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Why Did They Follow Hitler?
The Psychology of National Socialism

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Introduction

What motivated millions of Germans to join the Nazi movement? What made Hitler and National Socialism possible? How could they manage to win the hearts of millions of ordinary and intelligent German people? When this question was put to renowned historian Joachim Fest, he admitted: “I have to say that I’m still not finished with this question. I still haven’t found the really convincing answer. No historian has found it, it is still a mystery”.¹ Similarly, social psychologist Harald Welzer wrote: “Until today, National Socialism is the most explored and the least understood phenomenon of historical research and no approach has managed to get hold of what happened”.

National Socialism is still a “mystery”, because there is a specific deficit in research on this subject. Examining the wealth of scholarly articles and publications, several observations can be made: There is a high number of publications about Hitler and other Nazi leaders, but comparatively only very few about those millions of Germans who had agreed to and supported Hitler and the Nazi regime, the millions of bystanders and perpetrators. What were their motives? What moved them to join, to voluntarily enlist, to over-fulfil the orders, to work towards Hitler, as Ian Kershaw (1998) called it? What excited and fascinated them? Daniel Goldhagen (1996) pointed out that these questions have seldom been asked and worked out so far. Only very few studies are based on interviews with Nazi bystanders and perpetrators. Even though Theodor Adorno (1997) called to thoroughly explore these men and women and their motives, because the roots of Auschwitz are to be found in the perpetrators, not in the victims.

In contradiction to this call, research on National Socialism was often distant to the persons of the bystanders and perpetrators. Often researchers focussed on super-individual institutions and structures, data, numbers etc. This was necessary, especially in order to fight the efforts by some to deny or play down the Holocaust. Yet, this may not suffice to explain the basic question mentioned above, because institutions and structures are empty and without effect without the people; facts are always created by people. Again: What motivated those millions of Germans who wanted and actively supported Hitler and National Socialism?

These reflections were the starting point for the research project Geschichte und Erinnerung (History and Memory), founded in 1998 (Marks 2001), connected with the University of Education (Pädagogische Hochschule) in Freiburg, Germany. Our research team was made up of professional from the fields of social science, history, social work, social education, psychology, psychoanalysis and education. All team members were born after WWII.

We conducted interviews with 43 men and women who had agreed with and actively supported Hitler and the Nazi movement.³ We were mainly interested in ordinary people, not so much in ‘prominent’ Nazi leaders or extraordinary mass-murders. The interviews were transcribed and evaluated using depth psychological-hermeneutic methods (Marks & Moennich-Marks 2001). In doing so, we pursued the following questions: a) What motives are expressed in the interviews? Why did the interviewees follow Hitler and the Nazi movement? b) In what way is the experience of the Nazi years still present, cognitively and emotionally, in the in-

¹ Fest, 2001, p.79, my translation.
² Welzer 1997, p.9, my translation.
³ Additional interviews were carried out in different settings.
terviewees today? c) What happens when people, who have been actively involved in National Socialism, and members of the following (first post-war) generation communicate about National Socialism?

The findings are transferred into the relevant fields of practice, especially school teaching on the topic of National Socialism and Holocaust and its prevention (“Holocaust education”).

The book *Why Did They Follow Hitler? – The Psychology of National Socialism* presents the research findings in six chapters, written in coherent language. Please find below a summary of chapter three:

**Shame and defence of shame**

Mr. Plessner⁴, born in 1918, begins the interview with the following words: "We, the youth and Hitler-youth went through life with open eyes, really open eyes. Remember 1932, Hitler’s visit. We went there and took part. We, the Jungvolk and Hitler-Youth leaders, formed a lane and then he passed us and he looks each one in the eyes. And that was impressive.

Imagine the youth of the village was simple, modest. The boys and girls were busy in agriculture from morning till night. When we came home from school, there was a note on the table: you go to such and such a place and take the hoe with you and late in the evening the boys were so tired, they fell asleep on the slate. And the mother said: Now, you go to bed and early tomorrow morning you’ll quickly do your homework so that the teacher is content. Everything was in a bad state. And then the Third Reich came. And we experienced camping out, sports. The youth was in motion. The youth was incited. The youth suddenly had a meaning. For us, this was a liberation, and that suddenly one could, pathetically spoken, be proud to be a German boy.

Here in the frontier area, near the Rhine river, right by the Maginot-line; we wrote the essay and the dictation to the sounds of the attacking trumpet of the French soldiers. And on the cupola of the Maginot-line the Senegal-Negroes were standing with their tribal marks, with their scars and looked over at us. Blue-grey uniforms, like ghosts and like evil spirits and that impressed us very much.

We were the pariah among the peoples, we knew that we had to experience much much much evil because of the Versailles dictation. And that we were indebted with billions of gold-marks, payments and things like that. Germany had to be reintegrated into the family of European peoples because that, being the heart of Europe, couldn’t be a starving country, which was always to be supported and restrained by the other peoples. One demanded that Germany should become great. And Hitler was the incarnation of this idea."

Mr. Plessner expressed a number of reasons that motivated him to join Hitler and National Socialism: He experienced the Nazi movement as liberation from the monotony of rural life, its poverty and hard labour. National Socialism allowed him to travel, meet new people and experience community. He was impressed by Hitler, who allowed him to be proud to be a German. In addition, the interviewee speaks about shame.

In the following, basic information about social and psychological aspects of shame are outlined, based mainly on the standard work by Leon Wurmser *The Mask of Shame* (1994).⁵

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⁴ Pseudonym; the personal information referring to the interviewees (name, profession, town etc.) have been changed.
⁵ As well as Hilgers 1997; Seidler 1997; Neckel 1991; Lethen 1994.
Shame is a very painful emotion. Numerous civilisations condemn certain traits or behaviours as shameful, such as: weakness (for example soft, shy or homosexual boys, or those who fear aggression, so called “weaklings”); social weakness (such as poverty, dependency, accepting charity, debts, losing, being uneducated, making mistakes); cowardliness, treason. Expressing emotions, tenderness or kindness is regarded unmanly especially in cultures and subcultures of German origin (Wurmser 1994). In shame-cultures (Lethen 1994), fear of disgrace and shame is a major mechanism of social control that protects the existing order more than laws and prohibitions ever could. In so-called primitive societies, any deviance from the commonly shared opinion, any individuality, or any individual and subjective interpretation may cause being ridiculed that may lead to suicide (Wurmser 1994). Achilles, for example, feared disgrace more than peril and death. Ethics of feudal and militaristic societies are based on the polarity of honour and shame.

Shame is a social affect (Neckel 1991; Wurmser 1994). While all emotions are somewhat contagious (Goleman 1995), this is true even more so for shame: People are not only ashamed of themselves, but also, for example, of their children, parents, ethnic group or nation. Shame, in its positive aspect (“healthy shame”), protects the individual’s integrity, its borders. Psychologically, shame goes back to earliest childhood: The child is hungrily seeking with its eyes for responding, mirroring eyes. From earliest age, the child has the following basic double-desires: The desire to look, watch and admire and, at the same time, to be seen, be looked at and admired. To desire to show oneself, impress and fascinate others and, at the same time, to be impressed and fascinated

The early stages of shame are created in the eye contact between parents and early child, when looking and being seen, fascinating and being fascinated are still one and are the major form of communication. This way, being loved/not-loved and power/powerlessness are expressed.

This communication is disturbed, if parents are, for example, absent; if they do not respect the child’s borders (obtrusiveness or emotional, physical or sexual abuse); or if parents cannot respond to the child’s search for loving eye contact, because they are depressed, addicted or traumatised. In this case the child’s later life may be impaired by low self-esteem and pathological or traumatic shame. Even newborn babies already turn away their face or body. At the age of 2 or 3 months, babies turn away their eyes, face or body consistently, when the mother is unreliable in her closeness/distance or if she is obtrusive. At the age of 8 months these reactions of withdrawal develop into fear of strangers and, from the 18th month and on, into shame. Traumatic shame is the child’s response to traumatic exposure, humiliation or rejection: The child, hungrily seeking with its eyes, finds no responding (mirroring) eyes; it meets cold or obtrusive eyes (“evil eyes”, as superstition calls it).

The emotions that come with shame are: feeling like a mistake, nothing, empty, wanting to disappear. Because shame is so extremely painful, it is often warded off; the most important defence mechanisms are the following: In order to disappear, someone may become expressionless. The emotional life is frozen under the ice of denial. Therefore the face is tense, petrified. The experience of life is being de-realized and de-personalized: “one” doesn’t talk about him- or herself. One doesn’t show “weak” emotions, since they are the most private and vulnerable aspects of oneself. Therefore tenderness, love, soft moods, emotions of dependency (perceived as weakness) are being repulsed. Humanistic values and ideals are disdained, i.e. people resort to cynicism. Further strategies to defend shame consist in disdain, the flip side of shame: Passive is turned into active; instead of feeling one’s own shame, others are humiliated, ridiculed, despised.

In German „man“.
treated like non-existent, eradicated, done away with them as if they were dirt; especially those that are regarded as weak (vulnerable, helpless). People are depreciated to objects, quantified to mere numbers and parts of a mass. Another defence strategy consists in efforts to restore one's honour. Grandiose claims and idealisations have the purpose to compensate the feeling of unworthiness.

Several aspects of shame and its defence are expressed by the interviewee: Mr. Plessner mentions the poverty, hard labour, lack of education and "bad state" of village life. Also his country, Germany, was poor, had to pay huge debts, was a "pariah" (i.e.: excluded, outside the caste-system), was restrained by other peoples, was not a valuable state. Opposite to that, the interviewee perceived Hitler as "the incarnation" of the idea to restore Germany's honour and to compensate its shameful defeat in WWI and debts.

Notice how often eyes are mentioned by the interviewee: His parents were too busy to look at him when he came home from school; more precisely: "the" mother, as the interviewee expresses in a depersonalised way (his father is not mentioned at all in the entire interview). From beyond the "border" African-French soldiers were looking down on him "like evil ghosts and like evil spirits", i.e. with "evil eyes". His hungrily seeking eyes finally were mirrored by Hitler, who (supposedly) was looking in his eyes—which is reported quite often in different interviews. This moment is present to him: notice him switch from past to present when he speaks about this very moment.

So what motivated millions of Germans to join the Nazi movement? Based on our interviews and their evaluations, one of the answers is as follows:

Large parts of the German population experienced defeat of WWI, the Treaty of Versailles, poverty, economic crisis, unemployment and weakness (i.e. inner strife) of the Weimar Republic as shameful. National Socialism managed to utilize this widespread shame for their purposes by offering and legitimating opportunities to defend shame:

- With a cynical ideology of toughness and thereby defence against weakness and humanistic values.
- With opportunities to humiliate others, especially Jewish fellow citizen, discriminating, ridiculing and de-riding them, doing away with them as if they were dirt; dehumanizing them to objects and mere numbers and eradicating them.
- With promises to restore Germany's honour.
- And with idealisations of Hitler and Germany ("master race") and grandiose claims to world domination.

References


About the author
Dr. Stephan Marks holds an M.A. in political science, psychology and modern history and a doctorate in social science, from the University of Giessen, Germany. He lived in the USA for five years. He is founder (1998) and director of the research project Geschichte und Erinnerung (History and Memory, www.geschichte-erinnerung.de). He is also the chairperson of Erinnern und Lernen e.V. (Remembrance and Learning, www.erinnern-und-lernen.de), and spokesperson of the Freiburger Institut für Menschenrechtspädagogik (Freiburg Institute of Human Rights Pedagogy). Currently, he directs a continuing education program on shame and dignity, www.scham-anerkennung.de, at the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany. He is author and editor of 13 books and numerous essays in German, English and Estonian. His book Why Did They Follow Hitler?, first published in 2007, has been translated into several languages to date.