

Architects of the Final Solution

Historians still debate when and how the Nazi persecution of the Jews evolved into systematic extermination. **PETER LONGERICH** analyses the evidence in a new study, while on page 38, **DAVID CESARANI** profiles one of the Holocaust's most notorious figures

AT LAST, more than ten years after the archives in Eastern Europe were opened, those historians who work on the Holocaust are able to draw a more comprehensive picture of the crime of the century. However, one of the questions that is still much debated is when, and under what circumstances, the National Socialist regime gave the order for the murder of the European Jews. It is not disputed that a crime of such monstrous dimensions can only have been authorised by the man at the top of the regime, Adolf Hitler, the 'Führer', a man who, from the time of his very first political statement in 1919 until he wrote his will in 1945, was possessed by the idea of 'removing' the Jews in one violent way or another.

But when was this decision taken? Half a dozen different dates have been suggested from the period between 1941 and spring 1942. It may appear astonishing that there is so much room for speculation in the reconstruction of the 'Final Solution', but on closer inspection it is not so remarkable. The Nazis seem not to have kept a written record of their decision to murder the European Jews. They themselves destroyed any documentation relating to this event that they did possess as thoroughly as they razed gas chambers or disinterred corpses from their shallow graves to burn them. It was no coincidence that Himmler told leading SS Officers on 4 October 1943 that the murder of the Jews was 'a glorious page in our history that has never been written and will never be written'.

A further difficulty is that those documents that have been discovered, despite the systematic covering of the Nazis' traces after the end of the war, are written in deliberately disguised language. Instead of 'killing' and 'murder', the perpetrators spoke of 'Final Solution', 'relocation', 'evacuation' or 'destruction'. They did so in order to preserve some secrecy, but no doubt also because of a

reluctance to face up directly to the reality of mass murder. The reconstruction of the decision for the 'Final Solution' cannot therefore be based solely on straightforward documentary evidence; we must also attempt to use the sequence of the mass executions, the deportations and the murders in the death camps to draw conclusions about the perpetrators of this crime against humanity. And this is a difficult and arduous task.

As early as 30 January 1939, Hitler made a public link between war and the genocide of the Jews. In a speech to the Reichstag (right) he announced that, in the event of a world war, 'the consequence will be not the Bolshevisation of the world and therewith a victory of Jewry; on the contrary, it will be the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'. In other words, if the Western powers resisted German expansion in Europe, Hitler would regard European Jews as hostages.

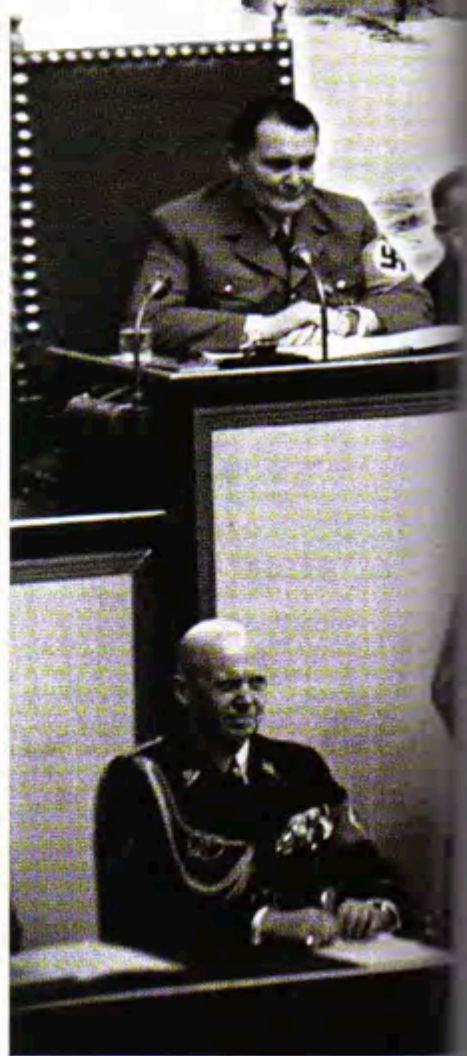
After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazi regime made concrete preparations for the taking of hostages on just such a vast scale: the Nazis planned a 'Jewish reservation', first in the Eastern part of occupied Poland, and then, after the summer of 1940, on the African island of Madagascar. However, after the end of 1941, Hitler, SS-Chief Himmler and Heydrich, Chief of the Security Police, were working on the assumption that they would soon be able to deport the Jews into the Soviet territories that they would conquer. Behind all these plans was the threat of 'annihilation' – a willingness to kill the human beings thus deported.

Immediately after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, German military units, the *Einsatzgruppen*, or task-forces, together with other police and SS units began to shoot large numbers of Jewish civilians in the newly occupied zones. They extended their activity in phases: first, leading Jewish men were murdered; then all men of an age suitable for military service; then all Jews indiscriminately, including old men, women and children.

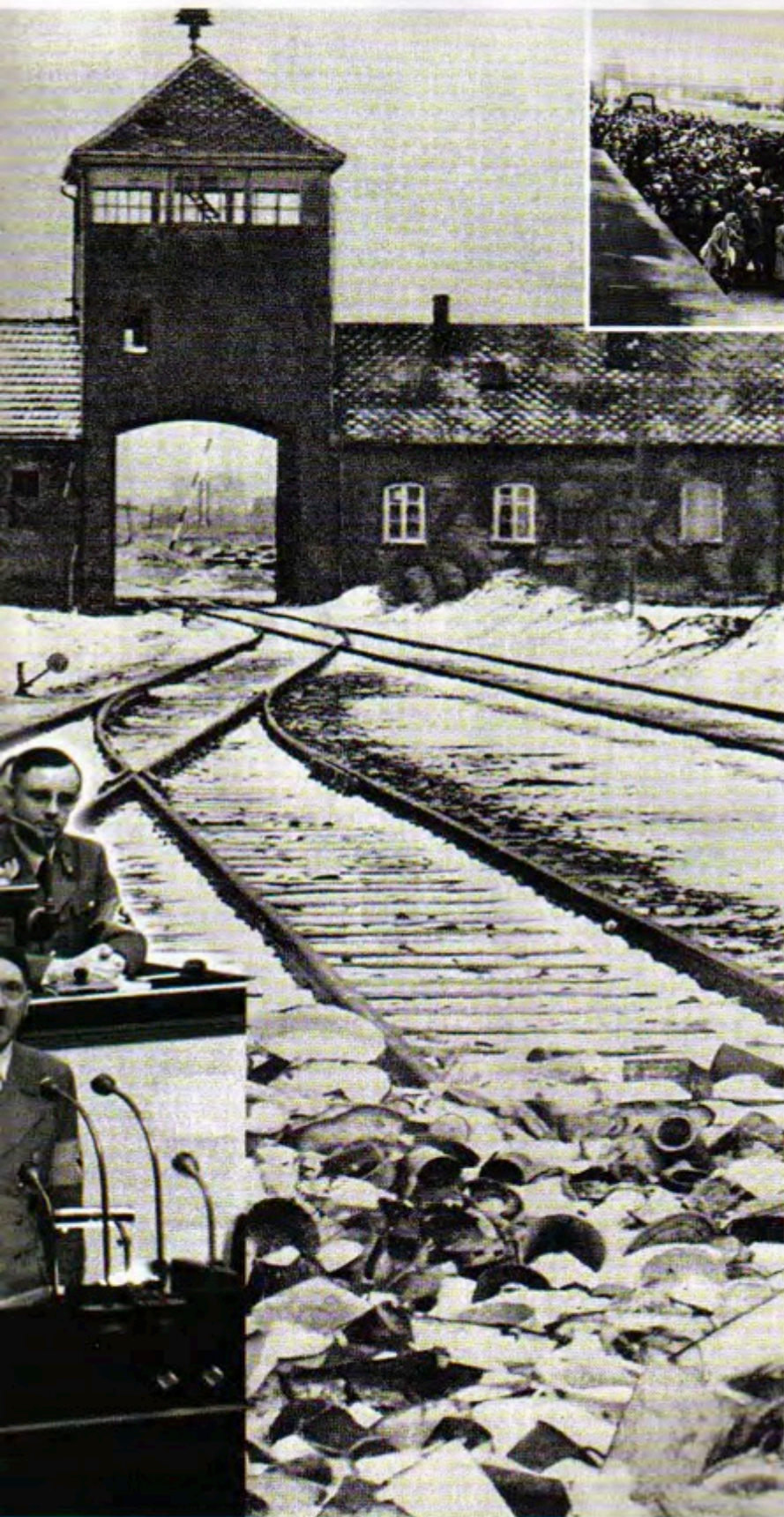
By the end of 1941, these units had murdered at least half a million Jewish civilians. Hitler was kept informed of these murders via detailed reports sent from the *Einsatzgruppen*.

A precise reconstruction shows that some units were carrying out indiscriminate murders

Hitler openly threatens the Jews with destruction in the Reichstag, 30 January 1939. Goering is seated above and behind him



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End of the line: Auschwitz (left) was the final destination for Europe's deported Jews. On arrival (above) many were selected for immediate gassing

of Jewish civilians as early as July or August 1941, while others did so only in the autumn. It is obvious that individual unit commanders had some room for manoeuvre and that they were not following an order or plan to murder Soviet Jews that had existed from the very beginning. They were following instructions that were deliberately open and were only gradually made more and more precise.

THE fate of the remaining European Jews had not been decided by the summer of 1941. On 31 July 1941, Hermann Goering, who since 1938 had been formally responsible for co-ordinating 'Jewish policies', authorised Heydrich to make 'all the necessary preparations [...] for the complete solution to the Jewish question in the German area of influence in Europe'. Other documents confirm clearly that at this point what the Nazis understood by 'complete solution' was still the planned deportation of the European Jews into Soviet territory. In order to implement this, however, the Soviet Union had to be first defeated.

In the middle of September, Hitler gave the order to commence deportations out of the area of the Reich, first into the ghetto of Lodz in Poland. A little later Riga in Latvia and Minsk in White Russia were added to the destinations for these deportations. Hitler ordered the deportation of the Jews 'into the East' in accordance with the decision taken from the beginning of 1941 – but without waiting for the original precondition, the defeat of the Soviet Union. He himself explained this move in October 1941 by saying that he wanted to reserve 'reprisals' against German Jews 'for the eventuality of an American entry into the war'.

When deportations from the Reich began in October 1941, the SS were working under severe pressure to implement techniques that had already been used to kill more than 70,000 asylum patients since 1939–40, for the murder of the Eastern European Jews. Gas wagons and gas chambers were to 'make room' in the ghettos for the Jews deported from the area of the Reich.

In the area around Lodz in annexed Poland, one of the *Einsatzgruppen* had been murdering

local Jews in gas wagons since October; after December, a gas wagon station in Chelmo was available. In addition, the Nazis were sketching plans for gas chambers in Mogilev near Minsk and in Riga. In mid-October, the decision was taken to build the extermination camp of Belzec near Lublin in the *Generalgouvernement* of Poland. Murders by gas were also planned for those areas into which it was intended to send the Jews from the area of the Reich. It was also in October that Himmler imposed a Europe-wide ban on Jewish emigration, and before the end of the year, those in charge of the Auschwitz concentration camp had the first prisoners murdered with the use of *Zyklon B* cyanide gas – these were Russian prisoners of war and the severely ill. Also in October the German army in Serbia began the systematic murder of Jewish men under the pretext of ‘reprisals’ for partisan actions.

At this stage, however, the murders did not affect all European Jews indiscriminately. In November 1941, when the German Security Police shot dead 6,000 Jews from the Reich directly after their arrival in Riga and Kowno, Himmler put a stop to these executions for a few months. Neither does the construction history of the extermination camps indicate any preparations for a Europe-wide genocide at this point. The first two extermination camps in Chelmo and Belzec were designed for regional mass murder, and there is nothing to indicate that in the winter of 1941–42 Auschwitz was being prepared to extend its first *Zyklon B* murders to hundreds of thousands of Jews a few months later. It is quite clear that the Nazi leadership still conceived at this point of a ‘Final Solution’ after the end of the war – in the conquered Soviet territories.

In the winter of 1941–42, the lethal threats made to the Jews by leading Nazis began to increase. In the issue of his weekly paper *Das Reich* of 16 November 1941, the Minister for Propaganda Josef Goebbels returned to Hitler’s Reichstag threat of 30 January 1939: ‘We are experiencing the fulfilment of this prophecy’, he wrote, adding that ‘world Jewry’ was undergoing ‘a gradual process of annihilation’.

On 12 December 1941, one day after he made his declaration of war against the USA, Hitler gave a speech to leading party functionaries. Goebbels noted, ‘As far as the Jewish question is concerned, the Führer is determined to make a clean sweep. He prophesied to the Jews that if they once again brought about a world war they would experience their own extermination. This was not just an empty phrase. The world war is here, the extermination of the Jews must be the necessary consequence.’ Six days later Himmler made an appointment with Hitler to confirm that his SS was on the right path. His note on this meeting reads, ‘Jewish question / to be extirpated as partisans’. In January and February 1942, Hitler made a series of public statements in which he once more returned to the threat he had made on 30 January 1939. He intensified his rhetoric now by speaking of the ‘extirpation’ of the Jews.



Jews in the ghetto at Lodz, Poland, with their belongings packed for deportation. In fact, many were executed immediately upon their arrival

‘The Final Solution would take place before the end of the war, in Poland, in dedicated extermination camps’

It was under the influence of such pronouncements that the Nazi authorities responsible for the ‘Jewish question’ began in winter 1941–42 to convert the old plan for a large-scale deportation of the European Jews to the occupied Soviet territories – where they would have been condemned to die sooner or later – into a concrete programme of murder. This did not happen overnight, but was the result of a long process of rethinking that considered when, where and how the ‘Final Solution’ would take place: before the end of the war, in occupied Poland and in dedicated extermination camps.

One of the major events in this transformation process is the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942, a meeting in Berlin of senior civil servants and SS functionaries. It was here that Heydrich announced that ‘after appropriate prior approval by the Führer, emigration as a possible solution has been superseded by a policy of evacuating of the

Jews to the East.’ This ‘evacuating of the Jews’ was supposed to begin as soon as the military situation permitted, and seems to have been for Heydrich only the first step on the road to the ‘impending Final Solution to the Jewish question’. At the Wannsee conference, Heydrich considered the killing of 11 million Jews, including the Jews of Britain and Ireland. He was therefore assuming that the full execution of this programme could only be attempted after the end of the war.

In the deliberately disguised language of the minutes of this meeting, we can read what Heydrich envisaged as the ‘impending Final Solution’: ‘Organised into large work-colonies and segregated according to sex, those Jews fit for work will be led into these areas as road-builders, in the course of which, no doubt, a large number will be lost by natural wastage.’ The ‘remainder who will inevitably survive’, he added, ‘will have to be dealt with accordingly’. Thus Heydrich was still intend-

GUILTY MEN OF THE HOLOCAUST



HEINRICH HIMMLER
Head of the SS. The decision to move from mass murder of the Jews to systematic extermination was made after he held two private meetings with Hitler. It was, he said 'a difficult responsibility'.



REINHARD HEYDRICH
Head of the SD Security Police. Chaired the Wannsee Conference which gave the green light for the Holocaust. His killing by Czech partisans removed all brakes from the mass extermination process.

JOSEF GOEBBELS
Propaganda Minister. He organised the 'Crystal Night' pogroms against German Jews in 1938. His indiscreet diary entries and newspaper threats provide a running commentary on the escalating pace of the Final Solution.



HERMANN GOERING
He ran 'Jewish policy'. In July 1941, he authorised Heydrich to proceed to the 'Final Solution' of the Jewish problem. The most senior Nazi leader tried at Nuremberg, on the eve of his execution he swallowed a concealed cyanide capsule.



Jews leave the Lodz ghetto. Far right: victims are blindfolded prior to execution



ing to deport the European Jews into the occupied Soviet territories, where they would be killed by a combination of 'destruction by work' and direct murder. However, the minutes of the Wannsee conference also indicate that the representative of the Polish *Generalgouvernement*, Secretary of State Bühler, did not wish to wait for the long-promised deportation of the Polish Jews to the East. He suggested instead that they should begin 'the Final Solution to this question in the *Generalgouvernement*, because by far the majority of the 2.5 million Jews there were 'unfit for work'.

Furthermore, he was in agreement with the representative of the ministry responsible for the occupied Soviet territories, that 'certain preparatory measures must be taken in the course of the Final Solution within the relevant territories themselves'. Both wanted, therefore, to murder the Jews in their districts immediately and not wait for the 'impending Final Solution'. And indeed, two

months later, with the bloody liquidation of the ghetto in Lublin and the first fatal transports to Belzec, which was now ready, the systematic murder of the Jews in the districts of Galicia and Lublin in the *Generalgouvernement* began. A few days after the deportations started, Goebbels noted in his diary that '60 per cent of them must be liquidated, and only 40 per cent can be set to work'.

In parallel to the extension of the murders to these two districts, the deportations were themselves extended. Trains were leaving the Reich territory and allied Slovakia and going to the district of Lublin. Goebbels again: 'The ghettos that are being emptied in the towns and cities of the *Generalgouvernement* are being filled up with Jews shunted out of the Reich, and after a while this process will be repeated.'

At the same time, the end of 1942, the first train left France with 1,000 hostages, mostly Jews, travelling to Auschwitz. Officially this was an act

of retribution for attacks made by the French resistance, but in fact it represented the first step towards a deportation programme being developed at the time, which included the whole of central and western Europe.

Himmler's official appointments diary, which was only discovered a few years ago, has entries in the week of 25 April to 2 May for a total of eight meetings with Heydrich in Berlin, Munich and Prague. This unusual succession of meetings was framed by two meetings between Himmler and Hitler. The diary does not reveal what was discussed in these two sessions. However, the events that immediately succeeded them suggest that it was in this period that the final decisions were taken for the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe.

After the end of May, SS and civilian authorities were extending the mass murders of Polish Jews to the whole of occupied Poland. In May the concentration camp of Sobibor was



Final destination: a trainload of doomed Jews from Hungary arrive at Auschwitz extermination camp

opened, and work on a third camp, Treblinka, was begun by the beginning of June.

The fatal attack on Heydrich by British-trained Czech partisans in Prague on 27 May 1942 must have contributed to the perpetrators finally losing all inhibitions. Himmler said in his speech to the SS at Heydrich's funeral, 'we will be done with the migration of the Jewish people within a year. Then no more of them will be migrating.'

After May 1942, the Jews deported from central Europe were no longer confined to the ghettos but were almost all murdered directly upon their arrival. This is what happened to the German Jews in Minsk and to the Slovak Jews in Sobibor. The survivors from among the central European Jews transported to Lodz in the previous autumn – a total of 11,000 people – were murdered at the same time in Chelmno.

A new wave of murders began in the Soviet Union in May, and by the summer had resulted in the almost total annihilation of the Jewish civilian population. A letter written by Himmler on 28 July 1942 refers to his task: 'The occupied Eastern zones are being cleansed of Jews. The Führer has laid the implementation of this very difficult order on my shoulders.'

The deportation programme from Western Europe, planned since the spring, began in full force in mid July. These transports went to Auschwitz, which was also the destination of all trains from Slovakia and of the first transports from the Reich. After early July, the SS murdered most of those deported immediately upon their arrival in Auschwitz in hastily constructed gas chambers. Only those 'fit for work' were admitted to the camp itself, and they usually died there after only a short time, victims of the appalling detention conditions.

Himmler inspected the death-factory of Auschwitz on 17 July 1942. That evening, at a gathering, he made a few remarks that were understood by the other guests to indicate that the murder of the European Jews was a matter that had been firmly decided upon. This information was smuggled into Switzerland and in the form of a telegram from Gerhard Riegner, the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, (who died last December) it reached the – incredulous – Western world. On 19 July, Himmler gave the instruction to murder all Polish Jews with the exception of a few hundred thousand who were 'fit for work'. The programme of mass murder was thus in full swing.

A precise understanding of the sequence of events and of the correlations between them changes our picture of the Holocaust. There was in

EICHMANN: MAKING A SCIENCE OF MOB RULE

ADOLF EICHMANN is one of the most familiar names among the Nazis responsible for the persecution and mass murder of the Jews. Thanks to his well-publicised trial in Jerusalem, in April-August 1961, Eichmann came to personify Nazi barbarism. The trial and the controversies that swirled around it helped to the crystallise and popularise the narrative of what we now call the Holocaust.

Yet Eichmann was in many ways the wrong subject. The prosecution misconstrued his role in the murder of Europe's Jews. It was further obscured by Hannah Arendt's account of the trial, published in 1963 as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin, 1994). Only recently has new scholarship allowed us to see Eichmann the man and the functionary in a truer perspective. Gideon Hausner, who prosecuted Eichmann, characterised the Third Reich as the climax of centuries of anti-semitism and described the accused as its 'executive arm for the extermination of the Jewish people'. After all, Eichmann worked as a 'Jewish expert' in the office of the Nazi security police (the SD) that handled Jewish matters. In 1938 he organised an 'emigration office' in Vienna that in record time robbed 150,000 Jews and ejected them from Austria. He took the minutes at the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942 which was believed to have been the occasion for the decision to implement the 'Final Solution'. Most notoriously, he led a special task force in Hungary, in March 1944, that deported 437,000 Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau in eight weeks.

But Eichmann's rise was not foreordained. His office languished in obscurity until 1938. It

was only then that the SS gained control over the 'Jewish Question' and replaced an old-fashioned mob hatred of Jews with a ruthless, 'scientific' programme. In 1939-40, Eichmann's efforts to fulfil SD policy by forcing Jews out of the Reich or into a Jewish 'reservation' in Poland were all frustrated. He had little to do with the massacre of over one million Jews on Soviet territory after the German invasion in June 1941. Eichmann was not one of the 'willing executioners' in the East who now bulk so large in our imagination. Hausner believed that the 'Final Solution' was a top-down ordinance from Hitler and the culmination of his policies. But historians now see it emerging haphazardly from a generalised racial-biological politics and various local genocides that were responses to other, stalled policies. Eichmann had nothing to do with this. But he came into his own once the decision was taken to deport the Jews of Europe to killing sites in Poland and Russia. With his experience and talent for logistics, he and his team wrote the instructions for deporting one Jewish community after another. Men he had picked in his likeness were sent out to supervise operations and solve glitches.

So was he, as Arendt claimed, a banal functionary, morally dulled to the murderous programme he was facilitating? Hardly. Witnesses testify to Eichmann verbally abusing Jews unfortunate enough to cross his path. He made 'site inspections' in Minsk, Chelmno, Auschwitz. In Budapest he personally organised deportations after his Hungarian collaborators developed cold feet. He once boasted to a crony that he would 'jump laughing into his grave' for his part in the death of four million Jews.

Eichmann was not a mindless cog in a bureaucratic machine, but nor was he the lynchpin of a centralised plan to implement a timeless anti-semitic project. He was the sort of vicious racist who knew what he was doing and wanted to find ways of doing it better, and precisely because of that enabled a genocidal regime to do its worst. *David Cesarani*



Vicious racist: Eichmann stands before the court which condemned him to death in Israel in 1961

all likelihood no single decision made by the Führer to murder the Jews of Europe. At the beginning of the war, the Nazis shifted from persecuting the Jews to murdering them, and the extension of this programme proceeded step by step in the light of the way the war was developing. In the eyes of the Nazis, war and Holocaust formed a single entity.

There can be no doubt about the central role of Hitler in anti-Jewish policies, but this monstrous and unprecedented crime also needed the complicity of many thousands of perpetrators. To set the apparatus of murder in motion required more than one order. **E**

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JOURNEYS

I Met Adolf Eichmann, a documentary featuring eyewitness accounts of Eichmann's activities, will be shown this month on BBC2.

National Socialist Extermination Policies edited by Ulrich Herbert (Berghahn, 2001); *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* by Mark Roseman (Penguin, 2002); *The Holocaust Encyclopaedia* edited by Walter Laqueur, Judith Tyler Baumele (Yale, 2001).

See BBC History Online's Holocaust section www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwtwo/holocaust/
Visit the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ. Tel: 020 7416 5320.