

Applied History of the Holocaust

A Framework for Understanding Collective (and Individual) Moral Responsibility

Lev Neymotin, PhD

Prologue: Two Roads in the Same Darkness

In 1942, in the small Polish town of Markowa, a farmer named Józef Ulma and his wife Wiktoria hid eight Jewish neighbors in their home. They shared food they could barely spare, always listening for boots on the road. When they were discovered, the Nazis executed the Jewish families — and then murdered Józef, his pregnant wife, and their six children, in front of the town.

The same week, just across the region, another farmer uncovered Jews in hiding on his land. He alerted the local police in exchange for a sack of grain.

Same landscape.

Same danger.

Two choices — each a window into what society had prepared people to become.

The Holocaust was not only a story of what was done to Jews. It is also a story of **what everyone else decided to do**.

Introduction: Why We Must Evaluate Collective Behavior

Today, many hesitate to speak candidly about the moral behavior of nations during the Holocaust. We fear unfair generalization or assigning guilt to those alive today. But we cannot learn from the past by refusing to see what actually happened.

If we accept that individuals can be altruistic or cruel, courageous or cowardly, we must also accept the same is true of societies. Nations are not abstractions; they are communities shaped by norms, beliefs, and habits of thought — and those collective qualities influence how people respond when confronted with injustice or opportunities for harm.

During the Holocaust, different societies made **dramatically different choices**. Some built the killing machinery. Others contributed eagerly. Others remained silent. A few resisted. Ignoring those differences is not sensitivity.

It is forgetting the very lessons that history demands we remember.

Applied history asks us not only **what** happened, but **why** — and how we must act now to prevent similar outcomes.

1 Responsibility: Who Did What?

The Holocaust was not one crime but millions of individual moral decisions. These can be understood through five categories of collective behavior:

A. Planners and Organizers

Nazi Germany conceived, designed, and industrialized genocide. It built death camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor; orchestrated deportations; and mobilized state institutions to murder at scale.

Example:

At Treblinka, even the train schedules required clerks to knowingly coordinate the arrival of human beings for annihilation. Genocide was not only carried out by ideological extremists — it depended on ordinary citizens performing ordinary jobs.

B. Willing State Partners

Some allied regimes participated out of their own initiative. Romania under Ion Antonescu stands out — its forces carried out mass shootings, pogroms, and deportations independent of German command.

Example:

In the Iași pogrom of June 1941, Romanian police and soldiers massacred thousands of Jews and suffocated thousands more in sealed freight cars — a horror that shocked even some German observers.

C. Local Collaborators and Perpetrators

Across Eastern Europe, especially in parts of Ukraine and Belarus, local auxiliaries and militias helped identify, capture, rob, and kill Jews.

Example:

During the Babi Yar massacre in Kyiv, local collaborators helped maintain order, identified Jews, and cordoned escape routes — enabling the murder of more than 33,000 Jews in just two days.

D. Passive Bystanders

Many who neither approved nor participated still remained silent. Their inaction created the conditions for mass murder to proceed unimpeded.

Example:

A family in hiding often survived only if neighbors brought food — and perished if neighbors looked away or alerted authorities. **Silence had consequences.**

E. Rescuers

Despite danger, thousands undertook acts of rescue. They prove that participation in evil was never unavoidable.

Example:

Irena Sendler smuggled Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto through sewers, ambulances, and toolboxes. She saved more than 2,000 lives. Many others risked the same fate as the Ulma family to do what was right.

Bottom Line:

Every nation had murderers, bystanders, and rescuers — but some had far more of one than another. Those proportions mattered. They determined who lived and who died.

2 Why Did Societies Respond Differently?

The responses of nations were shaped long before the war began:

Pre-existing antisemitism

Societies that already dehumanized Jews slid quickly into violence.

Political systems

Authoritarian regimes enforced obedience; collapsed states opened doors to extremism.

Contrast: Denmark protected nearly all its Jews; Slovakia willingly deported its own.

Social pressure and conformity

Many feared standing out more than they feared committing a crime.

Chaos of war

Starvation and fear eroded empathy and moral courage.

Leadership signals

There is a standard line of defense blaming the leaders:

When leaders demanded cruelty, many complied.

When leaders defended humanity, many followed.

I disagree: good peoples and nations produce and select good leaders. Bad peoples and nations produce and select bad leaders. Do not blame leaders, blame peoples and nations!

Core insight:

In a crisis, people rarely invent new morals — they act according to the moral training society has already given them.

3 What Do We Learn?

- When cruelty becomes convenient, true character emerges.
- Evil rarely requires commitment — only compliance.
- Small acts of courage can alter countless destinies.

Applied Principle:

A society must be judged by how it treats those with no power — especially when mistreating them is easy. This principle is not abstract history; it is a practical tool for evaluating the health of our societies today.

4 Why This Matters Now

Genocide does not begin with killing. It begins with:

1. **Dehumanizing words**
2. Exclusion and erasure
3. Public indifference
4. Systematic oppression
5. “Necessary” violence

We have seen these steps before.

We know exactly where they lead.

If we avoid moral judgment of societies — past or present — we leave ourselves unprepared for the next test. And history has never stopped testing humanity.

“Never again” is not a memorial ritual. It is a responsibility.

Conclusion: What Applied History Demands of Us

The Holocaust revealed the full spectrum of human behavior — not in theory but in action. The question each society faced was simple:

Will you recognize these people as human — or not?

The answers varied then, and they still vary now.

Genocide does not require millions of committed killers.

It requires millions who **find a reason not to care**.

We examine the behavior of nations during the Holocaust not to burden the innocent, but to alert the living:

- Where is dehumanization becoming normal?
- Who is being pushed outside the circle of empathy?
- When do we look away — and why?

The categories we saw in the 1930s and 1940s — planners, collaborators, bystanders, rescuers — still exist today. The critical question is not which our ancestors were.

It is which **we** are becoming.

As Yehuda Bauer warned:

Never become a perpetrator.

Never allow yourself to be a victim.

Never, never be a bystander.

History does not repeat automatically.

It is repeated by people.

And people can choose differently — if they remember.