
2**HEINRICH HIMMLER****Speech to the SS, 1943**

Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) was one of the most powerful leaders of Nazi Germany. He was the head of the SS, or *Schutzstaffel*, an elite army that was responsible for, among other things, running the many concentration camps. Hitler gave Himmler the task of implementing the “final solution of the Jewish question”: attempted genocide of the Jewish population of Germany and the other countries the Nazis occupied. The horror that resulted is today often referred to by the word *holocaust* (literally, holy burnt offering).

The following reading is an excerpt from a speech Himmler gave to SS leaders on October 4, 1943. What was Himmler’s concern in this speech? What kind of general support for the extermination of the Jews does this excerpt suggest existed?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Psychiatrists say that people use various strategies to cope when they must do something distasteful. We might summarize these strategies as

Source: Heinrich Himmler, “Secret Speech at Posen,” in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz (New York: Behrman House, 1976), 132–33.

denial, distancing, compartmentalizing, ennobling, rationalizing, and scapegoating. *Denial* is pretending that something has not happened. *Distancing* removes the idea, memory, or reality from the mind, placing it at a distance. *Compartmentalizing* separates one action, memory, or idea from others, allowing one to “put away” certain feelings. *Ennobling* makes the distasteful act a matter of pride rather than guilt, nobility rather than disgrace. *Rationalizing* creates “good” reasons for doing something, while *scapegoating* puts blame on someone else.

What evidence do you see of these strategies in Himmler’s speech? Judging from the speech, which of these strategies do you think his listeners used to justify their actions?

I also want to make reference before you here, in complete frankness, to a really grave matter. Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it. Just as we did not hesitate on June 30, 1934, to do our duty as ordered, to stand up against the wall comrades who had transgressed,¹ and shoot them, so we have never talked about this and never will. It was the tact which I am glad to say is a matter of course to us that made us never discuss it among ourselves, never talk about it. Each of us shuddered, and yet each one knew that he would do it again if it were ordered and if it were necessary.

I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people. This is one of those things that are easily said. “The Jewish people is going to be annihilated,” says every party member. “Sure, it’s in our program, elimination of the Jews, annihilation—we’ll take care of it.” And then they all come trudging, 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his one decent Jew. Sure, the others are swine, but this one is an A-1 Jew. Of all those who talk this way, not one has seen it happen, nor one has been through it. Most of you must know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out—excepting cases of human weakness—to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory, for we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today—amid the bombing raids, the hardships, and the deprivations of war—we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues. If the Jews were still ensconced in the body of the German nation, we probably would have reached the 1916–17 stage by now.²

¹ A reference to the “Night of the Long Knives,” when Hitler ordered the SS to murder the leaders of the SA, a Nazi group he wished to suppress. [Ed.]

² Here Himmler is apparently referring to the stalemate on Germany’s Western Front in World War I. [Ed.]

The wealth they had we have taken from them. I have issued a strict order, carried out by SS-Obergruppenführer Pohl, that this wealth in its entirety is to be turned over to the Reich as a matter of course. We have taken none of it for ourselves. Individuals who transgress will be punished in accordance with an order I issued at the beginning, threatening that whoever takes so much as a mark of it for himself is a dead man. A number of SS men—not very many—have transgressed, and they will die, without mercy. We had the moral right, we had the duty toward our people, to kill this people which wanted to kill us. But we do not have the right to enrich ourselves with so much as a fur, a watch, a mark, or a cigarette, or anything else. Having exterminated a germ, we do not want, in the end, to be infected by the germ, and die of it. I will not stand by and let even a small rotten spot develop or take hold. Wherever it may form, we together will cauterize it. All in all, however, we can say that we have carried out this heaviest of our tasks in a spirit of love for our people. And our inward being, our soul, our character has not suffered injury from it.

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Source: Jean-François Steiner, *Treblinka* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 153–54, 155–58, 159–60.