

The Background to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer

Director of the International Center for Holocaust Studies of Yad Vashem

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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- Can you point to a reason, or reasons, as to why the Holocaust took place between the Germans and the Jews?

B- The overall answer, I suppose, lies in the history of the Jews within European or, if you like, Christian/Moslem culture. Any kind of a radical rebellion against Western civilization had a good chance of turning against the Jews. In other words, one answer would be traditional antisemitism.

Regarding the Germans, however, it was the result of specific circumstances that took place in Germany, and which developed over time. There is nothing genetically German in the Holocaust; it could have happened elsewhere.

Practically all of Europe was Christian, and Jews in Christian perception had a very central place, because they, after all, were the background against which Christianity arose. This background could not be eradicated; it had to be there all the time. Christianity saw in the Jews the symbol of evil, the symbol of the devil, because they believed -- of course, as we know quite wrongly -- that the Jews were somehow responsible for the crucifixion of the Christian messiah. And only the devil could have wanted the crucifixion of the Christian messiah.

Now what did the devil want? The devil wanted to rule the world, and so the Jews, possessed by the devil, wanted to rule the world. That, I think, is the origin of the idea that the Nazis adopted, of a Jewish conspiracy to control the world. This developed over time, of course, with its ups and downs. There were also some Christian trends, or streams of thought, that were opposed to this, that were more pro-Jewish than that,

but they were a small minority. Overall, the Jew was the prototypical “other” in Christian self-understanding.

With the modernization and industrialization of society, the Christian element in this became less important. Nowhere in Christian thought or in Christian history was there ever a plan to kill the Jewish people -- never. Jews had to be kept underfoot... Jews had to be deprived of equal rights... Jews could not do this, and could not do the other.... But a genocidal program never developed in Christianity, because there was a moral hindrance that Christianity created to any kind of genocidal thought. In other words, to kill a Jew was to kill a person, a human being, and this was against the law of God, and so it was forbidden -- in theory. In practice, of course, this was very often overcome by mobs that killed Jews in large numbers, but this was against Christian theology.

The moment that Christianity was abandoned, the moment that there was a rebellion against it (through the secularization that began in the 18th century), you had Christian antisemitism without Christianity. And then antisemitism, clear and undiluted, could turn towards the logical end of an argument that said the Jew was a symbol of the devil. Now he became the devil himself and, of course, the devil had to be destroyed. There is a certain logic in that. This has nothing to do with Germany per se, but rather with Western civilization in general.

However, there was a minority trend of thought developing that led to genocide. It took place in Germany, I think, because it's elite, composed of bureaucracy, aristocracy, church and mainly academia, as well as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and so on. There was a minority trend of radical, racial antisemitism that took hold and became stronger and stronger because of intellectual, economic and political crises in German society. Contrary to other countries, perhaps, these factors (especially just before, and just after, WWI) made it possible for these right -wing intellectuals to direct the whole society towards genocide once they came to power.

Q- You're actually saying two things: On the one hand, you say that it was a logical development; on the other hand, you claim that it was a historical accident of sorts.

B- I think there was a logic in this development, but it did not necessarily have to happen. In other words, it could have happened otherwise. The fact that the Holocaust happened doesn't mean that it had to happen. All kinds of developments point to such a conclusion. For instance, the fact that the Nazis never received a majority by popular vote in Germany. In the last free elections of the Weimar Republic in November 1932, the Nazis lost 34 seats in the German parliament, and 2 million votes, and they were on the way down. It was at this point that they came to power. To the conservative, non-Nazi, but radically conservative elite, the Nazis were no longer a threat, and they were obviously getting weaker. Of course, once they were in power, they turned the whole thing round. But it didn't have to happen.

It didn't have to happen after 1936, because during that year, Germany occupied the Rhineland, against the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler gave an order to the German army that if but one battalion of French troops crossed the Rhine to counter the German entrance into the region, the Germans should withdraw. The French never moved, but they could have. There was in place a democratic government, and some of its members were very much afraid of what Hitler was doing in Germany.

Another crucial point came very late -- in early 1939, just before the war broke out. The British and the French negotiated with the Soviets to stop Hitler. As a result of mutual jealousies and a credibility crisis between the two sides, this never came off. If an agreement had been reached, we don't know what would have happened. But, certainly, this overwhelming danger of a world war, in which the Holocaust became possible, could have been avoided. Not because of the Jews, but because of the interests of the three powers: Britain, France and the USSR.

The Holocaust was not a deterministic development; it took place in Germany because of certain developments in German society. These trends were not the norm in German society. Some people argue that, from the Middle Ages, or from the beginning of the 19th century, a norm of very radical antisemitism developed in Germany. No. That was a minority opinion, which ultimately gained ground and came to rule. This minority opinion developed into what Saul Friedlander, I think rightly,

has called “redemptive” or “messianic antisemitism,” creating a redemptive utopia. If the Jews were done away with, then the world would be beautiful, nice, and wonderful. This type of antisemitism certainly was not the norm in Germany or in any other society, but it was there. It took hold especially of the academia, and this became crucial.

Q- Can one talk of a continuity between traditional antisemitism and Nazi antisemitism, or was there a leap from one to the other?

B- There are clear elements of continuity between Christian antisemitism, nationalistic antisemitism, and racist, radical, exterminatory antisemitism. The Nazis accused Jews of things mostly found in medieval Christian antisemitism, such as the theory of a Jewish world conspiracy and the theory of Jewish blood -- the very idea of a racial component in antisemitism. In other words, even if the Jews were to become Christians, their blood would prevent them from becoming different.

This idea was developed very early in the 14th and 15th centuries in Spain, and after the expulsion of the Jews. There was an idea that if people's distant ancestors (five or six generations before), had been Jews, they could not occupy certain central positions in Spanish society. Even though they had undergone baptism generations ago, “Jewish blood” still circulated in their bodies, and therefore you could never trust them. This aspect was not really new, but for it to become an ideology was new.

So you have an element of continuity, and you have a jump. The jump is that before racist antisemitism, Jews were considered to be the symbol of the devil, and with racial antisemitism, they became the devil himself. Before racial antisemitism, there were certain elements in Christianity that prevented the slaughter of human beings in general -- at least in theory, not in practice -- for moral reasons. This disappeared with the rise of racist antisemitism, which rejected Christianity because it was Jewish. There's an element of truth in that, because Christianity developed from Judaism. And therefore all these people thought that because Judaism contaminated Christianity, ultimately it was no good for this modern age.

The Nazi version of antisemitism did something that the others had never done: It translated theory into practice. In the past, you could find many statements that the Jews should be done away with -- but these were statements, only words. The words didn't become flesh (to use a term from Christian theology). But here the words became flesh; in other words, the idea became something real and tangible, and it was translated into reality .

Source: The Multimedia CD *'Eclipse Of Humanity'*, Yad Vashem, 2000.