



Use of Rorschach tests at the Nuremberg war crimes trial: A forgotten chapter in history of medicine ☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

Seventy years ago, psychiatrists and psychologists had unusual access to the Nazi leaders awaiting trial by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. Early leaders in the field of psychosomatic medicine were instrumental in facilitating these interviews as well as arranging for the administration of psychological testing with the Rorschach inkblot test. These observations were kept under wraps for decades and there remains controversy even now about what these Rorschachs revealed—demonic psychopaths or just morally corrupt individuals.

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The Nuremberg trials

This history has its roots in a quiet little town in Switzerland where Hermann Rorschach worked. When he died in 1924, he had no way of knowing that the world was careening into another war or that twenty years later the test that he had invented would be used to study the Nuremberg war criminals. The Nazi leaders' Rorschach tests were hidden away for decades while the two Rorschach examiners feuded about their interpretation and release.

The city of Nuremberg went through remarkable transformations in the 20th century. It started out as a gorgeous old city, famed for its toy industry and crafts, home to Durer and birthplace of Pachelbel and an extensive publishing industry. By the late 1920s, it had become a stronghold of the Nazi party and in subsequent years was home to throngs of Party faithful during the recurrent party rallies. By war's end in 1945, the city was virtually destroyed. Ninety percent of the inner core was destroyed and an estimated 30,000 bodies rotted in the ruins. Surprisingly, the Palace of Justice and an adjacent prison survived the bombings, somewhat the worse for wear. This building complex became the venue for the International Military Tribunal where the Allies tried the highest-ranking Nazis they could find. As Justice Robert Jackson, the lead American prosecutor noted:

“The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being

repeated. That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to reason.”

[[1]]

The International Military Tribunal met in Nuremberg for almost a year until its sentences were carried out in October, 1946. There were many subsequent trials at Nuremberg and elsewhere, but this first one was notable, in part because of the role that psychiatric research played and because the trial focused on the Nazi leaders rather than rank and file.

The impetus for psychiatric and psychological assessment of the war criminals

Psychiatry and psychology were oddly central to the trial in ways that are largely forgotten. First of all, the trial was not so much “who done it” as it was a “why did they do it.” Mass killing is common. The Nazi killing was different from blood lust in terms of its scope, attention to detail, and the modernity and culture of the killers. In their wake, the number of non-combatant deaths in World War II was staggering, and the machinery of destruction consumed the lives of millions of Jews, Roma, Slavs, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the mentally infirm, and handicapped children.

All of this is well known, but there are two threads in this dark history that are largely forgotten but pertain to the history of psychosomatic medicine. A group of American medical societies were early advocates of psychological study of the war criminals, and a group of psychiatrists and psychologists were indeed very active in the Nuremberg jail, albeit less so in the courtroom per se.

☆ This paper is based in part on a presentation to the European Association of Psychosomatic Medicine meeting in Nuremberg, Germany in July, 2015.

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On June 11, 1945, a group of medical societies wrote Justice Robert Jackson requesting urgently that the psychology of the war criminals be studied. The societies were remarkably diverse, including the American Association on Mental Deficiency, the American branch of the International League Against Epilepsy, the American Neurological Association, the American Orthopsychiatric Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, and the American Society for Research in Psychosomatic Problems (which later became the American Psychosomatic Society). The academic societies received a surprising amount of support from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) whose leader General William J. Donovan was an enthusiast for psychological studies and from Murray Bernys who was in the War Department's Special Branch and – by coincidence – was married to Freud's niece. Excerpts from the Societies' letter follow:

“Detailed knowledge of the personality of these leaders ... would be valuable as a guide to those concerned with the reorganization and re-education of Germany In addition to the psychiatric interviews it would be desirable to make a number of psychological tests such as ... the Rorschach If and when the accused has been convicted and sentenced to death it would be desirable to have a detailed autopsy. Especially of the brain. Therefore it is urged that the convicted be shot in the chest, not in the head.”

[2]

Two of the Societies' recommendations particularly stand out—that the Nazis should be studied with the Rorschach test and that the Nazi leaders' brains should be studied. It was a decidedly unusual letter. The trial had not even started, but the academics were already recommending that the prisoners be executed in such a fashion that their brains could be studied post mortem. This second recommendation was ignored and the defendants who were condemned to death were hanged and cremated.

On the other hand, their first recommendation for psychiatric assessment was honored to a surprising extent. Jails always have psychiatrists on hand who serve diverse purposes. We help assess competence to stand trial and we provide medical services to prisoners, even on death row. Nuremberg was well stocked with psychiatrists, but two extraordinary individuals happened to be stationed at the prison.

Douglas Kelley was a young American psychiatrist who was a bit of a polymath. Early in life, he had been identified as a genius and was in the famous Terman study of gifted California children. He was a very experienced psychiatrist, ran innovative programs for soldiers who suffered from what we would call today PTSD and by happenstance was an internationally renowned Rorschach expert. Because he spoke little German, he needed a translator.

Gustave Gilbert was a young American psychologist who spent most of his war years interrogating prisoners. His German was flawless, and he was a meticulous observer who kept careful notes, but he had little experience with the Rorschach test.

Kelley was the superior officer who interacted with the prisoners from August 1945 through January 1946. Gilbert was his subordinate who was assigned as his interpreter and worked at Nuremberg from October 1945 to October 1946. Kelley claimed to have spent 80 h with each of the prisoners during his time at Nuremberg. Given the cramped quarters in the prison cells, Kelley and Gilbert (or occasionally another interpreter) would conduct interviews sitting on each prisoner's small cot with the prisoner sandwiched between them. What would it have been like to conduct extensive psychiatric interviews in such close proximity to such repellent individuals? Both Kelley and Gilbert left extensive diaries about their experiences [3,4].

The Rorschach test in 1945

Today, the Rorschach test seems “musty,” a relic from an earlier time in psychiatry. In the 1940s and 1950s the Rorschach test was THE

psychological test. Its ability to map what was on a person's mind made it a useful adjunct to psychiatric evaluations at a time when the field focused heavily on the unconscious. Its unstructured nature lent itself to evaluating patients who were noticeably guarded or uncooperative. Thus, its inclusion as a core component in the psychological evaluation of the Nuremberg war criminals was entirely logical. In addition to its ability to tap into the unconscious, the Rorschach test had one other use. It was after all a Gestalt test that examined perception and was thus an early indicator of neuropsychological functioning.

Its evocative images in black and white with occasional bursts of color captured the attention of popular culture, and the Rorschach was commonly portrayed in movies of that era. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the intelligence community as well as court prosecutors were already familiar with the Rorschach test. Given the Nazis' obsession with death and violence, it was abundantly clear that there were powerful irrational forces underlying their behavior, and thus a test like the Rorschach added a natural for Nuremberg.

Hermann Rorschach was born in Switzerland in 1884. As a boy, he loved the game of *Klegsographia* where players would carefully construct an inkblot and then see who could come up with the most observations or associations about each inkblot. Young Hermann loved the game so much that his high school nickname was “Klex,” (i.e. “blot”). As a young psychiatrist, he developed the inkblot test. Rorschach wasn't the first psychiatrist or psychologist to focus on inkblots. Binet, the originator of the IQ test, also investigated their use in 1895. What Rorschach added was his attention to detail and his artistry.

Shakespeare ironically noted the perils of subjectivity in interpreting such tests. In *Hamlet*, act III, scene 2, Hamlet and Polonius gaze into the clouds and Hamlet keeps persuading poor Polonius to change his mind about the shapes in the clouds.

Hamlet	Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius	By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.
Hamlet	Metinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius	It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet	Or like a whale.
Polonius	Very like a whale.

What Shakespeare pointed out came to haunt psychiatry and psychology centuries later when investigators tried to make sense of the Nuremberg war criminals' ink blot tests. How do you guard against bias if you know whose inkblot answers you are viewing? Will the rater, like poor Polonius, switch from describing the cloud (or inkblot) from a camel to a weasel or a whale—just because he was influenced by someone else's interpretation? What if the rater knew that a particular war criminal described seeing dancers in an inkblot?

Interpreting the Rorschach

While the Rorschach test looks unstructured, it is a carefully prescribed interaction between tester and patient. The patient is presented with 10 cards and queried, “What does this card remind you of” and, “Can you point out what parts of the card made you say that?” Patients commonly offer several interpretations of each card, and these are carefully recorded. The testing process generally requires about an hour.

Rorschachs are typically interpreted in two ways. One approach emphasizes the content or themes that the patient discloses, and the other scrutinizes technical aspects of how those themes are recognized. Does the patient react to the whole card or just a piece of it? Does the person focus on color or shading in the blot, the black of the ink vs the white space on the card? How decent is the form? Can the examiner perceive how the patient recognized part of a card as dancing bears, for instance, or was the patient's report wildly idiosyncratic? Whether one focuses on content or technical analysis, what really counts is the composite response to all ten cards.

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