Perceptions of the Nazi Mind:
Psychological Theories, 1940’s – Present

Advising Professor: Dr. Jane Pederson
Cooperating Professor: Teresa Sanislo

Taylor Pieper
History 489
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
May 13, 2013

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital version is published by McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire with the consent of the author.
Table of Contents

Abstract &middot; iii

Introduction &middot; 1

Theories from 1940-1950 &middot; 3

Theories from the 1970’s &middot; 10

Theories from the 1990’s &middot; 22

Theories from the 2000’s &middot; 27

Conclusion &middot; 30

Bibliography &middot; 32

Figures

Figure 1 &middot; 17
Abstract

Since the Holocaust, psychologists have attempted to explain the mindset of the Nazi men who performed such atrocities. To most, the horrors of the Holocaust are unfathomable and thus trying to understand the psychology of the men behind it is nearly impossible. Throughout the years, however, psychologists have attempted to do just that. There have been a plethora of theories as to what the mindset of these genocidal murders was. These theories have evolved and changed overtime, however, and thus the American public perception of Nazis has changed right along with them. This paper will explain the changing theories throughout the years as well as the American perceptions of Nazis that echo them.
Introduction

Historians have proposed numerous theories of what lead to the rise of Nazis and the rationalization of the Holocaust in Germany. A culmination of political, economic, cultural, social, and most importantly, psychological issues impacted the mentality of Germans causing them to join the Nazi party and commit the atrocities of the Holocaust. However, these psychological factors are largely neglected in the works of historians.

Not until recently have historians included the psychology of the Nazi mind. Psychoanalysis of prominent Nazi figures gives the greatest insight into the motives of Hitler and other Germans who became genocidal killers. Research of these works broadens the understanding of the Nazi psyche. Uncovering the information necessary to complete a full picture of how psychologists perceived the mind of Nazis both in the past and presently, I intend to reveal the inner-workings of the mind of Adolf Hitler as well as other prominent Nazi leaders. I hope to shed light on the ideals and psychological maneuvers that Hitler employed in order to sway so many seemingly “normal” German citizens to become genocidal killers.

As I progress through the different decades and waves of psychological publications, it becomes clear that there was a big shift in how psychologists explained Nazi behavior. Early on, psychologists claimed that the events of the Holocaust were an isolated incident that occurred as a result of a few prominent madmen. They attributed the events of the Holocaust to Hitler and a handful of other major Nazi leader’s own
personal psychological disturbances. Later, however, psychologist began to claim that these events could really have occurred anywhere given the right social circumstance. They believe that nearly all average citizens would go against their own morals when faced with a dilemma regarding obedience to authority. This shift in theories regarding the psychology of Nazis will be an underlying theme throughout this paper.

I will also be exploring the impact of these psychological works on American public perception of Nazis. I will analyze whether or not the language and diction used to talk about the Nazis changed as the different psychological theories were published throughout the decades. In other words, did Americans start to refer to Nazis more as “mad men” or “psychologically disturbed” as more and more psychological works were published on the matter.

This work will analyze the psychology of the Nazi mentality through different periods of history. Beginning with works of the early 1940’s including documents from the Nuremberg trials, Nazi testimonies, and a work from G.M. Gilbert, and Walter Langer. The next wave of publications that are explored in this paper are from the 1970’s. The five works examined here primarily attempts to explain the Nazis mentality psychologically. The next grouping of work comes from the 1980’s-1990. These three sources include works of more modern psychoanalysis of the Nazis. The final collection of works examined in this paper comes from the 2000’s. These five sources apply new psychological theories to what drove the Nazi mind.
Through analysis of these works, this paper will increase understanding of the various and changing theories of the psychology of Nazi Leaders. It will also reveal the numerous psychological theories of the mind of Adolf Hitler himself. Finally, it will disclose the impact of these works on American public perception of Nazis throughout history.

Theories from 1940-1950

There appear to be little to no works of psychological analysis of Adolf Hitler from close quarters while he was living. However, there is one prominent work of psychoanalysis that was conducted about Hitler while he was still living that came from Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1943, psychoanalyst, Walter Charles Langer, prepared a psychoanalytic report of Hitler for the Office of Strategic Services. In this work, Langer used Freudian theories to psychoanalyze Hitler. He analyzed Hitler’s mental and emotional state as well as his impact on those around him. Langer looked into what Hitler believed and knew about himself, what his associates thought of him, what the German people thought of him, the psychological analysis of these factors, and concluded with what he believed would be Hitler’s probably behavior in the future. Langer amazingly even correctly predicted Hitler’s death by suicide. This immensely important report was actually kept classified for many years until it was released and published in the book, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report*, in 1972.

Langer began his analysis of Hitler by acknowledging what he understood about Hitler’s own beliefs about himself. Hitler believed himself to be an all-powerful being whose duty it was to save Germany. “And yet all of his former associates whom we have been able to contact, as
well as many of our most capable foreign correspondents, are firmly convinced that Hitler actually does believe in his own greatness. Fuchs reports that Hitler said to Schuschnigg during the Berchtesgaden interviews: “Do you realize that you are in the presence of the greatest German of all time?”\(^1\) Hitler also believed that he could not make mistakes and that everything he did and said was historical. He thought that he was the greatest war lord of all time and those around him could clearly see that he believed himself as unfailing and invincible. Langer concluded that, “This belief in his own power actually borders on a feeling of omnipotence that he is not reluctant to display.”\(^2\) All in all, Hitler thought he was the chosen one that was destined for greatness and for the creation of a new world order. Langer summarized this belief, “A survey of all the evidence forces us to conclude that Hitler believes himself destined to become an Immortal Hitler, chosen by God to be the New Deliverer of Germany and the Founder of a new social order for the world.”\(^3\)

Langer also noted the image of Hitler among the German people. He explained how Hitler’s speaking abilities and use of propaganda persuaded and swayed people into trusting in him as they hung on his every word. “He was so convincing on the speaker’s platform and appeared to be so sincere in what he said that the majority of his listeners were ready to believe almost anything good about him because they wanted to believe it. The Nazi propaganda agencies were not slow in making the most of their opportunities.”\(^4\)


\(^2\) Ibid, 30-31.

\(^3\) Ibid, 39.

\(^4\) Ibid, 49.
propaganda used by Hitler portrayed himself as something more than a man. He did everything he could to make it appear that he was somehow divinely chosen to save Germany. Through this use of propaganda, Hitler began to sway the German public to believe that he and he alone held the answers and the capabilities to change the order of the world for the better. It was with this belief that ordinary German citizens began to follow him.

Langer notes that in order to truly understand Hitler’s motivations during this time period, one must look closely at the framework of his mind. Through analysis of Hitler’s past, his behaviors, and through correspondence with those closest to him, Langer comes to the conclusion that Hitler had deep and extensive mental issues.

There was general agreement among the collaborators that Hitler is probably a neurotic psychopath bordering on schizophrenia. This means that he is not insane in the commonly accepted sense of the term, but a neurotic who lacks adequate inhibitions. He has not lost complete contact with the world about him and is striving still to make some kind of psychological adjustment that will give him a feeling of security in his social group. It also means that there is a definite moral component in his character no matter how deeply it may be buried or how seriously it has been distorted.\(^5\)

Langer then noted that Hitler appeared to have two wholly separate sides to him that blurred exactly who he was as a person. Part of Hitler’s personality strove to be socially liked and accepted, it was lazy and obsessed with media, music, and an effort to appear in good taste. The other side was much darker. This version of Hitler would stay up for days at a time doing work with incredibly driven and high energy levels. It was callous and determined. “As one surveys Hitler’s behavior patterns, as his close associates observe them, one gets the impression that this is not a single personality, but two that inhabit the same body and

\(^5\) Ibid, 126.
alternate back and forth. The one is a very soft, sentimental, and indecisive individual who has very little drive and wants nothing quite so much as to be amused, liked, and looked after. The other is just the opposite --- a hard, cruel, and decisive person with considerable energy --- who seems to know what he want and is ready to go after it and get it regardless of cost.°

Clearly Langer believed Hitler had at least some form of psychological personality disorder. He explained how this split in his being led to deep inner turmoil within Hitler:

With this diagnosis established, we are in a position to make a number of surmises concerning the conscious mental processes that ordinarily take place in Hitler’s mind. These form the nucleus of the ‘Hitler’ he consciously knows and must live with. It is in all probability not a happy ‘Hitler’, but one harassed by fears, anxieties, doubts, misgivings, uncertainties, condemnations, feelings of loneliness and of guilt. From our experience with other neurotic psychopaths we are probably on firm ground when we suppose that Hitler’s mind is like a battle royal most of the time with many conflicting and contradictory forces and impulses pulling him this way and that.

Langer obviously believed that Hitler has a vast underlying personality disorder that drastically affected his mental processes and very easily could be the cause of his eccentric behavior. He compares this nature of Hitler to that of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and explained that only by understanding the extent and magnitude of these oscillations between personality structures can we really understand Hitler’s actions. Langer explained that this characteristic is very common in many psychopaths.°

Another major component in the mentality of Hitler, according to Langer, is the theory that Hitler is using a psychological maneuver of repressing his sensitive side by over

° Ibid, 127.

° Ibid, 126-127.

° Ibid, 128.
exaggerating his “Fuehrer” personality. He believed that Hitler despised the sentimental side of himself and all emotional aspects that accompany it because he views them as weaknesses. In an effort to rid himself of this side, Hitler greatly emphasized his determined and overly masculine side, identified with that personality, and then promoted that image to the world.

Langer explained:

The whole ‘Fuehrer’ personality is a grossly exaggerated and distorted conception of masculinity as Hitler conceives it. The ‘Fuehrer’ personality shows all the earmarks of a reaction formation that has been created unconsciously as a compensation and cover-up for deep-lying tendencies that he despises. This mechanism is very frequently found in psychopaths and always serves the purpose of repudiating the true self by creating an image that is diametrically opposite and then identifying oneself with the image. The great difference between Hitler and thousands of other psychopaths is that he has managed to convince millions of other people that this fictitious image is really himself.9

Hitler’s overzealous, masculine, and violent behavior thus can be explained by the fact that he tried to play the part and portray an image of himself as such in order to repress the aspects of his other self that he loathed.

Based upon the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Langer attributed much of this personality disorder to Hitlers’ upbringing as a child. He states, “Freud’s earliest and greatest contribution to psychiatry in particular and to an understanding of human conduct in general was his discovery of the importance of the first years of a child’s life in shaping his future character. It is during these early years, when the child’s acquaintanceship with the world is still meager and his capacities are still undeveloped, that the chances of misinterpreting the nature of the world about him are the greatest.”10

9 Ibid, 131.
10 Ibid, 142.
Thus, Langer attributes Hitler’s misunderstanding of the nature of the world and the values of power and dominance to which he holds dear must have sprouted from experiences in his early life. In Hitler’s case, his father played a huge role in relaying to him the value of being a faithful servant to the state and also instilled in him a fear that the world was dangerous, uncertain, and unfair. Langer states, “The person who should give him love, support, and a feeling of security fills him with anxiety, uneasiness, and uncertainty.”¹¹

According to this analysis, it is obvious to see how Hitler’s ideals and mentality regarding power and control of his surroundings stemmed from fears instilled in him from his childhood. Langer noted other early-life experiences that impacted Hitler’s mental state including, a Freudian-theorized Oedipus complex regarding his mother and rivalries with his siblings.

Langer explained how he believed Hitler transferred his affections for his mother to affections for his country later in his life. When Germany lost the First World War and many Jewish people became the point of blame for this, Hitler, “promptly transferred his repressed hate to these new perpetrators.”¹² Thus, Hitler detested Jews. Langer also attributed this hate to an intense use of the psychological defense mechanism of projection. He believed that Hitler took everything that he hated about himself and mirrored them in the qualities of a Jew. Therefore, “his own personal problems and conflicts were transferred from within himself to the external world where they assumed the proportions of racial and national conflicts.”¹³

¹¹ Ibid, 146.

¹² Ibid, 156.

¹³ Ibid, 183.
Through use of Freudian theories, Langer clearly believed that Hitler’s mentality sprouted from internal struggles. His anti-Semitism and unforgiving outlook on the nature of the world came from his own internal psychological problems that he then, unfortunately, turned outward and unleashed on Europe.

In terms of how this book affected American public opinion, its influences can be seen in a 1972 issue of *TIME* magazine. In article called, “The Two Hitlers”, the issues of Hitler’s erratic behavior are discussed. This article praises Langer’s work and holds his findings and theories in high regard. Thus, the article portrays Hitler as being a, “psychopath”, and alters public perception of him.14 This is a far cry from the genius that many had seen him as years prior. For example, in 1938, Hitler was featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine as the man of the year. He was not necessarily praised for his achievements, however, he was recognized for being one of the most influential and groundbreaking men of the time. After the publication of Langer’s book, which revealed much of the inner-workings of Hitler’s mind, popular American media picked up on his theories and spread the perception that Hitler was, indeed, a psychopath. Of course, because Langer’s work was kept classified, this article and its influences on American public opinion could not be spread until the 1970’s. This is not to say that there was not talk of possible psychological disturbances in Hitler’s character prior to this time. In 1939 an article was published in *TIME* magazine that described a feud between psychologists trying to diagnose Hitler. It was believed that Hitler was disturbed and one psychologist, “tentatively

---

diagnosed him as a schizophrenic”\(^\text{15}\) The other feuding psychologist, Dr. Carl Jung, described Hitler as being, “in the category of the truly mystic medicine men”.\(^\text{16}\) This is to say that he believed that he was, “acting under the command of a higher power”.\(^\text{17}\)

It is clearly evident that American public perception changed vastly over the decades as Hitler is regarded as man of the year in 1938, referred to as possibly schizophrenic in 1939, and by 1972 he is perceived as being a diagnosable psychopath. The publications of these prominent psychologists obviously played a large role in how Hitler was regarded and understood in the United States.

**Theories from the 1970’s**

During the 1970s another wave of psychological publications regarding the mentalities of Hitler and his Nazi followers arrived. Psychological works came from Erich Fromm, Florence Miale, and Hans Askenasy. Fromm was the first to publish his work during this period.

Erich Fromm was a German psychologist and psychoanalyst. His work centers around the mindset of Hitler during the years leading up to and during the Holocaust. One theory that Fromm gives to explain Hitler’s behavior and ability to commit such atrocities was that he employed a defense mechanism in which he de-humanizes the enemy to make killing them seem less like murder and more like simply ridding himself of a nuisance. He states, “Hitler did the same by calling ‘political enemies’ he wanted to destroy Untermenschen (‘subhumans’). It

\(^{15}\) “Two Diagnoses.” *Time*, May 5, 1939.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
seems almost a rule, when one wants to make it easier for one’s own side to destroy living beings of the other, to indoctrinate one’s own soldiers with a feeling that those to be slaughtered are non-persons.”

Fromm dedicates a full chapter of this book to psychoanalyzing Hitler’s life and mind to further explain his actions. Unlike Langer, who primarily focused on innate explanations for Hitler’s behavior, Fromm looked at both internal and external causes. He also differed from Langer in that he looked beyond the classic Freudian theories to explain the mentality of Hitler. Furthermore, Fromm disagreed with Langer’s theorizing of Hitler’s childhood being the main influence on the personality of the man he turned out to be. He says, “The most important difference is the following: classic analysts assume that character development is finished around the age of five or six years, and that no essential changes occur afterward other than by the intervention of therapy. My experience has led me to the conviction that this concept is untenable; it is mechanistic and does not take into account the whole process of living and of character as a developing system.” It is obvious that the psychological theories believed by Fromm differ greatly from those of Langer’s from thirty years prior.

Though Fromm agrees that a child’s upbringing does greatly affect the person they become, he believes that Langer attributes too much of his theory on situations in which nearly all children grow up. Therefore, he cannot support Langer’s ideas because he claims that so many children had such similar upbringings as Hitler, but none of them turned out the

---


19 Ibid, 369-370.
tyrannical psychopath that he did. Thus, there must be something more that happened in Hitler’s life to turn him into the man he became. Instead, Fromm looks to later experiences such as his failure in high school, conflict with his father, and losing himself to a fantasy world. He claims, “But if one connects Hitler’s behavior in these youthful years with the data from his later life, a pattern emerges: that of a highly narcissistic, withdrawn person for whom phantasy is more real than reality.”

Fromm believed that Hitler was driven by destructiveness. He theorized that as Hitler grew up, he began to crave the ability to tear things down and begin them again. He had an obsession with architecture and yet wanted to destroy Paris and other major cities during the war and start them over himself. He went beyond architectural destructiveness as well as he also wanted to tear down the “race” of Jews. These destructive patterns, Fromm believes, help explain Hitler’s motives and mindset during World War II. On top of this destructive behavior, Fromm also believed Hitler suffered from necrophilia, was sadomasochistic, and with his intense narcissism, lacked and feelings of love or compassion. With this theory, it becomes clear how Hitler was able to so easily destroy other human lives. With only the narcissistic capacity to love himself and with no compassion for others, Hitler would have no problem exterminating an entire “race” during the Holocaust.

Fromm concludes his psychoanalysis of Hitler by recapping most of what he would have diagnosed him with. He states, “In analyzing Hitler we have found a number of severely

---

20 Ibid, 374.

21 Ibid, 380.

22 Ibid, 406.
pathological traits: we hypothesized the presence of a semi-autistic streak in the child; we found extreme narcissism, lack of contact with others, flaws in his perception of reality, intense necrophilia. One can legitimately assume the presence of a psychotic, perhaps schizophrenic streak in him." Fromm concludes that Hitler had numerous psychological disorders and an immensely flawed outlook on reality, but he somehow could not classify him as being insane. Through all of his psychological maladies, Hitler was somehow incredibly successful for a good portion of his life. Thus, Fromm denotes that indeed Hitler’s behavior stemmed largely from his psychological issues, but overall he would not declare him insane.

In following with the theme of discovering whether or not these Nazi men were insane, another publication from 1975 addresses just that question. Florence Miale and Michael Selzer wrote the book, The Nuremberg Mind: The Psychology of the Nazi Leaders. This book begins by addressing Hannah Arendt’s theories regarding the banality of evil and whether or not just any normal citizen could have become a murderous Nazi. After studies conducted by many psychologists of prominent Nazi figures such as, SS Obersturmbannfueher Adolf Eichmann, she believed that most Nazis could not be considered insane or sadistic. In Eichmann’s case, the findings pointed to him being a normal and even admirable person with a positive outlook on life. In a vast contradiction to this finding, Miale and Selzer reported another psychological report that concluded that Eichmann was in fact a mad man.

---

23 Ibid, 431.
24 Ibid, 431.
The only published psychological evaluation of Eichmann’s personality presents a very different portrait of the man. In an article published after the trial, Gideon Hausner, Eichmann’s prosecutor, reported that the Szondi test had been administered to Eichmann and sent to Dr. Szondi for analysis without any indication as to the subject’s identity. In his reply, Hausner reported, Szondi ‘started by saying that he never analyzed tests of people who had not been identified for him but then added that when he’d glanced briefly at the results they were so extraordinary that he performed a complete analysis. The person who’d taken the test, he declared, revealed in all phases a man obsessed with a dangerous and insatiable urge to kill, arising out of a desire for power…a perverted, sadistic personality.’

Miale and Selzer next looked into the study conducted by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University. In the same year as the Eichmann trial, Milgram set out to discover the degree to which people would obey a command even as it went against their own conscience. This was in direct correlation to the fact that nearly all Nazis that were put on trial pleaded not-guilty as they were just “following orders”.

In Milgram’s experiment, he would have volunteers come into a setting with another person who was an actor. They were told that they were working on a memory study and that one of them would be randomly designated the teacher and one the learner. However the experiment was rigged and the unknowing volunteer would always be given the role of the teacher. As the teacher, their job was to ask the learner a question. If the learner got it wrong, the teacher was instructed to administer what they believed to be an electric shock that was hooked up to the learner. The amount of volts of each shock ranged from fifteen to four-hundred and fifty. Accompanying these volt switches were words that indicated the shocks intensity. For example, at 15 it read “slight shock” and at 450 it may say “Danger- Severe Shock” or simply “XXX”. The teacher was supposed to administer the next higher level of shock for

\[\text{Ibid, 7.}\]
every time the learner answered a question incorrectly. The volunteers were able to hear and sometimes see the learner as they were getting “shocked”. Once the teacher reached a certain level of shock, the learner would begin to protest, scream in agony, demand to leave the study, or even slump over in silence in their chair and appear unconscious or even dead. The volunteers typically experienced a moral conflict as they no longer wanted to deliver painful shocks to the learners. However, using just simple encouragement such as “please continue”, the administrator of the experiment almost always persuaded the volunteer to continue on.27

Milgram, through this experiment, showed the extent that any average citizen would ignore their own conscience and continue on with an experiment that so very clearly made them uncomfortable as a result of following orders.28

What Milgram’s findings indicate then is that people will go to great lengths beyond what they believe to be morally okay in order to obey authority. They do this because they believe that it is not their personal selves that are to blame but rather the experimenter. They believe they do not have to take personal responsibility for it because they were simply following orders. “Indeed, Milgram goes on to suggest that while the teachers in his experiments may have been upset about having to administer the shocks, they did not consider their actions wrong at the time that they were performing them. And this not only because they did not regard themselves as responsible for their actions (they were merely obeying

27 Ibid, 7-8.

28 Ibid, 8-9.
orders given to them by others), but also because they had transferred to the experimenter the responsibility for determining whether their actions were immoral or not.\textsuperscript{29}

This finding thus correlates to the testimonies of the Nazis in that it supports their pleas that they were not insane murders but that they were just following orders. As Milgram states, “The psychology of obedience does not depend on the placement within the larger hierarchy: the psychological adjustments of an obedient Wehrmacht general to Adolf Hitler parallel those of the lowest infantry man to his superior, and so forth, throughout the system. Only the psychology of the ultimate leader demands a different set of explanatory principles...the social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often, it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.”\textsuperscript{30}

Thus, Milgram’s study, suggested that it was not the aggression of each individual Nazi, but rather circumstance of following orders that they found themselves in that persuaded them to commit the acts that they did. It is implied, then, that the only mind that should be in question, than, is that of the man giving the orders, Adolf Hitler. Miale and Selzer concluded these findings saying, “Obedience rather than aggression is what made the ghastly tragedy possible. Moreover, under the conditions which prevailed in Nazi Germany, any of us decent, normal people could have behaved as the most bestial Nazi did.”\textsuperscript{31}

Next, Miale and Selzer looked into a study administered on the Nazis involving the Rorschach Method. The Rorschach Method was created by Hermann Rorschach, a Swiss

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 10.
psychiatrist, just before World War I. In this method, a series of ten inkblots are shown to the test subject to identify what image they see in the ink blot. The variance of these responses would reveal the mindset of the individual. As described by Miale and Selzer, “In a manner consistent with the basic Freudian understanding of the human mind, Rorschach hypothesized that the objects which people saw in the ink blots were perceived not at random but rather on the basis of the distinctive characteristics of the individuals involved. Those characteristics, Rorschach suggested, could be identified through the careful analysis of people’s responses to the blots.”

The idea behind the test is that the subject will project their inner-selves into what they see in the ink blot. This allows psychiatrists to get a better understanding of the mentality of their subjects, in this case, the Nazi prisoners.

Figure 1. One of the original 10 Rorschach ink blots.
(Date accessed: 2/25/13)

---

32 Ibid, 17.
After administering the Rorschach test to the sixteen Nazi prisoners, it was found that not surprisingly; many of them shared similar dark personality traits. Miale and Selzer explain that one of the major themes found amongst these Nazi’s personalities was depression. They claim, “Fifteen of the sixteen subjects indicate depressive mood qualities by referring to such concepts as night, darkness, grayness, blackness, and so on. This is, indeed, the single most prevalent quality in the group and, for what the statistic is worth, is found in an average of four responses per subject.”

Perhaps before, and most certainly after the Holocaust, that depression was a serious and prominent facet of the Nazi mindset.

The second most commonly found trait of the Nazi mindset was violence. It was found in fourteen of the sixteen subjects. Other common themes found in the analysis of their responses were, status, rejection of responsibility and death. These all correlate with the traumatic experiences that they had all just encountered during the Holocaust. Given these responses, the authors concluded that fifteen of the sixteen tested fell into the diagnoses of a psychopath. They elucidate, “Perhaps the most remarkable fact about the group of subjects in our collection is that at least fifteen out of the sixteen were, in varying degrees psychopathic --- Neurath being perhaps the sole exception. It is probable that these traits are to be found in large numbers of any group of ‘power seekers’ --- whether in politics, commerce, the arts, or elsewhere --- but the proportion here seems extraordinary.”

In summary, the data gathered and analyzed from these Rorschach tests lead to the conclusion that these Nazi leaders were in fact beyond normal citizens. Therefore, these tests go against much that had been previously

---

33 Ibid, 271.

34 Ibid, 280.
said about Nazis being average citizens that were coerced into becoming Nazis based on situational factors of the time.

Thus, Miale and Selzer give multiple interpretations of the Nazi mind during this time period. Some of the research they report on concluded that Nazis were ordinary citizens that became the pawns of the Holocaust; that they were good people who simply followed orders as Milgram’s study suggested. However, the results of the Rorschach tests that the authors expose propose otherwise. These tests suggested more that the Nazis, given the results of the tests, were deeply disturbed psychopaths prior to the situation they were put into. This book then leaves it up to the reader to draw their own conclusions of the mindset of the Nazi. It leaves the question of whether or not these men became Nazis based on deep and innate violent behavior patterns or if they had simply fallen victim to social psychological factors of the environment and situation they found themselves in.

Miale and Selzer claimed that their book offered explanations as to why many Nazis became Nazis, but that they could explain, Adolf Hitler. They claimed that the mentality of his followers who were possibly just following orders would not be the same mentality held by their leader who would have to have a completely different mindset as he was the one giving the initial orders that his Nazis then obeyed. He had to be the one with the original thoughts. However, another study published in 1975 attempted to explain just that information. *Hitler’s Ideology: A Study in Psychoanalytic Sociology* by Richard A. Koenigsberg explained the mentality of the man who gave the orders. His mindset was clearly abnormal in such a way that his Nazi followers could not be classified as he was the instigator of the atrocities committed.
Koenigsberg looked deep into Hitler’s ideology in order to explain exactly what was going on inside this man’s head that lead to such unfathomable behavior.

Koenigsberg references numerous speeches and written work by Hitler including his book, *Mein Kampf*. Koenigsberg found common themes related to the nation of Germany to a body and many other objects metaphorically to a body-like system, Koenigsberg concluded that Hitler suffered from difficulties separating the real world from his metaphorical fantasy of his nation of Germany as a literal living organism. Koenigsberg described Hitler’s fantasy of the German nation as follows: The country is a living organism, the people are the flesh and blood (the substance) of the national body. Politics are efforts to maintain the life of the national body, acting ruthlessly is engaging in any action which serves to maintain the life of the national body. The Jew is a force of disintegration within the national body and an organism which threatens to consume the national bod. Communism is a force of disintegration within the national body. Bringing the German people together is welding and fusing together the “cells” of the national body such that the probability of disintegration is decreased. Negative conditions within the country are a disease within the national body. Improving conditions within the country are elimination the forces destruction from within the national body. Saving the country is preventing the national body from dying. The immorality of the nation is the self-renewing quality of the national body: as long as new “cells” continue to be born they will “fill” the national body and, consequently, perpetuate it.\(^{35}\)

The summation of ideas is that Hitler was deep into a fantasy in which his country was a living organism and that organism was on the verge of being killed. It can be concluded from Koenigsberg’s work than that Hitler’s mental state was very unstable as he was unable to separate the real world from his fantasy world.

This work also theorized that Hitler closely associated his mother’s life with that of the “life” of Germany. Following his mother’s death due to breast cancer in 1907, Hitler’s main priority became saving his country in such a way that he could not save his mother.  

Koenigsberg described how Hitler employed a psychological defense mechanism of denial of his mother’s death that influenced his behavior as a political leader. He claimed that Hitler’s refusal to accept the idea of the non-permanence of his mother’s existence correlated directly to his attempts to save the life of his country at any costs he saw necessary.

In summation, Koenigsberg believed that Hitler employed a mechanism of psychological projection of his unconscious into his reality. He states:

On the basis of the data and analyses appearing in the first two chapters, one may draw the following conclusions: Hitler’s perception of social reality is shaped by two central phantasies, which are projected into the world. In one instance, Hitler projects an infantile, sado-masochistic sexual phantasy into social reality. Consequently, he perceives the German people to be in danger of being attacked and exploited, and of being contaminated, debased and humiliated thereby. In a second instance Hitler projects the image of his mother, dying of cancer, into social reality. Consequently he perceives the nation to be diseased, disintegrating, and in the process of dying. On the basis of this analysis, then, it would appear to be possible to ‘make sense’ of Hitler’s fantastic view of the world: his perceptions reflect, not a description of external reality, but a symbolic transformation of inner psychological processes. Social reality serves, for

---

36 Ibid, 55.
37 Ibid, 57.
Hitler, as a ‘transference vehicle,’ providing a screen upon which his unconscious phantasies may be projected.\textsuperscript{38}

Konigsberg said that Hitler’s mindset was one that was detached from reality and that he projected his own fantasies into reality. This theory explained Hitler’s mentality from the perspective that his subconscious was almost completely in control of his external behavior. As the 1990s approached, however, still more psychological theories began to emerge.

\textbf{Theories from the 1990’s}

There were very few works on the topic of Nazi psychology published during the 1980’s and still few during the 1990’s. Two very prominent sources that were published, however, came from G.M. Gilbert and from Eric Zillmer, Molly Harrower, Barry A. Ritzler and Robert P. Archer in 1995.

In G.M. Gilbert’s book, \textit{Nuremberg Diary}, he recounts his experiences during the Nuremberg trial. Gilbert was the prison psychologist during the trial in 1945. He had firsthand encounters and sessions with twenty-one of the highest ranking Nazi officials on trial. In his book he recounts these interviews with the men as well as their individual defenses on trial. Nearly all of these men used some form of psychological defense mechanism which pushed the blame of the Holocaust and their guilt on to someone else. They all claimed that they were just following orders and thus were unjustly persecuted. Within these first-hand interviews, Gilbert gave a very personal look into the lives and thoughts of these men.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 58-59.
This work provided a detailed account of actual thoughts and conversations had with these prominent Nazi figures. One of the most interesting and summative excerpt comes from a conversation between Gilbert and Hermann Goering. Goering was one of Hitler’s most favored Nazi leaders. He was administered the Rorschach test while imprisoned and constantly demanded the results of his test. A few days after Goering’s verdict of a sentence to death, he asked for his results yet again. This time, Gilbert gave in and told him what his test had said about his personality and state of mind. Gilbert explained the results:

Frankly, they showed that while you have an active, aggressive mind, you lack the guts to really face responsibility. You betrayed yourself with a little gesture on the ink-blot test. Goering glared apprehensively. ‘Do you remember the card with the red spot? Well, morbid neurotics often hesitate over that card and then say there’s blood on it. You hesitated, but you didn’t call it blood. You tried to flick it off with your finger, as though you though you could wipe away the blood with a little gesture. You’ve been doing the same thing all through the trial --- taking off your earphones in the courtroom, whenever the evidence of your guilt became too unbearable. And you did the same thing during the war too, drugging the atrocities out of your mind. You didn’t have the courage to face it. That is your guilt. I agree with Speer. You are a moral coward.39

Gilbert came to find that many of these men were deeply disturbed mentally, despite their pleas that they were good people who were simply following orders. In this way, he is in accordance with Langer, Miale and Selzer that most of the Nazi leaders could be diagnosed as genuine psychopaths.40

Contributions to understanding the mind of the Nazis are furthered by the work of Eric A. Zillmer, Molly Harrower, Barry A. Ritzler and Robert P. Archer in their book, *The Quest for the Nazi Personality: A Psychological Investigation of Nazi War Criminals*. In this work, the authors

---


40 Ibid, 435.
take on a new perspective of analyzing Nazi personality. They claim that it is easy and even comforting for people to deem all Nazis insane and that the events of the Holocaust were an isolated incident, never to be repeated. They argue, however, that attributing these Nazi’s behavior solely to their biologically and psychologically determined personalities without factoring in the social environment of submitting to authority figures that they found themselves in would be a mistake.

They also argue that analyzing the personalities of a handful of Nazis (as many of the previous authors in this paper had) is drastically oversimplifying the complexities of the personalities of all of the Nazis during the Holocaust. Therefore, in their text they analyze and measure the personalities and traits of over 200 Nazis. They claim that many of the Nazis did in fact possess similar behavioral and personality traits, but to lump them all into one personality type would be incorrect. They say:

In fact, based purely on averages and probabilities of modern personality theory it would be highly unlikely that all Nazis shared on common personality, but highly likely that some traits were coming to subgroups of Nazis. The Nazis were hardly a random sample of individuals from the varieties of human nature. That is not to say that many Nazis of a particular order or rank did not have specific traits in common, or were more likely to exhibit a particular personality trait than non-Nazis. But to bluntly suggest that all Nazis had a homogeneous personality and to reduce the behavior of many individuals to global and common descriptors using one or two adjectives, is an obvious oversimplification, one that has however been engaged repeatedly in describing the developments of the Third Reich.41

---

These authors propose that the personality and behavior of a Nazi could not be routinely defined, but rather it had to be measured on a case by case basis. They argue that, “it is both the individual context and specific group characteristics in which Nazi behavior occurred.”

Zillmer, like those authors of the past, grappled with the idea of whether or not Nazis were criminals or just average citizens caught in a social situation that coerced them into becoming murderers. In order to answer this question, he looked into the results of the psychological Wechsler-Bellevue Intelligence Test that was administered to the Nazis in the Nuremberg Trial. The results of this IQ test were not to estimate these men’s intelligence, but rather to understand their individual levels of cognitive abilities. This would allow psychoanalysts to get a better grasp on exactly what kind of mental state these individuals had.

The mean IQ of the 21 Nazi leader prisoners was 128 which were within the superior to very superior range of cognitive abilities. IQ scores ranging about 140 would technically be categorized as geniuses. Thus, a few of these Nazi leaders would have been considered geniuses. However, the authors then point out that there is no correlation between intelligence and morality. Surprisingly, these findings were kept mostly unpublicized. Zillmer explained, “It may have suited public opinion better if the case could have been made that the defendants were in some way mentally deficient and that the crimes committed by them were related to

---


43 Ibid, 46.
their impoverished cognitive state." He also explained that in a case like this where the defendants would benefit from appearing cognitively inept, being the acutely intelligent men that they were, why did they not intentionally do poorly on the test? The answer to this question explains immense amounts about the personalities and the mental states of these men. They were still fighting for a chance to assert their power and racial superiority. The authors claim that many of them genuinely enjoyed taking the IQ tests and the competition between each other’s results. Zillmer explains:

Furthermore, it appears that many of them were not only complying subjects, but were actually trying to outdo each other or genuinely attempting to impress the Allied occupiers of their psychological superiority. Many of them viewed themselves as a member of the master race (*Herrenrasse*) and wanted to demonstrate to their conquerors their intellectual prowess. After all, they had been living through many years of being told, and spreading the word, of their racial supremacy.  

One element of these Nazi’s mental state becomes clear from this reaction to the testing, that their belief in their own racial superiority was deeply ingrained in their psyche. Even when their lives were at stake, they still strove to portray themselves as superior and compete for the highest achievement. From this information, the impact of the social factors of propaganda and ideologies of Hitler is readily apparent in these Nazi’s minds. Even after the war and the death of their Fuhrer, they still fought for rank, power, and superiority; ideals that their leader and country were promoting for years. This evidence clearly shows the impact of social influences on the mindset of the Nazis and stamps out much of the belief that their behaviors came from innate personality traits of violence and insanity.

---

44 Ibid, 51-52.

These authors also investigate the validity of the Rorschach tests administered to the Nazis at Nuremberg and their results. They believe that the tests cannot be held up as completely accurate and thus would disagree with past authors who took these results so seriously as indisputable fact and evidence of the psychopathic nature of the Nazi mind.

Theories from the 2000’s

Interestingly, there was a flood of new publications regarding the mentality of Nazis during this decade. These publications focus more heavily on the influences of social psychology, much more so than any works from the past. Primarily, these books attempt to explain the social psychological reasons for why these seemingly ordinary Germans turned to Nazism. These ideas appear to contrast the earlier works on the subject which more often attributed Nazi behavior to innate explanations of insanity and psychopathic natures of the individuals. This shift in views of what drove the Nazi personality and behavior, most likely, can be attributed to two factors. The first being that closely following the Holocaust, most publications attempted to comfort the public by attributing Nazi behavior to innate sadistic qualities of the individuals. This gave the world someone to directly blame. It also gave them piece of mind in that they believed that this event could only have occurred because of this group of madmen rather than social circumstance. Therefore, they believed they would never have to worry about atrocities such as the Holocaust occurring ever again.

The second reason for the shift in explanation and understanding of the Nazi mind, most likely, came from the fact that social psychology was really not a highly revered or publicized form of psychology during the earlier periods of publications regarding the Nazi mentality.
Thus, this rather large wave of publications in this decade can be attributed to the fact that theories of social psychology have become more accepted in the modern psychology world.

In Jay Y. Gonen’s book, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler’s Utopian Barbarism*, he began by explaining the use of fear, terror, and the Nazi ideological message that “fell right on target” in attempts to mobilize the masses.\(^4\) Gonen refers to the theory of zeitgeist to explain the manner in which the socio-cultural environment was just right in Germany at that time to allow for and, more importantly, encourage German citizens to accept and even become Nazis. He explained, “The zeitgeist is a concept that denotes the ripening of a cultural image or idea to the point where its time has arrived.”\(^4\) In the case of Germany, this time was that of the rise of Nazism.

Gonen does not leave the entirety of his theories of the Holocaust up to social psychology, however. He supports the “double-track” theory which was proposed by psychohistorian, Rudolph Binion in 1979. This consisted of the idea that Hitler’s aims at solving the imaginary Jewish problem and of fixing the inadequate German living space were tracks that overlapped in his mind and led him to resort to the despicable behaviors that he did.

Adding to that, in Hitler’s mind, he could always find a way to blame his traumatic life experiences on the Jews. For example, when his mother died of cancer he placed the blame on her Jewish physician who failed to save her. Similarly, in the case of the humiliation of the loss of World War I, again, Hitler found the Jews at the center of who was to blame. In facing his


\(^4\) Ibid, 3.
current problems then, Hitler’s unconscious would replay the drama of these traumatic events and draw him to the same conclusions, to blame the Jews. Gonen explains, “Binion consequently subscribed to the basic notion that beneath the historical plays of current events unfolded a drama of psycho-historical replays of the group. And as the basic ingredient of the drama happened to be trauma, the replays and their variations were bound to produce replicas in their compulsive repetition of the central emotions and impulses.”

In this way, Gonen explained that Hitler’s mindset was that of the psychological defense mechanism of scapegoating the blame of traumatic events in his life on to others, in his particular case, the Jews. He did this because he unconsciously replayed past traumas and applied his emotions and experiences of those events into his current issues, thus returning to the conclusion that the Jews were to blame. With this conclusion, Hitler sought to solve the problem of inadequate living space and saving the body of the nation by removing that which he believed was poisoning it, the Jews.

As far as understanding how the influx of these social-psychological based works impacted the American perception of Nazis, another article from a 2003 edition of TIME magazine may hold the answer. In an article entitled, “The Early Days of Evil”, a television mini-series depicting the adolescence and eventual rise to power of Adolf Hitler is discussed. In this article, the author, James Poniewozik, describes how there is much debate about whether or not showing the life and struggles of an adolescent Hitler would be a poor decision because it may appear as though the series is trying to create sympathy for him. Poniewozik states, “The

48 Ibid, 6.
controversy is really an extension of a long-standing debate: Does explaining Hitler’s evil mean excusing it? However, Peter Sussman, the executive producer of the mini-series claims that is not the case. He claims that showing Hitler’s youth will not produce sympathy for Hitler.

The article implies, instead, that the main driving force behind the Holocaust was not a result of the individual psychology of a few mad men in leadership positions, but rather a product of the social-circumstances of the time. The executive producer of TV Guide, Ed Germon stated, “The U.S. before the war in Iraq was, like Germany during Hitler’s rise, a place where people were afraid to go against the prevailing current.” The series is not so much about Hitler becoming a genocidal leader, but rather the foreboding notion that a nation would allow him to go through with it. The popular American perception of Nazis that is held during this period in history, as seen through this article, is that the real enemy of the Holocaust was not, in fact, individual psychological issues of Nazi leaders but rather the social-psychological factors such as obedience to authority and groupthink.

The fact that now popular media portrays the Holocaust as being a product of social circumstance rather than the fault of psychologically disturbed Nazi leaders proves how the American perception of the Nazi mindset has echoed the publications of prominent psychologists of every decade.

**Conclusion**

---


50 Ibid.
The atrocities that unfolded during the Holocaust will forever puzzle today’s generation and generations to come as far as trying to come to an understanding of exactly how something so terrible on such a grand scale could ever occur. It is quite literally a question that may never be answered. However, psychologists have proposed theories for decades since it happened as to how a human mind could ever justify being so cruel. In the first few decades following the Holocaust, psychologists attempted to place the blame solely on major Nazi leaders and claim that the events that took place there were an isolated incident, never to be repeated again. As time progressed, however, new psychological theories began to emerge that pointed to the social circumstances and social-psychology concepts as the real enemy. There is very clear shift in these psychologist’s theories as they stray further from abnormal psychology concepts and ideas of psychologically disturbed Nazi leaders, and veer more in the direction of social-psychology as holding the answer. From the 1970’s on, theories of obedience to authority and groupthink have become prevalent in psychologists’ attempts to explain the mindset and psychology of Nazi leaders.

It is also evident through analysis of American popular media publications that the work of these psychologists is echoed in the American perception of Nazis. Through analyzing the language used when talking about Nazis throughout different decades of TIME magazine, it becomes blatantly clear that the publications of psychologists such as Walter C. Langer, Erich Fromm, Jay Gonen and a plethora of others have greatly impacted the American perception and popular opinion of the Nazi mindset.
Primary Sources:


This book talks about the social-psychological experiments conducted by famous psychologist Stanley Milgram and how his findings prove that the German Nazis were not insane or madmen but rather a group of people in an unfortunate social situation. This book grapples with the idea that anybody within a certain social situation will act against their normal behavior patterns thus creating the notion that anyone could have fallen victim to becoming a Nazi. This should be important in my research as it gives a psychological perspective and explanation for how and why the Nazis became Nazis.


**Secondary Sources:**


This book gives an alternative view to the psychological explanation for the events of the Holocaust by explaining the social factors in Germany during the time leading up to World War II. Koonz blames the rampant anti-Semitism in Germany for the rationalization of genocide by not only the Nazis but much of the German public as well. This source should be interesting to contrast with other sources that give a purely psychological explanation for the rise of the Nazis and the coming of the Holocaust.


This book gives background on Hitler, one of his high ranking Nazis, Hess, and the psychologists who analyzed their behaviors. It explains the use of psychoanalysis on Hitler and Hess and the results of the testing. These results explain the psychological motivation that drove these men to commit such acts. It should be incredibly important in my research as it gives the direct account of psychoanalyses of Hitler and Hess and their motivations during and after World War II.


This book combines a number of theories as to how Nazism and the Holocaust came about. The author examines political, economic, cultural, and social causes on top of individual psychological motivations that culminated into the start of the Holocaust. It should be important for me as it will reveal different perspectives of how Nazism came to be.


"The Two Hitlers." *Time* 100, no. 14 (October 2, 1972): 64.

