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'DESTRUCTION THROUGH LABOR': Slave laborers at an IG Farben facility during World War II

Blood Money

The grim story of a chemical combine's fatal compromise with the Nazis, and its murderous consequences

Tibor Krausz

SCOUTING FOR A SITE FOR A new plant in April 1940, engineers from the German chemical giant IG Farben decided on a small town in Upper Silesia, in Nazi-occupied Poland. It had much to recommend it: proximity to coal supplies and lime deposits, plenty of water sources and good transportation lines. The town of Oswiecim, Auschwitz to the Germans, also had a small SS-run prison camp in place already: it could be tapped for slave labor, Heinrich Himmler assured the engineers.

A large chemical plant was duly built

some two miles east of the ever-expanding concentration camp, whose inmates, courtesy of the SS, would soon be pressed into the production of methanol, a vital ingredient in aircraft propellants and explosives. Within two to three months, grueling 16-hour shifts on a starvation diet reduced even the healthiest inmates to emaciated skeletons. They would be replaced and dispatched in gas chambers, among other Jewish prisoners, at Birkenau, using gas manufactured by an IG subsidiary. Seized by the postwar Polish government, the plant carried on producing synthetic rubber.

Although soon after the war the IG Farben conglomerate was broken up by the Allies, its erstwhile constituents (BASF, Agfa, Bosch) remain instantly recognizable brand names today. They stand alongside other engineering giants with a shameful past of Nazi-era collaboration: Daimler-Benz and BMW (tank, U-boat and aero engines), Siemens (engines, radar, anti-shrapnel helmets), Zeiss (precision optics), Blaupunkt (electronics).

None of these companies shied away from

using POWs and concentration camp inmates as slaves: Slave laborers required no wages and could be instantly replaced with new ones once they'd been worked to death. In "Germany's managerial elite," noted Cambridge historian Adam Tooze in his 2006 book "The Wages of Destruction," "[Hitler's] regime found willing partners."

Just how willing is apparent from a new history of IG Farben. In "Hell's Cartel," a Faustian tale of corporate sellout, Diarmuid Jeffreys, a BBC documentary producer, charts the chemical giant's "slow but inexorable descent into moral bankruptcy," starting long before the Nazis appeared on the scene. The conglomerate boasted several Nobel laureates among its scientists and pioneered wonder drugs like aspirin. (Its Jewish inventor, Felix Eichengruen, would be robbed of his credit by the Nazis before being sent to Theresienstadt.)

Founded in 1925, IG Farben was a cartel of six German chemical heavyweights, including the drug maker Bayer, the photo-chemist Agfa, and the plastics manufacturer BASF (all of them still industry leaders), whose fortunes had been made on synthetic dyes and dominated the global chemicals market. At its zenith in the late 1930s,

IG Farben employed a highly trained workforce of some 200,000.

As early as 1916, however, Germany's industrial chemists had blithely set a precedent for the Nazis' use of slave labor by convincing the Kaiser's army in World War I to dragoon hapless Belgian civilians and Russian POWs into work at understaffed plants.

Yet, though IG Farben has become synonymous with industrial evil, it wasn't a singularly immoral corporation from the get-go. Rather, in Jeffreys's telling, it was a process of moral compromise that accelerated the company's descent into villainy after IG Farben's directors hitched their fortunes to the Nazis, creating a lethal symbiosis between industry and regime. Without help from the company's ingenious scientists and hard-nosed managers, the author says, Hitler could never have launched, much less sustained, his apocalyptic scheme of war and genocide.

BY THE TIME HITLER CAME TO power in 1933, IG Farbenindustrie AG was a formidable corporate giant rivaling the international business clout of America's Standard Oil. The German chemical industry was a world leader in the scientific alchemy of synthesizing rare natural substances, and IG Farben would prove invaluable to Hitler's war effort.

In line with the Fuehrer's goal of a self-sufficient economy to allay Germany's acute raw material shortages during massive rearmament, the company spearheaded the production of high-quality synthetic rubber. It also came up with a way to keep the Luftwaffe in the air by chemically synthesizing coal (abundant in Germany) into aviation fuel. The company profited handsomely in return. During the war years IG Farben's annual investment stood at half a billion Reichsmarks – a fiftyfold increase over a decade earlier, when the Nazis came to power amid economic recession.

Whereas some businessmen and engineers (in the steel industry, for instance) sang to the Nazis' tune with reluctance, those at IG Farben joined in the chorus enthusiastically. An IG Farben director, Carl Krauch, became Hermann Goering's plenipotentiary for chemical production. With 23 other company executives, Krauch would be tried for war crimes at Nuremberg, where 13 of them were found guilty and sentenced to prison terms. In his defense, vice chairman Georg von Schnitzler explained IG engineers' eager collaboration

as their professional duty to solve technological challenges posed by Hitler's drive for autarky.

If German industrialists were not all motivated by National Socialist ideology, corporate greed made up for that. War was great for business. The German war machine's shopping list from IG Farben included light metals for Stuka bombers, high explosives, belt buckles, mess kits, plastic keys on Enigma encryption machines, even synthetic rubber-tipped windshield wipers. Meanwhile, as the Nazis plundered occupied territories, the concern shared in the spoils, acquiring prized industrial assets like Czechoslovakia's Skoda Works, a leading arms manufacturer previously owned by the Rothschilds. "By the end

ing enmity. Bosch went on to help Jewish employees harassed out of their jobs by finding them employment at the company's foreign factories (until they were fired from there, too).

Yet his principled stance didn't become company policy. The "new guard" of younger managers played along with the purging of Jews as they eagerly did business with the Nazis. By signing a lucrative government contract to produce 350,000 tons of synthetic gasoline annually, the chemists agreed to relieve Germany's acute reliance on fossil fuel imports, thereby "providing Hitler with [some of] the means to launch the most devastating conflict in history," Jeffreys writes.

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of the war," Jeffreys writes, "the mighty IG had become Hitler's cartel."

Even before Hitler achieved absolute power, the cartel's directors rallied behind the Nazis. On February 20, 1933, Hitler, newly installed as chancellor, summoned two dozen leading German industrialists – IG Farben heavily represented among them – to a meeting at Hermann Goering's private residence to ask for their support before parliamentary elections scheduled for March 5. They pledged 3 million Reichsmarks on the spot, with IG Farben alone contributing almost half a million marks. The company would remain among the regime's primary financial backers both in taxes and direct contributions right until the end.

Historians, such as James Pool in his revealing "Who Financed Hitler," have argued that German industrialists manifested overt Nazi sympathies from the start. Jeffreys offers a more nuanced explanation, portraying IG Farben executives' keen cooperation as a sign of self-serving opportunism, not ideological agreement. They were diehard nationalists, yes, but not virulent xenophobes – and were fairly liberal about economic matters.

Carl Bosch, the cartel's elderly visionary chairman, the writer points out, even pleaded with Hitler on behalf of IG's many Jewish scientists, earning himself the Fuehrer's last-

And so the Faustian deal was enacted with ever tighter cooperation – until, during the war, collaboration turned into criminal connivance.

THE NAZI IDEOLOGUES SAW FIT to adapt genocide to the exigencies of industrial production. Hitler and Himmler envisioned the Final Solution not only as murdering Jews outright but also as working them to death as slave laborers in German industry and on planned giant construction projects in occupied Poland and Russia. During "selection" at death camps, healthy young men and women were spared immediate execution in order to meet their intended ends through Vernichtung durch Arbeit, or "destruction through labor."

That policy suited IG Farben just fine. The company's buna, or synthetic rubber factory, at Monowitz fed off labor supplied by Auschwitz. In fact, Auschwitz-Birkenau, the outgrowth of a far smaller SS prison camp, was first conceived by SS leader Heinrich Himmler as a labor ancillary for IG Farben's plant.

The factory grounds would soon grow into a separate concentration camp – run by brutal company kapos with help from the SS – where "death came in a form profitable to the Third Reich," as Jeffreys puts it. Few

inmates lasted more than a few weeks. "By now," the author notes, "the whole project had assumed a ghastly self-sustaining logic, seeming to be as much about the consumption of prisoners [35,000 employed in 1943 alone, most worked to death] as about producing synthetic rubber."

At Auschwitz itself, the German Pest Control Company, an IG Farben subsidiary in Frankfurt, profited handsomely from its product Zyklon B, which was used for gassing Jews. IG Bayer, meanwhile, found the death camp a useful laboratory for its serological "research" in Dr. Josef Mengele's experiments on select inmates, many of them children. Another doctor employed at Auschwitz by the company wrote home enthusiastically to his colleagues in Leverkusen: "I have thrown myself into my work wholeheartedly to test our new preparations ... I feel like I am in paradise."

With such revealing details, Jeffreys leaves no doubt about company managers' and chemists' willful connivance in Hitler's crimes. His chronicle of IG Farben's corporate history, from its formative years in the 1860s

to its descent into ignominy a century later, is a meticulous, damning account told well and vigorously, although his strictly chronological retelling precludes a better-defined analysis of the pivotal war years (we're nearly halfway through the 410 pages before Hitler shows up). The reasons Jeffreys discovers behind the concern's sellout – greed, unscrupulousness, hypocritical see-no-evil stance – may appear more selfish than manifestly evil, but therein lies IG Farben's true iniquity: in its sycophantic pursuit of profits in the service of an unspeakable regime.

Few stories exemplify better the dangers and self-defeating follies inherent in a scientist's surrender to the vagaries of realpolitik than that of Fritz Haber (which Jeffreys unfortunately recounts only in scattered footnotes). The flamboyant Jewish scientist, working at BASF, achieved chemistry's equivalent of turning lead into gold by extracting nitrogen (essential for fertilizers and explosives and hitherto obtained from fast-depleting guano sources) from air as synthetic ammonia. He duly won a Nobel in 1918, but not before the proud German

patriot had earned himself a darker distinction – as the pioneer of poison gas in modern warfare at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915.

Indirectly responsible for the agonizing death of numerous Allied soldiers, Haber drove his wife to suicide and escaped being tried as a war criminal only by fleeing incognito to Switzerland. Despite his contributions to the Fatherland, the Nazis promptly disowned him. Haber died a broken man in 1934, and several members of his family were later gassed in concentration camps.

As Haber can testify, with Faust, a pact with the devil, however lucrative at first, always ends in blood and tears. ●



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