The Jewish Councils

An Overview

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Postwar Attitudes Toward the Jewish Councils

Perhaps no other topic in the history of the Holocaust has elicited more agonizing questions and given rise to more heated debates than the role played by the Jewish councils in German-dominated Europe during World War II. The dominant viewpoints on this issue have varied with the passage of time.

During the immediate postwar period a condemnatory attitude was most discernible. Many of the survivors as well as a considerable proportion of the governmental and political figures in liberated Europe were inclined to identify the leaders of the Jewish councils and of their auxiliary enforcement organs as collaborators and to call for their indictment and punishment as war criminals. In response to these pressures, in several countries a number of council leaders were indeed arrested, tried, and convicted.¹

In more recent years the pendulum of historical evaluation appears, with a few notable exceptions, to have swung in the opposite direction. Some well-known historians and philosophers, including Hannah Arendt, have continued to embrace the condemnatory position, deploring the “role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people.”²
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Many contemporary students of the Holocaust, however, portray the Jewish councils in a more lenient and understanding fashion, emphasizing the mitigating factors for their behavior. These students focus on the lack of alternatives available to council members and the predicaments with which they were confronted in the context of the extraordinary conditions created by an enemy bent on the physical destruction of an entire people. In this context council members are viewed as faithful representatives of the Jewish communities, dedicated to protecting the constituents' fundamental interests by whatever means they had at their disposal.

In this article I shall endeavor to offer as balanced an evaluation as possible of the intrinsically thankless and unenviable role of the Jewish councils during the war in the context of the conditions in which they had to operate. In pursuit of this objective the following observations are advanced ab ovo:

- Concurrently with their invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the leaders of the Third Reich resolved to replace their original plans, which would have "solved" the Jewish question by resettling the Jews of Europe, with a diabolical, ideologically conceived scheme to exterminate the Jews during the course of the war.
- In pursuit of this "Final Solution" (Endlösung), conceived after the spring of 1941 as a central mission of the war, it was the Nazis and their accomplices who determined the time, place, and scale of the various anti-Jewish operations (Aktionen) in terms of their priorities and interests and particular local conditions.
- The local conditions varied with the prevailing attitude of the particular governments and Christian populations. Such attitudes ranged from full collaboration in many parts of eastern Europe to reluctant cooperation, or resistance, in some parts of western Europe.
- The ultimate fate of the Jews was not determined by the attitudes and actions of the Jewish councils, for their members, like the Jewish people as a whole, were basically helpless and defenseless. The determining factor in the destruction of the Jews was neither the composition nor the specific actions of the Jewish councils, but the conditions and reality under which they had to operate. The fate of the Jews was the same in Warsaw, where Adam Czerniaków committed suicide rather than cooperate in the impending deportations, as it was in Łódź, where Chaim Rumkowski had believed in the possibility of "salvation through cooperation and labor," or

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in Bialystok and Minsk, where Ephraim Barash and Ilya Moshkin respectively supported and embraced resistance. Their fate was also the same in Slovakia, where the Jewish leaders sought to buy off the SS representatives in pursuit of the so-called “Europa Plan,” as it was in Hungary (excepting Budapest), where the council leaders employed time-tested techniques designed to win the desperate “race with time.”

The Councils and the Final Solution

While the Jewish councils were conceived to play an important role as an accessory instrumentality in the Nazis’ bureaucratic machinery of destruction, they were not essential for that purpose. Indeed, the Nazis adapted the tactics of the Final Solution to the particular circumstances in the various countries under their domination. The specifics were often dictated by the degree of urgency to solve the Jewish question in particular areas as well as by the readiness of the local authorities to cooperate in the implementation of the Nazis’ sinister plans. In the areas where the Nazis exercised exclusive jurisdiction, or enjoyed the wholehearted cooperation of the local authorities, neither the existence nor the conduct of the Jewish councils could have made any difference in the outcome of the Nazis’ Final Solution drive.

Thus, in many parts of the Soviet Union occupied by Germany, including the formerly free Baltic states, much of the Final Solution program was carried out directly by the Germans through their specially trained Einsatzgruppen, which were usually assisted by readily available local volunteers (Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and others). Even in the few localities in this area where diminishing numbers of “working” Jews were allowed for a while at least to survive and form ghettos with duly established Jewish councils, it was the SS that carried out directly many of the anti-Jewish measures. In Vilna, for example, following the completion of the first wave of exterminations in July and August 1941, the 46,000 surviving Jews were driven into the local ghettos by the Germans themselves. In Minsk, too, the great Aktionen of November 7 and November 20, 1941, in which approximately 20,000 Jews were massacred, were carried out with the SS completely bypassing the Jewish council. In Serbia, also, the Germans, relying primarily on the Wehrmacht rather than on the Einsatzgruppen, massacred the Jews in a series of reprisals during the fall of 1941 and spring of 1942 without involving the local
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Jewish leaders. The Germans occasionally acted directly even in matters that were usually in the purview of the Jewish councils. Thus, in Brussels, where both the local authorities and the Jewish council refused to engage in the distribution of the distinctive yellow badge, the German Military Administration assumed this task.

The Germans also bypassed the Jewish councils in the ghettization-concentration-deportation drives wherever they could safely rely on the local governmental authorities to carry out the “dirty work,” preferring to act merely as advisers and supervisors in the implementation of the Final Solution program. They did this not so much to safeguard the psychological integrity of the relatively few Germans who were assigned to the program (for these were ideologically indoctrinated and fully committed to the idea that the Jews had to be exterminated as bacilli to assure the survival of the Aryan races) but to spare their matériel and manpower for other purposes. This was especially true in countries they fully dominated. Thus, in Lithuania the Jews living in the smaller localities were rounded up on orders transmitted directly by the local authorities without involving the Germans or the Jewish Councils. This was also true in German-occupied Hungary, a country which remained only nominally sovereign after March 19, 1944. In all the communities of the country except Budapest, the Jews were rounded up and deported within a short period of time exclusively by the Hungarian gendarmerie and the local law-enforcement agencies.

In some countries the Jewish councils or communal leaderships were not only uninvolved in the ghettization and deportation, let alone the destruction process, but actually enjoyed a degree of maneuverability that enabled them to frustrate to a considerable extent the intent of the Germans. This was the case in Italy and the smaller Axis-allied states (including Hungary up to March 1944) as well as those conquered countries in which the Nazis failed to set up a totally submissive quisling government. In all of these states the Germans could not act unilaterally and so endeavored to bring about the solution of the Jewish question through the cooperation of the local governments whose consent they needed. Clearly, the attitude and actions of the Jewish leaders reflected the position of the local governments. The more the latter manifested their independence and asserted their sovereignty vis-à-vis the Germans, the greater were the opportunities for the Jewish leaders not only to maneuver in pursuit of rescue operations, but also to refuse their cooperation in the anti-Jewish drives.

By far the most dramatic case is that of Finland. Although Hitler
complained about the "subversive activity" of Finland's small Jewish community, and in 1942 Himmler actually urged the Finnish government to solve the Jewish problem, the Finns stubbornly resisted this intervention in their internal affairs. Although the Finnish authorities reportedly handed over to the Germans a number of refugees and several "Jewish criminals and Communists," they were insistent on protecting their small indigenous Jewish community. The Germans apparently abstained from exerting further pressure on Finland in this respect. However, this was due not so much to "Hitler's great esteem for the Finns" as emphasized by Hannah Arendt, but primarily to the Führer's belief that it would be unwise to jeopardize his relations with a fiercely independent Finland, one of his staunchest allies in the anti-Soviet war, in order to eliminate a few thousand Jews. In Romania, a country noted for its anti-Semitic policies, the ultrarightist regime of General Ion Antonescu refused to go along with the Nazis' Final Solution program and the Jews of Romania proper, i.e., those of Muntenia (Walachia), Moldavia, and Southern Transylvania survived the war almost intact. They were not even placed in ghettos and wore no yellow badges. As part of its defiance, the Romanian government did not permit German control over the Jewish council, the Bucharest office of which directed a network of local organizations.

The same situation also applied to Vichy France, where the regime exercised considerable autonomy and the Germans depended to a large extent upon the local bureaucracy and law-enforcement organs not only for the administration of this conquered country but also for the "solution of the Jewish question." In this country the Jewish council, the Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF), was in a position to escape many of the agonizing tasks that its counterparts had to fulfill in other parts of Europe. Established in November 1941, the UGIF was legally defined as an autonomous civilian public institution and placed under the tutelage of the General Commissariat on Jewish Questions (Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives), which had been set up under French jurisdiction earlier in the year. The relatively independent posture of France was reflected in the policies of the commissariat during the tenure of Xavier Vallat (March 1941 to May 1942), the Vichy appointee, and to a lesser extent of Darquier de Pellepoix, the Germans' choice, in the sense that both well-known anti-Semites took into consideration Marshal Pétain's differentiation between indigenous and foreign Jews, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm or adherence. This posture was reflected by the permission given the General Consistory of the
Jews of France (Consistoire Générale des Israélites de France), the traditional Jewish organization under the leadership of Jacques Helbronner, to continue its operations—to the great dismay of the Germans. In their drive for an effective implementation of the Final Solution, the Germans normally insisted on the existence of only one central Jewish organization in a country or a larger isolated area.) Although the UGIF, operating in northern, occupied France, was compelled to deal with the German Security Police in matters affecting the lives of the Jews, including those interned at Drancy, it was able because of the conditions prevailing in the country to refuse participation in the arrest, expulsion, and deportation process. Neither did it provide lists or assistance to the drives launched for the apprehension of Jews in hiding. As in Romania, the UGIF did not operate within the framework of ghettos and could dispense with the use of special Jewish police forces. It served "primarily" as a relief and welfare organization.

The correlation between the effectiveness of the Jewish leaders and the manifestation of independence by their state is also proven by the cases of Bulgaria and Hungary, both Axis-allied countries. In Bulgaria, only about 11,300 "alien" Jews were deported from the Bulgarian-occupied territories of Macedonia and Thrace in March 1943. Almost all of the 50,000-member Jewish community of Old Bulgaria survived the war.

That the Germans refrained from imposing their will in Jewish matters when they encountered determined opposition is proven poignantly by the case of Hungary—twice. Despite ever increasing German pressure, the Hungarians refused to engage in any radical solution of the Jewish question. And while, as in Bulgaria, the Hungarians also deported close to 18,000 "alien" Jews to near Kamenets-Podolsk (where most of them were slaughtered in August 1941), they protected the close to 800,000 "Hungarian" Jews—by far the largest surviving Jewish community of Europe—until the German occupation of the country on March 19, 1944. The currently available evidence shows that even after this date the Germans would have refrained from embarking on the Final Solution program had the new quisling government, and especially its experts on Jewish affairs who acted in close collaboration with the Eichmann Sonderkommando, not shown such great enthusiasm for the program. The second demonstration of this point came on July 7, 1944, when Miklós Horthy, the regent of Hungary, decided to halt the deportations. The Germans and their Hungarian accomplices had no alternative but to abide by his decision and refrain from the deportation of the
Jews of Budapest. But by that time the Hungarian countryside was already *judenrein*.

The active though involuntary involvement of the Jewish councils in the Nazis' sinister designs against the Jews was a phenomenon restricted almost exclusively to the Third Reich and the countries annexed or occupied by it. This was particularly true in eastern Europe, whose Jewry—the cradle and reservoir of modern Jewry—was the special target of the Nazis' fury. But here too the behavior of the Jewish councils varied, because of a number of factors, making generalizations impossible. Even in these areas the extent to which the Jewish leaders cooperated depended less on their religious, factional, or political-ideological affiliation than on local conditions; in particular, it depended on how exclusively the Jewish question was the province of the Germans, the eagerness with which the quisling authorities served the interests of the Germans, and the extent to which the local Christian church leaders and populations reflected compassion, hostility, or indifference toward the Jews. This is abundantly proven by the case of Greece, where great variations can be noted between the treatment of the Jews in Salonika and in Athens. In the former city, which contained 56,000 of the 77,000 Jews of Greece, the Germans were empowered to exercise absolute control over the Jewish question. Here Rabbi C. Koretz, the head of the *kehilla*, was turned, against his will, into an important tool of the Germans. Presumably unaware of the ultimate scope of the deportations, he was, like many of his counterparts in Nazi-dominated Europe, ensnared in an endless web of deceptions. According to recent accounts, Rabbi Koretz attempted to persuade the Germans not to remove the Jews, and when his efforts failed, he contacted the Greek authorities, including Prime Minister I. D. Rhallis, but to no avail. He paid with his life for his audacity. The picture was completely different in Athens, where Rabbi Eliyahu Barzilai, supported by the top city officials, refused to cooperate with Dieter Wisliceny. The SS leader came to Athens on September 20, 1943, to continue the deportation program, but found a Jewish community that could count on significant protection from the local Greek authorities. The pleas of Rabbi Barzilai were sympathetically received by Damaskinos, the metropolitan, and Krisurdaov, the police chief in the Eighth District of Athens. Even the prime minister was more considerate in "the case of the ancient Jewish community of Athens, whose members (were) considered to be true Greek citizens."\(^\text{18}\)

The role played by Rabbi Koretz was duplicated and indeed far exceeded by that played by his counterparts in many communities in...
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Nazi-occupied Europe, especially Poland and Lithuania. In these communities, the councils were nearly exclusively under the control of the Nazis, in an almost totally hostile environment, acting as helpless pawns. They were naturally eager to save themselves and their loved ones, but they also wanted to help the ever-shrinking communities to the limit of their constantly diminishing opportunities. Their actions and attitudes reflected the extraordinary conditions created by the Germans and their accomplices who alone—to repeat—determined the time, place, and scale of the liquidations in accordance with an diabolical, ideologically conceived plan.

Having demonstrated the close correlation between the attitudes and actions of the Jewish leaders in the various countries of Nazi-dominated Europe with the degree of independence or autonomy manifested by their governments, one may proceed to an examination of (a) the guidelines relating to the establishment and the functions of the councils; (b) the variations in their creation; (c) the structure of the councils and the characteristics of their leaders and members, including their awareness of the Final Solution; (d) the functions they performed voluntarily and involuntarily; and (e) the attitudes manifested toward them during the war.

Guidelines

Beginning with the establishment of the Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland (succeeding the Reichvertretung) on July 4, 1939, and ending with the legalization of the Association of the Jews of Hungary on April 19, 1944, the Jewish councils operating in Nazi-dominated Europe were set up on the initiative of the Germans. This was as true in independent Romania and in Vichy France, where the national legislatures enacted the necessary laws, as it was in Poland, where the German occupants issued them. While the Jewish councils varied to some extent from country to country and to a lesser degree within the few countries in which the internal administration of Jewish affairs was not nationally centralized (e.g., Poland), in general their composition and activities conformed to the basic guidelines outlined by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reich Main Security Office, on September 21, 1939.19

Heydrich identified the functions of the councils as ephemeral, a means for the achievement of "the ultimate goal (which requires a prolonged period of time)."20 Although the ultimate goal was not yet fully
crystallized—at the time, the Nazis were still toying with the idea of possibly concentrating the Jews of Europe in a "Jewish reservation" in the eastern part of the continent or of resettling them somewhere else, possibly in Africa—the plan for centralizing the local administration for the solution of the Jewish question by utilizing the Jewish councils was firmly established. This idea was clearly identified in the decree on the Jewish councils, which was issued on November 28, 1939, by Hans Frank, the governor-general for the Occupied Polish Territories. Article 5 of this decree stipulated not only that the Jewish council leaders had to take orders from the German authorities and were responsible for "the conscientious execution of these orders to their full extent," but also that all the Jews had to obey the instructions issued by the Jewish council regarding the execution of the German orders.²¹

The central idea was to place the councils within the wheels of the Nazi bureaucratic machinery, serving as the primary contact between the authorities and the individual Jewish communities. This objective compelled the Nazis to reject any attempts by the Jews to continue to operate their many local and national institutions on an autonomous or federal basis and actually to dissolve most of them and place those they considered temporarily useful under the jurisdiction of the councils. The councils emerged both as one of the major links of communication between the authorities and the Jewish communities in carrying out orders, and as the representatives through which the particular communities could express their needs. In fulfilling their often contradictory tasks, they wielded considerable power over the day-to-day affairs of the communities they led. This was especially true in the ghettos that survived a relatively longer period of time. In many of these the councils were empowered not only to regulate all aspects of their internal economies but also to preside over matters of life and death. This power was, of course, highly circumscribed; the councils never enjoyed any independent decision-making power over the ultimate fate of their communities. Their jurisdiction and longevity were determined by the Germans and their accomplices.

The power of the councils was derived from and was propped up by the authorities, who always insisted that their orders be carried out promptly and fully. These orders ranged from the surrender of property to the preparation of lists and the selection and transfer of Jews for "special treatment." In fulfilling these tasks the councils inevitably became transformed into instrumentalities serving the interests of their mortal enemies, and were turned against their will into accessories to the very
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The idea of rationing in the SS councils was never the same as the rationing by Hans B. Article 546a of the Final Solution program. The Jewish Councils exerted considerable effort toward easing the suffering of their fellow Jews and to gain time in the hope of liberation following a quick Allied victory. Unfortunately, their wishful thinking about the imminence of the Third Reich’s collapse was constantly overtaken by the speed and effectiveness with which the Nazis carried out their Final Solution program.

Types of Councils and Their Origins

The councils varied considerably in terms of their origin, longevity, jurisdiction, and composition. Some of the councils, especially in the smaller communities, were ephemeral, lasting only a few days or weeks. Following the transfer of the Jews into the larger ghettos or areas of concentration, these councils were disbanded and their members shared the fate of the rest of their community, as, for example, in practically all the provincial Jewish communities of Hungary in 1944. Others, both local and national, lasted for several years. One such example was the Joodse Raad of Holland and the councils in the larger ghettos of Poland. The Jewish council of Łódź, which holds the record, lasted from shortly after the German conquest of Poland in September 1939 to the liquidation of the ghetto in August 1944. In the course of their long existence, many of the councils underwent radical changes in terms of their structure, composition, and function.

Some of the councils were national in jurisdiction. This was the case, for example, in France, Holland, the Reich, and Romania. There, the councils operated outside the context of formal ghettos, although each of these countries had a number of internment or labor camps for Jews. The Jewish council of Budapest was both local and national, acting not only on behalf of the Jews of the capital but also—until the Hungarian countryside became judeenheit on July 9, 1944—as the major vehicle of communication between the authorities and the many local ghetto leaderships all over the country. In Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Transnistria, and the occupied areas of the USSR, the councils functioned almost exclusively within the framework of the local ghettos. The only exception was the Council of Sosnowiec, which served as a regional council for eastern Upper Silesia, having under its jurisdiction the local councils in the area. At both levels, and in all the affected countries, the councils...
operated in virtual isolation from each other except for official censored communications and occasional underground contacts through special messengers. Deprived of every means of genuine contact, the councils usually acted "independently" of each other in response to the orders and directives of their particular German or collaborating national authorities.

Although the councils were everywhere founded on German initiative, there were great variations in their establishment and composition. In some places, including Vilna and Minsk, the council leaders were appointed directly by the Germans. In several places, including Kovno, the council leaders had to be persuaded by the old-time civil and spiritual leaders of the Jewish community to accept the position, which they feared and loathed. Although many of these enjoyed the confidence of the particular community's leaders, they were not traditional representatives of the kehillahs. This was true in practically all the Jewish communities that had previously been under Soviet domination. In these areas the Jewish organisations and institutions had been disbanded in accordance with Soviet policies regarding nationalities, as a result of which the traditional communal lay and spiritual leaders were either imprisoned or exiled. Consequently, the leaders of the Jewish councils in most of these communities were either "foreign" Jews, that is, persons with no roots in the particular communities, or had not previously been active in communal Jewish affairs. Nevertheless, they normally tried to further the best interests of the communities into which historical events had thrown them. There were, of course, exceptions, as in the case of Minsk, and in Romania, France, Belgium, and Hungary.22

These modes of appointment, however, were the exception. By far the most prevalent manner in which a council was established was through self-organization by the traditional leaders following an order by the German or quisling authorities. In most places the Jewish councils were composed of the long-established, trusted lay and spiritual leaders of the particular communities. Many of these councils were, in fact, coalitions of the various local religious, political, and Zionist leaderships banded together to share the burdens and responsibilities that were thrust upon them. In this respect they were indeed authentic organs of communal leadership whom the Jewish masses trusted and looked upon for guidance and assistance. This image of the councils, like the discretion they had in local matters, was totally in accord with the Nazis' diabolical plan. In contrast to German policies toward the defeated nations, and especially the Slavic ones, whose planned permanent en-
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slavement in the envisioned thousand-year Third Reich required the immediate physical elimination of their elites—a practice followed by all ideologically oriented conquerors—the Nazis’ Final Solution program called for the elimination of the Jewish leaders only at the end. Their plan required that the authentic Jewish leaders be turned into accomplices by ensnaring them in an endless web of deceptions that would induce them, *inter alia*, to help lull the Jewish masses into submission and occasionally even to participate in the physical processes of destruction. In a way, the Jewish councils served the interests of the Nazis even by their charitable and humanitarian activities, since to the extent that they provided the wherewithal of survival to their ever shrinking communities they relieved the burden from the Germans. Indeed, this was in accord with the Nazis’ strategy, which envisioned not only the imposition of these impossible burdens upon the councils, but also the channeling of the Jewish masses’ anger and bitterness over the inadequacy of these services against their own leaders rather than against the Germans. This was clearly revealed by Heinz Auerswald, the Nazi commissar of the Warsaw ghetto, in his November 24, 1941, letter addressed to Berlin: “When there is suffering (in the ghetto), the Jews’ wrath is directed primarily against the Jewish authorities, and not against the German supervisory authorities.”

The legitimacy of the Jewish councils certainly, though obviously unintentionally, aided the Nazi authorities by making their job easier. But important as this element was, it was not a determining factor in the Final Solution program even in the case of those councils (for example that of Budapest) which were fully aware of Nazi designs.

What options did the councils have? To burden the Nazis by failing to provide, however inadequately, the Jews with food and housing in the ghettos? To resign? To commit suicide? Many of the council leaders remained in their positions from a sense of duty and devotion to the community. It would have been relatively easy, in some cases at least, for them to follow the example of other Jews with money and connections and to escape. Most of them concluded that by staying instead of escaping or resigning they could mitigate and perhaps avert the losses by continuing to provide experienced leadership. If they had resigned en masse, there is no doubt that the Nazis and their accomplices could easily have found another or yet a third set of Jewish leaders to serve in the council: they would have found this just as easy a task after a mass suicide by all the members of a council as after their liquidation.

Could the Jewish councils have refused to carry out the orders of the
Nazis? Yes, and in many cases they did. It was possible, to some extent, especially in the countries that retained and exercised a considerable degree of independence. There were also many cases of active defiance on the part of the council leaders, but then the Nazis and their accomplices carried out the tasks themselves and frequently much more cruelly. On the other hand, it is quite possible that, in some countries at least, the replacement of the traditional and trusted leaders of a community by a collective of unknown figures universally perceived as quislings might have awakened the masses to the realities of the fate awaiting them and induced them not to cooperate or possibly even to resist. In a way, the Jewish council leaders were in a no-win situation. It was part of the Nazis' plan that they too were to be eliminated immediately after the completion of their assigned tasks. But had they refused to serve in the council and by some miracle survived the war while tens and hundreds of thousands of their fellow Jews were massacred, they certainly would have been condemned by the survivors for having represented their community only while prestige and honor were the reward, and for having abandoned it in its darkest hour.

The Structure and the Leadership of the Councils

The internal structure of the councils frequently determined the efficiency with which they performed their tasks vis-à-vis the authorities and their communities. However, the structure was no more important than their membership or any other characteristic in determining the ultimate fate of the Jews. Whatever the differences in their characteristics, the councils usually acted and reacted similarly when they were confronted with similar conditions. The leadership and internal administration patterns tended to reflect the prewar modes of operation, adapted of course to the requirements imposed upon them. The councils usually operated within the existing institutional structure in their communities. Many of them, especially the national ones and those operating in larger ghettos, had numerous departments offering a variety of social-welfare, medical, educational, cultural, and religious services that were traditionally delivered by the kehillahs. Because of the isolation of the ghettos, the Jewish councils had to assume additional functions that were normally the responsibility of the local state administrations. The councils were compelled to deal with such state-related functions as housing, utilities, the acquisition and distribution of food, transporta-
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tion, and mail. They had special departments or sections dealing with administration, finance, housing, and economic and technical services. In the larger ghettos they even had well-organized though unarmed Jewish police units. The staff of most of these departments enjoyed a medium of well-being and security, which was, of course, only ephemeral. Many councils were merely opportunistic, trying to safeguard their own and their families' interests; many others, however, were genuinely committed to serving the best interests of their communities with the constantly diminishing resources at their disposal. While the extent to which a ghetto "flourished" depended upon the resourcefulness and talents of the Jews, the duration of its existence was always determined by the Germans and their accomplices.26

While a ghetto or community was allowed to exist, the Germans did not particularly object to the varied communal activities of the Jews, in as much as these too essentially served German interests. Since the destruction of the communities followed a predetermined timetable— which the Jewish leaders were obviously neither aware of nor able to influence—until the time came for a particular ghetto to be destroyed, the Germans were perfectly content not to have to provide even a minimal level of those social services the Jews themselves were providing. At the same time, it suited the Germans to foster Jewish illusions about eventual survival by permitting such normal activities as theatergoing and attendance at concerts; in their view, the busier a ghetto was, the less preoccupied its population was bound to be with the impending disaster.

In many ghettos, especially in eastern Europe, the Jewish police played a particularly important role. In almost all of the eastern communities the Jewish police was established on German orders and was frequently infiltrated by informers and Nazi agents who often intimidated and occasionally dominated the council as well as the police leadership. Subordinated to the Jewish councils, the Jewish police were responsible not only for maintaining law and order but in several places also for carrying out some measures involved in the Final Solution program.27

Although many of the prewar Jewish communities of eastern Europe, especially those of Poland, were organized on a democratic basis, with leaderships periodically elected in communal assemblies, the Jewish councils were generally organized and led in an autocratic manner. They were naturally neither elected by nor responsible to their particular "constituencies." Some of the councils were dominated by their dictatorial chairmen. This system was favored by the Germans not only because it
was in accord with their own leadership principles, but also because it proved for them more effective than the collective or democratic system. In many ghettos the council members tried to act as a collective body. In still others the most influential members of the council acted as a clique. The close cooperation between the top leaders of many of the councils was usually based as much on their mutual trust and on long-standing personal friendship as on their collective mistrust of some other members of the councils. The secrecy of their deliberations and actions often chagrined their colleagues, who not only mistrusted their judgment but also resented having to bear collective responsibility for decisions they had no part in making.

During the period of relative normality, that is, before the launching of the Final Solution program, the councils often held formal meetings, and their deliberations and decisions were nearly recorded, albeit in cautious and discreet language. During most of their life spans, however, the councils met on an emergency basis in a desperate attempt to cope with the ever more frequent and harsh challenges confronting them. The dictates of constantly arising emergencies, which required the speedy decisions that larger deliberate bodies would have made more difficult, if not impossible, compelled most councils to become ever more autocratic.

The quality of the Jewish council leaders and members varied. While many of the well-to-do and the influential Jewish leaders with good connections fled their countries—this was especially the case in Germany in the 1930s and elsewhere in east-central Europe shortly before and after the outbreak of World War II—the consequent decline in the quality of the Jewish elites was not fatal. In many a community the Jewish leadership consisted of highly motivated, dynamic lay and religious leaders who were imbued with a deep sense of Jewish consciousness. They reached their positions in the community by virtue of their wealth, class, generosity, learning, profession, prestige, and, not infrequently, family tradition. Because of their prominence in the communities, they were usually routinely renominated and reelected. In many communities in western and central Europe, the Jewish leaders were primarily patriotic, anti-Zionist and assimilationist. In these parts of Europe, the Jewish leaders were highly committed to the values and principles underlying their particular state and social systems. They usually belonged to the upper middle class, and some, especially in Hungary, to the lower aristocracy. Reflecting their class background, they were basically conservative, and tended to identify with the political and socioeconomic views...
cause it to function properly. In short, the system.

But what about the ruling clique? In the councils of the Bund, the members were chosen from the ranks of the proletariat, but they had no control over the unchaining of events, which were often chaotic and difficult, if not impossible to cope with. The situation was made even more critical when the speedy, but not very logical, solution of the problem was reached by the extermination of all Jews in Europe.

While the course of the Final Solution process lived and operated under the psychologically understandable illusion that their particular community might somehow survive the catastrophe that was befalling other Jewish communities. This was as true of the leaders of the national Jewish communities that were still relatively intact as of many local communities within countries where the Final Solution was already in progress. This psychological defense mechanism, a retreat from reality, was based partly on their inability to perceive the possibility—and indeed very few logically thinking people could conceive of it at the time—that a systematic, assembly-line mass murder could be perpetrated in supposedly enlightened twentieth-century Europe. In many places the Jewish leaders were misled by the belief that the Nazi measures affected only the “foreign” Jews and that the fully assimilated indigenous ones had little if anything to fear. In some countries this idea was quite well founded. For example, in Bulgaria only the “alien” Jews of Macedonia and Thrace were affected; Romania deported to Transnistria primarily the “alien” Jews of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina; the French were eager to rid of their “foreign” Jews; in Belgium the deportees consisted almost exclusively of stateless Jews of Czech, German, Polish, and Russian origin; in Hungary the close to 18,000 Jews who were deported to near Kamenets-Podolsk in the summer of 1941 were identified as “alien”; and finally even in Holland the drive was at first directed only against the German and other “alien” Jews. This was one of the factors that induced the Joodse Raad to cooperate more readily with the Germans in order to assure the better protection of the Dutch Jews. The Dutch council remained for a long time
under the mistaken impression that the anti-Jewish drive was directed exclusively against the "foreign Jews"—a faulty assumption that resulted, in Hannah Arendt's words, in "a catastrophe unparalleled in any Western country."32 The Dutch Jewish leaders at the time did not know—any more than the leaders of most other European Jewish communities knew—that this was only a tactical aspect of the Nazis' strategy to liquidate all Jews.

Declarations by the Allies (including that of December 17, 1942, which for the first time defined the extermination of the Jews as a crime), like the broadcasts by the BBC and other official and underground anti-Nazi radio stations, were not taken at face value during the first years of the war, either by the Jewish leaders or by the representatives of the oppressed nations. The broadcasts were in fact well substantiated, for the mass executions perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen in the former Soviet-held territories during the second half of 1941 and the deportation-extermination process launched early in 1942 could no longer be entirely hidden despite Nazi attempts to conceal them. Early in 1942, information on these activities was beginning to reach the Allies and the governments-in-exile with increasing frequency and in ever greater detail. However, broadcasts about the extermination of the Jews were quite infrequent and lacked specific details.

Only gradually did the awareness of the Nazis' designs enter the consciousness of the Jewish leaders. The timing and extent of the awakening differed in various parts of Europe, depending upon the leaders' degree of isolation and their relative status. Thus, although the measures enacted by the Germans almost immediately after the occupation of Poland were quite draconic, very few, if any, of the Jewish leaders, let alone the masses, thought or indeed could think that these were merely the first steps of a diabolical plan which would eventually lead to the physical destruction of all the Jews. Nothing in the history of the Jewish people—not even the harshest measures of the past, the expulsions and the pogroms—could have prepared them for this ideologically conceived objective that excluded even the traditional avenue of escape: conversion.

When the mass executions began in Lithuania and the other German-occupied Soviet territories, Jewish leaders at first thought they were facing isolated incidents directed primarily against persons whom the Nazis considered "useless" and "unemployable" and that the Jewish communities, though greatly diminished and totally impoverished, would nevertheless survive the war. As the nature of the periodic Aktionen became known to the ghetto dwellers at large, the survivors of these oper-
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actions were increasingly aware of the dangers and did everything in their power to render themselves “useful.” Unaware of the Nazis’ goals, they viewed the local exterminations as “the incarnation of unrestrained hatred and disregard for human lives.” As Yisrael Gutman correctly observed, they viewed the extermination campaign “more as an unwillingness to distribute food and other vital necessities to a population which the Germans considered to be inferior and inefficient.” Unlike the leaders of the free world—both Jewish and non-Jewish—they were not aware of the Nazis’ plan relating to the Final Solution. By the time those Jewish council leaders who eventually did realize the diabolical character of the Nazis’ actions came to their senses, they were already trapped, together with their shrinking communities.

Voluntary and Involuntary Actions of the Councils

The Jewish councils were confronted from the beginning by an impossible dilemma: how to reconcile their responsibilities to the communities they voluntarily served with the involuntary activities the Germans imposed upon them. As successors to the traditional kehillah leaderships, whose tasks they were eager to continue to fulfill, they were entrust by the Nazis with functions they were not accustomed or prepared to handle. The conflict and the contradictions between the German orders and Jewish communal interests became increasingly irreconcilable. Powerless and helpless, the councils were very quickly transformed into unwilling and unwitting instrumentality of the Germans while still trying to serve the interests of their communities with their constantly diminishing resources and options. But, as emphasized earlier, even these latter activities indirectly served the interests of the Nazis. Once trapped in the Nazi web, they had no alternative but to cooperate. Among other things, they were compelled to cooperate in the compilation of lists that were used in the ghettoization and deportation process; they prepared inventories of personal and communal properties that were subsequently confiscated; they raised funds for the financing of many aspects of the Final Solution program, including the purchase and distribution of the yellow badges, the erection of ghetto walls, and the support of work and concentration camps; they lulled the masses into submission; and they participated in the apprehension of Jews for deportation.

The council leaders carried out the tasks imposed upon them with various degrees of reluctance and effectiveness. In several cases, they
also worked with the underground resistance movement. Many of them paid with their lives for their heroic actions. Most council leaders were involved in a desperate struggle to save not only themselves and their families, but also as many others from their ever shrinking communities as possible.

Some councils, including those already aware of the Nazis' intent to annihilate the Jews, thought they could save at least the working remnant of their communities by making themselves "indispensable" to the Germans. Their rescue-through-labor strategy was based upon the supposition that some of the German organs of power, especially the Wehrmacht, were interested in preserving Jewish manpower for their own needs. They were convinced that the Germans could neither do without the skills of many of the Jews nor train non-Jews to replace them quickly enough. While this approach managed to postpone but not to prevent the ultimate destruction of all of the ghettos (none lasted to the end of the war), it caused considerable tension between the Jewish councils and the various groups of "skilled" and "unskilled" Jews in the ghettos. The periodic Aktionen of the SS, timed according to schedules with well-defined priorities, at first primarily affected the unskilled—the elderly, the very young, the ill, and the unemployed. When the councils tried to protect some in these vulnerable categories of Jews by classifying them as "skilled" or "employed," the truly skilled workers often virtually rebelled, fearing that their own lives and the lives of their families were being endangered. Little did the skilled workers in possession of special certificates know that they were destined merely to live a little longer. They could not possibly be aware of the Himmler order that once non-Jewish replacements were found they too were to be expeditiously eliminated "in accordance with the wishes of the Führer."

It was this same posture engendered by their helplessness that induced many council leaders to cooperate with the Germans even in the selection or apprehension of Jews for deportation and certain extermination. In some places (e.g., Budapest) the Jewish councils were used only as intermediaries for the preparation and distribution of summonses for the Jews specified on lists prepared by the SS and their accomplices. In others, they were compelled to participate in the roundup. In still others, they were ordered to select a certain number of Jews for surrender to the SS by a specific date. In all these cases, the Jewish leaders used almost the same rationalizations to justify their actions. Their assumption was that by obeying and carrying out the Germans' order themselves they could mitigate the suffering of the victims and save at least part, if
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Many of them leaders were lives and their communities lazis' intent to working reasonable" to the upon the sup- for their own er do without them quickly not to prevent to the end of Jewish councils in the ghettos. Tying with well— the elderly, councis tried to zyng them as actually rebelled, ties were being of special cer- longer. They nee non-Jewish usually eliminated ness that in- the certain extermin- nals were used of summonses as accomplices. pondup. In still wsf for surrender sh leaders used. Their assump- order themselves at least part, if not the majority, of the ghetto population, whereas disobeying, let alone resisting, would not only aggravate the immediate situation of the Jews but also inevitably lead to their total destruction. The choice, as many of them conceive it, was basically one between total extermination and partial survival. 39

The actions and reactions of the Jewish council members reflected both the different realities of the respective communities and their perception of these realities. The Jewish leaders' perceptions of the policies and objectives of the Nazis were distorted and to some extent influenced by the personal favors the SS extended to them and their families. This was a standard SS approach in all the countries under Nazi rule, not only toward Jewish leaders but also toward Christian local officials, as a way to acquire their confidence and cooperation. 40 In the case of the Jewish leaders, these favors consisted primarily of exemption for them and their immediate families from anti-Jewish measures. The benefits were normally short-lived; at the close of Final Solution measures in a particular area, the leaders would normally also be picked up and subjected to the same treatment as the rest.

Wartime Attitudes Toward the Councils

No empirical data are available on the attitudes toward the councils of the Jewish masses within or outside the ghettos. The documentary materials that are available, including the minutes of the council meetings, the diaries, and postwar memoirs and personal narratives, reveal a complex picture which precludes generalizations. In most of the ghettos, the Jewish councils were perceived—at the beginning at least—not so much as instrumentalities created by the Germans primarily to serve their own interests, but as institutions run by Jewish leaders eager and willing to help their communities. In many places the ghettos were at first perceived as enclaves of safety, where the Jews, led by their own community leaders and protected by their own militia, would be shielded from the wanton attacks of the Nazis and their local accomplices. The idea of Jewish autonomy was in fact exploited by the Nazis, who deceived the Jews by taking advantage of their predilection for self-government. The case of Theresienstadt illustrates the extent to which the Jews were unaware of the Nazis' sinister designs. The first "settlers" of this camp were idealistic Zionists who thought of setting up a hachshara, a training
and vocational education center for the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia, in order to retrain them to become pioneers for Palestine.

However, with the passage of time, the deepening frustration and anger of the ghetto dwellers, caused by the ever increasing hunger, disease, and executions, was increasingly directed against the councils—to the great satisfaction of the Germans. The perceived and real inequities of the measures enacted by the councils became the subject of vocal criticism and occasionally of outright defiance. The intensity of the opposition and its manifestations varied. Occasionally, much of the opposition came from within the council itself. Sometimes this was due to intrigues; at other times it was on matters of principle. Opposition from outside the council was most frequently articulated by the representatives of the Zionist groups and political parties operating underground. In many places the councils were also under pressure from various gangs and cliques, which occasionally relied on the influence of the Nazis to pursue their selfish interests. In still others, opposition to the council came from the ghetto population. For example, during the first year of the war, there were mass street demonstrations in the ghettos of Częstochowa, Łódź, and Lublin, among others. Individuals in many ghettos showed their opposition by refusing to heed the orders of the councils pertaining to the payment of taxes and fees and the fulfillment of labor obligations. As a matter of fact, the taxation policy, the housing program, and the labor plans of many of the councils were indeed quite unfair. Through bribery and other means the rich and those with connections could, before the deportations at least, escape the brunt of many anti-Jewish measures, placing a commensurately greater burden upon the poor and unprotected. Emanuel Ringelblum, the noted chronicler of the Warsaw ghetto, in his diary entry of January 1942 bitterly remarked that the council’s work was “an evil perpetrated against the poor that cries to the very heaven.”

During the early phase of the war, the underground leaders did not openly challenge the councils. In most places they agreed in principle with the positions taken by the councils in the attempt to assure the continued existence of the ghettos, even after the first Aktionen were launched in the former Soviet-held territories. In the context of the conditions at the time, they recognized that revolt within the ghettos was not a means of rescue but a road to certain, though honorable, death. This option was almost universally recognized as reasonable, for during this period the majority of the ghetto populations were still alive and there was no inkling of the impending general disaster. However, when the patterns of the Nazis’ design became discernible to the under-
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ground leaders, they adopted a more militant and antagonistic posture toward the councils. They began to subject the council leaders to increasingly severe criticism both within and outside the ghettos. In Warsaw and in many other ghettos in eastern Europe, the Jewish resistance organizations, composed primarily of Zionist-oriented young men and women, were increasingly appalled by the involvement of the Jewish leaders and the Jewish police in the deportation process and openly challenged the councils, offering themselves as alternatives to the leadership. They frequently expressed their opposition by arresting and executing persons they identified as collaborators. In other instances the underground interfered with the work of the councils or issued stern warnings to them. In Brussels, for example, a detachment of the Partisans Armés (Armed Partisans) under the command of Charles Rochman occupied the council's building on July 25, 1942, destroyed most of its files, and warned the Jewish leaders about their nefarious activities. Similar warnings were issued by the underground to the Hungarian Jewish leaders.

While in retrospect the underground obviously had a more accurate perception of the Germans' intentions and was more sensitive to the plight of the masses, in the context of the Nazi era it is somewhat unfair to compare their activities with those of the Jewish councils. The council leaders were openly identified as establishment leaders—whether designated, elected, or self-appointed—and had the dual responsibility of carrying out the tasks imposed by a relentless enemy and of fulfilling their obligations, however meagerly, to a constantly dwindling community; the resistance leaders, on the other hand, obviously had no such explicit responsibilities and enjoyed a modicum of security by virtue of their cover of anonymity.

The conflict between the councils and the resistance movements was not evident all the time, and in many places it did not even exist. For one thing, in many communities there were no resistance movements (Jewish or non-Jewish) at all. In many others the councils covertly cooperated with the underground leaders in rescue operations and even in the preparation of battle plans in anticipation of the liberating Allied armies. In still others, albeit in only a limited number of smaller Jewish communities, including Łachwa, Tuczyn, and Ząbciol in Poland, the Jewish councils were in fact in the forefront of the resistance. The paths and techniques adopted both by the councils and by the underground groups varied. Ultimately, neither provided a means of rescue for the masses—something that was beyond their power—in the face of a total-
itarian enemy who was strong enough to defeat temporarily most of the well-equipped armies of Europe and who was single-mindedly devoted to the achievement of its ideologically defined high-priority goal: the extermination of an entire people. The activities of the Jewish councils, including their unwilling and unwitting cooperation with the Nazis, reflected primarily the helplessness and defenselessness of the Jewish people. The record of the councils varied from country to country for reasons beyond their control. Some of them were more successful in serving their communities than others. But whatever their mistakes and whatever the level of their cooperation and collaboration, one must never forget that the ultimate responsibility for the Holocaust must be borne almost exclusively by the Germans and their accomplices all over Europe.