

THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF DENIAL

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Holocaust deniers have an investment in taking a defensive stance. Theodor Adorno noted that to haggle about how many millions of innocent people were murdered in the Holocaust is degrading.¹ Hagglng about numbers is central to holocaust denial. Deborah Lipstadt's investigation of the nuances and varieties of deniers' claims across cultures makes it evident that, whatever their political or ideological objectives, deniers undertake their haggling in response to what they perceive to be an aggressive manipulation of history.² Deniers charge that the manipulators are the Jews, who have inflated the number of Jewish deaths during World War II to garner sympathy for their diverse agendas, all of which can be traced to their bid to consolidate their world power. In the words of one denier, "The Jews have been able to dupe the world by relying on their mythic powers and conspiratorial abilities. As they have so often done in the past, world Jewry has once again employed its inordinate powers to harness the world's financial resources, media and political interests for their own purposes."³ Deniers also develop conclusions about the rationale behind the manipulation of statistics. In reference to the figure of six million Jewish victims, for example, one denier offers the following explanation: "Six is the holy number of Judaism, so we can safely assume that the alleged number of Holocaust victims is a Jewish religious

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¹ THEODOR ADORNO, EDUCATION AFTER AUSCHWITZ, in NEVER AGAIN! THE HOLOCAUSTS CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS 11 (Edwina Lawler, trans., Kramer 1997).

² See DEBORAH E. LIPSTADT, DENYING THE HOLOCAUST: THE GROWING ASSAULT ON TRUTH AND MEMORY (1994) [hereinafter LIPSTADT, DENYING THE HOLOCAUST]; see also DEBORAH E. LIPSTADT, HISTORY ON TRIAL: MY DAY IN COURT WITH DAVID IRVING (2005) (Lipstadt's account of David Irving's testimony at the libel suit her brought against her) [hereinafter LIPSTADT, HISTORY ON TRIAL].

³ RAPHAEL LEMPKIN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE HOLOCAUST 860 (New York, 1990).

myth derived either from the Thora [sic] or the Talmud.”⁴ Through a form of mythical thinking masquerading as rational investigation, this denier claims to reveal the myth behind the ‘myth’ of the Holocaust.⁵ Professing insight into his opponent’s rationale is another way of creating the impression that there is an opponent in the first place and of thereby exposing the victims as the true victimizers.⁶

We do not know what anxieties fuel deniers’ defensive posturing. We only know about the paranoid anti-Semitism they hide behind. David Irving’s libel suit against Deborah Lipstadt revealed something further about the mind of the denier. In his closing argument, Irving addressed the judge as “mein Führer.”⁷ He appeared not to have realized his lapsus, even after the room burst into laughter.⁸ This moment is a reminder of the common ground occupied by deniers and neo-Nazis; it also alerts us to the depth of the unconscious identification between contemporary anti-Semites and the supporters of Hitler’s Third Reich. With this latter question of identification in mind, in what follows, I will explore what I see as indications of the psychological conflicts that have found expression through Nazi anti-Semitism. My suggestion is that the historical episodes I will discuss in view of this issue can also be characterized as lapsae, insofar as they strain against, and point to, tensions within the manifest design and goals of Nazis anti-Semitism.

Commenting on the link between psychological conflicts and the physical realm, Theodor Adorno states, “Whenever consciousness is disabled, it is thrown back upon the body and the corporeal sphere in an un-free form that is prone to acts of violence.”⁹ Adorno cites as one of the reasons for the disabling of consciousness an ideal of traditional German education, namely, the hardening of the individual, which advocates and enforces the values of “indifference to pain,”¹⁰ endurance, and “discipline through hardship.”¹¹ He writes,

⁴ Jürgen Graf, *Jewish Population Losses in The German Sphere of Influence During World War II*, RENSE, March 2001, <http://www.rense.com/general47/sixml.htm>.

⁵ See LIPSTADT, *DENYING THE HOLOCAUST*, *supra* note 2, at 25-28. (Lipstadt understands mythical thinking masquerading as reasoned inquiry to be an assault on reason itself).

⁶ *Id.* at 23. This latter claim is the central assertion of deniers.

⁷ See, LIPSTADT, *HISTORY ON TRIAL* *supra* note 2, at 263.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See ADORNO, *supra* note 1, at 15.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 16.

¹¹ *Id.* at 15.

This educational image of hardship, in which many may believe without reflecting on it, is absolutely perverse. The notion that manliness consists in a maximum amount of endurance long ago became the cover image for a masochism that – as psychology showed – is all too easily a component of sadism. This praised being-hard-on-them, which is the goal of this education, means indifference to pain, pure and simple. Thereby a difference between one's own pain and that of others is not even very firmly established at all. The person who is hard toward oneself buys oneself the right to be hard towards others as well and avenges oneself for the pain the feelings of which one was not permitted to show and had to repress.¹²

The advocacy and enforcement of such a pedagogical ideal does not dissolve the fear of pain and the rage the infliction of pain creates; it instead engenders repression of these responses, the compensatory outcome of which is that the individual “buys oneself the right to be hard towards others.”¹³ Alice Miller has pointed out the connection between such “poisonous pedagogy” and the persecution of the Jews:

Schooling oneself to be senselessly hard requires that all signs of weakness in oneself (including emotionalism, tears, pity, sympathy for oneself and others, and feelings of helplessness, fear, and despair) be suppressed “without mercy.” In order to make the struggle against these humane impulses easier, the citizens of the Third Reich were offered an object to serve as the bearer of all these qualities that were abhorred because they had been forbidden and dangerous in their childhood—this object was the Jewish people.¹⁴

Miller cites Himmler's 1943 Posen Address, in which Himmler, the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police, delivered a secret speech to SS generals about their intention never to speak or record the program of mass murder.¹⁵ Addressing the psychological outcome of this program for his generals, he states:

Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lying together, five hundred, or a thousand. To have gone through this and yet – apart from a few exceptions, examples of human weakness – to have remained decent, this has made us hard.

¹² *Id.* at 15–16.

¹³ *Id.* at 16.

¹⁴ ALICE MILLER, *FOR YOUR OWN GOOD: HIDDEN CRUELTY IN CHILD-REARING AND THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE* 80 (Hildegard and Hunter Hannum, trans. 1990).

¹⁵ See *Combatting Holocaust Denial: Origins of Holocaust Denial*, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=eng&ModuleId=10007273>

This is a glorious page in our history that has never been written and shall never be written.¹⁶

It is significant that the first person deemed an enemy of the Nazi state was not a Jew but a German infant, Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, the so called “Knauer baby,” who had been born severely disabled.¹⁷ The child’s father wrote to Hitler in late 1938 requesting that his infant be granted a “mercy death” (*Gnadentod*).¹⁸ The case interested Hitler, who, as result, sent his personal physician, Karl Rudolph Brandt, to investigate.¹⁹ Brandt’s instructions from Hitler were to consult with the physicians at the Leipzig University Children’s Clinic where the child was hospitalized and verify the facts of the baby’s condition.²⁰ If they were found to be true, he was to assure the child’s doctors that they would not face legal proceedings.²¹ The doctors in the case who met with Brandt agreed that there was “no justification for keeping [such a child] alive.”²² Given the struggle against human impulses behind the pedagogical imperative in Germany, the Knauer baby’s victimization might be understood as revealing a more general ambivalence towards children, as those who possessed the undesirable impulses that had to be suppressed. The “top secret” classification of the planning and implementation of the euthanasia program for the killing of disabled children would seem to confirm this,²³ as would the widespread cooperation of physicians, nurses, bureaucrats and parents from around the country.²⁴ Formal “protective guidelines” were created and a panel of experts appointed to judge which infants were to be taken into the

¹⁶ See MILLER, *supra* note 14; see also JOACHIM C. FEST, *THE FACE OF THE THIRD REICH: PORTRAITS OF NAZI LEADERSHIP* (Michael Bullock, trans. 1970).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the Knauer case in the context of the systematic killing of handicapped children during the Third Reich, see HENRY FRIEDLANDER, *THE ORIGINS OF NAZI GENOCIDE: FROM EUTHANASIA TO THE FINAL SOLUTION* 39–61 (1995). On the basis of legal transcripts, Friedlander states that the sex of the Knauer baby is unknown and that the precise nature of its handicaps is also not certain, although according to testimony, it was born without one leg and part of one arm, and that it may have been blind; not all observers noted the baby’s blindness. It is also not certain whether the baby was mentally handicapped.

¹⁸ See ROBERT JAY LIFTON, *THE NAZI DOCTORS: MEDICAL KILLING AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GENOCIDE* 50 (1986).

¹⁹ See FRIEDLANDER, *supra* note 17, at 39; see also LIFTON, *supra* note 18, at 51.

²⁰ Lifton, *supra* note 18 at 51.

²¹ See *id.*

²² See *id.* (quoting from Brandt testimony, Feb. 4, 1947, *Nuremberg Medical Case*, transcript, pp. 2409-10, and vol. I, p. 894).

²³ See FRIEDLANDER, *supra* note 17, at 44.

²⁴ *Id.* at 48.

program.²⁵ Regulations made it mandatory for midwives and doctors to notify authorities whenever a baby was born with birth defects.²⁶ Those deemed “eligible” were usually given a lethal dose of a medication.²⁷ Between 1939 and 1945, some 5000 infants, children and juveniles were murdered through this operation.²⁸ These murdered children were the material signifiers of the “disabled” consciousness Adorno discusses; the word Adorno uses, *verstümmelt*, which his English translator renders as “disabled,” means mutilated or maimed.²⁹

The so called “Aryan paragraph” of the April 7, 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service was the legislative beginning of a new order emerging from a culture of disabled consciousness.³⁰ Through this order, the source of psychic conflict was now projected to the outside, where it materialized in the form of Jewish blood. Primo Levi noted that this new order was based upon a conception of the world that regarded every stranger as an enemy.³¹ When such a conception “becomes the major [premise] in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager.”³²

At the end of the paranoid logical chain was the Lager, where disabled consciousness acted out in the open. In every SS-run camp, the highly codified regulation of the prisoners had the effect of dissimulating the defensiveness the Jews triggered insofar as they were walking reminders of the repressed vulnerability of the German populace. The order and practices of the camps did so by turning the prisoners into no threat at all, by reducing them to nothing. The use of words like “fressen”³³ which is the term for the way animals eat, to describe prisoners, or reference to a prisoner as an inanimate piece (“Stück”) reflects the destruction of the prisoners’ humanity through procedures designed to insure that the

²⁵ *Id.* at 46.

²⁶ *Id.* at 45

²⁷ *Id.* at 54.

²⁸ *Id.* at 61.

²⁹ “Verstümmeln.” Pons Globalwörterbuch Deutsch-Englisch. (1983).

³⁰ SAUL FRIEDLANDER, *I NAZI GERMANY AND THE JEWS* 27 (1997). The exclusionary measures of this law, which applied to more than two million state and municipal employees, targeted political opponents of the state and Jews. Paragraph 3 stated that “Civil servants not of Aryan origin are to retire.” The first supplemental decree of the law defined “non-Aryan” as “anyone descended from non-Aryan, particularly Jewish, grandparents or parents. It suffices if one parent or grandparent is non-Aryan.” *Id.*

³¹ PRIMO LEVI, *SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ* 9 (Stuart Woolf trans.) (Touchstone 1996).

³² *Id.* at 9.

³³ *Id.* at 86.

distinctions between the human and non-human, SS and prisoner, remained clearly delineated and absolute.³⁴

We might understand the frequent outbursts of rage by the SS as responses to the anxiety-provoking collapse of such distinctions, when the SS leaders would be reminded of their repressed vulnerability. One such incident occurred, most likely in late October of 1944, as the Russians were approaching Auschwitz.³⁵ The Auschwitz commandant Joseph Kramer ordered the prisoners in the women's hospital to be sent in ambulances to the crematoria.³⁶ It was not Kramer's practice to become involved in the routine running of the camps.³⁷ But on this day, he appeared. As Mengele and twenty SS guards watched, Kramer entered the barracks and shouted commands to his subordinates, who began the process of clearing out the women.³⁸ The women were weak and ill, and some had trouble leaving the bunks.³⁹ The SS guards begin to beat those who were unable to move swiftly enough, and then, Kramer exploded.⁴⁰ One eyewitness reports "Kramer himself had lost his calm. A strange gleam lurked in his small eyes, and he worked like a madman. I saw him throw himself at one unfortunate woman and with a single blow of his truncheon shatter her skull."⁴¹ The contents of her skull splattered "on the floor, the walls, the SS uniforms, their boots."⁴²

In another episode of violence, an SS guard encountered a *Muselmann*, or "Muslim," which was the term used in the camps to refer to prisoners who were simply not equipped to struggle for their own survival:

The SS man was walking slowly, looking at the Muslim who was coming towards him Dragging his wooden clogs, the dull-witted and aimless creature ended up bumping right into the SS officer, who yelled at him and gave him a lashing on the head. The Muslim stood still, without realizing what had happened. When he received a second and, then, a third lashing because he had forgotten to take off his cap, he began to do it on himself, as he had dysentery. When the SS man saw the black, stinking liq-

³⁴ *Id.* at 76.

³⁵ See INGA CLENDINEN, *READING THE HOLOCAUST* 153 (Canto 1999).

³⁶ *Id.* at 152.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* at 152-53; see OLGA LENGYEL, *FIVE CHIMNEYS* 150-151 (1985).

⁴² *Id.*

uid begin to cover his clogs, he went crazy. He hurled himself on top of the Muslim and began kicking his stomach with all his strength. Even after the poor thing had fallen into his own excrement, the SS man kept beating his head and chest. The Muslim didn't defend himself. With the first kick, he folded in two, and after a few more he was dead.⁴³

Why were the SS beside themselves? Why did Kramer break from his typical behavior, hamper the efficiency of the operation? Why did he soil his uniform, as did the SS guard when he fell upon the dysentery-afflicted prisoner? In both of these episodes, the SS is provoked by behaviors that deviate from the prisoners' prescribed code of conduct. Sick and weak, these prisoners do not perform as expected, not out of willfulness, but from frailty. I would suggest that the sight of their vulnerability triggers the rage of the SS. Camp "life" was designed to destroy that vulnerability, to "dehumanize." But the *Muselmann* and the woman in the Auschwitz infirmary were proof that the destruction could never be thorough. Vulnerability could not be stomped out, because it was coextensive with human life itself.

The German population's response to the Allied aerial bombings of their cities suggests a similar intolerance of vulnerability, only this time in Germany itself. These bombings targeted 131 towns and cities, some of them more than once.⁴⁴ They killed 600,000 civilians, destroyed three and a half million homes, and by the end of the war, left seven and a half million people homeless.⁴⁵ The German author W.G. Sebald, in an essay about the protracted silence in German literature about this catastrophe, notes the following:

The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of [the] country.⁴⁶

⁴³ ZDZISLAW RYN AND STANSLAW KLODZINSKI, I AN DER GRENZE ZWISCHEN LEBEN AND TOD. EINE STUDIE ÜBER DIE ERSCHEINUNG DES 'MUSELMANS' IM KONZENTRAZIONSLAGER, AUSCHWITZ-HEFTE 128-129 (1987), quoted in GEORGIO AGAMBEN, REMNANTS OF AUSCHWITZ: THE WITNESS AND THE ARCHIVE 42 (Daniel Heller-Roazen trans 1999).

⁴⁴ W.G. SEBALD, ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION 3-4 (Anthea Bell trans. 2003).

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 4.

In exploring this elision in the collective memory, Sebald calls attention to a detail from the natural history of the decimated cities: the proliferation of rodents and flies thriving on the unburied corpses. According to Sebald, there are only three references to this subject in the literature of that time: Heinrich Böll's novel, *The Angel was Silent*, which was written in the late '40s but not published until 1992 and which describes a rat "among the ruins making its way from a mound of rubble to the street, sniffing the air;"⁴⁷ a story by Wolfgang Borchert in which "a boy keeps watch by the body of his brother, who is buried under the rubble;"⁴⁸ and a passage from an essayistic memoir by Hans Erich Nossack, called *The End: Hamburg 1942*.⁴⁹ Nossack describes how, in order to remove the corpses in the air raid shelters, it was first necessary to use flame-throwers to dissipate the dense swarm of flies around the bodies; the maggots on the floors and steps of the cellars had to be cleared in the same way.⁵⁰ According to Sebald,

[t]he conspicuous sparsity of observation and comment on this phenomenon can be explained as the tacit imposition of a taboo, very understandable if one remembers that the Germans, who had proposed to cleanse and sanitize all Europe, now had to contend with a rising fear that they themselves were the rat people.⁵¹

Sebald transforms the empirical proliferation of the vermin into a symbol for the return of the repressed in the German collective consciousness. The Germans do not speak about their devastation. The logic goes, that to do so would be to admit that they were as vulnerable as the Jews, who were supposed to be the only vermin who could be exterminated, and whose disappearance would purify Europe.⁵² But the destruction wreaked by the bombings revealed that the source of the plague of vulnerability could not be confined to the designated enemy. It lived in the Germans as well; they too were the rat people. The corpses of their own dead, and the rats and flies they spawned, were a grim reminder of the unbearable vulnerability at the heart of German identity.

For the Germans to mourn their losses would have required that this vulnerability be admitted into the collective consciousness.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 34.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 35.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 34–35.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 35 (citing HANS ERICH NOSSACK, "DER UNTERGANG," IN INTERVIEW MIT DEM TODE 238 (1972)).

⁵¹ *Id.* at 34.

⁵² *Id.*

The enduring silence in the aftermath of the bombings indicates that such an admission would have posed too great a threat. According to Sebald, the German defensiveness has not softened; on the contrary “the new Federal German society relegated the experiences of its own prehistory to the back of its mind and developed an almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression”⁵³. Sebald writes that behind Germany’s rehabilitation stands not only economic and geo-political factors – the Marshall Plan, the Cold War – but “a purely immaterial catalyst: the stream of psychic energy that has not dried up to this day, and which has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations” of the German state.⁵⁴ The question is whether the defensive zeal of Holocaust deniers draws from the same source.

⁵³ *Id.* at 12.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 13.

