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# ***HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE HOLOCAUST A Cautionary Tale For Public Administration***

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*This article examines the historiography of the Holocaust and its implications for public administration. The analysis shows how bureaucratic procedures and values carried out by regular civil servants were essential to both the formulation and implementation of the Holocaust. This cautionary tale urges public administrators to reflect on the possibility that their systems and actions can contribute to the worst kinds of human behavior and to consider incorporating the Holocaust into the identity of the field.*

In the final phases, not even orders were needed. Everyone knew what had to be done, and no one was in doubt about directions and goals. . . . The fact is that the initiators, formulators, and expeditors, who at critical junctures moved the bureaucratic apparatus from one point to the next, came from within the apparatus

———R. Hilberg (1989)

More than half of a century after the world learned of this event, the meaning of the Holocaust for society remains a matter of considerable disagreement and debate (Bauman, 1989; Browning, 1989; Goldhagen, 1996). In public administration, which has typically been viewed in rather ahistorical terms, little consideration has been given to the possibility that the Holocaust might constitute part of the “usable past” or identity of the field (Adams, 1992; Stivers, 1995).

This article relates public administration to the Holocaust in two ways: (a) by demonstrating the centrality of routine bureaucratic processes and the regular civil service to the implementation of the Holocaust; and (b) by showing that the nature and dynamics of these bureaucratic processes are not unique to Nazi Germany or the Holocaust, thereby establishing that the Holocaust ought to be considered part of the usable past and identity of the field of public administration. The significance of the connection between the Holocaust and the civil service in Germany is such that responsibility for the event shifts to include not only those who planned and committed overt acts of killing innocent human

beings but also to embrace the routine and seemingly neutral acts of state and municipal authorities. Indeed, without the full complicity of professional civil servants it is virtually inconceivable that the mass murder of Europe's Jews could have been accomplished to such a great extent.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE HOLOCAUST

Historical interpretations of the Holocaust center around two conceptual frameworks—one *intentional*, the other *functional* (Browning, 1989; Goldhagen, 1996). Both frameworks have important implications for the role of public administration in the Holocaust and what it means for the field today. The intentional interpretation (much like Allison's, 1971, Model I or rational actor) centers on understanding the unfolding of events that led to the Holocaust as stemming from Hitler's explicit intention to annihilate the Jews and other "undesirable" peoples which was derived from his racist ideology and implemented by his henchmen through the centralized commands of an all-powerful totalitarian dictatorship.

Intentional interpretations of the Holocaust emphasize its uniqueness in history as an unprecedented event, both in terms of the enormous scale of the genocide and the inhumanity of the killing processes. The physical destruction of Europe's Jews is seen as a fixed goal in Hitler's mind from the beginning. Events that transpired subsequent to that decision were orchestrated steps on the road to realizing this twisted vision. When the circumstances of the war provided the opportunity, Hitler acted to accomplish his goal of annihilating the Jews. The most important of the two decision points is the former, when Hitler decided what must be done. The decision as to how and where was relatively incidental and entirely consistent with his original vision, which was conceptualized 22 years before its implementation (Dawidowicz, 1975). In this framework, evil results from Hitler's intent to annihilate the Jews, and the role of public administration in the Holocaust is a secondary one, as civil servants act as extensions of and in response to the Nazi dictatorship.

Functional interpretations of the Holocaust (which includes aspects of Allison's, 1971, Model II, organizational processes, and Model III, governmental politics) downplay the importance of Hitler's intentions and the role of central planning, emphasizing instead how the final solution emerged from the chaotic interplay of changing circumstances, decentralized organizational structures, established bureaucratic procedures, and improvised decision processes. This perspective focuses on the anarchical nature of the Nazi state, its internal competition, and its haphazard decision making which encouraged continuous improvisation and radicalization at the local or micro level (Broszat, 1981; Browning, 1989). In contrast to the intentional approach, the role of Hitler and the central Nazi leadership is seen as more of a catalyst for these disparate forces than as that of central planners or decision makers. The Holocaust was imple-

mented by a multipronged operation of a highly decentralized apparatus or web of organizations rather than by a centralized command hierarchy (Hilberg, 1989).

The functional perspective sees no meaningful distinction between the conceptualization and implementation of the final solution (Browning, 1989, pp. 98-99). Although Hitler's ideological fixation assured that a final solution to the Jewish problem would be sought, it did not specify the form it would take. As circumstances changed, so did the definition of the problem and its possible solution. Only after considering and experimenting with a number of definitions of and solutions to the Jewish problem did the final resolution emerge. Even the infamous death camp at Auschwitz was not created for its ultimate role but evolved through a succession of purposes (Adam, 1989; Hilberg, 1989). Functionalists (for example, Broszat, 1981; Browning, 1989; Hilberg, 1989) argue that the intent to pursue genocide as the final solution was more latent than manifest until it crystallized in the minds of decision makers as previous solutions—such as ghettoization, deportation, and resettlement—proved increasingly unworkable. That is, genocide as an intentional strategy was reconstructed as decision makers became aware of the path they were following and the consequences of their actions. The conception of total genocide emerged from practice as sporadic acts of killing groups of Jews and others (gypsies, homosexuals, handicapped) led to the idea of systematically killing all Jews.

The functionalist emphasis on process tends to highlight not the uniqueness and enormity of the Holocaust, but rather micro level processes and the extent to which they reflect much "that is familiar and even commonplace in the context of contemporary institutions and practices" (Hilberg, 1989, p. 119). The Nazi dictatorship, German anti-Semitism, and Hitler's racist ideology represent necessary but not sufficient conditions for the Holocaust to occur (Bauman, 1989). Just as, or even more important, were latent tendencies toward dehumanization within routine bureaucratic processes "performed by thousands of functionaries in public offices and private enterprises . . . embedded in habit, routine, and tradition" (Hilberg, 1989, p. 119). Those involved in these processes did not merely respond to the Nazi dictatorship but also provided impetus and direction to the genocide.

Ultimately, however, neither the intentionalist nor the functionalist interpretation of the Holocaust provide, by themselves, a satisfactory explanation for what happened. Though we cannot penetrate Hitler's mind or even his conversations with his inner circle of advisors, the actions of the Third Reich during the 1930s do not reflect a consistent intention to commit genocide against Europe's, or even Germany's, Jewish population. Several strategies aimed at removing Jews from German society were considered or tried before circumstances and experience led Hitler and the Third Reich to their final solution to the Jewish problem (Bauman, 1989; Browning, 1989). On the other hand, a purely functionalist explanation for the Holocaust tends to marginalize Hitler's intentions and influence on events to an extent that obscures his role in leading Germany toward the final solution.

Combining the functionalist and interpretive perspectives provides a better explanation of how the Holocaust occurred: not as the result of exclusively intentional or functional processes but as the confluence of historical and political forces, racist ideology and anti-Semitism, organizational anarchy, and the bureaucratic processes of a highly developed modern society. The combination of planning and opportunism, of tight control and improvisation, of rational preparation and intuitive action, was characteristic of how the Nazis gained, exercised, and eventually fell from power (Browning, 1989; Yahil, 1990, p. 54).

To the extent that both intentional and functional perspectives contribute to understanding the Holocaust, organizational structure and modern bureaucratic processes should constitute at least as much of the overall picture as the intentions and directives of the Nazi dictatorship. Functional processes formed the foundation for the vast and systematic mass killing that defined the Holocaust and it cannot be understood apart from the role played by such relatively mundane operations. As the following sections will show, bureaucratic procedures carried out by regular civil servants were essential to both the formulation and implementation of the Holocaust. These activities were not carried out by a few specialized departments but by all of the public bureaucracies, national and local. No special agency or commission was created to deal with the "Jewish problem." Existing organizations adapted themselves and contributed to the evolving task of separating Jews from the society of the Third Reich to the point where their destruction became the logical and efficient solution to an administrative problem.

## **THE GERMAN CIVIL SERVICE AND THE THIRD REICH**

Yahil (1990) identifies three basic tools that Hitler used to establish and maintain his totalitarian state—terror (including the SS and Gestapo), legislation, and propaganda. To these we must add the public bureaucracy. Hitler used all of these simultaneously (and sometimes at odds with each other) to achieve his ends, but no significant action was ever carried out that had not first been legally sanctioned (Rubenstein, 1975; Yahil, 1990). This approach allowed Hitler to justify his actions to both the international community and to Germany's civil service who were essential to administering the Nazi state and the Holocaust. Germany's professional civil servants and the courts probably would have fought against a regime that lacked legal and constitutional legitimacy as they had done against the 1923 putsch (Brecht, 1944).

Following Hitler's election to the chancellorship, the Reichstag passed two key pieces of legislation in the spring of 1933. First, the Emergency Regulation in Defense of the People and the State abolished the basic individual rights and legal protections of a democratic society. Second, the Enabling Act, or Law for Removing the Distress of People and the Reich, provided the legal instrument to sanction and strengthen his dictatorship. The Act invested Hitler with direct

legislative authority and he used it to pass numerous laws aimed at putting the government fully under the control of the National Socialists (Yahil, 1990, pp. 54-55). It also placed the civil service at the disposal of Hitler's cabinet for whatever it deemed fit to decree. Once Hitler was elected and the Enabling Act passed according to constitutional requirements, civil servants had little choice but to fall in line with the new regime or find themselves at odds with an overwhelming power.

Their professional duty, as they understood it, demanded that they apply decrees issued within the limits of the Enabling Act, whether they personally approved or not. The individual public employee was faced with a limited range of choices. He could (a) withdraw and starve, (b) stay in office and warn or advise during the preparation stages of new measures, or (c) try to undermine the regime. But the legalistic measures of the Nazi regime left little opportunity for concerted resistance. Once a decree based on the Enabling Act was issued, civil servants felt obligated to execute measures that fell under their jurisdiction (Brecht, 1944, p. 105).

The importance of a cooperative and dutiful public bureaucracy to the Third Reich is reflected in the fact that the first basic statute passed under the Enabling Act was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, promulgated on April 7, 1933, together with a statute that restricted the independence of the secondary states in favor of the central government. The intent of this legislation was to remove Jews and other unreliaables from important government posts (Browning, 1983; Yahil, 1990, p. 64) and it represented a key first step in separating Jews from German society. Yet, not all Jews were removed at first. World War I veterans were retained and those who were dismissed received their regular pensions. Even unreliaables received 75% pensions. These were not revoked until the end of 1938 (Brecht, 1944, p. 110).

According to Brecht (1944, pp. 110-111), the majority of dismissals came from the ranks of the higher civil service. Out of 1,663 Prussian members of the higher civil service in field positions, 469 (28%) were either dismissed as unreliable or Jewish (12.5%), or were demoted to lower positions for administrative reasons (15.5%). In the middle brackets of the civil service, including the clerical class, only 3.46% were affected (1.13% unreliable; 2.33% for "other reasons").

These figures should not lead to the conclusion that most remaining civil servants belonged to the Nazi party. The great majority did not belong, especially during the 1930s. Most civil servants were neither creations of the Nazi state nor old-fashioned anti-Semites. They were career professionals who valued competence, efficiency, and their ability to overcome obstacles and adverse conditions and they often knew what to do without asking for direction (Hilberg, 1989, pp. 132-133). They wanted to keep their jobs and were allowed to do so because they were needed to administer the state and their functions were considered politically neutral, constituting no danger to the rule of national socialism. Indeed, widespread dismissals would have posed a much greater threat to

the regime's stability. The legislative and legalistic measures taken by the new government reassured most civil servants that their actions were legally justifiable and made them sufficiently reliable as administrators in nonpolitical posts.

When viewed as a whole, therefore, there appears to have been very little direct prodding or purging of the German bureaucracy (Hilberg, 1989, p. 129). Most civil servants were relatively comfortable in positions that entailed morally neutral functions, such as economic affairs, tax collection, social security, statistics, railroad service, foreign currency, municipal government, and so on, meaning that their work could not be directly implicated in acts they would judge to be immoral, illegal, or unethical. Acts of murder and cruelty generally were not assigned to permanent officials. If indirectly involved in such actions, they would try to be fair to the victims and attend to the details of administration within the boundaries of the law. Being of such service brought some moral conflict to civil servants in the Third Reich, but most reasoned that matters would only be worse if they failed to cooperate and do their duty (Brecht, 1944, p. 106). However, a closer examination of these so-called morally neutral functions will show that such activities were not as neutral or peripheral to the killing process as civil servants would have liked to believe. As Hilberg (1989, p. 129) points out, they contributed their share to the destruction of the Jews as a matter of course.

## THE GERMAN CIVIL SERVICE AND THE HOLOCAUST

Most generally, the Holocaust evolved from the attempt to solve the Jewish problem, or, how to separate Jews from the German state. It became, essentially, a vast and complex administrative problem. As the policy evolved, it was up to the various components of the public bureaucracy to figure out how to accomplish it. The difficulty of the problem stemmed from the fact that, anti-Semitism aside, Jews were fully entwined with every aspect of German (and European) society—economic, political, social, and cultural. No matter how virulent Hitler's hatred of the Jews and the zeal of his followers, Jews could not suddenly be exiled or killed without severely disrupting the social fabric and political economy of German society and Hitler did not even pursue such an approach in the early years of his regime (Browning, 1989).

Anti-Jewish legislation of the 1930s reflects the gradual escalation of a policy to remove Jews from German society (Bauman, 1989; Rubenstein, 1975; Yahil, 1990). The denationalization decrees of the 1930s empowered the minister of the interior to cancel naturalization granted since the end of World War I and provided that all German citizens residing outside of the Reich could be deprived of their citizenship. The ultimate impact of this decree was felt in 1941 when the Reich Citizenship Law was amended to provide that a Jew "who takes up residence abroad" was no longer a Reich national and his or her property was to be confiscated by the state. As soon as the Gestapo transported

Jews beyond the German border, regardless of their unwillingness to go, they lost all their rights as citizens. No government was concerned for their fate and the Nazis eliminated all legal and moral impediments to carrying out the final solution (Rubenstein, 1975, pp. 32-33). The legal conversion of Jews from citizens into aliens preceded their destruction. Before they were executed, the Jews had ceased to exist as members of a political community.

But before this occurred, the authorities had to deal with the fact that the Jewish communities were entwined with the German (and European) population. A variety of measures were needed to sever these connections without violating the rights or interests of the non-Jewish population. The necessary actions to implement anti-Jewish legislation thus had to be taken by technical specialists—accountants, lawyers, engineers, physicians, and so on, many of whom belonged to the public service. Many technical and legal problems had to be solved: Who was (or was not) a Jew? How was a Jewish enterprise to be defined? How were their assets to be disbursed? Where were the boundaries of a ghetto to be drawn? These administrative problems were dealt with by bureaucrats in their memoranda, correspondence, meetings, discussions, and rulings (Hilberg, 1989, pp. 120-121).

Legal procedures and accounting routines were essential to the process of separating Jews from German society through a decentralized apparatus that was attempting to preserve non-Jewish rights and to balance the books at all times. By following proper procedures, the German civil servant could feel satisfied that his actions were appropriate and legal. He could separate his actions from their inhuman consequences by equating correctness with rightness, and accuracy with accountability. In this way, the German bureaucracy adapted to the evolution of Nazi anti-Jewish policy from legislative discrimination and expropriation to deportation and extermination (Browning, 1983, p. 147).

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the Holocaust is that it was accomplished in large part by government bureaucrats carrying out routine functions as if virtually nothing was out of the ordinary. Whereas, understandably, history has focused on the brutality of the SS, the Gestapo, and infamous concentration camp doctors and guards, much less attention has been given to the thousands of faceless bureaucrats such as those in the Finance Ministry who engaged in confiscations, the armament inspectors who organized forced labor, or municipal authorities who helped create and maintain ghettos and death camps throughout Germany and Eastern Europe. The destruction of the Jews was, for the most part, procedurally indistinguishable from any other bureaucratic process. Great attention is given to precise definition, to detailed bureaucratic regulation, for compliance with the law, and for record keeping.

For example, one difficult administrative problem involved the financing of rail transport, which was essential to the destruction process. Jews had to be transported out of Germany and other European countries to the death camps which stripped them of all legal protections afforded to citizens and allowed the



Nazis to execute them away from major population centers. But bureaucratic procedure had to be followed, and it dictated that no agency, including the Gestapo or the SS, could just use the trains as they saw fit. The German Rail Authority derived its revenue from individual clients or organizations requiring space on its trains. The client for the trains to the death camps was the Gestapo and the travelers were Jews. The fare, payable by Gestapo offices, was calculated at the passenger rate of third class, for the number of track kilometers, one way only, with discounts for children. Group rates were applied to transports exceeding 400 individuals. For the guards, the round-trip fare had to be paid (Hilberg, 1989, p. 129-131).

However, the Gestapo had no budget for transport and there was no precedent for simply charging such expenses to the Finance Ministry. The Gestapo solved the problem by developing a self-financing scheme that shifted the burden of funding to authorities in the foreign areas where Jewish properties had been expropriated or even to the Jewish communities themselves. Levies were collected and deposited in special accounts ("W") which the Gestapo controlled and then paid to the rail authority. The Finance Ministry condoned this practice even though it constituted an evasion of the basic principle that only the ministry could collect funds for the Reich and disburse them to agencies. By allowing the Gestapo to find and implement a creative, albeit illegal, solution to the financing problem, the basic framework of routine bureaucratic procedures could be preserved allowing civil servants to focus on their administrative responsibilities with a minimum of disruption or moral discomfort.

The financing of rail transport illustrates the combination of rational, bureaucratic procedures with the improvisation and opportunism that characterized the many activities that contributed to the Holocaust. Every effort was made to preserve the facade of legal procedures at all times and to find the most efficient solution to the problem. The approach was consistently impersonal and dehumanizing. Hilberg (1989) points out how this approach is reflected in the reporting system. Offices and field units would make reference to the final solution in long summaries of diverse activities, following a rigid format and matter-of-fact style that masked the nature of the activities. "The Jews are absorbed in the daily passage of events, and there is seldom any disconcerting emphasis on their ultimate fate (Hilberg, 1989, p. 131)." Jews basically became a subheading under bureaucratic lists of wages, rations, taxes, transport, and so on.

It is important to recognize, however, that the routine duties and procedures carried out by civil servants contributed to the Holocaust in more direct ways. Concentration camps and death camps had all the problems of large cities and generated externalities that affected the surrounding communities and environment; the SS and Gestapo found that they could not carry out their grim mission without the aid of competent and diligent public officials. Though the SS had complete control over what happened in their camps once they were built, they

had to conform to normal planning and inspection procedures while the camps were under construction. Public officials dealt with the siting and maintenance of death camps in much the same way as they would any other public facility or private industry, as illustrated by the following comments by a provincial planner in the Auschwitz region:

When I gave my permission some time ago to create a concentration camp, I made it clear that a camp of this enormous size, located in such an extraordinarily well-located place for industry . . . would be expected to accept many conditions in the interest of other parties or for the common good. (quoted in Van Pelt, 1994, p. 134)

But problems commonly dealt with by public bureaucracies took on horrific and dehumanizing properties in the context of genocide and the Holocaust. A particularly vexing problem at the larger concentration and death camps involved the processing and disposal of human waste. The attempt to dispose of waste in the most efficient manner (most output for the least cost) resulted in systems that stripped inmates of the last vestiges of their humanity and wreaked havoc on the surrounding environment and communities (Van Pelt, 1994). The initial reluctance of the SS to invest resources and manpower in the construction of adequate latrines and wastewater facilities at Auschwitz resulted in vast amounts of sewage flowing into the Vistula river and strained relations with the surrounding communities. By 1943, teams of engineers and planners were fully engaged in designing a sewage treatment facility for Auschwitz. Although none of the civil servants who worked on the sewage problem directly killed anyone, the camp's operation required their complicity (Van Pelt, 1994, pp. 135-136).

In discussing the role of the railroad administration in the Holocaust, Hilberg points out that their heavy participation in activities that supported the genocide of the Jews should command our attention because neither they nor most other public agencies in Nazi Germany conformed to any common definition of an ideological vanguard or movement. "If nothing else, their history should tell us that if Hitler and the Nazi Movement . . . were essential for the Holocaust to occur, so was at least in equal measure the readiness of ordinary agencies to engage in extraordinary tasks inherent in the Final Solution" (Hilberg, 1989, p. 126).

Does this mean that German public administrators were "willing executioners" (Goldhagen, 1996) or banal functionaries who merely followed orders (Arendt, 1963)? The answer, as in the intentionalist versus functionalist debate, is both. The genocide, whether intentional or functional in nature, was not the result of carrying out well-defined orders from the center nor of spontaneous killing, but evolved through a series of steps, from seeking solutions to successive problems. The death camps were the final solution the Jewish Problem, a relatively short step to take after traveling a long road toward this ultimate crime and administrative evil (Bauman, 1989; Browning, 1992).

## CONCLUSION

He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer.

———*Elie Wiesel* (1960)

More than 50 years after the event, what is the meaning of the Holocaust for public administration? There is no single, satisfactory answer to this question. However, given what we know about the Holocaust and how it happened, it is imperative that public administrators continually pose this question and make it part of the very identity of the field. For example, the role of the professional civil service and public bureaucracy in the Holocaust should give us pause when we consider the following statement by Woodrow Wilson from his classic essay on the study of administration, a work that continues to influence conventional views of public management and administration (see Lynn, 1996, p. 39).

When we study the administrative systems of France and Germany, knowing that we are not in search of *political* principles, we need not care a peppercorn for the constitutional or political reasons which Frenchmen or Germans give for their practices. . . . If I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly, I can borrow his way of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it; and so, if I see a monarchist dyed in the wool managing a public bureau well, I can learn his business methods without changing one of my republican spots. . . . By keeping this distinction in view,—that is, by studying administration as a means of putting our own politics into convenient practice . . . we are on perfectly safe ground. (Wilson, 1887, p. 221)

Wilson wrote at the end of the 19th century. At the close of the 20th century it is difficult, standing in the long shadow of the Holocaust, to conclude that public administrators, in any political context, are supported by anything resembling safe ground. The historical record shows that the Holocaust was not the result of a radical departure from modernity and the practices of rational, bureaucratic administration but represents one of their inherent possibilities (Bauman, 1989; Rubenstein, 1975). As the final solution evolved, there was nothing that is normally considered part of modern public administration—professional education and expertise, ethics, bureaucratic procedures, accountability to elected officials and so on—that could prevent or resist the genocide of the Jews. Public administrators were both willing and helpless in the face of great evil.

Though there is little in the way of solace or comfort to be found in this cautionary tale, it does tell us that public administrators—as scholars, students, and practitioners—at least need to reflect on the possibility that their systems

and actions can contribute to the worst kinds of human behavior. In this era of increasingly ideological and polarized politics (Lowi, 1995) and unwanted, surplus populations (Rubenstein, 1983), public administration should not be taught, practiced, or theorized about without asking how it relates to the Holocaust and the potential for administrative evil. By doing so, we may be able to recognize and avoid the pathways that lead toward dehumanization and destruction.

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