

THE HOLOCAUST

THE HUMAN TRAGEDY



Martin
Gilbert

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The Holocaust

The Human Tragedy

Martin Gilbert

The Holocaust: The Human Tragedy

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DEDICATED TO

Professor Alexander Lerner, two of whose daughters, aged five and three, were killed by the Nazis in 1941, and whose own sixteen-year struggle to leave the Soviet Union for Israel is now successfully concluded

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MARTIN GILBERT

Merton College, Oxford
4 September 1985

PREFACE

In the late summer of 1959, accompanied by a Polish friend, a non-Jew, I travelled by car to the River Bug near Malkinia junction, on the Warsaw—Leningrad railway. We had intended, my friend and both of us students, to cross the river by the road bridge marked on my pre-war map. But on reaching the river, we found that the bridge was gone: destroyed in the fighting of fifteen years before, when the Red Army had driven the Wehrmacht from eastern Poland.

It was late afternoon. From the river bank, my friend called to a peasant on the far side, who was loading wood into a small, barge-like boat. Eventually, the peasant rowed over to our side of the river and took us back with him. We explained our purpose, and he took us to his village, half a mile away. Then he found a cart filled with logs, harnessed his horse to it, and drove us over the rough road southwards towards the village of Treblinka.

From Treblinka village we proceeded for another mile or two, along the line of an abandoned railway through a forest of tall trees. Finally we reached an enormous clearing, bounded on all sides by dense woodland. Darkness was falling, and with it, the chill of night and a cold dew. I stepped down from the cart on to the sandy soil: a soil that was grey rather than brown. Driven by I know not what impulse, I ran my hand through that soil, again and again. The earth beneath my feet was coarse and sharp: filled with the fragments of human bone.

Twenty-two years later I returned to Treblinka. The bridge over the Bug had long been rebuilt. At the entrance to the camp was a museum, placards and explanations. Further on was the clearing, filled now with small stone monuments, each stone inscribed with the name of a town or village whose Jews had been murdered there. The sites of the railway siding and the gas chamber had been identified and marked. The railway itself had been re-created symbolically, with concrete sleepers.

I could not bend down again to disturb the soil. In the years that had passed I had learned too much of what had happened there, and of what torments had been inflicted on my fellow Jews.

The systematic attempt to destroy all European Jewry—an attempt now known as the Holocaust—began in the last week of June 1941, within hours of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The onslaught upon Jewish life in Europe continued without respite for nearly four years. At its most intense moments, during the autumn of 1941, and again during the summer and autumn of 1942, many thousands of Jews were killed every day. By the time Nazi Germany had been defeated, as many as six million of Europe's eight million Jews had been slaughtered: if the killing had run its course, the horrific figure would have been even higher.

Jews perished in extermination camps, execution sites, ghettos, slave labour camps, and on the death marches. The testimony of those who survived constitutes the main record of what was done to the Jews during those years. The murderers also kept records, often copious ones. But the victims, the six million who were done to death, could leave no record. A few fragments of diaries, letters and scribbled messages do survive. But in the main, others must bear witness to what was done to the millions who could never tell their own story.

This book is an attempt to draw on the nearest of the witnesses, those closest to the destruction, and through their testimony to tell something of the suffering of those who perished, and are forever silent.

The preparations for mass murder were made possible by Germany's military successes in the months following the invasion of Poland in 1939. But from the moment that Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933, the devastating process had begun. It was a process which depended upon

the rousing of historic hatreds and ancient prejudice, and upon the cooperation or acquiescence of many different forces: of industry, science and medicine, of the Civil Service and bureaucracy, and of the most modern mechanisms and channels of communication. It depended also upon collaborators from countries far beyond the German border; and it depended most of all, one survivor has remarked 'upon the indifference of bystanders in every land'.¹

First steps to iniquity

For many centuries, primitive Christian Europe had regarded the Jew as the ‘Christ-killer’: an enemy and a threat to be converted and so be ‘saved’, or to be killed; to be expelled, or to be put to death with sword and fire. In 1543, Martin Luther set out his ‘honest advice’ as to how Jews should be treated. ‘First,’ he wrote, ‘their synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it.’ Jewish homes, he urged, should likewise be ‘broken down or destroyed’. Jews should then be ‘put under our roof, or in a stable, like Gypsies, in order that they may realize that they are not masters in our land. They should be put to work, to earn their living ‘by the sweat of their noses’, or, if regarded even then as too dangerous, these ‘poisonous bitter worms’ should be stripped of their belongings ‘which they have extorted usuriously from us’ and driven out of the country ‘for all time’.¹

Luther’s advice was typical of the anti-Jewish venom of his time. Mass expulsion was a commonplace of medieval policy. Indeed, Jews had already been driven out of almost every European country including England, France, Spain, Portugal and Bohemia. Further expulsions were to follow. In Italy Jews were to be confined to a special part of the towns, the ghetto, and, in Tsarist Russia, to a special region of the country, the ‘Pale’. Expulsion and oppression continued until the nineteenth century. Even when Jews were allowed growing participation in national life, however, no decade passed without Jews in one European state or another being accused of murdering Christian children in order to use their blood in the baking of Passover bread. This ‘blood libel’, coming as it did with outbreaks of popular violence against Jews, reflected deep prejudices which no amount of modernism or liberal education seemed able to overcome. Jew-hatred, with its two-thousand-year-old history, could arise both as a spontaneous outburst of popular instincts, and as a deliberately fanned instrument of scapegoat politics.

The Jews of Europe reacted in different ways to such moments of hatred and peril. Some sought complete assimilation. Some fought to be accepted as Jews by local communities and national structures. Others struggled to maintain an entirely separate Jewish style of life and observance, with their own communities and religious practice.

The nineteenth century seemed to offer the Jews a change for the better: emancipation spread throughout Western Europe, Jews entered politics and parliaments, and became integrated into the cultural, scientific and medical life of every land. Aristocratic Jews moved freely among the aristocracy; middle-class Jews were active in every profession; and Jewish workers lived with their fellow workers in extreme poverty, struggling for better conditions. But in Eastern Europe, and especially in the Polish and, even more, the Ukrainian provinces of the Tsarist Empire, anti-Jewish violence often burst out into physical conflict, popular persecution, and murderous pogrom. Here, the poorest regions of Tsarist Russia, church and state both found it expedient, from their different standpoints, to set the Jew aside in the popular mind as an enemy of Christianity and an intruder in the life of the citizen. Jealousies were fermented. Jewish ‘characteristics’ were mocked and turned into caricatures. The Jew, who sought only to lead a quiet, productive and if possible a reasonable

comfortable life, was seen as a leech on society, even when his own struggle to survive was made more difficult by that society's rules and prejudices.

These eastern lands where prejudice was most deeply rooted spread from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Their most densely populated regions were White Russia, the Volhynia, Podolia and the Ukraine. In these regions there had existed throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth a four-tiered social structure, from which was to emerge the most savage of all wartime hatreds. At the top of this structure was the Pole: the 'Pan', the landowner, Roman Catholic, Polish-speaking. Next was the Ukrainian peasant: the 'Chlop', adherent to the Russian Orthodox faith, Ukrainian-speaking. Next was the *Volksdeutsch*, or Ethnic German: descendant of German settlers who had been brought to these regions in the eighteenth century, farmer, Protestant, German-speaking. Fourth, and, in the eyes of each of the other three, last, was the Jew: resident in those regions for just as long, if not longer, eking out an existence as a pedlar or merchant, Jewish by religion, and with Yiddish as his own language, 'Jewish' also by speech.

No social mobility existed across these four divides. By profession, by language and by religion, the gulfs were unbridgeable. Pole, Ukrainian and Ethnic German had one particular advantage: each could look to something beyond the imperial and political confines of Tsarist Russia in order to assert his own ascendancy, and could call upon outside powers and forces to seek redress of wrongs and indignities. The Jew had no such avenue of redress, no expectation of an outside champion. Unable to seek help from the emerging Polish or Ukrainian nationalisms, or from German irridentism, he lacked entirely the possibility each of the other three had, that war, revolution and political change might bring about better times.

The four-tier structure of Pole, Ukrainian, Ethnic German and Jew ensured that the conditions of assimilation and emancipation which came into being in Western Europe after the French Revolution did not exist, and could not exist, east of the River Bug; that the ideals and opinions which benefited Jew and non-Jew alike throughout Western Europe in the hundred years following the destruction of the remnants of the medieval ghetto system, and much more, by Napoleon, failed to penetrate those regions in which by far the largest number of Jews were living in the hundred years between Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the First World War.

In the war which came to Europe in August 1914, Jews served in every army: and on opposite sides of the trenches and the wire. German Jews fought and died as German patriots, shooting at British Jews who served and fell as British patriots. Of the 615,000 German Jews in 1914, more than 100,000 served in the German army, although before 1914 Jews could enter the military academies only with difficulty, and certain regiments almost entirely excluded Jews. Man for man, the Jewish and non-Jewish war casualties were in an almost exact ratio of the respective populations. Jews and non-Jews alike fought as Germans: for duty and for the Fatherland.

The first member of the German parliament to be killed in action was a Jew, Dr Ludwig Haas, a member for Mannheim: one of twelve thousand German Jews to fall on the battlefield in German uniform.² Jews in the Austro-Hungarian army fought Jews in the Russian, Serbian and Italian armies. When the war ended in November 1918, Jewish soldiers, sailors and airmen had filled the Rolls of Honour, the field hospitals and the military cemeteries, side by side with their compatriots under a dozen national flags.

After 1918, within the new frontiers of post-war Europe, Jews found themselves under new flags and new national allegiances. The largest single Jewish community was in the new Polish state. Here lived more than three million Jews, born in the three empires destroyed in the war: the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and the German. In the new Hungarian kingdom lived 473,000 Jews. A similar

number lived in the enlarged Rumania, and only slightly more, perhaps 490,000, in Germany. Cze Jewry numbered 350,000; French Jewry, 250,000. Other communities were smaller.

The security of the new borders depended upon alliances, treaties, and the effectiveness of the newly created League of Nations, whose covenant not only outlawed war between states, but also guaranteed the rights of minorities. In each state, old or new, the Jews looked to the local laws for protection as a minority: for equal rights in education and the professions; and for full participation in economic life.

Even as the First World War ended on the western front, more than fifty Jews were killed by local Ukrainians in the eastern Polish city of Lvov. In the then independent Ukrainian town of Proskurov seventeen hundred Jews were murdered on 15 February 1919 by followers of the Ukrainian nationalist leader, Simon Petlura, and by the end of the year, Petlura's gangs had killed at least sixty thousand Jews. These Jews were victims of local hatreds reminiscent of Tsarist days, but on a scale unheard of in the previous century. In the city of Vilna, the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania', eighty Jews were murdered during April 1919; in Galicia, five hundred perished.³ 'Terrible news is reaching us from Poland,' the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann wrote to a friend on 29 November 1918. 'The newly liberated Poles there are trying to get rid of the Jews by the old and familiar method which they learnt from the Russians. Heartrending cries are reaching us. We are doing all we can, but we are so weak!'⁴

On 18 December 1919 a British diplomat wrote an account of one such episode, during which Poles had killed a number of Jews suspected of Communist sympathies, and arrested many others. The Jewish women who had been arrested, but who had been exempted from execution, he noted, 'were kept in prison without trial and enquiry. They were stripped naked and flogged. After the flogging they were made to pass naked down a passage full of Polish soldiers. Then, on the following day, they were led to the cemetery where those executed were buried, and made to dig their own graves, then, at the last moment, they were told they were reprieved; in fact, the gendarmerie regularly tormented the survivors.' The victims, added the diplomat, 'were respectable lower middle-class people, schoolteachers and such like'.⁵

In Germany, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Jews were among those active in rebuilding the broken nation. Hugo Preuss, Minister of Interior of the new government, prepared the draft of the Weimar Constitution, one of the most democratic in post-war Europe. Another Jew, Walther Rathenau, served as Weimar's Minister of Reconstruction, and then as Foreign Minister.

But in the turmoil of defeat, voices were raised blaming 'the Jews' for Germany's humiliation. In Berlin, the nation's capital, there were clashes between Jews and anti-Semites: 'Indications of growing anti-Semitism', the Berlin correspondent of *The Times* reported on 14 August 1919, 'are becoming frequent.'⁶

A manifestation of this anti-Semitism was shown by one of Germany's new and tiny political parties, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the NSDAP, soon better known as the 'Nazi Party, after the first two syllables of 'National'—*Nazional*. The party's twenty-five-point programme was published in Munich on 25 February 1920, at a time when it had only sixty members. The essence of its programme was nationalistic, the creation of a 'Great Germany', and the return of Germany's colonies, which had been lost at the time of Germany's defeat. Point Four was a racialist one: 'None but members of the Nation', it read, 'may be citizens of the State. None but those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the Nation. No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the Nation.'⁷ Another point demanded that all Jews who had come to Germany since 1914 should be forced to leave: a demand which would affect more than eighteen thousand Jews, most of them born

the Polish provinces of Tsarist Russia.

The anti-Jewish sections of the Nazi Party's programme had been drafted by three members. One of them, Adolf Hitler, was number seven in the party's hierarchy. A former soldier on the western front, he had been wounded and gassed in October 1918, less than a month before the war's end. On 12 August 1920, Hitler spoke for two hours in a Munich beer cellar on the theme, 'Why we are against the Jews'. During his speech, he promised his listeners that his party, and his party alone, 'will free you from the power of the Jew!' There must, he said, be a new slogan, and one not only for Germany — 'Anti-Semites of the World, Unite! People of Europe, Free Yourselves!' — and he demanded what he called a 'thorough solution', in brief, 'the removal of the Jews from the midst of our people'.⁸

A year later, on 3 August 1921, Hitler set up a group within the Nazi Party whereby he would control his own members and harass his opponents. This *Sturmabteilung*, or 'Storm Section' of the party, was quickly to be known as the SA; its members as Stormtroops. These Stormtroops were intended, according to their first regulations, not merely to be 'a means of defence' for the new movement, but, 'above all, a training school for the coming struggle for liberty'. Stormtroops were to defend party meetings from attack, and, as further regulations expressed it a year later, to enable the movement itself 'to take the offensive at any given moment'.⁹ Brown uniforms were designed; the wearers soon becoming known as Brownshirts. Parades and marches were organized. The party symbol became the *Hakenkreuz*, or swastika, an ancient Sanskrit term and symbol for fertility, used in India interchangeably with the Star of David, or *Magen David*, whose double triangle had long signified for the Jewish people a protective shield, and had become since 1897 a symbol of Jewish national aspirations.

From the Nazis' earliest days, the swastika was held aloft on flags and banners, and worn as a insignia on lapels and armbands.

By the time of the establishment of the Stormtroops, membership of the Nazi Party had risen to three thousand. Hatred of the Jews, which permeated all Hitler's speeches to his members, was echoed in the actions of his followers. Individual Jews were attacked in the street, and at public meetings and street-corner rallies Jews were blamed, often in the crudest language, for every facet of Germany's problems including the military defeat of 1918, the subsequent economic hardship, and sudden spiralling inflation.

Hitler's party had no monopoly on anti-Jewish sentiment. Several other extremist groups likewise sought popularity by attacking the Jews. One target of their verbal abuse was Walther Rathenau, who as Foreign Minister, had negotiated a treaty with the Soviet Union. Street demonstrators sang, 'Knock off Walther Rathenau, the dirty, God-damned Jewish sow.' These were only words, but words with the power to inspire active hatred, and on 24 June 1922, Rathenau was assassinated.

Following Rathenau's murder, Hitler expressed his pleasure at what had been done. He was sentenced to four weeks in prison. 'The Jewish people', he announced on 28 July 1922, immediately on his release, 'stands against us as our deadly foe, and will so stand against us always, and for a long time.'¹⁰ In 1923, a Nuremberg Nazi, Julius Streicher, launched *Der Stürmer*, a newspaper devoted to the portrayal of the Jews as an evil force. Its banner headline was the slogan: 'The Jews are Our Misfortune'.

On 30 October 1923 Arthur Ruppin, a German Jew who had earlier settled in Palestine, noted in his diary, while on a visit to Munich, how 'the anti-Semitic administration in Bavaria expelled about seventy of the 350 East European Jews from Bavaria during the past two weeks, and it is said that the rest will also be expelled before too long.'¹¹

On 9 November 1923 Hitler tried, and failed, to seize power in Munich. Briefly, he had managed to proclaim a 'National Republic'. He was arrested, tried for high treason, and on 1 April 1924 sentenced to five years in detention.

After less than eight months in prison, Hitler was released on parole. During those eight months he had begun a lengthy account of his life and thought. Entitled *Mein Kampf*, My Struggle, the first volume was published on 18 July 1925. In it, the full fury of Hitler's anti-Jewish hatred was made clear: he explained that he was drawing upon his personal experiences as a young man in Vienna before the First World War.¹² He had come to Vienna in February 1908, shortly before his nineteenth birthday, and had remained there until May 1913.¹³

Every page of Hitler's recollections contained references to the Jews of Vienna and their evil influence. 'The part which the Jews played in the social phenomenon of prostitution,' he wrote, 'and more especially in the white slave traffic, could be studied here better than in any other West European city,' with the possible exception, he added, of 'certain ports' in southern France: 'a cold shiver ran down my spine when I first ascertained that it was the same kind of cold-blooded, thick-skinned and shameless Jew who showed his consummate skill in conducting that revolting exploitation of the dregs of the big city. Then I became filled with wrath.'¹⁴

There were, Hitler argued, two perils threatening 'the existence of the German people', Marxism and Judaism.¹⁵ It was in Vienna, he wrote, that he had discovered the truth about the Jewish conspiracy to destroy the world of the 'Aryan', by means of political infiltration and corruption, using as its tool the Social Democratic Party, and as its victim, the working class. This word 'Aryan' was a linguistic term, originally referring to the Indo-European group of languages. Since before the end of the nineteenth century it had already been distorted as a concept by a number of writers, among them Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who gave it racial connotations, and used it to denote superiority over the 'Semitic' races. Yet the term 'Semitic' itself was originally not a racial but a linguistic term relating, not to Jews and non-Jews, but to a language group which includes Hebrew and Arabic. None of these refinements troubled the new racialism. For Hitler, 'Aryan' was synonymous with 'pure' while 'Semitic' was synonymous with 'Jew', and hence 'impure'.

Considering the 'satanic skill' displayed by Jewish 'evil councillors', Hitler wrote, 'how could the unfortunate victims be blamed?' The Jewish politicians were masters of 'dialectical perfidy', the very mouths 'distorted the truth'. Marxism was a Jewish device, a Jewish trap. 'The more I came to know the Jew, the easier it was to excuse the workers.'¹⁶

Hitler presented himself as the man who had seen, and who would prevent, not only the destruction of German life, but the destruction of life on earth, by 'the Jew'. The dangers, as he saw them, concerned the racial integrity of the German people, and a deliberate assault on that integrity. As he told his readers:

The black-haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, satanically glaring at and spying on the unsuspecting girl whom he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood and removing her from the bosom of her own people.

The Jew uses every possible means to undermine the racial foundations of a subjugated people. In his systematic efforts to ruin girls and women he strives to break down the last barriers of discrimination between him and other peoples.

The Jews were responsible for bringing negroes into the Rhineland, with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the

Jew might dominate.

For as long as a people remain racially pure and are conscious of the treasure of their blood, they can never be overcome by the Jew. Never in this world can the Jew become master of any people except a bastardized people.

For this reason, Hitler added, 'the Jew systematically endeavours to lower the racial quality of all people by permanently adulterating the blood of the individuals who make up that people.'¹⁷

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler outlined his mission: to expose, and then to destroy the threat posed by worldwide Jewish effort to destroy the foundations of 'Aryan' life. 'Was there any shadow of an undertaking,' he asked, 'any form of foulness, especially in cultural life, in which at least one Jew did not participate?' and he went on to answer his own question in these words: 'On putting the probing knife carefully to that kind of abscess one immediately discovered, like a maggot in a putrescent body, a little Jew who was often blinded by the sudden light.'¹⁸

Germany could only become a great nation again, Hitler argued, if it saw, and repelled, the Jewish danger. Germany's defeat in 1918 could have been prevented, but for 'the will of a few Jews': traitors inside the German Reich.¹⁹ 'There is no such thing', Hitler concluded, 'as coming to an understanding with the Jews. It must be the hard-and-fast "Either-Or".'²⁰

In his book, Hitler described the mission that inspired him, telling his readers:

Should the Jew, with the aid of his Marxist creed, triumph over the people of this world, his Crown will be the funeral wreath of mankind, and this planet will once again follow its orbit through ether without any human life on its surface, as it did millions of years ago.

And so I believe today that my conduct is in accordance with the will of the Almighty creator. Standing guard against the Jew I am defending the handiwork of the Lord.²¹

There was little reason for anyone to heed such hate-mongering in the summer of 1925. The Weimar republic was scarcely halfway through its first decade, slowly establishing a democratic parliamentary regime. The twin economic pressures of reconstruction and the payment of reparations to the Allies were being lessened year by year. The crisis of whirlwind inflation had passed. Employment was slowly rising. International conferences offered Germany, for the first time since her defeat, equal participation in European diplomacy. On 16 October 1925, three months after the publication of Hitler's first, bitter, obscure volume, Germany signed the Locarno Agreement, guaranteeing, as an equal partner with Britain, France, Belgium and Italy, the frontiers of Western Europe.

Under Article Two of Locarno, Germany and France, as well as Germany and Belgium, mutually undertook 'that they will in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other'. These undertakings offered the prospect of security for the war-weary masses of all the signatory states, which included Poland and Czechoslovakia.

For the eight million Jews of Europe, Locarno seemed to offer the prospect of a quiet life. Seven years had passed since the Ukrainian massacres of 1918 and 1919. But in at least one Jew's mind, vengeance was called for. His name was Shalom Schwarzbard—his Hebrew first name meaning 'Peace'. On 25 May 1926, in Paris, he killed the exiled Ukrainian leader, Simon Petlura. 'I am performing a duty for our poor people,' he had written to his wife a few hours earlier. 'I am going to avenge all the pogroms, the blood....'²³

On 10 December 1926 Hitler published the second volume of *Mein Kampf*. Once again, anti-Jewish venom permeated its pages. 'At the beginning of the war,' Hitler wrote, 'or even during the war, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Jews who were corrupting the nation had been forced to submit to poison gas, just as hundreds of thousands of our best German workers from every social stratum and from every trade and calling had to face it in the field, then the millions of sacrifices made at the front would not have been in vain.' On the contrary, Hitler continued, 'if twelve thousand of these malefactors had been eliminated in proper time, probably the lives of a million decent men, who would be of value to Germany in the future, would have been saved.'²⁴

These were still the writings of an extremist with no prospect of political influence, let alone power. In 1926 his party's membership stood at seventeen thousand, among them the black-uniformed *Schutzstaffeln*, 'Protection Squad', or SS, set up a year earlier to provide Hitler and the Nazi leadership with personal protection: a personal security service. It was all on a small, if noisy, scale.

On 4 July 1926 a youth movement had been inaugurated for young Nazis: the Hitler Youth. In 1926 the Nazi membership rose to forty thousand. The uniformed Stormtroops were active on the streets as brutal thugs, with a political party to give them respectability.

In May 1928, the Nazi Party participated in the German national elections, securing twelve seats in the Reichstag.

European democracy did not seem to be endangered by such apparently minor developments. Germany, disarmed, by the Treaty of Versailles, posed no military threat to its neighbours. The Locarno Agreement, signed with such high hopes, continued to serve as an apparent guarantee of stability. Germany's remaining reparations payments were being rapidly reduced by negotiations.

Suddenly events began to favour Hitler and his followers. Inflation began to rise again. Unemployment grew to unprecedented levels. The growth of German Communist support triggered a reaction on the right. Extremism replaced the Weimar democratic ideal.

The internal problems which had given the Nazis their first few seats continued to worsen. Unemployment rose yet again, reaching three million by the end of 1929. Both workers and employers were its victims. Small businessmen suffered equally with those on the factory floor. As the economic distress grew, the Nazis denounced Jewish 'wealth' and 'conspiracy'. In Berlin on 1 January 1930 brown-uniformed Stormtroops killed eight Jews: the first Jewish victims of the Nazi era. For the next nine months, Jews were molested in cafés and theatres, and synagogue services were constantly interrupted by these uniformed hooligans, already dignified by the title 'Party Members'.²⁵

An election was called for mid-September 1930. During the campaign, the Stormtroops were again active in terrorizing Jews as well as Communist voters and other political opponents. In the course of the campaign, seventy-eight Jews were among those wounded by SA thugs. The election itself was held on 14 September 1930. To the amazement of election-watchers in Germany and abroad, the number of Nazi seats rose from 12 to 107. With more than six million votes, the Nazi Party was now the second largest party in the state.²⁶ On the day the Reichstag opened, several Jews were attacked in Berlin, and the windows of Jewish-owned department stores were broken. As the Nazi deputies walked to the Reichstag, their supporters in the crowd chanted one of the party's popular slogans: '*Deutschland erwache, Juda verrecke!*', 'Germany awake, death to Judah!'

On 15 March 1931 Nazi Party officials were told: 'The natural hostility of the peasant against the Jews, and his hostility against the Freemason as a servant of the Jew, must be worked up to a frenzy.'²⁷ Six months later, on the eve of the Jewish New Year, squads of young Stormtroops attacked Jews returning from synagogue. An eye-witness recorded how, in one incident, 'while three youth

beat an elderly gentleman with their fists and rubber truncheons, five other young men stood around protect them.’²⁸

The strong helping the strong to attack the weak; this was to become a hallmark of Nazi action. So too was the deliberate choice of a Holy Day in the Jewish calendar and of a religious target. In 1933 alone, fifty synagogues were desecrated, and several thousand tombstones defiled in more than a hundred Jewish cemeteries.²⁹

Frequent though they were, it was not these anti-Jewish actions, but the spectre of unemployment that made daily headlines throughout Germany, providing the Nazis with a massive source of discontent, recruits and votes. In the election for President in June 1932, which the incumbent President, Field Marshal Hindenburg, won with 53 per cent of the ballot, the former corporal, Adolf Hitler, came second, winning over 36 per cent of the votes cast. The Communist candidate, Ernst Thälmann, received only one in ten of the votes. Of the two extremes, Nazism had proved the more attractive. It was also the more effectively organized: in 1931 the SS, organized and enlarged by Heinrich Himmler, established its own Intelligence Service, the *Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD, headed by Reinhard Heydrich, to keep a close watch on dissent within the party.

In further national elections on 31 July 1932, the Nazi Party won 230 seats in the Reichstag. Hitler had now established enough power to form a government in coalition with others. But he declined to accept second place, refusing to agree to a coalition unless he were Chancellor. At further elections three months later, on 6 November 1932, Nazi votes and seats both fell. Hitler’s opponents declared that the Nazi movement was on the wane: that its chances of power were ended.

With 196 seats, a loss of 34, Hitler was outnumbered by the combined forces of the Socialists and Communists. But his opponents on the left lacked sufficient unity, or sense of danger, to combine. A prolonged political crisis led to negotiations, and negotiations led to a compromise. The parties of the centre and the right agreed to accept Hitler as Chancellor, at the head of the coalition in which they would share Cabinet seats and power. Hitler agreed, and on 30 January 1933 was appointed Chancellor. He was forty-three years old.

‘I had been skating that day,’ a ten-year-old Jewish boy, Leslie Frankel, who lived in the village of Biblis, near Worms, later recalled. ‘When I got home,’ Frankel added, ‘we heard that Hitler had become Chancellor. Everybody shook. As kids of ten we shook.’³⁰

1933: the shadow of the swastika

Hitler moved rapidly to establish his dictatorship. An Emergency Decree, passed by the Reichstag on 5 February 1933, expropriated all Communist Party buildings and printing presses, and closed down all pacifist organizations. In the following week, the Stormtroops, now buoyed up by the enthusiasm of the constitutional victory, attacked trade union buildings, and beat up political opponents in the streets.

Three weeks after the passing of the Emergency Decree, Hitler found the opportunity to take a second step towards dictatorship, when on February 27, fire broke out in the Reichstag building. Even before the blaze had been extinguished, and long before any guilt could be established, the Nazis had demanded new rules concerning 'protective custody', and these rules, legalizing arbitrary imprisonment without warrant or trial, came into effect on February 28, followed immediately by mass arrests, and a settling of accounts with political opponents. One of those arrested, a Berliner by the name of Bernstein, was given fifty lashes because he was a Communist, and then a further fifty lashes because he was 'also a Jew'.¹

On March 9 the Stormtroops were active throughout Berlin. Many Jews were beaten, the *Manchester Guardian* reported, 'until the blood streamed down their heads and faces, and their backs and shoulders were bruised. Many fainted and were left lying on the streets....' The Stormtroops worked in groups of between five and thirty men, 'the whole gang often assaulting one person'.²

The terror in the streets was witnessed by foreign diplomats and journalists from the world press. But from March 9, terror found a hidden base behind barbed wire. For, beginning on that day, the SS sent thousands of critics of the regime, including many Jews, to a so-called 'concentration camp', Dachau, near Munich. The camp, 'empty huts in a gravel pit', was run by the local Dachau SS, which had already become notorious as 'one of the most savage and brutal SS platoons in Bavaria'.³

During March 1933 Dachau was enlarged to enable five thousand prisoners to be kept there. Meanwhile, the terror in the streets continued. On March 11, Jewish-owned department stores in Braunschweig were looted. On March 13, all Jewish lawyers and judges were expelled from court in Breslau. On March 15, in Berlin, three Jews were arrested by Stormtroops in the Café New York, taken to a local Stormtroop headquarters, robbed of all their money, 'beaten bloody with rubber truncheons, and then turned out in the streets in a semi-conscious state'.⁴

All over Germany, Jews, as well as non-Jewish critics of the regime, were attacked and beaten. Against the Jews, these so-called *Einzeloperationen*, or 'individual operations', were carried out against shopkeepers, rabbis and communal leaders. 'A considerable number of people were arrested without any reason at all,' a Berlin lawyer, Benno Cohn, later recalled, 'and among them were a considerable number of Jews.'⁵ One of these Jews was a baker's apprentice, Siegbert Kindermann. Before Hitler's coming to power, Kindermann, a member of the Bar Kochba Jewish Sports Society, had been attacked by Nazi thugs. His attackers had been brought to court, and convicted. Now the thugs took their revenge. On March 18 Kindermann was taken to a Stormtroop barracks in Berlin and beaten to death. His body was then thrown out of a window into the street. Those who found his body

discovered that a large swastika had been cut into his chest.⁶

An imminent boycott of Jewish shops, publicized outside Germany, led to considerable protest. On March 27 a mass rally in New York's Madison Square Garden threatened a counter-boycott of all German-made goods, until the anti-Jewish boycott was called off.⁷ The Nazi leaders therefore limited themselves to a one-day, Sabbath, boycott of all Jewish-owned shops, cafés and businesses. 'The Jews of the whole world are trying to destroy Germany,' posters declared in every German city. 'German people, defend yourselves! Don't buy from the Jews!'⁸

The boycott began at ten in the morning of Saturday, April 1. Stormtroops, standing outside Jewish-owned shops, carried placards urging 'Germans' not to enter. The Star of David was painted in yellow on black across the doors and windows of thousands of shops, and, in crude lettering, the single word *Jude*, 'Jew', the sign of the swastika, and the slogans, 'Perish Judah!', 'Jews, Out!', 'Go to Palestine' and 'Go to Jerusalem!'



GERMANY 1933

‘On every Jew shop’, wrote Lady Rumbold, the wife of the British Ambassador in Berlin, ‘we plastered a large notice warning people not to buy in Jewish shops. In many cases special notices were put up saying that sweated labour was employed in that particular shop, and often you saw caricatures’

of Jewish noses.’ It was, she added, ‘utterly cruel and Hunnish the whole thing, just doing down a heap of defenceless people.’ ‘To see people pilloried in this fashion,’ she wrote three days later, ‘a very large number of them quite harmless, hardworking people, was altogether revolting, and left a very nasty taste in the mouth. I shall never forget it.’⁹

German Jews were stunned by this organized, absurd, cruel display, which Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, Dr Joseph Goebbels, described in his diary as ‘an imposing spectacle’.¹⁰ During the course of the day of the boycott, one Jew was killed, a lawyer by the name of Schumm, who had been arrested at Kiel after an altercation with a Stormtrooper, taken to Stormtroop headquarters, and shot. This ‘lynching’, as it was described, was headline news in almost every British newspaper on the following Monday morning.¹¹ ‘As a matter of fact,’ Hitler declared in his first speech after the boycott, ‘the Jews in Germany had not had a hair of their heads ruffled.’¹²

The Jews of Germany had been among Europe’s most assimilated, most cultured, most active contributors to the national life of the state in which they lived. Hundreds of thousands of them had become an integral part of German society. They had made significant contributions to German medicine, literature, science, music and industry. ‘They could not possibly believe’, Benno Cohn Latoski recalled, ‘that this cultured German nation, the one which was the most cultured of the peoples of the world since time immemorial, would resort to such iniquitous things.’¹³

The impact of the one-day boycott was considerable. ‘Many Jews on this Saturday were depressed’, wrote the editor of the German-language *Judische Rundschau*, Robert Weltsch, in his editorial on April 4. They had been ‘forced to admit their Jewishness’, not for ‘an inner conviction, not for loyalty to their people, not for their pride in a magnificent history and in noblest human achievement’, but for ‘the affixing of a red placard or a yellow badge’, and by the sticking of placards to their windows, and the daubing of their window-panes.

During these boycott activities, the Stormtroops had painted the Star of David on the windows of Jewish-owned shops. ‘They meant to dishonour us,’ Weltsch noted, and went on to declare: ‘Jews take it upon yourselves, that Star of David, and honour it anew.’

In his editorial, Weltsch expressed his hope that the Nazi movement, ‘which took such pride, as a pioneer, in raising the pride of the German nation, will not find work to be done in the degradation of others.’ But if it were to do so, ‘we, the Jewish people, will be able to defend our pride.’¹⁴

On April 7 the concept of a racial difference between German Jews and all other Germans was given legal status when the German government ordered the dismissal—called in the Ordinance ‘retirement’—of all civil servants ‘who are not of Aryan descent’.¹⁵ By giving German non-Jews the status of ‘Aryan’, this imaginary concept, based upon nonsensical and discredited theories of ‘purity of race’, Hitler formally divided German citizens into two groups. ‘The greatest achievements of intellectual life’, Hitler told the German Doctors’ Union, ‘can never be produced by those of an alien race, but only by those who are inspired by the Aryan and German spirit.’¹⁶

German cities competed in zealous pursuit of the new ‘Aryan’ ideal. In Frankfurt, on the day of the first ‘Aryan law’, German Jewish teachers were forbidden to teach in the universities, German Jewish actors to perform on the stage, and German Jewish musicians to play in concerts. The very concept of ‘German Jewish’ was being denied and denounced: one could either be a German, or one could be a Jew.

To terrorize political opponents, churchmen, Communists, homosexuals and Jews, the new government set up concentration camps at Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen, in addition to Dachau. In each of these camps, daily beatings and harsh treatment quickly became the rule. By the beginning

April 1933, at Dachau, there were less than a hundred Jews among the thousand German citizens being held without warrant, or trial. News of conditions in the concentration camps circulated both inside and outside Germany. 'This Nazi revolution', wrote the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Horacio Rumbold, to a diplomatic colleague, 'has brought out some of the worst characteristics in the German character, namely, a mean spirit of revenge, brutality amounting in many cases to bestiality, and complete ruthlessness.'¹⁷

Rumbold's letter was dated 11 April 1933. On the following day, in Dachau, four Jews died as a result of deliberate sadism. An eye-witness account of their deaths was smuggled to Britain by a prisoner who was later released. 'A few days ago', he wrote, 'we were going out as usual to work. All of a sudden the Jewish prisoners—Goldmann and Erwin Kahn, merchants, Benario, a lawyer from Nuremberg, and a medical student, Artur Kahn—were ordered to fall out of the ranks. Without even a word, some Stormtroop men shot at them; they had not made any attempt to escape. All were killed on the spot. All had bullet wounds in their foreheads.' The four Jews were buried openly, the SS being present. 'Then a meeting was called, and a Stormtroop leader made a speech in which he told us that it was a good thing these four Jewish sows were dead. They had been hostile elements who had no right to live in Germany; they had received their due punishment.'¹⁸

German Jews acted as best they could to ameliorate their situation. On April 13 a group of Jewish bankers, community leaders and Zionists established in Berlin a Central Bureau for Relief and Rehabilitation. But on that same day, at Berlin University, notices appeared on the campus: 'Against the un-German spirit'. 'Our most dangerous opponent', these notices declared, 'is the Jew. The Jew can only think Jewish. If he writes German, he is lying. The German who writes German and thinks Jewish is a traitor.'

The first Jews had reached German soil in Roman times. Jews had lived in Germany for more than a thousand years. The Jewish contribution to Germany's sacrifices in the Great War had been a source of pride to the German Jewish community. Jews had been among the leading rebuilders of Germany after the defeat of 1918, and among those who suffered most severely from the post-war economic turmoils. All this was now to be forgotten, or denied. 'We mean to treat the Jew as a foreigner,' the Berlin University placards stated.¹⁹ Twelve days later, the German government passed an Act 'against the excessive number of students of foreign race in German schools and universities'. Under the Act German Jews were to be considered 'of foreign race'.²⁰

Throughout Germany, Jews were singled out for violent assault. On April 22 a press report from Wiesbaden stated blandly that a Jewish merchant, Salomon Rosenstrauch, was 'shot in his flat'.²¹ On the following day, at Worms, another Jewish merchant, Mathau Frank, was hanged, six days after his sixty-sixth birthday.²²

On April 26 the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, or Secret State Police, was taken over by the Nazis. Known as the Gestapo, it was given powers to shadow, arrest, interrogate and intern, without reference to any other state authority. The apparatus of dictatorship was now complete: the SS security service; its SS intelligence arm; the Gestapo secret police; and the concentration camps to which their victims could be consigned. Law courts, and due process of law, defence lawyers, and appeal courts, became things of the past.

Expulsion of Jews from the universities was rapid and total. On learning that the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, Fritz Haber, had been deprived of his professorship, *The Times* commented on the 'irony' that Germany's ability to carry on fighting for four years in the First World War 'was in all probability due to him more than to any other man'.²³ Another distinguished professor, Martin Wolf

the leading German authority on civil law, was driven out of his lecture room by swastika-wearing students. Albert Einstein was forced into exile. 'We do not want to be the land of Goethe and Einstein,' declared Berlin's Nazi newspaper, linking Goethe's cultural genius with Einstein's Jewishness.²⁴ Within two weeks it had been announced that no Jewish painter, no Jewish sculptor, and no engineer was to be represented at the annual Academy Exhibition: 'Even Jewish artists who were at the front', it was reported, 'have been excluded from exhibitions.'²⁵

'When I hear the word culture, I get my Browning pistol ready': hundreds of theatre audiences cheered at these lines, spoken by the hero in a play by Hans Johst. On May 10, in front of the Berlin Opera House, and opposite the main entrance to Berlin University, thousands of books were burned in a massive bonfire: books judged degenerate by the Nazis. Many of these were by Jewish authors.

The burning of books, and the killing of individuals, went on side by side. On the day before the book-burning, Dr Meyer, a Jewish dentist in Wuppertal, was mutilated by Stormtroops, and then drowned.²⁶ In Dachau, in the last two weeks of May, four Jews were murdered: Dr Alfred Strauss, a lawyer, on May 15; Louis Schloss, a businessman, on May 25; Karl Lehburger, a businessman, on May 27; and Willi Aron, a lawyer, two days later.²⁷

Jews reacted in different ways to the renewed violence. A few, in despair, committed suicide. Thousands left Germany as exiles, abandoning their possessions, friends and lifetime links and associations. More than five thousand emigrated to Palestine. Most German Jews waited, however, hoping that the storm would pass.

In Upper Silesia, the Jews found a legal means of protection. This pre-war region of Germany had been incorporated in post-war Germany as a result of a League of Nations plebiscite, and would remain under the legal protection of the League until 1937. A Jewish office worker there, Franz Bernheim, who had been dismissed as a result of the new German racial laws, appealed to the League for redress. His appeal was discussed by the League Council on May 30, and again five days later. 'It was no easy matter', the historian Nathan Feinberg has noted, 'for a persecuted people without a country to compete against the might of such a major power as Germany.'²⁸

Bernheim's petition was upheld, and a Mixed Commission of the League, headed by a Swiss diplomat, Felix Calonder, ensured that the Jews of Upper Silesia could practise law and medicine, as well as receive official funds for education, at least until the expiry of the Geneva Convention for 10 years later.

The Nazis did not like to defer to the League in Upper Silesia. But Nazi Germany, for all its international anger, was still disarmed, still looking for international approval, still seeking to match dictatorship at home with respectability abroad. The Nazi press made no secret, however, of the national goal. 'We must build up our state without Jews,' the party newspaper declared on 26 June 1933. 'They can never be anything but stateless aliens, and they can never have any legal or constitutional status. Only by this means can Ahasuerus be forced once again to take up his wanderer's staff.'²⁹

Jews outside Germany watched Nazi Germany's words and actions with alarm. Most fearful were the three million Jews of Poland, Germany's eastern neighbour, and themselves often the victims of popular anti-Semitic incidents. In Warsaw, a young Jewish historian, Emanuel Ringelblum, was so distressed by events in Germany that he decided, as he wrote on June 2, to begin 'the intensive collection of materials relating to the Hitler decrees'—photographs, letters, documents, posters— as well as material on 'Jewish countermeasures'.³⁰ On July 14, in the Polish city of Vilna, on the day on which, in Berlin, the Nazi Party was declared the only legal party in Germany, Dr Jacob Wigodski wrote in a Vilna newspaper: 'We must continue to fight against the Hitler pogroms. We are fighting

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