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Author(s): Hannah Arendt

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SOCIAL SCIENCE TECHNIQUES AND THE STUDY OF CONCENTRATION CAMPS

By HANNAH ARENDT

Every science is necessarily based upon a few inarticulate, elementary and axiomatic assumptions which are exposed and exploded only when confronted with altogether unexpected phenomena which can no longer be understood within the framework of its categories. The social sciences and the techniques which they have developed during the past hundred years are no exception to this rule. It is the contention of this paper that the institution of concentration and extermination camps, that is the social conditions within them as well their function in the larger terror apparatus to totalitarian regimes, may very likely become that unexpected phenomenon, that stumbling-block on the road toward the proper understanding of contemporary politics and society which must cause social scientists and historical scholars to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior.

Behind the obvious difficulties of dealing with a subject matter in which the mere enumeration of facts makes one sound "intemperate and unreliable"¹ and on which reports are written by people who during their very experience were "never wholly successful" in convincing "themselves that this was real, was really happening, and not just a nightmare,"² lies the more serious perplexity that within the frame-

¹ "If I should recite these horrors in words of my own, you would think me intemperate and unreliable," Justice Robert H. Jackson in his opening address to the Nuremberg trials. See *Nazi Conspiracy And Aggression* (Washington 1946) vol. i, p. 140.

² See Bruno Bettelheim's report "On Dachau and Buchenwald" in *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. vii, p. 824.

work of common-sense judgments neither the institution itself and what went on within its closely-guarded barriers nor its political role make any sense whatsoever. If we assume that most of our actions are of a utilitarian nature and that our evil deeds spring from some "exaggeration" of self-interest, then we are forced to conclude that this particular institution of totalitarianism is beyond human understanding. If, on the other hand, we make an abstraction of every standard we usually live by and consider only the fantastic ideological claims of racism in its logical purity, then the extermination policy of the Nazis makes almost too much sense. Behind its horrors lies the same inflexible logic which is characteristic of certain systems of paranoiacs where everything follows with absolute necessity once the first insane premise is accepted. The insanity of such systems clearly does not only lie in its first premise but in their very logicity which proceeds regardless of all facts and regardless of reality which teaches us that whatever we do we can't carry through with absolute perfection. In other words, it is not only the non-utilitarian character of the camps themselves; the senselessness of "punishing" completely innocent people, the failure to keep them in a condition so that profitable work might be extorted from them, the superfluousness of frightening a completely subdued population, which gives them their distinctive and disturbing qualities, but their anti-utilitarian function, the fact that not even the supreme emergencies of military activities were allowed to interfere with these "demographic policies." It was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war.³

It is in this context that the adjective "unprecedented"⁴ as applied to totalitarian terror receives full significance. The road to total domination leads through many intermediary stages which are relatively normal and quite comprehensible. It is far from unprecedented to wage aggressive war; massacres of enemy population or even of what one

³ Goebbels reports the following in his Diaries for March 1943: "The Fuehrer is happy . . . that the Jews have been . . . evacuated from Berlin. He is right in saying that the war has made possible for us the solution of a whole series of problems that could never have been solved in normal times. The Jews will certainly be the losers in this war come what may." *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, ed. by Louis P. Lochner (New York 1948) p. 314.

⁴ Robert H. Jackson, *op. cit.* vol. ii, p. 3.

assumes to be a hostile people look like an everydáy affair in the bloody record of history; extermination of natives in the process of colonization and the establishment of new settlements has happened in America, Australia and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and forced labor gangs, employed by the state for the performance of public works, were one of the mainstays of the Roman empire. Even the claim to world rule, well known from the history of political dreams, is no monopoly of totalitarian governments and can still be explained by a fantastically exaggerated lust for power. All these aspects of totalitarian rule, hideous and criminal as they are, have one thing in common which separates them from the phenomenon with which we are dealing: in distinction from the concentration camps, they have a definite purpose and they benefit the rulers much in the same way as an ordinary burglary benefits the burglar. The motives are clear and the means to achieve the goal are utilitarian in the accepted sense of the term. The extraordinary difficulty which we have in attempting to understand the institution of the concentration camp and to fit it into the record of human history is precisely the absence of such utilitarian criteria, an absence which is more than anything else responsible for the curious air of unreality that surrounds this institution and everything connected with it.

In order to understand more clearly the difference between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, *i.e.* between those data which respond to our commonly accepted research techniques and scientific concepts and those which explode this whole framework of reference, it may be useful to recall the various stages in which Nazi antisemitism unfolded from the moment of Hitler's rise to power in 1933 up to the establishment of the death factories in the midst of the war. Antisemitism by itself has such a long and bloody history that the very fact that the death factories were chiefly fed with Jewish "material" has somewhat obliterated the uniqueness of this "operation." Nazi antisemitism, moreover, showed an almost striking lack of originality; it did not contain a single element, either in its ideological expression or propagandistic application, which could not be traced back to earlier movements and which did not already constitute a cliché in the literature of Jew-hatred before the Nazis ever existed. The anti-Jewish legislation

in Hitler Germany during the thirties, culminating in the issuance of the Nuremberg laws in 1935, was new in terms of 19th and 20th century events; it was neither new as the avowed goal of antisemitic parties all over Europe nor new in terms of earlier Jewish history. The ruthless elimination of Jews from the German economy between 1936 and 1938 and the pogroms in November 1938 were still within the framework of what one would expect to happen if an antisemitic party seized the monopoly of power in a European country. The next step, the establishment of ghettos in eastern Europe and the concentration of all Jews in them during the first years of the war, could hardly surprise any careful observer. All this appeared hideous and criminal but entirely rational. The anti-Jewish legislation in Germany aimed at satisfying popular demands, the elimination of Jews from the overcrowded professions seemed destined to make place for a seriously underemployed generation of intellectuals; forced emigration, with all its concomitants of plain robbery after 1938, was calculated to spread antisemitism throughout the world, as a memo of the German Foreign Office to all officials abroad succinctly pointed out;⁵ the herding of the Jews into eastern European ghettos followed by some distribution of their possessions among the native population seemed to be a marvelous political stratagem to win over the large antisemitic segments of eastern European peoples, to console them for their loss of political independence and frighten them with the example of a people which suffered so far worse a fate. What could be expected in addition to these measures were starvation diets on the one hand and forced labor on the other during the war; in case of victory, all these measures seemed to be the preparation for the an-

⁵ The Circular letter of January 1939 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to all German authorities abroad on "The Jewish Question as a Factor in German Foreign Policy in the Year 1938" stated: "The emigration movement of only about 100,000 Jews has already sufficed to awaken the interest if not the understanding of many countries in the Jewish danger. We can estimate that here the Jewish question will extend to a problem of international politics when large numbers of Jews from Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Rumania are put on the move. . . . Germany is very interested in maintaining the dispersal of Jewry. . . the influx of Jews in all parts of the world invokes the opposition of the native population and thereby forms the best propaganda for the German Jewish policy. . . The poorer and therefore the more burdensome the immigrating Jew is to the country absorbing him, the stronger this country will react." See *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. vi, p. 87 ff.

nounced project of establishing a Jewish reservation in Madagascar.⁶ As a matter of fact, such measures (and not death factories) were expected not only by the outside world and the Jewish people themselves but by the highest German officials in the administration of the Occupied Eastern Territories, by the military authorities and even by high ranking officers in the Nazi party hierarchy.⁷

Neither the fate of European Jewry nor the establishment of death factories can be fully explained and grasped in terms of antisemitism. Both transcend antisemitic reasoning as well as the political, social and economic motives behind the propaganda of antisemitic movements. Antisemitism only prepared the ground to make it easier to start the extermination of peoples with the Jewish people. We know now that this extermination program of Hitler did not stop short of planning the liquidation of large sections of the German people.⁸

⁶ This project was propagated by the Nazis at the beginning of the war. Alfred Rosenberg announced in a speech of January 15, 1939 that the Nazis would demand that "those people who are friendly disposed to Jews, about all the Western democracies who have so much space . . . place an area outside of Palestine for the Jews, of course in order to establish a Jewish reserve and not a Jewish State." *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. vi, p. 93.

⁷ It is very interesting to see in the Nazi documents published in *Nazi Conspiracy* and the *Trial of the Major War Criminals* (Nuremberg 1947), how few people in the Nazi party itself had been prepared for extermination policies. Extermination was always carried out by the SS troops, upon the initiative of Himmler and Hitler, against the protests from the civilian and military authorities. Alfred Rosenberg, in charge of the administration of Russian occupied territories, complained in 1942 that "new plenipotentiaries-in-chief (*i.e.* SS officers) endeavored to carry out direct actions in the occupied eastern territories, overlooking those dignitaries who were appointed by the Fuehrer himself" (*i.e.* Nazi officials outside of the SS). (See *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iv, p. 65 ff.) Reports about conditions in the Ukraine during the fall of 1942 (*Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iii, p. 83 ff.) show clearly that neither the *Wehrmacht* nor Rosenberg were aware of the depopulation plans of Hitler and Himmler. Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland dared even in September 1943, when most party officials had been frightened into submission, to say during a meeting of the *Kriegswirtschaftsstabes und des Verteidigungsausschusses*: "Sie kennen ja die toerichte Einstellung der Minderwertigkeit der uns unterworfenen Voelker, und zwar in einem Augenblick, in welchem die Arbeitskraft dieser Voelker eine der wesentlichsten Potenzen unseres Siegringens darstellt." *Trial of the Major War Criminals*, vol. xxix, p. 672.

⁸ During a discussion in Hitler's headquarters about measures to be carried out after the conclusion of the war, Hitler proposed a National Health Bill: "After national X-ray examination, the Fuehrer is to be given a list of sick persons, particularly those with lung and heart diseases. On the basis of the new Reich Health Law . . . these families will no longer be able to remain among the public and can no longer be allowed to produce children. What will happen to these families will be the subject of further orders of the Fuehrer." *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. vii, p. 175, (no date).

The Nazis themselves, or rather that part of the Nazi party which, under the inspiration of Himmler and with the help of the SS troops, actually initiated extermination policies, were in no doubt as to the fact that they had entered an altogether different realm of activities, that they were doing something which not even their worst enemies expected them to do. They were quite convinced that one of the best chances for the success of this enterprise lay in the extreme improbability that anybody in the outside world would believe it to be true.⁹ For the truth was that while all other anti-Jewish measures made some sense and were likely to benefit their authors in some way, the gas chambers did not benefit anybody. The deportations themselves, during a period of acute shortage of rolling stock, the establishment of costly factories, the manpower employed and badly needed for the war effort, the general demoralizing effect on the German military forces as well as on the population in the occupied territories—all this interfered disastrously with the war in the East, as the military authorities as well as Nazi officials, in protest against the SS troops, pointed out repeatedly.¹⁰ Such considerations, however, were not simply overlooked by those who had put themselves in charge of extermination. Even Himmler knew that in a time of a critical shortage of labor, he was eliminating a large amount of workers who at least could have been worked to death instead of being killed without any productive purpose. And the office of Himmler issued one order after another warning the military commanders as well

⁹ "Imagine only that these occurrences would become known to the other side and exploited by them. Most likely such propaganda would have no effect only because people who hear and read about it simply would not be ready to believe it." From a secret report concerning the killing of 5,000 Jews in June 1943, *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. i, p. 1001.

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that protests from military authorities were less frequent and less violent than those of old party members. In 1942, Hans Frank stated emphatically that the responsibility for the annihilation of the Jews came from "higher quarters." And he goes on to say: "I was able to prove the other day .. that (the interruption of a big building program) would not have happened if the many thousands of Jews working at it had not been deported." In 1944, he complains again and adds: "Once we have won the war, then for all I care, mince-meat can be made of the Poles and the Ukrainians and all the others who run around here..." (*Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iv, p. 902 and 917.) During an official meeting in Warsaw in January 1943, State Secretary Krueger voiced the concern of the occupying forces: "The Poles say: After the Jews have been destroyed, then they will employ the same methods to get the Poles out of this territory and liquidate them just like the Jews." That this was indeed intended to be the next step is clear from a speech of Himmler in Cracow in March 1942. *Ibidem*, vol. iv, p. 916 and vol. iii, p. 640 ff.

as the officials of the Nazi hierarchy that no economic or military considerations were to interfere with the extermination program.¹¹

The extermination camps appear within the framework of totalitarian terror as the most extreme form of concentration camps. Extermination happens to human beings who for all practical purposes are already "dead." Concentration camps existed long before totalitarianism made them the central institution of government,¹² and it has always been characteristic of them that they were no penal institutions and that their inmates were accused of no crime, but that by and large they were destined to take care of "undesirable elements," *i.e.* of people who for one reason or another were deprived of their judicial person and their rightful place within the legal framework of the country in which they happened to live. It is interesting to note that totalitarian concentration camps were first established for people who had committed a "crime" *i.e.* the crime of opposition to the regime in power, but that they increased as political opposition decreased and that they expanded when the reservoir of people genuinely hostile to the regime was exhausted. The early Nazi camps were bad enough, but they were quite comprehensible: they were run by the SA with bestial methods and had the obvious aim to spread terror, kill outstanding politicians, deprive the opposition of their leaders, frighten would-be leaders into obscurity, and to satisfy the SA-men's desire to revenge themselves not only upon their immediate opponents but also upon members of the higher classes. In this respect, the SA terror clearly constituted a compromise between the regime, which at that time did not wish to lose its potent industrial protectors, and the movement which had been led to expect a real revolution. Complete pacification of the anti-Nazi opposition seems to have been achieved by January 1934; this at least was the opinion of the Gestapo itself and of high ranking Nazi officials.¹³

¹¹ That "economic considerations should fundamentally remain unconsidered in the settlement of the (Jewish) problem" had to be repeated from 1941 onward. *Ibidem*, vol. vi, p. 402.

¹² Concentration camps made their first appearance during the Boer War and the concept of "protective custody" was first used in India and South Africa.

¹³ In 1934, Reichsminister of the Interior, Wilhelm Frick, a party member of old standing, tried to issue a decree "stating that 'on the consideration' of the 'stabilizing of the national situation' and 'to reduce the abuses in connection with the infliction of protective custody,' 'the Reichsminister had decided' to place restrictions upon the exercise of pro-

By 1936 the sympathies of the overwhelming majority of the people for the new regime had been won: unemployment had been liquidated, the living standard of the lower classes was steadily rising, and the more potent sources of social resentment had all but dried out. Consequently the population of the concentration camps reached an all-time low for the simple reason that there no longer existed any active or even suspected opponents whom one could take into "protective custody."

It is after 1936, *i.e.* after the pacification of the country, that the Nazi movement became more radical and more aggressive on the domestic as well as on the international scene. The less enemies Nazism encountered within Germany and the more friends it gained abroad the more intolerant and the more extremist became "the revolutionary principle."¹⁴ The concentration camps began their new increase in 1938 with the mass arrests of all male German Jews during the November pogroms; but this development had been announced by Himmler already in 1937 when, during a speech to the higher officer staff of the Reichswehr, he explained that one would have to reckon with a "fourth theater in case of war, internal Germany."¹⁵ No reality whatsoever corresponded to these "fears" and the chief of the German police knew this better than anyone else. When war broke out a year later, he did not even bother to keep up the pretense and use his SS troops for police duties inside Germany but sent them at once to the eastern territories where they arrived when military actions had been successfully concluded in order to take over the occupation of the defeated countries. Later, when the party had decided to bring the whole army under its exclusive control, Himmler did not hesitate to send his SS companies to the front.

The main duty of the SS, however, was and remained even during

protective custody." See *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. ii, p. 259; *cf.* also vol. vii, p. 1099. This decree was never published and the practice of "protective custody" increased greatly in 1934.

According to a sworn affidavit of Rudolf Diels, former chief of the political police in Berlin and acting chief of the Gestapo in 1933, the political situation had become completely stabilized by January 1934 (*ibid.*, vol. v, p. 205).

¹⁴ In the words of Wilhelm Stuckart, State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior. *Ibidem*, vol. viii, p. 738.

¹⁵ See Heinrich Himmler, "On Organization and Obligation of the SS and the Police," in *National-politischer Lehrgang der Wehrmacht vom 15. — 23. Januar 1937* (restricted for the Armed Forces). Translation in *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iv, p. 616 ff.

the war the control and administration of concentration camps, from which the SA was completely eliminated. (Only during the last years of the war did the SA again play some minor role in the camp system, but then the SA troops were under the supervision of the SS.) It is this type of concentration camp rather than its earlier form which strikes us as a new and at first glance incomprehensible phenomenon.

Only a fraction of the inmates of these new camps, usually survivors from earlier years, could be regarded as opponents of the regime. Greater was the percentage of criminals, who were sent to the camps after they had served their normal prison terms, and of the so-called asocial element, homosexuals, vagabonds, work-shirkers and the like. The overwhelming majority of people who formed the bulk of the camp population was completely innocent from the point of view of the regime, quite harmless in every respect, guilty neither of political convictions nor of criminal actions.

A second characteristic of the camps, such as they were established by Himmler under SS rule, was their permanent character. Compared to Buchenwald, which in 1944 housed more than 80,000 prisoners, all earlier camps lose their significance.^{15a} Even more obvious is the per-

^{15a} The following table shows the numerical expansion and the death rate of the concentration camp Buchenwald during the years 1937-1945. It was compiled from several lists, given in *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iv, p. 800 ff.

Year	Arrivals	Camp Strength		Deceased ²	Suicides
		High	Low		
1937	2,912	2,561	929	48	—
1938	20,122 ¹	18,105	2,633	771	11
1939	9,553	12,775	5,392	1,235	3
1940	2,525	10,956	7,383	1,772	11
1941	5,896	7,911	6,785	1,522	17
1942	14,111 ³	10,075	7,601	2,898	3
1943	42,172	37,319	11,275 ⁴	3,516	2
1944	97,866	84,505	41,240	8,644	46
1945	42,823 ⁵	86,232	21,000 ⁶	13,056	16

¹ These were of course mostly Jews.

² The total of deceased is certainly higher and is being estimated at 50,000.

³ This figure shows the influx from the Eastern Occupied Territories.

⁴ The difference between arrivals and camp strength, or between High and Low does no longer indicate liberations but transports to other camps or to extermination camps.

⁵ Only for the first three months of 1945.

⁶ Camp strength at moment of liberation.

manent character of the gas chambers whose costly apparatus made the hunting for new "material" for the fabrication of corpses almost a necessity.

Of great importance for the development of the concentration camp society was the new type of camp administration. The earlier cruelty of the SA troops who had been allowed to run wild and kill whomsoever they pleased, was replaced by a regulated death rate¹⁶ and a strictly organized torture, calculated not so much to inflict death as to put the victim into a permanent status of dying. Large parts of the inner administration was given into the hands of the prisoners themselves who were forced to mistreat their fellow prisoners in much the same way the SS did. As time went on and the system became more established, torture and mistreatments became more and more the prerogative of the so-called *Kapos*. These measures were not accidental and hardly due to the growing size of the camps. In a number of instances, the SS was expressly ordered to have executions carried out only by prisoners. Similarly, mass-murder not only in form of gassing but also in form of mass-execution in ordinary camps, became as mechanized as possible.¹⁷ The result was that the population in the SS camps lived much longer than in the earlier camps; one has the impression that new waves of terror or deportation to extermination camps occurred only when new supplies were assured.

The administration was given into the hands of the criminals who formed the unchallenged camp aristocracy until, in the early forties, Himmler reluctantly yielded to outside pressure and allowed the camps to be exploited for productive labor. From then on, the political prisoners, mostly old-timers, were promoted to the position of the camp élite, because the SS found it soon impossible to have any work performed

¹⁶ The following is an excerpt from a letter of December 1942 from the SS Main Office of Economic Administration to all camp commandants: "...a compilation of the current arrivals and departures in all the concentration camps .. discloses that out of 136,000 arrivals about 70,000 died. With such a high rate of death, the number of the prisoners can never be brought up to the figure as has been ordered by the Reichsfuehrer of the SS. .. The Reichsfuehrer has ordered that the death rate absolutely must be reduced..." *Ibid.*, vol. iv, Annex II.

¹⁷ Ernest Feder in an "Essai sur la Psychologie de la Terreur," in *Synthèses* (Brussels 1946) reports an order of the SS to kill daily several hundred Russian prisoners of war by shooting through a hole without seeing the victim.

under the chaotic conditions of the former aristocracy of criminals. In no instance was the administration given into the hands of the largest and obviously least harmful group of completely innocent inmates. On the contrary, this category always belonged to the lowest level of the internal social hierarchy of the camps, suffered the heaviest losses through deportation, and was most exposed to cruelty. In other words, in a concentration camp it was by far safer to be a murderer or a Communist than simply a Jew, Pole or Ukrainian.

As to the SS guards themselves, we must unfortunately discard the notion that they constituted a kind of negative elite of criminals, sadists and half-insane persons—a notion that is largely true for the earlier SA troops who used to volunteer for concentration camp duty. All evidence points to the fact that the SS men in charge were completely normal; their selection was achieved according to all kinds of fantastic principles,¹⁸ none of which could possibly assure the selection of especially cruel or sadistic men. Moreover, the administration of the camps was run in such a way that it appears to be beyond doubt that within this whole system the prisoners did not fail to fulfill the same “duties” as the guards themselves.

Most difficult to imagine and most gruesome to realize is perhaps the complete isolation which separated the camps from the surrounding world as if they and their inmates were no longer part of the world of the living. This isolation, characteristic already of all earlier forms of concentration camps, but carried to perfection only under totalitarian regimes, can hardly be compared to the isolation of prisons, ghettos, or forced labor camps. Prisons are never really removed from society, of which they are an important part and to whose laws and controls they are subject. Forced labor as well as other forms of slavery do not involve absolute segregation; laborers by the very fact of their work come constantly in contact with the surrounding world and slaves were never really eliminated from the environment. Ghettos of the Nazi

¹⁸ Himmler described his selection methods (*op. cit.*) as follows: “I did not accept people under 1.7 m . . . because I know that people who have reached a certain height must possess the desired blood to some degree.” He also obtained photographs of the applicants who were asked to trace their ancestry back to 1750, to have no family member of ill political repute, to “acquire black trousers and boots from their own means” and, finally, to appear in person before a race commission.

type have the closest similarity to the isolation of concentration camps; but in them families, and not individuals, were segregated so that they constituted a kind of closed society where an appearance of normal life was being carried on and sufficient social relationships existed to create at least an image of being and belonging together.

Nothing of this kind is true for concentration camps. From the moment of his arrest, nobody in the outside world was supposed to hear of the prisoner again; it is as if he had disappeared from the surface of the earth; he was not even pronounced dead. The earlier custom of the SA to inform the family of the death of a concentration camp inmate by mailing to them the zinc coffin or an urn, was abolished and replaced by strict instructions to the effect that "third persons (are to be left) in uncertainty as to the whereabouts of prisoners. . . This also includes the fact that the relatives may not learn anything when such prisoners die in concentration camps."¹⁹

The supreme goal of all totalitarian governments is not only the freely admitted, long-range ambition to global rule but also the never-admitted and immediately-realized attempt at the total domination of man. The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme circumstances of a human-made hell. Total domination is achieved when the human person, who somehow is always a specific mixture of spontaneity and being conditioned, has been transformed into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death. This disintegration of personality is carried through in different stages, the first being the moment of arbitrary arrest when the judicial person is being destroyed, not because of the injustice of the arrest but because the arrest stands in no connection whatsoever with the actions or opinions of the person. The second stage of destruction concerns the moral personality and is achieved through the separation of concentration camps from the

¹⁹ *Nazi Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. vii, p. 84 ff. One of the many orders forbidding information on the whereabouts of prisoners, gave the following explanation: "The deterrent effect of these measures lies (a) in allowing the disappearance of the accused without a trace, (b) therein that no information whatsoever may be given about their whereabouts and their fate." *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 146.

rest of the world, a separation which makes martyrdom senseless, empty and ridiculous. The last stage is the destruction of individuality itself and is brought about through the permanence and institutionalizing of torture. The end result is the reduction of human beings to the lowest possible denominator of "identical reactions."

It is with a society of such human beings, each at a different stage on its way to becoming a bundle of reliable reactions, that the social sciences are called upon to deal when they try to investigate the social conditions of the camps. It is in this atmosphere that the amalgamation of criminals, political opponents, and "innocent" people takes place, that ruling classes rise and fall, that interior hierarchies emerge and disappear, that hostility against the SS guards or the camp administration gives way to complicity, that the inmates assimilate themselves to the outlook on life of their persecutors, although the latter rarely attempt to indoctrinate them.²⁰ The unreality which surrounds the hellish experiment, which is so strongly felt by the inmates themselves and makes the guards, but also the prisoners, forget that murder is being committed when somebody or many are killed, is as strong a handicap for a scientific approach as the non-utilitarian character of the institution. Only people who for one reason or another are no longer ruled by the common motives of self-interest and common sense could indulge in a fanaticism of pseudo-scientific convictions (the laws of life or nature) which for all immediate practical purposes (winning the war or exploitation of labor) was quite obviously self-defeating. "Normal men do not know that everything is possible,"²¹ said one of the survivors of Buchenwald. Social scientists, being normal men, will have great difficulties to understand that limitations which usually are thought to be inherent in the human condition could be transcended, that behavior patterns and motives which usually are identified, not with the psychology of some specific nation or class at some specific moment of its history, but with human psychology in general are abolished or play a quite secondary role, that objective necessities conceived as the ingredients of reality itself, adjustment to which seems a mere question of elementary sanity,

²⁰ Under Himmler's regime, "any kind of instruction on an ideological basis" was expressly prohibited.

²¹ Rousset, David, *The Other Kingdom* (New York 1947).

could be neglected. Observed from the outside, victim and persecutor look as though they were both insane and the interior life of the camps reminds the onlooker of nothing so much as an insane asylum. Our common sense, trained in utilitarian thinking for which the good as well as the evil makes sense, is offended by nothing so much as by the complete senselessness of a world where punishment persecutes the innocent more than the criminal, where labor does not result and is not intended to result in products, where crimes do not benefit and are not even calculated to benefit their authors. For a benefit, expected to be realized in centuries,²² can hardly be called an incentive especially not in a situation of great military emergency.

The fact that due to an insane consistency this whole program of extermination and annihilation could be deduced from the premises of racism is even more perplexing, for the ideological supersense, enthroned, as it were, over a world of fabricated senselessness, explains "everything" and therefore nothing. Yet, there is very little doubt that the perpetrators of these unprecedented crimes committed them for the sake of their ideology which they believed to be proved by science, experience and the laws of life.

Confronted with the numerous reports from survivors which in remarkable monotony always "report but do not communicate"²³ the same horrors and the same reactions, one is almost tempted to draw up a list of phenomena which do not fit into the most general notions we have of human being and behavior. We do not know and can only guess why the criminals withstood the disintegrating influences of camp life longer than other categories and why the innocents in all instances

²² It was Himmler's specialty to think in centuries. He expected the results of the war to be realized only "centuries later" in the form of "a Germanic World Empire" (see his speech at Kharkov, in April 1943, *Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. iv, p. 572 ff); when confronted with the "deplorable loss of labor" caused by the death of "tens and hundreds" of prisoners, he insisted that this "thinking in terms of generations is not to be regretted." (See his speech at the meeting of the SS Major generals at Posen, October 1943, *ibidem*, vol. iv, p. 558 ff). The SS troops were trained along similar lines. "Everyday problems do not interest us . . . we are only interested in ideological questions of importance for decades and centuries, so that the man . . . knows he is working for a great task which occurs but once in 2000 years." (See his speech of 1937, *loc. cit.*).

²³ See *The Dark Side of the Moon* (New York 1947) a collection of reports from Polish survivors of Soviet concentration camps.

were those who disintegrated most quickly.²⁴ It seems that in this extreme situation it was more important to an individual that his sufferings could be interpreted as punishment for some real crime or some real defiance against the ruling group than to have a so-called good conscience. The complete absence of even rudimentary regret on the side of the persecutors, on the other side, after the close of the war when some gesture of self-accusation might have been helpful in court, together with the ever-repeated assurances that responsibility for the crimes rested with some superior authorities, seems to indicate that fear of responsibility is not only stronger than conscience but even stronger, under certain circumstances, than fear of death. We know that the object of the concentration camps was to serve as laboratories in training people to become bundles of reactions, in making them behave like Pavlov's dog, in eliminating from the human psychology every trace of spontaneity; but we can only guess how far this is actually possible—and the terrible docility with which all people went to their certain death under camp conditions as well as the surprising small percentage of suicides are frightful indications²⁵—and what happens to human social and individual behavior once this process has been carried to the limit of the possible. We know of the general atmosphere of unreality of which the survivors give such uniform accounts; but we can only guess in what forms human life is being lived when it is lived as though it took place on another planet.

While our common sense is perplexed when confronted with actions which are neither passion inspired nor utilitarian, our ethics is unable to cope with crimes which the Ten Commandments did not foresee. It is senseless to hang a man for murder who took part in the fabrication

²⁴ This fact is quite prominent in many published reports. It has been especially remarked and interpreted by Bruno Bettelheim, in his "Behavior in Extreme Situations," in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. xxxviii (1943). Bettelheim speaks of the self-esteem of the criminals and the political prisoners as distinguished from the lack of self-respect in those who have not done anything. The latter "were least able to withstand the initial shock" and were the first to disintegrate. Bettelheim, however, is wrong when he thinks that this is due to the middle-class origin of the "innocents"—at his time mostly Jews; we know from other reports, especially also from the Soviet Union, that lower-class "innocents" disintegrate just as quickly.

²⁵ This aspect is especially stressed in David Rousset, *Les Jours de Notre Mort* (Paris 1947).

of corpses (although of course we hardly have any other course of action). These were crimes which no punishment seems to fit because all punishment is limited by the death penalty.

The greatest danger for a proper understanding of our recent history is the only too comprehensible tendency of the historian to draw analogies. The point is that Hitler was not like Jenghiz Khan and not worse than some other great criminal but entirely different. The unprecedented is neither the murder itself nor the number of victims and not even "the number of persons who united to perpetrate them."²⁶ It is much rather the ideological nonsense which caused them, the mechanization of their execution and the careful and calculated establishment of a world of the dying in which nothing any longer made sense.

²⁶ Robert H. Jackson, *op. cit. Nazi Conspiracy*, vol. ii, p. 3.