

A Devil of the Details: The Life and Crimes of Nazi Wilhelm Frick

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The Holocaust is remembered with a series of iconic and ghastly images that soiled the 20th Century: the emphatic gesturing of Adolf Hitler in front of crowds teeming with fervour. The pounding boots of the Gestapo as they hunted their victims, dogs racing ahead with snarling lips curled. The ghostly survivors of concentration camps, shrunken and starved, staring like cadavers come to life, whose suffering surpasses description. An infamously villainous Nazi cast associated with these events and atrocities: Hermann Goering, perhaps the most prominent member of the Third Reich, after its dictator. Joseph Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister. Heinrich Himmler, commander of the SS. And, of course Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi Party.¹ The name Wilhelm Frick is distinctly less familiar, more of a footnote in Holocaust history, which is anomalous upon closer inspection; one of the earliest Nazi Party members, he would prove to be instrumental in the Holocaust.² He was a lawyer, a bureaucrat, and an administrator of the Nazi Party, who calculatedly legalized the Nazi persecution of the Jews, and conceptualized forces that would attempt total Jewish destruction.³ Frick was an architect of the Holocaust because he created the legal foundation that enabled the Third Reich's atrocities against the Jews, and helped to conceive and initiate its most lethal machinery—the Nazi police and concentration camps.

Wilhelm Frick was born in Kaiserslautern, Germany, in 1877. His mother died when Frick was an adolescent, his father remained a widower until he passed away at 80. The youngest of four children, Frick described his familial relationships as cordial but lacking true kinship. His siblings died before 1940, leaving him with no immediate family. He attended universities across Eastern Europe, and practiced law for a short time in Kaiserslautern before he worked for the Munich police. Frick was assigned to a division that dealt with racketeering and politics—practical experience for a man who would harmonize corruption, terrorism and law for the Third Reich.⁴ He met Adolf Hitler in 1923, and became a member of the National Socialist Party that same year; after the failed Beer Hall Putsch, the future dictator told Frick that “parliamentary methods”—not aggression—would be the means for the Nazi Party

¹Anthony Read, *The Devil's Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle* (New York: Norton, 2004), 922.

² "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 2" *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Proceedings Volumes* (The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School, 2008), <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/imt.asp#proc>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

to win power. "It was my job to transform the parliamentary way into the authoritarian way," Frick said of his job description. "The whole parliamentary system was overthrown and in time all laws were taken out of the hands of the parliament and into the authoritarian control."⁵

Frick's work in policing, law, and politics foreshadowed his future career within the Third Reich, where he would manipulate all three disciplines in an effort to help Germany win its racial war. However, it was his casual, matter-of-fact statements of his job description—namely, removing power from the parliamentary sphere and placing it under authoritarian control—and his pragmatic, detached statements about his children suggest Frick operated disconnectedly, unemotionally and indifferently as a human being. He married twice, and two of his five children died before the end of the war—one on the Eastern front in 1941, the other committing suicide in 1945. When asked about his son who was killed in action, Frick offered a decidedly short obituary: "It was sad. It's war. Many others died, too. It's war." His eldest son's suicide evoked an equal measure of Frick's stoicism; he felt little sorrow, he said, because of the "nature of life, the laws of nature, and the ways of war."⁶

Frick's cold pragmatism and shrewd manipulation of the law would become hallmarks of his career in the Third Reich. As Minister of the Interior—a position he would hold from 1933-1945—Frick was officially responsible for domestic German affairs, including lawmaking.⁷ One of Frick's most infamous acts was co-authoring the Nuremberg Laws, the legislation that served as the catalyst for much of the Third Reich's gradual savagery; these laws helped drive the Nazi vision of an Aryan race living in a Jew-free Europe from theory to near fulfillment.⁸ Frick formulated laws that directly prohibited Jews from owning businesses, restricted their access to education, and forbade them from marrying Germans.⁹ He legally withdrew German citizenship from the Jews, stripped them of their right to vote, and forced them to wear the Star of David to allow for easier identification and segregation.¹⁰ In a letter from the Organization of Independent Orthodox Communities to Adolf Hitler in 1933, rabbis described the diminishing quality of life for Jews living under the Third Reich: their livelihoods and means of survival had been eroded, and for many, the

⁵ Leon Goldensohn and Robert Gellately, *The Nuremberg Interviews: An American Psychiatrist's Conversations with the Defendants and Witnesses* (New York: Random House, 2004), 40-46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 4," *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Proceedings Volumes* (The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School, 2008) <<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/12-17-45.asp>>

⁸ Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman and Abraham Magalot, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, 8th ed. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 61-62.

⁹ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 2"; Karen L. Riley, "A History of the Holocaust," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 6, no 3 (Winter 1992): 42.

¹⁰ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 2"; Riley, "A History of the Holocaust," 44.

laws served as a death sentence.¹¹ Frick was later described as having been "determined to relegate the Jews to an inferior status by denying them common privileges and freedoms."¹² Nuremberg prosecutors alleged that he had designed legislation to phase in the systematic extermination of the Jews, by slowly diminishing their rights until there were no legalities preventing their ultimate destruction.¹³ This accusation was legitimized by the Wannsee Conference of 1942, at which high-ranking Nazi officials were formally briefed on the plan to exterminate the Jewish population. At Wannsee, the Nuremberg Laws were cited as the "foundation" for the Final Solution.¹⁴ The following year, Frick passed another law that would further the "Wannsee Protocol": Jews were expelled from "any judicial process" that caused "police [to become] the sole arbiters of punishment and death."¹⁵ As a direct result of Frick's law, Jews fell outside the realm of any legal protection, freeing the Third Reich to commit indiscriminate injustices against that community. During his time as Minister of the Interior, Wilhelm Frick used the legal process as a weapon and a tool of the Holocaust. That process—most notably including the Nuremberg Laws—ultimately became the bedrock of Jewish mass-murder in the Wannsee Protocol.¹⁶

One might be inclined to perceive Wilhelm Frick as having been an indirect participant in the Holocaust, by observing his role as a judicial architect, and for his work designing and managing the Third Reich's police systems and concentration camps. Frick participated in creating and overseeing Himmler's SS, the SA, the SD and the Gestapo, each of these divisions played a part in the Third Reich's attempted purge of European Jews.¹⁷ These forces liquidated ghettos, beat and murdered Jewish civilians, carried out pogroms and eliminated political opposition while under Frick's jurisdiction.¹⁸ Frick formulated and helped pass the law that would allow the Nazis to impose "protective custody" on whomever they wished, which was a calculated move that would lead to the internment of Jews in camps where

¹¹ Arad, Gutman and Magalio, *Documents on the Holocaust*, 61-62.

¹² "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 3" *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Proceedings Volumes* (The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School, 2008), <<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/12-13-45.asp#camps>>.

¹³ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 1" *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Proceedings Volumes* (The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School, 2008), <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/chap_11.asp>.

¹⁴ Jan M. Piskorski, "From Munich through Wannsee to Auschwitz: The Road to the Holocaust," *Journal of the Historical Society* 7, no. 2 (2007): 164; "Wannsee Protocol, January 20, 1942," Lillian Goldman Law Library,(2008), <<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/wannsee.asp>>

¹⁵ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 3"

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 6.

millions would be exterminated. He also secured the land upon which Auschwitz would be built.¹⁹ He acted as the chief "controlling authority" over the concentration camps, personally visiting and examining them as Jews were forced into labour, often worked to death, and eventually murdered systematically. As the trials later detailed, "once in the custody of SS guards, the victim was beaten, tortured, starved, and often exterminated through the so-called 'extermination-through-work' program, or through mass execution gas chambers and furnaces of the camps." Frick oversaw it all.²⁰ He also controlled the Medical Division, a particularly macabre and heinous part of Nazi history: doctors performed inhumane experiments on patients to further Nazi science. Jews were thrown from high altitudes, drowned, and dissected alive. They were cut open and then sewn shut with infected materials in their limbs to gauge the effectiveness of antibiotics. They were covered with phosphorous and set on fire to test burn salves.²¹ Frick not only managed sadistic scientific testing on human beings, but also voluntarily inserted himself into the ghoulish procedures, exhibiting a cold-blooded taste for cruelty.²² During a visit to the camp at Dachau, he took the time to familiarize himself with experiments on prisoners. His interests included the process of infecting healthy inmates with malaria-infected mosquitos and exposing others to freezing temperatures until they died.²³ Wilhelm Frick was blatantly crucial to the Third Reich's persecution of the Jews because he helped establish the police systems that abused, arrested, and murdered them, and supervised the concentration camps that systematically destroyed them. Frick then pushed his involvement into utter depravity with his personal interest, dedication, and voluntary sadism.

Many rationalizations have been proposed for Nazi behaviour, theoretical reasoning for how people could commit acts of such violence, and cruelty, and yet still be human. In his book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, historian Christopher Browning offers the Stanford Prison Experiment, the Stanley Milgram Experiment, the sleeper effect, and indoctrination at a young age as viable explanations.²⁴ During his final days Wilhelm Frick would defy them all, offering few explanations for his systematic cruelty and the murders he had sanctioned. He would not express any regret for having helped to transform Germany into a totalitarian state, or having passed laws that stripped the Jews of their rights.²⁵ He conveyed no remorse for the brutal police divisions he had overseen, as they tortured and killed the Jews, or the camps he had created with

¹⁹ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 2."

²⁰ Ibid.; Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 315; "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 1."

²¹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 604-611.

²² "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 2."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 167-178.

²⁵ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 2."

legislation, death machines that chewed their charges whole.²⁶ Instead, Wilhelm Frick's sole regret was that he believed the Third Reich had been mismanaged, preventing it from achieving the triumph he had envisioned: "Hitler was undoubtedly a genius, but he lacked self-control. He recognized no limits. Otherwise the thousand-year Reich would have lasted more than 12 years."²⁷ His interviews at Nuremberg ultimately depicted a man living without a shred of remorse—only disappointed that the Third Reich had not been able to expand its bloody regime across Europe.

Frick said in his closing statement at the Nuremberg tribunal that: "In fulfilling my legal and moral duties, I believe that I have deserved punishment no more than have the tens of thousands of faithful German civil servants and officials in the public service who have already been detained... merely because they did their duty."²⁸ Wilhelm Frick's defence had hinged upon the notion that he was simply fulfilling his obligations to the party, yet that falls apart under scrutiny. As American military general Lucius Clay acknowledged, if those in command of the Nazi Party were found guilty at the Nuremberg Tribunal, half a million Germans would also be subject to arrest. The "faithful German civil servants" cited by Frick were not exempt from guilt; the persecution of Jews had been a national epidemic. Civilians had been spared judgment only because the Nuremberg tribunals' presiding American justice, Robert Jackson, understood it to be more manageable to prosecute those in positions of leadership.²⁹ Additionally, as one of the earliest Nazi Party members, Wilhelm Frick simply possessed more knowledge than the average "faithful German" about the Third Reich's intentions, and channeled it directly into persecuting the Jews. During Frick's trial at Nuremberg, one affidavit presented recalled a conversation Frick had had in 1932: "When I gave an emphatic answer to Frick concerning the particular matter discussed, he replied, 'When we are in power we shall put all of you guys into concentration camps.'"³⁰ This is evidence that Frick was privy to the Third Reich's planned persecution of "undesirables" in Germany even before the party governed. His own words indicate that he operated with a full understanding of how his laws and decrees were going to be used against the Jews before he had even formulated them. While this does not suggest the innocence of the "faithful German civil servant," it directly exposes Frick's awareness and facilitation of the Final Solution to be beyond that of the civilian population. Furthermore, Frick showed not only comprehension of what the Third Reich hoped to achieve, but also a *desire* for it to reach its bloody and totalitarian objective of a Jew-free Europe, by any means necessary, when he said: "Just as Mussolini exterminated the Marxists in Italy, so must we also succeed in accomplishing the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Goldensohn and Gellately. *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 44.

²⁸ James Owen, *Nuremberg: Evil on Trial*, (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2006), 308.

²⁹ Goldensohn and Gellately. *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 4.

³⁰ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 2."; "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 3."

same through dictatorship and terror."³¹ This statement entirely contradicts the notion that he was only "fulfilling [his] legal and moral duties." Frick not only wanted this violent dictatorship, he ultimately worked to manifest it with his legal authority by formulating the Enabling Act, which allowed the Nazis to assume totalitarian control of Germany.³²

Wilhelm Frick devoted his life to advancing Nazi causes, and he would meet an early death for this. On October 16, 1946, he was hanged after being found guilty of crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity.³³ It was reported that, as he walked the steps to the gallows, he stumbled—a strange, striking detail to recount, and a singular, vulnerable moment in time for a man characterized by his lack of humanity.³⁴ For Wilhelm Frick was not merely a cog in the Nazi death machine; he served as a designer of the Nuremberg Laws, which banished Jews to the peripheries of German society, tore away their rights, and stripped them of their livelihoods.³⁵ He corrupted legislation to forsake and betray the Jews, denying them of what fundamentally protects civilians and using it to tie them hand and foot.³⁶ He legalized Germany's transformation into a totalitarian state, allowing it to move violently forward, uncontested, with its persecution of the Jewish population.³⁷ He helped build and manage the German police forces that were free to administer punishment, torture and death to any Jews they encountered.³⁸ He legalized, procured, and oversaw the concentration camps, and took an intimate fascination in its more gruesome experiments.³⁹ After all this, he offered no repentance or shame, only the lingering regret for what could have been, had the Third Reich continued for millennia.⁴⁰ Made distinctive by his repeated facilitations of Jewish persecution, and instrumental planning and overseeing of the Holocaust, Wilhelm Frick was the kind of catalyst the Third Reich needed to make the Final Solution a reality. He worked beyond the rhetoric of the Nazi Party to create action, yet remains a lesser-known—and wholly chilling—figure in Nazi history. He may have stumbled on the way to the gallows in an atypical moment of weakness, but moments later, with his last words, he made clear that his belief in the Nazi Party and its vision had not been shaken by

³¹ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 3."

³² "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol. 2."

³³ Read, *The Devil's Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle*, 831; Owen, *Nuremberg*, 351.

³⁴ Kingsbury Smith, "The Execution of Nazi War Criminals," *International News Service*, 16 October 1946, accessed at <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/nuremberg/NurembergNews10_16_46.html>

³⁵ Arad, Gutman and Magalot, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust*, 61-62.

³⁶ "Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 3."

³⁷ "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Vol 2."

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Goldensohn and Gellately. *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 44.

confronting death: "Long live eternal Germany."⁴¹ The declaration exposed the man he was at his core: a devoted Nazi, anti-Semite, and true believer.

⁴¹ Smith, "The Execution of Nazi War Criminals."

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