

The Genesis, Ideology, and Aftermath of Nazism

The Aftermath of Nazism and World War II

In May 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allies, marking the end of World War II in Europe. Anticipating defeat, Adolf Hitler, his propaganda minister Goebbels, and their families committed collective suicide in Berlin in April 1945. The fear of retribution was palpable among Nazi supporters, as exemplified by a prominent physician, Helmuth's father, who contemplated killing his family before taking his own life, fearing the Allies would exact revenge for the atrocities committed against the 'crippled and Jews'.

An International Military Tribunal was established at Nuremberg to prosecute Nazi war criminals for 'Crimes against Peace', 'War Crimes', and 'Crimes Against Humanity'. Germany had waged a genocidal war, resulting in the mass murder of millions of innocent civilians, including 6 million Jews, 200,000 Gypsies, 1 million Polish civilians, 70,000 mentally and physically disabled Germans, and countless political opponents. The Nazis employed unprecedented methods of killing, such as gassing people in centers like Auschwitz. While eleven leading Nazis were sentenced to death and many others imprisoned, the retribution was widely considered insufficient given the scale of their crimes. The Allies, however, aimed to avoid the harshness imposed on Germany after the First World War.

The Genesis: Germany After World War I

Many believed that the rise of Nazi Germany was rooted in Germany's experience at the end of the First World War.

Defeat and the Treaty of Versailles

Germany, a powerful empire, fought World War I (1914-1918) alongside the Austrian empire against the Allies (England, France, Russia, and later the USA). The war, which drained Europe's resources, ended with Germany's defeat by the Allies in November 1918. The abdication of the emperor led to the establishment of the Weimar Republic, a democratic constitution with a federal structure, where deputies were elected to the Reichstag by universal adult suffrage, including women. However, this republic was immediately unpopular due to the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, signed with the Allies:

- Germany lost its overseas colonies, a tenth of its population, 13% of its territories, 75% of its iron, and 26% of its coal to neighboring countries.
- The Allied Powers demilitarized Germany.
- The 'War Guilt Clause' held Germany solely responsible for the war and the damages suffered by Allied countries.
- Germany was forced to pay compensation amounting to £6 billion.
- The resource-rich Rhineland was occupied by Allied armies for much of the 1920s.

Many Germans blamed the new Weimar Republic for both the war's defeat and the humiliation at Versailles, mockingly calling its supporters (Socialists, Catholics, Democrats) 'November criminals'.

Effects of the War and Political Instability

Beyond the treaty, the war had a devastating psychological and financial impact on Europe, turning it from a continent of creditors into one of debtors. The Weimar Republic inherited the burden of war guilt and national humiliation, further crippled by reparations. European society saw soldiers glorified above civilians, with politicians and publicists emphasizing aggression, strength, and masculinity. Media glorified trench life, despite the miserable reality faced by soldiers. This environment fostered popular support for conservative dictatorships, highlighting democracy's fragility in interwar Europe.

Political Radicalism and Economic Crises

- **Spartacist Uprising and Political Divide:** The Weimar Republic's birth coincided with the revolutionary Spartacist League uprising, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution. While the Republic crushed this uprising with the help of the Free Corps, it led to the formation of the Communist Party of Germany. This created an irreconcilable enmity between Communists and Socialists, preventing a united front against Hitler.
- **Hyperinflation of 1923:** Germany's war efforts were largely funded by loans, and it had to pay war reparations in gold, depleting its reserves. When Germany refused to pay in 1923, France occupied the industrial Ruhr region. Germany retaliated by recklessly printing paper currency, leading to hyperinflation. The value of the German mark plummeted dramatically (e.g., 1 US dollar equaled 24,000 marks in April, rising to trillions by December), causing prices to soar and widespread hardship. The Dawes Plan, introduced by the Americans, later eased Germany's financial burden by reworking reparation terms.

- **The Great Depression (1929-1932):** A period of relative stability (1924-1928) ended with the Wall Street Exchange crash in 1929, triggering the Great Economic Depression. German economic recovery, dependent on short-term US loans, collapsed. Industrial production fell by 40% by 1932, unemployment reached 6 million, and despair became commonplace. The middle classes feared 'proletarianisation' (being reduced to the working class or unemployed), while farmers suffered from falling agricultural prices. The Weimar Republic's inherent defects, such as proportional representation (leading to unstable coalition governments) and Article 48 (allowing the President to impose emergency rule and suspend civil rights), further weakened public confidence in democracy.

Hitler's Rise to Power

Adolf Hitler, born in Austria in 1889, served as a corporal in World War I, earning medals for bravery. Horrified by Germany's defeat and enraged by the Treaty of Versailles, he joined the German Workers' Party in 1919, which he later renamed the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party). After a failed coup attempt in 1923, the Nazis struggled to gain popular support until the Great Depression. The economic crisis, with its widespread unemployment and destitution, created fertile ground for Nazi propaganda promising a better future. The Nazi Party's share of votes in the Reichstag surged from 2.6% in 1928 to 37% by 1932, making it the largest party.

Hitler's Appeal and Propaganda

Hitler was a powerful and passionate speaker who promised to build a strong nation, undo the injustice of Versailles, restore German dignity, provide employment, and secure the future for the youth. He vowed to eliminate foreign influences and resist 'conspiracies' against Germany. He pioneered a new style of politics, utilizing rituals and spectacles for mass mobilization, including massive rallies, red banners with the Swastika, Nazi salutes, and ritualized applause. Nazi propaganda skillfully projected Hitler as a messiah, a savior who would deliver the German people from their distress, appealing to a population whose pride had been shattered by economic and political crises.

The Destruction of Democracy

On January 30, 1933, President Hindenburg offered Hitler the Chancellorship. Once in power, Hitler swiftly dismantled democratic structures:

- **Fire Decree (February 28, 1933):** A mysterious fire in the Reichstag building provided the pretext to indefinitely suspend civic rights (freedom of speech, press, assembly) guaranteed by the Weimar constitution.
- **Repression of Opponents:** Communists, considered arch-enemies, were swiftly sent to newly established concentration camps. They were among 52 types of victims persecuted by the Nazis.
- **Enabling Act (March 3, 1933):** This act established dictatorship, giving Hitler all powers to sideline Parliament and rule by decree. All political parties and trade unions were banned, except for the Nazi Party and its affiliates. The state gained complete control over the economy, media, army, and judiciary.
- **Special Security Forces:** New extra-constitutional forces were created, including the Gestapo (secret state police), SS (protection squads), criminal police, and Security Service (SD). These forces operated with impunity, detaining people in torture chambers, sending them to concentration camps, deporting them, or arresting them without legal procedures.

Reconstruction and Expansion

Hitler initially focused on economic recovery, assigning Hjalmar Schacht to implement state-funded work-creation programs, which produced the famous German superhighways and the Volkswagen. In foreign policy, Hitler achieved quick successes:

- Pulled out of the League of Nations (1933).
- Reoccupied the Rhineland (1936).
- Integrated Austria and Germany (1938) under the slogan 'One people, One empire, and One leader'.
- Wrested German-speaking Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, then absorbed the entire country.

These actions, often met with unspoken support from England (which considered the Versailles Treaty too harsh), seemed to reverse Germany's destiny. However, Hitler's true aim was war and territorial expansion. He dismissed Schacht, who advised against rearmament due to deficit financing, choosing war as a means to accumulate resources through territorial expansion.

World War II and the Eastern Front

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, initiating war with France and England. The Tripartite Pact (Germany, Italy, Japan) in September 1940 solidified Hitler's international power, and puppet regimes were installed across much of Europe. At the pinnacle of his power, Hitler pursued his long-term goal of conquering Eastern Europe to secure 'Lebensraum' (living space) and food supplies for Germans. His attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 proved to be a 'historic blunder', exposing Germany's western front to British aerial bombing and its eastern front to the powerful Soviet armies. The Soviet Red Army inflicted a crushing defeat at Stalingrad, then hounded retreating German soldiers to Berlin, establishing Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe for half a century.

Meanwhile, the USA, initially reluctant to join the war due to past economic problems, entered after Japan (an Axis power) expanded its power in the East, occupied French Indo-China, and bombed the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. The war concluded in May 1945 with Hitler's defeat and the US dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Nazi Worldview and Ideology

Nazi ideology, synonymous with Hitler's worldview, rejected equality and embraced a racial hierarchy. At the top were the blond, blue-eyed Nordic German Aryans, while Jews were placed at the lowest rung, considered an 'anti-race' and arch-enemies. Other 'colored people' were ranked in between based on external features. This racism drew on misinterpretations of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection, and Herbert Spencer's concept of 'survival of the fittest'. Nazis twisted these ideas to justify human intervention in a supposed natural process, arguing that the strongest race (Aryans) must survive, retain purity, become stronger, and dominate the world.

The other core aspect of Hitler's ideology was the geopolitical concept of 'Lebensraum' (living space). He believed Germany needed to acquire new territories in the East for settlement, which would expand the 'mother country', allow settlers to maintain ties with their origin, and enhance Germany's material resources and power. Poland became the primary 'laboratory' for this expansionist experimentation.

Establishment of the Racial State

Upon gaining power, the Nazis immediately began implementing their vision of an exclusive racial community of 'pure and healthy Nordic Aryans'. All those deemed 'undesirable' were

targeted for physical elimination. This included Germans considered 'impure' or 'abnormal', many of whom were condemned to death under the 'Euthanasia Programme'. Gypsies and blacks were persecuted as 'racial inferiors' threatening Aryan biological purity. Russians and Poles were deemed 'subhuman' and forced into slave labor, often dying from hard work and starvation.

Jews, however, were the worst sufferers. Nazi hatred of Jews, while having roots in traditional Christian hostility (stereotyping them as Christ's killers and usurers, barring them from land ownership, confining them to ghettos, and subjecting them to periodic violence), was fundamentally based on pseudoscientific race theories. These theories asserted that conversion was not a solution; only total elimination would solve the 'Jewish problem'.

Stages of Persecution and Annihilation (The Holocaust)

1. Exclusion (1933-1939): Jews were terrorized, pauperized, and segregated, compelled to leave Germany. The Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 stripped Jews of German citizenship, forbidding marriages and extramarital relations between Jews and Germans, and prohibiting Jews from flying the national flag. Other legal measures included boycotts of Jewish businesses, expulsion from government services, and forced selling and confiscation of properties. A major pogrom in November 1938, known as 'the night of broken glass', saw Jewish properties vandalized, synagogues burnt, and men arrested.

2. Ghettoisation (1940-1944): From September 1941, all Jews were forced to wear a yellow Star of David. They were confined to Jewish houses in Germany and ghettos like Lodz and Warsaw in Eastern Europe. These ghettos became sites of extreme misery, poverty, hunger, starvation, and disease due to deprivation and poor hygiene. Jews had to surrender all their wealth upon entering.

3. Annihilation (1941 onwards): Under the cover of war, the Nazis pursued their 'racial ideal' through genocide. Occupied Poland was divided, with much of the northwest annexed to Germany. Poles were forcibly removed from their homes, which were then occupied by ethnic Germans. Polish intelligentsia were murdered to keep the population servile. Aryan-looking Polish children were snatched, race-tested, and either raised in German families or left to perish in orphanages. The remaining parts of Poland, designated the 'General Government', became the destination for all 'undesirables' and served as killing fields for Jews, featuring large ghettos and gas chambers. Jews from across Europe were transported by goods trains to death factories in Poland and elsewhere, including Belzec, Auschwitz, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, and Majdanek, where they were gassed with 'scientific precision'.

Control Over Society: Youth and Women

Hitler was fanatically interested in controlling the youth to build a strong Nazi society, implementing ideological training both inside and outside schools.

Youth in Nazi Germany

- **School Cleansing:** Schools were 'cleansed' by dismissing Jewish and 'politically unreliable' teachers. Children were segregated, with 'undesirable children' (Jews, physically handicapped, Gypsies) expelled and eventually sent to gas chambers.
- **Nazi Schooling:** 'Good German' children underwent prolonged ideological training. Textbooks were rewritten, racial science was introduced to justify Nazi racial ideas, and stereotypes about Jews were popularized even in math classes. Children were taught loyalty, submissiveness, hatred of Jews, and worship of Hitler. Sports were used to nurture violence and aggression, with boxing promoted to make boys 'iron-hearted, strong, and masculine'.
- **Youth Organizations:** Ten-year-olds joined Jungvolk, and at 14, all boys joined the Hitler Youth, where they learned to glorify war, aggression, and violence, condemn democracy, and hate 'undesirables'. After rigorous training, they joined the Labour Service at 18, then served in the armed forces and Nazi organizations. All other youth organizations were systematically dissolved and banned.

The Nazi Cult of Motherhood

Nazi ideology dictated that women were radically different from men, and the fight for equal rights was seen as destructive. Boys were trained to be aggressive and masculine, while girls were taught to be good mothers, rear 'pure-blooded Aryan children', maintain racial purity, manage the home, and instill Nazi values. Hitler declared, 'In my state the mother is the most important citizen.'

However, not all mothers were treated equally:

- Women who bore 'racially undesirable' children were punished.
- Those who produced 'racially desirable' children received favored treatment in hospitals, concessions in shops, and on tickets. 'Honour Crosses' were awarded for having many children (bronze for four, silver for six, gold for eight or more).
- 'Aryan' women who deviated from the prescribed code of conduct, such as maintaining contact with Jews, Poles, or Russians, were publicly condemned and severely punished,

often paraded with shaved heads and placards, facing jail sentences, and losing civic honor, husbands, and families.

The Art of Propaganda

The Nazi regime meticulously used language and media to great effect, often employing deceptive and chilling terms:

- **Euphemisms for Murder:** Words like 'kill' or 'murder' were avoided in official communications. Mass killings were termed 'special treatment', 'final solution' (for Jews), 'euthanasia' (for the disabled), 'selection', and 'disinfections'. 'Evacuation' meant deporting people to gas chambers, which themselves were labeled 'disinfection-areas' and designed to look like bathrooms with fake showerheads.
- **Media Manipulation:** Nazi ideas were spread through visual images, films, radio, posters, catchy slogans, and leaflets. Posters stereotyped, mocked, and abused 'enemies' as evil. Socialists and liberals were depicted as weak and degenerate foreign agents. Propaganda films, such as *The Eternal Jew*, were made to create hatred for Jews, portraying them as vermin, rats, and pests, often with exaggerated features (e.g., hooked noses, flowing beards) despite many German Jews being assimilated. This propaganda worked on people's emotions, channeling their hatred and anger towards 'undesirables'.
- **Broad Appeal:** Nazis skillfully appealed to all sections of the population, including farmers and workers, by promising solutions to their problems.

Ordinary People and the Crimes Against Humanity

While many Germans adopted the Nazi worldview, feeling hatred for Jews, reporting suspicious neighbors, and believing Nazism would bring prosperity, not all were Nazis. Some actively resisted, braving repression and death. However, the large majority were passive onlookers, too scared to act or protest, preferring to 'look away'. Pastor Niemoeller, a resistance fighter, famously lamented this 'uncanny silence' in the face of brutal crimes, noting that people remained silent as different groups were targeted, until 'there was no one left who could stand up for me.' Some, like Erna Kranz, an ordinary German teenager, genuinely felt the 1930s offered hope and improved well-being, highlighting the subjective experience of the era.

Knowledge About the Holocaust and its Legacy

Information about Nazi atrocities began to trickle out during the final years of the regime, but the full horror of the Holocaust was only realized after Germany's defeat. While Germans

grappled with their own plight as a defeated nation, Jewish survivors were determined to ensure the world remembered their suffering. Many ghetto and camp inhabitants kept diaries, notebooks, and created archives, demonstrating an 'indomitable spirit to bear witness'. Conversely, the Nazi leadership attempted to destroy incriminating evidence as defeat became imminent. Today, the history and memory of the Holocaust are preserved through memoirs, fiction, documentaries, poetry, memorials, and museums worldwide, serving as a tribute to those who resisted, a reminder to collaborators, and a warning to those who remained silent. Mahatma Gandhi's letters to Hitler, appealing for peace and non-violence, stand as a testament to the moral opposition against the Nazi regime.