

# Psychoanalysis and the Holocaust – or: Subject and Object brought upto date<sup>1</sup>

Frederik van Gelder

„Do you know that over a period of twenty-five years, between 1922 and 1947, seventy million Europeans – men, women and children – have been uprooted, deported, killed?“<sup>2</sup>

Philosophers of both the male and female kind have this – to most people – irritating eccentricity of seeming to deal not with the real world in which we all happen to live, but instead confining their attention to the ideas and arguments produced within it. They get on everybody’s nerves by playing around with paradoxes and logical conundrums, and they seem to derive a childish and quite incomprehensible pleasure from mental puzzles of the kind which in the secular European tradition from Kant onwards have come to be called ‘antinomies’, ‘aporias’, or ‘logical contradictions’.

That this preoccupation with such mental puzzles and paradoxes is not quite – at any rate: not always – the ‘glasperlenspiel’ fashionable post-modern scepticism would like to make of it is something I hope to convince you of in the course of the next hour.

The paradox I would like to consider was first formulated by Hegel more than a century ago, and translated into the idiom of the modern social sciences can be summarised in two statements the plausibility (and mutual contradictoriness) of which I would like to explore with you.

They are:

- A consideration of depth psychology leads inevitably to questions concerning the historical process as a whole and:
- A study of the historical process as a whole leads one inevitably to questions concerning depth psychology.

Allow me to elaborate on the first of these statements:

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2 Albert Camus, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1957.

## 1. *A consideration of depth psychology leads one inevitably to questions concerning the historical process as a whole*

In the years which have elapsed since the second world war the mental health professions have discovered something which, once one comes to think about it, seems so obvious that the only aspect of it which seems surprising at all is the length of time it has taken to be generally accepted. What they have discovered is this: that persecution, mass murder, torture and the threat of a barbaric and violent death are experiences which – provided one survives them at all – mark one for life, and that no-one who has seen the head of this modern Medusa can escape the horror of what it is that they then spend the rest of their lives fleeing from. There is such a thing, it seems, as spiritual murder (Niederland 1980), and the discovery thereof in mainstream psychology is a surprisingly recent development.

The literature on this phenomenon of what the psychologists in their more clinical terminology call psychotrauma or ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD)<sup>3</sup> has grown rapidly in the last decades, and it is not a debate confined to specialist discussions alone. To anyone who has read e.g. Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, Victor Frankl, Eddy de Wind, Elie Cohen, the poems of Nellie Sachs, Paul Celan or Ingeborg Bachmann, is conversant with the work of Peter Weiss or Samuel Bak – to mention only these very few – it is clear that the topic persecution and its psychological consequences has a significance far beyond the debates of psychologists and psychiatrists. As German historians conversant with your own popular literature this will be a familiar theme to you.

When I refer here in this paper however to depth psychology I have a much more specific debate in mind, namely that being conducted amongst Psychoanalysts on the question of the longterm psychological consequences of persecution, and it is to this that I now wish to turn.

So what is it that the psychoanalysts mean when they speak of ‘severe psychotrauma’?

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3 As defined by the ‘DSM’, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, bible of the American Psychiatric Association, in its various revisions. (Currently DSM IV) Psychoanalysts regard this terminology as tendentious; c.f. Otto Kernberg: “Der gegenwärtige Stand der Psychoanalyse” in: *Psyche* vol. 6, June 1994, p. 493.

That the survivors of the Nazi death camps – survivors of the systemically planned mass murder of entire cultures and population groups – were afflicted by emotional and psychological complaints not directly related to the obvious state of starvation, of the organic and infectious diseases these survivors also manifested was not something even a part of the medical profession was prepared to countenance until well into the nineteen-sixties, and even then only reluctantly, in the face of a great deal of resistance.

Early knowledge of the fate of the millions of innocents to die in the German machinery of industrialised mass murder came to us in fact not from the medical profession, but from published (auto)biographies, from diaries, from the few official reports which were not deliberately kept secret or – conversely – rejected as fanciful exaggerations. Some reports exist only in the form of secret diaries or appeals subsequently found buried in the ground of former concentration camps, such as e.g. that of the ‘Sonderkommando’ of crematorium three at Auschwitz-Birkenau<sup>4</sup>, or saved in some other way for an indifferent and incredulous posterity.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that a few individuals had not started, even before the end of the war, to document and gather information on the psychological consequences of the first policy of mass murder ever to be carried out by a modern nation-state. (Löwenthal 1945) Several of these early reports came from psychiatrists or psychoanalysts who had themselves survived the concentration camps, such as Bruno Bettelheim, Eddy De Wind, Elie Cohen, or Victor Frankl, or had been fugitives from the German occupation forces, such as Hans Keilson in the Netherlands, Leo Eitinger in Norway. Karl Landauer, one of the founding members of the psychoanalytic movement in Germany before the war, carried out psychoanalytic treatment during his own imprisonment in Bergen-Belsen, where he himself succumbed.

Another example is Paul Friedman’s observations in a Displaced Persons (DP) Camp in Cyprus immediately after the war – they now read, fifty years later, like an adumbration of what has taken half a century to be ac-

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4 E.g. the notes of Salmen Lewenthal, found buried in 1962. c.f. Werner Renz: “Wir wollten eine große Sache vollbringen – Zum 50. Jahrestag des Aufstandes des jüdischen Sonderkommandos im Vernichtungslager Auschwitz”. *Frankfurter Rundschau* 7.10.94, p. 18.

5 E.g. the diaries of Czerniakow, Emmanuel Ringelblum, the lyrics of Jizchak Katzenelson.

cepted, at least amongst therapists and psychologists, as the ‘survivor syndrome’.<sup>6</sup>

But the more general question which only in recent years has started to be posed is this: what is the status of such findings, and wherein, if any, lies the relevance for historiography? The medical profession deals after all mostly with symptoms, it collects and documents them in order to alleviate the suffering of individual patients – it is not interested in macro-sociological processes, let alone in the historical process as a whole. Setting aside here the scandalous indifference of the post-war world towards the plight of the survivors<sup>7</sup> – the Israeli selfhelp organisation AMCHA estimates, conservatively, their number, worldwide, at about one million – it could be argued that they represent a medical and social-work problem, and not a theoretical one. In the widespread, almost universal trend towards the ‘medicalisation’ of the plight of the survivors there is this implicit assumption: that however harrowing their plight might be, that there are no issues here of theoretical import for the social sciences. I hold this view to be one more of our many comfortable but mostly untenable illusions regarding the events of fifty years ago. It is an expression of our collective desire to forget the horrors of the past, horrors of which the survivors are an unpleasant reminder. It is the medical and mental health professions which have now proved beyond any shadow of doubt that wartime persecution changes the emotional lives – the ego-structures, the psychodynamics, the attitudes to themselves, to their families, to the world at large – of millions of people in decisive ways over many generations; but it is an illusion to think that what the mental health professions have now documented is a problem for the mental health professions alone.

That this *is* an illusion: to regard the psychotrauma problem as one which can be reduced to a question of medical/ psychiatric/psychoanalytic method (or social work measures) is something the psychoanalytic debate about psychotrauma itself confirms. I would like to review, briefly, three aspects of this debate about psychotrauma which seem to me already to have set in motion a re-evaluation of psychotherapeutic theory and practice

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6 C.f. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis on this: “Extremtraumatisierung als kumulatives Trauma” in: *Psyche*, 1979, vol. 33, p. 993. Also Wenda Focke’s recent William Niederland biography, which gives a useful overview of the work of the last decades: *William G. Niederland – Psychiater der Verfolgten – Seine Zeit – sein Leben – sein Werk* (Würzburg 1992.)

7 C.f. Christian Pross 1988: *Wiedergutmachung. Der Kleinkrieg gegen die Opfer*, Frankfurt am Main.

as radical as any since Freud himself ceased to publish sixty odd years ago. I shall discuss them under three headings: rephilosophisation, rehistoricisation, repolitisation.

### a) Rephilosophisation

Trauma is originally (and in organic medicine to this day) a medical term designating externally induced injuries to the human body such as fractures, contusions, dislocations, gunshot wounds, crush-injuries, cuts, burns and sprains; the term serves in the first instance to distinguish such exogenous injuries from endogenous diseases in which the causal agent is of a quite different kind, such as the infectious, degenerative, circulatory, metabolic, hereditary, immune, substance-abuse diseases and so on. Within organic medicine the term trauma presupposes – as does the entire nomenclature of somatic disease – an agent, namely the medical practitioner or his/her representative, who is to carry out some kind of instrumental intervention such as bandaging, cauterising, splinting, disinfecting, suturing and the like, procedures in which the patient concerned remains a passive onlooker whose understanding of what it is that is taking place is not unwelcome, but (as every veterinary surgeon knows) by no means a prerequisite.

The concept trauma, in other words, is imbedded in a form of knowledge constitutive for the emergence of modern (organic) medicine during the nineteenth century, namely a Cartesianism which sees the world as if it were composed of objects relating to one another in an endless series of causal chains, whose analysis and understanding is necessary for any kind of future action or intervention calculated to achieve a new state of affairs, and hence set in motion a *different* set of causal chains. In this respect there is, as far as ‘trauma’ and the mode of thought associated with it is concerned, nothing very special about the application within the medical profession of a notion of cause and effect which historically it took over from the natural sciences.

In contrast to this causal-instrumental conception of trauma and its treatment Freud and his followers have developed – in a distinct break with the epistemological objectivism of the medical establishment from which they originate – a hermeneutic-communicative conception of trauma in which the relationship of ‘theory’ to ‘practice’ has undergone an important transformation. No longer is the system of theoretical categories – of empirical descriptions, of diagnostic terminology, of the subsumption of experiences under theoretical perspectives – one which is geared, on the part of the cli-



nician, towards a future instrumental manipulation of objects and objectified processes – instead it is the subjective *symbolically* organised state of mind of the client which occupies center stage. Freud's metapsychology is gleaned from a knowledge of the decisive intersubjective influences operative in every human socialisation process, a knowledge used not to facilitate a manipulative intervention on the part of the clinician but to stimulate instead a process of *self-reflection* on the part of the client.

This is not the place to enter into the complex debate about the methodological status of Freud's metapsychology, about the question of Freud's putative 'scientistic self-misunderstanding' (Habermas 1968), or about the details of what it is that happens in the course of a successful psychoanalytic treatment. Three aspects of the psycho-trauma debates have in recent years however begun to make clear that the extension of the trauma-concept to processes of individual or collective reflection is a metaphor which has outlived its usefulness; all of them come from the attempts of psychoanalysts to understand the legacy of the Holocaust.

a) When a recent documentation of the history of the psychoanalytic profession during the Nazi era carries the subtitle "Beiträge zur Bearbeitung eines unbewältigten Traumas" (Lohmann 1984), then the authors are dealing, it is clear, not with an *individual* affliction which can still be thought of as a medical condition, but with a process of collective intellectual/moral corruption enforced by a totalitarian and terrorist regime. Recent European history, replete with instances of the failure of the intellectuals in the face of political intimidation, cannot be reduced to a question of *psychodynamics*, however important an understanding of the psychological foundations of – say – antisemitism or other regressive mass ideologies may be.

b) A second aspect of the psycho-trauma debate which uses the trauma-concept to describe collective, sociologically relevant phenomena is the notion of *society at large* being in some sense traumatogenic. Two psychoanalysts who have probed the effect of *postwar* indifference upon the fate of the survivors have been Hans Keilson in The Netherlands, Haim Dasberg in Israel. Both have documented the deep sense of alienation which set in once the survivors registered the political conformism, the crass materialism, the collective narcissism and cynicism which characterises the post-war world. A political conformism of which the psychoanalyst/psychiatrist is seen as the representative, rather than its critic and hence a potential ally.

“Als Arzt und Psychotherapeut, der sich in erster Linie mit dem Individuum befaßt, neige ich dazu, in der traumatisierten Person einen medizinischen Fall zu sehen, dessen Probleme offensichtlich in den Bereich der Psychopathologie fallen. Nach dieser Auffassung ist das Trauma das Ergebnis von psychologischem und physiologischem Streß, dem das Opfer einmal ausgesetzt war; es leidet an verdrängten Gefühlen der Wut oder der Trauer, der Hilflosigkeit oder an Todesangst, die durch Geschehnisse ausgelöst wurden, die für ‘nicht Traumatisierte’ schon längst Geschichte geworden sind.”

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“Im Laufe meiner langjährigen klinischen Erfahrungen wurde mir jedoch klar, daß der ‘post-traumatische’ Mensch als ein Opfer von Gewalt einerseits und politischen Kräften andererseits gesehen werden muß und daß er neben den Auswirkungen der erschütternden Ereignisse, unter denen der Patient heute noch leidet, gleichzeitig das Opfer einer ihn abweisenden Gesellschaft bleibt.” (S. 18).

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“Der Therapeut ist Teil der Gesellschaft, die sich gegenüber den Opfern abschirmt. ... Der Therapeut, der die psychischen Folgen organisierter Gewalt behandelt, kann nicht in einer distanzierten wissenschaftlichen Position verharren.” (S. 31) (Dasberg 1992)

c) A third aspect of the psycho-trauma debate which undermines Psychoanalysis’ own taboo on epistemological and philosophic questions (Jones 1953) is the relation to *historical* reality. In the work of several recent authors there is a distinct modification of the self-conception of the clinician vis-a-vis the client/patient. (Grubrich-Simitis 1994) The ‘instrumental’ attitude of the clinician is relativised in favour of an ‘I-Thou’ relationship (Dasberg 1992) in which it is the objective reality of a shared historical situation which is emphasized. The grandiosity of the PTSD-technician is abandoned for a shared sense of both ‘being in the same boat’: namely faced by an ever more crisis-ridden and uncertain world, in which fear of the future is by no means a monopoly of the survivor.

As one participant of the 1993 Hamburg conference “Children, War and violence” put it:

“The survivor reminds the psychically ‘healthy’ (including the psychoanalyst) of his/her mortality, of the precariousness of all human existence, of the ignominy and barbarity with which untold millions of innocents have met their death within the last sixty years. This reminder is intolerable, its suppression is a central function of all that which passes for contemporary culture, its presence is universal to a society which calls itself post-modern. Hence the victim is ‘sequentially’ traumatised (in a sense different from the one used by Hans Keilson), is once again ostracised and rejected: this time round not in the name of the racist madness of the Nazis, but in that of the sonorous terminology of official psychiatry. Upon the heads of those who have gone through a hell beyond the imagination of a Dante

or a Breughel is heaped the final indignity: instead of the understanding and support which they crave above all else – for the lack of which they commit suicide with unfailing regularity – they are given to understand, with the full authority of modern scientific medicine to back it up, that they are not quite right in the head. The very witnesses of the pathology of modern society, whose testimony could shake us out of a once again dangerous complacency about the state of the world in which we find ourselves, are stigmatised as neurotic, are treated as a new field of research for the psychiatric PTSD specialists, (i.e. as objects), rather than as a group of people who have something of great importance to say to us all.”<sup>8</sup>

To summarise the first part of this paper: there is, in the recent psycho-trauma debate, a ‘movement of thought’, a movement away from the exclusively instrumental-manipulative conception of treatment which regards the patient as a solitary subject involved in a process of ego-integration, in which the analyst thinks of him/herself as ‘repairing’ a putative narcissistic deficiency. (Krystal 1988) This is being contrasted, in at least a part of the literature, by the realisation that at least part of the problem is the apolitical, entirely innerworldly attitudes of main-stream psychoanalysis itself: what could be called ‘the-world-is-basically-OK-it’s-just-that-you-are-sick’ school of thought. (Jacoby 1983) This is being replaced by a wider awareness, itself stimulated by the psycho-trauma debate, that it is the objective world, the one we all share, which is in crisis. In the course of this debate it is the psychoanalytic profession’s own Cartesianism, its own nominalism, which is increasingly being thematised.<sup>9</sup>

## b) Rehistoricisation

It is no accident that the psycho-trauma debates have motivated a re-assessment of assumptions which go to the heart of Freud’s own understanding of neurosis: the libidinal theory of the causes of hysteria.<sup>10</sup>

In Freud’s own thinking the transition from the *causal-analytic* to the *hermeneutic-communicative* conception of trauma is well-known and generally acknowledged in the relevant text-books: it is the decision to treat the reports of childhood sexual abuse – the apparently highly eroticised associ-

8 Unpublished notes: Hamburg congress “Children, War and violence”.

9 What Dahmer calls psychoanalysis’ “peculiar platonism”, in Dahmer 1980, p. 665. c.f. also Paul Parin 1990.

10 Ilse Grubrich-Simitis 1979: “Extremtraumatisierung als kumulatives Trauma” in: *Psyche*, 33, p. 991-1023. Ibid: “From Concretism to Metaphor. Thoughts on some theoretical and technical aspects of the psychoanalytic work with children of Holocaust survivors” in: *Psychoanalytic study of the Child*, vol. 39.



ations of hysteria-patients<sup>11</sup> – as phantasies lacking any basis in the real facts of childhood experience. It is the exploration of such apparent *phantasies* within the psychoanalytic session, their relativisation against the assumptions about the nature of thought-processes of early childhood, which lie at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice to this this day, and have passed into the now familiar popular parlance of oedipal conflicts, free associations, repressions and sublimations of libidinal and aggressive drives, sexual neuroses, and so on.

*Not* to have taken sexual and aggressive associations at face value, i.e. not to have to treat them as memory-traces of real events and occurrences in the biography of the traumatised individual was in other words the pivotal event without which there would have been no history of psychoanalysis to trace, no distantiation from the mechanical materialism of nineteenth-century neurology, no ‘Freudianism’ as we now know it. The transference (and counter-transference) situation, the methodically induced introspection, the free association, the aim of integrating ‘split-off’ elements of the traumatised ego, the ‘re-symbolisation’ of somatised symptoms, this entire procedure is based on the psychoanalytic assumption that a *relativisation* of the traumatic events in the biography of the individual will lead to a kind of stoic and ‘mature’ acceptance of past injuries suffered. It is in the resigned acceptance of the unchangeable nature of past events on the part of the patient that psychoanalysis basis its confidence in the healing powers of its own procedures.

But what happens if a patient cannot stop dreaming of burnt corpses, of gas chambers, of disembowelled children, of death trains, of the screams of the tortured and the condemned?<sup>12</sup> If the patient is one of those many survivors obsessed with endless visions of death and destruction? (Herman 1980) Is the implicit stoicism of the psychoanalyst – the implicit *denial* and relativisation of past events – not inappropriate in a situation in which it is a collective historical event of the magnitude and destructiveness of the Holocaust which has burnt its indelible scars deep into the life and psyche of the survivor? I quote Jean Améry on this:

“... was mich bedrängt, ist keine Neurose, sondern die genau reflektierte Realität. Es waren keine hysterischen Halluzinationen, als ich das ‘Verreckel!’ hörte ...

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11 The famous Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim) c.f. Steven E. Goldberg 1988: *Two patterns of rationality in Freud's writings* Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

12 K.Zetnik 135633: *Bestendig voor ogen – De Paddestoel-Wolk van Auschwitz*. [Always before my minds' eye: the mushroom cloud of Auschwitz] Kampen. 1987.

Auf das Bewußtsein des vergangenen und die legitime Befürchtung eines neuen Kataklysmus läuft alles hinaus. Ich, der ich beide in mir trage – und diesen doppelt lastend, weil ich jenem nur durch ein Ungefähr entrann, bin nicht ‘traumatisiert’, sondern stehe in voller geistiger und psychischer Entsprechung zur Realität da. Das Bewußtsein meines Katastrophen-Judeseins ist keine Ideologie. Es darf verglichen werden dem Klassenbewußtsein, das Marx den Proletariern des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts zu entschleiern versuchte. Ich erlebe und erhelle in meiner Existenz eine geschichtliche Realität meiner Epoche, und da ich sie tiefer erfuhr als die Mehrzahl meiner Stammesgenossen, kann ich sie auch besser erleuchten. ...

Nur ein ‘Höre Welt’ möchte zornig aus mir dringen. So will es die sechsstellige Nummer auf meinem Unterarm. So fordert es das Katastrophengefühl, Dominante meiner Existenz.” (Améry 1977)

I am convinced that considerations such as these must lead to a revision of nothing less than psychoanalysis’ own conception of objectivity, in the context of a more explicit thematisation of historical, political and sociological realities.

A ‘de-politicised’ psychoanalysis, intent on conforming to the demands of the mainstream medical establishment, is having to rediscover a truth uttered by one of its own forgotten rebels: “Der soziologisch-kulturpolitische Charakter der Psychoanalyse läßt sich durch keinerlei Maßnahmen aus der Welt schaffen. Der Charakter ihrer Entdeckungen .. macht sie .. zu einem Todfeind der politischen Reaktion. Man mag sich hinter Illusionen wie dem Glauben an eine ‘unpolitische’, das heißt der Politik völlig disparate Natur der Wissenschaft verstecken: Das wird nur der wissenschaftlichen Forschung schaden, aber die politischen Mächte nie daran hindern, die Gefahren zu wittern, wo sie in der Tat liegen, und dementsprechend zu bekämpfen. (Z.B. Verbrennung der Bücher Freuds) Da die Psychoanalyse .. über die medizinischen Aufgaben hinaus kulturpolitische Bedeutung hat .. bedeutet jeder Versuch einer Anpassung oder Verhüllung des Wesens der Bewegung sinnlose Selbstopferung...” (from a letter by Wilhelm Reich to the ‘Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag’ in 1933, protesting its refusal to publish his book *Charakteranalyse*). (quoted in Dahmer 1994)

### c) Re-politicisation (Or: psychoanalysis as a critique of ideology)

If I have interpreted recent developments within the psycho-trauma debates correctly, then the mental health professions are facing a situation in many ways comparable to that of the early nineteen-thirties. A de-politicised majority of theorists and clinicians seeks refuge within the

mechanistic theories of tradition medicine. Only a beleaguered minority addressed itself, like the ‘Left-Freudians’ of more than half a century ago, to that Sisyphus task of attempting a comprehensive theory of society in its totality. (Fromm 1932) A task which now – as much as it did sixty years ago – once again has the somewhat unassuming title of an ‘analytic social psychology’. (Dahmer 1980)

To turn now to the second of the theses I had set out, at the beginning of this lecture, to make plausible:

## *2. A study of the historical process as a whole leads one inevitably to questions concerning depth psychology*

I take my point of departure from a paper which is, for historians, no doubt more familiar than the material dealt with above: Saul Friedländer’s introduction (entitled “The ‘Final Solution’: Unease in Interpretation”) to the volume edited by him, *History and Memory – Studies in Representation of the Past*. (Friedländer 1989) The issues he touches upon are ones which, even in the English-speaking discussions, are generally discussed under the heading of ‘The Historikerstreit’, after the original controversy between Habermas and Nolte in the late eighties. (Habermas 1987) What is the argument about? Friedländer puts it like this: there is, even after all the facts about the Holocaust are known – even if “a full historicisation seems by now possible and even in large part achieved” – one is left with a sense of unease, a sense that something vital has been left unsaid, that our desire to understand the events of fifty years ago are deeply thwarted. (As opposed to the historicism of a Nolte, Stürmer, Fest, who are content to relativise the Third Reich and its misdeeds against a global historical interpretation of – say – ‘the Twentieth Century’, or ‘Modern European History’.)<sup>13</sup>

Friedländer illustrates this “unease in historical interpretation” (p. 62) by asking after the “psychology of the perpetrators”. (ibid.)

“Most interpreters try to avoid the problem posed by the psychology of total extermination by concentrating exclusively on specific ideological motives (i.e. theories about the role of the Jew in society and history) or on institutional dynamics. There is no way of denying both the importance of the radical antisemitic theme and of competitive internal politics, as well as the dynamics of bureaucracy

13 C.f. the correspondence between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, in Broszat 1988.

in giving a general interpretation of the ‘Final Solution’. But an independent psychological residue seems to defy the historian. The psychological dimension, whenever recognized, is usually reduced to a vague reference to the ‘banality of evil’. My hypothesis, in this first part, is that for some historians this particular dimension remains a kind of riddle subsumed under other explanatory categories, but which accompanies any discussion about the ‘why’ and not the ‘how’ of the ‘Final Solution’.” (p. 62/63)

He goes on to quote from Himmler’s notorious and oft-quoted secret speech before high-ranking SS-officers in Posen on October 4, 1943, which starts:

“Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, when 500 lie there or 1000. Having borne that and nevertheless – some exceptional human weakness aside – having remained decent (*anständig geblieben zu sein*) has hardened us ... All in all, we may say that we have accomplished the most difficult task out of love for our people. And we have not sustained any damage to our inner self, our soul and our character. (*und wir haben keinen Schaden in unserem Inneren, in unserer Seele, in unserem Charakter daran genommen*)” (p. 63)

Now what is it about this speech which makes it for Friedländer (and for us) so incomprehensible? Not so much, Friedländer notes, the coldbloodedness with which eleven million people (Heidrich’s calculation at the Wannsee conference) are condemned to the bullet and to the gas-chamber. These things are, terrible as this is to admit from our own privileged (and for the moment comfortable) perspective of historical hindsight, now wellknown. What Friedländer finds so incomprehensible is the way in which the genocide of the Nazis could *possibly be justified by an appeal to universal values*, as Himmler does indeed do in his speech. (“This [the extermination of the Jews of Europe, S.F.] is the most glorious page in our history, one not written and which shall never be written.”)

Friedländer, a historian rather than a psychologist or a philosopher, comes close to recognizing the centrality of those mass paranoias which in the philosophical and dialectical traditions are called ‘ideologies’:

“There can be little doubt about the centrality of the anti-Jewish obsession in Hitler’s worldview, as well as about elements of antisemitic motivation at various levels of the Party and the population, but the overwhelming centrality of this factor is not apparent in the case of Himmler and his Posen audience. The core motivation may well be more decisively attributed to a series of elements which I shall mention further on, among which are the ‘Führer-Bindung’ and the ‘Rausch’.” (p. 64)

The power of the Nazis was based not only on their racist and antisemitic ideology. Even at the height of their popular support at the polls, the last peace-time election of 1935, they failed to gain an electoral majority, and the terrorist nature of the regime was even then only barely veiled. But it is also true that they could mobilise millions of dedicated – even fanatical – supporters, that they could count on widespread sympathy in the administration, in the army, in the professions, in the diplomatic corps, and that these collective convictions went so deep as to present a not inconsiderable problem even for the post-war, democratised society in Germany which had officially abjured them.

What Friedländer calls the “paralysis of comprehension” (p. 66) or the “historian’s unease” is based, I wish to suggest, on the unwillingness of the historian to face, head-on, the fact that politically relevant events take place against a backdrop of shared values – however insane they may appear to us now – and that these mass delusions have not, to date, received the attention they deserve.

The nemesis of militarism and of a demagogic nationalism armed with modern weapons of mass destruction – in the thirties embodied starkly in the rise to power of the ‘Third Reich’ – cannot be understood by means of a historical narrative of the conventional kind alone. Apparently we need to look for kinds of explanations, kinds of descriptions of past events, which go beyond that conventional historicism which in my own student days we irreverently called the ‘one-goddamn-thing-after-another’ conception of the past. We are ourselves not ‘above’ history, we do not occupy some kind of Archimedean point beyond the fray, our own understanding of truth and objectivity is not beyond criticism. In trying to puzzle out the relationship between shared convictions, selfreflections, past events and contemporary fears about the future, we cannot, it seems, do without theories of the kind once called ‘dialectical’. We need to regain a conception of the history of the human race in its entirety, based on an understanding of the psychological and emotional forces which have bound us, since the beginning of the European Enlightenment, into those antagonistic totalities we commonly call ‘nations’ or ‘cultures’. Faced with the reality and the consequences of the Holocaust, both Psychology and Historiography are forced to look beyond their own disciplinary boundaries, are forced to thematise and put into question traditional certitudes. We need one another, it seems, if we are to understand both ourselves and our own history, and we need to do both if we are to free ourselves from a by no means irrational fear of a repetition of the horrors of the past.



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