

READING

No Time to Think

Milton Mayer, an American journalist and educator, wanted to find out how a variety of people had reacted to Hitler's policies and philosophy. Seven years after the end of World War II, he interviewed German men from a cross-section of society. One of them, a college professor, had this to say about his experience of that period:

[The study of] Middle High German was my life. It was all I cared about. I was a scholar, a specialist. Then, suddenly, I was plunged into all the new activity, as the university was drawn into the new situation; meetings, conferences, interviews, ceremonies, and, above all, papers to be filled out, reports, bibliographies, lists, questionnaires. And on top of that were demands in the community, the things in which one had to, was "expected to" participate that had not been there or had not been important before. It was all rigmarole, of course, but it consumed all one's energies, coming on top of the work one really wanted to do. You can see how easy it was, then, not to think about fundamental things. One had no time.

...The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all *diverting*. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway. I do not speak of your "little men," your baker and so on; I speak of my colleagues and myself, learned men, mind you. Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had. There was no need to. Nazism gave us some dreadful, fundamental things to think about—we were decent people—and kept us so busy with continuous changes and "crises" and so fascinated, yes, fascinated, by the machinations of the "national enemies," without and within, that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us. Unconsciously, I suppose we were grateful. Who wants to think?

One doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even talk alone; you don't want to "go out of your way to make trouble." Why not?—Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

Uncertainty is a very important factor, and, instead of decreasing as time goes on, it grows. Outside, in the streets, in the general community, “everyone” is happy. One hears no protest, and certainly sees none. You know, in France or Italy there would be slogans against the government painted on walls and fences; in Germany, outside the great cities, perhaps, there is not even this. In the university community, in your own community, you speak privately to your colleagues, some of whom certainly feel as you do; but what do they say? They say, “It’s not so bad” or “You’re seeing things” or “You’re an alarmist.”

And you *are* an alarmist. You are saying that *this* must lead to *this*, and you can’t prove it. These are the beginnings, yes; but how do you know for sure when you don’t know the end, and how do you know, or even surmise, the end? On the one hand, your enemies, the law, the regime, the Party, intimidate you. On the other, your colleagues pooh-pooh you as pessimistic or even neurotic. You are left with your close friends, who are, naturally, people who have always thought as you have.

But your friends are fewer now. Some have drifted off somewhere or submerged themselves in their work. You no longer see as many as you did at meetings or gatherings. Informal groups become smaller; attendance drops off in little organizations, and the organizations themselves wither. Now, in small gatherings of your oldest friends, you feel that you are talking to yourselves, that you are isolated from the reality of things. This weakens your confidence still further and serves as a further deterrent to—to what? It is clearer all the time that, if you are going to do anything, you must *make* an occasion to do it, and then are obviously a troublemaker. So you wait, and you wait.

But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds of thousands will join with you, never comes. *That’s* the difficulty. If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions, would have been sufficiently shocked—if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in ‘43 had come immediately after the “German Firm” stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in ‘33. But of course this isn’t the way it happens. In between come all of the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.

And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying “Jewish swine,” collapses it all at once, and you see that everything has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in—your nation, your people—is not the world you were born in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the

mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays. But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to God. The system itself could not have intended this in the beginning, but in order to sustain itself it was compelled to go all the way.

You have gone almost all the way yourself. Life is a continuing process, a flow, not a succession of acts and events at all. It has flowed to a new level, carrying you with it, without any effort on your part. On this new level you live, you have been living more comfortably every day, with new morals, new principles. You have accepted things that your father, even in Germany, could not have imagined.

Suddenly it all comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven't done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing). You remember those early morning meetings of your department in the university when, if one had stood, others would have stood, perhaps, but no one stood. A small matter, a matter of hiring this man or that, and you hired this one rather than that. You remember everything now, and your heart breaks. Too late. You are compromised beyond repair.¹

¹ From Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933–45* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 167, 169, 171. Reproduced by permission from University of Chicago Press.

Connection Questions

1. Why did the professor accept the Nazis' policies? How did he evaluate, years later, the choices he made or did not make? How do you evaluate them? Why does he emphasize the small steps in the transformation of Germany?
2. Draw an identity chart for the professor. What aspects of his identity may have influenced the decisions he made in 1933?
3. Is it important that the interview with this professor took place seven years after the end of World War II? How might this affect the way you interpret and analyze his account?
4. What elements in the professor's choices not to act were based on particular circumstances of his time and place? What elements in his choices may reflect more universal human tendencies?
5. Can you think of a time when you didn't speak out or act against what you thought was wrong? What kept you from acting?