In May 1941 the Allies were presented with an extraordinary opportunity to delve into the Nazi psyche when Rudolf Hess, Deputy Führer of the Nazi Party, was taken prisoner in Scotland. Hess claimed to have flown to Britain on a serious peace mission, but his captors did not believe this, and he was moved to England as a prisoner of state. Over the next four years, as Hess’s physical and mental symptoms grew more bizarre, British army doctors closely studied his behaviour, communications and ideology, growing ever more interested in what their patient could tell them about the psychopathology of Nazism itself. Professor Daniel Pick has studied archived
wishes of the ‘masses’, they would be able to
as well as collective portraits of the fears and
collective psychological studies of Hitler and his acolytes,
analysts believed that by building in-depth
states that led people to embrace Nazi ideology.

Analysts believed that by building in-depth
explore not only the military threat from
Nazism, but also the underlying psychological
exploration of the popular attractions of fascism, they sought
ways of entrenching liberal democracy and ‘denazifying’ Germany after the war.”

Hess was one of many German prisoners
considered through a psychiatric and
psychoanalytic lens during this period; because of
his closeness to the Führer, he was a particularly
significant subject, seen, on the one hand, as
abnormal, on the other as a ‘pointer’ to prevalent
attitudes. Henry Dicks was the wartime doctor
who most closely analysed Hess, and attempted
to decipher his phobias, erotic feelings, and
system of beliefs. Dicks wanted to understand
what had attracted Hess to authoritarianism and
what Hitler meant to him unconsciously.
Professor Pick says: “Dicks concluded that for
men such as Hess, Nazism was not so much the
expression of a rational political calculation, but
more like a symptom of mental confusion: an
affliction masquerading as a ‘choice’. Hitler, Dicks
believed, solved a psychological problem for Hess,
not only by providing him with the authoritarian
leadership he craved, but also by standing in,
unconsciously, for an all-powerful father figure
he could serve and revere, whilst all sense of
weakness, mess, and chaos was blamed upon, and
projected into, the Jews and other reviled
groups.”

Dicks, and other psychiatrists at that
time brought to the fore the idea that political
ideologies played upon people’s inchoate terrors
and desires, and might well express a kind of
madness. Dicks also speculated that certain
Germans might be unconsciously envious of the
English character and suffering from an
‘inferiority complex’. Many clinicians in this
period, he drew on Freudian ideas such as ‘the
superego’, and reached for the language of sadism
and masochism, to understand the dynamics of
Nazi emotional ties.

While Hess was being assessed in England,
in the United States agents from the Office of
Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the
CIA, were attempting a similar analysis of
Hitler, albeit at a distance and with no direct
clinical experience of their subject. They
believed that an understanding of Hitler’s mind
would shed light on the psychology of the
German people who had succumbed to him.
Such a swift intellectual move between
accounts of individuals, groups and nations
would be regarded as highly problematic
nowadays, but were viewed as part and parcel
of intelligence work at the time.

Although it is hard to be sure what precise
difference the psychological work of Dicks and
his counterparts at the OSS made to the military
effort, it was the start of a longstanding
relationship between the field of psychoanalysis
and political profiling, and it influenced a host
of post-war psycho-social studies of
‘the authoritarian personality’ and inquiries
into the popular lure of militarism, racism, and
populist demagogues.

Professor Pick concludes: “Psychoanalysis
sought to reveal how under Nazism people’s
unconscious longings could be mobilised and to
consider how the regime was able to appeal to
powerful infantile feelings of hatred, love,
grievance, envy and sadism. The analysts
explained how a collective psychology of fascism
was created and delved into the unspoken
motivations, as opposed to the stated intentions,
of the political subjects who rallied to the cause
of the Duce and the Führer after the First World
War. Such precursors of contemporary psycho-
social studies were sometimes incautious in their
generalised claims to have plumbed the true
psychic meanings of political choices, but they
were surely right to argue that neither liberalism
nor Marxism had as yet satisfactorily explained
fascism. Politics, they proposed, entailed both
conscious and unconscious processes, and all too
easily played upon mad forms of idealisation and
ferocious demonisation, extreme ‘splitting’,
manic ‘solutions’, a drive towards death and
destruction, and an utter dehumanisation of the
other. These processes, of course, have not gone
away; whilst psychology can never be a self-
sufficient substitute for history, economics,
anthropology or sociology, psychoanalytic
accounts of unconscious fantasy and the
Freudian language of the mind remain of acute
political relevance today.”

Daniel Pick is Professor of History at Birkbeck. His
book, *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind: Hitler, Hess and
the Analysts*, was published by Oxford University
Press in 2012. Professor Pick’s research was
supported by the Wellcome Trust.

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