

## **An Oath of Murder**

On August 2, 1934, at 9 AM President Hindenburg died. This cleared the way for Hitler and the Nazi Party to take total control of Germany. Hindenburg had been the only person in the entire German government with the power to remove Hitler from his position as Chancellor of Germany. At 12 PM the same day, the announcement was made that the offices of Chancellor and President had been combined (Shirer 226). The newly titled Fuehrer now had absolute control over Germany. To solidify his power, he immediately demanded a revised oath of allegiance from the officers and soldiers of the Armed Forces. It read: "I swear by God this sacred oath, that I will render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Fuehrer of the German Reich and people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to risk my life at any time for this oath" (227). No longer did the German military give their loyalty to the constitution and the nation of Germany, but to one of the most evil men in history. On August 19, 1934, 89% of Germans voted in a referendum to approve Hitler's new and absolute power in Germany (Nohlen and Stöver 762). With these actions the German people were not indirectly or partially responsible; they were completely responsible for the Holocaust by transferring national accountability to one individual.

Adolf Hitler's antisemitism was known to the German military and the German people. Historian Daniel Goldhagen stated that as early as 1920, Hitler was giving speeches about why he was antisemitic and his future plans to remove Jews from Germany (134). He explained, "The Nazi Party, a profoundly antisemitic institution, had over *eight million* members" (Goldhagen 32), which was over one third of Germany's population. These members knew Hitler's ideologies; he hated Jews and he wished for their ultimate removal and elimination from Europe. Through his speeches and writings, Germans knew that Hitler would stop at nothing to

eradicate the Jews. Already in a speech on August 13, 1920, he proclaimed, “we are animated with an inexorable resolve to seize the Evil [the Jews] by the roots and to exterminate...it root and branch. To attain our aim we should stop at nothing, even if we must join forces with the Devil” (Goldhagen 134). In his famous autobiography *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote, “If...twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas...the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain” (Hitler 679). The Germans, knowing all of this, still supported Hitler and his appointment as Chancellor of Germany in 1933.

Why, with all of this knowledge, did the German people choose this man as their leader? Germans hated Jews as Hitler did. For centuries religious literature was supportive of the destruction of Jews. Martin Luther, a seminal religious figure in German culture, wrote, “A Jewish heart is as hard as a stick, a stone, as iron, as a devil,” and also, “ ‘We are at fault for not slaying them,’ he fumed shortly before his death” (Gritsch). History has proven with abundant evidence that German culture believed Jews to be parasitic, evil, and untrustworthy. German children had been taught from birth that the Jews were the equivalent of the boogymen or the henchmen of the Devil. This was evident in their fairy tales, school books, literature, church doctrine, and in the current social practices. Born and bred to be antisemitic, this nation of people was the perfect group to undertake the Holocaust. It was a German undertaking, executed by Germans from ingrained beliefs moving them to commit genocide. In 1934 the political conditions were in alignment for the German people to spring into action by wholeheartedly taking an oath to murder in the name of Nationalism.

When asked what the Germans might have done differently, it is difficult to give just one answer. By refusing to give an oath of allegiance to Hitler, the German military could have overthrown the Nazi regime in 1934. Instead of excusing themselves from the responsibility of

protecting all German citizens, including German Jews who began to settle in Germany as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Shyovitz), the military could have put an end to Hitler's plans and honored the Weimar Constitution. The German people could have voted for officials that would have lead the nation towards liberty and justice, worked for peace in their war-torn nation, and promoted social progress. But instead, as Goldhagen argued, "The will to kill the Jews was...embedded deep in their beliefs about Jews, it welled up from within them, driving them forward to action when the opportunity presented itself" (163), an opportunity to murder their Jewish neighbors.

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