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Localized Final Solutions Nazi Extermination Process(es) from a Micro to a Macro Scale of Action

SILVIA ANTONIA ICĂ

Fitting perfectly into the category of events that reshaped the humanistic perception of the "good-evil" dichotomy, the Holocaust haunted the mind of historians since 1945. Undoubtedly regarded as the climax of the Second World War in terms of conflict escalation and celerity of results, this particular event constituted a fundamental element for the shaping of post-war societies, associated explicitly with the image of a stereotypical fascist movement characterized by violence, xenophobia and moral nihilism.

In scientific terms, fascism is the most ambiguously formulated political concept of the last century, at the same time being charged with all sorts of encompassing meanings. In many cases devoid of all specificity, the academic discourse on this delicate topic has created an unhealthy blurred image, in continuous search of new colonial territories, which eventually led to an amalgam of misrepresentations entirely out of line with the historical reality of the ages. Although agreeing that the fascist movement was in its essence a unique apparition on the socio-political tableau, there is no general consensus upon a working definition of the term, the only convergence point of the scholars being that of a genesis of terminology. The German Fascist movement and its product, National Socialism, continue to represent the most atypical form ever expressed, questioning on every occasion all attempts of reaching a harmonious unanimity. The insights provided by Hannah Arendt in the 1960s seem to contradict all classic theories which tabulate National Socialism in the category of fascist, totalitarian movements, by arguing that the totalitarian framework is the means of destruction, certainly not its basic explanation; totalitarian leaders do not believe in the promoted ideology, but use it to control and mobilize the masses. Therefore, Hitler's Anti-Semitic National Socialism cannot fit into this category¹. The Führer's ideological obsession was a chameleonic one; it managed to extrapolate its form out of the context it was living in by making use of integrationist movements and racial nationalism.

Probably one of the most difficult tasks of students of the fascist movement and its German identification is prediction of future research directions and strictly connected to this, a selection process which will bring back on the menu some of the buried perspectives. Ultimately, the topic at hand will continue to fascinate both researchers and passionate readers due to its infinite exploratory options, which always present the same entry points, but never reach the same conclusive gates. For countries of the former communist bloc, the problem of interpretation and establishment of

¹ François FURET, *Unanswered Questions: Nazi Germany and the Genocide on the Jews*, Schocken, New York, 1989, p. 35.

importance of the events go much deeper, in comparison to the distanced West. Here, the debate is by no means directed towards the future of research, but rather focused on attenuation of severe discrepancies in the field caused by the former communist rule and its isolationist, punitive tendencies. A great step forward has been taken with the opening of the former communist archives, which now allow East-European researchers to gather up the threads of the individual stories making up the genocidal puzzle.

In light of the new opportunities provided, the historiography of the Holocaust in Europe and its climax, meaning the institutionalization of the "Final Solution" has brought to light numerous important aspects, often ignored in the struggle of understanding the abominable events. Being impossible to place on the temporal axis, the final decision which led to the attempted genocide of Jewry all around the continent and with further expansion on a global level after the end of the war, still poses more questions than it answers. Public debates between those who struggled to understand this experience were much heated immediately after the disclosure of the Nazi genocidal machinery, unsurprisingly shedding light upon the post-war German society who was now desperately trying to shift focus from the historical events, because of their charging significance. The appearance amongst historians of several major interpretative tendencies with regard to the official incipient phase of the extermination policy further polarized the universal understanding of this phenomenon, polarization which provided the perfect opportunity for the advocates of Holocaust denial to question the validity and therefore existence of any sort of "Final Solution" and its decisional framework. Postulating a variety of possible scenarios, almost all of them revolving around the famous Wannsee Conference from January 20th 1942, scholars managed in creating a truly blurred projection of their own reality, carefully chosen to sustain in an irrefutable manner their own argumentation. Needless to say, they failed in reaching a consensus on the basis of all collected evidence, which still take sides depending on the user's perspective of the matter, leaving much room for interpretation. The political sensitivity of this problematic, transcending to a certain level the perpetrator-victim denomination, takes up a whole new importance in the sense that even 70 years later, if clarified could point fingers and name names.

The documentation difficulties and methodological barriers encountered when writing this study have made it hard to follow a classical approach, leaving behind the idea of reconciling historical information with empirical research of different archival resources. Therefore, the stipulation of a new objective is needed before going any further. A simple reevaluation of the dynamics of the "Final Solution" as understood today, its historiography and argumentation, but also the purposes to which the latter is intended, has revealed the need for a different kind of study with respect to its genesis and decisional process. Specifically, the next pages will be concerned with answering the following questions:

- Was the idea of extermination of the European Jewry existent in Hitler's mind previous to the implementation of Operation Barbarossa?
- Was there a final order which initiated the mass killings?
- Is there a causal connection between the decision of extermination and the successful eradication results of the regional samples in the East?

Although the justification of such an endeavor can be considered far too comprehensive and with too many penetrating layers, the proposed thematic struggles to intercept the more than various ideas which compile it, moving beyond

the pure historical perspective, to a relational and rational approach of the course of events. Furthermore, this rather experimental tentative comes in light of acute lack of an exclusive, comprehensive study on the origins and implementation of the Final Solution, a topic on which the few remarkable contributions spell the name of Christopher Browning. Not only such inter-relational attempts are scarce internationally, but they lack completely in the Eastern part of the European continent, where in fact they could prove to be the most worthy and perhaps fruitful in terms of results. Departing from the above mentioned research questions, the alternative working hypothesis is the following: the regional and local decisions of implementing genocidal policies made by Nazi leaders and their collaborators determined the universal character of the Final Solution, thus evolving from a micro to a macro scale of action.

Thus, the paper will attempt, and hopefully succeed in proving that the decision for implementing a final solution and therefore beginning the process of total extermination of the Jewish people didn't necessarily come to mind until it was already implemented at a local level on the Eastern front. More to the point, the final inspiration for employing mass destruction techniques came from places like Ukraine and the Baltic Countries, which in the context of failing solutions such as deportation and ghettoization proved to be the only remaining alternative in order to get rid once and for all of the "unwanted" elements.

In terms of argumentation structure, division is made between three main parts, each with its own supporting part for the main hypothesis. Thus, the first part will be dedicated to explaining the background of the fundamental problem, shedding light upon the several ideas the Nazi leadership unsuccessfully tried to implement in order to solve the difficult situation. The main focus will constitute here what Browning specifically names "the three-ex system": Expulsion, Exploitation and finally, when all others fail to provide the wanted results, Extermination¹. The second part is concerned with the analysis of the Final Solution as a decisional process, emphasizing its labyrinth like itinerary from the design stage to the point where it was fully operational, whereas the final part puts under microscope a small slice of Nazi-occupied Ukraine, with the purpose of observing ground-policies implementation and the wider context they helped develop. At the end, the critical point which any future reader should be able to identify is that in order to understand the process of extermination in its resulting magnitude, one must mandatorily look at it as a mosaic of very small pieces, which put together created one of the most horrendous paintings history has so far provided.

The main question which still remains unanswered is whether Hitler and implicitly the Nazis started out their domination with the already implanted idea that Jews must physically disappear from the face of a brand new Europe, dominated by the German nation. During the 1970s and 1980s the issue of "intention" became the core paradigm around which the academic environment revolved, leading to the birth of two major tendencies, or approaches: intentionalist vs. structuralist/functionalist. While the former underlined on all levels Adolf Hitler's ideology, will and pre-determined planning of all actions, the latter viewed things from a totally different angle, illustrating the Final Solution and all extermination policies not as a

¹ Christopher R BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution. The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2004, p. 27.

sudden decision, but as a slow emergence of an idea¹. With the beginning of the 1990s, Holocaust studies shifted directions from the upper mentioned dichotomy, now facing yet another crucial topic: the origins of the Final Solution and strictly connected to it the role of Hitler in the decisional process. This new debate brought together some sort of consensus on very specific issues, such as the centrality of the year 1941 and the fact that Hitler indisputably played a key role in the entire decisional process. Before going deeper into the analysis of the origins of this radical decision which will make the primary subject of the second part of this paper, it is worth taking a closer look at certain decision-making patterns practiced by the Nazis when dealing with their racial empire building in the East.

The idea of a Germanic people with insufficient living space has been haunting the minds of many ever since the Middle Ages, but it was only in the 20th century that the term "Lebensraum" was associated with such an important meaning. Hitler saw in it the perfect motivation for justifying the imperialist tendencies of Germany, having in mind the future growth of the population and with it, the ever-growing economic needs. Moreover, the need for a future German colonization of the East is specifically detailed in his *Mein Kampf*, somehow predicting the up-coming continental bloodshed².

Being a rather ignored topic for many who chose to tackle the difficulty of National Socialist ideology, the relationship between European imperialism, Nazism and the Holocaust cannot be ignored. However, the Nazis were much more successful in combining the main tendencies of German imperialism than any other pre-war political organization, by managing to introduce them into the much more complex ideological structure. Under Hitler's "consensual dictatorship"³, imperialism was completely absorbed into the party program, and further employed to create the necessary bonds (where they were lacking) within the party leadership. Inheriting a very durable and arborescent ideological tradition, the Nazis did nothing but embrace the already existent *Lebensraum*, to which they cunningly added economic and legitimizing, popularizing interests. Initially of little value even for the early Nazi ideologues such as Feder and Rosenberg, who were more or less flirting with the idea of imperialism only for strengthening the party's nationalistic credentials, this tendency was neither imposed obsessively by Hitler himself at the beginning, only in a large, conventional and contextual sense. The preoccupation for foreign policy was substantially increased after the failed coup of 1923 and the writing of *Mein Kampf*, when Hitler's world view becomes much more structured. The reasoning which lies behind this shift in priorities is not clear yet, but most speculations are based on the significance of Hitler's imprisonment time, when he indisputably became acquainted with geopolitical theories, especially developed by Haushofer and others like him⁴. Nonetheless, one must not ignore the political context of this event, which also helps in understanding Hitler's insistence on foreign policy. The schematization of a very well thought structure helping him take over by legal means, which revolved

¹ IDEM, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.

² Adolf HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, vol. 2, transl. by Ralph Manheim, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998, (originally published in 1926), p. 453.

³ Robert GELLATELY, Ben KIERNAN, *The Specter of Genocide. Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 243.

⁴ Karl Dietrich BRACHER, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1970, p. 122.

around creating unity inside the NSDAP was yet another reason for the shifting interests. Moreover, imperialism would play a key role for the Nazis in finding the middle-ground with German Big Business, whose financial and public support they desperately needed.

At first glance, the circulating versions of German imperialism managed one way or another to transcend class struggle, becoming a very attractive idea for the multi-layered, heterogeneous society. Serving its future purpose almost impeccably, the imperialistic ideology became a universal catalyzer which had the sole power of uniting very remote interests and ideologies, making sufficient room for reconciliation and even cooperation. By 1930, Hitler's foreign policy framework was already in a final form, after this stage only suffering very minor modifications. Revolving around the same "*lebensraum*-nian" axis, he further developed the necessary antagonism between Germany and the rest of the world, justifying the need for conflict through the more important need for agricultural space. In his eyes, there was nothing more important than the protection of an independent peasantry that would ensure the wealth of the entire German empire:

"History has taught us that a nation can exist without cities, but history would have taught us one day, if the old system had continued, that a nation cannot exist without farmers...Lasting successes a government can win only if the necessity is recognized for the securing of a people's *Lebensraum* and thus of its own agricultural class"¹.

However, the Nazis did more than to rely exclusively on *Lebensraum* when talking about imperialist policies. Taking things to the next level, they wrongly incorporated the economic ideas primarily absorbed in *Weltpolitik* which were on all levels incompatible to their initial priorities². The geopolitical circumstances of the time combined with a rather flexible Nazi ideology from this point of view led the German government to take a series of contradictory and eventually catastrophic measures during the war. The permanent hunt for the living space was also translated into changing alliances, or at least that is what the Nazis imagined in the first place. Because the main idea was to find this kind of "manna" in the East, and that implied dealing with the Russian state, the need for anti-Russian inclination was of paramount importance. Nourished also by the imminent danger of Judeo-Bolshevism threatening to take over the West, this fundamental split shortly became the foundation of German policy, destroying any sort of cooperative relations that might have existed in the recent years. France was more or less in the same situation, but for different reasons. Emphasizing the need for German hegemonic supremacy at a continental level, Hitler and the Nazi elite saw the urgent need of recovering the damage provoked at Versailles, and France was the main target. On this occasion however, Hitler's rationale stepped out of the radical-conservative pattern he had so far embraced. Perfectly aware that there would be no continental friends for Germany except fascist Italy, he sought the support of what he

¹ Norman H. BAYNES, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler April 1922-August 1939*, vol. 1, Howard Fertig, New York, 1969, p. 385.

² Woodroff S. SMITH, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p. 245.

considered to be the Germany's "natural ally"¹, Great Britain, who in order to protect its statute as the greatest sea power would inherently seek collaboration with the much superior Germany. Needless to say, the results were not as initially predicted.

Until the rise of National Socialism, the differences between the imperialist ideologies in Germany were never truly overcome, still preserving their dualistic features. The prototype vigorously promoted by Nazis was instantaneously a hit mainly because of their exploitation in terms of public attitudes, which were already polished by the difficult experiences of the past decades. The first years of war reshaped Germany as a very impressive territorial empire, at the cost of fighting against almost all great powers, including USSR and the United States. The impossibility of victory in the East and failure in the procurement of the coveted *Lebensraum*, alongside with the conflicting economic strategy and *Weltpolitik* spoke very loud in terms of policy efficiency. Therefore, strategies had to be changed on all fronts, and more importantly the culprits had to be pointed out for the system to keep functioning.

Tracing the roots of Jewish Question has proved to be more than challenging, each theory being intrinsically connected to the pan-European character of anti-Semitic history. Symbolizing all that which was threatening and beyond understanding, the Jewish antagonistic view, especially in relation to the Christian world, quickly developed into xenophobic anti-Semitism, through the rapid spread of stereotypical values. Being labeled as primarily nonbelievers, with a predisposition to commerce and urbanism as a way of life, Jews were amongst the first victims of European pogroms, developing a reputation which unfortunately would last for more than a millennium. Moreover, although initially a religious-based conflict, along with the passage of centuries this promoted anti-Judaism would take on various dimensions, including economic, political and social ones². After the Middle Ages, which were a total fiasco in terms of Jewish acceptance, the gradual secularization of modern Europe combined with a more scientifically-based social and political context somehow declined the anti-Semitic wave, thus propelling the remaining Jews back into both Western and Eastern European societal strata. However, due to historical events, it was now clear that the new Jewish conglomerate was the East, who had embraced it in desperate times because of the great economic potential it announced. But there was yet another factor which predicted great changes for the European Jewish minority: the so-called "Dual Revolution" which announced the emergence of liberal and nationalist doctrines, along with profound social and economic transformations, thus allowing all kinds of minorities to dream of equality before the law, right to free speech, to education and so on. Even for the long-molested Jews from autocratic Germany, this could mean only good news, as they finally had the opportunity to take a step further from their declining traditional values which had ruled their lives for long. Never have they been so wrong. Without catching any break, they soon became associated with the destruction of European traditional values, but this time from a much worse perspective. 19th century society was keeping religious values in the remoteness of its complexity; therefore explanations had to be found elsewhere. For the first time, Jewish behavioral patterns were turned into with racial characteristics, paving the

¹ Andreas HILLGRUBER, *Germany and the Two World Wars*, transl. by William C. Kirby, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 45.

² Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 3.

way for the much more devastating and fruitful future threats¹. Browning puts this aspect in an impeccably non-confusing manner: "If previously the Christian majority pressured Jews to convert and more recently to assimilate, racial anti-Semitism provided no behavioral escape. Jews as a race could not change their ancestors. They could only disappear"².

The beginning of the Second World War and the victorious taking-over of National Socialism would open up a can of worms which had long been sealed. Jews were about to experience the greatest and most violent racist escalation in their entire history, culminating with the government-sponsored extermination policy better known as the Final Solution.

Apart from the historical roots of German anti-Semitism, the expansion of eugenics movement and the structural organization of the Nazi state apparatus, there is yet another context which is of paramount importance when studying the origins of the Final Solution. The failed plans for major population resettlement and the Nazi leadership's unattainable dreams in terms of demographic engineering during 1939-1941 were all evidence of the incapacity of the government to solve the Jewish problem, frustrations leading to radicalized measures in terms of anti-Jewish policy, up to the point when ethnic cleansing was decided. During the two years that preceded the climax of the *Shoah*, Nazi anti-Jewish policies could be defined in three words: expulsion, exploitation and ghettoization. Here, it is necessary to make an important observation, one which was unfortunately for a long time ignored by students of the Holocaust. After 1939, the priorities of the Nazis were to get rid of all Jewish population by relocating it in a territory yet to be chosen. In reality, because of failing on every attempt to do so, they had to quickly improvise, thus the idea of ghettoization. In other words, although many have taken the policy of ghettoization as being self-contained and with the role of preparation for the further genocide, in its complexity this step represented nothing more than a temporary solution for the baffled Nazi policy-makers.

On September 21st 1940 Hitler approved the deportation of Jews into the non-German area, making references to a *Judenstaat* which would ultimately be placed around the city of Lublin, in this way clarifying that what he had previously considered, meaning the deportation of Jews over the borderline of newly conquered territories would not be sufficient to solve the problem. The Jews had to be placed in their reservations, located as far as possible from the *Reich* but still inside the German empire, where the Nazis could be in total control of their fate. This was to be called the Nisko Plan, after the Polish city that would become the borderline of the "Jewish cage". It was Eichmann who wanted at all costs to prove his organizational capacities on this occasion, especially after emigration policies of which he was responsible for had long faded away. His career rested upon the turn of a die, so this was for him the perfect opportunity to adapt to the new favorable circumstances. In his quest for grandeur, Eichmann further expanded the deportation plans, increasing the Jewish transports both in number of individuals and frequency, at the same time managing to preserve the "certain voluntary character and obtain an unobtrusive as possible departure of

¹ George L. MOSSE, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, Howard Fertig Publishing, New York, 1997, p. 69.

² Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 5.

the transport”¹. There is much to be discussed around Eichmann’s individual actions, which towards the end of the program were actually managing to change the nature of the whole organizational system, but what is sure by now is that the whole process was stopped from the above, not by its malfunctioning in terms of results. Then again, it didn’t have much time to prove its efficiency, either. The orders coming from the Reich Security Main Office clearly commanded that all Jewish evacuations had to be stopped immediately, including any future action plans². Unable to save his entire ambitious collage, Eichmann could only make sure that the last transports which were already too far-ahead in terms of preparation, reach their destination. The motivation for stopping all actions on this front was neither the emerging conflict between Jews and the local populations from the relocation sites, nor the willingness to preserve good relations with the Soviet structures. As usually, the problem came from a shift in priorities at the Nazi leadership level, which determined Himmler himself to give the stop order. The legitimacy of Himmler’s decision was, according to him, given by the technical difficulties the transports have encountered, but in reality this was not the case³. The real motivation was that Himmler, who had been recently put in charge with the relocation of the Baltic Germans, had the difficult task of finding the living space for tens, even hundreds of thousands of people which the Reich was calling home. All throughout the year of 1940, these long thought deportation plans which were meant to drastically rarify the Jews went hand in hand with the relocation policy of the ethnic Germans. Moreover, even if refusing to admit so initially, the Nazis did eventually realize that they were facing a difficult choice: to keep working on expulsion and deportation policies in order to solve the Jewish issue, or to fortify the desired *Lebensraum* through the resettlement of the Germans from the outside of the Reich’s borders. The apparent incompatibility between these two problems led the officials to procrastinate a clear solution of the Jewish situation, giving priority to the imperialist doctrine Hitler had initially envisioned. The experiment Eichmann designed was to be a serious wakeup call for the government, in the sense that it perfectly illustrated its limitations in terms of local vs. central policy implementations.

In terms of racial policy, theory became practice the very moment when Hitler’s army returned victorious from the French battlefields. This exhilaration provoked by the sweet taste of victory had a number of important consequences, among which winning the definitive and irrevocable support of the army, especially concerning Nazi racial policy. Once again, one of the newly appointed officials, expert in Jewish matters, namely Rademacher, took advantage of the euphoric circumstances and the so-far useless contributions of Goering and Frank, and went over everyone’s heads, reaching up to Hitler himself. The current situation presented much better options, such that in addition to Jewry, Poles could also be included in the deportation equation. Once with the prospects of annexation of territories in the West, the German Jewish question was no longer German; for the first time it had become a European problem, which the Nazi ideologues felt responsible to solve, at any cost. The announcement of a favorable international context, with France almost obliged to put at German disposal its entire colonial inheritance and Great Britain seriously pondering upon

¹ Doron RABINOVICI, *Eichmann’s Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938-1945*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, p. 57.

² Yad Vashem Archives, O-53/93/235–38, R. Gunther Tagesbericht, October 19, 1939.

³ Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 42.

the option of a peace treaty, provided the perfect framework for the adoption of a new approach, this time a much more "exotic" one: the Madagascar Plan. From a purely psychological perspective, the failure of yet another perfectly designed plan that was supposed to have no impediments rendered the Nazis catatonic, thus contributing a great deal to the emergence of a different kind of Final Solution, a much more radical one.

Rademacher's proposal was not an original one, however. Dating back to the 1930s already, the idea of using this remote African island for creating a Jew-free Europe constituted an attraction point for French, Polish and even British anti-Semitic thinkers¹. After spreading the word on all layers of German structure, including the one in the General Government, confidence in the success of this approach skyrocketed to such a point that even the construction of Polish ghettos was immediately suspended, "in light of the new plan of the Führer"². In practical terms, the Madagascar idea was overflowing with simplicity: Jews were to be taken there by multiple cargo ships, where they would be allowed to have a great degree of autonomy. Furthermore, the financial burden of providing basic necessities was to be lifted off the German shoulders by scraping a common Jewish fund with all their belongings, with the purpose of helping them become independent, once arriving on the island. Needless to say, in the eyes of the architects this degree of independence, seen as a magnanimous gesture, was also beneficial in terms of propagandistic actions, envisioning Germany and its Führer as merciful gods. Nevertheless, by the end of December 1940 the Madagascar proposal was still pointlessly awaiting its signature on Heydrich's desk³. However serious this planning was taken by all Nazi officials, Germany's inability to defeat Great Britain rendered all preparations mute. It was only a victorious Germany that came up with such an idea, and a defeated one that finally let it go, adding yet another massive failure on the attempts list and simultaneously heading with rapid steps toward systematic mass murder. Since the creation of the "super-ghettos" in Madagascar and Lublin was no longer an option, ghettoization policy became the only solution for keeping under control the masses of Jews which were incorporated with the annexation of Polish territories into the Reich.

At the local level, German authorities were caught by surprise when hearing that they now had to deal with ghettos' organization on the long run. With very scarce guide lines from the higher hierarchy which still refused to accept that deportation plans were no longer viable, Nazi commanders on the ground now had to deal with the fact that the Jews were clogged up, thus the necessity to take matters into their own hands. In light of this new, unpredicted situation, there were many variables which had to be taken into consideration: enforcing a security policy that would prevent any mutiny inside the ghetto, the desire justified through the need to pillage any Jewish valuable and invaluable belongings and the exploitation of Jewish labor force

¹ Philip FRIEDMAN, "The Lublin Reservation and the Madagascar Plan: Two Aspects of Nazi Jewish Policy during the Second World War", in IDEM, *Roads to Extinction. Essays on the Holocaust*, ed. by Ada June Friedman, Jewish Publication Society of America, New York, 1980, p. 43. Although I do not agree with Friedman's hypothesis that Madagascar and all the similar plans were only intended as covers for the Nazi's true intentions, I do find his insights about the development of these actions very helpful.

² Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 84.

³ Karl A. SCHLEUNES, *Legislating the Holocaust: The Bernhard Loesner Memoirs and Supporting Documents*, Westview Press, New York, 2001, p. 49.

combined with the resources needed to sustain it were some of the aspects which were determined on a regional or local basis, with no consensus regarding a certain pattern to be followed in terms of policy implementation¹. In the context created by the new ghettoization policy, individuality of actions both from the part of the Nazis and their victims were of paramount importance. While the latter distinguished themselves through maintaining a high level of cultural activities and spiritual resilience, thus refusing to participate to their dehumanization, the former were characterized by the authority of their own personal ambitions, more often than not with an economic character. The "attritionists-productionists" disjuncture which was created particularly based on these individualistic aspects perfectly illustrate the above-mentioned traits. This dilemma which quickly arose in the minds of the commanders, which postulated either starvation or production, was never entirely solved, not least at a universally agreeable level. Jews in Lodz were living under different rules than those in Cracow, some ghettos were self-sufficient while others rested upon German financing, which basically meant victims were starving to death because they weren't prioritizing enough. In the end, even Nazi ghetto commanders saw the burden that their jobs had become, physically and psychologically exploiting their prisoners under conditions hard to imagine. However, they did manage to preserve death quotas on a reasonable level given the circumstances in which Jews were living, thus indicating no intention of any sort of further extermination planning. Through most of their policy implementation, the majority of local leaders showed desire not to radicalize the situation, but instead to bring it to an economic bearable level, one that would prove useful until the Reich decided once and for all what to do with the great number of inhabitants. They would no longer have to wait, as with the implementation of Operation Barbarossa, the onset of the Holocaust was just around the corner.

The thousands of books, articles and international conferences having as a core subject the origins of the Final Solution were never enough to put an end to all the controversies regarding it. Not only this, but the gaps created by the lack of instrumental information and the creation of what appears to be a vicious circle of disagreement have greatly heated public debates in countries focused on the study of the Holocaust, thus hardening the perception of the phenomenon in its encompassing reality. In order to make the passage from the previously discussed antecedents which allowed the escalation of the Jewish situation, to the comprehensive analysis of the decisional process of the Final Solution one must be absolutely aware of the interpretative opportunities that historical documentation offers. Furthermore, the focusing points for testing the hypothesis of the present paper revolve around the high significance of individual actions and of certain temporal dates. More than half a century later, the possibility of accurately reconstructing any chain of events from the period between 1940 and 1945 is long gone, that is if it ever existed. Apart from the obvious difficulties caused by the human damages of the war and its aftermath, meaning the trials, the question of documentations and whether or not they existed poses a very big impediment in deciding the "when" and the "who" of the extermination process. In light of these aspects, the present part of the paper is focused on establishing, limited as it may be, some ground rules for the modern interpretation of this subject, the opening statement being represented by a small discussion on the notion of "intention".

¹ Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 113.

Based on the evidence available to the scientific community, it is impossible to certainly assert the exact moment when Hitler decided that a mass extermination process should be applied to all European Jewish population. The already mentioned intentionalist vs. functionalist dichotomy and its ongoing debate has wrongly traced the origins of Nazism to the early 1870's, implicitly the pre-Nazi German (and let us not forget, European) anti-Semitism, thus making it a basic explanation for the National Socialist movement rise to power, when in fact it was only a perfectly mastered tool. Among the rather phantasmagoric interpretations which question the emergence of a final solution as a latent decision, it is indeed worth mentioning the one of Lucy Dawidowicz. Her unique approach if we consider the time she was publishing, stipulates the idea that Hitler's intention to exterminate the Jews dates back to the end of the First World War¹. Moreover, the whole expansionist policy which Hitler obsessively implemented all throughout the Second World War was nothing more than the means to obtain his goal. The equivalency of Jews with Bolsheviks therefore perfectly justifies his plans for a massive invasion of the Russian territory. Needless to point out, the inaccuracy of these kinds of rationalizations was proven on all fronts.

If the intentionalist approaches are basically equivalent in terms of disproof simplicity, the functionalist ones are much more challenging. Here, the closeness and equal plausibility of each of the proposed alternatives provide no clear demarcation line, or at least not a significant one. The first to propose a temporal interval in which the decision had to be taken was also one of the first historians who examined the overall decisional process of the Final Solution. Therefore, Leon Poliakov suggests that a final decision regarding the Jewish question had to be made "some time between the end of the Western campaign in June 1940 and the attack on Russia a year later"². From this moment on, all other versions of what is practically an identical story revolve around the same temporal framework. It is Raul Hilberg however, who manages to set up a research trend in what is considered today to be the first comprehensive and complete study of the Holocaust, and implicitly of the problematic of the Final Solution. With a much more prudent approach when compared to the ones of his predecessors, Hilberg's insights offer as a critical nexus Goering's letter to Heydrich from July 31st 1941, which among others empowered the latter to take whatever measures he deemed necessary for solving the Jewish Question³. Further reinforcing the functionalist thesis, Hilberg perfectly illustrates the emerging aspect of the genocidal idea, rather than its sudden blooming. In stark opposition to this new perspective, one of the former expert witnesses to the 1960's war crimes trials, namely Helmut Krausnick, offers a very skeptical view with regard to the impossibility of determining an exact moment at which Hitler could have made the decision. Nevertheless, by his reasoning the limit had to be set somewhere by the end of March 1941, emphasizing the importance of Jewish emigration policy annulment two months later. The upper mentioned correspondence between Goering and Heydrich are seen as nothing more than a formality, necessary to legalize the whole procedural framework of a decision already taken. The subtle, yet still perceivable discrepancies between the multiple

¹ Lucy S. DAWIDOWICZ, *The War against the Jews: 1933-1945*, Bantam, New York, 1975, pp. 147-165.

² Leon POLIAKOV, *Harvest of Hate: the Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe*, revised edition, Schocken Books, New York, 1979, p. 106.

³ Raul HILBERG, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, Quadrangle, 1961, p. 142.

theories cannot go by unexplained. As demonstrated previously, up until 1940 the Nazi policy was directed towards emigration and later on, deportation of the Jewish minority. However, as evidence suggests, this approach was still in progress even by the end of October 1941¹, which is incongruent with any sort of extermination decision, possibly taken the same year. Hilberg's explanation for this incongruity is a rather non-convincing one, staking its money on the possibility of an existent gap between the advent of the deportation process and the design stage of the gas chambers per se². The 1970s academic trio composed of Browning, Mommsen and Broszat further widened the distance between the bulk of theories, in a successful attempt to counteract what at the time seemed an outrageous hypothesis put forward by extreme right-wing authors and Holocaust deniers such as David Irving. Hitler's awareness of the implemented genocidal policy was for the first time challenged, based on the favorable context created by the supposed lack of any written command towards the high Nazi hierarchy³. Although failing to demonstrate that the killings from the summer of 1941 in Russia were actually part of a continental plan, the above mentioned researchers did manage to doubtlessly attest Hitler's approval of the actions. Nonetheless the controversy of this highly debated topic deserves a much more thorough analysis, and will be saved for a separate discussion.

The military stagnation of the German army in the East rendered deportation practices infeasible, adding up to the pile of frustrating situations the Nazis now had to deal with. The territorial subjugation of Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Ukraine, countries with relatively high Jewish populations, was in the end useless from this perspective, as it provided no alternative to purify the Reich. The last two and a half years, otherwise successful in terms of imperialistic conquest, now brought under the German noose millions and millions of undesired elements, with no further place to go. This being the case, the assumption that mass killing was implemented in a great measure because it proved the only alternative to escape the trap the Nazis themselves had been building is not so far-fetched. In fact, the whole killing process was firstly initiated at a local level, by individual actions whose experiences and results became of paramount importance, offering the perfect example of how to deal with such a situation. The institutional character of the policy came only afterwards, with the erection of the extermination camps in Poland, in the spring of 1942⁴. The first to experience such treatments were Jews in the Polish Ghettos, which had become overcrowded and infested with disease. Here, local commanders made such decisions on a daily basis, routinizing the killings in order to solve the most imperative problems, such as maintaining on a reasonable level the storing capacity, and making more room for new comers from the Western parts of Europe.

The extension of Broszat's thesis came in 1983, when Mommsen characterized Hitler's behavior towards the Jewish policy as being indecisive, and even with a compromising appearance. Moreover, in his view Hitler's employment of threatening speeches was seen as a tool, having the purpose of intimidating the international actors, when in reality in terms of policy making he was uninformed of the real situation

¹ Gerard REITLINGER, *The Final Solution: An Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945*, Beechhurst Press, London, 1953, p. 81.

² Raul HILBERG, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, cit., p. 263.

³ Martin BROSZAT, "Hitler and the Genesis of the 'Final Solution': An Assessment of David Irving's Theses", *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. XIII, no. 20:2, 1979, pp. 73-125.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

up until very late¹. The Wannsee Conference proved to be in this case much less important than originally stipulated, as it presented mass killing as only one among many options, preserving its still experimental phase. Jewish physical exploitation which was welcomed since the beginning by all Nazi lines acted as a camouflage for genocidal actions only later, definitely not in the design stage. Mommsen also agrees that the murders were not following any kind of pre-established program, but were rather based on improvisations which ended up escalating the magnitude of the process: "Once it had been set in motion, the extermination of those people who were declared unfit for work developed a dynamic of its own"². However, abstracting Hitler's role to such a degree that the killing processes became in their essence autonomous was considered dangerous in the whole interpretation of the Holocaust, as it was prone to lowering to a certain level the Nazis' responsibility for their actions. The next few pages are dedicated to exploring this particular aspect, meaning Hitler's involvement in the decisional process of a final outcome.

"The sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been necessary if twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poisonous gas."³ It is hard to imagine that the same person who could have uttered such words 15 years before the beginning of the Second World War, for which he is held directly responsible, had nothing to do with the implementation of the Final Solution. Hitler's statements from *Mein Kampf* should not be interpreted however as a recommendation for the future plans, even though as it clearly shows, the idea never left his mind. The dictator's incredible firmness in terms of objective, no matter how illegitimate it was, and his success in obtaining the desired aim, meaning the removal of Jews from the Reich and its new territorial acquisitions, may seem to offer a direct answer with respect to Hitler's involvement in the decisional process. Nonetheless, as already mentioned his participation is almost impossible to prove effectively; or at least at first sight. If his perpetual enmity towards the Jewish people can easily be testified, the matter of how this reflected and influenced upon his policy making is very difficult to establish. In order to be able to reach any kind of consensus upon this matter, even after meticulous analysis of available evidence, one must still rely on speculations, fact which is all the more concerning when there are very different interpretations of the same actions. In light of such scattered pieces of the puzzle, which reflect in good measure the overcomplicated bureaucratic style of the Nazi leadership, including the Führer, who after the beginning of the war implemented a new method of communication relying much more on the spoken word in order to avoid exposure of vital information, not many theories have the opportunity to be verified⁴.

As Ian Kershaw observes in his ample research, up until the 1970s the fact that Hitler gave a direct order which launched the structured extermination of the Jews was

¹ Hans MOMMSEN, "The Realization of the Unthinkable: the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in the Third Reich", in IDEM, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, pp. 233, 237.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 248-249.

³ Adolf HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, cit., p. 318.

⁴ Leni YAHIL "Some Remarks about Hitler's Impact on the Nazis' Jewish Policy", *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. XXIII, no. 19:1, 1993, pp. 282-286.

unquestionable¹. This rather precipitated assumption stemmed from a "Hitler-centric approach to the Third Reich"² which constantly accentuated the leader's mentality above all other factors. It was only afterwards that the shift in importance from individuality of action to the actual composition of the Nazi bureaucratic machinery took place, keeping in mind of course the parameters of Hitler's moral responsibility for the implementation of the genocide. The complex structural composition of the Nazi state apparatus, with its different agencies constantly competing in terms of policy efficiency, led to the controversial idea that after all, Hitler gave no extermination order at any moment in time during the war. Instead, the failure of organizing deportations according to the plans combined with the unsuccessful campaign in Russia during the second half of 1941 constituted the perfect incentives for *Gauleiters* in the East to inaugurate the killing process. Extermination as imposed from the above hierarchy came only later, with its gradual transformation into a comprehensive program until the next year. Both Mommsen and Browning concur in their views that giving a final order for the implementation of mass extermination would have been incompatible with Hitler's *modus operandi*, especially since according to testimonies he always sought to avoid any kind of conversing path that could lead to the subject of a final solution, even when dealing with his own factotums. According to Browning, Hitler did require the preparation of an extermination plan in the summer of 1941, since the following actions of the Nazi leadership would have been unthinkable without his permission or demand, but the results of the Nazi brainstorming were rather late in coming³. Nonetheless, there are many other variables which must be taken into consideration for a better understanding of the whole process. On the one hand, the *Einsatzgruppen* operations in the East were considered as being policy-altering for some, leading to a transformation in the Nazi procedural framework. The decision that everything should be done in order to reverse the side effect which represented the increase of the number of Jews from the annexed territories and the constantly-arriving information about the killings which were already deployed in Russia by July 1941 both signal Goering's letter as being the further step towards the actual implementation of mass killing. The necessity of finding better methods to deal with this problem was now of paramount importance, and the context of Jewish emigration blockage, the finalization of the camps and the premiere gassing of the Polish Jews at Chelmno as certified in December all inferred to a Hitler green light either at the end of October or the beginning of November⁴.

Offering a different kind of approach with regard to Hitler's input vis-à-vis the ordering of the Final Solution is Gotz Aly, who knew exactly how to exploit the opening of the former USSR archives after its collapse from 1991. Keeping close to Mommsen's earlier idea of "cumulative radicalization"⁵, Aly presumes the decision making process as being a very complex one, with multiple visible incitements in the months of March, July and October 1941, which were still present under experimental

¹ Ian KERSHAW, "Hitler's Role In the Final Solution", in IDEM, *Hitler, The Germans and the Final Solution*, Yale University Press, London, 2008, p. 95.

² *Ibidem*.

³ David CESARANI, "Introduction" to IDEM (ed.), *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 7.

⁴ Christopher R. BROWNING, "A Reply to Martin Broszat Regarding the Origins of the Final Solution", *Simon Wiesenthal Centre Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1984, pp. 124-127.

⁵ Hans MOMMSEN, "The Realization of the Unthinkable...cit.", p. 212.

stage by May 1942. In other words, his approach succeeds in reconciling almost all other academic factions, especially given the fact that his insight was sustained by different regional studies conducted in the formerly occupied territories¹. Things get really interesting if looking at his interpretation of Hitler's role in the process, which this time is viewed as having the task of moderating and judging different proposals or schemes that the Nazi leaders were continuously pushing forward, first in order to get the Führer's appreciation and second, to find a way out of the problems they had been creating in the last couple of years. Amongst other motifs which could have pulled Hitler's trigger are enumerated the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague, a theory pushed forward by Florent Brayard in order to link the somehow inexplicable comments Himmler made about the Führer's unusually harsh words when referring to the Jewish people in the context of Heydrich's funerals², and last but definitely not least the signing of the Atlantic Charter already in August 1941, which came as a hit for Hitler, who in the context of his strategical failure in the war against the Soviets now had to come to terms with the idea of an inevitable war against the United States, fact which aggravated his nervous breakdown.

Instead of offering a clear-cut answer to the question revolving around Hitler's involvement in the decisional process of the Final Solution, which by now already resembles a Herculean task, the ending part of this discussion is focused on clarifying yet another problematic aspect, more exactly the possibility of encryption of bureaucratic documents, which we must constantly remember, never mention physical extermination, whether written by Hitler, Himmler or any other member of those involved in the process. Leaving aside diaries, postwar testimonies or speeches which offer a very different alternative when compared to the official bureaucratic line of action, post-war studies have come up with the elucidative scenario where official documents circulated by the Nazis were actually lying, deliberately using terms as "deportation" or "evacuation" as code-names for extermination and killing. Even though in the early years this was a very attractive thought for students of the Holocaust, elucidating many of the unanswered questions, in fact the theory abounds in logical contradictions. First of all, because of the cause-effect relation which is perfectly observable in the Nazi actions until mid-1941, there is no doubt that the utilization of the above-mentioned terms was the proper one, without leading to any hidden meaning. The question then arises, how could words have drastically changed their meanings and more specifically, how could the lower hierarchy, the receiver of the orders be informed of such subtle changes? It was impossible for people giving orders to indicate the shift in interpretation of their words at the lower level, and as a consequence deduce that the latter had to act accordingly³. Moreover, the idea that these changes were somewhere and somehow written down in order to be transmitted is in contradiction to the whole purpose of the codification process, not to mention assuming the Nazis did so, we would severely underestimate their

¹ Ian KERSHAW, "Hitler's Role...cit.", p. 19.

² Florent BRAYARD, *La "Solution Finale de la Question Juive". La technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision*, Fayard, Paris, 2004, p. 46.

³ For a better understanding of the subject, see Germar RUDOLF, *Lectures on the Holocaust. Controversial Issues Cross Examined*, The Theses and Dissertations Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 193. Although widely categorized as a Holocaust denier, his argumentation is indisputably presented in an extremely scholarly manner, drawing attention upon both pro- and counter-arguments of the Holocaust revisionist thesis.

thinking capabilities. Performing mass killings at such ample levels did require a certain degree of secrecy, hence the permanent silent vocabulary with respect to the extermination process, but from there to re-interpreting the orders on such a scale is a long way. Since it has already been mentioned, the next part will focus exclusively on the concept of secrecy, or more to the point on the connections provided by the triangulated relationship between the so-called "Operation Barbarossa", the Final Solution and the War of Destruction imagined by the Nazis.

As previously established, it is safe to assume that most researchers agree that the implementation of a final solution was never based on a singular, independent decision made at a certain point in time. However, accepting that the whole decisional process was characterized by incremental events raises some important questions with respect to the pivotal nature of some of them, while others, considered less relevant, are left in the background. The so-called "*vernichtungskrieg*" and its intense planning during the spring and summer of 1941 enters under this category, postulating the deaths of millions of Soviet civilians, shedding light as always on the Jewish minority. The example set in Poland was to leave no room for interpretation when talking about the implications this war of annihilation would have on the Russian territory. The genocide of Soviet Jews was now a given, with mass executions and starvation being thoroughly planned on a much bigger scale and much more organized in terms of resources management than in the previous years in Poland. Furthermore, in terms of timing of the Final Solution, the debate revolves around the initial positions which puts forward the idea that prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union the order to murder all Soviet Jewry was still inexistent¹. The arrangements which would initiate Operation Barbarossa were also responsible for setting in motion the deadly sequences which further encouraged the beginning of systematic mass murder, gradually expanding the target from Soviet to European Jews.

In spite of the fact that the war of destruction against the Red Army and the encompassing Soviet population was already underway, it is very important to notice the psychological barriers which still had to be overcome, until the ultimate stage of the Final Solution as we now understand it was accomplished. The summer of 1941 still envisaged forced resettlement as the answer to the Jewish problem, but as destructively conceived as it was, this plan did not escalate to mass extermination policies. However, the first couple of weeks of the Barbarossa enforcement helped in creating the lethal precedents which, looking in retrospect proved to be real turning points towards mass killings². In this context, the importance of non-German assistance in framing the anti-Semitic policy during this period should by all means have its proper share of attention. The participation of population from the Nazi occupied territories in violent acts against their fellow Jewish neighbors had a significant extent in perpetrating later genocidal measures. As Browning identifies, "the scope of their involvement ranged from assistance in identifying, persecuting and ghettoizing Jews to the carrying out of pogroms, 'cleansing measures' or other acts of violence"³. The best example here for sustaining this argument is the case of Lithuania, the Baltic country which prior to the war harbored the biggest Jewish population from North-Eastern Europe, and by the end of 1943 it had become one of the undeclared *Judenfrei* areas.

¹ Hannes HEER, Klaus NAUMANN, *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2004, p. 205.

² Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 253.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

The invasion of this country on June 22, 1941 allowed the *Einsatzgruppen* for the first time to begin the organization of Jewish killings, making it the place where officially, the Holocaust had begun. Moreover, reporting to Berlin, one of the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders who were at the time deployed in Lithuania recounts to his superiors the local pogroms which started not later than 25th of June, 3 days after the invasion, resulting in 1500 Jewish deaths¹. If this is the case, one cannot help wondering if this occasionally overlooked aspect had far reaching repercussions for later anti-Jewish policies, in the sense that it set the perfect example of how should the situation of the Jews be dealt with. As further demonstrated in the third and last part of this paper, the Lithuanian case was not unique from this perspective, similar patterns of action being observable in the case of occupied Western Ukraine, where local population stood on the same side as the Nazis until the very end of the massacres.

The amazing success of the Führer's military strategy in Russia in the first months of action further boosted the Nazis' confidence in their capabilities, who intended to erase all remains of Bolshevism in order to avoid the future rise of any kind of possible dangers for the soon-to-be great German Empire. In his euphoric state, Hitler went so far in his speeches that he compared himself with a much improved, politicized version of Robert Koch, who in his own words, "has discovered in Jewry the bacillus of social decomposition"². Jews were racially unfit to occupy any place in the colonial Garden of Eden envisaged by the Führer, and in the context of victorious military outcomes his subordinates had to make an impeccable impression in accomplishing their tasks. Further supporting both hypotheses that local actions had a major role in deciding the mass killings and that no direct order came for genocide implementation is the fact that the commanders of the killing units were informed of the changes in a non-uniform manner, at different moments and through different means. However, this irregular dissemination of the new policies had little impact in terms of efficiency impediments, and by August 1941 already, almost all occupied areas were intensively planning and implementing killings at a systematized scale. The following months did nothing more than bring about improvements in the killing methods, with Himmler and Heydrich effectively putting an end to the long search. In mid-October, they had found what they were looking for, and in light of new coming actions, Himmler gave the order to immediately stop all Jewish emigrations³. The final part of the paper proposes an ample case study having as main objective the analysis of empirical evidence concerning policy implementation in Western Ukraine, and the wider context it helped develop, thus supporting the idea of a final solution spreading like a domino effect, from a micro to a macro scale of action.

The East-European modern state of Ukraine is one of the newest of the continent, but its history has never fallen under the same label. Having a geopolitically charged past, mainly characterized by 500 years of different imperial dominations which constantly had a regional character (the Habsburgs in Galicia, the Ottoman Empire in Bukovina and finally, the Russian Empire) the Ukrainians were late in developing a sense of national identity, because of the constant cultural, social and political trends

¹ Dina PORAT, "The Holocaust in Lithuania. Some Unique Aspects", in David CESARANI (ed.), *The Final Solution...cit.*, p. 159.

² Max DOMARUS, *Hitler. Speeches and Proclamations: 1932-1945*, vol. 2, transl. by Mary Fran Gilbert and Chris Wilcox, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Wauconda, Illinois, 1990, p. 981.

³ Christopher BROWNING, *The Origins of the Final Solution...cit.*, p. 372.

which were more than often imposed forcibly upon the population. Wasting its one chance of developing a separate Ukrainian identity under the Habsburg rule which was much more permissive in terms of assimilation of local culture than the Romanovs, Ukraine was to encounter all kinds of obstacles which would make it impossible to gain any sort of awareness all throughout the 19th century and further on. The active Polish resistance to the creation of an independent state, combined with very scarce economic resources and a practically inexistent degree of political consciousness, to which is further added an organized intelligentsia and even a linguistic fragmentation of the regions¹, made futile even the thoughts of developing a separate identity of the population, which in all fairness was in fact very heterogeneous. Even though most of the Ukrainian borders were slowly incorporated into the Russian Empire, the Western part remained for several centuries under Polish rule. After Poland's taking over by the Russians however, Galicia and Bukovina were to survive separately from the other Ukrainian territories until their forced agglutination during World War II. Therefore, Western Ukraine was subjected to a different kind of historical experience, which in the context of understanding the formation of national identity of the state becomes of paramount importance. Managing to avoid the long Soviet impositions, development in terms of identity was different, following the path of a much more nationalist approach, which would last even after the gaining of independence from 1991. Furthermore, because of the historical closeness to the Habsburg Empire, Western Ukraine is different in terms of European identity affirmation, which is much stronger than in its Eastern counterpart. In light of confronting these variables, it seems easier today to understand (yet not justify) why, during the Nazi occupation, the Ukrainian local population in this region but not exclusively, had such a major role in the killing processes.

The beginning of the Second World War found a Ukrainian population composed mainly of traditional Russian rulers, German settlers, Polish landlords and Jewish traders, while the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians belonged to the peasantry². Being hungrily craved because of its potential in terms of agricultural resources and human labor force, the Ukrainian space was always prone to exploitation and extreme transformations, a sort of danger which along with the rise of Soviet and thereafter Nazi imperialism reached its climax. The latter regarded this territory as the soon-to-be Aryan *Lebensraum*, having in its composition all sorts of German establishments, such as agricultural colonies, military equipment and necessary SS gears³. Hitler's delusions with respect to Ukraine being comparable in terms of usability with India helped a great deal in altering policies and behavioral patterns of Nazi elites, who tried by all possible means to colonize the territory during the War.

The military conquest of Ukraine in the summer of 1941 was followed by the arrival of Nazi personnel who, at the sight of local conditions, was rendered speechless. The Soviet stamp from the last decade had remained visible especially in the rural areas, which made up almost the entire territory. For the Germans, the unbearable living conditions provided nothing more than a confirmation of the "subhuman"

¹ Paul KUBICEK, *The History of Ukraine*, Greenwood Press, London, 2008, p. 68.

² Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005, p. 2.

³ Dirk MOSES, *Empire, Colony and Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2008, p. 279.

status of the Slaves, further stressing the immediate need for accomplishing their mission and making visible progress as fast as possible. Ironically enough, the Nazi leadership even acknowledged the benefits of Stalin's domination over Ukraine, as it set the perfect base for the future German empire-building. The ethnic Ukrainians knew nothing more than to live under imperialism and constant war; for them, the changing of the occupation was only nominal, passing from the Soviet to the German whip¹. However, not all regions viewed the arrival of the Nazis with the same amount of pessimism. In Western Ukraine and more specifically the Zhytomyr region, because of the intensively promoted Western stereotypes and the tragic events involving the recent Soviet rule, citizens naively welcomed the Germans, clueless of the terrors they were about to endure. Not only that, but living in memory of the first German occupation during World War I, which was benefic in economic and cultural terms, they willingly provided the Nazis with the demographic situation of the entire region, thus alleviating them from a great amount of work. In the context of a blitzkrieg strategy which intended to erase to a certain degree the current Eastern settlements, the Wehrmacht couldn't afford wasting valuable time on dealing with civilian population. Once again, Zhytomyr was a particular case in the sense that here, the army, the police and the SS set-up a separate administration specifically designed as to play a leading role until the civil leadership was programmed to arrive in November the same year. During the five months when Himmler and his SS were officially in charge, the regime unleashed its murderous campaign which focused on a careful selection of victims, not only from among the Jews, but also from the ranks of Soviet POW and other unwanted elements, be it of racial or political considerations. On the other hand, the German-Ukrainian relations from this period are often described as "a honeymoon"² from the perspective of the omnipresent consensus and the provided opportunities. The Soviet withdrawal meant that Ukrainian nationalists could start preparing the ground for obtaining independence. Moreover, the positional shifts in the societal strata immediately became visible, with the German minority being all of a sudden elevated to the proper Aryan level to which they belonged, while for Jews the future was starting to seem unpredictable, at best. The initial approach of the Germans with respect to the local population nourished the latter's hopes that on this occasion things will much improve. Exploiting the circumstances of their invasion, the Nazis managed in creating an anti-Bolshevik foundation of their expedition, thus portraying themselves as "god sent liberators", taking advantage of the region's powerful religious drives³. Propaganda machinery which on every occasion called to the Ukrainian people made use of religious rites in order to promote its anti-Semitic ideology, encouraging and instigating on every occasion local initiatives which often led to Jewish pogroms.

As for the nationalist movements which operated on the ground, they were deceptively convinced by the Nazi cooperative behavior that they would even benefit from support in obtaining their goal. Their faith in the success of the operation was so strong that they established certain bonds with the German army and the SS,

¹ Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building...cit.*, p. 30.

² *Ibidem*, p. 31.

³ Karel C. BERKOFF, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 147.

helping in the final preparations of Barbarossa¹. The false illusions would soon be crushed by German authorities and the conflict arising from the obvious divergence of interests will be settled in favor of the latter, who firmly sought to place the local German minority into key-positions of the towns and villages, thus interfering with the nationalists' plans to improve the local living conditions. Nonetheless, from the perspective of inter-ethnic relations what is interesting to observe in this case is that, although Ukrainians saw the *Volksdeutsche* together with the Jewry as possible threats to their status, in fact up until the arrival of the Nazis in the summer of 1941, the Zhytomyr population was much more radical in stigmatizing the Polish and Russian minorities, which due to the historical conflicts were still seen as the main antagonists². The incubation of interethnic tensions never had the chance to manifest itself on a practical level, except for the Ukrainian-Jewish relations which on the background of Nazi agitations took on much more violent displays. The credulous Ukrainians soon realized that the Nazi administration wouldn't provide the expected results, counterbalancing their considerate attitude towards religion and nationalist movements with the already known policies of intimidation and mass violence.

The five months military occupation of the Western part of Ukraine with its administrative center in the city of Zhytomyr brought along the merciless execution of tens of thousands of Jewish civilians, actions legitimized by the ongoing war and the already discussed euphoria of victory of the German troops on the Eastern front. The rigorous administrative structure imposed in the beginning by the military, with its preserved hierarchical pattern and anti-Semitic doctrine was to remain stabilized until the 1944 Soviet return, thus opening the way for more mass killings to take place in an unquestioned and unpunished manner. Trying to come up with a suitable characterization of the fresco, the telling features that come to mind are first of all the surprisingly numerous acts of indigenous collaboration, the draconic security measures against all civilian population along with the mass punishments in case of infringements and lastly, the continuous economic exploitation which left the population in abject poverty during and after the Nazi withdrawal. Moreover, in order to fully understand the nature of the events one must not neglect the central role played by the SS police forces coordinated by Himmler, which acted as a despotic force on both civilian and military administrations. Although organized in an irreproachable manner from the executive point of view, enjoying permanent help from the local administration which was being exploited to serve the Nazi goals, the military rule was chaotic on all other levels. The Führer's regional appointees hardly managed to reach any sort of consensus with respect to the manner of ruling of each occupied region, except for the area of security measures which were by all intents and purposes equally strict. Contextual challenges such as severe economic deficits and all sorts of administrative complications, up to and including overcrowding and inhumane conditions of the ghettos and provisional camps for Jewish civilians and POW, were settled through the use of violence and terror, on most occasions used randomly and without accountability by the Nazi enthusiasts, which weren't few in

¹ Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building...cit.*, p. 38.

² Karel C. BERKOFF, "Was There A Religious Revival In Soviet Ukraine Under The Nazi Regime?", *Slavonic and East European Review*, no. 3, July 2000, p. 548.

numbers¹. This temporal interval of only a few months constituted the tragic point of convergence of different variables, an intersection which became lethal in terms of racial policies.

Unquestionably, the contemptuous final solution(s) alternative to the Jewish question and their extermination as a race began not in the gassing chambers of Auschwitz, but in rather isolated East European locations such as Zhytomyr². The 2 million Jewish victims claimed by the Nazi machinery from North-Eastern Europe died almost integrally on the spot, in full view of the "racially fit citizens", who more than occasionally even pulled the trigger. Unlike the industrial and impersonal style of the gassing procedures, in Ukraine the killing processes reached a much more intimate level in the sense that the concepts of justification of the murders, the carelessness or participation of the witnesses and the victims' traumatic experiences acquire a very important socio-psychological extension. Zhytomyr's Jewry is of paramount importance for understanding, as historian Dieter Pohl says, "the transition from a selective policy of destruction to one of total eradication" and the mechanisms which helped making the successful passage³. Furthermore, from a regional perspective, the analysis of the course of events during the years of occupation provide useful information with respect to the Nazified administrative structures, the importance of hierarchical distributions and social dynamism which made possible the mass extermination of the unwanted elements. In addition, the constant presence of the Nazi elite in the region and its interaction with the lower hierarchy provide further understanding of the Reich's structural division and the relations between the groups and individuals. The vague definition of expectations when talking about the ordering of a final solution practically gave all local commanders free hand in approaching the Jewish policy, thus adapting the harsh measures to local conditions. Nonetheless, like all efficient machineries, this one also needed more than a powerful engine in order to accomplish its goals. The SS, the SD and the police needed two important pillars upon which to found their work, more specifically the full partnership of all German departments in the region and the active support of the indigenous population. In the end, they got even more than they were initially hoping for.

Ironic as it may seem, although Ukraine was the country with the biggest Jewish concentration after Poland, its significance in understanding the Shoah was often overlooked. Subjects such as Jewish forced labor, both German and Ukrainian civilian participation in massacres and denunciations did not constitute an attraction point for researchers of the topic until very recently, with the post 1991 opening of the Ukrainian archives⁴. The general knowledge of the Holocaust in Ukraine is resumed at the events from Babi Yar in the fall of 1941, or at best the whole military administration period until November, the same year. The initial phase which set off the extermination process, regarded from a localized perspective such as the case of Zhytomyr and its surroundings provide crucial evidence in promoting the hypothesis that the murder of the European Jewry was never planned "in the meeting

¹ Theo SCHULTE, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, Berg, Oxford, 1989, pp. 289-292.

² Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building...cit.*, p. 69.

³ Dieter POHL, "The Murder of Ukraine's Jews under German Military Administration and in the Reich Commissariat Ukraine", in Ray BRANDON, Wendi LOWER (eds.), *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2010, p. 301.

⁴ Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building...cit.*, p. 71.

rooms of the Nazi leadership”¹, but developed as such on the ground, following the snowball effect. The general assumption is that the exact date at which the decision of extermination was made is impossible to verify. What is clear however is that regardless of the motives, the dramatic increase of the killings during the months of August and September which also changed their primary targets, going from male-only to inclusion of women and children, was ordered from a higher-ranked position. Therefore, instead of wasting precious time in search of an officially documented order which might or might have never been given, it would be much more fruitful in terms of results to actually try and reconstruct the connection between the killings ascent and interactions of leaders and local subordinates which in the end led to the promotion of a policy of eradication at the state level.

Although initially concerned of the possibility of a negative reaction from the part of the *Wermacht*, the *Einsatzgruppen* took advantage of the instrumentality of warfare in order to allure the former into embracing the Führer’s ideological affinities in terms of racial policy². A very prolific collaboration between the three parties – the *Wermacht*, the SS and the police – was established at a formal level preceding Operation Barbarossa, between Heydrich and Quartermaster, General Eduard Wagner. Although at the high hierarchical level things were clear from this perspective, the different local and regional configurations this brand new alliance formed after the invasion still remain in the shadows. Apart from socially bonding over their jobs, the created link between officers, commanders and soldiers led to a very well coordinated manner of action which on a certain level eased the psychological discomfort of the executions. As Lower observes in her study, what struck most when analyzing Nazi administration on the ground was the perfect division of labor that the SD and the military laid out, which was most visible in the events following the month of August in Zhytomyr. Individual collaborations were also exploited in order to get the best out of the situation, perfectly demonstrating how agencies with partially different objectives merged around the Holocaust.

The average Ukrainian “*Volk*”, in its overwhelming majority belonging to the peasantry, continuously sought all throughout the war and implicitly the Nazi occupation to preserve its previous living arrangements, which plainly speaking referred mostly to agricultural subsistence. Nonetheless, the socially higher-ranked Ukrainians ended up, forcedly or not, working with both military and civilian German administrations. Standing out from the bulk of state employees, the influential Ukrainian police was by far the most enthusiastic in performing its genocidal tasks, systematically chasing the Jewish population on every occasion. Little wonder that the only documented evidence of the Ukrainians’ role in the implementation of the Final Solution is provided by the German records, which vaguely stipulate the duties of every recruited auxiliary police unit, thus making research of the problem even more difficult than anticipated³.

When addressing the issue of influence of the German occupation upon the behavioral pattern of the local citizens, one cannot ignore the fact that the context created by racialist thinking brought to the surface certain types of criminal tendencies. Although the problem of establishing if in fact pogroms took place spontaneously or

¹ Dieter POHL, “The Murder of Ukraine’s Jews...cit.”, p. 236.

² David CESARANI (ed.), *The Final Solution...cit.*, p. 58.

³ Wendi LOWER, *Nazi Empire-building...cit.*, p. 90.

they were exclusively instigated by the Germans is somehow doubtlessly clarified by Nazi reports which claim that most violent outbursts were provoked by themselves, one cannot generalize to such a degree the course of events¹. In the city of Zhytomyr for instance, to the miscalculation of the Nazi leaders, the population was disinclined in helping with the anti-Jewish policy implementation, refusing to take any kind of active measures against their Jewish neighbors. The Nazi administration took advantage however of the historically imposed anti-Bolshevik feelings of the Ukrainians, and equated them with the anti-Semitic ones through manipulating methods and intense propagandistic actions. What resulted is not very hard to imagine: local Ukrainians were convinced of the evilness the Jews provoked, and started taking matters into their own hands in order to liberate their lands.

Participation in the Holocaust was also extremely high among the members of nationalist Ukrainian organizations, who in light of pursuing their fantasies with respect to independence, helped the Germans on many occasions in rounding up and identifying the Jewish population. Although this pro-German orientation wouldn't last long, especially after the Nazis incorporated Galicia (the mother-land of nationalist movements) into the *Generalgouvernement*, Ukrainian nationalists still lived under the strong impression that for their country "the lesser evil was Hitler and the greater evil, Stalin"². Following to the letter this slogan, they continued their bloody quest of liquidating Jews until the very end of the war, in part because of associating them with Bolshevism, but also to comply with the German will. Fundamentally, the Ukrainian cooperation to mass killings can be explained through the historical context of the Nazi occupation, generally being analyzed as an unfortunate conjunction of skillful German recruitment processes, brutalization of the previous Soviet rule and the psychological state of war, which helped in lowering inhibitions to the point that murder became a normalized action, not only for trained soldiers, but even for the common citizen.

In terms of complexity and sensitivity, Holocaust studies practically offer no comparative background, no matter how attractive this aspect may seem today when seeking to obtain certain political purposes. From a purely theoretical perspective, the most interesting peculiarity of this rather unique event is not the innovation brought on by the gas chambers, but the pseudoscientific concepts which the Nazis embraced and later created in order to destroy the supposedly European "common enemy". As hopefully demonstrated in this paper, the extremely racial ideology obsessively promoted by National Socialist doctrine did not lead to an inevitable genocidal path, but rather pushed forward the idea that any sort of territorial German-Jewish cohabitation was for all intents and purposes impossible. Nonetheless, no matter how unique in terms of ideological motivation, the Holocaust's final number of the victims' count (even the most exaggerated results) do not stand out, if compared for instance to the causalities produced by deliberate famines imposed in communist Russia or China. Moreover, comparing in proportional significance, the 1994 Tutsi indiscriminate slaughter in Rwanda surpasses the Nazi results, the former having an

¹ John Paul HIMKA, "Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews during the Second World War: Sorting out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors", in Jonathan FRANKEL (ed.), *The Fate of the European Jews: 1939-1945. Continuity or Contingency?*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p. 172.

² *Ibidem*, p. 194.

extinction rate of over 75%, while European Jews had an estimate of between 57 and 67% of the pre- War numbers¹. Under no circumstances should these comparisons be intended to underestimate the contribution of the Holocaust in understanding the genocidal boundaries, especially since it helps a great deal in preventing or limiting this kind of future behavior. In this sense, the individuality of each innocent victim and his or her suffering surpasses the status of grammatical fiction, once again reminding humanity that immortality can be achieved in more than one way.

With respect to drawing a conclusion on the decision making process and implementation of the Final Solution, no matter how hard one tries certain things will always remain unexplained, and certain hypothesis unverifiable. The amalgam of inter-dependent variables which have to be taken into consideration irrespective of the road we chose to adopt will almost exclusively result in the discovery of new discrepancies. Chronological correlations such as the one between victory in the East and radicalization of anti-Jewish measures are indeed very plausible, indicating rather a cumulative process towards mass extermination, which very much depended on the continuously changing circumstances and last but not least on the local conditions. Yet, after in-depth analysis there is one conclusion which stands out before anything else: the Final Solution as we now understand it initially presented a much localized character, emerging in places such as Ukraine and the Baltic Countries, where the Nazis' perfectly structured administrative framework and a local population driven towards collaboration by its pregnant historical past converged to the point that genocide became part of daily life.

The Ukrainian case study this paper proposes as a departure point for understanding the genesis of the Final Solution is an attempt at shedding light upon the omissions researchers have made so far in tackling the Holocaust. The unfortunate geographical position of Ukraine, which on the continental map was always at the crossroads, first between the Entente and the Central Powers and three decades later between the Allies and the Axis Powers offered the perfect context to ravage on two different occasions its territory, unwillingly hosting the two most powerful armies of the world battling for supremacy. After 1941, as a future Nazi colony Ukraine became ground zero for the onset of the Holocaust. Surprisingly or not, before the German occupation Ukraine was no stranger when dealing with Jewish pogroms. The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century brought along differently located massacres of the Jewish minority, having as main protagonist the Ukrainian rural population. Interesting enough, these violent escalations coincided with the decisive changes of the Tsarist regime, somehow following in scope and intensity, as Elias Heifetz observes, "a course parallel to that of the revolutions"². Considering the historical evidence which indicate deeply-rooted anti-Semitism, we can take a step further in understanding why the Holocaust was possible on such a scale on Ukrainian territory.

One final important aspect which would make a good research subject is the consequence of Ukrainian partition from 1941 in relation to the multiple interpretations of the Holocaust as seen today. After the invasion, Hitler once again dismantled the Ukrainian territory, parts of which were incorporated to the General Government

¹ Benjamin A. VALENTINO, *Final Solutions. Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, The United States of America, 2004, p. 178.

² Elias HEIFETZ, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine In 1919*, Thomas Szeltzer, New York, 1921, p. 1.

and Romania, thus dashing to the ground Rosenberg's dream of creating a unified Ukrainian state under German suzerainty¹. Consequently, Holocaust in Ukraine is today analyzed almost exclusively in connection to the *Wermacht* administrative territories and the Reich Commissariat Ukraine. Looking at the situation from a purely technical angle however, the events from Galicia should belong to Holocaust in Poland, while Holocaust in Romania should also include the region of Transnistria, same as Transcarpathia should be analyzed with Hungary. These historical distinctions in interpreting the events clearly demonstrate the important role of occupiers, be them Germans or Russians, in implementing genocidal policies throughout the region they ruled. Nonetheless, demographic data speaks louder than the nature of territorial occupation, in the sense that the majority of the population in each of these zones was unquestionably Ukrainian. Moreover, no matter the 1941-1945 inauspicious division, almost all ruptured pieces now make up the independent state of Ukraine.

As for the genocidal experience of the war and the importance of the Holocaust in drawing lessons, analyzing what came after (Yugoslavia, Rwanda) we can only conclude what we already suspected: that history teaches us no lessons. Most probably, as sociologist Robert Merton cleverly argued, if men define situations as real, then they will become real in their consequences². As expected, the tragic events involving the Jewish people left a huge red stain on behavioral developments for almost all peoples of the continent. National identity in several parts of Europe is now less deep, less passionate and less extreme in its demands. In post-war Germany, this debate took on a particularly delicate character, having profound moral and political roots. The Nazi experience caused a high degree of anxiety and moral crisis, leading to instability and distrust in the country's post-war institutions. Not being able to make peace with its own past, German national identity was bound to become entirely future-oriented. Sometimes being reluctant with regard to their own nationhood, many Germans took advantage of the context of European integration in order to link inextricably to a wider democratic community. Living in fear that genocide is still possible on such a systematized and state-organized scale would be incongruous, basically because masses have become almost impossible to mobilize in a similar number as during the wars, due to the unlimited number of options available (politically, socially and economically). But it wouldn't hurt to take a glance into the past once in a while, just as a quick reminder that choosing not to believe in the Devil, won't protect us from it. No matter what "Devil" may epitomize here.

¹ Wendi LOWER, Ray BRANDON (eds.), *The Shoah in Ukraine...cit.*, p. 2.

² Jacques SEMELIN, *Purify and Destroy. The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, p. 85.

