The Holocaust

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7 The Holocaust

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Historiography

The current perception of the Holocaust as an historical event of crucial importance in the heart of the twentieth century is relatively recent. For several decades after the survivors of the Nazi genocide were liberated, the 'final solution of the Jewish question' was not considered a central theme even in the history of the Third Reich and World War II, as any glance at historical monographs published during those years demonstrates. Subsequently, as awareness of the event's historical significance grew, interpretations of its meanings and ramifications also multiplied. Indeed, while all events of the past are constantly reconsidered depending on the place and time from which they are observed, the Holocaust has been increasingly used as a model, a warning, a foil, or a myth in order to prove often starkly contradictory assertions. Ironically, then, an event that had initially been marginalized, not least because of its almost incomprehensible extremity, has now, once again thanks to its radical nature, taken centre stage in the historiography and representation of the previous century, engaging scholars and many others seeking to draw lessons from the past for the sake of the present. At the same time, the multiple uses to which the Holocaust has been subjected tells us not only about present concerns but also about the complexity of its origins and the profound effects of its implementation.

In the wake of World War II numerous monuments were erected throughout Europe proclaiming 'never again'. Yet people's understanding of what precisely should never be allowed to happen once more differed substantially from place to place and person to person, depending on such factors as national affiliation, ideological conviction, and religious denomination. Moreover, such meanings changed significantly over time. Initially, before the term Holocaust came into popular use, the notion of Nazi crimes against humanity implied just that, namely crimes both against all members of the human race and against the very concept of a shared humanity. The Third Reich victimized its domestic and foreign foes, its political and perceived racial enemies, the nations it occupied and enslaved and those that fought against it. Since Nazism was universally destructive, there appeared to be no need to distinguish between its victims, whether they died in the Blitz against Britain, were deported from France as resistance fighters, were shot in acts of collective punishment and starved to death in Belarus and Leningrad, or were murdered as Jews. Alain Resnais's influential

film *Night and Fog* (1955) reflected this trend of lumping all victims together, as did the Soviet regime, which insisted that all nations of the USSR had suffered and sacrificed equally in the Great Patriotic War. The removal of monuments commemorating the genocide of the Jews, and the silencing of references to local collaboration in the Holocaust, became the staple of post-war Soviet politics of memory.

There was by that time, however, also a very different understanding of the Holocaust, as expressed, for instance, in Léon Poliakov's 1951 study, *Harvest of Hate*, which presented the genocide of the Jews as the culmination of a long history of anti-Semitism and Judeophobia, marking it thereby as essentially distinct from all other crimes of racism, war, and occupation perpetrated by the Nazis. This view was widespread among Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, especially those who came from Eastern Europe, and was also dominant in the State of Israel, eventually constituting the underlying premise of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961–62. It was during the 1960s, not least following the Six Day War of 1967, that the term Holocaust increasing became the common designation in English of the 'final solution', whereas in Israel (and later on also in France) the term Shoah (catastrophe) was adopted. Thus, two different narratives of the Holocaust emerged: one which perceived it as a consequence of Nazi ideology, and applied it by and large to all groups persecuted and murdered by the Nazis, and another that saw it as rooted in European, Christian, and even pre-Christian anti-Judaism, with the Nazis as only the most extreme expression of centuries-old sentiments and a timeless urge to root the Jews out of European society.

Among scholars, especially historians, two other related but also quite different schools of interpretation developed. The first, which was obviously linked to the Judeophobia narrative but also focused more clearly on Nazi ideology and especially on Adolf Hitler, came to be known as 'intentionalism'. According to this school, Hitler had mobilized deep-seated sentiments in Germany specifically and Christian Europe more generally in order to implement his worldview, which was transformed into German policy once he took over power in 1933. As Hitler saw it, human history was an endless struggle between superior and inferior races. In order to dominate the world, the Aryans had to destroy or subjugate all other inferior races and to conquer an extensive 'living space' in Eastern Europe and Russia, where they would find sufficient resources to flourish and multiply. The Jews, in this worldview, were an anti-race, which both competed for dominance in the world and was entirely parasitical on other races, polluting them with its own blood even as it miraculously preserved its racial purity—a symbol of strength in Hitler's racial universe. As 'intentionalists' saw it, Hitler pursued the policy implications of this worldview throughout his twelve-year rule, seeking to build an empire in the east, subjugate the Slavs, and, especially, most consistently and relentlessly, murder the Jews. In other words, Hitler transformed the 'age-old hatred' of the Jews into an ideology and, once he came into power, into state policy.

A very different interpretation of the dynamics that led to the genocide of the Jews, which came to be known as 'functionalism' or 'structuralism', conceded Hitler's

expansionist, racist, and genocidal predilections, but presented him as an essentially weak dictator whose strength emanated from the competition between different state and Nazi party institution for his favour. Since he was ideologically always the most extreme even within the ranks of the party, and because power in the Third Reich was associated with proximity to the Führer, those individuals and institutions (such as the NSDAP, the SS, or the Wehrmacht) who offered the most radical policies and solutions to real and perceived obstacles on the way to accomplishing Germany's goals were likely to gain more in influence and tilt policy in their favour. In this process of what 'functionalist' historian Hans Mommsen called 'cumulative radicalization', Jewish policies increasingly came to dominate as Germany's goals of conquering and colonizing 'living space' in the East were thwarted by the resistance of the Red Army. Hence, rather that being a policy planned in advance and ruthlessly pursued by Hitler, the 'final solution' was understood as the result of the chaotic structure of the Third Reich and the tendency of its power brokers, in the words of Ian Kershaw, to 'work toward the Führer' as they ruthlessly competed with each other for influence.

More recent interpretations of the Holocaust have made use of both much greater documentation—partly made accessible after the fall of communism and partly thanks to the archival diligence of younger scholars—and of new trends in historical scholarship more generally. Three directions stand out in particular. First, as demonstrated by Timothy Snyder, there has been a growing recognition that the Holocaust took place largely in Eastern Europe, where the majority of the Jews lived and were murdered. Hence it has appeared increasingly important to understand the links between Jews and their communities in those countries and to evaluate the effect of centuries-long interethnic relations on the implementation of genocide by the invading Germans in World War II. Research by such historians such as Jan Grabowski has indeed revealed the widespread collaboration of local populations in the mass murder of the Jews.

Second, as historians have increasingly researched the phenomenon of European imperialism and colonialism, scholars such as Wendy Lower have examined the links between Germany's colonial aspirations in Eastern Europe and Western Russia and the mass murder of the Jews. Indeed, unlike earlier historiography, the Holocaust has been interpreted—perhaps most influentially by Götz Aly—as the most extreme, and the only 'successful' component of a demographic restructuring and settlement plan of vast regions referred to by the Nazis as the *Ostplan* (Eastern Plan). Finally, the growing prominence of genocide studies has had an impact on the understanding of the Holocaust as part of a larger context of modern state-directed mass murder. It has been argued that the Holocaust is comparable in certain respects to other cases ranging from the genocide of the Herero in German Southwest Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the Armenian genocide of World War I, all the way to the post-1945 genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, to name only the most prominent. But it has also been shown that the Holocaust was distinct from these cases in other respects, not least because of the extensive use of extermination camps

as well as the Nazi regime's urge to kill every single Jew it could lay its hands on. Among the most prominent scholars working in this field are Donald Bloxham, Dirk Moses, and Jürgen Zimmerer.

While these larger interpretive frameworks have integrated the Holocaust into the context of modern history as a whole, they have also been criticized as depriving it of its historical and symbolic singularity. A different approach to integrating different perspectives of the event in reconstructing the history of the Holocaust, but also of other cases of mass violence, has put greater emphasis on the experiences, perceptions, and accounts of those subjected to it. The other approaches discussed above largely concern the perpetrators of genocide, be they the ideologues, leaders, or actual killers. From the point of view of historians writing such accounts, what needs to be explained are such questions as decision-making, motivation, and the mechanics of implementing a continent-wide undertaking of mass murder. In this kind of historiography the victims become merely the end product of decisions and actions over which they have no control. But the Holocaust, like all other genocides, was also, indeed primarily, an event in which millions of human beings were murdered, often in the most horrendous manner, and after being subjected to extreme physical and mental torment. Hence some historians, including Saul Friedländer, Alexandra Garbarini, and the present author, have increasingly turned to the diaries and testimonies of the victims in order to recreate their personal human experience, as well as to shed light on aspects of the Holocaust that were of no interest to the perpetrators and therefore cannot be found in the documents they left behind. This approach, rather than providing overarching explanations to the manner in which the Holocaust was organized, or comparing it as a whole to other genocides, seeks both to humanize the experience of the victims by giving them back the voices of which their murderers had deprived them, and to examine such relatively neglected aspects of the event as the social dynamics within Jewish communities exposed to genocide, the relationship between Jews and their Christian neighbours, and the contacts, often erroneously assumed to have been inexistent, between the killers and their victims. In this sense, this approach is concerned with the intimate aspects of communal massacres and one-on-one violence starkly different from the impersonal character of the extermination camps.

Origins

With these changing perspectives and interpretations in mind, let us now try to examine more closely the roots, implementation, and aftermath of the 'final solution'. The deeper origins of the Holocaust can be traced back to two main sources. The first is the transformation of anti-Jewish religious theology, popular mythology, and socioeconomic resentment, into modern anti-Semitism in the last third of the nineteenth century. Modern anti-Semitism stemmed from the combined effects of Jewish emancipation and the rapid industrialization especially of Central Europe, resulting in massive urbanization and displacement of rural populations, the weakening of

traditional elites, and the erosion of the old middle class of small artisans and manufacturers. These were increasingly replaced by heavy industry, chain stores, a growing white collar and service sector, and mass media, all linked together as never before by a dense network of railroads. This 'great transformation', as the renowned economic historian Karl Polanyi called the industrial revolution, had particularly unsettling effects on those who could not adapt to it, even as the expanding urban spaces and communication networks facilitated the emergence of a new type of mass politics. The Jews, who swiftly entered the new economy following their emancipation in the wake of German unification in 1871, came to be identified by those socio-economic sectors left behind as the cause of their misfortune. In that sense, the combination of economic modernization, the expansion of equal rights, and the aggressive nationalism of the new nation-state, constituted a fertile soil for the rise of political anti-Semitism as the vehicle of populist nationalist parties.

The second root of what eventually evolved into Nazi ideology was the emergence of scientific racism throughout Europe. Some of this discourse can be dated back to linguistics and the growing tendency to identity different families of languages with specific ethnic or racial origins, as in the distinction between Indo-European and Semitic languages. Another element was a reading of Charles Darwin's ideas about evolution and the origins of species as providing scientific proof for the inherent and immutable differences between human species or races, which in turn enabled the ranking of some (such as Aryans) as higher than others (such as Africans) on the evolutionary tree. Such notions combined with the concept of racial hygiene, according to which it was possible to breed ever purer, and hence superior races, whose opposite were mixed and therefore inferior or degenerate races. Since such conceptualizations of humanity stemmed from Europe and North America, it is hardly surprising that Indo-European white Aryans came to be viewed as both physically and morally superior to all other races—at least as long as they preserved their racial purity both in their own lands and even more importantly in their growing colonial empires.

Indeed, it was the conquest of colonial empires that encouraged Europeans to perceive themselves as superior, not only militarily and technologically but also culturally and morally, and for some also biologically. But it was also the rule by small European elites over masses of non-European populations that aroused the fear of going native, not only by adapting to other ways of life but also through intermarriage and hence racial mixing, thereby diluting precisely those essential superior qualities: hence the growing obsession with preserving racial purity through categorization and segregation.

Scientific racism and racial hygiene, which asserted a science of human evolution and breeding, therefore became not only part of a legitimate discourse in Europe but also signalled their practitioners' modernity and sophistication. When applied to the Jews, who came to be seen by the anti-Semitic movement as an alien, non-European race, this discourse lent scientific sanction to the politics of resentment, exclusion, and hate. It was the marriage of old prejudices and beliefs, new socioeconomic rage and

fear, and the assertion of irrefutable scientific evidence for immutable racial difference that made modern anti-Semitism into such a powerful, albeit never entirely pervasive, political movement. What was still missing from this potentially explosive mix were two elements: a moment of general crisis that would allow the fear- and hatemongers to appeal to the masses, and the notion that all the seemingly insoluble problems facing society could be solved by removing the Jews.

It was this 'redemptive anti-Semitism', as Saul Friedländer had called it, that became the core of Hitler's worldview and Nazi ideology, and whose early echoes can be found in such statements as that of the late nineteenth-century German historian Heinrich Treitschke, who proclaimed that 'the Jews are our misfortune', words that became the motto of the yellow Nazi rag, *Der Stürmer*. In the wake of Germany's disastrous defeat in World War I, the terrible inflation that followed and destroyed the savings of the middle class, and finally the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, German society found itself swept from one crisis to another. The old imperial regime was gone, the sense of economic security and slow but certain progress had been eroded, national pride had been humiliated, millions of Germans had sacrificed their lives and their health for naught, and a new republican regime had been created which many perceived with suspicion as a foreign imposition controlled by social outsiders. This was a moment in which many angry and fearful Germans sought both assurances of a better future and identification and removal of those who had brought about this unexpected calamity. The 'stab-in-the-back legend', according to which Imperial Germany had not been defeated on the battlefield but rather was betrayed from within by Jews and socialists (who were seen as largely synonymous), became more than just a myth about the shocking collapse of 1918 and provided an explanatory framework for all the miseries of the Weimar Republic. It was this idea that Hitler and his new National Socialist party latched on to: Germany could be great again, but only by liquidating the enemies from within, first and foremost the Jews. Redemption required ruthless social surgery, which Hitler promised to carry out.

Judenpolitik

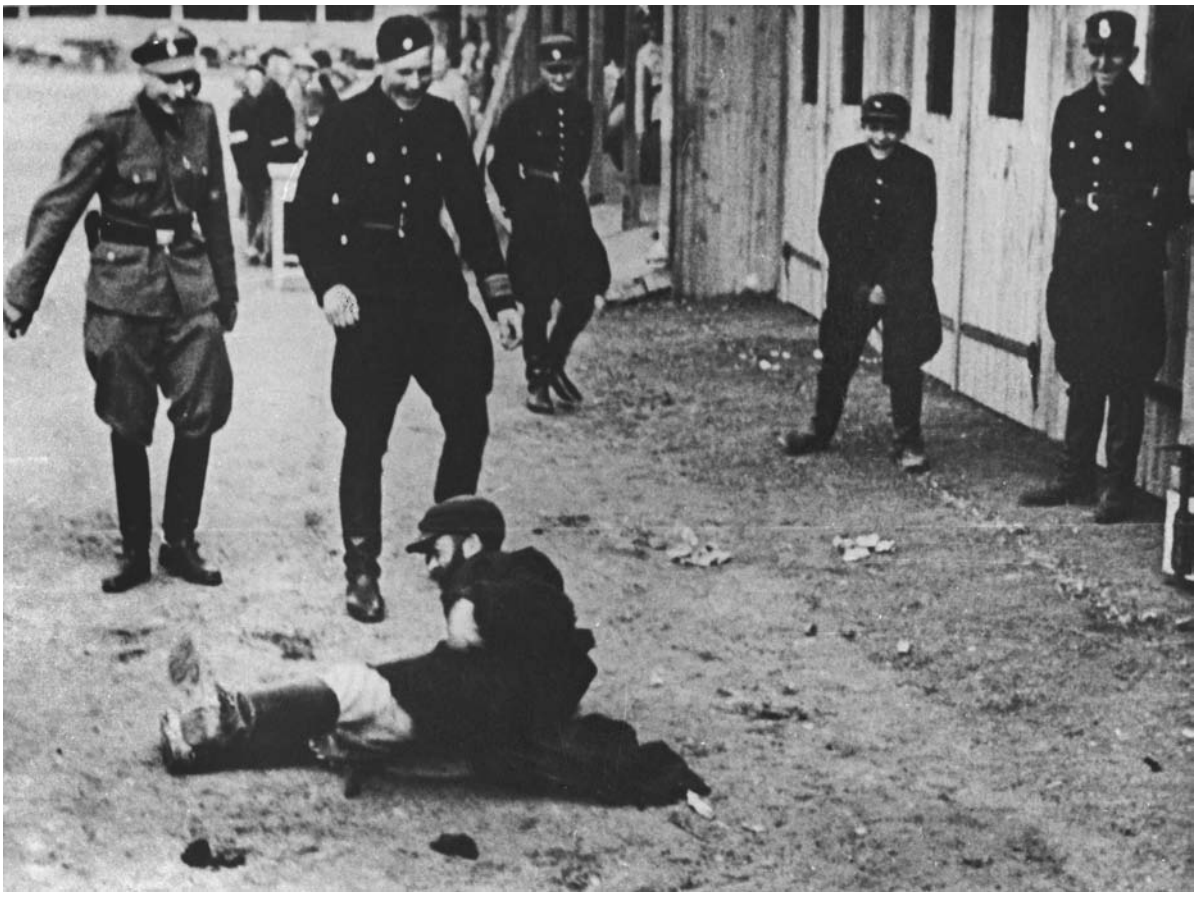
To be sure, anti-Semitism was hardly unique to Germany; but it was only there that a leader dedicated to such a radically redemptive variety of it came to power and immediately set about implementing his ideology. It is also the case that the racist worldview of the Führer and his party dictated policies against other perceived biological threats and 'social outsiders', not least the handicapped and the Sinti (German Roma), as well as homosexuals, the 'work-shy', 'habitual criminals', and other so-called 'asocials'. But in Hitler's own imaginary and consequently for the Nazi state as a whole—as convincingly argued by Peter Longerich—*Judenpolitik* (Jewish policy and policies) played a central role in the consolidation of a *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community) by distinguishing it from its ultimate internal Other, 'the Jew'. The obsession of the regime with 'solving the Jewish question', despite the presence of merely half a million Jewish German citizens, and the links made by the regime

between Germany's redemption as nation and race and bringing misfortune upon the Jews, became an integral part of re-educating the German public and preparing it for the struggle to come. In 1933 Germany might have been just as, or even less anti-Semitic than some other European countries, not least in Eastern Europe. But by the outbreak of the war, especially the younger cohorts of Germans had been exposed to intensive anti-Semitic indoctrination, and had repeatedly observed public displays of humiliation and marginalizing of fellow Jewish citizens. This process arguably disciplined them into viewing Jews as a dispensable and malicious presence that needed to be and indeed was thankfully being removed from their midst. Yet when these same young men and not a few women marched into Eastern Europe they discovered to their horror that millions of other Jews resided there, many of them resembling the anti-Semitic stereotype of the traditional orthodox Jew much more than any they had known before in Germany.

Prewar Nazi Germany engaged in an ongoing assault on its Jewish citizens, leading to their pauperization, marginalization, and immigration. The Nuremberg Laws of

A Jewish family from Memel on the way to a collection point with SS men watching, 23 March 1939.

1935 made Jews into second-class citizens and limited contact between Jews and Aryans (who were defined as non-Jews, since the Nazis could never find a way of 'scientifically' determining who was a Jew and who was an Aryan). A process of Aryanization of Jewish property brought about a vast transfer of wealth from Jews to Germans, and pressures on Jews to leave the country, despite the scarcity of countries willing to take them in, increased greatly after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938. In the course of two days, hundreds of synagogues were burned down, thousands of Jewish-owned businesses were looted and destroyed, close to a hundred Jews were murdered, and tens of thousands of men were incarcerated in concentration camps. By September 1939 half of German Jewry had left, and those who stayed behind were disproportionally elderly and female. But many of the German Jews who left were later captured by the advancing German army and ended up like so many others as Hitler's victims.



Guards amusing themselves in the Łódź Ghetto, 1942.

Germany's *Judenpolitik* in the 1930s suggests that at this point Hitler had not yet conceived any plans of actually perpetrating genocide, but was rather keen on creating a *Judenfrei* (Jew-free) Reich. But his ideological goal of establishing a German colonial empire in the vast 'living space' east of the Reich necessitated an encounter with populations deemed either inferior or dangerous: Slavs and Jews. In this sense, while German policy in the 1930s cannot be deemed genocidal, its inherent dynamic was murderous from the very beginning, since its goals could be accomplished only by ruthless and violent displacement of populations on an unprecedented scale. The outbreak of war soon confronted Germany with a self-imposed dilemma for which it did not have an immediate answer.

The invasion of Poland was premised on a concept that came to be articulated more clearly two years later as '*Vernichtungskrieg*', or war of annihilation. At a closed meeting with his military chiefs on the eve of the attack of 1 September 1939, Hitler reportedly urged them to behave with utter ruthlessness toward the Poles, adding 'Who speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?' This reference to the genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in World War I, likely meant to allay any fears of punishment for the crimes that would ensue, is telling in several ways. While there was in fact talk of prosecuting those responsible in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, neither the new Turkish authorities nor the international organs expected to deal with such cases ended up punishing anyone. To Hitler and his ilk this obviously indicated that the perpetrators of crimes on a national scale could expect impunity, all the more so if they were victorious, which was the only alternative Hitler entertained. At the same time, the Armenian genocide was also the first instance in which an awareness of the need to mobilize the international community against state sponsored mass murder was awakened and a new discourse on crimes against humanity was initiated, however unsuccessfully. Indeed, Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish jurist who eventually coined the word genocide and successfully led the effort to pass the 1948 United Nations resolution against this 'crime of crimes', had begun to articulate his thinking regarding this 'crime without a name' upon learning about the Armenian genocide. In fact, this systematic destruction by an empire of one of its own ethnic and religious minorities—closely observed by German military advisers—was not the first genocide of the twentieth century. That dubious credit was reserved to the genocide of the Herero and Nama people in German Southwest Africa in 1904, where a German general, sent to quell a rebellion by Africans whose lands had been colonized by German settlers, issued his infamous 'extermination order', leading to the killing, lethal expulsion into the desert, or enslavement, of the indigenous population by regular German military forces. Hence Hitler's assertion that no one spoke any longer of such cases, did not mean he had forgotten them; quite on the contrary, he had learned that states can get away with mass murder, a lesson he applied with unprecedented determination during the next six years. That Imperial Germany had perpetrated one of these earlier genocides and had been party to the other could only further encourage the Führer to destroy his real and perceived enemies without any compunction or fear of retribution.

A barefoot child on the street in the Warsaw Ghetto, February 1941.

The rapid destruction of Poland, facilitated by Germany's alliance with the Soviet Union as agreed upon in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which divided the country between the two powers, created the occasion for the Nazi leadership to implement its ideological goals of creating an eastern 'living space' and of 'solving the Jewish question'. But as it turned out, the scale of this undertaking was much greater than expected and the two ideological goals could not easily be pursued at the same time. In their effort to expel Poles from parts of Poland annexed by the Reich and to settle there ethnic Germans coming from the Soviet Union, the Germans had to decide what they should meanwhile do with the over two million Jews living in their newly-conquered territories. The SS *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) formed before the invasion to deal with Germany's political and 'biological' enemies engaged in a great deal of violence, which entailed both decapitating the political and intellectual leadership of the Polish state, and massacring and terrorizing Jews so brutally that even some Wehrmacht generals issued complaints. Yet the bulk of the Jewish population was

Two members of the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish police overseeing the removal of corpses, 1942.

eventually incarcerated in sealed ghettos, the largest of which were in Warsaw and Łódź. It does not appear that at this point there was any consensus within the German leadership as to what should be done with these vast numbers of Jews, who were living in increasingly lethal conditions, deprived of sufficient food, shelter, and sanitation. The general goal was clear: they had to be 'removed' or 'resettled'. But the meanings of these terms changed over time. Initially, there were plans to deport the Jews of Poland to the southeastern corner of that country and let them starve to death there, but that proved impracticable, not least because the German governor of what came to be called the General Government—the parts of German-occupied Poland not directly annexed to the Reich—strongly resisted an influx of Jews in 'his' territory. Following the victorious western campaign of May–June 1940 and the armistice with France, the Germans revived an old Polish idea of deporting the Jews to the French colony of Madagascar, where it was presumed that they would die in great numbers thanks to the local conditions. But not unlike the Polish leaders who had dreamed of ridding

their nation of the Jews in the 1930s, the Germans in fact had no means of transporting millions of Jews across the world to an island off the coast of Africa, certainly not as long as the British navy still ruled the waves.

Mass Murder

The result was that for the next two years about half a million Jews died mostly of 'natural causes' in the ghettos, and most others were increasingly put to work for the German war effort as well as for the private enrichment of the corrupt German administrators of their ghettos. But the impatient wait for a truly 'final solution' of the Jewish question was soon to end. On 22 June 1941, Germany launched operation 'Barbarossa', invading the Soviet Union with over three millions soldiers, accompanied by Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and Italian allies. German commanders were issued with a series of orders that instructed them to sort out and kill political commissars in the Red Army down to the lowest level, to ruthlessly treat all suspicious elements in Soviet territories such as partisans, members of the communist party, and Jews, and to 'live off the land' by taking whatever they needed to sustain themselves from the often poor population they would occupy. Military jurisdiction was curtailed as far as actions against occupied Soviet citizens were concerned. Very few preparations were made to accommodate the expected mass of Red Army POWs that would result from the encirclement tactics of the Wehrmacht. Most ominously, the army high command signed an agreement with the chief of the SS and the police, Heinrich Himmler, to support the actions of the four *Einsatzgruppen* operating behind the fighting troops, made up of some 3,000 men and soon assisted by numerous police battalions, SS formations, and local collaborators. Hitler's self-declared *Vernichtungskrieg* in the east eventually caused the death of close to thirty million Soviet citizens, most of them civilians, including well over three million Red Army POWs, about two-thirds of the Soviet troops captured by the German armed forces. The war in the Soviet Union also very quickly developed into a series of mass murder actions of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their auxiliaries.

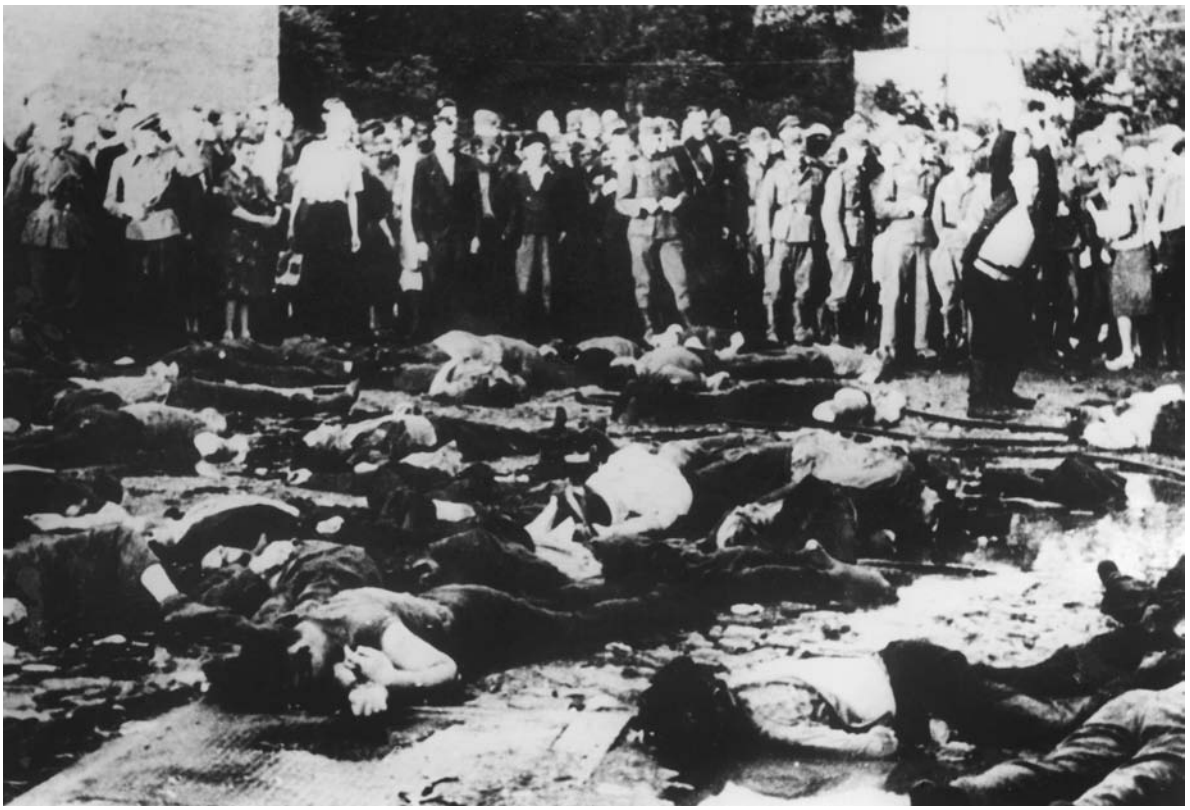
As the Red Army retreated before the invading Wehrmacht, especially the Jewish residents of those parts of Eastern Poland that had come under Soviet occupation in 1939 were subjected to a series of murderous pogroms by their Christian neighbours, Poles and more prominently Ukrainians. These eruptions of local violence were often led by Ukrainian nationalist activists and units trained by the Germans, and encouraged by the *Einsatzgruppen* under command of Himmler's deputy and chief of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), Reinhard Heydrich. In the capital of Eastern Galicia, Lemberg (Lwów, L'viv), some 4,000 Jews were massacred between 30 June and 2 July, with many thousands more butchered in other towns of the region. This initial wave of brutalities and massacres was followed by the imposition of more orderly German Security Police presence in areas occupied by the Germans as the Wehrmacht's spearheads, followed by the mobile murder squads, moved further east into the Soviet Union. Several mass shootings on an unprecedented scale took place

A Jewish victim of the mostly Ukrainian pogrom in Lembreg, July 1941.

7.1 The Division of Poland and Sites of Major Death Camps.

during those early months, including the massacre in Kamieniec Podolski of over 23,000 Jews in late August, the mass shooting of up to 12,000 Jews in Stanisławów in mid-October, and the massacre of over 33,000 Jews in Babi Yar near Kiev in late September. Similarly, by late November *Einsatzgruppe* A, operating in the Baltic states, had murdered close to 140,000 people, mostly Jews, in mass shootings (Map 7.1).

All those killings were carried out by a combination of German policemen of different units and types along with local militias and the German military. They



The pogrom in Kowno; a young Lithuanian butchered Jews with a crowbar, June 1941.

were public affairs viewed by many bystanders and were accompanied by numerous brutalities as well as organized looting and popular plunder of property and valuables. Jews were mostly murdered and buried close to where they lived and their property was largely transferred to the occupiers and to their neighbours.

In the course of this first wave of killing, in which hundreds of thousands were murdered in one-on-one shootings and buried in mass graves throughout Eastern Europe and the western parts of the Soviet Union, new ideas about how a 'final solution to the Jewish question' could be implemented were entertained by the leadership of the Reich. Scholars do not agree on when the plan for such a solution, requested in a letter sent in July 1941 by Hermann Goering, Hitler's deputy, to Heydrich, was decided upon. Christopher Browning has argued that Hitler made the decision in the 'euphoria of victory' over the USSR, some time in the fall of 1941. Christian Gerlach proposes that the decision was made only after the Soviet counter-offensive at the gates of Moscow and the entry of the United States into the war in early December, making it into a world war of the kind that Hitler had warned as early as 1939 would bring about the extermination of the Jews. This decision, he

suggests, was announced shortly thereafter by Heydrich to senior Reich officials at the Wannsee Conference of 29 January 1942. For his part, Peter Longerich perceives this policy as evolving incrementally, alongside the development of ever more efficient killing methods and organization, until it ultimately congealed into a continent-wide genocide in spring 1942, at which time mass deportations to newly built extermination camps began, first from the Warsaw ghetto and later that summer from other parts of Poland and from western Europe.

Whichever interpretation we accept, what we do know is that the construction of murder facilities began by late 1941, with the goal of killing Jews not by mass shooting where they lived but by gas in special camps to which they would be transported by train. Eventually, the Germans built four extermination camps—Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka—dedicated only to mass murder, mostly of Jews, and two camps—Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau—which combined murder facilities with incarceration and forced labour. About half of the estimated 5.5 to 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were gassed in these camps, over a million of them in Auschwitz and almost as many in Treblinka.

In the Polish town of Olkusz Jews were forced to lie face down in the market square all night before their deportation to a death camp, 1942.

Deportation of Jews from the town of Drohobycz in eastern Galicia, 1942.

While the killing of many East European Jews, as well as most Jews deported from southeastern, southern, and western Europe, occurred in the extermination camps, vast numbers of Jews continued to be murdered in their sites of habitation in the east. This kind of killing was very different from the industrial, relatively insulated, and impersonal mass murder in gas chambers, which distinguished the Holocaust from other genocides. Instead, it was intimate, face-to-face mass murder in towns where the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders often knew each other beforehand and where no one was entirely passive or could claim not to have seen, heard, or known about the killing. Performed by rather sparsely staffed stationary outposts of the Security Police scattered throughout Eastern Europe, the killing was facilitated by larger formations of local auxiliary policemen, mostly reconstituted from nationalist militias that emerged following the withdrawal of the Soviets. These militias maintained their own political-ideological agendas, geared toward the creation of independent states cleansed of such undesirable elements as the Jews and other ethno-national minorities (such as most prominently the Poles in Volhynia and Galicia—former Eastern Poland). Hence the genocide of the Jews in Eastern Europe was also part of a major undertaking of ethnic cleansing and nation state formation in which the Germans themselves came to play an auxiliary role. This was most evident in the case of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which devastated the lands of Eastern Poland and facilitated the extraordinarily high percentage of Jewish victims in regions where German police presence was minimal. For instance, in the area of Czortków-Buczacz in eastern Galicia, an outpost of up to thirty German police personnel, assisted by several hundred Ukrainian auxiliaries, murdered about 60,000 Jews, some 95 per cent of the total Jewish population there, mostly in the brief period between fall 1942 and summer 1943.

Communal genocide was not limited to what later became the lands of Western Ukraine. As the historian Jan T. Gross showed in his influential study, *Neighbours*, in July 1941 the ethnic Polish population of the town of Jedwabne murdered up to 1,600 of their Jewish neighbours without any assistance from the Germans. Further research has shown many more such cases in that region of Poland. Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians also participated in the killing of their Jewish neighbours. To be sure, this popular violence should not detract any responsibility from Nazi Germany, which both initiated a continent-wide genocide, and gave license to a wide array of local organizations and individuals to attack, loot, and kill their Jewish neighbours. But for the Jews living in these East European villages, towns and cities, who had coexisted with their Christian neighbours for centuries, the fact that their acquaintances, colleagues, classmates, and friends had turned against them, hunted them down, or delivered them to the Nazi murderers, meant that they experienced the Holocaust not just as a murderous invasion by a foreign enemy but also as a series of communal massacres in a once familiar but now lethally hostile environment.

Mass shooting of Lithuanian Jews by members of the Wehrmacht and the Lithuanian auxiliaries, 1942.

Grey Zones

There is no doubt that the few Jews who survived were in many cases sheltered by Christian neighbours or strangers; it was almost impossible to survive without such help. Moreover, those offering help could expect that the Germans would kill them and their families if they discovered they were hiding Jews, although that did not always happen. At the same time, the motivation for rescue was clearly complex, often ambiguous and inconsistent, and tended to change over time, ranging from exceptional cases of pure altruism to expectations of substantial monetary or material profit. Most Jews saved by Christians also reported being betrayed, at times by the very same people who were hiding them. Jews who ran out of money or valuables could expect to be denounced or killed. Conversely, some local collaborators in the killing of Jews chose to help some Jews, while not a few of those who resisted the Germans for nationalist reasons also hunted down Jews as part of their nationalist agenda. This complexity partly explains the ambivalence of survivors, and why they often took decades before acknowledging their debt to their rescuers, since they also had bitter memories of their own family members being killed or handed over by people they had considered to be friends before the war.

Germany's allies were both instrumental in the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews and in protecting many of their own Jewish citizens, often, although not exclusively, for reasons of their own perceived national interests. Bulgaria handed over Jews living in territories it had annexed thanks to its alliance with Germany, but refused to allow its own 50,000 Jewish Bulgarian citizens to be transported to Auschwitz. Hungary, though ruled by an anti-Semitic dictatorship, and often treating its Jewish citizens harshly, also protected them from deportations until the Germans invaded and deported about 400,000 Jews in the spring and summer of 1944 to Auschwitz, where most of them were gassed, in the last mass murder operation of the Holocaust personally orchestrated by Adolf Eichmann. The Romanians killed more Jews on their own than any other German ally, close to a quarter of a million people, but then protected the Jews in the Regat, the heartland of Romania, from deportations, so that more Jews survived there than in any other East European country. The French, whose collaborationist regime retained police control over its citizens until

SS men chasing down a Jewish man in Amsterdam, 1942.

late 1942, assisted in the deportation of 75,000 Jews, most non-citizens, to Auschwitz, where the vast majority of them were murdered, but then refused to collaborate in the deportation of Jewish French citizens, so that two-thirds of Jews in France survived. Conversely, although the Netherlands had no significant anti-Semitic tradition and its Jewish community was well integrated, during the German occupation the country's administration and police ably assisted the Germans in deporting to their death about three-quarters of the estimated 150,000 Jews living there at the time, even as two-thirds of the up to 30,000 Jews who went into hiding survived.

Considered from the perspective of the Nazi authorities, the mass murder of the Jews was both a major war goal and an impediment to victory. Ideologically, 'removing' the Jews was imperative. But the 'final solution' also diverted significant manpower, organizational knowhow, and facilities from the war effort and deprived Germany of a vast, often highly skilled, and desperately willing labour force, fully aware that only work might spare it from murder. As Germany's fortunes turned and its military losses multiplied, increasing numbers of German workers had to be sent to the front and ever larger quantities of war-materiel had to be produced. It was for this reason that Germany now tried to keep Soviet POWs alive and exploit their labour. Similarly, the Reich now resorted to ever greater recruitment of initially voluntary and subsequently forced labour in occupied territories both in the east and in the West, a policy whose side-effect was to increase local armed resistance by men and women who feared being bombed in German factories by Allied aircraft. Especially in Eastern Europe, where the Jews had traditionally worked as artisans, German industrialists and military agencies were reluctant to allow them to be murdered. The argument between the ideologues, such as Hitler and Himmler, who insisted that the Jews had to be murdered in order for the war to be won, and the realists who argued that the Jews could first help win the war and then be dealt with, ended with the victory of the former. But this goal was also accomplished by making rhetorical use of the Nazi policy of '*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*', or annihilation through work. According to this logic, able-bodied Jews would be employed in essential war production, while other 'useless mouths to feed', such as children, the ill, the handicapped, and the elderly, considered a burden on the economy and depriving German citizens of scarce resources, would be killed. This rhetoric redefined genocide as an economically rational policy rather than ideological insanity at a time of total war. To be sure, once the able-bodied had been worked to the bone, they too became useless eaters and could be murdered in turn.

The ghetto in Łódź, renamed Litzmannstadt by the Germans, was a particularly gruesome example of this logic, into which Jewish communities and their leaders were also drawn in a frantic attempt to survive. The head of the ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski, was determined to save as many of its Jewish inhabitants as possible by mobilizing them to efficiently produce war-materiel for the Germans. In return he delivered to the Germans all those deemed unable to work. In September 1942 Rumkowski demanded from the remaining population of the ghetto, which had numbered over 160,000 people when it was created in April 1940, to 'give me your children', insisting that

their sacrifice would allow others to survive. Indeed, the Łódź Ghetto was the last remaining large concentration of Jews under German control; but in August 1944, shortly before the arrival of the Red Army, the Germans sent all its remaining Jews, including Rumkowski, to the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

Rumkowski serves as one of the examples of Jewish collaboration with the Germans, whose goal was to save 'what could be saved' but whose practice often made it easier for the Germans to murder the Jews. The numerous Jewish councils created by the Germans throughout Eastern Europe were supposed to mediate between Jewish communities and the occupiers; they were normally helped by detachments of Jewish police that provided internal control of the ghettos or Jewish residential districts. But these Jewish police forces, armed with clubs and dressed in uniforms, also helped the German police and its local auxiliaries round up the Jews and deport them. Many policemen acted as they did both in an attempt to save themselves and to protect their families. Eventually, most of them were also murdered, as were members of the Jewish councils. These policemen also became the targets of Jewish resistance groups that formed in many ghettos and camps, since they were seen as traitors and symbolized collaboration with the Germans. At the same time, not a few Jewish policemen ended up joining the resistance once their own families and communities had been murdered.

The motto, 'let us not go like sheep to the slaughter', penned in a pamphlet issued by Abba Kovner, the commander of the Jewish resistance in the Wilno Ghetto at the end of 1941, became the slogan of Jewish resistance everywhere. While small groups of Jewish partisans operated in the forests and at times worked together with Soviet partisans—even as they were often attacked by nationalist underground fighters—the single largest resistance to the Germans erupted in April 1943 in the Warsaw Ghetto, after two-thirds of its population of 300,000 had already been gassed in Treblinka. Although the battle with the Germans, which lasted several weeks, was no more than a minor and hardly costly diversion for the Germans, it had immense symbolic value for the Jews at the time and subsequently; it was also the single largest civil uprising in occupied Europe until that time, to be followed in August 1944 by the Polish uprising in Warsaw, in which many surviving Jews also fought and were killed.

Three other uprisings symbolized the horrible dilemma in which Jews found themselves during the Holocaust. In August 1943 in Treblinka, and in October that year in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibór, the largely Jewish members of the *Sonderkommando* teams, changed with undressing the victims, leading them into the gas chambers, and then disposing of their bodies in crematoria or pyres, rose up against their guards and tried to escape. Most of the rebels in all three uprising were either killed in the ensuing fighting or caught and murdered later on. At least in the case of Birkenau, where the rebels also blew up one of the crematoria facilities, the goal was not only to escape but also to hamper the ongoing mass murder. Yet the moral conundrum of these uprisings was that up to that point, these hundreds of young, strong men had greatly facilitated the operation of industrial murder for the Germans in the vain hope of surviving as long as possible. Since they were also charged with sorting out the victims' belonging and could easily loot them, the *Sonderkommando*

Arrival of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1944.

personnel were also far better fed and dressed than other prisoners, leading an eerily privileged life in the very 'heart of darkness'. To be sure, all members of the *Sonderkommando* knew that sooner or later they too would be murdered; the very fact that they had seen the innermost workings of the extermination system meant that they would never be allowed to live to tell the tale. But their choice to serve in this capacity, at times even seeing the murder of their own family members and communities, made them symbolic of what Primo Levi has called 'the gray zone', to which possibly also such men as Rumkowski and many other members of the Jewish councils and Jewish police can be said to have belonged.

Motivations

In 1996 the American political scientist Daniel Jonah Goldhagen published a study called *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. The book created a stir by arguing that in the Holocaust Germans had been motivated by a unique 'eliminationist' anti-Semitism, which he traced back well into the nineteenth century, and that consequently not only was there never any difficulty finding Germans willing to kill Jews but that many of them actually enjoyed doing so. The book was attacked because it presented anti-Semitism as the sole motivator of the Holocaust and Germany as singularly infected with that disease. As we saw, there were many other reasons for the genocide of the Jews; anti-Semitism in Germany increased dramatically only after Hitler's 'seizure of power', and several other nations were at least as deeply infected. Moreover, many of the perpetrators were not at all German but belonged to local auxiliaries or to allied nations. Another attempt to examine perpetrator motivation was made by the historian Christopher Browning in his 1992 book *Ordinary Men*. Browning argued that the reserve policemen he investigated had pulled the trigger mostly because of peer pressure and obedience to authority, acting therefore in accordance with the findings of social psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. But while some individuals may have had initial qualms about killing innocent women and children, the fact of the matter is that the German police, SS, and even regular military rarely reported difficulties in recruiting men to kill other human beings even when punishment for refusing or evading orders was at most transfer to another unit or to the front. In numerous post-war German judicial investigations and trials one finds that whether the defendants had any inner objections to such actions or not—and their statement many years after the event about such responses cannot be taken at face value—German perpetrators engaged in constant, efficient, and relentless mass murder.

Such actions were normally carried out by Gestapo officials and other police and SS personnel as members of the Security Police; but many other Germans on the ground in towns and cities occupied by the Germans, such as regular soldiers, fire brigade members, administrative staff, technical experts such as engineers, railroad men, and so forth, as well as these men's families, including their wives, girlfriends and mistresses, their children and at times even their parents, witnessed the killings and

occasionally participated in them. Almost half of the victims of the Holocaust were not killed in isolated extermination camps but in mass shootings enacted as public events viewed or heard by all the inhabitants of the towns in which they were carried out, thereby making it impossible for anyone not to engage in one way or another and often enough to profit from what the victims left behind. In other words, we cannot understand the Holocaust merely as a sophisticated, mechanical, and impersonal industrial murder, but also very much as a social phenomenon that for several years, especially in Eastern Europe, created a genocidal routine in which everyone played one role or another. The comforting notion of a bystander majority that was either indifferent or concerned but played no part in the event and (as we would like to think) internally objected to it is largely a post-war fabrication, and is certainly not confirmed by the victims' accounts, which depict them as being hunted down and murdered by all and sundry.

Those leaders of Germany committed to ordering and organizing the genocide, certainly recognized no 'gray zones', no moral ambiguity, and no going back. In his infamous speech in Posen (Poznań) in October 1943, Heinrich Himmler pointed out to an audience of SS officials that what they were carrying out, namely the 'final solution of the Jewish question', was a hard but necessary undertaking. He recognized that some lesser Germans, who did not belong to his 'black order', might find it difficult to understand the need to kill each and every Jew, and might certainly relent from implementing this policy. But as he saw it and drummed into his men, what they were doing was both a 'glorious page' in the annals of history and one that would never be written, not least because the rest of humanity had not yet reached this understanding. The SS was in that sense operating outside of conventional morality, according to which the killing of innocent women and children was a crime and an atrocity, and transforming such acts into a magnificent, courageous act of self-preservation. The ability to carry out the massacre of thousands, said Himmler, and yet to remain unsullied by such acts, was what 'made us strong'.

Toward the end of the war Himmler reconsidered. Thinking about his own personal fate rather than the 'world-historical' events his organization had unleashed, he looked for ways to negotiate with the Allies and was willing to release some concentration camp inmates in return for his personal safety. When it was all over he tried to escape, armed with false papers, was arrested, and before he could be identified committed suicide. It was a wretched end for someone who had claimed to be the creator of a new race of fearless, ruthless warriors. Hitler found his chief executioner's final betrayal despicable; even more than Himmler, the Führer was convinced that victory in war and the murder of the Jews were synonymous. Because Germany had failed, the Aryan race (rather than its indomitable leader) had proven itself unequal to other races, especially the Slavs. This was ideological consistency, according to which might was right. And even after having ordered and orchestrated the single largest genocide in modern history, Hitler was certain that the Reich's defeat was a Jewish victory. As he wrote in his final testament on 29 April 1945, shortly before he committed suicide in his Berlin bunker, the war that destroyed Germany 'was desired

and instigated exclusively by those international statesmen who were either of Jewish descent or worked for Jewish interests'. Yet he remained convinced that 'out of the ruins of our towns and monuments the hatred against those finally responsible whom we have to thank for everything, international Jewry and its helpers, will grow'. The very last sentence of his testament urged 'the leaders of the nation and those under them to scrupulous observance of the laws of race and to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry'.

Many other officials charged with the genocide of the Jews never relented from their belief in the necessity of eradicating that 'race'; even decades after the event, those still alive showed no signs of remorse and a great deal of pride in their accomplishment. Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, wrote in this vein shortly before his execution in 1947; Franz Stangl, commandant of Sobibór and Treblinka, could not bring himself to any statement of remorse while being interviewed by the journalist Gitta Sereny during his trial in the late 1960s. And Adolf Eichmann, the Reich's expert on deportations, whose career spanned the entire period from forcing Austrian Jews into penniless exile in 1938 to deporting hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in 1944, expressed pride in his deeds during his years in Argentina and told the court in Jerusalem in 1962 that 'remorse is for little children'. Rather than a bureaucratic cog in the extermination machine, as shown in great and devastating detail by the philosopher Bettina Stangneth in her study *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, he was a dedicated ideologue who kept trying to kill Jews even after being ordered to stop by his superior Himmler. Indeed, Eichmann built his reputation in the German exile community in post-war Argentina on actually exaggerating his importance in carrying out the genocide of the Jews. What Hannah Arendt had called 'the banality of evil' in her 1963 study of the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, did not apply to Eichmann, or to many other perpetrators, in the sense that she meant, namely that they were 'desk-killers', paper pushers and careerists who had neither a conscience nor any particularly anti-Jewish bias, but merely wanted to further their own careers. If there was any banality here, it was the manner in which they considered the vast crimes they had orchestrated as a perfectly reasonable way to resolve an issue that needed resolution, 'the Jewish question'. That this also helped them advance in the ranks and enhanced their power and influence was naturally pleasing; but what filled them with pride and a sense of accomplishment was that they had succeeded in carrying out the unthinkable and in the process made it routine.

Willi Dressen, the German Federal Republic's former director of the Central Office of the State Justice Administration for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg, calculated that by 2005 altogether 106,000 people had been investigated for National Socialist crimes, of whom only 6,500 were sentenced, with a mere 166 receiving life sentences; this meant, he noted, that 'purely statistically each murder cost ten minutes in prison'. Hence while the organizers of the Holocaust felt pride in their accomplishment, the perpetrators who pulled the trigger were rarely punished and went back to their normal lives after the war; very few of them seem to have felt, and rarely expressed, any personal sense of guilt.

Aftermath

Conversely, the survivors of the genocide experienced liberation as a much more unsettling and ambivalent event than is often assumed. For one thing, liberation from German occupation meant different things to different people and in different geographical locations, and these differences projected onto the memories of those who experienced the event. As the Red Army swept into Eastern and Central Europe in 1944–45, it liberated the few remaining Jews still in hiding, in small partisan groups and forest camps. The Soviets also reached the extermination camps, some of which had been completely destroyed by the Germans, while Auschwitz and Majdanek had been partially evacuated. The Russian-Jewish author Vasily Grossman wrote a harrowing account at the time of his first encounter with what remained of Treblinka and the realization that it was a facility dedicated exclusively to the mass production of corpses. The Polish-Jewish filmmaker Aleksander Ford made the first documentary on the liberation of an extermination camp in Majdanek.

But while for the Jews the arrival of the Red Army meant liberation, for many of their Christian neighbours it spelled reoccupation. In Western Ukraine the fighters of the OUN-UPA continued resisting the Soviets into the early 1950s, and killings of

Jewish children liberated at Auschwitz, February 1945.

Jews by these freedom fighters also went on even after the arrival of the Red Army. The nationalists often identified the Soviets as Jews or as serving Jewish interests, whereas for Jewish survivors the realization that some of the frontline Soviet units were officered by Jews appeared almost miraculous. In Poland the Soviet imposition of a communist regime was perceived by many as Jewish revenge, and the return of Jews who had fled to the Soviet Union evoked fears that they might reclaim their property. Such sentiments, combined with the internalized anti-Semitism of the pre-war era and the perception of Jews as prey during German rule, triggered off violent pogroms, the most notorious of which occurred in Kielce in 1946, in which more than forty Jews were murdered. Such responses to the return of the Jews, and the revival of the myth of 'Jewish Communism' (*Żydokomuna*), led to the mass migration to the West and to Palestine-Israel of the close to a quarter of a million Jews who had returned to Poland in the wake of the Holocaust.

In the West the arriving allied units liberated numerous concentration camps that had been used for most of the regime's existence to incarcerate real and perceived political and ideologically-defined social enemies of Nazism but not Jews. These camps, such as Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, filled with Jews only at the end of the war when the inmates of labour camps in the east were sent on horrific death marches to the West as the Red Army drove ever deeper into German occupied territories. The survivors of these death marches arrived famished, diseased, and exhausted at the German concentration camps just as the administration of these institutions began to disintegrate, and many died there. For the western allies, what they encountered there formed their perception of the Holocaust, or rather their understanding of the nature of Nazi crimes against political resisters and innocent civilians. Just as in the West it was not realized—and has remained quite unknown—that the back of the Wehrmacht was broken in the east by the Red Army, where the vast majority of German troops fought and were killed, so too this encounter with the concentration camps created a false understanding of that the crimes of the Nazis were really about.

This skewed perception was also reflected in the Nuremberg Tribunal of 1945, where the major surviving war criminals of the Nazi regime were tried but the genocide of the Jews played a minor role, and the voices of the survivors were hardly heard. It was only during the Eichmann trial almost two decades later that for the first time over one hundred survivors of the Holocaust testified about their experiences in an internationally reported judicial setting concerned exclusively with the genocide of the Jews. Many of those testimonies had little to do with Eichmann's specific crimes or could not be directly linked to him, which is what aroused the ire of several observers, not least Hannah Arendt. After all, there was little doubt about Eichmann's guilt and responsibility, although arguments about his motivation persist to this day. But as a didactic judicial event, the trial played a major role in bringing the Holocaust into people's consciousness as an event that was both intimately linked to and a crucial component of Nazism and World War II.

When writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt relied a great deal on the then recently published study by Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (even though she had opposed its publication as a reader for Princeton University Press). Hilberg had used the German documents collected for the Nuremberg Tribunal, and like that tribunal believed that using survivor testimonies added a subjective element that was neither historically reliable nor useful in persuading the public that what appeared simply unimaginable had actually taken place. But his book, based on a dissertation he was warned by his advisor would finish off his academic career, became the first of a growing list of scholarly studies in the 1970s and 1980s that finally established the centrality of the Holocaust to the history of the twentieth century and liberated it from the perception that it was 'merely' part of Jewish history. The ongoing reinterpretations and rewritings of the Holocaust today are all based on a premise that did not exist a few decades ago, namely that we cannot understand the history of our time without integrating into it the history of the Holocaust. If there is a warning here, it is that by the same token, we cannot insulate ourselves from the massive crimes against humanity that have already become the mark of the twenty-first century.