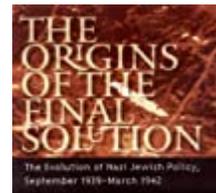




Christopher R. Browning. *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 640 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1327-2.



Christopher R. Browning
with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus

Reviewed by Hilary Earl (Department of History, Nipissing University)

Published on H-German (April, 2005)

When I was asked to review Christopher Browning's new book I was not in the least hesitant; in fact, I was rather excited. Anyone familiar with Browning's work knows his books are a pleasure to read. Not only is he one of the foremost experts on the Nazi "Final Solution" to the Jewish question, but in transmitting his arguments, he is always eloquent and articulate, and judicious in his use of language. Browning is such a good writer that I frequently hold him up as an example for my students to emulate and more than one undergraduate has conveyed to me the power of his prose. Now, imagine my surprise when a 640-page book arrived in my mailbox. I thought it must be a mistake. Browning's books are never more than 200 pages and frequently they are less. After reading *The Origins of the Final Solution* I now understand why the book is so lengthy. It was commissioned by Yad Vashem as part of a comprehensive multi-volume project on the history of the Holocaust. Who better to ask to write the volume on the origins of the Final Solution than Christopher Browning, a historian who has spent most of his career attempting to answer this question.[1] That the book represents the culmination of a lifetime of research and writing is not the only reason it is so lengthy. Browning asked Jürgen Matthäus to contribute his expertise on this subject, and as a result the volume includes two chapters on the role of Operation Barbarossa and the *Einsatzgruppen* (the mobile intelligence and killing units) in

the origins of the Final Solution.[2] The fact that the time-frame of the analysis is less than three years—September 1939 until March 1942—also indicates just how advanced our knowledge is on the subject. Indeed, this volume is so comprehensive that it presents the reader with a near blow-by-blow account of the unfolding of events that led to the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews in late 1941.

Browning is neither a functionalist nor an intentionalist. His position is somewhere in between, what he calls a "moderate functionalist"; that is, someone who views the origins of the Final Solution as a process in which the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews was the result of the cumulative radicalization of policy and not Hitler's life-long intention.[3] Little by little as the Nazis tried and failed to solve the Jewish question, solutions became increasingly more radical until finally, the decision to murder them all was made. Even though Browning believes there was no blueprint, he does not eschew the important role of Hitler or other high-ranking Nazis in the decision-making process.[4] Rather, the comprehensive nature of the project requires that he examine every possible facet of this complex question. Explaining when, where, and by whom the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews was made means he cannot ignore the role of the individual in the decision-making process anymore than he can ig-

nore the role of the war in radicalizing policy. Page by page and chapter by chapter the author builds a strong and convincing case: The Final Solution was more than the decision of one man, it was the outcome of the repeated failure of the Nazis to solve their population and racial problems through resettlement and expulsion, in the context of a war of destruction in the east and within a polycratic system that allowed for some individual initiative, but which also included the complicity and active involvement of all major state organizations, including the German bureaucracy and the army. This is not a simple argument. In fact, it takes ten chapters to elaborate fully.

The book begins with an introductory chapter immediately dispensing with the idea that the Holocaust was the logical and/or inevitable outcome of centuries of Christian anti-Judaism. Undoubtedly this beginning is in part a response to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's criticisms of Browning's methodology, but it is also an attempt by the author to situate his subject in a broader historical framework. While the chapter in no way exhausts the issue of the role of Christian anti-Judaism in the origins of the Final Solution, it is important in that it is here that Browning lays the foundation for the rest of the book: the Final Solution was not the outcome of years of Christian anti-Judaism or even generations of racial antisemitism, but rather it was the result of Germany's particular historical experiences, and was inconceivable without World War II, which was a necessary precondition for its evolution.

The remainder of the book contends with various components of the question of origins. For example, Browning illustrates quite convincingly that in 1939, Poland was a testing ground for Nazi "racial imperialism," a time when Nazi anti-Jewish policy was indistinct from its overall policy against Poles and other racial "inferiors." During the Polish campaign, then, the Nazis attempted to solve their so-called population problems through resettlement; that is, moving undesirable elements of the population to areas far away from Germany. Massive population transfers proved to be impossible however. Resettlement was a failure; instead, many Poles were uprooted and entire segments of the Polish population were murdered. What is significant about this early period, argues Browning, is that it was the failure to solve the population problems through resettlement that brought the Nazis one step closer to genocide. In Poland the Nazis learned an important lesson: it was easier to murder undesirable peoples than to find them new homes. This would become significant later in the war, most especially in 1941 during their war of destruction in Soviet

Russia.

Browning also illustrates the relationship between the policies of expulsion and ghettoization, and genocide. After the failure of resettlement, the Nazis thought they might solve the Jewish problem through mass expulsion. The Nisko and Madagascar plans, intended to permanently rid Europe of its Jews, failed to solve their racial problems however. Again, Browning argues that failure was an important step toward genocide. Why? Because it radicalized policy and brought the army into the killing process. If expulsion was a practical failure, what then was the relationship of the policy of ghettoization to the origins of the Final Solution? For Browning, the debate about what to do with the Jews of the ghetto highlights the fact that not only was there no uniform ghetto policy, but at this time the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews had not yet been made.[5] In effect, ghettoization was not an end in itself, but rather a temporary solution to a larger problem during wartime. According to Browning's view the Jewish problem would be solved, but not until after the war was over; until then the Jews would be concentrated in ghettos and put to work. Ghettoization, then, was intended as a temporary measure, not as a permanent feature of Nazi population policy. And, like with the policy of expulsion, it was important in that it illustrates just how improvised racial policy was at this time in 1940-1941. It was not until the Germans invaded the Soviet Union that Nazi anti-Jewish policy was transformed into genocide.

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, marks a watershed in the origins of the Final Solution. It was during this campaign that the destructive impulse took shape, and for the first time the systematic murder of Jewish men, women, and children was practiced by members of the elite *Einsatzgruppen* with the help of the German army. Once women and children were murdered, a Rubicon was crossed. By mid-August 1941 murder permeated everything, the *Einsatzgruppen* were killing Soviet Jews en masse, and the Final Solution in Russia was well under way (pp. 320-321). In the next year and a half approximately one million Soviet Jews were murdered. In this way Operation Barbarossa and the mass murder carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen* was the bridge between localized mass murder and the European-wide genocide that was to follow in the spring of 1942.

If the war in the east marked the beginning of the systematic mass murder of Soviet Jews, when did the Nazis decide to murder all of Europe's Jews? The turning

point, according to Browning, was October 18, 1941, in the anticipation of military victory in the east.[6] Prior to this point, many attempts were made to solve the Jewish question through resettlement and expulsion. After October 18, 1941 however, there was only one solution: death (p. 318). While it took several months before the Final Solution could be implemented, the fact that the Nazis conceived of such a murderous policy is an unfortunate testament to the incredible “problem-solving abilities” of the perpetrators (p. 316). As Browning concludes, it only took a little more than two years (from the outset of war in September 1939 to October 1941) for the Nazis to determine that systematic mass murder was a viable and desirable option. What followed the mass murder of Russian Jews was the implementation of the decision to murder all of Europe’s Jews, beginning with the gassing of Jews in the Polish town of Chelmno in December 1941. The following spring Jews from across Europe would meet the same fate in stationary gas chambers erected throughout Poland.

Who made the decision to murder all of Europe’s Jews? When was the decision made? Why and how was it made? *The Origins of the Final Solution* is an answer to these questions and for this reason is an extremely important book. It marks the first time since Raul Hilberg’s *Destruction of the European Jews* that any historian has written a comprehensive history of the subject. For this reason it is difficult to critique. I suspect my criticism of the book is the same as anyone else who reads it: length. While its comprehensive nature is its strength, it is, to some extent, also its short-coming. The length of the book may deter some readers, and in all likelihood the novice will find the sheer amount of information daunting. However, just as Hilberg’s lengthy *Destruction* showed that the murder of the Jews required the efforts of all elements of German society—what he called “the machinery of destruction”—Browning’s *Origins* illustrates the complexities of the decision-making process. This is an important book and to date marks the only comprehensive analysis of the origins of the Final Solution. For this reason it should be read by anyone serious about this subject. Scholars and graduate students alike will find it illuminating, and while I would

not recommend assigning it to undergraduates, certainly selected chapters would prove useful in the classroom. I am glad that I read this book, I now have one of the most important reference works at my disposal, and next time I look for information to write a lecture on the link between Nazi population policy in Poland and the origins of the Final Solution, I will know where to turn.

Notes

[1]. For example, Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985); *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Origins of the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); and *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

[2]. Matthias wrote chapter 7, “Operation Barbarossa and the Onset of the Holocaust, June-December 1941,” and contributed to chapter 6, “Preparing for the ‘War of Destruction.’”

[3]. Browning’s position is most clearly stated in “Nazi Resettlement Policy and the Search for a Solution to the Jewish Question, 1939-1941,” in idem, *Path to Genocide*, pp. 3-27.

[4]. Although Browning is more functionalist than intentionalist, he still emphasizes the important role of Hitler in the last, and arguably most important, phase of the decision-making process. See “Conclusion,” pp. 424-433.

[5]. Browning labels the two sides of the ghettoization debate attritionists and productionists. To solve the Jewish Question, attritionists advocated letting Jews starve to death. Productionists, on the other hand, believed that ghetto Jews should be allowed to live and be used for labor.

[6]. October 18, 1941 marks the day that expulsion was no longer seen as a viable option to solve the Jewish problem.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Hilary Earl. Review of Browning, Christopher R., *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10403>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.