



Part 4. The Nazis in Power

13. Political controls

As the Nazis had promised, they moved quickly to transform Germany from a constitutional democracy into an authoritarian dictatorship. An early step they took was to eliminate rival political parties. Some were banned outright; the rest were pressured to dissolve themselves; and in July of 1933, the Nazi government banned the formation of new political parties.



Hitler, *der Führer*

In 1934, the Nazis further consolidated their power and augmented Hitler's. Hitler had almost always had a strong grip on the internal politics of the Nazi party, but it had not been absolute. 1934 brought an internal purge and an elimination of Hitler's rivals. The triggering event was Ernst Röhm's attempted rebellion. Röhm had been head of the SA, the *Sturmabteilung* or Storm Division, the paramilitary wing of the party. Röhm had used his position to form a rival power bloc within the party and planned a rebellion. Hitler was warned of the rebellion ahead of time and was able to suppress it. In the purge that followed, forty-three conspirators and rivals were executed. Along with the purge, there were many unofficial as-

sassinations as old scores were settled. The result of the blood-letting was a Nazi party even more strongly united around Adolf Hitler.

In August of the same year, President Hindenburg died. Paul von Hindenburg had been the grand old man of German politics, holding the office of the presidency, which was along with the chancellorship one of the two highest political offices in the land. Upon Hindenburg's death, Hitler merged the positions of president and chancellor, thus augmenting his power further. In a nation-wide plebiscite to confirm the merging of the two positions, almost 90% of Germans voted in favor of granting Hitler greater powers.

The Nazis now controlled all the major political offices, they had cleaned house internally, and they had eliminated all rival parties. In firm control, they next set about re-shaping all of German society.

14. Education

Political tools such as physical force and authoritarian laws are necessary tools for a dictatorship, but long-term control of a people also requires control of their minds. The Nazis recognized this and made re-shaping Germany's educational system a priority. They already had a good head-start.

When the National Socialists came to power in 1933, about 2.5 million Germans were members of the Nazi Party. Seven percent of the Party's members were from the upper class, seven percent were peasants, thirty-five percent were industrial workers, and fifty-one percent were from the professional and middle class. Surprisingly, in the latter group, the professional and middle class, the largest occupational group represented was elementary school teachers. Hitler and the Nazis thus already had a core group of committed followers in a position to help them shape the minds of the next generation.

The general purpose of education

The Nazis had a particular kind of youth in mind. As early as 1925, Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf*: “the folkish state must not adjust its entire educational work primarily to the inoculation of mere knowledge, but to the breeding of absolutely healthy bodies. The training of mental abilities is only secondary.”²⁸

Come 1933 and power, Hitler repeatedly made it even clearer what kind of healthy bodies he wanted the educational system to produce:

My program for educating youth is hard. Weakness must be hammered away. In my castles of the Teutonic Order a youth will grow up before which the world will tremble. I want a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once again flash from its eyes ... That is how I will eradicate thousands of years of human domestication ... That is how I will create the New Order.

Intellectual training was less emphasized than physical training, but it was not omitted. Students were trained in Nazi ideology, studied German history from a National Socialist perspective, learned political activism, and trained themselves to develop a selfless, obedient, duty-oriented moral character. The curriculum was revised, textbooks re-written, and teachers trained as servants of the cause. Early in the Nazi reign, teachers were declared to be civil servants and required to join the National Socialist Teachers League, swearing an oath of absolute fidelity to Adolf Hitler.

²⁸ Hitler 1925, p. 408.

The Hitler Youth

In addition to transforming the formal school system, the Nazis put great emphasis on the Hitler Youth organization. The Nazi Party's youth organization had been formed in 1922, early in the party's history, and acquired its Hitler Youth name in 1926. The purpose of the Hitler Youth was to train a cadre of devoted young followers outside the formal school system. Once the Nazis came to power, the formal German school system and the Hitler Youth became complementary training and indoctrination programs.



A Youth and the Führer

Boys could enter the program when they were age six, though official training began at age ten. All members of the Hitler Youth swore this oath: “In the presence of this blood-banner, which represents our Führer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am ready and willing to give up my life for him, so help me God.”²⁹

Full membership and systematic training began at age fourteen and included the ability to take a physical beating without whining. Brutal fighting sessions among the boys were common and encouraged. As Hitler had put it in *Mein Kampf*, “But above all, the young, healthy body must also learn to suffer blows.”³⁰ If a boy was unable to withstand the pain or pressure, he was embarrassed in front of his peers. Those who succeeded, though, received accolades, a sense of belonging to a great cause, and useful symbols of their status, such as a special dagger.

²⁹ Quoted in Shirer 1962, p. 253.

³⁰ Hitler 1925, p. 410.

Parallel programs existed for girls. The League of Young Girls was established for girls ten to fourteen years of age. The fourteen-to-eighteen-year-old girls' group of the Hitler Youth was the Bund Deutscher Mädel, or League of German Girls. From seventeen to twenty-one years of age, young Aryan women were members of Faith and Beauty. Instruction focused on home, family, and the duty to bear children. The girls' training was similar to the boys', including wearing military-style uniforms, engaging in soldier-like activities, and learning Nazi ideology and activism.

Although the youth were encouraged to question their parents and their non-Nazi teachers, *within* the Hitler Youth absolute obedience was demanded. Despite this, membership in the Hitler Youth was *appealing* to many young Germans. Summer camps and parades were regular activities for the Hitler Youth. There was also the feeling of camaraderie and the sense of developing a sense of self-discipline, loyalty, and honor. Membership came to be considered to be a badge of honor—and, as the Nazi Party came closer to achieving power, membership even became a status symbol.

In 1932, the year before the Nazis came to power, the Hitler Youth had 107,956 members—or five percent of the German youth population. Within a year, membership had swollen to well over two million members.

In 1936, membership in the Hitler Youth became mandatory. All other youth groups had ceased to exist, been absorbed into the Hitler Youth, or abolished. And by 1939, the year that World War II was to begin, membership in the Hitler Youth reached almost eight million members.

The universities

The Nazis had also achieved great success with older students, those of university age.

Well before Hitler came to power, Nazi student groups

existed at universities all over Germany. Before 1933, it was common for students to come to classes wearing brown shirts and swastika armbands, and in many cases it was the most intelligent and idealistic university students who were the most activist and outspoken supporters of National Socialism.

The students also had many allies among their professors.

When the National Socialists took power, they prohibited all Jews from holding academic positions—this resulted in the firing of hundreds of tenured Jewish professors, including several Nobel Laureates. To their credit, many other professors resigned in protest or emigrated. But such professors were in the small minority.³¹

A large majority of university professors remained on the job, either silently accepting the new regime or even actively supporting it. In 1933, for example, 960 professors, including prominent figures such as philosopher Martin Heidegger, made a public proclamation of their support for Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist regime.³²

³¹ “But in numbers the *émigrés* were not to be compared with the leading figures in every field of intellectual endeavour who hailed the advent of National Socialism and pledged support to its Führer with every evidence of enthusiasm” (Craig 1978, p. 639).

³² Shirer 1962, p. 251. Rohkrämer notes the following: “Association with National Socialism was also widespread among philosophers. While twenty philosophy professors were forced out of their positions, about thirty joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and almost half became party members by 1940” (Rohkrämer 2005, p. 171). On Heidegger in particular, given his high profile in the landscape of 20th-century philosophy, “‘Martin Heidegger? A Nazi, of course a Nazi!’ On a purely factual level, this exclamation by Jürgen Habermas is fully correct. Contrary to what Heidegger and Heideggerians have long maintained, historical research has demonstrated beyond doubt Heidegger’s early enthusiasm for National Socialism. Heidegger sympathized with the Nazis before 1933, he actively maneuvered to become rector, he publicly joined the Nazi Party on May Day, and the ceremony around his Rectoral Address included Nazi flags and the singing of the ‘Horst Wessel Song.’ While Jews and political opponents were removed from the university (like his teacher Edmund Husserl) or even forced to flee the country (like his intimate friend Hannah Arendt), Heidegger showed his enthusiastic support for the destruction of the Weimar Republic and for the new regime. He praised the Führer principle for the university sector, while striving to attain

15. Censorship

What the Nazis established for the schools and universities they attempted to establish for German society at large, by means of sweeping government regulations on media and outright censorship. The world of schools and education was only an important microcosm of the Nazis' plans for all of German society.

Joseph Goebbels, Germany's new propaganda chief, put it this way: Any book or work of art "which acts subversively on our future or strikes at the root of German thought, the German home and the driving forces of our people" should be destroyed.

The great symbolic statement of what was to come occurred early in the Nazi regime—the May 10, 1933 book burnings, just a few months after the Nazis assumed power.

In the Unter den Linden, an open square across from the University of Berlin, roughly



20,000 books were burned in a huge bonfire. Goebbels spoke at the event to 40,000 cheering spectators. Some of the authors whose books were destroyed were Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, Jack London, Helen Keller, H. G. Wells, Sigmund Freud, Émile Zola, and Marcel Proust.

An important and sometimes overlooked fact about the book burnings is that they were not instigated by the Nazi

such a position for himself. In speeches and newspaper articles he identified himself with Hitler's rule, going so far as to state in autumn 1933 that 'the Führer himself and alone is and will be Germany's only reality and its law.' He not only approved in principle of the Nazi cleansing, but also tried to use the new regime to destroy the academic careers of colleagues, for example by initiating a Gestapo investigation" (Rohkrämer 2005, p. 172-173).

government. Nor were they instigated by non-intellectual thugs. The book burnings were instigated by university students. The Nazi Party's *student* organization conceived and carried out book burnings all across the country—book bonfires burned brightly that night in every German university city. The professors had taught their students well.

Goebbels's official title was Minister of the Reich Chamber of Culture. The Reich Chamber of Culture controlled seven cultural spheres: fine arts, music, theater, literature, the press, radio, and films. This gave him power over all the major media in Germany and enabled him to use his formidable talent for propaganda effectively. He quickly established regulations that anyone working in any of those fields had to become a member of the Nazi party and join the respective chamber. The purpose of the regulations was, as Goebbels put it:

In order to pursue a policy of German culture, it is necessary to gather together the creative artists in all spheres into a unified organization under the leadership of the Reich. The Reich must not only determine the lines of progress, mental and spiritual, but also lead and organize the professions.³³

In the realm of art, Hitler and Goebbels attempted to cleanse Germany of modern art and to replace it with “Germanic” art. Classical plays, music, and operas, as well as Hollywood B-movies were still allowed, but galleries exhibiting modern art were shut down.

Newspapers received close supervision. The Reich Press Law of 1933 prohibited editors of newspapers from marrying Jews, and required that editors meet daily with the Propaganda Ministry to ensure that no misleading stories were published. Essentially, this meant that the government told the

³³Quoted in Shirer 1962, p. 241.

newspapers what they could and could not print.

Likewise, radio was taken over in 1933 by another branch of the Propaganda Ministry, the Chamber of Radio.

The Chamber of Films took over the content of the film industry, though it left the production of films up to private firms.

In all areas of arts and culture, uncooperative editors, writers, and performers were ousted, or sent to prison or concentration camps, or sometimes killed. Those editors, writers, and performers who remained knew how they were to behave. German culture thus became an obedient tool of Nazi politics.

16. Eugenics

Nazi education and censorship attempted to control people's *minds*. The Nazis also controlled the *bodies* of their citizens as much as possible. Milder controls involved new public-health measures such as an aggressive campaign against smoking: the Nazis banned smoking in certain public places, ran an anti-smoking propaganda campaign, and placed restrictions on how tobacco could be advertised.

Stronger controls extended to the sex and reproductive lives of the citizens, and this takes us into darker territory—the Nazis' embrace of eugenics.

Eugenics was not unique to the Nazi regime or to Germany. As early as 1895, eugenics researcher Adolf Jost had published a book called *The Right to Death*, which called for state control over human reproduction, and many intellectuals in many countries embraced eugenics. In nature, the argument ran, only the strongest males get to mate with the females; the weaker males get to mate less frequently or not at all; this natural selection of the stronger and de-selection of the weaker serves to keep the species healthy and strengthen it.

The same principle holds for farming. Just as a farmer is concerned to improve the quality of his herd, so the state should be concerned to improved the quality of its citizenry. And just as a farmer will not let any bull mate with any cow, so the state should not let just any male have sex with any female; the farmer will select his strongest and healthiest bulls and have them mate only with his strongest, healthiest cows. Those bulls and cows not up to standard are culled from the herd and not allowed to reproduce at all.

As Rudolph Hess, deputy Führer of the Reich, would say a little later: “National Socialism is nothing but applied biology.”³⁴

Before the Nazis came to power, German intellectuals were among the world leaders in eugenics research. In 1916, Dr. Ernst Rudin, the director of the Genealogical-Demographic Department of the German Institute for Psychiatric Research, established a field of psychiatric hereditary biology based on eugenics theory. Rudin became the president of the International Federation of Eugenic Organizations, the world leader of the eugenics movement. In 1920, psychiatry Professor Alfred Hoche and distinguished jurist Karl Binding wrote *The Permission to Destroy Life Unworthy of Life*. Their book called for the destruction of “worthless” humans for the sake of protecting worthy humans. So-called worthless individuals included the mentally and physically disabled.

Another influential book, *The Principles of Human Heredity and Racial Hygiene*, written by Drs. Eugen Fischer, Lenz, and Bauer, hailed the superiority of the German race and

³⁴ Richard Walther Darré, Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture from 1933 to 1942, had a crucial role intellectually and administratively in determining Nazi policy: “Just as in the animal world, this committed Social Darwinist proposed a system of racial selection in order to ‘breed’ a new rural nobility and to achieve the ‘breeding goal of the German people.’ Darré suggested marriage restrictions for Jews and ‘less valuable’ non-Jews, strict state control of all marriages and fertility, and sterilization of those members of the community who were considered to be a threat to the ‘racial purity’ of the German people. The Nazis used all of these measures in the subsequent years ...” (Gerhard 2005, p. 131-132).

called for the use of concentration camps for non-Germans and mixed races. Fischer already had experience with this—having planned and executed the forced sterilization of South Africans who were the offspring of German military men and women indigenous to South Africa.

By the time the Nazis came to power, eugenics was an established part of German intellectual life. One striking indication of this is that German universities had twenty-three official Professors of Racial Hygiene.

National Socialism held that the state should take over where natural selection left off. In line with their collectivism and anti-individualism, the Nazis held that medicine and reproduction should serve the interests of the state rather than the individual. Like the farmer, the Nazis wanted high quality Aryan children for the state's purposes, so they took charge of the mating process of Germany's citizens. The Reich could not allow individuals to rut with just anyone. Taking away individual choice in reproduction would improve the stock and cleanse the nation of bad genetic elements.

The Nazis also argued that they were thus more strongly socialist than their arch-rivals, the Communists. While the Communists focused almost totally on issues of money, capitalism, and economics, the Nazis argued for a more comprehensive socialism: *Every* aspect of human life, including family and reproduction, was to be socialized.

The Nazi eugenics program had two faces: positive and negative.³⁵ The positive face aimed at increasing the number of pure Aryan births; the negative face aimed at eliminating inferior genetic influences in Germany. In order to implement both sides of the program, the Nazis first needed to define racial purity. They decided that there were three racial categories: *Full Jew*, having three or more Jewish grandparents; two degrees of *Mischlinge*, or mixed types, having either one or two Jewish grandparents; and *Full Aryan*, having no Jewish grand-

³⁵Using “positive” and “negative” here descriptively, not normatively.

parents. The pure Aryan would be the tall, slender yet strong, blond human being.

This led to some serious parody, given that not many of the Nazi leadership met those criteria. Neither Goebbels nor Göring nor Hitler himself obviously met them.

All humor aside, the Nazis set to achieving the positive face of their program in several ways. They provided incentives to encourage racially pure marriages. Incentives included loans to help married couples get established, subsidies for each child produced and official awards and medals for “hero” mothers of four or more children. Childless couples were vilified. The Nazi government also lowered the age of marriage to sixteen, encouraged the birth of illegitimate Aryan children, outlawed abortion for Aryans, outlawed marriage for sterile women, strictly regulated birth control, and initially forbade mothers from working outside of the home.

Heinrich Himmler was in charge of this area of Nazi policy. Himmler was also the Chief of the SS and the Gestapo, and so was one of the top two or three most powerful Nazis in the regime. Under Himmler’s direction, the Nazis also created the *Lebensborn*, or “Fount of Life,” program in 1935. This project developed group homes for young, unmarried Aryan women impregnated by Aryan men. Once the racial purity of the parents had been established, the young women stayed in the homes and were given free food and medical care. In return, the women signed over all rights to their fetuses, who, upon birth, would be raised by select Nazi families. Between 12,000 and 16,000 infants were born in *Lebensborn* homes in Germany and Nazi-occupied territories. A few years



Heinrich Himmler

later, in order to speed up the development of a pure Aryan race, the Nazis began to kidnap Aryan children from occupied territories. An estimated 250,000 children six years of age and younger were taken back to Germany and assimilated into Nazi homes.

The negative face of the Nazi's eugenics program required the extermination of non-Aryans. In 1935, the Nazis implemented the Nuremberg Laws for the Protection of Hereditary Health. These laws included forcible sterilization of individuals with mental and hereditary physical defects. During the 1930s, the Nazis sterilized approximately 400,000 people. Certification of Aryan descent became a requirement for marriage; interracial marriages were prohibited; and the remaining rights of Jews were revoked.

The Nazis then introduced extermination. In May of 1935, the regime euthanized twelve patients in a mental hospital in Hadamar, Germany. The Nazi Interior Ministry required that all children under three years of age with congenital malformations and mental deficiencies be registered with the state. Those deemed unfit were taken away from their homes for "special treatment." "Special treatment" meant either being injected with a lethal dose of medicine or simply starved to death. The Nazis were still somewhat cautious about public scrutiny, so part of their strategy was slowly to get the nation accustomed to human extermination before they turned their full attention to the Jews.

The public justification for these deaths was not only the biological health of the state. The Nazis also gave a collectivist economic justification. If the health of the citizenry is the State's responsibility, then the State must allocate its economic resources responsibly. If money and resources are used to care for the weak, then the stronger humans are forced to sacrifice. But the stronger human beings are the State's best assets; it is they who are the realization and the future of the *Volk*. The

State accordingly has a moral obligation not to waste economic resources on the weak; and when the weak are destroyed as nature intended, the strong will be enhanced and the species advanced.

This brings us to Nazi economic policy.

17. *Economic controls*

Through education and censorship, the Nazis attempted to socialize the German *mind*. Through public health measures and eugenics, they attempted to socialize the German *body*. A natural extension of both policies was to socialize German economic production.

As would be expected by the socialist part of National Socialism, the guiding principle of Nazi economics was that all property belongs to the people, the *Volk*, and was to be used only for the good of the people. Just as one's body is no longer one's private possession but rather belongs to the whole community, economic property was no longer anyone's private possession but to be used by State permission and only for the good of the people.

Upon coming to power, the Nazi government nationalized Jewish property and in 1934 passed a law allowing the expropriation of property owned by communists.

Another early policy given high priority by the Nazi government was the organizing of all German businesses into cartels. The argument was that—in contrast to the disorderliness and egoism of free market capitalism—centralization and state control would increase efficiency and a sense of German unity. In July of 1933, membership in a cartel became compulsory for businesses, and by early 1934 the cartel structure was re-organized and placed firmly under the direction of the German government.

By 1937, small businesses with capital under \$40,000 were dissolved by the State; labor unions had been dissolved, as were the rights to strike and collective bargaining. Unemployment was dealt with by public works programs of road-building and so on.

All property and labor power was now either owned by the State or, if still owned by private parties, subject to almost-total control. Businesses were told by the State what to produce and in what quantities. Prices and wages were set by the State.

And if anyone complained, a commonly used Nazi slogan put them on the defensive:³⁶ “The common interest before self interest.” The argument was quite clear: You are not a private individual seeking profit or higher wages in a capitalist economy. You and your property belong in trust to the German people, and you have a duty to serve the public interest, even if it involves a personal sacrifice.

There is an important sub-point worth dwelling upon, for there is a lively debate about just how committed to socialism the Nazis were. After all, they did not outright nationalize all businesses as pure socialism would require; rather they allowed several important businesses to remain in private hands.

A 1935 official statement put the National Socialist policy this way:

“The power economy will not be run by the state, but by (private) entrepreneurs acting under their own free and unrestricted responsibility. ... The state limits itself to the function of control, which is, of course, all-inclusive. It further reserves the right of intervention ... in order to enforce the supremacy of considerations of public interest.”³⁷

³⁶“Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz!” (quoted in Meinecke 1950, p. 51); cf. the 1920 Nazi Program.

³⁷Quoted in Pipes 1999, p. 221.

The issue about how socialist the Nazis were is, in part, a judgment call about long-term principles and short-term pragmatism.

Here is a related example: Clearly the Nazis were strongly committed to racism. But we could point out that they formed alliances with the Italians and the Japanese, neither of whom are Aryans racially. Yet obviously it would be a mistake to infer from these alliances that the Nazis were not really racist. They *were* racist, but as a matter of short-term strategy and political compromise they were willing to form alliances with those whom they would otherwise despise. Since the Italians and Japanese were powers, it made strategic sense to overlook the racial issue in the short run.³⁸

The same holds for the economic socialism: allowing some major businesses to remain officially in private hands made pragmatic economic sense in the short run. The Nazis knew they needed productive businesses to fuel the economy and their developing war machine, so it would have been foolish to interfere too much with smoothly-running enterprises. Additionally, the Nazis knew they could count on the German nationalism of many business owners to go along with what the Nazi government asked of them. And if push came to shove, the Nazis could and did pass precise regulations to direct production as they saw fit.³⁹

³⁸ Hitler's pragmatism in foreign policy: "In political life there is no such thing as principles of foreign policy. The programmatic principles of my party are its doctrine on the racial problem and its fight against pacifism and internationalism. But foreign policy is merely a means to an end. In questions of foreign policy I shall never admit that I am tied by anything" (quoted in Heiden, p. xx).

³⁹ "Buried under mountains of red tape, directed by the State as to what they could produce, how much, and at what price, burdened by increasing taxation and milked by steep and never ending 'special contributions' to the party, the businessmen, who had welcomed Hitler's regime so enthusiastically because they expected it to destroy organized labor and allow an entrepreneur to practice untrammelled free enterprise, became greatly disillusioned.

So while the Nazi government imposed many regulations upon German businesses, the Nazis counted on and received much voluntary commitment and enthusiasm. Most business owners, managers, and workers believed in the cause and devoted their economic energies to it. They saw the personal sacrifices demanded of them as their duty, and they obediently and willingly bore the sacrifices for the good of the cause.

As a result, from 1932 to 1936 Germany underwent an economic boom, lifting itself out of the stagnation of the 1920s and early 1930s. Unemployment fell from six million to one million, national production rose 102% and national income doubled.⁴⁰

By 1936, the same year the Germans hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin, the German economy was again a powerhouse. A national vote was held in March to gauge popular support for Hitler's regime. "Adolf Hitler" was the only name on the ballot, and voters had a choice to vote for Hitler or not. As dubious as the vote was, the numbers do tell us something: 98.6% of the voting population voted, and of those 98.7% voted for Hitler. That means that over 44 million adult Germans expressed approval and only about half a million did not.

18. Militarization

The most important part of the new Germany was the military. On a historically unprecedented scale, the German economy became a war economy.

One of them was Fritz Thyssen, one of the earliest and biggest contributors to the party. Fleeing Germany at the outbreak of the war, he recognized that the 'Nazi regime has ruined German industry.' And to all he met abroad he proclaimed, 'What a fool [*Dummkopf*] I was!'" (Shirer 1962, p. 261).

⁴⁰ Shirer 1962, p. 258-259.

Conscription had been re-introduced in 1935, and in 1936 Hermann Göring took over as Germany's economic minister. Under Göring's direction, Germany began to develop a total war economy in earnest. Up until this time, the re-militarization of Germany had been kept semi-secret and had been largely paid for by funds confiscated from enemies of the state and blocked foreign bank accounts.



Hermann Göring

Under Göring's leadership, the re-militarization came out into the open. Göring started a Four Year Plan to make Germany self-sufficient so that it would be able to survive blockades during a war: he reduced imports to a minimum, put price and wage controls in place, built factories to produce rubber, textiles, fuel, and steel—all commodities essential to a war machine—and taxes were increased greatly upon private businesses to fund the war.

Also as promised as long ago as 1920 in the Nazi Party's founding political program, the Nazis initiated a strategy of geographical expansion. In 1936, Germany re-occupied the Rhineland. Also in 1936, Hitler concluded an alliance with Mussolini and Italy and sent troops to Spain to support General Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime. There was no military response from France, England, or the other Allied powers.

In 1938, the Germans took over Austria; no shooting or violence was necessary. After the takeover, a plebiscite was held in which one could vote yes or no for Hitler: In Austria, 99.75% voted for Hitler; in Germany, 99.08% voted for Hitler. Hitler was angry that he received a slightly lower level of support from the Germans than he did from the Austrians. Again there was no military response from the Allies. Instead

they believed Hitler was satisfied. They still believed him when he signed the Munich Agreement promising no more expansion beyond the Sudetenland, then a key part of Czechoslovakia. As a result of that agreement, Hitler was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year for 1938.

Early in 1939, the Germans took over all of Czechoslovakia. Again there was no military response from the Allies.

But on September 1, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland, and this time the western Allies responded.

World War II had officially begun, and the twentieth century began its second great collision of incompatible philosophies of life—with the broadly liberal, individualistic, democratic, and capitalist Allies of the west at war with the authoritarian, collectivistic, and socialistic Axis powers of the east. And at the end of the war, tens of millions more people would be dead.

The Germans were steeled for war and well prepared physically and psychologically. They believed in *Lebensraum*—in the rightness of Germany's expanding as much as necessary to acquire land and resources to survive. They believed in the rightness of Germany's expanding to re-incorporate ethnic Germans now living in foreign lands. They believed that Germany had a moral mission—even a divine mission—to show the world the way to a brighter, idealistic future and to destroy the tottering and depraved capitalist nations of the West. As Hitler put it at the beginning of the war: “What will be destroyed in this war is a capitalist clique that was and remains willing to annihilate millions of men for the sake of their despicable personal interests.”⁴¹

And of course, the Germans had plans for the Jews.

⁴¹ Quoted in Lukacs 1991, p. 121.

19. *The Holocaust*

In 1821, the German poet Heinrich Heine wrote, “Where books are burnt, in the end people are also burnt.” Heine was evoking the terrible era of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in which both people and books were burned regularly. But he was also making a philosophical point about the importance of ideas: books are about ideas, and ideas matter. We humans live what we believe, and if history teaches us anything it is that people can believe an incredible variety of things about themselves and the world they live in. Books store and transmit ideas, but it is in the minds of actual human beings that ideas live and are put into practice. Burning a book has some stopping power for an idea, but the only way to eliminate an idea fully is to eliminate the individuals who believe it. Dictators know this and they have no compunction about eliminating individuals.

The Nazis were not historically unique in this way—where they were unique is in the huge scale upon which they operated and the cold-bloodedly efficient ruthlessness with which they destroyed, killed, and burned human beings.

Eleven to twelve million human beings were exterminated during the Holocaust; approximately six million of them were Jews. We have all heard the numbers and the terrible stories before, and sometimes it is hard for them not to become just abstract statistics in our minds.

But just think of *one* person you know who lives a real life, has dreams, works hard, loves his or her family, has a quirky sense of humor, wants to travel the world. And then imagine *that* person taken away in the middle of the night, herded into a cattle car, stripped naked, experimented upon without anesthesia, slowly starved, gassed, shoved into an oven and burned to cinders. That is what the Nazis did to millions of human beings.

All of the theoretical ingredients of the National Socialist program that contributed to the Holocaust were announced publicly twenty years before the Holocaust began:

That human beings are divided into collective groups that shape their identity.

That those collective groups are in a life and death competitive struggle with each other.

That any tactic is legitimate in the war of competing groups.

That human beings are not individuals with their own lives to live but are servants of the state.

That the state should have total power over both the minds and bodies of its citizens and may dispose of them as it wishes.

That citizens should obey a higher authority and be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of their group, as defined by higher authority.

Additionally, during the 1930s the Nazis had experimented with most of the practical techniques that would be used in the Holocaust. In the 1930s, basic human rights to liberty, property, the pursuit of happiness were denied to millions as a matter of official policy. Many of those deemed undesirable had been forced to leave their homes and country. Those who stayed were subject to officially tolerated vandalism, beatings, and occasional murders. Some of those deemed unfit to reproduce had been sterilized. Some of those deemed unfit to live had been euthanized. As early as 1933, concentration camps had been established north of Berlin at Oranienburg and at Dachau in the south of Germany. More camps were added as the decade progressed.

And of course the vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazis and their sympathizers among millions of Germans had been common knowledge and common practice. It is appropriate that the classically-educated Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Reich

Minister of Culture, would express it most bluntly and clearly: “Certainly the Jew is also a Man, but the Flea is also an Animal.”⁴²

So I return to our early question: How could Nazism happen?

20. The question of Nazism’s philosophical roots

We do not do ourselves any favors by not understanding Nazism thoroughly or by being satisfied with superficial explanations. It took a world war to stop National Socialism in the twentieth century. War is brute force. Brute force rarely changes anyone’s minds about anything, and it alone does not destroy the underlying causes that motivate conflict. To use a crude analogy: If two neighbors are having an ongoing argument about a series of issues, and one neighbor hits the other and knocks him unconscious—that ends the argument but it does not solve their problems. The source of their argument is still there and it will re-surface.

The same holds for the underlying causes of National Socialism and its differences with the liberal democracies. The liberal democracies were able to knock out the Nazis in World War II, though it was a close call—but the underlying arguments are still with us.

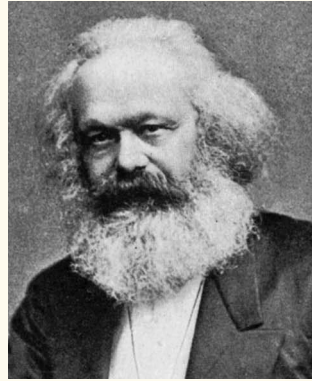
The differences between National Socialism and liberal democracies are profound and involve entirely different philosophies of life. National Socialism was the product of a well-thought-out philosophy of life, the main elements of which were originated, crafted, and argued by philosophers and other intellectuals across many generations.

The Nazi intellectuals were not lightweights, and we run the risk of underestimating our enemy if we dismiss their ideology

⁴² “Sicher ist der Jude auch ein Mann, aber der Floh ist auch ein Tier.”

as attractive only to a few cranky weirdos.⁴³ If your enemy has a machine gun but you believe he only has a pea shooter, then you are setting yourself up for failure. And if we remind ourselves of the list of very heavyweight intellectuals who supported Nazism—Nobel Prize winners, outstanding philosophers and brilliant legal thinkers—then it is clear that these were no pea-shooters and that we need heavyweight intellectual ammunition to defend ourselves.

In the case of other major historical revolutions, we are more familiar with seeing the significance of philosophy. When we think for example of the causes of the Communist Revolutions in Russia and China, we naturally think back to the philosopher Karl Marx. When we think of the causes of the French Revolution, we think back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. When we think of the causes of the American Revolution, we naturally think back to the philosopher John Locke. The same holds the causes of National Socialism—although since the Nazi regime went so horribly wrong, there is perhaps some reluctance to name names. Yet naming names is sometimes crucial if we are going to get to the historical heart of the matter. What philosophers can we cite in the case of the Nazis? Several names are candidates: Georg Hegel, Johann Fichte, even elements from Karl Marx.



Karl Marx

But in connection with the Nazis, perhaps the biggest and the most controversial name regularly mentioned is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. The Nazis often cited Nietzsche as one of their philosophical precursors, and even though Nietzsche died thirty-three years before the Nazis came to power, references to Nietzsche crop up regularly in Nazi writings and activities.

⁴³Recall Albert Speer on “the event that led me to [Hitler]”—a speech Hitler gave to the College of Engineering in Berlin: Speer expected it to be “a bombastic harangue” but it turned out to be a “reasoned lecture” (quoted in Orlow 1969, p. 199).

In philosopher Heidegger's lectures, for example, "Nietzsche was presented as *the* Nazi philosopher."⁴⁴

In his study, Adolf Hitler had a bust of Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1935, Hitler attended and participated in the funeral of Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth. In 1938, the Nazis built a monument to Nietzsche. In 1943, Hitler gave a set of Nietzsche's writings as a gift to fellow dictator Benito Mussolini.⁴⁵

Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, was also a great admirer of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his semi-autobiographical novel, Goebbels has the title character Michael die in a mining accident—afterward three books are found among his belongings: the Bible, Goethe's *Faust*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

So who was Friedrich Nietzsche?

⁴⁴Rohkrämer 2005, p. 181.

⁴⁵During WWI, the German government printed 150,000 copies of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and gave them to soldiers along with a copy of the Bible.