

The Holocaust



The Holocaust



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Introduction

This course explores the Holocaust, as the destruction of European Jewry is commonly known. The mass killing represented by the Holocaust raises many questions concerning the development of European civilisation during the twentieth century. This course, therefore, covers essential ground if you wish to understand this development.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- perceive the enormity of the events under discussion
- recognise the kinds of ideas and incidents which may have prompted them
- demonstrate an awareness of the historical arguments surrounding the Holocaust
- demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between the Holocaust and the war.

1 Precursors?

World War I has a claim to being called the first industrialised war in the sense that, for the first time, the full power of industrial technology was deployed in concentrated ways on the battlefields. During the Second World War, what might be termed industrialised mass killing was employed for the first time – not on the battlefields but in specially designated areas behind the battle fronts. The perpetrators were directed by educated men, little different socially from the bureaucrats in other European states proud of their ‘civilisation’. The firms that competed for contracts to build the extermination plants and supply the killing gas were, in the run of things, ordinary businesses, but the specifications to which they worked and their bills of lading reveal that they knew clearly in what they were involved. The victims were non-combatants selected primarily because of their racial origin. European Jewry was the principal target of this killing; however, the Nazis also used their killing machinery against Gypsies and Slavs, and they murdered others regarded as mentally defective or deviant and who, in consequence, were considered a threat to the ‘Aryan race’. (See Table 1 below for estimates of the numbers killed.)

1.1 The Holocaust: a unique event?

The Holocaust, as the destruction of European Jewry is commonly known, and the broader mass killing pose many questions both for this course and for our understanding of the development of European civilisation during the twentieth century. I cannot hope to answer these questions here, in so few words.

The table below estimates the number of Jewish people killed in the Holocaust.

Table 1 The genocide of Jews by the Nazis (minimum and maximum estimates)

Country	Jewish population	Estimates of number of Jews killed		
		Lowest	Highest	% of Jewish population
Poland	3,300,000	2,350,000	2,900,000	88
USSR	2,100,000	700,000	1,000,000	48
Romania	500,000	200,000	420,000	49
Czechoslovakia	360,000	233,000	300,000	83
Germany	240,000	160,000	200,000	83
Hungary	403,000	180,000	200,000	50
Lithuania	155,000		135,000	87
France	300,000	60,000	130,000	43
Holland	150,000	104,000	120,000	80
Latvia	95,000		85,000	89
Yugoslavia	75,000	55,000	65,000	87
Greece	75,000	57,000	60,000	80

Austria	60,000		40,000	67
Belgium	100,000	25,000	40,000	48
Italy	75,000	8,500	15,000	26
Bulgaria	50,000		7,000	14
Denmark		(less than 100)		
Luxembourg		3,000		
Norway		1,000		
Total	[8,388,000]	4,194,200	5,721,000	68

(Source: Tim Kirk, *The Longman Companion to Nazi History*, 1995, p.172)

Activity 1

From your own general knowledge, do you consider the Holocaust to have been a unique event?

You may be aware of the Turkish massacres of Armenians during the First World War. There were also massacres of Greeks and Turks by opposing sides during the Turkish–Greek War of 1921–22; Serbs were reported to be imposing their dominance in the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by killing ethnic and religious rivals. You may also have heard of the Ustashi massacres of Serbs, the Serb massacres of Croats and the Soviet massacres of Poles. However, what we might term the ‘industrial plants’ of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor and Treblinka were designed to manufacture death. They used modern technology to mass-produce killing, unlike the grisly, primitive barbarism of the Ustashi death camp at Jasenovac. And I think it is justifiable to say that they constituted a qualitative and quantitative jump in massacre and genocide.

The question I posed here takes us to the heart of issues surrounding the Holocaust. Is it unique? If so, what makes it unique? And, of course, why did it happen as and when it did? In 1981 Tim Mason suggested a major division between historians of the Holocaust: the ‘intentionalists’, who stress Hitler’s ideology and leadership, and point to a programme of policies which the Nazis sought to implement from the beginning; and the ‘functionalists’, who put less emphasis on individuals and their ideas, and more on the institutional and social structures of Nazi Germany (Mason, ‘Intention and explanation: a current controversy about the interpretation of National Socialism’, 1981). There are also arguments over the extent to which the German people as a whole were to blame; were they, as Daniel J. Goldhagen has argued, ‘Hitler’s willing executioners’ (1996)? And to what extent should the Holocaust be seen either, in essence, as a ‘war’ against the Jews, or as one element of a much broader denial of human value to a whole clutch of individuals and social groups – Gypsies, homosexuals and others, as well as, most significantly in terms of numbers, Jews. Although in the mass killings of the Holocaust this denial reached its most horrifying manifestation, the science on which it was based was not unique to Nazi Germany.

1.2 Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was not an invention of the twentieth century, nor was it simply a German phenomenon. In the years before 1914 violent pogroms were directed against Jews, who were made scapegoats for the problems of the Russian Empire. The flight of Jews from the east, first to escape the violent prejudices unleashed periodically in Tsarist Russia and then to escape the upheavals in the aftermath of World War I, sharpened the anti-Semitism which was already to be found in the west of Europe. The Jewish population of Paris had risen from 24,000 in 1870 to 150,000 sixty years later. In 1882 a Catholic priest established a newspaper whose title, *L'Anti-sémitisme*, advertised its content; four years later a young journalist, Edouard Drumont, published a deeply unpleasant but very successful book with a similar message, *La France juive*. The fact that Captain Alfred Dreyfus was a Jew contributed significantly to the hostility directed towards him when he was accused of spying for Germany in 1894; according to *La Croix*, a newspaper which spoke on behalf of the zealous Catholic Assumptionist Order, his trial became 'a duel between the army and the Jewish syndicate'. In France Jews were blamed for the economic recession of the 1930s. In Britain anti-Semitism and fear of alien Jews from the east who did not appear to seek assimilation fed into the Aliens Restriction Acts of 1905 and 1919. It was to be seen in British fascism, but it could be found also in non-political, everyday life. When, terrified by the Blitz, the proprietor and his wife of a coffee shop directly opposite a Metropolitan Police section-house sought refuge in the section-house shelter, the police officers, who frequented the coffee shop, objected that 'We don't want Jews in here' (H. Daley, *This Small Cloud*, 1986, p.174). But anti-Semitism, like any other form of racial or religious prejudice, does not automatically lead to mass murder.

1.3 Eugenics

Just as anti-Semitism was not unique to Nazi Germany, neither were ideas of racial superiority or attempts to create a society peopled by 'better' human beings. Politicians, scientists and social commentators in many European countries expressed concern about the 'degeneracy' of their respective 'national stock' in the years before World War I. Sir Francis Galton – scientist, anthropologist, cousin of Charles Darwin and inspired by his work – had coined the word 'eugenics' in 1883. Eugenics was to be 'the study of the agencies under social control which may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations physically and mentally'. In 1912 the first International Congress of Eugenics was hosted by London University. Heated arguments took place over whether measurable human characteristics could be used to assess laws of human variations, and whether the strong might mate with the physically attractive but feeble-minded to produce satisfactory offspring. The slaughter of World War I accentuated the concerns about 'national stock' and impelled many governments to encourage repopulation and to 'improve' and 'reinvigorate' their citizenry. Eugenics appealed to politicians and thinkers of both the left and the right. On the positive side its influence resulted in the development of housing and welfare policies and the encouragement of physical fitness in schools and elsewhere. But the question of what to do with 'degenerates', 'inferior types', the 'mentally deficient' and the 'ineducable' produced what was often an unpleasant, negative side. In Britain the solution to this question was generally seen to be incarceration; thus, for example, many young women who gave birth to illegitimate children were labelled as 'mentally deficient' and shut away in asylums for an indefinite period. Elsewhere sterilisation was seen as the answer. Nazi Germany led the field here, with over 200,000

sterilisations by 1937, but was by no means alone. Sweden began a similar policy in the mid-1930s, and it continued for forty years. In 1939 Nazi Germany progressed from sterilisation to the killing of the inmates of asylums as part of its 'euthanasia' programme; around 70,000 were killed before the programme began to be run down in 1941 following protests from the public and church leaders.

Moreover, if Nazi Germany stands out for pursuing brutal eugenics policies before the implementation of the so-called 'Final Solution [*Die Endlösung*] of the Jewish question', there were others in influential positions elsewhere who, before the start of the Second World War, were advocating violent policies to restrict the rights of minorities and/or to remove alien ethnic groups from their national territory. In 1919, for example, the new Hungarian state set limits on the number of Jews who could enter university. These restrictions were tightened in 1921, and in 1939 legislation was introduced that banned Jews from white-collar occupations. Vaso Cubrilovic was the youngest of the group of Serbs whose assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand had triggered the events leading to war in 1914. Released from prison on the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he went on to become a distinguished historian and philosopher at the University of Belgrade, and eventually served as a minister under Tito. In 1937, in the midst of his academic career, he published a pamphlet which urged the use of 'the brute force of an organised state' to make life intolerable for Albanians living in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo and to drive them out either to Albania or Turkey.

2 Nazi ideology and anti-Jewish policies

Anti-Semitism was central to Hitler's world view and to that of most Nazi activists. Hitler considered Jews to have been foremost among profiteers and racketeers during World War I; they engineered the 'stab in the back' of November 1918; they were hand-in-glove with Bolshevism. In August 1919 Hitler was an instructor at a military camp at Lechfeld, near Augsburg. His task was to inject nationalist and anti-Bolshevik ideas into the men in the camp, many of whom were recently released prisoners of war.

2.1 Anti-Semitism and Hitler

Anti-Semitism was a major feature in Hitler's addresses to the men, and this led to him being consulted by his superiors on 'the Jewish question'. The consultation led, on 16 September 1919, to his first recorded written statement on the matter. This looked forward to the removal of rights from the Jews and, eventually, to 'the removal of the Jews altogether' (quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*, 1998, p.125). With hindsight it is tempting, and perhaps satisfying, to draw a line from Hitler's attitudes in 1919 to the death camps – but does such an 'intentionalist' perspective provide a satisfactory explanation for developments and contingencies over twenty-five years?

An analysis of Hitler's writings and speeches from the origins of the Nazi Party through to the outbreak of World War II suggests that he shifted his language to suit changing audiences and changing priorities. From late 1922 and through 1923, for example, ferocious anti-Semitism gave way to extreme anti-Marxism with little or no reference to, or linkage of this with, Jewry. Ian Kershaw (*The Hitler Myth*, 1987, p.231) has suggested that this was part of a conscious attempt to appeal to a wider audience; anti-Marxism had a bigger appeal than anti-Semitism. Verbal attacks on the Jews were not a main theme of the electoral campaigns of the early 1930s, and even after the Nazis had achieved power Hitler avoided personal association with attacks on Jews, though he publicly supported 'legal' discriminatory measures.

2.2 Early anti-Jewish policies in the Nazi government

Hitler's government was sworn in on 30 January 1933. On 28 March all Nazi Party organisations were urged to carry out a boycott of Jewish businesses and professionals on 1 April. The exhortation came from 'the Party Leadership' and claimed that the boycott was in response to the lies spread in the foreign press by Jewish emigrants; in reality, though, it was an attempt to impose some discipline on the freelance, anti-Semitic vandalism and violence of Nazi activists (especially the SA) in the light of the Party's political dominance. The German population as a whole did not show itself to be particularly sympathetic to the boycott, and it was called off as an organised, nationwide event after one day. Over the next two and a half years, while some local Nazi activists continued to rant against the Jewish 'menace' and, on their own initiative, assaulted or intimidated Jews, little was said or done publicly by the Party hierarchy. Then, on 15 September 1935, in a speech to the *Reichstag* assembled at the Party rally in Nuremberg,

Hitler announced 'defensive actions'. He declared that these were necessary as calming measures because of plots and boycotts which had been engineered against Germany by Jews abroad. These 'actions' became known as the Nuremberg Laws. The 'Citizenship Law' led to the division of the population into 'subjects' and 'citizens'; Jews became mere 'subjects' and lost legal equality. The 'Law for the Defence of German Blood and Honour' forbade marriage and sexual relations between Jews and 'Aryans'. At the same time Jews were banned from raising the German flag and employing non-Jewish female servants or staff under the age of 45. An additional thirteen decrees supplemented these laws over the next few years; the Protection Law, for example, was extended to include Gypsies and 'Negroes'. Most of the new decrees, however, were concerned with removing Jews from influence and authority within the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the national community); thus the licences of Jewish doctors and lawyers were revoked, Jews were issued with new, distinct passports, and so forth. There was some negative reaction to this legislation – from a few businessmen who feared an adverse effect on the economy, and from churches, liberals and ideological opponents of the regime – but most ordinary German people appear to have accepted it, or at least turned a blind eye. But again, for a long period, there was little public comment from the Party hierarchy, and little public debate.

Activity 2

On 7 November 1938 the Third Secretary at the German Legation in Paris was assassinated by the 17-year-old son of a deportee. The Nazi response was the organised pogrom of the night of 9–10 November, *Kristallnacht* – 'Crystal Night', or 'the Night of Broken Glass' (some now prefer the less euphemistic term *Reichspogromnacht* – pogrom night). [Documents II.8 II.9, and II.10](#), are extracts from reports of the event.

1. What is the origin of each of these reports?
 2. Might you expect the origin of each document to affect how the events are reported in it?
 3. In the light of your answer to question 2, can you detect from these reports a general picture of the reaction of the German people to *Kristallnacht*?
1. Document II.8 is a report smuggled out of Germany by socialists or socialist sympathisers; Document II.9 is a police report; Document II.10 is a report from a senior local government official.
 2. Whatever document we are looking at, we have to be aware of who wrote it and for what purpose. We might, therefore, approach each of these documents with some reservations. Might the socialists have had an axe to grind? Might they have been tempted to couch their account in ideological terms, or in terms which their audience would have found generally encouraging about the direction events in Germany were taking? Similarly with the police and the local government official: how far might they have been writing what they knew their superiors wanted to read?
 3. What is interesting is that, even given these differences of origin and ideological baggage, the reports tell roughly the same story – *Kristallnacht* was not universally well received by the German people.

Historians of Nazi Germany, whose conclusions are, of course, based on many more than three documents, generally agree that the destruction and violence of *Kristallnacht* prompted widespread criticism. Some of this may simply have been

concern about violence on the streets; note, for example, the comments made by the *Regierungspräsident* towards the end of his report. Moreover, as the SOPADE report suggests, the reaction to the event – and to the persecution of the Jews in general – appears to have varied from place to place given the numbers of Jews present in the community, the extent of intermarriage and local traditions of anti-Semitism.

2.3 The significance of *Volksgemeinschaft* in Nazi ideology

Hitler made no reference to *Kristallnacht* in his speeches at the time of the event. Less than three months later, however, on 30 January 1939, he gave a two-hour address to the *Reichstag*. The speech focused principally on the international situation but contained the ‘prophecy’ that a new war would bring about ‘the destruction *Vernichtung* of the Jewish race in Europe’. The ‘prophecy’ was singled out in newsreel coverage of the speech, yet neither the official reports on the impact of the speech nor the SOPADE reports comment on this section in their assessment of its impact. What people appear to have been most interested in was Hitler’s discussion of the chances for peace or war.

By the outbreak of World War II, Jews in Germany had been deprived of citizenship. In addition they had been the victims of boycotts, intimidation, physical violence and brutality, some of which had been organised by Nazi Party officials, some of which was the work of local Nazi thugs acting on their own initiative. With hindsight we know that the situation was to get infinitely worse, but, prophecies about ‘the destruction’ of European Jewry aside, was there anything yet to suggest the creation of death camps and genocide?

The treatment of the Jews between 1933 and 1939 was one aspect of a policy which sought the creation of a racially homogenous, focused, national community – the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Other countries which emerged out of the First World War with multi-ethnic populations also looked for ways of dealing with their minorities, and few of these were particularly generous or pleasant. There are two things which stand out about Nazi Germany, however: the ethnic minorities within the territory of Germany were relatively few in number; and Nazi policy during the 1930s set out to incorporate into the *Reich* many of those territories occupied by ethnic Germans outside the frontiers of 1918 – Austria, the Sudetenland, and so on. The mystic Utopia of the *Volksgemeinschaft* required that all its members be centred on the same goal, dedicated to hard work and prepared for self-sacrifice. Those who would not fit in – the ‘asocial’, the ‘workshy’, homosexuals, political opponents – and those who could not fit in – ‘aliens’, the ‘ineducable’, the ‘incurable’ – had to be excluded, even eradicated. Anthropology, biological sciences and eugenics were deployed to identify both these groups of outsiders and even to suggest ‘treatment’. As noted above, the treatment of the ‘insane’ and ‘incurable’ was more violent in Germany than elsewhere and, from 1939, involved murder. Furthermore, in Nazi thinking Jews were not merely people who practised a particular religion; they were a ‘race’. Given thinking that was not unique to interwar Germany, the Nazis believed that as a ‘race’ Jews could be identified scientifically. The Nazis did not only present the Jew as someone who could be identified biologically; they also put forward a series of artificially constructed manifestations of the Jew as an enemy of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In the

words of Detlev Peukert, one of the most authoritative commentators on everyday life in Nazi Germany:

The very diversity of actual modern Jewish experience was taken to point to the existence of the mythical hate-figure of the essential 'Jew' lurking behind the most disparate surface appearances. The intellectual, culturally assimilated Jew stood for detested modernity; the religious Orthodox Jew matched the traditional hate-image of Christian anti-Semitism; the economically successful Jew stood for 'money-grubbing capital' and liberalism; the Jewish socialist represented abhorrent 'Bolshevism' and 'Marxism'; the 'Eastern Jew' from the alien culture of the ghettos was a suitable target for the aggression and arrogance of the civilising and colonialist missions of the imperialist era.

(Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 1987, p.209)

Activity 3

Many, indeed most, of these images were not confined to Nazi thought. Can you suggest why, in the context of Nazi Germany, they may have formed the basis for genocide?

It is, of course, a truism to say that the Nazi regime was ruthless and brutal; it had demonstrated itself as such both in the treatment of some of its own (Rohm and the SA for example), and in the treatment of the 'insane' and 'incurable'. While the abstract image of the 'Jew' was not specifically German, it constituted an all-encompassing opponent of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Nazi Utopia. It might be argued that, having created this ubiquitous monster, ultimately only an all-encompassing 'solution' to the problem would suffice. Moreover, once Germany had embarked upon war, and once therefore the *Volksgemeinschaft* had to be fully focused and prepared for determined effort and self-sacrifice, the removal of any internal 'alien' threat – especially this threat – became all the more imperative.

This answer relies heavily on Peukert's analysis. You may have come up with something very different. When Peukert gave a conference paper arguing that the Final Solution was 'a systematic, high technology procedure for "eradicating" or "culling" those without "value"' he was criticised for refusing to afford primacy to the attempt to exterminate European Jewry – the Jews were, after all the principal victims of the mass killing – and for seeming to reduce Nazism to 'biological politics' (T. Childers and J. Caplan, *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, 1993). Explaining mass murder is not easy. The point to note, I think, is that there was a change in the Nazi persecution of the Jews during the war, and it is to this change that I want now to turn.

3 War and the Final Solution

The term 'Final Solution' (*Die Endlösung*) was a euphemism. Himmler was fully prepared to talk about killing to his immediate subordinates, but much of the Nazi killing machine was shrouded in bureaucratic euphemism.

3.1 Terminology used during the 'Final Solution'

The doctors and administrators charged with murdering 'incurables' were the 'Public Ambulance Service Ltd' (*Gemeinnützige Krankentransport GmbH*); the motorised death squads which first went into action in Poland in 1939 were 'task forces' (*Einsatzgruppen*); the massacre of nearly 34,000 Jews in the ravine of Babi-Yar after the capture of Kiev in September 1941 was a 'major operation' (*Gross-Aktion*). People identified for extermination in official Nazi documents were listed as those to be given 'special treatment' (*Sonderbehandlung*), sometimes abbreviated to 'SB', and from roughly mid-1943 the term 'special lodging' (*Sonderunterbringung*) was also used.

3.2 Plans for 'resettlement' of the Jews

The occupation of western Poland after the brief campaign of 1939 gave the Nazis *Lebensraum* to colonise with ethnic Germans, some of whom were soon to be repatriated to the *Reich* (and thence, often reluctantly, to the newly annexed provinces of the Warthgau and Danzig) by new conquests. But the preparation of these provinces for the colonists necessitated the expulsion of a million Poles and Jews, who were driven east to the Nazi-controlled satellite of Poland known as the *Generalgouvernement* (General Government). In the autumn of 1939 plans were prepared for a Jewish reservation in the vicinity of Lublin. It was estimated that some 3 million German, Austrian, Czech and Polish Jews would have to be moved east. As part and parcel of these expulsions Jewish elders were murdered, together with several thousand Polish notables (academics, national and local leaders) who, it was feared, might become the leaders of a Polish resistance. At the same time, linked with the euthanasia programme, about 10,000 patients in psychiatric hospitals, both Jews and Poles, were murdered by shooting and gassing; this was so that accommodation and transit camps could be created for the ethnic German settlers being brought in at this stage from the Baltic states and that part of Poland occupied by the Soviets. However, the policy of genocide does not yet appear to have been on the agenda. The Jews were shut up in ghettos, most notoriously in Warsaw and Lodz, to await resettlement. Himmler himself dismissed extermination in a memorandum of May 1940, preferring the option of shipping Jews off to a colony in Africa or somewhere similarly distant: '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' (quoted in Browning, *The Path to Genocide*, 1992a, p.17). For a few months after the fall of France there were serious discussions about using the island of Madagascar in such a way; the number of Jews to be thus 'resettled' grew to about 4 million with the addition of those from France, Belgium, the Netherlands and other conquests. The failure to defeat Britain created a major problem for the implementation of this plan.

While discussions about the Madagascar plan continued, the situation in the ghettos deteriorated. There had been no clear policy from Berlin about confining the Jews in the

ghettos; local Nazi authorities were left to improvise on what everyone appears to have regarded as a temporary expedient. Whatever else they were, the ghettos were not the intended resettlement reservations. The Jews rapidly spent their money and sold their valuables so as to purchase food from the Nazi administration and from those outside the ghettos. They began to starve, and epidemics started; possibly as many as 500,000 Polish Jews died as a result of the increasingly appalling conditions in the ghettos. Some Nazi administrators were unconcerned, but the majority sought to facilitate the creation of systems whereby the ghettos could become self-sufficient, with the Jews being put to work but kept separate from 'Aryans' and others.

Around the beginning of 1941 the Madagascar plan was finally abandoned; while the Nazis had no qualms about killing Jews and others, they appear still to have been thinking in terms of removal and using the fittest as slave labour. In March 1941 Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the *Reich Security Head Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA)*, was discussing plans for a new deportation of Jews further to the east of Poland. Much of the precise detail remains unclear, but it appears that the intention was to separate the Jews by gender, possibly even sterilising the women; the fit would then be used as slave labour, to build roads and drain marshes, while the remainder would be put into 'death reservations'. It was also accepted that many would die while marching east for the resettlement.

3.3 Factors leading to the 'Final Solution'

Activity 4

Two questions:

1. What was east of Nazi-occupied Poland?
 2. On what would this new resettlement depend?
1. Soviet-occupied Poland, and then the USSR.
 2. On seizing and occupying Soviet territory.

Heydrich's new round of planning coincided with the preparations for Operation Barbarossa and depended on German victory over the USSR. In consequence it coincided also with the preparation of the Commissar Order. Historians, and others, have argued about the precise point at which the final decision to murder European Jewry was taken, but there does appear to be some tie-in with the brutality unleashed in the invasion of Russia. The problem is a lack of precise documentation. Much was destroyed on Himmler's orders in the closing stages of the war; other documents appear to have been destroyed as a matter of course as events progressed; and much is also obscured by the use of weasel words and euphemism. There are arguments for seeing a significant shift in policy towards the Jews during the preparations for Barbarossa in the spring of 1941, in Goering's instruction to Heydrich of 31 July 1941 to prepare 'a comprehensive solution to the Jewish question'; in the increased exterminating fury (that is, killing women and children in equal numbers to men) among the *Einsatzgruppen* during the euphoria of the initial success against the USSR in August 1941; in Heydrich's meeting with government ministry representatives at the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942. But the German historian Götz Aly has

argued that the search for an 'order' or a 'decision' essentially ignores the way in which the Nazi state bureaucracy worked (and, indeed, how any state bureaucracy works).

Political decisions generally are not made in a day, nor are they carried out in linear fashion; and they are not exclusively positively determined ... [T]he course of political opinion formation – even under the conditions of the Nazi dictatorship – can be viewed as a more or less open process. The transitions between planning, decision-making, and practice were fluid, the boundaries between the participants and interested institutions permeable ...

A Führer order was not needed ... Hitler took part in building the consensus, made demands, and let the implementors know that they did not need to conform to any traditional norms; rather they could carry out any type of 'solution' at all ...

The ongoing linkage between practice and planning was characteristic of the attempts to deport the Jews right from the start. Even in their first weeks on the job, the bureaucrats in Himmler's 'resettlement' institutions had resorted to mass murder. For their immediate purposes, they had patients in Pomeranian, Polish, and West and East Prussian psychiatric hospitals 'cleared out' to 'accommodate' ethnic Germans ...

With the start of the Russian campaign, a second important practice joined the almost two years of practical experience of murder: the mass executions of Soviet prisoners of war, Jews, and suspicious civilians on the eastern front.

(Aly, 'Final Solution', 1999, pp.253–4)

The *Einsatzgruppen* followed the army into the Soviet Union, massacring Jews and Russians with their guns and their gas vans; but, as discussed above, the evidence suggests that the members of the German army too were fully prepared to become involved in the killing of a 'race war' (*Rassenkrieg*). In August 1941 the 6th Army headquarters, at the news that some off-duty soldiers had volunteered to help with executions, or had gone along to watch or to take photos, instructed that men should not participate in such executions unless ordered by a superior officer. Two months later Field Marshal von Reichenau, the 6th Army commander, backed by Field Marshal von Rundstedt, issued an order to his men explaining what made the war in the east different.

In this eastern theatre of war, the soldier is not only a man fighting in accordance with the rules of war, but also the ruthless standard-bearer of a national ideal and the avenger of all the bestialities perpetrated on the German peoples. For this reason the soldier must fully appreciate the necessity for the severe but just retribution that must be meted out to the subhuman species of Jewry.

(Quoted in Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 1998, pp.56–7)

3.4 The mass production of death

Mass shootings by soldiers and *Einsatzgruppen* and the use of the mobile gas vans took time and energy. There was concern about the effects on the morale of the men involved. Towards the end of 1941, even before the Wannsee Conference, the Nazis had begun building camps in Poland that incorporated large gas chambers for the mass production of death. Belzec was the first to come into operation in February 1942, killing people with carbon monoxide first released from bottles and subsequently produced by a conventional internal-combustion engine. But the bureaucrats responsible for the killing found that the procedures were still not quick enough to cope with the numbers of those who were to be given 'special treatment'. The problem was exacerbated after Himmler's order of 19 July 1942 that all Jews in the General Government of Poland, with the exception of a few who might be put to work, should be exterminated before the end of the year. The gas chambers were enlarged, but problems began to be experienced as a result of the enormous numbers of corpses that had been buried, and were putrefying in the vicinity of the camps. The bodies were consequently exhumed and burned. From the end of 1942 and through 1943 the first extermination camps were gradually run down. The bulk of the killing was switched to Auschwitz, where people had been killed since September 1941. Four massive buildings known as crematoria (incorporating gas chambers which used the hydrocyanic acid gas Zyklon B, as well as ovens for the incineration of corpses) were completed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the spring of 1943. Precise records of how many were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau do not exist; roughly two-thirds of the arrivals at the camp were classified as 'unfit for work' and were marched straight to the gas chambers. It seems that there were at least 1,334,700 victims: 1,323,000 Jews; 6,430 Gypsies; 1,065 Soviet prisoners of war; 3,655 others, mainly Poles (Kogon *et al*, *Nazi Mass Murder*, 1993, p.173 note). One of the crematoria was put out of action by a prisoners' revolt in October 1944. In January 1945 all four were dynamited by the SS, and attempts were made to destroy camp documents in the panic generated by the Russian advance.

4 Ordinary men? Ordinary Germans?

This section provides some activities and documents to describe those involved in the perpetration of the holocaust.

4.1 The killers – portrayal and reality

Activity 5

Read [Document II.11](#), Himmler's speech to the *Gauleiter* (leaders of the territorial divisions of the Nazi Party, found under the link below) of 6 November 1943, and answer the following questions:

1. What, according to Himmler, have been the advantages of the extermination policy?
 2. What have been the difficulties with it?
 3. How do you think he portrays the killing and the killers?
1. Himmler speaks in terms of the removal of 'a plague' which was destroying the people, and argues that this has enabled Germany to survive the pressures of war, particularly aerial bombardment.
 2. He suggests that there have been several difficulties, all of which have been overcome. First, there has been the assumption by some – even Party members – that there were 'decent Jews' who might be spared. It is implicit in what Himmler says here, though not developed in any way, that such notions are quite wrong-headed. Equally wrong-headed, in his estimation, was the notion that women and children might be spared; this, he insists, is 'unjustified' since it would leave the potential for future avengers. Finally, he notes concerns about the extreme pressures on the people responsible for the killing, and the fear that they might be seriously distressed or psychologically damaged.
 3. Himmler portrays the killers as heroes carrying out an unpleasant, but necessary, task. There seems to me to be an element of the 'stiff upper lip' here when he talks of the killers stoically bearing their responsibility in silence.

The speech has an internal logic, but it is a perverted one. It shows the extent to which Himmler and the Nazi élite had internalised the idea of the Jews as being subhuman; they were simply 'a plague' which had to be destroyed for the good of all. It was unpleasant work, but someone had to do it; it was also a noble task, and the men who were involved had to be strong and silent. The question then has to be posed: is this what the killers themselves believed?

Activity 6

Read Christopher Browning's article, ['One day in Józefów: initiation to mass murder'](#), and answer the following questions:

1. Who were the killers discussed by Browning?
 2. What offer did Major Trapp make to his men, and what happened to the men who accepted it?
 3. What were the effects of Jósefów on the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101?
 4. What does Browning note as having been significantly ignored in the judicial interrogations of the 1960s and 1970s? Can you think of any ideology which is not much mentioned, but which ultimately inspired the killing?
1. The killers came from two major sources. There were men from former prisoner-of-war camps, generally Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians, who had been trained by the SS. These men usually did the brutal work of driving Jews from their dwellings to the railway stations and shooting on the spot those too old, too young or too sick to make the journey. A few hundred of these men subsequently went to the death camps, where they outnumbered the German staff by four to one. Then there were police units, like Reserve Battalion 101, which drew its NCOs from career policemen and young men who had volunteered for the Order Police before the war, sometimes to avoid conscription. The rank and file of these units were civilian conscripts generally considered too old for front-line military service. In passing, Browning also mentions 'the desk murderers' – the bureaucrats who never got their hands (or uniforms) bloody, but who worked in a routinised way at a distance from the killing.
 2. Trapp ordered that anyone who did not feel up to the killing could fall out. Some of those who refused to participate were subsequently given tough, unpleasant tasks; for others there appear to have been no repercussions.
 3. Some men could not cope with the killing; they avoided it and/or broke down during it. Those who carried on, which was the majority, appear to have become desensitised during subsequent actions, though on these later occasions they tended to form cordons, leaving the 'dirty work' to the 'Hiwis'.
 4. Browning notes that anti-Semitism was virtually ignored both by those asking the questions and by the men who were being interrogated. Browning also only touches on Nazi ideology in passing, and he remarks that the men of the battalion mostly came from 'one of the least Nazified cities in Germany' (Hamburg), and 'from a social class that in its political culture had been anti-Nazi'.

4.2 Who to blame

Browning developed his work on Police Battalion 101 into a book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992b). The same material was subsequently used, and reinterpreted, by Daniel J. Goldhagen for *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996). Goldhagen points the finger of blame for the Holocaust precisely at Germany. The Holocaust was, he stresses, a German phenomenon, and he argues that it built on what he detects as 'an eliminationist form of anti-Semitism' already present in nineteenth-century Germany. Of course, it was Hitler and the Nazis who unleashed the mass murder; nevertheless, Goldhagen maintains, they succeeded with such frightening ease because of the way in which ordinary Germans had long regarded Jews. The debate has been furious. Goldhagen's

book was, initially, poorly received – particularly so by German academics. The main criticisms focused on three main areas: the extent to which such ‘eliminationist’ anti-Semitism existed; the fact that Goldhagen was making a special case for the treatment of Jews when Slavs, Gypsies and others were also being massacred; the fact that much of the killing was actually done by non-Germans, such as the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police (*Arajs Kommando*). This particularly appalling group tortured and raped their victims, sometimes literally wading in blood and drunk on vodka. But Goldhagen has also had his strong supporters, who stress that, when all is said and done, it was the Germans who began the mass murder. They also point out that, even if the Germans did not commit all of the killing, they nevertheless administered it, and very few ever spoke out against it (unlike, for example, the euthanasia programme, which had been publicly criticised). The arguments can be followed up in, for example, Robert R. Shandley, *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate* (1998). For two particularly ferocious critiques of Goldhagen, which challenge the way in which he has both interpreted documents and constructed his argument, see Norman J. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (1998).

4.3 The response of some of Germany's allies to Nazi anti-Semitism and the Final Solution

The Hungarians were latecomers to the killing of Jews, but when they became involved in 1944 their police and administrators appear generally to have acted with an unpleasant enthusiasm for the enterprise. Vichy France introduced anti-Semitic legislation early on. The Statute of Jews of 3 October 1940 barred French Jews from holding responsible positions in the public service, from teaching and from the news media; it also prohibited them from entering the *département* of the Allier, where the town of Vichy itself was situated. Over the next two years there was increasing discrimination as Jewish businesses were expropriated and as quotas were introduced in the professions. Non-French Jews – those who had fled from the east in the aftermath of World War I or from Nazi persecution in the 1930s – were handed over to the Germans first. While there may be something in the argument that this was done to protect those Jews who were French citizens, the three men appointed, successively, to head Vichy's department of Jewish affairs were all noted for their anti-Semitism, and even French Jews were handed over in the end. Some of Vichy's behaviour was clearly to appease the Germans, though it can also be said to have built on the long-standing tradition of anti-Semitism in France. It should also be noted that there were French people who resisted these policies, notably Protestants in the Cevennes who established escape routes for Jews, and for the first time a section of the French clergy came forward during Vichy to denounce anti-Semitism. Mussolini's Italy began an anti-Jewish campaign in 1937 and a succession of anti-Jewish laws was passed in the following year, coinciding with *Kristallnacht*. Foreign Jews were to be deported; Italian Jews were forbidden to marry ‘Aryans’, to run businesses employing more than 100 workers, to own more than 50 hectares of land, to work for the civil service or in teaching. It is difficult to account for the laws. The Fascist movement was racist, particularly with regard to Africans, but, while some Fascists were anti-Semitic, this was not a key tenet of the creed and there were relatively few Jews in Italy. Nor is there any evidence of Nazi pressure. The anti-Jewish policies appear to have been the result of concerns about loyalty during a future war; however, they were generally unpopular among the conservative elites which had supported Fascism, as well as among ordinary

people, who began to wonder where aggressive foreign policy was leading and who generally disliked the Germans. Italian army officers seem to have had no qualms about handing Serb partisans over to the Ustashi, yet they did not hand Jews over to their German allies when requested. And if the tiny 'Italian Social Republic' established for Mussolini in September 1943 pursued anti-Semitic policies, this can be put down principally to the fact that the Germans – notably the ambassador Rudolf von Rahm and SS General Karl Wolff – had the real power.

5 Legacy

In the wake of the Soviet armies during 1944–45 came police units. In Poland the communist Office of State Security (*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*, UB) refilled former Nazi camps and prisons with civilians, many of whom were Germans innocent of any offence other than that of being German. Somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000 died as a result of UB behaviour in the camps and prisons; victims were beaten, tortured, starved, killed. One of the only researched UB units is that which operated in Upper Silesia, particularly around the town of Gliwice, about 50 miles north of the Czechoslovak border; the town had formerly been in Germany, and had been known as Gleiwitz. All of the commanders of this UB unit were of Jewish origin, as were three-quarters of their men. John Sack, who drew particularly on the oral evidence of Jews, Germans and Poles from the region, called his bleak study of Gliwice *An Eye for an Eye* (1993). Even recognising that the Jews were ‘provoked’, Sack, himself a Jew, found it painful to acknowledge that Jews were responsible for the deaths of ‘not Nazis ... but German civilians, German men, women, children, *babies*, whose “crime” was to be Germans ... I suspected that some Jews would ask me, “How could a Jew write this book?” and I knew the answer must be “No, how could a Jew not write it?” (pp.x–xi).

5.1 Relativising the Holocaust?

Relativising the Holocaust has been one of the classic techniques of some of those engaged in Holocaust denial; they have sought to minimise Nazi atrocities by listing them alongside the British concentration camps of the Boer War, the terror bombing of German cities during World War II and, perhaps most effectively, the purges and Gulags of the Soviet Union under Stalin. When, during the 1980s, the eminent German historian Ernst Nolte suggested that the Third Reich was a symbiotic product of Soviet terror and that the atrocities it perpetrated might be typical of certain modern states experiencing massive internal reconstruction and expansion, he unleashed an international furore. Yet Nolte never denied the events of the Holocaust, as some individuals on the political right have sought to do, and, as in the high-profile case of David Irving, with the trappings of academic history. The Nolte incident can be situated in the context of German historians trying to come to terms with the enormities of the Nazi regime and confronting the problem of how to interpret the course of modern German history – where did it all go wrong? But interpreting events – questioning why the Nazis came to power and why the Holocaust happened – is quite different from denying that those events ever happened or arguing that the events themselves are merely interpretations.

5.2 The aftermath of the Holocaust

In interwar Europe ethnic Germans had been in an overwhelming majority in the populations of both Germany and Austria. In addition, the two largest minorities spread across the states of interwar Europe, and particularly the states of the centre and east, had been Germans and Jews. The war and the Holocaust produced ‘solutions’ to the questions of both minorities. The Jews of central and eastern Europe who survived were often unwilling to return to their former homes; indeed, many of those who did return home found their property destroyed or occupied by others who would not give it up. Thousands

of them moved westwards; and thousands more moved westwards from Poland, from Hungary, and from elsewhere following a wave of anti-Semitic pogroms in 1946 which left many dead. But the states of western Europe were reluctant to absorb these Jewish refugees, and those who sought to travel to Palestine were prevented by the British, who held the territory under a League of Nations mandate. The creation of Israel in 1948 finally opened the door to them, but led, in turn, to the displacement of Palestinian Arabs. The Holocaust and its aftermath did not eliminate Jews from Europe, but it resulted in the continent being far less a central focus of the life of the Jewish people.

German minorities in eastern Europe also fled westwards in the aftermath of the war; 5 million went in 1944–45. Over the next three years the governments of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia expelled another 7 million. Rather than being Hitler's dream of empty land for German settlers, central and eastern Europe, which had witnessed most of the Holocaust, now became empty of Germans as well as Jews.

Conclusion

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The main installation of the memorial is a long, narrow corridor lined with small stones of quartz crystal. Each stone represents one of the 200,000 individuals deported from France to German concentration camps during World War II: Kristin Parker © 2005

Christopher R. Browning, "One Day in Jósefów: Initiation to Mass Murder" from 'Lessons and Legacies III: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World', edited by Peter Hayes, pp 169-83, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1991.

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