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COVER IMAGE

Woman Wearing Mantilla, *Roman Halter, IWM Collections*

Roman Halter is a Holocaust survivor. His entire family were killed in the genocide. He recalls: 'On the Sabbath, sitting in the ladies' gallery in the synagogue, it was fashionable for Polish Jewish women to wear a Mantilla. My mother looked wonderful in it.'

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Nazi perpetrators in Holocaust education

The Holocaust is often framed, in textbooks and exam syllabi, from a perpetrator perspective as a narrative of Nazi policy. We are offered a different orientation here. Interrogating and understanding the Holocaust involves understanding *why* the people who perpetrated the Holocaust did the things that they did. As Wolf Kaiser shows, this is a complex question, since explaining the Holocaust means explaining the actions of individuals in very diverse positions whose actions were shaped by individual choices in the framework of structures that they had partially created themselves. Understanding perpetrator action and decision making is no easy task, of course, particularly given the enormity of the actions in question, but it is only through exploring the complex webs of values, beliefs and decisions that drove the Holocaust that we can begin to make sense of why it happened.

Wolf Kaiser
Wolf Kaiser is Deputy Director and Director of the Educational Department of the House of the Wannsee Conference, Berlin.

Historical empathy without sympathy

When the trial against Adolf Eichmann was prepared in Jerusalem, a psychologist examined the defendant in order to find out whether he was insane or fully responsible for what he did. When the psychologist was asked afterwards whether Eichmann was 'normal', he answered: 'Yes, he is normal. Certainly more normal than I am after this examination.' The anecdote is a warning that dealing with Nazi perpetrators confronts teachers and students with the darkest side of human nature. But it also underlines that the Holocaust cannot be explained by supposing that the Nazis were insane or even some different kind of human beings. There were some pathological characters among the Nazi leaders, but this phenomenon can by no means explain how a systematic genocide could happen. Most Nazis and their collaborators were normal human beings who committed very extraordinary crimes.

Since the Holocaust was planned, organised, and executed by human beings, it can be explained, although the existing explanations may not yet be comprehensive and entirely convincing. In order to explain why the Holocaust happened we must try to understand what the perpetrators did and what they thought.

There is a German proverb saying: 'To understand everything means to condone everything.' In this case the proverb is certainly not applicable. Studying the Holocaust we are confronted with the most despicable attitudes and behaviour and most people will react with disgust and horror. And even when they go a step further and analyse how and why such inhuman attitudes and acts emerged, and on which ideology and dynamics they were based, the aversion will not fade away.

Reading a letter written by SS-officer Rolf-Heinz Höppner to Adolf Eichmann about the Jews isolated in the ghettos of the annexed Polish territories can be used as an example. Höppner referred in particular to the situation in the Lodz ghetto under German administration headed by Hans Biebow (see Figure 1) when he wrote on 16 July 1941: 'There is the risk that, in the coming winter, it will become impossible to feed all the Jews.' One would expect suggestions to follow how sufficient food supply could be organised. But the logic of the Nazi perpetrators is different; they would hardly go backwards and revoke a measure, but decide upon more radical 'solutions' to problems they themselves have created. So Höppner continues:

> *It should be seriously considered if it would not be the most human solution to dispose of the Jews, in so far they are not capable of work, through a quick-acting agent. In any case this would be more pleasant than to let them starve.*[1]

The document shows how Nazis who were neither near the top of the hierarchy nor in the centre of the Third Reich contributed to the radicalisation of anti-Jewish politics. Five months later they had found a 'quick-acting agent': The killing of Jews of the Warthegau in the gas-vans of Chełmno started on 8 December. When we interpret the document in its historical context, it does not lose its chilling potential; on the contrary: we understand that it is a product of rational planning and cynicism and this is more disturbing than insanity.

Difficulties that students face when they deal with Nazi perpetrators

The difference between historical explanation and comprehension without critical distance is very important for historians and for educators. It can happen that students – eager to understand the motivations of perpetrators – cross this line, not intending to approve the crimes, but showing them as an inevitable consequence of certain predispositions and constraints. This is not only educationally unwelcome; it is also historically untrue. The perpetrators had options (whereas the victims were often confronted with 'choiceless choices'). Showing that the decision to take part in persecution and mass murder was based on the ideology of the perpetrators, on their ambitions or their authoritarian attitude does not mean to pretend that there were no alternatives.

Perhaps the most difficult task for students when dealing with Nazi perpetrators is to find an adequate language that can describe the perpetrators' way of thinking and challenge it at the same time. Students tend to unwittingly reproduce the ideological language of the Nazis. They need help to express a critical analysis.

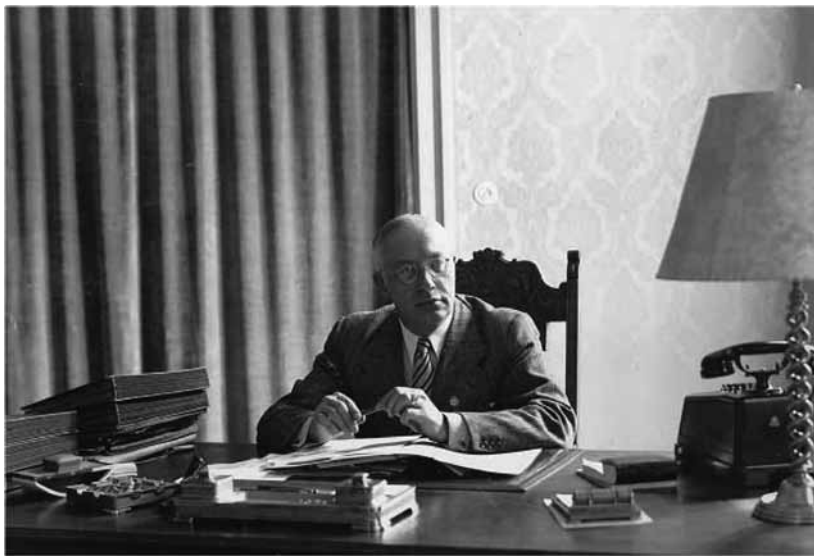
This is particularly important when we do not only focus on executioners of mass murder, but include those who prepared it ideologically, planned and organised it. If we want to understand why the Holocaust happened these perpetrators are more interesting than the killers. Studies should not be limited to persons who can be defined as criminals on the basis of the penal code. They must include journalists who spread antisemitism, jurists who undermined the state of law by interpreting and changing the legal system according to Nazi ideology, bureaucrats who coordinated anti-Jewish activities (see Figure 2), tax officers who organised the dispossession of Jews, railroad men who allocated the trains transporting the Jews to the death camps, and so on. However, it is important to differentiate between perpetrators and bystanders. The passivity of bystanders also had an impact on the events. But they were not themselves executors of discrimination, persecution and murder.

We cannot analyse the position and functions of perpetrators without looking at the society that generated, supported and tolerated the perpetrators. At the same time we have to explain the special responsibility of the perpetrators. The concrete relation between perpetrators and society must be described differently for different groups of perpetrators. Gestapo agents had a particular position in society and their relation to other citizens was different from that of tax officers who confiscated Jewish property and put it on auction, of SS-camp guards or of the officials of the ministerial bureaucracy preparing anti-Jewish legislation. It is not helpful to adopt the Nazis' ideological concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ('community of the people') without examining its degree of reality, let alone vague ideas of the German people's character based on national stereotypes.

When teaching about the Holocaust, we are confronted with high expectations. Holocaust education should inform our students about a complex historical process, which is difficult to understand. Furthermore, it should also make them think

Figure 1: Hans Biebow's birthday, December 1942, photographer: Walter Genewein, the chief accountant of the ghetto administration in Lodz
Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt

Figure 2: Martin Luther, Undersecretary of State at the German Foreign Office, equipped with the weapons of the bureaucrats



about questions that are relevant for the present and the future. How do we reach such goals? Do students get a deeper insight into the history of the Holocaust by studying the perpetrators? Does this generate understanding of threats to human co-existence and reinforce values that characterise a citizen who is ready to defend democratic principles and human rights?

Dealing with the perpetrators provides access to crucial questions of Holocaust history. The Holocaust was the climax of more and more radical politics of the Nazis against the Jews. In order to analyse and understand this process we need to study the files documenting the activities of the perpetrators who initiated and controlled it. We must analyse their motivations and their way of thinking and behaviour, if we want to understand why this happened and why it was done in this manner. The victims had very little influence on the way things developed. Of course the letters and diaries written by Jews who were exposed to the escalating cruelty of the Nazis are very valuable sources for reconstructing their experiences, but in order to understand the driving forces

behind the radicalisation of anti-Jewish actions we must deal with the perpetrators.

Studying biographies of perpetrators

During the last 15 years, many books and papers on Nazi perpetrators have been produced and many individual or group biographies of perpetrators have recently been published portraying perpetrators in different functions within the agencies of the Third Reich and on different levels of the hierarchy. Studying such biographies is one possible approach.

Raul Hilberg began his book about *Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders* with a chapter about Hitler.[2] No doubt that Hitler has to be mentioned first when we speak about Nazi perpetrators. But the persisting notion that many people have that all crimes of the Nazis were initiated by Hitler and committed following his orders is certainly wrong. In his monumental biography of Hitler, Ian Kershaw quoted a phrase coined by a rather unknown Nazi functionary, the state-secretary of the Prussian Ministry for Agriculture, Werner Willikens, in 1934: 'working toward the Führer'.[3] Kershaw uses it as the *Leitmotiv* of his book. It expresses Hitler's key-position, but it is also a hint that we have to look at the Nazi functionaries who developed initiatives on their own to realise the racist and antisemitic policy of the Third Reich. And we should include others in our syllabus who were not particularly keen to get rid of the Jews, but who nevertheless took part in their persecution because they understood that this was one of the main goals of the regime and that they would benefit from their participation in terms of career, power or wealth.

Perpetrators held different positions in the Nazi system not only in terms of hierarchy. There were diverse groups of perpetrators participating in the persecution and murder of the Jews. Not only those who committed the murder in the camps and at the shooting ditches: the members of the SS, of the police, and in not so few cases of the army have to be mentioned here. Also bureaucrats in many bodies of the state, municipalities, and the Nazi Party had an essential function in the process. They were involved in the discrimination and isolation of the Jews and the organisation of the deportations into death. Through anti-Jewish propaganda and harassment even members of the Hitler Youth paved the way for the radicalisation of anti-Jewish measures and the acceptance of these measures by many Germans.

A documentary called *Heil Hitler: Confessions of the Hitler Youth* provides an example that can be used with students of different ages.[4] In this film, Alfons Heck, who was a fanatical member of the Hitler Youth, tells his story in a rather self-critical way. He remembers that the November Pogrom (euphemistically called *Kristallnacht*), when the synagogue of his hometown was burnt down, was an exciting spectacle for him. When he watched his best friend being deported, he felt that this was necessary for the good of Germany. As a 16-year-old at the zenith of his career in the Hitler Youth, he shot down an American fighter plane. Several interesting questions can be discussed after watching the documentary. Was Alfons Heck a bystander or a perpetrator? What motivations lay behind Nazi fanaticism? What responsibility did Germans have who became enthusiastic Nazis? What alternative behaviours would have been possible? Similar autobiographical memories given by female members of the Hitler Youth equivalent, the German Girls League (*Bund Deutscher Mädel* or BDM), can also be used for exploring these questions.[5]

Another example – more suitable when teaching older students – is the biography of Franz Schlegelberger, state secretary and from January 1941 to August 1942 acting Minister of Justice in Nazi Germany. Different from Heck, Schlegelberger had a leading position in the ministerial bureaucracy of the Third Reich. He was the most prominent defendant in case three of the Nuremberg Trials, where he got a life sentence, mainly because of his responsibility for the infamous Poland Penal Law Provision. But Schlegelberger was not a fanatical Nazi like his follower in the Ministry of Justice, Otto Thierack. On 13 October 1942, Thierack wrote to Martin Bormann that he intended to turn over criminal jurisdiction over Poles, Russians, Jews and Gypsies, to the Reichsführes-SS Himmler. And he added with regret: 'In doing so, I stand on the principle that the administration of justice can make only a small contribution to the extermination of these peoples.'[6] Such sentences cannot be found in Schlegelberger's writings. His attitude was ambivalent, and this makes him more interesting.[7]

Schlegelberger, an author of highly esteemed books of jurisprudence, tried to defend the independence of the judges against Hitler's interventions. But he did not extend this care to Jewish judges who were dismissed. Insisting on the rule of law and supporting the anti-Jewish politics of the regime actively and creatively was compatible for him. He held antisemitic feelings and had no reservations about discrimination against citizens simply because they were Jewish. It was important to him, however, that all actions of the state were in accordance with laws. In the end, his strategy did not even help to preserve the formal rules. In October 1941 Hitler read in a newspaper that a Jew from Kattowitz, Markus Luftglass, had been sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison because of illegally stockpiling eggs. Hitler demanded the death penalty for Luftglass, and Schlegelberger handed him over to the Gestapo for execution. Schlegelberger's case shows how a renowned jurist became a Nazi perpetrator. Denying Jewish citizens equal rights put him on a slippery slope on which there was no halt. In 1942 he argued that so-called half-Jews (*Mischlinge)* should be forcibly sterilised instead of being deported – an intervention that only proved that he was well informed about what was in store for the Jews.

Most of the perpetrators do not deserve a study because of their interesting character. Rather than aiming at reconstructing the life story of a fascinating personality, dealing with biographies of Nazi perpetrators should be understood as an approach that provides an insight into the historical, sociological and psychological conditions from which the Nazi crimes emerged. It allows us to deal with questions that go beyond describing what certain individuals did and what happened to them. In the context of Holocaust history our first question would certainly be what direct or indirect responsibility the person had for the persecution and murder of the Jews. This historical question could be followed by a more psychological one: how did these people become so unscrupulous that they participated in preparing or committing systematic mass murder of human beings? But we should also ask what the political and social conditions were that allowed people to plan or practise such

extreme violence. Referring to the complicated cooperation of people from many offices and professions in the Holocaust we might ask: which specific skills did they use in order to make the murderous machinery as efficient as it was? Questions referring to the aftermath should also be asked. Were the perpetrators put on trial or did they have to face any other consequences of their crimes after the end of the Nazi regime? How did they deal with their guilt?

We should also be aware that a biographical approach has certain limits. We will not always be able to give answers to all the aforementioned questions. And the answers will certainly not meet the expectation that analysing biographies of perpetrators could provide a comprehensive and satisfying explanation of why the Holocaust happened. It does not even allow for the construction of a causal link between the conditions and events in the life of a certain person and the crimes he or she committed. In many cases there is a lack of sources that would allow for the reconstruction of his or her motivation. Only a few Nazi perpetrators wrote diaries or letters revealing their mentality. And if they did so, they usually had good reasons to destroy them. There are some exceptions, such as the Nazi physician Friedrich Mennecke, who was deeply involved in the 'T4-programme' to murder mentally ill and disabled people and the selection of prisoners in concentration camps to be murdered in so-called 'Euthanasia' centres, the 'special treatment 14f13' (see Figure 3). The numerous letters of this physician to his wife were preserved and have been published.[8] They give an interesting insight into this murderer's daily work and into his thoughts. The letters do not only reveal his racist and antisemitic sentiments, but also a total inability for self-reflection and a ruthless eagerness to contribute as much as he could to mass murder in the camps and 'Euthanasia' centres. Every day Mennecke tells his wife how many files he has got done; in other words, how many prisoners were selected for death in the gas chamber.

In research on perpetrators another kind of evidence is often used: the files of post-war criminal investigation and trials. These are rich sources of information. But these documents have to be interpreted very carefully. They provide a retrospective interpretation based on the evidence given by the defendant and by witnesses and the conclusions of the court. The defendant – advised by his lawyers – was of course interested in hiding certain aspects and highlighting others. And we also have to be aware that the attorneys and judges selected information according to the rules of the trial. They did not intend to write a historical biography, but to decide whether or how the defendant had to be punished according to the applicable laws. Nevertheless it is worthwhile studying such judgements. The documentation of the Nuremberg Trials[9] and the series of 47 volumes containing judgments of German courts against Nazi perpetrators[10] belong to the most important collections of evidence about the Nazi crimes. In these documents we can find biographies of the defendants and often a detailed description of certain events, which can serve as a clue for exploring the circumstances and the character and behaviour of the persons involved.

Analysing behaviour in key events of the Holocaust

Analysing key events instead of a whole biography can be an alternative approach. Students can usually study biographies only very selectively in the classroom because of their limited

Figure 3: Dr. Friedrich Mennecke and his wife Eva
Deutsches Bundesarchiv

Figure 4: Helmuth Groscurth
Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1997-017-20

reading capacity and time restrictions. If we focus on a certain event, students can study the behaviour of several persons involved (including those who did not become perpetrators) and interpret the differences.

Saul Friedländer has written an excellent analysis of the murder of the children of Byelaya Tserkov – one of the most horrible stories in the gruesome history of the Holocaust.[11] It can be used as a case study, not because of the horror, but since it is instructive to study the different attitudes and behaviour of SS- and army officers on different levels of the hierarchy and their scope of action. Not only fanatic SS-murderers and Nazi officers were involved, but also military chaplains and an officer of the general staff of the army division who was one of the most committed opponents to Hitler among the high-ranking officers. The diaries of Colonel Helmuth Groscurth, who died in a Soviet POW-camp from typhus in 1943, were preserved and published (see Figure 4).[12]

When the SS was going to shoot the Jewish children whose parents had already been murdered, Groscurth, who had just arrived at the site, intervened and tried to save them. His intervention failed and he was sharply criticised by his Commander-in-Chief because of his attempt. Afterwards he wrote a report for his self-defence. This is a very ambivalent document. On the one hand Groscurth insisted that the troops should 'avoid violence and roughness towards a defenceless population', on the other his main interest seemed to be the honour of the army, not the survival of the children. He wrote:

> *In the interest of maintaining military discipline all similar measures should be carried out away from the troops… Following the execution of all the Jews in the town it became necessary to eliminate the Jewish children, particularly the infants.*[13]

How could Groscurth, a deeply religious Protestant and anti-Nazi, write such sentences following the logic of the murderers? The bitter truth is that in the eclipse of humanity we will hardly find a hero without fault.

In many cases, Germans who were neither members of the SS nor of the Nazi Party not only failed to help Jews or remained passive, but even actively took part in the killings although nobody was forced to do so. In an exhibition about the crimes of the German Army an instructive example was given.[14] Three commanders of companies got the same order from their superior to kill the entire Jewish population in the region of Krutcha in Belarus. One of them, Hermann Kuhls, a member of the SS, executed the order without hesitation. The second one, Friedrich Nöll, first tried to avoid this, but when the order was confirmed in a written form, he obeyed. The third, Josef Sibille, a teacher and active Nazi Party member since 1933, refused the assertion that the old Jews, women and children at the site were a risk for the security of the German troops and told his commander that his company would not take part. Asked when he would ever become relentless, he answered: 'Never'. His insubordination did not have any further consequences for him. Unfortunately, his behaviour was exceptional.

The question why so many Germans took part in the killings although they could have avoided doing so without risking their lives has been widely discussed. Above all, the controversy between Daniel Jonah Goldhagen and Christopher Browning found a large audience.[15] Goldhagen maintained that the Holocaust emerged from an 'eliminationist antisemitism'[16] which he called a German national project deeply rooted in German culture, whereas Browning emphasised factors, which influenced the behaviour of the majority in the actual situation like group-pressure, a sense of insecurity in an unknown and hostile surrounding and brutalisation through the war experience. The German social psychologist Harald Welzer recently revisited Browning's explanation and added a detailed analysis of the killing process as an organised procedure, which facilitated the participation of those who were reluctant in the beginning.[17] But he also stated that without racist ideology this would not have been accepted. He mentioned an alteration of the frame of reference, a rapid change of social norms through the measures taken by the Nazis against Jews and other minorities and widely practised in everyday life since 1933. This practice was based on the assertion of a fundamental inequality between human beings. The training programmes of the police, as described by Jürgen Matthäus, can be understood as an actualisation and intensification of this underlying assumption which made the policemen ideologically fit for mass murder.[18]

What was said about the motivations and mentality of murderers in police units cannot simply be applied to the bureaucrats who organised the deportations and mass-killings. Their behaviour deserves a special consideration. Christopher Browning's book *The Path to Genocide* contains an outstanding paper on three middle-echelon bureaucrats.[19] Under the title 'Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrator's Comprehension of the Final Solution' Browning portrayed three ambitious administrators who became active collaborators in organising genocide: Franz Rademacher at the Jewish desk of the German Foreign Office (see Figure 5), Harald Turner, the chief of the German military administration in occupied Serbia from April 1941 to the fall of 1942, and Hans Biebow, the head of the 'Office for Food Supply and Economics' in Lodz who was responsible for the ghetto administration. He shows them as 'normal' bureaucrats, being 'accommodators' as opposed to 'anticipators' of mass murder like Biebow's deputy and antagonist in Lodz, Alexander Palfinger, who, as early as November 1940, zealously advocated systematic starvation to promote 'a rapid dying out of the Jews'. Biebow wanted to prevent starvation by making the ghetto self-sustaining. But when in the autumn of 1941 he received signals (not orders!) from above that solving the 'Jewish question' would now mean systematic mass murder, he actively took part in shipping the Jews from Lodz to the Chełmno death camp. Browning reconstructed a similar process in all three case studies. They all accepted the notion that there was a Jewish question to be solved. At least in Rademacher's and Turner's case this clearly meant a need to get rid of them one way or the other. Browning emphasised that none of them 'initiated mass murder from below, neither did they receive explicit orders from above'. But all cooperated in genocide once it had begun. Browning concludes:

> *The personal adjustment that each had to make flowed so naturally out of the logic of his past conception of the Jewish question, and dovetailed so completely with his own career*

self-interest, that there was no sudden crisis of conscience, no traumatic agonizing, no consciousness of crossing an abyss, virtually no foot-dragging, and only occasional attempts to escape personal involvement, provided of course that it could be done without damage to career.[20]

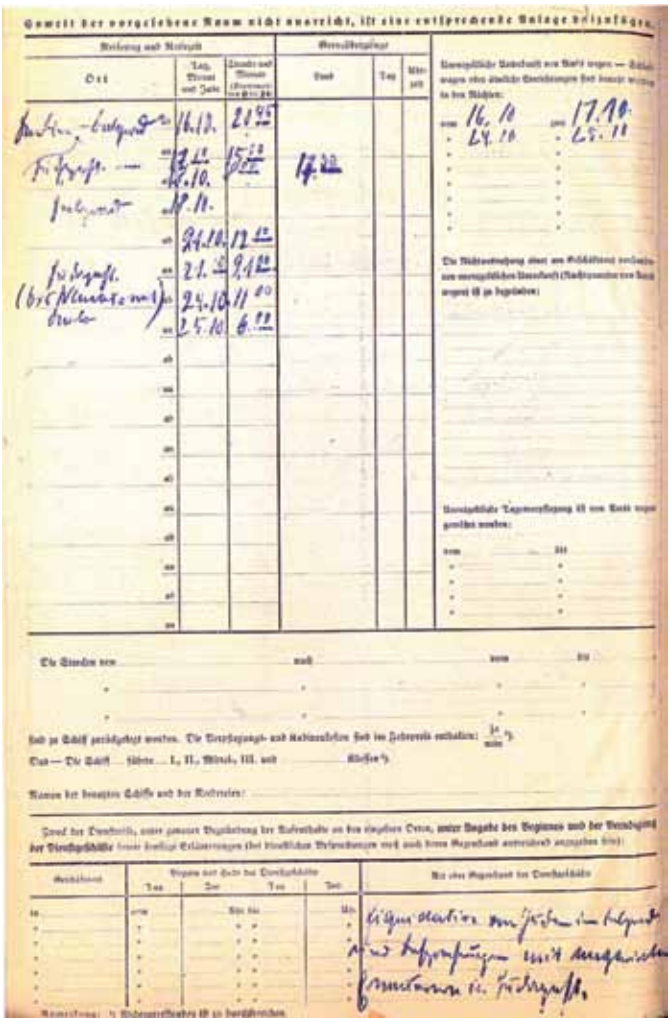
Browning's essay can be used for conceptualising a lesson or a series of lessons on Nazi perpetrators. It demonstrates that we might miss the point if we focus on the moment when a 'normal' bureaucrat became a mass murderer. Rather than looking at the decision taken in this very moment, Browning suggests analysing the 'logic' of the conceptions and interests of the perpetrators.

Problematising simple lessons from history

It is legitimate to choose historical events for studying human behaviour. But the examples must not be isolated from the historical context. Studying the history of the Nazi perpetrators can contribute to the ability to assess political, social and cultural developments from a democratic point of view, heightening awareness of present dangers, and motivating people to look for alternative options. But we should not try to deduce from historical examples a set of rules of conduct that are universally applicable.

If we expect learning from history, there is a specific difficulty when Nazi atrocities are made the subject of study: the enormous differences between the historical topic, the learning situation and 'real life'. We should not try to compensate for these differences by simulations. Such experiments imply the risk either of being inadequate to the seriousness of the historical event or of damaging the self-confidence of students as moral personalities. And they will not provide any proof that a lesson learnt from the Holocaust under normal conditions will be applied in an extreme situation. We have to admit that we do not know whether our educational efforts will have the desired effects on behaviour in the future. We can observe reflections and see how students deal with important questions. We may hope that they will see warning signs based on the historical experience. But they themselves will have to find their own way in the actual situation. History encourages reflection, but it does not provide signposts for the right way to go in a quickly changing world.

Figure 5: Form of the German Foreign Office for travel expense accounting. Franz Rademacher gave 'Liquidation of Jews in Belgrade' as the reason for his journey on 16/17 October 1941.
Deutsches Bundesarchiv



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