

Is the Holocaust just one genocide amongst others or something more than genocide, and if it is more than genocide, in what does that consist?

Theorists such as Gaita have argued that “it is far from clear that genocide is the essence of the Holocaust” (Gaita, 2002: 140), by this, he means that there was something ‘more than’ genocide which made the Holocaust unique, and thus transcendent of the bounds of what is considered genocide. Other theorists such as Geras, bolster this point, saying that there were “brutalities that were surplus even to the aims of genocide”, suggesting that it was brutality which captured the ‘essence’ of the Holocaust, not the genocide in itself (Geras, 2003: 42). Through this essay, I will seek to rebuke both of these claims, and instead assert that ‘genocide’ is in fact the ‘essence’ of the Holocaust, and thus the Holocaust cannot be ‘more than genocide’. However, I will also rebuke the notion that the Holocaust is either ‘something more than genocide’ or ‘just one genocide amongst others’ and instead assert that the Holocaust was an unprecedented display of the purest form of genocide.

As an aside, it is important to note that the Holocaust is of course ‘unique’ insofar that every event is, in that it is the only genocidal event orchestrated by the Nazi regime between 1941 and 1945. Just as any date is unique for example (14/11/22). However, in the interest of philosophical investigation – this intuitive understanding of ‘uniqueness’ will be overlooked.

The very formation of the word genocide is founded within the context of the Holocaust. Coined in 1942 by Polish lawyer and Holocaust survivor Raphael Lemkin (Lemkin, 1944), it is a fusion of the words ‘cide’ from Latin and ‘genos’ from Greek, translating literally to ‘the killing of’ a ‘category’ or ‘species.’ According to Gaita, it was a distinction made in order to distinguish the awfulness of mass murder in the name of “the ancient political end of eradicating opposition”, and something worse which strips away humanity from its victims and their community in the name of destroying a group of people (Gaita, 139). In 1948, the United Nations adopted the International Criminal Specification, within which the following definition of genocide was contained: “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such” (UN, 1948). Thus, to argue that the Holocaust is ‘more than genocide’ is to argue that there is something which makes it unique from all events, which fulfil this definition.

Theorists such as Geras, suggest that it was the brutality witnessed within the camps which elevates the Holocaust beyond genocide (Geras, 42). Not only does he cite conditions within the camps, he suggests that there was a deliberate attempt on behalf of the Nazi regime to humiliate as best they could – their Jewish victims. Geras further argues that humiliation was not required by the aim of forced Jewish extinction, and thus it is in fact humiliation and brutality which makes the Holocaust ‘more than genocide’. (Geras, 41-42). Nigel Pleasants presents two striking examples of deception in the name of humiliation, which bolster Geras’ claim (Pleasants, 2016: 306). The first example of which was the design of the gas chambers, which were disguised as showers. Victims were to believe that they were simply showering before changing into their issued outfit, but it was to be the last room they entered. The second example of deception was the role of the

Sonderkommando – (primarily Jewish) death camp prisoners who made up a significant proportion of the death camp staff. One of the roles of the *Sonderkommando* was to convince the new intake of death camp prisoners that they should comply with the orders of the SS, and therefore enter the gas chambers. The use of a community in the destruction of its own people seems to be particularly depraved, as it created a veil of safety which gave victims hope before their murder. Both examples illustrate the deception and humiliation the victims of the Holocaust were subjected to – which could be argued to be beyond what is required by genocidal aims. Therefore, through these examples, it could be argued that there was in fact something ‘more than genocide’ occurring in the camps.

Bauman, on the other hand, warns against using these examples as proof of the Holocaust being ‘more than genocide’, as he argues that there was rationality on behalf of the perpetrators in using Jews as collaborators. Bauman states it enabled the perpetrators to “extend and solidify their power, and eradicate the roots of opposition” (Bauman, 1991: 2). This is convincing in that the victims were more likely to be trusting of people from their own community rather than SS officers, and so would create less opposition – making the task of genocide more efficient. Additionally, this claim is also convincing in that the role of the *Sonderkommando* distanced perpetrators from accountability, something they would obviously favour. Furthermore, the regime would have wanted to save on staff where possible, due to the deployment of German men across occupied Europe. In respect to the disguised gas chambers, there could also be a practical element – as the future victims entering the camp would be unaware of what was taking place, and thus would make less of an effort to escape. Therefore, Bauman’s suggestion holds significant weight. What it certainly does is raise doubt as to the intentionality of humiliation and deception committed during the Holocaust. Therefore, if Bauman is correct, the Holocaust cannot be ‘more than genocide’. If he is not, there is still insufficient evidence to suggest that genocide was not the ‘essence’ of the Holocaust, and thus, the claim that the Holocaust was ‘more than genocide’ is weakened.

Most convincingly, Pleasants suggests that the brutality was a consequence of genocide (Pleasants, 307). This is because the perpetrators were motivated by “fear, hatred, contempt and disgust” (Pleasants, 307). This is convincing, as the culmination of historical and contemporary hatred for Jews at the time was at a peak. Academia, spearheaded by Eugenics, asserted that the Holocaust was the ‘final solution’ to the ‘Jewish problem’. Through their belief in the inferiority of ‘Jewishness’, they were able to shift the hegemonic discourse, and thus inspire the acts of brutality and humiliation that were witnessed in the camps. It was, therefore, a true belief in their genocidal aims, that caused the perpetrators to organise the Holocaust in such a depraved way. Brutality, therefore, can be seen as a result of the purest form of genocide – one where the perpetrators truly believed they were ridding the world of “pollutants” (Gaita, 139). Therefore, if brutality, humiliation and deception are a result of genocide in itself, genocide must be the ‘essence’ of the Holocaust. Thus, the Holocaust cannot be argued to be ‘more than genocide’ on account of these considerations.

Pleasants further asserts that if the Holocaust is not ‘more than genocide’ in respect to brutality and humiliation, if it is to be unique, it “leaves the idea of kindlessness as the only conceptually interesting and challenging sense of ‘unique’” (Pleasants, 302).

That is, it transcends categorisation, and as a consequence, understanding. An implication of this conception of uniqueness is that the Holocaust is untied to all historical events, in that it is utterly unlike anything else. Buber argues that there was a lack of sufficient punishment for the perpetrators of the Holocaust and thus it could be suggested that the events of the Holocaust are beyond the realms of our institutions – making it the only event of its kind (Buber cited Gaita, 2002: 143). This is convincing in that the worst punishment available at the time was execution, which doesn't capture the brutality and scale of the atrocities committed. This argument is somewhat convincing in that, if something has transcended all previous understanding of human behaviour, it must be kind-less and cannot be grouped with any other event in history or law. However, this argument is weakened by Hannah Arendt's assertion that many depraved human acts are not accounted for in our institutions (Arendt cited Gaita, 2002: 143). Any genocide is, of course an example of this, but more convincingly – any murder. Murder almost always has unintended victims – for example spouses, children, family members and friends who have to live without their loved one. These unintended victims are too, not represented through our existing institutions. Therefore, morality and law should be treated as distinct – and once they are, it seems that the Holocaust is not 'kind-less'. Furthermore, the term genocide was coined in reference to both the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide simultaneously. It therefore seems, counter-intuitive to suggest that the Holocaust is kind-less, as Lemkin would have coined two individual terms. Additionally, Lemkin had campaigned for the recognition of genocide in international law for over a decade before the Holocaust, and the events of the Holocaust did not inspire him to campaign for a new 'kind' of crime – but instead he used the Holocaust as proof of the horrors of the purest form of genocide. Therefore, the claim that the Holocaust is 'kind-less' is weak. Thus, if the Holocaust is not 'more than genocide' on account of the brutality and humiliation that took place, and neither on grounds of 'kind-less-ness' – the Holocaust cannot be 'more than genocide'.

What cannot be denied, however, is the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust. For something to be unprecedented, it must be the most significant event of its kind. This is certainly true of the Holocaust. It is firstly unprecedented in scale, "between five and six million Jews lost their lives in Nazi Europe", and importantly proportion "some two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of world Jewry" (Geras, 39). This shows the utter dedication of the Nazi party to eliminate all Jews from the world, and a belief in their ability to do so. The Holocaust was also unprecedented in that it was founded out of a unique worldview. The Nazi regime believed in a 'Jewish conspiracy', whereby the world is secretly controlled by an underworld of powerful and rich Jews. This view is founded out of historical Jewish persecution and stereotyping, based on religious differences – such as the betrayal of Jesus, or the ability to lend money under Judaism for example (which led to high levels of resentment in the middle ages as inequality widened between those who lent and those who borrowed). The Holocaust was also unprecedented in the distribution of victims across borders. Staggeringly, 'only' 175,000 German Jews made up the estimated six million victims of the Holocaust – most of which came from Poland and other occupied European nations. This further shows how the Nazis truly believed in 'Jewishness' as a global problem, and their dedication to being 'saviours' for the rest of the world. Unprecedentedness, however, does not suggest that genocide cannot happen again. It could be argued that the current persecution of Uighur Muslims in China is genocide – without knowing the full extent of what is happening behind

camp walls. Even without the confirmation of mass execution, the relocation and 're-education' of the Uighurs is a clear attempt to destroy a community through the destruction of culture, based on the belief that they are inferior to the Han Chinese community. However, it is unlikely that a genocide of the scale of the Holocaust will happen again – due to the unique motivation behind the Holocaust. It is this which makes the Holocaust unprecedented, and thus, distinctive. Therefore, it would be incorrect to label the Holocaust as 'just one genocide amongst others' as this is to diminish its distinctiveness and significance as a historical event.

Overall then, the suggestion that brutality and humiliation made the Holocaust 'more than genocide' is unsupported at best, and entirely misinformed at worst. Furthermore, if it is unsupported, there is a suggestion that there is something else at play which makes the Holocaust 'more than genocide' – such as an inability to categorise it. However, it is also untrue that the Holocaust is kind-less and therefore it is in fact categorisable, meaning the Holocaust cannot be 'more than genocide'. What can be affirmed however, is that the Holocaust is not 'just one genocide amongst others' – as this is to diminish the significance of the events that took place. The Holocaust instead, should be considered as an example of an unprecedented display of the purest and most depraved form of genocide.

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