

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 2 Number 2 August 2003

Jay Y. Gonen, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003. ISBN 0-8131-9046-0, 240 pages. \$19.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Lee Baker, University of Cincinnati, Raymond Walters College

Historians of the Third Reich have long tried to explain how and why National Socialism appealed to such a broad spectrum of German society. Previous authors have looked to Germany's past and found traditions (or a lack of certain traditions) which predisposed Germans to be receptive to the Nazi message; others have identified the specific circumstances of the 1910s and 1920s as preparing the ideological, economic, and political ground for the Nazis. This book contributes to the literature on this topic. The main thesis is that Hitler was successful because his message mirrored "shared group fantasies." These fantasies, which revolved around curing national "traumas" such as the loss of World War I, were part of a mass psychology which found Nazi ideology appealing because it utilized the preoccupations and psychological expectations of the majority of Germans. For example, the "stab in the back" legend was particularly satisfying as an explanation of how Germany lost the Great War because it fit into cultural assumptions, based in part on Richard Wagner's operas and the Grimm fairy tales, that only treachery and deception could prevent the German people from achieving their goals. This book tries to unravel how German mass psychology both fed and was nourished by the particular world-view of the Nazis. The essential findings of the book are summarized in nine points in the penultimate chapter, and some may find it useful to read this first as the remaining chapters expand on these and explain their significance.

Gonen's thesis depends on these mass fantasies and desires resonating with Nazi ideology and therefore explicates Hitler's ideology and its connections to German culture. In several core chapters Gonen identifies the main components of Hitler's ideology as the Jewish threat, inadequate German living space, and the Führer Principle. The mainspring of Nazi ideology was the belief that Jews, whose goal is the total domination of mankind, pose a fatal threat to the well-being of all human society. Gonen carefully shows how this peculiar analysis of world history activates Nazi ideology, especially as it relates to the pursuit of a *lebensraum* adequate to accomplish folkish goals. The Jews operate in insidious and devious ways in achieving their mastery of the world and both the discovery of their machinations and the full mobilization of the folk against them requires the active involvement of a leader capable of penetrating their disparate disguises. These analyses are extremely valuable for anyone interested in understanding Hitler's world-view (even if you disagree whether or not he had one). They are not simply a rehash of Eberhard Jäckel's interpretation, but a careful analysis of Hitler's speeches and writings during the formative period of his rise to power (the early 1920s). Gonen carefully draws out the primary importance of the "Jewish problem" in understanding Hitler, and shows that everything in Hitler's world-view was ultimately shaped and driven by his belief that he was destined to "solve" this problem once and for all and achieve "utopia." For Hitler, utopia was the idyllic period in German history before Jewish blood had infected Aryan blood, and his goal, which Gonen spells out clearly, was to recreate that moment and thus restore German racial health.

Gonen focuses on this desire to "repeat" history as the core of the psychological problem for Germans. Their dissatisfaction with the way things have turned out compels them to constantly replay history in a vain attempt to finally "get it right." Hitler offered a way out of this vicious circle by pinpointing the exact cause of German suffering: the Jews. Hitler promised to the Germans, in ways that resonated with their cultural and psychological assumptions, a new route to utopia through the elimination of the Jews from within the body politic as well as from the outside world. To accomplish this the Germans would be purified, combined into a united and energized folk, and then launched in an aggressive campaign to eradicate the Jews from Germany and the entire

world. Nazi ideology was thus doomed to failure as it entailed war with, ultimately, the entire world. This was a venture, as previous history had shown, that Germany could not achieve given the limitations of its economy and resources.

This book is a valuable contribution to understanding why Nazism was appealing to Germans. Its basic premise, that psychological principles can be applied to society as a whole, may not be appealing to everyone, but the discussion is nonetheless fascinating and insightful and is one that I will integrate into my classroom.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2001, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved