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Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

Dominic Bell

The Holocaust and the “Shoah” are terms used to describe the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis against six million Jews during World War II. This programme of systemic state-sponsored murder was implemented to exterminate Jews, the Romani and handicapped persons. Emphasis on these three groups however, marginalizes the extent to which other groups were victimized, most notably blacks, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and political opponents. This raises the following question: Does the persecution of blacks during the Holocaust constitute a genocide? In response, this paper offers a critical assessment of the treatment of blacks under the Nazi regime while making comparisons to the plight of other persecuted groups. Consequently, it argues that under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, a genocide was committed against mulatto children in the Rhineland. Thereafter, it demonstrates that the atrocities inflicted upon black Germans meet some of Raphaël Lemkin’s techniques of genocide. Finally, it holds that where genocide was not committed, crimes against humanity and war crimes were perpetrated against African Germans, African Americans and other blacks.

The fate of blacks during the Holocaust entailed isolation, persecution, sterilization, medical experimentation, torture, and murder.¹ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler held that “the Jews were responsible for bringing Negroes into the Rhineland, with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they [hated] and thus lowering its

¹ Robert Kesting, “The Black Experience during the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust and history: the known, the unknown, the disputed, and the reexamined*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 358.

Undergraduate Transitional Justice Review, Vol.4, Iss.1, 2013, 19-33

cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate.”² As a result, the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws declared blacks to be a minority with ‘alien blood,’ which prompted some to leave the country and isolated those who remained. Firstly, propaganda backed by the German state depicted blacks as “rapists of German women and carriers of venereal and other diseases.”³ Even under the Weimar Republic, they were considered a threat to the purity of German blood, an opinion which only intensified under the Nazi regime. In fact, “by 1937, hundreds of Rhineland mulatto children had been taken into custody by the Gestapo under secret orders. Ultimately, doctors Fischer, Abel, and Heinrich Schade were instrumental in sterilizations and disappearances of, and medical experiments performed on, the children.”⁴ Moreover, their actions were fully endorsed by the Third Reich.⁵

Blacks were ostracized in German society and those who manifested their displeasure were killed or incarcerated. Hilarius Gilges, for instance, was arrested by the Gestapo in relation to labor demonstrations and his body was found under a bridge in Düsseldorf the following day.⁶ Blacks were also detained in Nazi concentration camps. “On June 1, 1945, the 21st Army Group submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission a report [, which] stated that ‘Negroes’ were used as slave laborers at Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany.”⁷ In a similar vein, Black Allied prisoners of war were cruelly mistreated in comparison with their white inmates.⁸ “Captured black colonial troops from South Africa and the French colonies were used as slave laborers by the Wehrmacht in engineering battalions, constructing military

² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf = My battle* (United States: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2010), 280.

³ Robert Kesting, “The Black Experience,” 359.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁸ *Ibid.*

21 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

fortifications and repairing roads.”⁹ Many died of mistreatment, malnutrition and diseases.

The Nazis also conceived of ‘MittelAfrika’ in their ‘Grossgermanisches Reich’: “The MittelAfrika plan called for exploitation of Africa’s resources to bolster Germany. The Nazis planned to reconquer the German colonies lost in 1915, add other African territories, resettle or enslave the natives, expropriate African property and land, form a police state under Heinrich Himmler’s direction, and adapt the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 for colonial conditions.”¹⁰ Ultimately, there was no overarching central plan to eliminate blacks from Germany or its occupied territories. The Nazis perceived them to be a minor threat and believed the bureaucratic system would encourage them to leave the country. That being said, the sterilization of mulatto children provides a notable exception to this rule and meets criterion (d) outlined in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention. Furthermore, the persecution of blacks during the Holocaust exemplifies Lemkin’s biological, cultural and economic techniques of genocide. Finally, the lack of an overarching central plan does not take away from the crimes against humanity and war crimes which were perpetrated against blacks in Nazi Germany.

The forced sterilization of Rhineland mulatto children meets criteria (d) of article 2 of the Genocide Convention: “Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.”¹¹ World War I brought an end to German colonial rule. The Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to relinquish all of its overseas territories and mandated the occupation of the left bank of the Rhine as well as the cities of Cologne, Coblenz, Kehl, and Mainz on the right bank. The Rhineland was occupied by France, Belgium, Britain and the United States; hence, black colonial soldiers were among the ranks of occupational forces. “The largest portion [of blacks] was in the

⁹ Ibid., 363.

¹⁰ Ibid., 360.

¹¹ UN General Assembly, Prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, 9 December 1948, A/RES/260, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f0873.html> [accessed 21 November 2012].

French army, with between thirty and forty thousand Africans, some from Madagascar and Morocco, but for the most part from Algeria and Tunisia.”¹² Consequently, the use of black troops in the French occupation of the Rhineland was the first large-scale introduction of blacks in Germany. Contact between Germans and blacks had been largely restricted to small colonial holdings in Africa and infrequent black immigration to Germany. Accordingly, the Rhineland occupation was the first domestic interaction with a substantial black population and provided an opportunity for the construction of the ‘Other’.¹³ As a result, Germany began an anti-France and anti-Versailles propaganda campaign called the ‘Black Shame’ which “relied upon images of black sexual debauchery and the perceived threat to German womanhood and nationhood, as well as German ‘racial purity.’”¹⁴ Characterizations of sexuality were intricately linked to the threat of miscegenation which shaped the discourse regarding black troops.¹⁵ Blacks were said to possess an uncontrollable sexual appetite which was substantiated by ‘numerous’ alleged sexual offences supposedly perpetrated by colonial troops.¹⁶

Furthermore, negative portrayals of relations between black troops and civilians served to homogenize ‘blacks’ of differing backgrounds, ethnicities and colour tones into one undifferentiated ‘Other.’¹⁷ Germany did not use colonial troops during the First World War and, therefore, the use of black soldiers by American and other European forces was seen as the creation of a superficial racial parity. “Here the threat posed by the establishment of racial parity was that the white German male might lose his manliness--a

¹² May Opitz, *Showing our colors: Afro-German women speak out* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 41.

¹³ Tina Campt, “‘Afro-German’: The Convergence of Race, Sexuality and Gender in the Formation of a German Ethnic Identity, 1919-1960” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1996), 29-30.

¹⁴ Iris Wigger, “‘Black Shame’ -- the Campaign Against ‘Racial Degeneration’ and Female Degradation in Interwar Europe,” *Race and Class* 51, no. 3 (2010): 34.

¹⁵ Tina Campt, “‘Afro-German,’” 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-44.

23 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

‘potential’ that could only be maintained through inequality.”¹⁸ For the Nazis, racial parity represented an imminent danger to aryan supremacy.

In a similar vein, the threat of miscegenation also shaped the discourse regarding German mulatto offspring. “Dr. Hans Macco, in his tract ‘Race Problems in the Third Reich’ claimed: ‘These mulatto children were either conceived through force or else the white mother was a prostitute. In both cases there is not the slightest moral obligation to these offspring of alien-race.’”¹⁹ Moreover, in order to depict them as a menace to the health of German body politics, the Rhineland bastards were characterized as carriers of the same infectious diseases as their fathers.²⁰ They were treated as pariahs and seen as carcinogens to the Aryan race. Consequently, the danger of mixed-raced offspring was conceptualized as ‘Mulattisierung’ or the ‘mulattoisation’ of the German race:

German people: the threat of violence inter-breeding with coloreds, the threat of sexual and other types of diseases, and the offspring of the unfortunate victims of these Coloreds, at least a dozen different races of which are stationed along the Rhine. If we calculate according to the so-called Mendel Rule which holds that the human genealogical line takes 300 years to purify itself from a single mixture with alien blood, the result is that the German race will be polluted for centuries by such a multiple and many-sided mixture as the colored occupation represents. But not only the German race, the entire white race.²¹

The Mendel Rule was one of many theories used to ‘Other’ the Rhineland bastards. Comparatively, discourses rooted in scientific racism and eugenics were used to justify Action T-4 which entailed euthanizing disabled persons and homosexuals. All measures

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ May Opitz, *Showing our colors*, 49.

²⁰ Tina Campt, “‘Afro-German,’” 56.

²¹ Ibid., 60.

considered, the shame of Germany's defeat in World War I was wrongly associated with the arrival of black colonial troops in the Rhineland. The introduction of a large-scale black population in Germany occurred at a time when Germans felt vulnerable and wounded by impositions mandated in the Treaty of Versailles. As a result, mulatto children became vehicles for the articulation of racist discourses and were portrayed as cancers to the Aryan race.²²

The 'Othering' of black colonial troops in the Rhineland resulted in disastrous consequences for mulatto children. Individuals were sterilized by the National Socialist (NS) regime between 1934 and 1945 under the 1933 'Law to Prevent Hereditary Sick Offspring.'²³ In addition, the sterilization of the Afro-German children of the Rhineland occupation was carried out illegally and covertly under Commission Number 3.²⁴ "The NS initiative against the Rhineland children was instituted on neither a legal nor a genetic basis, but by means of an 'administrative initiative' which seemed not to have required official authorization."²⁵ As a result, roughly four hundred mandatory sterilizations of Afro-Germans were recorded without any legal basis.²⁶ These atrocities committed against mulattos are tantamount to genocide under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention. "The sterilization of the Rhineland children had been discussed at least five years prior to the promulgation of the 1933 law, although under the Third Reich, it quickly became clear that lacking a genetic basis, no such sterilization could be authorized under the NS sterilization program."²⁷ In this light, the majority of sterilizations were carried out covertly but there was clear intent to destroy, in whole, the ethnical African-German group in the Rhineland by "(d) imposing measures intended to prevent births

²² Ibid., 63-64.

²³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴ Ina R. Friedman, "No Blacks Allowed," in *The Other Victims: First-Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 92.

²⁵ Tina Campt, "'Afro-German,'" 75.

²⁶ May Opitz, *Showing our colors*, 52-53.

²⁷ Tina Campt, "'Afro-German,'" 75.

25 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

within the group.”²⁸ Regardless of the small number of victims, sustained purposeful action was undertaken by the Nazi regime to “physically destroy [mulatto children in the Rhineland] through the interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members.”²⁹ By and large, the sterilization of the Rhineland bastards during the Holocaust deserves recognition as a genocide.

Raphaël Lemkin coined the term ‘genocide’ in reference to “the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group [occurring in] two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.”³⁰ Subsequently, he identifies various techniques of genocide carried out in the following fields: Political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious and moral. Lemkin’s definition is important to consider because it was the precursor to the Genocide Convention which was adopted as a result of the Holocaust and, therefore, did not exist during the crisis. Consequently, with respect to the persecution of black Germans under the Third Reich, it is clear that these atrocities constitute biological, cultural and economic genocide. In a first instance, Lemkin describes biological genocide as a policy of depopulation where the “[main] purpose is the adoption of measures calculated to decrease the birthrate of the national groups of non-related blood, while at the same time [taking steps] to encourage the birthrate of the Volkdeutsche living in these countries.”³¹ The German physician Wilhelm Schallmeyer asserted that Germany needed to secure its biological capacity and racial quality by licensing marriage and sterilizing those of ‘lesser hereditary value.’³² Consequently, “the first

²⁸ UN General Assembly, Prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide.

²⁹ Helen Fein, "Genocide: A Sociological Perspective," in *Genocide: an anthropological reader*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 82.

³⁰ Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," in *Genocide: an anthropological reader*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi persecution of the gypsies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

Undergraduate Transitional Justice Review, Vol.4, Iss.1, 2013, 19-33

victims of Nazi genocide were those most vulnerable, people deemed handicapped. The July 1933 *Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Defects* resulted in the involuntary sterilization of 400,000 severely disabled and chronically mentally ill patients.”³³ Similarly, Jews, the Romani people, black Germans, Jehovah’s Witnesses and homosexuals were also forcefully sterilized in varying degrees. As noted in the previous argument, the foremost of these instances pertaining to blacks was the sterilization of mulatto children in the Rhineland. Three commissions were used to certify ‘Rhineland Bastards.’ Children were removed from their homes and put before these commissions without any form of representation. Thereafter, pending the ruling, they were taken directly to the hospital and sterilized.³⁴

Secondly, a similar component of biological genocide is the prohibition of mixed race relations. As Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann held, Jews and Roma were “carriers of alien blood,” and could not be allowed either to marry or to have sexual relations with those of Aryan descent.³⁵ Comparatively, mixed-marriages between blacks and whites were annulled and criminalized by the Reich as well as the Prussian Ministry of the Interior.³⁶ All in all, biological genocide is the most evident of Lemkin’s techniques where African Germans are concerned.

Another technique of genocide relevant to the case of black Germans is cultural genocide. In his discussion of cultural genocide in western Poland, Luxembourg and Alsace-Lorraine, Lemkin highlights general compulsory education attendance at the Volksschule or grammar school. Furthermore, he asserts that “in the Polish areas Polish youth were excluded from the benefit of liberal

³³ Donald L. Niewyk, "The Holocaust: Jews, Gypsies, and the Handicapped," in *Centuries of genocide: essays and eyewitness accounts*, ed. Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198.

³⁴ Ina R. Friedman, “No Blacks Allowed,” 92.

³⁵ Simone Schweber and Debbie Findling, *Teaching the Holocaust* (Los Angeles, CA: Torah Aura Productions, 2007), 153-154.

³⁶ Robert Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note,” *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 83, No. 1 (1998): 89.

27 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

arts studies and were channeled predominantly into the trade schools.”³⁷ In a similar vein, African-German children were ostracized by the Nazi bureaucratic system. They were compelled to attend the Volksschule as part of their mandatory education and, thereafter, were prohibited from pursuing any form of higher education.³⁸ In all likelihood, this was done to prevent dissidence and limit autonomy. Secondly, the Nazis exercised a rigid control on all cultural activities to prevent the expression of the ethnic spirit through artistic media. In Luxembourg this control was maintained through the Public Relations Section of the Reich Propaganda Office which encompassed dance, theatre and music among others.³⁹ Similarly, this rigid control was exercised throughout most of the country to the detriment of black entertainers. “‘Niggerjazz’ musicians in Germany and some of the German occupied territories were denounced in racial propaganda and subjected to discrimination, persecution, and, later, incarceration in the Falkensee concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. In 1943, Valaida Snow, a black female jazz musician, was reportedly jailed in Denmark and Germany by the Nazis.”⁴⁰ Likewise in Düsseldorf, Hilarius Gilges, a tap dancer and an actor, became involved in the leftist work-entertainment group the Northwest Ran which organized anti-Nazi demonstrations and protests. Incidentally, it is for this reason that he was arrested and murdered by the Gestapo. All measures considered, the rigid control of cultural activities in Nazi Germany entailed a cultural genocide against African Germans.

Alongside the cultural genocide perpetrated against black Germans, an economic genocide was committed which Lemkin describes as “the destruction of the foundations of the economic existence of a national group necessarily [bringing] about a crippling of its development [or] even a retrogression.”⁴¹ In the case of Jews, these measures were ruthless and diverse. A boycott of Jewish

³⁷ Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," 31.

³⁸ Robert Kesting, "The Black Experience," 360.

³⁹ Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," 31.

⁴⁰ Robert Kesting, "The Black Experience," 361.

⁴¹ Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," 31.

businesses was implemented by 1939 as the Law for the Exclusion of Jews from Economic Life. Furthermore, “the Nazi government terminated Jews from civil service jobs, disbarred hundreds of Jewish lawyers, and refused to make national health insurance payments for services rendered by Jewish doctors.”⁴² Conversely, the measures taken against black Germans were not nearly as harsh, which was, in part, due to their small population being perceived as a minor threat. Nevertheless, racial discrimination prevented them from seeking employment, welfare, or housing.⁴³ As a result, many African-Germans were driven to a life of crime, which the Nazi regime addressed on an ad hoc basis and outside of the rule of law. In response to the case of ‘Tom’ (last name unknown), a fifteen-year-old mulatto who resorted to felony after he was unable to obtain a job, the Prussian Ministry of the Interior received a message from Berlin. “The attachment told him to handle the situation at his level... because...the insignificant number of blacks did not warrant laws of official guidelines. Moreover, other correspondences in the German Community Conference files contain similar guidance to other offices.”⁴⁴ In this light, participation in economic life was restricted for black Germans. Though they did not face the same limitations as Jews, an economic genocide was still committed against them.

In certain instances where genocide was not committed during the Holocaust, crimes against humanity and war crimes were perpetrated against African Germans, African Americans and other blacks. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Explanatory Memorandum defines crimes against humanity as “particularly odious offenses in that they constitute a serious attack on human dignity or grave humiliation or a degradation of one or more human beings. They are not isolated or sporadic events, but are part either of a government policy.... or of a wide practice of atrocities tolerated or condoned by a government or a de facto authority. Murder; extermination; torture; rape; political, racial, or

⁴² Joseph H. Tyson, *The Surreal Reich* (Bloomington: Iuniverse Inc., 2010), 132.

⁴³ Robert Kesting, “The Black Experience,” 360.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 91.

29 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

religious persecution and other inhumane acts reach the threshold of crimes against humanity only if they are part of a widespread or systematic practice.”⁴⁵ As such, some of the most glaring crimes against humanity perpetrated against black Germans were the medical experiments performed on the Rhineland children. “With Hitler’s full knowledge, and at the instigation of Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS, and other members of the High Command, those experiments were carried out, under the direction or organization of the various physicians in position of authority in the Nazi regime.”⁴⁶ Two scientific minds of note are Eugen Fischer, a leading anthropologist who served as the Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, and Dr. Ernst Grawitz, SS Chief Physician. “On July 20, 1942, [Dr. Grawitz] reported to Heinrich Himmler that racial blood testing had been performed by [Dr. Fischer] on serums of ‘whites and blacks’ in 1938. Moreover, Fischer had performed the same tests on Gypsies and scheduled similar tests for Jewish inmates at Sachsenhausen in 1942.”⁴⁷ The knowledge that detainees were scheduled for sterilization, or for disposal, facilitated medical trials. Medical practitioners were more willing to engage in experimentation knowing that the fates of their patients had already been determined by the Third Reich. Nevertheless, complicit physicians and physicians in positions of authority, such as Dr. Fischer and Dr. Grawitz, were guilty of crimes against humanity in the same manner that the twenty-three defendants in The Medical Case of the Subsequent Proceedings at Nuremberg were tried and convicted.⁴⁸

The Medical Case of the Subsequent Proceedings at Nuremberg also saw convictions of war crimes which are relevant to

⁴⁵ UN General Assembly, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (last amended 2010), 17 July 1998, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3a84.html> [accessed 21 November 2012].

⁴⁶ Cherif M. Bassiouni, *Crimes against humanity in international criminal law* (2nd rev. ed. The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1999), 341.

⁴⁷ Robert W. Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 92-93.

⁴⁸ Cherif M. Bassiouni, *Crimes against humanity*, 342.

the persecution of blacks in Germany. Correctly defined, war crimes include “murder, the ill-treatment or deportation of civilian residents of an occupied territory to slave labor camps... the murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war... [the killing of prisoners,] the wanton destruction of cities, towns and villages, and any devastation not justified by military, or civilian necessity.”⁴⁹ Firstly, it is evident that the unlawful seizure, and medical experimentations on blacks constitute war crimes. Secondly, the use of black colonial troops from South Africa and French colonies as slave laborers for the Wehrmacht are also war crimes. “Another violation occurred when five African American prisoners of war were forced to serve as drivers for the 116th SS Panzer Division near Petit Halleux, France. One Vokssturm commander ordered his men to ‘kill all colored prisoners on sight, because they stink.’”⁵⁰ Likewise, a report to the United Nations War Crimes Commission from the 21st Army Group in 1945 confirmed that blacks were used as slave laborers at Neuengamme concentration camp.⁵¹ Finally, the treatment of black civilian prisoners and black prisoners of war witnessed by Wilhelm Ruhl, a Gestapo guard at Butzbach prison, qualify as war crimes. “Ruhl accused other Gestapo guards of deliberately executing some of the prisoners of African descent and burying their bodies in a bomb crater near the prison... While the treatment of blacks was discriminatory, brutal and harsh in internment and concentration camps and prisons, evidence indicates that black Allied prisoners of war fared no better compared to black civilians.”⁵² All in all, the experimentation, deportation of black civilians to concentration camps, and the treatment of black prisoners prove to be strong evidence of war crimes perpetrated by the Nazis.

In conclusion, this paper raised the following question: Does the persecution of blacks during the Holocaust constitute genocide? In response, it offered a critical assessment of the treatment of blacks

⁴⁹ Gary D. Solis, *The law of armed conflict: international humanitarian law in war* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 301-303.

⁵⁰ Robert Kesting, “The Black Experience,” 363.

⁵¹ Robert W. Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 94.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 95.

31 Examining the Persecution of Blacks During the Holocaust

under the Nazi regime while making comparisons to the plight of other persecuted groups. Consequently, it argued that under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, a genocide was committed against mulatto children in the Rhineland. Thereafter, it demonstrated that the atrocities inflicted upon black Germans meet some of Raphaël Lemkin's techniques of genocide. Finally, it held that where genocide was not committed, crimes against humanity and war crimes were perpetrated against African Germans, African Americans and other blacks. The goal of this paper was to shed light on a neglected aspect of the Holocaust which is often glossed over. Conversely, it did not intend to prioritize the suffering of one particular group over others. The inclusion of intent in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention negates the influence of positivism associated with quantifying the number of victims. As such, the sterilization of four hundred mulatto children does indeed qualify as genocide even though it pales in comparison to the mass murder of approximately six millions jews during the Holocaust. It is also important to note that the list of atrocities established in this essay is not exhaustive and that further research could be conducted into other techniques of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated against black Germans. Furthermore, other lines of potential inquiry could focus on the persecution of the Romani people, disabled persons, homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses and political opponents during the Holocaust. Ultimately, one of the most important lessons to take away from this paper is that there is no safe level of racism and that any agenda which prioritizes economic and political security over humans rights can be disastrous.⁵³ Moreover, the creation of artificial binaries in the process of 'Othering' can lead to egregious crimes committed in the name of racist ideologies. Finally, a highly sophisticated and advanced bureaucratic state apparatus can make the general population complicit in these acts.

⁵³ Donald L. Niewyk, "The Holocaust: Jews, Gypsies, and the Handicapped," 211.

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Undergraduate Transitional Justice Review, Vol.4, Iss.1, 2013, 19-33