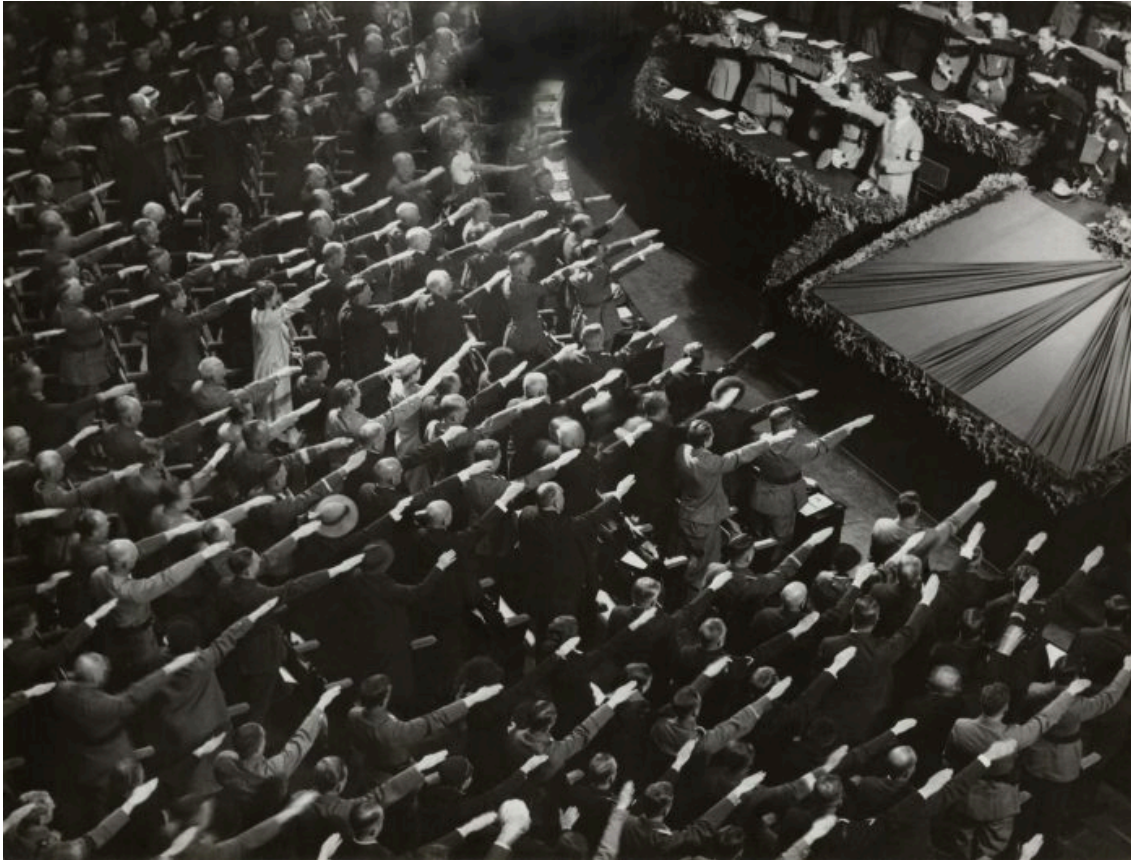


Germans haven't faced their families' Nazi pasts, says Himmler great-niece

By Mark Bridge - July 20, 2022



Attendees give Hitler the Nazi salute at a fundraising event in Berlin, 1935. Photo: Everett Collection/Shutterstock.com

A growing majority of Germans have not faced up to the Nazi pasts of their own families and this is fuelling far-right extremism, the great-niece of Heinrich Himmler has warned. Author and political scientist Katrin Himmler, 55, researched her own family history after marrying an Israeli Jew and having a son. She discovered that her great-uncle, the head of the SS and one of the main architects of the Holocaust, was by no means the only Nazi in the family as she had been led to believe.

As she relates in her book *The Himmler Brothers: A Germany Family History*, her grandfather Ernst as good as condemned a "half-Jewish" man, Major Schmidt, to death when he advised his brother Heinrich Himmler that Schmidt was unfit to manage an engineering firm. She will speak on Saturday (July 23) at We Have Ways Fest, the Second World War history festival, about confronting her family's legacy and the danger that Nazi ideology still poses. Ahead of the event, Ms Himmler, who lives in Berlin, answered some questions from History First.

How did your awareness of the role of your relatives in the Nazi regime develop and what made you feel you needed to write your book?

"I always knew about Heinrich Himmler and his role, as it was no secret in the family. The problem was that everybody else, above all his brothers and their wives, appeared to be innocent or even anti-Nazi in the familiar storytelling. We blamed Heinrich Himmler as the scapegoat in the family, like the majority of Germans blamed Hitler after 1945 for having 'seduced' them.



Katrin Himmler. Photo: Mané Espinosa

"Hitler had promised the Germans so much: belonging to the 'master race', which was why they 'deserved' to become a great nation again and to conquer the world. So, as long as the German military was successful (until 1941), a majority of Germans were supporting the regime, including its crimes as a kind of collateral damage. Only in the last years, when the war turned around, and above all afterwards, when the country was destroyed and millions had lost everything, people felt like they were the victims of Hitler, blaming him/the inner circle of Nazis for not keeping promises, for Germany's bad reputation in the world due to the mass murders. And most Germans never took responsibility for anything that happened in their name.

"The consequences are that nowadays a growing majority of Germans think there were no Nazis in the family, but only heroes and resisters. And at the same time the number of hate crimes committed by right-wing extremists is constantly growing.

"I published the book about my family because it is somehow like a reflection of what happened in Germany — the shared responsibility between perpetrators, bystanders and profiteers; the denial of this shared responsibility after 1945; our refusal to discuss how the ideas of Nazi education went on after 1945 and the impact this still has on the following generations."

What does Germany need to do to address the risks you've identified?

"I think more political education of young people would be helpful, and more possibilities to practice democratic engagement from a very young age — which our school system doesn't really allow so far."

What impact has your research, speaking and publishing had on its wider audience, and how has it changed your understanding of yourself and your family's past?

"There have been so many positive reactions from both sides — descendants of survivors and perpetrators — the first telling me how important it was for them that I tried to be honest towards my family's history, and the latter asking me how and where they can start to do family research themselves.

"I learned that you never get to a point where you find a balance between looking on your grandparents as Nazis and as loving humans. They were both, and it is difficult for me until nowadays to think of both together. As to Heinrich Himmler, it is much more difficult: although he did monstrous things, he was not a monster, but a human, a loving husband, father, brother, son and uncle."

If someone asks you why people like Heinrich Himmler did what they did, and how we can try to stop such things ever happening again, what do you say?



"We often make a mistake thinking the Nazis had no moral standards. But they had their own, perverted morality, believing that only the 'master race' of the 'Aryans' were human beings with all rights and entitlement to empathy. They saw all the other nations or ethnic groups as enemies or what they called 'sub-humans' — objects of hate, discrimination, persecution and elimination

"Although history never exactly repeats and the Holocaust is singular in history, certain aspects are comparable: other genocides in history — before and after the Holocaust — were also based on a strict distinction between us and the others, and on a devaluation of a certain group as 'sub-humans'.

"The belief that not all humans do have the same rights is the basis of right-wing extremists and religious fundamentalists worldwide, which makes them so dangerous."

Crowds salute Hitler in Danzig, September 1939. Everett Collection/Shutterstock.com

You've said before that your marriage to an Israeli and the birth of your son were both factors in your decision to carry out your research. What impact has it had on them?

"Interestingly, the research I did about my family inspired the family of my ex-husband to do some research about their ancestors as well. Although we come from the most contradictory family backgrounds — descendant of Holocaust survivors and descendant of the very perpetrator responsible for the Holocaust — we had some similar experiences around our lack of knowledge about our families' pasts, although for different reasons, of course.

"Our son is the first generation profiting from the facts being no longer hidden. He doesn't have to deal with the legacy any more, but is free to do what he likes."

Are you doing other work in this area at the moment?

"In recent months I was invited to a lot of schools with a lecture about right-wing extremists, talking about their dangerous agenda and their international networks. I am also trying to show, how much these extremists do rely on the Nazi agenda and propaganda of the early 30s."



What is the main message you want to get across at We Have Ways Fest?

"Having a closer look at the skeletons in the closet can be frightening and painful, if it concerns our own relatives. But, from my experience, it's worth it, because it can take away the fear of the unknown, clear your mind, give you the possibility to think out of the box and improve communication in the family. Last but not least, it enabled me to get in contact with wonderful people outside this box that I never imagined I would meet."

Mark Bridge

<http://historyfirst.com>

