

The Problem of Holocaust Appropriation: On Pro-Life Organization Live Action's Comparison
of Abortion and Genocide

Ilina Nikolovska

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On December 2, 2020, Live Action, a non-profit pro-life organization, posted a photo to their Instagram comparing the number of Holocaust victims to that of aborted fetuses in the United States. By presenting a larger number of aborted fetuses (60 million) than Holocaust victims (11 million), they suggested that a purported abortion epidemic is deadlier than the Holocaust.¹ However, this appropriation is not only ethically wrong but misrepresents the reality of the Holocaust. Firstly, it attempts to equate Holocaust victims', and in particular Jews', lives with unborn ones, and in this way dehumanizes the former groups. It also fails to address the topic of race and thus suggests that race was not a meaningful difference for organizers of the Holocaust. Lastly, by comparing genocide to a process that is painless for fetuses, the post ignores the torture Jews experienced at the hands of Nazis. Ultimately, by reducing Jews' humanity to that of unborn beings, erasing the role of antisemitism in the Holocaust's creation, and disregarding the issue of Jewish suffering, Live Action's post downplays the reality of the Holocaust.

Firstly, by equating Holocaust victims, and therefore Jews, with fetuses, Live Action reduces the former groups' humanity, and by extension undermines the severity of the Holocaust. As philosopher Jeff McMahan writes, according to the widely-accepted notion that "psychological continuity is the criterion of personal identity," "the conscious subject that exists in association with the human organism prior to the coming into existence of the person is some sort of *pre-person*, a subpersonal subject of consciousness that begins to exist when the organism becomes capable of supporting consciousness and mental activity and ceases to exist when the person comes into existence."² So, fetuses are not alive in the way that born humans are, but

¹ Live Action (@liveactionorg), "Holocaust: 11 Million Victims; Abortion: 60 Million Victims," Instagram, post, December 2, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIUExLGBRVg/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>.

² Jeff McMahan, "Identity," in *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39, 46, <https://doi-org.proxy.queensu.ca/10.1093/0195079981.003.0001>.

exist in some sort of pre-life. By merely comparing the lives of Holocaust victims to those of fetuses, this post diminishes the former's humanity. It is also worth noting that, while the post only refers to "victims" of the Holocaust and not Jews in particular, Nazis mainly targeted the latter in concentration camps.³ Specifically, 6 of the 11 million were Jewish, and Hitler himself spoke often of "'annihilat[ing]...the Jewish race in Europe'" to the German public.⁴ Thus, Jews were Nazis' primary victims, and so by diminishing the humanity of Holocaust victims in general, this post mainly diminishes that of Jews. Moreover, while the top photo in the post depicts a pile of battered shoes that presumably belonged to these victims (note, the words "Holocaust" and "11 million victims" are written over them), the bottom shows a collection of children's socks still in their packaging.⁵ The shoes ultimately provide insight into Jewish victims' humanity in that they show the kinds of items that they wore and seemingly liked when they lived freely, or at least freer than in concentration camps.⁶ Meanwhile, the packaged socks do not give any sort of indication as to who those "60 million [abortion] victims" were in that the former never belonged to the latter.⁷ This lack of authenticity in the second picture speaks to fetuses' lack of humanity because it emphasizes the fact that they did not exist in the way that Jewish victims did. Therefore, the post unintentionally admits that the latter had more humanity than the former. In comparing these different types of beings, Live Action's post takes away from the fact that the Holocaust happened to real, not potential, people, and thus downplays its severity.

³ Live Action (@liveactionorg), "Holocaust: 11 Million Victims."

⁴ Gordon Dueck (presentation, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, September 7, 2022); Adolf Hitler, *Reden und Proklamationen, 1932-1945*, ed. Max Domarus, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Löwit, 1973), 1058, quoted in Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Jewish War': Goebbels and the Antisemitic Campaigns of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 19, no. 1 (March 2005): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dci003>.

⁵ Live Action (@liveactionorg), "Holocaust: 11 Million Victims."

⁶ Norman J. W. Goda, "Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933-1939," in *The Holocaust: Europe, the World, and the Jews, 1918-1945*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 61-5.

⁷ Live Action (@liveactionorg), "Holocaust: 11 Million Victims."

Live Action's post also diminishes the reality of the Holocaust by erasing the role of antisemitism in its creation. As mentioned, the post only uses the words "Holocaust victims" to refer to a predominantly Jewish group of people.⁸ In this way, it suggests that race was not an important difference to those organizing the Holocaust and that Nazis' selection of victims was perhaps arbitrary. However, antisemitism was central to the Nazi worldview, so much so that Nazis referred to Jews as the "world enemy," or, in German, *welt feind*.⁹ They specifically blamed Jews for every problem they encountered, including the assemblance of the Allies, and created the Holocaust as a way of countering the supposed root of these problems.¹⁰ Thus, the existence of the Holocaust depended on the presence of antisemitism in 1930s and 1940s Germany.¹¹ The inextricability of the Holocaust and antisemitism shows that the former was part of a larger evil (i.e., racist ideology) and was therefore not an arbitrary event. But while Nazis killed from a place of racism, potential parents typically do not abort fetuses from a place of bigotry. Rather, these decisions depend on personal factors such as a lack of economic stability, a lack of desire to have children, and the state of a potential parent's or fetus's health.¹² So, in pulling the Holocaust out of its racist context, Live Action's comparison suggests that it was something of a blip in an otherwise peaceful and just German history, and in this way takes away from the social significance of the event.

Thirdly, Live Action's comparison downplays the reality of the Holocaust because it ignores the issue of Jewish suffering in concentration camps. Specifically, by presenting abortion as deadlier than the Holocaust, their post suggests that fetuses suffer more from the former than

⁸ Live Action (@liveactionorg), "Holocaust: 11 Million Victims."

⁹ Dueck (presentation).

¹⁰ Herf, "The 'Jewish War,'" 53, 63.

¹¹ Goda, "Nazi Germany," 58; Norman J. W. Goda, "The Final Solution in Western Europe, 1942-1944," in *The Holocaust: Europe, the World, and the Jews, 1918-1945*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 243.

¹² Yanshu Huang et al., "The Precious Vessel: Ambivalent Sexism and Opposition to Elective and Traumatic Abortion," *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11-2 (October 2014): 437, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0423-3>.

Jews did from the latter.¹³ But, according to researcher Stuart W. G. Derbyshire, “[t]he neural circuitry for pain in fetuses is immature,” and so abortions are not painful procedures for them.¹⁴ Live Action recognizes this claim as a common pro-choice argument on their website, but their rebuttal is nothing more than an assertion that “[p]ain sensation” is simply “another stage in development,” and that some people never develop it and are not any less human because of that.¹⁵ Ultimately, they do not deny that fetuses cannot feel pain, and so this comparison in turn implies that the Holocaust did not create pain, or at least much pain, for its victims.¹⁶ However, in reality, concentration camps were factories of physical and emotional pain for Jews. For example, Nazis worked many of them to death and tore them from their loved ones. As historian Norman J. W. Goda notes, upon arrival at Auschwitz, those “unfit” for labour were segregated and killed. This group typically included “[m]others with children... and the elderly, sick, and the disabled,” which meant that “[f]amily members generally never saw one another again.”¹⁷ Those that Nazis selected for labour, however, often developed illness due to “poor diet, poor hygiene, and exposure” to said illness, and were “beat...for moving too slowly, for slouching, or for not understanding orders.”¹⁸ Thus, Holocaust organizers designed these camps to be as physically and emotionally agonizing for their victims as possible. So, by comparing the Holocaust to a procedure that is painless for fetuses, Live Action’s post belittles the experiences of victims, and in particular Jewish ones, and takes away from the Holocaust’s status as an instance of genocide.

¹³ Live Action (@liveactionorg), “Holocaust: 11 Million Victims.”

¹⁴ Stuart W. G. Derbyshire, “Can fetuses feel pain?,” *BMJ* 332, no. 7546 (April 2006): 912, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.332.7546.909>.

¹⁵ “When Does Life Begin?,” Life’s Beginning, Live Action, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://www.liveaction.org/learn/the-problem/lifes-beginning/>.

¹⁶ See pages 2-3 for a discussion on the notion of humanity and what constitutes a person.

¹⁷ Norman J. W. Goda, “Auschwitz and The Terrible Secret, 1941-1943,” in *The Holocaust: Europe, the World, and the Jews, 1918-1945*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 228.

¹⁸ Goda, “Aushwitz,” 231.

All in all, by suggesting that a national increase in abortion is deadlier than the Holocaust, Live Action's Instagram post downplays the reality of the latter. For example, it reduces Holocaust victims', and thus Jews', humanity to that of fetuses, despite the latter's not being alive in the same way that born humans are. As a result, it diminishes the fact that Nazis mass-murdered a group of real, not potential, people. The post also glosses over the importance of antisemitism in the Holocaust's creation in that it does not mention the topic of race. So, it presents the Holocaust as an arbitrary event and not one rooted in the larger evil that is racist ideology. Thirdly, it disregards the torture Jews experienced at the hands of Nazis and thus undermines the severity of the Holocaust. This discourse surrounding Holocaust appropriation remains significant because it ensures that contemporary generations do not forget the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish population, and that they make active efforts to keep fascism at bay or eliminate it altogether.

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