

# Was the Holocaust Planned and Premeditated?

Lecturer: Elly Dlin

## Lecture 3: Was the Holocaust Planned and Premeditated?

### Stages of the Final Solution

Historians tend to divide events into different time periods. These divisions are a greater or lesser reflection of what actually happened in the past, but regardless of their accuracy, validity or reliability, all periodizations are artificial and not to be misconstrued as being an inherent aspect of the events themselves. Time periods or stages of development are created by historians and added to the event.

Let me illustrate with the term "Middle Ages". Did anyone living in 14th century Europe know that they were living in the Middle Ages? Certainly not. "Middle" implies being between "early" and "later". Presumably people then (if they thought about it at all) regarded themselves as living in modern times.

Historians of the Holocaust divide Hitler's 12-year reign into 3 main periods: from the assumption of power in January 1933 until the start of war in September 1939, from 1939 until the start of the implementation of the Final Solution in June 1941, and from then to the end of the Third Reich in May 1945. In this lecture we will look at two diametrically opposed interpretations of history that each attempt to answer the question was the Holocaust premeditated?

### The Intentionalists see a straight and clear road

The intentionalist school is made up of those who are convinced that the Nazis\Hitler "intended" to kill the Jews at some relatively early point in time (here historians may differ as to exactly when that point was reached) and that he proceeded along the road to Auschwitz in a carefully planned and premeditated fashion. Gerald Fleming (among others) makes reference to documents, speeches, utterances and testimonies about Adolf Hitler (including ones that predate his joining the National Socialist Party in 1920) to trace an "unbroken continuity of specific utterances...a straight path...a single, unbroken, and fatal continuum...to the liquidation orders that Hitler personally issued during the war" (Gerald Fleming, pp. 13 and 24).

Lucy Dawidowicz writes that "War and annihilation of the Jews were interdependent. The disorder or war would provide Hitler with the cover for the unchecked commission of murder. He needed an arena for his operations where the restraints of common codes of morality and accepted rules of warfare would not extend...Once Hitler adopted an ideological position," she adds, "he adhered to it with limpetlike fixity" (quoted in Michael Marrus, p. 25; a limpet is a snail that tenaciously holds fast to surfaces).

The intentionalists stress consistency, orderly sequence and persistence from start to finish in the Nazi's anti-Jewish policies. They understand Hitler as possessing a coherent "blueprint", parts of which he periodically revealed in speeches or in writing. His tactics may at times have appeared to be somewhat haphazard, and periods of stalemate or even back-tracking were not unknown, but the "final solution" was always Hitler's clear goal and he pursued it relentlessly.

The intentionalist school was fed by the solid tradition of fervent anti-Hun propaganda that emerged from both of the two World Wars in the 20th century Europe and by the vast quantity of rumours that were spawned, such as the one of Germans having collected dead bodies from battlefields in 1916 and 1917 in

order to process human body parts into fertilizers and soaps (a charge that was taken seriously enough in the 1920s to have been investigated by a Governmental Commission of the British House of Commons).

But the underlying logic of the intentionalist school is really founded in 1945 at Nuremberg. The War Crimes Trials were run by judges who needed to be convinced of "premeditation". The evidence was gathered by lawyers who wanted to prove the charges articulated by the International Tribunal: conspiracy to breach international law, orchestrating and launching an aggressive war, engaging in crimes against humanity with the conscious goal of committing horrendous atrocities, including inter alia, mass murders of innocent civilians.

A concrete example of the intentionalists' interpretation of history is their reading of the 30 January 1939 Reichstag speech that I quoted in my previous lecture (DOCUMENTS ON THE HOLOCAUST, pp. 134-5).

"One thing I should like to say on this day which may be memorable for others as well as for us Germans: In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it. During the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish race which only received my prophecies with laughter when I said that I would one day take over the leadership of the State, and with it that of the whole nation, and that I would then, among many other things, settle the Jewish problem. Their laughter was uproarious, but I think that for some time now they have been laughing on the other side of their face. Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!"

They present it as "proof" of Hitler's "intentions", in advance of the start of the World War, to annihilate the Jews. But is it? That evening Hitler spoke for hours but devoted only a brief few minutes to the Jews. We certainly would neither deny nor downplay Hitler's amply demonstrated will for taking ruthless actions, for striking sudden blows intended to totally crush his enemies, and for his lust for blood. But was the Holocaust clearly present in Hitler's mind prior to 1941 and before the surprising German military victories and the stunning Allied defeats suddenly put his armies in positions of power and of control that no one could have predicted beforehand?

How do we evaluate the seriousness (or lack thereof) of the two "territorial solutions to the Jewish question" - the Nisko Plan (in the Lublin District of Poland) and the Madagascar Plan (an island off the south-east coast of Africa). Were they both mere bluff and camouflage or were they serious attempts to deal with the Jews by exiling them into territories not intended for ultimate Germanization? Nearly 5,000 Jews were actually deported to the Lublin District under the Nisko Plan in October 1939. Technical difficulties that plagued Himmler's more grandiose plans for large-scale population transfers soon caused this program to be abandoned also, but for a brief period it was certainly taken seriously by significant elements in the Third Reich (including Reinhard Heydrich and the Gestapo men, Heinrich Mueller and Adolf Eichmann).

How serious was the Madagascar Plan? One week after German troops reached the English Channel and trapped the best units of the Allied Armies at Dunkerque, Himmler presented a memorandum entitled "Some Thoughts on the Treatment of Ethnic Groups and Jews in the Occupied East" (a Nuremberg Document):

"I hope completely to erase the concept of Jews through the possibility of a great emigration of all Jews to a colony in Africa or elsewhere...However cruel and tragic each individual case may be, 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."

Next to this section of the report Hitler added the hand-written notation: "very good and correct."

Were they fooling themselves or did they really mean it? For a brief period in the summer of 1940 the German Foreign Office was busily working on the plan and Mussolini and the Italian Foreign Minister were informed of the plans to resettle all of the Jews in Madagascar. Construction work was actually

HALTED on the Polish ghettos since soon they would not be needed. As one SS officer said in Warsaw: "The war would be over in a month and the Jews would all leave for Madagascar".

The idea of an island dumping ground for the Jews had to be put on ice as the Battle for Britain dragged on and then later, by the spring of 1941, a new and far more lethal stage of the Nazi anti-Jewish policies had been reached.

Was there a straight and clear road to Auschwitz?

### **The functionalists see a twisted road**

The father of the functionalist approach to the Holocaust is probably Karl Schlüener who wrote a book in 1970 entitled *THE TWISTED ROAD TO AUSCHWITZ*, but the study that broke the solid wall of intentionalist thinking about National Socialism was undoubtedly A.J.P. Taylor's *THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR* that appeared more than a decade earlier.

Reenacting the controversy of the 1920s when the "revisionist" historians attacked the consensus about Germany being solely responsible for the outbreak of the First World War, Taylor sparked a heated debate with his argument that Hitler had not intended for the Second World War to begin and that it was not German actions but those of the Allied governments that had actually precipitated the conflict.

The functionalists present a confused picture of the inner workings of the Third Reich. Far from it being seen as a well-oiled hierarchy in which authority flowed downwards and obedience flowed upwards, the Nazi bureaucracy was described as a maze of competing power groups that revolved around the personalities of bitter rivals who were diametrically opposed to the policies and interests of each other and who were ceaselessly plotting against and clashing with their rivals. One writer compared the essence of the Third Reich to a medieval struggle between feudal oligarchies engaged in a Hobbesian war of all against all (Robert Koehl).

Hitler is seen as a brooding and often distant leader who preferred to let his subordinates fight it out amongst themselves while he remained passive and untainted on the sidelines. Once a winner had clearly emerged, the Fuehrer would ensure that the victor got his laurels by recognizing his de facto control. It was a sort of "institutional Darwinism" (David Schoenbaum) in which bureaucrats and bureaucracies struggled to survive and only the strongest of them would endure. At the heart of the system was NOT premeditated planning but a fatalistic *laissez-faire*. What happened happened. No one could predict who would emerge victorious and which one of the competing policies and policy-makers would ultimately dominate, but the one that won was the one that should have one. Its success was post factum proof of its superiority (had it not been meant to win then it never would have won) and therefore its success was also ultimate proof of the rightness of its victory.

### **Concrete examples of differing interpretations**

1. The Nuremberg Laws (or in their official names: The Law of Reich Citizenship and The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour) 15 September 1935 (all documents in this section are reprinted in *DOCUMENTS ON THE HOLOCAUST*). Intentionalists see them as a keystone to Nazi anti-Jewish measures. They provided a legal definition to the question "Who is a Jew?", a step that is essential in the process of marking Jews out from the rest of the society, isolating them and preparing the ground for their ultimate elimination.

But, argue the functionalists, if they were so crucial to the process, why were they drafted almost as an after-thought on the back of a napkin in an all-night cafe? The context in which these laws were presented was the "normalization" of relations between the Aryan race and the Jews. If these were the new terms under which life was to proceed then it provided some stability. If these provisions defined what were the restrictions and limitations under the law, then the rest was "illegal". Contact between Aryans and Jews was now narrowly circumscribed - for example, it became illegal for Jews to employ in

their households female Aryans under 45 years old - but not totally eliminated since it was now legal to employ one over 45 years old, or to hire a male.

The representative body of German Jewry responded that the Nuremberg Laws "come as the heaviest of blows for the Jews in Germany" but at the same time they create "a basis on which a tolerable relationship becomes possible between the German and the Jewish people." Taken in context, the Jewish reaction of alarm and fear may have also been mixed with relief.

2. Another example of differing interpretations is in regards to the policy of ghettoization. The Instructions by Heydrich on Policies and Operations Concerning Jews in the Occupied Territories, 21 September 1939 (known by the nickname "schnellbrief"). It distinguishes between "final aims" and "the stages leading to the fulfillment of this final aim". It set out the areas that "are to be cleared of Jews" and also the principle of "as few concentration centers as possible...only (in) cities which are rail junctions, or are at least located on railroad lines". In addition to defining the ghettos, it also outlined the size and responsibility of the Jewish councils and several key German economic interests, such as labour and food sources.

Again the intentionalists hold this document up as a cornerstone of the Nazi's anti-Jewish policies. Yet the actual practice of the Third Reich was so diverse and variegated in places that these provisions were kept more in the breach. So how important were they? How do we explain that as central a feature as the ghettos is not a carefully planned and considered program but an after-thought, considered haphazardly, some 3 weeks after the start of the War?

And what is the "final aim" or "endziel"? Does the fact that it is not defined even in a highly secret document of the secret police not imply that it has not yet been clarified? Are the "endziel" and the "endloesung" (the final solution) the same thing, as the intentionalists would have us believe? After all, NO document uses them interchangeably. Functionalist historians stress the probability that the real meaning of the "endziel" to be a territorial solution for the Jewish question (either the "Nisko Plan" in the Lublin District or the "Madagascar Plan"). They also point out that the first appearance in a document of the term "endloesung" was in 31 July 1941 - several weeks after the start of the organized mass murders of Jews in the East. The term first appears in a letter sent to Heydrich by Goering entrusting him to report back on "the preliminary organizational, practical and financial measures for the execution of the intended final solution ("endloesung) of the Jewish question."

6 months into the mass killings, at Wannsee, Heydrich was nervous that someone would raise serious objections to his policies or would challenge SS control in this area. When that did not happen, his relief was apparent to all, as described by Eichmann during his interrogation.

### **The bottom line of this dispute**

Yet the gap between the two positions, the intentionalist and functionalist, is far from unbridgeable. The pure intentionalist position does not completely hold because if Hitler was merely waiting for the first opportune moment to implement his pre-conceived murderous intentions then why did he wait 2 1/2 years before beginning the Final Solution in Poland? He held absolute control over millions of Jews from September 1939 but only began the mass murders in the spring of 1942.

But neither does a pure functionalist position fit the facts, for if the murder of the Jews was nothing more than a random side-show that happened to develop out of conditions at the time than how can we explain Hitler's steadfast determination, in the face of repeated difficulties and set-backs, not to desist from pursuing the Jewish question? Each failure seemed only to cause him to re-double his efforts to find a solution. And from his first surviving letter in 1919 until his final written statement - his suicide note of 29 April 1945 - the one subject that most occupied his attention was the fight against international Jewry. Hitler's ideology may neither have been pretty nor fully consistent, but it was of primary importance to everything that he did, and antisemitism was always at its very heart.

Perhaps a greater challenge than making sense of the individual character and role of Adolf Hitler is trying to understand why so many perfectly normal people followed him along that murderous path. It is to that question that we will turn in our next lecture.