

Different Views of the Posen Speech

“Excerpt from Himmler’s Speech to the SS-Gruppenführer at Posen (October 4, 1943)”

GHDl: http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1513

Posen Speech¹

Heinrich Himmler’s Speech at Posen was given on October 4, 1943 in the town hall of Posen, at that time known as Poznan. I found an excerpt of the speech on GHDl (German History in Documents and Images) and followed the speech back to the Nuremberg Trials where it was used as evidence and back to the original day of the speech to find how it was maintained and captured.

Himmler’s speech (the excerpt on GHDl) transmits his views regarding how Germans should approach the war against the Allies. He states the ideological fallacy of placing moral consideration upon those that the Germans are facing in war time and he stresses the importance of looking out for German blood first, even if that results in the death of tens of thousands of women on the other side and starvation of millions. He then speaks of the expectation of victory for the Reich and begins to lay out his plan for this as he believes that the SS will be instrumental during peacetime as well. He also makes the statement that the SS should be granted defensive control of the Eastern frontier of Germany once the war ends--a way to preserve the edge of his organization and to maintain the purity of their ranks. His closing statements of this excerpt show his expectation for another great war after the conclusion of the current one, that of Europe vs. Asia.



Figure 1: Heinrich Himmler
(Oct. 7, 1900- May 23, 1945)

¹ Source of image: Speeches by Heinrich Himmler at Posen on October 4, 1943 and October 6, 1943, www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/HimmlerSpeeches.html.

The full version of this speech deals with “the Jewish question” in which Himmler openly admits and condones the Holocaust. He states Nazi rhetoric that Jews were destroying Germany and the world from within and that the only solution left to them was the total destruction of this group. This speech was actually recorded by phonograph and was stored by the SS on disks. This speech is important because it was the only recorded time a high level official of the Third Reich openly spoke of the extermination of Jews and in such specificity. This source was later used in the Nuremberg Trials to serve as supporting evidence for the crimes committed by the Nazis during WWII. The question remains of why did Himmler allow this recording to take place as the Nazis had taken such care to hide their actions from the greater world. A recording would only make their position more precarious and give their enemies more fuel if Germany lost the war. Some historians have given the argument that many speeches given by leading Nazis were recorded with the belief that after their victory against the Allies the German people would want copies of them for posterity, a physical example of the strength and success of the Nazi party and the validation that their might makes right. In contrast however, the Axis powers were losing WWII by the time of the Posen speeches. By mid-1943 Italy had fallen and the German hold on the eastern front was slipping as Soviet troops were enjoying victory after victory. In this light one is left to question why Himmler allowed his speech to be recorded and also copied down by hand.

Heinrich Himmler was the leader of the SS, a major paramilitary branch within the Nazi government that began as a small group of bodyguards but expanded greatly as Germany entered World War II. By war’s end they served as Hitler’s bodyguards, guards of the Chancellery, elite soldiers on the front lines, and the overseers of the Nazi concentration camps.² Himmler was one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany during WWII and strove greatly to retain favor from Hitler. An ardent racial purist and face of antisemitism, Himmler oversaw many of the atrocities that took place during the war but much focus is put on his role in the Holocaust especially.³ He is the speaker

² Editors, History.com. “The SS.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 18 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/ss.

³ “Heinrich Himmler.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/heinrich-himmler.tape

from the Posen Speech of October 4, 1943, a private speech to SS officers speaking openly about the Nazi mass killing of Jews. This specific speech is notable however due to it seemingly being the only recorded and transcribed speech of a Nazi leader speaking of the Holocaust in straightforward terms.

All of my searches of the Posen speeches by Himmler focus mainly on his addressing of “the extermination of the Jewish people.” While Himmler’s Speech at Posen touched almost solely on the future of the Schutzstaffel after the war and the violent deeds they would have to commit against the Russian people. The committees of the Nuremberg Trials addressed this speech holistically and utilized it to point to war crimes committed against Russian POWs and civilians as well as Jews in Europe yet modern audiences have taken the relatively short segment on Jews and made this the primary focus. This exploration tracks the original speech of Himmler and attempts to observe how it has been used over time and how the public’s perception of it has shifted.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

- **“Himmler Posen Speech - Extermination of the Jews Excerpt.” Performance by Heinrich Himmler, *Wikipedia*, 20 Dec. 2016, [upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/79/Himmler_Posen_Speech - Extermination of the Jews excerpt%2C Oct 4%2C 1943.ogg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/79/Himmler_Posen_Speech_-_Extermination_of_the_Jews_excerpt%2C_Oct_4%2C_1943.ogg). (Original Date being Oct. 4. 1943)**

This audio file is taken from the greater recording of Himmler’s speech at Posen. This portion covers his portion on the ‘Jewish Question’ yet the full audio recordings, approximately 190 minutes, can be found and ordered from the U.S. National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/research/captured-german-records/sound-recordings.html>). This audio recording was made on the day of the speech within the town hall of Pozen (at this time called Poznan), an ideal acoustic location for a speech of power to a smaller audience. The audio was captured on tape with some claiming that it was recorded on a red oxide tape and others believing that it was captured on a wax phonograph-style disk.⁴

⁴ “Himmler’s October 4. 1943 Speech.” *The Nizkor Project*, www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/h/himmler-heinrich/posen/oct-04-43/.

- **Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality. “Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Volume IV.” *Military Legal Resources*, 4 May 2016, www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Nazi_Vol-IV.pdf. - Pages 558-578 (Originally dating from 1946)**

This source from the United States’ volumes provides a translation of Himmler’s October 4, 1943 speech at Posen that addressed a small cadre of elite officers within the SS. This speech was intended to bolster the morale of these officers and to instill in them a sense of purpose and an image of a future where Germany won the war. This specific version of the excerpt is notable as it was used to cross reference a variety of different court cases brought against Nazis and Nazi sympathizers after World War II. This excerpt was used in U.S. trials and was originally copied over from the Nuremberg Trial version. Both of these sizable compendiums of speeches, letters, and statements were used to corroborate with each other to paint a picture of blatant antisemitism within Germany and obvious knowledge and intent of carrying out the Holocaust and other associated atrocities.

- **Himmler, Heinrich. “Extracts From Speeches Concerning the SS and the Conduct of the War.” *Nuremberg - Explore the Nuremberg Trials!*, nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/2974-extracts-from-speeches-concerning?q=Himmler%2B1919-PS#p.1. (Dated from 1946 during Nuremberg Trials)**

This is a pdf of the actual typed translation of the Posen Speech used for the Nuremberg Trials. The speech was taken from a German copy that was being used for the tribunals against leaders of the Nazi party and later the men under their commands. The speech was translated into English so that English judges and observers could follow along and understand the cases as well as their German counterparts who had the transcription of the original recording, word for word. The Posen speech of Oct. 4, 1943 was labeled as Document 1919-PS and has attained a level of infamy within the realm of German historians and specifically historians of the Holocaust as this speech was the only one that has been recovered of a high level Nazi official speaking on the Holocaust in an open manner. This document was utilized to confirm that the Holocaust was a planned procedure and that a great many people within Germany knew about it due to the way Himmler spoke to his subordinates about the genocide.

- **“The Trial of German Major War Criminals : Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal Sitting at Nuremberg Germany.” *The Avalon Project - Laws of War : Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague IV)*, avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/07-27-46.asp.**

This document details the proceedings of the Nuremberg trials on the hundred and eighty-eighth day, July 27, 1946. The purpose of this is to show that Document 1919-PS (the Posen Speech) was used by the tribunal, both on this day and on many others to

serve as examples of the disdain and lack of care for basic life that Nazi brass held towards their 'opponents'.⁵ Within this same day Himmler can also be seen to have proclaimed "Anti-Semitism is the same as delousing...We have only 20,000 lice left, and then that matter is finished off within the whole of Germany."⁶ These trials provide an important narrative as they are used as a way to condemn the Nazi movement and their other Axis allies while giving further context upon the Posen Speech and other records like it. This same document (1919-PS) was used in the opening of 'Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Volume I Chapter XII - The Persecution of the Jews' to set the stage for the claim that Nazi Germany was a knowing and active agent in the extermination of Jews within Europe. This document was also used in 'Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Volume 2 Chapter XV Part 5' a dozen times (i.e. Section B, Section D) to highlight the role that Himmler and his SS saw during WWII and their envisioned future role in the future. This document is utilized in numerous other cases in the Nuremberg Trials-- these three references serve as an example of the widespread use of Himmler's speech during the trials.

- **GUIDES TO GERMAN RECORDS MICROFILMED AT ALEXANDRIA, VA.**
www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/t175-1.pdf. (Dated 1961)

Within this pdf there is the listing of Himmler's speech at Posen, summarized:

"Oktober 1943 in Posen, « Geheime Reichssache, provenance unknown* First page, probably containing distribution list, missing. Speech deals with German expansion to the East, policy towards inferior races and preservation of German blood. The speech includes the statement that Germany would content herself with conquest in the East and had no intentions to conquer England."

This catalogue from Virginia deals with Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Heinrich Himmler). This catalogue is seemingly innocuous yet it speaks of a copy of a microfilm from Himmler's Posen speech and provides a short summary of it--one that mentions German policies towards 'others' and the future of Germany, yet no explicit statement referring Jews. This microfilm would have been a typed interpretation of Himmler's audio speech or perhaps a copy of a previous translation. This shows that in 1961 the cataloguer of the vast supply of articles related to Himmler did not see this piece as special due to the quick admittance of the Holocaust, nor did the people who summarized it for them.

- **Dicks, Henry V. *Licensed Mass Murder: A Socio-Psychological Study of Some SS Killers*. Basic Books, 1973.**

Within this text by Henry Dicks there is not a specific reference to the Posen speech yet I found a very similar argument that I have found within many of the texts referencing the Posen Speech. The argument essentially states that while the perpetrators of the Holocaust are obviously guilty of mass murder, a large portion of people who made it

⁵ "The Trial of German Major War Criminals." P. 477, 491, 498.

⁶ "The Trial of German Major War Criminals." P. 505.

happen (guards, police, information gatherers) were not necessarily advocates of the death of all Jews. Instead, Dicks and other historians including James Kellas reference the concept “*tragedy of obedience*,” in which perpetrators became conformists more than outright sadists.⁷

- **Grunberger, Richard. *Hitler's SS*. Dorset Press, 1993.**

This source looks at the role of the Posen Speech in more of a political/economic manner than anything. Grunberger acknowledges the violent message within the Posen speech towards Jews by Himmler but focuses his eye on the economic message within this speech, the threat that any SS man who “touches a single Reichsmark forfeits his life.”⁸ Grunberger uses this part of the speech as an example among many others of the Nazi state’s avowal of “austerity” but argues that this simply “was a smokescreen behind which Nazism...acted as a goad to every base instinct.”

- **Kellas, James. “*The Impact of Western Nationalisms: Essays Dedicated to Walter Z. Lacquer on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*.” *International Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 2, 1994, pp. 431–451., doi:10.2307/2625269.**

James references Himmler’s Posen speech describing the speech as an example of Himmler’s contempt for those who struggled to see the atrocious acts of the Holocaust through. Where most scholars look at the Posen speech primarily in the context of Himmler’s perceived future for Germany or his role in the process of the Holocaust, Kellas takes it one step further to look potentially into the psyche of Himmler himself--as a man who “betrayed a certain a certain contempt for the weakness of his fellow Germans--and perhaps his own as well.”⁹ Within this journal James Kellas acknowledges the fact that while many people within Germany and their occupied territories were approving of the Holocaust in theory, the majority were not comfortable engineering it in actual practice--one of the primary reasons that the killing of Jews was changed from primarily mass shootings to gas chamber and death by labor.

- **Yenne, Bill. *Hitler's Master of the Dark Arts: Himmler's Black Knights and the Occult Origins of the SS*. Zenith Press, 2010. - Pages 211-212, 218-220.**

This source provides a narrative that the Posen speech on October 4, 1943 was to a very small and select group of Nazi officers--men that were “the cream of the dark corps.”¹⁰ These men, or at least the majority of them, would have known of the industrial killing of Jews before this event and it is very likely that this kind of openness about the subject was normal for them. What is abnormal however is the fact that this speech was recorded and even transcribed. Bill Yenne states that Posen speech was “transcribed

⁷ Dicks, p. 264-265.

⁸ Grunberger, p. 93.

⁹ Kellas, p. 445.

¹⁰ Yenne, p. 211.

and typed by SS Untersturmführer Werner Alfred Wenn,”¹¹ a man who held the lowest rank of officership within the SS. After the speech was recorded and transcribed by Wenn, the speech was “locked away in secret for safekeeping, but discovered by American forces after World War II”. This suggests that the speech was intended to be kept for posterity, likely as a historic moment where the superiority of the Aryan powers was claimed, yet was hidden away with the understanding that the world would not accept this message--at the very least not at the time of the speech. Yenne continues in his book to acknowledge that the majority of this speech was centered around the greatness of the German people and Himmler’s plans for the future of the SS, yet does come to speak on the addressing of the ‘Final Solution’. This article provides analysis of the Posen speech and establishes the sudden shift from speaking of the bravery that must be maintained along the Eastern Front into one of “chilling candor,”¹² in regards to the slaying of Jews, people he classifies as “clandestine saboteurs, agitators, and instigators.”¹³ Yenne drew on a multitude of sources within his book but the primary information that he found in regards to Posen and the origins of the film of Himmler came from *Operation Reinhard (Mass Extermination in Poland)* by Artur Eisenbach.

- **Shroer, Timothy. “Civilization, Barbarism, and the Ethos of Self-Control among the Perpetrators.” *German Studies Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 33–54.**

This source addresses the seemingly unlikely but consistently observed people who enacted the Holocaust. Shroer addresses testimony from a number of individuals regarding their sympathy for the killing of millions of Jews and other undesirables for the Nazi cause yet their insistence that they are good people who bore the burden of terrible acts for the greater cause. This position mirrors the message that Himmler conveyed within his speech and is even explicitly referenced when the commandant of Auschwitz is described as a man who:

“sought to portray himself as an exemplar of the sort of SS man described by Heinrich Himmler in his 1943 speech at Posen: one who had looked on piles of corpses of the victims, but who nevertheless claimed to have remained ‘decent’.”¹⁴

This article addresses the speech and builds upon Himmler’s speech to show that propaganda and strong speeches/addresses by men such as Himmler and Hitler inspired inhumane acts that are to this day reviled and considered some of the most extremes of human vileness.

- **Rabinbach, Anson. “378. Speech at Posen (1943)” *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, University of California Press, 2013, pp. 785–791.**

This source addresses the speech that Himmler gave at Posen on October 4, 1943 and

¹¹ Yenne, p. 211.

¹² Yenne, p. 218.

¹³ Yenne, p. 219.

¹⁴ Shroer, p. 36.

addresses the primary aim of Himmler in his speech which was to rouse his officers and to restore morale along a crumbling eastern front. While he was likely aware of the desperate position that the Nazi state was in, it was still productive to try and paint a picture for the men holding the front. Rabinbach addresses 'the Jewish question' that Himmler addresses within his speech yet sees it as an abnormality that Himmler would admit to this when being recorded, as seen by no upper tier leader speaking of the Holocaust openly before this and not really after either. While public perception of this speech has become one that focuses on the admission of responsibility for the Holocaust, that was not the primary goal of this speech and is thrown in more as an afterthought if anything as the speech instead urges the SS officers to stand strong against Soviet forces and to treat them inhumanely in order for a greater Germany to emerge after the war.

- **Mattogno, Carlo. "Extermination Camps of "Aktion Reinhardt". Castle Hill Publishers, 2013. (p. 499-500)**

This source is an example of Holocaust denial. The Posen speeches are refuted here using a difference of translation of the word "umbringen", typically used as extermination in contemporary translations, instead using the word evacuation. With this "evacuation" in mind, the Nazis were simply trying to deport the Jewish population, not kill them. Despite seemingly overwhelming evidence that the Holocaust happened, a sect of historians claim that reports of the Holocaust are either hyperbolized or that the claims are entirely baseless. While the historical community greatly backs the existence of the Holocaust I found it important to reference an example of a scholar using the speech to *refute* the Holocaust, not support it.

- **"Excerpt from Himmler's Speech to the SS-Gruppenführer at Posen (October 4, 1943) ." GHDI - Document, germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1513.**

This is the actual document that I found on GHDI and only has 3 pages, as opposed to the full length of the Posen speech, which lasts dozens of pages. This excerpt is interesting as it mentions the plan for Eastern expansion of Germany and the future of the SS but does not include mention of the Holocaust which is what the majority of people who look at this speech believe it was especially important for.