

Who put the blitz in blitzkrieg? What magic allowed millions of Nazi victims to step onto trains in Germany or Nazi-occupied countries, travel for two and three days, and step out at Auschwitz or Treblinka - and within an hour be marched into gas chambers? In "IBM and the Holocaust," Edwin Black presents a chilling case against IBM and its first CEO, Thomas J. Watson, as cold-blooded, opportunistic, Nazi collaborators.

Black's parents are Holocaust survivors. Black is adept at historical research and forensic accounting. "IBM and the Holocaust" is a moral indictment with almost seventy-five pages of notes following over four hundred detailed pages of text. Black has left little room for a libel suit by Big Blue, but I suspect that he'd welcome the occasion.

The book tells the story of IBM's conscious involvement in the Holocaust and in the murderous Nazi war machine. Black doesn't spare examples of horror or heroism. He doesn't imply that the Holocaust wouldn't have happened in the absence of IBM, but Hitler would never have murdered so many without IBM's punch card technology.

IBM commercialized punch card technology in the 1920s. Mechanical punch card technology preceded electronic computers and database programs, but the results are analogous. IBM manufactured proprietary cards onto which census data could be coded by punching holes on numbered cells in different columns. The cards were sorted in a player piano-like machine. For example, cards, each representing one person, could be quickly sorted to isolate all males aged 16 to 30 and skilled in metalwork. Names and addresses of these men could be printed and the men pressed into service at a weapons factory. Depending on what census data was collected, racial origin, religion, first language, trade or profession, it was easy to identify populations to be exploited as slaves or to be gassed.

Thomas J. Watson joined what became IBM in 1914 after a successful career with National Cash Register. NCR systematically eliminated competitors, misled customers and sold knock-off merchandise. Its sales force was regimented and driven. Watson brought this legacy to IBM. IBM leased machinery to clients, obliged clients to purchase proprietary punch cards, had its machines programmed and maintained by IBM technicians, had IBM statisticians design census questionnaires and IBM quashed competition. IBM New York opened subsidiaries in Europe and insisted on royalty payments to IBM NY, typically 25% of gross sales. As Black documents, IBM NY restricted foreign ownership and manoeuvred adroitly to avoid paying taxes on concealed profits. Ironically, IBM excelled at practices Hitler attributed to Jews. In 1937, Watson, for his public support of the Nazi cause was awarded the highest medal Germany could confer upon a non-German. Concurrently, Jews were being ghettoized and exterminated with the efficiency afforded by punch card technology.

IBM was successful and profitable in Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933, after WWII began in 1939, after the Americans entered in December, 1941 and after WWII ended in 1945. Throughout the war, IBM NY was able to control its German subsidiary through its neutral Swiss office and a sympathetic Nazi receiver. During the war, IBM machines contributed to the efficiency of Axis trains, the allocation of slave labour which supported the German war industry and the Final Solution. After WWII, IBM was never called to account for Nazi collaboration although the world understood that corporate collusion was the keystone to Hitler's terror. Businessmen who cooperated with Hitler were considered war criminals, but Watson and IBM slipped through the net not just unscathed, but richer. I wonder how Watson is spending eternity?