

7 Key debate

► *Where did the responsibility lie for the Nazi racial war?*

Nazi Germany's racial war of 1939–45 remains one of the most fundamental controversies in history. Historians have raised important questions about the role and power of Hitler and all the other institutions in bringing about the genocide.

Nazism: a model of totalitarianism

In the 1950s historians saw the Nazi apparatus of terror and destruction as an example of totalitarianism. According to such interpretations there were no fundamental differences between the regimes of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Indeed, Carl Friedrich's analysis went so far as to identify six major features common to totalitarian dictatorships:

- an official ideology
- a single mass party
- terroristic control by the police
- monopolistic control over the media
- a monopoly of arms
- central control of the economy.

KEY TERM

Cold War The period of tension between the USA and the USSR, 1945–90, that did not result in open warfare.

The idea of Nazism as a form of totalitarianism held great weight in the 1950s, but this thinking was a product of the **Cold War**, when liberal Western historians rather too readily assumed close similarities between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia.

Hitlerism: the strong dictator

Not surprisingly, the so-called 'intentionalist' approach has maintained that Hitler himself played the vital role in the directing of the Third Reich. As N. Rich tellingly wrote: 'The point cannot be stressed too strongly. Hitler was master in the Third Reich.' Many continue to concur.

The concept of the strong dictator has been most overtly outlined by the work of Hildebrand and Jäckel. In their view, Hitler took the responsibility for taking the 'big' decisions, which shaped the direction of Nazi Germany in foreign and race policy. Moreover, although there were other power bases within the party, Hitler preserved his own authority by tolerating only key Nazis who were personally loyal, for example Himmler.

Interestingly, although the historian K.D. Bracher remains in the same camp, he differs in focus of emphasis. He recognises that there was division and confusion in Hitler's regime. However, he believes that it was the result of a *deliberate* policy of 'divide and rule' on the part of Hitler. Moreover, he claimed that this strategy was successful in maintaining the *Führer's* own political authority.

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EXTRACT 1

From Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, Macmillan, 1979, pp. 43-4.

Hitler deliberately destroyed the State's ability to function in favour of his personal omnipotence and irreplaceability, and he did so from the start ... [He] brought about a state of affairs in which the most various autonomous authorities were ranged alongside and against each other, without defined boundaries, in competition and overlapping - and only he was at the head of them ... absolute rule was not possible in an intact state organism but only amid chaos. That was why, from the outset, he replaced the State by chaos - and one has to hand it to him that, while he was alive, he knew how to control it.

According to Haffner in Extract 1, how did Hitler set out from the start to establish total authority?



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A polyocracy: a chaotic power structure

In marked contrast, structuralist historians, such as Broszat and Mommsen, writing in the 1970s (see pages 130-1), have focused their analysis on the structure of the Third Reich. They believe that the Nazi regime really just evolved from the pressure of the circumstances and not from Hitler's dominant role. In fact, Hitler's personal weaknesses and limitations led to poor leadership. He was considered incapable of making effective decisions and, as a result, the government lacked clear direction. He was not able to keep the tensions in the economy and the state under control. Moreover, he was never able to manage the other powerful institutions. Structuralists have seen the Third Reich in its power system as a 'polyocracy', which became an alliance of different overlapping power groups consisting of the Nazi Party itself, the SS-Police system and the army, big business and the higher levels of the state bureaucracy. Although they did not always agree, they were dependent on each other and prepared to work together as partners in power.

Finally, the leading Nazis exerted their own influence for their own objectives and frequently Hitler did not intervene. Indeed, Mommsen even goes as far as to describe Hitler as 'unwilling to take decisions, frequently uncertain, exclusively

concerned with upholding his prestige and personal authority, influenced in the strongest fashion by his current entourage, in some respects a weak dictator’.

Historians of the ‘structuralist’ school, also called ‘functionalist’, emphasise the unsystematic nature of Nazi policies as unclear responses to a disorderly government. According to the structuralist interpretation, the moral responsibility for the ‘Final Solution’ extends beyond Hitler to include the whole apparatus of the regime. Most notably, K. Schleunes, writing in 1970, has suggested that there was no direct path because of the existence of rival policies and the lack of clear objectives. He describes the road to Auschwitz as a ‘twisted one’ and concludes that ‘the Final Solution as it emerged in 1941 and 1942 was not the product of a grand design’. Instead, from 1941 it came to be implemented as a result of the chaotic nature of government within the regime. Various institutions and individuals were responsible for developing the improvised policy which would deal with the military and human situation in eastern Europe by the end of 1941.

Obviously, that approach has led to claims of abnegating of individuals’ responsibility. But nearly all ‘structuralist’ historians have been keen to emphasise that this in no way reduces the guilt of Hitler, who was in total agreement with such a policy. For example, H. Mommsen concludes his analysis as follows: ‘That the solution was put into effect is by no means to be ascribed to Hitler alone, but to the complexity of the decision-making process in the Third Reich, which brought about a progressive and cumulative radicalisation.’

Charismatic domination: working towards the *Führer*

Kershaw provides a synthesis of structuralist and intentionalist interpretations. In many ways, his methodology may well be defined as structuralist, and yet he insists that the extent and centrality of Hitler’s authority is placed in the wider context, particularly of the German elites and the complicity of German society. He certainly does not portray Hitler as the weak dictator. This is because Hitler succeeded in generating an environment in which his followers carried out his presumed intentions and willingly took the responsibility ‘to work towards the *Führer*’ (see pages 155 and 189). As Kershaw says: ‘Hitler’s personalised form of rule invited initiatives from below and offered such initiatives backing, so long as they were in line with his broadly defined goals’.

EXTRACT 2

From Ian Kershaw, *Hitler’s Role in the Final Solution*, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 2006, p. 38.

Hitler’s ‘prophecy’ of January 30th 1939, which he was to invoke so frequently in the following years, has claim to be regarded as a key both to Hitler’s mentality, and to the ways he provided ‘directions for action’ ... It illustrates, in fact, how ‘charismatic leadership’ operated in the crucial area of genocidal policy, and how Nazi activists at different levels of the regime were adept in

? According to Extract 2, how did Hitler’s personalised form of rule pave the way for the ‘Final Solution’?

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knowing how to 'work towards the Führer' without having to wait for a precise Führer order. It seems unlikely that Hitler ever gave one single, explicit order for the 'Final Solution'. Within the unchanging framework of his prophecy, he needed to do no more than provide requisite authorisation at the appropriate time to Himmler and Heydrich to go ahead with the various escalatory stages in the murder of Europe's Jews.

The Germans: ordinary people

Some historians have taken the structuralist interpretation a lot further and have adopted a more 'bottom-up' approach to explaining Nazi Germany. They go as far as claiming that the Nazi leadership had little to do with starting the Holocaust and that the real initiative came from other groups. Götz Aly, writing in 1999, for example, has focused on the role of the German Army in instigating genocidal crimes (as opposed to the SS). He also highlighted the involvement of the broader government bureaucracy, 'a planning intelligentsia' and even the financial banking sector in driving anti-Semitic policy.

Even more controversially, the American historian Daniel Goldhagen has suggested in his book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), that the Holocaust was 'intended' by the ordinary German people because so many were prepared to participate in the Third Reich's darkest deed. This is explained, according to Goldhagen, by the fact that within German culture there had developed a violent variant of anti-Semitism in the Nazi years which was set on eliminating the Jews. Such a view resurrected the old argument of 'collective national guilt and shame':

EXTRACT 3

From Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Little, Brown, 1996, pp. 416-18.

The men and women ... who peopled the institutions of genocidal killing ... were overwhelmingly and most importantly Germans ... this was above all a German enterprise; the decisions, plans, organisational resources, and the majority of its executors were German. Comprehension and explanation of the perpetration of the Holocaust therefore requires an explanation of the Germans' drive to kill Jews. Because what can be said about the German cannot be said about any other nationality or about all of the other nationalities - namely no German, no Holocaust - the focus here is appropriately on the German perpetrators.

In his very broad conceptual overview of Nazism, M. Burleigh has also distanced himself from the structuralist interpretation of chaotic government. Although in his book, *The Third Reich: A New History* (2001), he still portrays Hitler as a messianic leader who guided the movement, he also emphasises that the Holocaust was the direct result of the ideology of the *Volksgemeinschaft* utopia.

How convincing is Goldhagen's interpretation in Extract 3?



In his interpretation he replaces the term 'class' with 'race', and shows how the Nazi policies on eugenics and euthanasia, the action against asocials and homosexuals, and the introduction of forced labour all combined to create an ideological justification for the racial war. By interpreting Nazism as a 'political religion', the Final Solution can be seen as a result of the 'moral force and consensual climate' of Germany.

Chapter summary

Despite the increasing military difficulties from 1942, the German resistance made no more impact than a few brave gestures. It was divided because of ineffective leadership. Still, there was a marked increase in dissent from 1943 in the wake of shortages and bombings, although the Nazi regime was never seriously threatened from within. In

any case, all shades of opposition were dealt with brutally. In the end, it was only the Allies' military occupation which ultimately destroyed the Third Reich in 1945. The war economy was not effectively mobilised at first, and even Speer's reforms did not solve the fundamental problems of labour and resource shortages. The Nazi racial war was the result of ideology and 1930s' policies, but the Final Solution was not really premeditated: it was more a pragmatic response to the pressures and the desire of key forces to satisfy Hitler's vision.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1 Why was Germany so militarily successful in 1939-41?
- 2 When and why did the military balance turn against Germany?
- 3 How effectively did the German economy expand in the early years of the war?
- 4 To what extent did the Nazis fail to mobilise the economy to the demands of 'total war'?
- 5 When and how did Nazi anti-Semitism degenerate into genocide?
- 6 Why were Gypsies persecuted?
- 7 How did the war affect people's living and working conditions?
- 8 Why did the war put particular pressure on German women?
- 9 How did the war change German people's attitudes to the regime?
- 10 Why was active communist resistance to the Nazi state so limited?
- 11 To what extent did the resistance of Christians and the students achieve anything?
- 12 Why did 'active resistance' fail to undermine the Third Reich?
- 13 Was military bungling the main reason for Germany losing the war?