



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on March 13, 2015

The Hazards of Blind Obedience

“It is only those who hope to transform human beings who end up by burning them, like the waste product of a failed experiment,” wrote Christopher Hitchens, years before ISIS released a video showing a Jordanian pilot being burned alive in a cage.

Wrote Liesl Schillinger regarding Martin Amis’ novel *House of Meetings* in her 2007 book review in the *New York Times*: “The narrator and protagonist (by no stretch could you call him the hero) of Martin Amis’s new novel is an archetype of the eternal Soviet nightmare, a decorated war veteran who ‘raped my way across what would soon be East Germany’ in the first three months of 1945.”



Amis’ character is described by Schillinger as a person “robbed of any belief in fairness by his prolonged servitude,” a veteran interned in a slave labor camp by his own government, a person hardened by his absorption into the dark side of Soviet history, a man who writes that he is not unique.

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“According to eyewitness accounts, the Red Army ‘was an army of rapists,’ and ‘Russian soldiers were raping every German woman from 8 to 80,’” wrote Schillinger. “He doesn’t blame himself. ‘History did it,’ he says flatly. Still, he offers as extenuation the Arendtian truism that ‘the peer group can make people do anything.’”

The Arendtian truism refers to Hannah Arendt’s description of the thoughtlessness and banality of evil she saw in Adolf Eichmann when she went to Jerusalem to report, for the *New Yorker*, on the trial of Eichmann, accused of crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity.

Reacting to Eichmann, a man with a top job in mass murder, organizing the evacuation and transporting of millions of people from all over Europe to the killing centers, Arendt wrote that “the deeds were monstrous” but Eichmann “was quite ordinary, commonplace.”

With the idea that “the peer group can make people do anything,” Amis’ central character could find support in the work of social psychologist Stanley Milgram.

Influenced by the trial of Eichmann and how people during World War II accepted the dictates of authority and obediently participated in the massive horrors of the Holocaust, Milgram conducted experiments at Yale University to test obedience. Those participating as teachers in the experiments were instructed to give punitive electric shocks to learners, actually Milgram accomplices, for incorrect answers.

With electrodes attached, learners were strapped to chairs. Teachers, in another room, were ordered by experimenters to administer increasingly higher levels of electric shocks for wrong answers.



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Shocks were not actually being administered but learners, as confederates in the experiment, shouted that they had heart conditions, pounded the walls and begged to be released when stronger shock levels were supposedly being administered.

The results showed that 65 percent of those participating as teachers followed orders to administer the highest voltage possible to the learners, even after the cries of agony had fallen silent in the adjoining room.

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