

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

POPULATION, ECONOMICS AND GENOCIDE: ALY AND HEIM VERSUS ALL-COMERS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE HOLOCAUST*

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It is no wonder that Götz Aly and Susanne Heim have caused a stir. Their book, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* has the power to shock.¹ In some 500 sides of thoroughly documented text, judeocide emerges as a product of neither impenetrable barbarism nor impersonal institutional functioning. Our own world is implicated as the authors lay bare what they see as ‘the connections between the politics of modernization and the politics of Auschwitz’.² The uniquely human capacities of conscious intent, long-term planning and utilitarian motive all make for a particularly premeditated mass murder. And there are more bitter pills to swallow. This was not just a crime without parallel; it was not even the whole picture. For Aly and Heim the Final Solution was just one aspect of a complete Malthusian policy to reduce population numbers throughout the whole of eastern Europe.

At the root of policy planning for murder, Aly and Heim unveil *Bevölkerungsökonomie* (the economics of population). Even before the nazis seized power, academics of all degrees of respectability had analysed both over-population in, and the handicap it implied to the industrialization of, all the countries to the east of Germany.³ With the national socialists in power, just such ‘thinkers’ came to staff the various ‘think tanks’ which were *de rigueur* for just about every nazi big-wig. The authors believe that in this capacity, the ‘experts’ influenced government policy.⁴ Looking beyond imperial conquest, the aims of nazis and population economists gelled around the restructuring the eastern populations to maximize their economic efficiency, productivity and prospects for development.

According to this analysis, therefore, during the Second World War racism and terror became the handmaidens of conscious change towards modern ends.⁵ The war in the east was orientated deliberately towards an ultimately modernizing type of conquest – one in which the numbers of Slavs living in overpopulated areas would be reduced dramatically. Starvation of the enemy was a deliberate policy meant to lay the

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¹ G. Aly and S. Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung* (Fischer, 1993). Reviews include C. Browning, ‘German technocrats, Jewish labour and the final solution: a reply to Götz Aly and Susanne Heim’ in *The path to genocide. Essays on the launching of the final solution* (CUP, 1992) and M. Housden, ‘Racism and the Third Reich’, *Historical Journal*, xxxvii, 4 (1994).

² Aly and Heim, *Vordenker*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 91–100.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 11–12.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 15–16.

basis of long-term economic efficiency.⁶ And if the Jews suffered, then it was part of this scheme, a practical issue of economic rationality. Indeed Aly and Heim even float the idea that annihilation may have been stimulated by problems encountered with food supplies as early as 1941 rather than due to racial factors *per se*.⁷

The thesis is provocative, and Dan Diner has been provoked. There are, he believes, methodological problems with *Vordenker der Vernichtung*.⁸ Aly and Heim are said to be uncritical in their analysis of original documents. Taking these at face value, the authors fall prey to the 'social semantics of the sources'.⁹ They are also too ready to accept that 'the more material a motive appears, so much the more believable the intention'.¹⁰ As a result, they miss entirely the depth of traditional anti-semitism which lay behind the arguments of the theorists themselves. Aly and Heim are left dealing with just a set of bureaucratic rationalizations rather than the real motives underpinning policy decisions.

In fact Diner makes a good case for believing that national socialism shifted entirely the foundations of economics. On the one hand, pre-existing moral boundaries between the claims of this discipline and society were destroyed as a prerequisite to the achievement of nazi aims. On the other hand, and more importantly, the very economic constant of 'the person' was transformed and relativized. Not just a single productive unit, the economic individual became conditioned by racial heritage. After all, as we are reminded, no one was ever killed for economic reasons alone. The murder of the 'unproductive' and 'superfluous' always had more to do with biology than strict cost-benefit analyses.¹¹ It was no mere chance that specifically the Jews were the first to feel the effects of any 'modernizing' tendencies. Ultimately the nazis embarked on not just a series of economically determined individual murders but racially conditioned genocide.

Diner criticises Aly and Heim, therefore, for treating population policy as it was *theorized* rather than *as it actually was*; but Götz Aly will not have this. In reply, he reiterates that from 1938 in particular planners were engrossed in work in which the Jewish question was intermeshed with more general demographic considerations.¹² For example, in October 1939, Dr Theodor Shieder was working on a memorandum about the creation of a 'left-over' Polish state dependent on the removal of Jews from the area and an intensification of agricultural production.¹³ Under conditions of war, Aly believes planners such as this were unleashed. In any event, he restates the thesis that the '*Neuordnung Europas*' was to be accomplished through two programmes of genocide which were intimately related in step-wise fashion – namely the 'entire solution of the European Jewish question' and the 'reduction of the Slavic masses'.¹⁴

So was the Holocaust the product of some modernizing and general instrumental rationality or a uniquely anti-semitic action? To give a fresh perspective to the debate, it is useful to look at events as they surrounded the Governor General of the Government General 1939–45, Hans Frank. Although certainly not involved in the waging of war against Russia's Slavs, as leader of an occupied territory in what had been southern Poland, he both dealt frequently with at least some of Aly and Heim's planners and also was implicated in racial policy as it actually developed towards the

⁶ Ibid. pp. 385 ff.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 391–2.

⁸ D. Diner, 'Rationalisierung und Methode. Zu einem neuen Erklärungsversuch der "Endlösung"', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 40 (1992), 359–82.

⁹ Ibid. p. 365.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 361.

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 367–72.

¹² G. Aly, 'Erwiderung auf Dan Diner', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 41 (1993), 623–35.

¹³ Ibid. pp. 629–30.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 635.

Poles and Jews in his lands.¹⁵ What he experienced is well documented in 38 volumes of official diaries.¹⁶

Without doubt Diner's identification of a new economics is in harmony with the character of the state Frank fashioned after Germany's swift military victory over Poland in Autumn 1939. In his apartheid order, both social opportunity and labour function were conditioned by perceived biology. Naturally leadership was the German role. To the Poles fell at least their own judicial system and the possibility of a technological secondary education. Practical manpower shortages meant that many Poles were also allowed to retain jobs in the civil service and on the railways. By and large, however, the Polish population was seen as a labour reservoir for German needs. In response to the requirements of wartime, as early as December 1939, 30,000 Polish workers were sent to the Reich. The aim was eventually to provide a million.¹⁷ To ensure their compliance, from even the early months, Poles consistently were the victims of atrocious 'pacification' measures.¹⁸ None the less there remained no doubt that the Jews were a significant way beneath them in the population hierarchy. Uniquely stigmatized, from November 1939 they were expected to wear white armbands bearing a blue star of David. They were allowed to organize only primary education, were allotted no independent judicial system and faced abominable ghetto conditions. Just to underline their perfectly separate status, their labour duties had to be kept strictly separate from those of the Poles.¹⁹

So how was the future of this system envisaged? Taking the early ideas first, as far as the Poles were concerned, the most likely option was a dramatic increase in population density. The plan was to transport all of the Poles from the formerly Polish territories now incorporated fully into the Reich (i.e. Warthegau, Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen and part of Silesia) into the Government General (which was never incorporated fully). As Frank explained it in a speech of January 1941, the *Führer* himself anticipated that this 'overfilling' of his territory with Poles would leave them 'having to seek work in the Reich'. They would become like the 'seasonal labourers' who used to travel from Italy to Germany.²⁰ At this time, the Government General's most likely future was indeed to become a long term labour reservoir for Greater Germany.

Two months later, however, there came a completely new direction. In a couple of speeches delivered in late March 1941, Frank indicated that the Government General ultimately would become 'a German area of life'. Eventually the 12 million Poles of the Government General would be replaced by four to five million Germans, making the area as German as the Rhineland.²¹ The transformation was scheduled for the next 15 to 20 years.²² Although what exactly would be involved here was not explained in any sort of detail, an insight into at least the way the wind was beginning to blow was provided by *Gauleiter* Bracht of Silesia in May. Speaking in the Government General,

¹⁵ For example, Walther Emmerich (Frank's secretary of state for economics) and the *Institut für deutsche Ostforschung* which the Governor General set up himself in Cracow.

¹⁶ A full copy of Hans Frank's *Diensttagebuch* (hereafter DTB) is located in the *Bundesarchiv*, Koblenz (*Bestand* R 52 II) although in due course it will be moved to Potsdam. An edited collection of the diary has been provided by W. Jacobmeyer (ed.), *Das Diensttagebuch des Deutschen Generalgouverneur in Polen 1939–45* (DVA Stuttgart, 1975), but it is not perfect. See R. Breitman *The architect of genocide. Himmler and the final solution* (Bodley Head, 1991), p. 282, footnote 139.

¹⁷ DTB, R 52 II/174 14 December 1939.

¹⁸ C. Klessmann, 'Hans Frank: party jurist and Governor General in Poland' in R. Smelser and R. Zitelmann *The nazi elite* (Macmillan, 1993), p. 43.

¹⁹ DTB, R 52 II/177 10 June 1940.

²⁰ DTB, R 52 II/181 19 January 1941.

²¹ DTB, R 52 II/181 26 March 1941.

²² DTB, R 52 II/181 25 March 1941.

and as recorded in Frank's official diary, he explained that in the terms of the job given to him by the *Führer*, he could get rid of everything in Silesia that was not German by means that were both shorter and more painful than resettlement. Bracht also added that to do so would not be right.²³ What was he talking about? If the aim was to germanize Silesia, only mass murder could have been a shorter and more abhorrent option than transportation, and its *possibility* apparently covered all non-German Silesians – Poles and Jews alike. If Bracht was speaking of such extensive options, no doubt a similar remit fell to Frank. In the weeks immediately before Operation Barbarossa, everything was being set up for grabs.

In its essential respects, in fact the situation facing the Jews was much more clear cut than that for the Poles. From an early time Frank regarded them as a temporary problem; at issue was only where their long term future lay. Initially, there was to be a Jewish reservation to the east of the river Weichsel.²⁴ From summer 1940, however, there came from Berlin the idea of transporting the Jews *en masse* to Madagascar.²⁵ In his speech of January 1941, Frank confirmed Hitler's intention of removing all the Jews from both the Reich and the Government General in a foreseeably short time (*in absehbar kurzer Zeit*).²⁶ By late March 1941, yet again indicating a new strategy, he was referring to possible 'warlike developments' (*kriegerische Verwicklungen*) in the east as offering a fresh set of opportunities.²⁷ Now there is considerable debate about how exactly the decision for extermination fits with this outpouring of plans for the resettlement of Jews; but already there may have been some such intent. Richard Breitman, for example, believes Frank was aware of such an option from as early as December 1940, since in a speech of this time the Governor General referred to his Jews as 'lice'. One did not get rid of 'lice' by transporting them somewhere new.²⁸ Bracht's speech of May has already been cited. In any event, by December 1941 (barely six months after Barbarossa had been launched) as far as Frank was concerned, the fate of the Jews in the Government General had been sealed. At a government meeting of that month he stated:

I want to tell you quite openly that one way or another an end must be put to the Jews... [I]f the Jewish ethnic group survives the war in Europe, then this whole war would only represent a partial success... I will start therefore basically from the expectation that they will vanish.²⁹

Accordingly he sent a personal representative to the Wannsee conference (state secretary Dr. Bühler).

So how did the picture develop in the later stages of the war? With the extermination of the Jews well under way, in early December 1942, state secretary Bühler indicated that unless something serious was done about the food situation in the Government General, 2 million Poles would be left without any official provision. They would face ultimate starvation.³⁰ If the aim really did exist at this time to begin to annihilate the Poles as well as Jews, here was a splendid opportunity.

In a speech of 14 December 1942 Hans Frank made clear that a full extent of options were being considered in both the Government General and Berlin.³¹ Although he was typically vague about his precise sources, Frank said that some believed all of the Poles should simply be exterminated (*ausgerottet*), others felt they all should be put to work for Germany, and others again believed those already working for the Reich should be

²³ DTB, R 52 II/183 2 May 1941.

²⁴ DTB, R 52 II/175 5 March 1940.

²⁵ DTB, R 52 II/177 18 May 1940.

²⁶ DTB, R 52 II/181 19 January 1941.

²⁷ DTB, R 52 II/181 26 March 1941.

²⁸ Breitman, *Architect*, p. 144.

²⁹ DTB, R 52 II/240 *Regierungssitzung* of 16 December 1941.

³⁰ DTB, R 52 II/198 7 December 1942.

³¹ DTB, R 52 II/198 14 December 1942.

kept while the surplus ones should be killed. In the context of the food shortage, Frank outlined a set of possible options endorsed by various Reich offices (those of Speer and Sauckel were now named): don't bother to feed the Poles in the Government General (presumably allowing them to die), but let some go to the Reich as labour; take all of the able bodied Poles into the Reich to work; only feed those in the Government General working for the Reich; or maintain just the able bodied Poles in the Government General as a labour reservoir. In fact none of these options was chosen.

In early 1943 Berlin indicated a revised attitude towards the Slavic peoples under occupation. In late February, for example, Frank's diary records the arrival of a circular from Goebbels stating that the previous system of 'extermination (*Ausrottung*), exploitation and discrimination' had to be shelved.³² A month later, in conversation with Frank, General Schindler of the armaments commission criticized the impact that food shortages in the Government General were having on weapons production by Polish workers.³³ The Governor General then mentioned that he had stored up a reserve of 200,000 tonnes of grain. Rather than send it to the Reich (as was expected), he was keeping it to feed his population. During the early summer, Frank decided that as of 1 September 1943, the rations for his Polish workers should be raised to be on a par with those received by Poles in the Warthegau – i.e. 80 per cent of the ration allotted to normal German use.³⁴ By August, Frank was also talking about improving supplies of clothing and shoes.³⁵

A certain (if only relative) 'restraint' towards the Polish population was also evident from Frank's diary in the unlikely context of the SS's Zamosc experiment which was also under way in early 1943. In this district of Lublin, SS and Police Leader Globocnik was acting unilaterally to seize Polish farms for the benefit of resettled *Volksdeutsche*. What was to be done with the farmers, disowned in the process? At a time when the Final Solution was in full swing, annihilation would have been easy enough. In fact, the Polish farmers were resettled – a move which was not without difficult consequences. Frank's diary records irritation on the part of German bureaucrats by the degree of popular uproar which followed the arrival of refugees from Zamosc in new areas.³⁶ This element of the Polish population was being redistributed rather than reduced.

Clearly in 1943 limitations were still on the treatment of Poles. Frank generally explained why in purely pragmatic terms. He argued that under the pressure of war, first and foremost, the Poles had to be kept as a placid labour supply.³⁷ Annihilation would jeopardize the aim. In October he put it slightly differently, explaining that every European was a resource for Germany's use.³⁸ As far as the Poles were concerned, therefore, the practicalities of war actually improved their immediate prospects.

But was this just a temporary expedient? On a number of occasions Frank still hints that something else still lay in the background. In August he stated that:

We all know that this land will become German one day, that we will not tolerate the Polacks here. But the time for that will be when we have won the war.³⁹

In more hysterical fashion, facing the crisis situation of 1944, he threatened that 'once we have won the war, mince-meat can be made of the Poles and Ukrainians'.⁴⁰ In the

³² DTB, R 52 II/201 23 February 1943.

³³ DTB, R 52 II/201 26 March 1943.

³⁴ DTB, R 52 II/202 and 204 12 May 1943 and 19 June 1943.

³⁵ DTB, R 52 II/206 3 August 1943.

³⁶ DTB, R 52 II/203 28 and 29 May 1943.

³⁷ DTB, R 52 II/205 9 July 1943.

³⁸ DTB, R 52 II/208 23 October 1943.

³⁹ DTB, R 52 II/206 2 August 1943.

⁴⁰ Frank's comment cited in A and J. Tusa, *The Nuremberg trial* (Macmillan, 1983), p. 40.

frustration of a lost war, attitudes against the Poles may have been hardening, but even now, as had consistently been the case, the implementation of a final solution in the Slavic question was still to be deferred.

What then was the position of the Jews in 1943? Here there was hardly any flexibility. In a speech of that June, Frank specified that it was not just propaganda to say that they really did still represent the greatest of dangers for Germany.⁴¹ On 2 August, he explained that of the 3½ million Jews who had been in the territory once, only a few work companies were left – all the others had ‘emigrated’ (*ausgewandert*).⁴² He was certain the NSDAP would outlast the Jews. It was pretty clear that this whole population really was in the process of being extinguished as Frank spoke.

When a change came here, it was in the opposite direction to that experienced by the Poles. A hint of what was to happen emerged at a government meeting of 19 October 1943.⁴³ Major general of police Grünwald raised the issue of Jewish concentration camps (*Judenlager*). In the light of a recent break out, these were said to constitute a major security threat. *SS-Oberführer* Bierkamp requested lists of all Jews in camps in the Government General to see how many were actually being used as labourers for the Reich. As he put it, the rest should be ‘deported’ (*abschieben*). There is no reason to believe that Hans Frank had any significant say in what happened next. The police authorities could manage their own affairs and were subject in the first place to Himmler’s fancies. As Christopher Browning’s study of reserve police battalion 101 describes graphically, in a matter of days at the start of November 1943 the Jewish camps of Majdanek, Trawnik and Poniatowa were liquidated.⁴⁴

It is clear, then, that Aly and Heim have highlighted something more generally overlooked. Yes, in the abstract there really was an overall policy scheme which had originated by March 1941 and which came to harness the fates of Poles and Jews to the point of genocide. The plans were indeed to be achieved step-wise. More questionable, however, is what we should really make of this general framework. From the perspective of the Third Reich, was the distinction between Polish and Jewish genocide really only to be explained in terms of practicalities such as timing, numbers to be exterminated and (as Frank himself explained) temporary usefulness of the victims? In truth, this was not the case.

Without question, individuals did exist in the Third Reich who were prepared to try to annihilate Poles as well as Jews in 1943. But for others this idea was not only at odds with the dictates of instrumental rationality, it contradicted too manifestly a belief that Poles in their own right merited better treatment. At the outset of occupation, their place in Frank’s apartheid order had been significantly better than that accorded the Jews. To fill in this picture more clearly still, during at least the early phase of war, Frank went so far as to specify that concern should be payed to Poles since many wanted to help the Germans, that one day they should come to have more confidence in German judges than Polish, that force against them should only be employed in accordance with law and not arbitrarily, indeed that there should not be a war of annihilation against them.⁴⁵ In 1943 they were still deemed Europeans (see above). At the outset, therefore, Frank thought of the Poles as meriting at least a minimal concern.

⁴¹ DTB, R 52 II/204 16 June 1943.

⁴² DTB, R 52 II/206 2 August 1943.

⁴³ DTB, R 52 II/207 19 October 1943.

⁴⁴ C. Browning, *Ordinary men. Reserve police battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 133–42.

⁴⁵ DTB, R 52 II/175, 176 and 177 5 March 1940, 9 April 1940, 25 April 1940 and 25 May 1940.

This starting point never altered so radically that they were put as far beyond the pale as the Jews. In this respect the Poles were the recipients of *some very last vestige* of a moral treatment.

By comparison, from an early point everything was geared up against the Jews to stigmatize them as the most fundamental social darwinian enemies of Germany. They were dehumanized and marginalized in a way far beyond any other population group in the Government General. They were deprived of any moral status. Rapid extermination suited their place in the nazi world view.

As this distinction between Pole and Jew suggests, there was a qualitatively different set of attitudes on the part of those driving the related population policies forward. As such, the two ethnic groups were facing fundamentally different murderous intents. The Jews always had to be dealt with urgently. When referred to publicly, they consistently suffered the most vitriolic vilification. They could not be compromised with. The biological threat they represented could not be allowed to survive the war. They were, indeed, a completely different order of problem. The over-riding rationality in their treatment was primarily to find the most complete and rapid solution to their perceived challenge under the prevailing circumstances. The murder of the Jews, therefore, speaks of a motive mixing atavistic prejudice, irreducible psychosis and ideological fixity.

By contrast, the Polish problem, with inhibitions attached, was never so pressing as to call for an immediate solution. While the Jews consistently faced rapid removal from the German lands, the Poles were granted a lengthy breathing space. They were an economic resource which could be dealt with at leisure and flexibly, if only to allow a lengthy exploitation. While a deteriorating military situation meant death for Jews, it meant life for Poles. Their case failed to inflame quite so many nerves, neuroses or political creeds. Both nazi planning for, and practical dealings with, the Poles were founded on a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis quite alien to the psychotic limitations of social darwinian anti-semitism. As a motive, it burned much less brightly.

So yes, in abstract terms Poles and Jews alike were defined as inferior peoples, and yes, both faced national socialist mass murder. But the plans in fact, were only superficially similar. Beneath the surface of the uniting abstract framework existed something more telling, something discrete in each case. Roughly expressed, it was the difference between dealing with an immediate racial threat and a long term racial burden. So although the final solution may well have represented a precursor to some later annihilation of the Poles, and while it certainly did have consequences for the population structure of eastern Europe, such issues do not really get to the bottom of why the Holocaust took place. Issues of population structures and economic efficiency are pretty much marginal to the tragedy of the Jews. Remove these from sight, and little is taken away from the picture. The goal of eradicating the Jews from Europe, as both the comments of Hans Frank in December 1941 and the frenzy of November 1943 show, was a 'thing in itself'. As such it required no logical, pseudo-modernizing population-economic justification (although if one fitted, it could always be applied). It was much more a matter of paranoid hatred aiming to eradicate a perceived biological threat, the like of which the Poles never represented. Although Auschwitz had implications for population-economics, its *raison d'être* always lay elsewhere.

So what was the connection between the Holocaust and the population planning for the Poles? Obviously, in the light of the discussion so far, we cannot make population economics into the most meaningful dynamic for nazi genocide as it actually happened. It was the other way round. The fanatical drive to solve problems posed by all so-called

inferior people by annihilation rode on the back of the Jewish question. Initially the Government General was to become a reservation of itinerant Polish workers who would benefit the Reich. Their long term future did not become completely bleak until it was already certain that the Jews would be removed once and for all – whether to Madagascar or another world. If everything was up for grabs by May 1941, for the time being at least most people were only ever likely to go along with the most severe option for the most feared and despised people.

Properly understood, certainly in the context of Frank's lands, the Jewish question represented a Rubicon; and it did so in two respects. In concept, anti-semitism drove people, first of all, to the aim of removing entirely the Jews. Only once this idea was established, were intellectual horizons broadened sufficiently for serious consideration of getting rid of other population groups. In practice also it was the Jews who had to be the first targets. In the Government General at least they had to be exterminated before anything quite so cynical and total could be applied against the Poles. In the final analysis, the latter could not even be left to the attrition of food shortages. Whichever way you look at things, it was no mere chance that the genocide of the Jews preceded that of the Poles. A specifically anti-semitic annihilation *had* to be applied before either the theory or practice of a later population-economic counterpart could develop properly.

The case of Hans Frank and the Government General shows, then, that the Third Reich did have a distinct set of policy priorities – deal with the Jewish question first and foremost (indeed as a policy valid in its own right), everything else could follow. But this does not mean that our knowledge of racial policy and planning is anywhere near sufficient. Within the policy paradigm as it unfolded, we definitely need to understand more fully the exact nature of the plots being hatched against Jew and Slav in spring 1941. What precisely lay behind the cryptic comments which Frank and Bracht made in public at this time? And given that Hitler put his name to at least the most visionary decisions, were these the product of his own paranoid mind, or was he paying heed (to whatever degree) to a particular set of planners? It is to the credit of Aly and Heim that not only have they challenged us to assess more critically the full significance of the Holocaust, but also that they have put historiographical themes such as these squarely in front of our eyes.