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### Dogma: How a Convenient Narrative Led to the Holocaust

Morgan Rynn Schroeder

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

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# Dogma: How a Convenient Narrative Led to the Holocaust

Advisor Dr. David Ellis

By Morgan Rynn Schroeder



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<sup>1</sup> "Tower A," Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. All photos were taken by me in 2023 unless otherwise specified.

## Introduction

By early 1942, Nazi military forces had managed to expand their territory into both eastern and western neighboring countries. With the attainment of this land came millions of new people that the Nazis would preside over, many of which they would eventually kill. During this crucial year, the Nazis used the inhabitants of the eastern Slavic territories to erect ghettos, concentration camps, and eventually extermination camps. Reichsführer of the SS Heinrich Himmler placed Odilo Globocnik into a position which allowed him to craft the systematic killing of Jews in Poland. Globocnik oversaw the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka extermination camps in an action known as Operation Reinhard.<sup>2</sup> Mass graves quickly accumulated outside of these camps, with thousands of victims murdered mostly by weaponized starvation, shootings or gassing. Fearing the discovery of these mass graves, Himmler ordered Globocnik to dig up the deceased and burn their bodies to dispose of the evidence. To this, Globocnik remarked that rather than digging up the deceased, they should “bury bronze tablets stating that it was we who had the courage to carry out this gigantic task.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite his audacious comment, Globocnik completed his task of burning up the majority of those murdered in the three extermination camps. However, long after the war, the Germans did eventually place bronze tablets all over Europe. Instead of stating the “courage” of the Nazis for killing the Jews, they placed these tablets in front of the last

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 282.

<sup>3</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 101.

residence of the Jews and simply stated their name, birth date, deportation date, and their subsequent fate.<sup>4</sup>



During my study abroad in Berlin in the summer of 2023, the hotel I stayed at laid out nine of these tablets. This grouping would be the largest collection that I would see

together outside of a single building. Every day that I stepped outside of my temporary residence, I took notice of these tablets, sometimes stopping to reread the names. I noticed others laid throughout the city as continuous reminders that the Berlin I walked through that summer looked vastly different from that same location in 1945.

To be clear, I will focus only on Nazis in their original context, from the founding of the party in 1920 to the downfall in 1945. The term *Nazi* refers to anyone who supported the ideology (*Nazism*) pushed by the party. To borrow the language of the historian Raoul Hilberg, they were *perpetrators*, not bystanders or victims. People under the umbrella of this term include party members, soldiers who engaged in war crimes, and civilians within the Reich who worked to support the cause. Civilians who did not support the ideology, yet did nothing to combat it, will not be considered Nazis in this context. This terminological distinction is not meant to excuse such individuals of all responsibility. Many of these people ultimately played a role in the Holocaust as passive enablers, but to lump them in with active ideologues would complicate my central task in this work.

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<sup>4</sup> Outside of Hotel Bellevue, Berlin. *Stolpersteine* or stumbling stones by Gunter Demnig.



Furthermore, when referring to the Holocaust, it must be understood that this term narrows the focus down to the Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis. Among many others, the deaths of the mentally or physically ill, homosexuals, Roma and Sinti, and civilians developed alongside the murder of Jewish people, but should not be melded together. These are different populations with their own cultures and the Nazis sought their elimination for distinct reasons.

Antisemitism, or hostile feelings towards Jewish people, was (and remains in today's neo-Nazism) an integral part of Nazi ideology. While the prejudice can stand on its own, Nazism cannot exist without it. The profound importance of antisemitism to Nazism helps to explain the expenditure of vast resources by party and military elites towards the cause and towards the effort to indoctrinate ordinary Germans.

This brief section on the importance of terminology matters because the Nazi movement started with words. Even before the 1920s, many people resonated with what the Nazis eventually articulated into a convenient antisemitic narrative. This (mis)understanding allowed them to create legislation that appeared justified in order to create a better Germany. Laws became policies of war. The Nazis invaded surrounding countries based in part on the preservation of those they saw as racially fit while simultaneously weeding out the unfit. As much as the ideology allowed them to rise and accomplish a tremendous amount of their goals, the resulting hubristic blindness ultimately led to their downfall.

## **The Evolution of Antisemitic Thought**

The most elite Nazis in Adolf Hitler's inner circle, including Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler among others, all shared Hitler's inveterate hatred towards Jews. Their dedication to eradicating the population implied a deeper loathing among the Germans than simply using Jews as a political tool. However, these factors do not explain why the Nazis disfavored the Jews above all other groups of people that seemed just as applicable to be scapegoated. This is not to say that the Nazis did not persecute any other groups: Slavs, communists, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and impaired were included among the many victims. Still, none of these groups ever reached the absolute top position of abhorrence that the Nazis placed the Jews in. A simple reason may be the convenience of the population size. Jewish population remained small enough to easily dominate, yet this circles back to the question of why the Nazis sought an enemy in the first place.

For many centuries, as far back as the Roman Empire, feuding religious factions created a hostile environment for Jewish people. This carried on into Medieval times across Europe. Most conflict only arose out of religious antagonism and out-group hatred was not limited to Jews. Christians and Pagans oppressed one another for many years, with the former eventually becoming the dominant authority. What makes antisemitism unique in this development comes from the limited power that they held compared to other creeds. Furthermore, around the late 1800s and early 1900s, antisemitism became something more. Judaism became conflated with race, which only made the alienation all the more volatile.

The historian Richard Evans shares an interesting thought experiment that explains the fragility of European armistice with the Jewish population. He explains: if a time traveler could find him or herself in Europe before WWI and asked a well-educated citizen to predict which country the Holocaust would take place in, the answer would most likely not be Germany. A more likely guess would be France, where an espionage case involving a Jewish artillery officer, known as the Dreyfus affair, led to an exponential rise in antisemitism. Another guess may be in Russia, where the Tsar oversaw the deaths of hundreds of Jews after the failed revolution of 1905.<sup>5</sup> Agreed upon by multiple historians, the thought experiment shows just how close Europe was to succumbing to a Jewish genocide before the Holocaust. Even with the shared misfortunes of WWI and the Great Depression, only the Germans arrived in such a state where mass killings could be carried out. I decided to focus this paper from the German perspective for this reason.

With an understanding of how antisemitism ignited in early 20th century Europe, now the scope must be narrowed onto Germany. Over centuries, numerous Germans became influential figures, not just in their homeland, but also around the world. Among many such celebrities, for better or worse, include Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Richard Wagner, and Friedrich Nietzsche. A commonality between these figures is that a number of historians accused all of them being antisemitic, but the situation is more complicated than that. In the case of Nietzsche, his antisemitic sister manipulated his works to fit the Nazi narrative. Kant's views remain up for debate, leaning in his favor of not resenting Jews. As for the others, they show either explicit hatred towards Jews or

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<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 31.

bias by today's standards. The Germans' history of antisemitism reaches far back to the founding of the state, and the most championed among them often fall into that category.

Perhaps the most interesting case among the celebrities can be found in the composer and master storyteller Richard Wagner. During his life in the 1800s, he used his influence to peddle antisemitic ideas outside of and within his popular artistry. Hitler once said, "Whoever wants to understand National Socialist Germany must know Wagner."<sup>6</sup> By analyzing Wagner's stories through this lens, it is easy to see the deeply rooted German ideas of dominating through special gifts and fighting sin associated with Jews, such as greed. By substituting the great warriors of old that Wagner glorified and their defeated miscreant enemies with Aryans and Jews, respectively, it becomes clear why his artistry was used as a medium to self-reinforce what nationalists considered the true history of Germany, opposed to a defeated country after WWI.

In a similar way, though less profound, the British-born self-identified German philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain wrote about what would later become the core tenets of Nazi ideology. He especially focused on the racialization of the Jews as a subhuman species contrasted with the superior Aryan race. In Chamberlain's most infamous work, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts (The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, 1899)*, he articulated the hatred of and gave philosophical power to numerous would-be Nazi leaders.<sup>7</sup> Wagner and Chamberlain popularized antisemitism, tying it to nationalist sentiments, and the hatred quickly became a pillar of common society, whether the average German could be completely aware of it or not.

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<sup>6</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich Volume I* (Garden City: International Collector's Library, 1960), 111.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

The development of the Nazis was a symptom of antisemitism in broader German society, though the Nazis certainly did much to intensify and radicalize it. The proximity and cultural apathy, or even antipathy towards the Jews made them a convenient scapegoat for the tragedy faced in the Weimar Republic. While the scale of animosity towards the Jews may not have developed to the extent that it later did in the Holocaust, some countries in Europe at the time might have brought about a large-scaled attack against them with the right components falling into place: the loss of a war, an economic crisis, and a ruthless dictator.

## **Trinity of Propaganda**

Despite the Nazi agreement that Jews caused the woes of the world, the use of “Jew” as a label became a catch-all and remained unrefined and therefore self-contradictory. Even with the guidance of the central government, by the end of the regime, the demonized term “Jew” could be slapped like a sticker over anything they disagreed with, regardless of consistency, and without proof. They placed the blame on Jews for the “stab in the back” that caused German defeat in WWI. The Jews also manipulated the markets, resulting in the worst economic depression in human history. They were simultaneously Bolsheviks *and* capitalists whispering in the ears of western leaders. Jews used their riches to control, while also *choosing* to live in squalor among rats. The Nazis who produced these myths performed extravagant mental gymnastics to confirm their own biases, but to Germans under the pressure of the time, a concrete reason to why they suffered was more than welcome.



Within the Third Reich, three main sources of propaganda overtook all forms of media available at the time. Hitler began this campaign of indoctrination in the 1920s with rallying speeches and his book, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). His fanatical, loyalist colleague in the party, Alfred Rosenberg followed up in 1930 with his book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, a reference to H. S. Chamberlain's *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*. Finally, after taking power, Joseph Goebbels oversaw all mediums of propaganda, from film to radio. These arbiters of information controlled the narrative surrounding the state of Germany and the sort of people who belonged within it.

Although numerous figures throughout German history wrote doctrines of propaganda, the most impactful and infamous of these was *Mein Kampf*. In this autobiographical book, Hitler lays out his reasoning for his hatred and attempts to supply evidence as to why every person of Aryan blood should join his cause. While this book reigns supreme in the public eye as an ultimate manifesto of evil, there is actually little about the book that is unique. He took much inspiration from Italian Fascism and feared Marxism, as did many others in Western societies at the time. He even admits that his introduction to antisemitism came from newspapers.<sup>8</sup> While this cannot be definitively proven, given the prominence of antisemitic rhetoric in the time of his youth, he may have first realized the collective feelings towards Jews through newspapers. Both the German Conservative party and the Pan-German League drummed up a lot of support through antisemitism even before World War I.<sup>9</sup> Although Hitler did not completely agree with the

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<sup>8</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Trans. Abraham Foxman. (Harper Collins, 2001.), 54-55.

<sup>9</sup> German History in Documents and Images. Document. "The Conservatives Embrace Antisemitism: The Tivoli Program of the German Conservative Party" (1892). Accessed August 13th, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=758](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=758)

practices of the Pan-German League, he appreciated the foundations with which the League was built, and supported the cause. They thought that Germans needed to unite with Austria and expand over Europe as the ruling race, an idea that he never abandoned.<sup>10</sup> His obsession with ruling, race, and Jewish conspiracies made him susceptible to propaganda, just like the people he eventually manipulated in the same way.

A myth surrounds *Mein Kampf*, where the words hold a possessive power over the reader, converting those with untrained eyes into a primed Nazi. Reading this book results in no such possession, but may actually put the reader to sleep. Historians almost universally regard it as a slog to study, and German citizens in the 1920s seem to agree. Hitler sold an insignificant amount of copies before 1930 and the amount of people who read cover to cover must have been even fewer.<sup>11</sup> After coming to power, the Nazis put a law in place where not owning a copy in a household would be punishable as an act of treason, but this does not mean that more people read it.<sup>12</sup> This book simply did not hold the same power over the masses as Hitler's speeches, where his style of rambling on about ideas could be articulated in such a way that inspired stadiums of people to scream with bliss for their *Führer*.

While the disorder of the book will lead many to scoff at the very idea of reading it any further, lawyer and activist against antisemitism, Abraham Foxman argues that the existence of this book before Hitler's achievement of power "denies the free world the excuse of ignorance. We dismissed him as a madman and we ignored his wretched book;

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<sup>10</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Vol. 1, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 2005), 196-197.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

the result was a tragedy of unprecedented proportions.”<sup>13</sup> The propagandistic component of the book may not have been successful in the past, but the foreshadowing that Hitler explains throughout proved to be ambitions strong enough to become a reality. He achieved his stated goals of *Lebensraum* (“livingspace”) where he would invade surrounding countries, including Russia, for a time.<sup>14</sup> He conflated Judaism with Marxism and eventually convinced others of the same.<sup>15</sup> Most significantly, he made his point more than clear on his intentions for Jews living in what he considered Aryan territory. With great repetition, Hitler refers to the Jews as “parasites” throughout his writing, and at the end of the chapter in which he describes when he fully embraced antisemitism, he declares, “Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*”<sup>16</sup>

Hitler held near complete oversight regarding what information would be shared with the German people. He placed tight restraints on the few people in his inner circle who shared in the power of influence, including Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels. Both men found themselves competing against one another for Hitler’s approval by producing content made for him which would subsequently be shown to the masses of Germany.

Rosenberg held a number of positions throughout the existence of the Nazi party, but considered his duty to be that of the “custodian” of Nazi ideology above all else.<sup>17</sup> His first position would be that of the head editor for the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the official

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<sup>13</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, xxi-xxii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 643, 654.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Emphasis in the original text.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg. *The Myth of the 20th Century* (Black Kite Publishing, 2017), 22.

Nazi newspaper. After continuous production and an increase in popularity in the 1920s, Rosenberg eventually came to reach his main goal of writing a conclusive theory on race in history by 1930.<sup>18</sup> The result was *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Much like Hitler, Rosenberg's publications would fail to be unique. He wrote his pseudo-history from the perspective of race as the ultimate factor that decided the tide of the future, justifying all of the actions that the German race would soon take. Although he achieved one million



copies sold by 1944, a common joke emerged that the book became the second great and unread bestseller of the Third Reich, second only to *Mein Kampf*.<sup>19</sup>

No definitive evidence remains that Hitler ever read Rosenberg's book. Further still, he did not consider it to be the ultimate articulation of

Nazi ideology.<sup>20</sup> Only Rosenberg's dogged loyalty allowed him to remain in a position of power. In 1934, Hitler promoted Rosenberg to head the cultural and educational section of the government with the purpose of allowing the latter to snuff out any outside influence on German society. This position would be expanded upon in 1941, as he also became responsible for establishing administration for the occupied eastern territories. This final promotion seemed to be only a ceremonial honorific to add to his titles. Lesser administrators seemed to carry more say in what actually became founded for the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; Location of the infamous book burning in Berlin, 1933; an instance of German students self-censoring in favor of propaganda.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

remaining years in the east.<sup>21</sup> Rosenberg ultimately accomplished little, even with his rank and resources. His competitor, Goebbels, won Hitler's approval outright.

Goebbels occupied the position of Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. Unlike Rosenberg, he took a rather subtle approach to his productions. Goebbels used Hitler's own tactic of not always explicitly stating end goals, but rather promoting a message that could be easily understood by common people. He appealed to patriotic nationalism while framing Jews as an ever present threat. Too much overt politicization, however, would eventually weigh down on the minds of Germans to the point of desensitization. He oversaw the licensing of every single film made in the Third Reich, and if he predicted it would hold significance for the Nazi cause, he would supply funding, along with professionals to work in front of and behind the camera.<sup>22</sup> This allowed him to hone the balance of messaging with such efficiency that Rosenberg grew to resent him with great jealousy. In his diary on March 1, 1940, Rosenberg wrote, "Dr. Goebbels, who so often talks of spiritual warfare, may find the right tone for a company of Levantines, but not the German people."<sup>23</sup>

A prime example of Goebbels' technique would be employed in the film *Jud Süß* (*Jew Suess*, 1940). This film depicts an extreme distortion of the historic trial of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, a half-Jew (by definition of the laws of the Third Reich). The Württemberg Diet accused Süß Oppenheimer of misappropriating money after the Duke of Württemberg, to whom he served as a financial advisor, had a conflict of interest with the Diet. Aside from these charges regarding finance, the Diet also leveled the allegation that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>22</sup> Leiser, Erwin. *Nazi Cinema*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1975), 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12.



Süß Oppenheimer engaged in sexual misconduct with multiple wealthy ladies, although they kept the identities of these women anonymous to protect their family names. The evidence surrounding the charges remained questionable, but regardless, the courts sentenced Süß Oppenheimer to death by hanging.<sup>24</sup>

The writer and director of the film *Jud Süß*, Veit Harlan, presented the historical retelling in such a way that frames Süß Oppenheimer's allegations as facts. He became the model archetype for a criminal Jew: a conniving man who stole money and raped innocent Aryan women.<sup>25</sup> The latter scene in particular roused Germans from their cinema seats with shouts. In a Berlin theatre it is said that people declared that the Jews must be removed from Germany!<sup>26</sup> The film inspired such hatred for Jewish people that Heinrich Himmler ordered his SS and police officers to view the film multiple times. During a post-war trial in Frankfurt, the former SS guard of Auschwitz, Stefan Baretzki, cited *Jud Süß* as encouragement to treat Jewish prisoners more harshly.<sup>27</sup>

Without a doubt, films impacted many Germans, steering them towards Goebbels ideals. He did not, however, win over everyone in a hypnotic way as is often attributed to the power of his propaganda. He achieved stoking the flames of the people who already agreed with him, but there is little evidence that people with a disposition of passivity were awakened into action. What impressed people more were the theatrical improvements within their own country. Before Goebbels, almost all popular movies came

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 572.

<sup>27</sup> Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, 85.

from Hollywood. Indeed, the more dramatized and less blatant a movie was, the more seats filled.<sup>28</sup>

A comparable film to *Jud Süß*, which came out the same year, *The Eternal Jew*, established that people cared little for content that had a more obvious agenda. In this documentary-style film, Jews are shown in Polish ghettos under destitute circumstances, *nevermind who put them there*. A narrator explains that the Jews prefer living in these conditions in order to sustain their wealth. They are compared to rats, people who spread diseases to good Aryans.<sup>29</sup> Audiences cared little for the film. Many walked out, missing the sequence at the end where Jews are shown slitting the throats of animals, as is a part of their kosher tradition.<sup>30</sup> Audiences widely agreed that the pandering to only the most radical Nazis was a waste of time and nothing they had not heard before in other forms of propaganda.

Aside from film, Goebbels experimented with new technologies, most notably with the radio. He ensured the production of cheap radios that were bought by millions of Germans and controlled all available stations in Germany. He made it clear in a speech from 1933 that he thought his role in government was to be ever-present, rather than reactionary. Furthermore, in a follow-up speech made ten days later, he stated his ministry works for the “mobilization of mind and spirit in Germany.”<sup>31</sup> He used this broadcasting power to share speeches by himself, Hitler, and other high ranking officials. Germans felt more connected to their leaders this way, not unlike Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside

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<sup>28</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 572.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 572.

<sup>31</sup> “Joseph Goebbels: Two Speeches on the Tasks of the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda” (March 15 / March 25, 1933), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 19th, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/subdocument.cfm?document\\_id=1579](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/subdocument.cfm?document_id=1579).

Chats.” Keeping in-mind the need for pleasing people, he also made sure that popular music played for many hours of the day. When the war began, practical information such as how to ration food was shared. Towards the end of the war, as Allied forces closed in and bombed out prominent cities, desperate messages were made over the radio to encourage Germans to keep fighting.<sup>32</sup> By this time, even once-fanatical supporters of Nazism began to turn off their radios.<sup>33</sup>

Not all Nazi propaganda succeeded in seducing people into the cause. It worked mostly as a tool to rally people who already supported it. Hitler’s speeches and Goebbels’ media proved to be the most effective of their attempts, with Rosenberg pushed out of view in his attempt to intellectualize Nazism. Rather than being blunt, people backed roundabout forms of propaganda, especially if they told a story. These tactics kept up support for the Nazis for about ten years before people began to see through the lies in significant numbers. Before the end, the German people would go through a long journey as a country as they slowly found themselves within one of the worst dictatorships the world had yet to see.

## **The Escalation of Laws**

Since the beginning of the Nazi party taking power in Germany in 1933, they implemented laws targeting Jews. While it was not the first law to be implemented which targeted Jews, the most detrimental of these early laws to be put into place was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. This law demanded that “civil

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 574.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

servants of non-Aryan descent are to be retired.” It also stated that those with “former political activity [which] affords no guarantee that they will act in the interest of the national state at all times and without reservation can be dismissed from service.”<sup>34</sup> This began to solidify the absolute control over the country and people which would only increase with time. The Jews would be the official enemy of the state and anyone who disagreed would lose their livelihood. This threat, combined with the paramilitary action taken by stormtroopers, shut down many otherwise-ordinary people from resisting through fear of persecution. For the Jewish population, this meant the beginning of the end of their citizenship.

Not all policy that would be used against the Jews started with explicit damnation targeting the population. To the Nazis, racial hygiene did not only mean the exclusion of racial mixing, but also the purification of diseases from their own race. The application of programs to erase people with hereditary disabilities set a precedent for the future extermination of sub-populations within the expanded Reich. Nazi doctors justified these deeds under the guise of empathy, for the people they killed were “life unworthy of life.”<sup>35</sup>

As early as 1933, the Nazi-ran government enacted the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases. Amongst the vague language, the law established that those with a “high probability” of passing on their deficiencies would be sterilized. Such deficiencies included: congenital mental deficiency; schizophrenia; manic depression, now known as bipolar disorder; hereditary epilepsy; hereditary St. Vitus’

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<sup>34</sup> “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” (April 7, 1933), German History in Documents and Images, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1521](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1521).

<sup>35</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich At War*, 77.

dance, also known as Huntington's chorea; hereditary blindness; hereditary deafness; and other serious hereditary physical deformity. Although the law included these specific diseases, other disabilities were included if they proved to be a "burden" on the state, especially if the disabled person needed welfare.<sup>36</sup> Neither the law or the doctors who performed the operation gave the victims any choice in the matter. Nearly 90% of cases were approved for sterilization and were unlikely to be overturned in an appeal. Two-thirds of the victims came from mental hospitals. By the end of the war, doctors sterilized 360,000 people and most of the procedures took place before the start of the war in 1939.<sup>37</sup>

When the war began, the Nazis changed their policies from sterilization to murder. Even with the distraction of war, Hitler still stuck to his ambition of racial hygiene. Rather than seeing it as a hindrance, he crafted the invasion of Poland around the policy, integrating it into the war effort as a whole. While Hitler may have always planned to deport or murder the lives "unworthy of life" in his new territory, he received a letter which inspired him to act sooner than later. A German citizen, a father, sent a message directly to him pleading for the euthanization of his own newborn son. The child had been born with terrible physical deformities to the extent that the disability would lead to dependence for the rest of his life. The father sent this letter to Hitler because no doctor

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<sup>36</sup> "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" (April 7, 1933), German History in Documents and Images, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1521](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1521).

<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, (New York: Penguin 2006), 508-509.



would or could euthanize the child for fear of being charged with murder. Hitler wrote a personal decree to his physicians which enabled the Children's Euthenasia Program.<sup>38</sup>

The headquarters for this program were centralized in Berlin under the codename of Aktion T4 (*Action*). Rather than continuing to expend resources for sterilization, people with extreme cases of disabilities would be executed. In Germany, Nazis took disabled people from their homes, including children, without consent from anyone. The Nazis transported the victims to large hospitals where the practice of murder became increasingly efficient. In the beginning of the program, doctors started by delivering lethal chemical injections. When this process became too strenuous for them, the idea of gassing the patients arose. With this alternative, multiple people could be gassed at once, saving time, effort, and resources. This worked so well that doctors exterminated patients almost immediately after arriving. After half a month or more passed, staff at the hospitals sent home letters explaining to their family that their relative died of tuberculosis or a similar illness.<sup>39</sup>

In Poland, Nazi soldiers committed the killings, not doctors. Upon finding hospitals and asylums, the soldiers forced the patients outside and into open fields where they were shot in thousands.<sup>40</sup> Unlike at the home front, the extent of the disabilities did not matter in the extended Reich. Any burden imposed by the existence of the patient needed to be exterminated. The development of the eugenics program parallels what would later happen to the Jews, but notably the sterilization and killing of the disabled needed to

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<sup>38</sup> "Signed Letter by Hitler Authorizing Euthanasia Killings" (backdated to September 1, 1939), German History in Documents and Images, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1528](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1528).

<sup>39</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 79-81.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

happen first in order for the persecution of the Jews to seem more justified. While the disabled are easily recognized with more clear effects on a society, to those who did not see the world through antisemitic lenses, the accusations against the Jews by the Nazis were far less obvious.

Much of the German population may have been familiar or engaged with antisemitism before the Third Reich, with many more succumbing to the ideology as Hitler and Goebbels encouraged it, but overall, the regime needed to convince a greater amount of people that the Jews were also “life unworthy of life.” Without the support, or at least the indifference, of German citizens and soldiers, the absolute removal of the Jews from Europe could not be done. The Nazis employed relentless, yet gradual indoctrination: explicitly to rally the political base and soldiers, implicitly for skeptical citizens.

The pressure on Jews increased from 1933 onwards with a sharp escalation taking place in 1935 with the publication of the Nuremberg Laws. Through these laws, the Nazis officially defined many important terms, beginning with, “A citizen of the Reich is only that subject who is of German or kindred blood and who, through his conduct, shows that he is both willing and able to faithfully serve the German people and Reich.”<sup>41</sup> A full German needed to be genetically and faithfully committed to the Nazi cause or lose their status. The treatment of non-citizens proved to be separate and unequal.

A Jew could not be a citizen. A half-Jew could not be a citizen. Only quarter-Jews may be spared if their parents raised them as Christians. Old age, injuries or a First Class Iron Cross earned in WWI came with the *acceptation* into old-age-ghettos rather than

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<sup>41</sup> “The Reich Citizenship Law” (September 15, 1935) and the “First Regulation to the Reich Citizenship Law” (November 14, 1935), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1523](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1523).

*evacuation*. Few exceptions to these rules could be made, including for women and children.<sup>42</sup> Part of the intention behind these laws was to encourage Jews to leave. At this point, the fate of their existence in Europe had yet to be decided. Debates of deportation, imprisonment, and execution loomed in the closed halls of government offices. As Hitler began making plans for war, the Jewish Question soon came to the forefront of plans laid out for an official Solution.

Goebbels thought of himself as a man capable of finding that Solution. Since the beginning of his career as a minister, he organized ways to terrorize the Jewish population. In 1933, he forced a boycott of Jewish businesses.<sup>43</sup> After the call to inaction, indeed few Germans continued to buy from Jews, at least publically. It is unclear if Goebbels thought that the avoidance of these businesses came from a shared hatred of the owners or if people merely feared the paramilitary Nazis posted outside the entryways. These men held weapons in the open, unafraid to beat anyone who disobeyed the order. They created signs with antisemitic slogans and slurs to be nailed over store windows.<sup>44</sup> The boycott of Jewish goods and services continued throughout the remainder of the Reich with little to no protest from the Germans.

After years of success in media production and protests, Goebbels felt confident enough to go against his own usual subtle style of propaganda in favor of a more radical approach. In early November of 1938, a 17-year-old Jewish boy, Herschel Grynszpan shot

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>43</sup> "Joseph Goebbels Calls for a Boycott of Jewish Businesses" (April 1, 1933), German History in Documents and Images, Image, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1940](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1940).

<sup>44</sup> "SA Members Hang Boycott Posters on a Jewish Shop in Munich" (April 1, 1933), German History in Documents and Images, Image, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1941](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1941).

and mortally wounded the Nazi foreign diplomat, Ernst vom Rath, in Paris. Vom Rath survived the initial attack, but despite the best efforts of Hitler's top surgeons, he died not long after.<sup>45</sup> Acting on behalf of the martyred, Goebbels took it upon himself to take out the collective rage of the Nazis onto the Jews.

As night fell, he ordered stormtroopers to raid the homes of Jews, chasing them to the streets and beating those who straggled. Defiance was met with gunfire. People who sought refuge in their synagogues found none. Their houses of worship burned with flames as tall as the skyline. The screams of the dying could be heard throughout the streets. What few Jewish businesses remained became looted and dismantled for good.<sup>46</sup>

At the end of it all, German citizens emerged in the morning to the smell of char from lingering smoke. As they walked through the streets, they passed over the broken glass for which *Kristallnacht* had been named. They did not know this at the time, but 30,000 fewer Jews inhabited their towns. The stormtroopers herded their prisoners into concentration camps, where many would remain until 1945 or until their deaths.<sup>47</sup>



The reaction of German citizens to *Kristallnacht* remains contested. Like any complex event, it inspired a mixture of opinions and feelings to varying intensities.

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<sup>45</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, (Binghamton: Yale University Press, 2008.), 173.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 174; "The Morning after the Night of Broken Glass [*Kristallnacht*] in Kassel: The Looted and Destroyed Jewish Community House" (November 10, 1938), *German History in Documents and Images*, Image, Accessed August 10, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1952](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1952)

Historians find it important to analyze the mindset of common Germans regarding this particular event because of its significance as a turning point in how the Nazis treated the Jews. Such a public display of cruelty could not be so easily ignored, unlike the disappearances of political enemies or the secrecy of Action T4. Regardless of the majority opinion, the German people failed as a whole to understand the situation they found themselves in and did not realize the full extent of their error until planes began flying overhead.

The historian Sir Ian Kershaw made a name for himself as a writer who understands the importance of nuance. He views the German citizen in a mature manner which does not belittle their existence into cartoonish villainy. When he states the opinions of ordinary Germans, he does so based on the expressed thoughts and actions that followed an event for the majority. Leading up to *Kristallnacht*, Kershaw argues that the ruling feeling of the Germans after the event was indifference.<sup>48</sup> After the demoralization of World War I, the economic hardship of the Weimar years, and then the abuse of the totalitarian dictatorship set in place, the pressure put on an untrusted, small minority did not inspire much sympathy. The propaganda won the support of some Germans, but most only attempted to survive, saluting when necessary and keeping *Mein Kampf* dusted on their shelves.

The presence of Gestapo, SA, and SS officers overshadowed any remaining affinity the Germans held for the Jews. Any real concern probably came from an economic perspective, rather than personal connection. In a time where families were threatened with the deprivation of food, they did not care about who they bought the cow from, but

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<sup>48</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, 163-165.



only the price of the cow.<sup>49</sup> As the Nazi government attempted to supply the German people with only German goods and services, most people followed along in lockstep.



Kershaw emphasizes that this conformity of indifference paved the road to Auschwitz.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this strong resistance of sympathy by the Germans, the attacks during *Kristallnacht* proved to be too significant to pretend Nazi action was justified. For the first time in a long

time, the Nazis found themselves facing resistance, or at least dissent. Even within the Nazi party, members privately admitted disapproval for the escalation of violence. One such member sent an unofficial private survey to a number of his colleagues of equal rank to gather the general consensus. He found that a mere 5% of the party members who filled out the survey approved of the action. Even more surprising, 63% reported that they felt some sort of disgust or anger towards the action.<sup>51</sup> Although the legitimacy of the survey remains murky, the NSDAP expressing such strong opposition towards their party in any form proves to be rare and significant.

As for the reaction of ordinary citizens, the protest against *Kristallnacht* became so considerable that the Nazis decided that a conference about the pogrom would be necessary. Headed by Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the committee of over 100 representatives from the economy, party, and government agreed that the attack on the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 186; The NS Documentation Centre of the City of Cologne. Behind these heavy doors the Gestapo held former prisoners to question them, often involving torture. The secret police served as yet another form of intimidation to keep Germans from acting against the state.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 177.

Jews was a failure. Rather than continue acting in a way which concerned the public, the committee circled back to their successful strategy of keeping the oppression of Jews a segregated operation. Göring took advantage of this. As the arbiter of the Four Year Plan, he often organized the Jewish workforce around the production of arms in preparation for war. This only increased as the invasion of Poland was less than a year away. As a final blow to the Jews, the committee agreed on forcing the Jews to pay for the damages done by the Nazis. Many of the same people who wielded such power over the population in this conference would later go on to continue the escalation of legislation against the Jews until all of their freedoms, no matter how petty, would be restricted.<sup>52</sup>

## **Under the Cover of War**

From the beginning of World War II, the German armed forces cared little for civilians. After years of instruction through propaganda and the reformation of the legislation based on racial ideology, the most radicalized soldiers saw the invasion of Poland as their right as Aryans. The slavic people were racially inferior and underdeveloped, according to the doctrine.<sup>53</sup> Using the tactic of *blitzkrieg* (lightning war), anyone who found themselves in the path of German forces would be obliterated.

One of the first instances of mass shootings occurred in the Polish town of Bydgoszcz in September of 1939. Here, after days of street conflicts between Germans and Poles, the occupying SS force put down the resistance. The SS gathered hundreds of rebels, but also uninvolved members of the intelligentsia class and clergy. They shot over

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<sup>52</sup> "Stenographic Report of a Portion of the Interministerial Meeting at the Reich Aviation Ministry [Reichsluftfahrtministerium]" (November 12, 1938), German History in Documents and Images, document, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1524](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1524).

<sup>53</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 390.

500 of these people and jailed hundreds more. This treatment came from encouragement from top Nazi officials, who ordered the “political housecleaning” of Poland.<sup>54</sup> This marked the criterion that the Nazis followed for the rest of the occupation.

Panic among the civilian population resulted in mass displacement. The Germans attempted to ensure structure to their invasion by capturing elite Poles, all the while separating out the Jews into ghettos. The further that the Germans extended their territory, the more civilians they gathered under their jurisdiction. The ghettos overpopulated at an overwhelming rate. The Jews trapped inside of these blocks lived in cramped, lice-infested conditions with few rations. The Nazis who oversaw the living situations learned that their increasing populations would soon become unsustainable, even with the bare-minimum resources allotted within the ghettos.<sup>55</sup>

Aside from ghettos, the Nazis also worked on establishing concentration camps as a more secure way to contain their prisoners. In 1940, the first of the three camp complexes known as Auschwitz opened. Like so many other camps, it started as a place to keep the worst offenders in the expanded Reich to be used as slaves. The first deaths within the camp came from targeted aggression from guards and overworking. The Nazis did not develop a gas chamber until 1941, where the first experiments on killing methods were used, largely inspired by Action T4.<sup>56</sup> The establishment and expansion of Auschwitz parallels actions by German forces at large, serving as the model example for the Final

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<sup>54</sup> “Polish Hostages Arrested During the ‘Pacification of Bydgoszcz.’” Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed August 20, 2023. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/polish-hostages-arrested-during-the-pacification-of-bydgoszcz>.

<sup>55</sup> “Ghettos in Poland.” Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed August 13, 2023. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos-in-poland>.

<sup>56</sup> “Auschwitz.” ———, Accessed August 20, 2023. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz>.

Solution. The invention of gas chambers occurred around the same time that the first mass shootings began. From then on, the Nazis did not turn back and sought to kill millions more people.

With Operation Barbarossa underway in mid 1941, German forces began making their way towards the Soviet Union. Rather than continuing to set up parameters for prison camps and going through the process of rationing food for the thousands of civilians they encountered, a special division of the army, the Order Police, opened fire on their first mass of defenseless Russians.<sup>57</sup> Not all of these victims identified as Jewish. According to the “Commissar Order,” any civilian suspected of being anti-German would be executed, bypassing the status of prisoners of war.<sup>58</sup> Not long after, Major Martin Weis declared that the war in the east was one against the Communists and the Jews. He interpreted Hitler’s orders as not only permission to kill, but permission to hunt down as many of their ideological enemies as possible.<sup>59</sup> On June 27th, 1941, Weis directed his battalion to invade the Jewish portion of the nearest town. The official death toll ranges from 2,000 to 2,200 people murdered.<sup>60</sup>

Much like the attacks during *Kristallnacht*, the killing of Jews in Russia began only semi-organized. As the Order Police continued their operations, for the sake of efficiency, they became more organized and systematic. Rather than plundering cities, the Nazis forced the captured Jews into fields where they dug trenches and were told that the

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<sup>57</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 9.

<sup>58</sup> “Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars (“Commissar Order”)” (June 6, 1941), German History in Documents and Images. Document. Accessed August 13th, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1548](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1548)

<sup>59</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

soldiers would later use them for upcoming battles. Instead, the next order came for the Jews to lay on their stomachs and remain still so that the Order Police could shoot them between the neck and the skull to ensure their blood and brains would not splatter.<sup>61</sup> The corpses would be thrown in the trenches and left alone until later orders from Himmler required the bodies to be burned.

Most Germans within the Order Police proved to be active executioners. The pressure between comrades encouraged them to continue, even as the burden of killing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children mounted. They relied heavily on alcohol, which the high command generously provided.<sup>62</sup> Each one of the policemen



thought of creative ways to rationalize their experiences. After the war, testimonies of the Nazis provided insight into how they convinced themselves to continue. One man stated that he only killed children. He did this after a partner of his killed the mother, so his disposal of the child could be justified as a mercy.<sup>63</sup> In spite of their rationale, their mental health deteriorated to an extent that the high command found unproductive.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>64</sup> "Ukrainian Jews are Shot by Members of a Mobile Killing Squad [Einsatzgruppe]" (1942), German History in Documents and Images, Image, Accessed August 19, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=3762](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=3762).

As the ghettoization and mass shootings of Jews continued in the slavic countries, ideas for alternatives circulated. Some Nazis, like Hermann Göring, attempted to integrate the Jews into the war effort and sap them for all of their worth. Other Nazis found this to be too close for comfort and proposed that forced deportations outside of Europe would be a better fate. However, neither proposal satisfied the most hateful of the Nazis, who saw the continued existence of the Jews as a direct threat to the Aryan race.

Hitler was all too aware of the many options, but found each one inadequate or unfeasible. Acting on his behest, Göring passed down the issue of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question to Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office. Heydrich already orchestrated much of the planning necessary to carry out the mass shootings against the Jews up to that point. He understood the gravity of the situation, but also fell into the camp which desired the 11 million Jews in Europe to be destroyed.<sup>65</sup> Nazis described him as “a man without defects” and a “blond beast” behind his back. He carried himself with such a cold, logical callousness that he once made the ordinarily reserved head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, shout at him for being too serious.<sup>66</sup> If any man in Europe would hold the meeting that decided the fate of the remaining Jews in Europe, it would be Heydrich.

On January 20th, 1942, in a villa outside of central Berlin, Heydrich held what became known as the Wannsee Conference. Fifteen representatives from the Nazi Party, SS, and government gathered together to debate the Final Solution. The only remaining piece of evidence to come from this conference was a single copy of the protocol written

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<sup>65</sup> “The Wannsee Protocol” (January 20, 1942), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1532](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1532).

<sup>66</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 276.

by the meeting host and SS Officer, Adolf Eichmann. He wrote with coded language about the genocide with words like “deportation,” which really meant movement into concentration camps.<sup>67</sup> As for the camps, a new technique for killing would be implemented: the use of poison gas within a large chamber, followed by incineration. The design of these chambers came from a mixture of what Nazi doctors used in the hospitals during Action T4 and the short-lived, experimental construction of gas vans used in



Poland, though the new killing element would be Zyklon B.<sup>68</sup> The conference accomplished centralizing the approach to the continuation of the Jewish genocide under the jurisdiction of the SS, depersonalized the murders, and allowed the most

vicious people in the Nazi regime to officially articulate their ideological desires.<sup>69</sup>

Within the protocol, Eichmann listed the populations of Jewish people from across Europe, implying that the task of the Final Solution could feasibly be carried out with absolutism. The countries included those outside of Nazi control, notably England, Spain, and Portugal among others, totalling 11,000,000 Jews.<sup>70</sup> At the time, he and his colleagues still believed that Germany could win the war. They did not know that as the year played out that German forces would fall into disarray. As for Heydrich, less than six months after the conference, Czech rebels assassinated him. The Nazi’s paranoia of revenge for their crimes began to arise after this. A massive crackdown on resistance ensued, with roughly

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<sup>67</sup> “The Wannsee Protocol” (January 20, 1942), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1532](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1532).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>69</sup> The Wannsee Villa.

<sup>70</sup> “The Wannsee Protocol” (January 20, 1942), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 9, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1532](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1532).

5000 Czechs slain as a result, with 1000 of them being Jews.<sup>71</sup> The progression of killing the defenseless came into full force with Order Police and concentration camp guards primed to carry out the Final Solution.

Although the pogrom was already underway at the time of Heydrich's assassination, the largest push in the Holocaust to murder as many Jews as possible took on his name as Operation Reinhard, or *Aktion Reinhard*. It was at this time that Himmler placed Globocnik in charge of coordinating the effort. Even though this proved to be the most impactful assignment in terms of numbers of lives lost, Himmler allotted a minimum amount of resources in order to carry it out. Globocnik gathered as many people as he could, including people involved in the "euthanasia program," SS, and Order Police.<sup>72</sup> Together they coordinated moving Jews from ghettos to extermination camps through a railway system or forced marches. They killed an estimated 1.7 million Jews in about 100 days.<sup>73</sup>

The momentum of death did not stop with the end of this operation. It continued on into late 1943, with a period of killing, cynically known as the *Erntefest* (Harvest festival).<sup>74</sup> Yet another order from Himmler, this operation was meant to clear out the remaining Jews in the Lublin District of occupied Poland. At first this idea came with some resistance from Nazi labor leaders. They attempted to keep the Jews alive, presumably not out of affinity, but rather to continue using them as slaves for the war effort. Himmler

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<sup>71</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 278.

<sup>72</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 50.

<sup>73</sup> Stone, Lewi. "Quantifying the Holocaust: Hyperintense Kill Rates during the Nazi Genocide." *Science Advances* 5, no. 1 (January 2, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 134.



overruled the trade-off in pursuit of the ideological goal set by Hitler, that every Jew in Europe must be exterminated.<sup>75</sup>

Aside from ideological commitment, the concern for resistance continued since the assassination of Heydrich. A Jewish underground movement supplied arms to many ghettos, allowing people inside to defend themselves, the most notable of these being in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>76</sup> These factors, paired with the crumbling war with the Soviet Union, contributed to the primary instruments of death being guns, rather than gas chambers. Order Police took Jews in labor camps out to fields with trenches and shot them in droves. To distract from the sounds of screaming and gunfire, they played music from loudspeakers, but this did little to drown out any noise.<sup>77</sup> Instead it resulted in a cacophony of horrific sounds. The noise eventually faded away, with 42,000 victims losing their voices.<sup>78</sup>

The historian of Order Police, Christopher Browning, writes that roughly two months after the Wannsee Conference, nearly 75 to 80 percent of all the victims of the Holocaust were alive, while 20 to 25 percent died. Eleven months later, the percentages reversed.<sup>79</sup> The Nazis managed to exterminate in a meticulous, effective way in which the world never dreamed of before their time. For all of their mistakes which led to their downfall, the gradual rise to arrive at a point where they could carry out their terror must not be underestimated as coming from a country of foolish people.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 137.

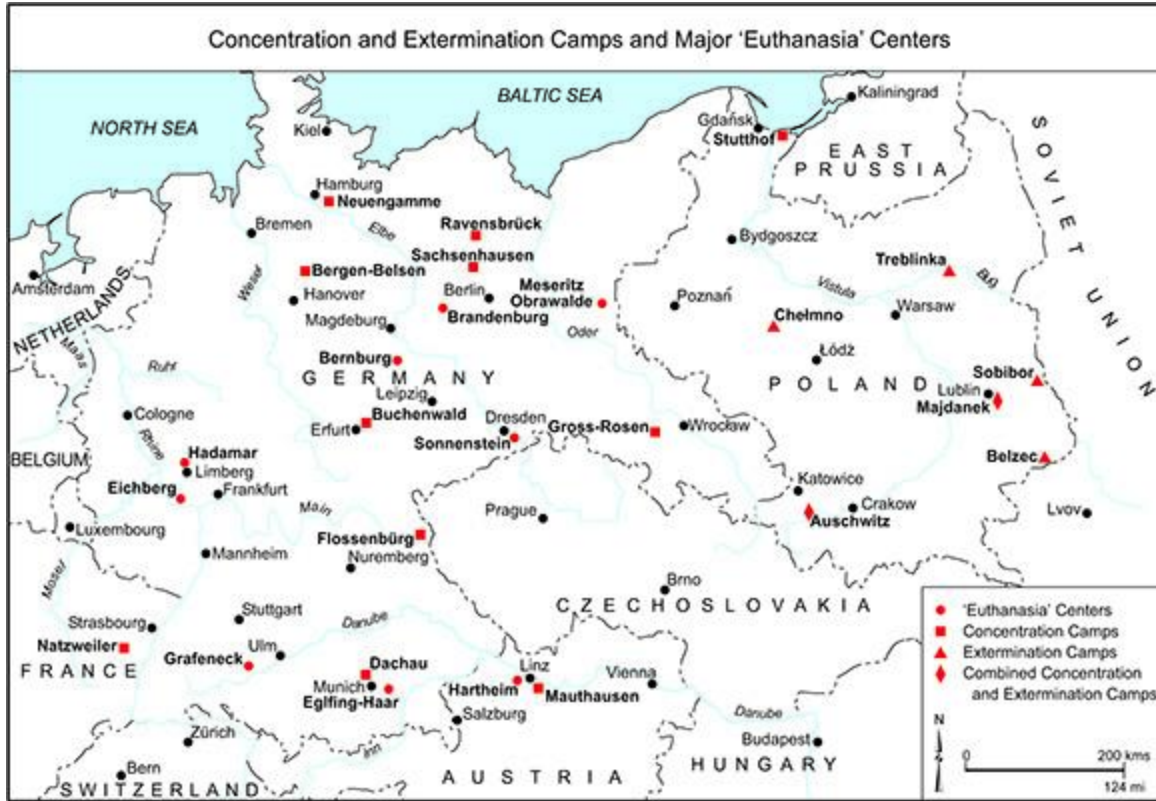
<sup>78</sup> "Aktion 'Erntefest' (Operation 'Harvest Festival')." Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed August 17, 2023. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/aktion-erntefest-operation-harvest-festival>.

<sup>79</sup> Browning, from the introduction of *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, x.

Though, who was to blame for this? Some justice must be salvaged from such a morally confounding series of events. The Nuremberg Trials after the war found many of the high ranking officials guilty and charged with war crimes. Unfortunately, a large number of Nazis in police battalions managed to avoid any sort of charges, not even indictments.<sup>80</sup> Many of the people involved in the Holocaust since passed away, but their legacies remain in plastic writing. I defined Nazis as perpetrators for this exact reason. Every person in the pyramid of power was involved in the application of ideology resulting in the Holocaust. Many orders came from Nazi elites, but thousands of Order Police pulled the triggers. Even lower ranking Nazis managed to develop strategies that became commonplace in the annihilation, including the simple tactic of shooting Jews between the skull and neck. The Holocaust may not have been planned from the start, but the result cannot be considered an effect of the fog of war. It was simply too systematic and embedded in their ideology. Instead they used the war as a cover for the evolving development which resulted in millions of people dead.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 146.



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<sup>81</sup> "Concentration and Extermination Camps and Major 'Euthanasia' Centers." German History in Documents and Images, Map, Accessed August 10, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/map.cfm?map\\_id=3432](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/map.cfm?map_id=3432).

## Numbers

The exact number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust cannot be uncovered.

Towards the end of the war, when the hope of victory fell from the eyes of many Nazis, they began destroying evidence. Nazis burned and buried many of the corpses. Even with the limited documentation left behind, they also left an untold number of people in forests to rot. It's difficult to know if anyone counted the infants that they disposed of, often by abandonment.<sup>82</sup> Another issue arises when creating a definition of the Holocaust. Usually, the number of Jews killed by the Nazis only includes the murders between 1939 and 1945. This leaves out those beaten to death by the military in the streets of Germany, like the minimum of 91 Jews killed in *Kristallnacht*, or those who perished of starvation in concentration camps before the war. The computation will never be exact, but the two leading sources on the matter come from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum with an estimate of 6,636,235 deaths and Yad Vashem, a memorial program in Israel, with an estimate of 5,846,032 deaths.<sup>83</sup>

In this visualized timeline, I included the estimated number of deaths that resulted from each law, event, or action by the Order Police. These numbers are shown out of 6 million, which is often considered the most simple average calculation. It is also the estimate that Adolf Eichmann gave in his testimony during his trial in Jerusalem.<sup>84</sup> The total of these events do not add up to 6 million because I simply could not include every single instance of murder. For instance, while the Sachsenhausen concentration camp kept


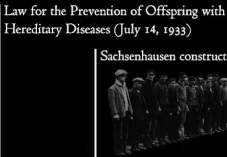


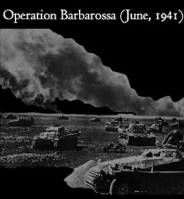
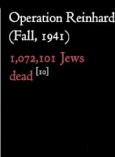





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<sup>82</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 208.

<sup>83</sup> "Estimated Number of Jews Killed in the Final Solution." Jewish Virtual Library, Accessed August 17, 2023. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/estimated-number-of-jews-killed-in-the-final-solution>.

<sup>84</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 318.

a record of many prisoners that they executed, the number of Jews has yet to be specifically calculated. I only intend to demonstrate some of the most influential moments and locations throughout the Holocaust.

<p>Joseph Goebbels Calls for a Boycott of Jewish Businesses (April 1, 1933)</p>	<p>Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases (July 14, 1933)</p>	<p>Sachsenhausen constructed (July 1936)</p>	<p>Invasion of Poland and beginning of WWII (September 1, 1939)</p>	<p>Ghettoization (October, 1939)</p>	<p>Operation Barbarossa (June, 1941)</p>	<p>Operation Reinhard (Fall, 1941) 1,072,101 Jews dead [13]</p>	<p>Harvest Festival (November 3rd, 1943) 42,000 dead [13]</p>	<p>Germany surrenders (May 7, 1945) Estimated 6 million Jews dead [16]</p>
								
<p>Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (April 7, 1933)</p>	<p>The Reich Citizenship Law (September 15, 1935) and the First Regulation to the Reich Citizenship Law (November 14, 1935) (Nuremberg Laws)</p>	<p>Kristallnacht (November 9, 1938) min. 91 dead [14]</p> 	<p>Aktion T4 begins (Summer, 1939) 1,000 Jews dead [15]</p>	<p>Auschwitz opens (Spring, 1940) 1.1 million [17] Jews dead</p> 	<p>Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars ("Commissar Order") (June 6, 1941)</p>	<p>The Wannsee Protocol (January 20, 1942)</p> 	<p>20th of Juli (1944)</p> 	

## Sachsenhausen

Such a complex operation of mass murder can be difficult to understand in terms of numbers alone. To state that a number of people died can be understood, but not felt. Numbers depersonalize. Numbers are how the Nazis labeled their prisoners. To understand the real impact of brutality leveled against Europe by the Nazis, the physical evidence and the words left behind by the victims must be respected. Visiting Sachsenhausen concentration camp gave me invaluable experience necessary to begin to understand what occurred there in a way that books alone cannot.

Many people warned me of what to expect. Visitors commonly use words like



“haunting” to describe the sensation. Even as over a month has passed, I still fall short of coming up with an explanation for what I thought or felt at the time. In moments of seclusion from other visitors, I stopped, closed my eyes, and opened them again in an attempt to see the

people who lived there almost 80 years ago.<sup>85</sup>

What I simply could not overcome was the presence of both a harsh juxtaposition to the past and irony. The two days that I visited happened to be pleasant, with a warm temperature and clear skies. Flowers now grow alongside beds of gravel where prisoner housing used to stand. Although rusted barbed wire and guard towers surrounded me, I walked free without fear. I do not think that everyone around me understood the privilege

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<sup>85</sup> Sachsenhausen: “Work sets you free,” a lie posted outside of many concentration camps.

it was to be in that particular place in this particular year. I observed that, contrary to the common stereotype of disrespectful American youth, people of all nationalities and ages were capable of misbehaving, not only the Americans. People spoke loudly indoors. Some young adults ran around in an open basement where the Nazis used to bring dead bodies after experimental surgery. The worst offense would be those who signed their names along a tucked away exhibition which explained the experiences of past prisoners.<sup>86</sup>

These people might have acted better if they had read what was in front of them.

Sachsenhausen has a uniquely rich history. Built in 1936 by political prisoner slaves, the Nazis designed this camp in the form of an isosceles triangle, the only one to take on this unique shape. The camp served as the headquarters for the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps, which sent orders to all other camps across Europe.<sup>87</sup>

Like most early camps, the Nazis began by

imprisoning political enemies, not yet imposing sentences on those deemed racial inferior.

As early as 1937, the Nazis began employing torture methods for either information or sadistic enjoyment. The victims underwent isolation in darkness for days on end, took



<sup>86</sup> Sachsenhausen: disrespectful messages could be found in multiple locations within the camp.

<sup>87</sup> Morsch, Günter, *Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp 1936-1945: Events and Developments*, ed. Astrid Ley. Sachsenhausen, Gedenkstätte und Museum, (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 6th ed., 2016, Originally published in 2008), 7



beatings until their bones shattered, and sometimes the guards hung them with their arms behind their backs from a high pole.<sup>88</sup>

As the laws changed outside of the camp walls, the people who came in changed as well. In June of 1938, during “Operation Work-Shy Reich,” Nazis arrested 6,000 men considered “work-shy” and made them into slaves that produced bricks. Most of these people identified as Sinti and Roma or were considered anti-socials, “who did not [want to] fit into the national community.” The Nazis then sent another 6,000 Jewish men to the camp after *Kristallnacht*.<sup>89</sup> By 1939, the slaves created between 9 and 12 million bricks per year.<sup>90</sup>



After World War II began, the number of Jews who arrived at the camp increased dramatically. Between September and December of 1939, Heydrich ordered that all male Polish Jews and stateless Jews be arrested. Over 1,000 Jews arrived, mostly from Berlin.<sup>91</sup> These Jews, separated from their families, found themselves at the lowest level of care within the camp hierarchy. The Nazis separated them into a “small camp” area separated from the rest. The cabins filled past capacity. Two to three people shared a single bunk, with some left to sleep on the floor with no blankets. These conditions only worsened in the winter. Diseases spread rapidly while lice provided constant discomfort.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 59; Sachsenhausen: inside a standard cabin with triple bunks.



The sadism only elevated as more people arrived. In January of 1940, the camp leader, Rudolf Höß, forced over 800 prisoners to stand on the parade ground for the entire day in below freezing temperatures. Many collapsed and died, with no assistance allowed. By the following morning, 140 people died from the cold. In that month, the camp records state 700 people died, the highest rate so far.<sup>93</sup> The political prisoner, Harry Naujoks, recalled the incident 40 years later:

Many of them are wearing only uniforms of drill (summer clothes). They stand for hours like that on the parade ground, across which an ice-cold wind is blowing. After only a short while the first few prisoners are already lying on the frozen earth, having collapsed through cold and lack of strength... More and more people collapse; the dead and dying are lying on the ground.<sup>94</sup>

The infamous practices used within the camp evolved as the guards learned what the prisoners hated most. Oftentimes the worst sort of pain did not require much work on behalf of the guards at all. A lack of action, resulting in starvation, frostbite, and death by natural human weaknesses proved to be just as deadly.

A particularly petty, but cruel way in which the Nazis weaponized food rations came with the help of the Red Cross. The Nazis initially rejected any outside assistance, but became weighed down with a famine for the prisoners. The parcels of food from the Red Cross provided much needed nutrients to prisoners, but not all. In the records of distribution, the Nazis only recorded giving the gifts to Norwegians. Many Nazis more likely kept the food for themselves. Some food circulated to Germans, French, and other

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<sup>93</sup> Morsch, Günter, *Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp 1936-1945: Events and Developments*, ed. Astrid Ley, 78.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*,

nationalities, but presumably none to the Jewish sector.<sup>95</sup> The only way any would receive food often came from generous inmates. The sacrifice of food often meant the difference between life and starvation on both ends of the transaction.

In 1942, the Nazis altered Sachsenhausen from a concentration camp to an extermination camp. Just outside of the triangle walls, prisoners used as slaves dug out a trench, which led to a morgue next to a new set of four crematoria. The Nazis named it “Station Z,” for it would be the last place many prisoners found themselves before being shot between their neck and skull.<sup>96</sup> One of the first mass killings occurred after a Jewish-Communist resistance group in Berlin organized an attack on the Nazis. Himmler personally ordered 250 Jews, referred to as “hostages,” to be made an example of, though they had no apparent connection with the resistance. The Nazis shot 96 inmates from Sachsenhausen and 154 from Berlin.<sup>97</sup>



The Jews did not always submit to Nazi rule within the camp, even when their odds seemed hopeless. As the killing of Jews became a priority, Himmler organized the deportation of Jews from Germany to Auschwitz. When the time came for those to be selected to go in the first batch, 18 young Jewish men attacked the guards around them. Although they succeeded in hurting their captors, their effort failed. If this same attack

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Page 110; Sachsenhausen, “Station Z” remains.

happened at any other point in time in the camp, the guards would have shot the rebels on the spot. The Nazis held confidence in Auschwitz as the more cruel alternative. They sent 254 Jews away, including the 18.<sup>98</sup> Soon, Sachsenhausen received its own gas chamber.<sup>99</sup>

## **Resistance**

Much like defining who should be considered a Nazis, defining people who resisted can be equally as difficult. The most obvious form of resistance came from the Allies outside of the Reich and the few rebel groups within the Reich. But what about the people who didn't find the bravery to physically fight back, but still disagreed with the Nazis? A unique feature of the German language, which English often lacks, is the distinction of gray within words. The aforementioned historian, Ian Kershaw, identifies two types of resistance best described in German: *Widerstand* and *Resistenz*. The former represents the traditional idea of fighting back and actively seeking the downfall of Nazism. On the other hand, Kershaw proposes that the latter term be applied to "everyday" forms of resistance, with or without intention.<sup>100</sup>

*Resistenz* may not appear to be significant on its face when put up against a government hellbent on murdering millions of people. In fact, it literally was not enough without *Widerstand*. The importance of *Resistenz* can be seen in two forms, however, by dysfunction within the Reich and by German recovery after the war.

One of the few institutions that the Nazis never managed to completely corrupt or dismantle was the Christian Church. Although Hitler treated the Church with as much

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<sup>98</sup> Morsch, Günter, *Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp 1936-1945: Events and Developments*, ed. Astrid Ley, 112.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>100</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. 3rd ed. (London: Hodder Education Publishers, 1993), 160.

diplomacy as he mustered, their ideologies clashed behind closed doors. He once said, “The best thing is to let Christianity die a natural death... The dogma of Christianity gets worn away by the advances of science.”<sup>101</sup> A reason for his reluctance to attack the church forthright came from the fact that in 1939, an overwhelming 95% of Germans identified as their Protestant or Catholic.<sup>102</sup> Conflicts between the two parties usually resulted with the Church conserving their influence in society. For instance, the Nazis attempted to remove the Crucifix from inside classrooms. Both the Church and Church-goers met them with rather outspoken protests.<sup>103</sup> In order to preserve the relationship between Church and state, the Nazis abandoned the idea. This contention was not enough to start a more general protest against the state and seems to be motivated by protecting Christianity, rather than forthright disdain for Nazism.

Another example of where *Resistenz* can be observed is with Germans’ reactions to propaganda ploys. As I established, not every attempt to indoctrinate people worked. Movie-goers voted for the best entertainment with the purchase power of



tickets. Listening to the radio was always a choice. Perhaps the most telling of mediums can be found in the failure of the Third Reich to produce art. Nazis cannot make art, only propaganda. What people created during the Third Reich had the subtlety of being hit over the

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<sup>101</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 547.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

<sup>103</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 174.

head with a brick. Depictions, such as the work by Adolf Ziegler and Arno Breker, show an idealized version of Aryans. Hitler, who considered himself an artist, adored these pieces.<sup>104</sup> He thought that a revival of “true” German art would be a step towards evading the decadence that began in the culture of the 1920s. In 1937, the “Great German Art Exhibition” opened as a display of the new generation of “art.”<sup>105</sup>

In opposition to “true” German art was “degenerate art.” In a guide to a free “Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich, it explains the rules set by the Nazis for why this

lesser art was the real propaganda assaulting the eyes of the viewers. Of course, any art created by Jews was never even considered to be critiqued in a meaningful way. Any form of abstraction, expressionism or representation was “barbaric.” Artists who shared visual experiences outside of the Nazi narrative, such



as portraits of the poor and people in brothels, were said to be communists attempting to turn people towards class warfare.<sup>106</sup> Although Nazi curators told people what to think as they walked through the galleries, the influence of art knows no bounds. Much like the option between *Jud Süß* and *The Eternal Jew*, “degenerate art” won its popularity through

<sup>104</sup> “Hitler and his Entourage view the Second “Great German Art Exhibition” (July 10, 1938), German History in Documents and Images, Image, Accessed August 19, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2074](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2074).

<sup>105</sup> “Hitler’s Speech at the Opening of the House of German Art in Munich” (July 18, 1937), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 19, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1577&language=english](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1577&language=english).

<sup>106</sup> “Guide to the ‘Degenerate Art’ Exhibition” (1937), German History in Documents and Images, Document, Accessed August 19th, 2023. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1578](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1578); “Storage Room in Niederschönhausen Castle for Confiscated Works of Degenerate Art, including Works by Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Gauguin” (1937), ——. Image, Accessed August 19, 2023. [https://germanhistorydoc.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2229](https://germanhistorydoc.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2229).

its storytelling, which most humans are predisposed to appreciate more. While it is true that visitors needed to pay in order to see the “Great German Art Exhibition,” only 400,000 people came in attendance, while the “Degenerate Art” show gathered 3 million people overall.<sup>107</sup>

The avoidance of galleries approved by Nazis shows a small, but hopeful instance of the indefinite nature of the control of culture. People can only be influenced up to a certain point. If questioned by an untrustworthy person, it can be assumed that most visitors in either gallery would give generic support for the “true art” gallery. Whether this was a conscious, truthful statement remains unknown. Only by observing their actions can it be guessed that they really did, at the very least, not care for what the Nazis intended them to appreciate.

Opinions on art were policed on a societal level. Serious disagreements on the matter may lead to ostracization, but not prison time. The amount of space allotted for disagreements always remained at a low threshold. The issue of the Final Solution brought on some of the worst fears among Germans. Speaking against it to any degree came with risk of imprisonment or the penalty of treason, execution. This widespread fear of vocalizing thoughts puts historians at a great disadvantage. Comprehending the viewpoints of Germans post-1939 presents a significant challenge, and attempting to quantify these perspectives is unproductive, risking generalization.

A comparatively easier way to understand resistance is by analyzing *Widerstand*. Numerous resistance groups arose within Germany, but the Nazis managed to suppress all

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<sup>107</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 180.

of them when their popularity posed a threat. The fates of rebels set an example for those engaging in *Resistenz*.

Contrary to the characterization made by the Gestapo, the Red Orchestra was a home-grown resistance, not a Soviet infiltration. This group organized around the idea of a socialist Germany built on peace rather than nationalism. Members distributed their message in the form of leaflets, warning people about Hitler's true nature. More importantly, members helped political fugitives escape the country and warned the Allies of Nazi war crimes. Unfortunately this group did not last long. In August of 1942, the Gestapo made 130 arrests, followed by rapid trials. On Hitler's direct orders, they executed 50 members of the Red Orchestra by hanging.<sup>108</sup>

Perhaps even more impactful was the White Rose organization of students based in Munich. The leading members, the Hans and Sophie Scholl siblings, gathered people to push back against racism, antisemitism, restrictions on personal freedoms, and violence in the east.<sup>109</sup> Not only was such a progressive group of people rare for Germany at the time, but also in the broader context of the majority of countries. They even dared to spray paint slogans on public walls, such as: "Hitler Mass Murderer." Like the Red Orchestra, they distributed leaflets, possibly several thousand. Also, like the Red Orchestra, the Gestapo took extreme measures to suppress the group. They arrested the Scholl siblings and tortured them into giving up the names of their associates. Rather than hanging or shooting the "traitors," the Gestapo opted for beheading them.<sup>110</sup> Germans who supported the White Rose understood the consequences and failed to accumulate anymore

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<sup>108</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 627.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 628.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

*Widerstand*. This did not mark the end of their message. Unknown sympathizers passed the leaflets on to the British, who began printing them in the hundreds of thousands. In 1943, the British dropped these leaflets over German cities, too many to be ignored or suppressed.<sup>111</sup> The efforts made by the White Rose were far from fruitless.

The two most prominent organizations that took action against the Nazis lasted only for a short time. The Germans also refrained from doing so until the Nazis held absolute power over the nation. It is easy to look back on these efforts and say that the Germans should have known better from the beginning, or that more should have been done. Gaining the perspective of the Germans is particularly important here. This was a society where *speaking* could result in torture and death. Sacrificing oneself was just one hurdle for these people when acting out meant risking the lives of those closest to them. Despite all of that, some still resisted. These people must be remembered just as much as those who became true Nazis.

Not all who engaged in *Widerstand* did so with the pure intention to take down Nazism. As for the conspirators who planned an assassination of Hitler, they united under the common cause of nationalism for Germany. They thought that Hitler and the war would soon plunge the country into devastation. Among the conspirators included members of the military and Nazi-supporting civilians. Aside from Hitler, they also planned on taking out his most loyal supporters, including Göring, in order to establish a new leadership, while essentially keeping the dictatorship. This became known as Operation Valkyrie.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.,



On the 20th of July, 1944, Claus Schenk Count von Stauffenberg entered one of Hitler's many headquarters, the "Wolf's Lair," with two bombs inside a briefcase. Stauffenberg served as a lieutenant-colonel in North Africa and was set to be promoted to the Chief of Staff of the Army General Office a few months later. His rank allowed him to be close to Hitler and trusted by the guards. During his time in the war, he lost most of his fingers, so he created a modified device that could be set off with little effort.<sup>112</sup> During a meeting, he walked into a room where Hitler and a few associates looked over a map sprawled across a large wooden table. After waiting a while, he engaged one of the two bombs. Fearing that he would not have enough time, he hastily placed the case under the table and left the room, saying he needed to make a phone call. As soon as he heard the bomb go off, he assumed Hitler to be dead and set Operation Valkyrie in motion.<sup>113</sup>

The other conspirators took action in a quick attempt to overthrow the government and SS. Little did any of them know, Hitler lived. By a slight chance, someone unknowingly moved the bomb under a thick leg of the table, preventing the explosion from taking full effect. Hitler escaped only with blown-out eardrums and a newfound mortal fury. A conspirator cut all communication from his lair to the outside. Confusion and mismanagement prevented anyone from acting efficiently. Eventually, Hitler found a way to make his voice heard, giving the country definitive proof that he remained in control.<sup>114</sup>

Almost everyone involved in the plot exposed themselves by doing their part to initiate Operation Valkyrie. The remaining loyal Nazis arrested 7,000 people, tried them

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 637.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 638.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 639.

through courts designed only for show, and executed 4,980 of them. The conspirators directly involved in the assassination attempt, including Stauffenberg, were shot one by one next to one another.<sup>115</sup>

The worst betrayal to Hitler came from Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. He served as one of the most cunning and honored fighters in North Africa. The people of Germany loved him. He may have gotten away with his association



with the conspirators by reputation alone, but decided to tell Hitler to his face that the war needed to end. Hitler responded by giving Rommel the option of suicide and a state funeral, or an arrest and disgrace. Thinking of what it would mean to his family and the German people if he revealed his involvement, he decided to commit suicide, disguised as succumbing to his war wounds.<sup>116</sup>

The motivations of the conspirators are far more morally ambiguous than the Germans who rebelled specifically against Nazism. Furthermore, the question of how their *Widerstand* compares to the *Resistenz* can be debated. Even though the conspirators came closer to taking down a main source of malice in the Reich, their selfish motivations make their actions seem unworthy of much support. Destabilizing the regime without

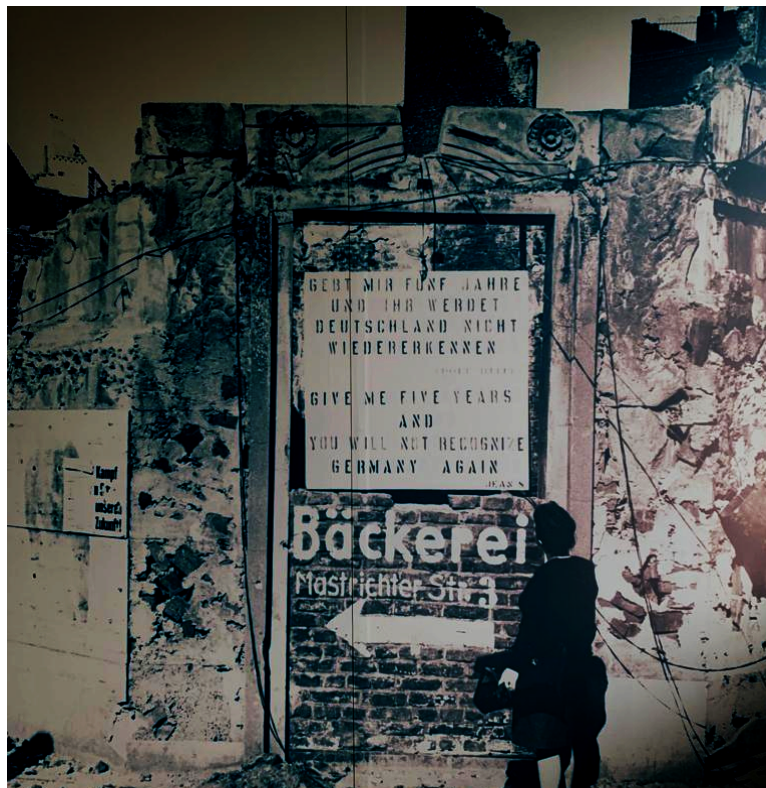
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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 640; "The Conference Room at the 'Wolf's Lair' after the Assassination Attempt" (July 20, 1944), German History in Documents and Images, Image, [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2233](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2233).

<sup>116</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 642.

revitalizing the ideology in the middle of the war might have caused more harm than good in the end.

Only the army could make a difference in who held power, but only German citizens could have turned the moral tide of the country. The latter eventually would, but it took the collapse of their society to make them realize how self-destructive Nazism was. The Nazis in power lost their narrative. Even if the Jews actually caused all of the problems that they claimed, they would have done less harm than the Nazis brought to their own people. The disregard for basic rights, mass programs of sterilization, the Gestapo, and the destruction of entire cities like Dresden and Hamberg took away the veil of ignorance from so many eyes. The fundamental flaw in Nazism, now brought to light, allowed people to eventually recover from the ideological hold.



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<sup>117</sup> Photo taken by Dr. Ian Harrington, 2023. National Socialist Documentation Centre, Cologne, Germany. Hitler: "Give me five years and you will not recognize Germany again" against a ruined city.

## Conclusion

Most historians attempt to characterize the Holocaust as the result of one force above others. Much of the blame falls on Hitler, for most people. The author of *Hitlers Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen, goes so far as to blame the majority of Germans, including civilians for becoming a part of the tyrannical machine. As for Christopher Browning, he explains the extermination operations in the east to be committed by ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances. I reject Goldhagen's theory in favor of Browning, but even the latter can be too broad. Perhaps because of the nature of book titles, his idea of *ordinary men* can be too broad. Not everyone who he applies this concept to can be considered ordinary. Many of the men chosen to execute Jews in the east actually came from paramilitary backgrounds, including many who worked with the SA, and they later went through extensive ideological training.<sup>118</sup> Still, the idea of corruption on an individual level seems to be an accurate story for many people living in the Third Reich.

To alter this claim slightly, I propose that the evolution of the Third Reich formed from a narrative. This narrative came from a rich history, unfortunately tainted by centuries of antisemitism. The Nazis used the Jews, not *only* as a scapegoat to blame for a tumultuous period, but truly perceived them as a threat to their existence. The Nazis promulgated this narrative through propaganda and laws, step by step, up to the point where killing could be seen as a reasonable Final Solution. It was a conscious push with an improvised ending.

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<sup>118</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 177.

As Richard Evans said at the end of his *Third Reich* trilogy, which I am greatly indebted to, it is difficult to avoid viewing the Third Reich without analyzing the legacy it left behind. Although the issue of antisemitism existed for a long time in Germany, this does not mean the Holocaust was inevitable in that specific country. Even so, from my visit to Germany, I saw first-hand how the citizens choose to keep the memory alive because it *did* happen there. Talking about events in the Third Reich remains to be far from a casual topic, but they own up to the past through education and symbolism.

My favorite, and the most profound of these monuments to the past is Hitler's place of death. The *Führerbunker* that he killed himself in was demolished. What remains is a small parking lot. There is a sign explaining some of the details about the old complex and what occurred, but otherwise the place is completely insignificant. Anyone not seeking it out could easily pass by without a second thought. The people who decided to keep the space unimportant completely disrespect everything Hitler wanted. It serves as a testament for the desire to move on.

Although most Germans did indeed move on, they do not forget their past. Although not everyone agrees with the artistic approach to many of the sights, Holocaust remembrance locations are placed throughout their cities, especially in Berlin. The most famous, and possibly most controversial, of these is the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." The artist meant to show through the slates how Nazism appears orderly on the outside, but as visitors walk through they find uneven ground and belittling structures surrounding them. Critics still argue that the site is underwhelming.<sup>119</sup> I agree. If not for the

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<sup>119</sup>Brody, Richard. The New Yorker. "The Inadequacy of Berlin's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.'" The New Yorker. July 12, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-inadequacy-of-berlins-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe>.

museum built underneath, there is little to take away from the structure. The reasoning behind it may also be too overly-intellectual to reach a wide audience.

Aside from this, due to neo-Nazis who often graffiti the memorial, the company Degussa attempted to help by supplying a coating that allowed graffiti to be removed easily. This sparked even more controversy, as reporters discovered that Degussa used to supply Zyklon B for the gas chambers used to kill Jews.<sup>120</sup> This single monument brings a lot of moral questions along with it: should neo-Nazis be able to express their thoughts; should Degussa be redeemed by helping with this memorial; is the memorial effective enough? I find myself in a position to only commentate on the matter. These issues must be answered by the Germans. I find the attempt admirable nonetheless.

On my last full day in Berlin, I visited the final memorial by complete accident. I wanted to see the *Reichstag*, but could not get too close because of construction work. I then decided to find a Soviet war memorial not far off, but an event for the Paralympic Games blocked this area. With no other plan, I decided to take a walk through a large forested area in the middle of the city known as the Tiergarten. Along the way, I passed an enormous statue of Wanger. Walking a little further I came to the Embassy of Japan on *Hiroshimastraße*. Further still, I happened upon a sign for *Aktion T4*.

I did not know at the time that the *T* in *T4* referred to the number 4 building on *Tiergartenstraße*. This was the headquarters for the program that resulted in the sterilization and killing of thousands of disabled people. Not even a mile behind me,

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<sup>120</sup> Harding, Luke, "Berlin's Jewish Memorial Halted after Firm Linked with Supply of Nazi Gas." *The Guardian*, October 27, 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/27/germany.arts>.

millions of Germans gathered to welcome the same people who might have been killed if they arrived in Berlin in 1939.

By visiting another country I returned to see my own country more clearly. There were certainly aspects about America that I missed in my time away, but plenty that I wish could be implemented here. Above many other concepts, I wish Americans could be as open about the past of this country. By studying Germany I found who inspired some of the worst acts committed by the Nazis. Before the 1930s, numerous American states implemented an involuntary sterilization program for people considered unfit to reproduce. California led the way with over 20,000 forced sterilizations all the way through to the 1950s. These eugenics programs were not kept secret from the public, but were openly funded by the states. Victims of these sterilizations still try to receive some sort of recognition, but the government of North Carolina is the only state giving victims reparations.<sup>121</sup>

There are monuments across Germany dedicated to the people affected by eugenics programs, while American politicians in the 21st century refuse to even acknowledge the past. This is only one area where memorials can be improved. It cannot be forgotten that Nazis also took notes on American laws based on racial segregation. The point of dredging this up is not to join the trend of people who write narratives where America is only the villain, such as those who wrote the controversial *1619 Project*. If there *must* be a narrative, I want it to be nuanced and accurate. This starts with proper education. People must be exposed to both the successes and failures of the past.

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<sup>121</sup> CNN. "Sterilization Victims Seek Compensation." Video. YouTube, March 8, 2012. [https://youtu.be/z3\\_c9pZ4SKc?s\\_i=F2yP8GB5o3sZfLoN](https://youtu.be/z3_c9pZ4SKc?s_i=F2yP8GB5o3sZfLoN).

Germany would not be a symbol of recovery without American influence. We must not fail them by falling short of the standards we hold against them for the same crimes.



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