Modernity and the Holocaust

What links can be drawn between the project of modernity and the Holocaust? Do you agree with the associations that some scholars have drawn between the two?

The Holocaust is perhaps the most iconic symbol of human cruelty. Of the nine and a half million Jewish people in Europe upon the rise of the Nazi power, six million perished in the Holocaust between 1933 and 1945. Faced with such overwhelming devastation, it is difficult for historians, and society in general, to place the Holocaust within history. This is not assisted by the positive metanarratives that contemporary states have formed for themselves. Zygmunt Bauman explains how 'The etiological myth deeply entrenched in the self-consciousness of our Western society, is the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity.'[1] This encourages some to view the Holocaust as a singular deviation from the path of 'human progress,' but this fails to place the event within its wider context. Others rebel against this optimism to argue that such murder is an intrinsic part of human nature. New historiographical movements have led scholars to study the Holocaust in relation to the project of modernity. This reveals how the Holocaust was profoundly modern in both its ideological motivations and physical practices. Yet while the Holocaust demonstrates the capacity of modernity for extreme violence, it does not represent its only capacity.

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[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) p.12.

Before historians can engage in significant debate about the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust, they must have similar understandings of what 'modernity' entails. This is more problematic than it would initially seem. Michael Freeman argues against the idea that 'civilised genocide is distinctively modern,' because 'we find cases of genocide in the earliest recorded societies characterised by literacy, city-state politics and complex social, economic and political organisation.'[2] Yet Freeman has unwittingly missed the point of the arguments he wishes to undermine, as he has conflated the meaning of civilisation with modernity. Modernity implies more than just being of the contemporary age. Alex Hinton explains how modernity is 'a set of interrelated processes that generate distinct formations through time and place.'[3] Modernity refers to the strengthening of the nation-state which, relies on imagined communities and the explosion of bureaucratic organisation that follows this. It also encompasses the force of the Industrial Revolution which transformed both economics and identity. It implies the reign of science, which not only caused huge advances in technology but linked with new ideology birthed through the Enlightenment, which centred on rationality and reason. Historians have trouble reaching a consensus on which exact dates we can confine modernity to, but this is not as important as acknowledging the physical and ideological paradigms that informed particular events in history. It is within this context that we must study the Holocaust.

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[2] Michael Freeman, "Genocide, Civilisation and Modernity" *The British Journal of Sociology* 46 (1995): p.215-218.

[3] Alexander Hinton, "Savages, Subjects, and Sovereigns: Conjunctions of Modernity, Genocide, and Colonialism," in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. by A. Dirk Moses, (New York: Begham Books, 2008) p.44.

Martin Shaw explains how through modern transport, communications and bureaucracy 'the loose boundaries of pre-modern states are replaced by precise borders, which are securely policed.'[4] He argues that 'there is an intrinsic relationship between killing and state power.'[5] The more power a state has, the more killing it is able (and likely) to undertake. Totalitarianism is arguably not exclusively modern, but nevertheless, increased technologies and capacity for surveillance allowed the ideal to be realised to a far greater extent than could have been previously imagined. Thus the extremes of Nazi Fascism were enforceable because of the modern capacity of a totalitarian state.

This power of the nation- state can be seen in the practical implementation of a genocide on such an immense scale. The Holocaust was not performed in the heat of the moment; it was coldly planned and organised through bureaucracy. We can see this in Gestapo Muller's order that early 'unauthorised' deportation be halted, as he explained himself; 'the resettlement and deportation of Poles and Jews in the territory of the future Polish state requires central coordination.'[6] The sheer numbers exterminated was as much facilitated by industrialisation as was the mass creation of war weapons in munitions factories. Henry Feingold explained how the Auschwitz death camp was 'a mundane extension of the modern factory system,' with 'raw material that was human beings' brought in by 'the brilliantly organised railroad grid of modern Europe' to be marked off on a 'manager's production charts.'[7] Science and engineering came together to create the optimal gas chamber for the most effective culling.

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[4] Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide: Organized Killing in Modern Society*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2003) p.59.
[5] Ibid., p.58.
[6] Christopher Browning, "From 'Ethnic Cleansing' to Genocide to the 'Final Solution': The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939-1941," in *Holocaust: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, ed. by David Cesarani and Sarah Kavanaugh, (London: Routledge, 2004) p.355.
[7] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.8.

Richard Rubenstein persuasively argues that rather than representing a relapse from modernity, these 'death machines' 'bear witness to the advance of civilisation' in their ability to take on a task of unprecedented magnitude.[8]

Even while understanding how the Holocaust was practically possible, many in contemporary times find it difficult to comprehend how such 'backward' cruelty could be inflicted within modern history. Yet the sobering truth is that there was nothing 'unmodern' about Nazi ideology. Immanuel Kant was a hugely influential modern philosopher whose theories reflected the values of reason and rationality. The state was placed at the centre of moral decisions which he argued should 'conform to natural right which stands before us as a model in the idea of practical reason.'[9] Kant's theology was aiming for peace which he thought relied upon the 'good organisation' of the state.[10] He saw peace as the natural 'progress' of modernity. It is obvious that this perceived process for peace was not fulfilled within the Nazi state. Yet as Zygmunt Bauman articulates: 'at no point in its long and torturous execution did the Holocaust come into conflict with the principles of rationality.'[11] Genocidal action was practised through 'good organisation' of the Nazi state which undertook rational planning with logical outcomes.

Implicitly tied up with ideas of rationality was the modern value of science. Science was – and still is – generally thought of as a morally neutral process. Yet it was morally dangerous that

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[8] Ibid., p.9.
[9] Immanuel Kant, "Cosmopolitan Rights, Human Progress, and Perpetual Peace," in *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006) p.533.
[10] Ibid., p.530.
[11] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust,* p.17.

the concept of unaffected science became a 'belief' in a way that replaced the previous role of religion. Scientific development of chemicals, which were used to fumigate the Jewish people in the gas chambers, was certainly not morally neutral, but there was nothing to contest this in the ideology of science and rationality. There was also nothing to distinguish academic science from what we would now see as pseudoscience, such as Social Darwinism. Through the 'rational' lens of Social Darwinism, irrational racism was validated and the concept of Aryan cultural superiority established. Christopher Browning explains how 'the broad support for German racial imperialism in the east was one foundation upon which the future consensus for the mass murder of Jews would be built.'[12] Even Hitler's central idea of *Lebensraum* (living space), which sought to create a larger culturally homogenous Germany, should not be seen as incongruous with modernity. The striving for *Lebensraum* cannot be innately separated from the colonial imperialism that was still occurring at the hands of other Western powers during the twentieth century.

Despite this powerful ideology it would be historically inaccurate to assume that the entire German people during the Holocaust were unified under Nazism. To begin with, the Nazi Party came to power in 1933 without ever achieving a voting majority. As Richard Evans argues, Hitler's anti-Semitic policies were actually unpopular and as such were downplayed from 1928.[13] The American consul in Liepzig reported that the majority of Germans were horrified by the mass attack on Jewish businesses and synagogues during *Kristallnacht* (the night of

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[12] Christopher Browning, "From 'Ethnic Cleansing' to Genocide to the 'Final Solution': The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939-1941," p.354.

[13] Richard Evans, *Rereading German History: From Unification to Reunification 1800-1996*, (London: Routledge, 1970) p.160.

broken glass) in 1938.[14] Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels complained how the introduction of the yellow star had incited sympathy rather than ostracisation as intended: 'this people simply hasn't grown up, it's full of idiotic sentimentality.'[15] The significance of the ideological dissent of many Germans can be seen in the fact that Nazi leadership tried to keep hidden the 'Final Solution,' which formalised the intention, and set into motion, a systematic process of total genocide. Many death camps were set up outside of Germany in occupied Poland, which assisted the attempt at secrecy. Himmler, speaking to SS leaders about the extermination program in 1943, declared that: 'we will never speak about it publicly,' as 'it is better that we carry for our people the responsibility.'[16]

Of course there must still have been a significant number of Germans involved in the Holocaust for such large scale destruction to occur. The concept of the entirety of the German people during World War Two being 'savage crazed Jew killers' would create a simple answer to how these people carried out such horrific acts. Yet the historical evidence does not support this racist claim. In fact, Kren and Rappoport explain that: 'by conventional clinical criteria no more than 10 per cent of the SS could be considered 'abnormal.''[17] Even more significant than this, Bauman argues how 'special care was taken to weed out—bar or discharge – all particularly keen, emotionally charged, ideologically over-zealous individuals' from direct involvement in the Holocaust.[18] Although it is difficult to comprehend how sane,

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[14] Evans, *Rereading German History*, p.161.
[15] Ibid., p.163.
[16] Ibid., p.162.
[17] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.19.
[18] Ibid., p.20.

rational people could undertake such extraordinary measures of inhumanity, analysing the process of genocide in its context of modernity is enlightening.

Before the Holocaust realised its full efficiency in the gas chambers of death camps from 1942, mass murder was undertaken by shooting squads of 'Order Police.' Jurgen Matthaus' graphic description that 'as a consequence of the short distance between the marksman and victim, the executor's uniform or exposed body parts were frequently splattered with blood or parts of brain' explains fully why 'the psychological strain on the perpetrators was thus extraordinary.'[19] In this method of extermination, all who were involved were confronted with the direct consequences of their actions; the moral weight of which rested heavily upon them.

The increased organisation of 'The Final Solution' sought to overcome these problems with full utilisation of the fruits of modernity. The impersonal industrial mentality that characterised the physical process of genocide also came to inform its psychological context. The SS headquarters in charge of the Holocaust was known as the 'Section of Administration and Economy.' This not only distracted from its true purpose; it redefined genocide as an impersonal matter of rational bureaucracy. Herbert Kelman explains how moral inhibitions are often overcome when actions are 'authorised' through official orders; are 'routinised' through rules and allocated roles; and when the victims are dehumanised.[20] Shaw says that

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[19]Jurgen Matthaus, "What About the 'Ordinary Men'?: The German Order Police and the Holocaust in the Occupied Soviet Union," in Holocaust: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies, ed. by David Cesarani and Sarah Kavanaugh, (London: Routledge, 2004) p.211.
[20] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.21.

'states claim to control the legitimate use of force' and this is a crucial assumption of modern order.[21] The ideal of discipline and patriotic loyalty were important values of modernity that in some ways replaced the focus on individual morality. A military chain of command displaced moral responsibility from the perpetrator to their superiors who again looked above them. Otto Ohlendorf, a leader of an SS death squad captured this idea when he articulated that: 'I surrender my moral conscience to the fact I was a soldier, and therefore a cog in a relatively low position of a great machine.'[22]

Physical distance from death facilitated through modern technology also assisted to overcome moral inhibitions. Raul Hilberg explains how the perpetrators of genocide 'could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk.'[23] Many who were part of the logistics of the Holocaust, those creating train links for example, may have been unaware of – or at least did not have to face directly – the bloody consequences of their actions. This 'invisibility' of Holocaust victims extended to the death camps themselves. Jews were shut out of sight in the gas chambers where a 'sanitation officer' would empty a sack of 'disinfecting chemicals' through the roof without facing his victims either before or after their time in the chamber.[24] After this fumigation, the morally neutral discourse of science was employed to treat the disposal of dead bodies as a 'medical' problem.

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[21] Shaw, *War and Genocide*, p.58.
[22] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.22.
[23] Ibid., p.24.
[24] Ibid., p.26.

This intense bureaucratic organisation and psychological manipulation extended even to the victims of the Holocaust themselves. When Jewish leaders allocated space and rations in the ghettos, or allowed the sacrifice of some in the hope of saving the majority, the Nazis were utilising 'their skills and labour in the implementation of the task of their own destruction.'[25]

Another important aspect was modern mass media, which facilitated the powerful Nazi 'propaganda machine.' Although propaganda is not exclusively modern, industrialisation increased dramatically the capacity to create and distribute printed materials that could reach all members of a society. Richard Evans discusses how since the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933, Germans were hit with a 'barrage' of propaganda that worked to dehumanise the Jewish people; 'portraying them at every level as parasites, bacilli, dangerous, verminous, dirty and scheming creatures who did not belong to the German race.'[26] As well as this, as Matthaus explains, despite the Holocaust being perpetrated against innocent non-combatants, 'Jews were equated with Bolsheviks, snipers, and plunderers in order to create a propagandistic haze behind which the mass execution of civilians appeared to be legitimate reprisal against a legitimate enemy.'[27] This constant vilification and scapegoating would have had significant effect for at least some of the German population who were made vulnerable by the great hardships they experienced during the aftermath of the First World War.

Of course the context of World War Two must also be considered. Some historians argue that industrial-scale genocide is tied up with modern processes of war. As Freeman explains, war

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[25] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.23.
[26] Evans, *Rereading German History*, p.160.
[27] Matthaus, "What About the 'Ordinary Men'," p.215.

can create a context where 'leaders of modern state bureaucracies bear grand designs and are emancipated from social constraints,' providing a 'recipe for genocide.'[28] The wars of modernity, fuelled by scientific and bureaucratic advances, were waged on a scale previously unimaginable, which reflected a new concept of 'total war.' Total war implies a lack of rules of combat, the mobilisation of the entire state and intense centralised organisation. For S. Forster and M. Gessler 'physical extermination of whole peoples lies within the logic of total war.'[29] This can be understood in terms of the degradation of barriers between combatant and non-combatant. Of the sixty million who died in World War Two, it is estimated that forty million were civilians. If the killing of innocents becomes 'acceptable' in war-time contexts, it can be seen how genocide could be carried out within this environment. Shaw explains how 'Totalitarianism was the state form of total war' from which 'genocide became a new form of war.'[30]

Yet genocide is not dependent on a war-time context. The example Hinton uses of Christopher Columbus and the dehumanisation utilised in imperial contexts reminds us of this. Columbus 'oversaw a program of enforced slavery and mass murder that coupled with disease, reduced the native Taino population from as many as 8 million to 100 000 by the time he departed in 1500.'[31] This may not have been formally planned or industrialised genocide, but as an outcome of the Age of Exploration it still reflected aspects of modernity.

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[28] Freeman, "Genocide, Civilisation and Modernity," p.208.

[29] Stig Forster and Myrium Gessler, "The Ultimate Horror: Reflections on Total War and Genocide," in *A World at Total War: Global conflict and the politics of destruction, 1937-1945*, ed. by Roger Chickering, Stig Forster, Bernd Greiner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.58.

[30] Shaw, *War and Genocide*, p.66.

[31] Hinton, "Savages, Subjects, and Sovereigns," p.442.

As well as this, despite the role of modernity in the Holocaust, it is important to note that genocide itself is not exclusively modern. Freeman points to 'the surviving texts of ancient societies' which 'record many massacres and apparent genocides.'[32] Violence against innocent people has of course been seen before the modern era. However through studying the Holocaust we can see that the capacities of modernity create new levels of possibility for human suffering.

As many scholars have argued, through the study of its practical and psychological motivation and implementation, the Holocaust has significant links to the project of modernity. Although there is overwhelming evidence that the Holocaust was both influenced and facilitated by modern systems, this does not mean society must accept events like the Holocaust as an inevitable feature of the contemporary world. Despite all those involved in World War Two participating in activities that killed significant numbers of civilians, Forster and Gessler remind us that 'Nazi Germany was the only power in World War II that resorted to genocide as a strategic program, as a means as well as an end.'[33] It is not helpful to explain the Holocaust as 'human nature' as this denies individuals and societies the ability to function as moral agents and implies that we cannot avoid such atrocities. Yet it is equally unhelpful to view the Holocaust as an uncivilised deviation from the path of 'human progress.' The Holocaust was an inherently modern occurrence; it is not something so culturally removed from the contemporary age that we cannot explain it. It proves that humanity does not

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[32] Freeman, "Genocide, Civilisation and Modernity," p.14.
[33] Forster and Gessler, "The Ultimate Horror: Reflections on Total War and Genocide," p.63.

inevitably progress forwards. If we deny this, we close our eyes to history's lessons and risk

falling into similar failures of morality.

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