

# The vocabulary of horror essay sample



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A word, like a smell or taste, has the capability of triggering emotions from subtle happiness to grim depression. The horrors produced by Nazi Germany in their mad attempt to exterminate Jews from Europe also produced a specific vocabulary of horror that lingers to this day. Every major conflict has produced a sort of linguistic code or slang, from the “ doughboy” of World War I through the “ grunt” of Vietnam to the “ IED” of Iraq. None has, and hopefully never will surpass the language of genocide of Nazi Germany. Words created by and associated with the Nazis evoke almost universal dread, terror and anguish. These are not pleasant words; they are disturbing, morbid, and almost pornographic in violence and inhumanity. Today, after almost seventy years from the onset of the atrocities, the following vocabulary is intensely powerful and painful. However, we must listen to it carefully for messages we may not yet understand. We must look past the emotion these words generate to understand the reality of conflict in the world. We must cherish these words and let them have an impact on us, or risk having them replaced with new terms for ancient horrors.

Many terms have had a historic use before being associated with to Nazi Germany. *Pogrom* , for example, is a Russian word for mass violent attacks or riots, typically carried out against Jews. Typically a “ pogrom” was in the Eastern European environment of Russia, Poland, and of course Germany (Wallace). It is now commonly used to describe any mass attack against an ethnic, racial, or religious group of people. Pogroms occur quite easily when authorities incite, condone, or ignore the perpetrators. Pogroms, particularly those carried out against the Jews in Nazi Germany, can almost be considered the precursor of genocide. There are no civil or criminal

consequences for the attackers. Shielded by authority and immune from prosecution, they are able to commit wanton murder, injury and property destruction against “citizens” unrecognized by the state—or considered subhuman and subject to extermination. It is not “lawlessness” but rather the enforcement of nonsensical law designed for oppression. It is the abdication of the rule of law, replaced by ignorant inflamed rhetoric. Pogrom is the sound of a heard of wild beasts moving in anger at targets and for reasons they do not comprehend. Pogrom is a very dangerous word.

“Pogrom” like most of the vocabulary of the Holocaust, will convey very different connotations to Jews and non-Jews. Further, within the Jewish community the reaction will be very different depending if the hearer is a survivor of the Holocaust or has family lost during the era. A non-Jew can only read about it, hear others’ accounts and see pictures of it. He hears the word and understands the meaning and perhaps the emotion, but it is history. For the survivor it may still be a reality he or she awakes to with a cold sweat; they hear the word and hear the screams and taunts and smell the synagogues burning. For a Jew it may not be a personal memory but a cultural one. He or she hears the word and remembers seeing tears well in the eyes of Aunt Sharon who has become very quiet. He hears the word and remembers why Uncle Joe doesn’t like crowds and has an old jagged scar running down his cheek. It is a word, like many of those that follow, to be used carefully, reverently, or not at all.

The most infamous Nazi pogrom occurred throughout Germany during November 9 and 10, 1938 and is known as *Kristallnacht*. This German word literally means “night of crystal” but more commonly referred to as the “

night of broken glass" (Kristallnacht). On those dates a massive, nationwide pogrom against Jews occurred in Nazi Germany, destroying synagogues, homes and shops in the Jewish communities—thus the name from the broken glass of shop windows. For two days Jewish communities in virtually every city were victimized by a frenzied population inflamed with "Aryan superiority" and hatred for the Jews. The shock and devastation were as tremendous as the outcry and relief were nonexistent. This would be, in hindsight, the Signal, and many Jews took it for that. From that night on came the realization they were no longer considered human, much less citizens with rights. Many Jews able to leave Germany did so; perhaps knowing the fate of those left behind was sealed (PBS).

Obviously for Jews this word has a terrible significance, particularly any survivors from the era. It is culturally important as a reminder of the necessity for vigilance in the face of rising tension and hatred. It was the first occasion of Nazi-sanctioned violence on a national scale, and is considered a terrible omen of the hatred and atrocities that would come. For non-Jews it has much less of an impact; however, the sound of the word, both sharp and guttural, is very appropriate to the event. Upon hearing the word it takes little imagination to hear the heavy shouts and curses of the violent crowds intermingled and accented with the sharp breakage of glass (Waterglass)

. *Ghetto* is another word with an ugly history predating Nazi Germany (PBS). The Nazis by no means created anti-Semitism; it had raised its disgusting head centuries before. In sixteenth century Italy Jews were required to live in a segregated area, one of which was a small island that was, or had been in use as a foundry ("ghetto" from Venetian Italian "gettare" or to cast). The

name stuck and came to denote an area of the city where Jews lived voluntarily or involuntarily. Nazi Germany gave the word an even more degrading and sinister connotation in connection with the infamous Warsaw Ghetto. Beyond merely a place where Jews were forced to live under heart-wrenching conditions, the Warsaw Ghetto and others were essentially “holding tanks” for the massed innocents until they could be transported to death camps (PBS).

To a Jew the word will in all likelihood conjure the image of the deprivation of Warsaw. We hear the word and see dozens of young Anne Franks growing up too soon without the beauty and benefit of a childhood. We hear the word and think of the countless sacrifices made, the countless moments of charity and love in the face of overwhelming gloom. The oppression, deprivation and degradation had reached the point where the Nazis employed *Ordnungsdienst*, or Jewish police to maintain a semblance of order in the cordoned-off communities (Wallace). Arguably some were traitors against their own people, out to curry favor with Nazis in exchange for favors or even life. It is undisputed that they stood guard and enforced the “law” under the watchful eyes of Nazis ready to kill them for their misdeeds. These words to a Jew will likely bring to mind the suffering and helplessness of hundreds of thousands of people trapped in squalor. Hopelessness is everywhere and there is no escape, no exit except trains to concentration or death camps.

Modern usage of “ghetto” has turned the word from horror to ‘hood. For many a ghetto meant the poor African American community, segregated by custom and housing “red-lining”. Today the connotation is almost hip; despite the poverty and drugs it is the nursery and home for rap, hip-hop,

and ever-changing musical and cultural style and fashion. It is an exclusive place—you are either in it and a part of it or you will always be outside of it. It bears no resemblance whatsoever to the Jewish ghetto.

The *Gestapo* (secret state police) and *Schutzstaffel* (protective squad) were both Nazi paramilitary cadres created and organized well before the outbreak of European hostilities (Wallace). Hitler, the supreme totalitarian dictator, understood and calculated his rise to power and these groups would help him ensure he maintained it. His plan for world domination called first for a German domination of everyone, not just potential opposition. The SS was originally a small cadre of Hitler bodyguards formed in 1925; the Gestapo formed later in 1933. Both the Gestapo and the SS has been portrayed in countless films and books. It would be difficult to find anyone who did not have some image when either word was heard. To Jew and non-Jew alike, these terms conjure zealous Aryans intent on the “ purification” of their beloved Germany. Both were the instrumental in the pre-war terror campaigns and pogroms leveled against the Jews.

Like many secret police agencies throughout history and the world they were accountable to virtually no one and operated within a veil of zealous secrecy and paranoia. That is the experience that cannot be copied on paper or celluloid. Any non-Jewish image of a large blond jack-booted Nazi, with SS “ lightning bolts” and Death’s Head insignia is also a caricature. There is no image to convey a personal or cultural memory of the kindly neighbor or shopkeeper, known for years, who has been an informer or agent for all of those pleasant years. The words may bring the image of sadism, torture, and

Nazi zealotry, but they also bring the insidious fear of not knowing who to trust. Both organizations supplied a fair share of war criminals.

It is likely most of the terms above can be spoken relatively freely and the speaker can expect emotional but measured responses. Some terms to this day are virtually unspeakable. The chemical *Zyclon-B*, literally German for "cyclone" is a horrific term to Jews and anyone with knowledge of the Nazi methods and mechanics of human extermination (Wallace). It is the "trade name" for a solid chemical compound, usually in grainy or pellet form that produced hydrogen-cyanide gas when it was exposed to air. The compound was originally developed to fumigate barns, barges and freight cars and was used initially in non-lethal concentration as a delousing agent. Nazi experiments in the early days of the war proved the effectiveness in murdering humans. Even discounting for a moment the ghastly role it played, the word itself seems to have sprung from a horror or science fiction novel. It evokes a sense of chemical and technical madness and superiority over man; the real "Genie" running rampant from the uncorked bottle.

There likely is no Jew and there should be no man who does not recoil in horror and rage at the sound of the word. Hear it spoken and listen for the hiss of the gas entering the death chambers. See the shock and horror on the faces of the innocents as they clutch their children or loved ones, or tear their fingers apart trying to escape. Hear their screams, wails, gasps and choking breath. And then hear the pounding silence. This is a term that will always carry the horror and revulsion of the genocide and is rarely spoken of in the Jewish community. It has become symbolic with all everything and everyone of grotesque evil, not unlike *Mengele*. (Wallace, PBS)

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Dr. Josef Mengele was a sadistic deviant physician and early member of the SS. Injured in the war, the death camps became his grotesque “laboratory” for the performance of usually lethal experiments on living subjects. He was an aficionado of Nazi genetic superiority theories and was obsessed with pseudo-scientific experimentation on twins. That children could be beguiled by a bit of candy from this monster adds to the horror. “Twin children frequently called him “Uncle Pepi”, and other twins told how Mengele would bring them sweets and invite them for a ride in his car, which turned out to be ‘a little drive with Uncle Pepi, to the gas chamber’” (Wallace)

Even the name of the “laboratory” he worked in— *Block 10* —has a sound of finality, of the impossibility of escape (PBS, Wallace). It is another term from the horror stories. It is the sound of mad callous physicians discussing opera over dying “patients”, screams of un-anaesthetized innocents experimented upon, and technicians mechanically dismembering human beings. Jews who here this word—like Zyklon-B—understand the necessity of survival in the face of evil.

Certainly the world has no shortage of evil men; however it is difficult to find a more abject example of the complete perversion of medicine and human nature. From 1945 until his death in 1979 the sound of his name galvanized a continuous manhunt by famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal and countless Israeli agents. It was a name whispered in the jungles and backstreets of South America, that notorious refuge for escaped Nazis. The Israelis had a wonderfully devious attitude appropriate for this fiend: catching him and bringing him to justice would be great, but it’s not a waste of *our* time for him to spend all of *his* time knowing we are looking! Hear his

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name and hear the children, cajoled and laughing, as Uncle Pepi drives them to their death. His name and legacy has survived him; to mention his name in Jewish company is to rip open old wounds.

The Nazis created six *death camps* : Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka (Wallace). Unlike *concentration* and *detention* camps, designed for consolidation of slave labor or temporary imprisonment, prisoners were selected to be either killed or placed in forced labor. Like the chemicals in use there, the term “ death camp” is known to Jew and non-Jew alike. To the Jewish the names of the camps may likely evoke the most poignant and still-vivid memories of family and friends never seen again or more personally, their time in hell spent at the camps. These “ models of efficiency” were designed to “ process” their human product from live delivery to rapid, efficient death. *Krenatoria* were erected in the camps for the rapid incineration of the gassed innocents (PBS). Again, here is a term that can punch through Jew and non-Jew alike. The images can be viewed, the mechanics understood, but the concept of factory-produced genocide is not easily grasped.

Both terms should trigger in all men a reflection of the impossibility of ignorance. Although concealed, the camps were located near towns and railway lines and depots. Trains delivered innocents around the clock—and always returned empty. The horrific smell from the ovens would inundate towns and the villagers went about their business with perfumed handkerchiefs pressed to their face. Locals vendors and tradesmen supplied a variety of products and services—and they saw nothing, they heard nothing. We hear those words and see the massive facilities and miles of

razor wire. We hear the words and suddenly smell and taste the horror. The locals hear nothing and say nothing. Their silence was deafening.

Hitler's "*Final Solution*", originally articulated in 1939, became a fully-operational priority by 1941 (Yad Vashem). It called for nothing less than the complete annihilation of all European Jews. To hear the term is to see Hitler in front of thousands infatuated with him, enthralled and transfixed by his words as he gesticulates behind a podium. Yet in hearing the words, knowing the meaning, we are confused, unable to grasp how anyone, much less a nation, could not just allow it to happen, but welcome it. To a Jew it means something completely different: it wasn't the first time this lethal idea spurted from the mouth of a lunatic, and it likely won't be the last, either.

Other terms describing the same horror, but with different connotation and denotation are *shoah* and *Holocaust* .(Shoah):

"Shoah" is a "biblical word...which has been used to mean "destruction" since the Middle Ages... (and) became the standard Hebrew term for the murder of European Jewry as early as the early 1940s. The word Holocaust, which came into use in the 1950s as the corresponding term in English, originally meant a sacrifice burnt entirely on the altar. The selection of these two words with religious origins reflects recognition of the unprecedented nature and magnitude of the events. (Shoah)

Jews tend toward "shoah" to illustrate Jews as the specific target; "Holocaust" is often used consistent with "genocide" to refer to mass murder of any group of people. It is not just a semantic difference; it is part of the cultural heritage of a people. No non-Jew can hear in "shoah" the

significance appreciated by a Jew. Any of the three terms will bring to mind what so many thought could never be repeated (Yad Vashem).

It can be repeated today. If time could talk perhaps every generation, or every century, will say “ this was the worse it can get” or “ man’s inhumanity to man is unprecedented”. The words of seventy years ago can still cause enormous emotional reaction to the victims, the Jews, the non-Jews. As every word set forth above brings a new chill or nausea, they have the opposite effect on a huge number of people. We cannot hear the “ final solution” and wonder how it could have become reality and then hear the Iranian and other radical Islamic leadership calling for the total destruction of Israel? What is it we hear so distinctly with “ Zyklon-B” that is undecipherable when we hear “ suicide bombing” or “ IED”? Are these words ready to be replaced as a new vocabulary is set before us? The words must continue to haunt us, terrify us, console us. We believe in a Phoenix rising from the ashes. We believe in survival against all odds. We believe in civilization over barbarity. We believe words will guide us.

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