

The roll call of the dead: What did Nazi genocide mean?

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Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder

by R.J. Rummel

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R.J. Rummel has staked out for himself an important topic—one with great significance for the study of 20th-century history, and one which has tremendous significance for the present, as, at the close of the 20th century, we struggle anew to understand how civilized nations can devolve swiftly into barbarism, and commit atrocities of almost cosmic moral viciousness. We do this because, once again, we in the West are confronted with the prospect of leaders for whom *people are the enemy*; leaders like Britain's Prince Philip, for example, or the international bankers, who are utterly explicit in their commitment to reducing drastically the world's population.

The topic is Nazi Germany's systematic extermination of European Jewry—the genocide of the book's title—and its mass murder of civilians in occupied lands, particularly Poland and what was then the Soviet Union—"democide," a word Rummel uses to characterize mass murder whose primary focus is not the destruction of an ethnic group.

Rummel, who is a professor of political science at the University of Hawaii, says in his preface that this work is part of his "comprehensive effort . . . to determine how much genocide and mass murder—what I call democide—have occurred in this century, *and why*" (emphasis added). This particular book (Rummel has written others on Soviet and Chinese mass murder) is his attempt to come to terms with this bloodbath in the heart of civilized Europe.

But, as such, the book does not succeed. If it were less pretentious, it would be more effective. Had Rummel said that he proposed to write, basically, a listing of the numbers killed, where, when, and under which aspect of the Nazi ideology, I would not be so critical. But, because he says

he means to explore *why*, and fails to do so, the book falls flat.

The figures

Other historians have recorded at least partial roll calls of the dead the Nazis left behind—and many of them with more attention to the question of "why." In fact, Rummel's figures are open to some question; he calculates that 20,946,000 people were murdered by the Nazis (not including combatants); but even that hideous figure may be low, since, if we take the best-known figures—roughly 6 million Jews killed, and roughly 3 million non-Jewish Poles—it is possible, even probable, that the total figure is higher than 20-21 million. Although Soviet data are notoriously hard to pin down, historians believe that *20 million* people, most of them noncombatants, died in what was then the Soviet Union, between the German invasion in June of 1941, and V-E Day in 1945 (this does *not* count Stalin's victims of the same four-year period). The figure Rummel gives for Nazi democide in the U.S.S.R. is 12,250,000. But it is unlikely that nearly 8 million Soviet citizens died in combat, so that the total for the U.S.S.R. could go even higher than the 12 million-plus Rummel chooses, and so also the overall figure.

Still, a new attempt is welcome in assessing the civilian death toll of the Second World War, the anti-population war *par excellence* of our own, or any century. Any historian of the war is confronted with the central fact that the killing focused primarily on civilians (unlike, for example, the First World War, whose bloodbath claimed staggering numbers of soldiers on both sides, but not civilians); the Second World War may not be the only war in history in which the civilian death toll was, far and away, higher than that among combatants (the Roman war on Judaea in A.D. 70 probably shows a similar proportion), but the Second World War is the only modern war of which this is true, and it is the one for which documents are most available to historians.

He overleaps himself

But, by billing his book as an analysis, or an attempt to grapple with the *meaning* of the Nazis and what they did,

Rummel overleaps himself. Aside from the lists, the book doesn't grapple with much of anything. It does not explore the nature of the ideology which enabled one of the most civilized and cultured countries the world has ever seen, to do such things. It does not attempt to explain the ways in which this pagan ideology was able to impose itself on a country of the Judeo-Christian West. It does not attempt to understand the explosive combination of despair and humiliation which gripped the German people in the aftermath of World War I, nor the role of Britain, France, and the United States in enabling Hitler to come to power, nor the philosophical wellsprings of Hitler's worldview—the man whom H.R. Trevor-Roper once called the “most philosophical” of all the tyrants in history, who acted on the basis of a thought-out, and ferociously self-conscious, pagan imperial impulse, to overturn the millennia of Judaism and Christianity in the West, and replace them with the Roman Imperium which the Jews battled, and the early Christians overthrew. (“The most formidable among the ‘terrible simplifiers’ of history, the most systematic, the most historical, the most philosophical, and yet the coarsest, cruelest, least magnanimous conqueror the world has ever known,” was Trevor-Roper's full phrase.)

There are other worrisome things about the book, which may seem picayune, but are not. Among them are the sources Rummel uses—not the sources for the death toll, but the sources for the overall historical context. These are extraordinarily incomplete. For example, the only book about Hitler per se cited by Rummel is the sensationalist *Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*, by Robert Payne, of which more below. Of the tremendous number of histories of Nazi Germany, and the Second World War, very few appear in Rummel's references. Even in Rummel's area of specialization, his sources are incomplete; for example, he cites Robert Jay Lifton's essay on “Sterilization and Euthanasia,” but fails to cite Lifton's full-length, and most important, book, *The Nazi Doctors*.

Thus, Rummel doesn't seem to know enough about the history of the period. He makes the egregious mistake of relying on Robert Payne for “reports” of secret meetings between Hitler and Himmler—meetings of which there *are* no reports, except in Payne's make-it-up-as-you-go school of historiography.

Rummel seems to be unaware of the fact that Robert Payne is one of the sloppiest, not to say sleaziest, of the “pop historians” who made World War II their province in order to exploit the sensationalism involved; his biography of Hitler is, basically, trash. It is not confidence-inspiring to discover Rummel relying on Payne for anything, and this book contains several other disturbing instances of Rummel's not knowing his material well enough. In any historical work, the historian must know more, not less, than what he writes.

The book's real contributions

Despite these criticisms, there are useful and important things in Rummel's book.

Most interesting are his comparisons between Nazi Germany and the other bloody dictatorships and killing machines of this century—among them, the Soviet Union and Communist China. The Nazis did not come close to the absolute figures of civilian dead claimed by the Soviet tyranny from 1917 forward, nor to the absolute figures for Communist China. But, in the six short years of World War II, the Nazis killed *proportionally* more than either of these two. Each year between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis killed *6 to 7 people out of every 100 in occupied Europe*, where “occupied Europe” includes every country in which the Nazis ruled except Germany. Rummel explains that this means that the odds of a non-German citizen of occupied Europe dying at the hands of the Nazis was a staggering *1 in 15*. (The odds of a German citizen being killed by his government were extremely high, too—roughly 1 in 93—but drastically lower than the odds for the *Untermenschen*.) The rate at which the Nazis killed civilians in the lands they occupied was 2.5 times the rate at which the Soviet government killed citizens, and, apparently, roughly 9 times the rate at which the Communist Chinese did, from 1949 forward.

It is not clear why Rummel does not include Pol Pot's monstrous project, which is estimated to have killed perhaps half the Cambodian population in a few short years. The rate of killing must have been still higher there, and perhaps in a later book he will address this.

Taking into account that lacuna, then, here is the conclusion Rummel reaches: “Given the years and population available to [them], the Nazis have been the most lethal murderers.” This helps to explain why, almost 50 years since the end of the Second World War, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Reich remain *the* touchstone, the measuring stick, for organized evil come to power. It is also a profoundly shocking comparison: Of all the “megamurderers,” as Rummel calls them, the state machine which killed at the fastest rate, was the one in the heart of Christian, civilized Europe.

Why?

How did this happen? And what does it mean? Rummel does not answer these questions, which naturally arise from his charts, graphs, and tables of the dead. Let me offer a few hypotheses.

The Nazis murdered all sorts and conditions of men, but primarily two different groups of people, for two different, but related, sets of reasons. First, examine the case of the Slavs, of whom, Rummel calculates, the Nazis murdered 10.5 million civilians—the non-Jewish Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, and others who were wiped out as the war progressed. Hitler's plan was to use the Slavs for slave labor, killing as many as possible in this way, and ultimately to depopulate the Slavic East, making it into the *Lebensraum* of the Reich. The Nazis envisioned killing many millions during the war through slave labor, starvation, and disease; and, after the war, deporting the remaining 30 or 40 million

Slavs to Siberia.

There were twin reasons for this in the Nazi worldview: first, because the Slavs were “racially inferior”; second, because the Nazis wanted their land. Nazism represented the most ferocious “social Darwinism” ever practiced, the absolute antithesis of everything the high culture of the Christian West had ever stood for. For the Nazi regime, *people* were the enemy. There were too many of them, and the wrong kinds of them, and “Nazi science” dictated that the most scientific approach was to eliminate them.

The second group of people were the Jews. The Jews were a tiny minority in Europe, they held no land, they represented no obstacle to the inexorable expansion of the Thousand-Year Reich. The underlying reason for the extermination of the Jews was related to the case of the Slavs, but ultimately very different. For, in killing the Jews, Hitler was killing an idea. And in the extermination of the Jews, we see the root of the Nazi worldview.

The Nazi lust for murdering the Jews was driven by Hitler’s “systematic” and “philosophical” mania to transform the world into a new pagan empire, purged not only of the “inferior races” of the Slavs, but above all purged of the hated Jewish and Christian religions that had undermined Rome. Hitler’s view was explicit: “The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity. Bolshevism is Christianity’s illegitimate child—and both are inventions of the Jew. . . . [But] the Roman Empire is a great political creation, the greatest of them all.” Armed with this worldview, Hitler concluded that, of the wars he fought, the most important was the war against the Jews.

The extermination of Jewry was in no way an afterthought to, or a consequence of, Hitler’s military war; nor was it a consequence of the deadly slave labor programs that stretched across the continent. In fact, as has now been documented in numerous histories, as the Nazi war effort began to falter in the last years of the war, Hitler, through his familiar Himmler, consciously and repeatedly prioritized the extermination of the Jews over the infrastructure required for the war effort. Down to the question of where to deploy rolling stock and freight trains—to serve the Eastern Front, or to move more Jews to Auschwitz?—Hitler consistently chose to keep the death trains running, even when it meant shorting the requirements of the military, and daily coming closer to losing the war. In Hitler’s eyes, if he had to make a choice between winning the war against the Allies, and winning the war against the Jews, he chose to wage the war against the Jews.

When the issue arose, whether to use the Jews more extensively in slave labor for the Nazi war machine (and gradually kill them that way), or to short the Nazi war machine of vitally needed labor, in order to hasten the day when Europe would be *Jüdenfrei*, Hitler consistently chose the latter. Here again, if the choice were between labor for the military war, and immediate death for the Jews, Hitler chose

the war against the Jews.

That was what he meant, in his last political statement, written April 29, 1945, the day before he committed suicide: “I die with a happy heart. . . . I have always fought the Jews with an open visor. . . . Above all, I enjoin the state and the people to uphold the racial laws to the limit, and to resist mercilessly the poisoner of all nations, international Jewry.” Perhaps he had indeed, in the military sphere, practiced what Joachim Fest calls “the strategy of flamboyant doom.” But in the war that *really* counted to him, the war of extermination, he had fought to win.

For Hitler, exterminating the Jews was the first, essential step in his “mission,” of restoring imperial paganism to Europe, and putting a full stop to the 2,000 years of intervening European history, civilization, culture, and religious faith. With the Jews gone, Judaism would be eradicated; with the Jews and Judaism gone, Hitler believed, Christianity (“that Jewish lie”) could be extirpated.

That is why Nazism was more ruthlessly systematic at killing than any of the dictatorships to which Rummel compares it. In the center of the Christian West, there arose a genuinely Gnostic movement, dedicated to undoing all that Christianity and Judaism had done. The mass murder was not a means to an end, in quite the same way as it was for Stalin. Here, it *was* an end.

Stalin, characteristic of Asiatic despotism, killed without thinking much about it; it was expedient. In Hitler’s case, it was *not* expedient.

This is not to overlook the similarities between Hitler and Stalin—and, far more, the common irrationalist roots from which Nazism and Bolshevism sprang, as the twin monsters of this century. But Stalin was a quintessential expression of amoral materialism, the “dialectical materialism” in which man was another beast, to be used or thrown away. Hitler was something different; a worshiper at the shrine of the pagan “Unknown God,” in whom we confront a truly Satanic mind, dedicated to murder as a Good. Unlike Stalin, who was a master opportunist, nothing would divert Hitler from this; no compromises, no opportunism, no exigencies of waging war. To Hitler, the survival of his country, of his armies—even of himself—meant nothing in comparison with the diabolism of killing the central idea on which western civilization was based: the Jewish and Christian concept of the God Who made man in His image.

Thus, Rummel’s comparative charts and tables contribute one thing to our recognition, and understanding, of the meaning of the fact that the Second World War devoured civilians, and depopulated Europe, at a pace far outstripping any military casualties. He contributes to the insight that Nazi mass murder was undertaken, not out of the exigencies of a monstrous political or military machine, but as a *religious* requirement, in service of the old religion of pagan Gnosticism, erupting undiminished in energy and evil, in the midst of the civilization it wished to destroy.