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A Reflection on the Psycho-Social Conditioning of Mass Crime

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A REFLECTION ON THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL CONDITIONING OF MASS CRIME

1. Introduction

In the following article I would like to present selected phenomena existing in the mental life of an individual, as well as external conditioning that binding together in the “twilight zone” (a term borrowed from Carl Gustav Jung), direct the workings of a person into path contrary to morality, directed against people. The study is not an overall presentation of the issue; it is a reflection on the psycho-social conditioning of the decisions made by the executors and decision-makers responsible for mass crimes, thus of people whose actions have directly or indirectly caused death, handicap, physical and mental suffering of numerous thousands people.

The personal interest in the describes issues will be shortly explained here.

The research on the mental effects of deportation in the depths of the former USSR in World War II commenced by me in 1999 demanded a thorough study of over a hundred CVs of the deported people, often abundant in traumatic experience in the years of the exile. They also evoked the necessity to analyze the works on that subject not only in the area of psychological and psychiatric results of the exile and gulags, but also to study the, experience and fate of people kept in German concentration camps, prisoners of war camps, kept in ghettos or persecuted in any other way. As a result, I have read about the personal experience and living conditions of various people that had been unbelievably hurt because of belonging to a particular nation, ethnic group or profession¹.

The analysis of the victims experience quickly evoked the question about the motivation of the oppressors. What were the psychological mechanisms and social pres-

¹ E. Jackowska, *Psychiczne następstwa deportacji w głąb ZSRR w czasie II wojny światowej. Przyczyny, moderatory, uwarunkowania*, Szczecin 2004.

tures that governed their behaviour? Why did they commence actions that decided about the extermination of numerous human lives? Following questions arose, including the most important one: are people in the twenty first century free from the danger of genocide?

I looked for an answer to the question in diaries and reports prepared by the organizers of the persecutions, the victims, and researchers that had had a direct or indirect (documents) access to the aforementioned groups of people. My research showed that literature on psychology of the oppressors is very limited. A more impressive number of studies deals with the psychological and psychiatric aspects of Nazi crime; thus most of the instances refer to the executioners of mass crimes made by the Nazi.

I will refer in the article to the biggest crimes of the twentieth century committed by representatives of two criminal systems: the Nazi and communists. I found fully substantiated the view of Herling-Grudziński², that communism and the Nazi system are “totalitarian twins”, despite the external difference of living conditions of people in the Nazi system and in communism, both systems were criminal. Describing the psychological mechanisms whose workings can lead to mass crime, an attentive reader will notice that some of them can be found today. Their existence is disturbing, since mass crime repeats itself. As recently as ten years ago we witnessed the end of the war in the area of former Yugoslavia, where tens of thousands civilians were murdered. Chechnya, Afghanistan and the Holy Land shed blood. A few months ago the dictator of Iraq was sentenced for crime against humankind. However, a majority of the actual perpetrators of the crimes of the twentieth and twenty first centuries have remained unpunished.

2. Controversy around the hypothesis on psychiatric conditioning of genocide

The simplest explanation of genocide is the agreement with a hypothesis that such crimes are committed by people diagnosed in three clinic groups: with an active process of mental illness, with distinctly shaped disturbed personality (syn. Psychopathic personality), and people in which the psychotic process is complicated by personality disturbance. From this point of view, the problem slips from psychological analysis, since it is set in psychiatric distortions and their multi factor etiology. Such a hypothesis is difficult to be neglected. Doctors’ opinions revealed in the recent years suggest that the most infamous criminal of the twentieth century – Hitler, suffered from a fast Parkinson disease, as a result of brain inflammation³. All the Nazi tried in Nuremberg were checked in detail by doctors, including psychological and psychiatric study based on longer observation. As a result of the study, it is known that Rudolf Hess – the deputy of Hitler, who was a prisoner of the British since 1941 (after a failed mission of

² G. Herling-Grudziński, *Inny świat*, Kraków 2000.

³ J. Lattimer, *Śmiertelna choroba Hitlera i inne tajemnice nazistowskich przywódców*, Poznań 2000.

persuading the government of Great Britain to make peace with Germany) repeatedly suffered from psychotic states and numerous times was a patient of psychiatric institutions. Moreover, psychogenic amnesia was diagnosed in him, as well as numerous traits of hysterical personality. Beyond any doubt, a diagnosis of disturbed antisocial personality was true about the leader of gestapo – Ernst Kaltenbrunner, or the long-serving minister of internal affairs, Wilhelm Frick⁴, just as was a long lasting addiction of Herman Göring to drugs. On the basis of other documents, unquestionable seems the recognition of antisocial personality of the head of the USSR security net – Lawrentij Beria and Stalin himself⁵.

On the other hand, analyzing the biographies of Nazi criminals and the creators and executioners of the communist system, in a vast majority it is not possible to find any factors pointing at an active process of a mental illness or personality deviation. Striking is also the fact that many of them, being mature executors of thousands of deaths, when younger were not distinct from their peers. An important element of the diagnosis of an antisocial personality, with the recognition of which actions against another person or groups of people are connected, is the early age (before 15 years old) of disturbed behaviour, such as instances of cruelty, deceit, violating the rights of other people, repeated aggression, etc. As far as the criminals tried in Nuremberg, not many fulfilled the criterion⁶. For example Albert Speer, a trusted architect of Hitler, who was charged with merciless usage of forced workers and prisoners of concentration camps when fulfilling his monumental constructions, or Jürgen Stroop, the supervisor of the pacification of Warsaw's ghetto, as well as Karl Dönitz signing the capitulation of Germany after the death of Hitler (the list can be widened) – they all were good students in their youth, posing no educational difficulties, displaying family bonds, and in adult life they formed long lasting emotional relationships. Thus, it can be supposed that the processes of degradation of higher feelings, of losing sensitivity and the ability to moral judgment of their own actions were gradual, yet systematic. The difficult to define submissiveness of personality to the strength of Nazi and communist propaganda, need for power, fulfillment of consecutive tasks of the superiors, constant contact with the leaders of totalitarian systems, a rich system of positive strengthening in form of promotion, prize, material profit, fright of repercussion, etc. Made them increasingly intertwined and prone to criminal behaviour. Psychiatric concepts, which explain genocide by mental disturbance, are thus not enough and must be enriched by other hypotheses. Taken into consideration must be a hypothesis that genocide can be done by individuals without primarily noticed evident instances of disturbed personality, so called "average people", for whom pathology in behaviour grows in years, and it starts when they first cross the border between a deed and judgment or feeling that something

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ A. Bullock, *Hitler i Stalin. Żywoty równoległe*, vol. 1–2, Warszawa 1994.

⁶ J. Lattimer, op.cit.

not in accordance with the system of values and norms has been done. The introduction of personality defense mechanisms in the space of moral conflict constitutes an antidote for the consciously experienced moral fear in the form of guilt.

It seems that a good illustration of such a hypothesis are the events from the history of medicine and interpretations explaining the presence of doctors in mass crime.

The described mechanisms were present not only in the circles of the higher officers of the Nazi and communist systems, but in other social groups, including doctors, as well. I will refer to facts and remind the reader that in 1993 in Germany was signed an “Act on prevention of genetically burdened offspring”, on the basis of which, thousands of people suffering from schizophrenia, affective psychoses, epilepsy and other mental illnesses were sterilized by force. In 1939, before the aggression on Poland, a top secret commission was created in Germany, ordered by Hitler, to exterminate all mentally ill. To its members belonged, among others, famous professors of medicine: Carl Schneider, Paul Nietche and Werner Heyde. The commission gave opinions on lists of patients of mental institutions directed for extermination, as well as designed clues as to the methods of killing⁷.

Leo Alexander – a consultant of the War Secretary of State during the Nuremberg trial, in the columns of *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1949, trying to explain Nazi crime writes: *Notwithstanding the final scope of the crimes, all their researchers concluded that they had quite modest beginnings. It began from an inconspicuous movement of the stress in the basic attitude of doctors to their profession. The point was for them to accept a phenomenon such as life not worth living (my emphasis – EJ). In the beginning, the term was referred to the seriously and chronically ill, gradually, however, the circle of people to whom the term was referred widened and started to include unproductive, ideologically or racially unwanted people, and finally, everyone not German*⁸.

Just after the attack on Poland, in autumn 1939, thus before mass extermination of Jews, there were mass executions of the patients of psychiatric institutions. The documented list with names of the executed ill people in Poland amounts to 7136 names, including 574 children. The estimated number is much higher. It is enough to add that from September 1939 to January 1940, about 1700 patients were taken from the psychiatric hospital in Kocborow to a nearby forest and shot. Children were killed with huge amounts of medicine, the doses and content of which were specified by doctors⁹. Unfortunately, the numbers are not widely known in Poland.

The knowledge about criminal use of medicine in the USSR is very limited. Nevertheless, some facts of using psychiatry for political purposes are disclosed, and not

⁷ *Zagłada chorych psychicznie w Polsce*, (ed.) Z. Jaroszewski, Warszawa 1993, pp. 10–120.

⁸ From: J.C. Dobson, G.L. Bauer, *Dzieci w niebezpieczeństwie*, Warszawa 1997, p. 147.

⁹ *Zagłada chorych psychicznie w Polsce...*

only in the published memories of ex-”patients”¹⁰, but also in academic writings¹¹. In the thirties of the previous century, in the Central Academic Research Institute of Judicial Psychiatry named after W. P. Serbski in Moscow, was created the infamous fourth section, where without any medical justification political prisoners were kept. They were drastically persecuted and applied with dangerous for healthy people pharmacological psychiatric treatment. For tens of years of the existence of communist system (till the year 1986), numerous institutions of closed specialist psychiatric “treatment” were brought to life. The therapy was based on psychotropic medicine and insulin (which causes drastic hypoglycemia that results in drastic somatic and mental symptoms) given to numerous thousands of healthy people – dissidents. “Slowly developing schizophrenia” was the diagnosis that legitimized “treating” the imprisoned in hospitals, under doctors’ supervision. This kind of schizophrenia was described in the course books of USSR psychiatry by renown psychiatric academics, including the generally known in medical society – professor Andrej Snieżniewski. This was another case of justifying crime with the standards of diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill.

It seems to me, that the enumerated actions, doctors constituted a part of, were this border after the crossing of which, the criminal deeds ceased to be the source of moral anxiety for some doctors, and the way to further genocide was open.

3. Personality defense mechanisms

Trying to understand the psychological processes taking part in criminal camp doctors that in concentration camps selected the prisoners to gas chambers or provided lethal injections, Lifton uses the term “doubling”, which must be interpreted as a defense mechanism that belongs to dissociation. By a defense mechanism I understand a habitual, unconscious, or not entirely realized, intra-psychological processes (cognitive distortion) and the manners of behaviour (behavioral acts) that serve to overcome emotional conflicts and fears, and thus simplifying the persistence of the sense of one’s own worth. The mechanism of *dissociation* is based on the decomposition of the structure of personality, on the separation of its particular elements and on elimination of those that pose a danger in a specific situation¹². To link two contradictory functions – healing and killing – becomes possible if the “*I*” structure is separated into two parts each of which constitutes a separate whole. Due to that, a doctor can both cure and kill without the feeling of guilt. The mechanism functioned with the use of – according to Lifton – “visionary idealism”. The Nazi movement attracted people that wanted to heal

¹⁰ W. Bukowski, *Moskiewski proces: dysydent w archiwach Kremla* (translation J. Darczewska), Warszawa 1999.

¹¹ T. Nasierowski, *Psychiatria polityczna do 1951 roku*, “Postępy Psychiatrii i Neurologii” 1996, vol. 5, part 3, pp. 453–470.

¹² S. Siek, *Struktura osobowości*, Warszawa 1986, p. 200; J. Aleksandrowicz, *Nerwice. Psychopatologia i psychoterapia*, Warszawa 1988, p. 165.

the Nordic race in its biological meaning. The path to health led through sterilization, “euthanasia,” and extermination of foreign ethnic groups. The doctors of Auschwitz perceived themselves as doctors that perform a salient technical task: “killing in the name of healing”. Similarly, the USSR doctors, by pharmacological destruction and violent treatment of dissidents, “protected” society against the “enemies of people” and against the danger of “forceful overthrow of the system”. When accepting such ideology, it was also possible to activate the mechanism of *rationalization*, which is fulfilled in an unconscious tendency to find rational explanation for a behaviour that is contrary to someone’s own system of values¹³.

Remaining with the subject of personality defense, numerous defense mechanisms should be discussed, an intense development of which is stimulated by the weakness of *ego* and by external pressure. I will analyze them, with reference, of course, not only to the doctors profession.

A structure that was unusually strongly reflected in the behaviour of Nazi and communist criminals was the dependence on authorities and obedience towards the supervisors. This is not merely about the kind of obedience that is the result of professional dependence. Here is meant the renouncement of the right to an individual’s autonomy, a total devotion to the leader or a group of leaders considered to be gods. Such phenomenon is widely present in psychotherapy of people, e.g. of sects addicts.

It seems justified to discuss the dependence on authority as to Nazi and communist criminals in the area of defense mechanisms of *identification* and *idealization*. The identification mechanism, defined by Laughlin¹⁴, is an unconscious process of becoming similar to other people, applying their behaviour and value system, which in the case of the discussed subject means unquestionable acceptance of the ideology and operations of the Nazi and communist systems. The mechanism of idealization is based on unconscious loss of criticism in the perception of the idealized person, and thus devoting to the person’s influence and demands seems natural, almost automatic. The mechanisms of identification and idealization liberate an individual from the sense of responsibility for their deeds. It is possible to do evil, fulfill aggressive impulses, to gain profit from following criminal orders (promotion, material profit) and simultaneously to preserve the feeling of one’s own worth formed by the consciousness of “doing one’s duty”. The stronger the idealization of leaders, the easier is to endow them with the right to decide about our behaviour.

Here, I would like to refer to the thought of Fromm, who in the “escape from freedom” saw the mechanism of fear reduction and searching for happiness¹⁵. The ruminations of Obuchowski on “people of a role” can be also mentioned, which are characterized by the author as “fully subjected, reduced to the world in which they are given

¹³ S. Siek, op.cit., p. 195.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 165.

¹⁵ E. Fromm, *Ucieczka od wolności*, Warszawa 1978.

a role¹⁶. As a result of the lack of differentiation between *subject I* and *intentional I*, they have neither any distance to the outside world, nor psychological distance to themselves.

The idealization of a leader was unusually strongly perceived in the personality of Joachim Ribbentrop – the minister of external affairs of the Third Reich, and of Hans Frank – the Governor of the General Govern. Ribbentrop¹⁷, confided in a psychiatrist that examined him as a result of the Nuremberg Trial: *I could directly feel his (Hitler's – ref. EJ) irresistible power. Though it was his fault that I was sent to prison, if Hitler came in here now, I would instantly do anything he would demand me to, not thinking about the consequence.* He also confirmed that just before the end of the Third Reich he wired Hitler with a request to let him die together.

Strong idealization, typical for a fragile *ego*, usually accompanies the following devaluation. Frank's life history clearly illustrates the phenomenon. In Frank's "Diary", in an entry from 1944, a fragment suggesting worship and cult of Hitler can be found: *And if a parish-priest came and wanted to give us final blessing, we would say: dear friend, forget about the stories about Christ; we have directly witnessed the Herald of faith*¹⁸. A year later, during the Nuremberg Trial, Frank writes:

*Hitler was an evil messenger of Satan*¹⁹.

Submissiveness toward authority, understood only with a defect in the development of *ego*, was a factor motivating the behaviour of Stroop – an executioner of a few tens of thousands Jews from Warsaw's Ghetto. Stroop, accused of persecution and murder of Polish people, leading the action of the extermination of Warsaw's Ghetto and of crimes committed in the Ukraine and other countries, was proving during the trial that he had to meticulously follow the orders of his leaders. Among others, he said: *I hadn't thought about it. I just followed an order*²⁰.

Following the characteristic of doctor Lattimer, the ability to blind obedience of the highest in military rank in Germany Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel was unheard of: *When he was asked, how could officers and men of honour perpetrate the horrible orders of Hitler, he would invariably answer, «We can only receive orders and follow them. It is difficult for Americans to understand the Prussian drill»*²¹.

Isolation is a mechanism that comes into being in circumstances of huge emotional burden, and it is based on separation emotional experience from the events with which they are usually connected. Lack of sympathy, indifference to requests for relief

¹⁶ K. Obuchowski, *Osobowość wobec zmian cywilizacji, czyli o ludziach roli, uczenia się i autorach siebie* [in:] K. Wenta, E. Perzycka (eds.), *Diagnoza psychologiczno-pedagogiczna wobec zagrożeń transformacyjnych*, Szczecin 2003, p. 69.

¹⁷ J. Lattimer, op.cit., p. 249.

¹⁸ S. Piotrowski, *Dziennik Hansa Franka*, Warszawa 1956, p. 522.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 161.

²⁰ K. Moczarski, *Rozmowy z katem*, Warszawa 1998, p. 391.

²¹ J. Lattimer, op.cit., p. 223.

from the exhausted, dying prisoners, including little children, becomes possible when the perpetrator or observer turns off the emotional sphere. In the memories of numerous persecuted people appears an opinion that the oppressors were characterized by coldness and indifference. Describing the meeting with Stalin, 3. Dec 1941, General Anders noted: ...*Yet, foremost impression is made by the eyes: black, dull and cold. Even when he laughs, his eyes never do*²².

Studying the psychological pictures of the Nazi tried by the Nuremberg Tribunal (Lattimer 2000)²³, I noticed that they are presented as very active, totally devoted to the following of their professional duties, precise in writing reports and public speeches, involved in various organization jobs, busy with intense social life, multiplying their money, further education, etc. It could be assumed, that by filling their time with work and entertainment, they drowned inside the reflection on the tragic for humanity outcomes of the escalation of military actioin of the Third Reich, of which they were the authors. *A selective lack of attention* is another defense mechanism typical for the wrongdoers. It is expressed in an unconscious tendency to deal with various issues not to deal with the cause of fear (especially moral fear) or other negative feelings²⁴.

4. The primitive world of desires

Kazimierz Obuchowski²⁵ distinguishes desires from needs. Needs refer to what is necessary for a man. Desires and appetites may reach further than real human needs. It is also essential that satisfying desires, a man can hurt himself and others.

In consecutive life stories of Nazi and communist dignitaries, an uninhibited desire for wealth is clearly seen. A pompous lifestyle, abuse in using the professional status in their own businesses, theft of public and private wealth on the occupied territories, accepting expensive gifts, as well as making use of legally unjustified facilities in private deals, all the above added to the creation of enormous fortunes that not only insured the luxurious existence of their families – wives and children, but other related people, as well. The biographer of Goringa writes: *he continually enlarged his palace, converting it into a gallery of the stolen works of art*²⁶.

In another biography it can be read: *Charles Lasch, the Governor of the Lvov District (Galicia) purchased for himself by a substituted person numerous carpets and works of art in the Netherlands and in France. Moreover, he used the right to confiscate that district governors had to collect in his villa unbelievable numbers of carpets, works of art, coffee, etc.*²⁷

²² W. Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału*, London 1973, p. 104.

²³ J. Lattimer, op.cit.

²⁴ S. Siek, op.cit., p. 200.

²⁵ K. Obuchowski, *Przez galaktykę potrzeb. Psychologia dążeń ludzkich*, Warszawa 1995, p. 13.

²⁶ J. Lattimer, op.cit., p. 88.

²⁷ S. Piotrowski, op.cit., p. 21.

Even the disclosure of Stalin's crime did not change the nomenclature status of the close collaborators of Stalin remaining alive after his death. In the documentary writers' words, the greedy and bribery group of nomenclature notables continued to steal from the poorer and poorer country, not resigning from life in luxury²⁸.

A conclusion can be drawn that the desire to become richer constituted an apparently strong impulse that strengthened the motivation to reflection-less following of the tasks given by supervisors.

It must be added here that both Nazi and communist systems kept their executives in the feeling of constant threat. Herling-Grudziński, among the factors conditioning the support for communism enumerates: *fear of terror, of prison, of persecution* as the first²⁹. The feeling of threat generates hatred and desire for revenge towards people that are found responsible for the threat. If the actual perpetrators of the threat are beyond reach, the hatred towards the hurt victims is strengthened³⁰.

The dramatic falls of the careers of the entrusted collaborators of Stalin or Hitler suspected of disloyalty also constituted an encouragement to the "here-and-now" life-style³¹. They supported the hedonist values, following the *carpe diem* rule in fear of a sudden end to the period of prosperity. The pursuit of wealth, licentious lifestyle distracted attention from the evaluation of actions and was an example of the above mentioned defense mechanism of selective lack of attention.

5. External influence – stereotypes, prejudice and dehumanization

In the sphere of cognitive processes of the oppressors there are prejudices and stereotypes that play an important role in lowering the resistance against acting aggressively. The creation of prejudice and stereotypes in totalitarian systems has always been controlled by planned propaganda.

Both the ideology of national socialism and USSR communism used systematic, importunate propaganda. Propaganda messages popularized the view of categorization of people into "ours" and those who constituted "them". The "pure" as far as race is concerned Germans, especially the members of NSDAP, were "ours". The "others" were Jewish people, Slavs – especially Poles. Gypsies and many other nations. In soviet communism, "our" groups were divided from "other" groups by social background, political CV, party and ethnic membership. According to social psychologists³², when categorizing groups into "ours" and "others", there is a phenomenon of biased perception of the members of "ours" group as "better" (it is about various features, biological, mental,

²⁸ A. Bullock, op.cit.

²⁹ G. Herling-Grudziński, op.cit., p. 324.

³⁰ E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, R.M. Akert, *Psychologia społeczna. Serce i umysł*, Poznań 1997, p. 525.

³¹ K. Obuchowski, *Przez galaktykę potrzeb...*

³² E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, R.M. Akert, op.cit., pp. 548–555.

character, etc.), and identification with this community is a confirmation of one's worth, higher social status, thus contributing to higher self-esteem, which is especially important for people who experience some lack in this sphere. Apart from biased perception, there is also a phenomenon of homogenization, i.e. perceiving the "others" as unvaried, considerably similar, yet totally different than "our" group. An important distinguishing factor of the "others" is either hidden or exposed hostility towards "ours". A stereotype comes into being that reflects the – incomplete, univocal, negative and threatening the existence of "ours" – portrayal of members of the "others". In truth, an important psychological source of prejudice and stereotypes are self-esteem conflicts and hidden fear.

A painful for us example of a stereotype used by the Nazi was the term "Polish bandits" as to the heroes of the Warsaw Uprising. The same term was used by the Soviets after the annexation of Poland on 17 Sep 1939 meaning the heroic Polish army defending Poland against Soviet invasion on Polish cities, e.g. Grodno.

Stereotypes and prejudice generate direct and indirect aggressive behaviour, the most common nowadays example of which are fights of the fans of two competing football teams. Stereotypes-prejudice formed in such a way that function in people with authority trigger repressive orders and instructions. By devaluating the oppressed person the cognitive dissonance that appears as a natural consequence of deeds contrary to morality is eliminated. A fragment from the diaries of the manager of the General Govern, Hans Frank, illustrates the presented mechanism:

More often than not I walk along the streets of Cracow... and I observe the shameless behaviour of some Poles towards soldiers and officers and I am overwhelmed with enormous indignation. Our privates are too polite, our officers are too well educated. Our decent civilians – Germans are unfortunately led here by a feeling of somewhat pity, or are indifferent towards them. I must admit that I sometimes wonder if I should initiate a special action and introduce a specific penitentiary code against the Poles that do not give way to German officers or nudge them on purpose...³³

And a second fragment: *substantially, we want to keep pity only for the German nation, apart from that for no one in the world³⁴.*

Another stereotype of a *Pole-master*, that takes advantage of a poor peasant, *greedy for free bread in USSR* was an impulse to motivate the members of NKWD that escorted the civilians sent into the depths of USSR and the commandants of camps in the locations of the exile to treat the deported people unmercifully, a vast majority of which were women and children³⁵.

An extreme example of prejudice is the process of dehumanization, during which the victim is subjected, devoid of human features, practically tossed outside the circle

³³ S. Piotrowski, op.cit., p. 448.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 449.

³⁵ E. Jackowska, op.cit.

of humanity. The cases of subjecting people have been present many years after the end of World War II. An example of the subjecting was the widely used in the dictionary of American soldiers, in the years of fighting in Vietnam, term “gook” that devoid the Vietnamese of such features as age, sex, ethnic origin, etc. The oppressor does not identify with a subjected victim. The processes of empathy are eliminated, thus it is easier to kill. A tragic consequence of mass victim dehumanization was the butchery done in 1968 by American soldiers on civilians – women, children and old people in My Lai village in Vietnam³⁶.

Here, I will indulge myself with a digression and I will express my personal conviction that the term “terrorist”, so widely used in the media nowadays, is the most recent example of dehumanization. A terrorist is not a feeling person, one that has beliefs, is a part of a community. A terrorist is an object that must be destroyed.

As I mention before, an important influence on the consolidation of cognitive distortions in form of stereotypes or prejudice comes from propaganda.

In literature can be found detailed descriptions of the rules and techniques of listeners’ and participants’ of mass meetings manipulation used by the Nazi and communists. Both the leaders of the communist party – Stalin and Lenin – and Hitler were the authors of widely spread, published in hundreds thousands copies works, fragments of which were used as propaganda material put on posters, broadcast by radio, and repeated on political meetings. Goebbels propaganda, apart from the spoken and written word, used also myth, ritual and ceremony. Professionally directed, monumental performances arose emotions, imprinted in consciousness and subconsciousness the Nazi ideology. In both systems, tens of thousands of the national-socialist party and communist party members, so called delegates, were sent to factories, schools, universities with an objective to popularize the ideas of their supervisors. In such a way, another mechanism of social influence was triggered – conformism towards the rules and norms popularized by the followers of the system. The conformist attitude allowed numerous “average” people to feel a part of a group and protection against social rejection. Conformism, breaking the borders of moral resistance, required real or artificial acceptance of the social rules that offended rights.

6. Conclusion

In the given study, I have tried to point at the personality mechanisms and social conditioning mechanisms that contribute to the rise of aggressive behaviour, and in some conditions, in people with weakly developed *ego* structure, they can unleash impulses to destructive actions on a wide scale directed against the victims considered “unworthy of surviving”. Both the Nazi and communist systems gave full social acceptance to fulfill the hostile impulses. With the lack of empathy, poor reflectiveness, the conform-

³⁶ E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, R.M. Akert, op.cit., pp. 267–268.

ist attitudes formed by propaganda, liability to the development of personality defense mechanisms that distort the view of the world and oneself, or active involvement and making decisions about mass murder of the groups that “threaten social order” were all easy to “justify”.

Concluding the analysis, I would like to emphasize that a perpetrator of mass crime can grow up in an average family and show no signs of demoralization before reaching adulthood. The individual personality mechanisms described above can be found in so called average people that during their lifetimes do not turn to crime. However, some of them cross the border behind which it is possible to commit crime. Then, when the malicious personality structures overlap, and an individual entangles into connections, submits to pressure typical for totalitarian systems, learns to gain profit from being available at all times to their supervisors and accepts the ideology of such a system – every action against people can be classified as a means of reaching “higher aims”.

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