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TECHNOLOGY AND REPRESENTATION II: COMPUTING
EDWIN BLACK; IBM AND THE HOLOCAUST: THE STRATEGIC
ALLIANCE BETWEEN NAZI GERMANY AND AMERICA'S MOST
POWERFUL CORPORATION

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INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF TECHNOLOGY

***IBM and the Holocaust:
The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful
Corporation***

Perhaps the only argument that Edwin Black understates in *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation* is the one that opens the book. As he puts it, "This book will be profoundly uncomfortable to read. It was profoundly uncomfortable to write."¹ Black, a "streetwise journalist,"² writer of techno-thrillers and author of *The Transfer Agreement*, a Holocaust finance investigation, has written a history so unbearably exaggerated and pompous that, for the reader, mere discomfort would be a relief. Black tells us that writing his book, "took a historic bravery and literary fearlessness that many lacked."³ I hope simply for endurance as I tease arguments out of the hyperbole of his text.

The thesis of Black's book is that without IBM, its German subsidiary Dehomag (Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen Gesellschaft) and their proprietary Hollerith machine, the Holocaust would have very nearly ground to a halt. This essay will address the issues raised by *IBM and the Holocaust* and the lines of further questioning the book's arguments suggest. I will begin with a description of the role of the Hollerith machine and the way it was used by the Nazis. I will also consider whether or not Black substantiates the gravity of his attacks against IBM. The book attributes the "chilling success"⁴ of the Holocaust to both the company and the machine; therefore, I will address the technological determinism in Black's argument. Finally, I will conclude with

¹ Black, Edwin. *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, 2002. P. 7.

² Black, Edwin. *Format C*. Washington, D.C.: Dialog Press, 1999. Back cover.

³ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p. 5.

⁴ Gabriel Schoenfeld quoting Edwin Black. Schoenfeld, Gabriel. "The Punch-Card Conspiracy." *New York Times* 18 March. 2001.

the notion that IBM, and its CEO, Thomas J. Watson, were motivated by profit above all else.

Herman Hollerith, an American engineer of German ancestry, invented the Hollerith tabulating machine in 1884. Hollerith began to explore the idea of a machine for doing statistics while working for the U.S. Census Bureau. The result was a mechanical census system that read cards punched with standardized holes. Each hole represented a different piece of information; and based on those holes, cards could be sorted and resorted to isolate different areas of the population. Hollerith soon realized that his machine could do more than map populations, it could be applied universally to any task that required accounting and calculating.

Though Hollerith's machine was a success, his combative business practices eventually forced him to parcel out shares of his company. In 1910 he licensed his patents to Willy Heidinger, founder of the firm that would become Dehomag. In 1911, Hollerith sold off the entire company to a conglomerate that was being assembled by war profiteer Charles Flint. Dehomag and its Hollerith machines joined the corporation that was the foundation of Thomas J. Watson's IBM.

The business relationship between IBM, Dehomag and the Nazi Party began in 1933 when Dehomag took on the census project to identify German Jews. According to Black, over the course of the war, the uses for Hollerith machines grew. The machines managed the moving of European Jews from their homes into ghettos and the subsequent transport of those Jews to concentration camps with, "timing so precise the

victims were able to walk right out of the boxcar and into a waiting gas chamber.”⁵ The machines also managed the food allocation intended to starve the Jews, the slave labor in the camps, and the cataloging of human cargo on trains that always ran on time.

Black does not fail to prove that IBM and Dehomag were complicit with the Nazis. Nor does he leave any doubt in our minds that Watson and IBM’s top management unscrupulously pursued the business opportunity presented by the Third Reich. But proving that IBM made it their mission to help Hitler destroy world Jewry is not something that the book accomplishes. Black’s one attempt to ameliorate the severity of his charge, a disclaimer that appears in his introduction, is contradicted by allegations that appear throughout the book. I owe the use of the following quotes and the specifics of this argument to New York Times reviewer Gabriel Schoenfeld.⁶ Edwin Black’s accusation of IBM is as follows: “IBM Germany, using its own staff and equipment, designed, executed, and supplied the indispensable technologic assistance Hitler’s Third Reich needed to accomplish what had never been done before—the automation of human destruction.”⁷ And here is Black’s disclaimer, “Make no mistake—the Holocaust would still have occurred without IBM. To think otherwise is more than wrong. The Holocaust would have proceeded—and often did proceed—with simple bullets, death marches, and massacres based on pen and paper persecution.”⁸ In Schoenfeld’s astute words, “But if this is so, in what sense were the punch cards and the tabulating machines ‘indispensable’?”⁹

⁵ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p.8.

⁶ Schoenfeld, Gabriel. “The Punch-Card Conspiracy.” *New York Times* 18 March. 2001.

⁷ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ Schoenfeld, “The Punch-Card Conspiracy.”

Michael Allen, writing in *Technology and Culture*, contests another of Black's allegations. Did Hollerith technology really play as large a role in carrying out the Holocaust as Black asserts? In his description of the Security Police's Volkstumskartei, a file of all non-German inhabitants of the Reich, Allen proves that the punch-card system was hardly universal. Quoting Allen, "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."¹⁰

In Black's writing, Hollerith machines don't merely take on exaggerated operational importance; they take on the sinister motives of the Nazis themselves. Rather than writing a well-wrought technological history of the Holocaust, arguably the first genocide of modern means, Black dispenses with a technologically deterministic focus on one machine. Quoting Black, "IBM did not invent Germany's anti-Semitism, but when it volunteered solutions, the company virtually braided with Nazism. Like any technologic evolution, each new solution powered a new level of sinister expectation and cruel capability."¹¹

In Leo Marx's words, and in Edwin Black's hands, technology is a "hazardous concept"¹². Marx, quoted here, could well be describing Black's approach to *IBM and the Holocaust*, "Today, we invoke [technology] as if it were a discrete entity, and thus a causative factor-if not the chief causal factor in every conceivable development of modernity. Although we can't say what that "it" really is, it nonetheless serves as a

¹⁰ Allen, Michael. "Stranger than Science Fiction: Edwin Black, IBM, and the Holocaust." *Technology and Culture* 43.2 (2002): 150-154.

¹¹ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p.73.

¹²Marx, Leo. "Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept." *Social Research* 64, 3 (1997): 965-988

surrogate agent, as well as a mask, for the human actors actually responsible for the developments in question.”¹³ Though Black ostensibly takes the following thoughts from the papers of Dr. Rudolph Cheim, a worker for the Labor Service Leader at Bergen-Belsen, they have the recognizable ring of Black’s prose. They also fit Marx’s critique to the letter, “Cheim soon began to understand the truth. Hundreds of thousands of human beings were being identified, sorted, assigned and transported by means of the Hollerith system. Numbers and punch cards had dehumanized them all, he thought. Numbers and punch cards would probably kill them all. But Cheim never understood where the Hollerith system came from.”¹⁴ Were punch cards really the deadliest killers in the Third Reich?

Perhaps the most important question the book invokes (and maybe the only place *IBM and the Holocaust* succeeds) is why so many American companies, not just IBM, continued to do business with Germany after the atrocities of the Third Reich were common knowledge, and even after the United States was at war with Germany.¹⁵ Black makes it abundantly clear that there was no horror grave enough to stop Watson’s maniacal quest for profit. He writes, “When Germany wanted to identify the Jews by name, IBM showed them how. When Germany wanted to use that information to launch programs of social expulsion and expropriation, IBM provided the technologic wherewithal. When the trains needed to run on time, from city to city or between concentrations camps, IBM offered that solution as well. Ultimately there was no solution IBM would not devise for a Reich willing to pay for services rendered. One solution led to another. No solution was out of the question.”¹⁶ Readers are left wanting a broader look at corporate misconduct during Hitler’s reign. Perhaps Black’s sensational timing of

¹³ Marx, “Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept.” Last paragraph.

¹⁴ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p.22.

¹⁵ Allen, Michael. “Stranger than Science Fiction: Edwin Black, IBM, and the Holocaust.”

¹⁶ Black, *IBM and the Holocaust*, p.74.

the launch of his book, which coincided with the filing of a class-action lawsuit against IBM for profiting from genocide, offers one reason why the book so universalizes IBM's role.

IBM and the Holocaust examines one example of the type of transnational secret capitalism¹⁷ American companies undertook during the Third Reich. The book also investigates the role of one technology used in the mechanization of genocide. But rather than portraying a complicit company and its despicable profiteering (with vendetta-like zeal) perhaps Black could have considered the presence of multiple international corporate conspiracies. And rather than focusing on one piece of machinery in an ill-wrought history of technology, the author might have looked at the mechanization of the Holocaust as a whole. In any event, if there were opportunities to produce either a meaningful history of wartime corporate misconduct or the role of technology in the Holocaust, Black missed them both.

¹⁷ Mindell, David. In-class quote. 5 Dec. 2006.