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HIST 314/Deshmukh

### THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE FREE

Ten ordinary men. Ten ordinary Nazi men. Besides being members of the Nazi party, they also had a mutual friend in the person of Milton Mayer, an American journalist of German descent and Jewish heritage. Years after the end of W.W.II, Mayer ventured to the German town of Kronenburg to find and interview some common Nazis. The men he found were run-of-the-mill townsmen. A baker, a schoolteacher, a janitor, a soldier, a cabinetmaker, an office manager, a teenager, a bill-collector, a Labor Front inspector, and a policeman. Their reasons for joining the party varied and Mayer befriended them all to learn their stories.

Through a series of interviews with each man, Mayer traced their history with the Party and their reasons for initially joining the Nazis. Most of them joined after the Party came to power. Mayer does a good job of painting their pictures in a sympathetic light; the way he describes it, one could compare their joining the Nazi Party to an American joining the Republican Party, if membership was conducive to gainful employment.

The ends of the political spectrum in Mayer's book are <sup>represented by</sup> Karl-Heinz Schwenke, the janitor and an SA Sturmführer and Heinrich Hildebrandt, a high-school teacher.

Schwenke, whose soldier son was another interviewee, is the only gung-ho Nazi. He

speaks the party line, taking every opportunity to recite it to Mayer. His rhetoric was the stereotypical Nazi speech that has been quoted throughout the years since the war.

Hildebrandt is the diametric opposite, an anti-Nazi who despised the Party line and just wanted to keep his job. The other eight men became Nazis for reasons that spanned the gap between the two poles.

Hans Simon, the bill-collector, is the man that lends the deepest insight into the reasons for the rise of the Nazi Party. The Nazi regime was totalitarian to the *n*th degree. They regulated every aspect of life. They observed all that occurred. Simon tells Mayer the German difficulty: "*Wir brauchen eine starke Hand.*" He says that Germans, because of their past, are unable to rule themselves and must be controlled with an iron hand. "That's the way we are," he continues.<sup>1</sup> This is the reason most of the men give for their acceptance of the Nazi regime and most likely the reason the Nazis were able to gain such a grip on the German people. The way Simon explains it, the Germans were waiting for another Kaiser.

It is this attitude, the idea that the Germans cannot, as a people, rule themselves, that permeated the culture so deeply that they all believed it on a base level. It is their non-interference, their desire to stay out of what the government does, that paved the Nazi road to power. The citizens of most countries do not generally interfere with their government but it seems early 20th century Germans seem to have elevated this concept

to an art form. The thing that the Nazis did that made Germans able to maintain their non-interference was act in gradations instead of dropping both shoes simultaneously.

Hildebrandt, the anti-Nazi, identifies another aspect of the new regime. He comments to Mayer, "...your American feeling of absolute equality...we have never had here. But there was a democracy in Nazism, and it was real...my inferiors accepted me."<sup>2</sup> This hierarchical aspect of Nazism was what drove all of them forward. The idea of superiors and inferiors completely infused their society, beginning with race as a determiner and ending with ancestry as a basis for gradations of Aryan purity. This "scientific" blood-based hierarchy was what allowed the Germans to accept the Nazi party line and enabled them to believe it on a culturally cohesive basis.

Mayer found a cross-section of German society that opened a new insight to the Nazi mind. These men he interviewed were not the movers and shakers of the High Command; they were honest, hard-working men not unlike any townsfolk in non-fascist nations. Schwenke, a bigot and a racist, could be found in any country, hating any minority. Hildebrandt, a scared and idealistic man that feared unemployment, could be found in any country, giving his students the means to examine and question authority. Heinrich Wedekind, the baker who joined the SA and then quit because he didn't agree with their radical direction, could be found in any country, rising early to make the town's breakfast rolls. What Mayer has done through these ten Nazis is show that they

were no different than anyone else. They were neither angels nor devils, neither inherently good nor inherently evil.

Mayer may be the only author to paint any Nazi in a sympathetic light. He has taken long strides toward shattering the stereotype of W.W.II-era Germans as ever-faithful goose-stepping Hitler devotees. These Nazis were not the men that formed policy, nor were they the men that propagated the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. Mayer seems to understand this and it touches his writing. He is more sympathetic than judgmental toward these men, even toward Schwenke and the few others that truly believed the Jews were the source of all their problems.

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<sup>1</sup> p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> p. 107.

A- / B+

generally  
good democracy.

Do you  
think you  
representative?