
From “National Socialists” to “Nazi”

History, Politics, and the English Language

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The linguistic abridgements indicate an abridgement of thought which they in turn fortify and promote.

—Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

In downtown Vienna, there is a small square called the Jewish Plaza (Juden Platz). Right in the middle of this area stands a house-shaped marble monument devoted to the memory of sixty-five thousand of Austria’s Jews who perished during the Holocaust. The names of various concentration camps to which these victims were relegated are carved around the foundation. On the paving in front of this symbolic “marble house” are three large inscriptions engraved in three languages: on the left German, on the right English, and in the middle Hebrew (see figures 1a, 1b, and 1c). The German one says, “Zum Gedenken an die mehr also 65.000 österreichischen Juden, die in der Zeit von 1938 bis 1945 von den Nationalsozialisten ermordet warden” (In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews who were killed by the National Socialists between 1938 and 1945). When translated, so does the Hebrew one in the middle. Yet the English version reads: “In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews who were killed by the *Nazis* between 1938 and 1945” (emphasis added).

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The Independent Review, v. 19, n. 4, Spring 2015, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2015, pp. 537-561.

Figure 1a
Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial in downtown Vienna

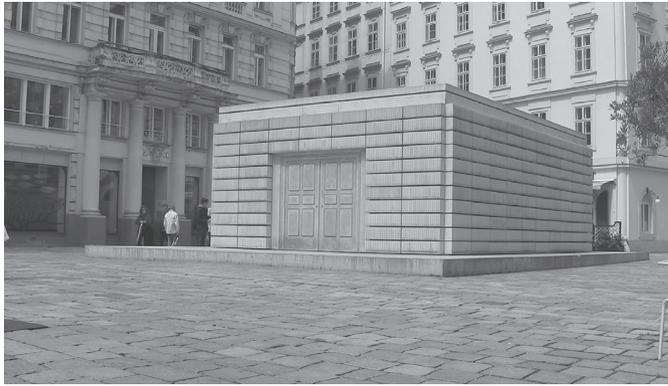
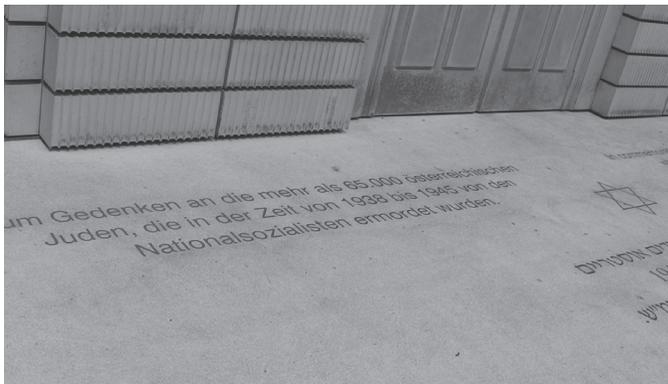
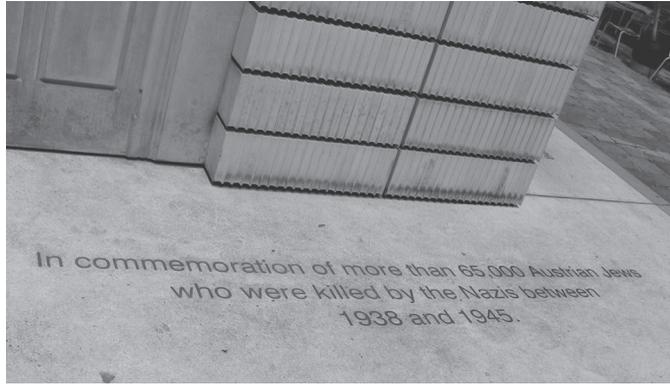


Figure 1b
Commemorative phrase in German on the paving in front of the Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial



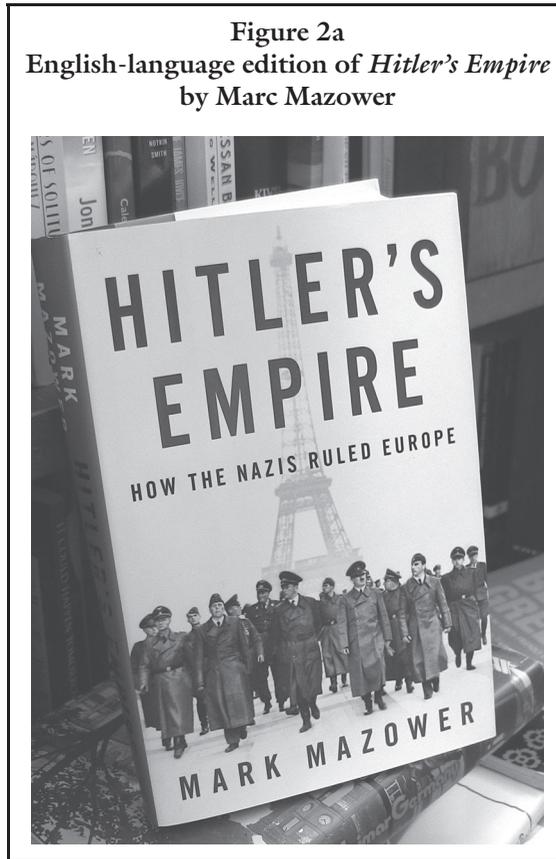
Two years ago when I visited this monument for the first time, I did not pay the slightest bit of attention to that small linguistic discrepancy. However, last summer when I visited Austria again, I became intrigued with this peculiarity. To be exact, my curiosity was sparked when on the same day after visiting that site, I strolled into Thalia, Vienna's largest bookstore. Browsing shelves with social science and humanities literature, I stumbled upon a German translation of *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, a 2009 book by the noted British historian Mark Mazower. The German edition of that book (Mazower 2009b), which has the same cover picture, is titled *Hitlers Imperium: Europa unter der Herrschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Hitler's empire: Europe under the National Socialism rule) (see figures 2a and 2b).

Figure 1c
Commemorative phrase in English on the paving
in front of the Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial



I eventually decided to look deeper into the origin of this language oddity. The first thing one notices is that when English-speaking people write and talk about Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, more often than not they routinely use the word *Nazi*. Thus, in English we have books and articles about Nazi economy, Nazi labor policy, Nazi geopolitics, Nazi genetics, and so forth. In contrast, when Germans refer to the same turbulent years, they usually use the term *National Socialism* (*Nationalsozialismus*). If they need to shorten it, they occasionally write NS or NSDP; the latter is an abbreviation of the long and all-embracing name for Hitler’s party, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei). In fact, Hitler and his associates never liked or used the word *Nazi*. They always called themselves “National Socialists.” Incidentally, before 1932, when the British and American media could not yet make up their minds in which camp to place Hitler’s followers, they too usually referred to them as National Socialists or sometimes simply as Hitlerites.

In the English language, the word *Nazi* acquired a very broad meaning. Like the term *fascist*, its linguistic twin expression, it moved away from its original context and entered the mainstream. Now it stays there as a loaded political smear, which people on both the left and the right use when they need to put down their opponents. Because in the West the crimes of Hitler’s regime were exposed more widely and deeply than equivalent or more monstrous perpetrations committed by other modern villains, in popular perception, “Nazi” Germany became the symbol of the ultimate evil. If in a heated political debate people apply this sinister sticker to political opponents, they clearly want to drive them outside of a civilized discourse and turn them into moral outcasts. Thus, during the George W. Bush administration, especially after his Iraqi adventure, the Left frequently referred to him, Dick Cheney, John Ashcroft, and the rest of his neoconservative retinue as “Nazis” or

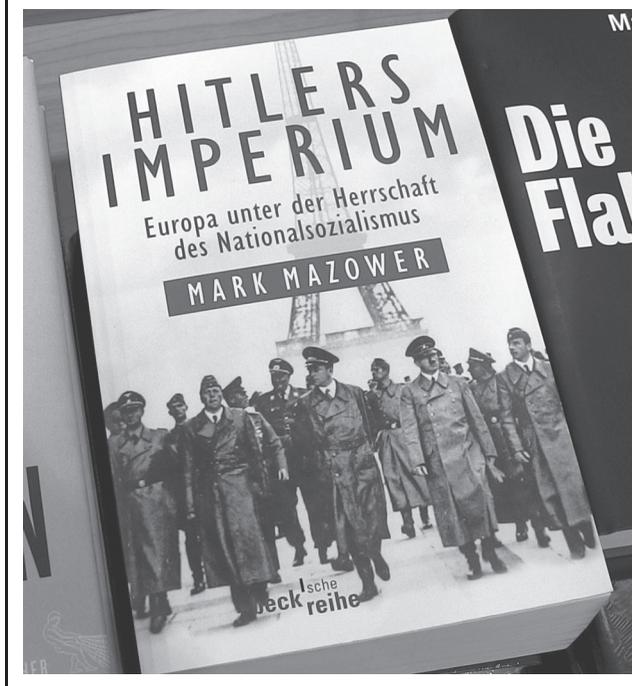


“fascists.” Conservative media frequently operates with the same label. For example, from the right one can hear such smear expressions as “lesbo-Nazi,” “femi-Nazi,” and “Green Nazi.”¹ In fact, “Nazi” has already transgressed both the left and the right political vocabulary and is now firmly stuck in our colloquial usage as a dismissive reference to somebody who is stubbornly restrictive about something. Remember “grammar Nazi” or Jerry Seinfeld’s famous “soup Nazi”?

However, going back to the particular context of Germany in the 1930s and the 1940s, Richard Overy, a prominent British historian of national socialism, recently wondered why we continue using the word *Nazi* in reference to Hitler’s regime when “historians who write about the Soviet Union under Stalin do not usually describe its features as ‘Commie this’ or ‘Commie that.’” He stresses that in English *Nazi* became a shorthand term that obscures more than it explains, and he cautions us that “sloppy language is an enemy to proper historical explanation” (2013, 3). Thus, Overy warns that an indiscriminate application of the word *Nazi* to all things German

1. For more about “Nazi” name calling in U.S. politics as a symbolic denunciation of “ultimate evil,” see Gallagher 2005.

Figure 2b
 German translation of *Hitler's Empire*
 by Marc Mazower



in the 1930s and the 1940s created a false perception that the entire country along with all its cultural and social institutions had been totally controlled by the National Socialist Party. He assures us that this was not the case and that “Nazi” Germany was not the omnipresent and orderly totalitarian monolith we think it was. Following the most recent scholarship on Hitler’s dictatorship, he points out that there were in fact pockets of life in art, music, science, and leisure activities that were weakly or hardly affected by the dominant ideology. It appears that Overy wants to assure us that if we replaced *Nazi* with *National Socialist*, our understanding of Hitler’s Germany would be somehow more nuanced. In his suggestion, one feels an unspoken assumption that the definition of *National Socialism* is less “totalitarian” than the definition of the sinister and loaded *Nazi*.

Unfortunately, Overy, who I am sure knows more about the topic than he reveals in his essay, has glossed over the origin of this abbreviation, not taking us through the entire historical and etymological maze to show how and why it emerged and entrenched itself in English. In one paragraph, he has simply summarized:

The term originated in the 1920s when contemporaries searched for some way of getting round the long-winded title of the party—the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). It was used chiefly by the

enemies of the party and never by the regime itself. The term “Nazi” or “the Nazis” had strongly negative associations; it was employed as a quick way of describing a movement popularly associated in the mind of left-wing critics outside Germany with authoritarian rule, state terror, concentration camps and an assault on the cultural values of the West. The term then, and now, was loaded. (2013, 3)

Let’s unpack that brief statement, for I am convinced that we are not dealing just with left-wing critics’ desire to get around the long name of Hitler’s party. It seems that the original choice of the term *Nazi* also had something to do with what George Orwell (1968) famously referred to as “politics and the English language.” In order to perform that unpacking, I need to make two detours: the first one into the historiography of National Socialism, particularly into how scholars have written about its economic and social policies, and the second one into the mind of its left-wing critics outside Germany.

Winners Write History: Disentangling the Nazi from Socialist Tradition

What is intriguing about Overy’s suggestion about parting with the word *Nazi* and shifting instead to the expression *National Socialism* is *History Today*’s readers reaction when they read his essay. Many of them were not enthusiastic about his suggestion. Moreover, one of them rushed to rebuke the professor, insisting that there was no issue here. This reader assured Overy that “Nazism, when used to distinguish the German variant of fascism, is a useful word.” Besides, as this reader correctly remarked, many still refer to what had been going on in Germany in the 1930s as *fascism*, using the latter word as a synonym for *Nazi*. This reader was convinced that *fascism*, the expression that had been peddled mostly by the Communist Left in the 1930s, was in fact more precise than “colloquial Nazism” and far better than “more misleading National Socialism.” This commentator also confidently enlightened Professor Overy that Hitler’s regime was “neither national nor socialist, but rather a kind of oligarchy with an obsession with ‘racial’ purity running up its spine” (“Comments” 2013).

What this particular reader threw to Overy’s feet is very instructive. His arguments were key points taken from mainstream popular and textbook literature that still continue to inform our perceptions of Hitler’s Germany. Even though for the past several decades scholars have debunked some of those household assumptions about National Socialism, their new approaches have not always trickled into mainstream media and pedagogy. Among these new findings are the regime’s “progressive social policies”² such as professional training and expanded welfare benefits, the

2. German historian Norbert Frei (2001) uses this expression in his landmark book *Der Führerstaat: Nationalsozialistische Herrschaft 1933 bis 1945*.

attempts to establish social equality for those who were included into the people's community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) of Germans, and the emotional satisfaction many common citizens of the Third Reich felt from partaking of the “totalitarian” ideological, economic, and social system.³ The mistaken notion of Hitler's regime as an “oligarchy,” which allegedly imposed itself on the innocent “virgin” populace and which oppressed the majority of Germans, still resonates with many writers of popular literature both on the left and on the right.

Here I am particularly interested in addressing so-called misleading National Socialism, a notion that still sounds appealing to the writers on the left. Well into the 1980s, a large number of humanities and social science scholars who studied modern dictatorships routinely assumed that there was nothing socialist about the “Nazis.” This was not some kind of intellectual dishonesty on these scholars' part, as some conservative authors frequently imply. It was simply a “commonsense” approach shaped by the popular Marxist and post-Marxist intellectual bubble in which they grew up. In fact, their intellectual stance went back to the time of the antifascist Popular Front ideology of the 1930s, which viewed Hitler's and Mussolini's dictatorships as extreme capitalism at the time when it was making its last stand before passing away (Brown 2009, 7–8). The efforts of British and American wartime propaganda to cement an alliance with the Soviet Union against National Socialism and its allies in the 1940s enhanced the view that Hitler's regime had nothing to do with socialism (Raico 2012, 141).

Later scholarly trends blurred the picture even more. In the 1950s, for many Western leftists and liberals the Cold War confrontation ended their romance with Stalinist Russia, and now Stalin more often than not was relegated to the same company with Hitler. Those Cold War years inspired so-called totalitarian studies (Gleason 1995, 72–88, 108–42), which appealed mostly to anti-Communist leftists and liberals as well as to the writers on the right. The “totalitarian school” viewed Hitler's and Stalin's regimes as alien repressive forces that imposed themselves on an innocent populace and exercised total control over society. Then in the 1960s and the 1970s, with the ascent of the New Left in academia, the “totalitarian school” slowly lost its influence, and much of scholarship on fascism and National Socialism was now informed by the “authoritarian personality” approach and by various post-Marxist studies, which were intellectually linked to the popular Frankfurt School. In addition to viewing Hitler-type regimes as the last-ditch resistance of decaying capitalism, scholars who worked within the “authoritarian personality” tradition began to treat National Socialist Germany and Stalinist Russia as forms of collective pathology. It was only in the 1980s that writers began to look seriously into the sources of the

3. See, for example, such landmark studies as Frei 2001; Gellately 2001; Baranowski 2004; Overy 2004; especially Aly 2007a, 2007b; Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2009; and Steber and Gotto 2014.

mass social support for those dictatorships and to explore the material, emotional, and cultural motives that forced people to, in Erich Fromm's (1941) expression, "escape from freedom."

Because the Soviet Union and the Western Left came out of World War II on the victorious side, and because Hitler's Germany was defeated, National Socialism was naturally disentangled from socialist tradition and eventually became singled out as a uniquely evil phenomenon with no analogies in human history. Such distorted lenses obscured a simple fact that Hitler's regime belonged to broad socialist tradition. To be more precise, just like Stalinist Russia and Mussolini's Italy, the Germany of the 1930s was one of the extreme manifestations of interwar militant populism that hinged on three pillars: collectivism, activist statism, and social engineering. In the wake of World War I, this militant populism more often than not channeled itself through existing socialist tradition (Brown 2009, 10). As we know, it is winners who write history. That is why until recently we still have a popular narrative line that, notwithstanding all their wicked things, the "Reds" are all in all still progressive and therefore are better than the reactionary "Browns."

One typical example, out of many, will suffice to demonstrate this trend. In 1983, historian Eve Rosenhaft published *Beating the Fascists* at prestigious Cambridge University Press. Her book explores fistfights between Hitler's Storm Troopers and Communist paramilitary units, who were equally brutal and ruthless. The title and the text clearly show that Rosenhaft sympathizes with the Red thugs. She does not mention that the Communists' major target was not Hitler's movement but the German democratic state, which the Communists wanted to destroy and replace with their own proletariat dictatorship. To her, the Communists were carriers of "noble" goals, so their violence was valid and redemptive. Conversely, the "fascists'" violence was bad. When Rosenhaft describes how Communist street fighters looted stores, she puts the word *plundering* in quotation marks (1983, 53). In her view, these "proletarian shopping trips" represented "sporadic impulses towards direct collective actions for the immediate relief of material hardship" (53). In contrast, she pictures similar actions by fascists as predatory and criminal. Without mentioning this esteemed scholar by name, historian Timothy Brown has completely debunked Rosenhaft's ideologically driven thesis by showing that, in fact, Communist and National Socialist foot soldiers shared the same cultural space (2009, 5–6). He demonstrates that the street fighters who represented the two poles of this radical culture were never separated by monolithic walls and in fact frequently shifted sides and cross-fertilized each other. Nevertheless, until recently, Rosenhaft's approach has been rather typical among historians of modern Europe. And the reason I chose to sample this particular book is simply that in 2008 Cambridge University Press decided to reprint it without any changes. Privileging the Left in general and Communists in particular very much distorts the state of the field and affects textbook literature.

“Hitler’s Willing Beneficiaries”: From Deficit Spending to Socialism at the Expense of non-Germans

Recent scholarship shows that Hitler’s regime was in fact both nationalist and socialist.⁴ When the dictator and his gang labeled their ideology “National Socialism,” they really meant it: their goal was to empower all people of “Aryan stock” at the expense of non-Germans. Whereas Stalin cannibalized his own population, expropriating and phasing out segments of society on the basis of their social and class origin, Hitler rejected class warfare and acted as a “benign” dictator toward German people. His biopolitics aspired to mold the members of the Aryan “tribe” into an all-inclusive “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) by uplifting them not through attacks on “class” aliens but on ethnic and racial “others.” Hence, the ideological emphasis of Hitler’s regime on the expropriation of resources belonging to non-Germans and the exploitation of their slave labor.

Strictly speaking, the message of National Socialism was not radically different from that of other forms of egalitarianism and socialism: strong antibourgeois sentiments expressed through a radical empowerment of a selected group of people at the expense of other groups. Moreover, the ultimate goals of national and international socialisms were the same: the engineering of a classless society (Overy 2004, 230). What made National Socialism novel and different from earlier forms of socialism was an attempt to blend the ideas of social justice and revolutionary nationalism (Aly 2007b, 323). As philosopher and economist Werner Sombart explained in the late 1930s, the term *National Socialism* meant a national union that was based on the conviction that socialism and nationalism depended on each other (1937, 113). This prominent Marxist scholar who later became an ardent fellow traveler of Hitler elaborated: “This viewpoint of National Socialism is based upon the thought that there is not social order having general validity, but that every order must be suited to the needs of a particular people” (113). Hitler himself was more succinct and precise in explaining his ideological goal as “the socialism of the race” (qtd. in Overy 2004, 232).

In 1920, when a group of disgruntled war veterans and drifters gathered in Munich and constituted itself as the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, it was not simply a rhetorical trick. It was a radical attempt to “cleanse” powerful German socialist tradition of its “harmful” class-based cosmopolitan “Jewish” traits and make it serve the interests of the classless German national community. This project had all chances to succeed. Victorious France, Britain, and the United States had unwarrantedly blamed and penalized and thus deeply humiliated Germany for World War I. In these circumstances, it was perhaps natural that the German socialist tradition was to receive a powerful injection of nationalism. Although the German

4. The best and most comprehensive study of socialist elements in Hitler’s policies is *Hitler’s Beneficiaries* by Götz Aly (2007a, 2007b).

Communist Party widened its popularity during the Great Depression, in conditions of lingering postwar national humiliation there was not much room left for international socialists to maneuver politically. It was thus not difficult for Hitler and his associates to purge German socialism of its cosmopolitan Marxist traits and to channel powerful anticapitalist sentiments into a racial and cultural warfare against the Jews, the internationalist Left, and what they referred to as the “Western capitalist oligarchy.”

Incidentally, historian Michael Kellogg has recently noted that prior to the end of World War I, Hitler was not obsessed with anti-Semitism (2005, 4). In fact, in the early years the behavior and utterances of the would-be die-hard anti-Semite dictator manifested conventional socialist leanings. It was only in 1918–19, when German pride was wounded by the humiliating surrender, that Hitler drifted toward radical nationalism, just like millions of his “Aryan” compatriots. In his case, nationalism was topped up by a virulent anti-Semitism that he absorbed from his new Munich acquaintances, mostly Baltic German and Russian elite expatriates, who had been disempowered by urban-based left radicals represented by cosmopolitan Russian and ethnic diaspora revolutionaries.

The Great Depression, which plunged German society into desperate poverty, completed the ideological mutation of people like Hitler, shaping them into what later became known as National Socialists. Thus, the historical circumstances of Germany transformed the original message of socialism—a doctrine of the universal liberation of the poor—into a nationalist project of empowerment for the Germans only. Drifting along with the rest of his compatriots from social to national justice, Werner Sombart, the economist I mentioned earlier, reflected well many Germans’ sentiments during the interwar years when he stressed, “For me German Socialism signifies nothing less than Socialism for Germany, that is, a Socialism which alone and exclusively applies to Germany” (1937, 114).

Left authors have insisted that Hitler’s regime toyed with the word *socialism* for pure rhetorical purposes in order to deceive the masses. In reality, Hitler was *truly* a National Socialist. To the very end of World War II, when his cause was already doomed, the dictator continued to be concerned about Germans’ well-being, distributed plundered loot and apartments to the victims of the Allies’ bombing, and rationed food, making sure that the people of the “Aryan stock” would never go hungry. A remark found in the memoirs of Albert Speer, the minister of war production in Hitler’s Germany, is very revealing: “It remains one of the oddities of this war that Hitler demanded far less from his people than Churchill and Roosevelt did from their respective nations. The German leaders were not disposed to make sacrifices themselves or to ask sacrifices of the people. They tried to keep the morale of the people in best possible state by concessions” (1970, 214).

Moreover, the Hitler regime’s seeming bizarre attempts to eliminate the Jews by diverting needed trains and trucks to deliver them to concentration camps at the very

end of the war originated not only from some irrational hatred of the Jews but also from an obvious economic "rationale"—a desire to expropriate and annihilate the Jewry in order to conserve limited food resources for the "Aryan" Germans. In this particular case, the reasoning was very simple: the Germans were to be sustained through the elimination of "parasites" and "useless eaters." The "existential" anti-Semitic sentiments, which always lingered on the margins of European tradition, served here as a convenient excuse for an economic expropriation of the Jews.

The most notorious case of World War II's Holocaust—the killing of 1.2 million Polish Jews unfit for work in 1942—was justified exclusively in economic terms as the need to release food supplies for Germans' use. In *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), Timothy Snyder reminds us that the same rationale stood behind the elimination of 3 million Soviet prisoners of war and 3 million Poles through starvation, which took place approximately at the same time the Polish Jews were killed (169–70; see also Aly 2007b, 193, 279, 285–86). In the 1990s, in his best-selling book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) political scientist Daniel Goldhagen unfairly placed all wartime Germans in the nation of "willing executioners" fixated on the elimination of the Jews. Twisting a bit this silly assumption—a mirror image of Hitler's propaganda—a more appropriate way to describe the sentiments of the German populace in the 1930s and 1940s would be to say that they were "Hitler's willing beneficiaries."

When Hitler took power in 1933, he strove to keep working-class people happy by doubling their holiday entitlements, eliminating the taxing of overtime pay, cracking down on landlords who wanted to raise rents, and introducing a nationwide health insurance that included retired people. The most ambitious efforts in this direction were grand projects of mass public works, which included road construction and military buildup. To the populace's general joy, the regime eventually eliminated unemployment. A symbolic gesture that was to show the regime's sensitivity to the people of labor was its declaration about making May 1 an official holiday (Frei 2001, 58, 85).

Generous welfare and social policies as well as grand public-works schemes and military industry expansion were accomplished through horrendous deficit spending. As a result, by 1938 the German government was on the verge of bankruptcy. Hitler's associates were constantly worried about losing popular support, which they had to repeatedly purchase through the distribution of various benefits. The number one question was how to cover the huge financial hole created by the runaway budget deficit. Again, the doctrine of National Socialism already contained a natural answer—by going after the money and resources of "unworthy" domestic aliens and especially after countries with developed industries and abundant natural resources. By expropriating Jewish properties first and then by manipulating occupied nations' currencies, confiscating their raw materials and industries, and plundering their precious metals, Germany was able to sustain itself (Aly 2007b). This was pure and naked predatory behavior—in other words, National Socialism in action.

Because of these efforts, the regime enjoyed the overwhelming support of the German population, including those who were not exactly thrilled about Hitler in the first place. At the very end of the war, Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels optimistically predicted, “Again and again we see one fact: that we will never lose this war because of the people. The people will persevere in this war until their last breath” (qtd. in Connelly 2009, 34). As it turned out, he was totally right: having a personal stake in the existing system, Germans resisted to the very end until they were totally overpowered by superior Soviet, American, and British forces. From 1939 to 1945, the “Aryans” never went on strike and never rebelled against their own government. It is notable, for example, that on the eastern front not a single town, except Greifswald, was surrendered without a fight (Connelly 2009, 34).

National Socialism, National Bolshevism, and Beyond

Despite the meteoric rise and then rapid collapse of the “one-thousand year” Third Reich, the novel idea pioneered by the National Socialists survived well after 1945. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, it was rekindled by many Third World national liberation movements, which frequently sought to empower their own “tribes” at the expense of ethnic and racial “others.” In this context, it is interesting to note that at the very end of the war Hitler prophesized that if Germany were doomed to perish, its National Socialist ideology would nevertheless reemerge in non-European countries (Weissmann 1996, 291). Serving as instructive proof that this morbid prophecy came true are various Third World national liberation movements’ numerous attempts to build egalitarian societies for their own “tribes” at the expense of others “tribes.” Frequently tinged with class animosity, these ethnic and racial assaults usually targeted particular minority groups that demonstrated visible economic success. Included among these attacks are the Amin regime’s brutal persecution of the Hindu merchants in Uganda and the Mugabe vigilantes’ marauding raids on or expropriation of white farmers in Zimbabwe. Throughout the twentieth century, with rapid modernization and the declining influence of mainstream religions, socialism and nationalism became intimate bedfellows, providing people an identity and a new faith. The source of their intimacy was their common core principles, collectivism and group thought, which allowed regimes to quickly shift back and forth from class warfare to ethnic warfare or to practice both simultaneously.

The experiences of the Soviet Union, China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cuba, and many other countries that claimed to be building socialist societies show that by the end of the 1980s all these regimes, despite their original internationalist and cosmopolitan rhetoric, either turned to mobilizing their masses against national enemies abroad or simply mutated into xenophobic projects that eventually came to target cultural, racial, ethnic, and foreign “others” instead of “class enemies” within their borders. It was also not coincidental that in post-Communist Eurasia, throngs of

former apparatchiks such as Slobodan Milosevich in Serbia and Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan quickly reinvented themselves as die-hard nationalists.

One of the best examples of such "socialism to national socialism" metamorphosis is the transformation of the Stalinist Soviet Union. In the 1930s and the 1940s, that country of "classical socialism" evolved from cosmopolitan internationalist Bolshevism, which had peddled the slogan of world revolution, into National Bolshevism, which was concerned about "socialism in one country" and propagated a peculiar ideological hybrid of traditional Marxism with its class approach and patriotic mythology based on Soviet/Russian nationalism (Brandenberger 2002). Ironically, this particular ideological evolution proved another prediction issued by Hitler, who, fully understanding the morbid power of nationalism, once stressed that the political trend would not be Germany going Bolshevik but Stalinist Russia going National Socialist (Brown 2009, 47). In the 1930s and 1940s, natural outcomes of the Stalinist shift were the mass exile and targeted executions of the diaspora Bolsheviks and laypeople represented by the Jews, Poles, Greeks, Germans, Chinese, Hungarians, and Finns, of whose loyalties the Soviet state was not certain.

A powerful National Bolshevik trend was also present in the German Communist Party in the early 1920s (Ascher and Lewy 1956). At that time, some German Communist activists competed with National Socialists for influence on the masses, glorifying the German army and telling people that they should work to revive Germany in alliance with the Soviet Union against the "evil" West. At one point, these elements formed the splinter Communist Workers Party. Like their "Nazi" twins, these Communist activists condemned parliamentary democracy, praised martial values, denounced Jewish capitalists, and even came up with a peculiar theory that German labor could effectively set up a dictatorship of the proletariat only through the revived national army. German National Bolsheviks were able to sway to their side many officers and war veterans, who found such an ideological brew of nationalism and anticapitalism very appealing. Moreover, the National Bolshevik activists sometimes invited National Socialist Party speakers to address Communist crowds and even printed posters that flashed both the red star and the swastika (Marcuse 2013, 179–80; Neumann 2013a, 154–55). Timothy Brown, who has explored Weimar Germany's left and right radical culture, writes about the existence of the whole segment of street fighters nicknamed "beefsteaks" (brown on the surface, red on the inside). This large red-brown mass with constantly shifting loyalties was attracted to the ideas of socialism, nationalism, and revolution that were advocated by both the National Socialist and Communist Parties (2009, 4, 79). At one point, after 1930, in a last desperate effort to win over the masses, the German Communist Party made an attempt to back up and widen those National Bolshevik sentiments. Yet it was already too late by then: National Socialism had already taken over the political playing field of militant nationalism mixed with anticapitalism and anti-Western sentiments. It is notable that the very notion of Hitler's ideology as "socialism of

the race” came from the German National Bolshevik outlook of the 1920s (Overy 2004, 232).

From the very beginning, the Western Left felt uncomfortable about the egalitarian socialist elements in Hitler’s policies and tried to play them down (Hannan 2014). This approach was later reflected in textbooks and popular mainstream literature. Since the 1930s, the Left has peddled two versions of the Hitler myth. According to the first one, Hitler sprang out of a capitalist cocoon as a puppet of large industrial monopolies that manipulated millions of Germans, mostly the middle-class or “petty bourgeois” people, into accepting him as their leader. Writers who stuck to this version insisted that dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini, and the like were the last-ditch effort of decaying monopoly capitalism that used them in their desperate desire to save that system from its final and unavoidable collapse. Recent scholarship shows that this view of monopolies as the spearheads of National Socialism is totally untrue. In fact, many large financiers did not originally trust National Socialists, viewing them as the right-wing version of Bolshevism. It is estimated that from 1925 to 1933 Hitler’s movement enjoyed a substantial support among blue-collar workers (who composed 31 percent of National Socialist Party membership), mostly from nonunion small workshops, and among public-sector employees (9 percent). Together, these two groups composed 40 percent of the National Socialist Party membership. This number far exceeded the number of farmers (10 percent), professionals (4 percent), and the so-called petty bourgeois element, who never made up more than 20 percent of the party (Mann 2004, 378). Moreover, by the mid-1930s, with their programs of full employment the National Socialists were able to win over the sympathies of the workers at large industrial plants, a group that prior to 1933 had traditionally joined the Social Democratic Party (70 percent) and the Communist Party (80 percent) (Gellately 2001, 15; Mann 2004, 159–60). It is also notable that by 1933 in *Schutzstaffel* (Protective Squadron or SS) units the number of people with a working-class background reached 41 percent (Mann 2004, 380). Furthermore, the leadership of the “bourgeois” ultraconservative German National People’s Party, the conservative German People’s Party, and the Catholic Center leadership was represented by landlords, industrialists, and high executives, whereas among the National Socialist leaders such individuals were very rare. Overall, the National Socialist Party was a multiclass nationwide movement in contrast to the parties on the left, which were “proletarian,” and to the parties on the right, which were “bourgeois” (Mann 2004, 160, 163).

Despite these historical facts, the view of Hitler’s dictatorship as a regime initiated by capitalists and backed up by the German middle-class “petty bourgeoisie” was repeated thousands of times by Communists and Social Democrats and eventually became part of the mainstream history narrative. Many students of Hitler’s Germany, including such popular nonsocialist writers as Alan Bullock (1971), began taking it for granted.

The second version of the Hitler myth, which emerged in the 1930s and became popular among liberals and the non-Communist Left, insisted that Hitler was a demonic charismatic dictator who took advantage of the German people’s sadomasochistic and authoritarian nature. It is argued that, building on the desperation caused by the Great Depression, he singlehandedly captivated the entire nation. Today, this psychological view is usually propagated through coffee table books and TV shows. The most recent example is the BBC documentary *The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler* (Rees 2012).⁵

Selective Research by German Refugee Intelligence Experts

Who shaped these two versions of the Hitler mythology? The tale about Hitler as a puppet of big business was disseminated mostly by the Communists. At the same time, many non-Communist left and liberal writers shared that “capitalist” interpretation. However, the latter also favored the myth about the “sadomasochistic” origin of Hitler’s dictatorship. Instrumental in shaping these two tales among British and American audiences were German and German Jewish refugee intellectuals, who brought with them to Great Britain and the United States a particular vocabulary for talking about their former country. Ideologically, they were mostly people with a clearly left political orientation (Gleason 1995, 33). It was these people who mainstreamed the use of the expression *Nazi* in English.

Among these refugee intellectuals, a group of left-wing émigré scholars who collectively called themselves the “Frankfurt School” played a crucial role in shaping the Anglo-American vision of National Socialism. The Frankfurt School was a disparate community of humanities and social science scholars with Marxist backgrounds. Originally clustered around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, they later escaped from Hitler to the United States, where they regrouped in New York City. Their major intellectual signature was an attempt to move away from the economic determinism of classical Marxism in order to humanize Karl Marx’s teaching and marry it to Sigmund Freud’s ideas. These scholars’ writings later came to exercise a powerful influence on American intellectual culture and shaped the minds of an entire generation of American and British social scholars in the 1950s and the 1960s. For example, Erich Fromm, one of the “Frankfurters,” became a dean of Western pop psychology and a prominent countercultural icon in the 1960s. During the same decade, his friend Herbert Marcuse became an intellectual guru for the New Left movement. Their colleague Theodore Adorno spearheaded research into the so-called authoritarian personality, which deeply affected the American intelligentsia’s view of politics and helped to marginalize as a form of pathology any ideas that did not fit left or mainstream liberal ideologies.

5. The best early example of the psychological interpretation of Hitler’s dictatorship is the classical *Escape from Freedom* by Erich Fromm (1941).

In the early 1940s, Fromm and his Frankfurt School friend Franz Neumann released two popular studies—*Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942), respectively—which heavily shaped the perception of English-speaking intellectual elites about what was going on in Germany at that time. Fromm, who had become disenchanted with traditional Marxism and the Soviet Union, sought to humanize socialism and looked more for a psychological explanation of National Socialism. Thus, he was among the first to build up the theory of the sadomasochistic nature of the German people, who, pressured by the Great Depression, psychologically surrendered themselves to Hitler’s authoritarian personality. *Behemoth* grew out of an expanded memo Neumann had prepared for the U.S. assistant attorney general, who had asked him to explain the essence of Hitler’s regime. The book’s major thesis is that capitalist monopolies were the ones who brought Hitler to power. Although, following contemporary German usage, Neumann still relied on the expression *National Socialism*, he emphasized that the German dictatorship was naked capitalism in its extreme form and had nothing to do with socialism. In his view, the latter was always noble and cosmopolitan, whereas the “Nazi” doctrine was ugly and nationalistic.⁶

During World War II, several Frankfurt scholars who were close friends (Marcuse, Neumann, and Otto Kirchheimer) went to work as intelligence analysts for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor of the present-day Central Intelligence Agency.⁷ Before the Cold War started, the U.S. intelligence community was not concerned too much about such experts’ leftist background and hired about forty of them at the OSS (Evans and Romerstein 2012, 104–6). John Herz, one of these analysts, chuckled, remembering how a “left-Hegelian spirit” had temporarily taken up residence in the OSS Central European Section (qtd. in Laudani 2013a, 3). As part of the OSS Research and Analysis Department, these German experts were responsible for explaining all things German and western European to U.S. policy makers. In fact, OSS head Colonel William Donovan, who hired these left-leaning folk, viewed the Research and Analysis group as the “final clearinghouse” that was to filter all information before it was used for policy decision making (Laudani 2013a, 2–3). Marcuse, one of the chief OSS Europe experts, explicitly stressed that by joining the U.S. government he wanted to influence the way Germany was presented to the American people in press, movies, and propaganda (Laudani 2013a, 8).

For people like Marcuse and Neumann, both of whom were committed non-Communist leftists, recording and discussing Hitler’s socialist policies were not a high priority. Such bias was natural and understandable: it was an instinctive desire to shut

6. Given his views, it was natural for Neumann to later volunteer, for pure ideological reasons, to spy for the Soviet intelligence service, which assigned him the code name “Ruff” (Evans and Romerstein 2012, 103–4).

7. For these scholars’ intelligence reports and wartime work at the OSS, see Laudani 2013b.

out the powerful opponent who had successfully hijacked a large part of the collectivist ethos they were so fond of. In their policy prescriptions, Neumann and Marcuse, along with other fellow experts, downplayed “Nazi” anticapitalism and recommended swaying postwar Germany in the direction of democratic socialism. In one of his memos, Neumann insisted that postwar Germany must “embrace elements from both Anglo-American and Soviet social structure and practice” (2013b, 414). Translating this message into a language of practical recommendations, he and Marcuse advocated a privileged treatment of the organized Left at the expense of all other political parties. They also insisted that the U.S. occupational administration in Germany maintain the centralized control of the economy that had been imposed during Hitler’s years. They also recommended compiling a list of about 1,800 German businessmen and industry managers and immediately incarcerating them. In their view, all of these individuals, although not members of Hitler’s party, should be locked up just in case because, as Marcuse put it, they were “essential for the rise and maintenance of Nazism” (qtd. in Laudani 2013a, 14). Indeed, for those who believed that capitalism was the chief culprit responsible for launching Hitler’s dictatorship, this suggestion was quite logical.

To be fair, Max Horkheimer (1941) and Frederick Pollock (1941), two other members of the Frankfurt School (neither of whom worked for the U.S. government), had a different view of National Socialism. Both scholars speculated that Hitler’s Germany might have been part of a general worldwide pattern of the burgeoning activist state. Thus, in a private letter, Horkheimer, the formal head of the Frankfurt School, wrote, “What happens today is only the consummation of a trend which permeates the whole modern era” and further suggested that run-away militant statism transgressed both capitalism and socialism (qtd. in Wiggershaus 1994, 290). As such, this statism was equally characteristic for “Nazi” Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Moreover, Horkheimer and Pollock did not fail to notice that in Germany in the 1930s the profit motive was replaced with what they called the “motivation of power” and that the market economy was subordinated to the goals of state planning.⁸

In fact, Pollock cheered that process because it included such “good things” as collectivism, a strong regulatory state, and efficient scientific planning. Subscribing to popular contemporary Keynesian notions, this reformed Marxist went as far as to suggest that under this efficient worldwide state capitalism, economic crisis and unemployment would be eventually arrested and removed through benevolent interference of enlightened bureaucrats (1941, 454–55). Such celebratory reasoning could easily raise an uncomfortable question: If, like the United States and the Soviet Union, the “Nazis” used planning and state power to harness crisis and provide full employment, why do we portray German dictatorship as evil? Neumann—a stalwart

8. It is now well known that long before the “Frankfurters” stumbled on these politically incorrect thoughts, Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek had already come up with similar ideas, which were doomed to stay marginal at that time.

Marxist who, like Marcuse ([1941] 1955, 410), argued that Hitler's regime represented capitalism unchained—harshly rebuked Pollock. Pollock's ideas—which, by the way, today represent the hallmark of mainstream left-liberal ideological wisdom—appeared to the Frankfurt scholars as pure heresy. Neumann directly accused Pollock of ideologically deviating from Marxism and alerted his comrades that the dangerous speculations about the rise of the universal omnipotent state contradicted the theoretical foundation of the Frankfurt School from beginning to end. For Neumann, Hitler's militant state, with its centralization and numerous regulations, was a natural outcome of capitalism's final stage, when the system was simply “pregnant” with socialism and ready to be taken over and used by benign forces on the left (Wiggershaus 1994, 286).

In his turn, Adorno hinted that Pollock's speculations might cast a shadow on the Soviet Union's reputation. He noted that despite Stalin's show trials and the Great Terror the only politically correct line of behavior was to stay silent about everything that was going in Stalinist Russia. Thus, Adorno advised his colleagues, “In the current situation, which is truly desperate, one should really maintain discipline at any cost (and no one knows the cost better than I!) and not to publish anything which might damage Russia” (qtd. in Wiggershaus 1994, 162). As a result of this plea, in the 1930s and especially in the 1940s the Frankfurt scholars silently agreed not to say anything bad in public about the Soviet Union, both for the sake of the leftist cause and for the sake of holding an antifascist alliance. It appeared that, having spelled out the inconvenient truth, Horkheimer and Pollack experienced their “Copernicus” moment, suddenly becoming apprehensive about their own dangerous speculations and quickly backing off. Feeling uncomfortable about the line of thought they were taking, Horkheimer literally swept under the rug any politically incorrect papers that could compromise the “correct” view of the “Nazis” origin (Wiggershaus 1994, 280–86).

In fact, Horkheimer had already set a precedent for such selective publication of Frankfurt School scholarship. In 1929–30, Fromm had found out in his sociological survey of several hundred left-leaning industrial workers that about 70 percent of them voted for the Left not out of conscious loyalty to the cause but out of conformism and opportunism. The uncomfortable conclusion that the proletarians' wishy-washy attitudes opened them to the National Socialist agenda was then anticipated. Still worse, 10 percent of those workers manifested clear pro-authoritarian sentiments (Burston 1991, 109; Funk 2000, 90). Horkheimer and several of his colleagues decided to suppress the results of Fromm's research to avoid provoking people into thinking that the left-leaning workers became Nazis simply because they were socialists. So, to add intellectual insult to this research injury, the results of Fromm's survey were not published until after his death (Burston 1991, 110). Furthermore, totally ignoring authoritarianism on the left, Frankfurt writers produced the so-called F-scale (F is *fascism*) to measure pro-fascist tendencies in contemporary society, which they linked to childhood experiences and associated exclusively with the Right. On this

F-scale, “fascist” right-wing tendencies were detected by grading people on the basis of nine psychological traits: submission, aggression, anti-intellectualism, superstition, stereotyping, longing for power, destructiveness, anti-intracception,⁹ and obsession with sex. The F-scale project later gave rise to the famous study *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), which became one of the must-own “holy books” for American social sciences and humanities.¹⁰

“Nazi,” “Fascism,” and Word Politics

The F-scale shows that for the opponents of National Socialism there was yet another way to talk about Hitler-type regimes, in addition to the parochial term *Nazi*, while simultaneously bypassing socialism. From the 1930s to the present, both in the West and in former Communist countries, writers have frequently used the generic term *fascism* to refer collectively to Mussolini’s Italy, Vichy France, and Hitler’s Germany. In fact, *fascism* became the favorite word of choice both for Stalinist propaganda workers and for the Communist Left outside of the Soviet Union. This was the Communist International’s easy and radical solution in the early 1930s to avoiding any potentially uncomfortable questions that could arise with regard to the expression *National Socialism*. Ideological avatars of Stalinism simply forbade use of the word *socialism* in any references to Hitler’s regime altogether. As a result, the name of Hitler’s party was rarely rendered in full in Russian. Furthermore, to remain politically correct, Soviet and Western Communist writers more often than not shied away from the word *Nazi* to avoid any hazardous questions about how this acronym might have come about in the first place.

Communists soon began using the term *fascism* to label not only Mussolini’s and Hitler’s regimes but also all movements that they defined as their enemies. For example, the Communist International routinely called Social Democrats “social fascists” until 1934, when Communists finally shifted gears slightly and began reluctantly building alliances with these left “apostates.” In the course of time, just like the term *Nazi*, the term *fascism* entered the mainstream and evolved into a metaphor for something evil, sinister, and hated. In a similar vein, *fascism*, just like *Nazi*, eventually lost its original meaning and came, as Orwell (1968, 132) reminded us, simply to describe something not desirable.¹¹

9. In the Frankfurt School’s jargon, “anti-intracception” meant an opposition to subjective and imaginative tendencies.

10. As late as the 1970s, the F-scale was still uncritically applied to the study of school populations in Germany and the United States (Burston 1991, 237).

11. It is notable that in his otherwise well-researched book *Liberal Fascism*, Jonah Goldberg (2008), a popular neoconservative writer, resorts to this particular loaded usage in order to dramatize his case regarding the historical linking of the National Socialists and Italian fascists with the progressive and socialist tradition.

The first recorded source of the expression *Nazi* is Hitler's early opponents, who began using it in the 1920s as a negative equivalent to the positive term *Sozi*, a short-lived colloquial abbreviation that contemporary Germans occasionally used to refer to the Social Democrats (Mautner 1944, 93). *Sozi*, like *Nazi*, never took root in the German language. Although a 1931 brochure released by Joseph Goebbels ([1931] 1992), the Third Reich's chief propaganda master, carried the title *Nazi-Sozi*, the word *Nazi* never caught on with Hitler's followers, who came to dislike it. They always preferred the more meaningful *National Socialism* or *National Socialist* or occasionally NS for short—the usage that has survived in German to the present day. Thus, on all their propaganda posters, Hitler's followers always wrote: "Vote National Socialist." Their opponents nevertheless quickly picked up the term *Nazi* and began using it in a derogatory manner. It has been claimed that Konrad Heiden, a popular German Jewish refugee journalist with a Social Democratic background, was actually the first one to introduce this expression into mainstream English (Clare 1999).¹² Ironically, Heiden's very first book about the "Nazis," when he still lived in Germany, carried the title *Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (History of National Socialism [1932]). However, two years later, when he was already on the run, he published another book that he characteristically titled *Sind die Nazis Sozialisten?* (Are the Nazis Socialists? [1934]), which already questioned Hitler's socialist credentials.

Although there is no evidence that Heiden was the first to coin the weasel N word, it is obvious that left-leaning writers and policy experts such as himself, Neumann, Fromm, and Marcuse were the ones spearheading its use. For all practical purposes, *Nazi* not only sounded conveniently short to English speakers but also did well the job of getting around socialist elements in Hitler's dictatorship. Apparently, another reason why that name established itself in English was the reluctance of British and American media, politicians, and propaganda workers to offend the Soviet Union, their wartime ally.

It was precisely after 1942, when the Soviet Union became a full-fledged ally of the Americans and the British, that the use of *Nazi* became increasingly popular and almost totally phased out the use of *National Socialism*. This particular turnaround was especially visible in Marcuse's writings. At the end of 1942, this philosopher turned intelligence expert wrote a propaganda memo for the U.S. Office of War Information in which he proposed a set of guidelines on how to successfully mobilize the American people against the enemy by utilizing loaded words that should be hammered into their minds (1998, 179–86).

Marcuse stressed that such expressions as *totalitarianism* were not good enough for propaganda purposes because they were too abstract for the common folk to

12. Heiden is known mostly as the author of the first comprehensive biography of Hitler (Heiden 1944), which still remains an interesting read. Although in this particular book Heiden occasionally did use the name "Nazi," his favorite expression for the description of the German dictatorship was "National Socialism." He apparently had not caught up yet with the undergoing change in usage.

swallow. *Dictatorship*, in references to Germany, was not a good word either because it blurred the difference between Germany and the Soviets, which could undermine the Allies' unity. So what was a good term for him? Marcuse pointedly stressed that "'Nazis' and 'Nazism' (not National Socialism) still seem to be the most adequate symbols. They contain in their very sound and structure something of that barbaric hate and horror that characterize both references. Moreover, they are free from the national and socialist illusions which their unabridged form still might convey" (1998, 180). Marcuse also regretted that this useful loaded term was still confined to the German regime only. To correct the situation, he suggested that American radio and print propaganda not only mainstream the expression *Nazi* but also apply it to fascist Italy and Vichy France. As if following his own advice, in his texts written after 1942 he switched from *National Socialism* to *Nazi*. With regard to Japan, as Marcuse remarked in passing, the popular expression *Japs* would work just fine for propaganda purposes, and no change was needed (1998, 180–81).

My suspicion is that, in addition to serving as a convenient way to get around Hitler's socialism, the abbreviation *Nazi* was attractive to people such as Marcuse because of its local German etymological links. People in Bavaria (southern Germany) traditionally applied this particular word (sometimes also spelled "Naczi") as a derogatory nickname for backward, clumsy, and awkward peasants. A closely related link was that *Nazi* was traceable to the popular Bavarian and Catholic Austrian name "Ignatius" (Mautner 1944, 94–95). However, "Nazis" were not what in English we usually call "rednecks." Bavarian "Nazi" peasants were not viewed as dumb country bumpkins. On the contrary, in a popular imagination they were expected to behave as mischievous tricksters, taking advantage of their stereotype as unpolished peasants to manipulate people. The first references to the National Socialists as "Nazis" were recorded in Bavaria somewhere in the early 1920s. Obviously, and I am speculating here, those who were the first to use it in reference to the National Socialists implied that Hitler's associates catered in a cunning manner to the low-level populist instincts of street crowds, which was certainly the case.

So, for all practical purposes, in British and American settings, the term *Nazi* became very useful. It was an emotionally and morally loaded abbreviation that was also conveniently short for an English-speaking ear. It did well the job of sweeping under the rug Hitler's socialist policies, and it did not cast a dark shadow on the Soviet socialist ally. Ironically, in his later book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse provided a brilliant analysis of the undercurrent meaning of such word-abbreviation games, although he never applied his analysis to his own and his colleagues' promotion of the shortened term *Nazi*. Instead, he deciphered the hidden meaning of such abbreviations as NATO, UN, and USSR. Marcuse correctly noted that in the case of NATO, UN, and USSR, one dealt with what he called the "cunning of reason," when an abridgement helps repress undesired questions. For example, he stressed that the abbreviation NATO hid the fact that the treaty itself was concluded by nations from the northern Atlantic area. If unabbreviated, stressed

Marcuse, the name might make people wonder what Turkey and Greece were doing in this organization (1964, 94–95). Using a similar logic, one can deduce the same “cunning of reason” in the use of the abbreviated term *Nazi*. Following Marcuse, one can say that, if unabbreviated, the term *National Socialism* might make people wonder what “socialism” is doing in this expression.

George Orwell once remarked that ideologically driven usage did reflect existing social reality. Nevertheless, he was convinced that various silly but politically charged words and expressions might disappear not through evolutionary process but by the conscious action of a determined minority (1968, 137–38). It appears that Orwell was too optimistic. First, the term *Nazi* has firmly established itself in a general English usage as a metaphor for an ultimate evil, and I am sure it will stay there. Second, English-language mainstream publishers still dance around Hitler’s socialism, following their gut feeling of what is politically correct and acceptable for their audiences. A single example will demonstrate what I mean here.

The book in question is *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Hitler people’s regime: Plunder, racial war, and National Socialism) by Götz Aly (2005), a prominent German historian. Its title was translated for American audiences as *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (Aly 2007b). Apparently to spare the sensibilities of left-liberal audiences, the American publisher completely changed the main title and the word *socialism* in the subtitle. However, it simultaneously injected the word *welfare* to intrigue those Americans who might not like the phenomenon that stands behind this word. Verso, the largest English-language leftist publisher, also released a British edition of the book (Aly 2007a) and further sanitized the title as *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: How the Nazis Bought the German People*. Not only has the term *socialism* disappeared here, but also the word *welfare*, which, one may speculate, remains so dear to Verso’s editors and readers. So I think we might still need to perform a great deal of intellectual exorcism if we want to say good-bye to the term *Nazis* and begin calling them what they were in reality—“National Socialists.”

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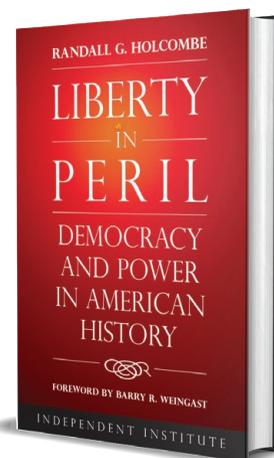
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