

Hamas and the Memory of the Holocaust



Ross Douthat

12/2/2023

In 1996, in a phrase that's stuck with me, Richard John Neuhaus described the Holocaust as "our only culturally available icon of absolute evil." The line appeared in a critical review of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's best-selling and furor-starting book, "Hitler's Willing Executioners," which was itself an example of Neuhaus's point in action. In the post-Cold War landscape, with American power seemingly occupying the stage of history by itself, the memory of Nazi Germany's genocide came to play a special cultural role in the self-understanding of the liberal West: We might not agree on the highest good, but we knew the highest evil, and arguments about its memory and meaning and implications were absolutely central to politics and culture.

That, at least, is how I remember the place of the Holocaust in the world of the 1990s. I saw "Schindler's List" in the theater as a 14-year-old. I read Elie Wiesel and Anne Frank and Primo Levi. I made a middle-school pilgrimage to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. From the first gulf war through Rwanda and Bosnia, arguments about global politics always seemed to be conducted with the Holocaust looming in the background. The controversy around books like Goldhagen's, or all the different theories limned in Ron Rosenbaum's "Explaining Hitler," were part of my introduction to intellectual discourse and debate. When my family became Catholics at the end of the 1990s, it seemed entirely natural that even when people had arguments about the Catholic Church, they argued about the Holocaust: Had the papacy done enough to save Jews, how deeply was antisemitism rooted in the faith, and so on.

That world was always timebound. Some of the special attention reflected the same dynamics as the fascination with the Greatest Generation in the same era, since in the 1990s many more Holocaust survivors were still with us than remain alive today. And along almost any timeline, the diminishment of European influence, the rise of Asia and the simple passage of time would inevitably have made the Holocaust somewhat less central to 21st century debates, less elevated among historical atrocities.

The question is how far that diminution is going, and what effect the obvious resilience of antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence might have on our collective memory. Do events like Hamas's Oct. 7 massacre of Israeli civilians reinforce the status of the Holocaust as the exemplar of absolute evil? Does the world's reaction, maybe especially the Western left's reaction, reveal just how much the memory of the 1940s has faded? You can see this uncertainty and complexity foreshadowed by trends in Western politics that predate Hamas's attacks and Israel's response.

For instance, the rise of populism has torn the cordon sanitaire around the far right in Western Europe, a barrier that always drew much, if not all, of its power from the memory of Adolf Hitler. Yet the new populism draws some of its anti-immigration energy from a fear of Islamic antisemitism, and European populists are sometimes more sympathetic to Jews and to Israel than the continent's leftists, or even than its center-left establishment. So Europe right now encompasses factions that prefer to decenter, if you will, the memory of the Holocaust, and also factions that want to appropriate that memory for new political purposes.

Or again, consider the role of the Holocaust in discourse about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand you have evocations of World War II and Nazi aggression and atrocities in the hawkish arguments for rallying to Ukraine's defense. On the other hand, the Western establishment's support for Ukraine has required giving a certain pass to the role of fascist and Nazi sympathies in Ukrainian nationalism, past and present — a tacit sidelining of the Holocaust even in the discourse of liberal internationalism.

With Hamas's attacks, the story seemed like it might be simpler: Here were atrocities against Jews carried out with seemingly genocidal zeal; here was a case where Neuhaus's formulation seemed immediately relevant; here was an opportunity to emphasize the necessity of historical remembrance.

But along with that immediate reaction there was a different one, an indifferent or even hostile response to any invocation of memory on Israel's behalf, and with it a revelation for many liberal Jews about how much the left has changed since the 1990s. The issue isn't just those far-left activists who seemed to sympathize outright with Hamas. It's a broader progressive disinclination to assign antisemitism a particularly important place among the evils of the world — at least not relative to “settler colonialism” and other constructs that would place Israel rather than Hamas in the dock.

One thing I did not expect amid these shifts was that arguments on behalf of Israel would themselves stray from Shoah exceptionalism by arguing that Hamas is worse than the Nazis. But maybe it makes sense, as response to the diminished memory of the Holocaust, that there would be uppings of the rhetorical ante along with invocations of the past.

The conservative writer Douglas Murray offered a version of this case in an interview a couple of weeks ago, and then the historian Andrew Roberts offered the argument at length in an essay for *The Washington Free Beacon*. Here's an excerpt:

For whereas the Nazis went to great lengths to hide their crimes from the world, because they knew they were crimes, Hamas has done the exact opposite, because they do not consider them to be so.

In October 1943 Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, delivered a notorious speech to 50 of his senior lieutenants in Posen. “I want to speak frankly to you about an extremely grave matter,” he said. “We can talk about it among ourselves, yet we will never speak of it in public. ... I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish people. ... It is a page of glory in our history that has never been written and is never to be written.”

By total contrast, the Hamas killers 80 years later attached GoPro cameras to their helmets so they could livestream their atrocities over social media. Although the Nazis burnt Jews alive in barns on their retreat in 1945, they did not film themselves doing it. There are plenty of photographs of Nazis standing around death-pits full of Jewish corpses, but these were taken for private delectation rather than public consumption.

... The sheer glee with which Hamas, by contrast, killed parents in front of their children and of children in front of their parents, was broadcast to the world. Nazi sadism was routine and widespread, but it wasn't built into their actual operational plans in the way that Hamas's sadism has been.

This argument not only did not convince me, it reminded me of the strength of the case for Holocaust exceptionalism, and why the Nazi genocide is likely to retain some crucial distinction in the annals of evil, even as the world changes and the 20th century fades.

Roberts emphasizes Hamas's public savagery as against Nazi attempts to hide their crimes from the civilized world. But those expressions of barbarism, like the terrible crimes of the Islamic State to which they've been compared, are notable precisely because they're throwbacks to a dreadful but also entirely historically familiar way of war, in which brutality and humiliation and rape are part of the arsenal of combat, and berserker passions are deliberately embraced.

It's the way of war depicted, for instance, in the darkest scenes in Robert Eggers's 2022 Viking film, "The Northman," where taking a village means killing the men, raping the women and herding the children into a building to be burned alive — and I'd bet that if the Vikings had access to GoPro cameras, many would have happily broadcast those atrocities to friends and enemies alike.

Now you can argue that whether for Hamas or the Islamic State, there is still a special evil in embracing this way of war under 21st century conditions, in the gaze of the internet, that goes beyond those medieval reavers — a performativity to the atavism that adds an extra layer of depravity, especially when you factor in all the logistical planning required for the Hamas assault to work.

But what especially horrifies and fascinates about the Holocaust is precisely that it doesn't simply feel atavistic in this way. The Nazis exploited bloodlust and deployed very public violence against Jews much more than Roberts's gloss suggests. But the Nazi "final solution" as a whole seemed less like a throwback and more like a monstrous evolution or dark refinement of human evil, in which civilization wasn't simply cast aside in favor of wanton cruelty, but rather harnessed, coolly and bureaucratically, to achieve murder on a scale that no mere berserker could ever hope to match. And the fact that Nazis like Himmler sometimes talked in ways that suggested that they knew themselves to be doing grave evil only emphasizes this extra satanic element — since it is worse to commit terrible crimes while bearing some kind of conscious knowledge of their

wickedness than to commit murder and worse while gripped by either bloodlust or a conviction of your own righteousness.

Later in his piece, Roberts emphasizes the impatience of the Hamas cadres, unleashing their campaign of terror when they didn't even really control the territory they had invaded, as against the Nazis waiting until they had "complete territorial domination" before unleashing their full genocidal plan. This, he writes, shows that Hamas's "lust for torturing and murdering Jews was therefore even more powerful than the Nazis'."

But again, it's precisely the patience and untrammelled power of the Nazis that makes their crimes distinct. Here, the view offered in a movie like "Conspiracy," the 2001 HBO film about the Wannsee Conference with Kenneth Branagh playing Reinhard Heydrich, is as essential as any depiction of the death camps to understanding the centrality of the Holocaust in evil's history. To kill and rape and torture, as Hamas did, when given a brief window of opportunity to strike against a hated and more militarily powerful adversary is terribly evil — but in a way that's intensely recognizable from all the cycles of violence and revenge in human history. Whereas to plan awful crimes with exquisite care and technocratic deliberation when you've already conquered, you're completely in control, the population you're targeting is entirely in your power — that strikes me as more horribly unique.

Roberts, in other words, has it backward: Patient, careful evil is worse than impatient reckless evil — more terrifying and more culpable at once. Bloodlust is always wicked, but building an apparatus to kill with cold indifference is ultimately the more satanic crime. Not for nothing does Dante place the fires of his Inferno in the outer circles, while filling the very depths of hell with ice.