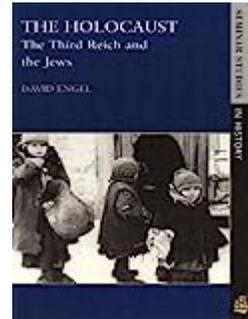




David Engel. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews.* Harlow, England: Longman, 2000. x + 148 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-32720-7.



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A Good, Brief Introduction to the Holocaust

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Seminar Studies in History is by now a well-known and successful series of short introductions to major historical periods or events published by Longman. A new volume in the series, *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews* by David Engel, is the subject of this review. Engel is Maurice R. and Corinne P. Greenberg Professor of Holocaust Studies, Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and Professor of History at New York University. He is the author of three monographs, one on Jewish survivors in Poland in the immediate aftermath of the war, and two on the Polish government in exile and its relationship to the Jews. He teaches courses on European Jewish history, Zionism, and the Holocaust.

It is quite a feat to attempt to cover the Holocaust in only 128 pages, of which 87 are actual text and the rest a collection of twenty-eight key documents, maps, a glossary, chronology, index, and bibliography (with 198 entries). Yet Engel succeeds very well indeed in providing both a succinct overview of the historical facts as well as a summary of the major historical schools of interpretation and scholarly controversies. Inevitably, a book of

this brevity on a topic of such great controversy will provoke some disagreement. Engel is to be congratulated, however, on his ability to cover both the basic facts and most important currents of interpretation in such a complete, sympathetic, and even-handed manner.

The subtitle of the book, "The Third Reich and the Jews," should be taken seriously, for the focus is almost exclusively on the persecution and extermination of Jews by Germans. While other groups persecuted by the Nazis such as homosexuals, the Sinti and Roma, Poles and other Slavs, etc., are mentioned, they are expressly excluded from the author's definition of the Holocaust (p. 5). This is a legitimate interpretation, particularly given the length of the book as defined by the series, but one which will reduce the usefulness of this book for many. Teachers using the book who take a broader definition of the Holocaust will need to add additional materials.

Because of the strict definition of the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish affair, the importance of National Socialist racial ideology is underdeveloped. The Nazis did give anti-Semitism a central place in their world view, but they were not simply anti-Semites, they were racists with

a hierarchy of all human groups and a clear desire to create an exclusively Germanic racial space in Europe, from which Jews must first be eliminated, but where Sinti, Roma, and all Slavs (to name just a few groups) were also ultimately unwelcome. The focus on anti-Semitism also leaves unexplained NS efforts to “purify” German society of “dangerous” elements such as the handicapped, habitual criminals, and other “asocials” who were dangerous not simply by their actions, but also because they might “pollute” or weaken German racial stock. The Holocaust, including its Jewish facet, simply cannot be understood without this wider racial and racist context to National Socialist thought.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for what follows by posing and answering three crucial questions: why study the Holocaust, how is “Holocaust” defined, and can the Holocaust be understood historically, that is, rationally? Engel is quite clear that there are very good reasons for studying the Holocaust (as opposed to some other topic) and that these reasons are important. He is also very clear that the Holocaust is subject to rational understanding and does not somehow lie beyond the scope of rational inquiry. This is, of course, a matter of some controversy, and it is important that Engel take a stand on the issue. Engel’s narrow definition of the Holocaust is a bit more problematic, as stated above.

Chapter 2 discusses the Jews. It defines (historically, not racially or religiously) who the Jews are, and gives a brief but useful summary of Jewish history from roughly 1000 B.C. to the 1930s. After pointing out the contradictory nature of Western European emancipation (greater freedom in exchange for greater conformity) and the shortcomings of emancipation in Eastern Europe, Engel ends with the conclusion that the position of German Jews by about 1930 was ostensibly one of the most secure and stable in all of Europe. There are few points to criticize in this chapter, though this reviewer would have liked some mention of the particular role of intellectuals and intellectual professions in Jewish emancipation. And it is difficult to know what to make of Engel’s pointed assertion that “Originally the word ‘Jew’ was used to designate what might be called today a citizen of Judea—someone whose right to reside in that country was inalienable and could be passed on from generation to generation” (p. 7), a phrase which seems to burden the ancient past with far too much conceptual baggage drawn from the present.

Chapter 3 discusses the Nazis and Germany, particularly with regard to attitudes towards the Jews. Hitler’s

view of the Jews is portrayed first, and then the place of the Jews in National Socialist ideology and in German public opinion is addressed. The exposition of Hitler’s anti-Semitism (pp. 16-17) seems a little over-drawn in its emphasis on his belief that Jews were literally not human. While Hitler’s writings and speeches do sometimes suggest this reading, the manner in which Hitler’s beliefs are explained makes it too easy to simply stamp him as a nut, and there was much more to his anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the space devoted to Hitler tends to overshadow the subsequent explanation of the anti-Semitism of other leading Nazis. Engel rightly states that many leading Nazis were not virulent anti-Semites, at least before becoming Party members, but goes much too far in suggesting that Party members were reluctant to apply Jewish-style extermination to other groups. This mischaracterization is based on two quotes, one by Erhard Wetzel (head of the Department of Racial Policy in the Ministry of Occupied Eastern Territories), and a second by Hans Frank. Neither men can be considered representative of the National Socialist leadership, and neither was particularly influential in defining overall policy. The portrayal of German public opinion, on the other hand, is judicious, and concludes that there was not widespread desire to eliminate the Jews, but also that less radical forms of persecution were generally accepted passively. Attention is paid to the role of the defeat in the First World War in making anti-Semitism seem plausible, and research into the “true believers” among the Nazis is briefly summarized. The chapter finishes with a section discussing the thesis of Christopher Browning and others that situational factors were largely responsible for turning “ordinary men” into killers. The oversimplification and ahistoricism of Daniel J. Goldhagen is rejected, but his notion of “ordinary Germans” is retained, not in the sense that the German people as a whole were all homicidal anti-Semites, but rather that the perpetrators of the Holocaust had all been subject to a long period of ideological indoctrination by the NS regime. Engel ends the chapter by citing a combination of both ideological and situational factors as being the most likely explanation of why Germans (and not just Nazis) engaged in genocide.

Chapter 4 is largely devoted to an exposition of the controversy between “functionalists” and “intentionalists,” or between those scholars who emphasize situational factors or stress the evolution of Nazi plans vs. those who hold that the Nazis planned and intended the extermination of the Jews from the very beginning of their movement. On the whole this is again a balanced and judicious discussion, with close reference to docu-

mentary evidence but also great sensitivity to the larger implications and contexts of each school of interpretation. If Engel seems to this reviewer to remain more sympathetic to the intentionalist camp, in the end, he very properly leaves the question open. If there is any fault in this chapter at all, it is perhaps that Engel fails to state strongly enough that the intentionalist and functionalist positions are today less absolute than they once might have been, and that there is a growing convergence between them.

Chapter 5 covers Jewish perceptions of threat and responses to it. In the process, Engel also explains the gradual deterioration of the position of the Jewish community in Germany before the outbreak of war, the dilemma of emigration, and the problems of Jewish community leaders in Germany in coping with increasing hardships and persecution. A special section is devoted to the question of Zionism and the response of Zionist groups to increased persecution. Engel quite rightly points out that no one in the 1930s could have been aware of the killing policies which were only implemented (perhaps only developed) in the early 1940s, and that it was very easy to misinterpret Nazi intentions and downplay or ignore the danger they represented, both for Jews and bystanders alike.

Chapter 6 covers the crucial transition from persecution to deliberate and systematic murder. Engel shows how, even though the Nazis continued to try to export Jews from Europe, the outbreak of war made this tactic increasingly impossible. The difficulties faced by the Germans in organizing the Holocaust include particularly the fact that the Nazis did not have complete freedom of action but always had to consider the possible reaction of both victims and bystanders. In the process, some of the reasons for the differing survival rates for Jewish communities across Europe are mentioned. The chapter again gives a balanced view of both intentionalist and functionalist interpretations and it also stresses the problems of evidence faced by both camps and particularly the question of the absence of a clear, written fundamental order for the beginning of mass extermination. The chapter is well done on the whole, and presents a wide range of major interpretations, with, perhaps, a slight bias toward intentionalist positions. Both the T4 "euthanasia" killings of the insane and handicapped in Germany as well as the mass murder of Polish intellectuals (and also of many Jews) during the invasion of Poland in 1939 are mentioned, but do not, for this reviewer, receive proper emphasis as precursors to the Holocaust. These weaknesses may be one of the unintended conse-

quences of Engel's decision to limit his definition of the Holocaust to the extermination of Jews, which does not allow him to give due weight to the systematic murder of other categories of people. In a more minor vein, it would have been helpful if the dates for the founding of the various death camps had been given, since this information is so important in determining the date for the transition to systematic mass murder (p. 57). The difference between death camps and concentration camps is addressed well, but Engel could provide more information on the "normal" concentration camps, and particularly should sketch out their basic contradiction: they were places of punishment and confinement, but also "re-education" through work, which, from the beginning, deliberately involved such severe maltreatment that death was a common fate for even "normal" prisoners (pp. 58-59). Finally, the translation of the German term "Sonderkommando" ("special command" instead of "special squad" or "special detachment") is awkward (p. 59).

Chapter 7, "Responding to Murder," is very well done, and aptly portrays the difficulties Jewish and other communities faced in divining German intentions from their often contradictory actions. It also demonstrates the near impossibility of accepting that the Germans indeed intended to kill every Jewish man, woman, and child under their control. The amount of information on the Holocaust available to Jews in Europe and countries outside Europe is discussed. The various forms of resistance and strategies for survival of Jewish communities in occupied Europe are examined. The role of Zionist groups in perceiving the true nature of the danger and in organizing resistance is given special attention, as is the reaction of neutral and Allied governments to the growing knowledge of Nazi actions. The chapter might have pointed out the general pro-German bias among East-European Jews which was an inheritance of the First World War (when the German occupation had been generally viewed as fair, and Germans as representatives of a civilized society) and which often made it hard for Eastern European Jews to understand the danger presented by the Nazis. More important, the complicity of collaborationist regimes, notably the Vichy government, could also stand much greater emphasis, though Engel does devote considerable space to this problem.

Chapter 8, the conclusion, returns again to the questions of our ability to understand the Holocaust through rational investigation and the limits to its representation which might exist. This is a short chapter, and intended to stimulate further discussion, rather than to present any kind of summary or closure. It ends by leaving the

big questions open. Some will find it too fragmentary or incomplete, others will no doubt find it provides a proper bridge to classroom discussions.

The bibliography is quite good, and includes some works in languages other than English. But one can inevitably contest some choices and propose others. Thus, in a bibliography which includes a book on the occult origins of National Socialism (a fairly obscure topic), there is not a single book by George Mosse, one of the most important historians of the Holocaust and related topics. Moreover, in some cases, the literature cited in the text is not always the best choice for a given topic among the works cited in the bibliography (as, for example, on p. 23, where the works of T. F. Abel ought to be cited regarding Nazi “true believers”).

The same goes for the glossary. It is generally very good, and will be a great help to beginners. Engel is to be congratulated for generally giving both the original German and the common English translation for appropriate key words. But there are some inconsistencies in the choice of entries. Why, for example, is the term “Lebensraum” not used or given, whereas the German word (and English cognate) “Aktion” is? The SS is present, as is the Reich Labor Service (though only in English), but not the SA. Both “Askenazi” and “Sephardi” might have been included. Moreover, the Croatian “Ustase” is defined in both the glossary and the text (p. 73) as a paramilitary group, and not as a political party. Furthermore, this author wishes that phonetic spelling for pronunciation of foreign words and places had also been given, for this is a problem for most English-speakers.

The appendix contains twenty-eight well chosen primary sources. Some are well known Nuremberg Trial documents, such as Heydrich’s invitation to the Wannsee

Conference, but others are less common. They come from a commendably wide range of sources. A great number of them describe conditions in Poland, but none concerns Western Europe. Most documents come from Jewish sources, and prove particularly useful in illustrating a wide range of Jewish responses to the Holocaust, both in Germany and in Poland. The source and date of each document is given. There are also four small but clear maps.

The usefulness of this book in the classroom is largely a function of the format of the series of which it is a part. In terms of level, it is most appropriate for advanced students of history at the secondary school or beginning university level, though graduate students preparing for comprehensive exams in an area outside their specialty may also find it useful. It is clearly too short to serve as the main textbook for an entire course on the Holocaust. It might, however, be used as the starting point for a proseminar on the topic, in which students would mainly read the important secondary works on the topic. More importantly, the book will function well as a reading within a broader course, say, for example, within a survey course of western or world civilization, or of European history in the twentieth century. The combination of text and primary documents allows many different sorts of written and oral exercises to be developed, and the very good bibliography is a fine starting point for further research. Engel does a very fine job of presenting the major interpretations and controversies of the Holocaust, a factor which only increases the usefulness of the book for stimulating discussion. Because of its brevity, the book would also be suitable as an introduction to the topic for the general public. This is a fine contribution to the series and a useful addition to the vast literature on the topic.

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