

NAZISM, THE LESSONS OF HISTORY: The Global War on Terror, in the “Original German”

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In 1939, Sebastian Haffner sat down and wrote a pre-history of Nazism.

Nazism had not been inevitable. It had not progressed steadily without setbacks. But it had been growing for many years, even before the name for it existed. It had been coming since the end of the Great War.

By the late 1920s, according to Haffner, “Berlin became quite an international city. Admittedly, the sinister Nazi types already lurked in the wings, as ‘we’ could not fail to notice with deep disgust. They spoke of ‘Eastern vermin’ with murder in their eyes and sneeringly of ‘Americanization.’ Whereas ‘we,’ a segment of the younger generation difficult to define but instantly and mutually recognizable, were not only friendly toward foreigners, but enthusiastic about them.”

The Stresemann Era, 1924-1929, saw Gustav Stresemann serve as Foreign Minister. He made peace with France, joined the League of Nations, won a Nobel Peace Prize, wandered the streets of Berlin unarmed and unguarded, and his signature is first at the bottom of the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Who studies him today? His spirit is far more powerful in Germany now than Hitler’s, so powerful as to go unnoticed.

But Hitler was coming. When Stresemann died in 1929, “we were seized with icy terror. . . . The era of peace was at an end. So long as Stresemann had been there, we had not quite believed it. Now we knew.”

In 1930, Heinrich Brüning became chancellor, ushering in what we would today call “bipartisan austerity” or “fiscal responsibility,” something the United States and its allies helped to impose on Germany, just as the United States and Germany now help to impose it on Greece or Spain. Brüning cut salaries, pensions, social benefits, wages, interest rates, freedom to travel, freedom of the press, and the powers of the parliament. “Yet, paradoxically, his actions were rooted in the conviction that he was defending the republic. Understandably, the republicans began to ask themselves whether there was anything left to defend.”

Haffner makes an interesting observation at this point in his reminiscences: “To my knowledge, the Brüning regime was the first essay and model of a form of government that has since been copied in many European countries: the semi-dictatorship in the name, and in defense, of democracy against fully fledged dictatorship.”

As a U.S. citizen in 2012, of course, there is nothing whatsoever familiar to me in Haffner’s description of Brüning:

“Anyone who takes the trouble to study Bruning’s rule in depth will find all those factors that make this sort of government the inevitable forerunner of the very thing it is supposed to prevent: its discouragement of its own supporters; the way it undermines its own position; its acceptance of a loss of freedom; its lack of ideological weapons against enemy propaganda; the way it surrenders the initiative; and its collapse at the final moment when the issue is reduced to a simple question of power.”

I will admit that Haffner does pull out a phrase I have heard used in our own day: “Bruning had no real following. He was ‘tolerated.’ He was the lesser evil, the strict schoolmaster who accompanied the chastisement of his pupils with the words ‘This will hurt me more than you,’ rather than a sadistic torturer.”

And this logic does strike me as oddly clear, almost like something I might have seen somewhere before without paying sufficient attention: “One supported Bruning because he seemed to be the only bulwark against Hitler. Knowing that he owed his own political life to the threat posed by Hitler, Bruning had to fight against him, but at all costs refrain from destroying him.”

But Hitler was coming. Haffner saw him coming in the face of a policeman newly militarized: “This face seemed to consist entirely of teeth. The man had literally snarled at me, baring both rows of teeth, an unusual grimace for a human being. . . . I shuddered. I had seen the face of the SS.” Two days later the Reichstag burned. The next day everything changed. Civil liberties, the rule of law, the Constitution, civilization: it all oozed away. Soon such changes would be instituted without even bothering with Reichstag-fire-like excuses.

People went along out of fear, or belief in the system, or a desire to change the Nazi Party from within, or from the value they placed in doing their work well, whatever that work might happen to be. People went along as the mythical frogs on whom we impose human behavior in the story of the boiling water. They did not understand. They did not want to understand. They did not want to consider that young people who understood might be right. They slowly began speaking the language of brutal stupidity: Einsatz (strike force), Garant (pledge), fanatisch (fanatical), Volksgenosse (racial comrade), Scholle (soil), artfremd (racially alien), Untermensch (subhuman), Heimat (Homeland).

Now, history does not actually repeat itself. It’s far too complex and unpredictable. But a few facts leap out at us today:

We are at war with the world without end for the sake of war itself.

We have given power over from the Congress to the President.

We have allowed the Supreme Court to give power over the President to financial and weapons interests.

We have developed a central corporatist and militarist communications system.

Our government operates in great secrecy, censoring and prosecuting whistleblowers.

Our military conducts criminal trials that people strain themselves not to laugh at or condemn, thereby training themselves in a new kind of behavior.

Our president claims the power to imprison, torture, or murder.

Our society has labeled a class of people “illegals” and subjected them to a secondary and abusive status.

Our police have been militarized, nationalized, and empowered to strip-search us or assault us with tasers.

A soldier was just dismissed for speaking unacceptably of the President.

Our government and large corporate partners spy on everything we say on a telephone or near a cell phone, and everything we do or type on the internet.

Our government kills people all over the world with drones and is now putting drones in our own skies.

And we’ve advanced from lying about wars to joking about the lies about the wars to not even bothering with the lies or any legal pretense whatsoever.

Have we killed as many people as Hitler did? No, not in the same manner. But by sins of both commission (Iraqis bombed and shot, for example) and omission (children starving and suffering from preventable illness, for example) of course we have. And we have the potential to quite easily kill many more.

I can still write this.

I can still post this on marginal websites unseen by the masses.

I can still say these things openly on the street.

But reporters are being preemptively detained. Peace activists’ homes are being raided. And the number two excuse I get from people for their inaction (after futility, which is always number one) is fear (which is not always high on the list — it had to be put there).

Do you use these phrases? Illegal Alien. Underclass. Stakeholders. Defense Department. Humanitarian Intervention. Homeland. Targeted Strike. Collateral Damage. Evildoers. Islamofascists. Terrorists. Muslim Extremists. Status of Forces Agreement. Iranian Threat.

If you use those phrases, are they your own?

If you hear those phrases, do you object to them? Do you protest them?

Do you ever think that when they destroyed ACORN it didn’t affect you because you weren’t a poor person and you weren’t a community organizer? Is preventing union organization all right as long as you’re not in a union? Is it OK if they lock up Muslims for free speech but legalize political bribery in the name of free speech for corporations, as long as you’re not a Muslim and your food comes from a corporation? Is it OK to profile Latinos because your ancestors got here earlier? Are we safe packing the prisons with blacks because you’re white? Can whistleblowers be put away for life as long as the President says they were secretly helping evil foreigners who want us dead?

Or does that worry you a little?

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