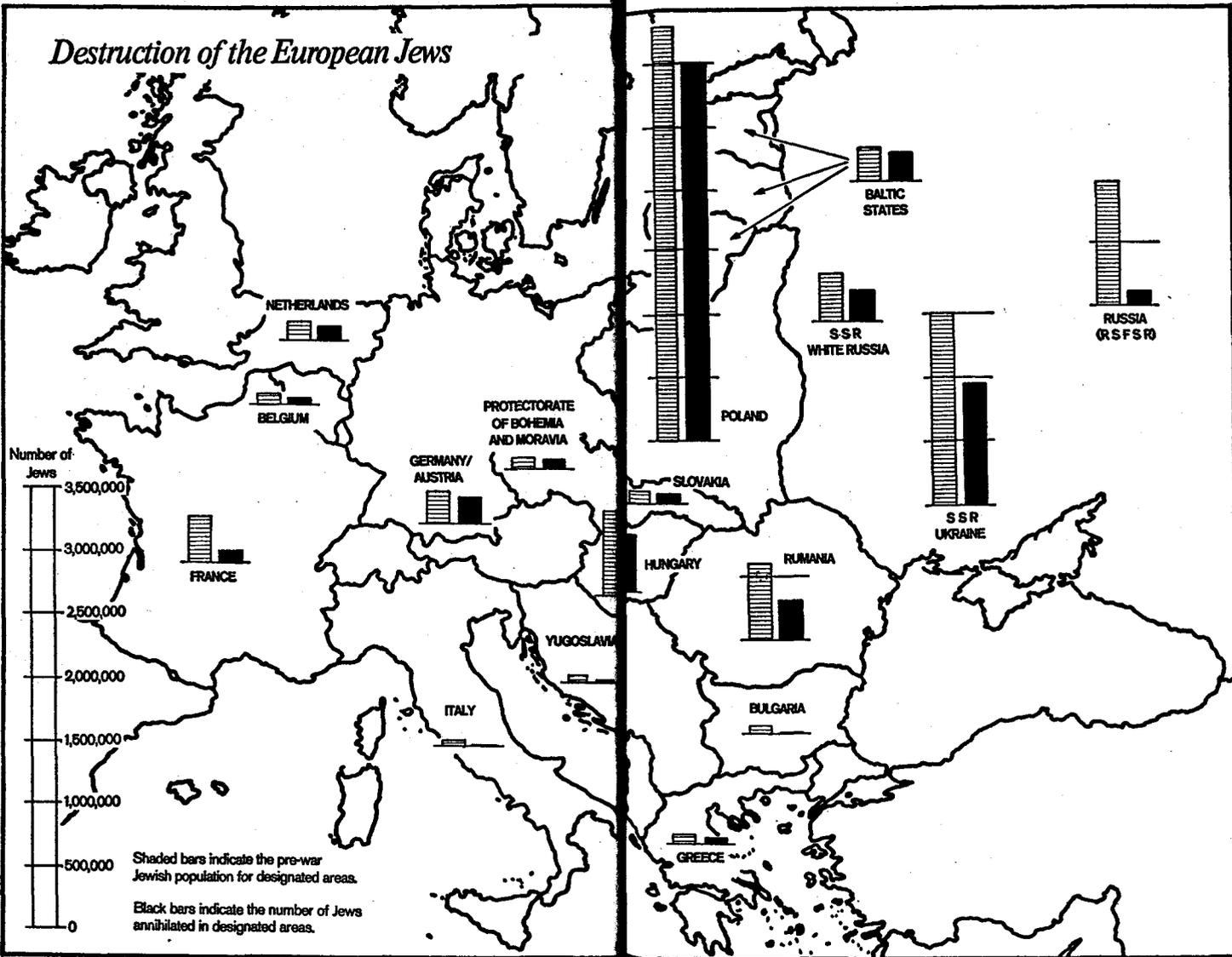


# Destruction of the European Jews



## The Subject:

### Definitions and Contours

The annihilation of six million Jews, carried out by the German state under Adolf Hitler during the Second World War, has resisted understanding. The question persists: how could it have happened? That question embraces several questions, each charged with passion and moral judgement. They are:

1. How was it possible for a modern state to carry out the systematic murder of a whole people for no reason other than that they were Jews?
2. How was it possible for a whole people to allow itself to be destroyed?
3. How was it possible for the world to stand by without halting this destruction?

Part I of this book, 'The Final Solution', attempts to answer the first question. Part II, 'The Holocaust', attempts to answer the second. A partial answer or partial answers to the third question can be found in Appendix A, 'The Fate of the Jews in Hitler's Europe'.

'The Final Solution of the Jewish Question' was the code name assigned by the German bureaucracy to the annihilation of the Jews. The very composition of the code name, when analysed, reveals its fundamental character and meaning to the Germans who invented and used it. The term 'Jewish question', as first used during the early Enlightenment/Emancipation period in Western Europe, referred to the 'question' or 'problem' that the anomalous persistence of the Jews as a people posed to the new nation-states and the rising political nationalisms. The 'Jewish question' was, at bottom, a euphemism whose verbal neutrality concealed the user's impatience with the singularity of this people that did not appear to conform to the new political demands of the state.

Since a question demands an answer and a problem a solution,

various answers and solutions were propounded to the 'Jewish question', by foes and even friends, that entailed the disappearance of the Jews as such – abandonment of the Jewish religion or its essential elements, of the Jewish language, Yiddish, of Jewish culture, Jewish uniqueness and separatism. The histories of Jewish emancipation and of European anti-Semitism are replete with proffered 'solutions to the Jewish question'. The classic illustration is the 'solution' offered by Constantine Pobyedonostsev, chief adviser to Tsar Alexander III, in 1881: one third of the Jews were to emigrate, one third to convert and one third to die of hunger.

To this concept that the National Socialists adopted they added one new element, embodied in the word 'final'. 'Final' means definitive, completed, perfected, ultimate. 'Final' reverberates with apocalyptic promise, bespeaking the Last Judgement, the End of Days, the last destruction before salvation, Armageddon. 'The Final Solution of the Jewish Question' in the National Socialist conception was not just another anti-Semitic undertaking, but a metahistorical programme devised with an eschatological perspective. It was part of a salvational ideology that envisaged the attainment of Heaven by bringing Hell on earth. 'The Devil is loose', Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen noted in his diary on 30 October 1942. The most important event of our time, André Malraux said, was '*le retour de Satan*', citing the German system of terror.

To attain its heavenly Hell on earth the German dictatorship launched a war that engulfed the whole world. Over 35 million people were killed, more than half of them civilians. On the battlefields 1 out of every 22 Russians was killed, 1 out of every 25 Germans, 1 out of every 150 Italians and Englishmen, and 1 out of every 200 Frenchmen. The human cost of 2,191 days of war surpassed the losses of any previous war in the world. That war brought death to nearly 6 million Jews, to 2 out of every 3 European Jews. Though one third of them managed to survive, though the Jewish people and Judaism have outlived the Third Reich, the Germans nevertheless succeeded in irrecoverably destroying the life and culture of East European Jewry.

The Final Solution transcended the bounds of modern historical experience. Never before in modern history had one people made the killing of another the fulfilment of an ideology, in whose pursuit means were identical with ends. History has, to be sure, recorded

terrible massacres and destruction that one people perpetrated against another, but all – however cruel and unjustifiable – were intended to achieve instrumental ends, being means to ends, not ends in themselves.

The German state, deciding that the Jews should not live, arrogated to itself the judgement as to whether a whole people had the right to existence, a judgement that no man and no state have the right to make. 'Anyone who on the basis of such a judgement', said Karl Jaspers, 'plans the organized slaughter of a people and participates in it, does something that is fundamentally different from all crimes that have existed in the past.'

To carry out this judgement, designated as the Final Solution, the German dictatorship involved and engaged the entire bureaucratic and functional apparatus of the German state and the National Socialist movement and employed the best available technological means. The Final Solution destroyed the East European Jews. In doing so, it subverted fundamental moral principles and every system of law that had governed, however imperfectly, human society for millennia.

In writing the history of the Final Solution, I approached the subject from the inside as best I could. Here the Germans are the actors and their acts are viewed through the lenses of German documents. In dwelling on Hitler's ideas about the Jews and on the development of modern German anti-Semitism, I have tried to show the intellectual and historical origins of the Final Solution. Throughout I tried to demonstrate the mutual influences and interplay of ideology and action, belief and programme, national character and political behaviour.

Part II, 'The Holocaust', describes the Jewish response to the Final Solution. 'The Holocaust' is the term that Jews themselves have chosen to describe their fate during the Second World War. At the most superficial level, the word 'holocaust' means a great destruction and devastation, but its etymological substratum interposes a specifically Jewish interpretation. The word derives from the Greek *holokauston*, the Septuagint's translation for the Hebrew *olah*, literally 'what is brought up', rendered in English as 'an offering made by fire unto the Lord', 'burnt offering', or 'whole burnt offering'. The implication is unmistakable: once again in their history the Jews are victims, sacrifices.

The Holocaust, then, becomes another link in the historic chain of Jewish suffering. The very word summons up the remembrance of the Jews in 1096 during the First Crusade. The chronicles and liturgical poetry of those days, in a striking concurrence, evoke the image of the Akedah, the Binding – or sacrifice – of Isaac, as the prefiguration of their own ordeals. For the Jews the Holocaust did not transcend history, but was part of the recurrent pattern of persecution that has been the Jewish historic experience. Still, within the perspective of Jewish history, the Holocaust is the most massive and disastrous catastrophe since the earliest days of that history. Even at the time of the greatest Jewish national trauma, the destruction of the Second Temple, the physical survival of the Jews was not in such jeopardy as during the Holocaust. In 70 C.E. only about one fourth of the Jews lived in Palestine, while the rest lived in the Diaspora. More Jews lived in Alexandria then than in Jerusalem. In 1939, in contrast, two thirds of the world's Jews lived in Europe and three fourths of them – half of all world Jewry – were concentrated in Eastern Europe.

The destruction of East European Jewry brought to an end the thousand-year-old culture of Ashkenazic Jewry that had originated in the Rhine Basin and that by 1939 was concentrated in Eastern Europe. It was a culture whose religious teachings and traditions defined its secular character and values. It was a culture whose language was Yiddish, the language in which Jewish males studied the Talmud, in which mothers sang lullabies and little children played games, in which merchants conducted business and preachers delivered sermons, in which shrews scolded and roughnecks cursed, in which young men courted their girls. Yiddish was a vehicle for a great religious and secular culture, and it generated a rich literature.

East European Jewry created a culture that venerated the *sefer*, the book of religious learning, but whose people laughed at themselves. It was a culture that put its people, familiar with poverty and hardship, on speaking terms with God. It was a culture unique in all Jewish history, and East European Ashkenazic Jewry, which fashioned that culture, was the wellspring of Jewish creativity for Jewish communities throughout the world.

Part II, 'The Holocaust', opens with a chapter about the German Jews in their encounter with National Socialism in the first stage of its

rule. Thereafter, Part II focuses on the experiences of the East European Jews, mainly in Poland and Lithuania, because they were the most numerous of all European Jews, because they constituted a unique civilization and because Eastern Europe was the central locus of the Final Solution.

The primary task I set myself was to describe the responses of the organized Jewish community to the Final Solution in its several stages. I have stressed the role and functions of Jewish communal institutions and communal leadership at various levels in the re-ordered Jewish society under German occupation. To the best of my ability and within the limits set by the availability of sources, I have tried to delineate the varieties of Jewish communal policy as formulated and carried out in different communities and by different communal leaders at various levels, sometimes in harmony and sometimes at variance with each other, and to show wherever possible the responses of the masses to these policies. Consistently, I have used Jewish sources as the lenses through which to view the Jewish community and to analyse Jewish behaviour.

One impediment was the inadequacy of Jewish documentation, despite its enormous quantity. Holocaust documents were composed under extreme persecution, and they are the quintessential products of external censorship and self-imposed restraints. Jewish official documents that have survived reflect the writers' awareness of the omnipresent Germans and their all-seeing eyes. The absence of vital subjects from the records may be explained by the predicament of terror and censorship; yet, lacking evidence to corroborate or disprove, the historian will never know with certainty whether that absence is a consequence of an institutional decision not to deal with such matters or whether it was merely a consequence of prudential policy not to mention them. The terror was so great that even private personal diaries, composed in Yiddish or Hebrew, were written circumspectly, with recourse to Scripture and the Talmud as a form of esoteric expression and self-imposed reticence.

Survivor documentation, on the other hand, frequently suffers from subjectivity, bitterness and partisanship – commonplace and habitual defects of most historical records. These documents have a further shortcoming. For the most part, the experiences recounted by survivors bring to mind the adventures of Stendhal's Fabrizio del

Dongo at the Battle of Waterloo. Like him, they are never quite certain what great events they are witness to. Like him, they have just missed seeing the Emperor – in their case, they have been too distant from communal responsibility to be able to describe with any authority those critical situations at which significant decisions were made and policies framed for the Jewish community.

With the liquidation of the ghettos, Jewish communal existence came to an end. Some 5, perhaps 10, per cent of East European Jews lived a brief while longer in closed concentration/labour camps, but no formal Jewish communal institutions existed any more. A minuscule number of Jews, atomized individuals, managed to survive even the death camps, but their story is not the history of the Jewish community. For this reason this book closes with the liquidation of the ghettos.

Appendix A, 'The Fate of the Jews in Hitler's Europe', is an attempt to put on record the essential bare facts about the Jews in each European country. Each country is considered individually and its wartime status described. A sketch of that country's pre-war Jewish population follows, and then the course of the Final Solution in the country is briefly recounted. It was my intention here to provide, in a kind of historical shorthand, a summary account of the fate of the European Jews during the Second World War and, at the same time, within the limits of the presentation, to enable the reader to distinguish those political, historical, social and geographic factors that accounted for the different treatment accorded to the Jews in various countries.

This is not a value-free book. The very subject matter of the Final Solution precludes neutrality. In writing about a nation that transgressed the commandment 'Thou shalt not murder,' it is impossible to be what Charles Beard characterized as 'a neutral mirror'.

Whereas the Germans, in planning and executing the Final Solution, played the role of the Devil and his hosts, the Jews during the Holocaust were, alas, merely human, saints and sinners, imperfect earthlings. In writing about the Holocaust I have tried to avoid moral judgements, though I have not hesitated to describe demoralization. In discussing the deeds of the handful of Jewish leaders who have been charged by survivors and scholars with criminal behaviour, I have

been persuaded by Professor Herbert Butterfield's view that the historian can never quite know men from the inside, because he can never carry his investigation into the interiority of their minds and hearts, where 'the final play of motive and the point of responsibility' are decided.

As best I could I have tried to present what actually happened. I strove to follow the two methods that Wilhelm von Humboldt perceived to be the historian's task in the approach to the historical truth: 'The first is the exact, impartial, critical investigation of events; the second is the connecting of the events explored and the intuitive understanding of them which could not be reached by the first means.'

## Appendix B The Final Solution in Figures

No one can establish with certitude the exact number of Jews murdered in the course of the Final Solution. The first estimate, made at the Nuremberg trials in 1945, of 5.7 million Jews killed has been shown by subsequent censuses and statistical analyses to have been remarkably accurate. The data of the 1959 census in the Soviet Union confirm the staggering Jewish losses during the Second World War.

The Jewish population figures for each country in the following table are estimates of the population within the country's borders at the time the Final Solution began to be carried out.

*Estimated Number of Jews Killed in the Final Solution*

COUNTRY	ESTIMATED PRE-FINAL SOLUTION POPULATION	ESTIMATED JEWISH POPULATION ANNIHILATED		
			Number	Per cent
Poland	3,300,000	3,000,000		90
Baltic countries	253,000	228,000		90
Germany/Austria Protectorate	240,000 90,000	210,000 80,000		90 89
Slovakia	90,000	75,000		83
Greece	70,000	54,000		77
The Netherlands	140,000	105,000		75
Hungary	650,000	450,000		70
SSR White Russia	375,000	245,000		65
SSR Ukraine*	1,500,000	900,000		60
Belgium	65,000	40,000		60
Yugoslavia	43,000	26,000		60
Rumania	600,000	300,000		50
Norway	1,800	900		50
France	350,000	90,000		26
Bulgaria	64,000	14,000		22
Italy	40,000	8,000		20
Luxembourg	5,000	1,000		20
Russia (RSFSR)*	975,000	107,000		11
Denmark	8,000	—		—
Finland	2,000	—		—
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,861,800</b>	<b>5,933,900</b>		<b>67</b>

\*The Germans did not occupy all the territory of this republic.