

The Unpredictable Past

# Hitler and the Holocaust

Alan Farmer assesses the personal responsibility of the Führer

On 30 April 1945 Adolf Hitler committed suicide in the bunker beneath the Chancellery in Berlin. From November 1945 until October 1946 over a score of the chief Nazis who had escaped death in the last few days of the war faced trial at Nuremberg for crimes against humanity. Let's for a moment suspend disbelief. Let's suppose that Hitler had not taken his life but had instead been taken alive by Russian troops in the last days of the war. Let's suppose that he too faced trial at Nuremberg. Leaving aside his responsibility for causing the Second World War, what would his defence have been with regard to the Holocaust?

## Hitler's Defence

Hitler's defence lawyers would have had a difficult task. They could not have pleaded insanity: Hitler, consistently (and brutally) rational, was not mad. Nor could they put him in the witness box. Had they done so, he would most certainly have incriminated himself. Far from denying the Holocaust, he would have accepted full responsibility for it. In his last political testament in April 1945 he claimed with pride that the extermination of the Jews was his legacy to the world. What now seems totally illogical and evil seemed to Hitler logical and good.

## Hitler's Actions: 1933-41

However, some points could be made in Hitler's defence. Although he often spoke of 'eliminating' the Jews from Germany, it is not totally clear what he meant. Did 'elimination' mean mass slaughter or simply mass deportation? And did Hitler have any clear ideas about how 'elimination' was to be achieved? His actions between 1933 and 1939 suggest that he was not intent on mass murder. While Jews had been turned into pariahs,



Hermann Göring, on trial at Nuremberg. He and ten other Nazi leaders were sentenced to hang, though Göring escaped the gallows by taking cyanide. Hitler had killed himself on 30 April 1945 and so was spared the public humiliation of a trial.

relatively few had been killed by 1939. The policy of forcing German Jews into exile was an odd policy to adopt if he was set on genocide. It would surely have made more sense to keep them corralled.

Germany's military success in 1939-40 resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Jews under Nazi control. In the German-

controlled areas of Poland alone there were some two million. The evidence suggests that until 1941 Hitler did not envisage – let alone order – an extermination programme. The forced emigration of all German-controlled Jews, whether to the General Government or to Madagascar, remained the Final Solution until early 1941. There is little basis for the claim

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that such plans were simply designed to conceal the regime's genocidal intention. The Madagascar plan was taken very seriously. Hitler's speeches in public and private in 1939-40 give no indication of any extermination plans. Until 1941 all the leading Nazi officials concerned with the Jewish issue – Himmler, Heydrich, Frank and Göring – declared that a policy of compulsory emigration offered the only real solution to the Jewish question.

Himmler in May 1940 accepted that deportation could be 'cruel and tragic'. But he went on to write that 'the method [deportation] is still the mildest and best, if one rejects the Bolshevik method of physical extermination of a people ... as un-German and impossible'. If Himmler was not thinking of extermination, it is unlikely that anyone else was. Hitler and Himmler had a close and sympathetic relationship in the formulation and implementation of racial policy. Thus to discover what Hitler was thinking, it is best to look at what Himmler was doing.

In 1939-40 Himmler was deeply involved in a massive (but hastily improvised) plan to racially restructure much of eastern Europe. Nazi Jewish policy in Poland was part of this demographic project and did not yet have priority within it. The resettlement of ethnic Germans from the USSR and the Baltic States was the centrepiece of Nazi racial policy. Polish peasants (rather than urban Jews) were more likely to be moved to the General Government to accommodate incoming Germans. If Hitler was thinking in terms of mass slaughter of all European Jewry in the years 1939-41, why were German Jews still encouraged to emigrate?

On 22 June 1941 Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa – the attack on the USSR. He was now fighting the war he had always wanted. Victory, as well as giving him control of all Europe, would provide the opportunity to destroy 'Jewish Bolshevism' and win *lebensraum* for

the German master race. Defeat, on the other hand, would mean disaster. Given the colossal stakes involved, the war against the USSR was to be different in kind from the war in the west: it was to be a brutal war to the death.

While Operation Barbarossa was the prelude to the start of the Holocaust, exactly when, how and in what circumstances the Holocaust order was given remains a mystery: no written order from Hitler has ever been found. Did Hitler drift into the Holocaust rather than it being the final phrase of a long-cherished plan? Was the killing initiated by Nazi authorities in occupied eastern Europe? Or did Hitler set the objective – get rid of Jews – without specifying how this was to be achieved? Did Himmler take him at his word and exceed his orders?

#### **A Weak Dictator?**

The defence might claim that Hitler knew very little about the details of the Holocaust. While Nazi propaganda gave the impression that Hitler was a far-seeing man of genius, brilliantly steering the German ship of state towards National Socialist goals, in reality he was not as exceptional as most Germans were led to believe. In many respects he was a weak dictator. His preference for his home in Bavaria instead of Berlin, and his aversion to systematic work in general and paperwork in particular, meant that decision-making in Germany was often a chaotic process. Most of his involvement in government took the form of face-to-face encounters with subordinates: a decision was often simply a casual remark which then became an 'Order of the Führer'. It was impossible for one man to keep abreast of, let alone control, everything that was going on in Germany (and later most of Europe). Every day decisions had to be taken on a huge range of issues. Hitler could not know about, even less decide upon, more than a tiny fraction of these matters. Accordingly, it was not

always clear exactly what his will was on any given matter. The problems do not end there. When there were – as often happened – competing views, Hitler found it difficult to make up his mind. The fact that he often did not get involved in matters or took refuge behind open-ended generalities sometimes had a damaging effect on the smooth running of government.

Historians Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat suggest that Nazi Germany bore more resemblance to a feudal than a modern twentieth-century state, with great Nazi magnates engaged in a ruthless power struggle to capture the 'king' (Hitler) who in turn maintained his authority by playing off one great lord against another. Hitler can be seen as an opportunist, responding to events rather than taking the initiative. Given that various power centres pursued their own particular interests without reference – indeed often in opposition – to others, it is possible to claim that the Third Reich was characterised by 'institutional anarchy', unique in modern German history.

Broszat and Mommsen have thus cast doubt on the extent to which the Nazi system was a product of conscious intention on Hitler's part. Mommsen has even suggested that the anarchic system controlled Hitler, rather than he the system. In this 'functionalist' view, many of the Nazi regime's measures, rather than being the result of long-term planning, were simply knee-jerk responses to the pressure of circumstance. Mommsen sees an improvised 'process of cumulative radicalisation' as subordinate organisations, vying with each other to maintain or acquire responsibilities, adopted the most radical of the available alternatives on the assumption that this reflected Hitler's will.

#### **Were Others to Blame?**

Hitler's defence team would surely have argued that the Holocaust was not just Hitler's work. Himmler, head of the SS, was the real 'architect of

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genocide'. He, in turn, delegated considerable authority in Jewish matters in 1941-2 to Reinhard Heydrich, his right-hand man. At the Wannsee conference in January 1942 it was Heydrich who formalised the administrative arrangements for the Holocaust. The SS was a perfect instrument for genocide. Its members were fanatical Nazis with a grossly distorted sense of duty. The German army was also massively implicated in killings in the USSR. German soldiers seem to have carried out horrendous massacres with some enthusiasm. Many ordinary Germans – civil servants, railway workers, policemen – were involved in the 'machinery of destruction'. Historian Daniel Goldhagen has claimed that the German people were 'willing executioners' and not simply cogs in a vast apparatus beyond their control. He believes that most Germans supported the policy of mass murder and that as many as 500,000 Germans were directly implicated in it.

Hitler's anti-Jewish views were by no means unique to him. Arguably, he was the product rather than the creator of an anti-Semitic society. Anti-Semitism pervaded many aspects of German life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the main reasons for Hitler's political success was that Germans – of every class, age, region, religion and gender – accepted his anti-Semitic message either fully or in part. Not all Hitler's supporters were vehemently anti-Semitic: few believed that Hitler would 'eliminate' all Germany's Jews. But most of the 44 per cent who voted Nazi in March 1933 expected – and many hoped – that he would take some action against the Jews. After 1941, most Germans suspected that something terrible was happening to Jews: most were indifferent to their fate.

Not just Germans were involved in the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism was a European phenomenon. Indigenous populations – Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Rumanians,



This aerial photograph allows us to identify some of the features of the Auschwitz death camp.

Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats – participated in the killing. In Western Europe, the Germans found a host of collaborators. Pope Pius XII, who probably knew about the Holocaust, said nothing in condemnation. Responsibility for the Holocaust was thus not Hitler's alone.

### The Context of War

The defence team would, finally, have placed the Holocaust in the context of the Second World War. Russians committed terrible atrocities on German soldiers and (later) civilians. British leaders allowed the bombing of German towns at night, aware that the main casualties were certain to be women and children. The British believed (rightly or wrongly) that bombing would help win the war. There was also an underlying assumption that the only good German was a dead one. Morally, this is not far removed from the case that Hitler might have made for the Holocaust. Hitler believed (wrongly) that the Holocaust would help Germany win the war.

### The Prosecution Case

In truth, the prosecution could easily have countered the defence arguments. There can be no doubt that racism and anti-Semitism were at the very core of Hitler's ideology. In the same way that Marx believed class struggle was the motive force behind the historical process so Hitler believed it was race struggle. In particular, he saw a permanent struggle between the Aryan race and international Jewry. The Aryans were potentially the fittest people on earth and upon their survival the existence of the planet depended. The Jews, on the other hand, were the ultimate adversary – 'parasites', 'leeches' and 'bloodsuckers' – who aimed to dominate the world themselves. Jews, in Hitler's view, undermined a people's capacity for struggle, weakened and subverted its racial purity and corrupted its positive qualities. He held the Jews responsible for all Germany's misfortunes and blamed them for (what he regarded as) a host of dangerous ideas – capitalism, internationalism, liberal democracy and, particularly, Marxism.

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### Hitler's Goals

While Hitler had little interest in many aspects of domestic policy, he determined the main strands of anti-Jewish policy. For much of the period 1933-9 Hitler showed that he was prepared to be pragmatic, taking account of internal and external pressures, in pursuing his ends. However, belief in certain principles and skill at tactical manoeuvring are by no means mutually exclusive. By 1939 Hitler's anti-Semitic goals had been systematically pursued and rapidly achieved. (For example, by September 1939 some 70 per cent of Germany's Jews had been driven to emigrate.) Precisely where Hitler's anti-Jewish policy was leading by 1939 is a subject of much debate. However, in a speech to the Reichstag in January 1939, he warned: 'If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nation once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevising of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'. The fact that Hitler expressed such violent intentions cannot be taken as proof that he was set on genocide. Nevertheless, he was set on war – a war for *lebensraum*. He may not have wanted war with Britain and France but he certainly hoped for a war with the USSR. Such a war was certain to put Jews in great danger. Given that he blamed the Jews for Germany's defeat in the First World War, it made sense, by his logic, to deal with them harshly, if only to ensure that lightning didn't strike twice.

### Was Hitler Weak?

Was Hitler really a weak dictator? The spirit of the Third Reich was embodied in his remark that there could be only one will in Germany, his own, and that all others had to be subservient to it. He rejected the notion of reaching a collective decision through anything resembling a democratic process. Decision-making in the Third Reich



Bodies being burned towards the edge of Auschwitz.

was thus inspired by his personal whim rather than by administrative procedures. In theory and in practice, Hitler's will in the Third Reich was law. He did not – and could not – concern himself with everything. However, in those areas he considered vital, he took the strategic decisions: subordinates simply hammered out the details.

Convinced that he was chosen by Providence to lead the Germans in their struggle for national existence, Hitler did not lack firmness of purpose. Sometimes he took a long time to make a decision but when he did his personal orders cut quickly through the administrative jungle. Given that institutional conflict is endemic in

virtually all government systems, it may be that the functionalists have exaggerated 'institutional anarchy' in the Third Reich. In reality, there was not always confrontation between the Party and the state civil service and between the mass of specialist Nazi organisations. The bureaucrats in all the camps often held similar views. Moreover, the men who staffed both the Party and state machinery conducted their business, for the most part, in line with tested German habits of order and obedience to authority. Nazi rule was not always chaotic. Indeed, 'institutional anarchy' does not fit the remarkable successes of the Third Reich in various areas, not least the conquest of most of Europe.

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Some of the dead found at Belsen concentration camp when it was liberated in April 1945.

### The Start of the Holocaust

Operation Barbarossa provided Hitler with both opportunity and the justification to solve the Jewish problem once and for all. Given the apocalyptic nature of the struggle, it made sense (by Hitler's standards) to exterminate Russian Jews and then to go a stage further and order the killing of all European Jews. Hitler had shown no mercy to mentally and physically handicapped Germans. He gave a written order for the euthanasia programme in 1939 – the Nazis' first attempt at systematic mass murder. Given that he regarded the Jews as more dangerous than the German handicapped, he was unlikely to find it hard to give a genocidal order.

Precisely when Hitler gave the order to commence the Holocaust remains a mystery. While there is some circumstantial evidence that he had made the fateful decision to

exterminate all European Jews by January 1941, it is far more likely that the decision was taken after the launch of Operation Barbarossa. But when? Most likely, an elated Hitler, confident of victory over the USSR, gave the fateful nod to Himmler in July 1941. Apparently master of all of Europe, he no longer had to worry about world opinion. Both Himmler and Heydrich were in close proximity to his headquarters from 15 to 20 July. Here was an opportunity for Hitler to have confided new orders. Certainly events now began to gather momentum. In late July Hitler committed two SS brigades (over 11,000 men) to assist the overburdened *Einsatzgruppen*. This was only the start of the build-up. By the end of 1941 there were some 60,000 men in *Einsatzgruppen* on Soviet territory – sufficient manpower to kill on a massive scale. In August 1941 Himmler travelled through much

of the Eastern Territories. The fact that he issued personal instructions probably explains why different *Einsatzgruppen* leaders learned of the new turn in policy at different times.

Whatever the precise time-scale, there is no doubt that by late August 1941 the killing of Jews in the USSR was on a different scale. In June/July most of the victims were men – shot individually by firing squad. By August, hundreds at a time were forced to lie in or kneel at the edge of a trench before being shot in the back of the head. Moreover, Jewish women and children were now routinely massacred. By September 1941 the mass slaughter of Russian Jews was well under way.

However, it is not certain that the surge of killings in the USSR meant that Hitler had yet decided to kill all of Europe's Jews. It may be that this decision came later – either in September, October or even as late as

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December 1941. By then, it had little to do with the euphoria of victory. It may be that Hitler finally decided on genocide more out of a sense of desperation than of elation. By September 1941 the Russian campaign, which the Germans had anticipated would last no more than four months, was far from over. German casualties continued to mount and Soviet guerrilla resistance was increasing. It may be that Hitler decided that the Jews would have to foot the bill for the spilling of so much German blood.

While Hitler may have given two extermination orders (one concerning Russian Jews in July 1941 and another later in 1941 affecting the rest of European Jewry), it is also possible that Hitler was considering killing all Jews in July 1941 and asked Himmler to come up with a genocide 'feasibility study'. After all, it was illogical to kill Russian Jews and then transport Polish Jews into the vacuum thus created. Given the gaps in the evidence, the debate about whether the Holocaust decision (or decisions) resulted from the euphoria of success or rather from fear born of defeat looks set to continue. But the evidence suggests that the pieces of the Holocaust fell finally into place between mid-September and mid-October 1941.

Just as with the euthanasia programme, Hitler seems to have been anxious to avoid associating himself too closely with the Holocaust, presumably because he feared alienating the German public. It is possible that he authorised Himmler to produce a solution to the Jewish question without enquiring too closely into what would be involved. Himmler was Hitler's most trusted servant. 'I do nothing that the Fuhrer does not know,' he boasted. Nothing so radical as the Holocaust could have begun without Hitler's approval.

## Conclusion

How might the judge have summed up the evidence? Although the

Holocaust was an enterprise to which countless people throughout Europe contributed, it was essentially a German enterprise. Hitler led Germany. His personality, leadership style and ideological convictions shaped the nature of the Third Reich. His fanatical anti-Semitism played a central role in the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy. He approved the cumulative intensification of Jewish persecution and his attitude served as its legitimating authority. While not always personally concerned with the detailed moves to achieve a 'solution of the Jewish Question', he gave signals that established priorities and goals. His racist dogma was the critical engine of the Nazi state.

German – indeed European – anti-Semitism may have been a necessary condition for the Holocaust but it was not a sufficient one. It was Hitler who made the difference. While he probably did not always harbour the intention of literally exterminating the Jews, extermination was always a possibility, especially in the event of war. And Hitler wanted war – the 'father of all things' – the prerequisite for the natural selection of the strong and the elimination of the weak. While he may not have wanted the war he got in 1939, he certainly got the war he wanted in 1941. Operation Barbarossa was the key to the Holocaust. The war against the USSR gave him the opportunity of destroying 'Jewish Bolshevism' and he took it with a vengeance. After 1941 Jewish extermination could be declared a military necessity. Once he resolved to kill all Russian Jews it was but a small step to decide to kill all Jews.

The road to Auschwitz was not necessarily very twisted. Its completion had to wait until the conditions were right. The moment they were, Hitler commissioned his architect-builders – Himmler and Heydrich – to design and construct the road.

The court at Nuremberg would

surely have found Hitler guilty of one of the most heinous crimes in world history.

## Further Reading

D. Cesarani (ed), *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (Routledge, 1996)

A. Farmer, *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1998)

**Nothing so radical as the Holocaust could have begun without Hitler's approval**

R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Holmes and Meier, 1985)

I. Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis 1936-1945* (Penguin, 2000)

M. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Penguin, 1989)

J. Noakes and G. Pridham, *Nazism 1919-1945: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination: A Documentary Reader* (University of Exeter, 1988)

## Issues to Debate

- When, how and in what circumstances did Hitler give the Holocaust order(s)?
- Who, Hitler apart, was to blame for the Holocaust?
- Is it fair to say, 'No Hitler, no Holocaust'?

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