

German Society, Hitler and the “Final Solution”

Excerpt from interview with Professor Shulamit Volkov

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Q- Was the “Final Solution” ultimately a project undertaken by the German nation as a whole? – that is, did everyone know and were there many participants, either directly or indirectly?

V- In some way, I would say that its a case of collective responsibility, but not necessarily because everyone participated in it. Where my opinion differs from that of Goldhagen is not in the question of responsibility, but concerning his description of the Germans as a single group of active, radical antisemites, marching on happily, finally about to do what they had always wanted to do: to kill the Jews. I think this was not the case. There was a minority of radicals who willingly and happily, so to speak, joined in the project of killing as many Jews as possible. But there was a majority of people who didn't care, who were not interested, who chose not to see what they didn't want to see – as people do everywhere – people who chose not to know, and who participated if necessary, but by no means with any kind of glee or enthusiasm.

Now, finally, when it comes to the question of responsibility, perhaps it doesn't matter so much. And this question, I believe, is even more essential for me than it is for Goldhagen, because, after all, my belief is that they had a choice. I believe that the situation in which they lived, and the tradition they had developed, created a choice for them in the matter of how, or whether, to live with the Jews, and – facing such a choice – they chose the path of extermination. This is what makes it so awful. Goldhagen does not seem to see that such a choice ever existed. He describes a development that was almost inevitable: that one was simply led to this situation by a tradition,

beginning with what one heard at home, in school, in ones surrounding environment, etc. Germans, according to Goldhagen, were in fact antisemitic, whether they wanted to be or not. I don't agree that this was the case.

Q- How does your approach differ from that of Hans Mommsen, who claims that the “Final Solution” was the result of a constant escalation stemming from the perpetual search for solutions which, perpetually failed to solve the problems?

V- Yes, I think that Mommsen takes this thesis to the extreme, and its time we found the middle ground. In history, it can be useful to take extreme views, but not always to hold on to them forever. It was helpful to show that there was also a functional aspect to Nazi policy, i.e., that there were concrete problems that the Nazis were trying to solve, and as the war went on, it became more and more difficult to solve them. And so they hit upon the solution of physically getting rid of the Jews, the “Final Solution”. When they saw that it “worked”, so to speak, that they could actually do it, and that there were ways of carrying it out in a rather simple and practical manner, they did not hesitate.

I believe that this takes the matter to much too great an extreme, and after having argued this for some 20 years, its time to begin to find some middle ground. In Friedlanders book, for example, I think there is such a possible middle ground. It is quite obvious that, to a degree, the Nazis were looking for solutions and didn't know how to handle the problem. But its also true that they couldn't stand the Jews, and had a prior tendency to come up with violent and radical solutions. So when problems mounted, they didn't suggest, say, drafting them into the army, but proposed gathering them all together in camps and killing them.

I think that the controversy [between functionalists and intentionalists] has played a role. Clearly, neither of the two extreme positions is completely correct. The question now is to find not simply the middle path, but the correct

path – the correct balance between the two outlooks. One must try to see both the latent and the radical antisemitism that existed, on the one hand, and the need to find practical solutions for the problems that were created on the other hand.

Q- What was Hitler's role in the development of the “Final Solution”?

V- I consider Hitler to have played a very important role, although, admittedly, I didn't always hold this view. At some point in the history of historiography, it became fashionable, to claim that individuals do not have much effect on history. But in light of what happened in Germany, one cannot uphold this position. Hitler had an enormous effect: a) he had an intuitive ability to say and do the things that somehow corresponded to what the society in which he lived wanted him to say and do; and, b) he managed to receive such an unbelievable response from them over a long stretch of time, not at one point only. Thus, his role was of utmost importance. He is just as important as all the other preconditions we talked about earlier. Without Hitler, it would not have happened.

Q- Is this just in the realm of a precondition, or did he continually push the idea of the “Final Solution”?

V- Clearly, as I said before, he had an ongoing influence on the run of events. But human agency can be only a part of the story. Its not enough to push: You have to have people who are willing to be pushed, to have them in a situation in which they are ready to cooperate in such a project. Hitler, with all his power, could not manipulate the sub-structure of German society beyond a certain degree. So I wouldn't say that he was the only important factor, but his role was of great significance, and I have a feeling that this will again be stressed in the historiography in coming years. If you take a relatively short-term view, as I do; if you don't think you have to begin with Luther – then a greater prominence is given to the actual actors on the immediate stage, and they also share a greater degree of responsibility. If you go too far back, each

particular figure loses importance along this lengthy route. But if you take 30, 40 years, then the main figures that stand out play a greater role, and you have to give them greater weight in explaining what happened.

Q- Was it just he who created the prevailing ambience or, in the final analysis, he who actively pushed it all the time?

V- Hitler played a very active role; nobody moved without him along the road of defining and redefining the Jewish “Final Solution”. It could not have happened without his particular leadership. As I have said, he could not shape the particular circumstances; he was manipulating them. And as always, with leaders of stature, of capacity, he too was able to manipulate them vigorously, and to use them to his ends.

In the long run, however, his power of manipulation was limited. He got himself into an impossible situation. It was inevitable, perhaps, but it all happened under his leadership. We can thus see both his capacity and his limitations.

Source: The Multimedia CD ‘Eclipse Of Humanity’, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.