

Robert Jay Lifton.
THE NAZI DOCTORS.
New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986.
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In this disturbing study Dr. Lifton provides a "psychohistorical" analysis of how doctors, sworn to heal, could become mass killers, and how, some forty years later, they rationalize the experience. Despite its somewhat numbing detail and other shortcomings, this study constitutes an important contribution to Holocaust literature, and to the sociology and psychology of medicine.

Put briefly, Lifton demonstrates that doctors, involved in the extermination of the Jews, saw themselves as merely doing what Deputy Party Leader Rudolph Hess called "applied biology." As one influential manual by a medical professor at the time put it, the doctor shall no longer simply care for the sick, but become a "cultivator of the genes," a "physician to the Volk," and a "biological soldier." No more chilling expression of genocide-as-biology could be imagined than the answer of a Nazi doctor who was asked how he could reconcile exterminations with his Hippocratic Oath: "Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind."

Among those interviewed were eighty former prisoners of Auschwitz (most of them doctors who had worked on the medical blocks), and twenty-eight Nazi doctors, five of whom had worked in the concentration camps.

It is one thing to have subscribed from a distance to the evil Nazi ideology that the Volk had to be purified. But how were seemingly decent German doctors able to become instruments of that policy, live in the midst of the killing camps, actually select the victims, see them go to the gas chambers, smell their incinerated flesh, and sometimes deliberately kill them in the course of experiments? The whole of Part Three of Lifton's book attempts to answer that question. He argues that a number of psychic mechanisms and influences in combination provide the explanation. One is what he calls "psychic numbing" towards the victim, "a diminished capacity or inclination to feel," including "the rejection of what one actually perceives and of its meaning." The other and related psychic mechanism he proposes is that of "doubling." In order to function psychologically in an environment completely antithetical to his previous ethical standards, the Nazi doctor invented an "Auschwitz Self." This was a "self" connected to the prior self, yet autonomous, and it became the one doing the dirty work. For the Nazi doctor in the camp, conscience could not be eliminated, but it could be transferred to the Auschwitz Self, "which placed it within its own

criteria for good (duty, loyalty to group, improving Auschwitz conditions, etc.) thereby freeing the original self from responsibility for actions there."

The book is impressive and the explanations are in many respects plausible, and even compelling. But nagging reservations remain. One is somehow uneasy with Lifton's elaborate efforts to explain and understand, in psychological terms, the immense and unique evil involved in the extermination of the Jews. There is, after all, a dimension of evil which is and remains beyond explanation, beyond understanding. Lifton is well aware of the great wrong involved here and clearly does not seek to excuse it or explain it away. Nevertheless the overall, though undesired, effect of doing a Freudian analysis of the Auschwitz doctor is to sanitize, at least partially, an event beyond cleansing.

Whatever the psychological mechanism and rationalizations which may have come into play, surely the more significant influence and explanation was already provided by Alexander Mitscherlich, in 1949, in the work he edited, entitled, *Wissenschaft ohne Menschlichkeit* (Science without Humanity). Largely in the light of the Nuremberg trials he concluded that German physicians had been guilty of two failures. They did not notice the dangers inherent in allowing medical practice to become subservient to a natural science which lacked any doctrine of man, and which gave no importance to the personhood of humans. Secondly, they did not insist upon the commitment of physicians to a calling higher than, and sometimes in conflict with, the ideologies of a nation-state, making them all too vulnerable to politically imposed interests. Lifton does refer to those factors but they tend to get lost under the weight and detail of his Freudian analysis.

Another reservation concerns Lifton's model of genocide. It is clear that, for Lifton, the Nazi extermination of the Jews provides a model of genocide more or less similar to all other instances of genocide. He also concludes with a warning that the dynamics and ideology of the Holocaust were similar to the "nuclear technology of genocide which now haunts us all."

In drawing these parallels with the past and present Lifton may be depriving the Holocaust of its unique and unparalleled evil. The type of biomedical, racist, and dehumanizing vision which fuelled the Nazi extermination of the Jews was arguably not a major source of other genocides in recent history. For example, the mass extermination of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915-16 was simply (and tragically) the extermination of a people believed to represent a political threat to the dominant power.

Warnings about the dangers of nuclear technology are always and increasingly in order. But to compare the dynamics which contributed to the Holocaust with those fuelling the present nuclear threat is to overlook the unique horror of each of those two realities. There is no evidence that the nuclear threat has arisen, or continues, because people in one society consider those in another less than human, or because they are prepared to see that other population exterminated to "cleanse" society. It is arguable that the nuclear threat and nuclear stockpiling continue largely in the absence of any clear ideology behind nuclear policies. If that analysis is correct then what influenced the Holocaust, and what could have been done to prevent it, is very different from what fuels the nuclear threat, and what must be done to lessen it.

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