EVERYDAY LIFE: ROLES, MOTIVES, AND CHOICES DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Higher Education in Nazi Germany

After Adolf Hitler was appointed German Chancellor in January 1933, the new Nazi government began an effort to completely reorder public and private life in Germany.[1] The Nazi regime quickly targeted German universities—among the most elite in the world at the time—for restructuring according to Nazi principles.[2] While the Nazi Ministry of Education initiated reforms, local Nazi organizations and student activists worked to bring Nazi ideals to German campuses. These forces, along with increasing antisemitism under Nazi rule, transformed everyday life at German universities. Throughout this period, students, faculty, and staff made individual decisions that both upheld and opposed Nazi ideology.[3]

With the passage of the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" in 1933, most Jewish professors in Germany were dismissed from their positions. Others, such as Professor Eugen Mittwoch, were able to keep their posts temporarily only due to the political value of their research. After purging Jewish and "politically undesirable" faculty, the regime then targeted the student body with the "Law Against Overcrowding in Schools and Universities." As German authorities continued to "Aryanize" German universities, Jews increasingly lost the

opportunity to teach or study. Many non-Jewish Germans sought to benefit from their persecution.

The daily business of university life continued in the wake of these new policies, but political concerns increasingly influenced the way professors and students worked and studied. The practice of denunciation, as demonstrated by the "Request for the Investigation of Professor Hans Peters," illustrates the danger posed to both students and faculty if they failed to follow new ideological norms. Those willing to voice support for the new regime—whether out of enthusiasm or practicality—often received promotions or other rewards. Meanwhile, many others quietly accepted the new policies and passively benefited from the persecution of their Jewish peers. Very few, such as the small student group in Munich known as the White Rose, took any significant action to resist the Nazi dictatorship.[4]

The Nazi government and its supporters manipulated several aspects of the country's traditional university system to turn German higher education into a crucial source of support for the new regime. For example, the German student population had been largely male long before the Nazi rise to power, and German campuses were dominated by fraternities.[5] Those organizations maintained traditional military discipline and dress codes, and their alumni groups exercised significant political power both before and after 1933. Fraternities—often working with the Student Council and Nazi Student League—served as a powerful and violent force for implementing Nazi principles at universities, often going beyond the party platform in their radicalism.[6] A Report on the Camaraderie House for Female Students of Göttingen shows how Nazi student groups used the format of traditional student organizations to train both men and women to become the next generation of Nazi leaders.

Although the regime could rely on many committed student activists, the Third Reich also sought the support of German professors to lend legitimacy to their policies.[7] Because German universities were state

institutions, professors' academic careers became vulnerable to the whims and wishes of the Nazi state. While only a small minority of professors had been Nazi Party members before 1933, several prominent professors quickly voiced their support for the Third Reich. In the new German university, political loyalty was valued over academic ability in the assessment of students and in the selection and promotion of professors. Authorities infused university classrooms with Nazi ideology—as shown in the document, "Foundation of the Advanced School of the German Reich". But prioritizing politics over academics affected the quality of German higher education.

Nevertheless, professors—even enthusiastic supporters of the new regime—often spoke out against some aspects of Nazi policy. The case of Eduard Kohlrausch shows how his opposition to student-led book burnings caused his removal from the university administration.[8] Dissent against individual policies, however, did not give rise to any concerted resistance movements. German universities as a whole formed a solid base of support for the Nazi regime, contributing valuable knowledge to the development of technology for the war effort as well as logistical support for the Holocaust.

The Nazification of universities overwhelmed the daily lives of students with new requirements, including mandatory lectures, physical exercises, labor duties, and political assemblies. Many students resented those requirements, even if they supported the Nazi Party. In Heidelberg, for example, where the daily life of students was dominated by political instruction and mandatory physical training, large numbers of students withdrew from the university in search of other educational opportunities.[9] As illustrated in the "Memo Regarding Maria-Elisabeth Koch," students also showed varying degrees of enthusiasm for the labor service that was often required of them in territories occupied by Nazi Germany.

The Nazi government's project of remaking German universities was broadly successful, but it produced unintended consequences. The quality of education suffered significantly as classes were regularly cancelled for political assemblies and students' schedules became filled with ideological and paramilitary training. Moreover, purging Jewish faculty deprived German universities of valuable expertise.[10] Within a few years, many observers in Germany and abroad became deeply skeptical about the quality of German higher education in the Third Reich.[11] Propaganda efforts such as the Carl Schurz tour for American professors and students—documented with a slickly produced video—did not prevent protest. The 550th-anniversary celebration of Heidelberg University met with opposition in Europe, even while prominent American universities such as Harvard accepted invitations.[12]

With the defeat of the Third Reich in 1945, Allied forces occupying Germany began a long-term effort to remove the influence of Nazi ideology in German society.[13] Many German academics who made significant contributions to the Nazi war effort fled to the United States, where they lived comfortable lives and their expertise was highly valued by American universities and the US military.[14] In postwar Germany, many faculty and students who had benefited from the Nazis' discriminatory policies without being especially vocal or enthusiastic supporters of the regime sought to cast their dissent or their silence as forms of political resistance to obscure their own complicity. Although many Germans denied having supported the Nazi regime, antisemitism persisted in postwar Germany. The case of Hermann Budzislawski shows the difficulties encountered by the relatively few German Jews who decided to return to Germany after World War II.

Sources in this collection document the choices facing students and faculty pursuing their everyday lives in the shadow of Nazism and the Holocaust. Over the course of this period, as antisemitic discrimination escalated to mass murder, the higher education system proved to be a

source of support—rather than opposition—to the party's project of remaking German society.