

Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews

SHLOMO ARONSON

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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I

The Phases 1933–1939

The Initial and the Double Trap

The Nazi regime's treatment of Jews between 1933 and 1939 was gradually radicalized.¹ Each new phase was preceded by public acts of violence instigated by party radicals and then finally transformed into anti-Jewish legislation. The process could be described as a dialectical relationship between organized actions coming from below and legal-administrative measures undertaken from above. The forces at work (e.g., storm troopers and local party bosses) usually brought about Hitler's own intervention, which assumed the form of a state act and created thereby a new, temporary anti-Semitic consensus that provided a basis for the next, more radical wave of activities from below and intervention from above.

Each wave of more radical behavior was related to developments in domestic political and economic affairs in Germany itself and in its relations with foreign powers. Between each wave, however, there were periods of relative calm and stabilization. Yet the very nature of the Nazi phenomenon was dictated by its dynamism. It could not accept a status quo for a long time but perceived in it a return to the past, which it wanted to prevent. Hence, a policy aimed at retention of the status quo would have been an inadmissible gain for existing pre-Nazi forces and values in society such as Christianity, liberalism, and leftist ideologies. Therefore, from a Nazi point of view, such a development would have been a triumph for "Jewish-inspired" forces. At the same time, each wave of anti-Semitic radicalization incorporated the expansion of Nazi power at the expense of the traditional elites and created new institutions to deal with the issue and/or directed the

¹ Parts of this section were taken from the entry "The Final Solution: Preparations and Implementation" in *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (Walter Laqueur, General Editor), (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 184–198), written by Dr. Peter Longerich and myself.

existing bureaucratic machineries toward the anti-Semitic schemes of the regime.²

The first wave of Nazi radicalism started in March 1933 with acts of violence against Jews as individuals and Jewish property. It was transformed into a general “boycott” organized by the new regime and culminated in the anti-Jewish legislation of spring 1933. With this wave, the Jews were completely removed from German public life. This phase brought about the rebirth of autonomous Jewish life in Germany, including a central representative body, and at the same time a large wave of emigration abroad. Nazi fears of a counterboycott by Jewish organizations abroad and the Nazis’ interest in enhanced Jewish emigration led to an agreement with the Zionist organizations toward a limited transfer of Jewish assets to Palestine.

The second phase started with a wave of mob activities against Jews in several German cities in spring and summer 1935. It culminated in the Nuremberg anti-Jewish legislation, which implemented the biological separation of Jews and transformed them into second-class citizens, or rather subjects, of the Third Reich. Anti-Jewish economic legislation, demanded by the party radicals, was not yet adopted. However, massive pressure was brought to bear on Jewish businesses toward their “aryanization.”

Here the significance of the “Four Year Plan” of 1936 must be emphasized. The Four Year Plan was geared toward mobilizing the German economy for war and making the German armed forces “ready for combat” by 1940. Inspired by the Soviet “Five Year Plans” and their success in at least creating an industrial base for the Soviet Union and in helping modernize the Red Army, Hitler – and Hermann Göring, his newly appointed economic czar – did not hide their intention to copy the Soviet example and outdo it. In the current scholarly literature, 1935 is understood to have been the point in time in which “the growth in Soviet military power was real, and the aims of their extensive rearmament were unmistakable,” at least in terms of defending the USSR all around.³ Yet the Nazi Four Year Plan had the target of “liberating” the German economy from the “Jewish yoke.” In this connection, Hitler declared in a secret memo to Göring that “Judaism as a whole” should be made responsible for any damage done to German industry and hence to the German nation by (Jewish) individuals. The extremely violent nature of Hitler’s anti-Semitic view combined with his future policy of expansion and global ambition was reflected here in two laws that he intended to enact. One would threaten industrial saboteurs with death, and the other would make the entire “criminal race” responsible for acts of sabotage committed

² Peter Longerich formulated the general description of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy before the Final Solution for our entry in *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

³ See David M. Glanz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998, p. 258).

by individuals.⁴ This latter law proved to be unnecessary at the time since Jewish acts of sabotage inside Germany never took place, and on top of this continued Jewish deliberations about boycotting German exports did not materialize, obviously because of the fear that the Jews in Germany could suffer as a result of the foreign boycott. For his part, Hitler might have learned to use Jews as hostages – a point to which we shall return. Yet already at this stage, the foundation for the machinery of destruction of the Jews and others was being laid. First, in 1935, Himmler unified the German police forces under his command and started to amalgamate them with the SS while recruiting key persons in other state agencies as “Verbindungsführer,” or those who served him on top of their loyalty to their civilian agencies. The fear – and contempt – toward the traditional German-Prussian bureaucracies and their exponents required such measures in Nazi eyes plus the recruitment of trustworthy people whose whole career would be tied to the regime’s future. The Four Year Plan, with its anti-Semitic connotations, gave Göring extra powers in the sense that he (later also the highest-ranking military officer in the German armed forces) could overrule the regular government agencies and issue orders directly to ministers or subordinates of ministers or heads of other agencies.⁵

Much less known than Göring is Herbert Backe. Backe was Secretary of State in Richard Walter Darré’s Ministry of Food Supply and Agriculture but also Göring’s Commissioner of Food in the Four Year Plan and Himmler’s Chief of Settlement in the SS’s own Race and Settlement Main Office under Darré as nominal head. Born in Batumi, Georgia, Backe was a “border German” of unique background. According to his SS personal file, the Russian authorities arrested him upon the outbreak of World War I. He fled to Germany after the Bolshevik Revolution, was appalled by the conditions imposed on his old motherland by the British blockade (ascribed to Jews and their war against Germany), worked as a miner and studied agriculture, joined the Sturm Abteilung (SA, Nazi storm troopers) in 1922, and became a Nazi Ortsgruppenleiter in 1925.⁶ A Diplom Landwirt (agronomist), Backe served as an expert at the NSDAP’s Reichsleitung (i.e., in the Nazi Party’s national headquarters in Munich), but in December 1933 he was recruited to the SS by Himmler and became both a “Führer” in the SS’s own Race and Settlement Office and Secretary of State in the Food and Agriculture Ministry. In 1936, he also became Göring’s Food Commissioner. In this capacity,

⁴ See *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10, Nuremberg, October 1946–April 1949*, Volume XII (Ministries Case), Doc. NI-4955, pp. 430–439.

⁵ See Consolidated file of Interrogations of Hermann Göring, ED/288 – John Toland Papers – Container 12, U.S. Library of Congress. It should be noted that Göring, who was interviewed at length by American interrogators after his capture, was never asked about his direct role in the Final Solution.

⁶ BDC personal file, NA microfilm, Roll 03343 SCO-025.

he could issue orders to his own minister and thus neutralize the somewhat incalculable Darré later on. Backe, like Hitler himself, was very much motivated by the lessons of the British blockade, which had significantly contributed to the collapse of the German home front and to the revolution of November 1918, while at the same time he was regarded as an expert on Russia. His role in both areas, related to his key positions as Food Commissioner and Himmler's key aid, will be elaborated further when we discuss 1940 and the "Final Solution" decision itself.

The third phase of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews started with a series of anti-Jewish acts of violence immediately following the Austrian "Anschluss" in March 1938 and culminating in the pogroms of November 9–11, 1938, known as "Kristallnacht." This previously unprecedented violence was crowned by collective punitive measures and the most radical legislation to that point, which was aimed at total expropriation of Jewish property and forced emigration. The policy of forced emigration was institutionalized in January 1939 when a Central Office for Emigration was created within the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo) following the establishment of a similar office in Vienna in summer 1938. This meant that the handling of the "Jewish Problem" rested more and more with the SS, while, at the same time, the forced emigration policy could be seen in Nazi eyes as not only allowing them to be rid of unwanted Jews but as exporting anti-Semitism abroad.

Before the outbreak of the war, Hitler was ready to allow Jewish emigration to Palestine, declared by the British and by the League of Nations to be a "Jewish Homeland" and later harboring an option of Jewish sovereignty.⁷ Yet Palestine proved to be the scene of the Arab rebellion of 1936–1939, which developed into a major revolt against the British (and the Jews) in 1937. Thus, Arab actions enter our picture in the sense that the Nazis might have seen in the difficulties that emerged for the British in the Middle East due to Jewish emigration, and the Arab responses to it, yet another double gain to themselves as a result of the forced exodus of Jews to Palestine. Yet the same calculation led the British to curb Jewish emigration into Palestine once

⁷ See Michael Wildt, *Die Judenpolitik des SD 1935 bis 1938* (Stuttgart: Schriftenreihe für Zeitgeschichte, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995, pp. 40–45), regarding the "Palestine oriented" policy of the SD and its ups and downs and limits, dictated among other reasons by the Arab rebellion of 1936–1939; see further "The SD and Palestine: New Evidence from Captured German Documents in Moscow," Dr. Wildt's contribution to *New Records – New Perspectives*, ed. Shlomo Aronson (Sede Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 2002, pp. 64–77) and see Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi–Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 44–54), Dalia Ofer, *Illegal Immigration during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1988) (in Hebrew), especially Chapter 1: "The Illegal Immigration before WWII" and part 1: "The Illegal Immigration 1939–1941," and Francis R. Nicosia, "Ein nützlicher Feind. Zionismus im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–1939," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (VfZ), 37(1989): 367–400.

they were preparing for war with Nazi Germany, which was a concession to Arabs and Muslims.

The timing of the enhanced stage of forced emigration by the Nazis may be explained by a combined sense of success and failure, as expressed in typical Sicherheitsdienst (SD) reports,⁸ according to which the regime had been stalled since the Olympic games of 1936. The Jews were still a part of the German economy, although removed from the political sphere, and emigration grew slowly.

Thus, we can follow the unwinding of the initial trap when the government of a modern, hereto civilized nation degraded its own citizens to the level of persecuted subjects and sought to deport them to foreign lands by force. Having lost their previous civil rights, their identity, and large parts of their property, if not all of it, these trapped people found themselves totally at the mercy of foreign powers.

The related double trap can be described as follows. For Hitler, the transformation of Central Europe and parts of Eastern Europe into a German-inhabited racial superpower was a *conditio sine qua non*; that continental Lebensraum (the racial “living space”) was to be “judenrein” (Free of Jews) at any rate. However, the forced emigration of the Jews from at least a part of that territory to begin with could be doubly beneficial: If spread all over the West, or in Western spheres of influence, the West being the only possible shelter for Jews due to its liberal traditions and Jewish influence therein, Germany would not only be rid of the Jews but Jewish refugees – through their admittance in large numbers, the public attention given to them in times of ongoing economic stress, social tensions, and limited rearmament – would fan anti-Semitism in the host countries and thereby serve the German interest in the relevant countries and possibly weaken their ability to resist Germany. If admitted to the Western world, anti-Semitism could thus help create a popular common base with Nazism, threatening the popular base of Western elites. This could force them to be more susceptible to German demands or risk trouble at home, not only with the resurrected Germany and its genial leader but thanks to the pressure of “International Jewry” and local Jews who would do their best to help their brethren. If this was the Nazi aim (and here lies the double trap), the relevant host nations were destined to refuse to play the Nazi game because of their domestic conditions and their growing sensitivity to the Nazi challenge to their interests and

⁸ See Wildt, *Die Judenpolitik*, pp. 84–105, Einleitung, and the relevant SD reports published by him starting in 1934 and my own discussion of the early Jewish politics of Gestapo and SD on the basis of several SD reports quoted therein, in Shlomo Aronson, *Reinhard Heydrich und die Frühgeschichte von Gestapo und SD* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1971) in which I have underlined the role of the SD as a factor contributing to the “race for the worst” among the Nazi agencies dealing with Jews. See also Otto D. Kulka, *The Jewish Question in the Third Reich: Its Significance in National Socialist Ideology and Politics* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975), Vol. II, Dok. 28, SD Lagebericht of January 1938.

values, which would require a national consensus to resist the Nazis in due course. For Hitler, however, any resistance to his schemes as a whole would assume Jewish connotations – not just because of expedient, propaganda-oriented, “functional” reasons but because the West was indeed perceived by the Nazis as if it was “Jewish ridden,” and also could be portrayed as “Jewish influenced” when it opposed Nazi Germany due to its traditions and system of government.⁹ Actual Jewish political influence in the Western countries was nil, and any Nazi arrangement with the Bolshevik and hence Jewish-inspired Soviet Union was to be temporary, pending Stalin’s own behavior and that of the West.

If Herman Rauschnig – the former Nazi Gauleiter of Danzig – can be trusted, in spite of some doubts about his truthfulness,¹⁰ he was told by Hitler that the Jews were his – the Führer’s – most important trump card against “the democracies” and that Jewish refugees were “a valuable hostage to me.” The Jewish “asset” in Hitler’s hands against the democracies could be interpreted (according to Rauschnig’s book, which was available in English in 1939) in the sense that Hitler would use the Jews in the West to work against Western interests and expose the West as being influenced by Jews in due course. Hitler could blame Western elites for being Jewish-ridden or Jewish-influenced if they opposed him, and he hoped to involve the Jews themselves and their alleged tools in a process that could discredit the elites in the eyes of the masses by pushing them to accept the unwanted refugees or face an unwanted war. The behavior of foreign Jews and foreign governments combined would decide the fate of the hostages when it came to war: a limited war, securing Nazi goals step-by-step, or a global one, which could entail the hostages’ total doom. Foreign governments did not necessarily accept the linkage created by Hitler between Jews and his hegemonic plans in Europe, which he then transformed into an open threat to kill the Jews altogether should it come to a second world war in his “prophecy speech” of January 30, 1939.

In fact, this speech marked the first time that Hitler publicly addressed the Jewish question in Europe as an issue of life or death in a continental context and in the context of a possible second world war. He proclaimed that if “international finance Jewry *in and outside Europe* (italics added) should succeed in thrusting the nations once more again into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth and with it the victory of Jewry, but the elimination of the Jewish race in Europe.”¹¹ This statement

⁹ See Adolf Hitler, *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier, 1941–1944. Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims*, Werner Jochmann, ed. (Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1980, pp. 93, 383–384).

¹⁰ Hermann Rauschnig’s *Hitler Speaks* was first published in English in London (London: T. Butterworth, 1939, p. 233).

¹¹ Text in Max Domarus (ed.), *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945* (Würzburg: Edition Schmidt, 1962–1963, Bd. II, pp. 1056–1058).

could be understood as an open declaration of Hitler's basic intention to eliminate the Jews anyway, especially because he was the one who was thrusting the nations into war. The same speech could, however, be seen as a threat aimed at the West, allegedly influenced by Jews, to refrain from opposing Hitler's hegemonic plans in Europe by force, which would allow him to deal separately with Poland, then with France and Britain (depending on London's own behavior), then with the Jews under his control, possibly by exiling them into some godforsaken place, and then, when the circumstances allowed it, with the USSR, culminating finally in a grand reckoning with the United States.