

III. Remarks on the First Volume

Hilberg introduces the first chapter of his work (“*Precedents*”) with the following words:⁸

“The German destruction of the European Jews was a tour de force; the Jewish collapse under the German assault was a manifestation of failure. Both of these phenomena were the final product of an earlier age.

Anti-Jewish policies and actions did not have their beginning in 1933. For many centuries, and in many countries, the Jews had been victims of destructive action.” (p. 11; *DEJ*, p. 5)

There are additional remarks on ‘anti-Semitism’ in European history. Hilberg regards the “*Nazi destruction process*” as the “*culmination of a cyclical trend.*” In the beginning, there were attempts to convert the Jews; since they for the most part did not want to convert, expulsion was then tried, and lastly, the third, most radical method followed, the physical extermination of the Jews (pp. 14f.; *DEJ*, p. 8). Hilberg summarizes his theory by means of creative declarations:

“The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.” (p. 15; *DEJ*, p. 9)

Hilberg declares that it was in Germany that enmity to the Jews reached its most extreme pitch was no accident, since it was part of a long tradition in Germany. In his time, Martin Luther had been a bitter opponent of the Jews, as his essay *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* shows (On the Jews and Their Lies, published in 1543; Hilberg pp. 22ff.; *DEJ*, p. 15). From Luther Hilberg goes on to the German anti-Semites of the 19th Century and to the Jew-hating ideology of National Socialism. Next he comments on the Jewish reaction to undergoing recurring persecutions: Jews reacted to these always with “*alleviation and compliance*” (p. 34; *DEJ*, p. 27). In the Third Reich this became their doom:

8 To reduce the number of footnotes, whenever I cite Hilberg, the page number of the updated German version is given in parentheses. Page numbers of the English original are tagged with *DEJ*.

“When the Nazis took over in 1933, the old Jewish reaction pattern set in again, but this time the results were catastrophic. The German bureaucracy was not slowed by Jewish pleading; it was not stopped by Jewish indispensability. Without regard to cost, the bureaucratic machine, operating with accelerating speed and ever-widening destructive effect, proceeded to annihilate the European Jews. The Jewish community, unable to switch to resistance, increased its cooperation with the tempo of the German measures, thus hastening its own destruction.

We see, therefore, that both perpetrators and victims drew upon their age-old experience in dealing with each other. The Germans did it with success. the Jews did it with disaster.” (p. 35; *DEJ*, p. 28)

As we see, at the beginning of his large work, Hilberg provides historical, psychological and philosophical observations on the history leading to the extermination of the Jews—for which he has at this point provided no proof, but which he assumes to be axiomatic. In effect, he harnesses the wagon before the horse. The proper scholarly method would have been to clarify the facts before going on to philosophize over what brought them about.

After the second chapter (“*Antecedents*”) in which the anti-Jewish measures undertaken after the seizure of power of the NSDAP are described, Hilberg turns to “*The Structure of Destruction*” (pp. 56ff.; *DEJ*, pp. 51ff.). As components of the “*Destruction Process*” he includes:

- The definition of the concept ‘Jew’ by the National Socialists (pp. 69-84; *DEJ*, pp. 63-80) and the prohibition on the mixing of Aryans and Jews;
- The dispossession of Jews (pp. 85-163; *DEJ*, pp. 81-154);
- The concentration of Jews in designated dwelling quarters, mainly ghettos, which first affected Jews living in the area of the prewar Reich and in the Protectorates of Bohemia and Moravia and subsequently affected Jews from the Polish territories conquered in 1939.

In this chapter Hilberg relies almost exclusively on solid and accessible sources, so the facts he describes here are mostly not disputable. This part of the work constitutes a useful documentation of the step-by-step disfranchisement of the Jews under NS rule. However, there is a swindle as to names going on here that is somewhat offensive. Discrimination, dispossession and ghettoization of a minority are not components of an “*annihilation policy*”. The Blacks of South Africa had no political rights under the Apartheid system and mostly lived in separated districts, yet no reasonable person would assert that they were *annihilated* by the ruling White minority. The Palestinians are tyrannized and harassed any number of ways in Israel and

even more in Israeli occupied territories—they were by no means *annihilated*. Hilberg is creating a deliberate confusion of ideas.

This is not the only example of dishonesty that we encounter in the first volume. On pp. 221f. (*DEJ*, p. 212), in connection with the removal of German Jews to the East, Hilberg writes:

“In October 1941, mass deportations began in the Reich. They did not end until the destruction process was over. The object of these movements was not emigration but the destruction of the Jews. As yet, however, there were no killing centers in which the victims could be gassed to death, and so it was decided that, pending the construction of death camps, the Jews were to be dumped into ghettos of the incorporated territories and the occupied Soviet areas further east. The target in the incorporated territories was the ghetto of Łódź.”

Hilberg still owes his readers a proof for this assertion. While the entire process of the removal of German Jews to the East can be documented up one side and down the other—and Hilberg mostly relies on German original documents in his numerous footnotes—he does not cite any document as source for the above assertion, nor even any witness testimony.

The passage just cited is one of the first clear examples of a dishonest tactic that Hilberg employs frequently in the second volume: He embeds undocumented assertions (or assertions supported only by questionable witness testimony) on *annihilation of Jews* among properly documented statements on *persecution of Jews* or *deportation of Jews* and may have hoped that the reader will not catch him. In the case above the illogic of his assertion can be grasped with both hands, especially when regarded in context. On pages 215-225 (*DEJ*, 205-214), Hilberg describes the logistical and organizational difficulties caused by the improvised mass removals of German Jews to the West Polish territories incorporated in the Reich in 1939 and to the Generalgouvernement and how furiously the local NS authorities repelled these removals. For example, Werner Ventzki, Chief Mayor of the city of Łódź, renamed Litzmannstadt, protested vehemently against the plan Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler was considering in September 1941 to deport 20,000 Jews and 5,000 gypsies to the Łódź ghetto, from which they were to be shipped further East the following year. Ventzki insisted that the arrival of 25,000 more persons in the ghetto, which was already full to overflowing, would raise the density of occupation to seven persons per room, that the new arrivals would have to be lodged in factories, which would disrupt production, that people would starve and that it would be impossible to prevent epidemics (pp. 222f.; *DEJ*, pp. 212f.). Nevertheless, the removal went forward.

If the purpose of the deportations was “*not emigration but the destruction of the Jews*”, as Hilberg asserts, the National Socialist policy of removal of the Jews to the East before the completion of the ‘death camps’ becomes senseless. According to Hilberg’s book, the two first ‘death camps’, Chełmno and Bełżec, became operational in December 1941 and in March 1942, respectively (p. 956; *DEJ*, p. 893). In that case, I ask: why would the Germans send massive numbers of Jews into the ghettos starting in October 1941 to wait for the ‘death camps’ to become operational, instead of holding off on the deportations for three or four months to save themselves the organizational headaches and the chaos in the ghettos? Hilberg does not bother to discuss obvious questions of this sort.

Nevertheless, the first volume of *The Destruction of the European Jews* represents a well-researched documentation on the destiny of the Jews in the Third Reich from 1933 to 1941. People may disagree as to the interpretation of the facts—but we are interested only in the facts themselves, and, unlike Hilberg, we refrain from random philosophizing. It is an abuse for Hilberg to classify the measures taken by the NS regime during this period as “*annihilation policy*”—they clearly do not fall under that heading.