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The Nazi Mind: Twelve Warnings from History.

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Everything is fragile – often a great deal more fragile than we think. That is the central message that I have taken from my work.[1]

Time and again I met people who were shocked at how swiftly their world changed – from Germans devastated by the economic collapse of the early 1930s to Hungarian Jews who couldn't believe how quickly their lives had been shattered by the arrival of the Nazis; from Polish academics who arrived at a university meeting only to be arrested and taken to a concentration camp to German children who suddenly found their family home on fire and their mother brutalized in front of them. All these people and more taught me how fragile our lives and the institutions around us are.

It is especially concerning when combined with the knowledge that while the National Socialist German Workers' Party is thankfully no more, the essential values of Nazism – hatred, scapegoating, anti-Semitism, racism and violent nationalism – are still very much with us.

With that in mind, here are twelve warnings of how democracy can be corrupted that I take from a study of this terrible period. They all relate to the chapters bearing the same titles that form the rest of this book.

I offer them in support neither of the left nor of the right, but as someone who values democracy over dictatorship.

Spreading Conspiracy Theories

We all know that powerful figures can seek to hide the truth from us, and there are many examples in history where investigative journalists have uncovered genuine conspiracies. But this is very different from the kind of conspiracy theories peddled by the Nazis and other unscrupulous groups. Honest investigative journalists have no prior agenda and follow where the facts lead them. The Nazis, on the other hand, already held preconceived prejudices and twisted and bent reality to support them. Their 'conspiracy theories' were blind to the truth.

The most appalling instance of this, of course, was the conspiracy theory that helped underpin the Holocaust. 'We were convinced by our worldview that there was a great conspiracy of Jewishness against us,' said Oskar Groening, an SS man who worked at Auschwitz. 'And that was expressed in Auschwitz in the idea that said, "Here the Jews are being exterminated . . . what happened in the First World War – that the Jews put us into misery – must be avoided. The Jews are our enemies." So we exterminated nothing but enemies.'[2]

It is hard to credit, hearing these shocking anti-Semitic lies, but the Groening I met was an unexceptional man. After the war he had taken a job as a personnel officer in a glassworks and lived quietly with his wife. He was so 'normal' that he was rather boring to spend time with.[3] By far the most interesting thing about him was that he had once worked at Auschwitz.[4]

It is many years since Groening committed his crimes, but conspiracy theorists thrive today more than ever, helped by the fact that social media can be used to undermine previously trusted sources of news and information, and that it is often impossible for us to 'prove' basic facts about our own lives. Prove to me, for instance, that William the Conqueror and the Normans weren't extraterrestrials. Or that an invisible super-race doesn't control our every action. Or that human beings really landed on the moon.

Thirty years ago I experienced an even more shocking example of this kind of thinking. I met a fanatical former Nazi – a Belgian member of the SS – and heard him deny the Holocaust. My colleagues and I argued with him and told him of the vast amount of evidence proving the existence of the crime. There were even photographs of the dead at the concentration camps.

He looked at us contemptuously. 'And you really believe', he said, 'these pictures are true?'[5]

Using Them and Us

The ability to categorize swiftly is essential to our survival. We wouldn't exist if our ancestors hadn't been able to judge in an instant whether someone was a friend or foe. That's why the amygdala, which performs this brain function, is such a crucial part of our lives.

The problem is that this kind of rapid assessment can lead to immense prejudice. The temptation to lump groups together and say 'they're all the same' is strong. And even though another part of the brain can subsequently attempt to question the validity of that decision, the emotional power of the amygdala inputs first, whenever we feel threatened.

Would-be dictators exploit this. They try and amplify our tendency to divide the world into 'Them and Us' by pointing dramatically to a 'Them' – a group of easily identifiable people whom they can scapegoat.

There are enormous benefits for any dictator in trumpeting this kind of 'Them and Us' rhetoric. It not only creates intense emotional feelings among their supporters, but it reinforces a sense of 'Us-ness' linking the followers to the leader, and conveys the reassuring message that no matter what problems you face, you can always blame 'Them'.

Leading as a Hero

Theorists like Max Weber and Ernest Becker recognized how much personal heroism is a valuable component of leadership.[6] Adolf Hitler was aware of this truth as well: he benefited considerably from both his service as a soldier in the First World War and his seemingly 'heroic' show of defiance when on trial for high treason in 1924.

Similarly, many other dictators – from Napoleon Bonaparte to Benito Mussolini and from Fidel Castro to Marshal Tito – came to prominence in large part because they were perceived as heroes, even though in many cases the dictator's 'heroism' was either exaggerated or created for propaganda effect.

We saw in this history how Hitler was already aware that he would almost certainly receive a lenient sentence for high treason when he 'bravely' gave his defiant speeches in the courtroom. And while the image of Mussolini leading his Fascists in a March on Rome in 1922 became a vital part of the 'Duce' myth, the truth was very different – he had travelled to the Italian capital on a train dressed in a suit and bowler hat.[7] But that hardly fitted the actions of a hero.

The problem with trusting 'heroic leaders' is evident from this history. It is but a short step from considering a leader a hero to perceiving them as a quasi-parental figure who always knows best. As the social

psychologist Erich Fromm pointed out in his *Escape from Freedom*, it can be seductive to hand over decision making to someone else – an individual you feel is better equipped to decide vital political and social questions.[8] But while it might be emotionally attractive to abrogate responsibility, it can also be extremely dangerous.

Corrupting Youth

Targeting people under the age of twenty-five takes advantage of the biological fact that the frontal cortex – the part of the brain that offers restraint and analytic judgement – is not yet fully formed. Consequently, adolescents are often the easiest people to mould into fanatics.

It wasn't just Hitler who intuitively understood this – other dictators have as well. In Cambodia many of Pol Pot's most zealous killers were under the age of twenty-five; in China Chairman Mao mobilized the students of the Red Guard to force through the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution; and in the Soviet Union successive leaders placed great emphasis on the youths of the Komsomol.

Every dictator wants to ensure that children and adolescents are taught only their approved version of history. By such methods they create an incremental process of habituation to the 'new thinking'. If they keep it up for a generation or two, there will be few people left who ever knew any different.

I learnt that first hand when filming in Russia in the early 1990s, just after the fall of communism. I asked an intelligent woman in her twenties – a librarian – how she had reconciled the existence of the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939 with the anti-Nazi propaganda the Soviet Union had subsequently produced two years later about the 'Great Patriotic War' against Germany.

'I never had to have a view on that,' she said. 'Because it wasn't until last month that I heard the truth about the Nazi–Soviet pact.'

Conniving with the Elite

It's too often forgotten that dictators frequently do not seize control on their own, instead power is handed to them by others.

We saw earlier in this history how Hitler could not have become Chancellor of Germany without President Hindenburg's approval, and that Hindenburg first had to be convinced by those in the nationalist elite around him.

Other dictators, like Francisco Franco in Spain, were also helped in their rise to power by the backing of influential members of the elite. Franco benefited enormously from the support of senior figures in the Catholic church, who believed he was leading a crusade against the Republican opposition.[9]

During the Spanish Civil War, after Franco relieved the siege of the Alcázar of Toledo in September 1936, he received a personal telegram thanking him from the Primate of Spain, Cardinal Isidro Gomá y Tomás. In his reply, Franco acknowledged how much the approval of the Catholic elite meant to him: 'I could receive no better help than the blessing of Your Eminence.'[10]

Benito Mussolini gained even more direct backing from the elite in his quest for power. In October 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III decided to make him Prime Minister of Italy, with disastrous consequences for the country.

President Hindenburg, Cardinal Gomá y Tomás and King Victor Emmanuel. Three powerful members of an elite, each of whom was instrumental in the rise to prominence of a dictator.

Attacking Human Rights

This is a common goal of all dictators. You can't run an absolute dictatorship without eliminating the human rights of your population. No one must be allowed to question your judgement or to speak out against you.

One of the first steps is to extinguish the rule of law. And you may not have to wait until you have destroyed democracy to start trying. Even if you're just a would-be dictator who has been elected by a popular vote, it is still sometimes possible to cripple the legal system by altering the appointment procedure for judges and removing any judges that don't support the new regime.

Equally, you can't succeed as a dictator if journalists are able to publish criticism about you. So abolishing the free press is also high on the list of initial tasks.

The right to individual free speech is another early casualty of a dictator's rule, and longer term there is frequently an attempt made to penetrate the private lives of ordinary citizens. The use of children to denounce their parents is one aspect of this control, as are restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights.

However, once they have destroyed the human rights of their population, the mistake many dictators make with their propaganda is not to heed the advice of Joseph Goebbels – 'at all costs avoid being boring.'[11]

Goebbels understood how important it was to provide entertainment for the population. But he wasn't the first to grasp this truth. Roman emperors reached the same conclusion nearly 2,000 years before. They realized that gladiator fights – initially performed as tributes on the death of a person of nobility – could be extended into more lavish shows. The more the population of Rome liked what they saw, the more they thanked the person who paid for the entertainment.

Exploiting Faith

Hitler understood the immense power of faith. If your followers have complete faith in you then no amount of reasoned argument will convince them that they're wrong. For that reason, we should be sceptical of politicians who ask us to have 'faith' in their judgement.

That is why many dictators despise intellectuals. They fear scholars will challenge any of their beliefs that are faith-based. Hitler, for that reason, hated lawyers. He saw them as coldly questioning his actions and interfering on behalf of the weak. The only other profession Hitler despised as much were priests. That wasn't just because, like lawyers, they spoke out for the disadvantaged, but because they represented a rival faith-based belief system.[12]

Dictators frequently promise a transcendent reward – a future utopia – in exchange for their supporters' faith. Hitler offered a vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, while Stalin promised a communist paradise. It also helped in psychological terms, as we saw earlier, that such goals were always just out of reach.[13]

In offering their utopian visions, dictators often create a false version of the past as an imaginary reference point. 'Back then we were tremendous' is the pitch, 'and we can be so again.' The Nazis certainly did this.

The idea of the 'Third Reich' was to link the present to what were perceived as the past glories of the Holy Roman Empire and the Germany that Bismarck helped create.

Valuing Enemies

'The more enemies, the more honour,' said General Werner von Blomberg, German Minister of War in the 1930s.[14] It was a sentiment that his boss, Adolf Hitler, would have agreed with wholeheartedly.

Hitler revelled in enemies. He understood that one of the easiest ways to bond people together is to convince them who their enemies are. He created an atmosphere in which the population always felt there were dark forces ranged against them – both internally within Germany and externally in other countries. But Hitler was not alone: it's hard to think of a dictator who doesn't value enemies in much the same way.

Enemies aren't just useful for dictators because they're an easy way of bonding people together, they also help overcome complacency within the leadership group and keep the population dependent on the regime for protection. Stalin's paranoia was such that he placed enormous emphasis on the search for 'enemies of the people' – real or imagined – while Reinhard Heydrich announced in 1935 that it would take the Nazis 'years of bitter struggle finally to push back the enemy in all areas'.[15]

Shrewd dictators understand that the search for enemies must be never-ending. And if you don't have any enemies, then you need to create them.

Eliminating Resistance

While it is commonplace for dictators to eliminate the basic human rights of their subjects, it can be more challenging for them to target powerful groups like the church or the army. And it is from these groups that resistance often arises.

General Blaskowitz, who protested about the atrocities committed by the SS in Poland, straddled both groups. A committed Christian, he was also faithful to what he believed were the ideals of the military.[16]

Similarly, four years later, it was no coincidence that it was a group of army officers who were behind the plot to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944. And many of those conspirators – including the main protagonist, Claus von Stauffenberg – professed Christian beliefs.

For the reasons discussed earlier, while Hitler sought to eliminate resistance to his regime wherever he could, he didn't feel able to destroy all potential opposition within either the church or the army.[17] But Stalin took a different view. His regime targeted both the church and the military in ways Hitler never did. His purge of Red Army officers during the 1930s was savage. He didn't seem to care that many of the accused were innocent of any wrongdoing or that because of the purge he lost a number of his most talented generals.

Stalin, a keen student of history, was aware that Napoleon Bonaparte had successfully overturned the revolution that preceded him. Napoleon, a brilliant army officer, had proclaimed himself Emperor just twelve years after the monarchy had been overthrown. Stalin wanted, at all costs, to prevent another Napoleon doing the same thing to his revolution.

It is a common mistake to think that a mass movement of ordinary citizens can bring down a dictator. It can't, unless the army and security forces give them their support. So the astute dictator either corrupts these armed units with money and other benefits or, as Stalin did, keeps them in a constant state of anxiety about possible denunciation.

Escalating Racism

Feelings of 'Them and Us' exist in all societies, but often they aren't fuelled by racism. Soldiers, for instance, always experience emotions of 'Them and Us' when confronting their enemies, regardless of whether they consider their opponents 'racially inferior' or not. But, as Hitler knew, when combined with racism the 'Them and Us' dichotomy takes on a powerful new dimension. Hence German soldiers fighting on the eastern front in the Second World War behaved – almost always – in a more inhumane way than those fighting in the west.

Racism, as the Nazis demonstrated, is the toxic brew that can heighten 'Them and Us' feelings to murderous levels. It is a judgement that one of the wisest people I met in the course of my work agreed with

unreservedly. He was Eugene Leviné, a German Jew who escaped to Britain just after Hitler came to power. 'There are always large numbers of people who are willing to persecute and hate,' he said, 'and if unemployment was a bit worse here [in the UK] and you advertised for a core of people to beat up or expel or possibly even kill either Asians, or Jews, or Irish, or even Welsh, and you offered them a going rate, of what, a thousand [pounds] a week, free uniform and accommodation, I don't think it would take you long to collect fifty thousand people. I'd get them together, I guarantee.'[18]

Killing at a Distance

A recurring theme of this history has been the psychological problems that people can experience if they are told to kill someone face to face. That difficulty, as we've seen, was a key reason why the Nazis developed more distanced methods of killing such as the gas chamber.

But it wasn't just the Nazis who understood the psychological benefits of killing at a distance. Many on the Allied side did as well. That is a truth I learnt twenty-five years ago when I interviewed Paul Montgomery, an American who flew bombing missions over Japan in the Second World War.

Even though he participated with his colleagues in the killing of thousands of civilians, he experienced no stress. 'I didn't have any regrets, to put it bluntly,' he told me. 'I was twenty-one years old that summer of the firebombing. And I really was wanting to get the war over and I wanted to go home. And if they told me to go bomb some cities, I went and bombed cities.'[19]

Distancing, once again, was primarily what allowed him and his flight crew to kill. 'It's not like going out and sticking a bayonet in somebody's belly, OK?' said Montgomery. 'You kill them from a distance . . . It's kind of like conducting a war through a video game.'[20]

While Montgomery insisted that he felt no racism towards the Japanese, he did admit that he felt 'hatred' towards them because he had 'lost some friends at Pearl Harbor'. So he was distanced from the people he was killing not just physically but emotionally as well.

It is a warning for the future, as warfare becomes more mechanized. Robots on the battlefield and other automated forms of attack

can only help distance the human killers still further from those they destroy.

What a merciless dictator will do with such resources is terrifying to imagine.

Stoking Fear

While Hitler's hatred suffuses this history, he also understood the value of another closely linked emotion – fear. One of the most important reasons that Germans fought on as long as they did was fear of the approaching Red Army. Another was fear of being denounced to the Gestapo as a 'defeatist'.

Fear is one of the emotions that stems from the amygdala – which explains the immediate and often devastating power of the feeling – and is closely linked in the brain to aggression. That makes evolutionary sense. If you are walking on the savannah and you're suddenly confronted by a ferocious wild beast, then you have to be prepared to do something about it – instantly.

While we are unlikely to encounter an animal today that wants to devour us, dictators know that the same emotional reaction can be created via incendiary words. Such a tactic also plays into 'loss aversion', a cognitive bias we discussed earlier.[21] It follows that one of the most potent political statements of all is: 'Be frightened, they are coming for your homes and children.' It was a central part of Hitler's message to the German population in the final days of the war, and it will be a central part of many future dictators' rhetoric in years to come.

It's a long list, and we would do well to be vigilant. But this is not a counsel of despair – there is still cause for optimism. Adolf Hitler employed every one of the techniques listed above, but in the end – at enormous human cost – something tremendous happened.

The Nazis were defeated.

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