

Were the Germans Hitler's 'Willing Executioners'?

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Abstract

Germany is currently undergoing a period of 'working through' the 'Nazizeit' [Nazi period]. Documentaries fill German TV screens, and 'Zeitzeugen' [witnesses of history] are interviewed before they die and it is too late. Everywhere, in private homes as in TV chat shows, people are beginning to talk, people who have been almost completely silent for over 50 years.

The paper presents findings from fieldwork in Germany in April 2000 that indicate that one of the sorest humiliations felt today by many Germans who lived in Hitler's Germany seems to be the humiliation they suffered as a result of their own beliefs: 'We were told that our Sold [pay] would help Germany win the Endsieg, and that we would get it afterwards! I believed that! This is so humiliating! You cannot imagine!'

The paper links the humiliation felt by Germans caused by their own loyalty to Hitler with a case from family therapy where a woman feels humiliated by her own feelings of love and loyalty to a man who exploited her. The suggestion is made that the fundamental mechanisms at work are very similar in the two cases. The aim of the research is to build a theory of humiliation that encompasses all relations, from the national to the individual level. This text is an introduction to the endeavour of building this theory.

Introduction

Germany is currently undergoing a period of 'working through' the 'Nazizeit' [Nazi period]. Documentaries fill German TV screens, and 'Zeitzeugen' [witnesses of history] are interviewed before they die and it is too late. Everywhere, in private homes as in TV chat shows, people start talking, people who have been almost completely silent for over 50 years. The 'Unfähigkeit zu trauern' [the inability to mourn], described by Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1982, may have had its origins in an inability to talk. It is only more than 50 years after the 'Zusammenbruch' [collapse] of Hitler's Germany that people are now starting to talk - people in general, not just those few 'Unverbesserliche' [those who cannot be reformed], who at the far right of politics have continued to broadcast Nazi ideals ever since World War II, or those few critical intellectuals with historical interests who have written books.

During my fieldwork in Germany in April 2000 I immersed myself in this discourse. I heard people talk about World War II, people who had avoided this subject before, and they said things that shocked, surprised and moved me. I had thought those times were forgotten, but had been misled by the façade of silence. Obviously, memories had been lingering under a thin cover for decades, waiting for the right time to come out. And astonishingly enough, even small details are still remembered, both in the conversations I had and in the television documentaries or talks I monitored, details in all their multi-facetedness, memories so alive that it is as if the war had ended only yesterday, and the torment is still vivid.

My aim was to collect impressions that could illuminate questions such as 'Did Hitler seduce the broad masses? Did he intend to do so and succeed? To what extent were the Germans 'willing executioners' as Goldhagen claims (Goldhagen, 1996)?

Hitler was obviously very competent at putting into practice what he calls the 'correct psychology' of seduction in the beginning of his career as 'Führer.' He writes on page 165 of his book *Mein Kampf* (Hitler, 1999): 'The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and hence to the heart of the broad masses.' And on page 167 he continues: 'The broad mass of a nation does not consist of diplomats, or even professors of political law, or even individuals capable of forming a rational opinion; ... The people in their overwhelming majority are so feminine by nature and attitude that sober reasoning determines their thoughts and actions far less than emotion and feeling. And this sentiment is not complicated, but very simple and all of a piece. It does not have multiple shadings; it has a positive and a negative; love or hate, right or wrong, truth or lie, never half this way and half that way, never partially, or that kind of thing.'

He continues his lesson in successful propaganda on page 168: '... the most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is borne in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over. Here, as so often in this world, persistence is the first and most important requirement for success.'

Simplicity and persistence, this was the recipe Hitler advocates to get the masses moving, and it is chilling how well Hitler put this into action as soon as he became 'Führer': 'The purpose of propaganda is not to provide interesting distraction for blasé young gentlemen, but to convince, and what I mean is to convince the masses. But the masses are slow-moving, and they always require a certain time before they are ready even to notice a thing, and only after the simplest ideas are repeated thousands of times will the masses finally remember them. When there is a change, it must not alter the content of what the propaganda is driving at, but in the end must always say the same thing. For instance, a slogan must be presented from different angles, but the end of as remarks must always and immutably be the slogan itself. Only in this way can the propaganda have a unified and complete effect' (169).

Everybody who ever heard recordings of Hitler's speeches has an inkling of the emotional power with which he conveyed his message, and the emotional response he received. An elderly man illustrated that fact in an interview (1999, on German television): 'I was a boy in my teens when I heard that Hitler would visit our little town. Already many hours in advance I went to the square where he was to arrive. I tried to stand on my toes, to put my head up, in order to get a glimpse of Hitler behind the masses of people who stood in front of me. A man

told me that I should not worry; first I would see yellow banners, and motorcycles. Twice I thought I saw yellow banners, but each time it was false alarm. Then, finally, Hitler came, but I saw nothing, because I fainted.'

This account illuminates the refrain I encountered during my research in 2000: 'You could not say anything against 'die Bewegung' ['the movement,' meaning Hitler's movement], there was this enthusiasm! My elder brothers and also my elder sister experienced 'den Aufschwung' [literally the 'upswing,' i.e. the first period of Hitler's reign when the economy improved]. You could not say a word! They were taken by it! I was the younger one, I did not dare to talk, and at the end of the war I had to take the shit! By then my brothers were dead! Killed as soldiers before they were 20! What could I have done? I am just disgusted, I can hardly see all these television programmes about the 'Hitlerzeit' [Hitler's times] now! I get sick! It is so humiliating how we were duped! I lost my brothers, I lost my father, and I lost 'Haus, Hof und Heimat' ['house, farm, and my home region'; he talks about the part of Germany that became Poland after World War II, - this was the region where his family's farm was located that he was to inherit, but that he also lost].'

He continues: 'The most disgusting and humiliating thing is the trace of belief and enthusiasm that was once also in me! But I was young, what could I have done? Of course everybody wanted to be part of it! Nobody wanted to be an outsider! When I had to become a soldier the war was hell. It made me sick. Ever since then all this makes me sick!' (interview with a former farmer now in his seventies, April 2000).

I started my research on the concept of Humiliation at the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo in 1997, and began preparing the project's idea in 1994. Now the whole German nation seems to talk about humiliation, in a multitude of contexts.

In *Hitler, Shame and Humiliation: The Intricate Web of Feelings Among the German Population Towards Hitler* (Lindner, 2000a) I tried to differentiate the situation of the German aristocracy from the conditions of the broad masses, and how Hitler was perceived in both groups. I described how the broad masses had been lifted up by Hitler, how they for the first time in history felt important after centuries of being routinely humiliated. The comments made by the German man in his seventies reported above illustrate the context of the 'kleine Leute' [the little people, or the broad masses]. Now, in the year 2000, I heard their voices, I heard how they felt betrayed and humiliated by their own belief in Hitler. 'You cannot believe how humiliating it is to remember that I believed that we should get our Sold [pay] after the Endsieg [final victory]! We were told that our Sold would help Germany win the Endsieg, and that we would get it afterwards! I believed that! This is so humiliating! You cannot imagine!' (interview in April 2000 with a man who as an adolescent was forced to become a soldier at the end of World War II).

The same person continues: 'Göring boasted of German Lufthoheit [control of airspace] over France! But we were in France as German soldiers and we could not go out!!! How humiliating! How we felt betrayed! At that time there were 'Auflösungserscheinungen' [signs of dissolution] in the German army!'

Interestingly enough, Hitler knew about the devastating effect of telling lies to the 'broad masses' in case where they themselves were in a position to test those lies against reality. He learned this during World War I. He writes about the devastating effect of the failure of the 'psychology' contained in German propaganda and contrasts this with the British success:

'And so German war propaganda offered an unparalleled example of an "enlightenment" service working in reverse, since correct psychology was totally lacking. There was no end to what could be learned from the enemy by a man who kept his eyes open, refused to let his perceptions be ossified, and for four and a half years privately turned the storm-flood of enemy propaganda over in his brain' (166).

On page 165 he explains the German mistakes in more detail: 'For instance, it was absolutely wrong to make the enemy ridiculous, as the Austrian and German comic papers did. It was absolutely wrong because actual contact with an enemy soldier was bound to arouse an entirely different conviction, and the results were devastating; for now the German soldier, under the direct impression of the enemy's resistance, felt himself swindled by his propaganda service. His desire to fight, or even to stand firm, was not strengthened, but the opposite occurred. His courage flagged. By contrast, the war propaganda of the English and Americans was psychologically sound. By representing the Germans to their own people as barbarians and Huns, they prepared the individual soldier for the terrors of war, and thus helped to preserve him from disappointments. After this, the most terrible weapon that was used against him seemed only to confirm what his propagandists had told him; it likewise reinforced his faith in the truth of his government's assertions, while on the other hand it increased his rage and hatred against the vile enemy.'

Hitler describes how the German soldier in the end 'rejected everything coming from this source [German propaganda] as "swindles" and "bunk"' (166), and thus lost faith in the national cause. Hitler did not foresee that this was exactly what would happen to 'his' Germany after World War II.

I was repeatedly confronted with the argument that the most humiliating aspect was the fact that people once believed in Hitler, or even loved him, if only a little bit. I searched for cases from other contexts that could illustrate the same mechanism. For example, many citizens of the former DDR seem to have similar feelings, at least those who believed, or tried to believe, that the DDR was the beginning of a better world.

The aim with my research on humiliation is to build a theory of humiliation that encompasses relations from all spheres of life, including relationships at the level of the family and in the private sphere. In fact, I found a case that illustrates the same mechanism from that perspective and I will conclude my paper by briefly outlining it.

Alice (the name has been changed) came to me as a client in 1991 because her marriage had collapsed. Alice is an intelligent well-educated European woman. She told me the following: 'I met Robert 10 years ago. He is 18 years older than me. When I met him, I had just come out of a relationship with an abusive man who could not endure an intelligent woman at his side. I was happy to meet somebody who was older and kinder. I yearned for kindness, for being taken care of, for not being hurt several times a day. I was touched and happy when Robert said that he needed me. My former husband had never said that, he only said that I was old and ugly.'

'I was happy about the new compliments in my life. I was ready to give Robert everything, I was happy to have found somebody who finally loved me, and obviously did not feel threatened by me, my education, my intelligence.'

'Robert lived and worked in Indonesia, and I moved to Indonesia to join him. He was separated from his wife who lived back in Europe, and he told me that he considered me his wife now, but that he could not get a divorce because of the laws back home in his country. I accepted. I preferred a happy relationship to a painful marriage. When I arrived in Indonesia I was full of plans, wanted to do research, get another degree, have a family...'

'Nothing of that happened. Now I am 10 years older and I have nothing. I have wasted all these years on this man. And the worst, I did not even recognise that I wasted the time while I did it! Every time we wanted to realise one of my goals, there was an existential crisis in his life. He had problems with his job, problems with his family, we always lived in emergencies. I hardly ever relaxed. I was all the time busy helping him with his problems, hoping that we would start 'our' life 'then,' and that thus also 'my' life would start one day. It never started.'

'How on earth could I have been so stupid as to accept all that? I think I did it because my mother taught me that a good woman is loyal to her man. My mother is very religious and believes that a wife has to support her husband. Today she reproaches me and asks me why I did not get my degree, why I do not have a family. She does not want to recognise that my wish to get her approval drove me into that. And what does Robert say? He says: "But why did you not tell me that you were not happy! If I only knew that I would have arranged our life differently!" I use to answer: "But you knew what hopes I had for in my life! You knew that! And when we decided to stay together you promised to take care of these hopes! And do you not remember how often I cried? You used to tell me off then, you used to accuse me of being weak. You told me to be optimistic, that was all what you did!"'

Alice continues, exhausted from a life of emergencies and sacrifices: 'Stupid me, I tried terribly hard to relax and be optimistic! Whenever I felt that I was not optimistic enough, I felt guilty of not loving him enough. How could I be weak in supporting this wonderful man who had so many troubles, I told myself. How blind, how stupid, I say today! How could I ever be proud of being intelligent while being so stupid? And proud of being a 'good woman'? But now I realise that Robert used all these emergencies to hide behind them, to avoid real commitment to me. He was not really interested in my needs, my dreams, my happiness. He needed my presence, he enjoyed my being near him, this was what he wanted.'

'I feel today that I was a valuable object to him, let us say like an expensive Chinese vase, in other words, he loved me like one loves a piece of art that one looks at everyday. He did not think of giving the vase food or protecting her from illness, of course not, because vases do not need that. It is not even lack of love on his side, it is lack of ability to be empathic. He is isolated within himself to a degree that I did not recognise. His kindness is not fake, he is kind, but he is deeply limited to himself, to his own needs and wishes, his kindness has its limits as soon as his needs and wishes are endangered.'

'Today my loyalty to him, as well as my intelligence, which made me proud once, make me feel disgusted of myself. I am not only ashamed of myself, I feel that I humiliated myself in front of the Alice who once thought highly of herself. I feel exploited by Robert; he manipulated me into helping him and sacrificing my life for him. And at the end he leaves me with the feeling that it was alone my fault, that I exploited myself, and he is even right! I feel that he raped me, in a slow process, a slow humiliating rape, which I allowed. I could kill Robert. He destroyed me and my inner core of dignity. What he did to me is worse than overt rape. A brute rapist does at least not lie. Robert raped me and made me believe it was love.'

The resentment, pain and suffering which this brought into my life cannot be measured' (adapted from Lindner, 2000b).

I ask myself, could not the case of Alice be placed within the same theoretical framework as many of the German accounts concerning the 'Hitlerzeit'? Could one conclude that many of Germany's 'kleine Leute,' the 'little people,' were, so to speak, 'raped' by Hitler? Not only seduced, but raped and humiliated?

How may the finding that one of the sorest humiliations seems to be the one from one's own beliefs be transformed into a theory of humiliation?

These questions will have to be addressed in another place. This piece will have to end here and claim to be nothing more than preliminary reflections upon a collection of impressions about the current discussion in Germany concerning World War II, put in context with a story of love-rape within a love-relationship. This text is but one little step in the direction of understanding the powerful dynamics of humiliation.

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