

GERMAN CIVILIANS AND THE HOLOCAUST

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Abstract – This paper looks at the Holocaust, not from the dominant approach of the Nazi elite, but from the perspective and role played by so called ‘ordinary’ Germans of the male civilian population. It examines their involvement within the context of events taking place in Nazi Germany after 1933, in particular the emergence of the *Volksgemeinschaft* or national community. It reviews the existing historical debate on this question including the background to and reasons for the Nazis’ decision to embark upon the Holocaust. The focus is on the role of selected groups in the Holocaust and their motives for getting involved and how this changes our perception of this key event in twentieth-century European history.

Keywords – Holocaust, Nazi Germany, *Volksgemeinschaft*, German Civilians, *Shutz Staffel*, Final Solution, *Lebensraum*, *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, *Deutsche Reichsbahn*.

Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, parts of this essay may cause distress.

In order to understand the extent to which ‘ordinary’ Germans actively participated in the ‘Final Solution’(1), the terms used must first be deconstructed. ‘Ordinary German’ is, perhaps, too vague a concept. For the purpose of this essay the word ‘ordinary’ refers to the social and economic position which these male civilians held within the Nazi regime, working men who found employment on the railways or in industry, men who did not necessarily possess fervent National Socialist beliefs or radical anti-Semitic thoughts. The analysis concentrates almost exclusively on the role of men; this is not intended to negate female involvement; many women at this time were fulfilling the role of the traditional housewife, as promoted by National Socialist ideology. The definition of ‘a German’ is problematic (a study in itself), since many German born citizens were excluded from the much vaunted *Volksgemeinschaft*, as they did not conform to the Nazi ideal. Social groups, such as communists, political opponents, homosexuals and Jews, were all excluded from the nascent, Aryan Germany and many found themselves stripped of political and social rights; they were now referred to as *Untermenschen*, meaning under man or sub-human. Hence, in this paper the term ‘German’ implies an Aryan or Reich German.

Anti-Semitism in Germany was by no means a new concept when the subject of what to do with European Jewry was discussed at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. As Beevor points out, from the earliest days of Hitler’s National Socialist regime ‘Hitler’s forceful seduction of the German

people began to strip the country of human values, step by step. Nowhere was the effect more evident than in the persecution of the Jews' (Beevor 2012, 4). Although Hitler is often depicted as resolved from the start to achieve the complete annihilation of the Jews, the operative aim of Nazi policy in its formative years in power was not yet the physical annihilation of the Jewish population, but rather their economic and social displacement and their removal from German soil. In the summer of 1940 Hitler toyed with the idea of the 'Madagascar Plan', to ship out the western Jews to that island. This idea was thwarted by the supremacy of the British Navy, but the plan was still a very real proposition as late as 1941. Even so, it would be unrealistic to state that the murder of millions of Jews was an inevitable consequence of the National Socialists' original wider plan. Most of the anti-Jewish campaign was carried out in the full glare of world publicity, manifesting itself in discriminatory legislation, economic deprivation, administrative harassment and social ostracism, as opposed to physical harm or murder. Three prominent examples of Jewish ostracism are: the Boycott of April 1st 1933, which led to a wave of racial legislation amid Jewish employees within various professions; the Nuremberg Laws of September 15th 1935, which sealed on Jewish emancipation in Germany and defined Jewish-ness in racial terms; and the state organised pogrom of November 9-10th 1938, the so called *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass). But, when Reinhard Heydrich (regarded by many as one of the cruelest of the Nazi leaders) convened the meeting at Wannsee, it was to inform and secure support from government ministries and other interested parties relevant to the implementation of the 'Final Solution'. Even so, historian Mark Roseman suggests that there was no deliberation as to whether such a plan should have been undertaken, but instead those present discussed the logistics of a policy decision that had already been made at the very highest level of the Nazi regime (Roseman 2002, 78). Roseman identifies an emerging syndrome of eager subordination amongst the men present at Wannsee; the war against the Soviet Union had put genocide on the Nazi's agenda. The conference shifted the focus of the regime's indoctrination from political enemies to the Jewish population of the Third Reich and acted to conclude the escalating measures against this religious group. Thus, the Holocaust would become the focus of two of the National Socialist's main ideologies. It was, as Sybille Steinbacher observes, 'the biggest stage for the mass murder of European Jewry', whilst at the same time a crystallizing point of the policy of settlement and 'Germanization' (Steinbacher 2004, 76). It was here that mass extermination and the acquisition of *Lebensraum* ('living space' for Aryan expansion) merged in conceptual, temporal and spatial terms.

But what was the nature and form of civilian participation in these events and why, if they knew of the mass killings, did ordinary Germans continue to work towards the destruction of Jewry? Was

there amongst the inhabitants of Germany a genuine acquiescence, or a blind, slavish obedience and an uncertainty of the facts that allowed these people to continue in their roles not knowing the full scale of what they were facilitating? The historical debate surrounding this topic is both complex and problematic.

The revisionist historian Daniel Goldhagen argues that ordinary Germans were entirely 'complicitous' and asks not why, but what caused people to follow a political system that creates an Auschwitz or Sobibor (Goldhagen 1996, 22). He suggests that because of the German people's antipathy and cruel indifference to the victims of Nazism, some Germans were willing, even eager, to do their part and what the Nazi regime succeeded in doing was to 'unshackle and thereby activate Germans' pre-existing, pent up anti-Semitism' (Goldhagen 1996, 132). However, for others the idea that a nation of people is inherently anti-Semitic and murderous to this extreme is implausible, and many historians, amongst them Christopher Browning, suggest that this theory has many shortcomings. Browning maintains that Goldhagen's monocausal explanation, that anti-Semitism alone was the motivational factor that led to mass genocide, is too simplistic (Browning 2000). Conversely, Browning's refusal to acknowledge the anti-Semitic, eliminationist ideology as the sole motive, conflicts with Goldhagen's underlying argument that a real psychological factor in the minds of the majority of killers was an important and necessary condition.

Benjamin Schwarz argues that the Holocaust did not start with Hitler and the Nazis, 'it began with the ordinary anti-Semitism of ordinary Germans' (Schwarz 2009, 49). This explanation builds on similar aspects of Goldhagen's view, but is it evidence enough to suggest that a whole nation of people are racist, anti-Jewish because they all hail from the same country, which again seems implausible. What is interesting about Schwarz's hypothesis is the idea that the Nazi system appeared to work from the bottom up; it implies that the National Socialist government gave the people what they wanted, i.e. the elimination of the Jews. Theodor Adorno, writing in 1950, focused on the authoritarian personality of Germans, indicating that their principle characteristic of obedience, to blindly follow orders irrespective of their moral content, is fundamental in explaining their compliance with the regime's planned annihilation of the Jews. Adorno states that, 'anti-Semitism is the rumour about the Jews', a rumour that was the focal point of National Socialist policy and propaganda effecting preconceptions held by Germans as to the Jews place in society (Adorno 1950, 347).

Some historians absolve ordinary Germans as willing participants in the Holocaust. Social

psychologist Lee Ross claims that the German people were 'ignorant dupes, guilty mainly of shutting their eyes to unpleasant realities that they could have readily discerned if they had been willing to look' (quoted in Lindner 2000, 3). Lindner supports the theory that ordinary Germans were led, through the use of propaganda, into mass killing as opposed to actively and willingly participating. She argues that 'Hitler seduced the German people creating not willing executioners but willing disciples or willing partners in seduction' (Lindner 2000, 5). It is this notion, that most were passively willing to either ignore or participate for fear of reprisal from the national socialist terror apparatus that appears to be validated by the evidence that follows in the second half of this study. Dahrendorf again adds further weight to this argument: he suggests that the ordinary German was passive and 'did not know about the national socialist crimes of violence' (Dahrendorf 1980, 37), but was that because nobody was prepared to ask questions? Consequently, was there a fear that they would realize the full horror and extent of the systematic and brutal killings that were taking place in the extermination camps? Although this was not a commendable stance it is hardly surprising that many did just that.

Revisionist historians have altered previously held perceptions that the Nazi party worked from the top down; Johnson believes that in the case of the destruction of European Jewry the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) was overburdened in maintaining the war effort and as such they depended on the support and the active collaboration of its citizenry for the continuation of the final solution. Johnson is arguing that the Nazi state operated, in this sense, from the bottom up, the ruling Nazis understood that they needed 'ordinary' Germans to participate in order to achieve their aims (Johnson 2006, 29). He continues:

One wonders how so many people could find the courage to dance to forbidden swing music ... and communicate their discontent with their government and society in many ways, but could not summon the courage and compassion to register abhorrence and thereby break the silence about the systematic murder of millions of millions of defenseless and innocent men, women and children (2006, 30).

Johnson demonstrates that many millions of Germans must have known at least some of the truth; he argues that there was a tacit Faustian bargain that was struck between the Nazi regime and its subordinates and concludes by suggesting that the German population aided and abetted one of the greatest crimes of the twentieth century: 'not through active collaboration but through passivity, denial and indifference' (ibid., 30). In some respects it is difficult to identify ordinary Germans too

closely with the Holocaust; in a sense it excuses or diminishes the culpability of those most directly involved, amongst them Himmler and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*). It is fair to say that the majority of Germans may not have realized that the dictatorship in which they lived was as vile as it became.

Another explanation as to why the Reich's citizenry would assist in the barbarism of the Jewish question is offered by Downing in his case study of the final solution in Poland (1998). He implies that the anti-Semitic propaganda that had become such a pivotal element of the NSDAP's indoctrination techniques leading up to and during the Second World War, proved the most significant factor as it dehumanized its victims. Downing claims that 'seeing victims not as humans helped some of the men, certainly, to ease at least part of their guilt at the beginning' (1998, 161). It is the implication that negative stereotypes helped contribute to a willingness to maintain the massacre that characterizes Downing's argument. Controversially, Schwarz argues that anti-Semitism in Germany was rife even before the alleged indoctrination of the Nazi propaganda machine. Schwarz claims that Nazi propaganda fuelled an already existing racial hatred of the Jews. It is perhaps difficult to understand propaganda as a driving force behind civilian participation in mass killing and although strong anti-Semitic publicity was rife, it is difficult to believe that it was strong enough to make somebody kill. Norbert Elias argues that Hitler utilized his skills as a propagandist to cumulatively build-up the resentment of ordinary Germans towards the Jews as he alleged that they were the cause of Germany's ills; he then directed this aggressive energy, fermented by humiliation, against Germany's neighbours and, more specifically, against the Jews (Elias 1998, 339).

The hate campaign waged by the NSDAP throughout its time in power put the Jewish problem at the forefront of their political and legislative agenda. It is implausible that the majority of the German population would not have acknowledged that the Nazis saw them as a problem, as vermin, as it had been the mainstay of their propaganda in films, such as *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew 1940) which graphically makes a comparison between rodents and the Jewish population. Nazi ideologies penetrated and altered popular attitudes, so that by 1939 most Germans believed that this religious group should be segregated or removed from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This does not in any way imply that the vast majority of Germans were in favour of genocide; a small number condemned Nazi policy in this respect, but most were indifferent to their plight.

Through the expansion of *Lebensraum* the first goal of the Final Solution was the deportation of the Jews to the recently conquered East. This was quickly and easily achieved at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as

it was easily accessed by the railway; because of this, Auschwitz became the perfect place to house, in relative secrecy, millions of Jews sentenced to labour and death. Some German civilians became increasingly aware of the mass killings within the death camps. Pivotal to the logistics of the 'Final Solution' were the employees of the *Deutsche Reichsbahn* (German Imperial Railway) who were fundamental in directing the freight trains carrying Jews from the whole of Europe to camps such as Birkenau. Steinbacher observes that 'In timetables of the *Reichsbahn* the transports were listed as special passenger trains, but were *de facto* sent out as goods trains' (2004, 76), and when these trains arrived at Auschwitz with their human cargo, the railway employees:

took over the carriages. A team of three, sometimes four, officials accompanied the transports to the camp. The railway men were present when the SS drove the inmates out of the carriages. They saw the selection process, watched the prisoner units unloading the luggage and the columns going to the crematoria. They brought the empty carriages back to the station, where the duty foreman of the goods dispatch office was already waiting for them (ibid.).

Therefore, there can be little or no doubt that the men working at this time, on this railway, had an awareness of what was happening. Indeed, after the war railway employees said that they 'knew nothing of the mass extermination until 1943' (Steinbacher 2004, 77). Why then after this realization did they not move to another location or raise objections? Was this a feasible step they could take to avoid their participation? Steinbacher suggests that these men thought they were, 'doing a valuable job' (ibid., 78). This implied indifference meant that these railway men could go about their jobs, taking Jews to final destruction, as if it were quite routine. Out of a sense of obedience and through the pedantic precision of their profession they showed no misgivings about their own actions. Perhaps the overwhelming burden of knowing about the systematic killings had no consequences for them, showing that some people were able to come to terms with mass murder.

IG Farben, the German chemical company with a factory situated in Monowitz near Auschwitz, is synonymous with both the utilization of slave labour from the concentration camps and the production (by one of its subsidiaries) of Zyklon B, the patented pesticide that was used to gas millions of innocent Jews. It is estimated that between 1941 and 1944 some eighty three thousand slave labourers were helping to build the facility, most were held captive at Auschwitz III-Monowitz (IG Farben 1947-8). The link between the Nazi Party and business is perhaps symbolized by this relationship more than any other. Here at IG Farben the civilian German population and the forced

labourer coexisted, working within the same company on the same site. It is plausible to suggest that they would have witnessed one another; the civilians would surely have seen the terrible physical state of the forced labourers and the SS guards beating them. Although the engineer and chief of construction at the Auschwitz plant, Dr Walter Durrfeld, denied knowing personally of any abuses of slave labour, his denials were contradicted by eyewitness testimony at the ensuing trial at Nuremberg. Prisoners testified that they were being beaten to death and many died from exhaustion whilst working for Farben. Many employees of the ammunition works, Friedrich Krupp GB, likewise kept to a pledge of silence regarding what they saw. One, Eric Lutat, testified as follows:

It was of course forbidden to talk about the things we learnt about the KZ [Konzentrationslager, or Concentration Camp]. However, we workers discussed it amongst ourselves, and I also mentioned it when I visited my family in Essen (Longbein 2004, 451).

His colleague, Paul Ortman, said: 'After about two weeks I went back to Essen [from Auschwitz] for a brief visit, and I know that at home I gave a report about what I had learned in Auschwitz' (ibid.). Civilians in the town of Auschwitz learned details that were known only to a small number of people. Georg Heydrich, the office manager of the massive IG Farben works in the town, was:

told by an obviously shaken and tearful SS man how corpses were burned on pyres outside the crematoriums in Birkenau. The SS man said that he had witnessed living people being thrown on these pyres (Longbein 2004, 451).

In his testimony Heydrich affirmed that the gassing of prisoners was discussed at that time, but they largely refused to believe it. There appears to be a variety of first-hand accounts that validate a general acknowledgement, within the work-force at IG Farben and the wider community around Auschwitz, of what was taking place in the nearby camp; even if some refused to believe it for themselves as 'common sense could not understand that it was possible to exterminate tens and hundreds of thousands of Jews' (Yitzhak Zuckerman, a leader of the Jewish Resistance in Warsaw, ushmm 2013). Steinbacher claims that the Reich Germans of Auschwitz were indifferent to the camp, although they did recognize its existence when, for example, the Lager-SS, on Wehrmacht Day in March 1943, invited citizens to a communal feast: the New Year festival of the same year was held in full view of the camp, two hundred Reich Germans ate hearty meals unaffected by the events taking place in the nearby camp (Steinbacher 2004, 79). In a relatively small settlement such as Auschwitz it is feasible that partial information, supposition and rumours circulated among the

inhabitants. People would have suspected the worst, particularly when they noticed a sweetish smell of burning flesh, evidence that would have been hard to overlook. A latent anxiety must have existed which meant that no-one asked questions, forcing people's grimmest suspicions to the back of their minds leading to indifference and an involuntary participation through silence.

In the first months of 1945, as the tide of war swung dramatically in favour of the approaching allies, a series of now infamous 'death marches' towards the ever shrinking Reich ensued. Many German civilians volunteered to act as guards on these large scale evacuations, as members of *Volkssturm* (2), the Police and just as ordinary civilians who wanted to preserve an ethnically pure Germany. In the town of Gardelegen, a settlement in east central Germany, the U.S. Army found the charred remains of Jewish prisoners in a barn:

It was later discovered that people had volunteered to guard the prisoners, including ordinary civilians, some of them armed with hunting rifles, who mutated into prison guards of their own volition (Blatman 2001, 176).

Colonel George. P. Lynch, of the 102nd U.S. infantry said of this attack:

Some will say that the Nazis were responsible for this crime.

Others will point to the Gestapo. The responsibility rests with neither. It is the responsibility of the entire German people (quoted in Hall 2011, online).

There are countless other examples of such atrocities; it appears that as the war approached its end and the presence of Jewish prisoners became more obvious in the midst of the German population 'the more regularly German civilians participated' (Blatman 2011, 189). There is no documentary evidence that the SS or Gestapo ordered these killings, it appears that these groups of civilians were protecting their homes from the so called sub-humans who had become the hate blank of the nation.

Perhaps the group most synonymous with the extermination of the Jews are the SS who had, during the pre-war years, competed with powerful rivals both within the Nazi Party and the state apparatus in order to gain authority to direct efforts towards a 'solution' to the Jews. They established a special department in the SD in 1934 with a specific aim of researching the Jewish question under the watchful eye of Adolf Eichmann, a man who demonstrated great imagination with regards to

Judenangelegenheiten (translates as Jewish matters). When the Nazis invaded Russia in July 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) consisting of the security police and the SD, with some support from German Army Units and locally recruited auxiliaries, such as the *Volkssturm*, had, ‘... been shooting all Jewish males of arms bearing age in the areas of the USSR that they occupied’ (ushmm 2013). Later in July, with the arrival of Higher SS and Police Leaders came the coordination fundamental to carry out larger scale operations, these two groups began to systematically wipe out entire Russian Jewish communities. Gellateley gives evidence of the Black Shirts disrespect for Jewish life, after a failed assassination attempt on Hitler in November 1939; in the Buchenwald concentration camp, twenty one Jews were shot as a result of their arrests during the 1938 pogrom. ‘Apparently the SS leaders in the camp regarded the killings as their own private reprisal, and they hinted of things to come’ (Gellateley 2001, 400). This illustrates the readiness for the SS to carry out killings irrespective of direct connections to Hitler’s intended assassination, nation or the Nazi Party. In general, however, there prevails the impression that the executions of Jewish people were excesses for which Himmler, Eichmann and the SS were responsible, while only a few contemporaries were ready to accept that this was a systematic proceeding of the regime. The aforementioned ambiguity, therefore, served as a smokescreen to prevent any comprehensive picture of the annihilation process. Even very high functionaries within the regime did not obtain adequate information about the destruction process. Another example is the role of Albert Speer, in later years he would become a predominant influence, who ascertained that he did not realize what was going on in Auschwitz (3). Maybe that is the outcome of a continuous repression of the truth or simply political naivety connected with the loss of any moral standards. If things like this could happen at the top of the regime, then it is not likely that the ordinary German achieved any distinct knowledge about the Final Solution, although frequently the men on the street, and communist opponents, were more aware of the events than the political class in the Third Reich, which did everything to repress an unwanted reality. The SS were, as Mommsen argues, motivated by racial prejudice and national fanaticism (Mommsen and O’Connor 1994, 367).

This essay has evaluated evidence that suggests that ordinary Germans did participate, both directly and indirectly, in the murder of European Jewry but their rationale for doing so appears less clear. There is no disputing that civilians did see and discuss elements of the ‘Final Solution’, but it is their motivations for involvement that are problematic. This paper has intended to add weight to the argument made by Lee, Lindear and Dahrendorf: that there existed passivity, an unwillingness to acknowledge what was happening in the death camps. It is perhaps striking that some Germans thought little about what was happening to the Jews; they were, wholly and not unnaturally

concerned with their own anxieties and sufferings. Propaganda still poured out its anti-Jewish vitriol, blaming them for the war and linking them with the destruction of Germany. Relatively few citizens within Germany had first-hand; detailed awareness of the murderous events continuing in the east; for most it was a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. It is the middle ranking bureaucrat, the fervent Nazis, that lay in the various strata's of the National Socialist regime that maintained a civilian presence and participation in the final solution; it was they who held the notion of producing and maintaining a racially pure *Volksgemeinschaft*. The interpretation that power emanated from the top down, or from the bottom up is perhaps problematic in that it ignores the middling ranks of the regime; both in civilian organizations, industry and the transport infrastructure, where there is apparent a recklessness and disregard for human life in the face of profit, maintenance of national identity and loyalty to the Third Reich. It was their manipulation of the mass population, who did not possess radical Nazi ideologies, that is the decisive factor in understanding why the German people participated in the Holocaust.

Notes

- (1) This paper does not intend to prove whether the Holocaust happened or not; the analysis assumes that the 'Final Solution' did take place.
- (2) The *Volkssturm*, or people's militia, was a military unit consisting of men between the ages of 16-60. They were poorly equipped and in many cases lacked even the most basic of uniform. Their military application was far from successful and desertion amongst their rank was common-place.
- (3) Although this would later be questioned as it was made transparent through his own admission in a private correspondence to a family member before his death in 1981 that he did know of the 'Final Solution'.

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