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IAN KERSHAW FATEFUL CHOICES

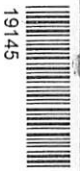
FATEFUL CHOICES

TEN DECISIONS
THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

1940-1941

IAN

KERSHAW



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IO

Berlin/East Prussia, Summer–Autumn 1941

Hitler Decides to Kill the Jews

*They said to us in Berlin: why are you giving us all this trouble?
We can't do anything with them in the Ostland or in the Reich
Commissariat [the Ukraine] either. Liquidate them yourselves!
... We must destroy the Jews wherever we find them and wherever
it is possible to do so.*

Hans Frank, Governor General of Poland, 16 December 1941

On 12 December 1941, the day after he had announced Germany's declaration of war on the United States of America, Hitler addressed his party leaders in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. After a lengthy survey of the state of the war, he turned to the position of the Jews. His Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, recorded what he had to say: 'With regard to the Jewish Question, the Führer is determined to make a clean sweep. He prophesied that if they brought about another world war, they would experience their annihilation. This was no empty talk. The world war is here. The annihilation of the Jews must be the necessary consequence. This question is to be viewed without sentimentality. We're not to have sympathy with the Jews, but only sympathy with our German people. If the German people has again now sacrificed around 160,000 dead in the eastern campaign, the instigators of this bloody conflict will have to pay for it with their own lives.'¹

By this time the Jews had been 'paying with their own lives', as Hitler saw it, for almost six months. Across the whole of the summer, since the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June, killing units of the German Security Police had slaughtered Jews in their tens of thousands, starting mainly with the men but before long including women and children. Just one of the four *Einsatzgruppen* or task forces, sent in behind the rapidly advancing Wehrmacht to wipe out 'subversive elements', rampaging through the Baltic, had murdered a precisely calculated 229,052 Jews by the end of

the year.² That was the first horrific phase of genocide. But by the autumn the genocide had extended beyond the occupied parts of the Soviet Union and was rapidly entering a second, wider and ultimately comprehensive phase. This aimed at nothing less than the physical extermination of the Jews of the whole of German-occupied Europe – what the Nazis would label the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question'.

The full implementation of the extermination programme would not get under way until the spring and summer of 1942, when the death-mills in the killing centres of occupied Poland commenced their industrial-style gassing operations and the dragnet became gradually stretched across the whole of Europe, east to west, north to south. The last ghastly stage of the mass transports and immense production-line gassings would not take place until the summer of 1944, when, with Germany forced ever closer to inexorable defeat, almost half a million Hungarian Jews were murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even then, the torment of the Jews was far from over. Tens of thousands were still to die in the horrors of the 'death marches' from east to west as the death camps in occupied Poland were closed down in the face of the rapid advance of the Red Army and surviving prisoners forced back into already disastrously overfilled labour or concentration camps (such as Bergen-Belsen) inside the Reich.

This untold misery, suffering and death followed from two crucial decisions – or, better, sets of decisions – in 1941. The first of these, in the summer, was to kill the Jews of the Soviet Union. The second, in the autumn, was to extend the killing to the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe. By the time Hitler's Reich collapsed, the death toll lay, by the most reliable accounts, between 5.29 and just over 6 million Jews.³ The target was, however, close to double this figure. As laid down in January 1942, a total of no fewer than 11 million Jews were envisaged as falling within the 'Final Solution'.⁴

The decision to kill the Jews of Europe had no precedent. It was a decision like no other in history. The nearest parallel had been the killing of between a million and a million and a half Armenians by the Turks in 1915 (some two-thirds of those living in Turkey at that time). There were some similarities. There had been a lengthy prehistory of Turkish hostility towards the Armenians, punctuated with outbreaks of terrible violence and massacres. There were ideological imperatives driving along radicalization. And the emergence of full-scale genocide took place in the context of an immensely brutal war. The murderous programme was then carried out with the backing of the Turkish government.⁵ But there were also important differences.⁶ Biological racism did not drive this genocide. Possibly as many as

20,000 Armenians avoided slaughter by converting to Islam.⁷ Conversion to Christianity could, of course, offer no protection to Jews in Nazi Germany. No existing policy of physical destruction of the Armenian community lay behind this earlier genocide. It had not been bureaucratically planned and was initially disorganized, arising from increasingly vicious, cruel responses to unforeseen crises in 1914-15.⁸ The Nazi genocide, though initiated only in 1941, was a logical – indeed, in certain respects inexorable – development from the premises of Nazi power. From 1933 onwards its quasi-intellectual underpinnings in uncompromising biological antisemitism became enshrined in state ideology (given embodiment in the highest authority in the land). This then impelled systematic, increasingly radical persecution, efficiently implemented by modern bureaucratic machinery, culminating in meticulously planned extermination carried out by new, industrial-style technology, and aimed at the eventual total eradication of every Jew in Europe.

It was a decision, too, wholly unlike in its nature those which we have been following in previous chapters. Those, including Hitler's, possessed (in varying degrees) a recognizable rationality – given the starting premises – in terms of the politics behind military strategy. This was certainly the case from the viewpoint of those taking the decisions. And a certain logic behind them – if warped in some cases – can be perceived even today, however disastrous the decisions turned out to be. The decision to kill the Jews was of an entirely different kind. However logical the path to genocide might have been, given the course of Nazi persecution of the Jews, the pathology of demonic antisemitism that lay at its roots defies rationality. And yet this decision, too, was, in a different but most fundamental sense, a war decision. The decision to wage war to the death against the Jews was in Nazi thinking part of and intrinsic to, not separate from, the vast military war in which they were engaged.

I

Hitler's address to his party leaders on 12 December 1941 made this clear. The Jews, he believed, had caused the war. They would now have to pay for it by forfeiting their own lives. He had, he said, prophesied this. It was a reference to the passage in his speech to the Reichstag on 30 January 1939, the sixth anniversary of his 'seizure of power', in which he had declared: 'In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it... Today I will once more be a prophet:

if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!⁹ This was no inauguration of the extermination programme. But it reflected a genocidal mentality, a certainty in Hitler's mind that Jews would carry the blame for another war – as, in his perverted psychology, they had done for the First World War – and that as a consequence they would *somehow* perish.

It was a 'prophesy' that never left him. He referred to it more than a dozen times, both privately and in public, during precisely the years when the 'final solution' was in full swing. And he always deliberately misdated his 'prophesy' to 1 September 1939, the day the European war began with the German invasion of Poland – when, in fact, in his Reichstag speech that day he never mentioned the Jews at all. The connection between the Jews and the war was, then, implanted in his mind from the beginning of the conflict. It was still there at the very end, when, dictating his 'Political Testament' on the eve of his suicide in the Berlin bunker, he once more held the Jews responsible for the war, but stated that this time the 'real culprit' had been forced 'to atone for his guilt'.¹⁰

This was Hitler's mentality: the war could never be won unless the Jews were to be destroyed. It was a mentality that had lingered with him since the First World War had ended in what for him was untold catastrophe, cowardly capitulation, detested revolution and national humiliation. Like many others on the Right in Germany at the time, he held the Jews responsible. As the misery, suffering and losses had mounted, the spotlight in the search for scapegoats had been turned, in a ceaseless barrage of propaganda by pro-war lobbies, relentlessly – and utterly unjustifiably – on Jews. They were blamed as war-profiteers, as shirkers avoiding military service and as fomenters of internal unrest that undermined the military effort. Hitler's own existing deep-seated antisemitism fed on these base calumnies. The part played by key figures such as Leon Trotsky in the Russian Revolution, and at home the fact that prominent leaders of the hated socialist upheavals – most plainly in the short-lived Bavarian experiment with a Soviet-style government in April 1919 – had been Jewish offered further rich sustenance to the vicious hatred of Jews which was by now rampant on the nationalist Right. Hitler sucked all this in, his own profound prejudices cemented into the pathological fixation that would never leave him: that the Jews were responsible for all Germany's ills.

For Hitler, a second war had to be fought to undo the calamity of the first, to reverse the course of history. And avenging the causes of that

catastrophe that had ushered in the 'Jewish' republic of Weimar, a regime produced by the 'criminals' of November 1918 who had ruined Germany, meant the destruction of the Jews. 'The removal of the Jews altogether' had to be the 'final aim' of any national government in Germany, he had written in his first political statement, in September 1919.¹¹ 'The sacrifice of millions at the front', he had declared in a terrible passage towards the end of *Mein Kampf* a few years later, need not have happened if 'twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas' at the beginning of the war.¹² It was not a blueprint for genocide. But the connection between war and the Jews, an idea that, once embedded in Hitler's mind, never left it, had unmistakable genocidal connotations. And from 1933 the man with this idea ruled Germany.

The idea was not confined only to Hitler's mind. In the direct aftermath of the *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom on 9–10 November 1938, Hermann Göring, Hitler's chief paladin, spoke in inner Nazi circles of 'a great showdown with the Jews' in the event of another war.¹³ Two weeks later, on 24 November, the main SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, spoke of eradicating Jews as criminals 'with fire and sword', resulting in 'the actual and final end of Jewry in Germany, its complete annihilation'. Such sentiments were by this time shared entirely or in good part by other leading Nazis. And, of crucial importance, they had become institutionalized in the most ideologically dynamic segment of the Nazi regime – the burgeoning empire that had come under the aegis of the SS-run Security Police. Here, careers could be made by developing an expertise on the 'Jewish Question': Adolf Eichmann, later the orchestrator of the 'final solution', was the paradigmatic example.¹⁴ But careerism and ideology went hand in hand. Those who earned their spurs by working ceaselessly to find ways of 'solving' the 'Jewish problem' were in the main true believers in the cause. They had long since imbibed the doctrine that the Jew was the root of evil, and that a strong, dominant Reich had to be one purged of 'impure elements', most especially of Jews.¹⁵

As supreme leader of the regime, Hitler embodied the basic belief that Germany's salvation rested on the removal of the Jews. Others strived in different ways to implement this ideological imperative. In the Security Police, the 'mission' had taken institutional form. And it was incorporated in the wider aim of war and conquest. Hitler's explicit linkage of the Jews and war had not only been able to play upon and exploit existing deep antisemitic prejudice. It had also given it a dynamic, messianic, purpose. By the time the war started, the Nazi leadership had been forged into a proto-genocidal elite.

Underpinning the genocidal mentality was a demonization of the Jew which had become the central figment of the Nazi imagination. This transcended practical considerations. Jews were a tiny minority of the German population – a mere 0.76 per cent in 1933 – and self-evidently in no position to challenge for power in the state, make competing claims on territory or scarce resources or pose in any other than phantasmic fashion the sort of perceived threat which served as the pretext for a number of instances of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the twentieth century. The Nazi image of the Jew went way beyond conventional hatreds. It presupposed the Jew as nothing less than the supreme *existential* danger. Within Germany, Jews were seen as ‘poisoning’ German culture. The ‘true’ essence of what was supposedly German was set against the subversive currents of ‘Jewish’ materialism and corruption. But the danger was seen to go even further. Dominating, in Nazi imagery, both the capitalism behind the ‘plutocratic’ enemies, Great Britain and the United States, and the Bolshevism behind the Soviet enemy, the Jew posed the ultimate threat to Germany’s very existence. In fact, the Jew stood for a world which was totally anathema to Nazism, a set of moral values which had filtered through both Judaism and Christianity to form the foundations of the civilization that, as he repeatedly made plain, Hitler wanted to eradicate. In this sense, Nazism amounted to an apocalyptic vision of a renewed nation and society which would arise out of the destruction and eradication of the corrosive values epitomized by the Jew. It was no less than a fundamental attempt to change the course of history, to attain national redemption by eliminating not only all Jewish influence, but the Jews themselves.¹⁶

Resting upon such a premiss, the decision to kill the Jews of Europe, though it arose in quite specific circumstances in 1941, followed an inexorable, awful logic. In examining other fateful decisions made by political leaders in 1940 and 1941, we have considered what, if any, alternative choices were open to them, as they viewed the situation at the time. But in looking at the decision to kill the Jews, no such alternatives posed themselves; or, rather, they posed themselves only as alternative methods of destruction.

In another way, too, the decision to kill the Jews was unique among those we have examined. It was no conventional decision, such as to go to war or not, taken after confidential discussions with a small number of ministers, generals or other associates, but then proclaimed publicly. It was a state secret of the highest order, not to be talked about even by the initiated. The most incriminating orders were given orally. Camouflage language was used in discussions at the highest level. Hitler himself never

spoke directly of the killing of the Jews, even in his innermost circle. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and responsible to Hitler alone for the implementation of the extermination programme, in contrast, did speak explicitly about the killing of the Jews. But this was at a late stage, in addressing SS men, then, subsequently, party leaders in early October 1943. With the prospect of defeat looming ever larger, it was the openness of a band of sworn conspirators, those who had burned their boats and were in it together. Himmler insisted that they had acted with a moral right and duty ‘to destroy this people which wanted to destroy us’. He described the ‘extermination of the Jewish people’ as a ‘glorious page in our history that has never been written and is never to be written’.¹⁷ His comments combined perverted pride in a fulfilment of a historic duty with the implicit sense that a crime of enormous proportions had been committed, one which had been necessary but could never be divulged.

Given such secrecy even within the upper echelons of the regime, a yet further difference from the decisions explored so far is self-evident. The decision to kill the Jews can only be pieced together on the basis of circumstantial evidence. In fact, the question of precisely when and how the decision was taken cannot be answered with certainty. Indeed, to speak of a ‘decision’ may itself be misleading in its implication of one finite moment when a precise pronouncement was delivered. A series of authorizations, each building cumulatively upon the last, is probably a more appropriate way of imagining what took place. But even if that is what happened, the authorizations, taken together, amounted to a resolve that the Jews of Europe should cease to exist. That is, they added up to a decision – even if it was one made up of parts.

We have, in fact, already noted that there were at least two parts to the decision: first to kill the Jews of the Soviet Union, then to extend the killing – a second phase which might have necessitated more than a single further authorization. Hitler’s role in the making of the decision, or decisions, cannot be precisely reconstructed. No written order has been found. Almost certainly, none will be found. But Hitler’s fingerprints are all over the ‘final solution’. Jews would doubtless have suffered discrimination under any nationalist leader in Germany at the time. The transformation into all-out genocide nevertheless needed Hitler. When, in March 1942, Goebbels described Hitler as ‘the unswerving champion and spokesman of a radical solution’ to the ‘Jewish Question’, he was stating the obvious.¹⁸ Without Hitler, the ‘final solution’ would have been unthinkable.

II

Antisemitism was virulent and endemic throughout most of Europe in the decades preceding the Nazi genocide. As the 'final solution' unfolded, long-standing hatreds ensured that Nazi rulers in the countries they conquered never lacked willing helpers to carry out the deportations, then killing, of Jews. But the 'final solution' itself could not have arisen anywhere other than Germany. It had to be a German creation.¹⁹

Hatred of Jews had traditionally been at its most vicious in the Russian Empire and eastern Europe, where brutal pogroms – the word itself is Russian – and localized massacres of Jews had long been endemic. In the Habsburg Empire, too, antisemitism was rampant. Hitler himself had in his Vienna days been a youthful admirer of two outspoken antisemites, the Pan-German leader Georg Schönerer and the mayor of the city, Karl Lueger.²⁰ Nor was deep prejudice about Jews lacking in western Europe. France had been rocked just before the turn of the twentieth century by the 'Dreyfus affair', when the trial and sentence to a penitentiary on cooked-up charges of treason of Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, gave rise to a frenzy of antisemitic outpourings.²¹

Germany before the First World War was far from being Europe's heartland of antisemitism. The small, mainly well-to-do Jewish community wanted to be assimilated. Archaic legal restrictions preventing this had by now been abolished. But the very fact that Jews were thriving in Imperial Germany caused resentment and animosity. Economic depression in the 1880s spawned an upsurge. A specifically antisemitic party was founded in the 1890s, and, though it lost most of its support within a decade or so, this had now mainly found its way into mainstream politics, most notably in the Conservative Party, and into the shrill nationalism of patriotic associations, pressure groups and student unions. There was certainly plenty of hatred of Jews in evidence. Even in Bismarck's time more than five hundred antisemitic publications appeared.²² As the nineteenth century reached its close, published anti-Jewish rhetoric increased rather than lessened in quantity and became, if anything, even more vicious. Theodor Fritsch's populist tract *Handbuch der Judenfrage* (Handbook of the Jewish Question), which Hitler later claimed to have 'intensively studied', chalked up its twenty-fifth edition within five years of publication in 1887. And the racist diatribe by the Germanized Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century), portraying the Jew as the embodiment of evil and 'proving'

that Jesus Christ was an aryan, became a bestseller on its appearance in 1900.²³

Antisemitism was, then, widespread throughout Germany, but for the most part discriminatory rather than given to major pogrom-like outrages as in eastern Europe (though small-scale, localized violence was no rarity). The rhetoric of the pernicious antisemitic literature in circulation was certainly frightening in its talk of Jews as poison, bacilli, parasites or vermin. The implications were obvious. But politics and rhetoric were far apart. None of this found its way into state-supported action. The Jewish experience in Imperial Germany was ambivalent. Alongside the discrimination ran distinct promise for a better future.²⁴ An observer of the European scene on the eve of war in 1914 would, even with the greatest foresight, have found it hard to imagine that a generation or so later Germany would unleash a programme of mass extermination to wipe out the Jews of Europe.

Hatred of Jews would, by itself, not have produced the 'final solution'. It was, of course, an indispensable component. But more was needed. Hitler himself saw in 1919 that hot-headed antisemitic outbursts, leading to pogroms, had to be converted into more systematic 'rational' persecution if the ultimate 'removal' of Jews (by which, at the time, he almost certainly meant expulsion from Germany) was to be attained.²⁵

To turn commonplace antisemitic prejudice and hatred, however appalling, into a programme for genocide they had first to be harnessed to the more widely appealing goal of national renewal. This had to be popularized through a party which could gain state power. The state power then had to be utilized to make the removal of Jews the central focus of policy within the framework of utopian plans for national salvation. The aim of removal of the Jews had to be institutionalized by organs of the state capable of systematic planning and ruthless implementation. Finally, the immensely brutalized conditions of a total war portrayed as a struggle for national survival were required to produce the accelerated drive to complete eradication of the perceived fundamental enemy. Precisely this, of course, happened under Nazism. It is hard to see how it could have happened anywhere else. There was nothing inevitable about Nazism's triumph, no one-way street from German antisemitism to the death camps. But once Hitler had total power in the state, the odds against a genocidal outcome narrowed sharply – even if no one at the time could conceivably imagine the full scale of the eventual horror.

Without the First World War this would, in any case, have been unthinkable. As the high hopes of 1914 turned to the immense disillusionment and bitterness that accompanied the mounting losses and dreadful material

hardships of the later war years, the search for scapegoats did not have to look far. It became easy to stir up animosity towards Jews. Hysterical antisemitism was built into the agitation of the pro-war lobby. Opposition to the war was decried as Jewish-fomented defeatism. Once the Bolshevik Revolution had taken place, Jews were, in addition, seen as the agents of world revolution. And when catastrophic defeat was accompanied by socialist revolution in Germany, subversion by Jews became a centrepiece of explanations of the trauma.

Hitler believed passionately that the Jews had caused Germany's disaster. But he was far from alone in the burning hatred that festered within him from this time. His early successes in the Munich beerhalls came from the way he could tap such sentiments. Most of those who were to become the provincial leaders of his party, the *Gauleiter*, his indispensable regional viceroys, came from the same generation and felt much as he did about the baleful influence of the Jews. The roughnecks in his paramilitary organization, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, the stormtrooper section), were also for the most part vicious antisemites – or became such once they had joined. But both paramilitary activity, embracing vitriolic antisemitism, and the radical ethnic-nationalist (*völkisch*) ideas of Hitler and the infant Nazi movement, had a far wider currency.

Many in intellectual circles and in the broader, well-read sectors of the middle classes, far removed from the vicious paramilitary thugs, dreamed of national unity and regeneration to overcome the rancour, divisions and perceived cultural and moral decline of the new socialist-run democracy. Removal of what was seen as corrosive Jewish influence fitted into ideas of national resurgence, the rebuilding of the Reich by a future great leader. That Germany's 'redemption' could only come about by 'removing' the Jews had been *one* strand of political culture stretching back to Richard Wagner – though neither the great composer nor practically anyone else imagined this to mean physical extirpation.²⁶ Amid widespread conservative-reactionary cultural pessimism framed by a lost war, the end of the monarchy, socialist revolution and a hated democratic system, anti-semitism found a fertile breeding-ground. The antidote was a new millenarianism, a national rebirth. Among the well-educated young Germans attending universities in the early 1920s were those who would qualify with doctorates in law, taking in and digesting ideas about the inner renewal of the German people by removing 'harmful influences', just as detoxification revitalizes the human body. The most pernicious 'harmful influence' that had to be removed, they learned, was that of the Jew. Some of those swallowing these ideas as students would later join the Security Police,

become the planners of genocide and lead the murderous *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia.²⁷

Between 1916 and 1923, then, antisemitism had established itself as a central component of right-wing thinking in Germany, and was now taken up in the politics of mass movements, among them of course the still small Nazi Party. The calmer middle years of the Weimar Republic from 1924 to 1929 flattered to deceive. The antisemitic fundamentalists had been temporarily forced out of the limelight. But they had not disappeared. And even in a pluralist democracy Jews, outside their own organizations and some liberal and left-wing circles, found few friends or defenders. Once that democracy crumbled and collapsed from 1930 onwards, opening up the path for Hitler's rise to power, increasing numbers of Germans were exposed to the full antisemitic armoury as they became drawn into the ever-expanding Nazi movement.

Antisemitism was seldom the main attraction of Nazism. But once in the party and its affiliations, there was no escaping it. By the time Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, he had behind him an enormous mass movement of some 850,000 members and around a half a million stormtroopers, all of them wedded to political aims that left no place for Jews in Germany. Beyond the party faithful, more than thirteen million Germans now backed Hitler. They were not all committed antisemites. But they all voted for Hitler in the full knowledge that he and his party favoured measures to ensure the total exclusion of Jews from German society.

The years of the Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933 were certainly uneasy ones for Jews. They were subjected to unending agitation, frequent discrimination and sporadic violence. Even so, it was possible for a Jew to feel 'at home' in Germany in those years.²⁸ That altered abruptly on 30 January 1933, when Hitler took power.

Hitler's personal paranoid fixation with the Jews as an omnipresent and omnipotent force within and outside Germany, the paramount threat to the nation, responsible for the lost war and all the ills that had followed from it, was shared in its entire lunacy by relatively few. The arcanum of his own peculiar 'world-view' had not won power for Hitler. But through different refractions – mutated, distorted and adapted – his hatred of the Jews had permeated in some sort of way by the time he was appointed Reich Chancellor the crude notions of millions as part of his broad message of restoring national unity and strength. And now, with the power of the state itself at the beckoning of a leader driven by pathological delusions about the Jews, whose word was a command to an army of apparatchiks, and who was accorded near-deified status by an adoring public, the quest

to remove the Jews from Germany could take new political and institutional form. From now on, there was no hiding-place for Jews in Germany. The sensible, far-sighted or plain lucky ones left. Many others moved to the relative anonymity of the big city. But there was no safety; only borrowed time.

Already in spring 1933 the first big discriminatory steps were taken. Jews were ousted from the civil service. Barriers were placed in their way to entering the legal profession, practising as doctors and obtaining school places for their children. A national boycott of Jewish shops and stores lasted only a single day, 1 April, but local and regional attempts to force Jews out of business did not let up. Not only did the antisemitic climate worsen; now the state gave its backing to those who were making the lives of Jews a misery. A second major wave of antisemitic agitation and violence in the spring and summer of 1935 ended with the promulgation of the infamous Nuremberg Laws in September – the overture to a succession of decrees taking away all civil rights from Jews and reducing them to the status of social pariahs. The expansion of the Reich in 1938 saw open antisemitic violence plumb new depths in Vienna, following the *Anschluss*, then in the annexed Sudetenland. But it was the orgy of destruction unleashed on Jews, their property and their synagogues throughout Germany on the night of 9–10 November 1938, cynically dubbed 'Reich Crystal Night' from the amount of broken glass littering the streets of big cities following the pogroms, that opened the eyes of the Jewish community, and the rest of the world, to the full viciousness of Nazi persecution. Wherever they could, Jews fled. To help them on their way, the regime rounded up between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews as pawns until the money for their emigration could be drummed up. Measures were now rapidly taken to force remaining Jews out of the economy. The process of 'aryanization' – the compulsory sales at giveaway prices of Jewish businesses – moved into its final stages. On the eve of war, a terrified, impoverished, numerically much reduced Jewish community stood at the mercy of Hitler's henchmen. Hitler's own rhetoric in his speech of 30 January 1939, and the actions of his regime, had by now left no Jews in any doubt that they had much to fear from the advent of a new war, a prospect which seemed by the day to become more certain.

Much of the radicalization of persecution between 1933 and 1939 had taken place with little or no specific direction by Hitler himself. Years later, he acknowledged that 'even regarding the Jews' he had been compelled 'for long to remain inactive' – mainly out of foreign policy considerations, not desire, of course.²⁹ He seldom needed to be active, except where a major

decision (such as the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, or unleashing the pogrom in November 1938) was concerned. It sufficed that he provided the general guidelines for what was required.³⁰ Characteristically, Hitler would give some 'signal' or 'green light' to his minions to indicate his wishes on measures against the Jews. Radicals would follow the prompt to intensify the persecution. This would either find Hitler's subsequent sanction, or would be channelled into discriminatory legislation. Either way, the momentum of persecution was sustained, its level ever more radical. Hitler's underlings at different levels of the regime were adept at knowing how to 'work towards the Führer' along the lines he would wish.³¹ This was not only the case for party apparatchiks and bureaucrats in government offices. It applied in exemplary fashion to the expanding realm of policing, security and surveillance under the control of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler and his right-hand man, the arch-technocrat of power Reinhard Heydrich.

By 1939, 'removal' of the Jews from Germany had proceeded a long way. But from the point of view of the Nazi leadership, it had not gone nearly far enough. Nazi policy towards Jews had been far from a straightforward route to a prescribed goal. It had encountered blockages, had experienced stops and starts and had followed a 'twisted road'³² – though never a path that deviated for long from ever-escalating radicalization of persecution. Despite the intensified persecution, by the end of 1938 over two-thirds of the Jewish population of 1933 still lived in Germany. And for most of these, as the Nazi authorities concluded, there was nowhere to go. Emigration was not an option.³³ Since 1937, the Jewish desk of the SD had been looking for ways to speed up their expulsion. A far-reaching idea was a territorial solution: ship the Jews out to some foreign, inhospitable place and dump them there. Some of the more barren regions of South America were among the zany ideas mooted for a while.³⁴ Nothing, of course, came of such far-flung notions. They were to recur, however, in a different – and even more dangerous – setting in 1940. Pogroms had been another method contemplated to speed up emigration. And, indeed, the terror of *Reichskristallnacht* prompted a flood of refugees, desperate now to leave Germany under any circumstances. Foreign doors to Jewish immigration that had largely been closed were temporarily forced open. Almost as many Jews left in 1938–9 as in the previous four years of Nazi rule.³⁵ Even so, on the eve of the war Jews in Germany still numbered not much less than half of the figure of 1933. The Nazis were still far from a complete 'solution to the Jewish Question', even within the Reich.

As late as November 1938, immediately following *Reichskristallnacht*,

Heydrich had thought it would take a decade to be rid of all the remaining Jews.³⁶ He was soon given his chance to take the matter in hand. The wanton destruction of Jewish property by Nazi hordes had been widely criticized – though far less so the aim of forcing Jews out of Germany – and turned out to be the final explosion of large-scale public atrocities within the bounds of the Reich.³⁷ A more ‘rational’ policy was needed. On 24 January 1939 Heydrich was appointed head of a Central Office for Jewish Emigration. This drew its inspiration from what the Nazi leadership saw as a highly successful operation, masterminded by Adolf Eichmann, in Vienna the previous year (where the proportion of Jews leaving had been far in excess of the rate for Germany itself).³⁸ When units of the Security Police moved into Poland behind the invasion force in September 1939, Heydrich now occupied a pivotal position in dealing with the ‘Jewish Question’ in the newly conquered territories. It was a task that dwarfed any that he had taken on before the war. The job had then been to expedite the forced emigration of what remained of a Jewish community that had numbered around half a million at the time of Hitler’s accession to power. And now, with the initial aim still unfulfilled, the conquest of Poland had brought a further two million Jews within the Nazi orbit. The ‘Jewish Question’ to be solved was no longer confined to Germany. It was a part of the war. And it had become much larger, not smaller, with the outbreak of hostilities.

III

Poland became in many ways an experimental ground for what was to come. Three large regions of the conquered country abutting Germany’s eastern borders were incorporated into the Reich. But in contrast to Austria and the Sudetenland the year before, where the population had been overwhelmingly ethnic German, most of those in the newly annexed territories were Poles. Ethnic Germans were a minority. And a further small minority in these provinces were Jews. The aim of the new rulers was clear. The provinces, long contested between Germany and Poland, were to become fully Germanized, and as quickly as possible. Removing the Poles, it was plain, could not be done overnight. But clearing out the Jews, the lowest of the low in a vanquished population treated like dirt by the new overlords, seemed an easily manageable task. One of the most ruthless of these overlords, Arthur Greiser, the boss of what came to be designated Gau Wartheland (usually called the ‘Warthegau’), with its headquarters in Posen,

presumed in November 1939 that the ‘Jewish Question’ was no longer a problem and would be solved in the immediate future.³⁹ But Greiser, and other Nazi leaders, presumed too much. They had not reckoned with the logistical difficulties that stood in the way of their objectives, however ruthless they were prepared to be.

The initial idea was to create a huge reservation in a strip lying between the rivers Vistula and Bug, in the extreme east of the part of Poland occupied by Germany (following the division of the country between the Reich and the Soviet Union). Jews from the newly annexed provinces, and in addition all the Reich’s Jews and 30,000 Gypsies, would be rounded up, loaded into cattle wagons and packed off to this dumping-ground. Hitler had approved the deportations. Heydrich expected them to last for about a year.⁴⁰

This was utterly illusory. Before autumn had passed, the idea of the reservation beyond the Vistula had been given up. Instead, Jews were to be deported into all four districts of the largest part of what remained of Poland, the ‘General Government’ with its headquarters in Cracow and not designated for incorporation into the Reich. A second notion swiftly to be abandoned – or rather, postponed – was the rapid deportation of the Reich Jews. Eichmann had organized the deportation of several thousand Jews from Mährisch-Ostau in the Protectorate (what remained of Czechoslovakia, now under German rule), Katowice in Upper Silesia, and Vienna to the Lublin district of eastern Poland in autumn 1939, and had presumed this would be the first stage of the removal of the Jews from Germany and Austria. However, the deportations were no sooner started than they were halted on orders from above, most probably from Himmler.⁴¹ The Reichsführer-SS had been given broad new powers by Hitler in early October to control resettlement in the occupied eastern territories. His priority was to find space in the newly annexed provinces, beginning with the ‘Warthegau’, to accommodate ethnic Germans from the Baltic and elsewhere beyond Germany’s areas of occupation. This meant the urgent removal not only of Jews but of vast numbers of Poles. In November the figure of a million Poles and Jews to be removed by February was mentioned.⁴² Deportation of Jews from the Reich, former Austria and the Protectorate had less urgency.

Staggering brutality was deployed in rounding up and deporting Poles and Jews from the ‘Warthegau’, but the targets in successive grandiose plans proved utterly impossible to meet. Little headway had been made by the time that Hans Frank, the head of the General Government who had earlier welcomed the plans to send Jews east of the Vistula, commenting that ‘the more that die the better’,⁴³ was closing the doors on further

deportations into his area. He simply had no possibility of accommodating huge numbers of deported Poles into his already overpopulated and impoverished region, desperately short of food supplies, he lamented. As for Jews, he wanted to make his area 'Jew-free', not to turn it into a dumping-ground for Jews from other, more privileged areas. But he recognized that in the short term, the General Government would have to take in more than half a million additional Jews and that 'only then can we gradually talk about what must happen to them'. He still had in mind a huge Jewish reservation in the eastern extremities of his region, on the border with the Soviet-controlled part of former Poland.⁴⁴

By spring 1940 it was evident to the Nazi leadership that their schemes for immense population transfer and resettlement (of which the Jews were only one part) could not be realized within the existing bounds of the occupied Polish territories. Leaders in the annexed provinces, most of all Greiser in the 'Warthegau', were frantic to be rid of the Jews under their aegis, but no avenue was open for their deportation. Ghettos, initially envisaged as no more than temporary holding places until their inhabitants could be deported, turned into more lasting institutions. The largest of them, Łódź in the 'Warthegau' and later Warsaw in the General Government, offered such opportunities for profit and corruption that their Nazi administrators were loath to contemplate their dissolution. Frank, meanwhile, was becoming even more obdurate. He had, it is true, told Hitler and Himmler that he had no other interest than to serve the Reich's need in making his region 'the receptacle of all elements that stream into the General Government from outside, be they Poles, Jews, Gypsies etc.' But he had then convinced Heydrich that the food situation in the General Government made it impossible to continue the resettlement programme.⁴⁵ An impasse had been reached.

A possible way out had, however, been mentioned by Frank himself as early as January, when he had seized upon the old antisemitic idea, first advanced by the German racist writer Paul de Lagarde in the 1880s, of settling millions of Jews in Madagascar, a French colony.⁴⁶ This, Frank suggested, would create space in the General Government.⁴⁷ At the time, it was no more than a pipe dream. But precisely this prospect opened up with the German military triumph in the western offensive in spring 1940. Five days after the German advance began, Himmler, in a memorandum prepared for Hitler on the treatment of the 'alien population in the east', remarked – seemingly as not much more than an aside – that he hoped to see the term 'Jew' 'completely extinguished through the possibility of a large-scale emigration of all Jews to Africa or to some other colony'.⁴⁸

Perhaps Himmler had put out the idea of deporting the Jews to Africa (Madagascar was not specifically mentioned) as a feeler. If so, he had met with no objection. Hitler approved the memorandum. And it must soon have been obvious in wider sections of the regime's leadership what was in the wind. For, as the defeat of France became a foregone conclusion, a proposal emanating from the Foreign Ministry envisaged Madagascar, not the General Government, as the destination for deported Jews. The idea was rapidly picked up. Madagascar would provide the answer to all the blockages in Poland. When, in July, Himmler halted deportations into his region,⁴⁹ Frank felt 'colossal relief'.⁵⁰ His difficulties would soon be over. Not only would no more Jews enter his domain; those there, in excess of two million, were to be shipped overseas and would cease to be his problem.

Madagascar, as the mooted new location of a Jewish reservation, was an idea with a short lifespan. But for several months in 1940 it was taken seriously at the highest level of the Reich leadership. And now, for the first time, a solution to the 'Jewish Question' was envisaged that embraced western Europe. Heydrich swiftly moved to acquire control. He spoke of the need to find a 'territorial final solution' to the 'entire problem' of the three and a quarter million Jews under German rule.⁵¹ Eichmann and his associates were put to work to design plans. By mid-August they were ready. Four million Jews – a million per year over the next four years – would be shipped off to the inhospitable island in the Indian Ocean, a faraway place where they would be out of sight and out of mind. The entire operation would be directed by the Security Police. There would be no independent existence there for the Jews. Their new home, a massive reservation or 'super-ghetto', would be run by the SS. The previous autumn, it had been recognized (and welcomed) that deporting the Jews to the Lublin district would decimate the Jewish population.⁵² Nothing different could have been expected from the 'Magadagascar Project'. The Jews, it was obvious, were being sent there to rot. The genocidal implications were plain. But the idea was stillborn. Not even the basic prerequisites were satisfied. Vanquished France could certainly have been compelled to cede Madagascar as a mandate under German aegis. But with Britain refusing to come to terms, the shipping fleet and security on the seas necessary to freight the Jews to Madagascar were unobtainable. Eichmann's blueprint was left to gather dust in a forgotten corner of Heydrich's desk.⁵³ By now, a better option was becoming feasible.

Hitler's decision in December 1940 that the attack on the Soviet Union would go ahead the following spring had massive implications for the

attainment of racial objectives. On the one hand, millions more Jews would fall into Nazi hands, at a time when no solution had been found to the problem of deporting the existing almost four million (soon to be recalculated at almost six million) in the German sphere. And whichever invasion routes the Wehrmacht might take, large numbers of Jews would lie within their path. On the other hand, the expected rapidly attained victory would open up the possibility of population transfer and resettlement through racial 'cleansing' on a gigantic scale.

By the time the invasion was launched, plans for precisely this were being compiled. The SS anticipated the removal, mainly through deportation to Siberia, of no fewer than thirty-one million people, mainly Slavs, over the next quarter of a century or so. It was taken for granted that five to six million Jews would 'disappear' as the first stage.⁵⁴

Before such plans were conceived, presumed victory in the east conjured up a new potential for solving the 'Jewish Question'. In place of the already obsolete notion of Madagascar, there was now the prospect of deporting Europe's Jews 'to the east', into the icy wastes of former Soviet territory, where the freezing cold, malnutrition, exhaustion and disease could be expected rapidly to take their toll. This is what Hitler had in mind when he cryptically commented at the beginning of February 1941 that, with Madagascar raising insuperable problems, 'he was now thinking about something else, not exactly more friendly'.⁵⁵

By this time, Hitler's unfriendly thoughts had already been transmitted to Himmler and Heydrich, who had been quick to see what an attack on the Soviet Union might mean for their own spheres of power. For Himmler, the planning possibilities for reordering the racial composition of eastern Europe were endless. For Heydrich, huge new tasks loomed for his Security Police. Beyond that lay the attainable prospect of accomplishing a 'final solution' to the 'Jewish Question'. From the beginning of 1941 this term was in frequent use. It referred, however, not, as it later came to do, to the programmed extermination in the gas chambers of the death camps, but to a territorial resettlement – though itself genocidal in implication – in the east as a replacement for the 'Madagascar Project'.

Certainly by January 1941, Himmler and Heydrich knew what was in Hitler's mind. On 21 January, Theo Dannecker, one of Eichmann's closest colleagues, noted: 'In accordance with the will of the Führer, the Jewish question within the part of Europe ruled or controlled by Germany is to be subjected after the war to a final solution.' Through Himmler and Göring, Hitler had commissioned Heydrich with submitting 'a final solution pro-

ject'. Profiting from his experience, Heydrich had been able to put together the proposal in its essentials very quickly, and it was already in the hands of Hitler and Göring. To implement it, however, would require a huge amount of work and detailed planning of both the wholesale deportations needed and also of the 'settlement action in a territory yet to be determined'.⁵⁶

The phrase had been first used in notes prepared by Eichmann for a speech on 'settlement' to be made by Himmler on 10 December 1940 to party leaders gathered in Berlin. Eichmann had estimated then that the deportations would encompass 5.8 million Jews – 1.8 million more than had been foreseen in the intended deportations to Madagascar, since the figure now covered Jews not just in territories under direct German rule, but within the 'European economic sphere of the German people'. The total comprised the number of Jews in continental Europe west of the German-Soviet demarcation line running through Poland.⁵⁷

Himmler had explicitly referred in his speech to the 'emigration of Jews' from the General Government – an area previously designated to take in Jews (as well as Poles) – in order to make room for Polish workers.⁵⁸ But where were the two million Jews in the General Government to be sent to? Madagascar, it was obvious, was no longer a possibility. But only a few days later Hitler would give the military directive for an attack the following spring on the Soviet Union. Himmler would certainly have known what was coming. The 'territory yet to be determined' could only mean some still undesignated region of the vast area expected within the coming year to fall under German control.

Since maximum secrecy surrounded the attack on the Soviet Union, no specification of the intended territory for this 'final solution' could be mentioned outside the circle of initiates. There was, therefore, still official talk of the General Government as the location. But those 'in the know' were aware that this was now mere camouflage. Eichmann acknowledged in March that the General Government was in no position to take in any more Jews.⁵⁹ When Göring and Heydrich spoke of the latter's remit having to accommodate the responsibilities of Alfred Rosenberg, earmarked to take over a Ministry for the Eastern Territories, set up to oversee the conquered Soviet lands, it was plain that the territory envisaged for the 'final solution', though not specified, lay farther east than the General Government.⁶⁰

Hitler promised Hans Frank in March, in fact, that his province would be the first to be made free of Jews.⁶¹ Other provincial Nazi leaders, sensing

what was afoot, now joined in the pressure to have their areas cleared of Jews. Goebbels gleaned misleading information that Vienna would soon be 'free of Jews', and that Berlin's turn was also imminent. 'Later,' Goebbels noted, 'the Jews will have to get out of Europe altogether.'⁶²

Meanwhile, plans had to be made not only for the 'final solution' of the pan-European 'Jewish Question', but for the treatment of the Soviet Jews in the wake of the forthcoming invasion. By spring, such considerations were enmeshed in the wider designs for a war which, Hitler left none of his military leaders in any doubt, would be a far cry from what had taken place in western Europe.⁶³ This, he declared categorically, would be a 'war of annihilation'. The 'Jewish-Bolshevik intelligentsia' was to be 'eliminated'.⁶⁴ The army leadership collaborated closely with Himmler and Heydrich on methods of operation. Orders were worked out by army leaders to liquidate forthwith all political commissars who were to be captured. Göring asked Heydrich to prepare a brief guide for the army about the Soviet secret police, political commissars and Jews 'so that they would know in practice whom they had to put up against the wall'.⁶⁵ By May, Heydrich was assembling four *Einsatzgruppen*, each of between 600 and 1,000 men drawn mainly from the Security Police and SD, which would enter the Soviet Union in the rear of the army to deal with all 'subversive elements'. In his briefings, Heydrich was both expansive and imprecise in designating the target groups. Jews, Gypsies, saboteurs and all Communist functionaries were a danger. He emphasized that Jewry was at the root of Bolshevism and, in accordance with the Führer's aims, had to be eradicated.⁶⁶

By the time German troops crossed the Soviet frontiers on 22 June, then, Hitler's regime had already moved a long way in a genocidal direction. The momentum had built up sharply during a period of nearly two years since Poland had been crushed. The numbers of Jews who had fallen under Nazi rule with the conquest of Poland, the barbarous treatment of the subjugated country – in which Jews were its lowest, most despised stratum – and the impossibility of finding a solution to an invented problem, however grandiose the vistas and however brutal the methods, all forced the ever more frantic search for a way out of the impasse. The favourable fortunes of war had momentarily offered the fantasy of a rapid European-wide remedy overseas, in Madagascar. Britain's obstinacy in insisting on fighting on swiftly ruled out that option. But the decision in late 1940 to smash the Soviet Union the following year opened a new possibility, and drove the radicalization still further. Now, the alluring prospect of a final territorial solution, where the Jews of Europe would die out in the arctic wastes of the Soviet Union, interlocked with plans for an annihilatory war in which

Jews, seen as the lifeblood of Bolshevism, lay in the path of the German army and were regarded as open season for the Security Police *Einsatzgruppen* in the rear. The trajectory was genocidal. But the steps into all-out genocide, even in the Soviet Union, had not yet been taken.

Hitler's own role in the development since September 1939 had been decisive and yet shadowy. He had at the outset laid down the ground rules for the barbarity in Poland. Of this there is no doubt.⁶⁷ Had he not done so, there would surely still have been atrocities. There was too much pent-up anti-Polish as well as anti-Jewish feeling to have prevented serious outbursts of violence against the civilian population. But if Hitler had issued explicit instructions to prevent and outlaw such actions, in all probability nothing remotely on the scale of the programmed inhumanity that occurred would have taken place.

As it was, having unleashed the ruthless programme of 'ethnic cleansing', Hitler could leave the planning and orchestration to Himmler and Heydrich. He also gave an open licence to his provincial chieftains, the *Gauleiter*, in the east, saying that he would not ask about the methods they used to Germanize their regions, and that he did not care about legal niceties.⁶⁸ But where key policy-decisions were necessary, resort had to be made to Hitler.

He alone could decide about the deportation of Reich Jews, for which some of his underlings were pressing. The mounting deportation problems within occupied Poland were also brought to his attention – not that he could solve them – and he was called upon on more than one occasion to placate Hans Frank about the absorption of Jews into the General Government. He certainly approved the lurch into the ill-conceived 'Madagascar Project'. And, as we noted, Heydrich's commission to work out a proposal to dispatch the Jews of Europe to an unspecified destination in the east, a territorial 'final solution', derived from Hitler. Himmler, Heydrich and Göring – nominally in charge of anti-Jewish policy since *Reichskristallnacht*, and up to his neck in planning for the economic exploitation of the east – were all extremely powerful figures. But their power emanated from Hitler. Without his mandate, their writ did not run. Behind the increasingly radical search for a solution to the 'Jewish Question' lay ultimately, therefore, the ideological imperative embodied by Hitler and by now permeating the entire regime: that another war would somehow bring about the destruction of the Jews.

On 30 January 1941, precisely as planning for a 'final solution' moved into a new gear with the possibility of deporting Europe's Jews to a dreadful, if unspecified, fate in the Soviet Union, Hitler for the first time returned, in

his speech to the Reichstag commemorating the eighth anniversary of his 'seizure of power', to his 'prophecy' of January 1939.⁶⁹ The timing was no accident. Hitler was obliquely signifying what was in his own mind: that the hour of the showdown with the Jews was approaching.

IV

With the crossing of the Soviet frontiers in the early hours of 22 June 1941, the 'war of annihilation' that Hitler had promised began. Nazi barbarism moved on to a new plane. Given the instructions to the army before the campaign began, it is hardly surprising that uncontrolled atrocities by ordinary soldiers began immediately. 'I have observed that senseless shootings of both prisoners of war and civilians have taken place,' commented one troop commander only three days after the attack had started. Five days later he had to repeat his order to desist from 'irresponsible, senseless and criminal' shootings, which he bluntly described as 'murder'. He nevertheless reasserted the need to uphold 'the Führer's calls for ruthless action against Bolshevism (political commissars) and any kind of partisan', and stated that the aim of the war was to restore peace and order to 'this land which has suffered terribly for many years from the oppression of a Jewish and criminal group'.⁷⁰

Even for a troop commander such as this one, who deplored and tried to halt arbitrary atrocities committed by his force, there was the acceptance of the need for ruthlessness towards commissars and partisans, and a belief that Jews – bracketed with criminals – were behind the Bolshevik regime. The mentality was widespread. This was a war like no other. And Jews were seen as central to it.

It was in this ideological climate that the killing of the Jews rapidly escalated as part of an unprecedentedly murderous campaign in which untold butchery was deployed against the civilian population and prisoners of war (who by the autumn would be dying in German camps at the rate of 6,000 per day).⁷¹ Heydrich, as we have noted, had briefed the assembled *Einsatzgruppen* on their tasks when they entered the Soviet Union. But, contrary to what was once widely accepted, he passed on no order at these briefings for wholesale genocide against Soviet Jews. Such a directive, verbally passed on by Himmler, would come some weeks into the campaign, and as the first big leap in an escalatory process of genocide. Even then it would take the shape of an incitement to extreme murderous actions rather than a formal order.

Heydrich's earlier instructions to the *Einsatzgruppen* had been more restrictive than this subsequent amplification, but, typically, imprecise. On 2 July, probably to cover the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen* against possible objections from army leaders, he had provided a written remit that stipulated the execution of Communist functionaries, various 'extremist elements' and 'all Jews in party and state positions'.⁷² This probably corresponded broadly with what he had told the commanders of the killing squads in the earlier verbal briefings, except that these were evidently couched in such a way that wide discretion was conceded to the *Einsatzgruppen* about the definition of the target-groups, and they were plainly encouraged to interpret the remit on the Jews liberally and as they thought fit. Rather than an explicit order, Heydrich's directions amounted to a murderous but open mandate, obviously capable of being translated into action in differing degrees since the *Einsatzgruppen* and their sub-units did not behave in uniform fashion during the early stages of 'Barbarossa'.

In fact, shootings by units from the *Einsatzgruppen* were only part of the initial wave of killing in which a centrally directed ideological thrust interacted with 'an incoherent, locally and regionally varied sequence of measures' taken by those on the ground.⁷³ Already on 24 June the head of the Gestapo office in Tilsit, in East Prussia near the Lithuanian border, gave the orders to shoot 200 local Jews, allegedly 'for crimes against the Wehrmacht' during the bold but futile resistance by Soviet border troops in the early hours of the invasion. The orders were taken on his own initiative, in accordance with the 'fundamental agreement with the cleansing actions' of the newly appointed leader of the *Einsatzgruppe* designated for the Baltic, Franz Walter Stahlecker.⁷⁴ Three days later Police Battalion 309 slaughtered two thousand Jews in Białystok. More than a quarter of them, including women and children, had been driven into a synagogue which was then set on fire. The 'action' had been initiated by a few fanaticized Nazis within the battalion's ranks.⁷⁵ But such individuals knew that such murderous brutality was now being verbally encouraged by SS leaders. Word soon passed round about what was expected.

Some units, most notably in the Baltic, were within a short time killing male Jews in very large numbers. In Kowno in Lithuania, for instance, 2,514 Jews were shot in a single day on 6 July.⁷⁶ Pogroms, deliberately fomented by the German invaders, giving full licence to the vicious and widespread hatred of Jews among the local population, made their own contribution to the unfolding horror.⁷⁷ In other regions, the killing was less unconstrained and largely confined to the Jewish 'intelligentsia'.⁷⁸ In this early phase after the invasion, then, there was central encouragement for

the killing actions, but a good deal of room was left for local initiative. If the actions were already outrightly murderous on a large scale, there had as yet been no explicit and general genocidal order. For Soviet Jews, the stage of total genocide was, however, soon to be reached.

It cannot be traced to a single order on a specific day. This is not how Nazi genocidal policy worked. Exactly how and when the key steps into genocide were taken and authorized rests upon the assembly of difficult evidence.⁷⁹ Hitler's utterly unbureaucratic style of rule, his emphasis upon secrecy and his characteristic usage of camouflage language and signals for action rather than unequivocal orders drape a veil over his interventions. At the next level down, whatever files Himmler and Heydrich kept on the 'final solution' were doubtless incinerated as the Reich fell into ruins. At any rate, they have not survived. And the later testimony of Nazi leaders, leaders of the death squads and middle-managers of mass murder has often proved fallible, at times also contradictory, on matters of detail. It was often, of course, also self-servingly mendacious. Even so, surviving documentation and later testimony permit a highly plausible reconstruction of the main stages of the unfolding genocide.

These did not follow explicit orders descending from the apex to the base of a pyramid. Rather, there was a complex interrelationship of 'green lights' for action coming from above and initiatives taken from below, combining to produce a spiral of radicalization. Through their own initiative in interpreting how they imagined they were expected to act, those directly involved in the killing forced the pace of rapid radicalization on the ground, in turn affecting the way the leadership itself reacted and amended policy. But the operations at the 'periphery', though they developed their own dynamic, were not independent of central instigation and control. They had been unleashed, fomented and sanctioned by 'guidelines for action' emanating from the 'centre'. That is, the key steps of the escalation into total genocide followed some form of central directive. This was invariably transmitted through verbal indications of what was required or 'encouragement' for action passed on by Heydrich or, more often, Himmler. These were in the main broadly couched imperatives rather than clearly defined instructions. This mirrored, it seems most likely, the way in which Hitler himself indicated his 'wishes' in confidential meetings 'under four eyes' with Himmler.

Such secret meetings, with no minutes taken and no one else present (except, on occasion, Heydrich), started a dialectical process. The expressed 'wishes of the Führer' would find immediate executive action through Himmler. Through the medium of Himmler, then of lower-level leaders of

the Security Police, they would percolate down, at different times and in varied formulations, to those carrying out the killing operations. Given a broad mandate which they could interpret in their own way, as long as this matched the imperative of intensified severity, the local leaders would then act as they saw fit, use their own initiative and deploy the invited extreme measures. These would in turn find sanction on high, and result in yet a further upwards ratchet of radicalization. Just such a process occurred in mid-summer 1941. It converted partial into total genocide in the Soviet Union.

On 15 July Himmler returned to the Führer Headquarters in East Prussia, where he had mainly been based since the start of the Russian campaign, after a brief trip to Berlin. Probably, he was expecting to attend an important meeting which Hitler was holding the following afternoon to lay out the framework of the future control and exploitation of the occupied territories of the Soviet Union after a war which was presumed to be as good as won. In the event, Himmler did not attend the meeting, possibly because he was diverted through the need to deal with the capture of an important prisoner of war taken that day – Stalin's son. Whether he saw or spoke by telephone with Hitler before the meeting cannot be established. But if he was away during the time of the meeting, he was soon back at headquarters, where the following day he had a lengthy lunchtime discussion about the previous day's deliberations. Hans Heinrich Lammers, the head of the Reich Chancellery, was present and explained Hitler's orders about the distribution of powers in the occupied east.⁸⁰ The outcome was that Himmler had been given overall responsibility for policing and security in the east.⁸¹

It was practically an open-ended mandate, only nominally restricted by the exhortation to respect the jurisdiction of the newly appointed Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg. Himmler received the minutes of the meeting shortly afterwards. He would have seen there – and doubtless heard much more about it verbally – that Hitler had spoken of 'exterminating anything opposing us' and pacifying the newly subjugated territory by shooting dead anyone 'who even looked askance'.⁸² Such draconian sentiments framed Himmler's new security remit, offering the widest scope for extension of his powers. But to take full advantage of this, he needed far larger police forces in the east than were currently available. And, given the mass shootings of Jews that had already taken place and the equation in the Nazi mindset of Jews with subversion and partisan activity (which Stalin had encouraged in his first speech to the people of the Soviet Union since the German invasion, on 3 July), it was

obvious that more police meant more killing – an intensification of the aim to ‘cleanse’ the newly occupied areas of Jews and thereby, in Nazi thinking, to ‘secure’ them.

On 18 July, the day after receiving Hitler’s decree according him responsibility for security in the east, Himmler cancelled a planned journey to the General Government.⁸³ Most likely, he was already at work in exploiting his new position. It is plausible to presume that he spoke at least by telephone with Hitler about his new tasks, and the need, if they were to be accomplished, to increase drastically the police forces in the eastern territories. He had in fact already had such ideas in mind even before the invasion took place. Hitler’s allocation of responsibilities for the east in the meeting on 16 July now gave him the chance to put the ideas into operation – and thereby substantially to extend his own powers. Between 19 and 22 July, Himmler dispatched two big SS brigades, totalling 11,000 men, to sweep through the Pripet marshes, the huge boggy region stretching over parts of southern Belorussia and northern Ukraine. With this, he had almost quadrupled the numbers of SS men behind the German lines within a week of Hitler’s meeting. This was only the start. Further huge expansion in policing followed. By the end of 1941, the numbers in police battalions in the east had reached 33,000 – more than eleven times the size of the original *Einsatzgruppen* that had been sent in the previous June.⁸⁴

Himmler needed no specific orders from Hitler to focus the attention of the newly dispatched units on killing Jews. From the outset of the eastern campaign, Jews had been the prime target of the killing squads. Already the numbers of Jews murdered vastly outstripped those of other victims. Their alleged subversive and oppositional behaviour was used as pseudo-justification for the massacres. The new remit for the most rapid and comprehensive ‘pacification’ of the eastern territories inevitably, therefore, had the direst consequences for Jews. The Pripet marshes, the location of Himmler’s newly dispatched SS brigades, were seen as a particular trouble spot in the occupied territories.⁸⁵ On 1 August the SS Cavalry-Regiment 2 circulated an explicit order from Himmler: ‘All Jews must be shot. Drive the female Jews into the swamps.’⁸⁶ Commanders still managed to interpret the ‘explicit’ order in varying ways.⁸⁷ But within a fortnight, they were reporting the ‘de-Jewification’ (*Entjudung*) of entire towns and villages in the region. Not just male Jews but women and children were now also being killed. One commander took Himmler literally and reported that the women and children had been driven into the swamps, which, however, were too shallow for drowning.⁸⁸ A comment some weeks later by Hitler shows that he was aware of the Pripet action. He had just reminded his

evening guests – Himmler and Heydrich – of his ‘prophecy’, and again blamed the Jews for the dead of the First World War and of the present conflict, when he said: ‘Don’t anyone tell me we can’t send them into the marshes! Who bothers, then, about our people? It’s good when the horror precedes us that we are exterminating Jewry.’⁸⁹

In his oblique comments, Hitler had linked together the Pripet action, the extermination of the Jews and his own ‘prophecy’ from 1939. As the widened assault on Jews in the east was beginning, on 1 August, the head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Müller, pointed out that Hitler wanted reports on the work of the *Einsatzgruppen* to be regularly sent to him.⁹⁰ On the same date, Müller had ordered illustrative material on the *Einsatzgruppen* operations to be assembled for Hitler ‘as quickly as possible’. A fortnight later, Hitler’s cameraman, Walter Frenzt, was present at the shooting of Jews in Minsk, attended by Himmler, to film the massacre. Whether Hitler or Himmler actually viewed the film cannot be proven. But, clearly, Hitler was keen to be informed about the progress in exterminating the Jews in the east, and at a crucial juncture.⁹¹ His expressed interest might fairly be taken to indicate an awareness that a new, more overtly and outrightly genocidal phase was beginning in the Soviet Union.

Even now, not all Jews everywhere were immediately slaughtered. Manpower and logistics alone constituted a hindrance. And the way directives were passed down left much scope for differing interpretations and emphases. The rate and timing of escalation in the murder were, therefore, not uniform. One of the units of *Einsatzgruppe A*, for instance, operating with exceptional brutality in Lithuania, registered 4,239 Jews (135 of whom were women) killed in July, but 37,186 in August (most of them in the second half of the month) and 56,459 in September, the majority comprising women and children.⁹² On the other hand, it was the second half of September before the already high killing rate of *Einsatzgruppe B*, in Belorussia, sharply increased. Women and children were, even so, often, if not always, included in the shootings. But in this region, too, entire Jewish communities were now being eradicated.⁹³

Overall, the numbers massacred assumed dimensions far beyond those of the first weeks of the Soviet campaign. The major escalation followed Himmler’s visit to the Minsk area in mid-August, where he experienced a mass shooting of Jews (including some women), discussed gassing methods with two of his commanders and, according to some postwar testimony, spoke of the ‘total liquidation of Jews in the east’, apparently claiming to have received an order from Hitler stipulating that all Jews, including women and children, were to be exterminated.⁹⁴ The testimony is not

wholly reliable, and no other evidence exists for the transmission of a clear order from Hitler. Whether or not Himmler himself actually gave direct orders now that women and children were also to be killed is also less than certain.⁹⁵ That is, nevertheless, what appears to have been understood. Himmler had conveyed to his leading commanders his widened security remit with its clear implication to wipe out the Jews in the occupied Soviet Union. This was not written down and transmitted in an explicit message. It was far too sensitive for that. The verbal transmission, passing down through briefings at varying levels, meant that different units heard at different times what was required of them.⁹⁶ But, by word of mouth, the news still circulated rapidly. By the end of August, the genocidal attempt to wipe out Soviet Jewry was well under way.

The escalation in the slaughter followed from a process of mutually reinforcing radicalization between those carrying out the killing and those at the regime's heart, laying down the guidelines of a policy of annihilation. Himmler was the main carrier of the mandate, the conveyer of guidelines for action to his commanders and police chiefs in the occupied territories, who passed it down the line to their men. But there was a still higher authority.

The huge extension of the police forces in the east arose immediately from Himmler's remit to 'pacify' the occupied territories, decreed by Hitler on 17 July following the crucial meeting on laying down the political jurisdiction of Nazi bosses. And it was scarcely coincidental that Hitler showed marked interest in the killing operations at the beginning of August, precisely at the time that Himmler was about to pass on widely couched instructions about extending the murder to Jewish women and children. Hitler's 'green light' to shoot anyone 'who even looked askance' – and, very probably, other drastic comments that were not minuted – had been sufficient to instigate the genocidal radicalization. Despite the variations in the timing of implementation, the widened remit of Himmler following the meeting in Hitler's headquarters on 16 July, and the inclusion, made known by mid-August, of Jewish women and children in the killing, amounted to a decision to eradicate the Jews of the Soviet Union.

V

The broader decision, to kill all the Jews of Europe, had not yet been taken. It was linked to, if separable from, the prior decision to wipe out Soviet Jewry.

In January 1942 the numbers of Soviet Jews were still estimated at five millions, although by then hundreds of thousands had been slaughtered.⁹⁷ But when around the turn of the year 1940–41 Eichmann had worked out the numbers of those from Europe west of the Soviet Union to be deported into a 'territory yet to be determined', he had made no reference to the millions of Jews already on Soviet soil. Excluding Soviet Jews, Eichmann reckoned the number to be deported to total almost six million (to which now several hundred thousand in the former Soviet area of Poland had to be added).⁹⁸

Plainly, by the time German troops crossed the Soviet border in June no clear and conclusive decision had been reached about an overall policy towards Soviet Jews – whether they were to be deported further east or simply killed. But ideology and logistics combined to make the rapid emergence of total genocide in the captured Soviet territories practically inevitable.

Deportation could never have been a feasible option. Even had the eastern campaign swiftly ended in German victory, as had been presumed, the mobilization of transport to ferry millions of Jews from all over Europe to some distant destination in former Soviet territory would have been a colossal undertaking. And if the Soviet Jews were not simply to be massacred where they were, there was the additional problem of transporting these, too, to whatever immense reservations were vaguely envisaged. The difficulties would have been equally enormous. In reality, of course, these issues never arose. As the German advance slowed, a continuation of the war into the coming year became a certainty and the prospect of a territory into which to expel the non-Soviet Jews faded into a lingering fantasy, the fate of the Soviet Jews themselves was sealed. By midsummer it had become plain. The only solution was to kill them wherever they could be found. And in an already genocidal climate, but with the option of deporting the remainder of Europe's Jews *into* the Soviet Union rapidly receding, the question of what should be done with them now gained intense urgency.

At first, it had looked as if early victory over the Red Army would swiftly open up the possibility of a total solution through mass deportation. Soon after the Russian campaign had begun, Hitler had spoken more than once of Jews as a bacillus. He felt like the Robert Koch (the discoverer of the tuberculosis bacillus) of politics, he said, describing the Jews as the 'ferment of all social decomposition'. He had proved, he went on, that a state could live without Jews.⁹⁹ He repeated the bacillus analogy when meeting the visiting Croatian minister Marshal Sladko Kvaternik a few days later. 'If there were no more Jews in Europe,' he told Kvaternik, 'the unity of the

European states would be no longer disturbed.' Whether they were sent to Siberia or Madagascar, he added, was a matter of indifference.¹⁰⁰ For his foreign visitor, Hitler was holding to the fiction of overseas deportation. For Nazi leaders, however, every 'special announcement' by the Wehrmacht of further advances in the Soviet Union raised new expectations of the imminent deportation of the Jews to 'the east' or 'Siberia' (taken loosely to mean somewhere in the Soviet Union). Hitler's comments offer clues to his thinking about the Jews at this juncture. At a time when massacres were crystallizing into full-scale genocide in the Soviet Union, such hints about the need for a radical solution throughout Europe would not have been lost on Himmler or Heydrich.

In July, as German victory in the Soviet Union, to be followed by the capitulation of Great Britain and a triumphant end to the war, seemed tantalizingly close, plans were compiled in the Reich Security Headquarters for a grandiose 'final solution of the Jewish Question' which Heydrich had already announced in May as 'doubtless forthcoming'.¹⁰¹ At the end of the month, Heydrich instructed Eichmann to draft an authorization from Göring (nominally in charge of the 'Jewish Question' since November 1938) to prepare 'a complete solution of the Jewish Question in the German sphere of influence in Europe'. Heydrich, we might recall, had already provided Göring in March 1940 with a draft plan to solve the 'Jewish Question'. What he was now seeking was formal authorization of what he had already verbally been granted – a step he evidently felt necessary at a key juncture in order to deal with heads of the civil administration and other agencies (especially Rosenberg's 'Eastern Ministry') which could interfere with the implementation of his plans. With Europe seemingly at Germany's feet, the time had arrived, it appeared, to carry out the deportation of the Continent's Jews into the Soviet Union – and to their deaths through 'natural wastage' from slave labour, malnutrition and exposure to a raw climate. For Jews incapable of working – children, elderly, infirm – suggestions of liquidation as a solution were already being proposed.¹⁰²

Over the following weeks, however, as the German advance slowed and the magnitude of the misjudgement about the fighting capacity of the Red Army was glaringly revealed, the genocidal solution through deportation to the Soviet Union – the prospect which had been the dominant idea since the start of the year – rapidly became unrealistic. The last hopes of territorial 'resettlement' in 'the east', after the General Government than Madagascar had come to nothing, were postponed indefinitely. But the pressure to deport the Jews had meanwhile intensified, not lessened. There was simply no possibility of reconciling the increased pressure to deport with the

insurmountable blockages on doing so. Meanwhile, mass killing of Jews had spread rapidly in the Soviet Union. And in the Reich itself, as news of the bitter fighting in the east filtered through, the public mood against the Jews, fomented by Goebbels' propaganda, was turning extremely ugly.

Jews in German towns and cities, hounded and persecuted at every turn, were depicted by vicious propaganda as subversives, agitators and troublemakers. They were portrayed as idlers who ought to be 'carted off' to Russia or, better still (it was ominously suggested), simply killed.¹⁰³ In the middle of August Goebbels put the case for compelling the Jews to wear an identifying badge to a fractious and ailing Hitler, and was given the green light. The wearing of the 'Yellow Star' by all Jews was introduced on 1 September. The Jews in Germany were now a marked minority – clearly visible, openly exposed to their persecutors, totally defenceless. The move was accompanied by the circulation to all Nazi Party offices of Hitler's 'prophecy' of 1939, that another war would result in the destruction of the Jews.¹⁰⁴

Heydrich had been less successful with a proposal in August to deport Germany's Jews. Hitler had turned down the suggestion of 'evacuations during the war'. But he gave permission for a 'partial evacuation of the larger cities'.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the old notion that the Jews were 'hostages' or 'pawns' whose presence in German hands might help to fend off an entry into the war by the supposedly Jewish-dominated United States still influenced him. More likely, he held to the view that there was simply nowhere to send the Jews to as long as the war in the east was unfinished. Poland, it had long been accepted, could take in no more Jews. But deporting the Jews into the Soviet Union at this juncture was not practicable. All available transport was needed for the front. This was for the time being a more urgent cause than using trains to ferry German Jews into Russia. Moreover, since Hitler viewed the Jews as a treacherous 'fifth column', deporting them to the Soviet Union while a bitter war against the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' enemy was still raging would in his eyes have been a dangerous move. The areas behind the battle-lines, where Soviet Jews were being slaughtered in their tens of thousands, were in any case scarcely fitted to accommodate a mass import of Jews from the Reich. And if the Jews were simply to be deported there in order to be shot, then the existing killing-units, though expanded since the outset of the eastern campaign, would need to be much enlarged. The 'final solution of the Jewish Question', Hitler presumably told Heydrich, would have to wait a little longer, until the war was over.

Nevertheless, within the upper echelons of the SS and Security Police

preparations for the 'coming final solution' continued. And the question was now posed about the fate of the deportees. Were they to be given 'a certain form of existence'; or were they to be 'completely eradicated'?¹⁰⁶ The question gained immediate urgency when, in the middle of September, Hitler changed his mind on the deportation of the Reich Jews. Stalin's brutal deportation of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans, for centuries settled along the Volga, appears to have prompted the volte-face. The pressure from within Germany and in some occupied countries, most notably at this time France, to 'evacuate' the Jews to the east had become intense. Vengeance for the fate of the Volga Germans, an argument pressed on Hitler by a number of Nazi leaders, placated his underlings in opening the previously closed door to deportation from the Reich. This was the decision, unquestionably Hitler's, which initiated the emergence over the coming weeks of the culminating phase of the genocidal process.

Within the following three months, what the 'final solution' meant would become clarified for those directly involved in its planning and organization. No longer did it refer to a territorial settlement on former Soviet territory (with the unspoken implication that the Jews would gradually die out). It now meant the physical annihilation of Jews throughout Europe. And since the prospect of deportation into the Soviet Union was rapidly receding, this would have to take place closer to home. Parts of occupied Poland were now starting to come under consideration as the location of the extermination programme. This most closely guarded secret was, in autumn 1941, in its full ramifications still confined to the leadership of the SS and Security Police. The civil authorities were as yet not fully initiated into what was planned. The uncertainties and confusion that prevailed that autumn reflected both the level of secrecy attached to the 'final solution', and the fact that it was still in its planning stage; imminent, rather than fully developed. But, triggered by Hitler's agreement in September to the deportation of the Reich Jews, the steps into total genocide now followed rapidly.

The issue of where the Jews were to go, and what was to happen to them on arrival, now became extremely pressing. On 18 September Himmler informed Arthur Greiser, boss of the 'Warthegau', that he would have to accommodate 60,000 Jews in the Łódź ghetto in his area for the winter, prior to further deportation 'to the east' the following spring. This was to meet Hitler's wish to have the Jews removed from the Reich and the former Czech lands as soon as possible.¹⁰⁷ But the Łódź ghetto was bursting at the seams, protested the local authorities. It could take in no more Jews. Himmler insisted, though the figure was reduced to 20,000 Jews (and 5,000

Gypsies). The suggestion had already been made in July that Jews in the Łódź ghetto incapable of working should be killed on the grounds that the ghetto could not sustain them.¹⁰⁸ And now large additional numbers were being sent precisely there. The quid pro quo, almost certainly, was permission granted from Berlin to exterminate the Jews of Łódź who were unable to work. The search for a suitable extermination site in the region began within weeks of the deportation order reaching Greiser. The gassing of Jews at Chelmno commenced in the first week of December.¹⁰⁹

The 'Warthegau' was only one of the regions designated for the reception of the deported Jews. Heydrich specifically mentioned Riga and Minsk, alongside the 'Warthegau', in early October.¹¹⁰ No clear blueprint for systematic mass murder had been devised by the time the first deportation trains started to rumble out of Vienna, Prague, Berlin and other cities, beginning on 15 October.¹¹¹ But the message emanating from Himmler and Heydrich – themselves certainly acting in accordance with Hitler's wish, however broadly he had couched it – was that the final hour for the Jews of Europe was about to toll.

In the meantime, those being sent Jews should act as they saw fit and take whatever radical initiative was needed. The invitation was accepted. During October and November, killing of Jews in huge numbers was adopted in differing regions of the Nazi empire as the way out of the self-manufactured problems. German Jews transported to Kowno and Riga in November were shot immediately on arrival. By now, mass shooting had spread beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. Close collaboration between the Wehrmacht, the SS and the Foreign Ministry led to the shooting of 8,000 Jews in Serbia in October as reprisals against partisan activity. In East Galicia, incorporated since the beginning of 'Barbarossa' into the General Government, around 30,000 Jews were shot in the autumn, though mass shooting in this region had been a feature since June.¹¹²

The use of poison gas was now starting to be recognized as an alternative method of killing – one which Himmler was ready to see adopted as being 'more humane' for the killers than shooting. In October, Heydrich commissioned the extended use of gas-vans. Reconnoitring a site for their deployment was already under way in the 'Warthegau'. A similar method was foreseen for Riga. And a stationary gas chamber, it seems, was planned for Mogilev, to deal with the Jews being sent to Minsk. In the General Government, which was spared the intake of further Jews, the first stages of what would become Belzec extermination camp had begun in September (when the gassing experts from the 'euthanasia action', halted the previous month, had become available). Construction of gas chambers started at the

beginning of November, by which date Hans Frank was aware that the Jews of his domain who were incapable of working were to be deported 'over the Bug', to their certain deaths.¹¹³

These regional killings still fell short of a systematic, coordinated programme. The civilian authorities in the occupied territories were certainly as yet unaware of any comprehensive, central directive for genocide. In Minsk, the local Nazi leader, the General Commissar of Belorussia, Wilhelm Kube, objected to the shooting of Reich Jews – 'human beings from our cultural sphere', whom he distinguished from the 'native brutish hordes' – and sought clarity on the treatment of Jews with war decorations, those married to 'aryans', and part-Jews (*Mischlinge*). Hinrich Lohse, Reich Commissar for the Eastern Territory, pressed by the army to keep skilled Jewish workers, wanted to know whether economic considerations made a difference to the treatment of Jews.¹¹⁴ Lohse was soon told that economic criteria were irrelevant. Jews were to be eradicated whatever the economic disadvantages might be.

To all appearances, a fundamental decision to exterminate Europe's Jews had by now been taken. Conceivably, it happened the previous month, in November.¹¹⁵ In this month – and November was so pivotal in the Nazi calendar for its connections both with the 'shameful' German capitulation in 1918 and the 'heroism' of the failed putsch of 1923 – it looks as if the calamity of 1918 and the fate of the Jews were much on Hitler's mind in the context of the current war. At lunchtime on 5 November, with Himmler present, he had said he could not permit 'criminals' to stay alive while 'the best men' were dying at the front. 'We experienced that in 1918,' he said. He made no specific mention of the Jews. It is unlikely, however, that they were far from his mind. That evening, after Himmler had left, he rambled on at length about the Jews. The end of the war would bring their ruin, he declared. He ended his diatribe with the words: 'We can live without the Jews, but they can't live without us. If that is known in Europe, a feeling of solidarity will quickly arise. At present the Jew lives from the fact that he destroys this.'¹¹⁶ Three days later, in Munich, addressing the party's putsch veterans on the eighteenth anniversary of the event, he castigated the Jews as the instigators of the war. A world coalition inspired by Jews, such was his message, would never triumph over Germany. It was the continuation of the struggle that did not end in 1918, he claimed. Germany had been cheated of victory then. Who the cheats were was unspoken but obvious. 'But that was only the beginning, the first act of this drama,' he stated. 'The second and the finale will now be written. And this time we will make good what we were then cheated of.'¹¹⁷ It was allusive, not direct.

And so were his comments to his usual entourage in his field headquarters in the early hours of the night of 1–2 December, where he said: 'He who destroys life, exposes himself to death. And nothing other than this is happening to them.' He meant: to the Jews.¹¹⁸ Within a week the gas-vans at Chelmno, the first of the death installations to begin operations, started their terrible work.

By now, the time was ripe for general clarification. With that in mind, Heydrich had sent out invitations on 29 November to those in the civilian administration most affected by the changing policy towards the Jews – several state secretaries, and a number of SS representatives. Hans Frank, the Governor General of Poland, and the SS chief in his domain, Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger, were swiftly added to the list, though their initial omission suggests that the General Government – not intended as the recipient for any deported German Jews – was not regarded as central to the discussion. Plainly, therefore, the participants were not about to learn of a detailed programme for gassing millions of Jews in extermination camps located in that region. Nor were precise arrangements for deportations a subject for a meeting that lacked a transport specialist. The recipients of the invitation were, in fact, largely in the dark about the aim of the meeting.

Some divined, correctly, that the treatment of *Mischlinge* would figure on the agenda. But the most important clues were contained in the wording of the invitation. This began by repeating the commission, nominally from Göring, to Heydrich of 31 July, then went on to speak about the necessity 'of achieving a common view among the central agencies involved' in 'the organisational and technical preparations for a comprehensive solution of the Jewish Question', a matter of 'extraordinary significance'.¹¹⁹ In other words, Heydrich's authority had once more to be established beyond question as the organization of the 'comprehensive solution of the Jewish Question', already laid down in July, entered its crucial phase. Heydrich's meeting had been scheduled to take place on 9 December. But crucial events intervened in the first days of the month, and the meeting had to be postponed.

On the 5th the German advance ground to a halt in intense cold not far from Moscow as a huge and devastating Soviet counter-offensive began. Any thoughts of deporting vast numbers of Jews into the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future were now completely illusory. The deportation plans that had underpinned Nazi hopes of solving the 'Jewish Question' over the past year had to be abandoned. Two days later, on the 7th, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, triggering the German declaration of war on the United States on the 11th, and confirming that the conflict had become

truly global. On the 12th Hitler explained to his party leaders, as we saw, what this meant for the Jews. In his 'prophecy' of 30 January 1939, he had promised their destruction in the event of another world war. His terrible conclusion followed: 'The world war is here. The annihilation of the Jews must be the necessary consequence.'¹²⁰

It was no conventional order. Nor was it an explicit decision. But it was an unmistakable signal. Those listening to Hitler were no clearer than they had been before about *how* the Jews were going to be destroyed. But they were left under no illusions: the destruction *would* take place, and now during the war rather than once victory had been won. This was the message to be relayed to subordinates in key positions in the occupied territories.

Among those in Hitler's audience on 12 December had been Hans Frank. He returned to the General Government and, four days later, repeated what he had heard to his own underlings in his domain. He even used some of Hitler's own phrases. Notably, he cited the 'prophecy'. The war would be only a partial success if Europe's Jews were to survive it, he remarked. They had to disappear. He said he had entered negotiations about deporting the Jews to the east, and referred to a large meeting which would take place in Berlin about this – a reference to Heydrich's meeting, postponed because of the events of early December. 'In any event,' Frank went on, 'a great Jewish migration will commence.' He came to the murderous consequences – the aim horribly clear, if the method of attainment was not. 'But what is to happen to the Jews?' he asked. 'Do you believe they'll be accommodated in village settlements in the *Ostland*? They said to us in Berlin: why are you giving us all this trouble? We can't do anything with them in the *Ostland* or in the Reich Commissariat [the Ukraine] either. Liquidate them yourselves! . . . We must destroy the Jews wherever we find them and wherever it is possible to do so.' Though Frank was still anticipating the deportation of the Jews of the General Government to the east, he was being told that it was pointless to send them there and encouraged to resort to mass killing on his own territory. He had as yet no clear notion of how this was to be carried out. He estimated the number of Jews in his region at 3.5 million (including half-Jews). 'We can't shoot these 3.5 million Jews,' he said, 'we can't poison them, but we must be able to take steps that will somehow lead to success in extermination.'¹²¹ At this stage, Frank evidently knew nothing of a programme to carry out the 'final solution of the Jewish Question' on the territory of the General Government itself, instead of further east, and through gas chambers installed in a number of extermination camps. Yet with the exclusion for the indefinite future of Soviet

territory as a deportation venue, precisely this new extermination strategy started to take shape in the weeks to come.

Heydrich's meeting was reconvened for 20 January 1942 at a different venue close to the Wannsee, a beautiful large lake on the outskirts of Berlin. The participants differed slightly from those scheduled for the original meeting. But they represented similar interests. Much had happened since the Göring mandate had been signed, back in July. And there had been major developments even since the initial invitations had been sent out. What was now being organizationally and technically prepared was no longer a deportation plan for territorial settlement in the east, however murderous that would have been in practice, but a coherent genocidal programme to kill eleven million European Jews in ways and by means still to be fully established, but in need of Continental coordination. Eichmann later doctored the minutes of the meeting to eliminate 'certain over-plain talk'.¹²² But probably Heydrich did not go into detail about the methods of killing. No one doubted what was intended. When Hans Frank's representative at the meeting, Dr Josef Bühler, his State Secretary, asked for the 'final solution' to start by removing the Jews of the General Government (who, he said, were mainly unable to work) since transport and manpower posed no great problem, he plainly grasped the new possibilities of mass killing, and closer to hand than the territory of the Soviet Union.¹²³ Since Hans Frank had been aware in the autumn of discussions about the construction of Belzec,¹²⁴ there was presumably some notion of what those possibilities might entail. There was no need for Heydrich to elaborate.

It would be some weeks after the Wannsee Conference, in March 1942, that the gas chambers of Belzec, then Sobibor and Treblinka started their grisly operations in the General Government. The largest death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Upper Silesia, would also begin killing Jews in March. And only by the spring would the deportations of Jews from western Europe to the death camps in occupied Poland commence.¹²⁵ The Wannsee Conference was still an interim stage in the emergence of the 'final solution'. But if the arrangements in January 1942 were still in an embryonic stage, by this time the decision to kill the Jews of Europe had already been taken.

VI

Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, has been described as 'the architect' of the 'final solution'.¹²⁶ So has his immediate subordinate, Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police.¹²⁷ But ultimate authority rested with

neither of them. Nor was the mind behind what was to emerge as the 'final solution' that of either Himmler or Heydrich. Indeed, if the construction metaphor is to be retained, Himmler might be described as the architect of the murderous edifice, and Heydrich as the master-builder. But the person who commissioned the project, the inspiration behind the design, had mandated both of them. This was Hitler.

Of course, the complex 'politics of annihilation' can by no means be reduced simply to an expression of Hitler's will. Many agencies throughout the Nazi regime, not just the top echelons of the SS, were necessary for total genocide to emerge over time as the 'final solution of the Jewish Question'. Complicity was widely shared. Hitler was no 'micro-manager'. That was not his style. In any case, he did not need to be. There was no shortage of those endeavouring to the best of their ability to put into practice what they took to be his wishes. No regular flow of edicts or decrees from Hitler was required to push along the radicalization.

Even so, at all crucial junctures of policy-making even in the 1930s – for example, the boycott of April 1933, the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, the pogrom of November 1938 and its aftermath – Hitler's authorization had been needed. This continued during the war. The decision to impose on Jews the wearing of the 'Yellow Star' from September 1941 onwards, all subordinate leaders accepted, could only be taken by Hitler. So could the decision later that month to deport the Reich Jews – a decision which practically overnight enormously intensified the genocidal pressures. It is inconceivable that the decision to move to all-out physical extermination did not also require Hitler's authorization.

Himmler, Heydrich and others directly involved in the 'final solution' indicated that they were acting in accordance with Hitler's wishes, or with his approval. With the extermination programme moving towards its climactic in summer 1942, Himmler declared: 'The occupied eastern territories are being made free of Jews. The Führer has placed the implementation of this very difficult order on my shoulders.'¹²⁸ Subordinate SS leaders were repeatedly informed, and were in no doubt, that in implementing the 'final solution' they were fulfilling 'the wish of the Führer'.¹²⁹ Unquestionably, they were correct.

Hitler's 'wish' may never have been expressed, even to Himmler, as a precise, unequivocal directive, given on a specific occasion, to kill the European Jews. It would have sufficed to give blanket authorization to the Reichsführer-SS to proceed with the 'final solution'. But both key stages in the autumn directly involved Hitler. The first was the decision in September to deport the Reich Jews at a time when there was nowhere to send them.

Genocidal impulses in a number of different regions followed rapidly, one after the other, from this decision. They did not yet amount to a programme. But the direction was plain, and the momentum building. The second was the new impetus given to finding a comprehensive 'final solution' that followed the declaration of war on the United States and the beginning of a prolonged global conflict in December. Deportation into Soviet territory, it was obvious, could not now be carried out for many months, if at all. But the 'final solution' could not wait. By the time Heydrich was able to convene the previously postponed Wannsee Conference, no further fundamental decision was needed. The task had become one of organization and implementation.

As the most terrible war in history, which Hitler more than any other single individual was responsible for unleashing, drew to its horrific close, the German dictator sought to justify the conflict to his own entourage – and to posterity. Once again, he resorted to his 'prophecy': 'I have fought openly against the Jews,' he stated. 'I gave them a last warning at the outbreak of war' – as always a misdating of his 'prophecy' to the date that war began. 'I never left them in uncertainty', he continued, 'that if they were to plunge the world into war again they would this time not be spared – that the vermin in Europe would be finally eradicated.' He was proud of what he had done. 'I have lanced the Jewish boil,' he declared. 'Posterity will be eternally grateful to us.'¹³⁰

Of all the fateful decisions we have considered in preceding chapters, the decision to kill the Jews, unfolding over the summer and autumn of 1941, is the one where it is least possible to conceive of alternatives. Had the invasion of the Soviet Union proceeded as the German leadership hoped it would, the 'final solution' known to history would not have taken that particular form. The killing fields would, in all probability, then have been mainly in the Soviet Union, not in Poland. But as long as the Nazi regime was in power and engaged in the war, the Jews would have perished in one way or another. Only the method and timing would have differed.

The decision to kill the Jews arose from an earlier aim, absolutely intrinsic to Nazism, to 'remove' them. Hitler had never lost sight of this aim since 1919. It did not initially mean physically annihilate. But such a meaning was potentially, and over the course of time actually, also embraced by it. The aim of 'removal' was in this way proto-genocidal. Only the 'successful' (from the Nazi perspective) expulsion of Germany's Jews before war began could have prevented the logical progression into genocide itself for these Jews. But even then the intended expansion by conquest of the Nazi leadership would inevitably have resulted – as in practice it did – in vast numbers

of further Jews falling within the clutches of the Third Reich. 'Removal' of these Jews was impossible without genocide, even if that had largely arisen from the deliberately imposed ravages of slave labour, malnutrition and disease. Only the prevention of war (ruled out by the politics of appeasement), the toppling of Hitler from within (for which the will was lacking among the German elites) or the rapid defeat of Hitler's Germany in the early stages of the war (an utter impossibility in military terms) could have precluded such an outcome. Otherwise, the only other way in which the Jews might have been spared their appalling fate is if better prepared Soviet defences had repelled a German invasion, forcing a compromise peace settlement, perhaps even with Hitler no longer in power. Stalin's obtuseness ruled out this possibility.

Germany's aggression was the main cause of Europe's second descent into war within a generation. It was also the crucial trigger, in the summer of 1940, to the spiral of events that we have followed, transforming conflicts at opposite ends of the globe by December 1941 into world war. Behind that aggression lay an ideological 'mission' embodied by the figure of Adolf Hitler. And inherent in that 'mission' was the 'removal' of the Jews. In this way, the Nazi war on the Jews was a central component of, inextricable from, the Second World War itself – the greatest slaughter the world has ever known.