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**DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES: ANTI-SEMITISM,
HOPELESSNESS, AND THE RISE OF NAZI PARTY**

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HIST 315: Modern German

Dr. David Ellis

Fall 2017

“Extremism can flourish only in an environment where basic governmental social responsibility for the welfare of the people is neglected. Political dictatorship and social hopelessness create the desperation that fuels extremism.”—Benazir Bhutto

Frustrated by months of disrespect [of herself and of one another] and little interest in learning, high school English teacher Erin Gruwell (played by Hillary Swank), stepped back and addressed her classroom with a commanding message.

“I saw a picture just like this once, in a museum. Only it wasn't a black man, it was a Jewish man. And instead of the big lips he had a really big nose, like a rat's nose. But he wasn't just one particular Jewish man. This was a drawing of all Jews. And these drawings were put in the newspapers by the most famous gang in history.”¹

Set in impoverished, broken-homed, gang-ridden Long Beach, California, the film *Freedom Writers*, a true story about an English teacher (Erin Gruwell) who inspired her hardscrabble students to resist lives of violence, criminal activity, poverty, and immense hurt. At a pinnacle moment in the film, she invoked images of the Nazis, comparing them to her students' Long Beach gangs, to challenge her students to live better and love one another. With vigor, she declared:

“You think you know all about gangs? You're amateurs. This gang will put you all to shame. And they started out poor and angry and everybody looked down on them. Until one man decided to give them some pride, an identity... and somebody to blame.”²

¹ *Freedom Writers*. Directed by Richard LaGravenese. Performed by Hillary Swank, Imelda Staunton, Patrick Dempsey. United States: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2007. Transcript. Accessed October 12, 2017.

² Ibid

Gruwell's comparison between her students' Long Beach gangs and the Nazis holds considerable weight. Both sought out power and killed members of enemy groups or factions. Both were poverty-stricken and betrayed by their current governments. But above all, both groups were hopeless and subsequently placed their hope in the hands of a cunning leader (or leaders) who promised radical change. Beyond these points, the similarities cease. Nevertheless, Gruwell's description of the Nazis as "the most famous gang in history" introduces an important and often overshadowed perspective: the Nazis started small, and they were people, too. Disillusioned by fourteen years of rampant poverty, governmental inefficacy, and as they perceived it: dying national sentiment; Nazi supporters understandably yearned for change—a return to greatness. Moreover, demonization of the Nazis and their supporters, though justifiable, obstructs our understanding of them as people who had unheeded visceral needs and desires. As has rung true throughout history, previously accepted moral codes and conditions can easily be jettisoned, ignored, and forgotten, if a society is stripped of hope and bathed in poverty, inequality, propaganda, and a culture of violence. Surely, this resonated in Weimar Germany—especially for members of the middle class.

No shortage of academic literature exists surrounding the rise of Nazism in Germany. And justifiably so: how couldn't it? How did an uber-nationalist fringe party of 1928 become the second largest (and subsequently only) party in Germany by 1933, receiving 2.6 and 43.9 percent of the vote, respectively?³ More significantly, how could millions of Germans become apathetic to Nazis filthy rhetoric and outward acts of

³ Karl O'Lessker, "Who Voted for Hitler? A New Look at the Class Basis of Naziism." *The American Journal of Sociology* 74, no. 1 (July 1968): 63.

discrimination and violence, while their country proceeded down a crash course to the Holocaust? The answers still continue to baffle and shock scholars to this day. However, likely the accounts of various Germans at the time, official statistics, and a backbone of cotemporary scholarship can shed light on these haunting questions.

Writing to her “dear child,” her son—Gerhard Scholem, a dissident Jewish journalist and communist, living in Palestine—Betty Scholem provides revealing glimpses into Weimar Germany society during the rise of Nazism and political radicalism.⁴ Unemployment had burgeoned to 20 percent by start of year that this letter was written—1931, and it continued to rise throughout the year. Workers wages and the prices of goods followed an opposite trend: they sunk.⁵ Adhering to conventional [pre-Keynesian] economic thought, people saved their money and thus purchased less during the depression. With a quiver, she authored these melancholic words to her son: “Just as all business came to a halt, the bank failed. The banks went into a government holding company, which showed no interest in the debts of ‘customers.’ All of this happened at once. It looks like we’ll lose everything.”⁶ This plight was not limited to her family and those in Berlin, however. “It’s a cold comfort to know that the entire commercial sector is in the same position and that more shops are going under than staying afloat...the situation is desperate,” she wrote.⁷ Doubtless, the Great Depression profoundly shaped the lives of everyone in Weimar Germany; nevertheless, all were not influenced equally. Those of the ‘New Middle Class’

⁴ Cynthia Ozick, “The Heretic: The Mythic Passions of Gershom Scholem.” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2002, 1-16.

⁵ “Course of the Great Depressions,” GHDI (1929-1934), 1,

⁶ Betty Scholem, “Betty Scholem on the Depression,” GHDI (1931), 1.

⁷ Ibid

(“Mittelstand”) reaped more than their fair share of negative consequences, following a ‘very significant reshuffling of the proletariat.’⁸

Uneven economic growth and mobilization of white-collar workers punctuated Weimar society and economy from the very beginning. Former social worker-turned-journalist, Hilde Walter, elaborates on this in her extensive studies of unemployment and underemployment in *New Middle Class*. Her report, “The Misery of the ‘New Mittelstand,’” underscores the inflation of the middle class following the war. Citing occupational reports, she illustrated that the number of employed people “grew twice as fast as the population” from 1907 through 1925 (the dates of the occupational reports).⁹ Cursory glances at this statistic may illicit promise; however, in actuality, these increases ushered quite the opposite. Moreover, these increases underscored a long-standing trend of nominal status inflation in German society. In other words, the prominence and security of the middle class progressively eroded over time. Discussing this trend in her studies in 1892, 1895, 1907, and 1925 occupation reports, Walter remarks that, “The number of the white-collar employees and civil servants constantly increased at the expense of the self-employed and the assisting family members, as well as blue-collar and domestic workers.”¹⁰ Skilled workers and mid-level professionals of all stripes became sorely disillusioned when they realized that their dreams of stability and prosperity had evaporated amidst clouds of industrial overgrowth and bourgeoisie benefit. The lower middle class—a class, which in 1897 boasted “a fundamentally secured existence, a combination of capital owned and income from work,” by 1925 could no longer enjoy “even a fraction of the economic basis that was previously

⁸ Hilde Walter, “The Misery of the ‘New Mittelstand,” GHDI (1929), 1.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid 2

the essential characteristic of the old middle class.”¹¹ Although the German economy experienced an ebb and flow for the remainder of the 1920s, conditions for the middle class remained largely unchanged and unfavorable.¹²

By 1930, many Germans had had enough. The Weimar government’s promises to restore the economy and establish national welfare proved fruitless, meeting a bitter end with the beginning of the Great Depression. Joblessness and underemployment ran rampant all throughout Germany. Meanwhile, radical movements—especially those on the right—grew in popularity throughout this time (1925-1930). As aforementioned, the most well known of these parties, the National Socialist or Nazi Party (NSDAP) received the fewest number of votes in the 1928 Reichstag election, and thus remained relatively small. Yet the Nazi Party’s divisiveness, promises for radical change, and charismatic leader—Adolph Hitler—offered a new alternative to those who vehemently opposed Marxism and Weimar regimes. Consequently, the Nazis witnessed a major rise in support at the 1930 election, increasing its support to 18.3 percent.¹³

For many today, this increase would be met with frantic alarm, and understandably so. One might ask: Have 18.3 percent of the German voters misplaced their moral compasses? Though, to craft such a question would be to employ an optimistic, presentist mindset. To be sure, the vast majority of Germans did not maintain fervent and violent senses of anti-Semitism; instead, apathy proved to be the most violent embodiment of anti-Semitism in Weimar and Nazi Germany. According to Dieder Hartmann, “Most people apparently found anti-Jewish sentiments both familiar and abstract, nothing to object to and

¹¹ Ibid

¹² David G. Williamson. *Germany since 1789: A Nation Forged and Renewed*. 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2016), 210-214.

¹³ O’Lessker 64; Dieter D. Hartmann "Anti-Semitism and the Appeal of Nazism." *International Society of Political Psychology* 5, no. 4 (December 1984): 636.

nothing to worry much about.”¹⁴ He later added that, “German culture was indeed infested with anti-Semitism...a pervading undercurrent of hostility and contempt is revealed by the spiteful image of the Jews in German folklore and popular literature.”¹⁵ Moreover, anti-Semitic media seems to have desensitized average, everyday Germans to hatred of the Jews. Betty Scholem certainly believed so. Remarking on the nature of anti-Semitism in Berlin in 1923, she writes, “There were no pogroms in Berlin. But anti-Semitism [had] penetrated and poisoned the people to such an extent that from all sides you can hear curses against the Jews—completely in the open, and with a lack of embarrassment that was never before seen.”¹⁶ Nazism’s growing popularity and pervasiveness can perhaps be best illustrated by the case of Louise Solmitz, a Hamburg schoolteacher who avidly spewed anti-Semitic rhetoric and joyfully celebrated Hitler’s appointment at chancellor, despite the fact that her husband was baptized Jewish.¹⁷

Contemporarily considered to go hand in hand, Nazism and anti-Semitism were not always so. In fact, Dieder Hartmann’s study illustrated a disturbing alternative, “The seminal study of Nazi seizure of power in a small West German town concluded that people ‘were drawn to anti-Semitism because they were drawn to Nazism, not the other way around.’”¹⁸ Retroactively and perhaps like most, Solmitz thus wondered, “Who took that [‘Death to the Jews’ rhetoric] seriously then?”¹⁹ However, with years of undelivered promises from the Weimar government, burgeoning economic depression, an dying national sentiments (or so many believed), in an era that witnessed “an almost unbroken chain of homeless men...the

¹⁴ Hartmann 636

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Betty Scholem, “Betty Scholem on Anti-Semitism in Berlin,” GHDI (1923).

¹⁷ Louise Solmitz, “Hamburg Schoolteacher Louise Solmitz on Hitler’s Seizure of Power,” GHDI (1933).

¹⁸ Hartmann 636

¹⁹ Solmitz 3

whole length of the great Hamburg-Berlin highway,” Nazism seemed to be necessary measure for new voters, “defecting Nationalists,” and the “Protestant middle-class sector,” in light of hopelessness, joblessness, starvation, and an epically failed republican experiment.²⁰ Thus, the Nazis achieved a 43.9 percent majority of the support in March 1933 as the Great Depression festered.²¹

From the mid-1920s through 1933, the Nazis gained the support of those who believed that the integrity and vitality of a German nation could not exist in a weak, even treasonous republic. Upholding a variety of socioeconomic positions and beliefs, but commonly thought of as members of the “middle class,” many German pledged allegiance to the Nazi Party in times of social and economic desperation. For many, anti-Semitism was not an ironclad creed but a necessary means to an end in a society underpinned in anti-Jewish rhetoric and media. Nazism provided hope to the hopeless (the starving, unemployed, and underemployed), and a new embodiment of nationalist sentiments, which many perceived had been under constant attack in a 14-year, Marxist-infiltrated Weimar regime.

²⁰ Heinrich Hauser, "The Unemployed." In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 84; O'Lessker 67.

²¹ O'Lessker 64. A 43.9 percent in a proportional representation system