

PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN
CIVILIZATION SERIES

The Holocaust

Problems and
Perspectives
of Interpretation

Edited by

Donald L. Niewyk

Southern Methodist University

1992

D. C. HEATH AND COMPANY

Lexington, Massachusetts Toronto

how the Nazis would have coped with more extensive and militant Jewish opposition. That, of course, is impossible. History is no laboratory science in which one can run the experiment over and change the variables. Answers will suggest themselves only through informed and sensitive appreciation of the situation confronting the victims at the time.

Raul Hilberg

Two Thousand Years of Jewish Appeasement

In a destruction process the perpetrators do not play the only role; the process is shaped by the victims too. It is the interaction of perpetrators and victims that is "fate." We must therefore discuss the reactions of the Jewish community and analyze the role of the Jews in their own destruction.

When confronted by a force, a group can react in five ways: by resistance, by an attempt to alleviate or nullify the threat (the undoing reaction), by evasion, by paralysis, or by compliance. Let us consider each in turn.

The reaction pattern of the Jews is characterized by almost complete lack of resistance. In marked contrast to German propaganda, the documentary evidence of Jewish resistance, overt or submerged, is very slight. On a Europeanwide scale the Jews had no resistance organization, no blueprint for armed action, no plan even for psychological warfare. They were completely unprepared. In the words of Anti-Partisan Chief and Higher SS and Police Leader Russia Center von dem Bach, who observed Jews and killed them from 1941 to the end:

Thus the misfortunate came about. . . . I am the only living witness but I must say the truth. Contrary to the opinion of the National Socialists that the Jews were a highly organized group, the appalling fact was that they had no organization whatsoever. The mass of the

From Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3 vols. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), vol. 3, pp. 1030-1039. Copyright © by Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. The title "Two Thousand Years of Jewish Appeasement" is that of the editor and not of the author.

Jewish people were taken completely by surprise. They did not know at all what to do; they had no directives or slogans as to how they should act. That is the greatest lie of anti-Semitism because it gives the lie to the slogan that the Jews are conspiring to dominate the world and that they are so highly organized. In reality they had no organization of their own at all, not even an information service. If they had had some sort of organization, these people could have been saved by the millions; but instead they were taken completely by surprise. Never before has a people gone as unsuspectingly to its disaster. Nothing was prepared. Absolutely nothing. It was not so, as the anti-Semites say, that they were friendly to the Soviets. That is the most appalling misconception of all. The Jews in the old Poland, who were never communistic in their sympathies, were, throughout the area of the Bug eastward, more afraid of Bolshevism than of the Nazis. This was insanity. They could have been saved. There were people among them who had much to lose, business people; they didn't want to leave. In addition there was love of home and their experience with pogroms in Russia. After the first anti-Jewish actions of the Germans, they thought now the wave was over and so they walked back to their undoing.

The Jews were not oriented toward resistance. Even those who contemplated a resort to arms were given pause by the thought that for a limited success of a handful, the multitude would suffer the consequences. Outbreaks of resistance were consequently infrequent, and almost always they were local occurrences that transpired at the last moment. Measured in German casualties, Jewish armed opposition shrinks into insignificance. The most important engagement was fought in the Warsaw ghetto (sixteen dead and eighty-five wounded on the German side, including collaborators). Following the breakout from the Sobibór camp, there was a count of nine SS men killed, one missing, one wounded, and two collaborators killed. In Galicia sporadic resistance resulted in losses also to SS and Police Leader Katzmann (eight dead, twelve wounded). In addition, there were clashes between Jewish partisans and German forces in other parts of the east, and occasional acts of resistance by small groups and individuals in ghettos and killing centers. It is doubtful that the Germans and their collaborators lost more than a few hundred men, dead and wounded, in the course of the destruction process. The number of men who dropped out because of disease, nervous breakdowns, or court martial proceedings was probably greater. The Jewish resistance effort could not seriously impede or retard the progress of destructive operations. The

Germans brushed that resistance aside as a minor obstacle, and in the totality of the destruction process it was of no consequence.

The second reaction was an attempt to avert the full force of German measures. The most common means of pursuing this aim were written and oral appeals. By pleading with the oppressor, the Jews sought to transfer the struggle from a physical to an intellectual and moral plane. If only the fate of the Jews could be resolved with arguments rather than with physical resources and physical combat — so Jewry reasoned — there would be nothing to fear. . . .

There was yet another way in which the Jews tried to avoid disaster. They anticipated German wishes, or divined German orders, or attempted to be useful in serving German needs. A Jewish council in Kislovodsk (Caucasus), acting with full awareness of the German threat, confiscated all Jewish valuables, including gold, silver, carpets, and clothing, and handed the property to the German Commander. The council in Šiauliai (Lithuania) had been asked three times whether any births had occurred in the ghetto and, each time it had replied in the negative. At one point, however, the council was confronted with twenty pregnancies. It decided to use persuasion and, if need be, threats on the women to submit to abortions. One woman was in her eighth month. The council decided that in this case a doctor would induce premature birth and that a nurse would kill the child. The nurse would be told to proceed in such a way that she would not know the nature of her act.

The most important mode of anticipatory action was the widespread effort, particularly in Eastern Europe, to seek salvation through labor. Indeed, the records of several ghettos reveal an upward curve of employment and output. The zeal with which the Jews applied themselves to the German war effort accentuated the differences of interests that paired industry and armament inspectorates against the SS and Police, but the Germans were resolving their conflicts to the detriment of the Jews. Generally, Jewish production did not rise fast enough or high enough to support the entire community. In the balance of payments of many an East European ghetto, the gap between income and subsistence living could not be bridged with limited outside relief or finite sales of personal belongings. Starvation was increasing, and the death rate began to rise. The clock was winding down even as German deportation experts were appearing at the ghetto gates. Ultimately, "productivization" did not save the ghettos. The Germans deported the

unemployed, the sick, the old, the children. Then they made distinctions between less essential and more essential labor. In the final reckoning, all of Jewish labor was still Jewish.

The Jewish dedication to work was based on a calculation that liberation might come in time. To hold on was the essential consideration also of appeals and the many forms of Jewish "self-help," from the elaborate social services in the ghetto communities to the primitive "organization" in the killing centers. The Jews could not hold on; they could not survive by appealing.

The basic reactions to force are fundamentally different from each other. Resistance is opposition to the perpetrator. Nullification or alleviation is opposition to the administrative enactment. In the third reaction, evasion, the victim tries to remove himself from the effects of force by fleeing or hiding. The phenomenon of flight is more difficult to analyze. . . .

We know that only a few thousand Jews escaped from the ghettos of Poland and Russia; that only a few hundred Jews hid out in the large cities of Berlin, Vienna, and Warsaw; that only a handful of Jews escaped from camps. Von dem Bach mentions that in Russia there was an unguarded escape route to the Pripet Marshes, but few Jews availed themselves of the opportunity. In the main, the Jews looked upon flight with a sense of futility. The great majority of those who did not escape early did not escape at all.

There were instances when in the mind of the victim the difficulties of resistance, undoing, or evasion were just as great as the problem of automatic compliance. In such instances the futility of all alternatives became utterly clear, and the victim was paralyzed. Paralysis occurred only in moments of crisis. During ghetto-clearing operations, many Jewish families were unable to fight, unable to petition, unable to flee, and also unable to move to the concentration point to get it over with. They waited for the raiding parties in their homes, frozen and helpless. Sometimes the same paralytic reaction struck Jews who walked up to a killing site and for the first time gazed into a mass grave half-filled with the bodies of those who had preceded them.

The fifth reaction was automatic compliance. To assess the administrative significance of that cooperation, one must view the destruction process as a composite of two kinds of German measures: those that perpetrated something upon the Jews and involved only action by Germans, such as the drafting of decrees, the running of deportation trains,

shooting, or gassing, and those that required the Jews to do something, for instance, the decrees or orders requiring them to register their property, obtain identification papers, report at a designated place for labor or deportation or shooting, submit lists of persons, pay fines, deliver up property, publish German instructions, dig their own graves, and so on. A large component of the entire process depended on Jewish participation — the simple acts of individuals as well as organized activity in councils. . . .

Not all Jewish cooperation was purely reflexive observance of German instructions, nor was all of it the last act of emaciated, forsaken people. There was also an institutional compliance by Jewish councils employing assistants and clerks, experts and specialists. During the concentration stage the councils conveyed German demands to the Jewish population and placed Jewish resources into German hands, thereby increasing the leverage of the perpetrator in significant ways. The German administration did not have a special budget for destruction, and in the occupied countries it was not abundantly staffed. By and large, it did not finance ghetto walls, did not keep order in ghetto streets, and did not make up deportation lists. German supervisors turned to Jewish councils for information, money, labor, or police, and the councils provided them with these means every day of the week. The importance of this Jewish role was not overlooked by German control organs. On one occasion a German official emphatically urged that "the authority of the Jewish council be upheld and strengthened under all circumstances."

Members of the Jewish councils were genuine if not always representative Jewish leaders who strove to protect the Jewish community from the most severe exactions and impositions and who tried to normalize Jewish life under the most adverse conditions. Paradoxically, these very attributes were being exploited by the Germans against the Jewish victims.

The fact that so many of the council members had roots in the Jewish community or had been identified from prewar days with its concerns gave them a dual status. They were officiating with the authority conferred upon them by the Germans but also with the authenticity they derived from Jewry. Day by day they were reliable agents in the eyes of the German perpetrators while still retaining the trust of Jews. The contradiction became sharper and sharper even as they kept on appealing, to the Germans for relief, to the Jews for acquiescence.

Similarly, when the councils endeavored to obtain concessions, they made a subtle payment. Placing themselves into a situation of having to wait for German decisions, they increased not only their own subservience but also that of the entire community, which perforce was waiting as well.

The councils could not subvert the continuing process of constriction and annihilation. The ghetto as a whole was a German creation. Everything that was designed to maintain its viability was simultaneously promoting a German goal. The Germans were consequently aided not only by Jewish enforcement agencies but also by the community's factories, dispensaries, and soup kitchens. Jewish efficiency in allocating space or in distributing rations was an extension of German effectiveness, Jewish rigor in taxation or labor utilization was a reinforcement of German stringency, even Jewish incorruptibility could be a tool of German administration. In short, the Jewish councils were assisting the Germans with their good qualities as well as their bad, and the very best accomplishments of a Jewish bureaucracy were ultimately appropriated by the Germans for the all-consuming destruction process.

If we should now review the Jewish reaction pattern, we would see its two salient features as a posture of appeals alternating with compliance. What accounts for this combination? What factors gave rise to it? The Jews attempted to tame the Germans as one would attempt to tame a wild beast. They avoided "provocations" and complied instantly with decrees and orders. They hoped that somehow the German drive would spend itself. This hope was founded in a 2,000-year-old experience. In exile the Jews had always been a minority, always in danger, but they had learned that they could avert or survive destruction by placating and appeasing their enemies. Even in ancient Persia an appeal by Queen Esther was more effective than the mobilization of an army. Armed resistance in the face of overwhelming force could end only in disaster.

Thus over a period of centuries the Jews had learned that in order to survive they had to refrain from resistance. Time and again they were attacked. They endured the Crusades, the Cossack uprisings, and the czarist persecution. There were many casualties in these times of stress, but always the Jewish community emerged once again like a rock from a receding tidal wave. The Jews had never really been annihilated. After surveying the damage, the survivors had always proclaimed in affirmation of their strategy the triumphant slogan, "The Jewish

people lives [*Am Israel Chai*]." This experience was so ingrained in the Jewish consciousness as to achieve the force of law. The Jewish people could not be annihilated.

Only in 1942, 1943, and 1944 did the Jewish leadership realize that, unlike the pogroms of past centuries, the modern machinelike destruction process would engulf European Jewry. But the realization came too late. A 2,000-year-old lesson could not be unlearned; the Jews could not make the switch. They were helpless.

Hannah Arendt

The Failure of Jewish Leadership

As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution. He did encounter one exception, however, which he mentioned several times, and which must have made a deep impression on him. This happened in Hungary when he was negotiating with Dr. Kastner over Himmler's offer to release one million Jews in exchange for ten thousand trucks. Kastner,¹ apparently emboldened by the new turn of affairs, had asked Eichmann to stop "the death mills at Auschwitz," and Eichmann had answered that he would do it "with the greatest pleasure" (*herzlich gern*) but that, alas, it was outside his competence and outside the competence of his superiors — as indeed it was. Of course, he did not expect the Jews to share the general enthusiasm over their destruction, but he did expect more than compliance, he expected — and received, to a truly extraordinary degree — their cooperation. This was "of course the very cornerstone" of everything he did, as it had been the very cornerstone of his activities in Vienna. Without Jewish help in administrative and police

From *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt. Copyright © 1963, 1964, by Hannah Arendt. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

¹Rudolf Kastner (Reszoe Kasztner), a Zionist leader in Hungary. See Part V. — Ed.

work — the final rounding up of Jews in Berlin was, as I have mentioned, done entirely by Jewish police — there would have been either complete chaos or an impossibly severe drain on German manpower. ("There can be no doubt that, without the cooperation of the victims, it would hardly have been possible for a few thousand people, most of whom, moreover, worked in offices, to liquidate many hundreds of thousands of other people. . . . Over the whole way to their deaths the Polish Jews got to see hardly more than a handful of Germans." Thus R. Pendorf . . . To an even greater extent this applies to those Jews who were transported to Poland to find their deaths there.) Hence, the establishing of Quisling governments in occupied territories was always accompanied by the organization of a central Jewish office, and, as we shall see later, where the Nazis did not succeed in setting up a puppet government, they also failed to enlist the cooperation of the Jews. But whereas the members of the Quisling governments were usually taken from the opposition parties, the members of the Jewish Councils were as a rule the locally recognized Jewish leaders, to whom the Nazis gave enormous powers — until they, too, were deported, to Theresienstadt or Bergen-Belsen, if they happened to be from Central or Western Europe, to Auschwitz if they were from an Eastern European community.

To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story. It had been known about before, but it has now been exposed for the first time in all its pathetic and sordid detail by Raul Hilberg [in his] standard work *The Destruction of the European Jews*. . . . In the matter of cooperation, there was no distinction between the highly assimilated Jewish communities of Central and Western Europe and the Yiddish-speaking masses of the East. In Amsterdam as in Warsaw, in Berlin as in Budapest, Jewish officials could be trusted to compile the lists of persons and of their property, to secure money from the deportees to defray the expenses of their deportation and extermination, to keep track of vacated apartments, to supply police forces to help seize Jews and get them on trains, until, as a last gesture, they handed over the assets of the Jewish community in good order for final confiscation. They distributed the Yellow Star badges, and sometimes, as in Warsaw, "the sale of the armbands became a regular business; there were ordinary armbands of cloth and fancy plastic armbands which were washable." In the Nazi-inspired, but not Nazi-dictated, manifestoes they