

9. The Holocaust was unique because for the first (and only) time, modern technology was used to kill large numbers of people in factories of death. True.

10. The Holocaust was unique because it was the Nazis' intent to murder every person of Jewish descent in Europe, ending the existence of this human group and thus changing humanity forever. True.

Though the Nazi elite were often characterized as colorless, banal personalities, their dreams and visions were far from prosaic. They were monumental, messianic and history-changing: to condemn to extinction, and to completely eradicate, *without exception*, one of humanity's oldest sub-groups forever. Their imaginations were on fire with this radical project, and it dominated their thinking even above the practicality of winning the war. One of the meanings of "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" is that if successful, this problem would never need to be confronted again, for all time, because no Jews would survive. As Adolf Hitler once commented, "Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement, know scarcely anything of it. It is even more than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew." (1)

As Steven Katz wrote in his exhaustive study The Holocaust in Historical Context, "It is this unmediated, intended complete *physical* eradication of every Jewish man, woman and child that defines the particular, singular nature of this event that we call the Holocaust. It is this unconstrained, ideologically driven imperative that *every* Jew be murdered that distinguishes the Sho'ah from prior and to date subsequent, however inhumane, acts of collective violence, ethnocide, and mass murder." (2)

Professor Yehuda Bauer elaborates on this: "...the Nazis tried to rule not just Germany but Europe, and ultimately the world, in the name of a new principle, the principle of 'race'. In order to accomplish this, ..." they had to oppose, I would argue, the major achievements of the European culture that preceded them, especially the legacy of the French Revolution and the Emancipation.

"I would go further than that and claim that the National Socialist rebellion against humanism, liberalism, democracy, socialism, conservatism, pacifism, and so on, was the most radical attempt at changing the world that history has recorded to date: the most novel and the most revolutionary....It is the unprecedented quality of the Nazi regime that goes very far in explaining the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust." (3)

Obviously the European Jews were not the only group the Nazis declared "life unworthy of life", but only the Jews had this fate reserved for them: not only that they must die, but that they must die in torment, their holy texts, artifacts and places desecrated or destroyed, their houses either burned or occupied by others, their moments of death utterly degrading and dehumanizing, either to stand naked and watch their friends, neighbors, relations shot, knowing they would be next, or to be herded into gas chambers, emerging as an anonymous mass to be consumed by fire. Not for nothing did the SS characterize Auschwitz as the *anus mundi*, the asshole of the world, from which

those who had polluted and defiled humanity would be excreted. Put in its simplest terms, the Nazis saw in *all* Jews everywhere on earth a universal threat to humankind. That is why they used the resources of a modern state and an armed forces in the middle of a world war to track down and murder even tiny groups of Jews in isolated locations like the Greek island of Rhodes.

In none of the other terrible ethnic or racial massacres of modern times was the underlying *intent* to utterly annihilate a human group, leaving not one survivor. For example, the goal of the Turkish massacres of Armenians in their midst was clearly to drive them out of Turkey, not make this group disappear from the earth. In this they succeeded. If their intent had been total destruction, they would have done as the Germans and *prevented* Armenians from leaving Turkey, then forcibly concentrated them in certain areas to make their task of mass murder easier. Then they would have searched for remaining Armenians across the continents of Europe and Asia and murdered them. The other clear difference is that Armenians who were willing to convert to Islam could escape death, though these were forced conversions. But there was no such choice for Jews caught up in the Holocaust. They were doomed to die regardless of their religious beliefs, based only on their “racial” designation as Jews. The political leaders of Turkey made a strategic decision to rid themselves of a troublesome ethnic minority. The political leaders of Nazi Germany shared an apocalyptic belief that “the Jews”, by controlling both the capitalist United States and communist Soviet Union, were the mortal enemies of Aryan civilization and must be annihilated world-wide.

In explaining the Holocaust’s uniqueness, Yehuda Bauer also points to its planned world-wide scope: “ All other genocides were limited geographically; in most cases, the targeted group lived in a reasonably well-defined geographic locale...the Turks targeted Armenians in ethnically Turkish areas; they did not care about Armenians elsewhere;”. (4.) “ Because the Germans fully intended to control not just Europe but the world, whether directly or through allies, this meant that Jews would ultimately be hunted down all over the world...This global character of the intended murder of all Jews is unprecedented in human history.”(5) Similarly, during the forced collectivization of agriculture in the U.S.S.R. under Stalin, the intent was never to annihilate every living Kulak, but to deliberately create famine conditions which would terrorize the peasant class into submission. The policy had a concrete political purpose. These differences are not semantic, they are concrete.

In Rwanda, for example, though the massacres clearly were ethnically motivated and encouraged by the government and mass media, a large number of Tutsis were left alive, and their culture survived intact. Nor were Tutsis hunted down and killed across the entire continent of Africa, as was the case for Jews in Europe. The massacres in Rwanda were instigated by the government and ruling party, and clearly meet the United Nations definition of genocide. But they are still different in important ways from the Holocaust. In his new book A World Without Jews Professor Alon Confino writes similarly: “ Why did the Nazis target the Jews as the only group that was hunted all over the Continent, as a sort of spaceless and timeless enemy, whereas other victims of genocide in this period, such as, for example, mentally ill or asocial groups, were not considered existential threats that demanded deportation to Auschwitz from Athens or Rome?”....

“Although they set out to kill all the Jews immediately during the war, they did not have a similar policy for other groups of victims...Why did the Nazis view the extermination of the Jews as so urgent and fatal to their survival? Why did Germans, Jews, and Europeans perceive during the war the extermination of the Jews as unlike any other genocide perpetrated by the Nazis?” (6) And Raul Hilberg explains further: “...the Holocaust was irreducibly distinct from any other historical event or phenomenon. One cannot explain it in terms of anything else...the Holocaust was *sui generis*...the destruction process was implemented regardless of its costs, not for any material gain and not for any military purpose. Even those Jews that may have been needed by the German war industry in a variety of sectors were killed. It becomes increasingly apparent, from the sheer examination of the evidence itself, that the destruction of the Jews of Europe was willed for itself and accomplished for its own sake.” (7)

Professor Bauer elaborates: “No gradation of human suffering is possible...How can one measure the suffering of a Rom woman at Auschwitz, who saw her husband and children die before her eyes, against the suffering of a Jewish woman at the same camp who underwent the same experience? Extreme forms of human suffering are not comparable, and one should never say that one form of mass murder is ‘less terrible’, or even ‘better’, than another. The difference between the Holocaust and less radical genocides lies not in the amount of sadism or the depth of hellish suffering, but elsewhere...”. (8)

Stated another way, Hitler’s goal was to make all of Europe “Judenrein”, free of Jews. All indications are that in another decade, this will be the reality in at least eastern Europe. The melancholy demographic trends show the remaining Jewish population of Europe as steadily shrinking. In Russia it is half what it was 10 years ago, and expected to decrease by half again in the coming decade. Similarly forlorn projections have been noted for other European countries. A visitor to present-day Poland, Russia or the Ukraine will find town after town, village after village, without any trace whatsoever of once substantial and thriving Jewish communities, only the spirits of the dead, ghostly ruins, decrepit cemeteries, unmarked or inaccurately marked sites of mass graves, etc. Only in the past few years are these societies beginning to emerge from this denial of history, of their own recent past.

In post-war Eastern Europe a centuries-old fierce anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe combined with a newly resurgent nationalism after 1945 to create a toxic situation in which destitute Jewish refugees who had lost most or all of their families, returned to the towns and villages of their birth only to find hostility, resentment, sometimes violence, and their confiscated homes now occupied by local citizens, their former “neighbors”. So the exodus to America and to Palestine, which became the new state of Israel in 1948, gained momentum. For more detail consult Omer Bartov’s book Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine, (Princeton University Press, 2007.)

The other sense in which Hitler succeeded, of course, is that a complete culture, an entire way of life, has disappeared forever, never to return. The unique world of the eastern European Jews, its language, customs, folklore, vast learning and literature, its deep spirituality, even its values, are lost to humanity forever and cannot be recovered. This is a wound in the human fabric which cannot heal. The fact that there were isolated survivors does not change the reality that this *culture* has vanished. As far as I can see,

this is also part of the uniqueness of the *Shoah*. For example, in spite of the terrible devastation inflicted upon their people, the Tutsi culture has not vanished from the earth. It still remains strong and vital in Rwanda, its social networks, its customs, beliefs and group identity still endure. But for Ashkenazic Jewry, *all* was lost and will remain lost. This is only one measure of the Holocaust's uniqueness. For vivid visual evidence of this lost world, I recommend exploring the pages of Silent Places: Landscapes of Jewish Life and Loss in Eastern Europe, by Jeffrey Gusky. (Overlook Duckworth, 2003.)

For most of those who perished in the Holocaust, their primary language was Yiddish. "...the only language that shared its fate with its speakers. Even though it survived here and there, with some individuals or some marginal groups, it died at Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka, and Sobibor with the people that spoke it. Yiddish writers and poets are thus the only ones who speak from the depths of the death of their people, and from the depths of the death of their language. They are the only ones to write in a world of deafness, with the consciousness of being without a family lineage, the only ones to write in no one's language. The death of a language is irremediable. If the Yiddish literature of the Disappearance is not comparable to any other, as Elie Wiesel says, it is not because it is more authentic, but because it speaks from within a double death." (9)

Along with the question of uniqueness are the often valiant attempts of so many to find meaning in these events. In their sometimes desperate struggle to find some redemption in the unfathomable, many writers have attached to these events meanings which they could not have had when they were unfolding. Yehuda Bauer has spoken wisely and eloquently on this: (10) (Yehuda Bauer, "A Past That Will Not Go Away", in The Holocaust And History, pp. 15-16) Here he discusses "...Emil Fackenheim's recent statement that the victims of the Holocaust were *kedoshim*, holy persons, because they were Jewish martyrs, killed because of their Jewishness, and hence suffering just like their ancestors had suffered, for the Sanctification Of The Name. I believe this hides the fact that there is no meaning to the Holocaust, because the only meaning it could have would be a Nazi meaning; for the Nazis there was a purpose in the killing, murder was meaningful. For the Jews it was totally meaningless. They had done nothing to earn the deadly enmity of Nazi anti-Semitism. Their faith, as far as they were observant in any sense—was not at issue. They were ordinary people, victims of murder; this does not make them holy, it makes them victims of a crime. People were taken from their homes or hiding places and murdered, for no apparent reason but the consensual will of a murderous society. This is extremely difficult to accept, because the conclusion is that the deaths of our dear ones were meaningless, and I must admit that I resisted this conclusion for years. The argument is usually that the meaning lay in the innumerable instances of sacrifice, as when children sacrificed their lives to try to save their parents...But Jews generally did not have the option to either live or choose sacrifice for some purpose, holy or otherwise, as they had had throughout their history, ...

"One of the most terrible things the Nazis did was to deprive their victims of a last satisfaction that their death might have some meaning. There is a perfectly understandable tendency to ritualize the Holocaust so that it may acquire some meaning, and of course there are meanings we ascribe to it post factum. ...For us, with our constantly changing understanding of the past, there are good reasons to derive this or that so-called 'lesson' from the Holocaust, meanings that make sense for us, but they are

quite extraneous to the event and its contemporaries, and are bound to change over time... The uniqueness lies in the motivation of the murderer.” (11)

Saul Friedlander, eminent Holocaust historian, has written : “...once a regime decides that whole groups, whatever the criteria may be, should be annihilated there and then and not allowed to live on earth, the ultimate has been achieved. This limit, one may suggest, has been reached only once in modern history—by the Nazis. In other words, the Nazis destroyed, industrially, methodically, entire segments of the human race, not because of any act committed, be it actual or potential, but because of their definition of who was human and who was not. The Nazis thereby touched, ... upon some fundamental feeling of human solidarity that may have definitively changed the nature of human relations. This possibly, in one form or another, is what has haunted the human imagination ever since.” (12)

“Lithuania, early 1942. Einsatzcommando 3 of Einsatzgruppe A, under the command of Colonel Karl Jaeger, has completed the execution of approximately 137,000 Jews, among whom were 55,000 women and 34,000 children. This is the apocalyptic background. An incident among thousands is inscribed in the 14 January 1942 entry of The Kovno Ghetto Diary. It reads as follows: ‘ An order to bring all dogs and cats to the small synagogue on Veliunos Street , where they were shot’. [The bodies of the cats and dogs remained in the synagogue for several months; the Jews were forbidden to remove them.]” (13)

The reader’s first instinct is probably to reread this passage in disbelief. This was my reaction, followed by a puzzled, “Why?” What thoughts might have been in the minds of those who gave and carried out these orders? Were they thinking that these animals had somehow been infected by the Jewish blood of their owners, or was it just another cruelty, another way of inflicting pain? It explains, better than I ever could, the difference, the *excess*, not in degree but in kind, between the events of the Holocaust and other episodes of ethnically motivated mass murder.

Raul Hilberg, one of the first historians to seriously investigate the Holocaust, famously said that he started out by studying small details, because he didn’t want to ask the big questions and come up with small answers. But sometimes the big questions, such as “How was the Holocaust ‘different’?”, can be found in such a small detail as German soldiers taking the time and ammunition to shoot all the cats and dogs belonging to Jewish households. When we feel overwhelmed by the seemingly irrational horror of the Holocaust, we need to remind ourselves that the Nazi regime was pursuing a rational logic to its ultimate conclusion. “ It must be remembered that Hitler and his circle were not insane in any ordinary sense. They threaten us precisely because, though *unique*, their uniqueness comes from their merciless willingness to pursue a logic, however unconventional, that is recognizably intelligible to others, even though others dared not dream it before they made it real.” (14) (Katz, *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50)

Another worthwhile explanation of what made the Holocaust different has come from Dan Stone, in his book Histories Of The Holocaust: “ Nazism was not just an attack on the Jews, or on the Romanies, or Slavs, or other despised peoples. It was not ‘merely’ an attempt to reshape the demography of Europe along racial lines. It was all these things, but also something more. Nazism was, as Yehuda Bauer says, a ‘total rebellion’ against ‘what we inaccurately call western civilization’. Or, we might say, it was a radicalization of characteristics of western civilization that had already been seen, in more incipient form, in slavery and colonialism and intra-European warfare in the

early twentieth century. What accounts for the horror of Nazism, and our enduring fascination with it, is Nazism's attempt to redefine what is meant by the term 'human being'. Nazism was an anthropological project that wanted to reshape the world by declaring a limited understanding of who was to count as human....

“ In a remarkable letter to her mentor and friend Karl Jaspers of 17 December 1946, the exiled German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote the following: ‘I haven't understood what actually happened. Perhaps what is behind it all is only that individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being.’ “ (15) I would add that it was less an attempt to destroy the concept of human being than to drastically narrow it, including only certain human groups and excluding others. Alon Confino calls it “building a new humanity.”

Every event in history is unique to its own specific circumstances. But it should be clear beyond any doubt that this event was “different” from all other racial persecutions or genocidal violence in both its belief (the iron law that all Jews must die) and its deeds across an entire continent. In Himmler's secret speech to SS officers in Posen in 1943, it could not be clearer that the *Shoah* was singular in both its intent and its deeds. Listen to his words: “The hard decision had to be made that this people should be caused to disappear from the earth....I myself believe that it is better for us—us together—to have borne this for our people, that we have taken the responsibility for it on ourselves (the responsibility for an act, not just an idea), and that we should now take this secret with us into the grave.” (16) Note his choice of words, not to disappear from Germany, or even from Europe, but from *the earth*. That is what makes the *Shoah* singular; no nation or group of people has ever declared their goal to be the complete disappearance by annihilation of another human group, for all time, throughout the world.

Of course even as an idea this is difficult to absorb and comprehend. But as Himmler stated, it was much more than just an idea. The decision that all Jews must die was above all a summons to action, a program to be carried out, so extreme that Himmler doubted even future generations of Germans would understand, thus the need for it to remain secret forever. These differences are important, not merely semantic. Yes, the Holocaust was different from all other racial or ethnic cleansings, and the ways in which it differed need to be analyzed clearly. To compare and contrast this history with other genocides does not trivialize or understate its unique reality, as some have feared. Rather it enables us to see that reality with greater clarity.



The Torah, also known as the first five books of the Old Testament
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Footnotes

1. Steven Katz, The Holocaust In Historical Context, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking The Holocaust, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, p. 53.)
4. Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking The Holocaust, p.48.
5. Ibid, p. 49.
6. Alon Confino, A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination From Persecution To Genocide, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014, p.13.
7. Raul Hilberg, “The Significance of The Holocaust”, in The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureacracy And Genocide, p.96.
8. Yehuda Bauer, “What Was The Holocaust?”, in The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2003, p. 454.
9. Rachel Ertel, quoted in Annette Wieviorka, The Era Of The Witness, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2006.
10. Yehuda Bauer, “A Past That Will Not Go Away”, in The Holocaust In History, pp. 15-16.
11. Ibid.

12. Saul Friedlander, ed., Probing The Limits Of Representation, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.3.
13. Ibid. p. 21. Source: Lucjan Dobroszycki, ed., The Chronicle Of The Lodz Ghetto 1941-1944, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984, p. 258.
14. Katz, Ibid., pp. 49-50.
15. Dan Stone, Histories Of The Holocaust, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. ___.
16. Heinrich Himmler, *Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden, 1933 bis 1945, und Andere Ansprachen*, ed. Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson ,Frankfurt am Main, 1974, p. 169.