Could it happen again? The Holocaust and the national dimension

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If we were to ask a sample of informed and concerned westerners to pinpoint the darkest place on earth, chances are they would nominate the end of the rail spur inside Birkenau death camp, midway between – and a stone's throw from – the ruins of Crematoria II and III. Anyone who went there to test this choice would not come away disappointed. The main Auschwitz monument stands on this spot today. *'Forever let this place be...a warning to humanity,'* its curt inscription says. No warning could be more dire.

Quite fortuitously, I stood on this spot on my first national day of the new millennium. Australia Day falls the day before 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the date on which several concerned nations now commemorate the Holocaust. A hard wind blew over the snow-covered ruins and surrounding desolation. The day was short, bleak and very cold. Just behind the monument stands a line of flagpoles. The flags of the present-day nations from which the victims came – including (disconcertingly) Germany's – already flapped stiffly in readiness for the next day's solemnities, which Poland's President, Aleksander Kwasniewski, would lead.

The place evokes a sense of human catastrophe and moral failure on a cosmic scale. But the imagery of nationhood, including my own heightened sense of national identity that day, and of the responsibilities that attach to it, only added poignancy to the place. These matters would also have weighed on President Kwasniewski the following day,[1] and no doubt on many who accompanied him.

Auschwitz's warning echoes throughout today's burgeoning Holocaust literature: it could happen again. Contributors, whose interpretations diverge as radically as Yehuda Bauer's and Zygmunt Bauman's, at least agree emphatically about the warning, and it inspires their writing. Bauer asserts the Holocaust's

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[1] On 26 January 2000, the day in question, he led a strong national delegation to the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, and has actively pursued reconciliation with the Jews. When the publication of Jan Gross's (2001) book on rural Poles' massacres of their Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust rocked Polish public life, Kwasniewski called on his compatriots to beg for forgiveness (*Guardian Weekly* 26.4-2.5.01).

'unprecedentedness', but by the same token fears its potential to become a precedent. 'And I am still scared,' he tells us simply in his latest book in a long and distinguished career, *Rethinking the Holocaust*. For that reason he defines the basic project of the Holocaust historian as accounting for it in a way that will advance the cause of prevention.[2] Few would disagree. For his part, Bauman concludes that '*we live in a kind of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing to stop the Holocaust happening.*'[3] Germany's historic salience in the modern west underscores his sense of the warning.

Unfortunately, today's Holocaust literature falls short of telling us just how we in the west are to read and apply the warning, and so advance Bauer's project. There are some obvious reasons for this. Firstly, the Holocaust was a huge and complex process. Secondly, historians have by no means come to the end of their primary research: archives lie unmined, new archives and material become available, some testimonies have yet to be taken, many remain undigested. Thirdly, on the basis of the primary research that has been done, historians come up with conflicting emphases and interpretations. Fourthly, historians – for obvious reasons the most important contributors to Holocaust literature to date – often have difficulty accepting the contributions of cognate disciplines. For many of us non-historians, for instance, the concept of modernity goes to the heart of the project, yet Bauer finds it 'unclear, contradictory, and to my mind useless'.[4] *Reading the warning* must be an interdisciplinary project, but disciplinary boundaries and biases die hard.[5]

However, the problem goes deeper than the above circumstances could explain. It's as if our experts see the Birkenau inscription, but not the national flags behind it, still less the specific traditions, institutions and identities they

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[2] Bauer 2001:xvi, 112. For his discussion of 'unprecedentedness', see in particular ch.3.
[3] Bauman 1989:88. His italics. Cf Bauer 2001:16 – 'we live at a time when the elements that produced the Holocaust are with us.'
[4] Bauer 2001:86. In his impatience with the offending concept, he conflates it with modern*ism*, a much narrower one.
[5] Bauer's (2001:69-83) scathing condescension towards Zygmunt Bauman, an eminent sociological theorist, exemplifies the problem.

stand for. They acknowledge nations only as arenas in which perpetrators, victims and bystanders interacted, and nationalism only as a monolithic force of darkness. As good liberal, humanist and cosmopolitan children of the Enlightenment, they reach for the truth undistorted by particularist standpoints. They filter out nationalism and the pretensions of nation-states in the interests of universal truths, principles and rights. Debates revolve around how 'ordinary men', or 'ordinary Germans', became mega-criminals, without systematic reference to the national institutional frameworks that conditioned the killers' actions. 'Morality is not a product of society,' Bauman writes, astonishingly. 'Morality is something that society manipulates.'[6]

On this basis, facile lessons are drawn. Yehuda Bauer asks us to add three more commandments – thou-shalt-nots covering perpetration, victimhood and bystanderism in genocide – to the existing Ten Commandments.[7] And truth is supposed to explain itself without need of conceptual focusing. Our task is simply to reveal how the Holocaust worked, spike the denialists' guns, draft international conventions that define and criminalise genocide and uphold universal human rights, and support the atrocity-exposing work of international NGOs. Stanley Cohen's slogan, *Acknowledgement now!*, wraps up his important *States of Denial*,[8] which exemplifies this rationalistic, liberal and cosmopolitan approach to reading and heeding the warning.

Yet liberal principles have no efficacy whatever outside of national institutions. As another self-consciously cosmopolitan defender of human rights, Michael Ignatieff, cheerfully admits, 'cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation-state for granted.'[9]

The conventional approach to Holocaust history thus trivialises nation-states, their traditions and institutions, and the *motivational* force – for good or ill – of national identity. This trivialisation, I will suggest below, hobbles attempts

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[6] Bauman 1989:183. Italics deleted.
[7] Bauer 2001:67, 273.
[8] Cohen 2001, especially chapter 10.

to explain the Holocaust, fails to locate where the danger actually lurks in the west, and bypasses the most effective means we have to prevent the Holocaust becoming a precedent. Firstly, I will outline the emergence of the nation-state and nationalism, and their propensity to either promote or refuse genocide. Secondly, I use the example of Yehuda Bauer's latest book to elucidate how historians have so far fallen short of clarifying the Birkenau warning. Thirdly, I want to indicate how the theory of nationalism might help to resolve some of the confusions in accounting for the Holocaust historically. Fourthly, I will show how this analysis directs our attention to the variable health of our national institutions and traditions as both the source of genocidal danger and the first line of defence against a genocidal development.[10]

My arguments will complement rather than detract from the dignity of unvarnished truth and universal principles. Like all serious students of Holocaust and genocide studies, I applaud the development of international conventions, institutions and culture in defence of human rights. These days we are (almost) all children of the Enlightenment. But that parentage didn't suffice in 1941, and it doesn't suffice now.

Of nation-states, nationalism and modernity

In the broadest possible terms, the Holocaust arose out of the failure of the political communities in German-occupied Europe to encompass ethnic diversity. Since time immemorial, ethnic diversity has been the normal human condition on significant land masses, not least the Eurasian one. Ethnic groups, of which the planet boasts around 15 000, have commonly shared territory or lived cheek by jowl, while migratory waves have often kept the relationship between group and

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[9] Ignatieff 1994:13. On liberalism's dependence of national institutions, see Poole 1999:3, 92.
[10] This chapter summarises an argument I have spread throughout my *Journey into Darkness* (Higgins 2003).

territory fluid. Sometimes – as the Old Testament and other histories record – religious or ethnic hubris led to local genocides.

But most of the time, as James Tully[11] has suggested, inter-ethnic contact was less news- or history-worthy. Ethnic groups arrived at modi vivendi, usually according to three rough and ready 'conventions'. They constrained the parties to an inter-ethnic dispute to recognise each other and negotiate in good faith; to obtain the consent of all parties affected by any ensuing arrangement; and to accept the right of each party to survive without assimilation or obliteration. The cumulative result was an untidy pattern of partially overlapping jurisdictions vested in religious and secular authorities with 'universal', regional or merely local/communal pretensions. In this 'ancient constitutionalism', territorial boundaries were vague and tentative.

Modernity swept away this pattern of inter-ethnic relationships, which is one of many reasons why we can't follow Bauer's advice to ignore it. 'Modern constitutionalism', as Tully calls it, began with the early nation-states in western Europe, around the sixteenth century. In contrast to pre-modern practice, they drew sharp boundaries on the map and claimed exclusive jurisdiction, or 'sovereignty', within them. And they legitimated themselves by recourse to the fiction that they represented – expressed the living essence of – a particular, homogeneous ethnic group.

Because national borders usually did not correspond to ethnically homogeneous habitats, the ethnicity in question had to be fabricated, and some actually existing ones suppressed. In order for Britishness to emerge, for instance, Welshness, Scottishness and Irishness had to be marginalised. As Pierre Clastres[12] puts it, every ethnic group is ethnocentric in the sense that it nurtures a cultural a priori which identifies just *this* group as the measure of all humanity. Under the aegis of the early modern nation-state, however, common or garden ethnocentricity turned ethnocidal.

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[11] Tully 1995:ch.4.
[12] Clastres 1988.

Early modern nation-states practised ethnocidal suppression against peripheral cultures at home. Settler colonisation of the Americas, Africa and Australia derived from this practice, Clastres goes on to suggest, and thus had a propensity to turn genocidal. The colonising states in question commanded the exclusive loyalty of their subjects, whom they marshalled with the centralised bureaucratic principles that their exclusive sovereignty facilitated. And they had guns, armies, ships and missionaries. So equipped they could land formidable armies on distant shores, overwhelm indigenous resistance, and impose their peculiar cultural, religious and economic homogeneity on their 'new Europes'.

As a subset of ethnocentrism, racism developed its own dynamic (and its own pseudo-scientific discourse) from the eighteenth century, so strengthening the propensity to genocide. Arguably the largest-scale genocide in human history was helped along in this way, in the Americas.[13] And even beyond their empires, the new nation-states made their own model of statehood more or less de rigueur for any political community that sought to withstand them.

The European colonisers excused their activities by reference to the myth that they were not just different from, and militarily superior to, the ethnic groups and races they were destroying. They were, they claimed, *vanguard* cultures on 'civilising' missions. They represented the future of humanity as a whole, and other cultures had no right to resist, or indeed exist.[14] Ideologues who promoted this aspect of the narrative developed race theory in aid of it. The Nazis would dramatically re-issue this genocidal hyper-ethnocentricity.

The nation-state was not the only political novelty that western modernity fostered. The concentration of sovereignty in the nation-state, which now had to bear responsibility for social administration as a whole, problematised the kind of *political community* the nation was to constitute. In response to this problem, the new 'civilisation' (to use its own self-description) included some morally more

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[13] See in particular Stannard 1992.
[14] As Tully 1995 rightly charges, the father of liberalism, John Locke, contributed most to this genocidal idea.

uplifting innovations that gradually crystallised in fact and in theory. Modern commercial society proved incompatible with absolutism, the divine right of kings, aristocratic privilege and ethnic exclusiveness. Where these pre-modern forms could be successfully challenged (as in Britain from the seventeenth century), always against bitter opposition, a vital interdependence evolved between civil society, the rule of law and the constitutional, representative state.[15] Civil society refers to the state's subjects (usually notables, later 'citizens') forming and mobilising around their own organisations to pursue their interests, strike bargains with rival ones, and influence state policy. None of these modern novelties contained any necessary reference to ethnic belonging. Rather, as the modern doctrine of nationalism itself emerged in the late eighteenth century,[16] they came to be promoted in some states as matters of a different kind of 'national' pride.

The French Revolution from 1789 spelled out the political ramifications of these changes in those societies in which the new urban moneyed classes managed to push them through. The state's putatively homogeneous 'subjects' turned into equal rights-bearing 'citizens' of unspecified ethnicity, and collectively they became the source of political legitimacy and national sovereignty. The state had to 'represent' them, thus demanding democracy in some form. In this way, *la nation* and *les citoyens* took on new meanings and a new dignity, changes that would spread to the USA and much of western Europe. The new self-consciousness of these citizens came to be known as *civic nationalism*.[17] On its basis the inclusiveness and dignity of citizenship became the measure of the nation's worth.

In short, civic nationalism focused on the combination of a deliberative, constitutional and representative state and an institutionalised, self-mobilising

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[15] Krygier 1996 provides a particularly insightful account of this development.
[16] Anderson 1991 is the classic text on the rise of nationalism. But as Couture et al (1998:10) note, analysts of nationalism are divided over whether to treat it as a distinctly modern phenomenon.

civil society. This combination could embrace the reality of cultural diversity, integrate the more complex societies that industrialisation fostered, and develop the capacities and legitimacy to regulate economy and society in the interests of efficiency and social harmony. The capacities of these 'moderate' states, no less than their deep roots in society, made them extremely 'strong', in the estimation of one of their major early theorisers, Montesquieu. Beside them, tyrannies were 'weak'.[18] Influenced by Montesquieu, Hegel made the additional point that modern society is so rent by egoistic interests that the modern state must reconstitute its moral unity on a higher plane.[19]

We should note in passing that three doctrines underpinned the development of the civic nation-state: in descending order of importance they were civic republicanism, democratic radicalism and liberalism. So far as the historical development of inclusive effective citizenship and democracy is concerned, liberals (and John Locke above all) were more often than not recalcitrants. Hence we must not confuse the civic nation-state with a mere liberal polity.[20]

An alternative, reactive form of national self-consciousness on the older basis of ethnic belonging, *ethnic nationalism*,[21] emerged where traditional elites successfully opposed the transformations in question. The German Romantics' recoil from the values of the French Revolution gave the world the archetypal case of ethnic nationalism. It subsequently spread to eastern Europe as the basis of resistance against Austro-Hungarian and Russian imperial rule, and later against Soviet control. Anachronistically, ethnic nationalism cropped up in the western sphere of influence when it constituted the basis of nation-building in

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[17] By common consent the formulation of civic nationalism is traced to Ernest Renan's classic 1882 lecture, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' An English translation appears in Renan 1990.
[18] See Taylor 1990 and Krygier 1996.
[19] Hegel 1991.
[20] Therborn 1977; Wolin 1960:293-9; Sandel 1996.
[21] The *locus classicus* here is the work of Johan Gottlieb Herder, for which see Herder 1969.

Australia from 1901 and Israel from 1948.[22] In spite of some recent philosophical challenges, this civic/ethnic divide enjoys virtually universal currency in the analysis of nationalism and nation-states,[23] even if it points to two contrasting ideal-types that seldom manifest in pure form.

Analytically speaking, citizenship in civic nations continued to evolve along two axes in the two centuries that followed the French Revolution. Juridical and practical exclusions on the basis of class, gender and race came under pressure from the labour, women's and civil-rights movements, and crumbled by degrees. Secondly, as T H Marshall suggested in his famous 1963 essay, on the basis of the original civil citizenship came political citizenship (universal suffrage) and social citizenship (socio-economic inclusiveness under the auspices of the welfare state).[24]

Given the actual ethnic diversity of virtually all modern states, the two varieties of nationalism contrast sharply in their propensity to contribute to or inhibit genocide within the borders of a given state. The emphasis on equal, rights-based and ethnically inclusive citizenship endemic in civic nationalism undermines any genocidal agenda. Thus liberal humanists err fundamentally in stigmatising nationalism as a job lot. The ethnic exclusiveness of ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, provides a condition precedent for a genocidal development which other historical contingencies may complement. Just how significant the distinction might be in practice raises the issue of *the efficacy of national identity*.

On this point theorists of nationalism collide with liberal accounts of motivation, including those implicit in most Holocaust histories. As Ross Poole

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[22] Irving 1997:esp. chs.6 and 7; Rosenberg 1996. Both cases contained hybrid elements. From 1967 Australia began to move towards civic national identity, a process that has now been thrown into reverse by over eight years of distinctively ethnic-nationalist conservative government.

[23] For a crisp summary of the contrast, see Ignatieff 1993:5-9. Seymour et al 1996 discuss the limitations of the dichotomy. They point to the difficulty of separating the two types out in many instances, and for the important variations in civic nationalism, which depend on contrasting institutionalisations of cultural diversity.

[24] Marshall 1963

puts the former perspective, nationalism has constituted for us moderns 'an inescapable political project...the very condition of a coherent political and social life'. National citizenship informs our approach to such central issues as moral commitment, responsibility and agency, including collective responsibility for past wrongs.[25] National community constitutes a primary moral community, while national identity locates us in an historical context.

National belonging is thus a basic source of our identity. It contributes the outlook, demands and fulfilments that inhere in belonging to a particular nation as a 'constitutive community'. These elements of identity are not imposed from outside, but rather they form each of us as moral agents. 'The collective "we" does not eliminate the "I"; on the contrary, it is its condition of existence,' Poole notes.[26] In Miller's terms, national identity is an 'active identity. Nations are communities that do things together, take decisions, achieve results, and so forth.'[27] Communitarians would add that we may well rebel against received communal values and roles (as a civic nation will empower us to do), but the terms of our rebellion will draw on the very vocabulary with which our constitutive community has equipped us. And it is this constitutive community which has the best chance of impelling us towards tolerance, altruism and acknowledging 'the needs of strangers'.[28]

As Poole shows, all this goes against the individualistic liberal grain. In the liberal outlook, the only operative identity we enjoy is our abstract, isolated and historyless personhoods, on which universal – religious or secular – principles are supposed to impinge. We face historical challenges and contingencies in this guise. But being a person is not a source of identity, which is always particularistic. And moral imperatives gain leverage on us only when they attach to our sense of who we are.

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[25] Poole 1999: 5-6, 72.
[26] Poole 1999:65.
[27] Miller 1995:24.
[28] For an elaboration of this concept see Ignatieff 1984.

Should we happen to find ourselves in the midst of a genocide, in the liberal view we will either triumph morally as rescuers or resisters, or meet defeat as perpetrators or bystanders. In the Holocaust perhaps two million persons ended up direct or indirect perpetrators, hundreds of millions stood by, and only a few tens of thousands turned rescuer. For many Holocaust historians, this bare statistical pattern defines the problem. Couched in this way, research questions can steer us, however eruditely, into the banal metaphysics of human nature.[29] Angels and devils inhabit each of us, and in a crisis the one or the other will gain the upper hand.

This is stale news. When Christopher Browning, for instance, tells us that conformity turned ordinary men into mass murderers,[30] we need to go beyond the obvious fact that peer pressure can lead any one of us to act badly. We need to know what sort of constitutive community moulded that conformity, and what socio-historical context brought it into play. An important task of the historian, surely, is to move from unhelpful metaphysical generalisations towards insights into specific historical contingencies.

What has to be explained

In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer performs an invaluable service in reviewing the state of play in Holocaust history-writing. Though he treats Bauman cavalierly, he certainly picks the central weakness in the latter's monocausal thesis that western modernity produced the Holocaust: Bauman ducks the question, 'Why Germany?' In spite of critiques of the widely held *Sonderweg* thesis – that German development, at least since the eighteenth

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[29] Cf Bauer's (2001:xi) explanation of the salience of the Holocaust in today's western public culture: 'the Holocaust says something terribly important about humanity.' This metaphysical line runs throughout the book. For instance, he suggests (p.21) we use our imaginations to 'build enough of a bridge' between ourselves and Himmler to understand him as a person, for his actions were human'. The mixture of good and evil in 'human nature' stimulates endless speculation, but it sheds little light on why some nations and communities are more genocide-prone than others.

century, has deviated fatefully from the typical western pattern – Bauer sees no alternative to adopting some version of it.[31] The Holocaust is unprecedented, and the Germans did it. I agree, but will explore in the next section just what we should seek from the Sonderweg thesis to elucidate the Holocaust. But first we need to specify what needs elucidation.

With his *Hitler's Willing Executioners* of 1996, Daniel Goldhagen achieved instant publishing success, fame among his lay readers, and notoriety among professional historians. He runs a crude version of the *Sonderweg* thesis: the Germans were possessed of an 'eliminationist' antisemitism from the Middle Ages, something that intensified from the mid-nineteenth century, and led them as a people to accept, collude in and perpetrate the Holocaust. For his part, Bauer worries about Goldhagen's thesis and its academic reception, an Angst that brings out the best of his own talents in *Rethinking the Holocaust*. For Bauer, Goldhagen rightly locates antisemitism and the Sonderweg at centre-stage, but presents indefensible versions of both. Bauer fears that his fellow historians, in their enthusiasm for exposing Goldhagen's weaknesses, are throwing the all-important babies out with the bathwater.

Bauer sets out to periodise German antisemitism, which Goldhagen presents metahistorically. Christianity, the source of antisemitism, had imbued all societies it influenced with at least 'moderate' antisemitism. But as Bauer shows, the Germans – Goldhagen notwithstanding – showed little inclination to vote for it. Until the interwar period, parties that stood on antisemitic platforms remained in the wilderness. In the interwar period, despite the crises that racked German society, electoral support for the Nazis was fickle and by no means clearly based on the allure of antisemitism. In 1928 their support fell to 2.6 percent of the vote. It rose dramatically again after that, but in the last free elections, in

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[30] Browning 1998:184-9.
[31] Bauer 2001:103. A long and complex debate has followed the Sonderweg thesis, for an introduction to which see Steinmetz 1997, a critic of the thesis. Nonetheless, it arguably remains in the ascendancy, not least among prominent historians of the Nazi era, such as Kershaw (1997:89).

November 1932, they lost two million votes. On that occasion, a slight majority of German voters supported the non-antisemitic or moderately antisemitic parties who opposed the Nazis.[32]

And yet, nine years later, 'German society had become a reservoir for willing executioners,'[33] just as Goldhagen claims. In fact, Bauer compellingly accuses Goldhagen of *understating* the extent to which 'ordinary Germans' acted as willing executioners. The latter's three case studies – the Order Police responsible for the mass shootings, the camp guards, and those on the death marches – are all tainted by SS affiliation, and thus aren't quite 'ordinary'. Goldhagen could have found much more ordinary Germans massacring civilian populations, especially Jews, if he had looked at the Wehrmacht (regular army). He should also have included the academics, doctors, economists, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats, minor policymakers and low-echelon functionaries who made the Holocaust happen.[34]

So something fundamental changed in German society between 1932 and 1941. Here, Bauer has to grapple with another awkwardness. He sympathises with intentionalists' accounts of the Holocaust, which trace it to a longstanding intention (Hitler's above all) to annihilate the Jews. Like Bauer, intentionalists highlight the role of antisemitism. But now he has lumbered himself with the periodisation asserted by the functionalists, the intentionalists' critics. The functionalists account for the origins of the Holocaust in the cumulative effect of the blind reactions of many decisionmakers and organisations to immediate predicaments in a disordered socio-political environment. This account downplays the importance of antisemitism. Like some other historians, Bauer declares the intentionalist/functionalist debate dead.[35] Yet symptomatically, we find it alive and well in his own attempt to hang onto the centrality of

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[32] Bauer 2001:101.
[33] Bauer 2001:102
[34] Bauer 2001:107-8.
[35] Bauer 2001:5, 29.

antisemitism, and of ideology as such, while sharing the functionalist focus on institutional explanations.

In the upshot, Bauer relies heavily on a bare assertion – that an 'absolutely central' *consensus* in German society to get rid of the Jews suddenly arose between 1932 and 1941 – to bridge the gap between two kinds of explanations: monocausal ones that privilege antisemitism, and institutional-circumstantial ones. Goldhagen himself didn't use the term 'consensus', but this is what he meant, Bauer assures us.[36] The broadly defined 'intellectual strata' of the Third Reich – 'upper class social groups, army officers, church leaders, bureaucrats, doctors and lawyers, industrial and commercial elites, and especially the university professors' – produced this consensus, which makes them the principal culprits in the Holocaust. In his new 'model', these strata achieved power in a crisis-ridden Germany. They did so for reasons unrelated to their genocidal ideology, but they managed to make the latter the basis of a new societal consensus.[37]

Such heavy reliance on a posited social consensus gives hostages to fortune. These days few serious analysts would disagree with Cohen's summation that the Holocaust was an 'open secret' in Germany more or less from the beginning.[38] In other words, ordinary Germans knew about it, or at least knew enough about it to decide not to know any more, or to enquire further. Ordinary Germans did not object to it, but outside the two million or so direct and indirect perpetrators who were easily recruited, it was still a taboo topic in public. We cannot simply impute a generalised consensus to this selective attention and bystanderism. Behind them lies a tangle of motivations, from approval of the killing, through moral indifference, to fear of the personal consequences of intervening, or even of breaking the taboo by announcing the

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[36] Bauer 2001:105.
[37] Bauer 2001:104-5.
[38] Cohen 2001:79.

secret. As social phenomena, denial and bystanderism are far too important and complex to dissolve into an imagined consensus!

These points aside, we can appreciate the force of Bauer's arguments and the way he defines the issues in current historical debates. But while his Sonderweg might take us to Kristallnacht in 1938, and even to the first killing fields of 1941, it peters out long before it reaches Auschwitz. As he himself shows, other national communities (Latvians, Lithuanians, Romanians, Ukrainians, Hungarians and so on) contributed any number of willing executioners to the Holocaust, or to pogroms under its shadow. In many cases their intelligentsias, too, played a critical role in inspiring and co-ordinating the process. What makes Germany so special was the intensity and duration of the Germans' genocidal project, and the strange priority it enjoyed in a country which was waging total war on three fronts against formidable enemies. Elite and consensus theory cannot explain this specialness.

To my mind Bauer, along with many others, only half-notices the crucial *societal* pattern behind the appalling numbers of perpetrators and bystanders, and their statistical ratios to rescuers. *Virtually every German institution, occupational group or profession contributed voluntarily (usually enthusiastically) to the Final Solution, turning their own traditional ethical protocols upside down.* The regular army, once a byword for adherence to military codes of conduct, slaughtered Jewish and non-Jewish civilians and POWs in their millions. The medical profession dedicated itself to the Nazis' racist utopia and so to massive forced sterilisation, to murdering 200 000 of its own patients in the T4 'euthanasia' program, and finally to the Holocaust death factories.[39] Scientists propogated crackpot theories about race. Lawyers wrote and enforced grossly unjust laws. Without qualm, social workers, school and university teachers, economists, statisticians, geographers, engineers and so forth lent their technical

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[39] For example, the psychiatric profession played a vital role in legitimating Nazi race theories, implementing the T4 'euthanasia' program, and facilitating the Holocaust: for a fine study of how it did so, see Dudley and Gale 2002.

competence to the social engineering of the Nazis' *judenrein* utopia. They did so with their professional bodies' blessings.[40] What we have here is nothing less than the self-immolation of a civil society, something far bigger than Bauer's delinquent intelligentsia.

Germany: the makeshift collapses

In Barrington Moore's classic *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,[41] Germany finds itself on a grander and longer Sonderweg, albeit one it shares with Japan. It builds on the frustration, in the German states, of political reform of the British and French type. The failure leaves the pre-modern elites intact – still legitimating their rule in ethnic terms – to preside over industrialisation. Moore calls this route into the modern world 'conservative modernisation'. Anachronistic political forms cannot resolve the social tensions and complexities of the industrialisation process. The regimes in question are forced back onto the time-honoured manoeuvre of external expansion – militarism – as a way to stimulate industrialisation while externalising social conflicts.

Germany exemplified the incongruity of economic modernisation under the auspices of antiquated political forms. The result, Moore suggests,

> had some resemblance to present-day Victorian houses with modern
> electrical kitchens but insufficient bathrooms and leaky pipes hidden
> behind newly plastered walls. Ultimately the makeshift collapsed.[42]

The ideological element in the makeshift intensified the Romantics' original gloss on the failure of political reform. Willhelmine Germany besotted itself on Wagnerian opera and *völkisch* culture as it put ethnic nationalism into overdrive. To this cocktail we can add authoritative charlatanry, both quasi-religious and

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[40] See, for instance, Bartov 1992, Aly 1999, Aly et al 1994, Gruner 2000 and Lohalm 2000. The complicity of occupational groups in the Holocaust is a matter of growing interest for contemporary German historians.
[41] Moore 1966:ch.8
[42] Moore 1966:438.

pseudo-scientific, about Teutonic racial superiority, above all over the Jews. When their turn came, the Nazis had to invent very little, except an ever more fanciful line of kitsch.[43] Bauer praises Jeffrey Herf's analysis of Germany's development in terms of 'reactionary modernism', but it provides only a narrow, cultural and ideological account of Germany's inner socio-political incongruity.[44]

The makeshift collapsed in the First World War, when Montesquieu's contrast between strong and weak *states* went to the nub of Germany's inability to sustain total war. It had the motive for militarism, the armed forces and the state-of-the-art technology, but no way to co-ordinate the industrial heartland and the home front in an era when socio-economic co-ordination and popular enthusiasm makes or breaks national military fortunes.[45]

Given its provenance in military defeat, the Weimar Republic was no more than a hastily erected, unattractive annexe built beside the ruins, to continue Moore's metaphor. When the Nazis seized power they did not seek to rebuild or replace the structure, but rather to gradually demolish what was left and forego the discipline and demands of statehood as such.

Writing in 1941, Franz Neumann, a conceptually astute analyst, described the Nazi regime as 'a *non-state*, a chaos, a rule of lawlessness and anarchy', in which power is de-institutionalised and vested directly in a mass movement, and personalised.[46] He noted that the Nazi 'lumpenintelligentsia' displaced all reference to Germany as a *nation* in favour of an obsession with 'the racial *Volk*'. It abhorred the 'French' associations of nationhood – democracy, popular sovereignty, constitutionality, civil rights, and national and international legal frameworks.[47] Ten years after Neumann, Hannah Arendt also pointed out that Nazism turned its face against both nationalism (in favour of a combination of

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[43] Ignatieff (1993:9-10) notes the connection between nationalism and kitsch, but he takes his best examples from ethnic nationalism. 'Kitsch is the natural aesthetic of the ethnic "cleanser".' See pp.70-2 for his comments on Nazi kitsch.
[44] Bauer 2001: 84-6.
[45] Compare Feldman 1966 with Marwick 1991 to get a sense of the breakdown of the German home front during the First World War.
[46] Neumann 1967:vii, 470.

tribalism and supranational ambition) and the state (in favour of direct rule by the Nazi movement).[48] Like Neumann, she also pointed to the 'shapelessness' of the 'so-called totalitarian state' in Germany.[49]

Much more recently, historians have built on Neumann's insights, now with the benefit of hindsight into the Holocaust and the way the Third Reich decayed after Neumann's observations. For Hans Mommsen it became 'an anti-state' which totally lacked organs for deliberative decisionmaking, for the articulation and integration of social interests, and the assertion of rational priorities. It was self-destructive and (like its imperial predecessor) incapable of either resisting war or co-ordinating the war effort.[50] His 'leading chieftains' of the Third Reich bear a striking resemblance to the warlords and gunmen, bearers of radical ethnic nationalism, who later emerged in former Yugoslavia.[51]

Ian Kershaw confirms Mommsen's picture of the Third Reich. 'During the war, the disintegration of anything resembling a state *system* rapidly accelerated.'[52] Nor was this any ordinary tyranny. Kershaw argues that the Nazi regime radically destabilised itself, and was incapable of either 'settling down' or reproducing itself: it could only self-destruct. In today's parlance, Nazi Germany was a failed state.

Yehuda Bauer argues vociferously for the 'explicability' of the Holocaust.[53] It becomes much more explicable, I suggest, when we reach for the explanatory framework that has built up around the nation-state and nationalism. Quite simply, Germany self-destructed as both a nation and a state. 'We' in the west have taken for granted the constitutive, institutionalised moral community that our nation-states in most cases have provided for the last few centuries. In Germany from 1933 it ceased to exist. The stunted institutions of the German

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[47] Neumann 1967:49-50.
[48] Arendt 1973 (1951):3-9.
[49] Arendt 1973:392-415.
[50] Mommsen 1997.
[51] Ignatieff 1993:19-56.
[52] Kershaw 1997:96.
[53] Bauer 2001:ch.2 and passim.

state and civil society, which had earlier maintained a shaky moral community, now collapsed. German society thereupon morally imploded.

When Thomas Hobbes speculated about a grim, morally chaotic 'state of nature', he had no historical precedent. He was only guessing what might happen if a society were deprived of its institutionalised moral regulators, and survival and greed alone moved individuals, be they ever so 'rational', as they followed these motivations in a disordered social context. The Third Reich finally confirmed his guess. This is one more sense in which the Holocaust is unprecedented. Once cast morally adrift in this drastic way, German occupational corps and organisations, as well as individuals, murdered and robbed indiscriminately. One does not need to assert some new element, such as Bauer's lethal antisemitic consensus, to explain this pattern, which, significantly, goes beyond the Holocaust itself. One only has to remove something essential to modern western life – the combination of constitutional state and civil society.

Kershaw tells us how the messianic goals of Nazism (including the elimination of the Jews)

> offered free licence to initiatives which...were more or less guaranteed sanction from above. The collapse of civilised standards which began in spring 1933 and the spiralling radicalisation of discrimination and persecution that followed not only met with no blockage but invariably found legitimation in the highest authority in the land.
>
> Crucial to this 'progress into barbarism' was the fact that in 1933 the barriers to state-sanctioned measures to gross inhumanity were removed almost overnight. What had previously been unthinkable suddenly became feasible. Opportunities rapidly presented themselves, and they were readily grasped.[54]

Just as in Hobbes' dystopia, venality unbridled by moral considerations came to steer the constituent elements of German society, as well as 'ordinary German'

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[54] Kershaw 1997:102.

individuals. Though writers of more general Holocaust histories seldom remark on it, the worst perpetrators were also markedly entrepreneurial, on the take.

During the Holocaust other nationalisms came into play, offering a basis of comparison. Eastern European ethnic nationalisms, in which religious (usually Catholic) affiliation constituted a defining ingredient of the ethnicity in question, inspired pogroms that merged with the Holocaust. This happened in Croatia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland. In these cases, the breakdown of the old imperial constraints and the turbulence of war unleashed the genocidal potential of ethnic nationalism. The ethnic states in question were more or less intact, and so contained their atrocities, targeting the Jews only. The contrast between their cases and the German one illustrates the distinction Bauer draws between genocide and Holocaust.[55]

But there were also some interesting counter-examples, from the annals of civic nationalism. Two national communities came out of the Holocaust with their honour intact – the Danes and the Italians. Even if their Jewish minorities were small, they did succeed in rescuing 90 and 85 percent respectively of their Jewish compatriots from the German occupiers.

When Georg Duckwitz, the shipping attaché at the German embassy in Copenhagen, decided to tip someone off about the coming *Aktion* against Danish Jews, he went to the right address: the leadership of the Social Democratic labour movement. It is an oft-remarked irony that socialists who preached proletarian internationalism made consummate nation-builders. For six decades Danish Social Democrats had been organising, with increasing success, to make Danish citizenship more inclusive, not least in the Marshallian sense. They opposed first- and second-class citizenship in general, and any distinction between Gentile and Jewish citizens in particular. They also made a virtue of centralised organisational efficiency. In a well co-ordinated operation, they put all the Jews they could find onto small boats which headed out into Öresund, the

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[55] Bauer 2001:ch.3.

seaway separating the country from Sweden. There they rendezvoused with police and fishing vessels from the harbours of Scania,[56] Sweden's southernmost province and the heartland of the then newly-hegemonic Swedish Social Democracy. No doubt the imperative to rescue called for little discussion by those concerned.

In style, rescue in German-occupied Italy presents a striking contrast. Individuals, local communities, grass-roots Catholic networks and religious institutions spontaneously responded to the Jews' plight as they learned about it. Italian soldiers, officers and policemen, as well as large numbers of civilians, fell into this pattern.[57] Again, political history illuminates why ordinary Italians behaved so differently from ordinary Germans, despite the strength of the 'nationalism' of both. The Italian Risorgimento finally won its struggle for national unification in 1870. It was a familiar amalgam of democratic and civic impulses on the one hand, and patriotism on the other:[58] the struggle for a united Italy converged with the struggle for a *civic* Italy. The political crisis that brought the Fascists to power in 1922 didn't suffice to change the ingrained nature of Italian national identity. What it meant to be an Italian remained unreconcilable with active or passive collusion in the Final Solution.

Civic patriotism seems to have inspired rescue in other countries as well, in some cases even pre-empting strong religious convictions. Gitta Sereny found many *religious functionaries* who undertook dangerous rescue work for *nationalistic* reasons. For instance, when asked why they had risked their own lives to rescue Jewish children, several French nuns replied, '*Mais je suis française, à la fin*'[59] – after all, I'm French.

The politics of heeding the warning

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[56] Yahil 1969.
[57] Zuccotti 1987. In her later book, Susan Zuccotti (2000) shows that Catholic rescue in Italy received no encouragement or leadership whatever from the Vatican.
[58] Riall 1994.
[59] Sereny 1983: 284-5.

I have so far suggested that a focus on variations in nationalism and nation-states can shed a good deal of light on what produced the Holocaust. I now want to turn to the way this framework can pinpoint the dangers of a repetition in societies like ours, and some broad guidelines for neutralising them.

The most obvious danger comes from the persistence and recrudescence of ethnic nationalism. With the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc, ethnic nationalism has rekindled, often with genocidal and other catastrophic consequences. European integration, and especially the blandishments of possible EU membership, may help neutralise ethnic nationalism. As against that, the Union's own largest member, Germany, still defines citizenship in exclusive, ethnic terms and accords a 'right of return' comparable to Israel's to its lost tribes in the east.[60] Its worrying neo-Nazi gangs thus have some support in the country's ethnic specification of citizenship.

Secondly, closely associated with the problem of ethnic nationalism is that of denial of genocide and atrocities. As I commented above, Stanley Cohen has provided us with a rich analysis of denialism, one that teems with examples.[61] But a focus on nationalism would have sharpened both his analysis and his examples. He could have highlighted the fact that denialist 'accounts' persist and carry most force when they underpin the peculiar public discourse of ethnic nations and national identities, including their typical narratives about the past. At least three of his four most frequently recurring national cases – Turkey, Nazi Germany and Israel – are acutely ethnic ones.[62]

The reason for this is clear. Ethnic nationalism relies on unilinear, essentialist narratives that emphasise the ethnic group's unique destiny or chosenness, innocent victimhood, set of virtues and heroic deeds. The darker

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[60] Ignatieff 1993:99.

[61] Cohen 2001. Cohen's concept of denial is much broader than the attempt to elide historical accounts – he focuses on the manipulation of information (and propagation of disinformation) in 'real time', during the actual commission of atrocities.

side of actual national pasts and presents contradicts this sort of narrative, and has to be suppressed.[63] Acknowledgement of dark deeds in the nation's past can clash with civic-nationalist vanities too; but in these cases at least, a sense of national moral progress leaves room for 'confronting' the past, and even for taking some pride in such confrontations and efforts towards restitution. The public discourses of Canada and New Zealand illustrate this more nuanced approach to national public history.

The normal combination of western institutions – civic nationalism, civil society and constitutional democracy – act, I have suggested, as the best prophylactic we have against genocide. A third and more profound issue faces us when these institutions come under pressure, as they are doing now. In Michael Sandel's analysis, during the postwar era they have been subtly eroded by the successful assertion of liberal 'rights' at the expense of democratically promulgated policy and law. When democratic governance is frustrated in this way, the political community and its public arena lose their vitality and relevance, and descend into scandal and triviality. Public figures and processes attract contempt, and the citizens turn more and more to private solutions and fulfilments. Public (and especially representative) institutions then lose their authority.[64]

To this insight should now be added the effects of (and hype surrounding) globalisation. Again, we find (economic) liberals only too happy to cede popularly-based national sovereignty to 'the market'. In their world, representative institutions have less and less to say about national and local development, a stance which also demeans public life. When this new

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[62] His fourth recurring case (or set of cases) is the late-twentieth century terrorist regimes in Latin America. Here, ethnic-nationalism coalesced with religious fanaticism.

[63] The recent, high-profile debate over white Australia's past treatment of the Aborigines exemplifies the peculiarity of ethnic-nationalist history. The conservative Federal Government from 1996 heavily patronised the denialist journal *Quadrant,* and various writers associated with it, in denials of historical wrongs done to Aborigines, which reflect badly on white Australia. Its endeavours have extended to interfering in the management of the National Museum of Australia to present white settlement in an overwhelmingly positive light.

[64] Sandel 1996.

fundamentalism takes hold, moral issues in particular become discursively unavailable in public affairs. As in Nazi Germany, venality then rules supreme.

Five years ago, a conservative legal theorist, Martin Krygier, sounded a timely warning about this trend:

> The often squalid but rarely frightening soap opera of an institutional liberal democracy will carry on, at least for a time, whatever the cast, and pretty well whatever they choose to do. This makes politics less interesting than the unpredictability of the uninstitutionalised world, but it is reassuring too.
>
> But the distance between reassurance and complacency is often short. We don't have to build the civilising institutions and traditions we are lucky enough to inherit, but we can improve them, and it is in our power to damage them. We simply don't know how quickly uncivil disrespect for civilised and civilising institutions will come to erode and deform them, and then deform us. It would be better if we never found out.[65]

The Germans and their victims certainly found out during the Third Reich. When I read the Birkenau inscription for myself, Krygier's words sprang spontaneously to mind.

Fourthly, the cosmopolitan human-rights 'community' tends to share the liberal recoil from nationalism and national affairs as being particularistic and negative. They can thus inadvertently contribute to the marginalisation of national institutions and traditions that still represent our best line of defence against genocide. Most of us no doubt hanker for a world in which supranational and international institutions with formidable judicial and executive arms prevent human-rights abuses of all kinds wherever they threaten. On a highly optimistic view, we may be witnessing the early beginnings of such a global regime. But its

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[65] Krygier 1996:31.

realisation lies far into the future, despite recent successes. And it will only be realised if national cummunities support it and ratify its instruments.

It would be especially egregious if the cosmopolitans were to convince us that campaigners against genocide face an either/or choice between the renovation of national traditions on the one hand, and the creation of international guarantees on the other. 'The love of humanity is a noble sentiment, but most of the time we live our lives by smaller solidarities,' Sandel observes in a relevant critique of 'the cosmopolitan ideal'. But '[a]t their best, local solidarities gesture beyond themselves toward broader horizons of moral concern, including the horizon of our common humanity.'[66]

Poole, Sandel[67] and others are aware that time might be running out for the nation-state. It's a time-bound political form like any other. But if its tide is ebbing, it is doing so slowly. While not neglecting whatever we can achieve as citizens of the world, a national version of Sandel's option for the time being remains our best one. In other words, we need to continue to defend and renovate our national traditions and institutions, and at the same time imbue them with universal obligations.

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[66] Sandel 1996:342-3.
[67] Poole 1999:ch.5; Sandel 1996:344-51.

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