

**Mass Murder and German Society in the  
Third Reich:  
Interpretations and Dilemmas**

**By Saul Friedländer**

**Hayes Robinson Lecture Series No.5 (2001)**

Presented at  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
on 6th March 2001

Published in 2001 by Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey.

Design and typesetting by the Publications Unit, Royal Holloway.

ISBN 0-902194-57-7

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INTRODUCTION TO  
**NEW HAYES ROBINSON LECTURE SERIES**

by

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Each year in March, a distinguished international historian is invited to give a public lecture at Royal Holloway. Past speakers have included Lawrence Stone, David Cannadine, Simon Schama, Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Brown, Linda Colley, Olwen Hufton and Robert Fogel. Their selected themes have ranged challengingly, from sexuality to long life, to visions of the afterlife.

The lecture is organised by the History Department under the terms of a benefaction from the estate of Margaret Hayes-Robinson, who was a much-loved Head of Royal Holloway's History Department (1899-1911) in the days when higher education for women was still being pioneered. The new series, inaugurated in 1992, has become a popular occasion in the College's annual timetable. Recent meetings have attracted over 200 friends of the Department. To our pleasure, these include many former students from both Royal Holloway and Bedford Colleges, as well as colleagues from an array of Universities and schools within the London area - and numerous guests from the local community in Egham. The success of the lectures has provided the basis for a new publication series, zestfully inaugurated by Natalie Zemon Davis's *Remaking Impostors: From Martin Guerre to Sommersby* (1997). The series has continued with Linda Colley's *Shakespeare and the Limits of National Culture* (1999), Olwen Hufton on *Whatever Happened to the History of the Nun?* (2000) and Bob Fogel on *Long Life in the Modern World: Changes in the Process of Ageing* (also 2000).

Details of the lecture programme are available from the History Department Postgraduate Office, Royal Holloway, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX. Please write; or telephone 01784-443311; or email [pg.history@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:pg.history@rhul.ac.uk).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The History Department gratefully acknowledges  
generous support  
for the 2001 Hayes Robinson lecture  
from Royal Holloway's  
*German Department & Centre for Holocaust Studies*  
as well as from  
*London's Wiener Institute.*

Their friendly assistance in providing financial support  
and publicity for the lecture  
is warmly acknowledged.

## MASS MURDER AND GERMAN SOCIETY IN THE THIRD REICH: INTERPRETATIONS AND DILEMMAS

By early August 1941, some six weeks after the German attack on the USSR, the murder of the Jews in Soviet territory had expanded from the killing of men to that of entire communities. In the small town of Bjelaja Zerkow, south of Kiev, occupied by the 295th Infantry Division of Army Group South, the Wehrmacht area commander, Colonel Riedl, ordered the registration of all Jewish inhabitants and asked the SS Sonderkommando 4a, a sub-unit of Einsatzgruppe C, to murder them.

On 8 August, a section of the Sonderkommando, led by SS Obersturmführer August Häfner, arrived in the town.<sup>1</sup> Between August 8 and August 19, a company of Waffen SS attached to the Kommando shot all of the 800 to 900 local Jews, with the exception of a group of children under the age of five. What followed has often been described;<sup>2</sup> when closely examined, however, it may lead to some new insights.

First, I shall dwell upon the events of Bjelaja Zerkow and, as a corollary, recall the widespread presence of members of the Wehrmacht at the sites of the massacres, as well as the participation of many of them in the mass killing of the Jews in occupied Soviet territory. This will lead to a reassessment of the German people's knowledge and attitudes about these exterminations. Finally, the description of the horror, the agony of the children of Bjelaja Zerkow, confronts the historian with a peculiar challenge that transcends the concrete issues dealt with in the presentation; it will be evoked in the summation.

### *Bjelaja Zerkow, 19-22 August 1941, and the participation of the Wehrmacht in the extermination of the Jews*

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<sup>1</sup> About the operation of Sonderkommando 4a and of its sub-units, see among others Helmut Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen: Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, 1938-42 (Frankfurt, 1993), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> See mainly Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers*, 1938-40, ed. Helmut Krausnick and Harold C. Deutsch (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 534 ff. The main documents relating to these events are available in English translation in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Reiss (eds), *'The Good Old Days': The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York, 1991), pp. 137 ff. See also Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York, 2000), pp. 617-19.

As mentioned, one group of Jewish children was not immediately killed. They were abandoned without food or water in a building at the outskirts of the town near the Wehrmacht barracks. On 19 August, many of these children were taken away in three crowded trucks and shot at a nearby rifle range; ninety remained in the building guarded by a few Ukrainians.<sup>3</sup>

Soon, the screams of these ninety children became so unbearable that the soldiers called in two field chaplains, a Protestant and a Catholic, to take some 'remedial action'.<sup>4</sup> The chaplains found the children half naked, covered with flies, and lying in their own excrement. Some of the older ones were eating mortar off the walls; the infants were mostly comatose. The divisional chaplains were alerted and, after an inspection, they reported the matter to the first staff officer of the division, Lieutenant Colonel Helmuth Groscurth.

Groscurth went to inspect the building. There he met Oberscharführer Jäger, the commander of the Waffen SS unit who had murdered all the other Jews of the town; Jäger informed him that the remaining children were to be 'eliminated'. Colonel Riedl, the Feldkommandant, confirmed the information and added that the matter was in the hands of the SD,<sup>5</sup> and that the Einsatzkommando had received its orders from the highest authorities.

At this point, Groscurth took it upon himself to order the postponement of the killings by one day, notwithstanding Häfner's threat to lodge a complaint. Groscurth even positioned armed soldiers around a truck already filled with children and prevented it from leaving. All of this he communicated to the staff officer of Army Group South. The matter was referred to the Sixth Army, probably because Einsatzkommando 4a operated in its area. On that same evening, the commander of the Sixth Army, Field Marshall Walter von Reichenau, personally decided that 'the operation ... had to be completed in a suitable way'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The Sicherheitsdienst or SD was the security service of the SS.

<sup>6</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 138.

The next morning, 21 August, Groscurth was summoned to a meeting at local headquarters in the presence of Colonel Riedl, Captain Luley, a counterintelligence officer who had reported to von Reichenau on the course of the events, Obersturmführer Häfner, and the chief of Einsatzkommando 4a, the former architect SS Standartenführer Paul Blobel. Luley declared that, although he was a Protestant, he thought that the 'chaplains should limit themselves to the welfare of the soldiers'; with the full support of the Feldkommandant, Luley accused the chaplains of 'stirring up trouble'.

According to Groscurth's report, Riedl then 'attempted to draw the discussion into the ideological domain. ... The elimination of the Jewish women and children', he explained, 'was a matter of urgent necessity, whatever the form it took.' Riedl complained that the division's initiative had delayed the execution by twenty-four hours. At that point, as Groscurth later described it, Blobel, who had been silent up until then, intervened: he supported Riedl's complaint and 'added that it would be best if those troops who were nosing around carried out the executions themselves and the commanders who were stopping the measures took command of these troops'. 'I quietly rejected this view', Groscurth wrote, 'without taking any position as I wished to avoid any personal acrimony.' Finally, Groscurth mentioned Reichenau's attitude: 'When we discussed what further measures should be taken, the Standartenführer declared that the Commander-in-Chief [Reichenau] recognised the necessity of eliminating the children and wished to be informed once this had been carried out.'<sup>7</sup>

On 22 August, the children were executed. On the following day, Captain Luley reported the completion of the task to Sixth Army headquarters and was recommended for a promotion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> Bernd Boll and Hans Saffrian, 'Auf dem Weg nach Stalingrad: Die 6. Armee, 1941-2', in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg, 1995), p. 277.

In terms of criminal behaviour, the dividing line did not run between the SS and the army but, as the Bjelaja Zerkow case shows, within the Wehrmacht itself. In this particular instance, alongside the SS, the police battalions and the Ukrainian auxiliaries, there were many soldiers and officers, including Field Marshal von Reichenau, Colonel Riedl, Captain Luley, and their kind; other soldiers and officers like Groscurth were shocked by what they witnessed. All in all, however, it was not the second group that characterised the behaviour of the Wehrmacht. As we shall see, even Groscurth's position is troubling.

The first Germans with any authority to be confronted with the fate of the ninety Jewish children were the four chaplains. The field chaplains were compassionate, the divisional ones somewhat less so. In any case, after sending in their reports, the chaplains were not heard from again.

The killing of the Jewish adults and children was public. In a postwar court testimony, a cadet officer who had been stationed in Bjelaja Zerkow at the time of the events, after describing in gruesome detail the execution of a batch of approximately 150 to 160 Jewish adults, made the following comments:<sup>9</sup>

The soldiers knew about these executions and I remember one of my men saying that he had been permitted to take part. ... All the soldiers who were in Bjelaja Zerkow knew what was happening. Every evening, the entire time I was there, rifle fire could be heard, although there was no enemy in the vicinity.

The same occurred all along the Eastern Front. Regular Wehrmacht soldiers were often ordered to assist the Einsatzkommandos in their task or they volunteered to do so. The eager participation of regular troops in the extermination campaign, for example, during the advance of the Sixth Army into formerly Soviet-occupied areas of Poland – particularly in Lvov and Tarnopol – and then into Soviet territory, is well established.<sup>10</sup> In some areas, divisional commanders took it upon themselves, without any prodding, to fill

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<sup>9</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Heer and Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg*, p. 271.

the role of the Sonderkommandos or of the police battalions when these units were not immediately available. Thus in the Generalkommissariat of Belorussia, the commander of Infantry Division 707 decided in the early days of October 1941 to act on his own. The division murdered rapidly and efficiently; its men shot 19,000 Jews, mainly in villages and small towns. In larger towns, the task was divided between Reserve Police Battalion 11, reinforced by Lithuanian auxiliaries and SD units from Minsk.<sup>11</sup>

Military commanders did not bother to explain the killings of women and children to their troops. Nor did Field Marshall von Reichenau in his notorious Order of the Day of 10 October 1941: 'The soldier must have complete understanding for the necessity of the harsh but just atonement of Jewish subhumanity.'<sup>12</sup> Hitler praised the Order of the Day and demanded its distribution to all front-line units in the East.<sup>13</sup> Within a few weeks, Reichenau's proclamation was imitated by the commander of the Eleventh Army, von Manstein, and the commander of the Seventeenth Army, Hoth.<sup>14</sup>

The number of Jews who fell victim to the participation of the Wehrmacht in murder operations is hard to evaluate and an estimate of the number of soldiers and officers who took part in the massacres is impossible. It is no less difficult to evaluate the reactions of Wehrmacht members who witnessed the killings but we know, from the most diverse sources, that vast numbers of soldiers and officers did attend and often photographed full-scale massacres. 'Why these Jews were beaten to death', a lance corporal of the 562nd Baker's Company testified about the massacres in Kovno. 'I did not find out. ... The bystanders were almost exclusively German soldiers who were observing the cruel incidents out of curiosity ...'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Gerlach, 'Deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen, Besatzungspolitik und der Mord an den Juden in Weissrussland, 1941-3', in Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik, 1939-45* (Frankfurt, 1998), pp. 281-2.

<sup>12</sup> The English translation is quoted in Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991), p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-1.

<sup>15</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 32.



A selection of soldiers' letters shows how widely Nazi antisemitic stereotypes and ideological statements about the Jews had been internalised.<sup>16</sup> Many of these soldiers were probably young enough to have been educated under the new regime and to have spent some time in the Hitler Youth, the anti-Jewish brutality of which had been openly demonstrated during the prewar years.<sup>17</sup> The anti-Jewish violence of the Wehrmacht rank and file was already manifest during the Polish campaign, but it has often been overlooked by historians due to the well-known protests of General Johannes von Blaskowitz and some other high ranking officers against SS atrocities.<sup>18</sup>

The traditional military elites were less rabidly antisemitic than the Nazi von Reichenau, but their attitude regarding the Jews was nonetheless hostile. After a conversation with General von Roques, the commander of Army Group North, Field Marshall Wilhelm von Leeb noted:<sup>19</sup>

On July 8, 1941, Roques complained about the wholesale shooting of the Jews in Kovno (thousands) by local Lithuanian auxiliary police at the instigation of the German police. We have no control over these measures. All that remains is to keep one's distance. Roques correctly pointed out that the Jewish Question could hardly be solved in this manner. It would most reliably be solved by sterilising all Jewish males.

In his study of the Axis and the Holocaust, Jonathan Steinberg, after quoting the violently antisemitic remarks of a German counterintelligence officer in Lybia added: 'In many years of intensive research in German army archives, I have found fewer than five examples of German officers expressing anything other than the opinions quoted above.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum: Vernichtung. Das Judenbild in deutschen Soldatenbriefen, 1939-44* (Hamburg, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> On this topic, see Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Alexander B. Rossino, 'Destructive Impulses: German Soldiers and the Conquest of Poland', in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 7/3 (Winter 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Georg Meyer (ed.), *Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen und Lagebeurteilungen aus zwei Weltkriegen* (Stuttgart, 1976), p. 288, quoted in Jürgen Förster, 'The Wehrmacht and the War of Extermination against the Soviet Union', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 14 (1981), pp. 7 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941-3* (London, 1990), p. 98.

This having been said, we have seen how repelled some at least of the soldiers and officers were by what they had witnessed in Bjelaja Zerkow. The cadet officer who has already been quoted also declared in his postwar testimony: 'It was not curiosity which drove me to watch this, but disbelief that something of this type could happen. My comrades were also horrified by the executions.'<sup>21</sup> Such comments were not infrequent. Thus, on 9 December 1941, Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff, the intelligence officer at Army Group Centre headquarters, noted in his diary that the facts regarding the murder of the Jews were known to their full extent; they were discussed everywhere and considered by the officers as violating the honour of the German army.<sup>22</sup>

Let us now turn to the central personality in the Bjelaja Zerkow events: Lieutenant Colonel Helmuth Groscurth. A deeply religious Protestant, a conservative nationalist, he did not entirely reject some of the tenets of Nazism and yet became hostile to the regime and close to the opposition groups gathered around Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and General Ludwig Beck. He despised the SS and in his diary referred to Heydrich as 'a criminal'.<sup>23</sup> His decision to postpone the execution of the children in Bjelaja Zerkow by one day, notwithstanding Häfner's threat, and then to use soldiers to prevent an already loaded truck from leaving, is proof of courage.

Moreover, Groscurth did not hesitate to express his criticism of the killings in the conclusion of his report: 'Measures', he wrote, 'against women and children were undertaken which in no way differed from atrocities carried out by the enemy about which the troops are continually being informed. It is unavoidable that these events will be reported back home where they will be compared to the Lemberg atrocities.' [This is probably an allusion to executions perpetrated by the NKVD.]<sup>24</sup> For these comments, Groscurth was reprimanded by Reichenau a few days later. Yet his overall attitude is open to many questions.

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<sup>21</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Gerlach, 'Männer des 20. Juli und der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion', in Heer and Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg*, p. 434.

<sup>23</sup> For more about Groscurth's personality, see the detailed introduction to the *Tagebuch* (as cited above, fn. 2). For Groscurth's reference to Heydrich, see *Tagebuch*, p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 150.

After mentioning Reichenau's order to execute the children, Groscurth added: 'We then settled the details of how the executions were to be carried out. They are to take place during the evening of 22 August. I did not involve myself in the details of the discussion'.<sup>25</sup> The most troubling part of the report appears at the very end:<sup>26</sup>

The execution could have been carried out without any sensation if the Feldkommandantur and the Ortskommandantur had taken the necessary steps to keep the troops away. ... Following the execution of all the Jews in the town it became necessary to eliminate the Jewish children, particularly the infants. Both infants and children should have been eliminated immediately in order to avoid this inhuman agony.

Groscurth was captured by the Russians at Stalingrad, together with the remaining soldiers and officers of the Sixth Army. He died in Soviet captivity shortly afterwards, in April 1943.

### *Spreading Knowledge and Its Implications*

Groscurth's attitude, examined according to the standards of the time, falls into an in-between category that was supposedly shared by the bulk of the German population in the Third Reich: *Resistenz*. The term, coined as a historical concept in the 1970s, literally means biological immunity. It was used to define the attitude shared by a vast majority of Germans who, for various reasons, went along with Nazi policies and initiatives, but who, nonetheless, were at least partly immune to the ideology of the regime and even slightly defiant in some cases.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, *Resistenz* found expression, as we know, in small everyday occurrences but also in more fundamental domains, as in the attitude of part of the Church to confessional schooling, the keeping of crucifixes in classrooms in Bavaria, and so forth. An even more significant form of *Resistenz* was manifested in the growing anger of parts of the population about the murder of the mentally ill, leading to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-1.

<sup>27</sup> *Alltagsgeschichte der NS-Zeit: Neue Perspektive oder Trivialisierung?* - Kolloquien des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte (Munich, 1984).

Bishop von Galen's public protest, which compelled Hitler to abandon the major euthanasia action in August 1941. Was any form of *Resistenz* also expressed in regard to attitudes about other, more extensive, criminal activities, such as the extermination of the Jews?

The answer to this last point has usually been that only during the final three years of its existence did Nazi Germany live in the shadow of 'Auschwitz', and even then very few Germans were aware of the full scale of its horror; therefore, the majority remained blatantly passive. Indeed, knowledge of 'Auschwitz' was limited until late in the war, but information about the mass atrocities and wholesale extermination of Jews spread to the Reich soon after the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union.

Already in July 1941, for example, Swiss diplomatic and consular representatives in the Reich and in satellite countries were filing detailed reports about the mass murders perpetrated on the Eastern Front; their information all stemmed from German or satellite sources.<sup>28</sup> Senior and even mid-level officials in various German ministries had access to the reports of the Einsatzgruppen and to their computations of the huge numbers of Jews they had murdered. Such information was mentioned in Foreign Ministry correspondence in October 1941 and not even ranked 'top secret'.<sup>29</sup>

Among the German population, even in small towns in the westernmost part of the Reich, rumours about the massacre of Jews in the East were rife before the end of 1941. Thus, on 6 December 1941, the SD reported comments voiced by the inhabitants of Minden, near Bielefeld, about the fate of the Jews from their own town, deported to the East a few days beforehand. 'Until Warsaw,' people were saying, 'the deportation takes place in passenger trains. From there on, in cattle cars. ... In Russia, the Jews were to be put to work in former Soviet factories, while older Jews, or those who were ill, were to be shot ...'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For the reports of Swiss diplomatic representatives, see Daniel Bourgeois, *Business Helvétique et Troisième Reich* (Lausanne, 1998), pp. 197 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (London, 1980), p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> 'Einstellung der Bevölkerung zur Evakuierung der Juden', SD Aussenstelle Minden, 6/12/1941, M18/11 Bestand: Preussische Regierung Minden/SD Abschnitt Bielefeld, Nordrhein Westfälisches Staatsarchiv Detmold.

The information was first and foremost disseminated by soldiers on leave in the Reich or through letters and snapshots sent home as mementoes from the Eastern front.<sup>31</sup> An indirect confirmation of this situation appeared one year later in an internal, confidential, document from the Party Central Office in Munich. 'In the context of work on the final solution of the Jewish question,' the Party circular stated on 3 October 1942, 'there has recently been some discussion by people in various parts of the Reich about "very harsh measures" against Jews, particularly in the Eastern territories. It has been established that such statements - usually distorted and exaggerated - are passed on by the people on leave from the various units engaged in the East, who have themselves had opportunity to observe such measures ...'.<sup>32</sup> In the summer and autumn of 1941, the mass murder of Jews in occupied Soviet territory was undoubtedly an even greater sensation to be told to family and friends than in the summer of 1942.

In the autumn of 1941 and the winter of 1941/42, information about the massacres reached the Reich by way of many other channels. Margarete Sommer, in charge of assistance work at the Berlin Archdiocese, was informed in early 1942 by Lithuanian Catholics and also, it seems, by no less an official of the Ministry of the Interior than Hans Globke, of the mass killings in the Baltic countries of Jews deported from the Reich.<sup>33</sup> After meeting with Sommer, Bishop Wilhelm Berning of Osnabrück noted on 4 February 1942: 'For months no news has arrived from Litzmannstadt. All postcards are returned. ... Transports from Berlin arrive in Kovno, but it is doubtful whether anybody is still alive. No exact news from Minsk and Riga. Many have been shot. The intention is to exterminate the Jews entirely [*Es besteht wohl der Plan die Juden ganz auszurotten*].'<sup>34</sup> Schutzpolizei Captain Salitter, who accompanied

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<sup>31</sup> By the second half of 1941, there were over three million German soldiers on the Eastern front, including a number of Waffen-SS divisions. The mobile killing units (SS units, police units, and also, at times, larger SS groups) numbered several tens of thousands of members.

<sup>32</sup> 'Confidential Information', 9/10/1942, Parteikanzlei der NSDAP, quoted in *Nazism: A Documentary Reader, 1919-45. Vol. 3*, ed. J. Noakes and G. Pridham, *Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination* (Exeter, 2001), p. 614.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Volk (ed.), *Akten deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirche, 1933-45: Vol. 5* (Mainz, 1983), p. 675n.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the 11 December 1941 transport of 1,007 Jews from Düsseldorf to Riga, was told that the Latvians wondered why the Germans 'bothered to transport the Jews to Latvia and didn't annihilate them right there'.<sup>35</sup> As for the mass extermination of Jews in Bukovina and Transnistria, it was openly discussed in Bucharest society.<sup>36</sup> As Groscurth had warned in his memorandum, 'It is unavoidable that these events will be reported back home.'

In summary, there clearly was a widespread awareness in Germany of the Nazis' mass murder campaign against the Jews. However, popular *Resistenz* (such as in the case of the euthanasia) found expression mainly in regard to measures taken against Germans only.

Personal expressions of sympathy towards individual Jews, such as the greeting of Jews wearing the yellow star, were not uncommon. Victor Klemperer also writes about recurring words of encouragement from his foremen or passers-by, as he and a few other elderly Jews shovelled snow in the streets of Dresden in February 1942.<sup>37</sup> Even the warning of Jews by individuals involved in the killing system is known.<sup>38</sup>

Such initiatives sometimes demanded courage. But the only popular protest regarding the fate of the Jews was initiated in the spring of 1943 by the 'Aryan' wives of a group of Jewish men about to be deported from Berlin. The Jewish husbands were released. As for the proposal made in August 1943 by Archbishop Konrad von Preysing of Berlin to protest against the extermination publicly, it was turned down by his fellow bishops on the instigation of the head of the German episcopate, Cardinal Adolf Bertram of Breslau; it was also ignored by Pope Pius XII.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Yaakov Lozowick, 'Documentation: "Judenspediteur", Deportation Trains', in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 6/3 (1991), pp. 286 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Mihail Sebastian, *Journal, 1935-44* (Chicago, 2000), p. 397.

<sup>37</sup> Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1942-5* (New York, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Freund, 'Waiting', in Mark M. Anderson (ed.), *Hitler's Exiles: Personal Stories of the Flight from Nazi Germany to America* (New York, 1998), p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-65* (Bloomington, 2000), pp. 73 ff.

Preysing himself ultimately chose to remain silent and it is the lonely voice of the prior of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin, Bernhard Lichtenberg, that expressed the outrage of a segment of Christian society, in a sermon. Betrayed by two women parishioners, Lichtenberg paid for the protest with his life.<sup>40</sup> The discrepancy in attitudes regarding the victimisation of Germans and that of 'others' is even more striking when one turns to the actual oppositional groups. This is not the place to dwell upon this issue but explicit antisemitism among leading members of the conservative civilian and military opposition to Hitler is well established.<sup>41</sup>

Until recently, the *prevalent* historiographical interpretation of German attitudes towards the extermination of the Jews was based mainly on an argument well summed up by the Israeli historian David Bankier:<sup>42</sup>

The lack of committed opposition to the persecution of the Jews largely explains why so many deliberately sought refuge from the consciousness of genocide and tried to remain as ignorant as possible: because it salved their conscience. Knowledge generated guilt since it entailed responsibility, and many believed that they could preserve their dignity by avoiding the horrible truth. This deliberate escape into privacy and ignorance did not save the public from being aware of the Third Reich's criminality. Knowledge of the mass shootings and the gassing filtered through to it, increasing the concern about the consequences of the Nazis' criminal deeds.

What Bankier states, in other words, is not that the Germans could not have known about the extermination, but that they did not want to know. Avoidance or repression of disturbing knowledge is undoubtedly a very common phenomenon and, logically, it could apply to the attitude of a majority of Germans regarding the fate of the Jews. It is an interpretation that cannot be easily proven or disproved. Information was manifestly available; but, how can

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<sup>40</sup> Otto Ogermann, *Bis zum letzten Atemzug* (Leutesdorf, 1985), quoted in R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-45* (New York, 1992), p. 268.

<sup>41</sup> Gerlach, 'Männer des 20. Juli', p. 434.

<sup>42</sup> David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution* (London, 1992), p. 156.

one demonstrate that the many Germans confronted with it either understood its significance, or denied its reliability, either repressed it or assessed it as a possibility, not, however, as a certainty?

Notwithstanding these various possibilities, I am suggesting here that the most plausible answer to this still open question could nonetheless be as follows: first, the information was widely available, as shown by evidence already cited. Second, that information was not ignored for several reasons. As we saw, it was discussed among the population and, if discussions took place in Minden, they took place in most parts of the Reich. Thirdly, a sequence of events known to most Germans could not but lead to compelling conclusions about the fate of the Jews: by the summer of 1941, the ruthless killing of the mentally ill had become common knowledge; the Jews were attacked day in, day out by State and Party propaganda as the ultimate enemies manipulating Bolshevism and Plutocracy in their increasingly bloody fight against the Reich. In the autumn of that year, Hitler and Goebbels' public anti-Jewish diatribes became increasingly strident and their threats of retribution more violent than ever before. The deportation of the Jews from the Reich to the East was public and could be seen by all; constant rumours and a flow of detailed individual reports about the mass killings of Jews in the East reached the Reich, within the overall context just mentioned. Under such circumstances, to remain oblivious to these converging indices and to the related information about mass murder was difficult.

As we saw, the reactions ranged from explicit compassion for the Jews to fear of expressing comments, to not wanting to rock the boat in time of war, to various forms of rationalisation, or even outright support of anti-Jewish crimes and, most commonly, to indifference. I stress explicit compassion, once again, even if it was limited, because in the ever darker picture unveiled by continuing historical research, it should not be forgotten. In Minden, after commenting on the deportation of the town's Jews, some of the inhabitants quoted in the SD report did express their disapproval, declaring that Jews too were 'God's



children'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it is indifference to the fate of the Jews - and by its very nature such indifference was not recorded by the diarists - that prevailed.

Consider the second clandestine leaflet distributed in early July 1942 by the 'White Rose' resistance group, in which the murder of some 300,000 Jews in Poland was mentioned. These Munich students immediately added a disclaimer: Some people could argue that the Jews 'deserved their fate', but then what about the murder of 'the entire Polish aristocratic youth?'<sup>44</sup> In other words, these militant enemies of the regime were well aware that the mass killing of Jews would not impress all readers of the leaflet and that crimes committed against Polish Catholics had to be added, particularly in Bavaria. We cannot generalise on the basis of this example, just suggest that for many Germans the mass extermination of Jews was not of deep concern.

Knowledge about huge massacres is different from that of total annihilation but is the difference between the two as radical as many historians suggest it is? Is knowledge of 'Auschwitz' really the decisive question? In terms of the protest against or the acceptance of mass criminality, we cannot, it seems to me, establish an insuperable divide between awareness of the murder of hundreds of thousands of victims, among them one's own neighbours, and that of the total extermination of an entire people. It should be added at this point that knowledge about the extermination centres was probably more precise than was thought until recently. Sybille Steinbacher has now shown that every summer hundreds of women visited their husbands who were camp guards in Auschwitz, and stayed for long periods of time. Moreover, among the Reich German population of Auschwitz there were complaints about the odour produced by the overloaded crematories.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> SD Aussenstelle Minden, 6/12/1941.

<sup>44</sup> Inge Scholl, *The White Rose: Munich, 1942-3* (Middletown, 1983), p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> Sybille Steinbacher, *'Musterstadt' Auschwitz: Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien* (Munich, 2000).

The widespread indifference of the German population does not demand any unusual interpretation, such as Daniel Goldhagen's 'eliminationist antisemitism' for example (an interpretation that, in my opinion, is much too monocausal, ahistorical and devoid of nuance).<sup>46</sup> The basic divergence in attitudes towards the members of the German community, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and 'others' suffices. The constant spewing of anti-Jewish propaganda and the permanence of various forms of traditional antisemitism added, undoubtedly, to this deeply rooted perception of the Jew as belonging to a category of beings quintessentially different from the Germans. All studies of German antisemitism, in its diverse forms, and of antisemitism in general, dwell on this basic distinction and, in that sense, the earliest form of a negative and hostile perception of a Jewish difference established by Christianity, could not but offer the necessary (but not the sufficient) foundation for the vilest of Nazi stereotypes. Even when they attempted to defend the converted Jews, the 'Jewish Christians', as they were called during the Third Reich, the German Protestant Churches felt the need to emphasise the alien characteristics of the converts. 'The Church expects nevertheless' - these were the words of a memorandum issued by the Protestant Church of Baden in defence of the converted Jews - 'that our alien racial Christian brothers and sisters should make serious efforts to give up those characteristics they have inherited from their fathers which are alien to the Germans and to integrate themselves in our German *Volkstum*. In public life they must show wise reticence, so that no obstacles may arise to the exercise of brotherly love.'<sup>47</sup> For the overwhelming majority of Germans, the Jews were alien *at best*. For many, they had come to be seen as enemies that had to be eradicated. Thus, the question asked by Otto Dov Kulka whether the attitude of the majority should be defined as indifference or rather as support for the policies of the regime, has to be asked, although it cannot but remain open.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Ursula Büttner, 'The Jewish Problem Becomes a Christian Problem: German Protestants and the Persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich', in David Bankier (ed.), *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism: German Society and the Persecution of the Jews, 1933-41* (New York, 2000), pp. 458 ff.

<sup>48</sup> Otto Dov Kulka, 'The German Population and the Jews', in Bankier (ed.), *Probing the Depths*, pp. 277-8.

A peculiar dimension has to be added. Furniture, rugs, clothes, household items and even homes that belonged to deported Jews became available to deserving *Volksgenossen* [those who were deemed, in Nazi parlance, to be members of the German racial community]. Furthermore, personal belongings could be bought at dirt-cheap prices at the *Judenmärkte* [literally, Jew markets] of major cities, or were distributed by the *Winterhilfe* [Winter-relief] often without the original tags having been removed. Material benefits reinforced the advantages of silence in the face of mass murder.<sup>49</sup> Whether under these circumstances one can speak of the 'normality' of everyday life under National Socialism is a moot question. Differently put, the everyday involvement of the population with the regime was far deeper than has long been assumed, due to the widespread knowledge and the passive acceptance of the crimes, as well as the crassest profit derived from them. A massive repression of knowledge, if it existed at all, took place after 1945 - and probably much less so beforehand.

### *The Historian's Responsibility*

'We the survivors', Primo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*, 'are not true witnesses. ... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the face of the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.'<sup>50</sup> As stark and fundamental as Levi's warning is, it encompassed only part of the picture: of necessity, it did not include those who could not yet recognise the face of the Gorgon, who did not yet have a voice of their own, the children of Bjelaja Zeikow and the hundreds of thousands like them.

Some years ago, the Berkeley historian Thomas Laqueur wrote a highly perceptive criticism of what he called the 'business-as-usual' historiography of

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<sup>49</sup> Frank Bajohr, *'Arisierung' in Hamburg: Die Verdrängung der jüdischen Unternehmer* (Hamburg, 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1988), pp. 83-4.

the Holocaust, one that 'fails to confront both the particular moral breakdown these events imply and the subjective terror that they inspired.' Laqueur's remarks were included in his review of the volume edited by Serge Klarsfeld to commemorate the Jewish children deported from France.<sup>51</sup> This volume includes thousands of short biographical data and pictures; sometimes the data is almost non-existent and no pictures were found. What was found about the life and deportation of a boy of eight or a girl of three sufficed, precisely because it was so little. Nothing probably remains that could evoke the names and faces of the children of Bjelaja Zerkow, except for the German reports describing their torture, terror and death. Should the historian of the Holocaust dwell only on the most minute details of the perpetrators' decisions or should that history also give a voice to the voiceless?

In more specific historiographical terms, the choice of the Bjelaja Zerkow case was not haphazard. The children's execution illustrates in several ways the very nature of the Nazi murder system and the Wehrmacht's function within it. The children were not killed on the spot: The issue was passed on from one level of authority to the next, from the field chaplains at the very bottom of the hierarchy to the commander-in-chief of the Sixth Army at the very top. Then, Reichenau's decision was transmitted through regular army channels of command. In other terms, we are facing a major characteristic of the regime: utter inhumanity within a perfectly functioning military administrative structure. Moreover, as we saw in Riedl's comments, the killing of the children was considered an ideological necessity.

The precise recording of the horror is necessary if we are to grasp some of the peculiar characteristics, motivations, and attitudes of various groups of perpetrators. All the killings were mass murder, but not all mass murders were the same. The killings perpetrated by the Latvians, the Lithuanians, the Romanians, the Ukrainians, the Poles, or the Croats were identical to those perpetrated by the Germans in terms of collective criminality. Yet each of these

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<sup>51</sup>Thomas Laqueur, 'The Sound of Voices Intoning Names', *London Review of Books*, 5 June 1997, p. 3.

groups left an imprint of its own. The anthropology of mass murder may lead the historian to traits and trends that will have to be taken into account in understanding the deeper strata of this extraordinary collapse of Christian and Western civilisation. Such an anthropology must often rely on minute details, and, at times, on the description of the most horrifying behaviour. Thus, apart from any other considerations, recording the horror is an outright historical imperative. How far this should be carried, however, can only be left to the historian's sensitivity and judgement, in each specific case.

The question remains whether stressing the criminality of the Nazi regime and dwelling upon its horrors, and particularly the Holocaust, hinders the historian's ability to remain detached and objective. In the early 1980s, it was strongly argued - by Martin Broszat among others - that the emphasis put by historiography upon the political and criminal dimension of the Third Reich offered a false or incomplete picture of its overall social dynamics and everyday reality.

It seems possible to consider the full criminal dimension of the Third Reich *a priori* and, at the same time, to perceive, to describe, and to analyse the domains of social activity that escaped the impact of Nazi ideology and criminality. For the historian, the main challenge is to find the right balance between the two, both in terms of interpretation and narration. There is no way of avoiding this challenge and no formula for resolving it. But deleting a precise rendition of the horror may lead to a skewing of the overall picture and also to a distortion of the history of a society that was more tainted by the criminal dimension of National Socialism than has been assumed for a long time.

The final sequence of the events at Bjelaja Zerkow was described by Häfner at his trial:<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Klee et al. (eds), *The Good Old Days*, p. 154.

I went out to the woods alone. The Wehrmacht had already dug a grave. The children were brought along in a tractor. The Ukrainians were standing around trembling. The children were taken down from the tractor. They were lined up along the top of the grave and shot so that they fell into it. The Ukrainians did not aim at any particular part of the body. ... The wailing was indescribable. ... I particularly remember a small fair-haired girl who took me by the hand. She too was shot later ...

Häfner, let us remember, was in charge of the killing.

In this fleeting last scene, in this total absence of any trace of humanity, it is possible that, beyond all theories, we may intuitively grasp as minute symbol and terrifying reality the peculiar evil of National Socialism and the quintessential core of the events that we call the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews of Europe.