

Was the road to Auschwitz a 'straight road' or a 'twisted path'?

Introduction:

The Holocaust is one of the most researched, documented and well known genocides to have ever taken place throughout history. Planning and executing this industrial mass killing relied almost entirely on the state apparatus, and the bureaucratic efficiency that was carved out for the task of eliminating the Jews in Germany and German-occupied Europe. While there is evidence to support both claims of Holocaust perpetration: that it was planned meticulously in advance, versus its slow escalation from coerced emigration to industrial mass murder, pinning down the actual truth has proven to be a more difficult and disputed area.

This essay will attempt to lay out the argument against the 'straight road' approach. Little to no evidence of planning for the massive effort to eliminate Jews in Europe before the Second World War exists. No such planning took place in the years before the start of the Second World War; the Nazi's encouraged emigration from Germany instead of pursuing extermination immediately. From this, a safe conclusion can be drawn that the desire to eliminate the Jews came after, at least, the conquest of Poland in 1939. We will examine throughout this essay the causality behind the change in thinking, and how the road to Auschwitz was reached.

Beginnings:

When the Nazi party roared into power in Germany in 1933, anti-semitism was at the core of the ideology. Many of its members were fervently anti-semitic and believed that Jews had played a large part in Germany's loss in the First World War. However, the Jews were still neighbours, friends and family. They were initially not forced into ghettos and camps, or forced to wear the famous Star of David, and the first of the Concentration Camps to be created was Dachau, and that housed mostly political prisoners, not Jews. The fact that no plans to eradicate Jews in Europe through mass murder existed prior to the Wannsee Conference is described by Peter Longerich in his book *Wannsee*, named for the conference and location where the fate of the Jews was decided. This is described as being the responsibility of one Reinhard Heydrichs to "create an overarching plan" (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 3). Had an all-encompassing plan been created before the Second World War, the German government would have been totally incapable of knowing specifics. For example, the number of Jews in Poland, or in the areas of the Western Soviet Union that very quickly came under German military control would have been beyond the German government to know and plan accordingly. The same can be said for the Benelux nations, as well as France and even Austria, which was annexed into Germany in 1938.

This lack of preparedness can be seen throughout the period of German conquest in the 1930's, primarily with the approach taken in Austria. When, in 1938, Germany annexed Austria in the chaotic Anschluss, panic set in across the Austrian Jewish population. According to Giles Macdonogh's book *1938: Hitler's Gamble* "25,000 Viennese Jews had asked for passports [to Poland]", and, when faced with this issue, Hermann Göring, one of the most powerful men in Germany, said: "The Jews can go, but they can kindly leave behind their money" (MacDonogh, 2009, Pg. 44). Surely, if a plan had been created from the outset to exterminate all Jews within German territory, occupied or otherwise, then the German government would not be so willing to let them emigrate. This can be seen

throughout the period of Nazi rule in Germany and increasing swathes of occupied Europe, up until the meeting at Wannsee in January 1942. The initial policy of the Nazi government, as well as their aligned puppet regimes throughout Europe, had been to encourage emigration, at a massive cost for Jewish individuals and organisations to the benefit of the state. Direct enrichment of state organisations through huge levies and emigration costs were of massive benefit to the German government at this time. As Longerich notes, “by the outbreak of the Second World War, the Nazi regime had succeeded in driving about 250,000 Jews out of Germany” (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 12).

Why then, did the German government move from coerced emigration to extermination as a course of action? This can most easily be explained through the fact that almost the entire continent of Europe, excluding states such as Sweden, Switzerland, Spain and Portugal which remained neutral, and German allies such as Italy, Hungary and Romania, were at war with Germany. This of course prevented expelling Jewish individuals to these areas, and the pre-war destinations of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Palestine became impossible as war now raged between Germany and these countries. Instead, in the early stages of the war with the Allies, and before war broke out with the Soviet Union, repression of the Jewish peoples of Europe became more intense. For example, as early as 1939, regions of occupied Poland were exposed to the first stages of mass killing. As Longerich notes, the use of a “gas van to murder the mentally ill” (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 25) was an idea and method of execution that became more and more prevalent in the occupied regions of the Soviet Union.

Even at this stage however, in 1941, extermination of the entire Jewish population of Europe was not the goal of the Nazi government. Deportation and resettlement, away from the German state, was still the primary method of anti-Jewish action undertaken by the Nazis. Riga, in Latvia, was the “second target destination for deportations from Reich territory” (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 27), showing that the Nazi government was still not set on extermination as the only cause to achieve their goals. However, it is also at this time that the administration became more involved in systematic, mass killing.

The First Mass Killings:

In January 1941, 10000 Jews in the Łódź Ghetto were killed by the gas van method mentioned earlier (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 26). This huge number of killings took place at the beginning of a clear shift within the Nazi government towards extermination instead of forced emigration and internment. Longerich notes that “during Autumn 1941, preparations were clearly being made to construct an extermination camp close to Minsk” (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 28). This decision can be seen largely through a strategic, as well as a political lens. Since the inception of the Nazi party and its accompanying ideology, antisemitism played a massive role in its popularity and decision making. The passing of the Nuremberg racial laws in 1935, which set out clear definitions of Jewish races and subclasses according to Nazi doctrine, as well as their rights and freedoms, is evidence enough of this. The massive swathes of Europe that came under the control of Germany during this time, as well as the accompanying Jewish, Roma and other discriminated against populations, and the stagnating Eastern front in the winter of 1941, made it so that these peoples had no place left to go but to the extermination camps.

Further forced emigration of peoples deemed unworthy of remaining in Europe was now impossible, and as we have seen, the first mass killings took place in what could be seen as being rudimentary ways, when compared with what would later become the main engine through which the Holocaust was perpetrated. With the creation of camps such as Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen in the occupied regions of Eastern Europe and throughout Germany, the foundations for massive scale industrial killing were laid. The question that begs to be answered, is how far in advance these camps, and the massive number of people murdered in them, were planned. Additionally, the involvement of key Nazi officials, such as Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler show that this shift in policy came from the highest echelons of government and political power. However, it is important to note, as Longerich does in his work *Wannsee*, that while it may be tempting to look at that conference as the key shifting point in the perpetration of the Holocaust, "it is clear that no decision to murder the European Jews was made at the Wannsee Conference" (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 3).

This is important to note and understand as there are many points throughout the history of the Holocaust that can be viewed as major turning points, or areas of change. The opening of Dachau is another one of these, and as the first of the camps like it throughout Germany it acted as the initiator of the fear and anxiety of the Gestapo. Julie Boyd notes that "Ever since the Nazi's came to power, camps had been an intrinsic part of national life" (Boyd and Patel, 2023, Pg. 265). While Dachau was not an extermination camp, its creation and the lessons learnt from its years of operation prior to the creation of the death camps in Poland and throughout Europe were of undoubtable support. It also provides an explanation for one of the more controversial and irreconcilable parts of the Holocaust - inaction by German civilians in the face of clear mass extermination.

Motivations:

The argument that has been presented in this document so far is one of no plans had been created in the years leading up to the Second World War. Evidence suggests that despite the involvement of many top Nazi officials, planning for the perpetration of the actual atrocities only began as late as 1941, two years after the start of the war. The actual construction and operation of concentration and extermination camps began at differing times - some began as internment camps, others were purpose built to serve as extermination camps. The shift away from forced emigration, which was of great benefit to the German government and its coffers in the years preceding war, to total eradication of the Jewish people in Europe can be seen through the expediency and speed with which the "Final Solution" took hold over German occupied Europe.

As we have seen, this change in approach can be seen most clearly through a military strategic lens. But it is not without its backing in political and ideological means. The rhetoric of the Nazi party had been, since its inception, anti-semitic. While it had not been outwardly genocidal in its actions until the first Jews were murdered in the camps, there is no denying that the language and actions of the German state in the years preceding the Second World War played a huge role in the motivations and actions of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

This indicates that the planning and perpetration of the actions that resulted in the deaths of six million Jewish people, and the thousands of other discriminated against individuals, in the Holocaust, were not planned in advance. Nazi rhetoric emphasised the need to remove the

Jews above all else, save for combatting Bolshevism. These matters were intertwined through the conspiracy theory of international Judeo-Bolshevism. Since the internal chaos following the end of the First World War, Hitler had become convinced that “a Jewish/Bolshevist conspiracy lay at the root of all Germany's problems” (Boyd and Patel, Pg. 26, 2023). This was, and still is, a core ideology of the National Socialist movement, and was used to great effect by propagandists of the regime, such as Joseph Goebbels, to convince the masses of treachery and the “stab in the back” myth to justify ever increasing methods of discrimination against the Jews of Germany. Understanding how the language and motivations of the Nazi state influenced the overall policy of moving towards total extermination as opposed to forced emigration is very important in the overall history of the Holocaust.

Another important and crucial step in understanding how the Holocaust played out can be found in examining the role that high ranking figures in the Nazi government played in forwarding the ideas of mass extermination. As we have already seen, Hermann Göring and the department that he ran, the Four Year Plan, stood to gain a tremendous amount by forcing wealthy Jewish citizens of Germany, and the areas that were annexed into it before the Second World War, into exile. A Jew could only leave Germany for the common destinations of the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada or Palestine if “he had enough money to pay for the emigration tax, or could raise it by selling off his goods” (MacDonogh, 2009, Pg. 91). This forced payment to the German state, something that was clearly an incredibly distressing act for anyone forced into it, was a sick and cruel action by the Nazi government to provide an air of legitimacy to their actions. Looking back, it is clear that it was a cash grab to help fill the coffers of a struggling war economy in peacetime, to the direct benefit of those running the nation. Bureaucrats and political strongmen like Göring stood the most to gain from the forced emigration of Jews, who often had to sell valuable possessions to afford the move to another nation. Even this was not safe from the cruelty of the Nazi government however. If a Jew or Jewish family had paid off their assets within Germany to make payment for emigration, the money that sat in a closed account could be “raided by the Ministry of Finance” (MacDonogh, 2009, Pg. 90).

This level of cruelty is depressingly clear throughout the entire period of Nazi rule in Germany and throughout the conquest of Europe. It also paints a picture that is undeniably “winding path” in its approach to the Final Solution. Had the Nazi plan been from the outset to destroy the Jews in their entirety, none of the actions taken to encourage emigration until the outbreak of conflict make sense in context. The obliteration of Jewish businesses in the *Kristallnacht* attacks during November 1938 is a clear display of this as well - the German state wanted the Jewish population to be scared, and more motivated to leave by angering and supercharging popular hatred of the Jews.

Conclusion:

This document has attempted to document the ways in which the German government coerced and forced Jewish people into leaving Germany prior to the start of the Second World War, in an attempt to show the reality of the planning and perpetration of the Holocaust. It is clear from examining the evidence, that the plan had been to force as many Jews as possible to leave Germany in a “legitimate” manner to avoid international scrutiny. Afterall, if the Jews had left of their own free will, then the German state could avoid prosecution of awkward accusations of mistreatment and genocide. It also allowed them to

continue their conquest of weaker European neighbours, such as Austria and Czechoslovakia with little to no intervention from the British and French. This served not only to directly enrich the German state and help balance its books, but also to slip more wealth into the hands of some of the most influential people in the German government.

Once the early German victories started to pile up, and more and more of Europe fell under the direct control of Germany and her puppet regimes, more Jewish people than the state could realistically hope to force to emigrate changed the result needed. In typically Nazi fashion, this “problem was in need of a ‘solution’” (Longerich, 2021, Pg. 13). In added twists of cruelty, people who had been discriminated against for almost a decade under Nazi rule were now moved by train, often in cattle carriages, throughout the Nazi controlled European periphery. They were forced to live in squalor, before being marched or shunted to the death camps that would see millions upon millions killed in just a few years. This was all done systematically, efficiently and bureaucratically, sometimes in the direct view of the German population. The inaction of the average German citizen, on an overwhelming scale, is something that still, possibly deservedly so, haunts the German nation to this day.

Understanding that no clear plan for the extermination of the Jews existed before the start of the Second World War is important to unlocking a piece of the history of the Holocaust that is often overlooked: the ease with which the German state, using its near decade of propaganda and antisemitic rhetoric, propagated and carried out one of the worst Genocides in human history. Maybe more relevant than ever in today's world is understanding just how easily these facts can be twisted to support abhorrent ideologies such as Holocaust-denialism and neo-Nazi, as well as modern fascistic movements all over the world. It is an important fact to remember during any examination of the Holocaust, that there are still large numbers of people who doubt the reality of the horror, and who feel absolved to ignore and downplay the misery, suffering and deaths of millions, often while spreading similar messages to the Nazis. Perhaps the best example of this, in modern contemporary terms, can be seen in the bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israel. *The Guardian* reported in October 2023 that the Israeli government saw Palestinians as “backward and a burden [to] the country” (McGreal, 2023). This language is so depressingly, clearly similar to that used by the Nazis that parallels, sometimes uncomfortable ones, have been drawn between the two states.

It falls to all of us, no matter our political ideology or affiliation, to recognise and stand against this, to stop even more innocent people losing their lives in the endless quest for violence that authoritarianism and discrimination demand. To end, a quote that has often been used throughout the war in Gaza that encapsulates the message that this document has tried to forward: Never Again Means Never Again for Anyone (Finkelstein, 2023).

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