

THE NAZI LEADERS

HELEN STEELE

While Adolf Hitler was undoubtedly the nexus around which the Nazi Party and the Third Reich revolved, he could not nor did not act alone. A cabal of men supported Hitler and enabled him to implement his vision of an anti-semitic nationalistic German state. These men formed the core of the Nazi Party and, in turn, the government of the Third Reich. Some were true believers, ideologues and early members of the Nazi Party. Others were opportunistic and ambitious men who joined the Party as it rose to power. Whatever their early allegiance, they all worked enthusiastically for the cause, providing the support necessary to effect the Final Solution and colluding in a massive criminal conspiracy.

The leaders of the Nazi Party (NDSAP) had organized the Party into three main groups. The Chancery of the Fuhrer acted as Hitler's office; the Chancery of the Party oversaw Party business and strategy, and the Reich Party Directorate (*Reichsleitung*) assigned Party leaders to specific areas of focus, including Foreign Policy and Finances. In this manner, it was similar to other political parties the world over. However, the Nazi Party also had directorates for "Germanization" and for "Propaganda," specialties that indicated its nationalistic, anti-democratic focus.¹

When Hitler won the election of March 1933, the Nazi Party was quick to take over all aspects of government.² The new Reich government resembled the structure of the Party itself, including a Reich Cabinet (*Reichsregierung*). Many of the Party officials of the Directorate took the equivalent role in the Reich Cabinet. Nazi leaders also instituted other groups within the administration, including a Secret Cabinet Council (*Geheimer Kabinettsrat*) consisting of the most trusted

members of the Party elite and a Reich Defense Council (*Reichsverteidigungsrat*) to oversee the military.³

Ostensibly, it appeared that the Nazi party in government had created a system not dissimilar to the Cabinet systems of other nations or of the earlier German governments. They appeared organized and united. However, this was not the case. Hitler allowed, even encouraged, each minister to run his ministry as a private fiefdom. Each minister, working essentially independently of the others, would do all in his power to please the Führer, instituting increasingly radical policies. While the German bureaucracy had once been among the best and most organized in the Western world, it now became a center of backbiting and Machiavellian intrigue in which one false move could prove fatal.⁴ Such a system allowed Hitler to remain above any failures, but also allowed men like Martin Bormann to achieve vast power.

Many of the early members of the Nazi Party who became the core of the Reich government, had been members of the defeated German Army in 1918. Depressed by the defeat and by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, they looked for excuses. Like Hitler, many found a scapegoat in the Jews. Men such as Martin Bormann and Hans Frank were passionate anti-semites, both joining right wing parties soon after leaving the army. Introduced to Hitler in the mid-1920s, they soon became his intimates – Bormann became his secretary, Frank his lawyer – and Hitler rewarded them with considerable power upon the ascension of the party to government.

Hans Frank ultimately became Governor-General of occupied Poland, where – known as the Jew Butcher of Krakow – he enthusiastically herded Jews into ghettos, executed hundreds of thousands of Poles and had yet more

¹ Nizkor. *Nazi Conspiracy & Aggression*, Volume II, Chap XVI.

² Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Holocaust: A History* (New York: Norton, 2002) 68

³ Jewish Virtual Library, *Principal Officials of the Nazi Party*,

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nazis.html>

⁴ Dwork, 82–83.

shipped to Germany as slave-laborers.⁵ Martin Bormann slowly rose through the power structure of the Nazi Party to become effectively second only to Hitler in power by the end of 1942. Controlling access to the Führer, Bormann kept away any who suggested anything but the most radical, aggressive actions and greatly restricted the power of other Nazis including Göring and Himmler. A fervent racist, who loathed not only Jews but also Slavs, he issued the decrees that ordered, "The permanent elimination of the Jews from the territories of Greater Germany can no longer be carried out by emigration but by the use of ruthless force in the special camps of the East." It was Bormann who gave Adolf Eichmann and the Gestapo complete jurisdiction over the Jews in a decree of 1 July 1943, allowing Eichmann free rein to implement the Final Solution.⁶

Not all Nazi ideologues were former veterans of the army. However, men such as Josef Goebbels and Wilhelm Frick became as vociferous anti-semites as anyone. Goebbels, a physically inadequate and resentful intellectual translated his own self-contempt into loathing for the Jews. Although he had originally opposed Hitler within the Nazi Party, the two men soon realized the similarity of their views and, as the regime took power, Hitler rewarded Goebbels with considerable authority. Goebbels did not let him down. He was the chief instigator of *Kristallnacht*, personally oversaw the deportation of Berlin Jews to the death camps in 1942, and was an eager collaborator in the Final Solution, believing the Jews to be, "unconditionally exterminable."⁷ If Goebbels put his genius for swaying the people to use, Wilhelm Frick used his genius for administration. A born bureaucrat, Frick joined the Party in 1925 and helped to organize it into a political unit capable of winning power. As Minister for the Interior, Frick oversaw the legislation that condemned

the Jews and was the official ultimately responsible for the concentration and extermination camps. He also oversaw the laws and decrees that put the Nazis in firm control of a totalitarian Germany and prepared Germany to go to war. Coldly clinical in his determination to exterminate the Jews and other enemies of Nazi Germany, he was essential to fulfillment of the Nazi goals.⁸

Heinrich Himmler, similarly, had never served in the German army. A failed businessman, he joined the Nazis early, taking part in the Beer Hall Putsch and rising to control Hitler's personal bodyguard, the *Schutzstaffel* (SS). Unwilling to be limited to that role, he greatly increased the membership of the SS, organized the purge against his erstwhile comrade Ernst Rohm and Rohm's SA, and led the SS to vast powers within the Reich. A believer not only in mysticism and mesmerism but also in the extremes of Aryan mythology, Himmler was a devoted racist. He opened the first concentration camp at Dachau and used the misery of the camps to justify the Nazi policy, "There is no more living proof of hereditary and racial laws than in a concentration camp. You find there hydrocephalics, squinters, deformed individuals, semi-Jews: a considerable number of inferior people." Imagining the SS as the medieval Teutonic Knights reborn, with him as Grand Master, Himmler carried out his mission, "the struggle for the extermination of any sub-humans, all over the world who are in league against Germany."⁹ Reaching the peak of his power in the late 1930s, Himmler later struggled with Martin Bormann and while he never lost control of the SS, his access to the Führer became limited and his power curtailed.

Other Nazi leaders looked for redemption for post-war Germany not necessarily through the destruction of the Jews (although they would do nothing to stop this) but in the rebirth of Germany as a world power. Rudolf Hess, another World War I veteran, was one of the first members of the party and was imprisoned with Hitler after taking part in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923. A

⁵ Israel Gutman, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1990) as reproduced by the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance Learning Center (<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/>)

⁶ Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany* (Routledge, 1997)

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Nizkor. II: XVI, 653-676.

⁹ Wistrich, "Himmler"

close associate of Hitler, he became deputy leader of the Party and, after they took power, oversaw the establishment of the Party's complete control of all aspects of German life.¹⁰ In 1941, however, Hess flew to Scotland ostensibly to negotiate a peace with the British. He was arrested as a war criminal. Historians still debate whether Hess made the flight under his own initiative or under orders from Hitler.

Hermann Göring, a World War I air ace, joined the Party as much for the excitement and the potential for power than any strong ideological reason. Yet, after helping to smooth Hitler's rise to power and playing a major role in the Anschluss, he showed as much antipathy towards the Jews as any of the more traditional ideologues. As creator of the secret police, Göring helped crush resistance to Nazi plans. As Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan, he obtained vast powers over the German economy and used the position to become immensely wealthy while stripping Jews of their property. Finally, Göring ordered Richard Heydrich to "carry out all preparations with regard to [...] a general solution (*Gesamtlosung*) of the Jewish question in those territories of Europe which are under German influence."¹¹ Whether or not he had begun as a militant anti-Semite nationalist or as an ambitious opportunist, his actions at the heart of the Nazi power structure made him as complicit as any of his compatriots. Certainly, he never showed any remorse for his actions. He led the unrepentant faction during the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg and declared, "This is a political trial by the victors and it will be a good thing when Germany realizes that."¹²

Not all Nazi officials had joined in the early years of the Party and these men often showed less dedication to the ideals behind the most extreme Nazi anti-Semitic policies. Perhaps seeing the tide of German opinion moving in favor of the Nazis, they joined the Party in search of power. Unlike ideologues like Frick or Frank, however, these later joiners denounced the Nazis and their

own part in the horror once the Allies had removed the Nazis from power. Often sobbing through the testimony at the International Military Tribunals in Nuremberg, Walther Funk declared, "that I should have resigned in 1938 when I saw how they robbed and smashed Jewish property."¹³ Yet, he had not. Once within the Nazi machine, these opportunistic politicians took every opportunity to show their loyalty through their actions. Men such as Walther Funk, who as Reich Minister for Economics helped to destroy the place of Jews within the economy and arranged the use of slave labor by German industrialists, became as important to the Nazi inner circle as the early radicals.¹⁴

Less enthusiastic were the leaders of the German military. Although they joined the Nazi Party and often held senior posts within the Reich government, men of the German officer class such as Erich Raeder, Karl Doenitz or Wilhelm Keitel were more loyal to the ideal of Germany than to the men actually running it. Hungry for a German resurgence or simply blindly obedient to their Commander in Chief, these men committed crimes that enabled Nazi aggression and did nothing to stop other Nazi crimes. Even attempts to depose Hitler by some military men, such as the assassination attempt by Claus von Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators in July 1944, were fueled by the realization that the war was all but lost because of Hitler's erratic behavior, rather than any desire to stop the Holocaust.¹⁵

Whether the leaders of the Nazi Party joined early or late, for ideological reasons, for personal ambition or to restore Germany to power, the results remained the same. They perpetrated acts that saw the destruction of millions of innocents, were responsible for German aggression throughout Europe and resulted in a ruinous war. The International War Crimes Tribunals held in Nuremberg between 1945 and 1949 were clear about the complicity of these men. Of the twenty-two major Nazis tried in the

¹³ Transcripts of the IMT, 12/15/45.

¹⁴ Nizkor, II: XVI, 715–735.

¹⁵ Jewish Virtual Library, *The July Plot ...* (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/julyplot.html>)

¹⁰ Nizkor, II: XVI, 690-709.

¹¹ Wistrich, "Göring"

¹² Transcripts of the IMT, 6/13/46.

major section of the Tribunal, the judges acquitted only three men. Many of the others, including Bormann (who was missing), Hans Frank, Göring and Frick, the court sentenced to death.¹⁶ While the actions of men like Himmler or Heydrich and their associates in the SS are often associated closest with the extermination of the Jews, it is clear that the politicians and the bureaucrats within the Nazi Party apparatus were not only aware of the plans for the Final Solution but actively and, in many cases enthusiastically, participated in these plans. As such, they were as criminally liable as were their paramilitary conspirators for the result.

¹⁶ “Charter of the International Military Tribunal” as reproduced by University of Missouri Kansas City School of Law, *Nuremberg Trials* (<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/nuremberg/nuremberg.htm>)

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