

THE LANGUAGE OF THE THIRD REICH (VICTOR KLEMPERER)

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Victor Klemperer is famous today for his diaries covering the National Socialist era in Germany. But those were published in 1995, thirty-five years after his death. The only book he published in his lifetime was this one, in 1947: *The Language of the Third Reich*. Its original title, *Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (i.e., Notebook of a Philologist), with the Latin evoking Imperial Rome, is more precise and informative, but I suppose we're too uneducated today for that title to be used. Either way, this book is fascinating in its description of the twisting of language by the Nazis, who, like all ideologues, turned words to their own ends of power.

The book is not easy to read. In part this is because for someone who does not read German, the distinctions and derivations Klemperer draws among German words are not necessarily obvious or easily comprehensible in translation. In part this is because the book consists largely of excerpts from Klemperer's famous diaries, strung together with narrative and comment, creating a somewhat choppy feel. Moreover, it is very difficult to understand many of Klemperer's references without first knowing details of his life, such as that he was Protestant (though considered a Jew by the Nazis), married to an "Aryan" woman. Thus, he survived until 1945, and escaped the final cull of Jews in Dresden by the chance occurrence of the firebombing of that city in 1945, which allowed him to reinvent himself as Aryan in the chaos. I know these details because Klemperer's story features heavily in Richard Evans's *The Third Reich in Power* (in which I first heard of this book), but someone without that knowledge would find much of this book very confusing. The footnotes help a little, translating Klemperer's causal use of acronyms, such as DAF for *Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, or Pgs for *Parteigenossen* (party members). But someone coming blind to this book might find it a tough road.

Despite Klemperer's background as a philologist, *The Language of the Third Reich* is not an academic attempt to analyze Nazi use of language. The sources that would have allowed Klemperer to write such an analysis at the time he wrote his diaries were wholly forbidden to

him. Rather, Klemperer offers mostly contemporaneous impressions of Nazi language, and its implications for individuals and society, using the scholarly tools he used throughout his life. Those tools were ideal ones, because his primary academic focus was languages (in his diaries he often complains bitterly of how the Nazis barred even private continuation of his work on eighteenth-century French literature). In fact, a more academic approach would probably have severely crimped the power of the book.

The Language of the Third Reich was published before George Orwell's 1984, but Klemperer's description of the purpose of the LTI, as he calls it throughout (*Lingua Tertii Imperii*), is essentially the same as that of Newspeak. "The sole purpose of the LTI is to strip everyone of their individuality, to paralyse them as personalities, to make them into unthinking and docile cattle in a herd driven and hounded in a particular direction, to turn them into atoms in a huge rolling block of stone. The LTI is the language of mass fanaticism." This affected all Germans, including those Germans not favorably disposed to the Nazis, as Klemperer shows with numerous examples. That's the overarching theme of the book, but several other themes recur throughout the book as Klemperer weaves together discussions of specific uses of language with his diary entries.

One such theme is how concepts that had always been communicated using specific words were replaced by more obscure (very rarely new) words that better comported with Nazi ideology. So, for example, the word *kriegerisch* (warlike) was largely replaced, and the usage expanded, by *kämpferisch* (aggressive or belligerent), meant both as compliment and command. Tied to this was a more general repurposing or refocusing of words, as in how the word *fanatisch* (fanatic), originally always used in a negative sense, was remade to be used as a positive modifier, and the more so the worse the war went for Germany. Or, more darkly, the use of the word *abgewandert* (gone away) by the postal service for mail returned to sender because it had been addressed to Jews transported to death camps—not a new usage, but one with new meaning, of which everybody was aware, but to which nobody publicly adverted. Along the same lines, superlatives were used constantly, and used more and more the later it got in the war. All these words and usages rose and fell with the fortunes of the regime; *Blitzkrieg* soon disappeared entirely, for

example, but the same was true of many other words, as the needs of the Nazi regime changed, or the strategic situation changed.

It wasn't just popular language, either. In the legal system, for example, the Nazis exalted *Rechtsempfinden* (the sense of justice), and denigrated the traditional usage of *Rechtsdenken* (the concept of justice). The Nazis spoke "never of a sense of justice on its own, rather always of a 'healthy sense of justice.' And healthy meant whatever accorded with the will and interest of the Party." (Sebastian Haffner's outstanding *Defying Hitler* covers the corruption of the legal profession under the Nazis in much more detail, but along the exact same lines.) Erosion of the rule of law in favor of making legal determinations through ideologically and emotionally charged feelings is the technique of all ideologues; it is, of course, a major characteristic of today's American Left (as I outline in my review of Haffner's book).

Another sub-theme is the addiction to sports analogies, much favored by Goebbels in his frequent radio addresses. Mostly this meant boxing and racing analogies, the former because it was *kämpferisch*, the latter because it was futuristic and technological (as also noted by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his *Three New Deals*). Klemperer's book contains a fascinating bit of historical anti-knowledge here. In the 1936 Olympics, held in Berlin, it is often said that Hitler was annoyed at the triumphs of the American Jesse Owens, because he was black, and thereby Nazi theories of racial superiority were disproved in a way that publicly and dramatically humiliated the Nazis. But Klemperer says in passing that the Nazi regime, "in accordance with its whole outlook—which places physical prowess on a level with intellectual achievement, or rather above it—it surrounds the Olympics with an incredible splendor, to the extent that for an instant even racial differences are forgotten in the glitter . . . the high jump of a black American is celebrated as if the leap had been achieved by an Aryan and Nordic man." That seems to contradict the usual parable of the 1936 Olympics.

Digging into this, it is easy to learn that the idea that the Nazis were displeased by Owens was simply a projection by Americans, eager to claim a humiliation for the Nazis, when none existed. Owens himself said that Hitler had to leave before the awards ceremony, but acknowledged him by waving at him as he left (and some claim to have also seen him shaking Owens's hand). No German newspaper treated Owens's

success (or that of other African Americans, such as the actual high jump champion—Owens was a runner) as a repudiation of Nazi doctrine. The Germans were just indifferent. In fact, the only rejection of Owens by a prominent politician was by—Franklin Roosevelt, who not only refused to see him, but refused to even send a message of congratulation. And the rest of Owens's life was fairly harsh, due to American racism. The inconvenience of these facts for Americans, and especially for the modern Democratic Party, is doubtless why this cloud of falsehood has been maintained. Of course, it's not like Nazis were enlightened racially—their indifference to people of African origin is easily explained by their rarity in the Europe of the time. In fact, my mother tells the story of how as a young girl, a Hungarian refugee in 1945, living in a Bavarian village, her family made a trip to the next village just to see a black American soldier, whom they called the "Saracen," because his skin color was such a novelty. No doubt if there were more black people in Germany, the Nazis would have been just as racist toward them as was Franklin Roosevelt, and the rest of white America at the time. But the fact remains that the story we're usually told, of American joy at the blow against German racism struck by Jesse Owens, is a complete lie, built up to serve modern-day political purposes.

It is also interesting that Klemperer sometimes shows gaps in his knowledge, that might not have showed up in a book written with the benefit of years of reflection. Jews were forbidden from attending Nazi speeches or even listening to them on the radio. (True, Klemperer could have listened prior to 1933, and presumably also in the early years of the Nazi regime, but he seems not to have done so, probably because he was not interested in politics.) So Klemperer's belief was that Hitler's speeches were simply "convulsive screaming" where he "shouted down opponents." Therefore, he couldn't understand why anyone was convinced by Hitler. This sells short Hitler's noted oratorical ability, which did contain such passages, but always preceded by buildup and followed by cathartic winddown that drew his listeners in. Hitler was nearly universally believed to be a fantastic orator, and it wasn't just mass self-hypnosis, as unconvincing as his speeches seem today. Klemperer just lacked the whole picture, something we find hard to comprehend given the ubiquity of television and video today.

Other interesting bits of knowledge pop up, as they often do when reading contemporaneous writings about events we usually view through decades of later writings. Klemperer notes the Nazi appropriation of Christian words and rituals for Nazi purposes (while noting that “from the very outset National Socialism fought against Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular”). These ranged from ceremonial recognition of martyrs, the parading of relics, and the constant use of *ewig* (eternal), to the encouragement of idolatrous treatment of Hitler, where non-Nazi Germans would repeat to Klemperer, when queried about some disaster or horror, only that “I believe in him.” Klemperer also offers an unpopular opinion about Zionism—namely, that “it is undoubtedly the case that Nazi doctrine was repeatedly stimulated and enriched by Zionism.” In fact, he draws extensive parallels between the language of Theodor Herzl and Hitler—not that he blames Herzl for Nazism, or thinks he did other than mean well, but Zionism held no appeal for Klemperer, who was German through and through.

It is worth remembering that when Klemperer published this book he was living in Communist East Germany, where he had chosen to return (that is, to what was then the Soviet Zone) after the war, and where he had joined the Party and was later lionized by the East German regime. Apparently the third volume of his diaries, covering the postwar years, is somewhat critical of Communism, but far more critical, in an incoherent fashion, of the West. Nowhere here does Klemperer compare and contrast Communist mutation of language with Nazi mutation, which would have been a fascinating and valuable exercise. Quite the contrary—he bizarrely exalts Communist twisting of language as wonderful and clarifying. In one section, he claims that “the wealth of new technical terms [under Communism in Russia] testifies to something diametrically opposed to what it reveals about Hitler’s Germany: it points to the weapons employed in the battle for the liberation of the mind.” He then compounds this glaring and sycophantic error with “It is absolutely essential that we learn about the true spirit of different nations . . . we have been told more lies about Russia than any other. . . . *Gleichshalten* (coordination) and *Ingenieur der Seele* (engineer of the soul)—both are technical expressions, but while the German metaphor points to slavery, the Russian one points to freedom.” I suppose, given his

experiences, one can forgive Klemperer this ingenuousness, if that is what it is, but to any rational and informed person, this is vomitous.

Of course, the spirit of the LTI continues today among all modern ideologues; it's just that most ideologues don't have the grip over their society that the Nazis did, so the total impact is less. We see flashes of the LTI in the propagandistic plasticity of today's leftist cant, most notably in areas where reality is denied by the Left but their view forced down on normal people by their control of the levers of education and culture (or what currently goes by that name). Thus, rather than "mutilation of the mentally ill," we are told that we must use the new term "gender confirmation surgery." Marriage is redefined to be something totally new, and we are told this is "marriage equality," rather than forced identical treatment of things wholly different. Or, a less obviously propagandistic usage, we witness the forced use of "she" instead of "he" as the generic pronoun in all writing, claiming that it's just a technical change, or mere fairness, when the real reason is to remedy fictional oppression, change modes of thought to coerce believing in that fictional oppression, and identify who is an enemy of the new regime. And here, just like the LTI, one forced shift in language is quickly followed by another, as we see that new usage now being mandatorily replaced by "they," something ungrammatical, jarring, and conveying less, rather than more, information. I, at least, won't use either stupid construction, in this life or the next.

All this is tied closely to the Left's demand that reason be replaced by emotivism. As Klemperer says, and we can say just as well of today's parallels to the LTI, "The insistence on the emotional is always encouraged by the LTI." But "[e]motion was not itself the be-all and end-all, it was only a means to an end, a step in a particular direction. Emotion had to suppress the intellect and itself surrender to a state of numbing dullness without the freedom of will or feeling; how else would one have got hold of the necessary crown of executioners and torturers?" "The language of the victor . . . you don't speak it with impunity, you breathe in it and live according to it." Which raises the question—are we going to let the modern Left be the victors, in language or anything else? I sure hope not.

But on reflection, I don't think that's the right question. They won't be victors, because they can't be victors. It is increasingly obvious,

despite surface appearances, that the behaviors of the modern Left are merely epiphenomena, the spastic dying lights of a dying political system, Enlightenment liberalism. The question, therefore, is not how to be victorious over the Left. It will defeat itself, as does, ultimately, anything that consistently and broadly denies reality, though it certainly doesn't hurt, and is enjoyable and beneficial to mankind, to hasten the process of defeat. The question, rather, is what will replace it—some chthonic horror, the bastard descendant of the twin nightmares of the twentieth century, Nazism and Communism? Or (my preference, of course), a new/old system, grounded in the real, and focused on human flourishing, as well as on human accomplishment?

It's likely to be one or the other, since liberalism is definitively played out, and given the limits of human nature, nothing truly wholly new is likely to show up. (The Singularity, strong artificial intelligence, and other forms of creating new humans and new human societies are pure fantasy.) I suppose there is a third possibility—that our culture could permanently collapse into a puddle, a mediocrity no different than almost all cultures outside the West have always been in world history—lacking in real achievements, extractive of their people, and, to the extent they today have any positive aspects, derivative of the accomplishments of the West. Maybe collapse, combined with immersive virtual reality, will lead to permanent global degradation. An unpleasant thought. But I will bet that the eternal Western verities of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome, as filtered through Christendom, would ultimately be reborn. Not, of course, that such a rebirth will necessarily take place in the West, or even involving any people currently of the West, since after all we are not having any children. Just as likely it will be some group of people who do have children, who adopt and inherit the magic of the West, as did the Franks and the Magyars. Maybe all those North Africans swamping Europe will adopt a better religion and a better culture—though if something like that happens, it could take a long time. But whoever grabs the brass ring, that someone do so is my goal, preferably now, not later, but either way thereby creating a new thing built on the wisdom of the old.