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EXPLAINING THE THIRD REICH: ETHICS, BELIEFS, INTERESTS

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In recent years, the historiography of Nazi Germany has taken what Neil Gregor has called a "voluntarist turn."[1] By this, Gregor means that the recent literature on Nazi Germany has emphasized "that the panoply of organizations actively involved in occupation and murder, the number of German men and women who actively participated in these crimes, and the range of places in which they committed them, was much, much greater than has hitherto been acknowledged."[2] In the first instance this voluntarist turn has meant an increased stress on the centrality of Nazi criminality and atrocity to the regime, not as one feature, but as the central characteristic, of the Third Reich. Alongside this, however, has come an increased insistence that these criminal policies were both widely known at the time and broadly popular among Germans. As Saul Friedländer has put it, "the everyday involvement of the population with the regime was far deeper than has long been assumed, due to the widespread knowledge and passive acceptance of the crimes, as well as the crassest profit derived from them."[3] In short, then, the most recent trend among historians of the Third Reich is to insist that people *believed* in the Nazi project, including its criminal aspects.

If true, however, this immediately raises some pressing questions. Why? Why did ordinary Germans tacitly support a regime they knew to be engaged in mass atrocity and systematic murder? And what exactly was it that people believed in,

1 Neil Gregor, "Nazism—A Political Religion? Rethinking the Voluntarist Turn," in *idem*, ed., *Nazism, War and Genocide: Essays in Honour of Jeremy Noakes* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005).

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Saul Friedländer, "The Wehrmacht, German Society, and the Knowledge of the Mass Extermination of the Jews," in Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan, eds., *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New Press, 2002), 28.

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or thought they believed in, when they believed in the Nazi project(s)? Broadly, there have been three types of answer to these questions. First, it can be argued that people supported Nazism because it was not terribly distinct from their own pre-Nazi values. This approach can, but need not, take the form of so-called *Sonderweg* arguments that attribute Nazism to Germany's purportedly pathological course of modernization.[4] Even without the metahistorical apparatus of the *Sonderweg*, it can more simply be argued that Nazism was an organic development of German society and that, consequently, it is to be expected that Germans would share many values with Nazis.[5] The second form of argumentation in response to the popular basis of Nazism is that the Nazis, in effect, taught the Germans Nazi values during the early years of their dictatorship. In its crude form, this approach can simply involve a reductive emphasis on Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine.[6] In its more sophisticated instantiations, however, this approach stresses the panoply of cultural techniques deployed by the Nazis to inculcate their values into the broader public.[7] Finally, it is possible to argue, as Friedländer implies, that many Germans supported the Third Reich because it was in their material self-interest to do so. Three excellent recent books, by Richard Steigmann-Gall, Claudia Koonz, and Götz Aly, encapsulate these various approaches.

Perhaps the most obvious response to the riddle of popular support for a vicious, criminal dictatorship has been a renewed in interest in Nazi ideology. In part, of course, this has been a reaction to the provocations of Daniel Goldhagen who, somewhat notoriously, argued that all Germans shared a broad ideological consensus in favor of "eliminationist anti-Semitism."[8] Even some of Goldhagen's most vehement critics, such as Yehuda Bauer, have found his "renewed emphasis" on ideology "useful."[9] Yet the return to a systematic study of Nazi ideology and its impact has been far too broad to be ascribed simply to the influence of Goldhagen alone, particularly since few, if any, historians find his specific arguments persuasive. Rather, there has been an effort to understand Nazi ideology along two axes.

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4 Hans-Ulrich Wehler remains the staunchest defender of this position. See Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4, *1914–1949* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003), esp. 675–843.

5 For arguments in this vein see Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

6 See e.g. Ralf Georg Reuth, *Goebbels: Eine Biographie* (Munich: Piper, 2000).

7 One particularly congent example of this approach is Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 2006).

8 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 23–4.

9 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 96.

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First, there has been an endeavor to understand exactly what it was that the Nazis in fact believed. This has involved taking up the gauntlet thrown down more than forty years ago by George Mosse when he asserted that Nazi "ideas were eminently respectable in Germany."[10] In this vein, Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich* (*HR*) takes on what was perhaps the most respectable of all ideas in early twentieth-century Germany: Christianity.[11] Arguing that, far from being occult mystics hostile to traditional Christianity, the Nazis were for the most part far more Christian in their world view than has previously been recognized, Steigmann-Gall challenges not only Mosse but much of the established historiography on Nazism and Christianity. This fact has important implications, according to Steigmann-Gall, for understanding pro-Nazi sentiments among practicing Christians, still at least a nominal majority in Germany in the 1930s (*HR*, 5).[12]

Yet Steigmann-Gall's relatively traditional intellectual (and institutional) history leaves open the very important question of the popular reception of Nazi ideas. If the emerging consensus is that the Third Reich enjoyed broad popular support, it is not enough to show that a relatively small number of Nazi elites themselves shared popular ideas, like Christianity. It is imperative to show also that a large number of ordinary Germans were themselves persuaded by Nazi ideology. This is the task that Claudia Koonz sets herself in *The Nazi Conscience* (*NC*).[13] Koonz argues that the Nazis were able to take existing cultural resentments and shape them into a new popular conscience, one that was ethnic, rather than universal in character. "Hitler transformed his followers' anger at cultural and political disorder into moral outrage" (*NC*, 2). And, contrary to Steigmann-Gall, she adds, "Where once religion had provided a steady moral purpose, Nazi culture offered an absolutist secular faith" (*NC*, 2). If Steigmann-Gall thus offers a relatively straightforward history of Nazi ideas, Koonz gives us a cultural history of Nazi ethics.

This turn to intellectual and cultural history to explain the popularity of the Nazi regime has not been without its critics, however. As always, idealism is confronted by more materialist conceptions of history, seeking in this instance at least to explain the same phenomenon. These materialist challenges offer

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[10] George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), 1.

[11] Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Page references are given in the text.

[12] For Steigmann-Gall's assessment of the difficulty of using church membership statistics as a reliable gauge of actual piety see *HR*, xv.

[13] Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 2003). Page references are subsequently given in the text.

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a useful opportunity to assess the possibilities and limits of intellectual and cultural history for explaining broader aspects of the past. If one reading of intellectual history as a discipline is that it is a "critical practice that measures the instrumental value of ideas within their historical context," then its value surely lies in its ability to explain things that more materialist approaches cannot.[14] Yet to judge this one must assess the value of such materialist approaches. Götz Aly, in *Hitlers Volksstaat*, offers precisely such a material explanation for the popularity of the Nazi regime. Aly's argument can be summed up, to borrow a recently popular phrase, as "it's the economy, stupid." According to Aly, the Third Reich provided generous material rewards and remarkably high standards of living for ordinary people, financed by the expropriation of Jews at home and the occupied territories abroad. People were loyal to the regime because they benefited from it and they were complicitous in Nazi crimes because they shared the plunder.

In these three books, then, we see three quite distinct approaches to explaining the popularity and legitimacy of the Third Reich. Yet, as I will show, it may be most useful to view these works less as antagonistic than as complementary. Each fills in a part of the picture that the others leave blank. Individually, each is rich and insightful, but taken together they may offer a more comprehensive explanation of the Third Reich than any of them is capable of independently.

Steigmann-Gall picks up on the recent trend in the history of relations between Nazism and the Christian churches, which argues that the older inclination to view the Nazis as essentially anti-Christian is untenable.[15] Where Steigmann-Gall departs from this literature is in reversing the terms of inquiry. Rather than asking what Christians thought of Nazis (and how they may have been coopted or perverted by Nazism), he asks what Nazis thought of Christianity. In particular in the first three chapters (of eight) of *The Holy Reich*, Steigmann-Gall offers a close reading of various statements by leading Nazis on the subject of Christianity. The remaining chapters focus more on the institutional history of Nazi efforts to implement their religious ideas after they came to power and cover more familiar territory.

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[14] John Pettegrew, ed., *A Pragmatists Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 5.

[15] Perhaps the paradigmatic expression of this older literature is John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1968). The revisionist literature is enormous. The best starting points would be Doris L. Bergen, *The Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Jews* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000; first published 1996); and Ernst Klee, *Die SA Jesu Christi. Die Kirchen im Banne Hitlers* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1989).

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Particularly important is Steigmann-Gall's assertion that by comparing the public and private utterances of Nazis, it is possible to dismiss the claim that the Nazis were merely dissembling for tactical reasons when they lay claim to some form of Christianity (*HR*, 14–15). In particular, he argues that Point 24 of the 1920 Nazi Party Program, which claimed that the party represented "positive Christianity," needs to be taken quite seriously as a central element in the Nazi world view. Positive Christianity was, on Steigmann-Gall's reading, an attempt by the Nazis to articulate a particular vision of the Christian faith tradition more suitable to the times, as they perceived them. Three core themes emerge from this concept: "the spiritual struggle against the Jews, the promulgation of a social ethic, and a new syncretism that would bridge Germany's confessional divide" (*HR*, 14).

Clearly, any effort to enlist Christianity in a racial struggle against world Jewry was bound to come up against the problem of Christianity's own Judaic origins. This fact led to some of the oddities of "positive Christianity" as articulated by leading Nazis. In particular they rejected the Old Testament entirely, as a Jewish product, and asserted that Jesus himself was Aryan, not Jewish. While hardly orthodox, these beliefs remained embedded in an essentially Christian world view. Indeed, as Susannah Heschel has shown, the effort to de-Judaize Christianity by racializing it had its origins in the Protestant theological response to the challenge posed by Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, the work of Abraham Geiger in particular.[16] According to Steigmann-Gall, the continued emphasis on an Aryanized Christ displayed by many prominent early Nazis, including Joseph Goebbels, Dietrich Klagges, and Walter Buch, is particularly telling. Also of obvious relevance was the tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. Indeed, in contrast to those who would stress the essentially scientific origins of Nazi racial anti-Semitisim, Steigmann-Gall argues that many Nazis continued to understand their anti-Jewish beliefs "within a Christian frame of reference" and "commingled racial and religious categories of the Jew" (*HR*, 29).[17] This seeming incongruity, deploying biological and cultural categories interchangeably, was reconciled by the claim made by Nazis like Buch that race was part of "God's creation, whose purity must be upheld by God's will" (*HR*, 33). Thus, according to Steigmann-Gall, although the Nazis rejected many elements of traditional Christian belief, they upheld others and remained, in their own minds, committed to a broadly Christian understanding of the world.

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16 Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

17 For one recent assertion of the scientific quality of Nazi race thinking see Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

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The second major theme to emerge from Steigmann-Gall's reading of positive Christianity is Nazi anti-individualism. Stressing the need to take Nazi socialism seriously, he argues that the party genuinely sought a "'third way' between Marxist and liberal socioeconomic models" (*HR*, 42). Anti-Semitism offered one clear framework for this endeavor. By associating Jews with everything they disliked about German capitalism, it was possible for the Nazis articulate an anticapitalist critique that was simultaneously anti-Marxist (the Jews, of course, being paradigmatic Bolsheviks for the Nazis).[18] But there was a Christian element to Nazi socialism as well. Picking up on older traditions of "ethical socialism" of the Christian Social movement dating back to the *Kaiserreich*, the Nazis were able to articulate their core social ethic: "public need before private greed." Even Hitler articulated this claim with explicit reference to Christ's call to "love one another" (*HR*, 46). "The tendency for the positive Christians of Nazism to reduce the economic problems of the day to a conflict of mammonism, making the question of the economic order a moral-ethical issue, closely resonated with the prior 'social Christian' belief that socialism was a matter of ethics and morality over the free play of unrestrained capitalism" (*HR*, 47).

Finally, like earlier German nationalists, Nazis saw the deep confessional divide in Germany between Protestants and Catholics as a threat to the national unity they sought to create. Part of the appeal of positive Christianity for the Nazis was its claim to have found a true, higher Christianity, above the petty sectarian divides of the institutional churches. In practice, however, Steigmann-Gall argues, Nazi positive Christianity definitely shaded more in favor of Protestantism than Catholicism. While some nominally Catholic Nazis, like Goebbels and Dietrich Eckert, tended to blame Martin Luther for the confessional divide, most Protestant Nazis and even some nominal Catholics like Hitler himself expressed considerable admiration for the great reformer. In part, this was due to the marked anticlericalism of Nazi religiosity, itself unsurprising given the potential for a clerisy to represent alternative sources of moral authority in a society the Nazis were determined to remake in their own image. In the end, the specific dogmatic differences between Protestantism and Catholicism were largely a matter of indifference for the Nazis; it was the institutions that mattered. In this the Nazis agreed with many liberal Protestants, who opposed both confessional schools and any whiff of ultramontanism:

> The Nazi approach to confessionalism displayed a general disregard for doctrine. Positive Christianity was not an attempt to make a complete religious system with dogma or ritual

[18] For a particularly persuasive effort to work out the logic of Nazi anticapitalist anti-Semitism see Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism," in Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes, eds., *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust: The Changing Situation in West Germany* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 302–14.

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of its own: It was never formalized into a faith to which anyone could convert. Rather, this was primarily a social and political worldview meant to emphasize those qualities in Christianity that could end sectarianism. (*HR*, 84)

Clearly, not all Nazis were Christians, whether positive or traditional. There were pronounced anti-Christians among the Nazi elite, whom Steigmann-Gall dubs paganists. Of these Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler were the most prominent and they consequently loom large in Steigmann-Gall's analysis, though Erich Ludendorf also merits substantial attention. For many historians, such mystics and occultists reveal the true origins of Nazi ideology.[19] Steigmann-Gall disagrees. To begin with, he points to what he terms the "paganist ambivalence," arguing that many paganists were less clearly anti-Christian in their attitudes than they at first appear. On Steigmann-Gall's reading, for instance, Rosenberg's ideas marked less a rejection of Christianity than an attempt at its "radical revision" (*HR*, 99). He notes that Rosenberg made frequent positive references to Jesus in his writings and even admitted to Christ's divinity (*HR*, 96). Other prominent Nazi paganists, like Walter Darré, "tempered [their] apparently unambiguous opposition to Christianity with an admiration for Protestantism" (*HR*, 103).

If readers remain unpersuaded by the religious ambivalence Steigmann-Gall finds in paganist writings, he argues further that it does not ultimately make much difference what the paganists thought. Paganism cannot be viewed as the intellectual origin and ideological core of Nazism because it was not widely accepted within the party.[20] Goebbels called Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* an "ideological belch" (*HR*, 93), while Hitler himself dismissed it as "unreadable" (*HR*, 257). And while it is true that *Myth of the Twentieth Century* sold hundreds of thousands of copies, Steigmann-Gall points out that it was required for all schools and universities to own a copy, perhaps inflating sales figures. Certainly it is true, as Steigmann-Gall points out, that Rosenberg was singularly unsuccessful in his bids for genuine power within the Third Reich (*HR*, 236–42). Rosenberg's own self-aggrandizing statements and inflated party titles notwithstanding, the simple fact is that he could not even gain any real control over his own purported domain of ideological training, constantly losing out to

[19] See, for instance, Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972); Robert Poise, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (New York: St Martins, 1986); or, more recently, Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[20] At least some knowledgeable readers have remained decidedly unpersuaded by Steigmann-Gall's reading in this regard. See e.g. the critical comments in Irving Hexham, "Inventing 'Paganists': A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (Jan. 2007), 59–78.

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competitors such as Phillip Bouhler, Hanns Kerrl (significantly of the Church Ministry) and Hans Lammers.

Obviously, the other leading paganist among the Nazi elite, Heinrich Himmler, is not so easily dismissed. From the mid-1930s on there can be no question that Himmler was one of the central figures in the Nazi regime.[21] And Himmler's anti-Christianity seems decidedly less ambivalent than that of some other leading paganists, at one point declaring openly, "We must finish with Christianity" (*HR*, 130), and advocating ancestor worship and occultism. Yet here too Steigmann-Gall argues that we are not, in fact, staring the core of Nazi ideology in the face. "Even among the party's other paganists, Himmler's religious views were regarded as bizarre" (*HR*, 130). And Hitler himself called Himmler's religious views "nonsense" and dismissed Himmler's calls for a new religion a "chimera" (*HR*, 130, 131). And Steigmann-Gall notes that for all his vitriol against Christianity, Himmler continued to respect the person of Jesus, even paying him the dubious compliment of insisting on his Aryan birth. Moreover, Himmler continually insisted that even within the SS, Christian beliefs were to be respected. "Hence, although Himmler rejected Christianity both as doctrine and as institution, he allowed considerable latitude of Christian expression not only for SS men, but in some senses even for himself" (*HR*, 132–3). On Steigmann-Gall's reading, then, Himmler's anti-Christianity, with the significant exception of his rabid anticlericalism, remained largely idiosyncratic, not a matter of party doctrine.

The remainder of *The Holy Reich* is largely taken up with an analysis of Nazi attempts to formulate religious policy in light of their expressed belief in positive Christianity. Here he notes that after the failure to establish a united national Protestant Church under state leadership in 1937, itself hardly an effort to actually destroy the Protestant Church, there was a "reorientation in Nazi thinking" about Christianity. "The position of churchmen in the party became more tenuous and individual party members detached themselves from the churches in increasing numbers" (*HR*, 218). Yet despite the rise to prominence of the anti-Christian Martin Bormann and the increasingly active anticlericalism of the party, there remained "real and persistent disagreement as to the continuing place of Christians and their religion in the movement" (*HR*, 259). Even in the later years of the regime, then, Steigmann-Gall contends, it remained possible to be both a Nazi and a Christian and the ideology, far from transforming into official paganism, remained at most ambivalent about traditional Christianity and broadly committed to many of the tenets of positive Christianity.

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[21] Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

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Steigmann-Gall's arguments have not remained uncontroversial, though not for the reasons one might expect.[22] In part because Steigmann-Gall is in fact building on a revisionist consensus that sees far greater affinity between Christianity and Nazism than earlier scholars recognized, few of his critics contend that Nazism and Christianity were antithetical. Indeed Manfred Gailus, one of Steigmann-Gall's most vociferous critics, has himself demonstrated the leading role played by Protestant pastors in disseminating Nazi ideas among the members of their congregations.[23] Rather, the criticisms tend to focus either on Steigmann-Gall's perceived overstatement of his thesis or on his underplaying of the significance of paganists like Rosenberg. On the first point, it is important to note that Steigmann-Gall is careful not to claim that Nazism was a Christian movement, merely that many Nazi elites thought of themselves as Christian and that Nazi ideology was influenced by Christian ideas in important respects. On the second point, while it seems fair to note that paganists like Rosenberg certainly represented one highly visible aspect of Nazi ideology, Steigmann-Gall's argument that Rosenberg remained a largely marginal figure within the party seems persuasive. Himmler and, later, Bormann (himself certainly anti-Christian, but no paganist either, as evidenced by his successful battles with Rosenberg) pose a more difficult challenge in this regard. Steigmann-Gall admits that, particularly under Bormann's influence, the party became far more active in its anticlerical activities after 1937, yet by this point Nazi ideology was well established. And Bormann's anticlericalism appears to have been motivated more by institutional concerns to eliminate potentially competing power centers within the Third Reich than by any ideological animus toward Christian doctrine as such (*HR*, 245). As for Himmler, Steigmann-Gall's assertion that his religious views remained outside the mainstream within the party seems plausible.

If there is a problem with *The Holy Reich* it lies less in what it does than it what it does not do. "I do not examine the reception of the German masses to the Nazis' religious claims or how pivotal those claims may have been to the broad social consensus the Nazis attempted" (*HR*, 12). While certainly understandable within the constraints of an already substantial, deeply researched, and densely argued book, this omission reveals one of the limits of a traditional history-of-ideas approach to intellectual history: ideas matter not only to their producers but also to their consumers and, in some contexts, the consumers may matter far more

[22] See, for instance, the largely negative responses (by Doris Bergen, Manfred Gailus, Ernst Piper, and Irving Hexham) in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (Jan. 2007). Steigmann-Gall's response can be found as "Christianity and the Nazi Movement: A Response," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (April 2007), 185–211.

[23] Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001).

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than the producers. If the Third Reich was, as historians now claim, a popular dictatorship then it is particularly important to understand the roots of that popular legitimacy, which means understanding how Nazi ideas were received. It is true that the existing literature on the Christian churches has established widespread support for Nazism among German Christians. Steigmann-Gall's addition to this literature is to demonstrate that they were not simply deceived by the Nazis into believing in a doctrine antithetical to their own. Yet this remains an inference from Steigmann-Gall's work. And an inference, no matter how plausible, is not the same thing as a sustained argument backed by evidence. What we do not know with any certainty from Steigmann-Gall's study is whether ordinary Christians in Germany supported Nazism because they perceived its essentially Christian ideological core or for other, entirely distinct reasons.

Here Claudia Koonz's book *The Nazi Conscience* steps into the breach. Drawing on a remarkable range of sources, from the writings of some of the usual intellectual suspects, like Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, to the boulevard press and illustrated magazines, Koonz seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Nazi ethics penetrated all aspects of daily life for ordinary Germans in the prewar years. These early years of the regime were particularly crucial, she argues, because it was in this period that ordinary Germans internalized the values of what she terms "ethnic fundamentalism," a form of "deeply anti-liberal collectivism" that stressed the boundaries of ethical obligation, seeing them not as universal obligations to human beings, but as obligations only to a strictly delimited community (*NC*, 13). According to Koonz, the Nazis used "sophisticated persuasive techniques" to inculcate these new values in the German populace. The mechanism for this moral pedagogy was not propaganda in the traditional sense, of which there was surprisingly little in the 1930s, as Koonz notes, and still less the massive deployment of terroristic force. In particular it was the dissemination of expert knowledge through multiple channels in education, associational life, and the media that persuaded Germans both that their own community was special and required protection and that the Jews in particular posed an existential threat to that community. There was thus a double-edged quality to Nazi ethnic fundamentalism. On the one hand it preached the positive value of the people's community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) for Germans, and on the other hand it declaimed the necessity of protecting that community from baleful and malicious threats of a broadly racial character. Consequently, "Germans did not become Nazis because they were antisemites; they became antisemites because they were Nazis" (*NC*, 10).

Two broad themes in particular drive Koonz's argument. First, she analyzes the interplay between a positive image of the German ethnic community and a negative image of the racialized threats to that community; both these aspects were central to the Nazi image of the people's community. Second, she stresses

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the central role of expert knowledge in disseminating this vision of the people's community. People believed in both the positive and negative aspects of the people's community, in effect, because trusted authorities, academics, public intellectuals, and teachers told them to. This had little to do with propaganda in the traditional sense of that term; rather, it was the production and dissemination of truth, or at least of a form of knowledge bearing all the accoutrements of truth.[24] "Not propaganda but knowledge had the power to change attitudes" (*NC*, 13).

Central to the project of creating a positive sense of the people's community was the transformation of Hitler's own public image from right-wing rabble-rouser to virtuous statesman.[25] Beginning with his tour de force performance at his treason trial in 1923 following his failed putsch attempt, Hitler successfully remade his political persona. In the course of the trial Hitler, "the uncouth agitator, remade himself into an innocent patriot who had been betrayed by a democracy too weak to defend Germanic honor" (*NC*, 22). Hitler's remarkable feat of transforming a clear act of treason into a patriotic defense of the nation set the tone for the rest of his political career. After his early release from prison in 1925, Hitler began to downplay the vicious anti-Semitism that had characterized his early career and to stress two themes instead: the unique virtue of the German *Volk* and the threats imperiling that *Volk* from both without and within. Alongside this, particularly after his appointment as chancellor in 1933, Hitler's personal virtue was continuously stressed in popular publications, replete with images of the Führer playing with children and dogs. "To achieve the broad consensus on which his continued power would rest, Hitler in effect de-Nazified his public image by refining the myth of his personal virtue and summoning his *Volk* to celebrate ethnic revival" (*NC*, 45).

In the process, Hitler systematically downplayed anti-Semitism in his public speeches both in the early 1930s and after his appointment as chancellor. He did this in large part because in the early years of the Third Reich anti-Semitism, at least in its more virulent and violent forms, was decidedly unpopular. "Whereas violence against Communists met with acclaim in Germany and abroad, racist terror backfired" (*NC*, 39). This, of course, presented Hitler with a dilemma. His most loyal followers, particularly those "Old Fighters" who had been so

[24] In this, Koonz's approach differs markedly from an earlier generation of scholarship that stressed the role of overt propaganda in the National Socialist regime. See e.g. Ernest K. Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda, 1925–1945* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1965).

[25] Koonz is, of course, not the first scholar to point to the importance of Hitler's public myth, as opposed to the private reality of Hitler the man, for the history of the Third Reich. Seminal in this regard is Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

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instrumental in bringing him to power, had supported him precisely because of his anti-Semitism. How, then, was he to convince the broad German public that he was not too anti-Semitic, while reassuring the Nazi loyalists that he was anti-Semitic enough? According to Koonz, he accomplished this through the use of "cryptograms" designed to signal to those attuned to the language that he remained committed to the extirpation of Jewry, while not appearing unreasonable to ordinary Germans (*NC*, 100). He would denounce already unpopular ideas as Jewish or project his own hatred of the Jews onto his victims, claiming it was they who hated Germans. "Needless to say, no one doubted Hitler's anti-Semitism. But a skillfully managed public relations campaign allowed moderate Germans to rationalize their support for Nazi rule. They could become 'yes but' Nazis—welcome ethnic fundamentalism and economic recovery while dismissing Nazi crimes as incidental" (*NC*, 102).

Yet, of course, Hitler and the Nazi regime remained fundamentally racist and anti-Semitic. The challenge was to educate the general public to the point where they could see the logic of the Nazi position. Crucial in this regard, according to Koonz, was the fact that the initial targets of Nazi race policy were not, primarily, Jews but "imperfect Aryans" (*NC*, 103). Koonz stresses the key role played in this project by Walter Gross, the twenty-nine-year-old physician appointed to lead the National Socialist Office for Enlightenment on Population Policy and Racial Welfare in 1933. Gross's job was twofold: to make, in effect, the fanatical racism of leading Nazis, including Hitler, salable to a broader public and, at the same time, to standardize and make coherent Nazi race thinking (*NC*, 113, 115). To this end, Gross's office published a flurry of pamphlets on racial hygiene and started a new illustrated magazine, *Neues Volk*, which reached a circulation of 300,000 by the late 1930s. Filled with positive, if decidedly clichéd, images of German life, emphasizing the importance of commitment to the people's community, the magazine effectively smuggled in racism with relatively few, but quite powerful, images of hereditary illness and anti-Semitic stereotypes. Yet for all his subtlety and political savvy, Gross basically failed in both of his tasks. Anti-Semitism remained unconvincing to many Germans and race thinking could not ultimately be standardized on a scientific basis, due to its intrinsic irrationality. Yet Gross's efforts were not in vain, according to Koonz. Almost despite himself, Gross had discovered what would become the key to Nazi genocide. He may have failed to transform most Germans into rabid anti-Semites, but he and others like him did inculcate a sense of German ethnic pride. And that would prove sufficient. In the mid-1930s Gross and his staff began

> to realize that public opinion may have been less vital than they thought. A determined cadre of convinced racial experts, backed by the judicial and police systems, could administer racial programs without the general public's realizing their extent. The key

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to success lay not in a massive public education campaign but in orderly procedure and a cadre of dedicated administrators. (*NC*, 128)[26]

In this regard, the development of a cadre of what Koonz calls "ethnocrats" in the wake of the Nuremberg race laws in 1935 provided crucial training ground for "administrators of white-collar racial persecution" (*NC*, 188). Thus Gross's great success lay less in his public efforts than in his forging of a "genocidal consensus" among diverse bureaucrats charged with implementing Nazi racial policy (*NC*, 130).

Nonetheless, the broad dissemination of racial knowledge remained a priority for the regime. Again, this took the form of first emphasizing everything positive about the German ethnic community and only then, in seemingly secondary form, pointing to the threats posed to that community by internal (racial) enemies. "This superficially milder version of Nazi ideology was both more palatable and more insidious" (*NC*, 141). Perhaps more important, on Koonz's reading, was the role played by academic scholars in making racism respectable in ways that helped people justify to themselves their compliance with anti-Semitic measures by the regime. In other words, Koonz argues that greed or prior anti-Semitism were insufficient. People had to be taught to be racists. And academics were singularly well placed to undertake this task. After 1935, with the quest for biologically grounded definitions of race acknowledged a failure in the Nuremberg laws, the locus of racist scholarship shifted to the social sciences and the humanities (*NC*, 197).[27] In particular, this scholarship provided the "proof" of the Jewish threat that had been previously lacking. "Starting in the mid-1930s fraudulent research dignified by the hallmarks of conventional scholarship made Jews strangers in the midst of a proud and defiant *Volk*" (*NC*, 193). Where earlier Nazi violence against the Jews had failed, this new anti-Semitic scholarship succeeded in convincing a broad public that their moral obligations to the community did not extend to Jews, who were now increasingly perceived as dangerous and malicious outsiders. While the press obviously played a crucial role in disseminating this now respectable racist knowledge, it was precisely its

[26] This emphasis on mid-level bureaucracy in formulating policies and procedures that would become genocidal is a recurring theme in the recent literature on Nazi Germany. See *inter alia* Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn: Dietz, 2001); Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2000); and Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002).

[27] This anti-Semitic scholarship is also the theme of Alan E. Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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scholarly appearance that rendered it credible to many Germans, especially to the budding army of ethnocrats and police already engaged in a program of massive discrimination, disenfranchisement, and expropriation of Jewish property. The "rational" anti-Semitism that emerged in the mid-1930s was fundamentally a bureaucratic application of academic (or pseudo-academic) knowledge.

In other words, Koonz in effect divides the adherents to the Nazi conscience into two categories, a small cadre of committed ethnocrats who developed ethnic fundamentalism into an ultimately murderous project and the vast majority of Germans who accepted this program without enthusiasm but also without objection. The pseudo-scientific racism that developed after 1935 was broadly, if indirectly, disseminated through the popular press, government pamphlets, the education system, and associational life. It remained insufficient to transform a majority of Germans into active anti-Semites willing themselves to oppress, much less murder, Jews. Yet it did convince a majority that they had no fundamental moral obligation to stand up for or help Jews either, not even German Jews. The Nazi conscience told the ethnocrats first to rationally exclude and then ultimately to murder Jews; it told ordinary Germans to allow this to happen, since the victims were not ones to whom any moral debt was owed.

According to Koonz, one group who failed, despite their best efforts, to contribute significantly to this new racist knowledge was theologians. "Given Hitler's and Himmler's contempt for organized Christianity, it is not surprising that antisemitic theologians received relatively little recognition for their efforts" (*NC*, 212). Indeed, Koonz repeatedly asserts that Nazi ethnic fundamentalism was deeply secular, a substitution of a new, Nazi ethic for an older, religious one. Experts replaced priests as the arbiters of moral obligations (*NC*, 5). In light of Steigmann-Gall's findings, one might legitimately wonder if Koonz does not overstate her case in this regard. Indeed, she herself provides evidence of more compatibility between Nazi ethnic fundamentalism and Christianity than her more programmatic statements indicate. For instance, she quotes Walter Gross, the great systematizer of Nazi ethnic fundamentalism, as blaming the Judaism for "substituting its 'vengeful God' for the 'heroic Germanic God'" (*NC*, 108). Or again, she cites a pupil in the Nazi schools as saying "People floated along in a confused jumble of Christian and National Socialist attitudes" (*NC*, 141). If Steigmann-Gall is right at all, this confused jumble may well have simply reflected the ambivalent Christianity of Nazism itself, its effort to preserve positive Christianity by rejecting its Judaic elements.

A more fundamental question raised by Koonz's work is whether people's moral conscience is in fact as malleable as she asserts. As she herself notes, there was considerable continuity with the public culture of the Weimar Republic (*NC*, 72). So what exactly was the role of tradition in the Third Reich? Or of cultural inertia? Is it really possible to radically transform a people's sense of moral

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obligation in less than a decade? Certainly, Koonz believes that at least some of these new Nazi values persisted well after the demise of the Third Reich (*NC*, 219). Would not earlier moral values, then, have persisted into the Third Reich? Perhaps Steigmann-Gall here offers clues to supplement, rather than contradict, Koonz's argument. If the Nazis were, in fact, more Christian that Koonz believes, then perhaps their ethnic fundamentalism resonated with many Germans precisely because it seemed to them less a revolutionary transvaluation of all values than a slight emendation of traditional Christian morality (itself hardly innocent of anti-Semitism, after all).

Finally, Koonz of course notes that one of the major forms of anti-Jewish policy in the prewar years was the so-called Aryanization of Jewish property. Yet she insists that while

> the overwhelming majority of Germans deplored the wanton destruction of Jews' property and resented boycotts, they gradually came to accept the pariah status of Jews as inevitable . . . lacking the civil courage to act on their objections, they preferred not to admit their weakness . . . Most needed to rationalize their collaboration. (*NC*, 193)

This may be true, but it is also true that a great many Germans profited enormously from the Aryanization process, both directly and indirectly. Ought we really to dismiss the profit motive out of hand as a factor in popular support for the Nazi regime? Götz Aly thinks not.

Aly approaches the problem of Nazi popularity from a radically different perspective than either Steigmann-Gall or Koonz. *Hitlers Volksstaat* (*HV*)[28] is an enormously erudite, deeply researched exemplar of a kind of social history rarely found among English-language historians anymore.[29] Aly's provocative thesis is, quite simply, that the Third Reich was an ethnically based social-welfare state, one in which, he insists, ordinary Germans lived better than they had ever lived before; it was, as he terms it, an "agreeable dictatorship" (*Gefälligkeitsdiktatur*). In this respect, Aly's argument may remind some readers of the older argument by David Schoenbaum regarding Hitler's social revolution.[30] Yet unlike Schoenbaum, Aly does not argue that there was a gap between the ideological image of a classless

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[28] Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005). Subsequent page references are given in the text. Translations are my own.

[29] William H. Sewell, Jr, "Whatever Happened to the 'Social' in Social History," in Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates, eds., *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 209–26. This kind of social history remains much more common in Germany, of course, exemplified most prominently, though by no means exclusively, in the so-called Bielefeld School.

[30] David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (New York: Norton, 1966).

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society and the reality of everyday life. Also, unlike Schoenbaum, Ally does not stress the regime's differential appeal to distinct social groups. Rather, for Aly, most Germans, as Germans, really were better off under the Nazis. Ideology had nothing to do with popular support for the Nazi regime, nor did anti-Semitism, which was no more widespread in Germany than elsewhere in Europe, even during the war, according to Aly. Rather, "On the basis of a comprehensive war of plunder and race war, National Socialism provided for a level of equality and social upward mobility previously unknown in Germany. That made it [simultaneously] popular and criminal" (*HV*, 38). As this quote indicates, Aly places far more emphasis on the war years than either Steigmann-Gall or Koonz (who ends her story before the outbreak of hostilities). This temporal extension is particularly valuable, since it was during the war, after all, that the vast majority of Nazi crimes took place and it was precisely this criminality which was most characteristic of the regime (*HV*, 36). If popular support for the Third Reich is puzzling during the peacetime years, it becomes downright mysterious once Germany entered into what would quickly prove to be an especially brutal and ultimately futile war.

Aly divides his analysis into four parts. Part I demonstrates how the Nazi regime divided domestic burdens to the benefit of the socially weak, with a particular emphasis on the hitherto little-studied Finance Ministry under the leadership of two German Nationalists (not Nazis). According to Aly, the process of Aryanization benefited primarily the state. "In total, at least nine percent of the regular Reich income in the last prewar years came from Aryanization redemptions" (*HV*, 62). As a consequence, 70 percent of German taxpayers were spared any direct war taxes through at least 1943, while a further 26 percent of higher-income Germans paid only a nominal sum. "The German leadership created and guaranteed a war socialism that was directed at securing the loyalty of the little people" (*HV*, 68)—this stands in marked contrast to prewar proposals for a 50 percent income tax in the event of war (*HV*, 66). Important for Aly's claim regarding the broadly egalitarian and redistributive character of Nazi tax policy is the fact that corporate taxes, by contrast, rose from an already high 40 percent to 55 percent by 1942 (*HV*, 78). In short, ordinary Germans were largely spared the cost of the war (and the prewar rearmament) because the state could balance the books with resources stolen from Jews, as well as with revenues from wealthy Germans who were in effect heavily taxed both before and during the war.

Part II of *Hitlers Volksstaat* delves into the myriad ways ordinary Germans were able to enrich themselves on a more mundane level during the Third Reich. Ordinary soldiers were allowed to plunder private property in the occupied territories, including in Western Europe, and ship the proceeds back home—"Hitler's Contented Robbers," Aly calls them (*HV*, 114). Those who lost their

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homes to the allied strategic bombing campaign were given new housing in apartments vacated by deported Jews. And, overall, the home front was provided a remarkably high standard of living, particularly in foodstuffs, by systematically allowing millions of Soviet POWs and civilians in the occupied territories to simply starve to death. These mechanisms of private enrichment were particularly important as a way for the regime to preserve the improved standard of living to which Germans had become accustomed in the prewar years, despite the very real economic sacrifices called for by the war (in the form of required overtime, as well as the substantial redistribution of resources to the army and away from consumer goods) (*HV*, 93).

In Part III Aly demonstrates the way the techniques of Aryanizaiton perfected in Germany before the war were applied in the occupied territories. Traditionally the historical image of Aryanization focuses on the private actors involved, corporate managers, bank directors, or even ordinary people who took over conveniently vacated Jewish businesses. Yet, Aly contends, this is to fundamentally miss the point.

> Almost everywhere in Europe where Aryanization took place, the respective state or occupation authorities liquidated Jewish property ... Yet here, as there, the private acquirers as a rule paid for the stocks, houses or the furniture and clothing of dispossessed Jews, albeit below the market rates set by the inflated wartime market. Everywhere, the property was nationalized before it was privatized; it "lapsed" [*verfiel*] to the state as German finance bureaucrats liked to say" (*HV*, 210).

As a result, state robbery became a "principle." The financial windfall went into the treasuries of the occupied countries, from where it made its way back to German occupiers, who then used this to subsidize German taxpayers with artificially low rates. As a consequence, the benefits of Aryanization in the occupied territories were distributed far more broadly than the relatively small number of individuals directly involved would seem to indicate.

Aly even thinks it is possible to explain at least some specific incidents in the history of the Holocaust on the basis of this principle of state plunder. After the German conquest of Greece in 1941, severe inflation rapidly set in there due to the excessive plunder by German (and to a lesser extent Italian) occupation troops amounting to upwards of 90 percent of Greece's real income in 1942, quickly devaluing the Greek drachma (*HV*, 278). Increasingly, goods, especially agricultural goods, were only available at extremely high prices on the black market. As a result, German occupation troops, who were paid in drachma, began to complain and even to barter military materiel on the black market (*HV*, 279). In response, Hitler sent Hermann Neubacher as *Reichssonderbeauftragten* to Greece to take matters in hand. Among the correctives undertaken by Neubacher was the extortion of 25,000 pounds' weight of gold from the Jewish community of

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Salonika on the eve of their deportation to Auschwitz. This was used to reduce the Greek government's contribution to the cost of the occupation by a corresponding amount, allowing them to stabilize their finances and bring inflation under control. There thus exists, according to Aly, a "connection between the Jewish deportation and the fight against inflation" (*HV*, 281), although he stops (just) short of saying that the Jews were deported to Auschwitz solely in order rob them.

In Part IV, Aly summarizes the financial gains of Nazi Germany from Aryanization and plunder during the war and articulates his conclusions. As far as Aryanization goes, Aly concludes that, including the German Reich itself, Aryanization brought between 15 and 20 billion Reichsmarks to the German government after 1 September 1939. As a consequence, he asserts, "The Holocaust cannot be understood unless it is analyzed as the most thorough mass robbery–murder in modern history" (*HV*, 318). As for the contribution of plunder to the German treasury during the war years, Aly's final calculations are nothing short of astonishing. At least two-thirds of German government income during the war came from foreign plunder and the tax contributions of slave laborers working in Germany proper (*HV*, 326). The remaining third was provided by German taxpayers, although very unevenly. The top 33 percent of taxpayers covered two-thirds of the German contribution to the war effort, while the 66 percent majority paid the remaining third (of the one-third total). All in all, Aly concludes, ordinary Germans had a very "cheap" war, financially speaking.

The Nazis' agreeable dictatorship was thus quite agreeable to most Germans:

> In the combination of general solicitousness [*Fürsorglichkeit*] and exemplary violence against so-called enemies of the people [*Volksschädlinge*], most Germans did not become enthusiastic Nazis [*Jubelnazis*] but rather conformists, who enjoyed the mundane opportunities the system provided them to walk off with things [*Mitnahmemöglichkeiten*]. Yet the passive loyalty thus achieved sufficed to preserve the Nazi state's internal capacity for action until the summer of 1944. (*HV*, 339)

Even more than Steigmann-Gall's work, Aly's has been enormously controversial, especially in Germany, where the popular reaction has been reminiscent of that which greeted Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* some years ago.[31] In scholarly circles, the critiques of Aly's work have focused broadly on two issues. First, economic historians have challenged Aly's statistics and his assertion that most Germans really were better off in the Third

[31] For a useful introduction to the popular debates in Germany see Jody K. Biehl, "How the Germans Fell for the 'Feel-Good' Fuehrer" *Spiegel-OnlineInternational*, http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,347726,00.html (accessed 27 May 2007).

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Reich.[32] Indeed, some economic historians have argued that the standard of living declined noticeably during the Third Reich as a result of its policy of autarky.[33] Among economic historians, Adam Tooze has leveled perhaps the most consequential technical critique of Aly's argument. According to Tooze, the core problem with Aly's analysis is that he radically underestimates the cost of the war for ordinary Germans because he concentrates on direct taxation, neglecting war loans.[34] Aly thinks this focus on taxation is methodologically acceptable because loans deferred the cost of the war until later and were (or would be) mostly repaid by plunder from foreign conquest. Consequently, Aly contends, loans imposed no economic burden on ordinary Germans. This is fundamentally wrong, according to Tooze. Loans do not actually defer real costs, Tooze points out, because they soak up available capital that would otherwise be used for other purposes, a phenomenon economists call "crowding out." For example, Tooze points out, Germany in 1938 faced a rather serious housing shortage, but it was all but impossible to build new apartments because so much capital had flowed into rearmament in preparation for war. And in 1942, 69 percent of the German gross domestic product (a better measure of the real costs of the war than the state budget, according to Tooze) went to the war effort; 52 percent of that came from domestic sources and only 17 percent from external resources;

> In other words, the real costs of a war cannot be delayed. One can only promise citizens compensation for these costs. Citizens forgo consumption and receive in return the promise that the loan will be repaid with interest, which should enable them to satisfy future needs more readily. And if foreigners pay these expenses, so much the better. Yet this is, as indicated, nothing more than a promise.[35]

There may thus be good reason to doubt Aly's assertion that Germans lived better during the Third Reich than ever before and that the war was as cheap as he claims. Yet if one relativizes Aly's claims, his core argument may remain intact. The crucial claims in *Hitlers Volksstaat* are that the Third Reich was broadly egalitarian, that it offered opportunities for social mobility, and that, above all,

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32 See, for example, Johannes Bähr, Rezension von: Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2005, in *sehepunkt* 5 (2005), Nr. 7/8 (15 July 2005), http://www.sehepunkte.historicum.net/2005/07/8192.html (accessed 27 May 2007).

33 Jörg Baten and Andrea Wagner, "Autarky, Market Disintegration, and Health: The Mortality and Nutritional Crisis in Nazi Germany, 1933–1937," *Economics and Human Biology* 1/1 (2003), 1–28.

34 Adam Tooze, "Doch falschggerechnet—weil falsch gedacht," *TAZ*, 16 March 2005. A fuller version of this critique can be found on Tooze's webpage: http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/academic_staff/further_details/tooze-aly.pdf (accessed 29 Aug. 2007).

35 Tooze, "Doch felschgerechnet," TAZ.

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Germans did not bear anything like the full burden of the war (unlike World War I); even if Germans did suffer to some degree from the regime's autarkic policies before or during the war, they may well have still been relatively better off, in comparison with both World War I (still within living memory) and the Great Depression that immediately preceded the Third Reich. Aly may overstate his case but if his argument is read in relative terms, it hardly seems fundamentally mistaken.

The second major scholarly criticism of Aly's argument seems more consequential. Aly's thesis hinges on the notion that ordinary Germans at least passively accepted the regime and its criminality because they benefited from it materially. This is fundamentally a claim about how ordinary Germans perceived the regime. Here Aly falls into difficulties similar to those of Steigmann-Gall. It may well be a plausible common-sense inference that people support governments that improve their standard of living, but correlation is not necessarily causality. And Aly's book, as full of evidence as it is, is conspicuously thin on demonstrations of popular attitudes toward the regime.[36] This is admittedly a difficult task in a dictatorship, but certainly not impossible.[37] Similarly, Aly's tendency to lump "Germans" together as a group, with little differentiation save by income level, may well overstate the homogeneity of popular attitudes toward the regime. Not everyone in the same tax bracket thinks the same way about politics. Indeed, it is quite possible for people's politics to diverge from their objective economic interests.[38]

More importantly, Aly could respond decisively to the economic critiques by Tooze and others were he in a position to argue that what was at stake was less the real economic welfare of ordinary Germans than their perceptions of that welfare. Perhaps most Germans were not really so well off during the Third Reich as Aly contends but it is also quite possible that they thought they were, at least relative to their immediate past experience. And if the issue at hand is, as Aly insists, the popular legitimacy of the regime, this perception almost certainly

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[36] This critique is made forcefully in Armin Nolzen, Rezenzion von: Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2005, in *sehepunkt* 5 (2005), Nr. 7/8 (15 July 2005), http://www.sehepunkte.historicum.net/2005/07/8193.html (accessed 27 May 2007).

[37] See, for instance, Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich, Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). One should also note Peter Longerich's brilliant recent dissection of the whole idea of public opinion in the Third Reich: P. Longerich, *"Davon habe wir nichts gewusst!" Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung, 1933–1945* (München: Siedler, 2006).

[38] For a interesting analysis of this phenomenon, albeit in an admittedly quite different context, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

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mattered more than the underlying reality, whatever that may have been. But this is not an argument that Aly can make, both because he lacks the evidence to do so and, more importantly, because it would run counter to his fundamental methodological presupposition. Aly's materialist history is thus fatally lacking an intellectual and cultural dimension. Commitment and legitimacy are, after all, not simply self-interested acts; they are also intellectual and moral engagements.

In the end, then, we are confronted here with three remarkable and remarkably different books each wrestling in their distinct ways with the same problem. Initially, it may seem as if the three approaches examined here—the intellectual history of ideology, the cultural history of community, and the socioeconomic history of political legitimacy—are fundamentally incompatible. On the one hand, there is a clear divide between Aly's materialist theory of Nazi economic populism and Koonz's and Steigmann-Gall's insistence that Nazi ideology was central to its popular legitimacy. On the other hand, although Koonz and Steigmann-Gall would both reject Aly's rather rigid materialism, they themselves differ sharply over the character of the Nazi world view and its significance for popular support. Koonz insists on its radically secular nature, Steigmann-Gall argues for its deeply Christian character. In effect, reading these three books together recapitulates two of the great methodological and theoretical debates in the history of the human sciences: between materialism and idealism, on the one hand, and between proponents and critics of the secularization thesis, on the other.

Yet read slightly against the grain, perhaps, these approaches are less incompatible than they at first seem. The problem with Aly's materialism is not that it is wrong, but rather its exclusivity, his rather dogmatic insistence that only material interests matter, and its application in a context where it cannot really answer the question being asked. If the issue at hand is the popular legitimacy of the Third Reich, then the "objective reality" of economic conditions matters less than the popular perception of that reality. One could follow the postmodernists in arguing that there is never any reality beyond the discursive perception (and creation) of that reality, but in this context it is enough to argue that a majority of Germans perceived the Nazi economy to be relatively fair and egalitarian and that that is what mattered for its popular legitimacy. Even if Tooze is right that the war was far more expensive in real terms than Aly's calculations indicate, it was certainly still cheaper than it would have been without sustained plunder. Moreover, if Aly's tax figures are at all accurate, the regime made a clear effort to distribute the most obvious burdens of the war in a way that benefited ordinary Germans as much as possible. Indeed, if one reads Aly's data with an eye toward the perceived fairness of the Nazi economy, his tax data becomes particularly important, because taxation is where most people concentrate their attention

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when thinking about the state and the economy. The crowding out of the capital markets by military spending is not something most people would perceive and even if the results were evident, in the form, say, of a housing shortage, they would be unlikely to make the connection between that and government policy. Rather, they would see the relatively low tax rates and appreciate that the government was at least trying to do its best for them. In other words, the "real" economic data Aly provides helps explain why many Germans would have felt that the Nazi idea of a people's community was something more than empty verbiage, that the government was willing, in effect, to put its money where its mouth was. Material reality, as an object of perception, appears to have real analytical purchase in this regard.

Similarly the divide between Koonz and Steigmann-Gall over secularization is less fundamental than it at first appears. To begin with, scholars have recently begun to argue that religiosity and modernity are far from antithetical, that religion too can be a fully modern phenomenon.[39] Why then should the Nazis' modernizing project, reactionary though it undoubtedly was in some respects, have been any different?[40] More specifically, Steigmann-Gall is careful never to claim that Nazism was a Christian movement as such. He merely insists that the Nazi world view contained stronger elements of Christian beliefs than has been previously noted. He certainly does not deny that Nazi ideology contained much that was quite distinct from any form of Christianity. He also makes clear that the Nazis never had much use for the institutional authority of the organized churches and sought at every opportunity to subordinate them to the state, as in their ultimately unsuccessful bid to create a unified, state-run Protestant Church. Koonz's claim that scholarship, or pseudo-scholarship, came to replace the authority of the churches as the arbiter of moral values in the Third Reich seems plausible enough, but she almost certainly overstates her case with regard to the purported exclusion of theology from the pantheon of Nazi science. As Alan Steinweis has recently demonstrated, theologians were as active in the propagation of Nazi pseudo-scholarship as any other academic discipline.[41] Nor need this be an either/or proposition because, while the churches did oppose the Nazis on some issues (euthanasia being the most prominent), on many others churchmen were active supporters of the regime. Expert knowledge and an odd

[39] See e.g. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Comparisons and Connections* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); or Michael Geyer and Lucian Holscher, eds., *Die Gegenwart Gottes in der modernen Gesellschaft: Tranzendenz und religiöse Vergemeinschaftung in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006).

[40] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[41] Steinweis, *Studying the Jew*, 64–91.

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kind of modernized religious knowledge could thus be not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing.

In the end, then, it may be possible to read these books in conjunction, rather than in competition, in such a way that they offer what amounts to a more holistic understanding of the popular legitimacy of the Third Reich. If Koonz is right that the Nazis in effect taught the Germans to be anti-Semites through their sophisticated dissemination of ethnic fundamentalism and the deployment of expert knowledge to articulate new boundaries of ethical obligation, the question remains as to how such a radical transformation could have been effected so quickly and seamlessly. Perhaps the success of this pedagogical endeavor derives in part from the fact that, as Steigmann-Gall demonstrates, the Nazis were less secular than Koonz believes. They articulated significant aspects of their moral agenda in explicitly Christian terms. Steigmann-Gall quotes Hitler as saying, "If positive Christianity means . . . the clothing of the poor, the feeding of the hungry . . . then it is we who are the more positive Christians. For in these spheres the people's community of National Socialist Germany has accomplished prodigious work" (*HR*, 190). Many of the Nazis' social-welfare policies were articulated in explicitly Christian moral terms. The Nazi conscience was indeed in many ways radically different from that of traditional Christianity; in this, Koonz is surely right. But it was articulated as a kind of Christianity nonetheless. The Nazis at least claimed their conscience was a Christian one. This fact may help explain why so many Germans were willing to adopt it as their own. They did not feel they were changing their minds all that much.

In effect, then, the Nazis were selling new wine in comforting old bottles. And moreover, as Aly so convincingly demonstrates, the wine was being sold at rock-bottom prices, since much of it was stolen anyway. The crucial point of Aly's analysis is that it was not just the war effort that was (to a greater or lesser extent) financed by plunder; expropriated property was not only used to pay for tanks and airplanes. The fact that the Nazis demonstrably shared their booty with the "little people" may not necessarily prove that those people accepted Nazism for this reason. But it is surely easier to commit to a community that, while it asks much, also gives much in return. Indeed, if one reads Aly's data in the relative manner I have suggested and incorporates the notion that people's perceptions of the economy were more important for Nazi legitimacy than its real character, then it is possible to see Aly's "agreeable dictatorship" as being one of the cornerstones of the kind of ethnic community Koonz sees as lying at the heart of the Nazi conscience. The Nazis did in fact create a more egalitarian community, one steeped in blood (as they openly proclaimed) and resting on a foundation of skulls. Yet this was a community of more than passive acquiescence. It was indeed a moral community, as Koonz rightly insists, but a quasi-religious community of shared moral engagement and common interest. So, read from

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the right angle, what we have here is not three divergent, competing accounts of the Third Reich, but three facets of a single, more comprehensive explanation.

In the Third Reich, the material and the ideal, the secular and the sacred, were mutually reinforcing. The Nazis claimed to be forging a community in which the common good had priority over selfish private interests. This would have been instantly recognizable to many Germans as a fundamentally Christian goal. This helped make it plausible, and preserved it from contamination by suspicions of Marxism. It was also important that the regime could be seen to be making concrete efforts to implement this noble vision, a reasonably egalitarian economic policy (for Aryan Germans) being especially important. The strict delimitation of this community on ethno-racial lines had both ideological and practical dimensions. There can be no doubt that racism lay at the very heart of Nazism and that, for the Nazis, this was a deeply (if perversely) moral vision. Yet it was also true that efforts to create and sustain this relatively egalitarian racial community, while simultaneously preparing for and fighting a monumental war, would have been impossible without exploiting resources beyond those available within the people's community itself.

Love thy neighbor was a genuine Nazi commandment but so too was the necessary corollary, rob and murder everyone else. This potent combination had both ideological and materialist elements. Together, but only together, they gave Germans something they could believe in. The economic egalitarianism based on plunder that Aly points to—even if more limited than he says—was the crucial visible marker of the Nazis' seriousness about the people's community, what made it real in people's minds, what made the regime's "mere promises" (Tooze) believable. If the Third Reich was a popular dictatorship, it was because it was able to combine traditional, familiar ideological tropes, from Christianity but also from nationalism, with new forms of expert knowledge, the power of "science," broadly disseminated through all the institutions of modern cultural life. This ideological vision was then implemented, made palpably real, in large part through economic policies of conquest, plunder, and genocide. There is no antinomy of the ideal and the material here, only the reciprocally constitutive articulation and implementation of a perverse vision of community. Indeed, one could perhaps argue that what was so particularly insidious about the Nazi regime was that it was a temporarily successful attempt to overcome some of the central antinomies of modernity itself, particularly between the material and the ideal, the secular and the sacred, community and society. The cost of this endeavor was of course catastrophic in human lives and it was utterly unsustainable in the long run because based on the sheer fiction of race, but for a time it was seductive enough to persuade a good many Germans that the Nazis really did offer a pathway to the future.

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