

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.² 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

² “*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.

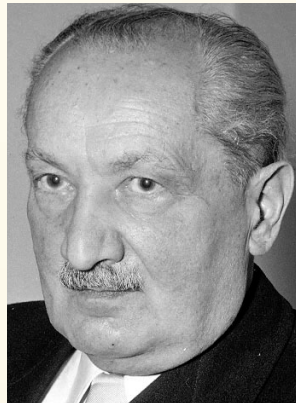
That is three Nobel Prize winners.

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.³ 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?⁴

5. Explaining Nazism philosophically

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

³Weinreich 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.

⁴Albert 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).