

Four responses to Nazism

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Open Access

Pilsworth, E. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7379-0996>
(2021) Four responses to Nazism. Journal of the British
Academy, 9. pp. 59-72. ISSN 2052-7217 doi:
10.5871/jba/009.059 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/95415/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/journal-british-academy/9/four-responses-to-nazism/>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.059>

Publisher: British Academy

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

COMMENTARY

Four responses to Nazism

Ellen Pilsworth

Abstract: This article examines four memoirs (by Jan Petersen, Sebastian Haffner, Nora Waln, and Hermann Rauschning) published in pre-war Britain which describe their authors' first-hand experience of life under National Socialism. These writers came from across the political spectrum, but by 1940 they had all risked their lives to escape and oppose the Nazi regime from a position of exile. Their powerful memoirs were an attempt to explain to international audiences what exactly had taken place in Germany, and to suggest ways forward. Incorporating a range of approaches, these writers' honest reflections on their personal responses to the Nazi movement offer profound insights to readers today, as we try to understand the increasingly distant Nazi era, but are also confronted by a return of far right ideas to mainstream discourse.

Keywords: National Socialism, Nazism, Germany, memoirs, Jan Petersen, Sebastian Haffner, Nora Waln, Hermann Rauschning, far right.

Note on the author: Dr Ellen Pilsworth is Lecturer in German and Translation Studies at the University of Reading. She currently holds a three-year British Academy / Wolfson Fellowship to fund her project, 'Knowing the Nazis, Inside and Out: Anti-Fascist Publishing in Austria, Germany and Britain, 1927–40'. Her past research has explored German Nationalism in literature from the 18th century onwards, as well as the German anti-authoritarian movement of the 1960s. With Dr Dagmar Paulus, she recently co-edited a volume on German Nationalism called *Nationalism before the Nation State: Literary Constructions of Inclusion, Exclusion and Self-definition, 1756–1871* (Leiden, Brill, 2020). ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7379-0996>

In 1940, Communist Jan Petersen, Liberal Nora Waln, former-Nazi Hermann Rauschning, and Conservative Sebastian Haffner all had one thing in common. They had risked their lives to oppose and escape the Hitler regime, writing powerful memoirs for British readers which described their lives under Nazi rule. Though coming from different national, political, and social backgrounds, these four writers agreed that National Socialism had to be stopped at all costs, but their paths to this conclusion could not have been more varied. Ranging from consistent opposition, through self-deception, denial, and a final wake-up call to the reality of Nazism, these writers' honest reflections on their personal responses to the Nazi movement raise profound questions today. This article examines each memoir in turn before considering—rather more speculatively—how these memoirs might inform our own responses to extreme right movements today, and the increasing normalisation of their ideas.

Sebastian Haffner, the Conservative

Sebastian Haffner's memoir of his life from 1914 to 1933 records his experience as an 'ordinary' middle-class German. Raimund Pretzel (his real name) was the son of a Berlin civil servant, and trained in law before switching to journalism after the Nazi destruction of the legal system (Schie 2004). He escaped Germany for England in 1938 and began a personal memoir which was published in incomplete form after his death, as he dropped it for a more urgent project, *Germany: Jekyll & Hyde* (first published 1940; republished 2008). His posthumously published memoir states, 'One might well consider my case as typical. From it, you can easily judge the chances for mankind in Germany today' (Haffner 2002: 4). He does not spare his British readers' sensitivities when he continues: 'You will see that they are pretty slim. They need not have been quite so hopeless if the outside world had intervened.'

Published with the English title *Defying Hitler* in 2002, the memoir opens with a 'prologue' of fifteen short chapters. Haffner narrates the recent history of Germany starting with his first formative political experience: the outbreak of war in 1914, when he was seven years old. He explains how his generation, who had enjoyed the war 'as one is a football fan' (13), had nothing positive to associate with 1918. The year brought peace, the forced abdication of the Kaiser, and the founding of the Weimar Republic, but that time 'recalls no sense of joy, only a bad mood, defeat, anxiety, senseless gunfights, confusion and bad weather' (20).

This emotional anticlimax made it easy for the Nazis later to hark back to the 'good old days' of nationalism and war before the Weimar years. This was especially true after the hyperinflation crisis of 1923, which Haffner sums up as a time of great disillusionment in Germany: 'not only money but all standards lost their value' (44).

Despite the few years of peaceful foreign policy and, finally, economic improvements under Gustav Stresemann (first briefly as Chancellor, then as Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic), social divisions in Germany rumbled on, and political polarisation grew. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression created economic chaos in Germany again, causing mass unemployment and severe cuts to welfare. Fear of Bolshevism, fatigue, and dissatisfaction with the Social Democrats' welfare programme on both the Left and the Right won the Nazis new votes from across the political spectrum. The elections of September 1930 saw 107 Nazis elected to the Reichstag, up from a previous count of twelve. By February 1933, Hitler had been made Reich Chancellor.

After the March elections of that year, accompanied by nationwide acts of vigilante violence by SA (*Sturmabteilung*) men, the party could legally form a majority government with 43.9 per cent of the vote. Within weeks they had banned political opposition groups of any kind and opened up the Oranienburg concentration camp for political undesirables in the outskirts of Berlin, as well as another outside Munich, in Dachau (Kershaw 2001: 463–4). Two months later, the Nazis announced a national boycott of Jewish businesses and workers on 1 April. The new prisons and concentration camps were filling up, yet a law was passed making it illegal to claim that any atrocities were taking place. How did Haffner, now a 23-year-old lawyer in training, react to these events as they unfolded?

The day before the boycott was due to begin, Haffner was in the library at his legal chambers, surrounded by other lawyers and law students, all hard at work. Suddenly the silence was shattered by distant sounds of doors banging, shouts, and boots. Someone whispered, 'they're throwing out the Jews', and a few people laughed. Haffner was more alarmed at that moment by his fellows' laughter than by the events taking place: 'With a start I realised that there were Nazis working in this room. How strange' (123).

His description of the palpable tension, powerlessness, and unspoken feelings as this event transpired is one of the most powerful in the book. 'Readers got up, tried to say something to one another, paced about slowly to no great purpose. One man, obviously a Jew, closed his books, packed his documents and left' (124). The shouts outside got louder and a man came in to announce that 'the S.A. are in the building. The Jewish gentlemen would do well to leave' (124). Soon the surge of brown uniforms rushed in and a leader commanded all 'non-Aryans' to leave the premises. Haffner tried to get on with his work and to ignore the racist 'cleansing' going on around him. When asked by the brown-shirted Nazi if he was an 'Aryan', he replied 'Yes' and was immediately filled with shame. 'What a disgrace to buy, with a reply, the right to stay with my documents in peace! I had been caught unawares, even now. I had failed my first test. I could have slapped myself' (125).

That night, only hours before the official boycott was introduced, Haffner and his Jewish girlfriend (who, of course, had just lost her job) went, of all places, to a cabaret. 'Our reaction to the experience of fearing for one's life, and being totally at the mercy of events, was only to try and ignore the situation and not allow it to disturb our fun' (128).

This admission by Haffner relates to another profound message of his memoir: that the non-Nazi individual under Nazism frequently reverted to one of three methods of facing their 'complete and unalleviated hopelessness' (166). One was to retreat into the safety offered by an illusion of superiority, privately maintaining the moral high ground and believing to the end that the good will triumph eventually. This worked for a while, but became harder to maintain as the years ticked by and compliance with the regime was forced in countless ways. The next route was to remain alert to every injustice, and to develop a sense of embitterment by 'masochistically surrendering oneself to hate, suffering, and unrelieved pessimism' (167). This could, however, lead to suicide. The third common emotional response was one of avoidance: 'ignore everything, look away, block your ears, seal yourself off' (169). Haffner was never able to employ this method for long, concluding that 'one can sometimes only save the peace of one's soul by sacrificing and relinquishing it' (170).

Haffner's obvious self-awareness makes the last chapters of his memoir especially painful reading. Perhaps this, indeed, is why he broke the memoir off here, and switched to the less personal, more analytical *Germany: Jekyll & Hyde*. These last chapters recall the weeks Haffner spent at a compulsory military-style camp for the indoctrination of all trainee lawyers who wished to sit their final exams. While at camp, Haffner wore a swastika armband, marched, saluted, and sang Nazi songs. What was worse than all this, he admits, is that he enjoyed the comradeship of the camp, and could see how the indoctrination took effect. It happened not through lectures or seminars, but through the group experience that forced you to repress your individual ideas, whilst allowing the Nazi ideas to circulate unopposed. In this sense, what happened at the camp was just a microcosm of what happened in the Nazi-controlled state. When the group of trainee lawyers met up again in Berlin, this time in their own clothes and without the unifying routine of the camp, there was no affinity between them, Haffner noticed. His last message is that male comradeship 'can become the means for the most terrible dehumanisation' (231)—not only of one's opponents, but even of oneself. 'Those of us who were not yet National Socialists knew now that it was in their blood' (238).

Haffner stayed in Germany for as long as he could without actively aiding the regime, and resisted in what small ways he could. He quit his law career after passing his final exams, refusing to work for a corrupted legal system, and refused to break up with his Jewish girlfriend after the Nuremberg laws of 1935 had made relationships

between Jews and non-Jews illegal. After *Kristallnacht*, the night of Nazi-organised pogroms against Jews, they both managed by separate means to leave Germany and escape to England, where they were married.

From the minute he was personally tested in the law library, Haffner's memoir suggests that any more overt resistance than the actions he took would have been futile. His next book, *Germany: Jekyll and Hyde*, also underscores this point: that once the terror was in place, acts of political opposition merely resulted in unpublished and therefore pointless martyrdom. By 1940, Haffner's only hope was the military defeat of Germany by international forces. It is impossible to read his memoir without sharing in his sense of hopelessness; but it also begs the question of what, if anything, could people like Haffner have done to oppose Nazism earlier, when they still had the chance.

Jan Petersen, the Communist

Communist Jan Petersen had already been fighting Nazism for years by the time they came to power. His memoir *Our Street* (first published 1938) depicted the last anti-Nazi demonstrations to take place in public, before Communist operations went underground. The account depicts Petersen and his comrades' struggles from January 1933 (two months before the Nazi majority government was elected) to the summer of 1934. Merely writing the memoir was a tremendously dangerous act, and Petersen frequently had to move house or hide his manuscript to avoid detection. His penalty would certainly have been arrest, probably imprisonment in a concentration camp, and then torture and death. As it was, he was able to smuggle the manuscript out of Germany when he emigrated secretly in 1935, pretending to be going on a skiing holiday. Petersen's manuscript was baked into two sponge cakes, and the customs officer bought his story that his nagging wife would not let him go without taking her home-made cakes with him. Macho banter came in handy when dealing with fascist border control.

Petersen (real name Hans Otto Schwalm) was the son of a Berlin builder. After leaving school, he worked as a lathe-operator and tool maker. He joined the Workers Youth Party at age 15, and the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1930, aged 24 (Fähnders, 2001). His memoir, *Our Street*, is centred in the Charlottenburg area of Berlin, a working-class district. His street was the Wallstraße—a poor, mostly unemployed community, and a centre for workers' activism and resistance, therefore an area ripe for Nazi violence. As the memoir opens, the Wallstraße is bracing for a Nazi march to take place. Brownshirts are being bussed in from outside Berlin, and the threat of violence is in the air. The windows of the Wallstraße are already riddled with

bullet holes, and many of the posters saying 'Red Front!', 'Antifascists! Vote for List 3!' have been pasted over.

'Berlin has become an armed camp overnight' (17), Petersen records. The police and SA are working together to take over the streets. Anti-Nazi protesters shout 'Down with the Brownshirt murderers!' and 'Shame! Shame!' against the police (18). Individuals are arrested. When suddenly a police column comes running from around the corner, the protesters disappear into their houses, locking the doors and windows. 'The walls of the houses re-echo the tramping of heavy boots. Suddenly a rubber baton is thrust in our faces' (20).

No one could read Petersen's accounts of these last stands against the Nazis without marvelling at the protesters' bravery. But they stood no chance against the armed SA guards with the police on their side. When SA man Hans Eberhard Maikowski was accidentally shot by the SA during a protest, the Nazis used this event as an excuse to crack down on the Wallstraße. The news reports pinned his shooting on the Communists, and the Nazis staged an elaborate funeral, mourning Maikowski as a victim and martyr. The street was ceremoniously renamed Maikowskistraße.

Despite eye-witness accounts that the shots were fired by SA men, over fifty protestors were arrested and 'investigated' for months in the course of the murder inquiry. As Petersen records, the Nazi paper *Der Angriff* (the attack) reported the final verdict of ten years' penal servitude as insufficiently harsh. In their eyes, it proved 'how essential is the establishment of a truly German law, in accordance with the natural feelings of the German people' (227). By including newspaper reports on this trial as well as the Reichstag fire investigation and the Ahé trial (when another accidental Nazi shooting was pinned on a Communist), Petersen's memoir depicts the degeneration of the press and criminal justice system under Nazism.

Besides illustrating these broader transformations, Petersen gives an individual perspective on everyday life in Nazi-controlled Berlin. He shows us those ordinary Nazis who surrounded him on buses, in restaurants and shops, and who policed him and his friends. He tends to present them as macho and sadistic, puffed up with pride in their chinstraps and leather boots. These were the 'old guard' who signed up voluntarily, not yet under coercion. As well as his own experiences, Petersen relates those of friends who had been tortured in prison or sent to the Oranienburg concentration camp. One of his friends was held there with the Jewish writer Erich Mühsam, witnessing his brutal torture by the camp guards (Palmier 1987: 43) before he was eventually murdered.

Petersen's memoir normalises the Nazi movement by showing how it attracted ordinary middle-class people who expected something better for themselves. Yet these were the same people who quickly became dissatisfied when the regime cut their salaries and raised the cost of living. Petersen writes, 'There are now many thousands

of grumblers who used to vote for Hitler. Those who still have their jobs lose a quarter of their wages through the exorbitant deductions and the continual “voluntary” levies’ (150). He reluctantly admits that many working-class voters have been won over to the Nazi cause too. Two of Petersen’s own relatives had become SA men, he writes: ‘They went through four years of war. Wear their medals proudly on their brown shirt now. One is a clerk, the other a barber. They always felt themselves to be cut out for “something better”’ (126).

Overall, Petersen’s anti-Nazism was rooted in his class consciousness. He knew the insidiousness of their racial ideologies, and was fully aware that his Jewish comrade faced harsher punishment ‘because of his race’ (248). Yet Petersen’s primary motivation was to resist a regime intent on crushing the labour movement and acquiring capital from the masses to fund another war. All this while its own people descended further into poverty and starvation, only superficially alleviated by policies like ‘Stew Sunday’ (*Eintopfsonntag*) and the Nazi charity ‘Winter Help’ (*Winterhilfe*). The closing image is one of Communist unity and solidarity against the Nazi oppression: ‘We have in an instant become one body, one mouth’ (278). But without support from elsewhere, the German Communists had no chance.

Overall, Petersen’s memoir shows the immense bravery and, sadly, the total futility of the Communist opposition within Germany after 1933. He joins Sebastian Haffner in his bitterness at the Social Democrats’ appeasement of the Nazi message. As Haffner recalled, in the final weeks of elections they had been adamant that they, like the Nazis, were ‘nationalists too’. Even more painful for Petersen, it was the Social Democrats who had skewered the Revolution of 1918–19, inciting the murder of German Communist Party founders Rosa Luxemburg and Carl Liebknecht. The Social Democrats did form an ‘Iron Front’ movement against Nazism which included trade union leaders in December 1931 (Harsch 1990), but this was not extended to the Communist Party, and it is unlikely they would have supported it in any case. To the Communists, the Social Democrats were ‘social fascists’, only one step away from the Nazis themselves.

Could the Weimar parties of the Left and Centre have worked together across political divides, in view of the Nazi movement that threatened the democracy they still all depended on? There was so much to divide them, but there were crucial areas of common ground too: the desire to prevent another war, and the belief in human equality. Yet the fear of Communism among the middle classes was too great to risk a rapprochement, and many turned a blind eye to—or even supported—the Nazis’ bloody attacks on the ‘Reds’. In the end, Petersen’s account echoes the Nazis’ scorn for bourgeois hypocrisy and self-interest: two characteristics that the Nazis knew how to exploit (see Arendt 2017: 438).

Nora Waln, the Liberal

American journalist Nora Waln entered Germany with her husband on the last Saturday in June 1934. The border control officer did not even ask to see Nora's passport. Months later, she learned she has simply been registered as '*Ehefrau*' (housewife)—reflecting the secondary status accorded to women under Nazism. She comments, however, that this is 'a title of which I am most proud, and to which I have not the least objection' (15). This frank welcoming of the role of housewife is characteristic of Waln's middle-class outlook, and the frequent lack of critical tone in her memoir, *Reaching for the Stars* (first published 1938).

Waln's husband was a music scholar, and they toured Germany for its operas and cultural scene. Unlike Petersen and his friends, she was not queuing for charity rations or in fear of unemployment. She had a manservant, a car, and bought a house during her time in Germany. Her descriptions of evenings with friends frequently involve three-course dinners, aristocrats, and influential members of the intelligentsia. There was certainly resistance to the Nazis among these people, but they expressed it in different ways, by stony silences, selective invitations, or, finally, a sudden emigration.

She records the full picture of life in the early years of the Nazi regime, but she rarely offers a personal judgment or openly critical analysis. Readers are left to make their own assessment: for instance, when she translates and paraphrases sections of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (which was not yet available in uncensored English). She faithfully presents his view on marriage, which 'is concentrated on eugenics' and aims to preserve the purity of the 'race' (166). Perhaps because of the wide support both on the Left and the Right for eugenics at this time, Waln offers no critique of Hitler's views here, though elsewhere she scorns the term 'Aryan', which suggests she did not subscribe to the Nazi ideas on race. She also points out that Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while he was in prison, using 'the leisure and liberty which he possessed as a citizen of the Weimar Republic, even under arrest' (165). The contrast between Weimar's culture of protection and freedom compared with the Nazi culture of domination and terror is there for the keen reader to see, but this is as obvious as her criticism ever becomes.

Waln describes her journey with Nazism as one in which she learnt to keep her views to herself, or, if comment had to be made, to speak indirectly, even when she felt horror and disgust. This technique she learnt from those around her, who were more at risk than she was if they were caught criticising the regime. In Easter 1935, after the reintroduction of military conscription and a new wave of arrests, she reflected that she could not enjoy the Spring beauty around her, 'knowing of the cruel treatment of German Jews, and thinking of the good men and women shut away in concentration camps. ... Many Germans were like me in this' (96).

Compared with Petersen's firm resolve and consistent resistance against everything and everyone associated with the Nazis, Waln makes no attempt to present herself as anything but confused, passive, and conflicted. She reflects the feelings of a large majority of the German population: those who were, at least initially, pleased with some elements of the Nazi programme, but who became less comfortable with the regime's aims and means once they were in power. Waln records seeing a remarkable increase in the adverts for 'doctors for sufferings of the mind' ('Arzt für seelische Leiden': 63), a token of the poor mental health of the population under Nazism, even of those enjoying relative freedom.

Unlike Petersen, of course, Waln was a foreigner in Germany. The Nazi government was not her government, and perhaps she felt a lesser degree of responsibility for its doings as a result. However, she knew that, as an international visitor, she did have the ability to share her knowledge and awaken the other Western powers to the terror in Germany. Yet she did nothing for four years, admitting in 1938 that she now saw 'the company of liberals the world over as rabbits of a clover field, myself among them' (61) while the Nazi weasel snuck in and murdered one of their own. She admits her own earlier failings, and those of all Western nations who stood by during the years that Hitler's power grew, 'but I did not see this [at the time]. Despite the internationalism to which I had been led.'

Waln refused to write off all Germans as evil, and concluded that they had been used to autocratic rule for so long that they had not been ready for the level of civic responsibility that democracy requires from every individual if it is to be maintained safely. It is her honest self-reflection, and her final acceptance of individual responsibility—something she admits to having neglected herself—that makes Waln's memoir such a compelling read. But what action could she now take?

As a Quaker and a pacifist, even in 1938 she cannot bring herself to call for military intervention in Germany, asking readers to offer their prayers and friendship (304) instead. After publication of her memoir in England, however, Waln sent a copy to Nazi police chief Heinrich Himmler with 'an insolent inscription' (*New York Times* 1964). As the quintessential Liberal, this was perhaps the most aggressive move she could offer. Waln's worldview was founded on Humanism and Enlightenment values, but her tolerance and open-mindedness created a blindspot in which Nazism was allowed to exist. In the end, her memoir shows what happens when Liberals look the other way for too long, preferring to maintain their principles rather than dirty their hands.

Hermann Rauschning, the Renegade Nazi

In his 1939 memoir *Hitler Speaks*, the former-Nazi President of Danzig, Hermann Rauschning, reconstructed a series of conversations with Hitler based on his own and others' experiences between 1932 and 1934. The port city of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland) had been made a semi-autonomous city-state by the Treaty of Versailles in 1920, and put under the control of the League of Nations. Belonging to the German minority in Poland, Rauschning was critical of the Polish government's oppression of minorities, and he worked to maintain German cultural communities in Poland, running a German library in Poznań and editing two German-language newspapers (Hagemann 2018: 32). He moved to Danzig in 1926 and wanted to work for closer cooperation between Poland and Germany. Attracted by the growing influence of the party, he joined the local Nazi branch in 1931 (aged 44), and first met Hitler in 1932. After the Nazis gained just over half the vote in the Danzig elections of May 1933, Rauschning was made President of the city-state's Senate.

In this role, Rauschning worked with Hitler and many other Nazi leaders for about a year, until he fell out with the party in 1934. When asked to authorise the arrest of Danzig's Catholic priests, persecute Danzig's Jews, and dissolve the Danzig Socialist Party, Rauschning refused to comply. He was disgusted by Hitler's 'criminal nonsense' (150) concerning the Danzig currency, as well as his unofficial but widely known plans to invade Poland, despite signing a non-aggression pact that year. Rauschning's rival, Albert Forster, took over the Danzig Senate Presidency and subsequently oversaw the mass murder of non-Germans and Jews in Poland. Rauschning survived several attempts on his life and managed to escape to France, where he was joined shortly afterwards by his family.

His only hope in 1934 was that the Conservative nationalists would by some means still be able to oust Hitler and free the country from Nazi tyranny. Two years after fleeing Danzig, he wrote an analysis of Nazism for German readers, exposing the movement as a 'revolution of nihilism' (*Die Revolution des Nihilismus*, 1938), hoping to mobilise a Conservative opposition movement within Germany. When he came to the UK later that year, the book was translated and adapted for English audiences as *Germany's Revolution of Destruction*. The success of this work led to his second book, *Hitler Speaks* (1939), a bestselling memoir of Rauschning's conversations with Hitler that appeared in several languages.

Compared to those of Haffner, Petersen, and Waln, Rauschning's memoir contains very little of himself. Most of the work is given over to dialogue, and reflecting Hitler's tendency to hold forth on a subject—sometimes for hours at a time—most of the speech is Hitler's. Occasionally however, Rauschning reflects on his own response to events, such as the Potempa murder of 1932.

During the night of 9 August 1932, five SA men in the town of Potempa in Upper Silesia broke into the home of a Communist called Konrad Pietrzuch. The five SA men beat Pietrzuch to death in front of his mother, and they were arrested soon after. When they were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, Hitler sent the five men a telegram praising their actions, and soon after the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Rauschning recounts Hitler's rage at the murderers' death sentences, and confesses that he was influenced by Hitler's views at the time. He remembers that, 'like most people, I saw in the abominable Potempa murder only a foul stain on the brown shirt, which was at that time still regarded as an honourable uniform' (25).

The turning point in Rauschning's support of the Nazis came later. It was an evening in 1933, once Hitler had become Chancellor. Rauschning, Joseph Goebbels, Magda Goebbels, and Hitler's half-sister Angela Raubal (mother of Geli Raubal), were sitting together in a cosy bourgeois sitting room at the Reich Chancellery with Hitler and a few leading *Gauleiter* (district leaders). Rauschning had been engaged in another conversation, but pricked up his ears when he heard Hitler decrying the world religions as 'all alike ... they have no future—certainly none for Germans'. He went on, 'For our people it is decisive whether they acknowledge the Jewish Christ-creed with its effeminate pity-ethics, or a strong, heroic belief in God in Nature, God in our own people, in our destiny, in our blood.' Hitler outlined his plans to destroy the Christian church from within, and claimed that he could do this within a few years, if he wished to. Rauschning recalls, 'at the time, I regarded this whole speech as sheer braggadocio. ... Nevertheless, it shook me to the depths. I had not supposed Hitler capable of so much cynicism. Later I was to remember it many times' (61).

Rauschning's memoir has been the subject of much controversy in recent decades. Early historians in the Hitler canon such as Hugh Trevor-Roper (1988) had trusted the work, but recent biographies either reject (Kershaw 2001) or ignore (Longerich 2019) Rauschning's text entirely. In the 1980s, an attempt was made by revisionist historians to discredit Rauschning's account. A Swiss school teacher called Wolfgang Hänel wrote an essay (1984) which undermined Rauschning's reliability, and this essay was then explored by Mark Weber (1983) in a piece for the *Journal of Historical Review*, a non-peer-reviewed publication with a history of promoting Holocaust denial. They both claimed that Rauschning had invented much of his account, and sensationalised Hitler's portrayal in order to sell copies of his book. Some of Rauschning's claims do conflict with the standard historical narrative. For example, Rauschning states that he heard Hermann Göring claim responsibility for the Reichstag fire, though most scholars today, including Ian Kershaw, pin this on the arsonist Marinus van der Lubbe. However, other historians have since discussed new evidence that supports Rauschning's claims (Bahar & Kugel 2001, Hett 2014), and the cause of the Reichstag fire is still not conclusively known.

Written years after the events described, Rauschning's memoir was never likely to be a verbatim report, but nor did Rauschning claim this for the text as a whole. The final chapter is an entirely fictional sequence in which Rauschning narrates Hitler's thoughts and dreams in a free indirect style—a long way from academic objectivity. My own view aligns with that of historian David Redles (2008), that the work can be used as a subjective retelling of a moment in history, filtered through an individual's experience and interpretation. In this regard, it is no different to the other memoirs I have studied. I see it as a valuable source of insight from a person who experienced the Nazi movement at first hand, and pretty close to the epicentre.

Rauschning's account teaches us what it was like to be included in the party, and how difficult it was to maintain your own views and standards under pressure from others. That Rauschning managed to do so is impressive, and he put his life in yet further danger by publicly vilifying the Nazis once abroad. Forever associated with his brief Nazi career, however, he was never accepted by the exile opposition movement (Conway 1973: 70). This is another example of how anti-fascist movements can so easily self-sabotage by refusing to unite around shared values, despite the past allegiances or differences in broader political outlook of individuals within the group.

Voices from a Dark Time

When these memoirs are read together today, one message which emerges from each of them is the importance of taking the threat to democracy posed by extremism seriously from the very beginning, and of not allowing extreme ideologies to enter mainstream discourse unopposed. Both Haffner and, more gravely, Rauschning admitted to underestimating the danger of the Nazi ideas before it was too late to fight them. As Waln's memoir shows, an overly tolerant Humanism can prevent timely action against dangerous ideas, while Petersen's memoir reveals the necessity of a united approach across party lines when democracy is under threat.

Crucially, if these memoirs show us anything, it is how limited the options for resistance and opposition to Nazism were once the terror of paramilitary squads was in place. As the distance between our current times and the Nazi era grows, it becomes increasingly difficult and—I suggest—even unhelpful to ask what most individuals might have done differently under such circumstances. To ask such a question implies that individuals were free to choose their actions, which is not the case in a state controlled by fear and violence. As Bertolt Brecht expressed in his poem of 1938, 'An die Nachgeborenen' (To those Born Later):

Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unseren Schwächen sprecht
Auch der finsternen Zeit
Der ihr entronnen seid.

(Brecht 1967: 725)

(You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.)

(Brecht 1976: 319)

Rather than apportion blame to those who lived then, we can strive to protect the freedom, democracy, and peace that we value today, and not to allow such dark times to return.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the editors and anonymous readers who offered feedback on this piece; to the British Academy and Wolfson Foundation for generously funding this research project, and to my colleagues, friends, and family for supporting me throughout.

References

- Arendt, H. (2017), *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, Penguin).
- Bahar, A. & Kugel, W. (2001), *Der Reichstagsbrand: Wie Geschichte gemacht wird* (Berlin, Edition q).
- Brecht, B. (1967), *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. E. Hauptmann, vol. 9 (Berlin, Suhrkamp).
- Brecht, B. (1976), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956*, eds J. Willett & R. Manheim with Erich Fried (London, Methuen).
- Conway, J.S. (1973), 'Hermann Rauschnig as Historian and Opponent of Nazism', *Canadian Journal of History*, 8(1): 69–70.
- Fähnders, W. (2001), 'Jan Petersen', in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 20 (Berlin, Duncker & Humblot), 255–6. <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz94928.html#ndbcontent>
- Haffner, S. (2002), *Defying Hitler*, trans. O. Pretzel (London, Phoenix).
- Haffner, S. (2008), *Germany: Jekyll & Hyde: A Contemporary Account of Nazi Germany* (London, Abacus).
- Hagemann, A. (2018), *Hermann Rauschnig: Ein deutsches Leben zwischen NS-Ruhm und Exil* (Cologne, Böhlau). <https://doi.org/10.7788/9783412511869>
- Hänel, W. (1984), *Hermann Rauschnigs "Gespräche mit Hitler"—Eine Geschichtsfälschung* (Ingolstadt, Zeitgeschichtliche Forschungsstelle Ingolstadt).

- Harsch, D. (1990), 'The Iron Front: Weimar Social Democracy Between Tradition and Modernity', in D.E. Barclay & E.D. Weitz (eds), *Between Reform and Revolution: German Socialism and Communism from 1840 to 1990* (New York, Berghahn), 251–74.
- Hett, B.C. (2014), *Burning the Reichstag: An Investigation into the Third Reich's Enduring Mystery* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Kershaw, I. (2001), *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London, Penguin).
- Longerich, P. (2019), *Hitler: A Biography*, trans. J. Noakes & L. Sharpe (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- New York Times* (1964), 'Nora Waln Dies', 28 September 1964.
- Palmier, J.-M. (1987), *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America*, trans. D. Fernbach (London, Verso, 2006).
- Petersen, J. (1938), *Our Street: A Chronicle Written in the Heart of Fascist Germany*, trans. B. Rensen (London, Faber & Faber).
- Rauschnig, H. (1938), *Die Revolution des Nihilismus* (Zurich, Europa Verlag).
- Rauschnig, H. (1939), *Germany's Revolution of Destruction*, trans. E.W. Dickes, (London and Toronto, Heinemann).
- Rauschnig, H. (1939), *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on his Real Aims* (London, Thornton Butterworth).
- Redles, D. (2008), *Hitler's Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York, New York University Press).
- Schie, U. (2004), "'Geschichte Deutschlands als Teil privater Lebensgeschichte": Ein Rückblick auf die Haffner-Welle', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 278(2): 399–415.
<https://doi.org/10.1524/hzhz.2004.278.jg.399>
- Trevor-Roper, H. (1988), 'The Mind of Adolf Hitler', in M. Bormann (ed.), *Hitler's Table-talk* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), vii–xxxv. first published 1953 (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
- Waln, N. (1945), *Reaching for the Stars* (London, The Cresset Press).
- Weber, M. (1983), 'Swiss Historian Exposes Anti-Hitler Rauschnig Memoir as Fraudulent', *The Journal of Historical Review*, 4(3): 378–80.

To cite the article: Ellen Pilsworth (2020), 'Four responses to Nazism', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9: 59–72.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.059>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
 The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk