



Review of: Edwin Black. *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001) 519 pp. Footnotes and index.

The year: 1993. The scene: The U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. A man visits the museum with his parents, both survivors of the Holocaust. The first exhibit is a Hollerith punch-card sorting machine bearing an IBM logo. "Why," he asks, is this here? "Did this machine help the Nazis identify and arrest my parents?" The man did more than ask the question. He sought an answer. After years of exhaustive research, he concludes that the IBM corporation enabled the Nazi regime to be as brutally efficient as it was in identifying and sending Jews to extermination camps, confiscating their assets,

and automating the German war machine. The man is Edwin Black, and his conclusions are in his shocking book: **IBM and the Holocaust.**

The image of the tattooed number on the forearm of a survivor of the death camps is one of the most recognized symbol of the Holocaust. Black shows that these numbers initially correlated to the IBM Hollerith punch card system. The Nazi's massive project of identification and deportation of the Jews, and their eventual extermination, required data processing capabilities that could easily be supplied by any computer system today. However, there were no such computers available to the Third Reich in those days. The most advanced data processing technology, in the form of Hollerith punch cards and the machines to sort them, was virtually monopolized by IBM, headquartered in New York. Black reveals that each concentration camp had its Hollerith department. The forms used in the camps to identify and track prisoners and forced laborers were co-designed by IBM consultants specifically for that purpose.

How could such a prestigious, seemingly all-American firm become a collaborator with such a reprehensible system of government, a participant in the most heinous crime in the history of humanity? Black's unflattering history of Thomas J. Watson and IBM delineates the corporation's takeover of its German importing agency, Dehomag, during the hyperinflation days of the Weimar Republic. Dehomag was an acronym for "Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen Gesellschaft." Once Hitler rose to power, Nazi Germany would become second only to the United States as IBM's best customer. Watson and IBM saw in the Third Reich not so much a threat to the world as an opportunity for unbridled profit. The relationship was mutual. Hitler even created a special medal, the highest honor that could be bestowed on a non-German. He presented it to presented Watson in a lavish ceremony. Germany in turn became dependent on IBM technology for its totalitarian vision of the future.

Black's meticulous documentation constructs an undeniable fact: after the outbreak of WWII, the IBM corporation knew where each of its leased (not sold) machines was in Europe, and what revenues it could expect from them. Each machine was insured and managed monthly. Even though Watson, under public pressure, returned his medal to Hitler, he continued to "micromanage" the German and European operations. Further, he fought to keep control of his

German subsidiary, knowing full well the profits that would accrue to IBM as a result. He did this with the knowledge, fuller than most, of the purposes for which his machines were deployed. When the war ended in Germany, the victorious Allies discovered just how dependent Germany was on IBM's Hollerith technology. Remarkably, instead of indicting IBM, they saw in these machines and their data a great opportunity to conduct a more efficient occupation of Germany and a rebuilding of Europe. Instead of evidence of crimes against humanity, the machines became an essential tool in the implementation of the Marshall Plan. In this way, IBM evaded any hint of complicity in the Holocaust. At least, until the publication of Edwin Black's book.

Now, the burden of proof rests squarely with IBM. What will it do with this thoroughly-documented "*J'Accuse*," this long-overdue indictment of corporate greed? If IBM can defend itself, make a case against the overwhelming evidence of its guilt presented by this book, then its lawyers and staffers will have to be busy for months. In all likelihood, IBM will choose to ignore this book and hope it will go away.

Not to remember is to give Hitler his victory. "Never forget" is the mantra imposed upon us all by the Holocaust. Over 15 million people have visited the Holocaust Museum since Edwin Black's visit there with his parents. Surely, many of them have asked the same questions. In his book, Edwin Black has furnished them with answers.

The book is profoundly discomfiting. As powerful as its message is, the author's dedication goes to the heart of the matter: "To my daughter Rachel, who will read this book, and to the six million who will not."

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