

How Could This Happen: Explaining the Holocaust by Dan
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Eighty-two years after Hitler became Reich Chancellor of Germany, seventy-seven years after Kristallnacht, seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz: time makes no difference. The Holocaust remains an inexplicable phenomenon, the catastrophe of catastrophes, an omnipresent stain on the soul of humanity.

In his thoughtful book, Dan McMillan attempts, with remarkable success, to demystify the Shoah, to explain how it happened and why. In doing so, McMillan is well aware of the pitfalls: to explain means to understand; to understand, to render the incomprehensible comprehensible, is to challenge the special status of the Holocaust as unique.

McMillan goes to great pains, then, to make distinctions, to inform the general reader why the Holocaust can be explained and yet still maintain its uniqueness. In Chapter 2, “A Genocide like No Other,” he lays out the differences. Rightly acknowledging that comparisons are gratuitous when addressing the suffering of the victims, he nonetheless asserts that it is possible to distinguish motives and governing ideologies—and thus to understand what happened. To that end, McMillan writes that the Holocaust “constitute[s] history’s most uncompromising assault upon the principle that every human being deserves to live” (18). Other genocides, he argues, were perpetrated for “some concrete purpose: for political power, out of perceived military necessity, to seize land and riches, or to enforce religious conversion. Only during the Holocaust have we come to murder a huge population solely for the sake of killing them” (18). In all other mass murders, McMillan continues, at least some proportion of victims could save themselves. In the Holocaust, no such salvation was possible.

In McMillan’s view, the “Nazi’s striving for complete biological extinction of the Jews has no parallel in history” (19), and he explains why the genocidal actions against the Armenians in Turkey and the Tutsi in Rwanda differ not only in magnitude but also intent. The Turks stopped their murderous actions against the Armenians while they still held political power; the Hutu leaders had no plans to murder Tutsis who lived outside of Rwanda’s borders (20). Finally, while it may be difficult to attribute motives to the governments then in power, it is possible to say, as McMillan does, that both the Turkish and the Rwanda governments were threatened by an imminent loss of power, leading them to lash out against and then

exterminate the minority populations living within their borders. In contrast, the minority of Jews living within the Germany and the millions living outside of it “posed no plausible threat” to the German government. Furthermore, according to McMillan, the Nazi killers acted “not in a mood of fear and desperation, but rather in one of exhilaration and joy” (21).

McMillan does, then, uphold the “special status” (12) conferred on the Holocaust. At the same time, he maintains that explaining what happened is possible and a necessary corrective to the common notion that it’s just not possible to understand, that the questions raised by the Holocaust have no answers.

McMillan devotes the rest of his book to detailing the factors that led to the Holocaust. Among these are Hitler’s rise to power and his enormous influence over the German people, the fragile nature of the young Weimar democracy (making it easy to overthrow), the impact of World War I on the generation of German men who came of age in the 1920s and 30s, the psychological factors in play that allowed men to murder defenseless civilians, other factors that led tens of millions of Germans to look away, and the rabid nature of religious anti-Semitism when mixed with a new brand of science called race theory.

Of primary importance to his argument is McMillan’s view that in Germany, unlike France, Britain, and the United States, the democratic process did not have enough time to mature. Making the transition from a monarchy to a parliamentary government, he writes, “has been a difficult and often dangerous undertaking for nearly every nation that has attempted it” (42). That the Weimar government failed and Hitler was able to wrest control from Hindenburg was due in large part to timing and the sad fact that there was no sustainable parliamentary process in place to oppose him. It was not due, in McMillan’s view, to a flaw in the German character or to a particularly German pathology (40-41).

Another contributing factor was the impact of combat during World War I upon thousands of German men. Although the vicissitudes of war led many to become pacifists after 1918, many others went on to glorify war. According to McMillan, “[T]he brutalizing combat of World War I gave birth to a genocidal cohort made up of hundreds and even thousands of men who had enjoyed combat, as well as many from the generation that followed who were too young to have experienced the war’s horrors, but old enough to worship the hardened men who had” (72).

Thus emerged “the newly forged ideal of the coldblooded soldier who calmly accepted the war’s massive slaughter” (75). Pausing to summarize his complex argument half-way through the book, McMillan writes in both a poetic and prophetic tone:

The ghastly battlefields and massive slaughter of World War I produced a generation of violent and hardened men, men who could accept the deaths of millions as a normal fact of political life. Yet men of many nations fought in the war without becoming murderers. It took the special role of nationalism and anti-Semitism in German politics, and the intensification of both in wartime Germany, to give these men the political convictions that made them so dangerous. It took the polarizing impact of the war on Germany's already dysfunctional political system, the crushing blow of Germany's defeat, and the political and economic chaos that followed to make Hitler's rise to power possible. Only then could the horror of the trenches find its fatal echo a generation later in the death camps and killing fields of the Holocaust. (77)

In the 1930s, as Hitler's political power increased, so did his power over the hearts and minds of the German people. *Der Furher* became "a mythic figure. . . whose every command deserved obedience" (119). McMillan links Hitler's success to a number of factors:

The longstanding hope. . . that a charismatic leader could heal the nation's divisions. . .; the German people's desperation amid the terrible crisis of the Great Depression; Hitler's gifts as a public speaker; the new medium of radio which brought his voice into German homes; the skillful use of propaganda. . .; and above all, . . . Hitler's astonishing run of dramatic successes, beginning with the suppression of socialism and communism in early 1933, and ending only with the failure of German armies to capture Moscow in December of 1941. (120)

Hitler's "astonishing success" led to unconditional loyalty on the part of his party members, the SS, the rank and file of the Wehrmacht, and the general populace. According to McMillan, "Hitler's role as the source of law dissolved legal and moral norms and radicalized [his] subordinates by encouraging them to take actions they thought he would approve," (135), sadly turning soldiers into murderers.

But, not without the spark of anti-Semitism. In Chapter 9, "Why the Jewish People?" McMillan lays out the complex historical, religious, and political contexts that Jews confronted as they settled throughout Europe and made their ways into professions and political movements. Citing only two of these strands here, suffice it to say that what McMillan refers to as "Jewish [financial] success" and "the belief that Jews promoted Marxism" – diametrically opposed ideas – were important contributing factors that fueled anti-Semitism and built the momentum that led to the Holocaust. Yet, as McMillan explains, jealousy of Jewish financiers on the one hand and fear of Jewish intellectuals, socialists, and communists on the other was not sufficient to create the Holocaust: Also necessary was the belief that

Jewish people constituted a *race* that was biologically distinct from the rest of all humanity and genetically predisposed to behave destructively. This way of seeing Jews could only have happened in the twentieth century, the high-water mark of racist thinking in world history. (152)

Once differences among ethnic groups were assumed to be scientifically verifiable, the “lower” races were viewed as polluters of society and, consequently, deemed “unworthy of life” – making the Holocaust possible.

McMillan’s overarching explanation ultimately boils down to the notion of a perfect storm: “[I]t took an almost impossible combination of dangerous ideas, ruined people, and unimaginably bad luck to make this catastrophe possible” (205). Had Germany become a democracy fifty or more years earlier, had Hitler not come to power when he did or at all, had the 2,000 years of religious anti-Semitism not met up with an uncompromisingly rabid form of racial science, it is unlikely that events in Europe would have led to the Holocaust.

But one remaining factor still needs to be addressed. All of the above-mentioned conditions help to explain the causes that led to the Shoah. But it took millions of people to support it, to put the machinery in place, to do the killings. It is here that McMillan wants readers to understand that those who added fuel to the fire were ordinary citizens, not unlike the rest of humanity. It was this “lack of a moral compass” (170) on the part of the perpetrators and the bystanders that, along with the above conditions, made the Holocaust possible.

In the end, McMillan wants the Holocaust and the indifference of the majority of the German people to serve as a corrective for those of us living in its aftermath. It is, he asserts, all too easy to blind ourselves to atrocities, especially when they happen on foreign soil or to people who exist outside of our own “universe of obligation.” If anything, McMillan’s book is a call to the citizens of democratic countries to speak out – and to act – when atrocities are being committed. McMillan would encourage us to develop a new muscle, one reacts quickly and responds to a notion of “collective responsibility,” to the idea that we must become “our brother’s keeper” (204).

It is here that McMillan’s views intersect with my own. As the founder and director of the Holocaust Educators Network, I, too, seek to use the lessons of the Holocaust to address current acts of injustice. In his preface, McMillan states, “The Holocaust frightens people like no other event in history, evoking an instinctive horror and loathing that almost compel us to look away from it” (ix). The teachers I work with have chosen to do the opposite. They turn toward the Holocaust in an attempt not only to understand it but also to think hard about how to bring its lessons to students

across the US. It is a daunting task. As Eva Hoffman warns in *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* “Stand too close to horror, and you get fixation, paralysis, engulfment; stand too far, and you get voyeurism or forgetting” (Cambridge, MA: PublicAffairs, 2004, 177). Finding the right distance from which to teach about the Holocaust so that students can develop the muscles that will enable them to speak out against genocide is our shared task. McMillan’s book, by making the Holocaust explainable, will be of great help along the way.

