



## Part 2. Explaining Nazism Philosophically

### 3. *How could Nazism happen?*

How could Nazism happen? This is an important question: professors and teachers the world over use the Nazis as a prime example of evil and rightly so. The Nazis were enormously destructive, killing 20 million people during their twelve-year reign. They were not the *most* destructive regime of the twentieth century: Josef Stalin and the other Communist dictators of the Soviet Union killed sixty-two million people. Mao Zedong and the Communists in China killed thirty-five million. The Nazis killed over twenty million and no doubt would have killed millions more had they not been defeated.<sup>1</sup>



**Victims of the Nazis at  
Auschwitz**

So it is important to learn the lesson and to get it right.

After coming to power by democratic and constitu-

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<sup>1</sup>See Courtois 1999, pp. x, 4: contributors to that volume variously estimate the Communist death toll to be from 85 million to 100 million. See also Rummel 1997, Section II. Rummel at <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/> has updated numbers. For example, new data on deliberately caused famines in the People's Republic of China under Mao led Rummel to revise the death toll for communist China upwards to 76,702,000.

tional means in 1933, the Nazis quickly turned Germany into a dictatorship. For six years they devoted their energies to preparing for war, which began in 1939. During the war in which every human and economic resource was needed for military purposes, the Nazis devoted huge amounts of resources in an attempt to exterminate Jews, gypsies, Slavs, and others.

Domestic dictatorship, international war, the Holocaust. All are terrible. But what exactly *is* the lesson of history here? How could a civilized European nation plunge itself and the world into such a horror?

#### ***4. Five weak explanations for National Socialism***

a) A common explanation is that the Germans lost World War I. They were bitter over the loss and the harsh punitive measures the victors imposed in the Versailles Treaty. There is a grain of truth here, but this is a very weak explanation. One reason why it is weak is that many countries lose bitter wars, but they do not respond by electing Adolf Hitlers to power. Another reason is that Germany's losing the war does not explain Italy. In the 1920s Italy turned to Benito Mussolini and his fascist version of National Socialism. But Italy was on the winning side of World War I. So if one of the winners of World War I became fascist, and one of the losers also became fascist, then whether one lost or won the war is not the significant factor here.

b) Another explanation holds that Germany's economic troubles of the 1920s were the cause of National Socialism. Here again there is a grain of truth, but again this is a weak explanation. Many countries suffer economic malaise, but they do not turn to National Socialism for the solution. There is also the phenomenon of Nazi and neo-Nazi movements throughout the twentieth century in relatively prosperous countries. Very few countries suffering economic difficulties go

Nazi, and there are plenty of Nazi-sympathizers in prosperous nations.

c) Another weak explanation suggests that there is something innately wrong with Germans, that history shows that they are inherently militaristic, bloodthirsty, and genocidal—and the Nazis merely tapped into and exaggerated innate German tendencies. This kind of explanation is an insult of course to the many Germans who were appalled by National Socialism, who opposed it and fought it vigorously. And it does not explain how National Socialism has appealed to people of many races and ethnicities. In 2005, *Mein Kampf* was a bestseller in the country of Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Do we want to suggest that the Turks are inherently bloodthirsty and genocidal? I do not think so.

d) Another weak explanation holds that Nazism is explained by the personal neuroses and psychoses of the Nazi leadership. The argument here is that Hitler was bitterly disappointed by being rejected for art school—or that he was a repressed homosexual—or that his right-hand man, Josef Goebbels was compensating for his below-average height and having a club foot. Again, this is a poor explanation. How many art-school rejects become Nazis? How many repressed homosexuals or handicapped men become Nazis? This explanation also ignores the large number of powerful Nazis who were neither homosexual nor short nor particularly interested in art.

e) Any of the above explanations can work together with a suggestion that the Nazis were a product of modern communications technologies—that as masters of rhetoric and propaganda the Nazis succeeded in fooling millions of Germans about their agenda and manipulated their way into power.

I have some sympathy for this way of thinking, for it is the kind of explanation that comes naturally to those of us raised in liberal democracies. When I first started learning

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<sup>2</sup> “*Mein Kampf* a Bestseller in Turkey,” April 20, 2005. <http://www.windsofchange.net/archives/006690.php>. Viewed August 24, 2009.

about the Nazis, I thought they must have been insane. It is hard to imagine that such horror could be anything but the products of deranged minds manipulating the masses. But here I want to suggest two reasons why I think it is not a good idea to dismiss the Nazis merely as manipulators.

The first is that the Nazis achieved power through democratic and constitutional methods. When the party was formed in 1920, it was a small, fringe party. But it spoke to the beliefs and aspirations of millions of Germans. And in the 1920s, the Germans were, arguably, the most educated nation in the world with the highest levels of literacy, numbers of years of schooling, newspaper readership, political awareness, and so on. It was in an *educated* nation that the Nazis achieved increasing success in elections through the 1920s, spreading their message far and wide, until they made their major breakthroughs in the early 1930s. Millions of voters in a democracy may be wrong, but it is unlikely that they were all deluded. A better explanation is that they knew what they were voting for and thought it the best course of action. And that is what I will be arguing.

But millions of people do not decide spontaneously to vote for this party or that. A mass political movement requires that much cultural groundwork be done over the course of many years. And this is where intellectuals do their work. A culture's intellectuals develop and articulate a culture's ideals, its goals, its aspirations. In books, speeches, sermons, and radio broadcasts, intellectuals are a culture's opinion-shapers. It is intellectuals who write the opinion pieces in the mass newspapers, who are the professors at the universities, the universities where teachers and preachers are trained, where politicians and lawyers and scientists and physicians get their education.

This leads us to the other reason why it is a weak explanation to say the Nazis were simply deranged and lucked or manipulated their way into political power. Consider the fol-

lowing list of intellectuals who supported the Nazis long before they came to power. These intellectuals represent a “Who’s Who” list of powerful minds and cultural leaders:

Philipp Lenard won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1905.

Gerhart Hauptmann won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912. Hauptmann once met Hitler and described their brief handshake as “the greatest moment of my life.”

Johannes Stark won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1919.

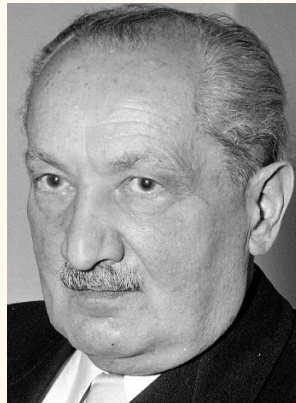
That is three Nobel Prize winners.

Then there is Dr. Oswald Spengler, author of the historical bestseller *The Decline of the West* (1918). Spengler’s books sold in the millions, and he was perhaps the most famous intellectual in Germany in the 1920s.

Then there is Moeller van den Bruck, another famous public intellectual of the 1920s. His book *The Third Reich* (1923) provided a theoretical rationale for National Socialism and was, like Spengler’s books, a consistent best-seller throughout the 1920s.

Then there is Dr. Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), probably the sharpest legal and political mind of his generation. Schmitt’s books are still widely read and discussed by political theoreticians of all stripes and are recognized as twentieth century classics.

And to round out this initial list, there is philosopher Martin Heidegger. Already in the 1920s Heidegger was being hailed as the brightest philosopher of his generation, which is especially significant in a philosophical nation such as Germany. That assessment has held over



**Martin Heidegger**

the course of the twentieth century. Ask professional philosophers of today to name the five most significant philosophers of the twentieth century and, whether they love him or loathe him, most will include Heidegger on the list.

These seven men are among the most intelligent and powerful minds in Germany in the decade before the Nazis came to power. They are leading figures in German intellectual culture, spanning the arts, science, history, law, politics, and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> All of them, to one degree or another, supported National Socialism. Was Hitler smart enough to fool all of these highly intelligent men? Or is it more likely that they knew what they believed and supported National Socialism because they thought it was true?<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Explaining Nazism philosophically

I want to suggest a better explanation: The primary cause of

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<sup>3</sup>Weinreich 1999 (pp. 13-16) gives a wide-ranging list of professors and intellectuals who supported Hitler prior to 1933. See also Rohkrämer 2005 for a clear discussion of the role of Heidegger and the many other philosophers who gave enthusiastic support to the Nazis. Earl Shorris (2007) describes Germany of the time as “a society richer in the knowledge of the humanities than perhaps any other in modern times. Among those people who rose to the top of the Nazi government were students of humanities, former scholars. Joseph Goebbels had studied history and literature at the University of Heidelberg. Reinhard (Hangman) Heydrich was the child of a pianist and an opera singer who founded a conservatory. Ernst Kaltenbrunner studied law at the University of Prague. More than a third of the members of the Vienna Philharmonic belonged to the Nazi Party. Albert Speer, who ran the business side of the Nazi war machine, was an architect.” Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), the great logician and philosopher of mathematics, can be added to this list. Frege was an anti-Semite and later in life named Adolf Hitler as one of his heroes; see Reuben Hersh, *What Is Mathematics, Really?* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 241.

<sup>4</sup>Albert Speer described “the event that led me to [Hitler],” which was a speech Hitler gave to the College of Engineering in Berlin. Speer expected the talk to be “a bombastic harangue” but it turned out to be a “reasoned lecture” (quoted in Orlow 1969, p. 199).

Nazism lies in *philosophy*. Not economics, not psychology, and not even politics.

National Socialism was first a philosophy of life believed and advocated by highly intelligent men and women. Professors, public intellectuals, Nobel Prize-winners—all powerful minds working at the cutting edges of their disciplines. It was they who shaped the intellectual culture of Germany in the 1920s and who convinced millions of Germans that National Socialism was the best hope for Germany’s future.

That is not to say that there were no other contributing factors. The legacy of World War I, persistent economic troubles, modern communication technologies, and the personal psychologies of the Nazi leadership did play a role. But the *most* significant factor was the power of a set of abstract, philosophical ideas. National Socialism was a philosophy-intensive movement.

I will up the ante further.

I also want to suggest that the Nazi intellectuals and their followers thought of themselves as *idealists* and as *crusaders for a noble cause*. This may be even harder to accept. The National Socialists in the 1920s were passionate men and women who thought that the world was in a crisis and that a moral revolution was called for. They believed their ideas to be true, beautiful, noble, and the only hope for the world.<sup>5</sup> Yes, Nazi ideology contained major elements of harshness, even brutality—but what if an important truth about the world is that it is harsh and brutal?



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<sup>5</sup> As did many foreign observers, e.g., the Anglican clergymen who expressed “boundless admiration for the moral and ethical side of the National Social programme, its clear-cut stand for religion and Christianity, and its ethical principles, such as its fight against cruelty to animals, vivisections, sexual offenses, etc.” (quoted in Manchester 1989, p. 82).

It may be hard to believe that the Nazis thought of themselves as noble idealists, especially with our after-the-fact knowledge of the horrible destructiveness of Nazism. It may be especially hard for those of us raised in Western liberal democracies to believe it—since from the cradle we’ve been raised to believe that freedom, equality, and peace are almost self-evidently good.

But what if they are not self-evidently good? Let me play the Devil’s advocate.

How long have human beings existed? Most anthropologists say *homo sapiens* has existed for well over 100,000 years, perhaps as long as 200,000 years. For how much of that time have freedom, equality, and peace been the norm? Democratic experiments were tried in ancient Greece for a few centuries. A little later, republican experiments were tried in ancient Rome—again for a few centuries. But Greece and Rome both failed: the Greeks were conquered by the Romans, and the Romans descended into authoritarian decadence before themselves being conquered. And there have been a few smaller and relatively brief republican city states—Renaissance Venice, Florence, and in the Baltic. That is a few short-lived experiments in over 100,000 years—not very impressive.

So now we imagine ourselves in Europe in the earliest decades of the twentieth century: democratic republicanism has been resurrected and is being tried again, for example in the United States of America. How successful have the modern experiments been? Come the 1920s, the United States is only about 150 years old. That means that it has survived for less time than the Greek democracies or the Roman republic. The U.S. lasted only 90 years before it plunged into a brutal Civil War, the reverberations of which are still being felt early in the twentieth century. In the 1920s the U.S. is itself experiencing economic uncertainty and is shortly to plunge into its Great Depression. Even in the United States, many intellectu-



als are suggesting that capitalism and liberalism are finished and that some form of centralized authority led by a strong man is the future. So in the 1920s, just how strong is the case for liberty, democracy, republicanism, and capitalism?<sup>6</sup>

What if a culture's brightest thinkers believe that democracy is a historical blip? What if they come to believe that the lesson of history is that what people need is structure and strong leadership? What if they believe that history shows that some cultures are obviously superior—superior in their arts, their science and technology, and their religion? What if they believe that history teaches that we live in a harsh world of conflict and that in such a world strength and assertiveness against one's enemies are essential to survive? Or even more strongly than that—that peace makes people soft and that it is conflict and war that brings out the best in people, making them tough, vigorous, and willing to fight for their ideals and if necessary *die* for them?<sup>7</sup>

I am suggesting that a set of ideals was primarily responsible for the rise of Nazism.<sup>8</sup> I think those ideals are extraordinarily false and terribly destructive—but that is not how millions of intelligent, educated, even in many cases well-meaning Germans saw them.

But why do I call them a set of ideals? Why not just say the Nazis had some ideas—of course they had some ideas with which to bewitch the masses—but basically they just wanted power and were effective at using those ideas to get power?

Well, of course the Nazis wanted power. What politician doesn't want power? But if you are only out for power,

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<sup>6</sup> “Few of the supporters of Weimar understood that for many Germans the fundamental political issue in 1930 was the pluralistic system of politics itself, not substantive issues within the system” (Orlow 1969, p. 186).

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Immanuel Kant: “a prolonged peace favours the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice, and effeminacy, and tends to degrade the character of the nation.” (1951 [1790], p. 28). See Appendix 4 for quotations on German militarism.

<sup>8</sup> Contra, e.g., Helmut Kuhn (1963, p. 310), who asserts that the Nazis *perverted* German philosophy.

think about how you go about getting it in a democracy. The best way is to identify the established political parties, join one of the powerful ones, and work your way up the ranks to the top.

Here is an analogy: In the United States, the two major parties are the Democratic and Republican parties. So if you are young and ambitious and you want a realistic chance at becoming a Senator or even President in your lifetime, you join one of those two parties. What you do *not* do is join a fringe party. What you do *not* do is start your own party—say, the Midwestern Farmer’s Union Party, out in the middle of nowhere. The only reason you would start the Midwestern Farmer’s Union Party is that you are a true believer in the ideals of Midwestern Farming and think you cannot achieve your ideals by joining the established parties.

But that describes the Nazis exactly. They did *not* join the Social Democrats or any of the established political parties. They set up their own fringe party, initially based in the south of Germany and away from the center of power in Berlin. They were true believers in a cause. They did not want power if it meant compromising their ideals by joining with an established party. They wanted power—but power to achieve what they took to be high ideals.

So what was this obscure political party formed in Munich in 1920, and what did it stand for?