# Humiliation in Reactions to Hitler's Seductiveness in Post-War Germany: Personal Reflections

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**Abstract**

*This article first addresses the various forms of humiliation. The discussion then offers the intricate web of feelings among the German population towards Adolph Hitler. It is argued that the 'broad masses' were subordinated in Germany's social hierarchy before and after World War I. 'The little people' rallied to Hitler's cause because he gave them a sense of importance. Only after World War II did many painfully recognise how he had abused their loyalty. On the other hand, the aristocracy had initially expected Hitler to be their puppet. Instead, he rendered them powerless and humiliated them with his initial political and military victories. After World War II, the defeat - the* 'Zusammenbruch'- *prompted a deep sense of mortification among the common people as well as the elite. After the monarchy had lost the contest in 1918, feelings of humiliation had fed public resentment and instability. In 1945, however, abasement had become an inner experience. Every Hitler follower had reason to feel humiliated by his or her misplaced devotion to the Führer — the 'little people' for allowing the destructive dictator, Adolf Hitler, to capture their hearts, the aristocracy for letting it happen. Unpleasant feelings of humiliation, denial, ambivalence, and uncertainty represented the common reactions to Hitler's fatal seduction as my interviews with German survivors of his regime revealed.*

## Introduction

My interest in the topic of humiliation, which culminated in a doctoral dissertation on the subject (Lindner 2000) was intimately related to my early life. I was born into a so-called *Flüchtlingsfamilie* or rather a 'displaced family' in what was then West Germany. Together with millions of others affected after World War II, my parents did not flee German Silesia voluntarily in 1945 but were forced out when Poland assumed control. I grew up with an acutely painful outlook: 'here where we live, we are unwelcome guests, yet, we have no home to go back to.' This sense of alienation was never, however, intensified by an overt antipathy towards my host environment. Confined to a town near Hanover in Lower Saxony during my school years, I began, at the age of twenty, to reconstruct my life as a global citizen, creating a new identity - a different home, as it were, in the world at large.

Whenever I still visit my mother and father, I am greeted by their silent agony and the sad short-hand description of their ordeal: 'Hitler has destroyed our lives.' As a result, the debate about the atrocities of the two World Wars has always been central to my life and work. In this article, I am drawing most particularly on interviews in Germany with members of the aristocracy who had opposed Hitler, with other members of German society, and, not least, with my family. Some of my relatives had advocated Human Rights in the middle of World War II and paid a high price for their compassion.

Could the intention to humiliate be the prime force behind the horrors of the Holocaust, genocide, and ethnic cleansing? To shame others *in extremis* is to seek the destruction of human identity as well as to inflict bodily and psychological pain and exult in the powerlessness and vulnerability of the victims. The final objective might be torture and death. There are also less drastic forms of humiliation in which a group or individual expresses contempt for the actions, appearance, or ideology of another individual or group. Humiliation — malign and destructive — is contrasted by humility and humbleness, which we perceive to be rather noble and benign. There is the humbling of oneself before another less powerful which can be a form of power in itself — the self-abasement of the parent toward an offspring to reduce the disparity in age and power and to show love. There is also the self-sacrifice of a saint in submitting to persecution as a martyr to glorify a supernatural power, as in Christian theology. To show humility of this kind is to reach the highest level of spirituality.

The kind of humiliation that Hitler and his Nazi followers developed took a far different path from the Christian way. Ironically or perhaps predictably, Hitler himself began as a victim of humiliation before becoming its master. One of his many deep disappointments arose from his desire to become a respected member of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. In October 1907 Hitler took the Academy's entrance exam but was rejected. In 1908 he applied for the second time and was not even admitted to the test. Eberhard Jäckel (1991) explains this vividly.

**How the.'Broad Masses' Saw Hitler**

The most intriguing form of humiliation — and there are many others — is the response that the German defeat in the Second World War provoked among those caught under the spell of 'der Führer.' I remember an old German woman once saying: '*Wir kleinen Leute haben sowieso nichts zu sagen. Die da oben machen doch was sie wollen!*' ('We "little people" have nothing to say anyhow. Those "up there" do what they want anyhow!') With these words the old woman expressed the worldview of many 'little people' in Germany, especially today's elder generation.

Germany was a society in which being insignificant was a daily experience for social inferiors. Since at least the eighteenth century, explains Norbert Elias, 'Particularly at the smaller and relatively poorer courts of the German empire it was customary to make social inferiors emphatically aware of their subordinate position' (Elias 1993, 95). The subdued helplessness of the ordinary folk was an inevitable part of their 'life-world' or their 'habitus.' Moreover, as Freeman Dyson argues, '*Soldatentum'* was deeply ingrained. 'To obey superiors unquestioningly and to worship the warrior spirit' was so habitual, 'that Hitler had little trouble in exercising power the way he did' (Dyson 2005, 5).

After years of repressing memories of the Hitler era, Germans are currently re-examining the '*Nazizeit*' (Nazi period). Documentaries fill German TV screens, and '*Zeitzeugen*' (witnesses of history) are interviewed before they die and recollections are lost. The absence of a second Hitler or of a revived sense of resentment and vengeance may play an assisting role in this change of mind. The success of the Marshall Plan and the quick boosting of the German economy to counteract Russian and Communist power to the east furnished the post-war Germans with the sense of success that makes genuine confrontation with the past more palatable. In private homes, as on TV chat shows, people are beginning to talk, even those who have been almost completely

silent for over 50 years. Interpreting the Nazi past has aroused healthy controversy. The conservative historian Ernst Nolte argues that the Hitler regime, for all its irrationality, was an attempt to blunt the expansion of Russian Bolshevism. Exasperated with this self-justification, former West German President Weizsäcker declared, 'Auschwitz remains unique. It was perpetrated by Germans in the name of Germany' (quoted in Tachibana 2005, 5).

Over the years, on trains, in shops, or in waiting queues, whenever I travelled in Germany, I overheard the uncensored voice of the ordinary folk who well-remembered Hitler's rule. Initially I expected that Hitler's regime would be deplored and cursed as one of '*die da oben*' ('them up there') who 'messed it up' terribly. To my surprise, however, Hitler, often called 'der Führer,' was recollected as part of the 'little people's' family life. He might have been simply a wayward dead brother or uncle who had gambled away everything but who still was kin and half-forgiven as a result. The attitude appeared to be most ambivalent — shame that they had followed him mingled with a kind of pity. He was the family's black sheep, so to speak. Hitler had obviously succeeded in entering the common people's lives much more intimately than any other leader before or after him. The exclamation '*Wenn das der Führer wüßte!*' ('If der Führer knew that!') illustrates this. Ordinary people used to repeat that sentiment when Hitler still was in power and when something went wrong in the administration or government. They asserted this because they trusted that he would fix the problem if he knew about it, that he would put '*die da oben*' who 'could do what they wanted' back on the 'right track.'

In short, what I observed showed that Hitler must have managed in an ingenious way to be perceived by the lower orders as someone who appreciated them, as being on their side, directing and protecting their well-being and security. He did this, they thought, by challenging the upper orders, 'those up there.' At the same time, Hitler was leading the country toward certain defeat. He managed a seemingly impossible feat, namely an escape from responsibility for the many problems and military disasters. He not only escaped accountability but succeeded in laying the blame on others — a transfer of condemnation that strengthened his own position with his dedicated followers.

**Hitler and the 'Broad Masses: A Love Affair**

From the very start of his climb to power, Hitler made clear his intention to reach the insecure but pliable German masses. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler (1999) analyses the failure of the Pan-Germanic movement in Vienna. In this context he explains that the 'tough sons of the masses' are needed if any serious fight shall be undertaken. He writes, 'But for this the sons of the broad masses are required. They alone are determined and tough enough to carry through the fight to its bloody end' (94). He continues (98):

> (T)he power which has always started the greatest religious and political avalanches in history rolling has from time immemorial been the magic power of the spoken word, and that alone. Particularly commoners can be moved only by the power of speech. And all great movements are popular movements, volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotional sentiments, stirred either by the cruel Goddess of Distress or by the firebrand of words hurled among the masses. Only a storm of hot passion can turn the destinies of peoples, and he alone can arouse passion who bears it within himself.

Rainer M. Lepsius (1993) analyses his charismatic leadership. Hitler was a master in displaying and inciting emotions; his repertoire ranged from heroic pathos to passionate tears. By being like ordinary people and at the same time their leader, he elevated them beyond their lowly place in German society. Nor did he burden them with complicated programs ('the art of all truly great national leaders at all times consists … in not dividing the attention of a people, but in concentrating it upon a single foe' (*Mein Kampf*, 108). Hitler glorified 'the *Volk*'s' supposed ability to sacrifice for the *Endsieg* (final victory) and offered easy solutions for the masses never before in history taken so seriously. Hitler even arranged for symphony orchestra music to be played in factories, thus giving the 'little people' a sense of greatness, identifying themselves as stalwart members of the Aryan race.

In the process, Hitler dismantled newly acquired rights under the Weimar regime. Women's suffrage — a recent achievement — was in a sense thrown away by a majority of German women who elected him to power. Many were deeply attached — almost in love — with Hitler. Women were glued to the radio whenever Hitler spoke, as I learned from a multitude of sources. Alison Owings (1995) verifies the point. Suppressing thoughts of an individualistic nature, Hitler elicited voluntary submission on a large scale — in the name of noble love, faithfulness, and loyalty — particularly from women. To meet his purposes they became wives and mothers of soldiers and assemblers of weapons — and little else. Norbert Elias (1996, 387) writes:

> One of Hitler's greatest talents — and one of the main factors in his success — was his intuitive, emotional understanding of the needs which a leader of the Germans and his crew had to satisfy in a critical situation. His own emotional needs corresponded to those of his followers. He reacted, without much reflection, to their emotional signals, verbal or non-verbal, with the emotional signals which they demanded and expected of a leader if they were to trust that he would be able to save them from an apparently hopeless situation of danger and despair.

Franz Janka (1997) impressively sketches the collective dream, which Hitler amalgamated in his personality. His admirers were ready to 'reciprocate' with their dedication to what they thought he asked them to want — the '*Endsieg*.' 'Hitler, and Hitler alone, seemed in the end to stand in the eyes of many Germans between them and total annihilation' (Elias 1996, 387). Only too late did 'the *Volk*' realise that the '*Endsieg*' was an inherently unattainable and a suicidal goal. But the reaction was not to condemn the past but to reconstruct it in a way that kept it familiar and less discomfiting.

**Hitler and the Aristocracy: A Humiliation**

With the bulk of the population adopting the role of faithful followers, the aristocracy found itself irrelevant. They had gloried in their right to rule. It was mortifying to be governed by a lowly little painter from Austria, '*dieser Gefreite*.' Hitler had achieved no more than a rather lowly place in the military ranking order, which the aristocracy used to lead. Furthermore, he was hiding behind the *Volk*. In less than two decades the formerly powerful elite suffered three blows to its class pride. The first was the loss of World War I and the Versailles Treaty. Since

the well-born were the primary carriers of national sentiment, they, above all, experienced the humiliation arising from the Versailles Treaty. The abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the founding of the Weimar Republic was the second disaster in their view. It entailed the destruction of the divinely 'ordained' aristocratic order and led to persistent resentment. Third, the rise of Hitler involved the most unbelievable degree of dishonour. He had not only snatched away their dearest theme of nationalistic identity but had also incited 'the masses' to create a new and totalitarian order that left them outside the domain of power.

According to a testimonial (August 3, 1999) that I received during fieldwork in Germany, aristocrats who were related to the failed assassins of 1944 called him 'the demon.' Those members of the German elite who joined the Nazi cause felt debased: they were forced to work with the 'demon.' Some, like the young and highly contentious Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, who carried the hidden explosives into Hitler's field headquarters, came to his disillusionment with the war and its architect rather late. According to Martyn Housden, even conspirators like the more elderly General Ludwig Beck, a member of the old Prussian order, long ignored 'many of the regime's crimes and misdeeds within Germany, even though they were abhorrent to him' (1996, 99.) But eventually, to Beck and others in the largely Prussian military elite, it grew clear that Hitler was relentlessly steering the passions of the nation to its ultimate perdition. What could have been worse? The ill-born Austrian artist did not deserve to be head of state. It is scarcely a wonder that some violated the code of German submission to authority in plotting assassination. For some among the well-born, Hitler's suicide and the nation's defeat seemed almost a vindication of both their marginalisation during the Weimar years and their opposition, however muted and ineffective, to the dictator. Housden (1996), Malinowski (2005) and Mommsen (2005) address the topic of Hitler's Germany, and the aristocracy and its resistance.

As to the German middle classes, a now 79 years old intellectual (on 22nd September 2005) explains that the middle classes were forced under Hitler's supremacy by step-by-step *Salamitaktik* (salami tactics). Among the most powerful element at his disposal was the support of the *Volk* who gave Hitler the legitimacy to build institutions of terror that forced the rest of the German population into submission. One of the most 'efficient' tools was *Sippenhaft* — when somebody showed resistance, his wife and children were threatened. There is not enough space in this article to explain the case of the middle classes in more depth.

**Why the Germans Were Not Depressed after the *Zusammenbruch***

'It is probably true to say that a large part of the German people continued to believe unshakeably in the Führer until he was dead, and perhaps for quite a time afterwards' (Elias 1996, 387). After the *Zusammenbruch* at the end of World War II, Germans immersed themselves in work. One might have expected that for the most part they would become either angry or depressed. After all, large territories were lost to Poland, to 'Slavs' whom the Germans had learned to despise as lowly beings. German defeat and military occupation for which humiliation was a palpable outcome did not lead to fury, vengeance, and retaliation as it had in 1918.

As the war's prospects darkened, Hitler had lashed out against the common folk who were supposedly too immature, too inadequate, to meet his demands. But, despite his disloyalty toward them, the members of the lower classes had come to understand that they were important

and that their work could make a difference. Labour became the new passion because its intensity helped to repress more unmanageable thoughts. Sacrifice for family needs and the regularity of work replaced any ideology, even the glories of national honour. Meanwhile the aristocracy had reason to be ashamed. They had permitted a 'mad-man' to overwhelm the nation without summoning the courage to stop him. Their only feeble satisfaction was to say to themselves afterwards: 'We knew that this Hitler was an incompetent *parvenu*.' These sentiments came from interviews with members of the aristocracy whose families had been involved in attempts to assassinate Hitler (3rd August 1999).

A woman, born 1930 in Breslau, capital of Silesia, into a world that was defined by Hitler, experienced the *Zusammenbruch* when she was 15. Suddenly the sweet and protected girl found herself in a new world where she was perceived as part of the evil German perpetrators by Poles and Russians, free to be raped and abducted. Her mother tried to protect her. Until she dies, she might never be able to tell whether her mother succeeded or not. Then the day came when the order was given that everybody had to gather at a certain place in town, only take what they could carry, and leave the key of their homes outside the door. In vain, she tried to carry her bed. Like millions of others, she lost everything, her home, her *Heimat* (homeland), her childhood security. She never recovered. Now, 60 years later she submits to chronic trembling. For weeks, she quakes from fear and wrath. In an interview (4th September 2005), she declared:

> The longer I live, the more I develop an enormous fury, compounded by the fact that I feel so helpless, that a handful of criminals, who turned themselves into the slaves of a single man, could lead the German people and half of the world into such total ruin. (*Je länger ich lebe, desto mehr habe ich eine unbändige und ohnmächtige Wut, dass eine Handvoll Verbrecher, die einem einzigem Mann hörig wurden, das deutsche Volk und die halbe Welt so nachhaltig ins Verderben führen konnten*).

Another German, soon 80 years old (born in 1926 in Silesia), saw his two beloved elder brothers die as soldiers in vain. Toward the end of the war, he himself was drafted and tried to resist and hold on to humanity. He was punished. At the age of twenty, his life was no longer that of a happy farm boy, lovingly caring for his family and his animals. His father, it could be said, died of grief. The son lost the family farm that he was to inherit, as well as one arm in the last days of the war. In addition, he lived through so many horrifying experiences that he will never be able to speak about them, he says, while in pain. The tragedy of Hitler's rule should teach us all, exclaims the dispossessed German:

> (T)he human being is a social creature and easily influenced, manipulated and seduced. In order to prevent disaster, one must swim against the current — and do so before it becomes far too late. Many ask, 'Why did you do nothing?' The reply is that at a certain stage, nothing could be done anymore. What we need most are exemplary leaders (Interview, 4th September 2005).

We all welcome exemplary leaders. However, perhaps institution-building is more important. Avishai Margalit (1996) wrote *The Decent Society*, in which he calls for institutions that no longer humiliate citizens. Decency reigns when humiliation is being minimised, humiliation in

relationships, but also humiliation inflicted by institutions. Decency rules when dignity for all is made possible. I call for a world-wide **Moratorium on Humiliation** in order to facilitate the building of a **decent global society**.

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Evelin Gerda Lindner (MD, PhD [Dr. med] and PhD, [Dr. social psychol]) refers to herself as a global citizen who starts from the premise 'that the desire for recognition unites us human beings — that it is universal and can serve as a platform for contact and cooperation…. It is when respect and recognition are failing, that those who feel victimised are prone to highlight differences in order to "justify" rifts that were caused, not by these differences, but by something else, namely by humiliation.' Her interest in — and contribution to — the study of humiliation led to an invitation in 2001 from the Columbia University Conflict Resolution Network to start up a program on Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HDHS). Since that time Dr. Lindner has devoted her time to writing books and articles that address the origins, development and effects of humiliation. She has traveled the world 'forg(ing) a network that knits together academia and practice in innovative ways and helps prevent and avoid cycles of humiliation and instead promote equal dignity.' This issue of *Social Alternatives* is one of the many ways in which the work of the HDHS reaches out to the world and inspires others to join its network.

**Suggested blow-ups**

To shame others *in extremis* is to seek the destruction of human identity as well as to inflict bodily and psychological pain and exult in the powerlessness and vulnerability of the victims.

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