
The *Judenrat* Dilemma

In every Jewish community throughout occupied Europe, the Nazi regime forced the local Jews to select a group of representatives to form a Jewish Council (*Judenrat* in German; plural, *Judenräte*), ostensibly to keep law and order and attend to the needs of the community, but in reality to facilitate the work of “resettlement,” the Nazi euphemism for extermination. In addition, the Nazi-appointed council was ordered to institute a Jewish police force to implement Nazi orders. Even in some of the concentrations camps, such as Theresienstadt, a *Judenrat* was set up. Additionally, in all camps the Nazis appointed a Jewish police force, known as *kapos*, to supervise forced labor and carry out administrative orders. For centuries, Jewish communities throughout Europe were self-governed by a council known in Hebrew as *kahal* or *kehillah*, and so the introduction of a *Judenrat* seemed to flow naturally from this historical continuum. But it soon became clear that the new regime was using the Jewish law enforcers as a tool to make their own genocidal work easier.

According to Hannah Arendt,

To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story. It had been known about before, but it has now been exposed for the first time in all its pathetic and sordid detail by Raul Hilberg, whose standard work *The Destruction of the European Jews* I mentioned before.

Raul Hilberg is considered the preeminent scholar of the Holocaust. His three-volume, 1,273-page magnum opus mentioned by Arendt, first published in 1961 (around the time of the Eichmann trial), is considered the seminal study of the Nazi Final Solution. In the '80s, when I worked on Nazi documentation with the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations (which looked for former Nazis who had entered the United States with false documents), his book was routinely used as a reliable reference by the prosecutors of such cases. In this book, Hilberg writes that "truly, the Jewish communal organizations had become a self-destructive machine."¹

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt goes on to say:

The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery, but the total number of victims would have hardly been between four and a half and six million people. (According to Freudiger's calculations about half of them could have saved themselves if they had not followed the instructions of the Jewish Councils. This is of course a mere estimate, which, however, oddly jibes with the rather reliable figures we have from Holland and which I owe to Dr. L. de Jong, the head of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation. In Holland, where the *Joodsche Raad* [the Jewish Council] like all the Dutch authorities very quickly became "an instrument of the Nazis," 103,000 Jews were deported to the death camps and some five thousand to Theresienstadt in the usual way, i.e., with the cooperation of the Jewish Council. Only five hundred and nineteen Jews returned from the death camps. In contrast to this figure, ten thousand of those twenty to twenty-five thousand Jews who escaped the Nazis—and that meant also the Jewish Council—and went underground survived; again forty to fifty percent. Most of the Jews sent to Theresienstadt returned to Holland.)²

When Arendt's book, reporting on the Eichmann Trial, first came out in 1963, paragraphs such as the above one quoted from her book caused a firestorm in the Jewish world. To many Jews it appeared as though this highly respected German Jewish scholar was shifting the blame for the destruction of European Jewry from the Germans to the Jews. The Jewish establishment practically ostracized her. Now, half a century later, her book has been reissued as a Penguin Classic and has found a new generation of readers. The controversy started by its author, however, continues unabated. Israel's

1. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 125.
2. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 125.

leading Holocaust scholar, Yehuda Bauer, has presented a counter-argument to the above text about the tragedy of Dutch Jewry.

Bauer writes,

Hannah Arendt's conclusion that had there been no Judenräte the Germans would have faced serious problems is restated despite the fact that many of the Soviet territories had no Judenräte, and the destruction was even more efficient there than in Poland.³

Elsewhere, Bauer writes,

The historical literature on the behavior of the Judenräte is voluminous, *and yet the subject is far from being exhausted*. Two basic approaches can be discerned. One is represented by Raul Hilberg, who has analyzed the Judenräte with the tools of the social scientist. He says in effect, that the moment the Jewish leadership groups accepted nomination at German hands, they became, willy-nilly, cogs in the destruction machine that the Germans developed to annihilate the Judenräte's own charges, the Jewish people. The Judenräte facilitated the murder, even when they did everything in their power to extricate themselves from that role. When they established hospitals and cured sick Jews, they made more slave workers available to toil for the Germans until the Germans decided to kill them.⁴

Bauer goes on to present his own view which he attributes to Aharon Weiss's earlier work on the subject. He writes:

I must repeat, we know they failed. But *we* know that they had to fail; they usually knew this only when it was too late; but—did they try to protect their communities even after they knew the situation was hopeless? We judge them with hindsight, and that is always a much more knowledgeable view. So we have to ask whether in a totally immoral world they tried to maintain elementary morality, whether their strategies were designed for the common good, and not whether their actions were successful. Finally and most importantly, we have found that generalizations about their behavior put forward by Hilberg, and in a different and more extreme form perhaps by Hannah Arendt, are inappropriate, because no Judenrat behaved in quite the same way as any other Judenrat. Each Judenrat presided over a hell,

3. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 77.

4. Ibid. 128 (italics added).

and similar though these hells were to each other, they were at the same time quite different.⁵

As we shall see in the next chapter, during the Holocaust the leadership of entire Jewish world, including the leadership of American and British Jewry, and the leaders of the Zionist movement worldwide and in Palestine, failed to act in any significant way to minimize the catastrophic dimensions of the destruction of European Jewry. Those who could and should have done more did not. As for the behavior of the Jewish Councils, their Jewish police force, and the kapos doing their ghastly work in the camps, here we are dealing with the doomed being manipulated by an enemy who, as we know, was one of the most ruthless enemies the world has ever known. With a gun to their head, they could have chosen to die rather than accept the role of Judenrat member, or ghetto police, or camp kapo. How can we, in the comfort of our homes and protected by the law as we are, how can we, judge them? What would we have done? Most likely, the majority of us would have done exactly what they did. We would have rationalized that we were delaying the bitter end by our actions. Hitler could die tomorrow, or the Allies could suddenly win the war. The traditional Jewish attitude is never to lose hope. A believing Jew says, I rely on divine providence. A careful study of the various heads of Judenräte throughout Europe shows that their behavior ran the entire gamut from close cooperation and abuse of power to self-sacrifice. Let us look at some salient examples.

In the Lodz ghetto, one of the major ghettos in Poland, the head of the Judenrat was a Jewish businessman named Chaim Rumkowski. According to Bauer,

Rumkowski was without any doubt a brutal dictator. He handed the children of the ghetto over to the Germans. He not only knew what their fate would be; he even made a speech, which has been preserved, telling the inhabitants of the ghetto why he was doing it: if he did not, the Germans would take young people as well as the children and the old people. If the young people did not survive, there would be no hope for the future; if they did, they would give birth to new children.⁶

Taken in isolation, this true story is horrifying. But years later survivors of the Lodz Ghetto referred to what might be called the “math of death,” and concluded that because of Rumkowski’s actions the Lodz Ghetto lasted two years longer than the Warsaw Ghetto, and in the end several

5. Ibid., 129.

6. Ibid., 131.

thousand ghetto residents survived, which gave Rumkowski a posthumous victory over Hitler.

The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest of the Jewish ghettos in Poland. The head of the *Judenrat* in Warsaw was Adam Czerniakow. In regard to Czerniakow, the distinguished Israeli Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer writes,

In stark contrast to Rumkowski, Czerniakow's ordinariness was his most notable characteristic. Yet his diary shows him to be anything but ordinary. His basic decency is striking in a time of unbridled ruthlessness. Not only did he devote every single day to his community, but he particularly cared for the humblest and the weakest among his *four hundred thousand wards*: the children, the beggars, the insane.⁷

On July 23, 1942, as the Germans were gearing up for the mass deportation of the Warsaw Ghetto residents to the death camp, Czerniakow committed suicide. On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising took place. It was a massive act of suicide, but it was also a message sent out to the world and in particular to the comrades of the Jewish fighters around the world and especially in the land of Israel: Jewish blood is no longer a free-for-all. Jews will no longer be led like sheep to the slaughter. The message was not lost. The Jewish world will never be the same again.

At the other end of the spectrum from Rumkowski we have Ilya Mishkin in the Minsk Ghetto, which contained eighty-four thousand inhabitants. Regarding Mishkin, Bauer writes:

His only qualification was that he spoke German. But from the first day he collaborated with the Communist underground, led in the ghetto by a Jewish Communist refugee from Warsaw named Hersh Smoliar. How could Mishkin do both: obey German orders (otherwise he would be removed and killed) and support the underground, supplying partisans in nearby forests with medical aid, clothing and other equipment and helping to smuggle some 7,000 Jews out of the ghetto and into the forests? But he did, and when he was murdered after relying on a supposedly anti-Nazi German officer, his successor, Moshe Yaffe, a refugee from Vilna, followed an identical policy. Yaffe was killed in July 1942 because he had warned the assembled ghetto inhabitants that they were going to be murdered.⁸

7. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (italics added).

8. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 134.

Bauer goes on to say: “Most of the Judenräte in Europe were somewhere between Lodz and Minsk in the degree to which they yielded to the Germans.”⁹ In other words, some slavishly followed the Nazi orders while others resorted to various forms of resistance, culminating in uprisings such as the one at the Warsaw Ghetto. But the great majority was somewhere in the middle, looking for ways to live another day. That meant offering the enemy workers to show that a particular ghetto had able-bodied people who could help the German war effort. It also meant preserving public health and obtaining badly needed food. In short, the story of the Judenräte is far from simple. Arendt referred to it as the “darkest chapter in the whole dark story.” But I respectfully beg to differ with her. All the chapters were equally dark, yet all contained sparks of light. To condemn doomed people is immoral. We have no right to judge them. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, we do have a right to judge Jewish leaders who were outside the Nazi-occupied zone and were able to do more and did not.

9. Ibid., 134.