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0521782279 - From Cooperation to Complicity: Degussa in the Third Reich

Peter Hayes

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From Cooperation to Complicity

From Cooperation to Complicity is a study of the Degussa corporation, a firm that played a pivotal role in the processing of plundered precious metals in Nazi-occupied Europe and controlled the production and distribution of Zyklon B, the infamous pesticide used to gas the inmates of Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps, during the Third Reich. The author traces the extent of the corporation's involvement in these and other Nazi war crimes, including the Aryanization of Jewish-owned property and the exploitation of forced labor, and delineates the motivations for such conduct.

Peter Hayes is Professor of History and German and Theodore Z. Weiss Professor of Holocaust Studies at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era* (new edition, Cambridge, 2001), which won the Conference Group on Central European History's biannual book award in 1988. He is also editor of *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (1991) and four other collections. He has written more than fifty articles published in German, French, and Italian, as well as English. In 1997–98, he was the Shapiro Senior Scholar in Residence at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Advance praise for *From Cooperation to Complicity* . . .

“Bringing to bear a knowledge of business rare among historians, Peter Hayes has, on the basis of previously inaccessible company records, meticulously documented the moral corruption under Nazism of a venerable German firm whose executives allowed it to be drawn into ever-deeper implication in the crimes of Hitler’s regime.”

– Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., Stille Professor of History Emeritus, Yale University

“This outstanding study reaffirms Peter Hayes’ claim to be the world’s leading authority on business and the Third Reich. It proves that the most profound condemnation is always delivered by careful scholarship, not histrionic polemic.”

– Neil Gregor, Department of History, University of Southampton, author of *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich*

“*From Cooperation to Complicity* is an in-depth study of the Degussa Corporation, a firm whose wide-ranging commercial and technological interests and activities brought it into frequent and often intimate contact with the Nazi regime and its policies. Impeccably researched and elegantly written, the book is a fitting companion to Peter Hayes’s classic study of IG Farben in the Nazi period, *Industry and Ideology*.”

– Raymond G. Stokes, Professor of International Industrial History, University of Glasgow

“With devastating clarity combined with controlled moral outrage, Peter Hayes dissects Degussa’s involvement in the most heinous crimes of the Third Reich, including the use of forced labor, the Aryanization of Jewish property, the refining of expropriated or murdered Jews’ precious metals, and through its subsidiary Degesch the supply of Zyklon B gas utilized at Auschwitz. Hayes demonstrates that ‘as so often in the history of the Holocaust, cooperating with its perpetrators was not the royal road to riches,’ but this hardly stopped politically shrewd and ‘materially and morally optimizing’ executives from exploiting business opportunities offered by the government. Motivated by personal career ambition, ideological support, nationalist solidarity, or most banally seeking to preserve the firm’s leading market position, Degussa executives ended up acting in ‘morally indefensible’ ways. This book is absolutely essential for anyone seeking to understand the roots and depths of corporate complicity during the Third Reich, but it should be read by anyone interested in business ethics and corporate responsibility.”

– Jeffrey Fear, Harvard Business School

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From Cooperation to Complicity

Degussa in the Third Reich

PETER HAYES

Northwestern University



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To VSM, for having the heart, and MFB, for taking the liberty

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I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them.

Baruch Spinoza

Man will become better, when you show him what he is like.

Anton Chekhov

You say that [it is better to work from within the Party] because you reckon that you can still have a say in things. With a “Führerprinzip” orders come from above and then it is only: Obey! He who enters this tumbling avalanche only increases the plunging mass.

Pastor Kurt Rebling to Kurt Gerstein, 1932–33

Everything, even the future, must in the end fall into the hands of the historians.

Shmuel Niger

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Abbreviations

archival references:

BAK	Bundesarchiv, Koblenz
BAL	Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde (Berlin)
BU	Biographische Unterlagen
BUA	Bayer AG Unternehmensarchiv, Leverkusen
DUA	Degussa Unternehmensarchiv, Frankfurt
HHW	Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Wiesbaden
LAB	Landesarchiv, Berlin
NWHD	Nordrhein-Westfälisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Düsseldorf
RA	Archiv der Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück
SSL	Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Leipzig
SHD	Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Dresden
SUAP	Státní ústřední archiv v Praze (State Archives, Prague)

other:

AG	Aktiengesellschaft (= Corporation or Inc.)
DAF	German Labor Front
DPG	Deutsche Pulvermetallurgische GmbH (Degussa subsidiary)
GmbH	Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung (= limited liability company or Co.)
HIAG	Holzverkohlungs-Industrie AG (Degussa division)
KG	Kommanditgesellschaft (= partnership or Co.)
kg	kilogram (= 2.2 U.S. pounds)
MG	Metallgesellschaft
ÖCW	Österreichische Chemische Werke (Degussa subsidiary)
POW	Prisoner of War
RM	Reichsmark (nominal exchange rate, 1935–45 = 2.5:U.S. \$1; in relation to U.S. dollar in 1999 = 1:4)
WASAG	Westfälische-Anhaltische Sprengstoff AG (an explosives firm)
ZAV	Zusatzausfuhrverfahren (export promotion procedure, i.e., subsidy)

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Readers should know from the outset that this book came into being under unusual circumstances and auspices for a scholarly work. During the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the completion of German unification removed political impediments to an examination of several issues related to Nazi-era war crimes that had remained incompletely or unsatisfactorily resolved since 1945. As a result, the name of the Degussa corporation of Frankfurt began to appear frequently in news publications worldwide. It surfaced first in connection with revelations concerning the plundered gold, some of it processed by this firm, that the Nazi state had used to pay for vital wartime imports, primarily via Switzerland, and that had remained, for the most part, in that nation's bank vaults ever since. Later, Degussa's American subsidiaries became the object of widely discussed class action suits filed in United States courts. These proceedings sought restitution or compensation payments to the surviving victims of not only the spoliation of precious metals, but also the parent firm's roles in the manufacture of Zyklon B, the infamous pesticide used to massacre hundreds of thousands of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek, and in the exploitation of forced laborers, many of them drawn from ghettos and concentration camps.

Stung by widespread public criticism and eager to demonstrate good faith in establishing a reliable record of Degussa's conduct, the corporation's board of directors resolved in 1997 to follow the example of several other large German enterprises and to charge a recognized scholar in the fields of German, Holocaust, and business history with the task of preparing a detailed study of their firm in the Nazi era.¹ My name apparently came to the directors' attention because I had written a prize-winning book on the IG Farben corporation, had done research in the Degussa archive during the 1980s and published an essay on my findings, and was slated to participate in a panel including Dr. Michael Jansen, then an officer of the corporation, on "Enterprise

¹ On the "critical mass" of factors that engendered projects of this sort during the 1990s, see Gerald D. Feldman, "Holocaust Assets and German Business History: Beginning or End?" *German Studies Review* 25 (2002), pp. 26–27.

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under National Socialism” at a conference in Frankfurt in early 1998.² During the following months, while I was serving as the J. B. and Maurice Shapiro Visiting Senior Scholar-in-Residence at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and working on a book on German big business and the Holocaust, Degussa approached me about undertaking the history its leaders envisioned. After a series of verbal and written exchanges, in which the firm renounced any right of review over what I would write, pledged to withhold no extant documentation, promised to keep its archives open to all bona fide researchers upon the completion of the project, and agreed to pay for my expenses and time, I accepted the assignment. From the fall of 1998 through the summer of 2001, as my teaching duties permitted, I worked through the surviving records of the firm in Frankfurt and gathered related material from several other archives, public and private. The publication of this book, the result of that research, stems from independent contracts between me and the English- and German-language publishers, to which the Degussa corporation is not a party.

Accepting a task of this sort entails risks to a scholar’s reputation. Suspicion is an almost inevitable and largely understandable reaction to even temporarily preferred access to documents on topical and emotionally charged matters. This is all the more the case when the benefiting scholar is being compensated for his work. A researcher thus privileged must expect to be prejudged, even pilloried, by those who assume that “who pays the piper calls the tune.” More specific to this particular subject area is the widespread mistrust that springs from the conviction that everything of importance concerning the implication of German business in the crimes of the Third Reich was established long ago by Allied investigative teams during the run up to the main and subsidiary Nürnberg trials of 1945–48.³ Although I disagree on that specific point and find many of the charges hurled at “sponsored” histories such as this book quite intemperate, I am grateful for the warnings embedded in such attacks. They have kept me constantly on guard against even subtle forms of conflict of interest. Whether I have succeeded in avoiding them entirely is for readers to judge. I urge them to approach my account with the same sort of simultaneously open-minded and skeptical spirit that they would apply to the work of a conscientious biographer who has studied long and hard, but also come to know the subject’s descendants, dined at their table, and intermittently shared in their standard of living. Even as

² The essay appeared as “Fritz Roessler and Nazism: The Observations of a German Industrialist, 1930–37,” *Central European History* 20 (1987), pp. 58–79; the conference proceedings were published as Lothar Gall and Manfred Pohl (eds.), *Unternehmen im Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1998).

³ See, for example, the remarks in the introduction to Christopher Simpson (ed.), *War Crimes of the Deutsche Bank and the Dresdner Bank* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2002), especially pp. 22–34. My review of this book appears in *German Studies Review* 26 (2003), pp. 667–68.

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readers properly allow for these possible seductions of proximity, however, two essential facts should be borne in mind: this book was neither conceived nor written as an “official” history of the Degussa corporation during the Third Reich, and that firm has neither censored nor endorsed the account given here.

In response to the public interest that engendered this work, I have structured it so as to give readers ready access to the means of satisfying their curiosity about the whens, whys, and hows of the following controversial matters: Degussa’s relations with the Nazi Party and state; the firm’s implication in the dispossession of the European Jews; its part in German military production, hence in enabling the Nazi conquest of much of Europe and the prolongation of World War II; its involvement in the exploitation of involuntary laborers, especially ones drawn from concentration camps; its responsibility for and knowledge of the murderous use of Zyklon B; and its reticence about exposing these matters to public scrutiny prior to now. I have also anticipated that readers will be interested in learning about a far more difficult subject to analyze, namely the degree to which the Degussa AG is still the beneficiary of the policies pursued by its leaders during the Nazi era. In short, this book is designed not as an all-embracing history of the firm under Nazism, but rather as a report on the most sensitive aspects of that history.

The resulting organization mixes thematic and chronological elements, in that I have tried to examine in discrete chapters each of the subjects that are most likely to concern readers, but in an order dictated by both logic and time. Thus, Chapter 1 provides an overview of the firm’s history and development so that readers can place the subsequent narratives in overall context. Chapter 2 treats Degussa’s relationship with the Nazi Party and regime from 1933 to 1945 with the same end in view. Chapter 3 then focuses on the aspect of Degussa’s complicity in the persecution of the Jews that arose earliest and continued longest, namely the enterprise’s acquisition of Jewish-owned property in Germany and occupied Europe. Chapter 4 turns to the process by which Degussa’s commercial interests and the expansionist purposes of the Nazi regime became increasingly enmeshed between 1933 and 1939. Chapter 5 concentrates on a particular aspect of Degussa’s business, the operations of its precious metals division, a topic that blends the themes of the preceding chapters but carries over into the time frame covered by the succeeding ones. Chapter 6 resumes the account of Degussa’s other productive sectors in 1939 and traces their militarization during the war years. Chapter 7 follows the route by which this transformation entailed implication in the Nazi state’s increasingly barbaric labor policies. Chapter 8 lays bare the most infamous aspect of the corporation’s wartime activities, the part played by its Degesch subsidiary in the massacre of European Jewry. Finally, Chapter 9 examines the destruction, collapse, denazification, and rebuilding of the enterprise in the years 1944–48, along with the attendant blend of self-protection and

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amnesia about Degussa's past that survived into the 1990s. Although this organizational scheme requires occasional repetition and some loss of a sense of simultaneity in readers' minds, I have risked these in the hope that readers will have the experience of penetrating not only successive subjects, but also accumulating ever deeper layers of knowledge concerning the firm and the thinking of its leaders.

Naturally, this is a history written from distinct perspectives, not only mine, but also that of its sources, and it therefore has the advantages and faults that go with both. Given the intense and extensive public and legal attention to Degussa in the past decade, I have felt a sense of urgency about making the record of the firm's behavior embedded in its own, rich archive accessible to a wide audience as soon as possible. This has ruled out the sort of meticulous canvass of every conceivably related documentary repository that an assiduous scholar normally wishes to undertake before publishing. Although the footnotes contain references to other sources, I have written largely from Degussa's records while striving not to be confined to their point of view. Only in the most pressing cases did I seek to gain access to the files of the firm's corporate partners, interlocutors, and rivals or to explore potentially relevant holdings in public archives. The papers of Henkel in Düsseldorf were obviously of particular importance, but I was denied access. Those of firms such as Continental Gummiwerke in Hanover or of the military agencies with which Degussa often dealt (in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg), I opted not to explore, lest the completion of this book be greatly delayed. I hope the material presented here will spur other researchers to amplify and contextualize it in illuminating ways.

An earlier version of Chapter 3 appeared in German in the Yearbook 2000 of the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt, as did an overview in English of some of my provisional findings in volume 5 of the "Lessons and Legacies" conference series.⁴ I am grateful to the publishers for allowing me to duplicate some of that material here, but should also point out to close readers that I have made revisions and corrections to these earlier texts. In the event of discrepancies, this book is the authoritative reference.

In order to avoid another sort of possible confusion, I should underline here that the operations of Degussa AG underwent a sweeping transformation through a series of mergers, divestitures, and reorganizations while this book was being researched and written. As a result, the firm's headquarters has moved to Düsseldorf from Frankfurt, where the former central office

⁴ Peter Hayes, "Die Arisierung der Degussa AG: Geschichte und Bilanz," in Peter Hayes and Irmtrud Wojak (eds.), *"Arisierung" im Nationalsozialismus: Volksgemeinschaft, Raub und Gedächtnis* [Jahrbuch 2000 zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust, Fritz Bauer Institut] (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000), pp. 85–123; and "The Degussa AG and the Holocaust," in Ronald Smelser (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies V: The Holocaust and Justice* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 140–77.

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complex is scheduled to be sold in the near future. It is not clear, as of this writing, which of the products that dominate the story told here will still figure in the enterprise's output when readers take up this text. Already, for example, the parent corporation is no longer active in metals separation, the line of business that gave the company its original name and hence the acronym that is its current title. In other words, the subject of this book is the historical Degussa, not the current one.

Finally, many words of thanks. First, to the managers of Degussa AG who decided in 1997–98 to risk this project, knowing that they would have no control over its findings, notably Dr. Uwe-Ernst Bufé, who was then the chairman of the managing board; Dr. Michael Jansen, who has since moved on to the German Stiftungsinitiative for the compensation of former forced laborers; and Dr. Jörg Streitferdt of the firm's legal staff. They took a constant but not intrusive interest in my work and steadily encouraged it. Second, to Frau Dr. Mechthild Wolf, who assumed responsibility in the 1970s for a corporate archive that had been thinned in the final year of World War II by air raids and the destruction of records as Allied troops approached key offices, and perhaps again during the 1950s or early 1960s. She organized the remaining documentation in exemplary fashion, without violating its original provenances, and preserved it with dedication. In the process, as in her dealings with me, she also managed the feat of being loyal simultaneously to the enterprise that entrusted its records to her care and to the historian's obligations to posterity that she learned while completing her doctorate at the University of Vienna. During her long trusteeship of Degussa's archive, moreover, she accumulated a vast interstitial knowledge of the events narrated here, on which I have drawn repeatedly. It is a pleasure for me to express my indebtedness to her work and my thanks to those like her in other enterprises whose daily diligence makes a book of this sort possible. That gratitude extends to her staff, specifically to her successor, Dr. Andrea Hohmeyer, and to Frau Hadersbeck, Frau Polzien, Ms. Whelan, and Herr Beck, who fulfilled many requests speedily and cheerfully and always made me feel at home in Frankfurt. Third, to the distinguished members of the international Academic Advisory Committee for this project, who read drafts of each chapter and made many helpful and stimulating suggestions: Prof. Christoph Buchheim (Mannheim), Prof. David Cesarani (Southampton), Dr. Paul Erker (Munich), Prof. Gerald Feldman (Berkeley), Prof. Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich (Free University, Berlin), Prof. Christopher Kobrak (ECSP-EAP, European School of Management, Paris), and Dr. Bernhard Lorentz (Hertie-Stiftung, Berlin). Fourth, to Dr. Ralf Banken (Frankfurt), whose own research into Degussa's precious metals operations during the Nazi period has been of great use to me, and to Dr. Daniel Inkelas, my former graduate student, who was particularly helpful in searching Degussa's records concerning the Auergesellschaft. Fifth, to a cohort of friends in Frankfurt: Irmtrud Wojak, Gitta Mohrdieck, Andrea Schneider, and Wolfgang Metternich, as well as an

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occasional visitor from further south, Stephan Lindner. Their warmth and laughter made spending so much time away from home bearable. Sixth, to a series of administrators at Northwestern University, who have supported me in countless ways: two successive presidents, Arnold Weber and Henry Bienen, Provost Lawrence Dumas, and Dr. Eric Sundquist, Dean of the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences from 1997 to 2002. And, finally, to my publishers, Frank Smith at Cambridge University Press and Ernst Wieckenburg and Andreas Wirthensohn at Beck Verlag, who never showed how much I tried their patience.

My most personal and happy expressions of gratitude are embedded in the dedication, but I also want to put down in bereavement the name of my friend and colleague at Northwestern, Geza von Molnár, who took a continuous interest in this work and who died suddenly before it was finished. A child of Leipzig, Geza was cut off from his Jewish German mother when she was driven into exile in the United States in 1938, then sent a few years later to his father's Hungarian homeland for safekeeping. After the war, he rejoined his mother and became an American, without ever really ceasing to be a Magyar, a German, and a Jew. He befriended me years ago, traded perspectives on the Germany of the years 1933–45 with me over countless warm and lively evenings, and informed my views in ways paralleled only by another refugee from this dark place and time, Peter Gay. I treasure Geza's memory and thank him still for connecting me with the world I study and with his dear wife, Barbara, from whom I have learned, as in the case of Peter's admirable wife, Ruth, so much over so long about humanity, in both senses of that word.

The responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation in this work is, of course, exclusively mine.