Historians and the Holocaust

1960s

* Early studies of the Holocaust did not consider the decision making process and took for granted Hitler’s role in that decision making process, instead the focus was on the timing of the decision.
* Leon Poliakov in 1961 argued that Hitler didn’t have an exact plan for extermination from the beginning.
* Wolfgang Scheffler in 1960 preferred the argument that the Holocaust wasn’t planned years before it was carried out but rather followed a ‘logical path’.
* Raul Hilberg in 1961 was the first to suggest that there wasn’t a single order to annihilate the Jews or a master plan, rather a sequence of decisions.

1970s – Two schools of thought

* The first school of thought works off the basis that the origins of the Holocaust were more complicated than being unplanned and Hitler’s responsibility.
* Karl Scheunes in 1970 downplayed Hitler’s role in anti-Jewish policy. He suggests that ‘his hand appears only rarely in the actual making of Jewish policy between 1933 and 1938’ – therefore there was no grand design and little direction for above. There were competing agendas, one-upmanship – for instance SS, ministers, party radicals etc competing for Hitler’s favour.
* Uwe Adam in 1976 talks about competing interests that conveyed a power struggle therefore it was not just Hitler’s responsibility. They reject 1941 as a key turning point and states there was no organised decision before or during the 1st phase of Operation Barbarossa against Russia to prepare and submit a plan for total solution of the Jewish problem in German occupied territories.
* The other school of thought focuses on Hitler.
* Eberhard Jackel marks Hitler as the central motivating force. Even during the idea of the Madagascar Plan had already decided on a more radical plan, therefore the Holocaust was a conscious, pre-meditated role.

Late 1970s

* Key point to note, Holocaust Studies as a discipline really takes off in the mid/late 1970s, with the release of ‘Holocaust’, a TV series with Meryl Streep in 1978 conveying this had translated to society/the world more broadly.
* Polarises further into two schools of thought, one which places Hitler as having the pivotal role in the planning of Nazi policy, representing intentions derived from coherent and consistent ideology, and the other enforcing the polycratic nature of the Nazi state, where there was intense competition, opposing agenda and chaotic decision making.
* Tim Mason coined the terms ‘intentionalism’ and ‘functionalism’ to describe these two opposing views.

Intentionalists

* Summary – The Holocaust was a result of definite intention and planning by Hitler.
* Some prominent names to look out for here – Lucy Dawidowicz, Eberhard Jackel, Andreas Hillgruber.
* The focus is on Hitler as the main instigator, and ideology is paramount, Hitler was violently anti-semitic and carried out a plan formed before he came to power, and as a totalitarian leader, he issued orders and people obeyed him.

How can we critique intentionalism?

* The interpretation does not fit how Jewish policy actually materialised, things were more chaotic and erratic. Therefore, policy evolved rather than appearing ‘ready made’.
* It is difficult to find evidence of a long held intention to murder or eradicate Jews.
* Minimises the role that we know other people played, blames Hitler entirely and lets others off the hook. What about people like Eichmann, Heydrich, Goebbels, Goring etc.

Functionalists/Structuralists

* Summary – there are broader factors at bay when considering the origins of the Holocaust. There was no single decision to eradicate the Jews but a gradual process furthered by cumulative radicalisation and a chaotic command structure, aka competing agents upping the stakes. By comparison, Hitler’s role is relatively minor.
* Some prominent names to look out for here – Karl Schleunes, Uwe Adam, Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen.

How can we critique functionalism/structuralism?

* This approach minimises the role of Hitler and the importance of ideology and violent expressions of anti-Semitism by Hitler himself.
* It depersonalises events which are so tragic and implies the focus is on impersonal ‘structural’ forces, but most important it removes moral responsibility – arguably ‘it would have happened anyway’.

How has historiography changed since?

Christopher Browning (1992)

* Agrees with functionalists/structuralists that there wasn’t a fixed intention of genocide from the very beginning, but emerged from 1941 as it seemed that vast numbers of Jews from Russia/the Soviet Union would fall into German hands.
* Differs slightly from functionalists as he does not endorse a polycratic approach – highlights Hitler as the key decision maker of a series of key decisions not just one decision of genocide.

Daniel Joshua Goldhagen (1996)

* A political scientist.
* The Holocaust was not a clandestine operation carried out on Hitler’s orders, it was an inevitable consequence of long standing anti-Semitism that was ingrained in German society.
* Those who carried out orders to kill were ‘willing executioners’ despite being ‘ordinary men’. Implying that many Germans wanted to see anti-Jewish policy implemented. This tries to challenge the common defence that many perpetrators were merely following orders.
* Implies that Germany carries collective guilt for the Holocaust, caused a huge amount of controversy.

Kershaw – Working towards the Fuhrer

* An idea that people did things in order to impress Hitler.
* Combines the most logical/best elements of rival interpretations.
* Did not coin the term, got it from a Nazi member/politician Werner Willikens, who was recorded as saying this on the 21st Feb 1934

Everyone who has the opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can hardly dictate from above everything which he intends to realise sooner or later. On the contrary, up till now everyone with a post in the new Germany has worked best when he has, so to speak, worked towards the Führer. Very often and in many spheres it has been the case—in previous years as well—that individuals have simply waited for orders and instructions. Unfortunately, the same will be true in the future; but in fact it is the duty of everybody to try to work towards the Führer along the lines he would wish. Anyone who makes mistakes will notice it soon enough. But anyone who really works towards the Führer along his lines and towards his goal will certainly both now and in the future one day have the finest reward in the form of the sudden legal confirmation of his work​