

## What was Hitler's involvement in the Holocaust? Hitler's comments on Jews

**SOURCE 18.35** Letter from Hitler to his military superior Adolf Gemlich in 1919

*Rational anti-semitism . . . must pursue a systematic, legal campaign against the Jews . . . But the final objective must be the complete removal [Entfernung] of the Jews.*

**SOURCE 18.36** Remarks made by Hitler in 1922

*As soon as I have the power, I shall have gallows after gallows erected, for example in Munich on the Marienplatz . . . Then the Jews will be hanged one after another, and they will stay hanging until they stink. They will stay hanging as long as hygienically possible. As soon as they are untied, then the next groups will follow and that will continue until the last Jew in Munich is exterminated. Exactly the same procedure will be followed in other cities until Germany is cleansed of the last Jew!*

**SOURCE 18.37** From a speech Hitler made to the Reichstag in January 1939

*If the international Jewish financiers outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into war, then the result will not be the BOLSHEVISING of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.*

**SOURCE 18.38** Extract from Himmler's recently discovered appointment diary

*18th December 1941. Meeting with Hitler on the Jewish Question. [Himmler wrote in margin:] to be exterminated as partisans.*

**SOURCE 18.39** Hitler's New Year message, 1942

*The Jew will not exterminate the peoples of Europe; he will be the victim of his own machinations [plots] instead.*

### ACTIVITY

Do Sources 18.35–9 prove that

- Hitler wanted to kill all Jews?
- Hitler was responsible for the Holocaust?

All students know that Hitler was anti-semitic and how central this was to his whole outlook on life. However, whether he really intended to kill the Jews is less clear-cut. This is partly because his long monologue (self-obsessed rant), *Mein Kampf*, is a very indigestible read, from which it is hard to extract clear, brief quotations. There is also the problem of language and translation. Hitler frequently referred to the 'removal' and 'eradication' of Jews and their influence, which could mean resettling them elsewhere, weakening their position or mass killing. When the mass killing of Jews started in 1941 it was deliberately masked behind the language of euphemism (that is, the use of a neutral expression to describe something offensive), such as 'resettlement', 'special handling' and 'final solution'.

A further issue is Hitler's direct role in ordering the Holocaust. No document signed by Hitler ordering that Jews be killed has been found. Although superficially perplexing, this is really not so surprising. Firstly, Hitler did not act in a neat, bureaucratic way. Many of his instructions were purely oral. Secondly, the Nazis tried to keep the Holocaust secret, and from 1944 deliberately destroyed much evidence of it. However, numerous high-ranking Nazis said that Hitler knew about the murders, and several claimed that he authorised them. Furthermore, the whole state was geared to enact the Führer's will, so it is inconceivable that Hitler did not approve of the Holocaust and it is highly probable that he ordered it.

## How might the nature of the Nazi state have contributed to the Holocaust?

Some historians see the Holocaust as developing in response to circumstances and as a result of the way the Nazi regime operated. The lack of formal restraints and the institutional social Darwinism with rivals vying to work towards the Führer led to a process of cumulative radicalisation, such that the sporadic murder of 'undesirables' could develop into a system of extermination factories. In such a state, given the lack of formal restraints, euthanasia could easily lead to mass murder. Certainly, the experience gained from the euthanasia programme, in terms of personnel and techniques, was later used in the Holocaust. It is also argued that the totalitarian nature of the state, with the incessant anti-semitic propaganda, the stress on blind obedience and the exercise of arbitrary repression, contributed to the Holocaust. However, there is no evidence of harsh punitive action against those Germans who did refuse to participate.

Source 18.40 is from the official record of a meeting of top Nazis following *Kristallnacht* (10 November 1938). These vicious anti-semitic riots had been partly organised by the authorities. Heydrich had instructed local police to discuss them with the Security Police and to arrest as many Jews as their prisons could contain. This escalation of anti-semitic violence led to further measures, as revealed in Source 18.40 below.

**SOURCE 18.40** Stenographic (taken down in shorthand) report of the meeting on the Jewish question, chaired by Goering, on 12 November 1938

*Goering: Gentlemen! Today's meeting is of a decisive nature. I have received a letter written on the Führer's orders, requesting that the Jewish question be now, once and for all, co-ordinated and solved one way or another. And yesterday once again did the Führer request by phone for me to take co-ordinated action in the matter.*

*Since the problem is mainly an economic one, it is from the economic angle that it shall have to be tackled. Naturally a number of legal measures shall have to be taken which fall into the sphere of the Minister for Justice and into that of the Minister of the Interior; and certain propaganda measures shall be taken care of by the Minister for Propaganda. The Minister for Finance and the Minister for Economic Affairs shall take care of problems falling in their respective areas.*

*The meeting, in which we first talked about this question and came to the decision to aryanise the German economy, to take the Jew out of it and put him into our debit ledger, was one in which, to our shame, we only made pretty plans, which were executed very slowly. We then had a demonstration, right here in Berlin, we told the people that something decisive would be done, but again nothing happened. We have had this affair in Paris now [the assassination of a German diplomat by a Jew], more demonstrations followed and this time something decisive must be done!*

*Because, gentlemen, I have had enough of these demonstrations! They don't harm the Jew but me, who is the last authority for co-ordinating the German economy...*

*If today, a Jewish shop is destroyed, if goods are thrown into the street, the insurance company will pay for the damages, which the Jew does not even have; and furthermore the consumer goods belonging to the people are destroyed. If in the future, demonstrations which are necessary occur, then, I pray that they be directed, so as not to hurt us...*

*I should not want to leave any doubt, gentlemen, as to the aim of today's meeting. We have not come together merely to talk again, but to make decisions, and I implore the competent agencies to take all measures for the elimination of the Jew from the German economy and to submit them to me...*

*The trustee of the State will estimate the value of the property and decide what amount the Jew shall receive. Naturally, this amount is to be set as low as possible. The representative of the State shall then turn the establishment over to the Aryan proprietor, that is, the property shall be sold according to its real value.*

**Goebbels:** *In almost all German cities synagogues are burned . . . I am of the opinion that this is our chance to dissolve the synagogues. All those not completely intact shall be razed by the Jews. The Jews shall pay for it . . . We shall build parking lots in their place or new buildings . . .*

*I deem it necessary to issue a decree forbidding the Jews to enter German theatres, movie houses, and circuses . . .*

*Furthermore, I advocate that Jews be eliminated from all positions in public life in which they may prove to be provocative. It is still possible today that a Jew shares a compartment in a sleeping car with a German. Therefore, we need a decree by the Reich Ministry for Communications stating that separate compartments for Jews shall be available – in cases where compartments are filled up, Jews cannot claim a seat. They shall be given a separate compartment only after all Germans have secured seats. They shall not mix with Germans, and if there is no more room, they shall have to stand in the corridor.*

**Goering:** *In that case, I think it would make more sense to give them separate compartments.*

**Goebbels:** *Not if the train is overcrowded.*

**Goering:** *Just a moment. There'll be only one Jewish coach. If that is filled up, the other Jews will have to stay at home.*

**Goebbels:** *Suppose, though, there won't be many Jews going on the express train to Munich; suppose there would be two Jews in the train and the other compartments would be overcrowded. These two Jews would then have a compartment all to themselves. Therefore, Jews may claim a seat only after all Germans have claimed a seat.*

**Goering:** *I'd give the Jews one coach or one compartment. And should a case like you mention arise and the train be overcrowded, believe me, we won't need a law. We'll kick him out and he'll have to sit alone in the toilet all the way!*

**Goebbels:** *I don't agree. I don't believe in this. There ought to be a law. Furthermore, there ought to be a decree barring Jews from German beaches and resorts. [Goebbels then refers to excluding Jews from German forests; then parks.] Furthermore, Jewish children are still allowed in German schools. That's impossible. It is out of the question that any boy should sit beside a Jewish boy in a German high school and receive lessons in German history.*

**Goering:** *Of course I too am of the opinion that these economic measures ought to be strengthened by a number of police-action propaganda-measures and cultural displays so that everything shall be fixed now and the Jewry will be slapped this week right and left.*

**Heydrich:** *In spite of the elimination of the Jew from the economic life, the main problem, namely to kick the Jew out of Germany, remains. May I make a few proposals to that effect? Following a suggestion by the Commissioner of the Reich, we have set up a centre for the Emigration of Jews in Vienna, and that way we have eliminated 50,000 Jews from Austria while from the Reich only 19,000 Jews were eliminated during the same period.*

#### ACTIVITY

- 1 What does Source 18.40 illustrate about the way the Third Reich operated? Refer to Hitler's role and the way decisions were taken.
- 2 Some historians argue that the Holocaust developed in a haphazard manner and not primarily as the result of a clear master plan by Hitler. How much evidence does this source provide to substantiate this view?

**SOURCE 18.41** R. Evans, *Rereading German History*, 1997, p. 150

*Goldhagen's argument . . . is that Germans killed millions of Jews during the Second World War not because they were forced to, nor because German traditions of obedience enabled a handful of fanatics at the top to do whatever they liked, nor because they were succumbing to peer-group pressure from their comrades-in-arms, nor because they were ambitious careerists, nor because they were acting automatically, like cogs in a machine. Least of all did they carry out extermination of the Jews because they faced death themselves if they refused to obey the order to do so. Goldhagen argues that Germans killed Jews in their millions because they enjoyed doing it, and they enjoyed doing it because their minds and emotions were eaten up by a murderous, all-consuming hatred of Jews that had been pervasive [widespread] in German political culture for decades, even centuries past. Ultimately, says Goldhagen, it is this history of genocidal anti-semitism that explains the German mass murder of Europe's Jews.*

#### TALKING POINT

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using one historian's summary of another's views?

## How far were the German people responsible for the Holocaust?

Most historians have tried to distinguish between Nazi fanatics who ordered and carried out the Holocaust and the mass of Germans who were uninvolved and arguably unaware of what was happening. This view has been challenged most recently by Daniel Goldhagen, a professor of history at Harvard. His Jewish father, also a history professor, was taken by the Nazis for execution but managed to survive. Goldhagen has made a name for himself with his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) which has aroused fierce controversy. He has not primarily based his study on new sources, but has studied again those used by an earlier research historian Christopher Browning and come up with very different views.

Goldhagen claims ordinary Germans were Hitler's willing executioners. The sources he has studied of the police who followed in the wake of the armies in eastern Europe reveal how thousands of ordinary Germans (most were not Nazi Party members) willingly participated and even revelled in brutality and mass murder. At least 100,000 ordinary Germans were involved in the Holocaust, and all Germans were potentially involved. Such involvement was not conceivable in any other country. Germans were morally responsible for the Holocaust. Goldhagen's view has been well summarised by Richard Evans in Source 18.41.

An alternative view is that most Germans were unaware of the full horrors of the Holocaust which the regime tried to keep secret. Although rumours existed, most Germans turned a deaf ear to them. Only a small number were actively involved, and many of these were Ukrainians and other non-Germans.

Other views accept that knowledge of anti-Jewish atrocities was widespread but it was a secret that could not be kept. However, for a variety of different and complex reasons most Germans did not act to prevent the horrors. Widespread anti-semitism played a part here, strengthened by Nazi propaganda, but this was not the same as most Germans being 'eliminationists'.

The criticisms made of Goldhagen illustrate much about the nature of the historical process. He has been criticised for:

- selective use of evidence: ignoring aspects that do not fit in with his thesis
- sweeping generalisations
- giving a simple answer to a complex question
- his narrow focus; his exaggeration of anti-semitism in Germany and the underplaying of it in other countries
- his subjective approach, as the son of a Jew who survived the camps
- appealing to the emotions by detailing the horrors, to the neglect of critical assessment
- his motivation: he is a careerist out to make a name/money for himself (which has certainly happened for his book became a bestseller)
- the effects of his views, encouraging hatred of Germans (thus fostering racism)
- undermining, by displaying the Holocaust as unique, the attempt to learn lessons from the Holocaust, and to understand similar horrors, and how to prevent them.

Thus he has been criticised for his methods, his motivation, and the possible effects of his work.

#### TALKING POINTS

- 1 How is it that historians looking at the same primary sources can develop contrasting historical explanations?
- 2 Should the possible effects of historical analysis be used to argue against its validity?
- 3 In the 1990s there was mass slaughter in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, and more revelations emerged about the 'Killing Fields' in Pol Pot's Cambodia in the 1970s. Can such contemporary events help us to understand how the Holocaust could happen?



## ■ 18C Why did the German people allow the Holocaust to happen?

A variety of claims have been put forward, ranging from evidence of mass ignorance to mass willing participation. Points made include:

- **They were unable to prevent it**

Nazi Germany was a terror state.

- **They accepted it**

Many Germans were

- conformist
- apathetic
- influenced by propaganda
- psychologically prepared
- influenced by social Darwinist views
- anti-semitic
- unconcerned about minority groups
- brutalised by war, believing 'life is cheap'
- convinced of the need to prevent Jewish atrocities against themselves and saw
  - the Jewish problem in biological not human terms
  - life as a cruel struggle.

The Holocaust was

- the culmination of the gradual dehumanising impact of the regime
- a logical development from euthanasia of the mentally ill
- something that Germans were gradually sucked into.

- **They were unaware of it**

The Nazis tried to keep it secret.

The extermination camps were far away in the east.

The Nazis used the language of euphemism, e.g. 'special handling', 'final solution'.

Germans perhaps

- did not have sufficient evidence of what was going on
- rejected wild, unbelievable rumours
- had information, but did not understand or internalise it
- closed their ears; they were skilled at knowing how not to know
- deliberately did not find out in order to reduce their responsibility
- tried to live a normal life by dissociating themselves from it
- retreated from reality.

### ACTIVITY

Debate: 'Were ordinary Germans violently anti-semitic and Hitler's willing executioners?'

The following points have been made in the 'Goldhagen debate'. Arrange them in two lists: those which he might use and those points which could be used by his critics.

- Eliminationist anti-semitism had deep roots in Germany.
- At least 100,000 ordinary Germans were involved in the Holocaust.
- There was considerable opposition to Nazism.
- Anti-semitism was not an important reason why millions of Germans voted for Hitler in Weimar elections.
- There is much evidence that many of those involved in killing Jews enjoyed it.
- No one was executed for refusing to participate in the killings.
- There were liberal attitudes to Jews in Weimar Germany.
- Many of those involved in committing atrocities were deeply disturbed by the experience.
- Germans were under pressure, and had been subjected to propaganda.
- Other countries, not just Germany, committed anti-semitic atrocities.
- Jews were involved in operating the Holocaust.
- Other groups were also systematically killed, e.g. gypsies.

Using these points and others, debate the Goldhagen view.

### TALKING POINTS

One German, interviewed in the 1990s about her lack of opposition to the Nazi treatment of Jews, commented: 'I was sorry about that. But really, just like today when you walk away from people in need, you can't help everywhere: it was the same then. You couldn't do anything, could you?'

1 Do you find this a powerful explanation?

2 Can we talk about 'the Germans' attitude' to the Holocaust?

Most historians now accept that knowledge of the mass murder of Jews, even if vague, was increasingly widespread, although far more so in the case of the shootings than of the extermination camps. Too many people were involved – not just the prison guards but front-line soldiers, bureaucrats, railway staff, industrialists – for the atrocities to remain a secret. This is certainly suggested by the following sources.

**SOURCE 18.42** Headline from a Hanover newspaper in 1942

*The Jews to be exterminated.*

**SOURCE 18.43** Bishop Theophilus Wurm to the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs

*The steps taken in the occupied territories have become known in our homeland. [They] are widely discussed and burden most heavily the conscience and strength of countless men and women among the German people who suffer from it more than from their family sacrifices.*

**SOURCE 18.44** A foreigner leaving Berlin in 1943, as reported by the British Embassy in Lisbon to the Foreign Office

*Feelings were certainly strong against Jews in general, but what the regime had done to them was considered by nearly everyone to be excessive.*

**SOURCE 18.45** Survey of opinions of a random sample of Germans carried out by American occupation authorities, October 1945

Statement	Percentage agreeing
Hitler was right in his treatment of the Jews.	0
Hitler went too far in his treatment of the Jews, but something had to be done to keep them in bounds.	19
The actions against the Jews were in no way justified.	77

#### TALKING POINT

What are the limitations of the 1945 American survey of German attitudes on Nazism (Source 18.45)?

Three recent historians have argued quite persuasively on this issue.

**SOURCE 18.46** M. Housden, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*, 1996, p. 160

*In the context of a society in which racism formed a background feature of everyday life, very many ordinary Germans indeed played small parts in making a fundamentally flawed system function. Accepting that concrete individual actions always reflect a mixture of motives, during peacetime conformity took the form of both passive acceptance of, and active support for, racial policies and actions which stopped short of the wholesale violence of 'Crystal Night'. With the nation at war, escalating racial policy grew into something people learned to live with; it was for most people a source of indifference. If their job dictated some sort of collaboration in the implementation of racial policy, by and large they conformed to the demand. Naturally there were exceptions to the rule ... But the impression lingers, as Willy Brandt [Chancellor of the German Federal Republic 1969–74] has said, that far too few people made conscious choices to oppose this particular form of evil. It became normal to conform to highly abnormal expectations.*

**SOURCE 18.47** D. Bankier, 'German Public Awareness of the Final Solution' in *The Final Solution*, ed. D. Cesarani, 1996, p. 225

*The view ... that very little was known about the extermination at the time, or that only unsubstantiated rumours about the Jews' fate circulated in Germany, is untenable ... On the basis of the available evidence it is equally untenable that the German people failed to comprehend the significance of the Nazis' genocidal policy ... The awareness of the extermination shaped the public's reactions to the regime's political stimuli and ... affected its interpretations of wartime reality.*

**SOURCE 18.48** I. Kershaw, 'German Popular Opinion during the Final Solution' in *Comprehending the Holocaust*, ed. A. Cohen, 1988, p. 154

*The fairly widespread knowledge of the mass shootings of Jews was . . . compatible with a spectrum of responses ranging from overt approval to blank condemnation, and above all with an apathetic shrug of the shoulders, the feeling of impotence, or the turning of the face from unpalatable [unacceptable] truths.*

*Much suggests, in fact, that this type of reaction – that is non-reaction – was the most commonplace of all. If one term above all sums up the behavioural response of the German people to the persecution of the Jews, it is: passivity [indifference]. The passivity was consonant [consistent] with a number of differing internalised attitudes toward Jews. Most obviously, it corresponded to latent [hidden] anti-semitism, and, arguably, to a mentality of 'moral indifference'. It also mirrored apathy . . . and a willingness to accept uncritically the state's right to take radical action against its 'enemies'. Above all . . . passivity . . . was a reflection of a prevailing lack of interest in the Jewish Question . . . At the time that Jews were being murdered in their millions, the vast majority of Germans had plenty of other things on their mind.*

### How did war contribute to the Holocaust?

Some historians put great stress on the impact of the Second World War. They argue that but for the outbreak of war the Holocaust would not have happened. Goebbels once described the struggle Germany was in as 'not the Second World War but the great racial war'. The mass killing of Jews began in Poland in the wake of the Nazi advance in 1939 and escalated in 1941 during the invasion of the USSR. There is now overwhelming evidence that it was not just the enthusiastic Nazis of the SS who committed mass murder in the Polish and Russian campaigns, but also ordinary units of the Wehrmacht.

The Second World War contributed to the Holocaust in the following ways:

- It disrupted the Nazi government's plans for mass Jewish emigration.
- It meant Germany gained control of millions more Jews at a time when the Nazi government wanted to remove Jews from its own territory.
- It brutalised people, and accustomed them to killing.
- Since Germans were dying in the war, many felt that killing their enemies was justified.
- It intensified paranoia about the enemy within; it encouraged extremism.
- It removed any concern about international opinion.

German soldiers embarking for the eastern front on 1 September 1939. The graffiti on the train says: 'We're off to Poland – to thrash the Jews'

