

I volenterosi carnefici di Netanyahu: come gli israeliani comuni sono diventati assassini di massa

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Nel 1996, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen pubblicò un libro che proponeva di riscrivere la storia dell'Olocausto. Il suo punto centrale era che il genocidio nazista fu reso possibile principalmente dall'esistenza di una profonda forma di "antisemitismo demonologico" che si era infiltrata nella società tedesca; Hitler e il regime nazista non stavano tanto agitandosi contro gli ebrei quanto semplicemente dando ai tedeschi comuni il via libera per agire in base ai loro già virulenti atteggiamenti genocidi. Senza questa forma di "antisemitismo eliminazionista", che secondo Goldhagen era essenzialmente parte del tessuto della società tedesca molto prima che i nazisti salissero al potere, l'Olocausto non sarebbe stato possibile.

Hitler's Willing Executioners di Goldhagen è stato un bestseller internazionale. Si proponeva di rovesciare quella che in precedenza era stata considerata la comprensione convenzionale tra gli studiosi delle motivazioni dei soldati tedeschi che perpetrarono il genocidio nazista – che erano essenzialmente "uomini comuni" senza alcun indottrinamento ideologico particolarmente forte che trovarono un modo per razionalizzare la loro partecipazione. , anche se in molti casi volontariamente ed entusiasticamente, in atti di barbarie umana agli ordini del regime nazista. Uno dei lavori più importanti che ha esaminato la mentalità dei soldati tedeschi è stato lo studio di Christopher Browning sul battaglione 101 della polizia di riserva, una forza paramilitare itinerante composta da ex civili trasformati in "assassini professionisti" che perpetrò l'omicidio di massa di decine di migliaia di polacchi. Ebrei nel giro di pochi mesi nel 1942.

Lo studio di Daniel Goldhagen ha esaminato anche il battaglione 101 della polizia di riserva, ma si è posto l'obiettivo di attaccare la spiegazione di Browning su come quei tedeschi di tutti i giorni siano diventati dei "volontari carnefici". Per Goldhagen, quella che chiamava la "spiegazione monocausale" secondo cui quei soldati erano antisemiti congeniti era sufficiente per capire come fossero capaci di tali mostruosità. Uno dei motivi per cui il libro di Goldhagen ottenne un'attenzione così diffusa fu che si trattava di un atto d'accusa nei confronti della società tedesca in grande stile, proponendo di ritenere ogni tedesco individualmente responsabile dell'Olocausto invece di attribuire la colpa esclusivamente al regime nazista.

Most Holocaust scholars harshly criticized Goldhagen for his overly simplistic and reductionist narrative, which they believed flattened the diverse historical processes that made such a systematic act of mass murder possible. In Browning's afterword to *Ordinary Men*, he said that many of Goldhagen's observations of the voluntarism exhibited by German

soldiers in massacring Jews were unoriginal and didn't contradict many of the insights already set forth by historians before him. Browning referenced Raul Hilberg's authoritative account of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which asserted that the killers "were not different in their moral makeup from the rest of the population. The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German," instead coming from a "remarkable cross-section of the German population." [1]

Hilberg believed that the Goldhagen thesis was weakened by two important factors: "not all the shooters were Germans... [and] not all the victims were Jews." But more importantly, Goldhagen's rendition of a "demon latent in the German mind" that took on the form of a "super-pogrom in the hands of shooters and guards" made it look like the Holocaust was "orgiastic" instead of calculated and methodical:

"All else, including the gas chambers in which two and a half million Jews died unobservedly by the perpetrators, is secondary, a mere 'backdrop' of the slaughter under the open sky."

The same danger lies in drawing similar conclusions about Israeli society today.

It would be tempting to conclude, after ten months of relentless genocidal war, countless victim testimonies of indiscriminate killing, mass executions, and systematic prison rapes, dozens of gleeful TikTok videos from Israeli soldiers boasting of their destruction of civilian infrastructure, and most recently, insurrectionary riots from Israelis over the right to torture and rape Palestinian prisoners without repercussions, that Israeli society is afflicted with a demonological and eliminationist hate against Palestinians that goes as far back as Zionism itself.

These observations aren't wrong, of course. But they aren't the entire story either. Much like the Nazi gas chambers created a routinized assembly line of death that insulated the perpetrators from the victims, so too is the latest Israeli technological innovation through the use of AI systems to loosely identify targets for dropping bombs from a distance. Yet since the Israeli military is a people's army made up of a remarkable cross-section of the Israeli population, and since many of the atrocities on the ground in Gaza were the product of the individual voluntarism of Israeli soldiers — Israeli outlets like *Haaretz* and +972 Magazine explained this away as "lax rules of engagement" — it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that both the Israeli state and society are partners in the genocide. It is in significant measure a genocide from above and from below.

On Zionist eliminationism

Drawing historical analogies is always tricky, not least because political regimes and their underlying motivations for carrying out atrocities during war vary wildly. The kind of imperial German racial supremacy that was part of the genocide of European Jewry was different

from the settler colonial imperative of the “elimination of the native” that characterized the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas by European colonists, or indeed the Zionist movement’s ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948 or the Gaza genocide today. But despite these differences, a common thread still runs through them, and so drawing these comparisons becomes unavoidable.

For all of Goldhagen’s distortions of the historical processes that made the destruction of European Jewry possible, the debate that his work aroused is instructive in understanding the current genocidal manifestations of the Zionist project and how it is reflected in the attitudes of “ordinary Israelis” conscripted for war.

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You would be hard-pressed to fault people for reaching that conclusion upon examining Zionism’s founding doctrines, from Jabotinsky’s “Iron Wall” to Yosef Weitz’s transfer committees, all the way through the Nakba and the Gaza genocide today. It’s hard not to conclude that it is all the logical endpoint of Zionist settler colonialism and that the general Israeli populace is now infected with one of its particularly eliminationist manifestations.

As if to confirm this verdict, when news broke that nine Israeli soldiers suspected of gang-raping a Palestinian prisoner at the notorious Sde Teiman detention center were detained by the military police for questioning, Israeli protesters flocked to the prison in outrage over the arrest of the soldiers, who they called “heroes.” Soon after, the question of whether it is legitimate to rape Palestinian prisoners became a serious topic of discussion at the Knesset.

But just like Goldhagen erred in fixating on such a monocausal explanation, it would be a mistake to ignore how this real sickness in Israeli society has also coexisted with a liberal righteousness embodied by outlets like *Haaretz* and +972 Magazine, which for all their pretenses at exposing Israeli atrocities in Gaza through interviews with military personnel, have also participated in manufacturing consent for the genocide within Israeli society and among “liberal” Israelis. Look no further than the Op-Eds and analysis of *Haaretz* contributors like Amos Harel, who advocated for the genocidal war from day one, or the continued dissemination of atrocity propaganda connected to mass rapes.

More important still, this intra-Israeli media narrative was also actively shaped by the Israeli government and Israeli politicians, who played key roles in genocidal incitement. But of course, it could hardly be said that they weren’t already planting in fertile ground. Israeli society was ready after the shock of October 7, and the Zionist regime was there to capitalize on it to the fullest extent. Both society and the state became co-conspirators.

Genocide from below

The concentrated acts of human cruelty on the part of Israeli soldiers are not a new revelation. As soon as the ground invasion of Gaza began, Palestinians started reporting what they witnessed. Some of it was caught on camera — and promptly ignored by Western media — and most of it was not. But all of it was continuously relayed by Palestinians who experienced the horrors firsthand.

This site has reported on a portion of these crimes, based largely on testimonies from survivors, and even that encompasses a wide gamut of sadistic practices and acts of violence that show a high degree of personal initiative on the part of Israeli soldiers.

In November, Palestinians reported how Israeli soldiers arbitrarily sniped at children held in their mothers' arms as they fled south down Salah al-Din Street, forcing them to throw their children to the side of the road and keep marching. Other soldiers forced disabled people and people on crutches to walk without assistance, and when they fell to the ground, they were forced to crawl through the checkpoint. Soldiers forced others to strip naked and crawl into a ditch, where some were shot dead. Others were forced to sit in the ditch for hours among the bodies of others who had been executed, before eventually being allowed to carry on. In February, Gazans reported on how Israeli soldiers and attack drones were following an open-fire policy of targeting anyone who walked in specific zones, often killing mothers next to their children as they fled Israeli forces. In March, Israeli soldiers fired on starving Gazans seeking aid from food convoys, massacring hundreds in what has become known as the "flour massacre."

Israeli soldiers also routinely kidnapped civilians and tortured them arbitrarily. Sometimes they were arrested and taken somewhere far away in another part of Gaza, where they were stripped naked and then forced to walk back to their shelters in the pitch black of night in the middle of a warzone. Others were forcefully conscripted as bait and human shields.

During the first invasion of al-Shifa Hospital in November, Israeli soldiers shot medical staff and patients when they tried to evacuate the hospital. When others tried to come out to aid them, they were shot also and left to decompose in the hospital courtyard and be eaten by stray animals. During the second invasion of al-Shifa in March, Israeli soldiers shot patients in their beds and doctors who refused to abandon the sick, separated people into groups with differently-colored bracelets, and executed hundreds of civil government employees who had gathered at the hospital to receive salaries. At Nasser Hospital, Palestinians uncovered several mass graves in April indicating that Israelis had executed hospital staff and patients; some bodies were found with medical catheters still attached, others with their hands bound.

All of this just scratches the surface, and none of it even touches upon the more wide-ranging machinery of death wrought by official military policy; the purposeful engineering of famine and the bombing of bakeries and humanitarian aid; the targeting of hospitals with the purpose of accelerating social collapse given the pivotal role of Gazan hospitals as hubs for

civil society during wartime; the bombing of fleeing civilians on evacuation routes; the destruction of Gaza's economy; the destruction of the health system; the genocidal torture, rape, and degradation of Palestinians in Israeli prisons; and of course, the carpet-bombing of virtually every part of Gaza with bombs meant to wipe out entire neighborhoods.

Many months after these reports emerged from Palestinians, some liberal Israeli and Western outlets published accounts based on anonymous testimony from soldiers and military officials that confirmed what Palestinians had already been saying. In May, CNN published a report based on the testimony of Israeli whistleblowers detailing the torture of prisoners at Sde Teiman. The New York Times followed it up with another report in June, detailing similar accounts from the prison, in addition to accounts of rape. +972 Magazine put out several reports on the different AI systems Israel used to deliberately target civilians, such as Lavender, the Gospel, and “Where’s Daddy.” In March, Haaretz published an exposé on how individual Israeli soldiers, with “no rules of engagement,” would shoot unarmed civilians that stumbled into arbitrarily defined “kill zones,” and that they were essentially given free rein to shoot anything that moved on sight, even when they were identified as civilians who posed no military threat. Another July report in +972 further corroborated this open-fire policy, detailing how soldiers would kill people and posthumously count them as “terrorists;” how these bodies piled up on the sides of the roads so much that they had to eventually be buried and hidden when humanitarian convoys passed by; how even when there were no explicit orders to exact revenge against civilians, field commanders deliberately turned a blind eye and gave their subordinates carte blanche to do what they wanted (again, +972 euphemistically calls this lax rules of engagement); and how Israeli soldiers burned down Palestinian homes for fun when the homes had fulfilled their operational purpose.

The picture that emerges is multifaceted, in which genocidaires can be found at both the top and the bottom of the military hierarchy. Of course, it is useful for Israel to focus only on the latter, to paint them as aberrations in military policy rather than organic extensions of it.

But the “lax rules of engagement” coupled with the clear genocidal incitement by Israeli leaders and politicians tell a different story. Israeli leaders know their society; Netanyahu knew what would be understood when he implored Israeli soldiers to “Remember what Amalek did to you;” President Haim Herzog knew what the interpretation of “no uninvolved civilians in Gaza” would entail. The reams of genocidal statements from Israeli officials could just as well have been general guidelines in lieu of official marching orders amid the peculiar absence of “rules of engagement” — in other words, the encouragement of “ordinary Israelis” in the military to exact retribution

And this desire for retribution did not come out of nowhere. Of course, preexisting racism against Palestinians undoubtedly played a role in the dehumanization that was necessary to accomplish what they did, but that racism was fanned to demonological proportions through

the persistent and widespread propagation of atrocity propaganda around the events of October 7, capitalizing upon and in fact building up the rage and desire for retribution among the Israelis who were soon to be conscripted into the army for the genocidal campaign.

Perhaps in other periods of Zionist colonial history, Israel was content to rule over Palestinians as second-class citizens under an apartheid regime, as Israel has done over the past 55 years, so long as they did not resist too violently. It could gradually carry out a process of slow ethnic cleansing in the meantime, pushing them into ever-smaller enclaves until they are forced to leave of their own accord. At other points in history, particularly during wartime, Israel could expel more Palestinians from their lands en masse, as it did in 1948 and 1967.

But since the Zionist brand of settler colonialism desires to replace the natives entirely, it stands to reason that the resort to genocide would always be an option if native resistance ever reached the level that it eventually did on October 7 — that is, to strike at the very heart of Israel's security doctrine of deterrence and its carefully crafted image as an invincible army. And what happened on October 7 far surpassed what Israel in its colonial contempt could ever have imagined Palestinians to be capable of achieving.

Notes

[1] Hilberg quoted in: Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 192.

[2] Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp. 200-201.

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