


access to history

Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

SECOND EDITION

Alan Farmer

 **HODDER**
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© Alan Farmer 1998, 2009
First published in 1998 by
Hodder Education,
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

This Second Edition published in 2009

Impression number	5 4 3
Year	2013 2012 2011 2010

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Cover photo: *The Ghetto of Jewish History*, 1976, an oil painting by Samuel Bak, image courtesy of Pucker Gallery, www.puckergallery.com
Typeset in 10/12pt Baskerville and produced by Gray Publishing, Tunbridge Wells
Printed in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 0340 984 963

Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The *Access to History* series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to 'cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be'. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.

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1

The Holocaust: The Historiographical Debate

POINTS TO CONSIDER

This book is an attempt to explain the persecution, and mass killing that resulted from this, of German and European Jews. This occurred in the 1930s and 1940s and is associated with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. By the end of 1941 Hitler was almost certainly committed to a plan to murder all the Jews living in Germany and German-controlled territory. (By 1941 this meant most of Europe.) This plan came to fruition in 1942 and continued until 1945. This introductory chapter aims to provide you with a framework for understanding some of the key historiographical debates – that is debates among historians – associated with the Holocaust. It will do this by introducing the following questions:

- What was the nature of the Holocaust?
- To what extent was Adolf Hitler responsible?
- How responsible were Himmler, Heydrich and the SS?
- How were the German euthanasia programme and the Holocaust connected?
- How guilty was the German army?
- To what extent were the German people responsible?
- Was European anti-Semitism to blame?
- Did Jews collaborate in their own destruction?
- To what extent were the USA and Britain to blame?
- To what extent were the Christian Churches to blame?

Key dates

1933 Hitler came to power in Germany
1939 Start of euthanasia programme
1941 German attack on the USSR

Key question
What is the correct name for the Holocaust?

1 | What was the Nature of the Holocaust?

The Final Solution, Holocaust or *Shoah*?

The systematic attempt to exterminate all European Jews is usually referred to as the Final Solution or the Holocaust. Neither term is entirely satisfactory. 'Final Solution' was used by the Nazis before 1941 to describe whichever anti-Jewish policy was in vogue at the time. Consequently there were several 'final

2 | Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

solutions’ (which did not involve the annihilation of the Jews) before the final ‘Final Solution’.

The word Holocaust comes from a third-century BC Greek edition of the Old Testament, translating as ‘the burnt sacrificial offering dedicated exclusively to God’. While Israeli historians have sometimes preferred to use the Hebrew word *Shoah* (meaning destruction), this book will use both Holocaust and Final Solution (interchangeably) simply because they are the terms most commonly used in the English-speaking world.

Non-Jewish suffering

Many think the word Holocaust should refer exclusively to the wartime fate of the Jews, thus emphasising the distinctiveness of the Jewish experience. However, the Jews were not the first and by no means the only group of people to be slaughtered by the Nazis. In 1939 Hitler’s government embarked on the so-called **euthanasia** programme which led to the mass murder of Germany’s physically and mentally handicapped. Some 70,000 people deemed ‘unworthy of life’ had been killed by August 1941, before the Final Solution was really under way. During the course of the Second World War, the Nazis killed large numbers of people because of their national origins (e.g. Poles, Russians and Ukrainians), because of their behaviour (e.g. criminals and homosexuals), because of their political affiliations (e.g. socialists and communists) and because of their activities in the war (e.g. Soviet prisoners of war and members of resistance groups). The Holocaust cannot be understood except in terms of the killing of these other groups.

Jewish suffering

There is little doubt that the Jewish suffering was worse than that of any other group, except perhaps Gypsies, who were also murdered because they were perceived to be a biologically defined race of people. The killing of most of the other victims lacked the co-ordinated fanatical zeal that the Nazis reserved for the Jews. The essence of the Holocaust was the fact that it targeted every Jew for death.

Statistics give some indication of the Jews’ fate:

- Almost six million Poles died in the Second World War. Three million of these were Polish **gentiles** – 10 per cent of Poland’s non-Jews; three million were Polish Jews – 80 per cent of all Poland’s Jews.
- Fifty million people are thought to have died between 1939 and 1945: 12 per cent of these were Jews.
- By 1945 two-thirds of all the Jews in Europe had been massacred.

It is impossible to give an exact figure for the number of Jews killed. The Nazis themselves had difficulties defining who exactly was Jewish and were not always certain which victims were Jewish and which were non-Jewish. Nor is it clear how many Jews lived in Europe before 1941 or how many were still alive after 1945.

Key date

Start of euthanasia programme: 1939

Key terms

Euthanasia

The act or practice of putting people painlessly to death. From the Greek for ‘sweet death’.

Gentiles

Non-Jews.

Key question

How many Jews died in the Holocaust?

Key term

War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg

At the end of the war, the people considered most responsible for the Holocaust were put on trial in the German town of Nuremberg.

The accuracy of statistics varies from country to country. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is establishing the number of deaths in the USSR. The Russian archives have only been opened to Western scholars comparatively recently and there is still massive research work to do. While the Nazis recorded some portions of the Final Solution with great accuracy, at other times little was recorded or has survived. Given the problems with the evidence, the debate about the precise numbers killed looks set to continue. However, most historians accept the findings of the **War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg** in 1946 and agree that some five to six million Jews died in the years 1941–5: one-third of the world's Jewish population. The murder of the Jews was carried out largely outside Germany. Over one million were shot by execution squads in the USSR. Some four million were gassed or worked to death in camps in Poland. By 1942 the killing was on an industrial scale as Jews from every corner of Europe were deported eastwards to die. While there have been many instances of concentrated persecution of Jews throughout history, the sheer magnitude of the Holocaust makes it a unique and terrible event.

Key question

Can the Holocaust only be properly understood and interpreted by Jews?

Understanding the Holocaust

Given that the Jews were the main target of the Nazis, there is a view that the Holocaust should only be studied – and can only be properly understood – by Jews. Many of the greatest Holocaust historians have certainly been Jewish. However, most scholars rightly insist that the subject, like all history, belongs to all humanity, irrespective of religious belief or racial background. Indeed the Holocaust could be said to 'belong' as much to Christians since it was often perpetrated by (nominal) Christians in the midst of a supposedly Christian and civilised Europe.

Key question

Do other twentieth-century crimes compare with the Holocaust?

How horrendous?

Whether the Holocaust was the most horrendous crime of the twentieth century, the ultimate standard of evil against which all other degrees of evil should be measured, is debatable. Probably Stalin (in the USSR) and Mao Zedong (in China) killed more people in the name of **economic determinism** than Hitler killed in the name of **racial determinism**. Nevertheless, the Holocaust was certainly one of the worst lapses into barbarism in the history of the world. As such, it is difficult to discuss rationally. In the 1980s there was talk, especially in Germany, that the subject was so horrendous and so totally inexplicable that it could not be adequately dealt with by historians. This view does not carry much weight. As historian Yehuda Bauer says: 'if the Holocaust was caused by humans and its horrors inflicted on other humans and watched by yet other groups of humans, then it is as understandable as any other historical event'. Historians cannot and should not avoid dealing with the subject. To suppress it would not just be a crime against history but also a crime against those who died.

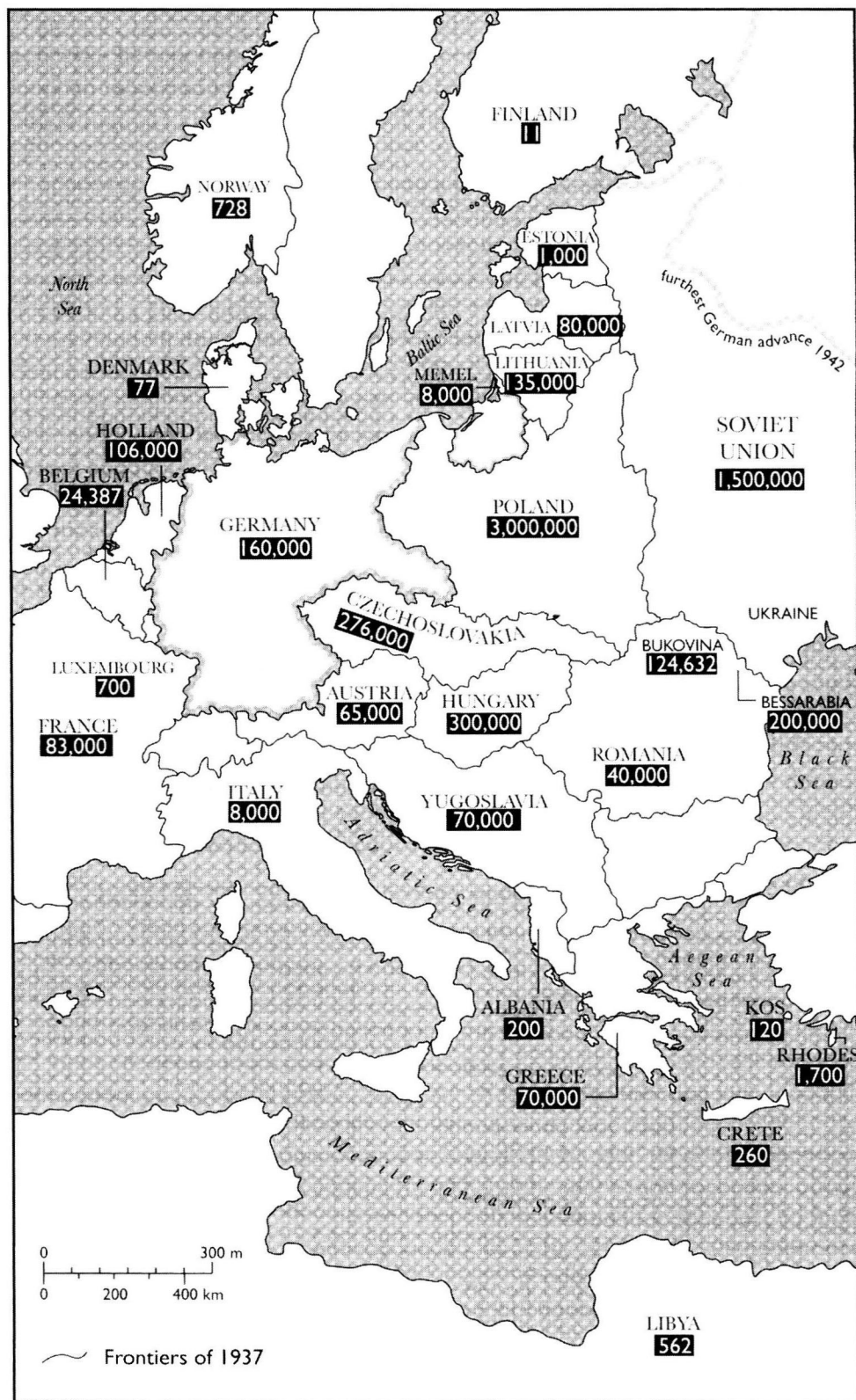
Key terms

Economic determinism

The notion that a struggle between 'haves' and 'have nots' has determined the course of history.

Racial determinism

The notion that a struggle between races has determined the course of history.



Estimated numbers of Jews murdered between 1 September 1939 and 8 May 1945.

Holocaust deniers

There are still some people who claim that the Holocaust did not happen. Over the years the ‘deniers’ have encompassed a wide spectrum of beliefs. Paul Rassinier, a French socialist who survived the horrors of two German concentration camps, was one of the first to claim that the gas chambers did not exist: largely because he had not seen one. Rassinier’s case rested largely on conviction: he did little research to substantiate it. His general view was that the Holocaust was a myth created by US and Jewish capitalists to help the birth of the state of Israel. Right-wing ‘deniers’, by contrast, have tended to the view that the Holocaust was a myth created by Jews and communists to damn the Nazis. They stress that much of the evidence for the Holocaust comes from the USSR and that no record emanating from the USSR at this time can be trusted. It is conceivable that the USSR, for propaganda purposes, could have ‘invented’ the Holocaust. However, the ‘deniers’ case collapses because there is enormous evidence, both from surviving Jews and also from the German perpetrators themselves – memoirs, eyewitness reports, testimonies in various courts, official government documents – that the Holocaust did occur. So overwhelming is this evidence that to deny the existence of the Holocaust is ludicrous.

In some countries, for example Austria and Germany, people can be imprisoned for denying that the Holocaust occurred. In 2006 the extreme right-wing British historian David Irving was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment in Austria for pleading guilty to the charge of ‘trivialising, grossly playing down and denying the Holocaust’ – although he actually denied that he was a Holocaust denier! It remains a moot point whether people should be punished for expressing their views, however objectionable, misguided or patently wrong those views are:

- Some feared that Irving might become a martyr for far-right extremists.
- Many tend to the view attributed to the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire: ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.’

Key question

Was Hitler a strong, all-powerful dictator?

Key dates

Hitler came to power in Germany: 1933

German attack on the USSR: 1941

Conclusion

Over the past 60 years historians from many countries, Britain, Israel, the USA and Germany, in particular, have produced detailed analyses of the persecution and liquidation of European Jews. The deportation and extermination process is not really subject to dispute among serious researchers. However, many critical questions about the Holocaust remain. This book can do little more than touch the surface of some of them.

2 | To What Extent was Adolf Hitler Responsible?

In 1945 the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal presented the Holocaust as a carefully orchestrated conspiracy, the last stage of a deliberate Nazi policy which aimed all along at the physical annihilation of all European Jewry. For nearly two decades after 1945 it was generally assumed that Adolf Hitler was totally – almost solely – responsible for everything that happened in Nazi Germany, including the Holocaust. The Third Reich was seen as a **monolithic state** where all power was concentrated in the *Führer's* hands. Hitler's bitter hatred of all Jews was seen as sufficient on its own to explain the murder of millions of Jews.

The intentionalists

Many historians (they are often referred to as '**intentionalists**') still believe that Hitler was an all-powerful dictator whose will was invariably translated into action. Some intentionalists (like Lucy Dawidowicz) see him conceiving the idea of the total physical extermination of the Jews in the 1920s and pursuing this intention remorselessly once he came to power in 1933. In the intentionalists' opinion Hitler's domestic and foreign policy was dictated by the determination to purify and strengthen the German – or **Aryan** – race. Internally, Germany was to be improved by weeding out those held to be racially undesirable: Jews, Gypsies and the handicapped. Externally, foreign conquest would secure *lebensraum* and a prosperous future for the thoroughbred German people. The attack on the **USSR** in June 1941 (codenamed Operation Barbarossa) was, in the intentionalists' view, a deliberate attempt to kill three birds with the same stone: win *lebensraum*; destroy communism; and eliminate Jews. Intentionalists thus see a straight road to **Auschwitz**.

What did Hitler mean by 'elimination'?

Few historians doubt that racism and **anti-Semitism** were at the very core of Hitler's creed. In the same way that Karl Marx believed class struggle was the motive force behind the historical process, so Hitler believed it was race struggle. Perceiving the Jews as the source of all evil in the world, Hitler was committed to eliminating them from Germany. But what did elimination mean? Did it mean mass slaughter or simply mass deportation? Did Hitler have long-term strategies or did he usually tend to improvise? In addition, we have to ask whether he was really an all-powerful dictator.

Monolithic state

A regime which is controlled by one man or party and in which all orders come from the top and are obeyed by those below.

Intentionalists

Historians who believe Hitler was a strong and efficient dictator who made most decisions – and controlled most of what went on – in Nazi Germany.

Aryan

A person of north European – especially German – type. This may sound imprecise but those who believed fervently in the Aryan race were unable to define it accurately.

Lebensraum

German word for living space. Many Germans hoped to expand German territory by conquering much of eastern Europe.

USSR

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Effectively the name for Russia from the 1920s until the 1990s.

Auschwitz

The main Nazi killing centre from 1942 to 1945.

Anti-Semitism

Opposition to – and dislike of – Jews.

Key question
To what extent did
Hitler plan the
Holocaust?

Key terms

Structuralists

Historians who believe that Hitler was a weak and inefficient dictator who was controlled by events and by the government system rather than controlling what went on in Nazi Germany.

Functionalists

Another name for structuralists.

The structuralists

Some historians (they are often called '**structuralists**' or '**functionalists**') doubt whether Hitler was the superman *Führer* depicted by Nazi propaganda. Functionalists, while not disputing that Hitler exerted considerable influence on the course of events, do not believe he was always the prime mover. They stress that although Hitler, in theory, was an all-powerful dictator, this did not mean in practice that he was always free to act as he wished, nor that he initiated every major development in the Third Reich. His power was restricted in a number of ways, not least the sheer impossibility of one man keeping abreast of, let alone controlling, everything that was going on in a country of over 70 million people (and soon to grow considerably). Every day an enormous number of decisions had to be taken on a wide range of issues. Hitler could not know about, even less decide on, more than a tiny fraction of these issues. Moreover, even after a decision had been taken it had to be implemented. This required an efficient administration.

From the early 1970s the work of historians like Mommsen and Broszat indicated that the Third Reich, despite Nazi propaganda to the contrary, was a mosaic of conflicting authorities and far from efficient. In their view it bore more resemblance to a feudal than a modern twentieth-century state with great Nazi 'magnates' (like Heinrich Himmler and Herman Göring) engaged in a ruthless and incessant power struggle to capture the 'king' (Hitler), who in turn maintained his authority by playing one great lord off against another. Some functionalists even regard Hitler as a weak dictator, lazy, frequently indecisive, and concerned more with his personal standing and striking popular postures than with policy-making. Virtually all functionalists see Hitler as an opportunist, responding to events rather than taking the initiative.

Such a view has major implications for Hitler's role in the Holocaust. It is possible to claim that the Holocaust was not the final phase of a long-cherished plan but a piece of improvisation in an unexpected situation. Functionalists go further, insisting that Hitler's hatred of the Jews was only one, albeit important, ingredient in a complex historical equation. They look within the chaotic Nazi government system itself for at least some explanation for the killing. It has been suggested, for example, that the killing was more the responsibility of local Nazi authorities in occupied eastern Europe and emerged as an improvised solution to the problem of how to deal with the masses of Jews sent to them as a result of a similarly improvised deportation plan, the consequences of which had been unforeseen. Unable to cope with the masses of Jews under their control, these authorities (according to Mommsen) came up with improvised murderous solutions in different places at different times.

Functionalists believe that Hitler's actions between 1933 and 1941 suggest that he was not necessarily intent on mass murder.



Hitler in power:
speaking at a radio
microphone in 1933.

By 1940 more than half of the Jews in Germany and Austria had fled or been driven out. This was an odd policy to adopt if Hitler was set on **genocide**. Nor was there any immediate mass killing of the two million Polish Jews who came under German control in 1939. Thus, it is possible to argue that the road to Auschwitz was 'twisted' and that the Holocaust was not the inevitable result of Hitler's coming to power in 1933.

Hitler's power

Structuralist historians have recently been criticised severely. One major charge is that they have focused to such a degree on the administrative arrangements in the Third Reich that they have lost sight of the motive force and ideological climate which informed the decisions. Most Holocaust historians today believe that Hitler was very much at the centre and in control of events, rather than simply one of a cast of thousands, improvising his way through an unscripted drama. 'In all its major decisions', declares Saul Friedländer, 'the [Nazi] regime depended on Hitler'. While he sometimes intervened spasmodically, there seems plenty of evidence to suggest that he could send orders crashing through the system like bolts of lightning to ensure his will was carried out. Yet while accepting Hitler's ultimate responsibility, intentionalist historians disagree about when, how and in what circumstances the Holocaust order was given:

- Did Hitler set the objective – get rid of Jews – without specifying how this was to be achieved?
- Did he give one or a series of orders which finally culminated in the Holocaust?
- Did he give the order(s) before or after the launch of Operation Barbarossa?
- Did his decision(s) result from the triumphalist atmosphere of mid-summer 1941, when German victory over the USSR seemed inevitable?
- Or did the decision(s) emerge only towards the end of 1941, when hopes of a quick victory had been dashed?

Genocide

The deliberate extermination of a racial, national, religious or ethnic group.

Key term

Key question

Why is it so difficult to know exactly what Hitler ordered?

The lack of written orders

In 1977 right-wing historian David Irving asserted that Hitler only learned of the Holocaust on 7 October 1943. Irving offered a £1000 reward to anyone who could produce a wartime document proving that Hitler knew about the Final Solution before that date. Irving's many critics (which include both intentionalists and functionalists) point out that he conveniently ignored Hitler's hate-filled rhetoric about Jews. They also stress that written orders were not necessary to begin the killing process. Hitler rarely committed himself to paper and preferred to give his orders orally. The lack of written orders from Hitler is, in essence, the problem. Given this situation, historians are likely to continue to disagree about Hitler's precise role in the Holocaust.

Key question

Which Nazis were most responsible for organising the Holocaust?

3 | How Responsible were Himmler, Heydrich and the SS?

Heinrich Himmler, head of the *Schultzstaffel* (or SS), ensured that Hitler's orders were carried out. An extreme racist who was totally loyal to Hitler, Himmler is often regarded (for example by historian Richard Breitman) as the 'architect of genocide'. However, Himmler delegated considerable authority in Jewish

Key term

Schultzstaffel

Originally the black-shirted personal guard of Hitler, the *Schultzstaffel* (abbreviated to SS) was later transformed by its leader Himmler into a mass army on which was to rest the ultimate exercise of Nazi power.



Reichsführer SS and Chief of Police Heinrich Himmler (left) with his right-hand man Reinhard Heydrich, March 1938.

matters to Reinhard Heydrich, his loyal henchman. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 it was Heydrich who formalised the administrative arrangements of the Holocaust. The SS, a highly organised police apparatus, was a perfect instrument for genocide. Its members were fanatical Nazis and had a grossly distorted sense of duty. Few doubt that Himmler, Heydrich and the SS played a vital role in anti-Jewish initiatives. But were the SS the only killers? To what extent have the SS become Germany's whipping boys, their (apparent) guilt helping to exonerate many other groups and individuals? To what extent did Himmler and/or Heydrich play a crucial role in the Holocaust?

4 | How were the German Euthanasia Programme and the Holocaust Connected?

Recently historians like Henry Friedlander and Michael Burleigh have pointed out the connection between the euthanasia killings and the Holocaust. The ideology, the decision-making process, the personnel and the killing technique all seem to tie the euthanasia programme to the Final Solution. Should the euthanasia programme be considered separately from genocide? Or was it, as Henry Friedlander claims, 'the first chapter'?

Key question

Why might the German euthanasia programme be seen as the 'first chapter' of the Holocaust?

5 | How Guilty was the German Army?

It was once claimed that the German armed forces (the *Wehrmacht*) were untainted by Hitler's racism and not responsible for the Holocaust. After 1945 many of Germany's top officers claimed they were unaware of what was happening to the Jews. Most historians now, however, believe that the army was massively implicated in the Final Solution. A number of German scholars have argued that the bulk of leading *Wehrmacht* officers were anti-**Bolshevik** and anti-Semitic and, regarding the war against the USSR as a war to the death, were quite content to support the brutality of the SS. The letters and diaries of ordinary German troops suggest that the majority were extremely racist. Many seem to have carried out horrendous massacres with enthusiasm. To what extent was the *Wehrmacht* an active, and willing, participant in the Holocaust?

Wehrmacht

The official name of the combined army, navy and air force in the Third Reich.

Bolshevik

The Bolshevik Party, led by Lenin, came to power in Russia in 1917. Bolsheviks were regarded – and regarded themselves – as revolutionary communists.

Key terms

6 | To What Extent were the German People Responsible?

After 1945 most Germans insisted they had no idea of what was happening to Jews in the east. Many may have been telling the truth. There is no doubt that the Holocaust was implemented with the utmost secrecy. Hitler and Himmler tried to keep knowledge about the Final Solution from both German and international opinion. Indeed, several senior Nazis claimed at the Nuremberg trials in 1945–6 that even they knew nothing about what was going on.

Key question

To what extent were the German people 'willing executioners'?

However, most historians now accept that Hitler, Himmler and the Nazi élite did not act alone. Their decisions had to be accepted and their policies implemented by many others. Precisely how many others is a subject of heated debate. Recent research has tended to contradict the notion that Germans knew little about what was going on. Many years ago historian Raul Hilberg suggested that large numbers of Germans – civil servants, railway workers, policemen – were involved in what he termed the ‘machinery of destruction’. More recently Daniel Goldhagen has argued that the German people were not simply cogs in a vast apparatus beyond their control. He has also claimed that most Germans supported the policy of mass murder and that between 100,000 and 500,000 Germans were directly implicated in it. With so many involved, the question Goldhagen asks is: how could the German people subsequently plead such total ignorance? He also asserts that: ‘The notion that ordinary Danes or Italians would have acted as the ordinary Germans did strains credulity beyond the breaking point.’

In terms of trying to reach a conclusion about the collective responsibility of the Germans for the Holocaust, several questions have to be answered. How anti-Semitic were most Germans? How many people knew what was going on in the east? How many were implicated in, and to what extent was there widespread support for, the Holocaust?

Key question

To what extent did European anti-Semitism contribute to the Holocaust?

7 | Was European Anti-Semitism to Blame?

Anti-Semitism was a European, and not just a German, phenomenon. For over 1000 years no century has passed without Jews being persecuted and killed in some part of Europe. In the 1930s several countries in eastern Europe, including Lithuania, Romania, Hungary and Poland, passed legislation discriminating against Jews. Violence against Jews was particularly widespread in Poland where 10 per cent of the population was Jewish. Jewish shops and houses were frequently attacked and scores of Polish Jews killed in **pogroms**. Even Polish Church leaders expressed anti-Semitic ideas. After 1939, according to many Israeli historians, the Polish people as a whole showed little sympathy for the Jews, and some supported Nazi actions against them. In those areas of the USSR occupied by the Germans after 1941, local people – Lithuanians, Estonians, Balts, Ukrainians and Belorussians – frequently co-operated with the Germans in slaughtering Jews. Lithuanians were among the most savage killers of Jews in the summer and autumn of 1941. Romanian troops murdered thousands of Jews in 1941–2. Moreover, many of Germany’s allies and **client states** in western and central Europe – not least France – collaborated with the Nazis and agreed that their Jews should be deported eastwards. It can thus be claimed that ‘ordinary’ Germans acted no differently from ‘ordinary’ Romanians, Lithuanians and a host of other European groups who also became Hitler’s ‘willing executioners’.

Key terms

Pogrom

An organised (violent) attack on Jews.

Client state

A country dependent on – and under the control of – another.