

Celine Cont

Professor Price

ENGL 1010

RP2: Habit and the Group

April 11, 2015

Obedience to Authority in World War II

During the holocaust, Nazi's killed 11 million people. The murderers were members of the National Socialist German Worker's Party. Every Aryan was allowed to join this party; humans just like you and me. How are people able to accept and support such barbarity that happened during that time? My family was involved in this topic and I am personally interested about how obedience to authority gets developed and how it influenced the people in the Second World War. It was through Hitler's techniques that he was able to create habits of groups, which influenced behaviors and changed people into mass murderers.

How is it possible that no one said anything against Hitler's doings? In 1963, Stanley Milgram published his study of obedience to authority, which is one of the most famous experiments in the history of psychology (Brannigan 623). In a newspaper announcement, Milgram searched for participants for his experiment. Those participants were told that they had to quiz a student sitting in another room about vocabulary words. If the student gave a wrong answer, the participant had to shock them with an electro shocker. The shocking appliance consisted of 30 switches numbered from 15 to 450, the highest voltage which could be deadly. However, the participant didn't know that the student was an actor. This student

pretended to scream and cry, begging the teacher to stop. The participant had the right to leave the room anytime, but, appallingly, 65% of the participants administered levels of punishment that appeared to be lethal. Milgram's work showed how ordinary people could do things they never thought they would do. One of the common defenses from the German population during World War II is that they were just 'following orders,' like in Milgram's study the lab-coated scientist, who told the participants to send the electric shock (Brannigan 624). Milgram described that ordinary people "could be transformed into brutal Nazis without much difficulty" (Brannigan 623).

Furthermore, groups are not only influenced by behaviors but also by habits made in society. In his book *The Power of Habit* Charles Duhigg describes the habit loop, which consists of cue, routine and reward. A cue is something happening in our daily lives. In the case of the Second World War, the cue was fear in the German people. The routine was to follow the rules. Therefore, reward was to be safe. During the Holocaust the reward was peer pressure. Charles Duhigg describes peer pressure in *The Power of Habits* as the following:

Peer pressure- and the social habits that encourage people to conform to group expectations- is difficult to describe, because it often differs in form and expression from person to person. There social habits aren't so much one consistent pattern as dozen of individuals habits that ultimately cause everyone to move in the same direction (p. 225).

The habit of peer pressure is another aspect to explain the mass murder of European Jews in the Holocaust. No one wants to stick out of a group and everyone wants to be liked. Not only peer pressure influenced the people.

To understand how Hitler was so successful in that short amount of time, we have to imagine the circumstances people were living in. In the 1910s and 1920s the German people were suffering from the high costs of the First World War. During that time the Germans were living in hunger and poverty. One reason for that suffering was the hyperinflation, which declined the value of the current currency 'Mark' (Parsson). This time is called the Weimar's Demise, which is named after a historical city in Germany. Adolf Hitler used this situation, so that he was seen as the only hope for the frustrated people.

For example my grandmother was a teenager during the Second World War. Renate Cont described it as a time with a lot of possibilities and activities. My grandmother confirmed over and over again that she didn't know what was happening to the Jewish people. She saw people disappearing but her parents didn't allow her to ask and nobody questioned it. Furthermore, she was active in the league of German girls, which gave her the opportunity to make a lot of friends and provided a lot of exciting activities. Renate still says that it was a good time for her teenage years and people grew together as a nation. She was forced to feel proud of her country wearing uniforms and having symbols everywhere. My grandmother was a member of the 'Hitler Youth Generation', which is a term that refers to the generation of Germans born between 1919 and 1931 (McDougall 24). This generation played a decisive role in reconstructing the communist state. Those

Clubs like the League of German Girls (BDM) and the Free German Youth (FDJ) functioned to give kids a home and to have leadership roles.

Another way to emphasize the power of habits in groups is if we take a look at scapegoating: The cue is that the people felt terrible about their life in hunger and poverty, the routine is to blame somebody else, for example the Jewish people, and as follows, the reward is to make the problem a problem for somebody else. The scapegoating of Jewish people started way back in history. In the bible it is written that Jews caused the crucifixion of Christ. This was the beginning of the punishment towards the Jews and continues today peaking at Hitler's time. Hitler not only changed the view of the people towards freedom of religion, but also changed daily actions and behaviors of the German people. One of the common arguments Hitler used against Jews was that they stole and ruined the German businesses, which is described by Kurt Hilmar Eitzen in his article *Ten Responses to Jewish Lackeys:* "Jewish crooks have driven thousands of German businessmen to bankruptcy with the glittering trash in their department store palaces (...). He who has bought good products cheaply from the Jew should never forget that the curse of a German worker and the tears of his hungry children come with them!" (6). This is a misguided view. One of the reasons why many Jews were wealthier was their tradition of family business in handicraft. Those jobs were safe regardless of the time, which differed them from the Germans during that time, many of whom lost their jobs during the Weimar's Demise.

Moreover, the colonization of language was one of the Nazi's greatest achievements. Nazi's were preoccupied with language and gave new meaning to old

terms. For example, an important word to the German nation gained a new meaning: 'homeland'. This word became the new meaning of an ideology homeland with peace and great opportunities (O' Shaughnessy 69). For the first time after 20 years of living in a depression of the Weimar's Demise the Germans felt proud of their country. They were their own community, who could take care of themselves.

To understand why people were excited about the Nazi party, we have to understand the Nazi's use of propaganda. Hitler's extraordinary success is almost understood and manipulated as the power of a brand. The propaganda was covered by everything from uniforms to technology, the costuming of policemen and soldiers, and the folk festivals and folk dress. People lived in a parallel universe of imagery and symbolism (O'Shaughnessy 56). Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, a professor of communication at the University of London, explains in this article *Selling Hitler: propaganda and the Nazi brand*: "The point is that a sense of injustice can be talked into people thereby leading to the rhetorical creation of conviction: we offer a vision of rebirth, an enemy to hate, the righting of historical wrongs, a job, a home, bread on the table and cash in the bank" (56). Therefore, the cue was living in a hard time after, the routine is giving the people a place to work, to stay, and to entertain and the reward was to feel safe and proud.

Furthermore, Hitler used group effects like wearing uniforms and having a symbol that is seen everywhere. In Germany, symbolism took an important stage. Not only the building of banners and statues and the flashes of lightning or the SS Runes and the crosses, but most persuasive was wearing the uniform which stands for collective identity (O'Shaughnessy 70). Wearing the same color and the same

uniform binds groups together and supports the peer pressure. If someone doesn't know the symbols or doesn't wear the uniforms he is not part of the group.

The propaganda strategies, group effects, and peer pressure explain why 13.75 million people voted in the year 1932 for Adolf Hitler (Darby 5). The problem of in and out groups, of searching for a scapegoat, and of peer pressure is still a daily issue. Even in small communities like schools, we can see bullies and their followers. Not every country allows people to live for their religion and people might even be killed for believing in their faith. Giving people safety, and feeling peer pressure because they were afraid to stick out of the group was all the people needed to let a mass murder of European Jews happen. All in all, every person could have turned into a Nazi, a person who kills millions of people, an ordinary person like you and I.

Work Cited

Brannigan, Augustine. "Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments: A Report Card 50 Years Later." *Society* Vol. 50.Issue 6 (2013): P623-628. 6p. Web.

Graham, Darby. "HITLER'S RISE AND WEIMAR'S DEMISE." *History Review* Issue 67 (2010): P42-48. 7p. Print.

Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. New York: Random House, 2012. Print.

Kurt Hilmar Eitzen, "Zehn Knüppel wider die Judenknechte," *Unser Wille und Weg* (6) 1936, pp. 309-310.

Parsson, Jens O. (1974). *Dying of Money : Lessons of the Great German and American Inflations*. Boston: Wellspring Press.

O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas. "Selling Hitler: Propaganda And The Nazi Brand." *Journal of Public Affairs* (2009): 55-76. Print.

Mcdougall, A. "A Duty to Forget? The 'Hitler Youth Generation' and the Transition from Nazism to Communism in Postwar East Germany, C. 1945-49." *German History* Vol. 26.Issue 1 (2008): 24-46. Print.