

HITLER'S ROLE IN THE "FINAL SOLUTION"¹

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HITLER'S MENTALITY: THE "REMOVAL" OF THE JEWS AS GERMANY'S SALVATION

Hitler's very first and last recorded political statements concerned the "Jewish Question." In a letter written as early as September 1919, using biological terminology he would frequently deploy, he spoke of the activities of Jews producing "a racial tuberculosis among nations." He stated emphatically that Jews were a race, not a religion. Antisemitism as a political movement, he declared, should be based on "reason," not emotion, and must lead to the systematic removal of the rights of Jews. However, he concluded, the "final aim," which could only be attained in a "government of national strength," had to be the "removal of the Jews altogether."²

In his "Political Testament," dictated on the eve of his suicide, with the Red Army at his gates, Hitler declared: "I left no doubt that if the nations of Europe are again to be regarded as mere blocks of shares of these international money and finance conspirators, then

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2 Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn, eds., *Hitler. Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), pp. 88–90; trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919–1945. A Documentary Reader*, vol. 1 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1983), pp. 12–14.

that race, too, which is really guilty of this murderous struggle, will be called to account: Jewry! I further left no one in doubt that this time millions of children of Europe's Aryan peoples would not die of hunger, millions of grown men would not suffer death, and hundreds of thousands of women and children not be burnt and bombed to death in the towns, without the real culprit having to atone for his guilt, even if by more humane means."³

Almost twenty-six momentous years separate the two statements. These were no propaganda ploys. There can be no doubt that they represent fervently held core beliefs. At their heart was the link in Hitler's mind between war and the Jews — there from beginning to end of his political "career". In a terrible passage in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler expressed his belief that "the sacrifice of millions at the front" would not have been necessary if twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas."⁴ It was not a prescription for future action. But the thought never left him.

Hitler's writings and speeches illustrate the striking continuity of a small number of basic, unchanging ideas that provided his inner driving-force. Whatever the vagaries of opportunistic policy and the necessary adjustments of propaganda over the years, these ideas remained a constant from his entry into politics down to his death in the bunker. It is seldom that a politician holds with such tenacity to a core body of ideas over such a lengthy period of time. And, however repulsive, and whatever their irrational basis, they did constitute a circular, self-reinforcing argument, impenetrable by rational critique, something which we can genuinely call a

3 Werner Maser, ed., *Hitlers Briefe und Notizen. Sein Weltbild in handschriftlichen Dokumenten* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1973) pp. 360–361; translated in *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, edited in the Office of the United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1946–1948), vol. 6, p. 260.

4 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 876–880th reprint, 1943), p. 772; translated as *Hitler's Mein Kampf*, with an Introduction by D.C. Watt (London: Radius Books, 1972), p. 620.

Weltanschauung, or ideology.⁵ This ideology was formed in full no later than 1925. There were really no more than three core elements, each of them a long-term goal rather than a pragmatic middle-range political aim, resting on an underlying premise of human existence as racial struggle: 1) securing Germany's hegemony in Europe; 2) attainment of "living space" (*Lebensraum*) to ensure the material basis for Germany's long-term future; and 3) removal of the Jews. It amounted to a vision of Germany's salvation — a glorious future in waiting. It could be achieved, Hitler repeatedly stated, only by heroic leadership that, by 1924, he had come to see as represented by himself. And all three strands of the vision could be attained at one fell swoop with the destruction of the Soviet Union — and with it the eradication of "Jewish Bolshevism". The war in the east that would eventually begin in June 1941 was, therefore, intrinsic to this vision.

The *Weltanschauung*, was, however, itself a rationalization of a deeper, more profound, feeling within Hitler: a burning thirst for revenge against those who had destroyed all that he held good. The war of 1914–18, when he had experienced the immense carnage as a committed and courageous soldier, fanatical about the German cause, had given him a purpose for the first time in his life. In one of the few letters he wrote from the front, in 1915, he spoke of the huge sacrifice in human life being worthwhile to produce a postwar homeland "purer and cleansed of alien influence."⁶ This was how he saw the colossal slaughter — not in terms of human suffering, but as worthwhile for the making of a better Germany. This was why the news, unexpected for him as for so many others, of Germany's capitulation in November 1918, which reached him while he was hospitalized at Pasewalk in Pomerania recovering from mustard gas poisoning, was so utterly traumatizing. He had identified his personal fate wholly with that of the German Reich.

5 See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitlers Weltanschauung. Entwurf einer Herrschaft*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1991).

6 Jäckel and Kuhn, *Hitler. Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen*, p. 69.

An acute sense of national humiliation now merged with his own misery. His searing bitterness and visceral hatred, of a rare intensity, reflected this identification, and was now directed at perceived enemies he had begun to identify years before, scapegoats first for his own ills, now responsible for those of the nation. He could not accept the failure of the army in which he himself had fought. Dark forces of sedition at home had to be responsible. Revenge, even though he was in no position to bring it about, gripped him with the force of an obsession. Those who had undermined Germany's national prestige, had reduced her to this shame, would have to pay for it. This was the personal fire within him that was never extinguished.

It was wholly consistent, then, that from the beginning of his "career" in 1919, Hitler fanatically pursued two interlinked goals: to restore Germany's greatness; and in so doing to avenge and make good the disgrace of the capitulation in 1918, punishing those responsible for the revolution that followed and the national humiliation that was fully revealed in the Treaty of Versailles of 1919. The goals could only be attained, as he repeatedly said, "by the sword"; that is, by war. Since in his eyes the Jews were responsible for these most terrible crimes of all time — for the "stab in the back" of 1918, the capitulation, the revolution, for Germany's misfortune; since in his perverted perception they were the main carriers of capitalism in Wall St. and the City of London as they were of Bolshevism in Moscow; and since in his belief in the legend of the "Jewish World Conspiracy" they would always block his path and pose the most dangerous enemy to his plans, it followed logically that war for him had to be a war against the Jews. Moreover, it was equally logical, in Hitler's mind, that, when that war was recognized as irredeemably lost, continuation of the struggle to the point of self-destruction, with the exhortation to future generations to continue the fight against international Jewry, would be needed as the final demonstration of Germany's defiance, the last act of sacrifice necessary to expiate the shame and infamy inflicted by the Jews in 1918.

The tenacity with which he held to his dogmatic belief that the Jews had caused the First World War but that, in the event of them plunging the world once more into war, they would perish, is truly striking. He repeated the sentiment over and again, publicly and privately. He saw himself as the agent of Germany's national salvation. And that salvation would only be achieved through destroying the power of the Jews.

The consistency of Hitler's aim "to remove" Jews, and the fact that, during the years of his dictatorship, the Jews were indeed "removed," first from Germany, then from the whole of German-occupied Europe, through ruthless persecution and ultimately physical annihilation, seems to offer a straightforward answer to the question of Hitler's role in the "Final Solution". However, this role is less obvious than it might at first sight appear. While his continued personal hatred of Jews can be plainly demonstrated, how that translated into policies of persecution, then extermination, is not always easy to discern. Hitler himself remarked in one of his wartime monologues that "even regarding the Jews, I had for long to remain inactive" — for tactical reasons, of course.⁷ Yet even without Hitler's close involvement in the direction of policy, continual radicalization of anti-Jewish policy took place. And as one seminal study pointed out long ago, "the figure of Adolf Hitler is a shadowy one."⁸ This in itself has given rise to differing interpretations among historians. How far Hitler had to intervene directly in order to steer policy, and whether the "Final Solution" followed a long-term, ideologically driven plan of annihilation or arose as the end of a process of "cumulative radicalization" out of unplanned, *ad hoc* improvisation and local barbaric initiatives in attempts to cope with the self-inflicted logistical problems arising from Nazi anti-Jewish policy, have been longstanding issues of legitimate disagreement. The nature and timing of any Führer order,

7 Werner Jochmann, ed., *Adolf Hitler. Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1980), p. 108.

8 Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz. Nazi Policy toward German Jews 1933–1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 258.

or even whether it was necessary for one to be given, have been a central component of the debate.

INTERPRETING THE DECISION FOR THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

With few exceptions, notably the early study by Gerald Reitlinger⁹ and the monumental work of Raul Hilberg,¹⁰ detailed research on the decisions and policies of genocide began as late as the 1970s, expanding greatly over subsequent decades, especially once the archival repositories in the former eastern bloc were opened. Only in the light of such research has it become possible to evaluate more precisely the role Hitler played in the emergence of the “Final Solution”. Yet even now, after exhaustive analysis, much remains obscure or contentious. The problems of interpretation arise from the complexities and deficiencies of the surviving fragmentary evidence, reflecting in good measure the obfuscatory language of the Nazi leadership as well as the extreme unbureaucratic leadership style of Hitler, who, especially once the war had begun, placed a high premium upon secrecy and concealment, with orders on sensitive issues usually passed on verbally, and on a “need-to-know” basis.¹¹

Until the 1970s it was generally taken for granted that a single, direct Hitler order launched the “Final Solution”. The presumption emanated from a Hitler-centric approach to the Third Reich, which placed heavy emphasis upon the will, intentions, and policy-directives of the dictator. This sometimes went hand in hand with the claim, as voiced in Lucy Dawidowicz’s influential book, that Hitler had followed a “grand design” or “program of annihilation” dating back to his traumatic experience of the end of the First World War, and that, though there had on occasion been necessary

9 Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd., 1953).

10 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961).

11 See Leni Yahil, “Some Remarks about Hitler’s Impact on the Nazis’ Jewish Policy,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 23 (1993), pp. 282–286.

tactical adjustments, the implementation of the plan merely awaited the right opportunity, which then came in 1941.¹² Gerald Fleming, one of the first historians to investigate systematically the evidence for Hitler's involvement in the implementation of the "Final Solution," concurred in seeing "a strategic plan" for the realization of Hitler's aim, dating back to his experience of the German revolution of 1918.¹³ Early biographers of Hitler followed a similar line.¹⁴ A "psycho-historical" explanation for this pathological aim was offered by Rudolph Binion, who saw Hitler entering politics in order to kill the Jews as revenge for Germany's defeat, in subliminal association with the death of his mother in 1907 under treatment from a Jewish doctor.¹⁵

A reaction to this pronounced Hitler-centrism gained ground in the 1970s. It formed a general alternative approach to interpreting the Third Reich — what came to be known as the "structuralist," or sometimes "functionalist," in distinction from the "intentionalist," approach. Rather than looking to Hitler's personal direction of policy, the fragmentation of policy-making in a "polycratic" system of government with confused and chaotic lines of administration, led by a "weak dictator"¹⁶ concerned primarily with propaganda and upholding his prestige, came to be emphasized. As regards anti-Jewish policy, too, "structuralist" approaches looked away

12 Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews 1933–45* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 193–208.

13 Gerald Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung. "Es ist des Führers Wunsch"* (Wiesbaden/Munich: Limes Verlag, 1982), pp. 13–27; English edition: *Hitler and the Final Solution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 paperback edition), pp.1–16.

14 Alan Bullock, *Hitler. A Study in Tyranny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 702–703; Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler. Eine Biographie* (Ullstein: Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Vienna, 1976), vol. 2, p. 930; John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 88–89.

15 Rudolph Binion, *Hitler among the Germans* (New York/Oxford/Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976), pp. 1–35.

16 For this term, see Hans Mommsen, *Beamtenum im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966), p. 98 note 26.

from the role of the individual — not that Hitler’s paranoid antisemitism, indispensability to the barbaric persecution that led to genocide, or moral responsibility were doubted — to the “structures” of rule in the Third Reich, and the “functions” of competing agencies as they strived to implement hateful, but vaguely couched “guidelines” for action. In a seminal article published in 1977, stirring a debate that has rumbled on ever since, Martin Broszat argued that Hitler had given no “comprehensive general extermination order” at all. Rather, problems in undertaking deportation plans, arising from the unexpected failure swiftly to defeat the Soviet Union during the summer and autumn of 1941, had prompted Nazi satraps in the occupied territories of the east to start taking the initiative in killing the Jews in their regions. The killing gained retrospective sanction from above, but only gradually, by 1942, turned into a comprehensive extermination program. There had been, therefore, no long-term design for the physical annihilation of Europe’s Jews. And there had been no specific Hitler order.¹⁷

In an influential essay published in 1983, Hans Mommsen presented a forceful argument pushing in much the same direction. Mommsen accepted without question Hitler’s knowledge and approval of what was taking place. But he saw a direct Hitler order as incompatible with the dictator’s endeavors to distance himself from direct personal responsibility and reluctance to speak of the “Final Solution,” even among his close entourage, except in oblique terms or propaganda statements. For Mommsen, the key to the emergence of the “Final Solution” was not to be found in the implementation of Hitler’s will to exterminate the Jews but in improvised bureaucratic initiatives whose dynamic prompted a

17 Martin Broszat, “Hitler und die Genesis der ‘Endlösung’”. Aus Anlaß der Thesen von David Irving,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 25, (1977), pp. 737–775. An English version was published as “Hitler and the Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’: An Assessment of David Irving’s Theses,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 13 (1979), pp. 73–125.

process of “cumulative radicalization” in the fragmented structures of decision-making in the Third Reich.¹⁸

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the time that these programmatic essays by Broszat and Mommsen appeared, detailed research into the decisions that launched the “Final Solution” was still little developed. Important works, beyond Hilberg, had in the meantime, of course, appeared, damaging beyond repair the notion of a “grand design” for extermination, a plan reaching back to 1918. Yehuda Bauer, one of the foremost Israeli experts on the Holocaust, summed up the general revision by pointing to a number of stages of development in anti-Jewish policy, all of them rooted in the unchanging notion of removing the Jews from Germany, though not following any long-term extermination program.¹⁹ This verdict followed two penetrating analyses of anti-Jewish policy by Karl Schleunes and Uwe Dietrich Adam which pursued the vagaries and cul-de-sacs of Nazi persecution, ruling out the notion of a simple strategy of implementing a longstanding extermination plan determined by Hitler. Far from being a straight path, the road to Auschwitz, according to Schleunes, was a “twisted” one.²⁰

Directly prompted by Broszat’s hypotheses, one of the first researchers to explore the intractable and highly complex source material for the crucial months in 1941 which saw the emergence of the “Final Solution” (meaning not just the mass killing of Jews in the Soviet Union in the wake of “Operation Barbarossa,” but a program to exterminate all the Jews of Europe in Nazi occupied areas) was Christopher Browning — in the early stages of a career which saw him advance to become one of the world’s leading experts on the Holocaust. Rejecting Broszat’s emphasis upon local

18 Hans Mommsen, “Die Realisierung des Utopischen: Die ‘Endlösung der Judenfrage’ im ‘Dritten Reich,’” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 9 (1983), pp. 381–420.

19 Yehuda Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p. 11.

20 Schleunes, *Twisted Road*; Uwe Dietrich Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1972).

initiatives only gradually congealing into a program, Browning insisted upon central direction and returned to an emphasis upon a decision by Hitler, which, like Hilberg and others, he placed in summer 1941. He saw this decision crucially reflected in the mandate given by Göring to Heydrich on July 31, 1941, ordering him to prepare a “total solution of the Jewish question.”²¹ The novelty of Browning’s interpretation, however, was that he envisaged Hitler commissioning Göring to work out a plan for the “Final Solution” to be confirmed at a later date — in effect the first part of a two-staged order. The next months witnessed radicalization at various levels, during which the killing of Jews escalated greatly. There was confusion, contradiction at times, and much improvisation. But none of this was incompatible, in Browning’s view, with a mandate to work for the extermination of the Jews dating back to the previous July. Browning concluded that in late October or November 1941, with the attack on the Soviet Union stalled, Hitler approved “the extermination plan he had solicited the previous summer.”²² In numerous impressive detailed studies that he has published on the topic since this early essay, Browning has never substantially revised this interpretation.²³

The timing, as well as the nature, of any Führer decision for the “Final Solution” had by now become a central issue of interpretation. It was extensively debated at an important

21 Peter Longerich, ed., *Die Ermordung der europäischen Juden. Eine umfassende Dokumentation des Holocaust 1941–1945* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1989), p. 78.

22 Christopher R. Browning, “Zur Genesis der ‘Endlösung’. Eine Antwort an Martin Broszat,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 29 (1981), pp. 97–109; English edition: “A Reply to Martin Broszat regarding the Origins of the Final Solution”, *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, 1 (1984), pp.113–132.

23 See, notably, Christopher Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985); *The Path to Genocide. Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Jerusalem and Lincoln: Yad Vashem and University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

conference in Stuttgart in 1984.²⁴ Most — though not all — of the experts participating accepted that there must have been a Führer order. However, on the date of such an order (which all agreed was at some point in 1941) interpretation varied considerably. The dominant view was that the crucial decision — mainly seen as linked to the Göring mandate — for the extension to the whole of Europe of the physical annihilation of the Jews already raging in the Soviet Union took place in summer, while the end of the war seemed imminent. Some, however, placed a Hitler decision not in the “euphoric” phase of the summer, but in the autumn, when it was realized that the war in the Soviet Union would drag on, and when the possibility of deporting Jews into Soviet territory, as earlier envisaged, had evaporated. The question of the timing of any Hitler decision had acquired wider significance. The “euphoria” interpretation had him planning to destroy the Jews from a position of strength, when ultimate triumph seemed within his grasp. It pointed in the direction of a determining intention to kill the Jews when the opportunity arose. The alternative, a decision taken from effective weakness, when the prospect of victory had receded and the problems of a protracted and bitter war were mounting, was more suggestive of a reaction to circumstances that had spiraled out of control, a response to the inability to bring about the desired territorial solution of the “Jewish question” by deporting Jews to the arctic wastes of the Soviet Union, and a vengeful determination to succeed in the “war against the Jews” even should ultimate victory in the military war prove impossible to attain.

The case for placing a Hitler decision not in the euphoria of high summer expectations of imminent victory, but some two months later, when pessimism over a long war in the east was starting to grip the dictator, was most cogently advanced by Philippe Burrin, writing in the late 1980s. In contrast to Browning and others, Burrin argued — a point meanwhile more widely accepted — that it

24 Eberhard Jäckel and Jürgen Rohwer, eds., *Der Mord an den Juden im Zeiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1985).

would be mistaken to see in the Göring mandate of 31 July 1941 a reflection of a fundamental order by Hitler for the “Final Solution”, that is, to extend the genocide already taking place in the Soviet Union into a program for the physical extermination of the whole of European Jewry. Rather, according to Burrin, the Göring mandate still fell within the remit of attaining a territorial settlement in the east once the war was over. The mandate, which had been drafted in Heydrich’s own office for Göring’s signature, was aimed at establishing the authority — in an issue where there were many competing instances — of the head of the *Reichssicherheits-hauptamt* in all matters pertaining to the solution of the “Jewish Question”. The lack of clarity that evidently still prevailed among Nazi authorities in the late summer and early autumn of 1941 meant, for Burrin, that no decision for the “Final Solution” had yet been made. He argued that such an order in September 1941 was synonymous with the decision to deport the Jews to the east — one unquestionably made by Hitler, and at a time when he was gloomy about the slowing advance in the Soviet Union and the growing prospect of a long conflict.²⁵

Soon after Burrin’s study appeared, the archives of the former eastern bloc started to divulge their secrets. Predictably, a written order by Hitler for the “Final Solution” was not found. The presumption that a single, explicit written order had ever been given had long been dismissed by most historians. Nothing now changed that supposition. In fact, little was discovered in Moscow or other east-European archives that cast new light directly on Hitler’s role in the “Final Solution.” Indirectly, nevertheless, new perspectives on the emergence of a genocidal program did provide fresh insights into Hitler’s own role.

One outstanding work which profited from the new research opportunities was Götz Aly’s study, published in 1995, of the

25 Philippe Burrin, *Hitler et les Juifs. Genèse d’un génocide* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 129–139, pp. 164–174. English edition: *Hitler and the Jews: The Genesis of the Holocaust* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1994).

interconnection of Nazi plans to resettle hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans in the occupied territories of Poland and the twists and turns of policy to deport the Jews. In his detailed reconstruction of racial policy-making in the eastern territories between 1939 and early 1942, Aly was able to show how increasingly radical anti-Jewish measures resulted from blockages produced by the brutally unrealistic resettlement plans of the Nazi authorities. Aly concluded that there was no single, specific decision to kill the Jews of Europe. Rather, analogous to Mommsen's notion of a system of "cumulative radicalization," he posited a "long and complex *process* of decision-making," with notable spurts in March, July, and October 1941, but continuing still as a series of "experiments" down to May 1942. Hitler's role, according to this interpretation, was confined to decisions as an arbiter between competing Nazi leaders whose own schemes to deal with the "Jewish question" had created insoluble problems.²⁶

Aly's argument that there had been no precise point at which Hitler had given a single decision for the "Final Solution" has gained backing from a number of detailed regional studies into the emergence of genocide in the occupied territories. One outcome has been a clearer understanding of how, in the critical months of autumn 1941, regional Nazi authorities resorted to increasingly radical "self-help" and local initiatives to free their areas of Jews. While there were evidently signals from Berlin indicating an approaching comprehensive "solution" to the "Jewish problem" and prompting regional Nazi leaders to adopt drastic measures to resolve their own difficulties, the conflicting interpretations of the aims of anti-Jewish policy in this phase seem to imply that a fundamental decision had not yet been taken. Some local extermination programs, set in motion by local Nazi satraps in coordination with Berlin, did commence. In November 1941

26 Götz Aly, *Endlösung. Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), pp. 398–399 and back cover. Published in English as *The Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London: Arnold, 1999).

construction began of a small extermination camp at Bełżec, in the Lublin District of the *Generalgouvernement*, instigated by the SS Police Chief of the area, Odilo Globocnik, with the aim of liquidating Jews in that area incapable of working.²⁷ In the “Warthegau”, the annexed part of western Poland, the regional police chief, Wilhelm Koppe and the Gauleiter, Arthur Greiser, liaised with Berlin about locating gas-vans at Chełmno. These began operations in early December to kill Jews from the overcrowded Łódź ghetto and elsewhere in the region as part of a deal to compensate for the influx of yet more Jews sent eastwards as part of the first wave of deportations from the Reich.²⁸ But localized “solutions”, including the shooting of Jews on arrival from Germany in the Baltic in autumn 1941, did not yet form part of a fully-devised, comprehensive program. A “Final Solution” was still evolving, still in an “experimental” phase.

Research had, in certain ways, then, moved away from the differing hypotheses about the date of Hitler’s decision for the “Final Solution” by implying — or explicitly stating — that no such decision had been made. By a different route, and on the basis of more profound research findings, this was returning to the broad thrust of the programmatic “structuralist” hypotheses of Broszat and Mommsen from the late 1970s and early 1980s. But the conclusions were far from universally accepted. The emphasis upon local initiatives, improvised measures, unsteered “processes” unfolding until they metamorphosed into an “unauthored” program of extermination was not convincing to many historians. Some experts — prominent among them Christopher Browning — felt that, for all the undoubted advances that detailed regional studies of emerging genocide had brought, the central direction of

27 Dieter Pohl, *Von der “Judenpolitik” zum Judenmord. Der Distrikt Lublin des Generalgouvernements 1939–1944* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 105ff.

28 Ian Kershaw, “Improvised Genocide? The Emergence of the ‘Final Solution’ in the ‘Warthegau’,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series (1992), pp. 51–78.

policy had been underplayed. The role of Hitler, too, seemed scarcely to figure in the new explanations. Was it likely, or plausible, that the most radical of radical antisemites had played no direct part in shaping the policies aimed at destroying his perceived arch-enemy?

As David Bankier then, in a magisterial survey, Saul Friedländer, had demonstrated, even in the 1930s Hitler had been more active in anti-Jewish policy, down to points of detail, than the earlier work by Karl Schleunes, in particular, had implied.²⁹ It was not easy, therefore, to accept that he had remained detached from decision-making at precisely the time when his long-professed aim of "removing" the Jews was turning into practical reality. Browning continued in an array of important publications also to maintain the importance of a Führer order, and to date this (as he always had done) to summer 1941 — the time of "euphoria." He remained unmoved by the objections raised to this dating, though he emphasized that he was not positing a single decision, but envisaging "the point at which Hitler inaugurated the decision-making process," the first move in developments that would stretch over the subsequent months.³⁰

Other historians, equally anxious to emphasize Hitler's direct role in steering policy towards an intended and planned "Final Solution," reached different conclusions about the timing of a Führer order. Richard Breitman dated "a fundamental decision to exterminate the Jews" by the dictator to as early as January 1941, adding, however, that "if the goal and basic policies were now clear, the specific plans were not," and followed only after some

29 David Bankier, "Hitler and the Policy-Making Process in the Jewish Question," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 3 (1988), pp. 1-20; Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997).

30 Christopher R. Browning, "Hitler and the Euphoria of Victory: The Path to the Final Solution," in David Cesarani, ed., *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 137-147; and *The Origins of the Final Solution*, pp. 314-316, pp. 426-427.

time, with the first operational decisions in July.³¹ In other words, Breitman was not positing an incisive policy-decision, rather a statement of intent. But Hitler had long held the view that another war would bring about the destruction of the Jews. And at this point, in early 1941, in the context of planning “Operation Barbarossa,” deportation of the Jews to the arctic wastes of the Soviet Union was opening up as a realistic prospect. There, over time, the presumption was that they would perish. It is difficult to see a Hitler decision in January 1941 stretching beyond that ultimate, though still vague, notion of a territorial solution. Though this was itself implicitly genocidal, the vagaries of policy over the following months speak against seeing January 1941 as the date when Hitler took *the* decision for the “Final Solution.”

An entirely different suggestion for the date of a Hitler order came from Tobias Jersak. In Jersak’s view, the declaration of the Atlantic Charter by Roosevelt and Churchill on August 14, 1941 (meaning that Germany would soon be at war with the USA) was the trigger for Hitler, suffering at that point from a nervous collapse and reeling from the recognition of the failure of his strategy to defeat the Soviet Union, to take the fundamental decision that the Jews of Europe should be physically destroyed.³² However, Jersak probably exaggerates the impact of the Atlantic Charter on Hitler. It is doubtful that this in itself was sufficient to provide the vital spur for such a momentous decision — one in Jersak’s interpretation, taken swiftly and without any consultation. Jersak is left, in fact, with little but speculation to support his claim that Hitler had already taken the decision when he met Goebbels on August 19, to agree to proposals put to him by the Propaganda Minister to force Jews in Germany to wear the Star of David.

Another interpretation of a fundamental decision by Hitler to launch the “Final Solution” was proposed by Christian Gerlach. For

31 Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (London: The Bodley Head, 1991), pp. 153, 156.

32 Tobias Jersak, “Die Interaktion von Kriegsverlauf und Judenvernichtung,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 268 (1999), pp. 311–349.

him, the disparities in implementing anti-Jewish measures ruled out a specific central order by Hitler in summer or early autumn. Despite the evident escalation of genocidal actions, there was still a lack of clarity about the treatment of the deported Reich Jews, and the various regional liquidation measures were not yet coordinated. The need to provide precisely this clarification and coordination lay, he claimed, behind Heydrich's invitation to significant figures in those agencies concerned to a meeting at the Wannsee on December 9, 1941. Pearl Harbor then intervened and the meeting was postponed. According to Gerlach's interpretation, by the time the meeting eventually took place, on January 20, 1942, Hitler's "basic decision" to kill all the Jews of Europe had taken place. In the context of a war that had now become global, Gerlach sees a speech made by Hitler to Reichsleiter and Gauleiter on December 12, and an accompanying series of private meetings with Nazi leaders during the following days, as tantamount to Hitler's "basic decision" for the "Final Solution."³³ Gerlach certainly makes a good case for a further radicalization of extermination policy in December 1941.³⁴ But it is difficult to imagine Hitler, who refrained from speaking on the extermination of the Jews in other than vague generalizations even to his intimate entourage, choosing to announce a "basic decision" to instigate the "Final Solution" to a meeting of around fifty Nazi leaders. None of those present later referred to this meeting as of any particular significance with regard to the "Final Solution." And Goebbels, whose diary notes form the source for Hitler's reported comments, summarized the remarks on

33 Christian Gerlach, "Die Wannsee-Konferenz, das Schicksal der deutschen Juden und Hitlers politische Grundsatzentscheidung, alle Juden Europas zu ermorden," *Werkstattgeschichte*, 18 (1997), pp. 7-44, reprinted with amendments in Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord: Forschungen zur deutschen Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998), pp. 85-166.

34 See Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1998), p. 467.

the Jews in a few lines of an otherwise extensive diary entry without highlighting them as of special importance.³⁵

A recent, meticulous examination of the complex evidence of decision-making on anti-Jewish policy between 1939 and 1942 offers yet another variant. Florent Brayard places the date of Hitler's order to commence the "Final Solution" as a comprehensive program later than any other historian had done, to June 1942, immediately following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague.³⁶ At Heydrich's funeral, June 9, Himmler told SS leaders that they would have completed the "migration" (*Völkerwanderung*) of the Jews within a year.³⁷ This is the point, infers Brayard, linking Himmler's comments to reported draconian remarks about the Jews by Hitler around that time, that the "Final Solution" — meaning the program for the complete and rapid eradication of all Europe's Jews — was initiated. It perhaps seems more plausible, however, to see it as the last major escalatory push in establishing a Europe-wide killing program. Peter Longerich's magisterial study of the "politics of annihilation" had, in fact, already established — something by now widely accepted, also by Brayard — that a comprehensive program of extermination of European Jewry developed as an incremental process, with a number of acceleratory spurts, between summer 1941 and summer 1942.³⁸ Already by March and April 1942, as Longerich shows, plans were being elaborated to deport the Jews from western Europe to the east, and to extend the killing in Poland and central Europe. Probably Heydrich's assassination provided the impetus to draw the threads together.

35 See Ulrich Herbert, "'Führerentscheidung' zur 'Endlösung'?" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 14–15, 1998, pp. 69–70.

36 Florent Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive". La technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

37 Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson, eds., *Heinrich Himmler. Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Vienna: Propyläen Verlag, 1974), p. 159.

38 Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung*, pp. 579–584.

It seems certain, given the fragmentary and unsatisfactory evidence, that all attempts to establish a precise moment when Hitler decided to launch the "Final Solution" will meet with objections. And, of course, much depends upon what is envisaged as a Führer order. Was it a precise and clear directive, or merely a "green light" or "nod of the head?" Interpretation rests additionally upon whether decision-making on the "Final Solution" is regarded as a continuum, with adjustments and acceleratory phases over the period of a year or so, or whether a point is sought where one precise quantum leap can be distinguished as forming *the* decision.

And yet, structuralist or functionalist accounts in which Hitler's role is minimized, or marginalized also seem unsatisfactory. Aly's emphasis, for instance, on the link between blockages in the Nazi plans for population transfer and resettlement of ethnic Germans and the radicalization of anti-Jewish policy, though valid, do not explain why the failure of deportation plans led to genocide solely in the case of the Jews.³⁹ This leads directly back to the role of ideology, often underplayed in structuralist accounts. Building on long antisemitic tradition, the Jews occupied a quite singular place in Nazi demonology, and in plans for racial "cleansing." The Jews had been the number one ideological enemy of the Nazis from the beginning, and their murderous treatment in 1941 followed not only years of spiraling persecution but also repeated statements by Nazi leaders, most prominently Hitler himself, advocating their "removal." So we are back to Hitler, and to his role in the way the Nazi system of rule operated.

It seems impossible to isolate a single, specific Führer order for the "Final Solution" in an extermination policy that took full shape in a process of radicalization lasting over a period of about a year. At the same time, much indicates that the extermination program did not develop without a decisive role being played by Hitler

39 See Ulrich Herbert ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998), p. 27; English edition: *National Socialist Extermination Policies. Contemporary Perspectives and Controversies* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000).

himself. To reconcile these two statements, we should look *both* for a *series* of secret authorizations for particular radicalizing steps, which can only be deduced from indirect or secondary evidence, *and* for a *number* of public signals or “green lights” for action. We should also recognize that Hitler was the supreme and radical spokesman of an ideological imperative that, by 1941, had become a priority for the *entire* regime leadership. Within that framework, we now need to consider how Hitler shaped the path to genocide.

THE DIALECTIC OF RADICALISATION IN NAZI ANTI-JEWISH POLICY BEFORE THE WAR.

With Hitler’s takeover of power on 30 January 1933, a proto-genocidal elite, backed by huge mass movement — the Nazi Party and its multifarious sub-organizations — held together by the utopian vision of national salvation, to be achieved through racial cleansing at the core of which was the “removal” of the Jews, gained control over the instruments of a modern, sophisticated, state system. The vision, both in its “positive” aspects (creation of a unified “people’s community;” rebuilding of national pride, grandeur, and prosperity) and its “negative” elements (destruction, not just defeat, of political opponents; “elimination” of those whose physical or mental weakness or disability were seen to threaten the health and strength of the population; exclusion of Jews from public life, and their physical removal from Germany) was embodied in the figure of the Leader. Hitler’s *Weltanschauung* — a set of visionary aims rather than precise policy objectives — now served, therefore, to integrate the centrifugal forces of the Nazi Movement, to mobilize the activists, and to legitimate policy initiatives undertaken to implement his expressed or implied will. The very looseness of the ideological imperatives encouraged functionaries of the regime, in a myriad ways, to “work towards the Führer”⁴⁰ to contribute to the accomplishment of the visionary

40 See, for this concept, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936. Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 529–531.

goals which Hitler represented. Among these goals, the "removal" of the Jews was a tangible objective, and one in which the pathological fixation of Hitler himself accorded with the central conviction of the ruling Nazi elite and also fuelled the widespread and often bitter antisemitism at the Party's grass roots — a seething pot of hatred into which a poisonous concoction of socio-economic grievances, anger, and resentments was poured. And among the antisemitic elite now running the German state, no one took a more radical stance on the "removal" of the Jews than Hitler himself. Countless speeches during the 1920s had demanded that the Jews, whom he often associated with vermin or bacilli, should be "removed," sometimes likening the removal to that of a parasite, or a germ, excised in order to leave a healthy organ. Such imagery implied that "removal" meant destruction or "annihilation" (*Vernichtung*), a term Hitler used in his bacteriological similes. The language is not just extreme but points also to a proto-genocidal mentality. The man with this mentality was now in charge of the German state. And countless Germans were seeking at every turn to implement what they interpreted to be his wishes.

Hitler was a shrewd enough politician to know when to tone down his violent antisemitism. In the early 1930s as the Nazi Party exploited conditions of economic depression and political collapse to soar towards power, his speeches focused less on antisemitism. The huge electoral gatherings, as he knew, were scarcely to be won over to the NSDAP solely by verbal assaults on the Jews. So Hitler adjusted to circumstances. His inner convictions — most notably the central place of the "removal" of the Jews in his ideological vision — had, however, not altered one jot. Once in power, Hitler knew he had to be tactically alert, particularly to the international pressures on Germany's still weak economic and military position, to press ahead with measures against the Jews — measures which he personally wanted, and which the Nazi Movement was demanding. When necessary, he could, and did, keep the Party radicals in check. At other times, it was useful to unleash their pent-up violence on the Jews. This produced a characteristic process of

radicalization during the 1930s: in accordance with Hitler's expressed or presumed wishes, a "green light" to step up measures against Jews would be given to Party radicals; pressure for action would build from below, which Hitler, though remaining aloof, would approve; when, for domestic or external reasons, violent forms of persecution became counter-productive, Hitler would intervene to channel the attacks into highly discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation, at each stage placating the radicals by ratcheting up the radicalization of the measures adopted. There was, therefore, a continuing "dialectic" between "wild" actions from below and orchestrated discrimination from above. Each phase of radicalization was more intense than its predecessor. The momentum in this way was never allowed to die.

It is well to keep in mind Hitler's pre-war role in the "Jewish Question" when considering the part he played in the emergence of the "Final Solution." It is plain that between 1933 and 1939 the decisive steps in the increasingly radical persecution of the Jews were taken with his approval and authorization — even where, for tactical reasons, he remained publicly detached or concealed the nature of his own interventions. Letting it be known that he favored action (invariably signaled through vicious public statements), and verbal approval of the most radical measures in confidential, unminuted discussions formed the usual pattern. Hitler was certainly involved when vital decisions (with regard, for example, to the boycott in 1933, the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, and the pogrom of 1938) were needed. Crucial shifts in policy required his approval. It is hard to imagine that this was not the case during the months in 1941–1942 when extermination of the Jews began to take shape as a concrete policy option.

As German expansionism led to acute tension in foreign affairs and the threat of war grew ever closer, Hitler evidently began to dwell upon the consequences for the Jews. His obsession with what he saw as the guilt of the Jews for the immense but futile "blood-sacrifice" of Germany during the war of 1914–1918, and for the calamitous defeat and revolution that had ensued, had never left

him. He was already blaming “Jewish war-mongers” in Great Britain and the USA, as well as the pernicious “Jewish-Bolshevik” Soviet Union, for any new conflagration that might ensue. And the growth and spread of German might now meant that notions of “removing” the Jews no longer had to be confined to the Reich itself. “The Jews must get out of Germany, yes out of the whole of Europe,” he told Goebbels at the end of November 1937. “That will take some time yet, but will and must happen.”⁴¹

In the anti-Jewish climate in Germany around the time of the *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom of November 9–10, 1938 — a climate more menacing than ever before — “marks of a genocidal mentality” were in clear evidence in the Nazi leadership. Threats to the existence of the Jews were specifically linked to the outbreak of another war.⁴² Hitler himself still connected this with revenge for 1918. Speaking to the Czechoslovakian Foreign Minister František Chvalkovský on January 21, 1939, he stated: “The Jews here will be destroyed. The Jews did not bring about the November 9, 1918 for nothing. This day will be avenged.”⁴³ He was not, of course, announcing to a foreign diplomat a pre-conceived extermination plan or program. But the sentiments were not merely rhetoric or propaganda. There was substance behind them.

In his long Reichstag speech on January 30, 1939, in the main a defiant tirade against what he portrayed as Jewish-inspired western war-mongers, Hitler declared:

In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it. ...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 Bolshevising of the earth,

41 Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (Munich: Saur, 1993), Part I, Vol. 4, p. 429.

42 See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945. Nemesis* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 129–153.

43 *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), Series D, Vol. IV, p. 170, Doc.158.

and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!⁴⁴

This was not “the decision to proceed with [the] irreversible mission” — effectively a prior announcement of the “Final Solution.”⁴⁵ Nor was it simply “a rhetorical gesture designed to put pressure on the international community.”⁴⁶ The speech, though not inaugurating an extermination program which would only fully materialize over three years later, can nevertheless be seen to hold a key to Hitler’s role in the “Final Solution”. The frequency of his later repetition of the “prophecy” (which, significantly, he consistently misdated to September 1, 1939, the day that war began), and at decisive junctures in the unfolding of genocide, shows how it was etched on his mind. Between 1941 and 1945, in the years when the “Final Solution” engulfed the Jews of Europe, Hitler referred publicly and privately to his “prophecy” of 1939 on more than a dozen occasions. No Nazi leader was left unaware in these years of the “prophecy” the Führer had made about the Jews. Joseph Goebbels, Hans Frank, and Alfred Rosenberg were among his underlings who alluded to it at different times. The German public, too, heard Hitler openly speak of it in major public addresses broadcast to the nation on no fewer than four occasions in 1942 alone, at the very time that the grisly operations in the death-mills in Poland were going ahead at full tilt. For Hitler, the “prophecy” denoted the indelible link in his mind between war and revenge against the Jews. Its repetition also served a wider purpose. Without ever having to use explicit language, the “prophecy,” beyond its propaganda effect to condition the general population against humanitarian sympathy for the Jews, signaled key

44 Max Domarus, ed., *Hitler. Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945* (Wiesbaden: R. Löwit, 1973), vol. 3, p. 1058; translated in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919–1945. A Documentary Reader*, vol. 3 (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1988), p. 1049.

45 Dawidowicz, *War Against the Jews*, p. 206.

46 Hans Mommsen, “Hitler’s Reichstag Speech of 30 January 1939,” *History and Memory*, 9 (1997), pp. 150–151.

escalatory shifts, acted as a spur to radical action by conveying the "wish of the Führer," and indicated to "insiders" Hitler's knowledge and approval of the genocide.

HITLER'S "PROPHECY" AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION."

Hitler returned to his "prophecy" on January 30, 1941, as *his* war against the "Jewish-Bolshevik" archenemy was taking concrete shape in his mind. In the very weeks prior to the speech, he had agreed to Heydrich developing a new plan to deport the Jews from the German sphere of domination to replace the short-lived and now defunct notion of deporting them to Madagascar. Ideas of deporting the Jews of Europe to a conquered Soviet Union after an anticipated quick victory over Bolshevism were already being aired by the SS leadership.⁴⁷ The repeat of the "prophecy" at this juncture, then, was a veiled hint that the hour of the showdown with the Jews was approaching.

By the time Hitler's "prophecy" next leaves a mark in the records, in the summer, genocide was already raging in the Soviet Union. The slaughter, initially confined in the main to male Jews, which had begun with the German march into the USSR on June 22, 1941, had been widened massively from August onwards to include Jewish women and children. This crucial extension of the killing followed a series of one-to-one discussions in mid-July between Hitler and Himmler. No record of the talks was kept. But the outcome, we can reasonably infer, was that Hitler gave Himmler authorization to extend greatly the number of killing units in the east.⁴⁸ Hitler wanted to be kept informed on the progress of the killing. According to a message from the head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Müller, on August 1: "Continual reports from here on the work of the Einsatzgruppen in the east are to be presented to the Führer."⁴⁹

47 Aly, *Endlösung*, pp. 272-273.

48 Browning, "Hitler and the Euphoria of Victory," p. 140.

49 Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung*, p. 86.

By mid-summer 1941, Party fanatics and police leaders were vehemently pressing for Jews, portrayed as dangerous agitators on the home front, to be removed from German cities. A step on the way was to compel them to wear some form of identification on their clothing. Hitler alone, it was accepted, could take the decision. Goebbels undertook to present the case. He found the dictator, on visiting the *Führerhauptquartier* on August 18, recovering from illness. Despite the astonishing successes of the Wehrmacht in the first weeks of the attack on the Soviet Union, there were ominous signs already in August that victory would not be attained before winter set in. After the first major dispute with his army leaders, Hitler was in a state of nervous tension. Goebbels had come at a good moment to put his case for permission to compel Jews to wear the “Yellow Star.” Hitler granted the Propaganda Minister what he requested. In so doing, he once more had recourse to his Reichstag “prophecy,” voicing his conviction that this was coming true with uncanny certainty. “The Jews will not have much cause to laugh in future,” Hitler said.⁵⁰ A key moment of radicalization of anti-Jewish policy within Germany was plainly interpreted by Hitler as a step towards the fulfillment of his “prophecy.”

The decision — which again all Nazi leaders acknowledged could only come from Hitler — to deport Reich Jews to the east, taken in September 1941, constituted a major step in the direction of total genocide. Hitler had until this point insisted on awaiting final victory in the east. Now, aware that the war would drag on and conscious that the USA would probably soon be involved, he agreed to demands from a number of Nazi leaders — exploiting Stalin’s deportation of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans from the Volga region to the wastes of western Siberia and Kazakhstan to press for retaliatory measures — to deport German, Austrian, and Czech Jews to the east even though the war was not over. It was a vital shift in policy. And the decision, indicated by

50 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Part II, Vol. 1, pp. 265–266, 269.

Himmler on September 18, 1941, was taken by Hitler himself.⁵¹ At precisely this point the Nazi Party's Propaganda Department distributed posters to all Party branches containing the words of Hitler's "prophecy."⁵² Evidently, the "prophecy" had by now acquired symbolic status, serving as a weapon of propaganda in preparing the German population for the deportation of the Jews through hardening the climate of opinion.

The self-created logistical problems following from the deportation decision gave the genocidal impulses in Poland, the Baltic, and other conquered eastern territories a strong and irreversible push. In the autumn, the steps into all-out genocide began to follow quickly, one after the other, as the German advance faltered and plans for full-scale deportation to the Russian wastes had to be postponed, then abandoned.

A month or so after giving the order to deport Jews from the Reich, with Himmler and Heydrich as his dinner-table guests in his field headquarters, and in the context of comments betraying his knowledge of the SS's attempts to drown Jewish women in the Pripet marshes, Hitler reminded his entourage of his "prophecy" of destruction for the "criminal race" which had been responsible for the dead of the First World War and "now again hundreds of thousands" in the current war.⁵³

Genocide was by now in the air. As preparations were underway to deport the first batches of Jews from Berlin and other German cities, Goebbels, who continued to be one of the most vehement advocates of the deportation, sustained the poisonous atmosphere with a menacing article on November 16, 1941 in his newspaper *Das Reich*, headed "The Jews are Guilty." Here, too, in an article widely circulated among the troops on the eastern front as well as within Germany, Goebbels directly invoked Hitler's "prophecy" of the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe," commenting that

51 *Die Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, p. 157.

52 Reproduced in Kershaw, *Hitler. Nemesis*, plate 45.

53 *Adolf Hitler: Monologe*, p. 106.

“we are experiencing right now the fulfillment of this prophecy.” Probably, given the centrality of the issue, the article had been discussed with Hitler. An added remark by Goebbels, that any sympathy with the Jews was misplaced, certainly mirrored a sentiment forcibly voiced by Hitler on more than one occasion, as the “Final Solution” became reality.⁵⁴

On December 11, 1941, following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor four days earlier, Hitler announced Germany’s declaration of war on the United States. By then, as we have noted, the killing of Jews in the Warthegau in western Poland was beginning and the construction of a small extermination camp at Bełżec in eastern Poland was underway, while deported Reich Jews had already been shot on arrival in Kowno and Riga. But these were as yet local, rather than general, solutions. The changed situation after December 11, now provided new impetus towards a comprehensive solution.

The following day, Hitler addressed his Party leaders in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin in a speech which, as we have noted, Christian Gerlach took to be the announcement of his “basic decision” to exterminate the Jews. We have seen reason to doubt this interpretation. Even so, the speech was important. Goebbels summarized next day in his diary what Hitler had said. His brief report indicates how, in the fundamental issue of anti-Jewish policy, crucial phases of radicalization could be initiated. “With regard to the Jewish Question,” Goebbels noted, “the Führer is determined to make a clean sweep. He prophesied that if they brought about another world war, they would experience their annihilation. This was no empty talk. The world war is here. The annihilation of the Jews must be the necessary consequence. This question is to be viewed without sentimentality” — a repeat of the point expressed in his newspaper article a month earlier. “We’re not to have sympathy with the Jews, but only sympathy with our German people. If the German people has again now sacrificed around 160,000 dead in

54 *Das Reich*, November 16, 1941.

the eastern campaign, the instigators of this bloody conflict will have to pay for it with their own lives.”⁵⁵

In the atmosphere immediately following such a decisive moment as the entry of the USA into the war, Hitler's repetition of his “prophecy” was, to go from Goebbels' account of it, more menacing than ever. Four days later, on December 16, Hans Frank, Governor General of Poland, speaking to his own minions in Krakow, repeated Hitler's “prophecy” in almost the identical words that Hitler himself had used in Berlin. “What is to happen to the Jews?,” he then asked, rhetorically. “Do you believe they'll be accommodated in village settlements in the *Ostland*? They said to us in Berlin: why are you giving us all this trouble? ... Liquidate them yourselves!” He concluded: “We must destroy the Jews wherever we find them.” But he did not know how this would come about. Obviously a comprehensive extermination program still had to be developed. He reckoned there were 3.5 million Jews in his domain. “We can't shoot these 3.5 million Jews,” he declared, “we can't poison them, but we must be able to take steps leading somehow to a success in extermination.”⁵⁶

Over the following weeks, the steps were taken. Hans Frank and his underlings did not need any specific Hitler order. They understood perfectly well what the repetition of his “prophecy” had meant: the time for the final reckoning with the Jews had arrived. The “prophecy” had served as the transmission belt between Hitler's own inner conviction that the war would bring about the final destruction of European Jewry, and the actions of his underlings, determined to do all they could to “work towards the Führer,” in turning Hitler's presumed wishes into reality.

Little over a month later, at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942 to discuss the organization of what Heydrich called “the

55 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Part II, Vol.2, pp. 498–499.

56 Werner Präg and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, ed., *Das Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1975), pp. 457–458.

coming final solution of the Jewish question,” Hans Frank’s right-hand man, Josef Bühler, State Secretary in the *Generalgouvernement*, asked directly if a start could be made in his area. He wanted the Jews there, most of them as he emphasized incapable of work, “removed” and the “Jewish question” there “solved” as soon as possible. The authorities there would do all that they could to cooperate.⁵⁷ Bühler, and behind him Hans Frank, had their way. By spring 1942, what was now rapidly emerging as a comprehensive extermination program was extended from certain districts to the whole of the *Generalgouvernement* as train-loads of Jews were ferried to the newly erected camps of Bełżec, Sobibor, and, a little later, Treblinka, in what soon came to be called *Aktion Reinhard*.⁵⁸

Ten days after the Wannsee Conference, speaking on January 30, 1942 at the Sportpalast in Berlin, Hitler again invoked his “prophecy.” “I already stated on 1 September 1939 in the German Reichstag,” he declared (as always, deliberately misdating his “prophecy”), “that this war will not come to an end as the Jews imagine, with the extermination of the European-Aryan peoples, but that the result of this war will be the annihilation of Jewry. For the first time the old Jewish law will now be applied: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”⁵⁹ Monitoring reactions to the speech, the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) remarked that Hitler’s statement had been taken to mean “that very soon the last Jew would disappear from European soil.”⁶⁰

57 *Die Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, p. 91. The authoritative study of the Wannsee Conference is that of Mark Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Penguin, 2002).

58 See Yitzhak Arad, *Bełżec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Bogdan Musiał, *Deutsche Zivilverwaltung und Judenverfolgung im Generalgouvernement. Eine Fallstudie zum Distrikt Lublin 1939–1944* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), Part III, esp. pp. 229ff.

59 *Hitler. Reden und Proklamationen*, vol. 4, p. 1829.

60 Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1938–1945* (Herrsching: Pawlak Verlag, 1984), vol. 9, p. 3235.

At the end of March 1942, Goebbels wrote explicitly in his diary of the liquidation of Jews in the Lublin District of the General Government. "A judgment is being carried out on the Jews which is barbaric, but fully deserved," he noted. "The prophecy which the Führer gave them along the way for bringing about a new world war is beginning to come true in the most terrible fashion." He added: "Here, too, the Führer is the unswerving champion and spokesman of a radical solution."⁶¹

During spring and summer of 1942 the deportation to the death-camps in Poland — now including the biggest of all, Auschwitz-Birkenau — was extended to the whole of the *Generalgouvernement* and to Slovakia, and finally to the occupied countries of western Europe. Previous important decisions concerning the "solution of the Jewish Question," such as the introduction of the Yellow Star or the deportation of Reich Jews, had required Hitler's authorization. It is unimaginable that it was not again sought and given for the massive extension of the killing program.⁶² As Florent Brayard has argued, this feasibly occurred during discussions with Himmler under the impact of Heydrich's assassination.⁶³

The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, who bore the chief responsibility for the implementation of the extermination program, repeatedly claimed that he was acting on Hitler's authority.⁶⁴ In a secret memorandum of July 28, 1942 to *SS-Obergruppenführer* Gottlob Berger, head of the SS-Hauptamt, for instance, Himmler stated: "The occupied eastern territories are being made free of Jews. The Führer has placed the implementation of this very difficult order on my shoulders."⁶⁵ He certainly spoke privately with Hitler on several documented occasions directly about

61 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Part II, Vol. 3, p. 561.

62 See Peter Longerich, *The Unwritten Order: Hitler's Role in the Final Solution* (London: Tempus, 2001), p. 106.

63 Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* pp. 16–18, 465–473.

64 Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung*, pp. 62–68, 163–165.

65 "Reichsführer-SS to Gottlob Berger," July 28, 1942, Berlin Document Center, SS-HO, 933.

extermination policy.⁶⁶ According to postwar testimony provided by his former personal adjutant, Otto Günse, and his manservant, Heinz Linge, Hitler showed a direct interest in the development of gas-chambers and spoke to Himmler about the use of gas-vans.⁶⁷ Though their testimony is inaccurate in a number of ways and cannot be trusted with regard to detail, Adolf Eichmann, in effect the “manager” of the “Final Solution,” Dieter Wisliceny, one of his deputies, and Rudolf Höss, the Commandant of Auschwitz, all asserted after the war that the orders passed on to them to implement the “Final Solution” derived from Hitler himself.⁶⁸ Second- and third-tier SS leaders directly implicated in the “Final Solution” were in no doubt themselves that they were fulfilling “the wish of the Führer.”⁶⁹ There is no reason to doubt that they were correct, and that Hitler’s authority — most probably given as verbal consent to propositions usually put to him by Himmler — stood behind every decision of magnitude and significance.

66 Czesław Madajczyk, “Hitler’s Direct Influence on Decisions Affecting Jews during World War II”, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 20 (1990), pp. 61–65; Hermann Graml, “Zur Genesis der ‘Endlösung’,” in *Das Unrechtsregime II*, edited by Ursula Büttner (Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 1986), p. 14; Peter Witte et al., ed., *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 1999), p. 294.

67 Henrik Eberle and Matthias Uhl, *Das Buch Hitler* (Bergisch Gladbach: Gustav Lübbe Verlag, 2005), pp.196–197. The passages in question make no mention of Jews and convey the impression that the victims of the gassing were Soviet citizens. The text, whose provenance and intended recipient — Stalin — makes it problematical in a number of respects, goes on (see p. 197 and note 195) to claim that gas chambers were first established, on Hitler’s personal order, at Charkow, though, in fact, no gas chambers were erected on the occupied territory of the Soviet Union.

68 Browning, *Fateful Months*, pp. 23–26; David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: William Heinemann, 2004), pp. 91, 98–103; Martin Broszat, ed., *Kommandant in Auschwitz. Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höß* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978), pp. 157, 180–181; Karin Orth, “Rudolf Höß und die ‘Endlösung der Judenfrage’. Drei Argumente gegen deren Datierung auf den Sommer 1941, *Werkstattgeschichte*, 18 (1977), pp. 45–57; Richard Overy, *Interrogations. The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands, 1945* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 357, 359–360.

69 Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung*, pp. 119–126.

Hitler was kept informed of the scale of the “removal” of the Jews — sometimes in detail. On December 29, 1942, for example, Himmler gave him a report, one of a series, of “bandits” liquidated in southern Russia and the Ukraine over the previous three months. The total “executed” numbered 387,370. Of these, 363,211 were Jews.⁷⁰ It was a clear indication that, as Hitler had agreed with Himmler a year earlier, the Jews were being exterminated in the east “as partisans.”⁷¹ But by the end of 1942 the killing was no longer confined to the east, and now extended over much of Nazi occupied Europe. And as Hitler repeated his “prophecy”, in his speech to the Party’s “Old Guard” in Munich on November 8, according to the SS’s reckoning close to four million Jews were dead.⁷²

Hitler continued to be closely involved in the “Final Solution.” The pattern is by now familiar. In line with his “prophecy,” Hitler’s aim to “remove” — which now, no one was in doubt, meant kill — the Jews of Europe set the framework. Within this general remit, a radicalizing proposal would then be put to Hitler to deal with some specific aspect of the overall problem. Hitler would give his approval. The action would follow. In this way, he agreed in September 1942 to a request by Goebbels to remove Jews from the armaments industry and have them transported to the east. The roundup of these Jews followed in January 1943.⁷³ In December 1942, Hitler acceded to Himmler’s request to have 600,000–700,000 Jews in France, where the southern part of the country was now also under German (and partly Italian) occupation, “done away with.” Only diplomatic difficulties over the deportation with

70 Berlin Document Center, SS-HO, 1238, Reichsführer-SS, December 29, 1942, “Meldung an den Führer über Bandenbekämpfung,” a report presented to Hitler on December 31, 1942; reproduced in Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung*, plate 4 (between p. 128 and p. 129).

71 *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 294.

72 *Hitler. Reden und Proklamationen*, vol. 4. p. 1937; *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 73.

73 Longerich, *The Unwritten Order*, pp. 109, 114.

both the Italians and the French prevented the implementation of the order.⁷⁴

As the war turned against Germany, such diplomatic difficulties intensified. Hitler's allies, looking to a post-Nazi future, became increasingly unwilling to deport their Jews to the gas-chambers. In the wake of the German military crisis following the catastrophe at Stalingrad, Hitler took a direct hand in trying to persuade them to be more cooperative. Obsessed as ever with the notion of demonic Jews presumed to be behind the war, he pressed his Romanian and Hungarian allies to sharpen the persecution. His language, when addressing the Hungarian leader, Admiral Horthy, in mid-April 1943, was particularly vicious. Hitler urged him — to no avail — to adopt a harsher stance towards the Jews, mentioning that the Polish Jews were being dealt with like a tubercular bacillus that attacks healthy bodies.⁷⁵ A month later, speaking to Goebbels, Hitler likened Jews to insects and parasites, declaring “there is nothing else open to modern peoples than to exterminate the Jews.”⁷⁶

The “prophecy,” by now essentially a cliché used to legitimate to others and to himself that the war he had launched, which was driving Germany ever closer to perdition, had been inevitable and warranted, was still evidently deeply embedded in Hitler's psyche. On May 26, 1944, he addressed a large gathering of senior officers on the Obersalzberg, above Berchtesgaden. In a central passage of his lengthy speech, he referred to the treatment of the Jews. The old notion that had possessed him since 1918 of Jews as a treacherous fifth-column of seditionists and revolutionaries on the home front was again voiced. The removal of the Jews had eliminated this danger within Germany, he declared. He defended himself against suggestions that it might have been achieved more humanely by

74 Madajczyk, “Hitler's Direct Influence on Decisions Affecting Jews,” p. 64; Longerich, *The Unwritten Order*, pp. 115, 120.

75 Andreas Hillgruber, ed., *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler. Vertrauliche Aufzeichnungen über Unterredungen mit Vertretern des Auslandes 1942–1944* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1970), pp. 256–257.

76 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Part II, Vol. 8, p. 288.

emphasizing once more the war as an all-or-nothing, life-or-death struggle, giving an apocalyptic vision of what would happen if Germany's enemies were victorious, and speaking of the horrors of the bombing of Hamburg and other cities, summing up: "This entire bestiality has been organized by the Jews." Humanitarian feelings were, therefore, he argued, "cruelty towards one's own people." He went on to hint at the action about to be taken against the Jews in Hungary — the horrific destruction of Hungarian Jewry would indeed unfold within weeks, following pressure directly imposed by Hitler⁷⁷ — to remove what he called "a seamless web of agents and spies." It was at this point that he turned once more to his "prophecy" of 1939 that in the event of war not the German nation but Jewry itself would be "eradicated". The audience of Wehrmacht officers responded with storms of applause.⁷⁸

In the last weeks of the war, the "prophecy" served Hitler's need for self-justification. Although his last recorded monologues from early 1945 survive only in dubious form,⁷⁹ the comments about the Jews on February 13 certainly sound authentically Hitlerian, and are fully in line with the repetitions of his "prophecy" that we have noted. "I have fought openly against the Jews," the text runs. "I gave them a last warning at the outbreak of war. I never left them in uncertainty that if they were to plunge the world into war again they would this time not be spared — that the vermin in Europe would be finally eradicated."⁸⁰ And as we saw at the outset, his very last political manifesto was still urging the relentless persecution of the Jews.

77 Fleming, *Hitler und die Endlösung*, p. 173; Madajczyk, "Hitler's Direct Influence on Decisions Affecting Jews," p. 67.

78 Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, "Hitlers Ansprache vor Generalen und Offizieren am 26. Main 1944," *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 2 (1976), p. 156; and idem, "Wie geheim war die Endlösung?" in *Miscellanea: Festschrift für Helmut Krausnick zum 75. Geburtstag*, edited by Wolfgang Benz (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), pp. 134–136.

79 See Kershaw, *Hitler. Nemesis*, pp. 1024–1025, note 121.

80 *Hitlers politisches Testament. Die Bormann-Diktate von Februar und April 1945* (Hamburg: Knaus, 1981), p. 69.

CONCLUSIONS

Hitler's "prophecy" of January 30, 1939, which he was to invoke so frequently in the following years, has claim to be regarded as a key both to Hitler's mentality, and to the ways he provided "directions for action"⁸¹ in the core element of his ideology. As such, it highlights the central ideological driving-force of National Socialism, and also shows the ways in which fundamental and unchanging ideas were accommodated to shifting forms of draconian persecution and translated into ever more radical policy-decisions. It illustrates, in fact, how "charismatic leadership"⁸² operated in the crucial area of genocidal policy, and how Nazi activists at different levels of the regime were adept in knowing how to "work towards the Führer" without having to wait for a precise Führer order. It seems unlikely that Hitler ever gave one single, explicit order for the "Final Solution." Within the unchanging framework of his "prophecy," he needed do no more than provide requisite authorization at the appropriate time to Himmler and Heydrich to go ahead with the various escalatory stages that culminated in the murder of Europe's Jews.

In speaking, as he had done in March 1942, of Hitler as "the unswerving champion and spokesman of a radical solution" to the "Jewish Question," Goebbels was correctly summarizing Hitler's role in the "Final Solution." This role had often been indirect, rather than overt, frequently granting approval rather than initiating. The unparalleled outpourings of hatred were a constant amid the policy shifts. They often had a propaganda or mobilizing motive, and usually remained generalized. Even so, there cannot be the slightest doubt: Hitler's role was decisive and indispensable to the unfolding

81 A term taken from Martin Broszat, "Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des Nationalsozialismus," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 18 (1970), p. 403.

82 For the way in which I apply this term to Hitler's rule, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Profile in Power* (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 10–14.

of the "Final Solution". Had another form of nationalist government been in power at the time in Germany, it would probably have introduced discriminatory legislation against Jews. But without Hitler, the creation of a program to bring about the physical extermination of the Jews of Europe is unimaginable.

