

Response paper 4



Response Paper #4: The Holocaust Certainly, the Holocaust is one of the most gruesome chapters in our history with millions of Jews systematically killed due to their race alone. It is for this reason why it has generated intensive scholarly interest and that diverging historiographical perspectives emerged as a consequence. A specific bone of contention in this diversity of views is concerned with the causation of the mass murder. Two dominant schools of thought in this area are the intentionalist and functionalist perspectives. They particularly differ on the complicity or the degree of responsibility that Adolf Hitler had in the Holocaust.

Historians in the intentionalist side of the divide believe that the Holocaust has been the Fuhrer's objective all along and has, in fact, been in the offing since 1919. The policy, which came to be known as the Last Solution, has been credited to Hitler's madness alone and no one else's (or at least primarily) though, according to Totten & Feinberg, he was influenced by the anti-Semitism sentiments in Germany and Austria back in the nineteenth century (29). Here, the Nazi structure has been reduced to a mere tool – a mechanism carrying out Hitler's specific orders to annihilate the Jews in Europe.

On the other hand, the functionalist argument dilutes Hitler's complicity in the Holocaust. The main premise of this stand is that anti-Semitism has flourished in the German society, particularly in the Nazi hierarchy, whose members either wanted drastic solutions to Germany's problems or to please their Fuhrer or both. Here, it is assumed that such deep-rooted anger towards the Jews made it easier for the bureaucracy to adopt a coordinated program in so short a time to exterminate the Jewish population. According to Berger, there are no evidences that specifically points to direct orders

from Hitler himself and that what has been determined was an order to purge Germany of Jews, but with no explicit command as to how this will be achieved (5).

In examining the merits and demerits of the arguments raised by the intentionalist and functionalist perspectives, two important facts emerge. First is that both have legitimate claims to credibility and significance. For example, there are rich sources that demonstrate the systematic evolution of Hitler's hate towards the Jews and these underscored how it became easier for him to attempt to annihilate the race, using the war as a pretext. Here, it also became easier for historians to credibly justify the sheer insanity of the mass murder. The breadth and efficiency of the murder was, on the other hand, explained successfully by the functionalist theory. The brutality of the Holocaust could not have been accomplished by one man alone. Certainly, his objectives were shared by those in the German bureaucracy, otherwise the killings could not have swiftly taken place in such a massive scale. The anti-Semitism that has permeated in Germany in the past also served this point of view.

The second is that each failed to address some issues. The most important of which is the fact that when one – either Hitler or the Nazi bureaucracy, depending on the perspective a historian is – committed the atrocities, surely the other would know about it. There was no reference about a massive disagreement or reprisal within the German leadership structure, and so, so whoever perpetuated the crime is not the sole responsible because the other sanctioned the act by turning a blind eye. With this in mind, arguing the degree of culpability either for Hitler or his Nazi underlings becomes moot because, in the end, the incredible feat has been accomplished and it would

not have been made possible without the cooperation of either one of them.

Works Cited

Berger, Ronald. *Fathoming the Holocaust: a social problems approach*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2002.

Totten, Samuel and Feinberg, Stephen. *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust (PB)*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001.