

An Interview With Prof. Hans Mommsen

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The “Functionalist” and the “Intentionalist” Schools of Thought

Q- You are a representative of the functionalists?

M- I belong to the representatives of that school, but this fact is no longer too important since recently there has been an intermingling of the various schools of thought. This was, in a way, propelled by the controversy about Daniel Goldhagen, who, in some respects, appeared to be as a super-intentionalist. In former years, my methodological position differed strongly from that of Christopher Browning or from Raul Hilberg. But today these differences are withering away, and the traditional distinction between the intentionalist and the functionalist schools lost much of its relevance. Instead, there emerges a divergence between the younger generation and the generation to which I belong, which makes itself felt in the realm of Holocaust research, while the conflict between the functionalists and the intentionalists is vanishing.

If one looks at Browning's book on Police Battalion 101 in Hamburg, one becomes aware that he used a lot of functionalist arguments. This change was even more evident in the case of Raul Hilberg. He started as an intentionalist and ended up as functionalist. Conversely, personalities like me, representing the functionalist camp, are ready to accept a lot of arguments from the other side. In contrast to that, there existed a constellation in the early 1960s in which it appeared necessary to point out more strongly that it was not only the ideological factor leading to the implementation of the Holocaust, but that a variety of other factors were involved as well and were even more relevant. Today even Yehuda Bauer arrived at the conclusion that there is no longer any significant conflict between the two schools.

The main issue in the debate still is related to the question as to when the Holocaust was set in motion, and that meant, that the killing comprised all European Jews and was not restricted to the Eastern and the German Jewry. There is, however, basically an agreement that the road toward systematic genocide (which is circumscribed by the name Auschwitz) was “twisted,” as Karl Schleunes argued — that one is confronted with an ever-accelerating process. Hence, it is less important to define whether the turning point lay in March 1941 or in July 1941, or whether it had to do with the crucial September 1941 talks between Hitler and Himmler, or even occurred not before April 1942 after Eichmann had explored the killing facilities of Globocnik — an opinion to which I am inclined, although I realise that this is a rather isolated position in the field. But these debates may be of importance for the experts, for general conclusions they do not appear too relevant.

The Motivation of the Perpetrators

Q- The basic notion was ideological, history, or the bureaucratic apparatus?

M- In a somewhat simplified manner, I used to point at the fact, that it was not Goebbels and Streicher who produced the Holocaust — they were mainly ideologues. In order to implement systematic mass murder, other people were needed who were not primarily guided by ideological deliberations.

Q- Can your focus on what motivated them?

M- Undeniably, there existed a consensus about getting rid of the Jews. But it was a different question whether to kill them or to press them to leave the country. Actually, with respect to this question the Nazi regime moved into an impasse, because the enforced emigration was surpassed by the extension of the area of German power. There did not exist any clear-cut concept until 1941. The process of cumulative radicalization of the anti-Jewish measures sprang up from a self-induced production of emergency situations which nurtured the process.

At a later stage, the perpetrators got adjusted to murdering people and did not reflect about it any longer. Where the SS cadres were concerned, they were certainly driven by racist prejudice and national fanaticism. But other factors contributed to the escalation of violence. The German scholar Goetz Aly, for instance, showed very clearly that among the adjacent motivations, the program to resettle the Volk Germans who came from the Baltic states and from Volhynia, later on from Bessarabia, too, played a significant role. The resettlement program functioned as an indispensable impetus to intensify the deportation and ultimately the liquidation of the Jews living in the annexed parts of Poland and the Generalgouvernement.

There existed an interaction between the target of resettling the Volk Germans in order to create the Great German Reich and the elimination of the Jews in Eastern and Central Europe. The leading perpetrators like Adolf Eichmann or Odilo Globocnik originally spent about 80 percent of their work on resettlement issues and only 10 percent on the “Jewish Question.” Thus, the job of implementing the Holocaust appears to be rather “unpleasant,” but forms an inseparable part of building the Great German Reich in the East. As could be expected from the very start, after the resettlement initiatives failed almost completely, the liquidation of the Jews became something like a compensatory task and the implementation of the Holocaust was finally all that was performed of the far more comprehensive program of ethnic cleansing and re-ordering of the east.

This is one example for the phenomenon, that the antisemitic motivation usually was interconnected with a bundle of nationalist motivations and interests. Simultaneously, the liquidation program became a self-propelling entity. When Heinrich Himmler late in 1944 tried to stop the liquidation operations, Eichmann still continued with the mass slaughter. In order to explain the attitudes of the perpetrators and those, who were directly and indirectly involved, we need a more complex explanation than the inherited ideological interpretation can present.

The methodological challenge consists in analysing the relation between different factors contributing to the deliberate murders. In this respect, I tend to put more weight upon the systematic factors, as represented in bureaucratic mechanisms and political interrelations. This viewpoint may be influenced by the deliberation that we are analysing the Nazi regime last but not least from the viewpoint of preventing the emergence of similar political and psychological constellations in the future, which, however, will not reappear on the same scale. From this perspective, the ideological factor seems to be less relevant than others if similar events like the anti-Jewish genocide might come into being again. According to my conviction, it is primarily structural determinants that produce situations in which the rule of the civil law is endangered and the inherited institutions get undermined, which is the precondition for a reign of terror and of mass murder. Every potentate will produce a more or less convincing ideological justification for the use of violence. This, however, does not mean that the unique role of racial antisemitism especially within European intellectual development should be ignored.

The Role of Antisemitism

Q- You would say that not only the preconditions, but the very nature of mass murder is to be perceived in the role of the bureaucratic apparatus?

M- The basic question which has to be resolved is how the fundamental change within the nature of antisemitism between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the postwar period came into being. The ideological factors per se were unchanged. Nazi antisemitism did not differ significantly from that of its forerunners in the late nineteenth century. What changed was the intensity and the circumstances under which it became virulent. This, certainly, is connected with the fascist character of the Nazi movement. Its inherent tendency to replace the means by the targets and its visionary and propagandistic concept of politics is the new element.

Already Hannah Arendt pointed out that a new quality arose in the way in which the slaughter was performed, because it was regarded as an ordinary job and no longer as an exceptional act. The pseudo-rational character of the persecution was the main difference from the historical pogroms that were driven by spontaneous, uncontrolled, and undisciplined emotions. Hence, it was a tragic phenomenon that the eastern Jews expected that they could bypass the onslaught of the Germans by being resilient and behaving according to historical pogrom situations. They were certainly wrong in doing this, because there was a specific difference between the former way of mobilizing Jew-hatred and deliberately implementing mass murder, as the Nazis did.

Q- I have the impression from what you've said that you do not agree with Goldhagen's viewpoint.

M- No, not at all. Goldhagen does not understand much about the antisemitic movements in the nineteenth century. He only addresses the impact antisemitism had on the masses in Germany, especially in the Weimar period, which is quite problematic.

Q- But he also said that there is no great difference between Nazi antisemitism and previous forms, save that the Nazi apparatus proved to be able to put the antisemitic aim into practice.

M- He did not say that explicitly, but he construes an unlinear continuity of German antisemitism from the medieval period onwards, and he argues that Hitler was the result of German antisemitism. This, however, and similar suggestions are quite wrong, because Hitler's seizure of power was not due to any significant impact of his antisemitic propaganda at that time. Obviously, antisemitism did not play a significant role in the election campaigns between September 1930 and November 1932. Goldhagen just ignores this crucial phenomenon.

Besides that, Goldhagen, while talking all the time about German antisemitism, omits the specific impact of the volkish antisemitism as proclaimed by Houston Stuart Chamberlain and the Richard Wagner movement which directly influenced Hitler as well as the Nazi party. He does not have any understanding of the diversities within German antisemitism, and he does not know very much about the internal structure of the Third Reich either. For instance, he claims that the Jews lost their German citizenship by the Nuremberg laws, while actually this was due to Hans Globke's collaboration with Martin Bormann in changing the citizenship legislation late in 1938.

From Murderous Antisemitism to Murderous Action

Q- What in your opinion made the murderous antisemitism become the Holocaust, the murderous action?

M- By coining the term “murderous antisemitism” you are close to Daniel Goldhagen's terminology, which, I think, is not really helpful. One should differentiate between the cultural antisemitism symptomatic of the German conservatives — found especially in the German officer corps and the high civil administration — and mainly directed against the Eastern Jews on the one hand, and volkish antisemitism on the other. The conservative variety functions, as Shulamit Volkov has pointed out, as something of a “cultural code.” This variety of German antisemitism later on played a significant role insofar as it prevented the functional elite from distancing itself from the repercussions of racial antisemitism. Thus, there was almost no relevant protest against the Jewish persecution on the part of the generals or the leading groups within the Reich government. This is especially true with respect to Hitler's proclamation of the “racial annihilation war” against the Soviet Union.

Besides conservative antisemitism, there existed in Germany a rather silent anti-Judaism within the Catholic Church, which had a certain impact on immunising the Catholic population against the escalating persecution. The

famous protest of the Catholic Church against the euthanasia program was, therefore, not accompanied by any protest against the Holocaust.

The third and most vitriolic variety of antisemitism in Germany (and elsewhere) is the so-called Volkish antisemitism or racism, and this is the foremost advocate of using violence. Anyhow, one has to be aware that even Hitler until 1938 and possibly 1939 still relied on enforced emigration to get rid of German Jewry; and there did not yet exist any clear-cut concept of killing them. This, however, does not mean that the Nazis elsewhere on all levels did not hesitate to use violent methods, and the inroads against Jews, Jewish shops, and institutions show that very clearly. But there did not exist any formal annihilation program until the second year of the war. It came into being after the “reservation” projects had failed. That, however, does not mean that those methods did not include a lethal component.

Hence, in Germany and Austria there existed three varieties of antisemitism, of which the volkish-racist version was, at least before the 1930s, a minority position. Hence, there arises the need to explain why a group of possibly 10 to 12 percent even within the Nazi party were able to determine the political course of the regime with respect to anti-Jewish politics. One component was the fact that Hitler always prevented any legal sanctions against radical racists, even if they had committed criminal acts. Thus, the ardent antisemites did not have to fear any sanctions if they turned to violent means against their Jewish compatriots.

Another mechanism has to be taken into account, too. The Nazi movement as a mass organization did not obtain considerable influence on governmental or administrative decisions. Conversely, its influence had been eliminated in almost all relevant fields of policy-making. Especially the extremist wing of the Nazi party and the Storm troopers reacted bitterly to what they regarded as an undue exclusion. They found a field for acting out their protest mentality — the persecution of the Jews. Even the representatives of the civil administration tended to direct the unsettled social revolutionary tendencies within the party

into the field of antisemitic activities. Thus, there existed a systematic tendency to underpin the antisemitic emotions in order to satisfy the NSDAP which in other political realms lost almost all of its former competence.

While on the one hand, antisemitic actions served as a kind of safety valve; on the other hand, the social revolutionary energies of the movement were steered into the realm of anti-Jewish policies because it was not blocked — as most domestic political issues — by vested social interests. Undoubtedly, the unrelenting antisemitic propaganda of the Nazi movement resulted in an increasing anti-Jewish indoctrination, in particular among the younger generation. It was symptomatic that the racist mentality was developing without relation to actual Jewish life.

“Cumulative Radicalization”

Q- You mentioned a figure of perhaps 10 percent who forced their agenda on the whole nation. Can you describe specifically what made this escalation happen when most of the nation was either indifferent or opposed?

M- The explanation of the phenomenon was one of the incentives for bringing the functionalist school into being. The typical escalation of political targets within the Nazi movement must be explained by the internal structure of the party as well as the political system that emerged after 1933. In both cases, there do not exist clear-cut separations between functional competencies within the party and in the state. Thus, you are confronted with never-ending rivalries between the Nazi chieftains, while the system is held together by the Fuehrer cult. Secondly, with the complete absence of any representative boards either in the Party or the state, the political decision-making process remained completely informal, and there was no institutional facility in which to discuss critical issues between divergent power holders. As a consequence, the alleged unity of the will did not really exist. The so-called Fuehrer orders that tended to replace ordinary legislation are far from being co-ordinated, and usually the competing chieftains would legitimize their conflicting ambitions by referring to varying orders by Hitler.

To take the field of anti-Jewish politics, there existed diverging interests between the institutions and party agencies involved. In the case of the takeover of Jewish property that was envisaged from the early summer of 1938, the German annexation of Austria had increased the appetite of the party chieftains, because after occupying Austria, the Nazis took over almost all Jewish business property in Vienna. About 8,000 shops and small enterprises went into the hands of merited party comrades. The Reich government tried to raise a levy from the new owners, but was not very successful in doing it. As a matter of consequence, Julius Streicher, the Gauleiter of Franconia, tried to enrich himself by taking over Jewish property in order to improve the financial resources of his Gau. The need for money by the party organization stemmed from the fact that Hans Xaver Schwarz, the party treasurer, kept the local and regional organizations of the party short of money. In the fall of 1938, the increased pressure on Jewish property nourished the party's ambition, especially since Hjalmar Schacht had been ousted as Reich minister for economics.

This, however, was only one aspect of the origin of the November 1938 pogrom. The Polish government threatened to extradite all Jews who were Polish citizens, but would stay in Germany, thus creating a burden of responsibility on the German side. The immediate reaction by the Gestapo was to push the Polish Jews — 16,000 persons — over the borderline, but this measure failed due to the stubbornness of the Polish customs officers. The loss of prestige as a result of this abortive operation called for some sort of compensation. Thus, the overreaction to Hershel Grynszpan's attempt against the diplomat Ernst vom Rath came into being and led to the November pogrom.

The background of the pogrom was signified by a sharp cleavage of interests between the different agencies of party and state. While the Nazi party was interested in improving its financial strength on the regional and local level by taking over Jewish property, Hermann Goering, in charge of the Four-Year

Plan, hoped to acquire access to foreign currency in order to pay for the import of urgently-needed raw material. Heydrich and Himmler were interested in fostering Jewish emigration. Eventually, the party itself did not profit from the expropriation of the German Jews, and also Heydrich did not get Hitler's approval for the establishment of Jewish ghettos and for the introduction of the Yellow Star. At least Goering provided him the competency to handle the so-called "Jewish Question," while the continuation of illegal actions by the party radicals was once more strictly prohibited.

The compromise between the conflicting interests was found in the perspective of a future "Final Solution," whose precondition — the complete exclusion of the Jews from the German economy — was agreed upon. It was symptomatic that any definite solution of the conflicting interests was not reached. There was still the expectation of being able to pressure the Allied governments to come along with the Rublee negotiations and pressure the Western powers to pay for the emigration of the German Jews. But simultaneously, Hitler perceived the possibility of using more massive pressure in the case of a military conflict.

"Ambivalence" as a Factor in Implementing the "Final Solution"

Q- Christopher Browning in his 1992 debate with Goetz Aly and Susanne Heim showed that in both the Warsaw ghetto and Lodz ghetto (especially in the Warsaw ghetto) the bureaucrats did not manage to settle things, but to escalate them. Then came an order from above which implemented the "Final Solution".

M- Browning described the struggle between the "nutritionists" and the "attritionists," pointing at two different groups within the public administration who differed with respect to the treatment of the Jewish inmates of the ghettos who were starving because of the lack of foodstuff and provisions for work. They were not necessarily responsible for the deterioration of the living conditions of the Jewish people, but there was an interaction between the Reich Main Security Office and the officers on the local level. The unbearable

conditions in the Lodz ghetto supported deliberations to kill at least those who were unfit for work. Recent research shows that comparable interactions happened elsewhere with regard to the “Jewish Question”.

One outstanding example is found in the so-called “Action Reinhard” which had been pushed forward by Odilo Globocnik first in Eastern Galicia. It appears to be symptomatic that he took the initiative, and then the central agencies in Berlin would join the project and send Adolf Eichmann to Lublin to study the annihilation facilities. The famous speech by Heydrich at the Wannsee conference, for instance, referred to Globocnik's practice of using Jewish labour in the construction of the famous D VI route. Similar examples for this interaction between the local agencies, especially the Superior SS and Police Leaders and the Reich Security Main Office are manifold, including activities of the autonomous antisemitic groups and the SS, as in the case of Lithuania and the Ukraine.

Besides of this specific pattern of the decision-making with respect to the “Jewish Question” there is the phenomenon that the implementation of the Holocaust was proceeding on the basis of a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, the propaganda did not conceal the intention of the regime to settle the “Jewish Question” once and for all, but the actual intentions were far from being clear. Hitler himself tended to avoid any distinct option, although he always functioned as the ideological engine to intensify the persecution. When in 1942 Hans Frank went to Hitler in order to protest against Heinrich Himmler's order to withdraw the Jewish workers from the armament factories in the Generalgouvernement, the dictator replied that Frank should settle this affair with Himmler directly, thereby avoiding taking any specific option.

The ambiguity by which the destruction process was driven forward was a precondition that meant that any disagreement with the genocide could not be officially articulated. Even for members of the government or leading officials in the army it was difficult to obtain reliable information. Consequently, opposing interests could not find any leverage, being suffocated with the

reprimand that the ongoing elimination was just the outcome of emergency situations. This phenomenon was not unique and certainly not restricted to the Nazi system. The case of the Vietnam war shows similarities, because the atrocities committed by American troops happened without any clear responsibility and protests were suffocated in the general disorientation and the fact that nobody was responsible. The effects of informal politics, therefore, cannot be overestimated.

The Role of Hitler

Q- What was Hitler's role?

M- Hitler's role was above all important on the ideological level because his insatiable hatred against the Jews lay at the bottom of the continuous escalation of anti-Jewish measures. His public utterances with respect to the "Jewish Question," however, avoided any direct allusion to the ongoing annihilation process and was restricted to metaphors. Even in his late speech on the Platterhof in August 1944, when turning to the "Jewish Question," he clung to the population statistics of 1938 and talked about the elimination of the Jews as a process still lying in the future. Obviously, he scrupulously avoided becoming personally identified with the Final Solution, which, as he knew very well, was extremely unpopular among the German population.

Symptomatic of the necessity to proceed in a clandestine manner to eliminate the Jews was the fact that the Party chancellery, when in 1942 delivering an order to the so-called political leaders to prepare the German population for "the necessarily harsh measures" that had to be used in order to eliminate the Jewish vermin, it was compelled to repeal this instruction and to replace it by the official parole that the Jews were being taken to the east in order to work there. One could not afford, therefore, to speak frankly about the systematic killing process to broader groups of the German people.

Even before the war, Hitler tried to avoid any direct responsibility for the "Jewish Question," as can be shown with respect to the November pogrom in

1938, when he did not openly support the anti-Jewish excesses. Also later on he reacted rather timidly when he was asked to formally approve an extension of the persecution with respect to the disruption of privileged mixed marriages, demanded by Himmler in 1942 and eventually rejected by the dictator. Hence, the protest at the Berlin Rosenstrasse, after the Gestapo had imprisoned hundreds of Jews who lived in privileged mixed marriages, successfully compelled the Gestapo to retreat.

Hitler's role was always ambivalent. This is discernible with respect to his dealing with the drafting of the Nuremberg laws and the issue of the Aryan paragraph; during the November 1938 pogrom when he delivered a speech to the German press on November 10 without the slightest allusion to the "Jewish Question" and the ongoing pogrom. Conversely, when Hitler had his traditional dinner in the Reich chancellery to which he would assemble mainly foreign diplomats and other high dignitaries, he immediately stopped Joseph Goebbels when the latter wanted to report about the pogrom. Even in the internal talks at the Fuehrer's headquarters it was quite unusual to mention this subject at all. When Odilo Globocnik was received by Hitler in 1942, he certainly did not have any opportunity to report of the ongoing action "Action Reinhard," save that he had been convinced that Hitler was informed anyway. Actually, the dictator did not want to be confronted with unpleasant things of that kind, although he certainly corroborated Himmler in his ambition to accelerate the solution of the "Jewish Question".

It is a matter of fact, that Hitler did not want to identify himself with the murderous process either publicly or privately. In the 1970s, the leading lawyer of the Central Agency to sue former war criminals at Ludwigsburg, Adalbert Rueckerl, failed to provide the juridical evidence that a man who had been treasurer in the Reich commissariat Ostland (and later on, State Secretary in the Adenauer cabinet), when he subscribed to the gold packages sent to the German Reichsbank knew that they contained gold teeth of the murdered Jews. Thus, I remarked to him that he would have similar difficulties in proving Hitler's juridical responsibility for the mass killings, because the

dictator had avoided signing any document which can be read as the alleged Fuehrer order — which, as we know by now, never was promulgated. Holocaust research did all it could to prove that Hitler directed the annihilation process, but it is more likely that he indirectly encouraged his chieftains to proceed with it.

One among the examples for Hitler's strange attitude is the fact that Heinrich Himmler eventually refrained from sending him the so-called Korherr report. Korherr was the leading SS statistician in charge of estimating the quantitative results of the annihilation process. When Korherr finally handed the report to Himmler, the latter returned it to him with the order to remove the term “Sonderbehandlung,” although even that term already camouflaged the extermination procedure. Even after this revision, the report (which had been already typed on the Fuehrer's typewriter with extra-large letters) was held back, obviously because Hitler disliked being directly confronted with the reality of the annihilation. (Actually, the original document lies in the Himmler files, and Himmler would not have sent anything but the original to Hitler). This is one example of the ambiguous attitude of the dictator on this issue.

There was unanimous agreement among the National Socialists, and certainly by Hitler, that the European Jews had to be eliminated, while the means to achieve that differed over time. The prevailing expectation was that after having implemented this task one could return to some sort of moral normalcy. This is shown by the thinking of Rudolf Hoess, who represented just a petty bourgeois mentality. Hitler was no exception to it, either: on the one hand, he continuously pushed the Holocaust forward, and did not want to get too involved in it, but on the other, he shied away from reality and never visited any annihilation camp.

There exists the revealing story of the Henriette von Schirach, the wife of Baldur von Schirach, the Vienna Gauleiter. She happened to be in the city of Brussels, and witnessed the deportation of Jews there, looking from her hotel onto the assembly point. Becoming aware of the inhuman treatments of the

Jews by the guards who were rather brutal, she decided to confront Hitler at her next visit at the Obersalzberg, believing that he would join her in her indignation. She argued that the treatment of the Jews ran counter to National Socialist ideals. According to her report, which appears to be correct, Hitler evaded her with the remark that women did not understand anything of politics and that they lack the necessary hardness. Mrs. Schirach replied by quoting Goethe: "Not to hate but to love is our task" and, after Hitler again tried to circumvent the issue, she and her husband abruptly left the room, while Hitler remarked to his aide: "Well, I never liked her because she always paints her lips." This was a typical reaction, showing that the repression of the crimes started from above and accompanied their commitment. Even in one of his very last statements in the Fuehrer bunker below the Reich chancellery, Hitler argued in his last testament that "we are even more human than the British and American air-force which were destroying the German cities," as if the deliberate killing of five million European Jews could be regarded as a retaliation for the Allied air offensives.

The political conditions created by Hitler led to the destruction of a normal orderly governmental process and prevented the political system from reestablishing some internal balance. Instead, a cumulative radicalization process set in which made itself felt primarily in the field of racial politics, but was not restricted to this realm. Hitler, by destroying the inherited governmental structure and replacing it by the socio-darwinist struggle between competing institutions and satraps created the preconditions for the acceleration of violence and inhumanity, but he did not act by himself. The driving force were people like Himmler, Heydrich, Globocnik, and Eichmann, as well as the leading generals and diplomats, who pressed for the implementation of what hitherto had been predominantly a propagandistic target.

Usually, Hitler is depicted as being resolved from the start to achieve the annihilation of European Jewry. This idea, certainly, is highly problematic. Undoubtedly, Hitler's visionary outlook went in this direction, but that cannot

be identified with any actual political program. One example in this respect is the famous speech delivered by Hitler in the German Reichstag on January 30, 1939 (I recently published an article on this subject in *History and Memory* in honour of Saul Friedlaender's sixty-fifth birthday). It is usually regarded as a public announcement of Hitler's intention to kill the Jews in the case of a general war, which he as usual describes as the outcome of Jewish machinations. The threat was that in the event that "international Jewry" produces war, the end would be the destruction of the Jews. Actually, the warning was not new at all; we find similar utterances in the tradition of antisemitism all the time, but even an almost identical utterance by Hitler in 1932, when mentioning the possibility of war, appeared almost meaningless. Two points of his speech are interesting in particular. First of all, this part of his speech — it lasted almost three hours and covered a great variety of topics — dealt with the results of the conference of Evian and intended to put pressure on the United States and other Western nations to provide money for the enforced Jewish emigration from Germany. In direct connection with his oft-quoted threat he argued that there was enough space in the world for the establishment of a Jewish state. Even at that time, Goering was continuing the talks with George Rublee in London through his emissary Wohltat in order to achieve an agreement on the emigration issue.

Thus, Hitler's famous utterance must be put in the political context and cannot be interpreted as an announcement of the "Final Solution." But there remains the question of why Hitler reiterated this special threat several times later on, because it is very exceptional that he would quote himself, even if he erroneously dated the utterance on September 1, 1939, the date when the Second World War started. The answer to this question at least partly relies on the fact that Joseph Goebbels, when preparing the movie *The Eternal Jew* in 1940, inserted that sentence of Hitler's Reichstag speech into the film. Because Hitler showed great interest in the production of this film and looked at the different stages of its development, seeing it possibly ten or fifteen times, he recollected the precise wording and would return to it later on, usually in the same propagandistic context of warning his opponents.

As far as Hitler's rhetoric is concerned, the notion to use the Jews as hostages in order to press for political concessions is quite familiar in the history of antisemitism. For example, Hermann Esser was one of Hitler's closest companions and a former member of the racist German Volkish Protection League, the most important rallying point for organised antisemitism. Esser, in a public speech dealing with the political situation immediately before the French invasion into the Rhineland in 1923, when asked by a member of the audience of how he would react if the French really marched in, argued that he would take for every French soldier one German Jew into custody. Thus, Hitler was anything but original in his argument, and it is not too surprising that the German public did not take it seriously, and the same was true even with respect to the Jewish organizations.

In general, however, the implementation of the Holocaust never was the outcome of any ideological decision, but a political process which eventually led to the conclusion that there was no way out but to kill the Jews in Auschwitz and elsewhere. This did not come into being before the second half of 1941.

What was Known in Germany About the Holocaust

Q- You say that the anti-Jewish measures and eventually the Holocaust were unpopular in Europe. Exactly how unpopular? What did the German population know, and how did Germans react to what they learned?

M- This is a difficult question. First let us ask how much the German population knew about the annihilation process. In connection with the Goldhagen debate, the First German television station ordered a opinion poll comprising a sample of people older than 65 years who were confronted with the question whether they had any information of the systematic liquidation of Jewish people in the concentration camps. Unexpectedly, over 27% of the test group responded with yes, although there is not the slightest doubt that this

figure is far to high, and any realistic estimate comprises about 7 to 8 % at the most.

Certainly, there remains the question what can be regarded as “knowledge”. To realise that the deported Jews expected a “terrible fate” was one thing, but precise knowledge about the process of mass slaughter another. Certainly, from the spring of 1942 there were manifold rumours, mostly derived from the letters of front-line soldiers, but also from reports by radical Nazis. Much was known about the atrocities committed in Poland, while information about the annihilation camps was rather scarce, and even the German resistance movement did not know what was going on before the fall of 1942, when most of the killings already had been done. One example to support this are the rather detailed leaflets of the “White Rose” resistance group in Munich.

In general, however, there prevailed the impression that the executions of Jewish people were excesses for which Himmler and the SS were responsible, while only a few contemporaries were ready to accept that this was a systematic proceeding of the regime. The aforementioned ambiguity, therefore, served as a smokescreen to prevent any comprehensive picture of the annihilation process. Even very high functionaries within the regime did not obtain adequate information about the destruction process.

Average people had the impression that Himmler was the main culprit, and while they blamed him for crimes committed against Jews, they exempted Hitler from any responsibility for them. This psychological mechanism was a widespread phenomenon, reflecting the need of the individuals to protect their sense of national solidarity that was inseparable bound with the leader figure of Hitler. This helps to explain why contemporary Germans tended to repress knowledge of the systematic liquidation of their former Jewish neighbours and to regard the crimes as stoppable excesses. In some respects, the Allied governments, the Vatican, the neutral powers, and even the Jewish organizations thought no differently.

The Isolation of the Jews from the Broader German Population

Q- Would you please refer to the 1933 to 1939 era, and afterwards to the reactions of the Germans to the Jewish citizens from the prewar period to 1933?

M- One of the basic preconditions for the implementation of the Holocaust was the social and cultural separation of their Jewish neighbours from the majority population. This was achieved especially as a result of the increasing anti-Jewish legislation and the growing discrimination that rendered the Jews as pariahs and put them into the hands of the supervising Gestapo.

As a matter of fact, the average German lost any social contact and, what was worse, any interest in the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens.

Q- Do you consider that during the five or six years during which the separation took place, there was not much protest against it, unlike the euthanasia program?

M Actually, there was almost no protest, even in the first years where resistance might have been possible without too great a risk. The conservative antisemitism, which I mentioned earlier, had the impact of lowering any moral reservations. It is misleading, however, to assume that the great majority agreed to the anti-Jewish program. I guess that about 25 to 30% of the population was opposed to the antisemitic policy of the regime, while the majority was indifferent. Thus, the radical minority which comprised about 6–8 % of the population — later on, under the pressure of the continuous indoctrination this figure was much higher — having the support of the party and the administration could set the tone and put themselves at the top of the wild actions against Jewish citizens and institutions. Because they did not fear any sanction, it was quite difficult to protest openly, leaving aside the fact that only a few dared to do so.

In order to understand the growing passivity of the majority of the population versus the escalating suppression, it is helpful to compare conditions in the Netherlands. As long as Dutch Jewry lived in a close social interaction with the majority population, there was a lot of open and active resistance on the part of the latter. But when the Nazi succeeded in transferring the Jews to separated labour camps and, therefore, interrupted communication with the majority population, the resistance faded out, although activities to rescue Jewish children went on for years.

Under conditions in Germany, the Jews retreated into the anonymity of the big cities. Here they were less visible and exposed than in the small towns and villages, where they easily became the target of discrimination and inroads by the SA and the Hitler Youth groups. Even under the conditions of the November 1938 pogrom, the average people did not dare to intervene, although they strongly detested the behaviour of the party radicals that they regarded as illegal. That they disagreed was obvious from the frequent compensation shortly after the boycott measures had been lifted.

The Lack of Opposition and Protest to Nazi Policy Against the Jews

Q- Many German Jews felt that they did not have the solidarity they would have expected from their neighbours?

M- That is right. But I do not think that this phenomenon was only the outcome of anti-Jewish prejudices. The background consists of the fact that the German-Jewish symbiosis had been already shattered during the interwar period. After the regime had established itself, the isolation of the Jews became almost insurmountable. Victor Klemperer reports that Jewish partners also feared to be in too close contact with their fellow-Germans for fear of reprisals. But what I learned of the attitudes of the colleagues of the Philosophical Faculty at the University of Marburg in the early years of the regime fills me with shame up to our days. The extreme isolation of the Jews was there from the start and did not need any terrorist pressure to achieve

that. From that viewpoint, the episode in which my Father — then a university teacher at Marburg — invited one of his last Jewish students (he lives now in Haifa) to be with us at Christmas 1933, appears to have been extremely rare.

But in general the Jews lost all contact with their former neighbors, went into the anonymity of the big cities, and were compelled by the exclusion from cultural and social life, as well as by the progressive expropriation, to form a community of their own, with the inclusion of assimilated Jews. The majority population did not think about the fate of the Jews, and they were rather surprised when their Jewish neighbours reappeared because of the introduction of the compulsory Yellow Star. The reaction was signified by a complete indifference. Certainly, the majority would not support the so-called “wild” actions, i.e., the spontaneous Jew-bating committed by extremist Nazi circles.

That the average German rejected the use of illegal violence became obvious in the 1938 pogrom. But it was symptomatic that the same citizens who detested the atrocities of the evening of November 9, applauded the imprisonment of 20,000 German Jews the following day because the imprisonment was by an official order of the Gestapo chief and appeared to be a legal procedure. Not the absence of antisemitic feelings, but the German mentality of favoring law and order was responsible for the public criticism of the pogrom.

That the Jewish population was regarded with total indifference by the majority population is supported by the fact, that in conjunction with the Nuremberg laws, the more modest standpoint of the ministerial bureaucracy prevailed over the ambition of the party to introduce a far more rigid Aryan paragraph, through which a far greater part of the majority population would have been affected. Through the exemption of half-Jews and Jews living in so-called privileged mixed marriages, a neat separation between the two groups of the population could be achieved. The separation was accelerated by the provision that Jews had to live in separate quarters and had to

establish their own social welfare system, schooling, and cultural life — this under the control of the Gestapo and under almost hopeless conditions. The separation was completed by a myriad of further discriminations, which cut Jewish life strictly apart from that of the majority even before it became visible through the introduction of the Yellow Star. The deportations happened under the eyes of the Aryan population, but with a few exceptions, there was no public protest at all, and even the Christian churches gave in.

The indifference lasted throughout the war years, although there are indications enough that the genocide would have met with opposition also by those Germans who had been indoctrinated by the antisemitic propaganda. It is difficult to assess to what extent the average citizen, even if he was critical towards the regime, became aware of the killing program. At the time when Goebbels in 1941 did all he could in order to exploit the Katyn murders in his propaganda, clandestine public opinion reacted critically and pointed to the fact that the Germans had done enough murders of their own, alluding to the fate of the Jews. But most symptomatically this insight almost disappeared in the following years, because by now they had other problems and stood under the impression of the ever more costly and brutalised war in the East. Under the impact of the Allied bombing offensive, the reminiscence of the genocide emerged again, and the air raids were increasingly regarded as a retaliation for the murder of the Jews. But this reaction never was consistent, and the official propaganda that the Jewish world conspiracy was responsible for the continuation of the war got considerable resonance.

While under these conditions the readiness to tolerate the crimes committed against the Jews persevered, where the Nazified part of the population was concerned, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent there had been opposition toward the Jewish persecution. The available sources do not tell anything about that, because the extreme pressure of the police and the courts prevented any mention of deviant mentalities even in the reports of the Security service. They only mention those critical of the deportation process who wanted the exemption of their own local Jews from persecution, while

believing in the Nazi anti-Jewish agitation. Anyhow, even under the most difficult conditions in wartime Germany, at least as many Jews survived as in the Netherlands, although they formed a tiny minority.

The vexing question why there was no significant protest, needs a differentiated answer. In the early years limited protest was possible, but later on, when the regime had established itself and did not fear foreign intervention, open protests were almost impossible. Where the average people were concerned, the system tended to create an atmosphere which was signified by lip-service to the propaganda and a loss of interest in public affairs. Individuals tended to preserve their private sphere and would no longer show any interest in politics. This resulted in a growing political and moral indifference, which may explain the almost complete absence of protests against the treatment of the Jews or the Soviet prisoners of war. Even the private sphere was no longer safe, and even smaller niches of society became more or less exposed to the control of the party.

On account of this increasing a-moral apathy the leader of the Kreisau resistance circle, Count Helmut James von Moltke concluded that the foremost target of the German resistance movement was to restore “the image of man in the hearts of our fellow-citizens” and to reanimate the sense of bearing public responsibility. The almost complete social atomisation of German society is difficult to assess. One should realise that the normal individual could no longer find any place where he could speak frankly — not even within his own family, which usually was politically split. This constellation made it extremely difficult to articulate political protest and to form the nucleus of any collective opposition.

This is certainly somewhat different with respect to the leading officials. But even there it was symptomatic that the ambiguity of the annihilation process prevailed, except within the circle of the personalities directly involved. One example for this is the involvement of the State Secretary in the Reich Chancellery, Wilhelm Kritzinger, who came from the Prussian higher civil

service, was an active Protestant and member of the Confessing Church. One of his colleagues, the Ministerialrat Killy was married to a half-Jew. Early in 1945, Martin Borman tried to relieve him from his office, but the German defeat prevent this. Kritzinger was trying to get information about the execution of Jews in Poland, which were reported to him by Melitta Wiedemann. When he sent some of his civil servants into the Generalgouvernement, they were ejected by the police and Himmler called him up and warned that any future interference would be responded to by taking the emiries into a concentration camp.

This is an impressive example of how even top leaders did not obtain any precise information about the annihilation process. Even in the diaries of Joseph Goebbels, the system of Auschwitz is but vaguely circumscribed. In December 1941, Kritzinger belonged to the group within the high ministerial bureaucracy who pressed for postponing the solution of the “Jewish Question” until the end of the war. Presumably, they expected to achieve a less intolerable solution than Himmler had in mind. In any case they wanted to prevent the possibility that Himmler could report officially to Hitler his ambitions and get Hitler's approval for the implementation of what was covered by the term “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” Obviously, Wilhelm Lammers, the Reich Minister of the Reich Chancellery, and Franz Guertner, the Reich Minister for Justice, could prevent Himmler's initiative, but they could not hinder him if he just went on without a formal decision by Hitler — which would then have been noted by the Reich Chancellery.

The same Kritzinger belonged to the group of high civil servants who attended the Wannsee conference on January 20, 1942. The conference served two purposes. The first was related to the issue of how to define the categories of Jews to be included in the deportations. The second consisted of settling the transportation problems. Because the program included the occupied countries as well as the German satellites, the Foreign office was represented there, too. The definition of the persecuted group was postponed and settled in a later State Secretary meeting in March 1942.

Even then, the modalities of the annihilation were far from clear. At least, Heydrich's speech delivered at the Wannsee conference was not taken at face value by critical observers like Kritzingler, who reported to Killy that the whole thing would have led to no definite result (he called it a “Hornberger Schiessen” — a German phrase describing a non-solution). This appears almost unbelievable, but one should be aware that ten days later even Heydrich, in a confidential speech to his Prague underlings, presented the plan to deport the non-assimilable Czechs to the Ice Sea-district which should be handed over to the SS and the Gestapo and turned into a huge concentration camp area destined to harbour the 11 million European Jews he had spoken of at the Wannsee villa. At the same time, Himmler ordered the dispatch of 100,000 German Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was conceived by him as a centre for letting out prisoners to the armament industry. The order was irrelevant because the prisoners, who already had died in the Stalags, were no longer available. Obviously, at that stage of the development, Himmler intended to replace them by German Jews. A couple of months later, Birkenau became the foremost place to kill the Jews by gas.

When in the spring 1942 Kritzingler became aware of what was really going on, he went to Lammers and applied for his resignation. Lammers, however, rejected his dismissal with the remark that without Kritzingler things would run even worse. The Kritzingler example proves the difficulty for those who were bound up with the governmental apparatus to obtain reliable information on the Holocaust and to break through the masked language. Among the high civil servants, there still prevailed the hope that in the long run they could isolate Himmler, who was regarded as the main culprit. As we know today, this was a far too easy explanation and served to exonerate all the indirect perpetrators. Eventually, late in 1944, Himmler, taking the command of the German troops in the Alsace, became separated from the Fuehrer Headquarters and lost control of the central decision-making.

Another example is the role of Albert Speer, in later years a predominant influence, who ascertained that he did not realize what was going on in Auschwitz. Maybe that is the outcome of a continuous repression of the truth or simply political naivete connected with the loss of any moral standards. If things like this could happen at the top of the regime, then it is not likely that the ordinary German achieved any distinct knowledge about the Final Solution, although frequently the men on the street, and especially socialist or communist opponents, were more aware of the events than the political class in the Third Reich, which did everything to repress an unwanted reality.

Raul Hilberg who originally was convinced that the average German must have known of the annihilation, later on revised his position after having studied the conditions of the German railway system and the reactions of the railway-men involved in the Auschwitz trains. A similar experience occurred for Christopher Browning when he analysed the role of Police Battalion 101 at Hamburg. As far as the moral implications are concerned, I always stress the fact that the average German could acquire enough information of the fate expected by his Jewish fellow-citizens through looking into the Reichsgesetzblatt and the normal legislation.

German Interest in the Holocaust Today

I want to point out that today you will find a great sensibility on the part of the younger generation in Germany to the history of the Holocaust and its political legacy. This is reflected by the fact that up to today about 180,000 copies of the diaries of Victor Klemperer have been sold. Where the middle-aged population in Germany — they comprise basically the children of the perpetrator's generation — are concerned, they tend to suppress the situation in which they feel it difficult to express themselves frankly on German responsibility for the Holocaust. In general, the German nation today is ready to accept the historical legacy of the Holocaust, and one should not overestimate the role of small right-wing extremist activists.

The Uniqueness of the Holocaust

Q- What about the uniqueness of the Holocaust?

M- There is no doubt, that the Holocaust was historically unique in many respects — the moral dimension, the cruelty of the perpetrators, the systematic implementation, and so on. But this uniqueness does not exclude a comparative view and to take it as an extreme example for the decline of western civilisation into barbarity. And it is of crucial importance to learn by studying this exceptionally complex event in order to prevent analogous constellations under which phenomena like the Holocaust might reappear. Thus, one should not over-emphasize its uniqueness, and it tends to become an agnosticism if one ascertains that this event is not explainable by the means of interdisciplinary historical research. It is not a black box.

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