

Applied History: Nations and Moral Choice

How Societies Revealed Their Moral Character in the Holocaust — and Why It Still Matters

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Preamble

The Holocaust was a moral test of societies, not only a crime against Jews. Different nations behaved very differently: Germany designed the murder; Romania, Austria, Ukraine/Belarus, Lithuania/Latvia, Poland, and France participated to varying degrees; Denmark notably resisted. Disclaimer: I am speaking about the 1920s–1940s. This is applied history—if we refuse to look honestly at how different peoples behave under pressure, we guarantee repetition, and we are already seeing it begin today, driven in part by mass media that was once supposed to unite and enlighten but now does the opposite, day after day.

Prologue – Two Roads in the Same Darkness

In 1942, in the small Polish town of Markowa, Józef Ulma and his wife Wiktoria hid eight Jewish neighbors in their home. They shared food they did not have, listened for boots on the road, and knew exactly what discovery would mean. When they were found, the Germans executed the Jews—and then murdered Józef, his pregnant wife, and their six children, in front of the town.

That same week, not far away, another farmer discovered Jews hiding on his land and reported them to the authorities in exchange for a sack of grain.

Same geography.

Same danger.

Two choices.

This is what applied history studies: how moral choice scales—from individuals to nations.

This is not a footnote to the Holocaust. This is the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was not only a crime committed against Jews. It was a moral test administered to entire societies. And societies did not respond equally.

In this essay, I will do something many historians avoid: I will compare national behavior directly. Not to assign eternal guilt, but to extract the only lesson history offers that can prevent repetition. If societies behaved differently then, they can behave differently again. Denying that fact is not humility—it is surrender.

Why I Am Willing to Judge Nations

We live in an age that is deeply uncomfortable with moral judgment—especially when it applies to peoples or nations. We are told to avoid “generalizations,” to speak softly, to dissolve responsibility into abstraction. But history is not abstract, and the Holocaust was not polite.

If we accept—without controversy—that individuals vary morally, from courageous to monstrous, then we must accept the same truth about societies. Nations are not metaphors. They are living systems of norms, permissions, habits, fears, and expectations that shape what millions of ordinary people do when pressure arrives.

During the Holocaust, those differences became unmistakable. Some nations built the machinery of annihilation. Some joined eagerly. Some participated enthusiastically at the local level. Some looked away. A few resisted.

To pretend these differences do not exist is not sensitivity. It is blindness.

I do not write this to assign eternal guilt, nor to indulge hatred. I write it because **applied history demands moral clarity**, not ritualized mourning. If we cannot speak honestly about how societies behaved when the stakes were absolute, then “Never Again” is nothing but a slogan.

I am deliberately blunt. If the language makes the reader uncomfortable, that discomfort belongs to reality, not to me.

The Moral Anatomy of Genocide

The Holocaust was not one crime. It was millions of choices repeated across geography and time. Those choices fall into five roles.

1. Planners and Organizers

Germany conceived, designed, and industrialized the Holocaust. The ideology, the extermination centers, the deportation systems, the bureaucracy of death—this was a state project. It was not an accident. It was not chaos.

What is most disturbing is not only the fanatics, but the ordinary Germans who made the system work: clerks scheduling trains, police units conducting roundups, soldiers participating in mass shootings. The Holocaust required millions of people to treat murder as “work.”

2. Willing State Partners

Some states did not merely obey German orders—they pursued genocide as their own project. Romania under Ion Antonescu is the clearest case.

Romanian police, soldiers, and administrators organized pogroms, death trains, mass shootings, and deportations to Transnistria, where Jews died by the hundreds of thousands through execution, starvation, and exposure. This was not reluctant compliance. It was initiative. It was cruelty practiced with zeal.

If one insists on moral differentiation, Romania belongs at the darkest end of the spectrum—not because Germany did not originate the Holocaust, but because Romania demonstrated how eagerly a society can embrace mass murder when given permission.

3. Local Collaborators and Perpetrators

In much of Eastern Europe—especially in parts of Ukraine and Belarus—the Holocaust took the form of bullets, pits, and forests. German killing units did not operate alone. They relied on local auxiliary police, militias, and neighbors who knew exactly where Jews lived, hid, and fled.

At places like Babi Yar, local participation was not incidental. It was operationally decisive. Without local collaboration, the speed and completeness of annihilation would have been impossible.

This is not a claim that “everyone” participated. It is worse: **enough did**.

4. Passive Bystanders

Most people neither killed nor rescued. They watched. They knew. They suspected. And they did nothing.

This category matters more than all others, because genocide does not require universal hatred. It requires mass indifference. Silence is not neutral. Silence is fuel.

A Jewish family in hiding lived or died based on whether a neighbor brought food—or informed. These were not grand decisions. They were small, daily, ordinary acts. And they determined life or death.

5. Rescuers

Every nation had rescuers. That fact destroys the argument that “nothing else was possible.” Irena Sendler saved more than two thousand Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. The Ulma family paid with their lives. Thousands of others across Europe chose danger over convenience.

They prove the central point: **collaboration and passivity were choices, not destiny**.

Nations Are Not Morally Equal

I will state this plainly: nations and peoples behaved differently, and those differences matter.

Germany built the Holocaust. Romania embraced it. Austria supplied disproportionate numbers of perpetrators and enthusiastic supporters. In parts of Ukraine and Belarus, local collaboration enabled mass murder at terrifying speed. Poland, under occupation and without a collaborationist state, displayed a fractured moral landscape—heroic rescue alongside betrayal and murder.

Historians rightly resist reducing this to arithmetic. But moral patterns are unmistakable. Some societies produced more killers. Some produced more helpers. Some produced more silence.

This is not hatred. This is observation.

National Moral Performance During the Holocaust: A Comparative Table of Atrocity

Historians often resist comparative moral judgment. They prefer descriptions, structures, processes. That caution is understandable—but insufficient.

When entire populations behave differently under comparable conditions, **comparison is not prejudice; it is analysis**.

I am not grading intentions.

I am not grading ideology.

I am grading **observable behavior under lethal moral stress**:

- **Cruelty**: how violence was carried out—its savagery, intimacy, and excess.
- **Willingness / Initiative**: how eagerly a society or state participated, independent of coercion.

The numbers are not the point.

The **patterns of conduct** are.

This table does not claim mathematical precision. It claims moral clarity.

Comparative Table: National and Regional Conduct Toward Jews During the Holocaust

The grading below is my moral synthesis of mainstream historical evidence.

The facts are widely documented; the *ranking language* is mine.

Country / Zone	Primary Role	Characteristic Atrocities and Conduct	Cruelty (1–5)	Willingness / Initiative (1–5)
Germany	Architect and Core Engine	Designed and implemented the Holocaust; industrial extermination camps; mass shootings by SS, police, and Wehrmacht; bureaucratic normalization of murder by “ordinary men.”	5	5
Romania (Antonescu regime)	Independent Genocidal State	Iași pogrom; death trains; mass shootings; Transnistria deportations where Jews died by starvation, exposure, and execution under Romanian authority—often without German direction.	5	5
Austria	High-Enthusiasm Perpetrator Society	Disproportionate representation in Nazi leadership and camp command; intense popular antisemitism after Anschluss; eagerness exceeding German average in some institutions.	4	4
Ukraine / Belarus (regional)	Severe Local Collaboration Zones	“Holocaust by bullets”; auxiliary police and militias essential to roundups, cordons, and hunts; intimate, neighbor-on-neighbor violence; wide regional variation but decisive local participation in many areas.	4–5	4
Lithuania / Latvia (regional)	Rapid Mass Participation Zones	Early pogroms; swift mobilization of local militias; extremely high Jewish death rates before camps became central; violence often immediate and public.	4–5	4–5
Poland (occupied)	Mixed Society under Occupation	No collaborationist state; coexistence of heroism and betrayal; Jedwabne and similar cases of local murder; later “hunt for Jews”	3–4	3

Country / Zone	Primary Role	Characteristic Atrocities and Conduct	Cruelty (1–5)	Willingness / Initiative (1–5)
		dynamics in rural areas; also largest number of rescuers.		
France (Vichy)	Administrative Collaboration	Deportations organized by French authorities; policing and roundups of Jews; less overt sadism, but bureaucratic efficiency in delivery to death.	3	3–4
Denmark	Moral Resistance Society	Near-total rescue of Jews through organized national effort; refusal to normalize antisemitism or deportation.	1	1

How to Read This Table (and How Not To)

This table does **not** claim:

- That every individual in a “high-cruelty” country was cruel
- That later generations inherit guilt
- That suffering can be ranked like a competition

It **does** claim something more uncomfortable:

When given the opportunity—or invitation—to persecute Jews, **some societies embraced it, some facilitated it, some tolerated it, and some resisted it.**

The moral character of a society is revealed not by what it says in peacetime, but by what it does when cruelty is rewarded and resistance is costly.

Why Romania Deserves Special Attention

If I am asked which case most decisively shatters the comforting narrative that “everyone was forced,” my answer is Romania.

Romania did not merely comply.
Romania **initiated**.

Its army, police, and administrators killed Jews on Romanian soil and in Romanian-controlled territories with brutality that required no German prodding. This matters, because it demonstrates that **genocide does not require German ideology**. It requires permission, dehumanization, and moral collapse.

That lesson extends far beyond Europe.

Once we are honest about **who killed Jews, how, and with what degree of eagerness**, we can confront the most devastating truth of all: that the Nazi system was designed not only to kill Jews, but to **force Jews into moral contamination**, compelling them to participate in impossible choices that would haunt memory long after liberation.

The Most Devastating Chapter: Jews Forced Into Moral Contamination

There is another truth that must be faced, and it is more painful.

The Nazi system did not only aim to kill Jews. It aimed to **destroy Jewish moral agency**.

“... Jacob Gens, the ghetto boss in Vilna, told a public meeting: ‘When they [Nazi SS] ask me for a thousand Jews, I hand them over. For if we Jews do not give out our own, the Germans will come and take them by force. Then they will take not one thousand but many thousands. By handing over hundreds, I save a thousand. By handing over a thousand, I save ten thousand.’”

– Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.

Let me be absolutely clear. Violent self-defense is not morally contaminated. Resisting a murderer is not a moral failure. What is morally contaminated is **selection**—the voluntary act of choosing which innocent people will be handed over to be murdered in order to save others. That contamination was not accidental. It was engineered. The Nazi system was designed to force victims into moral ruin, to make survival itself carry unbearable guilt. This was not Jewish failure. It was Nazi cruelty at its most refined.

The Opposite Pole: Self-Defense and the Refusal to Choose Victims

The contrast with Rabbi Meir Kahane is intentional, and it is necessary.

If Jacob Gens and Chaim Rumkowski represent the tragic logic of selection under coercion—choosing who must die in order to save others—Kahane represents the complete rejection of that logic. His position was not subtle, not polite, and not designed to make Jews comfortable. It was designed to keep Jews alive.

Kahane argued that centuries of Jewish helplessness had taught persecutors a dangerous lesson: that Jews could be pressured, negotiated with, divided, and ultimately destroyed. His answer was blunt—*stop choosing victims; start defending yourselves*. He believed that deterrence, not accommodation, was the only language consistently understood by those who prey on Jews.

I am not romanticizing violence. Jewish law forbids cruelty. But Jewish law also demands self-defense. If one is honest, one can usually see the line separating the two. Kahane insisted that refusing to cross that line was not moral purity—it was moral surrender. He was assassinated in 1990. He was tired of speaking to Jews who preferred acceptance to survival, comfort to strength. His ideas made integration harder, and that was precisely his point.

Applied History Today: Nothing Has Ended

We like to believe the Holocaust belongs safely to the past. Then Jews are murdered at a Hanukkah celebration on a public beach in Australia, and the world responds with what it always responds with: statements, outrage, memorials.

This is not prevention. It is ritual.

The moral pattern has not changed. Antisemitism is incited, sponsored, normalized, and then operationalized through intermediaries. Jews die. The world moves on.

Applied History Today: State Sponsorship and the Illusion of Distance

The recent murder of Jews at a Hanukkah gathering in Australia is not important because of where it happened. It is important because it happened at all—and because it did not happen in a vacuum. Antisemitic violence today is not merely spontaneous hatred. It is cultivated, financed, trained, encouraged, and morally licensed by state actors. In our time, that role belongs most clearly to Iran. Iran does not merely tolerate antisemitism; it institutionalizes it. It exports it through proxies, propaganda, and armed networks that convert ideology into bloodshed.

I am aware that this claim will be called “too specific,” “too political,” or “too harsh.” I accept full responsibility for making it. Applied history requires naming engines, not hiding behind abstractions. The Holocaust taught us what happens when sponsors of mass hatred are treated as distant theorists rather than active participants.

The response of the world to Jewish murder today remains ritualized outrage. Statements are issued. Memorials are held. And nothing changes. This is not prevention. It is performance.

I will state something that many prefer not to hear. Israel bears responsibility here—not moral blame, but strategic responsibility. A Jewish state exists precisely because Jewish life cannot rely on the goodwill of others. When antisemitic murder is sponsored by a state, today’s Iran being the key actor, the evil incarnation of the Nazi Germany, and the response is limited to words, deterrence erodes.

Personally, I have a sense that the “good nations” of the world would not openly oppose the Israel's strategy expressed as, "Push Iran’s government into deep bunkers; or six feet under." Remember bombing Iraqi nuclear reactor, or the recent US and Israel jointly annihilating the Iran’s nuclear capability?

I am not calling for violence for its own sake. I am stating a reality the modern world repeatedly refuses to confront: **deterrence works only when it is credible**. Moral clarity without consequence is noise. History is explicit on this point, whether we like it or not.

Conclusion – The Judgment We Avoid Will Be Repeated

There is a popular habit of blaming leaders while absolving societies. I reject it.

Good peoples and nations tend to produce good leaders. Bad peoples and nations tend to produce bad ones. Leaders do not emerge in a vacuum. They are selected, supported, tolerated, or resisted by the societies beneath them.

Do not blame leaders.

Blame peoples and nations.

The Holocaust was a German project, eagerly joined by some, locally enabled by others, and made possible by mass indifference. Its cruelty extended even into the souls of its victims, whom it forced into impossible choices.

The table of national conduct is not an academic exercise. It is a warning system. It shows how quickly entire societies can slide from prejudice into participation, from indifference into murder. It also shows that resistance is possible—at scale—when moral norms are strong. The future will not ask what we intended. It will ask what we did.

And today, when Jews are murdered again, the same categories reappear: planners, enablers, collaborators, bystanders, and the rare few who resist.

History does not repeat itself automatically.
It is repeated by people.

Applied history is not remembrance.
It is warning.

And warnings are useless unless they are taken seriously—before the next choice is made.

