THE WAR AGAINST THE JEWS; REFLECTIONS ON MODERN GENOCIDES

I. Overview, goals of lecture
   A. My goals for this lecture will have to be described as impossible to fulfill.
   B. I struggled for some time to compose a lecture dealing with genocides in a general way, with attention to various ones that I felt I previously did not have time to address adequately (such as the Irish “Great Hunger”, or the pogroms of 1919-20).
      1. I finally concluded that the goal was not achievable in the time I have.
         a) I thus will be looking most carefully at the Nazi mass murder of the Jews and will try to fit in, as time permits, in some more wide-ranging remarks about other “holocausts” or genocides.
   C. I particularly want to concentrate on concluding remarks about the man, Adolf Hitler -- that “man of the century” -- his beliefs, psyche, intentions, that go beyond the many familiar generalizations about him.
   D. I will try to develop what I consider some of the more interesting broader implications about this man.
      a) Did he really act according to an overall ideology, or a Weltanschauung?
      b) Or, was he simply a power-hunger opportunist, without any convictions or firm plans, seizing opportunities as they came?
   2. Did he always intend a general war as part of Germany’s world domination?
      a) Or, did the idea only "grow upon" him?
   3. Did he from the beginning plan to kill the Jews?
      a) Or, did that plan also grow upon him, perhaps urged upon him and developed in its details by his lieutenants?

II. The nature of Hitler’s anti-Semitism
   A. A fundamental question, with far-reaching implications: Why did Hitler hate the Jews so much that he wanted to murder them all?
1. In this was he a “typical” German, or was he unlike most Germans?
   a) Did he cause something to happen that Germans themselves would not have done?

2. In a broader way, Was his hatred unusual, somehow different from the hatred of others -- not only Germans but non-Jews in general (did many of them, too, want to kill all Jews?)

3. Was this an “inhuman” or “unique” hatred?

B. "No Hitler, no Holocaust"?

1. Some observers have insisted that without Hitler it is hard to explain the Holocaust; without him it would not have occurred.

2. My own interpretation centers around a key question of Jew-hatred:
   a) How much is hatred of Jews in history related to "objective" factors and how much is it based on "fantasy"?
   b) Simply stated, were Jews hated because of such things as competition for jobs, their exploitation of non-Jews, their role in various scandals, their position as communists, socialists and other left-wingers?
   c) Or, were they hated because they fit into fantasies about them as "Christ-killers," in some sense the personification of the Devil in the real world? ("for no real reason")

   (1) The “fantasy” element lends itself to fanatical solutions (though the “real” can also lead to murder, certainly)

   (2) Hatred based on “fantasy” tends to speak to deeply irrational factors, ones in which compromise is not an option.

C. Hitler’s experience with Jews

1. The evidence is we have on this issue is not conclusive but is nevertheless provocative and puzzling
   a) That is, there is much more evidence of favorable relationships with Jews than of unfavorable
b) Hitler’s parents do not appear to have been anti-Semitic, both by his own description and that of others.

c) Hitler seemed to revere the Jewish doctor, Dr. Bloch, who treated his dying mother.

(1) Hitler told him repeatedly that he would never forget his efforts to save her, and he sent friendly postcards to Dr. Bloch on many occasions, gave his paintings to him.

d) When down and out in Vienna, on a number of occasions it was Jews who bought his paintings, helped him out, encouraged him.

e) Among his few friends in Vienna was a Hungarian Jew, a man who gave him an overcoat when he desperately needed one (Hitler termed this man "a thoroughly decent human being")

f) The officer who recommended Hitler for an Iron Cross was a Jew.

g) In a more general way, in the prewar years Hitler spoke of his admiration for Jewish artists and intellectuals.

D. What conclusions can one reach from these remarkable contacts with Jews before the end of WW I?

1. I suggest: Hitler's postwar hatreds of Jews did not emerge from ample and personal contacts with "real" Jews.

   a) Rather, fantasies about them that related to his own psychological needs, in particular his need to hate, to focus his resentment and anger.

2. A larger point is to be made: So it was with the other fanatical anti-Semites.

   a) Jews served a role in their fantasy life, in their own "need" to hate, to find a focus for their inner tensions and frustrations, an explanation for why the world was so troubled, etc.

E. Hitler and anti-Semitism in immediate post-war period.

1. It is possible that the role of Jews in the revolution and then in the Weimar Republic acted as a kind of catalyst in activating Hitler’s fantasies about Jews.

   a) One of the most persuasive accounts he gives in
Mein Kampf of his contacts with Jews has to do with his rage, while in the hospital, in witnessing the Jewish revolutionary soldiers who came to the hospital.

2. At any rate, by 1919-20 he unmistakably came into direct contact with other anti-Semitic theorists

   a) And he began to incorporate violent attacks on the Jews in his speeches, programs, etc.

   b) Yet, as earlier noted, after 1924, he seems to have tried to appear relatively moderate, on this as on other issues.

F. Hitler's contradictory statements on the Jewish issue thus muddied the issue, or allowed some to think that he had "matured," or that he was only mildly anti-Semitic.

   1. Other concluded that his anti-Semitism had never really been "sincere" but was rather a political tool, to be abandoned when no longer useful.

   2. What was "really" going on in his mind must remain ultimately a mystery.

III. The first anti-Semitic acts of the Nazi regime

A. The actual steps taken against the Jews of Germany are not as easily understood as often suggested.

   1. They rather speak of a "crooked path" to the Holocaust.

      a) Such a conception helps us to understand how so many German Jews themselves misunderstood how serious the threat to them was.

B. Again, as noted, the Night of the Long Knives was interpreted by some as a sign that the radical anti-Semitism of the Nazi movement had been repressed.

   1. Thousands of Jews who left Germany in 1933 came back after June 1934.

C. Even the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 were not widely considered "radical".

   1. Some Jewish leaders even welcomed them publicly, in that they offered a set of basic laws—very important to a law-abiding people like the Germans—and they seemed at least to clarify the situation.

      a) Similarly, it was reassuring that Hitler proclaimed "this is my last word on the Jewish Question"
b) He let it be known that he had rejected more radical versions that were put before him

IV. Hitler's growing "hold" on Germany, politically and psychologically

A. The point should now emerge more clearly: Hitler's "hold" on many Germans had to do not only with his great successes, economically and politically
   1. Many saw him as a "moderate," as peace-loving, a great statesman, Germany’s longed-for savior
   2. Such was especially the case in the key years of 1934 to 1938, the Golden Years, when the "bonding" process was most powerfully effective

B. What were his "real thoughts" about Jews in these years?
   1. The question cannot be answered with confidence, but it is at least possible that his ideas were still in formation to some degree
      a) Especially in terms of what his ultimate "program" would be
   2. I am persuaded that his specific plans for them emerged to an important degree, as in all other areas—internal, foreign policy, etc.—as events developed, as opportunities offered themselves
      a) It does not seem to me that he had definite, concrete plans for them all along, in particular that he “intended” from the beginning of his career to kill them all
      b) One can, to be sure, persuasively argue that some terrible fate was implicit in the language he sometimes used
      c) Yet, he also made statements, privately and in public, that seemed to hold out the possibility of a non-violent, reasonable solution to the Jewish Question
      d) In this, as in so many other areas, people could believe what they wanted to believe

C. How "popular" was anti-Semitism in the 1930s?
   1. This is a key question: If Germans were “in their vast majority” (Goldhagen’s language) virulently anti-Semitic, then it would appear that anti-Semitic measures would be
popular

2. Yet, Hitler and his most influential advisers continued to put the Jewish issue at a low level of priority
   a) They clearly didn’t believe that anti-Semitism was widely popular
   b) To the end Hitler complained that the average German didn’t understand the importance of his own war against the Jews)

3. On the other hand, a persuasive argument could be made that a majority of Germans favored “moderate” measures against the Jews

4. An even more persuasive argument could be made that relatively few Germans were willing to take risks to oppose anti-Jewish measures
   a) It is hardly the case that Jews were extremely popular in Germany
   b) The Nuremberg Laws, for example, seem to have been widely accepted
   c) But at the same time there is little evidence that most Germans were calling for stronger measures, let alone mass murder

D. It may make more sense to reformulate the question:
   1. It is clear that growing numbers of Germans had given over to Hitler much of the range of their own sense of moral responsibility
      a) Many accepted that if their Fuehrer hated Jews, then they hated Jews
      b) Or, more likely, they reasoned that the Fuehrer knew best how to handle the Jewish Question, since he was solving all the other problems so ably

V. **The growing power of the S. S.**
   A. This is a fundamental point: Jewish policy was given over, more and more, to Himmler’s S. S., and Himmler was a racist fanatic, without question, as were many of his lieutenants
      1. However much ordinary Germans followed Hitler blindly, Himmler’s organization was dedicated to carrying out Hitler’s will, unquestioningly, no matter what
         a) Even so, he seems to have been stunned by the
orders to kill all Jews—that was not his initial plan

2. Again a crucial point: Himmler believed in working quietly, bureaucratically, not trying to rouse the mass of German people to violent action, but rather leaving things to his elite corps
   a) And, again, this “anti-Semitism of reason” appears to have been Hitler’s policy

VI. The steps of bureaucratic mass murder

A. The point of the Final Solution being a "passionless" and bureaucratic operation, carried out by an elite without the participation of the population, is an important one, although recently challenged by Goldhagen, in his *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*

B. There was no dramatic escalation at first
   1. Each step was incremental, partial, and there was a definite backing away at times (for example, on the boycotting of Jewish merchants)
   2. Violence against Jews before 1938 was relatively low-scale

C. Anschluss, March 1938
   1. Several scholars have seen this as the beginning of a radical escalation in violence against Jews
      a) Austria had in fact long been known for a stronger anti-Semitism than Germany

D. Kristallnacht (Nov. 1938)
   1. This is considered by many scholars the formal beginning of the Holocaust, although the numbers involved were in fact still relatively very small
   2. Since it was a violent uprising, involving large numbers of Germans, it would seem to contradict the assertion that violent anti-Semitism was not popular

E. It was supposed to be a kind of mass, spontaneous uprising against the Jews in indignation over the shooting of a German diplomat by the Jew, Hershl Grynszpan
   1. Yet studies of it have shown that it was anything but spontaneous
      a) It was rather orchestrated by Goebbels in
conjunction with elements of the SA
b) It almost certainly had Hitler's tacit, if ambiguous approval (Hitler's exact role remains unknown, but he must have at least not discouraged Goebbels)
c) The greater mass of the German population was not engaged, not consulted, and watched passively
d) Some were repelled, some joined in opportunistically, but most simply watched (though clearly put off by the damage to property)
e) It was an "un-Germanic" thing, a pogrom, the kind of thing the primitive Russians, Poles, or Romanians, did, but not the law-and-order Germans

(1) It also seemed “un-Hitlerian”, in that Hitler had spoken on many occasions against this kind of mob, anti-Jewish action (cf. his “anti-Semitism of reason”)

F. Kristallnacht was also provoked bitter differences within the Nazi party
1. Himmler and Goering in particular objected vociferously
   a) Not, of course, out of moral considerations, but because they thought it stupidly destructive
   b) Moreover, they hated Goebbels and were in constant competition with him for Hitler's favor
2. In the intra-party squabbling afterward, Hitler awarded management of the Jewish Question to Himmler, as noted

VII. The outbreak of World War II, Sept. 1939
A. What might have happened to the Jews in Germany if peace had prevailed in the following years is an interesting question, but it seems unlikely that mass murder would have been attempted
   1. All scholars are agreed, the war fundamentally altered perspectives and—no doubt more important—opportunities
B. Hitler had frequently threatened "world Jewry" if it continued to “plot” against his regime
   1. On the eve of the war he made even more pointed threats about destroying all Jews if they persisted in pulling
Germany into war

C. The victories in the east and their significance for the Holocaust
1. The sensational victories of Germany's armies radically redefined the nature of the "Jewish Question" that had to be dealt with
   a) The numbers of Jews under Nazi control increased tremendously because the center of Jewish population was in Poland and Russia

2. These victories also contributed to an even wilder enthusiasm for Hitler, and even greater tendency to follow his orders unquestioningly

D. The evidence is overwhelming that until late 1939 most of those in charge of Jewish issues saw their task as forcing Jews out of Germany
1. They seem to have worked most diligently and seriously on the so-called Madagascar Plan
2. But even without that about half of Germany's Jewish population had left the country by early 1939
3. The victory over Poland put under German control millions more Jews
   a) And thus the "solution" of forced emigration no longer made any sense
   b) And of course with a war going on, the Madagascar Plan was even less feasible than before

E. The order to murder the Jews
1. The full story of the actual genesis of the idea to exterminate the Jews systematically, as the "Final Solution," will probably never be known
2. But the best evidence now available indicates that Hitler gave orders, orally, to begin mass killings in the late spring of 1941
   a) The order seems to have been part of planning for the offensive against the Soviet Union
   b) Orders were to kill all Soviet officials, "all communists and Jews" (in Nazi ideology these were largely overlapping categories)
3. Murders by the Einsatzgruppen (special troops following the German army in Russia)
a) This was "simple murder" by means of guns
b) Perhaps a million were killed in this way
c) But this method was found to be a unsatisfactory: It was too inefficient, too "inhumane", too hard on the men who were ordered to do

4. Various other methods tried, including gassing in vans
a) The most "successful": gas chambers, with Zykon-B gas
b) Developed into huge killing centers, the most famous of which was at Auschwitz
c) It was in these centers that some four to five million Jews died, either from gas or disease, or overwork, or exposure to cold, etc.
d) Many were put to death in a modern, industrial, highly efficient fashion

VIII. Holocausts compared, meanings
A. Lessons to be learned (as with WW II and "appeasement"?)
   1. Single factors all appear inadequate as source of lessons
      a) racism by no means inevitably leads to genocide
      b) power politics (with war), nationalism, German history all need to be taken into consideration -- and each factor diminishing the lessons to be learned, emphasizing the "uniqueness" of the murder of the Jews
      c) Personality seems a strong contender (but it is "accidental"—how could we ever predict another Hitler?)
         (a) "intention" here plays a key role, in that it allows for a sense of guilt, responsibility (collective in the case of the German nation

B. Is the Holocaust beyond "lessons," a metaphysical or religious event?
   1. Punishment from God
      a) Satmar rebbe: Holocaust is God's punishment for Jews' abandoning Jewish Law in Orthodox form
   2. A mysterious religious event, like Crucifixion (Elie Wiesel)

C. Has the Holocaust been misused, exploited?
1. Does in make Jewishness "fascinated with death"?