shows Jewish society pressuring Esterka to induce the king to grant trade benefits to the Jews. And "then the Jewish people will be revitalized and all the gold will flow to them; then the cornerstone of the new Jerusalem will be laid." It was no accident that Bułharyn chose the name Esterka as an allusion to the biblical figure, emphasizing the humiliating aspect of the Book of Esther.

In the novel *Mazepa* (Мазепа, 1833–1834), Bułharyn describes the Jews as follows: "The swarms of Yids were seen by the people as vermin that had crawled out of their holes before the world was created." Bułharyn was one of the first to concoct the notion of the Jews controlling the world: "What rules the world is not power—as believed by those not privy to the inner workings of politics, but cunning. Catholic Europe is run by the Jews, their priests, and their women; that is to say, by money, prejudice, and passion..." Mazepa himself, who dreams of ruling, "is nothing more than a feeble tool manipulated by the powers-that-be, meaning the Yids, who decided to make him the independent leader of Ukraine for their own benefit." "Even the owners of the Russian estates," wrote Bułharyn in a different novel, *Ivan Vizhigin*, "in fact belong to the Jews."

Bułharyn's ideas were not an isolated phenomenon,

and were apparently widespread in Europe. In 1868, a

German journalist by the name of Hermann Goedsche

published the novel *Biarritz* about an imaginary trip to

Prague. The work borrowed freely from Alexander

Dumas, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu. In one chapter,

entitled "The Prague Cemetery," he wrote about a secret

conspiracy of thirteen rabbis who meet once every

hundred years at an ancient cemetery in Prague to plan

how to take over the world. The rabbis, who represent

the twelve tribes of Israel, gather around the biblical

Jacob, who is magically conjured up as the thirteenth

figure. There they discuss their quest for global

domination, and the "distribution of labor" among them.

The chapter in question was published in the French

newspaper *Le Contemporain* in 1881. In 1876, it was

translated into Russian, and in 1891 agents of the

Okhrana (secret police) began circulating it widely in order to deflect popular anger away from the Tsarist regime. The book became one of the best-selling works in history.

It is customary to view modern antisemitism as an outgrowth of the emancipation of European Jewry. It should be recalled, however, that the emancipation—like the concept of the nation-state—was a product of the French Revolution. The two are interdependent. The emancipation paved the way for the entry of Jews into social circles that had previously been off-limits to them, and for economic and social competition with the majority society, leading to fierce incitement against them. But this ignores a no less important aspect, which led to the delegitimization of the Jewish people. To Christians, Jews could exist in the Christian world as inferior and subjugated, but not as beings with equal

rights; hence, the emancipation eliminated the legal basis for a Jewish presence. True, it is hard to speak of emancipation with respect to Tsarist Russia, yet the most violent expressions of Russian antisemitism took place in areas where Jews enjoyed relative freedom, specifically Novorossiya (New Russia), which was annexed to the Empire only in the late 18th century. In other words, with or without rights, it was the departure from a state of total social and economic inferiority that undermined the Jews' legitimacy and enabled the Tsarist regime to give free rein to the killing of Jews. The result was the series of horrific pogroms that took place in southern Russia between 1881 and 1906.

German nationalism also emerged as a result of the Napoleonic wars. Its major theoreticians, such as Herder, Hegel, Fichte, and Treitschke, created a picture of an ideal German state like no other—homogeneous in terms

of culture, religion and collective historical memory. Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) saw the Jews as the personification of the liberal approach, which was foreign to the German way of life. He argued that the Jewish presence in Germany was a destructive influence on the German state and society, and negated the right of German Jews to any distinctive national characteristics; if they wished to remain in Germany they would have to assimilate fully into German society. It was von Treitschke who coined the slogan: "Die Juden sind unser Unglück!" (the Jews are our misfortune). This motto, which was later adopted by the Nazi party, was displayed at official gatherings, and appeared on the front page of every edition of *Der Stürmer* from 1927 onward.

The nation-states that were established following the "Great War" were not liberal. The unprecedented casualties of the war led some to ponder the reasons for

their defeat, and others to try to root out the foreigners in their midst. Following the First World War, tens of thousands of Russian exiles fleeing Communist persecution streamed to Germany in general and Berlin in particular. The October Revolution was seen by them as a Jewish plot. Among the exiles was Fyodor Weinberg, a former officer in the Tsar's army, who published a German translation of the *Protocols*, immediately selling 100,000 copies. In the *Priziv* newspaper, published by Weinberg in Berlin, he used the *Protocols* as an argument in favor of exterminating all Jews. In the atmosphere that prevailed in Germany, most notably among the newly released soldiers and the right, the *Protocols* offered a reasonable explanation for Germany's incomprehensible defeat and fueled the myth of the Jew as "back-stabber." By 1933, more than 30 editions of the book had been sold and hundreds of

thousands of copies were in circulation. The hope of the new nation-states was not to achieve a democratic society but to secure exclusive status for the dominant nation in an "organic" society incapable of displaying tolerance toward an ethnic minority of a different culture. Xenophobia fanned the flames of nationalism, and there was a feeling that foreigners were conspiring against the new nations from within and without. All the new states were highly suspicious and hostile toward the minorities in their midst, especially if the latter had once ruled over them. Their shattered pride must be redeemed. One of the ways that the new nation-states consolidated themselves was by taking steps to erase the historical memories of minorities from the previous regime.

Examples can be found in a quick glance at the history of the Balkans and of eastern and central Europe. Serbia, Albania, Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria

expended considerable effort in obliterating the memory of the Ottoman Turks, who had ruled over them for centuries. Similarly, they reduced to the bare minimum the rights of the ethnic minorities living under their sovereignty, in an effort to establish a mono-ethnic state. The historical memory of the Albanians in Kosovo was wiped out by the Serbs; that of the Greeks in North Epirus by the Albanians; and that of the Albanians from South Epirus by the Greeks. The memory of the Slavs and Muslims in Macedonia was erased following its annexation by Greece in 1912. Likewise, memories of the Romanians in Transylvania were eradicated by the Hungarians before 1918, while the Hungarian presence was wiped out by the Romanians following 1918. Modern-day Turkey, for its part, did away with the memory of the Armenians and the Greeks.

From the perspective of the new nationalism, the Jews were always a dangerous foreign element. Under the impact of the Holocaust, we tend to forget that between 1918 and 1939, there was nationalist incitement in virtually all of Europe and even Turkey, and concurrently, antisemitic agitation and some degree of delegitimization of Jewish existence in nearly every one of the new nation-states, including Hungary, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.

From nationalism to animalism

How did the shift from the conceptual, historiosophical, literary plane to the reality of physical extermination take place? We must return here to the ideas of Milgram and Zimbardo in their broader sense. In a place and time where those with legal, religious or intellectual authority permit—and even order—the use of violence against

certain groups, large sections of the population receiving these directives will act on this permission, and the violence will snowball. The reasons for this include the benefits to the perpetrators, pressure by the authorities on bystanders to participate in acts of violence in order to turn them into criminal accessories, and pressure exerted by these collaborators on others to take part in the violence for the selfsame reason.

By the late 19th century, violence and murder of minority populations conquered as a result of ethnic conflict had already become the norm. The groundwork for connecting the national idea with the systematic extermination of populations, without the "justification" of an uprising or rebellion, had first been laid long before, and reemerged not long before World War I.

Two cases that I would like to mention here differ from what took place in Nazi-occupied Europe in at least

two respects: magnitude and geopolitical background; that is to say, the numbers were much smaller, and the geopolitical context was not European. They are similar, however, in the link between a nation's sense of superiority and its right to annihilate the people under its rule; its ability to utilize technological innovations not available to the vanquished population; and the exploitation of the resources of the conquered territory. The reference is of course to the slaughter of the South American Indians by the Spanish (in the 16th century), and[1] of the Herero and Namaqua tribes in Namibia by the Germans (1904). The "primordial swamp" was unquestionably in Europe, but the first creatures slithered forth from it years before the First World War.

I wish to cite just one example from World War II Europe which relates not to Nazi Germany but to

---

[1] David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Romania. Romania clung to its refusal to grant equal rights to the Jews even after the Treaty of Versailles, and in fact was the last state to do so. Only in 1923 was a constitution enacted in Romania that rectified the situation; but the step was taken with great reluctance in light of the need to recognize the rights of the hated Hungarian minority that had ruled Transylvania until the war, and of the Transylvanian Jews' identification with Hungarian culture. In both the Regat and Transylvania, most Romanian politicians and intellectuals were tainted by severe antisemitism both before and after 1923. As in many European states, two Fascist nationalist organizations emerged in Romania: the Legion of the Archangel Michael (1926) and the Iron Guard (1930). Both were founded and led by a charismatic and powerful politician named Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Their platform was xenophobic and antisemitic. King

Carol II, fearing for the stability of his monarchy, had

Codreanu assassinated in November 1938. The king had

a Jewish mistress by the name of Magda Lupescu, and

the masses saw the killing of their beloved leader as a

Jewish plot (recalling the story of Esterka). It should be

noted here that, mistress or not, Carol II was far from a

lover of Jews; an antisemite, by his definition, was

"someone who hates Jews more than is necessary...." The

loss of Southern Dobruja to the Bulgarians, Transylvania

to the Hungarians, and Serbia to the USSR was ascribed

to divine punishment for the murder of Codreanu, and

the incitement against him intensified. The masses

surrounded the king's palace shouting "Abdica!"

(abdicate). In the summer of 1940, he fled the country

with his mistress, leaving his 18-year-old son in the

hands of a military junta headed by Ion Antonescu.

Immediately afterward, several members of his inner

circle who had remained in Bucharest were killed. But a string of murders was directed primarily against the city's Jews, culminating on January 22, 1941, when the Legionnaires rounded up 200 Jews—men, women, and children—led them to the city's slaughterhouse, stripped them naked, and placed them on the conveyor belt to endure all the stages of the butchering process. In the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, written when all the atrocities of World War II were already well known, this act was referred to as one of the most brutal pogroms in history. The writers had ample material for comparison.

What, then, was the difference between this slaughter and the acts perpetrated by the Nazis? Organizational ability, logistical support, technological means, perseverance, and the scope of the objective. The latter is also one of the reasons that a majority of the German

people was involved, whether directly or indirectly, in this colossal act of violence.

Unlike Arendt and Browning, I see nothing banal about evil. On the face of it, the results of Milgram's and Zimbardo's experiments absolve the individual of moral responsibility, since they prove that he is destined to choose evil anyway, if given the opportunity. But I believe that the ability to choose between good and evil is ingrained in every human being by virtue of the first human contact that he experiences. The fact that he is alive says that someone took care of him and placed his needs above her own. Thus he knows the difference between good and bad. The choice lies in his hands. As written in the book of Genesis: "Sin crouches at the door...but you can be its master."

Free choice, as portrayed in both the Bible and Greek mythology, reflects the concept that a god or gods knows

in advance what man will choose, though the choice still lies in his hands. The gods knew that Oedipus would slay Laius, but the decision to draw his sword and not to give way was his own. Simon Baron-Cohen's studies on the link between the physiology of the brain and man's ability to feel empathy for others reinforce this notion. Baron-Cohen proved that, over and above the ability to empathize (which is acquired in infancy from contact with the mother), there is an innate physiological and chemical conditioning that determines an individual's behavior toward his fellow man on a spectrum from utter lack of empathy to total self-sacrifice. However, these same studies show that man's behavior in practice is also determined by his environment and his accumulated experience. In other words, the gods know the entirety of the genetic "baggage" of tens of thousands of years of man's existence. And they know that this will

undoubtedly have a major impact on his decisions, but it will not be the sole factor. His individual human experience can tip the scales. It is his decision.

Milgram's experiment showed that 60% of the participants agreed to inflict violence on others; 40%, however, chose not to cooperate despite the fact that they had been instructed to do so by an important professor at the University whose erudition they respected. Zimbardo's experiment, which was more extreme in that it was carried out under simulated prison conditions, was also more extreme in its results. Both occupied Europe and Nazi Germany can be compared to a type of prison in which at least some of the "inmates" were terrorized into going along with—or even taking part in—actions they would not normally engage in. Within the "prison" of Nazi Germany, there were those who chose the simpler alternative of complying with the demands of the

prison warden, while others chose to pay the price for disobedience. They were not many, but it should be remembered that 44% of the voters in the 1933 elections voted for the Nazi party. The members of the White Rose numbered only six.

Conclusion

The national idea has been losing its charm since the end of the 20th century. Surprisingly, religious ideologies are regaining lost ground in people's hearts and minds. And not surprisingly, they are once again becoming a source of justification for mass atrocities. This time, it appears that converting to a different religion will not help the victims. Global economic interests sustain these ideologies—or at least resign themselves to their existence. Don't say this is simply the way of the world. Do not obey!