

MODERNITY AS VIOLENCE

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A review of Modernity and the Holocaust by Zygmunt Bauman. Moscow, Europe Publishing House, 2010.

REVIEW

Not only philosophers, but also historians, demographers, and sociologists agreed to call the events of the first half of the twentieth century a catastrophe. However, it was only philosophers who ventured to ask **what was the reason of the catastrophe?** There were two answers given to this question. The first one maintained that the two world wars, which according to many thinkers had brought European states that dominated throughout most of the modern era to the brink of destruction, were a logical outcome of the development of Enlightenment ideals adopted by European countries in the twilight of the Middle ages. In other words, the moral program of the modern age and the Enlightenment ideals it was based on were themselves infected with violence and barbarity.

The second answer stated that European societies had to endure the world wars because they had perverted the ideals and let barbarity overcome civilization, urge it towards violence, and allow it to defeat previous aspirations for social interaction. The only way to get out of the moral and social crisis European civilization found itself would be to return to the Enlightenment ideals of the XVII century.

Ultimately, however, both responses to Europe's experience of the XX century have a degree of incompleteness to them. In order to overcome something, one needs to comprehend and understand how and why it happened, to describe the mechanisms that allowed for the social trauma that



nearly ruined European civilization.

Unfortunately, philosophers got away with only vague explanations, leaving a difficult problem even more obscure.

There were those, however, for whom it was a call of duty to explain distinctly what happened to Europe in the XX century. One of them was Zygmunt Bauman, whose book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, suggests a rather unconventional explanation for why a civilized Europe so unexpectedly sank into a bacchanalia of violence, and why a previously respectable German nation became a criminal state and undertook as a goal the genocide of the Jews.

The unconventionality of Bauman's position, which spawned criticism from both 'left' and 'right' forces, lay in the following and relatively simple thesis: **the social structure of modern society itself provides the basis on which to commit genocide of those**

who have been deemed to be an alien, a stranger, or an outsider.

Applying his thesis to the process of modernization and rationalization in traditional societies, the highest expression of which is bureaucratization, Bauman shows how the dehumanization of societies slowly progressed, and how the stranger, the other, the alien ceased to be perceived as human. Consequently, subsequent actions never threatened to violate the maxim of the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in accordance with which a human being ought only to be treated as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. For if you deprive an outsider of all features that make him a human being, turn him into a number, an element of statistics, you can do with him as you wish. After all, does a number suffer when it is erased?

The dehumanization of a human being forms the basis of all subsequent rationalization, and is what allowed the horrifying crimes of the XX century – the Holocaust, the GULAG, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this sense, a Holocaust-like event could happen again in any society that is presently thought to be democratic. This is a dreadful truth indeed, but to turn a blind eye to it is to risk living through the horrifying experience of the XX century once again. We should be grateful to Zygmunt Bauman for making us discuss this unnerving truth. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant books of the XX century, now translated into many languages including Russian. ■