



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.¹



**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-

¹See 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