The aggressions of Germany and Japan unleashed forces of violence that also distinguished World War II from World War I. New technologies of warfare (machine guns, biplanes, and gas in World War I) that had been directed almost entirely at soldiers in trenches were transformed by World War II into missiles and warheads that rained down on civilian populations. Even the victorious Allies directed previously unheard of violence against civilian populations in the firebombing of cities like Dresden and Tokyo and the use of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Despite the pounding barbarity of the Western Front, the era of World War I still contained features of earlier "gentlemanly" conflict. Like chivalric jousters, aristocratic World War I pilots displayed colorful scarves and saluted their falling rivals. But the extreme nationalistic and racist movements of the interwar years instilled a hatred of the enemy that eviscerated any possibility of compassion or fellow feeling. Totalitarian governments indoctrinated mass citizen armies with a hatred that sometimes made the new technologies of violence redundant. Millions of newly designated enemies—neighbors as well as foreigners—were murdered by hand.

This chapter begins with selections on Nazi Germany: excerpts from Hitler's Mein Kampf, a Nazi speech on the extermination of Jews, and a description of the workings of one death camp, Treblinka. Then a recent historical essay places the holocaust of German Jews in a larger perspective. An even larger global view of the war and genocide brings us to Dr. Robert Wilson's letters about Japanese atrocities in China. We conclude this chapter on the war that killed so many millions by reflecting on its ending in mass death by a new weapon of far greater magnitude. We ask how, amidst the greatest technological progress the world had ever seen, the lives of ordinary people became so cheap.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Thinking about the Unthinkable

To be able to think about the unthinkable is to be able to understand without excusing. Occasionally when we learn of something horrendous, we simply say, "I don't believe it." Our disbelief harbors two feelings: first, our sense of outrage and anger, a rejection of what was done; second, our unwillingness to believe that such a thing could happen or did happen. Our choice of words expresses the difficulty we have making sense of the senseless.

We must try, however, to understand such catastrophes so that we can help to prevent similar horrors in our own time. Understanding reprehensible acts requires a level of empathy that is often difficult to arouse. As you read these selections, you will be encouraged to understand and explain events that are easier to not think about. To understand what is offensive is not to excuse it, but to be better prepared to avoid it in the future.

ADOLF HITLER

Mein Kampf, 1926

Hitler (1889-1945) wrote Mein Kampf (My Struggle) in prison where he was jailed after an unsuccessful attempt to take over the German government in Munich in 1923. As he wrote in the Epilogue, included at the end of this selection, the German National Socialist Labor (Nazi) Party, banned after the attempted coup in 1923, was revived by 1926 to become a force in German politics.

We read from this rambling 700-page book today because of what happened in the years after its publication in 1926. In the context of the global depression after 1929, the Nazi party grew to be the largest party in the German Parliament by 1932 with 37 percent of the popular vote. In January 1933 Hitler was appointed chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg. He proceeded to concentrate all power in his hands as Führer (Dictator), militarize the German economy, and mobilize for war. In 1938, while the rest of Europe stood by, he annexed his native Austria and German-speaking regions of Czechoslovakia. In March 1939, he added the rest of Czechoslovakia. On September 1, 1939, the German invasion of Poland triggered World War II in Europe.

During the same period the Nazi regime imposed increasingly discriminatory restrictions on German Jews. As early as 1933, Jews were banned from government service, law practice, some medical careers and some schools, and Dachau, the first concentration camp in Germany, was built. In 1935 the Nuremberg laws outlawed any civic life for Jews and any sexual contact between Jews and non-Jews. In the next couple of years Jews were banned from all other occupations, Jewish children were banned from public schools, and German properties were seized. With the outbreak of war, Jews in Germany and in German-occupied countries were rounded up and put in concentration camps.

camps where they were forced to work in factories for private corporations or government producers of war materials. In 1941 the Nazis began building extermination camps, first in Poland, to annihilate Jews, Poles, and other enemies of the Nazis. These included communists, socialists, political dissenters, homosexuals, Romani (Gypsies), Slavs, and other ethnic and religious minorities. By 1945, upwards of 11 million Jews and other “undesirables” had been killed.

It would be a mistake to try to see all of this in embryo in a young artist in Vienna twenty years before, or even in the vitriolic ruminations of a prison inmate ten years later, but what do these selections suggest to you about Hitler’s motivations and the roots of Nazism?

THINKING HISTORICALLY
To understand the unthinkable it is necessary to resist the temptation to demonize. To call someone a “Devil” or “Evil Incarnate” obviates the need to understand and learn. The English word understand is equivalent to the German word verstehen, which social scientists have used to connote empathetic knowledge: relating to another human, putting oneself in their shoes. This is a technique to gain knowledge; it has nothing to do with excusing or forgiving. Try this with probably the hardest subject in history: How did that aspiring art student become Hitler? What went wrong? How did his background, environment, and experience produce a future monster?

In the House of My Parents

Today it seems to me providential that Fate should have chosen Braunau as my birthplace. For this little town lies on the boundary between two German states which we of the younger generation at least have made it our life work to reunite by every means at our disposal.

German-Austria must return to the great German mother country, and not because of any economic considerations. No, and again no: even if such a union were unimportant from an economic point of view; yes, even if it were harmful, it must nevertheless take place. One blood demands one Reich. Never will the German nation possess the moral right to engage in colonial politics until, at least, it embraces its own sons within a single state. Only when the Reich borders include the very last German, but can no longer guarantee his daily bread, will the moral right to acquire foreign soil arise from the distress of our own people. Their sword will become our plow, and from the tears of war the daily bread of future generations will grow.

I, too, while still comparatively young, had an opportunity to take part in the struggle of nationalities in old Austria. Collections were taken for the Südtmark1 and the school association; we emphasized our convictions by wearing corn-flowers2 and red, black, and gold colors; ‘Heil’ was our greeting, and instead of the imperial anthem we sang ‘Deutschland über Alles,’ despite warnings and punishments. In this way the child received political training in a period when as a rule the subject of a so-called national state knew little more of his nationality than its language. It goes without saying that even then I was not among the lukewarm. In a short time I had become a fanatical ‘German Nationalist,’ though the term was not identical with our present party concept.

This development in me made rapid progress; by the time I was fifteen I understood the difference between dynastic ‘patriotism’ and folkish ‘nationalism’; and even then I was interested only in the latter...

Did we not know, even as little boys, that this Austrian state had and could have no love for us Germans?

Our historical knowledge of the works of the House of Habsburg was reinforced by our daily experience. In the north and south the poison of foreign nations gnawed at the body of our nationality, and even Vienna was visibly becoming more and more of a un-German city. The Royal House Czechized wherever possible, and it was the hand of the goddess of eternal justice and inexorable retribution which caused Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the most mortal enemy of Austrian-Germanism, to fall by the bullets which he himself had helped to mold. For had he not been the patron of Austria’s Slavization from above!...

Years of Study and Suffering in Vienna

When after the death of my mother I went to Vienna for the third time, to remain for many years, the time which had meanwhile elapsed had restored my calm and determination. My old defiance had come back to me and my goal was now clear and definite before my eyes. I wanted to become an architect, and obstacles do not exist to be surrendered to, but only to be broken. I was determined to overcome these obstacles, keeping before my eyes the image of my father, who had started out as the child of a village shoemaker, and risen by his own efforts to be a government official. I had a better foundation to build on, and hence my possibilities in the struggle were easier, and what then seemed to be the harshness of Fate, I praise today as wisdom and Providence. While the

1Another term for Austria. Apparently devised in imitation of the old imperial Marks by the Verein für Deutschtschum im Ausland, founded in 1881 to defend the endangered nationality of Germans in the border territories.

2The corn-flower was the emblem of Germaans loyal to the imperial House of Hohenzollern and of the Austrian Pan-Germans.
Goddess of Suffering took me in her arms, often threatening to crush me, my will to resistance grew, and in the end this will was victorious. I owe it to that period that I grew hard and am still capable of being hard. And even more, I exalt it for tearing me away from the hollowness of comfortable life; for drawing the mother’s darling out of his soft downy bed and giving him ‘Dame Care’ for a new mother; for hurling me, despite all resistance, into a world of misery and poverty, thus making me acquainted with those for whom I was later to fight.

In this period my eyes were opened to two menaces of which I had previously scarcely known the names, and whose terrible importance for the existence of the German people I certainly did not understand: Marxism and Jewry. . .

In the years 1909 and 1910, my own situation had changed somewhat in so far as I no longer had to earn my daily bread as a common laborer. By this time I was working independently as a small draftsman and painter of watercolors. Hard as this was with regard to earnings—it was barely enough to live on—it was good for my chosen profession. Now I was no longer dead tired in the evening when I came home from work, unable to look at a book without soon dozing off. My present work ran parallel to my future profession. Moreover, I was master of my own time and could apportion it better than had previously been possible. I painted to make a living and studied for pleasure. . .

Today it is difficult, if not impossible, for me to say when the word ‘Jew’ first gave me ground for special thoughts. At home I do not remember having heard the word during my father’s lifetime. I believe that the old gentleman would have regarded any special emphasis on this term as cultural backwardness. In the course of his life he had arrived at more or less cosmopolitan views which, despite his pronounced national sentiments, not only remained intact, but also affected me to some extent. Likewise at school I found no occasion which could have led me to change this inherited picture.

At the Realschule, to be sure, I did meet one Jewish boy who was treated by all of us with caution, but only because various experiences had led us to doubt his discretion and we did not particularly trust him; but neither I nor the others had any thoughts on the matter. Not until my fourteenth or fifteenth year did I begin to come across the word ‘Jew,’ with any frequency, partly in connection with political discussions. This filled me with a mild distaste, and I could not rid myself of an unpleasant feeling that always came over me whenever religious quarrels occurred in my presence.

At that time I did not think anything else of the question.

There were few Jews in Linz. In the course of the centuries their outward appearance had become Europeanized and had taken on a human look; in fact, I even took them for Germans. The absurdity of this idea did not dawn on me because I saw no distinguishing feature but the strange religion. The fact that they had, as I believed, been persecuted on this account sometimes almost turned my distaste at unfavorable remarks about them into horror.

Thus far I did not so much as suspect the existence of an organized opposition to the Jews.

Then I came to Vienna.

Preoccupied by the abundance of my impressions in the architectural field, oppressed by the hardship of my own lot, I gained at first no insight into the inner stratification of the people in this gigantic city. Notwithstanding that Vienna in those days counted nearly two hundred thousand Jews among its two million inhabitants, I did not see them. In the first few weeks my eyes and my senses were not equal to the flood of values and ideas. Not until calm gradually returned and the agitated picture began to clear did I look around me more carefully in my new world, and then among other things I encountered the Jewish question. . .

Once, as I was strolling through the Inner City, I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought.

For, to be sure, they had not looked like that in Linz. I observed the man furtively and cautiously, but the longer I stared at this foreign face, scrutinizing feature for feature, the more my first question assumed a new form: Is this a German?

As always in such cases, I now began to try to relieve my doubts by books. For a few Heller’s I bought the first anti-Semitic pamphlets of my life. Unfortunately, they all proceeded from the supposition that in principle the reader knew or even understood the Jewish question to a certain degree. Besides, the tone for the most part was such that doubts again arose in me, due in part to the dull and amazingly unscientific arguments favoring the thesis.

I relapsed for weeks at a time, once even for months.

The whole thing seemed to me so monstrous, the accusations so boundless, that, tormented by the fear of doing injustice, I again became anxious and uncertain.

Yet I could no longer very well doubt that the objects of my study were not Germans of a special religion, but a people in themselves; for since I had begun to concern myself with this question and to take cognizance of the Jews, Vienna appeared to me in a different light than before. Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity. Particularly the Inner City and the districts north of the Danube Canal swarmed with a people which even outwardly had lost all resemblance to Germans. . .

What had to be reckoned heavily against the Jews in my eyes was when I became acquainted with their activity in the press, art, literature,
and the theater. All the unctuous reassurances helped little or nothing. It sufficed to look at a billboard, to study the names of the men behind the horrible trash they advertised, to make you hard for a long time to come. This was pestilence, spiritual pestilence, worse than the Black Death of olden times, and the people were being infected with it . . .

If, with the help of his Marxist creed, the Jew is victorious over the other peoples of the world, his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity and this planet will, as it did thousands of years ago, move through the ether devoid of men. Eternal Nature inexorably avenge the infringement of her commands. 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 . . .

Political Reflections Arising out of My Sojourn in Vienna

The Western democracy of today is the forerunner of Marxism which without it would not be thinkable. It provides this world plague with the culture in which its germs can spread. In its most extreme form, parliamentarianism created a ‘monstrosity of excrement and fire,’ in which, however, sad to say, the ‘fire’ seems to me at the moment to be burned out . . .

Munich

In the spring of 1912 I came at last to Munich . . .

. . . A German city! What a difference from Vienna! I grew sick to my stomach when I even thought back on this Babylon of races. In addition, the dialect, much closer to me, which particularly in my contacts with Lower Bavarians, reminded me of my former childhood. . . .

Assuredly at a certain time the whole of humanity will be compelled, in consequence of the impossibility of making the fertility of the soil keep pace with the continuous increase in population, to halt the increase of the human race and either let Nature again decide or, by self-help if possible, create the necessary balance, though, to be sure, in a more correct way than is done today. But then this will strike all peoples, while today only those races are stricken with such suffering which no longer possess the force and strength to secure for themselves the necessary territories in this world. For as matters stand there are at the present time on this earth immense areas of unused soil, only waiting for the men to till them. But it is equally true that Nature as such has not reserved this soil for the future possession of any particular nation or race; on the contrary, this soil exists for the people which possesses the force to take it and the industry to cultivate it.

Nature knows no political boundaries. First, she puts living creatures on this globe and watches the free play of forces. She then confers the master’s right on her favorite child, the strongest in courage and industry.

When a people limits itself to internal colonization because other races are clinging fast to greater and greater surfaces of this earth, it will be forced to have recourse to self-limitation at a time when the other peoples are still continuing to increase . . .

For us Germans the slogan of ‘inner colonization’ is catastrophic, if for no other reason because it automatically reinforces us in the opinion that we have found a means which, in accordance with the pacific tendency, allows us ‘to earn’ our right to exist by labor in a life of sweet slumbers. Once this doctrine were taken seriously in our country, it would mean the end of every exertion to preserve for ourselves the place which is our due. Once the average German became convinced that he could secure his life and future in this way, all attempts at any active, and hence alone fertile, defense of German vital necessities would be doomed to failure. In the face of such an attitude on the part of the nation any really beneficial foreign policy could be regarded as buried, and with it the future of the German people as a whole.

Taking these consequences into account, it is no accident that it is always primarily the Jew who tries and succeeds in planting such mortally dangerous modes of thought in our people. He knows his customers too well not to realize that they gratefully let themselves be swindled by any gold-brick salesman who can make them think he has found a way to play a little trick on Nature, to make the hard, inexorable struggle for existence superfluous, and instead, sometimes by work, but sometimes by plain doing nothing, depending on how things ‘come out,’ to become the lord of the planet.

It cannot be emphasized sharply enough that any German internal colonization must serve to eliminate social abuse particularly to withdraw the soil from widespread speculation, but can never suffice to secure the future of the nation without the acquisition of new soil.

If we do not do this, we shall in a short time have arrived, not only at the end of our soil, but also at the end of our strength . . .

Conclusion

On November 9, 1923, in the fourth year of its existence, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party was dissolved and prohibited in the whole Reich territory. Today in November, 1926, it stands again free before us, stronger and inwardly firmer than ever before.
All the persecutions of the movement and its individual leaders, all vilifications and slanders, were powerless to harm it. The correctness of its ideas, the purity if its will, its supporters' spirit of self-sacrifice, have caused it to issue from all repressions stronger than ever.

If, in the world of our present parliamentary corruption, it becomes more and more aware of the profoundest essence of its struggle, feels itself to be the purest embodiment of the value of race and personality, and conducts itself accordingly, it will with mathematical certainty some day emerge victorious from its struggle. Just as Germany must inevitably win her rightful position on this earth if she is led and organized according to the same principles.

A state which in this age of racial poisoning dedicates itself to the care of its best racial elements must some day become lord of the earth.

May the adherents of our movement never forget this if ever the magnitude of the sacrifices should beguile them to an anxious comparison with the possible results.

HEINRICH HIMMLER

Speech to the SS, 1943

Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) was one of the most powerful leaders of Nazi Germany. He was the head of the SS, or Schutzstaffel, an elite army that was responsible for, among other things, running the many concentration camps. Hitler gave Himmler the task of implementing the “final solution of the Jewish question”: attempted genocide of the Jewish population of Germany and the other countries the Nazis occupied. The horror that resulted is today often referred to by the word holocaust (literally, holy burnt offering).

The following reading is an excerpt from a speech Himmler gave to SS leaders on October 4, 1943. What was Himmler’s concern in this speech? What kind of general support for the extermination of the Jews does this excerpt suggest existed?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Psychiatrists say that people use various strategies to cope when they must do something distasteful. We might summarize these strategies as denial, distancing, compartmentalizing, nobilitating, rationalizing, and scapegoating. Denial is pretending that something has not happened. Distancing removes the idea, memory, or reality from the mind, placing it at a distance. Compartmentalizing separates one action, memory, or idea from others, allowing one to “put away” certain feelings. Nobilitating makes the distasteful act a matter of pride rather than guilt, nobility rather than disgrace. Rationalizing creates “good” reasons for doing something, while scapegoating puts blame on someone else.

What evidence do you see of these strategies in Himmler’s speech? Judging from the speech, which of these strategies do you think his listeners used to justify their actions?

I also want to make reference before you here, in complete frankness, to a really grave matter. Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it. Just as we did not hesitate on June 30, 1934, to do our duty as ordered, to stand up against the wall comrades who had transgressed, and shoot them, so we have never talked about this and never will. It was the tactic which I am glad to say is a matter of course to us that made us never discuss it among ourselves, never talk about it. Each of us shuddered, and yet each one knew that he would do it again if it were ordered and if it were necessary.

I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people. This is one of those things that are easily said. "The Jewish people is going to be annihilated," says every party member. "Sure, it's in our program, elimination of the Jews, annihilation — we'll take care of it." And then they all come trudging, 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his one decent Jew. Sure, the others are swine, but this one is an A-1 Jew. Of all those who talk this way, not one has seen it happen, not one has been through it. Most of you must know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out — excepting cases of human weakness — to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory, for we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today — amid the bombing raids, the hardships, and the deprivations of war — we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues. If the Jews were still enounced in the body of the German nation, we probably would have reached the 1916–17 stage by now.

1 A reference to the "Night of the Long Knives," when Hitler ordered the SS to murder the leaders of the SA, a Nazi group he wished to suppress. [Ed.]

2 Here Himmler is apparently referring to the stalemate on Germany's Western Front in World War I. [Ed.]