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Historical Study B-54

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"Your search did not find any articles." This phrase and countless variations appear time and again when conducting research for a topic that would seem, at first glance, relatively mainstream: the involvement of the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) in the Holocaust. Whether conducted in German or English, electronic searches seem to imply that there are almost no publicly-available World War II-era documents from anywhere in the world that discuss a connection between IBM and Nazi Germany. It is theoretically possible that no connection exists—that IBM's Hollerith machines were not used by the Third Reich to facilitate the mass murder of six million innocent Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and other "anti-social" persons—but recent research suggests otherwise (Hollerith Machine 1). Since it is virtually impossible to find related documents in publicly-accessible locations, or even on the vast expanse of the internet, only one possibility remains: that for some reason, fifty-seven years after V-J day, the documents evidencing such claims still remain privately-held (Black 445).

In addition to the countless documents evidencing the collaboration of German corporations who exploited Jewish slave labor to achieve the military goals of Hitler's regime, there is plenty of evidence to substantiate the fact that American corporations also profited from their own exploits in Nazi Germany. Until recently, it was thought that only a few traitorous companies, such as General Aniline and Film Corporation, were involved with aiding the Third Reich (Black 337). Any that did collaborate are generally assumed to be long extinct from the current business landscape. Certainly, no image-conscious company that still operates today would advertise the existence of materials providing an indisputable link to a dark Nazi past.

Given the Darwinian impulse of every organism, biological or legal, for survival, IBM might have avoided the harsh light of scrutiny completely had it not been for a single exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The 1993 exhibit, featuring a small Hollerith D-11 punch card tabulator, complete with IBM nameplate, was on display next to a placard vaguely associating the machine with lists of Jews compiled by the Nazis. Author Edwin Black happened to visit the Museum with his parents, both Holocaust survivors (Black 11). Six years later, on February 11, 2001, Black released a controversial book entitled "IBM and the Holocaust" in forty countries and nine languages, for the first time sparking a heated debate about the actual involvement of the technology monolith in World War II on the other side of the Atlantic (Probing 1, Black 440). As it happens, February 11, 2001 is also the earliest date of any document on the subject that can be found using any popular electronic research system. For the average person, before Black's book was released, information connecting IBM to the Holocaust simply did not exist. Afterward, a flurry of book reviews and press releases began to shed some light on the topic—the same light that IBM had successfully avoided for almost six decades.

Black's "IBM and the Holocaust" attempts to answer the questions of how IBM's Hollerith punch card machines were actually used by the Nazis, and whether or not IBM was aware of its customers' sinister intentions. It only begins to answer the question of how IBM was able to avoid scrutiny for so long. One perfectly valid possibility is that the company did not know what its machines were being used for, and so it had nothing to disclose. The alternative explanation is that IBM, a $38 million company with 11,315 employees in 1939, was able to use its "supra-national" status to cover up its actions during the war, and its legendary corporate bureaucracy as a tool to cover up its actions afterward (IBM Highlights 14). If the latter explanation is actually the case, then IBM is definitely not alone. Bertelsmann AG is only

now coming to grips with a dark past that it vehemently denied for decades. A front-page article in the December 23, 2002 *Wall Street Journal* details the company's complete turnaround, from its initial claims of having resisted Nazi forces, to its eventual admission that it actually published more than 100 anti-Semitic books for the NSDAP (the official name for the Nazi Party) (Karnitschnig A1, A6). I.G. Farbenindustrie, whose assets were split up among several German companies in the years following the end of World War II, never even bothered denying any wrongdoing; its executives were immediately tried for war crimes at Nuremberg (Leventhal 1). I.G. Farben employed legions of Jewish slave laborers in its Buna synthetic rubber factory, conveniently located within the barbed-wire confines of the Auschwitz concentration camp (Black 337). Its former headquarters, also General Eisenhower's headquarters after World War II, is now part of a university campus.

IBM's official stance is that it knows nothing. With the exception of a press release vaguely dated "February 2001" stating, "IBM does not have much information about this period," the company's main public web site is devoid of any information on the topic (IBM Statement 1). It is therefore perplexing as to why IBM recently denied Black access to the company's archives in Stuttgart, Germany (Black 446). A company with nothing to hide should also have nothing to lose. IBM may not be willing to provide the documents to prove it, but between the independent research conducted by Edwin Black, the testimony of persons who worked for IBM or its subsidiaries during World War II, and the suspect behavior of IBM itself, it appears that IBM has something to hide.

Since Hitler came to power, the world of technology has changed immensely, but the world of business has remained fairly constant. Even today, companies can be described simply by looking at the personalities of the individuals who run them. In 1933, Thomas J. Watson was the President of IBM, but to a certain extent, he also was IBM (Black 41). As the President of

the International Chamber of Commerce, a spin-off of the League of Nations, his name carried enormous weight (71). Through his connections with the State Department, he often served as an unofficial ambassador when visiting dignitaries from foreign nations, whether at home or abroad (72). He kept in touch with Franklin Roosevelt, and even once visited Hitler personally. Watson's stamp was imprinted everywhere at IBM, including the steps of the company's training institute, where his trademark word, "THINK," was engraved among others (51). As is often the case with successful businesspeople, profit was his single motive (46-47). Under his leadership, IBM prospered, perpetually expanding into new territories and introducing new products (IBM Highlights 6-18). Looking back, Watson's actions as a company President are not questionable because he was motivated by profit, but because he strove for it even when he knew that his gain came at the expense of others' lives.

Protests against Nazi Germany were quite rare despite frequently disturbing headlines emanating from the country, but nevertheless, Watson realized that he might come under scrutiny for his over-enterprising nature. He had once before; prior to his arrival at IBM, Watson had been a top salesperson at National Cash Register, where he attracted the attention of the U.S. Department of Justice for encouraging anti-competitive sales practices (Black 61). Consequently, he immediately began devising plans to avoid culpability. Watson's best strategies were ones that simultaneously maximized IBM's profits while minimizing IBM's liability for its own actions. The simplest of these combined brilliant marketing with confusion. Instead of using the IBM name for European subsidiaries, which carried with it a foreign connotation, Watson substituted his own world-famous name in many instances. Some subsidiaries, such as France's Compagnie Electro-Comptable de France, were already established and sufficiently distanced from New York, and so their names remained unchanged. As for the rest, IBM's subsidiary in Belgium was called Watson Belge, in Italy, Watson Italiana

(44), in Nazi-occupied Norway, Watson Norsk (233), in Sweden, Svenska Watson (44), in Nazi-occupied Holland, Watson Bedrijfsmachine Maatschappij N.V. (294), in Bulgaria, Watson Business Machines Corporation, Ltd. (385), and in Nazi-occupied Poland, Watson Büromaschinen GmbH (193).

The cornerstone of IBM's European operations, understandably located in Germany, was not named after the controlling corporation in New York, nor after Watson, but after Herman Hollerith, the founder of IBM, who happened to be of German descent. In 1896, after securing the business of the U.S. Census Bureau where he worked, Hollerith incorporated the Tabulating Machine Company (Black 28). Eventually, he sold the company to a notorious international arms dealer, Charles Flint, who combined it with three other companies to form the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company (CTR), the predecessor to IBM. Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen Geschelleshaft (German Hollerith Machines Corporation), abbreviated by the shorthand term Dehomag, was the official name of IBM Germany (30). Though it was not planned at the time, the word "Deutsche" became particularly important, as the NSDAP would only recognize so-called Aryan businesses as legitimate. German law dictated that to keep the word "Deutsche" in its name, Dehomag had to retain at least partial German ownership (76). The stipulation was the source of unending battles between Watson in New York and his various German partners (220).

Watson also used the element of time to bring in additional revenue for IBM. Though he may not have foreseen the long-term consequences of his actions, Watson's progressive expansion throughout Europe had the additional effect of adding another confusing factor to the mix. Each IBM subsidiary, formally incorporated within its own respective country, was not formed at exactly the same time. Looking at the network of companies retrospectively, it is difficult to keep track of which entities were involved when in the war. Some simply did not exist before the German army invaded; sales territories were in a constant state of flux (Black

62). Hollerith tabulators in Romania serviced by IBM Bucharest technicians one day might be serviced by Dehomag technicians the next.

It is no coincidence that IBM always seemed to expand one step ahead of Hitler. According to Black, Watson kept a close watch on Hitler's plans for German expansion and acted accordingly (Black 151). (Doing so would not have been difficult; the main thrusts of Hitler's speeches were essentially advertised on the front page of the *New York Times* on a regular basis.) IBM's Dutch subsidiary was incorporated on March 20, 1940, less than two months before the Nazis invaded (294). Polski Hollerith, established in Poland in 1934 to crush a competitor who had sealed a contract with the Polish Ministry of Posts, changed its name to the more recognizable Watson Business Machines sp. z. o.o. in 1937 (192-193). When the Nazis invaded, it changed its name once more to Watson Büromaschinen GmbH, this time adding the German incorporation suffix (193). The Bulgarian subsidiary, Watson Business Machines Corporation, Ltd., was incorporated on March 17, 1938, only three years before Bulgaria joined the Axis powers (385). The NSDAP was already an excellent, paying client. Whenever Hitler expanded, so too would the demand for Hollerith machines.

The NSDAP used Hollerith machines for a variety of purposes, from validating marriage licenses to counting horses, but of particular importance to the Reich was the success of Adolf Eichmann's "evacuation" program (Black 225, 206, 327). Deporting Jews to concentration camps was an extraordinarily complex process whose efficiency depended on the Party's ability to generate cross-referenced lists of trains, occupations, races and people almost instantaneously. Just as with health care and security, the Nazis were able to transform an uncontroversial and innocuous tool of modern-day government, the census, into an angel of death (Hollerith 1). Even IBM freely admits, "It has been known for decades that the Nazis used Hollerith equipment and that IBM's German subsidiary during the 1930s—Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen GmbH

(Dehomag)—supplied Hollerith equipment" (IBM Statement 1). The task of tabulating the vast numbers of people in "Greater Germany," which also included all of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Norway, Holland, Greece, parts of France, and other countries, as well, required some sort of automated system. Manual counting, though an option, was not nearly fast enough for the Reich, and counting by hand based on numerous inter-related criteria was nearly impossible on any human time scale. Dehomag was able to provide Hollerith punch card tabulating and alphabetizing devices, capable of sorting information by whatever criteria the Reich desired at a rate of thousands of cards per hour (Black 87).

Technical achievements aside, part of the brilliance of Herman Hollerith's nineteenth-century punch card system design was the monopoly which it automatically granted to the make of the punch cards—in this case, IBM. The Hollerith systems were designed to be compatible only with specialized Hollerith punch cards, and *vice-versa* (Black 98). Genuine Hollerith punch cards bore the prominent gothic script "Hollerith" logo. To lock its clients into the monopoly, IBM required customers to sign a Byzantine agreement stipulating, among other regulations, that punch cards had to be purchased only from IBM. Competitors who wanted a share of the lucrative market would run into incredible barriers to entry. Each card had to be manufactured with the utmost care and precision. Only certain types of chemical pulp could be used, the card dimensions had to be exact to within a less than one-hundredth of an inch, corners had to be cut at perfect right angles, and special storage facilities had to be built to regulate humidity. Any defects in a card could throw off the sensitive machinery in a sorter or tabulator. At the rate of several thousand cards per hour, a single paper jam could be an informational and financial disaster (97-98).

Until Watson personally approved the decision to begin manufacturing punch cards in Europe, Dehomag's clients were thus put in the awkward position of depending upon imports

from IBM New York for the vital supplies that their machines needed to run. Even then, due to the scarcity of paper, let alone paper that met IBM's stringent conditions, punch cards still had to be imported in massive quantities from the United States. Though each card—representing a record of data, or in the case of a census, an individual—could be sorted virtually an unlimited number of times, each could only be punched once. With the information from each individual person requiring at least one card, and usually many more, even the profits from just manufacturing the cards for censuses was lucrative (Black 98). Once the cards were loaded into a Hollerith machine, by turning various dials and controls on the front, it was possible to sort them by a trait or combination of traits, explaining how the Nazis were able to obtain incredibly detailed lists of Jews with such amazing efficiency. Due to the problematic nature of the numerous moving parts in each machine, special Hollerith experts employed by Dehomag or other IBM subsidiaries were often kept as on-site technicians to maintain the machines (212). For the entire room full of Hollerith tabulators at the Dachau concentration camp, a Dehomag technician was almost always present (429). For the multitude of sorters and other Hollerith machines used by the Polish railroads to track and route cattle cars full of Jews to death camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka, an "outside expert" from Dehomag was always on-site (436). IBM did not only know how its machines were being used—its employees were practically on the front lines.

Not only did IBM control the global market for punch cards, it maintained complete control over the Hollerith machines themselves. The company never actually sold a single machine—it leased them out to its customers, carefully recording the model number, serial number, manufacturing date, manufacturing location, and client location for each and every one (Black 26, 207). Among hundreds of other machines, Dehomag headquarters and IBM Geneva kept close track of Model D-11 calculating tabulators and Model D-11 VZ counting machines

installed at Nazi military sites all throughout the Reich (207). The completeness of the information allowed the company to easily dispatch service technicians to maintain them, but it also worried Nazi officials. They were concerned that IBM executives in New York might learn of Hitler's closest-kept military secrets, and understandably so. Watson and other IBM executives in America tracked Dehomag's progress on a day-to-day basis throughout much of the war from New York and Geneva, ensuring that the division's profits always found their way back to New York. That the traditional German knack for engineering kept the Reich running smoothly is only partially true. It took the enterprising spirit of American businessmen to ensure that Nazi Germany was always healthy enough to contribute to the bottom line.

With such a direct link between IBM's headquarters in the United States and the installations of Hollerith devices at what were clearly Nazi military sites, it is hard to imagine how the company could deny that it was doing business with the enemy in the midst of wartime. A United States law, General Ruling 11, specifically prohibited American companies from engaging in any financial transactions with Nazi Germany, which included the various countries that it occupied (Black 284). IBM used a tactic of strategic misinformation to preclude intervention in its day-to-day operations. A typical transaction might have involved shipping hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of punch cards to Europe as supplies for a "subsidiary," with monies later returning to the United States in the form of a "royalty." Royalty payments were frequently used to mask Dehomag's profits as expenses travelling overseas, giving auditors the impression that a third-party IBM licensee was merely paying for punch cards. Occasionally, annual profits managed to slip into the transactions, as well. Money flowing out of the company was therefore deliberately classified incorrectly to avoid unnecessary government regulation and involvement (77).

As time progressed from 1933 onward, the NSDAP implemented an increasing number of financial restrictions for German corporations. To foster growth of the German economy, companies were forced to deposit their earnings in blocked bank accounts so that the funds could only be used in the Reich (Black 67). Consequently, Dehomag's profits, denominated in Reichsmarks, were virtually impossible to get out of the country, even though IBM New York demanded them based on its 83% ownership of the corporation (231). This put Watson in a bind; since foreign firms were generally distrusted, and so-called Aryan firms favored, he needed to distance the American-sounding IBM name from Dehomag in whatever way possible, while simultaneously retaining control of the company. If he exercised too much control from New York, Dehomag could lose the privilege of using the word "Deutsche," and he might induce a rebellion among the German management. If he exercised too little, Watson would never see his own company's profits. A combination of protracted negotiations, bribes and threats ensured that IBM would maintain its policy of deniability on both sides (79-80, 230). Watson had a powerful bargaining chip: the German managers' shares of stock were not true shares; they could not be sold back to any entity but IBM itself. Therefore, even with General Ruling 11 in effect, Watson was able to exercise control over Dehomag from his New York office while giving German authorities the impression that the company was running itself.

As the hub of European operations, Dehomag also had to deal frequently with transfers of Hollerith machines to and from other Nazi occupied nations, such as Romania. Keeping track of funds to correspond with all of the different machines required keeping track of a system of bank accounts scattered across Europe, some of which had special conditions attached to them.

The centerpiece of IBM's efforts to portray the company as an innocent bystander in Nazi Germany was a memo cabled to all of IBM's European subsidiaries in late October, 1941. It read, "In view of world conditions we cannot participate in the affairs of our companies in

various countries as we did in normal times. Therefore you are advised that you will have to make your own decisions and not call on us for any advice or assistance until further notice." The vague instruction did not tell companies to halt business with the Nazis in any way—only to keep IBM New York in the dark. On paper, IBM New York did not know what was going on with machines in Europe because it did not want to know (Black 289). In reality, its executives were fully aware of the horrible crimes that were taking place day after day in Nazi Germany. Watson himself had visited Germany a number of times, where Nazi brutality could constantly be seen in the open streets. On one notable occasion he even received a Nazi Medal of Honor from Adolf Hitler himself (134, 145).

Though General Ruling 11 could prevent IBM from contacting Dehomag in Germany directly, it said nothing about communicating with neutral countries. Not surprisingly, the IBM Geneva office became a communications hub, farming out orders received by cablegram from New York to the company's offices across continental Europe. Likewise, since IBM could not acknowledge the direct receipt of messages from any of its European divisions, so subsidiaries could only communicate back to it through Geneva (Black 395). IBM has not forgotten the importance of maintaining offices in overseas countries—today, foreign IBM offices act as excuses for IBM's public relations personnel to withhold documents. When Edwin Black personally requested files from the company, IBM often claimed that they were not available because they were stored away in the company's somehow difficult-to-reach offices abroad.

IBM employed several other tactics to avoid General Ruling 11. Some important conversations took place over the telephone instead of in writing, simply so that there would be no record of them having ever taken place. Others were passed off as personal letters that just happened to be from Dehomag employees to IBM New York executives, written in an intentionally vague, terse and confusing IBM tongue (Black 298). Many documents were

written in this "company language," terse English designed to convey specific meaning in as few implicating words as possible.

As a multi-national corporation essential to the American war effort, IBM's communications network was not limited to its internal resources. Thanks to his U.S. government connections, Watson was able to use the State Department and American embassies throughout the world to carry out IBM business. While the mission of the State Department is partially to aid global American commerce, IBM's requests often involved asking the State Department to transmit messages detrimental to the American war effort. Even before General Ruling 11, Sam Woods, the United States commercial attaché in Berlin, frequently transmitted cablegrams to and from Germany on behalf of IBM. His role became of heightened importance when IBM could no longer talk to its own subsidiaries without a special Treasury Department license (Black 239). Ironically, the only party helping to circumvent the regulations of the U.S. Government was the U.S. Government.

Watson's fame as President of both IBM and the ICC was in and of itself a factor that put him beyond suspicion in many American's minds. Even investigators at the Department of Justice were warned not to be too critical, citing IBM's importance in the American war effort (Black 334). While his company was selling Hollerith machines to the NSDAP, Watson was also building munitions in rapidly converted factories, many of them stamped with the IBM logo. So-called "IBM soldiers" were even recruited to run and maintain Hollerith devices in special vans that would travel with Army units as Europe was liberated country by country (405).

Watson's actions more than a half-century ago are crucial now that "IBM and the Holocaust" has put the company on the defensive. His measures of deniability are still in effect as IBM defends itself against incriminating documents, and even lawsuits. To coincide with the release of Black's book, attorney Michael D. Hausfeld filed suit against IBM on behalf of five

Holocaust survivors. One aim of the lawsuit was to pressure the State Department to open corporate archives to the public (Lawyer 1). When the plaintiffs willingly dropped the lawsuit to facilitate the transfer of $5 billion in reparation payments by various German companies to survivors worldwide, IBM appended a short statement to its February 2001 press release stating only, "The lawsuit has been dismissed," implying dismissal by a federal judge (IBM Statement 1). Carol Makovich, the IBM public relations representative assigned to the issue, then stated, "We have believed from the beginning that this lawsuit had no merit" (Lawyer 1).

IBM's efforts to share its records of the World War II era for the benefit of the general public have been less than stellar, and have actually been the focus of a great deal of criticism from the academic world. When asked why IBM has not made more of its files available, Makovich explained to reporters that the company's corporate archivist, hired in 1998, had not had time sort through all of its records. One must wonder why an archivist would have sort through records before allowing historians to view them. The company proudly claims to have "donated some 10,000 pages of documents archiving IBM's business during the Nazi era to New York University and Hohenheim University in Germany over the last two years," according to a Reuters article from March 30, 2001 (Lawyer 2). In reality, IBM shipped six boxes of filtered materials to a dead sea scrolls researcher at New York University's Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, which specializes in ancient texts. The researcher, who had no idea what the boxes contained, simply stored them in his closet for a number of months, until other researchers began inquiring about their disappearance. A letter written by Sybil Milton, former senior historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to former IBM Chairman and CEO Lou Gerstner, called IBM's donation, "an act of obstruction intended to impede access and research." He further noted that the department at NYU "specializes in Biblical archaeology and pre-twentieth century learning and is inappropriate as an archival repository for IBM materials;

indeed the physical transfer and potential disarray of these records seems likely to obstruct further access and research." According to Black, the files at Hohenheim University remain unavailable (Black 445).

My own telephone call to Carol Makovich, the IBM Public Relations representative assigned to the issue, resulted in the following explanation, which contradicts statements that she has made in the past: IBM does not have any available documents on the Holocaust, but will not issue a statement to that effect. To request such a statement or to request any documents, a formal document request must be faxed to an unknown department, which will then be approved in an unknown period of time. One should search the IBM public web site for the keyword "Holocaust" to find out more (Makovich).

Searching the IBM public web site for the keyword "Holocaust" only results in the press release with Makovich's telephone number. Interestingly, while that press release states that "IBM does not have much information about this period of the operations of Dehomag," IBM's German web site says otherwise (IBM Statement 1). There, IBM apparently found enough documents to create a year-by-year timeline of IBM Germany going all the way back to 1910. In particular, the time line references the expansion of Dehomag with the opening of a new IBM office in Berlin on January 8, 1934, shortly after Hitler's coming to power (Die Jahre 1). It also specifically mentions the total worth of Dehomag's assets in 1934, 7 million Reichsmarks, as well as the number of punch cards used, 90 million, in the "large German census" of 1939 (2).

The only logical explanation for IBM's strange behavior is that it is hiding documents which point to its overt connections with the Nazi party. Ironically, by not coming forward with honest answers, the company has done more to hurt its public image than it would have by simply turning over the documents from the start. IBM's press release states that "IBM and its employees around the world find the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime abhorrent and

categorically condemn any actions which aided their unspeakable actions" (IBM Statement 1). While it may be true that IBM's employees today despise the Nazis, it was not true in the 1930s, and not even in the 1940s. Again, IBM is in the position of having a monopoly, not on cash registers or punch cards, but on documents that could educate the public and help to prevent similar events from taking place in the future. Bertelsmann AG, though it has received its fair share of negative press for admitting the truth of its past, has nevertheless survived as a corporation. The longer IBM holds out, the worse the damage to Holocaust survivors and its own corporate image will become. As the search engines demonstrate, Edwin Black's book is only the beginning.

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