Comment: Making Perpetrators

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Seventy years ago, the perpetrators began to walk off the stage of history. As the prospect of defeat in World War II became more plausible in 1943, Germans made frantic distinctions between themselves and the mighty Nazis or the "clean" Wehrmacht and the criminal SS. They squeezed themselves into ever smaller roles as passive observers, even victims, and they measured and remeasured the increasingly gigantic parts that a few Nazis (whose numbers steadily diminished) around Adolf Hitler had played. Eventually, they blamed the Nazis for losing the war and destroying Germany. Before the end of the war, this effort at recasting history's players revealed at least partially critical judgments of National Socialism, but after the war it was almost entirely exculpatory and self-serving. After 1945, the most influential historiographical accounts of the Holocaust continued to keep perpetrators at a distance. The "intentionalist" school emphasized the ideological intentions of Hitler and the antisemites he gathered around him and was only secondarily interested in the ways in which Germans from all walks of life had been perpetrators in war and genocide. The "functionalist" school put the stress on structural dynamics in the radicalization of German policy and did not spend a great deal of time considering the moral choices available to individuals or the ideological motives they might have had. If "intentionalists" made important distinctions between "big" and "little" Nazis, "functionalists" drew critical attention to the circumstantial contexts of complicity at all levels. In the end, both historiographical traditions obscured the active roles of ordinary Germans. But perpetrators have been pushed back onto the stage of the history they very much produced, in part because historians in the last thirty years have taken ideology more seriously and because they are more apt to see the Third Reich in terms of consent as well as coercion. Moreover, the rapidly expanding history of the Holocaust has made race an indispensable category of analysis and thus racists and antisemites central subjects of study. As scholars attempt to give victims a voice, they also end up bumping into more perpetrators. Since 1989, the centrality of the Holocaust and other historical disasters in the civic culture of Europeans keeps the role of perpetrators and the quandary of complicity in view.

Lynne Viola effectively outlines the reasons why "the question of the perpetrator in Soviet history" has not always been successfully answered, and she reveals some of the differences between the role of the perpetrator in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany. Like the Bolsheviks, the Nazis thought in terms of purity, but theirs was biological and racial, not ideological. Although the Nazis periodically culled the German population, throwing "asocials" into concentration camps and sterilizing racial "undesirables," the distinction between healthy and sick or between "Aryan" and Jew was much more stable than the distinction between terrorists and terrorized in the Soviet Union. As a result, it is easier to identify German perpetrators who were never in danger of becoming victims of the violence they meted out. In the Soviet Union, ideo-

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logical purity was a more evasive goal that allowed more refinements and admitted more ambiguity than the achievement of biological purity. It also made the party both the subject and the object of the efforts at political purification. By contrast, in the Third Reich, the Nazis worked to create a cadre of leaders, especially among young people, who were encouraged to take initiative and to represent the superiority of German "Aryans." Although they genuinely believed that they lived in a dangerous world of lethal enemies, the Nazis were not suspicious of themselves.

It seems to me that German perpetrators were also far more self-conscious about their roles in history. Many German racial administrators thought of themselves as victims, or, more precisely, believed that Germany had almost been extinguished at the end of World War I, was perilously close to falling into the same jeopardy in World War II, and therefore had to take drastic action in the wartime present in order to survive. This drastic action meant striking preemptively whether at so-called racial degenerates in Germany itself, at Jews around Europe, or at the Soviet Union when the time seemed opportune. The ability to take drastic action required a process of moral reeducation aimed at shedding Judeo-Christian morality, which was caricatured as *Humanitätsduselei,* and adopting in its place a stringent racial ethics to promote German life. The principal goals of moral reeducation were discussed in pamphlets, periodicals, and speeches and institutionalized at all levels of the Third Reich, particularly in training camps for young people and for the SS. Training was organized not simply for military purposes but to make the military and paramilitary forces capable of acting in an uncompromising way as long as the means served German ends. To enlist Germans into a "community of fate" was a lifelong program that introduced children into the Hitler Youth and deposited them in the Reich Labor Service, the Wehrmacht, or the SS. Of course, adhering to the new moral maxims, subordinating the self to the community, and ultimately taking the most drastic action by murdering civilians was not easy, and perpetrators frequently expressed doubts before fortifying and rearming themselves. Thus the whole process of training, the expression of doubt, and the effort of reaffirmation were characterized by a high-degree of self-consciousness. Nazi Germany cultivated leaders distinguished by their willingness to transgress conventional morality. The SS boasted of its ability to do so. Indeed, perpetrators spoke openly of the hard responsibilities they had assumed and even of the crimes they committed. By the end of the war, the Nazis even encouraged Germans to see themselves as the Allies did, as criminals who, it followed, had to win the war in order to save themselves. By declaring Germans to be extraordinary victims and by invoking the need to take drastic action and promoting a transgressive ethics in order to act, the Nazis deliberately endeavored to produce self-acknowledged perpetrators. The point of Nazism was to introduce perpetrators on the stage of history in order to make Germany unassailable.[1]

1. On views of 1918 and moral retraining, see Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, 2010); and Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office,* trans. Tom Lampert (Madison, 2009).

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While Nazi perpetrators were supposed to seize the initiative, they did not operate in an administrative apparatus consumed by fear and mistrust. German overlords did not have to negotiate ambiguity the way Bolshevik cadres did. Theirs was a culture of sovereignty, not confession. They did not have to readjust to constantly changing directives in order to survive. They did not take steps backwards in order to take further steps forward in a vertiginous ideological dance. They did not accuse themselves of overzealousness, revisionism, or ultra-radicalism. And Nazis did not land in concentration camps.

Of course, there were real limits on the extent to which the National Socialists could mold themselves or the leadership cadres they trained. Not only was Humanitätsduselei never eradicated but perpetrators did not consistently act with notions of a "Jewish world conspiracy" or "Bolshevik subhumanity" in their heads. Christopher Browning and Harald Welzer have offered powerful arguments demonstrating the role of circumstance and setting in motivating shooters to kill. Conformity to the group, obedience to authority, the "total" nature of institutions such as the military, and the training of soldiers to kill enemies were all compelling factors on the killing fields.[2] These were not specifically Nazi features, but characteristics of modern armies. In this regard, the research on German perpetratorship is portable to the Soviet Union. What does seem specific to the Soviet case, however, is the "confessional culture" of Bolshevism by which perpetrators and victims were "locked into the same language." Tribunals, trials, committee hearings, and even interrogation rooms constituted a specifically Soviet geography of terror. Nazis and Jews hardly shared the same premises, although the Nazis did claim that they did to the Jews what the Jews intended to do to the Germans. This pitiless worldview rested on the unchanging nature of "us" and "them." As Eric Rentschler observes about antisemitic caricatures, in the eyes of the Nazis, "living entities evaporate into their primordial form and become divested of empiricial existence and temporal being," which were the very subjects of Bolshevik inquiries into the self.[3]

What emerges after World War I is a view of the world in which violence had become much more common—Viola emphasizes the horrendous consequences of the Russian civil war a few short years after the horrors of the world war. An extremist vocabulary of "extermination," "destruction," and "liquidation" increasingly described what was taken to be the characteristic condition of international affairs. In the decades after the end of the Great War, mass death was regarded as an unsurprising component of the modern world. This new anthropology was seen as something self-evident by both the Bolsheviks and the Nazis. In Moscow as well as Berlin, observers were neither surprised nor shocked when they examined the dangerous inventory of the contemporary, which is perhaps why Vasilii Grossman made his plea, "This question needs thought," in such a naive register. The ground that Bolsheviks

2. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); and Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normale Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 2005).

3. Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 160.

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and National Socialists walked on trembled. Even so, no one went further than the Nazis in the effort to produce perpetrators who would take preemptive action to destroy enemies and save Germany. Able to act according to a pitiless worldview and willing to remake the world in view, the perpetrator was the ideal Nazi. The point of Nazism was to fashion such men.

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