

Adolf Hitler: How Could a Monster Succeed in Blinding a Nation?

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*“What good fortune for those in power that people do not think.” –
Adolf Hitler, as quoted by Joachim Fest*

Is it still possible in today's Germany to escape the realization that without the mistreatment of children, without a form of child-rearing based on violence to inculcate blind obedience, there would not have been a Hitler and his followers? And thus not millions of murdered victims either? Probably every thinking person in the post-war period has wondered at some time or other how it could have happened that a human being devised a gigantic machinery of death and found millions of helpers to set it in motion.

Yet the monster Adolf Hitler, murderer of millions, master of destruction and organized insanity, did not come into the world as a monster. He was not sent to earth by the devil, as some people think, nor was he sent by heaven to “bring order” to Germany, to give the country the autobahn and rescue it from its economic crisis, as many others still believe. Neither was he born with “destructive drives”, because there are no such things. Our biological mission is to preserve life, not to destroy it. Human destructiveness is never inborn, and inherited traits are neither good nor evil. How they develop depends on one's character, which is formed in the course of one's life, and the nature of which depends, in turn, on the experiences one has, above all, in childhood and adolescence, and on the decisions one makes as an adult.

Like every other child, Hitler was born innocent, only to be raised, as were many children at the time, in a destructive fashion by his parents and later to make himself into a monster. He was the survivor of a machinery of annihilation that in turn-of-the-century Germany was called “child-rearing” and that I call “the concealed concentration camp of childhood,” which is never allowed to be recognized for what it is.

I have described in detail how he made this concealed horror manifest in his Third Reich in my book *For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983) and in my other books, for example, *Banished Knowledge* and *The Untouched Key* (both published by Doubleday). There the reader will also find a detailed line of reasoning to support everything which, for reasons of space, I can only allude to here in a very abridged way.

In order not to die, all mistreated children must totally repress the mistreatment, deprivation, and bewilderment they have undergone because otherwise the child's organism wouldn't be able to cope with the magnitude of the pain suffered. Only as adults do they have other possibilities for dealing with their feelings. If they don't make use of these possibilities, then what was once the life-saving function of repression can be transformed into a dangerous destructive, and self-destructive force. In the careers of despots such as Hitler and Stalin, their suppressed fantasies of revenge can lead to indescribable atrocities. This phenomenon doesn't exist anywhere in the entire animal kingdom, for no animal is trained by its parents to deny its nature completely in order to become a "well-behaved" animal - only human beings act in such a destructive way. According to the reports of Nazi criminals (and also of soldiers who volunteered to fight in Vietnam), their unconscious programming to be violent began in every case with a brutal upbringing that demanded absolute obedience and expressed total contempt for the child. I know of no example of this which is so well-documented and which demonstrates so clearly the consequences of the psychological murder of children - bringing along with it a form of collective blindness - than the fateful success of Adolf Hitler.

The Fuhrer once told his secretary that during one of the regular beatings given him by his father he was able to stop crying, to feel nothing, and even to count the thirty-two blows he received.

In this way, by totally denying his pain, his feelings of powerlessness, and his despair- in other words, by denying the truth - Hitler made himself into a master of violence and of contempt for human beings. The result was a very primitive person, incapable of any empathy for other people. He was mercilessly and constantly driven to new destructive acts by his latent feelings of hatred and revenge. After millions had been forced to die for this reason, those feelings still haunted him in his sleep. Hermann Rauschning reports nocturnal paroxysms of screaming on the Fuhrer's part, along with "inexplicable counting", which I trace back to the counting he did during the beatings of his childhood. Hitler did not invent fascism; he found it, like so many of his contemporaries) prefigured in the totalitarian regime of his family. The National Socialist version of fascism, however, does bear unmistakable traces of Hitler's childhood. But his early experience was by no means an exception. Thus, neither Gerhart Hauptmann nor Martin Heidegger nor many other celebrated intellectuals of the day were able to see through Hitler's madness. To do so, they would have had to be able to see through the madness of their own upbringing.

Hitler could make Europe and the world into the battlefield of his childhood because in the Germany of that time there were millions of people who had experienced the same kind of upbringing he had. Although not necessarily conscious of the fact, they took the following principles to be self-evident:

1. Not life but order and obedience are the highest values.

2. Only by means of violence can order be created and preserved.
3. Creativity (embodied in the child) represents a danger for the adult and must be destroyed.
4. Obeying one's father absolutely is the highest law.
5. Disobedience and criticism are unthinkable because they are punished with beatings or the threat of death.
6. The living, vital child must be turned as early as possible into an obedient robot, a slave.
7. Undesirable feelings and real needs must therefore be suppressed as vigorously as possible.
8. Mothers must never protect their children from punishment by the father but after each incidence of torture must preach to them to honor and love their parents.

Fortunately, there were persons now and again with whom a child could find refuge from this totalitarian regime, and perhaps even experience love, respect, and protection. On the basis of these good experiences, even simply on the basis of the comparison they provided, a child could at least pass inward judgment on the cruelty endured and not want to inflict it in turn later on. But when there were no witnesses to come to the rescue, the child had no choice in this bizarre scenario but to stifle every natural reflex such as anger or even laughter, and to practice absolute obedience daily in order to keep the father's menacing behavior within bearable limits. It was this kind of early character training that Hitler was later able to exploit. In strict accordance with this system of child-rearing he then developed his Nazi ideology, which had the following practical consequences:

1. The will of the Fuhrer is the highest law.
2. The Fuhrer will forcibly create order and make Germany into the paradise of the Aryans, the master race.
3. Those who submit like robots to his orders will be rewarded.
4. Whoever dares to offer criticism will be sent to a concentration camp.
5. Jews and gypsies must be annihilated - men, women and children.
6. The disabled and mentally ill are likewise to be put to death.
7. Poles and Russians are fit to become useful slaves.
8. Free art is dangerous and "degenerate"; like every other form of free creativity, it must be persecuted.

Without the numerous documentary films that attest to the frenzied acclaim Hitler received, no one today would believe that a madman with this ideology of contempt for human beings could generate so much enthusiasm. How was it at all possible that Hitler found such an immense number of followers? By promising his people a solution to all their problems and by offering them a scapegoat? Certainly. But that alone would not have been enough. In order to use untold numbers of people as marionettes, he had to make his

promises in the style of the domineering, violent father most of his followers knew, feared, and admired.

From the history of human sacrifice – from cannibalism to the Aztecs – we can learn how some religions have sanctified such acts in order to exonerate parents' crimes against their children. Whoever reads this history with open eyes is struck again and again by the same pattern: "If I do to others what was once done to me, then I don't need to feel all the pain I would otherwise have to experience. If I put everything in ideological or religious packaging and repeat all the lies those around me have been taught to believe, I will have many followers. If, in addition, I – like Hitler – make use of my acting talent and imitate the manner of the threatening father whom almost everyone once believed blindly and absolutely and whom everyone feared, then I'll be able to find countless helpers for every conceivable crime – all the more easily, the more absurd the crime."

The famous Milgram experiment, in which participants complied with instructions given by an authority figure to administer electric shocks of increasing intensity to other participants, has proved this very convincingly. For many adults, formerly obedient children, are just waiting for a legal form of discharge of the rage they pent up decades earlier. In the mistreatment of their own children, known as "child-rearing," or in wars and genocide, society offers them this discharge and the culturally specific label to go with it.

What point is there for us today in learning about Hitler and his history? For me, the main point is this: our knowledge will serve as a warning against our blindness and encourage us to give it up once and for all and to struggle against collective repression. This is what I do consistently in all my books in order to help people understand the psychodynamics of the mistreatment of children and its immeasurable danger for society, as demonstrated by Hitler's case. My explanations are by no means intended to suggest pity for a man as merciless as Hitler.

It was in large part owing to Hitler and his history that I became aware of the *dangers of our traditional morality*. We are exhorted to honor our parents and never question them no matter what they have done. Yet when I realize that millions of human beings had to die so that Adolf Hitler could keep his repression of childhood trauma intact, that millions were subjected to humiliation in concentration camps so that he never had to recognize how he had once been humiliated, then I believe that one can't point out these connections often enough in order to shed light on this unconscious production of evil. How should young people be expected to recognize and reject inhumanity and crime if these continue to be disguised instead of being pointed out as plainly as possible? Only when young people are *permitted* to know *exactly* what happened and how it could happen, only if they don't allow anything to stifle their curiosity and are not afraid of the truth, can they free themselves from the burden placed upon them by their forebears' blindness.

If Hitler's name is no longer taboo in Germany, then these findings will also be able to bring new knowledge to light and create a new stimulus to understanding. The greatest obstacle in this regard is to deny the mistreatment one suffered as a child and to defend oneself against it at the expense of others: of children, of subordinates of partners, or of voters. As recently as 1997, more than half of the parents in West Germany were in favor of corporal punishment as a means of bringing up children – in spite of the many years of effort on the part of the Child Protection League to enlighten the public. Where does this persistent lack of awareness stem from? Why don't these parents know that physical or – as the case may be – psychological punishment constitutes degradation and mistreatment of children and always, sooner or later, has destructive consequences, whether visible or concealed? Why don't they know that with their demonstrably false claim that striking children is absolutely necessary and completely harmless they are affirming, preserving, and perpetuating a destructive tradition?

They don't know this because they are familiar from their own experience *only* with *this* form of child-rearing and had to learn at an early age to regard it as normal and harmless. In their eyes, violent methods are the only effective corrective for a child's behavior. For this reason, they construct complicated theories to explain Nazi Germany's murder of millions. That seems easier to them than to experience the pain and degradation they once felt at being beaten as children even though this could unlock the door to awareness, an awareness that would protect their children from mistreatment and themselves from their blindness as parents and voters. If they are in government, then their awareness would perhaps also save entire nations from wars and other senseless sacrifices. Countless human beings have already been killed in wars whose instigators didn't want to realize they were carrying dynamite which they were constantly trying to get rid of at the expense of other people in order to take revenge for old, highly personal wounds. Faced with even the merest possibility of a nuclear war, we must not allow ourselves to ignore this knowledge any longer. And yet we do just that: innumerable experts and officials occupy themselves daily and hourly with the consequences of child abuse without being able to know and see these consequences for what they are.

Even the most macabre childhood doesn't exonerate a criminal from the guilt that consists in his destruction of life. As an adult he has the opportunity of confronting his childhood, of not denying the horror he endured then, of experiencing the hatred that was repressed and understanding its justification. Hatred *experienced consciously* is only a feeling, and feelings don't kill. But destructive actions blindly directed at ersatz objects are *deeds* which can cost human beings their lives and for which the perpetrator must bear the blame.

Perhaps our grandchildren will be able to say; "What good fortune that we weren't beaten like our grandparents and now are able to see things much more clearly than they did. If being beaten in childhood had been harmless, they wouldn't have been blind to Hitler's

contempt for human beings; they would have seen through it *immediately* and rejected it, as our children do when confronted with acts of cruelty. Children who are permitted to defend themselves don't become destructive. It is evident that destructiveness is not the inevitable fate of humankind, for the loving treatment of children could banish it from the world. The "destructive drive" slumbers in children who were once mistreated and who later don't want to know what happened to them in their past. We ourselves have no need to strike our defenseless children; we can't even imagine doing that, even when we're tired and have no patience for their questions. After all, there are so many other ways to treat children that are truly productive, respectful, and not destructive.

It is just as impossible for us to imagine having been fascinated by a Hitler. People who were treated with respect as children, who weren't drilled to become robots with the aid of mistreatment, will never want to die out of "faithfulness to the Fuhrer" or send thousands of human beings to Stalingrad against all reason just because some madman planned it. But Hitler's generals stood at attention in the Fuhrer's headquarters, and all counter-arguments dissolved into fear and mental paralysis or, on the other hand, into enthusiasm when they heard *him* (the father) speak. This disastrous political blindness that cost millions of people their lives proves conclusively what our grandparents so hotly denied: that in *every* case, physical as well as psychological abuse of the child is not only harmful but highly dangerous. Not only for the individual but under certain circumstances for whole nations.

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