

DEFINING THE HOLOCAUST

It is important to recognize that a new political definition of "holocaust" emerged about 40 years ago. According to that definition, holocaust is "the conscious effort to physically kill *every* man, woman and child in a given ancestral group because of their ancestry." (It is the literal definition of "genocide.")

You will note that this definition is *not* synonymous with oppression, with racism, or with the mass destruction of human life -- although it includes them all. In other words, this definition does *not* include the effort to wipe out the culture of a group; nor the effort to imprison or enslave a group; nor the murder of a number of its members; nor the wanton slaughter of millions of people in the most immoral of wars.

There is no way to comparatively measure the horrors of these different monstrous events -- all of which, alas, have taken place in our human history. In its own way, each such event is as horrible, as memorable, as intolerable as the others. But there is a difference in the *significance* of these various events. No one would say that it is "worse" for a village to be decimated by black plague than by typhoid fever. But these two diseases have a different significance, different symptoms and different remedies. So, a holocaust, as defined, has its own special significance.

Furthermore, in modern Western history, there is only one event, affecting only one group, which fits this definition of holocaust, and probably epitomizes it for all time. That is the Nazi Holocaust: the effort to physically kill every person of Jewish ancestry. That is why, when we refer to The Holocaust, we are referring singularly to the holocaust of the *Jews* in the Nazi period.

It is *not* a matter of numbers. In proportion, Jewish losses were almost six times greater than the massive losses of the Russians during that war, almost eight times the losses of the Polish people, nine times the losses of the British and over 500 times the losses of the United States. But that, in itself, is *not* the unique significance of The Holocaust.

It is also true that the Nazis persecuted, imprisoned and killed many people in target groups, other than Jews. Aside from political and religious opponents, the Nazis persecuted and deliberately executed many "undesirables," such as homosexuals, Poles, Russians and other Slavs. But none of these groups was scheduled for "holocaust" as defined. None of these groups was ideologically slated for 100 per cent extermination. The Nazis managed to exterminate "only" 90 per cent of the Jews in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany -- but if they had won the war, the figure would have been 100 per cent. That is the meaning of holocaust, which happened only to the Jews. in, consequently, *The Holocaust*. The same design did not even apply to the Gypsies, who were tragically slaughtered in some areas.

But what's the "special significance?" It is that an ancestral group was singled out as not just undesirable or inferior, but *the* diabolical force in the world -- and not because of what they said, or did, or believed, but, irrevocably, because of their "blood." Therefore every single trace of that "blood" had to be extinguished -- not just for some political-scapegoating purpose (less than 100 per cent would do for *that*), but out of pure mindless passion. Now, that is more than the intent to oppress. It is more than calculating tyranny. It is a different matter, with different significance.

It is the modern political expression of a deep and animalistic impulse to find and exterminate blood enemies. It is an impulse which the civilized world, to save itself, had better recognize and maintain defenses against.

And there is a special significance in the fact the *Jews* were the single ancestral group singled out as the diabolical "blood" target. The Jews are uniquely vulnerable for this role. That is why, in addition to the inconsolable weight of grieved numbers, The Holocaust has special meaning for the Jews. But The Holocaust, as something which happened uniquely to Jews, has special significance to everyone.

But to equate The Holocaust with all of the wanton murders, persecutions and depredations of Nazism, totalitarianism or other tyrannies, is to trivialize all of them, and to blur the understanding memory of a singularly revealing historical tragedy. Without such an understanding, all of us will be poorer humans, and in the way of mortal danger.

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