Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction

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Götz Aly’s and Susanne Heim’s Architects of Annihilation is a translation of the authors’ Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe), first published in 1991. The alteration to the title may be designed to emphasise the authors’ argument that there was a rational purpose behind the Holocaust. There are also slight alterations to the text; sections have been rearranged and, more significantly, sentences and occasionally whole paragraphs omitted. Although these alterations do not substantially affect the authors’ original thesis, it is regrettable that they have not been mentioned by the publishers, who have also disgracefully failed to provide an index, despite the fact that, unusually for German academic books, the original had a good index. The book would also have benefited from a new introduction setting out the subsequent development of the debate provoked by its German original more than a decade ago.

Aly’s and Heim’s arguments proved highly controversial when they appeared in 1991, for they fundamentally challenged the existing interpretations of the Holocaust. They rejected both the idea put forward by some that the Holocaust is rationally and historically inexplicable and the mainstream emphasis on the irrationality of Nazi policy, with the racist and specifically anti-semitic views of Hitler and leading Nazis seen as the main motivating factor. Instead, Aly and Heim insisted that Auschwitz should be understood not in terms of ‘a totally irrational racial hatred’ but rather as being motivated primarily by ‘utilitarian goals’. Indeed, they explained the Holocaust as part of a much broader and rationally motivated project, a ‘grand strategy known as “negative population policy”’. (p. 4)

According to this view, the Nazis’ aim was to create a German-dominated Europe whose economy would be reorganised to maximise productivity. This would require economic modernisation, to which the key was seen as being the rationalisation of population to achieve an ‘optimum population size’. Population groups which, for whatever reason, were surplus and unproductive would be eliminated by one means or another. In this perspective, therefore, the Jews were just one amongst a number of groups to be targeted for elimination. Their extermination was given priority under wartime conditions because it was the easiest to implement. But in principle they were no different from the other groups being targeted on demographic/economic grounds. As evidence for this view the authors point to Nazi plans for the conquest of the Soviet Union, which envisaged millions of Russians dying of starvation, the death of three million
Russian POWs during 1941-42 through wilful neglect, and the ‘General Plan East’, formulated during 1941-42, which included the removal of tens of millions from the Soviet Union and Poland over a period of some 25 years.

But why the Jews in particular? Aly and Heim argue that the economic role of the Jews was seen as representing a major barrier to economic modernisation. Thus the authors see the ‘Aryanisation’ programme (the take-over of Jewish businesses by ‘Aryan’ Germans or Austrians during 1938-1939) as motivated not primarily by anti-semitism, by the desire to eliminate the Jews from the German economy on racist grounds and as a step to driving them out of Germany altogether, but rather as essentially ‘a state-directed programme of closures and rationalisation’ the principal benefits of which were ‘structural in nature’, namely the improvement of the position of German retail trade. Racism was merely a supporting motive. In particular, the measures carried out in Vienna became ‘a textbook example’ for other occupied territories in which ‘racist ideology and economic rationalisation came together for the first time’. (p. 23)

However, the main focus of the book is on the situation in Poland between 1939 and 1943. The authors argue that the economic exclusion of the Polish Jews and their subsequent ghettoization, deportation and extermination were integral parts of a comprehensive programme for the modernisation of the Polish economy, designed to make it more productive in the interests of the German economy. The Polish economy was allegedly burdened with an over-populated and unproductive agrarian sector. Rationalisation of the agrarian sector would lead to large-scale unemployment. This could only be efficiently solved by absorbing the more productive elements into the industrial and commercial sectors, while the unproductive elements would have to be got rid of. However, Polish industrial and commercial development was blocked by the Jews, whose numerous small businesses dominated these sectors of the economy. Removal of the Jews would thus enable some of those who had been rendered surplus by the rationalisation of the agrarian sector to form a new Polish petty bourgeoisie.

Central to Aly’s and Heim’s approach is their assumption that policy for the occupied territories, including Jewish policy, was largely driven by a group of demographers and economists who not only shared a common vision but worked together through a network of contacts between the various agencies in which they were employed. The authors thus proceed through an analysis of the biographies and proposals of a number of individuals attached to various planning agencies within the occupied territories. This research represents their most significant contribution to our knowledge of these events. Through their pioneering work they have brought to light a remarkable range of evidence which certainly proves that there were considerable numbers of experts who were developing plans for a future German empire, plans that envisaged the elimination of millions of people and yet were based on demographic and economic models that were ‘rational’ within the conceptual frameworks upon which they were operating.

Their book raises two important questions, however. First, how far can these experts be considered ‘architects of annihilation’ as far as the Holocaust is concerned? In other words, what was the actual extent of their influence on the decisions that led to it? To put it somewhat crudely, Aly and Heim are arguing that in effect these experts provided the ideas for the anti-intellectual Nazi leadership. Secondly, what was the role of racism in general, and anti-semitism in particular, in the decisions that were taken and what was their relationship to the plans of the demographic and economic experts?

In Architects of Annihilation, Aly and Heim start from the assumption that extermination only emerged as a solution of the ‘Jewish question’ in the course of the war and that it did so as a result of the crisis situation created by the resettlement measures implemented in Poland, on the basis of the demographic/economic reform plans of experts employed in middle-level agencies. Since these plans had from the start assumed the elimination of surplus population groups as part of a negative population policy, their ideas provided the basis on which the decision to exterminate the Jews was taken as the easiest means of solving the crisis, since the Jews were regarded on racial grounds as the most expendable group. As part of their argument, Aly and Heim try to make a case for the Four Year Plan organisation, in the General Council of which some of these experts were members, as playing the key role in decisions leading up to the Holocaust. This has some
plausibility in that Hermann Göring, the head of the Four Year Plan, was given responsibility for the Jewish question by Hitler in the autumn of 1938. However, the argument is difficult to sustain, since Göring, who by 1939 had effectively handed it over to Himmler and the SS, was in practice by then only formally responsible.

One of the problems of reviewing a book published more than a decade ago is that things have moved on. In this case one needs to consider the fact that Aly published a study of the Holocaust in 1995 (‘Endlösung’, Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer) published in English in 1999 under the title ‘Final Solution’. Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews (transl. Belinda Cooper and Allison Brown, London: Arnold). In this book the experts to whose plans he has paid such attention and attributed such significance in Architects of Annihilation appear on the margins and receive only a few references. Aly justifies this by claiming that, whereas in the earlier book ‘we viewed events from the perspective of a planning elite that thought in terms of tabula rasa, here [in Final Solution] we are dealing with the complement to that, the reactions and plans of the practitioners’. (p. 4)

However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the individuals and agencies that dominate Final Solution – Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann, Frank and so on, and the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA): that is, the ‘practitioners’ – were in fact the key players and decision-makers in the Holocaust, rather than the demographers and economists of Architects of Annihilation.

Of course there is still the question of the basis on which they made those decisions. Aly claims in Final Solution that ‘murderous ideas spread osmotically, rising through a type of capillary action’. (p. 7) This is a suggestive metaphor but it is no substitute for a detailed study of how and how far the ideas of the experts actually influenced the decisions taken to exterminate the Jews. And here Architects of Annihilation is weak. There is no systematic analysis of the relationship between the plans of the experts and these decisions. The authors make a good case for claiming that, in providing a rationale for extermination, the experts assisted in forming the climate in which extermination became the consensus solution to the problems that had been created by the Nazis themselves. However, in neither book do they demonstrate that the demographic/economic arguments of the experts played a decisive role in the decisions that led to the Holocaust; they are on especially weak ground when applying this argument to Germany and western Europe. In particular, they fail to demonstrate that such utilitarian arguments were more significant than racist ideas and assumptions in determining Nazi policy towards the Jews.

Aly’s and Heim’s attempt in Architects of Annihilation to downplay the role of ‘irrational’ racism in Nazi policy and practice, by comparison with allegedly ‘rational’ and ‘utilitarian’ demographic and economic arguments, raises a number of issues. In the first place, in her recent study of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office (RuSHA) (1), Isabel Heinemann disputes Aly and Heim’s interpretation of the germanization programme in Poland, which, according to them, ‘was guided far more by the perceived economic benefits than by a fundamentalist interpretation of Nazi ideology’. (p. 80) By contrast, Heinemann demonstrates the key role played by the ‘race experts’ who were deployed in Poland and the Protectorate to assess whether or not the inhabitants were racially qualified to be ‘germanized’. She shows that they considered their racial criteria to be rational and successfully asserted them against utilitarian criteria. Indeed, she concludes that ‘within the resettlement and germanisation policy in Poland utilitarian factors were considered subordinate to racial-political motives’. (p. 599) Indeed, as Ulrich Herbert has shown in his studies of the post-1918 generation of völkisch nationalist students, who formed the SD cadre (2), these men did not regard their racist ideas as ‘irrational’ but, on the contrary, as guiding principles for a re-ordering of German and later European society on a scientific basis, designed to maximise the strength and quality of the ‘national body’.

Finally, the demographic/economic arguments cannot arguably be detached from the racist perspective in which they were formulated. Ideas of a demographic reorganisation of Europe, with certain population groups being privileged and others being disadvantaged or eliminated, were not simply based on economic criteria of efficiency and productivity, but implicitly also included a racial element. It is true that it is often difficult to disentangle the two, with racial quality being, amongst other criteria, frequently defined in terms of economic and social efficiency. But it would be a mistake to deny racial notions unrelated to economics a
discrete and determining role in Nazi policy and action. Indeed, in another pioneering piece of research in his Final Solution, Aly demonstrated that, instead of being driven by the plans of the experts, the dynamic towards Jewish extermination in Poland was driven by the racial (ethnic) reordering of Europe, not primarily on economic grounds but through the need to resettle large numbers of ethnic Germans returning to Germany, mainly from various parts of eastern Europe occupied by the Soviet Union. As he clearly shows, it was the pressure created by the need to accommodate hundreds of thousands of these ethnic Germans in the annexed Polish territories that created the population bottlenecks there and in the General Government, to which Poles and Jews were then deported. It was a self-induced crisis based on ethnic rather than economic criteria which, within the prevailing anti-semitic consensus, prompted the lethal response that followed.

The issue of the role played by anti-semitism is indeed central to the discussion. For Aly and Heim anti-semitism as a motivating force was relatively marginal. In their account, the Jews figure as one of the ‘surplus’ population groups whose existence was regarded as an obstacle to an efficient German empire. For them the fact that the Jews were regarded as on the bottom rung of the Nazi racial hierarchy explains why they were targeted first, but it does not make Nazi policy towards the Jews qualitatively different from their behaviour towards Poles or Russians, a behaviour driven primarily by utilitarian considerations. However, although one can accept that the extermination of the Jews was indeed part of a wider programme of ‘negative population policy’, which involved the intention to eliminate millions of non-Jews, and that the motives for this policy were in substantial part economic, this reviewer does not consider that the evidence put forward by Aly and Heim, based on their studies of the role of particular experts, indicates that this was the prime motive for exterminating the Jews.

To begin with, their analysis is overly confined to the years 1939-1941 and to developments in Poland. They do not attempt to explain the extension of the Holocaust from 1942 onwards to the rest of Europe. If the Holocaust was primarily motivated by economic priorities, it is indeed difficult to explain the lengths to which the Nazis went and the resources in terms of transport and manpower they expended in the middle of a war (which by then was not going well), in order to bring Jews from the furthest corners of Europe to the extermination camps. Moreover, when it came to racial selections, unlike other ethnic groups, no Jews or Gypsies were considered worthy of germanization. And, notoriously, when the Reich Commissar in the Baltic States, Hinrich Lohse, enquired of his superiors in November 1941 whether Jews should be killed ‘without regard to age, sex or their usefulness to the economy’, he was informed that ‘economic considerations are to be regarded as fundamentally irrelevant in the settlement of the problem’. (3) Thus, this manic pursuit of the Jews surely suggests that for the Nazis the Jews were indeed qualitatively different, even by the standards of the racial paradigm within which the regime operated.

If this is true, it gives us a clue as to who had the major influence on the decisions that brought about the Holocaust. It was not the demographic/economic experts for whom utilitarian considerations were paramount, even when they were operating within the racial paradigm. It was not even the bureaucracy of the extermination programme itself, although, once the programme had been launched, men like Eichmann who were responsible for implementing it, did indeed acquire a determination to see the job through, come what may. Ultimately, it was the Nazi leadership – Himmler, Goebbels, the SS/SD cadres and, above all, Hitler himself – who set the agenda and determined the priorities. This did not of course mean that every initiative, or even the majority of them, came from the top. Recent research has clearly demonstrated the important roles played by those on the ground in driving forward and radicalising the process. But this radicalisation happened within a framework of assumptions and expectations created and sustained by the leadership. And it was the shared view of the leadership that the elimination of the Jews, who were regarded not primarily as an economic burden but rather in pathological terms as a form of disease threatening the health of the German ‘national body’, that was vital.

To be fully understood, Architects of Annihilation needs to be seen in its intellectual context. Since 1984, Aly, Heim and a group of like-minded scholars, associated with two privately-funded Hamburg institutes, have been publishing a series of important and highly original works drawing attention to the crucial role played by doctors, psychiatrists, criminologists, statisticians, demographers, economists, and historians in
various spheres of Nazi policy and action. These works have a common perspective. Nazism is seen as providing the opportunity for this predominantly young, academic or academically-trained elite to realise its shared utopian visions of a rationalised economic and social order, by removing the political and ethical barriers that had existed under the pluralist democracy of Weimar. At the same time, this elite provided the Nazis with the possibility of legitimising their ideology by lending it an intellectually respectable rationale. In the words of Aly and Heim in Architects: ‘our theme is the nightmare of a designing rationalism in the sense of practical policy-making which inherently tends towards the abandonment of moral restraints and as such found in Nazism its ideal conditions’. (p. 9)

Moreover, their concern is that these ideas and values survived 1945, in many cases indeed because the individuals who propagated them managed to secure senior positions in post-war Germany. However, their critique is aimed at more than the role of individuals or a specific elite. It is concerned with what it sees as tendencies within the whole post-Enlightenment modernisation paradigm. Such concerns were of course first articulated by members of the Frankfurt School and have subsequently been taken up by Foucault and others. They were first applied to the interpretation of the Holocaust by Zygmunt Bauman in his Modernity and the Holocaust (Cambridge: Polity, 1989). Bauman argued that the Holocaust was essentially the result of modern culture as a ‘garden culture’, dominated by the gardener’s design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions. In his view the Holocaust was the by-product of the modern drive to a fully-designed, fully-controlled world when the drive gets out of control and runs wild.

Aly and Heim specifically endorse Bauman’s notion of the role of the ‘gardener’s vision’. However, while this perspective is valuable in helping us to appreciate the latent dangers inherent in modern culture and their actual realisation in modern totalitarian regimes, when applied to the Holocaust there is a danger that this approach will ignore or underestimate the specificity of these events – in other words the circumstances that were responsible for their occurrence in a particular historical context. In particular, there is a danger of ignoring the role of ideas that do not have an obvious utilitarian rationale, in this case anti-semitism, as one, indeed arguably the, determining factor in the dynamic that led to the extermination of five to six million Jews. Architects of Annihilation, for all its brilliance, originality and impressive research, has not avoided these dangers.

Notes

1. Isabel Heinemann, ‘Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut’. Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003). Back to (1)

The authors thank Professor Noakes for his review and do not wish to comment further.

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