

'Empire of Destruction' podcast transcript

Speakers:

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TH: Welcome to this podcast. I'm Tom Howard from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. We're very privileged today to have Dr Alex Kay who has written a really amazing, profound, interesting book, 'Empire of Destruction'. Alex is Senior Lecturer at the Chair of Military History / Cultural History of Violence at the University of Potsdam. Alex is, however, not a military historian, as you might assume from the title; he is widely recognised as a leading scholar on the Third Reich and German history and has published especially on areas such as the genocide of Soviet Jewry and the Hunger Plan. So Alex, it's wonderful to have you here. Thank you so much for spending the time with us in this podcast. Before we can start, just to kind of frame it a little bit: this podcast is aimed in particular at teachers, the sorts of teachers we work with here at the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, which is with teachers all around the country in England. And there are four things as we talk to Alex about his work and his book to just bear in mind. One is to do with the importance of teaching about victim groups and about their experiences that aren't always seen as being part of the Holocaust, per se. We teach, and we strongly believe, that these are really important stories that need to be told. And we actually do this in some of our sessions. So it's really wonderful that Alex has obviously worked particularly in this area. We also think in terms of teachers in secondary schools in England, many of you will be working with how we treat sources and using evidence, particularly GCSE exams require that and a lot of it happens in Key Stage Three as well. So we'll ask Alex a little about his work here, maybe at a higher level than GCSE, about his experience with working with sources on his book. Now, obviously, this podcast is also part of a series of bringing the latest academic research into the classroom. So there could be no better example of this than Alex's book, which is only recently published. And also reflecting on what this history might mean for us in the present. So kind of why, why study this history? What does it mean to us? How does it speak to us today? So without any further ado, welcome, Alex. And I'm going to ask you, my first question is really aimed at teachers that may not have read your book yet, if they haven't read your book, they need to go and get it because I've read it and it's amazing. If they haven't read it, can you just give us a little flavour about some of the key themes that you talk about in your book, and also what motivated you to write it? What kind of compelled you to put all this down in this format?

AK: Thank you, Tom. And I'd like to start by thanking you for the very kind invitation to record this podcast with you and the very flattering introduction there. Yes, I think there's one main reason why I decided to write this book. And that is, perhaps surprisingly given the number of works written on the subject, this is the first time that a single book addresses all major victim groups of Nazi mass killing together, namely, the mentally and physically disabled within Germany, and later in the occupied territories; the Polish ruling classes and elites; Jews, of course, across the length and breadth of Europe; captive and unarmed Red Army soldiers; the Soviet urban population; those civilians in primarily rural areas who fell victim to preventive terror and reprisals, especially in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Greece and Poland; and Europe's rural populations. And taken together, the Nazis killed approximately 13 million civilians and other non-combatants in deliberate policies of mass murder,

almost all of them during the war years of 1939 to '45. And indeed the vast majority between mid-1941 and spring '45, so in the space of only four years. And for all the differences in the nature of the victims I've just listed, they had something fundamental in common. It's no coincidence that all these seven major killing programmes took place during the war years. The commonality shared by the different victim groups is closely related, I argue, to the military conflict itself. And while each of the killing programmes possessed a racial component, of course, the logic of war was central to the rationale for targeting each and every one of the victim groups because they were regarded by the Nazi regime at the end of the day, in one way or another, as a potential threat to Germany's ability to fight and, ultimately, win a war for domination in Europe. And I think when one hears the subtitle 'A History of Nazi Mass Killing', many will think first and foremost about the gas chambers. And you asked me, part of your question was, you know, what key things has my research revealed? And I think one of them is, is that our notion of industrial, modern Nazi mass murder is somewhat misleading, given that half of the murdered Jews were not gassed, three of the five main extermination camps did not possess crematoria, some of these complexes consisted for the most part of wooden buildings, and the crematoria in Auschwitz, for example, were often out of order due to their sloppy construction. Furthermore, new technologies or operational procedures for murder introduced at one of the killing centres did not necessarily lead to a change at the others. So looking at all those murdered by the Nazi regime, Jews and non-Jews alike, one thing that my research revealed is that starvation accounted for the most deaths, then shooting, and only then gassing. Substantial numbers of disabled people, Jews, Roma and Soviet prisoners of war fell victim to each of these three methods. And, in addition to these three principal means of killing, numerous other victims were stabbed or beaten to death, drowned, hanged, burned alive or given lethal injections. So what this means is that the majority of the Nazis' victims were murdered using what you might refer to as traditional techniques, and frequently often at close range, with direct interaction between perpetrator and victim. So, it's been said before, but my book I think vividly illustrates that our idea of impersonal, industrialised, production-line mass murder by the Nazis is only half the story.

TH: Lovely, thank you so much, Alex. Which kind of leads into the next question, which I think you partly answered, which is to do with how our research challenges, or how your research rather challenges our thinking of the victims and oppression of groups, particularly also those groups that are not part of the Holocaust, and you mentioned a slew of them there, the major victim groups. So one thing that struck me reading your book was the kind of seminal place that you put the First World War in, and the context of the First World War in informing these events, and what happens. That is one of the things I kind of took away from reading your book. Is there anything else? Or you can either expand on that a bit, or is there anything else that, as you kind of wrote it, challenges our thinking about the victims of oppression at this time who were not Jews in particular?

AK: Yeah, of course the Holocaust was not carried out in isolation. I think we have to keep that in mind. Many of the killing operations occurred concurrently, and indeed worked on parallel lines, not only when it came to the ways in which the victims were murdered, as I mentioned, but also in terms of the perpetrators, who were spread across a number of state and Nazi Party institutions. Some of these organisations were involved in several programmes of annihilation, often simultaneously. So just to give two or three examples. The Chancellery of the Fuehrer, for instance, provided personnel for both the murder of psychiatric patients and the gassing of Polish Jews during Operation Reinhardt, the murder of Poland's Jews. The SS and police played a central role in the mass murder of Roma, psychiatric patients and Jews in the occupied territories. And the Wehrmacht, the German armed forces, participated directly in the elimination of Polish elites, the genocides of

Serbian and Soviet Jewry and of Roma, the starvation of captured Red Army soldiers and the Soviet urban population, and also the brutal anti-partisan operations in Eastern and Southeast Europe. And, in fact, viewing the entire range of Nazi mass-killing programmes, members of the Wehrmacht may in fact have constituted the majority of those responsible for large-scale crimes carried out on the part of the German Reich. So that means that alongside the Jewish victims of Nazi killing operations, you have a huge number of non-Jewish victims, and therefore, there is no monocausal explanation or single explanatory model for the actions of the perpetrators. The answer we seek can be found only in the interaction of several factors converging in specific historical circumstances. The conduct of the Holocaust perpetrators, for instance, cannot be explained in terms of their ideology alone, and yet cannot be understood without it because anti-Semitism provided at all times a general absolution for their actions. However, more than half of the victims of deliberate Nazi policies of mass murder were not Jewish. Anti-Semitism as a motivating factor cannot explain why German and Austrian perpetrators massacred Belarusian villagers, starved German psychiatric patients or gassed Austrian Roma. However, anti-Semitism was only one, albeit central, component of Nazi ideology; radical ethnic nationalism and biological racism were also a key elements. And I think they are indispensable for explaining Nazi atrocities against non-Jewish victims. And these profound ideological convictions were not held by a few fanatics, but by hundreds of thousands of people at the same time. And these people came not only from elite Nazi organisations such as the SS, but also in substantial numbers from the Wehrmacht, which with a total of 18 million members between 1935 and 1945, constituted effectively a cross section of the German male population at the time. So that means that very many perpetrators came not from the fringes, but from the heart of German society. And the prevalence of these radical ideological convictions during the years in question, point to a shared and defining historical context. The perpetrators were less ordinary men, to refer to Christopher Browning's famous book, than ordinary Germans during an extraordinary time in German history. So I think that this, the unity of and three-way interplay between the shared national trauma of 1918, by which I mean what you refer to Tom – defeat in the First World War, and its tumultuous aftermath – ideological radicalisation and sanctioning from above are crucial to understanding the actions of the Nazi perpetrators against Holocaust and non-Holocaust victims alike.

TH: Oh, that's really helpful. Thank you, Alex. So I think two things you highlight there that we teach much about is understanding this history in context. And I think, as you've kind of spoken to us, there's a strong sense of that. And also there aren't monocausal explanations for this history, and that we're looking at, you've explained really clearly, some multi-causal factors that try and help us understand. So thank you so much. One thing that we do, so as a Centre in our programmes, working with teachers, we use a lot of individual narratives or case studies of particular events and consider the kind of questions they throw up, or whether they're illustrative of something or anomalies, or that they have particular resonance in some way. Now, I know, having read your book, that there is a vast array of instances, case studies, events, of people that you kind of mentioned, and it seems slightly, not churlish, to ask you to pick out maybe one or a couple that maybe stick in your mind. But I'm going to ask you to do that. Is there something you would mind sharing with us that, as you were maybe sort of writing about it or finding out about, you thought, actually, this has some particular resonance in some way?

AK: Yeah, thank you, Tom. That's an interesting question. And I think there are actually two in particular that spring to mind of all the individual fates and the individual narratives that are discussed in the book, there are two that spring to mind. And one of them is the case of Josef Perl. He was an adolescent Jew from Czechoslovakia, who witnessed the shooting of his mother and four sisters in late 1941, at the age of 10. But, living on his wits, somehow managed to survive

multiple ghettos and concentration camps and eventually reunite with his father some 20 years after the war. And he was actually with his mother and sisters at the time of their murder, at the time of their shooting, and he was himself next in line to be shot when there was an air raid. And he was able to escape the shooting site during the chaos that ensued. And in 1988 he gave an extensive audio interview, which is now part of the Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust oral history collection at the British Library Sound Archive. And, in my book, I quote at length from the passages where he describes the murder of his mother and sisters and his subsequent escape. And, for me, the most striking aspect of Josef Perl's remarkable testimony is perhaps his recollection, almost 50 years after the events in question, of his sensory experiences when confronted with imminent death. He talks of the instinctive feeling of danger, the smell of earth, the sight of what he described as boiling lime in the mass graves, the absence of pain when his mother and four sisters were shot, and the mechanical functioning of his body. Now, on the one hand, it's tempting to question how reliable Josef Perl's memories could have been almost 50 years after the fact. But on the other hand, he was able to recall the most minute details, which had evidently burned themselves into his brain. So that's really stayed with me. And I think it's a fascinating testimony. And another one, if I might be permitted to mention a second, is that of Yura Ryabinkin, a 16-year-old Russian boy who lived with his mother and sister in the besieged city of Leningrad. He started keeping a diary on the day of the German invasion, June 22nd, 1941. And his heart-breaking struggle between hunger and conscience pervades his uncommonly candid diary entries, particularly for a 16 year old, throughout November and December 1941. And he starved to death early the following year. And that's another testimony that I use quite extensively in the book.

TH: Lovely. Thank you, Alex. I think at one point in the book, I think it's towards the beginning, you talk about the fact that you feel a moral obligation to the victims to tell their stories. And I know you're just briefly summarising here, but certainly in the book with Josef Perl, you go into a lot more detail, and I kind of invite again people, if you want to read more about that, then definitely buy the book. Thank you. Two last questions. One is thinking about... so, so students that we work with, do a lot of work with sources and grappling with them, trying to work out in what ways they're helpful, or in what ways they're problematic? Would you mind just sharing with us, what sources... so I know you mentioned the British Library oral archive, but what kind of sources did you go to, to write your book? And was there anything that you found particularly interesting or helpful or problematic with any of those?

AK: Thank you, Tom. Yeah, this is obviously a key challenge facing anyone attempting to write a book of this nature. And added to that or compounding that fact is the situation that some of these victim groups, especially Soviet prisoners of war and the disabled outside of the borders of the Reich, have so far been the subject of only limited research in English. So for some of them, for some of these victim groups, the majority of the works I consulted were in German. And in other cases, crucial publications were only available in Polish or Russian, so I had to cast the net quite wide. Now, the book has a stronger focus on survivor and other victim testimony than my previous works, and there are some magnificent resources available, for example, the aforementioned Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust oral history collection at the British Library Sound Archive, but also I could name two or three other examples: the testimonies held at the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Laxton, the Chronicles of Terror testimony database at the Pilecki Institute in Warsaw, or the more well-known Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and also the German Russian Museum in Berlin has recently acquired an extensive collection of letters by former Soviet POWs. And in addition to drawing from these collections, I also made use of multiple published and unpublished letters and diaries by mainly Soviet, Polish and German civilians and officials. So this results in the inclusion of often little-known and, in many cases, incredibly powerful victim and survivor testimony

being quite a prominent feature of the book. And I just gave two examples with Josef Perl and Yura Ryabinkin. Now, of course, in terms of challenges facing the historian in using these sources, survivor and other victim testimony can be very subjective, but I would argue that the same applies to perpetrator testimony. And what the former does is give us an insight into how the victims experienced events either while they were happening or subsequently, and no other type of source gives us that. And for me, personally, working on the book was also a challenge because there were of course times when I found it emotionally hard to write, in particular when it came to the suffering of children and adolescents. And I think the mass murder of children is arguably the most salient feature of National Socialist atrocities. And, you know, for good reason, I highlighted Josef Perl and Yura Ryabinkin. Yura's diary in particular, still somehow refuses to relinquish its hold on me. And as you mentioned, Tom, I do include a word of warning at the end of the introduction to the book, saying some readers may find this work harrowing to read. Now, this might appear to be a rather banal or unnecessary statement to make about a book with the subtitle 'A History of Nazi Mass Killing'. It's true, however, that I haven't shied away from presenting these events in quite graphic detail, but my purpose there is not to shock or sensationalise. On the contrary, writing a sanitised version of these events would only succeed in making them appear more abstract, in my view, and realism and accuracy would be sacrificed in favour of palatability. So, as you say, I do feel there's a moral obligation to the victims to tell the story as faithfully as possible. And maybe my extensive use of testimony from survivors and other victims goes some small way towards giving them a voice and treating them as individual human beings rather than as statistics.

TH: Definitely, definitely. Thank you. Thank you, Alex, for sharing that with us. Finally, for teachers listening to this, or the general public, some people might wonder, what has this got to do with us today? Why should we... Why should we know about this history? So particularly, maybe for young people that we work with. So these are people, young people from ages of 11 up to 18, studying history at various levels, why should they know about this history? So, if they asked you, sorry, a slightly blunt, clunky question, but why, what, how does it speak to us today? What do you think, Alex?

AK: I think that's a really good question, Tom, because of course, it is, first and foremost, a history book. It's about events that took place in the past, but I do strongly believe that this history should act as a warning. There are still many lessons to be learned from it. And I would like to perhaps highlight two of those. First, the largely internalised convictions of most Nazi perpetrators established a fundamental and deep-rooted loyalty to the Nazi state and in turn to their comrades that went beyond conventional group conformity and peer pressure. And this was heightened in wartime, during deployment on the front line and in the rear areas. And Sebastian Haffner, who was one of the most perceptive contemporary commentators on National Socialism, wrote a youth memoir – which I highly recommend if someone out there wants to approach this subject, and wants a starting place, one book, then I would recommend Sebastian Haffner's youth memoir – and it ends with an account of his own experiences in autumn 1933 in a camp for legal trainees, and Haffner, interestingly enough, explicitly denounces comradeship as an engine of moral decay, a poison, as he terms it. So if I could just quote briefly from his book, because I think it's very effective in illustrating the dangers of comradeship, as he saw it, and he said 'this comradeship can become one of the most terrible means of dehumanisation and has become so in the hands of the Nazis. The fact that it makes one happy for a while does not in the least change that. It corrupts and depraves a person like no alcohol or opium can. It makes humans incapable of leading an independent, responsible, civilised life. In fact, it is actually a means of de-civilization. To begin with the central feature: comradeship completely removes the feeling of personal responsibility. The person who lives in comradeship is relieved of any concern for his existence, any hardship in the struggle for

survival. It is even worse that comradeship relieves a person of responsibility for himself, before God and one's conscience. He does what everyone does, he has no choice. He has no time to think. His comrades are his conscience and they give absolution for everything, provided he does what everyone else does.' And the fact of the matter is, very few Nazi perpetrators were able or willing to remove themselves from this community of comrades which Haffner described. And, of course, it's not enough to obliterate feelings of personal responsibility for people to commit atrocities. Yes, the Nazi perpetrators knew that the state gave them absolution for what they did. More than this, however, their shared trauma, resentments and ideological convictions convinced them that *they* were victims and therefore justified in what they were doing, righting, as they saw it, a past wrong. And, as Haffner recognised, there is no community-building without boundaries, without the Other. The group needs the Other in order to become a community. And the sociologist Albert Cohen observed that nothing unites the members of a group like a common enemy, although this was ancient wisdom already in Aristotle's day. So that would be the first warning that I would highlight. And second, people can commit terrible atrocities when they believe they've been wronged. And, like most perpetrators of genocide and mass killing, the Nazis were not only convinced that they were victims, but also that what they were doing was right and necessary. They believed it was necessary in order to rectify what had gone wrong in 1918 and, in the new war, to avoid a repetition thereof. Germany's defeat in the First World War, and the loss not only of its colonies, but also of Reich territory in the north, the east and the west spawned what I refer to as an individual and collective inferiority complex in German society, which was characterised by resentment, pettiness and a strong yearning for status and affirmation – all characteristics of the future Nazi perpetrators. And, in the words of Haffner once more, the war years later became the positive underlying vision of Nazism. So the two lessons are, to sum up, first, beware the effects of community-building; comradeship completely removes feelings of personal responsibility and requires the identification of a common enemy. So it has not just positive aspects, which I think should be clear, but also negative aspects. And second, people can commit terrible atrocities when they believe they've been wronged, and therefore feel justified in taking radical action. And I think these two lessons are kind of timeless, they don't just apply to the Nazi era, but also to today's world.

TH: Definitely, Alex, thank you so much. So I'd just like to conclude by saying again if you... I think I've said it already, but if you haven't bought the book go out and buy the book 'Empire of Destruction.' It's a fascinating read, very compelling. Thank you, Alex, for sharing your thoughts with us today, very profound, and particularly that last one really got me thinking in ways that I hadn't thought before about comradeship and the, the factors that kind of, kind of come out of that and the implications of that. So thank you so much for that. Thank you everyone, as well, for tuning in and listening. And I look forward to meeting you again when we do our next podcast but for the moment, thank you so much, Alex and everyone else, and it's bye from me. Bye.