

The Germans and the Holocaust

Part II 1938–45

? Why did the Nazi regime begin a programme of extermination of 'undesirables'?

During the 1930s the National Socialists had introduced a series of measures that removed the civil rights of Jews. Their aim was to eliminate Jews from everyday life, though this programme had a mixed impact on the population. It was accompanied by an intensive propaganda campaign that sought to portray the Jews as the embodiment of evil. Historian Saul Friedlander suggests that by the end of the 1930s the majority of the German people had been transformed into passive 'onlookers' rather than 'activists' and had come to accept the Nazis' persecution of the Jews.

A successful foreign policy had meant that Hitler's personal popularity rose, while the purge of the conservatives among the top military commanders reduced the danger of an army coup. To use historian Ian Kershaw's phrase, Hitler's 'charismatic dominance' of the German people had begun and would not end until 1945. As the regime plunged into a war, which after 1941 became a race war, a series of decisions was taken that would evolve into the Holocaust.

master race: the Nazis saw themselves and racially 'pure' German Aryans as a master race destined to rule other ethnic groups, who were seen as racially inferior.

euthanasia: an easy, painless death to end extreme or terminal suffering.

Texts relating to the article

Browning, C. R. (1998) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Perennial.

Burleigh, M. (1997) *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on the Nazi Genocide*, Cambridge University Press.

Friedlander, H. (1995) *The Origins of Nazi Genocide*, Chapel Hill.

Friedlander, S. (1997) *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Phoenix-Giant.

Goldhagen, D. (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Abacus.

Kershaw, I. (1998) *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris*, The Penguin Press.

All Jews were forced to wear a yellow star.

The euthanasia programme

The first mass victims of the Nazi desire to create a **master race** were not the Jews, but the mentally and physically handicapped. On 1 September 1939 Hitler authorised the start of a secret programme of 'mercy killing', headed by an SS officer in the Chancellery, Philip Bouhler, and a medical expert, Dr Brandt. The order carried Hitler's signature and therefore directly linked his name to what followed. The document coincided with the outbreak of the war, so in Hitler's own mind the great racial struggle had begun. The programme was given the code name *Aktion T4* after the offices where Bouhler and Brandt were based (4 *Tiergartenstrasse* in Berlin). In all, 70,000 handicapped people were gassed by SS personnel with the help of prominent medical experts.

During the war this programme was extended to 150,000 'unproductive consumers of food'. As historian Michael Burleigh has shown, **euthanasia**

and **eugenics** had a long tradition in Germany and were advocated in the 1920s by many genuinely humane figures. But it was the Nazi government that put theory into practice by creating a regime obsessed with racial purity. In 1934 special 'Eugenic Courts' were established to allow the sterilisation of 350,000 examples of 'dead-weight life'.

Few of the medical experts were motivated by blood lust; many saw an opportunity to further their careers. Their contribution was as essential to the Holocaust as that of the bureaucrats at German railways who organised transport. The order of 1 September 1939, was eventually replaced in the spring of 1940 with the Law on the Treatment of Community Aliens. The ultimate aim of the programme was a *Volkskörper* purged of the genetically feeble. *Aktion T4* experts were eventually sent to the East, where their expertise made a vital contribution to the extermination programme.

Genocide

Historians have searched but have so far failed to find a decree that directly links Hitler to the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the three most important actors — Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich — obviously appreciated that they were committing the foulest of crimes as they attempted to conceal their precise roles. The extermination programme fitted in with the *Weltanschauung* of the most radical of the radicals, Hitler himself. From the moment that German armies drove eastwards into Poland in September 1939, a series of steps were taken that led to the establishment of the death camps. Henry Friedlander feels that the euthanasia programme provided the blueprint, but on this occasion the authorisation came from 'verbal' orders.

In Poland special SS mobile units (*Einsatzgruppen*) rounded up Jews and cleared psychiatric institutions, without any legal restraint. By the spring of 1941, 365,000 people, mostly Jews, had been rounded up and sent to the **General Gouvernement** of Poland under Hans Frank. A policy of **ghettoisation** began to take shape where Jews were herded into sealed-off areas in Warsaw and Lodz. Here, fed on the poorest of diets, the Jews were forced to work for the regime.

Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, marked the final settling of scores with the two enemies of Germany, the Jews and the Bolsheviks. Before the offensive began, a 'General Plan East' was drawn up that fulfilled Hitler's wildest flights of fantasy.

Lebensraum in Russia would secure the future of the German people, who would provide a new ruling élite. In total an anticipated 31–51 million 'racial' aliens would be moved to make way

Heinrich Himmler (1900–45)

From 1923	Associated with the Nazis.
1929	Selected by Hitler to be his personal bodyguard.
1934	Took command of the Gestapo (the Prussian Secret Police — a force that became deeply feared for its cruel enforcement of the law).
1936	Became commander of the unified German police forces, which he used as the foundation of a personal power base.
1943	Appointed Minister of the Interior. Was held responsible for ordering genocide in the concentration camps.
25 May 1945	Captured by the British. Himmler committed suicide shortly afterwards.

eugenics: improvement of the human race through selective breeding.

Volkskörper: racial body.

Weltanschauung: philosophy of life.

General Gouvernement: western Poland was absorbed into Germany. The General Gouvernement (the remainder) became a (theoretically) separate state, ruled by Hans Frank.

ghettoisation: the herding together of Jews or other ethnic minorities into one section of a town or city.

Lebensraum: living space.

Sonderkommando: special commando group, i.e. murder squads.

final solution: a euphemism for the Holocaust. (A euphemism is an inoffensive term used in substitution for a term considered to be offensive.)

Nazi concentration camps and Jewish ghettos.

for the German migrants from areas such as the South Tyrol.

In the East it was inconceivable that any kind of compromise would be possible between the Nazis and 'racially inferior' groups. The Commissar Orders (13 May and 6 June 1941) demanded the immediate execution of Communist Party members and by implication, according to most historians, the Jews. This order was carried out by both the SS and the regular Army (*Wehrmacht*). For instance, it was the *Wehrmacht* that assisted the *Sonderkommando* in the notorious 29–30 September 1941 Babi Yar murder of 33,771 Jews. The rapid sweep eastwards of the German forces was accompanied in the rear by *Einsatzgruppen*, who murdered around 1 million people in the first year of Barbarossa. The connection to the scientific community was still intact as 'experts' selected victims for experiments and eugenic research.

The '**final solution**' was, therefore, well under way before the Wannsee Conference on



Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42)

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- In 1931 Heydrich joined the NSDAP and the SS.
- He formed an informal partnership with the leader of the SS, Himmler, and eventually became head of the Gestapo.
- Heydrich was the chief organiser of the 'final solution'.
- He was ambitious and had a reputation for callousness, which earned him enemies. In an attempt to avoid them he moved to Bohemia in 1942, where he became Reich Protector of Bohemia. He was assassinated there by the Czech resistance.
- In revenge the Nazis destroyed the buildings and murdered the inhabitants of the Czech village of Lidice; this action became symbolic of Nazi malevolence.

20 January 1942. This sought to bring together all elements of the Holocaust to co-ordinate their activities and for Heydrich to assert his authority over the whole process. Throughout 1942 a series of killing facilities was constructed on the advice of *Aktion T4* experts at **Auschwitz** (January), **Sobibor** (April) and **Treblinka** (July).

Within Germany the condition of the Jewish community steadily deteriorated. By law all Jews wore yellow stars, and a curfew was imposed permitting Jews to go out on the streets only between 4 and 5 p.m. The regime tried to hide its crimes from the rest of the world. The Red Cross was shown the 'model' ghetto at Theresienstadt in Bohemia while the killing took place in the East. But stories of atrocities soon filtered back home from soldiers on leave, and anyone travelling by rail could see the arrests and deportations to the East by cattle truck. It is true that 1,400 Berlin

Jews were saved by sympathetic Germans, but the majority of the population hardly lifted a finger. Research has shown that the state's terror apparatus, especially the Gestapo, left the majority of Germans alone and concentrated on the regime's racial enemies.

Reserve Police Battalion 101

The material above provides an outline of the unfolding of the final solution, but the attitude of ordinary Germans to the exterminationist policies of the regime have not really been considered. How were perfectly civilised men and women transformed into murderers?

An answer of sorts is to be found in the surviving files of Reserve Police Battalion 101: 125 transcripts of interrogations undertaken by the German authorities in the 1960s. The Order Police provided soldiers for holding and pacifying territory occupied by the advancing German forces. By 1940 there were 244,500 Order Police and 101 battalions had been created. Battalion 101 was sent to Poland, where it participated in the regime's policies from the outset, including the resettlement of 36,972 Poles in May 1940. The battalion comprised 500 men, mostly middle-aged and from a broad range of social backgrounds. It was directly responsible for the murder of 38,000 Jews.

On the first occasion that the men of Battalion 101 were required to murder for the regime, in Jozefow, their commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career policeman, made an astonishing offer. Anyone who did not feel up to the task could step down. This offer applied throughout the period that the battalion was involved with the final solution in Poland. Historian Christopher Browning estimates that only around 10% (at best 20%) of the men took advantage of Trapp's offer.

Browning suggests that there was a whole range of factors that helped explain the readiness of the majority to murder. Ambition, peer pressure, respect for authority, the dehumanising impact of war, propaganda and anti-Semitism all played their part. He also points out that, over time, principled people saw their resolve slip away and they became desensitised to the idea of murder. Some members of the battalion enjoyed their work, others did not. There were 14 Luxembourgers in the battalion and they behaved in broadly the same way as the Germans. Thus a complex picture emerged of mass murder, and Browning concluded that 'if the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?'

Historian Daniel Goldhagen, who studied the same material as Browning, reached a very different conclusion. To Goldhagen, the absence of coercion signifies that the members of Battalion 101 were 'Hitler's willing executioners' (the title of his 1996 book). The men enjoyed their work, killing for pleasure, and were motivated by a single idea:

2 To what extent did Hitler have a blueprint for genocide?

Auschwitz, Sobibor, Treblinka: famous Nazi concentration, death or extermination camps (see map on p. 9).

Key points

- ✱ The Second World War made the racial policy of Nazi Germany more radical.
- ✱ National Socialist policies were aimed at creating a master race through the destruction of the genetically weak elements in society. The mass murder programme had Hitler's full support.
- ✱ From September 1939 a policy of herding the Jews into ghettos began in Poland. From the start of Operation Barbarossa (1941) the need to destroy the regime's political (the communists) and racial (the Jews) enemies was stressed.
- ✱ The Wannsee Conference (1942) was held to co-ordinate a programme of destruction that was already well under way.
- ✱ Historian Daniel Goldhagen has argued that German willingness to participate in the murder of the Jews confirms his theory that before 1945 the Germans were inherently anti-Semitic.
- ✱ Historian Christopher Browning suggests that such a sweeping, mono-causal explanation is unsatisfactory. He outlines a much more complex series of motives that allowed ordinary Germans to become mass murderers.

'demonological anti-Semitism'. Goldhagen's book became a bestseller and caused enormous controversy in Germany, since his essential argument was that Germans before 1945 were uniquely anti-Semitic.

There is, however, good reason to question both Goldhagen's conclusion and his method. The evidence used is sometimes quoted in a partial or selective way. For instance, Goldhagen claims that when Trapp made his offer in Jozefow it was part of a 'pep talk' that was geared to activating the entrenched anti-Semitic attitudes of the battalion. Yet seven witnesses reported that Trapp was weeping as he made his speech, and others recalled that Trapp distanced himself from the orders, stressing that they came from a higher authority. Equally, it appears strange that German anti-Semitism should suddenly disappear in 1945 with the fall of the Third Reich, given that Goldhagen stresses it as a feature of everyday life in pre-war Germany.

Christopher Browning's argument that all human beings are capable of genocide under certain conditions may make unpleasant reading. It is, after all, far more comforting to believe that the Germans in 1942 had some kind of flaw, yet recent events in the Balkans and in Africa seem to provide strong support for his case.

Conclusion

The Holocaust is hard to explain. The Nazis did not work to any blueprint, and a direct link between

German soldiers standing over the murdered inhabitants of Lidice in Czechoslovakia, June 1942.

Mein Kampf and subsequent events is unclear. During the 1930s Hitler's main concern was to establish himself in power, and his anti-Semitism re-emerged later. It is also important to distinguish between a hard core of rabid National Socialists, for whom war against the Jews was essential, and the remaining population, who tended to demonstrate callous indifference. This helps explain some of the early measures introduced by the regime and challenges Goldhagen's argument that Germans were inherently anti-Semitic.

No single 'Hitler decree' to begin the final solution has been found, nor is this likely. The eugenic intent of the government, the gradual stripping of civil rights from the Jews in the 1930s and the race war that began in 1941 all led to the murderous logic of the death camps. The fact that the regime sanctioned genocide in the context of a dehumanising and desensitising war, together with the passivity of the population, meant that many ordinary Germans — but by no means all — were prepared to commit murder.

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- 2 How far was the extermination programme supported by the German population?

Further reading for students

Bartov, O. (ed.) (2000) *The Holocaust*, Routledge. A series of essays on the origins, implementation and aftermath of the Holocaust.

Lindemann, A. S. (2000) *Anti-Semitism Before the Holocaust* ('Studies in History'), Longman.

Neville, P. (1999) 'The Holocaust: blueprint or wartime emergency?', *MODERN HISTORY REVIEW*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 2-4.

Useful Web sites

www.holocaust-history.org.uk (free archive of photographs and essays)

www.knowledge.co.uk/spiro/index.htm (Holocaust Studies for Schools)

www.welsenthal.com/resource/index.html (for a glossary of historical terms, personnel etc.)