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How anti-Semitic were
the German people
before 1939?

The Germans and the Holocaust Part I

Holocaust: in this context,
a programme of mass
murder (extermination) of
Jews.

redemptive anti-Semitism:
the belief that the German
nation would be redeemed
(saved) by being liberated
from the clutches of the
Jews.

Aryan: Indo-European

during
ber 1938.

TOPHAM

In the context of Nazi Germany, race war and the **Holocaust**, is it possible to speak of the Germans as 'willing executioners', or is the chain of events that leads to genocide more complex and problematic? This article will examine the nature of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism, together with the extent to which his prejudices were shared by the rest of the population. Anti-Semitism was not a big issue in 1930s Germany, but a government had come to power that was about to make it into one.

Redemptive anti-Semitism

Jews never made up more than 1% of the entire German population, and German anti-Semitism in 1914 was less severe than in France, Austria or Russia. For instance, German Jews had been given civil rights in the 1870s at a time when substantial Reichstag majorities had taken civil rights away from Germany's Roman Catholics. Jews came to enjoy a substantial role in finance and culture by the turn of the century. This progress had a price, as resentment of the 'growing influence' of Jews, combined with German national identity and traditional religious prejudice, produced a unique form of anti-Semitism that Saul Friedlander has described as **redemptive anti-Semitism**.

German nationalism emphasised the 'nation state', racial integrity and the need to exclude non-Germans; assimilation was seen as dangerous. Towards the end of the nineteenth century this racial exclusivity came to embrace the mystical concept of a pure **Aryan** super race, combined with religious prejudice that associated Judaism with ritual murder and the occult. The 'redemption' of

Daniel Goldhagen, on the other hand, favours the theory of **exterminationist anti-Semitism**. In *Hitler's Willing Executioners* he suggests that the Germans were unique in their intolerance and hatred towards the Jews and quickly warmed to the regime's propaganda message. He scarcely mentions that Austrian, French and certainly Baltic anti-Semitism was far more extreme in the early 1930s. Even so, the Nazis were obsessed with race and during the 1930s encouraged and promoted the elimination of Jews from public life. The 'drip, drip' effect of anti-Semitic propaganda should not be underestimated. In time large sections of Germany's population, but by no means everyone, came to accept the portrayal of the Jews as an evil group.

Nazi policy 1933–34

While Hitler may well have been keen to moderate his own virulent anti-Semitism, his followers, particularly among the SA, were determined to settle scores with their sworn enemies, the communists and the Jews. The main problem for Hitler in the early years of his regime was therefore to bring the 'old fighters' into line.

Thanks to a particularly active American press corps in Berlin, the world was quickly made aware of the atrocities that were perpetrated from January 1933 onwards against the regime's political opponents. This inevitably included the Jews. Goering was given the task of defending the Nazi government's actions. He simply denied that any such attacks had taken place. The hypocrisy of this statement quickly became apparent.

On 31 March 1933 Streicher, the *Gauleiter* of Nuremberg and publisher of the newspaper *Der Stürmer*, organised a boycott of all Jewish shops and medical and legal practices for the following day. The international press was outraged, while the

Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919).

the German nation would be achieved with the liberation of German life from the clutches of Judaism. Thus the murder of Jews could be seen as a cathartic process.

Hitler learnt his anti-Semitism from Dietrich Eckart, to whose memory he dedicated *Mein Kampf*. Hitler's obsession with the 'Jewish threat' was shared by thousands of other Germans on the far right, whose world had collapsed with Germany's defeat in 1918. They now believed that **Bolshevism**, a world-wide, Jew-inspired conspiracy, was further challenging Aryan civilisation. The main leaders of the Russian Revolution were Jews, as were the key revolutionaries in the turbulent period of economic and political chaos in post-1918 Germany: Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Kurt Eisner. The conspiracy theories were given a further boost by the discovery of a Russian secret service forgery — *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* — which suggested there was a blueprint for Jewish dominance.

Eliminationist or exterminationist anti-Semitism?

Hitler was capable of concealing his true ideological beliefs (hence the disappearance of overt anti-Semitism from his speeches after 1929) but when faced with obstacles, frustrations or defeat his fanaticism resurfaced. Friedlander, in *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, argues that from the outset Hitler and the National Socialists followed a policy of **eliminationist anti-Semitism**. During 1933 and 1934 the desire to appease Hindenburg and the élites (the Army, the aristocracy and big business) led to the introduction of a series of measures that removed Jews from ordinary life. This was seen by many within the establishment as redressing the balance of the Weimar Republic's favouring of Jews and communists.

cathartic: cleansing, purging.

Mein Kampf: a book written by Hitler when he was in prison in 1923, in which he set out his ideas and aims.

? What was 'the Jewish threat'?

Bolshevism: Marxism as promoted by Lenin and believed in by the Bolsheviks, who seized power in Russia in October 1917.

eliminationist anti-Semitism: belief in removing Jews from influential roles in German life.

exterminationist anti-Semitism: belief in exterminating (killing) Jews.

SA: *Sturmabteilung* — the Brown Shirts, early Nazis led by Ernst Roehm.

Gauleiter: district leader (a *Gau* was a district).

? Explain in your own words the different recognised categories of anti-Semitism.

majority of Germans 'did not identify with it'. For instance, a number of housewives, anticipating some kind of initiative, had stocked up with goods from the shops and continued to patronise them after the boycott had ceased. According to Norbert Frei, in *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, the boycott was an attempt to forestall unwanted action on the part of extreme (and at this point disenchanted) elements among the SA and to pacify the commercial classes who had been the bedrock of Nazi support since 1930. There was no popular demand among the Germans for the boycott.

The 'Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service' (7 April 1933) was introduced for the same reason. This law was aimed at purging the bureaucracy of 'unreliable' elements, while an 'Aryan' paragraph allowed the dismissal of Jewish officials. Interestingly, this continued a pattern inaugurated before 1933 under Papen to attack 'republican' appointments to the civil service. Equally revealing was the intervention of Hindenburg to defend the rights of Jewish ex-soldiers. Thus the law further regulated the unwanted interference in state affairs by the SA and, like the boycott, was partly to appease and thwart the 'revolution from below'.

Historian Norbert Frei feels that 'just as in the period in which the NSDAP rose to become a mass party from 1929/30, during the early years of the Third Reich racist anti-Semitism did not stand in the foreground of policies and propaganda'. The concern of the regime was to deal with internal problems caused by the 'old fighters', who wrongly assumed that they were now in government. To the majority of Germans the anti-Jewish and anti-Marxist measures were part and parcel of the tidying-up operation that had begun in January 1933. Crucially, 'they resulted in both a further dulling of political morality and a regimentation of society based on intimidation'.

As Hitler's personal position improved, his radical racial ideas resurfaced as the restrictions on his freedom of action were progressively removed. In an environment where, in the historian Ian Kershaw's words, everyone was 'working towards the Führer', ambitious Nazis came to

realise that racial initiatives were certain to please Hitler.

After the initial measures described above, the desire to avoid offending the international community reasserted itself. Quiet initiatives that eroded the freedom and employment opportunities of individual Jews were introduced in the shape of 'Aryan paragraphs' that were incorporated into the structure of universities, schools and companies. This was again in line with the wishes of many ordinary Germans, who felt that the Jews had come to dominate a number of professions such as medicine, the performing arts and the law. Nevertheless, by late 1934 some Jews felt that the worst was over in Germany and returned from exile in France.

1935: the persecution increases

In September 1935 the party issued the 'Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour' and the 'Reich Citizenship Law'. These two laws, which enshrined racial prejudice in the legal system, are better known as the 'Nuremberg Laws'. Such an initiative had been considered since July 1933, but Hitler wanted to end the annual rally with a finale that would inspire the party. A new set of laws on citizenship and marriage would also reassure the party that Hitler still considered them a priority, despite his siding with the Army in 1934. Marriage between Jews and Aryan Germans was forbidden, although the regime tied itself in knots trying to define whether half- or quarter-Jews (individuals with two or one Jewish grandparents — the so-called *Mischlinge*) were really Jewish.

The need to please the rank and file of the party gathered at Nuremberg was obviously an issue here, but the legislation also fitted into Hitler's desire to eliminate the Jews from society. The fact that the Nazis still had to tread carefully was demonstrated in 1936, when the degree of discrimination was scaled down for the Olympic Games.

1938 was a key year in the regime's 'war' against the Jews. On 8 November, in response to the assassination of the German diplomat von Rath by a disgruntled Jew (Hershel Grynszpan) in Paris, Goebbels 'engineered' a pogrom, which lasted for 3 days. Ninety-one people lost their lives and a further 30,000 were rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps. This 'initiative' came about because Goebbels was out of favour with Hitler following revelations about a relationship with an actress. *Reich Kristallnacht*, as the incident was named, was therefore an attempt to win Hitler's favour. It also provided another opportunity for the fanatics in the party to satisfy their rabid anti-Semitism.

Hitler's personal position within Germany had strengthened following the purge of the Army, as it was the only institution capable of removing him. The Army's natural conservatism had always proved to be a restraining influence on Hitler, and many officers had found the regime's anti-

How did Hitler set about establishing anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany?

NSDAP: National Socialist German Workers' Party, i.e. the Nazi Party.

pogrom: an organised attack on and/or massacre of section(s) of a population; in this sense, on Jews.

Key points

- ✱ In 1914 there was more anti-Semitism in Austria, France and Russia than in Germany, where Jews made up 1% of the population at the most.
- ✱ Extreme German nationalists came to believe that Germany could only be 'redeemed' by the removal of all Jewish influences from German society.
- ✱ Hitler and right-wing Germans were obsessed with the 'Jewish threat', believing it allied with Bolshevism because the main leaders of the Bolshevik revolution (as well as key leaders in Germany's postwar crises) were Jews.
- ✱ Initially, anti-Semitism as a key policy and propaganda issue was not well supported by the German people, but attitudes hardened, increasing prejudice and discrimination against Jews.
- ✱ Many anti-Semitic measures, for example *Reich Kristallnacht*, were implemented only to please the leadership of the Nazi Party.
- ✱ Following his 1938 Army purge, Hitler was free to indulge his racial ideas, which he had previously modified for fear of losing power.

Jews forced to scrub the streets, 1938.

Semitism distasteful. Furthermore, as Friedlander points out in *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, following the **Anschluss** in 1938, policy against the Jews took a more radical turn as Jewish homes were seized by the occupying Germans, shops were looted and, perhaps most shockingly, Jews were made to scrub the pavement.

On 20 August 1938 Adolf Eichmann (who held the rank of *Untersturmführer*, or second lieutenant, of the **SS**) was entrusted with the task of masterminding an intensive programme to force Austrian Jews to emigrate. This seems to have been a more efficient version of a general policy that the regime had followed since 1936. Destinations such as Palestine and even Madagascar were suggested as the ultimate destination of Europe's Jews. However, by 1938, to use Friedlander's phrase, 'the bulk of the German population had become passive "onlookers" in contrast to the "activists" among the National Socialists'. This did not mean that the German population was ready, or willing, to be launched headlong into genocide.

Anti-Semitism was undoubtedly a prominent aspect of Hitler's personal creed. After 1933 the Nazi leadership saw the need to please the radical anti-Semites in the party with trade boycotts, race laws and pogroms. The majority of the population, however, did not share the party's pathological hatred for Jews, but they gradually lost the ability to make moral judgements about government policy. Following the Anschluss and the

outbreak of war, Hitler, now freed from internal restrictions, could turn his attention to his dream of creating a master race.

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Further reading

Frei, N. (1993) *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, Blackwell. A first-class study of fascism in Germany. This is a worthwhile place to begin general research into the period.

Friedlander, S. (1997) *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Phoenix-Giant. A challenging but extremely worthwhile study of Nazi policy up to the start of the war. It contains some sombre examples of the steady erosion of humanity and dignity in Germany.

Goldhagen, D. J. (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Abacus. This caused a huge stir when it was first published, with its bold and unambiguous accusation that the German people were content to implement Hitler's racial ideas. The first two chapters should be read alongside Friedlander's more measured approach.

Kershaw, I. (1998) *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, The Penguin Press. A masterly and readable account of Hitler's career up to 1936. This is an excellent work for the formative influences on Hitler's racism.

Anschluss: the union with Austria.

SS: short for *Schutzstaffel*, began in 1925 as Hitler's bodyguard, and became an independent organisation in the Nazi Party in July 1934. Under Himmler, the SS became the élite force that operated the concentration camp system.