



Holocaust and History

The Holocaust was made possible by a society that scapegoated a group for their problems. Poor Germans saw Jewish people as wealthy, rich Germans saw Jewish people as clever, the German Christians saw Jewish people as “Christ killers,” peasant Germans saw Jewish people as “robber barons,” and Germans saw Jewish people as too knowledgeable. Dehumanizing Jewish individuals with derogatory names along with individuals willing to use the situation for personal gain intensified the fears and hate.

The Nazi Party in Germany allowed the hate to transform into a belief in the extermination of a whole group of people, starting at the Babi Yar ravine in the Ukraine in 1941 with the first mass killing in pits. Later, gas chambers and ovens would be used to increase the killing. Six million Jews and five million other “undesirables” were taken to the pits and ovens. When Simon Wiesenthal was released from a camp in 1945, a German woman asked him how it was in the camp. He told her to be glad she was not there. She responded, “Why would I—I am not Jewish!” Knowing about something is not understanding it.

When we teach the history of the Holocaust, it is about the brutality and killings and not the underlining causes. Simple acts of name calling dehumanize people even when the words are used in fun. We become desensitized to the damage that it may cause. The computer games, films and songs that are played today are filled with graphic violence that also desensitizes individuals to the human cost.

Stanley Milgram’s test pointed out that individuals were more likely to inflict extreme harm—pain—on others when they were a greater distance from the subject being tested. Philip Zimbardo’s prison experiment at Stanford indicate that an individual’s guard would show sadistic behavior in a very short time period. One-third of the guards in the study became cruel and tough. Jane Elliott’s experiment with blue eyes and brown eyes had similar results of making one group superior to another. Social values and conduct of individuals can and are part of the problem with ethnic hate.

John Dower’s book *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* states that war hate will induce war crimes. Dehumanizing others contributed immeasurably to psychological distancing that facilitated killings. Since 1945 and the Holocaust-type mass murders have taken place at My Lai during the Vietnam War, Bosnia ethnic cleansing in 1992, and the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda ethnic cleansing in 1994.

The human cost is lost in a history that only points out the graphic abuse of power. If history is taught to learn from the past, then based on the evidence of ethnic cleansing, we have failed. Based on the evidence of the swastika being used today, we have failed. Let us learn about ourselves and be on guard against our worst inner emotions and be empathetic to others.

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