Whose Orders?

By RICHARD J. EVANS

June 24, 2007

In 1997, Saul Friedländer published "The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939," the first of his projected two-volume history of "Nazi Germany and the Jews." In the introduction to that volume, he announced his intention of "establishing a historical account of the Holocaust in which the policies of the perpetrators, the attitudes of surrounding society and the world of the victims could be addressed within an integrated framework." Such a framework has indeed been missing from most historical accounts of this most difficult and challenging of subjects. They have focused either on the processes of decision-making and their implementation or on the world of suffering and death experienced by the victims. Friedländer's first volume stood out from most other work in this field because it successfully combined both of these aspects. And his second volume does so as well. It now establishes itself as the standard historical work on Nazi Germany's mass murder of Europe's Jews.

And yet "The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945" is no ordinary academic book. True, Friedländer seems to have read virtually every printed source and secondary work on his vast subject in English, German and French. His judgments are scrupulous and levelheaded. And he treats the historical controversies that have raged around so many of the topics he covers with untiring fair-mindedness. He writes without a trace of polemic or of facile retrospective moralizing. The book meticulously satisfies every requirement of professional historical writing.

What raises "The Years of Extermination" to the level of literature, however, is the skilled interweaving of individual testimony with the broader depiction of events. Friedländer never lets the reader forget the human and personal meanings of the historical processes he is describing. By and large, he avoids the sometimes unreliable testimony of memoirs for the greater immediacy of contemporary diaries and letters, though he also makes good use of witness statements at postwar trials. The result is an account of unparalleled vividness and power that reads like a novel.

Friedländer's witnesses run into scores if not hundreds, and range from well-known figures like Anne Frank and Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Jewish administration of the Warsaw Ghetto, to more obscure individuals like Mihail Sebastian, a Romanian writer in his 30s, who recorded the descent of his country into its own barbarous version of genocide, and Raymond-Raoul Lambert, an Alsatian veteran of the French Army in World War I. Their haunting words chronicle the horror and disbelief of European Jewry as it slid down through discrimination and persecution to deportation and death. "If my life ends," the Warsaw religious teacher Chaim Kaplan wrote not long before he was taken away to perish in the gas chambers of Treblinka, "what will become of my diary?" Like many others cited in this book, it survived not least by chance, having been smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto into the hands of the Polish underground resistance movement, from where it eventually found its way to New York and publication in the 1960s. The writings of diarists like Kaplan, committed to paper in conditions of terrible adversity, provide much of the human dimension of this remarkable book: they did not write in vain.

These people were the victims, Friedländer argues, not of anonymous processes generated in the machinery of Nazi and SS administration, but of one man above all: Adolf Hitler. Friedländer is critical of the recent, voluminous literature, mainly by a younger generation of German historians, that attempts to depict the extermination program as the outcome of coldly rational processes of decision-making by administrators, "experts" and officials in the German-occupied areas of Eastern Europe, who decided that the Jews would have to be killed so that the limited food supplies available in the area could go to the Germans, or to make room for German settlers or Germans left homeless by Allied bombing raids.

Such arguments do not explain the manic obsessiveness with which Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and the man in charge of implementing the extermination program, tracked down Jews to arrest and kill, even traveling to Germany's ally Finland to try and persuade its government to surrender that country's tiny Jewish population, which was of no objective economic or strategic importance to Germany at all. Nor do these arguments do justice to the virulent language of hatred used by the Nazi leaders, Hitler and Goebbels in particular, when they spoke, as they did almost unceasingly, of the Jews.

Friedländer devotes a good deal of space to quoting Hitler at length, showing clearly his personal obsession with the forces of international Jewry that, in his mind, lay behind the actions of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. It was the Jews, he believed, who had fomented the war launched (in reality by himself) in September 1939. As the United States committed itself ever more firmly to the Allied side in the summer and fall of 1941, Hitler delivered one tirade after another against the Jewish conspiracy he thought lay behind Roosevelt's policy. It was at this point that he escalated his persecution of the Jews first to deportation to the East and then to mass murder and total extermination.

Jean-François Martin

The German defeat by the Red Army at the Battle of Stalingrad in February 1943, blamed by Hitler yet again on the Jews, raised his anti-Semitic fury to fresh heights. The Jews, he declared, were driven by their innate racial instinct to subvert civilization everywhere. “The modern peoples have no option left,” he said in May, as the genocide was reaching its height, “but to eliminate the Jews.” Millions of entirely innocent and largely unsuspecting people across Europe paid for such violent fantasies with their lives.

The diaries and letters cited in the book show graphically how even as the prospective Jewish victims began to fear the worst, they continued to hope for the best; only a small minority found their way into hiding or resistance. As for the mass of non-Jewish citizens in Germany and other parts of Europe, indifference was the commonest reaction. Police and other state officials in most occupied countries cooperated willingly in the roundups and deportations; in some parts of Europe, notably Poland, Romania and Croatia, native anti-Semitism made its own brutal contribution to the genocide.

Friedländer’s narrative sweeps across an entire continent, encompassing every country affected by the Nazi drive for domination. In Bulgaria and Slovakia, popular outrage at the genocide forced governments initially willing to collaborate to change their stance. Leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in a number of countries played a part in articulating such feelings, and individual priests in Germany and elsewhere sometimes paid for their courageous opposition with their lives. But Friedländer makes it equally clear that many clerics, particularly senior church leaders who feared that open criticism of the genocide would bring down the wrath of the Nazis on them, remained silent and inactive, except where Jewish converts to Christianity were concerned. In some areas — particularly Croatia — nationalist clergymen egged on the murder squads with their own brand of religiously inspired anti-Semitism. Pope Pius XII, the subject of an earlier book by Friedländer, does not come out well, but what strikes the reader yet again is the exemplary evenhandedness with which Friedländer weighs the arguments on both sides in an area that has become more controversial than most in recent years.

The book’s chapters are organized chronologically, each covering a period of several months. This has the disadvantage of breaking up many of the narratives, so that, for example, if one wants to follow what happened in the Netherlands, or in Romania, or even in Germany itself, one has to search through several different chapters to piece the story together. But for the reader who persists from beginning to end, this structure has the benefit of enabling one to see the connections between what was happening at any one time in different parts of the Continent, to link it to the state of play of military affairs during the war (which Friedländer usefully sketches in at various points) and to follow the slow development of Nazi policy and its implementation as it unfolded over time.

In a celebrated exchange with the German historian Martin Broszat many years ago, Friedländer argued that, faced with such events, no historian could or should remain neutral. Born in Prague into a Jewish family in 1932, Friedländer grew up in hiding in France during the war, and his personal history gives him an unusually strong identification with his subject. Broszat, who had spent much of his career compiling or overseeing expert witness reports in German war crimes prosecutions and had a vested interest in preserving the appearance of neutrality, disagreed.

The practical consequences of Friedländer’s stance are apparent: the personal testimonies of Hitler’s Jewish victims create an overwhelming impression of suffering and cast a lurid light on the policies and actions of the Nazis and their helpers. The downside of this is that the experiences of the perpetrators are presented perhaps less fully than they might have been. Their testimony is generally used to describe the conditions they created rather than (with the obvious exception of Hitler himself) to chart their personal beliefs, motives or impressions. The attitudes and behavior of the German people also remain unexplained, and are presented in a sweeping and undifferentiated way that does scant justice to the nuances and complexities that recent historical work has uncovered.

And the book’s focus on the sufferings of the Jews pushes the broader context of Nazi racial policy — which includes the mass murder of millions of Soviet prisoners of war, the systematic extermination of the Polish intelligentsia, the killing of about 200,000 mentally ill or handicapped Germans, the annihilation of a large part of Europe’s Gypsies — possibly too far into the background. For as a good deal of recent work has shown, the Third Reich’s genocidal policies toward the Jews have to be understood as part of a larger policy aimed at the ethnic reshaping of Europe. Comparisons with these other victims would have made it evident that the Jews occupied a special place in the exterminatory mentality of the Nazis; they were perceived not as a regional obstacle but as a global threat, not as inferior beings like insects but as powerful enemies, whose very existence anywhere was a terrible danger to the future of the German race.

Still, to have broadened the focus too much would have made this already very lengthy and complex book almost unmanageable. Friedländer succeeds in binding together the many different strands of his story with a sure touch. He has written a masterpiece that will endure.