

IV

Robbery with Violence

Core Elements of Supremacist Belief Systems

They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.—Charles Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*¹

In the remarks made to SS leaders mentioned in the Introduction, Heinrich Himmler was unusually frank when he discussed the Nazis’ genocidal plans. Although senior Nazi officials continued to state publicly that their policy was to evacuate Jews, Himmler said their real goal was extermination. He went on to caution his audience that although what they were doing was “a page of glory” in their history, they must keep it a secret among themselves.²

This honesty was a rare departure from the standard Nazi practice of hiding the murders they were committing with code words. One

Holocaust scholar, Raul Hilberg, recalled examining tens of thousands of Nazi documents without once encountering the German word for “kill” (*töten*) until, after many years, he finally came across the word in an edict concerning dogs.³ As mentioned earlier, *Sonderbehandlung* was one of many euphemisms the Nazis used for killing—they gave their victims “special handling.” Hilberg once listed more than a dozen other terms used instead of “kill” or “murder.”⁴

When senior Nazi officials spoke among themselves, though, the camouflage was no longer necessary. At the Wannsee Conference, for instance, they debated various ways to murder all of the eleven million Jewish people who lived in Europe—whether to shoot their victims, work them to death, or kill them with carbon monoxide from an internal combustion engine.⁵ In Eichmann’s minutes, though, this became a discussion about “various possible kinds of solution”⁶ and the extermination plan itself was referred to as “the Final Solution of the European Jewish question.”⁷

Like the Nazis, Hungarian fascists used code words to describe the implementation of the Final Solution in their country. Jewish people who had been rounded up and forced to go to Auschwitz were referred to as “resettled,” the homes they had been made to leave were called “abandoned apartments,” and the contents of their homes and businesses were described as “property left behind.”⁸

In addition to linguistic camouflage, Nazis used secrecy to hide what they were doing. Every SS officer who worked in a concentration camp was sworn to silence.⁹ Himmler selected Auschwitz as the site for the Birkenau extermination camp partly because the Germans could hide it among the many labor camps in the area.¹⁰ And Himmler’s mobile killing squads tried to commit massacres out of public view, unless they were intended to frighten the local population.¹¹

The secrecy and euphemisms the Nazis used to conceal their murders from others also shielded them from what Raul Hilberg called “the censoring gaze” of their own conscience.¹² Christian moral codes, of course, include a commandment against homicide, so engaging in murder

created an internal conflict the Nazis had to resolve in some way.¹³ To do that, they came up with several rationalizations and justifications. A common one was that Jewish people weren't fully human—they were subhuman (*Untermenschen*)—so the moral rules that usually protected humankind didn't apply to them.¹⁴ In the remarks to senior SS officers mentioned above, Himmler referred to non-Germanic people as “human animals.”¹⁵

Because Jews were thought to be less than human, the Nazis believed it was all right to treat Jewish people—and other targets of their venom, including Roma and Slavs—like animals. And they did. They shipped Jews to Auschwitz in cattle wagons and killed most with Zyklon-B, a pesticide. In the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, the filmmaker juxtaposed images of rats with those of Jewish people. A narrator explained the connection: just as rats were the vermin of the animal kingdom—spreading diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, and dysentery—Jews were the vermin of the human race. Considering the peril, it wasn't just permissible for Germans to eradicate European Jewry, it was a matter of self-protection, like exterminating rats.¹⁶

That wasn't the only excuse Nazis came up with for committing mass murder. Flipping truth on its head, they projected their aggressive impulses and greed upon their victims, claiming that “international Jewry” was plotting to rule the world and destroy Germany and German life. *The Eternal Jew* concluded with footage of Hitler saying, in a 1939 speech to the German Reichstag: “If international-finance Jewry inside and outside of Europe should succeed once more in plunging nations into another world war, the consequences will not be the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.”¹⁷

Individual murderers and thieves often came up with their own rationalizations to avoid feeling guilty for their misdeeds. A common one, used even by senior Nazi officials, displaced responsibility onto others. They told themselves they were only acting under orders. Adolf Eichmann was the most notorious example. At his trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann

said of the 1942 conference, in which senior Nazis discussed the plan to exterminate European Jewry: "I felt something of the satisfaction of Pilate, because I felt entirely innocent of any guilt. The leading figures of the Reich at the time had spoken at the Wannsee Conference, the 'Popes' had given their orders; it was up to me to obey, and that is what I bore in mind over the future years."¹⁸

They also soothed their conscience by telling themselves that they hadn't acted out of hatred or vindictiveness, or that what they had done was entirely legal under their laws, or that they couldn't have stopped the slaughter even if they had tried.¹⁹

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Supremacists in Leopold's Congo Free State and Victorian England followed the same pattern. Whether supremacist ideologies are based on ethnicity, race, or gender, they have the same core elements:

1. Supremacists want something that belongs to members of a group they dominate.

Jewish people had two things the Nazis wanted: their property and their labor. At Auschwitz alone, Nazis looted an estimated 142,996,769 Reichsmarks (about 800 million dollars in today's value) from the belongings prisoners had taken with them to the camp²⁰ and another 60 million Reichsmarks (about 340 million dollars today) from selling their labor to private companies.²¹

Living in a pre-industrial society, people in the Congo Basin didn't own personal property of great value to a European monarch. They did, however, have two things Leopold craved: land and labor. The Nazis' forced labor camps in Europe, massive as they were, didn't hold a candle to the mammoth slave colony Leopold set up in the Free State. As mentioned earlier, according to Félicien Cattier's calculations, by 1906, Leopold had extracted more than 70 million francs (350 million dollars in today's value) from his private estate in the Congo.²²

Men didn't enslave women in nineteenth-century England but dominated and exploited them. As mentioned earlier, a woman usually earned half as much as a man for doing the same work.²³ As a result, working-class women were fortunate if they earned enough to pay for the bare necessities.²⁴ After someone in the crowd shouted to Constance Lytton and the other suffragettes in a deputation headed toward Parliament, "Go home and do your washing!" Lytton thought of the washerwomen who, perhaps distraught with worry about how to get by from day to day, had washed the white collars and shirt fronts of members of Parliament. She told herself that she would speak on their behalf if she managed to find a way past the phalanx of police blocking her way to the Houses of Parliament, and thus became a spokesperson for the deputation.²⁵

2. Supremacists use violence and coercion to dominate members of a weaker group and take what they want.

Socially dominant groups commonly use systematic violence and coercion to oppress and exploit members of subordinate groups.²⁶ Leopold's Force Publique soldiers used extreme violence to dominate and coerce Congolese natives. A commission he appointed to investigate reports of government-sponsored atrocities found that when people living in a village failed to come up with the rubber or provisions the government required, soldiers often went on a murderous rampage, massacring villagers and setting huts afire.²⁷ They also took women as hostages, whom they held in conditions so deficient that many died.²⁸ As E. D. Morel said, Leopold's philanthropy in the Congo was actually "legalized robbery enforced by violence."²⁹

The coercion nineteenth-century English men used to dominate women was usually less lethal.³⁰ Economic and social pressures induced most women to marry³¹ and, once married, to continue living with a husband even if he was abusive. A woman could only obtain a divorce if she proved her husband had engaged in cruelty, incest, or bestiality and had been adulterous as well. And if she left her husband without getting a divorce, a woman forfeited all claims to the custody of her children.³²

What happened to Caroline Norton, a prominent poet and novelist, showed the coercive power of Victorian child custody laws. After Norton left a husband who had repeatedly beaten her, he was given sole custody of their sons and rarely allowed her to see them. Once, he failed to tell her that her youngest son had fallen ill until the boy was on his deathbed. She rushed to see her son and anxiously asked a woman whom she met in the town where he lived whether he had gotten any better, only to have the woman tell her: "No, he is not better, he is dead."³³

Sometimes, the coercion men used was more obvious. In late-nineteenth-century London, wife beating was described as "normal" when used as a disciplinary measure, and some industrial parts of England and Scotland were known as "kicking districts" due to the great frequency with which husbands assaulted their wives.³⁴ In an 1853 debate in the House of Lords about a bill to increase the penalties for wife battering, Earl Granville lamented the continuing effect of an old English proverb—"a woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more they are beaten, the better they'll be."³⁵

3. Supremacists usually try to hide the harm they inflict.

E. D. Morel began to suspect that Leopold's activities in the Free State weren't as benign as he was making them out to be when a Free State official berated his employer for disclosing that a shipment of goods to the Congo consisted largely of war materiel—information that he insisted must be kept secret.³⁶ Leopold refused to give the Belgian Parliament access to the Free State's financial records when it was considering annexation,³⁷ and had the records burned after it annexed the Free State from him.³⁸

Some of those who opposed women's suffrage worried that enfranchisement would remove the veil of privacy that surrounded British households and intrude into the sacred precinct of family life, as William Ewart Gladstone once wrote in a letter to a colleague explaining his opposition to a women's suffrage bill.³⁹

4. Supremacists disguise their wrongdoing with euphemisms and code words.

Leopold's officers in the Congo hid their domination and exploitation of the Congolese with doublespeak and euphemisms. A native kidnapped from his village to serve as a soldier or a porter was called "a volunteer" or "a liberated man."⁴⁰ The officers also misappropriated language from a legitimate practice to lend an aura of respectability to their illegitimate one.⁴¹ When they chained Congolese men together and forced the men to carry goods and materiel without pay, it was a "portage tax"; when they coerced women in villages into providing food for their soldiers, it was a "foodstuffs tax"; when they made men go into the jungle and harvest rubber for them, it was a "rubber tax."⁴² The Congolese received almost no services from the government for payment of these "taxes." It was, as Professor Cattier concluded, not a state at all, just a predatory business.⁴³

Victorian English men also used verbal camouflage to hide (and justify) the force they used to coerce women. They called wife battering "domestic chastisement"⁴⁴ and spousal rape "the exercise of conjugal rights."⁴⁵

5. Supremacists justify their exploitation by claiming that members of a group they exploit are inferior, so ordinary social rules don't apply.

The three European jurists Leopold appointed to investigate reports that government soldiers had committed atrocities in the Congo decided it would be unfair to judge the soldiers by European standards of civilized behavior because the natives were so uncivilized.⁴⁶ They didn't doubt that coercion was necessary to civilize a people "still in large measure savages."⁴⁷

Among the reasons anti-suffragists gave for opposing women's suffrage was that women were intellectually inferior to men.⁴⁸ They usually expressed this in a more gentlemanly way, though, saying that women were guided too much by emotion and too little by reason,⁴⁹ or as Tennyson put it: "Man with the head, and woman with the heart."⁵⁰

In a 1913 letter to the *Times*, the playwright George Bernard Shaw mocked one claim Prime Minister Asquith had made regarding his opposition to enfranchising women:

In the debate on the Dickinson Bill Mr. Asquith for the first time opposed the franchise for women on the ground that woman is not the female of the human species, but a distinct and inferior species, naturally disqualified from voting as a rabbit is disqualified from voting—A man may object to the proposed extension of the suffrage for many reasons. [. . .] [I]t is one thing to follow a Prime Minister who advances all, or some, or any of these reasons for standing in the way of votes for women. It is quite another to follow a Prime Minister who places one's mother on the footing of a rabbit.⁵¹

6. In extreme cases, supremacists claim people from another group aren't fully human and treat them like animals.

One way supremacists legitimize the violence used to exploit people from other groups is to divest them of human qualities or attribute to them characteristics usually associated with animals.⁵² Because of the belief that humans are superior to all other animals, supremacists consider the others to be less than human.⁵³ So, their thinking goes, they can treat these others inhumanely, even slaughter them.⁵⁴

Well into the twentieth century, the most common slur Europeans in the Congo used when referring to Congolese people was “macaques.” In 1960, after a Belgian king made remarks in Leopoldville that heaped praise on what Leopold had done in the Congo, Prime Minister Lumumba was furious. He responded by accusing the Belgians of having presided over “a regime of injustice, suppression, and exploitation,” adding with a snarl, “We are no longer your ‘monkeys.’”⁵⁵

Reformers in Victorian England worked to pass laws to limit the severity of “correction” a husband could mete out to his wife. In 1853, one of them urged his colleagues to extend to women the same protection they had given “to poodle dogs and donkeys” when they had passed the Cruelty to Animals Act four years earlier.⁵⁶ And, as mentioned earlier,

when Constance Lytton saw townspeople jeer and laugh at a sheep, it occurred to her that men in Victorian and Edwardian England treated women much the same way.⁵⁷

7. Supremacists devise stereotypes and rationalizations to justify the privileges they receive.

While the justifications vary from culture to culture depending on the groups involved, they all support a dominant group's claim that inequality is fair, legitimate, natural, or moral.⁵⁸ In some cases, supremacists claim their dominance is just a law of nature, as an MP did in an 1873 debate on a women's suffrage bill, arguing: "Man in the beginning was ordained to rule over the woman, and this is an Eternal decree which we have no right and no power to alter."⁵⁹

Supremacists often generate several different stereotypes about members of a subordinate group. Leopold's commissioners believed that the Congolese had no sense of morality,⁶⁰ were bloodthirsty,⁶¹ and needed to learn the value of work,⁶² all of which legitimized their domination by Europeans. In some cases, the stereotypes contradict each other. At times, British anti-suffragists claimed that women were so obstinate that giving them the vote would lead to endless family discord, and at other times said they were so easily influenced that letting them vote would effectively give a second vote to their favorite male relative or clergyman.⁶³ Either way, they were unfit to vote.

Sometimes, members of a dominant group say that although they place limits on members of a less powerful group, they only do that to protect this weaker group. A leading expert on the common law of England, Justice William Blackstone, said the constraints placed upon Victorian women were intended only for their protection—advantages granted to them because they were such great favorites under the laws of England.⁶⁴

These, then, are the red flags that supremacists are at work. It begins benignly enough, with people's pride in their own group, their heritage, and even their strongly held political beliefs.

Pride becomes pathological, though, when members of a group begin to believe they are superior to other groups and should be able to rule over everyone else. Claims of group superiority and the use of violence against those from less powerful groups are markers of exploitation. Other markers are supremacists' use of secrecy and doubletalk to hide what they are doing, as well as rationalizations to legitimize what would otherwise be seen (and condemned) as wrong. At times, the euphemisms they use to camouflage their villainy serve as justifications too. They often claim their group is exceptional. Of course, exceptionalists rarely believe that their group is exceptionally bad or inferior. They arrive at the same pathological place as other supremacists, convinced that commonly accepted moral rules don't apply to them because they are superior.

Turning attention now to exceptionalists who believe that "human beings stand at the pinnacle of the moral hierarchy,"⁶⁵ let's return to the question asked in the Introduction: Do the reasons these exceptionalists give for believing that humans deserve unique moral status have merit? To begin answering this question, the next chapter will consider the reasons people commonly give for believing that humans are different from and superior to all other animals.