

# Education, Moral Values, and Democracy: Lessons from the German Experience

Douglas F. Tobler

History is not very popular these days. We apparently live in an age that has turned its back on the past. To many, history is what Henry Ford said it was—bunk—with little relevance to either individual or collective life. This would appear to be especially true of college students, who are staying away from history classes in droves. Perhaps that is because, as one friend put it, they have not lived long enough to be conscious of history, let alone understand it. But the student generation is not alone in what the sociologist Robert Nisbet, quoting T. S. Eliot, calls “disowning the past” in favor of a present that is progressively more impatient with yesterday.<sup>1</sup>

We historians have contributed to this declining interest by becoming too narrow in the pursuit of our own special interests and by abdicating to journalists the task of writing to the general educated public. We have perhaps thought the “trickle down” theory would work better in history than it does in the economy. We have also lost some credibility by our failure to draw commonsense conclusions or even lessons from our studies in the collective experience and thus forfeited a major purpose for which history exists. What good is the study of history if we do not learn something about ourselves and the human condition? Some modern historians have even exhibited a kind of cynical pride in the meaninglessness of history. For example, consider the following comment by Professor David Donald of Harvard:

What undergraduates want from their history teachers is an understanding of how the American past relates to the present and the future. But if I teach what I believe to be the truth, I can only share my sense of the irrelevance of history and the bleakness of the new age we are entering. . . . Unlike every previous American generation, we face impossible choices. . . . What, then, can a historian tell undergraduates that might help them in this new and unprecedented age? Perhaps my most useful function would be to disenthral them from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the past.<sup>2</sup>

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Douglas F. Tobler is a professor of history at Brigham Young University. This essay was first presented as a BYU forum address.



Part of the current skepticism about the value and meaningfulness of history may result from a tendency to put too much emphasis on the side of history that is unique and changing, while taking historical continuity for granted. There are basic human needs and values, such as life, freedom, the preservation of human dignity, the desire for justice, and the search for a purposeful existence, that do not derive from history and transcend time. These form a continuity that balances with change to provide us with some standards for judging the past.

What historians should be telling students is that history is unique to human beings, that it is intrinsic in our nature and at the same time elevates us above the rest of nature. History serves the same purpose for society as memory does for individuals: it protects us from collective amnesia, a disease even more disorienting and dangerous to a society than to an individual. Just as the thoughtful memory of things past provides perspective and direction in personal life, so history can work its civilizing influence upon a society. But while neither memory nor history can offer an ironclad guarantee for the future, they are (as Bernard Baruch once said in defense of old age) “better than the alternatives.” In his own day, Albert Einstein pleaded to have history taught as “progress in civilization,” as a means of developing a lofty spirit in man commensurate with his potential dignity.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course, numerous insights or lessons to be learned from historical study. This essay explores some insights gained from a look at democracy and freedom through the German experience in the first half of the twentieth century.

My study and observations during the past few years have convinced me that democracy does indeed offer the best hope for all of mankind to enjoy the blessings of freedom and the opportunity to develop what the early nineteenth-century German philosopher and government minister Wilhelm von Humboldt called the “full flowering of the human personality.” Recent struggles in Poland, the Phillipines, and Korea have vividly illustrated this basic yearning we all have to control our own destiny. At the same time, we have learned that democracies are not as inevitable as some nineteenth-century political thinkers supposed, and that they cannot be imposed on a people who do not want them or who refuse to pay the price—both the down payment and the monthly installments. Moreover, democracies are fragile and require constant vigilance if they are to survive. Winston Churchill summarized this view in a thoughtful speech to the House of Commons in 1947:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.<sup>4</sup>



For the German people, the years after World War I were a time of extraordinary change and turmoil. Their failure to achieve a viable democracy during this period proved to be a catastrophe for them and for the world. An examination of this first attempt at German democracy, with its potential implications for other times and places, may be a worthy effort for the historian. But first let me briefly review the facts in the case. The rising generation is too young to remember them, and those who lived through the era may have forgotten.

In November 1918, World War I—the “war to end all wars,” to make the world “safe for democracy”—came to an end. After four years of giving their all to what they believed was a “just” cause, the German people discovered they had indeed lost the war. The magnificent empire Bismarck had created in the center of Europe collapsed; Kaiser Wilhelm II fled; and in the heat of the revolutionary mood a democratic republic, the Weimar Republic, was proclaimed. The Weimar Republic was from the beginning a frail and even sickly plant. There were few democrats and even fewer republicans to provide a fertile soil for growth. Some Germans wanted the monarchy back; others wanted neither the republic nor a monarchy, but something patterned after Bolshevik Russia.

The young republic was buffeted by a constant stream of difficulties: responsibility for the punitive Versailles Treaty, which every German, regardless of political persuasion, resented; political assassinations of strong democratic leaders; invasion of the industrial Ruhr heartland by French and Belgian troops; inflation that saw the exchange rate soar from eight to four trillion marks for one dollar in four years; the Great Depression, with similar unemployment and misery to that in America but without our stabilizing democratic traditions, values, and institutions; political instability and psychological despair. In this mood, the political leadership and a plurality of the people turned to Adolf Hitler. He had, he said, answers. Most Germans were convinced things could hardly get worse; they would experience a rude awakening. On the occasion of his accession to power, Hitler promised, “Give me ten years and you will not be able to recognize Germany.”<sup>5</sup> This turned out to be the ironic understatement of the century!

What were Hitler’s “achievements” in his twelve years of power? For the first six years, he brought apparent prosperity and renewed national pride while preparing for war and locking the country in the noose of a totalitarian police state. Then followed 2191 days—six years—of conquest, slaughter, misery, famine, death, degradation, and guilt. Twenty million Germans went to war; 3,250,000 died in battle while another 3,350,000 civilians perished in addition to 7,750,000 wounded and 1,300,000 missing. Of twenty million buildings in Germany, seven million were destroyed or damaged, along with three



thousand miles of railroad track. The monetary cost for Germany, in 1940 dollars, was \$272 billion.

The cost for the world was greater. Seventy million men fought in history's bloodiest conflict; seventeen million died on the battlefield together with eighteen million civilians. Some calculations push the death toll beyond fifty million. The direct cost of the war was one trillion 1940 dollars, or about two-and-a-half trillion today. Indirect costs (mostly property damage) totalled an additional four trillion.<sup>6</sup>

But there was also a heavy moral cost. As the prospects for victory deteriorated, the Nazi leadership intensified the other war against the Jews. Consciously, systematically, bureaucratically, and efficiently, Hitler's regime carried out their major objective: the murder of the Jews. But other things, such as faith in modern man and in our capacity for progress toward civilization, died too. Many wondered if this was indeed what the world was coming to.

Democracy in Germany had failed, but questions remained. Why did it fail? Why did the German people, with their reputation for cultural and educational achievement, permit someone like Hitler to acquire and consolidate power in such a way as to start a war and carry out the Holocaust? What motivated the Nazi leadership to pursue their course to so destructive an end? What had happened to the ethical and moral values that should have served as a barrier against inhumanity? Could something similar happen there—or anywhere—again?

Historical explanations are necessarily complex. Oversimplification is as dangerous and distorting in understanding history as it is in understanding the motives of individuals. Historians have offered long-range explanations that emphasize the German tradition of authority and the strong state while playing down the significance of individual freedom. This was coupled with the Machiavellian marriage—the legacy of Bismarck—that united national pride and the ruthless abuse of political power. The German idea of freedom within the state rather than against it was different from that in the West. Then there are the short-term explanations: the loss of World War I, the Depression, the despair and disillusionment and the particular concatenation of people and events that led up to 1933. There are also political, social, economic, and psychological explanations; all have contributed something to our understanding, but all are, in my judgment, inadequate to account for the magnitude of the event.

Two respected German historians looked out on the carnage after 1945 in search for meaning, one from within the country, where he had spent his entire life of eighty years, the other from the safer refuge of the America to which he had been driven. Both had taken pride in their native culture and its achievements; both now stood in horror at the sight. The older man, Friedrich Meinecke, called the sight before him "The German



Catastrophe” and in Gordon Craig’s felicitous phrase offered the following explanation: “the emphasis upon power at the expense of spirit has corrupted the values of the people and stunted their political growth.”<sup>7</sup> The younger historian, Hajo Holborn, later Sterling Professor of History at Yale, allowed more time to pass before offering a more expansive but similar analysis. While paying attention to the role social conflict had played in paving the way for Hitler, Holborn placed a major portion of the blame elsewhere:

The actual decline of German education goes far to explain not only why so many Germans voted the Nazis into power but also why they were willing to condone so many of their subsequent crimes. German education hardly dealt with the “whole man”; it chiefly produced men proficient in special skills or special knowledge but lacking not only in the most primitive preparation for civic responsibility but also in a canon of absolute ethical commitments. Although the churches provided this for a good many people, and to a greater extent within the Roman Catholic Church than within the Protestant Churches, the number of Germans who looked to the church for guidance was limited. The higher philosophy and the humanities of the period were largely formalistic or relativistic and did not produce a firm faith. In these circumstances it was inevitable that so many people fell for cheap and simple interpretations of life and history, as offered by the racists. To young people in particular this proved an irresistible temptation.<sup>8</sup>

Well over a century before this explanation was written, a French nobleman-scholar came to the United States to study democracy in its living setting. He was confident that it was the “wave of the future” for France as well as the rest of Europe, but he doubted that the Old World was preparing to make democracy work. Therefore, he set out to determine “the principles underlying action, principles susceptible of universal, not merely American, application.”<sup>9</sup> What followed was the classic *Democracy in America*, which has served ever since as a kind of handbook for those who wished to know what conditions democracy needed to prosper and grow. Very early in the treatise, Tocqueville admonished political leaders about the interrelationship between education, moral virtues, and democracy:

The first duties that are at this time imposed upon those who direct our affairs is to educate democracy; to reawaken, if possible, its religious beliefs; to purify its morals; to mold its actions; to substitute a knowledge of statecraft for its inexperience, and an awareness of its true interest for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to time and place, and to modify it according to men and to conditions. A new science of politics is needed for a new world.<sup>10</sup>

Later, in an 1835 letter to one of his closest friends, M. Stoffels, Tocqueville explained both the advantages and weaknesses of democracy, asserting “that such a government cannot be maintained without certain conditions of intelligence, of private morality, and of religious



belief that we [France] as a nation have not reached, and that we must labor to attain before grasping their political results.”<sup>11</sup> Tocqueville then enunciated some of these moral principles—Holborn’s absolute commitments—which must be idealistically and passionately held by both leaders and the broad mass of the people if democracy is to function properly: (1) a religious view of man’s existence, placing him a little lower than the angels and making him responsible to his Creator in a life hereafter for his deeds in this one; (2) an unshakable faith in the worth of the human being; (3) a commitment to the equality of all as human beings—“the gradual development of the principle of equality is a providential fact”<sup>12</sup>; (4) a true and sincere respect for right and justice; and (5) a true love of freedom, which, as a later scholar, John Hallowell, counseled “requires both a knowledge of the good and the will to choose the good when known.”<sup>13</sup>

It was precisely these moral values that were not a strong enough part of German life to enable the young democratic political institutions to resist the seductive appeal of Hitler and his party. When torrents of disillusionment, resentment, and irrationality overflow traditional banks, only absolute ethical standards held with fervor and conviction can provide the dams and headgates needed to keep the raging stream from untold destruction.

How could the widely respected German educational system have contributed to the creation of a moral climate favorable to Hitler’s rise to power? At the end of the nineteenth century, Germany had the lowest rate of illiteracy in Europe—a mere .05 percent at a time when Britain had twice and France eight times that rate.<sup>14</sup> However, universal education in Germany was limited to the elementary grades. Both before and during the Weimar era of the 1920s, an overwhelming majority of students had completed their comprehensive schooling by age fourteen. Thereafter they attended vocational school for two or three years before becoming full-fledged members of the permanent work force. In 1931, for example, there were approximately seven-and-a-half million children in the elementary schools but fewer than nine hundred thousand in secondary schools and fewer than 120,000 students enrolled in all German universities and technical schools.<sup>15</sup> Thus, only about one out of every eight children went to school beyond the eighth grade, and fewer than one in fifty attended the university.

More significant than the numbers, however, were the curriculum, textbooks, and spirit that pervaded the classroom. The curriculum consisted of the three R’s plus singing, with history, geography, natural science, and geometry added in the upper grades. Learning was generally by rote memorization of the facts under the direction of a schoolmaster, although from time to time there were serious attempts to humanize the approach. Albert Speer, Hitler’s architect and later



Minister of Armaments, remembered what school was like for the generation that provided the Nazi leadership:

In school, there could be no criticism of courses or subject matter, let alone of the ruling powers of the state. Unconditional faith in the authority of the school was required. It never even occurred to us to doubt the order of things, for as students we were subjected to the dictates of a virtually absolutist system.<sup>16</sup>

Speer's evaluation is reinforced by a mature Albert Einstein. After finding refuge in the U.S., he spoke out against the education through coercion that he had resented as a boy:

To me the worst thing seems to be for a school principally to work with methods of fear, force, and artificial authority. Such treatment destroys the sound sentiments, the sincerity and the self-confidence of the pupil. It produces the submissive subject. It is no wonder that such schools are the rule in Russia and Germany.<sup>17</sup>

It is significant that an estimated 30 percent of the political leaders in Nazi Germany came from among the teaching profession, especially from elementary schoolteachers.<sup>18</sup> By the early twentieth century, there was little, if any, attention paid in the German elementary schools to the human values: the sacredness and dignity of the individual personality with its need for maximum personal freedom, as taught a century earlier by Humboldt and friends. Instruction was designed to teach the basic subjects—not citizens—and to promote German nationalism, military strength, and the preservation of the class system. Children and adults read Goethe and Schiller, but it was difficult to internalize the human values in their work—if they were understood—over against the prevailing dogmas of the time.<sup>19</sup>

Students in the elementary schools were required to have religious training, but it, too, stressed order and discipline and was cold and formalistic. The foremost scholar on the German educational system, Friedrich Paulsen, described his own religious training experience in these terms:

As far as I can remember, [religious instruction] adopted the scheme of neo-Lutheran orthodoxy and contained an epitome of the system of dogmatics, conceived in the spirit of that new faith and dealing at length with such matters as the doctrine of the two natures and the three offices of Jesus, the way of salvation leading through recognition and confession of our sins, through repentance and penance, faith and justification, to sanctification and eternal bliss. Of all these things we are able to give account in the form of forceful definition. But I do not remember that any impression was ever made in this way either on our minds or on our hearts.<sup>20</sup>

The secondary schools and universities—the prestigious training ground for Germany's elite—did no better than the elementary schools



in either teaching or exemplifying the moral values needed for democracy. Harry Kessler, one of Weimar Germany's most respected intellectuals, reflected back on his school days at the famous Johanneum Gymnasium, a special high school for those going on to the university in Hamburg, and noted that the aim of studying Latin and Greek, the staples of a curriculum designed to produce a truly educated, refined, and humane individual, had been perverted:

All that remained of the ideal of the human individual, bearing in his mind and heart consciousness of all mankind and its culture, such as had inspired the age of Goethe, all that remained was the enormous industry necessary to absorb the immense material involved [and this] had acquired an independent function and usurped, as it were with satanic majesty, the throne of the old ideal of humanism.<sup>21</sup>

Even more than the public schools, the universities basked in the glow of international adulation. Budding scholars came from everywhere to sit at the feet of lionized savants whose reputations had been built primarily on substantial research productivity, and this productivity was primarily in the realm of narrow specialization. In that system, serious advancement to full professor was out of the question if you were just a teacher. Prominence, power, and prestige produced a kind of contempt for being generally educated; it also produced a narrowness of perspective easily communicated to students wishing eventually to emulate the social position of their professors. Looking back in 1946, the Heidelberg philosopher Karl Jaspers attributed the rise of Nazism in the university to "the disintegration of scholarship into an aggregate of specializations [that] had in wide circles destroyed the spirit of truth."<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, German university communities also were contemptuous of the kind of political involvement that democracies require. To be politically aloof—apolitical—was to preserve the professor's supposed objectivity and make him a credible critic of society and the political order. But this was a dangerous delusion: most professors were intensely political in support of the old order. To them, the monarchy, German power in the world, and a socio-political order based on a class system were infinitely superior for Germans to any kind of republic or democracy, which they viewed as a foreign import from the West. And this attitude was maintained long after the monarchy had been replaced by the republic.

German universities taught other values that gave little help to democracy. Besides being institutionally vacuous, Christianity inspired little faith and confidence among the intellectual elite. Higher criticism of the Bible, the onslaughts of philosophical and practical materialism, and the substitution of nationalism and the power of the state as ersatz religions to which one owed primary spiritual and emotional allegiance all had a withering effect on traditional Judeo-Christian values.<sup>23</sup> In



addition, the academic community had given a new respectability to the doctrine of anti-Semitism. Even before Hitler achieved actual power in January 1933, the German universities had become first bastions against democracy and the Republic and then student citadels for the new movement. The universities, even more than German society in general, had been secularized to the point that the central issues of Christianity—love and fear of God and love for fellowman—had become blurred in the vision of a generation soon to gain enormous political power. Speaking of the secular transformation from his parents' generation to his own, Paulsen wrote:

But there can be no doubt that a great change has taken place in the general attitude; the ties which used to bind the individual to the Church as a traditional way of life have greatly weakened. To the parental generation, a life without the Church would have seemed unthinkable, while the generation now growing up would hardly be conscious of any great gap in their lives if the Church were suddenly to disappear. It is remarkable how rapidly this alienation has spread even to the rural communities in a neighborhood which used to hold with the Church. The principal reasons are that life in general has become more worldly and that the mind has been taken up by other interests.<sup>24</sup>

In Carl Zuckmayer's play *The Devil's General*, the hero, Harras, a rough but honorable general in the German Air Force, muses over the negative role that education has played in the formation of his generation:

Our kind of half-education has filled our guts with metaphysics and our heads with intestinal gas. We are dragged down by what we can't digest. We have become a nation of intellectually constipated elementary school teachers who have traded the disciplinary stick for a riding whip in order to disfigure the face of humanity. We build castles in the air and are slave drivers at the same time. A miserable people.<sup>25</sup>

What has been said about the failure of the schools to teach absolute ethical values was also true, if to a slightly lesser degree, of the churches. Both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches as well as some smaller religious groups were so thoroughly entwined with the prevailing political, economic, and social mores that their pulpits were more often given over to sermons of national rhetoric than calls for repentance. Protestants, in particular, had accepted the marriage of church and state ever since the time of Luther nearly four centuries before. Religion, to them, was primarily institutional and passive, not personal and active. At the same time it was political and even class oriented, not spiritual and ethical. One was a Christian by one's church affiliation rather than by conduct; the church's (and by extension the state's) enemies were each person's enemies, and it was as difficult for them to carry out the challenging injunction to love our enemies as it is



for us now. In a 1945 address, Karl Jaspers expressed the deep feelings of guilt that many Germans carried with them:

Thousands in Germany sought, or at least found death in battling the regime, most of them anonymously. We survivors did not seek it. We did not go into the streets when our Jewish friends were led away; we did not scream until we too were destroyed. We preferred to stay alive, on the feeble, if logical ground that our death could not have helped anyone. We are guilty of being alive. We know before God which deeply humiliates us.<sup>26</sup>

Three other issues clouded the vision of religious Germans, making it difficult for them to perceive the evil about them. First, there was a kind of morbid preoccupation with “Godless Communism” threatening them from the east. Many Germans, especially those who considered themselves “religious,” became convinced that the political choices open to them had been narrowed to only two, National Socialism and Communism, and that since Hitler had given repeated assurances that his regime must be built on “positive Christianity” (whatever that meant) he was the last bulwark against the westward thrust of this political and ideological scourge. Hitler talked about being God’s servant and of following his providential intuition. In *Mein Kampf* (1924), after describing how he had become a rabid anti-Semite, he closed the chapter with the kind of arrogant rhetorical flourish that was to become his ideological stock-in-trade: “Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*”<sup>27</sup>

The insensitivity to the threat posed by National Socialism to the basic ethical values needed for democracy was aided by the churches’ long-time sympathy with anti-Semitism. When a delegation of Catholic bishops remonstrated with Hitler shortly after he took office about his already-manifest persecution of the Jews, he stifled their objections with a brief history lesson. The protocol of the meeting reveals the following response:

He had been attacked (Hitler said) because of his handling of the Jewish question. The Catholic Church had regarded the Jews as parasites for 1500 years, had ushered them into the ghetto, etc.; at that time Jews had been seen for what they really were. In the era of Liberalism [the 19th century] this danger had no longer been seen. I return to the previous period, to what was done for 1500 years. I do not place race above religion, but I see this race as parasites on state and church, and perhaps I am doing Christianity the greatest of services thereby; hence their expulsion from the educational area and the state professions.<sup>28</sup>

German Protestants had, if anything, an even stronger anti-Semitic tradition than the Catholics.

The Christian churches in Germany had been cool in their reception of the Weimar democracy not only because of their injured nationalist



sentiment, but because they also identified the Republic with materialism and moral decadence, both also largely ascribed to the wicked hidden hand of the Jews. The decadent cabaret life of Berlin in the 1920s loomed large enough as a national moral problem that Christians of several denominations were willing to support a strong leader who promised to clean it up—without paying too close attention to what else he might do in the process.

In his recent prize-winning book on Germany, Professor Gordon Craig of Stanford has summarized the moral myopia of the educational and religious establishments: “[they] reflected all too faithfully the weakness of the political and social system that supported them. Indeed, as the years passed, the energies of Germany’s religious and educational institutions seemed to be diverted increasingly from their functions and used to buttress the status quo.”<sup>29</sup> Professor Craig might have added that not only was this true of the churches and the schools, but of German homes as well. Traditions of authoritarianism, nationalism, and the age-old commitment to duty and responsibility combined with contempt for democratic political life and postwar despair to create a home climate easily exploited by the demagogue.<sup>30</sup>

The moral impoverishment of education and religious life had a profound effect on the three groups of Germans who played a major role in making the war crimes and the Holocaust possible: the rank-and-file Germans who either voted for Hitler or acquiesced in his accession to power; the specialists and technocrats, like Albert Speer, who willingly put their considerable talents and abilities at the disposal of a criminal regime; and the criminals themselves, the ones who had struggled so many years precisely to be able to organize the crimes committed. The catastrophe could not have taken place without the involvement of all these groups.

Least culpable, in my view, are the common German people themselves. To this day, those of the Nazi generation are torn by a sense of guilt for the crimes committed by a regime that they may have helped to bring to power and did not try to overthrow. They thought—as did many other responsible observers around the world—that they were turning over their government to a man with special political gifts, who understood what they did not and had not been educated to understand: how Germany could regain the international power, prominence, and prosperity the country had lost. No one else within the framework of the Weimar Republic had been able to master the serious political and economic disorders; Hitler seemed to have the answers. Most people did not inquire much about his views on the dignity of man or the preservation of life, law, and freedom. These were the people of the “false conscience,” those who thought they were doing right but whose consciences betrayed them. They sensed Hitler’s arrogance but did not



perceive that his inclination to “play God” was deadly serious; the cult of the Fuehrer made him responsible to neither man nor God. Nor did it seem to matter to them, as Sebastian Haffner has pointed out, that Hitler was a great hater who subsequently derived much inward pleasure from killing.<sup>31</sup> They knew he had a low opinion of Jews and intended to put them in their place—many Germans approved of this—but they paid little attention to how the Nazis progressively dehumanized the Jews in the popular mind until they could be dealt with as rats to be exterminated. The German citizenry simply had not been adequately prepared by the primary institutions—home, school, or church—to identify and defend moral absolutes in a time of national crisis. Only after the hour had grown late and the evil fully revealed did many Germans realize what had been lost.

The lack of moral scruples also played a role in the willingness of skilled technocrats, bureaucrats, and specialists of every kind to lend their talents and skills to the objectives of the Nazi regime. These were people such as Albert Speer; Hjalmar Schacht, a financial wizard who helped finance Hitler’s early objectives; Franz von Papen; Leni Reifenstahl, the famous movie director; Erwin Rommel; Walter Schellenberg; and many more.<sup>32</sup> Even more than the common people, these were “morally indifferent.”<sup>33</sup> These were people with special talents without which, as Speer later lamented, the Third Reich could not have been built:

I was already surprised at the paltry intellectual level and lack of intellectual members [in the Nazi Party]. . . . With his party comrades alone, Hitler could never have ruled. His triumphs, which astonished the world for a time, could not be traced to the strata of functionaries who began in the Party and forged ahead into the administrations of the Reich and the regional governments. Quite the reverse. . . . An excellent officialdom and outstanding technocrats in the widest sense of the word offered their services in 1933. And in many respects they were behind Hitler’s economic and administrative successes.<sup>34</sup>

These people were not necessarily committed to Hitler’s aims. They simply did not ask the moral questions. When later queried whether he knew about the crimes being committed in Eastern Europe, Speer responded that that was not the right question; he did not want to know. When a friend, Gauleiter Karl Hanke, who had seen the extermination camps, began warning him against accepting an invitation to view Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, Speer turned him off. Speer’s account movingly describes the morally indifferent technician and the later awareness of guilt:

I did not query him [Hanke], I did not query Himmler, I did not query Hitler, I did not speak with personal friends. I did not investigate—for I did not want to know what was happening there. Hanke must have been



speaking of Auschwitz. During those few seconds, while Hanke was warning me, the whole responsibility had become a reality again. . . . For, from that moment on, I was inescapably contaminated morally; from fear of discovering something which might have made me turn from my course, I had closed my eyes. This deliberate blindness outweighs whatever good I may have done or tried to do in the last period of the war. Those activities shrink to nothing in the face of it. Because I failed at that time, I still feel, to this day, responsible for Auschwitz in a wholly personal way.<sup>35</sup>

In his last book, Speer describes in minute detail a conference with Hitler in September 1942 concerning the use of prisoners of war in Nazi slave labor camps. He comments on the state of moral callousness that prevailed in these terms: "This conversation, which was to determine the fate of countless unfortunates through the next two-and-a-half years, took place in a matter-of-fact, technocratic manner detached from any human considerations."<sup>36</sup>

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel would become legendary for his bravery and cunning, but also for his commitment to the conduct of warfare according to the rules. Still, he could be and was exploited by Hitler because his extraordinary ambition and vanity blinded him until it was too late to resist the basic destructiveness and criminality of his superiors.<sup>37</sup> Countless others were, like Adolf Eichmann, simply bureaucrats, "carrying out orders." To them it was more important to be diligent and loyal in their assigned tasks than to inquire about their morality. They understood the system. Peter Drucker has written about this moral indifference among German elites he had known. He describes one acquaintance who, in his search for ambition and power, became an administrator for the Final Solution. This Drucker characterizes as the sin of lusting for power. He describes a second acquaintance who played a game of trying to prevent the worst and perished. This was the sin of pride. Then Drucker concludes: "But the greatest sin is neither of these two ancient ones; the greatest sin may be the new, the 20th-century sin of indifference, the sin of the distinguished [German] biochemist-psychologist who neither kills nor lies but refuses to bear witness, in the words of the old gospel hymn, when 'they crucify my Lord.'"<sup>38</sup>

I will not spend much time discussing the criminals of the third group. With them, there was no moral indifference; they knew exactly what their objectives were and were willing to pay the price. They were a relatively small clique with Hitler as the unquestioned leader and demigod.<sup>39</sup> They did not challenge his authority or his political or military abilities. Notwithstanding recent attempts to exculpate Hitler from responsibility for the atrocities, we have it from Speer and others that the annihilation of the Jews was indeed the dominant obsession of Hitler's life. He seemed possessed and had the capacity to mesmerize those about him. Like an inverted pyramid, everything in the Third Reich derived



from him, and it is unlikely that the whole movement would have been anything like it was or achieved what it did without him. Knowingly, he and his henchmen set out to violate not only the absolute ethical standards necessary for democracy, but to make a shambles of the rules of decency and civilization and the laws of God and man. They had their own gods and their own rules, the real law of the jungle. Human life was first degraded by misery and then coldly blotted out. Hitler's contempt for human life, even the vaunted Aryan race, was made manifest in the end when he proclaimed that the German people should meet their twilight of the Gods because they were unworthy of his leadership. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that had he been successful in World War II, he would have used the totalitarian police power to persecute and perhaps weaken the Christian churches so that they could pose no threat of any kind to him. I cite here two quotations which reproduce the representative tone and substance of Hitler's beliefs about democracy and its underlying values:

Democracy is Jewish domination, for the people do not rule; public opinion is manufactured by the press which is owned by the Jews. At the same time democracy is not an end in itself, but the means to an end. The end is the achievement of Jewish domination through education for democracy—that is, through the creation of a lethargic mass of people who thinks that it rules through its elected representatives.<sup>40</sup>

And again:

Insofar as we deliver the people from the atmosphere of pitiable belief in possibilities which lie outside the bounds of one's own strength—such as the belief in reconciliation, understanding, world peace, the League of Nations, and international solidarity—we destroy those ideas. There is only one right in this world and this right is one's own strength.<sup>41</sup>

What followed from these ideas and circumstances we have already chronicled. The "Holocaust Kingdom" based on moral indifference exacted a heavy toll from mankind, but that price could yet become higher if some lessons are not learned.

What, then, are the lessons? I do not know all of them by any means, but let me cite a few. One stimulating intellectual historian, Franklin Baumer at Yale, has expressed skepticism about the future of our Western civilization and its values if secularization continues to destroy the "permanent ideals"—the absolute values—that have served us so well in the past. They are vitally important for our whole culture.<sup>42</sup> Robert Nisbet asks another question: "What is the future of the idea of progress in the West?" He responds:

Any answer to that question requires an answer to a prior question: what is the future of Judeo-Christianity in the West? For if there is one generalization that can be made confidently about the history of the idea of progress, it is that throughout history the idea has been closely linked with, has



depended on, religion or upon intellectual constructs derived from religion. . . . In our day, however, religion is a spent force. If God is not dead, he is ebbing away, and has been since the early part of the century.

Then Nisbet paraphrases G. K. Chesterton that “the result of ceasing to believe in God is not that one will believe nothing; it is that one will believe anything.”<sup>43</sup>

One lesson the German experience teaches us is that if any people wish to acquire or preserve the blessings of democracy—freedom, human dignity, life, justice—they must accept and prepare for the responsibilities that go with it. Democracy requires, especially in times of stress, a passionate commitment to those ideals—to the absolute ethical values—if it is to survive. Citizens must develop their critical, intellectual, and spiritual faculties to be able to choose correct policies and good leaders. Our education must be broad enough to transcend a narrow specialization and prepare us for something beyond a life of personal indulgence, material wealth, and militant moral indifference. We need a lively sensitivity for the dignity of all human beings, which, in turn, derives from understanding the relationship of each person to God. When any person’s human dignity and life are threatened, we cannot sit idly by. Einstein was right: “When the human condition is threatened, each of us should make his own personal contribution to the discussions and decisions on which its fate may eventually depend.”<sup>44</sup> Merely to have gone to school or even to the university may not be enough to train not only mind and heart, but emotions and judgment to be a sentinel in the modern world. Democracy requires the education of the “whole” man as preparation for correct thought and action.

The German experience also teaches us that membership in a church is not sufficient for being a Christian. Institutional and “social Christians” found it easy to accept or even go along with Hitler and his policies. German Catholics and Protestants were much more concerned about the potential threat to Jews who had become Christians than they were about the threat to Jews as Jews. Only those for whom the fear of God (in the sense of caring what God thinks of them) and love of fellowman were “flesh of their flesh and bone of their bone” were able to recognize the wicked and criminal tendencies of the regime.

Latter-day Saints have an unusually sacred commitment to the life, freedom, and dignity of man. We believe all human beings, regardless of color, economic or social status, or religion, are God’s literal children, and that is the most exalted statement that can be made about our nature. To think of or treat another human being as anything less is to betray not only our humanity, but also our embryonic deity.

I cite one last lesson: citizens in a democracy must be well enough educated and informed to choose their leaders wisely. We must make the effort to identify demagogues, haters, destroyers, and those



contemptuous of God and man, and do it in time. Modern scripture counsels us to choose men who are wise, honest, and good (D&C 98:10). Elder Neal A. Maxwell has pointed out that they must be all three.<sup>45</sup> With these lessons, perhaps we and others will be able to preserve a democracy where the wicked do not rule and the people do not mourn.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank my friend and colleague Gordon Whiting for calling my attention to Nisbet's book. It is a sobering view of a society that is not only turning its back on the past, but also on the Judeo-Christian values that have formed a basis for the progress of Western civilization (Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* [New York: Basic Books, 1980], 323ff.).

<sup>2</sup>David Donald, quoted in the *New York Times*, 8 September 1977; later reprinted in the *American Historical Association Newsletter* 15 (December 1977): 3–4. Nisbet believes this point of view is widely held by historians.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted from a 1934 speech, in Arturo Loria, "Einstein and Education," *Einstein: A Centenary Volume*, ed. A. P. French (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 221.

<sup>4</sup>*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 150.

<sup>5</sup>Adolf Hitler, speech in 1933 as quoted in Louis L. Snyder, *The War: A Concise History, 1939–1945* (New York: Dell, 1960), 611.

<sup>6</sup>I have relied on Snyder's statistics in *The War*, 611–14.

<sup>7</sup>Gordon Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 763. See also Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen, Dritte Auflage* (Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus Verlag, 1945), 161 and passim.

<sup>8</sup>Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany*, 3 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1969), 3:813.

<sup>9</sup>Philips Bradley, introduction to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1955), 1:xix.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup>John J. Halliwell, *The Moral Foundations of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 112.

<sup>14</sup>Craig, *Germany*, 187.

<sup>15</sup>R. H. Samuel and R. Hinton Thomas, *Education and Society in Modern Germany* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), 38, 112. This is the best study of the subject available.

<sup>16</sup>Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 35.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in French, *Einstein: A Centenary Volume*, 316.

<sup>18</sup>Samuel and Thomas, *Education and Society in Modern Germany*, 67.

<sup>19</sup>Speer makes an oblique comment about the relationship of literature to his education: "Even in our senior year, German class assignments called solely for essays on literary subjects, which actually prevented us from giving any thought to the problems of society" (Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 35).

<sup>20</sup>Friedrich Paulsen, *Friedrich Paulsen, an Autobiography*, trans. Theodore Lorenz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 117.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Samuel and Thomas, *Education and Society in Modern Germany*, 17–18.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>23</sup>For further elaboration of this view, see my "German Professors and the Weimar Republic" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1967).

<sup>24</sup>Paulsen, *Autobiography*, 39–40.

<sup>25</sup>Author's translation of Carl Zuckmayer, *Des Teufels General* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1980), 117.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Dial Press, 1947), 72.

<sup>27</sup>Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 65.

<sup>28</sup>"Roman Catholic Conference in Berlin, 25–26 April 1933," in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A Documentary Account of Christian Resistance and Complicity During the Nazi Era*, ed. Peter Matheson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 18–20.

<sup>29</sup>Craig, *Germany*, 180.



<sup>30</sup>The role of family life in preparing the ground for Hitler has yet to be fully explored. Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann has, however, made us aware of the increase of patriarchal authority in the German bourgeois family in the latter part of the nineteenth century, with each husband/father fashioning himself as a kind of miniemperor in his own family (see Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Die deutsche Familie* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974], 117–18). The impact of nationalistic attitudes and the lack of religious teaching in homes is manifest in a study by Theodore Abel of the life histories of six hundred Germans who joined the Nazi Party. He presents six typical cases of how and why they cast their lot with Hitler (see Theodore Abel, *The Nazi Movement* [New York: Atherton Press, 1966]. This book was originally published in 1938 under the title, *Why Hitler Came to Power*).

<sup>31</sup>Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, trans. Ewald Osers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979), 154.

<sup>32</sup>Christopher Browning, "The Government Experts," in *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy and Genocide: The San José Papers*, ed. Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton (New York: Kraus International, 1980), 183–97.

<sup>33</sup>The question of "moral indifference" is the subject of a stimulating book by Ranier C. Baum, *The Holocaust and the German Elite: Genocide and National Suicide in Germany, 1871–1945* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981).

<sup>34</sup>Albert Speer, *Infiltration*, trans. Joachim Neugrosche (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 4.

<sup>35</sup>Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 481.

<sup>36</sup>Speer, *Infiltration*, 24–25.

<sup>37</sup>See David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox* (New York: Dutton, 1977).

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Baum, *Holocaust and the German Elite*, 25.

<sup>39</sup>Hugh Seton-Watson made an interesting distinction between "dictators"—meaning, it would seem, absolute monarchs—and "totalitarians." Dictators have been inhibited by moral and religious sanctions of some kind; they have respected some standard external to themselves. To totalitarians everything is relative except their own power. The difference can be well summed up in the relative claims of Louis XIV and Hitler. "L'état, c'est moi" left large fields of human endeavor untouched. "Recht ist, was dem Volke nutzt" (Right is whatever benefits the people) was an unlimited claim, especially in view of the fact that the sole judge of the interest of the *Volk* is Hitler (see "Revolution and Democracy in the 20th Century," in Wilhelm Burges, ed., *Zur Geschichte und Problematik der Demokratie* [Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt, 1957], 115).

<sup>40</sup>Gordon Prange, ed., *Hitler's Words* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1944), 37.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>42</sup>Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 517.

<sup>43</sup>Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 351–52.

<sup>44</sup>French, *Einstein: A Centenary Volume*, 216.

<sup>45</sup>Neal A. Maxwell, "Challenge of Democracy" (Address delivered at Brigham Young University, 24 February 1972).