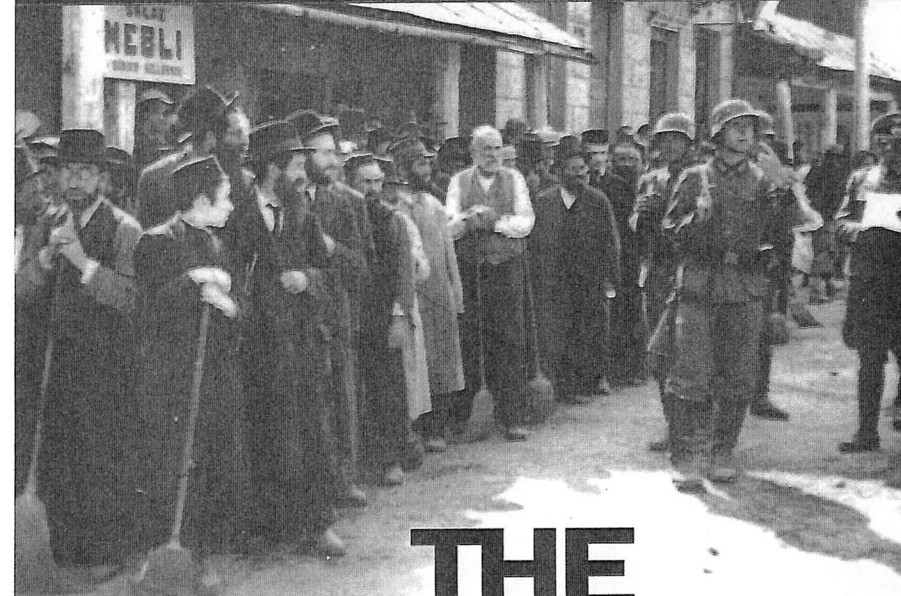


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THE ORIGINS OF THE FINAL SOLUTION

THE EVOLUTION OF NAZI JEWISH POLICY
1939-1942

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Conclusion

HITLER AND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN NAZI
JEWISH POLICY, SEPTEMBER 1939—MARCH 1942

In the five weeks between September 18 and October 25, 1941, events had moved rapidly. Hitler had reversed his earlier decision not to permit the deportation of Jews from the Third Reich until after the war and instead sought the unrealizable goal of a *judenfrei* Germany by the end of the year. The sites of the first extermination camps were selected. The testing of various methods of killing by poison gas were conducted. Jewish emigration from the Third Reich was forbidden. And the first 11 Jewish transports had departed for Lodz as a temporary holding station. The vision of the Final Solution—a program aimed at murdering every last Jew in the German grasp—had crystallized in the minds of the Nazi leadership and was henceforth being turned into reality.

If the last pieces in the decision-making process came together quickly in the end, this fateful cluster of decisions itself was the climax of a long process stretching over a period of 25 months from September 1939 to October 1941. The commitment to some kind of final solution to the Jewish question had been inherent in Nazi ideology from the beginning. Thus Nazi Jewish policy had evolved through a series of final solutions, which first envisaged a *judenfrei* Germany through emigration and then a *judenfrei* Europe through expulsion. This process of radicalization culminated in 1941 in the ultimate Final Solution of systematic mass murder. Jewish policy could evolve no further in concept. It remained only to be implemented through action.

What was Hitler's role in this fateful evolution? As the ultimate embodiment of Nazi ideology as well as the constant inciter and mobilizer of the party faithful, Hitler had certainly legitimized and prodded the ongoing search for final solutions. His obsession with the Jewish question ensured that the Nazi commitment would not slacken, that the search for a solution *one way or another*

to this self-imposed problem would not fade away into obscurity or be indefinitely postponed. No leading Nazi could prosper who did not appear to take the Jewish question as seriously as Hitler did himself. Thus Hitler, simply by his existence, exerted a continuing pressure on the political system, which induced a competition among the faithful and ambitious to advance ever more radical proposals and to carry out Jewish policy in an ever more brutal and comprehensive manner. For many—the “true believers”—this commitment to the Final Solution was a deeply felt conviction. For the unquestioning loyalists, it was a matter of completely identifying with Hitler. For eugenicists and planning experts, it was the opportunity to realize an agenda of their own that overlapped with that of Hitler. For technicians of many sorts, it was a chance to display their skills. And for countless others, it was a cynical exercise in political careerism, opportunism, and accommodation. In the end the results were the same. The commitment to some kind of final solution permeated the entire regime, and acceptance of such a priority on the part of the regime characterized much of the German population at large.

But Hitler's role was also more immediate. From September 1939 to October 1941 he was an active and continuing participant in the decision-making process. Indeed, not a single significant change in Nazi Jewish policy occurred without his intervention and approval. Two basic conclusions can be drawn about this participation. The first concerns Hitler's mode of operation. To make his wishes known, he would give signals in the form of relatively vague and inexplicit statements, exhortations, and prophecies. Others, especially Himmler, responded to these signals with extraordinary alacrity and sensitivity, bringing to Hitler more specific guidelines for his approval. The classic example is Himmler's May 1940 memorandum on the treatment of alien populations in the east. On occasion, not only guidelines but quite concrete proposals—such as those for marking German Jews or commencing deportations from particular cities in the Reich to particular destinations in the east—were submitted to Hitler as well. If one continuity above all others emerges in this regard, it is the close and sympathetic relationship between Hitler and Himmler during this period. If one wants to know what Hitler was thinking, one should look at what Himmler was doing.

A second rather consistent pattern is the chronological correlation between victory and radicalization, indicating that the emergence of the Final Solution was influenced and shaped not only by Hitler's enduring obsession with the Jewish question but also by the changing circumstances and the periods of elation and victory euphoria in which the Third Reich found itself. Let us briefly review this chronological pattern:

Hitler had indicated in his January 30, 1939, Reichstag speech that the

outbreak of war would have fateful consequences, leading to the destruction of the Jews in Europe. He thus communicated to his followers, or at least to the more astute among them, that his expectations would be radicalized in wartime. Himmler did not disappoint. In mid-September, in the flush of victory over Poland, the Reichsführer-SS submitted proposals for the demographic reorganization of eastern Europe, including the Lublin reservation for Polish Jews, which Hitler approved. In March 1940 Hitler indicated his disenchantment with the plan for the Lublin reservation, however, and the opposition of Göring and Frank threatened Himmler's wider demographic design for the quick "Germanization" of the incorporated territories. In May 1940, after the decisive breakthrough in France, Himmler submitted his memorandum on the treatment of the alien populations in the east, with the prospect of sending the Jews to Africa. Hitler deemed the memorandum "very good and correct." In the following month, with the victory over France assured, Hitler embraced the Madagascar Plan, which had been initiated in the Foreign Office and immediately co-opted by Heydrich.

With the imminent expansion of the war into the Soviet Union, Hitler again signaled new expectations. On at least four occasions between February 26 and March 30, 1941, he set the tone for a "war of destruction" against Jewish Bolshevism. Not just the SS but also the military and economic planners immediately sought to cast his ideological pronouncements into specific policies, such as the SS-Wehrmacht agreement on Einsatzgruppen activities in the war zone, the *Kommissarbefehl*, and the plan to deprive large areas of the Soviet Union of a subsistence-level food supply. In mid-July, with the stupendous early victories of the Barbarossa campaign, Hitler urged an acceleration in the murder campaign, to create a "Garden of Eden" in the east from which Germany would never withdraw. He also indicated that the time had now come to approach every country in Europe with the demand for the removal of every last Jew. Shortly thereafter, Heydrich procured authorization to prepare and submit a "total solution" to the European Jewish question. In September the Germans encircled Leningrad and captured Kiev, and in early October they resumed the march on Moscow and won the stunning double encirclement victory at Vyazma and Bryansk. Victory by the end of the year still seemed attainable, and a mood of euphoria reminiscent of midsummer again permeated the Führer's headquarters. Also in mid-September Hitler reversed his earlier deferral of deportations until "after the war." In October the deportations began, and further Jewish emigration from the Continent was forbidden. In the same weeks various gassing experiments were conducted, and German commandos ap-

peared in Belzec and Chelmno in preparation for the construction of extermination camps at these sites. The creation of gassing facilities in Riga, Mogilev, and Sobibor was also contemplated at this time.

Nazi racial policy was radicalized at points in time that coincided with the peaks of German military success, as the euphoria of victory emboldened and tempted an elated Hitler to dare ever more drastic policies. With the "war of destruction" in the Soviet Union underway and the imminent prospect of all Europe at his disposal, the last inhibitions fell away. Hitler's final hesitations in August 1941—to wait until "after the war"—were overcome in late September and early October, with the last great military encirclements that still promised an early victory.

But Germany's string of military successes finally came to an extraordinarily abrupt end in late October.¹ The bad weather, terrible roads, shortage of supplies, exhaustion of German troops, and stubborn retreat of the remnants of the Red Army all combined to bring the Wehrmacht to a halt. There was no open road to Moscow. But the tide of war turned too late for European Jewry. The Soviet Union was saved but the Jews of Europe were not. The Nazis were now committed to a program of mass murder which, though conceived in the euphoria of victory, would be implemented in defeat. Lebensraum and Final Solution, Hitler's twin obsessions, had evolved and radicalized under the spur of victory and opportunity. In defeat, the evolution was over. Henceforth Hitler would cling grimly to the vision of Lebensraum and Final Solution that had been reached in the fall of 1941, bringing about the destruction first of European Jewry and then of Germany itself.

That October 1941 was not only the fateful watershed in Nazi Jewish policy but also a crucial military turning point on the eastern front can be seen in hindsight. Such a perspective was not, of course, available to the Nazi leadership at the time. The Nazi regime would continue doggedly to pursue military victory, which would elude them, as well as preparations for a genocide of the European Jews that would prove all too successful. In regard to the latter, Hitler continued to incite his followers and legitimize the policy of mass murder. On December 12, 1941, he met with the party leadership and made it clear that the entry of the United States into the war would not delay implementation of the Final Solution. In the month following the Wannsee Conference he made numerous comments, both public and private, about the fate of the Jews that exceeded in frequency and vitriol even his comments of the preceding months.²

On March 10, 1942, Hitler had dinner with Himmler, who also gave a postdinner presentation. On March 11, 12, and 13, Himmler spoke with Hey-

drich on the telephone about the Jewish question and Krüger's enhanced position in the General Government as state secretary for security and then departed for Cracow and Lublin. There Himmler had meetings with Frank, Krüger, and Globocnik on March 13 and 14, on the eve of the first deportations from Lublin and Galicia to Belzec. And on March 17, Hitler had both lunch and dinner with the recently returned Himmler, who made yet another presentation to the Führer as well. This was just hours after the gas chambers at Belzec had begun to operate full-time.³ Ten days later, on March 27, Goebbels reported in his diary:

The Jews in the General Government, beginning in Lublin, are now being evacuated to the east. This is a pretty barbaric procedure, not to be described here more precisely, and of the Jews themselves not much will remain. . . . A judgment is being carried out against the Jews that, indeed barbaric, is fully deserved. The prophecy that the Führer made about them for causing a new world war is beginning to come true in a most terrible manner. . . . No other government and no other regime would have the strength to solve this question comprehensively. Here, too, the Führer is the unflinching champion and spokesman of a radical solution⁴

In the long evolution of Nazi Jewish policy to the Final Solution, Hitler had been of course not only "champion and spokesman" but also the necessary and pivotal decision maker.

GERMANS AND THE FINAL SOLUTION

During the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938, aside from the frustrated party activists who had finally been allowed their day in the streets, most Germans were (to borrow Saul Friedländer's term) "onlookers" who disapproved of the violent and destructive attack upon German Jews and their property. For most Germans the disapproval was not triggered by any sense of solidarity with Germany's beleaguered Jews or principled opposition to their being deprived of both their rights and property by legal and administrative processes. The nature of the pogrom, with its wanton destruction of property, the burning of houses of worship, and the flaunting of public violence, rather than the persecution of the Jews itself, was the most disturbing aspect of Kristallnacht for most "ordinary" Germans.⁵

Nevertheless, the largely negative public reaction to Kristallnacht begs the vital question. If "ordinary" Germans still shied from the breaking of shop windows, the torching of synagogues, and the beating of Jews in the streets of

Germany in 1938, why were they willing just three years later to begin murdering Jews en masse in eastern Europe. In terms of public violence, there was no comparison. The firing squad executions left the killers saturated in the blood of their victims, and even deportation from the Third Reich to the faraway death camps involved pathetic processions of elderly Jews and waves of suicides. And on Polish territory the deportations would soon be characterized by widespread and highly visible ghetto-clearing operations that were mounted with tremendous ferocity and left the streets lined with corpses. How in three brief years had "ordinary" Germans been transformed from "onlookers" squeamish and disapproving of vandalism, arson, and assault into "willing executioners" who could perpetrate mass murder with unfettered violence?

Change in time and place was vitally important. After September 1939 Germany was at war, which in turn created a vast German empire in eastern Europe. Even though the initial popular reaction to the outbreak of war was one of apprehension rather than enthusiasm,⁶ almost no one in Germany was prepared to engage in dissident, critical, or nonconformist behavior in this regard. It would be no exaggeration to state that the single greatest consensus in the political culture of German society (and scarcely unique to Germany) was the obligation to do one's duty and support one's country in time of war. This consensus was not invented by the Nazis, but it served them well. War in general meant the suspension of critical stance, the temporary erasure of the distinction between loyalty to country and loyalty to regime, the acceptance of demands for sacrifice and toughness, the predisposition to see the world as divided between friends and enemies, and the expectation that terrible things will inevitably happen paradoxically combined with the tendency to dismiss reports of such as exaggerated enemy propaganda.

Indeed, the Nazi leadership was well aware that war would create a propitious situation for carrying out policies that were inexpedient if not unthinkable in peacetime. As Göring alerted the assembled Nazi leaders in the wake of Kristallnacht: "If in some foreseeable future an external conflict were to happen, it is obvious that we in Germany would also think first and foremost of carrying out a big settling of accounts with the Jews."⁷ Hitler in turn made this expectation quite public in his Reichstag "prophecy" of January 30, 1939, that world war would mean "the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe." And Jews were not the only Nazi target whose vulnerability was vastly intensified by the outbreak of war, as Hitler's order for the mass murder of mentally and physically handicapped Germans in the fall of 1939 clearly shows.

The conquest and partition of Poland in September 1939 was a major step in the creation of Nazi Germany's east European empire and offered a propitious

site for various policies of racial imperialism. As the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Freikorps campaigns, and the almost total rejection of the Versailles Treaty demonstrate, refusal to accept the verdict of World War I and unquenched imperial aspirations in eastern Europe underpinned by notions of German racial and cultural superiority were broadly held sentiments in German society. They provided more common ground between the bulk of the German population and the Nazi regime than did anti-Semitism.

In short, wartime Poland offered a time and place where Germans would be more transformed by what they saw and did between 1939 and 1941 than they had been by their experience of the domestic dictatorship in 1933–39. Just as the decision-making process leading to the Final Solution was incremental and influenced by the intoxicating euphoria of success on the one hand and the frustration of impasse and dashed expectations on the other, so was the process of adaptation among the perpetrators. An unbroken chain of victories not just in Poland but also in Scandinavia, France and the Low Countries, and the Balkans extended German control over the Continent. But it was in Poland above all that Germans were exhorted to behave as the master race over inferior native populations and where they encountered in massive numbers the strange and alien *Ostjuden* so different from assimilated, middle-class German Jews. Here the corrupting process of racial imperialism could be launched most easily.

In Germany the regime attempted to keep the mass murder of the mentally and physically handicapped relatively secret. Not so for racial imperialism in Poland. There was little reticence over the arrest and murder of the Polish leadership and intelligentsia, and the roundups of Poles for either expulsion or labor were even more open. The degradation rituals and public torments aimed against Polish Jews were especially visible. The flood of measures for marking, expropriation, forced labor, and segregation and the heightened incidence of impoverishment, starvation, and disease that so disproportionately afflicted Polish Jewry accelerated the vicious circle of dehumanization and further persecution.

Committed to Germany's proclaimed mission of racial empire building in the east, German occupiers in Poland soon accepted and indeed advocated the notion that when they were done remaking the demographic map of eastern Europe, no Jews would remain. The Jews in Poland, far more than the relatively small and constantly declining number of assimilated Jews in Germany, posed a problem to be solved. Mass expulsion—what we now call “ethnic cleansing” but what the Nazis euphemistically called “resettlement”—first to Lublin, then to Madagascar, and finally further east was the imagined panacea. It was but one aspect of a wider demographic revolution the Nazis intended to engineer, but it

proved illusory. The reality was overcrowded, disease-ridden, impoverished ghettos of Polish Jews who could be concentrated but not expelled. The Nazis' self-imposed problem had both worsened and become further rather than closer to solution.

German colonial administrators in Poland differed on interim measures: some favored an intensified attrition of the Jewish population through starvation while others preferred the productive use of Jewish labor to cover the cost of food, reduce the threat of epidemic, and contribute to the war economy. But virtually no Germans in Poland—whether they were city administrators dealing with food and housing shortages, public health officials facing epidemics, policemen combating the black market, economists and military contractors exploiting the territory, or urban and landscape designers and “demographic engineers” planning “aesthetic” German settlements—envisaged a long-term Jewish future there. The goal that all Jews would disappear was widely accepted before the means of systematic mass murder were chosen, but German policies had created “untenable circumstances” (*unhaltbaren Verhältnisse*)⁸ and “an impossible situation” (*ein unmöglicher Zustand*)⁹ for which it would be increasingly easy to mobilize consensus for a radical solution.

The decisive leap from disappearance through expulsion to disappearance through systematic mass murder was first taken, however, not in Poland but rather in the Soviet Union. Added to the existing context of racial imperialism and “untenable circumstances” were the crusade against Bolshevism and the “war of destruction.” According to measures planned not only by the SS but also by military leaders, economists, and civil administrators, millions in the Soviet Union were fated to die through mass execution, starvation, and expulsion. One pattern was already clear. In the past wherever the Nazis carried out mass executions, Jews were shot in disproportionate numbers; wherever food was scarce, Jews starved first; and wherever people were deported, the Germans never conceived of any Jews being left behind. For example, as Henry Friedlander has shown for the “euthanasia” program, selected German handicapped were killed after screening, but all of the German Jewish handicapped were killed indiscriminately without selection.¹⁰ These tendencies would inevitably be intensified by the identification of Jews and Bolsheviks that was not only embedded in Nazi ideology but also widely held by conservatives throughout Europe. In short, even before the invasion German intentions for the Soviet Union had genocidal implications for Soviet Jews that transcended what Polish Jewry had yet suffered.

By the spring of 1942, two million Soviet prisoners of war had perished, and millions of other Soviet citizens had starved or been shot. When these victims

are added to the 70,000–80,000 German mentally and physically handicapped, the Polish intelligentsia, the reprisal victims, and many others who had also been killed by them, the capacity of the Nazi regime to mobilize Germans to kill even non-Jews by the millions is evident. In these cases anti-Semitism was not even a relevant much less sufficient motivation. These dead were almost invariably victims of Nazi racial imperialism, which devalued the lives of whole categories of people in addition to Jews.

When, in the context of racial imperialism, “war of destruction,” and crusade against Bolshevism, Germans were willing to kill millions of others, they were also willing to kill *all* Soviet Jews. In late 19th-century Germany, Shulamit Volkov has written, Jews had become a “cultural code” for democracy and socialism, capitalism and free enterprise, internationalism, and cultural experimentation. In Poland they had also become a symbol for the “untenable circumstances” of disease, overcrowding, black marketeering, filth, and starvation. By 1941 on Soviet territory the Jews had become a code word for Bolshevism, Asiatic threat, and partisan resistance in what was conceived of as an all-or-nothing war between implacable racial and ideological enemies.

German anti-Semitism was not static but intensified with the changing historical context. In the 1930s growing enthusiasm for Hitler and the Nazi regime was due primarily to the restoration of political order, the return of economic prosperity, and the revival of national grandeur. There was no similar popular acclamation for the persecution of German Jews, but likewise no solidarity with the victims, who were increasingly isolated and deprived of their rights and property by a succession of legal and administrative measures. As of 1938, aside from a minority of party activists, most Germans were not yet ready or willing to visit physical violence upon their Jewish neighbors but neither were they interested in coming to their defense.

With the outbreak of war and the commencement of racial empire building, first in Poland but above all on Soviet territory, that situation changed. Two vicious circles were set in motion. For the decision makers at the top, each victory and territorial expansion was a setback in solving their self-imposed Jewish problem, as the number of Jews within the German sphere swelled inexorably. For the occupiers in the east, each measure taken brought a solution no closer but instead contributed to “untenable circumstances” (or at best a precarious stabilization) that dehumanized the Jews yet further and at the same time disposed the German occupiers to expect and advocate yet more radical measures. The solution to the Jewish problem through the eventual disappearance of the Jews—sometimes, somehow—was taken for granted.

Within the context of the murderous “war of destruction” against the Soviet

Union, the leap from disappearance of the Jews “sometimes, somehow” to “mass murder now” was taken in the summer of 1941. Once underway on Soviet territory, this ultimate or Final Solution beckoned to the Nazi regime as a solution for the rest of Europe’s Jews as well. Already in the midst of committing mass murder against millions of Jews and non-Jews on Soviet territory, “ordinary” Germans would not shrink from implementing Hitler’s Final Solution for the Jews of Europe as well.