



## **Volksgemeinschaft – Ausgrenzungsgemeinschaft. Die Radikalisierung Deutschlands ab 1933**

### **4. Internationale Konferenz zur Holocaustforschung**

**Eine Konferenz der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung in Kooperation mit der  
Universität Flensburg und der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin**

**27. – 29.1. 2013 in Berlin, dbb forum berlin, Friedrichstraße 169/170**

*Daniel Feierstein, National University of Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires*

Beitrag zum Podium: Soziale Dynamiken und Alltagskultur

28. Januar 2013, Berlin

### **Is anyone a spectator in a genocidal society?**

*For each one we touch, a thousand paralyzed with fear. We act by irradiation.<sup>1</sup>*

This line from an Argentine theater play expresses brilliantly, in a nutshell, how terror operates in a concentration camp society. Harassment, torture, and murder are not simply intended to destroy the victims but, indirectly, to paralyze the whole of society with fear. This paper asks to what extent representations of genocidal processes and concentration camps have shown awareness of this fact and, conversely, to what extent it is possible to work through the consequences of terror while those who were

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the book "El señor Galíndez" by Eduardo Pavlovsky.

neither perpetrators nor direct victims see themselves as "outside" their terror-stricken society.

### **The binary view of genocidal processes and the division of society into perpetrators, victims and bystanders**

As a paradigmatic case of genocide, the Nazi genocide provides a good example of how different interpretations can promote ownership of experience or, conversely, alienation. The hegemonic way of thinking about the Nazi genocide is in terms of the Jewish and Roma communities annihilated in Germany, Poland and Lithuania. Once stripped of their citizenship, Jews and Gypsies could no longer be seen as Germans, Poles or Lithuanians - or even as Europeans, once Nazism became a Europe-wide ideology during WWII. Accordingly, "ordinary" Germans, Poles and Lithuanians seem to have remained largely indifferent to the fate of the victims except for possible feelings of solidarity.

Such black-and-white, binary ways of thinking not only assign entire groups of people to the category of either perpetrators or victims, but assume that these groups have enduring and stable characteristics. These assumptions deny the complexity of the historical processes involved as well as ignoring the dynamic and artificial nature of identity construction.

On the other hand, if we are able to understand the Nazi genocide as also a partial destruction of the German, Polish or Lithuanian national groups, we can reinstate the victims as full citizens and confront the goals of Nazism, which proposed the need for a Reich *Judenrein*. The aim of Nazism was not only to exterminate certain groups (ethnic, national and political, among others), but to transform German and European society through the absence of such groups, a transformation that in the event proved to be quite successful. In particular, one of the most enduring effects of the Nazi genocide of Jews and Gypsies was the disappearance of internationalism and cosmopolitanism as constituent parts of German and European identity.

Indeed, what tends to remain hidden in discussions of the Nazi genocide and other historical cases of genocide is that perpetrators and victims previously shared a common identity (as Ottomans, Germans, Poles, Rwandans or Yugoslavs). It is precisely this plural identity that genocide seeks to destroy and replace with a uniform identity (Aryan Germans, Ottoman Turkish Muslims, Rwandan Hutus and so on).

Identities can be radically transformed (as in Argentina, Chile, Cambodia or Indonesia) or directly eliminated (as in former Yugoslavia, where identity is only readable as Serbian, Croatian or Bosnian and the previous Yugoslav identity can no longer be remembered, let alone reconstructed). Thus, the identity that remains hidden is precisely the one the perpetrators sought to annihilate and replace with the binary oppositions model of "pre-existing identities", such as Germans versus Jews, Armenians versus Turks or Hutus versus Tutsis.

### **The Nazi genocide and its forgotten precursor: the concentration camp period 1933-1938**

The hegemonic view of the Nazi genocide has tended to overlook its preparatory stage: the deployment of terror in German society between 1933 and 1938, which paved the way for and accounts for the compliance and even complicity of large sectors of the German population in mass extermination.

Robert Gelately divides the Nazi repression prior to the death camps into four main periods: <sup>2</sup>

1) Between 1933 and 1934, Communists and members of other leftist political parties were placed in "*preventive custody*" – in other words, they were imprisoned without trial in concentration camps. Gelately estimates that about 100,000 prisoners passed through these camps, of which over 65% were members of the German Communist Party. Between 500 and 600 inmates were killed in these two years by summary executions or as a result of living conditions in the camps.

2) After a drastic reduction in the use of concentration camps during 1935 and much of 1936, the Nazis found a new target: the "asocial". Dr. Werner Best, a lawyer and chief legal advisor to the Gestapo, defined asocial as "*every attempt to impose or maintain any theory besides National Socialism,*" which was "*a symptom of sickness, which threatens the healthy unity of the indivisible volk organism.*" <sup>3</sup> In his instructions to the *Kripo (Kriminalpolizei)* of April 4, 1938, Himmler defined asocials those "who demonstrate through behavior which is inimical to the community, but which need not be criminal, that they will not adapt themselves to the community". <sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.40

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.97

The *Kripo* developed increasingly specialized branches to handle different types of “asocials”, including homosexuals, drug addicts, abortionists and their clients, adulterers and “crime of opinion”, constituted by the mere possibility of critical judgment about Nazism or any of its policies. This was coupled with a policy of “crime prevention” which operated by sending “potential” criminals, ex-prisoners, beggars, prostitutes and even the unemployed to prison or concentration camps. Of the 5,000 to 15,000 prisoners interned in concentration camps between 1936 and 1938, most were “asocials” rather than Communists or political opponents.

3) The Nazis simultaneously developed policies of persecuting physically and mentally handicapped people which started with the sterilization law of July 14, 1933, and culminated in the murder of 70,000 psychiatric patients and handicapped children in the Aktion T4 operation between 1939 and 1941.

4) From June 1938 onwards, racial policies gradually predominated. At first, these affected only against Jews and Gypsies but after the German invasion of Poland in 1939 policies became increasingly anti-Slav, particularly with regard to the Polish population and - after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 - Russian prisoners. The Nazi-organized pogrom of November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*), culminating in the arrest of between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews, 1500 of whom were sent to concentration camps accused of being “asocials”. About a hundred of these Jews were murdered and the rest were released after a few weeks, but not for long. Simultaneously, Himmler ordered the arrest of at least 200 unemployed people in each police district of Germany. The detainees were used as “free labor” in labor camps as a way of encouraging others to work. In 1939 there were just over 40,000 concentration camp inmates but with the creation of these new labor camps and the outbreak of war, these figures increased enormously, making Nazi camps a radically new experiment.

Before World War II the Nazis persecuted those who behaved or expressed themselves physically in ways they considered politically subversive or “abnormal”. Persecution even extended to those dedicated Nazis who tried to maintain some autonomy and a critical voice within the Nazi movement, as happened with the SA and later with certain splinter groups with the SS. More generally, anyone who objected to Nazi militarist or racist policies, or who refused to take their place in the world of work or the law, who was a homosexual or practiced interracial sex with Jews, Gypsies or

Slavs, could become a target. However, by 1938 the great enemy of the Reich had become the Jews.

In the immediate pre-war period, the Nazis saw the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe as the “breeding ground of all the Jews in the world”.<sup>5</sup> That is why they argued that to “stop the Jews was to stop communism”.<sup>6</sup> Central European Judaism in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century was, in the eyes of the European bourgeoisie, a subversive mode of identity construction, characterized by a culture that based decision making and action on critical thinking. This was a culture that valued the rabbinical discussions in the Talmud and the ethical thinking of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which challenged Kantian ideas. Its “assimilated” versions were to be found in Marx, Freud and Einstein, who had effectively deconstructed the scientific thinking of their time, and in the Jewish-influenced Marxism of Walter Benjamin, among others. In short, attempts to understand the Nazi genocide and the Wannsee Conference often lose sight of the preparatory stage that made genocide feasible. Without the concentration camps and the persecution that evolved in Germany between 1933 and 1938, the “final solution to the Jewish question” would never have been possible. Regarding concentration camps in Germany itself as a technology of power puts later events in a new light and allows us to evaluate what happened to German society during the Nazi era.

### **Concentration camp power as social discipline**

The concentration camp was a two-way device, operating on the inmates of the camp and on society as a whole, the question arises as to how it affected each of these two groups. Numerous testimonies of survivors of Nazi concentration camps center on the “breaking down” of personality. The guards’ systematic brutality was intended to break the inmates as *social beings*, destroying their capacity for self-determination. The stereotypical image of Nazi concentration camp survivors was that of “living dead”<sup>7</sup> -

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.142

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.125

<sup>7</sup> This image is found in various testimonies, although the names were different in different concentration or extermination camps. In Auschwitz these people were known as or *Muschelmänner* or Moslems (perhaps because they had gone into their shells like mussels but also because the SS looked on Arabs as fatalistic); in Majdanek they were called *Gamel* (bowls, because food was their only interest), in Dachau *Kretiner* (idiots), and in Stutthof *Krüppel* (cripples - because of their immobility). In Mauthausen, Schwimmer kept afloat by playing dead while in Buchenwald the same people were

human beings who had lost all control over their lives and were no longer able to decide even the simplest things for themselves.

The same pattern is found in other concentration camp experiences. However, I will limit myself here to one other example - the network of over 500 concentration camps set up during the last military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 – in order to illustrate how concentration camps work as a power strategy and how they affect society as a whole.

While these powerless figures might seem to the perpetrators to be “ideal” members of society, it is clear that even authority would disappear if all citizens’ autonomy were denied to this point. However, the example of *total domination* that occurred in the concentration camps demonstrated the perpetrators’ ability to override individual and social autonomy on a wider scale. In this sense, the concentration camp was what Max Weber called an “ideal type” – a selective, one-sided representation of an aspect of social life.<sup>8</sup> As regards society at large, the aim was not to create “living dead”, but to keep people frightened enough to ensure continuity, obedience and order. The literature on concentration camps and “total institutions” such as psychiatric hospitals emphasizes the deliberate and systematic destruction of personality that occurs in such places. The following procedures, described by Bruno Bettelheim and Pilar Calveiro as well as by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his (1961) book *Asylums*<sup>9</sup>, can be typical of most testimonies of concentration camp survivors:<sup>10</sup>

---

known as *müde Scheichs* (tired sheikhs – fatalistic Arabs again!). At the women’s camp of Ravensbruck, *Schmuckstücke* (jewels) was a euphemism for *Schmutzstücke* (filth). In all these cases, the images refer to the same social process: the loss of any capacity for self-determination. The “living dead” lost all control over their own lives

<sup>8</sup> “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality.” Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. Lutz Kaelber (Free Press, 1949). p.90

<sup>9</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Anchor Books, 1961

<sup>10</sup> See Bruno Bettelheim, 1960. *The Informed Heart*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf; Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición. Los campos de concentración en Argentina* [Power and disappearance. The concentration camps in Argentina], Colihue, Buenos Aires, 1998; Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Anchor Books, 1961. For an analysis of “subjective demolition” in the concentration camps, see Sylvia Bermann, Lucila Edelman, Diana Kordon et al. *Efectos psicosociales de la represión política. Sus secuelas en Alemania, Argentina y Uruguay* [Psychosocial effects of political repression. Its aftermath in Germany, Argentina and Uruguay], Goethe Institut, Córdoba, 1994.

### 1) *Destruction of identity*

In both Argentina and Nazi-occupied Europe, the prisoner's name was exchanged for a number as soon as he or she entered a concentration camp. But loss of identity went beyond that. As Bettelheim observes, inmates were cut off from the references that defined their identity: everything for which they were known, recognized or stigmatized outside the camp was erased, from their professional to their social status, and they were denied all contact with friends or family. Within the concentration camp, their identity was determined only by the way they behaved *within* the camp - their response to torture and brutality and their greater or lesser degree of collaboration. Faced with situations they could not even imagine before entering the camps and for which they were psychologically unprepared, their self-esteem collapsed.

### 2) *Annulment of perception and mobility*

While prisoners' previous identity was being erased, they were simultaneously prevented from recognizing their new environment. In the Nazi camps, detainees could be executed on the spot for trying to discover the camp's position and layout or for monitoring the punishments meted out to other detainees. Survivors also described how prisoners became cynical and apathetic, "looking without seeing", incapable of responding ethically or reflecting on their environment or fate.

In Argentina, sensory deprivation was taken a step further. On arrival at the camp or detention center, the "disappeared" were blindfolded or their heads were covered with hoods or bags - a treatment known as "walling up"- while their mobility was also restricted by shackles or threats. Moreover, communication between detainees was prohibited, and sometimes they could not even communicate with the perpetrators, except during interrogations.

The combined effect of these procedures was social and physical disorientation followed by a breakdown of personality. Feelings of panic were common in prisoners subjected to these conditions for more than just a few hours. The victims, plunged into total darkness, silence and immobility, tended to lose all track of time and space. Often, prisoners were stripped of all their clothing, which left the body not only in darkness, silence and immobility, but also naked and vulnerable.

### 3) *"Initiation": the role of torture*

If incarceration in a concentration camp involved restrictions on perception and mobility and loss of identity, initiation into concentration camp life was via torture.

Inmates were subjected to beatings, asphyxiation and a variety of physical punishments during their first hours and days at the camp as a way to breaking them in and getting them used to their new condition.

#### 4) *Infantilization and animalization*

To the already mentioned procedures can be added what authors and survivors call infantilization (or regression) and animalization, all of which involve the destruction of agency and self-determination.

In the concentration camps, prisoners lost control of their most basic human functions. They were forced to ask permission to urinate and defecate, or to use a bucket inside the cell in which they were incarcerated. They had to request authorization to perform even the most basic tasks. Food, as well as being meager and of poor quality, was transformed into a sort of privilege for those who were considered well behaved. Any activity, even the most trivial, was regulated by the authorities. Often, detainees were forced to behave like animals, imitating the sounds of dogs or cows and crawling on all fours, or to go to the restroom blindfolded, where they would stumble into walls or doors, among other forms of humiliation.

This loss of control of bodily needs, which are regulated externally by the perpetrator, was compounded by the spatial and temporal disorientation mentioned earlier and the constant terror that torture could be resumed.

#### 5) *Unpredictability*

Finally, there was the impossibility of knowing how to save oneself. The ultimate fate - death - was both suggested and hidden. The manner in which behavior was evaluated was indecipherable. In some cases torture lasted weeks; in others, only few days. In some cases, collaboration was rewarded with death; in others, it brought certain privileges. Sometimes, acts of solidarity or defiance were punished with death or a visit to the torture chamber; but on rare occasions, they were tolerated and even respected.

This contributed to the breakdown of personality, as various witnesses have testified, since it made it impossible to foresee the consequences of one's actions. Any action or inaction could result in death, but there was no pattern. Death was always just around the corner and, in the long term, seemingly inevitable; however, it was rationed in an arbitrary fashion like the food.

In many cases, the prisoners' loss of previous identity and stable references and disconnection from their own feelings and perceptions - even from their own bodies - led to a complete breakdown of personality. Recalling his experiences in Buchenwald concentration camp, Bettelheim describes a figure that epitomizes the camp system even more than the living dead - namely, the "adapted" man. This was a person who had accepted some or all of the perpetrators' values. An extreme example was the prisoner functionary, or *kapo*, appointed by the Nazis to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp. Most *kapos* behaved with extreme brutality toward other prisoners. In the Argentine concentration camps, the "adapted" could be asked to torture their companions or to work at detecting and identifying new victims to be brought in for interrogation.

But, as most survivors point out, such cases accounted for only a minority of those who underwent destruction. "Adaptation" was encouraged both inside and outside the concentration camps even though it did not often go as far as direct collaboration or the transformation of the victims into perpetrators. Its purpose was, perhaps simpler: the erasing of the rebelliousness or solidarity among the survivors of the camps and - more fundamentally - in society at large.

### **The limits of "adaptation": the adapted, the dissemblers and the "living dead"**

Imitating the perpetrators' gestures, behaviors, topics of conversation and value systems was a prerequisite for survival in a concentration camp. Inmates needed to avoid drawing attention and - even more importantly - they needed to cultivate moral indifference to everything they saw. Not only to what happened to themselves, but also to their peers, many of whom were no longer there the next day because they had been killed, "deported" or "transferred", while the rest continued to be subjected to torture, abuse, degradation and humiliation. And each day, new detainees arrived to undergo the terrible period of "initiation" torture, interrogation, degradation and humiliation.

Survivors of the Nazi and Argentine camps describe three basic types of adapting:

a) *Total adaptation*. That is to say, acceptance of the perpetrators' values. In the Nazi concentration camps, they became *kapos*, collaborators, and informants. In Argentina, they were especially good at torturing and interrogating former colleagues or at

carrying out street sweeps for urban militants.<sup>11</sup> Often, this “adaptation” resulted from an inability to endure torture; but sometimes it was simply a product of the concentration camp *situation*. Terror was enough to gain acquiescence without the need for physical pain.

b) *Dissembling*. Because the main purpose of concentration camps was to destroy the inmates’ personality, it was impossible to survive without accepting to some extent the values the perpetrators sought to instill. A significant difference in the Argentine case was the use of internment to extract information - but this rarely lasted beyond the first ten days. Therefore, the only way to resist and to survive was to adapt outwardly to these values, while resisting them internally. This behavior implied a huge psychological cost, because it required a high degree of schizophrenia to convince the perpetrators of a transformation that really did not exist, or at least did not exist to the extent the perpetrators expected or supposed. It also required a very careful assessment of the *limits of collaboration*, to distinguish at what point adaptation was real and not merely a pretense.

Dissembling placed prisoners in a permanent state of tension. They could pay with their lives for the slightest sign that betrayed their schizophrenia. Or they could be degraded to the lower echelons of camp life, which would mean renewed visits to the torture chamber, humiliation, and loss of privileges, such as slightly better food. Moreover, the prisoners felt compelled to analyze each act of “collaboration” in minute detail in order to determine how useful it would be to the perpetrators and to what extent it made the prisoner the perpetrators’ accomplice.

Mario Villani, who was interned in various concentration camps in Argentina, suffered one of many dilemmas when he was ordered to repair one of the instruments with which the perpetrators tortured their victims - the “picana” or cattle prod used to give electric shocks, a torture which Villani himself had suffered repeatedly. At first, Villani refused to carry out this task. However, instead of punishing him for his disobedience, the perpetrators simply turned to using more primitive instruments - such as metal objects plugged directly into the power supply - which inflicted much greater pain and physical harm. This persuaded Villani to repair the instrument of torture.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Street sweeps involved an ex - detainee accompanying a group of repressors in random searches for former activist-friends in cafes, train stations, border crossings, etc. where political dissidents might be circulating.

<sup>12</sup> Entrevista a Mario Villani, Proyecto “Archivo de Testimonios de Sobrevivientes de los Centros Clandestinos de Detención en Argentinas”, Cátedra “Análisis de las prácticas sociales genocidas”

Villani's dilemma illustrates indeed a permanent tension suffered by “dissemblers”: the extent to which adaptation can be resisted by the dissembler's deeper psychic structure.

c) *“Living dead”*. As mentioned earlier, total adaptation would mean surrendering all remaining autonomy, making it impossible for the victims to stay alive on their own. And indeed, unable to accept their captors' values or to endure the tension of dissembling, the living dead let themselves die. Their will to live was paralyzed by the camp situation. In this state, malnutrition, overcrowding, disease and degradation, undermined the victim's power of resistance and, although their bodies held out for a while, led to absolute subjective extinction.

### **Inside and outside the camps**

One of the purposes of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany (and later in Nazi-occupied Europe) as well as in Argentina was to reshape society. Even if most people never set foot in one, the camps sent a message of terror to anyone tempted to think for themselves.

The prototypes of the Nazi concentration camp in its own territories was Dachau (even if Mauthausen, in Austria, was one of the worst ones). Dachau was opened in March 1933, barely a month after the Nazis took office. Heinrich Himmler described it as “the first concentration camp for political prisoners”.<sup>13</sup> At first, it mainly housed political prisoners - Communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists, and other political opponents of the Nazi regime. Over time, other groups were also interned at Dachau, such as Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and homosexuals, as well as so-called “asocials” and repeat criminal offenders. The camp's message, however, was addressed to the entire German population, as a disciplinary warning about the consequences of defying authority or displaying the slightest sign of political, social or cultural autonomy.

---

(Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, UBA) y Asociación Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos. Esta anécdota fue narrada previamente por Villani en las audiencias del Juicio a las Juntas militares, en 1985. Interview with Mario Villani, Project “Archive of Testimonies from Survivors of Clandestine Detention Centers in Argentina”, Chair of Analysis of Genocidal Social Practices, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires and Association of Ex Disappeared Detainees (AEDD). This story was told earlier by Villani at the hearings of the trial against military junta in 1985.

<sup>13</sup> *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* (The Munich Latest News), March 21, 1933. Cited in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau\\_concentration\\_camp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau_concentration_camp)

The Nazis covered Germany with this kind of camps (very different than Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka) and, when war broke out in 1939, hundreds more were set up in the occupied territories, with many smaller sub-camps attached to them.<sup>14</sup> It is calculated that approximately 15,000 labor, death, and concentration camps were built although the exact figure remains uncertain.<sup>15</sup> The six extermination camps tend to overshadow the key role played by thousands of concentration camps scattered throughout Europe as a strategy of social discipline.

In Argentina, more than 500 concentration camps and detention centers were distributed up and down the country. As in Nazi Germany, there was at least one camp within fifty miles of every major city so that the whole of society was trapped within a giant web of horror. As in Nazi Germany, it is not yet clear how many people were interned in these camps and centers. I do not mean those who died in them – most of these victims have now been identified - but we still do not know how many people were held for a day or two, maybe a week, and then returned to social life.<sup>16</sup> Nearly every day, a new survivor appears.

To sum up, the camps performed a number of simultaneous functions: they eliminated social and political resistance; they dehumanized inmates as a way of justifying and legitimizing genocide; they disciplined and regulated society through terror – a terror of the unknown as well as the known, based on rumors that awakened fantasies and tapped into people’s innermost fears; a terror that bred suspicion towards those victims that “reappeared” – cutting them off from the social whole and spreading distrust among the population. This defensive attitude trapped the individual within the worldview of individualism, closing off the possibility of political action, solidarity or cooperation.

### **Defeat and confusion: the logic of psychological destruction**

The perpetrators sought to produce “adaptive” behavior both inside and outside the camps, although the procedure was different in each case. One of the fundamental

---

<sup>14</sup> Gelatelly estimates that more than 100,000 prisoners passed through the Nazi concentration camps during 1933 and 1934, mostly political dissidents. Their average stay was between one and two weeks and not more than one thousand prisoners died. However, the experience profoundly shook German society, paved the way for Nazi totalitarian rule. See Robert Gelatelly, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945*, Oxford, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> For a list of the main camps, see: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>

reasons why people tried to “adapt” *outside* the camps was because defeat came to be redefined in terms of failure so that future struggle seemed pointless. This subjective feeling of devastation destroyed the personality, transforming political defeat into compliance and creating a state of mental “confusion”.<sup>17</sup>

The difference between defeat and denial is an important one. The defeated do not necessarily deny their past: they can analyze it in an attempt to understand their own limitations and circumstances and to learn from their mistakes. In this sense, defeat is a great teacher. Basically, when a defeat is understood as such, it encourages us to analyze the causes of defeat, to improve or transform our tools and methods, and keep on fighting. Defeat is often the mother of victory and no social reorganization is final, not even one founded on genocide.

By contrast, “confusion” paralyzes us in a similar or complementary way to terror. Individuals who are confused - particularly regarding their identity - do not know what to do in life. They deny the meaning of their actions and the principles upon which these are based. They understand their struggle as futile and their defeat as unnecessary. Naively, they would like to turn back the clock in an attempt to recover the dead, the annihilated. They accept the genocidal guilt, a guilt that does not belong to them. The logic of this discourse is that if there had been no questioning of the previous order, of the authoritarian order, there would have been no deaths.

There is no way of proving this counterfactual argument. On the contrary, Argentina’s “National Reorganization Process” not only sought but *needed* to destroy preexisting social ties in order to impose a new economic and social order. Moreover, it is next to impossible to find any historical indicators that would show that *less* political conflict, *less* radical social struggles or even *less* willingness to resort to political violence would have prevented the killing or at least modified the objectives of Argentina’s genocidal perpetrators. And the same with Nazism.

---

<sup>16</sup> For the impact of such practices in Chile, see Elias Padilla Ballesteros, *La memoria y el olvido. Detenidos desaparecidos en Chile*, [Memory and forgetting. Disappeared detainees in Chile], Ediciones Orígenes, Santiago, 1995

<sup>17</sup> For the concept of “mortification” see Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Anchor Books, 1961. I am indebted to Beatriz Granda for the concept of “confusion” and some of the ideas of this paragraph. An analysis of types of confusion can also be found in Sylvia Bermann, “Sociedad, psicología y tortura en América Latina” [Society, psychology and torture in Latin America] published in Bermann, Edelman, Kordon et al, op. cit., pp. 11 to 29.

Transforming “defeat” into a “mistake”, denying the rebellious and critical spirit of the years previous to the concentrationary order, assuming that all political struggle is useless because it may end in repression, and secretly accepting the brave “reorganized” new world as the only one possible - something which, for better or worse, must be accepted and digested- is simply to enact the multiple meanings of the phrase “never again”. For “never again horror and death” also means “never fight again; never criticize or rebel again; never show solidarity again or feel moral responsibility for those who suffer”. The genocidal power remains intact, so the only way to ensure “never again horror and death” is by guaranteeing we will “never again” make the mistake of believing we can challenge the status quo, of imagining that other social relations are possible.

With their utopias dead but not buried –their ideals tortured and destroyed in the camps and then “disappeared” - many members of a defeated generation, *confused* by terror and genocide, were all too ready to cling to any wreckage they could find after the maelstrom had subsided. Thus they became an easy prey to individualism, selfish “careerism” or complicity in later and most horrible crimes, as happened in Germany after the initial concentration camp period (concentration camps themselves continued functioning in parallel to other types of camps until the end of the war in 1945).

Concentration camps within Germany were the necessary condition for compliance and complicity of “ordinary” Germans in the Nazis’ policy of extermination outside Germany. In this sense, they functioned as a preparatory stage for the death camps and gas chambers. To think of the German population as “spectators” of genocide prevents us understanding how German society was first terrorized to create a consensus for invading the rest of Europe. This does not absolve the accomplices, nor does it justify the behavior of important sectors of German society, but it is important not to gloss over the profound effects of concentration camp terror in pre-war Germany and elsewhere.

In his book on mental hospitals, Goffman distinguished four coping strategies used by inmates to adapt to the institutional situation. These strategies, he claimed, applied equally to other total institutions like prisons. These are: 1) *withdrawal*, also known in psychiatric institutions as “regression”; 2) *intransigence*, whereby inmates confront hospital or prison staff or refuse to cooperate, 3) *colonization*, whereby inmates settle into a routine and make the best of the privileges available; and 4) *conversion*,

whereby inmates come to see themselves through the eyes of the institution and take on the role of the perfect inmate.

But attempts at “conversion”, either in society in general or within a concentration camp, are always problematic. Converts, whether religious, political or ideological, are generally not accepted by anyone. The constant pressure to prove that their newfound faith is more profound and more radical than the next person’s only increases their *state of confusion*. In addition, their old ideas cling to them like a second nature they cannot get rid of. The idea of starting a process of dialogue with their former enemies is too loathsome for words. Not even if the perpetrators went down on their hands and knees.

Many would-be converts are unable to make the moral leap and remain mired in confusion. Midway in their conversion, they cannot come to terms with their own history. They cannot establish a pleasurable relationship with the past, which they now deny.

Understanding this process is essential if we are to challenge the logic of genocidal and post-genocidal social reorganization. Converts, in spite of everything, are not perpetrators. They are victims, even though it is difficult to see them as such, particularly in moral terms. Converts, however, are confused victims who cannot accept themselves as such, or who can only see themselves as victims in the past or in abstract terms. They blame their own identity. Those victims who are occasionally able to recognize that they are *still* victims can only do so in the abstract. They continue to experience a deep need to deny their previous identity – an identity once expressed through a characteristic synthesis of being and doing.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is not possible for a society to work through the trauma of concentration camp terror unless it sees it as a profound defeat – one it must question, examine, understand and learn from. Simultaneously, those of us who belong to a later generation need to help these survivors overcome their confusion - for our sake as much as theirs. Together, we need to leave behind the concentration camp experience and understand (again) that the current social structure is not the only one possible and that not every challenge needs to end in a concentration camp. We must remember that the whole purpose of annihilation was to prevent us speaking out and conveying our

experiences. Annihilation was intended to stop us thinking, discussing or evaluating what had happened to us, to force us to accept and participate in crimes we never believed ourselves capable of.

Even if (and that is fundamental) the consequences of a concentration camp system don't save us from the criminal and moral responsibilities on our actions. However, it is also important to understand how we went there, how was the process in which we became capable of doing things we never thought we would be capable of.

### **Reformulating social relations: a struggle for identity**

What happens, then, to a society that remains silent while people are beaten in the streets and disappear? What happens to a society in which some denounce their neighbors, while others steal their jobs or businesses, their homes or other assets? All these forms of what “moral participation” in genocide must inevitably lead to a blurring of moral distinctions, an inability to distinguish between right and wrong, fair and unfair. This is true not only for those who live in a time of genocide, but for subsequent generations as well.

At the same time, the trauma produced in the population by a genocidal process, and internalized as a way of relating to others mediated by terror, may manifest itself in diverse ways. One of these is survivor guilt among those who have lost relatives, friends or colleagues. Another is the inability to assert oneself in family or social relationships or to find a group identity. The transgenerational nature of guilt and denial among members of the “in-group” is visible in the way that young ethnic German psychoanalysts, even today, are afraid to explore patients' Nazi-related family histories.<sup>18</sup> The attempt by the perpetrators to create a “strong” homogenous society through terror also destroys the in-group, to a greater or lesser extent – both morally and psychologically.

But if genocide is not directed solely at the material victims of the annihilation process, one must ask: How could such a trauma affect a post-genocidal society in which most people - accomplices, informers, betrayers or simply those who had stolen or made use of the victims' property remained silent? Can a small betrayal of human values in the course of one's work, the breaking of a strike, an act of aggression in the street, or

---

<sup>18</sup> Vamik Volkan, Gabriele Ast, and William F. Greer, Jr. *The Third Reich in the Unconscious: Transgenerational Transmission and Its Consequences* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), p.160.

an anonymous denunciation be viewed as moral participation in genocide, whether through active consent or tolerance of inaction?

Perhaps observing the past in terms of the present, requires us to look at the present with greater mistrust. Without knowing who all the victims of genocide were and why and how they were persecuted, tortured, annihilated, we hardly know who we are ourselves, and why we live as we do.