

## The Role Of Academics And Professionals In The Final Solution

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Q- Can you describe the way you and your colleague Goetz Aly understand how the Final Solution occurred? What brought it into being?

H- We started our research with a certain discontent about the explanation for the Final Solution because everybody referred to antisemitism as a central motive for the decision. Our hypothesis was different.

First of all, we dealt mainly with German policy in occupied Poland. We found there had been a very large debate on the structural problems of Poland — the vicious circle of poverty and over-population. By the way, over-population was one of the central problems analyzed, not only by the Germans, but also by scholars of other countries. What was specific to the Germans was the means they proposed to solve this problem.

Several scholars — sociologists, space planners, economists, agricultural planners, and historians — in their reports on Poland, proposed as one crucial precondition for making that country an effective part of the German economy lower the population rate.

Our hypothesis was that this was a crucial contribution to the decision for the Final Solution. They didn't act just because they were antisemites, although many of them were. They were mainly driven by a utopian idea of a modern efficient economy to make Poland an efficient part of greater Europe, ruled by the Germans. The main aim of these planners and experts was not to solve the "Jewish Question" but excluding the Jews from the economy was just a

tool for realizing their economic projects. In their perspective, they had to exclude part of the population from the economy, and even out of society, because in their calculations there were too many people, and Nazi racial antisemitism provided the criteria of who to select to be pushed out of society. Of course, they knew what happened to the Jews because they were in the occupied territories and saw the ghettos and the deportations. So it wasn't that they didn't realize what they were actually proposing: they did it deliberately. They didn't say directly that the Jews should be murdered, only that the Jews would no longer be part of the Polish economy.

Another example of their rationalization plans for the Polish economy was the suggestion of putting two or three Jewish shops together in an attempt to make one Polish shop, or to make one ethnic German shop out of two or three, or even five Jewish or non-Jewish Polish shops, or farms, or workshops. They calculated it even down to the small details and combined it with their ethnic policy and resettlement policy for ethnic Germans to replace whole Jewish populations and a large part of the non-Jewish Polish population in the annexed territory by ethnic Germans.

This crucial contribution from experts had never been taken into consideration before. We thought that the combination of economic planning and social engineering with a racial policy was a dangerous mixture.

Q- Can you show a direct influence of such experts' reports in influencing the decision for the Final Solution?

H- I think one has to prove such a connection for each paper or report written by one of these scholars. Generally, you can say that there is a correlation between the proposals made by the scholars and the arguments, for instance, of Hans Frank (the General Governor of occupied Poland), or other high-ranking German politicians at that time. For instance, the expert opinion of a certain Reichskuratorium for economic efficiency reported on the Warsaw ghetto, and proposed as one possible solution to use the ghetto as a means

to destroy or annihilate the Jewish people. This expert's opinion was discussed three times in governmental meetings in the Generalgouvernement. In this specific case it is very clear that the expert's opinion was taken into consideration. But perhaps other scholars just wrote an article, and we'll never know if Himmler read it or not, or if he changed his mind on the basis of the article. But we know, for instance, that one of Himmler's speeches about the resettlement policy — in which he made some central remarks on the Jews — was based on a paper prepared by Konrad Meyer, the head of the main office for planning, under Himmler's authority. Meyer provided him with the plans for resettlement and pushing the Jews out of the occupied territories, and gave him the main statistical information and guidelines of the German plans, and Himmler referred to it directly in his speeches. But of course, there are other plans in which you don't have this direct connection. You will never know if they spoke about it or not, because many conversations were not written down, or there are no protocols that mention specific reports, and in many cases the written documents were destroyed. We did find proof for the first time the "Jewish Question" was linked with the debate on over-population and the structural problems of the Polish economy in 1938 — before the war. The topic of over-population was worked on at the Institute for the Eastern European Economy, and also by Professor Werner Conze at the University of Koenigsberg at same time. This combination of the anti-Jewish policy and proposals for overcoming the structural crisis in Eastern Europe quickly became "common sense" among the scholarly community all over Germany.

Q- In your opinion then, there was no Final Solution planned somewhere in the high ranks, but it was a few local processes that took place, some of them professional, some of them ideological; somehow they went together, but it was not some grand plan.

H- No, I think a grand plan did not exist from the very beginning, because otherwise it doesn't make any sense to force the Jews to emigrate from Germany and Austria, for instance, and to spread them all over Europe or all over the world only to re-collect them later on.

Q- You mean that in the years 1941 to 1943 in the Generalgouvernement or other places there was no general plan that came from up above, from Hitler or Himmler, but rather it was initiated by planners who pushed it from the bottom up? That there was no Final Solution, but just economic solutions to various problems in parts of Europe?

H- No, I think what the experts did was make proposals, and I think this is a crucial element about the a dictatorship or police state and its functioning. The usual idea we have is that the dictator gives the orders and all the people have no choice but to obey. In this case, I think there was a very complicated relationship between the leaders and the Fuehrer — Hitler — and this middle range of academics, and even public opinion. Public opinion was a very important factor and the superiors really cared about it. The S.D. always tried to find out what people were thinking, what the rumors were, and so on; they tried to find out exactly how far they could go.

But, to come back to the academics, I think they worked out proposals and made plans with a general guideline from above — or maybe it was not a guideline — but they knew which type of plan had the best chance of being accepted. In an antisemitic state with anti-Jewish ideologies, proposals that calculated the murder of the Jews would have a chance of being accepted. Or at least, this was not something that according to their criteria would be a hindrance against such a plan. Of course it didn't happen accidentally, but I think it was worked out in a more detailed way region by region and branch by branch, for instance, to solve different problems of the ghetto economy which was created by the Germans.

Or in another example, to solve the contradictions between resettlement policy toward the ethnic Germans, and the anti-Jewish policy. There were permanent contradictions in the different aims the Nazis tried to realize. I think the contribution of these experts was to work out concrete proposals to solve certain self-made problems, for certain branches, or for certain regions. Of

course, the superiors had to agree and accept these plans. It was not just middle-range academics who decided in which direction the whole history would go. But step by step they worked out plans that were very different from each other but had one common denominator — it always went against the Jews. Both an agreement from above and developing plans from below were necessary.

Q- Was there, in any case, a conflict between the professional economic considerations and the ideological ones? If you take the Jewish population in different places, they're not homogeneous, and it seems as if the Jews were seen as one category. Was there any place in which one could see that they perceived differences among the Jewish populations?

H- No, in practice German policy did not make differences. There were very, very few exceptions. In the professional papers concerning the Eastern European economy, they considered the "Jewish sector" of the economy as very underdeveloped, very poor, very irrational, inefficient, and so they saw it as a possibility to gain space — planning space — if you want, by excluding the Jews from society, and from the economy first of all.

Of course there were differences, and they did recognize that certain shops owned by Jews were very well off and others less so, and other Jews had no shops at all, but traded in the market or something like that. But the Jews were, on an economic level, made to appear all the same as far as German policy went. By being forced into the ghettos, the Jews had no possibility of maintaining their families and earning their livings.

At the End of the War: Continuing the Anti-Jewish Policy

Q- Why did they maintain this murderous policy towards the Jews even when it later became uneconomical to do so, when they were already losing the war?

H- First of all, you can't explain the deportation of every single Jew solely by economic criteria. Why, for example, in the farthest Greek island did they search for the Jews in order to deport them?

However, the general consideration was economic. Most parts of the Eastern European economy — and what they saw as the Jewish sector of the economy, or even the production in the ghettos — was inefficient compared to German criteria. They could have used the same raw material in a more efficient way using machinery, with fewer people to maintain, whereas in the ghettos, they employed many more workers but on a very low level. It was slave labor that didn't cost anything, but still they had to maintain the workers, and maybe up to a certain point, their families as well. Another point is that we consider the development of the Final Solution was not made when the Germans faced the “Jewish question” in Western Europe, but rather when they faced the “Jewish” in Eastern Europe, in Poland, after the beginning of the war. In Poland there were millions of Jews, not hundreds of thousands as in Germany. Certain “solutions,” for example, mass emigration, were no longer possible. They didn't try to force Polish Jews to emigrate, even though beforehand they had forced German Jews to do so.

In Western Europe, they tried to profit from expropriating the Jews and to reinforce either the German economy or the economy in the occupied Western European countries mainly in favor of the Germans, of course, but also to a certain degree in favor of the local population.

Q- But still, for example, take the case of Hungarian Jewry: the Germans in 1944 knew that they were going to lose the war. It's not rational to take trains and invest money and other resources in deporting hundreds of thousands of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz. Doesn't this contradict the way of thinking about the Jews only from an economical point of view?

H- In 1944, the war was lost more or less anyway, and then they took into consideration that maybe the Jews would take revenge if any survived. It was

not just that they took the trains in order to deport the Jews instead of transporting arms to the front, but they combined it, for instance, with the resettlement and the exchange of labor forces in the first labor camps in Germany. I don't want to go into detail on this, however. I think, too, that at a certain point there was also this argument that now it had to continue until the bitter end. In that situation, it was understood that the crimes were so immense that they couldn't hope that anyone would forget the millions who had been killed up to that point, even if they stopped the killing.

The “Functional Rationality” of the Professionals

Q- You said that from 1938, we can see that people in various professions were applying what they had learned, yet their plans and projects seem — from the Western liberal humanistic viewpoint — to be totally irrational. How did it originate?

H- What kind of irrationality? I think it's actually a very functional rationality. They just looked at their alleged economic problems — and they described the economy in Eastern Europe as underdeveloped, lacking capital; old-fashioned and inefficient, with a structural problem because of overpopulation (in German terms). According to their criteria or their perspective at that time, the overpopulation in the agricultural regions of Eastern Europe, as well as in the main part of Eastern Europe, was so immense that there was no surplus to be drawn from this economy. People maintained their families on a very low level and didn't produce a surplus that could be invested to build up industry or a modern economy. They described it as a vicious circle.

What is very interesting is how they dealt with similar problems after the war.

We wrote about one of the economists who had been a consultant in the Generalgouvernement. In Poland he had proposed to build up the industry by excluding Jews from the economy, to rationalize, and combine a few inefficient shops in order to make “healthy” Polish shops. And after the war, in October 1945, this same scholar worked for the British occupation

government in Western Germany. He wrote a proposal for rebuilding greater Hamburg in which he considered greater Hamburg or Germany — Western Germany — to be overpopulated, and to have the same structural problems as in Poland. There were very few machines and a lack of capital, and overpopulation in relation to the means of production, because of the refugees. He was suggesting that if we employ, let's say 75%, or the whole population, on a very low level, since they would not be able to produce a surplus, we would never emerge from the crisis. But you have to maintain all of them, even though they don't work efficiently. So it would be better to employ half the population on an efficient level and to provide them with the proper means of production; and they can then maintain or feed the other half of the population up to the point where the situation improves. One could also choose another approach, employing 75% of the population on a middle range level, and let the other 25% die. But, he said, we wouldn't choose this approach because we can't make a selection.

This is a very interesting point — that he lacked the criteria for selection. By contrast, in occupied Poland he had the racial criteria for selection.

In postwar Germany, it was also possible to request foreign capital — Marshall Plan money — to invest in the underdeveloped economy. In occupied Poland, the Germans didn't want to apply German capital to build up industry. They had made the general decision that the capital to build up industry in Poland (or in Eastern Europe in general) had to be drawn out of the society itself. And if it didn't work in the traditional way, because agriculture in Poland didn't produce an adequate surplus, then other solutions had to be tried. In Poland they could select part of the population for destruction — but the same scholar refused to employ that method after the war towards the German citizens.

The potential for Another Holocaust

Q- In an article in Yad Vashem Studies, you summarized it, “in this sense we should not see the Holocaust as returning to barbarism, or not as the



breakdown of civilization or an Asiatic deed, as a possibility that certainly is/could be/has a potential in modern civilization." What do you mean?

H- This so-called solution, calculations, and expert opinions are not so far from the problems scholars of today are thinking about or trying to solve in "underdeveloped" countries. Our research was about a specific situation, and a specific means the Germans applied in Eastern Europe. The main point is that there was no taboo on calculating the death of millions of people in order to create what they considered to be a splendid future for greater Europe. There was no check to say it was not the task of an economist to maintain part of the population on the best possible level, but rather to maintain the whole population. Their considerations were to build up an efficient economy, and under the conditions in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1930s and early 1940s, they considered it acceptable to calculate mass murder as a means of modernizing the economy.

What we tried to emphasize in the Yad Vashem Studies article is that it's not that far from economic considerations today. I don't want to suggest this is being done today in underdeveloped countries, but there are many disturbing points that should make us reconsider this way of thinking. It was very functional and merciless; the lives of people had very low value, and we know that there are certain countries today where life has a low value, even if one doesn't calculate the possibility of mass murder in order to modernize the economy. The way of thinking is not that different — accepting the hunger and starvation of many people as something you can't do anything about. I don't want to compare this to the Holocaust because I think it's really a different matter. Nevertheless, you would be underestimating these ideas if you think they are something from the Middle Ages. They're here in the middle of our Twentieth Century. It's a crime of the Twentieth Century, planned in Germany and realized in Europe, not in Asia, as suggested by Nolte's reference to an "Asian deed".

Using Genocide to Solve Economic Problems

Q- As far as I know, there was no other total genocide meant to solve economic problems. If this was the only place where there was such a genocide, maybe there is something else found only there and not in other places — perhaps antisemitism, or racial antisemitism — that should be emphasized more. We know that in other places there's a variety of means to solve economic problems, but without using genocide.

H- Of course you can't separate the economic considerations from the long history of antisemitism, and as I said, it was the dangerous mixture of the two which made this specific genocide possible. Maybe in our book we overemphasized the economic plans and projects because they had not been taken into consideration up to that point, but had been constantly overlooked. You can't explain whether the Holocaust was possible only as a result of the history of antisemitism, because then you have to answer the question, why didn't it happen earlier? Or why didn't it happen, for instance, in countries other than Germany, where there was also very vigorous antisemitism?

It cannot be said that it was an economic argument and nothing else, but rather the dangerous combination of the racial or anti-Jewish policy with economic arguments and motives. A very important factor was the utopian thinking of the very young experts who were convinced that they were the ones who would change the world, or at least Europe. This was their great chance — they thought they would live to see what would come out of their wonderful projects — to change a whole continent — not just for twelve years, but for the future in general.

It also must be taken into consideration how ordinary Germans reacted to all this. It was not just an understanding between the academics and their superiors and political leaders, but also had a kind of consent from the German population. If you want to put it just in two categories, I think you can't separate the rational or economic arguments from the antisemitism.

Expelling Jews from Prewar German Society

Q- To continue in another area, Jews were very much involved in the elite of German society during the Weimar Republic — in the press, the arts, academia, some economic aspects — yet it seems that it was very easy to expel them from German society altogether during the course of a few years in the 1930s.

H- It worked in a very few years, but with an enormous propaganda effort as well. I think it has also to do with the same attitude they had towards Eastern Europe. One main point was to redistribute resources and opportunities in society. I wouldn't say this explains how it could happen so fast, but I think it was an important factor, at least, to give certain privileges to the non-Jewish Germans, to the disadvantage of the Jews. For instance, the scholars we spoke about were very young. Most of them studied during the 1920s or early 1930s, with the prospect of being unemployed afterwards. The German law for the restoration of the professional civil service of April 1933 threw the Jews, communists, and socialists out of their jobs in administration and state affairs. This law was one of the first career opportunities for the young professionals, because they were able to take over the positions that Jews had beforehand. The whole question of "Aryanization" works that way.

There was of course an enormous amount of antisemitic propaganda, and at the beginning, an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Many Germans had, or thought they had, good reason to agree with the new government, and to take advantage of it, because unemployment was reduced, and they could take over certain jobs, or shops, or property from the Jews. It worked like that even throughout the first years of the war, when the non-Jewish population was proud of what had come out of Germany. They had felt so humiliated after World War I, as we can see from the diaries of Viktor Klemperer who describes it more as opportunism than as an initiative taken over by "ordinary Germans." He says that they agreed with the anti-Jewish policy, but it was not their main concern. They didn't protest because for other reasons they found the new government at least acceptable, or else they actually agreed with it, or were even happy about it. Later on, according to Klemperer, the really

vigorous and brutal antisemitism came out during the last years of the war, when Germany was no longer successful. At that point many Germans were afraid that if Germany lost the war, the Jews or the Allies or whoever would treat them the same way they treated the Jews, and so they stuck to their government because they were afraid.

Q- You said that German society profited from the Jews being expelled from their society. But wouldn't you then conclude that Jews were not really integrated into German society before 1933, so it was very easy to expel them after 1933?

H- I'm not sure about that, because the Jews considered themselves to be part of German society, and not just of another religion. For many of them, their main identity was to be German and not Jewish.

Q- Some people comment that it was a one-sided love affair.

H- Yes, a love affair, because I think they were accepted in large parts of the society; in other parts of society they were still considered to be a problem, or aliens, or it was embarrassing to be Jewish, or to marry a Jew, or something like that. But if you use the term "love affair," I really don't know who of the non-Jewish Germans really loved the Jews as Jews, in the same way as many of the German Jews loved Germany and suffered very much from being thrown out of society. Who really defended them? Very, very few people, and mostly not on some ideological basis, but very often on the basis of personal relationships.

Q- Do you think there was something special in the relationship between Germans and Jews from the end of the nineteenth century and during the Weimar Republic that in one way or another led to the events of the late 1930s and the 1940s?

H- Of course there is a continuity, but I think not in a way there were no alternatives. Of course, antisemitism and the Nazi movement didn't just fall from the sky, but had its roots in German society and in the history of antisemitism in Germany. But I do think there were alternatives. At this point we can say it was an illusion to believe that the Nazis wouldn't remain in power for long. This is what kept many Jews from emigrating, because they thought, governments were coming and going, so why not the Nazi government as well? At the very beginning, during the first weeks and months there was this illusion. And I think there was a real chance that Nazi rule wouldn't have lasted twelve years but maybe only until 1934.

You can see the continuity in the history of antisemitism and also perhaps in certain authoritarian tendencies in German society, but it also required the policy of intimidation and terror for the Nazi government to remain in power.

You can see this throughout the 1930s, but with regard to some questions and political problems, the Nazi government attempted certain solutions, and only continued with them after seeing how well they worked. For instance, with regard to the euthanasia program, they tried to find out if people would accept their "unfit" relatives being killed. Would they feel released to be rid of them, or would they really protest against it? Also, for instance — and I don't want to over-emphasize this — there was a very interesting reaction towards the non-Jewish wives of Jewish husbands who protested in the Rosenstrasse in February 1943 and succeeded in getting their husbands released. It was the consequence of a very complicated and very specific political situation at that moment of the war. But it was also a ray of hope. If this had happened more often, you can't know what might have resulted. I don't know if the Germans really had the ability to force the government to resign by public protest. Maybe there would have had to be a real riot to do this, or maybe only the army could have forced the government to act differently. This is speculation, but I think it was not a one way street.

The Possibility of Protest Against the Nazi Regime

Q- Vis-a-vis the euthanasia program and the protest, it seems there were some ways to protest, but about the Jews or the Jewish faith, almost none of the Germans protested, not even the churches. I ask again because it really bothers me ;I think one should be bothered by it. How could you explain this indifference or apathy towards the fate of the Jews after it seemed that they were so integrated — not from the ideologists who held a burning hatred toward the Jews, nor from the intelligentsia, who saw how they could solve the European economic problems — but from the ordinary Germans, when we see that at other times they really protested.

H- I don't know if indifference is not just an underestimation of what they felt; maybe it was a silent consent. Not every one of them would have liked to kill a Jew, or endeavor to kill Jews, but maybe they agreed that somebody else — their government, at least — would push the Jews out, and they didn't want to know more than that. We all know they had the possibility of knowing what happened in the Eastern European death camps, but they preferred not to know too much about it.

They didn't protest against the Jews being excluded from German society, but this doesn't mean it was indifference. Everybody had "his" Jew he had had some trouble with, and perhaps they also had some troubles with their non-Jewish neighbors — but they could hardly call for the exclusion and murder of the non-Jewish neighbors. However, they could ask for the exclusion and finally killing of the Jewish neighbors. If you read the research done about how antisemitism worked in small German towns, for instance, it's really a very serious question. In a tiny town of 3,000 or 4,000 people, there were a handful of Jewish shopkeepers who were integrated in that town, even for several generations, or hundreds of years, and yet the people turned against them. In the large cities, Jews were quite, or relatively, safe. But even there, the Germans turned against the Jews they knew, and with whom their children went to school. Thus I think it was not only indifference. Even though some didn't care, there were also many who lined up in the street to see how the Jews had to go to the station to leave the little town. And yet, imagine this in

any little town wherever in the world — there is something more at work here than indifference. I suppose it was more like a green light: now it was allowed to attack the Jews. If they couldn't attack everybody they'd have liked to attack, at least they could now attack the Jews, and so they did. Or they didn't protest when somebody else attacked the Jews and did the job for them.

Q – Thank you very much.

**Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.**