

Intentionalism and Functionalism: Explaining the Holocaust

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Historians the world over have long sought to provide an adequate explanation for the atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler during what is now commonly known as the Holocaust. The debate over its cause has become split in two: some prefer the ‘intentionalist’ explanation, which focuses largely on the idea of Hitler specifically intending to commit genocide, naming him as the most significant figure. Others prefer the ‘functionalist’ position, which maintains that the Holocaust was the result of a chaotic political atmosphere, which was preyed upon by opportunists. The intentionalist position suffers greatly from a lack of adequate evidence, and consequently cannot prove Hitler’s intentions beyond reasonable doubt. On the other hand, the functionalist position is better able to compensate for the lack of evidence, and thus provides a more solid historical explanation for the Holocaust.

As one of the most horrific occurrences in modern history, the Holocaust has perplexed many who attempt to ascertain why any human being would bring such cruelty upon others. In determining the unfolding of the Holocaust, historians have naturally attempted to turn to evidence of Hitler’s intentions, coupled with the actions of other prominent Nazi leaders. However, this has proved a complex task because of the destruction of considerable ‘physical and documentary evidence’ indicating Hitler’s precise intentions [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. Nevertheless, historians have attempted to overcome this problem with the help of what evidence remains, with focuses on the evolution of Nazi ideology and the changing political atmosphere in Germany. Accordingly, a debate between two schools of thought has been born. Both schools attempt to explain the methods by which the Holocaust developed and they have come to be known as ‘intentionalist’ and ‘functionalist’ respectively.

I The Debate

Timothy Mason developed the terms in an essay written with the aim of drawing focus away from Hitler as the sole explanation of the Holocaust. A functionalist himself, Mason held that it was important to consider the ‘dynamics of Nazi barbarism’ as institutionally and economically motivated, without insisting that Hitler’s will must ‘carry the main burden of explanation’ [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. Mason, in accordance with other functionalists, maintains that it is necessary to examine the factors in the development of the Holocaust on a broader scale, beginning with the economic situation of Germany in the 1930s [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. He argues that multiple social and economic factors led to a chaotic political atmosphere, amidst which opportunists seized the chance to instigate genocidal programs [Mason, 1995, p. 213]. In this sense, functionalists place great significance on the ‘machinery of government and its effect upon decision-making in the Third Reich’ [Mason, 1995, p. 213].

Conversely, intentionalists argue that Hitler and other high-ranking officials launched a ‘murderous war of genocide and destruction of human life’ simply because they desired it [Mason, 1995, p. 213]. They insist that the Holocaust was a result of the ‘distinctive murderous will of the Nazi leadership’ [Mason, 1995, p. 215].

I argue that while the intentionalist position is successful in demonstrating that Hitler possessed a homicidal attitude towards the Jewish people, it suffers significantly from a lack of evidence and thus does not succeed in proving beyond reasonable doubt that Hitler’s hatred of the Jews led directly to genocide. I will show that unless an adequate link is found to exist between Hitler’s hatred and the actual actions of the Nazi party, the functionalist argument provides a more solid historical explanation for the way the Holocaust unfolded.

II The Intentionalist Argument

It has been suggested that it is significantly easier to define the intentionalist argument than the functionalist [Mason, 1995, p. 212]. In general, the argument promotes the idea that the destruction of Jewish people was ‘inspired by Nazi racial ideology’ which resulted from Hitler’s intentional actions [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. As such, intentionalists focus on Hitler as the most significant figure in the instigation of the Holocaust. This is supported by evidence deduced from ‘British decodes of [German] radio transmissions’ that ‘Jews were the principal targets of large-scale Nazi violence against civilians from the start’ [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. Even as early as 1922, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler labelled Jews as a target in suggesting that had thousands of them been killed during World War I, lives of German soldiers may have been saved [Hitler, 1943, p. 679]. Further, in 1936, Hitler prepared the German military for war against Russia in order to eliminate the “250 million Jews”, a figure derived from equating 250 million Bolsheviks with Jews [Hitler, 1939]. Also amongst the limited evidence is Hitler’s announcement in 1939 that if ‘Jewish financers within and outside Europe

should succeed...in plunging the nations...into a war, the result will be...the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe' [Hitler, 1939]. This suggests that from the beginning, Hitler intended to carry out genocide.

Similarly, it is argued that Hitler, along with prominent Nazi leaders, wanted to commit genocide [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. This is demonstrated by examining the early manifestations of 'Weltanschauung', or world view [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. This assists in defining the ultimate goal of the Third Reich as genocidal, as the ideas expressed in the Nazi party's Weltanschauung appear similar to the actual actions taken by Hitler during the war [Mason, 1995, p. 216].

In order to prove Hitler's intentions, historians portray Hitler as an evil, calculating man, which, in the absence of significant concrete evidence as to his intentions, assists in making the argument more convincing. In fact, they dedicate significant effort to combatting the shortage in evidence. They also assert that the roles of Himmler and Goering during the war are significant in proving Hitler's intentions. As early as 1936, Goering announced that Germany would deal with the Jews "one way or another".

A Characterization of Hitler

Many historians portray Hitler as a man who sought only to exact vengeance upon the Jewish people he held responsible for all Germany's hardships during and following WWI. Many argue that a man with Hitler's history of anti-Semitism must undoubtedly have developed the requisite intention for genocide. As a young man, there evolved in Hitler an anti-Semitism that was 'traditionally inspired' and 'racialistic' in form, which he then converted to 'goal-oriented' as his political career grew more significant [Fleming, 1984, p. 29]. As early as 1921, it is held that Hitler desired that the 'Jewish dominion that had afflicted the nation since 1918' be ended [Fleming, 1984, p. 14]. In 1922, Josef Hell claimed that Hitler, in response to a question regarding the fate of the Jewish people responded with a highly graphic account of his brutal intentions [Hell, 1922, p. 5]. However, this argument, despite its seemingly conclusive proof of the likelihood that Hitler intended genocide, is weakened by the fact that all its evidence relies on others' interpretations of Hitler's thoughts and proclamations.

Regardless of any proof of Hitler's intentions, he was not alone in his discriminatory views. Early 20th century Europe was full of similarly minded anti-Semites, thus Hitler's attitude alone is an insufficient explanation for genocide. However, a distinction must be made between Hitler and other

anti-Semites, for while they shared violent views, Hitler was the only one radical enough to initiate genocidal programs.

B Lack of Evidence

In order to pursue the intentionalist position, it has become important for historians to find methods of surmounting the lack of concrete evidence of Hitler's intentions. Many argue that such a dearth does not hinder investigation into Hitler's pre-war intentions. Some even take advantage of it to further characterize Hitler as 'evil'. They suggest that the absence of evidence proves indisputably that Hitler was a deceptive, lying man who would resort to anything to achieve his goal of the destruction of Jews [Weizsäcker, 1950, p. 199]. Fleming, too, persists in his argument that Hitler decided at an early stage to commit genocide and also characterizes Hitler as a secretive man who '[refused] to confide in others', hence the dearth of evidence. Fleming veers slightly towards the functionalist debate in suggesting that other Nazi officials, unaware of Hitler's plans, 'pursued different policies for years' [Fleming, 1984, p. 18]. Fleming takes into account the absence of written evidence and turns instead to Hitler's verbally articulated plans, focusing on his relations with Himmler. He argues that Hitler conveyed his desire for destruction of the Jews to Himmler who, given his role in the party, was then able to 'set in motion the machinery of death' [Fleming, 1984, p. 18].

C Role of Himmler

Like Fleming, many historians support the idea that Himmler was also significantly involved with Nazi plans for genocide. It has been argued that evidence provided by Himmler explicitly depicts Hitler's genocidal intentions. Himmler reported that in 1941 Hitler made an order regarding the irretrievable resolution of the 'Jewish question' saying that 'every Jew that we can lay our hands on is to be destroyed' [Höss, 1995, p. 351]. Himmler and Hitler's interactions are held to be significant in demonstrating the progression of Hitler's intentions. As leader of the SS, Himmler greatly assisted it to be come 'a racial-ideological elite'. He assisted in promoting racial superiority throughout Germany by instigating 'racial entrance requirements for members' prior to the beginning of World War II (WWII), which demonstrates that from the outset of Hitler's political life, he intended racial discrimination within Germany [Fleming, 1984, p. 34]. This entire argument is severely weakened for two reasons. Firstly, there is the fact that any testimony provided by Himmler may

be considered unreliable, given the high likelihood of him attempting to offload his responsibility [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. Secondly, the aforementioned unreliability of Himmler's evidence means that there is not a sufficient link between Hitler's negative attitude towards Jews and his decision to commit genocide.

D Flexibility of Intentionalism

The intentionalist argument does, however, allow for varied interpretations. It makes room for arguments examining a variety of time periods, and is not so structured as to hinder progressive theories. Some historians focus on Hitler's genocidal intentions as being developed prior to the war, while some view it as originating during the war. Browning maintains that Hitler's specific intentions were the most significant cause of the Holocaust, but suggests that the decision was not defined until mid-1941 [Browning, 1985, p. 22]. He also suggests that while Hitler did indeed eventually develop an intention to commit genocide, this was not 'high on [his] agenda early in the war' [Browning, 1985, p. 22]. This is a demonstration of the flexibility of the intentionalist position that, in its flexibility and thus wider scope of evidence, asserts a more convincing argument.

E Criticisms of Intentionalism

Possibly the most evident criticism of the intentionalist argument relates to difficulties experienced in terms of proving that Hitler's genocidal intentions were solely responsible for the Holocaust. The lack of conclusive evidence leads to a more vague interpretation of Hitler's intentions, as it is highly necessary to demonstrate a link between his view of the Jewish people and his genocidal intentions, without which the argument is futile [Mason, 1995, p. 220]. Conversely, it could be argued that the lack of evidence is suffered by both sides of the debate and is thus not a significantly adequate reason to not conform to a certain argument. Also, a lack of evidence does not necessarily mean that specific events did not occur, a fact that appears to still be incomprehensible to some functionalists.

Breitman argues that it is incorrect to look generally at Hitler's political ideology prior to WWII, link such evidence with speeches made during the war regarding the destruction of the Jews, and then claim that this is direct evidence of Hitler's intentions [Breitman, 1991, p. 25]. He suggests that this is too broad a view, and does not allow for a nuanced examination of other aspects of Hitler's asserted intentions including relocation of Jews [Breitman, 1991, p. 25].

III Functionalist Argument

Functionalists maintain that at the beginning of WWII, Hitler and his officials had not made any decisions as to how to approach the 'Jewish Problem' [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. In fact, it is argued by many that Hitler's main goal was in fact economically focused [Mason, 1995, p. 215]. The 'cumulative radicalization' of Nazi policy that ultimately led to genocide was a result of the 'way in which the Nazi leadership conceived of political power' [Mommsen, 1976, p. 179, Mason, 1995, p. 214]. Functionalists depict this as a multiple step process, beginning with the ascendancy of Hitler as the sole leader of Germany, followed by the political void created as a result of his weakness and his subsequent manipulation by other Nazi leaders, and finishing with the achievement of the Nazi party's 'National Socialist' goal.

A Political Transformation

According to the functionalist argument, policy is the key to determining the unfolding of the Holocaust. Looking at original Nazi policy, it can be ascertained that fundamentally, the leadership in the Third Reich '[strove] towards politics without administration' [Mommsen, 1976, p. 179]. Hitler, and prominent Nazi leaders such as Himmler and Goebbels, saw the characteristics of an administratively focused political organism as 'constraints on their power' [Mason, 1995, p. 214]. To avoid this, the leaders sought to instigate inadequate policies, in the sense that they 'disrupted existing policies... and had unforeseen administrative and political results', which led to a later construction of 'further ill-considered decisions' including the Polish occupation policies [Mason, 1995, p. 214].

The disintegration of the Nazi government into 'increasingly ill-coordinated special task-forces', with a clear lack of coordination between ministers, resulted in increased powers being awarded to Hitler as the sole leader of Germany [Mason, 1995, p. 214]. Division within the Nazi party was exacerbated by the fact that Hitler discouraged collaboration between members of the party, as he regularly created 'new organs of state', leadership of which was given to 'men who were loyal to/dependent upon him' [Mason, 1995, p. 215].

B Weakness of Hitler

Hitler's weakness as a leader contributed to the poisonous political situation in Germany prior to WWII. It both constricted 'the regime's freedom of action' and led other prominent Nazi leader's to assume excessively powerful positions [Mason,

1995, p. 215]. His fear of diminishing his popularity through unpopular decisions resulted in government inaction with regards to policy-making. This meant Hitler's power as leader of Germany was reduced, as the scope of his policies was narrow. Further to this, Hitler's attitude towards other leaders within the Nazi party also weakened his leadership powers. His 'deference to the senior leaders', coupled with his unrelenting trust of their political instincts was crucial in exacerbating his inability to efficiently and effectively exercise 'government policymaking procedures' [Mason, 1995, p. 215]. As a result, space was left for high-ranking officials to influence political decisions. Hitler encouraged this power, as he gave them significant freedom of reign, including granting their requests for jurisdictional extension [Mason, 1995, p. 215].

C Role of Powerful Officials

This leads to the idea that the weakness of Hitler's power meant that those who were responsible for the Holocaust's initiation (namely other high-ranking officials within the Nazi Party) acted independently of Hitler [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. These leaders were guided by racial ideology, and merely saw Jews as enemies in a 'practical sense', in terms of enemies who were preventing them from achieving their goal [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. The powerful officials were not an united, organized group of politicians with a range of common goals. Rather, there existed considerable internal tension within the government, with prominent leaders focusing solely on their respective jurisdictions [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. However, the various officials were united in one crucial goal: 'making Germany... more National Socialist' [Mason, 1995, p. 216].

D National Socialist Goals

The vagueness of the Nazi party's 'National Socialist' goal led to the radicalization of policy, which inevitably resulted in genocide. The goal was vague, and there is no evidence of any decisive steps outlined by the party as to its achievement [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. It is likely that a general agreement was made that the best way to address the aim was to generically seek 'persecution of the designated enemies of the cause' [Mason, 1995, p. 216]. The absence of an explicit and practical goal led to issues being treated in the most radical of ways, as these were the 'most National Socialist', and it was by these means that prominent Nazi leaders, compensating for Hitler's reticence to formulate unpopular policy, could create some semblance of policy goals [Mason, 1995, p. 216].

Such resorting to political improvisation due to a lack of policy 'rested upon the deployment of extreme violence' [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. The Nazi leadership found itself responsible for 'territories with large Jewish populations', thus enemies of the cause, and as such they 'improvised... separate "solutions" that became increasingly murderous' [Draper, 1999, p. 14]. This idea is supported by functionalist Schleunes who suggests that between 1933-1939, Nazi policy regarding persecution of Jews varied greatly, even in terms of restraining violence, and involved the introduction of 'one piece of legislation after another' [Schleunes, 1970, p. 261]. The fact that it was the actions of prominent Nazi leaders other than Hitler that defined Nazi policy entails that Hitler was not necessarily the 'self-conscious and purposeful author' of the violent policies.

E Criticisms of Functionalism

Many intentionalists argue that the functionalist argument is inadequate as it allows Hitler to be relieved of some responsibility, given that direction of focus away from his specific will. However, as asserted by Mason, the functionalist argument does not involve a denial of Hitler as a 'morally responsible political leader who made choices which were inspired by distinctive malevolent intention' but rather that a focus on his will alone is insufficient for explaining such genocide [Mason, 1995, p. 220].

Some anti-functionalists suggest that functionalist arguments not only diminish Hitler's responsibility for the Holocaust but also underrates 'the capacity of Nazi leaders for premeditated evil' and, contrary to the view accepted by society at large, that the regime was not as horrific as it is known to have been [Mason, 1995, p. 217]. However, it is necessary to consider whether we are too careful of 'underrating' the Holocaust to the point where we are unable to adequately determine its origins, and are thus historically hindered. Historians must be wary of developing a leaning towards the intentionalist view out of a desire to lay blame on those commonly viewed as brutal and inhumane. This could lead to historians blinding themselves to other explanations.

Functionalists themselves find their own argument complicated, due to difficulties in clearly replacing the notion of Hitler intending the Holocaust with another plausible explanation. Historians have been demonstrably capable of discovering evidence showing that some 'Nazi officials... had no inkling of a master plan for the Jews' and that within the party there were examples of opposition to mass murder' [Breitman, 1991, p. 25]. Aside from this, however, functionalists are conflicted in terms of deciding whether a plan was developed at all, or

if it followed ‘critical initiatives’ on the part of the Nazi leadership [Breitman, 1991, p. 26]. Similarly, Breitman highlights the fact that, in writing about Hitler’s crimes, various historians neglect to specify when the crimes were committed, and succeed only in proving Hitler’s significant role in them [Breitman, 1991, p. 27].

As suggested earlier, functionalists must also be wary of their interpretations of the lack of concrete evidence regarding discussions of the extermination of the Jews. Mommsen’s argument that the lack of evidence of such discussion indicates its complete absence is shallow and does not demonstrate a nuanced approach to the way Nazi leaders made decisions [Mommsen, 1991, p. 110].

IV Reichstag Fire

The two most prominent interpretations of this event exemplify both sides of the intentionalist/functionalist debate. It is an example of how the absence of reliable evidence as to the origins of the fire resulted in the development of separate arguments. An examination of this event assists in proving which of the schools of thought are more successful in explaining Holocaust-related events and, by consequence, the origins of the Holocaust. On 27th February 1933, the Reichstag building was set on fire [Tigar and Mage, 2009, p. 32]. Following this, Germany saw a wave of mass arrests of prominent people including ‘Communist leaders and Reichstag deputies... Social Democrats, leading left-wing intellectuals, and trade union leaders’ [Tigar and Mage, 2009, p. 32]. In 1934, prominent communist Marinus Van des Lubbe was executed for having been found responsible for the fire [Tigar and Mage, 2009, p. 32]. To this day, however, his execution remains controversial and as does the identity of the arsonist.

The intentionalist argument rests on the idea that the arsonist was a Nazi, which supports the view that the Holocaust originated from ‘evil’ intentions on the part of Nazi leaders. Intentionalists advocate that the fire was part of the Nazi plan to firmly establish a dictatorship [Mason, 1995, p. 217]. It was necessary in paving the way for the achievement of the party’s goals. Conversely, the functionalist argument relies on the Reichstag fire’s arsonist not being a Nazi. Rather, functionalists argue that the fire was a demonstration of the human ability to act with ‘violent improvisation’ and ‘seize that main chance regardless of wider consequences’ [Mason, 1995, p. 217]. Here it is evident that the functionalist position benefits from the lack definitive proof and can even take advantage of it. Without proof that a Nazi was responsible for the fire, functionalists are more capable of providing a convincing argument.

V Conclusion

Ultimately, the intentionalist argument as a historical explanation is highly favourable as a result of its flexibility and the fact that it conforms to the most popular societal view of Hitler. However, the functionalist position does not rely solely on inconclusive evidence, as the intentionalist position largely does, and despite a wealth of criticisms, a more convincing argument based on the evidence at hand. Furthermore, functionalism is aided by the fact that genocide is not necessarily contingent on finding a ‘smoking gun’ document ordering the destruction of a people. Rather, systematic attacks on a target group’s essential foundations are enough.

Thus, functionalism may be seen as the most accurate depiction of the origins of the Holocaust.

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