

The coming of the Third Reich

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In his preface the author Evans sets out his intentions of presenting the rise of power of the National Sozialists without any moral judgments, leaving those to the reader, as well as not falling into the trap of the perspective of hindsight and recording the rise as being inevitable. However, those commendable ideals are very hard to live up to. The first failure is eminently excusable, it is hard, not to say perverse to chronicle the emergence of the Third Reich without revealing personal disgust. The second failure is more serious, yet exceedingly hard to avoid. All historical writing is based on the present, trying to fathom it. Thus what stand out in the record of the past are exactly those features that have left traces in the present; those who have not are inevitably rejected as dead-ends (reinforcing the sense of the course of history as being inevitable), but for those who actually lived through the times, not just reading about them, they were not seen as such, and hence played an important role in decisions, decisions that thus may strike us as strange in retrospect.

The atrocities committed by the Nazi powers are often seen, if not exactly intrinsic to the German psycho, (whatever that means), as at least inherent in their culture and history. The most extreme modern proponent of this view is Goldhagen, whose demonization of the German people, especially its indigenous antisemitism, would, if taken *ad notam*, condemn them, if not to actual extermination, at least to indefinite containment as a dangerous and immature race, a standing threat to mankind. Evans clearly takes exception to such crude vulgarity and points out, following the suggestion of the German historian Meinecke, that we need not go further back in history than to the late unification of Germany under Bismarck in the 1860's, to understand the historical precedents to the rise of the Nazis. Bismarck is often presented, both by admirers and detractors, as the ruthless Iron 'Kanzler' pursuing his visions with an iron hand resorting to force; when in fact he was above all the master diplomat, who coined the phrase that 'politics is the art of the possible' and who admitted that one cannot direct events only take advantage of them. The military exploits of Bismarck were limited, if eminently successful, and did, like most military ventures of the 19th and 18th century involve relatively few deaths, especially when civilians were concerned, in glaring contrast to the total wars of the 20th century. The supposedly militaristic tradition of the Germans is basically limited to the rise of the Prussian state in the early 18th century; the Austrian being part of the partly Spanish Habsburger Empire. As such it pales compared to that of France or the imperial ambitions of Russia. Yet it would be a severe distortion of truth to deny its prestige in the late Wilhemine period predating the outbreak of the First World war.

The First World War is traditionally blamed on Germany, as an inevitable consequence of its growing industrial power finding its actual geographical limits too confining, resulting in an aggressive stand for great power status. The actual outbreak of the First World War was effected through a sequence of diplomatic blunders and prior commitments and

responsibility for it cannot clearly be laid at the door of any single belligerent. True its eventual outbreak may have been just a matter of time presaged as it was by mutual suspicion and escalating armaments. Kennan in his study - 'The fateful Alliance' laments the break-up of the traditional alliance between Prussia and Russia and its replacement by a more or less secret alliance between the French and the Russian, which must have been felt as hostile to the Germans. And clearly German patriotism was clearly matched by shrill French nationalism eager to avenge the humiliation of 1871 when the German second Reich formally was born in the palace of Versailles.

The actual event of the First World War turned out to be a nightmare, very far from the traditional quick military engagement of previous decades, deeply traumatizing the contestants. It led to the break-up of four empires and completely rewrote the map of Europe as a consequence. The trauma it involved, may be very hard to understand for us, but a telling indication is the fact that the Spanish flu, an epidemic that killed millions of people all over Europe at the end of the War is almost obliterated from collective memory, its sufferings dwarfed by the War itself.

A collection of myths surrounds the conclusion of the war. One is the notion that the German army was undefeated, when in fact it had broken down in face of the overwhelming fresh resources the Allied could muster with the late participation of the Americans. In total war military prowess and heroics only play short-term roles, in the end it is just a matter of statistics, who ever has access to superior resources eventually will prevail. But foreign troops never entered German soil (at least not until after the conditions of the Peace treaty made it an option) fostering the unfortunate illusion. Another myth, or maybe rather delusion, is that Germany was solely responsible, and that it had to be punished. Clearly the victors write history and the prevalent view, partly shared by Evans, is that Germany is at least predominantly responsible, a view clearly reinforced by the hindsight of the Second World War, of which the First may be seen as a failed first bid. The question of guilt and its equitable distribution is of course never to be settled, and almost a century after the event, of limited interest. Yet at the time it led to the idea of punishment, especially proposed by the avengeful French, who after all had suffered the brunt of the fighting and demographically the largest proportional losses. This leads to the second myth that the reparations to be paid by Germany were excessive and led to the economical collapse of the country. The Germans protested at the time, and their protests actually found a sympathetic ear among the British, while in fact the territorial losses suffered by the Germans were marginal, its infrastructure was left intact by the war, and as Germany regained its international standing, renegotiations of the reparations were successfully made. In fact, Macmillan in her book '1919', claims that the reparations the French had to pay to the Germans in 1871 were actually more severe. Nevertheless the harsh conditions of the Versailles Treaty were not only intended to humiliate the Germans but also succeeded in doing so leading to a deep resentment shared among most segments of its population. True such resentments may strike us as immature in retrospect and although widely publicised at the time and a continuing Leitmotif in Nazi propaganda one may nevertheless seriously ask oneself how much it really affected people. Still there was a widespread feeling of wounded National pride, which for the record, probably was as much shared by the Jews as by any other segment of the population.

The postwar period led to a disintegration of established authority, especially its democratic manifestations, all over Europe, and thus the experience of Germany was in no way unique. The Weimar republic has been much aligned but in view of the turbulent times it showed remarkable resilience. It was born during a revolutionary crisis, deposing the Emperor and leading to a situation of red uprising and concomitant terror reminiscent of what was at the time going on in Russia as well as in Hungary. Those developments are now largely forgotten, as they failed to be sustained, but at the time they probably were seen at least as important as the Russian one. After all the proletarian revolution was not expected to survive unless it became an international one, and for the people living at the time it certainly was seen as the beginning of a red fire to engulf the world. The German and Hungarian Revolutions were brought down by force. The legacy of this incipient civil war must have been as traumatic as the end of the World War, but not much is made of it.

German political life had been quite active under the second Reich. Political opinions tended to be polarized, and provided their supporters with a strong sense of identification. This held in particular for the Social Democratic party which had been founded in 1889 as a committed Marxist party. Voter turn-outs at elections were very high, a tradition carried through into the Weimar Republic testifying to a politically very conscious electorate. Bismarck had tried to stem and undercut the Socialist advance by instigating progressive reforms relating to health and unemployment, reforms constituting the first serious attempt to establish a modern welfare state. Thus although the German constitution was not parliamentary in the modern sense and hence of a rather authoritarian nature it was basically of a benevolent kind. This commitment to the welfare of its citizens continued during the Weimar years, although the size of the commitments turned out to be beyond the power of the state to handle in view of the scope of the economical strains to be suffered at the end of the period.

The attempted revolution of 1918 left a dark legacy. It radicalized politics, with the Social Democrats splitting off the Communists, who turned into irrevocable foes of the former¹. The violence involved together with the fact that the Versailles treaty constrained the size and resources of the German army² led to the establishment of alternate forces, once the monopoly of the State had been compromised. Foremost were the Freikorps and the Steel Helmets drawing their recruits from war veterans and actively involved in the fighting against the communists, who naturally had their own forces, leading to the formation of various other forces on the right-wing fringes and a tradition of street-violence and intimidation as an unavoidable component of the political process. The back side of the enfranchisement of the general public was the growth of populism and demagoguery in manipulating the masses and from which the radical fringes on the right learned a lot from the militant left. One example is of course Adolf Hitler.

Hitler, on which numerous biographies have been written, remains an enigma. His early career shows a rather pathetic drifter entertaining dreams of an artistic career living

¹ Hobsbawm reports that at the final years of the Weimar Republic the Communists considered the Social Democrats to be their main enemy. A division of the left to have momentous consequences

² It is amusing to learn that during the 20's there was a sustained collaboration with the Soviet Union allowing the German Army to sidestep the restrictions of the Versailles treaty

at the lower edge of Bohemian society inspiring pity rather than revulsion. Indeed a most unlikely candidate for a National leader. His transformation was a result of his stumbling on his true vocation, namely that of a political demagogue. The ideology he presented constituted a rather mixed and confused brew of scattered ideas popular at the time. Evans is right to emphasize the role played with non-German racists like Chamberlain and to connect the ideas of white supremacy with the general western attitude as manifested in colonial adventure. In this regards the German were no worse, maybe on the average even better, than the major Colonial powers. Antisemitism played an important role, although by the advantage of hindsight, this feature may be more prevalent to posterity than to contemporaries, who might have been more enthralled by the prospects of a German revival. Hitler wrote contemptuously about the intellectual level of the masses and the need to simplify and reduce argument to slogans, and it might be tempting to attribute the crudeness of Nazi ideology to him falling prey to his own mesmerizing propaganda. Most likely there was not much beyond Hitlers vision than a simple nihilistic bid for power and the glorification of his own ego. In this, despite all allusions to the transcendent ideas of Marxism, he can be compared with Stalin. The difference is that Stalin was a natural gangster and came to power entirely through intrigue inside an already established powerstructure; while Hitler, so to speak, earned his laurels by a successful career as a public speaker, starting literally from nothing, and thus displaying gifts beyond those of primitive ruthlessness.

The fascination with Hitler rests on the assumption that one single person can be evil enough to bewitch a whole nation and impose his perverted vision on its citizens and thus personally being responsible for millions of dead. However attractive, as well as frightening, such an assumption may be, it is basically a romantic one. Obviously Hitler would not have been able to rise had he and his party not struck sympathetic chords with a significant section of the Germans to infuse the Nazi movement with the dynamism it manifested. This leads us back to the initial question of whether Nazism was a German disease and only possible in Germany itself. The dispassionate study of such a question would require a certain sympathetic engagement with the ideas of Nazism itself to lay bare its attractive as well as seducing aspects in addition to the horrors we now know too well. Such an engagement is not an attractive proposition to a historian, who definitely might jeopardize his own external credibility in the process and who might also nourish a secret fear of being seduced himself.

Evans points out that the Nazis styled themselves as a movement (*Bewegung*) and not just a party in order to transcend the parochial connotations of the latter. As a movement it harnessed great enthusiasms, and the skills of Hitler as a public speaker seems documented beyond reasonable doubt (although like most skills it was not uniquely bestowed, but those of equal mastery have been swept into the dustbin of historical oblivion, a fate Hitler seems to have avoided for the foreseeable future) although we are nowadays not in a position to fully appreciate it. His magnetic influence on those he came into personal contact with, seems even harder for us to fathom, although it too has been amply corroborated. His early years of timidity seem to exclude such a possibility, but on the other hand nothing is more charming than power itself, and once Hitler began to be associated with power, the latter turned out to reinforce itself and thus to rise exponentially. In electoral campaigns

the Nazis introduced many innovations. They were focused on results and hence tailored their propaganda specifically for targeted audiences, something made possible by the fact that their ideology had no coherence but was sufficiently vague to allow a great latitude of interpretation. The fact that abstract truth and consistency was not a major virtue did nothing but to help. And it is also likely that actual anti-semitic propaganda was toned down in preference for anti-communist sentiments, playing on fears of a red terror, as being more susceptible to public concerns. Also the staging of mass rallies, as well as conducting a campaign using airplanes, greatly impressed the voting public. Although Nazism is often associated with a so called turning back of the clock, returning to a perceived primitive past of manly virtue; the movement as such was quite adept at exploiting modern technology and flirting with the nihilistic elements of futurism as enthusiastically expounded by the Italians instigators of that cultural movement. In fact there was in Nazism something for everyone, and to many it no doubt presented a wholesome antidote to the degeneracy of Weimar culture. Thus probably being as much associated with innocuous concerns like say naturism (nude bathing), environmental awareness, health and sunbathing, as with say explicit antisemitism. With some special pleading one may even argue that there was an explicit leftist touch to the movement in its appeal to the common man against the oppression of capitalists, although the latter of course were associated with foreign elements, notably a vaguely conceived Jewish conspiracy. But the party established good relations with high finance and those advocating more explicit leftist views were eventually purged.

The rise of Hitler is often seen as a cautionary tale for democracy. That democracy within itself harbours its own destruction, that it can only work with a well-educated and politically sophisticated electorate. Nazism rested on the mass-support for its legitimacy and it seems hard to see how a similar movement could have risen let alone taken power in the Germany of Bismarck. But, as Evans points out, it is very important to keep in mind that Hitler never enjoyed in Weimar times the support of the majority, although his party became eventually the largest one. Hitler was never elected by the Germans to become chancellor, but his elevation to such a position was engineered backstage by nationalistic politicians convinced that they could control him. In fact the popular support of the Nazism started to wane just prior to his promotion, and it is generally assumed that the party would have lost its influence once the temporary crisis following the Wall Street crash a few years earlier had run its course. Quite probably this was realised in the party giving them a sense of urgency, needing to act quickly and decisively while the iron was still warm.

What happened after the ascension to power is both illuminating and sad to contemplate. Illuminating as it shows the interdependence between the different institutions of a civilized society, and how fragile is the structure when it is being assaulted by a determined and ruthless foe. The Nazis acted with great dynamic force, employing to maximal effect their own indigenous armies, the larger SA - the brownshirts and the more exclusive SS, to achieve later notoriety. The only thing that could have stopped them at this stage would have been a military coup (incidentally illustrating the fact that such a universally deplorable outcome can in certain circumstances constitute the lesser of two evils). But powerful people able to have engineered such a development had already been

sidestepped earlier, and in any case, it is not clear that the army would have risked a civil war. Hindenburg, the old dotty of a spurious reputation due to his exploits on the Eastern front, was simply too senile and confused to have acted his role as a president in the circumstances³. After the burning of the Reichstag, often seen as a deliberate action by the Nazis, although Evans attributes its source to have been politically accidental, there followed a violent crack-down on the Communists. The Social-Democrats and other democratic parties would soon follow, as well as a special concord with the catholic church, modelled on the Italian precedent. But before that the crucial dismantling of parliamentary democracy occurred with the so called Enabling act, in which laws could be made completely sidestepping the parliament as well as the President. In order for such a fundamental law to become legal (illustrating once again that in principle democracy can legally dismantle itself) a two-thirds majority was needed. Such a one was engineered by brute intimidation of the representatives as well as ignoring absent Communist elected to the Reichstag, actually making it formally illegal, and thus in the context criminal. The Social Democratic leader timidly trying to oppose had brought with him cyanide (setting a precedent?) in case he would be attacked by the SA mob at the meeting.

Within a few months power had been consolidated, although some members of the judiciary, notably also some later notorious Nazis⁴, did exert independence in prosecuting members of the SA for wanton violence. Painful as it may be to read about the takeover, the actual physical suffering it brought about is probably dwarfed by the atrocities committed in 1918, and the violent coup against democracy it constituted, is in no way an isolated phenomenon during the 20th century, but had not only an obvious precedent, but also many repeats in the second half of the same century, examples of which the reader can easily provide for himself. The pain we feel from reading is due to the fact that the scale is still small enough to be fathomed and the victims are not without faces. Soon enough the scales would increase beyond the concretely imaginable.

To intellectuals the ugly and repellent face of Nazism assumes a special graphic quality in its suppression of culture and academia, although in the general setting those must be seen as rather trivial manifestations. When it came to the arts, official Nazi taste was extremely narrow and undeveloped, leading to an exclusion of all but the insipid⁵. The consequence was that many of the leading intellectuals emigrated and thereby in the general consciousness occupy positions as major and courageous dissenters. It is particularly depressing for an academic to witness how easily the academic professions caved in. For a mathematician there is some comfort, however thin, that the mathematicians and the

³ After becoming chancellor Hitler staged a military parade involving both the SA and veteran forces like the Steelhelmets. It is reported that when Hindenburg was viewing the spectacle from his tribune he wondered who the prisoners were that the German army had captured and paraded in front. The point being that the war veterans presented a very disciplinary force walking in perfect step, while the SA were stumbling along

⁴ Evans refers to Frank, later in charge of Poland

⁵ It is noted that Goebbels exhibited a more catholic appreciation, in particularly including Nolde, a rather conservative artist, probably in sympathy with many of the aims of the party itself, but who was considered artistically degenerate. Goebbels had to toe the line, which he probably did without serious regrets.

physicists were far less willing to engage in acts of denunciation than members of the humanities and the social sciences. Maybe the intellectual bankruptcy of the Nazi ideology was particularly obvious in settings marked by extreme rigour. An interesting case is Heidegger, whose enthusiasm for the movement is hard to understand. What did he want out of it? Personal glory and advancement? Meglomanica ambition? His philosophy was too sophisticated for the Nazis to embrace, and he thus never got to play the role he might have dreamt of⁶. In general the most prominent academicians and scientists emigrated while the mediocre ones took advantage of vacant positions. A cynical explanation may be that for the former emigration was an option due to their international recognition. In hindsight it is a mystery why not more people left than who actually did. The obvious explanation is that emigration was an act of desperation (and besides international borders were closed except to those of a celebrated status⁷) and few expected the extreme circumstances to prevail, in fact after consolidation a more lenient attitude was generally expected to surely develop. In the academic setting the vanguard of Nazification was carried through by enthusiastic students, involving the infamous spectacles of book-burnings. It is hard to avoid to compare such youthful enthusiasms with the excesses of the red guards in China thirty years later, and why not the student revolutionaries of '68? Youthful enthusiasm is seldom guided by deeper wisdom, but provides a malleable phenomenon to be exploited.

Then finally there was the gradual but inexorable deprivation of civic rights for the Jews, although initially those married to 'Aryans' or who had served in distinction in the War, were exempt. This disenfranchisement of their fellow Jews was watched neither by enthusiasm nor by any sense of outrage, testifying to the spectacle of a cowed population. The responsibility for atrocities do not only rest with the initiators but also with those who let them happen, be it out of opportunism, indifference or plain fear. Still, and this is very important to keep in mind, who can tell whether we would have acted differently. This doubt does not exonerate past decisions and actions but should stop us from assuming unwarranted righteousness.

Two more volumes have been advertised.

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⁶ A failure that obviously served him well after the war

⁷ Wanting to become a celebrity is not only an ambition of vanity but also an avenue to the freedom of choice