

Week 4

Friday, April 26, 2013

“What we commonly mean by “understand” coincides with “simplify”: without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions.” (Primo Levi, 36)

“Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic; and for all that, compassion itself eludes logic.” (Primo Levi, 56)

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the formalities of the essay assignment, peer review of essay outlines.
- Discuss different approaches to the question how the Final Solution became the mass murder of the European Jews.
- Pick up the questions of continuities & responsibility.

Peer Review & Announcements (20 minutes)

AGAIN: Go to the Catalyst Workspace > Writing Resource Section

- Writing guide for historical essays
- Link to the Chicago Manual of Style
- A brief guideline & template for more effective reading notes – *Go over them in class*
- Guide for effective note taking

Explain how writing assignment works:

- Thesis statement in the introduction summarizes your point of view: Which of the two essays you find more convincing and why.
- However, the order of the different parts of the essay does not reflect the order of steps that writing the essay entails. (Use board to explain.)
- Essay should contain three thesis statements: Your own & the ones of the two essays you analyze.

Discussion Questions (30 minutes)

1) How did German expansion to the East (to Poland and the Soviet Union) impact the enactment of the Final Solution?

2) Compare and contrast the motivations for the killers as described by Browning and Goldhagen. Are there certain characteristics that are similar? Different? Which do you find convincing? Why?

- According to Browning, why did so few men refuse?
- Do you find Browning’s connection to the Stanford prison and the Milgram experiment convincing?

- According to Goldhagen, how can the Germans' participation in the genocide be explained?
- Can both approaches exist side by side? What are the shortcomings of either one?
- Can the behavior of the Hiwis really be explained exclusively through their position under the Germans, as Goldhagen does? (p. 96)
- What was the purpose of violence, according to Goldhagen and Levi (p. 39)?
- How may their use and reading of sources affect the different scholars' approaches (See Levi, p. 40)?
- What are Goldhagen's and Levi's (p. 44) perceptions of the significance of the totalitarian state for the mass killing?
- Why were the Special Squads kept away from the outside world (Levi, p. 52)? (Connect to former readings about acceptance.)

3) Should the Wannsee Conference be considered a turning point in the implementation of the Final Solution?

- In the context of lecture and this week's readings, what seems to be an explanation for the attitudes and decisions of those present at the Conference?

4) What is the "Gray Zone" that Primo Levi describes?

5) According to Levi, why did the members of the "Special Squad" accept the task? Why didn't they rebel? Why didn't they rather die?

Summary

Browning & Goldhagen debate is an excellent example of a controversy in history. And if you haven't already, I recommend for you to read up on the discussion of Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executers*.

But what can we learn from that? We can learn to take different factors into account, like Prof. Naar did when he explained the willingness of Nazi cadres to collaborate. One of the criticisms of Goldhagen's argument was that it was too focused on one factor.

We can also learn that it is important to look closely how and which sources historians employ to build their argument.

And finally, we should always keep in mind what Levi does in his chapter: That it is difficult to fully understand past actions applying present attitudes and knowledge.

It is up to each of us to decide which approach to question why so many Germans participated in the Nazi mass murder we find most convincing. However, no matter which of the many possible factors we find most important eventually, we should always keep all of them in mind.

The danger of focusing on just one factor may make it impossible to remember the important point Levi makes: “because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children.” (p. 53)



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