

## Introduction: The Mystery

“How on earth?” asked my mother.

—WALTER KEMPOWSKI, *TADELLÖSER & WOLFF*

The German writer Walter Kempowski once mused that his entire literary output may one day be reduced to this all-too-familiar question. Such a question, he wrote, “is a lot for a lifetime, analogous to ‘I know that I know nothing.’”<sup>1</sup> Drawing a connection to Socrates’ aphorism is no doubt astute, but can anyone better answer the question than Kempowski’s mother? In his autobiographical novel *Tadellöser & Wolff* gunfire alerts the Kempowskis to the arrival of Soviet troops in their hometown. After a stray bullet rips through the leaves of the family pear tree, the mother wonders, “How on earth?” and then says to the teenage Walter and his grandfather, “We better go inside.”<sup>2</sup> Like every novel, every historical treatise has a moment in which it must resort to a gesture of showing such as this; none capture the entire complexity of events. This is a truism, yet such truisms bear repeating. In *Tadellöser & Wolff* the question that severely tests both the writing of history and what our society holds for certain—how could it have come to *this*?—finds expression in a mother’s everyday chatter. The novel shows how an extreme break from normality could (and, in principle, can) be experienced as normal. And precisely for this reason it was (and will be) possible.

Why does this question persist so stubbornly? Why, after thousands upon thousands of pages of published historical analysis, do we find it posed again at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Throughout Harald Welzer’s 2005 book on mass murderers we find the question formulated in the naïve language of the 1950s: “How could ordinary family men do such a thing?”<sup>3</sup> Let us put aside the purportedly shocking observation that Adolf Eichmann and Rudolf Höß and others like them were ordinary family men (whatever *ordinary* is supposed to mean). This kind of observation is shocking only because our notion of acceptable behavior for family men has changed. The family structure ensures nothing, as any rational person understands. In attempting to illustrate the iniquity of *Homo sapiens* with hyperbole, Schopenhauer wrote that “many a man would be capable of slaying another, merely to smear his boots

with the victim's fat," though he immediately wondered whether this was in fact an exaggeration.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, such an insight does not require twentieth-century experience. Though Auschwitz was without precedent—Germans were the first to build a city solely for the purpose of murder—we have always known that humans are capable of committing atrocities that leave us speechless. Consider the act of smashing an infant's head against a wall, written about again and again through history. Is this a habit of *Homo sapiens* or a fantasy it habitually projects onto other members of the species? Both, one is tempted to say. Tzvetan Todorov cites an account of the conquistadors that reports of soldiers killing indios just to see whether swords whetted on river stones were sufficiently sharp.<sup>5</sup> "The identity of the massacre victim," Todorov notes, "is by definition irrelevant . . . : one has neither time nor curiosity to know whom one is killing at that moment."<sup>6</sup> Is it inconceivable that such people once bounced children on their knees? We may not be able to imagine it, but we know it has happened. No one seriously believes that murderers return home to their families without first washing the blood from their hands. But shouldn't thoughts of our children prevent us from committing murder to begin with? Welzer points out that such thoughts have indeed gotten in the way of homicidal plans on occasion, but this is not the rule, and when they do cause hesitation they can also be overcome, as history so often teaches.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the thought of loved ones at home is what motivates murder in the first place. Such sentiments were what Major Wilhelm Trapp, the commander of Reserve Police Battalion 101, relied on as he prepared his men for their gruesome mission in the Final Solution.<sup>8</sup> The twentieth century provides a terrifying number of additional examples, but to arrive at this depressing (and, sadly, all-too-unsurprising) knowledge we do not need the history of the twentieth century.

Calling the attempt to murder the entire Jewish population of Europe—the attempt to beat to death or shoot to death or poison every Jew Germans could get their hands on—a "monstrosity without precedent" does not mean that the individual deeds of its perpetrators were without precedent. The agents of the Holocaust were in principle no different from the men of Caesar's cavalry, who, in violation of the human rights prescribed by Roman law—"human rights" may sound anachronistic but the *jus gentium* was exactly that—exterminated the Gallic tribes of the Tencteri and the Usipetes, bludgeoning and drowning men, women, and children alike.<sup>9</sup> The same applies to Communist-era denunciations. What had once occurred only under exceptional circumstances (Sulla's proscriptions, say) or as a paranoid outgrowth of a society permeated by superstition became, under Stalin, the dominant political style *ad absurdum*.<sup>10</sup> This too is without precedent, though not denunciation itself, or the informer who chooses this path. What is without precedent is a system of concentration

camps extending from Germany to Eastern Europe; what is without precedent is the Soviet Gulag. Not without precedent is the camp guard, the seasoned sadist, or the tormentor—people who at some point appear to forget that the heads they are cracking belong to human beings. “Cats scratch; dogs bite; men kill” is how Ruth Klüger put it to me once. There is nothing to be surprised about, nothing to explain. So why does the question asked by Mother Kempowski endure?

The how-on-earth question in the context of “ordinary family men” is revealing precisely because it is patently absurd. It is a screen question, just as Freud spoke of screen memories. The real question, the one behind the screen, is this: how is it possible that murderers became our “ordinary” fathers? The question is tortuous because it necessitates in us an excruciating ambivalence while confronting us with a set of unresolved moral issues (whether they are resolvable at all is another matter). And it continues to do so despite the many real and fictionalized revolutions of 1968 and the innumerable attempts at literary reckoning with our fathers and grandfathers.<sup>11</sup> But here too we must ask what vexes us. Certainly not every son or daughter of a murderous father has been so disturbed by the latter’s deeds as to turn to endless theorizing. This is because the painful ambivalence I speak of is predicated on an essential condition: the existence of a gap between the morality that legitimizes a deed and the morality by which we judge it. The (mercifully small) share of the generation of grandchildren who deny the Holocaust and chant “Glory and honor to the German Wehrmacht” do not know this ambivalence. And it is the exception in places—such as the successor states of the Soviet Union—where mass murder is commonly seen as either committed by others or a necessary corollary of modernization and war for the fatherland.<sup>12</sup>

The question whether the legitimation of a deed later loses its validity is equally pertinent to all twentieth-century horrors, as the cases of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remind us.<sup>13</sup> In Germany the process of delegitimation was particularly thoroughgoing. For this the Nuremberg Trials were a necessary but insufficient condition, a fact demonstrated repeatedly in the following decades, up to and including the controversies of the late 1990s surrounding the exhibition on German Wehrmacht crimes curated by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, a moral rupture with the Nazi era did indeed take place in the years immediately after 1945. The interpretation of Germany’s so-called *Zusammenbruch*, and the conclusions to be drawn therefrom, have generated much controversy since the war. If this were before 1945, when heroizing the sins of the fathers was the norm, Germans would claim that interpretation was the *only* point of controversy. A sign of the moral hiatus between then and now is our rejection of the word *only*.

Something else about the expression *ordinary men* must be addressed: the meaning of *ordinary* vacillates. It can mean “mentally ordinary,” that the men weren’t sadists in the clinical sense, for then they would have continued after 1945 of their own accord.<sup>15</sup> It can also mean “typical of the time,” that the men were not ideological fanatics or brainwashed by propaganda (something that could be said of most on account of their young age). Finally, *ordinary* can mean “someone like you and me.” This is where Protestant humility chimes in and says amen. But skepticism of one’s own moral fortitude is overrated.<sup>16</sup> The gap between past and present morality that enables us to ask uncomfortable questions should also compel us to insist that these *were no ordinary men*, that these men *were not like you and me*, for *that* standard of ordinary is no longer valid. We must acknowledge this fact and cleave to the new (or reclaimed) standard. The answer to the question “How could ordinary men . . . ?” is that the criteria for what is ordinary can change.

But so quickly, so radically? you ask. Here’s a question in return: Which quick and radical change do you mean? The one that began in 1933, or the one that began in 1945? I am inclined to see the latter as more astonishing, and I am inclined to think everyone would agree. Consider Friedrich Schiller’s description, in 1790, of the Thirty Years’ War:

[A] desolating war of thirty years, which, from the interior of Bohemia to the mouth of the Scheldt, and from the banks of the Po to the coasts of the Baltic, devastated whole countries, destroyed harvests, and reduced towns and villages to ashes; which opened a grave for many thousand combatants, and for half a century smothered the glimmering sparks of civilization in Germany, and threw back the improving manners of the country into their pristine barbarity and wildness.<sup>17</sup>

If the Thirty Years’ War resulted in half a century of barbarism, wouldn’t the occurrence, between 1914 and 1945, of a *second* thirty-year war<sup>18</sup>—a war with theaters across the globe, millions of dead soldiers and civilians, millions killed in concentration camps, millions of displaced persons and refugees, unthinkable devastation to cities and countries, and millions inured to death and destruction—naturally lead one to expect an even longer period of cultural and moral decline? By 1944 Theodor Adorno had spotted the parallels between the wars and offered the following prognosis:

Like the Thirty Years’ War, this too—a war whose beginning no one will remember when it comes to an end—falls into discontinuous campaigns separated by empty pauses, the Polish campaign, the Norwegian, the Russian, the Tunisian, the Invasion. Its rhythm, the alternation of jerky action and total standstill . . . has the same

mechanical quality which characterizes individual military instruments. . . . Life has changed into a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralyzed intervals. But nothing, perhaps, is more ominous for the future than the fact that, quite literally, these things will soon be past thinking on, for each trauma of the returning combatants, each shock not inwardly absorbed, is a ferment of future destruction. Karl Kraus was right to call his play *The Last Days of Mankind*. What is being enacted now ought to bear the title: "After Doomsday." . . . [T]he idea that after this war life will continue "normally" or even that culture might be "rebuilt"—as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation—is idiotic. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for? And even if countless people still have time to wait, is it conceivable that what happened in Europe will have no consequences, that the quantity of victims will not be transformed into a new quality of society at large, barbarism? As long as blow is followed by counter-blow, catastrophe is perpetuated. One need only think of revenge for the murdered. If as many of the others are killed, horror will be institutionalized and the pre-capitalist pattern of vendettas, confined from the time immemorial to remote mountainous regions, will be re-introduced in extended form, with whole nations as the subjectless subjects. If, however, the dead are not avenged and mercy is exercised, Fascism will despite everything get away with its victory scot-free, and, having once been shown so easy, will be continued elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Mann came to a similar conclusion. In his diary entries from May 4 and 5, 1945, we read:

The most savage brutality in victory; moaning and appeals to generosity and civility in defeat. / No, [the Germans] are not a great people. Speer asserted on the radio that never has a civilized country been so battered. Germany looks like it did after the Thirty Years' War. . . . Erika read an article to be published in *Liberty* about the punishment of war criminals, which seems like it will fail to happen just as it failed in 1918, unless the Russians decide to make a public example of the Germans. On the other hand, it is not possible to execute a million people without repeating the methods used by the Nazis. Around a million would have to be annihilated.<sup>20</sup>

Both Adorno and Mann emphasized the impossibility of an adequate response to German crimes, and it was on this impossibility that Adorno pinned the expectation of prolonged catastrophe and escalation. It is important to remember that this was a prognosis, not a valuation. One can indeed claim that in the decades after 1945 the situation in Europe was catastrophic, particularly so in Germany, but that would be a moral judgment, and Adorno does not offer

one here. A moral judgment might be directed at the way postwar normality has almost entirely concealed the cataclysm, to the extent that one can live in Germany, or in Europe, without having to think about mass murder and death, all the historical interest and days of remembrance and memorials notwithstanding. About the attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe Hannah Arendt uttered these famous words:

That was the real shock. Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn't a people have enemies? But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened*. . . . [S]omething happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

But what does this mean? No death can be made good, and suffering only rarely. Every murder is, as Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*, a breach in nature. Yet if we follow Hannah Arendt and refuse to place the extermination of Jews in the continuum of war and peace, destruction and reconstruction, barbarization and recivilization, then we must regard the fact that after 1945 (and more rapidly and more thoroughly than after 1918) Germany sought precisely *to make amends for its crimes*—through transfers of money (some shamefully late), through building a stable democracy, through integration with the West, through the condemnation of antisemitism and the Nazi ideology—*as a moral scandal*. Or we must doubt the sincerity of those amends; we must suspect that they are no more than skin deep, that the recivilization of the Germans will last only as long as postwar prosperity, that an economic crisis would undo everything.

But what would be the point? No one today can seriously wish that the catastrophes Adorno predicted in 1944 had in fact occurred. And even were another civilizational cataclysm to befall Germany, scarcely anyone would conclude that it was a result of the previous one, or that the democratic institutions and civil manner of postwar Germans had been a mere phantom, dissipated like vapor in a stiff wind. Though much of what Germany after 1945 did or (more often) did not do has been rightly criticized for its moral failings, we can hardly wish that the country's postwar development (first in West Germany and then, after 1990, in unified Germany) had taken a *completely different tack*. Germans after 1945 did not "restore" Nazi Germany; they institutionalized the basic features of a civic order that before 1933 had existed only in nascent form, which is why the Nazis were able to transform it so easily into a racially defined *Volksgemeinschaft*. In East Germany the socialist idea of a national community

occasionally manifested similar language because both Communist and Nazi movements formed in the struggles of the 1920s and remained committed to the symbols acquired during those years. Once in the Soviet Union's triumphant sphere of power, East Germany followed a mostly unsurprising path. What was surprising was the path taken by the Federal Republic of Germany, at least through the 1960s, when in the wake of the Spiegel Affair and the passing of the Emergency Laws many expected a backslide into dictatorship. And it is this fact—that the prophesied postwar catastrophes did not take place, not the speed at which Germany initiated a genocidal world war with little resistance from its population, nor the massive military retaliation and destruction needed to end it—that shows most forcefully that modernity can coexist with extreme violence and still have, or appear to have, our trust. Yet since we usually direct the how-on-earth question to the years 1933–45, *since we usually ask ourselves how the actual catastrophe was possible instead of considering the vexing question as to why the predicted catastrophes never came*, we appear to think that a loss of trust is the likelier outcome.

But why should modernity's coexistence with mass murder vex us? Haven't we grown accustomed to the idea while reading books such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Modernity and Ambivalence*, works that devote more time to understanding catastrophe than continuity? Theoretical models like these operate on the belief that there is a mystery to be solved. The truth, however, is that *there are no mysteries*, only *mystifications*, either of the contrived kind, such as when we describe something ordinary in an unusual way that causes others to fall into speculation, or of the reflective kind, such as when reality collides with our routines or theories to an extent we can't ignore yet fails to dislodge them, so attached to them have we become. If we fail to grasp the origin of the problem and continue to project mysteries onto the world, the world will continue to look back at us in kind. What is mysterious is not the catastrophe but our ability to integrate it with our lives. *We mystify the catastrophe to deliver normality from the burden of constant vexation.*

In "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915), Sigmund Freud wrote that the violence of the World War—at the time no one knew it would soon become the first of two that century—dashed our hopes that civilization could prevent relapse into barbarism.<sup>22</sup> Primo Levi wrote something similar about Auschwitz: even if Auschwitz does not surpass the human barbarism of past centuries, its special infamy endures because we thought we had put such behavior behind us.<sup>23</sup> This particular form of disillusionment was made possible by the historical optimism that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, and doubtless characterized the nineteenth century and parts of the twentieth, but which in the 1950s ceased to dominate precisely because of

mass disillusionment. Freud wrote that such lessons in disappointment help build our sense of reality. Yet if the feeling of mystery about the twentieth century expressed nothing more than the feeling of disillusionment, the former would have disappeared once the latter gave way to reality, but this was not what happened.

Each century provides its own anthropological lessons. The individual is, to modify Marx's famous formula, the ensemble of his historical conditions—past, present, and future. And the individual is always that which before had seemed impossible—in good as well as in evil. Yet we know how quickly standards can change. What prevents us from simply adding to past lessons yet another?

The form of life we have taken to calling *modernity* not only *ought not* to have been compatible with the occurrence of violent excess in the twentieth century; once it did occur—for nonmysterious, specifiable reasons—modernity at least *ought to have perished* as a result. All culture and cultural criticism after Auschwitz, Adorno wrote, is garbage.<sup>24</sup> This is a moral pronouncement (see above), not an empirical description, and ultimately an expression of the indignity that art and culture failed to diminish our homicidal tendencies. But, as Adorno himself knew well, this objection to art and culture was an objection on paper only; its purpose was to warn us of answering barbarism with self-barbarization.<sup>25</sup> Our persistent trust in modernity despite our knowledge that it is other than we presumed it to be is the subject of this book.