

## 1939-1945: The Germans exterminate the Jews

Ivan JABLONKA

**In a text which will be remembered as his masterpiece, historian Saul Friedländer recounts the enactment of the “final solution to the Jewish question in Europe”. His book is a monumental piece of historical work, but also a choral narrative which allows the voices of all the witnesses to resonate, and a personal quest for this child who lost his parents in the Shoah.**

Reviewed: Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007, £30, 896 p. Translated into French as *Les Années d’extermination. L’Allemagne nazie et les juifs, 1939- 1945*, by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Paris, Seuil, coll. “L’Univers historique”, 2008.

Any reader will quickly see that the publication of *The Years of Extermination* is an event, crowning Friedländer’s entire body of work as Professor of History at the University of Tel Aviv and at the University of California: with admirable erudition, these thousand pages of text give a cohesive rendition of the genesis and enactment of a crime that remains unique in history, and the enormity, extraordinary complexity and universal implications of which have given rise to studies the world over. Friedländer does not provide us with any revelations about some little-known aspect of the Shoah: the importance of this book – which is more of an overview than a piece of archival research – lies in the clarity of its argument, the soundness of its reasoning, the breadth of its view, and the mastery of a bibliography which covers Anglo-Saxon, German, Israeli and French works. But there is more: the reason why the book endures in our minds long after we have finished reading it is not only that it expresses an unbearable truth, but also that, in order to do so, it uses a literary technique which creates a chorus of echoes around the reader.

The “years of persecution”, which Friedländer analysed in a first volume published in 1997<sup>1</sup>, were followed by the seven years of the Second World War, which saw the execution of between five and six million Jews in the territories controlled by the Nazis. The three parts of the book describe the build up of the extermination programme: a phase of terror, between the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the attack of the USSR in June 1941; a phase of mass murder, from summer 1941 to summer 1942; and finally the actual Shoah, which lasted till the fall of the Reich.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, New York, Harper Collins, 1997.

## From Terror to General Extermination

The first phase is defined by the extension of the “Reich model” to the whole of Europe. Exclusion and aryanisation laws come into effect. A policy of Jewish expulsion and emigration is implemented in the Reich, the Protectorate, and then in Warthegau, Upper Silesia, Alsace-Lorraine and in the Saarland. In Poland, the Jews are parked in reduced urban areas where they are subjected to forced labour in exchange for a few supplies. On 1 May 1940, the district of Baluty, in Lodz, closes on 163,000 of them. In the General Government, in November 1940, Frank has the Warsaw ghetto closed; a year later, with the arrival of Jews from neighbouring towns, it will number 445,000 people. This policy of “productivisation” in urban ghettos that have been decimated by famine and disease, with no connection to the outside world but governed by Jewish Councils, takes place against a background of continuous murderous violence. Nevertheless, Jews continue to leave the continent, sometimes with the cooperation of the RSHA, the Reich Security Main Office of the SS directed by Heydrich. Extermination is not yet a policy that goes without saying.

Everything changes with the invasion of the USSR, when Eastern Poland, the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Belorussia all fall under the control of Germany. Himmler then issues orders to massacre all men, women and children, without distinction. In August 1941, in a small town to the south of Kiev, a commando from the Einsatzgruppe C executes 900 Jews in agreement with the Wehrmacht, and then 90 children under five years old who had initially been spared. In September 1941, 34,000 Jews are shot in the Babi Yar ravine near Kiev. Soon, more sophisticated techniques appear. Special lorries, which can kill 40 people in one go using their exhaust fumes, are put into use in the Baltic countries, in Serbia or in Chelmno. In the autumn of 1941, experiments are launched in Auschwitz using a powerful pesticide, Zyklon B, and gas chambers using carbon monoxide are installed in Belzec.

A crucial step has just been taken: “home-spun” methods, such as shootings carried out in the villages or forests, have been complemented by industrial techniques in *ad hoc* installations in Chelmno, Belzec, Auschwitz and Sobibor, where gassing is in full swing as early as the spring of 1942. The massacre has become more intense, but also more systematic and efficient. Nevertheless, its roots remain essentially local: the Germans massacre any Jewish communities which they come across as they move eastwards, and the extermination camps serve to empty, through murder, the Jewish ghettos (Chelmno for the Jews of Lodz, Belzec for those of Lublin, Lvov and Krakow, etc.). In May 1942, two attacks – against an anti-Soviet exhibition in Berlin and against Heydrich, shot down by a Czech commando – lead to the radicalisation of the final solution.

In the summer of 1942, aside from the opening of Treblinka, which is to be used to exterminate the Jews of Warsaw, new installations are put into service in Belzec and in Auschwitz, where bunker II enables the assassination of the Jews of the Reich and of the West (prior to the construction, in 1943, of crematoriums II to V, which are far superior from a technical perspective). In June 1943, Himmler orders the liquidation of all the ghettos in the Ostland: Jewish workers are sent to concentration camps, and useless ones are “evacuated east”. From this point on, the aim is to hunt down all Jews without exception, wherever they are in Europe, in order to assassinate them. In July 1942, the French police organises the raid on the Vel’ d’Hiv, an antechamber to Auschwitz. Himmler attempts to convince Finland to hand over its foreign Jews, i.e. 200 individuals. In 1943, it’s the Thracian and Macedonian Jews’ turn to be assassinated. In the spring of 1944, while the Nazis are facing one military setback after another, 400,000 Hungarian Jews are deported to Auschwitz at a rate of 12 to

14,000 a day; in the camp, the crematoriums are over capacity, and the bodies have to be burned in the open air. By this point, the issue is no longer the colonisation of the East, the exploitation of a servile workforce, or economic advantages for the *Volksgemeinschaft*: all that is left is “ideological fury”. From Izieu to Vilna, from Helsinki to Skopje, Europe must be made *Judenrein*. In 1945, between five and six million Jews, including one and a half million children, have been assassinated. To use one of Friedländer’s comments, “here is one war at least that Hitler has won”.

### **The When and the Why**

We do not know exactly when Hitler issued the order to exterminate all European Jews. However, the three-part structure of *The Years of Extermination* puts forward a chronology which is reminiscent of the one Browning used in *The Origins of the Final Solution*: the invasion of Poland, the attack of the USSR and the deportations to extermination camps from the spring of 1942 each constitute a stage on the way to the radicalisation of the killing<sup>2</sup>. The tipping point is somewhere in between these two last stages. During the whole of the summer of 1941, the Nazi leaders are hesitating between various “solutions”. The mass massacres in the USSR, which are aimed at the Jews as potential partisans, ambassadors of Bolshevism or obstacles to colonisation, marks the start of the final solution, but this has not yet become a general plan of extermination. Likewise, in August 1941, Hitler refers in the presence of Goebbels to the mass deportation of Jews to Northern Russia and to their enslavement once victory has been secured; mass death is implicit, but, according to Friedländer, Hitler is not referring to an “organised, generalised and immediate extermination”.

However, in the autumn, the Führer resumes his litany of invectives against the Jews. In September, he decides to deport German Jews to the East. On several occasions between October and December, he tells various interlocutors that the extermination of all Jews is necessary: this is probably the time at which the decision is made (Friedländer is not obsessed with the issue of the exact date). At the same time, Himmler orders that all Jewish emigration from the continent be stopped. In particular, he rejects an offer from the Franco government to evacuate to Morocco 2,000 Spanish Jews who were arrested in Paris: for Heydrich, they would be “too far away to fall directly under” the final solution to the Jewish question. On 20 January 1942, the Wannsee Conference, held under the leadership of Heydrich in the presence of fourteen secretaries of state, senior civil servants and SS officers, decides to decimate “useful” Jews through forced labour and to “evacuate to the East” any others, in other words to send them to their immediate death.

What happened between the euphoria of the summer 1941, arising out of the initial successes of the Wehrmacht in the East, and the end of the year? Friedländer insisted on this point in his PhD thesis, which he defended in the early 1960s<sup>3</sup>: Roosevelt’s efforts to lead the United States into the war played a crucial role in Hitler’s mind. For Hitler, only the Jews are able to push the leader of global capitalism to come to the aid of the besieged fortress of Bolshevism. Given this fact, Hitler returns to his “prophecy” from January 1939, according to which the onset of a world war would not lead to the victory of international Jewry, but rather to its

---

<sup>2</sup> C. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution. The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 - March 1942*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2004. For Florent Brayard, the month of June 1942 also constitutes a major caesura (F. Brayard, *La Solution finale de la question juive : la technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision*, Paris, Fayard, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> S. Friedländer, “The Role of the American Factor in Germany’s Foreign and Military Policy”, 1963.

annihilation. By December 1941, following the attack of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, world war it is: the extermination of the Jews must be its necessary consequence.

This explanation views ideological factors – the hallucinatory anti-Semitism that is driving Hitler, the dignitaries of the Reich and many Germans – as the motor of Nazi policy: the Jew is a brutish, cowardly, vile and bloodthirsty enemy. The threat which he poses to the Aryan race and to all nations is not just deadly, it is an active one (a characteristic which is not shared by other enemies of the *Volk*, such as the mentally ill, homosexuals, or Slavic or Roma people). In *The Years of Persecution*, Friedländer qualified this anti-Semitism as being “redemptive”, since it is experienced as a crusade aimed at saving the world by getting rid of the Jews once and for all, from the “plutocrats of London and New York to the Bolsheviks”, according to the words of a modest German sergeant in 1941. In order to put an end to their actions, the old proverb of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” must be turned against them. As a metahistorical enemy, the Jew thus represents a constant rallying myth; this explains why, when war becomes global, anti-Semitism becomes all the more virulent. The only “solution”, which is tirelessly repeated, is radical elimination: this is what Goebbels publicly argues on 18 February 1943 (i.e. two weeks after the defeat of Stalingrad), under the applause of the audience of the *Sportpalast* in Berlin.

With this explanation, Friedländer is setting himself apart both from Goldhagen (who puts forward the anti-Jewish sadism of the Germans) and from Browning (for whom material and psychological constraints determined the actions of “ordinary men”)<sup>4</sup>. We can feel that he is more indulgent towards Götz Aly, who demonstrates that the plundering-destruction of the Jews allowed the Germans to maintain their quality of life through to the end of the war<sup>5</sup>; but this thesis does not fit very well into Friedländer’s picture, based on an anti-Semitic monomania.

### **The Solitude of European Jews**

The picture painted by Friedländer is absolutely black: the Germans have a collective responsibility for the murder, the massacres often took place with the complicity of local populations, the churches kept quiet when they weren’t approving these actions, Jewish Councils displayed a guilty naivety, the Allies and the Jews from Palestine remained passive. In a word, European Jews were completely abandoned to their deaths.

Friedländer showed, a long time ago now, that Nazi anti-Semitism was connected to a “collective psychosis”<sup>6</sup>. In 1939 and subsequently, many Germans perfectly understood what Hitler meant with his “prophecy”. As for the Shoah itself, many people were in the know, or even approved of it: the wives of the SS men assigned to the camps, the German population of the town of Auschwitz, the train drivers, but also, more widely, the dignitaries of the Reich, the civil servants working in the Chancellery and in the RHSA, industrialists, Wehrmacht soldiers. During the invasion of the USSR, the massacres of civilians are accompanied by brutally cynical comments. In the camps, the killers do not hesitate to acknowledge their

---

<sup>4</sup> See, respectively, D. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York, Knopf, 1996; and C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York, HarperCollins, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries. Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*, translated from German by Jefferson Chase, Metropolitan Books, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular S. Friedländer, *L’Antisémitisme nazi. Histoire d’une psychose collective*, Paris, Seuil, coll. “L’histoire immédiate”, 1971.

crimes. In 1941, an SS doctor in Ravensbrück writes to his wife that he is murdering people, then eating sausages for dinner and is sleeping “like an angel”. Prüfer, an engineer who designed the new crematory ovens in Birkenau, which were constructed with the help of a dozen firms, is so proud of his invention that he has it patented. For Friedländer, by the start of 1943, information about this mass extermination has reached the majority of the population of the Reich (and co-exists with the persistence of anti-Semitism).

The satellite states of the Reich were involved in the Shoah: the Vichy regime organises raids, the Slovak government takes the initiative of offering Jewish workers to the Reich, the Rumanian army and police force massacre over 300,000 Jews. As for local populations – Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Ukrainian, Croat – they often helped the Germans; and even the Polish resistance refused to “feign affliction at the disappearance of a nation which, after all, has never been dear to our hearts.”

In the rest of Europe, the situation is met with indifference, with the notable exception of the Netherlands, where the first anti-Jewish measures prompt protests from Protestant churches and trigger strikes. But on the whole, people keep quiet. Friedländer shows that “no social group, no religious community, no learned institution and no professional association in Germany and throughout Europe declared its solidarity with the Jews,” so it was possible to carry out the extermination programme through to its end without any kind of counterweight. In Germany, for example, the only protest made by Christian churches, through the voice of Mgr. Clemens in 1941, relates to the “euthanasia” of mentally ill individuals; subsequently, one single – private – letter of protest is sent to Hitler by the head of the Confessing Church, Mgr. Wurm. This attitude was supported by the continual silence of Pope Pius XII, who declared (even during the deportation of Jews from Rome to Auschwitz) that he could give the Jews “no effective assistance other than Our prayer.” For Friedländer, who studied the case of the Vatican as early as the 1960s, there is no doubt that this permissiveness, over time, facilitated the most murderous policies<sup>7</sup>.

Of course, isolated individuals also helped Jews throughout Europe: the “Righteous”, but also humanist diplomats such as Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Kovno, or Guelfo Zamboni, the Italian consul in Salonica. The support given to the Jews in some cases expresses the “ambiguity of good” – as witnessed by Kurt Gerstein, a deeply religious Protestant, who is present at a gassing in Belzec in his capacity as disinfection specialist for the Waffen SS and who, haunted by the crime, attempts to tell the world<sup>8</sup>. As for the Allies, they have clearly chosen abstention. In 1943 and 1944, in spite of their public denunciations, they refuse to implement even the slightest rescue measure; in July 1944, the American Deputy Secretary of State for War refuses to bomb the railways between Hungary and Auschwitz or the camp itself. In June 1944, even though the whole world knows the details of the extermination, the Red Cross delegate visiting Theresienstadt (which was meant to be the “final camp”) does not ask to continue his investigation in Birkenau.

---

<sup>7</sup> See S. Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation*, New York, Knopf, 1966, translated from French by Charles Fullman [*Pie XII et le Troisième Reich : documents*, Paris, Seuil, coll. “L’histoire immédiate”, 1964].

<sup>8</sup> S. Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein, the ambiguity of good*, New York, Knopf, 1969 [*Kurt Gerstein ou l’ambiguïté du bien*, Paris, Casterman, 1967].

## The Division of the Jews

Meanwhile, as the extermination is becoming more radical and the rest of the world is abandoning the victims to their fate, Jewish solidarity is disintegrating. In the ghettos, Jewish Councils are instrumentalised by the Nazis. In Lodz, the grotesque Rumkowski has money printed and sees himself as a king, convinced that “the authorities are full of admiration for the work that has been accomplished in the ghetto.” In 1943, rabbi Koretz, the leader of the Salonica community, immediately submits to the requirements of the Nazis. In the West, throughout the 1930s, assimilated Jews look askance at the arrival of refugees from Central or Eastern Europe, who are accused of providing fodder for anti-Semitism. Jacques Helbronner, a representative of the traditional French Jewish elite, and president of the consistory following the departure of the Rothschilds, tries to convince his friend Pétain that the Israelites have nothing in common with foreign or recently naturalised Jews; he will die in Auschwitz with his wife in November 1943.

Friedländer’s assessment is final: during the extermination phase, while the *Judenräte* displayed increasing docility, none of the strategies they came up with was successful; only luck or external circumstances led to the survival of some Jews. In contrast, a minority of Jews, pushed to despair, chose to die with weapons in their hands, for example in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, in Treblinka and in Sobibor; ultimately, “important as it was in symbolic terms, the armed Jewish resistance did not save lives, but rather accelerated the rate of extermination.”

In the United States or in Palestine, the Jews did not see fit to come to the assistance of their European brothers. For Rabbi Wise, paralysed by the fear of providing the anti-Semites with arguments and of displeasing Roosevelt, the only thing that counted was the victory of America. In the context of the boycott of the Axis powers, this unconditional Americanism led to putting the starving Jews living in the territories controlled by Germany under embargo. In 1943, Wise tried to prevent an “emergency conference to save the European Jews” from being held. As for the leaders of the Yishuv, who were obsessed with the Zionist ideal, they cooperated with the Nazis as early as 1933 to make Jews come to Palestine; when the extermination starts, Ben Gurion and the Jewish Agency decide that the only thing to do from now on is to ensure the prosperity of the land of Israel.

## Choral Writing

Friedländer’s overview thus appears to be one of the only comprehensive works on the Shoah. In this regard, it can be compared to *La Destruction des Juifs d’Europe* by Raul Hilberg, published in 1961 and constantly added to thereafter; perhaps, in fact, Friedländer’s book is trying to measure up to this text. Based on German sources (and then, from 1990, Soviet ones), Hilberg’s book focuses above all on the “modern destruction process”<sup>9</sup>, meaning the bureaucratic efficiency of the extermination, the chains of command, the flow charts and the numerical assessments. It breaks down the process of execution into stages, region by region, according to the perspective of the executioners: the definition of a Jew, expropriation, the concentration in ghettos, mobile killing operations, deportations, execution centres with their particular organisation, staff, management, modes of operation and, finally, their destruction. In contrast to this administrative breakdown, Friedländer has made the somewhat disconcerting choice of dividing, within each of his three main parts, his chapters according to

---

<sup>9</sup> R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Yale University Press, 1961.

simple chronological markers (September 1939, May 1940, December 1940, June 1941, September 1941, etc.), which essentially equates to putting into perspective any kind of chronological division. Where Hilberg scientifically takes apart the mechanism of the death machine, Friedländer writes the lived experience of men into a narrative.

*The Years of Extermination* is full of testimonies taken from letters and diaries. We hear the voices of executioners, senior officers, Luftwaffe pilots, members of police reserve battalions or simple soldiers, like this anonymous individual, garrisoned somewhere in former Poland, who writes to his family in November 1940: “It’s really laughable: all the Jews say hello to us. [...] When you look at these people, you come away with the impression that really nothing justifies them living on God’s land.” We enter what Primo Levi calls the “grey area”, where the victims lose their innocence, where the executioners are no longer completely awful – like this Polish schoolboy from the Pinsk region who writes to the district superintendent to ask him to confiscate a Jew’s accordion, or like Calel Perechodnik, a Jewish policeman from Ottwock, near Warsaw, who claims that he did nothing all day, and certainly did not take part in the raids.

Finally, Friedländer gives the victims a voice, by drawing on the diaries and autobiographies of Anne Frank, Ety Hillesum, Victor Klemperer, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Emmanuel Ringelblum, Adam Czerniakow. But he also unearths forgotten accounts, which are also very emotionally charged, for example that of little Dawid Rubinowicz, twelve years old, the son of farmers in the district of Kielce, who walks across the fields for four hours because the Jews are no longer allowed to travel on carts. In the Lodz ghetto, in September 1942, Sierakowiak witnesses the deportation of his beloved mother: “I felt as though my heart was breaking. But it didn’t break, however, it let me eat, think, talk and go to bed.” At each stage, Friedländer tries to capture the state of mind of the various individuals he is writing about, their reactions to misfortune, the meanders of hope. Throughout the war, we hear voices that have not yet been silenced rise up from towns, from the countryside, from the ghettos or from the camps. They answer each other like a tragic chorus.

This may be what is the most original about this book: it highlights the interaction between executioners, victims and witnesses, while traditional studies tend to deal with these different categories separately. This panoramic view allows Friedländer to show how the Barbarossa operation of June 1941 transforms the morale of the ghettos, how a decision made by Himmler or by a *Gauleiter* has direct repercussions on the life of a child. By displaying this human chain, Friedländer shows that the Shoah is a whole which no element can be abstracted from. On the way, the reader discovers the monstrously performative nature of the Nazi orders: one word from Berlin is enough to cause the death of people five hundred kilometres away – which does not mean that it does not also require the collaboration of hundreds of individuals at various levels.

### **The Book Continued**

If Hilberg was an architect, Friedländer could be a storyteller. Their backgrounds may not be irrelevant when it comes to these historiographical choices. The former was not personally affected by the Shoah. Born in Vienna in 1926, he emigrated to the United States in 1939 to escape from Nazi persecution; as a member of the American army, he fought in Europe through to the end of the war. In the 1950s, he worked on the *War Documentation Project*, which gave him access to the archives of the Nazi administration; it was not until the early

1990s that he started to examine the experience of survivors and executioners, but without ever giving much credit to the testimonies<sup>10</sup>.

Friedländer, on the other hand, was born in Prague in 1932, that is to say “at the worst possible moment”. His family went into exile in Paris and, when the French were defeated, found refuge in the Allier. At this point, his father understood that they were trapped: “His right to live was being taken away, and he no longer even knew what to die for.” Two years later, his parents handed over the boy to a Catholic institution and attempted to cross over into Switzerland; they were refused entry and handed over to the French police, and ultimately assassinated in Auschwitz<sup>11</sup>. Their attitude during the war, the destiny of supposedly integrated Jews, the intrinsically murderous folly of Nazism, have never stopped haunting the historian; in this sense, *The Years of Extermination* is a profoundly autobiographical book. As Friedländer announces from the start, his aim is to explain the Shoah without taming the “initial feeling of incredulity.” In short, he wants to make us understand what will always remain incomprehensible.

History is not just a search for knowledge. It is always a way of responding to some private torment. Here, a personal quest is combined with what could be defined as a militant act. The Jewish diarists to whom Friedländer gives a voice are the first historians of the Shoah. With death closing off their horizon, they felt a visceral need to bear witness for times to come. While Himmler was claiming that the extermination of the Jews was a glorious page which should never be written, they needed, before disappearing, to talk to the people who would come after them. After fleeing from Warsaw, Hermann Kruk, a Yiddish and Bundist intellectual, makes the choice of staying in Vilna, “at God’s mercy”; he decides to keep a chronicle of the town, to be “the mirror and conscience of the great catastrophe.”

From the start, the history of the Shoah was an act of resistance. It was an act of dignity which ended the life of so many individuals – Doubnov, the great historian assassinated during the evacuation of the Riga ghetto, Ringelblum and his group Oneg Shabbat, the tireless archivists of the Warsaw ghetto, the chroniclers of Lodz, and last but not least the members of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz, whose manuscripts were found underneath the ashes. What they started writing when Death was a Master from Germany, Friedländer has continued. His book is a strange thing: a masterpiece, a memory, a monument, a cry. It is harrowing, because it is a grave; it is soothing, because they had no grave.

First published in [lavedesidees.fr](http://lavedesidees.fr), 29 February 2008. Translated from French by Kate McNaughton with the support of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah and published by Books&Ideas, 21 March 2013.

[©booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: the Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> As Friedländer has explained in *When Memory Comes*, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979.