Criminals with Doctorates

An SS Officer in the Killing Fields of Russia, as Told by the Novelist Jonathan Littell

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This is a report about the Holocaust novel *The Kindly Ones* which deals with events that were the subject of a war crimes trial in Nuremberg. By coincidence I was one of the courtroom interpreters at that trial; several defendants whose testimony I translated appear as major characters in Mr. Littell's novel. This is as much a personal report as an historical one.

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the murders committed by Nazi units in Russia in World War II. These crimes remain largely unknown to the general public. My reasons for combining a discussion of the actual trial with a critique of the novel are twofold: to highlight a work that, as far as I know, is the first extensive literary treatment of these events published in the West and to compare the author's account with what I witnessed at the trial.

In the spring of 1947, an article in a Philadelphia newspaper reported that translators were needed at the Nuremberg Trials. I applied successfully and soon found myself in Nuremberg translating documents that were needed for the ongoing cases. After

passing a test for courtroom interpreters I was assigned to the so-called Einsatzgruppen Case. Einsatzgruppen is a jargon word denoting special task forces that were sent to Russia to kill Jews, Gypsies, so-called Asiatics, Communist officials and some mental patients. In this case twenty-two ranking SS officers commanding these units were on trial for killing many thousands of innocent civilians for racial reasons. There were four Einsatzgruppen (A, B, C, D) with a total strength of about 3000 men, drawn from various types of police units. Estimates of the number of persons they killed range from one million to 1.4 million people. The evidence consisted of the reports sent by these units to Berlin, where the Allies found them. An example: "During the period 10 April to 24 April 1942 in Latvia, units of Einsatzgruppe A killed 1272 persons, including 983 Jews, 204 Communists and 71 Gypsies." (Trials 17) The ultimate aim was "to clear the East of Jews as completely as possible." (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 158) According to the English historian Ian Kershaw, "The Einsatzgruppen ultimately came to make a major contribution to the murder of in all over two million Russian Jews...Their detailed monthly 'reports of events' belong to the most horrific surviving relics of the Third Reich." (Kershaw 258*).* The author has dedicated his book "to the dead".

The trial, lasting from September 1947 to April 1948, was held before three American judges. There was no jury. All defendants pleaded 'not guilty in the sense of the indictment', by which they meant, I think, that they denied having committed a crime because they were following orders. The sentences were as follows: of the 22 defendants, 14 were sentenced to death, 2 to life, 3 to 20 years, 2 to 10 years, and one to time served. Of the 14 death sentences four were carried out in 1951 (Otto Ohlendorf [Commander of Einsatzgruppe D], Paul Blobel [Commander of Sonderkommando 4a of Einsatzgruppe

C], Werner Braune [Commander of Einsatzkommando 11b of Einsatzgruppe D], Erich Naumann [Commander of Einsatzgruppe B]). The remaining death sentences were commuted and the prison sentences substantially reduced in 1951 by the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, John J. McCloy.

Most of the defendants were well educated; among them were many lawyers, a political scientist, a lapsed Protestant minister and even an opera singer. Ten of the twenty-two defendants had studied law. (Earl 121) They were not thugs or maniacs or common criminals. Though they pleaded superior orders, they gave the impression of blindly committing criminal acts without any reflection, even when these acts were militarily, politically or economically harmful to the German war effort. The killers referred to their victims as “useless eaters” (Trials, 31 and 416), a term used three times in Littell's book. I can recall no remorse, which parallels the behavior described in the novel. Of the defendants who appear in this book, three play a major part in Littell's account: Otto Ohlendorf, Commander of Einsatzgruppe D, Paul Blobel, Commander of Sonderkommando 4a and Otto Rasch, Commander of Einsatzgruppe C.

The novel is an attempt to come to grips with the Nazi killing mentality. Told in the first person by the fictional narrator, SS officer Maximilian Aue, the book consists of two parts. The first part is a fact-filled report of the murderous campaign in Russia against Jews, Gypsies and other minorities by the Einsatzgruppen. The second part, beginning after the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, traces the narrator's career as an assistant to Himmler to the end of the war when he escapes from Berlin as the Russians close in. The second part introduces analogies to Greek tragedy that enrich the book's literary landscape but may strike the reader as extraneous to the Holocaust. But

as the book's title indicates, the Greek connection constitutes a central feature of the plot.

The title, “The Kindly Ones”, refers to the Furies, also known as the Eumenides, avenging Greek deities who punished crimes, especially in families; they were sometimes called “the kindly ones” to mitigate their anger. If the title refers to the Nazis, it is doubly ironic, for they kill with impunity while the mitigators, like the narrator, fail to mitigate. But the title could also refer to the Furies that pursue Maximilian Aue, since he is presented as an Orestes figure. (Orestes was pursued by the Furies for killing his mother and her lover with the help of his sister Electra, because they had killed their father Agamemnon.) The book was written in French by an American, perhaps because he has greater facility in that language and because it may read better in French; and because Europeans may be closer to World War II than Americans, emotionally as well as geographically. The greater anomaly is that a Jewish author has placed a German SS officer at the center of a Holocaust novel. The book was clearly written to inform the reader of the enormity of Nazi crimes in Russia, which are less well known than what happened in stationary places such as concentration camps.

The book begins with a flashback after the war, when Aue lives in France as a prosperous family man and manufacturer who writes down his wartime experiences and reflects on them. He lives to tell the tale. Since this is a 975-page book I’ve had to limit myself to what seemed particularly striking to me.

The campaign begins in June 1941 at the border between Poland and the Ukraine. The author concentrates on the Southern sector of the campaign, from the Ukraine to the Caucasus, probably because that was the farthest German advance, which enabled the Einsatzgruppen to operate in a vast stretch of territory. And there were several extreme

personalities among the SS commanders in that sector. In the Caucasus the complex ethnic make-up of the population challenged the racial theories of the killers, which offer the author an opportunity to deride them.

The crimes of the Einsatzgruppen are reported by SS officer Aue, then a first lieutenant, who is a member of the notorious Commando 4a. Using an act of sabotage as a pretext, this unit killed 33,771 Jews in two days at Babi Yar in Kiev on September 29-30, 1941, with substantial help from Ukrainian police units. At his trial the commander of the SS unit, Colonel Paul Blobel, testified as follows:

> The victims knew what was going to happen to them...they were resigned to their fate, and that is the strange thing about these people in the East.
>
> Q: Did that make the job easier for you, the fact that they did not resist?
>
> A: ...Everything went very quietly. It took time, of course, and I must say that our men who took part in these executions suffered more from nervous exhaustion than those who had to be shot.
>
> Q: In other words, your pity was more for the men who had to shoot than for the victims?
>
> A: Our men had to be cared for.
>
> Q: And you felt very sorry for them?
>
> A: Yes. These people experienced a lot, psychologically. (Trials 491)

The phrase “nutzlose Esser”, used in the trial, appears in the novel in Blobel's address to his officers: “useless mouths to feed” (Littell 120. All subsequent references in Littell's book will hereafter be listed by page numbers only.) In placing SS Lieutenant Aue at perhaps the most brutal mass killing of the Holocaust outside of the death camps,

the author is putting him to the test. Despite orders from the commanding SS general that every officer take part in this action, Aue delays his appearance at the killing site. He inspects the columns of Jews headed for the ravine called Babi Yar, seeming to feel sympathy for their fate. Eventually he has to take his turn to kill – for the first time. He administers coups de grâce but is unnerved by the sight of a beautiful dying girl who gives him a look so searing that he loses all composure. Infuriated by her senseless death he goes berserk and has to be relieved for his own safety – the only such breakdown of this cynical career man.

This is only one of numerous Holocaust sites that Aue attends – by the end of the book he will have been present at each of the major Holocaust locations. A map of the Holocaust could be drawn from his SS journey. And he meets the major figures responsible for the murder of the Jews. Standing somewhat apart from the killings he interprets the events for the reader. He is a witness and reporter of the crimes against the Jews, and he lives to impart this knowledge to the world. His path through the Holocaust acts as a basic outline of the novel.

Reflecting on Babi Yar, Aue finds that "we had invented something compared to which war had come to seem clean and pure... something crucial...that if I could understand it then I'd understand everything and could finally rest." (130-131) He had witnessed a previous killing without personally killing anyone. Though he tries to rationalize the killings as "inevitable and necessary" (81) he has deep misgivings - "another dirty day's work" (83). Yet he doesn't apply for a transfer when it is available. Is he trying to save his own skin? Is he afraid of being exposed? Does he hope to mitigate the atrocities? Or is he simply a curious observer of an historic event? He is ordered to

prepare a documentation of Babi Yar with photographs which he has bound in black leather confiscated from the victims; it is entitled “The Great Action of Kiev” (135). Blobel praises it highly and promises to send it to Himmler and perhaps even to Hitler. This is Aue's contribution to Babi Yar: a handsome scrapbook to show what Germans have done in Kiev. He is documenting the event for posterity.

The account of the Babi Yar massacre is a key passage in the book. Babi Yar is a Jewish tragedy compressed into two days. It is well documented by survivors who were still living fairly recently. When the author was in Kiev he located an elderly Jewish man who had survived this massacre at the age of 13. He remembered it in detail and provided the author with precise information. The description of this massacre in the novel is one of the memorable set pieces in this book. Babi Yar may stand for all time as an example of racial madness carried to an extreme – an action of “senseless human waste” (130) that defies all attempts at explanation.

The factual fidelity in this book is remarkable – even about the reassignment of Otto Rasch, commander of Einsatzgruppe C which included Commando 4a. It is a fact that Rasch (Dr. Dr. Rasch) was replaced shortly after the massacre in Kiev. The author claims that Rasch had written a statement that all Jews could not be eliminated, that Bolshevism (synonymous with Communism) was not identical with the Jewish population, that the destruction of Bolshevism was more important than killing Jews, that killing Jews would have a negative impact and that Jews should be put to work – worked to death. Rasch thought it was physically impossible to kill all Jews – a rational view even for this officer known for his brutality. There were simply too many Jews in this region, and they were vital members of the labor force. In their authoritative study of the

Einsatzgruppen, the historians Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm report that Rasch was probably relieved for holding exactly these views, despite Heydrich's esteem for this officer. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 628f.) In one of his last reports Rasch tells of the “besonders starke seelische Belastung” on his men when they killed 300 Jewish patients in a mental hospital in Kiev. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 629) Even Rasch's successor, Dr. Max Thomas, punitively transferred from the West, claimed that liquidation “cannot be a possible solution of the Jewish problem.” (Headland 200)

Aue explains how the victims were counted at Babi Yar to Richard Korherr, Himmler's chief statistician. (Korherr is a historical figure.) The “patients, or rather the condemned” - he avoids using the word 'Jews' - were subdivided into groups of twenty or thirty. As they passed a table, a non-commissioned officer counted them and wrote down the numbers. “The first day, they stopped at twenty thousand exactly.” (462-463. According to information received from the author, he did not make this up but does not remember the source.) During their discussion about the numerical accuracy of the Einsatzgruppen reports, Korherr tells Aue that the numbers were occasionally over reported – sometimes because the officers were hoping for a promotion. I recall exactly such testimony.

Aue expresses doubts about killing Jews. Then why does he continue? His background offers some clues. Most important is the manner in which he joined the Einsatzgruppen. Essentially he was blackmailed: having been arrested during a homosexual encounter he is brought before Thomas Hauser, an officer in the Nazi Security Service (SD), who had heard of Aue's excellent reports for the SD before Aue resigned to complete his doctoral dissertation. (Aue was a lawyer.) Believing Aue to be a

Nazi asset Hauser recruits him for the SD, assuring Aue that the charges against him would be dismissed. Serving under this cloud Aue may feel constrained to stay the course, though aware from the beginning what the Einsatzgruppen were doing. Thomas had informed him, and he attended the meeting in Pretzsch where the task force commanders received their orders. This meeting actually took place shortly before the invasion of Russia (22 June 1941).

Aue's mentality is right-wing from the start, and he has a tolerance for violence that qualifies him for his SS assignment. "*I crossed over to the dark shores*", he admits (24), though he claims to be a human being like any other – a self-serving rationalization, since not everyone is a potential killer. During his studies in Paris he moved in right-wing circles, which accounts for his assignment to report on potential pro-German influence on the French Government in 1939. (This part suggests a Nazi effort to undermine the French Government.) One of Aue's acquaintances in Paris was the historical figure Robert Brasillach (1909-45), a writer who was tried and executed after the war for collaborating with Germany.

Aue's right-wing stance stems from his father. The father had served in World War I, had lived with his French wife in Alsace, where Aue was born in 1913. (At that time Alsace was German. The loss of Alsace-Lorraine after the German defeat in 1918 was painful for father and son.) After the war the father served in a right-wing militia in Germany (Freikorps) and took part in a plot against the Weimar Republic (Kapp-Putsch). He left his wife and son. We learn that he had worked for a prominent Nazi businessman who had arranged for Aue to join the SS. Following in his father's footsteps Aue traveled to Germany in 1930, at age 17, where he heard Hitler speak about Germany's renewal.

Inspired by this speech Aue came to believe that his own future was “with this unfortunate people, my father's people, my people too” (466). He joined the Nazi Party in 1932.

His views on anti-Semitism are not consistent, at least cannot be squared with his actions. Indeed, it is doubtful whether he has any firm views beyond self-preservation. Early in the campaign he has doubts about killing Jews but doesn't act on them. During a pogrom in Lvov (Ukraine) a priest begs him to intercede, but he fails to do so. Though he doesn't command an execution squad and doesn't participate in shootings, he attends them regularly, helps prepare them and reports them. Had he been asked to lead such a unit he would have done so. Even after the order to kill all Jews, including women and children, - the so-called Führer order – is received, Aue doesn't ask for a transfer, even when a colleague does so. SS General Max Thomas, Commander of Einsatzgruppe C, orders those who couldn't kill Jews to be reassigned, and Otto Ohlendorf, the Commander of Einsatzgruppe D, testified at his trial that he had to transfer some of his men because they were psychologically unable to shoot civilians.

A strong streak of passivity in his character, combined with a going-along mentality, determines Aue’s conduct. “I observe and do nothing, that's my favorite position.” (252) In the back of his mind may be fears about being exposed (though he seduces a fellow SS officer) and perhaps an awareness that he is a witness to a world-historical event that he doesn't want to miss. He seems to be proud to be a part of it and wants to see how it will end and how it affects him. Walking on the dead to reach the wounded, at Babi Yar, reminds him of stepping on cockroaches while on vacation in Spain as a boy – a shockingly callous reaction that is repeated by a guard at the Sobibor

concentration camp. Elsewhere the author speaks of Aue's coldness.

Ohlendorf's successor, Walter Bierkamp, transferred Aue to Stalingrad because he disapproved of his benign view of the Caucasian mountain Jews and found his friendship with a visiting scholar suspect.

Aue is badly injured at Stalingrad and is evacuated with his friend Thomas' help. After recovering from his wounds Aue is appointed assistant to Himmler, charged with enabling concentration camp inmates to be productive workers for the German war effort. Before assuming this assignment he becomes the chief actor in a family tragedy of Greek dimensions. He kills his mother and stepfather, but in a trance, so that he later had to be confronted with the evidence; and he has an incestuous relationship with his sister, the only woman he has ever loved. This family constellation is based on the Orestes story: Orestes killed his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, with the help of his sister Electra, because they had killed their father Agamemnon. The ramifications are wide-ranging but seem to have little connection with Nazi crimes, except that both deal with murder. Perhaps the author wanted to endow his novel with a literary dimension or place it in a literary tradition of crime und punishment, but the Greek drama seems artificially imposed.

Whether the author intended to embed the Holocaust in a Western context of murder and retribution or whether he presented Nazi atrocities as the most extreme descent from Greek principles of guilt and expiation, the Nazi murders go far beyond 'Western Civilization'. Greek tragedy deals with an individual of stature who is defeated in a conflict with superior forces or in a collision with fate or the moral world order. It involves basic existential questions, such as the relationship of the individual to the world

and to God. Nothing of this order applies to the Nazi murders of the Jews. Moreover, Maximilian Aue's murder of his mother and stepfather is not sufficiently motivated to make him a modern-day Orestes; it introduces a personal crime into a world-historical event. For these reasons the introduction of Greek tragedy into the novel seems to me of dubious validity. A more fitting analogy that comes to mind is the killing orgy in the *Nibelungenlied*, which shares with the Holocaust a lack of any moral restraint.

Aue blames his mother for driving his father away, marrying a Frenchman and choosing a government career for him for which he is not suited. But these are hardly sufficient reasons for committing murder. There are some literary clues: *Electra* by Sophocles is his favorite play; in a school production he played the part of Electra with deep personal involvement and gender confusion. His obsession with his sister has more to do with his sexuality than with any Wagnerian overtones. Parallels between this family drama and Aue's situation are that he knows Greek; the pursuit of Orestes by the Furies for killing his mother and stepfather is mirrored in Aue's wild descent into the abyss at the end of the book.

In an interview in France – cited by Daniel Mendelsohn in his review in the *New York Review of Books* – the author differentiates between the Greek conception of guilt and the Judeo-Christian view. He argues that Judeo-Christian theology allows for sin and redemption, whereas this doesn't exist in the Greek world, where guilt, however incurred, is unredeemable. He cites the example of Oedipus who is guilty of killing his father and marrying his mother, even though he acts without intent. (Mendelsohn 22) In the novel Aue feels no guilt for his killings – he is a man without a conscience, at least a sociopath, more likely a psychopath – but he is guilty. This is the meaning of the novel's final

sentence: “The Kindly Ones were on to me.” As an Orestes figure, Aue is being judged by Greek standards, since there is no Judeo-Christian theology in the Nazi killing fields. He is unredeemed and unredeemable.

More relevant is Aue's fantasy or hallucination of seeing Hitler wearing a prayer shawl and phylacteries, like a rabbi. This vision could express an underlying sympathy for his victims or it could be an atavistic phenomenon – the vestige of an affinity that can emerge in a person dealing constantly with Jewish issues (the Nazis kept a secret collection of Jewish art objects) – or an awakening of his conscience or of a repressed humanitarian impulse. Or is he, as a member of a despised minority, identifying with another despised minority? Aue knows certain Hebrew words, like 'tefillim', 'tallith' and 'kaddish', which is unusual in European non-Jews, but he could have heard these from Jewish victims. More important is the fact that he is circumcised. This is not customary in non-Jewish German men. He claims it had to be done because of an infection, but this is not credible. Whatever the reason, it may align him in a hidden way with his victims, though he expresses no sympathy for Jews; he merely finds their murder senseless. He even has a dream in which Himmler is protecting him, “the little Jew”. “Trust me. Whatever happens, I won't let you go. We’ll cross together or we’ll fail together.” (794). His vision of Hitler as a rabbi recalls Chaplin's film “The Great Dictator”, in which Hitler is juxtaposed against a poor Jewish fellow, one being the obverse of the other, as if to imply a human connection, however tenuous. But the fantasy could also be induced by the shot in the head that he suffered at Stalingrad.

Aue is aware that he fails to act on his doubts about killing Jews and that he is using anti-Semitism as a cover. Yet there seems to be a vestige of Jewishness in him. This

is confirmed by a moving scene in the Caucasus (278-284). A very old mountain Jew pleads to be shot by Aue rather than by a Nazi death squad. Aue complies. After the old Jew picks out his own gravesite he is shot by Aue's non-commissioned officer and laid to rest in his own grave. The importance of the scene lies in the old Jew's recognition of Aue as a kindred soul to whom he entrusts his life, death and burial in a grave where no Nazi killer will ever find him. There he rests in peace. (Mercier-Leca 89-91)

Hatred for Jews among Nazi bureaucrats often acted as a career-boosting spur, because Hitler was a fanatic anti-Semite. Among unimaginative officials with their higher-orders mentality, anti-Semitism served as a prerequisite for ambitious career men. A striking example is the case of Adolf Eichmann. The narrator gives a vivid description of Eichmann with whom he has official dealings. Eichmann headed the Jewish office at Nazi Security headquarters. This put him in charge of organizing the transportation of Jews to the death camps, in effect seeing to it that as many Jews as possible were killed. He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the SS, not a high rank considering his key position. As Aue presents him, he is an efficient mid-level administrator of strictly limited perspective who guards his turf jealously and takes pride in doing his work well but is unable to think independently or make decisions. His mind is severely compartmentalized: “My responsibility stops when the train leaves - the rest I can't talk about.” (561) Aue doubts that Eichmann harbored a special hatred for Jews, that he could have worked in another occupation, but that he cooperated conscientiously when the decision to exterminate the Jews was made.

But killing innocent people is not an occupation like any other. Doing so makes him a criminal. Aue's benign judgment of Eichmann is also a judgment on Aue, as is his

perversion of Kant's categorical imperative - a high point of the book for one German critic (Lüderssen 9. I owe this reference to my colleague, Sigrid Bauschinger.): “Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of your action, would approve of it.” (566) But Kant wrote: “Act as if the principle of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.”(Rohmann 219) Or: Act in such a way that your action can become the universal principle of moral law. (791) This corruption of a famous German philosophical principle is matched by the perversion of legal principles by Aue and his SS-cohort lawyers. Note that Eichmann shows Aue his scrapbook of the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, just as Aue took pride in his scrapbook of the massacre at Babi Yar.

As a member of Himmler's staff Aue is invited to attend Himmler's speech in Posen on 6 October 1943. Himmler was addressing most of the ranking Nazi officials involved in the extermination of the Jews. In this speech, a historical event, the SS leader spoke openly and brutally about the extermination of the Jews – a subject that had until then been top secret. The following is an oft-quoted excerpt from this speech:

> Most of you must know what it means when a hundred corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1000. To have stuck it out and at the same time (apart from exceptions caused by human weakness) to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us so hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and will never be written. (Manvell and Fraenkel, 136.)

There exists a tape or record of a similar speech, made two days earlier, which was introduced at Nuremberg in the Göring trial. The author cites the document number under which this tape was introduced into evidence. (664)

The novelist turns this event into one of the great set pieces of the entire book.

Himmler's blatant revelation which shocked his listeners is explained as follows: in case Germany loses the war, which loomed as a real possibility in October 1943, none of the assembled Nazi leaders would be able to plead ignorance of the murder of the Jews. They understood that Himmler was making them complicit, that they were deeply involved and would have to stand or fall together. Aue was aware that he too was being addressed. He had long been aware that the murder of the Jews "binds us once and for all, prevents us from ever turning back...It's the *Endsieg* or death." (142) Already the BBC was broadcasting precise information about the killing program and naming names.

The segment dealing with Himmler's speech is told in dramatically breathless style – run-on sentences, a pile-up of facts, a heightened narration – to highlight its importance. The presence of Albert Speer, the armament minister credited with giving Germany two extra years of war, moves Aue to comment that Speer knew what was going on, which made his post-war denial "somewhat indecent" (678).

To what lengths the SS officers went to kill Jews is shown by Ohlendorf's action in the Crimea. Though he testified at his trial that he considered the policy of killing Jews a mistake because it damaged Germany's reputation, he carried it out zealously. In the Crimea he found two tribes, the Krimchaks and the Karaites. He sent an inquiry to Berlin asking whether they were Jews. After some kind of study the answer came back: spare the Karaites because they were recent converts to Judaism, but kill the Krimchaks because they had Jewish blood in their veins. (This is mentioned in the novel.) He followed this order to the letter. This action shows that this well-educated man believed in the Nazi racial theory absolutely; it exhibits a bureaucratic mentality at its most extreme: carrying out an order utterly, completely, perfectly, and beyond all reason. This

is the man who estimated the number of people killed by Einsatzgruppe D at 90,000 but who indignantly denied that he had killed anyone; he merely supervised the killings to see that they were done in a disciplined manner:

> “The Jews were shot in a military manner. There were 15-man firing squads. One bullet per Jew. In other words, one firing squad of 15 executed 15 Jews at a time.
>
> Q: Did you supervise or witness?
>
> A: I was there twice for short periods.
>
> Q: Were the victims men, women and children?
>
> A: Yes.
>
> Q: Were the children shot?
>
> A: Yes.
>
> Q: Did you feel you were doing the right thing?
>
> A: I myself didn't have to do it.
>
> Q: Didn't you direct it?
>
> A: Yes. But...all I had to do was see to it that it was done as humanely as possible.
>
> Q: Would you do it again?
>
> A: I didn't do anything.
>
> Q: How long did it take to kill 90,000?
>
> A: A year.
>
> Q: What was the maximum on one day?
>
> A: 4000 or 5000 in one day.
>
> Q: Did Jews who were to be killed know it?
>
> A: About ten minutes prior to the shooting.

Q: Was there any disorder?

A: No.

Q: Did your wife know of this business of the Einsatzgruppen?

A: No.

Q: Have you seen her since 1941-42?

A: I saw her, but never talked to her about those things. I didn't think it was good conversation for a woman."

(Goldensohn, 389-392. The interview was conducted on 1 March 1946; Goldhagen, 1982)

In the novel Ohlendorf had been Aue's superior and mentor in the Security Service in Berlin. When they met in the Crimea Ohlendorf asked Aue to join his staff. In accordance with the fictional Ohlendorf's request, Aue is transferred from Einsatzgruppe C to Einsatzgruppe D, which Ohlendorf commanded. He may have been drawn to Aue as a fellow intellectual. But even though Aue describes Ohlendorf as "a remarkably intelligent, penetrating man, definitely one of the best minds of National Socialism, and one of the most uncompromising " (205), Ohlendorf's rigid adherence to Nazi racial policy - "the Crimea is already nearly *judenrein*, and we 've almost finished with the Gypsies too" (208) – shows him to be much less sophisticated than Aue. As depicted in the novel Ohlendorf is hardly a deep thinker, which matches his performance in court.

Ohlendorf was an economist by profession, who rose quickly in the Nazi hierarchy: he was only 34 when he was assigned to lead Einsatzgruppe D as a major general. In the novel Ohlendorf calls the executions "a mistake, but a necessary mistake" because the Jews "present a phenomenal, urgent danger for us." (220) – a Nazi cliché.

Perhaps he tried to prove himself to Himmler, who had sent him to Russia. The most detailed book on the Einsatzgruppen remarks on the “deutsche Gründlichkeit“ of Ohlendorf's mind-set. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 629) According to a biographer of the poet Paul Celan, it is likely that his parents were killed by a unit of Einsatzgruppe D. (Felstiner, 12-15)

When asked in court whether he considered the Führer order moral, Ohlendorf testified as follows: “The order, as such, even now, I consider to have been wrong, but there is no question for me whether it was moral or immoral, because a leader who has to deal with such serious questions decides from his own responsibility and this is his responsibility and I cannot examine and not judge. I am not entitled to do so.”(Trials 303) (If Hitler ordered it, it must be ok; Hitler doesn't make mistakes, one defendant testified.) (The judges commented as follows when a defendant claimed that it was futile to try to get transferred because his successor would have done the same thing: you can't be sure what the next man would do. Besides, this was your decision; if you had left, at least on that day no one would have been shot.)

They were not going to stop until every Jew was killed. The SS High Commissioner (Generalkommissar) for White Ruthenia (Western Ukraine), Wilhelm Kube, complained that the killings would lower “the prestige of the German Army...in the eyes of the local population” that he was trying to win over to the German cause. “With such methods one cannot maintain law and order in White Ruthenia. That badly wounded people are buried who have then dug themselves out of their graves is such an outrage that the incident ought to be reported to the Führer and Reich Marshal.” (Trials 451.) Kube didn't mind killing Russian Jews but objected to killing German Jews because they

came from Kube's own “Kulturkreis” whereas Russian Jews were “bodenständige vertierte Horden”. (Kershaw 261). (The defendant Gustav Nosske didn't hesitate to kill Russian Jews but refused an order to kill half Jews in Düsseldorf; he was sent to the infantry but didn't lose his rank and was not court-martialed.) Aue finds three categories of killers: Those who kill because they enjoy it; they are criminals. Those who do it as a duty even though they don't like it. And those who kill Jews because for them Jews are animals – like a butcher killing a cow. (107)

As the German drive into the Caucasus bogs down, the commanding army general orders the execution units to leave the Caucasian mountain Jews alone, so as not to stir up the various tribes against the German occupiers. The lengthy discussions between Army, SS and racial experts read like a parody of pettifogging bureaucrats discussing something that is absurdly unimportant in the face of mortal war. The attempt to identify which tribes were Jewish turns into a research project for Aue. By way of a footnote, the German writer Ernst Jünger made an official inspection trip to the Caucasus at this time; this trip, mentioned in the novel, actually took place. Jünger published a diary of this trip, *Kaukasische Aufzeichnungen*, which first appeared in 1949. In this diary, extending from October 1942 to February 1943, I could find only one reference to Nazi atrocities when Jünger speaks of the “ungeheuerlichen Schandtaten des SD nach der Eroberung von Kiev” (Jünger 493), but coming from an official observer that's better than silence.

During Aue's inspection trip to the camps in Poland, as requested by Himmler, he meets a Lieutenant Döll at the concentration camp Sobibor. He is “one of those famous functionaries from the Führer's Chancellery” (588) assigned to the euthanasia program. Döll, a fictional figure, reports that in 1941 he was sent to Russia to carry out “special

actions" with gas vans. His unit killed wounded German soldiers who "were too messed up to have a useful life" (588). (Victor Brack, who is mentioned in the novel [588], directed this program; he was a defendant in the doctors' trial, was found guilty and was executed.) Disapproving strongly Döll was transferred to Sobibor. He tried to justify himself: he wanted to be a farmer but had joined the police during the Depression. "My children were hungry, it was the only way to be sure I could put food on the table every day....On one hand, it wasn't very pleasant. But on the other, it wasn't the front, and the pay was good, my wife was happy. So I didn't say anything." Aue: "And Sobibor?" He shrugged his shoulders: "Sobibor? It's like everything, you get used to it...Little men and little women, it's all the same. It's like stepping on a cockroach." (589)

Aue makes excuses for him, as he did for Eichmann. "...a good family man who wanted to feed his children, and who obeyed his government even though in his innermost being he didn't entirely agree. If he had been born in France or America, he'd have been called a pillar of society and a patriot; but he was born in Germany and so he is a criminal." (589) There are two problems with this view: not every citizen does what Döll did, even in a dictatorship – he doesn't say that he was drafted. And it was possible to be reassigned. Aue is also making excuses for himself. Reflecting on the word *Endlösung* and other jargon Aue shows more interest in the language than in the victims (630-632). He argues that there is no moral difference between Nazi Germany and the West (668-669), that both are ruthless colonizers, that all world powers are alike because of the means by which they acquired their power. But the West, mainly England, France and the U.S., offers a haven for refugees and dissidents, which Germany has done only for Russians fleeing the 1917 Revolution, to the best of my knowledge. A man of Aue's

personal make-up – gay, of divided background, reflective, artistic – might be expected to value tolerance for dissent, but there is no sign of this.

Aue won't hunt. Invited to a hunting party with Speer at the estate of an industrialist which formerly had a Jewish owner, Aue tells Speer: "I don't like killing... It's sometimes necessary to kill out of duty... Killing for pleasure is a choice." (702) An SS officer who refuses to hunt. Walking through the woods with Speer Aue reflects: "...this is what they've turned me into…a man who can't see a forest without thinking about a mass grave." (702) But there is no correlation between his reflections and his actions. He is cautious, withholding political opinions and trying to navigate among conflicting positions – an accommodationist. With one exception: he has lost his belief in the power of world Jewry, because it had been unable to rescue Europe's Jews or even to help them in the late 1930s when no country would accept them.

This insight occurs to him during the catastrophe that befell the Hungarian Jews. Despite his efforts to save Jewish workers, most of the Hungarian Jews perished in Auschwitz. The reasons for the disaster were bureaucratic compartmentalization and indifference. Eichmann called Hungary "my masterpiece" (799). On his return from Auschwitz where Himmler had sent Aue to inspect the evacuation he heads for his sister's home in Pommern, despite the approach of the Russians. The purpose of this segment is to fill in gaps in his background and his vivid fantasy life centering on his sister.

We learn from his sister's husband, Berndt von Üxküll, that Aue's father was a maniac who committed barbaric acts during the Baltic campaign against Communists. Üxküll, a Baltic aristocrat and a member of an existing family [Baron Jakob Johann von

Uexküll (1864-1944) was a biologist from Estonia and a founder of environmental studies], had fought in a right-wing unit with Aue's father, but was close to the group who tried to assassinate Hitler, whereas Aue's father became a convinced Nazi. Üxküll was related to Claus von Stauffenberg through Stauffenberg's mother whose maiden name was von Üxküll-Gyllenband. (Like Stauffenberg, Bernhard and Woldemar Üxküll-Gyllenband were actual members of the George-Kreis.) This passage of the book apparently seeks to differentiate between two Germanies – Nazi Germany and the aristocratic-elitist Germany – one Nazi, the other anti-Nazi. Aue's sister Una, by reason of her marriage to von Üxküll and by her own conviction, is opposed to Nazism. The only sensible statement about Jews in the entire book, which is filled with anti-Semitic nonsense, is made by Una: "For if *Jew,* these days, still means anything, it means Other, an Other and an Otherwise that might be impossible, but that are necessary." (875)

Though unwelcome, it is needed to counteract majority thinking, to criticize the establishment. It is impossible because it stirs resentment. I am convinced that one of the chief differences between Jews and Germans lies in the tendency of Jews toward satire, skepticism, parody, black humor, the ability to laugh at pretension, at authority and at oneself. And toward the irreverence often found among Jews – irreverence toward traditions that are revered by Germans (cf. Heine). This is the existential defense of a persecuted minority. -

On his way back to Berlin Aue kills an old Junker for playing Bach in a small church: "It's because of these corrupt Junkers that Germany is losing the war. National Socialism is collapsing and they're playing Bach. It should be forbidden." (932) This utterly irrational act attests to his Nazi orientation and the streak of violence in his

character. He is a killer.

Back in Berlin, Thomas procures false papers, as do other RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) members. Aue attends the final Berlin Philharmonic concert on April 12, the day FDR died, while at night he kills his Romanian lover, perhaps in disgust over his sexuality or to erase tell-tale clues. Thomas is prepared to escape, disguised as a forced French laborer, and urges Aue to go to Paris. (Aue speaks fluent French.)

On 27 April, three days before the end, in his bunker, Hitler decides to honor ten RSHA officers for their service, including Aue. (In terms of this novel there has to be an encounter with Hitler.) As Hitler approaches, Aue is struck by his disproportionately large nose. When Hitler faces Aue to honor him, Aue forcefully bites Hitler's nose. He is seized but escapes when the car carrying him is hit by a grenade. After killing a policeman with a paving stone he runs into a subway tunnel where he is confronted by the two detectives who prove to him that he killed his mother and stepfather. One of the detectives is killed in the subway fighting. Aue kills the other detective with one shot. And he kills his friend Thomas with an iron bar. Exchanging his uniform with Thomas' jacket, Aue takes Thomas' pistol, his money, and the papers of a French slave laborer and leaves his own papers in his discarded uniform. But the Furies pursue him for his killings. For now he gets away with it, but the book's title suggests otherwise. The last sentence reads: “The Kindly Ones were on to me.” He has to live on with his war-criminal past.

Why Aue? He carries heavy psychological baggage: he is an observer more than an actor, of a divided heritage, an aesthete who prefers philosophy, literature and music. The chapter headings – toccata, allemande, courante, sarabande, menuet, air, gigue – refer

to movements in piano music of Rameau which Aue likes, but their extreme innocence contrasts drastically with the events he describes. And since most of these musical terms denote dance music, they could be considered dances of death – analogous to Celan's poem "Todesfuge". Music is, after all, *the* German art.

By putting a gay SS officer at the center of his novel, the author may be commenting on the Nazi psyche; there were problems in the Nazi Party with this particular subject. The strict Nazi rules against homosexuality may reflect concern that the military is vulnerable – based on a male-dominated ethos that pervaded German society. There is, further, the problem of authority: absolute obedience to orders, rank consciousness and the exalted respect for authority figures tend to undermine a healthy sexual development.

Being a member of a harassed minority Aue might be expected to question the extermination of the Jews. He is plagued by persistent digestive ailments which are clearly psychosomatic. And being half French he might view Germans with a critical eye. This doesn't happen, as he tries to conform to avoid suspicion. Personally he is critical but officially he goes along, not wishing to expose himself. At the outset he announces that he has no guilt feelings. This compliant mentality in the face of overwhelming atrocities pervaded the ranks of the SS. The subservience to authority was also a hallmark of the defendants in this trial. Compliant and also complicit, Aue proves that he is a killer. Though he won't kill an animal he doesn't hesitate to kill human beings. This qualifies him as an SS officer. The motto of the SS is "Meine Ehre heißt Treue" (Encyclopedia of the Third Reich 902): loyalty to their leaders, no matter what. Aue is a good judge of the leading Nazis who are seen through his eyes. His main function in the book is to trace the

path through the Holocaust and unmask the SS leaders who were responsible for it. Though he lacks conviction as a rounded literary figure, he is an adequate interlocutor between the reader and the extremity of these events.

Close to the end of the novel, as Germany is collapsing, the two Nazi industrialists who have been promoting Aue's career are on their way to Moscow. Hitler didn't succeed, they tell him, but Stalin will carry on their extreme anti-Western agenda. They ask Aue to join them in Moscow as they offer their services to Stalin. They seek world domination. But this isn't attainable as long as there are Jews. That's why they wanted the Jews to be killed. Jews are dissenters, skeptics, critics, protesters. Jews will stand in the way of those who want to rule the world. This may ultimately be their salvation.

The book merits high praise for accurately describing the murderous Nazi campaign in Russia. The author has done an enormous amount of research and has visited numerous killing sites. As a literary work the novel has serious flaws: a shaky plot, the uncertain characterization of the narrator, some purple prose, a lack of coordination between the Holocaust and Greek tragedy. Still, the work is remarkable for exposing Nazi atrocities in Russia and for its convincing portrayals of Himmler, Eichmann, Speer and a host of other Nazi figures who had a part in the destruction of the Jews. And especially for its wealth of thought-provoking ideas.

The appearance of the novel has revived the trial for me in a more palpable way than ever before. This has to do with the nature of memory which is sharper of earlier events, and with the subject matter of this case. One cannot easily process material of this nature. The concentration on the sentence structure delayed the impact of the content. It

took me some seven or eight years after the trial to become fully aware of what I had translated. Perhaps this delay protects the psyche from too great a shock. Since then this case has preoccupied me increasingly, the more so because I was teaching German. The book has dramatized for me that I was a witness to a primordial event. This event remains inexplicable: a racial madness of "senselessly wasted life" (130). It has significantly lowered the threshold for violence in our age.

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