

Is There A Culture Of Brutality?

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"Where books are burned in the end people will be burned, too."

Heinrich Heine, 1797–1856

An interesting question: can brutality be embedded in a culture that also contains religious precepts and moral strictures that are diametrically opposed to it?

Perhaps it will help to start at the beginning. There is a notion about that our earliest ancestors lived in a peaceful world, partly because hunting and fishing and taking care of the necessities of life kept them busy. Besides, these early populations were thinly enough spread out to ensure that their territory could support their needs. So, there really was not enough population density to give occasion for conflict, brutality, or massacres. These idyllic notions have been undermined by study of the few skeletons of our early ancestors that have so far been found. It seems that not too many of them died of old age. These skeletons show damages in many parts of the body. While some of them may have been caused by accidents, many of them provide clear evidence of being inflicted by humans.

As we follow our ancestors into the beginnings of recorded history, they start to engage in agriculture, animal husbandry, and the formation of small states. These small states that were founded on the increasing agricultural surpluses originally served to exploit the newly developed division of labour. But they were also quickly forced to defend themselves against attacks on their wealth. For thousands of years people engaged in the most extraordinary brutalities in order to extend their power and increase their wealth. While, over time, the states became larger, brutality remained not only widely accepted, but also continued to be evaluated as a sign of valour in battle and efficacy in administration.

Eventually, the moral ground shifted in Europe when first the Jews and later the Christians included the fifth commandment "thou shalt not kill" in their religious strictures. In due course, the French Revolution affirmed "the rights of man" and the United Nations and the Helsinki accords proclaimed "the bill of human rights." While these instruments did not noticeably diminish brutality in human interactions, they did diminish its approval ratings and changed people's expectations.

The twentieth century seems to have set new records, both in the number of victims and in the abandon with which they were sacrificed.¹ This is true regardless of whether one looks at the conflicts between states or at the victimizations that occurred within states. The reason for this increase in the number of victims is that the underlying motivation has changed. In the past that motivation had to do with power and greed. In the twentieth century that motivation has become ideological.

The question posed in the first sentence of this paper arises in connection with the shock and incredulity with which the world received the news of the Holocaust. It seemed that a Western European country like Germany, with its traditions of philosophy, poetry, music, literature and sciences could not possibly be involved in committing such horrors. Even today, in spite of the enormous volume of documentation now available, that argument is still the mainstay of many Holocaust deniers. For this reason it is important to examine this question in some historical detail.

My interest in exploring this question was sparked by Gunter Heinsohn's theory² concerning Hitler's rejection of Judeo-Christian morality. While I do not agree with him on all details, reading his treatment has certainly set me off in a parallel direction. It does seem that German brutality exceeded the general level of brutality that was common throughout Europe's history. Hitler not only rejected the Judeo-Christian ethics, he also wanted to return to the older, more primitive values of pre-historic times that had been preserved since antiquity. While these did not have their origin in the Nazi period they certainly were emphasized and glorified.

Since I was born in Germany I am aware of the extent to which the memory of the early Germanic tribes was still alive in German culture even before Hitler. Their primitive lifestyle was celebrated as heroic even when they were defeated by the Roman troops and also when they finally invaded the Roman empire.³ Their memory is concretized by naming streets after them so that even the smallest and most obscure tribes should not be forgotten. Their history seems to have been punctuated by incessant warfare, mostly among themselves.

This tradition has continued in German history. The brutality of the Peasants' War⁴, the Thirty Years' War⁵, and the Seven Years' War⁶ are legendary. Warfare was frequent throughout Europe. What was different about these protracted wars was that they were fought between Germanic contestants. Although all of the participants were nominally Christian states, religion seems to have had little relevance to the brutality and ferocity of the contestants. If anything, clerics on both sides blessed the troops going into battle and saved the souls of the mortally wounded -- a tradition that is still alive.

The persecution of the witches which took place in much of Europe was particularly intense in Germany. It even induced the major of Osnabrück to build a brick oven for the cheaper and more expeditious disposal of condemned witches.

Although the large number of Germanic principalities were finally united by Otto von Bismarck in 1870 into what he hoped would be a modern national state, brutality persisted in the way internal politics was conducted. It also manifested itself in the way Germany dealt with its newly acquired colonies -- including the first genocide of the twentieth century in German Southwest Africa in 1904-1907.

Even the conduct of foreign policy was characterized by this style. The following quote is from Hannah Arendt.⁷

What head of a civilized state would ever before have uttered the exhortation of William II to a German expeditionary contingent fighting the Boxer insurrection in 1900: "Just as the Huns a thousand years ago, under the leadership of Attila, gained a reputation by virtue of which they still live in history, so may the German name become known in such a manner in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look askance at a German." (p. 65)

After World War I, political life in Germany became increasingly violent. Political parties included armed militias and assassinations became more common. During the Nazis' drive for power elections were fought with machine guns and armored personnel carriers. Once they were in power, even intra-party differences were settled with extreme violence, as during the "night of the long knives", when members of the Nazi party who disagreed with Hitler's policy were killed.

All this seems to mean that the same brutal and violent methods were applied to any group that had fallen out of favour. International agreements, such as the Geneva Convention, were simply ignored. It did not matter whether the victims were Germans. Nor did it matter whether they were children or seniors, male or female, ill or healthy. The only thing that mattered were fluctuating definitions of inclusion or exclusion. Thus, during the euthanasia project, Germans were obviously willing to kill the children of their compatriots. It is true that a considerable amount of opposition was voiced by the population once the news leaked out. However, rather than stopping the killing, these protests merely ensured that the curtain of secrecy was tightened.

During World War II, the number of victim groups escalated dramatically. In the drive to implement the ideals of their race policy any means could be justified. Carrying out these means elevated the perpetrators to heroes in the service of the "master race". The victims of the extermination camps are well-known, though only the Jews have created a vast literature on the Shoah. Less well-known are the fates of millions of Russian prisoners of war who died at the hands of their German captors. Even less well-known are the about 100,000 members of the Wehrmacht (German Army) who were court-martialed for cowardice or desertion. Between 15,000 and 20,000 of them were executed immediately. The rest were sent to the Wehrmacht's own concentration camps, located in Norway and Lapland, from where hardly anyone returned.⁸ To appreciate the enormity of these actions against their own soldiers it is worth noting that the Western allies together executed one (1) soldier for desertion. And totally unknown until now is what Michael Naumann, the Minister of State at the Federal Chancellery in Berlin, has reported:

Eugen Stähle, ministerial superintendent of the Württemberg Grafeneck clinic where disabled Germans were gassed beginning September 1939, dismissed the Stuttgart Church Commissioner Reinhold Sautter on 4 December 1940 who had reproached him in a private conversation with the killing of persons supposedly "unfit to live". Stähle coolly replied: "The fifth commandment 'thou shalt not kill' is not a commandment from God but merely a Jewish invention." (9)

Lest I be misunderstood, this is not meant to diminish the importance of the Shoah or the tragedy of the Jewish people. Rather, it addresses the question posed at the start of this essay. How can we explain this apparent incongruity of a Christian people engaging in such gross brutality on such a massive scale? There seems to be little doubt that the majority of the German people were practicing Christians. Neither can we doubt that many Germans, well before Hitler, luxuriated in their sense of superiority and prided themselves on their heroic past. Heinsohn argues that the Nazis rejected the Judeo-Christian morality because they saw it as an effort by foreign elements to undermine the heroic ethos of a superior race. That hypothesis does not help to explain the long-standing dedication of Germanic peoples to extremes of brutality -- regardless of whether it was aimed at external or internal enemies.

I have no answers to the above questions. I raise them exactly because I have not found satisfactory explanations in the literature. To talk about cognitive dissonance simply attaches a label to the phenomenon without explaining it. To talk about antisemitism may explain why the Jews were one of the victim groups, but does not explain the wide-spread use of extreme brutality. To talk about race theory may explain why so-called non-aryan groups were victimized, but it does not explain why

the same brutal methods were applied to Aryans. That German culture celebrated violence as part of a heroic tradition is clear. What is new during the Nazi period is the participation and support of significant proportions of intellectuals, scholars, university professors, as well as the professions of law, medicine, etc. But the original question remains. In the European culture area where brutality is commonplace, why does one people stand out?

This paper is clearly a work in progress. Therefore, I shall close with some questions that might bear further investigation.

-- Masochism is a characteristic of individuals. But is it possible that there is such a thing as a masochistic society or a masochistic culture? If there is (without the usual circular reasoning) then one could say that it explains why people in such a society visit their brutal methods on their own members.

-- A related question concerns the way certain societies seem to celebrate and memorialize not only their victories, but also their defeats. Of course, that is hardly an exclusively German phenomenon. We only need to think of the significance of the Alamo in the United States and particularly in Texas

-- How does one explain the enormous number of casualties inflicted by China and the Soviet Union on their own people? Clearly, they were inflicted by communist dictatorships. But I don't know enough about the history of either country to say whether these were the result of a long established culture of brutality or were an innovation of Mao and Stalin?

-- What was/is the role of colonialism? Does all expansion involve genocide as Sven Lindqvist argues?¹⁰

-- Finally, how is it that ordinary, peace-loving people can be aroused to participate in the most

outrageous brutalities? It is clear that in those cases where we have reasonably reliable data it is established that not all citizens participated. Can such dissenting groups be expanded and become militant in opposition to all forms of violence?

Bibliography/Endnotes

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2. Heinsohn, Gunnar. *Why Was The Holocaust Different From All Other Genocides?* Bremen: Raphael Lemkin-Institut für Xenophobie- und Genozidforschung / Schriftenreihe Bd. 7, 1998.

3. Kahler, Erich. *The Germans*. Edited by Robert and Rita Kimmer. Princeton University Press, 1974.

A brief history from the Roman Empire to Hitler, based on a series of lectures. See esp.: Ch. 2 "The Confrontation" on the 'Germanic Tribes' which debunks the German glorification of what was a barbaric, precivilized past.

"Not only Roman and Christian writers but Germanic sources as well attest to the primitive social and economic conditions of the Germanic tribes. Fierceness in battle was the highest virtue among the tribes. Peaceful occupations were looked down upon and held unworthy of a man. The whole early record of the tribes is one of perpetual feuds, plunder, raids, and massacres; and the custom of human sacrifice is confirmed up to the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. by Roman, Greek, and Christian sources." p. 30.

"It is obvious enough how far removed from Christianity this Germanic religion was. The absence of a just god, the lack of a divine law, and the meaninglessness of history all stand in direct contrast to the underlying tenets of Christianity. The Germanic peoples did, of course, eventually succeed in bridging this gulf too; but elements of this early, primitive religion remained alive and continued to exert an influence on Germanic history well into our own times. Richard Wagner and the Nazis after him were able to draw on German mythology and turn it to their own purposes because it spoke of a heroic age that the German people, divided and embittered, had never experienced in their history and that they were willing to recover at the cost of the Roman and Christian heritage they had never quite made their own." p. 37.

4. An early 16th century insurrection of peasantry of southern Germany against the tyranny and oppression by the nobles during which thousands were slain.

5. Fought in 1618-1648 between the Catholics and Protestants of Germany in which France, Sweden and other peoples participated from time to time and which was finally ended by the Peace of Westphalia.

6. War between Austria and Prussia that lasted from 1756 to 1763.

7. *Imperialism: Part Two of The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951.

8. Wette, Wolfram, ed. *Deserteure der Wehrmacht: Feiglinge - Opfer - Hoffnungsträger. Dokumentation eines Meinungswandels*. Essen: Klartext 1995. ISBN 3-88474-269-8

9. Naumann, Michael, translation of his speech to the final panel on 28 January 2000 at the International Forum on the Holocaust, held during 'A Conference on Education, Remembrance and Research', Hosted by the Prime Minister of Sweden, Stockholm, 26–28 January 2000

http://www.holocaustforum.gov.se/conference/official_documents/speeches/naumann_eng.htm

10. Lindqvist, Sven. Exterminate All the Brutes. New York: The New Press, 1996.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

Otto Gritschneider. Furchtbare Richter: Verbrecherische Todesurteile deutscher Kriegsgerichte. München: Beck, 1998. Presents 28 cases with his comments. Some judgements were even carried out two days after Germany had capitulated. None of the judges that were prosecuted in the Bundesrepublik were found guilty. (pp. 172–173)



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