

# The Genesis of the Holocaust: An Assessment of the Functionalist School of Historiography

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The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 and the subsequent condemnation of its ideological foundations meant that few sought to defend its policies or even write its history from the inside. As a consequence, the task of attempting to explain Nazi policy on its own terms fell to historians from the outside. This task was particularly difficult when it came to accounting for the advent of the Holocaust—the mass murder of European Jewry—for, on one level, it was widely regarded that this was a “sacred and essentially incomprehensible event”, while on a more practical level, deficiencies and ambiguities in documentary evidence would invariably render any explanation incomplete. Nevertheless, since the 1960's, an increasing number of historians have put forward their interpretations of how the Holocaust came about.. This essay will focus on one particular group of these historians—whose ideas first emerged in West Germany in the early 1970's, and who, since 1981, have been referred to as the functionalists - providing both a brief overview of their position and an assessment of the contribution which their work has made to the subject in recent decades.<sup>1</sup>

To gain a full understanding of the arguments put forward by the functionalists, it is at first essential to place these arguments within their own historical context, and this may be done by considering three interrelated questions: ‘Who were the functionalist historians?’; ‘What was the purpose of their writing?’; and ‘What other works on the subject were being written at a similar time?’ Beginning with the last question, it may be noted that the work of the functionalists was preceded by that of another group of historians, known in recent years as the *intentionalists*<sup>2</sup>. Attributed originally to a number of more conservative West German historians, including Andreas Hillgruber and Klaus Hildebrand—although subsequently advocated internationally<sup>3</sup>—the *intentionalist* position grew out of an atmosphere of denial inherent within West Germany in the post-war decades, at which time Nazism was regarded as an aberration, and the enormity of the crimes of that period attributable primarily to the determined fanaticism of Adolf Hitler. As a consequence, the *intentionalists* adopted in their work this *Hitlerist* approach to the Holocaust, whereby this terrible event was regarded essentially as the

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'functionalist' was introduced by Tim Mason, in an article entitled 'Intention and explanation: A current controversy about the interpretation of National Socialism' in Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, *The "fuehrer state" : Myth and reality*, (Stuttgart : Klett-Cotta, 1981). Elie Wiesel, cited in Ronald J. Berger, "The "banality of evil" reframed : The social construction of the "final solution" to the "Jewish problem" ', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34 , 4 (1993), p. 597; Ian Kershaw, 'Improvised genocide ? The emergence of the 'final solution' in the 'Wargenthau'.' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1992), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Mason likewise attached the label 'intentionalist' to these historians in his 1981 article.

<sup>3</sup> The intentionalist position is expounded in numerous works, including : Klaus Hildebrand, *The Third Reich*, (George Allen and Unwin : London, 1984); Gerald Fleming , *Hitler and the final solution*, (Berkeley, California : University of California Press, 1984). For a summary of intentionalist literature, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship : Problems and perspectives of interpretation*, (London : Edward Arnold, 1993), pp. 83-85.

end result of the determination and ability of one man to see his own racist desires come to fruition.<sup>4</sup>

In a brief composite of the *intentionalist* position, it was maintained that, from a very early date—at least as early as 1925, with the release of the second volume of *Mein Kampf*—Hitler "openly espoused" his ideological objective to bring about the physical destruction of the Jewish race, an objective which assumed a central position once he came to power in 1933. Finding widespread favour in Germany for his anti-Semitic cause, Hitler pursued this objective relentlessly throughout the course of his political career, repeatedly revealing his murderous intentions in the years leading up to the war. (In his famous speech of January 1939, for instance, he spoke candidly about "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe".) Finally, in the early months of 1941, with the disorder of war providing a necessary cover, and belief in an imminent triumph over the Soviet Union providing an air of elated self-confidence, Hitler gauged that the time was right to set his long-held plan in motion. This he did by issuing a personal—albeit secret—order for the mass killing of the European Jews to commence.<sup>5</sup>

While initially accepted - and indeed, it has continued to be accepted in some historical circles<sup>6</sup>—the *intentionalists'* personalised interpretation of the Holocaust lost some ground in West Germany throughout the 1970's, where the atmosphere of denial about the Nazi past had given way to the determination of a new generation to confront the demons of its fathers. It was in this atmosphere of confrontation that a number of historians, including Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen—"broadly associated with the Social Democrats and the liberals"—began to challenge the *intentionalist* position, as they undertook to place the blame for the crimes of the Third Reich back onto the German people, by acknowledging that Germans had not just participated in these crimes, but had originated them. It is with this objective in mind, therefore, that it is now appropriate to turn to the work of Mommsen and Broszat, as well as other writers of the functionalist school, including Karl A. Schleunes and Uwe Dietrich Adam, to consider the arguments which they put forward with regard to the emergence of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

In an effort to broaden the moral culpability for the Holocaust, the functionalists began by refuting the *intentionalists'* contention that Adolf Hitler had been its sole initiator. While not denying Hitler's "personal pathological hatred" of the Jews, they refused to accept that this hatred alone provided a sufficient explanation for the unfolding of events. Furthermore, they contended that the physical extermination of the Jews was not a central political objective of Hitler's dictatorship, or one which he strived personally to see through to its murderous conclusion. Rather, they asserted that the

<sup>4</sup> Richard Evans, *In Hitler's shadow : West German historians and the attempt to escape from the Nazi past*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989) pp. 11, 73; Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, 'The "banality of evil" reframed', p. 598; Lucy Davidowitz, Klaus Hildebrand, cited in Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, pp. 83-84; Michael R. Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, (University Press of New England : London, 1987), p. 37; Saul Friedlander, introduction to Gerald Fleming, *Hitler and the final solution*, p. xiv; Arno J. Mayer, *Why did the heavens not darken ? The 'final solution' in history*, (New York : Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 460; Helmet Krausnick, cited in Hans Mommsen, 'The realisation of the unthinkable : The 'final solution' of the Jewish question' in the Third Reich' in Gerhard Hirschfeld, ed., *The policies of genocide : Jews and Soviet prisoners of war in Nazi Germany*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> It should be made clear that the ideas of the functionalists did not merely displace those of the intentionalists.

<sup>7</sup> The functionalist historians did not represent one united body of thought, and what is presented in this essay is a composite of their various ideas.

Evans, *In Hitler's shadow*, pp. 12, 74-75.

Fuehrer considered the Jews mainly in terms of their propagandistic value, and his frequent anti-Semitic ramblings—which the *intentionalists* saw as a clear indication of his evil intentions—were meant for no other purpose than to enhance his public image, while he remained unconcerned, or perhaps incapable, as Mommsen contended, of translating the “metaphor of extermination into reality”. Hitler's personal role in the Holocaust, then, the functionalists maintained, was a limited and essentially indirect one—as Mommsen put it, that of “ideological and political originator”. An undisputably charismatic, but somewhat distant leader, Hitler had only to vaguely express his intentions—to ‘get rid of the Jews from German territory’—and then leave it for others to translate these intentions into policy. This is not to say that the Fuehrer did not approve of or sanction Jewish policy once it had been decided, but rather that he was not concerned with or involved in the initiation of each step.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, far from a situation in which Hitler personally dictated each and every policy in accordance with his carefully thought-out racial objectives, the functionalists emphasised that, in reality, the Third Reich functioned in a state of “authoritarian anarchy”, whereby rival bureaucracies and power groups all manoeuvred to extend their own authority, by proving “their diligence, the efficiency of their machinery and their political indispensability” to the Fuehrer. As a result of this chaotic environment, it was asserted, Nazi policy towards the Jews emerged in a largely unsystematic and improvised fashion, as these competing groups—including members of the army, police and bureaucracy, as well as party organisations—sought to devise the most efficient means of ridding the Jews from Europe. Inevitably, this improvised and un-coordinated process of decision-making led to increasingly radical measures, until finally, extermination emerged as the only solution to what had turned into a massive and yet self-induced administrative nightmare.<sup>9</sup>

In an effort to support this claim that the road to the Holocaust was a “twisted” and uncertain one, Schleunes, Adam and Broszat traced the various initiatives which were put forward in the Reich from 1933 in an effort to deal with the “Jewish problem”, including the earlier attempts at economic and legal exclusion, as well as the policy of compulsory emigration. This latter policy, these historians claimed, offered the Nazis the hope of a “territorial Final Solution”, and it was this solution rather than extermination, which won favour with senior Nazi officials, as various plans for resettlement—including the Madagascar Plan—were put forward for their perusal. Even when war and the conquest of extra territory dramatically increased the number of Jews under Nazi authority, and ruled out resettlement to Madagascar, at least as a short-term option, alternate schemes were devised for deporting the Jews to Russian territory in the wake of an imminent Soviet defeat. Deportation then, and not extermination as the *intentionalists* asserted, was the Nazi's plan for the Jews on the eve of the war with Russia.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, pp. 87-89; Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, p. 42; Mommsen, 'The realisation of the unthinkable', pp. 102, 132; Richard Breitman, 'Auschwitz and the archives', *Central European History*, 18 (1985), p. 379.

<sup>9</sup> Phillippe Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews : The genesis of the holocaust*, (London : Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 18; Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, p. 40; Mommsen, cited in Breitman, 'Auschwitz and the archives', p. 377; Mommsen, 'The realisation of the unthinkable', p. 107; Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Karl A. Schleunes, *The twisted road to Auschwitz : Nazi policy toward German Jews 1933-1939*, (Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 1970); pp. 257-258; John S. Conway, 'The holocaust and the historians', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 450 (July 1980), p. 159; Breitman, 'Auschwitz and the archives', pp. 377-379; Mommsen, 'The realisation of the unthinkable', pp. 117-123.

That a policy of extermination was adopted, therefore, must be seen as a tragic consequence of the failure of the German thrust into Russia, or as Broszat stated, “a ‘way out’ of a blind alley into which the National Socialists had manoeuvred themselves”. It was at this stage, according to Broszat, that local Nazi authorities in the occupied territories, unable to cope with the number of Jews transported to and concentrated in their areas, began to take matters into their own hands, by adopting a practice of extermination as a way of solving their own local problems. Eventually, this killing process gained sanction from the Fuehrer, for as Broszat asserted, it is untenable to think that it could have continued without Hitler’s approval—although both Broszat and Mommsen were adamant that no “comprehensive general extermination order” was ever issued from Berlin. With the Fuehrer’s approval, nevertheless, this largely improvised process, from January 1942, began to develop into a planned and systematic program of genocide.<sup>11</sup>

In short, the position adopted by the functionalists was that the Holocaust had emerged not as much as an ideological imperative of the Fuehrer, as from the chaotic administrative structure of the Third Reich and the increasingly desperate circumstances which arose during World War II. This revised interpretation, it must be said, did not meet with universal approval, some members of the *intentionalist* school, for instance, accusing the functionalists in general, of “trivialising the wickedness of Hitler”, and Mommsen in particular, of coming precariously close to lending support to the arguments of Hitler apologist, David Irving, who had claimed that not only did Hitler have nothing to do with Jewish policy, but that he knew nothing of the 'Final Solution' until 1943<sup>12</sup>. It was not just the *intentionalists*, however, who found this interpretation of the Holocaust to be less than satisfactory, but rather, in recent years, a number of criticisms have been levelled at the functionalist position both from inside and outside the *intentionalist* school.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most valid criticism of the functionalists is that, according to Phillippe Burrin, they “have swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction”, by seeking to minimise too greatly both the personality of Adolf Hitler and the role of Nazi ideology as contributing factors in the emergence of the Holocaust. As Lothar Kettenacker argued, Hitler was not the “swaggering Utopian” which Mommsen portrayed him to be, out of touch with reality and letting others make all of his decisions, but rather “it was his leadership which gave the regime its real driving force, and kept it moving towards more radical objectives”. Furthermore, Richard Evans claimed that it was remiss of the functionalists to dismiss Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric as meaningless, adding that they offered no satisfactory explanation why, when Hitler threatened the destruction of the Jews, we should not believe that that was exactly what he meant. Daniel Goldhagen recently seconded Evans' claim, stating that, “contrary to those who would dismiss Hitler’s words, there is every reason to privilege Hitler's understanding of his own intentions, and to take the congruence between stated annihilationist intentions and consummated deed at face value”.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Broszat, 'Hitler and the genesis of the 'final solution' : An assessment of David Irving's theses', in H.W. Koch, ed., *Aspects of the Third Reich*, (London : Macmillan Education, 1985), pp. 405-409; Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, pp. 85-86; Mayer, *Why did the heavens not darken ?*, p. 460; Mommsen, 'The realisation of the unthinkable', p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> For Irving's position on the Holocaust, see David Irving, *Hitler's war*, (Sydney : Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Lothar Kettenacker, 'Hitler's final solution and its rationalisation' in Gerhard Hirschfeld, ed., *The policies of genocide : Jews and Soviet prisoners of war in Nazi Germany*, (London : Allen and

For those who regard Hitler as both an initiator and a radicaliser, therefore, it would seem a most improbable proposition that the Holocaust could have commenced from a series of locally initiated killings, rather than from a direct order from the Fuehrer himself, for as Henry Friedlander reasoned, “nothing so radical or unprecedented could be initiated without Hitler's approval”. Intentionalist, Eberhard Jackel, added weight to this claim, by stating that there is much evidence to suggest that some local officials were “shocked or appalled when the Final Solution came into effect”, but agreed reluctantly to the decision because it had resulted from a Fuehrer order. According to Friedlander, it is likely that this order was issued verbally to Himmler in the summer of 1941—in an effort by Hitler to minimise his own involvement in the crime—who in turn authorised Heydrich “to undertake organisational, technical and final steps” to initiate the killing process. However, although Friedlander’s claims have been supported by other historians, including Richard Breitman and Christopher Browning, while all surviving Nazi documents in regard to the Holocaust are cloaked in “euphemism and camouflage”—even when officials were speaking amongst themselves—this claim can not be completely verified.<sup>15</sup>

Hitler’s role aside, some historians have argued that by concentrating primarily on the roles of circumstance and chaotic administration in the emergence of the Holocaust, the functionalists ignored the “ideologically rooted thrust” of the Nazi regime. John Moses, for instance, indicated that “it would be an historical short-circuit to assume that the decision to perpetrate genocide on the Jews emerged only out of the dynamic of the events in 1939-40”, while Goldhagen added that by looking only at the “situational and material factors”, the functionalists had lost sight of the “broader interpretative framework”. Richard Evatt summed up this position most succinctly, when he stated that “... there should surely be no doubt as to the fact that a murderous ideological anti-Semitism provided the driving force behind the progressive radicalisation of Nazi policies towards the Jews”.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these criticisms, however, it must be said that some aspects of functionalists' argument have gained widespread acceptance, and in recent years, there has been an increasing tendency amongst historians towards a convergence of the positions of the two opposing schools, namely a reconciliation of the concepts of premeditation and improvisation. Jackel, for instance, who once stressed the coherence of Adolf Hitler’s ideology, now concedes that although Hitler had an “intention” to deal with the Jews, the path to the Holocaust was “circuitous, and largely improvised”. Historian, Christopher Browning, concurs with Jackel’s opinion, claiming that while there existed “some kind of ideological imperative calling for some sort of ultimate

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Unwin, 1986), p. 89; Evans, *In Hitler's shadow*, p. 76; Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's willing executioners : Ordinary Germans and and the holocaust*, (London : Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Friedlander, *The origins of Nazi genocide : From euthanasia to the final solution*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina : The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 284; Eberhard Jackel, Christopher Browning, cited in Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, pp. 44-45; Edward Alexander, *The holocaust and the war of ideas*, (London : Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 216; Kershaw, 'Improvised genocide ?', p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, p. 90; John Moses, ' "Special treatment" : David Irving's futile crusade for Hitler's innocence', *Quadrant*, (June 1986), p. 34; Goldhagen, *Hitler's willing executioners*, p. 133; Evans, *In Hitler's shadow*, p. 77.

reckoning with the Jews, that would satisfy Nazi racial imperatives”, a coherent plan for the extermination of the Jewish race simply did not exist.<sup>17</sup>

Rather, historians including Browning, Michael Marrus and Israeli Holocaust expert, Yahuda Bauer, have accepted the functionalists' contention that Nazi policy towards the Jews developed in largely improvised stages, as competing agencies put forward one solution after the next in an effort to solve the “Jewish problem”. Further, both Marrus and Bauer have added their voices to the functionalists' claim that expulsion rather than extermination was for many years the Nazi's primary goal in regard to the Jews, citing numerous official documents which reveal that this was the case. Marrus, for example, drew attention to a German Foreign Office document from 1939, which stated clearly that “the ultimate aim of Germany's Jewish policy” at that time was “the emigration of all Jews living on German territory”.<sup>18</sup>

While many have agreed, therefore, that the Holocaust was not the end result of a coherent Nazi strategy, historian Ian Kershaw has provided additional evidence to support the functionalist's claim that the systematic extermination of the Jews could be seen to have its roots in a series of ‘improvised’ local killings in the occupied German territories in the Autumn of 1941, referring in particular to the killing of 100, 000 Jews in the Wargenthau area of Poland, where Governor Arthur Greiser had been given permission by Hitler to “deal with the Jews as he saw fit”. Conforming then, with the functionalists' image of Hitler as a dictator who “was content to provide carte blanche for others to turn ideological imperatives into concrete directives for action”—although not denying that Hitler approved the course of action—Kershaw went on to indicate that the killings had an “unmistakable air of improvisation, experimentation and rapid adaptation to ... new opportunities”, and concluded that “the Final Solution, as it came to emerge, formed a unity” out of a number of these “organisationally separate programs”.<sup>19</sup>

While these preceding examples reveal, therefore, that the arguments of the functionalist school have received both criticism and support from the wider historical community in recent decades, it at this point appropriate to make an assessment of the contribution of the functionalists to the area of Holocaust historiography. To begin, the functionalists have fulfilled their initial task of broadening the culpability for the crime of the Jewish extermination, by drawing the attention away from the guilt of one man—Adolf Hitler—and placing it back onto the German people, at the same time calling for a reevaluation of Hitler's personal role in the unfolding of events. Further, in addressing the question of how the Holocaust happened, they have necessarily placed the event into a wider historical setting, viewing the killing process not just in relation to Nazi anti-Semitic ideology, but drawing attention to the chaotic governmental framework within which the Reich operated, as well as the increasingly uncontrollable circumstances of World War II. In short, while the arguments of the functionalists have not met with universal approval, and indeed, while some of their claims may never be proved conclusively due to the ambiguity of the documentary evidence, their contribution to the

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<sup>17</sup> Eberhard Jackel, cited in Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews*, p. 22; Browning, cited in Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Browning, cited in Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, p. 43; Yahuda Bauer, 'Genocide : Was it the Nazis' original plan ?' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 450 (July 1980), pp. 37-42; Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>19</sup> Kershaw, 'Improvised genocide ?', pp. 74-75.

Holocaust literature has, nevertheless, widened the context for continued debate by helping to bring a “dark chapter of German history” out into the open.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship*, p. 90; Marrus, *The holocaust in history*, p. 2.

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