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Why Germans Supported Hitler, Part 1

by Jacob G. Hornberger

It has long intrigued me why the German people supported Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. After all, every schoolchild in America is taught that Hitler and his Nazi cohorts were the very epitome of evil. How could ordinary German citizens support people who were so obviously monstrous in nature?

Standing against the Nazi tide was a remarkable group of young people known as the White Rose. Led by Hans and Sophie Scholl, a German brother and sister who were students at the University of Munich, the White Rose consisted of college students and a college professor who risked their lives to circulate anti-government pamphlets in the midst of World War II. Their arrest and trial was depicted in the German movie *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, which was recently released on DVD in the United States.

Of all the essays on liberty I have written in the past 20 years, my favorite is "[The White Rose: A Lesson in Dissent](#)", which I am pleased to say was later reprinted in *Voices of the Holocaust*, an anthology on the Holocaust for high-school students. The story of the White Rose is the most remarkable case of courage I have ever come across. It even inspired me to visit the University of Munich a few years ago, where portions of the White Rose pamphlets have been permanently enshrined on bricks laid into a plaza at the entrance to the school.

A contrast to the Scholl movie is another recent German movie, *Downfall*, which details Hitler's final days in the bunker, where he committed suicide near the end of the war. Among the people around Hitler was 22-year-old Traudl Junge, who became his secretary in 1942 and who faithfully served him in that capacity until the end. For me, the most stunning part of the film occurred at the end, when the real Traudl Junge (that is, not the actress who portrays her in the film) says,

All these horrors I've heard of ... I assured myself with the thought of not being personally guilty. And that I didn't know anything about the enormous scale of it. But one day I walked by a memorial plate

of Sophie Scholl in the Franz-Joseph-Strasse.... And at that moment I actually realized ... that it might have been possible to get to know things.

So here were two separate roads taken by German citizens. Most Germans took the road that Traudl Junge took — supporting their government in time of deep crisis. A few Germans took the road that Hans and Sophie Scholl took — opposing their government despite the deep crisis facing their nation.

Why the difference? Why did some Germans support the Hitler regime while others opposed it?

Each American should first ask himself what he would have done if he had been a German citizen during the Hitler regime. Would you have supported your government or would you have opposed it, not only during the 1930s but also after the outbreak of World War II?

After all, it's one thing to look at Nazi Germany retrospectively and from the vantage point of an outside citizen who has heard since childhood about the death camps and of Hitler's monstrous nature. We look at those grainy films of Hitler delivering his bombastic speeches and our automatic reaction is that we would have never supported the man and his political party. But it's quite another thing to place one's self in the shoes of an ordinary German citizen and ask, "What would I have done?"

What we often forget is that many Germans did not support Hitler and the Nazis at the start of the 1930s. Keep in mind that in the 1932 presidential election, Hitler received only 30.1 percent of the national vote. In the subsequent run-off election, he received only 36.8 percent of the vote. It wasn't until President Hindenburg appointed him as chancellor in 1933 that Hitler began consolidating power.

Among the major factors that motivated Germans to support Hitler during the 1930s was the tremendous economic crisis known as the Great Depression, which had struck Germany as hard as it had the United States and other parts of the world. What did many Germans do in response to the Great Depression? They did the same thing that many Americans did — they looked for a strong leader to get them out of the economic crisis.

Hitler and Franklin Roosevelt

In fact, there is a remarkable similarity between the economic policies that Hitler implemented and those that Franklin Roosevelt enacted. Keep in mind, first of all, that the German National Socialists were strong believers in Social Security, which Roosevelt introduced to the United States as part of his New Deal. Keep in mind also that the Nazis were strong believers in such other socialist schemes as public (i.e., government) schooling and national health care. In fact, my hunch is that very few Americans realize that Social Security, public schooling, Medicare, and Medicaid have their ideological roots in German socialism.

Hitler and Roosevelt also shared a common commitment to such programs as government-business partnerships. In fact, until the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional, Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which cartelized American industry, along with his "Blue Eagle" propaganda campaign, was the type of economic fascism that Hitler himself was embracing in Germany (as fascist ruler Benito Mussolini was also doing in Italy).

As John Toland points out in his book *Adolf Hitler*, "Hitler had genuine admiration for the decisive manner in which the President had taken over the reins of government. 'I have sympathy for Mr. Roosevelt,' he told a correspondent of the *New York Times* two months later, 'because he marches straight toward his objectives over Congress, lobbies and bureaucracy.' Hitler went on to note that he was the sole leader in Europe who expressed 'understanding of the methods and motives of President Roosevelt.'"

As Srdja Trifkovic, foreign-affairs editor for *Chronicles* magazine, stated in his article "[FDR and Mussolini: A Tale of Two Fascists](#)", Roosevelt and his 'Brain Trust,' the architects of the New Deal, were fascinated by Italy's fascism — a term which was not pejorative at the time. In America, it was seen as a form of economic nationalism built around consensus planning by the established elites in government, business, and labor.

Both Hitler and Roosevelt also believed in massive injections of government spending in both the social-welfare sector and the military-industrial sector as a way to bring economic prosperity to their respective nations. As the famed economist John Kenneth Galbraith put it,

Hitler also anticipated modern economic policy ... by recognizing that a rapid approach to full employment was only possible if it was combined with wage and price controls. That a nation oppressed by economic fear would respond to Hitler as Americans did to F.D.R. is not surprising.

One of Hitler's proudest accomplishments was the construction of the national autobahn system, a massive socialist public-works project that ultimately became the model for the interstate highway system in the United States.

By the latter part of the 1930s, many Germans had the same perception about Hitler that many Americans had about Roosevelt. They honestly believed that Hitler was bringing Germany out of the Depression. For the first time since the Treaty of Versailles, the treaty that had ended World War I with humiliating terms for Germany, the German people were regaining a sense of pride in themselves and in their nation, and they were giving the credit to Hitler's strong leadership in time of deep national crisis.

Toland points out in his Hitler biography that Germans weren't the only ones who admired Hitler during the 1930s:

Churchill had once paid a grudging compliment to the Führer in a letter to the *Times*: “I have always said that I hoped if Great Britain were beaten in a war we should find a Hitler who would lead us back to our rightful place among nations.”

Hitler was a strong believer in national service, especially for German young people. That was what the Hitler Youth was all about — inculcating in young people the notion that they owed a duty to devote at least part of their lives to society. It was an idea also resonating in the collectivist atmosphere that was permeating the United States during the 1930s.

Hitler and anti-Semitism

While U.S. officials today never cease to remind us that Hitler was evil incarnate, the question is: Was he so easily recognized as such during the 1930s, not only by German citizens but also by other people around the world, especially those who believed in the idea of a strong political leader in times of crisis? Keep in mind that while Hitler and his cohorts were harassing, abusing, and periodically arresting German Jews as the 1930s progressed, culminating in Kristallnacht, the “night of the broken glass,” when tens of thousands of Jews were beaten and taken to concentration camps, it was not exactly the type of thing that aroused major moral outrage among U.S. officials, many of whom themselves had a strong sense of anti-Semitism.

For example, when Hitler offered to let German Jews leave Germany, the U.S. government used immigration controls to keep them from immigrating here. In fact, as Arthur D. Morse pointed out in his book *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, five days after Kristallnacht, which occurred in November 1938, at a White House press conference, a reporter asked Roosevelt, “Would you recommend a relaxation of our immigration restrictions so that the Jewish refugees could be received in this country?” The president replied, “This is not in contemplation. We have the quota system.”

Let’s also not forget the infamous 1939 (i.e., after Kristallnacht) “voyage of the damned,” in which U.S. officials refused to permit German Jews to disembark at Miami Harbor from the German ship the *SS St. Louis*, knowing that they would be returned to Hitler’s clutches in Nazi Germany.

(The Holocaust Museum in Washington, to its credit, has an excellent exhibition on U.S. government indifference to the plight of the Jews under Hitler’s control, a dark period in American history to which all too many Americans are never exposed in their public-school training. See also my June 1991 *Freedom Daily* article “[Locking Out the Immigrant](#)” .)

Check out this interesting website: wow.blogs.com/photos/hitler/cover.html, which details a very nice pictorial description of Hitler’s summer home in Bavaria published by a prominent English magazine named *Home and Gardens* in November 1938 Now, ask yourself: If it was so obvious that Hitler was evil incarnate during the 1930s, would a prominent English magazine

have been risking its readership by publishing such a profile? And let's also not forget that it was Hitler's Germany that hosted the worldwide Olympics in 1936, games in which the United States, Great Britain, and many other countries participated. Ask yourself: Why would they have done that?

The Great Depression was not the only factor that was leading people to support Hitler. There was also the ever-present fear of communism among the German people. In fact, throughout the 1930s it could be said that Germany was facing the same type of Cold War against the Soviet Union that the United States faced from 1945 to 1989. Ever since the chaos of World War I had given rise to the Russian Revolution, Germany faced the distinct possibility of being taken over by the communists (a threat that materialized into reality for East Germans at the end of World War II). It was a threat that Hitler, like later American presidents, used as a justification for ever-increasing spending on the military-industrial complex. The ever-present danger of Soviet communism led many Germans to gravitate to the support of their government, just as it later moved many Americans to support big government and a strong military-industrial complex in their country throughout the Cold War.

Hitler's war on terrorism

One of the most searing events in German history occurred soon after Hitler took office. On February 27, 1933, in what easily could be termed the 9/11 terrorist attack of that time, German terrorists fire-bombed the German parliament building. It shouldn't surprise anyone that Adolf Hitler, one of the strongest political leaders in history, would declare war on terrorism and ask the German parliament (the Reichstag) to give him temporary emergency powers to fight the terrorists. Passionately claiming that such powers were necessary to protect the freedom and well-being of the German people, Hitler persuaded the German legislators to give him the emergency powers he needed to confront the terrorist crisis. What became known as the Enabling Act allowed Hitler to suspend civil liberties "temporarily," that is, until the crisis had passed. Not surprisingly, however, the threat of terrorism never subsided and Hitler's "temporary" emergency powers, which were periodically renewed by the Reichstag, were still in effect when he took his own life some 12 years later.

Is it so surprising that ordinary German citizens were willing to support their government's suspension of civil liberties in response to the threat of terrorism, especially after the terrorist strike on the Reichstag?

During the 1930s, the United States faced the Great Depression, and many Americans were willing to accede to Roosevelt's assumption of massive emergency powers, including the power to control economic activity and also to nationalize and confiscate people's gold.

During the Cold War, the fear of communism induced Americans to permit their government to collect massive amounts of income taxes to fund the military-industrial complex

and to let U.S. officials send more than 100,000 American soldiers to their deaths in undeclared wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Since the 9/11 attacks, Americans have been more than willing for their government to infringe on vital civil liberties, including habeas corpus, involve the nation in an undeclared and unprovoked war on Iraq, and spend ever-growing amounts of money on the military-industrial complex, all in the name of the “war on terrorism.”

Crises versus liberty

While the American people faced these three crises — the Great Depression, the communist threat, and the war on terrorism at three separate times, the German people during the Hitler regime faced the same three crises all within a short span of time. Given that, why would it surprise anyone that many Germans would gravitate toward the support of their government just as many Americans gravitated toward the support of their government during each of those crises?

Even Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans eagerly joined the Hitler Youth when they were in high school. In the ever-growing crisis environment of the 1930s, millions of other ordinary Germans also came to support their government, enthusiastically cheering their leaders, supporting their policies, and sending their children into national service and looking the other way when the government became abusive. Among the few who resisted were Robert and Magdalena Scholl, the parents of Hans and Sophie, who gradually opened the minds of their children to the truth.

The three major crises faced by Germany in the 1930s — economic depression, communism, and terrorism — pale to relative insignificance compared with the crisis that Germany faced during the 1940s — World War II, the crisis that threatened, at least in the minds of Hitler and his cohorts, the very existence of Germany. That Hans and Sophie Scholl and other German students began circulating leaflets calling on Germans to oppose their government in the midst of a major war, when German soldiers were dying on two fronts, makes the story of the White Rose even more remarkable and perhaps even a bit discomfiting for some Americans.

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