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How Could This Happen: Explaining the Holocaust by Dan McMillan

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McMillan, Dan. *How Could This Happen: Explaining the Holocaust*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. xi + 276 pages. Hardcover, \$27.99.

Dan McMillan, a German history Ph.D., overtly states in his introduction that “this is not an academic treatise” (p. xi). Instead, his synthesis of works familiar to Holocaust historians is a cautionary tale, presenting evidence for his argument that if certain conditions in a civilized society are met, genocide can be the result.

The tale is well-known to most denizens of the early twenty-first century. Devastated by the Great War and humiliated by the Versailles Treaty, Germany permitted itself to fall under the leadership of a man who would establish himself as a dictator of a totalitarian system. Hitler would exploit Germany’s economic and political instability, as well as scientific racism, to eliminate his real and perceived enemies, and advance his position as ruler of Europe. What is particularly noteworthy about this work, however, is the way in which McMillan subtly links Nazi Germany’s story line to aspects of the world in which today’s readers live.

In an early chapter, McMillan asserts a certain uniqueness with respect to the Holocaust, emphasizing Nazi Germany’s unyielding determination to dehumanize and eradicate every Jew in Europe. However, he also refuses to view Nazi Germany as a completely unique case, because to do so, he implies, could lead future generations to false complacency, imagining that a Holocaust-like event could never recur in a western democracy.

McMillan devotes the majority of the book to delineating the historical circumstances that permitted Hitler and the Nazi party to take power, and to why anti-Semitism was such a central theme in Nazi politics. Throughout, he draws parallels to the present day. Firstly, he discounts the stereotype of the “obedient German” surrendering democracy to authoritarianism by pointing out that even though “a small number of wealthy individuals... have badly damaged democracy in the United States” through unlimited donations to political campaigns, Americans still have not become “especially obedient toward authority” (p. 42). Secondly, McMillan condemns the collective voice of protest represented by right-wing splinter parties like the Nazis during the Weimar era, when they, like the Tea Party of current United States politics, “complained that social-welfare spending . . . on health insurance was too generous, and that their taxes were too high” (p. 115). Lastly, McMillan explains how major elements of Nazi ideology (nationalism and anti-Semitism) became popular in Germany when it felt itself politically threatened on the world stage in 1914. The Nazis just continued the “right-wing fantasy that national pride could be a substitute for democracy and social justice” (p. 59), a sentiment familiar to any American who has lived through the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century.

McMillan draws his closest ties to American politics in a historical context. Social Darwinism manifested in Nazi racial theories justified United States’ rule over the Philippines after 1898; Filipinos, as ‘Orientals,’ were seen as not capable of self-government. In the early twentieth century, American scientists made advances in the pseudo-science of eugenics, pioneering laws and social policy grounded in racism; similar theory was later adopted by the Nazis in their own sterilization and euthanasia programs. McMillan also compares the example of the Nazis’ Reserve Police Battalion 101, one of the killing squads at work in Poland and Russia (and highlighted in the works of Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen), with the actions of the U. S. Charlie Company at My Lai during the Vietnam War.

McMillan calls his book a synthesis of the available scholarship, and it is an able one. Scores of the notable Holocaust scholars are represented—Hilberg, Fleming, Friedländer,

Kershaw, Aly—to name just a few. The well-read Holocaust historian will recognize the arguments as she comes across them. However, by recasting the familiar narrative into a new scope, focusing the analysis on the political and cultural environments in Germany between 1914 and 1939 rather than the process of killing itself, McMillan provides another lens through which to view the genocide. In fact, it is not just a lens, but a mirror. *How Could This Happen* is not just an explanation of the Holocaust; it is a reminder of what could happen anywhere, even in ‘civilized’ societies.

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