Gerald Fleming's *Hitler and the Final Solution* is an unconventional and important book. It is unconventional in its structure; although it follows a broad chronological pattern, each of the twenty-three chapters takes a new, unexpected direction, and at each step the landscape of death is presented from an angle the readers could not have prepared themselves for. Some of the most important material reappears in various places, like the recurrent theme of a nightmare. Such a structure, more akin to literary than historical discourse, is puzzling at first, but it gives the book its full impact.

The initial impetus for writing *Hitler and the Final Solution* seems to have come from British historian David Irving's thesis that Hitler was not aware of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, at least until 1943.¹ According to Irving, this extermination was planned and implemented in great part by Heinrich Himmler and the SS without Hitler's knowledge. If it were to be proven, this thesis would substantially change our image of Nazism. Irving's revisionist claim was controverted long before Fleming's book, but Fleming settles the case once and for all. Fleming has gathered and analyzed a vast amount of evidence concerning

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Hitler’s knowledge of and involvement in the Final Solution; and he is the first to have done so on such a scale.

In his research Gerald Fleming used most of the published sources, from well-known documents presented during the Nuremberg trials to seldom-quoted information from trials of the sixties and the seventies. He combed Western archives and gained access to Soviet archives in Riga—a rare feat. This investigation brought to light unexpected details. Finally, the primary sources were augmented and interpreted through painstaking written inquiries that reached little-known, although well-informed, participants in the events. Every historian is something of a detective; Gerald Fleming has proven himself a master in that line.

Of course, some critics may find fault with using as evidence testimonies given thirty-five or more years after the events. How would anybody recall the exact terms of an order, a discussion, or a speech after so many years? To this possible argument I see two obvious answers. First, the events were so unusual that those in any way involved would doubtless remember them with much greater precision than they would more recent, but ordinary, events. Second, the testimonies tally with the documents; they bolster the author’s demonstration but are not the basis of it.

Hitler and the Final Solution is important not only as a documentary achievement, but also as a timely resource in the growing debate among historians of Nazism. The debate opposes two interpretations of the Nazi system, which may apply to the interpretation of Nazi policies toward the Jews and of the Final Solution in particular. It is an important debate, and in my opinion, Fleming’s book will play a major role in the arguments for or against each position. Let me try to show the significance of the debate and the meaning of Fleming’s work in that context.
From the end of the sixties on, the traditional interpretation of National Socialism has been increasingly challenged. Recently the term “intentionalist” was appended to the traditional school, the term “functionalist” to the new wave. The debate, limited for a long time to German historians, is now spreading. Although theoretical issues are central, the arguments on both sides are not devoid of moral undertones: the functionalists, for instance, have been accused of banalizing National Socialism; the intentionalsists, of concentrating all responsibility on Adolf Hitler.

For the intentionalsists, there is a direct relation between Hitler’s ideology and Nazi policies; there were initial aims and once the Nazis came to power, steps were taken systematically to implement those aims. And the absolute centrality of Adolf Hitler within the system appears so obvious to the intentionalsists that, according to Hildebrand, “one should not speak of National Socialism, but of Hitlerism.”

The functionalists, on the other hand, feel that there is no necessary relationship between the ideological dogmas of Nazism and the policies of the Third Reich; that decisions are functionally linked to one another and do not follow a preestablished plan; that the constant interaction and the constant pressures exercised by multiple agencies within

2. The terms were coined by Tim Mason in his “Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National-Socialism,” in Der Führerstaat: Mythos und Realität, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (Stuttgart, 1981). These labels are useful to clarify the issues, but one should remain aware of their normalizing effect and not forget the nature of the events beneath such abstractions. See my own Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death (New York, 1984) on the normalizing effect of historical discourse concerning the Final Solution.

3. For a detailed presentation of Klaus Hildebrand’s position, see his “Monokratie oder Polykratie? Hitlers Herrschaft und das Dritte Reich,” in Der Führerstaat: Mythos und Realität, ed. Hirschfeld and Kettenacker, 75ff.
the system necessarily limit the role of the central decision-maker; and that his decisions take the aspect of a planned policy with clear aims only through the artifices of propaganda or, for the historian, in retrospect.

The difference between these two groups is manifest in their contradictory interpretations of the genesis and implementation of Nazi policies toward the Jews. For the intentionalists, there is a straight line from Hitler's anti-Semitic ideology of the twenties (as expressed in his early speeches, his dialogue with Dietrich Eckart, and Mein Kampf) to the policies of the Third Reich and all the way to the Final Solution:

Whether or not it is possible to establish a link between the gas war of the First World War and the gas chambers of the Second World War, it is sure that Hitler's anti-Semitism, as it is presented in Mein Kampf, was determined by war. It was born from the war, it needed warlike methods, and it came to its ultimate realization in wartime. It was therefore logical that this anti-Semitism should find in the next war, which, in any case, was foreseen from the very beginning, its bloody culmination.4

We find this clear link between Hitler's early anti-Semitic ideology and his later anti-Semitic practice posited in the writings of Helmut Krausnick, Ernst Nolte, Eberhard Jäckel, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Klaus Hildebrand, and Andreas Hillgruber, to mention only German historians.5 In this and every other respect Gerald Fleming would be considered a straight intentionalist, an ultra-intentionalist in fact. At the very beginning of his study, the relation between


5. Most non-German historians of Nazi anti-Semitism may be considered intentionalists, with the clear exception of Karl A. Schleunes; his Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy Towards the German Jews, 1933–1939 (Urbana, Ill., 1970) is perhaps the first comprehensive functionalist presentation of Nazi policies during the thirties toward the Jews.
Hitler's early anti-Semitic ideology and the ultimate extermination orders is stressed in no uncertain terms:

The line that leads from these early manifestations to the liquidation orders that Hitler personally issued during the war—the actual target of this investigation—is a direct one. A sample taken from Hitler's utterances over the years reveals this striking continuity: Hitler's remark to his childhood friend, August Kubizek, as the two passed the small synagogue in the Bethlehemstrasse in Linz, "That does not belong here in Linz"; Hitler's unshakable conviction that "the Jews had continued to perform ritual murders" up to the most recent past; the Führer's statement on 21 October 1941, at noon in the Führer's Headquarters, preserved in a memorandum signed by Martin Bormann: "When we finally stamp out this plague, we shall have accomplished for mankind a deed whose significance our men out there on the battlefield cannot even imagine yet"; and Hitler's assertion four days later, in the presence of Himmler and Heydrich: "It is good that we are preceded by an aura of terror for our plans to exterminate Jewry." This unbroken continuity of explicit utterances was reflected in a more or less tacit continuity of deeds. Hitler's anti-Semitism in his Linz years (1904–1907) was followed by his introduction into the Viennese "Antisemitenbund" (Anti-Semite Association) in April 1908. Much later, but still to be ranged along the same continuum, were the first shootings of German Jews in Fort IX in Kovno on 25 November 1941 and in the Rumbuli Forest outside Riga on 30 November 1941 at 8:15 A.M. (pp. 2–3 below)

Few historians, even among the staunchest intentionalists, would accept such an extreme linear thesis. But even if the intermediary stages between Hitler's early anti-Semitism and his final policies toward the Jews were numerous and complex, Fleming's position is helpful on one essential point: it reminds us of the implacable aspect of Hitler's anti-Semitism, of its deep and early roots, as well as
of its obsessional character. To deny that it was a factor in the later extermination policies needs more explanation than to declare it a major impetus.

To prove their point, the intentionalists can show the clear and rapid succession of stages in Nazi anti-Jewish policies (as well as in other fields, foreign policy being perhaps the most telling example): "The National Socialist program called for the disenfranchisement of all Jews; anti-Semitic activities were part of its early history. Once in power, the Nazis began the systematic organization of the persecution of Jews. No tactical considerations were allowed to interfere substantially with instituting the boycott of Jews, expelling them from public life, making them subject to special laws, and finally annihilating them."^6

In addition to viewing a continuity between Hitler's ideology and his policies and pointing to a quick succession of stages, the intentionalists sometimes assume technical planning. For instance, the euthanasia program at the beginning of the war could represent a technical preparation for the Final Solution; in any case, killing by gas on a small scale certainly led to the idea of mass extermination by gas: "The method that was later used for the mass extermination of Jews by gas was then tried from the very beginning of 1940, during the extermination of people interned in psychiatric institutions, within the framework of the action called 'T4.'"^7 Here too Gerald Fleming takes an extreme position:

A straight path leads from the built-in gas chambers of the euthanasia institutes in Brandenburg, Bensburg, Grafeneck, Hartheim, Hadamar, Sonnenstein, and Eichberg to the extermination camp in Sobibor, under SS-Major Christian Wirth, formerly of the euthanasia institute

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in Brandenburg. In the euthanasia institutes German victims—chiefly mental patients—were "quickly and quietly" eliminated with carbon-monoxide gas; and already in June 1940 the practice of pilfering gold-filled teeth from the corpses of the Jewish victims among them had begun. At Sobibor, identical liquidation procedures, along with the same despoliation of Jewish corpses, were the order of the day. (p. 24 below)

Strangely enough, although Gerald Fleming deals with every minute aspect of Hitler's intervention in Jewish matters during the summer and autumn of 1941, he does not deal directly with the problem at the heart of the present debate: was a general order to exterminate the Jews given by Hitler, and if so, under what form did he give it and when? For intentionalist historians, such an order was probably given in the spring of 1941, on the eve of the attack on the Soviet Union. This was the time when the order was issued to shoot the Red Army Commissars, when the Einsatzgruppen were instructed to exterminate the Jews in occupied Soviet territory, and when a "certain final solution of the Jewish problem" was mentioned in the Reich Main Security Office's statement forbidding further Jewish emigration from Belgium and France.  

Or, it could have been given in the early summer of 1941, after the beginning of the German attack on Russia, when Göring instructed Heydrich to prepare the "total solution of the Jewish problem in all the territories under German control."  

No historian today would believe that such an order was given in writing. In its oral form it could have been either a clear instruction passed on to Göring or to Himmler, or, more probably, a broad hint that everybody understood

(Fleming, as we shall see later, shows how Hitler tried to avoid having his name directly linked to orders concerning the extermination process). In any case, for intentionalist historians, a signal must have come from Hitler to set the Final Solution in motion.

For the functionalists, many of the basic tenets of the intentionalist position are improbable. Let us recall, first of all, the common denominator of all functionalist interpretations: the Nazi system was in great part chaotic, and major decisions were often the result of the most diverse pressures, without any imperative central planning, forecasting, or clear orders from the top indicating the aim and the means of a given policy.

Two major studies, that of Karl Schleunes and that of Uwe Dietrich Adam (both of which deal mostly with the thirties, although Adam’s includes the first two years of the war), represent some of the basic functionalist positions on the anti-Jewish policies. In the words of Karl Schleunes, “during the first years of the Third Reich, nobody within the Nazi movement, starting with the Führer himself, could define what the solution to the Jewish problem could be. . . . It is only in the widest sense that the anti-Semitic premises of National Socialism help us to explain the course taken by the great variety of measures concerning the Jews.”

Uwe Dietrich Adam pushes the functionalist thesis one step further. After following in detail the anti-Jewish measures of the thirties in which, according to him, no clear direction is to be found until 1938—when the SS took over and furthered a systematic emigration policy—Adam reaches a first general conclusion: “One cannot speak of a coordinated and planned policy towards the Jews . . . a global plan con-

10. Schleunes, Twisted Road; Uwe Dietrich Adam, Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich (Düsseldorf, 1972).
11. Schleunes, Twisted Road, 257–58.
cerning the nature, content and scope of the persecution of the Jews never existed; it is even highly probable that the mass extermination was not an aim that Hitler had set a priori and that he tried to achieve.”

In Adam’s view of the crucial events of 1941, the extermination of the Jews in occupied Soviet territory was not necessarily part of a global extermination plan; it was only between September and December of that year, following the situation created by deporting Jews from the Reich to the ghettos of the East on the one hand and the stalling of the German offensive in Russia on the other, that Hitler decided to replace the “territorial solution” of the Jewish problem with global extermination.

Martin Broszat adopts Adam’s general description of the 1941 events, but he in turn takes the argument one step further: whereas Adam believed that Hitler had ordered the global extermination of European Jews some time in the fall of 1941, Martin Broszat believes that such an order probably never existed. The Final Solution was the result of a series of local initiatives aimed at solving local problems (the chaotic situation in the ghettos); it only gradually became an overall action:

It thus seems that the liquidation of the Jews began not solely as the result of an ostensible will for extermination but also as a “way out” of a blind alley into which the Nazis had manoeuvred themselves. The practice of liquidation, once initiated and established, gained predominance and evolved in the end into a comprehensive “programme.”

This interpretation cannot be verified with absolute certainty but in the light of circumstances, which cannot be discussed here in detail, it seems more plausible than

12. Adam, Judenpolitik, 357.
the assumption that there was a general secret order for the extermination of the Jews in the summer of 1941.

In a footnote to the above lines Broszat adds: “It appears to me that there was no overall order concerning the extermination of the Jews and that the programme of extermination developed through individual actions and then reached gradually its institutional and factual character in the spring of 1942 after the construction of the extermination camps in Poland.”

In Martin Broszat’s demonstration, Hitler’s anti-Jewish ideology is stressed, but its direct relation to policies is questioned. For Hans Mommsen likewise ideology loses all concrete significance, and the ultimate outcome of Nazi policies toward the Jews, as of Nazi policies in general, can best be explained by “cumulative radicalization,” a process resulting from the constant competition between various Nazi agencies, and representing the overall fight for power positions within the system:

In each individual case the common denominator of the competing power blocs was not a midstream compromise, but whatever in any given circumstances was the most radical solution, previously considered as beyond the realms of possibility. To avoid surrendering its overall authority on the Jewish question, the Ministry of the Interior consented to drastic discriminatory measures which once and for all showed that the “rule of law” had been nothing but a painstakingly maintained facade. To prevent Jewish property from falling into the hands of the Gau organizations as a result of wild-cat “aryanization,”

Goering, following the November Pogrom (of which he, like Heydrich, disapproved), gave orders for arypanization by the state; the departments involved hastily busied themselves with supporting legislation, even if only to retain their share of responsibility. The impossible situation created by the material and social dispossession of the Jews caused individual Gauleiters to resort to deportations, regardless of consequences, a move bitterly resisted by the departments concerned. However, the result was not the replacement of deportation by a politically "acceptable" solution, but, on the contrary, the systematic mass murder of the Jews, which no one had previously imagined possible—the most radical solution, and incidentally one which coincided with Hitler's own wishes.  

More recently Hans Mommsen has presented the functionalist position in its most extreme form: there is no direct Hitler-instruction for destroying the Jews, Hitler's declarations concerning their annihilation are mere propaganda ("even the talks with Marshal Antonescu and Admiral Horthy"—in which Hitler mentions annihilation of the Jews—"have to be considered as typical metaphors of Hitler's propaganda"), and the Wannsee Conference itself is not about an extermination program ("the annihilation program still appeared to be quite vague and Heydrich's remarks could be interpreted differently, although he mentioned the necessity of a late extinction of those deported who might survive the annihilation process through work"). It is obvious why Gerald Fleming's book has an essential place in the current debate.

It may be tempting to state that each approach has its merits and to seek a synthesis between the two positions. In fact functionalism, which stresses the dynamics of a system instead of the central role of a leader, fits better in many ways within the mainstream of modern historiography. The image it offers of Nazism is more “normal,” easier to explain: any group can stumble haphazardly, from step to step, into the most extreme criminal behavior. Responsibility remains, obviously; but it is more diluted, more nebulous, because of the very automatism of the process, its outcome unforeseeable, and because of the absence of real premeditation as well. Intentionalism, on the other hand, asserts that the course of action was in some way planned. This latter view gives Hitler a predominant role, but it also implies much greater awareness at various levels; whereas functionalism, pushed to its logical conclusion, gets very close to denying that Hitler had accurate knowledge of the Final Solution. It leaves most of the operation to subordinate agencies—in a nutshell, to police terror.

These considerations are not to be dismissed lightly. But for the historian the only valid test is that of documentary evidence. It appears, in my opinion, that in scanning available evidence—and Fleming’s study has been of major importance in bringing a great deal of it together—historians may tend to be more convinced by the traditional, intentionalist position, at least insofar as anti-Jewish policies and the Final Solution are concerned. Let me state my own point of view: In the matters with which Hitler was obsessed, those forming the core of his system—conquest of the Lebensraum, as well as the all-embracing fight against the Jews—his intervention is clearly seen at crucial stages. In other fields, the functionalist position could easily be proven. The problem of interference
between the other fields and the major elements of Hitler's system remains open.

Let us now concentrate entirely on key issues relating to the Final Solution itself. The main problem is to verify Hitler's orders for and personal involvement in the extermination process versus the thesis of a more or less haphazard development—one initiated at a local level and systematized only later, chiefly within the SS and without any overall extermination order ever having been given, at least by Hitler. The latter argument is made possible by the fact that no written Hitler-order about the Final Solution has ever been found; but one may assume that it would never have been given in writing. Since, in one way or another, the extermination process reached its full-scale form in the second half of 1941 and the first weeks of 1942, we shall systematically review the various interpretations relating to that period.

In his study of the genesis of the Final Solution, Martin Broszat points out that none of Hitler's main aides, when interrogated after the war, had any recollection of an oral order for the overall extermination of the Jews; moreover, Broszat shows that entries from Goebbels's unpublished diaries, when referring to the Jewish problem during the summer and fall of 1941, often allude to evacuation to camps on Russian territory but do not mention any extermination order. Finally, still in terms of documentary evidence, Broszat quotes the controversy between Himmler and SS-Brigadeführer Dr. Friedrich Übelhör, who was in charge of the Lodz Ghetto. Übelhör strongly objected, at the beginning of October 1941, to deportations from the Reich to Lodz, because the ghetto was already overcrowded; this controversy would be meaningless if extermination had been decided upon.17

17. For these various arguments, see Broszat, "Hitler und die Genesis der 'Endlösung,'" 74ff.
American historian Christopher R. Browning pointedly answered that Himmler and Heydrich, the main architects of the Final Solution, were dead when the interrogation started and that Göring, the principal defendant at Nuremberg, was fighting for his life and would certainly not have admitted that he had forwarded a global extermination order. And the Goebbels diaries were a poor source at best, as Goebbels since November 1938 was notoriously kept out of Jewish affairs by Göring, Himmler, and Heydrich. On the other hand, Browning points to a whole series of references to the preparation of the Final Solution during the summer and fall of 1941 that gives an unmistakable sense of mass annihilation. He also points to the fact, strangely omitted by Broszat, that after the war Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss and Adolf Eichmann both referred to the planning during that period for overall extermination. Finally, Browning indicates that what Broszat describes as “vague” Nazi plans for dealing with the Jews in the summer and fall of 1941 (forced labor whereby many would die; then possibly “helping” the others to die) in fact represents an extermination program.¹⁸

But let us turn now to the sequence of events. Until the fall of 1941, Soviet Jews are the only ones systematically exterminated; Uwe Adam and Martin Broszat do not find a necessary link between those exterminations and an overall Final Solution through mass killing. In the fall of 1941, however, deportations from the Reich start, mostly to Lodz, Kovno, Minsk, and Riga. Some of the deportees sent to Riga and Lodz are exterminated on the spot, along with local Jews, near Riga and in the Chelmno (Kulmhof) extermination camp near Lodz. It would seem that we are now confronted with stages of an overall plan, as the extermination process includes Jews transported from Germany to the kill-

ing sites. But in Broszat’s view these killings are still initiated to solve local problems (the deportations from the Reich add to the overcrowding of the ghettos and the Jews cannot be sent further east, as the Wehrmacht’s advance in Russia is slowing down). In fact, according to Broszat, the very chaotic aspect of the deportations from the Reich, owing to Hitler’s sudden wish to see the Reich cleared of Jews as soon as possible, seems to preclude any systematic planning of an extermination process.

Gerald Fleming brings important evidence to show that the Riga exterminations are not a local improvisation: the Reichskommissar Ostland, Hinrich Lohse, is advised by Himmler through SS-General Friedrich Jeckeln that the exterminations are on order from Himmler and in accordance with a “wish” of the Führer (see p. 75 below: “Tell Lohse it is my order, which is also the Führer’s wish”). Clearly then, this is no local initiative but, for all purposes, a Hitler-initiative.

For the genesis of the Chelmno exterminations the evidence is more complex. Martin Broszat reminds us that the idea of exterminating some of the Lodz ghetto Jews in order to solve the problems of overcrowding was already discussed among local SS officers and with the Reich Main Security Office as early as July 1941, when no general plan for the Final Solution could yet have existed.19 Would not the extermination in the fall be the result of the same type of consideration, developed at a lower echelon?

Here again, Fleming brings us new evidence. In March 1944, Wartheland Gauleiter Arthur Greiser (in whose domain Lodz and Chelmno were included) proudly reports to his Führer that practically all of the Wartheland Jews have been exterminated (mostly in Chelmno). On 21 November 1942, Greiser informed Himmler that when he had met with

19. Broszat, “Hitler and die Genesis der ‘Endlösung,’” 749n. Dr. Friedrich Übelhör’s protests against sending deportees from the Reich to Lodz ties in with this reasoning.
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Hitler he was told, as far as the Jews were concerned, to act according to his own judgment. Greiser had had two meetings with Hitler, 1 October and 11 November 1942. (See p. 22 below.)

Greiser's report to Hitler in 1944 clearly means that Hitler's words of October or November 1942 had been understood. Yet Greiser had started the exterminations in Chelmno a year before those meetings. If Greiser had received the same kind of order as that given to Lohse in the fall of 1941, Hitler's directive, a year later, would not make sense. Therefore, information about the overall planning could not have been passed on automatically to those responsible for various killing operations. Although for the Chelmno exterminations "Sonderkommando Lange" (a special task force that used gassing vans, as it had for the euthanasia killings) was sent from Berlin, Greiser was possibly unaware that this was part of an overall action—until he got the hint from Hitler a year later.

If one moves from the single operations to the general context, the whole picture becomes much clearer. In the fall of 1941, the Einsatzgruppen had exterminated nearly one million Jews in the Soviet Union, and Jews from the Reich were being killed in Riga and Chelmno; all emigration of Jews from occupied Europe was forbidden (order of 23 October 1941); construction of the Belzec extermination camp in the Generalgouvernement had begun; and the first killing experiments with Zyklon-B gas had taken place in Auschwitz. The groping phase that characterized the summer and early fall—and that gave the impression of the haphazardness Broszat uses as a key argument—was coming to an end: the various projects were falling into place within the general framework of the Final Solution.

In this context the meaning of the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942—at which Heydrich presented the outline for the Final Solution to the assembled representa-