

IG Farben: giant of the German chemical industry and participant in Nazi atrocities

Abstract

I.G. Farben was a giant chemical company founded in Germany after the German defeat in World War I. Under Nazi pressure, the company fired all Jewish employees, used slave labor and manufactured the pesticide Zyklon B which was used in gas-chamber mass murders. Until the end of World War II, I.G. Farben was a conglomerate of German chemical companies. Following break-up of the conglomerate, it became the mother of many of today's largest chemical companies including BASF, Bayer and Sanofi-Aventis.

Introduction

In 1924, a distinguished industrial chemist, Carl Bosch, suggested a merger of most of Germany's leading chemical companies into a single corporation. The merger was called I.G. Farben where I.G. (Interessen-Gemeinschaft) means community of common interests and Farben means colors or dyes, referring to the major product of the original German chemical industry. I.G. Farben was formed in late 1925. Eight companies were incorporated into the existing BASF¹. Carl Duisberg was the chairman of the supervisory board. Bosch was chief executive officer of the company. The new corporation was highly successful. I.G. Farben's shares tripled in 1926.

The British blockade in WWI was, in part, responsible for the lost war. Because Hitler did not want Germany to face the problems experienced in World War I, he prepared his country to be self-sufficient in chemical resources to be provided by I.G. Farben.

At the end of WWII, a team of civilian and military experts assigned by General Eisenhower stated [2]: "Without I.G.'s immense productive facilities, its far-reaching research, varied technical experience and overall concentration of economic power, Germany would not have been in a position to start its aggressive war in September 1939."

Hitler dependent on I.G. Farben

For his war, Adolf Hitler was dependent on I.G.'s gasoline for airplanes and tanks, on rubber for wheels and on fibers, chemicals and metals. He was counting on I.G.'s research scientists for armament and for developing war technology.

- Oil:

In 1925, when the Haber-Bosch process² was no longer exclusive to Germany, Bosch had to find a promising process for making a commodity chemical. He acquired the Bergius process for production of synthetic oil from coal through a hydrogenation process. This was a very expensive and hard to operate process. Thus I.G. asked for and received Standard Oil's (Exxon today) participation with financial support. This participation was canceled by Standard Oil during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the discovery of oil reserves in Texas. (Standard brought the idea back with the oil embargo boycott of 1974.)

When in July 1932 the Nazis became the strongest political party in Germany, Bosch predicted Hitler would be elected. Thinking of his company's interest, he informed Hitler about I.G.'s synthetic oil project with the motive that it would render Germany self-sufficient in oil. Hitler assured I.G. political and financial support. I.G. Farben's board supported Hitler in the Reichstag elections. The

¹ BASF = Badische Anilin and Soda Fabrik

² Fritz Haber, supported by BASF, and Carl Bosch invented the Haber-Bosch process for large-scale production of synthetic ammonia.

first step was the expansion of the Leuna plant. I.G. ensured the Fuehrer's independence in oil until 1944 when the U.S. Air Force bombed I.G.'s synthetic oil plant. After that, the German oil sources depended on crude oil production in Germany, Holland and Romania.

- Rubber:

Another major preparation of Germany for WWII was the production of synthetic rubber known as Buna. Its purpose was to supplement natural rubber for tires. When the Germans planned the Soviet invasion (over 3 million German soldiers) in 1941, I.G. was asked to increase its Buna production and new plants were added to the existing Huels and Schkopau plants.

- Metals:

I.G. was a major Magnesium producer. Magnesium is a light metal that was widely used in flares and fire bombs and can substitute for aluminum when alloyed. Aluminum was necessary for aircraft.

At the Nazi party congress in 1936, Hitler announced the 4-year plan [2]: "in 4 years, Germany must be wholly independent of foreign countries in respect to all those materials which can in any way be produced through German capability, through our chemistry, engineering, and mining industries."

At the dawn of war, the German chemical industry, supported by Hitler, added explosives, gunpowder and poison gas to its list of products.

Borkin [2] writes: "It was a military-industrial partnership at its purest."

I.G. Farben and the Nazi Party

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the chemical industry was demoralized. I.G. Farben needed and received the Nazi financial support to make synthetic fuels, fibers and rubber competitive in the international markets.

Carl Bosch was the head of I.G. when Hitler took power in early 1933. Hitler needed I.G. but I.G. needed Hitler as well. Under economic and political pressure, I.G. strongly involved in preparing for war.

As Hitler gained political influence toward total power, I.G. faced a major problem: many of its leaders were Jewish (such as Alfred Merton, Otto von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Kurt Oppenheim...) and thus, Nazi targets. Bosch was not able to protect the Jewish scientists in his group. Hitler's orders were decisive. Even the German war hero, Haber was exiled from Germany, despite the efforts of Max Planck, the great physicist, who, at Bosch's request, tried to discourage Hitler from such a decision. By 1937, the corporation had no more Jewish employees. Bosch was replaced by Hermann Schmitz who tried in vain to warn Germany that it wasn't ready for war industry-wise.

I.G. Farben was forced into a "marriage of convenience with the regime" even though it did not believe in the Nazi ideology such as "Aryanization" [1]. The Nazi authority prevailed. Because I.G. wanted large-scale product development, needed the government's aid. Profitability made I.G. Farben overlook the racism and barbarism that was going on³ in concentration camps; the corporation did much to promote itself to the regime's expectations and success. Many I.G. scientists and other I.G. members became prominent Nazi figures.

Toward the end of WWII, as the German military situation was getting worse, the Nazis came up with the idea of attacking the enemy's main cities with Tabun and Sarin, killer gases that attack the nervous system. Both gases were discovered by I.G. and guarded by the Nazis under the code name "N-Stoff". To Hitler's big disappointment, he learnt from IG that the gas was known to the Allies and that they possessed a higher production capacity of it. But I.G. had overestimated that

³ Nazis stripped the Jews of citizenship and property and began to deport them to concentration camps.

capacity. This miscalculation saved London, Washington, Moscow and many other Allied cities from nerve-gas attacks which could have reversed the war's outcome.

Zyklon B gas

In World War I, the first poisonous gas used by the German army was a bromide from the Bayer laboratory. Then Fritz Haber introduced chlorine which brought significant damage to the Allies.

Auschwitz⁴ represents the peak of IG's partnership with the Nazi regime. In Auschwitz, I.G. Farben had huge synthetic rubber and oil plants where they used slave labor (1942-44) from the Auschwitz camp to build the plant and to work under terrible conditions of sickness, malnutrition and punishment, supervised by SS guards. Zyklon B (generic name: prussic acid), the lethal gas used in the Auschwitz camp, was a product of Degesch, a subsidiary of I.G. At first it had commercial use as an insecticide. German law required that the pesticide contain an indicator (a special odor) as a warning of the lethal nature of the gas. However, the SS ordered Degesch to omit the indicator. The gas was first introduced in the Birkenau camp. In 1941, a huge factory of I.G. Farben was built east of Auschwitz. Heinrich Himmler wanted to expand the Auschwitz camp. In June 1941, he ordered Commandant Hoess to begin extermination. Hoess rejected carbon monoxide which he found not lethal enough and chose Zyklon B. I.G. prospered from its subsidiary Degesch, especially in the years 1942-44.

Degussa and I.G., tied to the Nazi regime via Henkel⁵, invented Zyklon B for use as a poisonous gas. Under the dictatorship, I.G. had little choice. The production of Zyklon B for the gas chambers during the Third Reich was I.G.'s link to the "Final Solution" and the chemical industry's legacy of anti-Semitism. Four million human beings died at Auschwitz in the Final Solution. I.G. had its own concentration camp at Monowitz near its Auschwitz factory, an investment that reduced the marches of the inmates from the camp to the work place. I.G. was entirely "nazified" and the label I.G. Auschwitz was in place. That plant was a failure: it cost 900 million Reichmarks and thousands of human lives but only produced little fuel and no Buna at all. Mass gassings also went on in Poland starting in the fall of 1939. Later on, I.G. claimed that the gas was for use as a pesticide and delousing agent. After the war, twenty-four of I.G.'s highest officials, a combination of scientists and industrialists known as the "Devil's Chemists", were charged with war crimes by the United States Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. After an 11-month trial, Judge Shake announced the results for the twenty-three defendants: ten of them were declared not guilty on all counts, the rest were sentenced from one to eight years with charges such as slave-labor⁶ and plundering.

I.G. Farben's legacy

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945. Some I.G. officials were prosecuted at Nuremberg by the Allies. A lot of camouflage was attempted. Especially after WWII, I.G. Farben was subject to American hostility. The Germans were blamed for America's deficiency in war technology: especially Du Pont (for synthetic rubber) and Standard Oil of New Jersey (for high-octane gasoline); I.G. had fought against the United States for market control⁷. Because of German ownership of several US production plants, one of the consequences had been a rubber shortage due to the cartel relations between I.G. and Standard Oil and an aluminum shortage due to the aluminum cartel that restricted production in all countries except Germany in 1941. To optimize the metal market, a magnesium cartel was also formed⁸ in 1931 which set limits on American magnesium production. To

⁴ Estimates of the number of prisoners that were held and died at Auschwitz and its sub-camps vary sometimes reaching 4,000,000.

⁵ Degussa and Henkel were two major German chemical companies.

⁶ Carl Krauch, I.G.'s last leader, was guilty on slave-labor count and sentenced to six years.

⁷ Latin America as a trade outlet was crucial for both [4].

⁸ I.G. and Alcoa (the American Magnesium Company) held the patent for Magnesium production [4].

prevent future cartels, after WWII, during the Allies' occupation, I.G. was broken apart by dispersing ownership of the plants that were not used exclusively for war purposes. Many of their plants were destroyed under Eisenhower's recommendations. Shares in I.G. were no longer traded on the stock exchange market. In 1949, the stockholders of the old I.G. asked for the I.G. plants to be turned into 3 companies: Bayer, BASF and Hoechst. The Allied High Commission reviewed the case and in 1951, it was decided that the 159 I.G. plants would be divided among nine companies: the first three (already running before 1926) as set by the stockholders and six smaller firms including Agfa, Kalle, Cassella, Huels... These companies started investing in the U.S. In 1947, the U.S. banned cartelization in Germany. Only in the 1950's did Bayer, BASF and Hoechst reenter America. But at that time, the American chemical industry, already oil-based dominated, while the coal-based German industry did not gain its strength back until the 1960s under a calmer American political climate. In 1953, the Allied High Commission established the final division of I.G.'s assets in West Germany: Bayer owned 100% of Agfa and of Cassella later on, and 28% of Huels in 1956 ... The Big Three became very profitable, among the thirty largest industrial companies in the world [2].

Conclusion

Hitler's dependence on I.G. was crucial. The chief of the chemistry department of the German Ministry of Economics stated [2]: "The four year plan [of 1934] was, in fact, an I.G. plan."

I.G. Farben played a major role in the Third Reich's power and criminality. Its leaders had to comply to the Nazi ideology involuntarily at first, but willingly later on. Their priority was profit and ability to meet competition. During the Nazi era, I.G. Farben policy was dictated by ambition for profit and the avoidance of punishment for not obeying the regime [3].

The I.G. Farben story shows that under government tyranny, chemical industry can become a partner in serious crimes against humanity.

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