

Professor Sir Ian Kershaw at Bolton's 80th Celebrations



Renowned historian Professor Sir Ian Kershaw joined the Bolton Branch of the Historical Association on 1 October 2007 to help celebrate their 80th anniversary. An audience of 185 people listened to his lecture on 'The German People and the Persecution of the Jews', which examined the attitudes of the German population to the Jewish minority during the first half of the twentieth century.

Beginning with a thought experiment designed to bring the issues up to date, he discussed the use of sources available to the historian and pointed out that prior to the rise of Nazism the majority of German Jews were integrated into German society; the only magnet for anti-semitism were those Jews who had fled from Eastern Europe after the First World War. Gradually the Nazi Party increased in popularity, and once the dictatorship came into being all newspapers promoted the message that the Jews were an evil influence. People who joined the Nazi Party were subjected to a barrage of anti-semitic propaganda, yet many ordinary Germans didn't support the boycott of Jewish businesses that the party called for.



Jewish reports of German generosity are often exaggerated but there certainly were examples of ordinary Germans' acts of kindness. Obviously some Germans continued to do business with the Jews on the grounds of their better terms. Another group of the population was opposed to the violent methods of oppression but not to the general aims; another group was indifferent. The general opinion was one of passive complicity.

There were different responses by different sections of the population throughout the war, and as most people left no record of their opinions it is difficult to know what the silent majority thought. It was a big risk to speak out against the regime, and the higher up the ranks the reports get, the more chance there is that anti-Nazi sentiments were filtered out. By 1942 killings were taking place on a massive scale, and although it is inevitable that there was some knowledge of this passed on by soldiers home on leave, it is impossible to know how extensively it was shared. For one thing, people didn't want to know, and for another the death camps were supposed to be a secret, so knowledge of them was sparse and passed off as 'foreign propaganda'.



Professor Kershaw summed up with the results of a survey that American troops carried out into attitudes to the Jews at the end of the war: that before the Nuremberg Trials in October 1945 about 20% of Germans were in favour of Hitler's policy towards the Jews. Passive complicity and indifference are the two main interpretations, and Professor Kershaw favoured the latter, as even now when faced with foreign crises most people think that they cannot do anything about it anyway.

Following the lecture Professor Kershaw took questions from the floor, which included some from members of the Branch, some from students and some from visitors. He then cut the Branch birthday cake, which the audience then enjoyed with tea and coffee during a chance for more informal conversation with the professor.