

April 2016

# Book Review: Claudia Koonz. *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003.

Noah Hutto  
*American Public University System*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll>

 Part of the [European History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hutto, Noah (2016) "Book Review: Claudia Koonz. *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003.," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 10.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol5/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ePress Journals at DigitalCommons@APUS. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Saber and Scroll* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@APUS. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@apus.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@apus.edu).

---

Claudia Koonz. *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003.

## Book Review

---

Noah Hutto

---

In *The Nazi Conscience*, historian Claudia Koonz studies the Nazi regime's manipulation through propaganda of the socio-political and intellectual dynamics at work within inter-war Germany. She contends that it was this skillful manipulation that enabled the National Socialist Third Reich to not only permeate the German people's everyday lives but also to infiltrate their norms, beliefs, and values. The result was an entire nation driven towards racist elitism and, eventually, genocide. In her opening remarks, Koonz briefly describes the roots of the word *conscience* and states that it "refers to an ethically attuned part of the human character that heeds the Hippocratic command: 'First, do no harm'" (p. 5). She then adds that the *Nazi Conscience* "describes a secular ethos that extended reciprocity only to members of the Aryan community" (p. 6). These definitions are directly quoted here because, although *The Nazi Conscience* is a well-written and important book, extensively explaining the evolution of the Nazi Party from street thugs to a politico-intelligentsia organization that eventually *re-educated* an entire country, Koonz fails to establish a baseline understanding of conscience as it applies to her book. She provides only a one-sentence definition that actually serves as an antonym for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. This is an overt shortcoming. Without a stronger foundation of what Koonz is implying, it is difficult to comprehend the meaning behind "Nazi Conscience," the very term she used to entitle her book.

In short, *The Nazi Conscience* is an in-depth portrayal of Nazi ideology, but such a brief description does Koonz's fine research and work an injustice. The chapters are arranged in a way that walks the reader from the rise of the Nazi Party in the 1930s, through Hitler becoming Reich Chancellor, and finally, to the eve of World War II. She then adds the back-story of the role Hitler's *Mein Kampf* played throughout various moments in the process. It is important to note, however, that Koonz does not present just another history or pseudo-biography on Adolf Hitler.

She does highlight Hitler's backseat approach on outspoken anti-Semitism after ascending to *der Führer*. She also discusses the impact *Mein Kampf* had upon the racial ideology, eugenics, and ultimately, the survival of the Aryan race that

emerged under the Nazi Party. These discussions are necessary in understanding her approach to the material and why she reduces Hitler to more of a minor character in *The Nazi Conscience*. She does this to illustrate how the overall Nazi machine imposed its ideals upon Germany. Koonz explains that this is very similar to the same role Hitler envisioned for himself—he was a common man, only interested in serving the *Volk*. This is an important aspect of her book.

Koonz establishes that it was Hitler's initial concepts combined with the Nazi Party's intelligent elite that provided the momentum that transformed the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) from a gang of thugs to a legitimate political party. She then discusses how the NSDAP played savior to a post-war, intra-depression, downtrodden population, and used its popularity to transform itself into an all-powerful, anti-Semitic, racially driven program that permeated every facet of German public and private life. In short, she establishes that the population was re-educated to view itself as one unit—the common *Volk*. By embracing their supposed racial superiority and accepting their German right and duty, the *Volk* felt justified in their “annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of the Jewish race in Europe” (p. 254).

Throughout *The Nazi Conscience*, Koonz shows impeccable research using sources from German archives that fully explains both the Nazi ideology of racism and their perceived survival-of-their-race struggle. The inclusion of photographs, propaganda posters/prints, and educational charts and pamphlets from the era further enhances the understanding of how deeply rooted the Nazi influence was in every facet of the German citizen's life. The chapters all flow from one aspect of society to another. She covers the educational institutions, the youth societies, the justice system, the introduction of eugenics, and the perversion of the sciences to “prove” the Nazi ideology correct.

Koonz describes in-depth how the Nazis used the German education system for spreading their racial ideology among the youth of the country. She dedicates an entire chapter, *The Swastika in the Heart of the Youth*, to discussing the brainwashing of the German youth. She further explains how any opposition to the new curricula was quickly crushed through the Party's *Reichminister* of Education and the eventual *Gleichschaltung* (Nazification) and monopolization of the Teachers' Unions.

In other chapters, she explains how key German intelligentsia simultaneously encouraged the Nazi racial ideology and eugenics in the circles of academia. To illustrate this, she focuses on three university professors, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the political theorist Carl Schmitt, and the theologian Gerhard Kittel. She opines that they incorporated certain aspects of the

Nazi ideology into their own practices, despite their disagreement with other portions of the ideology, specifically as a means of maintaining a certain prestige within the Party as the Nazis continued gaining power.

The Nazis gained influence over the executive branch of the justice system soon after academia. The Nazi Party enacted the *Nuremberg Race Laws* that curtailed many of the everyday rights of German Jews in 1935. As Koonz explains, in 1934 the Nazi Party, Goebbels especially, was aware that they had not completely won over the German public to its radical racism. This was disconcerting as they introduced the *Nuremberg Laws*. The Nazis—once established with legitimate government power—were intent on initial subtlety for exclusion of the Jews from German society. They saw this as a means to legitimize their racism, which in turn led to their solution for the Jewish question, and was an example of progress from the violent methods of the *Sturmabteilung*, the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party and the precursor to the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS.

Koonz explains, “Most Germans seemed to accept the ostensibly legal expulsion of Jewish citizens from particular segments of public life” (p. 166) and some major players assisted this undercurrent within the justice system by joining the fight for the Nazi racial order. Interior Minister Frick headed the Committee on Population and Race, and along with passing forced sterilization bills in 1933, he also assisted in determining what percentage of Jewish blood would disqualify a German citizen from being considered a German under the Nazi Reich.

During the 1930s, arguments abounded as to the exact extent one was determined a German citizen or a Jew. The determining factor was dependent upon how many Jewish grandparents were in one’s ancestry. Despite a tough read discussing the Nazi’s unabashed racism, Koonz’s research did uncover at least one positive highlight almost hidden within the text of Nazi hatred. She explains that there were a few Nazi members who realized how deep and wide the tracking of Jewish heritage would cut across the German population, and they served as zealots for a restrained approach on racial treason laws outside of what *Jewish* meant as far as laws and the justice system was concerned. She cites the examples of Franz Gurtner, the Minister of Justice, and Bernard Losener, a Ph.D. in law who was placed in charge of Jewish affairs within the Interior Ministry. Koonz’s tone is not meant to exonerate the two men. Instead, she makes clear that Gurtner and Losener’s positions complimented those of the jurist Roland Freisler. The latter was instrumental in drafting several law proposals that designed to ban sexual relations between Jewish and German citizens.

Her work endows the reader with a greater understanding of just how powerful the Nazi party became as a political entity and how that power facilitated

its emergence as the powerful, “respected” beacon of hope for the rebirth of the German nation. This rebirth provided further feelings of indebtedness among the *Volk*, permeating the thoughts and actions of the German people. In the end, the outer layer of Nazi pseudo-scientific and pseudo-scholarly re-education of society is peeled away exposing the ideology for what it was—naked racism. However, as Koonz explains, “it seems clear that Germans were neither brainwashed nor terrorized. Rather, they conformed to the regulations of which they approved and circumvented those they disliked” (p. 178). The real miracle is that by the outbreak of war, the initial dislike of racism, via anti-Semitism, all but ceased to exist.

As noted earlier, the only real weakness in Koontz’s work is her failure to clearly define her term “conscience” as it applies to her term *Nazi Conscience*. Despite its inclusion within the title, she offers the reader only a cursory explanation of the word conscience in the introductory chapter. Because of this shortcoming, Koonz fails to reveal the real conscience of the German people during the reign of *The Third Reich*. She does outline four “assumptions that underwrote the Nazi conscience” (p. 254) but even this short list is a two-page discussion addressing the following. First, the German *Volk* were united, not only by blood, but also by a historical and cultural heritage. Second, criticism of anything the Nazis felt was detrimental to the *Volk* was deemed unethical. Third, the majority of the German people condemned the Treaty of Versailles thus creating a version of Germany’s own “Manifest Destiny”—that is, the *Volk* now believed they had an inherent right and necessity for expansion eastward. In a way, it provided legitimacy to Hitler’s decree that Germany required *Lebensraum* (additional living space, or essentially, more land). Finally, by appealing to a pre-existing German survival of the fittest mentality, there was the assurance that German bloodlines, history, culture, and land would remain exclusively German—*Deutschland für Deutsche* and *Deutschland über alles*.

Unfortunately, despite her excellent work in outlining the infiltration of the Nazi ideology into every aspect of German society throughout the 1930s and up until the outbreak of World War II, her use of the term *conscience* conjures an image that her initial thesis fails to produce. In fact, as an afterthought, hidden in the Acknowledgments section in the back of her work, she explains that she “identif[ied] the particular strategies by which Nazi persuaders made their contingent and, indeed, chaotic universe appear to be fixed . . . [discussing] fascist collaborators, I causally used the words ‘Nazi conscience’” (p. 344). Again, this still rings of a concept to unearth aspects beyond just Hitler and Goebbels as the intelligentsia driving force behind the Nazi regime. Despite this shortfall, however, she pushes the historiography in a new direction.

Overall, Claudia Koonz proves an incredibly apt researcher of Nazi Germany. She delivers in *The Nazi Conscience* a raw, unabashed look into an evil empire; one that ostensibly preached an emphasis on *Volk* and *Vaterland* yet subtly increased the euphoria of “comfortably numb.” This enabled the German people to ignore or embrace absolute and undisguised racism. The anti-Semitic Nazi principles of racism and hate were slowly accepted as normal German values. The Germans began believing that in order to support the *Volk* and thus, the *Vaterland*, they must embrace Nazism, and through a process of self-Nazification (*Selbstgleichschaltung*), Koonz shows that the “citizens of the Third Reich were shaped by a public culture so compelling that [they] . . . came to accept the existence of a hierarchy of racially based human worth, the cult of the *Führer*, and the desirability of territorial conquest” (p. 273).

As a parting thought, Koonz argues that the racist ideology and political strategy of the Nazis’ quest for “an exclusive community of ‘us’ without ‘them’” (p. 274) has not ended with the defeat of the Third Reich. In the 1930s, “Many Europeans looked on from neighboring countries with envy even if they deplored the Nazi state” (p. 163). Today, the currents of racial hatred and ethnic purity once espoused by the Nazis continue their manifestation in our global society. One needs only to read the headlines emerging from the Middle East describing the horrendous conduct of the Islamic State to see the warning within *The Nazi Conscience*. Koonz provides a chilling image of the unchecked results of a disastrous combination of hate, power, authority, and the psychological vulnerability of a defeated people.