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I

FROM “ETHNIC
CLEANSING” TO
GENOCIDE TO THE
“FINAL SOLUTION”

The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939–1941

Why the emphasis on decision and policy making, it might be asked. Is this not an exhausted topic whose time has come and gone with the intentionalist/functionalist controversy of the late 1970s and early 1980s, characterized by unduly polarized alternative interpretations? The intentionalists emphasized the centrality of Adolf Hitler’s ideology, pre-determined plans, and opportunistic decision making, whereas the functionalists emphasized the dysfunction and unplanned destructive implosion of an unguided bureaucratic structure and tension-filled political movement that had driven themselves into a dead end. One approach perceived the Final Solution as being more like the Manhattan Project, a massive and well-planned program that produced the destruction intended, whereas the other perceived it as a kind of Chernobyl, the unintended but all too predictable by-product of a dysfunctional system.

If the intentionalist/functionalist controversy in this highly polarized form is no longer at the center of Holocaust research, nonetheless a much more nuanced debate over Hitler and the origins of the Final Solution, based on a much vaster documentary collection, has found new life in the 1990s. In this debate, virtually all the participants agree on the centrality of the year 1941 and an incremental decision-making process in which Hitler played a key role. What is being debated are the relative weighting of the different decisions taken in 1941 and the different historical contexts invoked to explain the importance and timing of those decisions. What is at stake is our differing understandings of

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how Hitler and the Nazi system functioned and how historically the fateful line was crossed between population decimation and genocide on the one hand and the Final Solution and Holocaust on the other.

The most recent controversy in this ongoing debate over the decisions for the Final Solution is the topic of my second lecture. But part of my argument is that the pattern of decision making that was practiced and the frustrations and failures that the Nazis experienced in racial empire building in Poland in the years 1939–41 are important for understanding the “fateful months” in which the Final Solution emerged. One crucial historical context for understanding the origins of the Final Solution, until recently overshadowed by the history of European and German anti-Semitism, the development of the eugenics movement, and the functioning of the Nazi system of government, is the visions of demographic engineering and plans for population resettlement that both inspired and frustrated Nazi racial imperialism in Poland between 1939 and 1941. I will argue that the theory and practice of what we now call ethnic cleansing was an important prelude to the decisions for the Final Solution that followed.

More specifically, I will argue that between September 1939 and July 1941, Nazi Jewish policy, as one component of a broader racial imperialism in the east, evolved through three distinct plans for ethnic cleansing to a transitional phase of implicit genocide in connection with preparations for the war of destruction against the Soviet Union. Hitler was both the key ideological legitimizer and decision maker in this evolutionary process, which also depended crucially upon the initiatives and responses elicited from below. For Hitler the historical contexts for his key decisions were the euphoria of victory in Poland and France and the galvanizing anticipation of a territorial conquest of *Lebensraum* and an ideological and racial crusade against “Judeo-Bolshevism” in the Soviet Union. Additionally, for the middle and lower echelon, regional and local authorities, key factors were not only their identification with Hitler’s goals and personal ambition to make a career but also frustration over the impasse created by the ideological imperatives of the regime and their failure to implement the previous policies of ethnic cleansing.

In the months before the invasion of Poland, Hitler made clear on several occasions that the outbreak of war would set a new level of expectation on his part. For instance, in his Reichstag speech of January 1939, he prophesied that a world war would mean the destruction of

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the Jews in Europe. And to his generals on August 22, he called for a "brutal attitude," "the destruction of Poland," and the "elimination of living forces."¹ When Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner asked Reinhard Heydrich about the tasks of the Einsatzgruppen, he was bluntly informed: "Fundamental cleansing: Jews, intelligentsia, clergy, nobles" (*Flurbereinigung: Judentum, Intelligenz, Geistlichkeit, Adel*).² But what did *Flurbereinigung* mean? How were Hitler's prophesies and exhortations transformed by his eager subordinates, especially Heinrich Himmler and Heydrich, into specific and concrete policies?

The arrest and decimation of Poland's leadership classes seem to have been decided even before the invasion.³ But plans for a more sweeping demographic reorganization of Poland, including a solution to the Jewish question, emerged only during the month of September. On September 7 Heydrich told his division heads that Poland would be partitioned and Germany's boundary would be moved eastward. Poles and Jews in the border region annexed to the Third Reich would be deported to whatever remained of Poland.⁴ A week later Heydrich discussed the Jewish question before the same audience and noted: "Proposals are being submitted to the Führer by the Reichsführer, that only the Führer can decide, because they will be of considerable significance for foreign policy as well."⁵ The nature of these proposals was

¹ *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (hereafter cited as NCA), III, p. 665 (1014-PS); Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* (Stuttgart, 1962), I, p. 25; Winfried Baumgart, "Zur Ansprache Hitlers vor den Führern der Wehrmacht am 22. August 1939," *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte* (hereafter cited as VfZ), 1968, pp. 120-149.

² Halder, *Kriegstagebuch*, I, p. 79.

³ Heydrich and Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner reached agreement in August that the Einsatzgruppen would arrest all potential enemies – that is, all "who oppose the measures of the German authorities, or obviously want and are able to stir up unrest due to their position and stature" (*die sich dem Massnahmen der deutschen Amtsstellen widersetzen oder offensichtlich gewillt und auf Grund ihrer Stellung und ihres Ansehens in der Lage sind, Unruhe zu stiften*). According to Wagner, the Einsatzgruppen had lists of 30,000 people to be sent to concentration camps. Edward Wagner, *Der Generalquartiermeister: Briefe und Tagebuch Eduard Wagners*, ed. by Elisabeth Wagner (Munich, 1963), pp. 103-4. In early September, Wilhelm Canaris pointed out to Wilhelm Keitel that he "knew that extensive executions were planned in Poland and that particularly the nobility and the clergy were to be exterminated." Keitel confirmed that "the Führer had already decided on this matter." NCA, V, p. 769 (3047-PS).

⁴ National Archives (hereafter cited as NA), T175/239/2728499-502 (conference of Heydrich's division heads, 7.9.39).

⁵ NA, T175/239/2728513-5 (conference of Heydrich's division heads, 14.9.39).

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revealed the following week, when Heydrich met not only with his division heads but also the Einsatzgruppen leaders and his expert on Jewish emigration, Adolf Eichmann. Concerning Poles, the top leaders were to be sent to concentration camps, the middle echelon were to be arrested and deported to rump Poland, and “primitive” Poles were to be used temporarily as migrant labor and then gradually resettled, as the border territories became pure German provinces. According to Heydrich, “The deportation of Jews into the non-German region, expulsion over the demarcation line is approved by the Führer.” This “long-term goal,” or *Endziel*, would be achieved over the next year. However, “in order to have a better possibility of control and later of deportation,” the immediate concentration of Jews into ghettos in the cities was an urgent “short-term goal,” or *Nahziel*. The area east of Cracow and north of the Slovak border was explicitly exempted from these concentration measures, for it was to this region that the Jews as well as “all Gypsies and other undesirables” were eventually to be deported.⁶

This plan was slightly altered the following week when Germany surrendered Lithuania to the Soviet sphere and received in return Polish territory around the city of Lublin between the Vistula and Bug Rivers. On September 29, Hitler told Alfred Rosenberg that all Jews, including those from the Reich, would be settled in this newly acquired territory between the Vistula and the Bug. Central Poland west of the Vistula would be an area of Polish settlement. Hitler then broached yet a third resettlement scheme. Ethnic Germans repatriated from the Soviet sphere would be settled in western Polish territories incorporated into the Third Reich. Whether “after decades” the German settlement belt would be moved eastward, only time would tell.⁷

⁶ NA, T175/239/2728524-8 (conference of Heydrich’s division heads, 21.9.39); NCA, VI, pp. 97–101 (3363-PS); Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers 1938–40*, ed. by Helmuth Krausnick and Harold Deutsch (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 362 (document nr. 14, Groscurth memorandum over verbal orientation by Major Radke, 22.9.39).

⁷ *Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs*, ed. by Hans-Günther Seraphim (Göttingen, 1956), p. 81. NA, T175/239/2728531-2 (conference of Heydrich’s division heads, 29.9.39). According to Götz Aly, “*Endlösung*”: *Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt/M., 1995), p. 39, the decision to repatriate all Baltic Germans from the Soviet sphere was reached between Hitler and Himmler only on September 27.

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In short, by the end of September 1939 Himmler had proposed and Hitler had approved a grandiose program of demographic engineering based on racial principles that would involve the uprooting of millions of people. These policies were fully consonant with Hitler's underlying ideological assumptions: a need for *Lebensraum* in the east justified by a Social-Darwinist racism, a contempt for the Slavic populations of eastern Europe, and a determination to rid the expanding German Reich of Jews. These policies were also very much in tune with widely held views and hopes in much of German society concerning the construction of a German empire in eastern Europe. There was no shortage of those who now eagerly sought to contribute to this historic opportunity for a triumph of German racial imperialism. And the degree to which the widely held hopes and visions of these eager helpers would subsequently founder on stubborn reality, the greater their willingness to resort to ever more violent solutions. The broad support for German racial imperialism in the east was one foundation upon which the future consensus for the mass murder of the Jews would be built.⁸

Heydrich's plans for the immediate concentration of Jews in urban ghettos had to be postponed owing to army concerns over undue disruption.⁹ But that did not deter one young and ambitious Schutzstaffel (SS) officer from taking the initiative to jump from the short-term to the long-term goal and implement the immediate expulsion of the Jews. On October 6, 1939, Eichmann met with the head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Müller, who ordered him to contact Gauleiter Wagner in Kattowitz concerning the deportation of 70,000 to 80,000 Jews from East Upper Silesia. Eichmann noted the wider goal of this expulsion: "This activity shall serve first of all to collect

⁸ Aly, "Endlösung," esp. pp. 13–17; Aly and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* (Hamburg, 1991); Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastward. A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1988); Hans Mommsen, "Umvolkungspläne des Nationalsozialismus und der Holocaust," *Die Normalität des Verbrechens: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung zu nationalsozialistischen Gewaltverbrechen* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 68–84. Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York, 1996), pp. 66–159.

⁹ Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *Das Heer und Hitler. Armee und nationalsozialistisches Regime 1933–40* (Stuttgart, 1969), pp. 671–2 (document nr. 47: Heydrich to Einsatzgruppen leaders, 30.9.39).

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experiences, in order . . . to be able to carry out evacuations in much greater numbers.”¹⁰

Within days Eichmann had expanded this program to include deportations from both Mährisch Ostrau in the Protectorate and Vienna. He had also located a transit camp at Nisko on the San River on the western border of the Lublin district, from which the deportees were to be expelled eastward. By October 11, German officials in Vienna were informed that Hitler had ordered the resettlement of 300,000 Reich Jews, and Vienna would be completely cleared of Jews in 9 months.¹¹ And on October 16, Eichmann confidently informed Artur Nebe, head of the Criminal Police, that Jewish transports from the Old Reich would begin in 3 to 4 weeks, to which train cars of “Gypsies” could also be attached.¹²

In short, between mid-September and mid-October 1939, Nazi plans for the ethnic cleansing of the Third Reich of Jews and “Gypsies” from both its old and new territories had taken shape in the form of a vast deportation and expulsion program to the farthest extremity of Germany’s new eastern empire – the Lublin district on the German–Soviet demarcation line.

Barely was implementation of the Nisko Plan underway, however, when it was abruptly aborted. On October 19, as the second and third transports were being prepared for departure, Gestapo Müller from Berlin ordered “that the resettlement and deportation of Poles and Jews in the territory of the future Polish state requires central coordination. Therefore permission from the offices here must on principle be in hand.” This was quickly followed by the clarification that “every evacuation of Jews had to be stopped.”¹³

¹⁰ Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter cited as YVA), O-53/93/283, Eichmann Vermerk, 6.10.39. For general studies of the Nisko Plan, see: Seev Goshen, “Eichmann und die Nisko-Aktion im Oktober 1939,” *VfZ* 19/1 (January 1981), pp. 74–96; Jonny Moser, “Nisko: The First Experiment in Deportation,” *The Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, II (1985), pp. 1–30; H. G. Adler, *Der Verwaltete Mensch* (Tübingen, 1974), pp. 126–140.

¹¹ Gerhard Botz, *Wohnungspolitik und Judendeportation in Wien 1938 bis 1945: Zur Funktion des Antisemitismus als Ersatz nationalsozialistischer Sozialpolitik* (Vienna, 1975), pp. 164–86 (document VII: Becker memorandum, 11.10.39).

¹² YVA, O-53/93/299-300 (Eichmann to Nebe, 16.10.39) and 227–9 (Günther-Braune FS-Fernspräch, 18.10.39).

¹³ YVA, O-53/93/235-8 (R. Günther Tagesbericht, 19.10.39), 220 (undated R. Günther telegram), and 244 (R. Günther Vermerk, 21.10.39).

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The stop order in fact came personally from Himmler, which he justified to the irate Gauleiter of Vienna on the basis of so-called technical difficulties.¹⁴ But what difficulties had caused Himmler to abort the Nisko Plan just days after it had been set in motion? Expelling Jews and "Gypsies," it turned out, was not the most urgent item on Himmler's agenda for the demographic reorganization of eastern Europe. Himmler had just gained jurisdiction over the repatriation and resettlement of ethnic Germans, and the first Baltic Germans had arrived in Danzig on October 15.¹⁵ The problem of finding space for the incoming ethnic Germans now took priority over deporting Jews from East Upper Silesia, the Protectorate, and Vienna. The geographic center of Nazi resettlement actions suddenly shifted northward to West Prussia and the Warthegau as policy priorities shifted from expelling Jews to finding lodging and livelihood for ethnic Germans.

But despite the sudden demise of the Nisko Plan, the goal of ethnic cleansing remained, though it was now to be implemented in more gradual stages. On October 18 Hitler reiterated that "Jews, Polacks and riff-raff" ("*Juden, Polacken u. Gesindel*") were to be expelled from Reich territory – both old and new – into what remained of Poland, where "devils' work" ("*Teufelswerk*") remained to be done.¹⁶ On October 30, Himmler issued overall guidelines for the *Flurbereinigung* of the incorporated territories that Hitler had once again sanctioned. Within 4 months, *all* Jews (estimated at 550,000) were to be expelled from the incorporated territories to a Lublin reservation between the Vistula and Bug Rivers. Also to be expelled were post-1919 Polish immigrants (so-called Congress Poles) and a sufficient number of anti-German Poles to bring the total to 1 million.¹⁷ Jews in the recently

¹⁴ Botz, *Wohnungspolitik und Judendeportationen*, p. 196 (document X, Himmler to Bürckel, 9.11.39).

¹⁵ Hans Umbreit, *Deutsche Militärverwaltungen 1938/39* (Stuttgart, 1977), p. 218.

¹⁶ *Trials of the War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal* (hereafter cited as IMT), vol. 26, pp. 378–9, 381–3 (864-PS).

¹⁷ *Faschismus, Getto, Massenmord* (hereafter cited as FGM) [Berlin (East), 1960], pp. 42–3 (NO-4059); YVA, JM 211, Frank Tagebuch: Streckenbach report of 31.10.39; *Biuletyn Glownej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich W Polsce* (hereafter cited as *Biuletyn*), XI, pp. 11F–14F, and Hans Frank, *Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939–1945*, ed. by Werner Präg and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer (Stuttgart, 1975), pp. 60–1 (conference of 8.11.39).

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established General Government were to be moved from west to east of the Vistula the following year.¹⁸

No one misunderstood the implications of this plan for a Jewish reservation in Lublin. Arthur Seyss-Inquart reported that the “extreme marshy nature” of the Lublin region “could induce a severe decimation of the Jews.”¹⁹ And the newly appointed general governor, Hans Frank, exulted: “What a pleasure, finally to be able to tackle the Jewish race physically. The more that die, the better.”²⁰

Clearly there were many Germans who were intoxicated by Hitler and Himmler’s vision of vast and brutal population transfers within 4 months and who welcomed the loss of life, particularly Jewish life, that this would entail. But turning this vision into reality would prove difficult for the Germans actually entrusted with the task of implementation. The first flood of ethnic Germans arrived in Danzig–West Prussia, where space was found by both brutally clearing half the population of Gdynia (Gotenhafen)²¹ and murdering the patients of mental hospitals.²² But Gauleiter Albert Forster proved increasingly uncooperative about resettling further ethnic Germans.²³ By late November the higher SS and police leader for Danzig and West Prussia, Richard Hildebrandt, announced that “in the Danzig district itself the Baltic Germans will no longer remain but rather be sent on.”²⁴

On November 28, Heydrich intervened from Berlin, drastically scaling down the immediate task facing the Germans to a “short-range plan” (*Nahplan*) that differed from Himmler’s guidelines of October 30 in significant ways. First, immediate expulsions were to take place only from the Warthegau rather than throughout the incorporated territories. Second, the quota was sharply cut from 1 million to 80,000 “Poles and Jews,” whose removal would make room for 40,000 “incoming Baltic Germans.” And finally, the racial and political crite-

¹⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter cited as USHMM), RG 15.005m, 2/104/15 (Müller, RSHA, to EG VI in Posen, 8.II.39).

¹⁹ IMT, vol. 30, p. 95 (2278-PS).

²⁰ FGM, p. 46 (Frank speech in Radom, 25.II.39).

²¹ Umbreit, *Militärverwaltung*, pp. 216–21.

²² Aly, “*Endlösung*,” pp. 114–26.

²³ Herbert Levine, “Local Authority and the SS State: The Conflict over Population Policy in Danzig–West Prussia,” *Central European History*, II/4 (1969), pp. 331–55.

²⁴ YVA: O-53/69/639–41 (Polizeisitzung in Danzig, 15.II.39) and 642–3 (conference of 20.II.39); JM 3582 (Hildebrandt speech, 26.II.39).

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ria emphasized by Himmler gave way to more practical concerns. Housing and livelihoods had to be procured for incoming ethnic Germans, and "urgently needed" manual laborers were to be exempted.²⁵

As a consequence, the emphasis on deporting Jews was diminished. Although by far the largest concentration of Jews in the Warthegau, those in the city of Lodz were not to be included, because it was not yet clear whether that city would ultimately be part of the General Government or end up within the boundaries of the Third Reich. Other Warthegau Jews were to constitute a deportation reservoir and be expelled only when needed to fill gaps and prevent delays, if the other priority-target groups were not available in sufficient numbers to fill the deportation quotas.²⁶

The Germans in the Warthegau exceeded the quota and reported triumphantly that they had succeeded in deporting over 87,000 "Poles and Jews" by December 17, 1941. The primary thrust of the "first short-range plan" (1. *Nahplan*) was not to solve the Jewish question but rather to remove Poles who posed "an immediate danger" and find space for the Baltic Germans.²⁷ The reason why the precise number or percentage of Jews among the expellees was not reported becomes clear from local documents. In Lodz local authorities had been too incompetent or inefficient to identify "politically suspicious and intellectual Poles" in sufficient numbers to fill their quotas. Thus they had "had to fall back on Jews."²⁸ The indiscriminate seizure of Jews was obviously administratively easier than the selective seizure of Poles. In the end, about 10,000 Jews were deported, mostly from Lodz after all, owing to the insufficient number of deportable Poles identified and listed by the local authorities. This figure of 10,000 Jewish deportees from Lodz was not included in the self-congratulatory final reports on the "first short-range plan," because it was evidence not of a success in

²⁵ *Biuletyn*, XII, pp. 15F–18F (Heydrich to HSSPF Cracow, Breslau, Posen, Danzig, 28.11.39; and Heydrich to Krüger, Streckenbach, Koppe, and Damzog, 28.11.39).

²⁶ USHMM, RG 15.015M, 1/5/4-7 (Rapp draft, 10.11.39) and 2/99/1-5 (Koppe circular, 12.11.39).

²⁷ *Biuletyn*, XII, pp. 22F–31F, and USHMM, RG 11.001M, 1/88/185–202 (Rapp report, 18.12.39); YVA, JM 3582, and USHMM, RG 15.015M, 3/208/1–12 (Rapp report, 26.1.40).

²⁸ USHMM, RG 15.015M, 3/218/13–14 (undated Richter report) and 27–35 (Richter report, 16.12.39).

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deporting Jews but rather of a failure to identify and seize Polish political activists and intelligentsia.

Immediately following the conclusion of the “first short-range plan,” Heydrich’s Jewish experts in Berlin once again posed the question “whether a Jewish reservation shall be created in Poland. . . .”²⁹ Heydrich’s response was threefold: he appointed Eichmann as his “special adviser” (*Sonderreferent*),³⁰ for the moment postponed any Jewish deportations from the Old Reich,³¹ and ordered a “second short-range plan” for “the complete seizure of all Jews without regard to age or gender” in the incorporated territories and “their deportation into the General Government.”³² On January 4, 1940, Eichmann reaffirmed that “On the order of the Reichsführer-SS the evacuation of all Jews from the former Polish occupied territories is to be carried out as a priority.”³³

However, despite the German recommitment to the immediate expulsion of all Jews from the incorporated territories, the problems that stood in the way of realization of expelling both Jews and Poles only multiplied in the new year. The arrival of 40,000 Baltic Germans was to be quickly followed by a further deluge of 120,000 Volhynian Germans. Hans Frank, so enthusiastic the previous fall, was now considerably sobered. He complained bitterly about the impact of the chaotic deportations of the “first short-range plan” and emphasized the limited absorptive capacity of the General Government.³⁴ The latter had been a matter of no concern in the fall of 1939 but increasingly became so as Hermann Göring insisted upon harnessing the productive capacities of the conquered territories to the war effort.³⁵ There were other problems as well. No trains were available until mid-February.³⁶ And Himmler, worried about a sufficient stock of German

²⁹ YVA, JM 3581 (RSHA II/112 an den Leiter II im Hause, 19.12.39).

³⁰ YVA, JM 3581 (Heydrich to Sipo-SD in Cracow, Breslau, Posen, Danzig, and Königsberg, 21.12.39).

³¹ YVA, JM 3581 (Müller to all Staatspolizeistellen, 21.12.39).

³² USHMM, RG 15.015m, 2.97/1-7 (2. Nahplan, 21.12.39).

³³ *Biuletyn*, XII, pp. 37F–39F (Abromeit Vermerk of 8.1.40 on conference of 4.1.40).

³⁴ *Biuletyn*, XII, pp. 37F–39F (Abromeit Vermerk of 8.1.40 on conference of 4.1.40; FGM, pp. 48 and 53 (reports of Gschliesser and Wächter); *Documenta Occupationis* (hereafter cited as DO), vol. 8, pp. 37–8 (report of Mattern); IMT, vol. 26, pp. 210–12. (661-PS); Frank, *Diensttagebuch*, pp. 93–7 (Abteilungsleitersitzung, 19.1.40).

³⁵ Aly, “*Endlösung*,” pp. 113–14.

³⁶ USHMM, RG 15.015m, 1/96/12–13 (Krumei report, 30.1.40, on Leipzig Fahrplanbesprechung of 26–27.1.40).