

Were Ordinary Germans Aware of the Holocaust?

The question of the German public's awareness of Nazi genocide is at the core of any conceptualization of World War Two and the Holocaust. Increasingly, Functionalist understandings of the era show that Hitler and his party never had a precise, specific plan for Nazi policies and instead developed many of them spontaneously. [1] Conversely, intentionalist theories maintain that Nazi party objectives were well established from the beginning and deviated little from their original intent.[2] However, before these arguments over the nature of the Holocaust's development can be considered, it is first crucial to establish what exactly the German public themselves knew about the Holocaust. This essay will contend that despite retrospective claims to the contrary, knowledge of the Holocaust within Germany was, in fact, endemic. Beginning with an effort to define some of the more imprecise terms in the question this piece will then go on to establish four key reasons why the vast majority of ordinary people within Nazi Germany would have been aware of the systematic extermination of the Jews. These will be: what Nazi leaders were saying about the Jews; the effect of international press and Allied propaganda campaigns; what could be seen or heard personally by German citizens and finally the veracity of retrospective accounts of the era. Utilizing a number of primary sources from the period and secondary source analysis this essay will show how the majority of German people during World War Two were cognisant of the mass slaughter of European Jews.

In order to accurately gauge German knowledge and awareness of the Holocaust it is necessary to define a number of otherwise unclear terms. First, the Holocaust itself. For some scholars the Holocaust encompasses all peoples systematically exterminated by the Nazis during World War Two – including Jews, Communists, Roma, homosexuals and the disabled[3]. While this definition can be useful for pieces with a broader scope this essay will focus primarily on the attempted extirpation of European Jewry by the Nazis during the Second World War – otherwise known as the Shoah. Second, “Ordinary” Germans. The notion of an “Ordinary” German, particularly during this time, is a necessarily fraught one with many different possible definitions. In this piece, ordinary Germans will be viewed as those not actively involved in the Wehrmacht army or any of Germany's other numerous paramilitary organizations (e.g. the Schutzstaffel (SS) and Gestapo), and will also exclude those partisan enemies of the state actively resisting Nazi oppression. Finally, “awareness”. This is perhaps the most complicated of these three terms to quantify and in an effort to do so I will propose a model called the continuum of culpability. This continuum will consider the German public in three groups: those who heard and saw nothing; those who heard or saw something but did not believe it was part of a widespread plan to destroy the Jews, and finally those who heard and saw something believing it constituted a genuine attempt to eliminate the Jewish race. Awareness, I propose, sits somewhere between the second and third groups. By utilizing this scale of knowledge, understanding and complicity it will be easier to assess what was known by ordinary Germans at the time and not just ignored or lost amongst the clatter of the rumor-mill. This scale will be particularly useful in considering much of the rhetoric used by senior members of the Nazi party – including Hitler himself – who regularly alluded to, and even explicitly mentioned, the desired destruction of Europe's Jewish populace.

While it has been well established that much of the Nazi party's rhetoric was deliberately verbose and

inflammatory, its importance in disseminating knowledge about the Shoah should not be underestimated. While some historians have claimed that Hitler “toned down [his] rhetoric after consolidating power”, examples before and after 1933 do not seem to support this.[4] In 1919, Hitler unequivocally stated that “the ultimate goal” of Nazism must be “the elimination of the Jews altogether”. [5] Then, twenty years later, at the start of the war in 1939 Hitler reiterated his desire to see “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe”. [6] Finally in January 1942, just ten days after the ostensibly secret Wannsee Conference “confirmed the regime’s determination to murder all Jews within reach” Hitler publicly announced as much in a broadcast rally before thousands of spectators at the Sportspalast in Berlin, stating: [7]

“this war can only end with the disappearance of the Jews from Europe...[and] their complete annihilation”. [8]

This kind of language was evident throughout Germany and certainly not just exclusive to Hitler. Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Propaganda Minister and one of Hitler’s closest associates, was quoted in an editorial from his weekly newspaper *The German Empire (Das Reich)* in November 1941 as saying “Hitler’s prophecy concerning the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe was now coming true”. [9] Similarly, a report of Hitler’s speech made on February 24, 1942 was published in *The Lower Saxony Newspaper (Niedersaechsische Tageszeitung)* containing a paragraph with the heading “the Jew is being Exterminated”. [10] Prior to the formulation of the Final Solution Alfred Rosenberg, a key architect of Nazi ideology, extolled the benefits of a mass forced-migration of Jews to Madagascar where; “in the wild island with its deadly climate the obnoxious Jewish race will find itself with one exit – death”. [11] From these statements it is clear that the upper echelons of the Nazi party, openly and unapologetically proclaimed the active extermination of the entire European Jewish populace.

Certainly, it cannot be argued that for public relations purposes the Nazis made any effort whatsoever to conceal their desires for the Jewish race, in fact, Nazi language was so extreme that it has been suggested many dismissed it “as mere rhetorical flourish”. [12] Regrettably for Germany’s public this seems unlikely. Some may have honestly refused to believe the sheer bombast of their own leader but “to listen to Hitler’s broadcasts was a public duty; work stopped, all were assembled and the press gave them extensive coverage” so it is hard to imagine that anyone did not at least hear what was being said. [13] Furthermore, it was not just the Fuhrer who made such extreme statements but rather the entire leadership of the Nazi party. This language saturated Berlin and abroad, Hitler essentially telling “Germans of the regime’s determination to kill the Jews of Europe and repeat[ing] it with utter clarity on several ceremonious and solemn public occasions”. [14] Along the continuum of complicity this indicates that very few Germans would have fallen within the first category of hearing nothing. Instead, the extensive coverage of Nazi propaganda meant that the vast majority of Germans would have heard (if not believed) their own leaders condemning the Jewish population to death. Despite contemporary protestations from Germans claiming that they did not know, it is undeniable that the most senior members of the Nazi party were describing the Holocaust in detail to the entire German populace, even if they were not listening.

Adding to this climate of anti-Jewish hysteria were extensive Allied propaganda efforts designed to inform the German populace of the slaughter of European Jews. Perhaps the most salient of these attempts were BBC international service broadcasts. These broadcasts stretched across much of the

Third Reich, reaching millions of Germans after the battle of Stalingrad when reliable casualty numbers became increasingly difficult to ascertain.[15] Broadcasts such as these were an important source of information about the extermination of Jews in general, with the BBC going to “considerable pains to ensure that the [information] was accurate and believable”.[16] These “deeply disturbing, unambiguous and factually based” reports detailed the mass murder of millions of European Jews, one excerpt from the service relaying:[17]

“Extermination and death is the new message of the season. Darkness lies over the concentration camp at Auschwitz where thousands upon thousands have had to bear the tortures of the SS.”[18]

While on December 27 1942 in the “War Against the Jews”, the BBC service made its most powerful and unequivocal appraisal of the Nazi party:

“Hitler’s regime is murdering hundreds of thousands of completely innocent men women and children in cold blood only because they are Jews.”[19]

For those Germans who listened many did not believe what they heard, too conscious of the “power of propaganda” and suspecting the BBC of only trying to demoralize them.[20] Others trusted the words from across the Channel, diaries recounting how some would listen to the English enemy broadcasts “with the volume soft” to avoid detection.[21] As with Nazi political rhetoric of the time, many chose to shut their ears to the evils being reported and claim a kind of plausible deniability, after all, the British were a long-standing enemy and this could easily be seen as scurrilous propaganda. But information about the extermination of Jews was too widespread and readily available (from both sides) for anyone to really claim that they had not at least heard about what was happening. Using the model proposed at the start of this essay, it is clear that on the continuum of complicity Nazi and Allied propaganda was informing the German population of what was going on and almost everyone besides the most closeted would have heard *something*. Although this information may have been dismissed as merely rhetorical flourishes or baseless propaganda, it would have been more difficult for Germans to deny the heinous crimes that were perpetrated by the Nazi party in front of their very eyes.

Perhaps the most significant indicator of German awareness of the Shoah was the evidence that was personally available to individuals at the time. During this period Nazi Germany was a nation entirely geared towards war, across every facet of society the Nazi party and the effects of global conflict left their indelible mark. From the beginning of the war the SS organized specific killing units (Einsatzgruppen) and began hanging Jews and anti-Nazis “in public squares for all to see” across “hundred of towns and villages”.[22] These “murders in the killing centers of Germany were of public knowledge” and when Nazi efforts to eradicate the Jews turned mechanistic in 1942 jokes about “ending up in the baking ovens” abounded.[23] Looking specifically at the archetypal death camp, Auschwitz, it is clear that ordinary people across Germany would have been privy to the internal mechanisms of systematic Jewish annihilation.

Auschwitz, like many other death camps, was not some “rural backwater” but rather a major railway junction, which serviced hundreds of thousands of Germans a year.[24] It was an affront to the senses on every level, belching five-meter high flames into the air from the crematoria while the stench of burning bodies was detectable for miles beyond the camp.[25] Auschwitz also “had fifty satellite work camps spread out all throughout Silesia” and was in close proximity to the German border and large populations centers.[26] Obviously anyone living anywhere near the camp would have had enough visual

and olfactory information to be aware of the Nazi's odious activities.

The Nazis blasé attitude towards public knowledge of the Holocaust is supported by diary records kept at the time, while Nazi gas vans were driving through different cities "day after day", scrupulous Germans such as Victor Klemperer and Adam Grolsch were keeping meticulous records of everything they saw.[27] Grolsch personally witnessed a massacre in Pinsk where thousands were murdered reporting: "I saw with my own eyes in two days 25,000 men women and children [murdered] in the most beastly ways". [28]

Although this did not occur within Germany proper it is clear little effort was made to keep it hidden from Germany citizens. Grolsch goes on to reveal that he had seen mobile gas chambers "used for smaller operations" throughout the Reich, his attention first drawn to their existence by the BBC.[29] Similarly, Victor Klemperer kept "exact and minute details about" the persecution and murder of the Jews, including chillingly accurate deductions about the nature of Auschwitz as a death camp from which "nobody comes back [alive], literally no one".[30] In terms of awareness, there can be no equivocating from what is personally seen. Although people may have dismissed, Nazi words as just rhetoric and the smell of rotting corpses or crematoria as the cost of war, few witnessing the mass execution of innocent Jews could so easily dismiss what was in front of their eyes. An operation the size of the Holocaust could not have been conducted clandestinely and in the process of such mass genocide thousands of civilians would have been exposed to the Nazis' horrifying methods. This is supported not only by circumstantial evidence regarding the layout and processes of camps such as Auschwitz but also by the reports kept by Germans at the time, who personally witnessed such brutality. In the continuum of complicity, this indicates that Germans were not just hearing about the holocaust from their leaders and through allied propaganda, but also witnessing it.

Less reliable than sources from the period are retrospective accounts regarding German knowledge of the Holocaust. While imperfect, these interviews with ordinary Germans give a crucial insight into how civilians conceptualized their role in the Shoah. Broad studies undertaken since the end of the Second World War have shown that many Germans maintain that they did not know about the annihilation of the Jews. This was shown in a retrospective study of 3,000 Germans conducted in the 1990s by Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband in *What We Knew*. This survey found that just over a third of those asked at the end of the war claimed to have "known, heard or suspected the Jews were annihilated en masse".[31] However, "all historic, social-psychological evidence indicates that this is not true".[32] Individual interviews with Germans who lived through the war as civilians show that some are now willing to confront how much they truly knew during this period. This is corroborated throughout *What We Knew* which exhaustively details interviews with German civilians who admit the full scope of their knowledge. Many recognized that the talk of pushing Jews Eastward for resettlement was a euphemism designed to cover their total destruction. One respondent explaining:

"extermination camps, that's what I imagined concentration camps to be".[33]

Others denounce their fellow German's claims of absolute ignorance, excoriating, "if someone says today that he had never known, that it is absolutely untrue".[34] These firsthand accounts confirm that evidence was everywhere to corroborate stories of mass extermination but most were just unwilling to listen. In terms of awareness this shows that once again, people knew about the fate of the Jews even if they were unwilling to admit it while it took place.

The arguments given in this piece to support the contention that Germans knew of the widespread murder of European Jews leave little room for alternative explanations. From every German speaker in the home and workplace came Nazi speeches consistently and explicitly stating the desired goal of Jewish extermination. Meanwhile, Allied broadcasts corroborated such claims with specific references to German mass-murder and mechanized death-camps. Yet this is not even the most damning evidence available. Across Germany, the country witnessed the extirpation of Jews by the most repulsive methods imaginable; gassing, starvation, hanging, shooting, beating and even live burial.[35] These atrocities occurred in German towns, cities, farms and provinces, not in the ephemeral East but in full view of the German citizenry. This is supported by primary sources from the period in diaries kept by those brave enough to describe the true horror of what was going on. Increasingly, this has been recognized by the rest of the world and Germans themselves, who now admit the true breadth of knowledge during the Shoah. It was not within the scope of this essay to investigate what caused the Holocaust nor how it could have been stopped, instead, this investigation was designed to show how knowledge and information may not necessarily be enough to stop governments and people from committing acts of evil. What is clear is that the worst genocide of the 20th century was not committed in the dark without consciousness or consent but under bright lights in front of a captivated German audience.

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[2] Ibid.

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[4] John Weiss, *Ideology of Death*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1996, p. 374

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[11] J. Weiss, *Ideology of Death*, p. 328.

[12] Ibid., p. 374.

[13] Ibid., p. 375

[14] Ibid. 375

[15] J. Weiss, *Ideology of Death*, p. 374.

[16] Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, p. 435.

[17] Ibid., p. 442.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Eric A. Johnson, Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew*, Cambridge, basic Books, 2005, p. 382.

[21] Ibid. p. 160.

[22] J. Weiss, *Ideology of Death*, p. 325.

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- [24] Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror*, p. 435.
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