

Book Review

Empire of destruction: A history of Nazi mass killing

Alex J Kay

New Haven: Yale University Press
2021, 400 pages
ISBN 978-0-3002-34053-3

Between 1939 and 1945, Nazi perpetrators deliberately killed more than 13 million civilians and non-combatants across the expanding German empire.⁷⁶⁴ This number excludes those who had already perished in Germany in the 1930s before the Second World War had erupted. Such a significant figure is almost too large for anyone to fathom. However, when considering that Namibia has an estimated population of 2,5 million, Botswana 2,3 million, Lesotho 2,1 million, Eswatini 1,16 million and that all populations combined are roughly only 8 million, the figure acquires a bit more meaning.⁷⁶⁵ A little less than half of the victims of these mass killings, approximately 5,8 million, were European Jews. The second-largest category of victims was the 3,3 million Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), followed by 1 million killed as preventive terror or reprisals in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Greece, Poland and other German-occupied territories. In Warsaw alone, roughly 185 000 victims perished during these anti-partisan operations. In addition, an estimated 300 000 mentally and physically disabled were also killed. To these figures, roughly 200 000 Roma and 100 000 of the Polish ruling classes and elites can be added.⁷⁶⁶

The Nazi Regime spared none among these targeted groups for annihilation. For instance, between 29 and 30 September 1941, German forces, assisted by Ukrainian auxiliary policemen, shot and killed 33 771 Jews at Babi Yar, a ravine on the outskirts of Kyiv.⁷⁶⁷ The number murdered over these two days was more than the number of inhabitants currently living in the West Coast town of Saldanha in South Africa. Apart from the magnitude of the number killed, this figure does not show that men, women, infants, the elderly, the ill and the disabled were among the victims. “[E]ach individual death”, so easily lost in these vast numbers, was “always singular”, designating a human life and not merely a statistic.⁷⁶⁸ By considering this, these numbers acquire an additional layer of significance. An additional layer is that each of these murders was also carried out at the hands of people using several methods.

Some of these first perpetrators were physicians and nurses who experimented with starvation and lethal injections. The first victims were German children who perished in the ‘euthanasia’ campaign. As these killing programmes expanded, three main methods came to dominate operations. These were “[s]tarvation, shooting and gassing, in that order” as the “preferred killing methods”.⁷⁶⁹ Carbon monoxide and gas vans were used in isolated cases in the early war years, such as during the murder of Polish psychiatric patients. However, for the most part, the other two methods proved far more efficient

in murdering thousands en masse in a short period at little cost. The effectiveness of shooting was particularly evident over three days in November 1943 when 42 000 Jewish forced labourers in concentration camps were shot during Operation Harvest Festival.⁷⁷⁰ Despite such lethality, gassing also gained prominence in later war years after German leaders, such as Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, instructed subordinates to find a “less burdensome [method] for the perpetrators” than shooting.⁷⁷¹ They feared that the mass shooting of civilians of all ages would brutalise and psychologically alter these men to such an extent that they would be unable to reintegrate into post-war German society. Despite such misgivings, these fears seemed unfounded for most of the over 500 000, primarily German and Austrian men, involved in the Holocaust alone.⁷⁷² The thousands of participants in other mass killing campaigns can also be added to these ranks.

These perpetrators were spread across several state and party institutions and were sometimes simultaneously involved in several annihilation programmes. Some served in the German armed forces, others in the police or paramilitaries such as the SS (*Schutzstaffel* or protective echelon). They also came from different generational groups and varied socioeconomic backgrounds. As a group, they were therefore markedly diverse. However, the one commonality they shared was a collective trauma. These individuals experienced it either consciously during the age of Imperial Germany and the early years of the Weimar Republic or through intergenerational transmission. Such shared trauma arguably mobilised many to participate in collective violence and mass killings. The result was that “[h]undreds of thousands of mass murderers were at large simultaneously” both during and after the war.⁷⁷³ These perpetrators seamlessly returned to quotidian life as schoolteachers, bank managers, physicians, town mayors, salesmen and other everyday professions. Most, if not all, were far removed from anything associated with violence. These individuals could return to ‘normalcy’ because the post-war context allowed it. Since the 1930s, under the previous National Socialist regime, the state had gradually dehumanised and removed legal protection from various designated groups. Some of these first efforts involved forced sterilisations. The result of this continuous process was that, by the time war erupted, the state had provided the perpetrators with a framework which legitimised collective violence and even genocide, as “a very specific type of mass killing”, to “destroy a group” under “the cover of war”.⁷⁷⁴

Therefore Germany did not carry out mass killings while simultaneously conducting a war; instead, “the logic of war was central to the rationale for targeting each and every one of the victim groups”.⁷⁷⁵ Each of these groups was considered “by the Nazi regime in one way or another as a potential threat to Germany’s ability to fight and, ultimately win a war for hegemony in Europe”.⁷⁷⁶ These policies and programmes formed part of the prioritisation of resources for the overall war effort. For instance, an estimated 18 million males served in the German military. They required rations, kits and equipment that had to be redirected from somewhere or someone.⁷⁷⁷ The inhabitants of territories seized by the German empire, which needed food, accommodation and other vital resources, can be added to this figure. Consequently, the National Socialist regime deliberately starved the Soviet urban population and other victim groups to death to allow others to live. As resources became increasingly scarce in the later war years, the Nazi regime

even went so far as to eliminate some of those German soldiers who suffered from war trauma and might prove a burden to the war effort. Other motivations for these German policies were eliminating potential focal points of resistance to German occupation, preventing the provision of aid to partisans, and eliminating potential spies and elements that could cause destabilisation behind the front lines. Children, for instance, posed the threat of seeking revenge in adulthood for the murder of their parents. All of the “killing programmes [might therefore have] possessed a racial (and racist) component”, but that was not the only or primary motivation behind them.⁷⁷⁸ Instead, it was an actual Nazi strategy to win the war.

If any of these aspects of Nazi mass killings during the Second World War sounds interesting, then Alex J Kay’s latest publication is highly recommended. However, potential readers should note Kay’s warning in the opening pages. More so than the included images, much of the content could prove very disturbing and upsetting to most readers. Unlike the discussion, all the pictures are positioned in the middle of the book and can be passed over easily. As for the content, as Kay himself notes, most of the book does not shy “away from presenting the events in graphic detail” while at the same time making every effort not to “shock or [to] sensationalise” events. Kay succeeds in treating such a complex topic with the required sensitivity, which could not have been an easy task. However, for these reasons, it might perhaps also explain why at least some of the earlier chapters read almost like a clinically sanitised list of German atrocities, which occurred at this or that place, on this or that date, carried out by this or that *Einsatzgruppe* (task force or special action group) resulting in an ‘x amount’ killed. The wealth of detail is impressive and indicative of thorough research, but some discussion is desired at times to break what seems like an endless record of horrendous events. Furthermore, for those readers lacking a sound understanding and knowledge of the internal mechanics of the Nazi regime, these parts might seem even more convoluted. A brief explanation early in the book on the functioning and organisation of the German empire, its institutions and its leadership would have gone a long way to fostering many readers’ general understanding of the context and ease their ability to focus on the central theses of the study. While at the same time, despite using ‘mass killing’ as the conceptual framework, Kay does not become entrenched in debates on theory, terminology, frameworks and concepts as some other academics sometimes do, which makes this work highly accessible to a broader audience.

Overall, the book fulfils its aim precisely as indicated by the sub-title; it is a book about *The history of Nazi mass killings* – nothing more and nothing less. The topic was meticulously researched as becomes evident early in the reading. Kay consulted numerous secondary sources, not only those written in English, and a variety of primary sources from multiple archives and innumerable perspectives. The compiled research is divided both chronologically and thematically into one compact volume. One of the main reasons that *Empire of destruction* is not yet another book on the Holocaust is that it is exactly not that. Kay explored seven identified victim groups in one single study. A further rarity is Kay’s contribution to the historiography of the persecution of Soviet POWs. No previous monograph focused on the fate and treatment of Soviet POWs is available in the English language. That is not to say that these and other

victim groups have not been researched, but sources are often only available in Polish or other foreign languages. For these reasons, this comparative study provides a new perspective on this period of violence and moral degeneration, which could influence our current knowledge and understanding of the period while it simultaneously also raises a fresh set of questions. Some aspects of mass murder are mentioned, such as enforced nudity, but its significance within the broader framework of mass killing needs further exploration. Another question is where does the persecution of those individuals accused of homosexuality feature in the narrative? Nowhere are they even mentioned in the book. This leads to another question. What is the difference between ‘victims’, ‘perpetrators’, ‘collaborators’, and ‘bystanders’?⁷⁷⁹ Local actors who directly participated in the carrying out of these atrocities, such as the Belarussian police and other auxiliaries from Lithuania and other places, are mentioned, but only in passing. Granted, neither these nor other questions could all have been dealt with in this single study, but perhaps they will be answered in subsequent publications by Kay.

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ENDNOTES

⁷⁶⁴ AJ Kay. *Empire of destruction: A history of Nazi mass killing*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021, 1, 284.

⁷⁶⁵ World Population Review. “2022 world population by country”.
<<https://worldpopulationreview.com/>> Accessed on 18 May 2022.

⁷⁶⁶ Kay *op. cit.*, p. 294.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 288.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁷⁹ See for example MJ Chodakiewicz. *Between Nazis and Soviets: Occupation politics in Poland, 1939–1947*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004.