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Initiating the Final Solution
The Fateful Months of September–October 1941

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Many scholars and survivors, as well as informed and interested readers and students, have occasionally expressed exasperation in response to the energy expended and print spilled by historians who have continued to debate the topic of my lecture tonight, namely the decisions that initiated the Final Solution. Measured against the magnitude of the event—the murder of nearly six million Jews—who cares precisely when the decisions were taken, and precisely how Hitler and/or others took them? Is not the debate over this or that month or the debate over Hitler’s explicit orders or vague instigations akin to the debates of medieval scholastics over how many angels could stand on the head of a pin?

Let me begin, therefore, by justifying my topic, by attempting to answer the daunting “so what” question. As an historian, I think it is always important to get the facts right. In this particular case it is even more important for four additional reasons. First, if the Holocaust was a watershed event in human history—the most extreme case of genocide that has yet occurred— what distinguished it from other genocides are two factors: first, the totality and scope of intent—that is the goal of killing every last Jew—man, woman, and child—throughout the reach of the Nazi empire; and second, the means employed—namely, the harnessing of the administrative/bureaucratic and technological capacities of a modern nation-state and Western scientific culture. If these elements distinguish the Nazi Final Solution both from other genocides in history and from the Nazi regime’s prior policies of population decimation and

genocide, it is not a trivial historical question to ask when Hitler and the Nazis committed themselves to this vision of murdering all the Jews of Europe through the most modern and efficient methods available to them.

Second, there is a need for Holocaust scholars in particular to get the facts right because there are people who do not wish us well. They stand malevolently prepared to exploit our professional mistakes and shortcomings for their own political agenda. From my experience as an expert witness in the Zündel and Irving trials, I know that this issue is one of their focal points of attack. I do not wish to make their dishonest task easier.

Third, this issue has wider ramifications. Only when we know when and how these decisions were taken can we responsibly ask why they were taken and why they were obeyed and implemented. From that earliest master historian, Thucydides, to the present, the study of decision-making has been a key approach used by historians to shed light on other issues. The decision-making process behind the Final Solution is no exception, in my opinion.

And finally, a study of decision-making restores a necessary sense of contingency and human agency. Many causal factors that historians discuss are indeed impersonal and structural—for instance, demography, climate, natural resources, and epidemics—and they set important parameters within which human beings make history. But in order to avoid explaining the past in terms of determinism and inevitability, the study of decision-making is a useful corrective.

After several decades of debate, historians have reached relative consensus on a number of important points concerning the decisions for the Final Solution. First, there was no single decision, no “big bang,” that produced the Final Solution. Rather, there were a series of decisions taken incrementally; the decision-making process was cumulative and prolonged. Second, the Final Solution on Soviet territory did not result from a clear decision and unequivocal instructions given to the Einsatzgruppen prior to the invasion on June 22, 1941. Instead closure of this phase of the decision-making process was reached in mid-summer, and both awareness and implementation of the new goal spread unevenly across the Eastern Front. Third, there is more continuity than discontinuity between the decisions for the Final Solution taken in 1941 and those behind the policies of ethnic cleansing and demographic engineering—what the Nazis euphemistically called “population policy” or *Bevölkerungspolitik*—in 1939–40. Fourth, decision-making did not abruptly stop in 1941; vital decisions continued to be made in 1942 and even later. Finally, most historians agree that the decision-making process was an interactive one between the center and the periphery, and it was based on both consensus and polycracy. It must be studied from below as well as from above.

Within this broad consensus, there still are differences of interpretation and emphasis, in particular concerning the extension of systematic and total mass murder from Soviet to the rest of European Jewry. The American historian Richard Breitman argues in the “intentionalist” tradition that a basic decision was taken in early 1941 in the context of preparation for Operation Barbarossa.¹ Subsequent decisions are best understood as decisions of implementation. The Swiss historian, Philippe Burrin argues for a position he dubs “conditional intentionalism,” namely that Hitler had already decided in the mid-1930s that under the condition of war on all fronts he would settle accounts with the Jews. This condition, he argues, was fulfilled in the fall of 1941 in the context of Hitler’s frustration over the prospect of a prolonged war on all fronts due to failure of the Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union and the imminent entry of the United States into the war.² The German historian Christian Gerlach,³ building on the earlier work of the Austrian Hans Safrian⁴ and Dutchman L.J. Harthog,⁵ argues that Hitler, in December 1941, took the “fundamental decision” or *Grundsatzentscheidung* to murder all the Jews of Europe. He emphasizes the failure of Barbarossa in that it blocked earlier plans to expel the Jews to the east, and especially Pearl Harbor and the resulting U.S. entry into the war. This meant the end of any usefulness to holding the Jews of Europe hostage and ushered in the “world war” (as opposed to a mere European conflict) that Hitler had prophesied in January 1939 would result in the destruction of the Jews in Europe. And finally, Peter Longerich has portrayed the development of Nazi “Jewish policy” as composed of four stages of escalation. He downplays 1941 while emphasizing September 1939 as the beginning of *Vernichtungspolitik* or “policy of annihilation” and April/May 1942 as the point at which the Final Solution emerged in its definitive form.⁶

In contrast, my own position emphasizes the importance of September/October 1941 over early 1941, December 1941, or spring 1942. It places these key decisions of September/October 1941 in a context of euphoria of victory rather than frustration over failed Blitzkrieg and either imminent or actual American entry into the war. It places greater weight on the key roles of Hitler and Himmler in comparison to regional and local initiatives. Quite simply, my thesis is that in September/October 1941 the Nazis crossed the watershed from conceiving of a solution to the Jewish question through expulsion and decimation to envisioning the Final Solution as the systematic and total mass murder of all Jews within the German grasp.

But why such differences of interpretation on a question so thoroughly studied over the past 25 years? In general, historians have never read and interpreted the same documents in same ways, but in this particular case there are two additional aggravating factors. First, there is

an asymmetry of surviving documentation—plentiful at some local, regional, and middle-echelon levels but scarce at the upper level—due to both Hitler’s non-bureaucratic work habits and the successful destruction of key SS files. Absent a “smoking pistol” document, historians must extrapolate and speculate.

Second, even in the rare case where the decision-making process in Nazi Jewish policy is well documented, it turns out to be very diffuse and amorphous. Take, for example, the Madagascar Plan. On May 25, 1940, after the rapidly advancing German army had trapped the entire British expeditionary force and elite units of the French army at Dunkirk and victory seemed assured, Himmler presented Hitler with a memorandum concerning his thoughts on the treatment of alien populations in Eastern Europe. He revived his vision for revolutionizing the demographic structure of Eastern Europe through massive ethnic cleansing and in particular proposed expelling the Jews from Europe altogether, perhaps to some country in Africa. According to Himmler’s subsequent notes, Hitler deemed his memorandum “good and correct” and told Himmler he could show it to the other Nazi leaders as being congruent with his “line of thinking.”⁷ In short, Hitler made no official decision and gave no specific order, but allowed Himmler to proceed with the knowledge that he could invoke the backing of the Führer.

Simultaneously but independently, a low-ranking official of the Foreign Office, Franz Rademacher, in response to the prospect of having the French empire at Germany’s disposal, proposed sending the Jews of Europe to the island of Madagascar. This low-level initiative was quickly passed to the Foreign Minister Ribbentrop and then to Hitler, who in a June 18 meeting with Mussolini indicated that Madagascar was to become a Jewish reservation. Himmler’s deputy, Reinhard Heydrich apparently caught wind of the scheme and five days later wrote Ribbentrop to assert his jurisdiction over any “territorial solution” to the Jewish question.⁸

Over the next two months of July and August, both the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) of Heydrich (and especially Adolf Eichmann as Heydrich’s key advisor on Jewish affairs) and the Foreign Office drafted and refined their own versions of the Madagascar Plan. Simultaneously, awareness of Hitler’s intention to expel the European Jews to Madagascar spread through German bureaucracy, even to the lowest echelons in occupied Poland.⁹ However, the plan was predicated upon the defeat of Great Britain, for without open seaways and the British merchant marine available for transport, it was obviously unworkable. Thus when Germany did not prevail in the Battle of Britain, planning came to an abrupt halt and no definitive version of the Madagascar Plan was ever submitted for approval.

In this example, we see a complex combination of dovetailing initiatives from both Himmler and the lower echelons of the German Foreign Office, jealous jurisdictional assertion

by Heydrich and the RSHA, vague but essential approval by Hitler, and a close correlation between decision-making on the one hand and rapidly changing military realities on the other. It is my contention that, informed by such an understanding of the processes of Nazi decision-making, a close study of new documents (such as the Himmler appointment calendar, the Goebbels diaries for the fall of 1941, and other documents from the East European archives), the recently released post-trial Eichmann memoirs, as well as old documents now seen in a new light, with special attention to detail and chronology, allows the historian to construct an argument from conjuncture or convergence concerning the fateful months of September/October 1941.

Let us begin with Goebbels' meeting with Hitler on August 19–20, 1941, when the Propaganda Minister hoped to obtain the Führer's approval for both the marking and deportation of Reich Jews. He was successful with the former but not the latter. As Goebbels subsequently recorded in his diary: "The Führer is convinced that his Reichstag prophecy is coming true; that should the Jews once again succeed in provoking a world war, this would end in their annihilation. It is coming true in these weeks and months with a certainty that appears almost sinister. In the east the Jews are paying the price, in Germany they have already paid in part and they will have to pay still more in the future." Concerning that fateful future, Goebbels learned when ("Moreover the Führer has promised me that I can deport the Jews from Berlin immediately after the end of the eastern campaign."), where ("in the east"), and more vaguely the ultimate fate of the deportees ("Then they will be worked over in the harsh climate there.").¹⁰

This episode is crucially instructive on three counts. First, it was perfectly clear to Goebbels (and presumably other Nazi leaders as well) that key measures such as marking and deportation required Hitler's approval. They could propose such measures but not undertake them on their own. Second, Hitler conceived of the "annihilation" of the Jews in two phases: that for Soviet Jews already was taking place; the other, for Reich Jews, would occur "in the future" and "after the end of the eastern campaign." Third, there is no hint that Hitler's prophecy and the murder of Jews, already being realized on Soviet territory and anticipated for German Jews following victory, were tied to the notion of a "world war" as being defined primarily by American involvement.

But for those charged with actual planning, what did Hitler's notion that the Jews would be worked over in the harsh climate in the east actually mean? A state of frustration and uncertainty can be seen in a memorandum of Rolf-Heinz Höppner, the chief ethnic-cleanser in the Warthegau, following a discussion with Adolf Eichmann. On September 2, 1941, Höppner

complained that plans for deportation to “reception territories” had to remain “patchwork” “because I do not know the intentions of the Führer,” Himmler, and Heydrich. “I could well imagine that large areas of the present Soviet Russia are being prepared to receive the undesired elements of the greater German settlement area....To go into further details about the organization of this reception area would be fantasy, because first of all the *basic decisions* must be made. It is essential in this regard, by the way, that *total clarity* prevails about what finally shall happen to those undesirable ethnic elements deported....Is it the goal to ensure them a certain level of life in the long run, *or shall they be totally eradicated.*”¹¹ (italics mine) Höppner’s memorandum confirms that men such as he were eager to “work toward the Führer” even if it meant planning the mass murder of the Jews. However, even the most fanatic SS man presumed that “basic decisions” by Hitler and “total clarity” in the minds of his subordinates were needed before one could pursue a policy of total eradication, and that as of early September those “basic decisions” had not yet been taken and “total clarity” had not yet been achieved.

Taken together, the Goebbels diary entries and Höppner memorandum raise five key questions about both Hitler’s “basic decisions” and the “total clarity” of the goals of Nazi Jewish policy. First, when did Hitler reverse his position of August 1941 and order the deportation of Reich Jews to begin? Second, what was the context for this decision? Third, did deportation mean expulsion to the east but with the ultimate fate of the deportees still undecided or at least unspecified, or had “total clarity” about total eradication been obtained? Fourth, when were the decisions taken to construct the first death camps equipped with gassing facilities? And fifth, were the first death camps only regional improvisations for regional killing, or were they part of a vision for a European-wide Final Solution?

The decision to deport the Reich Jews can be dated precisely. Following meetings between Hitler, Himmler, and others on September 16–17, Himmler informed the Gauleiter of the Warthegau, Arthur Greiser, on September 18 of Hitler’s decision to deport Reich Jews to Lodz “as the first step” in clearing the Reich of Jews. This deportation to Lodz, however, was merely an interim measure being taken “in order to deport them yet farther east next spring.”¹² The military situation at this time was one of renewed German success. The offensive in the south achieved breakthrough on September 12, encirclement of Kiev on September 16, and the fall of Kiev on September 26. The Wehrmacht resumed the offensive on the central front with Operation Typhoon on October 2, achieving the double encirclement of Vyazma and Bryansk by October 7.

More important, how did Hitler perceive the military situation at this time? In meetings among Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Goebbels and others on September 23–24, Heydrich informed Goebbels that the “evacuation” of Jews from Berlin “could occur as soon as we arrive at a clarification of the military situation in the east.” From Hitler, Goebbels learned that the Reich Jews would be deported step by step, with Berlin first in line, and that Hitler expected “great victories” in the next 3–4 weeks. He predicted the end of serious fighting and the encirclement of Moscow by October 15. On the occasion of Hitler’s speech at the Sportspalast on October 4, Goebbels recorded, “He looks at his best and is in an exuberantly optimistic frame of mind. He literally exudes optimism. The offensive has been surprisingly successful so far....The Führer is convinced that if the weather remains halfway favorable, the Soviet army will be demolished in fourteen days.” Three days later, Goebbels noted: “It goes well on the front. The Führer continues to be extraordinarily optimistic.”¹³

On October 10 in Prague, Heydrich announced Hitler’s goal of clearing the Reich of Jews as much as possible by the end of the year.¹⁴ On October 15, the day Hitler had predicted for the end of serious fighting, the first Jewish transport departed for Lodz. Thus the deportation decision was taken in the euphoria of victory, not frustration of defeat. But what did deportation mean for the fate of the deportees? One possible approach to answering this question is to examine the earliest preparations for death camps with gassing facilities.

In Auschwitz Zyklon B was tested in Bunker 11 on September 3, followed by a large-scale test in the old crematorium on September 16.¹⁵ Contrary to the confused post-war testimony of Auschwitz commandant Rudolph Höss, these tests were probably not envisaged as preparation for the central role this camp was ultimately to play in the Final Solution. Instead, due to Hitler’s “euthanasia” stop-order in late August 1941, selected prisoners at Auschwitz could no longer be sent for gassing at Sonnenberg (as part of Aktion 14f13), and thus the camp conducted its own gassing experiments.¹⁶ Later in the fall small contingents of selected Jews from the work camps of Organisation Schmelt in Upper Silesia were trucked into Auschwitz and gassed in the old crematory.¹⁷ Also in October designs for a new crematorium included two unusual features—recessed ducts and a double ventilation system—particularly suitable for converting the underground morgue into a gas chamber.¹⁸ Apparently no SS engineer was going to design a new crematorium less versatile or multi-purpose than the old. Nonetheless, these developments at Auschwitz were probably a result of local initiative, showing how widespread and commonplace the notion of gassing Jews had become, but did not yet suggest awareness of the camp’s future role in the Final Solution.

Three other examples, however, demonstrate intense interaction between center and periphery in the preparation of gassing facilities. In mid-September, at the request of Artur Nebe (both commander of Einsatzgruppe B and Heydrich's chief of the Criminal Police), Heydrich and Nebe's crime lab chemist Albert Widmann was sent to Belorussia, where he conducted successful gassing experiments with carbon monoxide from the engine exhaust of a truck and a car to kill mental patients. Widmann returned to Berlin with the test results, whereupon Heydrich authorized the RSHA motor pool to design and construct gas vans. In late October or early November, a prototype gas van was driven to Sachsenhausen and tested on Soviet prisoners of war. The RSHA then contracted for the conversion of thirty trucks into gas vans.¹⁹

On October 1, Lublin SS and Police Leader, Odilo Globocnik, wrote to Himmler requesting an urgent meeting to submit documentation concerning the "removal" of alien populations from the General Government.²⁰ On October 13 a two-hour meeting was held among Himmler, Globocnik, and General Government Higher-SS and Police Leader Friedrich Wilhelm Krüger.²¹ The two most prominent experts on the Lublin district—Dieter Pohl and Bogdan Musial—accept this as the point at which Himmler approved the construction of the death camp at Belzec.²² In the following week Governor General Hans Frank, having just learned that he could not deport his Jews into the territories farther east, nonetheless forbade further ghetto-building "because the hope exists that in the near future the Jews can be deported out of the General Government," and specifically mentioned that they would be "sent over the Bug."²³ On November 1, construction of the camp at Belzec near the Bug River began.²⁴

Also sometime in October the chauffeur Walter Baumeister drove his boss Herbert Lange, the head of the mobile "euthanasia" team stationed in Poznan, around the Warthegau. They then drove to Berlin for consultations, returned to Chelmno near Lodz, confiscated key buildings in town, and began construction of the camp there in late October or early November.²⁵

Others have argued that these were yet further examples of regional initiatives to kill regional Jews. Let us examine the case of Belzec in particular detail. Some historians have argued that the killing capacity of the initial gas chambers at Belzec was so limited that the beginning of their construction on November 1, 1941, could not indicate any intention or plan for a European-wide Final Solution. Rather the construction of Belzec was allegedly a Globocnik initiative that aimed at killing a portion of Polish Jewry. This is a speculative argument from circumstantial evidence. It is also based on a questionable assumption about sequence: that the planning and construction of adequate killing facilities is the key indicator

for dating decisions for Final Solution, not the initial experimentation and preparation toward the end. There is also, in my opinion, reasonably credible post-war testimony to the contrary.

In September 1941 Philip Bouhler and Viktor Brack of the Führer Chancellery, who had been in charge of the now curtailed T-4 or “euthanasia” program, visited Globocnik in Lublin.²⁶ Sometime “in the late summer” of 1941, Christian Wirth of the T-4 program also told an associate that he “was being transferred to a euthanasia institute in the Lublin area.”²⁷ In numerous post-war testimonies, including the recently released post-trial account that Eichmann entitled “Idols” or “False Gods” (Götzen), he related how he had been summoned by Heydrich and told of a Führer decision for “the physical destruction of the Jews.” He was then sent to Globocnik in Lublin, who was supposed to be making preparations for that purpose by using anti-tank ditches. “I want to know what he is doing and how far he has come,” Heydrich told Eichmann. Upon reaching Lublin Eichmann was driven by Globocnik’s assistant Höfle to a small wooden house on the right hand side of the road. “We were received by an order policeman in rolled up sleeves, who himself apparently had been working by hand. The style of his boots and the cut of his riding breeches indicated that he was an officer. From the introduction I learned that I was dealing with a captain of the Order Police. In the post-war years his name had long ago escaped me. Only through the literature did I remember again. His name was Wirth.” Eichmann was taken across the road and along a small forest path, until they arrived at “two small peasant huts standing under deciduous trees.” Wirth explained that “he had to hermetically seal all the windows and doors. After the work ended, Jews would come into the rooms and would be killed by exhaust gas....”²⁸ But “the motor was not yet there, the installation was not yet in operation.”²⁹

When did this trip to Lublin and the encounter with Wirth take place? According to Eichmann, “these wood structures were in...a forest, a deciduous forest, a quite dense deciduous forest, large trees and so on; in full color, their leaves were....It was therefore 1941 in the fall.”³⁰ He also placed it before his trip to Lodz (sometime before September 29) and “shortly before” the order to prepare the first deportation (which departed on October 15).³¹

Those who dismiss this Eichmann testimony make three (to my mind unpersuasive) arguments against its credibility.³² First, they argue that according to the testimony of Wirth’s assistant, Josef Oberhauser, Wirth did not arrive and take command of Belzec until December 1941. But Oberhauser did not arrive in Lublin until October or November and his testimony cannot preclude Wirth’s earlier presence in Lublin in September. Second, they assert that Eichmann was contriving a legal defense by falsely invoking an early Hitler decision. But Eichmann’s legal strategy was to push dates back, not forward, in order to counter the

testimony of Rudolph Höss that he was involved in the choice of Birkenau as a gas chamber site and Zyklon B as a killing method as early as the summer of 1941. Moreover, by admitting his prior knowledge of the ultimate fate of those he deported (but who were not immediately killed in the fall of 1941), he was deepening, not lessening, his self-incrimination. Finally, they argue that Eichmann could not have been in Lublin until after November 1, when construction began, and was probably not there until the winter, given his reference to seeing two (or on two occasions three) wooden huts. But this argument does not hold if Eichmann was visiting not the Belzec death camp but rather an earlier experimental site nearby. In this regard it should be noted that Eichmann was not alone in describing such a site. Bogdan Musial has also found the postwar testimony of the former chief of the Lublin Gendarmerie, Ferdinand Hahnzog, who mentioned the use of carbon monoxide from exhaust gas in “a primitive installation, consisting of a hermetically sealed shack hidden deep in the forest across from Galicia near Belzec.”³³

In my opinion Eichmann visited an experimental site in the forest near Belzec, where two peasant huts were being prepared by Wirth. This occurred at roughly the same time that Widmann was in Belorussia, and both Widmann and Eichmann reported back to Heydrich in Berlin before he left for Prague on September 27. The Wirth tests then became the basis of Globocnik’s subsequent letter of October 1 requesting a meeting with Himmler. That meeting of October 13 in turn led to Himmler’s decision to construct Belzec, not deep in the forest but on the edge of town on a rail line in order to be able to handle continuous transports. At the same time the Widmann tests led to the construction first of a prototype and then to a fleet of thirty gas vans.

Indeed, within ten days of the Globocnik-Himmler meeting of October 13, there was an astonishing proliferation of potential sites for death camps equipped with gassing facilities in addition to Belzec and Chelmno. On October 23–25 Himmler visited Mogilev and discussed the construction of gas chambers. By mid-November the Topf Company had been commissioned to construct huge crematoria, whose ovens were later diverted to Birkenau.³⁴

On October 23, Erhard Wetzel of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (the so-called Ostsministerium) was summoned to the Führer Chancellery by Viktor Brack, who declared himself ready to aid in the construction of “gassing apparatuses” in Riga, since they (presumably gas vans) were not in sufficient supply in the Reich. Wetzel then met with Eichmann, who confirmed that Reich Jews were to be sent to Riga and Minsk. Wetzel then reported that Jews capable of work would be sent “to the east” later, but under the circumstances there was no objection “if those Jews who were not fit for work are removed by Brack’s helper.” Local officials in Riga were subsequently told to cease objecting to the arrival

of Reich Jews, for this was a temporary measure and the Jews would be sent “farther to the east” later.³⁵

Apparently October 23 was a very busy day for Eichmann, for he also held a meeting with representatives from Gestapo offices in the Reich, including the incorporated territories.³⁶ No protocol of that meeting survives, but on the very same day, Paul Wurm, foreign editor of *Der Stürmer*, wrote a hurried note to a friend: “On my trip from Berlin I met an old party comrade who works in the east on the settlement of the Jewish question. In the near future many of the Jewish vermin will be exterminated through special measures.”³⁷

And at some unspecified date in the fall of 1941, SS officers came to the obscure rail station of Sobibor on the eastern border of the Lublin district and measured the ramp.³⁸

But even if the proliferation of plans for four gassing camps (Belzec, Chelmno, Mogilev, and Riga, but counting neither Birkenau, where a direct connection to Berlin cannot be traced, nor Sobibor, whose dates are uncertain) in the brief ten days between October 13 and October 23 indicates the key role played by central authorities in Berlin, not just reactive approval of local or regional initiatives, was gassing intended only for Soviet and Polish Jews? I think not. Certainly the geographical location of three of these sites—Chelmno, Riga, and Mogilev—at or near the three destinations for the deportation of Reich Jews, and Wetzel’s explicit statement that non-working Reich Jews sent to Riga could be immediately eliminated with “Brack’s helper,” would indicate the inclusion of Reich Jews. And two other sets of documents from this time indicate an even wider European scope.

On October 13, 1941, the Foreign Office informed Heydrich’s RSHA of a Spanish request to obtain the release of those Jews of Spanish citizenship who had been seized in the mass arrest of Parisian Jews in retaliation for the August attack on a German officer in the Paris metro. In return the Spanish government offered to evacuate to Spanish Morocco all Spanish Jews in France, some 2,000. Since this was fully in line with the hitherto prevailing goal of removing all Jews from Europe by whatever means, the Foreign Office was in favor of accepting the Spanish offer. But on October 17, just three days after Himmler and Heydrich had held a five-hour meeting, the Foreign Office was informed of the RSHA’s opposition for two reasons. First, the Spanish government had neither the will nor the experience to guard Jews in Morocco. “In addition these Jews would also be too much out of the direct reach of the measures for a basic solution to the Jewish question to be enacted after the war.”³⁹ This fundamental shift away from a policy of expulsion was confirmed in a Himmler-Heydrich telephone conversation the next day, as cryptically noted in Himmler’s telephone log: “No emigration by Jews to overseas.”⁴⁰ Prohibition of all Jewish emigration was made official on

October 23, and henceforth it was German policy to keep all Jews in Europe, not to get them out. And what, one must ask rhetorically, did the expression “measures for a basic solution to the Jewish question to be enacted after the war” mean at the exact point in time when the Nazis were planning at least four death camps with gassing facilities?

At the same time the Foreign Office “Jewish-expert” Franz Rademacher, and one of Eichmann’s closest associates, Friedrich Suhr, were in Belgrade pursuing a local solution to the Serbian Jewish question. Their investigative trip revealed that German forces in Serbia were in the process of shooting all Jewish (and “Gypsy”) men but would not shoot Jewish women, children, and elderly. On October 25, Rademacher reported that the Jewish women, children, and elderly would be temporarily incarcerated. “Then as soon as the technical possibility exists within the framework of a total solution to the Jewish question, the Jews will be deported by waterway to the reception camps in the east.”⁴¹ Again, one must ask rhetorically, what kind of reception camps were intended at precisely this point in time for Jews obviously incapable of labor?

Also, on October 25, the same day that Wetzel met with Brack and Eichmann, and on which Rademacher submitted his report, Hitler met with Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler just back from Mogilev. In the previous days the vehemence of Hitler’s anti-Jewish tirades had already intensified considerably. Now, after referring to his Reichstag prophecy, Hitler proclaimed: “It is good when the terror precede us that we are exterminating the Jews....We are writing history anew from the racial standpoint.”⁴²

In the fateful months of September/October 1941, the goal of Nazi Jewish policy fundamentally changed from a vision of expulsion and decimation to one of total and systematic extermination. Many decisions were still to be taken concerning how, when, at what rate, in what sequence, and with what temporary exemptions. But the “basic decisions” and “total clarity” sought by Höppner in early September were now there. Those working on the Jewish question were no longer in doubt about what “working toward the Führer” meant and what was expected of them. This new vision of total eradication—to be carried out in “reception camps in the east” through “special measures” such as Brack’s “gassing apparatuses” and encompassing even the Jewish women and children of Belgrade and the Spanish Jews in France—differed fundamentally from the old vision. Among the many decisions taken in the course of the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy, in my opinion, this was the single most important one. The watershed between previous policies and the Final Solution had been crossed.

Notes

1. Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (New York, 1991).
2. Philippe Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews: The Genesis of the Holocaust* (London, 1994). Arno Mayer also argued that the Nazis turned to “judeocide” out of rage over the derailment of Barbarossa. *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The “Final Solution” in History* (New York, 1989).
3. Christian Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision to Exterminate All European Jews,” *Journal of Modern History*, 12 (1998), pp. 759–812.
4. Hans Safrian *Die Eichmann-Männer* (Vienna, 1993).
5. L. J. Hartog, *Der Befehl zum Judenmord: Hitler, Amerika und die Juden* (Bodenheim, 1997).
6. Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung: Eine Gesamtdarstellung der Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung* (Munich, 1998).
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