



NAZI IDEOLOGY

and the HOLOCAUST

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RESEARCH, WRITING, AND EDITING

William F. Meinecke Jr., *Historian*
Alexandra Zapruder, *Consultant*
Timothy Kaiser, *Project Director*
Laura Glassman and Barbara Hart
of Publications Professionals, *Copy Editors*

REVIEW

Peter Black, *Senior Historian*
Sarah Ogilvie, *Director of the National Institute
for Holocaust Education*
Steven Luckert, *Permanent Exhibition Curator*
Susan Bachrach, *Special Exhibitions Curator*
Edward Phillips, *Deputy Director of Exhibitions*
Daniel Napolitano, *Director of Education*

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

Studio A, Alexandria, Va.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Fred Zeidman, *Chairman*
Joel M. Geideman, *Vice Chair*
Sara J. Bloomfield, *Director*

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Victoria Barnett	Andrea Lewis
Lea Caruso	Wendy Ng
Amy Donovan	Bruce Tapper
Stephen Feinberg	

NAZI IDEOLOGY



BETWEEN 1933 AND 1945, GERMANY'S GOVERNMENT, LED BY ADOLF HITLER AND THE National Socialist (Nazi) party, carried out a deliberate, calculated attack on European Jewry. Basing their actions on antisemitic ideology and using World War II as a primary means to achieve their goals, they targeted Jews as their main enemy, killing six million Jewish men, women, and children by the time the war ended in 1945. This act of genocide is now known as the Holocaust. As part of their wide-reaching efforts to remove from German territory all those whom they considered racially, biologically, or socially unfit, the Nazis terrorized many other groups as well, including Roma (also known as Gypsies), Germans with mental and physical disabilities, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, and Soviet prisoners of war. In the course of this state-sponsored tyranny, the Nazis left countless lives shattered and millions dead.

Much has been written about what took place during the era of the Holocaust and where, when, and how the Nazis carried out their murderous plans. To fully comprehend the Nazis' actions, however, one must consider and understand the theoretical underpinnings that led them to conceive of such plans in the first place. In other words, what did the Nazis believe and how did they put their theories into practice?

Adolf Hitler formulated and articulated the ideas that came to be known as Nazi ideology. Born in a small town in Austria, Hitler had failed as an art student before becoming a corporal in the German army. Like many of his countrymen, he was embittered and humiliated by Germany's defeat in World War I and was further outraged by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, which had been signed in 1918 and which required the vanquished nation to give up vast territories and to pay heavy war debts.

Hitler joined the nascent Nazi party in the early 1920s, finding a political home among others who despised Germany's democratic Weimar government—established immediately following Germany's defeat in World War I—and who blamed Marxists and Jews for the country's problems. Hitler used his personal charisma to rise to the top of the radical, militant party, soon becoming its leader. Amid economic crisis and social unrest throughout Germany, the ranks of the Nazis swelled to 50,000 by 1923.

That same year, Hitler and the Nazi party attempted a coup, called the Beer-Hall Putsch, but failed to seize control of the government. In the trial that followed, Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison for treason. There, he wrote his political autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), in which he outlined his vision of a new future for Germany. In his book, Hitler stated that he first became an active antisemite during his formative years in Vienna, where he became familiar with social Darwinism. That theory sought to apply Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to human society, imagining all of human history as a struggle for primacy between social groups, whether defined by race, ethnicity,

nation, or class. He also incorporated in his writing elements of Malthusian economics, a theory suggesting that the earth's finite ability to produce food, as well as its cycles of disease and natural disaster, inherently limited population growth. Finally, Hitler combined those theories with writing about the nationalist German notion of "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*), which glorified peasant life and idealized the land. From this composite of social, economic, historical, and mystical elements, Hitler adapted and skillfully propagated an ideology that put the necessity of racial struggle at the center of human affairs.

Hitler was convinced that he had found the key to comprehending an extraordinarily complex world. He believed that a person's characteristics, attitudes, abilities, and behavior were determined by his or her so-called racial makeup. In Hitler's view, all groups, races, or peoples (he used those terms interchangeably) carried within them traits that were immutably transmitted from one generation to the next. For better or for worse, no individual could overcome the innate qualities of race.

Although most people accept the notion of an *individual* human impulse to survive, Hitler, like other social Darwinists, believed that all members of a race or ethnic group shared a *collective* instinct for survival. In his view, the continuation of a race primarily depended on the ability of its members to pass on its innate characteristics to succeeding generations. This notion translated to an abhorrence of intermingling between peoples, because it would lead to the pollution of the distinguishing elements of the race and, in turn, to the degeneration of its very nature. According to this thinking, this process could, over time, threaten and potentially extinguish an entire race.

The second element in Hitler's theory of survival involved the need to acquire "living space" (*Lebensraum*). Each race, he asserted, was driven to struggle with others for room in which to grow and for resources on which to thrive. "Every being strives for expansion," he said in a speech in Erlangen, Germany, in November 1930, "and every nation strives for world domination." Those who were successful in this territorial competition would continue to expand their numbers, thereby overwhelming the smaller populations around them. The lesser races, weakened by a lack of living space, would eventually stagnate and die out. In the end, he judged the success or failure of each race by the size of its population and the area of territory it controlled: a great nation occupied a huge area of land; a weak one held little or none. The road map to racial survival depended not on peaceful coexistence with one's neighbors but on defeating them in the quest for limited resources.

In Hitler's mind, however, the struggle for survival was not a neutral contest in which all races were different but equally entitled to supremacy. Instead, he believed in a hierarchy of racial groups in which some were inherently gifted—possessed of traits such as integrity, intelligence, and beauty—whereas others were fundamentally flawed by nature

and were devious, stupid, or ugly. Because he held that all racial groups shared the same drive for collective survival (competing against one another for finite resources and space in which to grow), and because he thought that racial mixing diluted good characteristics and spread bad ones, Hitler viewed those races at the top of the hierarchy as being at risk of infiltration and destruction by those at the bottom. To survive, a superior race must not only separate itself from lesser ones but also continue to suppress and dominate those who would threaten to overtake it.

Hitler imagined himself as a savior, applying his theoretical construct of racial struggle to the specific case of Germany. He condemned the democratic Weimar Republic as weak and ineffectual. Moreover, he felt the country's leaders had led the nation dangerously astray and had corrupted the German soul by overemphasizing the intrinsic worth of the individual. To Hitler, individuality was an egoistic and culture-corroding value because it duped people into forgetting about and thereby relinquishing their role in the collective group, which he called "race-consciousness."

Hitler was not alone in his beliefs. Nationalist political movements in Germany and Austria tended to view the state as a collective entity, describing it as a "National Community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*). More-extreme racist nationalists saw the state as a "community of the people" (*völkische Gemeinschaft*), by which they meant not just a national but a racial group imbued with a mystical sense of shared blood and common fate. In such a framework, which Hitler wholeheartedly adopted, a person mattered only for the role he or she played in serving the racial community. Hitler planned to use his power to reeducate the people along those lines by suppressing any political or spiritual loyalty beyond that to the race-nation. He would thus reclaim for Germany its place among the nations and would ensure its collective survival.

The stakes of this racial "survival of the fittest" mentality were particularly high for Hitler and for those who adopted his views, because they believed themselves to be at the top of the hierarchy but threatened with infiltration and corruption by inferior peoples. They called themselves "Aryans," although the term, in fact, refers to the language spoken by Indo-Germanic settlers from Persia and India who migrated over centuries into Europe. The Nazis perverted the word's meaning to support racist ideas by viewing those of Germanic background as prime examples of "Aryan" stock, which they considered racially superior; the typical "Aryan" in the Nazi view was blond, blue-eyed, and tall. Additionally, for Hitler and the Nazis, a racial hierarchy existed even among so-called Aryan peoples, and they dubbed those of Nordic descent, especially "Aryan" Germans, as the ultimate "Master Race," gifted above all others by virtue of innate superiority. As such, the Nazis believed they were destined to rule a vast empire they called *Das Dritte Reich*, or the Third Reich

(the Nazis used this term to emphasize historical continuity—First Reich: the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, 962–1806; Second Reich: Hohenzollern empire, 1871–1918; and the Third Reich, which would begin when the Nazi Party came to power).

Hitler painted for his countrymen a terrifying picture of this great race of “Aryan” Germans threatened with imminent danger because of the Weimar Republic’s misguided leadership following World War I. By opening the doors of the nation to members of those races that the Nazis considered innately inferior and by granting them equal rights as German citizens, Hitler argued that the republic and its predecessors had encouraged intermarriage between “Aryan” Germans and inferior foreigners. This racial intermixing, in turn, produced offspring whose undesirable racial traits contaminated the purity of the “Aryan” bloodline and who were unlikely, because of their race, to be loyal to Germany. To make matters worse, the republic had also permitted the unlimited reproduction of people whom Hitler considered biologically flawed, degenerate, or a negative influence on the health of the race as a whole. This reckless lack of respect for the law of nature, Hitler argued, posed a dire threat to the purity of the “Aryan” German race and, consequently, to its very existence. “By mating again and again with other races,” Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “we may raise these races from their previous cultural level to a higher stage, but we will descend forever from our own high level.”

Hitler and the Nazi party outlined in clear and unequivocal terms their racial enemies. Those races included Roma (Gypsies), Slavs, African Germans, and especially Jews. Likewise, people with physical and mental disabilities, viewed as “hereditarily unfit” Germans, were deemed a biological threat to the health of the nation. As the Nazis framed it, the particular threat each so-called enemy posed to the collective whole was slightly different, but the essence was the same. Building on age-old prejudice and suspicion, Nazi rhetoric made a case for the segregation and exclusion of those whom they considered a danger to their racial purity.

In Hitler’s mind, no group was more dangerous and more threatening than the Jews. Because he defined them as a race, he argued that they were instinctively driven to increase their numbers and dominate others. At the same time, he insisted that their methods of expansion were fundamentally suspect. Because Hitler tied racial continuation to territorial acquisition, he believed the Jews, who had no land of their own, should not exist at all. In fact, he theorized that when the Romans expelled the Jewish people from Israel more than 2,000 years ago and scattered them across the empire in what has come to be called the Diaspora, the Jews should have begun a long decline, ending ultimately in extinction. So why did they continue to exist and even thrive? Hitler concluded that they must have adapted to their landless environment and cultivated traits—such as cunning,

deviousness, and deceitfulness—that would ensure their survival. In so doing, their very existence in his view ran counter to nature and defied the intended course of human history.

Specifically, Hitler believed that the Jews escaped extinction by migrating and attaching themselves to existing states or communities, always pushing their own interests and exploiting the native people whose territory they entered. According to Hitler, the Jewish nature was the opposite of the “Aryan” Germans’ nature. Whereas the Nazis prized racial hierarchies and purity of bloodlines, the Jews, in his view, sought race-mixing, assimilation, and equality; whereas the Germans valued national strength and loyalty, the Jews weakened states by cultivating international businesses and financial institutions that fostered interdependence among nations. Hitler presented Jews as parasites, who used devious means, such as financial profiteering, media control, and race-mixing, to weaken the “host” nation, dull its race-consciousness, and reduce its capacity to defend itself. He voiced his view in a speech in Nuremberg in January 1923: “The internal expurgation of the Jewish spirit is not possible in any Platonic way, for the Jewish spirit is the product of the Jewish person. Unless we expel the Jewish people soon, they will have Judaized our people within a very short time.”

Hitler believed that the Soviet Union was the first country in which the Jews had triumphed and that the Jews were using the Communist state to enslave the Slavic population. Like other Nazi leaders and right-wing nationalist politicians, he imagined that Jews were creating conditions necessary for a Soviet revolutionary takeover in Germany: massive unemployment, hunger, and homelessness. In his view, then, rather than a legitimate political and economic structure, communism was a tool devised by Jews to disguise their dominance and control of the Slav and so-called Asiatic peoples of eastern Europe and Eurasia. In the fact that two of every three European Jews lived in eastern Europe, Hitler found further corroboration for his view that the region had been infiltrated and taken over by the Jewish people.

Anti-Jewish paranoia was not original to Hitler or the Nazis. A fabricated publication called “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”—first published in Russia in 1905—purported to document the secret plans of Jewish leaders who were conspiring to take over the world by, among other methods, controlling the international economy and the media. That work, conclusively dismissed as “clumsy plagiarism” by the London *Times* in 1921, nevertheless continued to circulate throughout Europe and the United States, thus providing support for worldwide antisemitic political movements. For Hitler, this distorted image of Jews as aggressors, quietly plotting to destabilize the state and secretly manipulating the forces that guide the government, justified and allowed preemptive action against them. As he expressed it in *Mein Kampf*, the threat was dire: “If, with the help of

Sankt Ojftgilz



Beschreibungen von Ernst Haeckel
Bilder von F. J. J. van der Pijl

1903

the Marxist creed, the Jew conquers the nations of the world, his crown will become the funeral wreath of humanity, and once again, this planet, empty of mankind, will move through the ether as it did thousands of years ago.”

Cover of a German antisemitic children's book (left), *Der Giftpilz (The Poisonous Mushroom)*, first published in Germany in 1935. This printing appeared in 1938. Even elementary schools became forums of political indoctrination and racial hatred. Nazi propaganda taught Germans to think in racist terms. GERMANY, 1938. USHMM COLLECTION

This view of Jews as Communists who had used their cunning to take over vast areas of eastern Europe fit neatly within Hitler's theories of territorial acquisition and population expansion. He contended that Germany was facing a dangerously low birth rate, largely because the lack of living space physically restricted the nation's growth. He and many other Germans blamed those problems on the Versailles Treaty, which forced Germany to give up thousands of square miles of valuable land to its neighbors, above all to Poland in the east and to France in the west. The result, as the Nazis saw it, was that Germany was losing the competition for land and population to the inferior Slavs, who occupied huge parts of the continent to the east.

To survive, Hitler argued, Germany must go to war, break the encirclement of the country by its enemies, reconquer the territory lost after World War I, and create a vast empire in the east. Despite the costs of war, the increased living space would provide Germany with the lands needed to expand its population and with the resources necessary to elevate it to world-power status. In the threatening and urgent language so characteristic of Nazism, Hitler warned that the opportunity was almost lost. If “Aryan” Germans did

not act decisively, they would come under the control of the Communist Jews and, in turn, be swept away by the masses of barbaric, uncivilized Slavs to the east.

For Hitler, German conquest would also destroy—once and for all time—the enemy of all peoples: the Jews. Hitler preached a simple tautology: on the one hand, the destruction of the Jews would weaken the Soviet state and facilitate the conquest of new living space for Germany; on the other hand, the realization of Germany’s natural claim to territory in the east would deal a decisive defeat to international Jewry. In the context of this ideological war against the Soviet Union, the Nazis planned and implemented the Holocaust.

Hitler’s theories led to the persecution of so-called inferior races inside Germany and, following the onset of war, the subjugation of various groups throughout the new German empire. The successful realization of his ideas, however, depended on the complete cooperation and unity of the National Community, which was to be made up of race-conscious “Aryan” Germans who accepted, obeyed, and conformed with Nazi ideology and social norms. Hitler and the Nazis demanded the public’s unconditional obedience, tolerating no criticism or dissent. Indeed, they saw it as their duty to conduct a perpetual “self-purge” of society, rooting out those who failed to support their views and help realize their vision. For this reason, those who rejected Nazi ideology, even if they were considered racially pure “Aryan” Germans, found themselves in grave danger.

A German Jewish schoolboy (right) wears the compulsory yellow Star of David. BERLIN, GERMANY, 1942. USHMM, COURTESY OF YAD VASHEM PHOTO ARCHIVES

For Adolf Hitler and those who adopted his theories and embraced his views, a race-conscious government naturally needed to tend to its survival imperatives: to identify

German conquest, for Hitler,

would also destroy those he perceived

to be the enemy of all peoples: the Jews.



and segregate races, to subdue so-called inferior peoples and promote the reproduction of superior ones, and to go to war to seize territory from neighboring nations. Moral and legal considerations were irrelevant, Hitler cautioned, for the iron law of nature dictated that the strong take from the weak. By virtue of their racial superiority, Germans had the right—indeed the duty—to suppress and eliminate the racial threats in their midst and to seize territory from the Slavs and to repopulate it with “Aryan” Germans. By doing so, Hitler insisted, they were following their own natural instincts and serving the progress of humanity. In the end, Hitler’s program of war and genocide stemmed from what he saw as a hard equation of survival: “Aryan” Germans would have to expand and dominate, a process requiring the elimination of all racial threats—especially the Jews—or else they would face extinction themselves.