

Introduction

Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn.—William Graham Sumner¹

Heinrich Himmler was a stickler for decent behavior. The Reichsführer insisted that SS soldiers carry out their work honestly and without brutality.² Above all, he repeatedly demanded one thing from his men—decency.³

In July of 1941, Himmler reinforced the mobile killing squads operating on the Eastern Front with SS cavalry units and police battalions to keep up with the work that would result from a new policy. From then on, he ordered that Jewish women and children would no longer be left to starve after the men in their community had been killed. Now, they, too, would be murdered.

He often visited the killing fields and delivered the new orders to death squad commanders personally.⁴ On an inspection tour in Minsk, he once asked to see a mass shooting. An officer who traveled with him told later how the victims had been forced to dig an open grave. Then some were made to lie face down in it. After they were shot, others were forced to lie on top of them and were shot from the top of the pit. Himmler went right up to the edge to get a good look and became queasy when a

victim's brains splashed on his immaculate gray field uniform. The officer jumped forward and steadied him.⁵

If the Jews left behind had known the townspeople the Nazis had taken into custody were shot, they might have begun to resist or even revolt, so the Nazis said they had sent them to labor camps.⁶ They used a similar ruse to deceive those headed to a gas chamber at Auschwitz, telling them upon their arrival that they were going to be assigned to a work detail after getting a shower and a meal. The signs outside the chambers where they were gassed read BATH HOUSES,⁷ and SS guards calmly advised those entering to carefully place their clothes on a hook in the undressing room and be sure to remember its number, because that was the way they would get their own clothing back after their shower.⁸ The guards knew, however, that all their clothes would soon be brought to "Kanada," the name prisoners had given to huts at the camp where all the victims' belongings were sorted before being sent to Germany.

This elaborate charade didn't deceive some victims. In a statement written after his capture, Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolf Höss told how some women realized that they and their children were being herded to



Fig. 1. Hungarian Woman and Children Walking to a Gas Chamber at Auschwitz/ Birkenau in May 1944: United States Holocaust Museum.

a gas chamber, not a bathhouse. They still managed somehow to find the strength to play with their children and talk to them lovingly while they all walked together to their death. He recalled how one woman, as she passed near him with her four children—all holding hands to help the smallest over the rough ground, pointed to her children and whispered, “How can you murder these beautiful, darling children? Don’t you have any heart?”⁹ (See Fig. 1.)

This book is about Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Höss and people like them, supremacists who believe their group is better than all others and should be able to dominate and exploit everyone from an inferior group. Human history has been a continual story of supremacists slaughtering and enslaving people, of constant conquests and wars waged in the name of one ethnic group—or race, or religion—or another, from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan, from the Crusades to European colonialism, from the Holocaust to the genocide in Rwanda.

It will tell how a people’s natural pride in its own group can fester into prejudice against those from other groups and, in extreme cases, entitlement to take whatever it wants from the others: their labor, their land, even their lives. As we try to understand how people once justified practices now seen as profoundly wrong—like slavery, colonialism, and the exploitation of women—we will see how people can harm others, even in reprehensible ways, and still live with themselves by engaging in what social psychologists call *moral disengagement*.¹⁰

For example, if you’re wondering how SS soldiers could continue to think of themselves as decent men after murdering women and children, part of the answer can be found in a speech Himmler gave to senior SS officers in the fall of 1943. He explained that the murders weren’t wrong because they were being committed for a worthy cause:

One basic principle must be the absolute rule for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood and to nobody else. [. . .] When somebody comes to me and says, “I cannot dig the anti-tank ditch with women and children, it is inhuman, for it would kill them,” then I have to say, “You are a murderer of your own

blood because if the anti-tank ditch is not dug, German soldiers will die, and they are sons of German mothers. They are our own blood.”¹¹

Himmler squared the ethical circle with blood loyalty, the belief that people of Aryan¹² blood were so superior to everyone else that they were entitled to take whatever they wanted from others.

The first part of the book will contain case studies of three different supremacist ideologies—the first based on ethnonationalism, the next on race, and the last on gender. Each will tell how supremacists secured and maintained the dominance of their group and what their adversaries did to defeat them. All three studies will involve European countries whose citizens considered themselves to be among the world’s most civilized people. And all three will be from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to make sure any lessons are recent enough to be relevant today.

In the first chapter, Heinrich Himmler will make a cameo appearance. The main characters, though, will be Adolf Eichmann—one of his SS henchmen who tried to get all the Jewish people in Hungary to the death camp at Auschwitz before the advancing Soviet armies gained control of the country—and his Swedish nemesis, Raoul Wallenberg. In this chapter, we’ll also meet Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who took the place of another Auschwitz prisoner condemned to die in a starvation cell at the camp, and his moral opposite, Father András Kun, a Hungarian priest who urged a band of local fascists to “fire in the holy name of Christ” when massacring Jewish residents of Budapest. The chapter will end as the Soviet armies encircled Budapest and the Nazis set in motion a plan to slaughter all those still alive in the central Jewish ghetto.

The focus will shift in the second chapter to the race-based supremacism of King Leopold II of Belgium.¹³ This chapter tells how he convinced other colonial powers to let him take a large slice of the “African cake” they were dividing among themselves by promising to bring civilization, commerce, and Christianity to people living in the Congo region. Instead, he brought what Arthur Conan Doyle called a more efficient form of slavery by forcing the Congolese to provide

labor for him in their own homeland.¹⁴ While working as a clerk in the shipping company that brought goods to and from the Congo, E. D. Morel discovered that the king was robbing the Congolese. Following the model British abolitionists had used a century before, Morel launched a global public awareness campaign to wrest the Congo from Leopold, by then the wealthiest monarch in Europe.¹⁵ With the help of a British consul who Joseph Conrad said used to emerge from months in the jungle as “serene” as if he had just been out “for a stroll in the park,” Morel managed to get the British government to pressure Leopold into giving up the Congo. Then he worked to stop the Belgian government from allowing the king to keep his vast private estate there—booty Leopold hoped to hand down to a new generation of royal thieves.

The third chapter is about a worldwide supremacist ideology that cuts across all national, ethnic, racial, and religious lines: male supremacism. Our story begins in 1867, when the prominent English philosopher John Stuart Mill urged his colleagues in the British House of Commons to pass a bill enfranchising women on the same terms as men. Although that effort failed, during the next forty years, advocates of women’s suffrage steadily gained support for their cause in the House of Commons, only to be repeatedly frustrated by opposition from political leaders concerned that the enfranchisement of women would hurt their own party’s electoral prospects.

The situation reached a boiling point when the government “torpedoed” a compromise enfranchisement bill making its way through the House of Commons. After militants protested by planting bombs, setting buildings afire, and slashing paintings in museums, government support for women’s suffrage plummeted. Then a group of suffrage societies led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett—who had watched Mill’s speech from the Ladies’ Gallery more than forty years earlier—took another tack. They put together a great pilgrimage in which thousands of supporters, many from the most remote parts of England and Wales, slowly made their way to London in the summer of 1913, with banners proclaiming they were seeking the vote in a nonviolent and law-abiding way. The pilgrims joined with others,

fifty thousand strong, for a mammoth rally in Hyde Park. Just when it seemed the pilgrimage had turned the tide in the women's favor again, war intervened, splitting the suffrage movement between those who opposed the war and others who supported it. Fawcett soldiered on as she had for decades, convincing many of her colleagues to show themselves worthy of full citizenship by engaging in wartime relief work. The work they did during the war changed the minds of many British politicians and an enfranchisement bill made its way through the House of Commons for the first time, only to face formidable opposition in the House of Lords.

The fourth chapter will consider whether different supremacist ideologies have common features that we can use to better understand how these ideologies work and how they can be overcome. It will also address several questions raised by the case studies, including:

- How could so many people living in Germany, one of the world's most civilized countries, help the Nazis carry out their genocidal plans?
- How did King Leopold's Catholic supporters in Belgium reconcile the murder and pillage committed by his soldiers with their Christian values? and
- How did a country that had abolished slavery decades before continue to limit English women to narrow lives in which they could perform only menial work, couldn't vote or attend a university, and, if they married, could be dominated by their husbands?

Although this chapter will include many examples from the three case studies, it's intended to be self-sufficient. You can bypass the case studies and go directly to this chapter if you'd prefer to do that. The case studies, though, describe in great detail the ways supremacists avoided shame and guilt for the harm they inflicted on others.

Any study of supremacism would be incomplete if it failed to address a type of supremacism that encompasses all others—the belief that we're

superior to other animals and are entitled to take whatever we need or want from them. The next three chapters will apply what has been learned from the case studies of ethnic-, racial-, and gender-based supremacism to human supremacism to see whether it, too, involves causing unjustified harm to innocent members of a weaker group.

James Rachels, the author of a classic text on moral philosophy,¹⁶ framed the issue this way:

We kill animals for food; we use them as experimental subjects in laboratories; we exploit them as sources of raw materials such as leather and wool; we keep them as work animals—the list goes on and on. These practices are to our advantage, and we intend to continue them. Thus, when we think about what the animals are like, we are motivated to conceive of them in ways that are compatible with treating them in these ways. If animals are conceived as intelligent, sensitive beings, these ways of treating them might seem monstrous.¹⁷

The sixth and seventh chapters will consider whether animals raised for food are intelligent and sensitive beings or just robot-like creatures genetically programmed to act the way they do. These chapters will also evaluate whether the reasons people give to justify using animals for food are good ones, or if human exceptionalism is camouflage for another form of supremacism.

The final chapter will go from description to prescription, discussing practical actions each of us can take to prevent supremacist beliefs from taking root in the first place or at least combat them before they become virulent, an issue that has become critically important with the recent resurgence of nationalism and other group-based ideologies. Fortunately, in recent years, social scientists have learned a great deal about how supremacist ideologies work, how they spring from some people's desire for social dominance and are sustained by myths that legitimize oppression, how they can metastasize into a *supremacist syndrome* of dominance-related beliefs, and most importantly, how they can be defeated. These

findings, like the information included in other parts of the book, will be documented with extensive notes for those who want to dig more deeply.

Let's begin.