

Ribbentrop: Guilty as Charged

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Joachim von Ribbentrop was the German Foreign Minister during the Second World War. He publically denied his complicity in the Holocaust during the Nuremberg Trials of 1945, claiming that he merely deferred to Hitler's wishes, and did not play a significant role in the initiation of the war that ultimately allowed for the Holocaust. Much historical research indicates otherwise. Ribbentrop did in fact play a prominent role in the rise of the Nazi party, conspired to wage wars of aggression, and, most importantly, in his role as Foreign Minister, actively participated in the planning and administration of the Nazi Final Solution. His participation included the confiscation of Jewish property, the spreading of anti-Semitic policy abroad, and lastly, the mass deportation and murder of millions of Jews across Europe.

Joachim von Ribbentrop joined the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in 1932 after becoming mesmerized by one of Hitler's speeches. Ribbentrop quickly developed a personal relationship with Hitler, which included Hitler visiting the Ribbentrop villa numerous times for dinner.¹ It was during the summer of 1932 that Ribbentrop played a significant role in the Nazi acquisition of power. His role involved providing his villa as the staging ground for several meetings between Hitler and Franz von Papen. The primary focus of these meetings was to seize the German chancellorship from Kurt von Schleicher, and to secure Nazi control of the Reichstag.² In his 1935 *Wer Ist's (Who's Who)* biographical sketch, Ribbentrop boasts that, through his intermediation, the Hitler government was formed, and, further, that the decisive meetings which perpetuated the Nazi rise to power occurred at his personal home.³ By 30 January 1933, the Nazis had secured power in the Reich, and Ribbentrop had simultaneously acquired an inordinate amount of influence on Hitler, which, by 1938, would culminate in his appointment as the Foreign Minister of Germany.

Ribbentrop became a member of the Reichstag in 1933, at which point he held various positions within the Foreign Ministry, such as foreign policy advisor to the Führer and representative of the Nazi Party on foreign policy. Near the end of 1933, Ribbentrop was put in charge of his own department within the foreign office, known as the "Büro Ribbentrop."⁴ This Büro did not replace the Foreign Office, but instead carried out specific tasks that the Foreign Office was unable or unwilling to perform. Through non-traditional methods such as bribing journalists and paying informants, the Büro effectively acquired political intelligence that was relayed to the Führer personally.⁵ It was in this capacity that Ribbentrop truly developed his influence over Hitler in regards to foreign affairs, and in 1938 Ribbentrop became the Foreign Minister of Germany.

¹ Paul Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop: His Life and Times* (New York: Julian Messner Inc., 1945), 76.

² *Ibid.*, 82.

³ Paul Seabury, "Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office," *Political Science Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1951): 537.

⁴ Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop*, 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

Ribbentrop directly conspired with Hitler to wage wars of aggression in his role as Foreign Minister, which ultimately contributed heavily to the outbreak of the Second World War. He assured Hitler that Britain and France would not follow through on their guarantees of protection for Poland if Germany were to invade. He based his unfounded counsel on the fact that neither country had declared war on Germany after the Munich Agreement, in which Hitler had reneged on a previous commitment not to engage in further acts of aggression against Czechoslovakia.⁶ Both Ribbentrop and Hitler, however, had been given advice to the contrary by Dr. Albrecht Haushofer, who worked part time for Ribbentrop as an expert on British affairs. Haushofer had indicated that Anglo-German relations were deteriorating and that the British would undoubtedly declare war if Germany attempted to expand into Poland through military conquest, and, furthermore, that the British war effort would be augmented by American support.⁷ Unfortunately, Ribbentrop's influence over Hitler was too great by this time for the Führer to be swayed by a report that Ribbentrop described as "Secret Service Propaganda."⁸ By this point, Ribbentrop's influence over Hitler was so pronounced that the former German Ambassador, Ulrich von Hassell, noted that: "According to all reports Ribbentrop is the man who has the most influence with Hitler."⁹ Clearly, that influence speaks to Ribbentrop's significant involvement in the start of the war.

It would be easy to conclude that Ribbentrop did, in fact, believe that the British and French would not wage war on Germany, due to the Western powers' continued appeasement of German aggression and expansion; however, it is more probable that Ribbentrop wanted to carry favour with Hitler by demonstrating his shared desire for war. Ribbentrop's lust for war also drew comments from another German diplomat, Kessel, and from the Secretary of State, Ernst von Weizsacker, who indicated that "the foreign policy of Hitler and Ribbentrop was directly aimed at war," and, furthermore, that any attempt by the Poles to negotiate would fail as they would be deliberately "presented with unacceptable demands."¹⁰ Ribbentrop's general disposition towards war as opposed to traditional diplomacy is fully captured in a diary entry by the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, in which he describes asking Ribbentrop whether Germany wanted "the Corridor, or Danzig," and Ribbentrop replied, "not anymore, we want war."¹¹ Another entry in Count Ciano's diary late in 1939 illustrates Ribbentrop's unwillingness to consider alternate approaches to achieving *Lebensraum* in the East:

The will to fight is unalterable. He rejects any solution which might satisfy Germany and prevent the struggle. I am certain that even if the Germans were given everything they demanded, they would attack just

⁶ James Douglas-Hamilton, "Ribbentrop and War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 4 (1970): 48.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 4 -Twenty-Ninth Day," Avalon Project, 2008, 567. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/01-08-46.asp>

the same, because they are possessed by the demon of destruction.¹²

At this juncture, however, Germany was not yet diplomatically prepared to invade Poland, as the risk of having to fight a two-front war was extreme. The western powers continued to support Poland, the southern border could not be secured as Romania and Yugoslavia rejected the status of German satellites, and the Soviets had begun talks with the French and British, which left Germany vulnerable and without support.¹³ Ribbentrop was tasked with finding a diplomatic solution that would enable further expansion in the East.¹⁴ He put his efforts towards forming an alliance with the Soviet Union and those efforts ultimately culminated in the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on 23 August 1939. The pact guaranteed peace with the Soviet Union and granted various territorial concessions to the Soviets, thereby precluding a Soviet alliance with the western powers, and rendering the German concern about the potential for a two-front war obsolete.¹⁵ This ultimately provided the Nazis with the assurance they needed to invade Poland.¹⁶ This, they did on 1 September 1939, and two days later both Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun, and the stage was set for the Holocaust to unfold.¹⁷

After Ribbentrop's appointment as Foreign Minister in 1938 he was tasked with creating the *Referat Partei* ("Special Party Section"), which he was to place under the leadership of his ruthless subordinate Martin Luther. This section was primarily responsible for communications between the Foreign Office and the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), which was directed by the Commander of the Schutzstaffel (SS), Heinrich Himmler.¹⁸ This is significant because, in 1939, Himmler's RSHA would become the primary control center of the Final Solution.¹⁹ The *Referat Partei* increased in size and importance, and, by 1941, it was transformed into a division known as the *Abteilung Deutschland*, which remained under Luther's control.²⁰ Luther, in his role as leader of *Abteilung Deutschland*, was ultimately responsible for carrying out such reprehensible activities as negotiating with other nations for the deportation of Jews.²¹ In 1941, Himmler and Ribbentrop agreed that the illegal activities of this party would be concealed from diplomatic mission chiefs,

¹² "Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 22 -Two Hundred and Eighteenth Day," Avalon Project, 2008, 568.
<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/01-08-46.asp>

¹³ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 226.

¹⁴ Sune Persson, *Escape From the Third Reich: The Harrowing True Story of the Largest Rescue Effort Inside Nazi Germany* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2009), 12.

¹⁵ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 226.

¹⁶ Sune Persson, *Escape From the Third Reich: The Harrowing True Story of the Largest Rescue Effort Inside Nazi Germany* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2009), 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Seabury, *Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office*, 547.

¹⁹ Johannes Hurter, "The German Foreign Office, the Nazi Dictatorship, and the Holocaust: A Critical Commentary on *Das Amt Und Die Vergangenheit*," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 49, no. 1 (2011): 86.

²⁰ Seabury, *Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office*, 547.

²¹ *Ibid.*

thereby indicating Ribbentrop's complicity in the overall plan to address the Jewish question.²²

Ribbentrop's views about Jews and his approach to dealing with the "Jewish Question" are clearly illustrated in a memorandum produced by his office entitled "The Jewish Question as a factor in German Foreign Policy in the Year 1938."²³ Implicit in that memorandum was the notion that simply removing Jews from Germany would not be sufficient.²⁴ The document addressed the strategy of dispersing all Jews from German territory, which by that time included Austria.²⁵ The document argued that expulsion of German Jews to other territories would add to anti-Jewish sentiment in those countries, particularly if the immigrant Jews were impoverished, which would place a burden on the host countries. These actions were designed to promote an international solution that would allow for the expulsion of all Jews from Europe. Ribbentrop's opposition to the formation of a Jewish State in Palestine was also evident, as he feared that such a state might influence world Jewry and international law and relations, much like the influence exerted by the Vatican.²⁶ In promoting anti-Jewish sentiment other countries might be more inclined to commit to the expulsion of their Jews.

Prior to 1941, Nazi Germany's solution to the "Jewish Problem" was one of forced emigration. This strategy was considered feasible even after the addition of Jews from Austria and the Sudetenland.²⁷ However, with the conquest of Poland, a massive influx of Jews came under German control, and a territorial final solution was ultimately sought that would entail resettling Jews in another region. With the conquest of Western Europe in the spring of 1940, Himmler began to focus his attention on how all Jews might be removed from the growing territory of the Third Reich.²⁸ This transition in Jewish policy from emigration to a permanent "territorial final solution" was supported by Ribbentrop, who ordered Franz Rademacher, head of the Jewish desk of the Foreign Office, to develop a plan for relocating the approximately four million European Jews to Madagascar where they would essentially live in a police state, controlled by the SS.²⁹ He proposed that Jewish assets would be liquidated to pay for the resettlement.³⁰ The Madagascar Plan did not come

²² Seabury, *Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office*, 548.

²³ Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Vol. VI (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 88. http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Nazi_Vol-VI.pdf

²⁴ German Foreign Ministry, "Translation of Document No. 3358-PS, "The Jewish Question as a Factor in German Foreign Policy in the Year 1938, Berlin, January 31, 1938"" accessed from Harry S Truman Library Online:[http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1945-12-13&documentid=C193-5-4&studycollectionid=nuremberg)

[pagenumber=1&documentdate=1945-12-13&documentid=C193-5-4&studycollectionid=nuremberg](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1945-12-13&documentid=C193-5-4&studycollectionid=nuremberg), April 30, 2015.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁰ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 85.

to fruition, however. While France was defeated and Ribbentrop did put into effect anti-Jewish measures in France, the British success in the Battle of Britain and in the U-boat war prevented Germany from having access to British shipping lanes to Madagascar.³¹ Another solution would therefore be required to remove the Jews from German occupied Europe.

While Ribbentrop had been supportive of various anti-Jewish measures throughout his time in the Ministry, he seemed to distance himself from the Jewish question by 1941.³² This coincided with a radical shift in German policy regarding the Jews from one of expulsion to extermination.³³ During the invasion of Soviet occupied territory, Jewish men, women, and children were systematically executed and a standardized method of mass murder was developed.³⁴ This was so effectively done that by the end of 1941, over 600,000 Jews had been killed. Historian Christopher Browning argues that the atrocities committed during the Soviet invasion set the stage for the subsequent mass murders.³⁵ Late in August, Adolf Eichmann informed Luther that a "final solution" was in the planning stages, and Hitler subsequently ordered the deportation of all Jews who still remained in the Reich.³⁶ By October 1941 the plans for mass extermination had taken shape, but the deportation of Jews to secret death camps would not begin until the following spring of 1942. This was because the system by which to deport Jews had yet to be organized, and the death factories had yet to be built.

The Foreign Office was closely involved in this process. Action against Jews in occupied countries could not be taken without the involvement of the Foreign Office. The same applied to foreign Jews living in Germany and to Jews in Axis-affiliated or neutral countries.³⁷ Although Ribbentrop had distanced himself from this process initially, by issuing a directive in August 1941 stating that all future memos from the SS and Himmler should be forwarded directly to Luther, thus escaping his immediate attention, he nonetheless failed to act when his agent in Serbia actively asked him to intervene to save 8,000 Serbian Jews from extermination. He passed the information on to Luther, instead, who subsequently ordered Ribbentrop's agent to support the execution.³⁸ He also refused to act on information about the mass slaughter of Russian Jews. In order to avoid diplomatic conflicts, he refused to allow the deportation of non-German Jews who lived in Germany but allowed Luther to negotiate with their home countries which were often anti-Semitic. The net effect of Ribbentrop's failure to act was the deportation of Croatian, Romanian, and Slovak Jews in Germany to concentration camps in the fall of 1941.³⁹

In January 1942, a meeting between high-ranking Nazi officials was arranged to resolve the "Jewish Question." This infamous meeting came to be known as the "Wannsee

³¹ Ibid, 88.

³² Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (London: Hachette Digital, 1992), 333.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 261.

³⁵ Ibid, 267.

³⁶ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 334.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 335

Conference," which Martin Luther attended as the representative of the Foreign Office.⁴⁰ It was at this conference that Nazi leaders who would be involved in facilitating the transport of Jews from German occupied Europe to extermination camps in Poland were explicitly informed of the Final Solution, which would include the deportation of 11 million European Jews to the East where they would be separated by sex and forced to build roads. The stated expectation was that most would die of natural causes as a result of harsh conditions, but that those who did survive would need to be dealt with because no trace of the Jewish race could be permitted to survive to rebuild.⁴¹ No one was permitted to dissent at this meeting and the Foreign Ministry was committed to the organization and administration of the mass deportation of the Jewish people.

Whether or not Ribbentrop actually knew about the proposed exterminations at this point is unclear. The "Luther Memorandum" did not actually make any reference to exterminations or gassings.⁴² Moreover, Ribbentrop had little to do with the "Jewish problem" at that time. It was not until August of 1942 that Ribbentrop renewed his involvement. He did so because he felt the SS was acting without the authority of the Ministry and because Luther had failed to include him on matters pertaining to Italy, as he had been instructed. Ribbentrop then had Luther removed from his position; Luther had ultimately betrayed him, and was sent to a concentration camp as a result.⁴³

Hitler was furious when a number of deportations were subsequently delayed, and, thus, after meeting with Hitler, Ribbentrop immediately instructed Ernst von Weizsäcker, the State Secretary at the Foreign Office, to begin evacuating all Jews from Europe as quickly as possible.⁴⁴ He further ordered the initiation of talks with Denmark, Hungary and Bulgaria about the deportation of Jews in their countries. Luther's *Abteilung Deutschland* had ultimately been disbanded after Luther's betrayal, but Ribbentrop created a new agency, *Group Inland*, that continued to organize the systematic exploitation and deportation of the Jewish people.⁴⁵ In September 1942, for example, he ordered German diplomats in various occupied states to facilitate the deportation of Jews to the East (i.e., to the death camps).⁴⁶ In addition, during the spring and summer of 1944 the Foreign Ministry, under the direct authority of Ribbentrop, actively participated in the deportation of 437,000 Hungarian Jews who were sent to Auschwitz, 320,000 of whom were murdered

⁴⁰ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 335

⁴¹ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 411

⁴² Martin Luther, "Translation of Document No. NG-2586 (J), 'Memorandum, from Luther, Under Secretary of State, Berlin, August 21, 1942'" accessed from Harry S Truman Library Online: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1945-00-00&documentid=C193-5-13&studycollectionid=Nuremberg, April 30, 2015.

⁴³ Christopher Browning, "Unterstaatssekretär Martin Luther and the Ribbentrop Foreign Office," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, (1977): 339.

⁴⁴ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 337.

⁴⁵ Seabury, *Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office*, 551.

⁴⁶ Robert Bush, "An investigation into the trial of a Nazi war criminal: Joachim Von Ribbentrop at Nuremberg, Germany, 1945-1946," M.A. diss., University of Richmond, 1963. 99. <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1199&context=masters-theses>

on arrival.⁴⁷

Ribbentrop's direct knowledge of the Final Solution is made apparent when the Regent of Hungary, Miklos Horthy, asked Ribbentrop what he was supposed to do with all the Jews in Hungary, and he is said to have replied "annihilate them or put them in concentration camps...there is no other way."⁴⁸ These actions of Ribbentrop's demonstrate his commitment to the Nazi Final Solution even after Luther's removal from the Foreign Ministry.

Ribbentrop was ultimately sentenced to death by hanging on 1 October 1946.⁴⁹ His efforts to convince the Tribunal that he was merely a loyal subordinate of Hitler, who simply followed his superiors' orders and made no important decisions, had failed. History does not support his denial of participation in the Holocaust. Research clearly demonstrates that Ribbentrop was actively involved in the persecution of the Jewish people throughout the Second World War. By facilitating the Nazi rise to power and conspiring to wage wars of aggression, Ribbentrop played a significant role in creating the perfect context in which to carry out the mass genocide of the Jewish people. Furthermore, in his role as Foreign Minister of Germany from 1938-45 he directly participated in the planning and administration of the Nazi Final Solution. He actively endorsed an anti-Semitic policy abroad, and worked hard to expedite the deportation of Jews throughout Europe. Among many other horrific acts, Ribbentrop was directly involved in the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, which resulted in the loss of over 300,000 lives. He denied personal knowledge of Hitler's ultimate plan, but the research proves otherwise. Ultimately, Ribbentrop was guilty as charged.

⁴⁷ Hurter, *The German Foreign Office*, 89.

⁴⁸ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: 1939-1945* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 395.

⁴⁹ "Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 22 -Two Hundred and Eighteenth Day," Avalon Project, 2008, 588. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/01-08-46.asp>

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