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IBM's Role in the Holocaust -- What the New Documents Reveal

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Newly-released documents expose more explicitly the details of IBM's pivotal role in the Holocaust -- all six phases: identification, expulsion from society, confiscation, ghettoization, deportation, and even extermination. Moreover, the documents portray with crystal clarity the personal involvement and micro-management of IBM president Thomas J. Watson in the company's co-planning and co-organizing of Hitler's campaign to destroy the Jews.

IBM's twelve-year alliance with the Third Reich was first revealed in my book *IBM and the Holocaust*, published simultaneously in 40 countries in February 2001. It was based on some 20,000 documents drawn from archives in seven countries. IBM never denied any of the information in the book; and despite thousands of media and communal requests, as well as published articles, the company has remained silent.

The new "expanded edition" contains 32 pages of never-before-published internal IBM correspondence, State Department and Justice Department memos, and concentration camp documents that graphically chronicle IBM's actions and what they knew during the 12-year Hitler regime. On the anniversary of the release of the original book, the new edition was released on February 26, 2012 at a special live global streaming event at Yeshiva University's Furst Hall, sponsored by the American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists together with a coalition of other groups.

Among the newly-released documents and archival materials are secret 1941 correspondence setting up the Dutch subsidiary of IBM to work in tandem with the Nazis, company President Thomas Watson's personal approval for the 1939 release of special IBM alphabetizing machines to help organize the rape of Poland and the deportation of Polish Jews, as well as the IBM Concentration Camp Codes including IBM's code for death by Gas Chamber. Among the newly published photos of the punch cards is the one developed for the statistician who reported directly to Himmler and Eichmann.

The significance of the incriminating documents requires context.

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Punch cards, also called Hollerith cards after IBM founder Herman Hollerith, were the forerunner of the computers that IBM is famous for today. These cards stored information in holes punched in the rows and columns, which were then "read" by a [tabulating machine](#). The system worked like a player piano -- but this one was devoted to the devil's music. First designed to track people and organize a census, the Hollerith system was later adapted to any tabulation or information task.

From the first moments of the Hitler regime in 1933, IBM used its exclusive punch card technology and its global monopoly on information technology to organize, systematize, and accelerate Hitler's anti-Jewish program, step by step facilitating the tightening noose. The punch cards, machinery, training, servicing, and special project work, such as population census and identification, was managed directly by IBM headquarters in New York, and later through its subsidiaries in Germany, known as Deutsche Hollerith-Maschinen Gesellschaft (DEHOMAG), Poland, Holland, France, Switzerland, and other European countries.

Among the punch cards published are two for the SS, including one for the SS Rassenamt, or Race Office, which specialized in racial selections and coordinated with many other Reich offices. A third card was custom-crafted by IBM for [Richard Korherr](#), a top Nazi statistician and expert in Jewish demographics who reported directly to Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler and who also worked with Adolf Eichmann. Himmler and Eichmann were architects of the extermination phase of the Holocaust. All three punch cards bear the proud indicia of IBM's German subsidiary, DEHOMAG. They illustrate the nature of the end users who relied upon IBM's information technology.

In 1937, with war looming and the world shocked at the increasingly merciless Nazi persecution of the Jews, [Hitler bestowed upon Watson](#) a special award -- created specifically for the occasion -- to honor extraordinary service by a foreigner to the Third Reich. The medal, the Order of the German Eagle with Star, bedecked with swastikas, was to be worn on a sash over the heart. Watson returned the medal years later in June 1940 as a reaction to public outrage about the medal during the bombing of Paris. The return of this medal has been used by IBM apologists to show Watson had second thoughts about his alliance with the Reich. But a newly released copy of a subsequent letter dated June 10, 1941, drafted by IBM's New York office, confirms that IBM headquarters personally directed the activities of its Dutch subsidiary set up in 1940 to identify and liquidate the Jews of Holland. Hence, while IBM engaged in the public relations maneuver of returning the medal, the company was actually quietly expanding its role in Hitler's Holocaust. Similar subsidiaries, sometimes named as a variant of "Watson Business Machines," were set up in Poland, Vichy France, and elsewhere on the Continent in cadence with the Nazi takeover of Europe.

Particularly powerful are the newly-released copies of the IBM concentration camp codes. IBM maintained a customer site, known as the Hollerith Department, in virtually every concentration camp to sort or process punch cards and track prisoners. The codes show IBM's numerical designation for various camps. Auschwitz was 001, Buchenwald was 002; Dachau was 003, and so on. Various prisoner types were reduced to IBM numbers, with 3 signifying homosexual, 9 for anti-social, and 12 for Gypsy. The IBM number 8 designated a Jew. Inmate death was also reduced to an IBM digit: 3 represented death by natural causes, 4 by execution, 5 by suicide, and code 6 designated "special treatment" in gas chambers. IBM engineers had to create Hollerith codes to differentiate between a Jew who had been worked to death and one who had been gassed, then print the cards, configure the machines, train the staff, and continuously maintain the fragile systems every two weeks on site in the concentration camps.

Newly-released photographs show the Hollerith Bunker at Dachau. It housed at least two dozen machines, mainly controlled by the SS. The foreboding concrete Hollerith

blockhouse, constructed of reinforced concrete and steel, was designed to withstand the most intense Allied aerial bombardment. Those familiar with Nazi bomb-proof shelters will recognize the advanced square-cornered pillbox design reserved for the Reich's most precious buildings and operations. IBM equipment was among the Reich's most important weapons, not only in its war against the Jews, but in its general military campaigns and control of railway traffic. Watson personally approved expenditures to add bomb shelters to DEHOMAG installations because the cost was born by the company. Such costs cut into IBM's profit margin. Watson's approval was required because he received a one-percent commission on all Nazi business profits.

Two telling U.S. government memos, now published, are remarkable for their telling irony. The first is a State Department memo, dated December 3, 1941, just four days before the attack on Pearl Harbor and as the Nazis were being openly accused of genocide in Europe. On that day in 1941, IBM's top attorney, Harrison Chauncey, visited the State Department to express qualms about the company's extensive involvement with Hitler. The State Department memo recorded that Chauncey feared *"that his company may some day be blamed for cooperating with the Germans."*

The second is a Justice Department memo generated during a federal investigation of IBM for trading with the enemy. Economic Warfare Section chief investigator Howard J. Carter prepared the memo for his supervisors describing the company's collusion with the Hitler regime. Carter wrote: *"What Hitler has done to us through his economic warfare, one of our own American corporations has also done ... Hence IBM is in a class with the Nazis."* He ended his memo: *"The entire world citizenry is hampered by an international monster."*

At a time when the Watson name and the IBM image is being laundered by whiz computers that can answer questions on TV game shows, it is important to remember that Thomas Watson and his corporate behemoth were guilty of genocide. The Treaty on Genocide, Article 2, defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group." In Article 3, the treaty states that among the "acts [that] shall be punishable," are the ones in subsection (e), that is "complicity in genocide." As for who shall be punished, the Treaty specifies the perpetrators in Article 4: "Persons committing genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in Article 3 shall be punished, whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials, or private individuals."

International Business Machines, and its president Thomas J. Watson, committed genocide by any standard. It was never about the antisemitism. It was never about the National Socialism. It was always about the money. Business was their middle name.

Edwin Black is the author of IBM and the Holocaust, The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation, newly released in the Expanded Edition.

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