

Campbell Shaw

Was the writing on the wall in Germany in the 1930s?

“Why didn’t they just leave?” This question has been asked over and over again following the Holocaust, and those of us fortunate enough to not have experienced the horrors of this genocide will never know all of the intricacies that went into Hitler and the Nazi’s efforts to purify Germany, but it has become clear, through the millions of novels that have been written on World War II, our growing understanding of human nature, and the naivety that exists in every human despite us getting burned again and again has shown that, while it may seem absurdly obvious today looking back on the Holocaust and Mein Kemphf and Nazi propaganda that they had every intention of making life miserable for Jews and other minorities, if not eliminate them entirely, but the reality of the matter is that no one was willing to believe that Hitler had that in him, no one was willing to believe that it could happen to *them*.

Of course there were signs, and in many ways it can still be near impossible to understand Jewish Germans making the conscious decision to stay in Germany during Hitler and the Nazis rise to power, but Germany was the Jews’ home as much as it was everyone else’s, and probably more so than it was Hitler’s, ironically. The writing wasn’t on the wall for them, just as it wasn’t for the U.S. Us humans like to believe that nobody is evil enough to attempt the extermination of an entire people, or that a fellow human being has the intention to collect those who aren’t believed to “fit” in society and throw them in a gas chamber. So it’s maybe not such a crazy thought that Jewish people weren’t able to see what we see as clear signs of coming war and genocide, since not only had they never experienced something quite like that in Germany, but because they thought Hitler to be *their* leader too.

This concept is equally difficult to wrap our minds around, considering the fact that we know all of the behind the scenes work it took to pull off the Holocaust, and since we know that Hitler favored anti-Semitic views from his very young life forward. Though, Hitler didn’t always seem like such a monster. In fact, people often considered his anti-Semitism to be just a little quirk in his personality, something that would dissolve over time. He and his Nazis, with specific help from his lead propagandist Goebbles, did a phenomenal job of hiding the real Hitler. Really, Hitler did a great job of hiding the real Hitler. He presented himself as someone who just wanted what was best for Germany. Nobody was sold on the idea of democracy in Germany, and following World War I, Germans were questioning the effectiveness of their government, so it didn’t take a lot for Hitler to win them over to his seemingly ideal concept of a new direction, with no democracy, per say, but still most of the perks of a people-centric government. Using his war hero stories and advantage of being a new figure that didn’t reek of old money or a long line of family in government, Hitler created a persona first for himself, and later for the Gestapo and Nazi Party, then ultimately “The New Germany”, that made him basically get handed power by

naïve figures like Wexler, who quite literally agreed to hand his power over to Hitler. Hitler wasn't a genocidal maniac to Germany in the 1930s, he was just another proud German looking to better his country. To Germans at this time, the only difference between them and Hitler was that Hitler was finally going to do something to recover their great country!

By the time everything started falling apart, and when people definitely should have begun to catch on, it was a national phenomenon to be a German in Hitler's Germany. Sure, Jewish people couldn't really have jobs, Jewish kids couldn't go to school, and people were mysteriously disappearing left and right after they said anything anti-Hitler, anti-Gestapo, or anti-Germany, but everything was going to subside sooner or later. Plus, Jews had some opportunity for work even in the 1930s, such as the opportunity to continue running their stores, only under a real German name and through someone else, or maybe even still getting asked to help with monetary jobs, since doing so was against the Christian faith. It seemed, to those inside Germany, that things weren't *that* bad. The writing on the wall was getting bolder, but since those who started catching on were handed the opportunity to get out of Germany legally, why would Jews or Gypsies have reason to suspect that wouldn't, at any point, be an option? When attempting to think from the point of view of those in Germany as a Jew, it's more reasonable to consider the possibility that they really were blind to Hitler and the Nazi party's doings, that they maintained hope in the great Deutschland, and were still proud Germans whose ancestors had lived there for generations. It's likely that they turned a blind eye, to some extent, to what was going on around them, and instead rolled their eyes and said things like "it'll blow over," or "we're Germans! We can make it through anything."

Further, the idea of acceptance greatly strengthened Hitler and the Nazis' ability to carry out all they did. When the idea of sterilization arose, not only had it already been in the backs of minds for centuries leading up to this point, but it kind of made sense to Germans. Parents would turn their children in to doctors if they suspected their child had a low IQ or a disability of some kind, since it seemed logical to them that, if their child wasn't an ideal German, then they shouldn't have the opportunity to reproduce and create more sub-par Germans. People accepted Hitler's laws and rulings as logical, in many cases. Maybe they didn't love the idea of getting sterilized, but those who turned *themselves* in to be considered for sterilization had to hold the belief that it was the right thing to do for their beloved country. Hitler may have brainwashed people to some extent, but in a multitude of instances, this work had already been completed for him by age-old beliefs and customs. This also plays into the idea that anti-Semitism was nothing new. Jewish people had been discriminated against since the beginning of Christianity, and while Jews had been through some rough stuff, they must have figured that they would be safe in modern 1930's Germany, at least from mass genocide. Preceding World War II, it's not as if the Jewish faith was popular amongst non-Jews, or even accepted. Jewish people couldn't own land, go into most professions, and weren't granted anywhere near the same luxuries as Christians, but they must have realized that that's just the way things are, and there was nothing really they could do about it. They had to consider the idea that, even if they did leave Germany, it's not as

if any other country in 1930s Europe would be much of an improvement. Anti-Semitism plagued societies since, quite literally, the death of Jesus Christ. Once they were deemed “Christ-killers” and ideas such as child scarification became associated with the Jewish faith, there was little hope within their community that they would be able to climb to the top any time soon. So it’s not completely far-fetched to assume that German Jews weren’t really that surprised when they started to get even more limitations. They wouldn’t have necessarily expected it, and they certainly wouldn’t have been supportive of it, but it seems unlikely that they would be wildly caught off guard by anti-Semitism, since it was something that they’d had to deal with for generations. They thought it would pass, as had any other anti-Semitic venture had in their lifetime. They had no reason to believe this one, under their brave new Fuhrer, would be the one everyone would remember and ponder for decades to come.

Ultimately, the writing on the wall may have been there to some capacity, but it was not only very well disguised and hidden by Hitler, Goebbles, and the Nazis, but it was also near-impossible for people to believe that anything relatively close to the Holocaust would come from some innocent anti-Semitic ideas held by their enthusiastic war hero leader who was quickly becoming the symbol of the new Germany. Just as hard as it is to understand the Holocaust today, it was near impossible for Germans to read the writing on the wall and understand what was to come.