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INTENTIONAL STRATEGY

Was the progressive isolation of the Jews from German life during the 1930s part of Nazi strategy intended to culminate in extermination?

Viewpoint: Yes. The persecution of the Jews was part of an intentional strategy that resulted in genocide.

Viewpoint: No. Adolf Hitler did not seriously consider the Final Solution until after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

So clearly has the history of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP) been identified with the Holocaust that people forget that the Final Solution only occupied the last five years of the twenty-five-year history of the NSDAP. And though the Party that Adolf Hitler joined in 1919 (and became leader of in 1921) was already anti-Semitic (as was Hitler), there is little sign in the early agenda indicating interest in the genocide to come. In the "25 points," published in 1920, the NSDAP political platform identified citizenship in the Reich with membership in the German race. Since Jews were explicitly excluded from the German race by the Party, which also believed that only members of the German race should live in Germany, the exclusion of Jews from Germany was implicit—certainly not their mass extermination, nor the elimination of Jews living outside the German Reich from France and Greece to Russia and Norway.

Even when the Nazis seized power in 1933, their anti-Semitic program seemed intent on exiling the Jews and plundering their financial resources rather than destroying them. Is it possible that the Final Solution became Nazi policy only shortly before the conversion of Auschwitz from a labor camp into a death factory? Or was the Holocaust intended, if not from the beginning of Hitler's rise to power, then from early in the Nazi dictatorship? In that case, the apparent scramble in the Party for a solution to the Jewish Question—whether forced emigration, exile to Madagascar, or dumping in "the East"—was part of an intentional strategy that started with rhetorical attacks against Jews and ended in the elimination of Jews in the gas chambers and ovens of Birkenau and Majdanek.

Lucy Schildkret Dawidowicz saw the "War against the Jews" as Hitler's intent from his earliest days in power. If he delayed implementing the Holocaust only until the Final Solution could be carried out under cover of war, then it was not because the Nazis were searching for a solution that only slowly realized itself in annihilation. Rather, anti-Semitic rhetoric, laws, and violence were intended to isolate the Jews and prepare the German people for a process of extermination already taking shape in unrecorded conversations among Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and other top Party officials.

Yet, an increasing number of historians have interpreted the same evidence to argue against the "intentionalist" thesis and in favor of a "functionalist" interpretation of Nazi planning for the Final Solution. Christopher R. Browning imagines a conversation taking place in mid July 1941, after the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) began massacring Jews in the Soviet

Historians argue that planning for the Final Solution did not begin until after the invasion of the Soviet Union (1941).



Viewpoint:

Yes. The persecution of the Jews was part of an intentional strategy that resulted in genocide.

What if Adolf Hitler had died in a plane crash in November 1938? It is possible to argue that the German elite would have rallied around the memory of the Führer and that the Nazi regime might have endured for some time. It is also likely that a war between Germany and other European nations would have occurred, although it could have taken a different form from World War II (1939–1945). However, it is hard to imagine that the Holocaust—the mass slaughter of European civilians, especially Jews, by the Nazis during World War II—would have occurred without Hitler. A Nazi regime without Hitler certainly would have persecuted, expelled, and murdered Jews, but would Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, or even Heinrich Himmler have built Auschwitz? Such an outcome seems dubious. It is simply impossible to account for the Holocaust without according a central role to Hitler. Nazi policy toward the Jews followed an intentional strategy from isolation to genocide, and Hitler was the key strategist.

One important body of historical opinion, dubbed “intentionalist” by historian Christopher R. Browning, argues that the Holocaust was simply the concrete application of Hitler’s obsessive hatred of Jews in the form of genocidal policy. The Holocaust happened because Hitler wished it to happen. If his written and spoken threats are to be taken at face value, he intended to carry out such a program of genocide from the beginning of his career. As historian Saul Friedländer put it: “To deny [the central role of Hitler in Nazi] extermination policies requires more explanation than to declare it a major impetus.”

Not all Germans shared his obsession; for that matter, not all Nazis shared their leader’s point of view. After a careful examination of autobiographical statements written by 581 early Nazis and collected by sociologist Theodor Abel, it was found that only about one in eight respondents even mentioned anti-Semitism as a factor in their decision to join the Nazi Party. Vague political, economic, and social resentments worked to attract a great many members

to the Nazi Party banner. Almost two-thirds of new members in 1930 cited anticommunism as the main factor. Almost all of these new Nazi recruits argued that a revolution was needed since “the system had failed.” Biographer Joachim C. Fest commented on the “unmistakable difference between [Hitler’s] rigorous obsession with Jews and the lukewarm German anti-Semitism.”

Much the same pattern holds true for the Nazi Party leadership. If one looks at the early politics of later Nazi leaders such as Goebbels, Göring, Rudolf Hess, or even Adolf Eichmann, clearly none of these figures joined the Nazis primarily to act upon their anti-Jewish feelings. Historian Sarah Ann Gordon examined the early Nazi elite and concluded that “surprisingly few of the top Nazi leaders were virulent anti-Semites before 1925.” In the case of many similarly minded Nazi leaders, they were attracted to anti-Semitism because they were attracted to Hitler. It is difficult to imagine how the Holocaust could have occurred without the unwavering political support of the Nazi Party. In practical terms, the first step toward genocide was Hitler’s success in infusing his personal obsessions into the heart of Nazi Party ideology. By the late 1920s, anti-Semitism had become a primary litmus test of loyalty to the Führer.

Hitler was the only figure in the Third Reich with the authority to carry out a policy of genocide. The hypothesis that Hitler used his authority as Führer to implement his lifelong hatred of the Jews in the form of mass murder seemed so obvious to the World War II generation that most scholars spent more time collecting threatening anti-Jewish quotations from Hitler’s speeches and conversations than examining the actual record of Nazi decision making leading up to the Holocaust (a term that only came into common usage in the late 1960s). The American prosecutors at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals presented Hitler as the central figure in a criminal conspiracy to carry out crimes against humanity. In brief, the prosecution argued that Hitler set out a coherent plan for the murder of German Jews in *Mein Kampf* (1925–1927) and then proceeded to carry out that plan in a systematic manner. The guilty verdicts of the Nuremberg trials also represented the views of the majority of postwar historians of the Third Reich.

It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as a new generation of scholars replaced those who had lived through the war years, that a competing explanation for Nazi genocide began to emerge. Partially in response to the maverick British historian David Irving, who argued in 1977 that Hitler was largely unaware of mass murders of Jews carried out by Himmler, many scholars decided that the time was right for a fresh look at the origins of the Final Solution, if only to refute the arguments of Irving.

Some younger scholars, mostly social and institutional historians, using the analytic tools of political science, argued that to view the Nazi government as an instrument of Hitler's will was simplistic and, more important, did not seem to reflect the actual nature of the Nazi regime. These scholars, often called "functionalists" or "structuralists," argued that the most notable feature of the Nazi dictatorship was competition for turf, not strict obedience to policy directives from on high, and that Hitler was no more successful than any other dictator in imposing his views on a fragmented, "polycratic" bureaucracy. Functionalists are more impressed by the chaotic decision-making process of the Third Reich and by the tendency of Hitler to retreat into his private world for months at a time while leaving the business of government in the hands of more energetic and ruthless deputies. Structuralist scholars see Hitler as a "Weak Dictator," as Michael R. Marrus expressed it: "a brooding and sometimes distant leader, who intervened only spasmodically, sending orders crashing through the system like bolts of lightning."

Ultimately, the structuralists can only shed light on the lesser question ("how?"), not the larger question ("why?"). Hitler was the driving force behind Nazi anti-Jewish policy from the moment he joined the NSDAP to his final political testament, written hours before he committed suicide. That is not to say that he had a mental blueprint for Auschwitz in mind when he wrote *Mein Kampf*. It is logical to assume that Hitler approached the Jewish Question with the same tactical flexibility that he applied to domestic politics or foreign policy. It is also logical to assume that changes on the diplomatic front—or later, during the war, changes in the military situation facing Germany—would have an impact on Hitler's thinking. Under changing conditions, Hitler's plans for the Jews might seem evolutionary rather than fixed. However, two factors remained constant: Hitler's unrelenting hatred of Jews and his position as primary strategist and policy maker for the German state.

The "twisted road to Auschwitz" that structuralist historians describe corresponds to tactical shifts in Hitler's thinking. For political reasons, or to present a progressive and peaceful

image of Germany to the world, Hitler was capable of downplaying his anti-Jewish rhetoric. Under the press of more immediate political and economic crises, Hitler sometimes put his long-range plans for the Jews on the back burner. It is even likely that he envisioned more than one potential Final Solution. In the late 1930s he considered a policy of expulsion: the forced emigration of all German Jews. One possible explanation for the terrible *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) pogrom of November 1938 is that the violence was intended as a clear message to German Jews to get out of the country. As war approached, Hitler began to think beyond the Jewish population of Germany. The final change in his thinking came in the summer of 1941 with the fateful decision to invade the Soviet Union. The German occupation of Poland and the European regions of the Soviet Union brought millions of non-German Jews under Nazi control at the same time that American entry into the conflict closed off all possibility of carrying out a policy of expulsion.

Hitler wanted to win a great war for Germany, and he wanted to eliminate the Jews from Europe. These two goals were intertwined in his mind. Although Hitler's ultimate goals were fixed and nonnegotiable, his tactics and definition of what constituted achievement of these goals were flexible; he was not committed to a rigid schedule of step-by-step persecution leading to the Final Solution. That conclusion is as far as the evidence allows one to go. There were clear limits to Hitler's flexibility. The tactics might be negotiable, but the strategy remained constant. In other words, Hitler might have considered alternate visions of a Total Solution, but he decided upon genocide. He admitted as much in a monologue at his headquarters in October 1941. In a document published in 1980 Hitler mused, "I had to remain inactive for a long time against the Jews too. There's no sense in artificially making extra difficulties for oneself; the more cleverly one operates, the better. It's better to keep silent; unless one doubts the future of the movement! If I believe that the movement will exist in a few centuries then I can wait. I wouldn't have dealt with Marxism either if I hadn't had the power behind me."

Psychologists have repeatedly commented upon Hitler's rigid personality and his stubborn boasting that his vision of the world was set in concrete at an early age. That pattern of rigid consistency certainly is apparent in Hitler's comments about the Jewish Question. From his earliest political speeches, through his autobiographical musings in *Mein Kampf*, to the end of his life, Hitler poured out his venomous hatred of the Jews. It is not necessary to dig deep to find evidence that Hitler was thinking of the mass mur-

FOR THE GOOD OF GERMANY

The demands listed in the program of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP), published 24 February 1920, were:

1. We demand the union of all Germans in a Great Germany on the basis of the principle of self-determination of all peoples.

2. We demand that the German people have rights equal to those of other nations; and that the Peace Treaties of Versailles and St. Germain shall be abrogated.

3. We demand land and territory (colonies) for the maintenance of our people and the settlement of our surplus population.

4. Only those who are our fellow countrymen can become citizens. Only those who have German blood, regardless of creed, can be our countrymen. Hence no Jew can be a countryman.

5. Those who are not citizens must live in Germany as foreigners and must be subject to the law of aliens.

6. The right to choose the government and determine the laws of the State shall belong only to citizens. We therefore demand that no public office, of whatever nature, whether in the central government, the province, or the municipality, shall be held by anyone who is not a citizen.

We wage war against the corrupt parliamentary administration whereby men are appointed to posts by favor of the party without regard to character and fitness.

7. We demand that the State shall above all undertake to ensure that every citizen shall have the possibility of living decently and earning a livelihood. If it should not be possible to feed the whole population, then aliens (non-citizens) must be expelled from the Reich.

8. Any further immigration of non-Germans must be prevented. We demand that all non-

Germans who have entered Germany since August 2, 1914, shall be compelled to leave the Reich immediately.

9. All citizens must possess equal rights and duties.

10. The first duty of every citizen must be to work mentally or physically. No individual shall do any work that offends against the interest of the community to the benefit of all.

Therefore we demand: . . .

24. We demand freedom for all religious faiths in the state, insofar as they do not endanger its existence or offend the moral and ethical sense of the Germanic race.

The party as such represents the point of view of a positive Christianity without binding itself to any one particular confession. It fights against the Jewish materialist spirit within and without, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our folk can only come about from within on the principle:

COMMON GOOD BEFORE INDIVIDUAL GOOD.

25. In order to carry out this program we demand: the creation of a strong central authority in the State, the unconditional authority by the political central parliament of the whole State and all its organizations.

The formation of professional committees and of committees representing the several estates of the realm, to ensure that the laws promulgated by the central authority shall be carried out by the federal states.

The leaders of the party undertake to promote the execution of the foregoing points at all costs, if necessary at the sacrifice of their own lives.

Source: "Program of the National Socialist German Workers' Party," The Avalon Project at Yale Law School <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/document/nsdappro.htm>>.

der of Jews at an early period in his career. For example, he told a Munich journalist in 1922: "Once I really am in power, my first and foremost task will be the annihilation of the Jews." Nineteen years later, at his dinner table, he mused: "I feel I am like Robert Koch in politics. He discovered the bacillus and thereby ushered medical science onto new paths. I discovered the Jew as the bacillus and the fermenting agent of all social decomposition." Finally, it is only necessary to remind the reader of Hitler's "prophecy" of 30 January 1939—a statement that he repeatedly referred to in later wartime speeches and conversations:

I have often been a prophet in my life and was generally laughed at. . . . Today I will be a prophet again: if international finance Jewry within Europe and abroad should succeed once more in plunging the peoples into world war, then the consequence will not be the Bolshevization of the world and therewith a victory of Jewry, but on the contrary, the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe.

There is a direct line, in the words of Gerald Fleming, from Hitler's personal hatred "to the liquidation orders that Hitler personally issued during the war." No historian expects to unearth a "smoking gun"—a document ordering the extermination of European Jews personally signed by Hitler. The decision to proceed from escalating persecution to genocide was reached within the senior leadership of the Nazi Party and the German state in such secrecy that historians still debate precisely when, where, and how it was made. It is doubtful that any historical research will ever provide exact answers to that question. The Nazi regime treated the implementation of genocide as a state secret. This lack of direct documentation should not concern the historian nor encourage those who attempt to deny the reality of the Holocaust. There is no contradiction in viewing Nazi policy toward the Jews as both tactically flexible and at the same time committed to a program of annihilation, as long as one remembers that it was Hitler, "the Robert Koch of politics," with his peculiar mix of obsessive hatred and political opportunism, who made the key decisions every step along the way.

One can never know the exact calculations that led Hitler to the decision to implement a policy of extermination any more than one can hope to ascertain precisely why he hated Jews with such intensity. It is even possible, as John Lukacs has argued, that "It [genocide] was Hitler's own secret—a secret to the extent that he pushed that knowledge away from himself. He certainly did not want to know anything about its details." However, it is equally certain that no important decision in the Third Reich could be

made against Hitler's wishes. Did Nazi policy toward the Jews unfold as part of an intentional strategy? Yes. Eighteenth-century English writer Samuel Johnson offered this commonsense maxim: "Intentions must be gathered from acts."

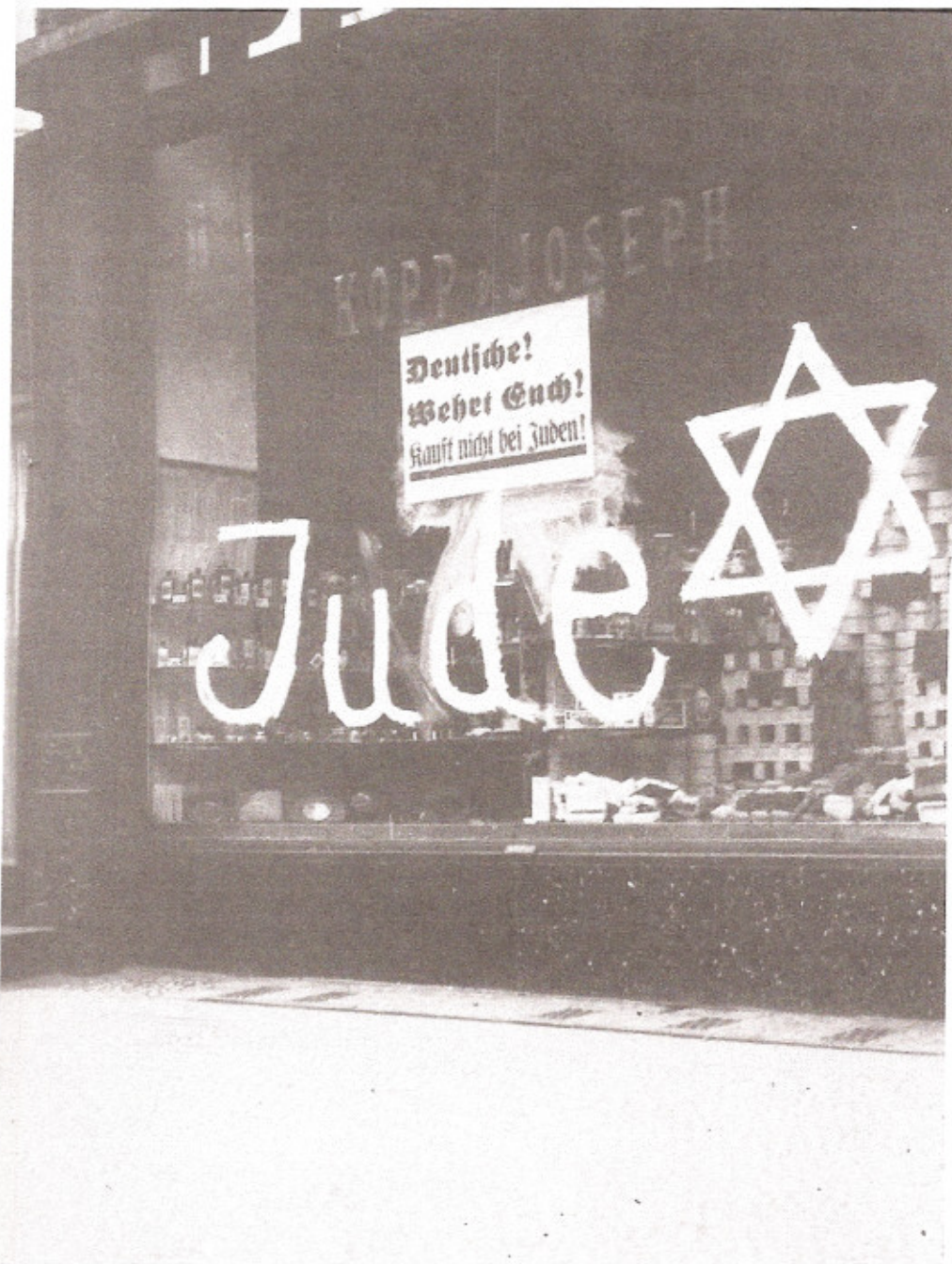
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Viewpoint:
No. Adolf Hitler did not seriously consider the Final Solution until after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The decision to move from persecution to annihilation of the German Jews was not made by the Nazi leadership until after the invasion of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941. The progressive isolation of Jews within Germany began in 1933, but their increasingly intense persecution, which led to a policy of final destruction, was not the result of a single, well-thought-out policy but of a haphazard evolution of policies. Nazi anti-Jewish thinking before 1941 progressed toward extermination, but there is no evidence that this goal was discussed until after the outbreak of World War II (1939–1945). Adolf Hitler's initial goal was to force Jews to emigrate from Germany. This policy failed for several reasons, not the least of which were the roadblocks set up by the Nazis themselves and the reluctance of other states to accept Jews as refugees. As a result of unsuccessful attempts to force Jewish emigration from Germany and an increase in the number of Jews under German control after the invasion of Poland and the Soviet Union, Nazi officials had to find a more effective way to deal with them. The extermination camps were the next step in an unplanned process that had begun years earlier.

Raul Hilberg was the first historian to argue that the extermination process was not planned. In *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) he argues, "The destruction of the Jews did not proceed from a basic plan. . . . The destruction process was a step-by-step operation, and the administrator could seldom see more than one step ahead." Hilberg elaborates on this idea by saying that emigration was the first phase of the destruction process and was carried out in public until 1941. The second phase, Jewish annihilation, began in 1941. This step was done in secret. Karl A. Schleunes, in *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* (1970), supports Hilberg's thesis. Schleunes contends that the plans for annihilation were not created far in advance, nor did early anti-Jewish



Boycott sign on the window of a Jewish-owned store in Berlin, summer 1933

(Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin)

activity logically create a direct path to the death camps. Even so, Nazi plans to expel the Jews from Germany did not follow a logical progression. Because of this uneven path, Schleunes deems that the entire process was a "twisted road" rather than a straight course.

A substantial part of Schleunes's argument is based on the assumption that plans leading to the Final Solution were created by several Nazi Party and government agencies, not by Hitler. A variety of policies emerged that were confusing and often

worked at cross-purposes to one another. Hitler did not coordinate the policies; he responded to them. During the postwar years second-ranked *Schutzstaffel* (SS) leaders often referred to a "Führer Order," or a directive that had been given by Hitler for the onset of the extermination process. No one who witnessed that order survived the war, nor is there any record of one being given. Essentially, policies that attempted to deal with the Jewish Question came from Nazi officials, not from Hitler. Since a variety of policies

were implemented by various people, who were not always communicating with each other, the Final Solution developed in an unsystematic way. Schleunes argues that this process was actually politically beneficial to Hitler:

The continued search for a solution to the Jewish problem allowed Hitler to maintain ideological contact with elements of his movement for whom National Socialism had done very little. The situation, which Hitler had created for himself, made the Jewish problem and the promise of its solution a functional necessity. . . . The search had to continue, whatever the obstacles. Out of these circumstances emerged the logic of the boycott [of Jewish businesses], and finally of the extermination camp.

By relying on his officials to create policies, Hitler was free to take a hands-off approach. Hitler, like the German people, eagerly awaited a solution to the Jewish Question. While they waited, Nazi agencies created the circumstances, and later the policies, that would leave no other choice for them than Jewish annihilation.

In 1933, with the Nazi Party increasingly in control of all aspects of German life, Jews found themselves under growing pressure as their political rights were virtually eliminated and their economic opportunities curtailed. First, the Nazi Party promoted emigration. Second was forced evacuation, followed by deportation. Lastly, when these plans had failed, came destruction. Christopher R. Browning, an historian of Nazi Germany, argues that Hitler was trying to create a *judenrein* (Jew free) Germany and that his initial goal was to promote emigration. In an effort to rid Germany of Jews, Nazi policy discouraged Jewish immigration to Germany from other countries, so that the immigration opportunities would benefit Aryans. This policy was maintained until October 1941. Browning further contends that the Final Solution was a "twisted road" rather than an intentional policy because Hitler's early support and encouragement of emigration would have been illogical had he intended ultimately to annihilate the Jews.

The Nazi Party arrived at their extermination solution out of frustration. Schleunes argues that "The search for a solution to the Jewish problem had been set into motion by the anti-Semitic energies which constituted the heart of Nazism; it was driven forward by the frustrations of each successive failure. A more extreme approach appeared to be the only alternative to the less-than-total solutions which had proved unsatisfactory or unworkable." The Nazi Party often had conflicting goals that prevented any of their plans from being truly successful. However, in 1939, Germany began its blitzkrieg (lightning war) in Poland. By acquiring more land for *lebensraum* (living space), Germany also increased

the number of Jews under its control. While acquiring control of Poland fulfilled the ideal of *lebensraum*, it set back Hitler's goal of creating a *judenrein* Germany. Because emigration was not significantly reducing the number of German Jews, not to mention Polish Jews, a new plan was called for.

The next plan was to create ghettos in which Jews could live. Initially, ghettos were created along rail lines, especially in the area near Lublin, Poland. In June 1940 the number of Jews increased again with the German conquest of Holland, Belgium, and France. Germany hoped to annex the French colony of Madagascar so that a ghetto could be created there for European Jews. However, Great Britain would have to be defeated in order for Germany to gain control of the seas and make this plan a reality. Germany delayed the Madagascar plan when Hitler decided to attack the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Hitler was determined, however, that the conquest of the Soviet Union should not complicate the Jewish Question. He decided that Russian Jews would simply be eliminated. This decision prompted a major change in Nazi policy. Whereas prior to June 1941 the Jewish Question had been handled by the physical removal of Jews, afterward the annihilation of Jews became de facto policy.

Under the direction of Reinhard Heydrich, *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) followed closely behind frontline troops into Russia, executing Jews, political commissars, and other potential enemies of the Reich. The elimination of Russian Jewry quickly became their primary task. This policy did not, however, extend to Poland or the rest of German-occupied Europe. Heydrich had been commissioned in 1939 to organize first the emigration and later the evacuation of Jews from Germany. However, beginning in 1941, the orders changed, though the chain of command did not. By 1941 Nazi policy on the Jews reached an impasse. Annexation and German military successes brought more Jews into the German sphere, but the possibilities of emigration lessened significantly. Nazi leaders began to think of a far more radical and final solution that might be more practical than emigration.

During the summer of 1941 Hitler decided to turn his recently developed bureaucracy of murder, which had worked efficiently in the Soviet Union, against the rest of the Jews of Europe. On 31 July 1941 Hermann Göring, head of the Gestapo, authorized Heydrich "to make all preparations in organizational, practical and material matters necessary for a total solution (*Gesamtlösung*) of the Jewish question in territories under German influence." The Final Solution was a culmination of the work of the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Wannsee Conference,

which was held in January 1942, to deal with questions regarding how to implement a plan of mass murder.

The murder process was fast and deceptive. First, it was carried out in occupied Russia from June 1941 to October 1942. The destruction extended into Poland from March 1942 to August 1943. Beginning in July of 1942 through August of 1943, genocide was instigated in western Europe. The psychological costs to the killers prompted some changes in how the process was completed. Large-scale shootings, such as those carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia, were impractical, and thus, concentration camps were connected into extermination camps.

It can be seen through the progression of changes in Nazi policy concerning the Jewish population that there never was a preformulated plan. As emigration, evacuation, and deportation failed, extermination emerged as the plan that would not need revision. The isolation of German Jews during the Nazi years was not an intentional strategy to annihilate them, nor did they perceive it as such. Most German Jews had become accustomed to life within anti-Semitic German society and could not imagine what was being prepared for them.

So it was that 1941 was the critical year in the evolution of Nazi policy toward genocide. The invasion of Russia created a new Jewish problem for Germany that was solved with mass murder. This decision led to the institutionalization of the Final Solution and its application throughout Europe. Though a *judenrein* Germany was Hitler's aim, how he achieved it was the consequence of the failure of earlier, unfeasible plans, not of a carefully implemented strategy.

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