

# What was hitler's role in the holocaust



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If one were to frame the Holocaust as beginning with the systematised, state-sanctioned persecution, alienation and subsequent dehumanisation of the Jewish population as initiated by Adolf Hitler's accession to the post of Reichskanzler on the 30 January 1933 and culminating in the liberation of the last of the death camps, Belsen on the 12 April 1945, Hitler must be said to have played a crucial role in the regime's development.

He instigated the Holocaust initially by stoking the nationalist sentiment which created the frenzied atmosphere necessary for the Holocaust to take place; without such a Zeitgeist, the Nazi Party may well have remained on the periphery of German politics. As things stood, however, many people readily received the Fuhrer's message and responded to his annual Nuremberg Rallies between 1923 and 1938 hysterically. Hitler's rhetoric permeated the German psyche and assured their compliance when he came to pursue his policy of Gleichschaltung, thus establishing a totalitarian grip over all branches of the Third Reich.

Once he had grown assured of his subjects' submission, Hitler began to outsource the regime's workings to SS, and to a lesser extent SA officers, like Reinhard Heydrich and Joseph Goebbels, whom he considered competent enough to implement his Weltanschauung. Unscrupulous careerists like these were a product of the 'Cult of the Fuhrer', which had given rise to an atmosphere of total adhesion to Hitler's ends. Hitler's Weltanschauung was a product of his experiences as a soldier in World War One.

He lay, prostrate in a hospital in Pasewalk, Pomerania when the news reached him of Germany's capitulation in November of 1918 and this

humiliating loss gave rise to a visceral hatred in Hitler that sought to expiate the failure of his compatriots<sup>1</sup>. While his Weltanschauung comprised of a tripartite ideology mainly preoccupied with Germany's hegemony over Europe, the final part pertained to the extermination of the Jews and it was the latter that would form the crux of his drive to power.

For, as a fanatic, it was imperative that he make his views clear, and bring his 'nation' to their senses, unified under his ideological banner. It was because of this necessity that he embarked on a series of rallies from 1921, which sought to expound the virtues of the 'November Criminals'. His speech on the 8th August 1921 in Salzburg was typical: Don't think you can fight racial tuberculosis without taking care to rid the nation of the carrier of that racial tuberculosis.

This Jewish contamination will not subside; this poisoning of the nation will not end, until the carrier himself, the Jew, has been banished from our midst.  
<sup>2</sup> Hitler came to appreciate the power of rhetoric in expediting his ideology; the German Worker's Party - a forerunner of the Nazi Party - had risen amidst a mood of discontent and was predicated on that mood's continued existence: its following was at its peak during the hyperinflation of the German mark to 4 trillion to a dollar in 1923 and the Great Depression in 1929; between 1928 and 1929 votes rose from 810,000 to 6,409,600<sup>3</sup>. Ian Kershaw, the celebrated biographer of Hitler, spoke of this in stating that 'simple slogans, kindling the fires of anger, resentment, and hatred, were what worked'<sup>4</sup> - Hitler could not afford to lose the votes he had won from his radicalism. His main role in the regime's formation was thus the identification of the Jews as the root of Germany's problems.

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This set the tone for the future ambivalence towards the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany. It was because of this that Alfred Rosenberg, an early and influential member of the Nazi Party, talked of anti-Semitism as the 'the unifying element of Reconstruction Germany'<sup>5</sup>. Following his rise to the helm of German Politik, however, Hitler reoriented his policies; he was keen to secure total submission within his Third Reich before he turned his focus to the extermination of the Jews.

Obedience was duly achieved by the Enabling Act of March 23, 1933 which gave Hitler a 'carte blanche to terrorise and neutralise all effective political opposition'<sup>6</sup> and he consequently 'lifted constraints, and removed barriers on measures that before 30th January 1933 had barely seemed conceivable'<sup>7</sup>. Total compliance was a necessary condition for the success of Hitler's regime; he would not entrust the regime's workings to inferiors until he was certain of the fact that it would not serve to detriment his authority.

Indeed, as the historian of Nazism, Joachim Fest noted, he 'never had he felt as dependent upon the masses as he did at this time, and he watched their reactions with anxious concern'<sup>8</sup>. This explains why he promptly crushed the potentially perverse SA leadership and leveraged his brainchild the SS.

Moreover, he even reprimanded Vice-Chancellor Von Papen's concerns about his 'Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring' on 14th July 1933.

It was in this way that he secured compliance and on these grounds that, once he had secured the additional caveat of economic stability, he would begin to delegate power bureaucrats of the SS. With the political machinery

of the Nazi party operating smoothly, Hitler began to tighten the economic structure of his Reich. It was Hitler's dream that his Reich would supersede the republic, emulating Otto I's Holy Roman Empire and Otto von Bismarck's post-unification Empire, thus making it the 'Third' Reich.

Under Hitler's auspices, Hermann Goering inspired Germany's economic resurgence through his Four Year Plan, which championed the notions of Autarkie - the notion that the German economy should be totally self-contained and self-reliant - and rearmament. Furthermore, between 1933 and 1936 employment in the construction sector alone rose from 666,000 to over 2,000,000<sup>10</sup>. The untold rewards that Hitler could offer technocrats like Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, who presided over both Krupp's Iron and Steel Concern and acted as chairman of the Reich Association of German Industry, secured their unconditional loyalty to the Nazi cause.

Even morally upright men like Fritz Thyssen willingly complied between 1932 and 1935<sup>11</sup>; that he defected to Switzerland in 1939 held little significance, for by this point Hitler had garnered the necessary drive for the fulfilment of his plans. The resurgence of the prior moribund economy restored confidence in the regime's efficiency and above all served to heighten the aura of invincibility surrounding the Fuhrer.

Kershaw referred to this when he stated that the 'the economic drive [created by the Nazi Four-Year Plan] created its own dynamic which fed directly into Hitler's ideological imperative'<sup>12</sup>. It was the final criterion for Hitler's willingness to delegate his power. The ethic of Hitler's Reich from this point was captured in the speech made by Werner Willikens, State Secretary

in the Prussian Agriculture Ministry in 1934: 'Everyone with opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can only with great difficulty order from above everything that he intends to carry out sooner or later.

On the contrary, until now everyone has best worked in his place in the new Germany if, so to speak, he works towards the Führer. '13 Economic resurgence and a sweeping show of his capability were central to the subsequent drive for 'cumulative radicalisation'<sup>14</sup>; Hitler's inferiors understood that the only means to personal advancement lay in complete adherence to his ambitions.

The events that unfolded on Kristallnacht duly vindicated Willikens' prophecy. Joseph Goebbels had fallen out of the Führer's favour following the ineffectiveness of his propaganda campaign during the Sudeten Crisis and his affair with the Czech actress, Lida Baarova, who was rumoured to have Jewish roots. In order to placate Hitler and mend his broken reputation, Goebbels instigated a wave of pogroms by delivering the speech which claimed that 'the Führer has decided that... demonstrations should not be prepared or organised by the party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered'<sup>15</sup>.

Perhaps more telling than this was Hitler's response, as it was recorded in Goebbels' diary, that no restraints were necessary since he believed that 'the Jews must for once feel the people's fury'<sup>16</sup>. Despite Hitler's apparent surprise, it is unlikely that Kristallnacht was truly unexpected; this 'spontaneous' public outburst was in fact manufactured by Goebbels in an attempt to recover his master's good graces. The Night of Broken Glass

would prove to be the inaugural moment of the third and final stage of the Holocaust.

Whilst Hitler's remark underestimated the extent to which he had, in fact, influenced the popular mind-set, the Cult of the Führer's effect was so profound that its influence was not confined to the SS, as Kershaw noted: 'Metaphorically, [there were] ordinary citizens denouncing neighbours to the Gestapo, often turning personal animosity or resentment to their advantage through political slur, business happy to exploit anti-Jewish legislation to rid themselves of competitors, and the many others whose daily forms of minor cooperation with the regime took place at the cost of others, were - whatever their motives - indirectly 'working towards the Führer'<sup>17</sup>. The Holocaust would not have been possible without the people's quiescence, if not acquiescence.

They soon understood how beneficial it could be, on a personal financial level, if they allowed the decline of the previously prominent Jews and while this is not to contend that the Germans were 'willing executioners' the predominant atmosphere of assent certainly aided Hitler's aims and may well have been necessary. Despite the degree to which certain matters were out of his hands, Hitler did not entirely relinquish control and was content to step in as the regime's imperator if he felt his interference was required. During the Berlin Olympics of 1936, he questioned Goebbels' handling of the delicate propaganda matter over the treatment of the Jews. At his behest, the ubiquitous 'Jews Not Welcome' signs normally seen throughout Germany were removed from hotels, restaurants and public places and the fervently anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer* was even removed from newsstands.

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This illustrates the degree to which he carefully constructed his public image and engineered his 'Final Solution' - only three years later on 30 January 1939 he contrived to expedite anti-Semitic reform: 'I want today to be a prophet again: if international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will not be the bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of the Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'.

The T4 Aktion of 1939 removed all doubts as to what Hitler envisioned for the Jews whilst the antagonistic line of foreign policy he contrived to lead that year showed that he had no scruples in 'plunging the nation into a world war' thus effectively commanding the 'annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'. With the annexation of Poland in September 1939 the two principle branches of his Weltanschauung were now inextricably bound, since the steps required for Germany's eventual hegemony over Europe (as Hitler envisioned it) necessarily brought more Jews under Hitler's command.

The invasion of Poland established an Imperium filled with bureaucracies, politicians and professions who were eager to please Hitler and it was to this frenzied mood that the Einsatzgruppen reacted - these were essentially splinter groups of the Wehrmacht, who, together with the SS, formed ad hoc Death squads<sup>19</sup>, in hunting down Jews. In mid-1941, for example, the SS Cavalry Brigade commanded by Hermann Fegelein during the course of 'anti-partisan' operations in the Pripyat Marshes, killed 14,178 Jews. These actions inspired a further wave of death squads, as evidenced by the orders of General Max von Schenckendorff who, between 24 and 26 September 1941, gave an SS-Wehrmacht seminar on how best to kill Jews<sup>20</sup>.



Von Schenckendorff was subordinate to Heydrich who was in turn directly answerable to Hitler, and it was in this way that Hitler was able to reduce his input since he could rest assured that his Obergruppenfuhrer would leave no stone unturned in eliminating the ideological enemy and that in the atmosphere of sycophancy he had constructed, few would dare to stand in the way of their aims. Just as the Germany's economic resurgence had fed into the Nazi's ideological drive, so too did their initial military success; the extermination of 'Jewish Bolshevism' was synonymous with the 'War of Annihilation' that reached its fulfilment in the Operation Barbarossa. By the Wannsee

Conference on 20 January 1942 Hitler chose not to preside and although he had a brief, nominal conversation with Heydrich regarding the Final Solution's strategy, the resultant Wannsee Protocol was constructed almost entirely without his direct input. Hitler's role in the Holocaust was complicated and evolved over time. Historians' analysis and attempts to understand his role have ranged from the Intentionalist to the Structuralist interpretations, which have purported to show Hitler's role as the Holocaust's emperor and its figurehead respectively; in reality, it was less transparent. At different times he fulfilled both of these roles. Crucially, until 1934 he played the role of principal overseer, scapegoating the Jews which laid the precedent for the contempt for the Jews of Nazi Germany that would culminate in the eventual attempt to exterminate them.

Hitler made explicit in his early rallies and decrees his plans for the Third Reich, the virtues of which he continued to expound in his later speeches. Whilst the execution of the Holocaust ran relatively untroubled, his war effort

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did not. His belligerence thus outgrew his bigotry, and because he would rather entrust the management of a relatively more menial<sup>21</sup> task, like the extermination of the Jews, to his inferiors than the mounting of the war effort, it followed that it was both convenient and expedient for him to delegate the responsibilities to Himmler, Eichmann, Goering, Heydrich and the like. There was therefore a 'twisted road to Auschwitz'<sup>22</sup> and one for which no man can take full responsibility, but only because Hitler decided that it should be so.