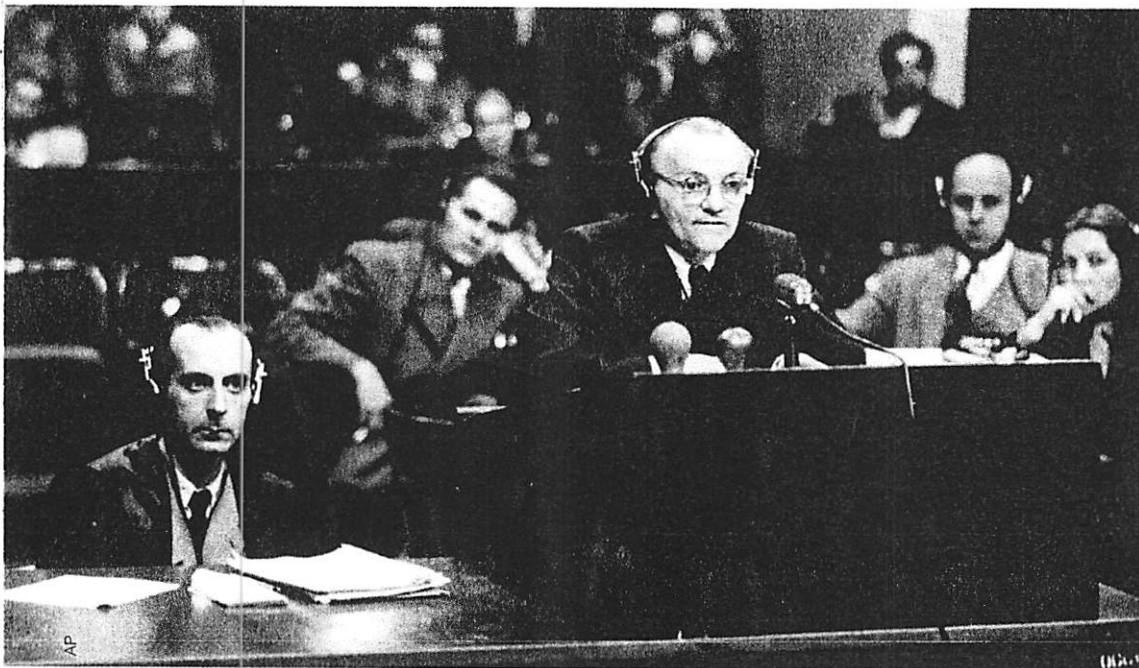


The Crimes of I.G. Farben

During WWII, I.G. Farben, a synthetic-fuels manufacturer for the German war machine, was a major supporter of the Nazi regime and a willing co-conspirator in the Holocaust.



Nazi collaborator: Heinrich Bueteifisch at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal. Bueteifisch directed operations at the I.G. Farben synthetic-fuels plant at Auschwitz, where the company participated in the Holocaust by running its own concentration-camp complex and by working slave laborers to death in its synthetic rubber and fuel plants.

by Dennis Behreandt

March 8, 1943 was the day when the Nazi S.S. came for Norbert Wollheim and his family. With his wife and his three-year-old son, Wollheim was sent to the Grasse Hamburgerstrasse “collecting camp,” a way station on the blood-stained path to the Nazi’s “final solution.” A few days later, the family was sent to Auschwitz. Wollheim would never see his family again. “On arriving at the station at Auschwitz,” Wollheim recalled at the Nuremberg Trials, “I was separated from my wife and child and have not seen them since.”

Wollheim was one of the “lucky” ones. Along with about 220 other men, he was separated from the other prisoners who were condemned to immediate death in the gas chambers. Instead, he was taken by truck to the Monowitz camp, a special labor camp within the sprawling Aus-

chwitz system of death camps. There, with the others, his head was shaved, he was disinfected, tattooed with his prison ID number, and immediately put to work. “I came to the dreaded ‘murder detail 4,’ whose task it was to unload cement bags or constructional steel,” Wollheim recalled. He had ceased to be a private citizen. He was no longer even the property of the Nazi state. Instead the deed to his life was held by the owner and operator of the Monowitz camp, the notorious German industrial conglomerate I.G. Farben.

Created by the unification of a number of German chemical firms, including BASF, Bayer, and AGFA following World War I, I.G. Farben was famous for its innovations — including in the manufacture of synthetic fuels and synthetic rubber — and for its stature as the largest chemical manufacturer in Europe and one of the largest corporations in the world. But with the rise of the unspeakably evil Hitler and his demon-

spawned followers, I.G. Farben would become infamous for its wholehearted support of, and participation in, the brutal Nazi regime.

Oil

By 1923, pioneering German chemist Carl Bosch had been managing director of the Badische Anilin und Soda Fabrik (BASF) Company for four years. During those years he had seen the post-World War I German economy crumble and, more disturbingly still, had seen French forces occupy the Ruhr Valley, causing the German government to order the closing of manufacturing plants there. The shutdown was devastating for BASF and the other companies of the German chemical industry’s *inter-*

sen gemeinschaft (literally, “community of interest” — i.e., a cartel).

Bosch had an idea for reversing the damage. Having played a central role in the creation of technologies to manufacture synthetic indigo and synthetic ammonia, Bosch was certain that it would be possible to manufacture synthetic motor fuels on a large scale as well. The technology already existed. In 1913, chemist Friedrich Bergius had invented a method of extracting liquid fuel from coal using a process that came to be called hydrogenation. Though this process could only be used in the laboratory, Bosch believed that, given sufficient funding, he could lead an effort to make the technique useful on a large scale.

The stakes were enormous. Germany was rich in coal, but had practically no reserves of crude oil. Success would mean energy independence for Germany and vast, almost unimaginable, wealth for the German chemical industry.

The problem was that BASF, large though it was, did not have the financial resources to tackle the problem all on its own. "A broader and more substantial corporate base was needed," wrote Department of Justice official Joseph Borkin in his book *The Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben*. Bosch had just such a plan. "He proposed that all the I.G. companies merge into a single corporation bringing all their industrial activities and financial strength into a gigantic monolithic entity." Bosch's proposal met with favor and on December 9, 1925 the companies of the I.G. cartel were merged into BASF creating a new corporate colossus: I.G. Farbenindustrie Aktiengesellschaft — I.G. Farben for short.

Synthetic Fuel and Nazi Germany

With the merger, I.G. Farben's immense research and engineering facilities swung into action. Officials from other nations and companies were overawed by the scale of the I.G. Farben effort. Frank A. Howard, the head of research and development for Standard Oil, was given a tour of the Farben efforts in 1926. Though Standard Oil was no slouch in matters of research, Howard couldn't believe what he was seeing at

the Farben facilities, stating that he was "plunged into a world of research and development on a gigantic scale such as I had never seen." Standard Oil president Walter C. Teagle was similarly impressed: "I had not known what research meant until I saw it," Teagle remarked. "We were babies compared to what they were doing."

Just when it looked like I.G. Farben was about to take the world by storm with its process for making synthetic fuel, the bottom fell out of crude-oil prices with the beginning of the Great Depression, and the outlook for synthetic fuels went from promising to bleak nearly overnight. But the rise of Adolf Hitler changed the equation. Even before becoming chancellor, Hitler met with Farben officials Heinrich Bueteffisch and Heinrich Gattineau. The man who would shortly become dictator of the German Reich told the two Farben men that synthetic fuel was a matter of central importance. "German motor fuel must become a reality, even if this entails sacrifices," Hitler said. "Therefore it is urgently necessary that the

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hydrogenation of coal be continued."

Though Bosch was initially cautious of the Nazis, he was eager to sign a pact with Hitler to ensure that the I.G. Farben synthetic-fuel program could continue. The pact was formally signed on December 14, 1933. Under the agreement with the Nazi regime, I.G. Farben was to increase production capacity so that by 1937 it could produce 300,000 to 350,000 tons of synthetic oil each year.

"I.G. Auschwitz"

After 1933, I.G. Farben identified itself ever more closely with the Nazi regime. At the same time it moved aggressively to increase synthetic-fuel production. By 1940, notes Daniel Yergin in *The Prize*, his 1991 history of the oil industry, Germany was producing 72,000 barrels of synthetic fuel every day. As the war dragged on, production actually increased. Yergin points out that production was up to 124,000 barrels per day and was still increasing in the first quarter of 1944. This, Yergin notes, "could not have happened without immense effort and all the normal tools and techniques of the Nazi war economy, including slave labor."

The increased demand for both synthetic fuel and the synthetic rubber known as Buna that I.G. Farben produced required the construction of additional facilities. The Nazis summoned I.G. officials Fritz ter Meer and Otto Ambros to a secret meeting to discuss the situation, after which Ambros was sent on a scouting mission to Auschwitz. Ambros found that the proposed site had ready access to coal, rivers, and both road and railroad transportation. But most of all, it had a ready source of labor in the unfortunates who were interned at the Auschwitz concentration camp. This, Ambros thought, would be



Symbol of power: I.G. Farben was one of the largest corporations in the world and, in a showcase of its power and prestige, its headquarters building was the largest office building in Europe. Within its walls, I.G. executives planned and directed the company's pro-Nazi programs.

“In July 1942,” wrote Justice Department official and I.G. Farben prosecutor Joseph Borkin, “the I.G. managing board voted to solve its Auschwitz labor problems by establishing its own concentration camp.” Owned and operated by I.G. Farben, the new camp horribly exploited slave labor.

the place to build the new I.G. Farben facilities. The new division would be named I.G. Auschwitz. I.G. management appointed Ambros head of the Auschwitz Buna facility and appointed Heinrich Buetefisch head of the Auschwitz synthetic-oil plant. Under their leadership, I.G. would wholeheartedly participate in the brutal genocide of Jews and others whom the Nazis considered undesirable.

since they were using slave labor — that the Nazi masters of Auschwitz didn’t understand “the working methods of ... free enterprise.” If the I.G. Farben notion of “free enterprise” was to succeed, they would need to build their own concentration camp. “In July 1942,” wrote Justice Department official and I.G. Farben prosecutor Joseph Borkin, “the I.G. managing board voted to solve its Auschwitz labor

At I.G. Auschwitz, the S.S. guaranteed the company access to 10,000 slave laborers under Nazi control. At first this seemed to satisfy the I.G. management. “Our new friendship with the S.S. is proving very profitable,” Ambros informed Fritz ter Meer. Relations soon deteriorated between I.G. and the S.S., however, leading I.G. executives to claim — ludicrously

problems by establishing its own concentration camp.” Though owned and operated by I.G. Farben, the new camp, Monowitz, would be run on Nazi forced-labor principles: “All the inmates must be fed, sheltered and treated in such a way as to exploit them to the highest possible extent, at the lowest conceivable degree of expenditure.”

It was a death sentence almost as inescapable as the gas chamber. Work groups would march into the factories in the morning, and carry back the corpses of those who had died of exhaustion in the afternoon. “I.G. reduced slave labor to a consumable raw material,” noted Borkin, “a human ore from which the mineral of life was systematically extracted. When no usable energy remained, the living dross was shipped to the gassing chambers and cremation furnaces of the extermination center at Birkenau, where the S.S. recycled it into the German war economy — gold teeth for the Reichsbank, hair for mattresses, and fat for soap.”

The Legacy of I.G. Farben

After World War II, I.G. Farben was broken up into its constituent companies, and several Farben officials, including Fritz ter Meer of the I.G. managing board and Otto Ambros and Heinrich Buetefisch, were sent to prison for their role in the enslavement and death of those victims of the Holocaust who perished at the hands of I.G. Farben. As for I.G. companies, several continue in operation, including Bayer AG, the producer of “Bayer Aspirin.”

The technology that allowed the conglomerate to make the synthetic fuel that powered the Nazi war and terror machine remains a viable energy alternative today. Farben produced a significant amount of fuel for Hitler’s Germany. “Altogether,” wrote Daniel Yergin in *The Prize*, “synthetic fuels would account for half of Germany’s total oil production.” If this could be achieved by the repugnant Nazis using starved, tyrannized, and deathly ill slaves, free American workers and entrepreneurs should be able to do infinitely better today. ■

A longer version of this article, containing information on the relationship between I.G. Farben and some American business interests, is available at: www.thenewamerican.com/artman/publish/article_4314.shtml



Rogue’s gallery: It wasn’t just a few I.G. Farben employees who aided the Nazis during the Holocaust; it was the entire organization. Many of I.G. Farben’s leaders answered for their crimes at Nuremburg after the war.