

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.”