

‘German Nazism 1933-1939 in the context of its contemporary political ideologies’

Adam Moolna, 26th March 2009

A political ideology is essentially a system of beliefs about power relations between individuals, groups or structures; both within society and between societies. Nazism was a political ideology that grew out of a German nationalist chapter established in Bremen in 1918, with the resultant National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party) seizing control of the federal German state in 1933. Present day interpretations of German Nazism are almost inevitably coloured by our knowledge of how the Holocaust and the Second World War unfolded. The unique horrors of this industrialised genocide lead many to consider Nazism to be a unique aberration that manifested the personal evil of Adolf Hitler and, in essence, to discuss it without connection to the other ideologies and nationalisms with which it co-existed. Considering German Nazism in the context of its contemporary political ideologies, however, allows a more nuanced analysis of what was truly unique about Nazism, and which features were in reality simply wider reflections of the 1933-1939 European political landscape.

The defining aspects of Nazi ideology are typically understood to consist of a combination of racialist ideas (anti-Semitism, blood nationalism, eugenics), war mongering (industrial preparation for war, militarisation of society) and strict Party control of society (propaganda and a secret police state). Contemporary political ideologies in Germany's sphere of interest (specifically Europe, Russia and the United States), however, shared many of Nazism's racialist and control ideas. Across much of the southern United States, for example, well established laws and practices treated black Americans as second class citizens (and would continue to do so into the 1960s). Modern theories of eugenics were pioneered during the 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States and Great Britain, spreading across Europe and the liberal West. And within the British Empire of the 1930s, Zionist nationalism in Palestine (legitimated by the 1917 Balfour declaration of support for a Jewish homeland) provoked the 1935 Arab Revolt, whilst apartheid structures were being formalised in the Union of South Africa. Indeed, Afrikaaner and Zionist nationalisms both used the same kind of 'holy land' symbolism as German Nazism. The Nazis similarly shared steadfast anti-Communism with the political liberals of the United States and Great Britain (notwithstanding the strategic expediency of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact); but also paralleled the Communists in the blurring of distinctions between Party and State, in the control of thought, and in the cult of the leader. These latter similarities are the basis of the contested 'totalitarianism' model that positions Nazism as a totalitarian political ideology like that of Stalinism; with the central role of organisations such as the secret police in maintaining control.

Nazi Germany did, however, have a plurality and duplication of power centres (and their roles) that contrasted with the centralisation of Stalinist Russia - Hitler employed 'social Darwinism' in setting broad policy objectives, with underlings competing to achieve those goals. Meanwhile, German anti-Semitism, which had previously mirrored that seen elsewhere in Europe and Russia, became radicalised in symbolism, spirit and legislation by the Nazi Party in power. This leads into what more subtly distinguishes Nazism as

unique, which was the extent to which various tenets common to the spectrum of dominant political ideologies were radicalised, both within Nazi thought and in the severity of their implementation. Unique radicalisation encompassed the three main ideological areas commonly held to define Nazism: nationalism; anti-Semitism; and war-making. France, Britain, the United States and Russia, like Germany, all had national myths about what defined them as people. Unlike Germany Nazism, however, the other 1930s national myths defined themselves essentially in terms of values alone. That is, in France, Britain and the United States, the nation was defined by a set of shared values; hence people of different blood lineages could become part of the nation by their assimilation into the value structure of society. Communism in Russia meanwhile defined itself as being a movement of shared class values, which superseded the idea of a nation or of blood. Whilst in all these countries racism was common, it did not figure as an explicit part of the dominant ideology. Nazism in contrast defined the German nation not just in shared Teutonic peasant values but as being, fundamentally, a struggle for the German race, to the extent that people of non-German blood would be physically excluded and even removed from Greater Germany. Thus anti-Semitism was radicalised from the discrimination (and even occasional pogroms) seen elsewhere to a uniquely state-organised explicit programme for the physical removal of European Jewry. War, rather than being a necessary evil in defence of the nation that is best avoided if possible, assumed a positive connotation as being desirable within Nazi thought - as a way through which the German nation could prove itself amongst the ranks of great nations. The focus of German economy and society was re-orientated towards an intended expansionist war following the 1933 Nazi seizure of power, arguably making war and conquests necessary to pay for expenditure and to plug raw material shortfalls.

What led to this radicalisation of Nazism in pre-war Germany? The self-conscious need professed by the Nazis for a strong nationalism arose partly from the newness of the German nation - there had been no unified German state until 1871, with people of Germanic blood spread across a previous plethora of small and disparate states in middle Europe. Consequently, the newly centralised state was also lacking in tradition and experience to constrain its behaviour on the rebound from defeat in the 1914-18 Great War. Moreover, the gradual spread of politicised administration during the mid-1930s, as the power structure of the Nazi Party merged with that of the state, allowed the more extreme prejudices and views of Hitler to become state policies. These were in turn sanctified by the cult of the leader; and further radicalised as the competing power centres sought to satisfy Hitler's understood desires in the most comprehensive manner they could. In conclusion, many of the ideological aspects considered uniquely 'Nazi' were actually common to the dominant Western political ideologies of the time, although these were radicalised in Nazism, and it is the extent of radicalisation that more accurately defines Nazism as unique. This radicalisation is suggested to have resulted from the lack of a longstanding, centralised German nation in combination with multiple Nazi Party power centres that competed to satisfy Hitler's own strong prejudices and grandiose goals.