

The Raul Hilberg Memorial Lecture
The University of Vermont
October 27, 2014

*The Second World War
and the Fate of the Jews*

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I

In one of the most striking passages in his memoir, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, Raul Hilberg recalls his experiences as a precocious 18 year old German-Jewish refugee inducted into the US Army and dispatched to Europe in the closing months of the Second World War. Writing in his customary tone of wry self-deprecation he carefully distinguishes his undistinguished record of military service from that of other servicemen - men who were shelled at Anzio, crossed the Rapido river or waded ashore on Omaha beach. But one battle experience was imprinted on his mind. 'It was April 1945 in Bavaria. I looked at a field bathed in the sun. During the night the Germans had attempted to assault our lines. Our machine-gunners had mowed them down. All over the field the bodies of Germans lay motionless, rifles stuck in the ground to mark their location. One corpse was on its back, its eye sockets filled with blood. What, I asked myself, could have compelled these men at this late stage of the war to run into almost certain death?' That question, his curiosity about the perpetrators, was to guide his life's work.

The definitive 2003 edition of the *Destruction of the European Jews* does not include Stalingrad, Sicily, or Normandy in the index. Kursk is mentioned, but as the place where a Jewish community was slaughtered - not as a crucial battle on the eastern front in July 1943. The start of the war is encompassed in seven limpid words: 'When the German army moved into Poland', as if the Wehrmacht had engaged in a bloodless manoeuvre. His discussion of the Madagascar Plan in mid 1940 concludes that it 'faded'. He doesn't explain that the plan to ship 4 million Jews to a tropical island off the coast of East Africa was rendered unfeasible because the British controlled the sea lanes and Germany proved unable to defeat Britain. The extent of his account of the invasion of the Soviet Union is limited to just that – 'the invasion of the Soviet Union'. He says nothing about the course of the conflict or the operations of the German Army. The Wehrmacht is treated simply as part of the 'machinery of destruction'.²

Perhaps most curiously he writes of the Wannsee Conference held on 20 January 1942, but originally scheduled for 9 December 1941, that it was 'postponed at the last minute'. He does not mention that the delay was caused by Pearl Harbour and Hitler's decision to declare war on the USA. Yet, historians today regard that juncture as vital in understanding the trigger for the 'Final Solution'. Hitler had stated on 30 January 1939 that if the Jews plunged Germany into a global war, they would pay the price. In December 1941, the war became a global conflict.³

This is not to say that Hilberg ignored the military conflict; of course, he did not. In his path-breaking research on the German railways he drew attention to the 'demands of war' and noted that 'Because of wartime conditions' timetables for special trains carrying Jews to the death camps were frequently subject to alteration. He pointed out that the allied landings in North Africa 'shook up' the political

equilibrium in Vichy France, causing the German occupation of the Free Zone. In typical understatement, he observed that in mid-1943 'the military situation did not exactly change in Germany's favour' and the surrender of Italy opened up new territories to the Nazi Jew hunters. He connected Hungary's desire to exit the Axis coalition in 1944 -- in direct response to German military defeats -- with Hitler's decision to occupy the country and ravage its Jewish population. ¹⁵

then (as Richard Breitman insists) or whether it pivoted on the end of the year for reasons we have already heard (adumbrated by Christian Gerlach).⁶

Military historians, for their part, chronicled the war as if it had no connection with the fate of Europe's Jews. The standard work by Basil Liddell Hart, published in 1970 and still in print, does not have the word Jews in the index. *Total War: Causes and Course of the Second World War* by Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, which appeared in 1974, submerged the deportation and massacre of Jewish populations in a section on 'Repression and Liquidation' that covered the suffering of all peoples in German-occupied Europe. Alan Clark's account of Operation Barbarossa devotes more space to the development of the Panzer Mk V tank than the slaughter of 1.5 million Jews. There is a chapter titled "Slaughter in the Ukraine," but it concerns the Battle of Kiev in September 1941 rather than Babi Yar. You will not find 'war crimes' in Clark's index.

I am glad to say that today it is standard practice for even hard-core military historians, such as Anthony Beevor and Max Hastings, to include a discussion of Hitler's ideology, Nazi genocidal policies, and their implementation in comprehensive histories of the conflict. It would be alarming if they did not. Since the 1990s a small library of books has appeared on the mass murder of Jews in the conception and execution of Operation Barbarossa and on the crimes of the Wehrmacht, especially. Whether they manage successfully to integrate the fate of the Jews with the operational dimension is another matter.⁹ *Ostkrieg*, a brilliant narrative of the war in the east by the American military historian Stephen Fritz, published in 2011, is perhaps the first to relate strategic decisions and operational developments to the murderous handling of Jewish civilians in occupied Poland, the USSR, and ultimately the whole of Europe.¹⁰

Sadly, I think, historians whose focus is primarily on the Jewish tragedy have done less to engage with either the macrocosmic dimension or the minutiae of warfare. One of the few attempts to do so is the fascinating collection of essays edited by Asher Cohen, Yehoyakim Cochavi and Yoav Gelber in 1992. Entitled *The Shoah and the War*, it offers a rare insight into the 'interrelation between the conduct of the war and the destruction of the Jews'. The collection was triggered by the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war; it is astonishing that it has not had any successor or spawned any significant research of a comparable nature. Instead, most of the work by 'Holocaust historians' has remained focussed on periods and places treated in isolation from the wider conflict.¹¹

The failure to connect the war and anti-Jewish policy is all the more surprising given the intensity with which Jews during the war followed the campaigns in every theatre. We tend to think of the Jewish people in German-occupied Europe, especially

those in ghettos, as cut off from the outside world, starved of food and information. In fact, in even the most hermetically sealed ghetto (such as Lodz) Jews were able to follow the course of the war blow-by-blow. They were not only able to get information; they were able to analyse it using sophisticated tools. Most middle-aged Jews had already lived through one world war; those in eastern Europe had lived through the Great War and a succession of lesser conflicts. Many Jewish men fought in the 1914-1918 conflict and younger males had since done military service. So they had a rich store of knowledge to draw upon, in addition to what they could glean from German military bulletins, BBC radio news broadcasts and what they saw with their own eyes.

Even though they were red in 'Fortress Europe,' Jews monitored the progress of both the Axis and the Allies. They were able to reach shrewd prognoses as to the likely outcome of the titanic confrontations in the east and the west, at sea and in the air. Crucially, they connected the dimensions of time and space in the prosecution of the war with their own fate. They understood what military historians and historians of the Jewish fate have not made clear enough: that Jewish survival was a race against time, that time and distance were dynamically related, and that Jewish existence hinged on operational choices by the Axis and the Allies.

II

For the Jews of Poland in May 1940, news that Germany had invaded the Low Countries and attacked France was greeted with immense excitement. We know from his diary that Adam Czerniakow, chairman of the Jewish council in Warsaw, followed the campaign in France almost day by day. Chaim Kaplan, a Hebrew scholar and teacher in Warsaw, recorded that news of fighting in the west gave hope to Jews.¹²

They were hopeful because no one expected the Germans to win a military showdown with the two most powerful empires in the world. The speed and totality with which the Germans defeated the French and British armies – a victory that was more due to the incompetence of the allied commanders than the brilliance of their opponents - surprised the Germans as much as anyone else. Victor Klemperer, a non-Aryan Christian living with his non-Jewish wife in a Jews' House in Dresden, found the course of events 'incomprehensible'. Emmanuel Ringelblum in Warsaw reported that 'the populace is enveloped in deep melancholy'. According to Kaplan, the fall of Paris occasioned 'weeping and wailing' amongst Jews and Warsawians.¹³

However, Emil Dorian, a Jewish doctor in Bucharest who had served in the Romanian army in the Great War, reached a very different conclusion. Although he too was shattered by the news that German troops had entered the city of light (a beacon to most cultured Romanians), the following day he wrote: 'Where will Hitler get oil, grain, tin, copper, and all the other raw materials imported from the [French] colonies?' He predicted that if Russia and America refused to supply the Third Reich and England continued to resist, Hitler's ambitions for global conquest would be thwarted.¹⁴

This was a stunning insight. Churchill's refusal to surrender and the inability of the Germans either to launch an invasion or subdue British resistance by aerial bombardment left Hitler with a painful dilemma. Even though Stalin adhered to the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement signed in August 1939 and continued to supply the Reich with mineral oil, grain and raw materials, these imports were not enough to sustain the voracious German war economy and feed the German population at the same time – not to mention meeting the burden of support for the Third Reich's needy Axis partners and the obligation to feed the inhabitants of occupied western Europe.

Hitler knew that unless he found a way to end the war soon, German industry would run short of raw materials, the military would have to draw on stocks of fuel and lubricants, while famine would threaten Europe.¹⁵

The Soviet Union emerged as the key to unlocking this predicament. Hitler believed that Britain would throw in the towel if the USSR was smashed. As well as destroying the threat of Jewish-Bolshevism, a victorious campaign in the east would leave the Reich in possession of vast agricultural regions that could feed the German population and supply grain to Germany's clients; it would give German industry access to unlimited natural resources; and it would lead to control of the largest oil fields in Europe, putting Germany in a position to challenge the USA for global supremacy.¹⁶

Stalin may not have believed reports that Germany was preparing to strike eastwards, but Polish Jews saw the signs. As early as September 1940, Chaim Kaplan divined that the Tripartite Pact signed by Germany, Italy and Japan, signified that Hitler was laying the groundwork for an attack on the USSR. In May 1941, Ringelblum observed that the General Government (the portion of occupied Poland that was not annexed to the Reich) was so packed with German troops that the price of foodstuffs had rocketed. Indeed, as Poland became a vast staging area for the German armed forces, the factories and workshops in the ghettos experienced a boom. Adam Czerniakow noted at the start of June 1941 that the military administration had ordered air raid precautions in Warsaw. On 18 June, several days prior to the invasion, Dawid Sierakowiak, a nineteen year-old living in the Lodz ghetto, reckoned that the anti-communist campaign in the German-merveked

The start of Operation Barbarossa brought a surge of hope to Jews across the continent. Sierakowiak reported that 'Everybody feels that a chance for liberation is finally possible'. Ringelblum spotted V for victory graffiti appear all over Warsaw, expressing the widespread belief in a Soviet victory. In the unoccupied zone of Vichy France, Raymond-Raoul Lambert, a veteran of the trenches and a Jewish communal activist, observed that 'Everyone looks happy.' Frenchman and women recalled 1812 and wished that Napoleon's fate would be visited on Hitler: 'The mirage of the east has always been the downfall of conquerors...', he wrote in his journal.¹⁸

Like most denizens of Jewish Warsaw, Czerniakow tracked the progress of the German armies with anxiety - not least because his son had fled to the Russian-occupied area of Poland in 1939 and settled in Lwow (which fell to the Germans at the start of July). Most Jews in Poland had relatives in a similar situation. So the weeks during which the German advance seemed unstoppable were especially tense. However, by late July the German army had run into stiffening resistance. Ringelblum noted 'The Soviet Army's stand is amazing the Jewish population. Now that the Russians have held out for seven weeks, the belief is growing that they will eventually liberate us from the German occupation.' Indeed, the German high command was facing the first of a succession of operational and logistic crises. Raymond-Raoul Lambert, drawing on his experience of the Great War and extracting everything he could from military bulletins, discerned this predicament. 'It's the first time Hitler hasn't had success with his blitzkrieg ... I really think that this time the fortunes of the Nazi conquerors will turn. Besides, America is practically in the war now, on the British side.'

situation for the Germans was not at all rosy. Lambert correctly diagnosed the failure of Operation Barbarossa: it was now too late in the year for Hitler to achieve the decisive victory he needed.²⁰

After agonising weeks in which they had charted German advances, Polish Jews had the satisfaction of seeing the Germans turn to them for fur garments that could be rushed to badly equipped troops at the front. The 'fur aktion' in December 1941 was carried out with the customary German brutality, and left many Jews facing an exceptionally severe winter without warm outer clothing, but it created a warm inner glow for what it signified: Hitler's first defeat. In his annual round up on the last day of the year, Emil Dorian reproduced an old Romanian saying: 'There are holes in the devil's boots.'²¹

Jews in Europe were not only pinning their hopes on the Red Army. Throughout 1941 they followed the waxing and waning fortunes of the British Eighth Army in North Africa and the disastrous British campaign in Greece. According to Rabbi Shimon Huberband, a member of Ringelblum's Oneg Shabat group, there was a saying in the ghetto that 'Germany is waging a war. England is playing a game. Germany will win the war. England will win the game.' After the British staged yet another evacuation -- from the Greek mainland -- Ringelblum transcribed a joke that was going the rounds: "'If the Germans win the war 25 per cent of the Jews will die; if the English win, 75 per cent'" (that's how long the English victory will take).' This witticism was tragically accurate. At this stage in the war, mid-1941, a quick German victory would probably have resulted in fewer Jewish deaths than a long, drawn-out allied victory. Although hundreds of thousands of Jews were being shot to death in Russia by the *Einsatzgruppen* and tens of thousands were dying each month in Polish ghettos, there was no German plan for a European-wide genocide and no facilities

with which to carry it out. All the evidence suggests that in this phase the leading figures in the Nazi regime intended that the Jews should be removed from the German sphere and deported into the Russian interior after the Soviet Union was militarily defeated.²²

The Jews had no doubt that the British would eventually triumph, but they sensed that they were working to a very different timetable. Huberband captured this awareness in another ghetto gag: 'A German asked an Englishman, 'On what do you base your optimism that England will emerge victorious? Do you have a huge army like the German army? The Englishman replied, 'No.' 'Do you have a powerful air force like the German air force?' The Englishman replied, 'No'. 'Well', asked the German, 'do you have enough ammunition?' To which the Englishman replied, 'No.'. 'Then what do you have enough of?' asked the exasperated German. 'We', said the Englishman, 'hav

However, Jews were equally apprehensive that every move America took towards war would be attributed to them. In the wake of the Lend-Lease agreement, Emil Dorian commented, 'The official German press immediately found out who the culprits were ... the American Jews!' According to the German newspapers, US aid 'will not help the Jews in Europe. They will pay with new suffering for American Jewry's hateful gesture'.²⁴

When America finally became a fully-fledged combatant a burst of optimism pulsed through Europe's Jews. Mary (Wattenberg) Berg in the Warsaw ghetto reported that 'American entry into the war has inspired the hundreds of thousands of dejected Jews with a new breath of hope. ... Most people believe that the war will not last long now and that the Allies' victory is certain.' In his final entry for 1941,

As their increasingly tragic commentaries show, the Jews were acutely conscious that outcomes on the battlefield would determine their future as much as anything planned by the Nazis. The failure of the Russian counter-offensives in Spring 1942 and German victories in the summer tormented Jewish observers. They were particularly disturbed by Rommel's successes in North Africa and his lunge for the Suez Canal. One of the last entries in Czerniakow's diary concerns the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. Chaim Kaplan, a Zionist who had visited Palestine in the 1930s, commented on developments in Libya and Egypt nearly every day. After the capture of Tobruk, he wrote in his journal: 'another disappointment England has suffered a defeat and is fleeing to Egypt. And once war is in Egypt who will wager that it will not spread from there into Palestine as well?' A week later, he penned 'Rommel is before Alexandria ... Sebastopol has been captured ... Where is the mighty British Army? Where is the power of mighty America? Where is the second front?' When Rommel was finally halted at the El Alamein line, Kaplan heaved a sigh of relief and, shrewdly, looked forwards to a British counterblow. Cooped up in Warsaw on the eve of the great deportations, he made an amazingly insightful analysis of the Wehrmacht at high-tide: 'Their victories on paper make no impression. A weakening is apparent in comparison with their power and might of last year.'²⁷

Indeed, military historians - notably Robert Citino in the USA and the official German war historians - now regard the Wehrmacht's summer victories in 1942 as illusory, gifted them by foolish opponents. In reality, the German armed forces had almost no chance of recovering the strategic initiative. Time was running against them; it was just not running fast enough to save the Jews. Chaim Kaplan for one did not live to see his prediction verified; he was swallowed up in the deportations and murdered in Treblinka.²⁸

In southern France, in June 1942, Raymond-Raoul Lambert had to endure the misery of hearing the French premier, Laval, dedicate his country to the policy of collaboration – with dire implications for its Jewish inhabitants. Yet the German army again looked invincible. So, he concluded with resignation, ‘we must submit and wait, hold on and endure’. The allied landings in Morocco and Algeria, ‘Operation Torch’, combined with the stalemate on the eastern front caused him to feel optimistic again. He was also cheered by what he saw with his own eyes when the Germans occupied the Free Zone of southern France in response to the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa. He noted that ‘There is little military equipment in evidence. The cars are old models, the soldiers either very young or older.’ Like Kaplan, Lambert noticed that the Germans were already being worn down: they were running out of resources, equipment, and manpower. He even believed that the war would end in autumn 1943.²⁹

By contrast, Dawid Sierakowiak greeted news of the Anglo-American landings in North Africa in November 1942 with a mixture of joy and frustration. Marseille was a lot closer to the allied armies than Lodz. David groaned that the British and the Americans were ‘doing everything except coming here, damn them’.³⁰

The German defeat at Stalingrad in November 1942 stimulated fresh expectations amongst the surviving Jews across Europe. ‘Germany’s confusion and collapse can clearly be seen,’ Emil Dorian wrote excitedly just a few days after the pincers of the Soviet attack met, encircling the German Army.

propaganda minister's speech at the Sportpalast in February 1943, blaming the Jews for every setback and pledging total war to defend European civilization against Bolshevism, Abraham Golub (Tory), deputy secretary of the Jewish council in the Kovno ghetto, reflected that 'Today we know ... that our enemy is on the decline and that every day something may happen which can change the whole situation. Our redemption may come quite unexpectedly.' Herman Kruk, a librarian in the Vilna ghetto, took down a ghetto joke that illustrated the resilient mood of the populace: A Jew lends money to a German. A Lithuanian watches in amazement and asks: How on earth can you trust a German? The Jew replies: Well, they took Stalingrad and gave it back.³¹

These hopes were all disappointed. German commanders in the east staged an operationally brilliant counter-attack that stabilized the front, while the Allied advance in North Africa displayed operational naiveté and incompetence. The delay in clearing the Germans from North Africa forced the American military chiefs to shelve plans for a cross-channel assault in 1943 and settle for the preferred British option of invading Sicily.³²

While they were not privy to the debates within the allied coalition, Jews in Europe sensed the implications. Emil Dorian noted that it took the British and the Americans 6 months to finish the job in North Africa. Herman Kruk celebrated the ultimate defeat of the Italian-German forces in Tunisia, in May 1943, but regretted the sluggishness of allied progress. 'We are running out of time', he said. 'If it lasts we will all be killed. If something significant does happen, then perhaps, just perhaps, we might "win" our existence'. In almost identical terms, Abraham Golub in Kovno mediated on the danger of a prolonged German defeat: 'With time at their disposal they will exterminate us.' From expectations of an allied invasion of Europe and a

speedy end to the war, Dawid Sierakowiak, now suffering from a multitude of ailments, was reduced to repeating a mantra in his diary: ‘Just to get by, just to get through as long as possible, just to come closer to the end of the war.’ At the other end of the continent, David Koker, a gifted, nineteen year old Dutch Jew who had recently arrived in Vught concentration camp with his family, wrote in his journal about the uncertainty encouraged by the military bulletins. Koker’s deportation coincided with the German evacuation of the Caucasus and the fall of Rostov, taking them back to where they had started a year earlier. But when the Russians were unable to push on to Kiev, Koker wrote that ‘The idea that the war will end soon [has] disappeared’ After the Germans actually recaptured Kharkov in March 1943 he noted sourly: ‘We won’t be out of this place for quite a while.’³³

The invasion of Sicily in July 1943 and the fall of Mussolini rekindled in Jews the exhilaration they had enjoyed in the midst of the German calamity at Stalingrad. To Emil Dorian, the fall of the Duce was the ‘most astounding event since the beginning of the war’. Fascism in Italy evaporated, provoking the suspicion that the same could happen everywhere that the Italian example had been imitated – including his native Romania. Calel Perechodnik, a former member of the Jewish police in Otwock, a resort town south east of Warsaw, was in hiding with his family at this point. In a memoir written during the war he recalled how thrilled they were to get the good tidings: ‘We could not sleep the entire night for the excitement ... we have the satisfaction that the war will soon be over and that our suffering would end.’ Once again, Lambert predicted that it would all be over in the following year. Philip Mechanicus, a middle-aged Dutch Jewish journalist interned in the Westerbork concentration-transit camp, recorded ‘The general view that the war will soon be over.’ To older people like him it felt like 1918 all over again. Then, defeat had

sparked revolution and the fall of an emperor in Austria, hastening the same cycle in Germany. Would there be a repeat performance? Mechanicus speculated, 'Every week means one more week and every week may be the last ... the regime in Germany may collapse like the regime in Italy ...'.³⁴

Of course, the Nazi government did not fall. It took a month for hugely superior allied forces to push the Germans and Italians out of Sicily. The follow-up invasion of Italy was half-baked and compromised by a bungled effort to get the Italians to defect to the allied side. Once ashore on the Italian mainland the allied advance degenerated to a snail's pace. Nor were the Russians able to capitalize on the victory at Stalingrad and deliver a knock-out blow against the Wehrmacht. Although the German counter-offensive at Kursk stalled and they were forced back, they were able to trade space for time and withdraw in relatively good order even if it meant giving up most of Ukraine. 1943 became the year of the victory that never happened.³⁵

Time ran out for Shimon Huberband who was deported to Treblinka in August 1942. Time ran out for Dawid Sierakowiak who died of tuberculosis in August 1943. Time ran out for Raymond-Raoul Lambert who was arrested with his family in August, sent to Drancy and shipped to Auschwitz-Birkenau in December 1943. Emmanuel Ringelblum escaped from the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943 and survived in hiding for a year, until his refuge was betrayed to the Germans. Herman Kruk was transferred to the Klooga concentration camp in Estonia where he was murdered a day before it was overrun by the Red Army in September 1944. Cael Perechodnik fled the Otwock ghetto and went into hiding until the Warsaw home army uprising when he became active in the resistance. He died in a bunker in October 1944 after it was discovered by the Germans.

Philip Mechanicus was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in March 1944 and murdered. David Koker was relocated to Auschwitz-Birkenau as part of a special working group, but perished of exhaustion, malnourishment and illness en route to Dachau in April 1945. Abraham Golub survived in hiding and later emigrated to Palestine. Emil Dorian continued to live in Bucharest and was a leading member of the Jewish community there until his death in 1956.

III

I will conclude with some brief thoughts on the dynamic between warfare, operational decisions, and the destruction of Europe's Jews. During the first half of the war, Jews paid the price for German military failure.

The strategic and operational doctrines that had governed the German high command since the days of Frederick the Great mandated short, ruthlessly fought wars and pursuit of the single, decisive victory. Germany was a medium-sized economic and military power, occupying an unfavourable geo-strategic location in the middle of Europe, surrounded by potential enemies but without easily defensible natural borders. Campaigns had to be rapid and decisive because the country could not sustain large armies in the field for a long drawn out conflict. This was as true for von Moltke and von Schlieffin as it was for von Rundstedt and von Manstein.³⁶

Hitler and his service chiefs absorbed the lesson that there was no point holding back military assets if the country would be doomed in a long war, and that it was necessary to be absolutely relentless in order to secure victory in the shortest possible time. But from the start of hostilities in 1939 they were confounded. Instead of isolating and fighting Poland, they found themselves confronted with a war on two fronts. Although it was relatively straightforward to defeat the Polish armies, in the

west they faced two imperial powers with vastly greater resources. Hitler was lucky in his enemies, though, and more by luck than judgment scored an astonishing victory in the summer of 1940. Yet this success turned out to be an illusion. Britain, with its imperial hinterland, refused to surrender and Germany lacked the means to finish her off. Hitler proposed to solve his strategic dilemma by invading Russia, thereby denying Britain the hope of assistance from the last major land power on the continent. The German army modelled its attack on the successful campaign in the west, popularly known as the 'blitzkrieg', yet the conditions in western Europe conducive to that style of warfare simply did not obtain in eastern Europe. Furthermore, the planning by the German general staff was remarkably slapdash. The result was a disaster that condemned Germany to a war it could not win.³⁷

The Jews paid the price. The preferred solution to the 'Jewish question' from 1939 to 1941 was a combination of forced emigration and expulsion. As the Germans conquered one country after another they hoped to exploit its territory or possessions as a dumping ground for unwanted Jews: first a corner of occupied Poland, then French-controlled Madagascar, and finally the land beyond the Urals. After Operation Barbarossa foundered the Siberian solution remained a mirage. However, Germany's defeat in Russia in 1941 not only removed the option of ejecting millions of Jews from areas under German domination, it had a domino effect across the continent. Plunging morale at home led the Nazi leaders to step up actions against the German Jews. Party bosses clamoured for Jews to be deported, freeing up apartments for bombed out German families. To make room for 'Reich Jews' in ghettos in the east, local Nazi rulers prepared to massacre the Polish, Latvian, and Russian Jews packed within their confines. Jewish civilians in occupied Russia were perceived as a security threat from the inception of 'Barbarossa', but as the military position worsened and

German supply lines were plagued by Russian marauders, Jews became prime targets for pacification operations. Finally, military failure created a resource crisis for the German army and the home front. There was not enough food for both the men under arms and the civilian population. The shortfall was met in part by depriving the populations in occupied Europe of food and fuel. Given Nazi racial predilections, the peoples of Poland and the USSR were condemned to the most drastic reductions in food supply; but the Jews were subjected to a policy that amounted to forced starvation.³⁸

Hitler had repeatedly threatened that if Germany found itself in a world conflict, the Jews would be punished. With the German declaration of war on the United States the war became global. Jews ceased to be hostages whose lives were held as a guarantee of American non-intervention; instead, they became culprits who deserved sanguinary retribution. Ultimately, the course of the war rather than decisions within the framework of anti-Jewish policy triggered the descent into a Europe-wide genocide.³⁹

As we have seen, during 1942 the Jews in Europe understood that they were in a race against time. Could the allied armies cover a sufficient distance, fast enough, to save them from the Germans? If the Jews paid the price for German military failure in the first half of the war, they paid the price for allied military failure in the second.

At a series of summit meetings between Churchill and Roosevelt, flanked by conferences between their chiefs of staff, from December 1941 to July 1942, the British and Americans argued over whether it was feasible to launch an invasion of northwest Europe in 1942 or 1943. The lack of shipping, shortage of landing craft, and the unseasoned character of the American armed forces persuaded the Americans to accept British recommendations for a smaller scale invasion of a peripheral

location. Churchill favoured Norway; his chiefs of staff insisted on North Africa. The American deferred to the British but soon realised the implications of the deal they had made: landings in North Africa in autumn 1942 would almost certainly rule out an assault on continental Europe until mid 1943.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, Operation Torch proved to be far more protracted than expected -- with severe knock-on effects. Secret negotiations with the local Vichy authorities were bungled and the assault faced serious resistance from French troops in many places. The beachheads were hundreds of miles away from the main targets: Tunis, Bizerte, and Tripoli. To the surprise of the allies, Hitler air-lifted troops to shield the rear of the Panzer Army Afrika while weather slowed the allied advance. When the British vanguard reached the Tunisian frontier it ran into strong German defensive positions. Although the Italo-German bridgehead in Tunisia was ultimately unsustainable and amounted to a strategic folly, it held up allied progress until early May 1943 and obliged the Americans to give up ideas of a cross-channel assault in 1943 and for the moment settle for the Mediterranean strategy preferred by the British.⁴¹

The Jewish question always had a security dimension for the Germans, but with allied troops securely based in North Africa it acquired new geographical dimensions and a fresh urgency. Now the entire southern Mediterranean littoral beckoned as a location for the second front that Stalin demanded from the western allies. As a result, Jewish populations that had so far escaped the ministrations of the SS came into focus as a potential fifth column or a source of assistance for an allied incursion. Hitler consequently ordered the immediate occupation of southern France and strengthened German garrisons in the Balkans. Every Jewish community in these zones was now regarded as a potential resistance nest, a bridgehead for the allies.

Luigi Fleischmann was a German-born teenager whose family had moved from Germany to Fiume after 1933. During the war they were interned in a village in the Abruzzi. From there Luigi excitedly followed reports of the Salerno landings but soon started to doubt the speed of the allied advance. In October 1943 he wrote in his notebook, 'the Allies are taking their time'. At that point, the British were just 60 miles away. But they did not reach his village until June 1944. By that time the Germans had seized several Jewish families in neighbouring towns. They were just a few of the thousands of Jews who were rounded up, arrested, and deported by German forces with their Italian Fascist collaborators.⁴⁵

In the end, the Anglo-American way of warfare doomed the Jews as surely as the German way of warfare. The courtesies and compromises of coalition warfare prevented bolder, more decisive moves that might have covered more ground, faster. The predilection for vast material superiority required a massive lead time for every operation to allow for the long, slow build up of men and munitions. The sheer sophistication of the Anglo-American military machine, its dependence on the internal combustion engine, made it vulnerable to supply bottle-necks, as in September 1944 when the allied forces in France literally ran out of gas.⁴⁶

In April 1944, the Czech Jewish writer Oskar Rosenfeld, a contributor to the Lodz ghetto chronicle, wrote in his private notebook, 'We are all waiting for redemption, liberation ...'. Three months later he summed up the prospects as, 'Apocalypse or redemption.' In August 1944, Rosenfeld was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau along with the most of the other 70,000 Jews still in the ghetto. Hate and indifference played their part in the Jewish apocalypse, but ultimately it was the war that explains why for millions there was no redemption.⁴⁷

³¹ *Dorian Diary*, 22 November 1942, 244-5; Victor Klemperer, *To The Bitter End. The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1941-45* ed. and trans Martin Chalmers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), 1 January 1943, 175; Avraham Tory [Golub], *Surviving the Holocaust. The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, trans. Jerzy Michalowicz, ed. Martin Gilbert with Dina Porat (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19 February 1943, 230-32; Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps 1939*

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