Notesspa-99
Discussion: Genocide and other Horrors

1. General remarks: this has been a bloody century! One might start and end with the Balkans, it had seemed, but now we must add East Timor. And besides, there was the Boer War (1899-1902) before the 1st Balkan war, in 1912—and then a war, a massacre or other horror, or more than one, for each year. And, of course, there were tyrannies and persecutions of lengthy duration. I doubt that I can say anything that hasn’t been said before.

2. What can anthropology say to all this? Perhaps only this: that we must look at the context—the historical and cultural context in each case. And in the case of a large percentage of the 20th century horrors we are dealing quite specifically with
   a. state level societies, and
   b. the use of ever more complex technology. Robert Jay Lifton, writing in 1961 (History and Human Survival) notes (1971, pb, p.195), that Hiroshima and Nazi genocide “share...their relationship to the contemporary technology of murder.” The technology not only makes murder on a vast scale possible. With reference to the victims and survivors, Lifton says, “Massive technological murder produces certain kinds of more or less predictable group psychological response”—“the very dimensions of contemporary technology can influence responses to these holocausts and render them somewhat unique.” Psychic numbing is one of these responses.

And since these lines were originally written, we have had another 40 yrs of “improvements” in technology.

Yet there is still very elementary person to person, face to face killing, torture, exploitation and the rest.

History, and its aftermaths, and its uses are key elements of the contexts we must seek to grasp.
In the words of the German art historian CARL NEUMANN

“The most terrifying events of world history have spread indifference towards realities and facts.”
He wrote these words not after WWII, but in1924! He could not have imagined that much worse was to come.

It is now clearer than ever that the 2 wars were only 2 acts of the same drama—that the 2nd was prepared by the first—not only by the mass killings in the trench warfare, but also by the destruction of the middle class in Germany and Austria by the hardships of the war and the subsequent drastic inflations.
Not only did, and do, the events of the past have consequences—as important are the images of the past, refracted through our vision of the present. The past is continuously reconstructed, retold, reimagined, with new consequences being drawn, often with quite specific purposes, to satisfy the ends of the tellers.

3. More specifically, what can psychological anthropology contribute?
What do political systems/institutions do to activate/motivate /encourage(force /excuse etc. participation of individuals in acts of violence and cruelty?

Richard Koenigsberg notes the psychological fusion sought by Hitler and expressed in the Nuremberg rallies. The psychological aspects have been noted—the elation and loss of self. (In a different context Ede Frecska and Zsusanna Kulcsar speak of “Social bonding in the Modulation of the physiology of Ritual Trance, (Ethos 1989:pp70-87)).

We can certainly speak of the Nazi’s highly structured rallies as rituals, and say that they were settings for the mobilization and modification of identity, social bonding and affiliation. F. and K. suggest that (p.79) “the experience of social identity...has a mobilizing effect on endogenous opioids and conversely, ritually induced endogenous opioid activity supports social identity.” Linked to affiliation, we find regression and loss of ego boundaries. Such conditions promote suggestibility, that is, the implanting of authority structures and commands.

While the most intense experiences are temporary, they were, and in other situations of this sort, are continuously bolstered by reiterations of the sacred mythologies—through what used to be called propaganda.

It is important to note that the Nazis didn’t invent such rituals of social cohesion—they did however greatly intensify them with their brand of drama—and they were aided in this by money and state power. It is not clear how far we need to go back into the past, but the rituals of the French Revolution might offer a convenient starting point. 19th century nationalism, including the gymnastic rituals of Czech sokols, and socialist May Day parades, among others, were all available as models. And then, there were also the Boy Scouts.

One more item on the subject of myths: As Reinhard Greve (Tibetforschung im SS Ahnenerbe)(1995:168-199 in Th.Hauschild,ed:Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht) has documented, Himmler and a group of adviser believed an occult theory in an original Aryan race that had found refuge in Tibet after the destruction of Atlantis. There they created a mysterious, realm, preserving secrets of this nordic Aryan race, etc

Incidentally, the notion of a Nordic race was developed by Gunther, one of Fischer’s coeditors of the volume mentioned by Gretchen Schaft. But we shall return to Fischer in a moment.

Greve says that not only were variations of this Tibet myth popular in Europe and America in the 19th century but that these ideas survive among New Agers and neo-nazis. At any rate, on the basis of such notions, as early as 1933, Himmler founded an Institute for Tibet Studies, as part of the SS Ahnenerbe—research into the “ancestral heritage” sponsored by the SS.

This Institute sent an interdisciplinary research team to Tibet in 1939, under the leadership of the zoologist, Ernst Schaefer. As a student he had been to Tibet twice
between 1931 and 1936, as a member of two German-American expeditions into eastern Tibet, for the study of Pandas and for anthropological research into the local population.

Here is the text of his address to the Himalayan club in India in July of 1939:

"I received a telegram from the Reichsführer SS Himmler, asking me to come and explain my aims and prospects. Having been a member of the Black Guard [SS] since a long time, I was only too glad that the highest SS leader, himself a very keen amateur scientist, was interested in my work of exploration. There was no need of convincing the Reichsführer SS, as he himself had the same ideas; he simply promised to give me all the help necessary and I asked him to act as sponsor of the expedition, which he graciously accepted." (cited in Greve, p.172, ftn 15.)

One member of this expedition was Bruno Beger, specialist in physical anthropology and racial science. The team was recalled to Germany in Aug. 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the war. By 1942, the dreams of conquest first of central Asia and then of the Caucasus had grown and the members of the Tibet Institute where instructed to conduct more directly war relevant work. As Greve puts it (p.181) "the peoples of the occupied territories had to be understood and analyzed from a race science perspective (rassenkundlich), in order to destroy them, deport them or to utilize them as “auxiliaries” (Hilfsvolk)."

Studies of Tibetans became studies of Mongol peoples and eventually, in 1943, studies of KZ camp inmates—with Beger going to Auschwitz to select and measure Jews for a collection of skeletons as part of a project of Professor Hirt, physical anthropologist in Strassburg. In Feb 1945, Beger was instructed to destroy all relevant documentation.

I'll return to more of this matter of physical anthropology/anthropometry in a moment. But let me first turn to Carol Nagengast's point about "symbolic violence" and more narrowly, dehumanization. This seems to apply wherever we find the horrors we have been dealing with in these papers. The Nazi’s were very active and very skilled in this area. They learned a great deal from, and contributed to, practices of advertising and promotion. Before the Nazis, there was political propaganda, using caricature and other techniques. Some of their anti-Semitic films are well known, although they were aware, before the war at least, what much of the rest of the world thought of their propaganda so that they were somewhat concerned about its dissemination outside their territories. Here is a small anecdote that illustrates the point: 1938: Julius Streicher and Der Sturmer.

a. *If we ask* what makes it possible for individuals to behave as they did and do, one question is whether it is necessary to have been mistreated in order to mistreat? How is mistreatment facilitated on the large scale level: propaganda, indoctrination, including the dehumanized image of the victim, fear of authority, political even academic ambition, all play their role.

b. Erikson notes that "a specific rage can be aroused wherever identity development loses the promise of assured wholeness...In periods of collective crisis, such potential rage is shared by many and is easily exploited by psychopathic leaders, who become the models of a sudden surrender to total doctrines and dogmas in
which the negative identity appears to be the desirable and dominant one... the rage aroused by threatened identity loss can explode in the arbitrary violence of mobs, or it can, less consciously, serve the efficient destructiveness of the machinery of oppression and war."(20-210 E.H.Erikson: Life History and the Historical Moment.(Norton 1975). And, of course, rage needs to be directed at an object—a category of persons, which makes the creation of scapegoats a necessary part of the whole.

c. Yet it is necessary to remember that Hitler’s appeal was not only to the disaffected, with their rage. He was successful also because he appealed to those who could and would support him with organization and money, for their own ends.

Here Racism played its role. Note its emergence, in part, out of medicine/anatomy, the need to classify—to create order. For anatomists, as for naturalists, there was also a degree of professional objectivity. We have noted a kind of mania for documentation, often on the basis of preexisting notions—one can hardly call them theories—in the Tibet institute and the SS Ahnenerbe. For politician and political theorists, advocates and others, the data become materials to be used for their own purposes. MJH (1948) notes how Gobineau and Huston Stewart Chamberlain used American pro-slavery writings to bolster their arguments. Joan Dayan, in her book, Haiti, History and the Gods (1995) shows a relationship between the classifications of animals and humans by the naturalist Georges Buffon and Moreau de St Mery’s racial classifications for 18th century St. Domingue. The system Moreau describes involves 110 ranked combinations, going from “Absolute white” (128 parts white blood) to “absolute black” (with 128 parts black blood) His list of white/black crosses includes not only mulattoes, and quadroons, but also marabou, griffe, sacatara (a cross between a white and a quarteron,) and so on. These labels have continued their role in contemporary Haitian society.

Gretchen Schafft speaks of Eugen Fischer.

Anecdote: Eugen Fischer and V. Gordon Child.

But to return to anatomy and the perversion of scientific curiosity:
Viz.:Amos Elon NYRB

d. Again, we are back to the subject of dehumanization, this time in the context of anatomy, growing out of what had been, in Kuhn’s terms, “normal science.”.

Here is another question: what happens psychologically to those who perceive themselves to be in danger? Here is an example: in a paper entitled “the other as nightmare” Yoram Bilu reports that during the intifada, both Jewish and Arab children reported dreams of aggression—in which they were the victims of aggression. Such dreams were more frequent among the Arab children. This study confirms the findings by Schneider and Sharp of the dreams of Australian Yir Yoront.

Regrettably, there seems to be a division between students of victims and of perpetrators at present. And we do have to ask:
What happens to people who survive (asking:—who survived what—at what stages of their own development/) WHAT IS THEIR EFFECT ON THE SOCIETIES IN WHICH THEY LIVE, ON THEIR CHILDREN, ETC.
The questions are endless and the repercussions of the past, seen from the present, are ever endless.
The past is not only another country, it is a shifting ground. We see it from and through the present. We see, in some sense, only a reflection of the past, as we understand it.