

The Destruction of the European Jews

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Reviewing the first, 1961 edition of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (London: W H Allen) in 1962 Andreas Dorpalen predicted that it would 'long remain a basic source of information on this tragic subject'.^(1 [2]) With hindsight, Dorpalen rather underestimated the impact that Hilberg's thesis would have on future scholarship. *The Destruction of the European Jews* shaped academic perspectives and popular understandings of what we now call the Holocaust, even though Hilberg avoids the term. It established the contours and the framework of academic discourse, posing questions about the relationship between ideology and structure in the prosecution of the 'Final Solution', which still preoccupy historians now. Without Raul Hilberg we may not have witnessed, and certainly not in the same way, debates about when that 'Final Solution' was designed, about what the essential conditions for genocide were, about the extent of criminality and complicity within the organised German community, about the responses of the bystanders, or notoriously about the reaction of the Nazis' Jewish victims. To this day historians of the Holocaust invariably salute *The Destruction of the European Jews* as a 'masterly analysis' and an 'unsurpassed landmark', agreeing that amongst Holocaust historians 'none [is] more influential than' Hilberg in having set the agenda for Holocaust research.^(2 [3])

Most importantly Hilberg established, through the various editions of his masterpiece, the narrative of the 'destruction process' at the heart of the Nazi genocide. Hilberg argues that the Nazi campaign proceeded from legislative discrimination against Jews in Germany after 1933, through aryanisation and liquidation of Jewish businesses and assets from the mid nineteen-thirties and then the physical and temporal ghettoisation of the Jewish populations in Nazi-occupied Europe from 1939, to their murder and annihilation after 1941. Historians may have ritually contested the relationship between these stages of destruction, but the narrative itself remained a matter of historical and historiographical orthodoxy. There would be very little dissent

from the idea that each stage was in itself a radicalisation in policy. Equally historians would largely agree that the stages were not clearly demarcated, but bled into one another. Each radicalisation was made possible, and perhaps even caused by, the extension of possibilities revealed in the cruelties that had preceded it.

Hilberg's essential thesis is that the 'Final Solution' was a bureaucratic process – and that it was the bureaucracy of the Nazi state that drove forward, with ever more lethal radicalism, the policies inflicted on Europe's Jews. The Holocaust was therefore, according to Hilberg, a systematically implemented programme that proceeded 'step-by-step ... to the annihilation of 5 million victims'.(p. 46) The 'destruction process' was perfected by a variety of agencies in the expanding boundaries of the Reich between 1933 and 1939, a model which was then applied and further perfected throughout occupied Europe after war began. The essential unity of purpose, as well as the competition between the agencies of the expanded German state, drove Nazi antisemitism to fulfil its ultimately genocidal potential. As Hilberg's thesis is largely unchanged here in the third edition – although it is even further expanded with new empirical and historiographical detail – this review will attempt to consider how the path-finding *The Destruction of the European Jews* can be read in the light of the insights of contemporary Holocaust historiography.

Despite being primarily concerned with the perpetration and perpetrators of genocide, Hilberg's original thesis was perhaps most controversial when dealing with the Jewish victims. In the preface to the first edition Hilberg had declared that his book was not about the Jews, but this did not prevent him offering a controversial interpretation of Jewish behaviour, an interpretation that remains unchanged in the third edition. Hilberg's double-pronged analysis rests on the observation that in the main Jews displayed an ingrained passivity in their response to Nazism and that the Jewish leadership, in the shape of the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils), was an essential part of the German bureaucracy of destruction contributing to the efficacy of the 'Final Solution'.

It would be wrong to argue that Hilberg takes no account of the fundamental ambiguity of Jewish leadership who 'both saved and destroyed its people'.(p. 216) The social and cultural capacities of the *Judenräte*, who throughout Nazi-occupied Europe provided what might be described as social and cultural services for the concentrated victims, are acknowledged. But much greater emphasis is given to the Jewish Councils perceived role in the German bureaucracy and therefore the 'destruction process' itself. Thus the problems with Hilberg's account of the Jewish Councils, which were identified at length by Isaiah Trunk as long as thirty years ago, remain.(3 [4]) In his effort to discern the 'destruction process' as a singular monolithic attack on the Jews, Hilberg continues to generalise about the *Judenräte*, despite their being established in different ways, at different times, for different purposes and having locally determined relationships with their wider Jewish populations. The social and cultural diversity of that populace also remains unexplored by Hilberg, whose insistence that leadership is simply located within the German-imposed administrative elites fails to bring to life the 'complexity, variety and ambiguity' of the Jewish ghettos as communities.(4 [5]) Hilberg ignores what has been described as the cultural miracle of the ghettos in which richly diverse cultural, political and religious activities were pursued.(5 [6]) The argument that this is not a book about the Jews does not really justify this disdain for consideration of the Holocaust as Jewish rather than German history.

As I have said, Hilberg's generalisations about Jewish leadership stem from his desire to see the entirety and singularity of the 'Final Solution': something which also points us to a potential problem with his interpretation of the Holocaust as German history. The Jewish Councils were co-opted as part of a general bureaucracy of concentration and murder – used to provide Jewish labour, to pacify the victim populations and then to administrate their transfer to killing centres. The local diversity of approaches to this central task are ultimately seen as irrelevant in comparison with their net contribution to the 'destruction process' as a whole. Their other activities, while acknowledged, are not seen as historically significant by Hilberg because they have little impact on the destructive ends of Nazi policy. Similarly, armed Jewish resistance (most famously in the Warsaw ghetto) is dealt with perfunctorily, precisely because it did nothing to alter the fate of Poland's Jews. Again this is an interpretation and a narrative that is justified by the view that all Holocaust history must flow through the filter of the 'Final Solution'.

However it could be argued that in continuing to regard and represent the 'Final Solution' as a single (if not necessarily unified) process, Hilberg is out of step with the historiography that has emerged since the beginning of the 1990s. Written by a generation of German historians, this historiography, based largely on archival sources uncovered in the former Soviet Union, suggests the priority of local determinants in the emergence of mass murder as systematic policy throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, especially in the East. Such an emphasis on the local points to the sheer complexity of the Holocaust and its irreducibility to singular explanatory notions such as Hilberg's bureaucratic 'machinery of destruction'. The idea that there were identifiable stages in a step-by-step process, which was essentially similar throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, becomes less tenable. Instead of being determined by a policy filtered through central decision makers – either as the result of a maniacal ideological fixity or the ceaseless dynamic of a self-propelling bureaucracy – this new historiography points to the local utilitarianism of the 'Final Solution' as a policy.

Dieter Pohl has for example demonstrated that the impetus for the emergence of a mass murder policy in the General Government came not from central decision-making but from the logistical problems of occupation. Similarly Thomas Sandkühler's investigation of the genesis of genocide in Galicia has argued that murder was a product of local policies of occupation and subjugation: the result of road-building programmes and food shortages, with Jews murdered as 'useless eaters', using the logic of the euthanasia programme. Other regional patterns of radicalisation have been discerned by Christian Gerlach in Byelorussia, Christoph Dieckmann in Lithuania and Sybille Steinbacher in Upper Silesia.^(6 [7])

The collective impact of this new historiography has been to break down the idea of the singular narrative of the 'Final Solution' first established by Hilberg. As such his arguments that link all of the extermination facilities in occupied Poland – when they appear to have been designed and operated as part of at least three discrete murder operations – appear outdated. This is not to say that Hilberg refuses to acknowledge local variations in genocidal policy, either in terms of its prosecution, or the way in which it was rationalised by the perpetrators. He specifically designates the murder of Jews in the Reich-incorporated Wharteland as a local and self-contained process instigated by Artur Greiser and local officials.^(7 [8]) Equally Hilberg's analysis of genocide in Serbia recognises, in a way that the work of Christopher Browning and Walter Manoschek complements and fleshes out, the participation of the army in murdering Jews there; and the crucial role that the threat to German security posed by partisan actions in the region played in the emergence of a genocidal reprisal policy.^(8 [9])

But none of these individual narratives is allowed to stand alone in Hilberg's all-encompassing approach. All are apparently linked by a monolithic sense of the 'Final Solution' implicitly controlled by Himmler's 'fanatic[al] functional centralisation' and reducible to the prescribed and even deterministic 'destruction process'. (p. 216) But this centralisation runs alongside an account of bureaucracy that is decentralised and encompasses the entire organised community: a bureaucracy that is, according to Hilberg, driven as much from the bottom up as it is from the top down.

It is therefore only at first glance that *The Destruction of the European Jews* appears out of step with the more recent historiography, which emphasises that the 'Final Solution' was made up of fragments. For

example, although Hilberg sees the 'Final Solution' as a single process, he refuses to give a singular narrative account of its development as a policy. As he did in the second (1985) edition, Hilberg sidesteps the ever-growing mountain of historiography concerned to locate a decision amongst the Nazi leadership to proceed with a programme of genocide, to launch the 'Final Solution' as we now understand it. Indeed this question, which appears so fundamental to some historians, warrants only a single comment buried in a footnote for Hilberg: 'chronology and circumstances point to a Hitler decision before the summer ended'. (p. 419, n.31) (9 [10]) The lack of priority that Hilberg ascribes to the central decision-makers reflects his belief that it is much more important to locate when the German bureaucracy as a whole – the organised community – came to a collective sense (rather than a decision) that a genocidal 'Final Solution' to their individual 'Jewish Questions' was necessary. So,

by the middle of 1941, the dividing line had been reached, and beyond it lay a field of unprecedented actions unhindered by the limits of the past. More and more of the participants were on the verge of realizing the nature of what could happen now. (p. 418)

Hilberg's 'destruction process' then, is not monolithic. He acknowledges that only those at the centre had a full knowledge or realisation of the destruction process (as he himself has discerned it), but this is not the same as arguing that such a policy emerged from the centre. His descriptions of Heydrich's pivotal role in the attempted centralisation of Jewish policy after the summer of 1941 may attempt to locate the meaning of the 'Final Solution' for Nazi decision-makers, and the innate competitiveness of the Nazi system, but they do not imply that such events are all important. There do remain some awkward generalisations within Hilberg's narrative – for example his refusal to discuss Aktion Reinhard and the murder of the Jews in the General Government as a separate bureaucratic and administrative mass murder, seeing it only as an exercise in expropriation. Yet, as a whole, Hilberg's conception of the destruction process does allow for localised innovation and radicalism as well as centralisation. Occupied Poland, Hilberg argues, was 'an area of experimentation [where] the machinery of destruction ... outdid the bureaucracy in Berlin'. (p. 188)

Far from being contradicted, Hilberg's work somewhat prefigures that of a new generation of historians who emphasise that genocide as a policy emerged for different reasons and at different times in different locations, not driven by a centralised decision-making process. But, where does this leave our understanding of the Holocaust as a whole? Have we reached a position where to put these policies together is nothing more than a narrative construction, the post-hoc rationalisations of historians, removed from the Nazi reality?

Actually *The Destruction of the European Jews* suggests not, and performs a valuable service in providing a sense of the context for the fragmented narrative emerging from new historiography – usefully helping to prevent the breakdown of the concept the Holocaust. Hilberg's massive text, with its mastery of the structures and relationships that organised genocide on a continent-wide scale, remind us first of the geographical extent of the 'destruction process'. That sense of scale also aids our understanding of the overall context within which individuals and bureaucracies, spread throughout the continent of Europe, took murderous decisions. Indeed it could be argued that it acts as a framework within which the new and ever more detailed Holocaust historiography may be understood, helping to restore or remind us of the usefulness of a single (but not necessarily unified) framework within which to understand the phenomenologically-identifiable Nazi attack on the Jews of Europe.

Hilberg makes the comparatively simple point at the beginning of his work that no single centre of Jewish policy existed in the Third Reich. There was no single ministry or institution that dealt with Jewish affairs (although Heydrich's SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) may have regarded itself as the centre of genocidal policy after 1941, this was not actually the case). The implications of such an observation are manifold, and should not simply be seen as the result of the 'polycratic' and decentred organisation of the Nazi state. As Hilberg also points out, almost every institution or administrative grouping in the machinery of government inside and outside the Reich did have officials and groups responsible for the management of Jewish matters. In this sense 'Jewish policy' actually lay outside the sphere of what we might understand as politics. It was an essential element of the regime, underpinning a great variety of assumptions and initiatives, impacting on every administrative structure. Indeed, the 'Jewish Question' could be argued to have been the driving force

of politics itself in the Third Reich.

This observation of the centrality of what, for the sake of convenience, can be called antisemitism, to the Nazi *Weltanschauung* is not new: it was of course at the centre of intentionalist readings of Holocaust history. But Hilberg does not allow the absurd simplicities of the argument that antisemitism equals the genocide of the Jews to stand. Nor does he give any credence to the contention that the idea of antisemitism as traditionally understood is enough to encapsulate Nazi attitudes towards the Jews. Hilberg's homage to the work of Götz Aly is an implicit acknowledgement that antisemitism was for many cast in the context of a much wider racial vision in the Third Reich. Original deportations from the Reich, and inside occupied Poland, were one element of a vision of a racially-restructured Europe, personified in Himmler's appointment as the Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germanism.^(10 [11]) Götz Aly's wider contribution to historiography is to demonstrate that antisemitism could function as a part of diverse political purposes in the Nazi era, as elsewhere he and Susanne Heim have demonstrated how lower level economic planners, their so-called Architects of Annihilation, envisaged the murder of Europe's Jews as a part of an economic modernisation of Eastern Europe.^(11 [12]) Hilberg provides us with a narrative framework within which we can locate these diverse purposes of antisemitism, which were put to diverse policy ends.

It was, argues Hilberg, the 'shared comprehension' of the rectitude of pursuing antisemitic policy that drove the German bureaucracy forward towards the 'Final Solution'. In emphasising the ideational underpinnings of that bureaucracy, Hilberg reminds us that the officials which made up the Nazi institutions were not simply the banal practitioners of a faceless murder process, but the enthusiastic implementers of a social and political vision: if you like, their intention was not removed from their function. It is common now to read that the heat of the intentionalist / functionalist debate which defined approaches to the Holocaust for so long has been cooled. But it is clear from re-reading Hilberg, that his deft analysis of the relationship between ideology and structure actually offered us a way out the fog much earlier.

Hilberg presents the bureaucracy of genocide on such a scale that it becomes clear that it in fact encapsulated a cross-section of German society under the Nazis. By doing so he provides a framework which both helps us to understand, and contributes to, what has been described as the 'emerging consensus' around attempts to explain the behaviour of the perpetrators of the 'Final Solution'.^(12 [13]) This consensus unites the ideological pathfinders of the RSHA (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt* – the SS Security Main Office) and the WVHA (*Wirtschafts und Verwaltungshauptamt* – the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office) with the 'ordinary men' of the Order Police, the shared assumptions of racial policing on the home front, and even the extension of complicity revealed in new analyses of popular involvement in aryanisation and expropriation. All are rendered explicable with reference to the triumph of a new moral and ideological atmosphere throughout the institutions of the Third Reich. In their own way institutions and individuals became progressively radicalised, as the horizon of possibilities was expanded by each new policy, action, theft or killing.^(13 [14]) Michael Thad Allen's masterly investigation of the bureaucrats concerned with the Business of Genocide in the WVHA is a useful example. His detailed exposition of the individuals and individual administrative groupings within this section demonstrates how individuals contributed to and were shaped by, the 'shared comprehension' of the different elements of the SS. Thad Allen is keen to make clear that his study of the minutiae complements Hilberg's 'macro' sense of the bureaucracy. ^(14 [15])

The idea of 'shared comprehension' also allows us to solve some of the self-imposed problems of Holocaust historiography too – for example the tension regarding the role of Jewish slave labour within a framework of genocide. If we raise antisemitism from the level of simple politics, then we can perhaps explain the apparent contradictions of policy by discerning their relationship to the same, new and dominant value system. The different uses and abuses of Jews throughout Europe, in line with local circumstances and perceptions, become complementary rather than contradictory.^(15 [16]) Within the framework that Hilberg provides, debates about decision-making and the precise moment that the Nazi leadership crossed the Rubicon to imagining a policy of wholesale genocide can also continue to be fruitful. While new perspectives on the contested months from the summer of 1941 may challenge Hilberg's throwaway assertion regarding Hitler's mindset, and will impact upon our precise understanding of the Nazi psyche,

they should not be allowed to unseat Hilberg's unique perspectives on the continent-wide scale of the politics of annihilation. ([16](#) [17])

Raul Hilberg's *Destruction of the European Jews* certainly remains a vital source of information on this tragic subject. While the simplicities of his condemnation of the Jewish Councils are unfortunate, his insight does aid our understanding of the Judenräte as an element of the German bureaucracy. Most of all Hilberg continues to give us a sense of the overall framework within which this bureaucracy functioned, and as such a sense of the wider significance of what may well have been localised genocides. If nothing else, Hilberg reminds us why that bureaucracy produced the Holocaust, in a manner that avoids the simplicities of explanations indicting either antisemitism or simply the depersonalised structures of government and occupation:

the Germans killed 5 million Jews. The onslaught did not come from the void; it was brought into being because it had meaning for the perpetrators. It was not a narrow strategy for the attainment of some ulterior goal, but an undertaking for its own sake, an event experienced as Erlebnis, lived and lived through by its participants.' (p. 1059)

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Notes

- [1.](#) Andreas Dorpalen review of Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, *Journal of Modern History*, 34:2 (1962), 226-27.
- [2.](#) Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 96 [editor's note: for a review of this book on these pages, [click here](#) [18]]; Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 5; Mark Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2002), p. 5; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, pbk edn (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xix.
- [3.](#) Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: Jewish councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*, pbk edn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), this is a new version, the original being published in 1972 (London: Collier Macmillan).
- [4.](#) Gustavo Corni, *Hitler's Ghettos: Voices from a Beleaguered Society, 1939-44*, transl. Nicola Rudge Iannelli (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 332.
- [5.](#) Tim Cole, 'Ghettoization', in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 65-87. This is an excellent collection surveying the development of Holocaust historiography and offers some interesting new perspectives.
- [6.](#) All of these scholars have published monographs on these subjects in Germany. For English language summaries of this cutting-edge research see Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000).
- [7.](#) For a very useful summary of the emergence of genocide in the Wharteland, see Ian Kershaw, 'Improvised Genocide? The emergence of the 'Final Solution' in the 'Wharthegau', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 2 (1992), 51-78.
- [8.](#) See Manoschek in Herbert, *National Socialist Extermination Policies*, pp. 163-85; and Christopher Browning, 'Wehrmacht reprisal policy and the murder of the Jews in Serbia', in idem., *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), pp. 39-56.
- [9.](#) See Christopher R. Browning, 'The decision-making process', in Stone, ed. *Historiography*, pp.173-96, for an analysis of Hilberg's interventions in the debate over decision-making; Browning also notes the phrase that I have highlighted here.
- [10.](#) Götz Aly, *Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews*, transl. Belinda Cooper and Allison Brown (London: Arnold, 1999).
- [11.](#) Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, transl.

A. G. Blunden (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003) [editor's note: for a review of this book on these pages, [click here](#) [19]].

[12](#). George C. Browder, 'Perpetrator character and motivation: an emerging consensus', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17: 3 (2003), 480-97.

[14](#). Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[15](#) [20]. See for example Ulrich Herbert, 'Labour and extermination: economic interest and the primacy of *Weltanschauung* in National Socialism', *Past and Present*, 138 (1993), 144-95; and Donald Bloxham, 'Extermination Through Work': *Jewish Slave Labour under the Third Reich*, Holocaust Educational Trust Research Papers 1:1 (London: Holocaust Educational Trust, 1999).

[16](#) [21]. See Browning, 'The decision-making process' for a summary.

Professor Hilberg greatly appreciates the time and labour Dr Lawson has devoted to his fine discussion of *The Destruction of the European Jews*, and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

The New York Times

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Yale University Press

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[8] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/reapp/lawsonT.html#7>

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[18] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/./articles/klierJ.html>

[19] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/./paper/noakesJ.html>

[20] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/reapp/lawsonT.html#15t>

[21] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/reapp/lawsonT.html#16t>

[22] <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/11/books/managing-the-death-machine.html?pagewanted=all>

[23] <http://yalepress.yale.edu/reviews.asp?isbn=9780300095579>