

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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**Around the Bonfire**

**T**he pyre was piled high for burning. Heinrich was ready. Students at the University of Berlin, he and Johann were in Opera Square waiting for book burning to begin: he to throw books in; Johann to see what was going on. The German Students Association, influenced by Nazi students to align universities with Nazi ideology, had called for burning books across Germany on this night of May 10.

“Why did you join the Nazi German Student Federation?” Johann asked Heinrich. He responded: “A friend in it took me to hear Hitler speak. A huge banner with a black swastika encircled in white on a bright red background hung behind the speaker’s platform. When Hitler entered the hall the large crowd went wild—cheering and shouting ‘Heil!’ He began his speech in low key. He became passionate as he continued, gesticulating with his hands and arms. He spoke with absolute conviction. He was charismatic. The audience burst into applause a number of times.”

“He said that millions of Germans are unemployed and the middle class impoverished. A Nazi government would deal with the Depression. It would create a national community and reawaken in the German people a sense of national unity. Jews would be excluded. Unlike Germans they are not members of the Aryan race. The rule of the democratic political parties had ruined the German people during the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic. The Nazi Party is fighting for Germany. It would lead the German people back to life and to greatness. The goal of its struggle is the preservation of this people for the future. They must expand their living space. The Nazi Party would restore Germany to its rightful place. It would break with a failed democracy. It stands for national revival.”

“Do you believe the Nazi ideology?” Johann asked Heinrich. He replied: “Of course. It consists of basic ideas: German nationalism, race, struggle, anti-Jew.” Johann answered: “People adopt ideologies because they give a simple view of the world and the emotional support of believing in common with other people.” Heinrich exclaimed: “Nazi ideology is scientific. At the University courses are taught in racial science! We learn about the German people in Volk courses that have become popular.” Johann inquired further: “Why are you anti-Jew?” “Jews stabbed the German army in the back by surrendering to end the World War, and Marxism is a Jewish doctrine,” Heinrich retorted. “That is not true. The German army was defeated by the end of the World War, and, though Marx was Jewish, Marxism is not a Jewish doctrine,” Johann answered. “So you say,” replied Heinrich, “The Nazi Party has taught me otherwise.”

What can we learn today from this? First, to distinguish. Even as Heinrich was pro-German and pro-Nazi without making any distinction between the two, some university students in recent years have made no distinction between being pro-Palestinian and pro-Hamas, nor a distinction between criticism of Israel’s government and anti-Semitism. Secondly, to question ideologies—including our own assumptions.

Johann asked Heinrich why he was ready to toss books on the bonfire. He said: “History is racial struggle, in particular, between the Aryan race

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and other races. I am burning books which are 'unGerman' in spirit." Johann responded: "That's a simplistic view of history."

Some students today who make no distinction between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel's government see history as a struggle between oppressors and oppressed: people are either one or the other. They see Jews as oppressors and Palestinians as oppressed. This is a simplistic view of the present and of history.

From Nazi Germany we can learn that a danger exists in politicizing universities. In the United States in recent years faculty and students have politicized some universities. A danger of the government politicizing universities presently exists, too. It is for universities and not for the government to decide curriculum and who should be appointed in the university. Moreover, universities exist not to incorporate an ideology whether from the left or the right but to provide higher education — which requires the ability to think critically. There is a need today for making distinctions, questioning ideologies, and thinking critically. These were not allowed in Nazi Germany. We must keep them alive today.

The Nazi Party projected evil onto opponents. In politics in the United States today, both political parties tend to see evil in each other and both seem locked into ideologies. This makes compromise and avoiding gridlock more difficult, for example, the recent federal government shutdowns. Most of the votes in Congress on the government shutdowns were party-line votes. Many Americans want more bipartisanship and far less gridlock in Congress. If politicians in the two parties would go beyond the self-interest of their parties, grounds for agreement could be found.