

# 'Eichmann Is Not Unique'

By H.R. TREVOR-ROPER

New York Times (1857-Current file); Sep 17, 1961; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2003) pg. SM13



Can it happen again?

Survivors at Buchenwald, 1945.

## 'Eichmann Is Not Unique'

A historian examines the forces that produced Adolf Eichmann—and the many like him. Could such a man, he asks, rise again?

By H. R. TREVOR-ROPER

THE verdict in the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem is now being considered by the judges who heard the mass of testimony offered. No great public trial, perhaps, has cast so long a shadow, both before and behind. From the very beginning, from the spectacular kidnaping of Eichmann in Argentina and his forcible, secret abduction to Israel, controversy has surrounded it which even the manifest fairness of the trial itself has not altogether stilled. When verdict and sentence are pronounced, controversy will certainly be heard again.

What are the deep roots of this controversy? It does not really concern the facts, which are hardly in doubt, nor the person of Eichmann, whom no one really defends, nor the technicalities of the law, which do not rouse public emotion. Fundamentally men are disquieted by the Eichmann trial because it has brought them face to face with a terrible fact of recent history which poses a grim question. How was it possible that in the heart of Europe, in the full

light and freedom of the twentieth century, six million persons were silently murdered, without charge and without crime? The trial and sentence of Eichmann, the undoubted organizer of those murders, does not dispose of that question. Let us not suppose that it does.

NOR does it dispose of another: Can it happen again; can there be another Eichmann?

Another Eichmann? The mind boggles at the thought. Is it possible? We read the evidence of the trial, the dreadful narratives of witnesses who had climbed naked out of mass graves, from under mounds of corpses, or had slipped from the doors of gas chambers, or thrown themselves from death trains, to tell the terrible story of this carefully calculated, conscientious, elaborately rationalized murder of their race. Surely, we exclaim, as we turn away in disgust, this crime was unique in history: there cannot be another Eichmann.

And yet, when we look further, can we be sure? We look at Eichmann in his glass dock. That dapper, sallow, insignificant-looking, tidy-minded man with his neatly piled papers, who took

such bureaucratic pride in the economy of his operations, was no unique figure, no volcanic tyrant, no Moloch, insatiable of human blood. Indeed, he explained, he was particularly squeamish about blood: he could never have been a surgeon; and so, for that matter, was Himmler, who fainted on seeing a mass execution.

There were sadists among the Nazis, of course: men who delighted in murder and women who made lampshades out of human skins; but these were criminals brutalized by their set tasks. The men who set those tasks were, in general, different: ordinary unimaginative functionaries like the business men who, in discreet language, competed for the cheap labor and waste products of the death camps, or the bankers who opened special deposit accounts for the gold rings and gold teeth of the corpses, or that efficient clerk who, without embarrassing questions, synchronized the railway timetables to Auschwitz and Treblinka, one Adolf Eichmann.

These men were not unique: they were legion. They were the thousands of dull, unquestioning Germans who accepted the social fact of anti-Semitism even in its most hideous form. And if they accepted it once, why

should they not accept it again?

After all, men have accepted it in the past. Anti-Semitism has a long past, although it is only in this century of science and speed that it has had at its disposal such terrible weapons, turning sporadic local pogroms into systematic, centralized massacre. The Jews know well that in no country and no century have they been exempt from expulsion or pogrom. Why should they suppose that the improved weapons of today should have been used for the last time in this century and by one country, Germany?

IN fact, even in recent years, German anti-Semitism was not unique. In Stalin's empire, Jews were persecuted as ruthlessly, though not as extensively, as in Hitler's, and that persecution though reduced, has not yet ceased. Since the wholesale liquidation of European Jewry, the intellectual élite of world Jewry, the Russian Jews are probably the most numerous in Europe. They might well be next on the list.

But why stop at the Jews? Once we study anti-Semitism in his historical context, divorced from particular personalities, times or countries, we must see (Continued on Page 106)

# 'Eichmann Was Not Unique'

(Continued from Page 13)

that it not the result of personal wickedness, or even belief or race. Admittedly, in the ages of faith, Jews were persecuted for their religion; but the Nazis were not interested in their beliefs, so we must assume that the real motives lie below the level of belief; they are psychological, not rational; social, not political. And if that is so, we should not expect such persecution to be confined to Jews.

**N**OR is it. In the long range of history, the Jews may have been the most constant, but they have not been the only victims. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Spaniards persecuted and finally expelled the Moors. They began by expelling them on the grounds of belief, but ended by expelling even those who were Christians. In the seventeenth century, the French expelled the Huguenots. In the nineteenth, the Turks destroyed the Armenians in their midst. Hitler destroyed gypsies as well as Jews. Seen historically, and in perspective, anti-Semitism is only the most obvious expression of a more general social and psychological phenomenon. That is why it may easily be stirred into life again.

Basically, that phenomenon is the psychological tendency to seek scapegoats in time of stress, and the social tendency to seek them in "out-groups"—that is, in social groups which are imperfectly assimilated in the society around them. A prosperous society can carry such groups within it, indeed may welcome them, but a society in crisis or decline often turns against them, especially if such groups seem to prosper while it fails. Then the passions of the natives are roused against the "outsiders" who (it seems) are indecently sucking the fat out of the land while contemptuously refusing to accept the patterns of behavior and belief of the natives

who harbor them and whom they exploit.

This view, of course, is a rationalization, not a true reason. Often such "outsiders" are not sucking wealth out of a society, but creating it. That was true of the Moors in Spain and the Huguenots in France, as became clear after their expulsion. It is often true of the



Eichmann on trial in Israel.

Jews. But men think up such reasons to justify an attitude which is really social.

Such, I believe, is the general basis of anti-Semitism and its variants. But between such a social mood and a catastrophe like that suffered by European Jewry, other forces must intervene. In particular, there must be agitators who will exploit this mood and focus the passions of the masses on the "out-group." Such were the Franciscan and Dominican friars who whipped up the Italian peasants against the Jews in the fifteenth century and the Spanish *pueblo* against Moors and Jews.

But also these agitators must be able to exploit or create a gulf of incomprehension between the natives and the

(Continued on Page 108)

(Continued from Page 106)

"outsiders." Nobody can destroy as scapegoats men whom he knows as human. It is therefore necessary that the "outsiders" be regarded as non-human or "sub-human." It is not always easy to persuade men that some of their fellowmen are "sub-human," but a long process of physical separation and indoctrination can do it; and once again, history shows how it can be done.

**F**OR instance, seventeenth-century Englishmen were generally tolerant and humane. Even in their civil war and revolution, they constantly remembered that their enemies were like themselves; they fought them with mildness and courtesy. Oliver Cromwell himself was ahead of his age in tolerance. But when Cromwell

Friedrich Spee, denounced as its real agents not credulous villagers or fanatical rulers, but "jurists and theologians who quietly enjoy their speculations and know nothing of the squalor of prisons, the weight of chains, the lamentations of the poor—things far below their dignity." How well we recognize, in these words, the respectable German bureaucrats who enabled Hitler to send six million Jews to death as "sub-human."

An "out-group" prospering amid general crisis, agitators to concentrate social resentment against it, a long period of propaganda declaring the "outsiders" inhuman—all these historic ingredients of persecution have long been endemic in Central Europe. When Napoleon emancipated the German Jews, many people thought



A roundup of Jews by Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943.

invaded Ireland; he assumed a new character. To him and his followers, the Irish were quite different. A generation of ideological propaganda against creatures safely invisible in another island made it possible for Englishmen to regard the Irish as "sub-human," and for Cromwell (who was surprisingly tolerant of Roman Catholics in England) to write from Drogheda that his "knocking on the head" of obstinate Irishmen was "a righteous judgment of God" on "these barbarous wretches."

Then again, in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe (and America), there was the execution of witches. Supposed witches were "outsiders" in their villages, uncooperative or suspect old women who were made scapegoats for the misfortunes of their neighbors or the death of their pigs. In those centuries, the churches built up a great, absurd mythology, making these old women agents of the Devil, intent on destroying all mankind; and because the bonds of a common humanity were broken, respectable lawyers and educated clergymen uttered hysterical nonsense and sent them, in some countries, to their deaths in thousands.

This craze was at its worst in Germany, where its most eloquent critic, the Jesuit

that the barrier of separation would be broken. Only their isolation in ghettos, it was said, had made the Jews different: now they would be "assimilated." But in fact they were not. Like the Christianized Moors of Spain, they were only half-assimilated: they remained an "out-group."

**S**O, too, in depressed, cosmopolitan Vienna, the capital of the multi-racial Austrian Empire, agitators arose who concentrated all the resentment of the "betrayed," frustrated former ruling race, the Germans, against the one race which had no standing and could be singled out as an "out-group"—the Jews.

It was in Vienna, at the end of the last century, that the fanatical anti-Semitic Mayor Lueger (whose views later inspired Hitler) horrified Theodor Herzl into his "Zionist" vision: the vision of an escape for European Jewry into a new Jewish state in Palestine. It was in Austria, too, in Hitler's home town of Linz, that Adolf Eichmann was brought up, feeding his thin mind on such anti-Semitic rubbish as the forged Protocols of Zion, which represented the Jews, like the seventeenth-century witches, as leagued in diabolical conspiracy to ruin mankind.

What began in Vienna was

transferred to Germany. Depressed and defeated Germany, after 1918, was a natural seed-bed of anti-Semitism. Left to itself, German anti-Semitism would no doubt have continued to ferment under the surface, as it has often done in many societies, breaking out intermittently here and there. But, by a terrible accident of history, the demagogue who set out to capture power in Germany in the Nineteen Twenties happened to be also the greatest of anti-Semitic agitators. It was as if one of the fanatical friars of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries had made himself Pope or King of Spain—and had also wielded all the resources of the modern state.

**T**HE Germany of Hitler's *Kampfzeit* was the Germany of the Great Depression, in which the middle classes lost their savings and the working classes their jobs. In his pursuit of power, Hitler exploited these facts. He set out to focus all the national frustrations of a defeated people and all the social frustrations of a dispossessed people against the historic "out-group" in their midst, whom he never ceased to designate as "sub-human." By the time his power was complete, he had created an image of the Jews: they were a stereotype, not human beings; and against that hated abstraction, an army of insignificant, faceless bureaucrats obediently issued the decree of death.

So the Eichmanns went into action. Lest they remember that they were murdering human beings, they piously averted their eyes; they used anodyne formulas, "disposal," "dispatch to the East," "final solution"; and even now they cannot be brought to admit that they actually harmed any human being. One will admit to passing on an order; another to arranging transport; a third to superintending arrival; a fourth to selecting those fit for work; a fifth opened the doors of the "disinfecting hall." There there is a pause, during which no one is responsible. After that a sixth removed the corpses, a seventh extracted the rings and teeth, an eighth fed the corpses to the flames. . . .

**A**DOLF EICHMANN is the personification of all these men. Soon he will be found guilty or not guilty; if guilty, he will be sentenced to death or otherwise. His fate is unimportant. What is important is that he should have no successor. But I do not believe that this depends on his fate. If anti-Semitism is never again to find so horrible an expression, we must turn away from Eichmann and seek to understand the workings of society, to prevent discrimination against "out-groups," to educate ourselves, and (not least) to use language correctly: not to call human beings "sub-human"; to say "murder," not "disposal," when we mean murder, and to know what that means.