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The Paradox of Animal & Human Rights in Nazi Germany

Nazi Germany often manifests itself as a black box of explanation. Current and historical scholarship regarding the Nazis still does not comfortably confront and explain the bizarre, brutal nature of the events carried out in the name of Aryan superiority. The typical expectations used with historical tragedies fail to apply when attempting to make sense of the horrors of the Third Reich. Despite being relatively removed from the past, we are still asking: “How was that possible?” I contend that a partial explanation lies in the ways in which the Nazis distinguished humans from non-human animals on moral, biological, and cultural bases. I hold that the Nazis’ blurring of the borderline between man and beast was not accidental: it was strategic, calculated, and deliberate. This blurring, however, resulted in the adoption of paradoxical attitudes towards the treatment of humans and animals. One example manifests within Adolf Hitler himself who—despite a horrific legacy of the systematic dehumanization and murder of millions of Jews, gypsies, and disabled persons—was particularly feeling in his compassion for non-human creatures. In this paper, I plan to describe the complex, often contradictory attitudes of the Nazis towards the treatment of animals through an analysis that pulls from the highest administrative levels of the Third Reich down to the very piece of propagandic film that prepared Germany for the Holocaust. Through an analysis of the historical concept of the “Jewish parasite” and environmental legislation of Hitler’s regime, I argue that the Nazis strategically employed this

artificial ambivalence between humans and animals to rationalize and enforce policies with intent for racial dehumanization and genocide.

1. Jewish Parasite

Anti-Semitism has existed for centuries and it did not begin with the rise of Adolf Hitler, although he certainly exacerbated anti-Semitic sentiment. The practice of disparaging Jews through animal representations can be traced back to early Christian history. Charles Patterson, author of the book *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, notes that the Patriarch of Constantinople (c. 347-407) referred to Jewish synagogues as a “lair for wild beasts” and believed that Jewish people “do not act any better than pigs and goats, in their lewd grossness and extremes of their gluttony” (44). He later observes that a German book, published in 1575, illustrated the phenomenon of a Jewish woman giving birth to two baby pigs. Patterson then notes the eventual transforming of the Jewish/wild-beast analogy to that of the “Jewish parasite.” Paul de Lagarde (1827-1891), a respected German scholar and specialist in Semitic languages, would often refer to Jewish people as “usurious vermin” that had the capacity to “pollute every national culture” (45). As a final example, it should be noted that in 1875, Major Osman Bey viewed Jews as “unproductive parasites.” Bey claimed that unless the other countries joined to destroy “the World’s greatest plague,” the Jewish parasites threatened to gain global supremacy (Musolff 24). As such, it’s clear that the historical trend of anti-Semitism, which can be traced back to the fourth century, evolved from comparisons to wild beasts to that of vermin, parasites, and other such creatures. While there remains a large amount of speculation as to the precise processes that transformed Hitler into an anti-Semite, we nevertheless observe his adoption of the “Jewish parasite” concept extensively throughout *Mein Kampf*.

Mein Kampf is an autobiographical manifesto published in 1925 that details, at length, Hitler's ideological foundation, anti-Semitism, and future plans for Germany. For historical context, 1925 was well before the rise of Nazism; at this time, Hitler had been the leader of the Nazi Party (then known as the German Workers' Party) for four years and would later assume dictatorial powers through his appointment to the German Chancellorship in 1933. It's clear with a preliminary reading of his work that Jewish-parasite analogies are plentiful throughout. Hitler often claimed that the Jews were of a lower social order, almost a separate species altogether, that had no home of its own and therefore had to parasitically attach itself to a nation's body for survival. In following this framework, he established that the Jewish parasite had to be destroyed if the country host was to survive. One of the most vividly revolting images in the text is Hitler's comparison of the Jew to a maggot:

What soon gave me cause for very serious consideration were the activities of the Jews in certain branches of life, into the mystery of which I penetrated little by little. Was there any shady undertaking, any form of foulness, especially in cultural life, in which at least one Jew did not participate? On putting the probing knife carefully to that kind of abscess one immediately discovered, like a maggot in a putrescent body, a little Jew who was often blinded by the sudden light. (Hitler 56)

In the latter half of his book, Hitler makes the supposedly parasitic nature of the Jew explicit:

Look at the ravages from which our people suffer daily as a result of being *contaminated* with Jewish *blood*. Bear in mind that this poisonous *contamination* can be *eliminated*

from the national *body* only after centuries, or perhaps never.... This *pestilential* adulteration of the *blood*, of which hundreds of thousands of our people take no account, is being systematically practised by the Jew to-day. Systematically these negroid *parasites* in our national *body* corrupt our innocent fair-haired girls and thus destroy something which can no longer be replaced in this world. (Hitler 310, emphasis mine)

As Andreas Musolff contends in “What role do metaphors play in racial prejudice? The function of antisemitic imagery in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*,” Hitler depicted the Jews as *parasites* that threatened to *infect* Germany’s national *body*. In establishing the Third Reich, Hitler intended to *annihilate* the *pest* from the national *body* to prevent further *infection* and *contamination* (35). Musolff summarizes this framework as one of “infection-crisis-therapy,” with the pestilent Jews occupying one side and the Nazis occupying the other. The resolution to this tense confrontation between the evil Jews and the savior Nazis, was, of course, the complete and total annihilation of the Jewish race. Hitler believed this would redeem Europe and—as paralleled by the author of the 1873 book *The Conquest of the World by the Jews*, Major Osman Bey—rid the planet of the “World’s greatest plague.” While outside the scope of this paper, I believe it’s worthwhile to point out that the Nazis often employed murder mechanisms paralleling typical forms of pest-control. This infection-crisis-therapy scheme put forth by Hitler and the Nazis seem to have informed lower-level implementation details of the Holocaust, like the specific use of gas chambers to poison and eliminate millions of people.

Critically, this framework of thinking that Hitler created was eventually adopted by his administration and served to dehumanize the Jews on a national level. Over the course of the Nazi reign, this Jew-parasite scheme would justify the marginalization and systematic killing of

millions of men, women, and children in favor of the protection of the Aryan race. While the growing anti-Semitism in Germany was initially met with resistance, Nazi propaganda was very effective in nullifying these protests. Before we analyze a critical piece of Nazi propaganda, I'd like to present the reader with Hitler's own commentary on the nature of effective propaganda: "The art of propaganda consists precisely in being able to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings, in finding the appropriate psychological form that will arrest the attention and appeal to the hearts of the national masses" (Hitler 148).

If *Mein Kampf* reveals the individual development of Hitler's anti-Semitism through his association of the Jews with parasitic vermin, then the Nazi film *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) demonstrates how this ideological framework was amplified at the state and local level through propaganda. *Der ewige Jude* is a 1940 film that attempts to justify the Jewish/vermin analogy through a documentary-style journey exploring "real" Jewish behaviors, customs, and traditions. The fundamental goal is to "expose" the reality of Jewry: each scene is carefully directed, shot, and edited to reveal to Germans the "true Jew underneath the veneer of European culture that concealed the Jewish parasite" (Hansen 82). The Jews are presented as foreign, untidy, dirty, subhuman creatures that attain wealth and power at the expense of the Germans, and their religion and culture draw particularly wrathful scrutiny from the film's narrator (83).

The film's director, Fritz Hippler, makes a number of deliberate filmmaking decisions that attempt to justify the Jewish/vermin scheme. For example, Hippler chooses to film exclusively in ghettos like the Warsaw Ghetto—these contained high numbers of poor, vulnerable resident Jews, which allowed Hippler to argue that this was their natural state as parasitic creatures. It enabled Hippler to assert that living in such miserable conditions was a normal and ordinary aspect of Jewish life, implying that the Jews *choose* to live among rats,

insects, parasites, pests, and other “low-level” creatures.¹ This blurring of the distinction between the Jews and unwanted pests is established through a few blunt scenes in the film, carefully edited to make their dehumanization seem justifiable and acceptable.

One such scene depicts large swarms of rats scurrying through sewers and the underground, which alternate with scenes of Jews emigrating out from Palestine. The narration claims: “Wherever rats appear they bring ruin, by destroying mankind's goods and foodstuffs. They spread disease, and plague, such as leprosy, typhoid fever, cholera, and dysentery.... They represent craftiness and subterranean destruction, just like the Jews” (Moller and Culbert 60). A few minutes later, the narration says: “The Jews are a race lacking farmers or workers, a race of parasites. Whenever a sore shows itself on the body of a people, the Jews settle and feed on the decaying organism. They find business in the sickness of a nation; therefore they try to increase every form of sickness” (Moller and Culbert 61). This theme is repeatedly brought up throughout the course of the hour-long film in brutal, explicit ways. As such, the audience is compelled to believe that the Jews are indeed subhuman by way of their traditions, behaviors, and mannerisms. The audience is led to believe that the Jewish race is indeed a parasite on the German national body that needs to be eliminated for the sake of Aryan purity. It’s precisely this effect that allows Hitler to prepare the German people for the Holocaust.

Beyond the visual comparisons between Jewish people and a whole host of creatures, the film also attempts to appeal to German morality. The “cruellest element of Jewish culture” is shown through the gruesome scenes of a kosher butchering at the end of the film. The intent is to document the brutality with which the Jews treat sacred animals and to conclusively establish that they are a barbaric race belonging to a lower social order. The irony is painfully clear: the

¹ While the film attempted to portray this misery as a normal element of Jewish life, it was actually filming the results of Nazi interference in the lives of millions of Polish Jews.

humane ethic that the Germans extend towards animals of radically different species is not extended to members of their *own species*. Note that this idea of German reverence towards animals is important—we will explore it later. After releasing the film to the public, Hippler claimed in a radio interview that the montage-style footage he took was authentic: “no Jew was forced into any kind of action or position during the shooting” and that they rendered “the Ghetto Jews in an unprejudiced manner, real to life as they live” (Moller and Culbert 48). Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda himself, recorded his impression of the film in his diary: “Scenes so horrific and brutal in their explicitness that one’s blood runs cold. One shudders at such barbarism” (Moller and Culbert 42).

In following the discriminatory framework set forth by the Führer, this film describes the Jew as a parasite that corrupts the music, art, and culture of German civilization. The documentary-like style of the film allows for a pseudo-scientific tone that encourages its audience to believe in the subhumanity of the Jews not on the basis of hate, but on the basis of objective science. Hansen writes, “The film combines the new tools of ethnography and medical anthropology to create an impression of scientific objectivity underlying an old claim: that the corruption of German culture reveals the presence of Jewish parasitic influence” (87).

The takeaway is clear: the concept of the “Jewish parasite” was deeply integrated with Nazi ideology. From Hitler’s claim of parasitic Jewish nature in *Mein Kampf* to the explicit comparison of Jews with rodents in *Der ewige Jude*, the Third Reich depended heavily upon the psychological dehumanization of the Jew as a “base-level” creature, comparable only to animals like rats, parasites, and bacteria. As a consequence, this implied the presence of a hierarchy wherein lower-level creatures like parasites (Jews) were placed near the bottom and higher-level animals (Aryans) were closer to the top. The formation of a social order as such is only possible

in a culture that willingly ignores the boundaries between man and beast. By equating the Jews to certain “low-level” animals, the Nazis could establish an order in which certain creatures (e.g. wolves, horses, cattle, frogs) could hold higher inherent worth than certain groupings of humans. This attitude towards animals led to catastrophic consequences for eleven million Jews and other “unwanted” human groups. So far, we have only explored one dimension of Nazi Germany’s attitude towards animals. Now, we analyze the other.

2. Nazi Environmentalism

For a person known as the murderous, tyrannical leader of the Third Reich, Hitler was a man of many dimensions. In seeming contradiction with his deep hate for particular groups of humans and systematic murder of eleven million people, Hitler was a vegetarian. He was deeply opposed to the idea of harming animals for consumption. Despite Hitler being a subject of massive scholarship, there is still a fair amount of speculation as to why he chose to be vegetarian. One of the leading theories regards Richard Wagner, Hitler’s favorite composer. Wagner, a known anti-Semite, believed that humanity was originally a single race that mistakenly divided itself into various races when people gave up their vegetarian diet. He believed that through eating meat, humans absorbed the blood of animals and became bestial. However, he also believed that even the most polluted, contaminated people could redeem themselves through again partaking in a purely vegetarian diet (Sax 130). There is a clear parallel between Wagner’s belief that meat-consumption would “pollute” or otherwise “contaminate” a people with Hitler’s insistence that the Jews were pestilentially contaminating the blood of the German national body. Assuming that Hitler was indeed influenced by this, he certainly disclosed his preference for vegetarianism in his private conversations. *Hitler’s Table*

Talk is a compilation of Hitler's private talks between 1941-1944 and according to it, Hitler declared one night in November, 1941, "But there's one thing I can predict to eaters of meat, that the world of the future will be vegetarian!" (125). Two months later, on the night of January 22nd, 1942, Hitler provided an extended explanation for the merits of vegetarianism:

Amongst the animals, those who are carnivores put up performances much inferior to those of the herbivores. A lion's in no shape to run for a quarter of an hour—the elephant can run for eight hours! The monkeys, our ancestors of prehistoric times, are strictly vegetarian. Japanese wrestlers, who are amongst the strongest men in the world, feed exclusively on vegetables. The same's true of the Turkish porter, who can move a piano by himself.... When you offer a child the choice of a piece of meat, an apple or a cake, it's never the meat that he chooses. There's an ancestral instinct there. (231)

Interestingly enough, while we typically expect people to convert to vegetarianism primarily out of appreciation for animals, Hitler seemed more concerned with returning to the "unspoiled blood" of man as well as with the apparent physical benefits that accompany a vegetarian diet. However, there is a fair amount of documentation displaying a young Hitler's compassion and appreciation for nonhuman animals.

Arnold Arluke and Boria Sax, in "Understanding Nazi Animal Protection and the Holocaust," document how integral dogs were to Hitler well before his rise to power. They note how Hitler's landlady in the 1920s, Frau Riechert, often saw a large dog named "Wolf" that seemed to be Hitler's closest friend. Later in life, Hitler spoke to his unique understanding of dogs, saying that they "are so intelligent that it's agonizing" (15). Indeed, he'd frequently remark

on his own wolfhound's unquestioned loyalty and devotion to himself while questioning the loyalty of his staff and administration (15). As a young artist, he sketched four dog portraits in great detail, reinforcing the idea that Hitler had taken a compassionate interest towards dogs at a young age. Besides dogs, Hitler also apparently enjoyed the presence of other types of animals. *Mein Kampf* contains a bizarre episode wherein Hitler, as a young politician, would "place a few pieces of hard bread or crust on the floor" for little mice to consume. He elaborates: "I had suffered so many privations in my own life that I well knew what hunger was and could only too well picture to myself the pleasure these little creatures were experiencing" (176). This struck me in its irony: Hitler was empathizing with the rodent, a supposedly low-order animal that would go on to play a critical part in the Jewish/vermin messaging of *Der ewige Jude* just a few years later. It's a prime example of the contradiction in attitudes and actions of the Nazis. To observe it at the highest level of the Third Reich demonstrates that the paradoxical attitudes of the Nazis did not develop organically in some arbitrary manner: it was informed by the self-contradictory nature of their very leader, der Führer.

Yet for all the love and compassion Hitler displayed towards non-human animals, he was also distinctively numb to human suffering. When Hitler was presented films by a friendly maharaja, he reportedly seemed indifferent to violent scenes depicting humans being savagely torn apart by animals, but would weep when he saw a wounded animal (Arluke and Sax 18). I suspect that Hitler's compassion for animals was a type of coping mechanism to allow him to deal with his own indifference towards human pain. Perhaps it was a deliberate way for him to feel "humane" during a time when he would command the murder of millions of people. It also reveals an (arguably ironic) reverence for animals that was shared by the legislators of his administration.

Germany of the 1930s was exceptionally progressive in regards to animal rights and welfare. No other country of the time came even close. One specific theme that influenced Nazi thinking on this front was the belief that animals were moral, if not sacred entities. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, had written in his diaries that “man should not feel so superior to animals... man believes that he alone has intelligence, a soul, and the power of speech. Has not the animal these things? Just because we, with our dull senses, cannot recognize them, it does not prove that they are not there” (Arluke and Sax 11). Goebbels clearly believed in the moral, sacred value of non-human animals, a sentiment shared by Hitler and other elite members of the administration. Arluke and Sax contend that a motivator for Nazi hate towards the Jews could be seen through certain anti-Semitic rhetoric that suggested that persecuting the Jews was justifiable on the basis of revenge for hurt animals. Indeed, Jews were “identified as enemies of animals and implicitly Germans” (21). In *Animals in the Third Reich*, author Boria Sax writes of Nazi leader Hermann Goring’s address of restrictions on vivisection:

The German people particularly have always shown their great love of animals and the question of animal protection was always near their hearts. For thousands of years the German people have always looked upon their household and farmyard animals as their companions, in the case of horses as their fighting companions, and as God’s creatures. To the German, animals are not merely creatures in the organic sense, but creatures who lead their own lives and who are endowed with perceptive facilities, who feel pain and experience joy and prove to be faithful and attached. . . . Under the influence of foreign conceptions of justice and a strange comprehension of law, through the unhappy fact that

the exercise of justice was in the hands of people alien to the nation — because of all these conditions, until now, the animal was considered a dead thing under the law. (101)

It's critical to note that Goring blames the unnecessary murder of innocent animals on "people alien to the nation"—the Jews. This is one example that illustrates how cherry-picked elements of Jewish culture, such as kosher butchering, were used against the Jews to justify their marginalization and murder. It reveals that the Nazis thought so lowly of the Jews that these humans were placed below animals in the social-order hierarchy. Therefore, it is baffling to observe that the first sections of the 1933 Law on Animal Protections claimed to "protect all animals and make no distinction between pets and others, between higher and lower animals, or between creatures that are useful and those that are harmful to human beings" (Sax 101). This was simply not true. The Nazis had formed, accepted, and pushed forward a hierarchical framework of thinking that placed various forms of life in different positions on the social-order. The Aryans were at the top, Jews at the bottom, and animals in between. The above declaration on the 1933 Law on Animal Protections is a clear example of the kind of absurd difference between internal Nazi attitudes and what they portrayed outward to the world. Despite this contradiction in intent and implementation, the 1933 Law on Animal Protections was nevertheless very progressive. They were especially detailed and known worldwide for their sophistication and specificity. While the laws themselves may have been based on humane ideals, a few were veiled attacks on the Jews. While never explicitly mentioning the Jews, the law established that animals must be stunned before being killed, which effectively banned the traditional practice of kosher butchering. Other rules went as far as to say that unnecessarily tormenting animals could be punishable by up to two years in prison, a fine, or both (Sax 182).

This intense emphasis on preventing the animal from “unnecessary torment” was inconsistent with the values the Nazis had prioritized: strength, hardness, and power. The spirit with which the Nazis systematically eliminated millions of “undesirable” humans was fundamentally at odds with their compassion, love, and care for non-human animals.

A few years after the passage of the Law on Animal Protection, the Nazis implemented laws dictating how animal transport was to be conducted. The 1938 Law on Animal Protection During Transport by Railroad provided, in excruciating detail, the parameters by which the spacing between individual animals was to be determined and how well attended the stalls were to be (Sax 185). What is especially disturbing here is the political context within which these laws were established. While the German authorities would penalize people for mishandling animals with multiple years in jail, these same authorities would violate *animal-protection* legislation by transporting millions of *people* to concentration camps in trains under miserable crowding conditions. This speaks to the horrifying ways in which the blurring of boundaries between humans and animals enabled the Nazis to equate the Jews to despicable pests. In this legal ordering of the world, Jews had lower inherent value than a living frog (the 1933 law established the illegality of removing legs from a living frog). The juxtaposition of the law establishing the illegality of “unnecessarily tormenting or roughly mishandling an animal” with the murderous actions of the Nazi regime towards fellow humans reveals a gaping chasm between the legal pillars of intent and enforcement. It’s a prime encapsulation of the bizarre attitudes the Nazis had towards the treatment of humans and animals, and it speaks to the great many paradoxes of the Third Reich.

3. Conclusion

In the case of the Third Reich, the disintegration of distinction between humans and animals led to paradoxical attitudes failing to protect fundamental human rights while taking the humane ethic to its extreme in regards to animal protection. It led to the willful ignorance of violations of Nazi animal rights laws in favor of attempting to remove the “Jewish parasite” from the national body. It led to the abolition of the moral distinctions between humans and animals by equating people as animals, allowing the Nazis to elevate the moral worth of an animal while simultaneously lowering the moral value of certain human groups. This deliberate, strategic disintegration of boundaries enabled the Nazis to rationalize and justify their actions in horrifying ways. Indeed, there exists a sinister sense of genocidal rationalism underlying the human-animal relational contradictions of the Nazis, one which convinced an entire nation of the need to rid itself of Jewish “vermin.” This rationalization of murderous intent serves as a mirror for society today to look inwards and examine the double standards by which we judge animals and people. As such, we cannot risk mythologizing and dismissing the Nazis as a group of irrational ethno-superiorists. They were not. We must closely examine the strategic, calculated processes that led to the rise of the Nazis and the execution of millions in the Holocaust. If we do not, we risk history repeating itself. In concluding, I ask the reader to consider the following quote from Heinrich Himmler, primary architect of the Holocaust:

We Germans, who are the only ones in the world who have a decent attitude toward animals, will also show a decent attitude toward these human animals, but it would be a crime against our own blood to worry about them. (Arluke and Sax 27)

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