

Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen? Psycho(patho)logical perspectives on Hannah Arendt's *The Banality of Evil**

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Abstract In 1961, the Eichmann trial opened in Jerusalem, and its worldwide resonance through media coverage questioned the collective conscience about responsibility for Nazi crimes. German philosopher Hannah Arendt attended the process as a special correspondent for the U.S. magazine *The New Yorker*. Her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) caused a great scandal: the author advanced the brazen idea of collective co-responsibility for Nazi crimes, reporting the identikit of a standard bureaucrat, a seemingly ordinary man, just like any one of us. Almost sixty years after its publication, this study adopts a primarily psycho(patho)logical perspective to reflect once again on the considerations Arendt shared in the *Banality of Evil*. In showing the multiple facets of banality, the research investigates recent results in the analysis of the criminal mind in order to shed light on the etiology of evil.

Keywords Shoah; Nazi genocide; evil; psychopathology; trauma

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1. Introduction: Hannah Arendt and *The Banality of Evil*

In 1961, the Eichmann trial opened in Jerusalem, and its worldwide resonance through media coverage questioned the collective conscience about responsibility for Nazi crimes. German philosopher Hannah Arendt attended the process as a special correspondent for the U.S. magazine *The New Yorker*. She published five journalistic-style accounts after the verdict, between the summer and fall of 1962. A collection of these writings was released under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in 1963, causing a great scandal: the author was, in fact proposing the brazen idea of collective co-responsibility for Nazi crimes, reporting the identikit of a common bureaucrat, a seemingly ordinary man, just like any one of us.

Since its first edition, there have been numerous reinterpretations, from Enrico Deaglio's *The Banality of Good* (1991), which focusses on the figure of the Italian "Giusto" Giorgio Perlasca to Bettina Stangneth's *The Truth of Evil* (2017[2011]),¹ who, in her critical reinterpretation of Arendt's original work, argued the hypothesis of the 'mask,' an extremely articulated strategy designed for the trial. In this way, the author restored peace to consciences by reframing the hierarchy in an out-of-the-ordinary human profile.

How then, did Arendt's text become so controversial? Perhaps because it insinuated that not all tyrants and executioners acted from a stage, to steal a metaphor from Zygmunt Bauman, who once referred to the XX century as the "century of spectators" (2015). And not because Arendt claimed that evil lurked among us, rather that evil could have been us. A simple yet disarming hypothesis: one of the most insidious aspects of evil was its ability to take on mundane, ordinary, whatever faces, therefore devoid of awareness for the individual. Furthermore, if the individual is unaware, it can be hypothesized that he is not responsible for the crimes he has been accused of.

A further query accompanies this study of the responsibility for Nazi crimes: *Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen?* (Will something happen to me?) The cue comes from the play *Ausmerzen: Lives Unworthy of Being Lived*, produced and performed by Italian actor Marco Paolini in 2011. The script, intended to acquaint audiences with the Nazi eugenics program known as

¹ Original title: *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* (2014).

Aktion T4,² deals with an earlier genocide, a ‘final solution’ enacted by the Nazi regime well before 1940 and aimed at all *unwertes Leben* or *unmensch* (lives unworthy of being lived): the terminally ill, those suffering from genetic malformations or the mentally ill.³

Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen? is an oft-repeated question by a nurse subjected to interrogation by liberating American soldiers. Her reaction puts forward two considerations. On the one hand, a sort of abulia, the incapacity of deciding and judging by oneself that Arendt associated to ‘thoughtlessness’; the suppression of life by euthanasia was indeed perceived as a mere nursing task, routine and monotonous – in other words, a ‘banality’. On the other hand, the question implies a legal action, a determination of responsibility – and this is where Arendt’s evil appears.

2. Premises

According to Cesarani (2005: 157), Eichmann managed genocide as a director of a multinational corporation. Eichmann, like other bureaucrats of his peers, was undoubtedly influenced by the economic and political background experienced by the Weimar Republic: the enormous debts incurred by the Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent Great Depression of 1929 that had weakened German business enterprises (Arendt 2009 [1951]). Moreover, the WWI defeat had been a severe blow to Germany’s international political role and was experienced as a snub to German lustre and honour.

Not surprisingly, the resulting identity crisis led intellectuals to support the fledgling theories of race, particularly Darwinian survival laws, and even to formulate the so-called “Aryan myth” (Poliakov 2019 [1971]). The fear of the *Vokstod* (death of German people due to racial degeneration) underlying the German decline had, therefore, two results: on the one hand, the purging of German society through euthanasia (the Nazi eugenics program already

² The Nazi eugenics program consisted of the systematic euthanasia of the infirm, mentally ill, and non-self-sufficient. It was named after the address of the Berlin headquarters (Tiergartenstraße 4); it went into effect in 1939 and was officially suspended in August 1941, when forces began to focus on concentration camps. However, the program continued to operate even after its extinction; according to estimates, it caused between eighty and one hundred thousand casualties. See Aly (2017 [2013]).

³ Hence the title of the play *Ausmerzen*, from the German verb meaning “to uproot,” in contrast to the preservation of the so-called “race myth.” These experiments were in anticipation of the *Endlösung* (Final Solution) that questioned the ethical and moral dilemma implicit in euthanasia.

mentioned, Aktion T4), as well as preventive mass sterilizations. These operations were intended to secure the demographic economy through a racial hygiene plan that soon extended to other undesirables: political prisoners, common criminals, asocials, stateless people, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

On the other hand, the "Aryan myth," together with the historical anti-Semitism that in Third Reich Germany took on the connotations of "eliminationist anti-Semitism" (Goldhagen 1998 [1996]), inspired the dehumanization of specific social categories, first and foremost Jews, but also Gypsies.

Supported by an effective propaganda campaign and the rhetoric and charisma of the Führer, the "Nazi myth" (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1992 [1991]) took shape, fomenting a National Socialist ideology,⁴ sometimes even making use of demonological elements (Loddo 2014). Combine these assumptions with the propensity of the German people for obedience to authority, and the outcome was a fertile climate for the conception and implementation of legalized genocidal operations. The picture, certainly condensed and not exhaustive, is undoubtedly lacking those ethical and moral assumptions that should logically prevent the implementation of such a plan.

When philosopher Karl Jaspers posed the question of German guilt in 1946, he provoked a heated debate around the issue of co-responsibility to Nazi crimes, interrogating public opinion through the contributions of historians, philosophers, sociologists and theologians. Due to the volume of critical literature on the topic, this study limits itself to investigating the psycho(patho)logical perspective that led to the Holocaust and reserved the right to explore other disciplinary approaches elsewhere.

In particular, this research takes into consideration the peculiarities of the German social tissue characteristic of the Third Reich by distinguishing three well-defined groups: the intelligentsia (bureaucrats, hierarchs and Nazi doctors), a category chargeable as (active) executors; the people (Browning's so-called "ordinary men"), more or less directly aware of and involved in the genocidal machine; and the victims, sometimes co-responsible for the efficacy of the concentration universe. In this investigation, the profile of Eichmann, as the extermination bureaucrat, is examined to emphasize how a red thread connects *Täter* (executioners), *Mitläufer* (bystanders), and *Opfer* (victims): a

⁴ This 'ethos of the masses' was meant to create a *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) or *Volkswille* (popular will). See Bauer (2001 [2009]).

common denominator that made the “Final Solution” possible and that reveals multiple facets, none of them, ‘banal’. The methodological approach primarily pertains to the field of psycho and socio-pathology to assess how and to what degree an individual’s exposure to a politically and socially toxic environment may affect the banality attributed to his or her actions, including criminal ones.

3. Eichmann in Jerusalem

On May 11, 1960, at about 6:30 p.m. local time, Adolf Eichmann, a former Nazi hierarch who had been a refugee in Argentina since 1950 under the name Ricardo Klement, was arrested in San Fernando, a suburb of Buenos Aires, at the hands of MOSSAD, through a tip-off from an informant, German judge and prosecutor Fritz Bauer, who, in turn, had been in contact since 1957 with the local informant, Lothar Hermann. The capture, in itself so sensational that it inspired Krause Lars’s drama *The People vs. Fritz Bauer* (2015), was made possible by the public activity of Eichmann, who, albeit in hiding, had exposed himself in 1955 in an interview with Dutch journalist Willem S. Sassen, a former member of the SS: evidence later cataloged in the records as the “Sassen tapes.”⁵ In addition to this material, there were the so-called “Argentine Papers,”⁶ sufficient evidence for prosecutors to reconsider Eichmann’s role within the machinery of the so-called “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.” Indeed, the main diatribe of the trial became to understand the degree to which Eichmann was responsible for the Nazi extermination as an active organizer of the genocide or, as the defense argued, a mere bureaucrat in the service of the regime. Arendt comments: “[he] could only be accused of having ‘aided and abetted’ the extermination of the Jews, extermination which he effectively acknowledged in Jerusalem, had been ‘one of the greatest crimes in human history’” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 32).⁷

Eichmann’s trial opened in Jerusalem at the Beth Ha’am (House of the People) on April 11, 1961, and proceedings closed on December 5, with Eichmann being charged with all the accusations. The sentence was carried out about six months later, on June 11, 1962. Eichmann’s depositions were taken in fourteen hearings, from June 20 to July 7; cross-examination lasted only two

⁵ Other sources refer to interviews given over the course of five months in 1957. See Loiacono (2019: 44).

⁶ A collection of memoir accounts written by Eichmann but not available for consultation.

⁷ All Italian sources were translated by the author unless otherwise specified.

and a half hearings, from July 7 to July 24, 1961. Actors during the trial, in addition to the defendant, were Attorney General Gideon Hausner; for the defense, Robert Servatius, a Cologne lawyer already involved in defense of former Nazi hierarchs; and, finally, Moshe Landau presiding over the entire trial. Given the international media coverage, despite the choice of Hebrew as the official language of instruction, simultaneous translation services in English, German, and French had been planned. To date, the trial proceedings do not appear to have been published: only the materials intended for and circulated by the press are available. Notwithstanding, extensive excerpts based on transcripts, protocols, and filed documents have circulated and been used by scholars since the early years after the trial, particularly in the legal field.

Arendt quoted the words of Ben Gurion, then Israeli Prime Minister: “In this historic trial, in the dock of the defendants sits not an individual, nor even the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 27). Hence a first, blatant contradiction: while the court should exercise impartial justice of crimes, the Eichmann trial, known for this as a “mock trial,”⁸ opened with the collective acknowledgment that the defendant’s sentence was known a priori. Eichmann was convicted of fifteen counts, including crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and membership in a criminal organization, specifically the SS and Gestapo.

The American magazine *The New Yorker* commissioned Hannah Arendt to play a different role than her usual, that of an opinionated reporter. Her reports were more than just objectively recounting the investigation she witnessed in dry journalistic terms. At times, she would highlight certain aspects, sometimes going so far as to use speculation to fill in the gaps that the court of history could not unravel during the trial *The Banality of Evil*, however, cannot be categorized as a pure example of literary journalism.⁹ Despite the hybrid writing, Arendt’s subjective perceptions did not obscure the meticulousness with which the author reported the various testimonies of the trial. The first publication of the five-part account was in the 1963 February/March issue of *The New Yorker*, followed by publication as a volume in May of that same year with the emblematic subtitle of *The Banality of Evil*.

⁸ *The Eichmann Show* (2016).

⁹ A form of creative nonfiction that approaches newspaper and magazine writing, based on historical facts and therefore requiring research and often, interviews. See for example *I am Adolf Eichmann* by Henri Ludwigg (1970 [1961]).

4. Eichmann: identikit of a “gentle hierarch”

Arendt presents Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962) as

A middle-aged man of average height, thin, with incipient baldness, uneven teeth, and myopic eyes, who for the duration of the trial will stand with his scrawny neck hunched over the bench (not even once will he turn to look at the audience) and desperately try (succeeding almost every time) not to lose self-control, despite the nervous tic that moves his lips and that has undoubtedly plagued him for a long time (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 11-12).

A lower-middle-class individual who, only by a fortuitous set of circumstances had joined the Nazi Party (membership number 889895) and later became *SS-Obersturmbannführer* (SS lieutenant colonel; serial number 45326), Eichmann did not join the party out of conviction nor adhere to the regime’s ideological faith. He was not familiar with the party program and had never read *Main Kampf* (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 43-44).

During the trial, he had pleaded “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment” (*Im Sinne der Anklage nicht schuldig*; Arendt 2021 [1963]: 30), by which words he meant acknowledging his guilt only before God and not before the law. Arendt explains, “Not guilty because according to the legal system of the Nazi period he had done nothing wrong; because the things he was accused of were not crimes but ‘state actions’” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 31). The label ‘state actions’ became the rhetorical shield behind which Eichmann’s entire defense was sustained during the trial. Partly, because Eichmann himself claimed that he never directly provided for the murder of another human being: “I never killed a human being; nor did I ever give the order to kill a Jew or a non-Jew: just, I never did it” (Eichmann, qtd. in Arendt 2021 [1963]: 31). Partly because, if any participation on his part was proven, it had to be understood within the limits of the diligent execution of government orders, for which he acted as a mere bureaucrat of the regime: “Servatius said that the defendant was not responsible for the ‘skeleton collections, sterilizations, killings by gas and similar medical matters’” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 84).

What was Eichmann’s role within the Nazi government machine? While the line of defense was built entirely around the figure of a mere bureaucrat, however diligent, at the Nuremberg trial, it was the defense attorney for Kaltenbrunner, an Austrian who headed the RSHA (Central Reich Security Office) after the 1942 assassination of Heydrich, who cleared his protégé of all

charges by blaming Eichmann for the extermination because, through his work, he had made the execution of the entire campaign possible (Stangneth 2017 [2011]: 86).

The official guide to the site of Villa Marlier, on Lake Wannsee on the outskirts of Berlin, reads, “Eichmann, as an organizer of deportations, played an essential role in the process of exterminating European Jews” (House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site 2002: 81). Villa Marlier is infamous for having been the scene of the Wannsee Conference, held on January 20, 1942, and whose fifteen participants - the *crème de la crème* of the National Socialist regime, the party, and the Schutzstaffel, including Eichmann - met at the invitation of Reinhard Heydrich to finalize the so-called *Endlösung der Judenfrage* (“Final Solution to the Jewish Problem”). The document continues, “From March 1944 onward, as head of the ‘Eichmann Special Command’ in Budapest, he was responsible for the forced transport of more than 437,000 Jews to Auschwitz and other concentration and extermination camps” (House of the Wannsee 2002: 81).

Heinrich Himmler, as head of the SS and German police (Reichsführer-SS and Gestapo), received direct orders from Hitler, which he then passed on to Heydrich. Before these reached Eichmann (*Referat IVB4 Jewish Affairs - evacuation and deportation*), there was an intermediate step at the State Secret Police Department, represented by Heinrich Müller. Executive orders again came via a direct dispatch from Himmler, this time addressed to Oswald Pohl, the official in charge of the economic and administrative office, who turned them over to Richard Glücks, the organizational head of the Nazi concentration camp system and responsible for getting the orders to the commanders of the individual camps (Cesarani 2005: 117-119).

Having mere operational functions and no responsibility in policy-making, Eichmann was not directly involved in the execution of the extermination orders. However, several government documents now passed to the archives reveal that his participation was more crucial. For example, a letter (see Figure 1) dated February 26, 1942 - thus after the Wannsee Conference - and signed by Heydrich, refers to a meeting planned for the “concrete execution of the final solution of the Jewish problem” (House of the Wannsee 2002: 101) and scheduled for 10:30 a.m. on March 6, 1942, in the presence of Lieutenant Colonel Eichmann.

The ambiguity of his position within the regime became the skirmish adopted by the defense to obtain, at least in part, a lesser sentence. Eichmann took

refuge behind what he called *Kadavergehorsam*, “cadaveric obedience” to the regime (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 158).

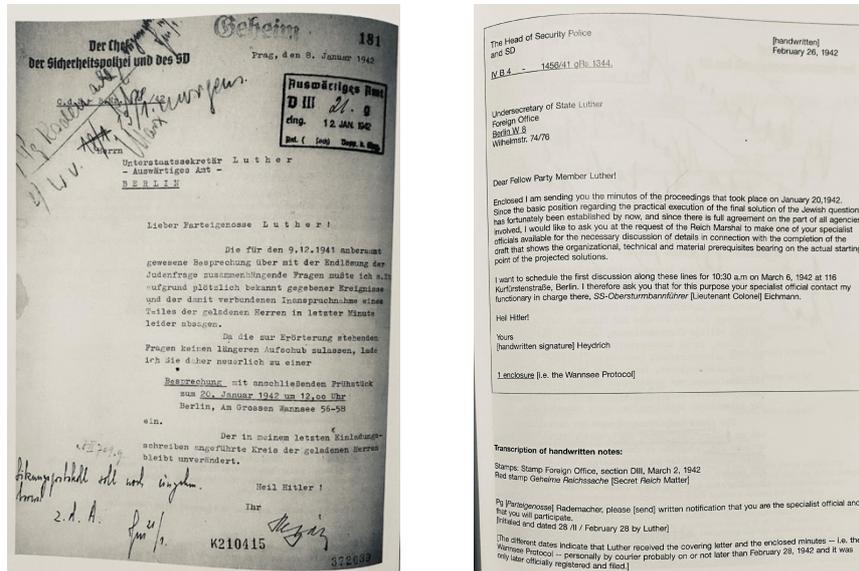


Figure 1: Letter dated February 26, 1942

4.1 *Kadavergehorsam*, ‘cadaveric obedience’

Kadavergehorsam indicates a “blind, fanatical obedience” or “excessive loyalty” and dates back to Ignatius of Loyola (1558).¹⁰ The word implies a character of passivity; in fact, it subtends an apathetic state in which the individual moves through everyday life like an automaton, moved by inertia rather than his own will. Eichmann, repeatedly appointed by his colleagues as an “expert on the Jewish question,” learned Hebrew and a smattering of Yiddish (Arendt 2021 [1963] 52); he was an ardent Zionist, as evidenced by his involvement in the development of the Nisko plan and, later, the Madagascar project. His main task was to provide for the ‘emigrations’ - also called ‘evacuations’ in official records - of Jews to make Germany *judenrein* (Jew-free). However, these were actual deportations because of the forced nature of the removal of people and property, the journey of which Eichmann meticulously planned

¹⁰ “Qui sub Obedientia vivunt, se ferri ac regi a divina Providentia per Superiores suos sinere debent perinde, ac si cadaver essent.” According to Bettelheim (1963: 27), “the argument of *Kadavergehorsamkeit*” referred to the greatest virtue for a soldier in the Prussian army: obedience from corpses.

(*Transportjuden*) as if it were a “production line” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 57). This earned him the appellation of “architect of the Holocaust”:

It is like an automatic factory, like a mill connected to a bakery. At one end, you slip in a Jew who still owns something, a factory, a store, a bank account, and this one goes through the building from one counter to another, from one building to another, and comes out at the other end without a penny, without any more rights, only with a passport on which it says, ‘You must leave the country within fifteen days. Otherwise, you will end up in a concentration camp. (Jewish officials in Berlin inspecting Eichmann’s offices, qtd. in Arendt 2021 [1963]: 58).

Not surprisingly, German critic Winfried Baumgart called the Shoah an “administrative genocide” (Arendt & Fest 2011: 135). Eichmann’s diligence and thoroughness enabled him to make a career within the National Socialist regime, earning four promotions from 1937 to 1941. The near-hegemony over the tangled rail transport network destined for deportation reflects an attitude that, as early as 1945, Rudolf Kasztner had dubbed “Eichmannism” (Stangneth 2017 [2011]: 89).

After *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night) in 1938, Eichmann’s view toward Jewish community leaders, with whom he interacted became hostile rather than aloof. The defense used this working dedication to its advantage, arguing the case for the bureaucrat unaware of the extermination: his responsibility was limited to the deportation. Arendt commented:

Since Eichmann had been in charge of transporting the victims and not of killing them, legally or at least formally, there remained the question of whether, at that time, he knew what he was doing and whether he was capable of judging the enormity of his actions. In other words, the extent to which, however medically sane, he was legally responsible had to be ascertained. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 108-109)

In support of his line of defense, several testimonies recovered in administrative reports archived in the regime files were submitted to the record. For example, to an SS commander, Eichmann allegedly addressed himself in these terms, “How can you do such a thing? Inflict it on women and children? It is absurd. Our people will become insane or mentally ill, our people” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 106).

Hence, by his admission, Eichmann knew: he only pretended to be unaware of the outcome of the deportations he organized meticulously. This

deposition could probably have been used to put an end to the trial if the cunning of the lawyer Servatius had not exploited the regime's bureaucracy to transform the figure of the executioner into that of savior, resulting in the true paradox of the entire trial: to present the ghettos and camps not as factories of extermination but as places of safe refuge for the now stateless Jews, liminal spaces where the Jewish community could be reconstructed. A thesis supported precisely by Eichmann's adherence to Zionism and his conception of the Nisko and Madagascar plans: "Who but he, Eichmann, had saved hundreds of thousands of Jews? Who but he, with his zeal and organizational skills, had enabled them to escape in time?" (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 70).

At this point, Arendt manifested a first, by no means impartial, judgment on the process, proposing a seemingly unobjectionable syllogism: "it was Eichmann himself who determined the final destination of all the convoys, [...] so he decided whether a particular convoy was to be exterminated" (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 113).

Again Eichmann's action was mediated by one of his subordinates, Franz Novak, Eichmann's transportation specialist (Cesarani 2005: 121). Nevertheless, the complex Nazi bureaucratic machine, operating at high levels of compartmentalization, contributed to self-exculpation. Russell (2019: 288) exacerbated the importance of compartmentalisation in reference to the 'genocidal chain' dealing with the Final Solution, while Lifton (2016 [1986]: 674) remarkably noticed: "bureaucracy deamplifies genocide".

Indeed, Eichmann was implicated in the extermination plan at the concentration camps since the purchase of Zyklon-B gas passed through his office (Cesarani 2005: 154), and his frequent visits to Auschwitz and other crucial locations suggested his duty was not mere 'paperwork'. Moreover, in 1942 Eichmann wrote a 100-page book entitled *The Final Solution of the Jewish Question*, which revealed he was committed towards a *judenrein* Germany to the point of being obsessed with the chimaera (Cesarani 2005: 158).

4.2 Eichmann: A psychological profile

Half a dozen psychiatrists had declared him 'normal.' One of them, it is said, had even exclaimed: 'More normal than I am after I have examined him,' while another had found that his whole psychology, his whole attitude, toward his wife and children, toward his mother, father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was 'not only normal but ideal'; and finally, even the chaplain who visited him regularly in prison after the Supreme Court had

finished arguing his appeal, assured everyone that Eichmann had ‘as positive ideas as ever. Behind the psyche experts’ play was that he was not suffering from insanity. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 35)

The psychiatric examinations of Eichmann are quite controversial. Firstly, because *The Banality of Evil* does not provide any psychoanalytic profile of Eichmann.¹¹ Secondly, because there is no evidence of “a dozen psychiatrists” in the record of Eichmann’s trial. The only psychiatrist Eichmann met was Dr. Shlomo Kulcsar, Head of the Psychiatric Department at the government-run Tel Hashomer Hospital.¹² A battery of psychological tests was administered in seven clinical interviews of three hours each (Brunner 2000: 4).¹³ The result of the evaluation by Dr. Shoshanna Kulcsar and Dr. Shlomo Kulcsar depicted Eichmann “involved in a continuous, partly conscious, partly unconscious *mise-en-scène*” (the Kulcsars qtd. by Brunner 2000: 5; emphasis in the original). They added “role-playing was [...] a deeply-rooted personality trait” for Eichmann (Brunner 2000: 6).

This psychological interpretation seems to validate the thesis of a ‘mask’ worn by Eichmann as a desk murderer, as defined by Brunner 2000) and it is corroborated by his interviews “limited, schematic and insincere” declined in an artificial language which was “lifeless, and mechanical, formalised and dehumanised”; thus, Eichmann was depicted as “an anxious man who smoked too much,” “detached from his feeling” and “afraid of strangers” (the Kulcsars, qtd. by Brunner 2000: 7). Notwithstanding, Dr. Shoshanna Kulcsar ascribed to Eichmann “sensitivity, talent, and spontaneous empathy” (Brunner 2000: 7). Surprisingly, Dr. Shlomo Kulcsar skipped over the inquiry stage of the

¹¹ Arendt expressed her doubtful considerations on the efficacy of the psychology study in her later *The Life of the Mind* (1977).

¹² Eventually, the Kulcsars rejected Arendt’s report in their article published in 1966 (Brunner 2000: 15). To the record, Hausner called on Gustave Gilbert, Professor and Chair of the Psychology Department of Long Island University in Brooklyn as “the most qualified expert in the world” to assess Eichmann’s psychological tests. However, Gilbert testified in the trial but not as an expert of mind (Brunner 2000: 23).

¹³ The interviews, conducted in German, took place from January 20, 1961 to March 1, 1961 and the psychological tests were the following: the Drawing Test; the Bender-Gestalt Test; the Thematic Apperception Test; the Object Relation Test; the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale Test; the Rorschach Inkblot Test; and the Stondi Test. Kulcsar’s wife, Shoshanna Kulcsar, Chief Clinical Psychologist in the Psychiatric Department at Tel Hashomer Hospital, was nominated responsible to evaluate the tests, with the exception of the Szondi Test (Peralta 1999: 78). A full analysis of these psychopathological assessments can be found in Selzer (1977).

Rorschach Test,¹⁴ in this way contributing to the unreliability of the psychological assessment.

As concerns the Szondi Test, which is usually implemented to establish personality diagnosis, the results showed “a criminal with insatiable killing intention” (Szondi, qtd. in Brunner 2000: 14);¹⁵ later, as Brunner (2000: 14) remarkably observed, it was seen as ironic that Eichmann’s homicidal tendencies were scientifically certified by means of a test developed by a Jewish Holocaust survivor, thus also raising doubts regarding the Szondi Test assessment.¹⁶

Accordingly, those psychological evaluations, conducted in such a controversial manner, did not reveal any particular pathologies or disorders. However, Arendt, in her coverage of the trial, carefully chose the term ‘banality’ and not ‘normality’ to refer to evil: something trivial to which little importance is attached and which therefore goes unnoticed. An attitude that is not dormant but silent:

The judges did not lend him faith because they were too good and perhaps even too well understood of the basic principles of their profession to admit that an ordinary, ‘normal’ person, neither vanished nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be so incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. From occasional lies, they preferred to conclude that he was fundamentally a ‘liar’ and thus overlooked the most critical moral and even legal problem in the whole case. They assumed that the defendant, like all ‘normal’ people, had acted well aware that he was committing crimes, and Eichmann was ordinary in the sense that ‘he was not an exception among the Germans of Nazi Germany’. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 36)

There are a couple of points to highlight. The first concerns the character of non- “exception[ality] among the Germans in Nazi Germany,” which opens the discussion to the active or passive co-participation of the *Mitläufer*

¹⁴ The results were belatedly published in the appendix of *The Nuremberg Mind: The Psychology of the Nazi Leaders* by Florence R. Miale and Michael Selzer (1975).

¹⁵ Full reproduction of the Eichmann’s Szondi Test can be found in Slovenko (1966: 46). A resume of the test by Hughes presents the assessments as follows: “The Eichmann profile shows an autistic power ego, sado-masochistic aggression, projective paranoia, and a bisexuality, beneath which lies a reservoir of raw Cain passions” (Hughes 1981: 336). The clinical evaluations of Eichmann’s psychological trait prove to be out of agreement, often controversial and never uneven.

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that the Szondi Test was administered to Eichmann ten times in seven meetings (Brunner 2000: 13); this is also anomalous.

(bystanders). The second aspect concerns the apparent “inability[ity] to distinguish good from evil” behind which Eichmann’s defense was constructed. Rejected by the Kulcsars, who sustained Eichmann had an inner moral voice, Arendt allowed Eichmann no moral conscience (‘thoughtlessness’) from which his faulty memory and the mask of the bureaucrat derive. Hidden behind obedience – more than blind, even ‘cadaveric’ – to regime ideals, Eichmann embodied unknowingness. Apparently, the same thoughtlessness expressed by the nurse implicated in the Aktion T4 program: *Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen?*

Eichmann thus represents the mindset of the gregarious, the one who “would not have felt his conscience was clear unless he did what he was ordered to do,” and only coincidentally did those orders consist of “transporting millions of men, women, and children to their deaths with great zeal and chronometric precision” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 35). In other words, “Eichmann was supremely convinced that he was not a more *inner Schweinehund*, that is, that he was not in the depths of his soul a sordid and unworthy individual” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 35). His responsibility was limited to acting on behalf (*im Auftrage*) of his superiors, as under the organizational chart of the Third Reich he held neither decision-making power nor executive power, but merely administrative power: “His guilt came from obedience, which was always extolled as a virtue. The Nazi leaders had abused this virtue, but he had never been part of the ruling clique, he was a victim, and only the leaders deserved to be punished” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 284).

Consequently, when in 1944 Himmler ordered the dismantling of the concentrationary system because of the arrival of the Red Army from the West, upon Eichmann’s suggestion, the so-called evacuation *Todesmärsche* (death marches) from the Nazi camps were organized, this initiative of his could not represent a crime, since Eichmann had only demonstrated the minimal problem-solving ability that contributed to the success of the political program. That is to say, once again, that the hierarch had only shown himself to be dutiful. Arendt recalled the

strange idea, actually widespread in Germany, that to be obedient to the law is not simply to obey, but also to act as if one were the lawgiver who drafted the law he or she obeys. Hence the belief that one must do even more than what duty requires. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 160)

According to Brunner, this idea roots back to a perverted Kantianism, which associates thoughtlessness to a loyal commitment to duty (1996: 78).¹⁷ This gregarious mentality, which Eichmann himself recognized in the aftermath of Germany's defeat on May 8, 1945, underlines a certain lack of emotional sensitivity, a kind of moral indifference that earned him the attribute of "lump of ice" or "lump of marble," an individual with *Landsknecht Natur* (mercenary nature), defined by some as a cyclist, "in the sense of one who bows his head before superiors, but who, while pedaling, presses on subordinates" (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 153). More simply, this mentality refers to a *Befehlsträger* (order-bearer) who, at the same time, is also a *Geheimnisträger* (repository of secrets), as his participation in the Wannsee Conference testified. This attitude is evident from the career of Eichmann, who, despite constant promotions, never aspired to leadership roles.

This lack of autonomy and need for group membership was probably due to his self-defeat caused by his failures at school and work prior to his affiliation with the National Socialist Party. The hierarch often manifested dissatisfaction, frustration, and a lack of fulfillment. In one of the most victim-blaming depositions he gave during his trial, Eichmann downplayed his 'success' in planning the deportations, once again appealing to his desperate attempt to save as many lives as possible:

My personal affairs and my year-lasting efforts to give some land to the Jews: what I prepared and planned ended badly. I do not know; it was like the evil eye was on everything. If I desired something and tried to achieve it, one way or another, fate would prevent me. I always had disappointments (Eichmann, qtd. by Arendt 2021 [1963]: 62-63).

Eichmann's psychiatric analysis, as already seen, did not diagnose any psychopathology or psychiatric disorder. Notwithstanding, in a 1999 article Peralta affirmed that, contrary to Kulcsar's opinion, Eichmann's obsessive features were clearly evident in the Rorschach test (Peralta 1999: 81); the Szondi test revealed a sadomasochistic-pervert structure (82); and the empirical background confirmed a predominantly schizoid individual (84). Thus, Peralta concluded, "I consider the best synthesising diagnosis in Eichmann's case to be that of a *borderline personality disorder*" (84; emphasis in the original). To the

¹⁷ This aspect deserves careful investigation, since it constitutes, along with the precarious political and economic circumstances Germany suffered in the wake of WWI defeat, the premises for Hitler's power attainment.

record, a 2021 study by Peralta, Kramer, Stassart and Mélon in re-evaluating Eichmann's psychological tests, asserted a similar psychological framework:

Les trois tests projectifs administrés à Adolf EICHMANN en janvier 1961 par le psychiatre I.S. Kulcsar révèlent que la personnalité du prévenu n'était ni commune ni banale. [...] Elles font apparaître un portrait complexe combinant les structures schizoïdes, perverses et obsessionnelles. [...] Le diagnostic d'une organisation limite (borderline) est acceptable mais il pêche comme toujours par son caractère vague et imprécis, ne signifiant finalement que la coexistence ou l'imbrication de plusieurs structures différentes. (Peralta et al. 2021: 10)

The psychologists also referred to Eichmann as “un schizoïde prépsychotique, un pervers sadomasochiste, et un meurtrier latent” (Peralta et al. 2021: 21). Eventually, the research theme focused the attention on a second evaluation of three specific tests, namely the Thematic Apperception Test, the Rorschach test and Szondi Test. Hence, this psychological assessment again defected from the complete overview of the Kulcsars' evaluation.

Without dwelling on why all the psychopathological investigations pertaining to Eichmann have proved to be methodologically flawed or inconsistent in their results, Arendt's account supported the idea of Eichmann's controversial temperament, as shown by his lack of initiative and his submissive character. The return of Eichmann to apathy - which we might call cyclical - implies, as a psychic disorder, a reduction or absolute lack of affective reactions to events. Such loss of interest is a manifestation of severe psychopathologies, including schizophrenia, major depression, and severe phrenasthenia (DSM-V). At the phenomenological level, it manifests as a deficit in the subject's activity rate, expressed both as a decline in interests and motivation and in a reduction in emotional responses to internal and external stimuli. Eventually, as the trial demonstrated, some angry outbursts towards other officers proved Eichmann was emotionally involved in his work (Cesarani 2005: 155).

His abulic state can likewise be traced back to ataraxia, that disposition of spirit of one who is self-sufficient and remains unperturbed in the face of the world's good or evil, maintaining unchanged serenity and self-sufficiency. Equally, abulia can be associated with adiaphora in the state of indifferent serenity of one who feels superior to the world's emptiness and is not subjected to its affective pressure. These assumptions describe Eichmann's lack of will to make decisions or act and the weight of his efforts whenever he took the initiative first. Since it does not represent a psychological disorder affecting the

life of the individual and those around him, this ‘national-socialist abulia’ does not entail a clinical diagnosis. It, therefore, does not constitute a mitigating factor in the case of the imputation of criminal acts. In other words, the absence of a common *mens rea* (criminal intent) did not absolve him; it substantiates Arendt’s banality to evil and, specifically, to Eichmann’s personality. At the same time, Eichmann’s example serves to understand the role of the *Mitläufer* and the *Opfer* who became accomplices due to this ‘national-socialist abulia’ and its multiple faces, which are later explored. This hypothesis seems to find confirmation in the words of Eichmann himself:

I was telling myself this: the head of state ordered it, and those who exercise judicial authority over me are now sending it forward. I took refuge in other areas and tried to have a cover that would give me peace of mind. In that way, I was able to shift - no, that is not the right term - to one hundred percent attribute this whole thing to those who held judicial authority and who happened to be my superiors, and to the head of state because they were the ones giving the orders. So, I did not hold myself responsible, and I felt free from any guilt. I was relieved that I had nothing to do with the physical extermination (Eichmann, qtd. by Loiacono 2019: 58-59)

4.3 Eichmann: the braggart

If Eichmann’s insensitivity and indifference can be ascribed to his personality as attributes of a German man who grew up in a historical moment of particular harshness and rejection, in which adherence to National Socialist ideals dictated blind obedience, Eichmann at trial reveals all his ambiguity: “I will jump into the grave laughing, for I have on my conscience the death of five million Jews [i.e., ‘enemies of the Reich,’ as he liked to say] gives me tremendous satisfaction” (Eichmann, qtd. by Arendt 2021 [1963]: 59).

These are the words that SS Captain Dieter Wisliceny reported during the Nuremberg trial and which threatened to demolish Eichmann’s defense strategy. His refusal to admit to being anti-Semitic but Zionist and his lack of decision-making skill did not justify him in the face of the Theresienstadt ghetto’s claim to authorship. Not surprisingly, Arendt commented: “This behavior of Eichmann created considerable embarrassment at the trial [...] the rebus constituted by the contrast between the monstrosity of the actions and the histrionic character of the man who had committed them.” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 67).

She added: “this man was not a ‘monster,’ but it was hard not to suspect that he was a jester” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 67). His mood, if not dysphoric, was undoubtedly incoherent: his selective or defective memory, could be attributable to a severe case of mythomania, coupled with a deficit in the so-called ‘theory of mind’ (Premack & Woodruff 1978) whereby Eichmann was incapable of attributing and understanding his own and others’ mental states and predicting their consequences:

Of course, the judges were not wrong when they finally told the defendant that all he had said was ‘empty talk’: but they thought that hollowness was fake and that he was trying to hide other things, hateful, yes, but not empty. The hypothesis seems to be refuted by the astonishing consistency and precision with which the defendant, despite his rather terrible memory, repeated word for word the exact stock phrases and clichés of his invention [...] The more one listened to him, the more it was evident that his inability to express himself was closely linked to an inability to think, that is, to think from someone else’s point of view. Communicating with him was impossible, not because he was lying, but because words and the presence of others, and thus reality as such, did not touch him. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 61-62)

Furthermore, one cannot speak of mnestic dissociation: Eichmann, at the trial, clearly recalled episodes related to his work but omitted others of a routine (read: trivial) nature for him: “Evacuating and deporting Jews was now an ordinary job for him, and the things that had stuck in his mind were the game of bowls, the fact that he was a minister’s guest, the news of the assassination attempt on Heydrich” (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 98-99).

As follows, he did not recall visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration complex even though Höss, the commandant-in-chief, confirmed his presence several times (Pearlman 2006 [1961]: 28).

4.4 The crime of obedience

This apparent inability of Eichmann to think deserves further study if only because it is usually considered an extenuating circumstance in the case of a criminal act. To take up the mask metaphor hypothesized by Stangneth, in her 2019 study Loiacono considered Eichmann’s boastfulness to be a kind of ‘mask of self-deception’ with consoling and de-responsibilizing effects. That is, in psychological terms, a defense mechanism by which Eichmann silenced his conflicts of conscience. Although derealization is usually considered a

psychological disorder, in the case of the Holocaust it seems to have taken on the characteristics of an adaptive mechanism (Lifton 2016 [1986]: 277). It was a fundamental distortion of reality helpful in limiting one's responsibility in the Final Solution. Loiacono explained: “[b]y detaching himself from reality and denying it, Eichmann was not present to himself, resulting in ‘incapable of thinking’” (2019: 65).

Eventually, this schizophrenic condition could take on the connotations of what Lifton calls ‘doubling’: the total splitting of the self also manifested in keeping private and work spheres separate (2016 [1986]: xix). Through this phenomenon, the subject interrupts the dialectic with the unconscious self while avoiding guilt because he no longer appeals to his moral conscience. Lifton explains that this process, having holistic dimensions, differs from the diagnosis of splitting (or dissociation, according to Janet) as per psychoanalytic tradition. One of its predominant features is psychic dulling (that sense of abulia which in Eichmann manifests itself in his role as a bureaucrat). There is also evidence of an affectivity disorder (which in Eichmann took the form of a dysphoric mood), pathological rejection of guilt (*Im Sinne der Anlage nicht schuldig*), and a depressive state fought with disproportionate violence (Eichmann's angry outbursts). Lifton commented: “Doubling is the psychological means by which the evil potential of the self is appealed to” (2016 [1986]: 575).

According to Biella, this occurs as the apical result of a routinized process of destruction (Loiacono 2019: 39), that is to say, habituation. In the clinical literature, this term refers to an inhibitory process that progressively suppresses the body's response to the reoccurrence of the stimulus.¹⁸ Supporting this hypothesis is the weakness of Eichmann's personality, the automatism required by his work, and the atmosphere of systematic lying in which the regime itself operated. Furthermore, here is the actual ‘crime of obedience’: by prioritizing his deference to orders, Eichmann renounced his awareness and self-esteem, resulting insubstantial, inauthentic, and a braggart. In short, he was “a mere bureaucratic operator who carried out orders because he wanted to please others” (Becker 1975: 121).

Proposing an analysis of defense mechanisms is interesting because it implicitly proves Eichmann's diagnosis of mental health: such mechanisms have

¹⁸ In the case of Auschwitz' life, Lifton talked about socialisation (2016 [1986]: 271) but I prefer to refer to this process as “the domestication of the self to Nazi concentration camp's *ordinary* atrocity”.

a functional character for the individual since they are in charge of maintaining the organism's homeostasis and never reach pathological levels in Eichmann. Such defense mechanisms consist of “cognitive and affective strategies that exclude or limit the disturbing and pervasive effects of the sphere of conscious experiences” of the individual (Biella, qtd. in Loiacono 2019: 23). In Eichmann, they can be recognized in 1) denial, which excludes adverse stimuli from consciousness; 2) splitting (in dynamic psychology or dissociation according to traditional psychoanalysis) or, as Lifton argued, ‘doubling’. In this regard, Eichmann himself stated: “There is one good thing that nature has given me: I can disconnect [*bewusste Gespaltenheit*] and forget very quickly, without effort” (Eichmann, qtd. in Loiacono 2019: 68); and finally, 3) rationalization, understood as telling oneself about reality in a certain way. Eichmann seemed not to reflect on the implications of his work as he carried it out.

Loiacono (2019: 41) also introduced the risk factor posed by the environment in which Eichmann acted, a crucial element that will be explored later: “His ability to act in that way was not to be considered innate but was influenced by society, surrounding ideas, and [his] conditions”. If it can be supposed that the habituation process – in the paradigms of automatism and violence addiction – and the individual's defense mechanisms are the keys to understanding the etiology of National Socialist evil, then in that case, consciousness brings us back to the initial question: *Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen?*

It is a disorienting question. Were the ‘gentile hierarchs’ devoted to the blind obedience that Eichmann called ‘cadaveric’? Does evil sometimes present itself in such devious forms as unrecognizable, subtle, well-disguised temptations in everyday life of which Lewis spoke in his *The Screwtape Letters* (1942)? Seriously, did Nazism, like other ‘-isms,’ other ideologies, get lucky in the “consensus factory,”¹⁹ to borrow Walter Lippmann's words (1922)? The evil it generated was determined by chance, by luck, so Nazism merely rode the wave of persuasion until things, simply put – got out of hand, overwhelmed by the perfect but intricate bureaucratic machine of the Final Solution?

Evil is caused not only by acting but also by not acting. It is the evil of omission, of omertà, in a word: the evil of *Mitläufer* (bystanders). As Bauman (2015: 10) reminds us, “Metaphysical guilt exists whenever human solidarity comes to a sudden halt in the face of its absolute limits”. It is a form of passive

¹⁹ This concept was later taken up by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman in their famous *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2006 [1998]).

collaborationism in which the citizen merely observes, privately thanking his God that he is not like the torturer with whom he shares blame for his non-action.

5. The Banality of Evil: Responsibilities of *Täter*, *Mitläufer* and *Opfer*

The analysis has focused on Eichmann, a Nazi hierarch and, therefore, an example of *Täter* (executioner) par excellence. In offering an overview of the most relevant research on the etiology of evil in the psychopathological field, there is a slight shift in perspective that investigates the blurred dividing line between *Täter* and *Mitläufer* (regime followers or bystanders), that is, that porous boundary of evil that Primo Levi referred to as ‘the gray zone’ (1991): “The more insignificant Eichmann was, the more the circle of co-responsible and accomplices widened to include almost all Germans or, at any rate, a conspicuous proportion of them” (Fest, in Arendt & Fest 2011: 68).

5.1 Reich and his mass psychology of fascism

At the same time the German National Socialist Party took power, Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich produced an emblematic text known as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933). In his essay, the author pointed out how:

The social consciousness of the officer is characterized not by a feeling of solidarity for the fate of his colleagues but by his position concerning the authority of the state and the ‘nation.’ It is a complete identification with the power of the state [...] The best personification of this mass psychological type is found in the sergeants of the various armies. [...] This identification with authority [...] represents a psychic reality and is one of the best examples of an ideology becoming a material force (Reich 2009 [1933]: 50-51).

This psychic ideology embraced by the Nazi hierarchs implies a complete identification with state power, i.e. a totalizing subjugation of the subject to a superior entity, tangible or intangible, embodied from time to time by the governmental institution, the military apparatus or, in extreme analysis, the figure of the Führer himself. The individual no longer acts according to his conscience but according to principles shared by the group to which he adheres and which he never questions:

The disastrously naïve credulity of the [...] co-religionists, their desperate need for human sympathy, their attitude towards the Authority that is never to be distrusted, the mother idea of Judaism which is that of justice...or the incredible hope that does not stop even in the face of the most horrible truth (Crescenzi & Zamagni, in Wiernik 1945 [2013]: 20).

5.2 Milgram and the heteronomous attribute of responsibility

In 1963 American psychologist Stanley Milgram published the first draft of a study, later developed in detail in 1974 in the publication *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* where he shared the results of his social psychology experiment conducted three months after the opening of Eichmann's trial. The study aimed to answer the question: is it possible that Eichmann and his accomplices were following orders?

This experiment was conducted in the basement of Linsly-Chittenden Hall at Yale University in 1961 and involved knowledgeable students. Participants responded to an order to inflict electric shocks on a subject; 65% had no difficulty complying with the order without physical contact and auditory stimulation with the victim. Milgram concluded that receiving orders from an authority induced a heteronomous state whereby the subject considered himself a mere instrument of the will imparted from above. In other words, a condition of psychological subservience to authority. According to the psychologist, this condition had three precise characteristics: 1) perceiving authority as legitimate; 2) adherence to that system of authority; and 3) the intervention of social pressures as an aggravating factor on the subject. Each of these characteristics fit well with the Nazi regime.

This experiment was anticipated by Solomon Asch's *Studies of independence and conformity* (1956), through which the psychiatrist demonstrated the importance of group acquiescence and its role in reinforcing obedience to authority.

5.3 Zimbardo and the Lucifer effect

In the summer of 1971, American psychologist Philip Zimbardo re-enacted another behavioral experiment in the basement of Stanford University, where a simulated detention environment was recreated in which, for two weeks, students recruited for a fee from Zimbardo's psychology course, would take turns acting as guards and prisoners. Due to the violence of abuse and

harassment that led to the collapse of some inmates/students, the experiment was halted early.

The scientific results were disclosed in *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007) where the scholar proposed an approach to evil as a sin of inaction or omission. The author identified several common characteristics among students in their assumption of the role of corrections officers/criminals: 1) a marked deindividuation; 2) obedience to authority; 3) a passive attitude in the face of threats; 4) constant self-justification; and 5) the ability to rationalize, as seen earlier with Eichmann. Again, all characteristics are attributable to the Nazi regime. Zimbardo also postulated a definition of evil: “Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, outrage, humiliate, traumatize, or destroy other innocent people-in, using one’s authority and systemic power to push others to do so for us” (Zimbardo 2007 [2008]: 4).

Interestingly, while at first glance this definition seems to exclude Eichmann, who was never personally implicated in acts that “harm, outrage, humiliate, traumatize or destroy” the Jewish people; at the same time, it seems to substantiate his responsibility in that he used his influence “to push others to do so.”

Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo’s experiments seem to suggest an aggravation of the psychopathological sequelae of those involved that is directly proportional to the increase in spatial approximation between perpetrator and victim.²⁰ This seems to be borne by the need to establish a cognitive and emotional barrier between agent and oppressed, appropriate for not registering violence as morally reprehensible. Indeed, these studies do not justify voluntary acts of indiscriminate violence, harassment and abuse resulting from genocidal intentionality which requires an investigation of individual murderous mentality and cannot be explained through mass psychology.

5.4 Browning’s ordinary men

In his investigation *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), American historian Christopher R. Browning dealt with Battalion 101 of the German Police Reserve, which between 1942 and 1943 was responsible for the shooting or deportation to the Treblinka

²⁰ Lifton reported about anxiety and nightmares, nowadays usually associated to post traumatic disorder. See Lifton (2016 [1986]: 618).

extermination camp of more than eighty thousand Jews. The exceptionality of the squad consisted in its composition of civilians, apparently ‘ordinary men’ - hence the title of the essay - recruited from the population: workers, clerks, merchants, and artisans with no military training. The author commented: “Unlike those who planned exterminations at the desk and could obfuscate the reality of the massacres behind the screen of distance, routine and bureaucratic euphemisms, these men saw their victims’ faces” (Browning [1992] 1995: 36).

In this reference by Browning to Eichmann and those like him who contributed to the success of the Final Solution, the author reflected on the distance/closeness dichotomy between perpetrator and victim already hypothesized by Milgram: a binomial not only spatial but primarily emotional. The concept of habituation or routine in extermination tasks also reappears. If it was ideals or obedience to orders that moved the National Socialist Party adherents, in the case of civilians recruited from among the people, it seems that the proper performance of the assigned work was the only incentive: “Habit also played its part: having already killed once, the men felt less traumatized the second time. One could also get used to killing” ([1992] 1995: 89).

The habituation process can find theoretical foundations in the *hardiness* proposed by Kobasa in 1979, initially referring to exposure to stressful stimuli by business people and later implemented with studies also targeting the armed forces. This theory considers stress exposure as a determinant of psychological resilience or a preparatory stage for resilient outcomes. Similarly, the so-called ‘stress inoculation theory’ proposed by Canadian psychologist Meichenbaum in 2004 develops an experiential practice whereby the subject is trained in self-control and the development of adaptive coping responses to stress. Even though such cognitive-behavioral therapy has been developed to resolve cases of posttraumatic stress disorder and other psychopathological sequelae; it seems clear there is a correlation between the individual’s prolonged exposure to stressful sources and certain insensitivity - ‘national-socialist abulia’ that has been previously defined.

Moreover, troop camaraderie and mass killings had the dissolution of the direct, and therefore the more intimate, relationship between perpetrator and victim in common. Collective execution granted the executioner a psychological escape route from guilt and shame, represented by the ‘diffusion of responsibility’ already presented by Zimbardo’s study. This kind of transfer of responsibility onto others contributes to self-justification by decreasing the psychological burden brought about by ‘vicarious dissonance’ (a state of

perceived estrangement and disbelief in out-of-the-ordinary situations)²¹ to the point of ensuring a certain level of moral disengagement. Such ‘diffusion of responsibility’ silenced self-sanctioning, a psychological mechanism that usually discombobulates moral conduct (Loddo 2014: 78). As Grossman stated, “groups allow a sense of anonymity to develop among their members that, further contributes to violence” (1995 [2015]: 129). A certain dulling of decision-making due to the peculiar sense of omnipotence/impotence felt simultaneously in the face of the annihilation of another human being also contributed to the shift of responsibility to the group (Lifton 2016 [1986]: 609-614).²²

These hypotheses do not explore the contribution of individual will in the perpetration of Nazi crimes, specifically in giving rise to episodes of particular cruelty and heinousness, often immortalized in celebratory photographs. This topic was addressed by Harvard scholar Daniel Goldhagen in his *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), in which he takes up Browning's studies of Battalion 101 and other companies operating in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. By choosing to implement the term *executioner* and not *perpetrator*, the author emphasized the character of voluntariness to action, rejecting as motivation the mere assortment of coercion, obedience, environmental pressure, and bureaucratic myopia. His thesis reflects the existence of a genuine hatred of Jews, rooted in Germany well before the rise of Hitler and expressed in a particular form of anti-Semitism that he calls ‘eliminationist.’ Goldhagen attributes the Third Reich to a “culture of cruelty” (1998 [1996]: 283) that sees the Shoah as a uniquely German phenomenon.

Resolving his thesis exclusively around ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism,’ Goldhagen did not take into account other forms of Nazi purges, most notably the previously mentioned Aktion T4 program.²³ Thus, his hypothesis cannot be

²¹ Indeed, the Holocaust has always been regarded for its exceptionality, a unicum in human history associated with the *Sonderweg* (German specificity). See Bauer (2009 [2001]).

²² Other theories in support of this thesis are due to Brunner in his postulation of a form of ‘collective narcissism’ (1996) and to Todorov (2001 [2000]) in his attempt to explain the absolute loyalty of Täter and Mitläufer through the concept of monism.

²³ The author objected that it was precisely the protest of the German people that led to the program's closure and not the need for the regime to focus its energies only on the concentration camps. In this way he substantiated his thesis that if there was a manifest will against the “Final Solution,” it would not have been implemented (Goldhagen 1998 [1996]: 135). However, the theory also lacked in attention concerning other minorities equally deported by the Nazis, including, for example, antisocial figures (prostitutes, homeless people, gypsies).

conclusive in motivating the process he calls the ‘Nazification’ of minds. Notwithstanding, episodes of intentional cruelty go far beyond the evil identified by Arendt and are antithetical to the aforementioned ‘national-socialist abulia’. Instead, they take on the appearance of what Grossman called “atavistic murderous hysteria” (1995 [2015]: 129). Such sadism deserves in-depth investigation into its etiopathogenesis, which will be reserved for future studies.²⁴

Eventually, one can again identify some common denominators with the ‘genocidal psychology’ traits starting with a certain emotional dulling advanced by Lifton earlier. Loddo, echoing Adorno’s thesis on the ‘dormant personality syndrome,’ ascribes to these categories of perpetrators a certain submissiveness to authority, the rigidity of thought, tendency to superstition, intolerance to ambiguity, conventional morality, rejection of weakness and nonconformity, hostility to the stranger and aversion to introspection (Loddo 2014: 59).

These aspects, together with the violence education (the psychological phenomenon of habituation) and the depersonalization/derealization disorder that is seen as enhancing emotional detachment between perpetrator and victim, seem to support the thesis of the defensive psychological mechanisms in place to avoid being engulfed in the guilt, shame and moral degradation of the genocidal initiative.

As already mentioned, camaraderie and team spirit represented valuable preventive environmental factors to the onset of psycho(patho)logical sequelae, for which alcoholism was undoubtedly the most widespread maladaptive coping strategy.

5.5 Wiernik and The Passive Complicity

Perhaps most shocking is the complicity of the victims (*Opfer*) of the regime. Take, for example, the testimony *A Year in Treblinka* (1945) by Yankel-Yakov Wiernik, a survivor of the Treblinka death camp uprising in August 1943. It is a testimonial account dictated by the urgency to record on paper the experience and the camp’s environments, which the author traced in a map later used in the creation of the model now preserved at the Ha-Get-ta’ot Museum.

²⁴ *Therapia magna auschwitzciense* constituted the belief of the physicians in charge of Auschwitz that they were also operating in humanitarian terms through the selections and subsequent gassing deaths of convoys of victims (Lifton 2016 [1986]: 289).

Wiernik was among the one hundred and twenty witnesses heard during Eichmann's trial. As a carpenter, he was responsible for building the gas chambers in the camp, one of the most fearsome in the Nazi concentrationary universe: between July 1942 and the fall of 1943, Treblinka claimed between 890,000 and 950,000 victims. Wiernik commented:

As soon as the gassing was over [...], they began to drag out the corpses. We were the ones who had to carry them to the pits. We were exhausted from working all day at the site, but we could not appeal to anything and had no choice but to obey. We could have refused, of course, but that would have meant flogging, either that same death or an even worse death, so we obeyed without complaint (Wiernik 1945 [2013]: 53).

Between one thousand and one thousand two hundred victims could be crammed into the camp's gas chambers; an estimated ten thousand to twelve thousand victims were gassed each day; if all thirteen gas chambers were in operation, the dizzying figure of thirty thousand victims per day could be reached. Wiernik observed: "Could anyone believe that a human being, living under such conditions, would even go so far as to smile and sometimes even make jokes? Really, one can get used to anything" ([1945] 2013: 56). And again: "The gruesome scenes that we saw all the time became an everyday occurrence and I gradually became more and more numb" ([1945] 2013: 78). Zimbardo reflected in this regard of learned helplessness, that sense of passive resignation and depression experienced as a result of recurrent punishment (2007 [2008]: 294). For Wiernik, surviving the inhumane conditions of the Treblinka camp constituted an exceptional feat even for the perpetrators, who were often forced to seek dysfunctional forms of compensation such as alcohol abuse; violence itself, with the adrenalin pumping it entailed, and which turned out to be an inhibitor of consciousness. Wiernik argued, however, that German society had been particularly fertile ground for the implementation of the concentrationary universe:

The German system is one of the most efficient in the world. There are authorities and authorities above authorities. Departments and sub-departments. And, most important, always the right man in the right place. Whenever ruthless determination is needed to destroy 'brutal and subversive elements,' one will always find good patriots who will carry out any command, any order. One will always find men ready to annihilate and kill their fellow men. I never saw them show any compassion or remorse. They never manifested any pity for the innocent victims. Never. They were

robots, automatons, carrying out any order as soon as someone of somewhat higher rank pressed a button (Wiernik [1945] 2013: 57).

The argument of the collaboration of the victims, which the Eichmann trial itself had the virtue of bringing to public attention, is delicate and complex and would deserve relevant insights reserved for future studies. As suggested until now, however, many of the psychological strategies and processes analyzed so far also provide primary explanations for forms of collaborationism among the victims.

6. What about us? The legacy of trauma

This study has emphasized the psychological dynamics behind the threat of the Final Solution. However, beyond the historiographical controversy between Holocaust intentionalism and functionalism, a syncretistic, multidimensional, interdisciplinary view is believed to provide a framework for more excellent intelligibility of the Holocaust. While its incomprehensibility preserves the character of exceptionality that discourages believing it possible that such an event could perpetrate a second time in human history, the very efforts to examine its causes and consequences can, if implemented correctly in the pedagogical field, avert a future annihilation of humanity.

The study thus sought to shed light on those executioner figures who, starting with Nazi bureaucrats and ending with so-called ‘ordinary men,’ and victims, were moulded into “situational killers” (Loddo 2014: 68). The emotional dulling postulated by Lifton, and, which has found in the present psychological study of Eichmann, multiple arguments in its favour, leads one to think of a voluntary and conscious splitting of the self in order to survive the environment saturated with slaughter in which they lived and worked: “this dissociation is an operation in which all bureaucracies are masters” (Bauman 2010 [1989]: 143).

If the nationality of genocide cannot be found in the entire German intelligentsia (hierarchs, bureaucrats, doctors, and technocrats of sorts), the German ethos, camaraderie, and obedience to authority seem to have influenced even the position of the ordinary men (active followers or mere bystanders), the latter who simply did not intervene on the ethical level, in fact tacitly or passively contributing to the Final Solution. Their lack of empathy opens the debate to ‘grey zone’ (Levi: 1991), liminal spaces of a-responsibility in which the subject is domesticated to the environment and conforms

according to new, exceptional rules that can no longer be ascribed to common morality. The Holocaust would thus result from “cultural history and social history, especially of the Jews, but also of the Germans, and thus actually has to do with their everyday life, their *Alltagsgeschichte*, under a criminal regime” (Bauer 2009 [2001]: 150).

Beginning with an analysis of the concept of banality that Hannah Arendt ascribed to Nazi crimes, this study aimed to explore the role of *Täter*, *Mitläufer*, and *Opfer* in the so-called “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem.” The emblematic example of Eichmann, investigated psychologically thanks to the trial accounts, on the one hand highlighted the ‘gregarious mentality’ driven by a ‘cadaveric obedience’ that seemed to dispense the hierarch from any guilt, his diligence complicit in serving the regime. On the other, this habituation process to the tasks he was in charge of questions his thoughtlessness, and his lack of self-awareness in asking: *Wird irgendetwas mit mir geschehen?*

The research showed how the banality proposed by Arendt, far from minimizing the seriousness of Nazi crimes, actually had the merit of emphasizing how even the most heinous crimes, those perpetrated against humanity itself, were not necessarily the result of psychotic minds or sociopathic individuals. *Täter’s* and *Mitläufer’s* abetment thus turns out to be a sneaky element, creeping into a smoky area, “that universal boundary across which a good person, a dutiful citizen, becomes an exterminator, with no awareness of the violence inherent in his or her actions and no remorse for the destruction of human life” (Mazzeo, qtd. in Bauman 2013 [2011]: 10).

This result is made possible by a phenomenon of ‘diffusion of responsibility’ that dispenses the individual from forms of self-reflection in favor of establishing a collective consciousness. Authority legitimizes particular rhetoric that does not need to be fully understood since it is sustained by the automation of actions and the economization of time: an effect similar to the productive line whereby the individual cog, however indispensable, remains anonymous and, indeed, trivial. A hypothesis already developed in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in which Arendt investigated the roots of National Socialist evil and which found in the de-responsibilization of the regime’s bureaucratic machine a kind of “atrophy of the faculty of judgment” (Donaggio & Scalzo, 2003: 25).²⁵ Not surprisingly, among the characteristics of

²⁵ For the sake of the record, it is only fair to point out how this thesis is refuted by Yacov Lozowick, one of Arendt’s most stinging critics, who insisted on how complete awareness of

the totalitarian regime in second place is, according to Arendt, “the killing in man of the moral person” (Traverso 2003: 44); an insight very similar to the disintegration of the autonomous structure of individuals hypothesized by Bruno Bettelheim (1943) or the atomization of individuals through terror, according to Leo Löwenthal (1946). In this way, the Nazi regime de-individualized citizens, silencing consciences behind uniforms, rituals, and military marches as well as formal greetings with hypnotic power: a behavioral conditioning that reawakens those ‘proto-totalitarian predispositions’ of the German bourgeoisie mentioned by Arendt.

What Hannah Arendt meant [by banality] was that monstrosities need not be monsters, that outrages exist without there being outrageous characters, and that the problem, concerning Eichmann, was precisely in the fact that according to the assessments of the supreme luminaries of psychology and psychiatry he, and along with him countless of his fellow malefactors, was neither a monster nor a sadist and was instead exorbitantly, terribly, frighteningly ‘normal’. (Bauman 2013 [2011]: 52)

This is the ‘cadaverous obedience’ of Eichmann and his fellow soldiers: Arendt deserved the credit of recognizing it within the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, an amorphous, indistinct, but cohesive mass society whose individuality was morally subjugated by the Nazi ideology.

According to Brunner, the “Arendtian notion of thoughtlessness serves to describe this absence of intrasubjective narcissism” (1996: 73). The healthy egotism which usually enhances one thoughts, ideas, actions and behaviour is substituted by the ‘collective narcissism’ which puts first Nazionalsocialistic regime and ideals, thus transforming the *Volk* in a conscious/unconscious accomplice: “While totalitarianism as a political system is pathologically narcissistic on an *institutional* or *collective* level, its servants are marked by a disastrous absence of narcissism on an *individual* and an *intrasubjective* level” (Brunner 1996: 78; emphasis in the original).

The language reflected this process: Arendt’s reference to Eichmann’s ‘empty talk’ or his apparent ‘inability to think’ as to say the incapacity to verbalise and articulate one’s will, mirrored the *Amtssprache* (officialese) which was the main vehicle of Hitler’s propaganda, not only spoken by his comrades but also by the German people as a whole:

the criminal nature of party actions would be proven precisely by the magnitude of the atrocities committed. See Lozowick (2004 [2000]).

By depriving himself of his autonomy, that is, by denying himself of a will, conscience and a voice of his own, Eichmann had indeed lost most of his human attributes. [...] Moreover, by killing himself symbolically as in individual he became an active part of an omnipotent political apparatus (Brunner 1996: 80).

Shoshana Felman defined this Nazi bureaucratic jargon as “a sort of robot-language [which] takes the place of *mens rea*” (Felman 2000: 470; emphasis in the original).²⁶ This transformed the evil in something linguistically and legally banal, a mere technocratic language that enhances ‘thought aphasia’ by numbing the minds. “So conceived, the Holocaust could be viewed as the perfection, rather than as the perversion, of legal positivism.” (Felman 2000: 470-471).

Episodes of resistance to the regime in the decade dominated by nationalist ideology number some fifteen attempts to assassinate Hitler, including the famous 1944 Operation Valkyrie that inspired Bryan Singer’s 2008 feature film. According to Hoffmann (1994 [1988]), even though such opposition was unleashed against dictatorial opposition, police excesses, and persecution, it was mainly expressed clandestinely through solidarity with persecuted communities or military espionage aimed at sabotaging the war. One could speak of high treason only in the rare cases of a *coup d’état* to overthrow the regime. Again, according to Hoffmann, the scarcity of these incidents was attributable to the legitimacy with which Hitler had come to power and the success of his party program, which had, in effect, cheered Germany up after the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles. Moreover, his persuasive tools were ubiquitous: the propaganda organs’ pervasiveness prevented any seemingly dissident maneuvering.

With her inquiry into the banality of evil and totalitarianism, Arendt insinuated a new phase of human evolution, that of *homo totalitarius* (Donaggio & Scalzo, 2003), rediscussing the dangerous equation that saw Eichmann as the evil epitome while ignoring the role that habituation to obedience – that is, voluntary subjugation – played in bringing about a “sclerosis of will” (Donaggio & Scalzo, 2003: 139) of the German people. This is the genuine moral fault: fanaticism was only a tool. For the Third Reich, Eichmann was not a state criminal but the fruit of “a moral disorientation induced by a ‘mass society’”

²⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the Nazi jargon, see Lifton (2016 [1986]: 605-607).

(Osiel 2003: 2019). His trial was not meant to question the banality of the Man-Eichmann but the reasons for his monstrous banality, which reduces the Shoah to a sanitary solution, a hygiene operation following the Nazi eugenics perspective already implemented with the Aktion T4 program.

At the same time, the regime has implemented the dehumanization of the enemy, eliciting in regime followers, active or passive, the loss of empathy for the suffering of others, which is what is most precious about human beings. This loss of moral discernment, which makes man capable of distinguishing good from evil, risked turning into the “Nagasaki syndrome” postulated by Anders (1995 [1964]), revealing the apocalyptic potential of globicide. Reflecting on Eichmann Arendt stated:

when I speak of the ‘banality of evil,’ I do so on a pragmatic level. [...] Except for his exceptional diligence in thinking about his career, he had no reason to be cruel, and even that diligence was not, in itself, criminal [...] To put it simply, he needed to understand what he was doing. [...] If this is ‘trivial’ and even grotesque, if with all our goodwill we cannot discover a devilish or demonic depth in him, that does not mean that his situation and attitude were common. [...] That distance from reality and that lack of ideas may be far more dangerous than all the evil instincts that are perhaps innate in man. (Arendt 2021 [1963]: 325-326)

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