

From “Latent Antisemitism” To The Final Solution

Excerpt from interview with Professor Shulamit Volkov

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Q- Where does the ideological dimension enter into your explanation ?

V- I don't place much emphasis on ideology which, in my view, always makes its appearance and plays a role only under specific circumstances. It did have a function, but it was not an independent factor. However, there was also a need to define and elaborate and to explain policy. And it was as such, of course, that ideological elements became necessary in Nazi Germany. After all, people believed in Nazi ideology and in its antisemitic ideology to varying degrees. In the end, both those who were fanatics and those who were relatively immune or apathetic towards it – people along the entire spectrum – eventually participated in the catastrophe and took a more or less active part in carrying out the Holocaust. In addition to the fanatics who were determined to go ahead and do something as radical and as awful at this point, one also needs a general public that is infected by a certain atmosphere, though not fanatic about it. Saul Friedlanders new book also shows that there was no great fanaticism with regard to antisemitism. There was more compliance and moral apathy, a moral inability to stand up to whatever happened around you .

Q- If you had to say which components ultimately led to the “Final Solution”, would you include the ideological antisemitism as a central factor ?

V- Antisemitism was certainly a necessary precondition. The Holocaust would not have happened without antisemitism. But it was by no means a sufficient condition – I think this has to be quite clear. There is a great difference between hating someone, resenting him, not being able to live with him, wanting to see him out of sight or even dead, and the will and power to get on

with a project of actually killing every individual belonging to this particular group .

Jews were hated for centuries, but there are only a few incidents in which this hatred actually turned into physical action against them on a grand scale. Eruptions of violence took place here and there, but they were not very common. What persisted was a resentment with which people could usually live. Some of them were willing to forget it with time, others not; but there's a great deal of difference between resentment or even hatred, and murder. This is what needs explaining, because, after all, Jews were hated for generations, so why now ?

If you look back to the late 19th century, you'll find that the worst pogroms took place in Czarist Russia. The most severe legal action against Jews took place in France during the Dreyfus Affair. Germany had a latent antisemitic atmosphere, and all layers of society were probably infected by it, but on the surface there was a basic acceptance of the Jews, not rejection. I believe that antisemitism cannot do much more than explain the basic precondition for the Holocaust. Ultimately, however, it does not explain what happened .

Q- What do you mean by “a latent antisemitic atmosphere ?”

V- There is a kind of antisemitism – not that one should not take it seriously – that cannot of itself lead to action – certainly not violent action – against Jews. In 19th century European culture, one finds abusive comments about Jews everywhere. If you take, for instance, the socialist camp in the late 19th century, both Jewish and non-Jewish socialists very often spoke derogatorily about Jews. They did not make a big deal out of it, but they often commented in this vein in their letters and elsewhere. After all, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, from its creation, had an antisemitic tradition, although there was a segment of the party that was more antisemitic than the other. The fact that comments about Jews were common in pre-World War II Germany was nothing unique. It was a common feature of European tradition. But this is not

enough of an explanation for the radical hatred that was typical of the Nazi phase. Something happened in-between, and this is perhaps the most difficult thing to explain: What exactly took place so as to a common element of popular culture – not an extremely meaningful one – into an indication for action, into a real ideology, into a scheme that dictated what had to be done. Understanding this sort of transition, I think, is crucial .

Q- How do you explain the leap from one type of antisemitism to another ?

V- It is extremely difficult to explain this leap. Perhaps most crucial was the combination of an extreme crisis during the Weimar Republic, with a leadership that was truly fanatic about the Jews. In the beginning, the Nazis probably also did not know exactly what they were going to do. They felt that they had to solve the “Jewish problem”. Friedlaender’s new book clearly shows that it was not clear – even to them – what they were going to do, or how to go about it. One must also remember that the actual killing and extermination began during a situation of what may be considered a “pre-crisis”, but continued in a real crisis during the war. After all, as early as 1942, the German army suffered serious defeats. Its as if one had to wait for a situation of extreme crisis in order to carry out the extreme version of the “Jewish policy”. It did not – and perhaps could not – happen under normal conditions .

I am of the opinion that one has to see the Holocaust in the context of this ongoing crisis that began in the Weimar Republic, together with the leadership of Hitler and a few of his aids. These two elements must be added to the latent antisemitism, which was by no means exterminationist – as Goldhagen would say – at first. This is true despite the fact that some such plans of extermination were occasionally in the air. But they were never taken up seriously, not even by the government of the Wilhelmanian Reich – by no means a responsible body. It was, after all, this government that started World War I. Even the leadership of Imperial Germany thought that plans to exterminate or de-emancipate the Jews were wild dreams; it did not seem

possible .

So you need to have a crisis-situation – a huge crisis, a great collapse of moral fortitude – in which suddenly everything seems possible. Something that previously seemed uncivilized, impossible, not even a parameter to think along, suddenly becomes a reality and a possibility. And if you have the leadership willing to carry it out, you can apparently get anywhere, including to such horrors as the “final solution .”

Its not simply that one needed to lose the war in order to start the Holocaust, nor simply to reach a turning point in the war. First of all, chronologically its not true: The extermination started before the turn of events in the Second World War, so that even on a rather simplistic level, this explanation does not work. But still, I think that in order to keep a project like this going on for so long, the situation of total war was a necessary condition. The barbarization of the soldiers, of everybody at the front, certainly made it easier, perhaps even possible, for the project of exterminating the Jews to be carried out. The fact is, the Nazis waited for a war situation before they began to carry it out. For the actual killing to start, I believe, you needed the added barbarization of total war .

Q- How did it happen that the Jews, seemingly so intertwined in German society, at least in so far as the financial, cultural, and academic elites were concerned, were so easily and quickly thrown out, not only from the elite but also from German society as a whole ?

V- This is one of the most painful aspects of the whole story. What must be remembered is this: German society, on the whole, accepted the Jews, and they were, on the whole, integrated into it. Perhaps they didn't always feel comfortable. At times they heard malicious Jewish jokes; on some occasions, there was actual discrimination against them – certainly before the First World War, during the period of the Kaiserreich, but also in the Republic. The atmosphere was not always friendly, but on the whole, if the Jews were

successful, they could hold most posts, including some in the government itself. And, in contrast to the Wilhelmanian Reich, during the Weimar period they could even be part of the highest bureaucracy and enjoy all positions in the academic world .

They truly entered into all aspects of life, with an emphasis on the cultural and scholarly worlds. The Germans had a long experience of living with Jews, and I think here lies one of the greatest tragedies. It was not a society that, throughout time, consistently refused to live with Jews, and finally had the chance to get rid of them completely – to kill them. It was a society that had actually accepted them, willingly or by force of circumstance, and only then decided to throw them out. It was a decision made at a point when other alternatives were clearly still open; it was not a result of simply rolling along some obvious path. How ,then, could this have happened? There's nothing more that one can say about it. Obviously, such a development is possible .

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