

Local Agency and Individual Initiative in the Evolution of the Holocaust: The Case of Heinrich
Himmler

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Speaking in the early 1940s on the “grave matter” of the Jews, Heinrich Himmler asserted: “We had the moral right, we had the duty to our people to destroy this people which wanted to destroy us.”¹ Appointed *Reichsführer* of the SS in January 1929, Himmler believed the total annihilation of the Jewish race necessary for the survival of the German nation. As such, he considered the Holocaust a moral duty. Indeed, the Nazi genocide of all “life unworthy of living,” known as the Holocaust, evolved from an ideology held by the highest officials of the Third Reich – an ideology rooted in a pseudoscientific racism that rationalized the systematic murder of over twelve million people, mostly during just a few years of World War Two.

But ideologies do not murder. People do. And the leader of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, never personally murdered a single Jew. Instead, he relied on his subordinates to implement his often ill-defined visions. Thus, to understand the Holocaust as a broad social phenomenon we must refocus our lens away from an obsession with Hitler and onto his henchmen. One such underling was indeed Himmler. The problem in the lack of consensus among scholars is over the matter of who, precisely, bears responsibility for the Holocaust. Historians even sharply disagree about the place of Adolf Hitler in the decision-making processes of the Third Reich, particularly in regards to the Final Solution. By focusing on just one perpetrator beneath Hitler we can begin to see how responsibility was diffused throughout an entire system, implicating thousands, perhaps millions, in genocide.

Before turning to the case study of Himmler, however, we must first understand how scholars have attempted to conceptualize the question of responsibility for the Holocaust. Tim Mason described the historiographical debate about the origins of the Holocaust as between

¹ Quoted in Joseph Tenenbaum, “The Einsatzgruppen,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 1 (1955): 63.

functionalists and intentionalists.² Intentionalists argue that the actions of the Nazi regime were the unfolding of the ideology and expressed intentions of its leadership, particularly Hitler himself. Functionalists argue that the extermination of European Jews was the result of the bureaucracy of the Third Reich, with many players involved in the decision-making process. Functionalism is also known as structuralism, and the structural factors that have been suggested in this debate include the German bureaucracy, Nazi ideology, modernization, and the context in which the Third Reich existed. Neither side disputes the premise that responsibility for the anti-Semitism that allowed the Holocaust lies on Adolf Hitler; intentionalists instead argue that the directive came from above, from Hitler, while functionalists argue that it came from the lower ranks of German bureaucracy.

Advocates of the intentionalist school argue that the Final Solution resulted from a master plan of Adolf Hitler. The orders and initiative, in this view, came from the upper ranks of the Nazi Party, directly from Hitler. Richard Breitman argues that the Final Solution started with Hitler's prewar speeches about the fate of the Jewish population. Heinrich Himmler and the SS took his words seriously, and from at least 1938 the idea of killing Jews made the SS agenda. Breitman acknowledges that the plan for the Final Solution evolved over time, asserting, "Himmler moved only gradually toward a comprehensive plan for all Jews."³ Breitman, however, denounces the idea that wartime constraints had any influence on the Final Solution because the plans had been set in motion before the outbreak of war. The policy of mass murder may have evolved over time to determine "how many Jews would be killed, when, and how," but the war itself had little effect on the ultimate goal of the Final Solution, conceived prior to the

² Richard Bessel, "Functionalists vs. Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years on or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?" *German Studies Review*, 26, no. 1 (2003): 15.

³ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1991), 246.

war.⁴ Breitman thus proposes that the Final Solution came about as a clear imperative but presents a flexible vision of intentionalism that allows for agency in Nazi structures, especially the SS, about the specifics of implementation.

Another intentionalist, Guido Knopp places the blame of the Holocaust squarely on Hitler. He argues that Hitler depended on his executioners – Goebbels, Göring, Himmler, Hess, Speer, and Donitz – only to carry out his murderous campaign: “Hitler knew perfectly well that none of his henchmen would ever dare to try doing anything that did not conform with his objectives.”⁵ In this view, the individuals close to Hitler, those that carried out the Final Solution, did only what the *Führer* told them to do. Knopp therefore not only argues for intentionalism, but also for the uniquely decisive role of Hitler.

Adherents of the functionalist school argue that the Holocaust did not result from some master plan of Hitler. Instead, it resulted from a gradual improvisation of the German bureaucracy, with many players involved in the decision-making process and no clear original goal. Indeed, according to Raul Hilberg, the Final Solution did not begin with the idea of extermination; it underwent a process: “A destruction process is a series of administrative measures.”⁶ Instead of clear directives from Hitler, the German bureaucracy exhausted what it saw as every conceivable measure to deal with the “Jewish question.” Once all other methods had been exhausted in part between the parameters of the war, the machinery turned to mass murder.

While Hilberg focuses on the bureaucratic machinery of the Final Solution, Christopher Browning looks at the decision-making process by local agents. He argues that Hitler did not make a basic decision to annihilate the Jewish population as soon as the opportunity arose.

⁴ Breitman, 248.

⁵ Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Henchmen* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000), 1.

⁶ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 27.

Browning contests the notion presented by Breitman of a secret plan by Hitler. While Hitler did harbor deep anti-Semitism, he only plotted to harm the Jews “one way or another” throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁷ Not until apparent victories against the Soviet Union in 1941 did Hitler make the decision to annihilate Jewry from all of Europe. Browning presents evidence of Hitler’s hesitance to commit mass murder. In August 1941, Hitler rejected proposals by Reinhard Heydrich and Joseph Goebbels calling for deportations to begin from the Third Reich because he did not want deportations to occur during the war. According to Browning, “For Hitler, clearly, the decision to murder Soviet Jewry and the subsequent decision to murder the rest of European Jewry were separable.”⁸ Thus, in his view, no plan to annihilate European Jewry existed before 1941.

Indeed, some historians have even contested the significance of Hitler. Hans Mommsen presents the argument that Hitler played little or no decisive role in the Holocaust. Instead, he left his subordinates to take the initiative based on his vague imperatives. The rivalries among Hitler’s subordinates led to the escalation of Jewish persecution, with each person attempting to “out-do” one another “to please the *Führer*.”⁹ Further, Mommsen considers the fact that no document has been found to indicate that Hitler directly ordered the Final Solution as such: Hitler never ordered the Final Solution, written or orally. Rather, he places greater agency in the evolution of the Holocaust in subordinates. He does not argue that Hitler played no role in the Holocaust, however: “Hitler, it must be conceded, was the ideological and political author of the

⁷ Christopher Browning, “The Nazi Decision to Commit Mass Murder: Three Interpretations: The Euphoria of Victory and the Final Solution: Summer-Fall 1941,” *German Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (1994): 479.

⁸ Browning, 476.

⁹ Hans Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 233.

Final Solution.”¹⁰ Hitler’s words of destruction against Jews caused fanatics such as Heinrich Himmler to take action, resulting in mass murder.

Some of the structural factors that have been suggested include the German bureaucracy, Nazi ideology, modernization, and the context in which the Third Reich existed. Hilberg offers a detailed description of the many bureaucratic agencies involved in the Final Solution. He also points out individual people who helped implement policies against the Jews of Europe, but only to make a broader point that most of the people involved filled roles given to them within the bureaucracy. The individuals only acted as pieces of machinery. In his description of the expansion of mass murder, Hilberg writes: “The German destructive effort evolved on several planes. On one, we may see an alignment of agencies in a destructive machinery.”¹¹ Perhaps intentionally, the Nazi regime stripped the German bureaucracy of what little humanity it had.

Daniel Goldhagen argues that strictly German anti-Semitism, which he calls the “eliminationist mind-set,” led to the Holocaust.¹² The “ordinary” Germans responsible for the brutality all had the same anti-Semitic mind-set. Nazi indoctrination did not play a role in the mass murder, but simply German anti-Semitism did. The “eliminationist mind-set” paved the way through history from Luther to Adolf Hitler, in a linear path. Further, the radical anti-Semites unique to Germany are not like the people living in Western Europe or America.¹³ Therefore, the eliminationist mind-set, and thus the Holocaust, are unique to Germany and cannot happen anywhere else.

Dieter Hartmann also posits the idea that anti-Semitism in Germany played a role in the Holocaust, though not to the extent that Goldhagen does. Hartmann argues: “But if so many

¹⁰ Mommsen, 239.

¹¹ Hilberg, *Destruction*, 264.

¹² Fritz Stern, “The Goldhagen Controversy: One Nation, One People, One Theory?” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (1996): 128.

¹³ Stern, 129.

Germans paid little regard to the very core of Nazi ideology, they could do so only because they did not truly resent it.”¹⁴ Further, Hitler’s profound hatred of Jews did not negatively affect his popularity. In fact, German public opinion about the persecution of Jews had been studied. Most Germans, while not desiring pogroms, proved ready to dehumanize them. Citizens held lawlessness in contempt, but approved of legal methods of discrimination. “Millions,” Hartmann wrote, “of allegedly decent people took part in devising or executing legal vilifications.”¹⁵ In addition to hostility and contempt by Germans, indifference and compliance cannot be denied. When the Nazis began rounding up Jews and rumors about mass killings spread, Germans did not react strongly. When the Nazis attempted to remove crucifixes from classrooms, on the other hand, Germans showed contempt. Symbols brought more reactions than the fate of Jews.¹⁶ Anti-Semitism mixed with sanctioned ruthlessness enabled large numbers of Germans to help carry out the Holocaust.

Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg argue that modernization played a crucial role in the Holocaust. Modernity has depersonalized and objectified human beings. All life is quantified, and freedom and moral independence continue to shrink. In today’s “techno-scientific” world, man is merely a subject and the bureaucracy is the “rational” form of organization.¹⁷ The authors do not believe that Nazism and its “death-world” resulted from Germany’s failure to completely modernize, but rather became a product of it. Further, technology and science made the Holocaust possible in the first place, by providing the tools the Nazis needed to implement an efficient machine of mass murder: “The crematoria and Zyklon B were the fruits of the same

¹⁴ Dieter D. Hartmann, “Anti-Semitism and the Appeal of Nazism,” *Political Psychology* 5, no. 4 (1984): 636.

¹⁵ Hartmann, 637.

¹⁶ Hartmann, 638.

¹⁷ Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, “The Unlearned Lessons of the Holocaust,” *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 2 (1993): 178-179.

technological and scientific productivity upon which our twentieth century civilization now rests.”¹⁸ Therefore, modernity is the basis for a genocidal universe.

Christopher Browning, by contrast, focuses on the individuals who perpetrated the Holocaust. He argues that the Reserve Police Battalion 101 consisted of ordinary men who did not hone “Nazi-like” attributes. As Browning points out, “Most came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least Nazified cities in Germany, and the majority came from a social class that had been anti-Nazi in its political nature.”¹⁹ His emphasis on the participation of seemingly ordinary individuals reminds readers of the fact that these are human beings perpetrating such violence, a feeling which is lost in the bureaucratic interpretation offered by Hilberg. Hans Mommsen also focuses on individuals. Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler, among others, played the decisive roles in the Holocaust. Himmler desired to create a utopia in the *Führer’s* lifetime. His ambitions to please Hitler led him to create the system of mass murder into which he directed a large portion of his energies.²⁰ Mommsen concludes that ideology alone cannot explain the Holocaust.

Whether Hitler had a master plan of Jewish annihilation or not remains to be confirmed, but it is clear that the Final Solution did not rest solely on his shoulders. It took careful planning and improvisation when required and involved the bureaucratic organizations throughout the Third Reich, as well as individual actors such as Heydrich, Hitler, and Goebbels. But the most decisive and important individual involved in the planning and implementation of the Holocaust was Heinrich Himmler. Five years after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Himmler gained control over all internal and external police forces in the Third Reich as *Reichsführer-SS*. Even

¹⁸ Milchman and Rosenberg, 180.

¹⁹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1992), 48.

²⁰ Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 239.

Reinhard Heydrich, considered by some historians to be the darkest figure of the Nazi elite, answered to Himmler as chief of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA). Therefore, Heinrich Himmler played a more important role in coordinating and executing the Holocaust than Adolf Hitler, overseeing every aspect of the Final Solution.

Heinrich Himmler thoroughly believed in the Nazi ideology, especially its anti-Semitic beliefs. He attempted to create within the SS an elite order, and in an SS Marriage Order issued on 31 December 1931, he insisted that wives of the SS men be racially pure in accordance with the Nazi ideology: “The aim is to create a hereditarily healthy clan of a strictly Nordic German type.”²¹ In a speech to SS Group Leaders on 8 November 1937, Himmler told the audience, “it would be stupid,” to theoretically collect together “good blood” from all of Germany while allowing people to marry and raise families as they wished. The women, he argued, should be just as racially pure as men of the SS.²² Himmler also believed that the Jews conspired with the Bolsheviks, and he intended to stop them from taking over Germany. In his speech at the Reich Peasant Congress on 12 November 1935, Himmler summed up the principles of selection for the SS, and remarked: “We shall ensure that never again will the Jewish-Bolshevist revolution of sub-humanity be unleashed in Germany, the heart of Europe, either from within or by emissaries from without.”²³

Following the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, the SS played the most important role in racial and settlement policies in Poland. On 7 October 1939, in the Decree of the *Führer* and Reich Chancellor for the Strengthening of German Nationality, Hitler appointed Himmler to

²¹Heinrich Himmler, “SS Marriage Order,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 493 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²²Heinrich Himmler, “Speech to an Audience of SS Group Leaders,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 493 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²³Heinrich Himmler, “The SS as an Anti-Bolshevist Combat Organization,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 495-496 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

Reich Chancellor for the Strengthening of German Nationality. With his new power, Himmler had the authority to issue any regulations necessary to carry out his duties. On 15 May 1940, Himmler issued a memorandum which stated that all non-Germans should be divided into splinter groups, never to unite or achieve greatness. Non-Germans of “good blood” would be assimilated into the German culture, and be treated as Germans. Jews would no longer exist in Europe because of a large scale emigration. Following the systematic assimilation of people with “good blood,” the General Government would be left with the racially inferior people. Germany would use this “race” as slave labor with no leaders or culture.²⁴ Himmler desired to rid the German people of not only Jews, but people of all “alien” ethnicities.

With his intentions in the General Government evident, Himmler issued an order instructing the Higher SS and Police Leaders (HSSPF) and Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) to deport Jews and Poles from the incorporated territories of Poland into the General Government. Reinhard Heydrich placed Adolf Eichmann in charge of organizing the deportations. A document dated 12 November 1939 contains the directives of the HSSPF for the deportation of Jews and Poles. Poles specifically targeted for deportation belonged to the intelligentsia or because their Polish attitudes constituted a threat to the “strengthening of German nationhood.”²⁵ German settlers would replace the displaced Poles. The government set up in the General Government consisted of Nazi Party members rather than military personnel, so officials could proceed with the deportations with brutality.

²⁴ Heinrich Himmler, “Some Thoughts on the Treatment of the Alien Population in the East,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 932-933 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²⁵ Higher SS and Police Leaders, “Directives of the HSSPF for the Deportation of Jews and Poles,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 936-937 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

With the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the fate of Jews changed from persecution to mass murder. On 13 March 1941, the OKW had drawn up directives for special areas concerning Operation Barbarossa. In the directives, Hitler assigned Heinrich Himmler special tasks in preparation of a new political administration, which would result from finally resolving the conflict between “two opposing political systems.”²⁶ The directive made clear that Himmler would act independently; Hitler placed the responsibility of ensuring that military operations would not be affected by the *Einsatzgruppen* on Himmler. The directive also stated that the details of Himmler’s mission would be worked out directly between the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Himmler. On 2 July 1941, Heydrich issued instructions to the Higher SS and Police Leaders assigned to Russia regarding the operations of the SS *Einsatzgruppen*. The instructions included the executions of all members of the Comintern, Jews in the service of the party or state, and other extremists. Further, the instructions specifically prohibited interference with purges of anti-Communist or anti-Jewish “elements” in newly occupied territories.²⁷ While the instructions called for the execution of Jews within the state or party service, one eyewitness claimed that Heydrich had given orders to exterminate all Russian Jews while addressing the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders. The stricter order could have been issued to assure the *Wermacht* that not all Jews would be exterminated.

The site of the first extermination camp was Belzec.²⁸ Two more extermination camps were to be built: Treblinka and Sobibor. Himmler informed Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höess in the summer of 1941 that, “The *Führer* has ordered the final solution of the Jewish

²⁶ OKW, “Directives for Special Areas concerning Directive No. 21,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1087-1088 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²⁷ Reinhard Heydrich, “Instructions concerning operations of the *Einsatzgruppen*,” in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1091-1092 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

²⁸ Noakes and Pridham, 1145-1146.

question and we –the SS – have to carry out this order.”²⁹ Initially, extermination camps had been set up to eradicate Jews and other “asocial” groups deemed unfit to work. On 19 July 1942, Himmler wrote to the HSSPF in the General Government, SS *Obergruppenführer* Friedrich-Wilhelm Kruger. In his letter, he made explicit that other than Jews living in camps in Warsaw, Cracow, Czestochowa, Radom, and Lublin, the General Government had to be completely rid of the Jewish population by 31 December 1942, regardless of ability to work. He deemed the measures necessary to protect the sphere of German interest.³⁰ One week later, Himmler wrote to the Chief of the SS Main Office, requesting that no decree concerning the definition of a Jew be published.³¹ Thus, not only would Jews be deported to extermination camps, but because of the lack of distinction between “Jews” and other members of the population, any person could be deported to be exterminated, if he or she could not prove that he or she did not have Jewish descendents. Furthermore, the letter proves that Himmler wanted the responsibility of exterminating the Jewish “race,” and responded with disdain to any individual who attempted to take that responsibility.

By the end of November 1943, the three extermination camps had been dismantled and the Jewish workers shot. Globocnik wrote to Himmler that Operation Reinhard had been concluded and all extermination camps destroyed. He requested that he be able to put forward recommendations for Iron Crosses, something Himmler indicated could be awarded upon

²⁹ Rudolf Hoess, statement after the war, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1175 (New York: Schocken Books).

³⁰ Heinrich Himmler, letter to SS *Obergruppenführer* Friedrich-Wilhelm Kruger, 19 July 1942, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1159-1160 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

³¹ Heinrich Himmler, letter to SS *Obengruppenführer* Gottlob Berger, 28 July 1942, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1160 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

completion of “this difficult task.”³² Himmler responded by expressing his thanks and appreciation for the service Globocnik and his men performed for, “the whole German people by carrying out the ‘Reinhard Action’.”³³ In early November 1943, the SS killed most of the remaining prisoners of the Majdanek concentration camp. Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz on 27 January 1945.

Heinrich Himmler played a more important role in the Holocaust than Adolf Hitler. As chief of all non-military security units and even the militarized *Waffen-SS*, and as overseer of the concentration and extermination camps, Himmler oversaw every aspect of the Final Solution. Any plans made by Heydrich and the RSHA or any other organization connected to the office of the *Reichsführer* had to be approved by Himmler. He oversaw the implementation of Nazi policies, including deportation into the ghettos. Adolf Hitler espoused the ideology that allowed the Holocaust to take place, but without the ruthlessness with which Himmler proceeded to annihilate the European Jewry, the Final Solution could not have proceeded the way it did.

This argument matters because it forces us to confront more broadly the realities of culpability in mass crimes of modern societies. Complicating the matter of responsibility, legally and morally, does not exculpate leaders such as Hitler. Indeed, the exact role Hitler played in the “Final Solution” and his level of awareness are still unknown. Similarly, how so many “ordinary” citizens could actively participate in mass murder, or at least stand by passively while it took place is still debated. The burden of guilt, however, for the millions of deaths during the Nazi regime rests on the shoulders of every person who actively participated in the murders, or did nothing to stop them. In cases of genocide such as the Holocaust, inaction is action.

³² Odilo Globocnik, letter to Heinrich Himmler, 4 November 1943, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1168 (New York: Schocken Books).

³³ Heinrich Himmler, letter to Odilo Globocnik, 30 November 1942, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 1169 (New York: Schocken Books).

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