On Shame, Rage, and the Middle Eastern Conflict

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Abstract

In his article “On Shame, Rage and the Middle Eastern Conflict,” Richard Rubenstein examines the genesis of the feelings of humiliation and defeat that led Adolf Hitler and his supporters to an unwarranted blaming of Jews for Germany’s defeat in World War I. This transference of blame culminated in the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. Dr. Rubenstein uses this as a context to provide insights into the emergence of Arab animosity towards Israel and the United States following the 1948 Israeli War of Independence and the Six Day War of 1967.

Although much has been written about the role of economics in international affairs, little has been written about the role of shame and rage in the relations between nations. This is unfortunate because of the role these related emotions have played in the wars of the twentieth century and could play in the twenty-first century.

Rage itself has been characterized as a “shame-based expression of anger.” To experience shame, a person must compare his actions with some standard, either his own or another’s, and must regard himself as having failed to meet that standard. Shame is thus the product of the very self that it condemns. Rage has also been understood as “anger out of control.” Frequently, this kind of anger is related to “a perceived loss of control over factors affecting our integrity—our beliefs and how we feel about ourselves.” Put differently, rage is a response to the subject’s perception of his/her own impotence.

Guilt is different. Like shame, it involves recognition of the fact that I have violated a standard, but, unlike shame, guilt focuses on those undesirable actions I seek to end and for which I would make amends. By contrast, shame is not about specific actions but about myself. In shame I judge myself to be without worth. Put differently, shame is a painful, narcissistic injury in which corrective action is paralyzed and I am left only with ananguished sense of self-contempt.

Biography

Dr. Richard L. Rubenstein is President Emeritus of the University of Bridgeport. A Distinguished Professor of Religion at the University and a Life Member of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Rubenstein also serves as Director of the University’s Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. An internationally recognized historian of religion whose writings lie at the root of Holocaust writings, his works have been the subject of more than a dozen doctoral dissertations. One of his books entitled “The Cunning of History” was recently translated into French. Professor Rubenstein’s writings have also been cited as a key inspiration for the Academy Award winning film Sophie’s Choice. Prior to assuming his role as President of the University of Bridgeport, Dr. Rubenstein served as Distinguished Professor of Religion at Florida State University. Recently Florida State University created the Richard L. Rubenstein Chair for Religious Studies in his honor.
For example, in the past, Muslim anti-Jewish hostility could be characterized as the condescension or contempt of a dominant power toward a useful but powerless inferior. Today, Muslim, especially Arab, anti-Jewish hostility partakes of something entirely novel in the history of Islam, the rage of those who have experienced defeat in the face of an enemy’s military victories and economic success. The situation was difficult enough when Christendom reversed centuries of Muslim dominance; Jewish military victory in 1948, characterized by the Arabs as al-Naqba (the catastrophe) was far less tolerable. Even Hezbullah’s ability to hold its own against Israel during the 2006 war in Lebanon has not really dissipated that rage among a critical mass of Muslims.

Bernard Lewis took note of this phenomenon almost two decades ago in an Atlantic Monthly article, “The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West and why their bitterness will not be easily mollified.” Long a knowledgeable observer of the world of Islam, the Princeton historian took note of the fact that the rejection of the West by an important segment of the Muslim world had generated emotions that could only be characterized as rage. Indeed, this rejection was becoming so unconditional that Muslim extremists could think of no more fitting characterization of the West than “enemies of God.”

According to Lewis, in its heyday the Muslim world saw itself as “the center of culture and enlightenment, surrounded by infidel barbarians whom it would in due course civilize.” As Lewis has commented, the struggle between Islam and Christendom has consisted in “a long series of attacks and counterattacks, jihads and crusades, conquests and reconquests” that have lasted for fourteen hundred years. It was not until the failure of the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683 that the world of Islam found itself on the defensive vis-à-vis the world of Christendom.

Particularly humiliating was the fact that Christian empires came to dominate much of the world of Islam. This was equally true of the expansion of the Tsarist Empire in the East and the Western European powers in the Middle East, Africa, India, and Indonesia. In the nineteenth century, Britain, France, Spain, Italy, and Holland divided up much of the Muslim world almost at will. The nineteenth-century efforts of the European powers to secure equal rights for Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire were especially galling. The world of Islam had been built upon an hierarchical system of structured inequality in which the religious and social dominance of Muslims over unbelievers was the uncontested first premise. Built into the very structure of Muslim identity was the system of dhimmitude, namely, “the comprehensive legal system established by the Muslim conquerors to rule the native non-Muslim populations subdued by jihad wars.” No matter how brilliant, talented, or wealthy an unbeliever might be, the humblest believing Muslim was regarded as superior to all unbelievers, at least in the eyes of Allah.

In the nineteenth and much of the twen-
family members against female family members who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by her family for a variety of reasons including, refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce -- even from an abusive husband -- or committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has acted in a manner to bring "dishonor" to the family is sufficient to trigger an attack. The ramifications of this impunity for women are significant. For example, a woman in an abusive marriage must make the choice to stay in the marriage and hope that the violence will end, or leave the marriage and hope that neither her husband nor any male relatives will kill her. A woman who is raped, even if she can prove that she was a victim of sexual violence, may be killed by her husband, father, son, brother or cousin.

Honor killings can thus be seen as an attempt to erase the stigma of shame from a family by eliminating the offending member. No act of contrition will do. Only the death of the alleged offender will suffice. Some of the alleged "offenses" seem trivial by Western

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According to the Daily Telegraph (UK), a young Saudi woman was murdered by her father for chatting on Facebook, a social network website. She was beaten and shot after her father found her in the middle of an internet conversation with a man. In a particularly bizarre case, a 16 year old Jordanian woman was murdered by her brother because another brother had raped her. The victim, not the rapist, was seen as having brought shame upon the family. While such killings are not officially sanctioned and are not confined to Islam, the official penalties incurred for such crimes tend to be exceptionally light when and if applied.

At the heart of all such behavior there appears to be masculine fear of loss of control, with all that such loss entails for personal identity. We need not enter into psychoanalytic reflection about masculine fear of the feminine to explain the need for control over women found in strongly patriarchal cultures. When unable to control their women, some men in traditional societies are likely to experience feelings of impotence and rage. Unfortunately, impotent rage can be sated, if only temporarily, by injury and murder. All too often men deny their impotence by their power to kill.

**German Defeat in World War I**

In important respects, Lewis’s characterization of Muslim rage is not unlike what many right-wing, German nationalists experienced in the face of Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Before the war, for example, Adolf Hitler had for years drifted without any definite vocation. The war gave Hitler his calling by giving him a “chance to defend his beloved Motherland.” In the early nineteen-twenties, Hitler described his feelings when Germany declared war on Russia and France in August 1914:

> To me these hours seemed like a release from the painful feelings of my youth. Even today I am not ashamed to say that, overpowered by stormy enthusiasm, I fell down on my knees and thanked Heaven from an overflowing heart for granting me the good fortune of being permitted to live at this time.

For Hitler, the stakes could not have been higher:

> Destiny had begun its course… this time not the fate of Serbia or Austria was involved, but whether the German nation was to be or not to be.

Imperial Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, 1914 and on France two days later. On August 5, 1914, Hitler volunteered for service and served with the Second Reserve Battalion of the Second Bavarian Infantry, known as the List Regiment, for the duration of the war. The unit first saw combat on October 29, 1914. After four days of fighting, the regiment was reduced in number from 3,600 to 611. The depressingly high casualty rate did not dampen Hitler’s enthusiasm for the war. He identified with Germany’s
struggle in a deeply personal way. He found his element in his regiment and in the war itself. He was apparently content to serve as a dispatch runner for the duration. According to Ian Kershaw, one of Hitler’s most authoritative biographers, “from all indications, Hitler was a committed, rather than simply conscientious and dutiful, soldier, and did not lack physical courage.”

Wounded slightly by shrapnel in October 1916, he was hospitalized in Berlin until December 1, 1916. He returned to his regiment on March 5, 1917. On August 4, 1918, he received the Iron Cross, First Class, a rare achievement for a corporal.

On the night of October 13, 1918, Hitler was painfully wounded in a British gas attack. By the next morning he was blind and was shipped to a hospital in Pasewalk near Stettin. It was there that he learned “the shattering news of defeat and revolution,” what he called “the greatest villainy of the century.”

Hitler described his reaction upon learning of the way the war ended:

I could stand it no longer. It became impossible for me to sit still one minute more. Again everything went black before my eyes. I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk, and dug my head into my blanket and pillow. I had not wept since the day when I had stood at my mother’s grave…. The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous event in this hour, the more the shame of indignity and disgrace burned into my brow (emphasis added).

Germany’s defeat was his personal defeat. For him the war would never end. He described his reaction when he first learned of the defeat:

And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations; in vain the hunger and thirst of months that were often endless; in vain the hours in which, with mortal fear clutching our hearts, we nevertheless did our duty; and in vain the death of two million who died.

Unable to bear the shame of military defeat, Hitler concluded that Germany had not been defeated but betrayed:

I knew that all was lost. Only fools, liars, and criminals could hope in the mercy of the enemy. In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed.

According to Hitler, Jews and Marxists,
the so-called “November criminals,” were responsible for Germany’s ultimate disgrace, surrender. Since Hitler had no intention of accepting the “Versailles Diktat” as the permanent basis for Germany’s relations with its enemies, another war was inevitable were he ever to gain power, and, in such a war, there would be no place for Jews once again to “betray” Germany.

Hitler’s response to Germany’s defeat in November 1918 was a private matter, but the official response of the German high command was not very different. On March 3, 1918, Bolshevik Russia signed a peace treaty with Imperial Germany. Less than three weeks later, General Erich Ludendorff launched the first of four German offensives against the Allies. With Russia defeated and the full force of American arms yet to be felt, the German public had every confidence that they would win the war. By July 1918 the German offensive had spent itself. On September 29, 1918, Ludendorff summoned Germany’s political leaders and demanded that they ask for an immediate armistice. In seeking an armistice, Ludendorff and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the Chief of the General Staff, were partly driven by fear of the imminent collapse of German arms and its likely consequences, the worst being a Russian-type revolution in Germany. Nevertheless, with the German army still in northern France, Belgium, and the former Tsarist Empire, a number of senior officers strongly opposed the armistice initiative. Their resolve was strengthened after receiving Woodrow Wilson’s uncompromising replies to the German armistice request between October 10 and 14. Ludendorff and Hindenburg became convinced that the Allies would never offer peace terms Germany would deem acceptable. According to historian Michael Geyer, the High Command became convinced that surrender was incompatible with German honor which could only be saved by an apocalyptic Endkampf (terminal struggle) involving the systematic devastation of the population and infrastructure of occupied French and Belgian territory, as well as a possible war to the death involving the entire German population. The Endkampf would be both a war of annihilation against the enemy and the self-annihilation of the German nation. Geyer reports a conversation between Ludendorff and General Ernst von Eisenhart-Rothe in which the latter brought up the issue of what would be done if the Allied terms for an Armistice were deemed “insufferable:”

Then, will Excellency [Ludendorff] not hope with me that a furor teutonicus will break out in the entire land, like August 1914 had seen, which will give us the ability to fight on, albeit unto annihilation. His [Ludendorff’s] eyes started to gleam and he responded with a strong and secure voice: “I count on it and hope for sure.”

German defeat did not result in an Endkampf because the government of the newly installed Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, and the Reichstag majority rejected the High Command’s plans.
rejected the High Command’s plans. Prince Max pointed out that the first responsibility of the government was to assure the survival of the nation. If that meant acknowledging defeat, the humiliation had to be accepted. Prince Max’s thinking was consistent with that of Germany’s greatest military philosopher, Karl Clausewitz (1780-1831), who saw war as an instrument of politics. By contrast, the High Command insisted that the Allied terms were dishonorable. Hence, total military catastrophe was to be preferred to a humiliating surrender.

In late October, Hindenburg and Ludendorff attempted to persuade the Kaiser to reject the armistice and call for a Volkskrieg, a total “people’s war.” The Kaiser refused and sent them with several other senior commanders, to meet with the Imperial Vice Chancellor Friedrich von Payer, Prince Max being unavailable because of illness. Ludendorff sought to persuade Payer to abandon peace negotiations and call for a popular insurrection. The issue for both the military and the German ultra-right was no longer victory or even territorial defense but the “honor” involved in preferring catastrophic national destruction to surrender.

Payer rejected Ludendorff’s demand for an end to peace negotiations whereupon Ludendorff declared, “Then, your Excellency, I throw the entire shame of the Fatherland into your and your colleague’s aces (emphasis added).” In his memoir of the war years, Payer spelled out his fundamental disagreement with Ludendorff:

An army commander with his en-

Geyer recounts that Rear Admiral Magnus von Levetzow, Chief of Staff of the Naval High Command, was also present at the meeting. In his memoirs, Levetzow described Ludendorff as “a majestic man, a representative of German honor” and described Payer as "a small, crappy party hack without a sense of national dignity and honor …weighing everything only from a petit bourgeois point of view ... sitting there cowering, with his beady, hate-filled eyes and clasped hands, under the powerful blows of the general.”

Geyer comments on this encounter, “One could call this [the encounter between Ludendorff and Payer] the pivotal scene in the formation of the stab-in-the-back legend.” Although Payer was not Jewish, von Levetzow used classical anti-Semitic stereotypes to characterize him. According to historian Peter Pulzer, “In the eyes of the extreme Right Payer had long counted as an honorary Jew.”

Neither Hitler nor the World War I German High Command invented the tradition of the ignoble betrayer who in stealth and treachery brings defeat upon the German military. It was deeply embedded in their cultural world. Although more Jews proportionally than their fellow citizens made the supreme sacrifice for what they
mistakenly thought was their Fatherland, that sacrifice was invisible to the German High Command, and, increasingly, the German public. On the contrary, in October 1916, the German High Command ordered a Judenzählung, “a Jew census,” to demonstrate that Jews were less patriotic than what at the time were considered their “fellow Germans.” The findings demonstrated the opposite to be true. Approximately eighty percent of the Jews in the German army served in the front-lines. Over 100,000 Jews served out of a total German Jewish population of 550,000; 12,000 died in battle; 30,000 were decorated for bravery. Disappointed, German military officials suppressed the findings.

To repeat, a person who experiences guilt can make reparation for specific acts whereas a person who experiences shame cannot. In shame, reparation seems impossible as the whole person is self-condemned as worthless. Hence, the temptation to evade self-condemnation by projecting one’s shame onto another is almost irresistible. Instead of punishing oneself, one punishes another for one’s failings.

This was especially true of Imperial Germany, a society in which the warrior caste stood at the very apex of the social hierarchy and military prowess was the emblem of superlative masculine virtue. By failing to achieve victory and by impotently standing by while Imperial Germany’s civilian authorities consented to what amounted to unconditional surrender, leaving the nation at the mercy of its enemies, the German warrior caste had failed its ultimate test. Nothing could be more shameful than to have been vanquished in a war in which approximately two million of their comrades were killed and 4,814,557 reported wounded.  

In shame, reparation seems impossible

The Stab-In-the-Back Legend/Prelude to Genocide

As the war came to a close, Germany’s military leaders prepared to reject responsibility for their catastrophic failure. It seemed inconceivable to them that Europe’s most advanced industrial power, with the best universities and scientific personnel, could collapse and surrender while the German army, numbering in the millions, still occupied the soil of its enemies. Moreover, the greatest humiliation was arguably yet to come. Article 231, the “war guilt clause” of the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, stipulated that:

….Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.  

During the nineteen-twenties, the Treaty
of Versailles, especially Article 231, was viewed by the majority of Germans as a “dictate of shame” whose purpose was to keep Germany from regaining the status of a great European power. The compulsory signing was especially bitter because Germans of all political persuasion “had rushed to arms in 1914 in the sincere conviction that they were fighting a war of self-defense.”

The stab-in-the-back legend (Dolchstoß in den Rücken) offered an enormously potent means of shifting responsibility so that German “honor” could be preserved in spite of defeat. Nor was it difficult to identify a suitable “betrayor.” The legend had its roots in two powerful traditions, the Nibelungen Saga in which Siegfried, the dragon-slaying hero, is stabbed in the back by Hagen von Tronje, and the New Testament narrative in which Jesus is betrayed with a loving kiss by Judas Iscariot. Over the centuries, Jews have been identified with Judas as the paradigmatic betrayer within Christendom. More often than not, whenever the stronger community met with grave misfortune, Jews were punished as calamity’s alleged authors.

Apart from its sources in myth and legend, the stab-in-the-back legend gained enhanced credibility in the German Right from the visible presence of left-wing Jews in the leadership of revolutionary movements that sought to end the war and establish socialist or communist regimes in its aftermath. Although Jewish loyalty to the Fatherland was real, it was all but invisible to right-wing German nationalists. What was visible was the Jewish presence in the Bolshevik leadership and in the left-wing regimes that managed to seize power temporarily in Bavaria and Hungary. At the time, Munich was home to Adolf Hitler and the embryonic National Socialist party.

As noted, advocates of peace negotiations came to be characterized as either “Jewish” or influenced by “a Jewish mentality.” By 1919 Ludendorff was committed to the “destruction of the internationalist, pacifist, defeatists,’ namely, the Jews and the Vatican, people who ‘systematically destroyed’ our ‘racial inheritance and national character.’” Not surprisingly, Ludendorff took part with Hitler in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. A year later, the general wrote that Germany must be made judenrein, “free of Jews,” before the next war. The stab-in-the-back legend thus became a prelude to genocide. If, as the legend asserted, the Jews had, succeeded in bringing down the mighty German nation by treachery and stealth, it was imperative to eliminate them for Germany to achieve success in the coming war. Hitler saw the war’s outcome as did Ludendorff. He had no doubt that the cause of Germany’s defeat...
had not been the failure of German arms but betrayal by Jews and Marxists. He was resolved to enter politics to prevent a repetition of the alleged betrayal. Thus, the Jews of Europe were ultimately to pay with their lives for the monumental, and indeed cowardly, evasion of responsibility by Germany’s World War I military leadership in seeking to preserve their “honor.” To the bitter end, a rage-obsessed Hitler saw himself as the innocent victim of those who had conspired to bring him and Germany down.

Defeat and Muslim Rage

Like the rage of the German ultra-right, the rage of contemporary Muslim extremists and their fellow travelers against Jews, Zionism, America, and, ultimately, the entire Western world has its roots in military defeat. In the case of rage against the West, the roots can be found in the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the lifting of the Ottoman siege of Vienna by the Polish King Jan III Sobieski on September 12, 1683, and the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699). At Karlowitz, the Ottomans signed a peace treaty for the first time on terms “basically determined by their victorious enemies.”47 The treaty set the pattern of Muslim retreat and defeat that continued until the middle of the twentieth century.

As noted above, no defeat visited upon Muslims by unbelievers has ever been as deeply felt as an offense against Muslim honor as the twin defeats inflicted upon the Arabs in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence and the Six Day War of 1967. This has been cogently expressed by the Israeli historian Benny Morris in the concluding paragraphs of his book on the first Arab-Israeli War:

But 1948 has haunted and still haunts, the Arab world on the deepest level of collective identity, ego, and pride. The war was a humiliation from which that world has yet to recover—the antithesis of the glory days of Arab Islamic dominance....The 1948 War was the culminating affront, when a community of 650,000 Jews—Jews, no less—crushed Palestinian Arab society and then defeated the armies of the surrounding states. The Arab states had failed to “save” the Palestinians and failed to prevent Israel’s emergence and acceptance into the comity of nations. And what little Palestine territory the Arabs had managed to retain fell under Israeli sway two decades later.”48

Since the 1930s there have been numerous attempts to “solve” the Arab-Israeli conflict. In recent years, there has been much talk about a “peace process.” Almost immediately after assuming office, President Obama let it be known that he
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Part of the appeal of Hamas is its claim that the Jewish presence in Israel/Palestine is illegitimate. The Covenant of Hamas, its fundamental document, asserts that “…the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf [an inalienable religious endowment] consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day.” (Article 11, Hamas Covenant) Hence, “there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors. (emphasis added)” (Article 13)

Could anything be clearer? Yet, senior statesmen in the West and even in certain Israeli circles are under the illusion that either Hamas’s leaders do not mean what they say or they can be talked out of what they mean. Neither outcome is likely, not because the leaders of Hamas are terrorists, although they are obviously willing to use terror as part of their strategy, but because they are religiously committed to a reading of Islam that will brook no compromise on the subject of Palestine. This is a reality that secularized elites in the West and Israel either do not understand or do not want to understand.

If these reflections have any merit, the people of Israel are faced with the prospect of a future of unending conflict of varying degrees of intensity. This is the price they have had to pay when they exchanged the hazards of dependent minority status for the dangers of sovereignty. In reality, they had little choice. Hitler and, truth to tell, his very many European sympathizers had demonstrated what minority status could lead to under condi-
tions of modernity. While it is true that two Muslim countries, Egypt and Jordan, have signed “peace” treaties with Israel, a critical mass among educated professionals and the “Muslim street” in both countries remain completely unwilling to accept any “solution” to the conflict other than Israel’s disappearance, an outcome a nuclear-armed Israel is hardly likely to accept gracefully.
References:


4. Jim Platt,


8. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


24. Mein Kampf, p. 204-206; Waite, The Psychopathic God, p. 244.


27. Schivelbusch, Culture of Defeat, p. 197.


30. Wilson stipulated that the Central Powers would be required “immediately to withdraw their forces everywhere from invaded territories.” He further insisted on “absolutely satisfactory safeguards and guarantees.”
for the maintenance “of the present military supremacy of the armies of the United States and its allies in the field.” And, Wilson explicitly demanded a new government in Germany because “the nations of the world do not and cannot trust the word of those who have hitherto been the masters of German policy.” The text of Wilson’s replies are to be found in Oliver Marble Gale, Americanism: Woodrow Wilson’s Speeches on the War (Chicago: Baldwin Syndicate, 1918), pp. 141-144. This book was digitized and made available by Google from the Harvard University Library.


34. Friedrich Payer, Von Bethmann Hollweg bis Ebert: Erinnerungen und Bilder (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei, 1923), pp. 142-43; I am indebted to Geyer, loc. cit. for this citation.

35. Deist, loc. cit.


42. On the Niebelungen tradition, Siegfried and Hagen, see Geyer, op. cit., pp. 506, 517-520; for a discussion of the role of Judas in transforming the Jews into the perennial betrayer of the


