

Nazism

Blithering Genius

2017 November 3

Contents

1 Introduction	1
2 The Modern Mainstream View Of Nazism	1
3 Understanding The Volk	2
4 Nazism Was A Nationalist Ideology	2
5 The Nazi Worldview	3
6 Were The Nazis Evil?	4
7 The Allies Were Also “Evil”	5
8 Conclusion	5

1 Introduction

Nazism is usually presented as a negative moral exemplar without any rational analysis. Nazism is also linked to the theory of evolution, again, without any rational analysis. Nazism is often referred to as “Darwinian”, although what this means is never spelled out. Certain ideas that were incorporated into Nazism, such as eugenics, are now considered evil because of their association with Nazism. Any use of evolutionary theory to understand human nature and/or solve social problems is equated with Nazism and rejected as evil. This places some very important ideas off-limits to discussion and debate.

In this essay, I am going to analyze and critique the Nazi worldview from a “Darwinian” perspective. I will also critique the popular moral narrative about the Nazis and WWII.

2 The Modern Mainstream View Of Nazism

In the modern Western mythos, Hitler is the epitome of evil. He is simply portrayed as an evil person motivated by hatred. The Allies are presented as morally good, and their victory in WWII is portrayed as a victory of good over evil. As a mythical narrative, the story of WWII illustrates a

moral principle and serves the function of social cohesion. We are the good guys and they were the bad guys. We won and they lost.

However, the myth of WWII does not hold up to basic scrutiny. Hitler was not a monster. He was a human being with a different worldview. Nazism was not that different from the beliefs of most people in the Allied nations at the time. Both sides in WWII did things that most ordinary people would consider to be evil today, if those actions were presented outside the familiar moral narrative of WWII.

3 Understanding The Volk

What was Nazism really? Was it a special kind of evil that captured the minds of Germans for some strange and inexplicable reason?

To understand Nazism, you need to understand its central concept: the “Volk”. The Volk was the German people, viewed as a kind of organism. The metaphor of a people as an organism was part of a vitalist strain in social and historical thought that originated in the 19th century and seems to have been strongest in Germany. The human population was viewed as composed of “peoples”. A people, such as the German Volk, was viewed as analogous to an organism. In this view, a people was a coherent whole that had its own history, developed according to its own plan, and had its own purpose or destiny. The nation-state was the political corollary of the concept of a people. To act as a unit, a people had to constitute itself into a political structure that could act effectively in the world as a unit. That structure was the nation-state.

The metaphor of a people as an organism is deeply flawed. It projects the properties of an individual onto a collective. It involves the fallacy of composition in viewing the whole as essentially the same as its parts. A collective does not have the properties of an individual. A collective of individuals can be organized into a society, but a society is not held together by shared genes or by some mystical essence. A society is held together by a power structure (a system of incentives) that gives it both coherence and agency. The biological *raison d’etre* of the individual is not to perpetuate a collective or society. It is simply to reproduce. Does a collective have a biological *raison d’etre*? No, not really.

The vitalist metaphor is persuasive, however. The ordinary person can understand the metaphor of a people as a kind of composite person. And it is easy for the individual to identify with this composite person of which he is a part, and to view his interests as similar or identical to its interests, as they are metaphorically conceived. The vitalist conception of a people, or nation, proved to be useful in organizing individuals toward political ends. It provided a justification for society that ordinary people could understand and relate to emotionally: one that was simple and moral, rather than complicated and causal/functional. It could be used to motivate and organize large collectives toward social change.

4 Nazism Was A Nationalist Ideology

Nationalism can be defined as a type of political ideology that:

- Is centered on the definition of the collective.
- Idealizes and personifies that collective.

- Dismisses other concerns as secondary or unimportant.

Nationalism is a form of identity politics, and it usually arises either as a separatist movement within a larger society, or as a reaction to an external threat.

After WWI, Germany was not exactly in either of those situations, but in a situation that combined aspects of both. The German people were not united under a single government. Germany and Austria had suffered a humiliating defeat in WWI. Lands with majority German populations were occupied by foreign powers. Germany did not have a stable government or a generally accepted political ideology after the collapse of the monarchy. People either feared or hoped for a communist revolution like the one that had just seized power in Russia. There was a large Jewish minority that had disproportionate economic and political power. Given those conditions, it was not surprising that Germany turned toward nationalism.

Nazism has to be understood as a nationalist ideology situated in a specific time and place. In the Nazi worldview, the proper collective was the Volk: the German people. The concept of the Volk referred to a common ancestry and character out of which the German culture had sprung. The existence and importance of the Volk was taken for granted as self-evident, in the same way that “all men are created equal” is taken for granted as self-evident in the US Declaration of Independence.

5 The Nazi Worldview

In the Nazi worldview, the purpose of the German state was to organize the Volk into a unified whole and to secure the soil necessary for its perpetuation and expansion. That soil had to be acquired, of course, at the expense of other peoples. This was regarded as the moral right of a people and a nation. The struggle between peoples for perpetuation and expansion was seen as the driving force of history, a natural and inevitable process. In this view, the Volk was the ultimate source of value. Both the individual and the state were expected to serve the interests of the Volk.

There is an apparent moral inconsistency here. Altruism was expected at the level of the individual, but not at the level of the collective. Individuals were expected to sacrifice their interests for the greater good of the Volk, but the Volk was expected to act selfishly in its struggle for existence against other peoples. This inconsistency is resolved by the belief that the Volk, rather than the individual, is the intrinsic source of value. Individuals were viewed metaphorically as cells within an organism, with their purpose being the good of the organism. Individuals not acting for the good of the Volk were viewed as “cancer” or “parasites”. In either case, they had to be purged from the body. (As a child, Hitler watched his mother die from cancer, and that probably affected his view of the world.) Competition was the moral norm of nature, and thus morally acceptable between nations, but altruism was the moral norm within the body of the nation.

Nazism provided a worldview that was functionally complete and reasonably coherent, as long as one did not question its basic assumptions. The individual belonged to a greater whole from which he derived his identity and purpose. He could take pride in the accomplishments of his people. The state existed as a means of organizing the mass of the people toward its perpetuation and expansion. History was a struggle between peoples. The strongest would survive and the rest would perish. Culture was a manifestation of the inner character of the people, and also a means of unifying them into a coherent entity. There were other components of Nazi ideology, such as its opposition to democracy and its ambivalence towards capitalism and individual profit. But the crux of Nazism was the concept of the Volk. The Volk was the ultimate source of value and identity for both the individual and the state.

One of the natural implications of this view is that individuals who do not belong to the Volk are potential enemies. To Hitler, since the Jews were a different people, their interests would naturally be at odds with those of the Volk. The Jewish people would be expected to form their own social structures and to perpetuate and expand themselves at the expense of the Volk. The Jews were not only outsiders, they were insider-outsiders. They lived inside Germany and were associated with political movements viewed as harmful to Germany, including communism and social democracy. The Jews were viewed as a separate and hostile people using deception to undermine Germany from within. This view fit easily into the Nazi worldview. It made sense if you accepted the premises of Nazism.

If you try to understand the Nazi worldview, you see that it was not radically different from the ordinary worldview of many other places and times. Nazism was irrational, but not more irrational than the modern Western worldview.

Is Nazism Darwinian at all? Yes, in two important ways:

1. Nazism accepts the existence of innate differences between individuals, populations and the sexes.
2. Nazism accepts that life is intrinsically competitive: a struggle to exist in which there are winners and losers.

In those two ways, Nazism is biologically realistic, and more so than the humanist worldview of the modern West. Overall, however, it is more idealistic than realistic.

6 Were The Nazis Evil?

Was Nazism the epitome of evil?

The idea that the Nazis were uniquely evil, according to the modern Western conception of good and evil, is absurd.

The Allies in WWII deliberately killed civilians in cold blood, just as the Nazis did. The fire-bombings of Dresden and Tokyo, and the atomic-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are well known examples. The pilot who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima knew that he was killing defenseless men, women, children and babies, just as the man sending Jews to concentration camps knew what he was doing. Both did what they were told to do by their societies, and both probably believed that their actions were morally good.

Hitler's concentration camps were based on two historical examples: the concentration camps used by the British during the Boer War and the Indian Reservations created by Americans. Concentration camps were not unique to the Nazis, even during WWII. The Russians put captured German soldiers into camps where most died. The Americans put Japanese-Americans into concentration camps based purely on their racial and ethnic identity. Would the interned Japanese have survived WWII if Japanese troops had invaded the US mainland, bombed major cities, and disrupted the US economy to the point that US citizens were going hungry? I doubt it.

7 The Allies Were Also “Evil”

By modern Western standards, the Nazis were more evil than the Allies only because they had a different ideology. Nazis are considered evil because they were “racist” and (in the modern mythos) the allies weren’t racist. The Nazi killing of civilians is considered a horrible “crime against humanity” that must be remembered forever, while the Allied killing of civilians is excused and swept under the rug. That the British and Americans ceased killing once they had won the war was due to the fact that, in their worldview, they had already achieved their objectives and there was nothing to be gained by further killing of Germans. (The Russians went on a bit of a killing, raping and looting spree.)

The Allies and the Nazis both justified their actions as necessary to achieve ends that they claimed to be good. While spouting moralistic propaganda, both sides succeeded in demonstrating the selfish and violent nature of both individuals and societies.

8 Conclusion

It is time we moved both Nazism and WWII from the domain of myth and propaganda to the domain of history. Nazism was a nationalist movement that arose in Germany after WWI for historical reasons, had some minor accomplishments, started a catastrophic war, and lost. It was based on an idealistic conception of human nature that is not implied by evolutionary theory.