

# The Jewish Councils of Poland:

The Evolution of Historical Interpretation

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## Introduction

On September 21, 1939, Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the German Security Police, sent an urgent letter to the chiefs of the mobile killing units (*Einsatzgruppen*) in occupied Poland. In the preface, Heydrich referred to a distinction between a “final aim” for the Jews and the stages leading up to this final aim. Part one of the letter demanded that all Jews be expelled from the countryside and then concentrated into ghettos with the aim of “[establishing] only few cities of concentration.” In part two, Heydrich expressed the need in each community for a Council of Jewish elders, which was to be made up of “the remaining authoritative personalities and rabbis.” These Jewish Councils were to be made fully responsible “in the literal sense of the word,”<sup>1</sup> for the exact execution of all German directives. The councils were to take a census of the Jews in their areas and would then be informed of the dates of evacuation into the ghettos. The Germans’ plan was to concentrate the Jews into ghettos by using the support of these Jewish Councils. They were created to assist the Germans in carrying out various orders and at no time were they considered to be autonomous.

This is a study of the Jewish Councils, and it is also a study of the Nazi system, because the *Judenrat* was a German-controlled apparatus.<sup>2</sup> Jewish self-help became integral to the Germans’ final aims, and the *Judenrat* as a concept necessarily became involved in the destruction process. Although responsibility for the genocide cannot be placed on the councils, many historians argue that they did, albeit reluctantly, aid in the annihilation process. Raul Hilberg came to this conclusion and received harsh criticism for his analysis of the *Judenräte*. Throughout his career he suggested that the Jewish Councils helped facilitate the destruction of European Jewry. In a 1981 article he argued that,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Reinhard Heydrich to Chiefs of All Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police, September 21, 1939 in Yitzhak Arad et al., *Documents on the Holocaust* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 174.

<sup>2</sup> Although there were pre-war Jewish communities (*Kehilla*) that did take on similar tasks as the Jewish Councils, they cannot be equated because their purposes were fundamentally different. The *Kehilla* existed to serve the Jewish community while the *Judenrat* existed to serve the Germans.

Once more, it should be emphasized that the Jewish Councils were not the willful accomplices of the Germans. Within the German superstructure, however, they were its indispensable operatives. Even when their activities were benign, as in the case of housing refugees or promoting sanitary conditions, they could contribute to the overall purposes and ultimate goals of their German supervisors.<sup>3</sup>

Hilberg asserted that the Jewish Councils failed to realize their overall role in aiding the Germans, continuing to do so even when their actions unmistakably contributed to the destruction process (i.e., during deportations). The debates concerning the Jewish Councils are among the most troubling byproducts of the Holocaust. Clearly, no member of any Jewish Council actively desired the destruction of his own people. Yet certain councils and council leaders took advantage of their communities. They made profits from deportations and taxation, and as their ghettos starved, some ate lavish meals. They often used their status in the community to save themselves at the expense of others, and some bribed officials with taxpayers' money to evade forced labor and other German demands. However, they also established schools, orphanages, and medical facilities to lessen the burdens of ghetto life. They built community centers and frequently held prayer meetings, and often tried to alleviate Jewish suffering despite being forced to comply with the Germans. Such actions illustrate the *Judenrat's* paradoxical behavior.

In many cases, the leaders and members of the *Judenräte* knew what their actions would entail. Despite this knowledge, they continued their policies regardless of the consequences, hoping simultaneously to please the Germans while saving a remnant of their community. As Raul Hilberg suggested, "The Jews attempted to tame the Germans as one would attempt to tame a wild beast. They avoided 'provocations' and complied instantly with decrees and orders. They hoped somehow that the German drive would spend itself."<sup>4</sup> These attempts to satisfy the Germans' ever increasing demands through compliance universally resulted in destruction, and

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<sup>3</sup> Raul Hilberg, "The Judenrat and the Jewish Response" in *The Holocaust as Historical Experience*, ed. Yehuda Bauer & Nathan Rotenstreich (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 109.

for this, many historians struggle with the question, “How could the Jewish Councils continue to comply with German demands when deportation and annihilation became a reality?”

Nazi policies offered no real choice in the matter: the *Judenräte* either complied with German demands, or they were disposed of. Nonetheless, many Jewish Councils were aware of execution sites, and the true meaning of deportations and killing centers, but they generally did little to inform their communities of the deportations and resettlement actions. A chronicler of the Warsaw ghetto, Emmanuel Ringelblum wrote, “Why didn’t we resist when they began to resettle 300,000 Jews from Warsaw? Why did we allow ourselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter?”<sup>5</sup> Ringelblum’s reference to “ourselves” implies that the Jewish Councils knowingly led the Jews to their deaths without so much as a warning of the destination. In a similar biblical reference, the Jewish Fighting Organization of Warsaw proclaimed: “Jewish masses, the hour is drawing near. You must be prepared to resist, not to give yourselves up to slaughter like sheep.”<sup>6</sup> Did the Jewish Councils deceive the Jews? Did they aid in the destruction process? What did they do or not do to save fellow Jews? These are all questions that must be asked, not only to understand why, but also how the Holocaust transpired.

This thesis will consider the conflicting role of the Jewish Councils and how interpretations of their roles in the destruction process have evolved. The Jewish Councils were neither collaborationist institutions nor solely victim institutions that took no part in the genocidal process. Many historians agree that the councils did aid (although unwillingly) in the destruction process, while others maintain that the Jewish Councils were victims in the clearest sense. With the exception of Hannah Arendt’s highly critical and criticized assessment of the Jewish Councils,<sup>7</sup> historians’ interpretations have not outright condemned the Jewish Councils

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Jacob Sloan, (New York: ibooks, inc., 2006), 310.

<sup>6</sup> Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

as collaborationist institutions. Yet, many historians question the extent of *Judenrat* culpability during the Holocaust. In short, there remains much debate over this topic.

This thesis will focus on the Jewish Councils in occupied Poland. Reinhard Heydrich's letter outlines the importance of the Generalgouvernement (a part of the occupied Polish territories not considered to be part of Greater Germany) as a concentration area for the Jews, and this area was later home to all of the major extermination centers during the Holocaust. Following Heydrich's September letter, Hans Frank, the Governor General of the Generalgouvernement, issued a decree on November 28, 1939<sup>8</sup> outlining the establishment and make up of the Jewish councils. According to this decree, the councils were to be formed no later than December 31, 1939. In communities with fewer than 10,000 Jews, a *Judenrat* of twelve members would be elected. In communities with over 10,000 Jews, twenty-four Jews would be "elected."

Poland had the largest population of Jews in Europe (approximately 3,000,000 in 1939), and hence the Polish *Judenräte* were responsible for a large percentage of Europe's Jews. After the invasion of Russia in 1941, many more Jews were deported into Poland from the East as well as the West. In many cases, Polish ghettos in territory annexed to the Third Reich such as Lodz, Warsaw, Krakow, Bialystok, and Lublin were the final transfer points before annihilation in the killing centers. Not surprisingly, there is a wealth of primary source information available from Poland, especially from the two largest ghettos, Lodz and Warsaw. The study of the largest ghettos will illustrate not only how individual councils and their members reacted to German demands, but more importantly how these differing policies affected the respective communities during deportations. Finally, the comparison of differing council policies will point to the debate over the controversial role of the *Judenräte*.

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<sup>8</sup> Regulation for the Establishment of the Judenräte, November 28, 1939, "Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority," Yad Vashem, <http://www.yadvashem.org>

Isaiah Trunk, an expert on the Jewish Councils whose magisterial work *Judenrat*<sup>9</sup> remains the best secondary work in the field, suggested that generalizations about the Jewish Councils should not, and in fact cannot, be made. Rather, the historian should acknowledge the diverse character of the *Judenräte* by focusing on individual communities. Although this is a cautious and legitimate view, there is a tendency among analysts to avoid any judgments at all when exclusively contextualizing the history of the *Judenräte* in individual communities. Of course, each council was unique and defined by individual differences. Yet this does not mean that a generalization cannot be made: the majority of the *Judenräte* in Poland maintained compliance strategies (even during deportations), and for this, a more generalized approach to the history of the *Judenräte* in occupied Poland is necessary.

Additionally, Trunk, as well as other historians, have studied the *Judenräte* as an almost hallowed issue: because the Jewish councils were victims, to criticize them in any way is to incorrectly state that they were, to whatever extent, collaborative institutions. Jacob Robinson has suggested that, “Legally and morally, the members of the Jewish Councils can no more be judged accomplices of their Nazi rulers than can a store owner be judged accomplice of an armed robber to whom he surrenders his store at gunpoint.”<sup>10</sup> Robinson simplistically compared communities of human beings to merchandise in a store: leaders have certain responsibilities to protect their communities, and despite their limitations, *Judenrat* policies often advanced the destruction process. There is no doubt that the Jewish councils were victims. However, although they could not affect broader Nazi policy, they were in a position to affect how it was implemented. However unwilling, they continuously complied with German demands, and their cooperation became integral to the destruction process.

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 159.

Due to the emotional nature of the role of the Jewish councils, historians like Robinson and Trunk often analyze the historical record sympathetically rather than analytically. This has often mired the debate over the Jewish councils in emotional and empathetic rhetoric, which limits the study of such a complex issue. Although the historian must avoid an overly sympathetic approach to their study, it is essential to acknowledge that despite the Jewish councils' controversial roles, they were Nazi-controlled institutions: the debates over the *Judenräte* would not exist without the Nazi system that established and maintained them. Once this is recognized, personal sentiments must not dictate the study of the Jewish councils. The historian must consider the *Judenrat's* role within an unbiased framework, separating him or herself from emotional interpretations in order to better understand their motivations and history.

As Raul Hilberg has maintained all along, the historian must look at facts surrounding the issue at hand. The councils were not solely antagonistic communities: they attempted to alleviate Jewish suffering by providing aid such as shelter, medical facilities and food services. Furthermore, the Nazi system manipulated the Jewish councils to serve their needs. They used ghettoization, demoralization, and degradation to ensure Jewish submissiveness. Thus, the complexity of the Nazi system no doubt exacerbated Jewish behavior to a certain extent. Even so, Jewish councils also deceived their communities; the Jewish police persecuted, searched out, and often beat fellow Jews; the councils prepared lists for deportation; the councils encouraged their communities to report to the deportation trains, and they generally carried out these policies in an orderly fashion. They obeyed German orders and helped send hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths. The vast majority of the councils did all of this without physically resisting the Germans, without informing their respective populations of the impending doom, and without refusing to carry out orders when they knew what the end result would be.



Patterns of *Judenrat* behavior can be summarized as follows:

1) a complete refusal to cooperate with German demands (regardless of the extent of cooperation); 2) the compliance with certain measures of a material nature such as the seizure of property and housing evictions, while refusing to hand over fellow Jews; 3) an assumption that certain aspects of the community would have to be sacrificed in order to ensure the survival of the larger Jewish community, and 4) the full compliance with all German orders without any concern for the general public. These attitudes were demonstrated in a study conducted by Aharon Weiss in 1977 regarding the conduct of 146 *Judenrat* chairmen in the Generalgouvernement.<sup>11</sup> 30.8% of the original chairmen, that is, the chairmen of the *Judenräte* who were killed in the first “actions” and deportations, offered help to their communities and warned of deportations, as compared to 14.4% who fully complied with German orders.<sup>12</sup> The Germans dismissed or killed close to 30% of those who refused to carry out orders or hand over their fellow Jews. In comparison, the members of the *Judenrat* that were appointed *after* the original deportations demonstrated a much higher level of compliance: in Weiss’ study of 101 “later” chairmen, 60.4% complied with German orders as compared to 15.8% who outright refused and warned their communities of the consequences of deportation. Many historians suggest, as does certain evidence, that the later members of the *Judenräte* were more corruptible and submissive to German demands, hoping for personal gain as well as survival. Whatever the case, the statistics clearly demonstrated that compliance was a common strategy among the council members cited, even after it became clear that deportation would precede annihilation. When the communities of Poland were threatened by mass extermination, many *Judenräte* continued to comply with the Nazis. Due to this uncomfortable realization, many

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<sup>11</sup> Israel Gutman, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 767.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

historians have attempted to understand at what point various councils became aware of the true nature of deportations.

Reports of extermination facilities began to leak into the ghettos by the spring of 1942, but many ghetto Jews believed that they were either simply rumors or isolated instances of brutality. In the town of Piotrkow Trybunalski, two Jews who escaped the Chelmno killing center revealed the truth about the gas chambers, yet “most people refused to believe their ears. [When] the leaders of the community met... they decided that the excesses the two young men had witnessed must be regional aberrations. Everyone knew that the SS commander Odilo Globocnik in Lublin was exceptionally vicious. Surely nothing so terrible could happen in their district.”<sup>13</sup> Although the Jewish Councils were initially unaware of the Nazis’ destructive aims (as demonstrated in the case above), it is unquestionable that during the mass deportations in the summer of 1942, most *Judenräte* were knowledgeable of German intentions. Consequently, their compliance during deportations directly affected the implementation of the destruction process. “Jewry,” wrote Hilberg, “became at least passively a participant in its own undoing.”<sup>14</sup>

This thesis is largely a study of the history of the *Judenräte* and the way in which historians have interpreted the councils’ roles. It will examine the history of the Jewish councils of Poland from the moment of their inception to the final deportations of Polish Jewry. Subsequently, this thesis will analyze and critique the work of scholars who have contributed to the debates over the Jewish councils. A careful study of these historical interpretations will not only reveal a more nuanced interpretation of the Jewish councils, but will also illustrate the moral and philosophical issues surrounding irresponsibility and actions. Although this thesis will examine the Jewish councils, it must be remembered that Nazi policies, and not Jewish behavior, are at the core of *Judenrat* studies.

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<sup>13</sup> Doris Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 184.

<sup>14</sup> Raul Hilberg, “The Ghetto as a Form of Government: An Analysis of Isaiah Trunk’s Work” in *The Holocaust as Historical Experience*, 66.

Chapter One of this thesis examines the historical narrative of the Jewish councils. From their establishment, many Jews questioned whether or not participating in a Jewish organization intended to serve the Germans was morally acceptable. Although the debates over the roles of the Jewish councils emerged with their inception in 1939, most Jews believed that complying with German demands was the only possibility at the outset of the war. Pre-war Jewish leadership was transformed into an apparatus to serve the Germans, and their responsibilities evolved from everyday tasks to more controversial decisions once the deportations began. From ghetto taxation to the Jewish police, Chapter One focuses on Warsaw and Lodz to illustrate how the roles of the Jewish councils became part of the machinery of destruction.

Chapter Two examines the leadership of the ghetto communities. As council chairmen, Adam Czerniakow of Warsaw and Chaim Rumkowski of Lodz illustrate differing forms and extents of cooperation, from suicide to full compliance. Some regard the suicide victim Czerniakow as one of the noblest Jewish leaders, while Rumkowski is often criticized for his despotic and compliant behavior. Regardless of these perceptions, both men neglected to inform their communities of the true nature of the deportations. Their policies, along with the policies of other leaders in occupied Poland, suggest the underlying problems of continued Jewish compliance during deportations, as well as the failure to inform Jews of what deportations entailed.

Chapter Three discusses the ghetto inhabitants' perception of the Jewish councils. Using the writings of Emmanuel Ringelblum and Chaim Kaplan of Warsaw, as well as other diaries and chronicles from Lodz and other ghettos in occupied Poland, the chapter will demonstrate that most ghetto inhabitants viewed the councils in a negative light. Early debates over the moral obligations of the Jewish councils emerge in these primary sources. Thus, in these examples are found the first criticisms of council leadership and policies

during the occupation. Although subjective and lacking a historian's hindsight, these sources offer a unique perspective on ghetto life and the Jewish councils that helped shape it.

This thesis also examines the evolution of historical interpretations of the Jewish councils. The debates over the *Judenräte* emerged within the ghettos, but interpretations of the Jewish councils continued to evolve once historians began to construct a more complete historical narrative. Chapter Four thus analyzes the ways in which scholars have studied and interpreted the *Judenräte* since the initial work was done in the mid-1950s. Debates over the Jewish councils emerged as a result of studies by Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Trunk, and others between 1957 and 1975. Other scholars have since contributed to the debates, but the books and discussions between 1957 and 1975 were the most dynamic and influential for *Judenrat* studies. Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) and Trunk's *Judenrat* (1972) remain the most fundamental to the subject matter, not only for the important historical narratives they present, but also for their influence on the debates over the Jewish councils.

This thesis will demonstrate the importance of *Judenrat* studies in relation to Holocaust studies as a whole. The Jewish councils became integral to the implementation of the "final solution" in Poland. However, the Nazi system that created them had as much of an effect on council behavior as the Jewish behavior and leadership. Council compliance often facilitated the destruction process, but Nazi policies controlled the Jewish councils. Jewish behavior was therefore dependent on Nazi manipulation. Thus, the study of the Jewish councils is also a study of Nazi policies: by studying the *Judenräte*, the historian gains insight into the complexity of the Nazi system. This thesis will consider the evolution of historical interpretations of the role of the Jewish Councils, from the first Nazi documents that established the Jewish councils, to the primary sources that emerged from the ghettos, to the historians' studies and interpretations of the *Judenräte*. The comprehensive study of how the

councils have been viewed throughout history is not only necessary to understand the *Judenrat* as an entity, but also to understand Nazi ideology and goals.