Introduction to Volume I

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This volume, the first of four in the *Cambridge History of the Holocaust*, has three main aims. First, it offers a brief history of writing about the Holocaust. It does so from different perspectives, outlining not only the evolution of the historiography over time but also some of the central conceptual and methodological questions facing historians of the subject. It then moves from historiography to history, offering a wide-ranging set of reflections on the genocide's longer-term causes and contexts. Finally, it engages with the Holocaust's immediate pre-history, focusing on National Socialist thinking, policy, and institutions, and their international resonance, up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE HOLOCAUST

The historiography of the Holocaust is as old as the Holocaust itself. The work done by Jewish observers reflecting on what was happening from exile or writing under Nazi rule (many left texts behind that they did not live to complete) is remarkable and continues to be influential. Of course, those observers did not necessarily perceive the phenomenon in the terms we would today. Particularly in the Soviet Union, where the war inflicted such unparalleled human losses and material and environmental damage, even for Jews it was the war that was the dominant frame of reference. Yet it was already abundantly clear to them that what they were witnessing was an extraordinary attempt to murder a group of people that had nothing to do with the military campaigns, strictly understood.[1]

[1] We say "strictly understood" because, for the Nazis, the murder of the Jews was synonymous with the military campaign, especially in "the East."

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As Boaz Cohen explores in his essay, the immediate postwar period saw an explosion of studies about the Holocaust's course and character, written by survivors in the temporary centers of early postwar Jewish life.[2] But if the historiography of the Holocaust can claim to have existed for more than eighty years, its development over that period has, as Cohen shows, been far from continuous or consistent. By the end of the 1940s attention had shifted elsewhere, and it would be more than a decade before academic historians began to engage seriously with relevant aspects of Nazi policy, and longer still before the Holocaust as such became a major focus of research. At that point, early Jewish scholarship disappeared from view, remaining submerged for almost half a century.

During the 1960s, historians, above all German historians, conducted very significant research into the Nazi regime, with important implications for our subject, even though, as Jane Caplan notes in her autobiographical essay, the Holocaust tended to hover on the margins. For Nicolas Berg, the historiography of the Holocaust at the time was characterized by *Konkretionsverweigerung*, or a tendency to avoid naming actual crimes and actual perpetrators.[3] Since the late 1970s, and particularly since the 1990s, history writing about the Holocaust has exploded and the literature is by now too extensive to be accessible to any single person. Dan Stone's essay on the more recent historiography of the Holocaust gives a flavor of this diversity. While scholarship is still dominated by work in English and German, the historiography in French, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, and every other language of Europe, as well as in Hebrew, of course, is immense. And even if the extraordinarily large primary-source base is to a large extent available in English translation, no single historian can read the sources in all of the original languages in which they were written, whether Russian or Yiddish, Greek or Norwegian. This volume can thus make no claim to comprehensiveness, but aims to explore some of the principal questions in the field.

[2] L. Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012); M. L. Smith, *The Yiddish Historians and the Struggle for a Jewish History of the Holocaust* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2019); R. Fritz, É. Kovács, and B. Rásky (eds.), *Before the Holocaust Had Its Name: Early Confrontations of the Nazi Mass Murder of the Jews* (Vienna, New Academic Press, 2016); É. Kovács and N. Aleksiun (eds.), *Survivor's Toil* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

[3] N. Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen, Wallstein, 2003), p. 164. See also U. Herbert, 'Holocaust research in Germany: The history and prospects of a difficult discipline', *German Yearbook of Contemporary History* 1 (2016), 17–48. As Herbert notes (pp. 27–28), in the "structuralist" interpretations that became influential in the 1970s and 1980s, "Even the perpetrators were excluded – instead, institutions and structures rather than people appeared responsible for the genocide."

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Of course, it is not only historians who have grappled with the Holocaust. As late as the 1980s the most intense reflections were to be found elsewhere – among political scientists, psychologists, theologians, philosophers, and more. Where those authors – particularly political scientists such as Raul Hilberg or Hannah Arendt – made important contributions to understanding the Holocaust's history, their work is explored in this volume.[4] But the responses in other fields, such as, for example, by Christian and Jewish theologians and religious leaders, while offering profound evidence of the Holocaust's enduring reverberations, did not necessarily illuminate historical understanding of its causes.[5] Chapters on some of these disciplines are therefore deferred to Volume IV, which explores the Holocaust's aftermath. They are, however, not wholly irrelevant for the questions posed in this volume, since they form part of the intellectual and cultural milieu in which historians formulated their ideas, a point we will return to in a moment.

If history writing about the Holocaust fluctuated in intensity, it has also been subject to many changes in form and content. Like all other sub-fields of history, Holocaust historiography has been influenced by trends internal to the discipline itself: the availability of certain sources; borrowings from cognate disciplines; changing views about historical epistemology; intellectual fashions of all sorts. But, like other sub-fields, it has been shaped also by factors external to the discipline: political and social changes; generational changes; and, perhaps most pertinent here, the changing status of the Holocaust in the wider culture, where we see historians reacting to trends in cinema, art, law, testimony collection, or commemoration. With respect to this phenomenon – one that historians are not always as aware of as they might be – it is usually the case that historians are reacting to the zeitgeist rather than the other way around. For that reason, Volumes I and IV should be seen very much as complementary.

Although one can identify certain points of continuity in the historiography of the Holocaust – most notably, the question of the decision-making process for the "Final Solution" – historians' focus has varied markedly, between perpetrators, victims, and "bystanders"; neutral countries or the churches; collaborators and "ordinary people"; ghettos, camps, and

[4] For a recent discussion of social science approaches to the Holocaust, see J. S. Kopstein, J. Subotić, and S. Welch (eds.), *Politics, Violence, Memory: The New Social Science of the Holocaust* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2023).

[5] For a useful reader, see S. T. Katz, S. Biderman, and G. Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

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deportation; microhistories, regions, or nations, depending on changing methodological trends, the availability of documents, and changing understandings of what counts as a historical topic (consider debates about gender and the Holocaust from the 1980s onwards, and the echo of those debates in today's debates about queer history in the context of the Holocaust). As testimony to this methodological innovation, Tim Cole's chapter surveys the way in which space and place have become central concepts in Holocaust research, while Jan Lambertz shows how changing approaches to the Holocaust have drawn on an ever-evolving archive. The first third or so of this volume focuses explicitly on the multiple perspectives, concepts, methods, and challenges posed and confronted by historians of the Holocaust, but in fact all the essays in this volume, and indeed in this Cambridge History, seek explicitly to engage with this extraordinarily compendious and multifaceted historiography.

CAUSES AND GENEALOGIES

It is a fair if rather depressing proposition that the larger and more significant a historical event is, the more historians will disagree in their explanations of it. It is salutary in any case to remember Hannah Arendt's warning against any all-too-deterministic approach to causation, something she saw as inimical to the contingency of human affairs. "Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality," Arendt wrote in "Understanding and Politics", one of her most important essays, "actually denies the subject matter of his own science."[6] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* the last thing Arendt wanted, according to Margaret Canovan, "was to produce a chain of causes that would seem to show that totalitarianism was inevitable."[7] But here, Arendt's stance was a reflection of more than just her general skepticism about historical laws. With the camps very much in her mind as totalitarianism's ultimate expression, Arendt observed that "the very event, the phenomenon,

[6] H. Arendt, 'Understanding and politics (the difficulties of understanding)', in J. Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt* (New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 319. For further discussion, see R. H. King and D. Stone, 'Introduction', in R. H. King and D. Stone (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 13–14.

[7] M. Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (London, Methuen & Co., 1977), 44.

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which we try – and must try – to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding."[8]

Arendt was echoing in more sophisticated form a sensation that confronted observers as soon as revelations about the Nazi murder program began to seep out, namely that what they were witnessing was unprecedented and could not be assimilated into existing categories. It is true that this reaction was in itself *not* unprecedented. As Dirk Moses has argued recently, previous horrors had occasioned similar sensations and claims.[9] But the sense that the Holocaust was distinctively hard to understand or to relate to prior historical phenomena has been enduring. The claim that the Holocaust is unique has been made with an explicitness and fervor that is, well, probably unique.[10] While most *historians* have steered clear of the rather metaphysical question of uniqueness, they have nevertheless not found it easy to classify the Holocaust. Three of the historiographical essays in this volume, by Dirk Moses, Aristotle Kallis, and Mark Roseman, respectively, look at attempts to bring the Holocaust into conversation with broad historical concepts, namely, "genocide," "fascism," and "modernity." In different ways, each shows how claims of the Holocaust's uniqueness have impacted the discipline, sometimes creating unnecessary barriers to comparison, sometimes, as in claims about modernity, paradoxically encouraging efforts to establish the Holocaust's universal significance. These essays and Dan Stone's contribution on "integration" in Holocaust research remind us, in fact, just how much recent scholarship has highlighted the many parallels and intersections between the Holocaust and other violent phenomena.

Not least because of the shock to which it gave rise, the Holocaust has invited a multiplicity of interpretations, influenced also by the disciplinary and cultural shifts noted above.[11] While many authors saw the radicalism of Nazi antisemitism as the genocide's most significant cause, in the 1980s a new body of thought emerged that saw antisemitism as just one part of a much broader racial agenda, whose radicalism and comprehensiveness cried out for explanation. Other interpretations stressed not the Nazi originality of thought, but the violence that characterized both their means and ends, and focused their explanatory efforts there. From the early years of

[8] Arendt, 'Understanding and politics', p. 310.
[9] A. D. Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[10] G. Rosenfeld, 'The politics of uniqueness: Reflections on the recent polemical turn in Holocaust and genocide scholarship', *HGS* 13:1 (1999), 28–61.
[11] These are addressed in the section on historiography below and in Volume IV.

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scholarship, a great deal of debate revolved around Hitler's centrality in formulating, selling, and directing the genocidal program – judgments on this question clearly affected where to place one's interpretative efforts. A raft of studies explored Hitler's formation and personality.[12] But when, in the 1990s, historians began to uncover the breadth of participation in genocide, and to see in the Nazi regime a "dictatorship of acclamation" (*Zustimmungsdiktatur*),[13] psychological studies of Hitler lost ground to efforts to understand the outlook and choices of far larger societal groups. All these choices in turn intersected with questions of timeframe – was the critical dynamic to be found in the last years of Weimar, in the interwar period more generally, in the long nineteenth century, or in modernity itself?[14]

The essays in this volume examining the Holocaust's long- and mid-range causes and contexts try to capture some of this heterogeneity, looking at, among other things, European antisemitism (Ulrich Wyrwa), the evolution of thinking about race and ethnicity (Eric Kurlander), the geopolitical impact of the First World War (Robert Gerwarth), the place and function of anti-communism in the interwar period (Andreas Wirsching), and the sturdiness and fragility of the Weimar Republic (Annemarie Sammartino). The editors would like to record their profound regret that Eric Weitz died during the preparation of this volume before being able to complete an essay on imperial and national roots of the Holocaust. He is deeply missed, and the volume is the poorer for his loss.

If the essays show any kind of commonality, two trends are visible. One is to see the First World War as a turning point, though the reasons for ascribing it such significance range widely from the geopolitical implications of the Entente's victory and German–Habsburg defeat, through the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements unleashed by the course of the conflict, to the cultural meanings ascribed to the experience of combat as the interwar period unfolded. The other is to emphasize the European, and, in some cases, international, nature of the processes and intellectual roots that shaped the Nazi movement, the context in which it gained power, and the rationales for its goals and actions. This is partly again because the First

[12] R. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York, HarperCollins, 1999).
[13] F. Bajohr, 'Die Zustimmungsdiktatur: Grundzüge nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft in Hamburg', in J. Schmid (ed.), *Hamburg im "Dritten Reich"* (Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2005), pp. 69–131.
[14] D. J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernism*, trans. R. Deveson (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991); and see Mark Roseman's Chapter 6 in this volume.

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World War left its imprint everywhere, as did the fall-out of the Russian revolution, the various national revolutions, and the counter-revolutionary responses, and as did the global panic about Jews that emerged in the war's and revolution's wake. Of course, an account of shared European roots leaves unanswered the question of why it should have been Germany that unleashed the Holocaust, and all our authors are alive to German particularities, and indeed to those of Hitler and the Nazi movement itself. But, for the most part, the contributions find the combustible material that led to the conflagration of the Holocaust outside Germany as much as within, and indeed see many of the decisive causal elements as transnational in nature or as a function of interwar geopolitics. This in turn helps to explain the degree of outside collaboration the Nazis were later able to solicit during the Holocaust itself (explored further in Volume II).

THE THIRD REICH UP TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The final section of the volume looks at the evolution of Nazi Germany and Nazi policy in the prewar era, with some essays glancing forward into the war years. As alluded to above, for a long time, analyses of the prewar Third Reich (and, as Helmut Walser Smith notes in his essay, it was the prewar period that long commanded historians' attention) were shaped by a debate about Hitler's role in running the regime and making policy, including policy towards Jews. On one side were those who believed Hitler set the agenda and made the crucial decisions. The opposing historical camp believed that while Hitler spread the rhetorical canopy, policy was driven forward by ambitious subordinates, jostling for position and seeking to outbid each other in fulfilling the Führer's agenda. In the first, "intentionalist," view, the Holocaust was envisioned by Hitler at an early stage and implemented according to his directions; in the second, "functionalist," approach, a process of radicalization culminated in genocide, something that had not been anticipated before the war, even if Hitler's rhetoric towards Jews had always been murderous enough to allow for the most radical of outcomes.[15]

[15] These terms were coined by T. Mason, 'Intention and explanation', in G. Hirschfeld and L. Kettenacker (eds.), *Der "Führerstaat": Mythos und Realität. Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart, Ernst Klett, 1981), pp. 23–42. In addition to the essays

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As shown by the contributions here on Hitler and the Nazi party (Thomas Weber and Helmut Walser Smith), and on the evolution of antisemitic and racial policy (Hans-Christian Jasch, Michael Wildt, and Richard Wetzell), the tension between plan and improvisation or between commands from above and demands – and violence – from below continues to figure in accounts of the origins of the Holocaust. Nazi policy towards Jews in the 1930s was not aiming at genocide (though Thomas Weber in his essay offers one of the most remarkable and trenchant defenses in recent years of the idea that Hitler's vision for Jews was from a very early stage truly and concretely murderous), and a great deal happened that was not proposed by Hitler.

Yet the research landscape today is quite different from that when the intentionalist–functionalist divide dominated discussion. The functionalists assumed that a fairly narrow coterie of party figures were the pacemakers and that they were driven above all by a struggle for survival and for power. The real causal agent was the Third Reich's peculiar combination of strong personal bonds to a charismatic Hitler, coupled with untrammeled and unregulated competition between the party power brokers, and a general direction given by Hitler's violent rhetoric. But, as many of the essays in this volume reveal, a much wider range of players, including scholars, intellectuals, civil servants, and others were active players in policy-making, and moreover signed on to many of the fundamental tenets of Nazi ideology. It remains true, however, as both Richard Wetzell's account of racial policy and Dirk Rupnow's chapter on "Jewish research" demonstrate with great subtlety, that "knowledge" in Nazi Germany is a slippery concept, and that distinguishing between cynical and instrumental utilization of regime vocabulary, on the one hand, and shared belief, on the other, is not easy.

Another fruit of recent research is the recognition that beyond the broad group of experts and professionals closely involved in shaping the landscape of ideas and policies, wider society too played a much greater role in the evolution and radicalization of policy towards Jews and other minorities – as echo chamber and audience for performances of the "People's Community," as beneficiaries of theft and dispossession, as extended arm of the Gestapo and participants in pogrom violence, and more. These themes are explored in a series of contributions, notably, Michael Wildt on the "people's community" and exclusionary violence, Christoph Kreutzmüller and Jonathan Zatlin on the dispossession of Jewish assets, and Alan Steinweis on Kristallnacht,

in this volume, see also the discussion of the origins of the "Final Solution" in Chapter 1 by Christopher Browning in Volume II of this series.

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which together convey a sense of the density and complexity of the pressures driving the Third Reich towards ever more radical versions of antisemitic and racial policy.[16] Recent research has also demonstrated the interrelationship of different persecuted groups' experiences under Nazism but at the same time highlighted the ways in which these experiences differed.[17]

The final two essays remind us that the international context is critical for understanding the evolution of Nazi racial policy. On the one hand, Hitler's expansionist aims provided the underlying timetable for the Third Reich's development. Here his primacy and vision are uncontested, and Richard Overy's essay offers a sophisticated account of the roots and character of Hitler's ideas about expansion, settlement, and continental hegemony. On the other hand, the regime was also alive to responses and resonances abroad, even if it increasingly concluded that it was unlikely to face pushback as it accentuated its assaults on unwanted minorities at home. A fruit of recent work has been the discovery of the degree to which the Nazi ideas resonated elsewhere, even if many outsiders were appalled by what they were doing. This ambivalent international sounding board is explored in Jonathan Wiesen's contribution.

What, if anything, unites the volume, other than a plea for pluralism and an openness to different approaches? It would perhaps be to overstate the extent to which there is agreement in the field – which is, after all, larger and more diverse now than it has ever been – to suggest that there is a consensus about the role played by antisemitism. Nevertheless, even historians who see *Judenpolitik* as inseparable from Nazi population politics in general, or who regard antisemitism as a weak analytical category in terms of explaining not what was in the Nazi leaders' heads but what actually happened when and where it did, tend to agree that none of what we now call the Holocaust could have taken place without the leading Nazis' obsessional focus on the Jews. We see this again and again in the chapters that follow. The notion that the "Aryan race" was under threat from the conspiracy being waged against it by the "international Jew" constituted the shared, tacit, and uniquely state-led characteristic of Nazi Germany. Nazism emerged out of concerns and ideas that were commonplace across Europe and the wider world, especially in the

[16] See here also M. Steber and B. Gotto (eds.), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014); N. Frei (ed.), *Wie bürgerlich war der Nationalsozialismus?* (Göttingen, Wallstein, 2018); E. Harvey, J. Hürter, M. Umbach, and A. Wirsching (eds.), *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[17] See, for example, A. Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023).

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Americas and other former colonies where people of European descent lived. Yet Nazism also coalesced into something that brought these commonplace ideas together in a way that was greater than the sum of its parts. The mystical attraction of Nazism felt by its adherents was shared by members of the Iron Guard or the Ustaše; the propensity for violence can be seen in the Fascisti, the Falange, or the Arrow Cross; the venality that saw Jews stripped of their possessions is echoed in Romanianization measures. But only in Nazi Germany was a paranoid antisemitic conspiracy theory the guiding ideological framework for almost all state activities, from producing school textbooks to the funding of mathematics to international diplomacy and, eventually, warfare. Many of these topics are dealt with in greater detail in the following three volumes, but, to make sense of them, this volume delineates the traditions and contexts that help to make sense of what followed.

The Jewish response to the Nazis is reserved for the third volume, and readers are referred to David Engel's opening essay there. But it is worth emphasizing here that German and Austrian Jews were far from passive, and, contrary to the frequently voiced postwar assumption, for the most part did not stick their heads in the sand and simply hope for better times. Scholarship over the last couple of decades, aided not least by the discovery of the records of the Central Association of German Jews (Centralverein, or CV), in a Moscow archive, has uncovered the degree to which the CV and other bodies actively tried to avert the Nazi threat before 1933, and to alleviate or mitigate the worst for as long as they were able. Even after the creation of a new unified body representing all sections of the Jewish community, the Reich Association of German Jews (Reichsvertretung, or RV) in 1933, the CV continued to be the backbone of efforts to monitor events across the country and to intercede with the authorities on behalf of beleaguered communities. Though they felt compelled to make public suggestions indicating their willingness to work with the new regime – for example, in 1935, in response to Hitler's speech announcing the hope that the Nuremberg Laws would allow for the peaceful, separate coexistence of Germans and Jews – their appraisal of the situation facing Jews was often very realistic. After the Nuremberg Laws, senior figures in the community recognized that the overwhelming majority of younger Jews would have to seek their futures abroad, and it was thanks to this insight that by the end of the 1930s over 80 percent of German Jews under forty had emigrated. None of this alters the fact that, as the essays in this volume reveal all too clearly, by the outbreak of war, a once proud

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German Jewish community had been reduced to a terrified, increasingly impoverished, ostracized, and powerless body.[18]

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

It is noteworthy that in her critique of an overemphasis on causation, Arendt referred to the "historical sciences." While it is true that the term *Geschichtswissenschaften* remains current in German, few historians believe that their discipline bears comparison with the natural sciences, and perhaps even with the social sciences. Understanding in historiography is produced through attention to the traces of the past that are referred to as sources. Using those sources, we construct a narrative of the past. But we are conscious that our narrative cannot be tested against an objective past, for "the past" does not exist except insofar as we recreate it in our representations of "it." History writing therefore involves an important aesthetic and ethical dimension that is inseparable from the attempt to provide truthful accounts of what happened and to offer explanations as to why these things happened. What Arendt identified – and this is a theme that runs across all disciplines and artforms that have tried to grapple with the Holocaust – is that our conventional forms of representation and understanding are undermined by the event under description and analysis. There is thus no alternative to methodological and analytical pluralism.

Not all historians will accept Arendt's view of historical methodology. But there is no doubt that the effort to understand where Nazism came from and, by implication, where the sources of thought and action that led to the Holocaust came from – in other words the task of this volume – remains central to Holocaust historiography. It is with that inquiry into origins in mind that this volume is conceived as offering a survey of the field in a quasi-Arendtian spirit; that is to say, as editors we do not seek to impose one reading onto the past or to place greater emphasis on one factor than on another (though we have our own views on the subject). Rather, we have invited contributors with the relevant expertise to show how, in Arendt's

[18] A. Barkai, *"Wehr Dich!" Der Centralverein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens (C.V.) 1893–1938* (Munich, Beck, 2002); J. Matthäus and M. Roseman, *Jewish Responses to Persecution*, Vol. I: *1933–1938* (Washington, D.C.: AltaMira Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010).

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terms, a whole host of factors coalesced, or crystallized, eventually to form the toxic brew that was the Nazis' genocidal ideology and campaign. We share Arendt's view that nothing is inevitable, a view that is not incompatible with a latter-day "intentionalist" reading which stresses the significance of Nazi ideology. For, even if the Nazis planned to murder the Jews from early on in the NSDAP's existence (something very few historians would now claim), the opportunity and ability to do so was by no means predetermined but had to be fought for by the Nazis themselves. Nor does Arendt's view automatically defend what might be seen today as a "modified functionalist" viewpoint; her emphasis on contingency by no means implies a disregard for ideological factors or for the history of ideas, as whole swathes of *Origins of Totalitarianism* reveal. In other words, the chapters that follow are offered in a spirit of methodological diversity, leaving it up to the reader to weigh up the different approaches and factors and to decide on the strength of evidence and historical argument which factors should be regarded as predominant.

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