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TO BE OR NOT TO BE GENOCIDAL: A COMPARISON OF RELIGIOUS REASONING IN  
MEIN KAMPF AND CAPT. HOSENFELD'S DIARY

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ABSTRACT

It was historical that doctors and health personnel participated in the holocaust by selecting prisoners in concentration camps. The weak were sent to the gas chambers. The concentration camps were Darwinist prisons where only the fittest survived. However, this paper is interested in the holocaust as an ethical policy rather than medical malpractice. We would be specifically looking at how religion influenced the thought process. Religion might seem redundant in health and social policy. However, it influenced ethical issues like Eugenics.

Furthermore, racial and religious sentiment did play a role in the holocaust. Ethics is a philosophical and ideological issue that includes religious philosophy. This paper discusses the role of ideology and religion in the totalitarian state of Nazi Germany. The texts used are Mein Kampf and Capt. Hosenfeld's diary. Even though they are part of the German establishment, these are two opposite views.

Keywords: Eugenics, Genocide, Totalitarianism, Holocaust, Ethics

Introduction

It was historical that doctors and health personnel participated in the holocaust by practised selections for prisoners in concentration camps. The weak were sent to the gas chambers. The concentration camps were Darwinist prisons where only the fittest survived. However, this paper is interested in the holocaust as an ethical policy rather than medical malpractice. We would be specifically looking at how religion influenced the thought process. Religion might seem redundant in health and social policy. However, it influenced ethical issues like Eugenics. Furthermore, racial and religious sentiment did play a role in the holocaust. Ethics is a philosophical and ideological issue that includes religious philosophy.

This paper contrasts how both Hitler and Hoseneld used religion to further or negate the totalitarian ideology of Nazism. Capt. Hosenfeld used religion to invoke humanity, while Hitler used it to provoke anti-Semitism. While the first used religion for ethical considerations, the latter was identitarian. We cannot imply that Hosenfeld or any other memoir perfectly represents the Nazi and anti-Nazi camps. Because Mein Kampf is used for propaganda and Hosenfeld's diary extracts are a case of exception.

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**Hosenfeld and Hitler**

Capt. Hosenfeld was the German Officer who saved Wladyslaw Szpilman, the Polish Pianist. Hitler needs no introduction. Hosenfeld's diary extracts are published with Szpilman's memoir *The Pianist*. Hosenfeld was a profoundly religious and spiritual man. Szpilman's memoir also contains an epilogue by Biermann.

"Biermann tells us ... He [Hosenfeld] was ... in a very religious Catholic family ... He joined the Nazi Party ... and became a Storm Trooper. When World War II came, he was considered too old for active service..." (Bernstein 119).

The religious background is significant because it might be the reason for his disillusionment. However, he was a member of the Nazi party and a Stormtrooper. This fact shows that he was either ideologically inclined or sympathetic to Nazism, at least at one point. One might be a member of the Nazi party due to circumstances like Schindler, but one does not sign up to be a Stormtrooper without a cause.

"The extracts from his diary begin in 1942 when he is already thoroughly disillusioned by his fellow countrymen" (Bernstein 119)

This disillusionment could be due to World War II, which made him reevaluate his ideological choices due to the sheer destruction and loss of the war after three years. However, he saw little active combat. The other and more plausible reason must be that he might have had a change in conscience after seeing the suffering of the Jews. He might have bought into the Nazi propaganda initially, but he might have seen through the lies during the holocaust.

"His saving of Szpilman was not an isolated act... in Biermann's epilogue. ... she [Mrs. Hosenfeld] had received a postcard from her husband from a Soviet prison camp with a list of names of people who might help" (Bernstein 120).

The existence of a list of potential benefactors who might owe him suggests that his actions might not have been entirely altruistic. He might have sensed the tide change in the war and was finding some insurance. However, he took a severe risk in helping and harbouring those deemed enemies of the state, which needs to be acknowledged.

Hitler was ambiguous about religion, but he identified himself as Christian and Christian imagery was used to provoke religious bigotry.

"And [Jesus]... made no secret ... of his estimation of the Jewish people ... But ... The Christ was nailed to the Cross ..." (Hitler 240).

This argument attempts to whip up the bigoted sentiment about the Jews killing Christ. It is hardly original and is sheer incitement. Furthermore, to blame the descendants for the alleged crime of the forefathers is akin to the Original sin of Christianity.

"our modern Christians enter into party politics ... they debase themselves to beg for Jewish vote...They even enter into political intrigues with the atheistic Jewish parties against the interests of their ... Christian nation" (Hitler 240).

Here, Hitler uses Jesus as a tool of discord for the relationship between Jews and Christians by reopening old wounds and antisemitic tropes and attacking anyone who wants a cordial relationship with Jews. Whereas Hosenfeld declared: "The greatest ideal on earth is human love" (Hosenfeld 240)

Here we can see that a religious case can be made for and against violence. While Hitler was obviously for violence, Hosenfeld took the latter route. It also shows that fascists will take any line of argument as long as it is convenient for them. This kind of argument does not mean Hitler was a devout Christian:

"Christianity was ... in a ferment of dissolution, in a stage preliminary to Bolshevism. He [Hitler] had only ridicule and derision ... for all those in the party who wanted to evolve a religious-cultist worldview within National Socialism" (Maier 13)

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It might be helpful to discuss what religion has to do with a totalitarian Eugenic state. Religion is a part of national identity and ideology. It also gives rise to beliefs and stereotypes, even reflecting a national sentiment. Anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany has evident roots in religious anti-Semitism.

"... words and actions in totalitarian movements operate in the realm of the momentous, just as they do in a religious context. According to Raymond Aron and Hannah Arendt, totalitarian rule is largely defined by the moment of terror" (Maier p. 10)

Jews were targeted for their religion. This intention is clearly outlined in *Mein Kampf*. The reasoning for anti-Semitism might vary, including racial, national, class envy, while compassion is humanity.

There are many reasons for hating a person, as viewed in *Mein Kampf* and not much for compassion in Captain Hosenfeld in his extracts. Readers of *Mein Kampf* have to rely on the underlying assumptions implied in reading both these memoirs. Hitler gradually assumes the inferiority and conspiratorial role of Jews in Germany. This assumption is followed through the memoir. Hosenfeld, on the other hand, is dismayed and works under the premise of shared humanity.

In a totalitarian setting, humane emotions or empathy are unnecessary for a state that supports Eugenics. However, any cohesive ideology is enough, even if it is incoherent or vile if it has a coherent following or a system ready to perpetuate it.

"A totalitarian system also tries to make its influence on the individual felt in the private sphere...Religions also tend to provide the individual with detailed laws and behavioural norms...to unify these through initiation, symbol and ritual" (Maier 11)

Hence, even if the entire ideology targets a particular marginalised community for genocide, it is a valid ideology in a totalitarian state as long it holds enough people together and is sufficiently motivating. Subjects are required to be convinced of the mission of the totalitarian state, even if their motives are diverse.

Let us take *Mein Kampf* as an example. Hitler tried to convince people of all stripes and banners of the Aryan nation that they needed to marginalise the Jews.

"The Jew offers the most striking contrast to the Aryan. There is probably no other people in the world who have so developed the instinct of self-preservation as the so-called 'chosen' people ..." (Hitler 234).

Hitler made Jew the primordial other of the Aryan race. The Jew, for him, was an antithesis of the Aryan. While both have self-preservation instincts, he favoured the survival of the Aryan one. He imagined Jews as an existential threat to his race. Here, Hitler invokes the race consciousness of the people who identify as Aryan.

"... the Jew is looked upon as specially 'cunning,'... he has been so throughout the ages. His intellectual powers... rather have been shaped by the object lessons which the Jew has received from others" (Hitler 234)

By making Jews a foil to the Christian Teutonic Aryan race, he tried to unite the majority of German society while marginalising the Jews. This tactic might be obvious. Nevertheless, he also portrays a minority as pathetic and dangerous at the same time. It is typical of fascist propaganda. He was also trying to fix a plot hole in his propaganda. Jews cannot be intellectually inferior and grand conspirators at the same time. Hence he tried to portray Jews as people with borrowed intellect.

"To be German was to be a Nazi regardless of one's personal ideology or nationality, although the German minority that had settled in Poland often for as many as seven centuries since the rule of the German Teutonic Order" (Frazenburg 41)

Not all Germans consider Aryan or Christian as their core identity. Ideology is as vital to communities as nationalism. This dilemma is a problem for fascist and totalitarian regimes that support genocide. Hitler tailored his message to Christians, Socialists, Darwinists, Naturalists, and Aryan racists. He knew that all these people had different equations of reasons to hate Jews. So he appealed to all their shared sense of anti-Semitism. Christians hated Jews for religious reasons and the age-old accusation of killing Christ. People of leftist persuasion despised the Jews for their perceived banking and Capitalist practices.

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"Early works on the churches under Nazism, while generally painting a picture of ecclesiastical resistance to the 'paganism' and anti-clericalism of the movement, ... of nearly unqualified Nazi opposition to Christian institutions and teachings" (Steigmann-Gall 268).

Although some Christians might find the Nazis distasteful, they likely found common cause vis a vis the Jews. Jews and Christians were, in certain aspects, at different ideological poles. They would have wanted Jews to be 'punished' for the alleged Crucifixion of Christ Jews. In this context, the belief in original sin would translate to blaming the Jewish descendants for their ancestors.

"...the histories of the churches during the Third Reich tended to emphasise those clergymen and laity on the 'winning side' of events" (Steigmann-Gall 268)

Another interpretation could be that some Christians paid court to those in power. It was indeed complicated to dislodge them from power. So they might have felt to render unto Caesar or the Reich what they are owed.

Hitler also preyed on the fears of overpopulation and population density among the educated in Germany. Nature is described as a goddess who makes natural selection as someone who "tends to check the increase of population in some countries and among some races, but by a method which is quite as ruthless as it is wise." (Hitler 112)

This description is for an audience partial to Social Darwinism and possibly opposed to religious rhetoric. It also shows that, unlike religious people who see virtue in the meek, fascists admire strength. This commentary also foreshadows the holocaust. He is giving a hint that one has to be as, according to him, ruthless as nature with weaker populations to control the overall population. It is almost like giving a sacrifice to a pagan goddess.

He thought that "German superiority" in the economy was that it preserved its national character and was less in the control of "International Finance." He thought that this was the reason for the World War. (Hitler 216) International finance is, of course, a dog whistle for Jews. He complained that around the first world war, "as early as 1916 - 17 practically all production was under the control of Jewish finance." (Hitler 157)

This fear-mongering, coupled with Christian distaste for usury and the trauma of the first world war, is a potent mixture. For Capitalists, he described Jews as enablers of Socialists and Unionists whom they despised. Hitler used religion against Marxists. He called Marxists "the mortal foes of all religion" (Hitler 211). The future Chancellor Of Germany claimed Das Capital was the "work of the Jew, Karl Marx" (Hitler 172). He thereby binds Marxists and Jews together in a conspiracy.

He also claimed oddly that Capitalists and Marxists were working together.

"... money-grabbing Capitalism...assisted in this fight by its faithful henchmen in the Marxist movement."(Hitler 187)

This perception would make it appear that Jews were the lynchpin of all evil suffered by Germans. They imagined Jews to be the manipulative Shylockian persona seen in the plays of the Bard. Greed and religion were used by people who cared neither for Aryanism nor Social Darwinism. Hitler presented Jews as less evolved humans who deserved to be ruled and enslaved or even pests.

This presentation of Jews is an example of how fascists use existing fault lines to weave a web of conspiracy around a minority under universal suspicion. One can notice that anyone can be declared an enemy by associating with the Jew, whether or not they are associated with them. Religion here is used as a tool of alienation.

For Hosenfeld, all those excuses for hating Jews do not hold water. He was a Christian who was not troubled by another religion in his midst, and he did not subscribe to the conspiracy that Jews were saboteurs of the German economy. Neither did he care for the Aryan race. There is no evidence of him being a religious bigot. Even if he was, he disapproved of the treatment of Jews, and he was a Captain in the German Army.

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There could be scepticism regarding Hosenfeld's actions of saving Szpilman. One might argue that Hosenfeld might have jumped ship in the war's later years, foreseeing Germany's inevitable defeat. However, the fact remains that Hosenfeld helped a lot of Jews, including Szpilman.

"Both the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks butchered the ruling upper classes and executed their royal families. They broke with Christianity and waged war on it, intending to wipe it off the face of the earth" (Hosenfeld 197)

The problem is that most nations have minorities and marginalised communities, and all nations have had turbulent histories. Hence it is not that difficult to manufacture the other. Hosenfeld points out that human history is never one-sided. He learned from history the dangers of violence from the religious and ideological wars. Unlike Hitler, rather than seeking revenge, he was able to look forward.

"On the one hand, they (Nazis) ally themselves with the ruling classes in capital and industry and maintain the capitalist principle, on the other, they preach socialism" (Hosenfeld 198)

Hosenfeld shows a vast difference between what a totalitarian state like Nazi Germany preaches and what they intend to practice. A totalitarian state would say anything in power, including appropriating religious grievances. Palanichamy felt that Hosenfeld had met his redemption:

"people, regardless of their affiliation ... redemptive qualities. Not all ... [is] black and white ... Sometimes, it would be more reasonable to illustrate ... war as a literal 'Gray Zone.'" (Palanichamy 7)

It is complicated for people to dialogue with fascists when shifting goalposts whenever they want. Hosenfeld found the anti-Semitism and the violence reminiscent of the medieval ages:

"Even in the old days, when nations were more religious and called their rulers Christian majesties, it was the same as today when people are moving away from Christianity. Humanity seems doomed to do more evil than good" (Hosenfeld 200)

Hosenfeld does not find the solution to man kind's problems is religion or spirituality. Nevertheless, he laments that people are moving away from Christianity. He seems to believe that universal love is the solution.

"Concerning the curriculum of reconciliation oriented remembrance, historical examples can contextualise such considerations by examples of reconciliation, such as Wilm Hosenfeld..." (Frazenburg 40)

Even universal love sounds a bit biblical or religious. The point is not that the lack of religion breeds problems, but a lack of sense of ethics leaves people unconstrained in pursuing power and resources. Hosenfeld puts this in a language familiar to him. However, his analogy holds. People use religion as a tool of contempt to vie for power, just as in medieval religious wars. This precedence shows that totalitarian rule might use old societal divisions to come into power.

"Only a small selection of the vast range of examples of modern political religion [is] available ... Bolshevism, Fascism, and National Socialism seem to be forms of faith, quasi-religious submissions to a higher, even absolute authority" (Maier 9)

There is also a need for a mature understanding of religion and politics. Religious ethics must have freedom of expression in the marketplace of ideas. They must be heard and discussed. Otherwise, religious discourse in society will be relegated to mere identity politics, which charlatans and fascists could appropriate. There must be a broader discussion of religion other than the self and others. Separating religion from politics will not make religion disappear. It will create a class of religious people who are disinterested in discourse and perceived victimhood.

Hosenfeld believed that people had a natural disposition towards freedom:

"But the love of freedom is native to every human being and every nation and cannot be suppressed in the long term. History teaches us that tyranny has never endured"

(Hosenfeld 201).

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Although one must feel inclined to be sceptical of his claim about the endurance of an authoritarian regime, no regime is indeed eternal. However, this is a massive relief for those under the yolk of fascist regimes.

Hitler had other views about tyranny.

"... subjugated races were employed as slaves was a similar fate allotted to animals, and not vice versa...employing ... he not only spared the ... conquered but probably made their lives easier ... state of so called 'freedom.'" (Hitler 230- 31)

It could also be argued that the love of one's freedom and material wealth makes people subjugate other people in the first place. This argument reminds us of Hitler's almost elaborate plan of taking over Slavic Russia:

"If new territory were to be acquired in Europe, it must have been mainly at Russia's cost"(Hitler 119).

Hitler viewed the Soviet Union to be weak. There are two probable reasons for this. One is that he looked down upon the Slavic race, and the other is that he underestimated a government of and by the supposed proletariat class and the Communists that he despised. Hence Hitler's motivations can be viewed as two-fold, one is intolerance for other views, and the other is severe hatred for weakness.

Hosenfeld had apprehensions about this business of reign of terror and subjugating others, and stealing their resources: While Hitler was taking genocidal action against the Jews, Hosenfeld was surprised by the lack of reaction of Hitler's victims.

"But surely this is madness. It can't be possible. You wonder why the Jews don't defend themselves. However, many, indeed most of them, are so weak from starvation and misery that they couldn't offer any resistance" (Hosenfeld 202)

This aversion to resistance shows that totalitarian regimes would intentionally keep marginalised communities weak to keep them from resisting. One can surmise that cutting resources of marginalised communities are a clear sign of impending fascism and genocide.

Hosenfeld was astonished by the amount of chaotic criminal tendencies within the Nazi regime:

"You can't help wondering again and again how there can possibly be such riff-raff among our own people. Have the criminals and lunatics been let out of the prisons and asylums and sent here to act as bloodhounds?" (Hosenfeld 203).

Here, it could be seen that the regime would give precedence not on merit or ethical values but to propagate violence and order by quashing resistance among subjects. The priority is for blind fanaticism to a particular ideology.

Hosenfeld realised the problem of propaganda in Nazi Germany:

"Lying is the worst of all evils. Everything else that is diabolical comes from it. And we have been lied to; public opinion is constantly deceived... Truth is under pressure everywhere; the facts are distorted "(Hosenfeld 204).

This kind of propaganda obviously would make it easier to marginalise people. Deceit would ensure that the public would not get the regime's true nature. It would help distort resistance and marginalise people in the regime's interests.

Fascist regimes lie to maintain power. However, not all regimes that lie are totalitarian, and not all totalitarian regimes need to use lying, at least towards their public. In the Nazi context, propagandist lies mainly were for foreign consumption, and domestically, they were pretty blunt in their objectives to dehumanise marginalised communities to the 'final solution.'

There might be political reasons for the World War and the holocaust, but the existential question of the war alludes to sense. Hosenfeld speculated on it and thought it was a lack of religious ethos and free thought:

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"It [Nazism] forbids people to practise their religion; the young are brought up godless...There are no commandments now against stealing, killing or lying, not if they go against people's personal interest..." (Hosenfeld 205)

When Hosenfeld is compared to *Mein Kampf*, we can see Hitler was not much bothered about ethics. He did not care if he was murdering and stealing from human beings. Hosenfeld was probably exaggerating when he implied that Christianity was forbidden. Certain religions and races were persecuted. However, the Nazis did not threaten the Christian identity of Europe, which was in line with Aryanism. They, however, sidelined Christian values and ethos, which might have compromised the Nazi project.

Hosenfeld interestingly adopted religious predestination and tribulation to interpret the plight of Germany:

"We know the story of the Deluge from Holy Scripture. Why did the first race of men come to such a tragic end? Because they had abandoned God and must die, guilty and innocent alike... And it is the same today" (Hosenfeld 205)

However, religious abandonment does not explain the Nazi ideology spreading across the political spectrum, even among the religious, including the clergy, and even among scientific thinkers and artists of the time, who are supposedly the proponents of free thought. Perhaps too much religious exceptionalism or free speech without limits gives genocide leeway.

The holocaust was an industrialised scale of human slaughter and was an extremely modern phenomenon. Biblical ten commandments were central to western ethical thought until the contemporary era. To quote the poet W. B Yeats from *Second Coming*:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

Interestingly Hosenfeld compares the inevitable fall of the Third Reich to the Biblical deluge. The point is that without stable, ethical thought and free thought to counter extremism, genocide would sound reasonable to many under a totalitarian system.

"There can be only one explanation: the people who could do it, who gave the orders and allowed it to happen, have lost all sense of decency and responsibility. They are godless through and through, gross egotists, despicable materialists" (Hosenfeld 207)

One might ask if Hosenfeld is not responsible as he comes under the category of people who were passive and "allowed it to happen." Hosenfeld, if one assumes his sincerity, did not allow the fascist propaganda or power, the material gains of being part of the system, or even his religious ego and prejudice to corrupt him. He knew he was powerless. Everyone is under threat if they do not follow the orders. His religious upbringing was something that gave him a moral compass. One might wonder if one needs religion to have a moral compass. The definitive conclusion from the Nazi era is that the scientific method is insufficient for ethical questions. For instance, if one's entire view of life is based on the adage of 'survival of the fittest,' one would find little sense in saving the weak.

Hosenfeld supported a democratic government, and he was not a monarchist or traditionalist. He also had pondered over the problem of evil:

"Is it God's fault? ... We are so willing to blame others instead of ourselves. God allows evil to come about because mankind has espoused it, and now we are beginning to feel the burden of our own and imperfections" (Hosenfeld 209).

Hosenfeld's interpretation of the problem of evil is that human beings are themselves responsible for their atrocities, and they cannot blame God for it. Logically, even atheists would have to agree to precisely this, even if they denied the existence of God. He prefers modern principles of enlightenment along with democracy. Ironically, fascism is a uniquely modern phenomenon that comes with populist representation. Hitler and

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Mussolini were elected into power. Elections cannot be divorced from ideals and institutions that make a society. Nazis came into force from the rubble of the first world war, where institutions were weak.

Hence, one might wonder if a fascist totalitarian system that perpetuates hatred and genocide against marginalised people emanates from a lack of ideas and institutions or when these ideals or institutions of society are weakened or corrupt.

"Poles see the war as a catastrophic era of German malevolence against the Polish people and the extinction of their long-awaited sovereignty" (Frazenburg 40)

This loathing and violence are used against people who express dissent. Hosenfeld thought that people did not resist or express disagreement because of the monopoly of the state institutions in exercising violence. This violence can be ruthless.

"If a Pole was caught hiding a Jew not only was he or she killed but so was the entire family" (Bernstein 113)

Disproportional violence is a hallmark of fascist governments and empires. Killing an entire family builds fear in dissenters and sympathisers of victims. As much as fascists hate the weak, they love to project strength. The Nazis knew that people would fear and respect them for their brutal tactics.

Meanwhile, Hosenfeld speculated why there was no revolution within Germany:

"There'll be no revolution at home because no one has the courage to risk his life by standing up to the G.Sta.Po. And what use would it be if a few did try? The majority of people might agree with them, but the majority is fettered" (Hosenfeld 210- 11).

Interestingly, Hosenfeld thinks that the majority would sympathise with the resistance. This change shows that people might review their opinions about the state after sensing no accountability for the state. This development suggests that people have very short-term memory and popularity is susceptible to change. However, this does not mean there could be a coup or resistance. Hosenfeld noted that no one wanted to risk their lives for fellow citizens or greater ideals. There is no sense of martyrdom in a liberal democracy. Everybody is materialistic and interested in their gains.

The Army is willingly being driven to its death, and any idea of opposition that might set off a mass movement is quickly suppressed there too... Our entire nation will have to pay for all these wrongs and this unhappiness... Many innocent people must be sacrificed before the blood guilt we've incurred can be wiped out. That's an inexorable law in small and large things alike. (Hosenfeld 211)

There are two points to be derived here. Highly materialistic societies that turn to fascism and totalitarian ways like Eugenics cannot resist because they do not have a higher calling than their comfortable existence or well-being. The other is that those with a higher calling or faith are uncomfortable with tyranny or betraying their ideals. Hosenfeld does not expect accountability from society but expects it from a higher power.

## **Conclusion**

When one contrasts Hosenfeld and Hitler, it can be concluded that there must be a more nuanced discussion about totalitarianism and religion rather than a simplistic interpretation of whether religion or ideology is good or bad. While Hitler used religion to perpetuate genocide or Eugenics, Hosenfeld used it as a moral compass within modern enlightenment.

While the Nazi moral compass of Hitler was Aryan Supremacy and some eugenic arguments, Hosenfeld was not influenced by Nazi ethics. Because his religious, humanistic values clashed with them, or he grew disillusioned with Nazism and took up religion again.

The definite conclusion that we can form is that ethical questions are not viewed the same even by adherents of the same camp. Another point is that belief systems shape ethical policy rather than sound scientific reasoning. Ideology made one save lives while making the other take them. The reason why Hitler was

more successful in execution is because of the power he wielded. This reason shows that one must have policymakers in the state with have good ethics.

It is also important to remember that social policy is dependent on the ground. This way, Hosenfeld could defy the policies of Hitler. Hosenfeld's defiance is due to his convictions. The reason why others were no other Nazis joined is because of their lack of beliefs.

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