PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN
CIVILIZATION SERIES

The Holocaust

PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

The Nazi slaughter of European Jewry during World War II, commonly referred to as the Holocaust,[1] occupies a special place in recent history. The genocide of innocents by one of the world's most advanced nations mocks our optimism about human reason and progress. It raises doubts about our ability to live together on the same planet with people of other cultures and persuasions.

Before it happened, virtually no one thought such a slaughter likely or even possible. To be sure, for many centuries antisemitism had been widespread throughout Europe. Devout Christians had viewed the Jews as Christ killers and deliberate misbelievers, but conversion was considered the inevitable cure, however long it might be delayed. Following the Jews' emancipation from discriminatory laws in the nineteenth century, the old religious antisemitism was joined by secular nationalisms that challenged the Jews' qualifications for membership in the nations in which they lived. Secular antisemites objected when the Jews, newly freed from persecution, often tied their destinies to growing capitalist economies, to liberal and socialist political movements, and to modernist trends in music, literature, architecture, and the theater. Success in banking, business, politics, and culture rendered the Jews far more visible than their small numbers ordinarily would have warranted. Europeans who felt threatened by modernity, and especially those who lost status as the result of economic changes and the spread of democracy, sometimes blamed the Jews for their plight.

Political parties that advocated antisemitism rarely won victories before 1914, but anti-Jewish attitudes became fairly commonplace in many European countries and in North America. If the "good" German (or Frenchman, or Russian) was viewed as pious, conservative, patriotic, and trusting, "the Jew" was stereotyped as materialistic, left-leaning, cosmopolitan, and manipulative. Antisemitism before World War I was more a war of words and a way to define one's own national identity ("we are the opposite of everything the Jews are") than a program for radical action. Antisemitic minorities that took the "Jewish problem" seriously advocated solving it by assimilating the Jews into the larger population or else repealing their emancipation and restoring the old discriminatory laws. Even the most inveterate antisemites, those who postulated a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the Western economy, recommended expulsion as a remedy of last resort. Only a few marginal figures hinted darkly at the need for still more radical policies. Hence antisemitism was a necessary precondition for the Holocaust but did not make it inevitable.

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[1] The word "Holocaust," first used in the late 1950s to refer to the Jewish tragedy during World War II, means "a burnt sacrifice offered solely to God." The problems with that meaning are obvious, but no other term has succeeded in taking its place. It has become a convention, and we will have to make do with it.

An ominous development of the late nineteenth century was the rise of modern biological racial "science." This now discredited offshoot of Darwinism assumed the primacy and permanence of inherited racial characteristics. Married to antisemitism, it could lead to the view that Jews were irredeemably depraved. But even those who played dangerously with racist ideas probably had no thought of racial annihilation, of genocide. When it became known that the Turks had committed genocide against the Armenians during World War I, Europeans dismissed it as the act of non-Christian barbarians acting in the fury of war. Western civilization, they supposed, had risen above such savagery.

After World War I, Europe experienced severe economic and political upheavals that intensified antisemitism almost everywhere. Added to the old charges that Jews were unpatriotic and greedy was the accusation that they were behind the spread of Communism. The participation of a few Jewish intellectuals and politicians in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and in Communist revolts elsewhere in Europe rendered this plausible. In Germany, Adolf Hitler, who had become a racial antisemite as a youth in his native Austria, made attacks on the Jews from the beginning of his career in the Nazi party in postwar Munich. Such attacks became staples of Nazi propaganda throughout his rise to power, but they were not employed consistently. In their efforts to be all things to all Germans, Hitler and his followers played up opposition to the Jews when it helped them, and played it down when it did not. As a result, no one could be sure what, if anything, the Nazis would do to the Jews in a future Third Reich. Germans who supported Hitler did so less because he was an antisemite than because he seemed to provide a clear alternative to the failed German republic and a means of defense against a threatening Communist movement. And yet, antisemitism was sufficiently commonplace in Germany to be at least acceptable to the 44 percent of Germans who voted for the Nazis in the last elections held before Hitler became dictator in 1933.

Once in power, the Nazis showed that they were sincere antisemites from the start. Jews were fired from government jobs, and were subjected to discriminatory laws, sporadic economic boycotts, and physical violence, all designed to make them despair of a future in Germany and leave the country. In 1935 the infamous Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of their German citizenship and outlawed sexual relations between Jews and "Aryans." The Nazis did not, however, press too hard against the Jews at first, fearing to upset the German economy, which was still recovering from the Great Depression, and worrying that fierce antisemitism would spawn costly foreign boycotts of German goods. Jews were sent to concentration camps only if they had been active in anti-Nazi political parties. As they moved toward the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Hitler and his lackeys were on their best behavior in order to make a positive impression on the world.

After 1936 the ever more self-confident Nazis increasingly cracked down on what was left of the Jewish community in Germany. The Third Reich was moving toward war and wanted to rid itself of its Jewish "fifth column" as soon as possible. More and more Jewish firms were "Aryanized," that is, expropriated by the state at a fraction of their value, and Jews were banned from most occupations. On the night of November 9–10, 1938, the Nazis used the excuse of a revenge attack by a Jewish teenager on a German diplomat in Paris to unleash a nationwide pogrom against the Jews. Named the "Crystal Night" for the broken windowglass that littered the streets and sidewalks in Jewish neighborhoods, it resulted in the burning of hundreds of synagogues and the beatings and arrests of thousands of Jews, several of whom were murdered. For the first time large numbers of Jews were sent indiscriminately to concentration camps and released only if they promised to leave Germany promptly. Most wanted desperately to go. The problem was finding countries that would admit them. Nazi confiscation of Jewish wealth meant that they would be penniless refugees seeking shelter in a world still sunk in depression. The democracies, preoccupied with their own problems, showed only limited understanding of the plight of the German Jews. Palestine was then a British mandate with an Arab majority that fiercely resisted any increase in the Jewish presence there. Never very particular about legalities, the Nazis resorted to "dumping" groups of Jews without papers across borders or aboard outward-bound ships. By the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, only just over half of the approximately 780,000 German and Austrian Jews had managed to emigrate from Hitler's expanding empire.

Emigration or else deportation remained the Nazi solutions to the "Jewish problem" throughout the first year of the War. Nazi officials discussed sending all of Europe's Jews to the French-held island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean or else to Siberia as soon as victory was won. Hence the large numbers of Polish Jews who had come under Nazi control were concentrated in cities and large towns, and subjected to brutal forced labor, but rarely anything worse. Jews in Hitler's enlarged "Greater Germany" began to be deported to ghettos in the part of occupied Poland not annexed to Germany or, in smaller numbers, to France for eventual deportation to distant dumping grounds. What ultimately made such deportations impossible was Hitler's failure to bring his war to a successful conclusion. Unable to defeat or reach a negotiated settlement with Great Britain, Hitler turned his armies against the Soviet Union in June 1941. At the same time the mass murder of Soviet Jews began.

As German forces swept across eastern Poland and into the USSR in the summer and fall of 1941, they were followed immediately by the mobile killing units called *Einsatzgruppen* (literally "emergency squads") under the command of the SS, which was the chief agency of terror throughout Nazi-dominated Europe. These units were assigned the task of liquidating all known or potential enemies of the Third Reich, especially political officials, Communist party functionaries, and Jews. Typically the *Einsatzgruppen* herded their victims into fields to be shot and buried in mass graves, as happened to 33,000, most of them Jews, at Babi Yar just outside Kiev on September 29–30, 1941. Occasionally the killers enlisted local antisemites to help do their work for them. Altogether the 3,000 members of the *Einsatzgruppen* were responsible for the deaths of between one and two million Jews.

Although the *Einsatzgruppen* continued their murderous sweeps on the eastern front into the later war years, they were never adequate to cope with all of the eleven million European Jews. As early as July 1941 Hermann Göring ordered Reinhard Heydrich, after Heinrich Himmler the most powerful SS leader, to formulate a "comprehensive solution to the Jewish problem." Heydrich's plan, approved in secrecy at a conference of top Nazi officials held in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee in January 1942, called for the SS to exterminate some Jews slowly, through forced labor, and the rest quickly in gas chambers. Under its terms, Jews from all over Nazi-occupied Europe continued to be concentrated in Eastern European cities where they were forced to work for the Germans in closed ghettos or at nearby labor camps. Those who were too young, too old, too weak, or simply not needed for work were sent to newly constructed extermination centers according to carefully calculated timetables corresponding to the camps' capacities.

The Jewish ghettos of such cities as Warsaw, Lodz, Vilna, and Minsk were hideously overcrowded places of starvation, backbreaking labor, disease, and death. Because they were imperfectly sealed off from the rest of the cities, smuggling alone made it possible for the inhabitants to survive. The exception, and then only in relative terms, was the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia, where prominent prisoners were held under model conditions to fool the International Red Cross and other inquisitive foreigners. The Nazis assigned control of the ghettos to Jewish Councils that governed with the aid of Jewish police. The Germans maintained overall control by executing uncooperative Jewish leaders and by holding the ghetto residents to "collective responsibility," shooting the family and friends of those who resisted or escaped. Only rarely did the Jewish Councils themselves resist, preferring to buy time by producing goods that were badly needed by the Nazi war machine. The one major ghetto uprising, that in Warsaw in April and May 1943, came only after most of its occupants had been transported to death camps. Hopes of saving at least a remnant of the Jewish communities were dashed when the last of the ghettos were liquidated in the summer of 1944, shortly before the arrival of the Red Army. Their pitiful remnants were sent to labor and extermination camps closer to Germany.

The extermination centers, all located in territory conquered from Poland, were of two kinds. Chelmno and the "Operation Reinhard" camps[2] of Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor were strictly death camps. Except for small crews of slave laborers who disposed of the corpses, the victims were gassed immediately on their arrival. The Nazis were already experienced in the use of poison gas. It had been employed in their secret "euthanasia" program in which more than 70,000 incurably ill Germans, most of them mental patients, had been murdered in gas chambers. Experimental gassings of Soviet POWs at Auschwitz and of Jews at Chelmno had occurred late in 1941. By the time all four death camps were shut down late in 1943, they had claimed approximately 1,600,000 lives. Almost all of the victims were Jews.

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[2] They came to be so-named for Reinhard Heydrich after his assassination by Czech patriots in Prague in May 1942.

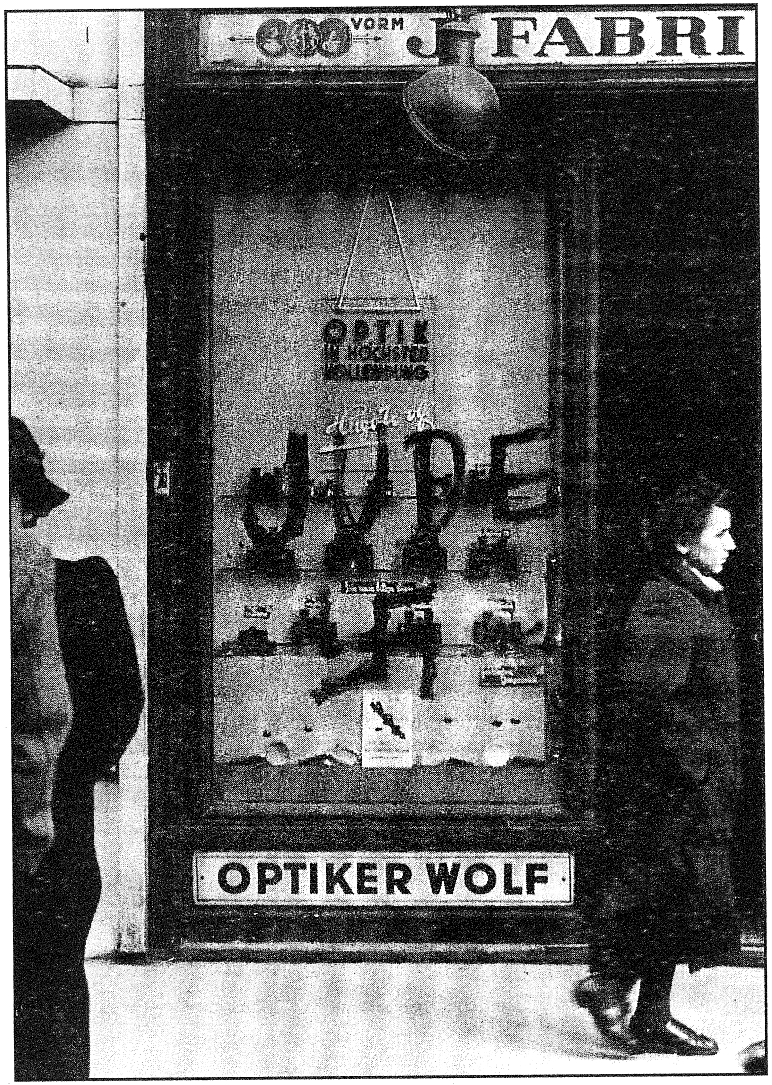
Unlike the four camps dedicated exclusively to extermination, Auschwitz and Maidanek were both killing and slave labor centers. New arrivals were selected for work or immediate death. Auschwitz, by far the larger of the two, had been founded in 1940 as a concentration camp for first Polish and then Soviet POWs. During the Holocaust it grew to occupy several square miles covered by huge synthetic rubber and oil factories, various smaller military industries, administration buildings, and barracks for more than 70,000 prisoners. For the prisoners, labor in the factories and the outlying coal mines was hell. Tens of thousands of them were literally worked to death, to be replaced from the constant inflow of new slaves. Some were resourceful enough, or lucky enough, to land desirable positions in the camp kitchens, offices, or medical wards. Others were chosen by SS doctors for hideous medical experiments that resulted in painful deaths and permanent mutilations. All were deprived of adequate food, clothing, rest, privacy, and human dignity. In addition, at Auschwitz-Birkenau, gas chambers and crematoria disposed of at least a million victims, most of them Jewish, before they ceased to function in November 1944.

As Hitler's empire crumbled, the pathetic survivors of the camps were force-marched to concentration and slave-labor facilities in Germany itself. There, in the final frantic days of the war their food was cut off and many died of starvation and disease. When British and American forces liberated camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Buchenwald, the grounds were strewn with the dead and dying. Estimates of the Jewish dead from all causes — shootings, gassings, hyperexploitation, and general privation — range from just over five million to more than six million. These were not the only innocent victims of Nazi racial madness. Hundreds of thousands of Gypsies and millions of Polish slave laborers and Soviet prisoners of war died at German hands. With the possible exception of the Gypsies, however, only the Jews had been targeted for total annihilation for purely racial reasons, making the Holocaust unique in world history.

The enormity of the Holocaust was not fully apparent to the world in the immediate postwar years. At the Nuremberg trials of the major German war criminals it was treated as part of Nazi crimes against humanity in general. Survivors set down their experiences in memoirs, and the Yad Vashem research institute established in Jerusalem in 1954 painstakingly assembled documentary evidnce of Nazi efforts to eradicate the Jews. But not until the 1960's did the Holocaust become genuinely visible to scholars, students, and the general public.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 is usually regarded as the turning point. Eichmann, the SS expert on Jewish affairs who had organized the transportation of Jews from all over Europe to the death camps, escaped to Argentina after the war. Discovered and kidnapped by Israeli agents, his trial in Jerusalem created a sensation. Also in the year of the Eichmann trial Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* made its appearance. The first massively documented history of the Holocaust, it remains today in a revised version one of the standard works on the subject. Since then thousands of books and articles on the Holocaust have appeared, making it one of the best-documented events in recent history. Efforts to deny that it ever happened can safely be regarded as the work of malicious zealots.

With the main features of the Holocaust clearly visible to all but the willfully blind, historians have turned their attention to aspects of the story for which the evidence is incomplete or ambiguous. These are not minor matters by any means, but turn on such issues as Hitler's role in the event, Jewish responses to persecution, and reactions by onlookers both inside and outside Nazi-controlled Europe. This anthology presents selected points of view on these issues with the goal of sketching the broad outlines of the debates and the trends in historiography. Readers are urged to suppress the perhaps natural inclination to suppose that all of these well-crafted arguments are equally valid, since, as we shall see, historians sometimes evaluate the evidence in very different ways. Nor should anyone feel compelled arbitrarily to adopt one position or another. Comparing historical interpretations sheds light on the process by which we come closer to the truth through inquiry and debate. If it stimulates thought and curiosity about the Holocaust, useful titles are given in the "Suggestions for Additional Reading" at the end of this volume.



A shop in Vienna marked "Jew" and defaced with a swastika shortly after the German seizure of Austria in 1938. (UPI Bettmann Newsphotos)

PART

I Origins of the Holocaust

Variety of Opinion

We shall begin by focusing on the earliest attestable symptoms in the biographical record of Hitler's personal antisemitism, his congenital hatred for the Jews. For the line that leads from these earliest manifestations to the liquidation orders that Hitler personally issued during the war . . . is a direct one.

Gerald Fleming

Hitler gave no formal order to carry out the Final Solution of the "European Jewish question." . . . It was founded upon improvised measures that were rooted in earlier stages of planning and also escalated them.

Hans Mommsen

It would appear that the euphoria of victory in the summer of 1941 and the intoxicating vision of Europe at their feet, not the dashed expectations and frustrations of the last months of the year, induced the Nazis to set the fateful process in motion.

Christopher R. Browning

Jewish policy as other departments of party and state pursued the old deportation plans. But by October, Hitler's order was firmly taking hold.

It should already be apparent that different historians have used the same body of evidence to reach widely conflicting interpretations. Here, as is not infrequently true in historical research, the sources are incomplete. Maybe one day some resourceful scholar will uncover direct evidence, perhaps something like a signed and dated Führer order for the Holocaust. Until then, we will have to make up our minds how to reconstruct the circumstantial evidence in the most sensible way.

Gerald Fleming

"It Is the Führer's Wish"

We shall begin by focusing on the earliest attestable symptoms in the biographical record of Hitler's personal anti-Semitism, his congenital hatred for the Jews. For the line that leads from these early manifestations to the liquidation orders that Hitler personally issued during the war — the actual target of this investigation — is a direct one. A sample taken from Hitler's utterances over the years reveals this striking continuity: Hitler's remark to his childhood friend, August Kubizek, as the two passed the small synagogue in the Bethlehemstrasse in Linz, "That does not belong here in Linz"; Hitler's unshakable conviction that "the Jews had continued to perform ritual murders" up to the most recent past; the Führer's statement on 21 October 1941, at noon in the Führer's Headquarters, preserved in a memorandum signed by Martin Bormann:[1] "When we finally stamp out this plague, we shall have accomplished for mankind a deed whose significance our men out there on the battlefield cannot

even imagine yet"; and Hitler's assertion four days later, in the presence of Himmler and Heydrich: "It is good that we are preceded by an aura of terror for our plans to exterminate Jewry." This unbroken continuity of explicit utterances was reflected in a more or less tacit continuity of deeds. Hitler's anti-Semitism in his Linz years (1904–1907) was followed by his introduction into the Viennese "Antisemitenbund" (Anti-Semite Association) in April 1908. Much later, but still to be ranged along the same continuum, were the first shootings of German Jews in Fort IX in Kovno on 25 November 1941 and in the Rumbuli Forest outside Riga on 30 November 1941 at 8:15 A.M. And in the following year report number 51, addressed "to the Führer, re: campaign against gangs," inventories 362,211 Jews executed for the period from 1 September to 1 December 1942. This report from the Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler was submitted to Hitler on 31 December 1942 by Hitler's personal adjutant, Hauptsturmführer Pfeiffer, as indicated in Pfeiffer's hand on page one of the report.

Hitler's objection at fifteen or sixteen to the synagogue in Linz raises the question whether the young Hitler might have been influenced by remarks at home or by his classmates, and perhaps also his teachers, at the Realschule in Linz, and had thereby learned to understand the word "Jew" in an increasingly pejorative sense. Hitler had the following to say about his attitude in Linz to the Jewish problem: "It is difficult if not impossible for me to say today when the word 'Jew' first gave me pause for serious reflection. I cannot recall ever having even heard the word in my father's house while he was still alive. I believe that the old gentleman would have regarded as culturally backward a particular emphasis given to this word. . . . At school I found no reason to question the picture I received from home, either. . . . It was not until I was fourteen or fifteen that I came across the word 'Jew' more frequently, partly in connection with political discussions."

According to Hitler's childhood friend, August Kubizek, nicknamed "Gustl" by Hitler (the two youths were very close from 1904 to 1908, chiefly because of their mutual love of Wagner's music), Hitler "touched up" the portrait of his father in *Mein Kampf* to give it a more "liberal tint." The customs inspector Alois Hitler was, again according to Kubizek, a regular at the local worthies' lunch table in his Leonding pub, where many believed in the ideas of the

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[1] Bormann was head of the Nazi Party Chancellory. — Ed.