MILGRAM, GENOCIDE AND BUREAUCRACY: 
A POST-WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The link between Stanley Milgram’s experimental study of obedience in 1963 and the explanation of the Holocaust during the Second World War has been the subject of controversy for the past five decades. Russell and Gregory (2015) offer the latest reflections on this relationship. Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann centred on the image of desk murderers mindlessly processing military orders. Milgram invoked pervasive evidence of compliance to morally reprehensible commands in his experimental study of obedience. The joint Arendt–Milgram perspective has recently fallen into disrespect as a result of voluntarism evidenced in recent studies of ordinary Germans in participation in mass murder. Russell and Gregory’s contribution advances an essentially Weberian explanation for the behaviour of perpetrators. Their analysis of the obedience experiments concludes that all the participants were constrained by a normative structure that led them to ignore harm to subjects as a result of the larger bureaucratic mindset that allowed Milgram’s assistants, his funders and his subjects to suppress acknowledgement of injury. They argue that this recapitulates key features of the Holocaust. The recent historiography of the Holocaust points to a post-Weberian understanding of the bureaucracies at the heart of the genocide – the slave labour program in Germany and German-occupied territory, and the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, where evidence points to a conscious and enthusiastic endorsement of the homicidal objectives of the Nazi regime.

Keywords: banality of evil; iron cage of rationality; Milgram’s obedience research; Nazi slave labour; polycratic bureaucracy; political responsibility (Arendt)

Milgram and the Holocaust

Many genocide scholars have noted that Milgram’s experimental work on obedience became paired with Hannah Arendt’s simultaneous coverage of the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem for his role in the mass murder and enslavement of European Jews, and seemed to provide empirical verification for her “banality of evil” thesis (Miller 2004a: 11). According to Miller (2004b: 209), both “Milgram and Arendt had converged, almost simultaneously, on the astonishing idea that rather ordinary people, in the dutiful conduct of their occupation, could perform unconscionable
evil.” In fact, Milgram had framed his obedience research in terms of its link to the Holocaust from the very start. The experiment deeply divided the academic community then, and continues to do so today. Russell and Gregory (2015: 129) argued that in the 1970s and 1980s “more scholars than not believed in the validity of the linkage” (Askenasy 1978; Charny 1982; Dicks 1972; Miller 1986; Rosenbaum 1983; Sabini and Silver 1982; Steiner 1980). Then they cite four sources that contested the linkage (Baumrind 1964; Fromm 1973; Patten 1977; Tedeschi, Lindskold and Rosenfeld 1985), but they overlooked a number of critics who challenged the validity (internal and external) of the experiments and their ethics (Baumrind 1985; Helm and Morelli 1979; Mixon 1971, 1989; Orne and Holland 1968; Darley 1992, 1995, 1999; Brannigan 1997, 2013; Nicholson 2011a, b; Perry 2012; Lang 2014). The heart of the matter is whether the fusion of Arendt’s account of Eichmann and Milgram’s experimental conclusions about obedience advances our understanding of genocide. Russell and Gregory outline the view that the Holocaust was expedited by Weberian-like bureaucratic forces (Weber 1946). In this article, we propose an alternative post-Weberian conception of the role of bureaucracy more consistent with the recent historiography of the Holocaust.

The Uncritical Acceptance of the M-H Linkage

There are many factors that have contributed to the uncritical endorsement of the M-H linkage. Milgram’s (1965) Obedience film was shown to more undergraduate students in psychology over the past 45 years than any other audio-visual resource in psychology. As Perry (2015) has shown, this film was a brilliant piece of propaganda that reiterated the obedience–holocaust link, that misrepresented the debriefing of subjects, strategically suppressed the evidence that many subjects experienced long-term trauma as a result of the experiment, and that many others simply were sceptical of the hoax. In addition, textbooks in social psychology began to give unprecedented coverage to the experiment, but they typically failed to present the leading methodological and ethical criticisms of it (Griggs and Whitehead 2015a, b). Miller (2004: 227) points out that “many social psychologists take pride in claiming the Milgram experiments as their unique contribution to Holocaust scholarship. Certainly the extensive coverage given to the obedience studies in contemporary texts is consistent with this line of reasoning.” By implication, there is not much prestige in criticizing the linkage.

Milgram advocated the linkage from his first journal article in 1963 and with the unprecedented promotion of his 1974 book. He personally distributed 69 copies of Obedience to Authority. At the top of his list was Hannah Arendt. His publisher sent review copies to over 170 newspapers in 42 states and to 60 magazines around the United States, thus taking the academic hypothesis to a public forum.
Milgram designed his book to be sensational. In the decade between his first article and the book, Milgram’s notes contain numerous early sketches and taglines that were designed to create a popular appeal. Gina Perry recorded several of these:

- Hand written in German blackletter: “Perhaps there is something in their national character that makes them follow orders unquestioningly. Perhaps this is what makes them … Americans. The most controversial book of the decade.”
- “Is your neighbor a potential Eichmann? This brilliant and controversial book pursues the truth to its core.”
- “Where’s Adolph Eichmann. Check your mirror, friend”;
- “the Brilliant Book that ignited a controversy on the Eichmann potential in America – obedience to orders, as American as cherry pie. A brilliant probe into how Americans respond to inhumane orders”. (Perry 2012: 293)

Aware of the power of controversy to generate interest and sales, Milgram embraced the sensationalist aspect of his research, and particularly the link to Eichmann, regarding it as a powerful selling point (Perry 2012: 294–295). Milgram also contributed stories on destructive obedience widely in popular magazines, and appeared on NBC *60 Minutes* in 1979 where he claimed controversially that a Nazi concentration camp could be readily staffed from ordinary people from any small town in America. This shifted the venue for discussion of the M-H link to popular culture. Within the academy, however, none of this popularity diminished Diana Baumrind’s ethical critique, nor Martin Orne’s methodological criticisms.

**The Growth of Scepticism**

Russell and Gregory (2015) argue that the credibility of the M-H linkage began to diminish in the 1990s. According to them, “Daniel Goldhagen’s (1996) book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, was most influential in reversing the general tide of support for the M-H linkage” (2015: 129). They added that “Goldhagen’s book emboldened a number of psychologists to challenge the M-H linkage” (ibid). Berkowitz (1999: 246) says, “Milgram’s (1974) obedience research does not represent significant features of the Holocaust, especially the sadism that occurred not infrequently, and disregards the vital difference between those who initiated the murderous policy and others who followed their orders.”

Mastroianni (2002), Fenigstein (1998a, b) and Mandel (1998) tackled the M-H link directly, all of them discuss Goldhagen, along with Christopher Browning’s (1992) analysis of the Order Police. The Order Police were the “ordinary” German policeman who engaged in mass shootings of the Jewish civilian population
behind the lines from Lithuania to Poland and the Ukraine. Goldhagen discusses Milgram at length and systematically dismisses the situationist presumptions of his explanation (Brannigan 1998). Browning is more sympathetic to Milgram and has been cited as supportive of the ecological validity of Milgram’s experiments (Mastroianni 2002: 164). But that support is mixed. Browning notes that the perpetrators’ own justifications point more to conformity than obedience as explanations for their self-reported conduct (164). Browning notes that the perpetrator behaviour was typically unreflective and sometimes enthusiastic, that is, voluntary or uncoerced. As Mastroianni (2002) notes, this “contrasts sharply with the emotional, principled conflicts that characterized Milgram’s subjects” (167).

Mastroianni (2002: 158) notes that while the current textbooks accept the M-H link uncritically, the “more recent historical literature … questions the relevance of Milgram’s obedience studies in understanding the Holocaust.”

Mandel is illustrative. He is highly critical of Goldhagen’s monocausal emphasis on the alleged German mindset against the Jews, and compares it to Milgram’s own monocausal focus on obedience:

Milgram’s account is similar to Goldhagen’s (1996) controversial thesis that Germans were already possessed by a virulent form of eliminationist anti-Semitism and that that factor on its own was sufficient to produce the motivational state underlying Germans’ willingness to kill Jews. (Mandel 1998: 79)

In weighing the evidence for the M-H link he turns to Browning, Milgram’s ally, not Goldhagen, to assess the ecological validity of the hypothesis. Browning (1992: 173–174) poses this question to his readers: “Was the massacre at Jozefow a kind of radical Milgram experiment that took place in a Polish forest with real killers and victims rather than in a social psychology laboratory with naïve subjects and actor/victims?” Mandel (1998: 89) says that, contrary to Milgram’s findings, “the answer to this question is no.” Mandel noted that as the lab conditions in any way began to approach the situations in real life on the Eastern front, Milgram’s subjects became more disobedient – the opposite of what occurred among the Order Police.

Goldhagen’s position was invested entirely in an “extremely dispositional” perspective, that is, a monocausal explanation defined as “eliminationist anti-Semitism”. Goldhagen argued that the Germans had acquired a uniquely virulent form of hatred of Jews that lowered the normal human aversion to hurting complete strangers. The “Final Solution” in late 1941 resonated with the German Volk because they felt that as a matter of principle the Jews deserved to die. By contrast, Browning’s evidence shows that during the forced marches of inmates evacuating the concentration camps in 1945, German townspeople sought to give relief to the
columns of starving Jews. Also, after 1945 eliminationist anti-Semitism appears to have largely evaporated from German public life. So Goldhagen’s explanatory “ace” failed to address counter-factual evidence. However, by attributing the epistemic shift against the M-H linkage to Goldhagen, Russell and Gregory assume that the new consensus is constructed on a faulty foundation, creating the justification for their proposed new challenge.

Many critics of the Milgram experiment have questioned whether it was really a study of obedience at all (Lutsky 1995; Burger, Girgis and Manning 2011; Reicher and Haslam 2011). Russell and Gregory’s argument uniquely replaces the question of obedience with the suggestion that subjects in the obedience study, as well as Milgram’s assistants, his National Science Foundation (NSF) funders and the university administrators, were all part of a rigid, hierarchical bureaucracy. From this perspective, compliance at every level was part of role allocation whose duties were prescribed by a division of labour under implicit overarching rationalizations. The compartmentalization of tasks caused a disjuncture between a participant’s action and a morally repugnant outcome. Participants were “protected by the fog of responsibility ambiguity” (136). This resonates with Arendt’s analysis. At times, Arendt characterized Eichmann as a kind of uninformed cog in a machine, or a mindless “desk murderer” in a larger bureaucracy. According to Russell (2009: 17), “the influences generating Arendt’s perspective could be traced backwards in a straight line through earlier intellectuals from C. Wright Mills to Hans Speier back to Max Weber.” The proposal to rehabilitate the obedience experiments beyond the new consensus which led to such scepticism regarding the M-H linkage is grounded in an analysis of the bureaucratic structure of the experiments themselves.

The key issue here is whether the original experiments exhibited the characteristics that Weber assigned to bureaucracy in his classical portrayal of them. Were the experiments rigidly standardized, transparent and predictable? Russell (2011: 153) had earlier warned against an uncritical acceptance of Milgram’s high completion rates since these were not spontaneous measures of compliance, but outcomes that had been tweaked by various manipulations so that in the words of Gibson (2013: 189) “by the first ‘official’ experimental condition the completion rate would be sufficiently arresting.” Gibson’s work also shows how the standardization of the experiment reported in publications failed to include ad hoc procedures negotiated during the experiment. These included the request by several subjects to have Williams confirm the health of the Learner, and the latter’s willingness to continue the experiment only after they were assured that the Learner was unharmed and willing to continue. Gibson (2013: 188) added, “there are myriad other, smaller departures [from standard procedure] that should be seen as no less important.”
Readers may not be aware of the extent of the documentation created by Milgram to capture the way his experiments were done. Milgram maintained audio records of all experiments, kept a detailed notebook in which he recorded all aspects of the conduct of the research from response to newspaper advertisements to draft scripts for staff, as well as keeping individual files and datasheets for each subject. The recent availability of Milgram’s papers and data related to the obedience experiments has allowed a closer inspection of original research and a re-analysis of its findings (Gibson 2011; Nicholson 2011a, b; Perry 2012).

For example, Perry noted anomalies in the use of prods by the Scientist, Mr. Williams. If the Teacher balked at continuing, Williams was to follow an escalating protocol of commands or prods to encourage compliance: (1) Please continue, or Please go on (2) The experiment requires that you continue (3) It is absolutely essential that you continue, and (4) You have no other choice, you must go on (Milgram 1974: 21). There were two other special prods: (5) Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent damage, so please go on and (6) Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on. Perry (2012: 133) noted in condition three that in the first cases “Williams scrupulously terminated the experiment after he had delivered the fourth prod … But by the end of the condition, Williams was straying far from his tightly controlled script, urging subjects time and again to keep going.” In condition 20, the all-female design, William’s behaviour conveyed the idea that nobody was leaving until each had fully complied. The resistance to comply was confronted persistently by Williams who re-applied the 4-prod protocol ad nauseam. This tends to undermine the claim that the subjects could withdraw at any time of their own accord. “Williams insisted that one woman continue 26 times. He argued with two others 14 times; one, 11 times; another, nine times; another, eight times; and noted that in the case of Subject 2014, the experiment ended in an argument” (134). During a debriefing month after the experiment with Dr Errera, one woman reports that in a standoff with Williams which lasted about half an hour, Williams brought her a cup of coffee as an inducement to continue. At these meetings, “three women described feeling as if they had been ‘railroaded’ by Williams” (135). After a rhetorical analysis of the exchanges between subjects and Mr. Williams, Gibson (2011: 306) concluded “the conventional view of the experimental procedure as highly standardized needs to be revised”. Why? Because Williams’ strategies changed within the course of specific treatments and across different treatment groups. The level of compliance was related to the ability of subjects to offer and defend compelling justifications for discontinuing, and opposing Williams’ pressures and injunctions. A rhetorical contest emerged where interlocutors invoked plausible justifications for desisting, and for rejecting the innovative verbal injunctions from Williams to continue.
There were also other tactics employed by subjects that made it difficult to characterize their behaviour as compliant. Many subjects verbally stressed the correct answer to the Learner, effectively subverting the experiment. Others ignored the protocol to depress the shock lever fully and/or to escalate the shock levels as required. And many subjects were not deceived by the hoax. Perry (2012: 147–162) documented numerous cases of subject suspicion. One subject detected the apparent “disinterest” of the Learner despite the strangeness or novelty of the lab environment; others noted the presence of one-way mirrors which suggested they were being watched; another subject noticed the distinctive “red-carpet treatment” accorded him as the Teacher, not the Learner; several mentioned the improbability of Yale permitting the shocking of heart patients; one subject thought the extremes of activity were like a Candid Camera set-up; some subjects noted the impossibly poor performance of the Learner and proposed to change roles; attempts to communicate surreptitiously with the Learner were not reciprocated (kick the wall if you can hear me); the presence of audio speakers in the Learner’s room suggested the protests were recorded; the artificiality of the sound quality and tenor of the screams coming from the Learner were unrealistic; the “dog-eared cheque” handed to one of the actors implied it had been used repeatedly; screams escalated even when one subject administered lower shock levels, etc. Cases of such scepticism were recorded in the Milgram archives. The following documents are from the New Baseline Condition on which Russell and Gregory focus their analysis. Neither subject was taken in by the hoax, and both completed the shock treatment. The views of subjects 501 and 508 were transcribed from the handwritten comments on a post experiment questionnaire distributed to all subjects once the research was over.

I believed that the subject was not getting shocks that would actually harm him because I was assured of this before the experiment. I was certain that Yale would not carry on any experiment that would harm a person. Towards the end of the experiment I doubted that the learner was getting shocks at all. (Subject 0501, Milgram Archives, Yale University Library)

In my case I believe that the statement that the learner had a heart condition may have influenced me to go on. I recall that my personal thoughts were (after 7 or 8 shocks) that the experiment was rigged to test me and not the learner. This was based on the belief that no one concerned with the experiment would take it upon himself to create a strong negative condition to the learner with a bad heart. (Subject 0508, Milgram Archives, Yale University Library)

Both subjects were 100% compliant. Neither believed they were hurting anyone.
Also consider the case reported by Hoffman, Myerberg and Morawski (2015: 671) based on their search of the archives. Subject 0113 reported the following:

I must confess that I suspected from near the beginning that something was amiss. Being in an electro-mechanical field I suspected that the voltage was not going up as was shown on the control board, but as I sat there at the board I figured out that if anything was being raised it was only the amperage ... As I sat there at the board I could remember getting calmer and calmer with the realization growing in my mind that I was not giving the person on the other side of the wall the shocks shown on the board.

Nicholson (2011b) found evidence that some male subjects thought that the experiment was a test of their masculinity, and their ability to face down America’s Cold War adversaries. What these various accounts suggest is that it is not possible to infer what most people thought or what they must have experienced, or even what the majority thought and felt. These anecdotes are suggestive but incomplete. Some cases suggest complete scepticism while others suggest that the suspicions were not fully articulate or conscious.

However, in Milgram’s (1974) aggregate data (172) based on 658 subjects, 56.1% “fully believed the learner was getting painful shocks”. Some 24% “believed the learner was probably getting the shocks” – though they had “some doubts”, and no mention was made of “painful” shocks. Clearly, a plurality of subjects in this assessment was taken in by the cover story. What is remarkable however is that where the subjects were most taken in by the cover story (the 56.1% group), 62% were defiant (239/369). In other words, of the 369 subjects who were fully convinced of the harm, the majority were defiant. When they were not so sure (the 24% group), their defiance dropped to 52% (83/158). And when they tended to be doubtful of the reality of the shocks (58/91), their obedience increased to 64%. Another way of summarizing these trends is to calculate the odds ratio of defiance based on the perception of harm. The odds of defiance increased 2.57 times when subjects suspected the Learner was being hurt (Brannigan 2013: 12).

This is corroborated in another way through the unpublished report prepared for Milgram by his research assistant, Taketo Murata. Murata examined the 23 conditions of obedience tested by Milgram. He hypothesized that those who reported “fully believing that the Learner was being shocked would not reach as high shock levels as those not fully believing. This is found to be so” (Murata 1962). In 18 out of 23 conditions, those who believed the procedures were harmful administered lower maximum shock levels than the sceptics. The implication of this is that where conditions are associated with high levels of completion, these
responses were associated with higher levels of scepticism about the harmfulness of the shocks. Any conceptual reconstruction of how persons interpreted the experiment must acknowledge this surprising correlation.

What is the evidence that “both Yale and the NSF signed off in support of the project” (Russell and Gregory 2015: 137)? Were they so tied up in their bureaucratic devotion to supporting new knowledge that they were indifferent to the potential harmfulness of the experiment? As for Yale, the record suggests that Yale did investigate the experiments following complaints from subjects. One of the subjects was Aaron Aronow, a New Haven city alderman. He was so infuriated after his participation in Group 9 (Group Pressure to Obey) that he both telephoned and wrote to Milgram to protest the experiment and to bring it to the attention of the university authorities. He met with the Provost of Yale, Kingman Brewster, to complain that the department of Psychology was “harboring lunatics and sadists” and demanded that Milgram’s experiment be shut down (Perry 2015: 636).

In addition, the concern for harm led Yale to initiate the unprecedented use of a psychiatrist, Dr Paul Errera, to de-brief subjects months after the experiment. As for the NSF, they refused Milgram’s request for funding to conduct further experiments. So these “bureaucracies” were rather more sensitive to potential harm than Russell and Gregory suggest. On 13 November 1963 Robert Hall wrote a lengthy letter detailing the reasons why Milgram’s application for further funding had been rejected. It is instructive in explaining the reaction of the NSF to the experiments. Robert Hall described the negative feedback from reviewers as falling into two categories. Firstly, those who felt “uncomfortable about the effects of the experiment on the subjects” and those who criticized the research for its “lack of theoretical guidance” and a sense that “your research demonstrates without explaining.” Quite apart from the effect on subjects and the lack of a theory, Hall wrote, Milgram had ignored his subjects’ interpretation of the events, had no evidence that subjects believed the situation, and had no proof that their behaviour inside the lab could be applied to the world beyond it. “How do we know if the situation is really credible to the Ss? It seems that some of them suspect there was a ‘catch.’ This may be operating below the level of awareness of the subjects” (Robert L. Hall, NSF, Program Director in correspondence dated 13 November 1963).

These are not the comments of a bureaucratic team player who nonchalantly “signed off” on the research. How do Russell and Gregory (2015) conclude the case for the relevance of the obedience experiments in explaining the M-H linkage? They write that it is here that the most direct connection between the OTA [Obedience to Authority] experiments and the Holocaust is found: such mass murder was carried out by modern industrialized, heavily bureaucratic, means, which as the
Holocaust progressed increasingly separated perpetrators from the human consequences of their actions. (146)

In short, as a result of bureaucracy, the perpetrators lost control of their actions or did not comprehend the consequences, and inhabited a “zone of indifference” characterized by “functional banality”. These factors were implicated in Arendt’s account of desk-bound bureaucrats who were supposedly indifferent to or ignorant of the fate of the Jews. This harkens back to Weber’s iron cage of rationality in which modern actors have become alienated from their life course and experience moral paralysis (Weber 1958). This is the continuity in thought between Arendt, Mill, Speier and Weber mentioned earlier.

The Holocaust is tied to the dystopian conception of amoral corporate or business behaviour that characterized organizations in the early twentieth century. The emergence of the middle-level managers in modern corporations exemplified this situation. Speier labelled them “value parasites” whose debut on the world-historical stage undermined human progress (Allen 2005: 259). C. Wright Mills (1951) picked up this theme in White Collar. Mills “blamed modern organizations with their new division of labour for a malaise of alienation and stunted moral development” (Allen 2005: 260). Allen notes that Arendt made Eichmann, an inauspicious salesman and petty administrator, “a central trope” in her explanation of the Holocaust. “Eichmann in Jerusalem … held the midlevel manager and bureaucratic organization accountable for the Nazi genocide” (ibid). In this narrative, the middle-level managers are stripped of personal responsibility and moral vision, and increasingly operate without entrepreneurial skills associated with ownership at the top of society, or the craft skills associated with the trades at the bottom. These are predicaments that Russell and Gregory attribute repeatedly to Milgram’s subjects. The “physical separation of cause from effect initially meant that subjects did not perceive themselves to be personally responsible for their ‘harmful’ actions” (144). Again, “Milgram’s quasi-bureaucratic invention gave practical meaning to the ‘banality of evil’ and saw ‘practically all’ functionaries doing their bit in unwittingly assisting Milgram to achieve his goal” (146 emphasis added). “The pressures that [Milgram] brought to bear on participants and which prevented so many of them from making ‘the right choice’ were similar to some of those that are inherent in large modern organizations” (147). Experiment = Iron Cage = Holocaust.

All this should sound familiar, but this perspective is precisely the one rejected by the new historiography of the Holocaust. This is the standpoint of what Allen describes as “the older literature”. The “new consensus” referred to in the subtitle of Allen’s (2005) chapter is premised on the rejection of the supposition that those who brought about the Holocaust did not want it to happen. “Have we fundamentally
misunderstood [the Nazi] world as if they lived it as we presume we would have, that is, by being alienated?” (Allen 2005: 261). Allen argues that we have wrongly assumed that the mechanistic division of labour choked off the moral resistance we presume existed prior to the Final Solution. By contrast, “to acknowledge the commitment, the mixture of petty bureaucratic routine, and an almost electric excitement, is to face squarely the strangeness of Eichmann and so many other like him” (262). The bureaucrats to whom he refers were not subverted by their organizations but were proactive in pursuing the war against the Jews and used modern organizations and their leverage to increase the range of their authority, often enthusiastically, in pursuit of radical discrimination against Jews and ultimately genocide.

Gruner (2005) illustrates this view of bureaucracy in an examination of German municipal governance in the 1930s. The political success of the Nazis in coming to power in 1933 was associated with initiatives throughout Germany at the level of local municipalities. The new players discriminated socially, politically and culturally against the Jewish population without direction from national authorities. In 1933 when Hitler acquired the Chancellorship in Berlin, many municipal politicians with a National Socialist orientation also came to power. They began to reduce services to Jews on their own initiatives from the start. These changes had a contagious effect and spread quickly across the country. Gruner (2005: 269ff) outlines some of these measures. Municipal officials cut ties with Jewish suppliers of goods and services. Non-Aryan employees were dismissed. Jews were barred from competing for public contracts. Subsidies for nurseries in Jewish communities were cut. Jewish organizations and social clubs were barred from renting space in municipal facilities. Jews were barred from public baths and swimming facilities. “Many welfare offices reduced the benefits for the Jewish poor and municipal hospitals and shelters for the homeless isolated the Jewish sick and homeless” (275). Municipalities barred Jews access to libraries, local fairs, zoos, theatres and museums. After November 1938, some municipalities advised citizens to vacate their Jewish renters and to concentrate Jews into segregated housing. While most people assume that the marginalization of the Jews was initiated from the top down by Nazi organizations such as the Gestapo and the SS, Gruner’s evidence suggest that German municipal authorities took initiatives on their own that pre-dated explicit Nazi policies to marginalize Germany’s Jewish citizens. “Often the entire administration of a town participated in the persecution of the Jews” – town planners, parks and recreation departments, tax and property offices, health and welfare, etc. (285). The Holocaust process was not the work of a rigid hierarchical bureaucracy, but of many willing players. What this suggests is that a typical Weberian approach to bureaucracy is in marked contrast to the recent historiography of the Holocaust, and the distinctive nature of the bureaucracies at its heart.
Beyond the Iron Cage: Extraordinary Institutions and Fanatical Bureaucrats

Gruner’s contribution to “the new consensus” about the role of bureaucracies in genocide does not deal with mass murder as such. However, Allen’s analysis of the use of slave labour in SS concentration camps, and Bartov’s (2001) analysis of the role of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front meet that test. Both challenge the image of passionless bureaucrats unwittingly contributing to mass murder. Allen’s (2002) Business of Genocide follows the careers of several dozen middle-level managers in the SS Business Administration Main Office, the WVHA. The WVHA was instrumental in developing a number of enterprises that were intended to showcase the transformation of the German economy in accord with the advantages of modern industry including the utilization of new technologies, and the rational allocation of labour under managers devoted to Nazi ideals. Contrary to expectations of modern capitalism, the SS were indifferent to the profitability of industry. Industry was instead a method of transforming German society into a cohesive workforce self-conscious of its historical mission to establish a new world order based on Aryan supremacy and its expansion eastward.

After the start of the war, German industrialists approached the SS to access the pools of labour imprisoned in the concentration camps – initially Russian prisoners of war (POWs), Polish partisans, political dissenters, and later, the Jews of Europe. Allen (2002) argues that the SS combined the dual purposes of exterminating the Jews, and making the “human assets” contribute to war production by classifying them according to language, skills and fitness for work, and shunting them on demand to production facilities all over Germany and Poland. By maintaining them on meagre diets, the last calorie of work was squeezed out of slave labourers, achieving two goals at once: war production and racial purification. The camp doctors and orderlies kept a daily tally of the camp populations and their health “in order to make fresh deliveries to the production lines of German firms. The end result was a relatively stable number of working prisoners in the camps beginning in late 1942” (201).

Allen’s (2002) analysis introduces two further concepts that differentiate the nature of bureaucracy from the original Weberian perspective. Nazi rule was “polycratic”. Rather than having a single top-down hierarchical power structure, Nazi organizations often shared the same jurisdictions, and individuals within organizations often competed with one another to achieve Nazi ideals. The Death Head units that policed the concentration camps contested the jurisdiction of the SS Labor Action office to control the inmate populations. The former were devoted to extermination; the latter to exploitation. While this sometimes created conflicts of interest, the ideological common ground led such diverse interest groups to
collaborate. This competition heightened the awareness of each actor’s role in the achievement of Nazi goals – the Aryanization of business, the Final Solution, and the creation of German settlements in the East. In addition, Nazi leaders promoted the concept of the Fuhrer principle. Himmler said that the SS does not tell an officer what to do. That is something he has to figure out for himself. The officer’s action is dictated by what he perceives would best serve the interests of the whole German Volk, just as Hitler was characterized as the embodiment of the larger communitarian interests of all the Germanic peoples. “The Fuhrer principle prompted individuals both to act spontaneously and to close ranks obediently, to act out but also to act in communion with other like-minded men” (13).

One of the consequences of that principle was the characteristic improvisation that marked the early days of the Holocaust where orders for “aktions” on the Eastern front were transmitted orally, and with a great deal of room for innovation about how mass executions were carried out. The managers described by Allen were not Weberian bureaucrats. They were zealous advocates of Nazi ideals, and advanced the path to the Holocaust competitively and enthusiastically.

The second major institution essential here is the Wehrmacht, and its contribution to total war and genocide on the Eastern Front, particularly after the invasion of Russia in June 1941. Traditionally, the German Army was assumed to have conducted its campaigns in the conquest of Europe with brilliant blitzkrieg manoeuvres, led with panache by generals like Rommel and according to the established rules and customs of war. These rules apply to the targeting of appropriate military objectives, non-aggression against non-combatants, acceptance of surrender by and respect of the rights of POWs, and responsibility for the humane treatment of conquered populations, among other things. Most observers assumed that the annihilation of Jews behind the front lines was the exclusive jurisdiction of the Einsatzgruppen and the Order Police, and that the Wehrmacht stuck to legitimate policies in respect of the rule of international law and custom. “The impression [was] created as early as the Nuremberg trials, that while some generals had collaborated with the regime, the ordinary soldier had nothing to do with ‘all that’” (Bartov 2001: xvii). Nothing could have been further from the truth. Bartov notes that

in the last few years more and more evidence has surfaced indicating the intimate links between the army and the regime’s genocidal policies even when those went completely against the logic of military operations ... such findings threaten to undermine the last bastion of the narrative of the Wehrmacht having conducted a “clean” and professional war. (xxi)

What differentiated the conquest of Western Europe and the invasion of the Soviet Union? The war against the Soviets was designed to annihilate
Soviet society and its Bolshevik government. The Slavs who made up the Soviet population were viewed in Nazi ideology as *untermenschen*, that is, sub-human. The Slavs and the Jews were to be cleared from the land to make *lebensraum*, and the settlement of the East by new Aryan colonies. German propaganda emphasized the purpose of the war. “The essential goal of the campaign against the Jewish-Bolshevik system is the complete destruction of the sources of power and the eradication of the Asian influence on the European cultural sphere” (quoted in Bartov 2001: 84). The treatment of the Jews and Commissars was to be harsh and their eradication complete. The army was given special directives to expedite the summary execution of such civilians contrary to the conventions of war. Hitler advised his generals not to accept the surrender of cities since he had no plans for their preservation. Millions of Red Army POWs were captured in the summer and fall of 1941. No provisions were made for food and housing. Most starved to death by the winter of 1942. Some were gassed at Auschwitz in 1941. Himmler later ordered the expansion of Auschwitz to house hundreds of thousands of POWs to be used as slave labour. In addition, pockets of Russian troops who were outflanked and caught behind the front line were shot as partisans. These actions were all war crimes.

There were other conditions that characterized the war in the East. The Soviets fought tenaciously to halt German advances on the outskirts of Moscow in late 1941. The German supply lines were stretched over half a continent. The Army had orders to “live off the land” which meant expropriating produce and livestock from the indigenous population. This created starvation wherever the Wehrmacht occupied territory. The rank and file also engaged in “wild requisitions” taking from civilians whatever they wanted, including food, winter clothing, boots and blankets. Anyone expressing opposition was summarily dispatched.

In the three fighting units that he researched, Bartov found that during the war in Russia the divisions lost between 2–3 times the number of men and 3–4 times the number of officers with which they were originally staffed in June 1941 (143). The invasion required infantry divisions to march 900 kilometres in the first month of the war. The soldiers were exhausted, and due to high levels of casualties, the units were perennially understaffed. However, Bartov argues that the resilience of the army was remarkable, not because of the comradery within the units, but because of the constant ideological indoctrination of the soldiers. This was largely the responsibility of the company commander and the junior officers.

Bartov studied the files of 531 officers in his three divisions. The vast majority were from the middle classes. One hundred and fifty-five were members of the Nazi party but all had come of age when they would have been particularly susceptible to National Socialist ideas and their “Germanic values.” These were much like the enthusiastic engineers who commandeered the SS slave labour projects.
These young men achieved important command commissions at the front and carried the responsibility for the military, as well as the criminal activities of companies, battalions and even regiments. These young men, the backbone of the army, had grown up under the impact of the Great Depression and the social and political crisis that destroyed the Weimar republic and brought the Nazis to power. (Bartov 2001: 66)

They were exposed to Nazi propaganda at school, at university, from the media and from all the labour and youth groups dominated by Nazi supporters. At the front, they were the conduit for the on-going indoctrination of the troops, especially when the Wehrmacht’s momentum began to stall, and ideology was critical when hope was receding. Bartov concluded that the indoctrination stiffened the determination of the men on the front and prevented the disintegration in the ranks. It also “legitimised and enhanced the barbarization of warfare in Russia … On the Eastern Front, Nazi Germany exercised barbarism on an unprecedented scale; its declared intention was extermination and enslavement” (149, 156). These policies left tens of millions of civilians and POWs dead (Erlikman 2004). European armies are thought to be typical Weberian bureaucracies. Anyone knowledgeable of the criminal nature of the activities of the Wehrmacht in the East who concluded that its members participated in mass murder “unwittingly”, ignorant of the relationship between cause and effect, or who “preferred to present the Holocaust as the outcome of anonymous bureaucratic forces” (xix) would be incorrect. According to Bartov, the army engaged in the war of extermination and enslavement with conviction and exhilaration. Allen’s analysis of slave labour under the WVHA and Bartov’s analysis of the Wehrmacht lead to conclusions that are diametrically opposed to a classical Weberian view of bureaucracy.

**Conclusion**

The growth of knowledge in respect of genocide will not be advanced by returning to a half-century old, admittedly daring and provocative experiment conducted in Yale under the aegis of studying obedience. Stam, Lubek and Radtke (1998: 162) argued that the professional subtext of the ethical and scientific controversies raised by the OTA experiments was the need to valorize experimental methodology to validate claims about people and society, essentially to promote “the importance and necessity of experimental social psychological research.” The OTA study was animated historically by pleas in Nuremberg and Jerusalem that the perpetrators of mass murder were company men who were simply following orders. The Weberian view reifies that understanding of perpetrator crime by suggesting that those persons, as epitomized in the Milgram experiment, were not
fully cognizant of their culpability as a result of the numbing effects of bureaucracy. We offer two alternative interpretations. First, this perspective mischaracterizes the experiments themselves. And second, recent historical work suggests that this process did not happen in the war. In the experiments, subjects tended to exhibit defiance where they perceived the effects to be injurious. In the case of the Nazi bureaucracies, the middle-level WVHA managers and the Wehrmacht officer corps were largely enthusiastic supporters of the Nazi regimes’ racist policies, and their consequences for total war against the Slavs and the Jews. There was no iron cage of rationality, but a surreal dedication to a transformative Aryan utopia that would last for a thousand years.

Ironically, this perspective dovetails significantly with Hannah Arendt’s (2003 [1964]) discussion of “personal responsibility under dictatorship”, an essay she wrote a year after her book on Eichmann. In the essay, she held that it makes more sense to look at the functioning of the perpetrators “in terms of overall support for a common enterprise than in our usual terms of obedience to superiors” (cited in Lang 2014: 655 emphasis added). She also stated that “there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters” because the very term, obedience, “obscured the extent to which individuals wilfully acted in support of their governments” (Lang 2014: 658). This reflects a post-Weberian perspective on the bureaucracies of genocide.

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References


