

The Holocaustist Blueprint or Wartime Emergency?

Was the 'Final Solution' an intended corollary of Hitler's anti-Semitism or an 'accident of war'?

Until the early 1960s, historical analysis of the Holocaust was limited in both quantity and extent. The change in attitude thereafter is sometimes attributed to the publicity surrounding the trial of the SS killer Adolf Eichmann, who was kidnapped in Argentina by the Israeli Secret Service, tried and executed in Jerusalem.

Now there is an entire academic field of Holocaust studies devoted to trying to answer some of the intractable questions surrounding this terrible human cataclysm. How could the Holocaust have happened? To what extent was it a product of Germany's past? Was it an inevitable result of Hitler's rabid anti-Semitism, or the

product of wartime circumstances? And why was there apparently so little Jewish resistance to the genocide?

Historians of the Holocaust fall broadly into two groups. The so-called *intentionalists*, who believe that the Holocaust was essentially a product of a plan hatched by Hitler; and the *functionalist* school, which has argued that only the coming of the Second World War caused the *Endlösung* ('Final Solution') to be adopted. There is another group of revisionists, or 'Holocaust deniers', but it would be a form of flattery to accord the title of 'historian' to such mavericks and fantasists.

The intentionalist view

Many students would find the intentionalist view of the Holocaust more convincing. It focuses on Hitler's extreme anti-Semitism, which is expressed so clearly in his book *Mein Kampf*. Here Hitler talks in lurid style about his first meeting with a Jew in Vienna, and how the Jews

were the root cause of all Germany's misfortunes, both during and after the First World War.

Hitler is seen to a degree as a product of German history, in the sense that anti-Semitism had been a feature of German intellectual life as far back as Luther in the sixteenth, and Fichte in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hitler was, of course, an Austrian by birth, but was known to have been influenced by leading anti-Semites like Lueger and von Schönerer, whose pamphlets he read as a young man. The recent suggestion by Kimberley Cornish, in a book entitled *The Jew of Linz*, that Hitler's anti-Semitism can be explained by his dislike of a Jewish schoolmate, Ludwig von Wittgenstein, while interesting, is not particularly convincing.

Intentionalist historians like Lucy Dawidowicz, Karl Dietrich Bracher and Alan Bullock see an unbroken line between the Holocaust and Hitler's earliest anti-Semitic ravings. According to Dawidowicz, the Second World War was significant only because it provided a convenient cover

Chronology of the Holocaust

- 1933** Hitler comes to power. Legislative assault on the Jews begins.
- 1935** The Nuremberg Laws.
- 1938** *Kristallnacht*.
- 1939** Outbreak of the Second World War seals off German Jewry from escape.
- 1941** Invasion of the USSR. First gassings at Chelmno.
- 1942** Wannsee Conference co-ordinates the government agencies involved in the Final Solution. Mass gassings start at Auschwitz and Treblinka.
- 1944** Completion of the Holocaust with the mass murder of 400,000 Hungarian Jews.
- 1946** Surviving Nazi leaders tried for crimes against humanity at Nuremberg. Ten are hanged.

Left: A woman lights candles on the rails to Auschwitz.

Right: A prisoner dying of malnutrition and ill-treatment outside Buchenwald prison camp at the end of the war.

for the mass murder of European Jewry. Hitler's speech of January 1939, in which he threatened the Jews with extinction if they plunged Germany into another world war, can therefore be seen as a logical follow-up to what he had written in *Mein Kampf*. There can be no possible doubt, the intentionalists argue, of Hitler's overwhelming personal responsibility for the Holocaust.

There are some problems with this interpretation, however. Hitler's fundamental anti-Semitism cannot be in doubt. But there was a lengthy passage of time between Hitler's coming to power in January 1933 and the first gassings of Jews at Chelmno in December 1941. Two other distinct phases in Nazi policy can be recognised in the period 1933-41.

The legislative phase

Between 1933 and 1935 the Nazis seemed pre-occupied with a legislative assault on the Jews. First of all there was an SA-organised boycott of Jewish shops and businesses, which was not actually very successful. Then Jews were systematically excluded from the professions and virtually every other aspect of mainstream German life. This process culminated in the infamous Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which deprived German Jews of their German citizenship, banned intermarriage with Aryans (ethnic Germans) and made normal life for Jews virtually impossible. By 1935 Jews had effectively been reduced to second-class status.

The emigration option

The legislative attack on the Jews went hand in hand with a second alternative option, although this only really came to the fore between 1938 and 1940. But as early as 1933, as a result of the so-called Havaara Agreements, the Reich Economics Ministry had allowed Jews to emigrate to Palestine in exchange for payment. The Jewish Agency also agreed that refugees' financial resources must be used to purchase German goods. It is interesting that Hitler, despite his fanatical anti-Semitism, condoned such agreements when it was in the Reich's economic interest to do so.

For some years little of substance was heard of the emigration option, although the Nazis flirted with the idea of sending Jews abroad. A radicalisation of anti-Jewish policy can, however, be identified following the nationwide attack on Jewish property and synagogues during *Kristallnacht* in November 1938. This followed the murder of a German diplomat in Paris by Hershel Grynszpan, a young Jewish boy whose parents had, with others, been 'dumped' along the Polish-German frontier but

refused access to Poland.

Some 20,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps following *Kristallnacht*, and the Nazis became more systematic in their efforts to exclude Jews from Germany altogether. Eichmann had set up an office in Vienna following the *Anschluss* (the union of Austria and Germany) in March 1938 to accelerate the expulsion of Jews from Austria. This office was replicated by Reinhard Heydrich, Himmler's deputy in the SS, for Germany itself. Hundreds of thousands of Jews had been forced out of the Reich, leaving their property behind them, by September 1939.

At the same time more outlandish emigration schemes were considered by the Nazi leadership. Göring suggested that rich US and Canadian Jews might be persuaded to pay for the settlement of Jews in the USA.

■ Concentration and extermination camps	
1 Auschwitz-Birkenau	11 Mittelbau
2 Belzec	12 Natzweiler
3 Bergen-Belsen	13 Neuengamme
4 Buchenwald	14 Ravensbrück
5 Chelmno	15 Sachsenhausen
6 Dachau	16 Sobibor
7 Flossenbürg	17 Stutthof
8 Gross Rosen	18 Theresienstadt
9 Majdanek	19 Treblinka
10 Mauthausen	

▲ 'Grossdeutsches Reich', 1942



This came to nothing. But a plan to resettle the Jews of Germany on the French colonial island of Madagascar seems to have been taken much more seriously. The fact that the French might have objected, or that British control of the seas might render this idea impossible, does not seem to have been part of the equation. Nevertheless, the Madagascar Plan was certainly under serious consideration as late as 1940. Another alternative was some sort of vast reservation in eastern Russia, once Hitler had carried out his threatened attack on Bolshevism.

The functionalist view

The coming of the Second World War in September 1939 accentuated what the Nazis liked to call the 'Jewish problem'. Many Jews were herded into ghettos like Warsaw and Lublin in conquered Poland, but there were many more of them. At 3 million, Poland had the largest Jewish population in Europe. Even more Jews came under Nazi control after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. What was to be done with them?

It is at this point that the functionalist school of historians differs most sharply from the intentionalists. According to leading functionalists like Broszat and Mommsen, it was this pressure of numbers that brought about the decision to murder the Jews *en masse*. The Holocaust was not, therefore, the result of a long-term plan but of a short-term wartime emergency. It was also a result of pressure from the SS and local Nazis in Poland to be rid of those masses of Jews.

Hitler himself, according to the functionalists, had little personal involvement in the decision for genocide. Indeed, according to Wolfgang Mommsen, Hitler was 'a weak dictator' who was quite incapable of formulating a blueprint about anything. Mommsen linked this with his theory that Nazi Germany was 'polycratic', a many-headed power system with rival power centres. Hitler, he argued, was a shambling, weak leader who only rarely intervened directly in government.

Thus there was no long-term plan for the Holocaust, but only a slide into genocide occasioned by the circumstances facing the Nazis in 1941–42. Intentionalists like Dawidowicz and Bracher hotly disputed this attempt to absolve Hitler of personal responsibility. Other historians like Burin, who is not totally convinced by the intentionalist analysis, have reiterated the centrality of Hitler's role. He willed the Holocaust.

The aftermath of Kristallnacht, November 1938.

The decision for genocide

A parallel debate has taken place about when exactly the decision to kill the Jews was made. Some, like Burin, argue for mid-September 1941; others believe that the decision may have been made in the early summer of 1941. What we do know is that the first Jews were gassed at Chelmno in Poland in December 1941, some 3 or 4 months before the gas chambers at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Sobibor began to operate. (The Nazis had already gassed mentally retarded people in Prussia as part of their euthanasia programme in 1941.) In January 1942 Heydrich chaired a meeting with other Nazi leaders at Wannsee, a Berlin suburb, about the practical problems posed by the mass liquidation of the Jews.

Thereafter the Holocaust gained momentum, culminating in the gassing of 400,000 Hungarian Jews in 1944. Even when it was clear that Germany had lost the war the killings went on, although Eichmann produced a bizarre scheme in 1944 whereby Hungarian Jews were to be swapped for 10,000 trucks and other raw materials needed by the Germans. This blatant attempt to save his own neck was flatly rejected by the Allied powers.

Jewish resistance

It has been argued that the Jews went passively to their deaths. And it is true that there was a generational difference in approach. Older Jews were more likely to co-operate with the *Judenrate* (Jewish Councils) in their efforts to save their communities by co-operation with the Nazis. But in practice the Jewish Councils had little choice. Resistance by them might result in death.

Younger Jews, especially those who were Zionists or communists, often chose active resistance. In 1943 Jewish resisters held out heroically for 6 weeks in the Warsaw ghetto against its destruction and evacuation; this was normally the

prelude to transportation to the gas chambers.

There were also Jewish uprisings against the Nazis in the Sobibor and Treblinka camps. These precedents left an important legacy. After 1948 the Jewish state of Israel would never accept dictation by force — the memory of the Holocaust was too vivid.

The legacy of the Holocaust

The physical remains of the genocide still exist because of the perpetuation of places like Auschwitz, and Holocaust museums in Israel and else-

where. Nazi leaders were punished for their crime at Nuremberg in 1946, but such justice was incomplete. Many leading Nazis escaped punishment, often (as in the case of the notorious death camp doctor Mengele) by fleeing to South America.

The question of responsibility still hung in the air. Were the democracies to blame because of their unsympathetic attitude to Jewish refugees before 1939, and their unwillingness to believe the first atrocity stories coming out of Poland in 1941–42? Were all Germans responsible for the Third Reich's crimes, as Daniel Goldhagen has suggested in a recent book? And what of those states like Switzerland, which gained financially from the Holocaust?

Crimes of genocide have still been committed since 1945 in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. And only in 1998 did the UN secure the agreement of the international community to the setting up of a permanent war crimes court. The shadow of the Holocaust still lies over us, and the potential for its repetition remains.

Further reading

- Burin, P. (1996) *Hitler and the Jews*, Edward Arnold.
 Dawidowicz, L. (1975) *The War Against the Jews*, Penguin.
 Goldhagen, D. (1997) *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Little Brown.
 Kershaw, I. (1991) *Hitler*, Allen Lane.
 Lipstadt, D. (1985) *Denying the Holocaust*, Plume.
 Marrus, M. (1987) *The Holocaust in History*, University Press of New England.

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