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An Unexpected Pair: The Nazis and the Environment

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An Unexpected Pair: The Nazis and the Environment

The National Socialist party in Germany left a legacy of atrocities including racism, anti-Semitism and genocide. From a modern perspective, it can seem hard to explain the rise of such a political group. The appeal of the Nazis to certain elements of the German public relied on the problems in Germany and the different aspects of their political beliefs, one of which paradoxically was their environmental outlook. While it seems an unlikely fit given their destructive and evil actions, the Nazis drew substantial public support and part of their platform included an idealized version of the German landscape and its importance in building a national community. They came to power during a time of crisis and built off the issues Germany had been facing for years. Appealing to the more conservative sectors of the German public, environmental ideology helped the Nazis as they utilized the notion of the *Volk*, the mythological ideas about the German people and their land.¹ Once in power, however, the policies of the Nazis did not reflect much concern for the natural environment. Naturally when the war started, that became the main focus of the party. Therefore, the most important years to focus on are the mid or late 1920s to the start of World War II in 1939. Among a number of other ideals, environmental ideology aided the rise of the Nazi Party by appealing in particular to conservatives, but also to the general ideology of German society. In reality, the actions of the leadership once in power generally contradicted this, making any environmental legislation or ideology more propaganda than policy.

¹ William T. Markham, *Environmental Organizations in Modern Germany*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 72

Literature Review

Given the horrific nature of the Holocaust and the Nazi policies, for years historians focused on studying how it could have possibly happened. Numerous books and collections exist today discussing the rise of the Nazis, their ideology and the political atmosphere in which they rose, along with their racist and anti-Semitic policies. Only in the last twenty to thirty years have scholars discussed some of the lesser known aspects of Nazism, like environmentalism, before their control of Germany and World War II. For this reason, a large amount of literature exists studying the causes and context of Nazi leadership, while a small number of authors explain what role conservation played. For those who do discuss nature protection, a discussion exists over whether the Nazis truly felt that Germany should protect its environment. Some feel that the environmentalist ideals had to be sacrificed for other policies while others suggest that the Nazis used the environment as mere propaganda.

Many scholars have discussed the rise of Nazis to power. Collections like *The Rise of Nazi Germany*², which features works by a number of authors on the creation of the party, explain how they gained in popularity, how the previous government's issues allowed for their success and how Hitler implemented a totalitarian regime once in power. Within this work, Hannah Vogt argues that the idea of an internal betrayal during WWI led to a Nazi state³ and Roger Manvell explains how the leaders used the SS and Gestapo to create a strict police state.⁴ Many scholars look at the economic issues that faced Germany at the time and how that made the public more open to radical thinking. Author Joseph W. Bendersky writes that the issues

² *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999)

³ Hannah Vogt, "the Myth of Germany's Betrayal Led to the Rise of Nazism" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 39-46

⁴ Roger Manvell, "The SS and Gestapo Enforce the Nazi Police State" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 101-106

with the economy led to “panic, popular anxiety and radicalization” of the German people.⁵ Expanding on this thought, Roderick Stackelberg explains that with the Great Depression, the Nazis could move from a small radical organization to one that appealed to the larger population.⁶ Other works focus on how the political atmosphere at the time contributed to the rise. The transition at the time from imperial monarchy to an apparent democracy left the government unstable. In his work, Hans Mommsen discusses how the fall of the monarchy meant creating a new government in the Weimar Republic which often represented disappointment and collapse. His work tries to explain how the Weimar Republic lasted from only 1918 to 1933 and how its failures led into the rise of the Nazis.⁷ A large amount of the literature on Nazi Germany focuses on its rise and the historical context. It represents a large variety of opinions and many different answers exist as to how the Nazis rose to power. While focusing on the environmentalism of the Nazi Party, it is important to still consider these issues as they represent the main reasons for their rise to power.

While numerous works exist dedicated to explaining the rise of the Nazis in Germany and how they came to implement their racist policies, recent scholars have focused more on individual elements of the Nazis’ complex ideology, including their environmentalism. Of those authors, some feel that the Nazis used the environment for propaganda while others argue Nazis genuinely intended to protect the environment, but had to sacrifice their ideals once in power. This opinion focuses more on the fact that the Nazi Party represented a complex and diverse collection of leaders and members. In an essay titled *Legalizing a Volksgemeinschaft*, Charles Closmann discusses the difficulties to describing the ideology of such a diverse group. Some

⁵ Joseph W. Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 61-66

⁶ Roderick Stuckelberg, *Routledge Companion to Nazi Germany*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 113

⁷ Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989)

leaders had a large interest in the environment while others seemed to have no interest. While some leaders like Walther Schoenichen pushed for the creation of a Nature Protection Office⁸, others tried to take power away from nature protection policies.⁹ To many scholars, the Nazi Party just had too many different ideologies and a diverse leadership to really protect the environment. The policies of Hitler do not necessarily represent all of the members of the Nazi Party. Author Thomas Zeller points to Alwin Seifert who had an interest in the environment. The Nazis selected him as a landscape architect in the planning of the autobahn and he made some effort to lessen the disruption to the environment.¹⁰ William T. Markham represents both ideas on Nazi environmentalism. He argues that the Nazi leadership really sacrificed the environment in order to help the economy recover and to build up a strong military.¹¹ In order to explain the contradiction, some scholars conclude that once in power they sacrificed parts of their ideology for a different agenda or that the Nazis had too diverse a group of leaders.

Other scholars in this field find that the Nazis used an interest in conserving the environment as a form of propaganda. In many cases, the policies related directly to other ideals the Nazis held. Michael Imort discusses the legislation regarding German forests and how it also had a use in propaganda. In claiming to protect the forests, the Nazis could say that they had an interest in the health of the landscape but also subject the public to ideas of the importance of the whole forest over the individual tree as they convinced people to put the state first.¹² William T. Markham combines the idea that some sacrificed their ideas while others just used the environment as propaganda. He provides a similar assessment as he discusses Walther Darré,

⁸ Charles Closmann, "Legalizing a Volksgemeinschaft" in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, edited by Franz- Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 27

⁹ Closmann 35

¹⁰ Thomas Zeller, "Molding the Landscape of Nazi Environmentalism" in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, edited by Franz- Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 147-170

¹¹ Markham 74

¹² Michael Imort, "Eternal Forest – Eternal Volk" in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, edited by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 43-72

one of Hitler's ministers, and his speeches on the link between the German people and their land, along with their entitlement to it and its importance in the health of the whole culture. This idea often provided justification for racial ideology or the expansionist policies of Hitler.¹³ These authors suggest that the Nazis used conservation as a way to both gain in popularity and to justify and force their ideology on the German people.

With scholars studying the main reasons for the Nazi Party's rise, academics have only recently started to discuss other areas of Nazi ideology. Those who have studied the idea of nature protection have concluded that Nazis sacrificed the ideology for more important tasks, they never had any real interest but only used it for political reasons, or both. The latter likely provides the most accurate conclusion. The Nazi Party represented a group of different individuals with some showing interest in putting nature protection into practice. However, once the Nazis had risen to power, the actions of the leadership indicated that the environment was not a priority. While some Nazis may have felt more strongly about conservation, the most influential Nazi leaders did little to address the issue and knew of the destructive actions against the environment that the state had taken. The most important leaders accepted these consequences to build a stronger economy and military.

Legacy of the Nazis

In the introduction to his work, historian Joseph W. Bendersky states that "the term 'Nazi' has become almost synonymous with evil itself".¹⁴ The quote likely summarizes the opinions of nearly all Germans and people worldwide. Throughout their rule, the Nazis committed a number of atrocities throughout Europe. The German people lived for decades with the knowledge of this legacy. The general perceptions of the Nazis focus on the same areas

¹³ Markham 70-72

¹⁴ Bendersky xviii

scholars originally focused on. When dealing with such matters, a natural feeling of horror occurs. Millions died in the concentration camps, millions were forced out of their homes and millions died in the war instigated by the Nazis.¹⁵ Memorials and museum exist throughout Europe, in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁶ Without the historical context and understanding of why the Nazis appealed to the then troubled German people, their rise seems illogical. For many it may also seem counterintuitive to think of the Nazis as trying to protect the environment. Their destructive legacy certainly would not indicate this. In order to understand the ideology of nature protection in the Nazis' rise to power and leading up to the war, it must be studied as something that occurred before the atrocities.

Germany Between the Wars

While the Nazis' policies on the environment may have helped spread their appeal, it is important to note the historical context in which they rose to power. The issue of the environment was not a major reason for their rise but instead an intriguing contradiction to their legacy. Nazis drew most of their support from their promises to correct the political and economic issues of the time. Without the political atmosphere left behind by World War I, the Nazis may never have won the necessary support. After the war, Germany had to deal with inefficient government, a depression and inflation, and the penalties of the Treaty of Versailles.

Following World War I, the victors limited the land ownership and military of Germany, while imposing war reparations and occupation. The Treaty of Versailles reads "the territories which were ceded to Germany...May 10, 1871, are restored to French sovereignty", "the German Army must not comprise more than seven divisions of infantry and three divisions of

¹⁵ Caroline Pearce, *Contemporary Germany and Nazi Legacy: Remembrance, Politics and the Dialectic of Normality*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21, 235, 40

¹⁶ Sharon MacDonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 122

cavalry”, and “the German territory situated to the west of the Rhine...will be occupied”.¹⁷ The Allies clearly wanted to prevent Germany from any sort of military endeavor and limit its power in global politics. In addition, the government had to sign a statement ensuring “Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected to”.¹⁸ Essentially, the treaty placed the blame on Germany and expected a costly repayment.

While the punishments may have shamed the German people, the defeat and harsh treatment came as a surprise to the average German. The fighting of WWI took place on foreign lands and the government had not communicated the realities of the war. Most Germans could not have predicted surrender.¹⁹ The unexpected results of the war left the public with an unexplained defeat. While Germans searched for answers, a myth grew that enemies within the nation had in some way sabotaged the army’s efforts. In his rise to power, Hitler and the Nazis provided an answer this question by agreeing with the public.²⁰ The Nazis’ rise to power occurred mainly because they did answer questions about the defeat of Germany in WWI, the economy and the crisis of the Great Depression.

The central issue the German people dealt with before the Nazis’ rise was the economy. Even during the war, the middle and lower classes suffered from the consequences of inflation. Though unions were increasing along with wages, the inflation the nation faced greatly outweighed any improvements.²¹ After the war, the next five years were marked with the same issue. In 1923, the German mark had fallen to a trillionth of its pre-war worth, largely affecting

¹⁷ Joachim Remak, ed., *The Nazi Years: A Documentary History*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969), 17

¹⁸ Remak, 20

¹⁹ Don Nardo, introduction to *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 17

²⁰ Nardo 18

²¹ Mommsen 7

the once rising middle class.²² To worsen the situation the newly formed democracy did little to correct it. Their policies put more pressure on the struggling industries, exacerbated the associated social issues and the mark continued to devalue more quickly leading to the Great Inflation in 1923.²³ Following a period of recovery, the global economy would suffer from the Great Depression starting in 1929, only six years later. With such persistent crises, the state of the economy became an important factor for many Germans.

With war reparations to pay and a dependency on other countries for investment and loans, Germany quickly felt the consequences of the Great Depression. In 1932, 6 million Germans were unemployed, on top of the recent experience of inflation.²⁴ This created a political situation, where an organization like the Nazis could thrive especially when also appealing to German ideology on nature, (discussed later). Given the democratic government's perceived failure to solve inflation or prevent economic depression, the German public naturally felt discontented. Socially, the difference between the different classes grew and created a divide that threatened the security of the government.²⁵ Radical groups gained in popularity and the Nazis targeted unhappy citizens, particularly the unemployed, by ensuring a change in politics would mean an improved economy.²⁶ A campaign advertisement in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper, read:

Hitler is the last hope of those who were deprived of everything: of farm and home, of savings, employment, survival; and who have but one possession left: their faith in a just Germany which will once again grant to its citizens honor, freedom and bread...Hitler will win, because the people want his victory!²⁷

²² Bendersky, 10-11

²³ Mommsen 125

²⁴ Bendersky 64

²⁵ Simon Taylor, "Germany's Post-World War I Economic Troubles" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999) , 54

²⁶ Bendersky 65

²⁷ Cited in Remak 42

This propaganda shows the blame placed on the present leaders and the promise of change. In reference to the economy, the Nazis ran a platform as a better option than those currently in power. With the political instability that followed the war, they could easily take advantage in a shift of power.

Between World War I and the rise of the Nazi party, the political atmosphere in Germany underwent two different transitions. Since the formation of Germany in the late nineteenth century, a monarchy ruled. Shortly after the end of World War I, the empire fell due to revolutionary discontent and would eventually give way to a democratic government known as the Weimar Republic.²⁸ Initially, the Weimar Republic had success with the economy. The financial situation improved as the nation used mass production and developed its heavy industry. However, this also meant that the success relied on this industry while already counting heavily on foreign investment.²⁹ As already discussed, this focus meant severe issues during the Great Depression.

The Weimar government also faced internal divisions. At its founding, the republic seemed like the triumph of the labor movements, democrats and socialists. In reality, the Allies forced the democracy on Germany. With a number of social uprisings, the new government leaned more towards its imperial past and the ideas of authoritarianism were already planted in the institution.³⁰ The Weimar Republic had a series of power changes with leaders attached to the former monarchy.³¹ The discontent of the people and lack of a strong, consistent government eventually culminated in the July 1932 elections. Though many did not find the Nazis threatening in 1928, by 1932 they held the majority in parliament, or Reichstag, and nearly a

²⁸ Mommsen 88

²⁹ Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher, Robert Lee Wolff, "The Nazis Gain Strength by exploiting the Electoral System" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 89

³⁰ Mommsen 87-88

³¹ Brinton et al 89

third of Germany supported them.³² Hitler started to work on plans to take power with former chancellor Franz von Papen, who had influence over President Hindenberg. They only needed his approval and on January 30, 1933 Hitler became the Weimar republic's chancellor.³³ With this, the Nazi Party had grown in popularity to the point of ruling Germany.

Despite their success in 1932, it is important to note that the Nazi Party did not necessarily represent a unified group, which will help to explain the complexities of their ideology and why it involved environmentalism. In order for Hitler and the Nazi Party to gain complete control of Germany, they had to address this. The November 1932 elections diminished the victories of July, likely due to the divisions in the party.³⁴ The Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or National Socialist German Worker's Party changed between its formation and the rise of Hitler. By 1932, the original members disagreed with the direction of the party. Though always radical, violence continued even after the success of the elections. In order to spread its message and demonstrate, the Nazi Party had often used force, starting with the creation of a military unit known as the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), or Storm Troop. They were recruited from former soldiers who still had loyalty to and pride for the nation, but no longer had a war to fight.³⁵ Likely still frustrated by the defeat of WWI, many joined the unit. The original members felt that the new members' actions may have limited recruitment to the party and hurt donations.³⁶ After seeing the force of the SA, many questioned the path Germany would take under the National Socialist agenda. The Nazi Party also involved a number of contradictions in their ideology, (which will be discussed later). These conflicts within the party help to explain why such a destructive force could have had a policy of nature

³² Bendersky 82

³³ Bendersky 86

³⁴ Bendersky 81

³⁵ Bendersky 43-44

³⁶ Bendersky 81

protection. Regardless of any division by 1933, Hitler and the Nazis had power and would soon rule with absolute authority.

Germany from the end of World War I until the rise of the Nazi Party clearly represents a time of instability, struggle and immense changes. In less than two decades the German government and people faced a harsh defeat, two economic crises and multiple shifts in political leadership. By 1933, Hitler stood as Chancellor of Germany and would soon create an authoritarian state under the leadership of the Nazi Party. The troubles and instability of post-war years allowed for the opportunity. This explains the context in which the Nazis rose and explains much of their popularity. The people of Germany wanted an alternative to the troubled Weimar Republic. Obviously, the Nazis provided answers for the German people on a number of urgent and large-scale issues, but other aspects of their platform may still have appealed to the German people. Regardless, the party created a particular public image in their rise to power that included a concern for the environment. A surprising part of their platform concerned the environment of Germany, which correlated with a movement in Germany known as the *Völkisch* Movement.

The *Völkisch* Movement

Given the troubles of Germany from World War I into the 1930s, the large amount of public discontent encouraged nationalist arguments involving nostalgic, romantic images of historic Germany. Many thought that a return to a more traditional way of life would correct modern issues, such as inflation and economic depression. In relation to the environment, this meant a rural society with an emphasis on the *Volk*. The idea of *Volk* created a link between the people of Germany and their natural environment. The *Volk* gave the natural world reason to exist, but in turn relied on it for food, land and other resources. Germans called this

Naturebedingtheit or ‘natural determination’.³⁷ This idea about the symbiotic relationship between humankind and the German landscape also emphasized the value of the Aryan population rather than that of any one person.³⁸ A German should not place his or her own success or happiness before that of the country and the land. This idea would become an important part of German society in the era leading up to the Nazi Party’s rule.

The movement around the deeply resonant concept of the *Volk* drew inspiration from the past Romantic movement and the scientific advances of the Enlightenment, despite their seemingly contradictory nature. In the early 1800s Romantics rejected the logic and reasoning made popular after the Scientific Revolution in favor of intuition and a closeness with nature. This applied to the *völkisch* movement’s reaction to modernism and its negative impacts. On the other hand, Darwin and other Enlightenment thinkers had created an interest in the natural world and its workings. German scientist Ernst Haeckel probably first gave ecology its name around 1866 and acted as spokesperson for the *völkisch* movement.³⁹ So the *Volk* inspired various political movements with a newfound interest in the natural environment, but also a rejection of many aspects of modern life.

The idea of the *Volk* also grew largely out of an idea in traditional German ideology about the importance of the land. Two writers who represent this idea of conservation were Ernst Moritz Arndt and Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl. Arndt had a particular interest in protecting both the German landscape and the peasants who worked the land and his work often relates to ecology. In 1815, he wrote an article *On the Care and Conservation of Forests*, including ideas like “When one sees nature in a necessary connectedness and interrelationship, then all things

³⁷ Mark Bassin, “Blood or Soil?” in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, edited by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005) 206

³⁸ Markham 71

³⁹ Basin 206

are equally important – shrub, worm, plant, human, stone, nothing first or last, but all one single unity”⁴⁰. As a student of Arndt, Riehl shared many of the same ideas. He wrote much closer to the *völkisch* movement in time than his mentor, focusing on many of the same issues, creating a link between Arndt and the movement. In an 1853 piece, he asked Germans to protect “the rights of the wilderness” and largely opposed the urbanization of the nation.⁴¹ Though these ideas of worshipping the natural world had strong environmentalist ideals, they also tied in ideas about nationalism.

Though ideas of nationalism had existed prior, the Napoleonic Wars helped to spark this idea on a large scale in Germany, when Napoleon conquered territories in modern day Germany through victories over Prussia in 1806. Despite trying to build an empire, Napoleon’s actions in Germany actually made its independence more realistic. In order to meet Napoleonic standards and requirements, Prussia had to improve and strengthen its government, economy and military.⁴² Though these improvements to the region, many Germans resented the occupation by Napoleon. A group of German professors formed a group known as the League of Virtue or *Tugendbund*, with the goal of expelling the foreign powers through, among other values, a “public spirit”.⁴³ When expelling the French, Germany experienced its first wave of nationalism. This would continue to grow, especially as the newly established German Confederation dissatisfied many. When this occurred, the Germans started to idealize and take pride in the victory during the “wars of liberation” over Napoleon and France.⁴⁴ These ideas of national unity can be seen in the works of Arndt and Riehl. Though Arndt looked at the

⁴⁰ Quoted in Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmeir, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*, (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), 6

⁴¹ Biehl and Staudenmeir 6-7

⁴² Michael Rowe, *Collaboration and Resistance in Napoleonic Europe : State Formation in an Age of Upheaval, C.1800-1815*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 133

⁴³ J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon*, (New York: American Heritage, Inc., 1963), 279

⁴⁴ George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 17

“interrelationship” of nature, his works did not connect the German people to their fellow humans. He focused specifically on the German landscape and his works often included racist comments on the French, Slavs, and Jews.⁴⁵ The work of his student includes similar racism. He writes “We must save the forest, not only so that our ovens do not become cold in winter, but also so that the pulse of life of the people continues to beat warm and joyfully, so that Germany remains German”.⁴⁶ Connecting the ideas of nature worship with nationalism transitioned both ideologies into the *völkisch* movement.

The connection between the people and the land that the *völkisch* movement emphasized had allegedly disappeared with urbanization and modernization.⁴⁷ In his work, *Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler articulated this idea. As a philosopher and historian, Spengler’s work focuses on using history from ancient times on to predict patterns in the future, though he does write from a German perspective in 1926. The themes of *Volk* are clearly represented. He discusses races in depth and states that in the history of a nation “the population of a land grows together into one single family”.⁴⁸ In this, he represents the nationalist attitudes of the *völkisch* movement.

Spengler also analyzes cities throughout history, including during his own time and concludes that all the recreational and intellectual pursuits associated with urban life have disconnected the “one single family”. The modern man of the city has no link to his heritage, unlike the rural peasant: “the continuance of the blood-relation in the visible world is no longer a duty of the blood”. For the typical peasant, “he is rooted in [his blood] as the descendant of his forbears...not the temporary connexion of person and thing for a brief span of years, but an

⁴⁵ Biehl and Staudenmaier 6

⁴⁶ Quoted in Biehl and Staudenmaier 6

⁴⁷ Markham 71

⁴⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1939), 127

enduring and inward union of eternal land and eternal blood”.⁴⁹ In other words, the family created by a common race has direct ties to the land and the family structure of the rural classes. The “organic unity and health of German society, rooted in the land and the virtues of the small farmer” had been compromised by cities. Though Spengler represents only one man’s views, he did represent a broader current of thought in Germany and reached a large German audience.⁵⁰ His work popularized the *Volk* ideas and emphasized the danger of continuing with the current pattern. It also resonated with the conservative elements of the population, mostly in rural areas, and advocates for nature protection. Many in small town and rural Germany believed in the danger of urbanization and modernity more generally. When the Nazi party entered into German politics and society, their ideals addressed these issues.

The ideas of the *Volk* and nature worship in ideology meant that the ideas of environmentalism were not new to Germany when the Nazis rose to power. In fact, a number of groups and advocates fought on behalf of the natural world from the mid-1800s. By the end of the century national groups had started to form, around the same time as many in the United States and the rest of Europe as part of a general movement in the Western world.⁵¹ One group forming at the time, the Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz or Homeland Protection Association of Germany, provides a good example of *völkisch* ideals. The group formed in the early 20th century with the idea of protecting nature for the good of the homeland. In their beliefs, the German landscape “bore the peculiar imprint of German history, German culture and German tastes”, meaning that the German people had helped to shape their environment and now they

⁴⁹ Spengler 104

⁵⁰ Markham 71

⁵¹ Markham 43

had a deep connection to the land.⁵² Most national groups would have grown by the time the Nazis formed as a party and started to campaign and a large number of their supporters came from conservative areas, helping to explain why the environment was a factor in their rise.

Nazi Environmental Appeal

The Nazis gained popularity particularly with conservatives in their rise to power. The Nazis came to power in 1933 and by that time, these elements of German society represented their main audience. From a modern American perspective, an interest in environmental issues would generally link a politician or activist to a liberal or progressive movement. In the case of Germany in the rise of the Nazis, the opposite held true. As already seen in the *Völkisch* Movement, the environment became linked with a longing for an idealized past. In this manner, environmentalism often meant conservative ideals. The bourgeois in Germany felt threatened by the social unrest and the talks of revolution and many joined the Nazi Party.⁵³ The shift in Weimar's government and power had already meant the loss of influence for the class. With their traditionalist ideals, which also linked to the health of the land, the Nazis attracted a large number of conservatives.

The Nazis' popularity with the rural farmers and nature advocates did differ slightly. In the case of farmers and the lower classes, they relied more on the issues with the economy and government that predominated in the Weimar Republic.⁵⁴ The propaganda built off of this and the worry that things could get worse during the Great Depression after 1929. The nostalgia for a traditional Germany with fewer problems appealed to the lower classes and the rural farmers, both having suffered in the post-war years. An unprecedented economic depression and lack of

⁵² Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, "Introduction" in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 5

⁵³ Robert Edwin Herzstein, "Who joined the Nazi Party?" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 81

⁵⁴ Markham 71

an effective government paved the way for the Nazi party. The promise of environmental protection also meant the protection of farmers' lands and source of livelihood. In addition, the Nazi promise of *Lebensraum* or a German "living space", promised to expand the land available.⁵⁵ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler states:

We National Socialists...must without wavering keep to our foreign policy aim, which is to secure to the German nation the soil and space to which it is entitled on this earth. And this action is the only one which, before God and German generations to come, will justify an investment of blood...we will have spilled no citizen's blood which will not allow a thousand others to live in future. The soil, on which in times to come generations of German farmers will be able to procreate strong sons, will sanction risking the lives of the sons of today...⁵⁶

The ideas of the *Völkish* Movement are manifest in Hitler's idea to expand Germany's borders. Rural citizens saw these promises as beneficial to their wellbeing, but the Nazis also reached environmentalists. Nature advocates took issue with the lack of environmental progress during the Weimar years. While ruling, the Weimar leadership managed to create very few pieces of nature protection legislation, discouraging and irritating many environmentalists.⁵⁷ When the Nazi party started to advocate and promise to protect the natural world, they also gained the support of these groups.

Many Nazi leaders spoke of environmental improvements that appealed to nature protection groups. It is important to note that environmental groups did have political or social influence prior to the rise of the Nazi Party, therefore appealing to them would also mean appealing to more of Germany's population and leaders. Throughout the 1920s, select groups that had decent-sized memberships and recognition across Germany also advocated for environmental causes. They also received some government funding and participated in politics.

⁵⁵ Thomas Lekan, "It Shall Be the Whole Landscape!" in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, edited by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 73

⁵⁶ Quoted in Remak 108-109

⁵⁷ Markham 72

One organization, the Friends of Nature, cooperated with different political groups and labor unions.⁵⁸ In addition, the club had established a network throughout Germany. This included 200 houses, which served as a meeting place for socialization or before excursions, plus hostels, campsites and swimming pools.⁵⁹ They clearly played a role in Germany, making Nazi appeals to environmental causes one factor in understanding their rise to power. The Nazis would have something to gain, or at least would not lose support, by appealing to environmental groups.

The issues of environmentalism were discussed by the leadership of the Nazi party. While Hitler believed in animal welfare and practiced vegetarianism, he never advocated for nature as much as his lieutenants did. He placed much more importance on the military, expansion and promoting the Aryan race. Men like Himmler, Hess, Walther Darré and Hermann Göring all discussed nature more often and published works on the subject.⁶⁰ One man instrumental in the appeal to environmentalists was Walther Darré, eventually Minister of Agriculture in 1933. This party member had an impact through his writings and speeches. One way in which he contributed to environmental appeals was by popularizing the expression “Blut und Boden”, meaning “blood and soil”.⁶¹ This applied to concepts of the *völkische* movement by tying the “blood” or the lineage of a person to the “soil” or land. According to the teachings of the Nazi party, “the German *Volk* was derived from its unique culture and racial superiority...evolved out of the successful efforts of the German *Volk* to adapt to and modify a challenging physical environment”. The works and influence of leaders like Darré show the emphasis the Nazi party placed on nature protection, even if Hitler himself had other priorities. The party still took an interest in either the issues or attracting other groups that did.

⁵⁸ Markham 69

⁵⁹ Markham 60

⁶⁰ Markham 72

⁶¹ Bassin 205

The use of environmental ideology can also be seen in the propaganda and the art produced and commissioned by the Nazis. Both largely showcased images of the natural world and rural Germans. For example, a campaign poster for the Nazis read “We farmers are cleaning things up. We vote list 2 – National Socialists”.⁶² This imagery continued once in power in a number of ways, like a stamp produced in 1939 to promote the national people’s car, the Volkswagen. In it, the car is seen on a rural road, with a forest in the background.⁶³ Another advertisement for Volkswagen included a picture of a young, smiling couple driving through the countryside. The outlines of mountains and some trees make up the background.⁶⁴ Propaganda is not just limited to posters and promotions and the Nazis also commissioned and showcased paintings and other forms of artwork. In 1937, the state hosted an exhibition of art, titled the “Great German Art Exhibition”, in the newly built House of German Art in Munich.⁶⁵ Of the images, most represented traditional forms of art, like historical interpretations and still life. Of all the paintings, 40 percent were landscapes.⁶⁶ These images, along with the environmental ideology, would surely have added to the appeal of the Nazis. However, the images produced during the reign of the Nazis draw their motives into question because of the reality of their rule and its environmental effects.

Nazi Rule and the Reality of Policy

While the Nazi Party offered protection of the natural world as one of their goals, their actions communicated different ideals. During their rise to power, the Nazis’ platform included a number of different and contradictory aspects, including “nationalism, anti-communism, anti-modernism, anti-urbanism, racism, territorial expansionism, confidence in technology and ...the

⁶² Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 13

⁶³ David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*, (Hoboken: Routledge, 2002), 65

⁶⁴ Welch 64

⁶⁵ Adam 93

⁶⁶ Adam 97

rootedness of the German *Volk* in the German soil and forests”.⁶⁷ Thus, certain contradictions existed in the ideology and it covered a variety of ideas. For example, the rejection of modernism would seem to act against the belief in technology. With this eclectic ideology that at times contradicts itself, the Nazis naturally failed to implement all of it into policy. In reference to environmental concerns, it would seem that other priorities had more importance or that it was always a matter of propaganda, with their romantic ideas of the German environment never translating into policy.

In order to accurately assess the Nazi dedication to the environment, it is important to understand the extent to which Hitler and the party had control over the German government. If they faced opposition to their policies and legislation from other parties and interested groups, then that may offer one explanation as to why they did not act on parts of their platform. In reality, the Nazis had quickly secured control after 1933. Initially Hitler and the leadership did have to sacrifice some Nazi promises in order to have total control. When first named chancellor, he did not have the unrivaled power he would have in a couple of years and still had to address the issues within the Nazi Party.⁶⁸ To start with, Hitler ensured that he had a strong military entity to enforce his rule. Though the SA had aided the Nazis in their rise to power, the divisions within the party meant that they had questionable loyalty. In 1934, of the 4.5 million SA members only an estimated million actually belonged to the party.⁶⁹ In order to control the politics of Germany he felt he needed a more reliable force. In order to accomplish this, Hitler authorized a series of arrests and executions, all of the victims having contested him politically. While he claimed a total of 77 executions, the Ministry of Justice had record of 207, with the real

⁶⁷ Markham 71

⁶⁸ Bendersky 87

⁶⁹ A. J. Ryder, “Hitler Consolidates Power by Eliminating the SA and Other Potential Opponents” in *Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo, (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 95

figure unknown.⁷⁰ Following this, he created his own force, the *Schutzstaffel* or the SS in 1934 which showed a willingness to carry out Hitler's arrests and repress dissenters.⁷¹ Hitler's brutal efforts did mean that he had established himself as sole leader by 1934. German citizens and even the SS now knew the dangers of questioning the authority of the Nazi state.

With this in mind, Hitler had created a nation where the Nazi Party had control and opposition faced arrest or death. In this situation, Hitler could act based on his own ideology without worries of compromising with other political parties. He had created a dictatorship and the democratic constitution of the former Weimar Republic had no relevance. Before even being appointed chancellor, Hitler stated that he did not fully intend to follow the constitution.⁷² Now as leader, little prevented him. Regardless of this, he did little to protect the environment. If he had personally intended to conserve the environment, he had the opportunity to do so.

While this does not mean that the majority of Nazis did not truly believe in environmentalism, the leadership of Nazi Germany also did not attempt to change Hitler's path. This may have occurred out of fear. In the case of the Nazi forest policy, or *Dauerwald*, (discussed in the next section), Walter von Keudell originally introduced the idea of a system to protect the health of Germany's woods to Hermann Göring. When the Nazis implemented the ideas, Göring and Von Keudell together served as leaders over this aspect of policy.⁷³ When the time came to focus on other priorities like war and industry, Von Keudell proved less willing to sacrifice his ideals about protecting the forest and Göring soon replaced him. The new 'deputy forest master', Friedrich Alpers had risen through the ranks of the SS and quickly lessened many

⁷⁰ Ryder 99

⁷¹ Roger Manvell, "The SS and Gestapo Enforce the Nazi Police State" in *The Rise of Nazi Germany*, edited by Don Nardo, (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999), 101

⁷² Bendersky 84

⁷³ Imort 48-49

of the *Dauerwald* regulations.⁷⁴ Von Keudell showed that the Nazi leadership rewarded loyalty and obedience to Hitler and his lieutenants.

Though Von Keudall did not face the harsh penalties of many who questioned the Nazis, the recent memory of the SA executions and the nature of a police state weakened or intimidated anyone who sought to challenge the regime. Von Keudall indeed cared about preserving the environment and he may have represented the average member of the Nazi Party, but the leadership did not support conservation ideals in their policy. Many of Hitler's lieutenants advocated for the environment prior to coming to power, but actions like those of Göring in this case suggest that they used it to gain support and realized that staying in power meant sacrificing those ideas. Industrialization, recovering the economy and building a military became the priorities of the Nazis. In addition, leaders of environmental organizations had to also adjust to the new leadership. Shortly after coming to power, the Nazis implemented *gleichschaltung*, meaning that the state now controlled privately-run groups. In order to remain an organization, members had to abide by *gleichschaltung* and in many situations joined the Nazi Party.⁷⁵ The party controlled both the government and many independent organizations. In managing these organizations directly, the government paid more attention to those with larger memberships.⁷⁶ The Nazi Party could easily have utilized these groups to push for environmental legislation if they truly wanted to focus on conservation. The control the Nazi Party had over the politics and society in Germany shows that they had the opportunity to follow through on their nature protection ideology. Instead the reality shows a much different emphasis.

With many issues to resolve following the First World War, (as already discussed), the Nazis put more emphasis on the economy and stabilizing the government. Though it was

⁷⁴ Imort 57-58

⁷⁵ Markham 75

⁷⁶ Markham 76

reasonable to fix these problems first, the Nazis did claim to protect the environment in some areas, (as seen in the next section), with the 1935 Nature Protection Law and the *Dauerwald* policy, but without much real change. In general though, Nazi policy actually damaged the German land and the leaders used the environment to justify the murder of millions. In order to increase their military power, the Nazis launched into rapid industrialization. This “required draining wetlands and removing hedges to increase land under cultivation , mechanizing agriculture and increasing use of fertilizer, increasing wood production, building new industrial and military facilities, and constructing autobahns” and though they did hire “landscape architect” Alwin Seifert for the autobahn, the Nazis could do little to justify any of these actions as environmental.⁷⁷ One could even say that in building a military and wanting *Lebensraum*, the Nazis wanted to protect the environment by taking the people out of the densely populated cities. War would be a necessary means to that end. However, as the loss of WWI and of territory in the Treaty of Versailles shamed most Germans, these occurrences may have caused the interest in expanding territory instead of environmentalism. Though the idea of building a *Volksgemeinschaft* with its healthy German soil may have originally seemed like a form of nationalism and environmentalism, the Nazis policy turned largely to racism and genocide.

In linking the German people to the land where they lived, anyone not of German descent had little claim to their land. Though many may not have seen the connection during their rise, Hitler and the Nazi Party did eventually use this idea in the practice of the Holocaust. In order to preserve the health and German people and their land, which belonged exclusively to them, the Nazis tried to expand its borders and remove non-Germans. The Nazi leaders who did show concern for nature protection also knew that they supported preparation for war and

⁷⁷ Markham 74

expansionism, along with extreme racism and eventually genocide during World War II.⁷⁸ The reality of the Nazi agenda and policy greatly outweighed any small steps towards conservation. Though they claimed to promote nature protection, the reality of this statement is evident through the study of both the 1935 nature protection law and the forest policy, known as *Dauerwald*.

1935 Nature Protection Law and the Dauerwald

During the rule of the Nazi party, though much of their environmental ideology remained propaganda, some actions did benefit the environment. In general, the leadership represented a number of contradictions. Two examples of this in environmental policy are the 1935 nature protection law and the forest policy called *Dauerwald*, or ‘perpetual forest’⁷⁹. In both cases, the Nazis seemed to have made progress in protecting the ‘homeland’ and promoted both as such, but in reality they had a different agenda. The nature protection law, which promised to preserve certain areas and institutionalize environmental ideology through officials and agencies, had a number of flaws and did not fulfill expectations. Meanwhile the forestry policies, despite good intentions, used propaganda that promoted their racist ideology and sometimes sacrificed environmental ideals.

The 1935 nature protection law came after years of governmental issues that had stopped the passing of environmental legislation. As already seen, the Weimar Republic had become a source of disappointment for environmentalists. The Nazi party, on the other hand, did appear to act on its promises. After coming to power in 1933, leadership had made progress towards protecting the German landscape within 2 years, after over a decade of Weimar Republic neglect. Though already shown to have more concern for his career, Hermann Göring did utilize his

⁷⁸ Biehl and Staudenmeir 24

⁷⁹ Imort 43

influence with Hitler in this case to help pass the law on the national level⁸⁰ and the law certainly seemed to value environmental issues. To start, the law created regulations for the protection of lands. A unique piece of land, one that had importance to science or just contributed to the scenic landscape, fell under the regulations. It also required government officials to ensure the adherence to the law and created new agencies.⁸¹ The law appeared to seriously address some of the issues of urbanization and increased land use that had worried advocates and the *völkische* movement. Despite this, when put into practice, the law did little to correct environmental damage.

Though Walter Schönichen, who worked alongside Göring, called the law the “definitive fulfillment of the *völkisch*-romantic longings”, the reality was much different.⁸² The 1935 nature protection law had a number of flaws and often received little attention from the leadership. Many of the protocols described in the law were ignored after its implementation or neglected to address many of the issues, for fear of harming the Nazi agenda which focused on industry and war planning. For example, the law did not act against the pollution in Germany’s air and water because of the obstacle it would create for industry’s development. The law also allowed exemptions for the army, public transport and “vital economic programs”.⁸³ This shows the priorities of the party. Though they passed environmental legislation, it did not have real power. In addition, the budget for the newly created offices did not allow for sufficient staff and this hampered the carrying out of the law.

Along with the nature protection law of 1935, the *Dauerwald* policy shows the use of the environment in propaganda. In 1934, the Nazi Party had officially mandated *Dauerwald* as its

⁸⁰ Markham 73

⁸¹ Markham 74

⁸² Biehl and Staudenmaier 22

⁸³ Markham 75

silviculture, or the “branch of forestry dealing with the development and care of forests”⁸⁴. The system called for improving the efficiency of the wood production by making sure that the ecosystem remains healthy.⁸⁵ *Dauerwald* was a reaction to the previous system that focused on creating a *Normalwald* or “normal forest”.⁸⁶ Also called “scientific forestry”, this method took a systematic approach to wood production and had negative environmental impacts. Though the system initially increased production, it depleted the soil and left the trees more susceptible to disease because ‘scientific forestry’ focused on the economic factors rather than the ecological ones.⁸⁷ The poor health of the *Normalwald* meant that production also suffered, so foresters may have had more concern for their profits than the environment when they turned to a new system. Given its predecessor, the *Dauerwald* hoped to correct the negative impacts and therefore create a more cost efficient and environmentally friendly model. While the decision to implement the *Dauerwald* as official policy may have concerned production and profit more, the Nazis had to recognize that the exploitation of the natural world for economic reasons would eventually lead to negative consequences.

The *Dauerwald* system focused on a few different techniques to improve the health of German forests. Foresters now would choose specific trees rather than clear-cutting entire areas and allowing the trees to re-grow naturally instead of planting in a row like a farm. They also cut at different ages, used tree types that matched with the terrain and environment, and focused on the quality of the tree rather than the amount harvested.⁸⁸ These strategies would improve both the wood production and the environment. Another aspect of the *Dauerwald* meant using species native to Germany to ensure that they could grow well in the climate and environment.

⁸⁴ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v., “silviculture”

⁸⁵ Imort 43

⁸⁶ Imort 45

⁸⁷ Imort 46

⁸⁸ Imort 47

This use of only *bödenständige* or native species helped to ensure that forests were in their natural state and healthy.⁸⁹ The Nazis institutionalized this as the official silviculture of Germany, showing they at least worried about the effects of damaging environmental impacts on the economy. Though this policy had a positive effect on the natural world, it also had a strong link to propaganda in Nazi Germany and would eventually fail due to other priorities in the Nazi Party.

The Nazi leaders often used the forest as a metaphor for the German people with the idea that the health of the entire forest mattered more than that of the individual tree. The idea of putting the nation before the person played an important role in Nazi ideology, as they convinced the public to devote themselves to the state. The *Program of the National Socialist German Workers' Party* reads “individual activity must not violate the general interest”.⁹⁰ Göring once emphasized this in relation to the forest saying:

Forest and people are much akin...the people is also a living community, a great, organic, eternal body whose members are the individual citizens. Only by the complete subjection of the individual to the service of the whole can the perpetuity of the community be assured. Eternal forest and eternal nation are ideas that are indissolubly linked.⁹¹

The eternal forest also utilized species native to Germany. While the species chosen likely meant more efficient growth, it also related to Nazi racism. In linking the German people to the forest, the Nazis also showed their desire for only those “native”. Göring also noted that “the German forest is national property”.⁹² It belonged to the people of Germany and through its protection, would ensure their eternal nature. This message shows the racist ideology of the Nazis and the *Dauerwald* also had questionable benefits for the environment with more focus on the economy

⁸⁹ Imort 52

⁹⁰ Remak 28

⁹¹ Imort 54

⁹² Imort 51

The motives for instituting *Dauerwald* policy may have never really focused on the environment. During the Great Depression, the market for wood had suffered with prices low enough that farmers would not sell. In controlling yields and pushing farmers to grow more expensive woods, the policy also acted to stimulate the industry.⁹³ This brings the motives of the Nazis into question and they would eventually focus more on the economy. In addition, the policy quickly changed with the needs of the state. When the supply of wood could not fulfill the demand, Göring increased the quotas to one and a half times the “sustainable yield” in 1935.⁹⁴ Within a year of implementing *Dauerwald*, the Nazis changed the policy. As already discussed, Göring dismissed Walther Von Keudell as his deputy when Von Keudell showed more interest in protecting the forest. The *Dauerwald* seems like an important piece of nature protection, trying to ensure the health of the forest, but the Nazis placed more emphasis on the economic output. The *Dauerwald*, along with the 1935 nature protection law, paradoxically shows the priorities of the Nazi Party.

Conclusion

The atrocities committed by the Nazi Party seem contradictory to many of the ideologies they supported during their rise to power. With economic issues and political instability, the Nazis promised to improve Germany and return it to a time without such problems. Their rise occurred in a specific context. To many conservatives, the promise of traditionalism and the appeal of the *Völkisch* Movement presented a much better option than the Weimar Republic. While it did not directly cause the popularity of the Nazis, they did include nature protection in their platform. Once in power, the focus on industrialization and preparing for a war meant that the policies actually damaged the environment. Though the leaders of Germany had discussed

⁹³ Imort 51

⁹⁴ Imort 57

the importance of the German environment, their actions instead led to destruction based on racist ideologies. Along with other ideals, the Nazis' discussion of the environment during the environment may have appealed to conservatives and correlated to an alleged German ideology, aiding in the rise to power. Once in power, the leaders' actions greatly contradicted this, making the promise of protecting the German environment more propaganda than actual policy.

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