

Interpretations of the Holocaust

From the mid-1960s, interpretations of Nazi Germany for the most part have been divided between two schools, which are characterised as the 'intentionalists' and the 'functionalists'. Intentionalists focus on Hitler and his ideology. In their view, the course of the Third Reich was primarily determined by the decisions of Adolf Hitler, which were 'intended' to realise the goals of an ideologically derived programme to which he had clung with fanatical consistency since the 1920s. Functionalists focus on the structures and institutions of the Third Reich, explaining the Holocaust as an unplanned 'cumulative radicalisation' produced by the chaotic decision-making process of a polycratic regime and ideological motivation to rid Germany of destructive elements.[1] This debate has continued to polarise Holocaust historians and it is only recently that some sort of compromise has been reached.

[1] C. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution*, Cambridge, Cambridge & New York, 1992, p. 86.

Intentionalist interpretations - espoused by such historians as Karl Bracher, Alan Bullock, Daniel Goldhagen, Klaus Hildebrand, Andreas Hillgruber and Eberhard Jäckel - identify a straight line from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to the Holocaust. The intentionalists concentrate on political and diplomatic history and have focused their interpretation of the Nazi period on the central role of Hitler and the continuity of his ideological goals from their crystallisation in the 1920s through to their realisation in the early 1940s. They quote classic texts, such as Hitler's speech of 30 January 1939, which predicted the extermination of the Jews. Although there is disagreement about when an 'order' was given for the Jews' extermination in Europe, intentionalists do not question Hitler's knowledge and leading role. They would say that Hitler decided on the mass murder of the Jews in the 1920s and thereafter worked with consciousness and calculation toward that goal. In some cases, the plan for the Holocaust is tracked back to 1919. Insofar as Nazi Jewish policy in the 1930s could be seen as conscious preparation for mass murder, it is embraced by intentionalists as evidence of continuity; when it did not, it is dismissed as either temporary expediency or the irrelevant and unguided experiments of Hitler's subordinates.

Many intentionalists have used Hitler's speech to the Reichstag in January 1939, only months before the war's outbreak, as proof of his intention to carry out the Final Solution. Hitler declared: "Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside of Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevisation of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!" Hitler often referred to this 'prophecy' at critical junctions in the war and the perpetrators of the genocide quoted the speech to justify their actions. It has been argued on the basis of this speech that politically aware members of the German public should have concluded from it that the ultimate fate of the Jews would be physical annihilation.[2]

[2] H. Mommsen, "Hitler's Reichstag Speech of 30 January 1939", *History and Memory*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 30 September 1997, p. 147.

Intentionalists believe that the ultimate decision to implement the Final Solution was tied to the invasion of Russia. The conquest of lebensraum and the total destruction of European Jewry were seen as so inextricably connected in Hitler's ideology that he inevitably sought to realise the two simultaneously.[3] Together, they constituted the nucleus of Hitler's racist ideology and were his conscious goals since the 1920s. Anti-Semitism was the core element of Hitler's world view and the Final Solution emerged in 1941 from a series of decisions taken by Hitler to achieve these long-held and connected goals at the same time.[4]

[3] Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 5.

Intentionalists stress the importance of ideology rather than structure and the Holocaust is located primarily within the contexts of German and Jewish history (rather than in the context of modernity or along a continuum of genocidal events in human history). Intentionalists also tend to argue for the uniqueness of the Holocaust, insisting that it was such an extreme form of genocide that it must be separated from other examples. The most controversial addition to the intentionalist interpretation was *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* by Daniel Goldhagen, which argued that anti-Semitism was the primary cause of the Holocaust and that Hitler was the prime mover of the persecution that culminated in genocide. While Goldhagen's book sparked intense debate, it does not appear to have exercised much influence on subsequent studies of the Holocaust. A common intentionalist position has all but disappeared. What they have in common is a concentration on the role of Hitler and the top leadership in the decision-making process.[5]

[5] *Ibid*, p. 94.

For Andreas Hillgruber, there was a fundamental connection in Hitler's mind between the acquisition of lebensraum through the invasion of Russia and a solution to the Jewish question through systematic mass murder. Hitler's policy from 1928 until the end of the Third Reich was to use anti-Semitism to dominate Europe. According to Hillgruber, Hitler's plan was to gain power in Germany and central Europe and then to extend Germany's influence into the East. Russia's defeat became inseparable from the extermination of the Jews.[6] To Hitler, the extermination of the Russian ruling class and Eastern European Jews was the prerequisite for German rule over Europe because there was a mythical link between Bolshevists and Jews in National Socialist ideology. Hitler had four motives when he began a war on the Eastern front: exterminate the Jewish-Bolshevik leadership, including Eastern European Jewry; lebensraum; to bring the rest of the population under German control; and to use the East for its natural and industrial resources.[7] This action was to be followed by the destruction of all Jews in the rest of continental Europe, who would be now under German control. "These enormous schemes, and particularly their connection with

racist ideology, were, to be sure, the programme of a single individual." [8] Then, Hitler anticipated, one hundred years after his death there would be a battle between the two remaining major world powers: Germany and the United States. [9] Germany would then become a world-dominating empire.

[6] A. Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge & London, 1981, p. 51.

[7] Ibid, p. 86.

[8] Ibid, p. 54.

[9] Ibid, pp. 49-50.

Ron Rosenbaum's book, *Explaining Hitler*, resulted from his belief that some post-war scholarship downplayed or dismissed the centrality of Hitler's role and saw him as a pawn of larger forces. He came to see the re-establishment of Hitler's central role as a moral responsibility, saying that the scholars who do otherwise permit Hitler "to escape". [10] Similarly, American historian John Lukacs' essential theory is that fifty years of speculation has seen the appraisal of Hitler's responsibility for his regime's crimes against humanity become less important. Lukacs believes that a better understanding of Hitler's role requires a less-personalized historical record of Hitler. Rosenbaum agrees, saying that Hitler redefined evil, but left us few reliable clues as to why. [11]

[10] R. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1998, p. 395.

[11] Krausz, "Two Other Books Settle for Explaining the Explainers", *The Jerusalem Report*, 4 January 1999, p. 47.

Functionalist - or structuralist - interpretations have gained increasing notice in recent years and are espoused mainly by German historians, for example Uwe Adam, Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen and Karl Schleunes. Ian Kershaw is an American example. Functionalists accommodate and stress the Nazis' decentralised and chaotic decision-making and believe that the Holocaust was a result of local initiatives to solve the 'Jewish problem' in the context of war and of 'cumulative radicalism'. The deportation of Jews into the General Government (Poland) can be taken as an example. The Jewish influx, which was increasing by late 1940, created problems for Governor Hans Frank and he pressured for a 'solution'. Nazi leaders looked for local answers which were in line with Nazi ideology, and the result was increasing radicalism at lower levels of the Reich hierarchy.

According to functionalists, there was no 'order' for extermination and they de-emphasise Hitler and spread responsibility. There was no preconceived plan or blueprint. There is an emphasis on the evolution of policies from emigration to deportation to annihilation, and no question of Hitler's knowledge or complicity. Instead, the inconsistencies within Nazi Jewish policy in the 1930s - Schleunes' 'twisted road to Auschwitz' - were proof that Hitler and the Nazis were not operating programmatically toward a premeditated goal. For example, many functionalists have looked at the character of Auschwitz, whether it was merely a labour camp or always intended to be an extermination facility, and what can be concluded about the Nazi intention to exterminate the Jewish race. [12] Functionalists would agree that, insofar as consensus was eventually reached in Nazi Jewish

policy, it was for the expulsion of the Jews - a goal Hitler and the Nazis pursued well into the autumn of 1941. This view holds that policy was largely improvised and that anti-Semitic measures became increasingly radical and culminated in the essentially unplanned murder of the Jews as other 'solutions' proved unsuccessful. Therefore, the Holocaust evolved from a complex matrix of institutional chaos and political, economic and military policies. Functionalists maintain that Hitler was envisaging an expulsion of Jews into Russia even as late as summer or autumn 1941 and they take the Nazis' resettlement schemes seriously.[13] It was only when the failure of the blitzkrieg in Russia blocked expulsion that mass murder emerged as a solution. The eastward movement of Jews already underway was backing up and, whether by Hitler's decision or local initiative, mass murder emerged as one solution to the 'problem'. [14]

[12] D. D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial: History, Justice and the David Irving Libel Case*, Granta Books, London, 2001, p. 140.

[13] Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[14] *Ibid*, p. 4.

Functionalist explanations downplay the importance of ideology and anti-Semitism. For example, Broszat argues that the liquidation of the Jews "began not solely as the result of an ostensible will for extermination but also as a 'way out' of a blind alley into which the Nazis had manoeuvred themselves." Mommsen directly opposes the intentionalists, arguing that "the 'thought' - that is, Hitler's fanatical proclamations of racial anti-Semitism - could not suffice in itself to unleash the systematic extermination of the Jews". He characterises the Holocaust as the outcome of a process of radicalisation, encouraged by the disorganised, polycratic nature of the Nazi regime, which developed its own internal dynamic. Nazi officials, eager to demonstrate their loyalty and indispensability to the Führer - as well as to expand their own power and influence - drove the process forward in a series of unplanned and largely uncoordinated stages. Only in retrospect, Mommsen insists, do these stages of escalation take on the appearance of a coherent plan.

Schleunes emphasises the diversity and contradictions of Nazi Jewish policy in the 1930s. For example, the boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933 negatively affected the German economy, so realists (including Hitler) proposed a retreat. Julius Streicher and other radical Jew-haters saw this as a dilution of Nazi ideology. "The frustrations of the radicals gave rise in the next few years to a series of anti-Jewish initiatives which were ill-conceived and, in the circumstances, doomed to failure. A striking feature of Nazi Jewish policy after the April [1933] boycott was its lack of coordination. Indeed, until late 1938, one cannot speak of a single Jewish policy." [15] Propaganda and speeches masked the inconsistencies in Jewish policies but there were also policies which were pursued without the sanction and knowledge of Party authorities. The boycott had exposed the internal realities of such measures, as well as the external reaction. Schleunes dates the 'order' for the Final Solution from the dispatch from Hermann Göring to Reinhardt Heydrich in 1941. "For the first time, the Nazi leadership had begun to think in practical terms of a total and final solution." [16] Outside reaction was now, of course, irrelevant because the war had by now become

a world conflict. Goebbels commented it was fortunate that "a whole series of possibilities presents itself for us in wartime that would be denied us in peacetime". The path to Auschwitz was by no means direct or planned in advance. Schleunes writes that a clear policy was impossible without the sanction of Hitler, but between 1933 and 1938 he was spending time on more important concerns. This "made inevitable the trial and error approach to the Jewish problem which marked the period to November 1938".[17]

[15] K. A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy Toward German Jews 1933-1939*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago, 1970, p. 92.

[16] *Ibid*, p. 255.

[17] *Ibid*, pp. 257-258.

Brozgat claims that, in the early years of the NSDAP, Hitler avoided a dogmatic definition of Nazi ideology. Positions by other leading Nazis were personal opinions or variations on an ideology.[18] Brozgat writes that Hitler "refrained from setting out radical ideological aims both at home and abroad." Hitler thought mainly in terms of what were the most pressing aims of the moment, therefore the Third Reich was constantly being reorganised.[19] The violence against and extermination of the Jews by the SS was simply an "outcome of an anti-Semitism which had once served as a popular propaganda device" - even though it also allowed the expansion of living space in the East.[20]

[18] M. Brozgat, *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich*, Longman, London & New York, 1981, p. 17.

[19] *Ibid*, pp. 352-353.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 357.

Mommsen deals extensively with a speech Hitler gave to the Reichstag in January 1933. He writes that the immediate political context and the particular conditions prevailing at that time should be taken into account. He argues that Hitler's threat did not occupy a prominent place in his lengthy speech. It was only in the last part, after he had spoken for over two hours, that Hitler raised the issue of Jewish emigration. The context was the ongoing negotiations for the emigration of Jews from Germany, which were being stymied by stipulations on the part of the potential host countries, such as the United States, Britain and South Africa, and by the unsuccessful outcome of the Evian Conference. According to Mommsen, Hitler's "formulations should be perceived in the context of the völkisch anti-Semitism that had been virulent in Germany since the Wilhelmine period. The notion of using the Jews as hostages in order to prevent the Western powers from inflicting damage on Germany was familiar to the fanatical anti-Semites of that era". Hitler's warning was simply a rhetorical gesture designed to put pressure on the international community. At that time, Hitler did not perceive any other solution to the 'Jewish problem' than forced emigration, including the idea of settling them in Madagascar. It was highly unlikely that either the German or the international public could have interpreted his statement as a declaration of serious intent to liquidate the Jews. Hitler repeated his prediction from the Reichstag speech several times between 1941 and 1943 and, while the context differed to some extent, the

main point remained the same. In addition, he alluded to his former prophecy whenever he addressed the Party on special anniversaries such as 30 January or 24 February. Although some of his allusions were sharpened in conjunction with the ongoing genocide, Hitler continued to use euphemisms to avoid any direct mention of the mass murder.

[21] Mommsen, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

An intermediate position was developed by Christopher Browning after the realisation that neither intentionalism nor functionalism could take into account all of the evidence. 'Moderate functionalism' places an emphasis on the ideology developed high in the Nazi hierarchy and looks at how it was used to solve local problems. According to Browning, Hitler did not decide on the Final Solution as the culmination of any long-held or premeditated plan. However, he did make a series of key decisions in 1941 which led to the mass murder of European Jews. There was no preordained plan; rather the Holocaust ensued as a result of responses to circumstances created by the war. Despite the absence of a written order from Hitler, the evidence clearly shows that he was an active and continuing participant in the decision-making process. No major change in Nazi Jewish policy took place without his knowledge and approval. The gradual radicalisation of Jewish policy between 1939 and 1941 seems to be linked to the series of military victories won by Hitler's armies. According to Browning, it was in his moments of euphoria that Hitler apparently radicalised his policies and made the drastic decisions that led to the annihilation of the Jews.

Ian Kershaw's later writings also contain a moderate functionalist approach. He writes that Hitler was crucial to the development of the authoritarian regime and the genocide of the Jews. But his motives, aims and intentions had to operate within circumstances beyond his control. Kershaw identifies more impersonal forces beyond Hitler's personality, "pressures unleashed and driven on by the chiliastic goals represented by Hitler". Indeed, "a combination of both personal and impersonal driving-forces ensured that ... the ideological dynamism of the regime not only did not subside but intensified, that the spiral of radicalisation kept turning upwards", towards the catastrophe that was the Holocaust. Furthermore, Kershaw quotes Hitler himself discussing the difference between a 'programmatist' and a 'politician'. Apparently, Hitler believed he was both, the epitome of great leadership, driving his people towards the goals of the removal of the Jews and acquisition of living space in the East. It was the job of the Party members below him to implement policies which would eventually lead to Hitler's providential worldview coming to fruition.

[22] I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis*, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p. xlvii.

[23] I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p. 252.

As a further example, studies of the killing fields of Eastern Europe generally conclude that much of the early mass murder resulted from the initiatives of local Nazi officials, often in response to logistical difficulties and food shortages. Kershaw observes that although Hitler had assured Nazi leaders in the General Government that the Jews would be 'removed' from their territory, Reinhard Heydrich had verbally instructed the Einsatzgruppen

to go further and liquidate Jews in the East. These briefings were interpreted in different ways in various areas. It is clear that local members of the security police were able to handle situations as they saw fit, in the assurance that they were 'working towards the Führer'. The killings in the East became de-bureaucratized, often characterised by improvisation and chaos.

[24] Kershaw, *Nemesis*, op. cit., pp. 462-469.

Ironically, the impetus for shifting the terrain of Holocaust studies was the publication of Goldhagen's controversial *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which was popularly received but critically slated by academics. Goldhagen investigates the behaviour of one police battalion engaged in the killing of Jews in the East. He writes that Auschwitz "was conceived by Hitler's apocalyptically bent mind as an urgent, though future, project, [but] its completion had to wait until conditions were right". This shows Goldhagen coming down on the side of the intentionalists, yet the whole argument of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is that 'ordinary Germans' played a crucial and indictable role in the implementation of the Final Solution. Indeed, the perpetrators were radicals, conservatives, Nazi Party members, soldiers and generals in the Wehrmacht, ambassadors and diplomats, civilian administrators and bureaucrats and, most importantly, 'ordinary Germans' and others across Europe who gave their tacit collaboration. While there were certainly many committed to fulfilling the Final Solution, it was indifference, disinterest and a striking lack of moral values among the masses that sealed the fate of European Jews and other minority population groups. However, just one of *Hitler's Willing Executioners'* many problems is that it does not answer why pre-war Germany was singled out for its obsessive Jew-hatred, when nations such as Russia, Romania and France also had histories of insidious anti-Semitism.

[25] D. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Little, Brown & Co, London, 1996, p. 425, quoted in Guttenplan, op. cit., p. 141n.

[26] E. Kavon, "Did He Lead or Was He Led?", *The Jerusalem Report*, 9 August 2004, p. 38.

Browning presents the Holocaust as both a 'war against the Jews' and as a process that evolved as part of the Nazi goal to conquer Europe. Browning has no doubt that the road from *Mein Kampf* to Birkenau was not as direct as the intentionalists would have us believe. There is simply no persuasive 'big bang' theory for the origins of the Final Solution. Nor does he believe that the functionalists' image of a detached Führer is correct. Even if no paper trail leads directly to Hitler's office, Browning believes that he operated in a very non-bureaucratic manner in making his wishes and priorities known to the perpetrators of the Jewish genocide. Browning argues that Nazi policy toward the Jews proceeded in stages, becoming more and more radicalized with each battlefield victory. Browning understands that the creation of lebensraum required exiling both Poles and Jews from the East, which meant the wholesale deportation of Jewish communities and ghettoisation. For example, Browning takes the Madagascar Plan seriously, saying the idea was scuttled only after the Germans lost total control of the Atlantic after the

Battle of Britain. Furthermore, a similar plan for resettlement of Jews in Lublin and the plan to turn Auschwitz-Birkenau into a death camp were tried also, only the latter, tragically, succeeding.

[27] Guttenplan, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

According to Browning, the turning point in Hitler's plans for the Jews was the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Operation Barbarossa, when Germany's early success further radicalized Nazi racial policy. Indeed, German mass murder of Jews in the USSR began months before the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942. The mobile killing units of the SS, members of police battalions and Wehrmacht soldiers began the task of massacring the large numbers of Jews who now came under their control and, after the shooting of more than a million and a half Russian Jews, the Nazis turned to more systematic methods. The technology and personnel from the T4 euthanasia programme were transferred to Poland, and by October, plans to gas Jews in extermination camps were set in motion. Browning concludes that the Nazis could not have destroyed millions of Jews without the overshadowing presence of Hitler making his wishes and desires known.

[28] Kavon, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

However, is Browning's thesis a resolution of the intentionalist/functionalist debate? Perhaps not as much as it might seem. The 'moderate functionalist' position still rests undeniably on the structure of the Third Reich and the often-willing cooperation of the German people (as well as others, such as Latvians and Poles). Even if Hitler did have a plan to exterminate the Jews that was two decades old by the time World War II began, he could not have attempted its conclusion without harnessing the administrative, military and police sectors of the Reich to his own ends. Furthermore, with plans as terrible as his, it is not just a matter of stating that Hitler was the leader and therefore the state would bend to his wishes; other circumstances, such as the economic situation, acted against the Jews and aided the rise of Nazism. Hitler was able to establish a popular dictatorship, one which stemmed from the Germans' desire for a restoration of their country's national prestige in the aftermath of Versailles, for an effective government capable of imposing law and order following the chaotic democracy of the Weimar Republic, and for a return to economic prosperity after the Depression. As an example, in the pre-war period the concentration camps were intended not only to safeguard Hitler's rule by taking political opponents into what was euphemistically labelled 'protective custody', but also to assure the middle class that the threat of a violent Communist seizure of power would be forever banished. Browning's position is a reinvestigation of the evidence which arrives at a conclusion much like both the functionalists and intentionalists, however it is still essentially functionalist because the organisation of the Reich and its people still plays a vital role. Even Mommsen, a functionalist, agrees when he says, "It is becoming increasingly clear that Hitler was an indispensable, if not the only, factor that

enabled the vision of the extermination of European Jewry to become reality."

[29] L. D. Stokes, "Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany", *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 37, Issue 3, December 2002, pp. 565-567.

[30] Mommsen, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

The argument between intentionalists and functionalists has created interesting controversies that have excited and challenged historians over many decades. The debate draws in many issues, from the personality of Hitler to the function of the concentration camps to the relationship between Nazi feelings towards the Jews, Communists and other groups. Unfortunately, the debate has also allowed revisionist and apologist historians to distort the role of Hitler and the nature of the extermination camps. However, although revisionist interpretations can be dangerous and offensive, they do provoke academic analysis and further evidence gathering. Critical and thorough investigation can only lead to a greater understanding of the Holocaust. Despite the possible resolution offered by Christopher Browning, other writers such as Daniel Goldhagen have exacerbated the controversy, encouraged peer reviews of proposed explanations and ensured that the issues will continue to be scrutinized. It is to be hoped that historians never reach complete agreement about the causes, methods and effects of the Holocaust, if only to ensure that the problems and dangers presented by the legacy of the Nazi regime remain at the forefront of intellectual discussion. If the causes of the Holocaust are withdrawn from historical debate, they will be forgotten and are all the more likely to threaten humanity again.

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