

Hitler and the Jews

The Genesis of the Holocaust

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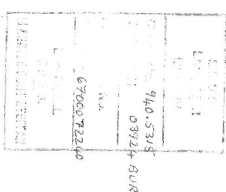
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To Saul Friedländer



leaving the way clear to pursue meanwhile another policy. Like the functionalists, on the other hand, I maintain that a consideration of circumstances was essential to the fulfilment of this intention, for its translation into action: here the perception of the failure of the Russian campaign and of its strategic consequences played a decisive part.

In the following pages, I restrict the perspective to what seems necessary to my purpose. The focus is on high-ranking Nazi officials, primarily on Hitler himself, on his theories and intentions, and also on his evaluation of the strategic situation. Many aspects of the picture have been left in shadow, or even in darkness: the historical roots of anti-Semitism, the attitudes of the German elite, and the short-sighted policy of the Western powers. More crucially, the victims themselves will virtually be absent, except as the objects of an unprecedented persecution. The reader will bear in mind that these objects were human beings, exposed to blows and humiliations, to the progressive deprivation of their property, and sometimes of their dignity, until their departure, one day, for the death factories.

1

Hitler's Anti-Semitism

Hitler occupied a key position in the Third Reich and was a central figure in the development of German history in the twentieth century. On these two points all historians agree, regardless of whatever disagreements they may have about the actual part he played. A familiarity with his ideology, in particular with his anti-Semitism, is therefore essential. What position did the Jews occupy in it, and to what fate did it doom them? That Hitler was capable of exterminating them he amply demonstrated. But we can only illuminate the origins and motives of his attitude by starting with the vision of the world that guided him.

The essential factor, which must be stressed at the outset, is the astonishing consistency and continuity of that world vision, once it was fully formed. As far back as the early 1920s, when Hitler was just a Bavarian agitator, its familiar leitmotifs were already blaring forth: racism and anti-Semitism, the ideal of the centralized national community, the leader principle, the unconditional condemnation of democracy, of the German revolution, and of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1923 another theme was added, that of the conquest of Lebensraum to the East, rounded out a little later by a global concept of foreign policy.

From then on, everything that has survived of Hitler's public and private statements, up to his testament of April 1945, attests to the permanence of a vision tirelessly reiterated and proclaimed. Certain themes, it is true, were modulated over the years. The conquest of Lebensraum and the concept of anti-Semitism, very much present in the 1920s, faded into the background at the end of the decade, especially from 1930 to 1932, when Hitler was striving to rally as much public support as possible to his agenda by appealing to the masses. On the other hand, his theories on the fate of future conquered peoples—expulsion or sterilization of entire

populations, the reduction of millions of persons to illiterate slavery would be reserved for his entourage and for the party's high command.

At the basis of the Hitlerian world vision was the 'eternal principle of natural selection', a theory in which the stronger race was supposed to assert, and impose its will on the weaker. For Hitler, humankind was composed of 'races as separate from one another as species in the animal kingdom. Within these races was a hierarchy determined by bloodedness assured a race's continued strength. Through ignorance of these 'eternal lessons of nature', through people had fallen into decadence, a decadence that began with the creation of the Bismarckian empire and whose symptoms, in addition to the loss of national values to debilitating ideologies such as liberalism, democracy, and Marxism, were the spread of venereal and hereditary diseases and, finally, crossbreeding with inferior races.

To snatch the German race from the jaws of decadence, it was necessary to purify it and to have it propagate. From the early 1920s Hitler had talked of outlawing marriages between Germans and foreigners, particularly blacks and Jews. But the fight against crossbreeding would require more radical forms of cleansing. As he told an American magazine reporter in 1923, Germany needed drastic remedies, perhaps even amputations: 'Syphilis, alcoholics, and criminals must be isolated and sterilized. A single nation should inspire the action: The preservation of the unfortunate is more important than the preservation of these unfortunate'.³

Hitler repeated these goals in *Mein Kampf*, writing of 'making the most ugly and most treacher decisions'. It would come, 'if necessary, to the strict isolation of incurables, a barbaric measure for those unfortunate enough to be afflicted, but a blessing for those who would otherwise be a burden to the nation'. The racist state of the future would forbid procreation defects, and would 'physically remove from hereditary capacity'.⁴ He would, on the other hand, encourage marriage and a high birth-rate by fighting abortion and by giving the large family to a place of honour. He would do everything, finally, 'to realize that supreme good: a race created according to the rules of eugenics'.⁵

This rebuilding of the race was not an end in itself but a means to an end: the power and glory of the German people. After restoring political unity to the nation, and undertaking the work of racial purification, it would then be possible to embark on the conquest of the space necessary for the nation's welfare. The German people, according to Hitler, had a right to expansion because of the discrepancy between the numerical size of its population and the extent of its land – a specious argument since the future regime would seek to increase that population by every available means. Thus, quite openly, if not would dominate Europe, Hitler wrote on the last page of his book 'a state which in a time of racial contamination justifiably watches over the best elements of its own race, must one day become master of the earth'.⁶

The Jews could not be absent from this racist theory. In Hitler's eyes, they were a parasite race which exploited the labour of the people among whom they settled; a race destructive by nature, incapable of establishing its own state; a race whose every activity was geared to the acquisition of world domination. For, as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that fake tsarist tract in which Hitler blindly believed, was supposed to prove, the Jews were bound together by a plot to dominate the world, and would stoop to anything to reach their goal. The ideas of the Enlightenment, democracy, pacifism, anything served that weakened the national will of the people off whom they lived. But their most effective tools were financial capital and Marxist agitation. By means of the first, they internationalized economies and brought them under their control. By means of the second, they divided people against each other and doomed them to civil wars that destroyed their powers of resistance. In one way or another, they were the enemies of any real national independence.

Hitler's anti-Semitism was a fantastic concept that completely ignored the diversity of the Jewish diaspora and the conflicting movements that accompanied it, and yet a coherent fantasy, inspired as it was by an obsession such for the ultimate culprit, some evil, paid shed light on the explain the workings of the universe and shed light on the calamities of the times. But hardly as original fantasy, and hardly personal. Hitler was the direct heir of theories that

had been circulating through Europe for several decades. But while he had patched his racist doctrine together with borrowed concepts, he had also integrated it into a world vision that singularly energized it and remodeled certain of its aspects. Seen in the framework of his racism, the Jewish problem was a problem among others, a problem whose solution would contribute to restoring and strengthening the nation. In reality, however, Jews were not in the same category as mental defectives; they were at the centre of Hitler's vision of the world. To understand the specificity of his anti-Semitism, we must consider the experience of the First World War and of Germany's defeat.

It was this defeat that gave Hitler's undertaking its fundamental impetus. In *Mein Kampf* he recorded the enthusiasm with which he greeted the outbreak of war in August 1914. In total contrast was the extreme rage that seized him at the time of the surrender, a surrender which seemed to him the product of betrayal from the rear. A clearly traumatic experience throughout his career he would return to the events of November 1918 as a central reference point, always evoking them with an emotionally charged intensity. He dated his entry into politics back to the 'frightful days' of the German revolution. They were what launched him on the search for the causes of the German collapse, and made him see the necessity of a political movement whose goal would be to triumph over the defeat.⁷ They served as a frame of reference for future action, and created enduring mental attitudes.

It is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which Hitler was marked by the war and the defeat. From them came his conviction that the workers must be won back to the nation, and that the ruling classes were bankrupt. From them he also derived the strategic principles that would later guide him. In his opinion the German Empire's cardinal mistake was to have united the other European powers against it when its only ally was an Austro-Hungary on the verge of collapse. Weichsen would have dictated winning over England by secret dealings, and not dragging it into the war, thereby giving priority at least temporarily to continental Europe, and to colonial expansion. In the future, everything must be done to avert the formation of such a coalition. The 'New Germany' would need allies, which would be Italy and Great Britain.

To win the first, as early as the 1920s Hitler declared himself ready to give up the southern Tyrol he had offered on many occasions his people. Forming an alliance with the second, evidently, he failed to appreciate the seriousness of British opposition to any continental hegemony. Once in power, he persisted in seeking to win London over to his way of thinking, at first by negotiation, later by force.

But the acquisition of allies was only a means: it was supposed to provide the freedom of action necessary for advancing, by localized wars, towards the larger objective. The first victim would be France, Germany's eternal enemy. Once its back was secure, the Reich would embark on the conquest of the vast territories to the East: there it would find the means of feeding its population and establishing its position as a world power. Localized blitzkriegs were the ideal strategy, one that took into account the limitations of the German economy and avoided overburdening the population; here again the lesson of 1918 had been learned. Conversely, everything must be done to prevent a war on two fronts which, Hitler was deeply persuaded, would once again prove fatal to Germany.

Furthermore, from his vision of the Great War and the defeat Hitler drew lifelong convictions. The first followed from his absolute belief that the war was lost because of the weakness of the imperial government, a victim of unnecessary if not criminal humanitarian concerns. He would have settled his score with Marxian theories by a break of hostilities by turning the previous favour of the workers to his advantage. He would have severely punished saboteurs of the war effort and inflicted the harshest penalties on the sinister gangs of 'criminals', 'rump', and 'deserters' who had sought to bring about the German defeat in November 1918. Finally, he would have ruthlessly suppressed the revolution itself, even if it meant executing thousands of people.⁸

From which he concluded:

before conquering the enemies without, one must have exterminated the enemy within, or else, woe to the people whose efforts are not crowned by success. The revolution which has harboured enemy elements in its breast, its powers of resistance will be broken, and the enemy without will carry the day.⁹

He drew another conclusion from the experience of 1918. He was convinced that the armistice had been a major mistake, that the war could have been won if a man determined to fight to the end had been at the head of the country, a man capable of galvanizing and stiffening the nation's morale. Even if it was hopeless, the fight should have been carried on. Victory or death was a motto he cherished. After 1939, as we shall see, he repeated *ad nauseam* that a surrender would not happen again.

The defeat also had a traumatizing effect on Hitler's anti-Semitism, endowing it with extraordinary violence and even giving it to a central position. Doubtless it was a factor in Hitler's decision to launch the war, but he was in Vienna before the first Jewish issue. But we can suppose that his was a fanatical anti-Semitism.¹⁰ But we can suppose that his was a still largely intellectual anti-Semitism, albeit one based on a considerable foundation of resentments. Significantly, it is in the passage in his book where he relates his reaction to the events of November 1918 that he uses the word 'Jater': it was then that 'Jate was born in me, hate for the perpetrators of these events'. This passage was followed a few lines later by this conclusion: 'With the Jew, there can be no negotiation, but only the decision: all or nothing! As for me, I have decided to go into politics.'¹¹ Very probably, it was at that moment that Hitler's anti-Semitism became an existential obsession, charged with the hate that would henceforth characterize it. It was at that moment also that it assumed a central position in his world vision, providing him with an explanation for the defeat.

Hitler viewed the defeat as the culmination of a war waged pitilessly by the Jews, an internal as well as an external war. Jews living abroad had fomented hatred of Germany and driven the whole world into the conflict. Meanwhile, inside Germany, their brothers had seized control of the economy and incited the workers to revolution, when the time came, they were able to stab Germany in the back. They were therefore responsible for the defeat and the slavery imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The struggle against them would end only in total victory for one side or the other.

Hitler's logical task, on the Jews occupied a major position in Hitler's world vision, was to develop a policy against the enemies of the New Germany, was the USSR, Germany in Russia, 'the Jew' had reigned supreme since he seized power under the cloak of communism and exterminated the

old ruling classes of German origin. Since he was incapable of constructive work, the regime he dominated was ripe for collapse'¹² – an underestimation Hitler would entertain until 1941. In France, a mutual understanding reigned between the national elite and the Jews, of one mind in their implacable hostility towards Germany and in their determination to reduce her to slavery. On the other hand, the situation in the countries Hitler wanted as allies was better, though by no means assured. In Italy, Mussolini was thought to be firmly enough in the saddle to be able to protect the true interests of his country from the press of foreign powers. The situation was less in France, a troubled when, as in the United States, Jewish influence was considered strong from the beginning. Hitler believed that the outcome of his efforts to win Britain as an ally would depend on the battle in London between the national and Jewish forces; he had an explanation ready for every outcome.

A global struggle was thus engaged between the force of national renewal, with Hitler at its head, and an 'international Jewry' bent on the destruction of Germany. Whence the presence in Hitler's anti-Semitism of a quasi-internationalist vein that expressed itself upon occasion through the slogan: 'Anti-Semites of the world, unite!'¹³ Whence also the existence of a messianic vein: Hitler presented himself as the man who had been given the task of ridding the earth of the Jewish peril.¹⁴ Against this global adversary he would put up an almost religious fight, a 'titanic struggle' that would culminate in sending back to hell the who mounts an assault on heaven.¹⁵

The essential idea, here as in all Hitler's arguments, ran thus: the Jew was rising up against the world order; he was the rebel and the aggressor; it was he who sought to destroy Germany and even to exterminate her population. Against this monstrous menace Hitler merely reacted: as he loved to point out, his struggle was purely defensive, imposed on him by the threat of extinction the Jews held over the German people. This easily recognizable characteristic is central to the nationalism of the extreme right: the perception of oneself and one's conduct as responses to a diabolical plot against the nation, the perception of oneself as the victim of the Jew. It is a perception we would be wrong to underestimate: in Hitler's eyes, mass defence against the Jews would always be measures of self-defence against a prevention justified by a mortal danger. It is also a concept that was an integral part

of his mind-set. As the philologist Klemperer noted, Hitler's statements consistently reveal the interaction of a Caesarean megalomania with a persecution complex.¹⁷

Anti-Semitism occupied thus an exceptional place in Hitler's racism. Doctrinally, the Jewish problem represented one aspect of the racial purification programme he intended to carry out in Germany as soon as he had seized power; it was therefore susceptible to a cold, rational solution. On the other hand, it lay at the heart of his plan for conquest and domination. In the interpretation he gave of the trauma of the defeat, the Jew had been elevated to the rank of ultimate adversary; he had become fundamentally linked to the fate of Hitler's plan, to its success or failure. Therefore, the Jewish problem was destined to dog Hitler's footsteps until the end of his crusade, and the Jews to suffer its dire consequences.

But what fate did Hitler hold in store for the Jews? Had he decided in principle on their extermination? Among his avowed goals, no clue is to be found. In 1919 he proclaimed the necessity for an anti-Semitism of reason, based on the recognition of the Jewish problem as a racial problem, in preference to an anti-Semitism of sentiment which could only lead to pogroms. He proposed combating the Jews with legal and systematic measures which would classify them and segregation applicable to foreigners, the ultimate goal being their deportation from the country.¹⁸ The February 1920 programme of the Nazi party provided for legislation along the same lines, without calling for the expulsion of all Jews. Citizenship would be reserved for Germans by race; Jews would be excluded from public service and from the press, but only those who had emigrated to Germany after 2 August 1914 would be expelled. Point 7, however, specified that it was the duty of the state to proceed 'in case of need' with the expulsion of all foreigners.

In the propaganda campaign waged by Hitler during the following years we find these same demands, with the same variations. Sometimes it was only a question of deporting Jews who had recently come to Europe from the East (the *Ostjuden*) and of banning all further immigration.¹⁹ More frequently, the deportation of all Jews was demanded, habitually under the slogan 'Jews Out'. In December 1928 Hitler once more declared that they would only be tolerated in Germany 'as foreigners'.²⁰ This was the extent of his

liberality: in the best of cases, Jews would have a precarious status, but for how long? If it is difficult to gain a clear and complete picture of his intentions, one can, however, justify saying that he had decided, once in power, to enforce a certain number of measures, Jews would be excluded from public service and from all positions which could influence national life; in due course they would have to disappear from German territory, probably after having been divested of their worldly goods.²¹

Hitler clearly found it difficult to articulate a programme. Although he held forth in *Mein Kampf* about the goals of his foreign policy, detailing its methods and stages, he never said a word about the steps he would take, once in power, concerning the Jews. An explanation can be found in the fact that the Jews occupied too central a place in his thought to be treated as a mere detail. He had already emotionally placed in his vision to be attained the subjects of a programme. A second explanation relates to the nature of the Jewish problem: it was not just a German problem. As he declared in *Mein Kampf*, it was not just a German problem. We have attacked the Jew from Germany; he will still remain our global enemy.²²

There is a tension, if not a contradiction, could arise between the policy of the removal of the Jews, which would solve the problem in Germany, and the policy that called for fighting a global enemy. If the battle waged against the Jews in Germany triggered the hostility of their brothers throughout the world (and of this Hitler was already convinced), it was unthinkable for him not to respond to the challenge: what better response than to use the German Jews as hostages? It was at the end of 1922 that he expressed this idea for the first time. After he assumed power, the Jews would be held as hostages until non-aggression pacts were concluded with foreign countries; in other words, until the international security of the new regime was assured.²³ His behaviour as well as his declarations would show that this concept was deeply rooted in his mind.

The removal of the Jews would, therefore, be weighted against the necessity of keeping them as hostages, at least for a while. In the end, however, it was the first objective that was supposed to be implemented. But Hitler could not settle for it pure and simple; a global solution would have to be found that would override its disadvantages and defuse

the Jewish peril once and for all. The Zionist solution did not have his approval, even though he sometimes said that the Jews belonged in Palestine rather than in Germany. He doubted that the Jews seriously intended to assemble in one state, their objective being, rather, to create a centre that would guarantee them state protection everywhere in the world. What was the answer, then? According to the memoirs of one of his old intimates, Hitler declared in 1931 that the global power of Jewry could only be broken by the deportation of all Jews to a Jewish state.²³ But this would require the co-operation of all the countries in the world, which was not going to happen tomorrow.²⁴ Here we see the emergence of the concept of a Jewish reservation, the concentration of Jews in a territory that would be placed under surveillance. Reduced to being at the planet's mercy, they would no longer endanger it.

Extermination is absent from all this. It is conceivable, however, that such an objective could not be spoken. According to evidence released after the war, Hitler declared in 1922, in the course of a private conversation, that once in power he would hang all the Jews in Germany in the public squares and let them rot.²⁵ No other source confirms these remarks which, in the context in which they were made, seem to have more in common with a death wish than with a program of extermination. We lack elements of direct proof, but the adoption of indirect approaches remains open to us. Hitler's vision of the Jewish reservation, had implications that must be taken into consideration.

Hitler, as we have seen, viewed his war against the Jews as a battle for the salvation of the world, a fight to the death that could only end with the extinction of one of the two adversaries. He also stressed on many occasions that this battle would be violent. Evoking the Jewish design of world domination, he wrote that no nation could 'remove this hand from its throat save by the sword', which would not happen 'without bloodshed'.²⁶ When he talked about the Jews, he usually hurled imprecations and turned readily to the language of destruction; the enemy must be struck down ruthlessly and annihilated.²⁷ He constantly used a vocabulary that dehumanized Jews and implied that they should be physically eliminated: microbes, parasites, leeches, spiders – so much harmful or repulsive vermin where extermination brings relief.

In another sense, there was nothing personal about this language; it belonged to an anti-Semitic tradition which, in fact, was not properly German: in the France of the Dreyfus affair, the same comparison with vermin accompanied quite specific calls for bloodshed.²⁸ And Hitler often used the term 'Jews' in a vague manner, applying it to all his enemies, particularly to Marxists, so that it is not always easy to determine exactly to whom his threats referred: to the Jewish community specifically or to an amalgam of his political adversaries?

It remains true, however, that the figure of the Jewish adversary aroused considerable hatred in him, and that a massacre was permanently etched on his mind to which he could not escape. It nevertheless seems excessive to say, as we have seen, that his anti-Semitic objective was to exterminate the Jews, or even simply equate a murderous potential and a murderous intent.²⁹ To do this, however, would be to block the possibility of understanding a crucial aspect of the problem, for that murderous potential, so present and yet in a way so imprecise as to its target and scope, does seem to border on intent in one very specific context.

We have already stressed the intense hate Hitler breathed into his statements whenever he referred to 1918. It is precisely in these passages evoking the November revolution that he expressed most concretely, and with the greatest emotional force, his desire for a bloody settling of accounts with the Jews. Thus, after having mentioned the enthusiasm of the German workers in the summer of 1914, and their detachment from the Marxist leaders, he wrote:

That would have been the moment to take action against the whole two-faced conspiracy of Jewish corruptors of the people. That is when, unhesitatingly, we should have moved against them, without the slightest regard for whatever cries and lamentations they might have raised . . . While the best of us were dying at the front, at least we should have disposed of the vermin in the rear.³⁰

And further on, still on the subject of the evil influence of the Marxist leaders who (according to him) were all Jews:

If just once, at the beginning or during the course of the war, we had exposed twelve or fifteen thousand of those Hebrew corruptors of the people to the poison gas that hundreds of thousands of our best German workers of every

extraction and empty profession had to endure at the front, the sacrifice of millions of men would not have been in vain. On the contrary, if we had rid ourselves of those twelve or so thousand fiends, we perhaps might have saved the lives of a million good, brave Germans full of promise.³¹

These passages are reproduced regularly as evidence of Hitler's will to exterminate Jews, which seems to me to ask a great deal. As we have said, Hitler had derived from his experience the conviction that in future the nation must be purified before going to war. But in the passages we have just quoted, he sees things from a different perspective, in that he returns to a past war to evoke what, after all, could have been done. Writing after the defeat, he retrospectively attributes a twofold value to the expedient step he wishes had been taken. A propitiatory value, for a step of this kind, expressing a desire to fight to the death, might 'perhaps' have brought victory, thus saving the lives of many German soldiers. A vengeance value, and this is the most striking, the deaths of thousands of Jews, even if they had not changed the outcome of the war, would have been fully justified, in that they would have avenged the Germans fallen at the front. By making such an association, between a long war, which spilled German blood and threatened to end in defeat, and the murder of a certain number of Jews, was Hitler in his rage simply reinterpreting the past, or was he also finding solutions for the future with fixed conclusions drawn from the war and the defeat, we must also see in his statements a determination to apply them if the same situation should arise. This is confirmed in the following assertion, made in 1931, according to a source whose authenticity, admittedly, is open to question:

We have learned a great deal from the last war and in the future we shall reap the benefits. (*Für Hitler suddenly flew into a rage and continued with vehemence*) In a case where our legitimate purpose is not understood and where the armed conflict is once again caused by world Jewry trying to turn back the pages of history . . . then they will be crushed.³²

We could maintain, then – and this hypothesis will be subjected to verification in the following chapters – that in Hitler's attitude toward the Jews a homicidal potential

escalated into a murderous intent, and even into an extermination plan, although we cannot be sure of this, or in one case, the reverse, that Hitler was aware of this. Such a hypothesis would signal the failure of his whole strategy, to be achieved by means of blitzkriegs. It would portend furthermore another triumph for the Jews, who had already been the victors in the Great War. In such an event, he vowed to take radical action against those he believed to be his ultimate adversaries: that action would demonstrate his will to fight to victory or to the death, would make the Jews pay for spilled German blood, and would avenge by anticipation the defeat that another war against a world coalition would probably cost Germany.

Here again we find the tension, if not the outright contradiction, already mentioned. Whether from Germany or from the future Great Reich, the departure of the Jews was imperative: they posed a grave danger to racial purity and to national cohesion. They therefore had to be removed quickly, if possible before the outbreak of another conflict. It possible by finding an international solution like a reservation, which would render them harmless. On the other hand, their presence in the German sphere would guarantee Hitler a means of pressing 'international Jewry' as he faced the challenges of his first days in power, and would also assure that he had an object of vengeance at hand in the event that his global strategy failed. As far as we can tell, neither of these two considerations had priority: they coexisted in his mind, creating a true ambivalence that sprung from his obsessive will to fight against an allegedly worldwide enemy. This ambivalence probably contributed to the difficulty he had in formulating a programme. He had no such trouble with the conquest of Lebensraum, an objective more easily kept at a mental remove. But regarding the Jews, he was reduced to a mass of heterogeneous attitudes and resolutions which could collide when it came to formulating a programme. Lebensraum and the Jewish problem were inseparable, although they bore a changing relationship to one another. Since the conquest of Lebensraum was the primary goal, the fight against the Jewish peril must not be pursued to the point of jeopardizing it: once victory was assured, the Jews would be reduced to helplessness in any case. But if the conquest of Lebensraum failed, the

radical fight against the Jews could become the primary goal, substituting for the first in order to avenge his failure.

The most striking thing is that Hitler seems, from the beginning, to have envisioned his failure and settled on a reaction to it. Even before assuming power, he brooded over the conclusions drawn from his wartime experience: there would not be another revolution; there would not be another surrender; finally, the Jews would pay dearly for any further opposition to the Reich's march to domination. In view of his personality and the fantastic logic of his anti-Semitism, it seems improbable to me that Hitler had in mind an extermination plan that would be put into effect in every instance, including an eventual victory. The success of his undertaking would produce the Jews as a trophy, after all, as powerful as he had imagined. The placement under surveillance in a reservation would suffice; they would be the living proof of his triumph. On the other hand, their ethnic nature would be confirmed in the event of lack of success; he would then react in even more extreme fashion since he would have the sense of an even greater menace, an even more disastrous end to his ambition.

Hitler was not alone in this way of thinking. The idea of treating Jews as hostages, and of extracting reprisals from them that would grow harsher as the situation worsened, seems to have been widespread among Germans of the extreme right after the war, although a systematic study of this subject remains to be done. For men convinced of the existence of a world Jewry, it went without saying that in the future the Jewish population would have to suffer the consequences for any assault on the fatherland, or the men who claimed to personify it. Thus Goebbels threatened on 19 September 1930 to launch a pogrom if an attempt was made on the life of a Nazi leader. On 21 March 1933, shortly after Hitler assumed power, a Leipzig newspaper carried this warning: "If a bullet strikes our beloved leader, all the Jews in Germany will immediately be put up against the wall and the result will be a greater bloodbath than anything the world has ever seen!" Other Nazis spoke, during the same period, of exterminating the German Jews if the French crossed the frontier, or announced, in the most general terms, that if a foreign army dared to tread upon German soil, it would have to march across the corpses of Jews.³⁴

Hitler was no doubt exceptional in the pathological intensity of his anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, in his obsessions and attitudes, he echoed the thinking of a number of men who, like him, had shifted the tactics of war into the field of political action, and had fashioned from the trauma of defeat a fantasy of apocalyptic violence in which the Jews were the targets of choice. We can speculate that, at the dawn of the Third Reich, these men faced the future armed with at least one certainty: another defeat would not occur except at horrible cost to the Jews.