

Conformity, compliance and complicity

‘Ordinary people’ and the Holocaust

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The Nazi mass murder of European Jews, Roma, the mentally and physically disabled and innumerable other victims, was only possible with the active assistance or at least passive acquiescence of millions of ‘ordinary people’ across Nazi-dominated Europe. Who were those ‘ordinary people’ who witnessed but were unwilling – or unable – to act against mass murder on an unprecedented scale, or who even became in some way complicit in the process of perpetration? To what extent was passivity rooted in partial consent or agreement with the persecution of minorities, or rather in subjugation and fear of the persecutors? Victim experiences have increasingly come to the fore, with the explosion of research on the Holocaust since the later twentieth century.¹ And alongside a continued focus on Nazi decision-making and policy formation, the immediate perpetrators of mass murder have also increasingly been the subject of intensive research, with heated debates about the relative significance of ideological socialization, brutalization in warfare and the implications of peer group pressure in mobilizing members of police battalions and Wehrmacht soldiers to work alongside the dedicated SS extermination squads or Einsatzgruppen in killing civilians.² The ways in which activists in territories occupied by or allied with Germany played a role as collaborators and auxiliaries have also increasingly been subjected to detailed and comparative analysis.³ Yet the responses of those who initially stood on the side-lines of Nazi violence – often termed ‘bystanders’ – remain to date somewhat out of focus.

The responses of members of surrounding societies could be all important to the survival chances of victims. In a situation of all-engulfing violence, people who could at first be considered ‘innocent bystanders’ inevitably became caught up in war and genocide; and their evolving responses could crucially affect historical outcomes. Understanding the circumstances and ways in which people in surrounding societies choose to act, or fail to act – or even change direction on the spur of the moment – is vital if we are to comprehend how mass murder on the scale of the Holocaust was possible. This issue is particularly relevant to understanding the roles of citizens of the Third Reich, the prime instigator and organizer of the Holocaust. Controversies over the involvement of ‘ordinary Germans’, in what has variously been characterized as a

'consensual dictatorship', a 'perpetrator society' or a 'regime of terror' held together by force and fear, show little sign of resolution. Whichever way the historical research seems to point, questions arise about the extent of complicity and the veracity of later self-justifications among people included in the Nazi 'national community'.

Moreover, debates about the Third Reich, as the initiator of war and genocide, are rarely linked to discussions about the societies over which it held sway during the war. The nature of surrounding societies could make a significant difference to victims' experiences and chances of survival. The contrasts between survival rates of Jews, ranging from more than 95 per cent in Denmark or 75 per cent in France to around 25 per cent in the Netherlands and a mere 5 per cent in Lithuania, are rooted in more than just the distinction between Western European countries from which Jews were deported and eastern European countries in which Jews were killed. Geopolitical locations and shifting considerations across the stages of the war clearly shaped Nazi strategies and differing regional policies; but the wider social context also affected the extent to which Germans were able to control particular areas and put into effect repressive, exploitative and murderous policies. From the victims' perspective, the wider environment affected chances of obtaining food, shelter, medical assistance, means of escape or hiding, including 'going under' in plain sight through the adoption of false identities.

While there have long been challenges to heroic resistance narratives in western European countries, research on complicity and collaboration in eastern Europe only developed significantly after the collapse of communism and remains hampered by the relative inaccessibility of some archival materials.⁴ Systematic comparisons between eastern and western Europe, and among eastern Europe societies within fluctuating borders, require further development. European-wide comparisons undoubtedly raise major challenges around area expertise: any overview must always be open to revision in light of emergent language-specific historiographies and sources. But there are also other, often extraneous, factors affecting comparisons. On occasion, there seems to be a moral hesitancy about bringing conquerors and conquered into the same universe of comparison, as though to delineate the contributing complicity of others might somehow reduce the burden of German culpability. There is also a (well-founded) fear that highlighting how eastern Europeans were victims of both Stalinism and Nazism might be misused to exonerate nationalist heroes from complicity in Nazi antisemitism, as evident in controversies in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. In the crossfire of contemporary identity politics, the field is complicated by an underlying ethno-nationalism: the reputation, even the supposed 'honour', of 'the nation' is held to be at stake.⁵ There are also individual sensitivities, where people are still affected by the consequences of the massacres and social upheavals of the Nazi era.

At the heart of all these controversies lies the issue of compromised identities, whether individual or collective, which are seen to be tainted by varying degrees of historical culpability. How then can we best understand gradations of guilt and complicity in different circumstances? Can the wider 'Aryan' population of Nazi Germany really be described as a 'perpetrator society', essentially rephrasing the outmoded 1945 claims about 'collective guilt' or that 'all Germans are bad Germans'? Or can we reach a more differentiated understanding of constraints, pressures, potential for acting in different

ways, even as we also explore how people were themselves changed by living through a period of immense terror and pressure for conformity? We need right at the outset to take seriously Kurt Tucholsky's comment – made in a despairing letter written in exile, shortly before his death in December 1935, to Arnold Zweig, also in exile – that 'a country is not only that which it does – it is also that which it is prepared to stomach, to put up with.'⁶ But Tucholsky's characteristically sharp insight does not in fact go far enough, in two respects: we need, first, to explore further how specific political conditions and historical circumstances affected social perceptions and interpersonal relations over time, with implications both for *what* people are prepared to 'put up with' and against *whom*; and secondly, and importantly, we need to go beyond the assumption of a uniform 'land', 'nation' or homogeneous 'society', to understand in a more differentiated fashion *who* precisely, and under what conditions, is more or less likely to 'put up with' – or alternatively to stand up and speak out against – injustice and violence against which others.

The passivity of bystanders can make a crucial difference to the course of persecution. We therefore need a differentiated approach to analysing the diversity of responses in persisting systems of collective violence; an approach that can disentangle the small steps, over time, that make ever greater numbers of people more likely to remain silent in face of violence against selected groups of 'others'.

Theoretical approaches: The problem of bystanders

The general field of forces is often summarized, following Raul Hilberg, in terms of three nouns: 'perpetrators, victims and bystanders.'⁷ A great deal of attention has rightly focussed on the first two: those directly responsible for ordering or executing acts of violence and their immediate victims. Yet despite the significance of the third and extremely broad element in this triad, there is little agreement on the scope or even the value of what proves to be an extremely slippery concept.⁸

Social psychologists have much to offer in terms of understanding individual responses within small group contexts in a broader environment where certain behaviours are not officially condoned.⁹ But the situation is very different when violence is state-sanctioned or it is the authorities themselves who are instigating collective violence. Moreover, individuals are not in some sense historical 'givens' or fixed personalities, but are constantly changing, affected by their times. People living within a persisting system of collective violence – whether for a matter of days, weeks or years – are themselves changed by the circumstances in which they make their lives. Social relations and cultural perceptions begin to shift, with significant implications for attitudes and action. Those who are initially simply witnesses to violence by chance coincidence of time and place – happening to be 'present' at both the time and the scene of the crime, so to speak – become themselves more deeply involved in the dynamics of systemic or state-sanctioned violence over an extended period of time. Their progressive involvement on one side or another is not readily captured in the notion of 'bystanders'.

Simply coining a concept such as the 'implicated subject' as an 'umbrella category' that is so capacious as to be effectively meaningless does little to further historical analysis of key distinctions.¹⁰ Rather than simply rejecting Hilberg's somewhat unsatisfactory triad of nouns, suggesting fixed identities, it may be helpful to explore further the possibility of a more differentiated approach to understanding changing roles, behaviours and attitudes in relation to collective violence.

There are clear benefits in taking a 'social process approach' to understanding the ways in which people may variously become involved in acts of perpetration at certain times.¹¹ Even so, this too can seem on occasion a little evasive. A social process approach may be good for understanding the social dynamics of changing configurations of violence over a period of time, but there is still some value in identifying precisely who did what to whom in particular moments of crime. The 'perpetrators' who instigate, organize or engage in violence, and the direct 'victims' of crimes, are in principle identifiable, despite the undoubted complexities of the real world. So we might want to retain those two nouns, at least for the moment of the criminal act. But to (re)assert this does not solve the wider problem of understanding the field of forces or social contexts within which the direct actors are operating. 'Bystanding' is intrinsically a temporally unstable, relational concept, with 'bystanders' defined purely in terms of initial location on the periphery of violent situations; yet it is nevertheless their changing perceptions and actions that may eventually make a significant difference to outcomes. And here, time operates in the opposite direction from that explored in 'social process' approaches. While people may *become* perpetrators over time, people inevitably *cease to be* 'innocent bystanders' the longer the violence lasts. Even by remaining passive, they do not remain neutral; passivity in effect condones violence, and in this way facilitates it.

So we need to ask: under what conditions do people come either to side with initiators and perpetrators of violence, or to extend sympathy and even assistance towards victims? There are a range of ways of exploring this question, with respect both to short-term situations – momentary incidents of violence – and to shifts in the character of social relations and political conditions over longer periods of time.

It is not easy to interpret bystander responses when captured, for example, in the fleeting instant of a photograph: passers-by watching impassively as Jews are taunted, attacked, marched along the street by persecutors; audiences laughing as old men are subjected to rituals of humiliation such as having their beards cut off or being forced to scrub the pavement on their knees; onlookers curiously taking photographs at public hangings or mass shootings. Do apparently eager facial expressions as captured on photographs – often the only traces we have, decades later – signal genuine approval, or nervous alignment with what are perceived to be dominant views? Are enthusiastic gestures – hysterically smiling heads forwards, arms outstretched in the Hitler greeting – just momentary effects of crowd behaviour? Are such expressions in effect masks, habitual 'public faces' readily donned under dictatorial conditions; or do they reflect genuine emotions, only expressed once approval of violence against 'outsiders' was legitimized? Is squinting, or looking away, a sign of discomfort at witnessing the subjugation of others, or merely a momentary attempt to avoid blinding sunlight in the eyes? Does a downcast head signal disapproval of what was going on, or simply

distraction at registering a blistered heel or rumbling stomach? Clearly, images of 'bystander' responses at particular moments – whether visual or verbal, as captured in equally snapshot reports on popular opinion – need to be supplemented by a range of other materials to explore internalities as well as external expressions, and to trace changing responses over time.

Exploring changing subjectivities over a longer period of time raises further questions. At what point, when inhabiting a persisting system of collective violence, does outward conformity become internalized and effectively normalized, as invidious categories and values are repeatedly expressed and enacted in everyday behaviours? At what point, or in what ways, do conformity and compliance cross the threshold into more active complicity? In what ways do individual situations and motives for action (or inaction) make a difference to later evaluations of passive or apparently complicit behaviour? Do professed motives – acting out of fear, or for 'good' reasons, rather than in service of 'bad' ideals or for 'selfish' personal ends – help to justify behaviours; and if so, how far can we believe which stories and forms of self-exoneration, produced under changed circumstances and for different audiences (including the self)? How, in short, do people's norms and values, as well as their perhaps mistaken perceptions of the situation, play a role in later analyses of actions and consequences? And, bearing these questions in mind, can we develop relevant distinctions between different degrees or forms of complicity?

The legal definition of complicity relates to 'aiding and abetting' a criminal act, providing assistance to those committing a crime or benefitting from such an act; and the definition of what constitutes a 'crime' varies with jurisdiction. But for historical assessment of degrees of involvement in both systemic violence and specific incidents, we need a wider conceptual framework. In particular, we need to develop ways of understanding both subjective perceptions and outward behaviours, which may often be somewhat at odds with one another.¹²

Patterns of involvement: A framework for analysis

The following analytic framework may be useful in assessing ways in which it is possible to be, for example, functionally complicit through roles and behaviours while varying in subjective perceptions of and attitudes towards such complicity. A sense of unease at the moral compromises entailed might affect a person's sense of identity, but personal morality may also be in conflict with commitment to a wider collective identity (as for example, membership of a group, a religious community, a nation). There are multiple ways in which living in a persisting system of collective violence intrinsically entails compromised identities, and also multiple ways in which individuals can seek to alleviate their own sense of discomfort at registering a degree of dissonance, in one way or another, by variously adjusting their perceptions, attitudes or actions according to circumstances.

It is important to note that the following categories are intended solely for analytic purposes: individuals might occupy or move between several positions. Combining subjectivities and behaviours, this framework is intended to help us understand the

roles people play, the fields of forces they inhabit, and their perceptions and evaluations of the situation. It starts from the premise that in a system of persisting collective violence the 'neutrality' of 'innocent bystanders' is only momentarily an option, if at all, and that people are continually faced with pressures to move in a variety of directions.

1. *Conformity*

Life in a dictatorship based on terror inevitably entails high levels of conformity. From the moment Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, people who were not necessarily Nazi enthusiasts rapidly 'fell into line'. Outward conformity was rooted partly in genuine enthusiasm for the new order, the national 'saviour' who would supposedly restore law and order to the streets, and make Germany great again. Conformity was partly a matter of simply going along with the crowd. But conformity was also based in justified apprehension, in light of the early and vicious crackdown on left-wing opponents of Nazism. One of the odder phenomena of the early Third Reich was that of what were jokingly called 'beef-steak Nazis' – brown on the outside, red on the inside – who donned Nazi uniforms to try to bury their communist or socialist past. There is a huge literature on support for Nazism; rather less on the ambivalent combination of outward conformity and inner misgivings.¹³

But what is more puzzling are the ways in which, over the early months of the regime, many citizens went well beyond what was formally required of them. They not only mouthed the slogans and raised their arms in the Hitler salute in public but also conformed to Nazi precepts in what might be thought of as 'private spaces'. Particularly notable in the memoirs of Germans excluded from the 'national community' on grounds of 'race' are stories of how formerly close friends and acquaintances rapidly dropped all contact with 'non-Aryan' fellow citizens. Breaking of friendships was, for example, one of the most painful memories of the period after 1933 in autobiographical essays written on the brink of war under the title 'My Life in Germany before and after 1933' – essays penned at a time when the worse that was still to come was not yet known about, and before knowledge of camps and gas chambers overshadowed all the agonies of persecution in everyday life that had taken place in the peacetime years.¹⁴

2. *Compliance*

Conformity and compliance are related to slightly different kinds of awareness and pressure to align with dominant views or practices. Conformity may be the result of informal pressures, not always made explicit, and of which people may not be consciously aware even as they come to behave in similar ways to others. Compliance is related to more clearly expressed and registered requirements: people find that in certain settings they have to comply with particular demands and regulations, requests and expectations. Non-compliance generally entails sanctions of varying degrees of severity, or potentially disagreeable consequences (as when an electrical device or plug that does not comply with safety regulations sparks a fire).

Ambivalent conformity can readily be turned into regularized compliance – and even what might be called pre-emptive over-compliance. People may come to believe

that compliance is not only unavoidable but also morally right: in the interests of the wider community with which they identify, furthering collective aims which they share, and so on. This is particularly the case where a sense of a 'national community' is being energetically propagated, with the assertion of a return to national greatness being eagerly accepted by large numbers of people. With increasing Nazi control of the media, law, cultural institutions, education and socialization, it required strong commitment to alternative or prior belief systems to hold out against falling in with new hegemonic discourses and practices.

With the Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service in April 1933, many Germans were surprised to discover that colleagues, acquaintances or even they themselves, had the odd Jewish grandparent of whom they had perhaps not previously been aware. Moreover, it was not only the areas of state employment covered by the law, but also many other businesses and leisure associations that now excluded people with 'non-Aryan' ancestry. Whether or not individuals were personally affected, this – and further legislation, a few months later, on compulsory sterilization of the supposedly hereditarily diseased – instantly highlighted the salience of 'race' and the notion of a 'healthy national community' as principles structuring exclusion and inclusion.

The 1935 Nuremberg Laws (while somewhat ameliorating the status of 'quarter-Jews', but too late to mitigate individual experiences of social decline since 1933) served both to normalize racialized perceptions of difference, and to foster both physical and social segregation of 'Aryans' and 'non-Aryans'. As a consequence of practical measures, enforceable in law, there was growing distance between shifting communities of empathy, with an impact not only on those ousted as Jews, but also on 'Aryans'. Many became increasingly indifferent to the fates of people with whom they were losing contact. Loss of contact meant they could more readily ignore the distress of those who had been stigmatized, marginalized, ousted from the new 'national community'. But others felt powerless, resigning themselves to going along with things. Growing *indifference*, alongside learned *ignorance*, and an increasing sense of *impotence* as it was ever more clear that the regime was firmly entrenched and far from transitory, variously contributed to *inaction* in the face of state-sanctioned violence against Jews and other victims of the Nazi regime.

Although compliance among older Germans was often still a matter of public performance accompanied by inner reservations, it was increasingly rooted in Nazi convictions among members of younger generations, brought up in an already racialized view of the world. And many adults were enthusiastic about the return to full employment and assertions of national pride in the mid-1930s. But this was not always the case.

'*Constrained compliance*' relates to the effectively powerless participation of those who feel forced by circumstances to comply. Through following regulations in a system of collective violence, people may be sustaining persecution without necessarily wanting to. Uncomfortable in their roles, yet unable to see safe means of opting out, they may seek ways of alleviating their own distress, even if only through occasional expressions of sympathy towards victims. They feel they have to go along with things, fearing the greater risks of other courses of action. A sense of apathy rooted in awareness of impotence or may underlie this path of least resistance.

3. Varieties of complicity

There are varying forms of complicity with a persisting system of collective violence. Two in particular may be highlighted: active facilitation of the regime's persecutory aims; and benefitting from the persecution of others. These may, similarly, be further subdivided according to degrees of agency and willingness to be involved.

'*Willing facilitation*' refers to playing an identifiable role in making systemic violence possible, and hence being, in effect, *complicit*. People may later claim they had merely worked as 'cogs in the machine', and should not be held responsible for the overall outcomes to which their own small part had contributed, but without them the system could not have functioned. This category would encompass, for example, innumerable German civil servants and collaborators in territories under Nazi rule.

'*Unwilling facilitation*' is a variant of this to be more thoroughly explored, as in the cases, for example, of Germans called up for Reich Labour Service who found themselves working in a concentration camp, or in a sanatorium where people with mental and physical disabilities were being killed, or eastern Europeans who were 'requisitioned' by the invading Germans to assist in providing materials and labour for killing operations. Some may have come to terms with their new roles and begun to behave accordingly, adopting and to some extent internalizing the rules and discourses of the organizations or contexts in which they now worked, and trying to persuade themselves that what they were doing had some justification; others may have found it far more difficult to accept, yet considered it impossible to get away unscathed (although many more later, wrongly, used such claims in attempts at self-justification). These cases might be better covered by the notion of 'constrained compliance', since despite constraints and misgivings they also actively contributed to the furtherance of the regime's persecutory and murderous policies.

'*Wittingly benefitting*' relates to knowingly improving one's own situation at the expense of the persecuted, whether through accruing privileges, possessions, housing, enhanced opportunities or employment prospects. To ease any discomfort in their construction of an 'unselfish self', people may find justifications for their improved situation, perhaps in terms of supposed benefits to the wider community with which they identify, rather than just themselves personally. This is closely related to ideologically tinged perceptions and '*acquired indifference*' to the suffering of the victims, which can be justified by supposedly higher priorities concerning one's own community. Benefitting at the expense of others can take place ad hoc, through individual initiative – seizing the property of murdered Jews – or be systematically organized, as in the unequal distribution of food through ration cards for different categories of people.

Again, there is a variant. '*Wilfully blinkered benefitting*' refers to 'turning a blind eye'. People may be fleetingly aware of the morally tainted nature of their benefits, but do not want to register this fully; they may rapidly suppress uncomfortable thoughts and find it easier to live with compromises if they ignore disquieting aspects; they may find it easier to say they 'didn't know' – for example, combatting a sense of contamination if forced to recognize they are wearing a fur coat from a murdered Jew. There are specific social conditions that can foster a capacity to 'turn a blind eye', or to engage in '*learned*

ignorance. (Of course, some may benefit while genuinely being entirely unaware of the tainted nature of the goods or privileges they enjoy, as in the case of young children at the time, or later generations ignorant of the source of their family's wealth. This I would exclude from any useful notion of complicity, although others take a different view.¹⁵)

4. *Principled retreat and refusal*

Basic conformity and compliance can be combined with behaviours that do not always further the aims of the regime. The famed 'inner emigration' was probably overstated after 1945 by people who had at the time engaged in compromises from which they later sought to distance themselves, claiming they had 'always been against it'. In the case of those who stayed within the system, a degree of everyday conformity and compliance was essentially for personal survival. It is extraordinarily difficult to live within a system built on an ideology and practices of exclusionary violence without having to make compromises and becoming in the process tainted, particularly in the eyes of people who may live under far less challenging circumstances and yet want to hold them to higher standards. But again, there are variations.

This category encompasses those who *retreat* from engagement as far as practicable: people who, insofar as they had any leeway for choice (far more so in some social positions than others), endeavoured neither to benefit from nor to further the persecution of those ousted from the 'national community'; or who, while not themselves subject to persecution, decided to leave Germany because they were unwilling to engage in the compromises required of them. Whether inner dissent combined with outward conformity should be garnished with the label 'opposition' is questionable; however, much of a relief it might be for family members to find that a relative really had been 'always against it'.¹⁶

More significantly, *principled refusal* might lead into momentary or more persistent attempts at *resistance and rescue*, actively seeking to mitigate the adverse effects of persecution on victims. This might still entail engaging in compromises. For example, having to use the language of the regime to appeal to authorities on behalf of victims may simultaneously serve to reinforce the apparent validity of the regime's language. Janus-faced tightrope walking is of the essence of survival in a dictatorship while simultaneously seeking to subvert it or mitigate its consequences. Yet despite inevitable compromises, such behaviour is intended to work *against* rather than *for* the regime's ends. Depending on circumstances, there may be only very limited possibilities for acts of rescue or resistance, but even small actions or simple gestures of support and sympathy might make a huge difference to individual fates.

The possibility for principled refusal and retreat varies significantly according to social standing as well as national, regional and local conditions. Perceived risks often massively outweigh the benefits or impulse to engage in refusal and retreat, let alone acts of resistance or rescue. Under Nazi rule, there were far greater penalties to face in some areas than others; networks of social support or fear of denunciation varied with community solidarity, and degrees of dependence on mutual goodwill and neighbourly relations shifted significantly, not only during but also after the war.

Challenges to 'neutrality' in peace and war

In a persisting system of collective violence, it is not possible to remain 'neutral' for any length of time. Even in the years up to 1937, large numbers of 'Aryan' Germans had become complicit in the persecution of 'non-Aryan' compatriots and others excluded from the Nazi 'national community'. But not every Reich citizen was complicit. That the population of the by-now-expanded Reich was deeply divided was evident in polarized responses to 'Kristallnacht' in November 1938.¹⁷ This was not, despite attempts at the time (and rather more surprisingly also recently) to label it as such, a 'pogrom' in the sense of a spontaneous popular outburst of violence, as Goebbels sought to portray it: the arson attacks on synagogues, the smashing up of Jewish homes and businesses, and the mass arrests and incarceration of adult male Jews, were clearly initiated and orchestrated from above. Yet many members of the wider population, particularly young people, participated in the violence, benefitted from looting and assisted in the humiliation of victims. Nazi activists encountered little by way of public resistance, whatever the widespread mutterings of shame. People who disapproved tended to look on passively, and only offered help to individuals in private, where risks were lower. Many 'Aryans' felt discomfited by the violence and extended personal sympathy to victims, despite simultaneously engaging in compromises through continued behavioural compliance. Non-Jewish Germans were, in effect, becoming ever more complicit by playing roles that furthered the goals of the Nazi regime, while at the same time assuaging their sense of unease by being kind to individual victims along the way. This dissonance and related sense of compromise was at the heart of subsequent discomfort about an 'unmasterable past'.

At this time, it was far from clear where exactly Nazi policies would lead. But by the late 1930s, within the Reich a 'bystander society' had developed in which the fates of those designated no longer part of one's own community of empathy could more easily be ignored. What do I mean by a 'bystander society'?¹⁸ It is one in which, first, there are fewer emotional or other connections between different groups or communities, such that it is easier for more people to ignore the fates of those now seen as 'others', to look away or 'turn a blind eye' to violence against them; secondly, in which conditions and perceptions have changed or been sufficiently manipulated as to ensure that people will variously believe, or act as though they believed, invidious discourses about 'others', and will fail to challenge prejudices and stereotypes; and finally, in which degrees of repression and control are such that those who are still unable or unwilling to accept the dominant norms feel essentially impotent, powerless to affect the wider situation in any effective way that would make it worth taking the associated risks. 'Bystanding' – passively observing or ignoring rather than intervening on behalf of victims – is in this way promoted and sustained by specific social, ideological and political conditions. While the position of being an 'innocent bystander' can only be momentary, the sociopolitical circumstances that secure widespread passivity and conformity – essentially permitting violence to continue – persist and may become ever more firmly entrenched over a lengthy period of time. This is the transformation that took place in Nazi Germany in the peacetime years from 1933 (including Austria

from 1938) – and with infinitely more fatal consequences in the circumstances of an aggressive and ultimately genocidal war from 1939 to 1945.

As conditions changed in wartime, priority was given to the supposed ‘national interest’ of the ‘people’s community’ which with ‘Aryans’ were enjoined to identify. The ‘Final Solution’ as it emerged in late summer 1941 was not predetermined. The sequential transitions – from provoking emigration and terrorizing Jews (Kristallnacht, November 1938; Poland, September 1939 onwards); through killing adult male Jews seen as a potential security threat on the eastern front (June–July 1941); to killing Jewish women, children, the sick and the elderly, whose labour could not be exploited (from mid-August 1941 onwards); banning emigration and deporting Jews to the east (from October 1941 in the Reich, 1942 from elsewhere); to the European-wide coordination of the ‘final solution’ of total extermination – were shaped by changing circumstances. Considerations related to the course of the war, conceptions of military necessity, the politics of food and hunger and the need for labour power. There were continual adjustments to methods and timing, with negotiations between centre and periphery, and competing demands, even as policies of persecution, exploitation and murder all tended in the genocidal direction set by Hitler. And everywhere, the implementation of exterminatory policies was affected by local political configurations and the character of surrounding societies.

How did widespread conformity and compliance among ‘ordinary people’ shift into complicity and perpetration – or, by contrast, into isolated attempts at retreat, refusal and even rescue? Once mobilized for war, and particularly with the unleashing of the ‘Holocaust by bullets’ in Summer 1941, Reich citizens became ever more deeply involved in the persecution and mass murder of civilians. Increasing numbers of direct perpetrators, mobilized within organizations specifically designed for violence – the SS, Einsatzgruppen, members of police battalions and Wehrmacht soldiers – were increasingly implicated in the escalating mass murder of civilians along the eastern front. With the growth of the Nazi empire, the mushrooming structures of administration, the expansion of the system of concentration and labour camps, alongside resettlement and ‘Germanization’ policies, and the exploitation of foreign forced labour, many more civilians were brought into the machinery of persecution. This was a structural change of enormous proportions. Mobilization of a nation at war effectively turned huge numbers of people into facilitators and accomplices in an inherently racist national mission.

It is arguable whether, for most of the Reich citizens involved on the ground, antisemitism was a prior motivational force – as it was for Nazi leaders and ideologues – or whether ideological frameworks of interpretation served rather to provide a reservoir of post hoc justifications for violence that transgressed all previous moral boundaries, helping to regulate otherwise uncomfortable emotions. As mass murder became increasingly a matter of public knowledge, so there were inevitably also reactions of shock and distress, particularly at the murder of women and children – a point explicitly acknowledged by Himmler in his infamous Posen speeches of October 1943. Yet most Reich citizens managed in some way to ignore what many tried to dismiss as ‘excesses’, and continued to support the ‘national community’ at war.¹⁹ Preoccupied with personal survival, protection of the homeland and anticipatory

anxiety or devastating grief about the fate of loved ones, most simply turned a blind eye to morally uncomfortable compromises on the perpetrator side. Deception about the destinations and fates of those who were not part of their own community of empathy was easier for the deceivers as well as the deceived.

When drawn into facilitating deportations, ghettoization and mass murder, subjugated members of defeated populations did not have quite the same repertoire of justifications on which to draw; they also had limited options and resources, and questions of power were crucial. In western European states, there were degrees of leeway to support, subvert or amend Nazi policies, depending on political circumstances, which significantly affected Jewish survival chances.²⁰ In eastern Europe, despite the more repressive German policies and drastic aims for the region, many locals nevertheless cooperated in the vain hope of promoting nationalist interests, or to vent antisemitic spleen, or to benefit in other ways, as was evident in the particularly virulent slaughter of Jews by some Lithuanians and Latvians in the six months following the German invasion, or the collaboration of Poles in the killing of 'neighbours' or participation in the 'hunt for the Jews'.²¹ Many ordinary eastern Europeans were, however, simply 'requisitioned' for tasks that were essential to the Nazi-initiated and organized murder of their former schoolfriends, workmates and neighbours: providing materials to build fences around ghettos, shovels and labour power to dig death pits, carts and trucks to transport Jews to their deaths and to bring back their clothing and possessions. Locals were often still deeply troubled, decades later, by having witnessed or been forced to participate in killing 'actions', organized by Germans but only possible with local assistance.²² Simply trying to survive through a combination of constrained compliance and a degree of blinkered benefitting – not thinking too hard about why a newly acquired blouse was bloodstained – while suppressing painful emotions, was all that was possible for the majority of impoverished eastern Europeans under Nazi rule.

Once the war was over, stories everywhere changed. And as individuals concentrated on building up their lives again, states and societies were reshaped in altered circumstances. From Spring 1945, Germans who had facilitated, benefitted from, or been compliant with Nazi persecution began to claim they had 'known nothing about it', even when millions had helped to make 'it' possible. Narrow legal definitions of culpability made it easier to use the notion of perpetration primarily in relation to intentional and brutal physical violence. Shades of complicity could slide by more easily, and more readily be made compatible with new normative frameworks. Particularly when personal discomfort at compliance with the system had been ameliorated by small gestures of sympathy towards individual victims, it was possible to construct a sense of self that had 'always been against it', even despite having also sustained the regime. Among those who had actively facilitated Nazi rule, the less immediately visible consequences of policies such as expropriation of property, reduction of rations, forcing people into cramped and unhygienic housing conditions, exploitation of labour, expulsion and 'resettlement' – administrative practices contributing to death at a distance, as it were – did not seem to have unduly troubled the consciences of those responsible. Former civilian bureaucrats, employers or participants in Germanization, generally betrayed little sense of personal responsibility for the wider consequences of individual actions. Accounts by facilitators and beneficiaries often shifted the

blame onto local auxiliaries who carried out direct acts of physical violence, or people portrayed as the 'real Nazis' (the SS, police, Gestapo, certain 'fanatical' members of the NSDAP), while often also still betraying racist sentiments decades after the events in question.²³ Meanwhile, eastern Europeans who had hoped that cooperation with the Germans would lead to national independence soon found their hopes further dashed by inclusion in the expanding Soviet empire in the Cold War. While they could hardly even try to claim they 'knew nothing about it', they found other ways of silencing, re-narrating or whitewashing a compromised past, further distorted in various ways by new official narratives under communist rule, and further adapted eventually in post-communist national colours.

Conclusions: Compromised identities and complicity

This analysis highlights the significance both of systems of power and repression and of interpretive frameworks for self-constructions, perceptions of others and justifications of action or inaction at different times. Historical situations are always more complex than can be captured in any typology. But the analytic framework suggested here attempts to highlight the possibility of complex combinations and changes over time, under changing circumstances. In particular, the significance within different categories of acquired indifference, learned ignorance and a sense of impotence, may help us understand the continuing unease of people who were initially neither direct perpetrators nor immediate targets of persecution but yet, over time, in a variety of ways became increasingly compromised by living within a system of collective violence.

Within the Third Reich, the racialization of identity and the radicalization of violence led to a definitive parting of the ways. Out of initial bystanders grew accomplices and perpetrators, as well as those who, by continuing to comply, effectively acquiesced in and furthered the violence. Very few were in a position to take the risk of resistance or rescue attempts, and many paid for dissenting remarks or defeatism with their liberty, even their lives.

Were those who did not approve, yet continued to conform and comply – perhaps through a sense of sheer powerlessness – in an attempt to muddle through also, in effect, in some sense complicit? Something does not feel quite right about such a claim. Not all Germans were bad Germans: this was not simply a 'perpetrator society', and blanket descriptions without adequate differentiation do not help very much.²⁴ Rather, I suggest, we need to enhance our understanding of perpetration and victimhood by exploring in greater depth the emergent structures and situational dynamics of a 'bystander society' in which people are more likely to withdraw and try not to be involved, as well as the processes leading individuals progressively into either greater complicity through facilitation and even acts of perpetration, or, alternatively, into modes of retreat, rescue or resistance. Cultural, social and political circumstances are absolutely central to any evaluation of individual responses. The analysis of the types of 'surrounding societies' that make collective violence more or less possible, in terms of the likelihood of passivity or inactivity in different quarters, needs to complement – not displace – analyses of forms of mobilization and involvement in acts of perpetration.

Understanding the significance of widespread conformity, popular compliance with a hostile environment and evolving complicity serves to contextualize, not replace, the analysis of culpability. Crucially, it helps us to understand the conditions under which perpetrators are able to pursue their deadly goals more effectively, and the extent to which, by contrast, victims may be able to develop viable strategies for survival.

In exploring questions around the conditions fostering widespread passivity, a more extensive and detailed comparative analysis would be necessary than could be even intimated here. This would include exploring not only the differing character of lived relations between Jews and gentiles over time, and the varieties and degrees of antisemitism in different regions, but also the specific historical circumstances in which antisemitic myths and ideologies can become salient and reservoirs of stereotypes and prejudices drawn upon. Important too are shifting 'communities of empathy', which make it easier for people to feel indifferent to the fates of others, as well as notions of civic activism, and the borders of what is sometimes called the 'universe of obligation'.²⁵ These relate in complex ways to conceptions of personal and collective identity, and distinctions between 'self' and 'other'. Emotional, social and cultural connections, the nature and extent of personal ties across different communities, as well as moral frameworks for understanding and acting in the world, all affect the choices people will make when confronted with systemic violence.

But equally important – perhaps more so in terms of the consequences – are changing structures of power and repression, and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for action. Perceptions of wider conditions inform feelings of powerlessness to affect the course of events in any way that would make the risks of action on behalf of others seem worthwhile. Expectations and aspirations for possible futures also play a significant role in people's decisions under challenging circumstances. For some individuals, commitment to political, moral or religious ideals may be so powerful as to override considerations of personal risk; at the extreme, a life is only worth living if it is deemed a worthy life, and there are compromises that cannot be contemplated if one is to be able to 'live with oneself' afterwards. These are matters of individual character and belief, however, informed and shaped by social environment, culture and circumstances. Approaches focussing on individual perceptions, social relations and cultural understandings serve to complement analyses of the historical circumstances of action, the institutional and organizational structures within which people act and prevalent discourses about, for example, the social context or collective aspirations for the future.

Such a comparative approach would need to be developed more extensively and on a broader European canvas, with detailed in-depth probing as well as wider comparisons and exploration of interconnections. It is all the more important, then, that historians develop conceptual frameworks and empirical analyses that will allow ideologically charged 'national' narratives and self-justificatory personal accounts to be critically evaluated. The Holocaust was a European phenomenon, and all who lived through this period were in some way affected. We need to understand the diverse ways in which people became involved and caught up in the enveloping tragedy, and how those who could not remain 'innocent bystanders' in this all-encompassing period of systemic violence also, by their actions and inaction, came to play a crucial historical role.

Notes

- 1 For the call for an ‘integrated’ history of the Holocaust, incorporating the voices of victims alongside the policies and practices of perpetrators, see Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945. The Years of Extermination* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007).
- 2 See for example the path-breaking work by Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), and recent responses in Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Hornburg (eds), *Beyond ‘Ordinary Men’*. Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography (Paderborn: Brill, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019). See also, for example: Alex Kay, *The Making of an SS Killer: The Life of Colonel Alfred Filbert, 1905–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Thomas Kuehne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler’s Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Ben Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers. The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler’s Police Battalions: Enforcing Racial War in the East* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).
- 3 See for example: Waitman Wade Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe. At the Epicenter of the Final Solution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Peter Black, Bela Rasky and Marianne Windsperger (eds), *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe* (Vienna, Hamburg: New Academic Press, 2019); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine 1941–44* (Houndmills: Macmillan, USHMM, 2000); David Gaunt, Paul Levine and Laura Palosuo (eds), *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust. Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).
- 4 See for example Leonid Rein, ‘Studying East European Perpetrators: The Case of Belarus’, Ch. 6, below.
- 5 As in the 2021 judgment in the legal case against Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking. See also Mary Fulbrook, ‘Complicity and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe’, *Jewish Historical Studies* 53 (2021): 115–35.
- 6 The letter of 15 December 1935 is reprinted in Kurt Tucholsky, *Gesamtausgabe. Texte und Briefe*, 22 vols, ed. Antje Bonitz, Dirk Grathoff, Michael Hepp and Gerhard Kraiker (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1996ff). My translation of the original German is taken from web version of the letter at <http://www.sudelblog.de/?p=186>.
- 7 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: Aaron Asher, 1992).
- 8 See further Mary Fulbrook, ‘Bystanders: Catchall Concept, Alluring Alibi, or Crucial Clue?’, in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn, 2018).
- 9 Cf. Catherine Sanderson, *The Bystander Effect: The Psychology of Courage and Inaction* (London: William Collins, 2020).
- 10 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1, 20. Rothberg’s definition shifts uneasily, from ‘a figure to think with and through’ (199) to real people in “‘transmission belts’ of domination’ who should be held ‘accountable in both moral and political registers’ (200). Key distinctions sometimes dissolve entirely, as when Rothberg claims that ‘implication comes in diverse forms: it describes beneficiaries and descendants, accomplices and perpetrators, and it can even attach to people who have had

- shattering experiences of trauma or victimization and are thus situated within “complex implication” (200).
- 11 See for example Andrea Löw and Frank Bajohr (eds), *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
 - 12 For the notion of ‘history from within’, see further Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017).
 - 13 See for example Robert Gellately, *Hitler’s True Believers. How Ordinary People became Nazis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) and Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); contrast Richard J. Evans, ‘Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151 (2007): 53–81; see also, for differing approaches, Michael Wildt, *Hitler’s Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion. Violence against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919–1939*, trans. Bernard Heise (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012); or Janosch Steuwer, *‘Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse’: Politik, Gesellschaft und privates Leben in Tagebüchern 1933–1939* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017).
 - 14 Archival collection in the Harvard Houghton Library (HHL) of essays under the title ‘My Life in in Germany before and after 1933’. See also Mary Fulbrook, ‘Private Lives, Public Faces: On the Social Self in Nazi Germany’, in *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany*, ed. Elizabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, Maiken Umbach and Andreas Wirsching (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 55–80; and Fulbrook, *Bystander Society in Nazi Germany: Conformity, Complicity and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
 - 15 Cf., for example, Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005), or Bernhard Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* (Beautiful Books, 2009).
 - 16 Cf., for example, Friedrich Kellner, *My Opposition: The Diary of Friedrich Kellner - A German against the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
 - 17 Cf. Alan Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Wolfgang Benz, *Gewalt im November 1938. Die ‘Reichskristallnacht’. Initial zum Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol, 2018); Wolf Gruner and Steven Ross (eds), *New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison* (West Lafayette, IN.: Purdue University Press, 2019).
 - 18 See further Fulbrook, *Bystander Society*.
 - 19 Cf. Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms*, (London: Bodley Head, 2015).
 - 20 See for example: Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, *Persecution and Deportation of the Jews in the Netherlands, France and Belgium, 1940–1945, in a Comparative Perspective* (Amsterdam: Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, July 2013, EHRI; updated 2018); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–44* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bo Lidegaard, *Countrymen: How Denmark’s Jews Escaped the Nazis* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013); Jacques Semelin, *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940–44*, trans. Cynthia Schoch and Natasha Lehrer (London: Hurst and Co., 2018; French orig. 2013); Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing. The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–1943* (London: Routledge, 1990).
 - 21 See, for example: Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016); Katrin Reichelt, *Lettland unter deutscher Besatzung 1941–1944. Der lettische Anteil am Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2011); Rūta Vanagaitė and Efraim Zuroff, *Our People. Discovering*

- Lithuania's Hidden Holocaust* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016; English transl. 2020). On Poland, pathbreaking texts include: Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews. Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); and Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 22 Father Patrick Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets*, trans. Hilary Reyl and Calvert Barksdale (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018).
- 23 Cf. also Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 24 Cf. Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, 'Beyond the "Bystander": Social Processes and Social Dynamics in European Societies as Context for the Holocaust', in Löw and Bajohr (eds), *The Holocaust and European Societies*, 3–14.
- 25 Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective* (London: Sage, 1993), 36–44. Fein's 'universe of obligation', based on 'Durkheim's notion of rules and the domain of the collective conscience' (36), differs in certain respects from my conception of 'communities of empathy'; there is insufficient space here to expand on this.