

PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN  
CIVILIZATION SERIES

# The Holocaust

Problems and  
Perspectives  
of Interpretation

Third Edition

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Prisoners behind barbed wire in Auschwitz, 1945. (Institute of Contemporary History and Weiner Library, London)

PART

VI

Possibilities of  
Rescue

Variety of Opinion

*[N]o rescue action was taken because no one, anywhere, had anything genuinely practical or effective to suggest, apart from winning the war even more quickly.*

William D. Rubinstein

*Pope Pius XII . . . could have communicated with church leaders . . . encouraging all of them to urge Catholics to provide shelter to Jews. The consequence would have been fewer Catholic collaborators and bystanders, on the one hand, and more Catholic rescuers and fewer victims, on the other.*

Michael Phayer

*It is very easy to claim that everyone should have known what would happen once Fascism came to power. But such an approach is ahistorical. . . . There was no precedent in recent European history for the murderous character of German National Socialism and for this reason most contemporaries were caught unprepared.*

Walter Laqueur



Finally, we turn to reactions to the Holocaust by foreign governments and institutions. Word about the mass murders leaked to the outside world within months of their start. We will inquire into the responses of the Western Allies and the neutral Vatican and examine prospects of rescuing the victims or slowing their destruction. Why was so little done and still less accomplished?

William D. Rubinstein doubts that much more could have been done and criticizes those who have identified concrete failures to act. He takes issue with an influential 1984 book by David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, which attacks President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration for indifference to Holocaust victims. Wyman argued that hundreds of thousands of Holocaust victims might have been saved had the United States taken twelve measures:

1. create a War Refugee Board in 1942, rather than wait until January, 1944
2. pressure or negotiate with the Germans to release Jews
3. pressure the Axis satellites to release Jews
4. provide European havens and aid to released Jews
5. locate havens outside of Europe for the Jews
6. provide shipping to transfer Jews to havens
7. encourage and assist Jews to escape
8. provide large sums of money for these purposes
9. provide medical supplies and food to victims in the camps
10. pressure allied and neutral countries to assist Jews
11. bomb Auschwitz and the rail lines leading to it
12. disseminate publicity about the Holocaust, threatening the German leaders and warning the victims.

Rubinstein attempts to refute all of Wyman's points. In Rubinstein's view the Germans were implacable in their determination to kill as many Jews as possible and would not have yielded to outside pressures to treat them differently. Hence any lack of will among Western leaders to aid the victims was irrelevant. They simply could not be helped. Rubinstein is particularly combative on the subject of bombing Auschwitz. Not all scholars agree with him that it was infeasible to destroy the gas chambers or that no one at the time advocated the bombing. Rubinstein is certainly correct that bombing Auschwitz would not have destroyed the Germans' ability to continue the killings in other ways. But what might the political

and psychological impact have been? In evaluating these arguments by Wyman and Rubinstein, we ought to be thoughtful about contingency in history. Is it ever legitimate to use the record of what actually happened to prove an argument about what might have happened?

Michael Phayer sheds light on the well-known silence of Eugenio Pacelli, who as Pope Pius XII led the Roman Catholic Church during World War II. Phayer shows that Pius XII was not, as the title of a recent best-selling book has it, "Hitler's Pope." He despised the Nazis, but he feared Soviet communism even more and considered Hitler a bulwark against it. That and his hope of using diplomatic methods to end the war gave the Pope tunnel vision, says Phayer. Pius XII, well informed about Nazi genocide, assisted thousands of Italian Jews to hide in Vatican buildings and Catholic convents and monasteries, and he personally interceded to save the Jews of Slovakia and Hungary, but he refused to make public or private statements instructing the faithful to aid Holocaust victims and oppose their tormentors. It was, Phayer concludes, a failure of personal courage and of Christian judgment. Interestingly, this and other indictments of Pius XII coincide with Vatican proceedings to elevate him to sainthood. In evaluating the critical views, one must keep in mind that from 1943 on the Vatican was entirely at the mercy of the Germans. It seems unlikely that an outspoken Pope would have been allowed to speak out for long. Should Pius XII have done so anyway, or did he do more good by keeping silent and maintaining Vatican neutrality?

Walter Laqueur questions people's ability to comprehend the Holocaust at the time it was happening. The Jews in Nazi hands, terrified and helpless, could not surmount the psychological obstacles to confronting their own extermination. Jews in the free world often denied the evidence before them out of vicarious participation in the horror of their coreligionists. Among the Allies, skepticism about stories that seemed inherently incredible and preoccupation with purely military objectives led to the same result. Perhaps nothing better illustrates this than the astonishment of American and British officers and newsmen upon the liberation of concentration camps in 1945. All had read and heard about Nazi atrocities, but they had not registered. Laqueur concentrates on the first year of the Holocaust, during which most of the victims died; however, the implications of



his analysis apply to the entire period. They place issues of Jewish resistance and outside responses in arguably less moralistic light.

It should be clear from these essays that assessing prospects of rescue during the Holocaust depends on our understanding of several issues. Were the Nazis determined to kill all members of the targeted groups, or prepared under certain circumstances to relent? Were Allied and church leaders antisemitic, indifferent to the fate of the victims, or lacking in imagination about how to help them? Or were these leaders helpless to act? If helpless, was that because of psychological impediments to comprehending the Holocaust, or because there was literally nothing they could do except defeat the Third Reich as quickly as possible?

William D. Rubinstein

## The Myth of Rescue

Do what? What could the Allies have done, what should the Allies have done, to rescue Jews from the Nazi Holocaust? A number of historians have made quite specific proposals and these should be carefully considered in the light of the arguments of this work. In considering any such proposal, one must at all times be aware of a crucial distinction between *what was actually proposed at the time* in the West and what has since been proposed, often many decades later, by historians who are able coolly to reflect on the events of the Holocaust, possessing knowledge well known today but unknown at the time. Proposals for rescue first made many decades later — that is, suggestions not actually made by anyone during the war itself — are *ipso facto* highly suspect if not historiographically illegitimate. An historical actor cannot reasonably be criticised by later observers for failing to do what no one thought of at the time; it is so easy to be wise after the event. Many of the proposals made by later historians fall into the category of those first proposed and

advanced after the war ended. But it must be emphasised that no proposal for rescue advanced by later historians was actually practical, or represented a likely way to save the lives of any European Jews, even if it had been taken up and acted upon with gusto by the Allies.

The most complete list of suggestions of what might have been done was advanced by David S. Wyman in the conclusion of *The Abandonment of the Jews*.<sup>1</sup> This list has been reprinted several times and is often taken by other historians to represent a realistic programme of regrettable missed opportunities. In my opinion, however, not one of the points made by Wyman is valid: not one could have been implemented during the war, and most were only proposed, with hindsight, many years later. . . .

Point (1): no one advocated the establishment of the War Refugee Board in 1942, or at any time before about July 1943. Professor Wyman has, in my opinion, exaggerated the number of Jews rescued by the Board by a factor of at least 90 per cent. Even if the Board had come into existence in 1942, it is extremely difficult to see what it could have accomplished, given that Nazi-occupied Europe was entirely beyond the reach of the Allies at that time.

Point (2): Adolf Hitler's aim was to exterminate European Jewry, and it is inconceivable that he would have agreed to releasing them at any time after late 1940. It was precisely upon Hitler's instructions that the Nazi policy of exiling its Jews was transformed into one of imprisoning them, prior to genocide. Professor Wyman evidently does not really believe that "pressing Germany" to release its Jews would have had the slightest effect, and is reduced to urging that this would have "demonstrated to the Nazis" that America was "committed" to saving Jews. But Hitler believed that America (as well as Britain and Russia) was *controlled* by its Jews; every air raid on a German city surely demonstrated the Allies' commitment to "international Jewry."

The fact that until mid-1944 "it was far from clear to the Allies that Germany would not let the Jews out" is a manifest *non sequitur*. From late 1940, it was Germany's policy "not to let the Jews out"; it is also difficult to see why Professor Wyman believes that the blocking of the Horthy offer marked a turning-point in Allied-thinking.



"Ransom overtures," even if vigorously pursued, would inevitably have failed [because] Hitler would, sooner or later, have heard of them and instantly stopped their continuation. And the more Jews who were likely to be ransomed, the more likely Hitler was to have learned of any negotiations.

Point (3): greater pressure *might* have been brought upon the Axis satellites, but it is difficult to see what this could conceivably have achieved. No Jews were deported from Rumania or Bulgaria to extermination camps; no Jews were deported from Hungary to extermination camps until May 1944, when the Nazis convinced Horthy that they were being sent to Germany to work for the *Reich*. When, through precisely the kind of campaign that Wyman implies was never made, Horthy became convinced that Hungary's Jews were being sent to their deaths, he halted the deportations; for his efforts, the Nazis staged a *coup d'état* in large part because of his lack of cooperation over the Jewish question. If Horthy had put a stop to the deportations before, Hitler would have staged the *coup* earlier. Indeed, an earlier pro-Nazi *coup* would almost certainly have seen the deportation and extermination of Budapest's Jews, who were spared chiefly because the Soviet armies were closing in on Auschwitz. One of Hitler's few explicit statements on the Holocaust is that he was extremely keen to deport Budapest's Jews to their deaths. Since no Italian Jews were deported to Auschwitz before the Nazi seizure of power there in September 1943, while Mussolini appeared to be protecting them from deportation, Italy's Jews seemed to be safe from extermination. Mussolini, by the outbreak of the war a convinced anti-semitic (if not yet genocidal) and a pro-Nazi, was certain to reject any entreaties by the Allies: he had declared war on the United States, not the other way round.

Points (4), (5), (6), (7), and (8) require little comment, predicated as they are on the Jews being allowed to emigrate from Nazi-occupied Europe in significant numbers during the war, something which was *ipso facto* impossible without a total change of heart by Adolf Hitler. It is worth reiterating that no Jews who successfully fled from Nazi-occupied Europe to the democracies were ever returned to Nazi-occupied Europe, Jews fleeing to Switzerland being the sole possible exception to this generalisation. Perhaps more pressure might have been brought to bear on Switzerland to take more refugees, but — despite its age-old history of neutrality — that country, surrounded on all sides by Axis Europe, was desperately afraid of a Nazi invasion, and there is no reason to suppose

that, for fleeing Jews, the borders to Switzerland were any less well guarded by the Germans than anywhere else.

The 70,000 Jews of Transnistria<sup>2</sup> survived the war, but, ironically, any sign that Antonescu was actually in the process of allowing them to emigrate would certainly have come to Hitler's attention and led to an immediate despatch of Eichmann and the SS. The Jews of Spain were safe from the Nazis, whether they remained in Spain or in a "long-promised camp in North Africa." This is a particularly egregious example of illogical "pseudo-rescue."

There were repeated messages and warnings, on the BBC and by underground sources, of what the Nazis had in mind for Europe's Jews. The central difficulty with all such warnings is that Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe could do nothing to heed them.

Point (9) in Wyman's list, concerning food and medical aid, is yet another example of egregious illogicality. Neither food nor medical aid could have been brought to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. As equivocal as the role of the International Red Cross during the Holocaust may well have been, it had no powers to enter any ghetto or concentration camp. Contrary to Professor Wyman's assertion, the Jews of Europe suffered not from a "British blockade" but from a Nazi blockade; short of defeating the Nazi scourge, this particular blockade was unlikely to end.

Point (10) is similar to point (3) and is fallacious for the same reason: the Nazis would not have allowed it. There were no "neutral diplomatic missions" in Poland, the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union, or indeed virtually anywhere from where Jews were deported to extermination camps; had there been any neutral diplomats in these places, it is extremely difficult to see what they might have done, since Hitler, the absolute master of continental Europe, saw the extermination of European Jewry as arguably the central goal of his life. . . . Raoul Wallenberg was successful — in so far as he was successful at all — in saving Budapest's Jews from the Hungarian Arrow Cross (and, occasionally, from the Nazi death marches). He did not save any of Hungary's Jews from deportation to Auschwitz, for the deportation of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz had ceased just as he arrived in Hungary. . . .

<sup>2</sup>The region of the western Ukraine under Rumanian control. After initial massacres, the surviving Jews were left unmolested. Ian Antonescu was the Rumanian dictator. — Ed.



There are several major difficulties with . . . assertions made by Wyman and the other historians who regard bombing Auschwitz as a classic lost opportunity. In the first place, no detailed suggestions as to how the bombings should be carried out were made by anyone until much later. With the hindsight of many decades, schemes such as these can readily be devised by armchair historians and strategists, but no one did so *at the time*, and it is therefore utterly pointless to attach blame for the failure to bomb Auschwitz or to regard it as in any sense a lost opportunity. Second, and even more importantly, Wyman and his school are not military historians, and have made no effort to take the realities of military strategy into accurate account. Their knowledge of military history, as seen by professional military historians, is superficial, out of date and decontextualised.

Recent military historians have looked at Wyman's claims about the possibility of bombing Auschwitz with critical eyes, and concluded that the options put forward were highly impractical and most unlikely to have succeeded. Kitchens' analysis, "The Bombing of Auschwitz Re-examined," is the most thorough, and refutes Wyman's suggestions as unrealistic at every point: it should be required reading for every student of this topic. . . .

The similarity of the dramatic Mosquito<sup>3</sup> operations to the problem of attacking Auschwitz's gas chambers and crematoria, however, is vague at best, and in a close comparison, Auschwitz emerges as a well-nigh invulnerable target. All of the notable low-level Mosquito raids from England were conducted across the North Sea or relatively flat north-western Europe, and none had to contend with navigating long mountainous stretches while flying at maximum range. Few, if any, of the special Mosquito raids attacked more than one building, while there were *five* discrete objectives at Auschwitz. Mosquito fighter-bombers had no defensive armament and could not dogfight with interceptors; flying unescorted they relied solely on surprise and lightning speed for success. These advantages would have been very hard to achieve and maintain while attacking multiple objectives with a force of perhaps forty aircraft, and in fact even the later special low-level Mosquito operations in Western Europe were escorted by P-51 Mustangs. Thus, flying over 620 miles in radio silence, crossing the Alps in some semblance of

<sup>3</sup>British precision light bombers. — Ed.

cohesion at low altitude, then sneaking through German air defenses with enough fuel to make a coordinated precision attack on five targets and return home beggars belief. . . .

Kitchens (and other recent military historians who have examined this question) shows, with proposal after proposal made by Wyman and others, that these were simply impractical and made by non-specialists with no real knowledge of Second World War military history.

There is also another matter, ethical and moral in nature, which must characterise any proposal to bomb Auschwitz: the fact that many Jewish and other prisoners held there would certainly have been killed in any bombing raid on the camp. Normally, this objection is dismissed on two grounds: they were going to die anyway, while Jews and others suffering under the Nazi yoke would have welcomed any bombing raid as evidence that the Allies had not forgotten their plight, even if it meant death for some in the short term. While there may be a hindsighted element of truth in these claims — hindsighted because no one at the time either proposed bombing Auschwitz or consulted its victims and prisoners — other realities have also to be kept clearly in mind. Bombing the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz was *not* like bombing a German armaments factory. . . .

. . . [A] degree of pinpoint accuracy was required which simply did not exist at the time. Because raids were often so inaccurate, the real possibility loomed, in any raid, of a "worst case scenario" in which the Allies killed numerous Jewish and other prisoners while failing to halt the murders in any way: for example, by Allied bombs falling on the camp's barracks rather than on the gas chambers. In 1944 there was every likelihood in the world of something such as this actually happening. In March 1944 — after a marked degree of improvement in bombing accuracy during visual attacks — only 13 per cent of bombs dropped in an average American Air Force bombing raid fell within 500 feet of their intended targets, and only 34 per cent *within* 1,000 feet. Accuracy then increased still further, but even in August 1944 only 44.5 per cent of all bombs dropped by the US Eighth Air Force landed within 1,000 feet of intended targets. (Most of even these targets, it must be realised, were in western Germany, much closer to the Western Allies, and not in remote southern Poland.)

That any bombing raid on Auschwitz might well have killed its prisoners without necessarily halting the extermination process is at the heart of accurately assessing any such proposal in the context of what was



actually proposed at the time. The central assumption made by Wyman and others is that proposals to bomb Auschwitz were repeatedly made by Jewish groups and individual activists, and these were rejected by the American government on a variety of inadequate and even malevolent grounds. In fact, however, many Jewish groups *specifically opposed the bombing of Auschwitz*, when the issue was raised in mid-1944, precisely because any such raid was likely to kill the camp's imprisoned Jews. . . .

Because of the inaccuracy of bombing raids in 1944, if a raid had somehow been launched against Auschwitz in 1944 it is probable — even likely — that such a mission would have been seen, then and now, as a complete fiasco, an ill-considered and dubious exercise, carried out for political rather than for military reasons, in which many hundreds of Jewish and other captives were killed but which utterly failed to halt the Nazi death machine. If (as is likely) this proved to be the case, one can readily imagine what the attitude of today's historians of "rescue" would have been: the Allies would now be *blamed* for "killing Jews" in a foolish and unnecessary way. Indeed, it seems to me to be a near-certain bet that many of today's historians who are loudest in their criticism of the Allies for failing to bomb Auschwitz, seeing it as evidence (if for them any were needed) of Western anti-semitism and complicity in genocide, would then be equally vocal — or, probably, even more vocal — in criticising the Allies for having bombed Auschwitz and "killed Jews" without reason, seeing it as evidence (if for them any were needed) of Western anti-semitism, complicity in genocide and assisting the Nazis to kill the Jews.

Wyman's final point falls into the same category as the others, a curious mixture of criticising the Allies for what they actually did and urging the egregious. The Allies repeatedly made clear their "full awareness of the mass-murder program," and were bombing Germany by day and by night. Professor Wyman's suggestion that Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe somehow volunteered for transport to Auschwitz is the most curious point of all. Jews had absolutely no choice in the matter: the Germans may have depicted their fate as working for Germany in factories or as "transportation to the east," but whatever their purported destination, the SS was, ultimately, there to enforce the deportation of Jews with their full terror, brutality and utterly relentless inhumanity.

It must finally be noted that few (perhaps none) of the points on this list were made by any person, Jewish or non-Jewish, or by any organisation at the time, certainly not in the form suggested by Professor Wyman, whose proposals represent his thinking when he wrote *The Abandonment*

*of the Jews* in 1984. As such, they are similar to any counterfactual historical speculation — what if Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo or if Lee had been victorious at Gettysburg?: food for endless, fascinating debate, but remote from the historian's task. In this case their pointlessness is compounded by the fact that not one suggestion, even with the superior wisdom provided by forty years' hindsight, was likely to have been successful. Professor Wyman may well recognise this, for immediately after presenting his list, he is careful to note that

*None of these proposals guaranteed success . . . There was a moral imperative to attempt everything possible that would not hurt the war effort. If that had been done, even if few or no lives had been saved, the moral obligation would have been fulfilled.*

In my opinion, given what was either possible or actually proposed *at the time*, this moral obligation was being fulfilled every day the war continued and brought Europe closer to liberation.

Other suggestions, different in kind from those made by Professor Wyman, have also been made by others. It has been suggested by several historians that the Western Allies could have launched D-Day a year earlier, in mid-1943, when Germany was allegedly in a weaker position to resist an invasion than in June 1944, and swept on to Berlin in time to prevent the genocide of Hungarian Jewry. . . . According to this view, America had favoured a 1943 invasion and was forced into foot-dragging by Churchill and the British strategists; in 1943 Germany's Atlantic Wall and its designs for maintaining an impregnable "Fortress Europe" were less well advanced, while landing craft for an invasion could have been found by diverting these from the Pacific and the Mediterranean theatres. *If D-Day had occurred a year earlier, and if its success had brought about a German surrender a year earlier, the lives of perhaps 600–700,000 Jews who perished during the last year of the war would have been spared.*

There are, however, many reasons for questioning whether it was logistically possible for the Western Allies to have initiated a successful Second Front a year earlier, and more fundamental reasons for doubting whether this could have saved Hungarian Jewry. The weight of very recent military history has been to emphasise the enormous strength of the Nazi military regime and the equally enormous difficulties facing the Western Allies as they prepared for Operation Overlord, the Normandy invasion. Nazi submarine warfare was a real danger to Allied shipping



until mid-late 1943; Nazi Germany was highly successful in its efforts to organise an economically unified Axis Europe; there were too few American troops in Britain and no "Mulberry" harbours to facilitate a cross-Channel invasion until 1944; most of all, perhaps, American strategic bombing of Germany's military-industrial infrastructure had not yet brought the Nazi war machine to its knees: its success began only in 1944.

Churchill and his British advisors, who controversially wished to delay a direct invasion of Europe until the last possible minute, were chiefly motivated by perceptions of the extraordinary fighting ability of the German military, and (with memories of the 1914-18 trenches clearly in mind) the near-certainty that Britain would bear tremendous casualties in any invasion which was premature. In 1945, when Germany was reduced to conscripting 15-year-olds and was utterly outnumbered and outclassed in every phase of warfare by the Allies, it still took the Soviet Union (with 12 million battle-hardened soldiers under arms) nearly 100 days to advance the 200 miles from central Poland to Berlin, a gain of just two miles per day; the Soviet conquest of Berlin cost the lives of 300,000 Russian soldiers. It is well known, too, that the Normandy invasion succeeded as well as it did because of wholly fortuitous factors (Erwin Rommel, the Nazi commanding general, was away in Berlin celebrating a birthday party) and through the efforts of a far-reaching attempt at deceiving the Nazis as to the main thrust of the Allied invasion whose success was certainly not guaranteed in advance.

More significant, however, is the fundamental fact that it was not the Western Allies who liberated either Hungarian Jewry or the extermination camps in Poland, but the Soviet army, and in mid-1943 — or even mid-1944 — the Soviet Union's front line was literally hundreds of miles to the east of these places. Soviet troops liberated Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, only in December 1943 and did not reconquer even one inch of Polish territory until July 1944. Neither Auschwitz nor Budapest were liberated until January 1945. Even if a Second Front had been opened a year earlier, and even if it had proved remarkably successful at thrusting into German territory, the Nazis would have had ample time to exterminate virtually every Jew who actually perished during the war; indeed Hitler might well have speeded up the extermination process if he suspected that the end was approaching. Only an advance of the Soviet armies at a rate paralleling that of an imaginary Western thrust a year earlier than actually occurred, and vastly more rapid than in the actual course of the war as it unfolded, could have guaranteed the liberation of the surviving remnants

of eastern European Jewry. Given the stubbornness of Nazi resistance, and such factors as the Russian winter, it is most unlikely, even in the most optimistic plausible scenario, that the Soviet armies could have regained eastern Europe before the SS had done its work.

Regret has also been expressed that Hitler was not assassinated. "Had Hitler been assassinated in 1943 or 1944, hundreds of thousands of Jews — if not more — would have been saved, so pivotal was his input in the Holocaust policy," Yehuda Bauer has written, and it is impossible to disagree with this assertion other than to add that without Hitler's ordering of the Holocaust, it would not have occurred at all. It is indeed puzzling that no well-planned, well-financed attempt at assassinating Hitler was ever made by either a Jewish source or by the Western Allies: while several rather amateurish efforts were made to assassinate Hitler, only the famous "Officers' Plot" of July 1944, headed by Lieutenant-Colonel Klaus von Stauffenberg, had an even remotely professional air about it. Had Jewish or anti-Nazi sources financed six or eight separate, unconnected assassination squads, cleverly organised and properly financed, it is difficult to believe that one of these would not have succeeded. Since 1950, four American presidents have been the victims of serious assassination attempts — one, of course, a successful attempt — despite massive security protection. Hitler, obviously, was at the centre of a totalitarian, militarised society, closely guarded by an elite secret service whose members were sworn to lay down their lives for the *Führer*. Yet Hitler also appeared continuously in the open air, and relied heavily upon public appearances and speeches for his continuing authority and mass appeal. Perhaps those who would have loved to see Hitler dead assumed that his successor would be even worse, but in fact it is unlikely in the highest degree that his probable successors such as Goering, Hess or even Goebbels would have ordered the Holocaust. Presumably, too, the wartime Allies feared that Hitler's assassination, if carried out under Allied instructions, would invite retaliation against Churchill and Roosevelt. Yet of all the roads not taken, assassinating Hitler would have been the most certain way of preventing the Holocaust or of stopping it once it began: even if Goebbels or Himmler had succeeded Hitler during the war, it is likely — as Yehuda Bauer has rightly argued — that they would not have murdered Jews with the single-mindedness of Hitler, if they continued to kill Jews at all. To be sure, if a Jew had assassinated Hitler, it is certain that the Nazis would have carried out a pogrom of unprecedented violence against any and all Jews



they could find, although no amount of Nazi vengeance against the Jews could have been worse than what actually occurred. The fact that no serious, carefully planned attempts were made by Jewish or Western anti-Nazi groups is evidence of how little the true menace of Hitler, or his utter centrality as the driving force in the Holocaust, was appreciated.

If the State of Israel had come into existence ten or fifteen years earlier, would this have helped in a central way? Self-evidently, a very significant number of Jews trapped in Nazi-occupied Europe would have fled there prior to Hitler's invasions of their countries; if Palestine/Israel had survived the war unscathed, presumably those Jews, too, would have survived the war. Yet, as we have seen previously, it is easy to overestimate the potential clientele for Zionism among eastern European Jewry prior to the Holocaust; *at the time, even when* Nazi Germany existed, most Jews were adherents of other ideologies — Bund Socialism, Strict Orthodoxy, Marxism — which were explicitly anti-Zionist, and showed no interest in migrating to the Hebrew-speaking *Yishuv*,<sup>4</sup> economically primitive and under constant Arab threat. Some historians have also argued that had Israel existed during the war, it might have saved Europe's Jews in other ways. For instance, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, seldom a proponent of overly sanguine "might-have-beens" of Holocaust rescue, nevertheless stated without qualification that:

*Without political power Jews had no chance for survival. Had a Jewish state existed in 1939, even one as small as Israel today, but militarily competent, the terrible story of six million dead might have had another outcome. As a member of the Allied nations, contributing its manpower and military resources to the conduct of the war, a Jewish state could have exercised some leverage with the great powers in the alliance. Even though it would not have diverted Hitler from his determination to murder the Jews, a Jewish state might have been able to wield sufficient military and political clout to have inhibited Slovakia, Rumania, and Croatia from collaborating with the Germans in that murder. A Jewish state could have persuaded neutral countries to give Jewish refugees safe passage. A Jewish state would have ensured a safe haven. A Jewish state would have made the difference.*

It is genuinely surprising to read — alas — such a naive and improbable statement in the writings of an author as astute and intelligent

<sup>4</sup>The Jewish population of British-administered Palestine. — Ed.

as Lucy S. Dawidowicz. Unfortunately, even if Israel had existed and attempted to use its "military and political clout" to change the anti-semitic policies of "Slovakia, Rumania, and Croatia," it was Hitler and Hitler alone who had the final say about the fate of the Jews in these places: he could — and doubtless would — have intervened to ensure the deportation of Jews from these countries, just as he did in Hungary. Indeed, had an independent Jewish state existed in Palestine during the war, the fate of the Jews might have been very different, but not in the way imagined here: Hitler might well have made its conquest and destruction a much higher priority than it was actually given. Rommel had only ten divisions in North Africa; with the destruction of Israel and the extermination of perhaps 1 million Jews there as his goal, Hitler might have agreed to give him twenty, thirty or whatever number of Axis divisions was necessary for a successful drive through Egypt (incidentally seizing the Suez Canal) to Palestine, doubtless fanning Arab anti-British and anti-Jewish nationalism every inch of the way. Given what we know about Hitler, which possibility was the more likely?

With great and genuine regret, we reach the final conclusion of this work: turn where you will, turn to any proposal for rescue you wish, one will invariably find either that it was wholly impractical (and, very likely, irrelevant) or not actually proposed by anyone at the time. I simply know of no exceptions to this conclusion, and certainly of no plans for rescue action which were actually capable of saving any significant number of Jews who perished. While this conclusion must be deeply depressing to some readers, it also suggests very strongly that both the governments of the Western democracies and the Jewish communities of the democracies must be viewed much more favourably: no rescue action was taken because no one, anywhere, had anything genuinely practical or effective to suggest, apart from winning the war even more quickly. Those excuses which are sometimes offered for the lack of a rescue policy — ignorance of genocide, Jewish community powerlessness, anti-semitism and anti-Zionism in the democracies, and so on — were, even if true, essentially irrelevant to the basic fact that rescue was impossible. Conversely, it cannot be emphasised too strongly that the responsibility for the Holocaust lies solely and wholly with Adolf Hitler, the SS and their accomplices, and with no one else. In searching for a rational explanation of modern history's greatest crime, it is important that we not assign guilt to those who were innocent.



Michael Phayer

## The Silence of Pope Pius XII

Pope Pius XII could not have halted the Holocaust, but even without a public protest, he could have communicated with church leaders throughout Europe, admonishing those who disdained the Jewish people and encouraging all of them to urge Catholics to provide shelter for Jews. The consequence would have been fewer Catholic collaborators and bystanders, on the one hand, and more Catholic rescuers and fewer victims, on the other. . . .

[In 1941 two] German bishops, having heard that 10,000 Jews would be sent from Austria to the General Government in Poland, asked each other "whether the episcopacy should intervene for them out of humanitarian concern or whether this must be left up to Rome to do." Catholic bishops felt the need of a coordinated policy.

It was not as if Germany's bishops were out of touch with the Holy See. Pius's letters to individual prelates during the war years number well over a hundred. . . . But Pius never divulged to them the horrible news that the Vatican had learned in 1942 and confirmed in 1943, namely, that Germany had built extermination centers in occupied Poland where millions were being murdered. Rather, Pius commiserated with German bishops about their bombed-out cities and churches, recalling with fondness his years in Germany and the particular churches, now in ruins, where he had celebrated this or that holy day liturgy. When the war turned against Germany, Pius assured its church leaders that he was praying daily, almost hourly, for peace.

But he almost never said a word about the Jews. Writing to Bishop Preysing, Pius said in April of 1943 that he was heartened to hear that Berlin Catholics were showing empathy for the city's Jews. To fend off Preysing, who pressured him more than any other Catholic bishop to

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speak out about the Holocaust, Pius adroitly put the blame on the United States. Recalling that a few years earlier in 1939 Bishop Preysing had urged him to assist emigrating Jews, Pius said that he "didn't want to mention all the difficulties the United States made for Jewish immigration." Of course, it is true that the United States had been painfully negligent in the matter, not even admitting the allowed quota of Jews. But the difference between disallowing immigration of foreign nationals and persecuting and killing one's own citizens need not be belabored. The pope used the United States as a dodge for failing in what Bishop Preysing believed was his responsibility.

At times, lack of communication became miscommunication. In November 1943, Cardinal Bertram of Breslau wrote the Vatican secretary of state asking what could be done to provide the last sacraments for those being condemned to death and summarily executed in occupied Poland. Instead of telling Bertram that it would be impossible to get permission to provide the last sacraments for the victims because Germans were murdering them by the tens and hundreds of thousands, Maglione assured him that the Vatican was doing everything it could through local church officials (in Poland) to get permission to spend the sacraments. There was clear intent here to conceal the facts about genocide.

Nor did the Holy See share its information about the Holocaust with Catholic resistance movements that were trying to save Jews. Volume eight of the Vatican's World War II documents contains numerous reports from French bishops and Nuncio Valerio Valeri that briefed the Holy See on their statements opposing Vichy antisemitic policies, made known the courageous rescue work of the *Témoignage Chrétien* group, and gave voice to their fears for the Jews. But one looks in vain in this and subsequent volumes of the documents for any kind of response from the Vatican regarding Jews. It would have been quite possible to share information about the Holocaust with Zegota in Poland, with Catholic resistance movements in greater Germany that were centered in Berlin and Vienna, and with the *Témoignage Chrétien* circle in France. Historian Gerhard Weinberg believes that had Pope Pius spoken out about the murder of the Jews, many more Catholics would have had the courage to hide them. Such encouragement, even given privately, would certainly have bolstered the work of the four groups mentioned here. . . .

How could the Holy See have supported the work of these groups? Rescue work required organization and numbers as much as courage.



Because of food rationing and the frequent relocation of refugees, rescue work was more of a group than an individual activity. The French newsletter *Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien* sought to inspire people to become active by reminding readers of Pius XI's "Spiritually we are Semites" statement and by urging action. "The church cannot disinterest itself in the fate of man, wherever his inviolable rights are unjustly threatened." The *Cahiers* was clandestinely delivered to all French bishops and to thousands of priests and laypeople — even Pétainists read it. As early as the end of 1942 the *Cahiers* affirmed, based on information from Cardinal Hlond, that hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered in gas chambers; in 1943, it reported that Hitler intended to exterminate all the Jews of Europe. Had the newsletter received confirmation of this information from the Holy See, or had it received encouragement from Pius XII similar to that of his predecessor, some French bishops would have continued after 1942 to protest the deportation of Jews, and more French Catholics would have become involved in rescue work. No, the Holocaust would not have been stopped, but as Elie Wiesel has written, "the trains rolling toward [Auschwitz] would have been less crowded."

The Zegota rescue circle in Poland had no need of Holocaust information; they had firsthand knowledge of the gruesome details. But the papacy could have assisted them with money. Since Polish Catholics had been the first victims of Nazi aggression and had felt totally abandoned by the papacy, any Vatican support of Jews, when their hour of desperation came, may have angered Poles. As we have seen, however, after the battle of Stalingrad, Polish church leaders became reconciled to Pius's ways. Certainly, more Poles would have been swayed to help rescue Jews if they had known the work had Rome's blessing. Zegota had need of money because Polish Catholics would not always harbor a Jew altruistically, and even if they would, they often did not have the money needed to feed extra mouths. . . .

. . . During the war years, the Vatican budget for its operations in Europe fluctuated between 1.3 and 2.2 million dollars. By converting some of the dollars into Swiss francs, the Vatican could finance its work in Nazi-occupied Europe. Clearly, the Holy See could have supported rescue operations. As it was, Zegota and *Témoignage Chrétien* depended solely on the Polish government-in-exile and on American Jewish organizations for infusions of cash. . . .

To find the actual reasons for Pius XII's silence about the Holocaust, we must look . . . toward two concerns of utmost importance to the pope: his desire to play the role of a diplomatic peacemaker, savior of western Europe from communism, and his fear that Rome and the Vatican, entirely defenseless, would be obliterated by aerial attacks before the war came to an end.

Years after the end of the war, Robert Leiber, the German Jesuit who was one of Pius's closest confidants, made clear the connection between the pope's silence about the Holocaust and his diplomacy. The reason that Pius XII did not speak out about the murder of the Jews, Leiber confided to the Dutch historian Ger van Roon, was that he wanted to play the peacemaker during the war. To safeguard his credentials for such a role, the Holy See had to preserve Vatican City's status as an independent state and neutral government. Pius's role model in this respect was Pope Benedict XV, whose efforts to negotiate a European peace during World War I had impressed a younger Eugenio Pacelli. There would have been nothing negligent about this policy had it not kept Pius from dealing adequately with the Holocaust. In his postwar report to the British Home Office, Minister Francis Osborne said that Pius had at his disposal two strong weapons against Nazi criminality — "excommunication and martyrdom." Pius did not use these, Osborne said, because he wanted to be the mediator of a negotiated peace. Thus, the Englishman, Osborne, a close observer of Pius, and the German, Leiber, his trusted adviser, are in full agreement on this point. . . .

A negotiated peace became an overriding concern for the Holy See. Before Stalingrad, Pius believed that the Americans should help the Russians, but with reservations, so that hostilities on the eastern front remained far from Germany. After the battle of Stalingrad and the successful Allied invasion of southern Italy in July 1943, Pius hoped that England and the United States would abandon the Russians so that Germany could deal with the Communist threat. Ideally, he hoped England would recognize the danger to the Christian west that communism posed, and conclude a separate peace with the Axis powers. This would pay a second dividend: Rome would no longer be threatened with air raids.

When Germany switched ambassadors to the Vatican in 1943, Pius tried to impress the departing Diego von Bergen and the newly appointed Ernst von Weizsäcker with his belief in a powerful Germany to withstand



the Marxist threat from the east. If the Nazis would just live up to the terms of the Concordat,<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius could support a German mission against Russia. After his first private audience with the pope, Weizsäcker reported to Berlin that "hostility to Bolshevism is, in fact, the most stable component of Vatican foreign policy," and that "the Anglo-American link with the Soviet Russia is detested by the [Holy See]."

The combination of Russian successes on the eastern front, the invasion of Italy by Anglo-American forces, and the fall of Mussolini (July 1943) led to a very noticeable increase in Communist activity in Rome and northern Italy, where a number of Catholic priests were murdered by Communist guerrillas. This disturbed Pope Pius, particularly because of vehement anti-church Communist propaganda. Still, the Vatican refrained from promoting a separate Italian peace with the Allies, because it would necessarily weaken Germany. The radical cure for Italian communism lay in the defeat of Communist Russia.

But Communist agitation in Rome was close to home, and it rested uneasily on Pius's mind. It would necessarily have reminded him of the tumultuous days in Munich at the end of the Great War when he had himself faced down a gun-toting Red revolutionary. Pius's concern over Italian Communist activity coincided with Germany's concern about Rome's Jews, whom they wished to "resettle." When the roundup of hundreds of Jews took place in October 1943 just outside Vatican city, Ambassador Weizsäcker and other Germans held their breath to see if the pope would protest. He did not, but three days later he requested that Germany increase its police manpower in Rome in order to cut down on Communist agitation.

The same priority of concerns was reflected several months later, in December 1943, when a Vatican consultation about Germany was intercepted by Berlin or allowed to leak out by the Holy See. Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner sent a memorandum to Joachim von Ribbentrop, German minister for foreign affairs, which reported that the main obstacles to a loyal relationship between the church and National Socialism lay in the latter's euthanasia and sterilization policies. The murder of the Jews was left out of the equation.

<sup>1</sup>A 1933 treaty between the Vatican and Nazi Germany that promised religious freedom to German Catholics. — Ed.

Pius XII's response to the Allies' Casablanca ultimatum for an unconditional surrender was to call for a peace of justice rather than a peace of force in his 1943 Christmas address. Sitting on the diplomatic sidelines, Pius referred derisively to the "Big Three" in conversation with Germany's Ambassador Weizsäcker. Pius had been upset with Germany when Hitler negotiated a non-aggression pact with Russia and invaded western Europe, but when the dictator returned to his quest for Lebensraum and invaded Russia in 1941, the pope became visibly emotional in conversation with the Spanish ambassador about what appeared to be the German defeat of the Communist menace. Because in Pius's mind Germany remained the last line of defense against Russian communism, the pope frequently discussed schemes for a negotiated peace with Weizsäcker.

The troubling aspect of Pius's preoccupation with diplomacy was that Jews would continue to be murdered as peace negotiations were under way. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were murdered during the time period between the battle of Stalingrad and the end of the war. Instead of confronting Weizsäcker with these crimes, Pius discussed peace negotiations with him. The subject of the Jews and their fate never came up. During 1943, Pius's attention remained riveted on his church and the potential danger to it from aerial attacks and from communism. Historian Saul Friedlander asks,

*How is it conceivable that at the end of 1943 the pope and the highest dignitaries of the church were still wishing for victorious resistance by the Nazis in the east and therefore seemingly accepted by implication the maintenance, however temporary, of the entire Nazi extermination machine?*

Pius would necessarily have been aware of the ongoing murder of the Jews because of reports about it to the Holy See and appeals for him to intervene. This continued almost to the end of the war, when international efforts, which involved the Holy See, got under way to save Hungarian Jews from deportation to Auschwitz. A high-ranking official in the secretariat of state, Monsignor Domenico Tardini, told the German ambassador that the United States would probably object to his (latest) proposal for negotiations because of the Holocaust (the "Jewish matter"). While Weizsäcker fished Vatican waters for negotiations, the Allies pressed Pius to speak out about the Holocaust.

Although Catholics and non-Catholics inside and outside the diplomatic corps reminded Pius of his role as a moral leader with reference to



the Holocaust, he concentrated on diplomacy, often to the exclusion of genocide. The pope allowed the Vatican to become involved with German resistance in an attempt to overthrow Hitler. Later, when Italy wearied of the war, Pius again violated the Vatican's neutrality by allowing England's minister to the Holy See to be an intermediary between England and Italy. But when it came to the Holocaust, strict diplomatic rules were adhered to. The Holy See did not allow its diplomatic offices to involve themselves in the negotiations with England and the United States that were necessary to ensure safe passage across the Mediterranean for the Jews in the Italian zone of France, who were desperately seeking to avoid deportation to Auschwitz.

As the Holocaust lingered on into the latter years of the war, Pius wearied of hearing about the Jews. "I remember," Polish ambassador to the Vatican Kazimierz Papée recalled, "when I came to see the Holy Father for . . . perhaps the tenth time in 1944; he was angry. When he saw me as I entered the room and stood at the door awaiting permission to approach, he raised both his arms in a gesture of exasperation. 'I have listened again and again to your representations about Our unhappy children in Poland,' he said. 'Must I be given the same story yet again?'" Even though ambassador Papée and western diplomats repeatedly pressed Pius about the Holocaust, the pope omitted time and again to discuss it with Germany's Ambassador Weizsäcker, who would later be found guilty of war crimes against Jews at the Nuremberg Trials.

The correspondence and dispatches of the German ambassador and the American envoy to the Vatican make it clear that Pope Pius's second great concern was the possible bombing of Rome, not the murder of the Jews. With the Holocaust in full force, the Vatican's diplomatic staff and the pope himself devoted most of their energy to ensuring that neither Germany nor the Allies would bomb Rome. This became possible for the Allies after General Erwin Rommel's Panzerkorps had been pushed out of northern Africa, allowing English and American troops to cross the Mediterranean and occupy Sicily. Driving German forces from mountainous southern Italy proved a more difficult task, one that lasted from the summer of 1943 to the summer of 1944. During these months of acute danger, the Holy See communicated directly with Envoy Taylor or Chargé d'Affaires Tittman no fewer than thirty-four times in an effort to forestall the bombing of Rome. . . .

President Roosevelt . . . promised that no American aircraft would drop bombs over the Vatican. The Holy See continued to press the issue

relentlessly, both through Envoy Taylor and through the apostolic delegate to the United States, trying to exact promises that Vatican property outside Vatican City would also not be harmed. Roosevelt, somewhat exasperated, finally gave instructions that the apostolic delegate should be informed that "war is war," and that with the Germans in charge of the city of Rome, no further promises would be forthcoming. The Holy See responded that if Vatican property were indeed bombed, the pope would protest publicly. No such threat was ever made regarding the murder of the Jews.

It exasperated observers, both inside and outside the Vatican, that the pope would be so concerned over what had not yet taken place and so little concerned over the ongoing murder of the Jews. Cardinal Tisserant remarked as early as 1940 that the pope dwelt too much on the danger of Rome's being bombed and not enough on the affairs of the church. In September, Myron Taylor told Montini that the "deplorable inhumanities in Germany against civilian populations are even more reprehensible than the attacks on all her neighbors whom she invaded." Minister Osborne put it to the Vatican secretary of state more bluntly on December 14, 1942: "Instead of thinking of nothing but the bombing of Rome, [the Holy See] should consider [its] duties in respect to the unprecedented crime against humanity of Hitler's campaign of extermination of the Jews."

Bishop Preysing, writing to Pius from heavily bombed Berlin, adopted the perspective that Minister Osborne found lacking in the pope. "Even more bitter [events than the air raids] face us here in Berlin with the new wave of Jewish deportations that were put in motion just before the first of March [1943]." Preysing then asked the pope to speak out again about the Holocaust. Six months later, in October 1943, Pope Pius was confronted with the precise choice that Bishop Preysing had put to him so pointedly — deportation of Jews versus aerial bombardment. It was at that time that the Reich Security Main Office moved to deport the Jews of Rome to Auschwitz.

When the catastrophe struck the Roman Jews, the bombing of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, which took place in July, still weighed heavily on the pope's mind. . . .

. . . The evening of the day on which San Lorenzo was bombed, Pope Pius wept as he prayed the rosary while looking out over the city of Rome from his Vatican quarters. When Vatican City itself became the victim of an air raid, the Holy See assumed, incorrectly as it turned out,



that an American plane was to blame. Because of all of the destruction by the Allies, Ambassador Weizsäcker could report to Berlin that Germany was winning the propaganda war. How could this be, survivor and historian Saul Friedlander has asked, at a time when the pope was aware of the nature of Hitler's regime?

In his correspondence with Bishop Preysing, Pope Pius made no secret of his priorities. Responding to the Berlin prelate, who had urged the pope to address the Holocaust, Pius asserted that the most pressing problem facing him lay in maintaining the absolute trust of Catholics, regardless of which side they fought for, so as to ensure the church's unity. Pius felt that if Rome became contested by Germans on one side and Anglo-Americans on the other, this trust would be in jeopardy. Pius also defended his policy by saying that he was conscience bound to bring all the pressure he could muster on the Allies not to bomb Rome. Catholics the world over, he said, saw the Eternal City as the center of Christendom and the birthplace of the church. As such, Rome symbolized the universal nature of the church. Should this symbol be destroyed, Pius affirmed, faith and hope among Catholics would be shaken.

What Pope Pius told Bishop Preysing, he could not tell the rest of the world. The fortunes of the war made the threat of Allied bombardment greater than bombardment by Germany so long as Pius remained silent about the murder of the Jews. The Holy See dared not link its concern over the possible bombing of Rome to its silence about the Holocaust because of the implication that the murder of Europe's Jews was a lesser priority.

Earlier Pius had assured Bishop Preysing that he was doing all that he could for the persecuted Jews, that he deeply sympathized with them, and that he prayed for them. The pontiff asserted that what he had said about the persecution of the Jews in his 1942 Christmas address<sup>2</sup> "was short but well understood," and he said that he intended to speak out again when the circumstances were right. Whatever circumstances the pope had in mind evidently never came to pass.

The inconsistencies of papal policy relative to the Holocaust may best be understood in the light of Pius's assumptions and priorities. These

<sup>2</sup>The Pope had broadcasted a general statement of sympathy for those who "by reason of their nationality or race are marked down for death or gradual extinction." — Ed.

were, first, that the welfare of Catholic states took precedence over the interests of Jews. The Holy See used diplomacy rather than (public) moral strictures to attempt to curtail the involvement of Slovakia and Croatia in genocide. Pius XII did not want to undercut popular support for the fledgling governments of these new Catholic countries by threatening their leaders with excommunication. The same policy held in western Europe for Catholic Vichy France. The Vatican avoided interfering with the "resettlement" of Jews after a sharp government warning following the courageous statements of a number of French bishops.

Second, the long-term danger that communism potentially held for the church preoccupied Pope Pius. His assumption that Germany would be the west's defense against bolshevism ensured that Pius's diplomatic course would be rocky, since Hitler instigated both the Second World War and the Holocaust. But Pius stayed his course inflexibly. The Vatican warned Slovakian leaders that "resettlement" meant perdition for its Jews, but only months later Pius allowed the Germans to "resettle" the Jews of Rome without uttering a word. Earlier, before the German occupation of Italy, the Vatican and officials in Mussolini's government had cooperated smoothly to save Jews. When the Germans took control of the country, the Vatican refrained from even approaching them on behalf of Jews.

Pius's assumptions and priorities are clearly set forth in his letters to Bishop Preysing in 1943 and 1944. He wanted his German friend from Weimar years to know that he cared about the Jews, but that his first concern was for the Catholic church, its universality and unity. Pius may have feared that communicating throughout the church word of the murders perpetrated by the Catholic Ustasha,<sup>3</sup> the complicity in genocide of Catholic Slovak priest Tiso, and the crimes of Catholic Austrians and Germans committed against Catholics in Poland would deeply divide the church. But this apprehension does not explain the Vatican's deceleration of information about the murder of the Jews.

Pius XII harbored a personal ambition to play an important role in world diplomacy, and he felt duty bound to shield the visible center of Catholicism from destruction. Standing amid the ruins of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, Pope Pius said, "Almost in the center of Rome . . . is our Vatican City, an independent state and an independent neutral

<sup>3</sup>The regime that controlled Croatia, a German satellite state during the war. — Ed.



state, which shelters priceless treasures, sacred not only to the Apostolic See but to the whole Catholic world." The Vatican's "priceless treasures" were not worth the lives of millions of Jewish men, women, and children, but in Pius's view what those treasures stood for were worth those lives.

Pius XII's priorities put Jews at mortal risk. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of additional Jews would have eluded Hitler's death camps had the Holy See accelerated rather than decelerated information about genocide. Did Pope Pius think the church so fragile that, should he speak out, it would not survive the war, even though it had survived the fratricidal Great War intact? Should the possible bombardment of Rome have been Pius's primary concern, or, as Bishop Preysing pointed out, should not the moral issue of the murder of the Jews have taken precedence? Were the churches and other structures of Rome and the Vatican really the nerve center of Catholic faith that Pius believed them to be? Was the possible future clash between Christianity and atheistic communism more important than the slaughter of the Jews who were being murdered in eastern Europe, and who would continue to be murdered while Pius hoped for a negotiated settlement to the war that would favor genocidal Germany, the church's defender from Russian communism? . . .

Pius XII's leadership failures inevitably affected how Catholics in high and low stations reacted to the Holocaust. The centuries of pogroms and antisemitism notwithstanding, the murder of the Jews was an unprecedented event that struck Catholics, especially in eastern Europe, as an apocalyptic event in some sense. Germans, hoping not to be held responsible for the Holocaust, did not wish to hear news of it. Elsewhere in Europe, the Nazi terror had the same effect on people to a greater or lesser extent, depending upon the degree of collaboration in each region. Only very strong papal leadership could have broken through these several obstructions to rally more Catholics to the cause of the Jews, who were traditionally regarded as outsiders.

The necessity for incisive leadership was most obvious in Catholic Hungary. Eastern European bishops often held leadership positions in both the church and the state prior to the Holocaust. Acting on cultural animosity toward Jews, they helped to enact antisemitic legislation as parliamentarians during the interwar period. Hungary's Cardinal Serédi played this role, and then turned a blind eye to the murder of the Jews during the course of the Second World War. Were these prelates unable

to see or to regret that what they had done before the war led ineluctably to what happened to the Jews during the war? When they persisted in their antisemitic convictions, did they think that the Nazis were the hand of God punishing his Chosen People? Since some eastern European bishops showed a correct and courageous attitude toward the persecuted Jews, we may assume that a sharp Vatican rebuke toward callous members of the Slovakian, Croatian, and Hungarian hierarchy would have had some effect.

Those bishops who harbored no ill will toward Jews — and they were numerous in western Europe, including Germany — tried to rescue them. We have seen that this occurred in Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany, although not uniformly throughout the land. Many bishops believed that in the face of Nazi ruthlessness, Catholics could accomplish more by sheltering a few Jews than by a public protest against their mass slaughter. But the postwar statement of Cardinal Frings to the effect that the passivity of German bishops before the Nazis resembled the passivity of Christ before Pilate is completely lacking in credibility. A number of bishops would very likely have spoken out if Pope Pius himself had done so or had encouraged them to do so. Pius XII's limitations as a church leader register here clearly, because, while claiming that when bishops spoke they spoke for him, he failed to tell them about the death camps in eastern Europe. In the absence of Vatican leadership, no European bishop had the courage to follow the example of Berlin priest Bernhard Lichtenberg and protest publicly.

We must look lower down the hierarchical ladder to find the Catholics who sacrificed the most for the Jewish people. Bearing in mind that they were only a tiny minority of all Catholics, we find that priests, nuns, and laypersons, rather than bishops, were prepared to intervene on behalf of Jews. A walk along the Avenue of the Righteous at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem gives witness to the number of Polish Catholics who sacrificed themselves, even their lives, for Jews. Operating through convent and monastery networks, within diocesan structures, through individual parish communities, through their own organizations such as *Zegota*, or, quite simply, as individual believers, hundreds, if not thousands, of Catholics throughout Europe came to the assistance of Jews. On the basis of their efforts, we may speculate that if there had been effective leadership on the part of the Holy See or on the part of bishops, the Catholic church could have organized a much more extensive and effective underground rescue operation.



We must not exaggerate about what might have been accomplished. Regardless of who the pontiff was, the centuries-old tradition of anti-semitism, dating back to the Fathers of the Church, if not to the Gospels themselves, could not have been reversed quickly enough either to forestall the Holocaust or to cause the majority of Catholics to come to the rescue of the Jews. In the middle of the war, Pope Pius wrote to Bishop Konrad Preysing that his pontificate was the most difficult of modern times. There can be no doubt about that. No other pope had to deal simultaneously with the problems of communism, world war, and genocide. Nevertheless, it remains lamentable that the murder of the Jews found a low place among Pope Pius's concerns. The pope's Cold War policies, giving precedence to the danger of communism over justice for Holocaust war criminals, speak volumes about his priorities. Had either Pius XII's predecessor or his successor led Catholics during the Second World War, historians would have more words of praise and fewer words of regret for the history of the church during the Holocaust.

*Walter Laqueur*

## The Failure to Comprehend

[T]here is one main pitfall in a work of this kind: the temptations of hindsight. Nothing is easier than to apportion praise and blame, writing many years after the events: some historians find the temptation irresistible. But the "final solution" more perhaps than any other subject should be approached in a spirit of caution and even humility. It is very easy to claim that everyone should have known what would happen once Fascism came to power. But such an approach is ahistorical. Nazism was an unprecedented phenomenon. In Fascist Italy, with all its evils, it is also true that during the twenty years of its existence some

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twenty enemies of the state (or of Mussolini) were actually executed, and of those some had, in fact, engaged in terrorist action. There was no precedent in recent European history for the murderous character of German National Socialism and for this reason most contemporaries were caught unprepared.

To understand this reluctance not only in Britain and the United States but also inside Germany and even among the Jews themselves to give credence to the news about the mass murder, one ought to consider the historical impact of the atrocity propaganda in the First World War. While this had not, of course, been the first war in which allegations had been made of widespread massacres and unspeakable cruelty, such propaganda campaigns had never before been conducted systematically on such a large scale. Both sides engaged in such propaganda, but the British and French with much greater effect than the Germans who felt aggrieved that they were losing the battle of words even though they had made a valiant effort to charge their enemies (and especially the Cossacks in East Prussia) with every possible crime.

Western allegations of German atrocities began with the violation of Belgian neutrality by the Germans in August 1914. The Germans, it was said, had ravished women and even young children, impaled and crucified men, cut off tongues and breasts, gouged eyes and burned down whole villages. These reports were not only carried in sensationalist newspapers but also endorsed by leading writers. . . .

Some readers probably remembered these stories when in June 1942 the Daily Telegraph was the first to report that 700,000 Jews had been gassed. For when the First World War had ended it soon appeared that many of these reports had either been invented — and some of the inventors admitted this much — or grossly exaggerated. The invasion of Belgium had indeed been a war crime, many Belgian civilians had been executed by the Germans on charges of armed resistance which were frequently unproven and there was a considerable amount of wanton destruction. But neither had the Allies always been wholly innocent and, in any case, it was a far cry from these acts to the allegations previously made with regard to German outrages. In the mid-twenties, Austen Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary, admitted in Parliament that the story of the corpse factory had been without foundation. And as late as February 1938, on the eve of another war, Harold Nicolson said, also in the House of Commons, that "we had lied damnably," that the lies had done Britain tremendous harm and that he hoped that he



would not see such propaganda again. Thus, when in late 1941 and 1942 information was again received about mass murder, about the use of poison gas and the manufacture of soap from corpses, the general inclination was to disbelieve it, frequently with reference to "lessons" from the First World War: no one wanted to be misled for the second time within one generation. Two vital circumstances were ignored: above all the fact that Nazi Germany of 1942 was a political regime very different from the Emperor's Reich of 1914, and secondly that even in the First World War, albeit in different conditions, large-scale killings had taken place in distant parts — the Armenian massacres. The atrocity propaganda of the First World War acted as a deterrent; it was not the only psychological obstacle making the acceptance of the horrible news so difficult, but certainly a very important one. Even what happened before 1939 in Germany and Austria could not be reasonably considered at the time the logical prelude to genocide. Hence the reluctance of the Jews both inside Europe and outside to believe the information about the "final solution." Accusations have been levelled against the Poles, the Western Allies and the Soviet leaders, against the Vatican and the Red Cross and almost everyone else for having betrayed the Jews. This study concerns itself not with the question of rescue but with the transmission of information. For all these countries and organizations the Jewish catastrophe was a marginal issue. This is particularly true for the main strategists of the war against Nazi Germany. Their paramount aim was to win the war against Hitler. Everything else was a matter of little interest and low priority. Winning the war in 1942 was bound to be more than a part-time preoccupation for the outcome was as yet by no means certain.

But *tout comprendre* is not necessarily *tout pardonner*. When all allowances have been made, when all mitigating circumstances have been accorded, it is still true that few come out of the story unblemished. It was a story of failure to comprehend, among Jewish leaders and communities inside Europe and outside, a story of failure among non-Jews in high positions in neutral and Allied countries who did not care, or did not want to know or even suppressed the information.

It will be asked whether it really would have mattered if the world had accepted the facts of the mass murder earlier than it did. No one knows. Quite likely it would not have made much difference. The Jews inside Europe could not have escaped their fate, those outside were too weak to help, and the neutrals and the Allies might not have done more than they did in any case, which, as is known, was very little indeed.

But there is no certainty. It is unlikely that many of those killed in 1942 could have been saved. Militarily, Germany was still very strong, its hold on its allies and satellites unbroken. There were, however, ways and means to rescue some even then. They might or might not have succeeded, but they were not even tried. It was a double failure, first of comprehension and later of seizing the opportunities which still existed. . . .

The evidence gathered so far shows that news of the "final solution" had been received in 1942 all over Europe, even though all the details were not known. If so, why were the signals so frequently misunderstood and the message rejected?

1. The fact that Hitler had given an explicit order to kill all Jews was not known for a long time. His decision was taken soon after he had made up his mind to invade Russia. Victor Brack, who worked at the time in Hitler's Chancellery, said in evidence at Nuremberg that it was no secret in higher party circles by March 1941 that the Jews were to be exterminated. But "higher party circles" may have meant at the time no more than a dozen people. In March 1941, even Eichmann did not know, for the preparations for the deportations and the camps had not yet been made. First instructions to this effect were given in Goering's letter to Heydrich of 31 July 1941. The fact that an order had been given by Hitler became known outside Germany only in July 1942 and even then in a distorted form: Hitler (it was then claimed) had ordered that no Jew should be left in Germany by the end of 1942. But there is no evidence that such a time limit had ever been set. It would not have been difficult, for instance, to deport all Jews from Berlin in 1942, but in fact the city was declared empty of Jews by Goebbels only in August 1943. Witnesses claimed to have seen the order, but it is doubtful whether there ever was a written order. This has given rise to endless speculation and inspired a whole "revisionist" literature — quite needlessly, because Hitler, whatever his other vices, was not a bureaucrat. He was not in the habit of giving written orders on all occasions: there were no written orders for the murderous "purge" of June 1934, for the killing of gypsies, the so-called euthanasia action (T4) and on other such occasions. The more abominable the crime, the less likely that there would be a written "Führer order." If Himmler, Heydrich or even Eichmann



said that there was such an order, no one would question or insist on seeing it.

2. The order had practical consequences, it affected the lives or, to be precise, the deaths of millions of people. For this reason details about the "final solution" seeped out virtually as soon as the mass slaughter started.

The systematic massacres of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Eastern Galicia, White Russia, the Ukraine and the Baltic countries became known in Germany almost immediately. True, the scene of the slaughter was distant and it took place in territories in which at the time civilians and foreigners were not freely permitted to travel. But many thousands of German officers and soldiers witnessed these scenes and later reported them and the same is true of Italian, Hungarian and Romanian military personnel. The German Foreign Ministry was officially informed about the details of the massacres; there was much less secrecy about the *Einsatzgruppen* than later on about the extermination camps. The Soviet Government must have learned about the massacres within a few days; after several weeks the news became known in Western capitals too, well before the Wannsee Conference. The slaughter at Kiev (Babi Yar) took place on 29–30 September 1941. Foreign journalists knew about it within a few days; within less than two months it had been reported in the Western press. The massacres in Transnistria became known almost immediately. Chelmno, the first extermination camp, was opened on 8 December 1941; the news was received in Warsaw within less than four weeks and published soon afterwards in the underground press. The existence and the function of Belzec and Treblinka were known in Warsaw among Jews and non-Jews within two weeks after the gas chambers had started operating. The news about the suicide of Czerniakow, the head of the Warsaw *Judenrat*, reached the Jewish press abroad within a short time. The deportations from Warsaw were known in London after four days. There were some exceptions: the true character of Auschwitz did not become known among Jews and Poles alike for several months after the camp had been turned into an extermination centre. At the time in Poland it was believed that there were only two types of camps, labour camps and extermination camps, and the fact that Auschwitz was a "mixed camp" seems to have baffled many.

3. If so much was known so quickly among the Jews of Eastern Europe and if the information was circulated through illegal newspapers and by other means — there were wireless sets in all major ghettos — why was it not believed? In the beginning Russian and Polish Jewry were genuinely unprepared, and the reasons have been stated: Soviet Jews had been kept uninformed about Nazi intentions and practices, Polish Jews believed that the massacres would be limited to the former Soviet territories. At first there was the tendency to interpret these events in the light of the past: persecution and pogroms. The Jewish leaders in Warsaw who learned about events in Lithuania and Latvia in early 1942 should have realized that these were not "pogroms" in the traditional sense, spontaneous mob actions, nor excesses committed by local commanders. There are few arbitrary actions in a totalitarian regime. The *Einsatzgruppen* acted methodically and in cold blood. The majority of Jewish leaders in Eastern Europe did not yet realize that this was the beginning of a systematic campaign of destruction. The whole scheme was beyond human imagination; they thought the Nazis incapable of the murder of millions. Communication between some of the ghettos was irregular; Lodz ghetto, the second largest, was more or less isolated. But rumours, on the other hand, still travelled fast. If the information about the "final solution" had been believed it would have reached every corner of Poland within a few days. But it was not believed and when the "deportations" from Polish ghettos began in March 1942 it was still generally thought that the Jews would be transported to places further East.

The illegal newspapers and other sources conveyed disquieting news, and the possibility that many would perish was mentioned. But the information was contradictory. Most people did not read the underground press and there were no certainties. Perhaps the Nazis did after all need a large part of the Jewish population as a labour force for the war economy; perhaps the war would soon be over; perhaps a miracle of some sort or another would happen. Rumours are rife in desperate situations and so is the belief in miracles.

After July 1942 (the deportations from Warsaw) it is more and more difficult to understand that there still was widespread confusion about the Nazi designs among Jews in Poland, and that the rumours were not recognized for what they were — certainties. Any rational



analysis of the situation would have shown that the Nazi aim was the destruction of all Jews. But the psychological pressures militated against rational analysis and created an atmosphere in which wishful thinking seemed to offer the only antidote to utter despair.

4. Of all the other Jewish communities only the Slovaks seem to have realized at an early date some of the dangers facing them. (So did the Romanians but their position was altogether different.) But even they failed to understand until late 1943 that the Nazis aimed at killing all Jews. The other communities (including German, Dutch, Danish, French, Greek Jews, etc.) seem to have lived in near ignorance almost to the very end. These communities were isolated, the means of information at their disposal limited. But with all this, most Jews in Europe, and many non-Jews, had at the very least heard rumours about some horrible events in Eastern Europe and some had heard more than rumours. These rumours reached them in dozens of different ways. But they were either not believed or it was assumed that "it cannot happen here." Only a relatively small minority tried to hide or escape, aware that deportation meant death. Nazi disinformation contributed to the confusion among the Jews. But the Nazi lies were usually quite threadbare and they cannot be considered the main source of the disorientation.
5. Jewish leaders and the public abroad (Britain, America and Palestine) found it exceedingly difficult in their great majority to accept the ample evidence about the "final solution" and did so only with considerable delay. They too thought in categories of persecution and pogroms at a time when a clear pattern had already emerged which pointed in a different direction. It was a failure of intelligence and imagination caused on one hand by a misjudgment of the murderous nature of Nazism, and on the other hand by a false optimism. Other factors may have played a certain role: the feeling of impotence ("we can do very little, so let us hope for the best"), the military dangers facing the Jewish community in Palestine in 1942. If the evidence was played down by many Jewish leaders and the Jewish press, it was not out of the desire to keep the community in a state of ignorance, but because there were genuine doubts. As the worst fears were confirmed, there was confusion among the leaders as to what course of action to choose. This was true especially in the US and caused further delay in making the news public. In Jerusalem the turning point came with the arrival

of a group of Palestinian citizens who had been repatriated from Europe in November 1942. The leaders of the Jewish Agency, who had been unwilling to accept the written evidence gathered by experienced observers, were ready to believe the accounts delivered by chance arrivals in face-to-face meetings.

6. The Polish underground played a pivotal role in the transmission of the news to the West. It had a fairly good intelligence-gathering network and also the means to convey the information abroad through the short-wave radio and couriers. Most of the information about the Nazi policy of extermination reached Jewish circles abroad through the Polish underground. The Poles had few illusions about the intentions of the Nazis and their reports gave an unvarnished picture of the situation. They have been accused of playing down the Jewish catastrophe in order not to distract world opinion from the suffering of the Polish people, and of having temporarily discontinued the transmission to the West of news about the killing of the Jews. The Polish underground, needless to say, was mainly preoccupied with the fate of the Polish people, not with that of a minority. But it did not, on the whole, suppress the news about the mass killings in its bulletins and the information transmitted abroad. There was one exception — the period in late July, August and early September 1942 (the deportations from Warsaw), when the London Government-in-exile, either on its own initiative or following the advice of the British Foreign Office, did not immediately publicize the news received from Warsaw. The evidence is conflicting: the information was certainly played down for some time but there was no total blackout. There was delay in London but no more than the delay among the Jewish leaders who also disbelieved the information when they first received it. It cannot be proved whether or not the London Polish Government-in-exile did show the members of the National Council all the material received. But Zygielbojm and Schwabart certainly had access to all essential information. The Polish Government was the first to alarm the Allied governments and world public opinion but it was accused of exaggeration, as were the Jews at a later date. From this time up to the end of the war the number of victims given in the official declarations of the Allied governments was consistently too low. Even after it had been accepted in London and Washington that the information about the mass slaughter was correct, the British and



US governments showed much concern that it should not be given too much publicity.

7. Millions of Germans knew by late 1942 that the Jews had disappeared. Rumours about their fate reached Germany mainly through officers and soldiers returning from the eastern front but also through other channels. There were clear indications in the wartime speeches of the Nazi leaders that something more drastic than resettlement had happened. Knowledge about the exact manner in which they had been killed was restricted to a very few. It is, in fact, quite likely that while many Germans thought that the Jews were no longer alive, they did not necessarily believe that they were dead. Such belief, needless to say, is logically inconsistent, but a great many logical inconsistencies are accepted in wartime. Very few people had an interest in the fate of the Jews. Most individuals faced a great many more important problems. It was an unpleasant topic, speculations were unprofitable, discussions of the fate of the Jews were discouraged. Consideration of this question was pushed aside, blotted out for the duration.
8. Neutrals and international organizations such as the Vatican and the Red Cross knew the truth at an early stage. Not perhaps the whole truth, but enough to understand that few, if any, Jews would survive the war. The Vatican had an unrivalled net of informants all over Europe. It tried to intervene on some occasions on behalf of the Jews but had no wish to give publicity to the issue. For this would have exposed it to German attacks on one hand and pressure to do more from the Jews and the Allies. Jews, after all, were not Catholics. In normal times their persecution would have evoked expressions of genuine regret. But these were not normal times and since the Holy See could do little — or thought it could do little — even for the faithful Poles, it thought it could do even less for the Jews. This fear of the consequences of helping the Jews influenced its whole policy. The position of the International Red Cross was, broadly speaking, similar. It had, of course, fewer sources of information than the Catholic Church and less influence. But it also magnified its own weakness. It was less exposed, in fact, to retaliatory action than it thought, and while its protests might well have been to no avail, it could have made known directly and indirectly the facts it knew. Some of its directors did so.

The neutral governments received much information about the “final solution” through many channels. There was no censorship in Sweden (except self-censorship) and in 1942 Swiss press censorship did not prevent publication of news about the fate of the Jews. Not all Swiss newspapers showed an equal measure of understanding and compassion, and the Swedish press had instructions not to report “atrocities,” but their readers could have had few doubts about the true state of affairs by late 1942.

9. Neither the United States Government, nor Britain, nor Stalin showed any pronounced interest in the fate of the Jews. They were kept informed through Jewish organizations and through their own channels. From an early date the Soviet press published much general information about Nazi atrocities in the occupied areas but only rarely revealed that Jews were singled out for extermination. To this day the Soviet Communist Party line has not changed in this respect: it has not admitted that any mistakes were made, that the Jewish population was quite unprepared for the *Einsatzgruppen*. It is not conceded even now that if specific warnings had been given by the Soviet media in 1941 (which were informed about events behind the German lines) lives might have been saved. As far as the Soviet publications are concerned the Government and the Communist Party acted correctly — Soviet citizens of Jewish origin did not fare differently from the rest under Nazi rule, and if they did, it is thought inadvisable to mention this. The only mildly critical voices that have been heard can be found in a few literary works describing the events of 1941–2. Some Western observers have argued that the (infrequent) early Soviet news about anti-Jewish massacres committed were sometimes dismissed as “Communist propaganda” in the West and that for this reason the Soviet leaders decided no longer to emphasize the specific anti-Jewish character of the extermination campaign. This explanation is not at all convincing because Soviet policy at home was hardly influenced by the *Catholic Times*, and it should be stressed that domestically even less publicity than abroad was given to the Jewish victims from the very beginning.

In London and Washington the facts about the “final solution” were known from an early date and reached the chiefs of intelligence, the secretaries of foreign affairs and defence. But the facts were not considered to be of great interest or importance and at least



some of the officials did not believe them, or at least thought them exaggerated. There was no deliberate attempt to stop the flow of information on the mass killings (except for a while on the part of officials in the State Department), but mainly lack of interest and disbelief. This disbelief can be explained against the background of Anglo-American lack of knowledge of European affairs in general and Nazism in particular. Although it was generally accepted that the Nazis behaved in a less gentlemanly way than the German armies in 1914–18, the idea of genocide nevertheless seemed far fetched. Neither the *Luftwaffe* nor the German navy nor the Afrika Korps had committed such acts of atrocities, and these were the only sections of the German armed forces which Allied soldiers encountered prior to 1944. The Gestapo was known from not very credible B-grade movies. Barbaric fanaticism was unacceptable to people thinking on pragmatic lines, who believed that slave labor rather than annihilation was the fate of the Jews in Europe. The evil nature of Nazism was beyond their comprehension.

But even if the realities of the "final solution" had been accepted in London and Washington the issue would still have figured very low on the scale of Allied priorities. 1942 was a critical year in the course of the war; strategists and bureaucrats were not to be deflected in the pursuit of victory by considerations not directly connected with the war effort. Thus too much publicity about the mass murder seemed undesirable, for it was bound to generate demands to help the Jews and this was thought to be detrimental to the war effort. Even in later years, when victory was already assured there was little willingness to help. Churchill showed more interest in the Jewish tragedy than Roosevelt and also more compassion but even he was not willing to devote much thought to the subject. Public opinion in Britain, the United States and elsewhere was kept informed through the press from an early date about the progress of the "final solution." But the impact of the news was small or at most shortlived. The fact that millions were killed was more or less meaningless. People could identify perhaps with the fate of a single individual or a family but not with the fate of millions. The statistics of murder were either disbelieved or dismissed from consciousness. Hence the surprise and shock at the end of the war when the reports about a "transit camp" such as Bergen-Belsen came in: "No one had known, no one had been prepared for this."

Thus the news about the murder of many millions of Jews was not accepted for a long time and even when it had been accepted the full implications were not understood. Among Jews this frequently caused a trauma in later years which in extreme cases led to the belief that every danger facing Jews, individually or as a group, had to be interpreted in terms of a new holocaust. Such a distortion of reality is psychologically understandable, which does not make it any less dangerous as a potentially disastrous political guideline. The impact among non-Jews has been small. There have been, after all, many intelligence failures throughout history. Optimists could still argue that one failure should not inspire pessimism and strengthen the argument for worst case analysis. As the long term (1910–50) British diplomat rightly said, his record as an inveterate optimist has been far more impressive than that of the professional Cassandras forever harping on the danger of war. He had been wrong only twice. . . .

It has been said that in wartime there are no "strategic warnings," no unambiguous signals, no absolute certainties. Not only the signals have to be considered but also the background noise, the interference, the deception. If even Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor came as a surprise, despite the fact that the eyes of the whole world were scanning the horizons for such signals — and despite the fact that there was much evidence and many warnings to this effect — is it not natural that European Jewry was taken unaware? But there was one fundamental difference: Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor were surprise attacks, whereas the "final solution" proceeded in stages over a long period. Some have claimed in retrospect that *Mein Kampf* and Hitler's speeches should have dispelled any doubts about the Nazis' ultimate murderous intentions. But this is wrong. The "solution of the Jewish question" could equally have meant ghettoization or expulsion to some far-away place such as Madagascar. It was only after the invasion of the Soviet Union that there was reason to believe that large parts of European Jewry would not survive the war. At first there were only isolated rumours, then the rumours thickened and eventually they became certainties. A moderately well informed Jewish resident of Warsaw should have drawn the correct conclusions by May 1942 and some of them did. But the time and the place were hardly conducive to detached, objective analysis; the disintegration of rational intelligence is one of the recurrent themes of all those who have written about that period on the basis of inside knowledge.



Democratic societies demonstrated on this occasion as on many others, before and after, that they are incapable of understanding political regimes of a different character. Not every modern dictatorship is Hitlerian in character and engages in genocide but every one has the potential to do so. Democratic societies are accustomed to think in liberal, pragmatic categories; conflicts are believed to be based on misunderstandings and can be solved with a minimum of good will; extremism is a temporary aberration, so is irrational behaviour in general, such as intolerance, cruelty, etc. The effort to overcome such basic psychological handicaps is immense. It will be undertaken only in the light of immediate (and painful) experience. Each new generation faces this challenge again for experience cannot be inherited.

The reaction of East European Jewry can only be understood out of their specific situation in 1942. But there are situations which cannot be recreated, however sophisticated the techniques of simulation, however great the capacity for empathy and imagination. Generalizations about human behaviour in the face of disaster are of limited value; each disaster is different. Some of those who lived through the catastrophe have tried in later years to find explanations. But while their accounts are of great interest, they are no longer *a priori* reliable witnesses. Their explanations are rooted in a different situation and this is bound to lead to a rationalization of irrational behaviour. The "final solution" proceeded in stages, chronologically and geographically. This should have acted as a deterrent, but it did not, on the whole, have this effect. There were no certainties, only rumours, no full picture, only fragments. Was it a case of a "people without understanding," which had eyes and ears but saw not and heard not? The people saw and heard but what it perceived was not always clear, and when at last the message was unambiguous it left no room for hope and was therefore unacceptable. It is a syndrome observed by biblical prophets and modern political leaders alike, that it is natural for man to indulge in the illusions of hope and to shut his eyes against a painful truth.

But it is not natural for man to submit passively to a horrible fate, not to try to escape, however great the odds against success, not to resist, even if there is no prospect of victory. True, there are explanations even for paralysis, but later generations can no longer accept them — hence the abiding mystery. Total hopelessness (the psychologists say) results in inaction; when there is no exit, such as in a mine or a submarine disaster, this leads to resignation.

The reaction of Dutch or Hungarian Jews can be compared to that of people facing a flood and who in contradiction of all experience believe that they will not be affected but are individually or as a group invulnerable. Some social psychologists will argue that such a denial of a threat betrays a fear of not being able to cope with it. But if such an explanation was true for some it certainly did not apply to others. They genuinely did not know what was in store for them. Danish Jews were perfectly able to escape to Sweden and if they did so only at the very last moment the reason was that they genuinely believed that they would not be deported. Equally, to give another example, the Jews living in Rhodes could have fled without difficulty to Turkey and would have done so had they known their fate in Auschwitz. But they did not know. Other Jewish communities were indeed trapped but their situation was still not identical with that of the victims of a mine disaster. Comparisons are only of limited help for understanding human behaviour in unique situations. In many cases the inactivity of Jews, individuals and groups, was not the result of paralysis but on the contrary of unwarranted optimism. . . .

One of the questions initially asked was whether it would have made any difference if the information about the mass murder had been believed right from the beginning. It seems quite likely that relatively few people might have been saved as a result and even this is not absolutely certain. But this is hardly the right way of posing the question, for the misjudgment of Hitler and Nazism did not begin in June 1941 nor did it end in December 1942. The ideal time to stop Hitler was not when he was at the height of his strength. If the democracies had shown greater foresight, solidarity and resolution, Nazism could have been stopped at the beginning of its campaign of aggression. No power could have saved the majority of the Jews of the Reich and of Eastern Europe in the summer of 1942. Some more would have tried to escape their fate if the information had been made widely known. Some could have been saved if Hitler's satellites had been threatened and if the peoples of Europe had been called to extend help to the Jews. After the winter of 1942 the situation rapidly changed: the satellite leaders and even some of the German officials were no longer eager to be accessories to mass murder. Some, at least, would have responded to Allied pressure, but such pressure was never exerted. Many Jews could certainly have been saved in 1944 by bombing the railway lines leading to the extermination centres, and of course, the centres themselves. This could have been done without deflecting any major resources from the general war effort.



It has been argued that the Jews could not have escaped in any case but this is not correct: the Russians were no longer far away, the German forces in Poland were concentrated in some of the bigger towns, and even there their sway ran only in daytime — they no longer had the manpower to round up escaped Jews. In short, hundreds of thousands could have been saved. But this discussion belongs to a later period. The failure to read correctly the signs in 1941–2 was only one link in a chain of failures. There was not one reason for this overall failure but many different ones: paralyzing fear on one hand and, on the contrary, reckless optimism on the other; disbelief stemming from a lack of experience or imagination or genuine ignorance or a mixture of some or all of these things. In some cases the motives were creditable, in others damnable. In some instances moral categories are simply not applicable, and there were also cases which defy understanding to this day.

## Suggestions for Additional Reading

Only a few of the most important studies of the Holocaust can be included here. This brief bibliography is restricted to literature available in English and does not include any of the works excerpted in this volume.

### General Surveys and Reference Sources

Michael Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York: 1990).

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