



Understanding Nazi ideology: the Genesis and impact of a political faith

by Carl Müller Frøland, translated by John Irons, Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Co., 2020, 345 pp., \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781476678306

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swathes of the country's fractious geographies. What would emerge is a more representative, polyphonic, and collective biography-as-ethnography, to further explore how the juxtaposition of precarious narratives and their concomitant survival strategies simultaneously reflects and transcends subjective individual experience. Overall though, Moussawi's creative-critical process of engaging the cultural ills of queer people's surroundings, through Orientalist fractals cohering with the practice and theory of *al wad'*, showcases a compelling and overdue response (and riposte) to the Orientalist discourses and quotidian disruptions the Lebanese continuously contend with. Because the counter-narrative possibilities of Moussawi's surveyed queer tactics carry survival quality that cannot be ignored, and, as this book suggests, will no longer be silenced the more audible dissident voices become, these strategies 'also gesture toward an expansive understanding of queerness – one that does not necessarily link to LGBT identities but to practices of negotiating everyday life' (6).

Gender aside, *Disruptive Situations* develops, through both *al wad'* and Orientalist fractals, a discussion on iniquity and survival that is relevant to everyone – *kulluna* (all of us) – who may dwell in struggling, deeply fragmented contexts, scholars and non-academics alike. In combining fresh, candid fieldwork with careful, nuanced theorizing, Moussawi's penmanship is impressively accessible, despite the rigor of his research. The book is recommended to a broad baseline of readers interested in interdisciplinary gender research, queer methodology and theory, Middle Eastern studies, and Arab and Islamic ethnography, as well as transnational, urban and area studies in sexuality or sociology.

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Understanding Nazi ideology: the Genesis and impact of a political faith, by Carl Müller Frøland, translated by John Irons, Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Co., 2020, 345 pp., \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781476678306

This is a very uneven book and it offers, as the subtitle states, a study of both the origins and outcomes of Nazism as—following a well-known concept—a political religion. Frøland, whom the book's cover states are working on a Ph.D. at the University of Oslo, delivers by offering a long genealogy of early-Romantic German ideas about the individual, morality, and the collective into the early twentieth century while also describing the biopolitical policies and worldview of the Nazi regime. This worthwhile contribution, however, also comes with troubling assertions about taking the Nazis and their ideas seriously and, perhaps even, sympathetically. Frøland argues in the introduction that the Holocaust 'functions as a mental barrier for a thorough historicization of Nazism' (p. 6). This is doubly puzzling as the Nazis have, indeed, been systematically historicized—as libraries of studies can attest—and, much more problematically, because the Holocaust is at the center of both Nazi ideas and, as he likes to say, their 'impact'.

Leaving aside, for now, these major reservations, Frøland offers a useful encapsulation of Nazi ideology in the book's thesis. Following a 1940 presentation by Arthur O. Lovejoy on 'The

Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas,' Frøland argues that the Nazi worldview can be summed up in the two interrelated idea-complexes of the organic and the dynamic (p. 10-11). These are two practical pillars around which to crystallize Nazi ideology from its genealogical inception to its terroristic implementation and Frøland continues to reprise them throughout the book. His, following Lovejoy again, is a history-of-ideas approach (*Ideengeschichte*) and he even goes so far as to endorse a German *Sonderweg* (special, or deviant, path) at the level of ideas as he argues, beginning with the early Romantics, Germans developed a unique 'mental vocabulary' around various 'cultural factors' that led directly to Nazism (p. 12). This provides the narrative arc of the study as Frøland charts iterations of the organic and the dynamic from the turn of the nineteenth century up to and through the Nazi seizure of power.

It quickly becomes clear that this is a work of synthesis. No archival research is cited and the discussions of most thinkers often follows one published source and prior secondary treatment by historians and theorists. Just as the book's thesis follows Lovejoy, decades-old studies by the likes of Fritz Stern, George Mosse and others line the path that Frøland travels from Goethe to Nietzsche and then Hitler. Alongside *Sturm und Drang*, we get a chapter each devoted to the ideas of Herder, Schelling and Fichte as Frøland develops his argument about Romantic antecedents to Nazi thought. The book explores, among many others, concepts related to the relationship between creation and destruction, the power of emotions and the will, nature and pantheism, vitalism and palingenesis, and the sacrifice of the individual to the whole or collective. Frøland argues that Fichtean 'nationalism has a religious dimension' (p. 37) that subsumes the individual and that German Romantic thought places 'a radical emphasis on the dynamic nature of existence' (p. 42). This solidifies his definition of the concepts (*Begriffe*) of the organic and dynamic which are drawn upon over the next two-hundred-plus pages.

The next chapter, Chapter VI, makes a departure as it is more of a summary of German politics in the period from Napoleon to Unification which relates to the development of *völkisch* ideology. That is completely understandable, but it is a break from the history-of-ideas method that Frøland attests. This is a break that is maintained throughout the book, despite claims to the contrary, as it is much more of a discussion of theory and (eventual) practice than stated in the introduction. That departure, however, is welcome as some of the better chapters are about actual policies and institutions. Nevertheless, the remainder of the next two parts of the book—each of which contains four chapters—develops the organic-dynamic binary through discussions of Paul de Lagarde and Julius Langbehn followed by interpretations of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and then Ernst Jünger. Frøland argues that by the First World War, 'Nietzsche has become the philosopher of war *par excellence*', and that Jünger's writing gave expression to and popularization of many of these social Darwinian ideas in the aftermath of the war (p. 97).

The rest of the book, some nineteen chapters, is devoted to the crystallization of Nazi ideology both before and after they are in power, the mechanics and significance of the cult of the *Führer*, an examination of the ideology and practice of the SS, and then an overall assessment of the Nazi downfall and worldview. For discussion of both Nazi ideas and, in particular, policies, Frøland closely follows the work of Richard J. Evans and Ian Kershaw. This guidance is salutary as some of the better parts of the book come when Frøland employs Kershaw's notions of 'working towards the *Führer*' (p. 171) to describe mobilization in the Nazi regime as part of a 'polycratic state' with productive rivalries and loci of power (p. 175). Beyond Nietzsche, much of the earlier discussion of pre-Nazi thought is dropped, but remains bundled in the commingling concepts of the organic and the dynamic tied to various Nazi thinkers and, what has been richly termed elsewhere, 'ethnocrats'. Alfred Rosenberg, Walther Darré and Werner Best are successfully depicted as bridging the gap between the genealogy of racist ideas and Nazi practice. The reader gets a sense of the functioning and motivations of the Nazi racial state.

But Frøland seeks to go further in his discussion of the impact and totality of the Nazi regime. He holds up the SS as proof that Nazi ideas have become so entrenched in German society and that a religious-like fanaticism has washed over everyday Germans. However, no historian would doubt, beyond critiques of careerism, the ideological bent of Himmler and the SS, much less Rosenberg and other ethnocrats. To attempt to support his broader claim of indoctrination and, indeed, dynamic embrace of Nazism, Frøland falls back on old arguments about Weberian charisma and mass spectacle. He argues, ‘The regime seeks to get the Nazi ideology to permeate all of society, to gain total control over its citizens and total power over their minds’ (p. 205). While most historians would be fine with this claim, Frøland takes its success as a given without providing evidence or statistics of reception and popularity. He asks rhetorically, ‘How could this political ideology gain such power over people’s minds?’ (p. 277) without—beyond mention of Hitlerian charisma or SS fanaticism—ever demonstrating that it did. The work of Claudia Koonz would be a welcome inclusion here to explore the dynamics (and limits) of this process in creating a ‘Nazi conscience’.

Perhaps the greatest methodological limitation to *Understanding Nazi Ideology* is contained in Frøland’s claim to adopt a ‘value-neutral and historicizing attitude’ toward Nazism and its attendant ideology (p. 6). In the book, this goes beyond an understanding-from-within approach and instead often results in taking Nazi claims at face value. This is nowhere more evident than in Frøland’s treatment of the category of nation. The concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community) and the Nazi utopia of consolidation and purification has been well explored and interrogated by historians for generations. This is, of course, the organic part of Frøland’s binary. But the reality was that the German ‘nation’ was riven by class, confessional, gender, regional, political, ideological and other fault lines. The Nazi goal was to pave over these differences through policies of positive and negative eugenics and inclusion versus exterminatory exclusion. Just as with the presumed acceptance of Nazi racial ideology, Frøland takes the *Volksgemeinschaft* as already having come to fruition and the German nation as a cohered, undifferentiated mass. Writing of those deemed worthy and ‘German’—and not as an aspiration of the regime but as an existing achievement—Frøland states, ‘This community, held together by a religion-like ‘worldview,’ gave a sense of meaning and belonging, a safe haven and an existential anchorage’ (p. 285). This statement is not a critical analysis of Nazi society. Rather, it is a recapitulation of the erstwhile and failed ambitions of the dictatorship and its architects of annihilation.

This is a book for non-specialists who are looking for an entry into Nazi ideology. As stated, the organizing principle around the idea clusters of the organic and the dynamic is useful and efficient. Much of the second half of the book, especially chapters on Nazi racial planners and the functioning of the racial state, could be worthwhile to assign to undergraduates. The endnotes, it should also be said, contain good references for further exploration and some interesting—and some puzzling—historiographical disagreements. This book represents an ambitious attempt at a synthesis that succeeds in some areas more than others.

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