

# The Functionalist Vs Intentionalist Debate History Essay

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History of the Holocaust

The Functionalist vs. Intentionalist Debate

Historians have been attempting to uncover the true reasons behind the Holocaust since the day it ended. Since the 1980s there has been a significant divide between two major groups of historians: those called the functionalists, and those called the intentionalists. The general term "intentionalist" is typically defined as a person who "essentially constructs a case around the decisive impact of particular individuals or events" (Claydon, John). A "functionalist" is one who "reacts specifically against the intentionalist approach and builds up a picture of what happened through meticulous research...without any preconceived ideas" (Claydon, John). Therefore when speaking of the Holocaust, intentionalist historians focus completely on Hitler. They believe that it was his idea (or intention) all along to preserve the Aryan race by exterminating Jews and other racial and ideological groups that the Germans saw as enemies. On the other hand, functionalist historians say that it was not Hitler's master plan that caused the Holocaust and the Final Solution. They believe in a number of various reasons inside and outside of Germany such as too many failed attempts at emigration, middle ranking German officials putting the idea in Hitler's head, and bureaucratic or economic motives and wartime pressure. This debate was at its prime during the 1980s and early 1990s. Before that, the majority of people completely blamed Hitler, taking the intentionalist's side almost without question. Today, more historians have taken a position in the middle, claiming that Hitler was at fault but that it was not necessarily his plan since the first day he came to power. I agree with middle, as I believe it's nearly impossible to come to a conclusion on which party is more accurate.

Some intentionalist historians include Lucy Dawidowicz, Andreas Hillgruber, and Gerald Fleming among others. They believe that Hitler had his plan from 1920 or earlier, and that was to exterminate the Jewish population. These beliefs come from a variety of different reasons. Some say his childhood corrupted him, causing him to create this "blue-print like plan" for a genocide (Julian, George). Others blame it on his central role and strong dictator skills, arguing that he controlled everyone underneath him and knew about everything that was happening amongst the Nazi Party, making it inevitable that his actions were to blame. Most intentionalists claim that his plan was written out in his autobiography, "Mein Kampf" or "My Struggle", where he says a few lines which give away his plan, proving that his intentions stemmed long before he came to power, and that it was as if Hitler fantasized of murder. Some, such as Lucy Dawidowicz, say that Hitler saw World War II as the perfect opportunity to implement his plan, but that it had been on his mind for up to twenty years prior to when it actually happened. Andreas Hillgruber often refers to speeches from the Nuremberg Trials, where he quotes Hitler and claims that the genocide never would have happened if it weren't for Hitler. One example is Hitler saying, "The final goal, however, must

steadfastly remain the removal of the Jews altogether" (ADL, 2001). Another quote is him explaining, "This struggle will not end with annihilation of Aryan mankind, but with the extermination of the Jewish people of Europe" (ADL, 2001). The word "extermination" is key because it is proof that he intended on a genocide at some point. These quotes prove Hitlers evil personality and make it easy to point fingers, but is still possible for a functionalist to argue that in the first quote he used the term "get rid of", which could mean deport, and in the second quote, it could have been from 1941 after the final solution was created. This again proves that both sides have strong points and it is nearly impossible to prove one completely accurate.

Functionalist historians include Ian Kershaw, Christopher Browning, and Hans Mommsen. Unlike intentionalists who believe the Holocaust stemmed from Hitlers early ideas around 1920, these historians believe that the Holocaust did not actually start until around 1941. The reasons for this is the multiple failed attempts to deport the Jewish prisoners out of Germany, and also the military losses in Russia. Fuctionalists argue that other parties besides Hitler himself had strong anti-semitism views and acted on their own. Extreme functionalists even believe that Hitlers ideas came from "middle ranking German officials in occupied Poland and spread to Hitler" (Haberer). Aside from other people influencing Hitlers actions, it is also said that the certain circumstances influenced his actions. Proof often used by functionalists to defend Hitler is that he did start out with sterilization acts such as what he used on the disabled, to purify and prevent "genetic deviants", but when that didn't work he was forced into the final solution. It has also been said that after failing to deport the Jews, the Nazi party was forced into the decision to "have" to kill them after forcing them into Ghettos and not knowing what to do with them. They say there was no place to put them, so they had no other option but to kill them. This relates to the idea of the "Territorial solution" that some functionalists believe in. Some say that what they really wanted was simply for the Jews to be in their own, far away land, expelled from Germany. At first, they planned to create a reservation near Poland, but it was vetoed by Hans Frank, the Governor-General of occupied Poland. In 1940 they came up with the "Madagascar Plan"; the idea to deport the entire Jewish Population to Madagascar. When that didn't work, functionalists argue that the "territorial solution" turned to the "Jewish Question" which eventually, in 1941, was forced to turn into the "Final Solution". The final solution was the only term that actually meant extermination.

As I stated earlier, I find it nearly impossible to come to a conclusion. Many historians in the middle of the spectrum claim that both sides use the same evidence but just read into it differently. One example is a quote by Adolf Hitler, "If at the beginning of the War and during the War, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under the poison gas, as happened to hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers in the field, the sacrifice of millions would not have been in vain" (Wasiak, Kjersti). An intentionalist would read this and say that this is proof that Hitler had a plan to kill out the entire Jewish population all along. A functionalist would read this and argue that this was only the solution after previous solutions had failed. Another example is the various quotes from Hitlers autobiography. Many times does he mention getting rid of the Jewish race. The only problem is that intentionalists automatically assume he means kill, whereas the functionalists think it could mean put in another country. I personally would side in the middle of the spectrum along side with historians such as Ian Kershaw and Yehuda Bauer. In their articles and books they seem to have the impression that Hitler was the driving force behind the

Holocaust, but was not necessarily to blame. He did at one point want to exterminate the Jews, but it was not necessarily his plan all along from 1920, that some others could have influenced his actions and ideas.

For years and years, historians have been struggling to find reasons for the Holocaust, reasons for Adolf Hitler's actions. Over time, two main parties have been created. The Intentionalists put complete blame on Hitler, saying that since 1920 it was his plan to create a genocide and kill off the entire Jewish race. The functionalists argue that many internal and external factors helped create the final solution, including other individuals and their views, countries' impacts during the war, and failed attempts to do what the Nazi party originally wanted, leaving no other choice but murder. There are countless essays, books, and articles from both parties, all of which with valuable evidence. For me personally, I believe it's difficult to completely side with one party. I believe that Hitler was the main force behind the Holocaust and the Final Solution. Whether or not his idea was implanted in his brain as a child, or the day he came to power, or even in 1941 right before the Final Solution was made, is still not proven. The debate is ongoing and has evolved as the years have gone on. Immediately following the Holocaust, it was automatically assumed by most that Hitler was completely to blame. As more evidence was uncovered, people began to question how one man could be so powerful and so evil, and the functionalist side began to grow. And finally today, although there still remains individuals on the far left and far right, it is common for historians to be in the middle, picking pieces from each side.

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