

**Functionalism v. intentionalism** is a [historiographical](#) debate about the origins of [the Holocaust](#) as well as most aspects of the [Third Reich](#), such as foreign policy. The debate on the origins of the Holocaust centers on essentially two questions:

- Was there a master plan on the part of [Adolf Hitler](#) to launch the Holocaust? Intentionalists argue there was such a plan, while functionalists argue there was not.
- Did the initiative for the Holocaust come from above with orders from Adolf Hitler or from below within the ranks of the [German](#) bureaucracy? Although neither side disputes the reality of the Holocaust, nor is there serious dispute over the premise that Hitler (as [Führer](#)) was personally responsible for encouraging the [anti-Semitism](#) that allowed the Holocaust to take place, intentionalists argue the initiative came from above, while functionalists contend it came from lower ranks within the bureaucracy.

The terms were coined in a 1981 essay by the British [Marxist](#) historian [Timothy Mason](#).<sup>[1]</sup> Notable functionalists have included [Raul Hilberg](#), [Christopher Browning](#), [Hans Mommsen](#), [Martin Broszat](#), and [Zygmunt Bauman](#). Notable intentionalists have included [Andreas Hillgruber](#), [Karl Dietrich Bracher](#), [Klaus Hildebrand](#), [Eberhard Jäckel](#), [Richard Breitman](#), and [Lucy Dawidowicz](#).

## Origins of the debate

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The search for the origins of the Holocaust began almost as soon as [World War II](#) ended. At the [Nuremberg War Crimes Trials](#) of 1945–6, the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question in Europe" was represented by the prosecution as part of long-term plan on the part of the Nazi leadership going back to the foundations of the [Nazi Party](#) in 1919. Subsequently, most historians subscribed to what would be today considered to be the extreme intentionalist interpretation. Starting in the late 1960s with the publication of such work as [Martin Broszat's](#) *The Hitler State* in 1969 and [Karl Schleunes'](#) *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* in 1970, a number of historians challenged the prevailing interpretation and suggested there was no master plan for the Holocaust. In the 1970s, advocates of the intentionalist school of thought were known as "the straight road to Auschwitz" camp or as the "programmeists", because they insisted that Hitler was fulfilling a programme. Advocates of the functionalist school were known as "the twisted road to Auschwitz" camp or as the "structuralists", because of their insistence that it was the internal power structures of the Third Reich that led to the Holocaust.

In 1981, the British historian [Timothy Mason](#) published an essay entitled "Intention and Explanation" that was in part an attack on the scholarship of [Karl Dietrich Bracher](#) and [Klaus Hildebrand](#), both of whom Mason accused of focusing too much on [Adolf Hitler](#) as an explanation of the Holocaust. In this essay, Mason called the followers of "the twisted road to Auschwitz"/structuralist school "functionalists" because of their belief that the Holocaust arose as part of the functioning of the Nazi

state, while the followers of "the straight road to Auschwitz"/programmeist school were called "intentionalists" because of their belief that it was Hitler's intentions alone that explained the Holocaust. The terms "intentionalist" and "functionalist" have largely replaced the previous terms used to signify the conflicting schools of thought.

## Debate

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Those historians who take an intentionalist line, like [Andreas Hillgruber](#), argue that everything that happened after [Operation Barbarossa](#) was part of a masterplan he credited Hitler with developing in the 1920s. Hillgruber wrote in his 1967 book *Germany and the Two World Wars* that for Hitler:

The conquest of European Russia, the cornerstone of the continental European phase of his program, was thus for Hitler inextricably linked with the extermination of these "bacilli", the Jews. In his conception they had gained dominance over Russia with the Bolshevik Revolution. Russia thereby became the center from which a global danger radiated, particularly threatening to the Aryan race and its German core. To Hitler, Bolshevism meant the consummate rule of Jewry, while democracy – as it had developed in Western Europe and Weimar Germany – represented a preliminary stage of Bolshevism, since the Jews there won a leading, if not yet a dominant, influence. This racist component of Hitler's thought was so closely interwoven with the central political element of his program, the conquest of European Russia, that Russia's defeat and the extermination of the Jews were – in theory as later in practice – inseparable for him. To the aim of expansion *per se*, however, Hitler gave not racial, but political, strategic, economic and demographic underpinnings".<sup>[2]</sup>

The German historian Helmut Krausnick argued that:

What is certain is that the nearer Hitler's plan to overthrow Russia as the last possible enemy on the continent of Europe approached maturity, the more he became obsessed with an idea—with which he had been toying as a "final solution" for a long time—of wiping out the Jews in the territories under his control. It cannot have been later than March 1941, when he openly declared his intention of having the political commissars of the Red Army shot, that he issued his secret decree—which never appeared in writing though it was mentioned verbally on several occasions—that the Jews should be eliminated.<sup>[3]</sup>

Streim wrote in response that Krausnick had been taken in by the line invented after the war to reduce the responsibility of the [Einsatzgruppen](#) leaders brought to trial.<sup>[4]</sup> [Klaus Hildebrand](#) wrote that:

In qualitative terms, the executions by shooting were no different from the technically more efficient accomplishment of the 'physical final solution' by gassing, of which they were a prelude.<sup>[5]</sup>

Against the intentionalist interpretation, functionalist historians like [Martin Broszat](#) argued that the lower officials of the Nazi state had started exterminating people on their own initiative.<sup>[6]</sup> Broszat argued that the Holocaust began "bit by bit" as German officials stumbled into genocide.<sup>[7]</sup> Broszat argued that in the fall of 1941 German officials had begun "improvised" killing schemes as the "simplest" solution to the "Jewish Question".<sup>[8]</sup> In Broszat's opinion, Hitler subsequently approved of the measures initiated by the lower officials and allowed the expansion of the Holocaust from Eastern Europe to all of Europe.<sup>[9]</sup> In this way, Broszat argued that the *Shoah* was not begun in response to an order, written or unwritten, from Hitler but was rather "a way out of the blind alley into which the Nazis had manoeuvred themselves".<sup>[10]</sup> The American historian [Christopher Browning](#) has argued that:

Before the invasion, the *Einsatzgruppen* were not given explicit orders for the total extermination of Jews on Soviet territory. Along with the general incitement to an ideological and racial war, however, they were given the general task of liquidating "potential" enemies. Heydrich's much-debated directive of 2 July 1941 was a minimal list of those who had to be liquidated *immediately*, including all Jews in state and party positions. It is very likely, moreover, that the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders were told of the *future* goal of a *Judenfrei* [Jew-free] Russia through systematic mass murder.<sup>[10]</sup>

By contrast, the Swiss historian Philippe Burrin argues that such a decision was not made before August 1941 at the earliest, pointing to orders given by Himmler on 30 July 1941 to the 2nd SS Cavalry Regiment and the [SS Cavalry Brigade](#) operating in the [Pripyat Marshes](#) in the [Pripyat operation](#) calling for the murder of male Jews only while the Jewish women and children were to be driven into the Marshes.<sup>[11]</sup> Browning argues that sometime in mid-July 1941 Hitler made the decision to begin general genocide owing to his exhilaration over his victories over the Red Army, whereas Burrin contends that the decision was made in late August 1941 owing to Hitler's frustration over the slowing down of the Wehrmacht.<sup>[11]</sup> Kershaw argues that the dramatic expansion in both the range of victims and the intensity of the killings after mid-August 1941 indicates that Hitler issued an order to that effect, most probably a verbal order conveyed to the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders through either Himmler or Heydrich.<sup>[12]</sup> It remains unclear whether that was a decision made on Hitler's own initiative motivated only by his own anti-Semitic prejudices, or (impressed with the willingness and ability of *Einsatzgruppe A* to murder Jewish women and children) ordered that the other three *Einsatzgruppen* emulate *Einsatzgruppe A*'s bloody example.

The Canadian historian Erich Haberer has contended that the "Baltic flashpoint of genocide", as the killings committed by *Einsatzgruppe A* between July–October 1941 are known to historians, were the key development in the evolution of Nazi anti-Semitic policy that resulted in the Holocaust.<sup>[13]</sup> The Baltic area witnessed both the most extensive and intense killings of all the *Einsatzgruppen* with 90,000–100,000 Jews killed between July and October 1941, which led to the almost total destruction of the Jewish communities in that area.<sup>[14]</sup> Haberer maintains that the "Baltic flashpoint of genocide" occurred at time when the other Nazi plans for a "territorial final solution" such as

the [Madagascar Plan](#) were unlikely to occur, and thus suggested to the Nazi leadership that genocide was indeed "feasible" as a "final solution to the Jewish Question".<sup>[13]</sup>

## Positions[\[edit\]](#)

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### Extreme intentionalist interpretation[\[edit\]](#)

Extreme intentionalists believe that Hitler definitely had plans for the Holocaust by 1924, if not earlier. Dawidowicz argued that Hitler already decided upon the Holocaust no later than by 1919. To support her interpretation, Dawidowicz pointed to numerous extreme anti-Semitic statements made by Hitler. Criticism has centered on the fact that none of these statements refer to killing the entire Jewish people; indeed, very few refer to killing Jews at all. Only once in [Mein Kampf](#) does Hitler ever refer to killing Jews when he states that if only 12,000 to 15,000 Jews had been gassed instead of German soldiers in [World War I](#), then "the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain." Given that *Mein Kampf* is 694 pages long, Dawidowicz's critics contend, she makes too much of one sentence. [Daniel Goldhagen](#) went further, suggesting that popular opinion in Germany was already sympathetic to a policy of Jewish extermination before the Nazi party came to power. He asserts in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* that Germany enthusiastically welcomed the persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime in the period 1933–39.

### Moderate intentionalist interpretation[\[edit\]](#)

Moderate intentionalists such as Richard Breitman believe that Hitler had decided upon the Holocaust sometime in the late 1930s and certainly no later than 1939 or 1941. This school makes much of Hitler's "Prophecy Speech" of January 30, 1939 before the [Reichstag](#) where Hitler stated if "Jewish financiers" started another world war, then "...the result would be the annihilation of the entire Jewish race in Europe." The major problem with this thesis, as [Yehuda Bauer](#) points out, is that though this statement clearly commits Hitler to genocide, he made no effort after delivering this speech to have it carried out. Furthermore, [Ian Kershaw](#) has pointed out that there are several diary entries by [Joseph Goebbels](#) in late 1941, in which Goebbels writes that "the Führer's prophecy is coming true in a most terrible way." The general impression one gets is that Goebbels is quite surprised that Hitler was serious about carrying out the threat in the "Prophecy Speech."

### Extreme functionalist interpretation[\[edit\]](#)

Extreme functionalists such as [Götz Aly](#) believe that the Nazi leadership had nothing to do with initiating the Holocaust and that the entire initiative came from the lower ranks of the German bureaucracy. This philosophy is what is known as the [bottom-up approach of the Holocaust](#). Aly has made much of documents from the bureaucracy of the German Government-General of Poland arguing that the population of [Poland](#) would have to decrease by 25% to allow the Polish economy to grow. Criticism centers on the idea that this explanation does not really show why the Nazis would deport Jews from [France](#) and the [Netherlands](#) to death camps in Poland if it was Poland the Nazis

were concerned with, and why the Jews of Poland were targeted instead of the random sample of 25% of the Polish population. Additional criticism of functionalism points out that Hitler and other Nazi leaders delayed railcars providing supplies to front line troops in the Soviet Union so that Jews could be deported by rail from the USSR to death camps thus demonstrating the pursuit of genocidal policies over pragmatic wartime actions.

## Moderate functionalist interpretation[\[edit\]](#)

Moderate functionalists, such as [Karl Schleunes](#) and [Christopher Browning](#), believe that the rivalry within the unstable Nazi power structure provided the major driving force behind the Holocaust. Moderate functionalists believe that the Nazis aimed to expel all of the Jews from Europe, but only after the failure of these schemes did they resort to genocide. This is sometimes referred to as the "crooked path" to genocide.

## Synthesis[\[edit\]](#)

A number of scholars such as [Arno J. Mayer](#), [Yehuda Bauer](#), [Ian Kershaw](#) and [Michael Marrus](#) have developed a synthesis of the functionalist and intentionalist schools. They have suggested the Holocaust was a result of pressures that came from both above and below and that Hitler lacked a master plan, but was the decisive force behind the Holocaust. The phrase 'cumulative radicalisation' is used in this context to sum up the way extreme rhetoric and competition among different Nazi agencies produced increasingly extreme policies, as fanatical bureaucratic underlings put into practice what they believed Hitler would have approved based on his widely disseminated speeches and propaganda. This phenomenon is referred to more generally in social psychology as [groupshift](#).

Given the fact that scholars have written so much in relation to Nazi Germany, Richard Bessel asserts that, "The result is a much better informed, much more detailed and more nuanced picture of the Nazi regime, and most serious historians of the Nazi regime now are to some extent both 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists'- insofar as those terms still can be used at all."<sup>[15]</sup> While some historians may remain entrenched on this subject, there is no unified causal theory to explain one of the greatest crimes in history.

## See also[\[edit\]](#)

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- [Historikerstreit](#) ("Historians' Dispute")
- [Holocaust Denial](#)
- [Nazi foreign policy debate](#)
- [Sonderweg](#)

## References[\[edit\]](#)

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1. [Jump up^](#) Browning 1986, p. 343 n1: "The terms 'intentionalist' and 'functionalist' were coined by Tim Mason, 'Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism,' *Der Führerstaat: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (Stuttgart, 1981), 21-40. Prime examples of the two interpretive approaches can be seen in the articles by Klaus Hildebrand and Hans Mommsen in the same volume."
2. [Jump up^](#) Hillgruber 1981, p. 51.
3. [Jump up^](#) Marrus 2000, p. 39.
4. [Jump up^](#) Streim 1989, pp. 439–440.
5. [Jump up^](#) Marrus 2000, p. 44.
6. [Jump up^](#) Broszat 1985, p. 399–404.
7. ^ Jump up to:<sup>a b</sup> Marrus 2000, p. 41.
8. [Jump up^](#) Broszat 1985, p. 408.
9. [Jump up^](#) Broszat 1985, pp. 408–413.
10. [Jump up^](#) Rees 1997, pp. 194–195.
11. ^ Jump up to:<sup>a b</sup> Rees 1997, p. 195.
12. [Jump up^](#) Kershaw 2008, p. 259.
13. ^ Jump up to:<sup>a b</sup> Haberer 2001, p. 65.
14. [Jump up^](#) Haberer 2001, p. 70.
15. [Jump up^](#) Richard Bessel, "Functionals vs. Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years on or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?" *German Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2003): p. 16.

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