

NATIONAL SOCIALISM AS MILLENNIAL RELIGION?

An interview with Dr. David Redles



After World War I, Germany faced enormous social and cultural turmoil; in this chaotic environment, Nazism emerged as a powerful movement and political force. How was it that ordinary Germans became Nazis? In his provocative book, *Hitler's Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York University Press, 2008), David Redles argues that Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) held out the promise to Germans that he would restore order and create prosperity. In his hands, Nazism became more than a political movement, it contained elements of a millennial spiritual movement; correspondingly, Hitler became not only the Führer but also a messianic figure. It was the millennial expectations he created that fueled the rise of Nazism. The Final Solution he envisioned had a distinctly eschatological quality; it would cleanse the world of its odious imperfection and impurity and save the German race.

Dr. Redles, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: Dr. Redles, a number of books have been published relating National Socialism to religion. In what ways does your book, *Hitler's Millennial Reich*, concur with and differ from other treatments?

Redles: When I first started my research, I was looking into the influence of German occultism, especially Ariosophy, on early Nazism. While I did find some influence on a few early Nazis, what I mostly found were millennial and messianic aspects. A few contemporary scholars, such as Eric Voegelin and Theodore Abel, saw religious aspects in the rise of Nazism. Indeed, Voegelin coined the term “political religion” in the 1930s to encompass the religious aspects he saw in fascism, Nazism, and communism. In the 1960s, especially in Germany, a new generation of scholars focused on the Nazi use of religious rhetoric in speeches and propaganda. In the last two decades, and again largely among German scholars, there has been renewed focus on the importance of religiosity in Nazi thought and actions. Most of these studies, however, have focused almost exclusively on the beliefs of Nazi leaders such as Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg, Heinrich Himmler, and especially Adolf Hitler. What the average Nazi party member believed has largely been ignored. It wasn't until 1980, when James Rhodes argued in his unjustly ignored *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution*, that the millennial belief system of Nazi leaders and average party members were linked. In my book I was able to verify and build upon Rhodes' work, utilizing two different collections of early party member testimonials. What I found by examining both the beliefs of Nazi leaders and early joiners of the movement was that millennialism was indeed at the heart of the formation of the Nazi movement, its recruitment of members, and the actions the movement undertook once achieving power in 1933.

WRSP: Why is it important to understand that National Socialism was a millennial movement? What is the theoretical yield from this approach?

Redles: Nazi millennialism arose in the wake of a lost war, a collapsing economy, and a general sense of social inversion that sparked a profound sense of impending apocalypse that in turn generated a desperate search for salvation. The Nazi millennial interpretation of the rapid and radical change of the post-war years was the prime catalyst for the creation of the movement, helped solicit its members, and ultimately, shaped its worldview. In the end, Nazi millennialism provided the logic behind the Final War and the Final Solution, as the Nazis considered the war against the Soviet Union and the war against the Jews as part of an imaginary, but strongly believed, Eschaton. I suppose the theoretical yield would entail a broader comparison of Nazi millennialism with other millennial movements that have arisen throughout history as responses to rapid and radical change. Some of these movements have resulted in positive change for both movement members and their society at large, and some have ended in catastrophic violence either done to movement members by external agents (sometimes government agents), or committed by group members against non-believers or those deemed responsible for the collapsing world.

WRSP: In what respects could National Socialism be understood as a progressive millennial movement involving belief in progress into a new era?

Redles: Well, the Nazis conceived of the Weimar period (1918-1933) as a turning point in world history. They believed that the decadent modern world, which they thought resulted from the triumph of liberalism and individualism, had unleashed the supposed “Jewish-Bolshevik” menace and, as a consequence, brought the world to a time of either apocalypse or salvation. National Socialism as a worldview was meant to save the world from that apocalypse. The Nazis believed that once they achieved power, defeated Jewish-Bolshevism, and racially purified the German Volk (“people” or “race”), the world would enter a New Age, the *Tausendjährige Reich*. While this term is usually translated quite literally as the thousand-year Reich, it actually stems from Martin Luther’s German translation of the “millennial kingdom” in the book of Revelation. Furthermore, as I discuss in my contribution to *End of Days* edited by Karolyn Kinane and Michael A Ryan (2009), the term Third Reich evolved from the millennial conception of time of Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202). The Nazis conceived of the Third Reich as the final stage of history, as a New Age of peace and prosperity for an Aryan humanity now dominant on the planet. Of course, Nazi millennialism was also rooted in a racial conception of the world. Purifying the Aryan race, enslaving racially inferior “sub-humans,” and exterminating the world’s Jews, were seen as essential acts for achieving the millennial Third Reich.

WRSP: In what respects could National Socialism also be understood as an averted apocalyptic movement aiming to avert an apocalyptic disaster?

Redles: This returns us to the Nazi conviction that the primary agent behind the imminent apocalypse was the imaginary, but strongly believed in, Jewish-Bolshevism. Indeed, early Nazi Dietrich Eckart and his protégé Adolf Hitler both conceived of the alleged threat of Jewish-Bolshevism in apocalyptic terms. In his important, and scholarly neglected, posthumous 1925 publication, *Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin*, Eckart argued that the rise to world power of Jewish-Bolshevism, supposedly unleashed by triumph of liberalism, would lead to the extinction of humanity on Earth. Hitler, in *Mein Kampf* (1925), in his unpublished second book, and in his many speeches and conversations, stated that eliminating Jewish-Bolshevism was the only way to avoid this apocalypse. World War II, especially the war on the Soviet Union and the Holocaust, must be seen as the Nazi attempt to avert this apocalypse by exterminating those deemed responsible for the potential end of humanity. Moreover, Nazi eugenic policies, including the forced sterilization of people deemed racially dangerous, such as those with inheritable diseases, but also including Afro-Germans, Sinti-Roma, and Jews, as well as the euthanasia of so-called “life unworthy of life” (the physically and/or mentally challenged), were meant to avert the racial apocalypse by cleansing or purifying the “body” of the Volk. The Final Solution therefore was conceived as both a religious and hygienic process.

WRSP: What is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and what was its influence on Hitler and other German Nazis?

Redles: *The Protocols* is a notorious hoax that blamed “the Jews” for the “evils” of modernity. This included the twin evils of capitalism and communism, the destruction of the royal houses of Europe (conceived as the descendants of past racial elites), and the spread of revolution and catastrophic war. Originally compiled around 1903, probably in Ukraine, *The Protocols* was plagiarized from early works that had little or nothing to do with Jews. The creators appear to have concocted *The Protocols* to influence Tsar Nicholas II of Russia (1868-1918) away from instituting liberal reforms in his empire. The idea seems to have been that if Nicholas believed the Jews were behind liberalism, including calls for social and political equality, democracy, and the securing of individual liberties, he would reject those

reforms outright. While this plan largely failed, *The Protocols* was picked up by Sergei Nilus (1862-1929), a Russian Orthodox millennialist who seems to have believed them to be real. For Nilus, *The Protocols* provided “proof” that the Antichrist would be a Jew born in Russia. When the Bolshevik revolution broke out in 1917 and the royal family subsequently murdered, *The Protocols* seemed to be not only prophetic, but real. When *The Protocols* was published in German translation in 1919 it quickly became a bestseller. Many Germans, including key Nazis like Hitler, Eckart, and Rosenberg, were convinced they proved that the lost war, the fall of the German, Austrian, and Russian royal houses, and the rise of communism were part of a larger conspiratorial plan for Jewish world domination. And it was this threat of Jewish world domination that sparked Nazi apocalyptic fears.

WRSP: What was the impact of Nazis' belief in *The Protocols* on their subsequent actions?

Redles: Since the Nazis saw themselves as world saviors from the supposed evils of Jewish-Bolshevism, *The Protocols* provided both an explanation for the world's impending apocalypse, as well as a plan of action. Since the extermination of higher humanity (the Aryans) would allegedly result from the Jewish rise to world domination, this threat could only be met with a counter or preemptive extermination of those same Jewish-Bolsheviks. The power and attraction of any conspiracy theory is that it explains the unexplainable, connecting events in ways that create meaning for the believer. For the Nazis and others, *The Protocols* explained everything that went wrong in post-war Germany, from political and economic collapse, to what they perceived as negative social and cultural change. Consequently, if everything apocalyptic resulted from the actions of an Evil Other, in this case the imaginary Jewish-Bolshevik, then the simple conclusion was that annihilating that Evil Other would save the world. Again, World War II and the Holocaust were the horrid, but logical, consequences of such a belief. Genocide therefore was conceived as a preemptive act of salvation, preventing the apocalypse and ushering in the Third and Final millennial Reich.

WRSP: What is your opinion of the thesis that German Nazis had succumbed to a mass, social madness, or a collective paranoid delusion in regard to the Nazis' perception of the Jews, who constituted a small minority of German and European populations, as an imminent and overwhelming danger?

Redles: It is difficult to extend individual psychological paradigms to entire nations or peoples, and therefore the notion of collective paranoia can be hard to prove. That said, as I mentioned, the power of conspiracy theories is in their explanatory function. Both paranoia and conspiracy theories explain the unexplainable and at the same time provide a convenient scapegoat for the world's descent into apocalyptic chaos. I have a chapter in *The Fundamentalist Mindset* edited by Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, James W. Jones, with Katharine A. Boyd (2010) that deals in part with the power of paranoia as seen in Nazi conspiracy theories. It is the sense-making ability of conspiracy theories that make them so attractive to certain individuals. When an entire society rapidly and radically changes, and moreover if enough members of that society interpret that change as being negative, then conspiracy theories can gain traction with large groups of people. So in the end, the question is, does collective paranoia generate conspiracy theories, as exemplified in *The Protocols* and the belief in a Jewish world conspiracy, or does the explanatory power of such a conspiracy theory provide a sense of meaning that non-believers simply characterize as paranoia? Perhaps in the end it is simply a false belief that is accepted by some individuals because of its sense-making function. It only becomes dangerous when the conspiracy believers decide to eliminate those supposedly behind the conspiracy. Certainly that was the case with the Nazis.

WRSP: What does an analysis of National Socialism tell us about the development of other radical religious and/or political movements?

Redles: When a movement arises that is utterly convinced that the world is about to be transformed in some radical way, and moreover that they are the chosen or elect who have a mandated mission to create the coming new world order, subsequent violent acts are a strong possibility. This is especially true when you hear rhetoric concerning the need to “cleanse” or “purify” the world in order to transform it. The chosen ones (the movement converts) assume with utter certainty that their vision of the Golden Age to come is the only valid one. Therefore, any diverging view needs to be mitigated if not eliminated. If some group is designated an Evil Other deemed responsible for either causing the decaying world, or inhibiting the creation of the new world, then they must be cleansed (eliminated). The Nazis betray this problem of ideological certainty and rigidity of thought that can lead to mass violence when contesting visions of the world to come cannot be reconciled. In this regard Hitler often proclaimed: “either we [the Aryans] will walk over their [the Jewish-Bolshevik] corpses or they will walk over ours.”

WRSP: What do conversions to National Socialism tell us about conversions to other radical religious and/or political movements?

Redles: In my study of the testimonials of the so-called Nazi Old Guard or Old Fighters, as the early joiners called themselves, I found striking parallels with the process of religious conversion. Many of the first Nazis described themselves after the Great War as being lost or confused. They found that the new Weimar Germany did not make sense to them. This was true especially of the war veterans who returned to a Germany they did not recognize. Many titled their autobiographical testimonials something like “My Path to Hitler.” They wrote that they were living in “darkness” in this new Germany, existing with little sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. With their conversion to Nazism “light” came into their lives. These are the terms they used to describe their conversion to Nazism. National Socialism not only made sense of the madness (again the Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy theory helped here), but it gave them meaning and purpose in their lives. They had a world to save, and as the chosen elect following their “God-sent savior” Adolf Hitler, the converts were transformed into saviors themselves. National Socialism was taken to be a new faith, and it provided not only a reason for everything wrong with the world—the demonic Jewish-Bolsheviks—but also laid out an imminent Golden Age—the millennial Reich. Unfortunately, the idyllic Third Reich could only be achieved if the Evil Other, the Jewish-Bolshevik, was exterminated. The willingness to sacrifice their lives to realize what they termed Hitler’s “Great Idea” gave the Nazi movement much of its power. But such certainty of belief can lead to ideological rigidity and a consequential lack of empathy for non-believers or social outcasts, whether they be the physically and mentally challenged, or the supposed inferior racial groups.

WRSP: In your courses, what do you think are the most important insights that students take away from learning about National Socialism?

Redles: First of all, I hope to strip away the many misconceptions about Nazi Germany. Mass media and the Internet have contributed to many of these misunderstandings about Hitler and the Nazis through

sloppy history or by using Nazi history as a foil to promote some contemporary political or religious agenda, such as anti-abortion, anti-gun control, anti-socialism, and even anti-environmentalism. Hopefully my students will also learn that the Nazi belief system was not simply propaganda, but a genuinely believed faith that not only drew thousands of converts to the movement, but many other Germans as well. Nazi millennialism not only brought the nation together after a period of disunity, but also provided the logic or rationale behind World War II and the Holocaust. I want them to realize also that the Nazis had the support of most Germans, and that the German people were not simply brainwashed by Nazi propaganda, but willing participants in the realization of the Nazi millennial agenda. I want my students to understand the danger of an ideology that focuses on collective salvation at the expense of individual liberties. The Nazis truly believed they were not only saving the world, but also building a better one. Such beliefs can lead to positive individual and social change. The Nazi desire to protect and purify the Volk, the collective body of the race, led to positive hygienic measures, such as state-sponsored anti-smoking and anti-cancer campaigns, but it also led to forced sterilizations, euthanasia, and ultimately, mass murder. Again, the Nazis considered the Final Solution a hygienic process. In the end, a belief system that is exclusive to one group, in this case the so-called Aryan race, can and often does lead to violence or at least severe injustice being perpetrated against the excluded, whether they be non-believers or some other out-group such as non-Aryans, and especially the world's Jews.

Dr. Redles, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum and sharing your insights with us.

David Redles earned his Ph.D. in History from Pennsylvania State University. He has been an Associate Professor of History at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio since 2000. He previously served on the faculties of Kent State University at Stark, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and San Antonio College. Dr. Redles is author of *Hitler's Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York University Press, 2008), and coauthor with Jackson Spielvogel of *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, 7th edition (Pearson, 2014). Dr. Redles has also contributed chapters on this subject to the edited collections, *War in Heaven/Heaven on Earth: Theories of the Apocalyptic* (2005); *End of Days: Essays on the Apocalypse from Antiquity to Modernity* (2009); *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (2010); *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (2011); and *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (2011). Dr. Redles has given invited lectures at the Center for Millennial Studies and the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies, both at Boston University. He was a featured speaker at the Center on Terrorism at John Jay College in New York City as well as at the Humanities and the Arts Dialogue on the Millennium at Tufts University.

WRSP Interviewer: Dr. Catherine Wessinger