

# Hitler's vile cretins

In power, the Nazi war criminals were masters of life and death for millions. In captivity, they proved to be petty and pathetic **By Tibor Krausz**

**PICTURE ANY** prominent Nazi, and he will appear something like this: a jackbooted, steely-eyed brute in a crisp uniform who is as much given to casual outbursts of murderous sadism as to barking “Heil Hitler!” with right arm raised in the obligatory salute.

It's a simplistic view of them, yes, but one with the comforting certainties of pigeonholing. Yet the Nazi mass murderers were hardly mere cardboard cutouts of one another. They were a disparate bunch: some erudite and cultured, some unschooled and uncouth, some prudish and dependable, some seedy and venal. When it came to the tasks of indoctrinating the masses, waging war and killing Jews, however, they all tended to be dedicated and methodical.

The usual explanations about why they murdered have run on predictable lines: The Nazis were sociopaths without any empathy for their victims. They were in thrall to their charismatic leader. They were sadists and ruthless murderers. They were indoctrinated and brainwashed. They were sticklers for rules and just followed orders. They were cold-blooded beasts in human form. They were a combination of all these to one extent or another.

To Joel E. Dimsdale, a Jewish-American clinical psychiatrist, some of these explanations were always suspect, or at least insufficient. “I grew up [in Sioux City, Iowa] with stick-finger thin ideas of evil from the comic books – the Joker, Lex Luther, Doc-

tor Doom. This was not a world where evil was nuanced,” he recalls in “The Anatomy of Malice.” What his long practice as a psychiatrist has taught him, the author says, is that people can rarely be reduced to clear-cut singularities of behavior and motivation. In the book he sets out to unravel the psyches of Nazi mass murderers – or at least get the measure of them.

To do so, Dimsdale, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, spent years scouring myriad archives for contemporary psychiatric evaluations, medical examinations, witness testimonies, wardens' memoirs and magazine articles about the two dozen Nazi leaders tried in Nuremberg after the war. He decided to zero in on four of the most notorious: Vice-Chancellor Hermann Goering, Deputy Fuehrer Rudolf Hess, Labor leader Robert Ley, and propagandist Julius Streicher. The result is a fascinating and informative compendium of details and little-known tidbits relayed with flair.

The Allied captors weren't impressed by the Nazi bigwigs in their charge. “They are perverts, dope fiends and liars,” opined Colonel Burton C. Andrus, the chief warden of the interrogation center at a converted resort in Luxemburg, where the chief Nazis were held while awaiting trial in Nuremberg. “When Dr. Frank” – Hans Frank, Hitler's personal lawyer who oversaw the murder of countless Jews in occupied Poland – “got here he

was wearing a pair of lace panties. Goering brought an apple-cheeked ‘valet’ with him. When Ley got here he had a gonorrheal tincture with him and complained that he couldn't live without women.”

There you have it: the Third Reich's finest. The Nazi leaders had been a famously fissiparous lot, and in prison too, they continued griping, whining, bickering, scheming and grandstanding. “On one occasion,” Dimsdale writes, “Goering tried to strike Ribbentrop with his marshal's baton, shouting ‘Shut up, you champagne peddler.’” Ribbentrop took offense at this breach of etiquette. “[M]y name is von Ribbentrop,” he retorted, insisting on the proper honorific.

Farcical? Certainly. Yet what they had all done while they were in power was hardly a laughing matter. Now, however, they were defeated men, humbled and deflated, who kept blaming everyone but themselves: each other and Hitler, mostly. Their mental state and behavior bordered on the comical. During a Rorschach test, commonly used in psychological analysis at the time, Ley detected the image of a fierce bear in an inkblot, which to him appeared Russian and represented rapacious Soviet-style communism. Even free association was constrained by their ingrained paranoid fantasies.

Goering, who suffered from delusions of grandeur, was in turns belligerent and obsequious. He was described by an American warden as a “simpering slob.” The blubbery



Hermann Goering, pictured at the 1945 Nuremberg Trials, was described by an American warden as a 'simpering slob'

Nazi was also an effete snob with monogrammed suitcases, fingers bedecked with large bejeweled rings and nails coated in red varnish. He was addicted to morphine, suffered from heart problems and struck several of his captors as a petty and manipulative prima donna prone to theatrics and hysterics.

Yet he was a complex character. The creator of the Gestapo and an architect of the Final Solution who had been a first-class fighter pilot in World War I, Goering was directly responsible for the deaths of untold numbers of innocents. But he was a doting husband and father, had a soft spot for animals, and could be magnanimous. He even saved two Jews who had once helped him. He puzzled his interrogators. One saw him as "the devil incarnate," another as "a silly fat eunuch."

He was a skillful orator with manifest talents. What he lacked was a conscience and a capacity for introspection. He remained unrepentant to the end and killed himself on the sly with secretly obtained cyanide. In clinical parlance, Dimsdale notes, Goering was a malignant narcissist whose only concern was his own well-being. Other people were simply disposable extras in the grand epic of his self-delusions.

Goering despised Ley, who was a crooked and boozy *bierhaus* lout, and as head of the German Labor Front had been partly responsible for the vast network of slave labor created by the Nazis at the point of machine guns. He was a fanatical Nazi and a rabid

Jew hater who wanted to "exterminate this filth, extirpate it root and branch." "Hitler was his Messiah, the Jew was his devil, and World War II was a titanic, apocalyptic struggle of good versus evil," Dimsdale writes.

Yet Ley had also championed the rights of German workers, including women. He resented being considered a war criminal. He strangled himself in his cell with a noose fashioned from towels. In a suicide note, he recanted his anti-Semitism, calling it "a mistake."

But then there was Julius Streicher: a pathological Jew hater, a convicted rapist and a brute of a man. Streicher had been editor of the Nazi rag *Der Stürmer*, in which capacity he had reveled in detailed depictions of Jews in lurid sadomasochistic phantasmagorias. He was the epitome of "sheer nastiness, unalloyed with any saving graces," Dimsdale notes.

"He is a dirty old man of the sort that gives trouble in parks," wrote the British journalist Rebecca West, who covered the trial, "and a sane Germany would have sent him to an asylum long ago." In Hitler's Germany, of course, vile cretins like Streicher, far from being sent to asylums, were appointed to leadership positions with the power of life and death for Jews and other undesirables. He went to the gallows shouting "Heil Hitler!" His final words were "Purim Feast 1946," in one last dig at the Jews.

Rudolf Hess, too, was a puzzle to his captors. A gaunt introvert with pinched, vulpine features and a "doglike devotion" to Hitler, in the words of a prison psychiatrist, Hess thought the Jews were trying to poison his food and control him telepathically. A bellyaching hypochondriac, the erstwhile Deputy Fuehrer was diagnosed by Allied psychiatrists as a paranoid schizophrenic. After he stabbed himself in the chest in a failed suicide attempt, Hess claimed that Jews had made him do it through remote-controlled hypnosis. Not surprisingly, Churchill didn't know what to make of him, dismissing his antics as like those of "a mentally defective child."

Others suspected Hess was faking mental illness to avoid punishment. But it's unlikely he was a picture of mental health. In 1941, during a secret fly-by-night mission that he'd hatched all by himself to impress Hitler, Hess flew alone to Britain in a small airplane so as to convince England to join Nazi Germany against Soviet Russia. He landed in a farmer's field in Scotland, where he demanded to speak to the Duke of Hamilton; instead he found himself imprisoned in the Tower of London. His escapade was one of the most bizarre episodes of the war. In the end he was declared fit to stand trial for war crimes and was sentenced to life in prison, where his erratic behavior continued until his death, at age 93 in 1987, when he hanged himself in his cell.

## Books

Four men, four different personalities. Yet they had a lot in common: extreme fanaticism that was impervious to reason, slavish devotion to Hitler, hugely inflated egos, pathological lack of conscience and even common decency. These traits alone didn't make them mass murderers, but they did make them ideal for leadership positions in a regime that was subservient to the will of a charismatic psychopath with world-conquering fantasies.

As Dimsdale's account makes it clear, these Nazi leaders weren't simply banal, as per Hannah Arendt's famous formulation about Adolf Eichmann; they were pathetic. Yet they managed to turn one of the world's most civilized and cultured nations into a basket case of unadulterated hate and primitive, murderous atavism, where citizens came to embrace their leaders' bizarre psychoses. How could that be?

Perhaps there's no mystery. We tend to view people as rational actors who make intelligent decisions. What if they aren't? What if most people are motivated by blind self-interest? And the Germans were told incessantly by the Nazis that their self-interest lay in getting rid of the Jews, who were incorrigibly malignant influences and devilish schemers out to destroy the Fatherland. As a result, to many of them the mass murder of Jews became a rational choice, a moral duty even.

"During the first try my hand trembled a bit as I shot, but one gets used to it," a German police officer, quoted in American historian Timothy Snyder's harrowing "Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin," wrote back home from the Ukraine apropos shooting Jews. "By the tenth try I aimed calmly and shot surely at the many women, children and infants. I kept in mind that I have two infants at home whom these hordes would treat just the same, if not ten times worse."

Here was mass murder justified as self-defense. This was a common refrain among the Nazis who saw, or portrayed, themselves not as perpetrators but as the actual victims of their Jewish victims. They claimed to be facing an existential threat from the Jews, those evil machinators who sought to control the world, subjugate long-suffering Germans and pollute the pure blood of true Aryans, the rightful masters of the world. It was a life-or-death, kill-or-be-killed struggle in which industrial-scale eugenics and genocide became tools of defensive social engineering.

"As a psychiatrist, I've seen an enormous

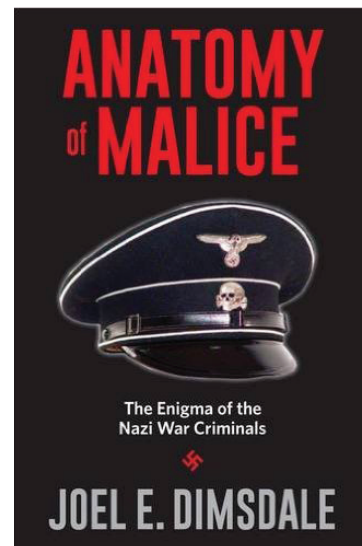
amount of irrational self-destructive behavior. Why should it surprise me if an entire nation gets derailed and intoxicated by malice...?" Dimsdale observes. He prefers the word "malice" to "evil" in describing the animating sentiment behind the Nazis' actions. What set the Nazis apart, the author says, was that they took their murderous malice to a new level: they industrialized it on a mass scale by subordinating the entire apparatus of the state to the goal of genocide.

The chief Nazi war criminals didn't have unique psychologies that made them do it, the author stresses. What they did have were unique opportunities to elevate themselves through brute force, which they duly took. Hitler's Germany enabled ambitious and ruthless people like them to positions of unquestioned authority, in which they became masters of life and death for millions upon millions of people. The Nazi leaders weren't monochrome villains. They were much worse: fairly normal human beings, some intoxicated by their power, some driven by their megalomania, some obsessed with their hatreds and blood lust. They could be ruthless opportunists or dull functionaries.

Social psychology experiments, Dimsdale notes, have borne out such views. In one seminal experiment, devised by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1960s, otherwise well-adjusted college students ended up administering increasingly painful electronic shocks to other students, to the point of outright torture, when they were instructed to do so. People, Milgram argued, can easily come to view themselves as merely the instruments of others in inflicting pain and death, thereby absolving themselves of personal responsibility. "[S]ocial context alone [can] foment a phenomenal amount of nastiness," Dimsdale notes.

Yet other experiments showed how easily people can become desensitized to the suffering of others in a phenomenon dubbed "bystander apathy." Such findings from the field of psychology have tallied with historian Ian Kershaw's observation that the Holocaust was largely the result of ordinary Germans' "lethal indifference towards the fate of the Jewish population."

All this makes for a sobering thought: without the active complicity or wanton indifference of millions of Germans the Nazis would never have got away with mass murder, much less managed to pull it off. Therein lies the true moral lesson of the Holocaust. ■



**Anatomy of Malice:  
The Enigma of the Nazi  
War Criminals**

Joel E. Dimsdale  
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