

# On Genocide

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*The Zone of Interest*, by Martin Amis, Jonathan Cape, 310 pages

The Jews have a history of obsession with a domineering God. The entanglement began some four or five thousand years ago and for many it continues still. The God is cosmic in ambition but strangely parochial in its gendered and ethnocentric preferences, and is all but impossible to take seriously in the age of science. This tribal God was inherited by two mainstream faiths, Christianity and Islam, which each revamped their theologies to efface the tribalism and inflate the cosmic ambition to fantastic extremes. The ruinous conflicts that resulted threw a shadow over many centuries of human progress.

The dark nadir in recent times of that ungodly struggle was the genocide perpetrated by the more demented servants of the Third Reich. Within the ugly context of an industrialized total war that racked up tens of millions of corpses in less than six years, including six million in Germany alone, some six million Jewish corpses were manufactured in a scattering of factories dedicated solely to that hideous task. Among them, Auschwitz in Poland is the most notorious. On a single large campus, about a million people, the great majority of them Jews, were deprived of life like cattle in a slaughterhouse. Most of the victims were herded into large chambers and gassed, after which their carcasses were fed by conveyor belts to ovens and incinerated. The remains were buried in unmarked pits in the surrounding pastoral landscape.

The rationale for this action was a racist ideology that seems in retrospect like a perverse and demonic caricature of the ethnocentric ideology of the Jewish people. Centuries of Christian persecution of Jews had set a precedent for interpreting Jewish theological speculations in the most malign light possible, and it was natural in the early years of the human sciences to update such paranoid fantasies into racist ideas with a scientific gloss. The general drift of these ideas was that the Jewish tradition of seeing the Jews as the chosen race of God, destined by divine election to prevail over the lesser races of the Earth, was itself destined to be overturned by a revolt of one such race, one which regarded its own credentials for prevailing over the lesser races to be scientifically more valid.

The science behind this revolt of the imperfectly Christianized race the Nazis idolized was transparently fallacious. The political impulse derived from it was morally benighted and practically absurd. Nevertheless, in the emotionally charged environment of a German nation that was, firstly, aggrieved by a sudden defeat in a bitter mechanized war of unprecedented destructiveness, secondly, existentially threatened by the sudden and barbarous eruption of communism on a continental scale in the territory of the former Russian empire, and thirdly, envious of the colonial empires of such peripheral European nations as Britain and France, the wild idea that Jews had somehow exploited not only their theocratic primacy over Christians to subjugate a proud warrior race but also their financial machinations to push the German nation to ruin struck a resonant chord. Thinkers with a poor grasp of science used the resonance to advance their racist fallacies.

The sad result of this eugenic madness was a plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe. The plan was hatched in late 1941 at a conference in Wannsee near Berlin and implemented within five years in an orchestrated undertaking now known as the Holocaust. This purportedly final solution to the Jewish problem involved the construction of giant camps like Auschwitz.

One consequence of the existence of such camps was the creation of a large class of state functionaries charged with the planning of the genocide and the administration of every last detail of the whole ghastly business. That this should have resulted in the moral contamination of the entire generation of such functionaries, who after guilty immersion in those deeds were fit only for termination with extreme prejudice, was in retrospect only natural. These functionaries, banal as they may have seemed as individuals, had become monsters beyond salvation in any rational judgment of the aftermath.

This is where Martin Amis takes his cue. As a novelist who rose to prominence by exposing to scurrilously satirical treatment the darker side of life in the dirtier corners of modern Britain, and who grew up in a Britain grown quite rotten with relief at having prevailed in its wartime defiance of the Third Reich, Amis seems to have been quietly obsessed for decades by the brutalization that the lesser Nazi officials endured in performance of their slaughterhouse tasks. The result is a novel set in Auschwitz and starring a camp commandant whose almost comic problems in the line of duty create a narrative thread to weave the big theme of genocide together with the more modestly human themes of sex and love, venality and courage, and so on. Like all novels, its success or otherwise for the reader is largely a matter of taste, but this novel has what it takes to appeal to discerning readers, as well as more than enough of what it takes to discourage almost anyone else.

Fortunately, Amis has good credentials for the task of writing this potentially embarrassing tract. As a true Brit with blond hair and blue eyes, he is almost certainly of largely Germanic extraction, but he also has a Jewish wife and Jewish daughters, so he is viscerally aware of the view from the other side of the racist fence. His literary ambition and accomplishments have served him well for the enterprise, and the shelf of books he has authored offers plenty of back story for the moral blockbuster that now adds its weight to the shelf.

Unfortunately, that back list includes beside the encouraging volumes a few tomes to which the only proper response is caution. Amis has written such brilliant books as the novel *Money* (1984) and the memoir *Experience* (2000) and such good books as the novel *London Fields* (1989) and the anthology *The War Against Cliché* (2001), but he has also published some horrible flops. His strange novel *Time's Arrow* (1991) tackled the Holocaust, but it was written backwards, which disqualifies it as a contribution to anything but a psychiatric dossier. His monograph *Koba the Dread* (2002) on Stalin and Soviet atrocities is naïve and best politely ignored as a work of history. And his novel *Yellow Dog* (2003) tackled racism and the limits of reason in a way that called forth cries of despair and loathing from critics.

Whether *The Zone of Interest* succeeds on a topic where so much is at stake is moot. Genocide is not a promising scenic backdrop for a comedy of human manners, and a novel with richly human characters whose repertoire includes comic tropes as well as tragic ones can only drive its narrative by relishing the everyday trivia surrounding its players. These have the effect of losing the forest of mass murder for the trees of personal pleasure and pain. A more fully conceived novel about the Nazi genocide would delve with forensic imagination into the mad science of racial types and the military acceptance of slaughter in the line of duty. We would need a novelist of the calibre of Tolstoy and a verbal tapestry on the scale of *War and Peace* to do justice to all that. As it is, Amis has made a bold stab in the dark that will do little more than annoy most readers.

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