

# The Long Shadow of Auschwitz

Before his execution by hanging in 1947, Auschwitz commander Rudolf Hoess confessed to his role in the industrialized slaughter of millions of Jews and other “enemies” of Hitler’s Third Reich. But Hoess’s guilt while extraordinary in its numbers extends to all leaders who carelessly choose war, Gary G. Kohls observes.

By Gary G. Kohls

The ending of my last column was the powerful Thomas Merton prose poem that gave voice to the infamous international war criminal, the Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoess. Merton has Hoess speaking from the gallows with a haunting accusation directed at history’s pro-war presidents, monarchs, dictators, prime ministers and assorted politicians who know that wars always involve the mass murder of defenseless civilians (euphemistically known as “collateral damage”).

The self-admitted war criminal Hoess accuses of war crimes every commanding officer who has ever ordered lethal bombings or artillery attacks that inevitably involve innocent non-combatants. That also would apply in modern times to the U.S. policy of extra-judicial assassinations of suspected “terrorists” by drone warfare as well as to every Apache helicopter crew (and their commanders) who targeted “suspects” in Iraq and Afghanistan. [See the horrifying war crime “collateral murder” video courageously made available to the public by Bradley Manning and WikiLeaks at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rXPrfnU3G0>.]

Hoess seems to be accusing every combat platoon that has ever blindly participated in night raids or mortar attacks in areas where civilians are known to be present. Merton has Hoess say, “Do not think yourself better because you burn friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.”

Merton also accuses the war-profiteering industrialists that bid for the jobs of designing, manufacturing and equipping the camps with increasingly efficient extermination machinery. German ingenuity in action.

Merton’s poem contains actual quotes from some of the documents that were found after World War II had ended. The innovative SS Lt. Col. Hoess was proud of and well rewarded for – his part in improving the craft of high-tech, industrial-strength mass murder.

He said: “Another improvement we made over Treblinka was that we built our gas

chamber to accommodate 2,000 people at one time whereas at Treblinka their 10 gas chambers only accommodated 200 people each.

“The way we selected our victims was as follows: We had two SS doctors on duty at Auschwitz to examine the incoming transports of prisoners. The prisoners would be marched by one of the doctors who would make spot decisions as they walked by. Those who were fit for work were sent into the camp. Others were sent immediately to the extermination plants. Children of tender years were invariably exterminated since by reason of their youth they were unable to work.

“Still another improvement we made over Treblinka was that at Treblinka the victims almost always knew that they were to be exterminated and at Auschwitz we endeavored to fool the victims into thinking that they were to go through a delousing process. Of course, frequently they realized our true intentions and we sometimes had riots and difficulties due to that fact.

“Very frequently women would hide their children under the clothes, but of course when we found them we would send the children in to be exterminated. We were required to carry out these exterminations in secrecy but of course the foul and nauseating stench from the continuous burning of bodies permeated the entire area and all of the people living in the surrounding communities knew that exterminations were going on at Auschwitz.”

Hoess and others among the Nazi hierarchy had noticed the terrible psychiatric toll (alcoholism, depression, suicide, etc) that the up-close and personal massacres were having on the common soldiers who reflexively obeyed the illegal orders to kill noncombatants. The decidedly less personal killing methods of starvation, shellings, bombings and gassing was far less traumatizing to the soldiers who were there at the end of the chain of command.

Hoess was hanged in 1947 for his role in the deaths of 3 million people at Auschwitz during his 3½ years (May 1940 to December 1943) as the camp's commandant. In a postwar affidavit (April 1946), Hoess confesses to his crimes:

“I commanded Auschwitz until 1 December 1943, and estimate that at least 2,500,000 victims were executed and exterminated there by gassing and burning, and at least another half million succumbed to starvation and disease, making a total dead of about 3,000,000. This figure represents about 70% or 80% of all persons sent to Auschwitz as prisoners, the remainder having been selected and used for slave labor in the concentration camp industries.

“Included among the executed and burnt were approximately 20,000 Russian prisoners of war (previously screened out of Prisoner of War cages by the Gestapo) who were delivered at Auschwitz in Wehrmacht transports operated by

regular Wehrmacht officers and men. The remainder of the total number of victims included about 100,000 German Jews, and great numbers of citizens (mostly Jewish) from Holland, France, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece, or other countries. We executed about 400,000 Hungarian Jews alone at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

“It took from 3 to 15 minutes to kill the people in the death chamber depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped.

“These so-called ill-treatments and this torturing in concentration camps, stories of which were spread everywhere among the people, and later by the prisoners that were liberated by the occupying armies, were not, as assumed, inflicted methodically, but were excesses committed by individual leaders, sub-leaders, and men who laid violent hands on internees.”

In his autobiography, written while he was awaiting his war crimes trial, Hoess wrote: “I want to emphasize that I personally never hated the Jews. I considered them to be the enemy of our nation. However, that was precisely the reason to treat them the same way as the other prisoners. Besides, the feeling of hatred is not in me. It is tragic that, although I was by nature gentle, good-natured, and very helpful, I became the greatest destroyer of human beings who carried out every order to exterminate people no matter what.”

### **The Willingness to Kill**

One has to ask out loud, given the fact that Germany was an overwhelmingly Christian nation: What kind of Christianity was it that justified, contrary to the teachings of Jesus, cruelty in parenting, hateful attitudes toward the “other,” and the justification of the organized mass slaughter of war? What kind of Christian leadership was it that did not stand up and courageously and prophetically say “NO” to its nation’s manufacture and stockpiling of (and its willingness to use) weapons of mass destruction whose only purpose is to kill humans and scorch the earth?

From where in the human soul comes the willingness to kill, wound, torture, enslave or starve another human or even cooperate with the evils of state-sponsored homicide or genocide, whether your militarized nation is fascist Germany or “democratic” America?

Harshness in childrearing is one of the realities that can easily result in the willingness to obey illegal orders to kill. Rudolf Hoess was a victim of cruelty in childrearing, a violent, xenophobic culture, a vicious anti-Semitism and an aberrant form of Christianity that was silent on or supportive of its

militaristic nation's glorification of war.

Being a part of the inhumane society that Hoess was raised in, he never had a chance to be all that he could have been. He was hanged on April 16, 1947, at the age of 45 on a gallows built near the Auschwitz death camp's crematorium in Poland.

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## Explaining the Unexplainable

Since World War II, the common reaction to the horrendous crimes of the Nazis has been to wonder how such extreme behavior was possible. But the more important point is how the process of killing could be made so mundane, a question that remains relevant today, as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

A couple of years ago, the iconic sign over the gate to the infamous World War II-era extermination camp at Auschwitz was stolen. (It was later recovered after being found cut into three pieces). At the top of that gate was this classic bit of Nazi propaganda, proclaimed to the millions of doomed incoming victims: "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Makes One Free).

"Arbeit Macht Frei" is a pretty good summary of what is otherwise known as "the Protestant work ethic" that started in Europe during the Protestant Reformation. Right-wing nationalists, anti-communist, pro-capitalist, pro-war, anti-Semitic, racist and religious reformers such as John Calvin and Martin Luther would have agreed that "Arbeit Macht Frei" supported their dogmatic teachings about fulfilling one's patriotic duty to the state, the church or the industry that employed the people.

Following Hitler's fascist takeover and the total destruction of Germany's liberal democratic government in 1933, Germans were indoctrinated to believe that it was their patriotic duty to defend the Nazi's Thousand Year Reich by any means necessary, including laboring, killing or dying for the cause.

Indeed, the efforts instituted by the fascist government (including the abolition of labor unions) resulted in virtually full employment in all of the

war-related industries that were set up to ensure the success of the Thousand Year Reich, including the military arts, police, fuel, chemical, agriculture, mining and weapons production. All of these industries thrived with willing, reasonably well-paid and grateful “Good Germans” who blindly applauded Hitler for orchestrating his “economic miracle”.

The transportation and communications industries that were essential for war-making – but which were also domestically beneficial – also thrived. Good examples included the building of the Autobahn for rapid troop movement and the increased production of automobiles, including the affordable Volkswagen for the masses and the not-so-affordable Mercedes for the elite.

The provision of cheap mass-produced radios and plenty of entertainment (propaganda) that was overseen by Joseph Goebbels made sure that everybody would be able to hear the demagogues spout their Nazi propaganda demonizing non-Aryan foreigners, Jews and various anti-fascist leftists, such as trade unionists, socialists, liberals and subversive antiwar activists.

Little more than a decade earlier, in 1922, hyperinflation, joblessness and hunger had followed the fiasco of World War I. Then, just as the economy was recovering, the Wall Street Stock Market crash of 1929 sealed German democracy’s doom.

So, after Hitler was appointed to the Chancellorship in 1933, even many of the most ethical Germans were thankful for the war industry work, and they liked the state-sponsored (socialized) medical care, educational opportunities and the paid vacations of Hitler’s “Strength Through Joy” campaign, even though there was essentially no freedom of movement in the labor market.

### **‘Good German’ Christians**

Until Hitler started occupying, colonizing and brutalizing other nations, things were going well for most obedient, white “Good German” Christians. Not so for non-Christians and other minorities who were suffering under the police-state jackboot of Prussian militarism.

“Good Germans” dutifully averted their eyes and closed their ears to keep from seeing the hateful anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination that were happening all around them, including the aggressive building of concentration camps all over Germany and the occupied territories.

The Nazi concentration camps started in 1938 at Dachau. The scores of concentration camps that eventually dotted Germany’s military empire (especially occupied Poland) also provided a lot of work for Hitler’s obedient (and

silenced) Volk, for each camp needed, in addition to the SS troops and Gestapo (who beat any resister into submission), numerous citizen-workers to keep them running smoothly.

The notorious extermination camp at Auschwitz employed 60 physicians and 300 nurses and many other ancillary staff members for just the medical facility, much of which was involved in human experimentation. Many of the people involved in those crimes against humanity were professed Christians.

The gulag of camps was good for the economy, though, for each of the camps was aligned with very profitable German corporations, whose bottom lines flourished with the cheap labor costs. The prison camps played a major role in Hitler's economic boom. Germany's Gross National Product grew substantially, for the labor was free and the food and lodging expenditures were minimal.

Auschwitz was located in Poland, far away from the eyes of most Germans back in the homeland. It was the most infamous of the camps, but the German occupiers of the newly acquired Polish territories knew what was going on inside. Still, most "Good Germans" averted their eyes and ears and noses. Most of them claimed that they were unaware that mass murder was happening on the other side of the electrified fences.

But it was a time of war and telling the truth in wartime is always a revolutionary act that requires a lot of courage. Witnessing to the truth in a time of war is also frequently regarded by military regimes as an act of treason. And so the Volk lied to themselves and to others.

Cognitive dissonance happened in Nazi Germany, although there was no such phrase back then that described the conscious or unconscious denial of and confusion about unwelcome new truths that contradicted deeply held beliefs. But the truth was obvious to all. Only one conclusion could be drawn from the 24/7 stench of burning flesh and the red smoke that came out of the crematorium's tall stacks of each of the extermination camps.

After the total collapse of the militarists, financiers, investors and industrialists who had been behind Germany's attempts to steal the resources of Europe and Asia (especially the oil fields of Eastern Europe and western Russia), more unwelcome truths were to be revealed. Among these revelations was the story of the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoess (not to be confused with Rudolf Hess who was Hitler's # 2 early in the Nazi regime).

### **Cruelty in Child-Rearing**

The Rudolf Hoess, MD, of Auschwitz infamy was the son of a devout, well-to-do, conservative Roman Catholic family that had wanted him to go into the

priesthood. But circumstances were such that he instead chose to serve Hitler in the thuggish Freikorps, that group of traumatized and unemployable World War I veterans who became his street fighters and mercenary soldiers and who believed the lie that leftists, especially Jews, socialists and communists on the home front had “stabbed Germany in the back” and were the real cause of the humiliating defeat in the trenches on the Western Front.

Just like most men who grew up in authoritarian Europe, Hoess learned unconditional obedience to authority early in his life. Cruelty in child-rearing, especially in males, usually elicits the unconscious desire for vengeance, often only acted upon in a delayed fashion, frequently against a scapegoat rather than against the original perpetrator of the cruelty, which is usually an abusive parent-figure.

Harshness in child-rearing was the norm for most German and Austrian children for centuries prior to Hitler, whose regime also promoted punitive child-rearing methods. It makes for vicious, obedient Nazi soldiers or, for that matter, Special Forces soldiers in any country.

Such “parenting” was reinforced by the similarly harsh discipline that was often practiced in most German churches and schools – and not just in Catholic schools, but in secular schools as well. And so Hoess wrote the following explanation for his willingness to reflexively carry out the decidedly un-Christ-like – indeed, satanic – orders he received from his superiors:

“Above all, I was constantly reminded that I was to comply with, and follow, the wishes or commands of parents, teachers, priests, etc., indeed all grown-ups including the servants, and that I was to allow nothing to distract me from that duty. Whatever they said, went. These fundamental values of my upbringing became part of my flesh and blood.” [See Alice Miller’s *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*.]

This is how military recruits in basic training internalize the killing arts. So it should come as no surprise when soldiers react automatically and violently in the war zone, obeying even illegal orders given in the kill-or-be-killed chaos of the battlefield. After the psychological trauma, humiliation and threats of punishment experienced in their child-rearing, school yards, mean streets or their basic training, soldiers can be relied upon to react automatically, even unconsciously, and do what they have been indoctrinated to do when their own physical survival is threatened.

Duty and honor; solemn oaths of allegiance to a flag (the Swastika or the Stars

and Stripes); obedience to god and country; patriotism; nationalism; "America # 1" and "Deutschland Uber Alles" are common examples that will promote the blind patriotism that has driven the killing machines on all sides of every war throughout the entire history of warfare.

Internalizing such propaganda allowed Hoess to perform his gruesome "duties" at Auschwitz, without any obvious signs of remorse when he was later tried, convicted and hanged for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The baptized Lutheran Adolph Eichmann, a contemporary of Hoess's, also reacted without remorse during his trial in Jerusalem long after the war, as did most of the other defendants at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial.

### **Consequences of Violence**

Sadly, the soldier-victims (willing or unwilling) of chronic brainwashing (which can easily create robotic humans willing to inflict pain on others) learn much too late that being involved in state-sponsored terrorism, directly or indirectly, can also be lethal to their souls and psyches, not to mention the souls and psyches of their battlefield victims (and loved ones when they come home), all of whom are mostly innocent, unarmed and decidedly defenseless women and children.

The invisible spiritual wounds of the warrior can also be experienced by another group: the guilty bystander, who witnessed the violence and then may have stood silently by, doing nothing to stop it. The guilt felt later for not intervening (or feeling helpless to intervene) often becomes too much to bear, with the resultant depression, anxiety, anger, insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks, drug use, homicidality and suicidality of combat-induced posttraumatic stress disorder symptom, often identical to that experienced by the guilty perpetrator.

One has to wonder what kind of Christianity is it that promotes harshness in parenting, racism, discriminatory attitudes toward the "enemy-other, and pro-war theologies. And what kind of Christianity remains silent about its country's extrajudicial assassinations by drone warfare or the manufacturing, stockpiling, and training to use, the lethal weapons that are only intended for human destruction?

From where in the human soul comes the willingness to kill, torture and cooperate with the evils of state-sponsored homicide and economic oppression, irrespective of what militarized nation one lives in, fascist/capitalist Germany or "democratic"/capitalist America?

As Bob Dylan asks so poignantly in his classic antiwar song, "Blowin' in the Wind": "How many times must the cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?"



“How many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry?” “How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?” “How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free?” “And how many times can a man turn his head pretending he just doesn’t see?”

The answers aren’t really mysteriously blowing in the wind. The answers to the questions about why there is an epidemic of violence instead of sustained peace are understandable and therefore preventable.

The solutions to the problems (and the prevention of the consequences) concerning both military and domestic violence lie in whether or not children and recruits are treated humanely (with unconditional love and mercy) or with brutality and/or neglect in their families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, workplaces and streets.

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