

## The Origins of the Holocaust

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The Israeli historian Dan Michman argues that there are two sets of questions that need to be asked in order to conceptualise and explain the Holocaust historically. The first set concerns 'basic problems': was the Holocaust an event in itself or part of a broader set of events? What is the characterising essence that distinguishes the Holocaust from other events, including those of which it was a part? What was the Holocaust's time period? These questions will be dealt with elsewhere. The second set of questions identified by Michman are those that we will focus on here: where are the 'roots' of the Holocaust to be found? And: 'What were the exact historical circumstances that made it possible?' [1] Michman correctly notes that the second set of questions can only properly be answered after the first has been satisfied; thus, although there is not space here to go into these issues in more detail, it makes sense to define the Holocaust as: 'the ideologically-driven state-sponsored attempt to annihilate the Jews and Gypsies of Europe in the years 1941-1945.' Although this definition can of course be questioned, it suffices here to make the focus on the second set of questions more meaningful.

It is important to note that Michman does not ask outright: what are the origins of the Holocaust? Rather he wants to discover the 'exact historical circumstances' that made the Holocaust possible. This reminds us that the historian's quest for establishing causation is always difficult. In the case of an event like the Holocaust – which has to be defined by the historian before s/he can explain it – it is perhaps impossible, or at least permanently under revision. We should bear in mind here Hannah Arendt's claim that because the historian deals with contingency and a future that is always open, the notion of causation is in fact inimical to historical explanation. This is because the ascription of causation imposes a kind of determinism on events that is the opposite of the essence of historical freedom: 'Belief in causality, in other words, is the historian's way of denying human freedom which, in terms of the political and historical sciences, is the human capacity for making a new beginning.' [2] This is why Arendt, in her major work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) explicitly eschewed any notion of causality in the strict sense and wrote instead of tracing 'elements' that 'crystallised' to bring about the event or outcome ('totalitarianism') in question. The phenomenon did not exist 'in essence' or in an inchoate form before it appeared, and thus there can be no question of describing a 'gradual revelation' of something that then appears inevitable. [3] It is this method of tracing discrete elements that have come together in an unexpected combination that will be followed here, as we look for the 'origins' of the Holocaust.

Historians have sought the origins of the Holocaust in many short-term and long-term factors. Longer-term factors include the unification of Germany and the putative development of Nazism out of Prussianism; the dislocations caused by rapid modernization in Germany that rebounded on the Jews as the supposed bearers of 'modernity'; the lack of democratic traditions in Germany and a longstanding antisemitic tradition; the impact of the

Great War; the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the rise of Communism; and, especially, the impact of the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty, the legend that Germany was 'stabbed in the back' by Jewish and Communist traitors, the Spartacist uprising in 1918, and the economic chaos and lack of legitimacy of the Weimar Republic. Short-term factors include the logic of Nazism and Hitler's obsessions; the circumstances in which the Nazis found themselves in 1941-1942 as the war started to turn against them; the 'cumulative radicalisation' of Nazi policies, especially under wartime conditions; the internal competition for power between institutions and agencies within the Third Reich and its expanding empire; the inability of the occupying forces in eastern Europe to feed the Wehrmacht as well as the local population; and the Nazis' race-thinking and mystical, millenarian antisemitism that saw the world in terms of a cosmic struggle between the 'Aryan race' and the 'non-Aryan races', especially the Jews, the *Weltfeind* (world enemy). [4]

Historians have long debated the details of the decision-making process for the 'final solution', and have recreated in remarkable detail a day-by-day account. [5] This provides us with much knowledge of what happened when, but does not always explain the preconditions and presupposed ideational frameworks within which those involved – whether at the centre of power, like Himmler and Heydrich, or at the periphery like the *Sonderkommando* leaders or the military occupiers – operated. It is for this reason that I will here focus on two necessary conditions for the development of the 'final solution': race-thinking and antisemitism. Whether from the 'intentionalist' or 'structuralist' side of the best-known debate in Holocaust historiography, most historians now share the views that the road to Auschwitz was twisted, that is, that there was no blueprint for the 'final solution' before 1941, but that the process of cumulative radicalisation that led to genocide can only be understood in the context of Nazi ideology. Although there was no plan as such to kill the Jews of Europe before 1941 at the earliest, the logic of Nazism and the fantasy that fuelled it was genocidal from the start.

There is an enormous literature on the development of race-thinking, much of it (especially in the early post-war years) motivated by a teleological concern with explaining Nazism. It should be clear from the outset that there is no necessary line running from Buffon, Linnaeus and Blumenbach, the eighteenth-century founders of modern physical anthropology, to Fischer, Verschuier and Mengele, the best known of the Nazi anthropologists. Indeed, when one examines German anthropologists of the late nineteenth century, they appear rather liberal in their views about 'race' in comparison with their British or American counterparts. Yet attempting to explain the Holocaust without reference to race-thinking seems absurd. The Nazis were obsessed with race and the Third Reich has been aptly dubbed 'the racial state'. [6]

The aim of the Nazis was to create a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a 'people's community' from which racial aliens (*Artfremden*) were to be excluded. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and the Euthanasia programme from 1939 onwards most clearly encapsulate this twofold drive for racial purity within the 'Aryan race' and for preventing pollution from other, supposedly dangerous 'races', especially Jews. To this end, racial research institutes were quickly established such as the Institute for Research on the Jewish Question or the SS Race and Resettlement Main Office, and other, existing centres were rapidly Nazified, such as the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWIA). Many

anthropologists brought themselves into line with Nazi ideology, a process that few found trying given their pre-existing theories about racial hierarchies and racial difference, even if few were ardent Nazis. Eugenics, euthanasia, and the selection of 'racially-valuable' children from eastern Europe for bringing up in Germany all became standard fare. In general, an obsession with racial 'fitness' within the Reich and the eradication or disabling of other 'races', whether Jews, Roma, or Slavs, became the two poles of Nazi racial policy. And racial policy was inseparable from all aspects of domestic and foreign policy, whether the 'Aryanisation' of Jewish-owned businesses or the search for *Lebensraum*.

Some scholars claim that anthropologists were responsible first for theorising and then for driving forward the Nazi ambition of attaining racial homogeneity.[7] They point especially to the roles of men like Mengele, who combined a career as an anthropologist with his position as SS doctor in Auschwitz. But it is clear that the Nazis tolerated more than they were inspired by the anthropologists and race-theorists.[8] And although there are clear lines of continuity – in ideas, technology, and personnel – between the Euthanasia Programme and Operation Reinhard (the extermination of the Jews of Poland in the death camps of Chelmno, Sobibór, Belzec and Treblinka), so that the murder of the Jews needs to be seen as part of a broader Nazi plan for the demographic reshaping of Europe, this does not mean that the Holocaust should be seen in a straightforward way as an outcome of race-thinking. The Third Reich was not the only country to have an influential eugenics movement or in which race-thinking played a prominent role – race-thinking was part of the general makeup of society in Britain, the US, and many other countries across the world from China to Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – but it was the only one which committed genocide justified on racial grounds.

What this means is that we need an additional explanation. There is no doubting the significance of race-thinking and anthropology in Nazi Germany, which was certainly one of the elements that came together to create the Holocaust. But Nazism as an ideology did not rely on science for its world view, just as Nazism in practice did not need scientists to carry out its dirty work, though it did not refuse their willing assistance. Hitler came to his antisemitic outlook in the post-Great War atmosphere of Vienna, still infused by the Jew-hatred of earlier antisemitic politicians such as Georg von Schönerer and Karl Lueger, and he and other early Nazis were inspired less by race-scientists than by racial mystics, such as Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, Arthur de Gobineau, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Nazi ideologists such as Alfred Rosenberg, Hans F. K. Günther, Ernst Krieck, Alfred Bäumler or Walter Gross[ck1] argued for Aryan racial purity on the grounds that this would bring about a homogenisation and hence revivification of a community that had become degenerate and decadent. And they violently attacked the Jews as the main source of this degeneration.[9]

The 'common-sense' view of the Holocaust is that since the Nazis killed Jews they must have been motivated by antisemitism; it is often surprising to lay-persons that so many academic historians think otherwise. It must be admitted from the outset, however, that only a small number of Nazis – not to speak of the German population as a whole – were radical antisemites who really believed in a Jewish world conspiracy. Rosenberg's magnum opus, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, was read even less than *Mein Kampf*. Yet a radical, mystical antisemitism did come to structure and to provide the background for much of Nazi policy,

in all spheres of activity, from theoretical physics to the fashion industry, as well as 'Judenpolitik' (Jewish policy) in the strict sense. Whether at school level (Reels 24 and 25<sup>[ck2]</sup>) or for the general public (Reels 18-20<sup>[ck3]</sup>), antisemitism lay at the heart of the Third Reich. Thus, although the 'slide' into genocide has to be examined as a day-to-day process that is reconstructed by historians in great detail, when thinking about the trends that existed in Germany – and in Europe, for the Holocaust was a European project – one needs to bear in mind that the short-term decision-making process only makes sense when situated in a chronologically-longer and ideologically-broader context.

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[1] Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), p. 10.

[2] Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)' in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p. 325 n.13.

[3] Hannah Arendt, 'A Reply to Eric Voegelin' in *Essays in Understanding*, p. 405.

[4] See Saul Friedländer, 'Ideology and Extermination: The Immediate Origins of the "Final Solution"' in *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, eds. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 17-33.

[5] The most detailed works are Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung: Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich: Piper, 1998) and Christopher R. Browning (with Jürgen Matthäus), *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (London: William Heinemann, 2004). See also Christopher R. Browning, 'The Decision-Making Process' in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke / New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 173-196.

[6] Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7] See especially Gretchen E. Schafft, *From Racism to Genocide: Anthropology in the Third Reich* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[8] Thomas M. Berez and Sheila Faith Weiss, 'The Nazi Symbiosis: Politics and Human Genetics at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute', *Endeavour*, 28:4 (2004), pp. 172-177.

[9] For an important early discussion of these racial theorists see Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938). For an excellent discussion see Uriel Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge,

2004). See also Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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[\[ck1\]](#)Gross as author and Rassenpolititische as Title leads to correct volume

[\[ck2\]](#)Propaganda Materials: Pedagogic and Biology

[\[ck3\]](#)Non-illustrated Propaganda Material