

# Hitler; the intentionalist and the functionalist

Historians who attempt to explain how the Holocaust, one of history's most profound events, occurred divide into two major schools: the intentionalist and the functionalist. Intentionalists may be defined as those who "essentially construct a case around the decisive impact of particular individuals or events." (Claydon, John) Functionalists may be defined as those who "react specifically against the intentionalist approach and build up a picture of what happened through meticulous research, often at a very local level, without any preconceived ideas". (Claydon, John) This Historical debate involves Hitler as a dictator, and the role he played in the administration of Nazi Germany. It is impossible to determine which school is more valid than the other, as these differing interpretations of history can be drawn from the same body of facts and information. (Laurita, Paula) This can be seen through the following quote by Adolf Hitler; "If at the beginning of the War and during the War, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under the poison gas, as happened to hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers in the field, the sacrifice of millions would not have been in vain." (Wasiak, Kjersti) This statement can be interpreted from both the perspective of the intentionalist, as well as the functionalist. An intentionalist would determine this as proof that Hitler had a plan for the Holocaust from the time he came into power, while a functionalist would argue that this was not a decision for future actions of annihilation, but rather that the idea for the genocide of the Jews evolved when other solutions proved to be unsuccessful. (Wasiak, Kjersti)

## Intentionalist

This intentionalist interpretation of this debate focuses directly on the intentions of Hitler, placing him directly at the center of the regime. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) This was the immediate post-war viewpoint, suggesting that the Nazi government was a structured system of command controlled by Hitler alone. (Julian, George) Intentionalists strongly believe in the idea that Hitler was the driving force behind the Holocaust, and that he himself gave the order for the 'Final Solution'. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) They state that Hitler was a strong dictator with a full, almost blueprint-like plan, for the genocide of the Jews. (Julian, George) With his central role in the Nazi government, it would have been impossible for him not to have known and approve all issues involved in the 'Jewish Question'. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists)

Intentionalists believe that Hitler devised the plan to murder the Jews even before he came into power, taking advantage of every opportunity possible to advance his goal of the 'Final Solution'. (Laurita, Paula) Hitler had recognized the Jews as Germany's great racial enemy as early as September of 1919. (Gellately, Robert: Page 414) He said that they must be "removed altogether" (Gellately, Robert: Page 414), making it clear that their destruction had become his true war aim. (Gellately, Robert Page: 527). 'Hitler swore "the Jew" would "not only fail in this effort to destroy Europe and exterminate its people, but would bring about his own destruction".' (Gellately, Robert:

Page 562). The genocide of the Jews, according to intentionalists, was outlined in Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf*; 'My Struggle'. (Wasiak, Kjersti) His plan for the destruction of the Jews was not influenced by events that later took place, but rather, predetermined in his writings. (Wasiak, Kjersti)

A fundamental intentionalist, Lucy Dawidowicz, puts great emphasis on Hitler's plan and intentions. She upholds the viewpoint that the Final Solution to exterminate the Jews was decided twenty years before it was implemented. Dawidowicz believes that Hitler was fully aware of his murderous plan, seeing World War II as the perfect opportunity to put it into action. (Functionalism versus intentionalism)

There are documents that verify discussions that took place between late September and early October that consider the details and difficulties of initial deportations. Based on his direct involvement in these discussions, Hitler would have been fully aware and would have given his approval for the establishment of the death camps. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) In 1945, witnesses reportedly admitted of a direct command from Hitler for the solution of the 'Jewish question' at the Nuremberg trials. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) Intentionalists believe that without Hitler, the genocide of the Jews would not have taken place. The Holocaust is to be blamed on Hitler, and Hitler alone. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists)

## Functionalist

The functionalist theory emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the Nazi State, its internal political rivalries, and the constant improvisations taken as a result of chaotic decision-making as the driving forces behind the Holocaust. (Functionalism versus intentionalism). Functionalists believe that Hitler was a weak dictator, with minimal involvement in the day-to-day administration of Nazi Germany. This argument can be seen in the following quote by Adolf Hitler, "What would happen to me if I didn't have people around me, men whom I completely trust, to do the work for which I don't have time? Hard men who act as energetically as I would do myself? For me the best man is the man who removes the most from my shoulders, the man who can take 95 percent of the decisions in my place." (Gellately, Robert: Page 452) The Nazi state functioned like a triangle, with Hitler at the top and one or two figures with their own levels of power underneath, such as Himmler or Borman. (Julian, George)

The 'Final Solution', according to Structuralists, only evolved to annihilation when it became evident that the Jews could not leave quickly enough. (Wasiak, Kjersti) The answer to the Jewish Question when Hitler first gained power was simply to make life for the Jews so unbearable that they leave Germany. (Wasiak, Kjersti) The decision for extermination was not put into practice until driving the Jews out of Germany was no longer an available option. (Wasiak, Kjersti) 'The sequence of events that began with "You may not work among us," led to "You may not live among us," and escalated to "You may not live at all".' (Wasiak, Kjersti) It became clear that all the German Jews could not flee the country by the time Poland was invaded by Germany in 1939. (Wasiak, Kjersti) This invasion caused 3.5 million Polish Jews to be added to the already existing number of unwanted people living under German Rule. (Wasiak, Kjersti) No matter how desperately they wished to leave, even by their

own free will, there was simply nowhere for them to go. (Wasiak, Kjersti) The plan for annihilation was then developed as the new method to rid the lands of Germany from the Jews. (Wasiak, Kjersti) This is sometimes known as the “crooked path” to genocide. (Functionalism versus intentionalism)

Radical intentionalist, Lucy Dawidowicz, argues that Hitler had already decided on the genocide of the Jews by 1919, referring to anti-Semitic statements he made to support her explanation.

Functionalists, however, criticize her arguments on the basis that none of these statements actually refer to the destruction of all Jewish people. Very few, in fact, refer to killing Jews whatsoever. (Functionalism versus intentionalism)

The majority of structuralists do not deny Hitler's anti-Semitism, and can agree that he was a catalyst for the events that occurred. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) They do, however, question his ability for long-term planning as his decision-making was often reluctant and uncertain. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists) Functionalists believe that the responsibility for the Holocaust must be credited to the whole state, and not just Hitler alone. (The Intentionalists and Structuralists)

## Conclusion

\* Decide which of these two schools you believe offers a better account of when and how the Holocaust was carried out.

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