

The Roots of Nazism

What are the roots of Nazism? One group of historians, who support the *Sonderweg* theory, find a connection between Nazi ideology and Germany's traditionally conservative government. According to these historians, the Nazis promotion of violence, anti-Semitism, *Lebensraum* (living space), and the purity of the Aryan race, was a continuation of policies that were supported by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial government (Nazi Party Program, cited in McDonough, pp. 104-106). Other historians contend that Nazi ideology cannot be traced back to some point in German history. They argue that Nazism was a unique phenomenon, which was born out of the many problems faced by the Weimar Republic. These problems include contending with Germany's humiliating defeat in World War I, the damaging effects of hyperinflation on the middle class, large reparation payments, and massive unemployment. In the midst of this turmoil, right and left wing opponents of the Weimar Republic banded together in support of radicals, like the Nazis, who promised them a better future. Whether Nazism was unique or not is also a point of contention among some historians.

Historian Oded Heilbrunner is one scholar who believes that Nazism was not a product of German history but was a unique phenomenon created out of the Weimar's unstable government. He asserts that "Nazism was a general mart for

all the social movements which had existed on the fringes of Wilhelmine society, [and] had risen to prominence during the war and [which] became influential during the 1920s” (Heilbronner, p. 575). Additionally, Hitler’s charismatic appeal helped to win over Democrats, conservatives, liberals, and Marxists who were dissatisfied with the problems of the Weimar Republic (Hitler on Spoken Word, cited in McDonough, pp. 110-11). Heilbronner contends that the Nazis may not have come to power without the unique economic troubles that Germany faced due to its inability to pay its wartime debts as required by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. By 1929, the combination of German repayment debts, hyperinflation, and massive unemployment resulted in “a profound radicalization and politicization of [German] society,” which made it possible for the Nazis to come to power (Heilbronner, p. 575). This radicalization and politicization included Germany’s farmers, who were convinced by Hitler that they were the backbone of a pure German society (Nazi Appeal to Farmers, cited in McDonough, pp. 114-15).

President Paul von Hindenburg allowed the Nazis to come to power because: he shared their conservative tendencies, he believed that they could be controlled, and he also had a fear that the Communists would otherwise take over the government (Spielvogel, p. 67). By discussing Hitler and Hindenburg’s shared conservative beliefs, including anti-Semitism, Heilbronner does give credence to the idea of continuity to some extent (Heilbronner, p. 575). Yet, he

believes that the Nazis extreme anti-Semitism had no roots in German history. He asserts that “even in the Weimar period it is hard to discover a direct line leading to the mass extermination of the Jews years later” (Heilbronner, p. 574). This point suggests that Heilbronner was a functionalist, who believed that the Nazis did not have any clear plan for the Jews other than to discriminate against them (Engel, p. 27). This perception could have been deceptive, however, since the Nazis toned down their anti-Semitic rhetoric before they came to power.

Heilbronner explains that the majority of Nazi supporters were not anti-Semitic; there was only a small group of Nazi leaders who imposed anti-Semitism as part of the party’s platform (Heilbronner, p. 574). He claims that “the frequent and difficult crises under Weimer contributed more than anything else to the dehumanization of German society and its elites” (Heilbronner, pp. 573-74). Consequently, German citizens were willing to accept the Nazis’ radical platform, which promised to create a greater Germany (Nazi Party Demands, cited in McDonough, p. 106). Heilbronner argues that the unique desperation experienced by Weimar citizens resulted in the triumph of a unique phenomenon, called Nazism.

On the other side of the scholarly debate are historians, like Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who support the *Sonderweg* theory of continuity. Wehler maintains that Nazi ideology can be traced to Germany’s imperial government. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution in the 1870s, the traditionally conservative German

elites who ran the government needed a plan in order to maintain their supremacy over the emerging middle class. Through policies, such as “social imperialism, social protectionism, and social militarism,” Wehler explains, these elites were able to retain control over German society (Wehler, cited in Mitchell, p. 5). In order to maintain the status quo, German elites implemented progressive social reforms that were defensive in nature, including the establishment of social insurance (Wehler, cited in Mitchell, p. 5-6). Wehler insists that “together with a combination of traditionalism and partial modernisation, they were able...to preserve the stability of an historically outdated power structure over a surprisingly long period [of time]” (Wehler, cited in Mitchell, p. 6). However, they were not able to hold together this social cohesion forever.

At a time when the growing middle class was in search of more liberal policies and reforms, Wehler believes that the conservative leaders did not go far enough to completely transform society because it would have entailed a loss of power for those in the government. Resisting this change, the elites entered World War I in order to refrain and to distract German society from the reforms it wanted. Discredited by the wartime loss and with the removal of Kaiser Wilhelm from power by the military, the Imperial government fell. However, its values ideas were sustained. These beliefs included “the tenacity of the German ideology of the state, its myth of the bureaucracy, the superimposition of class

differences on those between the traditional late-feudal estates and the manipulation of political anti-Semitism” (Wehler, cited in Mitchell, p. 7-8).

Helping to keep these ideas alive were the autonomy of the conservative military and the continued existence of a right-wing judiciary. Both of these elements opposed democracy and supported authoritarianism (Spielvogel, p. 15). This was especially evident in the short prison sentence given to Nazi Fuhrer Adolph Hitler for his role in the failed 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. While the Social Democratic-led coalition government in Weimar tried to instill democratic values in its citizens, persistent economic problems prevented the complete transformation of society. In search of security, Germans clung to their “old” beliefs in authoritarianism after they turned against democracy. Wehler contends that “the fact that [the] break with the past did not go deep enough and that the consequences of the successful preservation of outworn traditions remained everywhere visible after 1918, accounts for the acute nature of the problem of continuity in twentieth-century German history” (Wehler, cited in Mitchell, p. 7). Wehler asserts that the continued presence of conservative values within society allowed Nazi ideology to take hold over the German people.

Historian David Blackbourn understands that there were elements of Nazism that could link it to Imperial Germany. However, he does not accept the notion that Nazism was a direct continuation of Germany’s Imperial government. Consequently, he does not believe that the course of German history should be

viewed as peculiar. Blackbourn contends that the existence of social upheavals in Germany's modernization attempts are not sufficient enough to characterize the nation as "peculiar" simply because it did not follow the "benign and painless" modernization efforts of other Western countries (Blackbourn, cited in Mitchell, p. 12). He explains, the "unevenness of economic, social, and political developments was in itself peculiarly German: Germany was much more the intensified version of the norm than the exception" (Blackbourn, cited in Mitchell, 12). Blackbourn recognizes the uniqueness of the Nazis despite the continuity of some of their ideas from Imperial Germany. For this reason, Blackbourn dismisses the *Sonderweg* theory because it implies that the unorthodox Nazis developed out of this troubled modernization process (Blackbourn, cited in Mitchell, p. 11). Accordingly, he dismisses historians, like Wehler, who believe that the Nazis rose to power because German elites refused to implement more social reforms. As Heilbrunner explains, Hitler deceived Hindenburg into thinking that he could be controlled (Heilbrunner, p. 575). This deception towards an Imperial holdover from the military reflects a lack of continuity between Imperial Germany and Nazi Germany.

Like historians Heilbrunner and Blackbourn, Allan Mitchell disputes the validity of the *Sonderweg* theory. While Mitchell accepts that there were some elements of continuity between Imperial Germany and the Nazis, he finds "a serious problem with the *Sonderweg* theory...[in that] it tends to remove

contingency from history” (Mitchell cited in Mitchell, p. 24). He asks the question of whether Nazism would have taken off had Hitler been killed in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. If Hitler’s personality was the driving force behind Nazism, as historian Jackson Spielvogel suggests it was, then the course of German history may have been altered without his leadership (Spielvogel, p. 133). Had this occurred, Mitchell believes that historians would not view German history as unique.

Additionally, Mitchell supports Blackbourn’s idea that German history should not be viewed as peculiar because each society has its own distinctive traditions. He explains that all Western nations sought “democratic political forms of representative government, advancing technology and public transportation, industrial and urbanization,” in addition to the establishment of many other social reforms (Mitchell, cited in Mitchell, p. 24-25). Therefore, Mitchell believes that studying the German people themselves, and not their history, will help to explain the roots of Nazism. Mitchell is eager to assert that “traces of fascism and its ugly twin racism were everywhere to be found, not just in the obvious cases of Mussolini’s Italy and Franco’s Spain, but also in France, England, and the United States” (Mitchell, cited in Mitchell, p. 25). If this were true, then he makes a compelling case in claiming that “Nazism was not an exception but an exaggeration” (Mitchell, cited in Mitchell, p. 25). Heilbroner contends that this exaggeration stems from the dehumanization of German

society, which was caused by the ills of the Weimar Republic. Where Heilbrunner and Mitchell differ, however, is whether they perceive Nazism as a unique phenomenon or not.

Without question, the debate on whether Nazism was a continuation from German history or not is a very heated one. Scholars on both sides make some valid points. In support of the *Sonderweg* theory of continuity, Wehler argues that Germany's elite pushed the country into World War I in order to avoid reforms. Despite the wartime loss, conservatives in the military and in the judiciary continued to preserve the values of Imperial Germany. Consequently, the Social Democrats who were in control of the government after the war were not able to instill democratic values into its citizens. With the continued presence of conservatism within Weimar society, the *Sonderweg* theory maintains that the Nazis were able to continue where Bismarck and Wilhelm left off.

As Mitchell explains, one flaw with this theory is that it does not consider contingency. If Hitler died, Nazism would have disintegrated and German history would have turned out completely different. Then, the alleged special path that led from Bismarck and Wilhelm to Hitler could never have existed. In agreement with Mitchell, Blackbourn also frowns on the *Sonderweg* theory. He does not believe that Germany's modernization efforts were out of the ordinary. Like Mitchell, Blackbourn contends that German modernization sought the same reforms as in other Western societies. Blackbourn believes that the only

difference between Germany and other Western societies was the trouble it had in enacting progressive reforms.

Of the four historians represented in this paper, Oded Heilbrunner is the most influential. He maintains that the problems of the Weimar Republic were responsible for the triumph of Nazism. He contends that reparation payments, hyperinflation, and massive unemployment turned society against democracy. Struggling for survival, individuals from the left and the right wings accepted Nazi violence and its party platform, despite the fact that the majority of Nazi supporters were not overly anti-Semitic. The Nazis promised to create a better future for the downtrodden Weimar citizens, and by deceiving Hindenburg, who shared some of the same ideology as the Nazis, they were able to come to power.

Whereas Heilbrunner emphasizes the uniqueness of the Nazi rise to power, Mitchell contends that elements of fascism were present in many Western countries, including the U.S., England, and France. Therefore, he believes that a study of the German people, rather than their history, will uncover the true roots of Nazism. While elements of Nazism may have been present in some Western countries, this claim trivializes the legacy of the Third Reich. After all, neither the U.S. nor Great Britain produced an Adolph Hitler. But, this does not mean that Germany deviated from the normal course of modernization. Had Europe not imposed the debilitating Treaty of Versailles on Germany its course of modernity would have only been slightly bumpy, instead of a nightmarish rollercoaster ride.

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