

## Stranger than Science Fiction

Edwin Black, IBM, and the Holocaust

**MICHAEL ALLEN**

---

Edwin Black's *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation* (New York: Crown Books, 2001) briefly achieved best-seller status soon after its publication, but sales dwindled in the face of negative reviews. While this review is also negative, it is important to note at the outset that Black addresses a significant issue, the continuing participation of American corporations in German affairs not only after Hitler had proven beyond doubt that he would trample civil rights but even after Germany was at war with the United States. It was not that foreign subsidiaries in Germany had no choice. Whereas the Nazi regime confiscated Polish and Soviet property, not to mention that of Jews, it left the capital of its enemies in the West more or less alone. It did block the transfer of foreign exchange, it did impose windfall profit taxes, and it did ration raw materials and intervene in other ways to place the economy on a war footing. But all firms, not just foreign corporations, faced such policies. The Nazis never needed to force many American (and British) firms to play greater or lesser parts in the German war economy, with all the atrocities that this entailed. If nothing else, *IBM and the Holocaust* should prompt us to ask why this subject has been left to someone like Black, a science fiction writer with limited abilities as a historian.

Black has also hit upon a somewhat clever approach, similar to that recently employed by Robert Gellately in his studies of popular support for Hitler in Germany. Black has read through the *New York Times* between 1933 and 1945 to establish a baseline of common knowledge about Nazi atrocities. He juxtaposes this research with an examination of IBM's American archives and some records of its German subsidiary, Dehomag. To what extent can we reasonably expect Thomas Watson, as chief executive officer

Dr. Allen teaches in the School of History, Technology and Society at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

©2002 by the Society for the History of Technology. All rights reserved.  
0040-165X/02/4301-0008\$8.00

of IBM, to have been aware of the criminal nature of Hitler's Germany? The *Times* would seem to be a good gauge. It is little known today that the *Times* reported extensively on the persecution of the Jews, even noting, in 1944, the inauguration of a "new modern crematorium and gassing plant . . . at Birkenau." The impression that "no one really knew" is common but hardly plausible. So why, asks Black, did IBM continue to pursue profits in Nazi Germany rather than divest itself of its German holdings once the criminal nature of the regime was plain for all to see? Admittedly this was not common business practice, but that does not make the question less relevant or the answer more savory.

Although IBM was not the only firm to reap profits in Hitler's Germany, Black maintains that Watson and his cohorts were extraordinary in their zeal. Far worse, in fact: Black contends that IBM aided and abetted genocide. "I was haunted," Black tells us on page 10, "by a question whose answer has long eluded historians. The Germans always had the lists of Jewish names. But how did the Nazis get the lists?" Since the business and tabulating machines produced by Dehomag were used to collate the results of the census, Black plausibly argues that IBM helped directly in delivering information used to round up Jews. As he puts it in one of his convoluted metaphors: "IBM did not invent Germany's anti-Semitism, but when it volunteered solutions, the company virtually braided with Nazism" (p. 73).

Unfortunately, doubts as to Black's competence to tackle this important subject arise within the first few pages, which introduce the inflated and pompous rhetoric that characterizes the entire text. Publishing the book, Black informs us, "took a historic bravery and literary fearlessness that many lacked" (p. 4). His assertions that he worked "virtually fifteen hours per day for a year" (p. 6) and "scanned and translated" a less-than-astonishing "fifty general books and memoirs as well as contemporary technical and scientific journals" (pp. 1, 3) fail to inspire much confidence that this book is the result of long, painstaking labor. Black as much as admits to only a tenuous mastery of the language skills needed to read the primary sources central to the Holocaust. He seems to have cajoled historians and archivists into aiding him, some of whom he obviously pestered repeatedly for "telephonic assistance." He does reassure us that over "the past thirty years of investigative reporting and publishing, I have learned to quickly identify the genuine pros," but the reader's suspicion only increases when we learn that Black has recruited "researchers and translators . . . through Internet sites" (pp. 4, 5, 1).

The body of the book confirms every nagging doubt. Not only does Black's command of German seem dodgy, his ability to handle English-language sources is questionable. To use the *New York Times* as proof of popular knowledge of the Holocaust is legitimate enough, but Black relies on the *Times* as his only historical record of the period (see his discussion of methods, pp. 14–15). Since any morning newspaper necessarily reports on a twenty-four-hour lag, he systematically gets dates wrong. Errors like this do

not really affect the substance of a book, but mistakes that misinterpret and interpolate evidence so as to consistently mislead readers are another thing altogether. In almost every case in which I was able to make a cursory check of Black's text against his own cited sources I found numerous errors, ranging from the trivial to the egregious.

The worst have to do with Black's key charge, that IBM's information technology enabled the Nazis to collate statistics on the whereabouts of Jews and, further, that without such means the Holocaust would have been nearly impossible. Any allusion to any card file or statistical compilation whatsoever seems to count for Black as solid evidence that the Nazis had deployed IBM-Hollerith machines. He seems completely unaware that many competing and complementary information systems necessitated card files in the 1930s and 1940s; there were non-IBM punched-card systems, and some punched cards were not even intended for mechanical tabulation. Typically the German government used multiple, overlapping systems.

Take, for example, the Reich Compulsory Registration Decree of 6 January 1938, which required all Germans to register their permanent address with local authorities. These were the address files used by the SS to locate Jews. The decree initially ordered all municipalities to standardize their forms and card files in conformity with uniform procedures throughout the Reich. The *Volkskartei*, the national card file, was the result. Both East and West Germany maintained compulsory registration after 1945, and it continues to this day. But the original file did not contain information about religious affiliation. This had to be added later. By the end of July 1938, the police were forcing Jews to apply for a special identification card as an extension of the larger registration process, and by May 1939 the SS Sicherheitsdienst (security police) had prepared a *Reichskartei der Juden und juedischen Mischlinge*, or "Reich Card File of Jews and Partial Jews." This in turn was part of a general card file of non-German inhabitants of the Reich (*Volks-tumskartei*).

The German authorities did not use Hollerith cards for these files. Instead, bureaucrats had to compile information by hand, a task for which they had recourse to quite traditional methods: they cross-referenced the national card file with the police files of Jewish identification cards, and statisticians then attached black tabs to Jewish registration cards in the national card file. This system was not unlike that still used in many doctors' offices, in which the staff flags patients' files with colored tags to aid in alphabetical sorting. Needless to say, it had and has little to do with mechanized information processing. In fact, Germany has only recently begun to computerize the national card file. As for Black's claim that only Hollerith machines enabled the Germans to know where all the Jews resided, one can turn to pages 88–89 of Götz Aly and Karl-Heinz Roth's brief but excellent book, *Die restlose Erfassung* (1984). There the reader can find reproductions of the sheets used by a statistical aide at the rail platform of a deportation train that

departed from Düsseldorf-Derendorf on 11 December 1941. The statistician categorized 1,007 Jews by gender, age, and profession in seven categories, tallied not with Hollerith cards but with simple hash marks.

Black relies extensively upon the careful research of Aly and Roth but consistently ignores any evidence that contradicts his own argument. Beyond this, he renders misleading summaries of information that does support his argument, especially biographical data on the Third Reich's statisticians and the institutions they worked for. Aly and Roth are by no means ignorant of the drive in Nazi Germany to use Hollerith machines, and they also point to the August 1942 contract between IBM and the Reich Ministry for Armaments and Munitions. Despite tentative attempts to mechanize statistical records, this push came only after 1942, with the increasing influence of Albert Speer as armaments minister. Speer began to use ever more accurate statistics on workers and industrial production in order to mobilize the Third Reich for total war, and thereafter Hollerith machines appear in increasing numbers. Before this, Aly and Roth argue, "mechanical record systems had but little to do with the sorting of people" (p. 120).

This was also true of the concentration camps, where the Business Administration Main Office of the SS began to compile accurate records only after Speer's armaments ministry began demanding them. Even then, both in Speer's Mechanical Record Systems office and in the SS, the process of erecting an efficient machine-counting system tended to drag on until the final surrender of the Third Reich. Hollerith tabulations appear in the records of the concentration camps only in the middle of 1944, when Nazi Germany had, for all intents and purposes, already lost the war. Ultimately Black's great story is no story at all. Traditional means of record-keeping more than sufficed for the destruction of the European Jews.

To Black, however, an IBM conspiracy is omnipresent. After a negative review by Peter Hayes in the 19 March 2001 issue of *Business Week*, Black charged Hayes with malicious distortion of "clear evidence" and "the historical record." He demanded a retraction and then set forth the following calumny: "Does Mr. Hayes personally know of anyone who has reviewed my book for any publication who has taken money for historical consultation from Nazi companies involved in concentration camps, or their defense attorneys? If so, the names of these Nazi-era corporate clients should be disclosed in any of these reviewers' author blurbs" (posted on H-Holocaust, 2 May 2001). Many readers of *Technology and Culture* will be familiar with Hayes's thorough research in *Industry and Ideology: I.G. Farben in the Nazi Era* (1987). While some would challenge his reserved condemnation of German corporations and the centrist political sentiments it is often associated with, Aly and Roth—who likewise refute Black—are committed leftists and bad boys of the German historical profession, notorious for their relentless attacks on West German capitalists, bureaucrats, and professors for complicity in the Holocaust. Roth was also shot in the stomach by the German

ESSAY  
REVIEW

police during an action against the Baader-Meinhof gang. Surely they, at least, are not IBM's hired academic thugs.

Rather than an astounding work of scholarly research and intellectual courage, *IBM and the Holocaust* is the product of a somewhat fevered brain. That hype and advertising could turn it into a best-seller, for however brief a period of time, says much about the gullibility of leftists and the American publishing industry's low standards. But the shame of all this is that ignorance regarding the complicity of American corporations in the crimes of National Socialism still reigns supreme.

JANUARY  
2002  
VOL. 43