

An Interview With Prof. Christopher Browning

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“Ordinary Men” or “Ordinary Germans”?

Q- I'd like to ask you a few questions concerning your books, and the research that has been produced in the last few years since *Ordinary Men* was published. My first question is about the German perpetrators — were they ordinary men, or were they ordinary Germans?

B- In some regards, of course, one can say they're ordinary Germans, ordinary Europeans, and ordinary men. When I use those categories I'm referring to different aspects of interpretation. When I chose the title “Ordinary Men,” I was focusing on aspects of human nature that are universal. It was not meant to deny that there are cultural features as well. In the battalion I studied, some of the men were Luxembourgers, not people of German background, and at best we can tell they behaved exactly like their German comrades, or at least the bulk of them. So, when I used the term “Ordinary Men,” I was trying to emphasize those features of group behavior that I saw in the battalion that make human beings vulnerable to being harnessed for programs of mass murder. In this case, most of them are German, not all. Certainly among the broader spectrum of perpetrators, we know the Nazis had little difficulty recruiting collaborators from many countries in Europe. The focus I was trying to take then was basically to look at broader features of human nature and not to imply that only Germans could have done this, because of course we know in Europe many of the perpetrators were not German.

Q- Were there unique aspects among the German perpetrators, where we could define these people as “ordinary Germans” in that many Germans, not just SS, took part in mass murders?

B- I'm not sure that we can say there's a unique aspect that brought Germans in, other than the fact that it was the Nazi Party which controlled the German regime that was the driving force behind this. And of course Hitler, with his very deep obsessions, particularly about Jews, was a driving force behind this. That is not to say that all Germans were of one mind with Hitler — I think that was not the case. I think it is important to look at the particularities of the Nazi Party, and certainly Hitler, who we would say clearly is a rather unique individual. I think when we look at most of the perpetrators — German and otherwise — I would not consider them to be unique, rather to be fairly ordinary. Certainly the way in which I used that term in the book was to imply that they were not people who were psychologically different; they were not disturbed, pathological individuals, nor were they highly ideological, politically-committed people before this occurred. Most of them, of course, in the Reserve Police Battalion 101 were fairly randomly selected off the streets of Bremen and Hamburg. They also were randomly selected out of the Luxembourg Police, and we know many other units raised in Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia, were selected from a cross section as well. So in that regard, I do think it's important to make distinctions between regimes that set policies and ordinary men who get harnessed to carry out those policies.

The Spectrum of Motivation of the Killers

Q- How would you explain then the motivation behind these people, who came from Luxembourg, from Germany, from Hamburg, in their willingness to take part in mass murders, where the murder itself was at very close range? We're not talking about the gas chambers; we're talking about shooting at close range. What motivated these people to do it?

B- It's important to realize that there is a spectrum of response, and we cannot speak of a single response or motivation. At one end of the spectrum of

response there was a cluster of what I would call true believers — people who identified with the values of the Nazi regime, who were ideologically conscious or at least came to accept the ideological imperatives of the regime. Then there was a larger middle group that basically adopted what we would call “standard operating procedures” — they did what they were asked and did not confront authority. At the other end of the spectrum was a smaller group that evaded direct shooting. They usually did other activities like guard duty, cordon duty, and so on, but didn't pull triggers and blow people's brains out at point blank range.

I think there were true believers who indeed sought an opportunity to kill. I think that as people behave, they often adapt their belief to that behavior, and I think more people became that as the killing process went on. The killing process gained momentum in part because people became what they did, and that therefore the cluster of what I would call the true believers, the eager killers, the enthusiastic killers, increased over time.

I think you also have a number of people who act out of their conception of what it means to be a tough soldier, a tough policeman, what their duty is as an occupier in a territory where they are exhorted to behave as the master race. They conceived of themselves as at war with a world of enemies encircling them. Some, I think, shot basically because they were simply afraid to confront authority, afraid to be seen as cowards, afraid to look weak — all of these motives were there.

In the book I took the position that as a historian has great difficulty trying to explain the motives of a single individual, much less 500 men, it's almost presumptuous to explain a whole nation. That doesn't mean as historians that we don't have to try to articulate certain generalizations. But I do think it is important to make qualifications; it is important to see the limitations of generalizations. It is important, certainly in the case when we're talking about perpetrators, to keep the distinctions between the degrees of enthusiasm, the

kinds of reaction, and the different motivations that explain different layers of behavior and reaction among the perpetrators.

Antisemitism as a Motivating Factor

Q- How much do you see the element of antisemitism; be it traditional or racial antisemitism that the Nazis espoused during the Third Reich, as an explanation of the motivation for the killings?

B- I would see it in several instances; certainly for the regime in terms of setting policy, it was crucial. Hitler was an obsessed antisemite. He also worked within a German and European context of centuries of traditional antisemitism whereby, in an increasingly nationalistic Europe, the Jews — the most significant minority without a nation or country — were also the most vulnerable minority. Given various historical circumstances in the past, they were also identified — in terms of what we might call political buzzwords for political mobilization — with all sorts of movements in Europe, from left-wing politics to exploitive capitalism to internationalism. Antisemitism was thus made a very broad plank in right-wing politics in virtually every country in Europe. Over the background of Christian antisemitism and at least a hundred years of antisemitic right-wing politics in which the Jew was the symbol for everything the conservatives opposed was superimposed the antisemitism of the Nazi regime, which was an extremely obsessive and fanatical antisemitism. Regimes like that of the Nazis can then harness people from elsewhere who've been totally desensitized on this issue. Antisemitism may not be of the same priority to them as it is to the Nazis, but their sensitivities towards Jews as equal human beings has been dulled considerably. So the impact of both these antisemitisms — both the impetus behind the regime's making policy and the lowering of the threshold at which lots of ordinary people in Europe would find it easy not to see the Jews as part of the community of human obligation to whom they owe some sort of respect — dovetailed.

Q- Your book begins with the story of Major Trapp bringing together the entire battalion and giving that talk, allowing those that do not want to shoot to step out of rank, and throughout the book, antisemitism as one of the motifs does not play a part. Why?

B- Oh, I disagree with that assertion. In the book I do talk about how there is a dovetailing of antisemitism with other factors; how the situation of the war and the polarization that it brings about in the creation of a racial empire in the East is in fact crucial. It made it easy for the Nazis to target Jews and to lower the thresholds by which other people could quite willingly shoot, or carry out the murder of Jews. Nothing, in a sense, helped the Nazis to kill Jews so much as the framework of a race war in which their own antisemitic priorities fit very easily. And it allowed them to harness others to their antisemitic priorities. As I've said, a broader kind of antisemitism of a much less obsessive kind was part of the equation as well.

Kinds of Antisemitism

Q- Dr. Daniel Goldhagen, in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners — Ordinary Germans in the Holocaust* mentions a unique type of antisemitism — “eliminationist antisemitism.” Prof. Shaul Friedlaender in his book *Nazi Germany and the Jews* talks about “redemptive antisemitism.” If you would comment on the eliminationist vs. redemptive antisemitism, where do you stand?

B- Well, I think a third person who's used a similar phrase is Gavin Langmuir, who talks about “chimeric antisemitism.” About this notion that there is a kind of fantastic, hallucinatory, deeply obsessive antisemitism, I think all scholars would agree. The question is, does that encompass all Germans or certain Germans, or does it encompass certain Germans and other deep antisemites in other countries, so that it is not a unique German obsessive phenomenon, but it is one layer of European antisemitism that is manifested in many different European countries. My own feeling is that indeed you can find

eliminationist or redemptive or chimeric antisemites in different countries in Europe.

One thing that separates German antisemitism from others is that it's the only country where a deeply-committed antisemitic regime actually takes power, and that is absolutely essential. However, I don't think one can read that to say the vast bulk of the German population were redemptive antisemites or eliminationist antisemites or chimeric antisemites. The distinction that, for instance, Gavin Langmuir makes is that what he calls xenophobic anti-Semitism — the broader social antagonism towards the Jews — is the fertile ground in which chimeric antisemitism grows. It is the seedbed for the sprouting of this chimeric antisemitism, eliminationist antisemitism. I think this is the stance in Saul Friedlaender's book — that redemptive antisemitism is one slice of the antisemitic spectrum in Germany. It is not a concept, I think, that he applies to all Germans; at least I would not use it in that way.

Q- Something else that comes up in your book, as well as with Goldhagen goes back to the question of how the Nazi perpetrators treat the Poles. Poles were also killed. How were they treated in parallel to how the Jews were treated?

B- I think certainly here we see a difference in government policy, that the ultimate policy the Nazis reached towards Jews was total genocide, the attempt to kill every last man, woman, and child of Jewish origin in Europe. The policy towards the Poles was denationalization, what we might now call “cultural genocide”: a destruction of their educational institutions, their ruling classes, their élites, to erase the notion of Polish identity so that Poles become a denationalized reservoir of slave labor, and that as a population they can be decimated, they can be moved, expelled, moved further East. But there was no Nazi design to kill every last Pole, man, woman, and child. Clearly there was a difference in policy as well as in German attitudes towards Poles. Certainly we know that they came to the East with a fair contempt towards Slavic life as well as Jewish life. For many in fact, they could behave

as brutally towards Poles as Jews in terms of personal inclination, but certainly the government policies were different in this regard.

If we want to pursue this — the notion of perpetrators and the national identity of victims — then one reason why I'm hesitant to make a single linear sort of explanation — from antisemitism to Germans to Holocaust perpetrators to the murder of European Jews — is, of course, that many of the perpetrators actually began their careers as mass murderers by killing groups other than Jews. Many of the euthanasia personnel who manned the death camps began by killing Germany's mentally ill. Certainly the first mass murder in the Soviet Union was that of Soviet prisoners of war rather than Jews. By April 1942, over two million Russian prisoners of war had perished. At that point, that was a body count well ahead of the number of Jews that the Nazis had murdered. Thus, something has to fit into the equation beyond simply antisemitic motivation. There was something in this regime and the way it related to its people that enabled them to harness a population to carry out mass murder on a staggering scale even if there had never been any Jewish victims. The Nazis will go down in history as a terrible mass murder regime, even if there had not been a Holocaust. We do know, of course, in the end, that the murder of Jews became the primary program of mass murder, but that was not necessarily apparent before the spring of 1942.

Q- How would you explain the number of photographs that have been found — that were published in your book and Goldhagen's book, that are at Yad VaShem, of German soldiers — Wehrmacht — humiliating Jews in Lomza and other places. Why would they carry these pictures with them?

B- I asked a friend once who'd been in Vietnam, did you take pictures? He said, we took pictures all the time. I don't think the fact that some people take pictures of this is a proof of how broadly or how pervasively everyone in the particular unit is involved or that they all have the same kind of motivation. Surely we have pictures of this triumphalism, of these souvenir photos of their domination and exhilaration as the master race. I don't think this is such a

surprising phenomenon that it requires a kind of exceptional explanation.

“Eager Killers”

Q- In your own book, you talk about the Jew hunts and the parties that they held, celebrating the number of Jews killed, or those that killed more. How do you explain these?

B- Nothing in my book was intended to say there isn't a significant core of eager killers. I used that term “eager killer” in the book long before other books came along. Nothing in my book was intended to downplay the degree of horror and gratuitous cruelty that was carried out. Certainly when my book first came out, many people's reaction was, My God, could it possibly have been that terrible? So, I think if we put ourselves back into 1992 when the book first came out, certainly the impression it created then was not one of minimizing German atrocities or not recognizing that there was a group of eager killers within this kind of unit.

The question that has emerged since then is whether this was the behavior of everyone in all the units? Is this in fact the mentality of the entire German people? And insofar as we can get into spectral breakdown within a unit, the evidence that I've been able to find recently does not indicate that at all. For instance, I'm working on a particular case now. It was an unplanned, unauthorized massacre of Jews in the village of Marcinkance in the Bialystok district. It was investigated because one of the people in the unit that was supposed to deport these people to a transit camp protested because a shootout took place, and they shot everybody on the spot. At the investigation, a very antisemitic police officer came down and interviewed six or seven of these people, so we have reports from a number of people, and, unlike postwar testimony, there was every incentive for the men to exaggerate their antisemitism and their role and contribution to killing the Jews. But out of a unit of seventeen men, there were four or five eager killers. There were six or seven people who stood by the fence and shot escaping Jews who tried to get

beyond the wire, which is what they were ordered to do, i.e., standard operating procedure. There were three people, as best as I can tell, who didn't shoot. A fourth protested and a fifth committed suicide on the eve of the action rather than show up. Thus we find a spectrum that goes from the extreme of four or five people who sought the opportunity to kill, to the other end that didn't take part, and a rare documented case of a suicide right on the morning that he was supposed to report to the ghetto clearing action.

It is that spectrum of layered behavior that I'm trying to capture, because I find that much more challenging as a historian to narrate and to flush out. I also find it much more troubling in the end, because it means that regimes can harness a population to mass murder, in which the bulk of them are not fanatical eager killers, but the killing takes place anyway. This is a much more dangerous world, this is a much more pessimistic view of the human condition, I think, than to have the view that only certain cultures with a uniform eagerness to kill can carry out genocide.

Q- Going to a different topic — the Final Solution, and the idea that the decision to kill the Jews crystallizes at a certain point in time. What are your views on this aspect of the Final Solution, when it crystallized, and who gave the order?

B- Two starting points. One, Hitler from the beginning was obsessed with the “Jewish Question” and wanted a solution to it one way or another — as Goering said in 1938. The second starting point was that Hitler did interpret the world in racial terms and saw the world as a racial struggle in which unfettered violence in fact was the path to victory. So it was a regime both committed deeply to antisemitism, and a regime that celebrated violence and had absolutely no qualms about taking human life. Human life individually did not count, it was the life of the Volk that counted. Given those two things, obviously it's no accident or fluke that the Nazis arrived at mass murder programs against a number of their enemies. We know the Nazis had mass murder programs for the mentally and physically handicapped in Germany, to

remove what they considered the inferior gene pool within the German race, just as they had a mass murder program against Jews, who were the most hated and most focussed-upon racial group on the outside.

On the other hand I don't believe Hitler premeditated all of this in the sense that he had a clear vision of a systematic mass murder program. I think that Nazi Jewish policy evolved in a way in which he, as well as other Nazi leaders, were feeling their way, that they were responding to changing circumstances, changing opportunities, changing confidence in what they could get away with, and how they could make history in unique way. So I see Nazi Jewish policy as an evolution that is shaped by these underlying driving factors of violence and antisemitism, but one in which the Nazis themselves didn't know exactly where they were going in fact until they got there — and they got there in the summer of 1941. Their vision between 1939 and 1941 I think is a vision of what we now call “ethnic cleansing” — a vast racial engineering of Europe, chasing out, decimating certain populations and elevating others; and the whole notion of bringing back Germans to repopulate totally cleansed lands is an extraordinary vision. It's all within a racial framework, and within that racial framework, of course Jews were at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy. But I think those policies in 1939 and 1941 were meant seriously; I don't think they were considered as alibis or as covers or camouflage, as if the Nazis were simply waiting to do what they knew they wanted to do all along, but had to pretend that they were doing something in the meantime. I think things like the Lublin Reservation or the Madagascar Plan were meant seriously, not only by the bureaucrats who were planning them, but I think by Hitler himself, and by Himmler. My own feeling is if you want to know what Hitler was thinking, you should look at what Himmler was doing, because Himmler and Hitler, in this period, were very much in synchronization. Himmler rose to such great power because he intuited what Hitler wanted. He understood Hitler, his prophecies, his exhortations, his wishes, better than others, and cast them into concrete programs. And what Himmler was doing between 1939 and 1941 was carrying out vast schemes of ethnic cleansing and racial and demographic reorganization.

The barrier, you might say, was breached most dramatically with the war of destruction against the Soviet Union, where even before the invasion Himmler talked about the 30 or 40 million people too many that were going to have to disappear. This, in a sense, opened the door to all sorts of mass murder programs. In addition to the starvation of Russian prisoners of war, they moved quickly into the systematic mass murder of Soviet Jewry within six to eight weeks of the invasion of the Soviet Union. Still, I don't think that that plan was already fixed in their minds with orders already given for it. Rather, with the great success they experienced, they moved fairly naturally into the opportunity then presented, certainly against Soviet Jewry by the summer of 1941 when they thought that resistance was virtually over and the Soviet Union was about to collapse. My own feeling is that that this was then extended to the rest of European Jewry in the fall of 1941, early October of '41. If I were to put a date on it, it would be the first week or ten days of October 1941, that Hitler gave his approval to the plans that he had solicited earlier.

For instance, I would interpret the Goering authorization, that Heydrich drafted and brought for his signature not as an order for the Final Solution, but an authorization to carry out a feasibility study, to draw up possible plans, and these were brought back to Hitler in September, and by early October, I think, he had approved them. The whole notion of death camps and gas chambers and a mechanism of deportation from countries all over Europe was not self-evident. That had to be invented, and I think that there was an incremental decision-making process in which these things were weighed and considered. Then they were brought back to Hitler. There was some hesitation, and the evidence, I think, indicates most probably that it was in the first week of October that Hitler said yes, that's what we will do.

Refining the Killing Techniques

Q- How do you explain the escalation and the different methods of killing that evolved from the shootings, the first use on September 9 of Zyklon B at Auschwitz, the gas vans, September and October 1941, when Chelmno was

in the process of being built, operable in December 1941. Why were the Nazis moving from one type of killing method to another?

B- The experience of the firing squads in the Soviet Union was that they had encountered some difficulties. One was simply that the manpower needed was greater than they wished to expend. Shooting people one by one takes time. There is also the problem of secrecy, since these open air executions were very public and we know that the Germans worried about what soldiers said when they went back on leave, or in letters they sent home. There were strict orders to confiscate film and pictures, and to forbid the taking of pictures at these kinds of executions. We know those rules were not always obeyed, and also that there was some psychological cost to being involved in these ongoing kinds of executions. At least some of the Einsatzgruppen and commanders called this to Himmler's attention. Moreover, in terms of how to extend mass killing to the rest of European Jewry, you can't — or rather you could, but obviously it would be relatively counter-productive — line up all the Jews of Amsterdam and shoot them down in the middle of Amsterdam, or of Paris. So different techniques had to be developed that would give greater secrecy, would provide for greater efficiency in terms of manpower, and would have less psychological cost. So, after the Goering mandate, a feasibility study had to be done, with lots of experiments.

There were the gas van experiment, the Zyklon B experiment in Auschwitz, and the transfer of some of the euthanasia personnel (who had used carbon monoxide gas at the euthanasia institutes) to set up, first the Belzec camp (which would be the prototype of the camps in the Generalgouvernement), also in October 1941. The personnel of a euthanasia group that had used an earlier model of gas van for killing mentally ill in eastern Germany in 1939–40 were then sent to set up the Chelmno Camp. Euthanasia personnel from the institutes in Germany itself helped set up Belzec; they would later staff Sobibor and Treblinka. Auschwitz, which already was a concentration camp, then took on the extra task of testing Zyklon B. I think all this is evidence of a search for the most efficient way to deal with some of the problems that they

encountered in the open air mass shootings in the Soviet Union, and that would make it easier to carry out the mass murder of European Jewry.

The Holocaust and Modernity

Q- Several German scholars have proposed a different interpretation of the mechanics of the decision-making process, and the motivation behind it. Can you comment on the thesis of Susanne Heim and Goetz Aly?

B- In their approach, the Holocaust is, in a sense, a kind of by-product of a modernization drive. What the Germans really wanted to do was to create a more efficient and economically developed Eastern Europe, and there were surplus populations that stood in the way of this, and the Jews were the easiest group to be removed. That would solve several problems at once, in their theory. It got rid of surplus population and it removed the cluster of artisans and people at an earlier stage of economic development so one could move quickly to a more modern kind of production.

My own feeling is that it is not the right explanation, that Susanne Heim and Goetz Aly found one strand of people who may have become parasites on the Holocaust and turned them into the center. There are all sorts of people who for different reasons participated in, or rationalized what was happening, from doctors who had to deal with epidemics, to people who had to find housing, to people who wanted to modernize the economy. All of them invested their own rationale in what was happening for other reasons, namely an ideologically and racially driven program of extermination. It may explain why they participated, but it doesn't explain why it happened. In that sense, I think they've taken one little sliver and magnified it into the total explanation.

Interestingly enough, I am much more in agreement with Goetz Aly's later book. In that book, he looks at overpopulation, resettlement, and the relationship between population policies, population expulsion, and the Final

Solution. To my mind, he's finally taking seriously himself what Himmler took seriously, and of course the job of the historian is to get back into the mind of the historical actors, not to impose their own kind of ideological blinkers on the past as a way of selecting out certain kinds of limited evidence. In his earlier work one should give Aly credit for extraordinary research in the archives; he uncovered many documents that other historians had not looked at, but I think he squeezed them into a very narrow interpretational framework that was very partisan and hasn't persuaded many other historians. His approach in the second book is much better, I think.

Another question that must be raised, however, is the relationship of the Holocaust to modernization. And there are a number of questions Holocaust historians have to deal with: why the Germans? Why the Jews? But also, why the twentieth century? If you have had a millenium of antisemitism in Europe, why did the Holocaust occur at this particular point in time? It is not illegitimate then, in fact I think it's important, to look at what might be the relationship between modernization in Europe and why the Holocaust happened at this particular point in history. My own feeling is that there is kind of a paradox. On the one hand, much of the impetus behind European antisemitism, and the new lease on life it gets as a tool for political mobilization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is on the conservative end of the political spectrum. It is what we may call part of the conservative reaction in which the Jew was identified with all sorts of changes that conservatives did not want — the growth of free enterprise, an industrial economy, growing urbanization, increased cultural experimentation, and the burgeoning modern political movements like liberalism and socialism. Such trends are all identified with Jews, and the Jew becomes the concrete symbol for all the changes taking place the conservatives don't like. And so one side of the Holocaust is in fact a movement of political reaction.

At the same time, of course, the Holocaust employs modern technology and modern mobilization capacities that didn't exist in medieval Europe, that wouldn't have been at the disposal of antisemitic murderers in the Middle

Ages. In the twentieth century it was possible to haul Jews from all over Europe on railways, to develop the technologies of the gas chambers and assembly line principles to kill people. Basically the death camp was a factory to murder people. It employed all the modern techniques of industrial organization in the very most efficient way. While it may have taken thousands of Germans to shoot down Soviet Jewry, a camp like Treblinka, where they murdered 950,000 people in one year, had a staff of 30 Germans, 120 Ukrainian guards, and 800 slave laborers from the prisoners and victims themselves. This is modern efficiency, this is industrial efficiency at its most horrifying, but it is also a striking example of the harnessing of modern capacities to an anti-modernist reactionary political stance.

Q- In the same train of thought, the English scholar, Prof. Zygmunt Baumann sees the Holocaust as a by-product of modernity. How would you see this post-modern theory behind the Holocaust?

B- I wouldn't see the Holocaust as a by-product of modernity, because much of the drive, as I have said, is a reaction to modernization. What fuels political antisemitism in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is mainly coming from the conservative end of the political spectrum and it's a reaction to changes that are taking place which are identified with or blamed on the Jews. Secondly, it must be said that there are lots of modern regimes that don't murder Jews, and there are also modern regimes that don't carry out genocide. So I don't think we can simply say modernization caused the Holocaust, or that the Holocaust is an inherent by-product of modernity. That, I think, is going too far, but I do think the exploration of the relationships between modernity and modernization on the one hand, and the Holocaust on the other, is an important part of the overall historical investigation.

The Holocaust as Unique and Universal

Q- Let's go on to a third area with basic questions about the Holocaust as a unique and universal historical phenomenon. What is your position?

B- My position is that in some essential way the Holocaust is unique. If one looks at the ideological drive behind it in the sense that here was a regime committed to killing every last Jewish man, woman, and child over an entire continent, that is not a common historical phenomenon. And if you look at the fact that this regime was able to harness virtually every organized aspect of German life, and especially the bureaucratic, administrative, and technological efficiencies of one of the modern nations of the world to this purpose, that, too, is a unique feature of the Holocaust.

If we recognize, however, that in certain essential ways the Holocaust is unique, that does not mean the Holocaust is unique in every way. In terms of the capacity of the regime to harness ordinary men to commit mass murder, I wish it were unique to this case. If one looks around, however, in the twentieth century, it looks quite the opposite. Where do we find a regime that wanted to commit mass murder that failed to because they couldn't find ordinary men to be their willing executioners? That does not seem to be a unique phenomenon at all. Tragically, I think, it's all too pervasive. Overall, I would say that up till now the Holocaust is the single most extreme example historically of total genocide. But there are also commonalities with other genocides. I think the comparative study of the Holocaust and other mass deaths and genocides can be fruitful. A good example is the approach that Robert Melson takes, in which he investigates the similarities and differences between the Holocaust and the genocide of the Armenians.

German Antisemitism Prior to Hilter's Rise to Power

Q- How would you characterize the nature of antisemitism in Germany prior to Hitler's rise to power?

B- There's a kind of paradox in German history in terms of the role of antisemitism. On the one hand, Germany was the country in Europe where Jews seemed to have achieved the most successful assimilation, where they rose in society to the professions and business world, maybe to a lesser extent in education, though certainly not in the bureaucracy or the military. But

in many areas of life in Germany they had made what they considered much better progress than elsewhere. One of the goals of many Jews of Eastern Europe was to get either to the United States or to Germany. Germany was one of the promised lands, one of the places that Jews had it so good. It certainly wasn't their perception at the time that Germany was a country saturated in antisemitism. George Mosse tells the "joke" that if in 1900 someone said that within fifty years all the Jews of Europe would be murdered, the response would have been, well, of course, those French or Russians are capable of anything. One would not have said Germany was the land most likely to be the genocidal murderer of European Jewry.

On the other hand, we know, for instance, that in German politics, they were not above discriminating. This was an authoritarian regime, it did not have a democratic culture. In the 1870s they passed massive discriminatory legislation against Catholics. In the 1880s they passed massive discriminatory legislation against socialists. In this period they did not revoke Jewish emancipation. This was not the burning issue of German politics in that period. That doesn't mean that within a certain segment of the population in Germany, there wasn't a growing antisemitism. In fact, precisely in reaction to the success that Jews were enjoying in German society, there grew an increasingly vicious antisemitic group — what one might call the redemptionist antisemites, or the chimeric antisemites, but I don't think we should blow them out of proportion. The question is, how important were they in German life at that time? How dominant? And my own feeling is that they weren't terribly dominant. They were one group of conservatives, but they certainly didn't make policy. They certainly couldn't put an end to German Jewish emancipation at this time, and it's important not to take what we know happened in 1933 and see it as the natural and inevitable result of a burgeoning antisemitism in Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

On the Ideology of Death

Q- How do you understand John Weiss's book, *The Ideology of Death*?

B- Well, I think he captures these sectors of society where antisemitism was strongest. Certainly within the universities, and certainly within part of the conservative camp, there were strong antisemitic reactions to the position that Jews had attained in German society. And in that sense, I think I prefer that approach to the one Daniel Goldhagen speaks of, that is, a kind of eliminationist antisemitism that envelopes all of German society. I think the Weiss book is more qualified and nuanced though perhaps still overbalanced in that direction, but at least he's focussing on the areas where antisemitism was most prevalent without saying this encompasses all of German society.

The “World Jewish Conspiracy” Theories

Q- Can you comment about the “World Jewish Conspiracy” theory which surfaced, especially after World War I, with rhetoric about the “stab in the back” and the Jews “permeating the atmosphere — you can't see them but you feel them,” and the overwhelming feeling that Jews everywhere were out to get the Gentiles.

B- In much of conservative politics in Europe, one might say that the Jew as the communist, the Jew as the revolutionary, as the Bolshevik, replaced what used to be the Jew as Christ-killer, and the common motif is antisemitic propaganda. Again, this is not uniquely German; this was seen in much of Central and Eastern Europe. In Germany itself, the situation was that in a very short period of time, between 1914 and 1929, Germany suffered total war, defeat, humiliation, runaway inflation, revolution, and a catastrophic economic depression. There are very few societies that have suffered such a sequence of traumatic body blows of that kind. That this would radicalize the political spectrum is not incomprehensible. And what we find is that within the German Right, in a sense, was a movement from the old Right to the radical Right, from the xenophobic antisemites to the chimeric antisemites, which took place very rapidly. The middle evaporated in Germany. Democratic societies don't function well without a middle. In Germany the middle evaporated; democracy became really unworkable. And then the question was, which of those

extremes was going to capture things, and in Germany clearly, the fascists, with the support of the old conservatives, did just that. So again, I think we have to see, and keep, the distinctions, even though we don't deny and de-emphasize what ultimately makes German antisemitism different than the rest of European antisemitism. In Germany, the Nazis came to power, whereas radical antisemitic movements didn't come into power on their own in other countries in Europe.

The Period of Ghettoization

Q- We talked about the Final Solution, but how do you view the interim period of ghettoization, from 1939 to 1941, before the actual decision to kill all the Jews was made?

B- My own feeling is that it came about in a rather unplanned way. That is, the Nazi vision and goal was expulsion. They took for granted that this “ethnic cleansing” was going to involve decimation — many people were going to die. The gist of Heydrich's order from late September 1939 was to concentrate Jews in different urban areas, and that process continued, but then the Germans had nowhere to expel the Jews. These areas then were sealed off and become urban internment camps, which basically became Jewish ghettos. In different areas this ghettoization took place at different times, so there wasn't a single uniform policy, either in terms of the form of the ghettos — some were open; some were partly closed; and some were hermetically sealed — and it didn't take place all at one moment. Lodz was sealed in May 1940, Warsaw in the fall of 1940. Ghettoization in southern Poland took place in the spring of 1941. And of course after the invasion of the Soviet Union, some ghettoization took place after the first wave of the Einsatzgruppen in the fall of 1941 in the Soviet Union. Thus my feeling is that we should see ghettoization in most cases as arising out of the decisions of the local authorities to deal with the concentrations of Jews that they couldn't expel. There is then a question of where to go from there. And we know, certainly in some areas, where we have the documents, particularly in Warsaw and Lodz, that in each case there was a debate. There was a struggle among the local

authorities whether to harness the Jews for labor and in a sense make them pay for the costs of their own imprisonment so that all of this would be done at no cost to the Reich, or simply to let them starve and then the “Jewish question” would disappear. There were advocates for intentional and systematic starvation. In the end, in both Lodz and Warsaw those who advocated creating a ghetto economy and harnessing the Jews for labor, did prevail. Of course, they could never overcome the fact that in Eastern Europe, which the Germans were looting for their own purposes, food was scarce and local populations were not getting enough food. Jews would always get less food than anyone else, and their starvation would continue, but in the Warsaw ghetto we know the starvation curve stabilized and then began to decrease in the spring of 1942. And in Lodz, too, the highest death rates were initially, in the summer and fall of 1940, followed by some stabilization. So there isn't evidence that the people advocating intentional starvation were in control, or else starvation would have continued to escalate. What does begin to change is production in the ghettos — that begins to go up. By the summer of 1942, on the eve of liquidating the ghetto, the ghetto authorities in Warsaw are bragging about their production rates. We know, of course, that in the Warthegau, the German authorities who were living very well off the Lodz Ghetto were boasting of its productive capacities. That doesn't mean, of course, that these people ever had the illusion that this was permanent. In fact, they take solace in the fact that they will temporarily exploit something, but at some point in the future, of course, all the Jews will disappear. And initially that disappearing was envisioned as expulsion. When that disappearance took place in the form of mass murder, it happened almost without a whimper. Only in Lodz did they manage to ward off the final liquidation of the ghetto until very late, until the summer of 1944. Everywhere else, once the decision from the center came, local authorities certainly did not obstruct, and in fact facilitated and cooperated.

The Heydrich Order of September 1939

Q- In the Heydrich Order of September 1939, he mentions the Endziel — the final aim. How do you interpret that?

B- If one looks at the Heydrich schnellbrief, we see that he orders the concentration of Jews in what will become the Generalgouvernement, except for the area to the east of Krakow. And we have documents that talk about a vast ghetto reservation there. And then when the Lublin district was added to Germany's share of Poland in very late September, that becomes then the goal of expulsion. In fact the Endziel at that time is expulsion to a particular part of the Generalgouvernement. The Lublin district is the goal by late September; initially it was to have been between Lublin and Krakow, and area Heydrich very explicitly exempts from concentration in the schnellbrief, if one looks at where he says this is to take place. So in my mind the Endziel is clearly a matter of expulsion. If one looks not just at the schnellbrief but the protocol of the meeting right before that, for which we do have the record, there it's very explicit when they talk about expulsion. The reading of the Endziel as somehow an early code name for extermination represents hindsight history, an example of reading Auschwitz back into 1939. I think it would be a very unfortunate mistake if one does that.

Q- Thank you very much.

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