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The Problem of Evil

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### The Power of Deception and the Potential for Tragedy

The problem of evil is a puzzling one. Evil, specifically in Nazi Germany, however provides a decent lens from which to look through. Nazis were able to convince almost an entire nation to be complicit to horrendous acts against their neighbors, against people their children went to school with, against their fellow Germans. Through the use of Neitzcheian propaganda and fear mongering, Hitler miseducated the German people into thinking and believing dehumanizing Jews and other “undesirables” was a moral good for the betterment and well being of the German people.

Hitler was able to rise to power and convince a nation of his beliefs historically quickly on account of the fact that during the National Socialist Party’s ascent, Germany had just lost World War One and was desperately in need of a self-proclaimed savior, especially after the humiliating Treaty of Versailles which, in addition to the war, had left Germany in an incredibly impoverished state, at least compared to how it was before World War One. Hitler managed to put Germany back on the map incredibly fast, partially due to his unification of the German people against the common enemies of undesirables, anyone that would hold back the “Volk”. “Every German soldier who dies in this war must be put on the debit account of the Jews. They have him on their conscience and that is why Jews must be made to pay.” (Joseph Goebbels).

During the 20's, the Weimar Republic, whose creation was the "result of a verdict in favor bourgeois parliamentary democracy and against bolshevik dictatorship" (Peukert 4) had fallen out of public approval. This helped pave the way for a new era of leadership...Nazi leadership.

The political and economic turmoil of the Weimar years undermined German support for democracy and created a yearning for stability, peace, unity, in order. A cohesive community of the people drew on older German traditions promoting social harmony over conflict and extolling the middle class ideals of handwork, clean living, and law and order. Another source of the concepts popular ideal came from its linkage to the first weeks of World War I, when all the German political parties seemingly suppressed there parochial interests to those of the nation and united in a common cause (Luckert 78)

This can partially explain how they gained control so speedily. When the anti-semitic movement grew in popularity, the German people were already used to uniting as a nation; this time however, it was against themselves. The pathway for National Socialism to walk on had been laid by instability. Germany wanted a change. They wanted a new, better way of life for themselves. What began as rational self interest hastily turned into fear and hate, its pace quickened by the vocal minority of anti-semites blaming Germany's rough financial years on Jews, as well as other smaller people groups, who generally had only as much fault as their fellow compatriots. However, "The potential for racial hatred lurks whenever political leaders appeal to the exalted virtue of their own ethnic community" (Koonz 274) and that is what the new leading party of Germany did, exalted the Aryan race. Through perhaps the most successful propaganda operation to date, the National Socialist Party was able to manipulate the common German citizen into believing what they wanted, but without what would be called

“brainwashing”, it seems the Nazis opted for a method of that could be described as “braingrowing.” “It seems clear that Germans were neither brainwashed nor terrorized. Rather, they conformed to regulations of which they approved and circumvented those they disliked” (178). Moreover, as if the fact that even having a Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment doesn't scream suspicion enough, their head minister, Joseph Goebbels, is quoted as saying “The best propaganda is that which works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge of the propagandistic initiative” (13). The National Socialist party was able to convert Germany to Nazism so hastily because of their disinformation in all its many forums. No matter how many V2s or submarines they manufactured, propaganda was the most powerful weapon of evil for Nazi Germany. It's what overwhelmed the average person with conformity of moral issues. The Nazi Party concocted overwhelmingly negative, racist, and hateful lies about Jews, but there was already strong anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe, in America, and around the world. The people of Germany, however, were more susceptible to any deception to get them out of their depressing reality, and the devil comes in cunning ways. Evil is seductive, and the Nazis were masters of seduction, persuading public opinion in nearly every corner of Germany. “Expert opinion vindicated the elimination of Jews as a moral act” (Koonz 265).

Medical doctors are widely accepted as experts in healing and their opinions are to be trusted. Nevertheless, in *The Nazi Doctors Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, it vocalizes that “The Nazi message—for victims, for possible observers, and mostly for themselves—was: all our killing is medical, medically indicated, and carried out by doctors” (Lifton 139). One might assume no amount of propaganda could sway one who has

taken the hypocratic oath and are sworn to protect, and never do harm to one's patient. "Pointing to the chimneys in the distance, Dr. Ella Lingens-Reiner asked a Nazi doctor, Fritz Klein, How can you reconcile that with your Hippocratic oath as a doctor? His answer was, 'Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind' (Lifton 16). When the general populous can be convinced to be acceptant of murder, the propaganda has to be brilliant and abundant. When the highly educated can be convinced of it, the education has to be without virtue. For their moral compass to be skewed so drastically and shift almost easily, means it was never solid in the first place. *Nazi Doctors* describes the change of ideology in this passage, "Most SS doctors underwent an extraordinary individual-psychological shift from revulsion to acceptance: "In the beginning it was almost impossible. Afterward it became almost routine." This shift involved a socialization to Auschwitz, including the important transition from outsider to insider" (Lifton 195). Killing became nothing for them, because it wasn't killing; it was just fixing the problem of the Jew.

If, at the heart of one's professional identity, one becomes easily susceptible to the idea that mental patients—and possibly other groups as well—lack ordinary human qualities, and hence to the idea of eliminating that group in favor of the ostensible health of all others, one might also be more amenable to embracing a new "therapy" that shows itself to be in accord with one's perceptions. In that way, many psychiatrists could harmonize with, even epitomize, the larger Nazi vision of curing by killing (Lifton 113).

When they can dehumanize one person, they can rationalize killing millions. When one looks at the accomplishments, it's clear to see these men were not unintelligent by any means, quite the opposite, actually. Nazi doctors were very educated in fields of medicine. That part of their

education was formed by a university, but their moral identity, that was shaped by Goebells. In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis said “Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil” (4). It would seem he is exactly right. The amount of textbooks read and tests taken does not change how wise, or how discerning one is. “The British historian Stephan Roberts, foreign observer writing in 1937, found “distressing” German students “worship” of Hitler: “it is this utter lack of any objective or critical attitude on the part of the youth, even with university students, that made me fear the most for the future of Germany. They're nothing the vessels for state propaganda” (Luckert 82). Nazi Germany created very intelligent, yet mindless drones through the use of propaganda in education. “A continuous flow of fraudulent research on the Jewish question shaped the moral context within which desk murderers and field commanders went about their work” (Koonz 258). The wave of lies does not start once one gets accepted into medical school, however; it in fact starts from the moment one is born in Nazi Germany, “Nazi changes to the educational curriculum brought anti-semitic content into the school classroom, most overtly through science classes in which teachers use instructional materials that portrayed Jews as a mixture of non-European races and depicted the “mixing” of Jews with “German blooded” persons as a threat to racial purity and national “health” (Koonz 87). What are doctors but those who pursue health? Like Machiavelli, the doctors would gladly sacrifice the Jew for the good of the Third Reich and for the security of the future health and purity of the Volk.

One of the Jews that was almost killed was Elie Weisel, who wrote *Night*. It is a gripping description of his experience during the holocaust. He recounts growing up in Hungary in a family abundantly valued by the community. Then, as a young boy, unaware of what was to

come, he is thrown into various different concentration camps during the final years of WWII. The weight of this account is evidenced in the fact that it took thirteen years to describe the atrocities that he lived. In *Night*, its observable not just the potential for some of the most wicked human behavior, but also how the saturation of propaganda created a dangerous culture of anti-Semitism. Additionally, it is apparent that the corrupt chain of power almost forced a stripping of identity.

This is evidenced in *Night* in a scene where a veteran of the concentration camp environment is telling Elie how to act. “In this place it is every man for himself and you can not think of others. Not even your father. In this place, there is no such thing as father, brother, friend. Each of us lives and dies alone. Let me give you some advice: stop giving your ration of soup to your old father...In fact, you should be getting *his* rations” (Wiesel 110-111).

Evil is selfish. Not only was this man telling a young boy to only think of himself, he was even saying that he should be stealing his own father’s food. This is what the environment of the concentration camp had turned this man into, a selfish narcissist giving “advice” to a kid to essentially kill his own father. Elie even admits to following the line of thought saying “He was right, I thought deep down. not daring to admit it to myself... You could have two rations of bread, two rations of soup...” (111). In Hungary, Elie wouldn't have even considered anything like that, but this is what the camps had turned people into, “creatures ready to kill for a crust of bread” (101). When the need to be evil in order to survive surpasses the consequences and uncomfortableness of breaking the social contract, that is when primal evil manifests itself. It was always inside whoever is committing whatever act, but the opportunity for that primal evil to show its face was created by the environment. Unfortunately, it would seem, due to the fact that

so many perished beside Weisel, life inside the camp has no meaning for most. Victor Frankl was also a survivor of Auschwitz. He said “ In the Nazi concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive.” (Frankl 126).

The Nazis did everything in their power to strip the prisoners of Auschwitz of their identity. The overwhelming tragedy of concentration camps made prisoners question their core beliefs like they wouldn't have before. The Jews were brutalized in almost every way imaginable, but perhaps worse than that would be attempting to, and in most cases succeeding in reducing them to a point where they didn't even believe they were men anymore. Wiesel describes his experience during the last few months he was in Buchenwald after his father died as this, “I spent my days in total idleness. With only one desire: to eat. I no longer thought of my father or my mother. From time to time I would dream. But only about soup, an extra ration of soup” (113). In contrast to Wiesel, Frankl finds meaning in the suffering of Auschwitz in order to survive, claiming, “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.” (Frankl 88). Not everyone was fortunate enough to maintain this outlook on the experience. A vast majority of the people within the camps, as was the case with Elie, happened to be that their identity was embedded in the belief of God. The Nazis constructed a place that made every non-Aryan who entered question their belief system to the point of collapse. Even Elie, who was arguably one of the more faithful, was pushed beyond his limits at one point as shown in *Night*.

“Blessed be gods name? Why, why would I bless him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might He created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna in so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in furnaces? Praise be thy Holy Name, having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar?” (67)

Even as one of the most religious and diligent scholars in his community, Elie still questions everything he believed in. Still however, shining through the dark is the will to meaning

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedom—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” (Frankl 86). When confronted with the daunting task of survival, Jews in the camps had to find a reason to keep going. “A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the “why” for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any how” (80).

For the people of Nazi Germany, both their “why” and “how” were manufactured and then spoon fed to them by the government. By slowly creeping in a culture of anti-Semitism, the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment worked at creating a nation of automatons, whose consciences were clear whenever they worked at the arrangement of millions of deaths. The most evil was present not on the battlefield but in the well lit, manicured offices that hateful mob mentality took place. “Everything said here about the self’s response to the call to genocide depends importantly upon idea structures of a collective nature, upon shared mentality rather than any isolated self” (Lifton 498). The undertaking of Gleichschaltung was so great, however,

that by the time its occurrence was realized, “The elaborateness of the bureaucracy’s organization conveys a sense of the inexorable—that one might as well go along because nothing can be done” (Lifton 496).

This word adapted by the Nazis to describe the unique process, *Gleichschaltung*, has no equivalent in other languages. “Nazification,” “coordination,” “integration,” and “bringing into line” all come close, but none carries the mechanical overtones of *Gleichschaltung*” (Koonz 72). *Gleichschaltung* was the Ministry of Propaganda’s most important job, and their greatest success. “*Gleichschaltung* occurred so stealthily that most people hardly noticed” (73). Through the use of, at the time, groundbreaking technology and continuous streams of falsified information, The Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany, Joseph Goebbels, was able to convince the entire nation that literally burning their former neighbors was not only acceptable, but necessary, “personal responsibility. Seen against an imagined lethal menace, deportation and mass murder became pre-emptive self-defense” (259). Germans were sure that they were doing the right thing by this. It was either the Jewish people or the true German Aryans. “A genuine believer in the Nazi project could engage in cruelty and murder with absolute integrity” (Lifton 323). But to the physicians sworn to do no harm, it wasn’t murder... just business as usual. They had reasoned with the help of trusted opinions and “scholarly” research that a Jew wasn’t worthy of living and actually needed to be removed for the continuation of the Volk, which is, of course, the most important. “Hitler ignored controversial domestic issues and pledged to rescue moral clarity from the ravages of democracy. Besides advocating one or another economic or diplomatic initiative, Hitler would speak for hours about “Volk and fatherland... the eternal foundation of our morality and our faith” and “the preservation of our Volk” (Koonz 75). Everywhere a student turned in

Germany, all they saw was anti-Semitism. In fact, “In the years before leaders contemplated the wholesale murder of Jews, anti-Semitic scholars set the stage for genocide by expelling Jews collectively from moral consideration as human beings” (Koonz 213). Conventional knowledge looks at the Holocaust as an event, but in reality it was a series of carefully crafted circumstances of gradual hatred and normalization of the abhorrence of Jews.

“Propaganda,” Adolf Hitler wrote in 1924, “is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert” (Luckert 1). He understood that emotions and groupthink can turn a civil nation complicit to future savagery. His regime took the common language of the State and twisted to fit their liking, similarly to how the Nazis did not create the narrative of anti-Semitism, they simply capitalized on what already existed. All the Ministry of Propaganda did was water the seeds of Germany’s own damnation...and they watered them well. The Nazis “changed the values, the frequency of words, and made into common property words that had previously been used by individuals. They confiscated words for the party, saturated words and phrases and sentence forms with their poison. They made the language serve their terrible system. They conquered words and made them into their strongest advertising tools, at once the most public and the most secret” (Klemperer 73). Hitler also grasped how much easier it is to manipulate someone while they're young. He knew if he had them grow up in an environment that he created, he could get them to do whatever he wanted, and that they wouldn't know anything different. “Inveterate Nazi teachers would assign selections from the virulently anti-Semitic children’s book *The Poison Mushroom*, which warned that although many Jews, like mushrooms, appeared attractive on the surface, they were poison underneath” (Koonz 150). Also, in raising them to sacrifice for Germany, older students memorized the Ten Commandments for selecting a

mate, which emphasized racial health and compatibility, with the reminder, “Your body does not belong to you; it belongs to your Volk” (Koonz 147). German youth wouldn't question something they wouldn't even think to question. They would never question their savior, especially when they have been brought up in this all encompassing environment of subliminal hate. Hitler's influence on the children is visible in an illustration for a school play in which the child declares, “My Führer! I know you well and love you like my father and mother. I will always obey you, like my father and mother. And when I grow up, I will help you like my father and mother. And you should be proud of me like my father and mother” (Koonz 143). Nazi Germany was the normal way of life; that is how it created killing machines, through the use of propaganda permeating through every crevasse of German life. There was an anti-Semitic poster on every corner warning of the sexually depraved Jewish doctor waiting to prey on innocent German Aryans or one that reads “everything in her has died. She was ruined by a Jew” and portrays a scene of a despondent mother who neglects her sobbing child and smokes a cigarette, a lonely rooming house and, on the floor, the photograph of the Jewish seducer who abandoned her” (Koonz 229).

Not only advertisements, but also radio was a major contributor to the Nazification of Germany. In *State of Deception- The Power of Nazi Propaganda* it states “If the Nazi Party had only limited access to radio broadcasts during the Weimar Republic, it gained, after 1933, almost complete control of this powerful, state-run medium. at the opening of the radio exhibition in Berlin in August 1933, Goebbels proclaimed that radio would be to the twentieth century what the press had been to the nineteenth” (70). Clearly they comprehend the power of the cutting-edge technology they were using, and when, by the start of World War One, over 70 percent of

German homes had a radio in them, obviously this was a mighty weapon. This was helped tremendously by the mass production of the “Volksempfänger” or “peoples receiver”.

Spearheaded by the infamous Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, its productions beginnings due only to the idea that the Nazis needed to spread their message further using this new means. The radios were limited in their range to prevent any foreign ideas that might be counter productive to the Party’s goals. The director of the Propaganda Ministry’s Broadcasting Department, Eugen Hadomovsky said, “ We radio people are marchers. We think of ourselves as the SA of propaganda. We march freely through the streets and enter every single house, so that the powerful current of National Socialist political and cultural ideas flows into each member of the nation. To work for the radio means to work for the Party and the Führer” (Luckert 70). Hitler being the masterfully skilled orator he was, this was a dream come true. Not only that, but he believed the spoken word was more powerful than the written. What a great advantage then, that “By 1934 had the largest ratio of radios per capita in the world.” (Koonz 94). Radio was not the only technologic advancements they capitalized on; however, additionally, by using film, the Nazi propaganda machine had the ability to seize millions of young minds. “Educational mass media opened up the possibility of standardizing education. Through a program of required films for weekend viewing, the ministry extended its reach to nearly 10 million student viewers” (Koonz 152). Furthermore, if the common people gave into emotions rather than logic like Hitler said, this could potentially be an even more capturing method of miseducation.

What begins as a rational self-interest easily turns into fear especially when there is someone fanning the flames, blaming all one’s country’s problems on people group who had

nothing to do with it. Refusing to admit the fault of one's nation and deflecting the blame. An example of how caught up one can get can be found in *State of Deception*.

I became a national Socialist because the idea of the national community inspired me. What I never realized was the number of Germans who were not considered worthy to belong to this community," said Melita Maschmann in her postwar memoirs written in the form of a report to a former Jewish friend. "the fact that you, for example, were not allowed to belong to the national community i overlooked for as long as I could" (86).

Even though not all were hateful, most were compliant. Evil came from the rationalizing of how great ones own people group is simultaneously putting down in generating an exaggerating the flaws of another group. In *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, Cohen and Simon state, "When people are solely focused on the pursuit of their own interests, they have all the potential to be unempathic" (8). Instead of being entirely self focused, in the case of Nazi Germany this translated to the community of German (meaning Aryan) people. The reoccurring theme of the all mighty Volk. They did not know any better, and why would they? *The Nazi Conscience* describes the experience of a child being poured into at school by a different type of teacher. "Posters in schools: "Collective need before individual greed." "You are nothing. Your Volk is everything!" "Divisiveness destroys; agreement builds." A primer opened with this command: "The Fuhrer says, 'Learn to sacrifice for your fatherland! We are all mortal. But Germany must live on'" (Koonz 145). Those are the teachings that have potential to create monsters, but they weren't, they only did monstrous things. When a German youth is fed the lie that the Volk is everything from the moment they are born, they will do whatever it takes to save it, like their savior saved them. The entrance into the Holocaust was not a slow one however, one cannot build gas chambers right away. First, just one individual must be

de-humanized. “The Nazis based their justification for direct medical killing on the simple concept of “life unworthy of life” (lebensunwertes Leben)” (Lifton 21). When one is brought up to believe not just a fellow German, but simply a fellow human isn't worthy of life, it's easy to see how the situation could rapidly snowball out of control. “Sadism and viciousness alone could not account for the killing of millions of people. The emphasis then shifted to the bureaucracy of killing: the faceless, detached bureaucratic function now applied to mass murder” (Lifton 15). This shift produced many things, one of which being psychological difference, now even if a doctor felt bad it was not his fault, the system was to blame.

The bureaucratic structure served to diffuse individual responsibility. In the entire sequence—from the reporting of cases by midwives or doctors, to the supervision of such reporting by institutional heads, to expert opinions rendered by central consultants, to coordination of the marked forms by Health Ministry officials, to the appearance of the child at the Reich Committee institution for killing—there was no point a sense of personal responsibility for, or even involvement in, the murder of another human being. Each participant could feel like no more than a small cog in a vast, officially sanctioned, medical machine. (Lifton 55).

Not surprisingly, the people of Germany went right along with it. “As long as the means of persecution appeared orderly, few raised their voices to object” (Koonz 184). People trust their doctors, and the doctors trusted Hitler. He brought the people the people hope through hate. By preaching the narrative of the “fact” that “Germany is in trouble, the Jew and undesirables are the problem, and I'm the one who can save us,” he was able to persuade Germany to follow in his long held racist beliefs and maniacal ways. Part of the reason for this was that he was actually able to transform Germany in just a short period of time. The people noticed that and were inspired. Hitler just took advantage of the inspiration. “Quickly, resolutely,

and virtually without material or human costs to the vast majority of the German people, Hitler achieved one foreign-policy success after the other..." (Koonz 99). His propaganda department worked extremely well with Goebells working on the Hitler youth program churning out new Nazis. If it were not for the megalomania, it looked as if they could truly last a thousand years. The new recruits had no idea they were recruits either. "Success depended on Hitler's ability to strip an obvious crime of its political meaning and reframe it as a moral act" (Koonz 96). But the more power Hitler obtained, the more he lost his mind trying to maintain it. The more he gave in to his consumptive tendencies in regards to power, the more he was consumed. By trying to play God, he created his own hell.

In contrast, Frankl seemed to do all he could to find heaven in the camps he was put in. "A human being is not one thing among others; things determine each other, but man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes—within the limits of endowment and environment—he has made out of himself" (157). No matter the propaganda, a survivor of the nightmare it had created claims man still has to take responsibility for who he is, and what he does. Even when the smokescreen of lies clouds the vision to the point of near blindness, the will to meaning can still be found and with it, the possibility to survive.

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