Jean Haussmann, *In Search of the Origins of Nazi Monstrosity: From Persecution to Annihilation*

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We are now about one human lifetime away from the Holocaust. The literature on this monumental human disaster has boomed, but the struggle to understand the causes of it has not been successfully concluded. Why did they do it?

Into the discussion comes a stimulating new book. It’s entitled “In Search of the Origins of Nazi Monstrosity: From Persecution to Annihilation.” The author is Jean Haussmann, a Swiss citizen.

The book is actually an extended outline. It explores, lists, and examines many probable and interrelated causes of the Holocaust. In the process, new light is shed on this abomination.

Haussmann grounds much of his analysis in the culture of those he calls Austro-Bavarians. During the course of the book he adds some from the Sudetenland, but these are minor figures. What Haussmann shows is that the Holocaust had its point of origin in the culture, outlook, religion, intellectual forces, philosophy and music of the region encompassing Bavaria and Austria. It is a region which has close internal affinities; he reports that Churchill wanted to create it as a separate country, after the end of World War II. Even today, there are strong similarities, as Bavaria seeks to retain its unique status within Germany and Austria, while opting to be a neutral land, has to contain repeated outbursts of neo-Nazi politics.

And sadly, the author concludes, Bavaria and Austria haven’t changed all that much. Look, he notes, at the violence which occurs, with mass approval, during the Oktoberfest, even to this day. Bavaria, he says, still shows tell-tale signs of homogeneity and irrationality.

The book begins with three levels set up for researching. There are the “material executors” – those individuals who conducted much of the actual murdering. There is, next, the civil servant class that supported the Holocaust. And finally, there is the idea itself of the Holocaust, a monster “sui generis,” which Hitler and his closest allies always sought and which, as seen in the notes from Wannsee, they forced on others less fervent in their anti-Semitism.

Haussmann says of the actual murderers that they were men who yearned for limitless power. With poor educational backgrounds, a lack of training in critical thinking, a feeling of alienation from the modern world, and fascination with violence already coursing through
their culture, these people constituted the perfect machinery for perpetrating mass cruelty. They could do so with moral indifference.

The civil servants, on the other hand, took on the German attitude of duty first, no matter what. The idea was expressed in a letter written to his son by the father, a high magistrate, of one concerned official who was upset by the operations of the Holocaust. Your job is to do your duty to the best of your ability, the father declared, and let those at the top who set the policy take the weight for it. The civil servants organized the killing with great efficiency, their ambition and lack of personal values making it all possible. Furthermore, as Hegel had taught, the state and the individual had become united, one in purpose, so the Prussians in the administration thought the German state was to be all powerful.

Finally, the Nazi leadership kept the goal of mass murder to themselves. There was an extraordinary homogeneity of the real Nazis, all coming from the region of Austria, Bavaria, or Sudetenland, many the earliest followers of the Nazi party. Haussmann shows by a significant number of tests that the Austro-Bavarians were in fact hugely overrepresented amongst Germans involved in the actual killing jobs. He looks in depth at the sentences handed out in Nuremberg; the sentences of death often went to those whose origin was in this particular region. Further, a study of the IQs of those held for trial at Nuremberg shows that the smarter ones were not condemned to death. His conclusion is logical: the early Nazis, those who attained high posts in the regime, were recruited from amongst the less intelligent Austrians and Bavarians.

What were the underlying trends that culminated in Germany taking this extreme, horrible direction under the Nazis? There came upon the victims of the Holocaust a “perfect storm,” says Haussmann, the confluence of several historical trends that he explores. The violence and murder of the Holocaust was a regression; it went back to the Inquisition. Catholic assumptions – particularly about evil undesirable people who can only be purged by death - - figured greatly in the zeitgeist that became Nazi extermination policy. Further, could the violence have been based in part on the fact that Nazi leaders mostly came from a borderland, where nationalist fervor always runs strongest?

Next, Haussmann notes the effect of Freudian psychoanalysis, a school of thought that developed in Austria and with which Hitler was apparently somewhat familiar. It lent to the Holocaust the idea of a subconscious (and perhaps irrational) level of the personality.

From popular theater music came the impact for Austria of the operetta. This form developed in Vienna, where it was very popular. It offered a “desirable but unobtainable” world, mostly of upper class life. Thus was highlighted the opposition between the desired life and the dramatic underlying reality.

Further, Austria was a setting in which both ritualistic crimes and incest were frequently found, Haussmann says. He reports that the Austrians have not been able to control this fixation about incest, even to the present day. The country recently focused on a man who
had his daughter locked up below the house; over the years of her captivity, she bore him children.

He then examines in more depth Austrian and Bavarian Roman Catholicism, which has been extremely authoritarian in nature. Plus, Catholicism, like psychoanalysis, is “quite strong at a ritual level in the search for mental balance,” says Haussmann. Both Catholicism and psychoanalysis provide a limited territory in which men are seen as acting on impulses they can’t control. These impulses often are evil and lead to suffering. Such impulses must be eliminated for the benefit of the patient and of society.

As to serious music, the Dionysian music of Wagner (with its cradle in the Bavarian town of Bayreuth) centers on conflict; on dissonance which must be resolved; and on the concept of a Nietzschean final solution, which must always be overwhelming and take place with the death of the interpreters and which constitutes a catharsis of the “cycle of life that was unable to withstand the violence of experience.”

Wagner developed the total art form. To him, mankind was on the brink of disaster; people face if not total victory, total annihilation, often both. This means overcoming all obstacles even if doom awaits. It is catharsis by death, a terrible price for the individual to pay but one which opens up a new era for the future generations. Internal doubts are resolved; there is but one approach, an all-engaging vision.

What these strands build is a totalizing interpretation of the history of mankind, perennial conflict and death as the inevitable outcome, even when sublimated by intense love. It is also a completely pessimistic view of the world. You have, thus, arrived at the nexus which led to the Holocaust.

Haussmann explores and emphasizes a number of these points:

1. Nazi dogma draws radical conclusions, just as the Roman Catholic Church did during the Inquisition. Capital punishment is based on the idea that the individual cannot be rehabilitated and the malefactor constitutes a virus affecting all society.

2. The zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, as seen in Wagner, reaches its resolution only in death. There is a need to clean the house. This is related, says Haussmann, to the need for order, always persistent in Bavarian and Austrian culture.

3. According to the author, animals have a strong desire to maximize violence. We, too, genetically may need a catharsis in order to overcome the strain of killing. We see this in the book of Job. We see this in the life of Christ. We see this in the Roman coliseum. So the Nazis in the concentration camps were like the wolves, with their prey which must be violently destroyed. It’s genetic, Haussmann thinks. And, interestingly, while the Prussians want no doubt, the Austrians like complexity.
4. Historically, as the intellectuals of Vienna surrendered after the Anschluss to the provinces and their dogmatism, a terrible culture of murder arose in Austria. Haussmann discusses two instructive, if horrid, cases. Locals voluntarily hunted and killed escaped Soviet officers from Mauthausen concentration campus; they called it the “rabbit chase.” There was also the killing for sport of 200 innocent Jews at Rechnitz, forced to build a wall against possible Communist attack. The Nazis who shot the prisoners were attending a party thrown by a countess, as the war was concluding in March of 1945; they thought to have “a last hunt”, some fun. They wanted, the author says, one more chance at the luxury of total power of one man over another.

5. Thus, a series of relatively independent elements converge and forge certain latencies into an identifiable force.

This is a powerful book which presents many ideas about what caused the Holocaust. Perhaps not every element of it will bear up under further scrutiny, but many of these points do, in fact, constitute part of the explanation for the most egregious mass murder ever to occur in the history of the Western civilization.