

The Holocaust and Other Genocides in the 20th Century: Social processes and mechanisms that lead to mass killings

Sippy Naveh

At the Educational Center at the Ghetto Fighters' House, we deal with human and social dilemmas in the process that led to the Holocaust and in the Holocaust itself, as a way of investigating our present and its hidden dangers. Consequently, our purpose is not just to deal with the Holocaust, but is an attempt to see it as a point of departure for understanding dangerous social processes, in order to foster moral and social awareness in the course participants. This is meant to foster greater tolerance and understanding towards all the groups in Israeli society, among them the Arabs and the Druze. In multicultural encounters we discuss the fate of the Palestinians and the troubles of the minorities, in order to deepen the groups' knowledge and understanding of each other.

What we will do here today is to examine, from the perspective of social psychology, the psychological-social mechanisms by which ordinary people are taken and turned into part of a mass murder apparatus. By the term "**ordinary people**" we exclude individuals with personality disorders, such as sadists or psychopaths, and those with a criminal background. The term refers to people with ethical modes of thought and conduct and normative moral constraints.

When we examine various instances of genocide and mass killings in civilian populations, we can assume that an extremely large number of soldiers and people have taken part in the mass killings, as in the following events of the 20th century:

Bosnia	200,000	1992
Gypsies	500,000	1941
Rwanda	850,000	1994
Armenians	1,000,000	1915
Cambodia	2,000,000	1968
Jews	6,000,000	1941

Social psychology poses the question: What are the social and psychological mechanisms at work in turning an ordinary person into a mass killer? What needs to occur, on the personal and social level, to make a person capable of taking part in the killing of women and children, of obeying and carrying out such orders, and in addition, believing that what he is doing is right, just, and even ethical?

This is to be considered: even though the reasons and motives vary, the backgrounds differ from conflict to conflict, the acts are carried out by various means, and their outcomes differ in scope and degree, it is nonetheless possible to see that the psychological processes and the social mechanisms operating in the people who participate in these events have similarities and common elements.

We will try to examine these processes and mechanisms. What must take place in order to take an ordinary person and elicit hatred and aggression from him, and turn him into a mass killer? Can this be elicited from any and all individuals? What social and personal mechanisms are at work here?

1. The Model

(I) Cognitive process –

- (a) Instilling of ideology/propaganda – “the just cause” – and all the methods for achieving it are valid: “the end justifies the means.”
- (b) Dehumanization and demonization: perceiving the “Other” as an enemy, as inferior, evil, cruel, dangerous, threatening, and therefore deserving to die.

(II) Affective (Emotional) process

- Feelings of hostility, contempt, vengeance, anger, along with feelings of fear and peril.

(III) Behavioral process (a graduated progression) –

- Separation, distancing, isolation,
- Discrimination, denial of civil and human rights,
- Humiliation, abuse, repression,
- Physical harm, torture, murder, extermination

Killing and extermination never begin from the behavioral stage. In order for a person to reach such a state of violent behavior, **he needs to go through these three stages, in this order:** a change of beliefs; experience of powerful negative emotions; and then increasingly aggressive behavior.

Nazi propaganda was intended and designed as a preparatory basis for the behavioral stage. Without the cognitive and emotional stages – the behavioral stage could not be achieved.

2. De- humanization

(or how to circumvent the mechanism that deters intra-racial aggression)

Most people feel unwilling to kill other human beings. This is an evolutionary mechanism meant to prevent a race or species from annihilating itself.

Descending the evolutionary ladder (humans> mammals> birds> reptiles), the ability to kill and injure increases, in the absence of a deterring mechanism.

How can this mechanism be circumvented in humans?

By creating an ideology in which people are ranked (first-class person, second-class person, etc.) and successively dehumanized. The Nazi propaganda placed the Jews on the absolute bottom of the evolutionary ladder – ranking them as sub-humans.

It is difficult to harm a person whom you perceive to be your equal. When the person is perceived as inferior, the aggression-detering mechanism is deactivated, and it is easier to do harm.

3. De-individualization

A person's sense of responsibility is reduced by the diminishing of individuality; The individual feels that he does not carry out an act on his own behalf, but rather on behalf of the organization to which he belongs, and thus feels no personal responsibility for his actions.

As the sense of personal responsibility for one's actions is reduced, there is a greater potential for violent behavior. This refers to the de-individualization of the perpetrator.

De-individualization of the victim – the perception of the victim's reduced individuality contributes to the process of dehumanization; the perpetrator does not see the victim as a person equal to himself, but rather as part of a group, an element within a mass, towards which it is easier to express violent behavior.

4. The “Scapegoat” Effect ; a Mechanism of Frustration – Anger – Aggression::

A weak population group is designated as the scapegoat. Feelings of frustration and anger from other sources stimulate aggressive behavior that is directed towards this group. This mechanism provides a channel for funneling frustration and anger generated by other sources.

The anger and frustration are directed at the weak population group, and there is social and legal legitimization to harm this group which is considered a “**legitimate victim**”.

The perpetrator's unconscious understanding that the aggression is aimed not towards the source of the frustration but rather towards an innocent group, leads to a reinforcement of the dehumanization process, and rationalizing: convincing oneself that this population group is actually inferior, guilty, and thus deserves this behavior.

5. Gradual Adaptation and Raising Threshold of Sensitivity:

Every physical and emotional phenomenon has an adaptation mechanism and rising threshold of sensitivity. As we adapt, a stronger stimulus is required to create the same response.

Generally the killing process begins with behaviors such as humiliation, denial of civil and human rights, and abuse, as preparatory stages for acts of killing and extermination. After every act of humiliation and abuse, the threshold of sensitivity rises and a kind of “immunization” takes place. This kind of adaptation enables one to ascend the scale of aggressive behavior, while gradual adaptation and emotional indifference is strengthened with every act.

6. The “Uniform” effect- a mechanism of dispersed responsibility:

Wearing a uniform creates the sense that a person is part of a broad mechanism, and contribute to the de-individualization of the perpetrator. The wearing of a uniform causes the person to feel as though he has been given a costume and therefore, he is “playing a part”. This diminishes the sense of personal responsibility and guilt, resulting in the response: “Not guilty; I was only following orders.”

7. Obedience to Authority and Conformity (as seen in Milgram's experiment) is a **and group norms** (as seen in Asch's experiment). The difficulty of not conforming to widespread common human behavior, together with **conforming to group pressure** group pressure, norms, and behavior in situations where an individual's

moral values conflict with those of the group, is another factor in understanding ordinary people's conforming and obeying orders in mass killings.

8. Learned Aggression: reinforcement by a System of Punishments and rewards:

Violent behavior towards a specific group of people can also be reinforced by creating the right conditions, such as:

- Conditions in which codes of violence against a specific group become the normative and accepted behavior, (social legitimization).
- Targeting a specific group of people as a "legitimate victim" against whom it is acceptable and permitted to perpetrate violence. (legal and social legitimization)
- Conditions in which violent behavior is not punished (or actually rewarded) which increases the legitimacy of harming a specific target group.
- Supplying role models for violent behavior towards the targeted group: Acts of violence on the part of significant persons, such as leaders, provide a role model and encourage aggression.

9. Reducing Dissonance by Rationalization:

The discomfort that is created as the result of one's behavior ("I have killed innocent women and children") that does not match one's stance ("These are women and children – this conflicts with my moral outlook"), creates the need to reduce the dissonance by means of various rationalizations.

Rationalization – a mechanism of convincing oneself, finding justification for one's behavior, in order to reduce dissonance, through a distorted perception of reality. ("I just obeyed orders ..., I tried to think of it as mercy killing..., If not me, than someone else would have killed them... they must have done something really bad to deserve this...,"). The greater the dissonance the greater the need to reduce it by rationalizing. This, in return, enables the violent behavior to increase.

Workshop Questions

- 1) What is your opinion of the contention that "**There is good and bad in everyone that can emerge under certain conditions**, and that even moral people, under certain conditions and in certain circumstances, are liable to carry out the most terrible acts"?
- 2) Are the conditions, circumstances and mechanisms that are liable to cause a person to draw out aggression from within himself, as presented in the model, **relevant to every nation**?
- 3) In your opinion, is there something **that can be done to prevent the activation** and drawing forth of aggression from within the person, as it is presented in this model? What can be done as **an individual and as a society** in order to identify the phenomenon and guard against it?

Stage 1 – Individual thinking

Stage 2 – Discussion in small groups

Stage 3 – Concluding discussion in the plenum