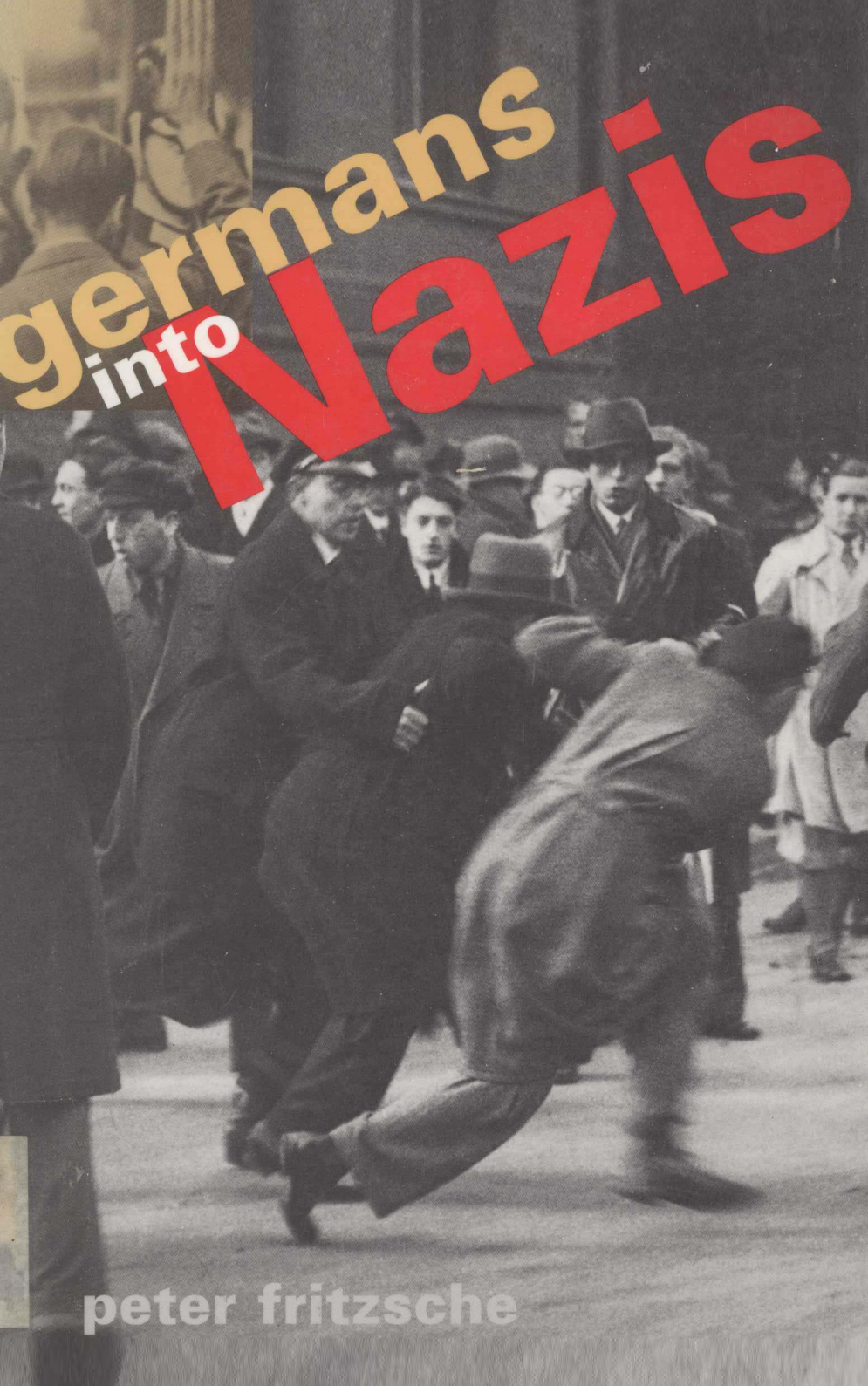
germans into Nazis



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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND

Printed in the United States of America
Third printing, 2000

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1999

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fritzsche, Peter, 1959–
Germans into Nazis / Peter Fritzsche.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-35091-X (cloth)
ISBN 0-674-35092-8 (pbk.)
1. Nationalism—Germany—20th century. 2. Germany—Politics and government—1918–1933. 3. World War, 1914–1918—Social aspects—Germany. 4. Germany—Politics and government—1933–1945. 5. National socialism—Germany. 6. National characteristics, German. 7. Germany—Social conditions—1918–1933. 8. Germany—Social conditions—1933–1945. I. Title.
DD238.F74 1998
943.085—dc21 97-23453

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for two Arnold O. Beckman Research Awards in 1993–94 and 1994–95 which funded research assistance by Glenn Penny, who was a great help. Gary Cohen, Gerald Feldman, and David Clay Large graciously read and commented on the manuscript, as did Harry Liebersohn and the German Colloquium. Thanks so much. I am also very grateful for the efforts of the anonymous readers for Harvard University Press and the support of its editor-in-chief, Aïda Donald. This book is dedicated with love to Karen Hewitt and to our children, Eric and Lauren.

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Introduction

Adolf Hitler among the patriotic revelers at Munich's Feldherrnhalle on 2 August 1914

Photo credit: Süddeutscher Verlag

One of the most famous photographs ever taken of Adolf Hitler perfectly illustrates the rise of the Nazis and the ideal of the Third Reich. It shows patriotic Germans gathered on Munich's Odeonsplatz to hear the declaration of war read aloud from the steps of the Feldherrnhalle on 2 August 1914. Amid the thousand-headed throng was the penniless painter who lived in an attic room on Schleissheimerstrasse. Crowds such as this one in the Bavarian capital had become familiar scenes all across the country in the last, tense week of July as eager patriots assembled again and again to cheer the resolve of the Reich government to support Austria-Hungary in the wake of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne. But people gathered on the street in recognition of something else as well: the common fellowship of being German and of belonging to a nation. The declaration of war against Serbia and Russia and then France and Britain early the next month was followed by an upsurge of popular nationalism later affectionately remembered as the "August Days," a period in which differences of class, confession, and region seemed erased and the people, the *Volk*, appeared to be all of one piece.

In the first weeks of World War I, a national treasure was steadily accumulated as much by enthusiastic civilians who volunteered for the war effort at home as by dutiful reservists who reported for service on the front. No other previous civic gestures had brought the idea of the nation to life in such compelling fashion as had these huge, spontaneous gatherings in the summer of 1914. Subsequently, the collective activities

to survive the war and vanquish the enemy opened up further possibilities for reimagining the future. Both socialists and nationalists felt their political programs justified by the public's war efforts.

Inevitably, the tender sympathies of the "August Days" diminished. As the war dragged on beyond the first winter and into a second, a third, and a fourth, Germans grew weary and disillusioned. Like the inhabitants of other belligerent nations, they lost hundreds of thousands of sons and brothers and fathers and suffered enormously under the deprivations of war. By November 1918, when socialist revolutionaries toppled the German emperor and princes, August 1914 was but a distant memory. Even so, the troubled years of the new Weimar Republic, the unwelcome peace terms at Versailles, the political rancor between Left and Right, the ruinous inflation, and finally the Great Depression insistently coaxed Germans to recall the fabled moment of unity. Over the years August 1914 was embellished as an enchanted counterpoint to the disenchanting terms of the Weimar Republic. Both Left and Right looked back beyond Weimar, and along the horizons of remembrance stretched the exemplary national unity achieved at the beginning of the war.

In ordinary conversations, neighborhood festivals, and war memorial services, Germans repeatedly turned over the memory of August 1914. Fifteen years later a bestseller list of battlefield novels and trench memoirs vividly illuminated this uplifting side to war: the unforgettable experience of the crowds, the heartfelt departures at train stations, the intimate community of the front lines. So it was not by mere chance that one day in 1930 the well-established Munich photographer

Heinrich Hoffmann pulled out the prints he had taken of excited city people on the first day of mobilization back in 1914. Already a locally prominent Nazi (having joined the party in 1920 with the "Number 59"), Hoffmann showed his portfolio to Hitler in a Munich café. Hitler browsed through the photographs and abruptly said: "I, too, stood in this crowd." Hoffmann could scarcely contain his excitement. To connect Hitler—party leader, political hopeful, self-styled redeemer—with the national idealism of August 1914 would be an extraordinary match. Hoffmann laboriously studied print after print, trying to make out each person to see if he could identify his Führer. Several hours later, the story goes, he found Adolf Hitler near the bottom edge of the last photo.[1]

This fortuitously discovered shot caught the precise moment when the Third Reich became possible. An enlargement shows an excited twenty-five-year-old Hitler caught up in the collective exuberance of nationalist celebration. Richard Hanser sets the scene: Hitler's mouth is half open and his "eyes are upraised and fixed. All around men have their hats on, but his head is bare. The hair is uncut and unkempt, adding to his look of intense agitation. The whole attitude is that of a man transported."[2] The new-found photograph corroborated Hitler's recollections in his 1924 memoirs. "Those hours" on the Odeonsplatz, he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "appeared like a redemption from the annoying moods of my youth." At least figuratively, Hitler fell to his knees and "thanked Heaven out of my overflowing heart that it had granted me the good fortune of being allowed to live in these times."

His good fortune was not the opportunity to serve his Austrian homeland—earlier in the year Hitler had in fact been

arrested for evading military service, though a medical examination eventually deemed him unfit. What filled this outcast with "impassionate enthusiasm" was his identification with the cause of Greater Germany, one which would more faithfully represent all Germans inside and outside the Reich. "In my eyes it was not Austria fighting for some Serbian satisfaction, but Germany fighting for her existence."[3] In this Hitler was not very different from thousands of other Germans, who rallied to the flag not to ward off international dangers but to assert national allegiances. Identity rather than duty was at work here. Loyalties were discovered and claimed rather than acknowledged and served. It was with the declaration of war that Hitler first found a wider meaning to his life and a sense of political purpose.

The photograph is also an extraordinary document of the national mobilization that this total war made possible. World War I occupies such a prominent place in modern history because it created new social formations organized around a national identity that was defined in increasingly populist and racial terms. Over the course of the war the massive mobilization of the population challenged older hierarchies of subordination and protocols of deference. At the same time, war reworked traditional gender roles, overruled long-standing class allegiances, and legitimized exclusive ethnic feelings of being German—to produce a fierce new community premised on the struggle for survival in which a whole people stood to win or lose. With an emphasis on nation rather than state, the stakes of the conflict were written in an insistently democratic vernacular. The mobilized crowd on the Odeonsplatz thus provided a glimpse of things to come. For millions of Germans

July and August 1914 constituted a new political point of reference that would remain valid for three decades.

Historians of Germany have tended to pass over the nationalist promise of 1914 to begin their accounts of Nazism with the nation's traumatic military defeat in 1918. Thus they understand Nazism as the outcome of extraordinary hardship more than of popular mobilization, and Nazi voters as more victims of circumstances than willful participants. Yet, to my mind, 1914 is the crucial date because it set in motion tremendous political aspirations. The triumph of National Socialism has to be sought as much in the realm of ideas and loyalties as in the convergence of economic and military crisis. Because the war so thoroughly revised the national imagination and recombined 60 million people in novel and often dangerous ways, 1914 is the appropriate point of departure for an account of why and how the Nazis came to power.

As Hitler himself reported, the declaration of war produced a sense of Germanness that filled him with ecstasy. For the rest of his life Hitler struggled to retrieve the unshakable union based on ethnic-based nationalism and public self-sacrifice. In his eyes the summer of 1914 was truly historic because it had created a new historical subject in world history—the German Volk—one unencumbered by past history and past inequities and finally unified to claim its imperial destiny. Nineteen fourteen always remained a model for what national mobilization could achieve. "More than once" in Germany's history, Hitler could claim, "thousands and thousands of young Germans have come forward with the self-sacrificial resolve freely and joyfully to make a sacrifice of their young lives."[4] For these reasons, 1914 anticipated Germany's national revolution of

January 1933 and its quest for empire in World War II a few years later.

Nazism has to be approached as much in terms of ideas and desires as in terms of traumas and scarcities, and it is the national idea, the satisfaction of upholding such an allegiance, and the social renovations it entailed that Hoffmann's photographs of the summer of 1914 illustrate so well. That so many Germans became Nazis was not an accident, an unlikely result of disastrous economic and political conditions. It should be stated clearly that Germans became Nazis because they wanted to become Nazis and because the Nazis spoke so well to their interests and inclinations. Given the illiberal aims and violent means of the Nazis, this popular support is a sobering, dreadful thing.

However, voters did not back Hitler mainly because they shared his hatred of the Jews. To be sure, many if not most Germans were anti-Semites to one degree or another and most recognized in the Nazis a political force of unprecedented toughness. In 1933 it was not difficult for anyone to imagine an increasingly brutal future for Germany's Jews. But National Socialism's murderous obsession with commonplace prejudices does not explain the wide support it found among Germans of all classes; the so-called Jewish question did not figure in the passionate electioneering of the Weimar Republic.[5] The Nazis out-polled conservative nationalists (who were also anti-Semites) and Social Democrats (who were not) because they were ideological innovators. The Nazis won such decisive pluralities in the 1932 and 1933 elections, not because they provided the operating instructions to carry out what was already on everyone's mind, but because they departed from estab-

lished political traditions in that they were identified at once with a distinctly popular form of ethnic nationalism and with the basic social reforms most Germans counted on to ensure national well-being. It is this political ensemble that the photographs of July and August 1914 anticipate.

In the four chapters that follow I propose to explore how we get from the anonymous man in the crowd to the Führer of the Third Reich, or more precisely, since this is a collective rather than an individual biography, how we get from patriotic enthusiasm to Nazi revolution, from 1914 to 1933. Each chapter opens with a photograph and a sketch of a crowd scene—July 1914, November 1918, January 1933, and May 1933—and goes on to examine the abundant social and political transformations of German society to offer an explanation of how and why the Nazis assembled such massive and enduring support in a few short years, which are among the most dramatic and terrifying in Germany's twentieth-century history.

July 1914

Berliners gather in front of the Schloss just before the kaiser speaks on 1 August 1914

Photo credit: Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin