

January 2014

## The Goose-Step is Only Functional for Geese: Perspective on the Intentionalist/Functionalist Debate on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and its Implications for Humanity's Advancement through Modernity

Richard A. Butler  
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Butler, Richard A. (2014) "The Goose-Step is Only Functional for Geese: Perspective on the Intentionalist/Functionalist Debate on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and its Implications for Humanity's Advancement through Modernity," *History in the Making*: Vol. 7 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol7/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

## **The Goose-Step is Only Functional for Geese: Perspective on the Intentionalist/Functionalist Debate on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and its Implications for Humanity's Advancement through Modernity**

By Richard A. Butler

*Abstract: This article aims to examine the nuances of both the Intentionalist and Functionalist perspectives as they relate to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. While acknowledging the ongoing debate between the two ideological camps, a new perspective is suggested as being a more appropriate means to understanding the event. This new perspective is heavily influenced by the research done by authors such as Timothy Snyder, Donald Bloxham and Christopher Browning. The research conducted suggests that instead of the two perspectives competing for prominence, a synthetic approach is more effective in analyzing Nazi Germany and the resulting atrocities. The new perspective is labeled as modified Intentionalist in the article, a perspective which asserts that the intentions of leadership created a society of functionaries, and with this realization, a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter can be gained. Secondary to the examination of the perspectives, the article also offers commentary on what implications Nazi Germany has had on humanity's progression through modernity.*

### **Introduction**

Does modernity bring out the worst in men, or do men bring out the worst in modernity? Modernity and the so-called "enlightenment" of humanity seems to have removed what it truly means to be human; its force has introduced systems like capitalism (which is a greatly successful economic ideology), but it propagates the loss of our basic humanity. In modernity, we see the objectification on ourselves as individuals moving increasingly towards becoming a statistic of some sort. The diminishment of society's humanity towards one another is a key contributor which has led to the phenomenon of nationalism, which seeks to mobilize groups of people who identify with each other for a common national goal at the expense of individualism. This new found power of modernity and nationalism was heavily utilized by the Nazi

party, and Hitler in particular. Hitler had the profound ability to orate, and motivated masses into fervent support of such a radically destructive ideology. How he was able to harness this power has been cause for energetic debate, especially in the newer generation of scholarship on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The traditional school of thought, the Intentionalist argument, asserts that in basic theory everything flowed through Hitler and he was solely responsible; however, the Functionalist approach argues that Hitler was not as paramount and it was society's ills that caused the calamity. Simply, the truth is that neither of these approaches is sufficient for explaining the complexities of Nazi Germany's policy, and it is advantageous to view Nazi Germany and the Holocaust through a modified Intentionalist lens in order to gain a more complete understanding.

In the most simplistic analysis of the arguments on what the real cause behind the success of the Nazi ideology in Germany and the subsequent eugenically inspired conquest of Europe, the first inclination is to support the Intentionalist faction. The correlation between espoused ideology and action is undeniable (that much is sure), which is the primary reason behind touting a "modified Intentionalist" perspective versus a "modified Functionalist." Operating under an Intentionalist umbrella helps reign in a sprawling Functionalist ideology, which seeks to explain Nazi Germany and the Holocaust through an abstraction. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, the Functionalist approach places the lion's share of blame on a deeply anti-Semitic society that had permeated not only Germany, but the European continent. Anti-Semitism was undeniably present in society before the Nazis came to power, however, the presence of anti-Semitism does not automatically vindicate the Functionalist perspective. Just because societal norms loaded the proverbial gun, does not mean that societal norms pulled the trigger, because it still needed its hit man. That hit man was none other than Adolf Hitler, but, before delving too far into the Intentionalist/Functionalist debate, it is important to lay the ground work, and to examine how one of the greatest tragedies in human history came to be realized.

While traditional Functionalism is largely a defunct perspective on how to view Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, the more progressive Functionalism that is espoused by historians such as Donald Bloxham and Timothy Snyder radically shift the perspective to understand the phenomenon in a revolutionary fashion. Bloxham's analysis in *The Final Solution: A Genocide* explores the idea that in order to comprehend Nazi Germany and subsequent genocide, scholars must expand the historical vision of the subject. His main argument is that the "shatter zones" created by the collapse of the Romanov, Ottoman, and Hapsburg Empires set off a series of genocidal incidents on the European continent and that the Holocaust was a genocide in a series of outbreaks caused by

these shatter zones. Snyders' analysis focuses on enhancing the spatial understanding of Nazi Germany focusing on the "bloodlands" between Germany and Russia. This spatial perspective aids in understanding why Hitler put such an emphasis on expanding East, especially when subsequent failure to do so led to the accelerated progression of the Final Solution as alternatives dwindled and industrialized killing was utilized. Both Snyder and Bloxham offer refreshingly new Functional perspectives which have reaffirmed the perspectives' validity, but only as a complementary faction to the overarching Intentionalist side.

One important fact to realize is that anti-Semitism was not a philosophy exclusive to the Nazis, and had long been present on the European continent before they assumed power. This is why Hitler knew that anti-Semitism was a popular and pre-existing sentiment in Germany. Thomas Fuchs asserts that "it is true that anti-Semitism was generally popular and therefore eminently serviceable as a Nazi rallying point and on at least one occasion Hitler admitted that had there been no Jews, it would have been necessary to invent them. 'It is essential,' he said, 'to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one.'"<sup>1</sup> If we accept that Hitler was a revolutionary figure in the German political landscape, we must ask the question: what was the spark that lit the revolutionary fire? The answer for Germany is born from the aftermath of World War I. As a result of the crippling sanctions placed on Germany by the Versailles treaty, the subsequent government thrust Germany into a state of immense dysfunction. The treaty was constructed in such a way that the allies sought to attribute blame to Germany for the devastation of World War I. Along with Germany having to admit guilt, the treaty imposed paralyzing sanctions which limited Germany's ability to militarize and called for them to bear the cost of reconstruction in the form of reparations. These sanctions, particularly the economic ones, were aimed to keep Germany as weak as possible, but what the Allies did not anticipate was the unintended consequences of such a heavy handed "peace" treaty.

Even though the treaty was begrudgingly signed by Germany, it took on a heavily punitive and harsh characteristic, as prescribed by the French and English parties. Thus, the French and English achieved what they desired and the treaty had the intended effect: Germany's economy was thrust into a tailspin. The treaty was successful in its aim, but often times it is the unanticipated reaction that sparks an uncontrollable fire; such was the case in post-World War I Germany. The effects of the treaty led to a growing disenfranchised poor, whose blame was levied at the inept Weimar Republic leadership and meddling outsiders. This is the precise environment that becomes a breeding pool for revolutions and

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fuchs, *A Concise Biography of Adolf Hitler* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2000), 164.

revolutionaries alike; it was the environment that gave birth to possibly the most infamous revolutionary in history, Adolf Hitler. Hitler, in response to the Treaty of Versailles and its effects on Germany, asserted in his *Secret Book*:

the source of a people's whole power does not lie in its possession of weapons or in the organization of its army, but in its inner value which is represented through racial significance, that is racial value of a people as such, through the existence of the highest individual personality values as well as through healthy attitude toward the idea of self-preservation.<sup>2</sup>

Hitler's reasoning places the impetus not on the physically tangible but on the socially constructed concept of race and the supposed superiority of the German. Buttressing his assertions in what would be a reoccurring theme in Hitler rationale, every ill to society was to be burdened by the racially inferior. Though he does not directly blame the Jews for the treaty this instance, the Jews are behind most, if not all, of the ills of society in Hitler's mind.

Hitler used the treaty and its aftermath as a lightning rod to garner support from the lower classes which were the most affected by the failing economy. He was a political genius in this sense, and was able to penetrate and mobilize a power bloc that had rarely been utilized. The key to this strategy was his ability to calibrate ideology in a way that it united and mobilized the formerly neglected. Hitler was able to do this through the networking of Nazi ideology, by promoting the National Socialism to the working classes who were being crushed under the weight of the economic sanctions prescribed in the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's target audience largely dictated how he would utilize the platform of National Socialism to suit those receiving it. "Adolf Hitler and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). The prime motive was...the party's promise to restore the lower-middle class to its former assured position."<sup>3</sup>

Hitler gained notoriety in his movement for his direct leadership in the attempted coup known as the Beerhall Putsch in Munich, an event that would canonize Hitler in the Nazi movement. While in prison for high treason, he capitalized on his increased prominence in the Nazi movement wrote his famous manifesto, *Mein Kampf* or *My Struggle*. In this rambling diatribe, Hitler blamed all of Germany's many economic

---

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Secret Book* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Richard F. Hamilton, "Hitler's Electoral Support: Recent Findings and Theoretical Implications," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 11, no. 1 (1986): 1.

problems on the treaty and Jewish influence, by accusing Jews of being subversive, and ultimately noting that the Jews were the reason for the popularity of Marxism. This is in addition to the myriad of Germany's hardships following its defeat in World War I.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike most other revolutionaries throughout history, Hitler's revolution was not primarily driven by violence, it was based in ideology and garnering support from the lower classes of society. Hitler knew that simply getting up on the podium was not enough to convince the entire country that his ideals were the best way forward; he took a more pragmatic approach to garner support. He had to identify himself as someone who was part of the movement, not above it; using this tactic Hitler was able to get his targeted power bloc to accept his ideological philosophy organically. It was this approach to propagating his revolutionary ideals that essentially launched Hitler into a Messiah-like position amongst his followers. Hitler was able to harness the sentiment of his followers and the economic environment of Germany to facilitate his slow-burning progression to ultimate power. Hitler's ascent to power was not born from blood, but a marked progression through the established political system.

With Hitler firmly cemented in party leadership, it is now time to move on to the ideology that propelled him to the precipice of society. Nazi ideology, from the beginning, was an extremely right-wing philosophy, and was at heart resolutely anti-Semitic. Even though Hitler is inextricably linked to Nazism, he was not its founder; he latched onto its platforms and then once he occupied a prominent position he shifted the ideology. Under his leadership, it became more internalized in Hitler himself, and thus "Nazism's uniqueness was Hitler, no less. Nazism was Hitlerism, pure and simple."<sup>5</sup> This shift to an ideology that was so beholden to one man is largely the reason Hitler became a Messianic figure and *Mein Kampf* became its holy book. *Mein Kampf* attempts to diagnose the problems that affected German society, per Hitler's perspective. Through racial axioms; he emphasizes the superiority of the Aryans in the face of Jews. Hitler's rationale in racism is obviously self-serving, but is assumed that his rationale had almost scientific certainty; "The result of all racial crossing is therefore in brief always the following: (a) Lowering of the level of the higher race; (b) Physical and intellectual regression and hence the beginning of a slowly but surely progressing sickness."<sup>6</sup> Hitler later appealed to people's intrinsic instinct to rid themselves of parasites, and frequently referred to the Jews as such. So much so, that it is a chapter title, in which Hitler states:

---

<sup>4</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 37-65.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Kershaw, "Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 242.

<sup>6</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 286

The Jew's life as a parasite in body of other nations and states explains a characteristic which once caused Schopenhauer, as has already been mentioned, to call him the 'great master in lying.' Existence impels the Jews to lie, and to lie perpetually, just as it compels the inhabitants of the northern countries to wear warm clothing.<sup>7</sup>

Hitler was intent on ensuring that anti-Semitism was ingrained, and that it would progress in intensity throughout his political career. *Mein Kampf* was only one of the early steps in establishing a fervent ideology based largely on racial superiority and the castigation of Jews.

Initially, after his seizure of power, Germany did not have codified laws which marginalized the Jews, however, the Jews were still discriminated against on the basis of the "unwritten laws" implied by the now official German ideology. Any ambiguity that may have existed in the Third Reich was erased September 15, 1935, when the Nuremberg Laws were legitimized; the marginalization of the Jews was cemented legally into Nazi society. The Nuremberg Laws consist of the Reich Citizenship Law, which includes the statute: A citizen of the Reich is that subject only who is of German or kindred blood and who, through his conduct, shows that he is both desirous and fit to serve the German People and Reich faithfully. While Jews are not explicitly mentioned in the statutes that constitute the Reich Citizenship laws, they are the primary aim nonetheless. In order to solidify this point, however, the second law, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, was adopted. The statutes of the aforementioned law prohibits: marriage between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood, sexual relations outside marriage between Jews and nationals of German or kindred blood, Jewish employment of German or kindred blood under forty-five years of age as domestic servants, and Jews from displaying Reich and national flags or the national colors.<sup>8</sup>

While the Nuremberg laws did not call for violence against Jews explicitly, the laws were a profound step in the progression towards the Final Solution, even if in 1935 the Final Solution as we know it had not yet been conceived. The Nuremberg laws set a distinct precedent for Nazi Germany, one that established that Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric was not merely talking points on a campaign; they were words with weight that would find their foothold in the policies of Nazi Germany. Post-Nuremberg laws Germany would follow a progression in intensity of anti-Jewish policies, which Christopher Browning chronicles in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>8</sup> "The Nuremberg Laws," last modified March 11, 2009, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nurlaws.html>.

progressive marginalization of Jews through measures that restricted their access to society: 1939 saw radios confiscated, '40 private telephones, '42 the ability to purchase newspapers and magazines. The Nazis also sought to economically cripple the Jewish population through a multitude of policies, beginning in 1938, which progressively restricted the Jews' ability maintain themselves.<sup>9</sup> The progression of the malicious anti-Semitic laws towards the ever evolving Final Solution to the Jewish Question lends to a somewhat functional understanding of the catastrophe often associated with Nazi Germany. The intent for the destruction of the Jews, however, coupled with the environment of Nazi Germany, suggests that the functionaries were created by ideological intent.

### **Demystifying Nazi Germany and the Holocaust**

There is no questioning the gravity of disaster that surrounds Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but it is necessary to remove and overcome the significant stigma surrounding such a momentous event in human history. As scholars, it is necessary to break it down and analyze it for its reality, rather than be enamored by its aura; in order to provide a purer understanding of the stakes and progression of Nazi Germany. From this perspective, it is vital to understand how the Nazi policy, which was normatively hostile towards Jews and other undesirables, progressed from discrimination to destruction. In order to understand this, a variety of issues must be explored: whether the the policies of Nazi Germany, Operation Barbarossa and conquest, economics, or the Final Solution itself are at fault.

It is of central importance to understand not just how the Final Solution evolved into what we now know it became, but to peel back the layers even more to see why such violent policies were allowed by the public to be enacted. Kershaw attributes this progression to indifference:

...depersonalization of the Jew had been the real success story of the Nazi propaganda and policy...the 'Jewish Question' was of no more than minimal interest to the vast majority of Germans during the war years...Popular opinion, largely indifferent and infuse with latent anti-Jewish feeling further bolstered by propaganda provided the climate within which spiraling Nazi aggression towards the Jews could take place unchallenged. But it

---

<sup>9</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of The Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 173.

did not provoke the radicalization in the first place...the road to Auschwitz was built by hatred, but paved with indifference.<sup>10</sup>

While Kershaw is correct in the sense that indifference was a major factor in the road to atrocity, indifference does not explain just how the Nazis were able to gain so much political capital to enforce these policies with expected indifference of the German population. The basis of this obscene indifference was born from the initial success of the Nazi party; following the reasoning that successes are veneration of ideology, Bloxham's analysis echoes this sentiment when he states: "Hitler achieved huge popularity in the mid-1930s as a result of general improvement in the German economy and bloodless foreign policy triumphs, and that was certainly a key factor in increased public acceptance of Nazi domestic programmes."<sup>11</sup>

Hitler knew that he had to gain the general public's favor before launching into the radical destructive policies that would define his final years in power. He nevertheless mused about the destruction of the Jews early on in his secret book (which was never published during his life), where he stated "In view of the endowment of Jewry, which after all is only destructive, it will operate even here only as the historical 'ferment of decomposition.' It has summoned to its help spirits of which it can no longer rid itself, and the struggle of the inwardly anti-state Pan-Slav idea against the Bolshevik Jewish state idea will end with the destruction of Jewry."<sup>12</sup> Hitler knew the political power of utilizing the so-called "other," and knew that if he overplayed his hand he could very well lose control of the power he had procured. It is also fair to assume that he was aware that he needed the political capital gained by success to be the catalyst of the progression to the Final Solution, as he found out when everything was falling apart in the Third Reich. His failures in the war became apparent to all those who had been disillusioned by propaganda when:

The Belarusian Front of the Red Army began to shell Berlin on 20 April 1945, Hitler's birthday, by early May it had met the Ukrainian Front in the German capital. Berlin fell and the war was over. Hitler had ordered subordinates to apply a scorched earth policy to Germany itself, but he was not obeyed. Although much

---

<sup>10</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 277.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Hitler, *Hitler's Secret Book*, 139.

young German life was wasted in the defense of Berlin, Hitler could effect no further policies of mass killing.<sup>13</sup>

The tightrope of extremist ideology was fundamentally tied to the success of the state; Hitler's early successes essentially validated the radical Nazi ideology, but as Germany was crumbling around him, Hitler's mandate on influence rapidly deteriorated along with the country.

In order to gain a more honest understanding of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, we must peel back the shroud of Auschwitz and recognize that the story does not begin and end in what has become the harrowing symbol of Nazi atrocity. The fact of the matter is that the implications were much larger than what occurred at Auschwitz. It is not that big of a stretch that most people assume that the concentration camps in Germany which often characterize the Holocaust were where the highest body counts were collected. This, however, is untrue as "the German prisoner-of-war camps in the East were far deadlier than the German concentration camps. Indeed the existing concentration camps changed their character upon contact with prisoners of war."<sup>14</sup> For conventional knowledge of the legacy of Nazi Germany, the realization that while the concentration camps were horrible, they were not the be all, end all, of Nazi atrocity. This is a new, important concept, which Donald Bloxham and Timothy Snyder, have developed.

Bloxham and Snyder alike are able to demystify Nazi Germany and the Holocaust largely through a spatial understanding of the events that occurred during the Nazi reign. Bloxham, however, diverts into a more functional position by using history of the region as the shifting point for explaining The Final Solution. What makes this spatial understanding so important to gaining a full understanding of the entire episode is that it allows us to see a tangible progression of ideology and the functionaries created by the intentions of party. Even while most of the killings associated with the Nazi regime were committed outside the camps, another important aspect to understand about the Holocaust and how it was situated spatially, is that most of it happened outside of Germany proper. "Most of the killing of Jews after 1939 happened outside Germany and away from the eyes of most Germans; most of the victims were not German nationals, meaning there were few residual bonds of connectedness between the groups; genocide happened while Germany was at war, with all of the introspection and bifurcation of the world into 'friends' and 'enemies' that that context brings."<sup>15</sup> The area of

---

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 311.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>15</sup> Bloxham, 154.

Europe in which most of the killings took place, whether in the concentration camps or as a result of Germany's conquest of Eastern Europe, Snyder appropriately labels, the "bloodlands" for the sheer amount of destruction of human life by Hitler and Stalin.

Although it would be too simplistic to describe the Eastern conquest by the Germans as purely one to rid Europe of the Jews, Hitler did know just how useful a tool they were in garnering support for an all-out eugenically inspired conquest of undesirables. "Nazism was a ceaselessly dynamic system that needed conflict, enemies, and 'inferiors' to justify its own ideology, and would always find more people to fight and kill."<sup>16</sup> This sentiment largely defines Operation Barbarossa (the codename for the German invasion of the Soviet Union) and how the events played out in the East, as Jews were the catalyst for conquest; the Nazis proceeded in eliminating ethnic Poles and Russians in their conquest. The pall of the Holocaust distorts the fact that "German plans envisioned even more killing. Hitler wanted not only to eradicate the Jews; he wanted to also destroy Poland and the Soviet Union as states, exterminate their ruling classes, and kill tens of millions of Slavs."<sup>17</sup> Equally important to realizing the complexity of the Nazi motivation for conquest was that it was not merely to remove the undesirables from existence. Hitler knew that Germany could not remain dependent on itself within its set borders, especially if it was to fight a war of great proportions. Thus, the conquest of the East was a form of Imperialistic expansion.

Economics were equally as important to Hitler as the conquest of the East and the ethnic cleansing that took place during those invasions. The two main targets for Hitler were Russia and the Ukraine. The motivation behind going after Russia was that "Hitler wanted Germany, as he put it, to be 'the most autarkic state in the world.' Defeating Britain was not necessary for this. Defeating the Soviet Union was. In January 1941, Hitler told the military command that the 'immense riches' of the Soviet Union would make Germany 'unassailable.'"<sup>18</sup> Russia was a primary target because of the many resources it possessed, namely oil. The impetus placed on Ukraine by the Nazi brass, Hitler included, was paramount.

The German army general staff concluded in an August study that Ukraine was 'agriculturally and industrially the most valuable part of the Soviet Union.' Herbert Backe, the responsible civilian planner, told Hitler in January 1941 that 'the occupation of Ukraine would

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>17</sup> Snyder, ix.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 159.

liberate us from every economic worry.' Hitler wanted Ukraine 'so that no one is able to starve us again, like in the last war'...in the long run, the Nazis' Generalplan Ost involved seizing farmland, destroying those who farmed it, and settling it with Germans.<sup>19</sup>

Propaganda may have suggested that the main underpinnings of Operation Barbarossa were racially based, but it is more than abundantly clear that racism was primarily a sales pitch and side effect of German assault on the East.

Despite Operation Barbarossa's initial success, it is widely known for its phenomenal failure and subsequent importance as the turning point for the Nazi war machine. More than its failure, though, was what it meant to the Nazi state and the Jewish Question. Hitler's prophecy, one that centers on faulting the Jews because: "'the world war is here,' Hitler told some comrades on 12 December 1941; 'the annihilation of Jewry must be the necessary consequence.' From that point forward his most important subordinates understood their task: to kill all the Jews wherever possible...Jews were now blamed for the looming disaster that could not be named."<sup>20</sup> This was the key pivot point in the course to the Final Solution. Previous plans had included deportations to places like Madagascar, which was one of the favored locations early on in the evolution of the Final Solution. "What might appear from a post-Holocaust perspective as a centrally planned and uniformly applied pattern of stigmatization, dispossession, concentration and annihilation was in the first months of Operation Barbarossa an incoherent, locally and regionally varied sequence of measures characterized on the part of German officials by increasing violence and its acceptance as normality in 'the east.'"<sup>21</sup> Acknowledging that the Final Solution was not some stone cast monolithic entity from its inception, but the result of the chaos that pervaded Nazi ideology, aids in breaking down the barriers of the enormous stigma surrounding the event. This leads us into determining what drove Nazi Germany into the annals of history and begs the question: was it the intent of ideology or the function of society?

### **Intentionalist/Functionalist Debate**

Make no mistake, the responsibility for the myriad of atrocities committed by the Nazi party is held in the hands of Hitler himself and

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> Snyder, 214.

<sup>21</sup> Browning, 259.

the upper echelon of the Nazi party. While that is clearly the case, some argue that the actions of the Nazi party were merely the next step in advancing the deep rooted anti-Semitism in Europe, in essence, removing the impetus of Hitler's direct involvement in the process. This stance is dangerously irresponsible when trying to explain just why the Holocaust was allowed to take place. By removing Hitler and the ideology that he represented as the sole cause of the Holocaust, the enormity of what transpired is significantly diminished, which is a dangerous sentiment that comes to light when looking at genocides through a Functionalist lens. That is not to say the Functionalist approach does not have a seat at the table when examining Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, however, because nothing is as black and white as many portray it to be. The fact of the matter is that the Holocaust was not a function of society, but was instead a purely intentional event spurred on by a totalitarian regime headed by Adolf Hitler.

When looking at an event as momentous in history as the Holocaust, it is important to realize that nothing can be reasoned with absolutes (though many try to define it that way), which is where the Intentionalist/Functionalist debate arises. The first and most reasonable, if a bit flawed, the Intentionalist approach asserts:

Intentionalists focus on the frequently and explicitly stated ambition of Hitler to eliminate German Jewry and his role in the actual process. Anti-Semitism, the antimodern ideology par excellence, was the core of the Nazi regime, and when the time came, the vast machinery of government was directed by Nazi elites to prosecute the 'war on the Jews.' By this theory the explanation of the Holocaust coincides neatly with the agency of those responsible for its perpetration. Act followed intention in a linear diachronic fashion. The Holocaust was anything but an accident, and there is no question of who was responsible for it.<sup>22</sup>

The Intentionalist approach to explaining the Holocaust unabashedly, as it should, places the responsibility of the Holocaust at the feet of the Fuhrer and the upper echelon of the Nazi party.

One need only to examine Hitler's own rhetoric to establish the intent. It is no secret how inflammatory his hate was for the undesirables, with Jews at the forefront of his vitriol. Hitler was a self-serving philosopher when it came to rationalizing and articulating his feelings for the Jews, and often utilized analogy as a tool to castigate them. For some

---

<sup>22</sup> A. D. Moses, "Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and His Critics," *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998): 201.

reason, Hitler seemed to believe that Jews had some sort of super natural power that was outside their own conscious control:

Jews are not aware of the destructive power they represent. Now, he who destroys life is himself risking death. That's the secret of what is happening to the Jews. Whose fault is it when a cat devours a mouse? The fault of the mouse, who has never done any harm to a cat? The destructive role of the Jew has in a way a providential explanation. If nature wanted the Jew to be the ferment that causes peoples to decay, thus providing these peoples with an opportunity for a healthy reaction, in that case people like St. Paul and Trotsky are, from our point of view, the most valuable.<sup>23</sup>

While this may just be a single instance of how Hitler invoked nature and historical precedence for his reasoning on why he was justified in his intense anti-Semitism, his rhetoric, whether in writing or speech, is often littered with the same sort of reasoning.

If there had been no rhetoric or propaganda preceding the actions of the Nazi party in its conquest of the Jews, then the Functionalist approach would have a leg to stand on when trying to explain Nazi Germany and the Holocaust holistically. Obviously that is not the case, and to try to argue in abstraction detracts from the task at hand. Even though the Functionalist approach is deficient in a major area of understanding, Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, one cannot assume that the Intentionalist perspective is pristine and without fault. Both approaches are fundamentally flawed, but that does not mean that they are entirely devoid of merit. They both exhibit a strong understanding of certain aspects of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but as stand-alone theories they cannot hold up as viable avenues to understanding the complexities inherent in the Nazi epoch.

The Intentionalist approach finds its greatest merit in explaining the macro-effects of Nazi Germany and in turn is rather deficient in explaining its micro aspects. Those micro aspects consist of the mid to lower level members of the party which made up the large majority of the population who stood by, towed the party line and were not among the Nazi elite. Where the Intentionalist argument succeeds, the Functionalist fails, and conversely the Intentionalist argument fails where the Functionalist argument succeeds. The Intentionalist perspective is able to explain the driving force of the ideology and grasps the momentous importance of Hitler and the upper echelon of the Nazi party

---

<sup>23</sup> Martin Borman, *Hitler's Table Talk* (Burlington: Ostara Publications, 2012), 60.

to society under its influence. It is nonetheless grossly lacking in its ability to understand the state of the people who were being driven by the ideology of the totalitarian government that had a phenomenal propaganda machine and arguably one of the most charismatic leaders of all time. Functionalism is the exact opposite, which for the most part misses the mark on how much “Hitler was irreplaceable in Nazism.”<sup>24</sup> It is still true though that the Functionalist perspective succeeds in its ability to analyze how the great majority of the population under the Nazi party was able to commit the dehumanizing acts of the Holocaust.

The Functionalists argue that the deep seeded anti-Semitism in Germany, let alone the European continent, was the bedrock for the progression of anti-Semitism in Nazi ideology that resulted in the Holocaust; and shows that Hitler himself was not imminently responsible. The Functionalist approach has prescribed arguments that seem to suggest that Hitler was largely not responsible for the Holocaust. Notions produced by this approach seem almost nonsensical, considering Hitler’s place in the Nazi regime: which suggests, “Hitler furnished the legitimating ideology, to be sure, but the actual substance of the Holocaust was the achievement of bureaucrats, eager to please their master, and willing to undertake any measure to advance their careers.”<sup>25</sup> In response to the previous statement or John Weiss’ assertion that “It is time to stop believing that ‘without Hitler, no Holocaust,’”<sup>26</sup> an Intentionalist would assert “In the long evolution of Nazi Jewish policy to the Final Solution, Hitler had been of course not only ‘champion and spokesman’ but also the necessary and pivotal decision maker.”<sup>27</sup> There are two types of Functionalists, responsible and irresponsible. Responsible Functionalists, such as Bloxham, recognize that “The Holocaust, like every other genocide, there was no inevitability to its occurrence.”<sup>28</sup> The responsible Functionalists are able ascertain the impetus of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but what scholars like Bloxham and Snyder are able to do, through careful analysis of the facts rather than the stigma, is provide a demystified perspective, even if their Functionalist base does not grasp the macro-effects as well as an Intentionalist base would. Bloxham and Snyder’s destigmatized approach to scholarship is a great and useful tool in gaining purer understanding.

Taking the two perspectives into account for their merits and deficiencies, it is abundantly clear that in moving forward, neither approach is a sufficient route to a more complete, honest understanding

---

<sup>24</sup> Ian Kershaw, “Working Towards the Führer: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 110.

<sup>25</sup> Moses, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Donald L. Niewyk, *The Holocaust* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Browning, 428.

<sup>28</sup> Bloxham, 7.

of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. When dealing with a situation this complex, standing on opposite poles will blind the eyes of the researcher to what the opposite pole has at its center. This problem is apparent in the analysis of the two perspectives and is the precise reason we need to move to a moderating perspective that allows us to see the whole picture. Moving forward with a modified Intentionalist perspective, that incorporates both perspectives under an Intentionalist umbrella provides the vantage point that illuminates as close to the whole picture as possible.

### **Modified Intentionalist Perspective**

Though it is important to establish that the Holocaust and the many atrocities committed by the Nazis were directly influenced by the intentions of the ideology espoused by Hitler and the Nazi elite, it is equally important to address the issue of the functions that ideology created. It would be easy to take the Goldhagen eliminationist anti-Semitic approach and claim that everyone in the Third Reich was directly responsible for the actions they took, no matter the external factors, and were responsible for the choices they made. The significance of the issue is that the environment Hitler and the Nazis created was one characterized by terror and paranoia. The propaganda machine of the Nazi regime was fantastically effective at inundating the masses with party ideology and facilitating the phenomenon of mob mentality, a skill Hitler himself employed in his oration; this skill was remarked on by Hans V. Klatenborn after an interview with Hitler, "It is evident...He has the orator's instinct for exaggeration and popularization, and is utterly without conscience or restraint when he is speaking for effect. He knows mob mind, and his one concern is to win it and hold it."<sup>29</sup> Hitler's totality as dictator, coupled with his charismatic leadership and effusive support of his propaganda machine created a society of functionaries of Nazism/Hitlerism.

The psychological state of those committing the atrocities for the Nazi regime seems distant from rational thinking due to them being in such a totalitarian state. Once taking into account the way the Nazi party operated, the totality in which it ruled, it is not hard to imagine how paranoid the masses must have been. This can be heard in the commentary of *Triumph of the Will*, "dictators want your body, your actions but, totalitarian governments want your mind."<sup>30</sup> Dissent was most definitely not allowed, and this only enhanced the paranoia and need to remain

---

<sup>29</sup> Adolf Hitler, interview by Hans V. Kaltenborn, "An Interview with Hitler, August 17, 1932," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 50, no. 4 (1967): 289.

<sup>30</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, Walter Ruttmann, and Eberhard Taubert, *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, Leni Riefenstahl-Produktion, 1935, DVD.

faithful to the Fuhrer. “Assistant Secretary Friedrich Gauss, formerly the highest legal officer in the German Foreign Office. He offered many reasons for the acquiescence of the Germans to the mass murder of Jews; some feared to lose their position, others to be arrested and brought to a concentration camp, ‘and we did not act. We had lost our courage and every concept of morality.’”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in the vein of what effect the state ideology had on the individual as far as ability to make decisions, policeman Kurt Mobius stated:

We police went by the phrase, “Whatever serves the state is right, whatever harms the state is wrong.”... it never ever entered my head that these orders could be wrong. Although I am aware that it is the duty of the police to protect the innocent I was however at the time convinced that the Jewish people were not innocent but guilty. I believed all the propaganda that Jews were criminals and subhuman... The thought that one should oppose or evade the order to take part in the extermination of the Jews never entered my head either.

<sup>32</sup>

The establishment of the lower levels of the Nazi regime as functionaries of the party is by no means an attempt to absolve them of guilt. It is however, meant to bring to light that there is an absence of absolutes when dealing with an issue as enormous as the Holocaust. Additionally, it is also meant to accentuate the intentions of Hitler and the influence he and the elite held over masses. The vehicle of this power was the ability of Hitler and the Nazi propaganda machine to utilize the appeal of nationalism. “The other” is inherent to Nazi nationalism, and these two concepts acted concurrently, because the majority of Nazi ideology was racially based.

The concept of the “other” was central to the Nazi agenda and the fact that it had no place in the Fuhrer’s Germany.

Nazi ideology despised otherness; it could not tolerate any presence that might subvert blood purity and the genetic ideals of an essentialism positing German culture and blood as the supreme representations of race. The Jews constituted “destabilizing sources of phobic anxiety and quasi-ritual contamination”... The Jewish out group,

---

<sup>31</sup> Kurt R. Grossman, “The Final Solution,” *The Antioch Review* 15, no. 1 (1955): 55.

<sup>32</sup> Edward B. Westermann, “‘Ordinary Men’ or ‘Ideological Soldiers’? Police Battalion 310 in Russia, 1942,” *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 41.

perceived as “both a hygienic and a ritual threat to a pure Nazi identity,” disturbed the racially constructed political ideal, its images and practices, and therefore had to be eliminated.<sup>33</sup>

Hitler himself set the agenda when it came to the dealing with the “others” that had polluted “his Germany.” He more often than not was not one who dealt in subtleties either, and his intentions towards the Jews were made abundantly clear in his January 30th, 1939 speech to the Reichstag in which Kershaw saw as a defining moment for him. As he included in the speech in “Hitler’s Decisive Role,” which reads:

I have very often in my lifetime been a prophet, and was mostly derided. In the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish people who received only with laughter my prophecies that I would some time take over the leadership of the state and of the entire people in Germany and then, among other things, also bring the Jewish problem to its solution. I believe that this once hollow laughter of Jewry in Germany has meanwhile already stuck in the throat. I want today to be a prophet again: if international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!<sup>34</sup>

The fact that the Functionalist argument found a receptive audience with indisputable evidence of the intent to destroy the Jewish people such as the previous speech is unfathomable. It was clear as day how Hitler regarded the Jewish people, and he was clearly on a mission to stamp out the Jews of Europe.

Even though Hitler had a taste for the theatrical when he gave speeches, given his record of violence in the face of impurity within the Reich, the Functionalists have no leg to stand on when it comes to attributing the blame to factors other than Hitler. Hitler was on a mission from the start to purge until he achieved the purity of blood, race, and ideology. His first purge was not against a group he perceived as a racial threat to the Germans, he purged members of the party whom he felt had overstepped their bounds. This, of course, was the purge of the SA police

---

<sup>33</sup> James M. Glass, “Against the Indifference Hypothesis: The Holocaust and the Enthusiasts for Murder,” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1997): 132.

<sup>34</sup> Niewyk, 28.

force in June and July of 1934 which was a “self-cleansing and reorganization...in response to the chaotic expansion of the SA since 1931 or 1932.”<sup>35</sup> The purge of the SA was not the most violent purge, but it did establish a precedent in which “Hitler’s purges clarified that the rule of law was subject to the whims of the Leader...Hitler ordered terror as a way to develop his own favored paramilitary, the SS, and assert its superiority over the various German state police forces.”<sup>36</sup> If violence was the answer for his own party members, it seems fairly obvious that what transpired in the Holocaust was a function of Hitlerism, not some abstraction extrapolated by Functionalists that society at large was to blame for its long history of anti-Semitism.

The Intentionalist approach more accurately captures Hitler’s significance to the Holocaust, and rightfully so, because to assert that he was anything less than essential to the Nazi goal of racial purity is absurd. The Functionalist approach tries to rationalize the phenomenon by arguing an abstraction that can never be proved, which is irresponsible scholarship of the Holocaust, because it diminishes the enormity of the event. Even though neither approach is absolutely correct or adequate in explaining the complexity of the Holocaust, one thing is clear through the comparative analysis of the Intentionalist/Functionalist debate; that while they both claim to have rationalized the irrational, neither of them can fully answer the simple questions of how and why. Both arguments attempt to answer in the absolutes of black and white, but the question is far too complex to be answered in absolutes. To get as close as possible to the complete answer, one has to acknowledge that there are gray areas, and that the best way to answer the why and the how is to synthesize the two arguments by focusing on the intentions of one man, one party, one ideology, and how it created functionaries under the umbrella of that man and party.

It could be argued that creating functionaries was Hitler’s intent, which would seem to validate the Intentionalist argument, but that is the precise reason for operating under the Intentionalist umbrella. Just because it was caused by intention does not exclude the important role of Functionalism; the two terms should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Working with this combined perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the situations and psyche of those committing the atrocities. A prime example of the function of intent is what happened in Garsden Lithuania, June 24, 1939. After the execution of Jews “for crimes against the Wehrmacht on order of the Fuhrer” the “Memel Schutzpolizei men discussed what they had done. In reassuring each other, comments were made like ‘Good Heavens, damn it, one

---

<sup>35</sup> Bruce B. Campbell, "The SA after the Rohm Purge," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 4 (1993): 660.

<sup>36</sup> Snyder, 76.

generation has to go through this so that our children will have a better life.”<sup>37</sup> When the sentiment of the functionaries mirrors that of the ideological agents running the society, creating functionaries from the intent of ideology has been achieved. People feeling that they were doing what was necessary for the betterment of society was the quintessential goal of Hitler-led Nazi Germany.

## **Conclusion**

When dealing with a subject as complex as Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, it is important to recognize the legacy that is associated with such an infamous event in human history. Equally as important, is recognizing that legacy is not being constrained the quest to gain a fuller understanding of how humanity devolved to institutional savagery. In the interest of pragmatism, no matter what perspective taken, whether it be a modified Intentionalist, Intentionalist, or Functionalist, it must be understood that there will never be a completely pure understanding of what happened. Even though there will never be a perfect analysis, it is the duty of interpreters of history to get as close as possible. At this juncture, the vehicle to get to that point is analyzing Nazi Germany and the Holocaust through a modified Intentionalist perspective.

The modified Intentionalist understanding provides a perspective that still allocates the lion’s share of the blame with the Hitler and his ideologies. Working under the umbrella of an Intentionalist perspective synthesized with elements of Functionalism, shifts the assumption that genocide is not a disease of function. Functionalism is, however, a symptom of genocide. By approaching Nazi Germany and the Holocaust this way, it eliminates the ability of the Functionalist to manipulate the historical record in a fashion to suit their platform. This is important because cherry picking history to fit a narrative places the Holocaust on a dialectical pattern, suggesting that history and events are working towards a goal. This dialectical pattern, when reigned in and applied within the confines of Nazi Germany, assists in understanding how the people went along with a radical ideology and how the Final Solution evolved within the chaos of the Nazi state.

There are many who would allocate the Holocaust as the defining moment of the twentieth century, and to a point they would be right, even if that perspective is a bit short sighted. It would be more accurate to assign that allocation to World War II as a whole. The many theaters of war forever shifted our view of humanity, and shows just how destructive we as citizens of the world can be. This is largely a product of humanity’s progress into modernity, as the regard for human life has

---

<sup>37</sup> Browning, 254.

been continually devalued. One need only look to the atrocities of war, whether it is the Holocaust, Operation Barbarossa, Stalinist Russia, the Atomic bombs or the actions of the Japanese in China. Simply, World War II was largely an assault on humanity.

This concept of modernity and humanity's ever vigilant search for a higher dose of it has led to people being only seen as numbers. "The Nazi regime turned people into numbers, some of which we can only estimate, some of which we can reconstruct with fair precision. It is for us as scholars to seek these numbers and to put them into perspective. It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people. If we cannot do that, then Hitler has shaped not only our world, but our humanity."<sup>38</sup> The legacy of modernity and the quest to keep progressing should not be defined by the loss of humanity, because the legacies of evil overshadow those in the past, but the present and future's appeal to humanity. Why is it easier for us to turn our humanity over to a statistic, rather than to strive as a collective entity, united in our humanity to exist? In the immortal words of Abraham Lincoln, "with malice towards none and charity for all"<sup>39</sup> If it is possible to move in that direction, we can begin to assure ourselves that humanity, in the face of modernity, has not been defined by someone as malevolent as Adolf Hitler.

---

<sup>38</sup> Snyder, 408.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Speech," last modified June 12, 2009, <http://www.abrahamlincolnclassroom.org/Library/newsletter.asp?ID=17&CRLI=94>.

## Bibliography

- Bloxham, Donald. *The Final Solution: A Genocide*. Oxford: University Press, 2009.
- Bormann, Martin. *Hitler's Table Talk*. Burlington. Ostara Publications, 2012.
- Browning, Christopher R. *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
- Campbell, Bruce B. "The SA after the Rohm Purge." *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 4 (1993): 659-674.
- Fuchs, Thomas. *A Concise Biography of Adolf Hitler*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2000.
- Glass, James M. "Against the Indifference Hypothesis: The Holocaust and the Enthusiasts for Murder." *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1997):129-145.
- Grossmann, Kurt R. "The Final Solution." *The Antioch Review* 15, no. 1 (1955): 55-72.
- Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- . *Hitler's Secret Book*. New York: Grove Press, 1983.
- . "An Interview with Hitler, August 17, 1932." By Hans V. Kaltenborn. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 50, no. 4 (1967): 283-290.
- Kershaw, Ian. *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- . "Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 239-254.
- . "Working Towards the Führer. Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship." *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 103-118.

*The Goose Step is only Functional for Geese*

- Moses, A. D. "Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and His Critics." *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998):194-219.
- Niewyk, Donald L. *The Holocaust*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011.
- Riefenstahl, Leni, Walter Ruttmann, and Eberhard Taubert. *Triumph of the Will*. Directed by Leni Riefenstahl. Germany: Leni Riefenstahl-Produktion, 1935. DVD.
- Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Westermann, Edward B. "'Ordinary Men' or 'Ideological Soldiers'? Police Battalion 310 in Russia, 1942." *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 41-68.

**Author Bio**

Richard Butler is currently a student in the M.A. of Social Sciences program at California State University, San Bernardino, and is a 2012 graduate from California State University, San Bernardino with a Bachelor's in History, which focused on modern Europe and China. After completion of his Master's, he intends to teach history at the high school level, eventually moving on to the community college level. Richard enjoys traveling to the places that he has studied and coaching baseball at a local high school. He would like to thank Dr. Pytell and Dr. Murray of the History Department at California State University, San Bernardino, as they have been incredibly influential on his educational path, and providing opportunities that would not have been possible without their guidance. Richard would also like to thank his family and friends for their unwavering support throughout his educational journey.



