



Interpretations of Nazi Germany

John Claydon charts a course across the complex minefield of Nazi historiography.

More words have been written about Nazi Germany than any other period of history, and there is no sign whatsoever of the flood drying up. Indeed the intensity of interest and debate, especially about the Holocaust, is greater now than it has ever been. The enormities of the Holocaust offer almost too much evil and suffering for us to comprehend, but in truth the whole of Nazi history, in the sheer scale and

Hitler and his henchmen. Historiographical debate centres on the relationship between them, and between the Nazis and the German people.

audacity of its ideas and the opportunism and ruthlessness with which they were implemented, defies our understanding. Yet there is a compulsion to try to work out how such things could happen in a time so comparatively recent, especially when we can reconstruct the past from

the dialogue of large numbers of people who lived through it.

The key issues

Because there is such a huge literature on the subject, and because that literature continues to expand on an almost daily basis, no one can feel an expert on Nazi Germany. Nevertheless interpretations of Nazi Germany have always revolved around two main issues: firstly, the role played by Hitler himself and, secondly, the extent to which the German people

knew about, and were willing to take part in, the persecution of the Jews and other minority groups which culminated in the Holocaust. Students of the period are fortunate in being able to trace very clearly the evolution of different interpretations of the Nazi period. This is particularly fascinating because three distinct groups of people have had to come to terms with their experiences and communicate about them with the generations of their children and their grandchildren. These groups are the oppressors, that is those who were members, or instruments, of the Nazi Party; their victims; and the mass of the German public, who were more or less actively involved in the worst features of the regime. The involvement of these later generations in discovering the true story of the Nazi years makes for compelling analysis in its own right, and there is of course the added complication that Germany became divided soon after the Second World War into two separate countries. West Germany was allowed to develop as a free and democratic power, while East Germany was directly controlled as a satellite power by the communist Soviet Union, which had suffered immense casualties at the hands of the Nazis.

The Communist interpretation

In the aftermath of the fall of the Nazi regime, historians from the Communist bloc gave little weight to Hitler's personal impact and emphasised in crude terms the economic forces which they claimed had created the Nazi era. They argued that big business in Germany had nursed Hitler's career along in order that he should act as its agent in the resurgence of capitalism in Germany and its search for domination over the rest of Europe and eventually the world. In short, the framework within which Hitler and the Nazis operated was dictated throughout the period of Nazi rule by these so-called imperialist forces. Clearly this is an unashamedly extreme Marxist position and gives a hopelessly inadequate role to Hitler and far too much influence to the political power of big business. In fact the Marxist camp has never succeeded in

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producing a credible view of Nazi Germany giving sufficient importance to Hitler.

Hitlerism

Opposition in the West to this stereotyping came in the much more sophisticated biographical approach of Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, written in 1952, which has remained a standard introduction to the subject, though clearly dated now because there has been so much subsequent research. In West Germany, in the years following the war, there was a predictable need to find scapegoats who could no longer answer back for themselves for the horror of what had gone on. This desire essentially to lay all the blame for the whole Nazi programme squarely on Hitler's shoulders, to dismiss it all as Hitlerism, is most fully articulated in the massive biography of Hitler written by Joachim Fest in 1973.

Intentionalism

This biographical approach developed in the historiography of the Nazi period into what has become known as the intentionalist tradition. It emphasises the central importance of Hitler's direct involvement in, and responsibility for, the detailed implementation of the Nazi programme throughout the whole period of Nazi rule. This orthodox intentionalist view has been upheld most strongly by German historians such as Karl Dietrich Bracher. In its most extreme form the intentionalist position, taken by Gerald Fleming for example, depicts a clear continuum from Hitler coming to

power to the workings out of the Final Solution during the Second World War. The ultimate fate of the Jews is traced from Hitler's alleged personal anti-Semitism at a young age, through his blaming International Jewry for causing the First World War, to the increasingly anti-Semitic programme of the 1930s and the death camps of the Second World War.

Structuralism

This intentionalist position was criticised and ultimately shown to be untenable by revisionist historians, of whom Ian Kershaw, author of the recent authoritative two-volume biography of Hitler, is the most prominent British example. Far from being decisive, Hitler was actually reluctant to take decisions. There is no evidence to show Hitler holding particularly strong anti-Semitic views before the First World War, nor indeed during his Vienna years. It was not until 1918, when the German nation was looking for scapegoats to blame for the catastrophe that had overtaken it, that Hitler identified an international Jewish conspiracy as being responsible for the war.

The intentionalist view of Hitler's overriding influence in the detail of Nazi policy and practices was increasingly rejected by these revisionist historians. Their research into the operation of Nazi government and administration suggested that Hitler had not played the dominating personal role he had previously been assigned. Detailed studies at every level of government from the local up, including the precise workings of the leadership, show that the chain of command was confused and unpredictable. In some ways administration seems chaotic. What underlay that perception is the combination of Hitler's lack of interest in the minutiae of government and the generally young, ambitious, highly educated and, most important of all, patriotically motivated, civil service created by the Weimar Government. This bureaucracy showed enormous resourcefulness and initiative in calculating, and putting into practice in

detail, what it interpreted as Hitler's vision for Germany.

Much of this early revisionism was done by German historians, notably Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat, while the leading British historian apart from Kershaw has been Tim Mason. They have shown that Hitler's ideas provided only a rough working outline for policy decisions, so that there was a gradual, stumbling process towards objectives that could actually be achieved. Hitler was undoubtedly chary of taking decisions, he was preoccupied with his own authority and status, and he was at times astonishingly over-influenced by whoever happened to speak to him last. All this led Mommsen to suggest graphically that Hitler could in some ways be seen as a weak dictator.

The intentionalists retaliated against this radical interpretation of the revisionist historians by labelling them as 'structuralists', or sometimes as 'functionalists', and accused them of providing excuses for those who carried out the brutalities of the Nazi regime. The differences between the intentionalists and the structuralists is most clearly explained by Mason in his article 'A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism', which is reproduced in the collection of his essays listed in the bibliography.

Compromise or victory?

The now widely accepted synthesis of the operation of the Nazi state is to some extent a compromise between the intentionalist and structuralist standpoints, but with a considerable leaning towards the latter. Certainly Hitler's personality is seen as the central ingredient in understanding the essence of Nazi rule, and during the war years his regime was increasingly highly personalised; but it was rather his laziness and avoidance of taking decisions which shaped the precise workings of government. The leading Nazis created their own power bases and were very much left the responsibility to take their own decisions, or rather to create policy within the broad-brush framework of Hitler's ideology. Generally speaking they



An SS officer and victims at Belsen, which was liberated by the British army in April 1945. Responsibility for the Holocaust is one of the mostly hotly contested issues in Nazi historiography

remained within their own separate spheres of influence, though on occasions they clashed. A good example of this was *Kristallnacht*, which marked a significant escalation of action against the Jews in 1938. It was provoked by Goebbels, but to the frustration of Goering who was taken by surprise and hated the disorganisation that resulted and the temporary lack of control from the centre. The sudden intensification of Jewish persecution also had economic implications for which he, with

responsibility for economic policy, had no chance to prepare, and he very quickly took steps to challenge Goebbels and re-assert his own authority. These two, and the opportunistic Himmler, were the main players by the time that war broke out, but their independence was

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mirrored hundreds of times over in the way Nazi officials took the initiative in making decisions. Even responsibility for the barbaric killing of mentally handicapped children was before long – once a test case had established the leadership’s compliance – being taken by the staff in charge of the residential homes supposedly looking after them. This whole policy is a good example of

In this poster ‘The people say YES’. But how far was this reality and how far propaganda?

the initiative on a major moral issue originally being taken at a low official level.

Kershaw, who is a leading participant in the development of this synthesis, describes this method of operating, with substantial responsibility and initiative being taken throughout the system, as ‘polycratic’ (literally ‘governed by many’). He argues that the superimposing of a search for national self-consciousness and re-birth after the horrors of the First World War on a highly efficient governmental system generated enormous energy and vitality

at all levels of government, but also tremendous degrees of instability.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust has its own huge body of literature, and here the debate is centred on two main issues: the decision-making processes that led to it, and the extent to which the German population as a whole was implicated in responsibility for what happened. Once again, and even more definitively here, the structuralists are triumphant in this debate. The detail of recent research findings shows that the Final Solution emerged gradually as the answer to what the Nazis saw as the problem of how to deal with the Jews, once the policy of forced repatriation had failed to cope with the huge numbers involved.

The polycratic view of Nazi government outlined above helps explain the framework in which the decision was taken. Not one but many people made key decisions. It was Goering who, in the summer of 1941, gave Himmler and his deputy Heydrich the task of finding a permanent solution for what to do with the Jews. This followed the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the occupation of territory where large numbers of Russian Jews lived. Experiments in methods of mass killing were carried out in different locations, and the use of gas pellets was determined to be the most efficient. So far as Hitler’s role is concerned, he moved towards accepting the concept of the Final Solution when he realised in late 1941, with German troops caught unprepared in the depths of a Russian

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winter, that the war was not going as well as it had previously. There is no substance to the arguments of those who seek to distance Hitler from direct involvement in the Final Solution, as the outcome of the recent David Irving libel trial has made clear. Increasingly, as crucial records from the German leadership seized by the Red Army in 1945 become available in the Moscow archives, it is clear that a concerted approach was decided on before the end of 1941. For a long time it was thought that the Wannsee Conference of early 1942 was where the decision was taken, but it now seems likely that the agenda for the conference, which was originally scheduled for December 1941 but eventually held in February 1942, was changed to working out how, rather than if, the policy should be implemented.

The German people

On the second issue, of the culpability of the majority of the German population, the harsh truth seems to be that there was a wide consensus across all sectors of society of willingness to support the mass killings. If this had not been so, the structuralists argue, bureaucracy would have at least have delayed the implementation of the leadership's decision. Daniel Goldhagen's and Christopher Browning's independent studies of the same evidence, the 1960s investigation of 210 officers and men from the Hamburg area conscripted for military service and assigned to the extermination of Jews, demonstrate this responsibility. Their researches achieve this end particularly effectively because, while they agree completely that many of these men were willing participants, they come to significantly different conclusions of why that should be so, and both almost certainly overstate their cases. For Goldhagen the leadership's decision simply unlocked and gave full vent to the pent-up aggressiveness of the

German population. Browning calculated that peer group pressure was what prevented many of this group avoiding the murderous task they had been given (in fact they had not been forced to participate and a minority had withdrawn). It is in this area that many questions remain unanswered and much work needs to be done. For example, when considering Browning's argument, peer group pressure seems much more likely to operate when a majority is in favour of a particular course of action. Victor Klemperer, himself a persecuted victim of Nazi anti Jewish policy, showed how the bureaucratic language of government in the Third Reich somehow allowed those carrying out the Final Solution to distance themselves from its reality, as if it were just another everyday administrative task.

Kershaw has produced the concept of a 'Messianic Hitler' arriving amongst the German people to offer them the opportunity of a kind of re-birth, a re-discovery of the pride of national consciousness that they craved after the humiliations of the Versailles Treaty, but even this does not fully explain why so many Germans were willing to participate in the Final Solution. The work of Ulrich Herbert, who has shown that a key element of German government under the Nazis was the highly educated bureaucracy whose members had been too young to serve in the First World War, needs to be built on. He demonstrates the civil servants' determination to develop what they saw as a new and liberated Germany, and part of their mission was to solve what they clearly diagnosed from the beginning as 'the Jewish problem'. Understandably, the generation which in general supported and willingly participated in Nazi policy sought to distance itself from responsibility in the postwar years, and it is also clear that it was the children of this generation who negotiated with the

occupying Allied troops after the war and in some ways aligned themselves with the fabricated innocence of their parents. For this reason only in the last few years has a more realistic view of the responsibility of the public at large been possible.

These debates on Nazi Germany are fascinating and very much alive. Their conclusions must be faced up to, and are changing our understanding of the period. Students need to be aware of them in order to appreciate the value of recent television series such as the BBC's 'A Warning from History', which was remarkably up-to-date in terms of the research findings included, and media coverage of the Holocaust and exhibitions on it such as that recently unveiled at the Imperial War Museum.

John Claydon is headteacher at Wydean School, Chepstow, and an A level examiner. He has recently spent a term on a schoolteacher fellowship at St Hugh's College, Oxford, doing research on the historiography of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

Further Reading

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