

## **The relish for killing and the exultation of slaughter**

In 1941, after the German army occupied Eastern Poland on its way to Russia, a large contingent of Christians in the village of Jedwabne conducted a day-long slaughter of as many of their Jewish neighbors as they could lay their hands on. The Germans did not authorize this pogrom, but looked the other way while it was carried out. Accounts vary as to the number of victims, but the most conservative estimate, offered by the Polish Academic Information Center at the University of Buffalo, is some 340 people, while a higher figure of 1600 has been plausibly suggested. It was in the interest of the perpetrators to blame the Nazis, and this convenient fiction was also satisfactory to the Soviet occupiers of Poland after the war. Some 60 years later, the conspiracy of silence was broken by historian Jan Tomasz Gross's powerful and disturbing account *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Gross found two predisposing factors contributing to the massacre: a history of virulent anti-Semitism stoked by right-wing Catholic demagogues; and the historical anomaly that Eastern Poland first fell under Soviet domination in 1939 owing to the infamous pact between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR in August of that year, and then two years later succumbed to the German army in the early days of its invasion of Russia. The publication of Gross's work in the United States triggered an outpouring of anger and

denial across Poland; this in turn prodded Polish journalist and trained psychologist Anna Bikont to do her own research. The result was an award-winning study, initially published in 2004 in France as *Le crime et le silence*, and finally provided to English-speaking readers in 2015 as *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne* (translated from the Polish by Alissa Valles, Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

Soon after, Julian Barnes, the English novelist and essayist, used Bikont's book as the springboard for a meditation on evil, published in the *New York Review of Books* on November 19, 2015. Bikont's account and Barnes's review do not add a great deal of information to what we knew about the massacre itself. What justifies Barnes's title – "Even Worse Than We Thought" – is Bikont's focus on the present-day indifference and hostility of large swathes of the Polish population to reckoning with the event. Wholesale distortion, brazen denial, and outright lying seem to be the rule and not the exception. The people of Poland today by and large offer a ragbag of rationalizations: the Germans did it; Polish townspeople did it, but only a few participated; anyway, the Jews had it coming.

Bikont encountered massive resistance to her project. A common belief among large numbers of her countrymen was that any such endeavor must be less about truth than about Jewish revenge – worse still, misplaced revenge, as the real culprits were the Germans, the Soviets, and the victims themselves. Rumors sprang up overnight that "the Jews" were demanding reparations – further proof of their "historic" greed for gold.

All of a sudden, a payback figure of \$65 billion was in the air and the Jews were out to ruin Poland all over again. And so there was born the new myth of "how vengeful the Yids are." In 2001, when Bikont started investigating, copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were still being distributed outside the church at Jedwabne; a Polish bishop was talking insolently of the "Shoah business"; the president of the American Polish Congress was explaining how "the Jews decided that Poland should not be Poland but a suburb of Israel"; a Father Bartnik announced that the Jews were "still causing wounds to fester"; while Lech Wałęsa made a blithely self-disgracing comment. Even if all the Jews still remaining in Poland had left, they would probably have found themselves caught in the final half of a final double bind. As the Poznań weekly unironically entitled *Culture* put it in 1936, "The Jewish problem can exist even when there is no longer any Jew left."

In March 2001, a well-dressed businessman in his thirties in Jedwabne explained matters to Bikont:

Jews have positions in government and the Church. Why are you digging it all up? Because it's a gold mine. . . . The Jews behave as if this were their home, but when I'm in a foreign country I can't do whatever I like. It was wrong of the Jedwabne authorities to let journalists in to dig up Jewish truth. It's not our truth.

Standard-issue sectarian and ethnic bigotry is certainly on display here, and the particular picture of Jewish perfidy is drearily familiar; but the idea that Jews have positions in the Catholic Church takes fantasy fiction to a new level. Waldemar Chrostowski, priest and professor, and vice-president of the Catholic University in Warsaw, had this to say in January 2003:

Why is there talk of the number sixteen hundred, despite the exhumation? We Christians wish to reconstruct the facts. For the Jews, the facts have no significance.

In brief, many Poles interviewed by Bikont in the first decade of the 21st century

replicated the anti-Semitism and susceptibility to crude Catholic propaganda that had provoked the massacre in the first place.

Barnes acknowledges that Bikont "does not get drawn into questions about the nature of evil" – she wishes only to provide a rigorously accurate account of a historical event and of current-day opinions about it – but for him, inevitably perhaps, trying to comprehend the nature of evil is at the heart of the book:

Another reader to whom Bikont showed her manuscript had this response: "For me the hardest thing to bear is not that the Jews were massacred in Jedwabne and the area, but that it was done with such cruelty and that the killing gave so much joy." This is indeed the hardest part to stomach, the part that quietly urges you to give up on humanity, yielding to a dismay that this is probably what we are all like, or all capable of being like, at some level, underneath. The joy, the mockery, the exultation of slaughter, and then the shamelessness of the killer's wife turning up at church on Sunday in a looted fur coat only recently worn to synagogue.

*Pace* Barnes, we have to hold tight to a truth that really admits of no contradiction – that this is *not* "what we are all like, or all capable of being like, at some level, underneath." To agree with Barnes about this is to surrender too readily to Freud's – and to some extent Jung's – absurdly universalizing psychology. Or to Calvinistic or Neo-Darwinian conceptions of original sin – either the fallen angel or risen animal versions, which tar all humans without exception with the same brush. In point of fact, there are millions of individuals who, rather than take the life of their assailant, would instead accept death. Such pacifists would rather die than do violence to another, and they are thus rendered incapable of wielding a weapon and directing it toward a fellow human being. (I admit that this runs counter to the instincts of a healthy animal; but this

is how powerfully culture has overridden biology as the determinant of our behavior.)

Many soldiers in past wars purposely fired over the heads of the enemy troops or never fired their rifles at all. It was awareness of this scandal that led the United States Army, after World War II, to replace bull's-eye targets with silhouettes of human beings on the rifle ranges in Basic Training – the better to habituate trainees to firing their weapons at the enemy troops.

We have to take a deep breath and try to understand what happens to some but *not* all of us, and resist the temptation to achieve a quick solution rooted in "human nature."

It is this relish for killing and the flaunting of spoils that asks us the hardest question. We can identify proximate causes of what happened: the extreme anti-Semitism of public life, the moral *trahison* of the professional classes, the particular circumstances by which Jedwabne and nearby towns changed hands in wartime, the age-long resentment of those who are different, and so on. These are the small "whys," which lead us to an overwhelming "why" – one at which language as well as thought often fails. Given that most of those involved, on both sides, had and have religious belief, or at least religious observance, the question looms the greater. "I just don't know where God was at that moment," commented a Catholic Pole who saved and subsequently married a Jewish woman.

The relish is indeed the hardest question. But again, it is important that we refuse to succumb to defeatism by accepting too hastily the proposition that "language as well as thought" will fail to illuminate the why. I would say that books such as the one under review give rather an over-full account of why. Not only is there no mystery about it: in the self-reporting of the perpetrators – either those who are shameless and continue to brag proudly about their murderous exploits, or those who are so completely

rehabilitated that they are now willing to be candid about their participation – there is distinctly the lack of any mystery. They give us admirably direct accounts of their reasons. What boggles our minds is not that the deed is inexplicable – the perpetrators explicate it only too well – it is that we cannot comprehend that the reasons they cite were persuasive to them. We know what they thought; we just can't wrap our minds around their having adopted the thought.

But often the perpetrators have been quite articulate about that as well. Rudolf Höss patiently explained to his captors at Nuremberg that the complete Nazi ideology could be found in the writings of Henry Ford, which were required reading in the upper echelons of the party. Adolf Eichmann explained that he had adopted the "little man's" version of Kant's categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it." This seemed, to a lowly lieutenant-colonel, a sensible equivalent to Kant's dictum: the leader of the nation, installed in power by a legitimate constitutional process, surely knew better than he did what should be done for the good of the people – "the people" being those excellent German Lutherans and God-fearing Catholics. As for deferring to another's authority in the matter of how to conduct his moral life, Eichmann resembled the vast majority of people on this planet, who follow the guidance of their parents, their teachers, their pastors, their bosses, and their government.

Barnes has a moment of inexcusable weakness in thinking that the question of evil "looms the greater" in light of the fact that "most of those involved, on both sides, had and have religious belief, or at least religious observance." Here I would recommend to him one of my favorite methodologies: whenever you encounter a

seeming paradox, simply assume that there is *no* paradox, and treat the puzzling material that appears to contradict the truth as instead the embodiment of the truth. Replace "How can this be?" with "This is, and no mistake." Thus did Einstein respond to the discovery that the speed of light remains constant in all frames of reference: instead of fighting it – "This is impossible, it can't be" – he accepted it as an axiom, and went on to propound the theory of relativity. In this case, Barnes is stymied, because he assumes that religious belief or religious observance would or should *militate against* the committing of murder. What entitles him to believe that? His piece was published in the wake of the Paris massacres, when Islamic jihadists murdered 130 people and wounded 368. Paris in 1572 was ground zero for the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of French Calvinists by French Catholics. Barnes needs to take a deep breath and acknowledge this incontrovertible fact – that a genocide is compatible with religious belief and observance. Religion was no impediment to the commission of the atrocity at Jedwabne. This is patent. There is no paradox. Next, Barnes needs to entertain the unsettling but likely hypothesis that religious dogmas may well instigate or exacerbate a slaughter. What do the godless not deserve to have done to them by the party of God?

We can accept the comment of the Polish Catholic who saved and married a Jewish woman – "I just don't know where God was at that moment" – without wishing to deride it, because we want to honor this man's courage and humanity. Nonetheless, if taken literally, his question can be answered definitively: God was far away, not merely in another galaxy, but in another dimension. Barnes next switches to a secular perspective:

For those with a nonreligious, and more mechanistic view of the world, explanation might be slightly easier, though no less bleak. It will tend to be located in a lack – a loss – of the imagination, a kind of mass autism, and a habituation to the banality of evil.

Barnes is strangely behind the times in his malapropos mention of "autism" here. Since autistics, almost alone among the subpopulations of *Homo sapiens*, are virtually incapable of the behavior exhibited at Jedwabne, he needs to find another word altogether, perhaps "automatism." With the excision and replacement of that one word, however, I believe he is tracking the truth, because he is tracking Hannah Arendt exactly. (It would have been the politeness of scholars to have cited her.)

But it goes beyond historic prejudice, moral indifference, plus a coveting of your neighbor's goods. One of the killers is quoted drunkenly boasting that "a man to me is nothing more than a whistling of the air." And we are back to the "joy" in and within the slaughter. As the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising put it, "There's something in man that makes him like killing."

The joy is perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of an atrocity. But it was Himmler's boast that the SS officers were morally clean because they did the necessary deed *without* any pleasure, and against their instincts to be kind and cooperative. In making the claim, he ironically ratified the view that I am putting forth here – when a methodical genocide is undertaken, it is *not* because our inborn human nature is coming to the fore. Such a deed must be prepared by a training calculated to *override* our normal nature. The massacre at Jedwabne, triggered more by stored-up malice than by a bureaucratic order – the Germans did not direct the slaughter, only gave the townspeople permission to do it – had been prepared for a long time. It was a

"righteous slaughter," felt by the participants to be a proper retribution, a balancing of the scales of justice.

This gave the perpetrators their justification for proceeding in a celebratory mood. And why not? Here is C. S. Lewis on the right of Christian warriors to enjoy the *esprit de corps* that is enhanced by joint killing:

The idea of the knight – the Christian in arms for the defense of a good cause – is one of the great Christian ideas. War is a dreadful thing, and I can respect an honest pacifist, though I think he is entirely mistaken. What I cannot understand is this sort of semipacifism you get nowadays which gives people the idea that though you have to fight, you ought to do it with a long face and as if you were ashamed of it. It is that feeling that robs lots of magnificent young Christians in the Services of something they have a right to, something which is the natural accompaniment of courage – a kind of gaiety and whole-heartedness.

And here is the inimitable Lewis touch, an unctuousness all his own, as he contemplates, with full approval, capital punishment as well as war:

Even while we kill and punish we must try to feel about the enemy as we feel about ourselves – to wish that he were not bad, to hope that he may, in this world or another, be cured: in fact, to wish his good. This is what is meant in the Bible by loving him: wishing his good . . . .

Hold on to these thoughts – the right to gaiety and whole-heartedness during a slaughter, the love that can be felt for the enemy as you kill and punish him.

It is one of my bedrock principles that we cannot understand evil unless we acknowledge that those who do it are "putting in good minutes." They are exhilarated; they are having a peak experience. But no one in Jedwabne sought transcendence in

just this way until a congeries of necessary and contributory causes coalesced on a particular day. It is just as correct to say of typical human nature that it goes along to get along, seeks a maximum of comfort with a minimum of effort, avoids conflict where possible, and does not wish a neighbor well but does not wish him ill either. This would seem also to be ordinary animal morality. For either the animal or the man to be catapulted out of this mood of easy everyday complacency, a galvanizing event must occur. Attacked by a predator and forced to fight for its life, a mammal will be mobilized to the utmost by an emotional frenzy and respond with the greatest violence that it is capable of. If it defends its life successfully by overcoming its adversary, no doubt it experiences a mammalian version of fierce exultation. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, in *The Social Life of Dogs* (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000), describes an encounter between Ruby, a new dog she has just brought home – perhaps unwisely, as it has a reputation for killing cats – and the resident alpha feline Rajah. Ruby escapes from the car and chases Rajah up a tree. Later, when Rajah is crossing the yard, Ruby gets loose a second time and goes for him again:

But Rajah had had his fill. He turned to face her. She rushed up to him, blind to the fact that his back was arched, his eyes were blazing, and his fur was on end. Before she knew it, he was swarming all over her, dealing her lightning blows. Ruby screamed the piercing *yi yi yi yi* of a dog hit by a car and tried to get away from Rajah. But Rajah wasn't finished. His rage had come, and he couldn't get enough of clawing Ruby. In her struggle to escape she knocked him aside, but he still wasn't finished and he chased her. She headed for the car but the windows were shut, so she swerved and sped across the field.

Cats don't have the stamina of dogs when running, and Rajah knew it. He slowed down and glared at her retreating figure. Then he boldly turned his back on her, and, ears low, fur still bristling, he went swaggering toward the house, for all the world like an ex-marine who has just won a fight in a barroom. As he walked he growled and spat, growled

and spat, as if he were swearing under his breath. He was reliving the experience.

The joy that accompanies extreme violence during a human atrocity is an emotion akin to Rajah's. We have inherited from our mammalian ancestors the human potentiality to kill viciously, and to triumph over our adversary in the act. But there is this difference: Rajah was actually endangered; the Nazis in Germany and the Polish Christians of Jedwabne only thought that they were. A human emotion is a sensation interpreted – a feeling combined with a thought. The key interpretation is that, like the animal attacked by the deadly predator, the human too is fighting for his life, and in defense of it commits no murder. It is "only" his psychic integrity, perhaps, that is under assault; but as the saying goes, "it is all in the mind." It is there that we are most vulnerable; and many a man who has failed to ward off a blow to his psyche has killed himself posthaste. The only problem with "psychic integrity" is that it is a figment. There is no such thing, and the threat to it is delusional.

On the day of the massacre, the Christians of Jedwabne, long enculturated in casual anti-Semitism but grudgingly good neighbors to most of the Jews in town, were suddenly living under wholly new conditions: the German exponents of the New Order were now the Authority; they had driven out the hated Soviets; they were everywhere ascendant in Europe; they backed traditional Catholic anti-Semitism – the popular bigotry against the Christ-killers – with an impressive array of intellectual arguments for "scientific racism"; they stoked the local resentments. The perpetrators entered into a state of ecstatic communion with each other. With God on their side, they went forth to rectify centuries-old wrongs. They were C. S. Lewis's cadre of "magnificent young

Christians," with exhilarating and meaningful work to do after long years of boredom and insignificance; and they experienced something that Lewis said they had a right to, that "natural accompaniment of courage – a kind of gaiety and whole-heartedness."

Bikont relates the details of a striking interview that shines a strong light on the joy of the murderers:

In Warsaw we visited . . . a retired seamstress living in the Praga district. The fragile seventy-three-year old Halina Zalewska, tottering around the house, elicited sympathy from the first glance. It didn't last, unfortunately. She knows a thing or two about Jews; she listens to the anti-Semitic ultra-right-wing Catholic Radio Maryja all day long.

Recounting the massacre in Jedwabne from the Polish point of view – "There wasn't any prejudice against Jews, Poles were just angry about what the Jews had done under Soviet rule" – Zalewska peppers her narrative with references to "dirty Jews" and "those Jewish beggars, now they want their property back," and drifts off into theology:

"Holy Scripture tells us the Jews are a tribe of vipers, perverts, they're untrustworthy and faithless. They played tricks on the Lord himself, and He had to send down plagues on them. He made them wander in the wilderness for thirty years. It's no accident He punished them the way He did. I've known about that from before the war, from religious studies. I remember everything, I'm seventy-three and I've still no sclerosis at all, though I don't eat margarine, only butter, because it's Jewish companies that make margarine."

Bikont's associate, unable to stand it any longer, says to Zalewska, "The Old Testament, the source of our faith, we share with the Jews, and Jesus was a Jew." She replies indignantly:

What are you saying, he was God's son, that tribe has nothing to do with

him. He didn't speak much Hebrew and no Yiddish at all.

If our mammalian brother exults over his killing of the predator who would have killed him, how much more so will our human brother glory in the killing of the faithless vipers and perverts who played tricks on the Lord himself.