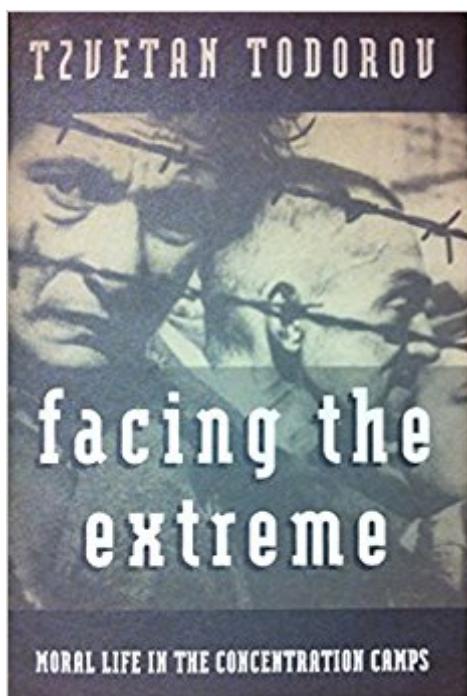


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# Facing The Extreme: Moral Life In The Concentration Camps



## **Synopsis**

Based on works by such figures as Albert Speer as well as lesser-known documents, a study of the moral practices within concentration camps uncovers the everyday virtues that persevered throughout the otherwise inhuman living conditions. Tour.

## **Book Information**

Hardcover: 307 pages

Publisher: Henry Holt & Co; 1st American ed edition (January 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0805042636

ISBN-13: 978-0805042634

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 6.5 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #338,110 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #31 in Books > History > Military > Prisoners of War #657 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Human Rights #688 in Books > History > World > Jewish > Holocaust

## **Customer Reviews**

It is an understatement to call the Nazi and Soviet death camps "outposts of hell on earth," as we know from the testimony of a powerful body of witnesses. Todorov looks inside these camps, and there he finds hope for all humankind, arguing that innumerable instances of heroism, self-sacrifice, and caring show that "moral reactions are spontaneous, omnipresent, and eradicable only with the greatest violence" and that "morality cannot disappear without a radical mutation of the human species." Even in a regime of terror and depersonalization, the ordinary virtues survived and sometimes even flourished, Todorov maintains. His wide-ranging study bears him out, and it makes for fascinating reading. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The concentration camp—including the Nazi death camps and the Soviet gulag—marks a defining attribute of our century, declares Todorov (*The Conquest of America*), and the extreme experiences there make questions of virtue and vice more stark. In this resonant analysis, the Bulgarian-born, Paris-based critic draws on reports from Primo Levi, Victor Frankl and others, as well as on such philosophers as Sartre and Rousseau. Todorov's meditation is dense but accessible, raising a rich set of questions, even as he occasionally interjects harsh self-scrutiny about his family's life under

Communism. He delves into the distinction and link between heroic virtues (courage) and ordinary ones (caring), the "banal roots" of monstrous behavior and the morality of recounting horrors (he finds Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer more worthy than Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*). Though the camp experience seems to confirm that human good never expired, Todorov fears that our technological mentality has made it easier to demonize and depersonalize others. This book was first published in France. BOMC, History Book Club, Reader's Subscription alternate. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In two ways, this book's subtitle, "Moral Life in the Concentration Camps", is misleading. This book does delve into choices inmates and guards faced in concentration camps -- Nazi & Soviet. Todorov does this beautifully and powerfully. Testimony comes from many of the most compelling sources such as well-known inmates -- Primo Levi, Bruno Bettleheim & Viktor Frankl. Especially interesting, here, is testimony from female inmates -- not all survivors. (And this became key to his final analysis -- more below.) Testimony also came from, e.g., Nazi commandants of Auschwitz & Treblinka as well as others. And this testimony is given space, room to breathe and live. Todorov genuinely lets these people tell us what they're saying, not merely snatching the "memorable quote" that makes Todorov's point. This testimony is good but, of course, uncomfortable. And it's not only realistic, but vital that we be uncomfortable, that we learn uncomfortable truths. Points Todorov makes are with guards and inmates both -- saints & heroes are rare, as are monsters & beasts. On both sides of the wire, these are generally "ordinary" people. Testimony goes further, not just from those "in" the camps. As Todorov says, this book is about "moral lessons \*of\* the camps and of the actions that took place in them, around them, \*and in response to them\*." Here is testimony not only from people nearby the camps, but from those far away -- not only Poland & Germany, but also France, UK & US. Again, good, and our vital uncomfortableness grows. We hear not only from "ordinary" Germans, but also "ordinary" US citizens -- though this last only briefly through our government. Todorov rejects national & ethnic guilt -- these are all "ordinary" humans. Good and, yes, even more uncomfortable. So with moral life not only "in" the camps, but also in response to them comes the question which haunts him, and which must haunt us: how was this evil -- and evil it most certainly was -- possible? Todorov, who grew up under a totalitarian regime in Bulgaria, is in a personal position to know what makes camps possible. And he's clear: what makes camps possible is not restricted to guards and commandants, who are, themselves, mostly "ordinary". Todorov knows, within himself and his family, how "ordinary" citizens leading "ordinary" lives within totalitarian governments act and don't act morally. From decades living in France & the US, he knows that

complicity -- not quite the right word -- is also possible for "ordinary" citizens leading "ordinary" lives in democracies. And this is the second way "in the camps" is misleading. Todorov gives us this testimony and explores its moral meaning not to document history, but to guide our present and our future. Not that Todorov becomes preachy or, as he calls, it "moralizing" (as opposed to "moral actions"). And not that he makes pleas for what he calls "heroic virtues", though these, as he notes, are sometimes necessary. Always within the overwhelming weight of testimony, Todorov points us toward causes not only within totalitarian regimes, but also within democracies. And presently, these causes have not diminished. From these testimonies, he points us toward what he calls "ordinary virtues", in particular, "caring", and especially "caring for individual strangers". Here, during WWII, he cites stories & testimonies of "rescuers" -- "ordinary" citizens who performed extraordinary acts, saving individual lives of strangers. Again, the weight of this book, in terms of what's most compelling and what occupies most pages, is testimony, not Todorov's "lessons". Todorov urgently says that these "lessons" are neither the only lessons possible nor the only way to understand & express them. Todorov is equally urgent about not reducing these horrific experiences with evil to "lessons". Do I agree with all of Todorov's lessons, even knowing they don't exclude other lessons? No. But they're often thought-provoking, sometimes even self-reflection-provoking. I cite two. First, I've read several concentration camp classics. But other than the Diary of Ann Frank, none were from girls or women. Here, in women's writing and experiences, I can better see some of Todorov's "lessons". Women often survived better, not because of Nazi or Soviet treatment, but because they were better, as a whole notwithstanding individual exceptions, at caring for others, and so for themselves. Second, he notes the need for both heroic and ordinary virtues, noting that, perhaps, the best way to combine them is not within an individual, but with a couple, as he shows with the rescuers. Couples were often able to sustain and accomplish more than single persons. A confession: I read this book for insights to help treat people with severe PTSD -- particularly extreme child abuse and war PTSD. I've just finished the book, so I'm not sure how this will work. But I think it may guide me with some clients. I know this will guide me in good ways, in true and moral ways, with my choices as an individual citizen, particularly in response to our current world situation and our political climate of hate and demonization. In the US, thankfully, we're not facing the extreme of Soviet or Nazi camps on our soil. (We'll set aside, but must very much truly consider, what happens in CIA "black holes" and at Guantanamo. Our leaders and the people supporting them are neither monsters nor beasts. Evil, of course, continues in our world. And it's useful to know that everywhere, leaders and people aren't monsters. It's also good to know how we "ordinary" people, with this book, might guard a little better against complicity in all its nasty, even deadly

forms. I recommend this book for those wanting to know about a wider range of concentration camp literature. I recommend this book for those interested in ethics in action, personally, philosophically & politically. And maybe something I've mentioned will touch your own reasons to read this book.

I read this for a paper on moral ambiguity in concentration camps. It is an incredible book. It theorizes about human behavior while telling the stories of inmates. I cried through a lot of it, but I learned a lot.

Highly recommended. Wise, clear, one of the best.

There are no shortage of books that deal with the Holocaust, but this work by the Bulgarian writer Todorov offers a rare and sensitive insight into how we understand and cope with evil. The writer has the courage to challenge the tendency by victims to own the historical atrocities they witnessed. He worries that by allowing the victims to define the evil of the oppressors we turn past genocides into monuments that do not speak to us. He explores the nature of complicity, heroism, myth and resistance in political and moral dimensions. He uncovers the potential in all of us to be, if not camp guards, then silent accomplices to mass murder. The book explores in disturbing detail the darkness that is part of the human condition. It has been a long time since I marked up a book like this. He stands alongside writers such as Primo Levi.

Tzvetan Todorov's work is a must read for someone trying to understand the multiple, competing decision points for everyone trapped in the maelstrom of totalitarian genocide. Much like Hilberg's *Victims, Perpetrators, Bystanders, Facing the Extreme* tries to consider the mental evaluation processes of everyone during this period of history. The most useful chapters are in the second section, entitled "Neither Monsters nor Beasts." Many aspects of personal character, coping mechanisms, and consequences are detailed in these chapters. While Todorov's style (or the translation) are sometimes difficult to follow, the essence of what he is saying is dynamic, challenging reading. The chapter on Depersonalization is especially attention grabbing; while it focuses on life in concentration camps, in our present culture and its problems, it has many applicable lessons. Todorov also makes many references to other salient works of Holocaust/genocide literature. For the new student of genocide, this may appear somewhat daunting, but Todorov does a fine job of quoting at length those passages that repeating, rather than leave you wondering what the stage whisper allusion was. For anyone who teaches about

genocide, this is a must read. For anyone willing to peel aside the dark curtain and look into the abyss of true dark humanity, this is a must read. Eva Fogelman's *Conscience & Courage*" is a far more uplifting, positive book than Todorov's, but Todorov exposes dark thoughts that need not be kept like mushrooms, but should be brought forward for discussion and reflection.

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