

Class

Sex



Introduction

Why should we care about Adolf Hitler, Nazism, and the Holocaust? The fascination of the Nazi period is obvious. Even from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the Nazi regime is still one of the most dramatic and destructive episodes in western European, indeed in world, history. Nazism is synonymous with terror, concentration camps, and mass murder. Hitler's war claimed tens of millions of lives and left Europe in complete ruins. Nazism has given us words and symbols that continue to strike fear in the hearts of people who otherwise know very little about Hitler or the Nazi regime. Think of the term for Hitler's secret police, "Gestapo," or the ultimate Nazi symbol, the swastika, which has become a twentieth-century shorthand for evil. In 1916, swastikas were prominently displayed on the uniforms of a Canadian girls' hockey team. At that time, well before Hitler's name had become a household word, this symbol could still be seen as a relatively innocent sun wheel. After Hitler, however, it could only mean death, destruction, and racial hatred.

Nazism is therefore important to all of us because of the ways in which it continues to live on in our imaginations. When we reach for a historical comparison to condemn a present-day dictator, Hitler's name comes to mind; politicians and reporters frequently compared Saddam Hussein, the former dictator of Iraq, to Hitler. When we look at pictures on television of genocide in Rwanda, images of the Holocaust may also play before our mind's eye. Since the end of the Second World War, the ghost of Nazism has helped Americans to define who they are. Because the United States played an important role in the coalition that defeated Nazi Germany, Americans can identify themselves as the very opposite of this ultimate evil, embodying all the best traits of democracy that Nazism had tried to destroy.

What was Nazism? The answer to this question has two parts because from 1919 to 1933 Nazism was a political movement and from 1933 to 1945 it was a political regime or state. In the years between the two world wars, from 1918 to 1939, there were several fascist political movements that looked like Nazism. Fascist political

A Nazi leader in Hamburg, Germany, stands in front of a huge swastika in 1933. He tells the assembled citizens they must contribute to the Nazi charity Winter Help.

ideas are extremely conservative, highly nationalistic, and antidemocratic. Fascists favor a strong central government ruled by a single fascist party that does not allow free speech or the other basic liberties and human rights important to democratic societies. Very few fascist parties have gained enough power to become governments or regimes. Italy was the only other major European country in which a fascist political party came to power under its own steam.

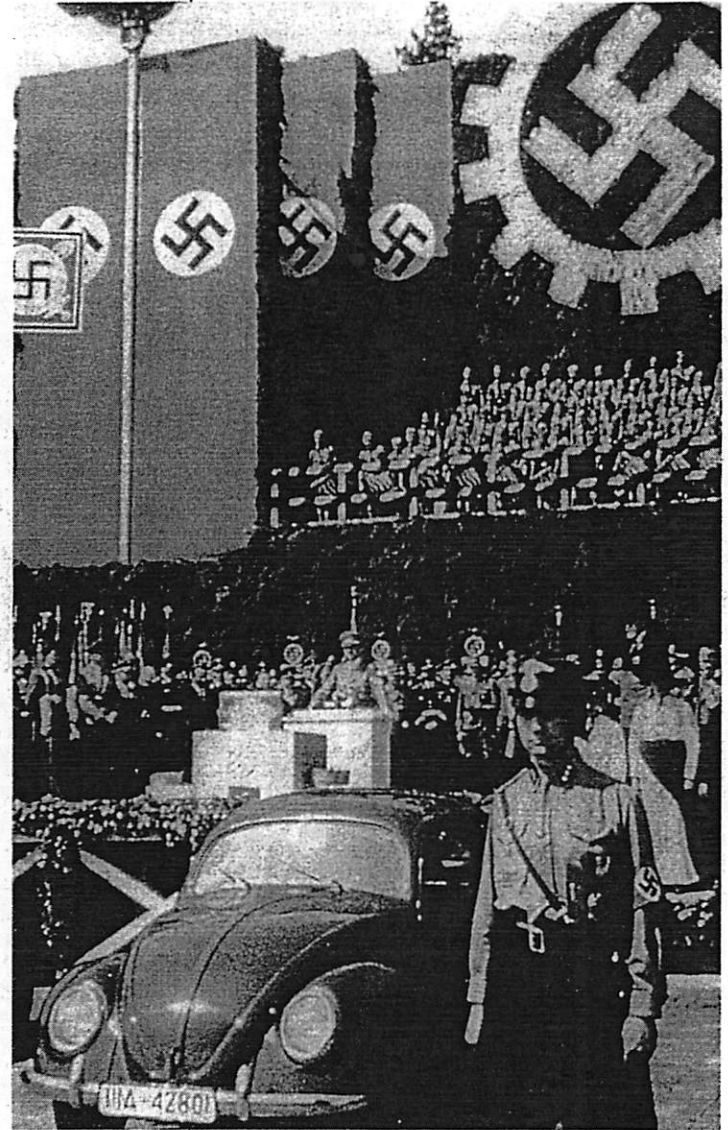
It is hard to imagine fascist movements without World War I. Fascist political parties and ideologies burst on to the political scenes of many European countries after the end of the war in 1918. Europeans turned to these conservative, rigid parties in response to the massive social disorder caused by this war that killed millions of soldiers in the trenches, threatened millions of civilians with starvation, and destroyed several European governments, including those of Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. German Nazism and other forms of fascism were also intense reactions to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and to the creation of the Soviet Union, a communist dictatorship that threatened to spread its doctrines and influence west across Europe. Communism is an ideology that sees the world divided between two major social classes—capitalists, or owners, and workers—locked in a major struggle with each other that leads to a revolution. In the revolution, the workers seize control of the state and of all industry and agriculture, which is then owned and run collectively by the new “workers’ state.” Fascist movements appealed to those Europeans who feared communism and who felt that the existing democracies were simply too weak to deal with this threat.

Like Italian fascism, German Nazism was fueled by an intense popular and ethnic nationalism. Unlike Italian fascism (and many other European forms of fascism), German Nazism embraced an extreme racial anti-Semitism, a hatred of Jews based on the false assumption that Jews are a distinct and dangerous race or ethnic group. Although some of the characteristics that describe Nazism are true of the entire history of this movement, after 1933 there were significant breaks and differences. The key difference was that after 1933, when the Nazi Party had control of the state, it revealed its vicious, anti-Semitic and racist core beliefs more and more openly and also embarked on a genocidal plan involving the deliberate murder of an entire people.

It is hard to conceive of Nazism without Hitler. Certainly his massive personal popularity gave the Nazi regime a legitimacy it would not have otherwise had. Certainly his program for a racial

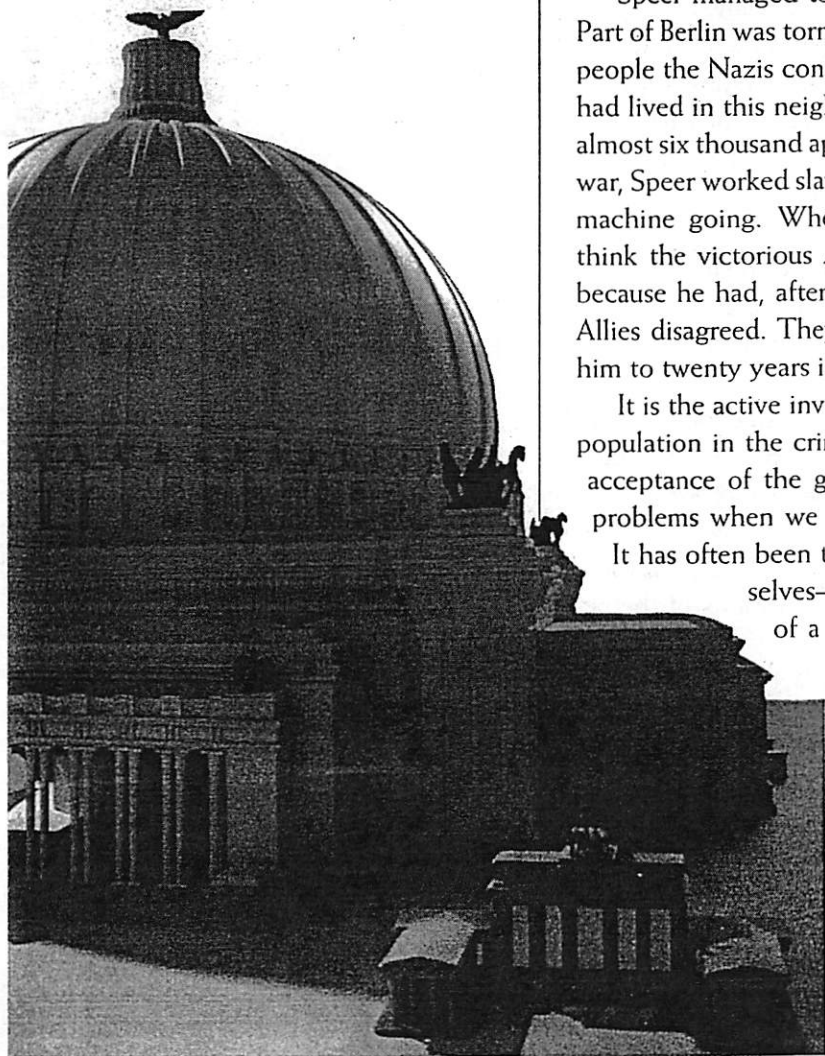
state and an aggressive war of conquest set the agenda for Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. But, it took many more Germans than just Hitler to fight a war that claimed more than 60 million lives before it was over, and it took many more Germans than the small, criminal band of Nazi leaders to plan, organize, and implement the murder of millions of Jews and other victims of the Nazis' racial hatred. In understanding Nazism, we can only get so far by analyzing Hitler's biography and psychology. Hitler led the way, but he did not simply brainwash or coerce Germans into performing or supporting unspeakably brutal acts of violence and murder. For the nightmare of Nazi ideology and racial hatred to become a lived reality, tens of thousands of Germans (and also non-German accomplices) had to perform criminal deeds willingly, sometimes even quite eagerly, that in any normal world would have brought them at the very least a long prison sentence. In addition to the active perpetrators, many millions more had to be prepared to stand by and say nothing as other human beings were persecuted and killed.

After 1933, Hitler set out his agenda, and defined in general terms the "problems" that needed to be solved—for example, the so-called Jewish problem. But, the particular "solution" to these problems that gained the upper hand at any point was the outcome of fierce competitions for power, and material advantage, among the other Nazi leaders, their subordinates, and the Nazi agencies they commanded. This competition generated ever more extreme answers to the problems Hitler had defined. Coming up with and then implementing the detailed plans eventually involved thousands, probably tens of thousands, of Germans, many of them technical experts and professionals in a variety of fields. These people were not just "following orders," they eagerly developed and implemented new and more efficient ways of, for example, murdering millions of Jews or administering mass sterilization to the "socially undesirable." By no means were all these participants in Hitler's racial program motivated solely by anti-Semitism or racial hatred—the chance to make a career in Nazi Germany could be just as compelling.



Hitler lays the foundation stone for the new Volkswagen factory at Wolfsburg, Germany, in 1938. A storm trooper proudly guards the prototype of the new "People's Car," the design for which eventually became known as the Beetle.

A model of the enormous domed hall that was to be the centerpiece of Hitler's plan to transform Berlin into Germania, the new capital of his vast empire. Had the gigantic structure ever been constructed, it would have been the largest building in the world.



Take the example of Albert Speer, who enjoyed a meteoric rise to power and prominence as Hitler's favorite architect. In 1925, Speer began to study architecture in Berlin. In 1931, after hearing Hitler speak, he joined the Nazi Party. When the Nazis came to power, Speer was given the job of redesigning the ministerial residence of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's chief of propaganda. The work Speer did on this job brought him to the attention of Hitler, who gave Speer the commission for the new Chancellery building. Together Hitler and Speer then began work on monumental plans to reconstruct Berlin and make it the capital (now to be called Germania) of the new Nazi Empire, with enormous public buildings that would dwarf all existing structures. The Great Hall was intended to be several times the size of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, which was then the largest single building in Europe.

Speer managed to complete part of his plan before the war. Part of Berlin was torn down and to house the Aryan Berliners, the people the Nazis considered to be ethnically pure Germans, who had lived in this neighborhood, Speer forcibly evicted Jews from almost six thousand apartments. As armaments minister during the war, Speer worked slave laborers to death to keep the German war machine going. When Germany was defeated, Speer did not think the victorious Allies would prosecute him for war crimes because he had, after all, been only an architect for Hitler. The Allies disagreed. They put Speer on trial in 1945 and sentenced him to twenty years in prison.

It is the active involvement of a large minority of the German population in the crimes of Nazism, combined with the passive acceptance of the great majority that pose the greatest moral problems when we look back on this period of world history.

It has often been tempting—not least for the Germans themselves—to see the crimes of Nazism as the work of a small band of criminals who led Germany astray. It is far more troubling to realize, for example, that the dreaded Gestapo, Hitler's secret political police, could never have done its bloody work without the help of literally tens of thousands of ordinary Germans. Citizens eagerly denounced relatives, friends, and neighbors to the secret police for the slightest reason, often only to gain some small personal advantage at the expense, perhaps, of another person's life. What can we

think of the German woman who denounced her husband, a former Communist, to the Gestapo simply to make room for her current boyfriend and who told her son that his father would go away and he would get a much better one. What can we say about the thousands of Germans who did not actively engage in the persecution of the Jews but were nonetheless happy to buy Jewish businesses, furniture, and other household items at rock-bottom prices when Jews were forced to emigrate from Germany in the 1930s?

The German people's widespread involvement in Nazi terror, their contribution to the construction of a regime of terror is one of the most disturbing features of the twelve years between 1933 and 1945. The Nazi leaders put on trial in Nuremberg, Germany, by the victorious Allies in 1945 were clearly only the tip of a much larger iceberg of participation and complicity in Nazi crimes. But how can we determine which Germans were tainted by their participation in the Nazi regime and which were innocent of all involvement? This has been the key question ever since 1945. It is a moral, not just a legal, question. And, it is a question that has never been easy to answer when we know that even those Germans who just did their jobs properly (such as building tanks and planes) made it possible for the Nazis to continue their war of annihilation until the bitter end.

We can learn about Nazi Germany from an enormous number of sources from the period. These original records include Nazi Party and government documents, many of which were captured by the invading Allied armies when they occupied Germany and are now on deposit in archives in Washington, D.C., and Moscow. We also have the eyewitness reports and memoirs of the people who lived during this time. There is testimony given to the post-war courts established to investigate Nazi war crimes. Many Holocaust survivors have published accounts of their experiences in Nazi concentration camps. There is also a huge array of visual evidence including documentary films and newsreels, photographs, propaganda posters, Nazi art, and images of Nazi architecture.



The cover of a 1962 issue of the Police Gazette tabloid announces that Hitler is still alive. Sensational and, of course, untrue stories in popular tabloid newspapers prove the public's continued fascination with Hitler and Nazism.

Enter Hitler

Who was the man to whom increasing numbers of German voters turned in the early 1930s? Adolf Hitler was born on April 20, 1889, in the small Austrian village of Braunau Am Inn just across the border from Bavaria in southern Germany. Hitler's father, an Austrian customs official, died in 1903. Two years later, at age sixteen, Hitler dropped out of school. When he was eighteen, dreaming of becoming an artist, Hitler went to Vienna and took the entrance exam for the school of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts. He failed. In December 1907, Hitler's mother, Klara, died of breast cancer. In October 1908, he again applied to the Vienna Academy, but this time his drawings were judged to be so poor that he was not even allowed to take the formal exam. Yet, he stayed on in Vienna, living in rented rooms and shelters for the homeless, earning some money by occasional day labor or by painting postcards that he sold to tourists.

During his time in Vienna, Hitler became extremely interested in politics and spent long hours arguing about political ideas with the other men in the homeless shelter. Although he was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hitler saw himself as an ethnic German who had been excluded by the mistakes of history from the new German Empire to the north. In Vienna, Hitler added racial anti-Semitism and a deep hatred of Marxism to his already intense German nationalism.

In 1913, Hitler moved to Munich in Bavaria to avoid military service in the multiethnic Habsburg Empire, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was also known, which he had grown to hate. But, when World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, Hitler eagerly volunteered to defend his adopted German fatherland. The war gave new meaning to his life. He served on the Western Front, won the Iron Cross, but never rose above the rank of corporal. In October 1918, he was temporarily blinded by a British chlorine gas attack. Hitler was devastated by the defeat of Germany and by the revolution that overthrew the monarchy

In this 1928 photograph, Hitler wears a military uniform and the Iron Cross he earned as a soldier in World War I.

in November 1918. He refused to believe that the German Army actually lost the war. Instead, he blamed Jews and Marxists for undermining the German war effort. In the summer of 1919, Hitler was still in the army, working as a political agent to combat the spread of Marxist ideas among the returning soldiers.

In September 1919, he was told to investigate a small extremist, anti-Semitic group in Munich known as the German Workers' Party, one of many new *völkisch* (intensely nationalist and racist) splinter groups that formed at the end of the war. He was supposed to find out whether this small organization's propaganda could be useful in the army's attempts to fight the spread of left-wing ideas among the returning soldiers. Instead, Hitler joined the party. Here he found a calling as a rabble-rousing political speaker. The insignificance of this small political fringe group allowed Hitler to make a political career that would never have been open to him in any of the major existing political parties. In February 1920, Hitler changed the party's name to National Socialist German Worker's Party, sometimes called the Nazi Party [in contraction of the party's full title]. The new name signaled his desire to win German workers away from what he called the poisonous "Jewish Teachings of Marxism" and back to the cause of the German nation. Because Karl Marx was a Jew, Hitler insisted that Marxism was an alien set of ideas that could only have negative consequences for Germans. In his view, Marxism encouraged them to see themselves as a society of classes warring with each other rather than as a race in competition with other races.

In early November 1923, the French and Belgians occupied the industrial Ruhr region in western Germany to force the Germans to pay reparations for World War I. At the same time, the post-war hyperinflation spiraled completely out of control. Hitler thought the time was ripe to overthrow the new democratic republic with force. His attempt to take control of the Munich government in early November 1923 failed because the army authorities refused to support him. Hitler was put on trial but received a light seven-month prison term.

The failure of this attempt to seize power convinced Hitler that the Nazis would have to conquer the Weimar

Hitler (first man on the left) poses with his fellow soldiers in 1916. In his life as a politician, Hitler emphasized that he had once been an ordinary soldier in the trenches, just like millions of other Germans.



Republic by legal, electoral means. Yet, when Hitler emerged from jail at the end of 1924, only 3 percent of the electorate took the Nazis seriously enough to vote for them. Germany was no longer in a state of crisis. The Nazis did not do much better at the polls until September 1930, when they increased their vote to 18.3 percent. By July 1932 they had become the single largest party in the German parliament with 230 seats and 37.4 percent of the popular vote. At least four factors produced this meteoric ascent: the weaknesses of Weimar democracy; the catastrophic Great Depression; the Nazis' ability to exploit the grievances of voters unhappy with the existing political options; and the growing desire of leading figures in industry, agriculture, the army, the government bureaucracy, as well as ordinary voters to replace Weimar democracy with some type of authoritarian rule by a strong leader. Despite his increasing popularity, Hitler never gained an absolute majority in elections. He could never simply demand to be made chancellor (prime minister, head of government in this parliamentary system), but had to be "lifted" into power by the president and other powerful government leaders.

From the War to the Failed Attempt to Seize Power in 1923

Adolf Hitler claimed that Jews could never be assimilated into German society, that Jews would always be dangerously different because their biology (what we might call their genes) made them think, feel, and act differently than Aryan (racially pure) Germans. In September 1919, Hitler wrote his first statement about the "Jewish problem" in response to a letter from one of his fellow participants in a German Army indoctrination course.

If the danger represented by the Jews today finds expression in the undeniable dislike of them felt by a larger section of our people, the cause of this dislike is on the whole not to be found in the clear recognition of the corrupting activity of the Jews generally among our people... it originates mainly through personal relationships, from the impression left behind him by the individual Jew and which is almost invariably unfavorable. Antisemitism thereby acquires only too easily the character of being a manifestation of emotion. But this is wrong. Antisemitism as a political movement must not be, cannot be, determined by emotional criteria, but

It makes no difference whether they laugh at us or revile us, whether they represent us as clowns or criminals; the main thing is that they mention us, that they concern themselves with us again and again, and that we gradually in the eyes of the workers themselves appear to be the only power that anyone reckons with at the moment.

—Adolf Hitler,
Mein Kampf, 1925