

Defying hitler essay



Haffner's *Defying Hitler*, is a fragmentary memoir about the German scene between 1914 and 1933. It provides a powerful, though fragmentary piece of political analysis of the situation in Germany. The Inflation of 1923, and the personalities and politics of the Weimar and Nazi periods are well known. However, in the memories of Haffner, they once again come to life with a completely new perspective.

The main thrust of *Defying Hitler* does not deal with the persons or reasons that caused that situation which was in Germany at those days but rather with the question of why that situation took place. As the author himself points out, knowing who set fire to the Reichstag is not as crucial as knowing “ what became of the Germans [...] [At the beginning] a majority of them voted against Hitler. What happened to that majority? Did they die? Did they disappear from the face of the earth?” (Haffner, 2000) Such questions provide the contextual basis for Haffner's powerful memoir. After reading the book a reader can find several explanations for Hitler's success among German population after the World War I. Thus, in this essay I provide some of them.

The First Reason

On January 30, 1933, Reichschancellor Hitler solemnly swore an oath to uphold the Weimar Republic's constitution. Hours later he convened his first cabinet meeting to plot the republic's overthrow. The first item on that meeting's agenda dealt with what could be called “ Fatherland security.” Hitler and his cohorts examined a legislative draft entitled *Gesetz zur*

Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich — “ Law for Removing the Distress of People and Reich.”

Better known as the “ Enabling Act,” the proposed legislation was designed to consolidate power in the hands of the chancellor and his cabinet in the event of a terrorist strike or similar threat to German national security. Since the 1918 Armistice that ended World War I, the German people had been battered by revolution, and their economy had been destroyed by depression and hyperinflation. While the Germans were desperate for leadership, they weren’t willing to give their government absolute power yet.

Hitler and his clique of criminals and degenerates understood that the public mood might be altered by a sudden, violent shock, giving the Nazi Party an opportunity to seize total power under the pretext of “ Protecting the Fatherland.” That shock came less than a month after Hitler’s first cabinet meeting, when, on February 27th, flames consumed a large section of Germany’s Reichstag Building. The fire was the result of an arson attack either by a Communist saboteur (as the Nazis claimed) or by a Nazi provocateur (to provide the excuse Hitler needed to put his program into action). Very soon after that accident, Hitler had already presented President Paul von Hindenburg with a draft executive order for protecting “ the People and the State.”

Described as a “ defensive measure against Communist acts of violence,” the decree announced that in light of the terrorist attack on the Reichstag, “ restrictions on personal liberty, on the right of free expression of opinion, including freedom of the Press; on the rights of assembly and association;

violations of the privacy of postal, telegraphic, and telephonic communications; warrants for house searches; orders for confiscation as well as restrictions on property, are permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed.” (Haffner, 2000)

Haffner recalls also that the presidential decree:

“ abolished freedom of speech and confidentiality of the mail and telephone for all private individuals, while giving the police unrestricted rights of search and access, confiscation and arrest. That afternoon [of the day after the decree was issued] men with ladders went around, covering campaign posters with plain white paper. All parties of the left had been prohibited from any further election publicity. Those newspapers that still appeared reported all this in a fawning, fervently patriotic, jubilant tone. We had been saved! What good luck! Germany was free! Next Saturday all Germans would come together in a festival of national exaltation, their hearts swelling with gratitude! Get the torches and flags out!” (Haffner, 2000)

But even after that initial decree, as Haffner records, there was no visible “ sign of revolution” at least, not yet. “ The law courts sat and heard cases,” he recalls. “ At home, people were a little confused, a little anxious, and tried to understand what was happening.” (Haffner, 2000) Haffner himself was among those relatively few Germans who understood the implications of President Hindenburg’s decree. “ I consider it a personal insult that I should be prevented from reading whichever newspaper I wish, because allegedly a Communist set light to the Reichstag,” he complained to a fellow lawyer. “

Don't you?" " No. Why should I?" replied Haffner's unwise friend. (Haffner, 2000)

Basing on these evidences we can arrive to the conclusion that one of the reasons due to which Hitler managed to gain power in the country and popularity among folk was fear of the society before the Communists. The society remembered too well the implications of the revolution of 1919 when though for a short time yet the Communists came to power. People remembered chaos and poverty that followed. The efficient stimulating of this fear as well as creation of the image of a cunning foe threatening the Fatherland and which can be defeated only by Hitler's authority found great success among people. More than that, dazzled society empowered Hitler through the democratic referendum with practically absolute authority in the country.

The Second Reason

Moral degradation of society is to be considered the second explanation for fascism success among German people.

On August 2, 1934, six weeks after the purge, President Hindenburg died. On the same day, recounts Haffner, " the officers and men of the German Army took the oath of allegiance ... not to the Constitution, or to the Fatherland, but to Hitler personally": " I swear by God this holy oath — I will render unconditional obedience to the Fuehrer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready, as a brave soldier, to stake my life at any time for this oath." (Haffner, 2000) Such an oath could be accepted only by perverted society.

In a national plebiscite held 17 days later, the German public was also asked to pledge absolute obedience by approving the consolidation of the offices of president and chancellor. Nearly 90 percent of the German population approved Chancellor Hitler's assumption of greater power than has ever been possessed by any other ruler in modern times.

The ascent of the Nazi Party, it must be recognized, was accomplished through carefully organized deception and facilitated by Germany's moral collapse. As late as 1930, Haffner recalled, Hitler and his co-conspirators were regarded as an embarrassment.

Common Germans considered Hitler to be

“ thoroughly repellent — the pimp's forelock, the hoodlum's elegance ... the interminable speechifying, the epileptic behavior with its wild gesticulations and foaming at the mouth, and the alternately shifty and staring eyes.... No one would have been surprised if a policeman had taken him by the scruff of the neck in the middle of his first speech and removed him to some place from which he would never have emerged again, and where he doubtless belonged.” (Haffner, 2000)

Within a few short years, after hyperinflation and moral decadence had ravaged Germany's national character, Hitler was successfully repackaged as a “ respectable” defender of the middle class. But much of Germany's middle class never fully embraced the Fuhrer. Many among the dispirited German public, weary of war and terror and desperate for stability, ratified the Nazi dictatorship, and its attendant police state, on the assumption that its fearful powers would never be directed against them personally. One

ballot noted by Haffner, signed by a person identifying himself as “ Non-Aryan,” contained the notation: “ Since nothing has happened to me so far I vote ‘ Yes.’” (Haffner, 2000) In those words of foolish resistance to tyranny one can trace a suitable epitaph for every free society that has succumbed to the institutionalized terror of a police state.

Fear, the wait-and-see policy, unwillingness to fight what you consider as the evil is direct evidences of moral degradation of German public in post-war period. And Haffner in his memoirs does not look for any justification for such society.