

* Daniel Johan Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing
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3 Holocaust (1996).

ELIMINATIONIST ANTISEMITISM:
THE "COMMON SENSE" OF
GERMAN SOCIETY DURING
THE NAZI PERIOD

BY THE EVE of the First World War, a discourse—namely a discussion structured by a stable framework with widely accepted reference points, images, and explicit elaborations—had for over thirty years been in place with regard to the Jews. The consolidation of this discourse, the forging of a common set of assumptions and beliefs about Jews, the solidifying of the Jews as a cultural and political symbol, one of decomposition, malignancy, and willful evil, meant that it was well-nigh impossible to discuss Jews except in its frame of reference. In the antisemitic publications of the late nineteenth century, when some new accusation against, or argument about, the Jews would appear, the construction would then be incorporated into subsequent editions of other antisemites' works that had initially been published prior to the novel contribution to the corpus of anti-Jewish thought.¹ The German discourse in some sense had as its foundation the extremely widespread, virtually axiomatic notion that a "Judenfrage," a "Jewish Problem," existed.² The term "Judenfrage" presupposed and inhered within it a set of interrelated notions. Jewish Germans were essentially different from non-Jewish Germans. Because of the Jews' presence, a serious problem existed in Germany. Responsibility for the problem lay with the Jews, not the Germans. As a consequence of these "facts," some fundamental change in the nature of Jews or in their position in Germany was necessary and urgent. Everyone who accepted the existence of a "Jewish Problem"—even those who were not passionately hostile to the Jews—subscribed to these notions,

for they were constitutive of the concept's cognitive model. Every time the word "Judenfrage" (or any word or phrase associated with it) was uttered, heard, or read, those partaking in the conversation activated the cognitive model necessary to understand it.³

Change of some sort was seen as necessary, yet the Jews' nature, because of their "race," was understood by Germans to be unchangeable, since the prevailing German conception of the Jews posited them to be a race inexorably alien to the Germanic race. Also, the "evidence" of their senses told Germans that the majority of Jews had already assimilated, in the sense of having taken on the manners, dress, and idiom of modern Germany, and so the Jews had already been given every possible chance to become good Germans—and failed.⁴ This axiomatic belief in the existence of the "Jewish Problem," more or less promised an axiomatic belief in the need to "eliminate" Jewishness from Germany as the "problem's" only "solution."

The toll of these decades of verbal, literary, institutionally organized, and political antisemitism was wearing down even those who, true to Enlightenment principles, had resisted the demonization of the Jews. The eliminationist mind-set was so prevalent that the inveterate antisemite and founder of the Pan-German League, Friedrich Lange, could with verity declaim the universal belief in the "Jewish Problem," rightly pointing out that the means to the "solution," and not the existence of the "problem" itself, was the only remaining subject of doubt and disagreement: "I assert that the attitude of the educated Germans towards Judaism has become totally different from what it was only a few years ago . . . The Jewish Problem is today no longer a question of 'whether'? but only one of 'how'?"⁵ The axiom that Jews were harmful and that they must be eliminated from Germany found renewed, intense expression in an unexpected context, during a time when national solidarity is typically forged and hardened, and social conflicts are dampened and deferred—namely the national emergency of full-scale war.

During World War I, Germans accused the Jews of not serving in the military, of not defending the Fatherland. Instead, Jews were alleged to have been staying safe at home and using the wartime conditions to exploit and immiserate the Germans for their own profit on the black market. The upsurge against the Jews was so extreme that in 1916 the Prussian authorities conducted a census of Jews in the armed forces in order to assess the Jews' martial contribution—a humiliating measure providing stunning testament to the Jews' precarious social position and to the ongoing belief in the centrality of the "Jewish Problem."⁶ It is precisely because Jews had long been considered dangerous aliens that the closing of Germans' ranks in social solidarity produced not a diminution of social animosity towards the Jews, but an upsurge in antisemitic expression and attacks. The more perilous the times, so drove

the antisemitic logic, the more dangerous and injurious the Jews must be. Franz Oppenheimer summarized the attitudes of Germans towards Jews, attitudes that Jews could not favorably alter no matter how fervently they might dedicate themselves to the German cause: "Don't fool yourselves, you are and will remain Germany's pariahs."⁷ German antisemites had always been somewhat autistic in their conception of Jews. The autism was to grow worse.

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC was founded in 1919 in the wake of the military defeat, the abdication of the German monarch, and the crumbling of the Second German Empire. With the exception of a few prominent figures, Jews were not central in the founding and governance of Weimar, yet like all things hated in Germany, Weimar's many enemies, as a matter of faith, identified it with the Jews, the purpose and effect of which was to help to delegitimize the democracy.

The economic privations of Weimar's first few years, including food shortages and inflation, were enormous. Germans, as a matter of course, routinely and widely blamed their individual and collective suffering on the Jews. A large number of government reports from around Germany attest to this, portraying a virulent hatred of Jews that was assessed by public officials to be explosive. The President of the Swabian district government, for instance, reported in March 1920: "I must not fail to point out with emphasis again and again the extraordinary agitation and discord that has taken hold of the population in the cities and in the country as a result of steadily-rising prices. . . . One hears everywhere that 'our government is delivering us over to the Jews.'" A Munich report on the political climate from October 1919 warned that the mood of the people was such that pogroms against Jews appeared "quite possible." Two years later, in August 1921, another police situation summary described Germans' attitudes towards Jews as being, if anything, more ominous: "Reports agree that the mood for Jewish pogroms is spreading systematically in *all parts* of the country [my emphasis]."⁸

A survey of the political and social life of Weimar reveals that virtually every major institution and group in Germany—including schools and universities, the military, bureaucracy, and judiciary, professional associations, the churches, and political parties—was permeated by antisemitism. Many had gone so far as to declare themselves openly and proudly to be antisemitic. A look at what is perhaps the most revealing of them all, the educational institutions, indicates that the youth and young adults of Weimar Germany provided large, willing cadres for the coming Nazi dispensation. Schools had become so rife with the words and symbols of antisemitism, on the part of both teachers and pupils, that between 1919 and 1922 the ministries of culture of a number

of German states issued prohibitions against the dissemination of antisemitic literature and the wearing of the swastika and other antisemitic symbols. Yet many teachers continued to preach aspects of the antisemitic litany, which included the foundational notion that a "Jewish Problem" existed in Germany, with all of its implicit and explicit warnings of the danger that Jews posed to the well-being of Germans.⁹

The universities were still more swept along by the antisemitic wave that engulfed them and German society. During Weimar, student organizations and student bodies throughout the country showed themselves to be virulently antisemitic. In one university after the next, governing student associations were already, in the first years of the Weimar Republic, captured by nationalist, *völkisch*, and antisemitic forces, often by electoral majorities of two-thirds to three-quarters. Many of them, with little opposition, subsequently adopted "Aryan paragraphs," clauses that called for the exclusion of Jews or for their severe restriction, both from student organizations and from study at universities. In 1920, for example, two-thirds of the student assembly at the Technical University of Hannover endorsed the call for "students of Jewish descent" to be excluded from the Union of German Students. The hostility to Jews, by both students and professors, and the many accompanying discriminatory acts were alarmingly described by the Prussian Minister of Science, Art, and Popular Education in 1920 as a "massive swelling of antisemitic tendencies at our universities." Max Weber, a few months earlier, commented in a letter that "the academic atmosphere has become extremely reactionary, and in addition radically antisemitic."¹⁰ All of this was to grow only worse ten years later, when many of these same organizations would wholeheartedly accept the leadership of Nazi students, and the National Socialist German Student League would win the allegiance of the majority of students in Germany and Austria. Professors, themselves anything but immune to the prevailing cultural models about Jews, rarely criticized the racist antisemitism that was the widespread norm on campuses. Even the great historian Friedrich Meinecke, a political liberal and a democrat, was an antisemite.¹¹

Antisemitism was endemic to Weimar Germany, so widespread that nearly every political group in the country shunned the Jews. Jews, though ferociously attacked, found virtually no defenders in German society. The public conversation about Jews was almost wholly negative. So convinced of the hopelessness of the position of Jews in Germany was Albert Einstein—who, prior to his arrival in Germany a few years earlier, had been neither particularly conscious of his Jewishness nor sensitive to antisemitism—that already in 1921 he averred that he would "be forced to leave Germany within 10 years."¹² A police situation report from October of the following year pre-

dicted a bright future for the Nazi Party because its central focus on the danger of the Jews was broadly subscribed to in Germany, and not only by some restricted groups: "The fact cannot be denied that the antisemitic idea has penetrated the widest levels of the middle class, even far into the working class."¹³ Werner Jochmann concludes, after surveying the period of 1914 to 1924, "that already in the first years of the republic the antisemitic flood had inundated all the dams of legality. Still greater was the devastation in the spiritual realm. Even the democratic parties and the governments of the republic believed that they could escape the pressure being exerted on them if they recommended to the Jews restraint in political and social life, and deported or interned the East European Jews."¹⁴ What was so at the advent of Weimar became ever more the case as the Republic's life unfolded. Not just words but riotous attacks were also unleashed by Germans upon Jews throughout Weimar, beginning already in 1918 in Munich and Berlin, where enraged mobs attacked Jews during the revolution. Another wave of mob attacks, which erupted around Germany in 1923-1924, led to the death of some Jews.¹⁵ Given the ubiquity and intensity of anti-Jewish feeling in Germany, sentiments that would later be activated and channeled by the Nazi regime into violent and murderous assaults, the restraints imposed by the Weimar government certainly prevented Germans' steady verbal assaults upon Jews from escalating still more frequently into physical ones.

The simple fact was that in a society that so continuously and vocally defined Jews and Germans as polar beings, that made the status of Jews within Germany a preeminent *political* question (and not just a theme of "civil society"), it was virtually impossible not to take sides, not to have an opinion about the "solving" of the "Jewish Problem," and, when doing so, to avoid adopting the prevailing Manichaeic idiom of Germany. Because the party leaders knew that antisemitism permeated their constituencies, including the working class, at the end of Weimar the political parties did not attack Hitler's antisemitism, although they attacked him on many other grounds.¹⁶ The correlation of forces that existed at the end of Weimar has been summed up as follows: "For antisemitism hundreds of thousands were ready to ascend the barricades, to fight brawls in public halls, to demonstrate in the streets; against antisemitism hardly a hand stirred. Insofar as slogans were in those days raised against Hitler, they put forward other things, but not the revulsion against antisemitism."¹⁷ The groups that were most likely to have harbored favorable, or at least different, conceptions of Jews in Germany either did not or perhaps felt compelled to keep their counsel in the face of the thoroughgoing antisemitism that permeated the society, its institutions and its politics. The Jews stood abandoned and alone, as Germany in 1933 was about to make unequivocal what had been true already for a while, that it had, in the words of Max

Warburg, the prominent Jewish banker, "disqualified itself from the ranks of the civilized peoples [*Kulturvölker*] and taken its place among the ranks of the pogrom lands [*Pogromländer*]."¹⁸

THE NAZI PARTY was the most radical political party to gain control of a government in European history. Significantly, its openly murderous radicality notwithstanding, it did so through electoral means. The National Socialist German Workers' Party, as the Nazi Party was formally named, was founded as the German Workers' Party in Munich on January 5, 1919, during the turbulent period of defeat, revolution, and reconstruction after World War I. The twenty-nine-year-old Adolf Hitler, who, after having served as a corporal during the war, was living in Munich, gravitated to it in September of that year as its seventh member. He soon was put in charge of the Party's propaganda, and by 1921 he became its political as well as its intellectual and ideological leader. Hitler, in possession of great oratorical skills, was the Party's most forceful public speaker.

Like Hitler, the Party from its earliest days was devoted to the destruction of Weimar democracy, a revision of Versailles, revanchism, anti-Bolshevism, militarism, and, most especially and relentlessly, antisemitism. The Jews, as Hitler and the Nazis intoned obsessively, were seen to be the root cause of all of Germany's other afflictions, including the loss of the First World War, the evisceration of Germany's strength by the imposition of democracy, the threat posed by Bolshevism, the discontinuities and disorientations of modernity, and more. The twenty-five-point Party program, promulgated in February 1920 (and never altered), included in many of its points attacks on the Jews and the call for their exclusion from membership in and influence on German society and institutions. Point Four declared: "Only members of the nation may be citizens of the State. Only those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. Accordingly no Jew may be a member of the nation." The program, written by Hitler and Anton Drexler, the Party's founder, was explicitly racist in its understanding of Jews. It dedicated the Party to combating "the Jewish-materialist spirit," effectively to an eliminationist project.¹⁹ The Nazi Party became Hitler's Party, obsessively antisemitic and apocalyptic in its rhetoric about its enemies. The centrality of antisemitism in the Party's worldview, program, and rhetoric—if in a more elaborated and avowedly violent form—mirrored the sentiments of German culture. The Party's rise in Germany at the end of the decade was to be meteoric.

In its first years, the Nazis remained a small, grass-roots organization. During its formative years, its main appearance on the national political scene was Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch of November 8-9, 1923, when he and two to

three thousand followers attempted to overthrow the Weimar Republic, an attempt that was immediately quashed. But for Nazism's eventual triumph, this quixotic, almost comical "revolution" would barely be remembered. Hitler's subsequent trial won for him further national exposure (the sympathetic court allowed him to use the trial as his soapbox), and his nine months in prison brought him the time to write his "memoirs," which set forth more systematically the views about politics, Germany, and the Jews that he had so frequently proclaimed in his tireless and popular speech-giving. *Mein Kampf* was an effective blueprint for his major undertakings later as Germany's leader. With terrifying and murderous language, Hitler revealed himself to be a visionary leader, offering Germans a future of a racially harmonious society, purged of class conflict and, especially, of Jews. Hitler brazenly put forward racist antisemitism as his first principle. In a characteristic passage, he explained why his understanding of history and the contemporary world meant that national salvation was possible only with lethal measures:

*Today it is not princes and princes' mistresses who haggle and bargain over state borders; it is the inexorable Jew who struggles for his domination over the nations. No nation can remove this hand from its throat except by the sword. Only the assembled and concentrated might of a national passion rearing up in its strength can defy the international enslavement of peoples. Such a process is and remains a bloody one.*²⁰

Looking back on the role of German Jews during the First World War, he mused in a typically murderous fashion: "If at the beginning of the War and during the War twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas," then millions of "real Germans" would not have died.²¹ In his writings, speeches, and conversation, Hitler was direct and clear. Germany's enemies at home and abroad were to be destroyed or rendered inert. No one who heard or read Hitler could have missed this clarion message.

Within a few short years of Hitler's release from prison and the Party's resuscitation, the Nazi Party was to become the dominant political party in Weimar. The Nazis first began to have some small success in national and regional elections starting in 1925, and became a substantial electoral force in the national election of September 14, 1930. They collected 6.4 million votes, totaling 18.3 percent of all votes cast, which won for them 107 of the 577 seats in the Reichstag. The Nazis were suddenly the second largest political party in Germany. The Weimar Republic, never having been accepted as legitimate by a large portion of the German people, soon came under siege, owing to an economic depression that saw fully 30.8 percent of the work force unem-

ployed in 1932. Hitler, the charismatic figure, and the Nazis' anti-Weimar, anti-Bolshevik, anti-international, and antisemitic message gained ever greater appeal during these difficult times. In the election of July 31, 1932, almost *fourteen million* Germans, 37.4 percent of the voters, cast their lots for Hitler, crowning the Nazis the largest, most powerful political party in Germany, with 230 seats in the Reichstag. At the beginning of 1933, Weimar's President, Paul von Hindenburg, after another election in November which actually saw the Nazi percentage of the vote dip four percentage points, asked Hitler to become Chancellor and form a government.

The Nazis came to power, owing to a confluence of factors, including the economic depression, the yearning in Germany for an end to the disorder and organized street violence that had plagued Weimar's final years, the widespread hatred of democratic Weimar more generally, the seeming threat of a leftist takeover, the Nazis' visionary ideology, and Hitler's own personality, which, his burning hatreds open for all to see, was attractive, even compelling, to so many Germans. The catastrophic political and economic disorder was clearly the proximate cause for the Nazis' final victory. Many Germans voted for the Nazis as the only political force in the country that appeared to them capable of restoring order and social peace—and of vanquishing Germany's enemies at home and of restoring Germany's status as a great power abroad.²²

Upon assuming the Chancellorship, Hitler held one final national election on March 5, 1933. It was hardly a free and fair election (the Communist Party was outlawed and intimidation of the opposition was extensive), yet these undemocratic tactics, and the violence that the Nazis had already unleashed upon Jews and leftists, did not deter voters, but increased the Nazi vote to over seventeen million people, namely 43.9 percent of those who cast ballots.²³ By this time, Hitler had effectively abolished civil liberties in Germany, the Weimar Republic, and any mechanism to depose him short of using violence. The Nazis were in power. They could begin pursuing Hitler's revolutionary program, some of which Germans would oppose and much of which they would embrace as their own.

WHEN THE FATEFUL day of Hitler's assumption of the office of German Chancellor came on January 30, 1933, the Nazis found that they did not have to remake Germans at least on one central issue—arguably the most important one from their point of view—the nature of Jewry. Whatever else Germans thought about Hitler and the Nazi movement, however much they might have detested aspects of Nazism, the vast majority of them subscribed to the underlying Nazi model of Jews and in this sense (as the Nazis themselves understood) were "Nazified" in their views of Jews. It is, to risk un-

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derstatement, no surprise that under the Nazi dispensation the vast majority of Germans continued to remain antisemitic, that their antisemitism continued to be virulent and racially grounded, and that their socially shared "solution" to the "Jewish Problem" continued to be eliminationist. *Nothing* occurred in Nazi Germany to undermine or erode the cultural cognitive model of Jews that had for decades underlain German attitudes and emotions towards the despised minority among them. Everything publicly said or done worked to reinforce the model.²⁴

In Germany during the Nazi period, putative Jewish evil permeated the air. It was discussed incessantly. It was said to be the source of every ill that had befallen Germany and of every continuing threat. The Jew, *der Jude*, was both a metaphysical and an existential threat, as real to Germans as that of a powerful enemy army poised on Germany's borders for the attack. The character, ubiquity, and logic of action of German antisemitism during the Nazi period is captured brilliantly by Melita Maschmann in a confessional memoir written to her lost, former childhood Jewish friend. A devoted member of the girls' division of the Hitler youth, Maschmann was not the progeny of country bumpkins, being the daughter of a university-educated man and a woman who had grown up in a prosperous business family. She begins telling of her youthful understanding of Jews by observing that the regnant conception of "the Jews" had no empirical basis.

Those Jews were and remained something mysteriously menacing and anonymous. They were not the sum of all Jewish individuals . . . They were an evil power, something with the attributes of a spook. One could not see it, but it was there, an active force for evil.

As children we had been told fairy stories which sought to make us believe in witches and wizards. Now we were too grown up to take this witchcraft seriously, but we still went on believing in the "wicked Jews." They had never appeared to us in bodily form, but it was our daily experience that adults believed in them. After all, we could not check to see if the earth was round rather than flat—or, to be more precise, it was not a proposition we thought it necessary to check. The grownups "knew" it and one took over this knowledge without mistrust. They also "knew" that the Jews were wicked. The wickedness was directed against the prosperity, unity and prestige of the German nation, which we had learned to love from an early age. The anti-semitism of my parents was a part of their outlook which was taken for granted. . . .

For as long as we could remember, the adults had lived in this contradictory way with complete unconcern. One was friendly with individual Jews whom one liked, just as one was friendly as a Protestant with individual Catholics. But while it occurred to nobody to be ideologically hostile to the Catholics, one was, utterly, to the Jews. In all this no one seemed to

worry about the fact that they had no clear idea of who "the Jews" were. They included the baptized and the orthodox, yiddish [*sic*] speaking second hand dealers and professors of German literature, Communist agents and First World War officers decorated with high orders, enthusiasts for Zionism and chauvinistic German nationalists. . . . I had learned from my parents' example that one could have anti-semitic opinions without this interfering in one's personal relations with individual Jews. There may appear to be a vestige of tolerance in this attitude, but it is really just this confusion which I blame for the fact that I later contrived to dedicate body and soul to an inhuman political system, without this giving me doubts about my own individual decency. In preaching that all the misery of the nations was due to the Jews or that the Jewish spirit was seditious and Jewish blood was corrupting, I was not compelled to think of you or old Herr Lewy or Rosel Cohen: I thought only of the bogeyman, "the Jew." And when I heard that the Jews were being driven from their professions and homes and imprisoned in ghettos, the points switched automatically in my mind to steer me round the thought that such a fate could also overtake you or old Lewy. It was only *the Jew* who was being persecuted and "made harmless."²⁵

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Maschmann's account conveys, better than any scholarly analysis of which I know, the central qualities of German antisemitism: its hallucinatory image of the Jews; the specter of evil that they appeared to Germans to be casting over Germany; Germans' virulent hatred of them; the "abstract" character of the beliefs that informed the treatment which its bearers accorded *real* Jews; the unquestioned nature of these beliefs; and the eliminationist logic that led Germans to approve of the persecution, ghettoization, and extermination of Jews (the evident meaning of the euphemism "made harmless"). Maschmann leaves no doubt that antisemitism in Germany was, for many, like mother's milk, part of the Durkheimian collective consciousness; it was, in this woman's astute account, "a part of their outlook which was taken for granted." The consequences of these views, of this ideological map, can be seen in the wild success of the unfolding eliminationist antisemitic persecution that began with the Nazis' assumption of power.

DURING ITS NAZI period, German antisemitism took predictable turns. Harnessed now to a state occupied by the most virulent and dedicated antisemites ever to assume the leadership of a modern nation,²⁶ anti-Jewish hatreds and yearnings previously confined to civil society by states that would not organize the burning sentiments into systemic persecution became during the Nazi period the guiding principles of state policy, with a number of unsurprising results:

1. The enactment of extensive, severe legal restrictions upon Jewish existence in Germany.
2. Physical and increased verbal attacks upon Jews, both spontaneous ones from ordinary Germans and ones orchestrated by governmental and party institutions.
3. A further intensification of antisemitism within society.
4. The transformation of Jews into "socially dead" beings.²⁷
5. A society-wide consensus on the need to eliminate Jewish influence from Germany.

All of these characterized not just the Nazi leadership but the vast majority of the German people, who were aware of what their government and their countrymen were doing to Jews, assented to the measures, and, when the opportunity presented itself, lent their active support to them.

The litany of German anti-Jewish policies and legal measures began with the almost instantaneous, yet sporadic, physical attacks upon Jews, their property, burial sites, and houses of worship, and with the establishment of "wild" concentration camps for them and for the political left.²⁸ The regime's and the public's highly injurious verbal attacks aside, the first large-scale and potentially symbolic organized assault upon German Jewry came just two months after Hitler's assumption of power. The nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, was a signal event, announcing to all Germans that the Nazis were resolute.²⁹ The Jews would be treated in accordance with the oft-stated conception of them: as aliens within the German body social, inimical to its well-being. Rhetoric was to be turned into reality. How did Germans react to the boycott? One Jew recounts that a few Germans defiantly expressed their solidarity with the beleaguered Jews. Yet "such protests were not very common. The general attitude of the public was reflected in an incident which occurred at a chemist's shop. A lady, accompanied by two uniformed Nazis, had entered. She brought with her some goods she had purchased a few days before, and demanded that the chemist should return her money. 'I did not know that you were a Jew,' she declared, 'I don't want to buy anything of Jews.'³⁰ Here was the sight of the German *Volk*, organized by the German state, collectively boycotting an entire group of German citizens, because this group allegedly, in cahoots with racial brethren abroad, was harming Germany.³¹ The Nazis signaled repeatedly and clearly, the boycott having been but one instance, that the era of Jews in Germany would soon come to a close.

Following upon this boycott, which was devastating to the social position of Jews, who were now publicly, officially proclaimed to be, and treated as, a pariah people, was a series of anti-Jewish legal measures that began what was to become the systematic elimination of Jews from German eco-

nomie, social, and cultural life, from a public and social existence in Germany.³² The Nazis passed the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service just a few days after the boycott, which led to the immediate dismissal of thousands of Jews, because it mandated "race" as a qualification for civil service employment.³³ Again, the symbolism was quite clear. This law, one of the first that the Nazis promulgated on any matter, was directed at the Jews, producing a "purification" of the state, an elimination of the Jewish presence in the institution perhaps most identified with the common and collective welfare of the people, most identified with serving the people. By definition, Jews could not serve (because serving implies helping) the German people. Although there were Germans who voiced criticism towards the open violence against Jews and towards the boycott (which was deemed to hurt Germany's standing abroad and was accompanied by great brutality), the criticism generally betrayed neither dissent from the conception of Jews underlying these measures nor solidarity with the beleaguered Jews.³⁴ The law excluding Jews from the civil service, being unaccompanied by public displays of brutality, was, not surprisingly, widely popular in Germany.³⁵ It was especially popular among the Jews' civil service colleagues. Working closely for years with the Jews did not, as would have ordinarily been expected, engender among the Germans feelings of camaraderie and sympathy.³⁶ Thomas Mann, who had already long been an outspoken opponent of Nazism, could nevertheless find some common ground with the Nazis when it came to eliminating Jewish influence in Germany: "... it is no great misfortune after all that ... the Jewish presence in the judiciary has been ended."³⁷ The dominant cultural cognitive model of Jews and the eliminationist mind-set that it spawned was dominant in Germany.

For the next two years, Germans inside and outside the government succeeded in making life for Jews in Germany—who suffered under a plethora of laws, measures, and assaults upon their livelihoods, social positions, and persons—all but unbearable.³⁸ During this period, the society-wide attack upon the Jews proceeded in an uncoordinated manner. Some of its aspects were mandated from above, some initiated from below, the latter generally, though not always, by avowed Nazis. The main, though not sole, initiators of assaults upon Jews were the men of the SA, the brown shirt shock troops of the regime. During the middle part of 1933, they unleashed physically destructive and symbolic attacks against Jews all across Germany. The assaults ran the gamut of what was to become the standard German repertoire. Verbal assaults were so common as to be "normal" actions, unworthy of special notice. The Jews' pariah status was publicly declared in Germany on explicit, unequivocal public signs. For example, all over Franconia, at the entrances to many villages and in restaurants and hotels, Germans posted signs with



Sign in Braunschweig in 1935 warns: "Jews enter this place at their own risk."

proclamations like "Jews Not Wanted Here" or "Entry Forbidden to Jews."³⁹ Munich, already in May 1933, also boasted signs on its outskirts that declared "Jews Not Wanted."⁴⁰

During the 1930s, towns throughout Germany issued official prohibitions on Jews entering them, and such signs were a near ubiquitous feature of the German landscape. One historian and observer of Germany described them in 1938:

Where formal decrees [banning Jews from a locale] are lacking, placards on the highways leading to the towns have the desired effect. "Jews Enter This Place at Their Risk," "Jews Strictly Forbidden in This Town," "Warning to Pickpockets and Jews" are favorites. Poets have been encouraged to make these announcements rhyme with "sow," "garlic," and "stink." Artists have been given an opportunity to depict on the placard the fate of any Jews incautious enough to disregard the warning. These placards are universal throughout Hessa, East Prussia, Pomerania, and Mecklenburg, and can be found in about one-half of the towns elsewhere. (None, however, will be found in such tourist resorts as Baden-Baden, Kissingen, or Nauheim.) Railway stations, government buildings, and all important highways take up the refrain. In the neighborhood of Ludwigshaven, a dangerous bend in the road

bears the following advice to motorists: "Drive Carefully, Sharp Curve—Jews, 75 miles an hour!"⁴¹

Such "public defamation"⁴² and humiliation expressed the Germans' eliminationist intent.

Supplementing the verbal assaults were physical attacks of fearsome symbolic content that began in the first months of the Nazi period and continued until its end. They included Germans forcibly cutting Jews' beards and hair.



A German cuts a Jew's beard in Warsaw in 1939, while others look on in laughter.

One Jewish refugee recalls having seen, in a Berlin hospital in early 1933, an old Jewish man with unusual facial wounds: "He was a poor rabbi from Galicia, who had been stopped in the street by two men in uniform. One of them gripped him by the shoulders, the other held his long beard. Then the second man took a knife from his pocket, and cut off the old man's beard. To remove it thoroughly, he had cut off several pieces of skin." Upon being asked by the physician whether or not the perpetrator had said anything, the man responded, "I don't know. He screamed at me: 'Death to the Jews!'"⁴³ Attacks upon Jewish businesses, synagogues, and cemeteries were perpetrated both by individuals and by organized groups. In Munich in 1934, for example, a man who had no Nazi affiliation provoked crowds of Germans to demonstrate against Jewish store owners, a demonstration that eventually erupted in violence. Beatings, maimings, and killings of Jews also became an

all too "normal" occurrence during these years.⁴⁴ An illustrative episode was recounted by the daughter of an unsuspecting cattle dealer from a small town in East Prussia, who was set upon by five heavily armed SA men in the middle of the night in March 1933. The "SA-man first beat my father, then my mother, and finally myself with a rubber truncheon. My mother received a deep cut on her head, and my forehead was also lacerated. . . . Outside the front door all of my father's competitors had gathered, and they behaved in such an indecent manner that I, as a young girl, cannot relate of this to you . . ." ⁴⁵ Attacks against Jews during this period were by no means confined to cities. Jews living in the countryside and in small towns throughout Germany were so persecuted by their non-Jewish neighbors and were subjected to so much violence in the first years of the regime that they by and large fled their homes to larger and more anonymous cities or abroad.⁴⁶ Such neighborly attacks, coming from people who had lived, worked, given birth, and buried parents, side by side with them, were intense. What took place in two nearby small towns in Hesse was by no means out of the ordinary.⁴⁷

Forty Jewish families were living in one of the Hessian towns, Gedern, upon the Nazis' assumption of power. Already, less than two months into the Nazi era, on the night of March 12, 1933, Germans broke into the houses of the town's Jews and brutalized them. They bludgeoned one Jew so badly that he had to spend a year in a hospital. When, on the occasion of the one national election that took place during the Nazi period, graffiti urging a vote for the (forbidden) leader of the Communist Party was discovered, Germans of the town marched some Jews in drill step to the bridge and forced them to wash it clean. They then beat the Jews. During this period, one Jewish boy was assaulted on the street, losing his eye to his assailant. A little while later, the Germans forced two Jewish men to parade in front of the town, beating them with whips which they had procured from a prosperous farmer. They communicated their desire to be rid of Jews with another unmistakably symbolic act, common to Germany at the time—the overturning of the gravestones in the Jewish cemetery. All of the Jews fled their intolerable existence in this town well before *Kristallnacht*, the last Jew leaving on April 19, 1937. Upon his departure, this apparently destitute man was denied food by his erstwhile neighbors.⁴⁸

A second town, Bindsachen, was yet another home to an early assault on Jewish existence. On the evening of the attack, March 27, 1933, immediately before it commenced, a large part of the town assembled in order to witness SA men bludgeon the chosen Jewish victim, who was known to everyone in the town. The townspeople, enthusiastic at the sight of their suffering neighbor, urged on the SA man with cheers.⁴⁹

A chronicle of Germans' attacks of all varieties upon Jews during this period (uncoordinated by state or Party offices) would fill many volumes. The instances recounted here were anything but atypical. Attacks of these sorts

were a "normal," quotidian part of Germany once Nazism was in a position to unleash the pent-up antisemitic passion.⁵⁰ The SA's rank and file, eager at last to give regular expression to their hatred of Jews, initiated much of the violence on their own. The state had implicitly declared the Jews to be "fair game"—beings who were to be eliminated from German society, by whatever means necessary, including violence.

The SA has typically been characterized as an organization of the rabble in uniform, of brutal men from the fringes of society, seething with resentment and bursting with violent urges.⁵¹ To a great extent this characterization is apt. Yet it must be emphasized that the membership of the SA was about *two million* men, which was approximately 10 percent of the German civilian male population of the age cohorts on which the SA drew.⁵² As the numbers indicate, the SA was representative of a significant percentage of the German people. Moreover, as with any radical, martial organization of this sort, many Germans outside the organization could be counted on to sympathize with the brutal antisemites in the SA who were willing to participate in attacks on Jews. The example of the savagely beaten and tormented Jew of Bindsachen illustrates this common phenomenon. The SA men took the initiative and were cheered on and aided by people from their town, who were presumably not SA members.

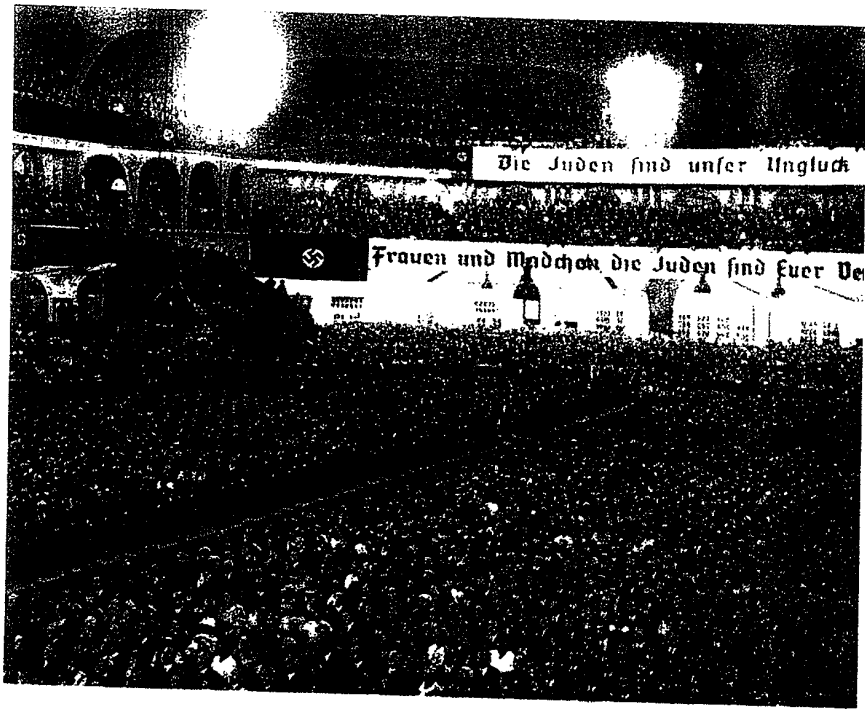
The attacks upon Jews during these first years of Nazi governance of Germany were so widespread—and broad-based—that it would be grievously wrong to attribute them solely to the toughs of the SA, as if the wider German public had no influence over, or part in, the violence. A Gestapo report in August 1935 from Osnabrück belies the notion of an innocent German public. Robert Gellately writes:

In that city and surrounding area there were "massive demonstrations" against Jewish businesses, which were publicly branded and surrounded by mobs; people who frequented Jewish businesses were photographed and the pictures were displayed in public. The streets were alive with action—parades and so on. . . . The "high point of the struggle against the Jews," as the report went, was a meeting on 20 August, which brought together 25,000 people to hear Kreisleiter Münzer on the theme of "Osnabrück and the Jewish Problem." The situation was so inflamed, however, that the Gestapo and other state officials had to call on Münzer to put a stop to the "individual actions," and he did so by publishing a warning in all the local newspapers; these actions were officially outlawed on 27 August.⁵³

The attacks upon Jews during this period, the attempts to hasten the eliminationist program, came by no means only from the "rabble" of German society, that 10 percent at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, all too blithely dismissed by interpreters of this period as immoral or amoral people

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from whom one could not expect better conduct. The initiative to eliminate Jews from social contact with Germans was also taken by municipalities and heterogeneous groups of Germans of all classes well before the state demanded such action, such as when, on their own, cities and towns began to bar Jews as early as 1933 from using swimming pools or public bathing facilities.⁵⁴ So many measures and assaults against Jews were initiated by small businessmen during this early period that this social stratum appears to have been the front of the majority of attacks originating from private German citizens.⁵⁵ Yet the initiative to eliminate Jewish influence from society was also taken by the most prestigious and best-educated professionals. German medical institutions and groups, for example, giving expression to their hatred of Jews, on their own began to exclude their Jewish colleagues, even before the government mandated the measures.⁵⁶ University administrators, faculty, and students across Germany similarly applauded and contributed to driving their Jewish colleagues out from their ranks.⁵⁷



Thousands of Germans gather at a mass rally on August 15, 1935, in Berlin, in order to listen to antisemitic speeches and to hear of a future Germany "cleansed" of Jews. The two banners read: "The Jews Are Our Misfortune" and "Women and Girls, the Jews Are Your Ruin."

Judges and members of the legal profession were so eager to purge their institutions and their country of Jewish influence that they, beginning already in the first few months of Nazi governance, often outran the legal mandates that the regime promulgated. In October 1933, one Berlin court upheld the dismissal of a Jew from administering an estate, ruling that the people's pervasive hatred of Jews "made it seem inadvisable to retain a Jew in office, even in the absence of a special law to this effect." Earlier that year, in July, another Berlin court provided a more sweeping justification for judges taking such initiative in the battle against Jewry. According to *Die Juristische Wochenschrift*, the most important German legal periodical, the court, writing with obvious approval, pointed out "that a revolutionary legislature [the Nazis had been in office but six months] naturally leaves loopholes which ought to be filled by the Court in applying the principles of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*."⁵⁸ The German judiciary—almost all of whom had taken the bench during Weimar and therefore were, at least formally, not "Nazi judges"—was composed of such ardent racial antisemites that leading Nazis (bound to the belief that the eliminationist program should be legally governed) chastised judges for having violated the law in their rampant eliminationist ardor. Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick similarly tried to rein in all those under his jurisdiction, including many holdovers from Weimar, from extending the eliminationist measures beyond the laws that the regime had made.⁵⁹ The judiciary's extensive contribution to the persecution of the Jews during the Nazi period reveals its members to have been zealous implementers and initiators of eliminationist measures. The judges composed a group that was obviously bristling with anti-Jewish hatred during Weimar, and then, when Hitler took power, was freed to act upon these beliefs.⁶⁰ In this sense, the judges, all their education and training in law notwithstanding, were like so many other groups in Germany. With the judges, this transformation is simply that much more glaring.

Effect
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influence

~~THE UNSYSTEMATIC NATURE of the legal measures taken against the Jews during the first few years of Nazism, and particularly the uncoordinated and often wild attacks upon Jews which, according to the government's own reports, occurred in every administrative district and in almost every locality,⁶¹ did cause many Germans to feel unsettled. Some objected to the wanton violence, and many, in and out of government and the Party, were unsure what sorts of action against the Jews were to be taken or tolerated. The Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 and subsequent legislation brought order to the uncoordinated state of affairs, defining precisely who was to be considered a Jew, or a partial Jew, and enacting a broad set of prohibitions that provided a good measure of coherence to the eliminationist program. Above all else, the Nuremberg Laws made explicit and to a great extent codified the elimination~~