

Rudolf Höss: Kommandant of Auschwitz

Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Höss was born on November 25th 1900 in Baden-Baden, Germany ("Rudolf Höss", *Jewish Virtual Library*). His childhood and teenage years made him into the man who would one day become the Kommandant of Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II. Since then, Höss is known as history's greatest mass murderer. Under his supervision, Auschwitz was the most notorious of the concentration camps set up by the Nazi regime. Auschwitz was known as a place Jews (and other prisoners) went to perish under the weight of hard forced labor, and is now known as where prisoners were exterminated by suffocation through gas by the thousands. Rudolf Höss supervised the murder of people by the thousands and did not blink an eye, and he was able to go home to his family on the grounds of the concentration camp every night. He was able to do this because of his own experiences in his younger years molding him into the man he was by 1939 when war broke out.

Rudolf Höss' childhood in Germany was characterized by a harsh father and religious duties. For even the smallest infraction of rules, Höss was punished severely. So he followed the orders of every authority figure in his life (Harding, 8). He was never personally close to anyone in his family, and never had very close friends as a child. He had no significantly close relationships established in a critical stage of life, which left him hardened. Höss even recalls in his memoirs both that he was "...taught to obey all adults...treat them with respect no matter what... Whatever they said was always right. This type of training is in my flesh and blood." (Höss, 50); and "If someone did something wrong to me, I did not rest until I felt I had gotten even. I was relentless and feared by my classmates." (Höss, 51). All of Höss' relationships stemmed from fear, anger, respect, and obligation.

Here, in these instances, it can be seen where Höss' sociopathy stemmed from. His strict household conditioned his unwavering obedience of all authority figures, and conditioned him to be unfazed by harsh punishments for minor transgressions. If a superior gave an order it was not his place to question it, whether that superior was a parent, teacher, priest, or Commanding Officer in the military. If he were to break rules, he knew he deserved whatever punishment awaited him, no matter how cruel. In this environment, Höss must have never developed a strong sense of his own morals and values to stick to. He was all too busy doing what everyone else told him. He may have perhaps believed that murdering people was wrong deep down, but that didn't matter. His loyalty to his superiors was his fatal flaw. Höss also did not know from close relationships and affection, so empathy was an emotion he would not be able to identify with. He could not imagine the pain and fear of the Jews that came to his camp—he did not understand how to consider and relate to the emotions of others. Tearing families apart was of no consequence to him. The lack of affection and personal attention given to Höss as a child is proven to promote higher rates of “morbidity and mortality”, meaning higher rates of mental illness and death (“Parental Warmth is Crucial for a Child’s Well-Being”, *Psychology Today*). This is seemingly where Höss' path to becoming the greatest mass murderer in history begins.

Höss' first kill would be in 1916, at the Turkish front of World War I. This is where he learned that he had the ability to kill “efficiently and quickly in the heat of battle” (Harding, 14). He was also only 14 years old at the time, having lied about his age to enlist because of his desire to be a brave soldier. It was during this time that Höss developed his disregard for human life. If a person was an enemy and the commander ordered them to be shot, he would obey without question and believe he was doing the morally right thing. This was especially true because during the first World War, he developed his first close relationship with someone, his captain.

The man was the first to treat Rudolf Höss with warmth, from caring about his well-being to ensuring Höss knew how proud he was whenever he was decorated or promoted. Höss looked up to this man like the supportive father he did not have, and this man was another soldier. This was someone who taught Höss how to handle battle, how to kill and continue on. This training is something he would use for the rest of his life, and the traits he learned would become integral to his personality.

Höss' activity in the first World War showcases some more of the foundation that was laid for him to become the world's greatest mass murderer. He wanted nothing more than to be a brave soldier, to him there was no higher honor than serving his country. Strong German nationalism is what fueled most of the Nazis to join the political party in the first place. The Germans supposedly in the Great War committed many, many civilian massacres and pillaged and burned the towns they passed through ("The 'German Atrocities' of 1914", *The British Library*). This meant that Höss had witnessed some of this, and so he had to adapt to the violence and the savage inhumanity of his fellow soldiers. The age of 14 is that of early adolescence—Höss was a young and impressionable boy. He was going to go along with the example his fellow soldiers set because he would assume that was the right option. Then, a military captain becoming his role model at such an impressionable age shows even more so where he learned to neglect the idea of preserving human life and preventing suffering. No person is born with these qualities, every child is born compassionate until they are *taught* differently. Höss was taught that humans whose beliefs contradicted his did not deserve to live, and that Germany must be preserved at all costs. On top of that, his captain showed him warmth and support, so Höss associated the man with positive things, no matter how gruesome the battlefield became. "It was a much more intimate relationship than I had with my own father," he recalled in his

autobiography. Höss only could see it through rose-colored glasses—people fighting for a cause, army battalions banding together and becoming brothers, and shedding blood for the Motherland. Höss learning to associate the Great War with beautiful, poetic imagery at a young 14 gives perspective on how he saw the Holocaust by the time he was 40.

Höss truly proved the effect the war had on him just after it ended, when he joined the *Freikorps*. The *Freikorps*, or Free Corps in English, were paramilitary units secretly used by the German government to suppress communism and unrest inside the country and at its borders (“Freikorps”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Höss experienced more of the idea of murdering civilians as a strategy of war in this time, when the *Freikorps* was in Latvia. He recalled in his memoirs that the Latvians would set fire to people’s houses who were harboring German or Russian soldiers and let the people burn. The *Freikorps* was accused of civilian massacres during this time, and all Höss truly took away from the intense and relentless battle he experienced was how he saw people pledge “deep personal allegiance” to a cause and leader, which is what he so yearned to be able to do himself (Harding, 33). It was because of this that Rudolf Höss went to prison. He and some of his other *Freikorps* comrades beat to death a man named Walther Kadow, an ex-*Freikorps* member who had betrayed another member to the French. This kind of betrayal would not be tolerated, so the men took his life, and Höss took on the blame when it came time for trial. He truly believed what he had done was not wrong, Höss writes that “Then and even now, I am still firmly convinced that this traitor deserved to die,” and then goes on to say how he was convinced, though he confessed, that he would not receive a sentence to prison time (Höss, 62).

These acts truly demonstrate the lack of regard Höss had for human life after his experiences in World War I. Civilian casualties and murder of traitors had become a part of his

morality, as he was justifying these acts to himself because he truly believed certain people deserved death. His comrades and fellow German citizens were upstanding people in his eyes, where so-called “traitors” to a cause were the kinds of people who did not deserve to live amongst them. Höss’ frame of mind during this time was highly influential, and the behavior he learned was that of brutality. Those who were enemies deserved no mercy. He learned that civilians who were on the opposing side did not matter, and they were collateral damage. He did not feel sorry for them for losing their homes or families, because they did not matter. Höss never understood how to relate to those people, so it never bothered him. All he wanted was to be a good soldier loyal to his country, no matter what the cost. And this unwavering loyalty is what lead him down the path to becoming the Kommandant of Auschwitz. In his mind, the ends justified the means. World War I and the *Freikorps* taught the young Höss that his loyalty and idea of the “greater good” came before anything else, and as long as he worked to help preserve Germany and make it better, it was worth any price.

After six years in prison for the murder of Walther Kadow, Rudolf Höss was released from prison. At this point, Höss decided to live out his true desires in joining the Artamanen League. They held something for him the army had not—he was able to live on a farm in peace and quiet, with animals he so loved, and other highly patriotic people who wanted to escape the “superficial” city life. The Artamanen League held very similar beliefs to the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party), or Nazi Party, of which Höss had been a member since 1922. That made the antisemitism of the Artamanen League familiar, though Höss had his own specific take on why he believed Jews were subhuman. He believed in a more “scientific” view, that Jews were the only thing holding Germans back from their ideal way of life, and the Jews were also holding them back from spreading their ideals which he believed would be readily and happily

accepted by the rest of the world. He saw them as standing in the way of Germany flourishing, and that made them enemies. Well, in 1923 Höss demonstrated what he believed should be done to enemies, or “traitors”: they deserved to die. He viewed the Jews he was ordered to kill in 1942 in the same light as he viewed Walther Kadow, whom he had helped kill without orders from a higher authority. It was the Artamanen League that set Höss up to become a higher ranking Nazi, because it was at a league convention that he met Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, a leader of the league in Bavaria and Hitler’s SS leader. The two grew very close, and it was Himmler who asked Höss to train as a supervisor in Dachau, the first concentration camp.

Rudolf Höss was happy living on a farm with his wife, but he was itching to become a soldier again. He had discovered it to be his true nature. So when Himmler called and asked Höss to join the SS, he was more than happy to do so. He was asked to complete his recruit training at Dachau, and up until then Höss had no idea what a concentration camp was (Höss, 81). It was in Dachau that Rudolf Höss worked under Theodor Eicke. Eicke was a man with no humanity towards anyone but his own men. Eicke believed that every prisoner in Dachau (which at the time was for “political prisoners”) was an enemy of the state and deserved to be killed if they tried to resist orders. He taught those who worked under him to develop an “antipathy” towards prisoners so that they could carry out harsh punishments without their own psyche being affected. Höss in fact did develop this “antipathy”, and became desensitized to the horrific workings of the concentration camp. In his memoir he recalls the first flogging he ever witnessed. Höss described that he felt “forced” to look, because if he had stood further back, he would have looked away. He described that hot and cold chills rippled through his body, and he shivered through the whole ordeal. He avoided being present at beatings, until he was of the rank where he had to be present. Höss thought of the block leaders who found the beatings

entertaining to be “two-faced, vulgar, very violent, and vile creatures” (Höss, 83). Then, he went on to express that later, the first execution at the beginning of the war did not upset him. He wrote “For this I can find no explanation.”

Eicke continuously pushed for the separation between the SS men of Dachau and the prisoners on an emotional plane. He emphasized that any SS officer who was sympathizing with the prisoners was unworthy and a weakling. He wanted only the best men who would obey every order despite their personal feelings. Eicke also apparently spent the nights talking with his guards about personal things, acting like a role model and confidant, so much so that the guards called him “Papa Eicke” and this made them obey orders without any hesitation (Harding, 65). Höss had proven himself to be the kind of man Eicke respected, and so Eicke transferred him to be a block leader at the concentration camp and he would deal directly with prisoners. Höss was unhappy with this transfer, but he had to obey because he was a good soldier. Dachau was a time of struggle for Höss. He battled with the need to be a dutiful soldier and SS man who cared nothing for prisoners, and his own personal guilt and sympathy he felt for the prisoners being how he personally felt about his prison time. He knew that for the prisoners, it wasn't the physical labor or torture that broke them down. It was the mental aspects that made the prisoners feel the dehumanization, and it is the mental aspects that pushed prisoners to do things like purposely run into the electrified fence. Höss understood this, but also understood the logic behind Nazis like Eicke's methods. He believed that Eicke did not personally agree with his “enemies of the state” view that he continuously pushed on his soldiers. He thought that Eicke drilled the ideas into his men to keep them at their utmost state of alertness and constant readiness. If the SS walked around believing that the prisoners would do anything to bring Germany down, they would always be on their toes keeping an eye on the prisoners. Any way

the prisoners could attempt to retaliate would be swiftly crushed by the SS because nothing went unnoticed or unseen because their guard was always up.

Höss saw the advantage to Eicke's ideologies on how to motivate his soldiers, and he performed his duties in the most satisfactory way he could. He claimed in his memoir to have worn a "stone-faced mask", and everyone was fooled. But deep down inside he felt guilt. At this point, in 1935, Höss' transition began. His internal struggle during his time at Dachau perfectly shows that before 1935, he had the human feelings of guilt and empathy. It is true that Höss believed in harsh punishments, and he was an accomplice to the murder of Walther Kadow, but even so his humanity still remained intact. Dachau broke him. As it broke the prisoners who were beaten and treated like animals rather than humans, it broke Rudolf Höss. His duty and loyalty to his country and to the SS demanded that he change, and so he did. He transitioned from a man who saw injustice and cruelty and felt pain from it, to a man who did not see injustice and cruelty at all anymore. He became a man who saw only reality, and he derived no feeling from it. Cruelty could happen in front of his eyes and his mind, heart, and stomach had adapted to it. He adapted to his surroundings and became the model SS officer his superiors wanted to see. This forced Höss to master the ability to live two opposing lives. By day he was a hardened SS soldier, and by night he was a model father and husband who left all the horrors of the concentration camp behind as he enjoyed music and play time with his children. The brutality that his loyalty demanded became second nature, like a learned reflex (Harding, 69). From here, Höss' brutality could flourish without his conscience holding him back.

In 1938, Höss was transferred to Sachsenhausen. Here he worked as the adjutant to the Kommandant Hermann Baranowski. Höss had gotten along with Eicke, but Baranowski struck a nerve in Höss that earned the Kommandant more respect from his adjutant. He had a different

way of distancing himself from the prisoners. Höss had been mortified by those who sadistically enjoyed beating prisoners for no reason, and he believed those guards to be beneath him. But Baranowski used a sort of logic to explain why the prisoners were deserved such harsh treatment. This logic is not described by Höss in his memoir, he only references that he respected the ideals Baranowski put forwards. During this point, Höss became much closer to the politics of the Nazi party and had more access to the right people so he could climb the political ladder. His friends from his *Freikorps* days had mostly gone on to be high ranking Nazi officials. And just as Höss became closer to the point of view of important Nazis, Germany experienced a wonderful economical surge. Germany was in a place that it hadn't been in since before World War I, and it was all thanks to Adolf Hitler. If anything were truly to help further Höss' belief that "the path and the goal of the Party were correct", it was that (Höss, 97). His nationalism and his spirits were high with his transfer to Sachsenhausen, for Germany was flourishing and he learned he would have less personal contact with the prisoners, and his personal doubts could fade away as if they never existed.

However, though Höss did not have to deal with the prisoners every day, he was put in charge of camp executions. His very first day he shot in the head a Communist prisoner who had been sentenced to death. At this point, World War II had been declared and Eicke gave a speech at Sachsenhausen about the SS new role in protecting the Fatherland and having no mercy to anyone who is a threat to the Reich. The motto he put forward was "There is only one thing that is valid: Orders!" and one is expected to bring even his own family to justice if they went against Hitler (Höss, 101). Eicke warned that they would have to prove their sense of duty by carrying out every harsh order and by protecting the war effort by any means necessary. There would be no room for kindness or mercy because now they were at war.

Höss felt the truth behind Eicke's words when he was ordered to kill a fellow SS officer, a man whom he had been friends with. The officer had been transporting a Communist prisoner to the camp, and the officer knew this prisoner well. He brought the prisoner to his apartment in order to say a last goodbye to his family, but the prisoner escaped through a window. Now this officer was dragged out of a car, in handcuffs and blindfolded, and presented to Höss for his death sentence. Höss did as he was ordered to. Not long after, executions in the camp were rising. Some of the SS members who were older and had been with the SS ten years already were overheard talking about it, and how the "hangman's work dirtied the uniform of the SS". Eicke was told about this, and he reported to Himmler. The officers suspected of being involved in this conversation were put on a more restricted duty and were not allowed to advance for the rest of their careers. As Höss puts it, "they learned to keep their mouths shut" (Höss, 101).

Sachsenhausen solidified Höss in his hardened SS officer persona, and taught him the standard he was now expected to live up to being World War II had officially begun. Prisoners were not to be spared for any reasons, and they were to be annihilated for even the smallest of infractions. Anyone caught even whispering a bad word against the Reich was not safe. Not even SS members themselves. Höss had learned to keep his doubts to himself beforehand, because one of his worst fears was seeming weak or soft to his superiors. But with the incident that occurred in Sachsenhausen, he knew his career depended on keeping quiet. Any thoughts against Hitler or the Reich or concentration camp procedures could cost him advancing in the SS. And Höss wanted to climb the political ladder, so he learned how to do so. His superiors said his fellow officer needed to be killed, and in order to prove his true sense of duty and allegiance to Hitler he had to kill the man. He was not weak and he was loyal to his Fatherland. Höss was a SS superior's dream. He followed orders without question, didn't ever seem to waver in his

emotions or loyalty, and he was meticulous in his duties and helped ensure the camp ran smoothly. He was close to all of the important people in the SS ranks, and he and Himmler had been personally close for quite some time. Höss had been molded into the model Nazi.

It was in the spring of 1940 that Höss got the call that would put him in the position that would make his name so well-known in history. He had shown promise in his workings at Dachau and then Sachsenhausen, and now Himmler wanted him to oversee the construction of a new camp in Poland, in the town of Oświęcim, and then be its Kommandant when the camp would be completed. This would be Auschwitz. During the construction of the camp, Höss started to note changes in his own personality. While working to try and build the camp, he often felt as though he was working alone, because his subordinates would not follow orders and carry out the tasks needed to be done in the way they were told. Höss felt he could not depend on any of the people that were sent to work with him. He writes that:

“Until then I always saw the good in people until I was convinced otherwise. However, in Auschwitz, where I saw myself cheated and disappointed at every step of the way by my so-called coworkers, I changed. I became suspicious. Everywhere I saw only deceit...In every new face I looked immediately for malice or the worst in everyone...I was unable to...trust anyone anymore...I became unapproachable and visibly hardened.” (Höss, 123).

The beginnings of Auschwitz were the final step in hardening Rudolf Höss into the cruel Kommandant of Auschwitz and mass murderer he became. The construction of the camp was completed in autumn of 1940, and not long after, Höss moved his family. They moved into a walled-in villa across a short path that led straight to Höss’ office on the main grounds of the camp. His family’s lives were never sorely affected, they had servants and entertained guests

fairly often. The servants were prisoners in the camp who retrieved for the family everything they needed from the camps supply of food and goods stolen from the Jews—things such as sugar and milk for food, and artwork and furniture for the home. The fact that Höss allowed his family to live on the grounds of Auschwitz tells a great deal about how he felt about the place. Auschwitz was a place where prisoners arrived in cattle cars like animals. They were ushered one way or the other, one way led to forced physical labor, and one way led straight to the gas chambers. Prisoners too young, too old, too sick, or too frail were sent automatically to be gassed and their bodies were burned in the crematorium which at the prime of Auschwitz ran 24/7. Auschwitz was a place where prisoners had their hair shaved, numbers tattooed on their arms to replace their identities, and uniforms were given so everyone looked the same. It was a place where prisoners went from humans to animals. They fought and killed each other for small morsels of food. They were ravaged with body lice, typhus, tuberculosis, and all other types of illnesses that in their frail states killed them immediately. There were prisoners called *Sonderkommandos* who loaded the bodies out of the gas chambers and pillaged them for valuables. Then they burned them. Auschwitz was a place that always smelled of death. But Höss allowed his family to live there—and next to a crematorium at that. He allowed his family to live in a walled villa on the grounds of a death factory. In order to do this, he must have believed in what he was doing. How else could one bring their family to such a horrific place? In order to sleep at night next to his wife and with his children in adjacent rooms, Höss truly had to believe he was doing the right thing by Germany, and by his family, by commanding this death camp and destroying these people.

The guests they entertained at the Höss villa ranged from high ranking Nazi officials to personal friends, including Mrs. Höss' brother Fritz. In a visit to the family home in Auschwitz,

Fritz asked Höss a question: why he described the prisoners as *Untermensch*, or subhuman. Höss' answer to said question provides the framework for his psychology throughout the Holocaust, why he did everything he did without remorse. He said "Look, you can see for yourself. They are not like you and me. They are different. They look different. They do not behave like human beings. They have numbers on their arms. They are here in order to die" (Harding, 105). Höss saw the prisoners as nothing more than poisonous insects that must be squashed. They were not human because they were different from him and his German counterparts, and because they were subhuman and toxic to the German state, extermination was the only and best option. These beliefs, as well as the fact that brutality was second nature to him by 1940, are what allowed him to oversee and order executions without regret or remorse.

Rudolf Höss showed perfectly throughout his time at Auschwitz that his humanity had worn down. George Klein, an inmate at Auschwitz, recalled a date in 1941, where Höss sat on his horse in a field right next to a machine gun. A man climbed into the machine gun and opened fire at over 500 female prisoners standing in the field, and when they were all dead, Höss surveyed the scene and merely rode off (Harding, 107). Also in 1941, when Höss was told by Himmler that Auschwitz had to become a factory of extermination, Höss went out of his way to find a cheap and quick solution that would kill as many Jews at a time as possible. He found out from another Kommandant at a Russian prisoner-of-war camp that he tried throwing Zyklon B pellets into a barracks and within an hour everyone inside the barracks was dead. Zyklon B was cheap, quick, and efficient, exactly what Höss needed to carry out Himmler's orders. He turned the building adjacent to the villa where his family lived into a gas chamber, a chamber that fed directly into the crematorium by a hallway so no one would have to see the bodies being transported from one building to the other. By doing this, he solved the problem Himmler had

given to him and was able to swiftly kill thousands and thousands of prisoners at a time around the clock. He wrote later about this discovery, saying "Now my mind was at ease" (Harding, 116).

Höss' ambition and determination is what made Auschwitz the ingenious and efficient killing machine that it was. He was obsessed, and every time a new problem arose he had to immediately. Höss wrote of his determination: "I didn't want this situation to get the best of me. My ambition would not permit it. I lived only for my work." (Höss, 122). He barely dealt with the prisoners at this point because he was so overwhelmed with his responsibilities running the camp. After learning how to harden himself in Dachau and Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz was much easier for him to deal with emotionally. Höss had already learned how to keep quiet with any of his doubts, or how disturbed he was by the workings. That would be the death of his career. Höss had learned how to execute orders and people without hesitation, and to be the prime Nazi. He believed that the prisoners in his camp were not human, and they were a threat to his nation. They deserved to suffer and perish. Auschwitz was to Höss a great accomplishment, because he had succeeded in the task given to him by Himmler. He was being the ideal soldier he had always wanted to be, and he was contributing more than ever to the war effort and doing what he believed was right for the Fatherland.

Rudolf Höss' psychology is one that can absolutely be seen as stemming from his childhood. Having explored his life from growing up with his father, to implementing The Final Solution, exact lines can be drawn through his life to show the progression from young innocent child to mass murderer. His harsh childhood caused him to believe in harsh punishments for even the smallest transgression of rules. His childhood also pushed him in the direction where he was able to be cruel to others during the civilian massacres in World War I, because Höss could not

identify with compassion and love of family because he grew up with no close relations. During World War I, Höss learned about being a soldier and about following orders and respecting his superiors. He also learned of the idea of civilian casualties as a method of war. Between World War I and the *Freikorps*, Höss saw the beauty of being devoted to a cause and being a part of something bigger than oneself. He craved that, and craved being a soldier. He craved being unwaveringly loyal to something. It was all of this, and his strong ambition, that ended up making him the perfect candidate for the SS. Once he joined the SS, Dachau taught him how to deal with prisoners and to deal with his personal feelings by ignoring them. He learned sternness and leadership. He also learned that his greatest fear was to be seen as weak or unworthy by his superiors, so he would do anything to please them. In Sachsenhausen, Höss learned how to follow every order given without question; that doubting superiors could mean the death of his career; and he learned to what extent his unwavering loyalty would take him. When building Auschwitz, he learned that no one but himself could be trusted to carry out orders completely and correctly. Through all of these things, Rudolf Höss became the man who could and would murder anyone he was told to, and could orchestrate the death of thousands of inmates at once, all for the sake of Germany.

This leaves still one more question. Does all of this mean Rudolf Höss was just a man made by his environment? Or is it still safe to say he was merely a psychopath? There are varying opinions on this matter. When World War II ended, and the Nazis were imprisoned awaiting trial, the Allies brought in a psychologist and named Gustave Gilbert and a psychiatrist named Douglas Kelley. The two had different theories, but they both agreed on one thing: all of the Nazis they interviewed (not including Höss himself) and analyzed were legally sane (Joyce, "In Search of the Nazi Personality"). Gilbert's theory concluded that there were three personality

types found that could be considered psychopathic: schizoid, narcissistic, and paranoid. Schizoid personality types are characterized by emotional aloofness and solitary habits. It could be said that Höss fit this. He was able to emotionally separate himself from what went on in the concentration camps, and he was brought up in an emotionally aloof home. He didn't have close friends growing up either. That also goes to say he had solitary habits. He was never close with his family or any friends, only his wife. Kelley's theory concluded, however, that he did not believe any of the Nazis they interviewed were mentally ill. He believed that a fascist Nazi government was possible in America because it was a "socio-cultural disease" that could manifest without insane leaders. The argument for this could also be made by looking at the state of Germany when Nazism rose. They were bitter from World War I and the reparations they were forced to pay left their economy with major inflation and they suffered a major depression. The people needed a scapegoat and needed a leader who would could fix all of the problems and stand up to the other world leaders. Hitler came along with a scapegoat and answers to everyone's prayers and the people readily accepted him and his beliefs.

According to *Simply Psychology*, another psychological theory that attempts to explain the Nazis is the idea of obedience to authority. In Nazi Germany, the Nazis were trained to listen to orders no matter what. Whether the orders were difficult or horrifying, they were expected to carry them out without question or hesitation. They were expected to obey authority blindly, and the scariest part is that they did. A finger was rarely lifted to help those that were unjustly being tortured and gruesomely murdered. And in hindsight, the idea of following such inhumane orders without question is a mortifying idea. So people went in search of what fueled this, and the findings were not what anyone was ready to hear.

Stanley Milgram did a series of experiments where he put Americans in a room and had someone order them to deliver a terribly painful or fatal shock to a victim they could not see (McLeod, "Obedience to Authority"). He was trying to test and see if Germans were different, if it was them specifically who were bred to obey authority blindly. But what he found is that Americans were just as willing to deliver the fatal shock to a helpless victim when someone ordered them to as a German was willing to fatally shoot a helpless victim in the head when ordered to. This experiment makes it seem that human nature is to follow a hierarchy. The Nazi war machine was built on a tightly run hierarchy and that was why it worked exactly how they wanted it to. According to Milgram's findings, the same could be true of Americans if faced with a similar situation. Or any other nation with the capabilities to create such a hierarchy. This would mean that Höss, and the rest of the Nazis, were not mentally ill, but normal people who fell subject to the phenomenon of human obedience to authority.

Groupthink is a phenomenon that could also explain the reason Höss and other Nazis obeyed as quickly and easily as they did. Groupthink is a subconscious occurrence where everyone in one area or society all think and act the same way, so others begin to think and act this way as well because they perceive it to be right (. It is about validation. When one goes to do something against the norm, they look at others around them to validate whether what they are doing is right or wrong. And if someone is questioning what to do in a certain situation, they look around to see what everyone else is doing, and they follow the crowd. If everyone around them is looking to do the same thing, it is perceived as the right thing to do. Groupthink can either be a wonderful thing or a terrible thing. It can inspire people to do something morally right or morally wrong. In the situation of the Holocaust, all of the Nazis believed the same thing, and German citizens did as well. If everyone believed that it was right to persecute Jews and Gypsies

and homosexuals, how could it be wrong? How could all of these people agreeing on one thing be wrong? It is hard to fight such an influence, especially when the nation is seemingly bettered once the persecution begins. Höss said himself that he knew the path of Nazism had to be right because he saw what it did for Germany and how the nation began to flourish. How could something bringing about a good outcome for a nation be so wrong? It is very possible that Groupthink is how Höss and many other Nazis ended up being responsible for so many bodies of innocent people.

Psychologists have been trying to explain for years exactly what it was that allowed the Nazis to commit the atrocities that they did without remorse. There are simple answers, there are more complicated answers, and all around there are just many different answers and theories. There is not one answer that can explain completely and totally how the Holocaust was successfully carried out without so much as an uprising from those ordered to carry out the systematic murder. There are also many aspects to the total situation that are important. Hitler could have never come to power as easily as he did if Germany were not in the vulnerable state it was in. The Jews would not have been the scapegoat if anti-Semitism hadn't been alive and well since ancient times. Perhaps the higher ranking Nazi officials would not have been in those positions if they weren't already on the more sociopathic side personally. It is highly possible that Groupthink is responsible for why the Nazis blindly followed orders, it was because they never saw anyone step out of line. And once someone did, they were severely punished. So no one would dare question the orders. It is possible that fascism is a socio-cultural disease that is capable of infecting any nation if the right circumstances come about. That could have been why everyone in the nation agreed to scapegoat certain people and annihilate them. It is possible that most of the higher ranking Nazis had psychopathic type personalities, but weren't full blown

psychopaths. So when prompted, they could commit horrible acts, but on a normal basis they would not think to do those things themselves. It could be that people naturally feel the need to obey authority, no matter what society it is. People may just naturally respond to those who have a higher status in life or in a hierarchy, and that is why Höss and other Nazis followed the example set forth by the higher ranking officials and Adolf Hitler. They perceived them to be of higher ranking, so they had to submit.

All in all, it doesn't matter what theory one chooses to believe. Any of them could be true, any of them could be said to explain what allowed the Holocaust to occur. Many arguments could be made to say that all of the Nazis were psychopaths, and many could be made to say the opposite. Regardless, through the research presented in this paper, it can be said that Rudolf Höss himself was conditioned throughout different points of his life to become the cold-hearted man who orchestrated the systematic murder of *millions* of people. No one has ever been born to do such things. Monsters are not born, they are made. Höss was never diagnosed with a psychological illness, but from 1900 to 1945 was before many mental illnesses had a diagnosis or treatment. Something may have been very wrong, but the man at one point exhibited human emotions of guilt and fear and regret. But he had emotions that were more overpowering: his loyalty, his ambition, and his steadfast determination. All of these point to him having developed the ability to ignore his guilt and his humanity. He started off mortified by the workings of a concentration camp, and ended up running a concentration camp. But at that point, he was not dealing directly with the prisoners every day and he was also desensitized to the entire system. Rudolf Höss believed wholeheartedly in a cause and in his nation, and for that he was willing to do anything. He was willing to kill the enemy and willing to stop anyone who was a threat to the Fatherland. At one point there was a breaking point for him, and that was the dehumanization of

prisoners. But after some time, he had adapted to that as well. It was all of that that made Rudolf Höss into the greatest mass murderer.

Between 1940 and 1944, 1.1 million people were murdered in Auschwitz I alone (Harding, 137). That is not counting the number of people murdered in Auschwitz II-Birkenau which was a factory of murder since prisoners began coming in in 1942. Rudolf Höss was tried in 1947 and was found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to death ("Rudolf Höss", *Holocaust Research Project*). He was hung in Auschwitz, between the crematorium and the villa in which he had lived. He died a mass murderer and war criminal. What makes a man turn into such a monster? To allow death at such a high rate to be carried out under his orders? What makes a man go out of his way to find a swift way to murder hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people? The answer that seems to be the only possibility is that the man must have, over time, been hardened and conditioned into someone that has no regard for human life and suffering. It is not a change that happens overnight, and no one is born without humanity. That is taught. Rudolf Höss learned about harsh punishments and ultimate obedience from his father, and his overseers in World War I and at Dachau and Sachsenhausen. He learned how to kill civilians without remorse through his World War I battles, and how traitors deserved to die through the *Freikorps* and Theodor Eicke. Höss believed that Jews were the enemy of the state and subhuman, so their deaths were nothing to him. Brutality was something he developed over time and it allowed him to become the greatest mass murder in all of history.

I write this paper in honor of all those who perished, and all those who survived, in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Let the horrors of the past allow for a brighter and more humane future. Let us remember, and say never again.

Works Cited

- Bergland, Christopher. "Parental Warmth Is Crucial for a Child's Well-Being." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, 4 Oct. 2013. Web. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201310/parental-warmth-is-crucial-child-s-well-being>>
- De Schaepdrijver, Sophie. "The 'German Atrocities' of 1914". *The British Library*. Web. <<http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/civilian-atrocities-german-1914>>
- "Freikorps: German Paramilitary Units." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Freikorps>>
- Harding, Thomas. *Hanns and Rudolf: The True Story of the German Jew Who Tracked Down and Caught the Kommandant of Auschwitz*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013. Print.
- Höss, Rudolf, and Steven Paskuly. *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1992. Print.
- Joyce, Nick. "In Search of the Nazi Personality". *American Psychological Association*. Mar. 2009. Web. <<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/03/nazi.aspx>>
- McLeod, Saul. "Obedience to Authority". *Simply Psychology*. 2007. Web. <<http://www.simplypsychology.org/obedience.html>>
- "Psychological Aspects Behind the Causes of the Holocaust". *Philadelphia University: Germany 2012*. 23 May 2012. Web. <<http://wordpress.philau.edu/germany2012/2012/05/23/psychological-aspects-behind-the-causes-of-the-holocaust/>>

"Rudolf Hoess." *Holocaust Research Project*. H.E.A.R.T., 2007. Web. <<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/hoess.html>>

"Rudolf Höss." *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2008. Web. <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Hoess.html>>