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The Holocaust – the Genocide of Europe’s Jews

The genocide of the European Jews, paraphrased by the perpetrators as the “Final Solution of the Jewish question,” called the “Shoah” (“destruction,” “calamity”) by survivors and the victims’ descendants, and for which the distorting term Holocaust (“a completely burnt sacrificial offering”), derived from Greek and popularized in English, has gained currency, was the crime of the 20th century, a crime of such dimensions and pursued with such ruthless intent that it has itself become a metaphor. It is not only the number of at least six million victims murdered in implementing an ideology of racial delusion that makes this genocide singular. Notwithstanding the genocide of the Armenians at the beginning of the century and many other historical instances of genocide, the Holocaust is unprecedented and without example. The murder of the Jews was not a series of excesses, of pogroms, or a suddenly emerging collective murderous frenzy; it was planned in advance, organized thoroughly, and implemented in all its ramifications with cool reasoning. Moreover, it was pursued as *raison d’état* by members of a civilized nation that believed itself to be the most noble of its kind and from this self-conception claimed the right to view others as inferior and exterminate them at will.

Anti-Semitism became state doctrine in Germany with the Nazi victory over democracy in 1933. Its development passed through several stages. Jews were ousted from business and socially excluded. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 deprived Jews of their civil rights and these discriminatory measures were carried out without arousing protest by German citizens, who accepted their formal “legality” as a new “law.” In April 1938 Jews were forced to declare their property and assets, as of May 1938 they were excluded from public tenders, in July a special identity card was introduced, in August a decree was issued forcing them to take on the first names Sarah and Israel, and in October a J was stamped into their passports (a measure initiated by Swiss authorities). Further forms of harassment on a local level were devised by mayors and Nazi Party leaders, such as signs declaring “Jews unwanted,” park benches marked as being “for Arians only,” or banning Jews from using municipal swimming baths. Following the “Anschluss” in March 1938, Austria became an experimental field for the forced emigration of some 200,000 Jews. From August 1938, the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna exerted the necessary pressure, implementing orders issued by the Reich Security Main Office.

The assassination of an official at the German embassy in Paris, an act of desperate protest by a seventeen year old against the deportation of 17,000 Jews of Polish nationality from Germany, then provided the Nazis with the pretext to unleash a pogrom in November 1938. The Nazi regime conjured out of this act a “conspiracy of world Jewry” and seized the opportunity to brutally demonstrate their hostility towards the Jews publicly. The November pogrom can be interpreted as a ritual of public humiliation, as the staged debasement of a minority, against whom widespread prejudice existed and latent hate and envy could be mobilized. The pogrom marked a shift in Nazi policy towards the Jews, which after expulsion now aimed at extermination.

It is a contentious issue whether the Nazi regime intended genocide from the outset (the emigration policy would seem to imply the opposite) or if the regime was locked into a spiraling radicalization that was then accelerated by the war. The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA, Reichssicherheitshauptamt), an organization that merged the Gestapo, Security Service (SD), and the Criminal Police, functioned as the coordinating authority from where Jewish policy was organized, initially as deportation and then as genocide. The pivotal figures were Heinrich Himmler, who in his position as Reichsführer SS was the head of a terror apparatus which included the concentration and extermination camps and the mobile death squads (“Einsatzgruppen”), his subordinate SS officers in the rank of general, such as Reinhard Heydrich and his successor Ernst Kaltenbrunner, both directors of the RSHA, the “Higher SS and Police Leaders” in the occupied territories, and those lower down in the command chain who received orders, such as Eichmann in the SS bureaucracy, or the concentration camp commandants and their guard details.

With the German occupation of Poland a radical persecution of the Jews began there in the fall of 1939 that included forced labor, humiliating means of identification, and concentration into larger cities. The ghettos were places of forced detention and exploitation; they served as relay stations in an enormous population transfer that, at the beginning of the occupation in Poland, was still without clear contours. In early 1940 the ghettos were sealed off from the outside world. From 1941 they were also the destination of deportations from Germany. As of June 1941 the network of ghettos on Polish soil (Warsaw, Łódź and Krakow, Częstochowa, Radom, Kielce, and many more) was rapidly expanded as the German military campaign advanced deeper into Soviet territory, through eastern Poland (formerly under Soviet occupation), Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Byelorussia, and Ukraine, with ghettos being established in Vilnius and Kaunas, Riga, Minsk, and, in August 1942 as one the last ghettos, Lviv. The ghettos were only one stage in the history of the Holocaust; between 1940 and 1943 they were nothing other than giant “waiting halls” for deportation to the extermination camps, vestibules to hell.

The deportation of German Jews, prepared systematically and well organized, began in the fall of 1941. Initially the destinations were the ghettos; later deportations went directly to the extermination camps in the East. Deportation meant the end of any remaining chance of eking out a livelihood, for all assets were now forfeited to the German Reich.

The decision to exterminate the Jews had already been made as German troops invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Although a written order by Hitler does not exist, this was not necessary to commence the extermination. To brief and coordinate the involved Reich authorities, Heydrich invited representatives to a meeting on January 20 1942, held in an SS-owned villa Am Grossen Wannsee in suburban Berlin. In the rank of state secretaries and higher SS officers, the participants represented Reich ministries and central SS administrative departments, as well as the civil administrations of the occupied territories, such as the Generalgouvernement of Poland. The minutes were kept by Adolf Eichmann, who had been placed in charge of the RSHA department IV B 4 (“Jewish Affairs”) at the end of 1939.

Heydrich opened the conference at Wannsee with the announcement that responsibility for policy towards the Jews was now to lie exclusively and without regard to geographic boundaries

with the Reichsführer SS, Heinrich Himmler, and himself as Himmler's authorized representative. The fate intended for at least eleven million Jews was formulated unequivocally:

“In the course of the final solution and under appropriate direction, the Jews are to be utilized for work in the East in a suitable manner. In large labor columns and separated by sexes, Jews capable of working will be dispatched to these regions to build roads, and in the process a large number of them will undoubtedly drop out by way of natural attrition. Those who ultimately should possibly get by will have to be given suitable treatment because they unquestionably represent the most resistant segments and therefore constitute a natural elite that, if allowed to go free, would turn into a germ cell of renewed Jewish revival.”

Because the genocide of the Jews was on the agenda, the conference of January 20 1942 is often misunderstood as the day on which the decision to commence the Holocaust was made. Aside from the fact that reaching agreement on how to exterminate millions of lives would have exceeded the competence of the conference participants, the death squads had long begun their horrific work. Nevertheless, the protocol of the Wannsee Conference is a key document of the Holocaust due to the fact that it clearly demonstrates that the Nazi regime intended to murder eleven million Jews in Europe. The “Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the SD” had been in action since June 1941, shadowing the German advance into the Soviet Union. The death squads – totaling 3,000 men in four “Einsatzgruppen” – were ordered to liquidate potential opponents in the Baltic countries, Byelorussia, Ukraine, and the Crimea. This meant predominantly Jews and they were the largest victim group. Between June 1941 and April 1942 these murderers, recruited from the SS and the police, killed almost 56,000 persons. Their tactics included pogroms incited with the aid of local collaborators and above all mass executions. In Lithuania and Latvia, in Byelorussia and Ukraine, and in other occupied areas, the German murderers found many willing accomplices in executing the Holocaust, banding together to form indigenous “defense units,” or venting their hatred of Jews spontaneously.

In Babi Yar, a ravine on the outskirts of Kiev, 33,771 Jews were shot over two days at the end of September 1941; at Paneriai, an outer suburb of Vilnius, 60-70,000 persons were massacred. Further mass execution sites were set up near Riga. Shooting pits were the hallmark of the Nazi sphere of control in Eastern Europe. In the spring of 1943 a special SS commando unit was formed to remove all traces of evidence. Jews were forced to exhume and burn the corpses before they themselves were then executed.

In the meantime, the murder methods had been refined and improved. Shooting was simply too slow and the psychological stress it placed on the murderers was proving overwhelming. In the search for even more efficient tools of murder, the personnel who had been involved in murdering disabled and mentally-ill persons during the “Euthanasia” program of 1939-40 were called upon to lend their experience and expertise: poison gas was to be now used. The carbon monoxide produced by the engines of “gassing vans” was employed; these were specially refitted heavy vehicles whose exhaust fumes were redirected into a sealed compartment crammed with victims. After a short journey the corpses were tipped directly into a mass grave. Gassing vans were employed by the Einsatzgruppen in Byelorussia and Serbia; in Chelmno they served as the lethal machinery for the extermination camp.

Mid-1942 saw the start of “Operation Reinhardt,” the goal of which was to kill all the Jews living in ghettos on Polish soil and performing forced labor for the German armaments industry. Three extermination camps were erected, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Most of the ghetto inhabitants perished in these camps. In Bia?ystok and Warsaw despairing Jews resisted their deportation from the ghettos heroically, if futilely, forcing German troops to eventually deploy heavy weapons to clear the ghettos.

In summer 1941, Himmler ordered the commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp to develop a semi-industrial method of killing, a step that ushered in the final phase of mass murder. In September 1941, the first trial run with the toxic agent “Zyklon B” (cyanide) was carried out in the base camp (Auschwitz I). A prussic acid impregnated onto diatomaceous earth that evolved gaseous hydrogen cyanide when exposed to air; the insecticide was easily transported and could be handled by the murderers without risk. Beginning in spring 1942, this silent and swift method of mass murder was practiced in specially constructed gas chambers (which were then rebuilt and extended several times) at Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Arriving from throughout Europe, the rail transports ended their journey at a ramp where the “selections” took place immediately: those deportees able to work were kept back while all others – as a rule 90 per cent of arrivals – were sent directly to the gas chambers. In Auschwitz too, the SS attempted to remove any traces of evidence, blowing up gas chambers and crematoria in fall 1944.

One million victims are documented for Auschwitz; 900,000 were killed in Treblinka between July 1942 and August 1943; 600,000 in Belzec, 250,000 in Sobibor, 152,000 in Chelmno, and at least 60,000 in Lublin-Majdanek. The atavistic methods of mass murder by pogrom and massacre, by execution at the edge of pits which the victims were forced to dig beforehand, and by slaughter, sadistic in all its forms, remained the order of the day despite the extermination camps. The murderers called their actions “Operations” and gave them codenames like “Harvest Festival.” In the camps Trawniki, Poniatowa, and Majdanek, over 40,000 Jews were murdered at the beginning of November 1943 under this slogan.

The factors contributing to this “break with civilization” (“Zivilisationsbruch”) have a long history, though one which explains only the ideological preconditions and not the horrific ramifications of implementing ostracizing prejudices and hostile constructs against the Jewish minority. There had been discussion in Germany about “solving the Jewish question” since the 1840s. In the context of a racial anti-Semitism that based its arguments on a pseudo-scientific biological determinism and synthesized the older religious hostility of the Christian Churches, first the exclusion of the Jewish minority was propagated and then the retraction of Jewish emancipation, their civil and legal equality, demanded. What remained politically ineffectual despite all the vituperative lampooning and the torrents of uproar, despite the formation of anti-Semitic political parties and agitation characteristic of the 19th century, and what in all its social explosiveness was hardly comparable to the openly aggressive animosity against Jews in Poland and Russia, developed in a situation of social and political frustration after the First World War in Germany from being part of the National Socialist ideology into a tenet promising salvation propagated by Hitler’s party and became state doctrine in 1933.

The notion of an “eliminary anti-Semitism” inherent to Germans, which was formulated to reinforce the thesis of the logical consistency of genocide as the inevitable outcome of German

history, is unfounded: animosity towards Jews was far more prevalent in other countries and its manifestations more violent. This though only makes it more difficult to explain the Holocaust. Deficient social integration and competence (leading to the “authoritarian personality”), a susceptibility to authoritarian political and legal thinking, belief in the promises of national salvation held out by Hitler’s dictatorship, a lack of conviction in defending the rule of law, compensated with the notion of belonging to a “master race” – these are all elements which pertain to an explanation, along with the theory of the gradual radicalization of Nazi rule or the model of a brutal population policy based on racism that willingly accepted the annihilating movement of people. Historians are still embroiled in debate on the intention of the genocide (what role did the ideology of anti-Semitism play? When was it decided to implement genocide? Did an order to exterminate need be issued in written form?) and its function in the political structures of the Nazi dictatorship. There is no rational explanation for the genocide of the Jews.

Berlin, May 2006

First published in:

Deutsche Geschichte im 20. Jh.: Nationalsozialismus, Holocaust, Widerstand und Exil 1933-1945 Online, De Gruyter/
K.G. Saur (2006–2022)