

IBM and the Third Reich

Many people believe that the information age was born in Silicon Valley, but this is a false statement. The information age was born in Nazi Germany in 1933 by the American company IBM. IBM and the Third Reich had been business partners from 1933 till the end of the war. It was IBM's job to supply the Nazis with census machines and punch card technology, which was used to organize and process information in a quick and efficient manner. These machines and technology were mainly used in Hitler's concentration camps for a quick way to classify prisoners and identify the average amount of work one could get out of a prisoner before they were executed. IBM was acting in an unethical manner, since there is evidence that IBM officials were fully aware of what was being done with their machines and continued to allow it.

Throughout the 1930's and 40's there had been headline after headline in the New York Times and other prominent news papers of a possible genocide. For example in the New York Times on June 21, 1938 "Goebbels warns Jews must leave", again in the New York Times on April 22 1941 "Census of all Jews planned in France", and finally in the New York Times on June 30, 1942 "1,000,000 Jews slain by Nazis, report says.". Thomas Watson dismissed these stories saying that it was just politics. These census machines that IBM sold to the Germans also had to be serviced regularly, which means IBM officials would have to travel to the concentration camps in order to service the machines. This in turn means that IBM had to have known what was going on if they had been to these camps. Also everything about these machines were custom made, so IBM had to know what was happening because they were making the punch cards for the Nazis and needed to know what sort of information to put on it. In October of 1941 right before it became illegal to trade and do business with Germany, Thomas Watson issued sent a message to all of IBM European subsidiaries saying not to tell him what they are doing and to not ask any questions. This does not sound like an order a CEO of an ethical company would issue. Don't CEOs have to be responsible for their international interests? IBM clearly knew that they were in-fact taking part in genocide, but chose to ignore it because it was a business deal that was making large quantities of money. Through these European subsidiaries IBM was able to legally participate in genocide and continue to profit off the innocent death of millions.

In the end it is interesting to think about how many lives could have been saved if IBM did not provide the Nazis with a quick and efficient way of processing their information. If IBM stayed out of the picture and decided to value morality over the great dollar the Nazis would not be able to process the information as fast as they were with the IBM machines and possibly slow down the extermination process. IBM is a good example on how essential ethics are in the business world and what can happen if ethics are ignored.

Sources

IBM and the Holocaust, by Edwin Black:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lpe2wDTfT9s>

Probing IBM Nazi Connections, Paul Festa: <http://www.news.com/2009-1082-269157.html>

How IBM helped automate the Nazi death machine in Poland, by Edwin Black:

<http://emperors-clothes.com/analysis/ibm.htm>

IBM implicated in Nazi extermination of Jews, by Thomas Greene:

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2001/02/11/ibm_implicated_in_nazi_extermination/