



Götz Aly

How Could This Happen

Germany 1933–1945

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- Götz Aly is one of the most well-known and renowned historians of the Holocaust and National Socialism.
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Explaining the inexplicable

In 1932, the German National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP) was elected by a large majority in the midst of a severe crisis. It soon took power and enjoyed growing support in society. Hitler needed war, but the people feared it. Nevertheless, 18 million German soldiers ended up terrorising Europe. How did it come to this? Why did hundreds of thousands take part in an unprecedented mass murder? Götz Aly profoundly analyzes the ruling techniques with which the Nazi leaders turned millions of Germans into compliant executors or into collaborators numbed by war.

Götz Aly is a historian living in Berlin. He has received numerous awards for his books, including the Heinrich Mann Prize and the Ludwig Börne Prize. In 2018, he received the Geschwister Scholl Prize for "Europe Against the Jews. 1880–1945". In "How Could This Happen?", he distills decades of research into a compelling narrative about Hitler's Germany, thoroughly enriched by authoritative sources, unpacking the power mechanisms employed by the National Socialists.

"Götz Aly has made it his task to understand the National Socialist mass crimes as phenomena of their century, and thus also still of our world."
Gustav Seibt, Süddeutsche Zeitung.



Sample Translation: Jefferson Chase

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The Question of All German Questions

The only question which we will face and to which there may still be something to say is the one of genesis, the one of "How was this possible?"

Felix Hartlaub (1913–1945), May 30, 1944

Why did tens of millions of Germans as of 1932 enthusiastically support Adolf Hitler, a man who had promised every time he had run for office that his first act would be to destroy Weimar Germany's democratic constitution? How did the government he led from 1933 onwards manage to reduce its many skeptics to first semi-satisfied passivity, then apathy? How did so many Germans become active, compliant or silent participants, providers of ideas, organizers, helpers, accomplices, and executors of the mass murder in the years that followed? Why did millions of German soldiers fight on to the bitter end, even after victory had long become impossible? "How on earth could this people have ended up like this?" This was the question posed in the winter of 1944–45 by economist Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966), who was forced into exile in 1933.

Although the literature on the Nazi era grows day by day, with a multitude of publications examining every possible detail in ever greater depth, the question of all German questions – how was this possible? – has been increasingly forgotten. The twelve chapters to come will attempt to provide answers to this single query. They are intended to stimulate discussion and further reflection.

I came to this question because of a question my youngest daughter asked me almost 30 years ago. She was 16 at the time and asked me if we could visit the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial together, which we did. Towards the end of that visit, she said, "Tell me, was Grandpa somehow involved in all this?"



I replied, "Yes, in a way." The man in question, my father Ernst Aly (1912–207), can fairly be considered an minor follower. He didn't have an easy time of it with me as a son, but in his later years he turned relatively talkative. I mention him from time to time in the following pages, not to distance myself from him, but to show how the microcosm sometimes reflects the big picture. I only noticed some of these mirror images while working on this book. Why was First Lieutenant Aly, a badly wounded soldier who had only partially recovered and was no longer fit for military service, sent to the former Olympic Village near Berlin for five weeks in the summer of 1943? Linking his story to the greater history of the German state and the war helped resolve this and another biographical mystery.

From 1932 to 1934, after graduating from high school, Ernst Aly completed a commercial apprenticeship at the Metz company in Freiburg – "a Jewish company," as he later emphasized. The Depression was raging, and going to university was out of the question. He worked for Metz in Berlin for a year, before briefly attending the German Business School in Hamburg on a scholarship. Although exempted from the *Leistung* because of the year of his birth, he served for twelve months in the 12th Infantry Regiment (Halberstadt) and left the military in October 1936 as an officer cadet. Under the norms of the day, that compensated socially for his lack of university education.

In January 1937, he accepted a friend's offer and became a housing construction officer for the Gaujugendführung (a Nazi regional youth organization) in the southwest German Saarpfalz region. He applied for membership in the Nazi Party that summer. He was briefly deployed as a soldier in the French campaign and later served on the Eastern Front for a few weeks from December 1942 to mid-February 1943. He was seriously wounded in his first battle and was left with severely restricted fitness for military service. From early 1944 until the end of the war, he managed the evacuation of German children from



Sudetenland in what had been Czechoslovakia. It was the most responsibility he had ever held. The experience of suddenly being given a huge task was something the 31-year-old shared with hundreds of thousands of his peers. In that post, he had to improvise constantly in order to spirit the 15,000 girls and boys entrusted to him away from the advancing front.

My father went about all these tasks with vigor and achieved success. He wasn't complicit in any acts of murder or war crimes, although he heard about such things repeatedly, and he spoke about them only late in life and in bits and pieces. Undoubtedly, he was one of many minor supporters of Hitler's Germany. The Kinderlandverschickung (KLV) – the German program of relocating children to the countryside during the Second World War – saved many lives during the bombing raids, and there are quite a few positive reports about it, including letters of thanks to him. At the same time, the KLV emerged from the Hitler Youth apparatus and was an insidious Nazi government instrument for increasing social atomization, relieving parents of immediate worries and keeping them busy and compliant. Everyone concerned, parents as well as children, was kept occupied, writing letters back and forth and functioning.

Renate Bandur, who was sent from Berlin with her class to Spindlermühle in the Giant Mountains in what is today the Czech Republic and Poland, describes very vividly how pleasant life was there in 1944 under the aegis of Ernst Aly. Her reports cohere with his own accounts. My father was responsible for arranging school lessons, accommodation in confiscated hotels, food supplies, and medical care. In his words: "During these day and night assignments, I got to know teachers, guides, doctors, administrators, homeowners and pastors who devoted their entire energy and concern to the more than 15,000 boys and girls." He also later reported that the work with the Czech support staff went extremely well until the very end.



While Jewish historians often write about their relatives, this is unusual among non-Jewish German academics. Some may fear that examples from their own lives could compromise their much-vaunted, footnote-buttressed claim to objectivity. Older historians, who grew up under the influence of the Hitler Youth and may later have been drafted into service as anti-aircraft gunners or soldiers, would have had to write about themselves. Doing so would probably have done a world of good for a prolific colleague and friend of mine like Hans Mommsen (1930–2015), who spoke emotionally in private about his father's complicated past (see Chapter III/2). Even in my generation, colleagues with whom I have worked closely for many years only told me about their parents after decades of acquaintance. Such parents may move into an Aryanized Heidelberg villa, some might have still owned beautiful Art Nouveau furniture robbed from Jews, and, in another case, one father – as a director of a major metalworking company in Upper Silesia – employed people from the nearby satellite concentration camp of Auschwitz to perform slave labor. The historian Per Leo presented his family history in the form of his 2014 novel *Flut und Boden* (Flood and Soil). Even today familial and personal pasts continue to influence and encourage historians to examine Hitler's Germany in various ways. Every German historian knows what it's like to be approached by eager members of the first, second and even third post-war generation who want to know what their fathers or grandfathers, less frequently their mothers and grandmothers, did and didn't during the Nazi era.

1. How could all of these atrocities have happened?

Across the social spectrum, proximity creates a need for maximum distance. The crimes against humanity committed during the Hitler years were perpetrated by Germans who, as a rule, did not engage in criminal activity either before or after that period and who were hardly any different, intellectually and morally, from us today. They came from all walks of life. Well-educated musicians and lawyers became mass murderers, as did police officers, office workers, farmers, skilled workers, and unskilled laborers. Despite the facts, the idea persists that the followers and functionaries of National Socialism were mainly “disoriented petty bourgeois” or at least came from a definable slice of society. Those who favor such false attributions suggest it’s possible to identify a specific past group circumstances made particularly murderous, thus excommunicating, if you will, that group from the present. From a human standpoint, we might understand attempts to attribute the crimes of Hitler’s Germany to social milieus that are as small as possible or at least precisely enough defined to reduce culpability and responsibility. But historical facts don’t support such attempts in the slightest.

National Socialism increasingly merged state and society, but compared to Stalin’s system of rule, for example, it was characterized by a high degree of internal plurality. Hitler did not demand absolute loyalty, nor did he rely solely on a minority of staunch, utterly committed party members and followers. Doubtlessly, hundreds of thousands of party members were inwardly opposed to many excesses. On the other hand, others who never joined the party – intellectual leaders and advocates, soldiers, officers, and generals – distinguished themselves as loyal servants eager to help the murderous regime. Indirectly, the



Nazi leadership's decision *not* to demand blind allegiance facilitated exterminatory terror. Those who kept silent and seemed harmless, the "fifty-to-eighty-percent supporters, were the soil in which a politics of lies and remilitarization flourished. The magnificent, functional buildings erected with the help of unsecured loans, much like the social welfare benefits distributed without a solid financial basis, rapidly integrated the German populace, creating a widespread conviction that better times were ahead. On this ground, however unsolid, there arose, on the one hand, a loyalty among a growing majority to the state and, on the other, a drive toward internal, then external expansion. The Nazi state gave every individual with increasingly greater tasks, demanded ever faster adaptation and mobilized enormous human and material resources and reserves for largely negative purposes, while the concrete, practically achievable goals of Nazi activism, which continually intensified during the war, soon became vague and ultimately invisible.

How was it possible to mobilize more than eighteen million German soldiers in the Second World War to ravage Europe from Warsaw to the North Cape and the Caucasus, from Leningrad to North Africa and the island of Rhodes with unprecedented violence? On what social, political, and economic foundations did Hitler's Germany accrue its monstrous destructive momentum? How was it possible that, starting in 1933—amidst extreme economic weakness and social and political turmoil—such powerful negative energies could accumulate and then be unleashed with such unimaginable force? All this happened in only twelve years – an extremely short span, both historically and in terms of a human life. Moreover, the core period lasted a mere eight years. (From 1933 to the end of 1934, the new state had to consolidate its power, while from 1943 to May 1945, Nazi Germany subjected itself to a bloody, delayed but inevitable defeat.) In general terms, it can be said that until 1939, the thoroughly negative energies conserved



themselves within the deceptive glow of general prosperity before exploding in unprecedented wars of conquest, plunder and destruction.

To answer the question of how this maelstrom could happen, it's necessary to examine the emergence and effects of political, social, and military dynamics. In their book *Soldiers: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying*, historian Sönke Neitzel and sociologist Harald Welzer assert that the internal situation in Hitler's Germany must be viewed as "a highly integrative social process beginning in January 1933 and ending with Germany's ultimate defeat in May 1945. The immediate "tremendously accelerated practice of exclusion" of those rejected was accompanied by many, equally immediate "obvious symbolic and material enhancements" of those deemed fit to belong. Those people were the majority. "This," Welzer and Neitzel write, "is where the National Socialist project drew its psychosocial appeal and power." The present volume doesn't aspire to be a meticulous history of individual institutions and sets of crimes. Instead, it seeks to examine how, in a not unusual historical situation, driving forces accumulated and ultimately led to unprecedented crimes carried out by Germans according to principles of division of labor.

The philosopher and evaluator of his times Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), although an enemy of democracy who longed for "national upheaval," accurately analyzing the political technique of power consolidation in July 1933. He described the period as a strange "whirlwind of strength and weakness." The words whirlwind, weakness, and strength summon up central elements of politics and propaganda, leadership and the dulling of people's senses in Nazi Germany. In the summer of 1933, Spengler was not yet able to visualize the extremely destructive chain reactions that would result from this constellation: velocity and more velocity, a feverish popular atmosphere, and extreme inner tension associated with fear, followed by brief relaxation and then once again artificially



generated and deliberate high tension. This dynamic created turmoil and unleashed powerful centrifugal forces. Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945) considered velocity to be the “mother of success.”

In the following twelve chapters, which don't follow any strict chronology, I discuss how the mass base of the National Socialist state emerged and the changing and complementary methods used to stabilize it. Promises and desires for social advancement played an important role, as did the tremendous acceleration of life accompanied by the constant mobilization of fear and hope, peace and war, self-deification and self-destruction.

I focus on the age and social structure of Nazi Party members, the consequences of unrestrained government borrowing, and the emotional swings and shifts in popular opinion during the war. I also cover the numerous trials and mass investigations of Catholic priests and lay brothers who had sexually abused minors. The aim of this book is not to denigrate the Catholic Church, but to show how the Nazi leadership targeted this point in order to break the considerable resistance of many Catholics, priests and bishops. Likewise, I will examine the means by which trade unionists, Social Democrats and even former communist ideologues were made to feel relatively comfortable in the new circumstances that arose in 1933–34. During this period, terror was sporadic and well-measured, and it soon subsided for a time. Given the false claim, which trade-union, socialist and Social Democratic circles elevated to an absolute truth after 1945, that unions were completely destroyed on May 2, 1933, this piece of history requires more attention. Conversely, two-thirds of the German population belonged to the Protestant regional churches. National Socialism didn't need to offer anything special to wear down or win over the majority of this group. Even before the Nazis assumed power 1933, Protestants were twice as likely to vote for Hitler's party than Catholics.

The second part of the book deals with the war years and focuses on the acceleration of life, the highly agile management of the state and the socially integrative effect of the crimes against humanity committed by Germans. It describes familiar behaviors and actions: selfishness, the balancing of conflicting interests to the detriment of third parties, the consolidation of precarious situations through participation and material redistribution, the overcoming of collective self-doubt by lionizing one's own identity group as a particularly noble community of values, and the denigration of alleged enemies, always collectively defined. Such political means can be used to improve the social integration of the self-defined native group. In the case of Hitler's Germany, the natives were those Germans deemed biologically and politically valuable – the vast majority of people in the country. It does not seem irrelevant today that National Socialism presented itself as an identitarian mass movement agitating for an end to perceived humiliation, toppling monuments, renaming streets and defining its followers as inherently superior people, to whom the future belonged.

There is no question that Hitler's government employed political techniques still in use –in milder forms – today. They include manipulation of information, destruction of public spaces where social issues can be freely discussed, racking up government debt as a state policy, social-support gifts to keep the masses complacent amidst increasingly authoritarianism, the stirring up of prejudice and hatred against clearly identifiable suspect minorities individuals and institutions as scapegoats. All this took place under the banner of hectic activism, concretely manifest in a monstrous tsunami of laws and regulations, creating a sense of vertigo and paralyzing any sort of reflection.

This was matched by the vagueness of the National Socialist program. It is misleading to keep talking about "Nazi ideology." No such thing existed. Instead, changing political programs were modified to fit specific situations and support

the basic cause of gaining and maintaining power. Nor is there any such thing as genuine National Socialist anti-Semitism. But the leaders of the NSDAP did recognize early on how easily the ideological plank of "the fight against Jewish supremacy" could win support far beyond the narrow circle of their followers. As a result, it was possible later on to keep the people reasonably satisfied at the expense of Jews, who were stripped of their professions and then their possessions. Thanks to gradually escalating injustices, committed collectively, the regime succeeded in maneuvering the majority of the German population into a relationship of allegiance. It formed a community of crime that was increasingly united from 1941 onwards and ultimately became chained to its own leadership.

The political scientist Franz Neumann (1900–1954), who was forced into exile, wrote in 1942 that National Socialism had "no political theory of its own." Instead, ideologies were used and discarded as needed since they were "nothing more than arcana dominationis," i.e., techniques of domination. The American historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who had studied in Berlin in the 1890s and traveled through Germany for several months in 1936, spoke of the "new worldview of Hitlerism," calling it "a still growing, evolving body of ideas that is being followed with tense enthusiasm by an ever-increasing number of Germans." Tense? What worried people? What did they fear? After three and a half years of National Socialism, Du Bois stated that nine out of ten Germans now supported Hitler, but they still found something sinister about the regime. Du Bois identified a strange Germany emerging, one that was "silent, nervous, and depressed," speaking only in whispers.

The factors just outlined produced a peculiar mixture of "strength through joy and success" that during the war, in the face of ever-increasing threat, became a social glue of "strength through inescapability and fear." No specific ideology was needed to arrange these political conditions. The basic elements



that helped Hitler's Germany unleash its destructive forces are age-old and archetypically familiar. They were vividly depicted, for example, in Otto Dix's painting "Seven Deadly Sins" from 1933. Dix portrayed Hitler as a "monster" with a malicious and suspicious glare, yellow with envy (Invidia), in the center of the image riding atop the cronish ugliness of avarice (Avaritia), eternally unsatisfied with her lot. To the left lurks a horned Germanic madman raising a dagger to strike at even the most harmless opponent. The figure embodies anger (Ira) – "the most vengeful, crucifying creature of all," as Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) put it in 1924 in his essay "Hitler's Violence," which summarized his experiences in Munich with revolutions, attempted coups and counterrevolutions.

Just behind the two front figures in Dix's painting, we see a vision of indifferent, conformist, lazy inertia (Accidia), i.e. the German people, depicted as the Grim Reaper, with empty eye sockets, the left side of his chest torn open, a hole gaping where his heart should be, inhabited by a toad. Hitler described the majority of the German people, whom he controlled and were so crucial for maintaining his domination, as his "masses from the middle." The three visible limbs of this aimlessly yet opportunistically dancing Accidia half-heartedly form into a flaccid swastika, while the figure wears white gloves to prevent from getting blood on its hands. The message is clear: Those who take care during murderous endeavors will be able to deny responsibility afterward, convincing themselves and everyone else that their hands remained clean and that they knew nothing about any crimes committed.

Alongside this rogues gallery, Lust (Luxuria) leans invitingly forward, with her legs spread to form a reddish vaginal opening, the picture of repulsive desire, with at least one a syphilitic sore on her mouth, the embodiment of fleeting, reckless pleasure. Sitting above that infernal sight is gluttony (Gula), insatiable, devouring herself, her mouth wide open, grabbing at everything and everyone, never able to



get enough. This is Dix's commentary on Aryanization and state larceny. To her left is Superbia (pride), nose haughtily stuck up in the air, a person of indeterminate gender and social rank who considers itself a particularly successful specimen of a noble race. But its face is covered in rashes and pockmarks, and Dix replaces the mouth with a sphincter. It's an image of a racially pure asshole.

Dix no doubt knew Bosch's famous tabletop "The Table of Wisdom," also known as "The Seven Deadly Sins," which placed wrath and gluttony at the center of "the most repulsive vulgarity." As eternally deprived art historian Wilhelm Fraenger (1890–1964) wrote, "They are depicted as squat, fat blocks that look like sacks stuffed with vices." In Bosch's Accidia, portrayed as a distinguished bourgeois woman dressed up for church, Fraenger sees a "state of mind of sinking into dull lethargy." She is "fully dressed, (...) but cannot move," simultaneously willing and unwilling, striving forward and shrinking back.

As we will see, such visual representations are also apt for the angry know-it-alls, resentful coveters of others' prosperity, sluggishly indifferent opportunists, insatiable gluttons, arrogant peacocks, ever bribable pennypinchers, and lascivious lovers of brief, adrenaline-fueled military pleasures, topped off by visits to soldiers' brothels, who populated Hitler's Germany. Every German naturally had an individual mixture of the seven deadly sins with which the Nazi leadership could reel him or her in.

The question of how Nazism has happened has played a central role in all my work for more than forty years. In my early career, together with Karl Heinz Roth, I examined the "restless collation of data" by statisticians and government registrars for the purpose of stabilizing Nazi power. In the case of the so-called euthanasia murders, I focused on the behavior of the organizers of the killings as well as that of the victims relatives. My book *Vordenker der Vernichtung*



(Architects of Annihilation), co-authored by Susanne Heim, deals with how educated elites supported the Nazi regime and their satisfaction when they transitioned from theory to practice, gained the ears of those in power and became able to wield political power.

My book *Endlösung* (Final Solution) hones in on the self-created needs that arose from projects aimed at ethnic homogenization, the “retrieval” of ethnic Germans abroad back “home” to the German Reich, and the expulsion and forced resettlement of Alsatians, Poles, Slovenes and other groups. That raised the question of what to do with the Jews, the group Hannah Arendt called the “minority par excellence.” Drawing on previously largely ignored historical documents, my book presented evidence for the thesis developed early on by Raul Hilberg (1926–2007), Martin Broszat (1926–1989), and Hans Mommsen (1930–2015) that instead of following a preconceived plan, Nazi policy toward Jews developed and was radicalized situationally.

My book *Hitlers Volksstaat* (Hitler’s Beneficiaries) examines the social welfare and financial policies used by the Nazi leadership to keep Germany’s masses, soldiers and homefront — especially women — happy. This was achieved with the help of legal measures against social inequalities, socially compensatory justice (for example, wartime food rationing), state expenditures financed by rampant, under-the-radar government debt, ruthless expropriation of Jews and Poles, and well-organized military-style plunder. My two books on anti-Semitism, *Warum die Deutschen? Warum die Juden?* (Why the Germans? Why the Jews?) and *Europa gegen die Juden* (Europe Against the Jews) examine popular envy of Jews’ success in climbing the social ladder intellectually and economically as a driver of modern, economically and societally based anti-Semitism that could be mobilized by political parties.



This present book is based on my earlier research, but it pursues a completely different line of inquiry. My question this time around is: How did the German leadership manage to maintain the constantly precarious unity of the German people and their leadership for twelve years and three months? As I will show, this unity was preserved not despite, but precisely because of the crimes committed by this state and its people. The following chapters deal with the techniques of rule employed by Hitler, his close associates and confidants, and the diverse, simultaneous methods – running the gamut from the soft to the severe to the inhuman – they used to gain, exercise and maintain power. Observed in vacuum, many, though not all, of these methods appear harmless. It was their combination and intensity that made them so effective in enabling a political program that rejected all legal, moral, and religious norms.

2 Notes on sources and further reading

The extensive specialized research on and documentation of National Socialism in recent decades have dramatically improved the point of this study started. We now possess far more empirical knowledge about the persecution of Jews, the primacy of politics over economics, questions of internal social cohesion and the swings in German popular opinion during the Third Reich. The same applies to decision-making among the political and military leaderships. A broad range of empirical studies have rightly discredited earlier attempts to reduce the Hitler era to theories of fascism, dictatorship or totalitarianism. The Munich Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) has compiled and edited Hitler's pre-1933 speeches. And the Internet now allows easy access to primary sources and secondary literature.

For two reasons, Joseph Goebbels will play an important role in the chapters to come. First, the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda would today be described as the director of an ever-growing executive committee of communications and political branding. Supported by actively involved, highly motivated, creative multimedia teams, he set and adjusted the political wording and framework, adapting it on a daily basis to changing conditions, always mindful of and seeking to influence the constant vacillations in public opinion down to the most minor oscillations.

In 1939, 2000 people were employed by Goebbels' newly created ministry – a huge number for the time – and that wasn't counting those who worked for the Nazi Party's Reich Propaganda Offices. Goebbels headed the entire state and party apparatus. His bespoke ministry was created in March 1933 by a decree of Reich President Paul von Hindenburg. In his later decree of June 30, 1933, Hitler defined its diverse responsibilities and tasks as including "spiritual influence on

the nation, propaganda for the state, culture, and the economy, and the education of the domestic and foreign public.”

Goebbels served from 1926 to 1945 as Gauleiter (regional party leader), of Berlin, from 1930 to 1945 as Reich Director of Propaganda, and from 1933 to 1945 as the head of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Above all, for our purposes, he left behind a voluminous diary. He was one of Hitler's most enduring, regular and at times closest confidants, and as such his notes constitute a major, nearly comprehensive source of information about the central political decisions of those years. The twenty-nine volumes of his diaries are now available in digital form. The publication of these sources, which are so important for research, is the result of decades of patient work by Elke Fröhlich, her colleagues at the IfZ, and also the respective departmental directors.

The present volume also profited the increasingly well-indexed holdings of German archives as well as the “German Newspaper Portal – German Digital Library.” Diverse individual studies on National Socialism allowed quick and easy access to information about the social structure and age of NSDAP district leaders, occupation officials in Poland, concentration camp guards and others. I have also made copious use of the excellently equipped, expertly managed library of the Topography of Terror Foundation in Berlin.

With few exceptions, trusting the judgement of my readers, I have chosen not to put terms commonly used at the time such as Jewish question, Führer, Aryanization, protection of blood, mixing, de-Jewification and the like in quotation marks. I use the names of cities, regions and states in currency at the time, adding later designations if there is a need to avoid ambiguity. Kyiv remains Kiev, and Leningrad isn't changed back to St. Petersburg.

More than 80 percent of the Jews living in Germany until 1933 were German citizens, i.e. Germans, and often proud of it. Nevertheless, for reasons of practicality and simplicity, I employ the terms Germans and Jews. Where German Jews are meant, the discerning reader will understand what I mean.

I often refer to German perpetrators rather than National Socialist perpetrators. I don't mean all Germans, but rather very many of them, frequently acting according to principles of division of labor or just passively shrugging their shoulders. The majority of Germans were neither passionate adherents nor opponents of Hitler. Ubiquitous turns of phrases such as "The Nazis built extermination camp X" or "The Nazis murdered so and so many hundreds of thousands of people here" obscure the role of the many German bystanders, collaborators, helpers and accomplices. In this respect, I agree with Thomas Mann, who wrote in March 1945: "It is impossible to demand of the abused peoples of Europe, of the world, that they draw a clean line between 'Nazism' and the German people... The world has gone through five years of a war sparked by Germany, a war full of suffering and sacrifice, and from day one in this war, Germany's enemies had to contend with all of Germany's ingenuity, bravery, intelligence, love of obedience, military efficiency, in short, with the entire German national power that stood behind the regime and fought its battles."

I quote Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" from the easily searchable 851st edition (Munich, 1943), which is not in Gothic script and is available as a PDF on the Internet. Because various partial editions of Joseph Goebbels' diaries have been published, I give only the dates of the respective entry. Almost always, the entries refer to events of the previous day, which is why the dates in the main text usually differ from those in the footnotes. For quotations from the fourteen-volume edition "Hitler's Speeches, Writings, Orders: February 1925 to January 1933," I give the date and the document number. I have used the digital versions of this work as well as



of Goebbels' diaries. Unpublished sources, such as Hermann Voss' diary, are listed separately at the beginning of the bibliography.

I would like to thank everyone who supported and encouraged me, who discussed my work and challenged my ideas. Above all, my thanks go to the many people who have worked for decades and made this book possible: archivists, editors of historical documents, authors who have investigated important individual issues, and lexicographers, whether they produce standard historical reference works or entries for Wikipedia. The latter are often accused of being of varying quality. Such shortcomings are obvious. But the same variations can be observed in highly distinguished bound editions, and anyone who does not believe that should take a look at the timorous, obviously hastily put-together entry on anti-Semitism in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck's *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Basic Historical Concepts), which makes no mention of terms like "social advancement" and "social mobility" despite their central importance in both historiography and twentieth-century anti-Jewish violence.

In the spirit of Raul Hilberg (1926–2007), I forgo adjectives communicating disgust or inner outrage except when there is absolutely no way around them. Typical pejorative, distancing terms like "henchman," "charismatic leadership" and "delusion/al," which remain very popular to this day, are nowhere to be found in Hilberg's magnum opus *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Hilberg refers to Hitler throughout as Hitler – not as "the dictator," and he eschews concepts like "racial doctrine" and "race theory." The word "ideology," generally used as a term of abuse, appears on only two occasions, and in both it is used correctly. Hilberg preferred the sober term "program." Constructs such as "National Socialist worldview" or "National Socialist ideology," which reflect Hitler's own purposely



obfuscating vocabulary, are also absent from the text. In an empiric academic text, such concepts may be cited, but they should never be taken at face value.

Because the era of National Socialism is slowly but surely receding from the “recent German past” into more distant modern history, I have provided dates for most protagonists upon first mention. The fact that active Nazis and their helpers belonged to discrete groups of very different ages and experience played a significant role in their behavior – the same is true for the silent tolerators, opponents and victims of Nazism. In many cases, it is interesting to know whether a given individual survived the war and, if so, for how long.

My answers to the question “How could all this happen?” remain incomplete. Others may supplement them and weigh individual factors differently, but one thing should be kept in mind. Like every historical epoch, the twelve short years of Hitler's Germany, too, must be examined using the historiographical methods commonly applied to other epochs. Anyone who wants to answer the question “How could this have happened?” and draw conclusions for the future should not demonize the Nazi past, but rather examine the conditions, practices of power, and dynamics as precisely as humanly possible.

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Götz Aly