Reinhard Heydrich’s Impact on German Mentality

*“The essence in obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as an instrument for carrying out another person's wishes and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions.”*

-Stanly Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (“Stanley”)

In the *Obedience to Authority*, Stanly Milgram justifies the motivations behind obedience with a person’s loss of psychological accountability for their actions. On July 1961, Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, devised the Obedience Experiment to investigate the obedience levels of an average person to explain German Nazi mentality (McLeod). After designing an experiment that pressured a subject to administer electric shocks to a “learner” each time he or she uttered an incorrect response, Milgram discovered that 65% of the surveyed adult men willingly inflicted shock voltages on the “learner” when commanded by an experimenter (Greger). Milgram used the results of his study to validate the ruthless impact of obedience on a person’s inherent conscience (Greger). The Obedience Experiment provides insight into the mindset of the German Nazis and the cruel violence they inflicted on the “enemies of the state”. Reinhard Heydrich utilized his power in the SS intelligence organization to strengthen loyalty in the German Reich and radicalize the view of the “enemies of the state”, eventually augmenting the German people’s obedience levels and decreasing their resistance towards the use of terror against persons threatening the racial purity of the Third Reich.

Reinhard Heydrich’s anti-Semitic childhood and “energetic” work ethic lead to his unquestionable acceptance of Nazi ideals and rapid ascent to supremacy in the Nazi Party (Reinhard). Growing up in an elegant and privileged home, Heydrich enjoyed a great social status; however, due to the prevalent rumor among the German community that his family had Jewish ancestry, he was often tormented with anti-Semitic slurs as a child (“SS Leader”). In attempt to disprove this harmful rumor, Heydrich joined a variety of violent anti-Semitic organizations after Germany’s chaotic defeat in World War I (“SS Leader”). Finally in 1931, he became a member of the SS, an elite group of Nazis that would later become the backbone of the Nazi regime (“The SS”). Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and prominent Nazi official, soon employed Heydrich to create the SD or the Sicherheitsdienst, the SS’s personal secret intelligence organization that searched for dissent and disloyalty within the Nazi Party (“SS Leader”). Heydrich’s callous determination to exterminate all threats to the Nazi Party lead to the dynamic expansion of the SD and earned him a valuable role in the Nazi regime (“SS Leader”). Under Himmler’s guidance and racial ideology, Heydrich became a radical follower of the Nazi policy of persecution of the “undesirables”, such as the Jewish people (“Program”). The anti-Semitic indoctrination Heydrich experienced as a teenager and Himmler’s racial ethnocentrism led to his unwavering dedication to Nazi doctrines. Heydrich’s quick embracement of Nazi racial ideology and suppression of the “undesirables” served as the platform for his inevitable rise to power in the SS ranks.

After being appointed Chief of the Prussian Gestapo in April 1934, Heydrich attempted to ensure the loyalty of the Nazi members through the radicalization of Nazi organizations (Stackelberg and Winkle 133). As the new Chief of the Gestapo, the sub-group in the General SS that dealt with police and racial matters, Heydrich helped expand the Gestapo’s influence over the entirety of the German Reich (“The SS”)(Stackelberg and Winkle 133). On June 30, 1934, Heydrich drastically purged the SD intelligence organization, replacing the old officials of the SD with more “reliable” SS officers (Stackelberg and Winkle 133). Heydrich questioned the loyalty of the SD members to the Nazi Party and used his influential role in the Gestapo to dismiss the untrustworthy members. By interfering in the SD’s leadership, Heydrich transformed traditional police influence into political influence; he used the SS’s new power to intervene in the private life of the German population to establish the Gestapo’s supremacy over the common Nazis (Stein 354). Heydrich elevated the Nazi Party’s level of extremity and increased the intense scrutiny of various Nazi organizations to enforce the loyalty of the members.

By manipulating the German people’s fear and using the suppressing presence of the Prussian Gestapo, Heydrich successfully increased the common German person’s loyalty to the Third Reich. With the expansion of the Gestapo, the police organization became responsible for all the arrests in Nazi Germany and the supervision of these convicts (Stackelberg and Winkle 133). Under Heydrich and Himmler, the Prussian Gestapo shot and killed a numerous amount of criminals for allegedly resisting the organization; for citizens who were “…guilty of [such] immorality…”, “… [these] illegal shootings became the rule” (Stackelberg and Winkle 133). The Gestapo administered so much violence against convicted persons that the Germans no longer questioned these unwarranted shootings. The desensitization of the Germans to unjust bloodshed gave the Gestapo authority over the population and increased leeway to disregard the law. In the German Reich, the arrests of the Gestapo became more arbitrary as the German people were punished for the slightest revolutionary impulse or critical remark against the Nazi Party (Stackelberg and Winkle 134). Due to the torture associated with arrests by the Gestapo, fear of the organization dominated the German population (Stackelberg and Winkle 134). The citizens’ dread of the Gestapo intensified the totalitarian state and destroyed any opposition to the unethical measures of the Nazi Party. Heydrich used fear of the Gestapo to augment the German people’s loyalty to the Nazi regime and ebb their rejection to the use of terror.

The Röhm Purge emphasized Heydrich’s authority within the Nazi Party and the Nazi members’ high obedience levels. Heydrich, along with other high-ranking Nazi leaders, was threatened by the strength of the leaders in the SA or Strumbabtelung, a paramilitary organization within the Nazi party; in April of 1934, Heydrich created false evidence suggesting the SA’s possible overthrow of Adolf Hitler (“The Night”). Hitler responded by tasking the SS with the purge of the SA leadership: on June 30, 1934, SS units transported the SA leaders to Munich’s Stadelheim prison, where they shot and killed 200 SA members (“Röhm”). The Röhm Purge was the first time the party used radical amounts of corrupt violence to preserve the Nazi Regime (“Röhm”). Heydrich used his influence as the Chief of Gestapo and head of the SD to push the Nazi Party past the norms of civilized society, further heightening his rank in the SS organization. In Himmler’s speech about the “Final Solution” in 1943, he referred to the Röhm Purge, stating that although the task was difficult to complete, “…each of us [the SS members] understood clearly that he would do it the next time if it were ordered and if it were necessary” (“Röhm”). Tasked with the daunting duty to purge the SA leadership, the SS members showed no signs of hesitation. The SS members’ lack of vacillation and resistance to Hitler’s mandate highlighted the Nazis’ willingness to blindly follow directions and obey authority figures. After Heydrich used his authority to instigate the Röhm Purge, the extreme obedience levels found within the Nazi Party motivated the SS members to use violence for the benefit of the state.

By forcing the German citizens to act like an auxiliary police force to the surrounding Jewish population, Heydrich heightened the German’s obedience levels and encouraged mass anti-Semitic actions. In a conference about the Jewish housing situation on November 12, 1938, Heydrich urged Herman Goering, a senior Nazi official, to pass a directive that Jews be concentrated in houses among the German population as opposed to ghettos; Heydrich stated that the “...the German population…force the Jew to behave himself. The control of the Jew through the…eye of the whole population is better than having him…where I [Heydrich] cannot…establish control over his…life through uniformed agents” (Hilberg 50). Passed in 1939, the housing directive used the German citizens as a supplementary police force to scrutinize all Jewish movement and report suspicious behavior to the SS (Hilberg 50). Heydrich used the directive to compel the German population to doubt Jewish morality and encourage the citizens to intentionally attempt to impose arrest on the Jewish people. Inspired by the SS’s obedience in the Röhm Purge, Heydrich applied the widespread Nazi mentality of carrying out duties for the good of the state and fear of authority figures to the common German citizens. Pushed by Heydrich, the housing directive aimed to increase the citizens’ obedience levels and radicalize the amount of anti-Semitic measures the citizens of the Reich participated in.

Heydrich’s definition of the “enemies of the state” inspired the German citizens’ eagerness to instill open and direct violence upon the non-Aryan people. In a meeting on April 29, 1936, Heydrich stated that “enemies of the state”—the Jews, the freemason, and the politicized cleric—used intellectual ability to attack Germany’s National Socialism state (Stackelberg and Winkle 194). He argued that these groups actively strived to slow down the law-making processes and spread rumors about Hitler’s government (Gerwarth 88). Regarding the Jewish people, Heydrich acknowledged that “A direct infusion of Jewish blood into the body of the *Volk* has thereby been averted [with the Nuremberg Laws] … [but] the indirect Jewish intellectual influence has not been completely stopped by any means” (Stackelberg and Winkle 194). Heydrich believed the freemasonry was just an augmentation of the Jewish body, trying “…imperceptibly to transform the character and mind of the German according to Jewish ideas” and politicized clerics were solely pushing unnecessary Christianity on the German people for political reasons (Stackelberg and Winkle 195). His definition of the “enemies of the state” convinced almost all the Germans to approve of the Nazi Party’s violent treatment towards the Jews, freemasons, and the politicized cleric (Stackelberg and Winkle 195). By accusing the “enemies of the state” of threatening the Reich’s racial purity and German social norms, Heydrich appealed to Germans’ racial nationalism and fueled their hatred of these subgroups. Heydrich’s accusations helped the Nazi Regime successfully gain the German population’s support and profoundly increased the Germans’ hostility toward these “enemies”.

As apprehensions for the plausible World War II increased, Heydrich effectively used his authority in the Gestapo to control the Kristallnacht of November 10-11, 1938, and strengthen German predilection to openly-inflicted anti-Semitism (Stackelberg and Winkle 222). Instigated by a German embassy official’s assassination by a Polish Jew and carried out by a group of rebel Nazi Party members, the Kristallnacht was a tide of anti-Semitic pogroms throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and Sudetenland (“Kristallnacht”). As head of the Gestapo, Heydrich sent out an urgent telegram on the early morning of November 10, 1938, ordering the State Police stations and SA leaders not to participate in the pogrom in any way, except to discourage looting and destruction of any German property, and prevent harm towards any non-Jewish person (“Kristallnacht”). The German civilians responded to the massive obliteration of Jewish home, synagogues, and Jewish-owned businesses and the violence it ensued with indifference (“Kristallnacht”). Due to the protection the German civilians received from Heydrich’s directive to the State Police, the Germans were not affected by the chaos of the Kristallnacht. The lack of personal involvement influenced the German civilians’ support of the Nazi Party’s cruel actions against the Jewish people. The change of German mentality and the openly-sponsored savagery in the Kristallnacht marked a crucial turning point in Germany’s anti-Semitic policy (Stackelberg and Winkle 222). Heydrich’s directive and the German population’s acknowledgement of the Nazi Party’s use of violence confirmed the state’s readiness for revolutionary anti-Semitic measures, such as Jewish deportation.

Following Heydrich’s ideas on the “enemies of the state” and the Kristallnacht, the German civilians developed a new mentality of superiority towards non-Aryans and began harshly persecuting the Jewish population. In the immediate aftermath of the Kristallnacht, the German government publicized a mass amount of new anti-Semitic decrees, deliberately designed to prevent Jews from making a living and destroying their property (“Kristallnacht”). German education officials began to expel Jewish children attending German schools, and the Jewish population lost the privilege to possess a driver’s license and obtain an automobile (“Kristallnacht). Influenced by Heydrich’s belief that the “enemies of the state” assailed the Third Reich through intellectual means, the Germans attempted to curtail the Jews’ education rights to weaken the threat of the “enemies of the state” on the German population. Using these laws, German citizens strived to enforce their dominance over the Jewish population and deprive the Jews of the basic necessities to survive in the Reich. Inspired by Heydrich’s definition of the “enemies of the state” and German racial nationalism, the German people suppressed and persecuted the Jewish people through highly arbitrary and debilitating laws.

Reinhard Heydrich combined the power of the SS and the usage of terror to gradually wield the German people into a massive persecuting force against the inundation of the “enemies of the state”. After being declared the Reich Protector in 1941, Heydrich became “…one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany” (Bryant 141). On July 31, 1941, Heydrich was tasked to organize and manage the “complete solution of the Jewish problem” (““Final””). Although he was assassinated before he could execute the “solution”, his merciless determination and scrutiny of details during the planning process led to the successful implementation of the “Final Solution”, resulting in the extermination of nearly two-thirds of the Jewish population living in Europe during World War I (““Final””).

Works Cited

Bryant, Chad Carl. *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

""Final Solution"" *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 10 June 2013. Web. 01 Apr. 2014.

Gerwarth, Robert. *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. Print.

Greger, Michael. "Appendix 39f - Obedience." *Upalumni*. United Progressive Alumni, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. Print.

"Kristallnacht: A Nationwide Pogrom, November 9–10, 1938." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 10 June 2013. Web. 08 Mar. 2014.

McLeod, Saul. "The Milgram Experiment." *Simply Psychology*. Simply Psychology, 2007. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.

"The Night of the Long Knives." *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

"Program in Judaic Studies." *Hangman*. Case Western Reserve University, n.d. Web. 09 Mar. 2014.

"Reinhard Heydrich." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 10 June 2013. Web. 09 Mar. 2014.

"Röhm Purge." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 10 June 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

"SS Leader Reinhard Heydrich." *The History Place*. The History Place, n.d. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.

"The SS (Schutzstaffel): Background & Overview." *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

Stackelberg, Roderick, and Sally A. Winkle. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

"Stanley Milgram Quotes (Author of Obedience to Authority)." *Goodreads*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.

Stein, George H. "Review: Reinhard Heydrich Und Die Frühgeschichte Von Gestapo Und SD." *The Journal of Modern History* 45.2 (1973): 352-55. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.