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Understanding the Holocaust

An Introduction

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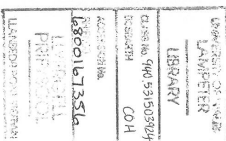
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UNDERSTANDING THE HOLOCAUST

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedent, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalizations. It means that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our age has placed on us – rather denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight.¹

This is the challenge posed by this book. Its aim is to enlighten readers about this most horrifying tragedy of the modern world, and to stimulate them to ponder the questions it raises about human nature and moral responsibility in contemporary society.

Notes

1. Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know*, Boston, 1993, p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

1. The history of anti-Semitism

For thousands of years Jews have been persecuted and murdered: arguably anti-Semitism is humanity's longest hatred. Given such widespread antipathy, the Holocausts should not be seen as a modern aberration, but rather the last link in a long chain of history stretching back to ancient times. The German onslaught against the Jews is a catastrophe that might well have been predicted.

The origin and growth of anti-Jewish hostility

The long history of such Judeophobia begins in the Graeco-Roman world. Living among pagans, both Jews and Judaism were subject to persecution and discrimination. Living in a Hellenistic culture, the typical view was that anything non-Greek was barbaric. Hence the Jewish tradition was viewed with suspicion and contempt. Later when Christianity emerged as a dominant force in the ancient world, Jews came to be regarded as contemptible and demonic. In its advocacy of anti-Jewish attitudes, the Church drew upon Hellenistic ideas.

Continuing this tradition of hostility to Jewry, the early Church believed itself to be the authentic heir to the promises given by God in Scripture. Jesus' messiahship ushered in a new era in which the true Israel would become a light to the nations. Such a vision of the Christian community evoked hostility against Jewry, who were viewed as apostate and unrepentant. Such hatred was fuelled by the Gospel writers who depicted Jesus attacking the leaders of the Jewish nation. The Church taught that what is now required is circumcision of the heart rather than obedience to the law. In

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proclaiming his message. Paul emphasized that the Jewish nation had been rejected by God, and the new covenant had taken the place of the old.

Following New Testament teaching, the Church Fathers evolved an *Adversus Judaeos* tradition which vilified Jewry. According to the writers, the Jewish community in lawless and dissolute. For this reason, all future divine promises apply only to the Church. It is the Church who constitute the elect, rather than the Jewish people. Appealing to Scripture, the Fathers sought to demonstrate that the conflict between the Church and the Synagogue was prefigured in Scripture. Separated from the Christian message of salvation, the Jews were rejected and are subject to God's wrath. Destined to wander in exile, they find no peace on earth.

The tradition of anti-Semitism created by the Fathers of the Church continued into the Middle Ages. During the centuries of the Crusades, Jews were killed throughout Western Europe. During this period a number of charges were levelled at the Jewish nation. Repeatedly Jews were accused of murdering Christian children to incorporate their blood into unleavened bread for Passover; such allegations of ritual murder spread from country to country, and Jews were victimized for supposedly condoning such atrocious deeds. Jews were also accused of blaspheming the Christian faith in their sacred literature, and as a consequence copies of the Talmud were burned. In addition, the Jewish population was accused of bringing about the black plague by poisoning wells.

During this period the stereotype of the demonic Jew became part of Western culture. Repeatedly Jews were accused of possessing attributes of both the Devil and witches. As the personification of evil, they were relegated to a sub-species of the human race. In addition, Jews were perceived as magicians, able to work magic against the Christian community. This belief served as the basis for the charge that Jews desecrated the Host and committed acts of ritual murder. In the wake of these allegations, the masses attacked Jews in their pursuit of the demons, and in this onslaught thousands of innocent victims lost their lives.

In the post-medieval period such attitudes were perpetuated throughout Western Europe. Although the Jewish community was expelled from France in the fourteenth century, negative images of Jews continued to play a role in French culture. Catchisms, lives of Jews and canticles portrayed the Jewish people as tools of Satan.

1. THE HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Further, tracts abounded which denounced the Jews in terms reminiscent of the Middle Ages. In England, Jews were vilified even though the Jewish nation was expelled in 1290. German Jews were also regarded with contempt – such hostility was powerfully expressed in Martin Luther's *Against the Jews and their Lies*. Such publications were followed by a wide range of tracts which denigrated both Judaism and the Jewish people.

Although Spanish Jewry flourished during the Middle Ages, Jews eventually came to be regarded with suspicion and contempt. Measures were taken against the Jewish population, and as a result many Jews embraced the Christian faith to escape attack. Such apostasy, as well as the Christian onslaught on Jewry, led to the decline of the Jewish communities, a trend which was resisted by Jewish leaders. During the fifteenth century the Church initiated a new form of Jewish persecution. The Inquisition was established to purge *conversos* or New Christians – Jewish converts to Christianity as opposed to Old Christians of pure blood – who were suspected of practising Jewish customs. Tribunals were created throughout Spain which applied torture to extract confessions from the guilty. Those who refused to confess were cast into the flames. Finally at the end of the century, an Edict of Expulsion was enacted to rid the country of the Jewish race.

When the Inquisition intensified its efforts to root out Christian heresy in Spain, Marranos (Jewish converts to Christianity) fled to other countries for safety from their Christian persecutors. Many sought refuge in Portugal, where they led a Christian way of life while observing Jewish practices. Following Spanish precedent, the Portuguese Inquisition was established in the next century and sought to discover Marranos. Other Marranos were driven to find homes in other lands. Both Turkey and Salonica constituted Marrano refuges from Christian oppression. Others went to Amwerp, Venice, Antwerp, Hamburg and London. Although in these centres *conversos* returned to Judaism, they nonetheless retained many of their former cultural characteristics. Some Marranos, however, broke away from traditional Judaism, and advanced heterodox religious opinions which unintentionally became the basis of further Christian anti-Semitism in later centuries.

Unlike their co-religionists in Western Europe, Jews in Poland enjoyed considerable tolerance and were granted numerous privi-

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leges. They were not confined to ghettos, nor restricted in their occupations. Under such conditions, the Jewish community created an elaborate form of local and national self-government, and rabbinic scholarship reached great heights. Yet despite such general prosperity, the country was subject to Christian anti-Jewish hostility in the late medieval period, and in the seventeenth century Polish Jewry was massacred by Cossacks under Bogdan Chmielnicki. In the wake of this Christian onslaught, the Hasidic movement encouraged religious pietism, but was severely criticized by the traditional rabbinical establishment. As the community was torn by this conflict, attacks were directed against the Jewish population by Gentiles. Such hostility in Poland was paralleled in Russia. Initially Jews were prevented from settling in the country, and with the annexation of Polish territories to Russia in the nineteenth century, Jews were viewed by Christians with suspicion and contempt and eventually expelled from the villages where they resided.

During the early modern period the commercial interests of the bourgeoisie, coupled with centuries-old prejudice against Jews and Judaism, evoked considerable hostility towards the Jewish population in western countries. In Germany, merchants protested against the infidels living in their midst. Jewish trade, they believed, would destroy the economic life of the country and pollute the Christian population. Similar attitudes were expressed in France where the bourgeoisie resented Jewish settlement despite the fact that the nobility regarded Jews as financially useful. In Great Britain, Jews were also subject to virulent criticism, and attempts to simplify procedures for Jewish naturalization and to authorize Jews to possess land were met with considerable resistance. In the United States, however, Jews gained a broad measure of freedom as the country struggled to achieve its independence from England. Nonetheless, despite many advances made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jewish life did not alter radically from medieval patterns of existence. Stereotyped as foreign and strange, Jews were subject to discrimination and persecution during the early modern period.

Under the banner of the Enlightenment, English free thinkers sought to ameliorate the condition of the Jews. Such attempts, however, were countered by other writers who attacked Jewry on grounds consonant with the spirit of a rationalist and scientific age. In France, Protestants influenced by the Enlightenment attempted to

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reduce charges against the Jewish population. Yet despite such progressive attitudes, they were unable to free themselves from traditional Christian assumptions about Jewish guilt and divine retribution. In addition, many of the major thinkers of the age encouraged Judeophobia. In Germany an attempt was made to present Jews in a more positive light, but here as well the rise of national self-confidence provoked antipathy towards the Jewish populace. Such philosophers as Kant, Fichte and Hegel wrote disparagingly of both Jews and Judaism. In order to escape such hostility, a number of enlightened Jews – primarily in Berlin – dissociated themselves from the Jewish way of life, and others sought to gain acceptance by becoming a new Jewish-Christian sect.

At the end of the eighteenth century the spirit of the Enlightenment stimulated Christian Europe to seek the amelioration of Jewish life. With the establishment of the Napoleonic era, Jewish existence was revolutionized. The summoning of a Great Sanhedrin in France paved the way for Jewish emancipation and the position of Jewry improved throughout the continent. In the midst of such social upheaval, German Jewish reformers such as Israel Jacobson attempted to adapt Jewish worship to modern conditions. To the consternation of the Orthodox, Reform Temples appeared throughout Germany. Yet ironically, many enlightened Jews influenced by the Romantic movement were uninterested in what Reform Judaism had to offer. Instead of providing a basis for the resurgence of Judaism, the movement undermined confidence in traditional belief and practice and intensified Christian antipathy to the Jewish way of life.

In Russia, the aim of emancipation was to bring about the assimilation of the Jewish population – the programme of the Tsars was driven by centuries-old Christian hostility to the Jews. From the Jewish side, responses to these moves throughout Europe to improve the plight of Jewry were mixed: traditionalists tended to fear that such steps would undermine Torah Judaism, whereas progressives enthusiastically welcomed new freedoms and opportunities. The Gentile reaction was equally ambivalent. Although liberals ardently campaigned for equal rights, many Christians feared the consequences of such agitation, and at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century outbreaks against the Jewish population spread from country to country.

In the enlightened environment of the nineteenth century, Jewish

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apologists sought to ameliorate the conditions of the Jewish population. In England Benjamin Disraeli, the Tory Prime Minister, formulated a theory of the Jewish race which served as the basis for his quest to grant civil rights to British Jewry. His advocacy of Jewish emancipation, however, provoked a hostile response from such critics as Robert Knox, who denigrated Jewry in terms reminiscent of previous centuries. Such disparagement was similarly a central feature of French life, as evidenced by the Damascus Affair in which the President of the French Council sided with the French consuls in Damascus who accused Jews there of ritual murder. Despite the peaceful conclusion of this affair, this medieval charge gave rise to widespread anti-Jewish sentiment in France. In addition, the Christian myth of the Wandering Jew who was driven from his homeland for having rejected Christ became a predominant image in French literature of the period and stimulated French Judaeophobia, as did the anti-Jewish allegations of French socialists. In Germany the advocates of German racism as well as metaphysical writers critical of Jews and Judaism generated considerable ill-will. Such hostility reached its climax in the diatribes of the composer Richard Wagner, whose critique of Judaism paved the way for the Nazis onslaught in the following century.

Discussion: The legacy of anti-Semitism

As we have seen, the Jewish people have been detested by those among whom they lived for nearly twenty centuries. What have been the causes of what is arguably humanity's most virulent and sustained hatred? There appears to be a variety of answers to this vexing question. First, the Jewish population, as a small, distinct minority community, has continually been regarded by other host countries as alien and strange. Determined to remain faithful to their religious traditions, Jews generally remained unassimilated. In addition, Jewry regarded itself as God's chosen people. Of all nations, the Jews were selected to be God's special servants. They were to be a light to the Gentiles. It is not surprising that such a sense of religious superiority outraged their Gentile neighbours.

In the view of some modern Jewish thinkers, such a minority status has inevitably rendered the Jews vulnerable. The father of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, for example, was convinced that

the problem of anti-Semitism could only be solved if Jews emigrated from the countries where they lived to create a Jewish homeland.

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'We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live', he wrote, 'seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes superloyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still deemed as aliens.'

Was Herzl right? Modern historical events – the Holocaust in particular – have for many proved the truth of his analysis of the Jewish question. Germany, as one of the most culturally and intellectually advanced nations in the modern world, unleashed the most terrible mechanized apparatus of murder to eradicate Jewry from Europe. In its quest to carry out a policy of annihilation it violated the fundamental canons of human decency. The war against the Jews has arguably demonstrated that no minority people which holds fast to its ancient ways can escape the wrath of host nations with their own xenophobic convictions.

But, it was not simply the minority status of Jewry which fuelled the flames of hatred. The conflict between the Church and the Synagogue led to bitter rivalry and contempt. As Christianity emerged triumphant in the Roman Empire, its leaders denounced the rival tradition from which it had sprung. Typical among the critics of Judaism was the fourth century Patriarch, John Chrysostom, who denounced Jewry for its rejection of Christ. The Jews will be crucified throughout history, he declared, because they crucified Christ.

It is because you killed Christ. It is because you stretched out your hand against the Lord. It is because you shed the precious blood, that there is now no restoration, no mercy any more, and no defence.'

Such a tradition of contempt continued from century to century. Repeatedly the Church alleged that the Jews were to suffer because of their rejection of Christ. They were blamed for deciding, and accused of the most heinous crimes against humanity. Demonized in the Middle Ages, they were perceived as the scourge of European

society, corrupters of Western civilization. In this light, the great reformer of the Church, Martin Luther, continued to vilify the Jewish nation. Initially he had hoped to convert Jewry, but when they failed to heed his call, he was incensed. In *Against the Jews and their Lies*, he called for the elimination of Judaism: "Their synagogues should be set on fire . . . they should be deprived of their prayer books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught . . . their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more."³

Christianity thus stands accused. Despite Jews' gentle words of compassion, Christians are guilty of the most callous, inhumane acts of violence against Jews. For two millennia the Church has continued and intensified the tradition of anti-Judaism which it inherited from the Graeco-Roman world. Today there are many Christians who are ashamed of this legacy of anti-Semitism and anxious for the Church to change its attitudes. Such a spirit of reconciliation has animated numerous official Church pronouncements which have sought to reverse its teachings.

Such efforts are to be welcomed. Yet, the wounds of the past are deep and the Jewish community is still traumatized by its ill treatment at the hands of Christians over the centuries. This legacy of the past should not be forgotten in any discussion of the Holocaust. Within the Nazi party, there were many who sought to reconcile the policies of National Socialism with the Christian faith. Indeed, before the Nazi seizure of power, a number of Evangelical supporters of the NSDAP joined forces and demanded that the Reich church. These Nazi Protestants represented what they called "Positive Christianity" – a form of racial ideology formulated in theological terms. In their view, God sacrificed the Aryan lineage. Is it surprising that many Jews continue to remain suspicious of Christian motives? As far as Catholics are concerned, the Vatican remained neutral during the Nazi period. Feeling itself vulnerable during the war, the Catholic Church remained silent in the face of Nazi monstrosities, and at times adopted an apparently pro-German position. The greatest charge against Pope Pius XII is that despite numerous appeals, he refused to speak out against the Nazi policy of extermination which in 1944 was described by Winston Churchill as "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world."⁴

What is the Jewish community to make of such Christian failures? Given the long history of Christian persecution and the Church's ambivalent attitudes during the war, it is questionable whether positive Jewish-Christian dialogue is possible in a post-Holocaust world. Christians may wish to expunge their feelings of guilt for past atrocities, but it seems unlikely that on the deepest level the Jewish community will be able to forgive their Christian neighbours for centuries of hatred, persecution, torture and murder.

Another factor which has frequently evoked anti-Jewish feelings has been the economic success of Jewry. In seventeenth-century Poland, for example, Jews who served as administrators of noblemen's estates were slaughtered in peasant revolts – their role as middlemen for those who were perceived as oppressors of the masses led to this onslaught. Again, in the early modern period German merchants feared the economic influence of their Jewish rivals, in their view Jewish trade would undermine their economic position. In modern times, Jews were also perceived as the embodiment of corrupt capitalism. Such thinkers as Karl Marx, despite his Jewish origin, bitterly caricatured Jewish financiers, portraying them as exploiters of the suffering underclass. Conversely, the Nazis viewed Jews as the prime movers of Bolshevism. Repeatedly Hitler accused Jewry of engineering a world-wide Communist conspiracy.

Through the centuries such factors led to the elimination of the Jewish population in the countries where they lived as well as to the confiscation of their property. This was so in medieval Europe as well as in modern times. During the Third Reich, Nazis not only used Jewish slave labour in the war effort but also deliberately robbed the Jewish population of their property and money. Racial ideology served as the justification for outright theft. Typical of such callous intent was the comment of Christian Wirth, the commandant of Belzec, who ecstatically described to an onlooker the gold that had been taken from the teeth of those who died in the gas chamber:

He was in his element and showing me a big jam box filled with teeth, said, "See the weight of the gold! Just from yesterday and the day before! You can imagine what we find every day, dollars, diamonds, gold!"⁵

Notes

- 1 Arthur Herzberg (ed.), *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, New York, 1959, p. 209.
- 2 Dan Cohn-Sheehy, *The Crucified Jew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, p. 33.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 4 R. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, London, 1992, p. 216.
- 5 Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust*, London, 1987, p. 428.

2. German hatred of the Jews

At the end of the eighteenth-century the spirit of the Enlightenment stimulated Christian Europe to seek to ameliorate Jewish life. With the establishment of the Napoleonic era, Jewish existence was transformed. For such improvements in Jewish existence were met by considerable resistance. Throughout Germany reactionaries continued to foster anti-Jewish sentiment, thereby generating considerable ill-will towards the Jewish populace.

German anti-Semitism in modern times

In response to steps towards Jewish emancipation in the late eighteenth-century, Christian anti-Jewish attitudes intensified throughout Europe. When Napoleon conquered the Great Sanhedrin, it was feared that the Emperor had conducted a pact with the forces of evil. According to a number of German theosophists, Napoleon's efforts to enfranchise Jewry was a final struggle between Good and Evil. With the defeat of Napoleon, such propaganda ceased. Yet the fear that Jews were seeking world dominion through their emancipation continued to inspire fear and contempt.

As a result of such sentiment outbreaks against Jews began in August 1819 in Wurzburg and spread throughout German towns and the countryside. Similar excesses took place in Bohemia, Alsace, the Netherlands and Denmark. The populace was aroused by traveling rioters whose cry was 'Heil! Heil!'. In response the Christian mob armed with axes and iron bars proceeded to the Jewish quarter and demolished the synagogue. In Berlin a contemporary account related:

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The excesses which have been committed against the Jews in several towns in Germany have given rise to fear amongst the Israelites in this capital, there have been reports of Jews being taken to the streets and the Jews' enemies paid a fair number of visits to cry 'Heil Heil' under the windows of the country houses of the nobles of this nation. An old Israelite pedlar of ribbons and pencils was chased by a crowd of delinquents in the street which echoed with the ominous cry: he made the best of it like a man with a sense of humour and continued on his way laughing and even shouting 'Heil! Heil!' incessantly himself, but having taken it into his head to peer into a shop and shout inside, a woman who happened to be on the threshold dealt him a violent box on the ears, to which he immediately replied with another. A police employee, who was within call, took him under his protection and, to get him out of reach of the ill-treatment to which he was still exposed, carried him to the police station. ... The famous 'Heil! Heil!' has already caused some tumultuous scenes in several public places.¹

As the century progressed, the advocates of German racism as well as metaphorical writers critical of Jews and Judaism continued to foster anti-Jewish sentiment. In particular the writings of two major proponents of Germano-Christian racism, Ernst Moritz Arndt and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, perpetuated the myth of the supremacy of the German people. According to Arndt, it is the Germans who possess the divine spark:

'I do not think,' he wrote, 'I am mistaken in stating that the powerful and ardent will of the German was the good species into which the divine seed could be implanted to produce the most noble fruits. The Germans, and the Latins interpreted and guided by them, are the only ones to have made the divine germ flower, thanks to their philosophy and theology, and as rulers to animate and guide ... the surrounding people, 'belonging to foreign species'.²

Such Germanness must be protected from contamination, and it was Arndt's desire that the Jews disappear as a separate people; this, he believed, could occur through their conversion to Christianity. 'Experience shows,' he stated, 'that as soon as they abandon their disconcerting laws and become Christian, the peculiarities of the Jewish character and type rapidly grow indistinct and by the second generation it is difficult to recognize the seed of Abraham'.³ Similarly, for Jahn the struggle against foreign blood is a battle of life and death for German society and culture:

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Hybrid animals have no real capacity for reproduction; similarly, mongrel peoples have no national survival of their own. ... he who strives to bring all the noble peoples of the world into one herd runs the risk of ruling over the most despicable outcast of the human race.⁴

In the midst of such racial and patriotic sentiment, the Wartburg festival was held in 1817 to commemorate the tricentenary of the Reformation and the tenth anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig. Delegates from fourteen primarily Protestant universities gathered together at Jena to found the *Allgemeine deutsche Burschenschaft* (United German Student Society). A solemn procession took place, followed by a divine service and an auto-da-fé of books and other objects regarded as anti-German. A letter from a Heidelberg student, Richard Rothe, described the event:

The people in Jena want a Christian-German Burschenschaft but we had always wanted till then a general one in the strictest sense of the word and we therefore decided to give entry to Jews and foreigners as to anyone else if they had acquired academic rights through matriculation. Thereupon the Germans – there were about twenty of them – flew into a terrible rage. Since then they form a sect in the Burschenschaft and at general meetings are mainly distinguished by forming a perpetual opposition to the Jewish and foreign members of the association. They are not too keen on their studies and act as if they have found Germany's saviours and redeemers.⁵

Alongside such patriotic attitudes which fostered the disparagement of Jewry, German metaphysicians castigated Judaism and the Jewish nation in terms reminiscent of previous Christian centuries. The theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Chilliary attempted to expose what he believed to be Jewish cannibalism. According to Chilliary such cannibalism was evidenced by the ritual murder of Jesus as well as subsequent ritual murders in Jewish history. In the light of such barbarism, he believed that it would be misguided to grant rights such men

who adhere so rigidly to old inhuman prejudices, who regard us as impure, like serfs and dogs, just as their ancestors did, even if they do not flaunt it to our face? It is men such as these who claim full civil rights, the right to exercise functions of government, to become the superiors of Christians, judicial and administrative officers!⁶

With similar antipathy the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach attacked the Jewish people:

The Israelites only opened their gastric senses to nature. They only enjoyed nature through their palate. They only became aware of God through the enjoyment of manna. ... Eating is the most solemn act or even imitation of the Jewish religion. In the act of eating the Israelite celebrates and renews the act of creation. In eating, man declares nature to be a nullity in itself. When the seventy elders climbed the mountain with Moses, then they saw the God of Israel. ... They stayed there before God, they ate and they drank (Exodus 24:10-11). The sight of the highest being therefore only aroused their appetite.⁸

With similar contempt the Hegelian Arnold Ruge emphasized the pernicious influence of Jewish on German society: 'They are maggots in the cloaca of Christianity, who are so unutterably comfortable in their reflective and stock-jobbing skin that they believe in nothing and precisely for this reason remain Jews.'⁹ Another Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, polemicalized against Jewish emancipation. In his *Die Judenfrage*, he criticized the Jewish people for having made their crime resided in 'not recognizing the purely human development of history, the development of human conscience.'⁹ Again, Karl Marx in his writings criticized the Jewish influence on bourgeois society. Material concerns, he argued, form the basis of Jewish life.

'The bill of exchange is the real God of the Jew,' he declared. 'His God is only an illusory bill of exchange. That which is contained in an abstract in the Jewish religion – contempt for theory, for art, for history, and for man as an end in himself – is the real, conspicuous standpoint and the virtue of the man of money. ... The chimerical inferiority of the Jew is the nationality of the trader, and above all the financier.'¹⁰

German hostility towards the Jewish people in the nineteenth century reached its culmination in the writings of the composer Richard Wagner. In exile in Switzerland from 1849 to 1851, he studied Germanic myths. In his first book he presented an Aryan theory of the origin of humanity based upon these studies: 'Upon this Aryan, i.e. these mountains, we have to seek the cradle of the present Asiatic peoples, as also of those who wandered forth to Europe. Here is the ancestral seat of all religions, of every tongue, of all these

nations, Kneiphof.'¹¹ Later, Wagner identified the God Wotan with the Christian conception of the Son of God.

Such convictions served as the general background of his *Das Judentum in der Musik*. In this work Wagner stated that the quest to emancipate the Jews was based on idealistic notions rather than on a personal familiarity with the Jewish population:

Even when we strove for emancipation of the Jews, however, we were more the champions of an abstract principle than of a concrete case: just as all our liberalism was not very lucid mental sport – since we went for freedom of the Folk without knowledge of that Folk itself, nay, with a dislike of any genuine contact with it – so our eagerness to level up the rights of Jews was far rather stimulated by a general idea, than by any real sympathy.¹²

For Wagner, the Jew was a degenerate element in society; even those who had been emancipated were incapable of making a positive contribution.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the manifestation of anti-Semitic agitation throughout Germany and Austria. In 1871 *The Jew of the Talmud* was published by Canon August Rohling, a professor at the Imperial University of Prague. This work, based on *Judaism Unmasked* by Johann Andreas Eisenmenger, revived the Christian myth of ritual murder. The twelve ritual murder trials of Jews in German regions held between 1867 and 1914 were largely due to Rohling's influence.

Another major figure of this period was Wilhelm Marr, who is credited with coining the term 'anti-Semitism'. In his *The Victory of Judaism over Germanism*, Marr argued that Judaism had been victorious in the modern world: 'We are the losers and it is natural that the winners should shout *Vae victis*. We are so Judaized that we are beyond salvation and a brutal anti-Semitic explosion can only postpone the collapse of our Judaized society, but not prevent it.'¹³ On the basis of such views, Marr founded an Anti-Semitic League in 1871. Similar attitudes were expressed in a series of articles by the journalist Otto Glagau in the magazine *Die Gartenlaube*: 'The Jewish tribe does not work,' he stated. 'It exploits the manual or intellectual production of others. This foreign tribe has enslaved the German people. The social question is basically the Jewish question.'¹⁴

In 1878 the minister Adolf Stoecker, chaplain of the Imperial

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Court, founded the Christian Socialist Workers' Party which promulgated anti-Semitism as a central policy. In consequence, violence erupted in Berlin in 1880 and 1881. Mobbs assaulted Jews in the streets, drove them from cafes, and smashed their store windows; in the provinces synagogues were burned. At the same time, Bernhard Förster, Nietzsche's brother-in-law, who visited Wagner's Bayreuth, organized a petition which called for a census of the Jews in Germany and their exclusion from the teaching profession.

Through the influence of the historian Heinrich Treitschke, anti-Semitism gained considerable respectability, and anti-Semitic movements and parties became increasingly common. International conferences were held, and various fraternities refused to admit Jewish students. In addition, the German custom of the student duel was denied to Jews. Numerous anti-Semitic treatises also began to circulate at the end of the century. All these works were eventually overshadowed by *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* by the Anglo-German writer, Houston Stewart Chamberlain. In his study Chamberlain maintains that the antiquity and mobility of the Jewish nation illustrates the confrontation between superior Aryan and pariah Semites. On the political front Karl Lueger, the leader of the Austrian Christian party, publicly espoused anti-Semitic policies in 1887 with the encouragement of Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Rampolla. Eventually he was elected mayor of Vienna. In Germany the *Antisemitische Volkspartei* won four seats in 1890. Three years later its numbers in the *Reichstag* increased to sixteen.

In the years leading up to World War I, the Jews became scapegoats for the problems afflicting German society. Objections were raised against the assimilation of German Jewry, and numerous Christian writers protested against the pernicious influence of Jewish attitudes. Such antipathy was symbolic of the age. Once the realities of World War I had become evident, Jews were blamed for all the ills afflicting Germany. In this environment of Judeophobia the philosopher Max Hinderer Boehm drafted a bill of indictment in the war progress, anti-Semitism erupted despite the fact that Jews had been actively involved in the war effort. As events began to go badly, Jews were blamed for the lack of German success. Allegedly Jews were not fighting for their country – those in the army had relatively pleasant jobs behind the front; others were making money

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out of the war. Such attitudes served as the background for the rise of the Nazi party in the years following Germany's defeat.

Discussion: German Judeophobia

From this survey it might appear that German attitudes towards the Jews were unique in the modern world. This, however, was not the case – throughout Europe similar attitudes prevailed. In France, for example, numerous books were published listing a wide range of grievances against the Jewish community. Repeatedly Jews were portrayed in demonic terms, and even advocates of emancipation agreed that the Jews constituted a fallen nation. Such disparagement continued into the next century. Despite the improvements in Jewish life that had taken place under Napoleon, the negative stereotype of the Jew continued to haunt French consciousness. According to the *Archives israelites*, the leading writers continued to perpetrate such myths:

Every one of them at least once in his lifetime is determined to cut himself a doublet in Middle Ages style and, when their imagination runs dry, they knock up a history of the Jews. There is not a novelist, a would-be short story writer, not the most wretched manufacturer of feuilletons who has not got a fantastic picture of the Jews of yore in his bag.¹⁵

While literary figures were caricaturing the Jewish people, anti-Semitism was also being promoted by French Socialists. Hostile to the industrialization of the modern world, these propagandists caricatured what they perceived to be the pernicious influence of Jewry. For these Socialists thinkers the Jew personified evil. Echoing the sentiments of previous centuries, such thinkers as Pierre Provodun recommended a course of action similar to what was carried out by the Nazis:

Jews. Make a provision against that race, which poisons everything, by burning in every way the writers, the mingling with any people. Jewishness is equal to the poison. France. The Jew is the enemy of mankind. That race must be sent back to Asia or exterminated.¹⁶

In England similar attitudes were widespread in the post-emancipation period. Despite the generally tolerant environment in the

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country, the presence of Jews continued to arouse public antipathy. The image Shakespeare's *Shylock* in his *Merchant of Venice* and Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* reinforced stereotypes of Jewish behaviour and generated prejudice against the Jew. When the Tory prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli attempted to improve the condition of English Jews, a number of writers vehemently castigated the Jewish community. In his *Agas of Man*, for example, Robert Knox attacked Disraeli's analysis of the Jewish problem.

'A respect for scientific truth,' he wrote, 'forbids me relating the monstrous tales of Disraeli; it is sufficient merely to observe here that, in a long list of names of distinguished persons who Mr Disraeli has described of Jewish descent, I have not met with a single Jewish trait in their countenance, in so far as I can discover; and therefore they are not Jews, nor of Jewish origin.'⁷

In Russia the emancipation of the Jew also provoked similar reactions. In 1844, for example, the Jewish folklorist Vladimir Dahl concluded that although ritual murder was not practiced by the vast majority of Jews, it did occur among the Hasidim. Subsequently trials for ritual murder took place. The latter half of the nineteenth century also witnessed counter-emancipatory tendencies among Russian writers. Feodor Dostoevsky, for example, complained in a letter to the procurator of the Holy Synod about the number of Jews he encountered. Remarking on the Jews he observed in Berlin, he wrote: 'It's unbearable. . . . Germany, or at least Berlin, has become Judaized'. In response the procurator asserted that Jews had become a threatening force in Russia as well.

What you write about the Yids is perfectly correct. They have invaded everything. . . . They are at the root of the social-democratic movement and tsaricide. They control the press and the book-trade. They reduce the masses to financial slavery. They formulate the principles of contemporary society, which tends to dissociate itself from Christianity. . . . And nobody dares say that here the Jews control everything!⁸

Given the prevalence of such hostility throughout Europe, why was it in Germany that the Holocaust occurred? What led the German nation to seek to exterminate the Jewish people in the most horrific fashion? Arguably the onslaught against Jewry could have taken place anywhere, yet Nazi Germany was unique in embracing racial

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doctrine as a guiding ideology of the Third Reich. For the Nazis, the Jews were not simply a pernicious influence on society – they threatened to contaminate the purity of German blood. In their view, Germanness must be protected from any form of contamination.

Such racial theory evolved over several centuries and continued to dominate racist theory in the nineteenth century. Pre-eminent among such theoreticians, Richard Wagner's son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain became one of the pioneers of the doctrine of Aryan supremacy. In his major work, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, Chamberlain argued that the Aryan race has always exerted a regenerative effect on societies threatened by disintegration, and that lesser blood types had always brought about cultural and social degeneration. According to Chamberlain, all great achievements are attributable to the Teutonic race whereas the Jewish people are cultural destroyers. Once the Jew has infiltrated any society, it becomes corrupt.

Such theories had a profound effect on Hitler whose own writings are infused with racial-anthropological ideas. Presupposing the existence of higher and lower races, Hitler declared that the Aryans alone were a culture-creating race. The Jewish race, however, is the embodiment of evil. On this basis, he condemned the inbreeding of races. In the quest to achieve a better and stronger society, he argued that only those who are healthy should produce children. What is required is a vigorous obstruction of reproductive capacities of those who would weaken the body politic. If the recovery of the social order is to occur, the Aryan race must predominate in all spheres of society. The Jewish nation as the enemy of humankind must be rooted out, and its destructive influence eliminated.

Inheriting anti-Semitic stereotypes passed on through centuries of persecution, the Nazis were convinced that the Jewish people were the perpetrators of a world conspiracy designed to undermine Western civilization. As a sub-human, evil and corrupting influence, Jewry became the central target of a genocidal policy of extermination; racially impure, they were to be eliminated for the sake of the *Volks*. Embracing social Darwinism, the Nazis believed they were acting heroically for the fatherland. Here then is an explanation for what has been perceived as a uniquely evil manifestation of human cruelty. The Holocaust should be seen as the consequence of the toxic mixture of anti-Semitism and racism. How else can one

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understand how one of the most civilized societies of the modern world engaged in one of the greatest crimes against humanity?

Notes

- 1 Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, Vol. III, London, 1975, p. 320.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 382–3.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 384–5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 389–91.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 415.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 417.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 420.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- 13 Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew*, Erdmann, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, p. 166.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 15 Poliakov, *op. cit.*, p. 350.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 376.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- 18 Cohn-Sherbok, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

3. Hitler

The Holocaust is inexplicable without Hitler. The driving force behind the Nazi rise to power, Adolf Hitler was the architect of the Nazi quest for European supremacy. Born in humble circumstances, Hitler emerged as the leader of the National Socialist Party and guided his party to victory in the troubled climate of the Third Reich. Once installed as Chancellor, he became a tyrannical dictator, leading his country to war in the vain attempt to create a German empire that would endure for a thousand years.

The making of the Führer

Born on 20 April 1889 in Braunau on the River Inn, Hitler's origins were complex. In 1837 a 41-year-old maid, Maria Anna Schickelgruber, returned to her native village of Stroos, pregnant and unmarried. Rejected by her family, she was housed by a neighbouring tenant farmer. On 7 June 1837 she gave birth to a baby boy who was baptised as Alois Schickelgruber. On his birth certificate the space for the father's name was left blank. This child was Hitler's father.

Several candidates have been suggested as Alois Schickelgruber's real father: a Craz Jew, Frankenberg; Johann Georg Hiedler, the person Maria Anna subsequently married; and Johann Nepomuk Hiedler, the brother of Johann Georg Hiedler. The first of these suggestions – that Hitler's grandfather was actually Jewish – was discussed by the former Reich minister, Hans Frank. In his autobiography, Frank disclosed that Hitler called him in 1930 to investigate the allegation that he was of Jewish origin. Frank disclosed that he discovered that Maria Anna Schickelgruber had been employed as a cook in a Jewish household at the time her baby

Notes

1. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, New York, 1941, p. 737.
2. Klaus F. Fuchsler, *Nazi Germany*, London, 1995, p. 33.
3. R. Jordan, *The Nazi Holocaust*, London, 1980, pp. 102-3.

5. Nazi racism

In the development of Nazi ideology, racist doctrines were of fundamental importance and had a crucial impact on German society following Hitler's ascendancy to power. From 1933 to 1945 Germany became a racial state, enacting legislation designed to protect Aryan blood from contamination by undesirables within society.

The background to Nazi racism

Nazi racial theories were grounded in post-Enlightenment notions about the nature of human society. In 1775 the German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that blacks and whites are racially distinct. In his view, there are different human races, even though they all belong to a single genus. Such differences, however, are no guide to their respective value. Subsequently racial theories disagreed with Kant, insisting that physical and psychological differences between races are an indication of their relative worth. On this basis they constructed racial hierarchies largely based on physical criteria.

The German theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater, for example, sought to deduce spiritual and psychological characteristics from physiognomy; similarly, the Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper measured the facial angles of different races, and categorized them in terms of physical beauty. The German physician Franz Joseph Gall used cranial measurement to differentiate races in terms of intelligence, moral disposition, and beauty. Using a similar method, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners ranked races in terms of beauty or ugliness. In his opinion, fair people were superior to all others whereas darker individuals were ugly and uncivilized. Arguing along the same lines, the philosopher Carl Gustav Carus

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argued that the universe is endowed with a soul which underwent various metamorphoses leading to the creation of human beings. The complexions of the human races, he maintained, reflect their degree of inner illumination.

Parallel with these views, racial-anthropological theorists sought to justify European domination of other peoples. Such a doctrine was based on earlier beliefs that ancient German tribesmen who were tall, blue-eyed and blond possessed honourable virtues. Such convictions served as the basis for the belief that Germans were the bearers of civilization to peoples of an inferior nature. In the *World Struggle of the Germans and Slavs* published in 1897, Moritz Wilhelm Hefter maintained that the German drive to the east was a necessary consequence of the superiority of the German nation. Arguing along similar lines, Heinrich von Treitschke eulogized the racial struggle against Prussians, Lithuanians and Poles. A form of magic, he believed, had emanated from eastern German soil which had been fertilized by German blood. Such a belief was designed to legitimize the Germanization of Prussia's Polish minority.

In addition to such racial doctrines, Nazism was buttressed by ideas drawn from various anthropological theories. In *Essai sur la noblesse de France*, published in 1735, Count Henri de Boulainvilliers stressed that the French nobility was descended from Frankish-Germanic invaders whereas townsmen and peasants were the descendants of the ancient Gauls. Such a notion was embraced by ideologists as well as historians of the Restoration. Among those who subscribed to this view was Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau who asserted that his family was descended from ancient Frankish aristocracy. According to Gobineau, white, yellow and black races were not equal in value. In his opinion, the rise and fall of civilizations were racially determined. All high cultures were created by Aryans; cultures went into decline when the Aryan ruling class bred with members of inferior races. When such intermingling occurred, he maintained, rebellions ensued by the racially inferior groups against the Aryan ruling races. This took place in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. In modern times, the French *Aryan Régime* was destroyed by a similar revolt.

Nazi racism was also supported by a variety of notions derived from Darwinism. In *On the Origins of Species*, Charles Darwin attempted to demonstrate that natural selection was fundamental to the evolution of the species. According to Darwin, in nature there is

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a constant struggle for existence. Only those species which are capable of adaptation are able to survive. Hence, the process of natural selection results in the development of each species. In *The Descent of Man*, he discussed the effects of modern society on this process and argued that breeding is necessary to counterbalance the impact of the absence of natural selection.

The application of Darwin's theories to human society was undertaken by a number of writers who pressed for the creation of utopian communities. Francis Galton, for example, embraced the principle of natural selection. In his view, members of the professions as well as healthy members of the middle class should be encouraged to reproduce. However, those persons who were unable to pass a genetics test should be encouraged to emigrate. As the founder of hereditary health care which he referred to as eugenics, Galton formulated a programme for improving the human race through genetic regulation. Such ideas applied to mating, education, public health and welfare.

Subsequently Darwin and Galton's writings were disseminated in Europe and the United States. In Germany the zoologist Ernst Haeckel sought to promote Darwin's theories, and advanced a new philosophy of human life called 'Monism'. This ideology was based on comparative zoology, and was designed to lead to moral perfection. In the *History of Natural Creation*, Haeckel argued that the Central European races were the most highly developed. No other peoples could be compared to them physically or intellectually. By virtue of their abilities, they would triumph over all other races and dominate the entire world. However, in order to ensure their ascendancy, selective breeding would be required. In propounding this view, Haeckel cited the case of ancient Sparta:

All of the weak, sickly or physically deficient children were slain. Only those children who were completely healthy and strong were allowed to live, and only they were later allowed to reproduce. Therewith the Spartan race was not merely maintained in selected strength and virtue, but rather with each generation their physical perfection was increased. Certainly, in large measure, the Spartan people owed their unique level of masculine strength and tough heroism to this artificial selection or breeding.¹

In line with such a policy, Haeckel recommended in *The Riddle of Life* that the sick be eliminated:

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What profit does humanity derive from the thousands of cripples who are born each year, from the deaf and dumb, from cretins, from those with incurable hereditary defects etc. who are kept alive artificially and then raised to adulthood? ... What an immense aggregate of suffering and pain these depressing figures represent for the unfortunate sick people themselves, what a fathomless sum of worry and grief for their families, what a loss in terms of private resources and costs to the state for the healthy! How much of this loss and suffering could be obviated, if one finally decided to liberate the totally incurable from their inescapable suffering with a dose of morphia.²

Similar ideas were found in the writing of the physician Wilhelm Schallmayer. In his *Hereditary and Selection in the Life of Nations: A Study in Political Science on the Basis of the New Biology*, he argued that the state has a responsibility to ensure the healthy character of its people – the birth rate and racial character of the nation must be protected from adverse influences. In his view, child marriages should be encouraged, and earnings-related allowances should be given to mothers. All such measures, he stressed, should be available to anyone examined by a qualified expert in socio-biological science. However, anyone who did not pass should be denied a certificate to marry, isolated and sterilized.

Later in the century Alfred Pöetz published *The Efficiency of Our Race and the Protection of the Weak*. In his view, the West Aryan or German race was the most civilized, but was being undermined by the increasing protection of the weak in society. In his view, the conception of children should not be haphazard, but instead regulated according to scientific principles. If a deformed child should happen then a college of physicians should determine if it should be killed. Furthermore, Pöetz argued that only inferior persons should be sent to the front during wartime. Such measures were designed to improve the quality of the race.

Other pioneers of modern eugenics emphasized the decisive impact of genetics on human personality. In their view, it is not possible to improve the capabilities of successive generations through training. Rather, human life is predetermined by its essential make-up – persons are composed of positive or negative biological material. In this light, such scientists as Alfred Grotjahn, a professor of social hygiene at Berlin University, advocated sterilizing those who were not members of the respectable working classes. These individuals included the insane, the workshy, those with sexually-transmitted diseases and alcoholics.

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These scientists and others were anxious to protect the civilized classes from those who could make little if any contribution to society. In their view, welfare programmes protected the unfit and undesirable. Such concerns emerged in Germany in the aftermath of World War I. In 1923 Gerhard Boeters, the Zwickau District Health Officer, disclosed that doctors in his district were sterilizing the mentally handicapped. With the onset of the Depression and mass unemployment, the use of scarce resources became a pressing question for the government. By July 1932 the Prussian government had formulated a Racial Sterilization Law which was later passed to the Reich Government.

Similar views about race were also voiced by a range of nineteenth-century thinkers. Although their opinions were not based on scientific evidence, they argued that human society must confront the problem of scarce resources. In 1880, for example, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared that those who were unfit should be eliminated from society:

Satisfaction of desire should not be practised so that the race as a whole suffers, i.e. that choice no longer occurs, and that anyone can put off and produce children. The education of the type must be kept to the 1) with the aim of higher development, 2) in order to leave behind the fruit of such persons. Concubinage is enough for all the rest, with measures to prevent conception. ... We must do away with all this crass lightheartedness.³

Other thinkers proposed various innovations based on social engineering. Wilhelm Hentschel, for example, pressed for the creation of stud villages in which suitable men would be encouraged to mate with up to ten women. Hentschel's ideas later had an important effect on the Aryanmen League which included leading Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hoess. Another figure of this period, Jörg Lanz, argued for the breeding of blond Aryan supermen. Such a notion was promoted through *Ostara: Newspaper for Blond People*.

Turning from these early thinkers to Hitler's own views, it is not clear what racist material Hitler read. Nonetheless, his ideology is deeply influenced by previous racial theories: *Mein Kampf* is imbued with such doctrine. In his view, there are a number of universal truths about human nature:

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Even the most superficial observation shows that Nature's restricted form of propagation and increase is an almost rigid basic law of all the innumerable forms of expression of her vital urge. Every animal mates only with a member of the same species. The timonae seeds the timonae, the finch the finch, the stork the stork, the field mouse the field mouse, the dormouse the dormouse.⁴

In his discussion of racism, Hitler emphasized the need for promoting racially selective breeding. Following the view of racial-hygienists, he promoted the victory of the better and stronger. What is required above all is purity of the blood. Only the healthy should produce children, and steps should be taken to obstruct the reproductive capacities of those who will weaken the Aryan race. Repeatedly in *Mein Kampf* and in his speeches, Hitler recommended a variety of measures to promote the birth rate of desirable members of German society. Child allowances, public housing projects and educational opportunities were among a range of policies designed to encourage parents to have more children. As part of this racial plan, Hitler argued that outlying colonies should be settled by those of the highest racial purity. Such individuals were to be chosen by racial experts.

Conversely, Hitler insisted that the recovery of Germany would only be possible if the struggle against Jewry were won. In his combat against the forces of evil, Hitler perceived himself as fulfilling a divine directive: 'I believe today that I am acting in the sense of the Almighty Creator; by warding off the Jews, I am fighting for the Lord's work.'⁵ For Hitler, the Jew represented the greatest threat to his utopian racial plan. Utilizing apocalyptic imagery, he believed that the Jew was the agent of the devil, and that in the battle between good and evil, the future of humanity was at stake.

Discussion: Racial theory

In a post-Holocaust world the racial theories of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appear preposterous. How could reputable philosophers and scientists have propounded notions with such disastrous consequences? Cloaked under a veneer of patriotism, the writers we have surveyed sought to provide a justification for European dominance and a policy for subjection and geographical expansion. In advancing doctrines

about racial superiority and inferiority, these thinkers came to believe that their views were scientifically grounded and justified by empirical evidence.

Yet, racial anthropology is nothing more than a pseudo-science with no basis in fact. According to these theorists, races can be classified according to strict physical criteria, yet such demarcation is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to stipulate. As we have seen, these theoreticians themselves held different and conflicting views. And certainly as far as Jewry is concerned, Jews do not constitute a particular racial group; rather, the Jewish community consists of a wide range of physical types with varying genetic backgrounds. There is no such thing as Jewish blood, even though through the centuries Jews have tended to intermarry. While in the past it has been possible to isolate stereotypic Jewish physiognomic characteristics, such features were by no means uniform or universal.

Regarding the systems outlined by racial theorists, there has been no generally accepted system of classification. Some like Immanuel Kant regarded different races as equal because they all belonged to the same genus. Later theorists disagreed: Christoph Meiner believed that it was possible to rank races on the basis of beauty or ugliness – fair people, he argued, were more beautiful than those who were of a darker complexion. Yet, it is obvious that such aesthetic judgements are purely subjective. Adopting a different approach, Carl Gustav Carus advanced metaphysical doctrines about a world soul which evolved into human beings; the complexions of the races, he contended, are reflections of inner illumination. Again, such a belief has no scientific foundation.

Similarly, anthropological theories proposing that Germans were the bearers of a superior culture lack any historical basis. Such figures as Moritz Wilhelm Hefter and Heinrich von Treitschke simply used such a doctrine to justify German expansionism eastward. Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's conviction that Aryans constituted a superior race and this justified inbreeding was also fuelled by the desire to legitimize discriminatory policies. Further, his racial analysis of rebellions which occurred in ancient civilizations lacks any historical foundation.

So, too, those writers who promoted social Darwinism were deluded in believing that their views were scientifically grounded. While Darwin's investigation of the natural world was in accord with scientific principles, the application of his studies to human

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society lacked the same rigour. Hence, Francis Galton's conclusions about natural selection were not based on empirical observation as he implied; his eugenic theories were nothing more than personal proposals for social engineering. Ernst Haeckel's monistic philosophy likewise lacked any scientific basis, and his advocacy of selective breeding was grounded in a particular form of social utilitarianism. The same criticism applies to Wilhelm Schallmeyer's recommendations for the improvement of human society, Alfred Ploetz's endorsement of breeding programmes, and Alfred Grotjahn's advocacy of sterilization.

The dangers of such pseudo-scientific ideas are now clear: Hitler's quest to rid society of what he believed to be undesirable elements led to mass murder. The inherent flaw in a programme of selective breeding, sterilization, euthanasia and extermination lies in its moral assumptions. In advocating such policies, racial theorists – including the Nazis – believed that the good of society was a supreme goal which took precedence over all other considerations. In *Mein Kampf* and in numerous speeches, Hitler expressed his belief that Germany had a special destiny in world history. This involved protecting Aryan blood from contamination at all costs. Any means would be justified in attaining this end, including murder.

In advocating such a policy, Hitler and his executioners were convinced that the ends justified the means, no matter how terrible. What can we make of such moral calculations? From an ethical point of view, Nazi utilitarianism appears monstrous and grotesque. The photographs and newscasts of German barbarism in the death camps is a permanent reminder of the consequences of such a policy. So, too, are the terrible accounts of the euthanasia programme in which innocent victims were gassed out of a desire to serve the state. Yet we should not turn a blind eye to the fact that despite our repulsion at scenes of wanton killing during the Third Reich, some of the principles lying behind Nazi policy have become a feature of contemporary society.

A central principle inherent in eugenic theory is that humanity benefits from the elimination of those who make no contribution to the community. In *Riddle of Life*, Haeckel stressed that cripples, the deaf and dumb, cretins, those with incurable hereditary defects and those kept alive artificially merely drain away resources which could be put to better effect for the healthy. In his view, such individuals suffer immeasurably and cause great grief for their families. It would

be much better, he argued, if such pain could be eliminated through euthanasia.

Although modern societies have not instituted programmes of mercy killing as outlined by Haeckel and others, the underlying presupposition of various medical treatments is that some persons are dispensable. In cases of amniocentesis, for example, pregnant mothers are permitted to know in advance whether the child they are bearing suffers from serious physical or mental disabilities. Parents, we believe, should have the right to terminate a pregnancy in such cases. Contemporary society has thus provided the legal means whereby future members of the community can be eliminated before birth if parents wish to be spared the anguish as well as the financial consequences of looking after them. In principle, then, certain elements of Nazi eugenics have permeated contemporary attitudes concerning those who are perceived as disposable.

Thus, though we recoil in horror from the excesses of Nazism, we should not sweepingly condemn Nazi eugenics without recognizing that in modern society we embrace some of the underlying presuppositions of eugenic policy ourselves. Indeed, public attitudes regarding health, education and welfare are frequently shaped by a utilitarian calculus, not unlike that employed by Nazi thinkers. In a world of scarce resources, difficult decisions need to be made, and in evaluating issues such as abortion, genetic engineering, cloning, premature birth, organ transplants, embryonic research, voluntary and involuntary euthanasia, we face the same type of problems as those which German society sought to resolve during the Third Reich. In seeking to untangle the ethical and practical dilemmas that these topics raise, we will need to be clear about the basic assumptions we make about human life and the society we seek to create.

Notes

1 Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Radical State: Germany 1933–45*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 30.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

4 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, London, 1992, p. 258.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

Notes

1. B. P. Smith and A. E. Peterson, *Heinrich Himmler, Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945*, Frankfurt, 1974, p. 61.
2. W. Runge and W. Schumann (eds), *Dokumente zur Deutschen Geschichte 1936-39*, Frankfurt, 1973, pp. 124-5.
3. Smith and Peterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-1.
4. G. S. Graber, *History of the SS*, London, 1996, p. 82.
5. J. Ackerman, *Heinrich Himmler als Ideologe*, Göttingen, 1970, p. 198.
6. Nuremberg Document 2384-3S.
7. Runge and Schumann, *op. cit.*, 124-5.
8. Abraham Kasach (ed.), *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, New York, 1973, p. 14.

8. German anti-Jewish legislation

On 30 January 1933 Hitler became Chancellor of the German Republic. Swearing the oath of office, he declared: 'I will employ my strength for the welfare of the German people, protect the Constitution and laws of the German people, conscientiously discharge the duties imposed on me and conduct my affairs and office impartially and with justice to everyone'. The ensuing events, however, illustrated that Hitler had no intention of governing democratically. Quickly he took steps to ensure that he would be able to rule without opposition, and that the Jewish population in Germany would be subject to an increasing series of restrictions which deprived them of fundamental rights.

Onslaught against enemies of the State

As Chancellor, Hitler's first act was to persuade Hindenburg and the Cabinet to dissolve the *Reichstag* and institute new elections in the hope that the Nazis would achieve a majority. Germany, he proclaimed, was on the verge of a new awakening. On 4 February Hindenburg signed a decree under Article 48 which enabled police to prohibit public meetings and suppress subversive literature — this law was directed primarily against Communists and Socialists as well as other opponents of the NSDAP.

On 27 February, the *Reichstag* was set on fire, and a Dutch Communist, Marinus van der Lubbe, was discovered in the building. The Communists were blamed for the burning of the *Reichstag*, and several days later Hindenburg signed a number of emergency decrees which inadvertently led to the dissolution of the Constitution.

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Designed to prevent further Communist acts of subversion, these editors suspended freedom of speech, press and assembly as well as the freedom from invasion of privacy and house search. In order to protect public order, the death penalty was imposed for various crimes including treason, arson and railway sabotage.

In the days before the election, the Nazi Party swamped voters with propaganda, alleging that only by voting for the Nazis would a Communist revolution be thwarted. Despite such efforts, the NSDAP failed to win a majority of votes. As a consequence, the NSDAP was compelled to enter into a nationalist coalition with the DNVP (German National People's Party). After the election, the Nazis increased attacks on their opponents. The SA (Storm Troopers) numbering 400,000 intensified its assault against Communists, Socialists, trade unionists and Jews.

Prior to the opening of the *Reichstag*, the Cabinet approved an Enabling Act which gave the government dictatorial powers. This bill, which included the right to pass laws required to consolidate the 'National Revolution', required a two-thirds majority because it entailed a change in the Constitution. With the support of the Centre and Liberal parties, the Act was passed despite the opposition of the Socialists and Communists. With the Enabling Act in place, the Nazis were able to pass laws without the consent of the Parliament, even though this constituted a violation of the Constitution. Hence, from the beginning of Hitler's Chancellorship, democratic procedures were overturned, and parliamentary authority was discarded in favour of dictatorial control.

With the power to act independently, the Nazis were now able to initiate a campaign of harassment against German Jewry. In its manifesto of 1920, the Party stated that:

Only nationals can be citizens of the State. Only persons of German blood are Germans, regardless of their religion. No Jew can therefore be German. If it is not possible to expel him from the entire population of the State, then foreign nationals (non-citizens) are to be expelled from the Reich.

In the past, attempts had been made to incite the German people to embrace such a policy. These early attempts had largely failed, but with the power of the Enabling Act, Hitler was able to initiate legislation which would isolate German Jewry from public life. The

first phase of this onslaught, beginning in April 1933 and continuing until the middle of 1935, excluded Jews from taking part in German professional and cultural life.

On 1 April 1933 the Nazis proclaimed a boycott against Jewish shops, businesses and professional services. Several days previously Hitler met with Goebbels, who had become the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. In a record of this meeting, Goebbels wrote:

We shall only be able to combat the falsehoods abroad if we get at those who originated them or at those Jews living in Germany who have thus far remained unmolested. We must, therefore, proceed to a large-scale boycott of all Jewish business in Germany. Perhaps the foreign Jews will think better of the matter when their racial comrades in Germany begin to get it in the neck.¹

Prior to the boycott, the NSDAP leaders issued instructions for the boycott: all party units were to form local boycott committees. At this Cabinet meeting Hitler explained that an organized boycott was necessary to control popular opposition to the Jewish populace; to calm those in the Cabinet who feared an adverse public reaction, he stated that the boycott would last only one day. The Party's instructions were to avoid violence. In the event the boycott lasted three days, Storm Troopers were stationed outside Jewish businesses with pickets which read: 'Don't buy from Jews!'. In addition, anti-Jewish slogans were written on the windows of stores, and customers were verbally and physically abused. Commenting on the scene, Goebbels wrote in his diary: 'I drive along the ... street in order to observe the situation. All Jews' businesses are closed. SA men are posted outside the entrances. The public has everywhere proclaimed its solidarity. Discipline is exemplary. An imposing performance!'

Some Jews reacted to such acts of terror with a defiant pride. Robert Weisach, for example, the editor of a Zionist publication, called on his coreligionists to remain loyal to their community and heritage. In an editorial, *Wear the Yellow Badge with Pride*, he wrote:

The first of April 1933 can be a day of Jewish awakening and Jewish rebirth. If the Jews will it so! ... This is a sound reminder to all our traitors. He who slinks away from his community in order to improve his personal position shall not earn the reward of his treason. ... The Jew who denies his Judaism is no better a citizen than he who affirms it

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uprightly. To be a renegade is shameful enough. So long as the world seemed to reward this shame it seemed profitable. The profit is swept away, the Jew is rendered recognizable as such. He wears the yellow badge."

This assault against Jewry was followed on 7 April 1933 by the first anti-Jewish law: the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service Act. This decree eliminated Jews and political opponents of the Nazi regime from the civil service. Hindenburg's objections to this law were met in a paragraph which exempted officials who had already been employed as civil servants on or before 1 August 1934, or who had fought at the front for Germany or her allies during World War I, or whose fathers or sons had been killed in action. On the same day another law cancelled the admission of lawyers of non-Aryan descent to the bar and denied permission to those already admitted to practice law – the regulation was subject to the same exemption as the Professional Civil Service Act.

These laws were followed by similar laws which excluded Jews from the positions of lay assessors, jurors and commercial judges, patent lawyers, panel physicians in state social-insurance institutions, dentists, and dental technicians associated with these institutions. On 21 April a law was promulgated banning Jewish ritual slaughter (*shehita*), several days later the Law against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning limited the number of non-Aryan students. An accompanying order fixed this limit at 1.5 per cent. This meant that the Jewish community would henceforth be responsible for the education of Jewish pupils in segregated schools.

On 6 May the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service was extended to honorary professors, university lecturers and novitates. On 10 May a campaign against disaffected writers, academics and intellectuals was initiated. A public burning of un-German literature was organized in Berlin – all books written or published by Jews or which dealt sympathetically with the Jewish tradition were consigned to the flames. On 14 July a law was passed which cancelled the citizenship of any German who had been naturalized after 1918. This was designed to disenfranchise the 100,000 Jews who had taken refuge in Germany from anti-Semitism in other lands.

This was followed on 28 September by a law which forbade the employment by government authorities of non-Aryans or of persons

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married to them. On 29 September the Hereditary Farm Act was passed which declared that only those farmers who could prove that their ancestors had no Jewish blood as far back as 1800 could inherit farm property. In addition, the Reich Chamber of Culture was established which aimed to bring all the country's cultural activities under control. The result of such legislation was the elimination of all non-Aryans from German cultural life. On 4 October, political papers came under state control. Hence within only six months the Nazis had restricted public life in Germany to Aryans: through a series of legal decrees, Jews had been removed from all positions in society.

Such segregation was facilitated through a decree promulgated on 11 April which defined a non-Aryan as anyone who was descended from non-Aryan, especially Jewish, parents or grandparents. Such descent was categorized as non-Aryan even if only one parent or grandparent was non-Aryan, especially if the person was of the Jewish faith. Thus, in cases of racial ambiguity, religious affiliation was crucial. In cases of uncertainty, it was necessary to obtain an opinion from the expert on racial research who was attached to the Reich Minister of the Interior.

Through such anti-Jewish legislation, Hitler had managed to consolidate his power within the state. Yet he was facing opposition from within the party itself. The SA under the leadership of Ernst Röhm constituted a major obstacle to Hitler's dictatorial control. Even though Röhm had been intimately involved in the rise of Nazism, he had grave doubts about the direction of the party. Fearing that Hitler was prepared to sell out to the conservatives, he was bitterly critical of the Führer:

Adolf is rotten. He's betraying all of us. He only goes around with reactionaries. His old comrades aren't good enough for him. So he brings in these East Prussian generals. They're the ones he pals around with now. . . . But Adolf is and will always be a civilian, an 'artist', a dreamer. Just leave me be, he thinks. Right now all he wants to do is sit up in the mountains and play God. And guys like us have to cool our heels, when we're burning for action. . . . The chance to do something really new and great, something that will turn the world upside down – it's a chance in a lifetime. But Hitler keeps putting me off. He wants to let things drift. Keeps counting on a miracle. That's Adolf for you. . . . Where the hell is revolutionary spirit to come from afterwards? From a bunch of old fogies who certainly aren't going to win the new war.

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Don't try to kid me, the whole lot of you. You're hitting the whole heart and soul of our movement go to pot.³

Fearing the excesses of the SA, Hitler resolved on a course of action which eventually resulted in the elimination of the SA. Goaded by Röhm's opponents, Hitler became convinced that Röhm was plotting a coup and resolved to take action. On 1 July 1934 Hitler left Bonn for Munich where he was told that the SA had attempted an unsuccessful push. Hitler then drove to Bad Wiessee where Röhm and his men were staying at the Hotel Hanselbauer. Hitler and other Nazis stormed into the hotel and arrested Röhm. Meanwhile in Munich, SA men were rounded up. On Hitler's return to the city, a secret order was given to execute political opponents. Murder squads tortured and executed those whose names had been placed on death lists by Göring and Himmler. Röhm, too, was assassinated.

This event, the Night of the Long Knives, cleaned the party of potential opponents to Hitler's rule. The German people were informed that Röhm had been plotting against the party. Newspapers reported that Hitler had put an end to immoral homosexual activity within the ranks of the SA. The Führer declared that he had rescued the nation and prevented the loss of thousands of lives. In a speech in the *Reichstag* on 13 July, he justified his actions and the delegates applauded this bloodbath. To the army he proclaimed that from this time forward only the army would be the bearer of arms. The *Reichstag* then passed a decree that legalized this killing as an emergency measure necessary for state security. Joining in this rejoicing, Hindenburg sent Hitler a telegram congratulating him on this suppression of treason.

In the wake of these events, Hindenburg died. On 2 August, just an hour after his death, it was decreed that the office of President would be merged with that of Chancellor – this meant that Hitler was now established as head of state and commander of the armed forces. All German soldiers then swore a personal oath to the Führer in which they stated their obedience and loyalty to the new regime which had overcome its opponents and become the supreme power in the land.

I swear before God this sacred oath: I will render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German nation and people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to risk my life at any time for this oath.⁵

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Discussion: Tightening of the noose

For Hitler, the NSDAP was more than a political party: it represented the hope for a new civilization based on race. Once Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor, it became possible for the Nazis to put their ideology into practice. At the core of Nazi social policy was the quest to rid Germany of a Jewish presence. As we have seen, the emergence of political anti-Semitism was a response to social and intellectual developments within Germany in the pre-war period. By the 1930s the Jewish community had become an easy target for the discontent and disorientation felt by many Germans in the wake of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Within German society Jews were easily identifiable, and much resented because of their relative success and affluence. By 1933, for example, Jews composed more than 16 per cent of lawyers, 10 per cent of doctors, and 5 per cent of editors and writers even though they constituted less than 1 per cent of the population.

From 1933 the assault against Jewish was gradual, and the early forms of persecution gave no indication of what was to follow. For many ordinary Germans, such agitation was no more than the Jews deserved. And, once the Nazis were firmly entrenched, any form of opposition – either from within the Jewish community or from sympathetic non-Jews – became totally impractical. Paradoxically, in such an environment of hatred and fear, it became possible for many Germans to harbour anti-Semitic sentiments while retaining positive relationships with individual Jews. As Melina Maschmann remarked in her memories of this period:

I had learned from the example of my parents that one could have anti-Semitic opinions without this interfering in one's personal relations with individual Jews. There may be a vestige of tolerance in this attitude, but it is really just this confusion which I blame for the fact that I later contrived to dedicate body and soul to an inhuman political system, without this giving me doubts about my own individual decency. In preaching that all the misery of the nation was due to the Jews or that the Jewish spirit was sedition and Jewish blood corrupting, I was not compelled to think of my Jewish friends. I had seen the Jews being driven from their professions and homes and imprisoned in ghettos, the points switched automatically in my mind to steer me round the thought that such a fate could also overtake you or

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old Levy. It was only the Jew who was being persecuted and 'made harmless'.⁶

In 1933 it was impossible to predict the reign of error that would be visited upon European Jewry during the Holocaust.⁷ In his autobiography completed before his execution after the end of the war, Rudolf Hess, the commandant at Auschwitz, related events that no one could have anticipated during the early years of Nazi rule:

I had to appear cold and indifferent to events which must have wrung the heart of anyone possessed of human feelings. I had to appear to the gas chambers. ... I had to see everything. I had to watch hour by hour, by night and by day, the burning and the removal of bodies, the extraction of the teeth, the cutting of the hair, the whole grisly business. ... I had to do all this, because I was the one to whom everyone looked, because I had to show them all that I did not merely issue the orders and make the regulations but was also prepared to be present at whatever task I had assigned to my subordinates. ... In the face of such grim considerations, I would bury all human considerations as deeply as possible. ... I had to observe everything with a cold indifference. ... In Auschwitz, I truly had no reason to complain that I was bored. ... I had to see one end in view, to drive everyone and everything forward, so that I could see the sun and the stars and the moon. ... Every German had to commit himself heart and soul to the task which might well be ... by the will of the *Reichsführer SS*, Auschwitz became the greatest human extermination centre of all time.⁸

At the beginning of Hitler's Chancellorship who could have predicted the tragedy that would unfold in the ensuing years?

One central question about this sequence of events continues to vex scholars of the Nazi period: what was the role of Hitler in the assault against European Jewry? According to historians of the 'intentionalist' school, Hitler was committed to the extermination of the Jewish people early in his political career. The Fichters, they argue, willed their destruction. On the other hand, historians of the 'structuralist' school reject the view that Hitler had a long-term plan for the annihilation of Jewry. The Final Solution, they believe, was implemented as a consequence of the inner momentum of the Third Reich. According to this interpretation, responsibility for the Final Solution extends beyond Hitler to those who implemented this

policy. In this regard, they stress that there is no concrete evidence that Hitler gave the order for mass murder.

Whatever the true interpretation of Hitler's role in the Final Solution, there is no question that the massacre against the SA was directly ordered by the Führer. While legislation aimed at depriving German Jews of their role in society was being promulgated, Hitler embarked on a murderous course of action against his own supporters. On 29 June 1934, while making a tour of labour camps in Westphalia, he made the final decision to act against the SA. At two o'clock the next morning, he took off from the Hangelar airfield near Bonn to fly to Munich. Before his departure, he telegraphed Röhm to expect to see him at Bad Wiessee the next day where he was enjoying his sick leave with SA companions.

The purge, however, had already begun. On 29 June various SA local leaders were arrested in Munich on the pretext that they were about to initiate a coup d'état. At the Ministry of the Interior, Hitler tore off the insignias of SA *Obergruppenführer* Schneiderbauer and his deputy and cursed them for their deceit. The next day a column of cars sped from Munich to Bad Wiessee where Heinke, the SA *Obergruppenführer* for Silesia was discovered sleeping with one of Röhm's men. According to accounts he was dragged out and shot on the road. In Munich itself, about 800 men of Sepp Dietrich's SS *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler were transported from their barracks and ordered to act as a shooting squad at the Stadelheim Prison.

Hitler ordered that a revolver be left in Röhm's cell, but Röhm refused to use it. According to an eye-witness, Röhm declared: 'If I am to be killed, let Adolf do it himself'. In the 1937 Munich trial of all those involved, it was revealed that he was shot by two SS officers. Röhm wanted to say something, but he was ordered to remain silent. Röhm then stripped to the waist and was killed. In Berlin, killings began on the night of 29-30 June, continuing throughout Saturday and Sunday. The main place of killing was the Lichterfelde Cadet School where leaders of the SA were executed. In addition, General von Schleicher and his wife were shot at their villa, as was General von Bredow. Gregor Strasser was arrested on Saturday and killed in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse Prison.

When Hitler returned to Munich on Saturday, Himmler gave him a list of those who had been killed. Hitler's finger moved down the list while Göring and Himmler spoke at his side. On Sunday the executions continued while Hitler gave a tea party in the Chancellery

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garden. During this period, as many as 54 men were shot in Breslau, and another 32 in Silesia. Here, there is no question that Hitler was the driving force behind this murderous activity. The Night of the Long Knives was a powerful illustration of the Nazi capacity for violence and bloodshed, a lesson learned too late by many Jews who continued to live in Germany and long for better days.

Notes

- 1 Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, London, 1990, p. 82.
- 2 R. Lardau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, London, 1992, p. 25.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 4 Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, London, 1995, p. 286.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 6 David Layton, *Germany and the Third Reich 1933-45*, London, 1998, p. 91.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

9. The Nuremberg Laws

Legislation against the Jewish community culminated in the Nuremberg Laws which redefined German citizenship, prohibited the pollution of the race, and required couples to undergo medical examinations prior to marriage. These laws provided a legal justification for racial anti-Semitism and transformed the notion of German blood into an official government policy.

Legislating citizenship

Segregation between the races had been a feature of German anti-Semitism since the nineteenth century. Theodor Fritsch, for example, advocated the separation between Aryans and Jews in his *Antisemiten-Katechismus* which contained two commandments for maintaining racial purity:

Thou shalt keep thy blood pure. Consider it a crime to soil the noble Aryan breed of thy people by mingling it with the Jewish breed. For thou must know that Jewish blood is everlasting, putting the Jewish stamp on body and soul unto the farthest generations.

Thou shalt have no racial intercourse with the Jew. Avoid all contact with the Semite, and especially his womenfolk. Do not marry from thyself and thy family, especially thy daughters, lest they suffer injury of body and soul.¹

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler expressed similar racial ideas: 'Blood sin and desecration of the race are the original sin in this world and the end of a humanity which surrenders to it,' he wrote.² According to Hitler, marriage is not an end in itself – rather it should serve the higher goal of increasing and preserving species and race: 'A folkish state,' he insisted, 'must therefore begin by raising marriage from the