

It Can Happen Here: On the Shoah, Fear, and the Fragility of Civilisation

CW: This piece discusses the Holocaust/Shoah, antisemitism, and the mechanisms of genocide and mass persecution. It also draws uncomfortable parallels with contemporary UK politics.

In 1939, German Jews formed about 0.8% of the total German population (about 69.3 million people). That is to say, there were around 525,000 Jewish people living within the pre-War borders of Germany. At the war's end, when the camps were liberated, about 12,000 German Jews remained.

The question here is not the self-evident appalling nature of those numbers, devastating as they are. The question I want to ask is the Arendt-ish one: *how could a highly developed nation-state, one of the most 'civilised' by the standards of the time, be induced to massacre its neighbours?* People who were a small minority and had lived alongside Germans for centuries. People who had contributed to German science, philosophy, music, medicine, and commerce. People who were, by any rational measure, *Germans* — as German as the people who would soon wish them dead.

The honest answer, the one that should frighten us, is that the Shoah did not require a nation of monsters. It required something far more ordinary and far more terrifying: ordinary people who allowed themselves to be persuaded that their neighbours were a threat. Not a military threat. Not an economic one, not really. A *cultural* and *identity-based* threat. The threat of being made to feel foreign in your own country. The threat of losing what you believed was rightfully yours by dint of birth.

The Mechanics of Manufactured Fear

In the space of roughly a decade, a sophisticated European democracy was transformed into a machine for industrialised murder. The Weimar Republic (cultured, parliamentary, pluralist, German) did not become Nazi Germany through some inevitable historical logic. It became Nazi Germany through a *political project*, led by people who identified an opportunity in fear and resentment and who had the shamelessness to exploit it.

What did that project require? It required the deliberate and sustained manufacture of an enemy. It required telling the majority population that their problems – mass unemployment, inflation, the humiliation of Versailles – were not the fault of systemic forces, not the product of economic structures, not the consequence of choices made by powerful men. No. It was the fault of the *outsider*. The infiltrator. The neighbour who looked slightly different, prayed differently, and whose name was unfamiliar on the tongue.

Hannah Arendt, writing in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, identified what she called the "*banality of evil*" — the way in which ordinary people, neither fanatical nor monstrous by disposition, became willing participants in extraordinary crimes. Not because they hated Jews in some primordial, inexplicable way, but because they had been *taught* to see Jews as a threat to something they valued. Their nation. Their pride. Their way of life. Their *identity*.

This is the **crucial** mechanism, and it is the one we must never allow ourselves to think is safely behind us.

The Architecture of Bigotry

When a dominant group feels its identity is under threat, it does not respond with rational debate. It responds with the politics of self-preservation. And the politics of self-preservation, once it takes hold, is extraordinarily difficult to reason with. Because it is not, at its core, a rational phenomenon. It is an *emotional* one. It lives in the gut, in the sense of loss and displacement and indignity that people feel when the world they knew appears to be changing around them.

This is not a diagnosis I am making from a comfortable distance. It is a pattern we can observe, in real time, in this country. In the United Kingdom, in the twenty-first century, in what we like to believe is a mature liberal democracy.

Consider the rhetoric that has become entirely normalised in recent years. The "*small boats*" discourse. The "*hostile environment*." The language of invasion, of swamping, of communities being "*changed forever*." The targeting of asylum seekers, of refugees, of migrants more generally. Not on the basis of evidence, not through careful policy deliberation, but through a **deliberate** appeal to the politics of fear. Suella Braverman speaking of Black people not 'really' being English. Nigel Farage making the preservation of a certain idea of Britain the centrepiece of his political project for three decades.

We tell ourselves these are different things. We tell ourselves that British civilisation is robust, that our democratic traditions are deep-rooted, that we could never slide into what Germany slid into in the 1930s. But this comfort is precisely the kind of dangerous complacency that Arendt warned us about. The Shoah did not begin with gas chambers. It began with rhetoric. With the slow, steady normalisation of language that presented a section of the population as a problem to be solved.

The Comfort of Historical Distance

There is a particular danger in the way the Shoah is often taught and discussed. It becomes *exceptionalised* — a singular horror, the product of uniquely German circumstances, of German nationalism and militarism and anti-Semitism in a particularly concentrated form. This is true as far as it goes. Germany in the 1930s was, in many respects, uniquely positioned to produce the catastrophe it did.

But the logic itself (the logic of manufactured fear, of the outsider as a threat to the insider's identity, of the majority feeling entitled to the subordination of the minority) is not German. It is human. It is present in every society where the majority has been taught to look for someone to blame. It is present in the history of colonial Britain, where "*the native*" was constructed as a threat to be controlled. It is present in the history of slavery, where Black people were constructed as a resource to be managed. It is present in every genocide, every pogrom, and every systematic persecution.

And it is present now, in Britain, in the way that trans people are discussed. In the way that refugees are discussed. In the way that Muslims are discussed, after decades of a "*War on Terror*" that treated an entire religious community as a suspect population. The specifics differ. The architecture is the same.

A Farrage and a Braverman Will Do

I want to be precise about what I am arguing, because precision matters here. I am not saying that Farrage or Braverman are equivalent to Hitler. I am not saying that contemporary Britain is Nazi Germany. Such comparisons, deployed carelessly, diminish the specificity of the Shoah and risk

becoming a form of political theatre rather than serious analysis.

What I am saying is this: *the conditions that make atrocity possible are not exceptional*. They do not require a Hitler. They do not require a thousand-year Reich. They require a political class that has decided to weaponise fear for electoral advantage, and a population that has been made to feel that its identity is under siege.

You see it in the trolling. In the Facebook threads and the letter pages and the comments sections. A person attacks a minority — viciously, personally, with a hatred that clearly runs deep — not because that minority is actually a threat to anything. But because of the minority's very existence, the minority's mere presence in the public sphere, the minority's insistence on equal treatment and equal dignity, it *feels* like a threat. It threatens the self-image of the majority. It disrupts the comfortable assumption that the world belongs to people like them.

This is what the philosopher Charles Taylor called the "*social climate*" — the ambient atmosphere within which certain political possibilities become thinkable and speakable and, eventually, actionable. Change the climate, and you change what can be said. Change what can be said, and you change what can be done. Normalise it. Make the unthinkable thinkable. And then doable.

The Slow Normalisation

The Shoah did not begin with a planned genocide. It began with a set of legal distinctions: the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which stripped Jewish Germans of their citizenship and legal rights. It continued with the systematic exclusion of Jewish people from professional life, from public life, and from the economic and social life of the nation. It proceeded through a series of escalations, each one building on the last, each one presented as a reasonable response to a genuine problem.

The pattern should be familiar. We have seen it in the legislation that made it a criminal offence for landlords to rent to undocumented migrants, which had the effect of creating a climate of suspicion that fell heavily on anyone who looked 'foreign.' We have seen it in the Windrush scandal, where Commonwealth citizens who had lived in Britain for decades were wrongly accused of illegitimacy as UK citizens. We have seen it in the punitive approach to asylum seekers (the Rwanda plan, the barges, the use of barracks) that treats human beings as a problem to be processed and eliminated.

None of this is the Shoah. But all of it operates on the same underlying logic: that a section of the population can be constructed as a problem, can be made to feel unwelcome, and can be progressively excluded from the protections and dignities that the majority takes for granted.

It Takes a Nation to Destroy a People

The final thing I want to say is this: the Shoah was not a German project in the sense that it was carried out by the German state. It was a German project in the sense that it required the *active participation or willing acquiescence of the German people*. Not all of them, and not all of the time, and not always consciously. But enough of them. Enough of the time.

This is perhaps **the** most uncomfortable truth of all. Genocide is not the work of monsters in the night. It is the work of ordinary people who have been persuaded (gradually, incrementally, through the steady manipulation of their fears and resentments) that their neighbours are not quite human, not quite deserving of the protections they themselves enjoy.

It takes a nation to destroy a people.

And a nation is made of people like us. People with families and jobs and hobbies and anxieties. People who mostly want to live quietly and do the right thing. People who, when faced with a slow,

steady shift in what is acceptable to say and do, will often choose the path of least resistance, the path of conformity, the path that protects their own position in the social order.

What Is to Be Done?

I do not write this as a counsel of despair. I write it as a call to vigilance. The processes that made the Shoah possible have not been eradicated from human society. They have not been quarantined in the 1940s. They are alive and active and present in every society — including our own — where the political class decides that it is acceptable to divide people into 'us' and 'them,' and to mobilise the majority against a minority for electoral gain.

The antidote is not complexity. The antidote is *memory*. Not the sanitised, historical, distance-protected kind, but the kind that forces us to look at the mechanisms clearly and say: this is how it happened. This is how it *always* happens. And this is what it looks like when it is happening here, and now, and to other people who are not us.

The next time you see a politician talking about "*swamping*," about "*invasions*," about the threat that a minority poses to the British way of life — do not look away. Do not tell yourself this is just rhetoric. *Remember.*

It takes a nation to destroy a people. It also takes a nation to refuse to.

Remember that.

Dies geschieht heute:

Auf den Planken vor den Neubauten, die errichtet werden über den Resten des Krieges, finden sich schwarze Kreuze, jedes ein vierfacher Galgen.

An den Mauern der wenigen Synagogen sehen die Vorübergehenden die missbrauchten Sterne Davids, besudelt sind etliche Brücken und Straßen mit den verfluchten Schmähungen von einst.

Die Überlebenden Juden empfangen am Morgen mit ihrer Post unscheinbare Briefe ohne Absender, enthaltend die alten Drohungen.

Auf den Friedhöfen der Juden sind die Grabmale der Verfolgten wieder umgestürzt, zertrümmert und verunreinigt, und die unschuldigen Pflanzen ringsum liegen zerstampft von genagelten Sohlen.

Dies geschieht heute!

Schuldig, schuldig wird der Unschuldige, wenn er nicht warnt vor dem Fall in die Schuld.

Seid wachsam! Bedenkt Geschehenes!

Das Bild der Erde von heute und morgen ist euer Antlitz!

Seid wachsam! Wachsam! Wachsam...

(Jens Gerlach, Jüdische Chronik)