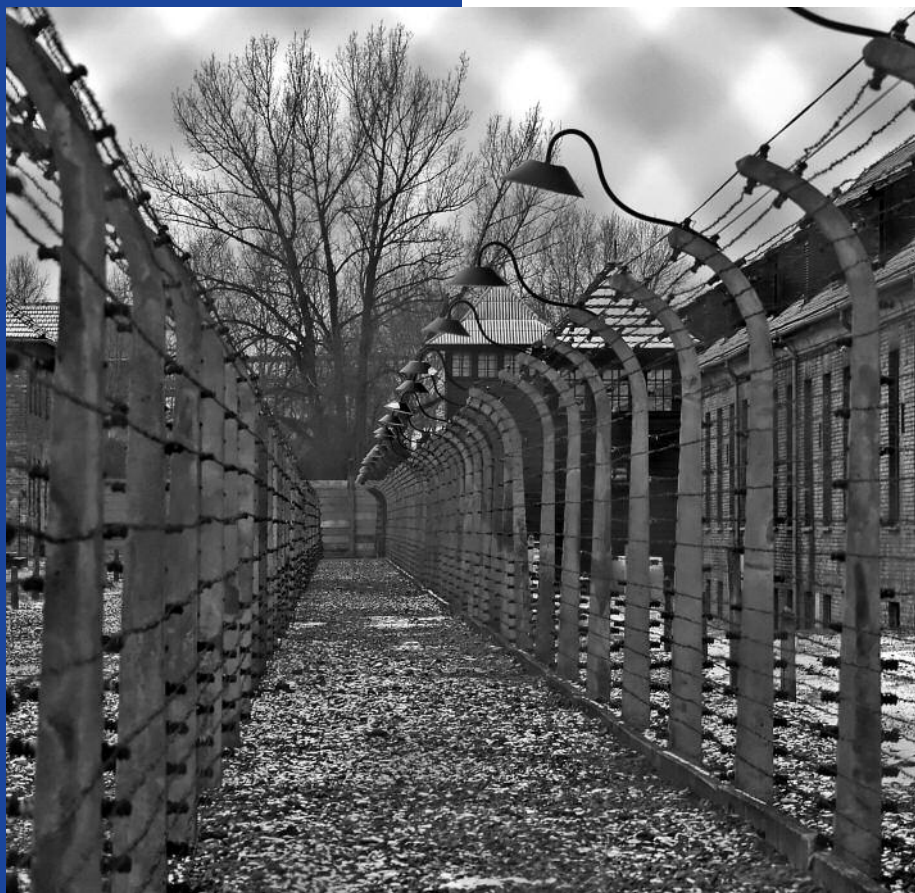


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UNDERSTANDING THE HOLOCAUST

COURSE GUIDE



Professor David Engel
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Understanding the Holocaust

Professor David Engel

New York University



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Understanding the Holocaust

Professor David Engel



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Understanding the Holocaust

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About Your Professor

David Engel

Professor David Engel is the Maurice Greenberg Professor of Holocaust Studies at the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. He is a fellow of the Goldstein-Goren Center for Diaspora Research at Tel Aviv University, and since 1985 he has been editor of the journal *Gal-Ed: On the History and Culture of Polish Jews*. Professor Engel is a member of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and in 2000 was a visiting professor at the Russian State University of the Humanities, where he taught the first course on the Holocaust to be offered in a university in the former Soviet Union.

David Engel is also the author of the following books:

The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews

Between Liberation and Flight: Holocaust Survivors in Poland and the Struggle for Leadership, 1944–1946

Facing a Holocaust: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1943–1945

In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1939–1942



The ruins of the Auschwitz II/Birkenau killing center in Poland.

Introduction

In *Understanding the Holocaust*, Professor David Engel of New York University examines the encounter between Germany's Third Reich and the Jews of the twenty European countries that fell under Nazi domination between 1933 and 1945.

The results of this encounter stretch human comprehension to the limit and raise frightening questions about the human condition. When it was over, two-thirds of Europe's Jews, some 5.8 million people, had died—and their deaths had occurred amid the most gruesome of circumstances.

Engel explores the reasons behind the Holocaust and attempts to enter into the minds of the participants. From the origins of the idea behind the killing campaign to the notions of modernity that many blame for creating the possibility for such a happening, Engel offers an illuminating analysis of the twentieth century's great tragedy.

Lecture 1: What Is “The Holocaust” and What Can Be Learned by Studying Its History?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel’s *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapters 1 and 2.

Our subject is the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews of twenty European countries that fell under Nazi domination between 1933 and 1945. As a result of that encounter, two-thirds of Europe’s Jews—5.8 million people—died, most of them because of actions taken by agencies or allies of the German government.

Today the encounter is usually designated as “The Holocaust.” That designation came into common usage only in the 1960s. Until that time the word “holocaust” had been used to describe most any instance of large-scale destruction and loss of life. The phrase “The Holocaust,” in contrast, began to be widely used around that time to refer to one particular catastrophe, as if that catastrophe constituted a holocaust *par excellence*.

People did not always think that way about the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany. For almost two decades after the end of the Second World War, most observers understood the murder of Jews as a subset of Nazi brutality, essentially no different from the oppression of political prisoners, slave laborers, and other groups for which the Third Reich had become infamous. It was common to think that these victims were persecuted because of nonconformist beliefs or actions. It took many years before it was broadly understood that Jews and certain other categories of victims (mainly Sinti and Roma and the disabled) had been targeted for reasons having nothing to do with what they believed or did. In particular, Israel’s trial of Adolf Eichmann in the early 1960s highlighted the victimization of Jews in a way that made it stand out from other instances of Nazi persecution and encouraged the assignment to it of a special name.

Assigning a special name raises the question of how the Nazi murder of Jews differed from atrocities perpetrated against other victimized groups by the Nazis or other brutal regimes. The most commonly offered answer is that the Nazis sought not only to decimate Jews as a group, but to kill each and every Jewish man, woman, and child within their reach. No Jew was to be spared on any grounds. Moreover, it is claimed, the Nazis justified their campaign of systematic, total murder by recourse to a view of the world that held Jews to be (literally) a lethal pathogen that, if allowed to live, would eventually destroy human life everywhere on earth.

Some scholars dispute that Jews were the only victims in history of a total murder campaign rooted in an ideology that wrote them out of the human race. They claim that there were other holocausts, not only one. This argu-

ment will probably never be settled completely. In a way, it is misplaced: No two historical events are ever exactly alike, but many historical events bear notable resemblances to one another. Individuals are free to decide whether the similarities or differences are more important to them. For our purposes, what is important is not whether the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews was historically unique but the fact that the leaders of the Third Reich defined Jews as mortal enemies of all humanity and on the basis of that definition sought to kill every Jew on earth. Virtually all scholars agree that that was the case.

Understanding this feature of the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews is the key to understanding what we can learn by studying the history of that encounter. Before the Holocaust happened, hardly anyone could conceive that something like it was possible. People could not imagine that the leaders of a major European country would come to perceive reality in so irrational a fashion as to define millions of human beings as nonhuman and actively seek their complete annihilation as a result. Even decades after the fact, many people still cannot comprehend how such behavior was possible. In other words, the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews points to frightening human capabilities of which few were aware before the deadly encounter unfolded. The Holocaust thus forces us to reconsider the way we think about ourselves as human beings.

Some maintain that such reconsideration is beyond our capacity. They claim that at bottom the Holocaust is incomprehensible and can therefore be approached only with a sense of awe and mystery. These lectures do not share that belief. They begin from the premise that the Holocaust was the product of human actions undertaken for intelligible reasons. Those reasons can be grasped by trying to enter into the minds of the participants in the encounter, to see the world as they saw it. Listeners will decide whether the effort has made the Holocaust easier to understand.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How was Nazi Germany's treatment of Jews different than its treatment of other oppressed groups?
2. How does the Holocaust challenge people's understanding of human capability?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Rosenbaum, Alan S., ed. *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000.

Lecture 2: The Origins of a Murderous Idea

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 3.

The idea that the Nazis used to justify the Holocaust—that Jews were not human beings but dangerous pathogens whose continued existence on earth endangered the well-being of humanity as a whole—evolved out of the world view of Adolf Hitler. That world view proceeded from two fundamental premises: first, that humanity was naturally and unalterably divided into distinct, genetically based groups (races); second, that each race was inexorably locked in a mortal struggle for survival against all other races, as a result of competition over a finite amount of available land on earth for growing food and raising progeny. According to Hitler, races survived by maximizing the amount of land under their control, a goal that could be accomplished only at the expense of other races.

Jews (whom Hitler defined as a race) seemed at first glance to contradict this theory, because they had managed to survive for centuries without controlling any land of their own. In order to resolve this conundrum, Hitler reasoned that Jews must have survived by exploiting land that belonged to other races. An organism that survives by exploiting the resources of its host is called a parasite. Thus Hitler concluded that Jews were not a normal race but a parasitical one.

Hitler appears to have taken the image of the Jewish parasite literally. In his youth he had been influenced by occult circles that espoused a theory according to which the earth was filled with nonhuman creatures who inhabited human bodies. Those creatures were supposed to constitute a danger to human life. Reasoning from the basic premises of his world view, Hitler determined that those creatures must be Jews. If so, it followed that Jews must be mortal enemies not only of the Germans, but of all races; as long as a single one remained alive, humanity as a whole was in danger. Hence, Hitler believed that by killing each and every Jew everywhere he was performing a vital service for all true human beings.

These ideas of Hitler's appear to owe little to the large repository of malevolent images through which Western culture has depicted Jews for many centuries. Although Jews had long been portrayed not only as parasites, but as devils, and had been assigned a host of frightening chimerical qualities, those representations had been generally understood as metaphorical, not literal. Moreover, until shortly before Hitler's time, it was generally agreed that whatever pernicious qualities Jews might display stemmed from their religious beliefs. These, it was almost universally held, could be changed through proper education; Jews could be redeemed by religious conversion or funda-

mental reform of their own traditions. Hitler denied these postulates. For him, the behavior of Jews was determined not by belief or training, but by genetics. Therefore, according to Hitler, Jews were incorrigible. Moreover, he held, if they converted to Christianity or otherwise assimilated into their surrounding society, they became not less, but more, dangerous, because they could not be easily identified as bearers of their supposedly harmful “Jewish” characteristics.

Hence, whereas in previous centuries people hostile to Jews had sought ways to correct, convert, and assimilate them, Hitler and his Nazi followers believed that all such efforts would ultimately prove harmful. To their minds, the only way to deal effectively with the threat posed by the presence of Jewish parasites among human beings was to kill each and every one of them. The Nazi regime thus embarked upon a far more aggressive program against Jews than had any hostile agency in the past. Even some of Hitler's allies, who themselves regarded the presence of Jews as a threat to their countries' well-being, could not conceive of a total murder campaign.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the two fundamental premises of Hitler's world view?
2. Why did Hitler believe that Jews had to be killed rather than assimilated or reformed?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology*. New York: New York University Press, 1993.

Jäckel, Eberhard. *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power*. Trans. Herbert Arnold. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Kershaw, Ian. *Hitler: 1889–1936 Hubris*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

Lecture 3: Why Germany?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 3.

No matter what Hitler himself thought about Jews, an entire country could not have been mobilized to carry out a systematic campaign to kill them all unless Hitler's ideas made sense to other Germans. In what ways and on what levels did those ideas appeal to the various segments of German society, and how can their appeal be explained?

Detailed studies of German public opinion before and after the Nazi regime came to power have consistently found that Hitler's ideas about Jews did not resonate especially well with German voters. In fact, while it was competing for power in democratic elections, Nazi Party propaganda did not suggest that it would ultimately be necessary to murder all Jews. The party's official platform spoke only of legal measures designed to strip Jews of their German citizenship, remove them from key positions of influence in German social and cultural life, and prevent them from competing with Germans for scarce economic resources. Once the Nazis controlled the German government, the laws they enacted with those aims in mind won widespread public approval. However, few Germans appear to have believed that enacting anti-Jewish laws was an especially pressing need. Moreover, whenever the regime encouraged physical violence against Jews, most Germans appear to have been repulsed. When German forces eventually began the systematic murder campaign, the government took stringent measures to keep the German public from learning about it, fearing that it would lose vital popular support.

As a result, few historians today agree with the notion that the Holocaust was a project of German society as a whole. Most believe that the Holocaust was planned and executed by only a select coterie of Nazi leaders and officials, who could count on the support of a hard core of Nazi true believers that probably numbered about 10 percent of the adult German population. That hard core appears to have been forged largely out of certain specific features of German history, especially Germany's experience during the First World War, the early chaotic years of the Weimar Republic, and the Great Depression, which began in Germany in 1930. Germany's defeat was widely attributed to a "stab in the back" by internal enemies. Because German war propagandists had presented the war to the German public as a clash between the German and Anglo-French "national spirits," and because Jews were widely presumed, for historical reasons, to possess a strong affinity for the latter, some Germans reasoned that Jews must be prominent among the internal enemies who had caused Germany to lose the war. That belief was reinforced by the leading role played by Jews in Germany's wartime peace

camp and in the formation of the Weimar Republic, which was perceived by many Germans as a beneficiary of their country's defeat. The identification of Jews with Bolshevism also helped heighten fear of a Jewish enemy.

Although only a small minority of Germans evidently believed that Jews were the primary cause of their misfortunes during the Weimar years, those misfortunes were sufficiently widespread, and Jewish identification with Weimar sufficiently strong, to provide fertile ground for Nazi propagandists. By cultivating that ground, the Nazi regime was eventually able to recruit a sufficient number of Germans to perform the various functions necessary to carry out a program of systematic mass murder. Nazi leaders also knew how to employ universal features of human psychology to encourage those Germans to execute that program with maximum efficiency.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Before the Nazis came to power, what did they suggest ought to be done with regard to Germany's Jews?
2. What factors helped to heighten the fear of a Jewish enemy?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Allen, William Sheridan. *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922–1945*. Rev. ed. Danbury, CT: Grolier/Franklin Watts, 1984.

Bankier, David. *The Germans and the Final Solution: Public Opinion Under Nazism*. New ed. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Weiss, John. *Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996.

Lecture 4: From Idea to Action: The Twisted Road to Auschwitz

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 4.

The fact that Hitler personally held ideas about Jews that, if carried to their logical conclusion, necessitated that each and every one of them be killed and the fact that a hard core of true believers was disposed to accept that conclusion do not mean that a campaign to murder all Jews was inevitable once the Nazi party assumed power in Germany in 1933. In the event, the Nazi regime does not appear to have embarked upon such a campaign in earnest until the latter part of 1941. Until that time the regime took a series of measures more or less in line with what the party platform of 1920 had envisioned. Laws passed in 1933 resulted in the dismissal of many (but not all) Jews from the civil service, free professions, and cultural and educational institutions. The September 1935 Nürnberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship and banned Jewish-German marriages and extramarital sexual relations. Additional legislation enacted in 1938 stripped most Jews of their assets and livelihoods, forced them to identify themselves publicly as Jews, created a segregated system of medical care, and expelled Jewish children from German schools. However, the German authorities consistently represented the intention behind these measures as establishing a legal framework for continued “tolerable relations” between the German and Jewish peoples. Indeed, although there were periodic outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence, the regime did not actively sponsor them until 1938. Nevertheless, some scholars believe that the authorities were disingenuous; they hold that the various legislative measures were part of a carefully considered, step-by-step plan to make eventual systematic mass murder of Jews as easy to accomplish as possible. However, no documentary evidence of any such master plan has been uncovered. Most scholars today thus interpret the measures rather as a series of experiments, evidence that for a long time the Nazi regime was not certain how it wanted to deal with Jews in practice. The road to Auschwitz, most believe, was not straight but twisted.

If there was any overall strategic aim behind measures aimed at Jews before late 1941, it appears to have been not to kill all Jews but to remove them physically from Germany and the other parts of Nazi-dominated Europe that the regime hoped to colonize for German settlement. The SS (*Schutzstaffel*—“Protective Echelon”), which began to take an active interest in Jewish affairs in late 1936, together with the German Foreign Ministry, elaborated a series of plans to cajole Jews into leaving the Reich, extrude them if they would not leave voluntarily, or resettle them by force in a special “Jewish reservation” in a remote location.

The efforts to induce Jews to leave Germany for distant destinations, which reflected government policy in the late 1930s, appear at first glance to contradict the dictates of Hitler's world view. If Hitler believed that the danger to humanity presented by Jews could be eliminated only by putting all Jews everywhere to death, how could he countenance a policy that sought to take Jews out of areas under German control and send them to places where Reich officials could not reach them? Several explanations are possible. The most persuasive sees the encouragement of mass Jewish emigration within the framework of the Nazis' broader geopolitical strategy. That strategy aimed at the conquest of the Soviet Union. Germany could not achieve its ultimate foreign policy aim without first building up its military strength, in violation of the peace treaty that had ended the First World War. The major Western powers—Great Britain, France, and the United States—were the guarantors of that treaty. Thus, as Germany rearmed, the Western powers had to be persuaded not to intervene militarily against German infractions. One way to accomplish this goal was to persuade public opinion in the Western countries that intervention served nefarious Jewish interests. Making those countries feel threatened by a potential massive influx of Jewish refugees was a way of spreading anti-Jewish feeling throughout the world, making Western public opinion more receptive to German anti-interventionist propaganda.

There are no documents that can prove or disprove this reconstruction of German thinking conclusively. In the end it is not possible to determine with any certainty whether there was any unifying logic at all behind the various measures regarding Jews that the Nazi regime undertook during the first eight years of its existence, let alone whether the logic was one of facilitating a premeditated murder campaign.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What actions did the Nazi Party take against Jews when it came to power?
2. How could expelling Jews from Germany have helped to facilitate Germany's foreign policy aims?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Friedländer, Saul. *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Part One: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Schleunes, Karl A. *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy toward German Jews, 1933–39*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Lecture 5: Facing Persecution

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 4.

If scholars today cannot determine precisely what lay behind the various anti-Jewish measures the Nazi regime undertook between 1933 and 1941, how much more difficult must it have been for contemporaries to come to grips with those measures and their meaning. In particular, German Jews were forced to make potentially life-altering decisions on the basis of information that was always incomplete, often contradictory, and generally subject to different interpretations. In the end, they could never be certain of the government's intentions. The only thing that was certain was that life under the Nazis would be extremely difficult.

A significant percentage of German Jews decided at a fairly early stage to leave the country, even before the government began actively trying to push them out. It seems likely that many more would have left had conditions been more favorable. Emigration meant financial loss, separation from family and friends, loss of social status, and the hardships of building a new life in unfamiliar surroundings. Whether those hardships would appear to outweigh the difficulties of remaining in Germany depended upon a range of factors, largely individual. By 1939, more than half of the Jews in Reich-controlled territories decided in favor of leaving.

Those who wished to leave faced another hurdle: the problem of obtaining permission to migrate to another country. By the time the Nazis came to power, virtually all countries possessed legal and administrative means of restricting immigration. The countries where significant numbers of German Jews sought entry debated whether and to what extent they should apply those means in order to keep refugees out. In the end, the large majority of Jews from Reich-controlled territories who tried actively to leave before the outbreak of war in 1939 were able to find a receiving country. However, they often faced serious bureaucratic hurdles before obtaining an entry visa to a new home. In some cases those hurdles delayed emigration until it was too late.

For Jews who could not or did not wish to emigrate, as well as for those who remained under Nazi rule for several years before leaving, Jewish welfare organizations developed an elaborate network of self-help activities. With assistance from Jewish charities in Germany and abroad, German Jews in need were able to obtain help finding jobs, interest-free loans, food, clothing, and shelter. A Jewish Cultural Association not only provided employment for Jewish artists and intellectuals who had been dismissed from their positions but spiritual sustenance to a beleaguered populace. A central Jewish political

representation lobbied the authorities for the most lenient possible application of anti-Jewish laws. It also operated a network of schools and educational programs for Jewish adults.

The aim of all these activities was to help Jews ride out what virtually all believed would be a passing storm. The storm might be extended and vicious and its effects devastating, but few observers were persuaded that those effects could not be weathered with adequate resources and proper planning and organization. Only after the outbreak of war in 1939 did it become apparent that the storm was far deadlier than anyone had imagined.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why was it difficult for many Jews to leave Germany?
2. What services were provided by the Jewish Cultural Association?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Barkai, Avraham. *From Boycott to Annihilation: The Economic Struggle of German Jews, 1933–1943*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990.

Kaplan, Marion A. *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Lecture 6: The Ghetto Regime

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapters 4 and 5.

Germany's conquest of Poland in September 1939 presented significant complications for Nazi Jewish policy. The two million Jews who inhabited the Polish territories that fell under German occupation increased the number of Jews under Nazi rule sixfold. The outbreak of war also made Jews from Germany, Austria, and the Czech lands enemy aliens in Britain, France, and their allies, meaning that those countries would no longer take in any Jewish refugees. The practice of pressuring Jews into emigrating was thus no longer practicable. As a result, the "Jewish reservation" idea came to dominate German planning for the future of European Jewry.

By 1940, however, plans for a reservation were dropped. Instead, Polish Jews were incarcerated in closed, segregated residential areas called ghettos, to which Jews whose homes were outside them were forcibly removed. Living conditions in the ghettos were squalid, characterized by extreme overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and deficient food supplies. Cut off from most means of livelihood, many Jews were forced to sell their possessions in order to stay alive. Starvation, cold, and epidemic disease extracted a horrible toll: as much as a fourth of Polish Jewry perished in 1940–41, before the beginning of systematic mass killing.

Some scholars have called the ghettos the first instrument by which the Nazi regime sought to kill all Jews within its reach, speaking of the initial ghetto period (1940–41) as the "phase of indirect murder." Most recent research, however, suggests that the ghettos were not established consciously in order to facilitate a murder program. In most cases the initiative for setting up a ghetto in a particular city or town came not from the central authorities in Berlin but from local Nazi officials, who needed to find a temporary way to control the masses of Jews under their jurisdiction until the central authorities implemented the reservation project or presented an alternate plan for their long-term fate. Local officials were also not of a single mind with regard to how the ghettos should be managed: while some adopted management strategies that indeed seem to have been meant to generate maximum death, others (including the heads of the two largest ghettos, Warsaw and Łódź) actually took steps to stop Jewish attrition. They regarded the Jews of their ghettos as an economic resource, preferring to provide them with the minimal level of sustenance, shelter, and medical care needed to exploit their labor for the German war effort. In many places the establishment of ghettos also served as a means of creating tension between Jews and Poles, thereby facilitating the German occupation strategy of maximizing friction between the two com-

munities. Because Poles had to be removed from areas set aside for ghettos, they often implored the Germans to make the Jewish residential areas as small as possible. Jews, in contrast, tried to enlarge those areas; the only way they could hope to do so was at the expense of living space for Poles.

Ghettos were not established throughout the Third Reich. In fact, in Germany proper top Nazi officials actively opposed their creation on the grounds that they would become breeding grounds for disease and crime and thus endanger the physical and social health of the German people. Moreover, even after ghettos had been set up throughout occupied Poland, officials in Berlin continued to look for ways to remove large numbers of Jews to parts of the globe beyond the Nazi orbit. Not until August 1941 were Jews forbidden to depart Nazi-occupied areas. It was only then that the German government began trying not to drive Jews away, but to keep them locked in. For all of these reasons, it is generally held today that the Third Reich actively embarked on a policy of systematic mass murder only after that date.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the “Jewish reservation”?
2. How did the establishment of ghettos escalate friction between Jews and Poles?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Gutman, Yisrael. *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Trunk, Isaiah, and Israel Gutman. *Lodz Ghetto: A History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Lecture 7: Killing Begins

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapters 5 and 6.

What prompted the Third Reich to implement a program of systematic murder of all Jews within its reach beginning in late 1941?

As with many questions in the history of the Holocaust, gaps in the documentary record make it impossible to be absolutely certain. To date, no one has found a written order for mass killing to begin. It is possible that such an order was issued and later destroyed. It is also possible that an order was given only orally, not in writing. But even that possibility has not been confirmed by unequivocal testimony.

Nevertheless, scholars have used the extant documents (which, though incomplete, are extremely voluminous) to propose various hypotheses. Virtually all agree that the principal catalyst was Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. As a result of that invasion and the extensive German conquests of Soviet territory that followed, an additional four million Jews were added to the areas under the Reich's control, more than double the number already under Nazi rule. Moreover, the war against Bolshevik Russia was conceived as an ideological war, a struggle to the death between Germany and its most dangerous enemy. Because the Nazis frequently conflated Jews and Bolsheviks, it stands to reason that a struggle so conceived could easily trigger a concentrated effort to eliminate the enemy once and for all. Hence few are surprised that the first mass killings of Jews occurred on Soviet territory, or that some half a million Soviet Jews were murdered before killing operations were initiated elsewhere in Europe. However, the connection between killings in the Soviet Union and elsewhere has been difficult to establish.

Research accumulating since the 1990s, based largely on newly discovered documents in archives located in former Communist countries, has done much to modify the way scholars approach the problem. Before that time, it was generally assumed that any order for killing, written or oral, must have come from the highest ranks of the regime. Recent archival findings have suggested, however, that troops entering the Soviet Union were initially instructed to undertake only targeted killings of clearly defined categories of Jews. It now appears that indiscriminate mass killings were initiated by local military personnel and commissioners, who subsequently sought approval up the chain of command for their actions. Until at least late fall 1941, thinking in Berlin still centered around the reservation idea: Nazi officials hoped that Jews from all over Europe could be deported to the Soviet areas east of the Ural Mountains that Germany expected to conquer. Once the German offen-

sive against the Soviet Union stalled, the central authorities appear to have become increasingly receptive to mass killing, until by the end of 1941 that model emerged as the preferred one for dealing with Jews from all parts of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Recent studies also give reason to suspect that the idea of systematic total killing may have suggested itself to local German commanders, at least in part, by observation of the behavior of local non-Jews toward Jews in territories conquered from the Soviet Union. The weeks following the German conquest witnessed outbreaks of violence perpetrated by Lithuanians, Estonians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Croats, and Romanians against their Jewish neighbors. At least some of this violence appears to have been spontaneous, not directly instigated by Germans. Furthermore, these killings were often more extensive than the targeted shooting undertaken by Germans in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet invasion.

Nevertheless, it was ultimately the central Nazi hierarchy, certainly with Hitler's approval and probably under his direct prodding, that made the decision to turn a local practice into a policy for the entire Reich. That policy was consistent with Hitler's world view and found its final justification in it.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the various hypotheses for the mass killings that Germany began in 1941?
2. Why is it not surprising that the first mass killings of Jews occurred in Soviet territory?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Bartov, Omer. *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Hirschfeld, Gerhard, ed. *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1986.

Lecture 8: Organizing Death

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 6.

Once the German leadership committed itself to an effort systematically to pursue and kill each and every Jew within their reach, both in the territories they occupied and in the countries that were their allies (Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, and Vichy France), it had to determine how best to achieve that goal. By late 1941 it was clear to Nazi policymakers that the killing method that had been inaugurated in the Soviet Union was not applicable to a continent-wide murder campaign. That method involved shooting at close range. It depended upon the ability to bring the killers—usually soldiers or members of the so-called special task forces (*Einsatzgruppen*) of the SS—directly to the places where the victims lived. The killers were responsible for all stages in the killing process: locating the victims, transporting them to the killing site (usually a field or grove on the outskirts of the victims' town or village), shooting them, and disposing of their remains. It turned out that, in order to proceed at what the Germans thought an adequate pace, this manner of killing demanded far more manpower than they could spare from the battlefield. The heavy personnel requirements also complicated the task of keeping the killing operations secret. The killings also took a psychological toll on enough German soldiers to make their involvement in murder a cause for concern in the higher echelons.

As a result, the planners of the murder campaign needed to find a method that would kill substantially greater numbers of victims at a faster pace with maximum secrecy, fewer personnel, and less exposure of Germans to the most gruesome aspects of the murder process. In fall 1941 they developed the idea of the killing center. This idea began from the premise that instead of bringing the killers to the victims, the victims would be transported from throughout Europe to a small number of remote locations, where they would be killed by mass asphyxiation in large gas chambers. The killing center method met all of the requirements that the architects of the murder program had set. By creating economies of scale it maximized efficiency. By permitting division of labor it distributed both individual physical contact with the murder process and moral responsibility for it. By confining murder operations to a limited number of sites, it made it easier to conceal them.

In order to make the killing center idea work, German planners had to do two things: they had to design and build the centers themselves, and they had to devise ways and means of transporting Jews to them from far and near. Design and construction began in fall 1941 and continued through to summer 1942. In all, six killing centers were built: Chełmno, Bełżec,

Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Birkenau (Auschwitz II). At Chelmno, asphyxiation was accomplished by loading Jews onto sealed vans whose exhaust fumes were then channeled back into the cargo area. Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Majdanek used diesel engines to send fumes into large gas chambers, while at Birkenau the gas chambers were filled with hydrogen cyanide gas. All together, about 3.3 million Jews were killed in these six locations. (Note that these were not concentration camps. Concentration camps like Dachau, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, and others served many terrible functions, but they were not involved directly in the murder process.)

The problem of transport was discussed at the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942, where representatives of thirteen government, Nazi party, and police agencies devised a rough schedule for bringing Jews from throughout Europe to the killing sites. The continent was to be “combed from west to east” in order to round up all Jews and ship them by rail to one of the six centers. Arrangements were made for coordination among various authorities that would allow roundups to be conducted, railroad tracks cleared, rolling stock distributed, and personnel assigned so as to ensure that the gas chambers would be neither overloaded nor idle. Although the policy of systematic mass killing had been approved before the Wannsee Conference took place, Wannsee signaled the commitment of all branches of the Nazi regime to making Europe *judenrein* (cleansed of Jews).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why did German leadership decide against the killing method inaugurated in the Soviet Union for its continent-wide murder campaign?
2. What two things did German planners have to do to make the killing center idea work?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Browning, Christopher. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Reprint ed. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. 3rd ed. 3 vols. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

Lecture 9: German Successes and Failures

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 6.

The plan adopted at the Wannsee Conference was not fully implemented. In fact, the goal of making Europe *judenrein* was not completely achieved. All in all, about 5.8 million European Jews died at the hands of Nazi Germany and its allies, mostly between 1941 and 1945. However, about three million Jews remained alive. Whereas in some countries—Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Germany, and Austria—more than 90 percent of the Jewish population in 1941 perished by 1945, in others—Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, and Norway—half or more of the Jewish population survived the Nazi era (in Bulgaria and Denmark survival rates came close to 100 percent). Accounting for the successes and failures is a problem to which students of the Holocaust have devoted much attention.

One factor whose importance has been noted is the varying degree to which Germany controlled what happened in the other countries within its orbit. Some countries were technically independent allies of the Third Reich. Others, though occupied by German military forces, maintained their own civil administrations for running day-to-day affairs. Germany had virtually complete control of military and civilian affairs only in Austria, the *Protektorat* (Bohemia and Moravia), the Baltic States, the occupied Soviet territories, Poland, Serbia, and Germany proper. These latter countries contained more than three quarters of Europe's Jewish population, and for the most part they were located the closest to the killing centers. It was thus a relatively simpler matter to organize their deportation to the killing sites than it was to dispatch Jews from more distant locations where the degree of German control was not as strong. So it should not be surprising that the countries under the greatest degree of German control were the ones that lost the greatest percentage of their Jewish populations.

In suggesting that deportations to the killing centers proceed from west to east, the Wannsee planners do not seem to have thought that lack of direct control would present a serious problem. However, experiences in France (one of the first countries set to become *judenrein*) showed them that they could not always count upon their allies to operate according to the schedules they had set forth. Moreover, in early 1942, when deportations from France were supposed to begin, German forces were engaged in heavy fighting in the Soviet Union and North Africa and could not spare much of their own personnel to take over control of the deportation process. As a

result, the Wannsee plan was effectively abandoned, as German administrators put their major effort into killing all Jews in the countries under their direct jurisdiction.

The major killing operation into which the Third Reich poured its resources during 1942–43 was the systematic murder of the Jews of Poland, which proceeded under the codename Operation Reinhard. In the course of this campaign, which claimed the lives of over two million Jews, the ghettos of Warsaw, Lublin, Lwów, Kraków, Cz stochowa, Białystok, and hundreds of smaller towns were liquidated and their inhabitants murdered in Beł ec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Operation Reinhard also gave birth to a standard procedure for initiating the killing process, known as the *Aktion*. Most notable in this process was the effort the Germans placed on inducing intended victims to board the deportation transports voluntarily and on minimizing potential resistance should the victims prove recalcitrant. These efforts, which displayed considerable psychological sophistication, indicated that even in the territories under their direct control the victims might have affected their degree of success, at least in theory. The behavior of both victims and those who have come to be called bystanders—non-Jews who encountered the Nazi murder campaign in one capacity or another—was thus a source of considerable interest and concern to the German authorities, who devoted much thought to figuring out how they could best maneuver both categories into a position where they would offer the least possible resistance. In the final analysis, the degree of German success or failure in ridding any one country of its Jews depended upon complex interactions among the killers, their targets, and witnesses to the crime.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why was the Wannsee blueprint not carried out in full?
2. What was Operation Reinhard?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Arad, Yitzhak. *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Cesarani, David. *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Gutman, Yisrael, ed. *The Nazi Concentration Camps*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984.

Lecture 10: Fighting Death: The Problem of Consciousness

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 7.

The question of the degree to which the behavior of Jews affected (or might have affected) the outcome of the Nazi murder campaign is highly controversial. For several decades after the end of the Second World War many charged that Jews throughout Europe had not given proper attention to the Nazi threat and had thus been slow to organize resistance to it. Today it is understood that there was an insurmountable disproportion between the resources available to Germans and Jews to achieve their respective aims. In the first place, the lack of behind-the-scenes information that had plagued German Jews during the 1930s proved an even more calamitous problem for Jews in the rest of Nazi-dominated Europe once war broke out. Nazi actions seemed to point in inconsistent directions, so that even the most sophisticated observers, Jewish and non-Jewish, concluded that reasonable possibilities existed for Jews to adapt successfully to the harsh conditions of occupation. Indeed, the policies that guided Nazi actions changed as the war went on. Until mid-1941, at the earliest, the Nazi regime did not have a clear notion that it was about to embark upon a program of systematic mass murder. If the leadership of the Third Reich was not certain that killing all Jews indiscriminately was an immediate aim, their intended targets can hardly have been expected to have seen the handwriting on the wall.

Obtaining accurate information with which to assess Nazi intentions became more difficult than ever once mass killing began, especially in the ghettos of occupied Poland, where each Jewish community was effectively isolated both from other Jewish communities and from the outside world. Both there and in other parts of the world the occupiers went to great lengths to camouflage their intentions. But even when bits of accurate information about German murder actions reached Jews, converting the available data into a correct picture of the fate the occupiers had in mind for them proved surpassingly difficult. For one thing, information about killing operations came in the form of reports about specific occurrences in particular places. Many such reports had to be verified and collated before a general trend could be inferred from them. Even after verification and collation, drawing proper inferences was encumbered by a significant psychological barrier. Today it is clear that a situation is possible in which a government adopts the systematic murder of an entire group of people, no matter how members of that group believed or behaved, as a matter of policy and devotes significant resources to its achievement, even when doing so appears altogether irrational to others. At the time such a situation was not only unprecedented, it was almost universally thought to

be entirely beyond the realm of human possibility. The greatest difficulty facing Jews confronting the Third Reich after 1941 was thus to transform information into the consciousness that each and every one of them had been sentenced to death and that there was nothing they could do to induce the authorities to annul the decree.

Two groups within Jewish society proved best able to do so. The first consisted of the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils)—Nazi-appointed bodies that constituted the official Jewish leadership in all countries under German rule. Their ability stemmed largely from their relative closeness to the German administration and from the relatively larger amount of information that came their way than was available to most Jews. The second was made up of members of youth movements—usually movements associated with political parties. They proved better able than most sectors of society to maintain contacts and share information over a wide geographical area. They were aided by the fact that, as a result of their youth, they were unencumbered by memories of the First World War, which was the source of many false historical analogies for the older generation. Even though the *Judenräte* and the youth movements developed a similar consciousness concerning the Nazis' murderous plans at a similar stage of their development, they formed radically different operative conclusions. In many places, they offered two distinct alternatives for Jewish responses to intended murder.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why were Jews throughout Europe slow to ascertain the true nature and extent of the Nazi threat?
2. What two groups in Jewish society proved best able to comprehend the Nazi threat?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Kermish, Joseph, ed. *To Live and Die with Honor*. New York: The Talman Company, 1989.

Laqueur, Walter. *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's "Final Solution."* Reprint. New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1998.

Lecture 11: Strategies for Living and Dying

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 7.

The most common strategy adopted by *Judenräte* heads throughout Nazi-occupied Europe was to seek ways to induce local German officials, if not to lift the sentence of death that had been placed upon their communities, at least to delay its execution. The hope was that if the Germans could be held at bay long enough, many Jews might be rescued once the Third Reich was defeated on the battlefield—a defeat virtually all Jewish leaders expected would come sooner or later.

In eastern Europe, this strategy underlay the so-called salvation through work policies adopted by the *Judenräte* in several major ghettos, including Łódź, Białystok, and Wilno. Jewish leaders in those ghettos hoped that the industrial capacity and available Jewish workforce in their cities would prove a vital resource for the German war effort and that German officials would respond accordingly, not only by protecting the workers from deportation to the killing centers but by providing them with adequate food, clothing, housing, and medical care. The urgent need they sensed to demonstrate the economic potential of their ghettos often led these leaders to push their charges to the limits of their endurance and beyond, to the point where some found themselves reviled by the very people they were trying to save. Some were even prepared to sacrifice those who could not work—mainly the elderly or infirm and the children—in the hope of temporarily satiating the Nazi beasts' appetite. To be sure, the ghettos that pursued this policy were among the last to be liquidated, but it has not been shown that "salvation through work" was responsible for their relatively long survival. In the final analysis it proved impossible to bargain with the Germans on the basis of economic advantage; the notion that Jews could be of any value to the Third Reich was not compatible with the conception of Jews as noxious parasites.

In contrast to the dominant strategy of the *Judenräte*, the youth movements frequently undertook to organize armed resistance. Beginning in 1942, armed resistance units were organized in over one hundred ghettos in Poland, the Baltic states, and the occupied Soviet territories. A minority of these groups engaged German forces in battle (most notably in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943); others conducted sabotage operations. However, nowhere was armed resistance conceived as a means of rescue or of dissuading Germans from continuing to kill Jews. Its purpose was rather to allow participants to choose what they regarded as an honorable form of death and to create a memory of heroism for future generations.

Other strategies were available only to limited numbers. Prisoners in several killing centers and labor camps staged revolts in the hope of escape; the few who succeeded generally tried to join partisan units (there were probably about forty-thousand Jewish partisans and members of general resistance movements throughout occupied Europe). Jews living in areas close to unoccupied territory could attempt to flee across the border. Those whose physical appearance and command of the local language did not betray their Jewish origins could adopt false identities as non-Jews. Others could seek hiding places. In certain exceptional circumstances, where it appeared that the Nazi regime might gain a significant diplomatic or strategic advantage, it proved possible for some Jewish groups to conduct extended negotiations with German officials aimed at ransoming large numbers of Jews for monetary payment. All of these strategies had only minimal success, however. It appears that organized efforts by Jews to reduce the dimensions of the Nazi murder campaign saved perhaps a bit more than 5 percent of the total number of potential victims. All of the survival strategies except salvation through work depended to varying degrees on assistance from different groups of bystanders—local non-Jewish populations, their institutions and leaders, and governments of states beyond the Nazi orbit. The Holocaust's dimensions depended largely upon how these groups responded to information about the Nazis' murderous plans.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the most common strategy adopted by *Judenrat* heads throughout Nazi-occupied Europe?
2. What was the purpose of the organized armed resistance by the Jewish youth groups?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Arad, Yitzhak. *Ghetto in Flames*. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1983.

Krakowski, Shmuel. *The War of the Doomed: Jewish Armed Resistance in Poland, 1942–1944*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1984.

Trunk, Isaiah. *Judenrat*. Reprint. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Lecture 12: Their Brothers' Keepers?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 7.

There were various ways in which bystanders could have assisted Jews. Local populations could help hide Jews and sustain them in hiding. In states that were independent allies of the Third Reich, as well as in countries where native bureaucracies remained intact, local leaders and civil servants could withhold cooperation from deportation actions or create procedural hurdles to hinder them. Underground movements could set up escape routes, procure arms for Jewish resistance groups, sabotage deportation transports, promulgate information about killing operations, and exhort the people they claimed to represent to take whatever action they could in opposition to the German murder scheme. Churches could also demand that their faithful act to foil Nazi plans, and they could offer succor to Jews in hiding. Allied and neutral governments could provide a haven for Jews who escaped the area of Nazi control and offer diplomatic protection to those left behind. Countries fighting Germany could also warn Germans that after the war they would be held to account for the murder of Jews. In addition, they could conduct reprisals, bomb rail lines leading to the killing centers, and offer ransom or return of interned German civilians or war prisoners in exchange for Jews marked for death. On the other hand, all of the various bystanders could choose not to do some or all of these things even when opportunities presented themselves. Some could even take actions that directly aided the Germans in carrying out their murderous plans.

Examples can be found of all of these responses. That the responses could be significant is demonstrated by the fact that in the seven countries where half or more of the prewar Jewish population survived the period of Nazi domination, German forces faced effective opposition by one or more local groups to at least some aspects of their anti-Jewish program. That opposition was rendered easier by the fact that in none of these countries were the Germans in complete control of every facet of life, as they were in the countries where Jewish death rates were highest. However, in two countries that enjoyed a similar relative freedom of action—Croatia and Slovakia—the native governments undertook on their own to kill Jews themselves or to hand them over to the Germans. Even some of the countries with relatively low death rates, including Bulgaria and Romania, applied different policies to different groups of Jews under their control. Policies in some of Germany's independent allies also varied over time, most notably in Romania and Hungary.

In countries where German control was greatest, responses were necessarily societal rather than governmental or administrative. Wide variation is evi-

dent within those societies, and the variations generally do not chime with standard social divisions. The majority response seems to have been apathy, with minorities actively involved either in rescue efforts or in assisting the Germans. Conflicting pressures within underground organizations in these countries often led to situations where rescue activities were undertaken belatedly, haphazardly, or with substantial misgivings.

Accounting for the variations in bystander response is a complex task. Perhaps surprisingly, the variations do not appear to correlate with the prevalence of prejudicial attitudes toward Jews in the different European countries. At most it can be said that countries with a strong tradition of ethnocracy (i.e., the expectation that the state exists primarily to serve the needs and interests of a single majority ethnic group) were less inclined to view German attacks upon Jews as attacks upon their own communities than were countries where ethnocratic notions were less pronounced. In the latter countries, individuals and organizations were more likely to assist Jews out of a sense of obligation, whereas in the former, decisions about whether or not to help were more often based upon calculations of ethnic self-interest.

Survivors often owed their lives to the willingness of non-Jewish bystanders to help them. It is not possible to determine how many Jews who did not survive owed their deaths to the unwillingness of other bystanders to do the same. Nevertheless, it appears clear that the actions of non-Jewish populations in the area of Nazi rule had a significant effect upon the degree to which German murder plans succeeded or failed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. In what ways could bystanders have helped Jews?
2. Why were countries with a strong tradition of ethnocracy less inclined to see German attacks on Jews as attacks on their own communities?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Hilberg, Raul. *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Tec, Nechama. *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Lecture 13: While Six Million Died

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 7.

There were also bystanders beyond the Nazi orbit, including the Allied and neutral governments and the Jews of the free world. Their ability to serve as effective instruments of rescue was necessarily complicated by their physical distance from the scene of the murder and their almost total inability to make direct physical contact with the threatened Jews of the Nazi realm. In the first instance, that distance compounded the difficulties both of obtaining accurate information about Nazi actions and of processing information, once obtained, into consciousness that all Jews within the Germans' reach had been sentenced to death.

Although mass shootings began in the USSR during the second half of 1941, reports about them did not reach the West until early 1942. The killing center at Chelmno went into operation in December 1941, but its existence became known in the free world only in the spring of 1942; the operation of other killing centers became known only during the second half of that year. The report that mentioned the Chelmno gas vans noted that 700,000 Polish Jews had already died at Nazi hands, claiming that "from the day the Russo-German war broke out, the Germans embarked upon the physical extirpation of the Jewish population on Polish soil." That claim and the details adduced in its support were widely disbelieved. It was not until November 1942, with the arrival of a courier from the Polish underground who offered eyewitness testimony about the murder of 265,000 Jews from the ghetto in Warsaw, that Western governments concluded that a systematic Nazi plan to murder all Jews was being put into effect. Jewish leaders in Britain, Palestine, and the United States reached the same conclusion around the same time.

The Polish courier whose report changed the consciousness of the Allied governments carried a request to those governments from Polish Jewish leaders in underground to incorporate the rescue of Jews into their war aims and strategies. Suggestions were made to the Allies to offer German POWs, civilian internees, or monetary ransom in exchange for European Jews, to drop leaflets on German cities informing the population of their government's murderous actions, to provide blank passports that might help Jews escape, to open their gates temporarily to refugees, to warn German leaders that they would be put on trial for their crimes after the war, and to bomb the killing center at Birkenau and the rail lines leading to it. On the whole these proposals were shunted aside. The most significant actions taken by an Allied government were those initiated by the United States War Refugee Board, established in January 1944. The Board played a key role in assisting Jews in

Romania and Hungary. In particular, it supported the mission of a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, who helped keep about twenty thousand Hungarian Jews from deportation with the aid of special protective passports. However, these actions were mounted only in the final stages of the Nazi murder campaign, after most European Jews were no longer alive.

There were various reasons for the behavior of the Allied governments. Most important among them is the fact that the Holocaust occurred in the midst of a brutal war, to which the countries fighting the Third Reich believed they needed to devote the full measure of their resources. Jewish spokesmen were unable to demonstrate how undertaking the rescue actions they demanded would advance the Allied war effort. The threatened Jews were for the most part not citizens of the major powers; hence the powers had no legal obligation toward them. The only argument Jewish spokesmen could offer was a moral one, and under the circumstances, responding to a purely moral imperative seemed to Allied leaders to be a luxury they could ill afford.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What actions were taken by the United States War Refugee Board?
2. What reasons were there for the actions of the Allied governments?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Engel, David. *Facing a Holocaust: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1943–1945*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

———. *In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1939–1942*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

Gilbert, Martin. *Auschwitz and the Allies: A Devastating Account of How the Allies Responded to the News of Hitler's Mass Murder*. Reissue. New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1990.

Wyman, David S. *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945*. New York: New Press, 1998.

Lecture 14: The Holocaust and the Modern Condition

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is David Engel's *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, chapter 8.

The murder of European Jewry ended only when the defeat of the Third Reich was imminent. Ever since Allied military forces first uncovered the physical traces that the killing program and other manifestations of Nazi brutality left behind, human beings throughout the world have been struggling to make sense of the images of emaciated bodies and corpses stacked like cordwood that those forces recorded.

One of the most vexatious questions in this regard has been whether the Holocaust constituted an essentially atavistic rebellion against the values of modern Western civilization, or whether it ought to be viewed more as the supreme indictment of that civilization. Those who have taken the latter position have been impressed by the ways in which the Third Reich harnessed modern science and technology to the task of what some have called "industrial killing." Even more, they have noted the vital role that modern techniques of management and organization played in the killing process. Finally, they have argued that the impersonal, alienated character of modern society broke apart social restraints that had earlier provided effective barriers against indiscriminate mass killing. Those who take the former position often note that one of the Third Reich's most effective methods of mobilizing public antipathy toward Jews was to portray them as the chief purveyors of many specifically modern values. Indeed, the Third Reich represented itself as an antidote to the ills of modern society. They also note that methods of "industrial killing" brought about the deaths of fewer than 60 percent of the Nazis' Jewish victims. Of the remaining 40 percent, the large majority was murdered by shooting in a manner that required little modern technology or organization.

The difference between the two positions can be overcome in part by conceiving of the set of events that since the 1960s has been designated as "The Holocaust" not as an indivisible whole but as a composite. It may well make sense to think about the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews as leading to a number of small-scale local "holocausts," some of which were completed, some not. Each local "holocaust" might have its own particular history, bearing important similarities to other encounters, but displaying notable differences as well. Modernity might be implicated in some of these holocausts more or less than in others.

In many ways it is comforting to view the Holocaust (or holocausts) as a product of the modern condition. After all, modernity is a human creation, and therefore human beings ought to be capable of correcting those characteristics of modernity that enabled the encounter between the Third Reich and the

Jews to yield its horrible results. The alternative view suggests instead that all human beings, and not only those socialized to modernity, are capable under certain conditions of producing such results *simply by virtue of their being human*. Human nature is not nearly so easily reconstructed and reformed as a particular form of human society might be.

But if the Holocaust is a product of humanity itself and not of modernity alone, then the question remains: What exactly *are* the conditions under which the destructive potential of humankind revealed by the Holocaust are more likely to be loosed or controlled? That is a question that all who care about the quality of human life on earth must continue to confront. The first step in a confrontation is to understand the conditions under which known holocausts have occurred. The purpose of these lectures has been to make a contribution to that end.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How could modern society have led to indiscriminate mass killing?
2. Was the Holocaust a product of humanity itself or of modernity?

Suggested Reading

Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Rubenstein, Richard L., and John K. Roth, eds. *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy*. Rev. ed. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2003.

Aktion (pl. Aktionen): An operation leading to the killing of Jews, most commonly involving a mass roundup and removal to a killing site.

Auschwitz: German camp complex near the town of Oświęcim, in occupied Poland, thirty-one miles west of Kraków. The main camp (Auschwitz I) was opened in June 1940 to house Polish political prisoners. A larger satellite camp, Birkenau (Auschwitz II), was built in late 1941, and a labor camp in the nearby village of Monowice (Monowitz or Auschwitz III) was operated by the IG-Farben chemical concern from May 1942. The Auschwitz complex became the largest and most notorious of all Nazi camps. Because almost 1.5 million Jews were put to death in the killing center at Birkenau, Auschwitz has become a primary symbol of the Holocaust.

Birkenau: Satellite camp of Auschwitz, known also as Auschwitz II, about two miles from the main Auschwitz camp. It also functioned as the largest of the Nazi killing centers: almost 1.5 million Jews, 16,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and 20,000 Gypsies were killed there between January 1942 and November 1944. It was the primary killing center to which non-Polish, non-Soviet Jews were deported.

Bund: Jewish socialist party founded in 1897. In interwar Poland it was one of the largest Jewish political movements, and it played an important role in underground activities in the Polish ghettos. Its report of May 1942 included the first statement that the Germans had a program to kill all Polish Jews.

Central Office for Jewish Emigration: Nazi-sponsored bureau established in Vienna in August 1938 to increase the pace of Jewish emigration from Austria.

Chełmno: The first Nazi killing center. Located about thirty-one miles west of Łódź, it employed sealed trucks for killing Jews by asphyxiation from exhaust fumes. Between December 1941 and March 1943, 320,000 people were murdered there, mainly Jews from western Poland.

Concentration camps: Camps employed for incarcerating political prisoners and others deemed undesirable by the Third Reich because of their beliefs, behavior, or presumed racial inferiority. They were not killing centers of the type used for mass murder of Jews.

Death marches: Forced marches of prisoners over long distances, accompanied by brutal treatment. The term is most commonly applied to the march from Budapest to Vienna in November 1944 and to the westward march of prisoners from labor and concentration camps east of Berlin during the first four months of 1945, in flight from the advancing Soviet army.

Einsatzgruppe (pl. Einsatzgruppen): Special task forces under SS supervision, deployed first in Poland and later in the Soviet Union for eliminating potential resistance to German rule. During the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, they bore a major part of the responsibility for carrying out mass shootings of Jews.

Genocide: Term coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 to refer to the destruction of a nation or ethnic group.

Ghetto: An urban area where Jews were compelled by law to reside. The Nazis used ghettos in occupied Poland and extended it to the Soviet territories conquered in 1941.

Intentionalist/functionalist debate: Historiographical controversy concerning (among other things) the origins of the Holocaust. Intentionalists argue that systematic mass killing of Jews was Hitler's plan before he came to power; functionalists argue that the idea of mass killing evolved only after the invasion of the USSR in 1941.

Jewish Fighting Organization: Armed resistance group established in Warsaw in July 1942 and the principal force behind the Warsaw ghetto revolt. Branches were established in other ghettos as well.

Jewish reservation: Idea floated within the Nazi regime in 1939–40, involving mass concentration of Jews in a single location.

Judenrat (pl. Judenräte): Official Jewish administrations established at German behest in most east European ghettos and in several other occupied countries.

Killing centers: Term referring to six German-established locations (Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Birkenau) to which Jews were transported from across Europe to be killed.

Labor camps: Camps where a minority of young, healthy Jews were exploited, along with non-Jews, as forced laborers instead of being killed immediately.

Madagascar Plan: Nazi plan to create a Jewish reservation on the east African island of Madagascar. Developed by the SS and the German foreign ministry, it received much attention within the Nazi regime in 1940, but it was abandoned late in the year when the decision was taken to invade the Soviet Union.

Majdanek: Killing center combined with a concentration camp on the outskirts of Lublin. About 500,000 Jews, Poles, and Soviet prisoners were brought to the camp between October 1941 and July 1944; 150,000 Jews from many European countries were killed there in gas chambers.

Mein Kampf: Hitler's autobiography and main ideological tract, published in 1925. Among other things, it is a principal source for the reconstruction of Hitler's ideas and plans concerning Jews.

Nazi Party: Common name of the National Socialist German Workers Party, founded in 1919 (known as the German Workers Party until 1920). Led by Hitler, it became the largest German political party in the July 1932 parliamentary elections. In January 1933, it took control of the government with Hitler as Chancellor (premier); two months later it altered the German constitution and inaugurated the Third Reich.

Operation Reinhard: Code name for the construction of Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka killing centers and their use in the murder of over two million Jews.

"Resettlement in the east": German euphemism for deportation of Jews to killing centers.

Salvation through work: Survival strategy employed by several Judenrat heads. It involved intensive Jewish-initiated exploitation of the industrial and labor resources of ghettos for German war production in the hope that the Germans would regard Jews as too valuable to the German war effort to be killed.

SS: Nazi police force and Hitler's personal bodyguard corps, transformed under Himmler's leadership into the principal police agency in the Third Reich. It supervised most of the German concentration camps and took a primary responsibility for controlling (and eventually killing) the Jewish population in German-occupied territories.

Volk (pl. Völker): German word literally meaning "people." Hitler used it as a substitute for the term "race," indicating a fundamental genetic division of humanity.

Wannsee Conference: Meeting held in Berlin in January 1942 to establish a timetable and coordinate the logistics of the transportation of European Jews to the killing centers.

Source: Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. Seminar Studies in History. Eds. Clive Emsley and Gordon Martel. Harlow, Essex, UK: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2000.

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