

Revisiting Dehumanization through the Lens of Ideology

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Abstract: Dehumanization has long been considered a key factor in mass violence and atrocities. However, the concept faces two main lines of criticism: critics either object to particular aspects of a specific rendering of dehumanization, or they argue against the relevance of dehumanization as necessary for killing people. The latter group highlights that perpetrators sometimes recognized their victims' humanity, a point some scholars illustrate with individual experiences of Nazi perpetrators during the Holocaust. By doing so, they complicate the notion of dehumanization and advance calls for alternative theoretical approaches to understanding perpetrators' actions. This article engages with such criticisms and reconsiders dehumanization through the lens of ideology, framing it as a dynamic, interpretative process. It first applies Leader Maynard's framework of ideology to approach dehumanization as a fluid concept in order to address heterogeneities in perpetrator-victim relations, emphasizing the process-like nature and role of individual differences in dehumanization. The empirical observations of three prominent critics are re-examined in light of this perspective, grounding the approach to dehumanization in individual experience.

Keywords: dehumanization, ideology, mass violence, Holocaust, National Socialism

Introduction

Research has long established that mass violence is not carried out solely by a handful of pathological individuals but often by ordinary people.¹ While some perpetrators and victims may have been strangers or people who disliked each other before, other perpetrators share social ties with their victims, being spouses, friends, extended family, neighbours, or colleagues of those they hurt. Once the violence begins, these relationships are shattered

1 Christopher R. Browning, *Ganz normale Männer: Das Reserve-Polizeibataillon 101 und die 'Endlösung' in Polen*, 7th edn (Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2013); James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

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as acquaintances are polarized into victims and perpetrators.² This raises a central question: How do people come to commit violence against others, particularly in mass violence scenarios and atrocities?

A widely accepted answer to this question is dehumanization, which is often regarded as a key social mechanism that enables collective violence.³ Research into dehumanization extends over realms such as technology,⁴ literary studies,⁵ and feminist philosophy,⁶ but is predominantly focused on the context of armed conflict.⁷ Regardless of the perspective, dehumanization is understood as the idea of perceiving others as less than human, making killing them easier. Perspectives vary and there is no one conceptual rendering of dehumanization, but the idea encompasses a wide range of interpretations of what it means to be not (fully) human.

Despite its prominence, dehumanization theory has faced criticism. Various scholars have pointed out inconsistencies in ideas of dehumanization and argued against them theoretically or challenged them empirically. Such criticism takes two forms: critics either object to particular

- 2 Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, 'The Study of Mass Murder and Genocide', in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 3–28 (p. 12); René Lemarchand, 'Disconnecting the Threads: Rwanda and the Holocaust Reconsidered', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4.4 (2002), pp. 499–518 (p. 512); Nicolas Mariot, 'On the role of Dehumanization of Victims in the Perpetration of Mass Killings: Research Notes', *Violence: An International Journal*, 1.1 (2020), pp. 102–22 (p. 111).
- 3 David Moshman, 'Us and Them: Identity and Genocide', *Identity*, 7.2 (2007), pp. 115–35; David L. Smith, *Less than Human: Why we Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, (St. Martin's Press, 2011); Holger Meyer, *Über das Töten in Genoziden* (Tectum-Verlag, 2009); Chiara Volpato and Luca Andrighetto, 'Dehumanization', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edn, ed. by James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2015), pp. 31–37.
- 4 Erika L. Milam, 'Theorizing the Inhumanity of Human Nature, 1955–1985', in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, (Routledge, 2021), pp. 112–24; Maria-Paola Paladino and Jeroen Vaes, 'Ours is Human: On the Pervasiveness of Infra-humanization in Intergroup Relations', *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, 48.2 (2009), pp. 237–51; Maria-Paola Paladino, 'Motivational and Cognitive Underpinnings of Fear of Social Robots That Become "Too Human For Us"', in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 292–306.
- 5 Suzanne Keen, 'Introduction: Narrative and the Emotions', *Poetics Today*, 32.1 (2011), pp. 1–53.
- 6 Mari Mikkola, 'Dehumanization', in *New Waves in Ethics*, ed. by Thom Brooks (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), pp. 128–49; Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Laurie A. Rudman and Kris Mescher, 'Of Animals and Objects: Men's Implicit Dehumanization of Women and Likelihood of Sexual Aggression', *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38.6 (2012), pp. 734–46.
- 7 Meyer, *Über das Töten in Genoziden*; Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political use in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University, 1982); Frank R. Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Cases Studies* (Yale University Press, 1990); Moshman, 'Us and Them'; Smith, *Less than Human*.

aspects of a specific rendering of dehumanization, or they argue against the relevance of dehumanization as necessary for killing people all together. The first line of critique can be illustrated through three examples, namely animalization, moral exclusion, and the lack of specific characteristics. Among these themes, the idea of animalization has drawn particular criticism. Being one such critic, de Ruiter argues that treating someone as an animal does not equal dehumanization, as animals are not by definition treated badly. Moreover, she argues, animals cannot be humiliated, as humiliation presupposes human moral sensibilities.⁸ A second form of critique, advanced by scholars such as Michel, focuses on the idea of moral exclusion: perceiving potential victims as illegitimate figures, such as killers or criminals, does not remove them from the moral universe but rather keeps them within it by holding them accountable for immoral acts.⁹ A third form of criticism addresses the claim that dehumanized people lack specific characteristics such as intelligence or competence. For example, Livingstone Smith shows that Nazis saw Jews as hypercompetent and intelligent, which directly contradicts the notion that dehumanization entails stripping victims of such qualities.¹⁰

For many critics, developing alternate conceptual ideas of dehumanization allows them to address the concept's alleged inconsistencies. However, in the second, more radical form of criticism, scholars do not see the solution to the issues with dehumanization theory as requiring a refinement of the concept of dehumanization and instead argue that the role of dehumanization in mass violence has been overstated in general. Their strictest criticism is directed against the very idea of dehumanization and purports that, at least in some cases, perpetrators still perceived humanity in their victims.¹¹ Some scholars even argue that not despite but because of such perceived humanity, victims were treated or tortured a certain way.¹² As a result, these scholars look beyond dehumanization analyses, focusing instead on alternate social mechanisms they see as more central to the perpetration of mass violence.¹³

8 Adrienne de Ruiter, 'To be or not to be Human: Resolving the Paradox of Dehumanisation', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 22.1 (2023), pp. 73–95 (p. 74).

9 Torsten Michel, 'Assaulting Diversity as Such: The Ontology of Dehumanisation in Mass Violence', *European Journal of International Security*, 8.3 (2023), pp. 281–98 (p. 286).

10 David L. Smith, 'Some Conceptual Deficits of Psychological Models of Dehumanization', *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, 4 (2023), pp. 1–4 (p. 2).

11 Michel, 'Assaulting Diversity as Such', p. 285.

12 Ibid., p. 285.

13 Kuper, *Genocide*; Johannes Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*,

The most elaborated of such extensive critiques come from Lang, Weißmann, Mariot, and Over.¹⁴ Over has gained prominence for an article that identifies seven challenges to the concept of dehumanization. Some of these critiques overlap with those of other scholars, yet her systematic approach offers a particularly comprehensive account. For example, she discusses animalization in-depth and highlights the potentially positive connotations of being likened to certain animals. Another challenge she poses is ‘that outgroup members are often described in ways that apply only to humans.’¹⁵ She points to depictions of victims as threats or outcasts, figures that are still essentially human. Importantly, she notes that the other could be dehumanized and humanized at the same time, a duality often visible in propaganda pieces. A final challenge worth noting is her observation that ‘being seen as less than human is not necessarily a risk factor for harm.’¹⁶ She illustrates this with the example of infants, who lack human qualities such as rationality or adherence to a belief system yet still receive care.

While Over’s challenges are both incisive and compelling, her argument proceeds largely through general empirical examples and broad patterns. The focus in this article, however, shifts to a different strand of critique – one advanced by Lang, Weißmann, and Mariot – that grounds its claims in specific, narrated encounters between perpetrators and victims. Such scholars do not argue based on general knowledge of genocides but rather consider individual violent encounters as understood through the perpetrators’ narrated experiences. Despite the inherent problems of working with such testimonies,¹⁷ such indi-

24.2 (2010), pp. 225–46; Johannes Lang, ‘Explaining Genocide: Hannah Arendt and the Social-Scientific Concept of Dehumanization’, in *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh (Anthem Press, 2017), pp. 175–96; Martin Weißmann, ‘Organisierte Entmenslichung’, in *Soziologische Analysen des Holocaust*, ed. by Alexander Gruber and Stefan Kühl (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2015), pp. 79–128; Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang, ‘On Hatred and Dehumanization’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 341–54; Harriet Over, ‘Seven Challenges for the Dehumanization Hypothesis’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 16.1 (2021), pp. 3–13; Wolfgang Benz, ‘Feindbilder in Europa – Traditionen und Strukturen’, in *Feindbilder in Europa: Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. by Anton Pelinka, Studienreihe Konfliktforschung, Bd. 23 (Braumüller, 2008), pp. 13–23.

¹⁴ Weißmann; Lang, ‘Questioning Dehumanization’; Lang, ‘Explaining Genocide’; Over; Mariot.

¹⁵ Over, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Scholars have long discussed the challenges of using testimonies of mass violence in general, and the Holocaust in particular, in considering accounts from perpetrators. See an extensive overview in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. by Dan Stone, Making Sense of History, volume 16 (Berghahn, 2015). Some scholars have expressed concern that

vidual encounters, moments in time, are significant indicators that are important when thinking about dehumanization. They are not limited to general knowledge about the Holocaust but show the heterogeneity of individual encounters between different people, highlighting the variability in how perpetrators perceive and interact with their victims. Closely examining these moments makes space for awareness of contradictions and heterogeneity that may be concealed in some conventional approaches to dehumanization. Such conventional approaches often concentrate on people in general, offering static accounts that imply that individuals share enemy images and prejudices to the same extent.¹⁸ This has been aptly criticized by Leader Maynard and Luft:

Most dehumanization research strips out key aspects of the actual human experience of dehumanization – creating an overly mechanical, impersonal and apolitical picture where dehumanization is portrayed as diffusely influencing individuals independent of their self-understanding, social relationships, or political and organization settings.¹⁹

To move the discussion forward, this article suggests a fluid theoretical framework that engages with heterogeneous perceptions of dehumanization. To elaborate on this perspective, the article proposes two key points: (1) the importance of understanding dehumanization as an interpretative process closely linked to a fluid conception of group identities, and (2) the value of recognizing humanization as part of an

perpetrator testimonies are sometimes treated as more reliable than those of victims (see Sibylle Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), pp. 85–104 (88). Furthermore, post-war reports are often considered problematic as they may have been shaped to exonerate perpetrators. Many such accounts were given in judicial contexts, increasing the likelihood of altered narratives (see Michael Dickerman, 'Using Trial Documents for Holocaust Study', in *Sources for Studying the Holocaust: A Guide*, ed. by Paul R. Bartrop (Routledge Taylor & Francis group, 2023), pp. 90–102 (p. 96). Yet, other sources, such as diaries or letters bear problems, too: they represent a certain way the writers want to be seen (see Amy Simon, 'Written Remnants of Catastrophe: Holocaust Diaries as Historical Sources', in *Sources for Studying the Holocaust*, ed. by Bartrop, pp. 33–44 (p. 35). While these concerns are important and merit in-depth discussion elsewhere, this article works with testimonies that other scholars have already treated as reliable and incorporated into their analyses. The degree to which such accounts may be strategically shaped or factually accurate can never be fully determined. Here, however, these testimonies and empirical observations are considered insofar as they are mobilized within arguments challenging dehumanization and therefore are not subjected to independent methodological scrutiny.

¹⁸ e.g. Meyer.

¹⁹ Jonathan Leader Maynard and Aliza Luft, 'Humanizing Dehumanization Research', *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, 4 (2023), pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

ideology that is discursively disseminated and established as a norm, yet adapted and interpreted differently by individuals. To develop the theoretical framework for this article, I build on Leader Maynard's insights into the mechanics of ideology.²⁰ While Leader Maynard reflects extensively on ideology in the context of violent conflict, he does not set out a dedicated theoretical framework of dehumanization.²¹ This article therefore takes his broader theorization of ideology – especially his emphasis on heterogeneities in ideological commitment – as an analytical lens for approaching dehumanization in depth. This makes it possible to conceptualize dehumanization as a collective phenomenon that affects individuals differently, to reflect on the diverse meanings it acquires over time and space,²² and to challenge the assumption of its monolithic character. It also deepens our understanding of its process-like nature²³ and varied forms of articulation.

This article proceeds as follows: it first addresses key criticisms of dehumanization, then outlines the empirical observations of Lang, Mariot, and Weißmann and examines how those observations challenge prevailing ideas of dehumanization. The theoretical framework is developed in two steps. First, it draws on Leader Maynard's ideas about ideologies, particularly his insights into heterogeneities of ideological commitment. Second, it extends this foundation to formulate my own approach to dehumanization, emphasizing the presence of

20 Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26.5 (2014), pp. 821–41; Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology in Political Violence and Conflict', *St. Antony's International Review*, 10.2 (2015), pp. 18–52; Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Ideology and Armed Conflict', *Journal of Peace Research*, 56.5 (2019), pp. 635–49; Jonathan Leader Maynard and Susan Benesch, 'Dangerous Speech and Dangerous Ideology: An Integrated Model for Monitoring and Prevention', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 9.3 (2016), pp. 70–95; Jonathan Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing: The Radicalized Security Politics of Genocides and Deadly Atrocities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

21 Although Leader Maynard has recently co-authored an article with Luft in which they engage with the topic of dehumanization, their critique of conceptions of dehumanization is primarily directed at conventional approaches rather than the articulation of a separate conceptual framework. While this article takes up several implications for dehumanization theory articulated in Leader Maynard and Luft's recent work, as these align closely with the article's perspective, the theoretical framework of dehumanization set forward here is developed independently. By doing so, some of the concerns raised by Leader Maynard and Luft, particularly the inclusion of a social and ideological context, are addressed (cf. Leader Maynard and Luft, 'Humanizing dehumanization research').

22 Kronfeldner's edited volume has made significant contributions to this topic: *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner (Routledge, 2021).

23 Rowan Savage, 'Modern Genocidal Dehumanization: A New Model', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 47.2 (2013), pp. 139–61.

fluid identities and interpretative processes in such. The article then revisits Lang's, Mariot's, and Weißmann's empirical observations, discussing them in light of the proposed model.

Challenging Dehumanization Through Empirical Observations

This section focuses on three of dehumanization theory's most prominent critics, Weißmann, Lang, and Mariot, and their specific empirical observations. Drawing on such observations, all three scholars highlight the variability in how perpetrators of the Holocaust perceived and interacted with their victims, arguing that not all perpetrators perceived their victims as non-human before killing them. Before turning to their empirical examples, the article briefly introduces each of their theoretical approaches.

Lang's work brings forward the point that excessive violence is often misunderstood as dehumanization but is more accurately regarded as a means for perpetrators to exert power over their victims.²⁴ Lang goes on to argue that the encounter between victim and perpetrator is indeed one of engaging with a victim understood as human; he understands dehumanization as a denial of the victims' subjective experience.²⁵ Through this denial, perpetrators detach themselves emotionally from their victims: the latter are perceived as not feeling human emotions or having subjective experiences and are denied their position in a 'meaningful social fabric.'²⁶ Building on this insight, Lang argues that such emotional detachment is inherently fragile, as human beings are naturally connected to one another. He does not purport that dehumanization does not take place at all, but he criticizes the overuse of the concept.²⁷ He argues that the actual denial of the subjectivity of the victim is very rare and habituation to violence is a much more likely explanation of the perpetrator's behaviour.²⁸

A different angle is offered by Weißmann, who distinguishes between psychological and social dehumanization,²⁹ which he sees as operating

24 Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization'.

25 Ibid., p. 225.

26 Ibid., p. 226.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 232.

29 Weißmann, p. 85.

according to different systems. He links psychological dehumanization to morality and argues that psychological dehumanization allows people to kill and still perceive themselves as morally rightful.³⁰ In contrast, social dehumanization excludes the victim through communicative practices and social interactions.³¹ Weißmann identifies different ways in which this occurs, such as speaking over others or failing to perceive them as persons with whom communication is possible. Referring to Luhman, he explains that dehumanized people are perceived as socially dead, as they are not seen as potential communication partners.³² Weißmann emphasizes that social and organizational factors, such as peer pressure and institutional norms, play significant roles in enabling atrocities, even when dehumanization is incomplete or absent.³³ He argues that 'with formal and informal organizational structures, it was therefore social rather than cognitive reasons'³⁴ that led to the killings of the victims. Following this thought, he argues that in many cases of mass violence, psychological dehumanization does not take place to the extent purported by other authors.³⁵ He concludes that there are some cases where perpetrators dehumanize their victims in the way the scholarly literature has established, but in most cases they do not.

In contrast, Mariot focuses on letters from and judicial interrogations of perpetrators, examining their attitudes and emotions during encounters with their victims. While he situates these moments within an ideological background, his primary interest is to understand participation in genocidal killings. While Mariot does not make different understandings of dehumanization – or his own – explicit, he calls it a 'symbolic degradation of the enemy'³⁶ and touches on perspectives such as animalization and objectification. Yet, what shines through in his account is that he tends towards a more literal understanding of dehumanization, describing it as 'dealing with things that were less than people.'³⁷ He cites incidents he interprets as killings without dehumanization, where executioners recognized their victims' humanity in various ways and yet killed them nonetheless. Mariot distinguishes

30 Weißmann, p. 89.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, p. 105. My translation.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

36 Mariot, p. 107.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

between different settings for killings, some less dehumanizing than others, and emphasizes how these changed over time. He concludes that dehumanization does not sufficiently explain participation in genocidal killings and calls for closer examination of alternative explanations for perpetrators' actions. In particular, he refers to Browning's research on group pressure, the diffusion of responsibility, and the routinization of tasks.³⁸

In the following section, some of Lang's, Weißmann's, and Mariot's challenges to conventional ideas of dehumanization are addressed. Taking into account individual experiences to explore dehumanization allows us to think about heterogeneous perceptions and individual interpretations of the process. Although Holocaust testimonies present certain methodological challenges, they allow us to approach individual perceptions and, in doing so, come closer to understanding what occurred during the killing process. While these individual moments are acknowledged, they are grouped together in the following section, alongside the challenge they pose to dehumanization theory.

This challenge takes four forms. Firstly, the empirical examples demonstrate that outside encouragement to kill is sometimes necessary, as the perpetrators may not possess the internal conviction to carry out lethal acts without the external influence of a social system. These hesitations or doubts arise before the act itself, requiring superiors to either encourage perpetrators to engage in violence before the act or to provide reassurance after the act. Lang cites an instance where Rudolf Höss mentioned that he had to encourage perpetrators, stating 'many of the men often approached me during my inspection trips through the killing areas and poured out their depression and anxieties to me, hoping that I could give them some reassurance.'³⁹ Such interactions reveal that, at least initially, the willingness to kill was not fully internalized by perpetrators and had to be actively reinforced before they engaged in violence.

Secondly, perpetrators sometimes recognize their victims' subjectivity and needs. While dehumanization typically reduces victims to an anonymous mass, in some cases, perpetrators remembered their victims' names, professions, and origins, indicating a humanizing gaze. Yet, identifying potential victims as *Germans* did not prevent perpetrators from killing their victims.⁴⁰ Lang discusses an episode where SS

38 Mariot, p. 117.

39 Cited in Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', p. 232.

40 Weißmann, p. 118; Mariot, p. 110.

guards who had previously interacted with Roma and Sinti prisoners on familiar terms had displayed visible unease during their victims' executions – yet, still carried out the killings.⁴¹ Similarly, Stangl, a commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps, described the victims as a *huge mass* and avoided interacting with them directly, admitting feeling distress about the violence and acknowledging the victims' individualities. Weißmann adds another example wherein a perpetrator acknowledged a pastor's religious needs, allowing him to visit another cleric before his execution.⁴² Such an act would have required the perpetrator to first recognize his victim as a human being.⁴³ A very different example shows something similar: perpetrators would sometimes set the beards of their Jewish victims on fire, an act that humiliated their victims on a personal level, suggesting that the perpetrators understood what symbols held significance for their victims.⁴⁴

A third point concerns the recognition of victims' individual emotions, which underscores awareness of their subjectivity as human beings. Mariot and Lang emphasize incidents in which Nazis acknowledged the bravery of Jewish women facing execution.⁴⁵ Mariot notes that Nazis also recognized their victims' tenderness: 'The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head, and seemed to explain something to him.'⁴⁶ Such demonstrations of care and empathy did not cease in the face of death. Even immediately before execution, Nazis witnessed victims showing empathy for others and tenderness toward fellow prisoners: 'They lay down in front of the dead or injured people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots.'⁴⁷ Such a gaze frames the other as a subject rather than a dehumanized object.

Closely related is a fourth observation: perpetrators at times identified with their victims. Mariot cites examples of Nazi executioners who upon seeing small children, were reminded of their own. One recalls: 'Particularly striking to me was the sight of a family who passed by in a line of Jews, and which included a girl of about twelve years. I couldn't

41 Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', p. 230.

42 Ibid., p. 116.

43 Ibid., p. 117.

44 Weißmann, p. 120.

45 Mariot, p. 112; Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', p. 231.

46 Mariot, p. 113.

47 Ibid.

help but think of my daughter of the same age, who was also blonde.⁴⁸ Mariot also includes other accounts in which the resemblance between one's own child and that of a victim was less direct, yet the encounter still evoked empathy. These reactions by the perpetrators stand in sharp contrast to those of perceiving the other as a dehumanized object.

The fifth and final observation concerns the emotional and moral discomfort that could persist even when perpetrators had already engaged in killing. Weißmann observes that, both during and following mass executions, perpetrators were encouraged to consume excessive amounts of alcohol and drugs as a means of numbing themselves and alleviating their discomfort.⁴⁹ Such evidence indicates that the inhibition to kill was still strong among many perpetrators, and even after mobilization to engage in violence had succeeded, discomfort in the face of victims' humanity could remain.

In summary, these empirical insights challenge the assumption that dehumanization is a necessary precondition for mass violence. Firstly, the examples demonstrate that external encouragement was often necessary to motivate and reassure perpetrators of the Holocaust, as many did not possess the internal conviction to carry out deadly acts. Secondly, victims were not always perceived as an anonymous mass; perpetrators often recognized the subjectivity and, in some cases, the individual needs of their victims, indicating a level of acknowledgment of their victims' humanness. Thirdly, executioners observed emotions as tenderness and bravery in their victims, letting them appear very human. Fourthly, executioners identified with their victims and were reminded of their own families or lives by their victims' behaviour. Lastly, the discomfort experienced by some perpetrators during or after the act of killing underscores that their moral inhibitions were not entirely eliminated, suggesting that dehumanization did not fully override the perpetrators' capacity for moral reflection. Together, these insights underscore the need to reflect on dehumanization processes.

Developing an Integrated Framework of Dehumanization

The following sections develop the article's theoretical framework in two steps. First, the article outlines Leader Maynard's ideas on ide-

48 Mariot, p. 110.

49 Weißmann, p. 116.

ology, focusing on his emphasis on the heterogeneity of ideological commitment. Second, it uses his framework of ideology as a lens to examine dehumanization in greater depth. From this perspective, it develops a rendering of dehumanization that emphasizes the interpretative nature of collective identity formation, perceptions of humanity, norms, and morality, as well as the varying ways individuals adopt and engage with ideologies.

IDEOLOGIES FROM LEADER MAYNARD'S PERSPECTIVE

Leader Maynard is well known for his incisive research on ideology.⁵⁰ He defines *ideologies* as 'the distinctive political worldviews of individuals, groups, and organizations, that provide sets of interpretive and evaluative ideas for guiding political thought and action.'⁵¹ He emphasizes that ideologies do not operate in isolation: in the context of mass atrocities, for example, they interact with factors such as political instability or peer pressure. The presence of these dynamics does not diminish the role of ideology but rather highlights its entanglement with broader social and political processes: Mass violence is complex.⁵²

In his view, ideologies are systems of different messages. For instance, it would be overly simplistic to reduce Nazi ideologies solely to hatred of Jews.⁵³ In this case, Leader Maynard argues the following:

One has to get to grips with the idealized representation of military life and ethnic community embedded in the legacy of the World War I *Kampfgemeinschaft*, the long legacy of Christian anti-Semitism in Central Europe, the centrality of racial science authorized by the German medical and academic professions, the distinctively Nazi virtue-systems of obedience and merciless toughness, their quasi-deterministic conceptions of historical time, and much more besides.⁵⁴

50 Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology'; Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology'; Leader Maynard, 'Ideology and Armed Conflict'; Leader Maynard and Benesch; Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*.

51 Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, p. 4.

52 Ibid.

53 Jews were, of course, not the only victims of the Nazis, but were targeted alongside Romani people, disabled individuals, political opponents, LGBTQ+, Jehovah's Witnesses, Slavic people, prisoners of war, Freemasons, and Afro-Germans.

54 Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology', p. 826.

To account for such complexity, Leader Maynard suggests three ways in which ideologies work: firstly, they may be part of 'active motives'⁵⁵ that inspire people to commit violence. Secondly, 'legitimizing perceptions'⁵⁶ may allow for and make sense of violence without motivating it. Thirdly, ideologies may provide 'rationalizing resources'⁵⁷ that help perpetrators deal with violence after the deed and prepare them for the next act of violence. He explains that for each actor, the strength of the three 'pathways'⁵⁸ may vary – one may be stronger than the other two for any given person.

Exploring why people believe in ideologies, Leader Maynard argues that people rely on key 'epistemic authorities'⁵⁹ to gain knowledge. When people hear the same thing over and over again from these authorities, it becomes established as a kind of collective knowledge, as something 'everybody says.'⁶⁰ This reliance is influenced by factors such as the perceived trustworthiness or status of the authorities, alignment with historical, cultural, or personal beliefs, and the degree to which people stand to benefit from conforming. Accordingly, Leader Maynard critiques researchers who force a binary distinction between *true believers* in an ideology and those who do not believe at all, arguing that such an understanding fails to account for heterogeneity in people and their beliefs.⁶¹ Instead, he advocates for a nuanced perspective. He notes that, 'if killers are not found to match expectations of the "raving ideologue" acting on the basis of "insane ideological commitment," it is quickly inferred that they were relatively uninfluenced by ideology in general.'⁶² He proceeds to debunk the assumption that only specific actors are affected by ideologies, arguing that people are influenced in different ways and to varying degrees.⁶³

Leader Maynard argues that people may still adhere to an ideology, even if their level of commitment to or expression of that commitment in their behavior differs.⁶⁴ He aptly states that

55 Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology', p. 831.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 831.

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, p. 830.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 831.

61 Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, p. 10.

62 Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology', p. 827.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 827.

64 Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, p. 10; Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology', p. 828.

[T]hey have often only come to accept justifications of extreme violence relatively recently, and as tacitly endorsed notions or taken-for-granted assumptions rather than substantive, self-conscious “beliefs.” But this does not make such perpetrators “unideological.” Most still internalize key hardline justifications of mass killing – even if rather selectively or half-heartedly – which can be vital in explaining their participation in violence.⁶⁵

This argument already hints at the direction the analysis takes below: it is assumed that people interpret ideologies differently based on their world views, personal experiences, and values. This also means that ideologies have a stronger weight for some people than for others. In Leader Maynard’s words: ‘Ideological beliefs do not need to be held pathologically, with one hundred per cent conviction, with explicit and self-conscious emphasis, or on the basis of many years of prior commitment.’⁶⁶ Thus, even if a perpetrator lacks hatred for their victims or acts partly for non-ideological reasons, the ideological beliefs they have internalized or are willing to believe in may still enable them to commit violence.

DEHUMANIZATION THROUGH THE LENS OF IDEOLOGY

Viewed through the lens of ideology, dehumanization appears not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a system of interconnected beliefs that reinforce one another. It gains meaning in connection with other ideas, shaping both perceptions of the world and the exclusion of specific groups. In this sense, ideologies provide a structured frame for interpreting reality, situating dehumanization within broader patterns of meaning-making and social ordering. It does not allow a simple or even universal answer to the question of what it means to be human (or dehumanized).⁶⁷ Such an answer would not only differ geographically and over time but also be dependent on the actors that shape the understanding of what it means to be human.⁶⁸ The notion of humanity

65 Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, p. 23.

66 Leader Maynard, ‘Role of Ideology’, p. 827.

67 Cf. Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 2.

68 Maria Kronfeldner, ‘Introduction. Mapping Dehumanization Studies’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 1–36 (pp. 2, 5); Siep Stuurman, ‘Dehumanization Before the Columbian Exchange’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 39–51 (pp. 39, 40.); Johannes Steizinger, ‘Dehumanizing Strategies in Nazi Ideology and Their Anthropological Context’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*,

– and, with it, dehumanization – takes on different contours, for example, in the genocide against the Tutsi, under National Socialism, and in the Cambodian genocide. As Kontler aptly summarizes: ‘The concept of humanity is not an intrinsic one, but a contextually defined cultural product shaped by processes of philosophical, historical, social-anthropological, and political self-reflection.’⁶⁹ Thus, the discourse on what it means to be human differs,⁷⁰ shaping at the same time the process of dehumanization: dehumanization is tied to discursively shared ideas of humanity that are inextricably linked to ideological contexts and the perpetrators’ perceptions. This leads to adopting the first part of Savage’s definition, understanding dehumanization as ‘a denial that a certain group is “equally” human, no matter how that “humanity” is defined.’⁷¹

Despite the elusiveness of the idea, dehumanization processes follow a certain logic: to identify a group as not being part of humanity involves the construction of in- and out-groups, so that *they* are identified as

ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 98–111 (p. 98, 100, 101); Marie-Luisa Frick, ‘Dehumanization and Human Rights’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 187–200 (p. 188); Leader Maynard and Luft, p. 2.

69 László Kontler, ‘Humanity’ and its Limits in Early Modern European Thought’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. by Maria Kronfeldner, pp. 52–63 (p. 52).

70 Scholars have contemplated what it means to be human. They stress typical human assets and specific characterizations such as language, openness, emotionality, warmth, and rationality, to name but a few. Every human being is considered as having those traits. See Herbert C. Kelman, ‘Reflections on the Social and Psychological Processes of Legitimization and Delegitimization’, in *The Psychology of Legitimacy: Emerging Perspectives on Ideology, Justice, and Intergroup Relations*, ed. by J.T. Jost and B. Major (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 54–73 (p. 58); Nick Haslam, ‘Dehumanization: An Integrative Review’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review: An Official Journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.* 10.3 (2006), pp. 252–64 (p. 256). Yet, such enumerations are not without pitfalls: By this definition, some disabilities would make people non-human. See Kronfeldner, ‘Introduction’, p. 6; Eva F. Kittay, ‘The Ethics of Philosophizing: Ideal Theory and the Exclusion of People with Severe Cognitive Disabilities’, in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, ed. by Lisa Tessman (Springer Netherlands, 2009), pp. 121–46; Gerald V. O’Brien, *Framing the Maron: The Social Construction of Feeble-mindedness in the American Eugenic Era*, Disability History (Manchester University Press, 2015); Heather E. Keith and Kenneth D. Keith, *Intellectual Disability* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013). Other scholars shift the focus to qualities such as moral standing, competence, or agency, focusing on what individuals can do or deserve rather than what they inherently possess. See Heather Gray, Kurt Gray and Daniel Wegner, ‘Dimensions of Mind Perception’, *Science*, 315 (2007), 619; Susan T. Fiske, ‘Envy up, Scorn Down: How Comparison Divides Us’, *The American Psychologist*, 65.8 (2010), pp. 698–706; Jared Piazza, Justin F. Landy and Geoffrey P. Goodwin, ‘Cruel Nature: Harmfulness as an Important, Overlooked Dimension in Judgments of Moral Standing’, *Cognition*, 131.1 (2014), pp. 108–24; Justin Sytsma and Edouard Machery, ‘The Two Sources of Moral Standing’, *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 3.3 (2012), pp. 303–24; Stuurman; Kronfeldner, ‘Introduction’.

71 Savage, p. 144.

different from the opposing group ('them'). A stable collective identity is assigned to the *other*, and characteristics are attributed to the members of that group equally.⁷² These characteristics are inseparably connected with values;⁷³ it is not only the different culture, skin colour, or religion, but also the ascribed values that matter in shaping conceptions of *the other*.⁷⁴ Taking the example of Nazi propaganda, certain physical features ascribed to Jews – such as an allegedly distinctive nose shape – were neither neutral nor stood on their own but were associated with negative stereotypes such as being greedy.⁷⁵ While various identities may exist simultaneously, within processes of building in- and out-group distinctions one collective identity is identified that overshadows everything else.⁷⁶ Being an academic or war veteran of the First World War no longer counted as defining identities once being Jewish, homosexual, or *asocial* became the primary imposed identity. Neglecting the parallel existence of many different identities and individual traits, this process is therefore consistent with identifying the *other* as members of one homogenous group.⁷⁷ The grades and nuances of the out-group's individual identities are dominated by the perception of a collective identity held in contrast to one's in-group identity.⁷⁸

Such perceptions are subjective, shaped by interpretation and the identity assigned to others.⁷⁹ Perpetrators discern victim groups as being restricted with precise boundaries, such as in the Nuremberg Laws.⁸⁰ Not only is the out-group formed in distinction to the in-group,

72 Wolfgang Benz, *Vom Vorurteil zur Gewalt: Politische und soziale Feindbilder in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, (Verlag Herder, 2020), p. 40; Moshman, p. 121.

73 Cf. Lajos L. Brons, 'Othering, an Analysis', *Transcience, a Journal of Global Studies*, 6.1 (2015), pp. 69–90 (pp. 70, 71).

74 Ho-Won Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis* (SAGE, 2010), p. 12.

75 Bernice Schrank, '"Cutting Off Your Nose to Spite Your Race": Jewish Stereotypes, Media Images, Cultural Hybridity', *sho*, 25.4 (2007), pp. 18–42 (p. 27).

76 That is also why in some conflicts, religious or ethnic identities are more important than in others. See Srdjan Vucetic, 'Identity and Foreign Policy', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. by Gizem Arikan and Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom (Oxford University Press, 2019).

77 Meyer, pp. 106, 107; Gregory H. Stanton, 'Could the Rwandan Genocide Have been Prevented?', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6.2 (2004), pp. 211–28.

78 Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Guide*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2011); Chalk and Jonassohn; Sune Q. Jensen, 'Othering, Identity Formation and Agency', *Qualitative Studies*, 2.2 (2011), pp. 63–78 (p. 65); Dawes, p. 52.

79 Cf. Valentino, p. 2; Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Polity, 2010), p. 113; Chalk and Jonassohn, p. 25.

80 Richard Heideman, 'Legalizing Hate: The Significance of the Nuremberg Laws and the Post-War Nuremberg Trials', *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, 39.1 (2017), pp. 5–24.

but the converse is also true.⁸¹ The in-group perceives itself as a homogenous group with positive characteristics 'that draw heavily on well-established historical tropes and myths and which are difficult to change rapidly.'⁸² Thus, while the out-group is perceived as different, the sense of being a member of the in-group provides a feeling of belonging, loyalty, and togetherness.⁸³ This perception has to be embedded into an ideological understanding of the world, where *the other* fits into a certain place.⁸⁴ The process does not have to be perceived by both groups in the same way. For instance, the Nazis perceived German Jews as *others* not belonging to their group, while most Jews perceived themselves as German citizens.⁸⁵

We can therefore deduce that dehumanization processes are not only based on the perception of *the other* but also of one's own collective. Dehumanization is about the relationship between both identities: the German *Herrenrasse* was considered superior to the Jewish *Untermenschen*. Perceiving *the other* as dehumanized is directly linked to the discursively negotiated ideological context. The perceived distance between these collective identities is reinforced through stereotypes, with the out-group viewed as embodying characteristics and values that differentiate them from the in-group.⁸⁶ They are perceived as distant and strange and any sense of them belonging to one's in-group – in this case, their *humanness* – is lost. For example, the perceived superiority of Nazi culture, viewed as a vital component of

81 Anthonie Holslag, 'The Process of Othering from the "Social Imaginaire" to Physical Acts: An Anthropological Approach', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 9.1 (2015), pp. 96–113 (p. 96).

82 Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology', p. 24.

83 Sabina Čehajić and Rupert Brown, 'Not in My Name: A Social Psychological Study of Antecedents and Consequences of Acknowledgment of In-Group Atrocities', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 3.2 (2008), pp. 195–211 (p. 195); Holslag, p. 108; James E. Waller, 'The Ordinarity of Extraordinary Evil: the Making of Perpetrators of Genocide and Mass Killing', in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by O. Jensen and C. Szejnmann, *Holocaust and Its Contexts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 145–64 (p. 152); Daniel Chirot and Clark R. McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?: The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 57.

84 Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology', p. 24.

85 Cf. Chalk and Jonassohn; cf. Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology', p. 30; Frances E. Frey and Linda R. Tropp, 'Being Seen as Individuals Versus as Group Members: Extending Research on Metaperception to Intergroup Contexts', *Personality and Social Psychology Review an Official Journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, 10.3 (2006), pp. 265–80; Caroline Holmqvist, 'Undoing War: War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare', *Millennium*, 41.3 (2013), pp. 535–52 (p. 537).

86 Michael Ranta, 'Master Narratives and the Pictorial Construction of Otherness: Anti-Semitic Images in the Third Reich and Beyond', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 15.1 (2017); Benz, *Vom Vorurteil*.

an Aryan identity, contrasted sharply with the supposed inferiority of the *culture-less Jews*. This highlights an aspect of dehumanization that underscores the distance between both group identities. When, during National Socialism, philosophers posited the existence of a *Rassenseele* (race soul), they argued that without such a race soul, Jews were incapable of forming a collective identity with a distinctive culture.⁸⁷ In contrast, Aryans presented themselves as having a distinct culture built on a long, shared history.⁸⁸ Such group understanding, although somehow strict, is also dynamic: perpetrators tend to broaden the imagined boundaries between both groups with their increasing consolidation of power.⁸⁹

Although scholars have stated that perpetrators of the Holocaust did not target their victims according to their victims' actions but, rather, their perceived group-belonging,⁹⁰ Nazis interpreted such behaviour through an ideological lens, using it as confirmation of beliefs they already took to be true:

The SS crew accompanying the train did not hide their amusement at the sight of the men and women squatting wherever they could, on platforms, between the tracks, and the German passengers openly expressed their disgust: "People like them deserve their fate, you only have to look at them. They are [...] dirty pigs; that is clear."⁹¹

This quote reveals dehumanization as 'both ontological precondition and process'.⁹² That means that dehumanization is understood as a precondition *and* a result of violence – the people in the quote were perceived as acting inhumanely as their actions were perceived through

87 Steizinger, p. 100; Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 107, 108; Stuurman, p. 50.

88 David B. Dennis, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 15, 16.

89 Valentino, p. 27; Alexander L. Hinton, *Why did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*, California Series in Public Anthropology, 11, 4th edn (University of California Press, 2010), p. 11; Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, 'Gender and the Future of Genocide Studies and Prevention', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 7.1 (2012), pp. 89–107 (p. 98).

90 Uğur Üngör, 'Studying Mass Violence: Pitfalls, Problems, and Promises', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 7.1 (2012) 68–80 (p. 68); John K. Roth, 'The Ethics of Uniqueness', in *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, ed. by Alan S. Rosenbaum, 3rd edn (Westview Press, 2009), pp. 21–32 (p. 22); Chirot and McCauley, pp. 23, 24, 68.

91 My translation, cited in Meyer, p. 27.

92 Lang, 'Explaining Genocide', p. 179.

an ideological lens. However, their behaviour was a consequence of having already been dehumanized, leaving them with no choice but to act as they had. In this way, the logic of dehumanization feeds itself, ensuring its own confirmation. This renders in- and out-group processes complex; they do not follow simple linear logic.

Despite this complexity, the outcome of such processes is clear: they serve to legitimize violence against others. Scholars have already stressed that this is based on the exclusion of the out-group from the moral universe,⁹³ meaning that moral rules no longer apply to the out-group.⁹⁴ However, criticism has shown that the relationship between dehumanization and morality is more complex than it first appears.⁹⁵ The other is not excluded from the moral universe, but is assigned a specific place within it, namely as the embodiment of immorality. In Nazi ideology, Jews and other victim groups were depicted as being criminals, draining the nation, and posing an existential threat, all of which were cast as profoundly immoral behaviour. In this logic, Nazi actions were not only justified but morally righteous. Such an understanding is possible because moral rules operate along horizontal and vertical dimensions and shift over time and across societies.⁹⁶ While the out-group stayed in a moral universe, they did not deserve the same treatment as the in-group 'because of the alleged nature of the out-group, [...] members of that group are worthy of the same treatment or consideration that would be afforded to members of the in-group.'⁹⁷

Ideologies of dehumanization thus transform the perception of morality: what had been morally wrong becomes morally right,⁹⁸ as morality – the sum of a society's values and norms – provides 'a code of conduct that guides behaviour.'⁹⁹ It shapes society by delineating which behaviours are desired and which are prohibited, as already illustrated by the earlier example of the Nuremberg Laws. These laws rigidly classified individuals as full-, half-, or quarter-Jewish and prescribed strict,

93 Moshman, p. 123; Hinton, p. 284.

94 Leader Maynard and Benesch, p. 80; Wibke Timmermann, 'Counteracting Hate Speech as a Way of Preventing Genocidal Violence', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 3.3 (2008), pp. 353–74 (p. 354); Chalk and Jonassohn, p. 28.

95 Michel, p. 286.

96 Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 31.

97 Savage, p. 144.

98 Peter Stemmer, 'Die Rechtfertigung moralischer Normen', *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 58.4 (2004), pp. 483–504 (p. 483).

99 Bicchieri, p. 31.

inflexible rules interaction and dictating whom to marry, from whom not to buy, and how to behave toward those identified by the terms of the system.¹⁰⁰ Such an example shows that ideologies are not only translated into concrete social norms but also become institutionalized.¹⁰¹

Such social norms show people which behaviour is approved and which is disliked.¹⁰² Complying with the norm set 'is usually a minimum requirement for admittance into a social group and for continued acceptance within the social group.'¹⁰³ In the case of a genocide, the generally valid norm¹⁰⁴ *you shall not kill* has to be adjusted or replaced by other norms to legitimize not only the dehumanization of specific groups but also the choice to act based on the perception of those groups as dehumanized.¹⁰⁵ If dehumanization legitimizes violence, it implies that an existing inhibition to kill must first be overcome.¹⁰⁶ Such inhibitions are shaped by norms and values instilled by epistemic authorities. Thus, who is considered legitimately killable and who is

100 Heideman; Oleksandr Kobrynsky, 'Defining the Jew: The Origins of the Nuremberg Laws', in *Nazi Law: From Nuremberg to Nuremberg*, ed. by John J. Michalczyk (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 35–47.

101 Savage, p. 156.

102 Bicchieri, p. 30; Antje Wiener, *The Invisible Constitution of Politics: Contested Norms and International Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 38; Nicole Deitelhoff, *Überzeugung in der Politik: Grundzüge einer Diskurstheorie internationalen Regierens*, (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), p. 37.

103 Trine Flockhart, 'Socialization and Democratization: a Tenuous but Intriguing Link', in *Socializing Democratic Norms: The Role of International Organizations for the Construction of Europe*, ed. by Trine Flockhart (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), pp. 1–20 (p. 14).

104 Although the norm 'you shall not kill' is considered universal, there are many exceptions to this norm, as in armed conflict or in countries that apply the death penalty. Thus, a universal ethical claim that prohibits killing in general does not apply; instead, 'compassion and morality' are selectively distributed. See Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 112.

105 Lang, 'Explaining Genocide', p. 183; Alex J. Bellamy, *Massacres and Morality: Mass Atrocities in an Age of Civilian Immunity* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Savage, pp. 146, 147.

106 This inhibition is inextricably linked to dehumanization, as most theoretical approaches assume that it must be overcome to commit severe violence. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Dialektik der Ordnung: Die Moderne und der Holocaust* (Europ. Verl.-Anst, 2002); Maureen Hiebert, 'Theorizing Destruction: Reflections on the State of Comparative Genocide Theory', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 3.3 (2008), pp. 309–339; Scott Straus, 'Retreating from the Brink: Theorizing Mass Violence and the Dynamics of Restraint', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10.2 (2012), pp. 343–62; Smith, *Less than Human*. There is no academic consensus on from where an inhibition to the act of killing comes. Scholars argue that it may be based on psychological factors [see Johannes Laimighofer, *Die politischen und sozial-psychologischen Ursachen zur Überwindung der Tötungshemmung bei Tätern eines Genozids* (University of Vienna, 2012)], biologically presupposed [see Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Little Brown, 1996)], or, as this article assumes, socialized.

not varies depending on time and place, as well as who is perceived as fully human and who is not.¹⁰⁷

Epistemic authorities share a perspective that explains the world, its instabilities, and its dangers in simplifying terms. Such contents are then connected to other, everyday ideological messages such as Nazi propaganda about practices such as eating healthy bread or using saunas.¹⁰⁸ Drawing on existing knowledge and combining different ideas, ideologies are amplified, and interpreted throughout the process, though some ideological messages are more stable than others. They are communicated over speeches, media, and propaganda, but are also institutionalized in laws, organizations, and businesses, or generally in social hierarchies.¹⁰⁹ These messages reflect and reinforce stereotypes and biases already present within the in-group, drawing on established discourses and collective imaginaries rather than arising in isolation.¹¹⁰

Yet, based on personal experiences, life contexts, world views, and characteristics, the framing of ideological topics still leaves space for individual interpretations.¹¹¹ People adapt ideologies differently and connect them with their existing experiences and lives. Not everyone has the same depth of understanding of an ideology, nor do they rely on key epistemic authorities to the same extent. It is not even necessary that individuals agree with an entire ideology: They need only accept those parts of an ideology that are sufficient to legitimize violence to feel justified when acting violently.¹¹² While some people believe in ideological knowledge fiercely, and internalize the message of dehumanization of certain out-groups, others are less committed. They might believe in the ideas communicated by an ideology but internalize those ideas to a lesser degree than more passionate believers.

Here, the interconnections of different social dynamics such as peer pressure or the authority of epistemic authorities play a role along

107 Karl-Dieter Opp, 'Die Entstehung sozialer Normen als geplanter und spontaner Prozeß', in *Normen und Institutionen: Entstehung und Wirkungen; [Theoretische Analysen und Empirische Befunde]*, ed. by Regina Metze, *Leipziger soziologische Studien*, 2 (Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl., 2000), pp. 35–64 (p. 57); Eona Bell, 'Ethnicity Versus Culture', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, ed. by Anthony D. Smith and others (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), pp. 1–2; Savage, p. 151.

108 Weitz, p. 113.

109 Kronfeldner, 'Introduction', p. 5; cf. Ranta; Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology'.

110 Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations, International Relations in a Constructed World* (M.E. Sharpe, 2007), p. 69.

111 Steizinger, p. 100; Savage, p. 146.

112 Leader Maynard and Benesch, p. 74; cf. Savage, p. 150.

with the individual position of people who perceive the world through a certain lens. Believing in part of an ideology, even to the extent of dehumanizing a specific group based on the terms of that ideology, is not the same as choosing to act based on that belief. People are social entities that are influenced not only by epistemic authorities but also by the world and how they see it. They act ambiguously. They might follow an ideology consciously, although their subconscious might tell them something different. Even if they recognize complexities within the world, some people are able to interpret them in a way that lets them adhere to an ideology and endure the contradictions and ambiguities in that belief system. Dehumanization is not a fixed state but a fluid process shaped by individual interpretation. People differ in how strongly they adopt dehumanizing views and how they integrate into ideological contexts. Rather than being a binary state, dehumanization exists on a spectrum – ranging from subtle forms to its most extreme expression in which in-group and out-group identities are perceived as maximally distant.¹¹³

In sum, dehumanization is an interpretative process that differs in time and space. In- and out-group processes discursively negotiate who is part of humanity and who is not. Different norms, values, and moral standards are perceived to apply to the out-group rather than to one's in-group. Thus dehumanization, as part of an ideology, is a logical step, embedded in complex contexts, constituting an evolving, dynamic process that is integrated into broader structures of identity perception. The perception of distance between one's in-group identity and that of an out-group also shifts over time and unfolds in distinct ways across different cases of mass violence.

APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous sections have shown that in-group and out-group identities are shaped along the lines of ideology. This process is often dominated by one actor. In any case, relationships between collective identities (in- and out-groups) are subject to change. The perceived distance between such collectives may either decrease or, in the case of conflict, increase. Dehumanization is not without context but rather embedded into identity processes that unfold over time. While the understanding of *humanness* is an ideological process that is bound in time and space

113 Cf. Moshman; Savage.

on a collective level, it is also interpreted and adapted on an individual level based on life experiences, world views, characteristics, and the individual importance attributed to values and morals.

The following section elaborates on the five challenges to dehumanization drawn from Lang's, Mariot's and Weißmann's empirical observations of the Holocaust. Firstly, that external encouragement was often necessary for perpetrators to engage in violence as they often lacked the internal conviction to carry out these acts. Secondly, victims were not perceived as an anonymous mass. Instead, perpetrators recognized the subjectivity of their victims and, in some cases, their individual needs. Thirdly, perpetrators observed human emotions, such as tenderness or bravery, in their victims. Fourthly, perpetrators identified with their victims, showing enough empathy to recognize their victims as subjects. Finally, the discomfort experienced during the act of killing highlights that moral inhibitions were not entirely eliminated. Seeking to address these conclusions within a broader empirical context, the section ahead builds on the article's theoretical framework to delve further into reflections on dehumanization.

How Nazi ideology spread on a collective level has been well researched.¹¹⁴ However, it is still worth briefly examining how *humanness* and dehumanization were interpreted from the perspective of such ideology. The dehumanization of Jews as part of an ideology propagated by the Nazis built on historic patterns of global antisemitism¹¹⁵ and was connected to existing narratives,¹¹⁶ prejudices, and fears.¹¹⁷ As Leader Maynard shows, ideologies are rarely new but 'the radical reinterpretation of [...] conventional ideas within extreme ideological narratives of threat, criminal conspiracy, patriotic valour, and military necessity.'¹¹⁸

114 Carl Müller Frøland, *Understanding Nazi ideology: The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith* (McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2020); Fred Weinstein, *The Dynamics of Nazism: Leadership, Ideology, and the Holocaust* (Elsevier Science, 2014).

115 Jonathan Sarna, 'American Anti-Semitism', in *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism*, ed. by David Berger (Jewish Publication Society, 2010), pp. 115–28; Benz, *Vom Vorurteil*.

116 Louis Feldman, 'Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World', in *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism*, ed. by David Berger, (Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 15–42; Frederick Schweitzer and Marvin Perry, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Walter Laqueur, *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

117 Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 5, 6; David Welch, 'Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39.2 (2004), 213–38 (pp. 213, 214.); Benz, *Vom Vorurteil*.

118 Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, p. 7.

Under National Socialism, strong in- and out-group processes were observable, as an ideology was developed that depicted an image of Jews in distinction to an Aryan race. The process started slowly: at first, Jews were verbally identified as enemies. From 1939, the discourse took on 'a distinctly more radical and murderous tone.'¹¹⁹ Jews were not only accused of waging war against Germany but also framed as parasites.¹²⁰ Any action against them was legitimized by the threat they posed to the wellbeing of the German people. Events, actions, history – everything was interpreted through this lens and took shape according to a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹²¹

Particularly between 1941 and 1945, antisemitic propaganda was part of the daily discourse to which every German was exposed.¹²² Gradually, *Jews* became more and more distant from *Aryans*, being framed as a distinct kind with specific character traits and values. The propaganda was also an attempt to gradually re-educate the population in the values and norms of the Nazi ideology.¹²³ Older norms had to be replaced by an ideology that depicted the other as an enemy to whom different values and norms applied than those suitable for one's in-group. Although discrimination and prejudices against Jews were not new, the degree to which Nazi ideology restructured society to this end was unprecedented. Prejudices were amplified, and all Jews were framed as enemies part of a threatening collective.¹²⁴ The differences between Aryans and Jews were reinforced with not only negative images of the Jews but also positive messages about Aryans, who were framed, for example, as 'the healthy, clean, hardworking, athletic Aryan man, married to a woman of the same race who produced many children for him.'¹²⁵ Early on, norms were constituted such as *do not buy at Jewish shops*, *do not have relationships with Jews*, and *do not include Jews in*

¹¹⁹ Herf, p. 4.

¹²⁰ Narratives in which the in-group describes the out-group as cockroaches, parasites, packages, demons, or moral enemies are common in genocides in general and not just in the Holocaust in particular. See Marie Fleming, 'Genocide and the Body Politic in the Time of Modernity', in *The Specter of Genocide*, ed. by Gellately and Kiernan, pp. 97–114 (p. 109); Timmermann, p. 354; Chirot and McCauley, p. 68; Leader Maynard and Benesch, p. 80. Although these narratives clearly frame the victims as non-human, it is doubtful that perpetrators perceived them as literal parasites. Cf. Smith, 'Some Conceptual Deficits'.

¹²¹ Herf, p. 6; Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2007); Weitz.

¹²² Herf, p. 12; Cf. Leader Maynard, 'Role of Ideology'; Dennis, p. 15.

¹²³ Welch, p. 214; Cf. Weitz.

¹²⁴ Herf, p. 12.

¹²⁵ Sémelin, p. 34.

the German *Volkskörper*.¹²⁶ Thus, the perceived distance between the two groups increased, and the dehumanizing discourse on Jews and other victims of the Nazis progressed. Eventually, Jews came to be depicted as parasites, cultureless, and evil.

Many non-Jewish Germans may have rationally accepted this in- and out-group distinction¹²⁷ and gradually come to adopt a reinterpreted reality and worldview, as well as new beliefs and new identities.¹²⁸ At the same time, individuals who subscribe to ideologies that deeply de-individualize people may, in some cases, have those ideologies perforated by personal contact with members of the de-individualized group who share parts of their own identities, such as those related to religion, origin, profession, neighbourhood, or parenthood.

In some isolated cases during the Holocaust, this hampered the killings. In most, it did not. How could Nazis dehumanize their victims, while simultaneously recognizing them as German citizens or remembering their names or professions?¹²⁹ After all, the Nazis were not a homogenous group, but represented the broader German population, including different genders,¹³⁰ ages,¹³¹ and classes.¹³² Individual characters, temperaments, and values – ‘the individual moral self-conception’¹³³ also came into play, influencing the perpetrators’ responses to the Jewish population. It follows that although Nazi ideologies referred to long-existing narratives and prejudices, not everyone believed in, internalized, or interpreted them and their corresponding norms in the same way. The internalization of ideologies and accompanying norms proceeds at different rates and degrees, again depending on individual

126 Weitz.

127 Cf. Annika van Baar and Wim Huisman, ‘The Oven Builders of the Holocaust: A Case Study of Corporate Complicity in International Crimes’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 52.6 (2012), pp. 1033–50; Kjell Anderson, ‘Who Was I to Stop the Killing? Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), pp. 39–63 (p. 39).

128 *Security Communities*, ed. by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, Cambridge studies in international relations, 62 (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Flockhart; Bellamy.

129 Weißmann, p. 118.

130 Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); James Wyllie, *Nazi Wives: The Women at the Top of Hitler’s Germany* (St. Martin’s Press, 2020). The inclusion of ‘different genders’ refers to both men and women within the Nazi movement. However, this does not imply recognition of non-binary identities, as Nazi ideology was based on a strictly biological and binary understanding of sex.

131 Christian Niemeyer, *Die dunklen Seiten der Jugendbewegung: Vom Wandervogel zur Hitlerjugend*, 2nd edn (UVK Verlag; Narr Francke Attempto, 2022).

132 William Brustein, *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925 - 1933* (Yale University Press, 1998).

133 Savage, p. 145.

history, upbringing, beliefs, political interest, and intellectual capacity, as well as the individual weight a person attributes to morals.¹³⁴ The fact that dehumanization was not fully concluded at the individual level underscores its complex and processual nature, yet in most cases this did not diminish the capacity to kill. However, one should remember that it was not only the perpetrators who were heterogenous. Although the Nazi ideology depicted the 'Jewish other' as homogenous, they were not. Whether they were strangers or former acquaintances, they shared a history with the perpetrators. Individual sympathy for the other person, similarities with friends, and personal animosities therefore influenced the degree of dehumanization.

Considering these complexities hints at why people still needed encouragement or felt discomfort after killing.¹³⁵ As mentioned above, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not just a few pathological individuals, but often ordinary people who may never have killed before.¹³⁶ Although they believed in the ideology, they sometimes connected with their victims on a human level and had strong, socialized inhibitions to committing murder.¹³⁷ Because of this tension, they relied on alcohol and drugs to numb themselves or on epistemic authorities to reinforce their ideological convictions and provide reassurance and moral justification for their actions. This did not always work out: sometimes the discomfort remained, and they were able to see through the dehumanized framing of the other person, recognizing fragments of their humanity – a tender gaze, signs of courage, or empathy.

As previously argued, there is a significant difference between believing in an ideology theoretically and acting based on it. Establishing ideological knowledge may be supported by physical measures such as the forced separation of groups, as in cases of apartheid. As soon as people are isolated from societal life through ghettoization or the imposition of other physical restrictions, the victims of that separation become generalized 'metaphysical persons' rather than real, embodied individuals in the minds of the dominant group. One's everyday life is separated from others: normal human interaction does not take place.

¹³⁴ Although National Socialism lasted for roughly 12 years, this was a relatively short period for its participants to experience a complete internalization of its ideologies to the extent that all their preexisting knowledge would be entirely displaced.

¹³⁵ This is also relevant when considering the occurrence of PTSD.

¹³⁶ Some had killed during the First World War, but in a different context, which does not apply to the younger generation.

¹³⁷ Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', pp. 232, 233.

Instead, stereotyping becomes common,¹³⁸ and the likelihood of everyday interactions, which could prove biases wrong, is minimized.¹³⁹ In contrast, the direct act of killing is much more personal. In such cases, the lack of physical distance from one's victim means that their crying, pleading, and pain cannot be ignored.¹⁴⁰ This may explain why some perpetrators felt discomfort while, after, or even planning to kill: taking a life is distinct from simply believing someone is inferior or not human. Some people still needed encouragement, either from other people or from drugs and alcohol.

The considerations above have demonstrated how the perspective on dehumanization developed in this article can address the challenges raised in the second section. The analysis has highlighted that the discomfort after killing, the need for encouragement, and the recognition of a victim's subjectivity stem from the individual interpretation and adaptation of the ideology. Moreover, the distinction between endorsing an ideology and acting on it – especially when it involves killing – highlights that dehumanization is an ideological, interpretative process. It must be analysed as such to understand perpetrators' heterogeneous perceptions of and interactions with their victims.

Conclusion

This article has developed a framework that understands dehumanization as (1) an interpretative process tied to fluid collective identities and (2) part of an ideology that is discursively disseminated and normalized yet adapted differently across individuals and groups. By situating dehumanization within this ideological lens, the analysis has highlighted its process-like nature and role in shaping perpetrators' perceptions and moral boundaries. These insights extend Leader Maynard's broader theorization of ideologies by specifying how dehumanization operates within them. To explore the implications of this framework, it was applied to empirical examples provided by Lang, Weißmann, and Mariot, using individual cases to illustrate lived experiences. This ap-

138 Bauman, p. 203; compare Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (Free Press, 1979), pp. 4, 5, 60; Peter T. Coleman, 'Intractable Conflict', in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Morton Deutsch, Peter T. Coleman and Eric C. Marcus, 2nd edn (John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2006), pp. 533–59 (p. 534).

139 Bauman, p. 204.

140 Browning, pp. 62–65; Grossman, pp. 74, 91.

plication explored how dehumanization, as part of an ideology, is heterogeneously adapted across contexts.

Humanness is not only interpreted on a collective level, dependent on time and space, but also on an individual level. Discourses surrounding dehumanization are likewise heterogeneous, involving diverse voices and interpretations. This not only affects the discursive level and overall shape of ideologies but also individuals' adaptation to them. Ideologies intersect with one's life experiences, personal characteristics, socialization experiences, values, and norms. While not everyone might subscribe to an ideology, those who do will interpret and internalize that ideology differently, revealing the nuanced nature of human beliefs and actions. In Leader Maynards words:

Given that there are not truly such things as "group minds," all talk of shared identities or ideologies represents something of an abstraction, but a productive and benign one. Just as every individual's way of speaking is unique, every individual's personal ideology and identity are unique. But just as we can still productively talk about people speaking the same language when their ways of speaking are similar, so we can talk about people sharing ideologies or identities when their ways of thinking and their notions of selfhood are sufficiently alike to enable meaningful generalizations to be made about them.¹⁴¹

Thus, even if a group believes in an ideology, the individual members might adapt to and interpret it differently based on their life experiences. This explains why, in a case such as the Holocaust, they may need encouragement to kill. What may appear as a paradox of dehumanization is an ambiguity rooted in what it means to be human.

Reflecting on the empirical observations provided by Lang, Marriot, and Weißmann has shown that more theoretical and empirical scrutiny of dehumanization processes is necessary. The idea of dehumanization is often generalized – partially according to the perception of enemy images and narratives as uniform – without exploring the heterogeneity of such discourses. Understanding dehumanization as part of an ideology, however, helps to address the problems these empirical observations raise, as well as the concerns raised by Leader Maynard and Luft, by considering dehumanization as part of an integrated framework. In favour of theoretical pluralism, this perspective

¹⁴¹ Leader Maynard, 'Identity and Ideology', p. 29.

represents only one approach; more thorough research is needed to fully grasp the complexities of dehumanization in different contexts. In some cases, for example, dehumanization may be less visible than in others. Dehumanization, as part of an ideology, develops slowly over time and does not always wear the guise we might expect. Taking this into account will help us understand and address current political violence: the exclusion and dehumanization of groups is not just a matter of the past; it remains highly relevant today.

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