

Theodore Silva

“Six Million Accusers” essay

The trial address of Israeli attorney-general Gideon Hausner against Nazi Bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann is a thorough description of the horrors of the Holocaust and a powerful condemnation of Eichmann’s role in it. Its language is bone-chilling, especially to those of us with Jewish ancestry and stories of family members permanently displaced in that terrible Shoah. The results of Adolf Eichmann’s trial, and the Nuremburg trials before his, should always be regarded as repudiations of deranged Nazi ideology and the systematic dehumanization and terror that it breeds. But this essay is not about the ancient evil of anti-Semitism before and after Dreyfus and Hitler, nor is it about the trial of history’s most murderous bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann. In this essay I will describe how “ordinary” people are capable of such inhumanity, explain the controversy around “the banality of evil” and present examples of the “just following orders” plea being used to justify inhumane acts in the present day.

In October 1945, the International Military Tribunal (IMT) convened in Nuremberg, Germany to try 199 Nazis and their collaborators in the wake of history’s deadliest war. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The defendants generally acknowledged that the crimes occurred but denied that they were responsible, as they were following orders from a higher authority.” This “Befehl ist Befehl” defense—literally “an order is an order,” was so widely used in these trials that it became known as the “Nuremberg defense.” This was fifteen years before the trial of Adolf Eichmann, where he used the same plea to the Jerusalem District Court in 1961. Just one year later, famous experiments conducted by

Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram seem to demonstrate how this plays out in the mind. Subjects of the experiment quizzed an invisible “student,” who was in on the experiment. Each time the student answers a question incorrectly, subjects are instructed to give him increasingly high electric shocks. It is made clear to the participants that the higher levels of electric shock are dangerous, even lethal. Participants can hear wails of pain beyond the wall. If the instructions to shock the student are not obeyed, the experimenter would prod them to administer the shock, going so far as to say, “you have no other choice but to continue.” The subjects were made to believe that they were actually supposed to kill the student. Every single participant administered at least a 300-volt shock, and 65% of participants approved the lethal 450-volt shock. Professor Milgram designed this experiment to answer his own question, “Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? [Or] could we call them accomplices?”

In the 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, author Hannah Arendt introduced the phrase “banality of evil” to describe Adolf Eichmann’s actions throughout the Holocaust and World War II. Arendt herself was a refugee, imprisoned for a time by the Gestapo for researching Nazi anti-Semitism. She makes a number of fascinating arguments about Eichmann, including that he showed “no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind. He personally never had anything whatever against Jews.” Arendt makes the case that although Eichmann was one of modern history’s worst mass murderers, he was also a pencil pusher: not especially ideological by Nazi standards, or even very intelligent. The arguments contained in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are controversial to this day—Eichmann may well have been more sociopathic or fanatic than Arendt gives him credit for—but the core of her claim is that ordinary people who show no signs of mental illness or antisocial behavior are capable of

great evil. Simon Wiesenthal, who dedicated the latter half of his life to hunting Nazi war criminals, called Eichmann a “desk murderer,” or one that “Doesn’t need to be fantastical, sadistic, or mentally ill to murder millions...it is enough to be a loyal follower eager to do one’s duty.” Adolf Eichmann and men like him tend to have clean consciences. Even with our modern understanding of the psychology of the “just following orders” defense, the expression is still being rephrased to defend inhumane practices in the United States and around the world.

In one of the United States’ worst war crimes of the 20th century, between 347 and 504 unarmed Vietnamese men, women, children and infants were massacred in My Lai and My Khe. Some women were sexually abused before their execution, and many men had their bodies mutilated in unspeakable ways. William Calley, then a lieutenant, was personally responsible for rounding up and gunning down Vietnamese he knew were civilians. When confronted about his horrific actions, Calley used the exact phrase “just following orders.” During his court martial, he stated “I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day...I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women, and children. They were all classified the same, and that was the classification that we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers...I felt then and I still do that I acted as directed, and I carried out the orders I was given, and I do not feel wrong in doing so.” Calley’s life sentence for his massacre was reduced to twenty years, then down to ten, but he was soon free on bail. Tremendous public sympathy and pressure from President Richard Nixon resulted in the murderer spending just a few months in prison in all. His superior orders plea was a success in the court of public opinion: Calley is still a free man, living in Gainesville, Florida.

A January 2020 *Frontline* documentary follows Wesley Farris, a United States Border Patrol agent tasked with separating children from their parents at the southern border. Farris

describes what it was like to be part of the program: in one case, a young boy of about two climbed and clung to him as a contractor attempted to drag him away from his parents. He could do nothing but watch as that boy was taken away from his family. You can see the pain in his Farris' face as he recounts this event. "That was the most horrible thing I've ever done... You can't help but see your own kids." The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports that that more than 5,400 individual children were separated from their families on the southern border between July 2017 and October 2019 alone. "I mean, none of us were happy about it," Farris says, "But everyone around me was doing exactly what we were all told to do." Of course, none of the Nazi zealots were nearly as repentant as Wesley Farris. Eichmann insisted on his innocence until his execution.

Perhaps the most profound and chilling lesson from Eichmann, Nuremburg, the Holocaust and World War II as a whole is that anyone is capable of great evil. To call every character who has ever committed grotesque crimes against humanity a "sociopath" is regressive and misses the point. Every person is a product of their environment: when brutality and inhumanity are so thoroughly normalized, one's empathy can be eroded. Adolf Eichmann himself reported repulsion seeing Nazi killing operations firsthand in Poland. Before long he was moved to a desk job where he adopted a "different personal attitude," becoming numb to the senseless violence he was commanding. Millions upon millions of innocent men, women, and infants cruelly died with a stroke of his pen. The Milgram experiment and many subsequent studies indicate that few of us aren't capable of the same evil. Nazi Germany was one case where an industrialized nation made hatred of the racial minorities a central pillar of its ideology, raised children to believe terrible lies, and acted to exterminate a people on a massive scale. It is of utmost importance that all people understand that they aren't immune to propaganda. That is

why we educate our children on the horrors of the Holocaust and teach that such atrocities can occur anywhere. Everybody ought to learn that the only way to end systematic oppression is to dismantle those systems that allow it to exist.

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