“Führer, You Order. We Obey”

95  Rudolf Höss, MEMOIRS

On gaining power, the Nazis began to implement the anti-Jewish policies Hitler and the Nazis had promised in Mein Kampf and thousands of books, pamphlets, and speeches. Jewish shops were plundered while police looked the other way, Jewish physicians were excluded from hospitals, Jewish judges lost their posts, Jewish students were denied admission to universities, and Jewish veterans were stripped of their benefits. In 1935 the Nazis promulgated the Nuremberg Laws, which deprived Jews of citizenship and outlawed marriage between Jews and non-Jews. In November 1938 the regime organized nationwide violence against Jewish synagogues and shops in what came to be known as Kristallnacht, or “night of the broken glass.”

After the war began in late 1939, conquests in Eastern Europe gave the Nazis new opportunities to address the “Jewish problem.” In early 1941 they began to deport Jews from Germany and conquered territories to Poland and Czechoslovakia, where Jews were employed as slave laborers or placed in concentration camps. In June 1941 special units known as Einsatzgruppe (“special action forces”) were organized to exterminate Jews in territories conquered on the eastern front. In eighteen months, they gunned down over 1 million Jews and smaller numbers of Gypsies and non-Jewish Slavs. Then in January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference outside Berlin, the Nazi leadership approved the Final Solution to the so-called Jewish problem. Their goal became the extermination of European Jewry, and to reach it they constructed special camps where their murderous work could be done efficiently and quickly.

When World War II ended, the Nazis had not achieved their goal of annihilating Europe’s 11 million Jews. They did, however, slaughter close to 6 million, thus earning themselves a permanent place in the long history of man’s inhumanity to man.

The following excerpt comes from the memoirs of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland between 1940 and 1943. Born in 1900, Höss abandoned plans to become a priest after serving in World War I and became involved in a number of right-wing political movements, including the Nazi Party, which he joined in the early 1920s. After serving a jail sentence for participating in the murder of a teacher suspected of “treason,” Höss became a farmer and then in 1934, on the urging of Heinrich Himmler, a member of the Nazi SS, or Schutzstaffel (Guard Detachment). The SS under Himmler grew from a small security force to guard Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis into a powerful party organization involved in police work, state security, intelligence gathering, administration of conquered territories, and management of the concentration camps. After postings at the Dachau and Sachsenhausen camps, Höss was appointed commandant of Auschwitz, which began as a camp for Polish political prisoners but became a huge, sprawling complex where over a million Jews were gassed or shot and tens of thousands of prisoners served as slave laborers in nearby factories. In
1943 Höss became overseer of all the Third Reich's concentration camps, but he returned to Auschwitz in 1944 to administer the murder of 400,000 Hungarian Jews. After his capture in 1946, he was tried and convicted for crimes against humanity by the international military tribunal at Nuremberg. He was hanged on April 16, 1947, within sight of the villa where he and his family had lived while he served as commandant at Auschwitz.

While awaiting trial, Höss was encouraged to compose his memoirs to sharpen his recollection of events he experienced. In the following passage he discusses his views of the Jews and his reaction to the mass killings he planned and witnessed.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What does Höss claim to have been his attitude toward the Jews?
2. How do his statements about the Jews accord with his assertion that he was a fanatic National Socialist?
3. Does Höss make any distinction between the Russians and Jews that he had exterminated?
4. What was Höss's attitude toward the Final Solution? How does Höss characterize his role in the mass extermination of the Jews?
5. How did his involvement in the Holocaust affect him personally? How, according to Höss, did it affect other German participants?
6. What would you describe as the key components of Höss's personality? To what extent was his personality shaped by the Nazi philosophy to which he was dedicated?
7. What insight does this excerpt provide about the issue of how much the German people knew of and participated in the Holocaust?

Since I was a fanatic National Socialist, I was firmly convinced that our idea would take hold in all countries, modified by the various local customs, and would gradually become dominant. This would then break the dominance of international Jewry. Anti-Semitism was nothing new throughout the whole world. It always made its strongest appearance when the Jews had pushed themselves into positions of power and when their evil actions became known to the general public.... I believed that because our ideas were better and stronger, we would prevail in the long run....

I want to emphasize here that I personally never hated the Jews. I considered them to be the enemy of our nation. However, that was precisely the reason to treat them the same way as the other prisoners. I never made a distinction concerning this. Besides, the feeling of hatred is not in me, but I know what hate is, and how it manifests itself. I have seen it and I have felt it.

The original order...to annihilate all the Jews stated, "All Jews without exception are to be destroyed." It was later changed by Himmler so that those able to work were to be used in the arms factories. This made Auschwitz the assembly point for the Jews to a degree never before known....

When he gave me the order personally...to prepare a place for mass killings and then carry it out, I could never have imagined the scale, or what the consequences would be. Of course, this order was something extraordinary, something monstrous. However, the reasoning behind the
order of this mass annihilation seemed correct to me. At the time I wasted no thoughts about it. I had received an order; I had to carry it out. I could not allow myself to form an opinion as to whether this mass extermination of the Jews was necessary or not. At the time it was beyond my frame of mind. Since the Führer himself had ordered "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question," there was no second guessing for an old National Socialist, much less an SS officer. "Führer, you order. We obey" was not just a phrase or a slogan. It was meant to be taken seriously.

Since my arrest I have been told repeatedly that I could have refused to obey this order, and even that I could have shot Himmler dead. I do not believe that among the thousands of SS officers there was even one who would have had even a glimmer of such a thought... Of course, many SS officers moaned and groaned about the many harsh orders. Even then, they carried out every order... As leader of the SS, Himmler's person was sacred. His fundamental orders in the name of the Führer were holy. There was no reflection, no interpretation, no explanation about these orders. They were carried out ruthlessly, regardless of the final consequences, even if it meant giving your life for them. Quite a few did that during the war.

It was not in vain that the leadership training of the SS officers held up the Japanese as shining examples of those willing to sacrifice their lives for the state and for the emperor, who was also their god. SS education was not just a series of useless high school lectures. It went far deeper, and Himmler knew very well what he could demand of his SS...

Whatever the Führer or Himmler ordered was always right. Even democratic England has its saying, "My country, right or wrong," and every patriotic Englishman follows it.

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1 All SS members swore the following oath: "I swear to you Adolf Hitler, as Führer and Chancellor of the Reich, loyalty and bravery. I vow to you and to the authorities appointed by you obedience unto death, so help me God."  

Before the mass destruction of the Jews began, all the Russian politruks and political commissars were killed in almost every camp during 1941 and 1942. According to the secret order given by Hitler, the Einsatzgruppe searched for and picked up the Russian politruks and commissars from all the POW camps. They transferred all they found to the nearest concentration camp for liquidation... The first small transports were shot by firing squads of SS soldiers.

While I was on an official trip, my second in command, Camp Commander Fritzsch, experimented with gas for killings. He used a gas called Cyclon B, prussic acid, which was often used as an insecticide in the camp to exterminate lice and vermin. There was always a supply on hand. When I returned Fritzsch reported to me about how he had used the gas. We used it again to kill the next transport.

The gassing was carried out in the basement of Block 11. I viewed the killings wearing a gas mask for protection. Death occurred in the crowded small cells immediately after the gas was thrown in. Only a brief choking outcry and it was all over... At the time I really didn't waste any thoughts about the killing of the Russian POWs. It was ordered; I had to carry it out. But I must admit openly that the gassings had a calming effect on me, since in the near future the mass annihilation of the Jews was to begin. Up to this point it was not clear to me... how the killing of the expected masses was to be done. Perhaps by gas? But how, and what kind of gas? Now we had discovered the gas and the procedure. I was always horrified of death by firing squads, especially when I thought of the huge numbers of women and children who would have to be killed. I had had enough of hostage executions, and the mass

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Cyclon (or Zyclon) B is a blue crystalline substance; its active ingredient, hydrocyanic acid, sublimates into a gas when it contacts the air. It causes death by combining with the red blood cells and preventing them from carrying oxygen.
killings by firing squad order by Himmler and Heydrich.4

Now I was at ease. We were all saved from these bloodbaths, and the victims would be spared until the last moment. That is what I worried about the most when I thought of Eichmann's5 accounts of the mowing down of the Jews with machine guns and pistols by the Einsatzgruppe. Horrible scenes were supposed to have occurred: people running away even after being shot, the killing of those who were only wounded, especially the women and children. Another thing on my mind was the many suicides among the ranks of the SS Special Action Squads who could no longer mentally endure wading in the bloodbath. Some of them went mad. Most of the members of the Special Action Squads drank a great deal to help get through this horrible work. According to [Captain] Höf­fle's accounts, the men of Globocnik's6 extermination section drank tremendous quantities of alcohol.

In the spring of 1942 the first transports of Jews arrived from Upper Silesia. All of them were to be exterminated. They were led from the ramp across the meadow, later named section B-II of Birkenau,7 to the farmhouse called Bunker 1. Aumeier, Palitzsch, and a few other block leaders led them and spoke to them as one would in casual conversation, asking them about their occupations and their schooling in order to fool them. After arriving at the farmhouse they were told to undress. At first they went very quietly into the rooms where they were supposed to be disinfected. At that point some of them became suspicious and started talking about suffocation and extermination. Immediately a panic started. Those still standing outside were quickly driven into the chambers, and the doors were bolted shut. In the next transport those who were nervous or upset were identified and watched closely at all times. As soon as unrest was noticed these troublemakers were inconspicuously led behind the farmhouse and killed with a small-caliber pistol, which could not be heard by the others. . . .

I also watched how some women who suspected or knew what was happening, even with the fear of death all over their faces, still managed enough strength to play with their children and to talk to them lovingly. Once a woman with four children, all holding each other by the hand to help the smallest ones over the rough ground, passed by me very slowly. She stepped very close to me and whispered, pointing to her four children, “How can you murder these beautiful, darling children? Don't you have any heart?”

Another time an old man hissed while passing me, “Germany will pay a bitter penance for the mass murder of the Jews.” His eyes glowed with hatred as he spoke. In spite of this he went bravely into the gas chamber without worrying about the others. . . .

Occasionally some women would suddenly start screaming in a terrible way while undressing. They pulled out their hair and acted as if they had gone crazy. Quickly they were led behind the farmhouse and killed by a bullet in the back of the neck from a small-caliber pistol. . . .

As the doors were being shut, I saw a woman trying to shove her children out the chamber, crying out, “Why don't you at least let my precious children live?” There were many heart-breaking scenes like this which affected all who were present.

In the spring of 1942 hundreds of people in the full bloom of life walked beneath the bud-

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4Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942) was Himmler’s chief lieutenant in the SS. He organized the mass execution of Jews in Eastern Europe in 1941.
5Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962) was a Nazi bureaucrat originally involved with Jewish emigration. After the Wannsee Conference he was given responsibility for organizing the deportation of approximately 3 million Jews to the death camps. He fled to Argentina in 1946, but was captured by Israeli agents who took him to Israel, where he was tried and executed in 1962.
6Odilo Globochik was the officer responsible for organizing and training SS units in Eastern Europe.
7Birkenau was the German name for the town where a large addition to the Auschwitz complex was built in late 1941 and early 1942.
The Global Community and Its Challenges

Ding fruit trees of the farm into the gas chamber to their death, most of them without a hint of what was going to happen to them. To this day I can still see these pictures of the arrivals, the selections, and the procession to their death.

The mass annihilation with all the accompanying circumstances did not fail to affect those who had to carry it out. They just did not watch what was happening. With very few exceptions all who performed this monstrous “work” had been ordered to this detail. All of us, including myself, were given enough to think about which left a deep impression. Many of the men often approached me during my inspection trips through the killing areas and poured their depression and anxieties to me, hoping that I could give them some reassurance. During these conversations the question arose again and again, “Is what we have to do here necessary? Is it necessary that hundreds of thousands of women and children have to be annihilated?” And I, who countless times deep inside myself had asked the same question, had to put them off by reminding them that it was Hitler’s order. I had to tell them that it was necessary to destroy all the Jews in order to forever free Germany and the future generations from our toughest enemy.

It goes without saying that the Hitler order was a firm fact for all of us, and also that it was the duty of the SS to carry it out. However, secret doubts tormented all of us. Under no circumstances could I reveal my secret doubts to anyone. I had to convince myself to be like a rock when faced with the necessity of carrying out this horribly severe order, and I had to show this in every way, in order to force all those under me to hang on mentally and emotionally.

Hour upon hour I had to witness all that happened. I had to watch day and night, whether it was the dragging and burning of the bodies, the teeth being ripped out, the cutting of the hair,9 I had to watch all this horror. For hours I had to stand in the horrible, haunting stench while the mass graves were dug open, and the bodies were dragged out and burned. I also had to watch the procession of death itself through the peephole of the gas chamber because the doctors called my attention to it. I had to do all of this because I was the one to whom everyone looked, and because I had to show everybody that I was not only the one who gave the orders and issued the directives, but that I was also willing to be present at whatever task I ordered my men to perform.

And yet, everyone in Auschwitz believed the Kommandant really had a good life. Yes, my family had it good in Auschwitz, every wish that my wife or my children had was fulfilled. The children could live free and easy. My wife had her flower paradise. The prisoners tried to give my wife every consideration and tried to do something nice for the children. By the same token no former prisoner can say that he was treated poorly in any way in our house. My wife would have loved to give a present to every prisoner who performed a service for us. The children constantly begged me for cigarettes for the prisoners. The children especially loved the gardeners. In our entire family there was a deep love for farming and especially for animals. Every Sunday I had to drive with them across all the fields, walk them through the stables, and we could never skip visiting the dog kennels. Their greatest love was for our two horses and our colt. The prisoners who worked in the household were always dragging in some animal the children kept in the garden. Turtles, martens, cats, or lizards; there was always something new and interesting in the garden. The children splashed around in the summertime in the small pool in the garden or the Sola River. Their greatest pleasure was when daddy went into the water with them. But he had only a little time to share all the joys of childhood.

Today I deeply regret that I didn’t spend more time with my family. I always believed that I had

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9Teeth extracted from the corpses were soaked in muriatic acid to remove muscle and bone before the gold fillings were extracted. Some of the gold was distributed to dentists who used it in fillings for SS men and their families; the rest was deposited in the Reichsbank. Hair was used to make felt and thread.
to be constantly on duty. Through this exaggerated sense of duty I always had made my life more difficult than it actually was. My wife often urged me, "Don't always think of your duty, think of your family too." But what did my wife know about the things that depressed me? She never found out.9

"The Face of War Is the Face of Death"

96 • Henry L. Stimson,
"THE DECISION TO USE
THE ATOMIC BOMB"

President Truman, who as a senator from Missouri and as vice president under Roosevelt did not even know about the Manhattan Project, learned of the atomic bomb in a meeting with Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson on April 25, 1945, two weeks after President Roosevelt's death. His first response was to appoint a small committee, known as the Interim Committee, to advise him on the use of atomic weapons in the war and the immediate postwar era. Its members included Stimson and seven others: George Harrison, an insurance executive who was a special assistant to Stimson; James Byrnes, a presidential advisor and soon secretary of state; Ralph Bard, undersecretary of the navy; William Clayton, assistant secretary of state; Vannevar Bush, president of the Carnegie Institution in Washington; Karl Compton, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and James Conant, president of Harvard University. They were advised by a Scientific Panel, made up of four persons who had played leading roles in the Manhattan Project: Enrico Fermi of Columbia University; Arthur H. Compton of the University of Chicago; Ernest Lawrence of the University of California at Berkeley; and Robert Oppenheimer, director of the atomic energy research project at Los Alamos, New Mexico.

The chair of the Interim Committee and the author of the excerpt that follows was Stimson. Born in 1867 in New York City and a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, Stimson had a distinguished career as a lawyer and public servant. Having served as secretary of war under President Taft and secretary of state under President Hoover, he was named secretary of war by the Democratic president Roosevelt in 1940, despite being a Republican. In 1947, after his retirement from public service and less than three years before his death in 1950, he published the article "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" in Harper's Magazine. It focuses on the work of the Interim Committee and the reasons why Stimson advised President Truman to drop the bombs on Japan without warning. Excerpts from the article follow.

9 In an interview with a court-appointed psychiatrist during the Nuremberg trials in 1946, Hoss stated that his wife actually did learn of his participation in the mass executions at the camp, and that afterward, they became estranged and ceased having sexual relations.