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# Population Movements in Eastern Europe and the “Final Solution”

## Root Causes: The Case of Jewish Refugees from Hitler and the Nazi Holocaust

Despite the hundreds of volumes that have been written on Jewish refugees from Hitler and the Nazi Holocaust, historians still have difficulty fitting Hitler's “Final Solution” of the Jewish Question into the larger framework of the Third Reich. Was the anti-Jewish course of Hitlerian policy set, from a very early point, for the ultimate goal of mass murder? Was “World Jewry” such a constant preoccupation, requiring continuing efforts, even at the expense of other German goals? Or did the Nazis’ murderous impulses evolve, notably under the impact of the war in Russia, to reach their genocidal conclusion only when that conflict reached its height? Did some particularly demonic ideological force drive the machinery of death forward, even at its lowest levels? Or was Nazi Germany less affected by the pathological hatreds of its leaders than is sometimes allowed?

Scholars grapple with these questions, and as they do so we are able to see more clearly into the dark recesses of Hitlerian criminality. We can continue to anticipate clarification from the study of Nazi Jewish policy, as research uncovers new administrative documentation and probes the workings of the Third Reich at the local level. My own effort here is to look at the matter from a different angle — prompted by my study of refugee movements on the European continent.

Seen from this vantage point, the decision to murder all of European Jewry is linked to an even wider demographic project undertaken by Nazism — the achievement of *Lebensraum*, or living space, written and spoken about by Hitler since the early 1920s. A look at Nazi policy in Poland, the first stage of that gigantic undertaking, may provide a key to understanding how European-wide mass murder became a fixed objective of the Third Reich.

In both rhetoric and the fundamental principles involved, the Jews were intimately a part of Hitler's foreign policy objectives. His most important goal, articulated from the earliest point in his career, was to build a vast new pan-German Empire, intended to achieve the purest expression of Aryan civilization and to last for a thousand years.

There were two strategies to achieve this end. First, Germany had to absorb extensive territory in Eastern Europe, to set the empire properly on its economic and biological foundations. Inevitably, this involved a conflict with Soviet Russia, a state crippled, Hitler thought, by its “Judeo-Bolshevik system”.

Second, to protect the racial fabric of the new order, Hitler encouraged vast population movements: non-Germans, especially Jews, had to be ruthlessly excluded from the territory of the new Reich; at the same time, pure Germans, or *Volksdeutsche*, wherever they lived, were to be brought within the fold, particularly in the new German territory carved out in the east.

### Nazi Jewish Policy, 1933-39

Historians have stressed the Nazis’ failure to clarify their Jewish policy in the earliest period of Nazi rule, emphasizing the lack of any clear planning or operational consistency in their anti-semitic programme. During the first five years under Hitler the radical impulses associated with the brown-shirted Storm Troopers alternated with a more cautious approach, fearful of severe repercussions against Germany, particularly in the economic sphere, that might result from too violent a move against the Jews.

Gradually, by means of a purge of the civil service, the Nuremberg Laws, and the confiscation of Jewish property, the Jews of Germany were marginalized,

isolated from their fellow citizens and reduced to impoverishment. Jewish emigration emerged as one objective, but by no means the exclusive goal of German policy.

All this began to change during the latter part of 1937 and throughout 1938, accompanying important shifts in the structure of the Third Reich. Briefly, this was an important turning point in the fortunes of the Hitlerian order, when the Nazi system had finally achieved sufficient solidity in economic and political terms to launch a new wave of radicalism at home and abroad. In a variety of spheres, Nazi policy-makers emerged from behind the conservative screens that had obscured the goals of the movement.

Hermann Göring, who became Economics Minister, accelerated the Aryanization of Jewish property. Other policies completed the isolation of German Jewry. And following the carefully orchestrated riots of *Kristallnacht*, in November 1938, the Nazi leadership placed new emphasis on getting rid of the Jews.

Henceforth Jewish emigration, and if necessary forced emigration, became a primary goal of the regime. Surveying the Jewish question in January 1939, a foreign office official observed that the “ultimate aim of Germany's Jewish policy is the emigration of all Jews living on German territory”. All signs at home were now positive. True, potential receiving countries were sealing their borders against “the undesirable Jewish intruders.” Yet eventually this difficulty would be solved, probably through some international agreement to solve the Jewish question. The main task of German policy was to keep up the emigration pressure.

Of approximately 525,000 Jews in Germany in 1933, nearly 150,000 managed

to leave by the beginning of 1939. Roughly another 150,000 left in the next two years. As the number of those trying desperately to escape accelerated, however, so also did the number of Jews at risk. In March 1938, with *Anschluss* — the Nazi absorption of Austria — some 200,000 more Jews were brought within the Nazi domain. Tens of thousands more Jews came with the incorporation of much of Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the following year.

Yet despite these daunting setbacks, the Nazis pressed ahead with their emigration policy. Placed in charge of Jewish persecutions by the Führer, Hermann Göring commissioned Reinhard Heydrich, head of Germany's huge SS police apparatus, to accelerate departures by all possible means. Heydrich in turn designated Adolf Eichmann, a zealous specialist operating from Vienna, to quicken the pace.

Meanwhile, in a series of negotiations with British and American representatives, German officials groped toward the "international solution" to which the Nazis were committed. Berlin suggested a variety of schemes by which great masses of German Jews could be dispatched from Germany with a small proportion of their property. Washington and London played the Germans along, hoping to encourage more orderly departures, yet anxious not to assume any new burden of assistance to the refugees. So matters stood when war with Poland broke out in September 1939.

### **Lebensraum in Eastern Europe, 1939-41**

Given the Nazis' attention to the Jewish matters before hostilities began, it is interesting that the Jewish issue played no role in the opening of hostilities against Poland. The Jews did not figure in the planning of *Fall Weiss*, code word for Germany's attack on her eastern neighbour, and the Jews were remarkably absent from the motivation that underlay Hitler's first moves in the Second World War. All this stands in significant contrast, by the way, to the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, in June 1941 — an important point to note for those who consider Hitler's central strategic aim to have been a "war against the Jews".

In September 1939, Hitler was enraged at the Poles' refusal to concede territorial adjustments on their western frontier and to acknowledge German hegemony in East Central Europe. To his assembled generals at the Berghof in late August, he declared his goal to be the elimination of Poland as a functioning society. Hitler assured his commanders that no pity should be shown, and no hesitation over means should be tolerated. Murder, apparently, would be widespread. According to one account, it was on this occasion that the Führer made one of his first, chilling references to genocide:

Chenghis Khan had millions of women and children killed by his own will and with a gay heart. History sees only in him a great state builder. What weak Western civilization thinks of me does not matter. . . I have sent to the East my "Death Head Units" with the order to kill without mercy all men, women, and children of the Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the vital space that we need. Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?

From the start, therefore, the Polish campaign was linked not to the Jewish question but to another of Hitler's fundamental goals: the carving out of *Lebensraum*, or living space, in the East.

Racial issues were closely interrelated with this geopolitical objective, however, as soon became apparent. Immediately following their devastating victory over the Poles, the Germans made the first geopolitical moves toward the achievement of their ends. Conquered Poland was divided in two. The northern and western parts, including Danzig, West Prussia, Posen, and Eastern Upper Silesia, were incorporated into the Reich (the bulk of these regions forming the new *Reichsgaue* of Danzig-Westpreussen and the Wartheland). The rest, known as the *Generalgouvernement*, was placed under the authority of a German governor, Hans Frank, responsible directly to Hitler.

The Nazi plan was to subject the incorporated provinces to the most intense Germanization, to eliminate all impure racial elements. The *Generalgouvernement*, to which the latter were to be

sent, was to become a vast work camp, an immense repository of unskilled labor to serve the needs of the enlarged German state.

This grand design called for vast shifts of population. Taking charge of this effort was Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer SS who had the dominant voice in the incorporated territory. In October, as soon as the guns fell silent, Hitler authorized Himmler to institute a Reich Commission for the Consolidation of Germandom (*Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums*), a powerful bureaucracy to coordinate the Nazi's population schemes. Under Himmler's direction, vast numbers of people, Jews and non-Jews, began to move in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe.

Crucial to the Germanization of the incorporated territories was the effort to bring hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans from wherever they lived in Eastern Europe to settle in the new eastern marches of the Reich. Hurriedly improvised in the autumn of 1939, this gigantic transfer of people also came under the aegis of Himmler's new *Reichskommissariat*, moving *Volksdeutsche* from Poland, the Baltic states, the Soviet Union, and Rumania.

In practice, these supposedly voluntary transfers of Germans westward from Eastern Europe were often little different from the Nazis' forcing of Poles in the other direction. Foreign correspondents were banned from the scene. Villages were sent on long treks to railway junctions, often without the slightest desire to "return" to a Reich they had never seen.

In the year after the conquest of Poland Himmler's *Reichskommissariat* noted nearly half a million German evacuees uprooted. During the entire course of the war about 1.25 million Germans were moved, of whom fewer than 500,000 were ever settled on farms. Most were simply moved from one resettlement camp to the next until the end of the war.

More important from my standpoint here is the movement in the other direction. To make way for the German settlers — whom the Nazis liked to think of as sturdy, independent agriculturalists — masses of local inhabitants were forced to the east — largely to be

deposited in Hans Frank's *Generalgouvernement*. Himmler's priorities underscored at the same time his concern to rid the Reich of particularly undesirable elements. All Jews, estimated at over 500,000, were to be removed from the incorporated territories. "Anti-German Poles" were another target group; so too were "persons of Polish-Jewish mixed blood". Polish intellectuals, and all those who might constitute the leadership of a future Polish nation, were similarly to be sent eastwards — those, that is, who had not already been murdered.

At first, Himmler's dynamic initiatives seemed to confirm the dumping-ground status of Hans Frank's preserve. Unannounced, train after train brought evacuees into the *Generalgouvernement*, causing immense logistical problems. Convoys arrived in freezing weather, without food, and without any preparation at their point of termination. By the end of the first year of occupation, no less than ten per cent of the entire population of the *Generalgouvernement* were turned into refugees. German officials simply did not know what to do with the flood of new arrivals, deemed by Himmler to be the refuse of the Third Reich.

Repeatedly, Frank protested the arrival of so many refugees and, in February 1940, personally delivered his complaint in Berlin — apparently to no avail. Jews, Poles and other "undesirables" continued to arrive on his doorstep. At the end of March, however, Frank joyfully announced the Führer's promise that his domain would one day be made *Judenrein* and eventually cleansed also of Poles.

### **Jewish Refugees and the German Lebensraum**

When it came to the Jews there was a particularly striking gap between Nazi theory and practice in the months immediately following the defeat of Poland. There was no doubt that the Nazis maintained their concern to settle sooner or later with their hated enemies, and their resolution to rid Europe eventually of the Jews showed no signs of abating. Within the conquered Polish territory, Jews often headed the list of the "undesirable elements."

Occasionally, the Nazis spoke of an as yet ill-defined "final aim," usually implying that its formal definition would await the end of the war. As a stock formulation the term "final solution" may have first appeared in June 1940, as a "territorial final solution", and it was increasingly used in the spring of 1941. By "final solution" the Nazis implied a vast process of deportation and emigration, in which the Jews would leave Europe en masse. The top priority was to eliminate the German Jews; then the others would follow.

Yet despite this long-range objective, Jews did not figure significantly in the vast deportations from the incorporated territories to the *Generalgouvernement*. To be sure, large numbers of Jewish refugees had spontaneously moved east in order not to remain in the territories incorporated into the Reich. In the earliest "wild resettlements" of the autumn of 1939, Jews seem indeed to have constituted an important part of the uprooted migrants. Thereafter, however, relatively few were sent.

For one thing, the Germans turned more and more to the Polish peasant population, preferring to transfer eastwards people whose homesteads could be conveniently occupied by a farm community of *Volksdeutsche*. As the German demographic project became more carefully organized, it appeared unreasonable to move the urban Jewish population before the rural Poles.

In addition, because of its uncertain status within the Wartheland, the decision was made not to undertake any deportations from Lodz, which happened to be the largest concentration of Jews outside the *Generalgouvernement*.

Driven by ideological imperatives to seek and prepare for a definitive answer to the Jewish question, yet blocked by practical problems from reaching their goals, the Nazi leadership strove for interim solutions. On September 21, 1939, Himmler's deputy Reinhard Heydrich issued a *Schnellbrief* to *Einsatzgruppen* leaders setting the stage for anti-Jewish activity in the newly-conquered Polish territories. He made reference to a top secret ultimate goal, or *Endziel*, that could not be defined at present, and drew attention to an immediate programme of concentrating the Jews in cities, at railway junctions, obviously in

preparation for their ultimate deportation. Councils of Jewish elders, later known as *Judenräte*, were to be set up in each Jewish community.

Local SS commanders thereupon took the initiative to establish these concentrations, usually closed off as ghettos, over the following months, extending into 1941 and even longer. During the next two years, a vast process of uprooting began, which constituted an unprecedented calamity for the Jewish population — overshadowed subsequently by the horrific mass murder in Nazi death camps. To facilitate future movement, refugees were packed into teeming ghettos in the poorest and least adequate portions of cities in both the incorporated territories and the *Generalgouvernement*. Everywhere, the Nazis cleared Jews from the countryside and forced them into towns where the ghettos were established. Evidence suggests that at least a million of Poland's three million Jews were torn loose from their homes as a result.

Within each ghetto, the crush of deportees made life impossible. Warsaw housed 90,000 Jewish refugees when its ghetto gates were closed in November 1940; the Nazis forced even more into the city, however, so that they numbered 130,000 in the spring of 1941 — about one-third of the entire Jewish population.

Within the ghettos overcrowding contributed to spectacular mortality rates. Typhus, dysentery, tuberculosis — all took their toll. The Jewish Councils' elaborately organized public welfare operations constantly broke down because of inadequate resources and the endlessly rising tide of need. The arrival of new refugees constantly exacerbated the situation. Not infrequently newcomers quarreled with residents of longer standing. Invariably, the refugees were at a disadvantage. New arrivals camped in schools, synagogues, and the few other public buildings within the ghettos.

Along with their periodic raids on the Jewish population for labourers, the Germans proceeded systematically to starve the ghetto inmates — a task made easier by their concentration in tightly enclosed areas. Raul Hilberg estimates that between 500,000 and 600,000 Jews died in ghettos and work

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camps as a result of Nazi policies — about one-fifth of Polish Jewry. And this was *before* the Nazis' Final Solution.

### Territorial Options

During 1939 and 1940, a handful of Nazi leaders took initiatives to break out of the straightjacket placed upon the Jewish question by the practical problems of administering newly conquered Polish territory. While some focused on the concentration of Jews in ghettos, awaiting the moment when a solution would present itself, others sought to hasten the moment when real progress could be made.

Among the most ambitious of these was Adolf Eichmann, the mastermind of Jewish emigration in the prewar period, whose office was a small cog in Heydrich's vast SS police bureaucracy. Eichmann seized upon his SS chief's and Hitler's declared approval of the idea of deporting Jews across the demarcation line with the Soviet Union into Russian-held territory in Poland. In order to realize this objective, Eichmann determined to mass Jews beforehand in a huge Jewish colony in a desolate, marshy region south of the city of Radom near the town of Nisko.

Beginning in October 1939, convoys of Jews arrived in the reservation from the Reich, Bohemia and Moravia, and the newly incorporated territories. The deportees suffered dreadfully from the lack of any serious preparations; bewildered refugees staggered from the trains after a horrendous journey and were told to build themselves a homeland. The result was a catastrophic mortality rate, and the deaths of many thousands.

Some German officials protested to Berlin, finding themselves inconvenienced by Eichmann's ill-planned disruption of their localities; Hans Frank too raised objections, fearing the advent of even more Jews in his domain. Himmler called the project off after a short time, likely having decided to put all available deportation energy into removing Polish peasants and settling incoming *Volksdeutsche*. Once more, Nazi hopes for an imminent breakthrough on the Jewish question were frustrated.

Another, much more ambitious effort

to realize a final solution flourished briefly after the defeat of France in the summer of 1940. With the expectation that Great Britain too would soon be crushed, and that a peace treaty would soon be signed with France, the German bureaucracy began to buzz with a new idea for relieving all Europe of its Jews. At the foreign office this time, an ambitious official manning the Jewish desk, or *Judenreferat*, brought forward a scheme widely aired in the 1930s — the establishment of a Jewish colony on the island of Madagascar.

Franz Rademacher began a serious feasibility study on several options for solving the Jewish question, among them the possibility of sending all West European Jews to the desolate island in the Indian Ocean. Heydrich himself then took up the idea of Madagascar, pushing it forward as a way of preserving his own SS pre-eminence in the field of Jewish emigration. In early July, as the research of Christopher Browning indicates, the idea reached Hans Frank in the *Generalgouvernement*, where it was gratefully seized upon as a relief from threatened future importation of Jews.

Through the summer, top Nazi officials seem to have genuinely embraced the scheme. Several plans went forward. Eichmann and one of his subordinates, Theodore Dannecker, envisioned that the four million Jews then under German control would eventually be sent — at a rate of one million per year. Rademacher sounded out experts in geography and demography, concluding that the scheme was possible.

Unfortunately for the bureaucrats involved, however, the basic conditions necessary to begin operations failed to materialize. No peace treaty with France was forthcoming, and no victory over Great Britain was won. The island remained therefore out of German hands, and sea access to it remained dominated by the Royal Navy. At the end of 1940, the plan was on the shelf.

### The Final Solution

As a result, the Germans faced another winter with the Jews. Millions more were under direct German control as a result of the great victories in 1939 and 1940. Emigration possibilities appeared increasingly unrealistic. Territorial solutions inside and outside Europe had

failed.

Despite the assurances that he had received from Berlin, Hans Frank continued to receive specifically designated shipments of Jews. He made a strong case to the Nazi leadership that the *Generalgouvernement* could not be the dumping ground some originally intended it to be. Its already high population density, abysmal food supply, and general economic crisis all made this impossible.

For several months more, until the latter part of 1941, Nazi Jewish policy remained officially committed to the idea of mass migration and expulsion. Then, during the course of the Russian campaign, code-named Barbarossa, a new "final solution" took shape: the Nazis determined to deport Jews from everywhere in Europe to specially designated killing centres in Poland where they would all be murdered.

What accounts for the change? It is difficult to assess fully the reasons for this shift in the Nazis' stated objectives, given the paucity of written directives and plain language addressing a crime of this magnitude. Certainly, the change was a part of a general radicalization of Nazism during Barbarossa and conformed to the pattern that Hitler had defined for that campaign.

It was a *Vernichtungskrieg*, a war of destruction, conceived as a struggle to eradicate once and for all the entire "Jewish-Bolshevik system", seen as fundamentally at odds with Nazism. But in addition, I would like to suggest, this shift to mass murder stemmed from problems posed by the accumulating masses of Jewish refugees in Nazi-occupied Poland and Russia, problems that reached a critical point under the impact of war.

At this point I enter the realm of speculation, as I fear all historians must to some degree when it comes to pinpointing the origins of the decision for European-wide mass murder. But it does seem to me that the accumulating frustrations of several years of aborted plans for a final solution came to some sort of head as the fighting in Russia raged. Massive killings of Jews accompanied that campaign from the start, following upon orders issued to the *Einsatzgruppen* before fighting began. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were

slaughtered. Consistent with the apocalyptic expectations for the outcome of the war, the Führer seems to have advised his followers that the decisive moment had come for the resolution of the Jewish question.

At the end of July, buoyed up by the first successes of the *Wehrmacht*, Göring issued his famous order to Heydrich to prepare "a total solution (*Gesamtlösung*) of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe". We cannot be certain what precisely was understood by "total solution" at that point, and it seems entirely plausible to me that emigration or expulsion of large masses of Jews still remained the overall conception.

Remember that Hitler and his generals expected sudden, dramatic success. The Red Army was going to be defeated in a matter of weeks. Russia would be prostrate. Presumably then Hitler would be able to deport or expel Jews into the great empty spaces of what had once been the Soviet Union — as various Nazis had proposed from time to time.

But, instead, the Russian campaign presented Hitler with a catastrophic setback. For once, the *Wehrmacht* did not meet its objectives. The fighting became more difficult with the autumn rains, the siege of Moscow, and the well-ordered Soviet retreat across the freezing Russian countryside.

The Jews, under these circumstances, became more bothersome than ever. Even with killings on a spectacular scale, the Nazis daily had more Jews on their hands. Their concentration in ghettos continued, and large numbers were being assembled at railway junctions ready for the long-awaited expulsions. Soviet territory, into which Jews might be dispatched, remained a battle zone, however. Most important, it became evident in the autumn of 1941 that the war would continue into the following year.

About this time, as news from the battlefields was becoming worse and as the Nazis faced even more frustration on the Jewish issue, orders seem to have gone out to prepare for mass killing on a European-wide scale. On October 23, in a striking reversal of emigration policy, Himmler ordered the exits closed even for German Jews. Deporta-

tions from Germany to the east began a few days before. SS teams visited the sites and began to prepare the first death camps — Chelmno and Belzec.

At the end of November, Heydrich sent invitations to Nazi Jewish experts across Europe to participate in a conference at the Berlin suburb of Wannsee on the "total solution". Emigration, as Heydrich made clear to that meeting, was now finished as a policy. Murder had taken its place.

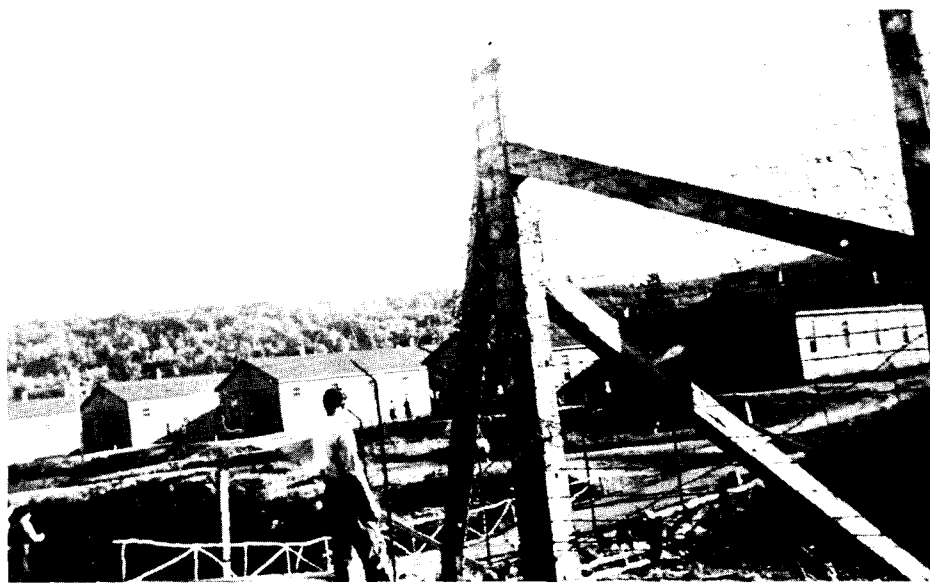
While the exact process by which this shift took place is likely to remain elusive for historians, I would suggest that it is useful to see the matter in the general context of Nazi population policy in Eastern Europe. Looking at the Final Solution this way makes several things clear. First, it is evident that the Jewish issue was but a part of a gigantic scheme for the demographic transformation of the European continent — the construction of *Lebensraum* alluded to in the pages of *Mein Kampf* and ever after a fundamental objective of Nazism. The Jews were to be eliminated from the Reich and perhaps from all of Europe, but other groups were also undesirable, and their removal was necessary in order to settle millions of ethnic Germans on the newly expanded soil of the Reich.

Second, it would be a mistake to assume that the Jews were a constant and continually urgent preoccupation of

the Führer and Nazi policymakers. In the period immediately after the conquest of Poland, indeed, top Nazis showed that they had other issues on their minds, and even other priorities in the racial-political field. It was much more important to remove Polish peasants from the incorporated territories in 1939 and 1940 than to concentrate on Jews.

But finally, it seems undeniable that the Jewish issue was of central, fundamental importance to Hitler and the movement he created. While the Jewish issue could be put on the shelf for a time, it was never forgotten. While the Nazis were prepared to postpone a settling of accounts with the Jews, it was always taken for granted that there had to be, one day, a final solution. In the end, quite unlike the case with the Poles, every Jew had to go — including old men, women, children and tiny infants. By whatever means, whether by a distant Jewish colony, emigration, massive expulsions, or murder, this particular problem cried out for an answer, and could not be put off indefinitely. In this strictly limited sense, the Nazi approach to Jewish issues was different from all other questions they faced.

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Summer shot taken at Camp N, Sherbrooke, Quebec, with an illegal pinhole camera. (Photo by Marcell Seidler).