Studying the Holocaust
Issues, Readings and Documents

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war aims were, therefore, sacrificed. The ideal was to rid the world of Jews as one rid oneself of lice. It was also, however, to 'punish' the Jews for their 'crime', and the crime in question was existence itself. Hitler, that such a charge had been directed only at devils, Jews had now become devils as well as vermin.

And there is but one thing that devils and vermin have in common: neither is human.

5. The Holocaust was not an episode within the Third Reich, a footnote for historians. In all other societies, however brutal, people are 'punished' for doing. In the Third Reich 'non-Aryans' were 'punished' for being. In all other societies — in pretended or actual principle, if assuredly not always in practice — people are assumed innocent until proved guilty; the Nazi principle presumed everyone guilty until he had proved his 'Aryan' innocence. Hence anyone proving, or even prepared to prove, such innocence was implicated, however slightly and unwittingly, in the process which led to Auschwitz. The Holocaust is not an accidental by-product of the Reich but rather its inmost essence.

6. The Holocaust is not part of German history alone. It includes such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, who successfully urged immigration policies prior to World War II cannot be explained in normal terms alone, such as the pressures of the Great Depression or a xenophobic tradition. Hitler did not wish to export national socialism but only antisemitism. He was widely successful. He succeeded when the world thought that the Jews must have done something to arouse the treatment given them by a German government. He also succeeded when the world categorized Jews needing a refuge as 'useless people'. (In this category would have been Sigmund Freud had he still been in Austria rather than in England; Albert Einstein had he still been in Germany rather than America... This was prior to the war. When the war had trapped the Jews of Nazi Europe, the railways to Auschwitz were not bombed. The Holocaust is not a parochial event. It is world-historical.

7. The Jews were no mere scapegoat in the Holocaust. It is true that they were used as such in the early stages of the Nazi movement. Thus Hitler was able to unite the 'left' and 'right' wings of his party by distinguishing, on the left, between 'Manichaeism' (i.e. Jewish) and 'national' (i.e. 'Aryan') 'socialism' and, on the right between rochensd Kapital (rapacious, i.e. Jewish capital) and schaffendes Kapital (creative, i.e. 'Aryan' capital). It is also true that the supply of Jewish victims given out Hitler would have been forced (as he once remarked to Hermann Rausching) to 'invent' new 'Jews'. But it is not true that the Jews were only a pretext for something else. So long as there were actual Jews, it was murder. Once, at Sinai, Jews had been singled out for life and a task. Now, at Auschwitz, they were singled out for torment and death.

8. The Holocaust is not over and done with. Late in the war Goebbels (who, needless to say, knew all) said publicly and with every sign of conviction that, among the peoples of Europe, the Jews alone had neither sacrificed nor suffered in the war, but only profited from it. As this was written, an American professor has written a book asserting that the Holocaust never happened, while other Nazis are preparing to march in Skokie [in Illinois, USA], in an assault on Jewish survivors. Like the old Nazis, the new Nazis say two things at once. The Holocaust never happened; and it is necessary to finish the job.

In the early 1960s a trailblazing, controversial and deeply disturbing series of experiments was conducted by the American psychologist, Stanley Milgram. He wanted to investigate patterns of obedience among 'ordinary' people in an attempt to understand, among other things, why so many Germans appeared to have obeyed orders unquestioningly — even when outrageous and immoral acts were asked of them. Milgram's results support the view that, even in our own 'normal' societies, we are very easily conditioned to respond positively to commands or requests from figures we think possess 'authority', even though we might know that such acts are wrong.

The following piece by Stanley Milgram comes from TV Guide (US), 21 August 1976.

Sometimes an event occurs during our lifetime that leaves an impression that is both indelible and puzzling. For me that event was the widespread participation of the German people in a system of death camps that destroyed millions of innocent men, women and children. The hapless victims were shot, gassed and burned in ovens.

These deeds were carried out by a people who were as civilized as any people in the world. How was it possible for them to act so cruelly? Did their behaviour reveal a potential that is present in all of us? As a social psychologist whose job is to look into the why and how of human behaviour, I decided to examine the response of ordinary people to immoral orders.

In order to explore behaviour, social psychologists often rely on an important tool: the experiment. Although experiments in chemistry and physics often involve shiny equipment, flasks and electronic gear, an experiment in social psychology is far more the dramaturgy of a theatre. The experimenter carefully constructs a scenario to focus on certain aspects of human behaviour, a scenario in which the end is unknown and is completed by the experimental subject. The psychologist tries to create circumstances that will allow him to look at the behaviour very carefully, note what he observed, and study its causes.

The experiment I set up was relatively simple: a person comes into the laboratory and, in the context of a learning experiment, he is told to give increasingly severe
electric shocks to another person (who, unknown to the subject, is a confederate and does not actually receive the shocks). This arrangement gave me a chance to see how far people would go before they refused to follow the experimenter’s orders. But a fuller scenario is needed to grasp the flavour of the experiment.

Imagine you had answered an advertisement to take part in a study of learning and are arriving at the university at the time agreed upon. First, you are greeted by a man in grey technician’s cost; he introduces you to a second volunteer and says you are both about to take part in a scientific experiment. He says it is to test whether the use of punishment improves the ability to learn.

You draw lots to see who is to be the teacher, and the other fellow the learner. Then you see the learner strapped into a chair and electrodes placed on his wrist. You are told that, when the learner makes a mistake in the question, his punishment will be an electric shock.

As teacher, you are seated in front of an impressive-looking instrument, a shock generator. Its essential feature is a line of switches that range from 15 volts to 450 volts, and a set of written labels that goes from slight shock to moderate shock, strong shock, very strong shock, and so on through XXX — danger, severe shock.

Your job, the experimenter explains to you, is to teach the learner a simple word-pair test. You read a list of words to him, such as blue day, nice girl, fat neck, etc., and he has to indicate by means of an answer box which words were originally paired together. If he gets a correct answer, you move on to the next pair. But if he makes a mistake, you are instructed to give him an electric shock starting with 15 volts. And you are told to increase the shock one step each time he makes an error. In the course of the experiment, the ‘victim’ emits cries of pain and demands to be set free, but the experimenter orders you to continue. The question is: how far will you proceed on the shock generator before you turn to the experimenter and refuse to go on?

Before carrying out the experiment I wanted to know how people thought they would behave in this situation, and so I asked them to predict their own performance. I posed the question to several groups: psychiatrists, psychologists, and ordinary workers. They all said virtually the same thing: almost no one would go to the end.

But in reality the results were very different. Despite the fact that many subjects experience stress, and protest to the experimenter, a substantial proportion continue to the last shock on the generator. Many subjects obeyed the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seemed to be, and no matter how much the victim pleaded to be let out. This was seen time and again in our studies and has been observed in several universities where the experiment has been repeated.

But there is more to the experiment than this simple demonstration of obedience. Most of our energy went into systematically changing the factors in this situation to see which ones increased obedience and which ones led to greater defiance. We studied the effects of the closeness of the victim, the importance of the sponsoring institution and how the sight of other people obeying or defying an authority affected obedience. All of these factors have a powerful effect on whether the subjects obeyed or defied the malevolent authority. This shows that how a person behaves depends not only on his ‘character’ but also on the precise situational pressures on him.

When the experiments were published, opinion about them was sharply divided. On one hand, the American Association for the Advancement of Science awarded the work its annual socio-psychological prize. At the same time, the experiments attracted fierce criticism, centering mainly on the ethical issues of carrying out the research. The experiments that I had hoped would deepen our understanding of how people yield to authority became themselves the focus of controversy.

But the problem of authority remains. We cannot have society without some structure of authority; and every society must inculcate a habit of obedience in its citizens. Yet those experiments show that many people do not have the resources to resist authority, even when they are directed to act inhumanly against an innocent victim. The experiments pose anew the age-old problem: what is the correct balance between individual initiative and social authority? They illuminate in a concrete way what happens when obedience is un restrained by conscience.

Source: Stanley Milgram in TV Guide (US), 21 August 1976 quoted in The Holocaust Years: Society on Trial (B’nai Brith Anti-Defamation League, 1979)

Jewish powerlessness and choicelessness

The following extract comes from Alexander Donat’s extraordinary memoir, The Holocaust Kingdom. This excerpt describes a Nazi round-up in the Warsaw Ghetto, the mounting terror and impossible psychological conditions confronting Jews. At this early stage, the ghetto victims placed deceptive faith in documents (in this instance the Ausweis or identity card) as a guarantee of exemption from deportation.

I saw a young mother run downstairs into the street to get milk for her baby. Her husband, who worked at the ‘Ostbahn’, had as usual left earlier that morning. She had not bothered to dress, but was in bathrobe and slippers. An empty milk bottle in hand, she was headed for a shop where she knew they sold milk under the counter. She walked into Operation Reinhard. The executioners demanded her Ausweis. ‘Upstairs . . . Ostbahn . . . work certificate. I’ll bring it right away.”
"We've heard that one before. Have you got an Ausweis with you, or haven't you?"

She was dragged protesting to the wagon, scarcely able to realize what was happening. 'But my baby is all alone. Milk...?' she protested. 'My Ausweis is upstairs.' Then, for the first time, she really looked at the men who were holding her and saw where she was being dragged to: the gaping entrance at the back of a high boarded wagon with victims already jammed into it. With all her young mother's strength, she wrenched herself free, and then two, and four policemen fell on her, hitting her, smashing her to the ground, picking her up again, and tossing her into the wagon like a sack. I can still hear her screaming in a half-crazed voice somewhere between a sob of utter human despair and the howl of an animal.

Another young woman I knew, after much trouble, finally persuaded a friend of her husband's, a man who managed a shop, to register her with his firm so that she could have an Ausweis. 'I'm doing it for you because you're Leon's wife,' the man told her, but it cost her every penny of what remained of the possessions she and her husband had owned when he had left in September 1939. 'You know I'm not taking this for myself. You understand, don't you? It's because of the others...'. Then he explained to her how the very next day she must move to the shop area and bring her eight-year-old boy with her. There she would be safe. She needn't worry about having no money or about leaving her apartment; she must bring only the absolute necessities with her, no more than the apartment house janitor's wheelbarrow could carry in one trip; but everything would be all right.

And, indeed, she was reassured. Calmly, she went about doing what she had to do, fighting for the life of her child. Her husband, she knew, would be proud of how well she had managed. Holding her little boy's hand, she told him, 'Now, you mustn't be afraid. Mother is looking out for you.' As she was turning the corner into the street where they lived, the little boy ran ahead, as children do. He skipped around the corner before she got to it. Why had she let him do it? How could she have let her sense of danger relax even for an instant? The street seemed so calm. When she heard him scream, 'Mama! Mama!' she sped around the corner and had just time enough to see a little body with a familiar striped sweater disappearing among the mass of other bodies in the wagon surrounded by police. She thanked God that she was in time to explain, that she had an Ausweis.

'But Madam,' the police said, 'how can we be sure that this is your child?'

She had not, it seems, quite understood. No more than any of us did at first. And when she finally did understand, she was beaten brutally 'for resisting the authorities,' but not a sound, not a sob escaped her. The policeman showed that they were not, after all, completely heartless. By surrendering her Ausweis to them – a commodity more valuable than gold at that point – she was permitted to get into the wagon, too, to accompany her son to the Umschlagplatz, and what lay beyond.

As the wagon began to move away, anyone within earshot could hear the voice of an old woman coming from beyond the boards of the van, repeating monotonously: 'Tell Zalme Katz his mother was taken away... Tell Zalme Katz his mother was taken away.'


The moral responsibility of 'ordinary' Germans

One of the most perplexing questions in one's study of the Holocaust concerns that of the German people's knowledge about, and apparent indifference towards, the persecution of the Jews in their midst. However, questions concerning the 'responsibility' of ordinary citizens whose governments commit terrible deeds in their name are extremely complex and debatable. To pass judgement on the moral conduct of others is often highly delicate, personal and prejudiced – all the more so when that behaviour takes place in a society and a context which are radically different from our own. """"Onus"""" or """"radically different""""? The following text is an experimental exercise to provide students with the opportunity to explore some of the most demanding moral questions raised by a study of the Holocaust. It comprises the transcript of 'trials' of two German defendants. Both of the characters are invented, but carefully drawn to represent the attitudes of sizeable numbers of real Germans during the Nazi era. What is being evaluated here is not so much their behaviour as the values and opinions that underlie their actions or, as is more appropriate in this instance, their inaction. These trials did not actually take place, nor, indeed, could they have taken place, for no one is put on trial for their moral attitudes. However, the significance of ordinary people's values in determining the outcome of the Holocaust – and, indeed, of many important historical events – should not be underestimated.

Recommendations for tutor

1. Each trial should be read dramatically, with one member of the class reading the prosecutor's questions, another the defendant's replies.
2. After each trial the class should silently read through the extra pieces
State of Israel in 1948. The text of the declaration, taken from the letter, is as follows:

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done that may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in other countries.

[Arthur James Balfour, British Foreign Secretary]

4 Adolf Hitler: A Letter on the Jewish Question

This is the earliest recorded expression of Hitler’s views on any subject. While it may appear significant that this letter is preoccupied with the Jewish question, it should be borne in mind that it was written expressly in response to a request by Adolf Gemlich, his military superior, who wished to know the place of the Jewish question within the German army’s anti-revolutionary propaganda (Hitler was at that time employed as a secret agent of the Press and Propaganda Office of the political department of the Wehrmacht).

Precisely what Hitler meant at this early stage (1919) by the words, ‘complete removal of the Jews’ is impossible to state with certainty. The German he used – die Entfernung der Juden überhaupt – is no more specific than its English equivalent. What is clear, however, is his prophetic commitment to a two-staged assault on the Jews of Germany, starting with a systematic ‘legal’ campaign.

Antisemitism as a political movement should not and cannot be determined by emotional factors, but rather by a realisation of the facts. And these facts are:

First, Jewry is clearly a racial and not a religious group. . . All that which is foreign a source of higher life — be it religion, socialism or democracy — is for the Jew merely a means to an end, namely, the satisfaction of his lust for power and money.

His actions will result in a racial tuberculosis of peoples.

Hence it follows: antisemitism based on purely emotional grounds will find its ultimate expression in the form of pogroms (which are capricious and thus not truly effective). Rational antisemitism, however, must pursue a systematic, legal campaign against the Jews, by the revocation of the special privileges they enjoy in contrast to the other foreigners living among us. But the final objective must be the complete removal of the Jews.

The following document is the first complete and coherent statement of aims and objectives of the infant Nazi Party. This programme would later form an important part of the basis of the Party’s successful appeal to the German electorate.

The Programme of the German Workers’ Party is a programme for our time. The leadership rejects the establishment of new aims after those set out in the programme have been achieved, for the sole purpose of making it possible for the Party to continue to exist as the result of the artificially stimulated dissatisfaction of the masses.

1. We demand the unifying of all Germans within one Greater Germany, on the basis of the right to self-determination of nations.

2. We demand equal rights for the German people with respect to other nations, and the annulment of the peace treaty of Versailles and St. Germain.

3. We demand land and soil to feed our People and settle our excess population.

4. Only Nationals can be Citizens of the State. Only persons of German blood can be Nationals, regardless of religious affiliation. No Jew can therefore be a German National.

5. Any person who is not a Citizen will be able to live in Germany only as a guest and must be subject to legislation for Aliens.

6. Only a Citizen is entitled to decide the leadership and laws of the State. We therefore demand that only Citizens may hold public office, regardless of whether it is a national, state or local office.

We oppose the corrupting parliamentary custom of making party considerations, and not character and ability, the criterion for appointments to official positions.

7. We demand that the State make it its duty to provide opportunities of employment first of all for its own Citizens. If it is not possible to maintain the entire

population of the State, then foreign nationals (non-citizens) are to be expelled from the Reich.

8. Any further immigration of non-Germans is to be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after August 2, 1914, be forced to leave the Reich without delay.

9. All German citizens must have equal rights and duties.

10. It must be the first duty of every Citizen to carry out intellectual or physical work. Individual activity must not be harmful to the public interest and must be pursued within the framework of the community and for the general good.

We therefore demand:

11. The abolition of all income obtained without labour or effort.

**Breaking the servitude of interest**

12. In view of the tremendous sacrifices in property and blood demanded of the Nation by every war, personal gain from the war must be termed a crime against the Nation. We therefore demand the total confiscation of all war profits.

13. We demand the nationalization of all enterprises (already) converted into corporations (trusts).

14. We demand profit-sharing in large enterprises.

15. We demand the large-scale development of age-old pension schemes.

16. We demand the creation and maintenance of a sound middle class: the immediate communalization of the large department stores, which are to be leased at low rates to small tradesmen. We demand the most careful consideration for the owners of small businesses in orders placed by national, state or community authorities.

17. We demand land reform in accordance with our national needs and a law for expropriation without compensation of land for public purposes. Abolition of ground rent and prevention of all speculation in land.

18. We demand ruthless battle against those who harm the common good by their activities. Persons committing base crimes against the People, usurers, profiteers, etc., are to be punished by death without regard to religion or race.

19. We demand the replacement of Roman Law, which serves a materialistic World Order, by German Law.

20. In order to make higher education — and thereby entry into leading positions — available to every able and industrious German, the State must provide a thorough restructuring of our entire public educational system. The courses of study at all educational institutions are to be adjusted to meet the requirements of practical life. Understanding of the concept of the State must be achieved through the schools (teaching of civics) at the earliest age at which it can be grasped. We demand the education at the public expense of specially gifted children of poor parents, without regard to the latter's position or occupation.

21. The State must raise the level of national health by means of mother-and-child care, the banning of juvenile labour, achievement of physical fitness through legislation for compulsory gymnastics and sports, and maximum support for all organizations providing physical training for young people.

22. We demand the abolition of hireling troops and the creation of a national army.

23. We demand laws to fight against deliberate political lies and their dissemination by the press. In order to make it possible to create a German press, we demand:

(a) all editors and editorial employees of newspapers appearing in the German language must be German by race;

(b) non-German newspapers require express permission from the State for their publication. They may not be printed in the German language;

(c) any financial participation in a German newspaper or influence on such a paper is to be forbidden by law to non-Germans and the penalty for any breach of this law will be the closing of the newspaper in question, as well as the immediate expulsion from the Reich of the non-Germans involved.

Newspapers which violate the public interest are to be banned. We demand laws against trends in art and literature which have a destructive effect on our national life, and the suppression of performances that offend against the above requirements.

24. We demand freedom for all religious denominations, provided they do not endanger the existence of the State or offend the concepts of decency and morality of the Germanic race. The Party as such stands for positive Christianity, without associating itself with any particular denomination. It fights against the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and around us, and is convinced that a permanent revival of our Nation can be achieved only from within, on the basis of:

**Public interest before private interest**

25. To carry out all the above we demand: the creation of a strong central authority in the Reich. Unquestioned authority by the political central Parliament over the entire Reich and over its organizations in general. The establishment of trade and professional organizations to enforce the Reich basic laws in the individual states.
The Party leadership promises to take an uncompromising stand, at the cost of their own lives if need be, on the enforcement of the above points.

Munich, February 24, 1920


6 The Nuremberg Laws

On 15 September 1935, at its annual Party Congress at Nuremberg, the Nazi Government passed two momentous decrees as part of an overall legal assault upon the Jews of Germany.

The first law stripped all Jews of their citizenship, reversing at a stroke the entire process of Jewish emancipation, which the Jews of Germany had struggled to achieve since the French Revolution of 1789 (emancipation had eventually been granted with the unification of Germany in 1871).

The second law outlawed marriage and sexual relations between Jews and those of ‘German or related blood’. An implementing decree of 14 November 1935 defined more precisely the terms ‘Jew’, ‘Aryan’ and ‘Mischling’ (one of mixed parentage). Christians whose parents or grandparents were Jewish could now be considered as full Jews for all purposes. The Nuremberg Laws effectively institutionalized Nazi racism and served as the basis for many further anti-Jewish regulations and pronouncements.

What follows is an excerpt from the two Nuremberg Laws and the Implementing Decree.

**Reich Citizenship Laws**

**15 September, 1935**

**Paragraph 2**

1) A Reich citizen is a subject of the State who is of German or related blood, who proves by his conduct that he is willing and fit faithfully to serve the German people and Reich.

2) Reich citizenship is acquired through the granting of a Reich Citizenship Certificate.

3) The Reich citizen is the sole bearer of full political rights in accordance with the Law.

**Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour**

**15 September, 1935**

Moved by the understanding that purity of the German Blood is the essential condition for the continued existence of the German people, and inspired by the inflexible determination to ensure the existence of the German nation for all time, the Reichstag has unanimously adopted the following Law, which is promulgated herewith:

**Paragraph 1**

1) Marriages between Jews and subjects of the State of German or related blood are forbidden. Marriages nonetheless concluded are invalid, even if concluded abroad to circumvent this law.

2) Annulment proceedings can be initiated only by the State Prosecutor.

**Paragraph 2**

Extra-marital sexual relations between Jews and subjects of the State of German or related blood are forbidden.

**Paragraph 3**

Jews may not employ in their households female subjects of the State of German or related blood who are under 45 years of age.

**Paragraph 4**

1) Jews are forbidden to fly the Reich or National flag or to display the Reich colours.

2) They are, on the other hand, permitted to display the Jewish colours. The exercise of this right is protected by the State.

**Paragraph 5**

1) Any person who violates the prohibition under Paragraph 1 will be punished by a prison sentence with hard labour.

2) A male who violates the prohibition under Paragraph 2 will be punished with a prison sentence with or without hard labour.

3) Any person violating the provisions under Paragraphs 3 or 4 will be punished with a prison sentence of up to one year and a fine, or with one or the other of these penalties.
First [Implementing] Decree to the Reich Citizenship Law
14 November, 1935

Paragraph 4

1) A Jew cannot be a Reich citizen. He has no voting rights in political matters; he cannot occupy a public office.

2) Jewish officials will retire as of 31 December, 1935...

Paragraph 5

1) A Jew is a person descended from at least three Jewish grandparents who are full Jews by race.

2) A subject of the State of mixed descent (Mischling) who is descended from two full Jewish grandparents is also considered a Jew if: (a) he belonged to the Jewish religious community at the time this law was issued or joined the community later; (b) he was married to a Jew at the time the law was issued, or if he married a Jew subsequently; (c) he is the offspring of a marriage with a Jew, which was contracted after the law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour went into effect; or (d) he is the offspring of extra-marital intercourse with a Jew and will be born out of wedlock after 31 July, 1936.


7 An eyewitness response to Kristallnacht

On the night of 9-10 November 1938, in a clearly orchestrated campaign throughout the length and breadth of Germany, gangs of SA thugs, other party members and hooligans roamed the streets in an orgy of violence. The operation took the form of the destruction or burning of synagogues, the raucasting of Jewish shops and warehouses and the terrorization, beating up and murder of Jewish individuals. According to the Nazis' own reports, 91 Jews were killed, more than 7,000 Jewish-owned shops destroyed and approximately 300 synagogues razed to the ground. The Nazis were apparently impressed by all the broken glass from the synagogue windows and named this violent night 'Kristallnacht' (the Night of Shattered Glass).

The reaction abroad was predictably outraged. And even among ordinary Germans, the general response was far from supportive of, and at worst indifferent towards, their own government's measures at that time. From then on, concerted physical attacks against Jews—including, after 1941, mass systematic extermination—would take place outside German soil.

The American consul in Leipzig described the event and the public reaction to it in these words:

The shattering of shop windows, looting of stores and dwellings of Jews... was hailed subsequently in the Nazi press as a 'spontaneous wave of righteous indignation throughout Germany'... So far as a high percentage of the German populace is concerned, a state of popular indignation that would lead to such excesses can be considered as non-existent. On the contrary, in viewing the ruins and attendant measures employed, all of the local crowds observed were obviously
benumbed over what had happened and aghast over the unprecedented fury of Nazi acts that had been or were taking place with bewildering rapidity ...

At 3 a.m. on 10 November 1938 was unleashed a barrage of Nazi ferocity as had had no equal hitherto in Germany, or very likely anywhere else in the world since savagery began. Jewish buildings were smashed into and contents demolished or looted. In one of the Jewish sections an eighteen-year-old boy was hurled from a three-storey window to land with both legs broken on a street littered with burning beds and other household furniture, and effects from his family's and other apartments ... it is reported ... that among domestic effects thrown out of a Jewish building, a small dog descended four flights on to a cluttered street with a broken spine.

Three synagogues in Leipzig were fired simultaneously by incendiary bombs and all sacred objects and records desecrated or destroyed, in most cases hurled through the windows and burned in the streets. No attempts whatsoever were made to quench the fires, the activity of the fire brigade being confined to playing water on adjoining buildings ...

Tactics which closely approached the ghoulish took place at the Jewish cemetery where the temple was fired together with a building occupied by caretakers, tombstones uprooted and graves violated. Eyewitnesses considered reliable the report that ten corpses were left unburied at this cemetery for a whole week because all gravediggers and cemetery attendants had been arrested ...

Having demolished dwellings and hurled most of the movable effects onto the streets, the insatiably sadistic perpetrators threw many of the trembling inmates into a small stream that flows through the Zoological Park, commanding horrified spectators to spit at them, defile them with mud and jeer at their plight. The latter incident has been repeatedly corroborated by German witnesses who were nauseated in telling the tale ... These tactics were carried out the entire morning of 10 November without police intervention and they were applied to men, women and children.


German Foreign Ministry memorandum on ‘The Jewish Question’, 25 January 1939

How the Nazis themselves weighed up their Jewish policy and its central significance in the drama of 1938 can be assessed in this revealing extract from a German Foreign Ministry memorandum on ‘The Jewish Question’, dated 25 January 1939:

Subject: The Jewish Question as a Factor in Foreign Policy in 1938

1. Germany’s Jewish policy as condition and consequence of foreign policy decisions in 1938.
2. The aim of German Jewish policy: emigration.
4. The Jewish émigré as the best propaganda for Germany’s Jewish policy.

It is probably no coincidence that the fateful year of 1938 brought not only the realization of the concept of a Greater Germany, but at the same time has brought the Jewish Question close to solution. For the Jewish policy was both pre-condition and consequence of the events of 1938. More than the power politics and hostility of the former enemy in the World War it was the penetration of Jewish influence and the corrupting Jewish mentality in politics, economy and culture which paralysed the strength and the will of the German people to rise once more ...

But the need for a radical solution of the Jewish question also resulted from the developments in foreign affairs which added 200,000 persons of the Jewish faith in Austria to the 500,000 living in the old Reich. The influence of the Jews in the Austrian economy made it necessary to take immediate steps to eliminate the Jews from the German economy ...

The campaign launched in reprisal for the assassination of Secretary of Legation von Rath has speeded up this process so greatly that Jewish retail trade — so far with the exception of foreign-owned stores — has vanished completely from our streets. The liquidation of Jewish wholesale and manufacturing enterprises, and of houses and real estate owned by Jews, is gradually progressing so far that within a limited period of time the existence of Jewish property will in Germany be a thing of the past ...

The ultimate aim of Germany’s policy is the emigration of all Jews living in German territory ... The Jew has been eliminated from politics and culture, but until 1938 his powerful economic position in Germany and his tenacious determination to hold out until the return of ‘better times’ remained unbroken ...
4 Roma (Gypsies), 1941–45

Place Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.

Estimated deaths 250,000.

Immediate catalyst Full-blown implementation of Nazi racial ideology following invasion of the Soviet Union.

Context Nazi racial and ideological war of extermination against Jews and accompanying subjugation of ‘untermenschen’ (subhumanity) in occupied Europe during the Second World War.

Background The Roma’s origins are as a distinct ethnic and linguistic group dating back to great migrations from the Indian sub-continent beginning some 1,500 years ago. Present almost everywhere throughout the European continent, possessing strong family and clan ties and with a social and economic culture based on migration, they have become outsiders par excellence. As such, Gypsies, as they are known to settled societies, have been the constant focus of prejudice, legal discrimination and persecution. The Nazis thus inherited a traditional and well-embedded view of Gypsies as an anti-social (or asocial) class, closely associated with criminality. In addition, they were inclined to view Gypsies alongside other ethnic, particularly East European Slavic, peoples as inferiors – ‘untermenschen’ – and classified them accordingly. There was, however, a paradox in this thinking. They distinguished between ‘pure’ Roma who were perceived to be ‘Aryan’ and impure Gypsy ‘non-Ayrans’. Consequently – and amazingly – while some Roma were being butchered at Auschwitz, others were serving in the German army. Indeed Himmler, the Head of the SS, is said personally to have intervened to exempt the perceived ‘Aryan’ variety from the exterminating process.

Nature of genocide While the peculiarities, or possibly confusion, of Nazi attitudes to Roma provided some loopholes for survival not available to Jews, the system of annihilation of Gypsies has close parallels with the ‘Final Solution’ of the Jewish question. German Gypsies were among those used for ‘wunderbehandlung’: special treatment in gassing experiments between January 1940 and August 1941. Gypsies too were rounded up for ‘resettlement’ in all the countries occupied by the Nazis and deported east to ghettos and to labour, concentration and extermination camps, often adjacent to, but separate from, their Jewish inmates. Round-ups, summary executions as well as disease – particularly typhus – all took a massive toll. During the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Gypsies were killed by SS death squads (Einsatzgruppen) when they were caught; they were also murdered elsewhere, particularly by the fascist Ustasi or Nylas groups in Croatia and later in Hungary alongside Serbs, Jews, communists and other ‘undesirables’. They were among the first to be exterminated in the experimental gassing units at Chelmno in early 1942. Most commentators agree that Gypsies sent to the special Gypsy Camp (Zigeunerkasernen) at Auschwitz-Birkenau or other death camps were not destined for total extermination, as was the case with Jews. Nevertheless, thousands of Gypsies died in medical experiments in the camps and thousands more in the gas chambers of Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and elsewhere. In all, it is estimated that nearly a quarter of Roma’s population in Nazi-occupied Europe was annihilated.

World response No action was taken on behalf of Roma during the war, though the indictment of German war criminals at the Nuremberg tribunal in 1946 cited Gypsies, alongside Poles and Jews, as peoples who had been the victims of ‘deliberate and systematic genocide’.

Perpetrators’ defence According to Nazi philosophy, Gypsies, in particular those perceived as ‘non-Aryan’ Gypsies, were a social and racial menace.

Long-term results Unlike the Jewish encounter with Nazism, there is very little documentary or historical material dealing with the Nazis’ onslaught against Europe’s Gypsy population. This is perhaps part of the explanation why no compensation was ever paid by West Germany to Gypsy survivors, as was paid to Jewish survivor-victims. The same failure is true of companies that, under the Nazis, employed slave labour. This lamentable position shows gradual signs of improvement: there have in recent years been specific commemorations and a recognition by the West German government in 1982 that what happened to the Gypsies was indeed a crime of genocide. This has opened up the possibility of legal redress and financial reparation through the West German courts. Demographically, too, the position of European Roma is improving. They continue to be a widespread minority, especially in Eastern Europe, and in some countries have been recognized as a national group. On the other hand, the persistence of anti-Gypsy prejudice is a factor making for continued harassment and discrimination in many European societies.

5 Bengalis, 1971

Place Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan.

Estimated deaths Between 1.25 and 3 million.