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Calls for Shell to apologise for ‘fuelling Nazi war machine’

A new book reveals the extent to which the oil company played a key role in Hitler’s war effort

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The oil company Shell is facing calls to apologise over its role in World War Two | Weyo / Alamy Stock Photo

The oil company Shell faces calls to apologise as a new book highlights the full extent of its role in fuelling the Nazi war effort.

According to 'Crude Britannia', by James Marriott and Terry Macalister, at the outbreak of World War Two the Anglo-Dutch company "effectively divided into an Allied corporation and an Axis corporation". The Nazi-supporting branch of Shell, called Rhenania-Ossag, "swung in behind the [German] government as the Nazi state began to invade other countries".

Or as Shell's official history states 'Following Hitler's annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, (Shell) Group managing directors sanctioned Rhenania-Ossag taking over Shell companies in those countries.' The same process took place in Hungary, Yugoslavia and Greece after Germany took control of those states.

Meanwhile Shell also supported Allied forces, producing aviation fuel for the RAF. The result, say the authors, was that "a dogfight over the Channel between a Messerschmitt and a Spitfire could have seen both planes powered by Shell fuel".

The book, launched last week, recounts how oil shaped modern Britain, from the 1930s to today. Its section on Shell's role in World War Two, based on the company's own official histories, has shocked readers.

Speaking to openDemocracy, Marriott said: "Over the many years of studying the history of Shell, and other UK based oil companies, in the 1930s and 40s, we have been careful to draw heavily on the works published by the companies themselves – to gain the official line – and draw on the works of scholars.

"In reading Shell's history closely we came to understand how the company was key to the German economy in the 1930s – the fastest expanding market in Europe, especially in aviation fuel. Shell, and other corporations, adapted themselves to the

into the requirements of the National Socialist government.

"When war with Britain came in 1940, the company effectively divided in two – an Axis part and an Allied part. It sold fuel to both sides in the conflict.

"The Axis part," he said, "gained assets in the states that came under German control". Simultaneously, he said " Many Shell staff played a huge part – and gave their lives – in the Allied war effort "

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Shell's German subsidiary, Rhenania-Ossag, fired all the Jewish members on its board in May and June 1933. The appointments to replace them included a member of the Nazi party. The official history states, "the far reaching changes to the Rhenania-Ossag board could not have taken place without the full consent of [Shell Central Offices... No questions of principle or moral judgements about the Hitler regime appear to have arisen." Shell's historians were not able to establish what happened next to these Jewish staff members.

Seven years later, after Germany invaded Holland, the Swastika flew outside Shell's HQ in The Hague.





The Royal Dutch Shell Company HQ in The Hague, flying a Swastika | Image via John Donovan

Marriott and Macalister highlight quite how significant the firm was within Hitler's war effort. "Shell staff worked together with the Reichsbahn [German railway] to oversee the transport of crude from company-owned oil fields in Romania... Shell workers assisted the delivery of aviation fuel to the airfields of the Luftwaffe," the authors say.

The Shell fields in Romania were supplying three million tonnes of oil to the Axis powers a year, while Shell refineries were turning it into fuel for the war effort.

In September 1942, a senior figure in Shell offered to send more than 100 staff to

build an oil refinery behind the German line as it advanced into the Soviet Union, showing they were “an active part of the Axis war effort”, says Marriott – “just as they were on the Allied side”.

“The course of the UK in the war might have been very different if Shell had dynamited its refineries in the Netherlands and France and destroyed its oil wells in Romania,” the authors say.

After the war, many of the assets that had been used by Shell when it was providing fuel to the Axis powers were “reabsorbed into the parent company”, Marriott said, including petrol stations, refineries and the company’s HQ in The Hague – which is still Shell’s building there today.

The writer and activist Dan Glass, a grandchild of four Nazi Holocaust survivors, responded to the book by quoting the Holocaust survivor Ruth Barnett: “The Nazi Holocaust may not be happening now but the infrastructure that enabled it to, still exists.”

“Holding individuals responsible for genocide to account is tokenistic if the corporations who maintained, perpetuated and benefited from the war machinery at large get away scot-free,” Glass added.

“The iconic Nuremberg Trials and other attempts at compensation and accountability for my grandparents, survivors and all those who perished I believe are futile if we don’t expose and challenge Nazi corporate crimes.”

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The Nazi Holocaust may not be happening now but the infrastructure that enabled it to, still exists

Responding to the revelations, Jess Worth, an organiser of the campaign group Culture Unstained, noted the failure of official institutions like major museums to tell the story of Shell’s role in the war. Meanwhile, she pointed out, Shell is a major sponsor of a number of such institutions.

Worth said. "It's disappointing to see museums taking Shell's cash in return for projecting this false image of responsibility, rather than shining a much-needed light on Shell's dark history."

Responding to questions from openDemocracy about its role in WW2, Shell pointed us to the company's website, which says that "when World War II began, Shell's London office was dedicated to supporting the war effort and the company's refineries in the USA produced aviation fuel to support the Allied air forces."

It continues "All Shell tankers came under [British] government control and many Shell staff showed great bravery in keeping them going, including the flying ace Douglas Bader who worked in the aviation department of Asiatic Petroleum before joining the RAF in 1939. War was also a catalyst for great innovation, with major advances in both fuel and chemicals research, including the development of fuels for new generations of aircraft such as the Spitfire."

The page appears to make no reference to what Shell's head office in The Hague was doing in the same period.

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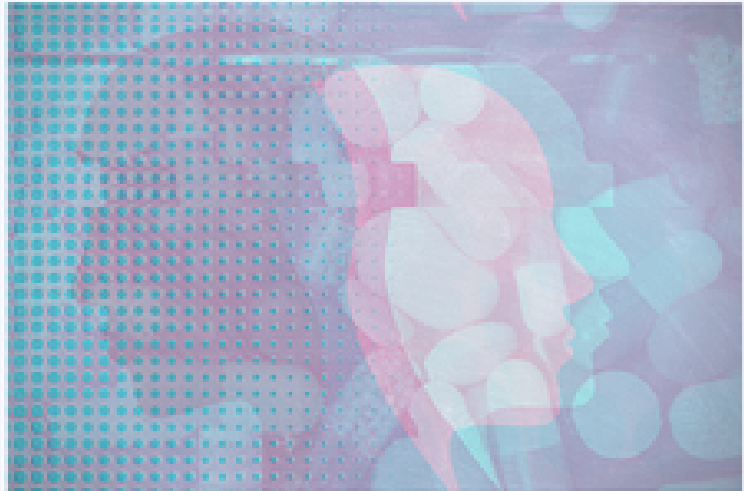
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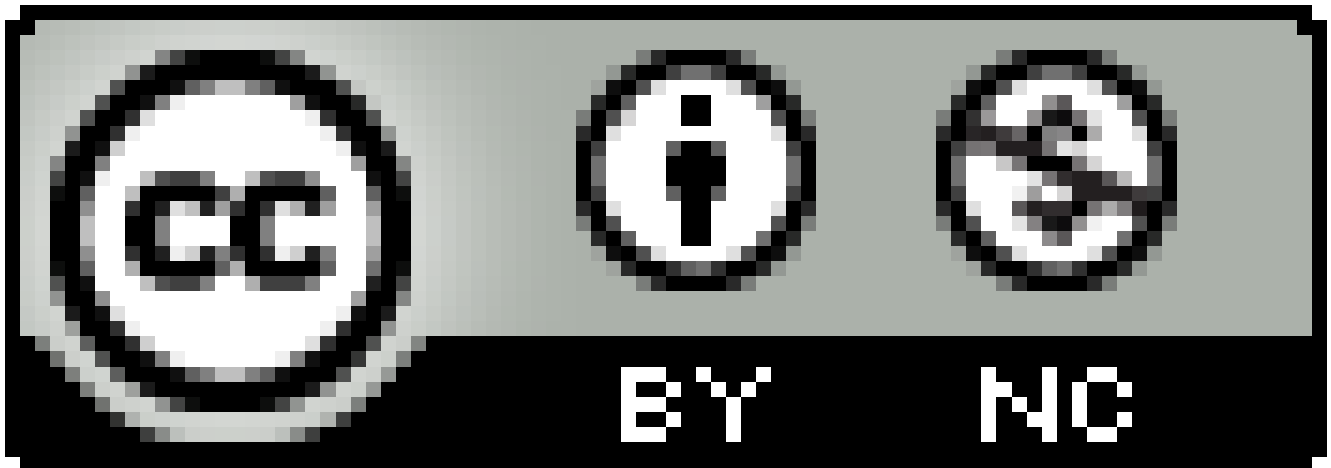
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