

## **Jonathan Saunders: *Nazism and the Heroic Last Laugh* (Basu)**

Nazism and the Holocaust continues to fascinate, frustrate and horrify scholarly analysts and lay observers (Stone, 2004). The deliberate scope and industrial scale of the collectively organized violence entails that any plausible account of Nazism must address the mutual relationships between the form of intersubjectivity articulated by the Nazis, namely *Volksgemeinschaft* (folk-society) and the nature of the hard, heroic and self-sacrificing subjectivity this required (Baird, 1992). The Nazis told themselves stories (in films, books, and speeches) about themselves both as official propaganda and through personal accounts of self. They continued to do so during the Second World War and Holocaust. The Nazi perpetrators of mass violence and murder – notably the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) of Nazi SS, police personnel and Wehrmacht soldiers operating in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, and more so the Nazi SS involved with the *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camps), namely the off-site bureaucrats, and on-site commandants, officers, guards, administrators, and doctors, as well as *Kapos* (Prisoner-supervisors) – arguably reflected the fulfillment of Nazi stories and fantasies.

Over the years, several sorts of explanations have been offered for their capacity to engage in direct violence: moral depravity in the form of bestial, barbaric or devilish dispositions; cultural (and religious) socialization to eliminationist antisemitism (Goldhagen, 1996; Mann, 2000); cultivated moral relativism and heroism (Bar-On, 1990; Koonz, 2005); situational pressures of peer conformity, obedience to authority, and role-fulfillment (Browning, 1998; Blass, 1993); and thoughtless and dispassionate rule-following conformity resulting in a banality of evil (Arendt, 2006). Adding to these approaches, and partially in reaction to the banality view, Slavoj Žižek (1997) has ventured the psychoanalytic (and specifically Lacanian) argument that Nazi perpetrators

were often engaged in *jouissance*, i.e., performing the fantasy of an excessive even unlimited yet obscenely transgressive enjoyment.

In my project I ask: Did the Nazis enjoy themselves? *Did the perpetrators take pleasure in having the last laugh at the expense of their enemy Other?* Žizek's approach has the potential merits of explaining the excessive and creative nature of the Nazi violence, especially in the Camps, that is mostly ignored by other explanations, as well as of suggesting that such patterns of violent performance recur in other settings, including our own. See in this regard the three images – of 1. an American Lynching, 2. Nazis in Poland, and 3. Abu Ghraib – attached. In consultation with Prof. Basu, I propose to pursue my research question by testing Žižek's claim on the actual memories and recollections of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators (eg. Dimsdale, 1980; Hackett, 1997; Klee and Riess. 1991; among others). My focus will be on the agentic and affective subjectivity of Nazi joy in violence.

This project builds on prior coursework including Professor Duvall's European Intellectual History series tracing the historical 'discovery' of personal subjectivity as it relates to duty. I also see it as a stepping stone in practical psychoanalysis towards the sort of understanding of a constructive subjectivity that is at once creative and reactive that will be necessary for further work in reinventing the academic understanding of *homo economicus*, my projected life's work!



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## References

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