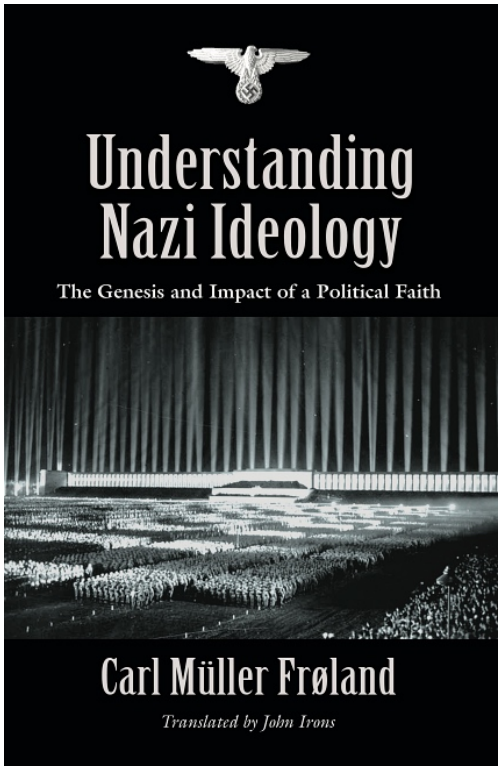

The book deals with the historical roots of Nazi ideology, its basic features, and its political and military impact in the Third Reich.

Understanding Nazi Ideology:
The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith - Revised English Edition
By Carl Müller Frøland

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Understanding Nazi Ideology

The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith

Carl Müller Frøland

Translated by John Irons

"One of the most important books this fall [2017] shows how central ideas from the intellectual history of Europe were converted into an aggressive philosophy of murder. ... The history teacher and the politician who does not read this book commits negligence in service..." (6 out of 6 stars)

- Bernt Hagtvet, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Oslo, Professor in International Studies at Bjørknes University College, and former Visiting Professor, European Studies Council, Yale Macmillan Center

"A unique account of Nazism from the perspective of the Nazis themselves—a monstrous project through the monster's eyes. ... In our time of political divisions and the strengthening of extremism on both sides of the socio-political spectrum, this book is more topical than ever"

- Croatian Literary Translators' Association (Društvo hrvatskih književnih prevodilaca)

"It is a valuable addition to the historiography of Nazi Germany, one that nicely bridges the gap between Nazism as an ideology and Nazism in practice and as policy. ... Recommended."

– *Choice*

" ... a tidiness to the exposition that makespar the book easy in which to orientate oneself ... compared to many other books on the same subject, easy to read ... Total obedience, blind fanaticism and the faith in the Führer's word as law, that becomes the ingredients in this late Nazism, with the gradual reversal of martial fortune during 1942, and the Nazis' grim recognition of final downfall. The goal of many convinced Nazis is then not to save the remnants, but to go down with flying colours - and to do as much harm as possible in the meantime. This reversal is vividly described by Frøland, and in his exposition we can also glimpse how the Nazis' worldview entered a more self-destructive phase as the realities of the war became more evident for ever more people. ... Undoubtedly, this debut book is a masterpiece in more than one sense, and will stand for a long time as a text which is hard to ignore. ... uncompromisingly ambitious ... When Frøland brings us into the Nazis' world of thought, he makes it easier to understand why this ideology could fascinate. Thus

it also becomes easier to see why people in our own time as well are attracted to extreme political ideas."

- Dag Einar Thorsen, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of South-Eastern Norway

"Frøland is a Norwegian, young, he wrote a book about an ideology that is probably the most elaborated topic in world literature, but he did it in a completely innovative way.... The book is a history of ideas and practices that have turned the system of thought into vicious politics. Frøland shows how it is possible for ideology to seduce large masses of educated and disciplined people, and how such people accepted the idea that the solution is to annihilate large groups of people. It is precisely this relativization of evil that makes this book so topical; hardly anything more important can be found at this moment."

- Tvrtko Jakovina, Professor of History at the University of Zagreb, lecturer at the Diplomatic Academy in Zagreb and guest lecturer at the Istituto per l'Europa centro-orientale e balcanica, University of Bologna

"Carl Müller Frøland effectively dissects the ideology of Hitler's brand of national socialism, linking it backward to its philosophical roots in German Romanticism, as well as forward to its implementation and practice by the Third Reich once established in 1933.... a challenging yet stimulating examination that clarifies the meaning of Nazism given its historical context.... Understanding Nazi Ideology is recommended for specialists and would be ideal as a graduate-level text.... effectively providing new insight and conceptual ways of thinking about Nazism and its place in twentieth-century political thought. For those interested in an objective, unbiased view of the historical roots of Nazism, the author has provided a valuable service."

- Military Review

"It is with excitement I have read Carl Müller Frøland's book. ... I am excited because it is so liberating to see a young academic embark on a project of such scope--and succeed with it. ... I am excited because the book touches upon important questions of how we can understand Nazism and the Third Reich. ... great lucidity ... impressive to read how with such seeming ease he treats the great span in his book, and how he

manages to concretize and synthesize his observations. ... Frøland writes well about the normalization of the extreme attitudes and actions in the SS organization, primarily in the Waffen-SS."

- Anders G. Kjøstvedt, Associate Professor, PhD in History, Faculty of Education and International Studies at Oslo Metropolitan College

"An excellent confirmation of how eternal, inexhaustible, always provocative and controversial this topic is, and how, within a given framework, thoughtful, persistent, critical research work can offer the interested public 'new keys' to understanding and questioning ideas and content. which even today in many ways burden modern man and his world.... brilliant.... masterfully maneuvering through extensive literature and hitherto lesser-known theoretical paths.... major guide for understanding a dark epoch, which speaks not only of what was, but also of what can easily be repeated"

- *Novi list* (Croatia)

"It is an impressive intellectual work that the author has accomplished."

- Clio - historiska boknyheter (Sweden)

"Despite the popularity of studying Nazi Germany ... there are few examples of this sort of analysis. ... a whistle-stop tour of the great, and not-so-great, philosophers and thinkers ... carefully dissecting their ideas before weaving the relevant strands together to show how Nazi ideology was formed. The beauty of this approach is that it is comprehensive and coherent, allowing the reader to understand the genesis of Nazi ideology as a whole ...an excellent description of the roots of Nazi ideology ... Coming from a history of ideas rather than a history of Nazism perspective, Understanding Nazi Ideology gives a fresh and valuable point of view ... important ...His [Frøland's] synthesis of the ideas that formed Nazism, of the events that made Nazism adapt, and of the people who led the movement, is detailed and convincing, turning the contradictory elements of the ideology into a coherent set of quasi-religious beliefs. ... he really has helped the reader - be they members

of the general public or of academia - better understand the essence of Nazi ideology."

- *Get History*

"'Nazismens idéunivers' ... made me understand that Nazism is much more deeply rooted in German political and cultural history than what historians usually have attributed to it"

- Erik Thomassen, historian and former Department Manager Analysis, The Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection

"a highly readable, important, and timely contribution to our understanding of Nazi ideology"

- Thomas Klikauer, Senior Lecturer, PhD, in Human Resources & Management at Western Sydney University, *The European Legacy*

"Many readers have a good idea of how Nazi Germany's foreign policy led to the Second World War, and many also have an idea of the racial thought that lay behind the Holocaust. However, this book by the Norwegian intellectual historian Carl Müller Frøland should cover another knowledge gap, namely those thoughts and that worldview that lay like a web beneath the political conceptions. ... Those who have an academic interest in National Socialism should appreciate the book ... as it shows the emergence of the ideology."

- Linus Björk, *BJT-häfte* nr 22, 2020 (Sweden)

"This is ultimately a book that allows for those who are interested in a myriad of different schools of thought to view how culture, philosophy, history, and memory all combined in order to create an ideology that still remains sadly relevant, at risk of becoming entrenched and idealised once again. I wholly recommend this as a textbook better to understand how such ideologies can be created, and also as a good example of how the past can affect the future in myriad ways."

- Raymond Radford, PhD candidate in Religious Studies, *Journal of Religious History*

"We have tended to think that Nazism is just barbarism, brutality and idiocy. Therefore, we have not looked at the ideology that carried it forth. Besides, we talk about Nazism as if we know what it means. What

does it mean when we say about someone that they were a Nazi? What did Nazism look like? What roots did it originate from? ... Frøland gives a valuable contribution"

- Terje Emberland, Senior Researcher at The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, PhD in Religious Studies

"a useful compilation of Nazi ideology"

- Politics, Religion & Ideology

"monumental work on the ideational emergence and political practice of Nazism"

- Hans Lödén, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Karlstad University, *Värmlands Folkblad* (Sweden)

"an important study that seems particularly suitable (e.g., for students) as introductory reading, but also for everyone as accompanying reading for the scholarly work with Nazi ideology"

- *Jahrbuch Politisches Denken* (Germany)

"recommended to those who wish to unravel all threads that run together in the Nazi fabric"

- Benny Carlson, Professor Emeritus of Economic History at the Lund University School of Economics and Management, *Axess* (Sweden)

"The last quarter of a century has witnessed an avalanche of studies on Nazi Germany ... The last three years alone have seen the publication of several major works such as Volker Ullrich's two-volume biography, Hitler: Ascent (2017) and Hitler: Downfall (2020); Thomas Childers's The Third Reich: A History (2017); Johann Chapoutot's The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi (2018); Peter Longerich's Hitler: A Life (2019) and Carl Müller Frøland's Understanding Nazi Ideology: The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith (2020)."

- Michael Evans, General Sir Francis Hassett Chair of Military Studies at the Australian Defence College in Canberra and Professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Deakin University, *Quadrant Magazine*

"For those who are new to the subject, Frøland's book can serve as an introduction to parts of the Nazi ideology ... The review of all kinds of theoretical approaches to Nazism has in addition a certain encyclopedic quality ... The theoretical breadth and the author's wide reading are one of the book's strengths ... Mostly Frøland writes elegantly and pedagogically"

- Olof Bortz, Postdoctoral Fellow in History, *Respons* (Sweden)

"There is a plethora of different approaches to explain the rise of the Nazi Party and the support it gained in the German population for its politics of hate and war. ... Carl Müller Frøland offers a novel way of looking at the emergence of the ideology which fueled these developments. ... Frøland's book provides a fascinating insight into the development of the ideas that led to one of the deadliest political ideologies in human history. ... he manages to present this deep history of the "political faith" of Nazi Germany in a convincing and substantial way. ... Frøland's book may provide a good starting point to delve deeper into the boundary area of politics, religion, and ideology."

- Matthias Eder, doctoral student at Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich, *Reading Religion*

"Frøland's work will benefit anyone beginning to study German intellectual history or who is interested in an overview of the intellectual origins of the Third Reich. Indeed, the author impressively engages major historiographical debates with useful brevity."

- Kacie Harris, PhD Candidate in Intellectual History, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*

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Introduction

Just over 70 years ago, Nazi Germany lost one of the bloodiest wars the world had seen until then. This was not only a military and political defeat, a collapse of its military strength and governmental system. It also marked the collapse of the ideological basis of the Nazi state. Nevertheless, not all aspects of German Nazism lost their hold in 1945.

The Topicality of Nazism

In 2011, German police uncovered the terror organization NSU – *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* (National-Socialist Underground). During the 2000-2007 period, its three members had killed ten people. Apart from a German policewoman, all the murder victims came from an immigrant background. The two male members of NSU committed suicide before the police could arrest them. Beate Zschäpe was the only surviving terrorist and she was put on trial, accused of ten murders and two bomb attacks as well as 15 assaults and robberies.

Zschäpe was a self-confessed "National-Socialist". One of the terms used to describe NSU in the German and international press was "neo-Nazi" – this meant that the killing of immigrants was linked to *neo-Nazism*, a much discussed political phenomenon in post-war Europe. To many people, the murders were an ominous sign that the threat coming from neo-Nazism in Germany had been highly underestimated by the authorities.

That which is regarded as neo-Nazism is normally linked to the more umbrella concept of *far-right extremism*. A somewhat different variant of this was put on the agenda in Norway in 2011, after Anders Behring Breivik's mass murder on 22 July of what he considered to be political enemies, something that cost a total of 77 lives and had various other serious consequences. In the wake of this mass violence,

there was a protracted debate in Norwegian society concerning what can have motivated the perpetrator to carry out such atrocities.

A great many people felt that Breivik acted on the basis of a clear ideological conviction, a "far-right extremist" one. Others claimed that it was a form of "neo-fascism", i.e. a variant of historical *fascism*. Such views many people felt were confirmed by the trial against the mass-murderer in spring 2012. Breivik defended the NSU killings as a necessary part of the struggle against what he regarded as an invasion of foreign culture resulting from mass immigration. He further expressed various views – including such ideas as an original people, an "Urvolk", and a Nordic "race" – which researchers connected to "neo-Nazism" or classical Nazism.

As Breivik openly admitted, he employed *terror* as a means to an end: His use of violence was intended to instill a deep-felt dread in his political opponents. NSU has also had a terrorist objective with their murders – to scare immigrants away from Germany. Since the turn of the millennium, all of Europe and the world in general have been subject to repeated acts of political terror. Much of this has been carried out by "Jihadists", supporters of "holy war" (*Jihad*) against the assumed enemies of Islam. The Jihadists represent a variant of so-called *Islamism*, also known as "political Islam", that legitimizes violence. Islamism is a political-religious ideology that advocates a theocracy governed according to so-called Sharia laws which as perceived as the expression of a true Islam.

On the Jihadist scene, ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in particular has made its mark since 2014, an organization that has been behind a series of terrorist attacks in Europe and other parts of the world. ISIL arose in the Middle East, and it is especially there that it can committed mass killings – it has, for example, attempted to cleanse religious minorities out of ISIL-controlled areas, as is attested by the find of a number of mass graves.

In large areas of Iraq and Syria that had been devastated by civil war, ISIL established what it called "Islamic State". In this state-like structure which fell in early 2019, the lives of the citizens were regulated according to strict Sharia laws. Islamic State had the nature of a *dictatorship*, a state (or structure resembling a state) where power

was, so to speak, totally centralized in the political leadership, and where its citizens had the leaders' ideological conviction forced upon them and were thus deprived of their basic human rights.

ISIL's ideology, in terms of its conceptual history, can be traced back to the interwar period. In 1928, the Egyptian teacher Hassan al-Banna in Cairo founded what is considered to be the world's first Islamistic organization: The Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Banna and other "Muslim brothers" enthusiastically greeted Nazism in Germany. Like the Nazis, the Islamists were highly anti-Jewish, they justified political violence and paid tribute to Hitler as a great leader. Because of the Nazis' anti-Jewish policy, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who had close ties with al-Banna and the Brotherhood, entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany; during most of the Second World War he lived in Berlin, where he transmitted radio broadcasts with antisemitic propaganda to the Arab world.[1]

These contemporary examples of right-wing extremism and Islamism show the topicality of a historical phenomenon such as Nazism. NSU, Breivik and ISIL display a number of ideological elements that are generally perceived as being typical of Nazi ideology: racism and/or antisemitism as well as ultranationalism in the case of the right-wing extremists – and regarding both them and the Islamists (who are also hostile to Jews), extreme collectivism in general and justification of dictatorship and of political violence. Most of these elements are frequently linked to *fascism* – an ideology of which Nazism is often considered to be a specific German variant. In the collective consciousness, Nazism is of course also linked to *war*.

During the Second World War, a number of European countries were in close contact with Nazism via German occupation. In a large part of the post-war period, both scientific analyses and popular presentations of Nazism have placed crucial emphasis on antisemitism. When it comes to the linking of Nazism and antisemitism, one ought first and foremost emphasize that it is a historical phenomenon: the Nazi attempt to eradicate all Jews in Europe via an industrially implemented genocide – that which has become known as the *Holocaust*. Several other population groups,

such as the Romani and Russians, were also decimated by the systematic eradication activities of the Nazis. Approximately six million of this ethnic minority were killed.

The Holocaust as a Mental Barrier

The American general Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, wrote in spring 1945 to General George C. Marshall: "The things I saw cannot be described in words [...] The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick." General George S. Patton, who was also present, stated that this was "one of the most horrendous things I have ever seen".[2]

The two American generals were so strongly affected by a visit paid to the newly liberated Ohrdruf, a Nazi concentration and labor camp that was part of the large Buchenwald camp. The liberation of the concentration camps was an unforgettably appalling experience for Eisenhower and the other allies who took part in it. What confronted the allies was highly emaciated, partially skeletal figures – some of them hardly capable of walking, others crawling along the ground. The sight of huge heaps of corpses confronted the soldiers and officers. Unsuspecting, the Americans came to see the consequences of a genocide the dimensions of which no one had possibly been able to imagine. The Holocaust – which the Nazi genocide came to be known as – became a watershed in world history.

In the collective consciousness, Nazism has become inextricably linked to this genocide. The Holocaust has remained a *historically unique* event: Neither before nor after has such a bureaucratically planned and coordinated mass-killing taken place, nor been industrially carried out on people on the basis of particular group characteristics. With its systematic policy of annihilation, Nazism and Nazi Germany have been associated in post-war Europe with boundless brutality and incomprehensible cruelty. For many people, Nazism has been lifted up to an almost ahistorical, mythical level –

this historical phenomenon has almost become synonymous with absolute evil.

More than perhaps any other historical phenomenon, Nazism in modern Western culture has been subject to various *taboos* – strong, almost religious "bans" against talking about the theme in particular ways. It is, so to speak, taboo to treat what are possibly "positive" aspects of Nazism, characteristics of the ideology that appear to be of positive value or attractive. This also applies to the question of the extent to which the attitudes or actions of Nazis can in any way be defended or accepted; in extension of this, it is also extremely difficult to advance the idea that Nazi Germany was perhaps not morally inferior in all respects in the Second World War.

In the collective consciousness, Nazism is placed in its own mental zone, a dark area enclosed within a mental electric fence. Like other tabooed phenomena, Nazism is met with a fear of contact – this is a predominant tendency. Anyone wishing to talk about this historical phenomenon must do so in the "correct" way, within morally predetermined frameworks. If a historian should happened to move even slightly outside these frameworks, that person must immediately distance himself or herself from Nazism, preferably by making use of negatively loaded characteristics and even pure invective. Such distancing would seem to originate from a form of moral fear. Historians wish to show the flag of their own impeccable morality to others, or feel the need to carry out a kind of ritual purification after having been in contact with something "impure". Nazism as a subject of study is equipped with the triangular warning sign "Danger! High Voltage!" – something that if touched will give an electric shock of many thousand volts.

The Historicizing of Nazism

On 1 January, Adolf Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf* was published for the first time in Germany since 1945, when the rights to the book held by the German Land of Bavaria expired after 70 years. The German authorities decided that the book should be published in an

scholarly commented edition, and printing any other version of the book was forbidden. In both Germany and other European countries there was also intense discussion as to whether the book ought to be published at all. A number of countries wished Hitler's work to be banned. This view was defended by referring to the alleged dangerous nature of *hate speech*: it could result in antisemitism and general racial hatred, neo-Nazism and far-right extremism.

It is undeniable that Nazism arouses extremely strong emotions in many people. This partly has to do with loathing and fury – partly with *fear*. Those who support banning *Mein Kampf* also used the argument that a new edition of the book would be an insult to the victims of the Holocaust and offend the feelings of those who survived. As has just been pointed out, the Holocaust would seem to be the most important reason why Nazism is hedged in by taboos. It functions as a mental barrier for a thorough *historicization* of Nazism, i.e. the attempt to place the ideology in its concrete historical context in order to understand it within the premises of its own period.

The maintaining of the taboos is hard to reconcile with free research, discussion and reflection. So it is not easy to approach Nazism in a sober, unprejudiced way, as one can as a historian with relation to other phenomena of the past. If one wishes to understand why the Nazis acted in the way they did, one must study their motives and thus their mentality also – the life of their thoughts and emotions. In doing so, one naturally ought to strive to adopt a value-neutral and historicizing attitude to the material. One ought to try to understand Nazism without judging it on the basis of its own value-related position – ideologically, ethically or, in a wider sense, in terms of its view of life, and by "view of life" is meant an overall conception of reality, including a particular view of humanity and values to which one associates oneself and in which one engages oneself personally.

How ought the thinking and mentality of the past be understood in general? What kind of perspective ought one adopt regarding the life of thought and emotions in earlier eras? As I see it, the writing of history cannot be approached in a value-free and thus fruitful way if it mixes two different approaches. One consists in the perspective of

a *participant*, which means that a historical phenomenon is studied *from the inside*, i.e. the own premises of the historical participants. The other approach can be called the perspective of an *observer*, and this means that a historical phenomenon is studied *from the outside*, with concepts that the historical participants themselves did not accept or were aware of. What do these two approaches involve when it is Nazism that is to be studied?

The historicizing of Nazism as an ideology or mentality presupposes a from-the-inside perspective: The conception of reality and self understanding of the historical participants – the Nazis – ought to be studied on its own premises, completely independently of the values, attitudes and ideas of the historical observer. Nazism as a phenomenon ought to be described as exactly as possible. The historical observer ought to strive to carry out a "verbal photography" of the inner life of the Nazis, i.e. the driving force or driving forces behind their thoughts and emotions. The Nazis' own way of thinking and their conception of the world must, in other words, be treated with an "open mind" – the person writing history must try to switch off his or her own value judgments in order to be able to attain a (more or less) impartial understanding of this historical phenomenon. The Nazis thought, felt and acted in a quite particular way, and all of these aspects ought to be described as precisely, soberly and dispassionately as possible.

A treatment of Nazism in terms of the history of ideas, however, also calls for a from-the-outside perspective: to a certain extent, Nazism must be dealt with using concepts that would have been unacceptable or perhaps nothing less than incomprehensible to adherents of the ideology. The historical observer may find it nature to describe or explain the phenomenon that is to be observed in a way that would have challenged the self-understanding of the historical participants. In the history of ideas, for example, the dividing into "eras" and classification of "conceptual tendencies" or trends of thought play a central role: Such overall techniques are linked to what I call an observer perspective.

If, for example, one claims that the development of Nazi ideology was influenced by a Jewish thinker, one will come up against

the pronounced antisemitic attitude of the Nazis. One might perhaps also find it natural to place Nazism in a category that its supporters would have protested against, as when one seeks to demonstrate similarities with ideologies that the Nazis were hostile towards.

To the extent that the "external" concepts one makes use of in one's analysis do not constitute any value judgment of the historical phenomenon, it is fully defensible to adopt an observer perspective – at times it is actually completely necessary in order to be able to carry out a reasonably precise analysis.

Similarly to the participant or from-the-inside perspective, then, the from-the-outside perspective is important in order to understand a historical phenomenon as fully as possible. When dealing with something like Nazism, a history-of-ideas approach must of course be combined with one that is traditionally historical.

In 1985, the German historian Martin Broszat wrote an article that created quite a stir, since he advocated "normalizing" Nazi Germany. By this he meant that the Nazi era ought to be treated in the same way, using the same historical analytical methods applied to any other period. Nazi Germany must no longer to considered a historical "anomaly", an inexplicable break with an otherwise "normal" development, but be treated as an integral part of German history.

Broszat attacked what he regarded as a predominantly moralizing treatment of the Nazi era and called for a more objectively balanced approach. He wanted to bring out the "normal" aspects of Nazi society, those which displayed a continuity with characteristics of pre-Nazi societies. Broszat claimed that historians in their treatment of Nazi Germany had one-sidedly emphasized the Holocaust and the criminal aspect of the regime.

In 1987, Broszat received a reply from another historian, Saul Friedländer, an expert on the Holocaust and Nazist antisemitism. Friedländer strongly warned against "normalizing" Nazi Germany, particularly that the Holocaust ought no longer to play a key role in every historical treatment of Nazi Germany. He felt that Broszat's desired approach could all too easily lead to a "relativization" or "bagatellization" of the atrocities of the Nazi regime. He asserted that

it was precisely the criminal, violent, genocidal aspect that constituted the true nature of Nazi Germany. The Nazi era could not be treated in the same way as other parts of history, for the Holocaust was a unique event in world history and ultimately completely unfathomable.

Running parallel with the exchange of views between Broszat and Friedländer was what has become known as the "controversy of the historians" (*der Historikerstreit*)[3]. This large-scale debate, which took place in the public media in Western Germany over several years and involved a number of prominent historians and philosophers, centered round precisely this question: Can and should Nazism be historicized?

Another important issue that was often raised was the sight of the "singularity" (*Singularität*) of the Holocaust: Does this genocide have a unique, distinctive nature or can it advantageously be compared with other genocides? Some people argued that the Nazi genocide was not different in kind from other mass-killings carried out in Communist regimes in the same century, such as in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin from the same period and the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia in the 1970s. Others claimed that any comparison between the Holocaust and some other genocide (or political mass-killing) would inevitably lead to a morally completely unacceptable result: The horrendous crimes of the Nazis would be "relativized" and thereby actually become bagatellized.

The quarrel rapidly developed into an extremely bitter polemical controversy, with clear demarcation lines of a politico-ideological nature and within the academic discipline of history. To that extent, this highly controversial debate is symptomatic of much of Nazi research, where new, more or less sensational hypotheses are not infrequently met by a mixture of moral- and discipline-based criticism.

Ideology and Politics

Anyone dealing with German Nazism as a historical phenomenon is faced with a number of challenges. The first has to do with the question of whether one can really talk about an actual Nazi "ideology" in Germany, and if so what kind of ideology this was. Along with most researchers into Nazism, I believe that a Nazi ideology existed. That raises a number of new questions. Which conceptual elements did Nazism consist in, and what were its most important characteristics?

Another important question is what consequences Nazi ideology had. What was the relationship between *ideology* and *politics*, between Nazi theory and practice? Did the ideology *motivate* such politics and the implemented policies – was it the actual driving force behind Nazi activity? Or did the ideology rather *legitimize* the politics of the Nazi state and the acts of individual Nazis, in the form of truth-distorting propaganda for the Nazi leadership? Can it be that Nazi ideology actually functioned as a motivating conviction in certain instances and as a legitimizing tool in others?

In the analysis of Nazism it is necessary to distinguish between ideology and politics, for it is by no means given that there is any correspondence between these two levels. The policies that were implemented did not have to be motivated by, or even correspond to, the ideology that had been developed by more theoretical Nazis. All those who worked for, or at any rate supported, the Nazi movement or state do not have to have internalized the Nazi ideology themselves – and even if they had done so, this does not mean that they necessarily acted out of purely ideological motives.

Nor is it certain that there is any correspondence between ideology (or politics) and *propaganda*, the Nazis' self-presentation or "selfie", in order to present themselves in a positive way. Here it is important to emphasize that many assertions that have been advanced as Nazi propaganda actually went against assertions made by Nazi ideologists – although it is not always easy to decide if a Nazi text is "ideological" or "propagandistic".

The Holocaust can serve as an example of the importance of keeping apart these three levels – ideology, politics and propaganda. Why did the Nazi state decide to carry out industrial genocide? Did this part of the regime's policy derive from Nazi ideology? Or was it due to non-ideological factors – economic, military or individually psychological? The quarrel between Broszat and Friedländer shows how historians divide levels in this issue.

Broszat presents Nazi ideology as a propagandistic instrument of mobilization for the regime. He claims that the Nazi leaders were not personally driven by any particular ideological conviction, but that they sought to get their subordinates to implement a particular policy by getting them to believe in the Nazi ideals. Broszat, then, opens up the possibility that Nazism could function as an action-inspiring ideology for those who did not find themselves in the top echelon of the regime, but he rejects the idea that the leading Nazis were fuelled by this ideology. Friedländer has a completely different conception. For him it is precisely the ideology – a fanatically white-hot, almost pathological hatred of the Jews, linked to a special understanding of history – that compelled the Nazi leaders to behave in a genocidal way.

The "Organic" and the "Dynamic": an Approach to Nazi Ideology

Both the question of the characteristics of Nazi ideology and of the effect it had are key issues in this book. A third issue, however, is just as important, and it is with this issue I first intend to deal: What are the origins of Nazism in within the context of the history of ideas?

In 1930, the world-famous literary author Thomas Mann gave a speech to a crowded hall in Berlin. He wished to warn the German people against Nazism, which he regarded as a serious threat – a political movement he feared would lead German into the abyss. In its printed version, his speech was given the title *Ein Appell an die Vernunft* (An appeal to reason)[4]. The reason for his giving his speech was the recent brilliantly successful election for the NSDAP, which

had resulted in a large number of representatives in the Reichstag. The party had become a genuine mass movement, with support from various sections of the German people.

Mann started by giving an account of the importance of major political, social and economic factors for the emergence of Nazism. He regarded these factors as important, although insufficient to explain why a movement such as Nazism had emerged.[5] For this phenomenon was also a result of a particular cultural development in Europe from the 19th century onwards, especially linked to German relations.

Mann found the roots of Nazism in German Romanticism, in what he called a "romanticizing philosophy". He described Nazism as "radical nationalism" and associated it with an "orgiastic cult of nature", calling it "radically anti-human" and "wildly dynamic". He additionally linked the Nazi movement to a kind of "irrationalistic" philosophy that "places the concert of life at the center of thought". As he saw it, it was a question of a "fanatical" nationalism that circled round dark, life-giving forces that in reality were destructive.[6]

Mann was one of the first to describe Nazism as an ideology with roots in German Romanticism – more precisely as an irrationalistic, ecstatic, religion-like cultivation of such phenomena as nation, nature and life. Mann turned the spotlight on two dissimilar trends of thought in German culture: a nature-oriented ultra-nationalism and a "dynamistic" life-worship.

The two Romantic trends Mann linked to Nazism were examined again ten years later. In 1940, Nazism as an ideology was scrutinized by the American philosopher and historian of ideas Arthur O. Lovejoy – the founder of the university discipline History of Ideas in the United States. At a symposium of the history of ideas in New York, Lovejoy made a contribution that the following year was printed in the Journal of the History of Ideas is a slightly revised form.

As the title "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas" implies, the article deals with Romanticism as an era and concept in the history of ideas. Lovejoy also attempts to let Romanticism shed light on the political events of his own age – the

war that was ravaging Europe, in which those fighting on one side, Germany and Italy, were dictatorships.

Lovejoy takes as his point of departure what he regards as an intellectual revolution in Germany in the 1790s. At the same time as the French Revolution, which marks the culmination of the period of the Enlightenment, a number of new ideas start to emerge in German culture.[7] Lovejoy identifies three ideas which he considers particularly important both for the distinctive nature of Romanticism and the further development of culture. These ideas are *das Ganze* (the whole, the totality), *Streben* (striving) and *Eigentümlichkeit* (distinctiveness). Lovejoy refers to *das Ganze* as "holism" and "organicism", *Streben* as "voluntarism" and "dynamism", and *Eigentümlichkeit* as "diversitarianism". [8] These three Romantic conceptions gradually merged into each other and about 150 years later contributed to the emergence of Nazism. That is the main thesis of Lovejoy's article. What do these three ideas consist in?

The first one has to do with the relation between part and whole. "The whole" in question is an organism. This whole is viewed by the Romantics as being a mystical, sacred entity, something that the individual human being ought to subordinate to or be completely absorbed into. The idea of the organic whole is basically metaphysical – it refers in other words to something abstract, immaterial, invisible. In Romanticism this idea gradually acquires a political meaning: The state is considered to be such a mystical organism, of which the individual is an "organ". The sole value of the individual is to function in the great whole into which it is integrated. Lovejoy is of the opinion that the idea of the political organism that became so widespread during the 19th century made many contemporary Europeans susceptible to the totalitarian ideologies that gained a hold in Germany and Italy.[9]

The second idea – *streben* apparently conflicts with that of the organic whole. The idea behind *streben* is the assumption that the most real and valuable thing in existence is movement, becoming, process, strife, battle – the dynamically incomplete rather that the statically complete. The concept of never-ending human striving gave rise to a glorification, almost deification, of "The Will" – will

connected to the striving for power, self-affirmation, action. Lovejoy claims that Hitler displays this clearly as a person: As a Romantic heroic figure Hitler embodies the "fighting" nation. The idea of *streben* is interpreted in Romanticism both as something collective and something individualistic – a state or nation can also constitute such a dynamic will.[10]

The idea of distinctiveness shows an importance difference between Romanticism and the age of the Enlightenment. While the idea of a universal human nature and a universal human capacity for reason is typical of the Enlightenment thinkers, the Romantics stress the unique individuality of each human being, and they deny the existence of a universal reason. The idea of the singular, the distinctive, is gradually transferred from the individual to the nation and becomes the concept of the unique, distinct nature of the nation. Every nation, then, as a completely distinctive culture that has emerged "naturally" through a special historical development and it cannot be compared with the culture of any other nation.[11]

Lovejoy shows how these three ideas are partially united in the growing nationalism of the Romantics, particularly in Germany, in the form of the conception of the nation as an organic whole, with a unique cultural distinctness that is dynamic and continually expanding. Precisely this complex of ideas is also to be found in Nazi ideology. "Distinctiveness" is to be seen in the Nazis' nationalistic idealization of the German nation, connected with the concept of the Germans as the *Herrenvolk*, the master race – already a well-known aspect of Nazi ideology at Lovejoy's time.

The presence in Nazism of the other two ideas which Lovejoy identifies as being typically Romantic, have commanded much less attention, both generally and within the study of history. "The organic" is expressed in the ideal of the "organic" nation – a totalitarian vision of society to which Lovejoy draws attention. "The dynamic" is clearly visible in the Nazi glorification of war.

Both Lovejoy and Mann represent a from-the-outside view of Nazism, although in different ways. Mann expresses himself as an anti-Nazist, i.e. a participant in the political landscape. Lovejoy expresses himself as a researcher, a scholar who attempts to shed

light on a contemporary phenomenon, looking at it as part of the history of ideas. Nor should one forget that Lovejoy gives his lecture in a different historical context than Mann. While the latter depicts Nazism as a movement that is gaining ground, i.e. before it has come to power in Germany, Lovejoy describes Nazism as it manifests itself a decade later, as a totalitarian dictatorship that is taking part in a major war. Despite this, both non-Nazis focus on some of the same aspects of Nazism as an ideology.

A *Sonderweg* in the History of Ideas?

The perspective I adopt in this book draws on the analyses of Nazism by both Mann and Lovejoy.[12] In both these analyses, more explicitly in that of Lovejoy, specifically German characteristics of Nazism are emphasized, ideological elements that have deep roots in German culture. Here we touch on the historiographical thesis of Germany's *Sonderweg* (special path) as an explanation of Nazism – one of the other themes touched on in the controversy of the historians.

The *Sonderweg* thesis asserts that the emergence and political dominance of Nazism is due to a particular German socio-political development that is clearly distinct from the contemporary development in other western European countries such as Great Britain and France. At odds with such a model of explanation is an approach which says that Nazism was a product of general European relations, that, for example, it is one of a number of variants of "Fascism". Yet another point of view that was defended during the controversy of the historians was that Nazism was a historical *anomaly*, that it marked a radical break with the preceding social and cultural development of both Germany and Europe in general.

Like other issues raised in the controversy, that of the *Sonderweg* is complex. I do not intend to try and answer it, but even so will come to defend a form of *Sonderweg* thesis in relation to the history of ideas. In my opinion, there was a development within German culture for a lengthy period of time that clearly differed from what was taking place in a number of other western European countries. From

Romanticism up to the inter-war period, there were a number of conceptual tendencies that mutually enhanced each other. During this period, a particular mental landscape was formed – certain concepts and patterns of thought, ideals and attitudes. Not all Germans necessarily found themselves in this landscape. To the extent that we can speak in this connection of a mental vocabulary, it must not be confused with the purely linguistic one, which by definition is shared by all Germans.

No culture constitutes a monolithic block of mental homogeneity: Every culture contains inner tensions, individual divergences, certain forms of "dissension" (whether this finds expression or not). Having made this important reservation, which for me is a cultural-philosophical point of departure, I believe that a not inconsiderable number of the Germans in the period in question were strongly influenced by the mental characteristics I have indicated.

The conceptual factors that were important for the development of German culture and society gain increased impact as a result of political, economic, social and military relations that arise within the German area. The cultural factors I will seek to shed light on, combined with the historical events that seem to reinforce them, have been of decisive importance for the genesis and development of Nazism. On the basis of this, it is difficult to see that a corresponding phenomenon could have arisen and gained a political hold on any other country than Germany.

Such a perspective is far from being uncontroversial. Just as little as other national cultures, German culture is not a closed circuit – it absorbs a whole series of impulses from without. We can find examples of such cultural "imports", primarily from a number of other countries outside the German cultural circle, such as France, Italy, Britain, USA and Russia.

Support for the *Sonderweg* thesis would seem to be far less among historians today than formerly. Among present-day researchers into Nazism, there is nevertheless widespread agreement that this ideology has its roots in the German culture of the latter 19th

century. In this book I attempt to show that the roots of Nazi ideology stretch back to German Romanticism around 1800.

My point of departure is that there is a connection in terms of the history of ideas between the two already mentioned Romantic conceptions – the organic and the dynamic – and Nazi ideology as it emerges and develops. Its origins lie in the Romantic ideas of the organic and the dynamic, and these ideas are further development as two distinct tendencies during the 19th century. The first is *völkisch* (a word that is hard to pin down in English: *ethnic*, *folkish*, *popular* are some of the dictionary translations) nationalism, which to an increasing extent makes its mark from the 1870s onwards. The second is a *vitalistic* philosophy, a life-worshipping, anti-rational mode of thought that is developed in the latter half of the 19th century. These two mind-sets gain increasing importance in Germany in the 20th century and occupy an important position in German culture after the First World War, i.e. in the period when Nazi ideology comes into being.

My analysis is thus of the connection between, on the one hand, Nazi ideology and, on the other, the *völkisch-organic* and the *vitalistic-dynamic* tendencies in German culture after the Romantic period. This analysis is followed by a discussion of the ideological nature of Nazism, with a number of Nazi-ideological texts as its starting point. Finally, I try to show illustrate how this ideology, with regard to its organic and dynamic aspects, can be said to be a driving force behind politics in Nazi Germany and the acts of individual Nazis.

In the first part of the book, then, I trace two lines in the history of ideas from the late 18th century to the early 20th century, in order to shed light on the origins of Nazism and to show how two Romantic conceptual complexes play an important role in the genesis of this ideology. My intention, then, is to historicize Nazism, to show that it is part of the "current of history" and did not come into being in a temporal vacuum. Since such an analysis can give rise to misunderstandings, it is necessary to make certain things precise. The history of thought (the historical development of ideas) presents a number of paradoxes – it is a narrative with many surprises. Not infrequently, one and the same narrative can point in widely

different directions and thereby produce highly dissimilar results. Many of the conceptions I deal with are of exactly that type. The organic and the dynamic – the two basic Romantic conceptions – are typical of this; they gradually become part of a number of various constellations of ideas and consequently not be linked exclusively to Nazism with regard to their historical effect.

It would be a wrong conclusion to believe that conceptions that have influenced Nazism almost automatically had to lead to this result, that, so to speak, they bore within them the seeds of Nazi ideology from the outset. To use such reductionist labels as "proto-Nazi" about German culture from a pre-Nazi period easily leads to gross oversimplifications of complex developmental processes. What we are looking at is various *tendencies*, and I only deal with some of these within a lengthy period of time. It is furthermore meaningless to impose on pre-Nazi thinkers or their thoughts any form of "guilt" or "responsibility" for having contributed to the emergence of Nazism (or any other phenomenon in the history of ideas for that matter).[13]

Some Explanatory Remarks

All the participants – all the "characters" in this "narrative" about the gradual generation of Nazism – will come forward on their own premises, without any distracting value judgments from the author. By allowing each of these voices to be heard, I attempt to bring out as much of the overall picture as possible. Even so, it is important to remember that these people of the past had no inkling of the "narrative" of which they would come to be a part. We who have not experienced living in earlier periods are also unable to know the particular mental climate that prevailed back then. On the other hand, one does have the advantage as a historical observer of seeming to stand high up and being able to look down on those living in the past, how they acted and expressed themselves.

'Nazi ideology" is not a system of thought, nor is it a traditional political ideology of a (more or less) well-integrated nature. Nazi

ideology consists of various ideas, ideals and attitudes that merge in various combinations and that seldom or never appear cohesively in individual Nazi texts. This ideology also has an outspokenly anti-theoretical aim. With its heavy emphasis on myths and symbols to suppress rational thinking, Nazism is oriented towards people's emotional lives.

When I use the concept *Nazism*, I to a great extent adopt the perspective of an observer. In the light of posterity we gain greater analytical clarity and are able to see distinct boundaries in a historical landscape, ones that for people living at the time were far more diffuse. My descriptions of this ideology will not always coincide with the ideological self-understanding of the Nazis. It is, for example, only natural to believe that most Nazis were not aware of all the aspects of Nazi ideology that are brought forward in this book; many Nazis perhaps only had a vague idea about some of the elements in the ideology they adhered to.

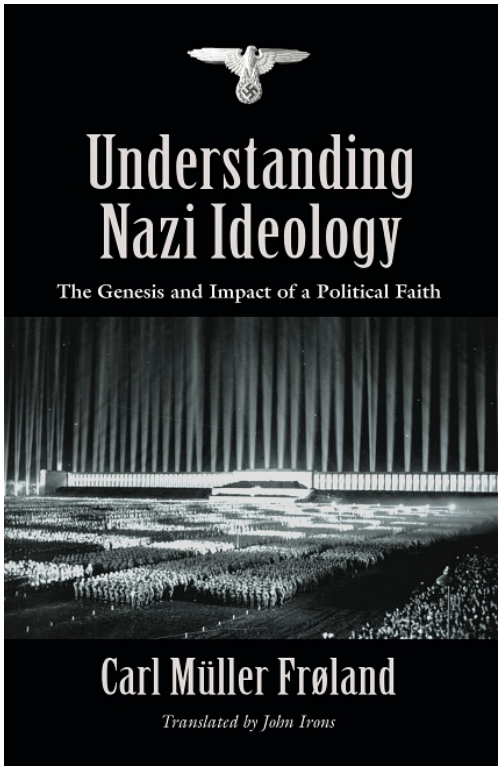
Even so, I think it is possible to identify certain conceptions that have played a fundamental role for Nazis of various kinds. I would actually go so far as to say that I regard the ideas of the organic and the dynamic as being two of the mental basic components of Nazism – "deep structures", to use Chomsky's terminology. The degree to which individual Nazis were aware of such mental basic components is of lesser importance in this context.

The material I deal with is complex and thus capable of various interpretations. The most difficult question – the causal link between ideology and action – is dealt with in the final section of the book. It is of course impossible to determine with any degree of certainty if Nazi ideology (or elements of it at any rate) "caused" the actual acts carried out by Nazis. So the types of causal explanations I suggest are therefore extremely tentative. As always, it is up to the reader to make up his or her mind as to whether the author has succeeded in his project.

The book is provided with a large number of notes. Some contain references to sources – partly to Nazi or pre-Nazi original texts, partly to secondary literature (mainly research contributions). Other notes provide additional information or more in-depth

considerations and are mainly intended for those with a specialist interest.

I make use of the historic present tense in each stage of the long time journey from c. 1770 to 1945, in order to recreate the various stages of the historical development in the best possible way. The overall aim is to enable the reader to enter the Nazi universe of ideas. What typifies it? How did it arise – what are its roots in the history of ideas? What significance did the Nazi world of ideas come to have for the Nazi state itself and for the individual Nazi? These issues – the origins, conceptual structure and effects of Nazism – are the subject of this book.



The book deals with the historical roots of Nazi ideology, its basic features, and its political and military impact in the Third Reich.

Understanding Nazi Ideology:
The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith - Revised English Edition
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