

An Open Letter about Edwin Black's "IBM and the Holocaust"

by Prof. Howard Segal

Correcting Errors in a Review about *IBM and the Holocaust*

In the June 28, 2001 issue of *Nature*, which is primarily a scientific publication, I reviewed *IBM and the Holocaust* by Edwin Black, drawing on my expertise in the history of technology. I am not and do not claim to be a Holocaust historian. Unfortunately, I unintentionally included some factual errors and misleading assertions about the book which need to be corrected.

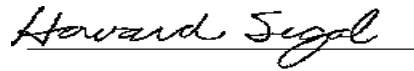
For example, I wrote: "Polish ghetto exterminators... for instance, never had punch-card machines, and the SS Race and Settlement Office obtained them only in 1943." In truth, there was no such thing in the Holocaust as a "Polish ghetto exterminator," with or without Hollerith machines. I should not have used that term or made that reference.

As for the SS Race and Settlement Office obtaining machines only in 1943, a fact taken from Edwin Black's book, a greater knowledge of the period would have revealed that this marginal organization functioned as an SS officers' marriage and adoption screening bureau; not surprisingly, this agency was late in getting its machines. The reference was misleading and not germane. An unknowing reader might believe that an agency of this provocative name, "the SS Race and Settlement Office," was somehow a prime mover in the extermination process, but it was not.

I also wrote: "Black minimizes the inefficiency of many Nazi procedures, which, for example, delayed many trainloads of Jews en route to concentration camps." In truth, trains are always delayed in their schedules, in peacetime, of course, but especially in the uncertain conditions of wartime. When I wrote this sentence, I was unaware that the bustling Hollerith Department of Polish Railways, equipped with 15 punchers and a large tabulator, allowed the Gestapo to keep track of the whereabouts and availability of trains deployed for the genocidal runs to Auschwitz and Treblinka. Hence, whether or not wartime or weather delayed those trains, custom-designed IBM programs helped the Nazis to locate and deploy the locomotives and boxcars. Indeed, virtually all European trains were tracked by Hollerith cards back then much as radar is used today to track airplanes. In retrospect, I do not believe that *IBM and the Holocaust* "minimizes the inefficiency of many Nazi procedures," including those involving trains.

In addition, I wrote: "The book's greatest weakness, however, is its exaggeration of the importance of punch-card machines and, in turn, of the degree of 'automation' of the Nazis' murderous operations." In fact, I know of no evidence or documentation that the book included any exaggeration at all.

I wish to emphasize that the focus of my review was on the book as an important and illuminating case study in the ongoing debate about the degree of technological determinism in both the past and the present. I ask readers to pay attention to the last line of my original review: "*IBM and the Holocaust* should be required reading not only for all Holocaust scholars but also for those contemporary celebrants of computerized access to information as a virtue in itself, little short of technological utopia." My recommendation of the book to all such persons--beyond just Holocaust scholars--remains unchanged.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Howard Segal", is written over a horizontal line.

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