

PENGUIN BOOKS



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The Portable

"useless mouths." Other such phrases, taken from speeches Himmler made to the commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Higher S.S. and Police Leaders, were: "To have stuck it out and, apart from exceptions caused by human weakness, to have remained decent, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written." Or: "The order to solve the Jewish question, this was the most frightening order an organization could ever receive." Or: "We realize that what we are expecting from you is "superhuman," to be "superhumanly inhuman." All one can say is that their expectations were not disappointed. It is noteworthy, however, that Himmler hardly ever attempted to justify in ideological terms, and if he did, it was apparently quickly forgotten. What stuck in the minds of these men who had become murderers was simply the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique ("a great task that occurs once in two thousand years"), which must therefore be difficult to bear. This was important, because the murderers were not sadists or killers by nature; on the contrary, a systematic effort was made to weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did. The troops of the *Einsatzgruppen* had been drafted from the Armed S.S., a military unit with hardly more crimes in its record than any ordinary unit of the German Army, and their commanders had been chosen by Heydrich from the S.S., élite with academic degrees. Hence the problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler—who apparently was rather strongly afflicted with these instinctive reactions himself—was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: "What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: "What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!"

Eichmann's defective memory where Himmler's ingenious watchwords were concerned may be an indication that there existed other and more effective devices for solving the problem of conscience. Foremost among them was, as Hitler had rightly foreseen, the simple fact of war. Eichmann insisted time and again on the "different personal attitude" toward death when "dead people were seen everywhere," and when every one looked forward to his own death with indifference: "We did not care if we died today or only tomorrow, and there were times when we cursed the morning that found us still alive." Especially effective in this atmosphere of violent death was the fact that the Final Solution, in its later

stages, was not carried out by shooting, hence through violence, but in the gas factories, which, from beginning to end, were closely connected with the "euthanasia program" ordered by Hitler in the first weeks of the war and applied to the mentally sick in Germany up to the invasion of Russia. The extermination program that was started in the autumn of 1941 ran, as it were, on two altogether different tracks. One track led to the gas factories, and the other to the *Einsatzgruppen*, whose operations in the rear of the Army, especially in Russia, were justified by the pretext of partisan warfare, and whose victims were by no means only Jews. In addition to real partisans, they dealt with Russian functionaries, Gypsies, the asocial, the insane, and Jews. Jews were included as "potential enemies," and, unfortunately, it was months before the Russian Jews came to understand this, and then it was too late to scatter. (The older generation remembered the First World War, when the German Army had been greeted as liberators; neither the young nor the old had heard anything about "how Jews were treated in Germany, or, for that matter, in Warsaw"; they were "remarkably ill-informed," as the German Intelligence service reported from White Russia [Hilberg]. More remarkable, occasionally even German Jews arrived in these regions who were under the illusion they had been sent here as "pioneers" for the Third Reich.) These mobile killing units, of which there existed just four, each of battalion size, with a total of no more than three thousand men, needed and got the close cooperation of the Armed Forces; indeed, relations between them were usually "excellent" and in some instances "affectionate" (*herzlich*). The generals showed a "surprisingly good attitude toward the Jews"; not only did they hand their Jews over to the *Einsatzgruppen*, they often lent their own men, ordinary soldiers, to assist in the massacres. The total number of their Jewish victims is estimated by Hilberg to have reached almost a million and a half, but this was not the result of the Führer's order for the physical extermination of the whole Jewish people. It was the result of an earlier order, which Hitler gave to Himmler in March, 1941, to prepare the S.S. and the police "to carry out special duties in Russia."

The Führer's order for the extermination of all, not only Russian and Polish, Jews, though issued later, can be traced much farther back. It originated not in the R.S.H.A. or in any of Heydrich's or Himmler's other offices, but in the Führer's Chancellery, Hitler's personal office. It had nothing to do with the war and never used military necessities as a pretext. It is one of the great merits of Gerald Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* to have proved, with documentary evidence that leaves no doubt, that the extermination program in the Eastern gas factories grew out of Hitler's euthanasia program, and it is deplorable that the Eichmann trial, so con-

cerned with "historical truth," paid no attention to this factual connection. This would have thrown some light on the much debated question of whether Eichmann, of the R.S.H.A., was involved in *Gasgeschichten*. It is unlikely that he was, though one of his men, Rolf Günther, might have become interested of his own accord. Globocnik, for instance, who set up the gassing installations in the Lublin area, and whom Eichmann visited, did not address himself to Himmler or any other police or S.S. authority when he needed more personnel; he wrote to Viktor Brack, of the Führer's Chancellery, who then passed the request on to Himmler.

The first gas chambers were constructed in 1939, to implement a Hitler decree dated September 1 of that year, which said that "incurably sick persons should be granted a mercy death." (It was probably this "medical" origin of gassing that inspired Dr. Servatius's amazing conviction that killing by gas must be regarded as "a medical matter.") The idea itself was considerably older. As early as 1935, Hitler had told his Reich Medical Leader Gerhard Wagner that "if war came, he would take up and carry out this question of euthanasia, because it was easier to do so in wartime." The decree was immediately carried out in respect to the mentally sick, and between December, 1939, and August, 1941, about fifty thousand Germans were killed with carbon-monoxide gas in institutions where the death rooms were disguised exactly as they later were in Auschwitz—as shower rooms and bathrooms. The program was a flop. It was impossible to keep the gassing a secret from the surrounding German population; there were protests on all sides from people who presumably had not yet attained the "objective" insight into the nature of medicine and the task of a physician. The gassing in the East—or, to use the language of the Nazis, "the humane way" of killing "by granting people a mercy death"—began on almost the very day when the gassing in Germany was stopped. The men who had been employed in the euthanasia program in Germany were now sent east to build the new installations for the extermination of whole peoples—and these men came either from Hitler's Chancellery or from the Reich Health Department and were only now put under the administrative authority of Himmler.

None of the various "language rules," carefully contrived to deceive and to camouflage, had a more decisive effect on the mentality of the killers than this first war decree of Hitler, in which the word for "murder" was replaced by the phrase "to grant a mercy death." Eichmann, asked by the police examiner if the directive to avoid "unnecessary hardships" was not a bit ironic, in view of the fact that the destination of these people was certain death anyhow, did not even understand the question, so firmly was it still anchored in his mind that the unforgivable sin was not to kill