Inside IG Farben

In 1925 the three leading chemical firms in Germany – BASF, Bayer, and Hoechst – merged, together with some smaller firms, to become IG Farben. IG Farben became like no other firm synonymous for the participation of German industry in the most heinous crimes of the Nazi regime. This book deals in depth with one of IG Farben’s leading factories, Hoechst, during the Third Reich. On the basis of long and meticulous archival research, including access to previously inaccessible company records, the author describes and analyzes the relationship between management and employees with the Nazi Party and its organizations. The author shows the exclusion and persecution of employees, particularly Jewish employees. He traces the extent of Hoechst’s involvement in the exploitation of forced labor, and its active participation in human experiments in several concentration camps. Throughout, he tries to shed light on the motivations of those responsible for this conduct.

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Inside IG Farben

Hoechst During the Third Reich

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English translation by Helen Schoop
Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts.

*Alexander Solzhenitsyn*
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Abbreviations

AOG Gesetz zur Ordnung der nationalen Arbeit 1934 (Law on the Organization of National Labor of 1934)
BA Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archives)
BA-MA Bundesarchiv-Militä rar archiv (German Federal Archives – Military Branch)
BASF UA BASF Unternehmensarchiv (company archives)
Bayer WA Bayer Werksarchiv (business archives)
BDC Berlin Document Center
Clariant WA Clariant Werksarchiv (business archives)
HA Hoechst Archives
HHStAW Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (Hesse State Archives)
IfZ Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich
NI Nuremberg document (industry)
PA Personalakten/-ordner (personnel files)
PSW (documents of) Personal- und Sozialwesen (Human Resources and Social Affairs)
TEA (documents of the) Technical Committee of IG Farben
Wacker UA Unternehmensarchiv (company archives) of Wacker-Chemie
From 1925 to 1945 the I.G. Farbenindustrie AG was the largest non-state-owned corporation in Germany and by most indices the world’s fourth largest such enterprise. Formed through the merger of the three preeminent chemicals firms on the European continent (BASF, Bayer, and Hoechst) with five smaller manufacturers, the company produced an immense array of goods, from dyes and pharmaceuticals to aluminum, fuel, and rubber, and its well-funded research operations added constantly to the total, achieving such lastingly valuable discoveries as sulfa drugs, magnetic tape, and a variety of synthetic fibers. But neither size nor inventiveness accounts for the firm’s enduring name recognition. Some sixty years after the conquerors of the Third Reich ordered the dissolution of IG Farben, it remains infamously linked with Adolf Hitler’s policies. In fact, it serves as the most common textbook example of the willingness of German big business to make common cause with barbarism.

More powerfully than any other industrial combine, IG Farben put its talents and capacities to the service of the Nazi program of armament, autarky, aggression, and annihilation. By 1943/44, the company and its numerous subsidiaries were supplying one-quarter of the artificial fibers, one-third of the fuel-from-coal, and all of the synthetic rubber (buna) on which the blockaded Reich’s armed forces depended; most of the nation’s munitions and the nitrogen they required; and virtually all of such indispensable substances as methanol, tetraethyl lead, and synthetic greases, along with the poison gases that Hitler kept in reserve. Foreign, often forced and sometimes enslaved, laborers made up one-half of the 333,000 personnel who provided these goods or worked on constructing new factories for that purpose. Among these were the approximately 30,000 concentration camp inmates killed while or after being compelled to help build IG Farben’s installations and staff its coal mines in the vicinity of Auschwitz. Most sensationally, the combine owned 42.5 percent of the
shares in the firm that owned the patents to Zyklon B, the pesticide used to murder approximately one million Jews at that death camp and at Majdanek. As a result, IG Farben seemed for decades – erroneously, we now know – to bear primary corporate responsibility for that product and its application.¹

Of course, so notorious an enterprise has been the subject of many books, and until recently most of them were unscholarly. Indeed, the involvement of the combine’s forerunners with chemical weapons production during World War I, as well as the firm’s enormous market presence and putative power in and outside Germany during the 1920s, invited sensationalist accounts even before Hitler’s accession. One of these presented IG Farben to American readers as “a monster camouflaged floating mine in the troubled sea of world peace”; another told Germans that the company constituted “the secret government of [their] republic.”² Such conspiracy mongering acquired new impetus during World War II, especially in the United States, where the notion acquired currency that numerous cartel agreements between IG Farben and several large and vital American enterprises hamstrung military preparedness and mobilization.³ Thus, an established image of the “Moloch IG” ensured that dismantling the corporation ranked high on the agenda of the victorious Allies in 1945. But neither this action nor the war crimes proceedings in 1947–48 against twenty-three leading executives of the firm stemmed the flow of publications about it. On the contrary, the split verdict of the American tribunal gave rise to a new, highly polarized round of writing. The judges voted 2 to 1 to acquit all the defendants on three of the five charges and ten on the remaining two as well; for the thirteen individuals convicted on one or two counts of the indictment, the maximum sentence came to eight years in prison, minus previous time in confinement, and all went free by 1951. As a result, during the ensuing thirty years, former prosecutors as well as spokespeople for communist East Germany, on the one hand, and erstwhile IG Farben employees, on the other hand, frequently retried the case in print, trading accusations and excuses in the guise of history.⁴

¹ On the true controlling corporate parent of Zyklon, see Peter Hayes, From Cooperation to Complicity: Degussa in the Third Reich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 8.
² The quotations stem, respectively, from Victor Lefebure, The Riddle of the Rhine (New York: Chemical Foundation, 1923), p. 18 (of which 147,000 copies were in print by 1927), and Helmut Wickel, I.-G. Deutschland (Berlin: Der Bücherkreis, 1932), p. 5.
³ See Joseph Borkin and Charles A. Welsh, Germany’s Master Plan (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), and, for summaries of these charges, Howard Ambruster, Treason’s Peace (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1947), and Richard Sasuly, IG Farben (New York: Boni & Gaer, 1947).
⁴ The principal works by former prosecutors are Josiah DuBois, The Devil’s Chemists (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), and Joseph Borkin, The Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben (New York: Free Press, 1978). Representative of the East German publications are Willi Kling, Kleine Geschichte der IG Farben – Der Großfabrikanten des Todes (East Berlin: Dietz,
Only in recent decades has polemic given way to academic research on the nature, causes, and consequences of IG Farben’s deeds during the Nazi era. My own book on the subject argued that IG Farben pursued a largely reactive course toward Hitler’s rise and rule. Driven by long-standing dedication to massive investments in large-scale programs of chemical synthesis (initially dyes and nitrogen, later fuel and rubber from coal) and alternately bribed and bullied by the “carrot-and-stick” economic framework that Nazism created, IG Farben’s leaders let themselves be transformed into agents of Hitler’s expansionist and racist ideology. In the process, their firm’s historic orientation around civilian and export markets gave way to concentration on domestic, primarily military, needs. The great growth and profitability that resulted between 1933 and 1945, and the attendant implication in spoliation of property and exploitation of human beings, reflected the workings of commercial and competitive calculations in a perverse context far more strongly than a putative identity of purposes between the giant combine and the NSDAP. According to my account, even the corporation’s dreadful decisions to build a factory near Auschwitz, then to enlist slave laborers in that project, emerged from a chain of “rational” and somewhat defensive considerations, rather than from ideological zeal. That circumstance hardly mitigated the vicious effects of the firm’s tunnel vision, however, or relieved its executives of responsibility for the horrors they worsened, including for the German people.

In 1990 Gottfried Plumpe published a Habilitationsschrift on the history of IG Farben, which adopted (though sometimes in distorted fashion and usually without acknowledgment) many of my findings but also departed from them in a way that proved both overdrawn and self-contradictory, yet fruitful nonetheless. While insisting that the determinants of the firm’s
behavior in Nazi Germany were almost exclusively internal and economic, rather than external and political, Plumpe also maintained that the Third Reich, despite the riches it brought IG Farben, retarded its long-term commercial position by discouraging research and development in such later rewarding fields as polymers for plastics and synthetic fibers. Logically inconsistent as these claims were, the latter one drew attention to a hitherto relatively underemphasized aspect of IG Farben’s conduct between 1933 and 1945, namely, its disadvantages to the firm itself. Plumpe thus underlined the degree to which IG Farben’s managers failed to defend their own and their stockholders’ interests, as well as civilized norms.

The most recent contributions to the literature on IG Farben have moved away from examining the combine as a whole from the perspective of its boardroom in order to scrutinize in detail what happened within sectors of the mammoth enterprise: the plants of BASF, one of the predecessor and successor firms; the former Hüls AG, founded in 1938 as a subsidiary; the Monowitz factory near Auschwitz from 1941 to 1945; and, in the case of this book, the main installations of Hoechst AG, another of the entities that formed and emerged from the IG Farben concern. Nonetheless, like my and Plumpe’s works, the studies of BASF and Hüls traced and analyzed managerial actions and overall trends but could not allot, because of gaps in the surviving archival sources, much attention to the biographies and attitudes of the individuals involved. Bernd Christian Wagner’s work concentrated more tightly on people, both those who ran and were subjected to Monowitz, but in a short time frame and under the most extreme conditions. Despite the great merits of all three studies, none accomplished Stephan Lindner’s feat of bringing readers, as his English-language title says, “inside IG Farben” during the entire span of its existence.

Thanks to Lindner’s pathbreaking and painstaking research and the unusual circumstance among corporate archives that the files of the former Hoechst are richer in personal records and recollections than, for example, statistical data, readers can now discern more precisely than ever before how deeply Nazi ideology penetrated the thoughts and actions of
Hoechst’s leaders and molded life within its plants from 1933 to 1945. To be sure, Lindner’s examination of the tertius inter pares of the founding firms of IG Farben devotes considerable attention to explaining why Hoechst occupied that status from 1914 to 1945 and how successive chief executives struggled to improve upon it. But his signal contributions to the literature on IG Farben lie in his exposure of the leading National Socialists within the Hoechst division, the extent to which its senior and mid-level managers shared or adopted and then acted upon the party’s ideology, the depth and duration of corporate complicity in such crimes as forced labor and drug testing on concentration camp inmates by the SS, and the lengths to which the refounded firm’s leaders went after the war to aid colleagues compromised by their deeds and ties to Nazism while showing scant human sympathy for either former slave laborers or persecuted employees. Over and over, Lindner confronts us with the worldview of the people who orchestrated Hoechst’s collaboration with the Nazi regime – not only the chemists and managers, but also the party’s representatives in the factory administration, and not just before 1945, but after, when such people, Lindner shows, repeatedly lied (the word is not too strong!) about their and the firm’s earlier conduct. Moreover, he directs our attention to what these individuals recurrently ignored: the fates of Jewish and other personnel who were harmed by such actions. The result is one of the most penetrating and chilling accounts of the interaction of commerce and corruption in the Third Reich and its aftermath that has been published to date.

Dr. Lindner’s findings cast dark shadows on many reputations, which makes the support of the former Hoechst AG for his book all the more worthy of note and praise. Deserving of special mention is the courageous commitment of Jürgen Dormann, first as chairman of the Managing Board of Hoechst AG, then chairman of the Managing Board of Aventis SA, the firm into which Hoechst merged in 1999, to the project. He assured the author – and myself as advisor to the work – of complete cooperation on the part of Hoechst’s departments, full access to relevant records in the firm’s possession, and total independence in preparing this text for publication, and, to the best of our knowledge, these promises have been kept. Also indispensable have been the inexhaustible efforts of Wolfgang Metternich, whose manifold responsibilities include managing and extending Hoechst’s archive. He unearthed, gathered, and preserved many illuminating, previously uncataloged materials for this study; arranged several interviews with surviving family members and other witnesses to the events described here; and provided numerous stimulating suggestions for research. Without the aid of these two individuals, as well as countless other longtime associates of Hoechst AG, this book could not have come into being.
Stephan Lindner’s unflinchingly forthright and honest account of Hoechst in the Nazi era will require students of IG Farben, including me, to reconsider and revise their interpretations. This book thus constitutes an important advance on our knowledge and a notable contribution to Germany’s and German industry’s continuing confrontation with its past.

Peter Hayes
When finishing a book one of the pleasant tasks is that of acknowledging the debts one owes to the people who gave their assistance on the long journey to completion. I have seldom received so much support as I did for this study, and listing all the people who helped me by name would far exceed the scope of these acknowledgments. I can therefore include only a few representative names of some of the people to whom I owe particular thanks.

My thanks go, in the first instance, to the former Hoechst AG, whose board agreed to finance the work for this study, granting free and full access to its documents, and renouncing any right of review over what I would write. I wish in particular to thank Jürgen Dormann, the former chairman of the board of Hoechst AG, later Aventis SA, for his great interest in this study and his unwavering support. I am also grateful to the Aventis Foundation for supporting the American edition of the book. My grateful thanks go to the staff of HistoCom who are responsible for the archives of Hoechst AG and who were always most supportive: Ursula Kotsch, Manuela Kuhl, Walter Molsberger, and Erwin Weishäupl. The head of the archives, Wolfgang Metternich, deserves special mention, since he supported the project and my work on it much more than one could expect from a business’s archivist.

Peter Hayes was my most important advisor for this study right from the start, as a scholar and as a friend. His contribution to this book can hardly be overestimated; I am immensely indebted to him. I would also like to thank the other members of the research advisory committee: Gerald Feldman, Raymond Stokes, Jakob Tanner, and Ulrich Wengenroth. The book benefited enormously from their help and constructive criticisms. The reports of two anonymous referees were also extremely helpful, and I wish to thank them for their suggestions and the trouble they took. They commended the translation, which was carried out by Helen Schoop. She performed a difficult task very well – and deserves very special thanks. I also
wish to express thanks to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Frank Smith, for the pains he took – and for his patience.

Finally, I owe thanks to Dieter Degreif and Hans-Hermann Pogarell and their colleagues in the other archives I consulted; they were all very generous and supportive. I was also permitted to make use of private papers, and here I wish to express my particular thanks to Anna Ercoli-Schnitzer, Oskar Henle, and Elisabeth Lautenschläger. Elisabeth Vaupel, Walter Wetzel, and my brother Michael Lindner very kindly assisted me in questions pertaining to chemistry, pharmaceutics, and medicine. I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues from my former workplace, the Institute for the History of Technology at the Technical University Munich.

Last but not least I wish to express my deep thanks to my wife, Sigrid, and our two children, Franca and Thomas, for their support and patience during the past few years.

I dedicate this book to the children of victims of the Nazi regime, in particular to the children of persecuted employees at the IG Farben plant at Hoechst. During my work on this study it became very obvious to me that they suffered no less from the persecution to which their parents were subjected; yet they are so often passed over in silence.

It goes without saying that I alone must be held responsible for any factual mistakes or misinterpretations in this book.