

The “Final Solution” -- A Bureaucratic Process or an Ideological Genocide?

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer

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January 18, 1998, Yad Vashem Jerusalem

Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- I'd like to move on to a totally different topic. What led to the “Final Solution?” Was it a self-motivated bureaucratic process, or was it an ideological process that was led by the topmost levels of the Nazi regime?

B- The leading historians who have explained how it happened had to take many things into account: how the bureaucracy operated; how the structure of German society attuned itself to a development that led to the Holocaust; how certain initiatives came from the lower ranks. But it doesn't explain why the bureaucrats did what they did. It doesn't explain why the structures of German society killed the Jews and not, say, all people with green eyes. I think the central motivation -- and recent evidence has shown this to be quite clear -- was a radical, racist = biological, antisemitic ideology. It is perfectly clear that the decision to mass-murder the Jews came from above, from a central group of ideologically motivated leaders of the Nazi movement. They in stages, decided to kill Jews because of an ideology, and not because they were forced into it by anything else. This central issue has to be borne in mind whenever we speak about the Holocaust.

Q- Can you be more specific?

B- One has to recognize the great contribution of the so-called functionalist school of thought as to why the Holocaust took place: and the development of social and bureaucratic structures, and of conditions that, according to some of these historians, more or less forced German society into a mood that made it possible for the Holocaust to take place. Functionalist historians such

as Hans Mommsen or Goetz Aly, or in a way Raul Hilberg, have contributed a great deal to our knowledge, and there's no doubt that these social structures are of great importance.

The question remains as to whether, without an ideological motivation, the Holocaust would have happened. I think not. We now have convincing proof, in that only recently did we discover the famous Hitler statement about destroying the Jews. On December 12, 1941, Hitler spoke in front of about 50 Party leaders in the Reich's Chancellery in Berlin. He said that now, with Germany's declaration of war against the United States, the time had come for his January 1939 prophecy about the annihilation of the Jews to be fulfilled. A speech by Hitler in front of the top leadership of the Party, on the "Jewish question," in those terms, is a Hitler's wish, interpreted as an order. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that it was that "wish" -- culminating, from the beginning of the war, after various plans to deport Jews to other places. This was after the beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and it led to the development of the "Final Solution".

On July 31, 1941, Goering gave the famous order to Heydrich to prepare an overall solution, and then a "Final Solution," in all of the areas of German interest in Europe. It seems as though there were hesitations about what to do with the German Jews; after all, they were part of German society, and it was not so easy to murder them. Nevertheless, murder did take place. There were counter-orders and hesitations regarding policy, yet they were all solved when the United States entered WWII. From a Nazi point of view, one could then go ahead and murder the Jews.

I think the intentionalist school of thought -- which places a strong emphasis on ideology and murderous antisemitism -- has won. One has to weave in the very important findings of the other school, so the old argument between intentionalist and functionalist is pass? by now. I don't know of any serious historian who would disregard the research of Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen, or Goetz Aly, or any of the other great contributors to this

discussion. The idea that local authorities were the reason that the Holocaust took place -- no. Clearly, it was an ideology that was crucial, central, and decisive. The orders came from above.

This can be proved locally as well. As my colleague Christopher Browning recently wrote to us at Yad Vashem, the middle level of German bureaucrats in Poland at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942 suggested a change in Jewish policy. In late 1941, these bureaucrats recommended that the Jews be given more to eat, because the German armies were thrown back, in front of Moscow. Their argument was that a Jewish working force was needed in their factories for the war effort. In order to utilize the masses of Jews, they had to get something to eat. They suggested increasing their rations, and, in fact, this was done in a number of ghettos. Then came a contradictory order from Berlin to kill them.

Now, according to Hans Mommsen and Goetz Aly, it was the middle level of bureaucrats who were leading toward the "Final Solution." I disagree. At a certain point, because they were pragmatists, they realized that they had a tremendous reserve of manpower. The order to kill the Jews came from Berlin. It was an ideological, anti-pragmatic order, which was contrary to every pragmatic German interest. Despite the importance of structures -- and they were there, and cannot be ignored -- the decision came from the center. In other words, it was an ideological decision.

Q- You mean Hitler?

B- An order from the center, as I just showed, is in fact a Hitler order. There is another indication of this: On December 17, 1941, he met with Himmler. Himmler noted in his diary just four words [in the German]: "Jewish question," and then there's a slash, and it says, "to exterminate them on the pretext they are partisans." It's quite clear that Hitler was directly involved. If that were true in December 1941, it was so much more so in July 1941 (six months beforehand), when Goering gave an order for a "general solution" and a "Final

Solution.” The idea that this could have been done without Hitler's involvement is ridiculous.

Q- Why was Goering's appointment of Heydrich to take charge of Jewish issues so significant?

B- This crucial document of July 31, 1941, was given by the No. 2 in the German Reich, Goering, who had been nominated by Hitler to be responsible for the “Jewish question” after the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938. Reinhard Heydrich was subordinate to Heinrich Himmler. The idea that Heydrich could have accepted such an order without Himmler being involved is, again, quite impossible. Just as Goering couldn't have moved without Hitler, so Heydrich couldn't have moved without Himmler. This is a clear statement that the so-called “Jewish question” should be handed over to the policeman, to the murderer, to the SS person, and to those who oversee the Einsatzgruppen. Obviously, they were not in charge of preparing summer camps, but rather of the idea of murder. This is a crucial element in the development towards the “Final Solution”.

Taken From The Multimedia CD ‘Eclipse Of Humanity’, Yad Vashem, 2000.