

*Also by Dan Stone*

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CONSTRUCTING THE HOLOCAUST: A Study in Historiography

RESPONSES TO NAZISM IN BRITAIN, 1933–1939: Before War and Holocaust

THEORETICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST (*editor*)

# The Historiography of the Holocaust

Edited by

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*Royal Holloway,  
University of London*

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# Introduction

*Dan Stone*

As an extreme case of genocide, the Holocaust – the murder of the Jews and Romanies of Europe by the Nazis during the Second World War – has become, in the West, the archetype of evil.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are many and varied, and are addressed in several essays in this volume. Whatever they are, there is no doubt that the literature on the Holocaust is now so enormous that no individual can have real mastery over all its aspects. The aim of this volume is to provide accessible and up-to-date essays on the major sub-fields of the historiography of the Holocaust, the largest part of the literature of what is now known as Holocaust studies. As such, it addresses the issues that have long exercised historians, such as the decision-making process of the ‘Final Solution’ (Browning), the role played by antisemitism (Heilbrunn) and Hitler (Noakes) as well as fields of inquiry that have only in recent years become major areas of study in their own right, such as the topography of genocide (Charlesworth), the question of bystander nations (Kushner) and gender (Pine). Some essays deal with topics that used to be central to the historiography of Nazism and the Holocaust and, after a long absence, have once again, in modified form, become central to the debates (Kobrak and Schneider; Erickson and Heschel; Rozett). Some deal with the after-effects of the Holocaust on post-war western culture, with a major emphasis on eastern Europe (Pohl; Dean; Fox; Lobont).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, not only have historians had unprecedented access to documents housed in archives of the former Soviet Bloc, but there has been increasing awareness of the importance of eastern Europe in its own right, for a full understanding of European history in general and the Holocaust in particular. The end of the post-war consensus brought about by the collapse of ‘real existing socialism’ and the US-led ‘new world order’ have meant that suppressed questions concerning collaboration, resistance and the true impact of Nazism and the Second World War are now being addressed. Although this is a potentially dangerous development, breeding resentment and reopening old wounds, it also permits a more thoroughgoing, critical treatment

of the past than has hitherto been possible.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the way in which the Holocaust has been memorialized and scrutinized, increasingly so, it seems, as time passes, is the subject of several contributions (Cohen; Stone; Waxman).

It is hard now to imagine a time when the Holocaust was not central to western consciousness or when there was a dearth of writing on the subject. One result of the extent to which the situation has so greatly changed is that even this survey cannot claim completeness. There are many more specialist topics within Holocaust historiography that have not been dealt with in detail, including the role of the Yishuv (the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine); the attempted rescue of Jews; more detailed studies of individual countries, especially major perpetrator countries such as Croatia, Romania and Hungary; the role of 'neutral' countries such as Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey; or the role of international bodies such as the Red Cross. Whole areas of Holocaust studies that deal with literature, psychology, music or philosophy have, with the exception of Zoë Waxman's and Josh Cohen's essays, been left out here, for no single volume can deal with all the responses to the Holocaust to which the various disciplines have given rise. Nevertheless, it is historiography that is the single largest body of literature, and within that literature the major topics of research, both old and new, are covered in this book.

One of the most obvious and yet, on closer inspection, most neglected topics is that of antisemitism. Most historians take it for granted that without the history of antisemitism the Holocaust would not have taken place. It is probably for that reason that comparatively few studies of German antisemitism before 1933 – especially during the years of the Weimar Republic – have been undertaken. There is an even more marked lack of regional and local studies and of German antisemitism in comparative national perspective. Oded Heilbrunner's essay seeks to explain why this should be so, and draws out the conclusions that can be made from the existing literature. He shows that antisemitism was not all-pervasive in Germany before 1933; but neither was it something that especially worried the majority of the population, who accepted the Nazi Party's hatred of Jews as part of its broader appeal, which was bound up with the crisis of Weimar. By contrast with the study of antisemitism, there is no shortage of literature, both academic or otherwise, on its most famous exponent, Adolf Hitler. Over many years scholars have sought to understand Hitler's personality and political career; in particular, they have sought to clarify his role in the Holocaust. Since no single *Führerbefehl* (order from the Führer) has ever been found, or is ever likely to be found, historians have debated the centrality of Hitler to the development of Nazi Jewish policy. Jeremy Noakes here provides a full survey of the historiography that covers the literature since the immediate post-war period. He leaves us in no doubt that Hitler was key to the working of the Third Reich and to the radicalization of its policies towards the Jews.

Understanding the complexity of the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' means studying far more than antisemitism and Hitler, however. Since the debate – described in several places in this volume – between 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists' which dominated historiography in the 1980s has to a large extent been overcome, there is now a greater realization that the attack on the Jews took place at a different pace in different areas. Thus, while few historians doubt the importance of ideological factors for understanding the basic framework within which all Nazi policies operated, it is increasingly clear that these policies were not uniformly implemented.<sup>3</sup>

This 'maturing' of the historiography is particularly clear in seven essays in this volume. Frank Bajohr shows that while economic gain was not the primary motivating factor of Nazi Jewish policy, nevertheless no account of the Holocaust is complete without an understanding of the massive bureaucracy (and massive population complicity) of expropriation that accompanied it. Tim Cole shows how applying geographical as well as historical and sociological methods to the policy of ghettoization – which has not been subject to close scrutiny since the early post-war years – reveals not only that the ghettos were more than a staging post in the overall history of the Holocaust, but that they were social microcosms that merit study in their own right. Dieter Pohl, one of the most prolific and original of the German scholars who have worked in the eastern European archives, shows that it is not possible to understand what happened to the Jews in Poland, at three million the largest single group of Holocaust victims, without understanding the broader context of the German occupation of Poland and the population policies that were implemented there. Martin Dean shows the extent of local collaboration in the Holocaust in eastern Europe, noting that 'without the German occupation there would have been no Holocaust, but without local assistance the loss of Jewish life would not have been so great'. However, he is careful to stress not only that the accusation of Jewish complicity in communist atrocities owed little to reality, but also that there were many people who helped to save Jews. The reality of collaboration and rescue is a complex one that cannot be explained by simple sociological or psychological formulae. The same is true of the role of big business, as Christopher Kobrak and Andrea H. Schneider show. While the accusation that big business supported Hitler's rise to power is true in part, nevertheless the extent of cooperation with the regime varied enormously from firm to firm. The economic reality of the Third Reich also means that there is more to the role of big business than the use of slave labour or other forms of involvement in genocide; after all, much of the Nazi regime's economic policy was antithetical to the interests of big business. How and why businessmen accepted or supported the Third Reich is not a simple matter that can be dealt with by talking of 'fascism' as a kind of capitalist crisis-management. The accessibility of company archives has meant that the writing of official and

non-official company histories has mushroomed in recent years, and Kobrak and Schneider provide a much-needed guide through this complex and hotly debated old-new topic. Likewise, Christopher R. Browning, one of the doyens of the subject, offers a clear yet provocative assessment of the debate that has exercised historians for so long, and in which he has played a key role: the decision-making process. Browning, who has long positioned himself as a 'moderate functionalist', demonstrates the interplay of ideological and 'structural' or circumstantial factors (such as military realities), the inseparability of reality and fantasy in the implementation of the 'Final Solution'. Based on his recent research, Browning restates his thesis that the point at which the watershed was crossed from unsystematic genocidal policies to the 'Final Solution' – 'the attempt to murder every last Jew within the German grasp' – occurred at some point between 16 September and 25 October 1941. Finally, Jürgen Matthäus shows how the recent wave of *Täterforschung* ('perpetrator research') in Germany has enlarged and at the same time made more incisive and careful historians' understanding of who was a perpetrator and, though far more difficult to answer, why they took part.

The many approaches to the Holocaust are not exhausted by studying the perpetrators. A number of the essays in this book reveal the necessity of looking at events from the point of view of the victims or the 'bystanders', or of seeking ways of explaining the Holocaust through less traditional historical methods. Andrew Charlesworth's essay is exemplary in this regard, since he shows how the study of landscape can provide new perspectives even on sites and events that are believed to be familiar. His wide-ranging survey of sites of destruction is simultaneously an exercise in familiarization – showing how ordinary were the places where the extraordinary took place – and defamiliarization – treating well-known places in a way that is striking, sometimes shocking, to those who have only encountered more conventional ways of thinking about the past. Tony Kushner's essay on Britain and America similarly seeks to break down existing narratives, questioning not only the concept of 'bystander nation', but seeking to historicize and clarify the heated debates about the role played by the two major western allies. He calls for a more subtle historiography that does not simply engage in a bitter debate of blame and counter-blame where the fate of the Jews is concerned. This is also John Klier's project, for while the USSR was not a bystander nation, the Holocaust as it took place on Soviet territory remains one of the least understood and most under-researched aspects of the event. Klier rectifies a number of misconceptions and explains how the Holocaust was dealt with in the post-war Soviet Union.

Also by no means 'bystanders' but neither direct perpetrators, the German Churches have in the last decade received a great deal of attention, with much research driven by the emotional debate over the role of the Vatican. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel show the extent to which the Churches – *contra*

secularization theorists – played a major role in German life, and assess how the influence of churchmen and theologians could justify persecution, but also (if far less often) counter it. As with collaboration in eastern Europe, it is clear that while institutionally there is much to criticize where the Churches are concerned, at the same time there were many Protestants and Catholics who, as individuals, saved Jews. Ericksen and Heschel calmly discuss the evidence of church collaboration with Nazism, and explain how post-war Christian theology has sought to deal with that terrible legacy.

Within the literature on Jewish responses to the Holocaust – which is not as large as one might imagine – two debates have for many years dominated the scene: Jewish leadership and resistance. Dan Michman, whose writings, in many languages, have dealt with all aspects of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, here addresses the former issue. Perhaps the most acrimonious debate (often, one could hardly dignify the state of affairs with such a scholarly term) has been that concerning the *Judenräte*, or Jewish Councils set up by the Nazis in eastern Europe. Distinguishing between 'leadership' and 'headship' Michman explains why, in the post-war years, so much criticism of the *Judenräte* arose, and guides us through the literature to arrive at a far more balanced and sophisticated response to the problem than has hitherto been possible. Without understanding the Nazis' policies, it is not possible to understand the response of the Jews, especially those made by their appointed 'leaders'. The same is true of resistance which, as Robert Rozett shows, must be seen in relation to Nazi actions. In the post-war years, especially in Israel, as the *Judenräte* were vilified so the resisters were eulogized. Rozett shows how the historiography of resistance has not only developed over time more subtle definitions of what the term means, but has gradually become more balanced, placing armed resistance in its proper context, that is, one which allows it to be discussed without over-emphasizing its occurrence or, by implication, denigrating those who could not or would not take part in it.

Although leadership and resistance have long been the dominant concepts in discussions of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, others have come to the fore in the last two decades. Perhaps the most important is that of gender which, despite considerable resistance from many scholars, can no longer be ignored as a significant methodological tool. Lisa Pine here reviews the now considerable literature on the subject and shows that a gendered approach to the Holocaust has important empirical and theoretical implications for a broader understanding of Nazi ideology and policies, and what it meant to experience the Holocaust.

In his essay, Ian Hancock, the most prominent of Romani scholars on the Holocaust, shows that the experiences of Romanies was no less central to the Holocaust than that of Jews. That Romanies continue to be excluded from much Holocaust historiography is a reflection of their general exclusion from



post-war European society and culture. Hancock demonstrates the need for further research on Romani experience, in order that their experience be integrated into Holocaust historiography in general.

The remainder of the book deals with the legacy of the Holocaust, with the various political, social, cultural and intellectual trends that are usually described with the shorthand 'after Auschwitz'. This is no less a part of the historiography of the Holocaust, since the effects of the Nazi genocide have been profound, and continue to impact on western society in many ways. Indeed, there is a sense in which with the passage of time these effects have become more, not less marked, as recent debates over trials of perpetrators, compensation for forced and slave labourers, Swiss gold, looted art and memorial days reveal.

In his analysis of Holocaust-related trials, Donald Bloxham reveals the extent to which these trials, from Nuremberg to Sawoniuk, have been influenced by political desiderata. He not only provides an introductory summary of the key trials, including the Auschwitz trials, the Eichmann trial and the recent spate of French trials, but also documents the extent to which the trials have been key moments in the development of 'Holocaust consciousness' and Holocaust memory.

Both Thomas Fox and Florin Lobont address the question of the treatment of the Holocaust in eastern Europe, before and after communism. Fox shows how historians in the Soviet Bloc were constrained by the official 'Marxist-Leninist' definition of fascism which prevented discussions of specifically Jewish suffering; and Lobont shows how this constraint has fed into the fraught atmosphere of post-communism, an atmosphere that has also been fuelled by ultra-nationalism and the rise of irrationalist ideologies in the post-1989 vacuum. Neither, however, sees the region in monolithic terms, and both are careful to address the differences in how the Holocaust has been treated – differences that relate to the nature of the communist regimes (some more Stalinist than others) and the nature of their collapse. Romania, Lobont shows, where the demise of the Ceauşescu dictatorship, with its 'national communist' formula, did not mean a sweeping away of the ruling class, retains more difficulties than most of the other states in the region.

The next three essays deal with what might loosely be called 'post-Holocaust culture'. Josh Cohen discusses the attempts made by philosophers to address the implications of the Holocaust for thought. In the context of a book on Holocaust historiography, Cohen's essay provides a salutary reminder that historians too use concepts and methods that are bound up with traditions of thought that have been called into question by the events of the Holocaust. His analyses of T.W. Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas suggest that it is possible to continue to think about Auschwitz. But his conclusion that one should 'continue thinking without yielding to the temptations of false consolation' is as relevant to historians as it is to philosophers. In her essay on testimony,

Zoë Waxman shows that Holocaust testimony has a long history dating back to the Holocaust period itself, when the ghetto diarists and archivists began the process. She also shows the way in which changes in testimony, as in Holocaust representation in general, have been influenced by social and cultural conditions, and discusses the different ways in which commentators have tried to derive meaning from testimonies. In my own essay on memory, memorials and museums I address a similar problematic to Cohen and Waxman: how is it possible to represent a past event that broke with all norms, that, as Jean-François Lyotard argues, was like an earthquake that 'destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly'?<sup>4</sup> The divide is between those who want to represent the past in such a way as to heal the wound, signalling a return to 'normality' (whether political, social, religious or national), and those who believe that representations of the Holocaust must be made in such a way as to maintain the gap as a form of continual questioning, as a reminder of Lyotard's 'seismic force'. In the context of Holocaust memory, which has been at the forefront of the general rise of 'memory culture' in the last decades, this divide is particularly notable, especially in the memorials and museums that are dedicated to it.

One of the outcomes of this memory culture has been an impetus to thinking about genocide in general, especially to thinking about post-1945 genocides, which have besmirched the earnest words 'never again'. The growing academic interest in genocide means that to some extent the future of Holocaust consciousness and of Holocaust studies lies in its incorporation into comparative genocide scholarship. A Dirk Moses' essay paves the way for this future engagement, with a study of how the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin's response to Nazism led to the creation of the UN Convention on Genocide, and how the Holocaust has been central to the development of understanding genocide as a concept. Moses argues that the Holocaust must be seen as part of a broader pattern of modern genocide, albeit an extreme case; and he argues in favour of retaining Lemkin's definition of genocide rather than seeing the Holocaust as the touchstone against which other cases of genocide should be judged. Although this book is devoted to the Holocaust, there is little doubt that in a few years there will be a need for such a historiographical survey of the burgeoning literature on genocide in general and on the sadly numerous examples of it that the modern age provides.

## Notes

- 1 See R.J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), especially Part III: 'After Auschwitz', for a discussion.
- 2 See, for example, H. Arendt, 'Power Politics Triumphs', *Commentary*, 1 (1945–46), reprinted in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), pp. 156–7;

I. Deák, J.T. Gross and T. Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); P. Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P. Ther and A. Siljak, eds., *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944–1948* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); S. G. Meštrović, *The Balkanization of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Postcommunism* (London: Routledge, 1994); S. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

3 A key text here is U. Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Problems* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000).

4 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 56.

# 1 German or Nazi Antisemitism?

Oded Heilbrunner

Until the 1960s most studies of the Nazi Party and National Socialism argued that antisemitism was an essential factor in explaining Nazi success before 1933.<sup>1</sup> But in recent decades, numerous studies have shown that antisemitism was probably somewhat underrepresented in Nazi Party activity and propaganda in the period before 1933, particularly in the last years before Hitler became Chancellor. Today, most studies agree that although a hardcore of radical antisemites existed within the party, most members avoided engaging in antisemitic activity. Millions of Nazi voters did not cast their vote for the party because they were antisemites. They were prepared to accept the Nazi Party's 1920 programme, including the antisemitic paragraph, only if the party offered them bread, jobs and hope for the future.

A discussion of this absence of antisemitic propaganda, activity and motives forms the core of this chapter. From an historiographical perspective I will address the following question: What was the relationship between Nazi ideological factors and rational motives, between hatred of Jews and economic distress, between the importance of race within the Nazi policy and political motives?

The chapter focuses on the historiography of Nazi antisemitism in the period from the late 1920s to the early 1930s for several reasons. First, most studies investigating the Nazis' rise to power deal with the period 1929–33 separately because of its importance in the history of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi Party and the history of German and Nazi antisemitism. Second, it was at this point that the Nazi Party became a mass political body. In those years, the party gained strength and popularity in Germany thanks to an unprecedented and innovative use of propaganda and ideology. So it is of interest to examine how antisemitism was incorporated into the party's propaganda and ideology, what part it played and, since this is the focus of this essay, how historians have studied this. Third, most studies dealing with the Nazis' consolidation of power after 1933 end with the years 1934–35. This reflects not only the foreign and internal

policies of the Third Reich, but also a fact that is relevant to our study: from the mid-1930s Nazi policy against the Jews can be understood as 'a gradually radicalizing process',<sup>2</sup> as a racist, antisemitic tone became a pivotal element of the Third Reich's ideology and propaganda. From the mid-1930s German and Nazi antisemitism entered a new phase – the road to extermination' – which is discussed in this volume by other contributors.

## I

When discussing German antisemitism, most scholars agree that before the First World War one can speak in terms of the rise and fall of political, organized antisemitism in Germany. Contrary to Daniel J. Goldhagen's controversial thesis of an 'eliminationist antisemitism' prevalent in Germany in the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> most researchers accept the oft-repeated argument that before the First World War Germany was not an antisemitic country, and that there was no such thing as a homogeneous, national German antisemitism. That does not mean that hatred of Jews did not exist, but it was local, lasted for relatively short periods and served the interests of particular social groups. The absence of any dominant cultural hegemony, any single political culture in Germany, largely explains the limitations on the spread of antisemitism.<sup>4</sup> One should also consider the assumption that prior to the First World War a taboo, based on middle-class mores, existed against certain forms of antisemitism, and that only the war and post-1918 conditions undermined this, so that the taboo lost its potency.<sup>5</sup> All this explains why widespread antisemitism did not exist as a dominant force in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 'restless Reich', the 'nervous Reich'<sup>6</sup> was riddled with cultural and, especially, religious contradictions. These contradictions and differences in the socioeconomic traditions in the various parts of Germany played a decisive role in limiting the scope of German antisemitism.

During the First World War the first signs of a relocation of German antisemitism appeared. From being a strong, local (peripheral) phenomenon, which sometimes had a racial character, with limited objectives, and which benefited certain social groups in the provinces, it became a national phenomenon. The first step took place in the political arena. The German Fatherland Party (*Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*), a right-wing antisemitic party which came into being during the First World War, as a result of the union of the various conservative, antisemitic, racial forces in Germany, preached an antisemitic racial ideology in the latter part of the war.<sup>7</sup> The party provided the conceptual and organizational model for all the antisemitic and nationalist movements that arose after the war, and was led by figures like Wolfgang Kapp and Heinrich Class, who made a decisive contribution to undermining the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic in its formative stages. Despite their dislike of Hitler, if we

wish to examine the sources of Weimar Nazi antisemitism and the question of continuity in German antisemitism, we have to begin with this party, its leaders, the First World War and the German revolution of 1918 when the party took a central role on the radical-right spectrum of the new political map.

## II

This being the case before and during the First World War, before we turn to Nazi antisemitism, we need to ask the following questions: At what point can we say that antisemitism became a central pillar of Weimar society? When did German antisemitism change from being an undercurrent, a marginal or local phenomenon, to being central in German society? I will highlight a variety of processes and outline a number of arguments which prevail today among most historians who study German society and the role of antisemitism during the Weimar period, especially in its final years. These arguments serve as a starting-point for any discussion of Nazi antisemitism.

There are a number of points at which researchers begin their discussions of the rise of Nazi antisemitism. The first is the First World War and its social, political and economic consequences (1916–23). There is no doubt that the decisive turning point that saw antisemitism break out of its minority position occurred between the last years of the war and 1923. The second is German inflation and its legacy (1923–26). And the third – and the focus of this chapter – the final stage, which led to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor (1929–33). I will examine these stages from an historiographical perspective.

## I

From the 1880s onwards, sociopolitical peripheries developed in Germany, which were characterized by social protest actions and, in some regions, a desire for radical-democratic reform. These populist manifestations, most commonly expressed by artisans and peasants, but to some extent by other social groups, were a hotbed of local antisemitism in the 1890s.

As we have noted, the formation of the Fatherland Party can be seen as an indication of the rise of a national, sometimes homogeneous, antisemitic political culture. Immediately after the First World War, some of the pre-war antisemitic peripheries provided fertile soil for the growth of radical antisemitic mass movements, such as the German-Nationalist Protection and Defence Association (*Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutz-Bund*), whose members were mainly professional salaried workers, teachers and civil servants.<sup>8</sup> The period 1916–24 with its difficult political, psychological, social and especially economic conditions, was of particular significance for the rise of German mass antisemitism.<sup>9</sup> The frequent crises of the Weimar Republic contributed more than anything else to the dehumanization of German society and its elites.<sup>10</sup>

Here, some researchers' main concern is with antisemitism in political language and discourse.<sup>11</sup> They show how the post-1918 period saw the widespread infiltration of antisemitic language and arguments into political discourse. In the political culture, with the exceptions of the German Democratic Party and the German Social Democrat Party, which were opposed to antisemitism, all groups (including the German Communist Party) employed antisemitic rhetoric, whether moderate or radical, to mobilize existing and new supporters and to undermine political rivals.<sup>12</sup> In religious life, the Protestant and Catholic Churches played an important role in this process. It was mainly the Protestant Church which remained firmly in the *völkisch* camp, although it rejected extreme antisemitism. Many pastors and vicars of the Church belonged to the Nazi Party. The Catholic Church, by contrast, rejected radical and *völkisch* antisemitism, but articulated time and again its sympathy for the nationalist camp. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church was ambivalent about Nazi antisemitism. On the one hand, priests continued to employ antisemitic images and express prejudices in their sermons and festive rituals and services. Violent Nazi anti-communist activity impressed many Church leaders in Germany and Rome and led in some Catholic regions to massive support for the Nazi Party. On the other hand, the Church could not support the pagan aspects of Nazi Party ideology. The bishops of Mainz clearly expressed this dissatisfaction in their declaration of 1930.<sup>13</sup>

It was above all the so-called 'golden twenties' which witnessed the gradual assimilation of antisemitic discourse.<sup>14</sup> Jacob Borut, who has studied Jewish vacations and the antisemitism encountered by Jews in tourist facilities during the Weimar period, shows many cases of antisemitic occurrences, proving that Jews could not escape antisemitism even on holiday. According to Borut, although there were hundreds of antisemitic hotels and guesthouses which refused to accept Jewish holidaymakers, this did not stop Jews visiting antisemitic resorts.<sup>15</sup> Recently, a number of studies have explained this phenomenon by saying that the German notion of the *Volk* underwent a gradual change after 1918, and especially after 1923. In the course of this transformation, the significance and importance of antisemitism were modified.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, those for whom antisemitism had never been a way of life started to adopt antisemitic jargon or joined the antisemitic camp. What happened, in short, was that an alliance was formed between racism and respectability.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to stress that Jews were not the only victims of the German moral collapse. The communists, workers affiliated to the organizations of the left and the French were among the groups for whom the German right manifested a deep hatred.<sup>18</sup> Recent studies remind us that the 'Jewish Question' was not the main concern of the majority of people in rural or urban Germany. Other concerns, such as inflation, the social upheavals of the 1930s, street violence and the horrific stories coming out of the Soviet Union (to note but

a few) were also important, perhaps more so than hatred of the Jews. By concentrating disproportionately on antisemitism we overlook the collective preoccupations of Germans after the First World War. The atmosphere of violence on the streets of the Weimar Republic overshadowed antisemitism.<sup>19</sup>

## 2

Many scholars today agree that the hyper-inflation of the years 1922-23 resulted not only in money losing its value, but also in a devaluation of human life.<sup>20</sup> The national humiliation, the defeat of Germany, the astronomical sums the Germans were forced to pay in reparations, the sense of insecurity and the massive unemployment which overtook Germany towards the end of the 1920s, the great fear of the extreme left and the almost continual atmosphere of civil war undermined the civil foundations, bourgeois values (*Tugend*) and Christian morality that had hitherto characterized various strata of German society. The unremitting atmosphere of violence and civil war under Weimar (mainly until 1924) was also, as Dirk Walter and Richard Bessel remind us, starting to produce public expressions of antisemitism.<sup>21</sup> In Berlin and Munich, street fighting between right-wing organizations and the radical left was common in the early 1920s. Many Jews, mainly *Ostjuden* (Jews from eastern Europe who fled to Germany during or after the war), were a popular target for the paramilitary organizations of the radical right. Here, perhaps, is a partial explanation of the origins of the cruelty described by Goldhagen of the mass killings in eastern Europe after 1940.<sup>22</sup>

## 3

Even in the late Weimar period it is hard to discover a direct line leading to the changed attitude towards the Jews expressed in the Nazi Party, German elites and society some years later. After 1924 the aggressive antisemitism of the radical right declined in popularity.<sup>23</sup> True, many Germans were now more amenable to manipulation from above, to the attraction of a false magician or to being drawn into violent activities. Small businessmen, doctors, intellectuals, students and university teachers are cited in recent studies as playing a decisive role in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

Geoffrey Giles, who focuses on the Nazi student organization in Hamburg, reminds us that antisemitism appears to have been one of the students' main preoccupations. In Marburg, argues Rudy Koshar, where traditions of political antisemitism were strong, the local Nazi student organization devoted most of its energy to fighting Judaism and 'Jewish finance capital'.<sup>25</sup> Ulrich Herbert, in his important study on the young, right-wing intellectual and SS officer Werner Best, argued that radical 'Folkism' was dominant among the academic youth of the bourgeoisie. Best, a university-trained lawyer, joined the Nazi Party in 1930 and the SS in 1931. For Herbert, Best is an example of a young intellectual

whose worldview had been fixed during the early Weimar years when the threat from communism and the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty had their impact on a whole generation of intellectuals. Their anti-republican ideology, antisemitism and anti-Marxism were expressed in their activities in right-wing antisemitic university circles. Those circles provided the soil from which grew the Nazi terror and genocide of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Michael Kater reminds us that after 1929, when competition with Jewish doctors became more intense, the Nazi organization of doctors, the *Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Ärztebund*, which represented the interests of several groups of German physicians, radicalized its antisemitism.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, many historians remind us that the Nazi Party did not especially hate the Jews. Its members and sympathizers had many enemies and many objects of attack, of whom the Jews were only one. It was undoubtedly an antisemitic party, but the antisemitism of its members before 1933 is insufficient to account for what happened from the mid-1930s onwards. It was still largely a 'written antisemitism' rather than a violent one.<sup>28</sup>

The classic studies on the history of the Nazi Party written during the 1950s and the 1960s which analyse the stages of the party's rise to power disregard almost completely Nazi antisemitism during the decisive period, even though they emphasize that antisemitic propaganda was used by the Nazi Party until 1924, and of course from 1933 onwards. These historians, mostly Jews who lived through the period under discussion (1950s and 1960s), focused their research efforts on the study of German Jews before and after 1933, and on Nazi ideology and the state. However, having recognized the importance of Nazi antisemitism, they failed to examine the varieties of its articulation in pre-1933 Nazi propaganda, apparently in the belief that the issue was beyond doubt. Even the serious scholarly controversy at that time over the question of whether the Nazi regime should be regarded as fascist or totalitarian did not attempt to touch on the character of Nazi antisemitism before or after 1933.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1970s and the 1980s a shift took place in the historiography of the Nazi Party which was reflected in studies of Nazi antisemitism. Several historiographical trends should be mentioned here. From the late 1970s more and more studies concentrated on aspects of regional, local and everyday life during the rise of the Nazi Party. These studies received a tremendous impetus from various school competitions on the topic of 'The Third Reich in my Home Town', and from the events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power). Both German and non-German researchers worked on this regional aspect. The regional aspect was part of an extremely popular trend at that time, known as 'history from below' (*Geschichte von unten*), which found its most extreme expression in the trend known as 'history of everyday life' (*Alltagsgeschichte*). Here too antisemitism before 1933 is treated as a marginal issue by both German and Anglo-American researchers or does not figure in their

work at all. Many German researchers were natives of the places they studied and it may be that they feared their neighbours' reactions. Others – many of whom were 'historians of everyday life' during the 1980s – were Marxists or at least held a worldview that was close to Marxism, an ideology that traditionally rejects antisemitism as an explanatory analytical tool because it was, supposedly, a factor diverting the attention of the masses from their real problems.<sup>30</sup>

The main historical trend that emerged in Germany as well as in Britain and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s was social history or, in Germany, the 'social history of politics'. This trend sought to explain historical processes and events in terms of social structures, social groups and socio-economic processes. This too might explain the relegation of antisemitism to the periphery of Nazi activity. Many historians argued that the reason why antisemitic propaganda was not often used by the Nazi Party was a tactical change in emphasis in party activity (the post-1929 wooing of social groups who were not traditionally known as antisemitic); the influence of local traditions on the party's methods (e.g. the size of the Protestant, Catholic or Jewish communities in the region under investigation); and finally the elevation of Marxism-Bolshevism to the position of enemy number 1 of the Nazi Party.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1980s, analysis of voting patterns for the Nazi Party, its members and organizations also became popular. However, here too none of the studies dwelt at any length on how antisemitism affected the considerations of party activists, members or voters. The most common view was that until 1933 the struggle against communism and Marxism was the principal preoccupation of the party voters. Thomas Childers argued that, on comparing the period up to 1925 with the phase beginning with the end of the 1920s, a downward trend in antisemitic activity and propaganda is evident. Richard Hamilton and Jürgen Falter, who, like Childers, studied voting patterns for the Nazi Party, very briefly supported Childers' arguments. They argued that antisemitism would emerge as an issue only when questions of capitalism and Bolshevism were raised. Racism played no role in voters' considerations or in the party's appeals to them. All these studies argued that the resort to antisemitism was grounded in regional factors.<sup>32</sup>

Two scholarly controversies that characterized the period should be mentioned here. The debate about Nazism and the Third Reich as 'Hitlerism' (the 'intentionalist' approach) or as 'polycracy' (the 'structuralist' approach) concentrated mainly on structures and the intentions of the Nazi leaders, elites and agencies. The role of antisemitism was one of the main issues here. It was again the period after 1933 that stood at the centre of the debate while pre-1933 Nazi antisemitism was again overlooked.<sup>33</sup> The German historian Ulrich Herbert, who represents the structuralist approach, still argues in favour of this approach, which seeks to 'set the causes and effect of the National Socialist policy of mass destruction in a different, sharper and simultaneously broader

focus' from that of the 'intentionalists'. On the other hand, Herbert accepts that this approach lacks any consideration of crucial ideological elements which influenced Nazi policy towards the Jews.<sup>34</sup>

Another debate among West German historians took place in the 1980s. This was the *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) and revolved, among other things, around the issue of antisemitism and the Holocaust. Ernst Nolte's irresponsible argument about the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinist Russia on the German middle classes, the Nazi Party and its leadership drew attention to the place of antisemitism and the Jews in Nazi ideology and activity prior to 1933. But here too, the debate focused on the period after 1933, while important questions such as whether before 1933 the party drew any distinction between Marxism and Judaism in its propaganda were left unanswered or, under the influence of Nolte's arguments, communism and Marxism were described as the arch-enemies of Nazism before 1933.<sup>35</sup>

The historiographical approach to the Nazi Party's antisemitism did not change much until the Goldhagen debate of the mid-1990s. In Germany, as well as in the US, public debate over National Socialist antisemitism has changed significantly since then. Goldhagen understands the mass murder of European Jews as the culmination of a centuries-long German obsession with Judaism. In his study, *Nazi antisemitism* was a German project that began long before the 1920s. He shows how rabid Nazi antisemitism, which developed during the 1920s, had deeper roots in German society. He pointed out that before 1933 any Jew in Germany could expect the worst from Hitler's party. Goldhagen's thesis about the Nazi Party's antisemitism was in fact a return to 1960s' arguments about the importance of antisemitism to the success of the Nazi Party, but he stresses this fact more than any other scholar, including those who wrote about Nazi ideology and propaganda during the 1960s. As in the case with the 'Hitlerism' versus 'Polycracy' debate or the *Historikerstreit*, the public discussion arising from Goldhagen's arguments totally ignored his thesis about pre-1933 antisemitism. Apart from minor remarks such as 'after 1930, the election propaganda of the rising National-Socialists mentioned antisemitism only peripherally',<sup>36</sup> no serious discussion developed around Goldhagen's argument about pre-1933 antisemitism in the way that debates developed around his argument concerning post-1933 Nazi antisemitism.<sup>37</sup>

### III

The reason for the marginal role assigned to antisemitism in the Nazi Party in the studies and controversies surveyed above must also be sought in the methods used by historians, in the positions taken by various scholars and, so it appears, in the conditions in various regions of Germany. It is clear that notwithstanding the different methods employed by various historical approaches to this

issue, they all reach roughly the same conclusion: antisemitism did not play a major role in the rise of Nazism before 1933.

We can see several trends within this historiographical consensus which enable us to raise questions and arguments with regard to any future research on this topic. First, we should pay more attention to the distinction made by many historians between Nazi opposition to Marxism and the hatred of and opposition to the Jews. According to this view (which was not only represented by Nolte and his disciples),<sup>38</sup> the Nazis are claimed to have regarded Marxism as a 'political enemy'. Here the communists were seen as the arch-enemy of the Nazi Party, while the Jews did not constitute any threat to party members and leaders, and were treated as an 'ideological enemy'. Before the Nolte controversy of the 1980s, the 'communists as arch-enemy' approach was a domain of many Marxist or proto-Marxist historians, such as the late British historian Tim Mason, the German historian Reinhard Kühnl and many East German historians. Against this view, many conservative and liberal scholars argue that these two concepts ('Judaism' and 'communism') are coextensive, and that hatred of Marxism even derives from hatred of the Jewish worldview and morality.<sup>39</sup> In any research on this topic in the future, the meaning of the concepts 'communism' and 'Jewry' for the Nazi Party rank and file, and not only for the Nazi elite (Goebbels, Rosenberg, Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich) must be clarified, not just for the post-1933 period but also for the earlier period.

Second, the 'modified structuralism' approach to Nazism, which is currently the dominant approach in research on the Third Reich,<sup>40</sup> should expand the scope of its research to the period before 1933 by bringing under its scrutiny Nazi activity vis-à-vis the Jews in the Weimar period. Ulrich Herbert, who advocates this approach, suggests that the 1970s' structuralist approach was not aware of how important racist ideology and antisemitism were in determining the thoughts and actions of many sections of the German population and the Nazi Party. Herbert (in his study of Werner Best) and his colleagues take for granted a certain ideological framework in their analysis, but here too they do not take the Weimar period into consideration in their assessment of Nazi policy.<sup>41</sup>

Third, lack of attention to Nazi antisemitism prior to 1933, often stems from a preconception that since it is well known that the party was antisemitic and very often resorted to antisemitism, there is no need to dwell on this question for the period before 1933. Here one must raise the question why so many historians place such emphasis on the antisemitic trends of the party before 1924, while devoting only scant attention to this issue in the years that followed.

### IV

Certainly, before 1933 neither the German people nor any group within the Nazi Party or its voters wanted what happened to the Jews after 1938. No doubt,

many sections within German society would have been satisfied with a visible restriction of Jewish influence. Only a minority within the Nazi Party itself (concentrated mainly around Julius Streicher and the *völkisch* group in Bavaria), whom we can call rabidly anti-Jewish, contemplated a sweeping deprivation of civil rights, implemented, if necessary, by physical force. The vast majority of the Nazi Party's members and voters were indifferent and sometimes even rejected this rabid antisemitism.

But this broad attitude towards the Jews among Weimar society also enabled the minority of rabid antisemites in the Nazi Party to argue, after 1933, for racial discrimination and to act accordingly. Unlike the rank and file of the Nazi Party, however, a few of its leaders were imbued with a depraved antisemitism of the racial kind to be found in certain intellectual circles of the early Weimar period. But the difference here was that these were precisely the people who, as a result of human error, were put in charge of the German state on 30 January 1933.

This point has to be borne in mind. Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Josef Goebbels, Julius Streicher and their associates came to power as the result of a political manoeuvre of the traditional German right which, we may recall, was before the war already imbued with antisemitism. Unlike previous manifestations of the German right, which had generally succeeded, that of 1933 failed and the golem turned on its maker.<sup>42</sup> The rise to power of the Nazis was not a foregone conclusion; it was not a case of historical necessity. There was no German 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) which began in the nineteenth century and led directly to 1933. On the contrary: some months before 'black January', the party had begun to break up, but the German elites who brought Hitler to power were corrupted, exhausted and unable to read the realities of the situation in Germany at the end of 1932 correctly.

The origins of Nazism, and hence Nazi antisemitism, lie in the crisis of Weimar society, which was reflected in a profound radicalization and politicization of that society. The radical populism which so typified the antisemitic peripheries in the period of the Second Reich gained a central position in the Weimar period as a result of the war, the revolution and the events of the early 1920s. Nazism was a general mart for all the social movements that had existed on the fringes of Wilhelmine society, had risen to prominence during the war and had become influential during the 1920s. But what was even more significant was that, in addition to the extremist currents that had infiltrated the party, Nazism in the period before 1933 also represented central streams of Wilhelmine society: national liberals, social Conservatism, Catholics and the socialist left. Democratic, conservative, liberal and Marxist ideas could be found within the party, together with calls for social and political reform under an authoritarian or populist democratic regime. And side by side with the racial antisemitism that had existed on the fringes of imperial society, the populist kind that was

prominent in the periphery and that found a home in the populist-radical-conservative parties of the Second Reich was also represented in the Nazi Party.<sup>43</sup>

This political department store made the Nazi regime popular, enabling it to carry out a social revolution. Unlike the German elites of the Second Reich and the Weimar Republic, National Socialism was able to exploit the great popularity it had gained in order to realize, among other things, its programme with regard to the Jews. The Nazi Party leadership was at the helm of a weary and enfeebled society which had lost much of its human face. Even more important, it had at its disposal intellectual and political elites which suffered from the same sickness. All were products of the Weimar crisis. The Nazi leaders, in collaboration with these elites, were able to mislead German society and mould it as a baker kneads and moulds his bread. This, of course, took time.

Most historians agree today that during the early years of the Third Reich 'the war against the Jews' was not the main goal of the new regime. Saul Friedländer argues that boycotts, 'spontaneous' grassroots action and legal actions were undertaken, but no more than that. The main task was to remove Jews from their positions in the state and the economy, but Jews could continue to live in Germany.<sup>44</sup> As late as 1936, a Jewish funeral in a village in the southern Rhine region in western Germany could be accompanied by the heads of the local Nazi Party who had come to pay their last respects to an anonymous Jew.<sup>45</sup> As Ulrich Herbert has recently claimed, the German people did not fanatically support anti-Jewish policy until the late 1930s.<sup>46</sup> As late as 1938, the heads of the SS could oppose *Kristallnacht* on the grounds that the disturbances might be too violent. But, as the Second World War reached its climax and the Germans were mired in the mud and snow of Russia, and the reverses of 1942 showed the Nazi leadership that victory was turning into defeat, the heads of the Nazi state took it on themselves to order the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' as well as cruel and vindictive actions against other social and ethnic groups.

## Notes

- 1 For this early period a good survey can be found in I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Arnold, 2000), chapter 5; O.D. Kulka, 'Major Trends and Tendencies of German Historiography on National Socialism and the "Jewish Question" (1924–1984)', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 30 (1985), 215–42.
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- 3 D.J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).
- 4 O. Heilbrunner, 'From Antisemitic Peripheries to Antisemitic Centres: The Place of Antisemitism in German History', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000), 559–76;



- H. Poetzsch, *Anti-Semitismus in der Region. Antisemitische Erscheinungsformen in Sachsen, Hessen, Nassau und Braunschweig 1870–1914* (Darmstadt, 2000).
- 5 A. Kauders, *German Politics and the Jews: Düsseldorf and Nuremberg 1910–1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
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- 7 H. Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei. Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1997); H.P. Müller, 'Die Deutsche Vaterlandspartei in Württemberg 1917/18 und ihr Erbe. Besorgte Patrioten oder rechte Ideologen?' *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Geschichte*, 59 (2000), 217–24.
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- 10 J. Bergmann and K. Megerle, 'Protest und Aufruhr der Landwirtschaft in der Weimarer Republik (1924–1933). Formen und Typen der politischen Agrarbewegung im regionalen Vergleich', in *Regionen im historischen Vergleich. Studien zu Deutschland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. J. Bergmann and K. Megerle (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), pp. 200–67.
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- 37 For the debate around the Goldhagen thesis in the US, see G. Eley, ed., *The Goldhagen Effect* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); for Germany, see Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies*; for Israel, see *German Anti-Semitism*, ed. Borut and Heilbrunner. All the books above and many others argue against Goldhagen and some provide new evidence which reveals the weakness of his thesis. But none touches on Goldhagen's arguments about Nazi and German antisemitism during Weimar.
- 38 See, for example, E. Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1987); Striefler, *Kampf um die Macht*; Richard Bessel, in his study on the SA in eastern Germany, argues that 'the lion's share of Nazi violence was aimed against the Left'. R. Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, p. 80.
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- 42 H.A. Turner, *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power* (Reading, MA: Harlow, 1996); W. Patch, 'Heinrich Brüning's Recollection of Monarchism: The Birth of a Red Herring', *Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), 340–70.
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- 45 I would like to thank Jacob Borut for bringing this event to my attention; it is referred to in E. Mais, *Die Verfolgung der Juden in den Landkreisen Bad-Kreuznach und Birkensfeld 1933–1945* (Birkenfeld: Heimatkundliche Schriftenreihe des Landkreis Bad Kreuznach, 1988), p. 328.
- 46 Herbert, 'Extermination Policy', p. 42.