

What factors help account for the violence and destruction generated by Nazis?

By Gary Foley ©

In accounting for the extensive violence and destruction generated by Nazis in Germany, no single factor, such as the cult of Hitler, or a deeply embedded historic anti-Semitism, can be identified as the primary motivational force. It would seem that a range of contributing factors coincided to create the political, social, economic and personal circumstances in which horrific acts would be perpetrated. Furthermore, if this is the case, no modern society is immune to committing such acts if the right set of historical circumstances exist. In this essay I will explore the range of factors that played a role in the development of Nazism and ultimately the Holocaust, and in doing so will, hopefully, demonstrate that what happened in Hitler's Germany was not a unique historical aberration, but rather a situation that can occur with startling regularity throughout modern history.

Recent arguments by authors such as Daniel Goldhagen claim that a deeply embedded history and culture of anti-Semitism was the 'central causal agent of the Holocaust'. Wolfgang Wippermann and Michael Burleigh are also advocates of this 'centrality of race' view of the Third Reich, and these writers and others present an impressive (albeit at times flawed) analysis of the history of German racial ideologies and anti-Semitism. But I find it difficult to ultimately accept their major conclusions which suggest that, firstly, the primary motivating factor for the Holocaust was a rabid, long-term, deeply embedded racism on the part of Germans, and that this in itself makes the German experience of Fascism unique and not to be compared with any similar style of state-sponsored mass murder elsewhere in history.

Such a view ignores evidence of other powerful political and social factors at work in the decades leading up to and including the Nazi era, and it also has the disturbing effect of providing a form of historical absolution for other regimes who have perpetrated equally appalling 'crimes against humanity' both before and since the Nazis. Goldhagen claims all that Hitler and the Nazis did was merely 'unshackle and thereby activate Germans, pre-existing, pent-up anti-Semitism'¹ but this view does not fully take into account the variety of ideological, structural and personal factors which contributed significantly to the Holocaust.

In terms of ideological factors, it could be said that German anti-Semitism was but one of a range of racial theories current in the historical lead up to Nazism. Indeed, the publication of Darwin's theory of biological evolution had an immediate impact in Germany and when Professor Ernst Haeckel developed these theories to incorporate a general theory of human and social development, the notion was used by racists to justify their, 'conceptions of superior and inferior peoples and nations'. These were some of the major contributing elements for the Nazis to later concoct their policies against 'inferior races', such as the Jews. Social Darwinism and a range of attendant theories such as phrenology and eugenics were extremely popular, not just in Germany at this time, but also in countries such as England, Australia and the United States.

What led Germany to take more direct action in terms of some of these theories was partially a deliberate exploitation of racial issues by the Nazis who used these theories to bolster their nationalist platform and thereby gain greater support from an already disaffected German populace. Furthermore, the ideological origins of German Nazism included a range of other influences including *Volkish* thought (which had flourished after the 1850s and which argued a superiority of Germanic races and was a semi-mystic form of racist nationalism), Pan Germanism (which contended that all Germans should be brought together under one nation, and which derived its support from the German middle class and political elite) and the Occult (through the work of Alfred Lanz whose "Study of Aryans" sought to demonstrate the 'purity' of the 'Aryan race' and called for breeding colonies and the castration of inferior races. Also influential was Guido von List who advocated in the creation of a new German Brotherhood and believed that a Messiah figure would appear). So it could hardly be said that historical German anti-Semitism was the primary contributing factor to Nazi racial ideology and policies.

Had the aforementioned German national disaffection not been so extreme at the time of the rise of the Nazis, then Hitler and his associates might not have had such a receptive audience for a scapegoat style of political analysis which derived from their polyglot of ideological influences. This German national disaffection in the 1920s had more to do with the loss of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles and crippling war reparations, than it did with anti-Semitism or racism. The systematic crisis in the

Weimar Republic served only to exacerbate a situation already ripe for the marginal ideas of the Nazis to gain mainstream currency. Thus it was not a question of Germans merely embracing the Nazis because a pre-programmed history of anti-Semitism had prepared them for it, but rather a range of ideological, political, social and economic factors aligning in a manner that created a climate conducive and receptive to extremist ideas and policies.

In addition, other factors were also important in terms of state mechanisms (such as the SS) and the formal lines of authority within the Third Reich (or rather, a lack of them). After 1934 the Third Reich was a regime which was a polycracy with anything but a clearly delineated hierarchical system, thus undermining claims both that Hitler was the primary dispenser of orders with regard to the Holocaust, and that these orders were carried out systematically by a well organised bureaucratic and military machine. Rather, I favour the “functionalist” argument which emphasises the disorganised nature of the Third Reich, partly because there were no clear lines of authority in Hitler’s regime, and also because the polycratic nature of the Nazi regime created what Mommsen called ‘the mechanism of compartmentalised responsibility’ⁱⁱ. This not only enabled the individual to rationalise and minimise his perception of his own personal responsibility, but also inhibited coordination and logistical planning between various parts of the bureaucracy and infrastructure required to implement the ‘Final Solution’.

It must also be remembered that on a personal level it could not be said that the membership of the Nazi Party was ever 100% anti-Semitic, in fact one survey showed that only 13% of Nazi Party members said that anti-Semitism was their primary reason for joining the party, whereas 32% nominated the appeal of the idea of a united Germany as their primary reason. Another feature of the Nazi Party as it developed was that prior to 1930 they had been largely unsuccessful in winning the hearts and minds of significant numbers of Germans, to the extent that in 1929 there were only 100,000 members. So it could hardly be said that the innate anti-Semitism of Germans sent them in droves into the Party. It was only when the effects of the Depression set in by 1930 that the Nazis began to flourish, and this suggests that social, economic and political turmoil were more central personal motivating factors than anti-Semitism.

One aspect of Hitler's Germany that puzzles many today is, how could a whole nation of people seemingly condone or, at best, passively accept the Holocaust as it happened in their midst? It seems to me that if one takes into account the type of society Germany had become in the two decades after WW1, and the fact that the populace had become inured to violence against 'racial enemies' through the regime's propaganda and pogroms, as well as the effect of Mommsen's 'mechanism of compartmentalised responsibility', it becomes a little more understandable.

As part of the extended process of acclimatising the populace to mass killing of 'expendable' people, the Euthanasia Program that began in 1939 was constructed philosophically on the concept of eugenics which had a history in Germany dating back to the 1800s. Eugenics saw the 'handicapped' and 'disabled' (physically, mentally or 'socially') as a 'burden' on society, and as part of their racial policies the Nazis had introduced during the 1930s, a range of lawsⁱⁱⁱ which ultimately resulted in the Euthanasia Program that had by August 1941 claimed 72,000 victims. This helped to accustom Germans to the notion that some elements in society were expendable and in such a climate the usual abhorrence of mass murder dissipated when also accompanied by the spectre of a ruthless state police apparatus that forcefully discouraged dissent of any type.

We should remember that Germany was a nation in turmoil after the abrupt end to WW1, and when Ernst Röhm and his SA Stormtroopers introduced paramilitary groups in the early 1920s, their methods of seeking to paralyse and destroy political enemies (social democrats, communist and Jews) and intimidation tactics were new to German society. But Hitler found useful the calls for law and order generated by their activities, even though Röhm had insisted that the SA remain outside the control of the Nazi Party. Whereas the SA membership was in 1931 almost twice that of the Nazi Party, by 1933 they had 445,000 members which was four times the size of the regular German army. Because the SA had their own agenda and were thereby a threat to Hitler's ultimate ambitions, he eventually disposed of the SA leadership in the 'Night of the Long Knives' in June 1934, which allowed Himmler's SS to become a law unto itself in order to implement Hitler's now professed desire for 'law and order'.

Thus Germany had evolved into a totalitarian state where state sponsored terrorism became the order of the day. From almost the minute Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 a slowly escalating campaign of intimidation and terror was waged against the perceived enemies of the regime, ie., Social Democrats, Communists, Jews and other 'racially inferior' groups. But even then Hitler and the Nazis did not take major steps toward the liquidation option, rather opting for a general strategy of imprisonment and forced labour in concentration camps for Communists and Social Democrats, whilst simultaneously harassing the Jewish community and encouraging them to emigrate.

Indeed, the fact that it was relatively late in Hitler's regime (1938) when the *Reichkristallnacht* made it clear to German Jews what their future held, and that the full-scale, 'organised' mass murder did not begin in earnest until 1941, would seem to suggest that for Hitler the 'final solution' did not have as high a priority as some historians suggest. The reason that less than 25% of Germany's Jewish population died in the Holocaust is that most took the opportunity they had to migrate (albeit under duress) up until 1938, after which persecution and harassment began to lead to mass murder, largely beginning with the invasion of Eastern Europe in 1939.

So, in conclusion I am suggesting that the Holocaust and other manifestations of violence and destruction under the Nazis was not due to a single factor such as universal anti-Semitism or a messianic Hitler determined fulfil his 'final solution', but rather due to a combination of a range of historical, political, social, economic and cultural factors that converged at a certain point in time. It is only through realising that such an alignment of factors is possible at any time in any modern nation that we should understand that what happened in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s could (and often does) happen anywhere. This should be a sobering thought for Australians who are today confronted with a new political party called, ironically, "One Nation", led by a moderately charismatic leader who seeks to scapegoat certain non-Aryan minorities for the economic and social ills of society, and who already has a purported 10% plus voter support base. It took Hitler and the Nazis until 1929 to achieve that level of voter support!