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Can Jews be Nazis?



Photographer unknown, Colonel Ernst Bloch, (German Mischling), c. 1944.

For many people, the question is inflammatory. The crimes of the German Nazis were of such magnitude that comparison with any other historical violence is invidious. The genocide of the Jews was deliberate and methodical and intended to eliminate every last one. The goal was the same with the Romani and Sinti people. By comparison, the Israelis – currently

accused of genocide — are rank amateurs. They have so far killed some 35,000 Palestinians in Gaza out of a population of 2.3 million.

But the question, “Can Jews be Nazis?” is nevertheless important for challenging claims of moral inoculation by virtue of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. If Israeli leaders are indeed committing a genocide in Gaza – as seems the case — they inhabit the same moral universe as the German Nazis, regardless of the suffering of past generations. In addition to the 35,000 killed, the war in Gaza has injured another 75,000 and displaced 2 million. Most of the victims are women and children – how can their deaths be justified? Israeli cabinet ministers, Knesset members, military personnel, and police have all freely spoken of their wish to force Palestinians into Egypt, establish Jewish-only settlements in Gaza, and even use an atomic bomb to kill everyone in the Gaza strip. (U.S. senator Lindsay Graham recently also suggested using a nuclear weapon against Gaza.)

Last week, the Israeli government suspended food and fuel deliveries to Gaza as collective punishment for a Hamas rocket attack that killed four soldiers. Such retribution is banned under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, by which Israel is bound. It also violates the teaching of the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel – “The person who sins; only he shall die.” One of the Hebrew sages, Hillel the Elder, reiterated the point in the *Mishna*, the “oral” Torah: “Each by his own sin will die’.

The 1948 U.N. Convention on the Crime of Genocide, describes it as “the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.” By that definition, Israel has joined the club of violators and is subject to international sanction. When the International Criminal Court levels charges of genocide against Prime Minister Netanyahu, National Security Minister Ben-Gvir, Defense Minister Gallant, IDF Chief of Staff Halevi, and Finance Minister Smotrich – indictments could be announced any day — the men will be subject to arrest by all convention signatories, including the U.S. (Genocide is also prohibited under U.S. law, but to be prosecutable, the crime must be committed in the U.S. or by U.S. nationals.) The punishment for genocide is 30 years imprisonment, or in exceptional circumstances, life in prison. If Netanyahu manages to avoid trial for corruption in Israel, and if he lives long enough (he’s 74), he could be arrested and held in detention at an ICC facility outside the Hague in Scheveningen. His jailers there are unlikely to let him to indulge his taste for pink champagne and Cuban cigars.

Jewish Nazis in Nazi Germany

“Can Jews be Nazis?” is also an historical question. To that, the answer is yes. Though membership in the German Nazi party was barred to Jews, thousands joined the Luftwaffe,

Wehrmacht, and Kriegsmarine in the 1930s. They did so for the same reasons as other Germans: To serve the fatherland, forge a career, and continue a family tradition of military service. After passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Jews were barred from enlistment, but some managed to hide their ethnic origins (and lack of a foreskin), or else obtain papers from Nazi Party officials attesting to their *deutschblütigkeit*. One colonel in the Wehrmacht, Ernst Bloch, a *Mischlinge* (half-Jewish person) received the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross for bravery, the highest award given to military and paramilitary officers in Nazi Germany. His Judaism remained undetected until 1944, when he came to the attention of SS chief Henrich Himmler. A few weeks later, he received the following letter from his superior, major general Wilhelm Burgdorf, deputy chief of the Wehrmacht personnel office: “The Führer has decided as of 31 January 1945 to discharge you from active duty. It is an honor to thank you on behalf of the Führer for your service rendered during war and peace for our people and fatherland. I wish you all the best for the future. Heil Hitler.” The wonder is not that Bloch was detected after so long, but that he was apparently surprised at his dismissal. A few weeks later, he joined the Volkssturm (people’s militia) and was killed during the Soviet invasion of Berlin. There were thousand of other Jews, not all *Mischlinge* who attained high roles in the German military. Twenty of them were awarded the Iron Cross.

In all, thousands of Jews in Germany and occupied Europe – out of a population of about 9.5 million — assisted the Nazi regime in some way. Most did so under duress. Jewish ghetto councils, or *Judenräte*, established by Nazi officials in Poland, Lithuania and elsewhere, were tasked with distributing limited provisions of food and medicine, recruiting forced laborers, confiscating Jewish property, and supervising the Jewish ghetto police. By 1942 or ’43, some *Judenräte* and ghetto police were directly assisting local Nazis by identifying resistance leaders and organizing Jews for deportation to the death camps. The Jewish police could be cruel, especially the “13 Group,” established in Warsaw in 1940. They ran their own prison and reported directly to the Gestapo. Nevertheless, given the threats and ambient violence – refusal to comply with Gestapo orders usually meant death — it’s difficult to cast judgement on cooperating Jews. By the end of the war, the vast majority of them were dead.

Similar moral and legal complexity concerns *Kapos* and *Sonderkommandos*. The former were concentration or death-camp prisoners recruited to supervise and direct other prisoners. They were generally, but not always, selected from criminal-inmates to reduce the likelihood that they would feel solidarity with their charges. *Kapos* were accorded privileges in exchange for their services and their brutality: separate quarters, better food, and civilian clothes. If someone selected to be *Kapo* refused service, he would generally be returned to the ranks of

regular prisoners, and somebody else appointed to take his place. Thus, it's easy to see why so few resisted recruitment – if there was always someone available for the job, a prisoner would ask himself: “Why shouldn't it be me, why shouldn't I survive?”?

Sonderkommandos were death-camp workers, such as at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and Sobibor, who cleared the gas chambers of bodies, put them in the crematoria, and disposed of the incinerated remains. The men who did this were generally recruited immediately upon arrival at the camps and would be shot or gassed at once if they refused. The work was of course unspeakable, and the Nazis made sure that it was unspoken; the *Sonderkommandos* were segregated from other prisoners to conceal the latter's fate, and nearly all were themselves killed in an effort to hide the facts of the Holocaust from the world. A few survived however, and the tales they told exposed the harrowing of Hell. To call them collaborators would be to inflict posthumous punishment upon people whose souls were already shattered.

American Jewish Nazis

There is nothing funnier than a Jewish Nazi. That's the unavoidable conclusion of any survey of post-War American comedy. In 1940, the popular Three Stooges (all Jewish), starred in the short film, *You Nazty Spy* in which Moe Howard plays a wallpaper hanger who somehow becomes Hailstone, the Hitler-mustachioed leader of the nation of Moronika. Two years later, the radio and TV comic Jack Benny (Jewish) starred with Carol Lombard in *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), directed by Ernst Lubitsch (Jewish). Benny plays Joseph Tura, a Polish stage actor who dresses up as a Gestapo officer to obtain a list of civilians targeted for Nazi reprisals. (It's a very complicated plot.)

Immediately after the war, there were a spate of war movies with Jews playing Nazi roles, but few were comedies. Within about a decade, that began to change. On *Your Show of Shows* (1954) Sid Caesar (Jewish) and Howard Morris (Jewish) performed an eight-minute sketch called *The German General* in which Howard helps dress Caesar in his elaborate uniform – military tunic, medals, epaulets, sash, sword, and peaked hat — while both speak in pseudo-German (mixed with Yiddish) double-talk. I won't give away punch line if you haven't seen it. (Click on the link!) A decade later, Peter Sellers (Jewish) played a former Nazi, now an American nuclear weapons expert in the black comic *Dr. Strangelove* directed by Stanley Kubrick (Jewish). And in 1967, in what is perhaps the pinnacle of American, Jewish comedy, Mel Brooks (Jewish) wrote and directed *The Producers*, with a mainly Jewish cast either playing Nazis or abetting them. Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder (both Jewish) are the two producers who aim to mount a Broadway musical so tasteless that it

closes in one night, allowing them to pocket all their investors' money. Kenneth Mars (Jewish) plays Franz Liebkind, the Nazi-helmet wearing author of the play "Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden," and Dick Shawn (Jewish) is the hippy-dippy *Fuhrer* who steals the show and makes *Springtime* a success. During the Busby Berkeley-style production number before the play's intermission, Brooks sings a single line, dubbing for one of the dancers in the chorus: "Don't be stupid, be a smarty! Come and join the Nazi Party!"



The Producers, Mel Brooks, writer and director, Crossbow, Embassy and Columbia Pictures, 1967, screenshot.

At about the same time, there premiered a television comedy – I'm ashamed to admit it was one of my childhood favorites – called *Hogan's Heroes* about a group of American GIs in a German POW camp, Stalag 13. The premise of the show is that the Nazis are comic buffoons, and the Americans are crafty and carefree, running an espionage and sabotage outfit from their barracks. The commandant of the camp, Colonel Klink was played by Werner Klemperer, the Jewish son of the great German conductor and composer, Otto Klemperer, and cousin of the literary scholar and diarist Victor Klemperer, whose three-volume journal of life under the Third Reich, *I Shall Bear Witness*, *To the Bitter End*, and *The Lesser Evil* is one of the essential testaments of the period. The incompetent and good-natured character of Sergeant Schultz, whose oft-repeated catchphrase was "I see nothing, I hear nothing, I know nothing," was played by the Ukraine-born John Banner (Jewish). He lost much of his family in the Holocaust, as did Robert Clary (Jewish), who played Corporal Louis LeBeau. Clary survived Buchenwald, while 12 other members of his immediate family

were sent to Auschwitz, where they were all murdered. How he managed to keep his composure in that show – which ran for six seasons until 1971 – one can only guess.

The reason Jewish Nazis are funny is that with the few exceptions noted above, Jews could not be Nazis. So, a Jewish Nazi is both a contradiction in terms, and an affront to anti-Semites hell-bent on destroying them. In Freudian terms, the laughter arises from the short-circuiting or release of psychic energy (cathexis) that occurs when the logical chain – Nazi killer creates Jewish victim — is broken. The same violation of expectation and laughter follows from Woody Allen’s famous stand-up routine about the Klan, performed from 1962-64. One day, he tells his audience, he was in the Deep South, and some friends invited him to a costume party. He rarely goes to such things, he says, but decided to make an exception and go as a ghost, dressed in a white sheet. But on his way to the party, he is picked up by a car with three other men dressed in sheets and hoods. They are obviously Ku Klux Klansmen who mistake him for one of them. He tries to make small talk (about grits), but soon slips up and they discover Woody’s Jewish identity. Just on the point of being lynched, he makes such an eloquent plea for universal tolerance, that the Klansmen decide to let him go and contribute \$2,000 for Israel bonds.

No joke

But the sell-by date for funny, Jewish Nazis is by now well past. What happens when Jews really do become Nazis – not party members, Klansmen or terrorists, but just Jews who, like some other Americans, embrace hatred, violence, racism and war? When Henry Kissinger was called a Nazi during the Nixon years and after, it was no joke. His indifference to mass murder was well-known. After his death, Ron Jacobs in *Counterpunch* offered the following summary:

“The list of murderous atrocities for which Henry Kissinger was in some part responsible is rivaled only by Adolf Hitler in 20th-century history. That list begins with the secret bombing of Cambodia, the genocide in Timor, the coup in Chile and the subsequent decades of fascist rule. It continues from there. If asked, I would argue that the primary difference between Hitler and Kissinger was the calculating and dispassionate manner in which Kissinger dispatched people to their deaths. Indeed, when asked about whether or not the bombing of Cambodia was effective, Kissinger responded by saying, “Whether we got it right or not is really secondary.” The deaths of more than a hundred thousand Cambodians in the bombing (and the subsequent coup and murderous campaign of the Khmer Rouge after the defeat of Saigon) were inconsequential in his mind.”

There have been many other, though perhaps lesser Jewish Nazis than Kissinger, that is, men and women indifferent to human suffering, and complicit in murder, genocide, and ecocide. They include Elliot Abrams, Ronald Reagan's assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs. He helped cover up or even facilitated genocidal attacks upon campesinos in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. He was also a key planner for the Iran-Contra affair, which illegally shipped arms and money to the terrorist *contras* in Nicaragua.

Madeline Albright, U.S. Secretary of State under President Clinton, was architect of the Iraq sanctions that killed millions. In 1995 alone, according to the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, more than half a million Iraqi children died from illness and starvation due to the sanctions. When asked by Leslie Stahl if the price was worth it, she replied: "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price? We think the price is worth it."

Stephen Miller, former special advisor to Trump, was champion of the Muslim travel ban and architect of the policy that separated children from their migrant parents. Lately he has been plotting a new anti-immigrant "blitz" if Trump is elected again. "Any activists who doubt President Trump's resolve in the slightest," Miller said, "are making a drastic error: Trump will unleash the vast arsenal of federal powers to implement the most spectacular migration crackdown. The immigration legal activists won't know what's happening." Miller has been busy lately, accusing of anti-Semitism anyone sympathetic to the plight of Gazans.

And on it goes. Jewish university chancellor Gene Block at UCLA allowed a gang of non-student thugs, a veritable *Freikorps*, to riot and attack peaceful anti-war student protestors. The violent mob was partly funded and abetted by Jessica Seinfeld, wife of the famous comedian. Another Jewish billionaire, Bill Ackman, also offered support for the UCLA counter-protesters, before withdrawing it when press and public responses to it turned soured. (He also funded raucous, pro-Israeli rallies at George Washington University and elsewhere.)

The point of this is not to say that wealthy and powerful Jews are uniquely abetting a genocide in Gaza or are masterminds behind global criminality. Those are versions of the anti-Semitic canards that enabled the rise of fascism and Nazism and that still animate the far-right in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. Jews comprise just 2.4 per cent of the U.S. population and 0.2% of the global population and have little sway over anything, anywhere, except in Israel and Palestine. There, a faction of far-right leaders has gained political and ideological sway over a small, but militarily powerful nation now hell-bent on genocide. They are proud decedents of the terrorist Irgun and Herut parties (which evolved into Likud), denounced by Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein and others at the time as "closely akin in [their] organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and

Fascist parties.” No more and apparently no less than any other community, Jews today are prey to fascist and Nazi ideation, despite their own catastrophic experience with it. That makes the heroism of Jewish protestors – students and faculty alike – at UCLA, USC, Columbia and dozens of other colleges and universities across the country all the more noteworthy and necessary. It’s also why journalists, politicians, business leaders and the rest of us have the obligation to speak up loudly against fascism, genocide, and war in Gaza and wherever else it occurs.

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