As the daily life of Berlin’s Jews became ever more difficult under the Nazi regime, rumour and hearsay grew about the fate of those ‘evacuated’ to the east. How much, asks Roger Moorhouse, did ordinary Berliners know about the fate of their neighbours and was the Holocaust literally unimaginable to the German capital’s ordinary citizens, Gentile or Jew?

Beyond Belief

On the first day of October 1941 Berlin’s Jewish community was preparing to celebrate Yom Kippur, the holiest festival in the Judaic calendar. At the heart of the celebrations was the German capital’s one remaining undamaged synagogue, on Levetzowstrasse in the suburb of Moabit, where Rabbi Leo Baeck would lead the service and minister to the faithful. There, despite all the trials and tribulations that they had endured, Berlin’s Jews would repent of their sins, receive God’s forgiveness and enjoy a brief respite of peace from a world that had turned decidedly hostile.

Yet, as the congregation was leaving Levetzowstrasse that evening, events took a sinister turn. At that moment Gestapo officials appeared at the synagogue demanding the keys to the building. Jewish community elders were ordered to go to the Gestapo office on the Burgstrasse, where they were informed that the ‘resettlement’ of the Berlin Jews was soon to begin. They were told that the Jewish community itself was required to cooperate fully in the resettlement and that the synagogue on Levetzowstrasse was to be used as a transit camp for those selected for deportation.

Preparations were swiftly completed. The synagogue was stripped of its contents, its windows were boarded up and it was equipped with a few straw mattresses. Berlin’s Jews, meanwhile, began to receive notice that they would be ‘resettled’. These notifications, on the headed paper of the Berlin Jewish Organisation, used a formal, unthreatening tone. Recipients were informed of the date scheduled for their ‘emigration’ and were advised of the procedures that were to be followed and the items that were permitted to be taken. All official documents, they were told, were to be surrendered to the authorities, including birth, marriage and death certificates, savings books, cash, bonds and financial papers. Two days prior to departure, evacuees’ baggage could be deposited at the collection point on Levetzowstrasse. The following day their homes would be sealed by the Gestapo and the evacuees would be required to assemble at the synagogue.

After a brief stay in the Levetzowstrasse camp, during which they would be processed and registered by the authorities, the evacuees would be escorted to Berlin’s railheads – primarily the station at Grunewald in the western suburbs – where they would be loaded onto
passenger trains for a long journey into the unknown.

Initially at least, the process was undertaken in a calm and orderly fashion, with Berlin's Jewish organisations on hand to provide food packages and supervise the embarkation. Conditions, as one eyewitness recalled, were 'quite tolerable'.

The evacuees were told that they were being sent to a variety of destinations - Minsk, Lodz, Warsaw or Kaunas - but that rarely brought any clarity. The official story was that they were being sent to labour camps where, it was insinuated, they would 'finally be taught the meaning of hard work'. But, in the absence of hard facts, the German capital was alive with fevered speculation. Some believed, for instance, that a kibbutz was to be established in the former Latvian capital, Riga; the less dewy-eyed, meanwhile, thought that they would be sent to 'break rocks' in Russia. Few of the nearly 60,000 that left the capital suspected the truth: that they were being sent to their deaths.

Shedding light

What did Berliners know about the Holocaust? How many of them knew what the Jewish evacuees did not; that the journey east would be one from which there would be no return? An answer to the latter question was offered in 2005 when the results of an important oral-history study by Eric Johnson and Karl Heinz Reuband were published. Using a sample of nearly a thousand Berliners of the wartime generation, a series of questions was asked, including whether the respondents had 'heard or knew about' the Holocaust prior to the end of the Second World War. The result for Berlin - a little below that for the other locations selected - was 28 per cent.

Such figures, the result of thorough research by respected academics, are an important contribution to the debate and certainly cannot be disregarded, yet I would argue that they require substantial qualification if they are to shed any meaningful light on the episode. Other questions need to be posed: precisely what information did Berliners receive? Where did that information come from? And to what extent were those that heard such information able to accept it as the truth? In seeking to answer these questions and to analyse the contemporary reactions of Berliners towards the Holocaust, it is useful to examine the contemporary accounts - memoirs and diaries - of Berliners themselves.
There was gossip and conjecture, of course. Despite being shrouded in the utmost secrecy, any event of the physical and emotional magnitude of the Holocaust was bound to find an echo in the domestic rumour mill. Diarist Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, for instance, heard the darkest stories in the winter of 1942. That December she wrote that ‘ghastly rumours are current about the fate of the evacuees – mass shootings and death by starvation, tortures and gassings’. Yet it is also vital to appreciate that the rumours were not heard by everyone. As late as January 1944, the Berlin journalist Ursula von Kardorff, who was otherwise a reliable and well-informed commentator, was confessing her ignorance of the ongoing slaughter: ‘If only one knew,’ she wrote in her diary, ‘what was happening to the deported Jews.’

**Soldiers’ tales**

Importantly, one must appreciate that those rumours that did circulate were at best partial, shrouded in hearsay and often of apparently dubious provenance. Nonetheless, there were some sources of information available. One of the most common was the military itself. Some soldiers heard rumours of the mass killings in the east and, in some instances, these would be relayed to friends and family back in Germany. The experience of Philipp von Boeselager, later a member of the resistance, was perhaps typical in this regard. He heard news of the Holocaust from a fellow officer who had shared a train carriage with some drunken members of the SS security service, the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), who had boasted that they had murdered 250,000 Jews in the rear areas of Army Group South on the Eastern Front in 1941.

A few German soldiers might even have seen proof in the form of gruesome ‘souvenir’ photographs of mass shootings, or perhaps themselves been witness to ‘actions’, roundups or massacres. One of the latter was a young Wehrmacht lieutenant, Axel von dem Bussche, who saw the killing of over 5,000 Jews at Dubno in the Ukraine in October 1941. Shocked by the scenes, he concluded that there were only three ways for an honourable soldier to react: ‘to die in battle, to desert, or to rebel’. He chose the last option and would join the ranks of the resistance.

Another important source of information was the German postal system. Surprisingly perhaps, limited communication was possible between those sent to the ghettos and those back home in Berlin and elsewhere and in this way news of the awful conditions and hardships experienced by deported Jews was occasionally able to seep back to the Reich. One Berliner received a letter from a deported Jewish friend in December 1941: ‘Send us something to eat, we are starving,’ her friend implored, before closing with a heart-rending plea: ‘Don’t forget me, I cry all day.’

In time, as the trickle of desperate letters and cards stopped entirely, serious concerns were raised. Thanks to the efficiency of the German postal service, letters sent out to the ghettos would be returned to the senders with the words ‘addressee deceased’ or ‘address unknown’ written across them. Berliner Hermann
Jews in Berlin

Samter recorded this worrying turn of events in late January 1942. 'Since the beginning of the year,' he wrote, 'no news has been heard from Litzmannstadt [Łódź]. Post sent there is returned with the note that no postal deliveries are being made in this or that street. It is suspected that typhus is the reason.' When later transports departed directly to the death camps, no correspondence was received from the deportees at all. Samter again voiced the tears of many: 'Of the thousand people who were supposedly taken to Kaunas on November 17th, not one of them has written. As a result, the widespread rumour has emerged that these people have been shot en route, or otherwise murdered.' Clearly, it often took many months for the reality of the Holocaust to even be suspected.

No questions asked

So the information that seeped back to the Reich, though belated, fragmentary and usually devoid of any wider context, could nonetheless be surprisingly accurate. Yet there were a number of factors that served to prevent its acceptance as fact. The first and most obvious among them was self-censorship. Civilians in Nazi Germany were profoundly ill-advised to ask searching questions regarding the fate of the deported Jews, or to spread the rumours that they may have heard. Ordinary Berliners, even if they broadly supported the Nazis, would have known very well that the regime had teeth and so tended to avoid behaviour that might bring them into conflict with the authorities. Self-censorship, therefore, and an element of political and social conditioning played an important role in effectively silencing the civilian population. For many, the dominant reaction was to close their ears to what little they may have heard.

Even among those who might have been more receptive to the truth of the Holocaust a cowed silence was often the norm, for fear of invoking the wrath of the Nazi state and endangering their own lives, or those of their loved ones. As one Berliner recalled: 'My husband told me about [the killing of the Jews], but I wasn’t allowed to tell anybody else. Had I done this,
my husband would have been put up against the wall, I would have been sent to a concentration camp, and I would never have seen the children again. One had to keep quiet.' Clearly, some Berliners knew enough to know that it was better not to know.

Mention must also be made of antisemitism, which was all-pervasive in Nazi Germany and played a vital role in conditioning ordinary civilians to accept and condone the persecution of the Jewish minority in their midst. For ordinary Berliners, exposure to years of propaganda made it hard for them to empathise with their former Jewish neighbours and many were reluctant to lend credibility to the rumours of the ill-treatment of Jews. They were most likely to view developments with indifference, or to see the Jewish plight simply as a 'problem' solved rather than any crime committed. This marginalisation and de-humanisation of the Jews meant that their physical destruction was prefaced and facilitated by a lingering social death. They had long since become invisible to the majority of their Aryan fellows.

The kleptocratic state

Such prejudices were also stoked by greed. As has recently been argued by historians such as Götz Aly, there was a peculiarly kleptocratic character to the Third Reich, in which the German public was encouraged to become complicit in both the plundering of the territories occupied by their soldiers and in the expropriation of the Jews. In the German capital, for instance, the property of Jewish 'evacuees' was minutely listed and inventoried, after which everything – from the building itself to the crockery and carpets – would pass to the state, where it would then be used to compensate and re-supply those who had been bombed out.

Some of that Jewish property also went for auction, where, as one eyewitness put it, 'good Aryans fought like jackals over a carcass to buy shabby objects [that] the Russian war had made scarce'. Notices in the newspapers would alert the public to upcoming sales, which were often carried out in the abandoned homes themselves, among the clutter and chaos of the recently departed. Those Berliners who participated in such auctions would clearly have been under few illusions that they were bidding for the property of Jewish deportees. Yet one should not extrapolate from that to conclude that they appreciated the precise fate of the unfortunates whose effects they were bidding for. They were indifferent, certainly, but they knew no more than the potential victims of the true horrors of the Holocaust. Whether out of greed, ideology or necessity, they were being made complicit in a crime whose true extent they could barely have imagined.

Among Jewish Berliners, too, reactions to the rumours of the Holocaust spanned the spectrum, but the dominant response tended to be one of impotent
Berliners welcome the arrival in April 1941 of the railway carriage in which the defeated government of the French Third Republic signed the armistice with Nazi Germany that led to the setting up of the Vichy regime.

Berliners welcome the arrival in April 1941 of the railway carriage in which the defeated government of the French Third Republic signed the armistice with Nazi Germany that led to the setting up of the Vichy regime.

Stoicism. Berlin's Jews had seen their fellows deported to an unknown fate and would certainly have felt that the persecution that they had suffered was coming to a head. In the early months of 1942, for instance, they had to cope with a flurry of new restrictions and prohibitions. They were banned from all public baths in January; the following month they were forbidden to buy firewood, newspapers and periodicals. In May Jews were banned from many areas of the centre of the capital and were forbidden to keep pets. The following month all optical and electronic items in Jewish possession had to be surrendered to the state.

If such measures appear petty, other legislation passed at the same time was much more onerous. In a series of decrees, the isolation and expropriation of German Jewry, a process begun in 1933, was finally brought to its conclusion. Jews were forbidden to sell, loan or trade their belongings and the sale of non-rationed items to Jews was prohibited. Jewish schools were closed, forced evictions became commonplace and the fit and healthy were sent to labour camps. In such difficult circumstances it is easy to appreciate how those Jews who remained in the capital often found little time and little energy to worry about their recently departed fellows.

Such hardships quickly became normality. Many Berlin Jews reacted with admirable pragmatism, offering help to deportees as far as they could and seeking to make both the time spent in the transit camp in the capital and the 'evacuation' itself as comfortable as was possible. Bertha Falkenberg, though herself of pensionable age, set up a group to help 'evacuees' by supplying them with extra provisions — sandwiches, coffee, water and soup — at the railheads. Some Berlin Jews sought to help the deportees further, even after they had reached their supposed destinations. As Elisabeth Siegel recalled:

*When the first letters, or rather postcards arrived from addresses in Warsaw or Litzmannstadt ... we collected money, flour, sugar and tea. This was then wrapped into small packages and addressed. Then a group of schoolchildren went from district to district to post the packages in letterboxes.*

These actions are testament to a remarkable compassion, but do not suggest an awareness of the realities of the Holocaust. Other Jewish Berliners, it seems, were more imaginative, but little better informed. A few, for instance, sought formally to deny their Jewishness.
Petitioners would apply to the Reich Race Research Office in Berlin to claim that they were not actually the biological child of Jewish parents, but the illegitimate offspring of an Aryan father. Family photographs would be produced as supporting evidence and the testimony of family members would be recorded. 'Never before,' one observer wrote, 'have there been so many marital infidelities, and so many daughters and sons ready under oath to assert their mothers' vagaries.' Of course, against all the imagined infidelities, fraudulent testimonies and carefully constructed genealogies, the Reich Race Research Office operated on a strictly scientific – or pseudo-scientific – basis. Very few of the applications were successful.

**Going underground**

Other Berlin Jews, meanwhile, weary of the barrage of legislation of persecution that they had been forced to endure and perhaps mindful of the horrific rumours that were circulating, were more decisive in their actions. Some resigned themselves to their fate and opted to take their own lives when the notice of their deportation from Berlin arrived.

A few, especially the young, sought a different form of escape: they went underground. For some it was a move that would have developed gradually, evolving from the common practice of avoiding the authorities by staying temporarily with friends or relatives. For others, however, the transition to a life 'underground' could be rather more precipitate. Twenty-year-old Joel König was virtually pushed out of the door of his Berlin home in August 1942, when his family's deportation notice came through. 'The last thing we need is for the Gestapo to find you here,' his mother told him. 'Get on your way ... make sure you get to Switzerland!' With that, he recalled, 'she ushered me out of the door without a kiss or a shake of the hand.' He would never see his parents again.
Those who took the plunge were known as Taucher; Divers, or even ‘U-Boats’, because they slipped beneath the surface of Hitler’s Reich into the invisible depths of wartime society. Unlike their namesakes, however, these human U-Boats were not self-sufficient and were almost always entirely reliant on the help and support of their Aryan neighbours and friends. In one example, a Jewish doctor named Arthur Arndt approached an old gentle friend to ask for assistance. It was the first step on a three year underground odyssey that would ultimately save all four members of Arndt’s family and would involve at least 50 Berliners risking their own lives to help.

The extent to which such individuals, Jews and Aryans alike, were more aware of the Holocaust is debatable. They would certainly have heard the rumours and would have appreciated that the Jews were in grave peril, but beyond possessing exemplary valour, it is highly doubtful that they had any more knowledge of the grim realities than any of their fellows.

The ‘imagination gap’

It seems that there were many in Berlin society who out of complicity, ideology or fear did not want to know what was really going on. Yet it is plausible to argue that there were many more who simply could not believe the rumours that they may have heard. At the most basic level it was all too easy for Germans to dismiss the horrific rumours of the Holocaust as so much enemy-inspired propaganda, designed to undermine the regime and hamper the wider war effort. But there were other factors at play that contributed to what one might call an ‘imagination gap’.

The first – perversely in the circumstances – was a profound belief in the fundamentally ‘civilised’ nature of the German state and society. The majority of civilians simply could not see how, legally and administratively, the Holocaust could be permitted to occur at all. Germany, even Nazi Germany, was a Rechtsstaat, they told themselves; a state governed by the rule of law; a state in which even the order confiscating the property of those Jews about to be deported cited in its preamble the six pieces of legislation on which its authority was based. Few Berliners would have believed, therefore, that Germany could permit mass murder, never mind actively sponsor it. It was an attitude that was eloquently expressed by one Berlin Jew, whose reaction to the rumours of the Holocaust was: ‘That can’t be so ... it’s the 20th century and we’re German.’

More broadly, however, many Berliners would have found it hard to believe the grim truth. Those, on both sides, who had an inkling of what was going on, were often unwilling to believe that their darkest suspicions could possibly be true. After all, the idea that an entire section of society could be systematically killed with the complicity of the German government was simply beyond the imagination of most people.

This disbelief was widespread and was even shared by the victims themselves. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi recorded the profound and gnawing fear that many Jews had – even when inside Auschwitz – that should they survive to tell their stories, their sufferings would not be considered credible. The same phenomenon was witnessed when the Polish underground courier Jan Karski travelled to Washington DC in the summer of 1943 to present his evidence of the Holocaust to a group of American Jewish leaders. After he had finished his testimony, which included his own eyewitness account of life in the Warsaw Ghetto and the murders taking place at the Izbica transit camp, Karski was addressed by Justice Felix Frankfurter of the US Supreme Court: ‘Mr Karski,’ he said, ‘I am unable to believe you.’ When a Polish diplomat then interjected and asked whether Frankfurter was calling Karski a liar, Justice Frankfurter clarified his response, replying that: ‘I did not say this young man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. There is a difference.’

So, if the world at large found it impossible to grasp the reality of the Holocaust, even when provided with incontrovertible proof, the minority of Berliners who heard the piecemeal evidence, rumour and hearsay were almost bound by their own humanity to dismiss such talk as enemy propaganda, or perverted fantasy. This crucial point must be borne in mind when any analysis of wartime opinions is offered. The sheer enormity of the Holocaust simply defied belief, even to the most hard-bitten and cynical of observers. As one Berliner recalled after the war: ‘We were realistic and pessimistic. But Auschwitz?’

Roger Moorhouse's latest book is Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital 1939-45 (The Bodley Head, 2010). He is the co-author, with Norman Davies, of Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City (Pimlico, 2003) and the author of Killing Hitler: The Third Reich and the Plots Against the Führer (Vintage, 2007).


For further articles on this subject, visit: www.historytoday.com/germany