

## NAZISM AND THE GERMAN PEOPLE: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

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On April 30<sup>th</sup> 1945, Adolf Hitler took his sidearm, pointed it at his head and fired a single shot, killing himself instantaneously. With this, the German Fuhrer quite unceremoniously ended a war that had been raging for six bloody years. Around Hitler's body, his beloved capitol lay in ruins while the reign of his thousand-year Reich was abruptly cut short. Ever since the extraordinary events of April 1945 unfolded, historians have grappled with the Nazis and their horrific chapter in history. Numerous questions have been raised regarding the circumstances of their rise to power and dealings while in control. Even more important, however, is the inquiry into the attitudes and actions of the common German citizen during this time. How was it that so many people seemingly supported a political organization obsessed with racial "purification" and bent on world domination? What exactly was their view of Nazism and their racial policies during the height of its power? Such complicated questions require equally complicated answers, leaving historians the great task of searching for a response through the remnants of Nazism.

The years following the end of the Second World War saw many historians take a sympathetic view toward the general population of Nazi Germany. It was believed that they were victims of a great illusion, one ruled by terror in which numerous atrocities were allowed to occur. The issue of German denial helped to encourage this type of thinking until historians began to take a closer look at the situation, seeking better answers. From the creation of this new partition came two primary schools of thought. The functionalist and the intentionalist groups disagree about the core explanations for the Holocaust. The functionalists believe that this tragic event came out of the chaos of the Nazi bureaucracy and the increasing desperation of their circumstances. On the other side, the intentionalists see the Holocaust as a preplanned event that came to fruition because of a mad man's twisted dream. Each of these groups offers a different and unique perspective on the Holocaust, giving historians several different avenues of thought from which to pursue.

In 1969, historian Martin Broszat released his work, *The Hitler State: The foundation and development of the internal structure of the Third Reich*, which tended to take a functionalist view of Nazism. Broszat's

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book describes the policies of the Nazis and how they operated within the structure of the state. He believes that Nazi policies did not truly grow out of their ideology, but were the outcome of the structure and conditions of government in Germany. Broszat specifically focuses on a Hitler that, while being the center reference point for the entire organization, tended to operate on the periphery of actual government decisions. In reference to ordinary Germans, Broszat does not disclose much but states,

Even the excessive Fuhrer cult in Nazi Germany, that persuasive belief in the leader which had a meaning and real importance far beyond determining ideology, for the integration and mobilization of the German people in the Nazi era, cannot be understood simply in terms of personality, as a result of the superior strength and leadership of Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup>

Even with Hitler's rise to power, the "success in overthrowing the Weimar Republic and in establishing the Hitler regime was primarily due to the collaboration between the conservative opposition to democracy and the national Socialist mass movement."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the German people who opposed democracy and wanted a restoration of conservative and authoritarian principles helped put Hitler in power and fostered the growth of his cult-like image. While there were struggles in the beginning as to how the party would be run within the German government and who would exert their new power, by 1938 Hitler filled this void when he ceased to be the party leader and became the Fuhrer.<sup>3</sup>

Martin Broszat sees the Nazis as an organization that needed popular support to establish its power in Germany. This was not a revolution in the usual sense of the word, but merely an exchange of authority. Once the Nazis grasped this authority, however, the German people, fueled by Hitler himself, the Nazi propaganda machine and their own social expectations, allowed Hitler to become the object of a cult of personality that we see today. His influence continued to grow with the successful implementation of Nazi foreign policy and only subsided after 1941 with the tide of the war turning against Germany. Overall, Broszat suggests that "Hitler's special authority as Fuhrer was not founded like [Joseph] Stalin's on the control of the central organizational apparatus of the Party and state, but in the last resort of charismatic appeal, and the ability this gave to integrate the nation as a whole."<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, this was just one part of a larger story brought to life with the consent of many Germans.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich* (New York: Longman, 1981), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

Continuing with the precedent set by Broszat, in 1982 historian Detlev J. K. Peukert published a fascinating study of everyday life in Germany titled *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*. Peukert seems to take a middle course regarding the question of whether German citizens, both young and old, had been active participants in Nazism and its subsequent policies. He focuses on the various groups that existed in Nazi Germany, beginning with the working class. In this instance, Peukert reveals that “the Nazis’ use of terror in the working-class districts and the continuous pressure to conform combined to create a ubiquitous sense of persecution and insecurity, as in a city occupied by foreign troops.”<sup>5</sup> He believes that the working class as a whole may have offered some small measure of token resistance, but because of the Nazi terror apparatus, could not organize in any significant way.<sup>6</sup>

Shifting focus slightly, Peukert understands that the young people of Germany have a slightly different story to tell. Peukert evaluates the impact of the Hitler youth and sees a program that, while at first possessing a major influence, lost its grip over younger Germans. Initially, the systemized Hitler Youth institution offered many young people opportunities they would not have normally had access to. However, as the war dragged on, more youth leaders were called into service and “the war reduced the Hitler Youth’s leisure activities: playing fields had been bombed, official hiking trips were cut down and finally discontinued.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this, opposition groups known as “Edelweiss Pirates” began to form and physically harass the Hitler Youth patrols.<sup>8</sup> Youths would gather together listening to music forbidden by the Nazis, and engage in swing dancing, helping to create an atmosphere of passive resistance. Peukert reasons that no major resistance was mounted because of the Nazi policy of “atomizing” the public, meaning that numerous social structures and traditional networks were broken down and swept away forcing many to see Nazism as a new center of focus.<sup>9</sup>

Even with these small measures of resistance, Peukert acknowledges that some aspects of Nazism were generally accepted by the population. He states that

The terror, directed against political or social trouble makers was not only not concealed from the population—as many who pleaded for excuses were to suggest after 1945—but was highly visible, was documented in the press during the Third Reich, was given legitimacy

in the speeches of the Reich’s leaders and was approved and welcomed by many Germans.<sup>10</sup>

More important was the public policies of Nazi racism, which while being decried by churches and some members of society, more often than not “were accepted and even approved, provided that they were applied within a framework that was outwardly legal.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his book, Peukert seems to align himself with the functionalist camp of Nazism. In reference to the ordinary Germans’ stance on the Nazis, he sees a nation that operates under an umbrella of terror and offers some resistance to its oppressors, yet acknowledges the dark underbelly of acceptance that did exist. On the whole, Peukert realizes that terror played an important role in the Nazi control of Germany, but refuses to believe they were completely unaware and unwilling to cooperate in the racially and ethnically charged system of government.

Several years after Peukert released his work, author Ian Kershaw contributed to the discussion with his work titled *The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. This comprehensive review on the source behind Hitler’s control of the government and its people, in a minute way, resembles Broszat’s effort. In his book, Kershaw takes an interesting approach to the average German’s outlook on Nazism by separating the Nazi party and Hitler into two separate and distinct categories. He claims that many citizens, especially in the early years of the World War II, disliked the Nazi party and their policies. However, they adored Hitler to the extent that when things went badly or policies backfired, Hitler was spared much of the criticism, at least until the defeat at Stalingrad in 1943.<sup>12</sup> Before, though, the German people seemed to gravitate to answers that drew attention away from Hitler by claiming that he was being misinformed, curbed by the Allies or so engaged in foreign affairs that he had no time for the home front. According to Kershaw, it was the Nazi propaganda machine that takes the greatest responsibility for this feat and states, “After 1933, Nazi propaganda, largely uncontested now that opponents within Germany had been silenced, could almost deify Hitler. Joseph Goebbels,<sup>13</sup> as we saw, ranked his creation of the public Hitler image as his greatest creation”<sup>14</sup> Kershaw also looks into the German people’s thirst for a new leader who could unite and stabilize a nation which had floundered under the tutelage of the Weimar government. Hitler provided such an opportunity and using

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<sup>5</sup> Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) 105.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 236.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 192.

<sup>13</sup> Propaganda minister of the Third Reich.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 254.

Goebbels' machine, he lured the German masses into a state of trust and misguided belief, a trust that, in certain ways, outlasted the Hitler and the war itself.<sup>15</sup>

While Kershaw does portray the Germans as a "victimized" group, in his eyes they are not without fault, especially surrounding the circumstances of the Jewish question. In his book, Kershaw recognizes that while many Germans were anti-Semitic before Hitler's arrival, most did not support extreme racial policies. The Jewish question was therefore avoided by fusing the Third Reich with the popular and attractive aspects of Nazi rule symbolized by Hitler himself. Kershaw says that "this in itself distracted attention away from the seamier side of Nazi policy," which in turn "ensured at least passive acquiescence in if not outright approval for escalating inhumanity of Nazi anti-Jewish policy."<sup>16</sup> More frightening are Kershaw's examples of how the Hitler myth, for some people at least, continued until the end of the war and beyond. "In 1968, six percent of the West German population (compared with four percent in 1965 and 1967) reported their willingness to vote again for a man such as Hitler."<sup>17</sup> Kershaw exemplifies just how powerful the image of Hitler created by his propagandists was, and how far reaching its effects could be felt. He believes that the German people fell under the spell of the image of a man who never really existed, but he is not shy about condemning their indifference to the most horrific of Nazi policy.

The aforementioned authors, while having slightly different ideas, tend to agree that Germans citizens were both ruthlessly deceived and themselves at fault in their sometimes lax views and approval of Hitler and Nazism. However, the topic of rule by terror is given only a small amount of reference in proportion to each work's scope. The treatment of this subject was improved upon in 1990 when historian Robert Gellately published *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945*. In his work, Gellately looks into the Gestapo and how they managed to control an entire nation with only a small core of individuals. He concludes that it was impossible for the terror organization to follow the orders that were given to them, especially as their responsibilities grew during the war. Gellately claims that "it simply did not have the physical resources to accomplish the task assigned to it, especially as these increased in number and scope. And this point stands even when one includes the help it could count on from other organizations of the Nazi party and German state."<sup>18</sup> How then was this task accomplished with such

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 253.

horrific efficiency? For this answer, Gellately points to the average German citizen as an accomplice to the Gestapo's mission of state control and racial purification. Since it was impossible for the German Gestapo to be everywhere at once, they relied heavily on the information and participation readily given by many citizens.<sup>19</sup> Why, according to Gellately, were Germans so eager and willing to commit these acts? For starters, the Nazis had done such an impressive job through their propaganda techniques and examples that many believed there truly was an agent on every corner, watching their every move. Gellately presents evidence that a number of Germans came forward with information because of petty differences including relationship squabbles, heated competition between businesses, and disputes involving neighbors.<sup>20</sup> This helped to create a society in which its citizens engaged in a kind of self-regulation, ensuring the Gestapo could easily control a numerically superior target with little or no difficulty.

Robert Gellately's take on Nazi Germany sees a society in which total control was achieved through active participation. The average German seemed to view the Gestapo as an omnipotent being, even though evidence clearly points to the opposite. Even so, Gellately says that "one ought to be cautious, however, in extrapolating from Wurzburg, the focus of his study, to the rest of the country. Enforcement may have been easier to achieve in smaller cities and towns in rural districts."<sup>21</sup> He paints the common German in a way that few authors had up to this point. Through his evidence and analysis, they appear much more as aggressors, rather than victims.

Following the course that had been laid out by Robert Gellately and others, historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen took the case against the German people to a place few had before. In 1996, with the release of his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Goldhagen attacks the German people as a nation that was willingly and actively participating in the Holocaust. Furthermore, he asserts that only in Germany could an atrocity on the level of the Holocaust have occurred, thanks to Germany's highly anti-Semitic past. Goldhagen sets up a scenario where anti-Semitism had been rampant in Germany for centuries. He believes this was ingrained into the German psyche until a particular situation came along to set in motion an event that was literally hundreds of years in the making.<sup>22</sup> One of the examples he uses to support his thesis is the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 144-158.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 27-48.

actions of Police Battalion 101.<sup>23</sup> This group of men who were mainly composed of regular German police was sent to Poland to commit the unthinkable. While most had no affiliation with the Nazi party, they participated in the killings of innocent people, with apparently very little remorse. They even told their friends and family about their actions, leading Goldhagen to state that “the Germans’ openness about their genocidal slaughtering-making it available to the view of so many other German men and women who happened to be stationed in Poland-is but an indication of the perpetrators’ obvious approval of their historic deeds.”<sup>24</sup> According to Goldhagen, this is just one example of what countless Germans were ready to do, giving little thought to the extraordinary consequences of their actions.

*Hitler’s Willing Executioners* created a firestorm of criticism upon its release in 1996. Many historians assaulted the book as nonsense, saying that he could not adequately defend many of the controversial statements held within his writings. Goldhagen, in return, defended his thesis claiming “that the perpetrators approved of the mass slaughter, that they willingly gave assent to their own participation in the slaughter, is certain. That their approval derived in the main from their own conception of Jews is all but certain, for no other source of motivation can plausibly account for their actions.”<sup>25</sup> If anything, Goldhagen showed that ordinary Germans were much more involved in Nazi racial policies than historians initially thought. He seems to conform to the intentionalist view of Nazism but includes nearly every German in the equation. However, there are many flaws within his argument, especially in regard to his point that the Holocaust could only happen in Germany, but for better or worse, his assertions led the discussion into relatively uncharted territory.

Following the storm created by Goldhagen, author Eric A. Johnson published his book, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans*, in 2000. Following the lead set by Gellately and Goldhagen, Johnson analyzes the Gestapo and their impact on the German population. Reacting as several of the previous authors had, Johnson sees the Gestapo as a well-trained and staffed organization without the necessary resources to control the targeted population. How then did the average German view this organization?<sup>26</sup> First, Johnson claims that most Germans had little or no contact with the Gestapo in their daily lives, and for the most part, did not fear them.<sup>26</sup> Also, the citizen informer that previous historians, such as Gellately, point to did not truly exist on a large scale, and if a person did present

information to the Gestapo, many times it was ignored. Johnson sees that Germany was still indeed a “police state” and that the Gestapo was not merely a reactive organization.<sup>27</sup> Still, he does not absolve Germans for their crimes against the Jewish race. He believes that the evidence of mass deportations reveal that by 1942, most Germans knew exactly what the Nazi regime was trying to accomplish, and the Gestapo agents who were shipping Jews away from their homes were well aware that they were headed to near certain death.<sup>28</sup> For their part in maintaining silence in view of these crimes, Johnson is not afraid to direct blame squarely at them. Even so, Johnson does reveal elements of the resistance movement, such as the church, showing that certain sects of German society did fight the Nazis and their twisted ideology.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson’s work follows a pattern set in the preceding decades by fellow historians. As he states in his book, “A recent trend in historical scholarship places the onus of guilt on ordinary Germans for the perpetration of Nazi crimes.”<sup>30</sup> However, Johnson is careful to note that “the recent trend in historical scholarship threatens to underestimate and obscure the enormous culpability of the leading organs of Nazi terror, such as the Gestapo and to overestimate the culpability of ordinary German citizens. It needs to be remembered that some Germans were far more guilty than others.”<sup>31</sup> Johnson’s book attempts to pursue the middle course, in showing that ordinary Germans were a greater factor in the Holocaust than first believed, but they were far from the only factor. Johnson reinforces the idea that the Gestapo did not rule by fear alone, and were not the ever-present demon in people’s lives. Representing a moderation of the extreme views held by Goldhagen and others, Johnson understands that culpability and blame is to be shared by many in Nazi Germany, but by none completely.

From 1945 to the early 1980s, a majority of historians pointed the blame for wartime atrocities solely in the Nazi party and their underlings. Even in Martin Broszat’s 1969 book *The Hitler State*, he makes only a small reference to the German people and instead concentrates mostly on Hitler and the bureaucracy. Historians saw German citizens as victims of an elaborate scheme, one in which they entered a state ruled by terror, and the truths of the Holocaust were hidden from them. This interpretation held for over thirty years, until scholars began to question what exactly occurred during the Nazi reign, along with the German people’s place in it. Harnessing the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>26</sup> Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 253.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 353-354.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 395-396.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 483-484.

burgeoning field of social history, coupled with newer quantitative methods, they poured over voting records, Gestapo files, military papers, court documents, and other related materials. What they found was something quite startling and contrasting to previous sentiments. Historians like Broszat and Peukert saw a Germany where many of its citizens bowed before Nazi policies and even wanted a figure such as Hitler to obtain power. They argue, however, that the German people did not necessarily actively participate in the killings of Jews and other minorities. Complementing this are historians Johnson and Gellately, who see German citizens as holding a greater proportion of guilt than had been previously associated, but still refraining from the extreme nature of Goldhagen's thesis. In addition, the concept of the Gestapo has changed dramatically over the last three decades, ranging from a nearly invincible organization that controlled the whole of the civilian population, to one struggling with meager resources and relying heavily on citizen participation. In the end, the field of German studies during the Second World War has seen drastic changes over the past sixty years. Splintering groups such as the functionalist and the intentionalists, along with those debating the true power of the Gestapo have added dimensions once thought impossible. This rapidly evolving subject continues to divide scholars, but ultimately clarifies our understanding of one of the most dramatic eras in human history.