



## Committee on Conscience

“Holocaust Perpetrators: Ideologues, Managers, Ordinary Men”

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“Perpetrators in the Holocaust, Cambodia, and Rwanda: ‘The Evil That Men

Do...”

Raul Hilberg wrote in 1961 that the Holocaust perpetrators represented “a remarkable cross-section” of German society and “were not different in their moral makeup from the rest of the population. The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German.”<sup>1</sup> Hilberg was challenging the then prevalent explanatory notion that the perpetrators were distinguished in their individual psychological and character traits from ordinary people. Seemingly normal in normal times, these “authoritarian personalities” allegedly possessed a cluster of “sleeper” traits that were activated or awakened in the historical circumstances of the Nazi dictatorship. These activated traits set in motion a process of self-recruitment and career advancement that resulted in the concentration of such individuals in the front ranks of the Nazi hardcore and especially among the Holocaust perpetrators. Their murderous behavior, often accompanied by voluntaristic zeal on the one hand and gratuitous cruelty on the other, was seen as the product of an abnormal psychological makeup that distinguished them from the rest of us.

The empirical weight of Hilberg’s study as well as subsequent scholarship, documenting the widespread participation of people from virtually all segments and professions of German society recruited in the most random and unselective ways, has forced scholars to seek the explanation for perpetrator actions in the dynamics of group and societal behavior rather than individual psychological abnormality. I would like to look at three such explanatory approaches—ideological, cultural, and

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<sup>1</sup> Raul Hilberg, [The Destruction of the European Jews](#), cited from the revised and expanded edition (New York, 1985), 1011.

situational/organizational/institutional—on the one hand, and three categories of perpetrators—ideologues, managers, and “ordinary men”—on the other. Neither the explanatory approaches nor the perpetrator categories are, of course, clear-cut and mutually exclusive. I am not looking for monocausal explanations for the behavior of monolithic groups. But I am trying to establish points along a spectrum that will be useful in highlighting both the broad division of labor, multiplicity of motivation, and range of individual choice that characterized perpetrator participation in the Holocaust.

Let us first turn to the explanatory approaches. Here I am using ideology in a very narrow and literal sense of the word, namely the working out of the logic of an idea or set of ideas. Ideologically-motivated action in this regard is conscious, calculated, and belief-driven. In this approach men determine the actions they will take based upon the ideas that they hold. They seek to persuade others to do likewise.

Here I am using culture to indicate those patterns of behavior, attitudes, assumptions, and values that are so ingrained in the fabric of everyday life that they are accepted as the “norm.” While ideology is experienced as a revelation, discovery, or conversion, culture in this regard is the milieu within which one is socialized. One does not discover or convert to one’s own culture; one becomes gradually aware or conscious of it as one discovers the existence of cultures and “norms” that are different.

By situational, organizational, and institutional factors, I am referring to those patterns and tendencies of human behavior within groups that seem to occur predictably and regularly across cultures. Pertinent examples for the topic at hand are: deference to authority, conformity to peer pressure, adaptation to

role expectation, ambition for wealth, status, and power, and the urge toward the construction of group identification, which in turn has the capacity to legitimize and exclude.

These categories of explanation do not operate in isolation from one another. How one understands or reads the situation one is in and responds to the organizational incentives and deterrents to which one is subjected will depend in part on the cultural baggage one carries. How wide an ideology spreads and how popular and accepted an ideologically-driven regime becomes depends in part on which cultural assumptions and attitudes are appropriated and promoted to the keystone position and which cultural values are discarded or violated, in short how much overlap there is between ideology and culture and the extent to which the former becomes internalized as the latter.

Let us now turn to our three selected categories of Holocaust perpetrators, and first of all the ideologues. From Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, and Goebbels at the top through the cohort of young SS and SD officers, especially in Heydrich's RSHA, in the middle, to various camp and killing squad personnel at the bottom, they represented a driving force behind the Holocaust out of all proportion to their numbers in German society. Here, obviously, motivation is not the key question. They were ideological antisemites who sought to transform their beliefs into actions, their words into deeds. Nonetheless, several qualifications are needed. First, the centrality of their antisemitism did not preclude either other motives or other victims, as can be seen in the letters of Fritz Jacob, the Gendarmerie commander in the south Ukraine. He sought his appointment there not only to

do what he called “practical work” for his Führer and but also because “the promotion path” was “really slow” in Saxony. Once in the east he killed Jews “without the slightest prick of conscience” because they were “not humans but rather ape men.” But Jews were not his only victims. “We do not sleep here,” he wrote. “Weekly 3-4 actions. One time Gypsies and another time Jews, partisans, or other riffraff.”<sup>2</sup> Second, contrary to the first generation of “intentionalist” scholarship, the centrality of Hitler to the Nazi regime and antisemitism to Nazi ideology did not equate with an early decision and clear plan for physical extermination. An uncompromising commitment to solve their self-imposed Jewish question “one way or another” only insured that in the face of changing circumstances and growing frustration, evolving Nazi policies would generally become increasingly lethal.

More problematic and contested in current scholarship is the relationship between the ideologues and the rest of German society. Did virtually all Germans share with the same intensity and priority the conviction of the ideologues about the need to eliminate the Jews, as Daniel Goldhagen has argued. Or were the “redemptive” antisemites (to borrow Saul Friedländer’s phrase) only one strand in the tapestry of German society, whose interactions with both the traditional elites and the wider population were key to the de-emancipation, isolation, and impoverishment of German Jewry as necessary steps toward making the mass murder even thinkable much less practicable? I favor an interpretation along the latter line.

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<sup>2</sup> Letters of Fritz Jacob to Generalleutnant Querner, 24.4.41, 29.10.41, and 21.6.42, printed in: “Schöne Zeiten.” Judenmord aus der sicht der Täter und Gaffer, ed. by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess (Frankfurt/M., 1988), 148-51.

To better understand the relationship between Hitler and the antisemitic ideologues on the one hand and German society on the other, a number of “linkages” must be explored. The first such linkage is that between antisemitism and Nazi campaign success. The Nazis sought to portray themselves as a movement devoted to the national interest above the divisive parties devoted to narrow class or sectarian interests. To do so, they needed to offer a number of “buzz words” and themes around which they could build a “coalition of discontent.” While central to Hitler and the party hardcore, antisemitism was only one among a number of such issues and one that was downplayed in the vital campaigns of 1930-32. What helped to give these diverse appeals the appearance of coherence and conviction, however, was precisely Hitler’s conviction that they were coherent, because all other problems were in one way or another a manifestation of the Jewish threat.<sup>3</sup>

The second linkage was between Hitler’s success and his power to legitimize. Most Germans who voted for Hitler did so to break political gridlock, solve the economic crisis, especially unemployment, and restore Germany’s international standing, not to persecute and murder Jews. Hitler’s perceived political, economic, and international success soon gained broad support and even adulation even among Germans who had not initially supported him. The undoubted popularity of the Nazi regime in turn gained it the standing and autonomy to legitimize and incrementally radicalize its own antisemitic agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Needler, “Hitler’s Anti-Semitism: A Political Appraisal,” Public Opinion Quarterly, 24 (Winter 1960), 668.

As William Sheridan Allen has argued, most Germans came to antisemitism through National Socialism and not vice versa.

The third linkage was between attitudes and goals fervently held among segments of German society, especially within the political milieu on the right, and the initial steps of the regime. Rearmament and rejection of Versailles, outlawing the Communist and Socialist Parties and dissolving the labor unions, cracking down on cultural dissidence and the open flaunting of traditional values all found deep resonance within the conservative milieu. Likewise there was the widespread perception on the German right that Jews had gained inordinate influence over German life and that virtually everything that had gone wrong in Germany could be traced in part to the detrimental effect of this pernicious Jewish influence. Thus the initial Nazi measures to de-emancipate the Jews and drive them out of Germany's political and cultural life found the same eager support as the dismantling of Weimar democracy and the Versailles international order.

A similar linkage between Nazi policies and widespread German attitudes can be found after 1939 as well: wartime patriotism enhancing identification with the regime and polarizing Germans vis-à-vis a more easily dehumanized enemy, pride in military success and the acceptance of new levels of violence, a sense of imperial mission and racial superiority in Eastern Europe, and a crusade against Asiatic and Jewish Bolshevism threatening not only Germany but European civilization.

Taken together this accumulation of linkages created a nexus between the Nazi regime and German society that empowered the ideologues and made the Holocaust possible. Still, if popularity, overlapping goals and shared attitudes were so essential to the regime's capacity to mobilize the German people, why was this nexus not broken when the regime asked its people to undertake unprecedented actions so contrary to other traditional values and murder millions of innocent men, women, and children? Let us examine more closely how specific groups of managers and ordinary men reacted to and participated in the mass murder.

I use the term "managers"<sup>4</sup> instead of "desk murderers" (Schreibtischtäter) because some of them did not sit behind their desks in Berlin comfortably distanced from events but rather worked in the field and had regular contact with their victims. I would like to consider two such groups: the so-called "Jewish experts" of the German Foreign Office and "ghetto administrators" in the General Government. The Jewish desk of the Foreign Office between 1940 and 1943 was headed by Franz Rademacher who had in succession three key assistants: Herbert Müller, Karl Klingenfuss, and Fritz Gebhardt von Hahn.<sup>5</sup> All were born between 1901 and 1911, studied law at the university and sought civil service careers. All conveniently joined the Nazi party between March and May 1933. None joined the SS or were involved in shaping Nazi Jewish policy before their assignment to the Jewish desk. Rademacher, the son of a locomotive engineer,

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Henry Friedlander, The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution (Chapel Hill, 1995), for the term.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see: Christopher R. Browning, The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office (New York, 1978).

was a self-made man who worked his way through gymnasium and university. He entered the Foreign Office in 1937 and was sent as charge d'affaires to the German embassy in Montevideo. He returned to Germany in the spring of 1940 at his own insistence, after he wife had an affair with one of the interned officers from the scuttled pocket battleship Graf Spee who were regularly entertained at the embassy. Ribbentrop's political infighter, Undersecretary Martin Luther, had just taken over the internal division, Abteilung Deutschland, of the Foreign Office and secured Rademacher's assignment to the vacant Jewish desk. Here, Rademacher the ambitious self-made man quickly became the self-made antisemite. Contacting various Nazi Party organizations and publishers, he assembled a library of antisemitic literature. He also made contact with professional antisemites, such as the foreign editor of Streicher's Der Stürmer, Paul Wurm, who praised Rademacher as "a really good authority on the Jewish question."

Rademacher's debut in shaping Jewish policy was sensationally successful. In early June 1940 he proposed through official channels expelling the Jews within the German empire to the French island of Madagascar, and this bizarre idea was adopted by Hitler and the SS within weeks. He was less successful in finding a permanent deputy. Herbert Müller, an old acquaintance, worked in the Jewish desk from November 1941 until April 1942, when after successfully pulling strings he was drafted into the army. While he sought actively to extricate himself from the Jewish desk, however, he did his job. He not only regularly rejected individual requests for emigration but also the

shipment of outside relief aid to the Lodz ghetto. “The planned Final Solution for the Jewish question...does not permit that food shipments be made from abroad to

Jews in Germany and in the General Government,” he noted. Karl Klingenfuss joined the Jewish desk in July 1942, found the work “unpleasant,” asked for a transfer in October 1942, and was reassigned to the Swiss embassy in early 1943. Only young Fritz Gebhardt von Hahn eagerly took to the work there. He boasted of his new standing “as expert for the Jewish question in the Foreign Office” and complained of other officials who “do not muster sufficient understanding for the necessity of a quick final European solution of the Jewish question.” Whatever their personal feelings and convictions, and the Jewish experts of the Foreign Office clearly differed in this regard, the bureaucratic work that they produced—aside from Rademacher’s splashy initiative on the Madagascar Plan—was virtually indistinguishable. They rejected requests for amelioration, attended interministerial policy meetings, processed the assignment of SS advisers to various countries, and above all facilitated the widening of the net of victims through advocating the inclusion of various categories of foreign Jews in the deportations.

With the ghettoization of Polish Jews in 1940 and 1941, the “ghetto administrator,” like the ministerial “Jewish expert,” became a fixture of the German bureaucracy and “machinery of destruction.” Early ghettoization, such as in Lodz in the spring of 1940, had initially been seen as a preliminary, short-term measure to facilitate expulsion or “ethnic cleansing.” When the intended

expulsions stalled, the ghetto administrators were left to cope with the consequences of soaring death rates due to disease and starvation. Different individuals offered different responses. In Lodz, for instance, Alexander Palfinger welcomed the starvation. "Given the mentality of the Jews," he argued, only the "most extreme exigency" would force them to part with their hidden valuables in return for food. When starvation did not produce Palfinger's predicted surrender of hidden Jewish wealth but only skyrocketing death rates, he was still pleased. "A rapid dying out of the Jews is for us a matter of total indifference, if not to say desirable..." His rival for control of the Lodz ghetto, Hans Biebow, the ex-coffee importer from Bremen, proposed a different policy. He argued that every effort had to be made "to facilitate the self-maintenance of the Jews through finding them work." Palfinger disparaged Biebow's "salesman-like" approach and argued that "especially in the Jewish question the National-Socialist idea...permits no compromise." But he did not prevail and angrily departed for Warsaw, where he found a like-minded proponent of a starvation policy in Waldemar Schön.

But in Warsaw too Palfinger and Schön encountered opposition. Like Biebow in Lodz, Hans Frank's economic adviser Dr. Walter Emmerich argued that "the starting point for all economic measures [in the ghetto] has to be the idea of maintaining the capacity of the Jews to live." The answer was productive labor, which in turn required adequate provisioning. Palfinger blasted Emmerich as an "impractical and unrealistic theoretician" who ignored the basic truth known to every farmer: "A work animal from whom a human being demands output was

never the subject of profound contemplation concerning its needs. On the contrary...the one who maintains the animal regulates its food supply according to its productivity.” But once again he was doomed to disappointment, as Schön and Palfinger were replaced by Heinz Auerswald and Max Bischof respectively. In Auerswald’s first meeting with the head of the Warsaw Jewish Council, the 33-year old lawyer assured Adam Czerniakow that “his attitude to the Council was objective and matter of fact, without animosity.”

In the following months Auerswald pursued two policies. He sought to foster a growing ghetto economy on the one hand and to halt the spread of epidemics on the other. While the former involved marginally better provisioning for workers and first a stabilization and then decline in the death rates, the latter involved constricting the ghetto boundaries and imposing the death penalty on Jews caught outside the ghetto walls. Of Palfinger, Ringelblum had noted that he “makes it a practice not to talk to Jews. There are dignitaries like that, who won’t see a Jew to talk with as a matter of principle. They order the windows...kept open because of the stench the Jews make.” In contrast Auerswald had lengthy and unusual conversations with Czerniakow. On one occasion—a remarkable 2 ½ hour meeting--Czerniakow discussed Auerswald’s “historical role and responsibility,” and on another advised him to “listen to the voices of his conscience above all.”

When Nazi policy switched from expulsion to mass murder, the role of the ghetto switched from urban internment camp to a staging ground for deportations to the death camps. Ghetto administrators reacted in different ways. Palfinger,

who had departed Warsaw for Galicia, helped to create the horrifically overcrowded Tarnopol ghetto and then destroy it. In Warsaw Auerswald betrayed Czerniakow in denying the latter's desperate inquiry about the rumored deportations in July 1942, but played no role in them. Soon out of a job, he made no attempt on his resume to rewrite his record with hindsight to make it appear as if he had prepared for and contributed to the mass murder. On the contrary, he listed his successes as "improvement of the hygienic situation" and "prevention of an initially feared economic failure" in the ghetto. If Palfinger required no conversion to a policy of mass murder and Auerswald abstained from one, Biebow quickly accommodated himself to the new course. In the spring of 1942, he was in frequent contact with the commandant at Chelmno to ensure the recovery of the valuables and clothing of the murdered Jews for his economic operations in Lodz. But he also wanted to recover "human material" from the destruction process. Thus when the killers swept through the small Jewish communities of the Warthegau outside Lodz, Biebow became personally involved in the selection process to skim off the able-bodied Jews for his own workshops. And in the summer of 1944, as a fitting conclusion to his career as ghetto administrator of Lodz, he persuaded the surviving Jews to board the trains for Auschwitz.

What can be said about the group dynamics of "ordinary" men below the management level who were assigned to kill their Jewish victims face to face? In my study of Reserve Police Battalion 101, I argued that this group of rank and file reserve policemen were the least likely Germans to become Nazi professional

killers. They were mostly working class, the milieu from which the Nazis experienced the least success in recruiting party members and voters. They were middle-aged men whose formative years preceded the Nazi seizure of power; they had not been subjected to the Nazi socialization and indoctrination processes of schooling and youth groups. And they were mostly from Hamburg, a cosmopolitan city in which the Nazis had not experienced much success. Despite this class background, age cohort, and geographical origin on the one hand, and despite having a commander who explicitly gave them the freedom to choose not to kill on the other, this battalion of some 500 men nonetheless participated in the shooting of over 38,000 Jews and deported over 45,000 more Jews to the gas chambers of Treblinka.

Based on my analysis of 210 post-war interrogations, I argued that the battalion had divided into three groups. First, there was a minority of eager killers who increasingly sought the opportunity to kill by volunteering for firing squads and the so-called “Jew hunts.” Second, there was a group of men who undertook whatever task they were assigned. They did not volunteer, but neither did they confront authority or evade. And third, there was a minority of “evaders” who took up their commander’s offer not to shoot, usually by portraying themselves as “too weak” to kill rather than by condemning the mass killing as criminal and immoral. I estimated that these “evaders” comprised more than 10% but less than 20% of the rank and file. I argued that situational and organizational factors, such as peer pressure, deference to authority, and role adaptation were key. But contrary to some readings of my book, I did not offer

this as a monocausal or sufficient explanation. Situational factors had dovetailed with cultural notions about nationalism, war, and presumed racial superiority— notions hardly unique to Germany—as well as a political ambience that had been saturated with the denigration of Jews for the previous 10 years.

My claim that a significant portion of the battalion had evaded personal killing was greeted by some with skepticism. I had been too gullible in accepting the exculpatory claims of the post-war testimonies, it was suggested. Yet subsequent research, based on other kinds of sources, has confirmed that my estimate was, if anything, too cautious. For example, according to the Jewish interpreter for the German gendarmerie station in the town of Mir in Belarus, Oswald Rufeisen, four of 13 Germans were eager killers but another four never took part in killing Jews. From the wartime files of a German police investigation of an unplanned massacre of the Jews in Markincance in the Bialystok district, of the 17 Germans involved, one committed suicide, one protested openly, and possibly as many as three others did not fire their weapons. In contrast, only four Germans eagerly joined the “hunt” for hidden Jews after the massacre.<sup>6</sup>

At every level of the perpetrator hierarchy, we encounter the ideological killers. Over time their ranks were swelled by others who joined them willingly, whether out of career ambition or because they were transformed by what they were doing. Still others did their jobs without perceptible enthusiasm or even with moderate distaste but the linkages that tied them to their country, the Nazi regime, and Hitler nonetheless held. For the significant minority for whom being

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<sup>6</sup> For details, see: Christopher R. Browning, Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers (New York, 2000), 155-166.

forced to participate in a program of mass murder might have created sufficient strain to break the linkages, the system proved surprisingly flexible. Through transfer or evasion, they could individually opt out of personal participation without having to challenge or repudiate the regime. A core of eager and committed men, aided by an even larger block of men who complied with the policies of the regime more out of situational and organizational rather than ideological factors, was sufficient to commit genocide. The presence of a minority of men who sought not to participate in the regime's racial killing was easily accommodated. Indeed, the machinery of destruction worked even more smoothly through allowing the most reluctant participants, on an individual level, to opt out.