

From “Ethnic Cleansing” to Genocide to the “Final Solution”

The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939-1941

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One crucial historical context for understanding the origins of the Final Solution, until recently overshadowed by the history of European and German anti-Semitism, the development of the eugenics movement, and the functioning of the Nazi system of government, is the visions of demographic engineering and plans for population resettlement that both inspired and frustrated Nazi racial imperialism in Poland between 1939-1941. I will argue that the theory and practice of what we now call ethnic cleansing was an important prelude to the decisions for the Final Solution that followed.

More specifically, that between September 1939 and July 1941, Nazi Jewish policy, as one component of a broader racial imperialism in the east, evolved through three distinct plans for ethnic cleansing to a transitional phase of implicit genocide in connection with preparations for the war of destruction against the Soviet Union. Hitler was both the key ideological legitimizer and decision maker in this evolutionary process, which also depended upon the initiatives and responses elicited from below. For Hitler the historical contexts for his key decisions were the euphoria of victory in Poland and France and the galvanizing anticipation of a territorial conquest of *Lebensraum* and an ideological and racial crusade against “Judeo-Bolshevism” in the Soviet Union. Additionally, for regional and local authorities, key factors were not only their identification with Hitler’s goals and personal ambition to make a career but also frustration over the impasse created by the ideological imperatives of the regime and their failure to implement the previous policies of ethnic cleansing.

In the months before the invasion of Poland, Hitler made clear on several occasions that the outbreak of war would set a new level of expectation on his part. For instance, in his Reichstag speech of January 1939, he prophesied that a world war would mean the destruction of the Jews in Europe. And to his generals on August 22, he called for a “brutal attitude,” “the destruction of Poland,” and the “elimination of living forces¹.” When Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner asked Reinhard Heydrich about the tasks of the Einsatzgruppen, he was bluntly informed: “Fundamental cleansing: Jews, intelligentsia, clergy, nobles” (*Flurbereinigung: Judentum, Intelligenz, Geistlichkeit, Adel*).² But what did *Flurbereinigung* mean? How were Hitler’s prophesies and exhortations transformed by his

¹ *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (hereafter cited as NCA), III, p. 665 (1014-PS); Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* (Stuttgart, 1962), I, p. 25; Winfried Baumgart, “Zur Ansprache Hitlers vor den Fuehrern der Wehrmacht am 22. August 1939”, *Vierteljahresheft fuer Zeitgeschichte* (hereafter cited as VfZ), 1968, pp. 120-149.

² Halder, *Kriegstagebuch*, I, p. 79.

eager subordinates, especially Heinrich Himmler and Heydrich, into specific and concrete policies?

The arrest and decimation of Poland's leadership classes seem to have been decided even before the invasion.³ But plans for a more sweeping demographic reorganization of Poland, including a solution to the Jewish question, emerged only during the month of September. On September 7 Heydrich told his division heads that Poland would be partitioned and Germany's boundary would be moved eastwards. Poles and Jews in the border region annexed to the Third Reich would be deported to whatever remained of Poland.⁴ A week later Heydrich discussed the Jewish question before the same audience and noted: "Proposals are being submitted to the Fuehrer by the Reichsfuehrer, that only the Fuehrer can decide, because they will be of considerable significance for foreign policy as well".⁵ The nature of these proposals was revealed the following week, when Heydrich met not only with his division heads but also the Einsatzgruppen leaders and his expert on Jewish emigration, Adolf Eichmann. Concerning Poles, the top leaders were to be sent to concentration camps, the middle echelon were to be arrested and deported to rump Poland, and "primitive" Poles were to be used temporarily as migrant labor and then gradually resettled, as the border territories became pure German provinces. According to Heydrich, "The deportation of Jews into the non-German region, expulsion over the demarcation line is approved by the Fuehrer." This "long-term goal," or *Endziel*, would be achieved over the next year.

However, "in order to have a better possibility of control and later of deportation," the immediate concentration of Jews into ghettos in the cities was an urgent "short term goal", or *Nahziel*. The area east of Cracow and north of the Slovak border was explicitly exempted, for it was to this region that the Jews as well as "all Gypsies and undesirables" were eventually to be deported.⁶

The plan was slightly altered when Germany surrendered Lithuania to the Soviet sphere and received the Polish territory around the city of Lublin between the Vistula and Bug rivers. On

³ Heydrich and Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner reached agreement in August that the Einsatzgruppen would arrest all potential enemies – that is, all "who oppose the measures of the German authorities, or obviously want and are able to stir up unrest due to their position and stature". According to Wagner, the Einsatzgruppen had lists of 30,000 people to be sent to concentration camps. Edward Wagner, *Der Generalquartiermeister: Briefe und Tagebuch Eduard Wagners*, ed. By Elisabeth Wagner (Munich, 1963), pp. 103-4. In early September, Wilhelm Canaris pointed out to Wilhelm Keitel that he "knew that extensive executions were planned in Poland and that particularly the nobility and the clergy were to be exterminated." Keitel confirmed that "the Fuehrer had already decided on this matter." NCA, V, p. 769 (3047-PS).

⁴ National Archives (hereafter cited as NA), T175/239/2728499-502 (conference of Heydrich's division heads, 7.9.39).

⁵ NA, T175/239/2728513-5 (conference of Heydrich's division heads, 14.9.39).

⁶ NA, T175/239/2728524-8 (conference of Heydrich's division heads, 21.9.39); NCA, VI, pp. 97-101 (3363-PS); Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebuecher eines Abwehroffiziers 1938-1940*, ed. Helmuth Krausnick and Harold Deutsch (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 362 (document nr. 14, Groscurth memorandum over verbal orientation by Major Radke, 22.9.39).

September 29th, Hitler told Alfred Rosenberg that all Jews, including those from the Reich, would be settled in this newly acquired territory. Central Poland west of the Vistula would be an area of Polish resettlement. Ethnic Germans repatriated from the Soviet sphere would be settled in western Polish territories incorporated into the Third Reich.

By the end of September 1939, Himmler had proposed and Hitler had approved a grandiose program of demographic engineering based on racial principles that would uproot millions of people. These policies were fully consonant with Hitler's underlying ideological assumptions: a need for *Lebensraum* in the east, a contempt for the Slavic populations of eastern Europe, and a determination to rid the expanding German Reich of Jews. These policies were very much in tune with widely held views and hopes in much of German society. There was no shortage of those who now eagerly sought to contribute to this historic opportunity for a triumph of German racial imperialism. The broad support in the east was one foundation upon which the future consensus for mass murder of the Jews would be built.⁷

On October 6, 1939, Eichmann met with the head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Muller, who ordered him to contact Gauleiter Wagner in Kattowitz concerning the deportation of 70,000-80,000 Jews from East Upper Silesia.

Within days Eichmann had expanded this program to include deportations from both Ostrau in the Protectorate and Vienna. He had also located a transit camp at Nisko on the San River on the western border of the Lublin district from which the deportees were to be expelled eastward.

In short, between mid-September and mid-October 1939, Nazi plans for the ethnic cleansing of the Third Reich of Jews and "Gypsies" had taken shape in the form of a vast deportation program to the Lublin district.

Barely was the implementation of the Nisko Plan underway when it was abruptly aborted. The stop order came from Himmler on the basis of so-called technical difficulties.⁸ But what difficulties had caused Himmler to abort the Nisko Plan just days after it had been set in motion? Himmler had just gained jurisdiction over the repatriation and resettlement of ethnic Germans. The problem of finding space for the incoming ethnic Germans took priority over deporting Jews.

But despite the sudden demise of the Nisko Plan, the goal of ethnic cleansing remained. On October 30th, Himmler issued guidelines for the *Flurbereinigung* of the incorporated territories

⁷ Aly, "Endloesung", esp. pp. 13-17; Aly and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die Pläne fuer eine neue europäische Ordnung* (Hamburg, 1991); Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastward. A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1988); Hans Mommsen, "Umvolkungspläne des Nationalsozialismus und der Holocaust", *Die Normalität des Verbrechens: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung zu nationalsozialistischen Gewaltverbrechen* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 68-84. Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York, 1996), pp. 66-159.

⁸ Botz, *Wohnungspolitik und Judendeportationen*, p. 196 (document X, Himmler to Buerckel, 9.11.39).

that Hitler had once again sanctioned. Within four months, *all* Jews (estimated at 550,000) were to be expelled to a Lublin reservation between the Vistula and Bug Rivers. Also to be expelled were post-1919 Polish immigrants (Congress Poles) and a sufficient number of anti-German Poles to bring the total to one million.⁹ Jews in the recently established General Government were to be moved from west to east of the Vistula the following year.¹⁰

No one misunderstood the implications of this plan for a Jewish reservation in Lublin. But turning this vision into a reality would prove difficult for the Germans actually entrusted with the task of implementation. Immediate expulsions were to take place, only from the Warthgau rather than from throughout the incorporated territories. The quota was sharply cut from one million to 80,000 “Poles and Jews” whose removal would make room for 40,000 “incoming Baltic Germans”. And the racial and political criteria emphasized by Himmler gave way to more practical concerns. Housing and livelihoods had to be procured for incoming ethnic Germans.

As a consequence the emphasis on deporting Jews was diminished. The largest concentration of Jews in the Warthgau, those in the city of Lodz, were not to be included. Other Warthgau Jews were to constitute a deportation reservoir and be expelled only when needed to fill gaps and prevent delays, if the other priority target groups were not available in sufficient numbers to fill deportation quotas.¹¹

Within the overall scheme for a demographic reorganization of eastern Europe, the Nazis had set for themselves three tasks: the ethnic cleansing of Jews from the Third Reich, of Poles from the Third Reich, and the repatriation of ethnic Germans from abroad. The plan for expelling the Jews had not been generated by the need to make space for ethnic Germans but rather preceded it. But then the urgency of resettling the Baltic Germans led to the temporary curtailment of Jewish expulsion. This conflict was soon complicated by additional economic factors: the concern for labor and production, the shortage of trains, and the limited absorptive capacity of the General Government.

The Nazi leadership attempted to solve this welter of self-imposed contradictions with limited success. Goring insisted that the first priority was to strengthen the war potential of the Reich. Jewish transports were to be sent only in an orderly manner

⁹ *Faschismus, Getto, Massenmord* (hereafter cited as FGM) [Berlin (East), 1960], pp. 42-3 (NO-4059); YVA, JM 21/1, Frank Tagebuch: Streckenbach report of 31.10.39; *Biuletyn Głownej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich W Polsce* (hereafter cited as *Biuletyn*), XI, pp. 11F-14F, and Hans Frank, *Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939-1945*, ed. Werner Prag and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer (Stuttgart, 1975), pp. 60-1 (conference of 8.11.39).

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter cited as USHMM), RG 15.005m, 2/104/15 (Mueller, RSHA, to EG VI in Posen, 8.11.39).

¹¹ USHMM, RG 15.015m, 1/5/4-7 (Rapp draft, 10.11.39) and 2/99/1-5 (Koppe circular, 12.11.39).

and with prior notification and approval. Frank immediately adhered to Goring's position.

When Himmler attempted to add Jewish deportations, Goring and Frank exercised their power to block unauthorized transports. Himmler had to concede once again that the expulsion of Jews would commence only in August, after the completion of the second "short range plan".¹²

Suddenly Germany's stunning victory in France emboldened Himmler once again. Sometime in May 1940, Himmler drafted a memorandum entitled "Some Thoughts on the Treatment of Alien Populations in the East." The 15 million people of the General Government and the 8 million of the incorporated territories – "ethnic mush" in Himmler's view – were to be splintered into as many ethnic groups as possible for "screening and sifting". Himmler wanted "to fish out of this mush the racially valuable" to be assimilated in Germany, with the rest to be dumped into the General Government, where they would serve as a reservoir of migrant labor and eventually lose their national identity.

Along with the denationalization, in effect cultural genocide, of the various ethnic groups of eastern Europe, the Jews were to disappear in a different way. "I hope to completely erase the concept of Jews through the possibility of a great emigration of all Jews to a colony in Africa or elsewhere," he proposed. Concerning this systematic eradication of the ethnic population of eastern Europe, Himmler concluded: "However cruel and tragic each individual case may be, this method is still the mildest and best, if one rejects the Bolshevik method of physical extermination of a people out of inner conviction as un-German and impossible."

With impeccable timing, Himmler submitted his memorandum to Hitler on May 25th. "The Fuehrer read the six pages and found them good and correct". Himmler obtained Hitler's authorization to distribute the memorandum to the eastern Gauleiter and Goring with the message that the Fuehrer had "recognized and confirmed" the guidelines.¹³

This episode is of singular importance in that it is the only firsthand account by a high-ranking participant – Himmler - of just how Hitler's decision was reached and a "Fuehrer order" disseminated in the shaping of Nazi racial policy during this period. At the opportune moment, Himmler responded with a new initiative in the form of a general statement of intent and policy objectives known to be in line with Hitler's general ideological outlook. The stage

¹² Frank, *Diensttagebuch*, pp. 158 (entry of 5.4.40) and 204 (entry of 19.5.40); *Dokumenty I Materialy Do Dziejow Okupacji Niemieckiej W Polsce, III, Getto Lodzkie* (Warsaw, 1946), pp. 168-9 (Riegierungsprasident to officials of Bezirk Lodz and Kalish, 8.5.40).

¹³ Helmut Krausnick, ed., "Einige Gedanke ueber die Behandlung der fremvoelkischen im Osten", *VfZ*, V/2 (1957), pp. 194-98.

was then set for a new round of planning in the search for a solution to the Jewish question through expulsion or ethnic cleansing.

For decades the island of Madagascar had exercised a fantastical attraction for European antisemites as a place for Europe's expelled Jews.¹⁴ The newly appointed Jewish expert of the German Foreign Office, Franz Rademacher, proposed that in planning for the peace treaty with France, Germany consider removing the newly acquired west European Jews to the French colony of Madagascar.¹⁵

The demise of the Lublin reservation and the emergence of the new Madagascar plan was, in Frank's words, a "colossal relief" for German officials in the General Government.¹⁶ Planning for Madagascar continued fervently until the end of August and then stopped abruptly. Madagascar lingered as the official policy until an alternative was proclaimed. Like Nisko/Lublin, Madagascar implied a murderous decimation of the Jewish population. And like the failure of Nisko/Lublin, the failure of Madagascar left the frustrated German demographic planners receptive to ever more radical solutions.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Nazis attempted to reinvigorate their lagging schemes for ethnic cleansing at the end of 1940. The "third short range plan" for the intensified expulsion of Poles was paralleled by yet another plan for the expulsion of the Jews beyond those of Lublin and Madagascar. On December 4, Eichmann submitted to Himmler a brief summary on the status of the Jewish question, noting that 5.8 million European Jews had to be taken into consideration for resettlement to a destination mysteriously characterized as "a territory yet to be determined". Clearly the General Government was not this mysterious destination, for its Jews formed the bulk of the 5.8 million to be expelled.

Planning for Operation Barbarossa remained secretive, and hence use of code language about a "territory yet to be determined" continued. The most detailed reference to this planning is contained in a memorandum written by Eichmann's close associate, Theodore Dannecker on January 21, 1941:

The Chief of the Security Police and the Security Service [Heydrich] has already received orders from the Fuehrer through the Reichsfuehrer-SS, to submit a project for a Final solution. The project

¹⁴ For the most recent scholarship on the European anti-Semitic tradition and the Madagascar Plan, see: Magnus Brechtken, *"Madagaskar fuer die Juden": Antisemitische Idee und politische Praxis 1945-1995* (Munich, 1997), and Hans Jansen, *Der Madagaskar-Plan: Die beabsichtigte Deportation der europaischen Juden nach Madagaskar* (Munich, 1997).

¹⁵ Politisches Archiv des Auswartigen Amtes (hereafter PA), Inland II A/B 347/3, Rademacher memorandum "Gedanken ueber die Arbeit und Aufgaben des Ref. D III, 3.6.40". A synopsis of this memorandum is Nuremberg Document NG-5764.

¹⁶ Frank, *Diensttagebuch*, p. 248 (entry of 10.7.40) for HSSPF Friedrich Wilhelm Krueger's announcement of the news, and pp. 252 and 258 (Abteilungsleitersitzung, 12.7.40, and entry of 25.7.40) for Frank's boisterous reception.

in all of its essentials has been completed. It is now with the Fuehrer and the Reichsmarschall [Goering]

It is certain that its execution will involve a tremendous amount of work whose success can only be guaranteed through the most painstaking preparations. This will extend to the work preceding the wholesale deportation of the Jews as well as to the planning to the last detail of a settlement action *in the territory yet to be determined*.¹⁷

That Heydrich had indeed prepared and submitted a plan to Goering is confirmed in a meeting of the two on March 26, 1941:

Concerning the solution to the Jewish question, I reported briefly to the Reichsmarschall and submitted my draft to him, which he approved with one amendment concerning the jurisdiction of Rosenberg and ordered to be resubmitted.

The reference to Rosenberg's jurisdiction – he was soon to be designated the future minister of the occupied Soviet territories – indicates once again that the proverbial territory yet to be determined was the Soviet Union.¹⁸

The documentation for this last plan for expelling Jews into the Soviet Union is quite fragmentary and elusive in comparison to the Lublin and Madagascar Plans. This was due in part to the need to preserve secrecy concerning the identity of the “territory yet to be determined.” And perhaps it was also because the Nazi leadership was caught up in the immediate preparations for Operation Barbarossa. But perhaps it was also because their hearts were no longer in it – that in the minds of Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich the notion was beginning to take shape of another possibility *in the future*, if all went well with the imminent military campaign.

Hitler's declarations that the war against the Soviet Union would not be a conventional war but rather a conflict of ideologies and races and that one avowed war aim was the “removal” of the “Judeo-Bolshevik *intelligentsia*”¹⁹ evoked responses from both the SS and Wehrmacht. Himmler and Heydrich created the Einsatzgruppen and procured military agreement for their

¹⁷ Cited in: Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz: Die Zusammenarbeit der deutschen und französischen Behörden bei der “Endlösung der Judenfrage: in Frankreich* (Nordlingen, 1989), pp. 361-3. In February 1941 Heydrich also dropped reference to the Madagascar Plan and wrote Undersecretary Martin Luther in the Foreign Office about a “later total solution to the Jewish question” to be achieved through “sending them off to the country that will be chosen later” PA, Inland II A/B 809-41 Sdh. III, Bd. 1, Heydrich to Luther, 5.2.41.

¹⁸ Cited in: Aly, “*Endlösung*”, p.270, with Aly's analysis, pp. 271-2. The document is from the Moscow Special Archives, 500/3/795.

¹⁹ *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht 1940-41*, I, pp. 341-2 (entry for 3.3.41).

operation up to the front lines. The German military itself stripped the civilian population of protection of law by restricting military court martial jurisdiction and mandating collective reprisal.

None of the Barbarossa planning documents or criminal orders of this period contain explicit plans concerning the fate of the Jews on Soviet territory. Certainly verbal orders were given to the Einsatzgruppen just prior to the invasion, the “most important” of which Heydrich relayed to the HSSPF in “compressed form” on July 2, 1941. Some historians, such as Helmut Krausnick, have interpreted this Heydrich execution order “in compressed form” as code language for the explicit and comprehensive verbal order given to the Einsatzgruppen prior to the invasion to murder all Soviet Jewry.²⁰ In contrast, I now share the view that the ultimate decision was made and orders were given for the Final Solution on Soviet territory beginning some 4 weeks after the invasion.

In my opinion, the last months before and the first weeks after the invasion of the Soviet Union can best be seen as an important transition period in the evolution of the Nazi Jewish Policy. The first two resettlement plans had failed and the third languished as the feverish and murderous preparations for Operation Barbarossa rendered it increasingly obsolete. Clearly plans for the war of destruction entailed the death of millions of people in the Soviet Union, and in such an environment of mass death, Soviet Jewry was in grave peril. Indeed, Nazi plans for the war of destruction, when seen in the light of the past Nazi record in Poland, *implied* nothing less than the *genocide* of Soviet Jewry. Within the framework of a war of destruction, through some unspecified combination of execution, starvation, and expulsion to an inhospitable Siberia, Soviet Jewry, along with millions of other Slavs, would eventually be destroyed.

But the *implied genocide* in the future of Jews on Soviet territory was not yet the Final Solution for all Soviet Jewry, much less the other Jews of Europe. The old resettlement plans were dead, replaced by a vague genocidal mission that was unspecific about timetable and means and still co-mingled the fates of Jewish and non-Jewish victims. However, this vagueness and lack of specificity would soon come to an end. In the “fateful months” following Operation Barbarossa, a series of decisions would be made. Out of these decisions would emerge what the Nazis called “the Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” a program of systematic and total mass murder, to begin and be completed as soon as feasibly possible, and for the first time with clear priority for the implementation of Jewish policy over the various other Nazi demographic schemes affecting ethnic Germans and Slavs.

²⁰ Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges: Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938-1942* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp.150-65; *Der Mord an den Juden im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Eberhard Jaeckel and Juergen Rohwer (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 88-106.

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