

**THE HOLOCAUST
IN HISTORY**

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A MERIDIAN BOOK

1. INTRODUCTION

THE HOLOCAUST, the systematic mass murder of European Jewry by the Nazis, sits uneasily in the history of our times. How is this ghastly event to be recorded? There is no dispute about personal memoirs—valued by all serious students of the subject as a message from a world that most of us scarcely imagine. But what about surveys of the modern era or the Hitler era? General histories do not seem to agree upon the place of the Holocaust as they do, for example, about the French Revolution or the First World War. In one traditional view, the Holocaust falls somehow outside history by virtue of its supreme importance—and hence it is held not subject to the wide-ranging investigation, discussion, and debate carried on with other aspects of the recent past. Close scholarly attention, it is feared, might diminish the horror evoked by the event, or lessen the respect accorded the most traumatic experience of the Jewish people in living memory. A related apprehension is that the dispassionate rethinking of some traditional notions of Nazism and the Holocaust might end up by trivializing the fundamentally evil nature of the regime. To others, the Holocaust remains an embarrassment, either because of a lingering antipathy toward the victims or because of an assumption that extensive historical investigation might suggest awkward particularist commitments. For both groups, academic discussion of the Holocaust has been uncomfortable. In the past, as a result, writers who examined the 1930s and 1940s

often ignored the subject, gave it only a fleeting glance, or adopted a sacral tone—"consecrating the experience," as one writer has said, suggesting that the issue was unapproachable for ordinary analysts of the human record.¹

My own sense is that things are changing, and the purpose of this book is to indicate how. Since the beginning of the 1960s, we have seen extensive historical investigation of the Holocaust and an increasing volume of serious publications treating it from every possible angle. The concerns and the disposition of writers in the post-war decade and a half remain intact, but are challenged now by a growing curiosity about the most venerable of historical questions: How could such a thing have happened? The following chapters review the very considerable historical literature on the Holocaust written in Western countries in the past two decades or so. Implicitly, they also chart a changed consciousness about the Holocaust, in which inhibitions to dispassionate historical discussion are gradually losing force.

Before beginning, a word about the spirit of this inquiry. As suggested, an important body of opinion opposes what might be called the "normalization" of the study of the Holocaust—its integration into the mode of discourse and explanation commonly used by practitioners of the historian's craft. "The Holocaust refuses to go the way of most history," writes Nora Levin, the author of a survey of the subject, "not only because of the magnitude of the destruction—the murder of six million Jews—but because the events surrounding it are in a very real sense incomprehensible. No one altogether understands how mass murder on such a scale could have happened or could have been allowed to happen. The accumulation of facts does not yield this understanding; indeed, comprehensibility may never be possible." In Levin's view, an impenetrable barrier will always separate the historian from the subject. "Ordinary human beings simply cannot rethink themselves into such a world and ordinary ways to achieve empathy fail, for all of the recognizable attributes of human reaction are balked at the Nazi divide. The world of Auschwitz was, in truth, another planet."²

Nobel Prize-winning novelist and poet Elie Wiesel returns again and again to these obstacles to understanding: "Auschwitz defies imagination and perception; it submits only to memory. . . . Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent

can comprehend." Holocaust writing, he feels, should dwell upon these limitations. "I write to denounce writing. I tell of the impossibility one stumbles upon in trying to tell the tale." Wiesel's self-proclaimed task has been a literary homage to those who were murdered. And from this point of view, much depends upon how worthy is the author in question. "Any writer may, if he so chooses, deal with the subject of the Holocaust," he complains in a recent article. His apparent conclusion: only the survivors, or perhaps those who are totally honest with themselves about the limitations of their powers, had better try.³

Wiesel is primarily concerned with artistic modes. Similar criticism has, however, been applied to scholarly discussion. Indeed, the careful qualification and guarded language that one associates with academic writing is sometimes held to be singularly inappropriate to describe the Holocaust.⁴ Three kinds of concerns, I think, have prompted this apprehension. First, there is the feeling that the work of historians is necessarily *incomplete*, omitting vital aspects of suffering and criminality, and hence ringing false as a portrayal of what actually happened. Second, there is the fear that *inaccuracies*, however minor, will inevitably poison such accounts and that the parade of scholarly apparatus will validate a historical assessment that is flawed as a representation of the past. Third, there is anxiety that any *revision* of traditional interpretations of Nazism or the assault on European Jewry will open the door to apologists for the Third Reich, trivializing the evil nature of the regime. Survivors especially, I think, can feel violated by many historians' efforts and are far more comfortable with acts of commemoration and the compilation of eye-witness testimony.

The term *Holocaust*, widely used only since the 1960s, may originally have reflected such preoccupations and serves now to separate this particular massacre from other historical instances of genocide.⁵ *Holokaustos*, we are reminded, comes from the third century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament, signifying "the burnt sacrificial offering dedicated *exclusively* to God."⁶ As such, the designation of the massacre of European Jewry connoted an event of theological significance, and perhaps as well an event whose mysteries were not meant to be understood. In addition, *Holocaust* may have indicated a preference to focus upon recounting the experience of the martyred victims, rather than the victimizers. *Holo-*

caust, it has been suggested, is a nonspecific term that implies to most people a bolt from the blue—like an earthquake or a flood—rather than a deliberate, criminal act. It does not suggest perpetrators, and like the Nazis' own designation, *Final Solution*, may easily lend itself to abuse by misappropriation.

In this respect, it is well to remember how recent is the beginning of professional study of the Holocaust and how short a period of time the enterprise has had to establish itself. Up to the time of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, in 1961, there was relatively little discussion of the massacre of European Jewry. At Nuremberg, immediately after the war, crimes against the Jews were part of the proceedings conducted by the International Military Tribunal, but such crimes never assumed a prominent place. The most important Nazis who directed the Final Solution were either dead—Hitler, Heydrich, Himmler—or missing, or were not deemed important enough to be judged as major criminals. Several of the most sinister Nazi murderers were tried and executed subsequently—including Otto Ohlendorf, head of a murderous team of Einsatzgruppen that shot masses of people in the Soviet Union; Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz death camp (and who appeared at Nuremberg as a defense witness); and Dieter Wisliceny, Eichmann's deputy, responsible for the deportations from Slovakia and Greece. But these trials did not draw wide attention and were not the occasion for recounting the full history of mass murder. Two surveys did appear in the early 1950s—by Gerald Reitlinger in England and Léon Poliakov in France.⁷ Important collection of materials was also undertaken in those years, as was the establishment of institutes to house and study them. Little of this information reached the wider public, however, and historians outside a small circle of survivors tended to ignore the issue. Broadly speaking, general works scarcely mentioned the murder of European Jews, or did so in passing as one more atrocity in a particularly cruel war. This neglect prompted real fears among prominent Israelis that the Holocaust was being forgotten.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann, who was brought to Israel from Argentina after being abducted by Israeli agents, was meant to place the Holocaust in proper historical perspective. The proceedings were intended to be a grand summation of the persecution and murder of European Jews, along with the indictment of a principal per-

petrator.⁸ "We want the nations of the world to know," said David Ben Gurion, then Israeli prime minister. Also, he added, Israeli youngsters had to face the terrible events of the recent past. "It is necessary that our youth remember what happened to the Jewish people. We want them to know the most tragic facts in our history." The trial was not concerned with revenge, he insisted, but it was certainly preoccupied with establishing a place for the Holocaust in history.⁹

Since then, scholarship has proceeded apace, in this sense fully justifying the intentions of the Eichmann trial organizers. Based on a masterful reading of German documents, Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* appeared in 1961—a landmark synthesis that remains unsurpassed as a survey of the destruction process. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, originally an assessment of the trial for the *New Yorker*, prompted a debate in the historical literature that echoes to our own time. Dozens of scholars in Western countries set to work. Arthur Morse's *While Six Million Died*, published in 1967, was the first important study of American bystanders, beginning a major genre of historical analysis. Yad Vashem, the Israeli institute devoted to Holocaust research and commemoration, has organized a series of important conferences since 1968, the published volumes of which show a clear evolution in the direction of detached, professional analysis. The institute's annual, *Yad Vashem Studies*, has become a major repository of research that is drawn upon extensively in this book. In Germany, meanwhile, several important trials of concentration-camp war criminals brought the Jewish question once again to the German public, including a group of historians too young to have been actively involved during the period of the Third Reich. Rolf Hochhuth's controversial play about Pius XII, *Der Stellvertreter (The Deputy)*, presented the issue to German audiences in the early 1960s. Through the Munich-based Institut für Zeitgeschichte, and its respected quarterly periodical, their work became known to a wide professional audience. An international symposium on the origins of the Final Solution was held in Stuttgart in 1984, bringing to the surface disputes that have their counterpart in other issues concerning Nazi Germany. We now have a vast literature on the Holocaust as a result of this scholarship. Indeed, the field is by now far too vast for any one scholar to master. A recent, select bibliography lists close to

two thousand book entries in many languages and notes over ten thousand publications on Auschwitz alone.¹⁰

Some words of the English historian Sir Herbert Butterfield help define the focus of the chapters that follow. Writing about the history of international conflict, Butterfield observed that historical understanding moved through two phases. The first, which he called "heroic," is formulated in the heat of battle; it has a primitive and simple shape, largely dwelling on moral issues associated with the cause of one or another of the belligerents. The second, which Butterfield referred to as "academic history," represents "a higher and riper stage of historiography," in which the structural features of the conflict are disengaged and the overall view is less one of melodrama than of tragedy.¹¹ To be sure, there are limits to the application of this model. The Holocaust was not an international conflict in any normal sense: it took place within the context of an international conflict, and to a real degree there was what Lucy Dawidowicz has called a "war against the Jews." But there was no war of the Jews against Nazism, save for the resistance of those targeted for murder. In most cases, this was a war of the doomed. The Holocaust is about murder, and no amount of imaginative reconstruction will ever change that fundamental reality. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which our view of the matter has altered, has become more shaded, and our vision has acquired greater complexity. Academic history in the past two decades or so has helped contribute to a deeper understanding.

This book looks back across this period of scholarly activity and attempts to summarize its findings for the general reader. But it also accepts and approves of what I see as the historical agenda of recent years—to apply the tools of historical, sociological, and political analysis to the events of the war years and to understand what happened to European Jewry as one would understand any other historical problem.

In rejecting many of the protests that have been made about the normalization of Holocaust scholarship, I want to insist upon the respect that has to be accorded many of the concerns I have noted. No amount of historical investigation should be permitted to detract from the awesome horror of these events, and no license for theorizing should inhibit the sense of limitation that all should have

when discussing conditions that are so utterly outside our experience. Those separated from these events—either by chronology or historical circumstance—can never penetrate their horrors or grasp their ultimate significance. In one sense, the Holocaust will forever be, as one literary analyst puts it, "unimaginable."¹² Yet as a thoughtful critic pointed out a few years ago, much the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about many other things as well.¹³ From the standpoint of theology, or even more humble ruminations on human nature, the systematic massacre of so many innocents is bound to escape understanding in some profound sense. So also do countless episodes of cruelty and destruction, however small or great their scale. Historians are used to tramping over their fields while suspending judgments on the fundamental human issues that are ultimately at stake. Once pointed in a scholarly direction most of us forge ahead, hoping to navigate safely using the customary tools of the trade. We simply do the best we can, knowing that our efforts are necessarily imperfect, incomplete, and inadequate.

With the passage of time and the fading of first-hand accounts, the inhibitions I have described will have less force. As Hilberg has suggested recently: "the era of researchers with personal experience of the period who could work with a sense of 'feel' for the document, is coming to an end."¹⁴ In time, as a result, the mystification will be dispelled and is bound to be replaced by the historical perspective.¹⁵ Doubtless some of the exercises that result will be misguided. But the alternative, silence, is surely a counsel of despair—yielding the field to falsification or to oblivion. Rather than denouncing this trend, it is perhaps better to look upon it as a challenge, following the Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua: "As the number of surviving eyewitnesses to the period diminishes, the more freely will human imagination range in its attempts to achieve understanding. All of this will have to be met in a spirit of patience and openness. The horror of the events and the sufferings of the victims will not rob the new attempts—including new emotional and moral judgments—of legitimacy. The freedom of man's spirit suffers no restriction. Hence we must be aware that further study is liable to inflict new pain and will sometimes require that generally accepted views, which, it seemed, were firmly and solidly established, be abandoned."¹⁶

said, might forever "baffle and terrify mankind" with "a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human spirit."¹ A closer look at assessments such as this will assist us in seeing the event in a broad historical perspective.

THE CENTRALITY OF ANTISEMITISM

Informed theories about the centrality of antisemitism in Nazism do not rest upon claims that anti-Jewish ideology was a predominantly German doctrine or a constant preoccupation of the leaders of the Third Reich. Research on the background to the Holocaust, indeed, has suggested the opposite. George Mosse pointed out long ago that if one were situated in Europe in the 1890s and asked to name the country most dangerous for the Jews, one might easily settle upon France. (Czarist Russia would also be a strong candidate.) Repeating the exercise in the early 1930s, Germany would be a much more likely prospect, but certainly not the only contender. Anticipating a great disaster for European Jewry in 1938, Vladimir Jabotinsky, leader of the right-wing Zionist Revisionists, called for mass evacuation. In his view, however, the source of the coming catastrophe was east European antisemitism, not that of the Nazis. The east European upheaval, he predicted, with Poland at the center, would far surpass what had already transpired in Hitler's Germany.²

Only a few decades before the Nazis, the map of European antisemitism looked quite different than in the 1930s or 1940s. There was certainly an antisemitic tide in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, as there was in other European countries, but one must be cautious in assessing its relative significance. Compared to Russia or Rumania, where Jews suffered extreme poverty, intense popular hostility, and public discrimination, Germany was a *Rechtsstaat*, according fundamental legal rights to Jews.³ There were no pogroms in the German Empire—the riotous outbreaks against Jews in which public authorities often failed to intervene or even assisted the violent assaults upon Jews and the destruction of their property. France, where there were pogroms at the end of the nineteenth century, became known to Jews elsewhere as the country of the Dreyfus affair and the home of very considerable popular

2. THE HOLOCAUST IN PERSPECTIVE

HISTORIANS STEEPED in the literature of Nazi antisemitism or Nazi policies during the Holocaust invariably feel in the grip of the most powerful of obsessions—different in kind from the hatreds and campaigns of persecution that punctuate the history of practically every era and civilization. Validating this perception, Holocaust specialists have presented a strong case for the "centrality" of antisemitism in Nazi ideology, or the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, even by the grim standards of twentieth-century massacres. At first encounter, these contentions do not sit well with the wider community of historians. Scholars often strain to justify their particular research commitments with claims that one or another patch of history deserves special attention and recognition. Indeed, students are frequently taught to begin their theses or research papers with some declaration of singularity. Most of us like to believe our subject is important, if not the most important, and the more deeply we examine a particular theme, the more we can be persuaded that it is truly "unique."

Yet there is substance to these arguments, which often began with the effort to make sense of preliminary findings. Isaac Deutscher, the biographer and admirer of Trotsky, a historian who certainly could not be accused of Jewish particularism, was among those who felt an "absolute uniqueness" to the Jewish catastrophe. Other massacres, he felt, had still some "human logic." This one, Deutscher

anti-Jewish feeling. In Alsace, formerly French and annexed to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, many local Jews extended their loyalty to the Kaiser at this time, abandoning attachments to their former country which they felt had betrayed them.⁴ In Habsburg Galicia, a major Jewish population center, the Jews eagerly referred to the Austrian kaiser in Yiddish as Froyim Yossel (Franz Josef), and they looked to Imperial Vienna for protection and favor. During the First World War, when German troops entered Polish territory heavily populated by Jews, they were sometimes welcomed as liberators by a Jewish populace eager to enjoy the benefits of German civilization.⁵

Historians no longer insist with such assurance, as they undoubtedly once did, on the importance of a "Jewish question" in Imperial Germany.⁶ The title of a book by Richard Levy, *The Downfall of the Antisemitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany*, tells at least part of the story: by the time of the Reichstag elections of 1898 these parties were running out of votes, numbers, money, and political energy.⁷ Divided within themselves, suffering badly from the effects of a "one-issue" strategy, they went into steep decline. In the end, according to Levy, such parties never amounted to much: between 1887 and 1912 representatives from this camp constituted only 2 percent of deputies who were reelected. Yet Levy would be the first to acknowledge that political parties were not the exclusive bearers of antisemitism. In a book on a related theme, Peter Pulzer noted that "the decline in the virulence of organized party antisemitism was matched by its increasing pervasion of social life, semipolitical bodies, and ideological and economic pressure groups."⁸ Opposition to Jews undoubtedly composed a low-grade consensus among many elements in German society at the time: this was especially the case among middle-class pressure groups such as the National Union of Commercial Employees, Pan-German associations, student fraternities, and the like. Shulamit Volkov has deemed antisemitism a "cultural code," a convenient abbreviation for a broad "cluster of ideas, values and norms" created in the first decade of the German Reich. This worldview opposed liberal, capitalist, democratic, and internationalist currents associated with the nineteenth-century emancipation of Jews. From the turn of the century, as a result, "antisemitism was professed by all groups and associations that propagated militant nationalism, imperial expansion, racism,

anti-socialism, militarism, and support for a strong, authoritarian government."⁹

Specialists in the history of antisemitism would acknowledge that what has been said so far could apply also to many other countries and that Germany was certainly not unusual in the extent of anti-Jewish thought at the time of the First World War. Some have made a strong case, however, for the particular intensity of one current of antisemitism that emerged in the Wilhelmenian Reich. In a book first published in Hebrew in 1969, Uriel Tal argued that there were two strands of anti-Jewish thought in Germany, traditional and radical. The former was largely Christian in inspiration and rested its opposition to Jews essentially on their rejection of the religious faith of the majority; the latter was violently anti-Christian in inspiration, pagan in its models for the ideal society, and racist in its definitions of Jews. This second blend of antisemitism proved much more dynamic, virulent, and uncompromising. Relatively the weaker of the two before 1914, radical antisemitism grew much stronger in Germany and Austria in the postwar period, eventually with disastrous consequences.¹⁰ This version, of course, became the main-spring of the Nazis' anti-Jewish ideology.

Extensive investigation of the beginnings of Hitlerian and Nazi antisemitism has failed to uncover any particular originality in this field—any new twist or turn in thinking about Jews. Virtually every commentator concludes that, despite his efforts to portray himself as an independent thinker and creative genius, Hitler expressed nothing that was not part of the popular culture of Vienna or Munich in the period of his youth.¹¹ And the Nazi party, similarly, offered voters no anti-Jewish plank that could not be found elsewhere in political life. Beyond this, it does not seem that antisemitism was always salient even in the Nazi camp in the period before Hitler became German chancellor. Sarah Ann Gordon notes that "surprisingly few of the top Nazi leaders were virulent antisemites before 1925," with the exceptions being Hitler himself, Alfred Rosenberg, and Julius Streicher—the latter two never becoming decision makers of the first rank.¹² Neither Goebbels, Himmler, Göring, Frank, Hess, the Strasser brothers, nor even Adolf Eichmann seems to have joined the Nazis because of antisemitism. Antisemitism was clearly a distinguishing feature of the party in the mid-1920s, and by the time Hitler made his political breakthrough in 1930, the Nazis were

the most enthusiastic exponents of anti-Jewish ideology in electoral politics. But it is difficult to say how important it was for members of the party, or for their increasingly powerful following.¹³

After a careful reexamination of autobiographical statements written by 581 early Nazis and originally collected by the sociologist Theodor Abel, Peter Merkl was struck by "how little the Nazi movement was motivated by shared, constructive goals of any kind"—even antisemitic ones. A third of the sample showed no evidence of prejudice, and nearly half seemed fairly uninterested in Jews. Thirteen percent were "paranoid" antisemites, prone to violence and political action against the Jews.¹⁴ Among voters, antisemitism is similarly less evident than one might expect as a basis for attraction to the Nazi cause. Notably, antisemitic propaganda did not do much for the party's popularity before 1930; nor, indeed, did every other effort to construct a broad, national movement. After the major success in the Reichstag elections in September of that year, when the Nazis won nearly 6.4 million votes (18.3 percent of the electorate), antisemitism played an uneven role. The Nazi leadership made a determined effort, at this point, to make the party *salonfähig*, or socially acceptable.¹⁵ At times this could mean toning down the obvious anti-Jewish preferences of Hitler or the Nazi leadership. For example, antisemitic expression seems to have been a positive liability among big businessmen, the very group the Nazis were eagerly courting in the period immediately before Hitler's seizure of power.¹⁶ In many localities, on the other hand, hatred of Jews was shouted from the rooftops because it was deemed politically advantageous. Looking at Lower Saxony during the *Kampfzeit*, the years of struggle before Hitler took power, Jeremy Noakes observed the very limited appeal of antisemitism among a population that was far more interested in economic and political matters. Studying Bavaria in the same period, Geoffrey Pridham felt that aggressive and "ideological" antisemitism was far stronger among party activists than among voters.¹⁷ Both, I think, would agree with William Sheridan Allen, who concluded in an examination of one town in Lower Saxony that residents "were drawn to antisemitism because they were drawn to Nazism, and not the other way around."¹⁸ Reviewing the literature on several localities in a substantial study of voting patterns, Richard Hamilton concludes that political opportunism took command. "If antisemitism

was not a viable theme in a given area, it was played down or abandoned. If it was viable, it was given considerable play."¹⁹

HITLER'S ANTISEMITISM

Given the foregoing, it is reasonable to ask in what way antisemitism may be seen as "central" to Nazism. The key, I think, lies with Hitler himself. About the centrality of anti-Jewish commitment in his own worldview, there seems little doubt. The Jews not only appear in virtually everything that ever concerned Hitler, but are at the very basis of his conception of the historical process—the idea of struggle. Adopting the crudest perversion of the familiar Darwinian view, Hitler saw history as a great arena in which peoples forever engaged in ruthless competition. These confrontations were not limited, as with sporting contests or the highly ritualized warfare of the eighteenth century. Nations, like individuals, Hitler believed, had to struggle desperately for their very existence. "The idea of struggle is as old as life itself," he said in a 1928 speech, "for life is only preserved because other living things perish through struggle. . . . In this struggle the stronger, the more able, win, while the less able, the weak, lose. Struggle is the father of all things. . . . It is not by the principles of humanity that man lives or is able to preserve himself above the animal world, but solely by means of the most brutal struggle."²⁰ "Ultimately this struggle, which is often so hard, kills all pity," Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, the book that was supposed to describe his personal odyssey as well as that of his people. "Our own painful struggle for existence destroys our feeling for the misery of those who have remained behind."²¹

Hitler claimed to have first discovered the Jews in Vienna, where he lived for five years before the First World War. In the pages of *Mein Kampf* he presented this discovery as an earth-shattering revelation. His eyes were opened to Marxism and Jewry, "whose terrible importance for the German people" he previously did not understand. "In this period there took shape within me a world picture and a philosophy which became the granite foundation of all my acts. In addition to what I then created, I have had to learn little; and I have had to alter nothing."²²

Hitler consistently portrayed Jews as the most determined and

sinister enemies of the Germans and all other nations as well. Jews constantly undermined a people's capacity for struggle, weakened and subverted its racial purity, poisoned its institutions, and corrupted its positive qualities. The Jews themselves were not a race, but an antirace; they had no culture of their own, but purveyed instead such doctrines as democracy or parliamentarianism which perverted or degenerated previously sound societies. Jews were continually mingling with other cultures, seeking to dissolve their structures and their institutions. Marxism was but one additional means by which Jewry conducted its relentless assault upon the societies and peoples of the world. Capitalism was another. In a world dominated by struggle, the Jews could be fendishly successful and were a perpetual threat to the existence of all healthy societies.

Jews posed a particular danger to the German people, for whom Hitler claimed to be a prophetic spokesman. Indeed, as he ex-coriated German society and its institutions during the *Kampfzeit*, Hitler associated the degeneration of his country with the triumph of Jewry. "In Germany today," he wrote in 1928, "German interests are no longer decisive but rather Jewish interests."²³ Undermined and weakened by the Jews at home, Germany at the same time confronted world Jewry abroad. Committed in the long run to securing *Lebensraum*, or living space in the east, Germans were locked in an uncompromising conflict with Bolshevism, itself a Jewish invention. Jewry, Hitler believed, "has taken over the leadership of all areas of Russian life with the Bolshevik revolution." What emerged from that upheaval was a regime that had a single aim: "to carry over the Bolshevik poisoning to Germany."²⁴ Finally, according to Hitler, the situation was desperate. Germany was sunk in decay and decadence. Jewry had triumphed in 1918, with the defeat of the Wilhelmenian Reich, and was closing in for the kill. To do nothing would be to assure catastrophe. "The German people is today attacked by a pack of booty-hungry enemies from within and without. The continuation of this state of affairs is our death."²⁵

Historians have made various attempts to make sense of this torrent of hatred and to answer the most puzzling of questions: Why the Jews? Eberhard Jäckel, the editor of Hitler's writings and speeches, sees the Führer's anti-Jewish obsession in the perspective of the rest of his worldview. According to Jäckel, Hitler identified three factors that were essential to a people's "racial value"—its

sense of itself, its form of leadership, and its capacity to make war. These three elements—translated into nationalism, the Führer principle, and militarism—wove their way into Hitler's thought and appear whenever he estimated a people's ability to conduct the incapable struggle for existence. *Mein Kampf*, according to Jäckel, rails against the three opposites of these qualities—internationalism, democracy, and pacifism. Hitler's electrifying discovery, Jäckel says, was that "the originators and bearers of all three counterpositions are the Jews." Bringing these ideas together in his unpublished volume of 1928, known as his *Secret Book*, Hitler "established for the first time a logical link between his foreign policy conception and his antisemitism. They were synthesized in his view of history. With this, Hitler's *Weltanschauung* had finally achieved the kind of consistency for which he had groped for a long time."²⁶ Jäckel goes on to see an inherent logic of massacre—a "blueprint," as noted in the title of his book, only in this case a blueprint not for power but for mass murder: "He had to annihilate the Jews, thus restoring the meaning of history, and with the thus restored, nature-intended struggle for existence, he at the same time had to conquer new living space for the German people. Each of these tasks was inextricably linked to the other; indeed, they were the mutually necessary preconditions for each other. Unless the Jews were annihilated there would very soon no longer be any struggle for living space, nor therefore any culture, and consequently nations would die out; not just the German nation, but ultimately all nations. But if, on the other hand, the German people failed to conquer new living space, it would die out because of that and the Jews would triumph."²⁷

Other historians look at the entire body of Nazi ideology, attempting to place Hitlerian antisemitism in the wider framework of Nazi social thought on a variety of issues. Drawing upon the earlier work of the German intellectual historian Ernst Nolte, Otto Dov Kulka sees an assault by National Socialism upon "the very roots of Western civilisation, its basic values and moral foundations." As such, the Nazi counterrevolution was "a revolt against the all-embracing idea of the unity of the human race." "In this context, Judaism was conceived as the historical source and the continuous driving force of this idea, which was then expanded in the course of universal history through Christianity and later in the democratic and socialist systems."²⁸

Still other historians have attempted to root Hitler's anti-Jewish obsessions within his own psychology, often seeing in his personal traumas the basis for his subsequent statecraft and remarkable appeal to the German people. In the view of Rudolph Binion, Hitler's poisoning in a mustard gas attack in 1918 was linked in his own mind with the painful events accompanying the death of his mother eleven years before, while she was being treated by a Jewish physician, Dr. Bloch.²⁹ Following his psychic upheaval of 1918, Hitler sought to relieve the earlier trauma, projecting his own guilt feelings for his mother's death upon the Jews. Hitler's subsequent career may be seen as an effort to contend with his painful past experiences by mass murder of the Jews and by territorial expansion at the expense of Soviet Russia. Germans followed Hitler, the argument goes, because his strategy promised to assuage their own national trauma—defeat in the Great War, a defeat that was never acknowledged or accepted.³⁰

Casting his net more widely, Robert Waite sifts Hitler's views on Jews and many other questions, offering what must be for the layman a dizzying array of Oedipal conflicts, projections, displacements, and other psychological mechanisms. Waite credits stories that Hitler may have believed in his own Jewish ancestry, seeing in this almost-forgotten aspect of the Führer's biography one powerful force pushing in the direction of genocide: "Since he never knew whether his own grandfather was Jewish, and no one could prove he was not, Hitler had to prove to himself beyond a shadow of a doubt that he could not possibly be 'corrupted' by Jewish blood. In order to convince himself that such a direct threat to his personal identity and life work was an impossibility, he became history's greatest scourge of the Jews."³¹

While impressed with the learning and ingenuity that have gone into analyses such as those of Binion and Waite, readers may nevertheless emerge from these analyses, like Alan Bullock, "in a state of suspended disbelief."³² Historians usually remain unconvinced about the workings of such mechanisms as "collective trauma," agreeing with Binion that such collective mental processes can be hard to perceive. Their effects are still harder to prove—at least to most historians' satisfaction. For related reasons, the sweeping explanations offered by Eberhard Jäckel, Ernst Nolte, or Dov Kulka may also be on too high a level of generalization to command uni-

versal agreement. These assessments tend to downplay the possibility that Hitlerian objectives evolved, that his attitudes may have shifted, and that the predisposition of the German population to follow this fanatic seems not always to have been constant. Most historians remain uncomfortable with contentions of ideological consistency or a "psychological continuum" lasting almost half a century. Further, it seems even more risky to apply such theories to an entire population—north and south, Catholic and Protestant, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, upper and lower class. Specialists in recording change, historians look for evidence of evolution or transformation, rather than their opposite. Also, being professional choosers of evidence, selecting some bits and pieces to relay to readers and rejecting others, historians are often suspicious about elaborate historical structures built upon an underpinning of quotations—aware that another selection could alter the balance or even send the entire framework crashing about its foundation.

Finally, historians usually prefer to focus on the way that Hitler's personality interacted with his environment. Presumably, Hitler could easily have remained a failed art student or a lonely, embittered antisemite without power or influence. In one particular social context, however, Hitler's narcissistic and paranoid characteristics became an especially potent mixture. As Fred Weinstein reminds us, although absorbed with his own personal strivings and obsessions, the Führer was able to address himself to real problems and real people. "Hitler's actions were oriented to reality, he promised solutions to real grievances, and he was highly admired for that reason."³³ Historians seek to understand that wider "reality" and to learn how Hitler could act so effectively in it.

Having said this, I think that even the most determined skeptic could draw two conclusions about the Nazi leader from what has been said. First, Hitler had an intense hatred of Jews, lasting his entire political career, seeing their very existence as a mortal threat to his geopolitical projects. Second, Hitler was the principal driving force of antisemitism in the Nazi movement from the earliest period, not only setting the ideological tone, but raising his intense personal antipathy to an affair of state. Hitler alone defined the Jewish menace with the authority, consistency, and ruthlessness needed to fix its place for the party and later the Reich.

Whether he had a "utopian project" of a Europe free of his Jewish

enemies, or a concrete genocidal goal, or just an ill-defined commitment against Jews, agreement is widespread that the Führer set the course.³⁴ Later in this book we explore decision making associated with the Holocaust and see how historians divide on the question of Hitler's role in this process. We also examine the place of various state agencies and the German population, and the involvement of collaborationist governments and peoples. For the present, however, we anticipate a conclusion that defines the centrality of antisemitism for Nazism, and by implication for the Third Reich. Antisemitism was central because Hitler determined that it should be so. Opposition to the Jews became a leitmotif of the regime, whatever the priority assigned to it in a tactical sense, because for Hitler ideological questions mattered and were treated with desperate seriousness. Beyond this, neither the existence of anti-Jewish traditions in Germany, the commitments of Nazi party leaders, nor the beliefs of the extensive Nazi following in the German population *required* the murder of the Jews. Put otherwise, antisemitism in Germany may have been a necessary condition for the Holocaust, but it was not a sufficient one. In the end it was Hitler, and his own determination to realize his antisemitic fantasies, that made the difference. The implication is summed up in the title of a popular article on a related theme: "No Hitler, No Holocaust."³⁵

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST

More problematic is the notion of the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust—a contention that requires careful definition. In one sense, of course, every historical event and every individual is unique, in that each is different from any other. Unlike social scientists, who search for generalities, historians are especially aware of such uniqueness, and indeed specialize in discerning those elements that make a particular event or society or individual unlike any other. Normally, their focus is on the particular rather than the general. Historians study a revolution, rather than revolutions; a war, rather than wars; and the Holocaust, rather than genocide. Naturally, historians have their ideas about the latter, but they do not usually earn their living by such pronouncements, and I venture to say that these are not the most valued exercises of historical scholars' time.

It is sometimes assumed that the contentions of historical uniqueness stake out some special claim for recognition of the Holocaust—a political or theological affirmation, rather than a historical evaluation. Reflecting on this problem, Geoff Eley feels that with the use of a particular terminology—*Holocaust*—he was being drawn into "an ontological statement about the Jewish predicament." "To insist upon the uniqueness of the event is a short step to insisting on the exclusiveness of interpretation which asserts an empathetic privilege and even a Jewish proprietorship in the subject."³⁶ Historians feel uncomfortable with the implicit charge set for them by philosopher Emil Fackenheim, for example, that they respond to the Holocaust "authentically" and that they acknowledge prior limitations on what they can and cannot explain.³⁷ Limitations there undoubtedly are, as every sensible person will acknowledge. To dwell on them is likely to paralyze the historian, however, and almost certainly will prescribe the historian's conclusions.

Another claim for historical uniqueness concentrates unduly, in my opinion, on one aspect of the massacre of European Jewry—the death camps. In the opinion of George Kren and Leon Rappoport, "the uniqueness of the Holocaust . . . stands out when the focus of inquiry is shifted from historical trends to the level of personal experience." Drawing upon the testimony of the survivors, they single out the netherworld of the camps as the basis for the singularity of the Holocaust. To them, the distinctive Holocaust theme is the removal of the camp experience from ordinary reality. Taking this as the essence of the Holocaust, these authors oppose studying it "in the cold light of normal history," feeling that in this way "there is no special challenge to critical inquiry" and that historians will consequently "conduct business as usual."³⁸

I have three objections to this line of argument. First, historical "business as usual" does no violence to the experience of the survivor and is no mean or idle pursuit. To the contrary, we owe it to survivors, and to ourselves, to conduct as objective and as thorough an inquiry as we can—along with whatever commemorative or philosophical reflections may be appropriate. Second, we know that while in general the Jewish experience of the camps was the worst of any group, and while Jews made up the overwhelming majority of those killed in the gas chambers, they were not alone in suffering these horrors. People from many groups and nations could be

found in the camps, and gassing also accounted for deaths among Gypsies, mentally ill Germans, Soviet prisoners of war, anti-Nazi Poles, and many others. Third, any overall assessment ought to encompass Jews who died in countless circumstances inside *and* outside the camps—each with its own private horror. It is clearly wrong to separate from the essence of the Holocaust those Jews who never survived long enough to reach the camps, or who were shot down by the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union, or who starved in the ghettos of eastern Europe, or who were wasted by disease because of malnutrition and neglect, or who were killed in reprisal in the west, or who died in any of the countless other, terrible ways—no less a part of the Holocaust because their final agonies do not meet some artificial standard of uniqueness.

Claiming uniqueness may, of course, simply be a way of asserting that the Holocaust was unprecedented. With this we are on more familiar historical terrain and closer to the kind of problem that historians are used to examining. After all, historians are supposed to have some idea how the events they describe compare with those that have gone before. To be sure, we are speaking in relative terms. No event occurs without antecedents, and few would assert that there were no preceding instances of massacre or anti-Jewish persecution that bear a relationship to the murder of European Jewry. The real question is: How much of a break with the past is this particular event?

Hitler's own words are sometimes adduced to demonstrate the filiation of the Holocaust with the massacre of Armenians by the Turkish government during the First World War. Before his military commanders, assembled at Obersalzberg on 22 August 1939, a few days before the German attack on Poland, Hitler urged the most savage treatment of the enemy. "I have placed my death-head formations in readiness . . . with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space [*Lebensraum*] that we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"³⁹ Hitler's bloodcurdling passage, originally relayed to the West by the American journalist Louis Lochner, is offered as evidence of the importance of precedent to the Nazi leader. Recent research suggests the authenticity of the quotation, which probably came to Lochner from the notes of

the army intelligence chief Wilhelm Canaris, relayed by former chief of staff General Ludwig Beck.⁴⁰ But the Führer's reference is hardly a convincing case for seeing the Holocaust as simply one more instance of escalating violence toward innocent people in the twentieth century.

No serious person could detract from the horrors of the slaughter of Armenians within the Turkish Empire, beginning in the years 1894–96, when beleaguered central authorities collided with an emergent Armenian nationalism and, reaching a genocidal climax in 1915, with deportations and killings apparently designed by the Young Turk government to remove the Armenian population from Turkish Armenia and Asia Minor. Observers from Britain and the United States were shocked not only by the brutality and scale of the massacres, but also by the appalling way in which communities were victimized throughout the whole of Anatolia. Arnold Toynbee, who assisted Viscount Bryce in preparing a massive report on the massacres in 1916, made the point that the deportations and killings, which often amounted to the same thing, were carried out according to a coordinated government plan. While there was considerable local variation in practice, and while some provincial governors were not ill disposed to the Armenians, the central authorities were "directly and personally responsible without exception, from the beginning to the end, for the gigantic crime which devastated the Near East in 1915."⁴¹

Killing on this scale, and with this apparent objective, was what the jurist Raphael Lemkin had in mind when he coined the term *genocide* in 1943, under the impact of news about the Nazis' murder of European Jews. As Yehuda Bauer has observed, Lemkin defined the term in two different ways—sometimes meaning the literal extermination of a people, but sometimes also suggesting that the assault could be gradual—"a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves," as sociologist Leo Kuper puts it.⁴² In the Armenian case, it is clearly the latter definition that applies. For however extensive the murder of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, and however thorough the work of the executioners in particular localities, killing was far from universal. Although downtrodden and oppressed as a community, the fact is that many thousands of Armenians sur-

vived *within* Turkey during the period of the massacres. Armenians continued to shelter in the Turkish capital of Istanbul throughout the war, and, as Toynbee himself estimated, possibly a third of the Armenian population escaped the carnage entirely, most of them fleeing abroad. When the bloodshed ended, and after the departure of several hundred thousand Armenian refugees who fled to Transcaucasia, Europe, and the Middle East, about 140,000 Armenians were still living in the Turkish republic, about a tenth of the prewar population.⁴³

Eugen Weber has suggested that technological capacity may have had something to do with the "incomplete" character of the Armenian genocide.⁴⁴ Descriptions of the slaughter make it plain that those in charge employed any and every means at their disposal, but that these were primitive indeed compared to the modern railway network, machine guns, and gas ovens used by the Nazis. Although Toynbee and others concluded that murder was directed from the center, in practice Armenians were butchered by the local gendarmerie, beaten to death by peasants, set upon by Kurdish tribesmen, left to die by roadsides, drowned in rivers, or abandoned in the desert. As Weber laconically observes, "these haphazard methods missed a lot of people." Beyond this, the primitive means available to the Young Turks also limited the horizon of what was conceivable in terms of mass murder. I have seen no indication, for example, that the Turks felt the killing ended prematurely or considered that their plans for the Armenians had failed. However atrocious the results, therefore, the killing process of 1915 lacked the machinelike, bureaucratic, regulated character as well as the Promethean ambition that we have come to associate with the Nazi Holocaust.

Another point about the attack on Armenians is that it occurred in the absence of the kind of all-consuming ideological obsession associated with the Nazis' derestation of Jews. As Bernard Lewis notes, the slaughter took place within the framework of genuine political conflict: "it was a struggle, however unequal, about real issues; it was never associated with demonic beliefs or the almost physical hatred which inspired and directed anti-Semitism in Europe and sometimes elsewhere."⁴⁵

Reflecting on the differences between the two instances of genocide, Yehuda Bauer suggests that the Armenian case is much more

akin to traditional massacres of helpless civilian populations in times past than it is to the attempted elimination of European Jews. Both involved stunning brutality, limitless cruelty, and disregard for human life. But, Bauer would add, the Nazi Holocaust went further. "What was unique in the Holocaust was the totality of its ideology and of its translation of abstract thought into planned, logically implemented total murder."⁴⁶ This is what Kren and Rappoport and others may have had in mind when they singled out the camp experience. For even if the camps did not encompass the whole of the Holocaust, they have been perceived as emblematic of the phenomenon as a whole. Reference to the camps may have significance as a way of evoking what are probably the most horrifying aspects of the destruction of European Jewry—the systematic dehumanization of the victims, the assembly-line process of mass murder, and the bureaucratic organization on a continental scale that brought people from every corner of Europe to be killed. These elements are certainly part of the Holocaust, and I would agree that they constitute part of its uniqueness.

It should be plain by now that uniqueness in the sense of being unprecedented does not refer to the numbers of people massacred. Massacre on the scale of the Holocaust would have been unthinkable in previous centuries, but not in our own. The twentieth century has seen a quantum leap in the numbers of people who fell victim to such man-made catastrophes as war and revolution, numbing those who assemble previously unheard-of statistics of the dead. In this gruesome context, the Jews have an important place, but not one that is unique. Some other instances of mass killing may illustrate the point. According to a recent investigation, Stalin's assault on the Soviet countryside during the 1930s took the lives of some 14.5 million—a ruthless attack on the peasantry associated with the collectivization of agriculture, and a deliberately caused "terror-famine," mainly in the Ukraine.⁴⁷ About the same time, Mussolini waged a murderous campaign in Ethiopia that involved the systematic use of mustard gas to kill masses of people; he was intending to replace the native population with Italian colonists. After the defeat of the German armies in eastern Europe in 1944 and 1945, some 12 million ethnic Germans were uprooted from parts of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Hundreds of thousands perished in the process. The

partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 precipitated the slaughter of close to a million persons in religious strife between Muslims and Hindus. As many as 3 million Bengalis may have been massacred in 1971, with the secession of the now-independent state of Bangladesh. And genocide in Kampuchea, ruled by a cruel and despotic revolutionary government in the 1970s, killed between 1 million and 2 million among the total population of only 7 million persons.⁴⁸

The Nazis murdered between 5 million and 6 million Jews during the Holocaust, two-thirds of European Jewry and about one-third of the entire Jewish people. But a staggering 55 million may have perished in all theaters during the Second World War—including some 20 million Soviet citizens, 15 million Chinese, 5 million Germans, and 3 million non-Jewish Poles. In what has been called “total war,” the lot of civilians was sometimes even worse than that of soldiers, and the proportion of noncombatants killed certainly surpasses by far that of the First World War. In all, some 18 million European civilians may have died as a result of famine, disease, persecution, and more conventional acts of war.⁴⁹

Awesome as they are, therefore, numbers do not in themselves prescribe the singularity of the Holocaust. But they provide a clue. For the *proportion* of European Jews killed during the Second World War, with roughly one of every three civilian deaths in Europe being that of a Jew, was undoubtedly greater than that of any other people, because of the Nazis’ policy toward them. Unlike the case with any other group, and unlike the massacres before or since, *every single one* of the millions of targeted Jews was to be murdered. Eradication was to be total. In principle, no Jew was to escape. In this important respect, the Nazis’ assault upon Jewry differed from the campaigns against other peoples and groups—Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, Poles, Ukrainians, and so on. Assaults on these people could indeed be murderous; their victims number in the millions, and their ashes mingle with those of the Jews in Auschwitz and many other camps across Europe. But Nazi ideology did not require their total disappearance. In this respect, the fate of the Jews was unique.

Consistent with the Nazis’ biological racism, each and every Jew was a threat, including the old, the ill, women, children, and even tiny infants. No Jewish community could be left in peace—at least,

not for long. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, intended to set in motion the Final Solution, the minutes noted 11 million European Jews.⁵⁰ The most ambitious task involved the millions of Jews of Poland and the Soviet Union, but the listeners were also told to prepare for eliminating Jews in such widely disparate places as Finland, Ireland, Turkey, and Switzerland, where the number of Jews was derisible. The smallest community mentioned was that of Albania, where the minutes noted a Jewish community of two hundred. So vital was this campaign that the Nazis even importuned their allies and client states to turn over Jews to be murdered. The destructive urge, moreover, was not a momentary spasm. It lasted as long as there were Jews to kill, despite important evidence of wavering within the Nazi hierarchy which I shall discuss in chapter 9. In the spring of 1944, when the end could reasonably be foreseen, Joseph Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry urged the press of the Third Reich to reiterate the official line: “In the case of the Jews there are not merely a few criminals (as in every other people), but all of Jewry rose from criminal roots, and in its very nature it is criminal. The Jews are no people like any other people, but a pseudo-people welded together by hereditary criminality. . . . The annihilation of Jewry is no loss to humanity, but just as useful as capital punishment or protective custody against other criminals.”⁵¹

TOWARD MASS MURDER

The Propaganda Ministry’s definition of the Jewish foe reflects the particular virulence of Hitlerian and Nazi antisemitism, according to which the Jews were demonized—presented not only as the mortal enemies of the Reich, but as an all-powerful, pervasive, biologically defined source of evil in the world. Eliminating the Jews, therefore, became a central commitment of Hitler’s regime, for which he demanded the total determination of his underlings. This became the hallmark of the massacre of European Jewry within the German bureaucracy. Officials all along the chain of command repeated that Jewish policy had the highest priority and required the most resolute fidelity to the principles of Nazism. From the Führer down, Nazis urged one another to be hard, unswerving, ruthless, determined. In a famous speech to his commanders in October

1943, SS boss Heinrich Himmler ridiculed the disposition to make exceptions: "I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people. This is one of those things that are easily said. 'The Jewish people is going to be annihilated,' says every party member. 'Sure, it's in our program, elimination of the Jews, annihilation—we'll take care of it.' And then they all come trudging, 80 million worthy Germans, and each has his one decent Jew. Sure, the others are swine, but this one is an A-1 Jew. Of all those who talk this way, not one has seen it happen, not one has been through it. Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out and—excepting cases of human weakness—to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory."⁵²

Such Nazi declarations carry the unmistakable overtones of Hitler's own obsession with Jews and his penchant for seeing the world in terms of apocalyptic confrontations. Totality was built into Hitlerian rhetoric, as J. P. Stern has described so well. In this as in so many other contexts, Hitler drew upon the "catastrophemindedness" of his culture and insisted that in accomplishing goals, customary human limits were meaningless. Even simple tasks or routine operations could be transformed into earthshaking necessities and decisive confrontations. Military chiefs labored painfully under these obsessions of their leader. Frequently Hitler's commanders protested to their Führer that particular military operations were beyond the capacity of the troops. To their dismay, Hitler usually replied by accusing them of faintheartedness or a lack of fidelity to National Socialism. Told that the Hermann Göring division could not cross the straits of Messina to the Italian mainland to face the Allied invasion of 1943, for example, the Führer burst into a characteristic rage: "It is not the ferries that are decisive. What is decisive is the Will!"⁵³ In the same way, having determined upon the elimination of Jews from the Reich, Hitler allowed no limits to the means necessary to achieve this "never-to-be-written page of glory."

One of the arguments of this book is that the distinctive elements of the Holocaust emerged during the campaign in the Soviet Union, in the second half of 1941, when a murderous Final Solution was extended to all Jews within the grasp of German forces. Up to that point there was no consistent, European-wide plan of action. In-

deed, Nazi persecution of the Jews followed an uneven path after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933.⁵⁴ From the start, there were two contradictory tendencies. Brown-shirted storm troopers and Nazi party activists lashed out at Jews on the local level, terrorizing and vandalizing Jews wherever they were to be found. On the other hand, more conservative elements in government circles and the bureaucracy preferred caution, worried that anti-Jewish actions might injure Germany's economic recovery and international reputation. Gradually, restraint got the upper hand, and persecution was directed from the center, with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 setting the legal framework and a campaign of "Aryanization" organizing the confiscation of Jewish property. Jews were removed from government service, from most professions, and pressured to leave Germany. In the second half of the 1930s, with economic recovery and with the regime more securely established politically, there was a new round of radicalization. Following the Nazi-sponsored riots of Kristallnacht in November 1938, the Nazis' objective for the Jews centered on emigration. Reinhard Heydrich and his SS police apparatus, operating under Himmler, were placed in charge. So it remained until the Barbarossa campaign. Up to Kristallnacht about 150,000 Jews emigrated, and another 150,000 managed to flee thereafter. Even after the outbreak of war Jews continued to leave, their numbers drastically reduced, of course, by the restrictive policies of receiving countries in the West. Murderous episodes were not uncommon throughout this period, and killing came easier to the Nazis once in occupation of Polish territory. When examined closely, even the two specific emigration schemes—the Nisko Project of 1939 and the Madagascar Plan of 1940—had a murderous dimension. But Jewish emigration still remained the long-term goal.

The momentous change that occurred in the latter part of 1941 was marked by the Nazis' decision to abandon emigration, which had previously defined the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." From this point, the Nazis were impatient. No longer did they say, as they had constantly repeated to one another when their Jewish policy seemed to be floundering, that the Final Solution would come eventually, at the end of the war. No longer did they anticipate that a peace treaty, to be signed with the vanquished enemies of the Reich, would define the terms of this solution in the form of a mass departure of Jews from the European continent. In a stunning volte-

face, Berlin ordered the SS to block all exits. On 23 October 1941, registering a new policy that had revolutionized Nazi policy toward the Jews, Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller passed along an order from Himmler: apart from a few exceptions judged to be in the German interest, no more Jews were to emigrate from anywhere in the Reich or occupied Europe. A few days earlier deportations from Germany to the east began. Within days, technical teams began work on the first two death camps, at Chelmno (Kulmhof) and Belzec. At the end of November, Heydrich sent invitations to Nazi Jewish experts across Europe to participate in a planning conference at Wannsee. Gassing of Jews started at Chelmno on 8 December. Planning everywhere speeded up. It was important now to work quickly, to finish the job before the fighting ceased. As Franz Rademacher of the German Foreign Office put it, "The Jewish Question must be resolved in the course of the war, for only so can it be solved without a worldwide outcry."⁵⁵ The Holocaust had begun.

This chain of events points to what I have defined as the essence of the Holocaust—that it targeted every living Jew for murder. Massacre, of course, was a familiar part of Nazi operations before the turning point in the autumn of 1941. The starvation of tens of thousands of Jews in Polish ghettos and the mass shootings conducted by killing squads that entered the Soviet Union following the Wehrmacht in the Barbarossa campaign suggest that war and occupation provided scope before this time for murderous solutions. But only when the gates of all occupied Europe were sealed, and when the destructive machine turned impatiently to the Jews of western as well as eastern Europe, did the Holocaust emerge as we understand it. Only then did the Nazis begin their compulsive hunt for Jews that designated the two hundred Jews of Albania as well as the 3 million of Poland. This was to be no ordinary massacre, therefore; nor even the greatest massacre that the world had ever seen. "No other government and no other regime would have the strength for such a global solution of this question," Joseph Goebbels wrote admiringly in his diary on 27 March 1942.⁵⁶

Having set their course on European-wide killing, the Nazis gave ample indication that the "radical solution" mentioned by Goebbels was no idle boast. Indeed, although the tide of war began to run against the Third Reich at the end of 1942, mass murder continued unabated, reaching a peak as the German war machine was being

battered to pieces. On 15 March 1943, for example, in the wake of the Stalingrad disaster, Hitler told his propaganda minister that he should not "cease or pause until no Jew is left anywhere in Germany."⁵⁷ To the end those who followed orders knew that there should be no slowing down of the engines of destruction, even though mass murder interfered with the conduct of the war, even though Jewish labor was a valuable commodity, and even though railway transport was needed for military uses. In the spring of 1944, for example, when the Reich was being pounded by Allied air forces, with the Red Army approaching and the Western powers poised to strike in France, the Germans found time to deport the 260 Jews of Crete, among tens of thousands of others. Together with Greek hostages and Italian prisoners of war they were placed on a ship in the Aegean which was then deliberately sunk. All of them drowned. Two weeks later, on the day the Allies landed in Norway, the Gestapo also bothered to round up 1,795 Jews on the island of Corfu, in the Adriatic. The deportees went directly to Auschwitz, where 1,500 were immediately gassed.⁵⁸ We usually know about such events, it should be noted, because the Nazis tell us about them, through the careful records that they kept, the punctilious bookkeeping of the Final Solution that chronicled details of the "radical solution." In contrast with other massacres of our time, including those that approach the scale of the Nazi Holocaust, the perpetrators convinced themselves that they were participating in a decisive, historic enterprise. Although their program was cloaked in secrecy, they ponderously counted the millions of dead, even assigning an SS actuary to the task in order to record a momentous accomplishment of the Nazi regime.

This view of the Holocaust stresses the evolution of Nazi policy, the radicalization of persecution to the point of European-wide mass murder, plotted in the latter part of 1941. As such, it suggests that both policy and the ideology behind it were subject to change, and were affected by a variety of circumstances that historians can identify and describe. Some of these, such as Hitler's sense of timing or the course of battle in the Russian campaign, had nothing to do with the Jews. Accepting the uniqueness of the Holocaust, this approach nevertheless insists upon it being a party of history, explicable as other aspects of Nazism and the Second World War. It may well be that on some profound level events such as the murder of

European Jewry will forever elude human understanding, as Isaac Deutscher suggested. But so it is also for much of recorded history, and for much of what we encounter in daily life. While historians cannot help but stand in horrified awe at the Final Solution, they have also tried to explain what brought it about. Their work on this particular issue is the subject to which we now turn.

3. THE FINAL SOLUTION

THE TERM *Final Solution* (*Endlösung*) first appeared as Nazi terminology, used by German themselves to designate their policy toward Jews. But what did the Nazis mean by these words? And what was the reality behind the phrase they employed? We must take care, in answering, lest we apply our own understanding, invariably associated with European-wide deportations and death camps. For while this undoubtedly *became* the Final Solution, this was not what those who first used these words with respect to Jews intended to convey. As we shall see, the stated objectives of the Third Reich changed over time. A look at how this particular term entered the Nazi lexicon raises the important question of why this occurred and how decisions on the Jews were made in the Third Reich.

As suggested in the last chapter, 1938 marked the intensification of persecution of Jews in Germany, with a new round of violence and a drive to expel Jews from the recently expanded Reich. In January 1939, the German Foreign Office told its representatives abroad about the "necessity for a radical solution of the Jewish question," referring also to the long-term goal as "an international solution." At the time, however, to quote the document further, "the ultimate aim of Germany's Jewish policy [was] the emigration of all Jews living on German territory."¹ By "international solution" the Foreign Office meant a negotiated settlement with receiving