

Tom:

I was disappointed to learn last night that I will miss the Holocaust discussion next week. As you might suspect, I have both interest in the subject and a somewhat unique – most would say heretical – view of the subject.

Attached are two articles that I've stumbled across recently. The piece by Swinburne is, at least to me, silly (and totally unrelated to the Holocaust). But, it relates to our conversation in class last night, so I pass it along for whatever it is worth.

As for the Holocaust, Leventhal makes a case for God based on the necessity of goodness and a source for morality. Interesting, but not necessarily compelling, at least not to me. [This is not to say that I agree with those who argue that the Holocaust is evidence for the non-existence of God or that this tragic event in human history followed, or was facilitated, by the death of a formerly living God. I just don't think Leventhal's arguments are fully convincing. So, again, I pass on the work for whatever it is worth.]

Since I unfortunately will not be able to attend the conference next week, I want to make another point regarding the Holocaust. Our view of this event is colored by our view of 20<sup>th</sup> Century history, a period that, because it is so recent, we have difficulty viewing objectively. The extermination by the Nazis of 6 million Jews is an important, but in the end minor, manifestation of a much larger event that involved the Allies as much as the Axis powers. That event was the culmination of the devaluing of human life resulting in "total war" – a conflict in which human life came to have no meaning. For a variety of reasons, we focus on one aspect of this event – the Holocaust – to the exclusion of other equally heinous events.

The Holocaust should not, of course, be ignored. Indeed, it is a comfortable way of looking at the consequences of total devaluation of human life, comfortable because the Nazis lost the war and lost all influence in the world. So, it is easy to judge and condemn their acts, and to take away the lesson that man can never achieve absolute knowledge and acts based on beliefs that we "know" something with certainty are likely to prove to be evil. But, the acts of the Nazis have to be viewed in context, the context of a prevailing world view at that time that the value of human life, at least individual human lives, is properly subordinate to pursuit of common societal goals – some legitimate, some not. In other words, the Allies as well as Germany and Japan adopted the view that the ends justify the means.

There is an historical argument that the worst aspect of the Holocaust, the systematic genocide of the Jewish population in Europe, was an accident attributable to a trivial mistake by a trivial (and, to the best of my knowledge, unknown) actor. While I have not researched this issue recently, and would not make these arguments publicly until and unless I had done so, the decision on the Final Solution was made in 1942, at least that is what the available documentary evidence suggests. And this decision followed the Battle of Britain in 1941 during which Germany conducted an air war against Britain with the objective of preparing for ultimate invasion by the Germans of the one significant country in Western Europe that they did not already control (Spain being an ally, albeit an uncommitted one.)

So what was this trivial mistake? Well, the Luftwaffe had been focusing all of its efforts on destroying Britain's air power, a necessary prerequisite to invasion, and it was largely succeeding. The aggregate loss of British aircraft from the bombing of their air bases (that is, planes and infrastructure destroyed on the ground together with those lost in the air attempting to defend the assets on the ground) would have been unsustainable had it continued. My understanding is that German aircrews had strict "rules of engagement" that limited the targets to British military assets and infrastructure and that prohibited the bombing of civilian population centers. This, of

course, would have been consistent with the Geneva Conventions and other rules of war to which the Germans had subscribed.

[German conduct towards prisoners of war, for example, demonstrates that they took their obligations under the Geneva Convention seriously. British, French and American prisoners of war were treated much more humanely than were Russian prisoners of war. The U.K., France and the U.S. had all subscribed to the Geneva Convention. Russia had not. And, Germany's acts towards prisoners shows that it thought the Geneva Convention was meaningful and put limits on its conduct. Now, of course, it is not quite this clear. Germany did not meet all of the standards of the Geneva Convention, even as to British, French and American POWs, but it did treat them very differently from Russian POWs, and the German power structure left the administration of POW camps to the Luftwaffe – logically, I've never understood why the air force should operate prison camps, but that's what the Germans did – and consistently rejected demands by the SS that it should run the POW camps. The German power structure recognized that the SS would not have respected the constraints of the Geneva Convention.]

The trivial mistake I referred to was a mistake by a German bombardier that resulted in an unplanned bombing of London. Had the Allies recognized this one event as a mistake, that is, had they waited a few days to see whether Germany would attack other civilian population centers in addition to, or instead of, British military air assets, the course of history might have been different. But, they did not wait. Instead, the British mounted an immediate retaliatory attack on a German city, Berlin if I am not mistaken. The Battle of Britain then changed from a legitimate military action to achieve air supremacy in preparation for an invasion to a questionably legitimate action to destroy industrial assets and a clearly illegitimate action to terrorize the British population with indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations. This change probably won the war for the Allies, because the Royal Air Force could sustain defensive combat losses, but could not have continued to sustain both defensive combat losses and destruction of military air assets and infrastructure on the ground. But, I digress. The point is that the retaliatory bombing by the Royal Air Force signaled to the Germans that the Allies were willing to reject limitations on attacks on civilian populations contained in the Geneva Conventions. Ergo, the extermination of the Jews was "fair game", so to speak. Thus, the infamous Wannsee (sp?) conference at which the fate of the Jews in Europe was sealed might otherwise have reached a different conclusion.

Meanwhile, while the U.S. Army Air Corp largely limited its actions to strategic daytime bombing of German infrastructure and industrial assets, the Royal Air Force engaged in nighttime bombing of civilian population centers. Again, this changed over time to some extent, and the distinction between the actions undertaken by the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force and the Royal Air Force was as much an allocation of tasks between these two military forces as it was a moral objection by the U.S. to indiscriminate bombing of civilian population centers. Indeed, after the invasion of Normandy, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force had no problem with helping our ground forces take St. Lo with a 12 hour bombing campaign that reduced this small city, really just a big town, to rubble, innocent French civilians – our purported Allies – be damned. [There are anecdotes of U.S. soldiers preparing for the invasion of St. Lo becoming physically sick – essentially motion sickness – because the shaking of ground from the bombing was so violent and lasted so long.] As might be expected, U.S. combat losses in capturing St. Lo were far lower than had the town been taken in house-to-house combat.

Two important points:

First, the Allies were well aware of what the Germans were doing to the Jews and did nothing to impede it. As more and more documents from the period are declassified, that becomes clearer and clearer. The rail lines to the concentration camps were never bombed, even after the Allies

had run out of legitimate military targets. One explanation for this is that Roosevelt and Churchill were looking to the postwar world and realized that, having been taken to a certain point, the Allies had to let the Holocaust continue, because if a critical mass of Jewish population survived, the consequence would have been interminable civil war in Europe after the Germans were defeated.

Second, from a moral perspective, Allied conduct, at least with respect to bombing of civilian populations, was, to a large extent, indistinguishable from what the Germans were doing. Recently, the minutes of the high level targeting meetings – the meetings of the general staffs of Britain and the U.S. at which bombing targets were selected – have been declassified. Reading them shows that by late 1943, and certainly during 1944 and continuing until the end of the war, we had essentially run out of legitimate military and industrial targets in Germany, and the targeting decisions had boiled down to “how many people can we kill how efficiently.” The fire bombings of Hamburg, Dresden and other cities is very hard to defend militarily or morally.

So, the Allies had, to a large extent (although certainly not to the extent of the Germans or the Russians) devalued human life in the conflict.

[As an aside, in the Asian theatre, the U.S. air forces were having difficulty effectively bombing Japanese industry and infrastructure. We were using B29s operating at 30,000 feet with conventional high explosive bombs. (B29s were pressurized and had much higher operating ceilings than the B17s, B24s and Lancasters used in Europe. Our bombing inefficiency in Japan taught us about what is now referred to as the jet stream.) Curtis Lemay, a truly sociopathic individual, was assigned to coordinate the air war against Japan and his answer was simple: Fly lower and use incendiary bombs to create massive firestorms to burn entire Japanese cities to the ground. The firebombing of Tokyo resulted in 100,000 civilian casualties – in one night. We ought not lament the casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those targets had been “saved” so the efficacy of the atomic bomb could be accurately judged. But, had the atomic bombs proven insufficient, both cities would have been firebombed. Those people were going to die, one way or the other. Yes, Truman agonized over use of the atomic bomb, but his angst was not primarily moral. He only wanted to know if it would work and, if so, how well.]

The Holocaust has to be seen in this context as well as in the context of the events in Russia and China (by the Japanese) that preceded it. Stalin is estimated to have killed some 30 million of his own people in the 1930s. The conduct of Japan in China beginning in 1937 was no less reprehensible, even if the number of lives lost was lower. The Holocaust is significant in the way a plane crash is significant – a large number of lives are lost in a single discrete event. We lose more people in auto accidents every day than in commercial air tragedies in most years, but psychologically we focus on the loss of large numbers of people in commercial air crashes more intensely than we do the number of people lost in auto accidents. Travel – by air or by car – is risky. Cars are not less risky (although whether they are more risky depends on how you look at the numbers and what statistical normalization decisions are made). Cars are not good and airplanes bad. So it is with the Holocaust. The loss of 6 million Jewish lives as part of an extermination program that killed between 14 and 20 million people is awful. And, that extermination program was reprehensible. But, it occurred during a period in history when a lot of conduct was reprehensible. And, while responsibility for the Holocaust rests primarily with the Nazis, the culpability of the Allies was more than de minimis. Thus, I do not see the Holocaust as an event focused on Jews (although I understand why they see it this way). Instead, I see it as part of a much larger event that involved many more actors.

Got to go. Enjoy the quiet from the corner of the classroom next week.

Regards,

MDS