There can be little doubt that the HSS was a key player in the "solution" of the Jewish question. He was determined to make his presence felt in the Lebensraum region and his priority was the elimination of the Jewish population. Of course, the murder of Jews was not something that was done lightly. The HSS wanted to ensure that the process of legitimation was clear and that the Jews were treated as inferior. As late as 1943, the HSS was still committed to the principle of the "Jewish question." The official's representatives continued to use general terms, such as "destruction," which would happen in the future. However, it was clear that this was only a matter of time.
There can be no doubt that Hitler's behaviour throughout his political career – from the end of the First World War until the end of the Second World War – was characterised by radical anti-Semitism. In one way or another, Hitler wished to put an end to the existence of Jews within the 'living space' (Lebensraum) of the German people, and this objective carried a very high priority in his political practice.

Of course Hitler's anti-Semitic stance cannot by itself explain the persecution and murder of the European Jews by the Nazi regime. A history of the 'final solution' must nevertheless take account of his central role in the decision-making process, not least because Hitler's constant authorization and legitimation of this policy articulated the central importance of persecuting the Jews for National Socialist policies as a whole.

An account of Hitler's role in the genesis of the 'final solution' is complicated by the fact that the dictator avoided the use of explicit written directives relating to the murder of the Jews, and only issued oral instructions on the subject to a single individual or in front of a small group of people. When he did speak about the subject, he used formulations that certainly left room for interpretation or deliberately concealed the true state of affairs. Hitler's behaviour in this respect was initially determined by the desire for secrecy. The murder of the European Jews was treated as classified information by the organs of the 'Third Reich' on principle, which is to say that no public discussion of the topic whatever was permitted. As Himmler said in his speech to the SS elite in Posen in October 1943, it was 'an unwritten, never-to-be-written page of honour in our history'.

The official silence on the topic of the 'final solution' did not prevent leading representatives of the regime from indicating in public, repeatedly, if in very general terms, that the Jews of Europe were moving towards their downfall or destruction – which, as we shall see later, is what Hitler in 1939 had announced would happen in the case of a World War.

However, it was not only the aspect of secrecy, inconsistently practised as it was, that made Hitler and other leading National Socialists follow the official
'REMOVE', 'ANNIHILATE', 'EXTERMATE'

policy and not speak openly about the murder of the Jews even when amongst themselves or in small groups, leading them to disguise their references to it. This behaviour was doubtless also partly governed by the refusal to take in the reality of the murder of millions of people. By speaking abstractly of 'annihilation', they kept the horror of it at a distance. It was forbidden to refer in any way to the fate of the Jews in Hitler's immediate surroundings, in his entourage and in front of his guests. Such denial of reality and self-deception became increasingly characteristic of the atmosphere in Hitler's headquarters.

The fact that the murder of the European Jews was linguistically obscured in this way makes interpreting the relevant key documents particularly challenging. The difficulty of this task is considerably increased by the tendency of the key words used by the National Socialists in describing the objectives of their anti-Jewish policy to change their meaning over the years as the persecution of the Jews became more and more radical. From mid-1941 onwards, and increasingly from the spring of 1942, Hitler and other leading National Socialists used words such as 'annihilation' (Vernichtung), 'extermination' (Ausrottung), 'final solution' (Endlösung), 'removal' (Entfernung), 'resettlement' (Umsiedlung) or 'evacuation' (Evakuierung) as terms to camouflage the mass murder of the Jews. In the period before this, they used the same terms with reference to the Jews but without necessarily implying a programme of mass murder. And when they are applied to other ethnic groups, the same terms may have a quite different meaning.

When interpreting the meaning of these terms, therefore, it is important to take into account the various phases of the National Socialists' anti-Jewish policy. They have no meaning independent of the time factor. During the 1920s and as far as the mid-1930s, the main aim of Nazi anti-Jewish policy was to undermine the legal and economic situation of the German Jews so as to force them to emigrate. The Jews were to disappear from German public life and later on, disappear from German territory altogether. When the Nazis used the term 'annihilation' (Vernichtung) during these early years, they referred on the one hand to the planned destruction of the allegedly dominant position of the Jewish minority in German society. On the other hand, however, from the context of the relevant texts it is obvious that at this point the term already had a violent and even murderous component to its meaning, however vaguely defined this might have been. In a cautious interpretation, it would not be an exaggeration to describe the meaning of the term 'annihilation' in this early phase as ambiguous. The perspective of mass murder was already present. By way of summary one is compelled to say that during this period (from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s), the Nazis envisaged as the final goal of their Jewish policy, as the 'final solution', a potentially violent 'removal' (Entfernung) of the Jews from German public life and eventually also from German soil.
At the end of the 1930s, the Nazis intensified the pressure for emigration or expulsion. During this period, terms like 'removal' (Entführung) or 'final solution' (Endlösung) indicated that the continued existence of a Jewish minority in Germany was no longer possible. The violent aspect of anti-Jewish policy became more and more significant. In the last year before the outbreak of the Second World War the term 'annihilation' (Vernichtung) pointed clearly to the possibility of genocide.

Between the outbreak of war in Summer 1939 and the middle of 1941, the Nazis were looking for a so-called 'territorial solution' to the 'Jewish problem', that is, they were planning to deport the Jews to territories on the periphery of their empire where there were insufficient means to subsist and where they would inevitably perish. Technically the terms 'resettlement' (Umsiedlung) or 'evacuation' (Evakuiierung) still denoted the idea of the geographical relocation of a mass of people, but one must not fail to note that this vocabulary increasingly incorporated the perspective of the physical end of the Jews in Europe. In this period the term 'final solution' was used in the same way.

Between the summer of 1941 and the spring of 1942 the meaning of these terms changed. They were now increasingly used as synonyms for mass murder. However, even in this period (particularly between autumn 1941 and spring 1942), the terminology can in some cases still be ambivalent. For an accurate interpretation each phrase has to be analysed in its historical context. In particular, in a period in which one Jewish minority after another was being included in the process of systematic mass murder, one has to determine which Jewish minority was indicated by each of the relevant phrases. For example, one cannot exclude the possibility that, in April or even May 1942, i.e. at a point when preparations for the systematic murder of European Jews were well underway, Hitler and the leading organisers of the murder-programme might occasionally have talked about 'alternative' plans for a 'final solution'. It is quite possible, even at this stage, that they may have been referring on certain occasions, in conversation, to earlier plans to deport the European Jews to an area on the outskirts of the German-controlled territories, where they would be killed or allowed to perish. This is especially plausible if such conversations were concerned with the Western European Jews, who in summer 1942 had not yet been included in the programme of systematic murder.

The occasional mention of 'alternatives' can be interpreted as reluctance on the part of Hitler and other members of the leading circle of Nazis to articulate openly the true consequences of the decision to kill millions of people, a decision which at this point had already been made and implemented.