

Hitler Comes to Power

In the early 1930s, the mood in Germany was grim. The worldwide economic depression had hit the country especially hard, and millions of people were out of work. Still fresh in the minds of many was Germany's humiliating defeat fifteen years earlier during World War I, and Germans lacked confidence in their weak government, known as the Weimar Republic. These conditions provided the chance for the rise of a new leader, Adolf Hitler, and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi party for short.

Hitler was a powerful and spellbinding speaker who attracted a wide following of Germans desperate for change. He promised the disenfranchised a better life and a new and glorious Germany. The Nazis appealed especially to the unemployed, young people, and members of the lower middle class (small store owners, office employees, craftsmen, and farmers).

The party's rise to power was rapid. Before the economic depression struck, the Nazis were practically unknown, winning only 3 percent of the vote to the Reichstag (German parliament) in elections in 1924. In the 1932 elections, the Nazis won 33 percent of the votes, more than any other party. In January 1933 Hitler was appointed chancellor, the head of the German government, and many Germans believed that they had found a savior for their nation.

Key Dates

JUNE 28, 1919

TREATY OF VERSAILLES ENDS WORLD WAR I

In the Treaty of Versailles, which followed German defeat in World War I, the victorious powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, and other allied states) impose severe terms on Germany. Germany, under threat of invasion, is forced to sign the treaty. Among other provisions, Germany accepts responsibility for the war and agrees to make huge payments (known as reparations), limit its military to 100,000 troops, and transfer territory to its neighbors. The terms of the treaty lead to widespread political discontent in Germany. Adolf Hitler gains support by promising to overturn them.

OCTOBER 24, 1929

STOCK MARKET CRASH IN NEW YORK

The plummet in the value of stocks that is associated with the New York stock market crash brings a rash of business bankruptcies. Widespread unemployment occurs in the United States. The "Great Depression," as it is called, sparks a worldwide economic crisis. In Germany, six million are unemployed by June 1932. Economic distress contributes to a meteoric rise in the support for the Nazi party. As a result, the Nazi party wins the votes of almost 40 percent of the electorate in the Reichstag (German parliament) elections of July 1932. The Nazi party becomes at this point the largest party in the German parliament.

NOVEMBER 6, 1932

NAZIS LOSE SUPPORT IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

In the Reichstag (German parliament) elections of November 1932, the Nazis lose almost two million votes from the previous elections of July. They win only 33 percent of the vote. It seems clear that the Nazis will not gain a majority in democratic elections, and Adolf Hitler agrees to a coalition with conservatives. After months of negotiations, the president of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, will appoint Hitler chancellor of Germany in a government seemingly dominated by conservatives on January 30, 1933.

After Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933, he moved quickly to turn Germany into a one-party dictatorship and to organize the police power necessary to enforce Nazi policies. He persuaded his Cabinet to declare a state of emergency and end individual freedoms, including freedom of press, speech, and assembly. Individuals lost the right to

privacy, which meant that officials could read people's mail, listen in on telephone conversations, and search private homes without a warrant.

Hitler also relied on terror to achieve his goals. Lured by the wages, a feeling of comradeship, and the striking uniforms, tens of thousands of young jobless men put on the brown shirts and high leather boots of the Nazi Storm Troopers (*Sturmabteilungen*). Called the SA, these auxiliary policemen took to the streets to beat up and kill some opponents of the Nazi regime. Mere fear of the SA pressured into silence other Germans who did not support the Nazis.

Key Dates

MARCH 31, 1933

NAZI GOVERNORS APPOINTED TO GOVERN GERMAN STATES

Adolf Hitler replaces elected officials in state governments with Nazi appointees. One of the first steps in establishing centralized Nazi control in Germany is the elimination of state governments. Hermann Goering, a leading Nazi, becomes minister-president of Prussia, the largest German state. By 1935, state administrations are transferred to the central government in Berlin.

MAY 2, 1933

NAZIS SEIZE CONTROL OF TRADE UNIONS

Storm Troopers (SA) and police occupy the offices of trade unions. Trade union officials and activists are terrorized. The trade unions' records are impounded and their assets seized. The unions are forcibly merged with the Nazi organization, the German Labor Front. Independent labor representation is thus abolished.

JULY 14, 1933

NAZI PARTY BECOMES THE STATE PARTY

All political parties except the Nazi party are dissolved. The Nazi party is the only political party permitted in Germany, a situation that will last until the military defeat of Germany in 1945. Germany thus becomes a one-party dictatorship. Membership in the party increases to 2.5 million in 1935, and ultimately to 8.5 million by 1945.

JULY 20, 1933

ADOLF HITLER SIGNS CONCORDAT (AGREEMENT) WITH THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A treaty between the German government and the Vatican (the highest authority in the Roman Catholic church) guarantees Catholics the freedom of private religious practice, but dissolves Catholic political and trade union organizations. The Vatican (which had the status of a sovereign state) was the first state to recognize formally the legitimacy of Adolf Hitler's government. Despite the treaty, the Nazis continue to persecute Catholic religious and cultural organizations, priests, and schools.

SS Police

An important tool of Nazi terror was the Protective Squad (*Schutzstaffel*), or SS, which began as a special guard for Adolf Hitler and other party leaders. The black-shirted SS members formed a smaller, elite group whose members also served as auxiliary policemen and, later, as concentration camp guards. Eventually overshadowing the Storm Troopers (SA) in importance, the SS became, after 1934, the private army of the Nazi party.

SS chief Heinrich Himmler also turned the regular (nonparty) police forces into an instrument of terror. He helped forge the powerful Secret State Police (*Geheime Staatspolizei*), or Gestapo; these non-uniformed police used ruthless and cruel methods throughout Germany to identify and arrest political opponents and others who refused to obey laws and policies of the Nazi regime.

In the months after Hitler took power, the SA and Gestapo agents went from door to door looking for Hitler's enemies. Socialists, Communists, trade union leaders, and others who had spoken out against the Nazi party were arrested, and some were killed. By the middle of 1933, the Nazi party was the only political party, and nearly all organized opposition to the regime had been eliminated. Democracy was dead in Germany.

Many different groups, including the SA and SS, set up hundreds of makeshift "camps" in empty warehouses, factories, and other locations all over Germany where they held political opponents without trial and under conditions of great cruelty. One of these camps was set up on March 20, 1933, at Dachau, in an abandoned munitions factory from World War I. Located near Munich in southwestern Germany, Dachau would become the "model" concentration camp for a vast system of SS camps.

Key Dates

FEBRUARY 22, 1933

SS AND SA BECOME AUXILIARY POLICE UNITS

Less than a month after Adolf Hitler is appointed chancellor of Germany, he calls on elements of the Nazi party to act as auxiliary police. The SS, initially Hitler's bodyguards, and the SA, the street fighters or Storm Troopers of the Nazi party, now have official police power. This further increases the power of the Nazi party in German society.

FEBRUARY 28, 1933

REICHSTAG FIRE DECREE EMPOWERS POLICE

An emergency decree following the burning of the *Reichstag* (German parliament) on February 27, 1933, grants the police almost unlimited power of arrest. This power is known as "protective custody." In National Socialist terminology, protective custody means the arrest of potential opponents of the regime without benefit of a trial or judicial proceedings. Protective custody prisoners are confined not in the normal prison system but in concentration camps. These camps were initially established by the Storm Troopers (SA) and later came under the exclusive authority of the chief of the SS (the elite guard of the Nazi state).

MARCH 20, 1933

HEINRICH HIMMLER ANNOUNCES THE OPENING OF DACHAU

The Dachau camp, located near Munich in southern Germany, is one of the first concentration camps established by the Nazis. SS chief Heinrich Himmler announces its opening on March 20, 1933. The first prisoners arrive on March 22. They are mainly Communists and Socialists. Dachau is the only camp to remain in operation from 1933 until 1945.

JUNE 17, 1936

HEINRICH HIMMLER BECOMES CHIEF OF THE GERMAN POLICE

Adolf Hitler appoints SS chief Heinrich Himmler chief of all German police units. All police powers are now centralized. The Gestapo (German secret state police) comes under Himmler's control. Responsible for state security, it has the authority to send individuals to concentration camps. Members of the Gestapo are often also members of the SS.

Propaganda and Censorship

Once they succeeded in ending democracy and turning Germany into a one-party dictatorship, the Nazis orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign to win the loyalty and cooperation of Germans. The Nazi Propaganda Ministry, directed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, took control of all forms of communication in Germany: newspapers, magazines, books, public meetings, and rallies, art, music, movies, and radio. Viewpoints in any way threatening to Nazi beliefs or to the regime were censored or eliminated from all media.

During the spring of 1933, Nazi student organizations, professors, and librarians made up long lists of books they thought should not be read by Germans. Then, on the night of May 10, 1933, Nazis raided libraries and bookstores across Germany. They marched by torchlight in nighttime parades, sang chants, and threw books into huge bonfires. On that night more than 25,000 books were burned. Some were works of Jewish writers, including Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. Most of the books were by non-Jewish writers, including such famous Americans as Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis, whose ideas the Nazis viewed as different from their own and therefore not to be read.

The Nazi censors also burned the books of Helen Keller, who had overcome her deafness and blindness to become a respected writer; told of the book burnings, she responded: "Tyranny cannot defeat the power of ideas." Hundreds of thousands of people in the United States protested the book burnings, a clear violation of freedom of speech, in public rallies in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis.

Schools also played an important role in spreading Nazi ideas. While some books were removed from classrooms by censors, other textbooks, newly written, were brought in to teach students blind obedience to the party, love for Hitler, and antisemitism. After-school meetings of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls trained children to be faithful to the Nazi party. In school and out, young people celebrated such occasions as Adolf Hitler's birthday and the anniversary of his taking power.

Key Dates

DECEMBER 5, 1930

JOSEPH GOEBBELS DISRUPTS PREMIERE OF FILM

In Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, one of Adolf Hitler's top deputies, and Storm Troopers (SA) disrupt the premiere of "All Quiet on the Western Front," a film based on the novel of the same title by Erich Maria Remarque. Nazi protestors throw smoke bombs and sneezing powder to halt the film. Members of the audience who protest the disruption are beaten. The novel had always been unpopular with the Nazis, who believed that its depiction of the cruelty and absurdity of war was "un-German." Ultimately the film will be banned. Remarque will emigrate to Switzerland in 1931, and the Nazis, after coming to power, will revoke his German citizenship in 1938.

MARCH 13, 1933

JOSEPH GOEBBELS HEADS REICH PROPAGANDA MINISTRY

Joseph Goebbels, one of Adolf Hitler's most trusted associates, is appointed to head the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. This agency controls the writing and broadcast of all media (newspapers, radio programs, and movies) as well as public entertainment and cultural programs (theater, art, and music). Goebbels integrates Nazi racism and ideas into the media.

MAY 10, 1933

JOSEPH GOEBBELS SPEAKS AT BOOK BURNING IN BERLIN

Forty thousand people gather to hear German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels speak in Berlin's Opera Square. Goebbels condemns works written by Jews, liberals, leftists, pacifists, foreigners, and others as "un-German." Nazi students begin burning books. Libraries across Germany are purged of "censored" books. Goebbels proclaims the "cleansing of the German spirit."

1933: Hitler Comes to Power

Twenty-five years ago, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, and a 12-year reign of terror across Europe began. Could history repeat itself?

By Patricia Smith



On the evening of Jan. 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, the newly appointed Chancellor of Germany, stood in a government building at an open window watching a torchlight parade of 25,000 Nazi troops march through the streets of Berlin. Thousands of Germans cheered as they marched by, and Hitler was giddy with delight. "No power on Earth will get me out of here alive," someone heard him say.

Earlier that day, the President of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, had appointed Hitler Chancellor (similar to Prime Minister). Having won more than 37 percent of the vote in the previous year's legislative elections, Hitler's Nazi party had enough power to effectively paralyze Germany's democratic government, which had been in place since 1919. Hindenburg hoped that by appointing Hitler, he could satisfy Nazi legislators and break the deadlock, while maintaining control of the government behind the scenes.

His miscalculation led to disaster for Germany, for Europe, and for the world.

How was Hitler, probably the most ruthless dictator of the 20th century, able to come to power in a democratic Germany 75 years ago? And could something like it happen again? To think about these questions, it helps to understand the circumstances in Germany at the time that helped Hitler and his Nazi party gain power.

Impact Of Versailles

In the early 1930s, Germany was in desperate shape. Its defeat in World War I and the harsh conditions imposed by the United States, Britain, and France in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles—including debilitating reparation payments to the victors—had left Germany humiliated and impoverished, with ruinous inflation eating away at its economy. The worldwide Depression that followed the 1929 U.S. stock market crash exacerbated the situation as banks failed, factories closed, and millions of people lost their jobs.

It all made for fertile ground for Hitler's radical nationalist ideology. The Nazis (short for National Socialists) promised to stop reparation payments, to give all Germans jobs and food, and to make them proud to be German again. And they blamed Jews for most of Germany's problems.

By 1930, when the Nazis won 18 percent of the vote, it was effectively impossible to govern Germany without Nazi support, according to Ian Kershaw, a history professor at Sheffield University in England. And that led to President Hindenburg's gamble to appoint Hitler Chancellor in January 1933.

Less than a month later, Hitler used the fire that destroyed the Reichstag, the parliament building in Berlin, as an excuse to declare a state of emergency and suspend democratic protections such as freedom of speech. (At the time, Hitler blamed the Communists, but many historians believe the Nazis set the fire themselves.) It marked, in effect, the death of German democracy and the beginning of Hitler's reign of terror.

Undesirables

Within months, the first concentration camp was opened in the Bavarian town of Dachau. The first prisoners were political opponents of the regime. But it wasn't long before other groups that the Nazis deemed undesirable were rounded up and sent away: in particular, Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies.

The SS—Hitler's elite paramilitary force—had long been terrorizing Germany's Jews, beating them up and vandalizing their businesses. The Nazis believed that Germans, part of what they called the Aryan race, were racially superior to Jews. In 1935, their racist beliefs became official German policy with the passage of the Nuremberg laws, which stripped German Jews of citizenship and laid the groundwork for the horrors to follow.

On Nov. 9, 1938, the Nazis orchestrated a nationwide wave of attacks on Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues. Almost 100 Jews were killed, and thousands were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The night became known as *Kristallnacht*—the night of broken glass.

At the same time, Hitler was moving Germany steadily toward war. In 1935, he began rebuilding Germany's military, in violation of the Versailles treaty. In 1938, he annexed Austria and the Sudetenland, a region of western Czechoslovakia where many ethnic Germans lived, making both part of Germany.

Then, on Sept. 1, 1939, Germany launched a surprise attack on Poland and conquered it so quickly that the term *blitzkrieg*, or "lightning war," was coined. On September 3, after Germany ignored their demands to withdraw, Britain and France declared war. World War II had begun.

By 1942, a year after Germany began implementing the Final Solution—detailed plans for the systematic extermination of all of Europe's Jews—it had conquered much of Europe, from France to the outskirts of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union (see map below). As more Jews came under their control, the Germans herded them into crowded ghettos in preparation for mass deportations to concentration camps across Europe, where they died of disease, starvation, and overwork, or were systematically murdered in the gas chambers. Six million Jews—the vast majority of Europe's Jewish community—ultimately perished in the Holocaust.

By the time the war in Europe (and in the Pacific, the war against Japan) ended in 1945, 48 million people worldwide had died, and much of Europe was in ruins.

These distant events still echo today. Indeed, with the world now facing great tensions and instability, the question of whether such a monstrous dictator could again come to power and threaten the world seems more relevant than ever, says Kershaw, the historian.

Lessons For Today

Around the globe, skilled politicians have been able to manipulate populist, nationalist, or racist feelings to advance authoritarian rule, according to Kershaw. In the 1990s, for example, the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, used nationalist rhetoric reminiscent of the Nazis to launch a campaign of ethnic cleansing and war in the Balkan region of Europe.

In recent years, President Vladimir Putin has gradually moved Russia in an authoritarian direction, and President Hugo Chávez has done the same in Venezuela, though his attempt to be named President for life was defeated in a referendum last year. In Zimbabwe, a once prosperous African nation now in ruins, President Robert Mugabe has used brutal force to stifle opposition and stay in power for 28 years.

But, as Kershaw points out, there are international organizations today that didn't exist in 1933—such as the United Nations and the European Union—that would put up some roadblocks to the rise of a dictator bent on world conquest.

Nevertheless, it's clear the world needs to stay on guard. "We always have to be watchful of a politician who announces that his country's destiny is determined by expansion, whether it's a land grab or a political and economic domination," says historian Peter Black of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. "Clearly, Hitler's statements as a politician were plenty concerning if people had taken them seriously."

Today, a key question for democracies is how to balance the fight against threats like Islamic terrorism with democratic freedoms. And that, Black says, is the second lesson to take from Hitler's rise to power.

"A politician who's prepared to sacrifice basic rights for security, that's something for a citizen of any democratic society to be concerned about," he says. "Whether you're looking at the Soviet Union or Germany, the move toward authoritarian dictatorship doesn't necessarily make the country more secure, and the cost to the population is very, very high."

There were still many Germans who were skeptical of Hitler when he became chancellor in 1933. But Führer propaganda and military success turned him into an idol. The adulation helped make the Third Reich catastrophe possible.

"Today Hitler Is All of Germany." The newspaper headline on Aug. 4, 1934 reflected the vital shift in power that had just taken place. Two days earlier, on the death of Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler had lost no time in abolishing the Reich Presidency and having the army swear a personal oath of unconditional obedience to him as "the Führer of the German Reich and People." He was now head of state and supreme commander of the armed forces, as well as head of government and of the monopoly party, the NSDAP. Hitler had total power in Germany, unrestricted by any constitutional constraints. The headline implied even more, however, than the major change in the constellation of power. It suggested an identity of Hitler and the country he ruled, signifying a complete bond between the German people and Hitler.

The referendum that followed on 19 August 1934, to legitimize the power-political change that had occurred, aimed at demonstrating this identity. "Hitler for Germany -- all of Germany of Hitler" ran the slogan. As the result showed, however, reality lagged behind propaganda. According to the official figures, over a sixth of voters defied the intense pressure to conform and did not vote "yes." In some big working-class areas of Germany, up to a third had not given Hitler their vote. Even so, there were one or two tantalizing hints that Hitler's personal appeal outstripped that of the Nazi regime itself, and even more so of the Party. "For Adolf Hitler yes, but a thousand times no to the brown big-wigs" was scribbled on one ballot-paper in Potsdam. The same sentiment could be heard elsewhere.

Beneath the veneer of Führer adulation constantly trumpeted by the uniform propaganda of the mass media, there are numerous indicators that Hitler's appeal remained far less than total, even in what later memory often recalled as the "good years" of the mid-1930s. One example of strong criticism leveled at Hitler can be seen in a report from the *Tagesspiegel* in Berlin in March 1936. Hitler's toleration of the corruption and luxury life-style of the Party big-wigs at a time when poor living standards still afflicted most ordinary Germans was, the report noted, heavily criticized. "Why does the Führer put up with that?" was a question on many people's lips, noted the report, and it was evident "the trust of the people in the personality of the Führer is currently undergoing a crisis."

Forgotten in Euphoria

One day after this report was submitted, however, German troops marched into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. In a spectacular move that fully exposed the weakness of the western democracies, Hitler could celebrate his greatest triumph in foreign policy to date. The domestic problems of previous months -- shortage of foodstuffs, high prices, low wages and, in Catholic areas, much antagonism towards the regime over the struggle between the church and state were temporarily forgotten in the euphoria.



The dramatic rise of the Nazis.

Despite the absurdity of the "election" result at the end of the month, when -- amid ballot-rigging, electoral manipulation and intense propaganda to conform -- according to the official figures 98.9 per cent voted "for the list and thus for the Führer," the re-militarization of the Rhineland was unquestionably a hugely popular move, and one widely attributed to Hitler's bold and skilful leadership. Much suggests, in fact, that between the death of Hindenburg in August 1934 and the expansion into Austria and the Sudetenland four years later Hitler was indeed successful in gaining the backing of the vast majority of the German people, something of immeasurable importance for the disastrous course of German policy ahead. Apart perhaps from the immediate aftermath of the astonishing victory in France in summer 1940, Hitler's popularity was never higher than at the height of his foreign-policy successes in 1938.

SPIEGEL ONLINE

Sebastian Haffner plausibly reckoned that Hitler had succeeded by 1938 in winning the support of "the great majority of that majority who had voted against him in 1933." Indeed Haffner thought that by then Hitler had united almost the entire German people behind him, that more than 90 percent of Germans were by that time "believers in the Führer." In the absence of any genuine test of opinion, and in conditions of intimidation and repression for those who might dare to challenge official propaganda, when the only public opinion which existed was that of the regime's agencies, such a figure can only be guesswork, and is probably too high. At the same time, it seems hard to deny that the regime had won much support since 1933, and that this owed much to the perceived personal "achievements" of Hitler. The personalized focus of the regime's "successes" reflected the ceaseless efforts of propaganda, which had been consciously directed to creating and building up the "heroic" image of Hitler as a towering genius, to the extent that Joseph Goebbels could in 1941 with some justification claim the creation of the Führer Myth to have been his greatest propaganda achievement.

The propaganda image was never better summarized than by Hitler himself in his Reichstag speech of 28 April 1939 (which Haffner also cited):

'By My Own Efforts'

"I overcame chaos in Germany, restored order, enormously raised production in all fields of our national economy...I succeeded in completely resettling in useful production those 7 million unemployed who so touched our hearts...I have not only politically united the German nation but also rearmed it militarily, and I have further tried to liquidate that Treaty sheet by sheet whose 448 Articles contain the vilest rape that nations and human beings have ever been expected to submit to. I have restored to the Reich the provinces grabbed from us in 1919; I have led millions of deeply unhappy Germans, who have been snatched away from us, back into the Fatherland; I have restored the thousand-year-old historical unity of German living space; and I have attempted to accomplish all that without shedding blood and without inflicting the sufferings of war on my people or any other. I have accomplished all this, as one who 21 years ago was still an unknown worker and soldier of my people, by my own efforts..."



SPIEGEL ONLINE

Hitler enjoyed widespread support in Germany.

The claim that the change in Germany's fortunes had been achieved single-handedly was, of course, absurd. Fascinating, nevertheless, in this litany of what most ordinary Germans at the time could only have seen as astonishing personal successes of the Führer, is that they represented national "attainments" rather than reflecting central tenets of Hitler's own Weltanschauung. There was not a word in this passage of the pathological obsession with "removing" the Jews, or of the need for war to acquire living space. Restoration of order, rebuilding the economy, removal of the scourge of unemployment, demolition of the restrictions of the hated Versailles Treaty, and the establishment of national unity all had wide popular resonance, ranging far beyond die-hard Nazis, appealing in fact in different ways to practically every sector of society. Opinion surveys long after the end of the Second World War show that many people, even then, continued to associate these "achievements" positively with Hitler.

Compared with the state of Germany six years earlier, it was hard for those listening to Hitler's 1939 speech, even many who had earlier opposed the Nazis, not to admit that Hitler had accomplished something extraordinary. Few were clear-sighted or willing enough to analyze what lay behind the "achievements," to reject the gross inhumanity on which Germany's rebuilding had been founded, to perceive the undermining of governmental structures and ruination of Reich finances that was taking place, above all, to comprehend the colossal risks for the country's very existence involved in the regime's course of action. And few were in any position to contradict the fundamental lie in the claim that Hitler had constantly endeavored to avoid bloodshed and to spare his people (and others) the suffering of war. What for most Germans in spring 1939 were aims in themselves, which Hitler appeared triumphantly to have accomplished, were for Nazi leaders merely the platform for the war of racial-imperialist conquest which they were preparing to fight.

But, however false their underlying basis, the claims in this speech point to areas of great success in winning over the mass of the population to support for Hitler. With all the caveats that are necessary for generalizations about approval, where those disapproving were mainly forced into silence, it is surely not mistaken to speak of a wide-ranging consensus through the integrative force of the Hitler Myth had cemented during the peace-time years of the dictatorship.

Fertile Terrain Prepared the Way

It was a manufactured consensus, a propaganda construct, with repression of political opponents, "racial enemies" and other outsiders to the proclaimed "national community" as the other side of the coin. The "superman" image of Hitler amounted to the central component of the fabrication. Already before the "takeover of power" it had been the creation of the most modern, hugely successful, political "marketing" strategy of its time, masterminded by Goebbels. And once the monopoly of state control of propaganda fell into Nazi hands in 1933, there was no obstacle in the mass media to the rapid spread of Hitler's "charismatic" appeal.

But even the slick and sophisticated techniques behind the creation of the Führer Myth would have been ineffective, had not fertile terrain been prepared long before Hitler became Reich Chancellor. Expectations of national salvation were by 1933 widespread, not just among Nazi supporters, and had already become vested in the person of Hitler. By the time that he took power, over 13 million voters had at least partially swallowed the Führer cult, which was more fully embraced by the huge (if fluctuating) mass membership of the Party and its myriad subordinate affiliations. The organizational basis was therefore laid for the wider transmission of the Führer cult.

Given the failure of Weimar democracy and the crisis conditions in which the Hitler government came to power, it was clear that if the new Reich Chancellor could swiftly attain some successes, he would substantially increase his popularity. The scope for the rapid widening of the adulation of Hitler, the winning of "the majority of the majority" who had not voted for him in March 1933 had been laid. The speed with which the Hitler cult now spread has to be seen from this background, as well as from the masterly deployment of propaganda imagery.

There were a number of crucial areas where Hitler could win great support by acting in what seemed to be the national, not partisan party-political, interest, and through converting his image from that of Party to national leader. Even his opponents recognized the growth of his popularity. The exiled Social Democratic organization, the Sopade, based in Prague, acknowledged in April 1938 the widely-held view it had repeatedly echoed, "that Hitler could count on the agreement of the majority of the people on two essential points: 1) he had created jobs and 2) he had made Germany strong."

Readily Accepted the Acclaim

In the early years of the Third Reich, most people sensed that after the dismal years of hopelessness there was new direction, energy, and dynamism. There was a widespread feeling that finally a government was doing something to get Germany back on her feet. Of course, Hitler, whose knowledge of economics was primitive, had not personally guided the economic recovery in the early years of the Third Reich. The reasons for the rapid revival were complex and varied. If any single individual could be said to have masterminded the recovery, then it was Hjalmar Schacht, President of the Reichsbank and Reich Minister of Economics. Hitler's contribution was above all to alter the climate, to build an air of confidence that Germany was being revitalized. But propaganda portrayed the economic upturn as Hitler's own achievement. He readily accepted the acclaim, and most people thought it was warranted.

It was the first major step towards winning over those who had not supported him in 1933. It seemed undeniable: while other European countries (and America) still suffered drastically from mass unemployment, Hitler had removed the scourge from Germany and ushered in a kind of "economic miracle". A Sopade report from the Ruhrgebiet in late summer 1934 acknowledged that even "the neutral labor force" largely believed in Hitler, adding: "The 'work creation' which the unemployed had landed in jobs, even if badly paid ones, has greatly impressed them. They believe that Hitler's 'quick decision-making' will lead him one day, if he is 'properly informed,' to change taxes in their favor." On a clandestine visit to Germany from his Norwegian exile in the second half of 1936, Willi Brandt, no less, admitted much the same: that providing work had won the regime support even among those who had once voted for the Left.

Left a Lasting Mark

By 1936, there was full employment. Of course, by now, rearmament, containing grave dangers for the future, was driving the labor market. But few Germans worried much about where the opportunities were work came from. The fact was, where in the past there had been immense misery through mass unemployment, there was now work. That was seen as largely Hitler's personal achievement. And if image differed from reality, it was the image that left the lasting mark.

That Hitler had rid Germany of mass unemployment and rescued the country from the depths of the depression was seen by many Germans long after the war as a major achievement, whatever disasters had later followed. Good living conditions and full employment were among the positive attributes of Hitler recorded in opinion surveys in the American occupied zone in the late 1940s, while a sample of young Germans in north Germany around a decade later thought Hitler had done much good in abolishing unemployment. As late as the 1970s, Ruhr workers still had positive memories of the peacetime years of the Third Reich, which they associated with full employment and the pleasures of excursions with the Nazi leisure organization, "Kraft durch Freude," or Strength Through Joy.

The second point singled out by the Sopade as the basis of Hitler's support was without doubt a key factor. Hitler never ceased to hammer home the humiliation Germany had suffered in defeat in 1918 -- allegedly the work of the "November criminals" -- and in the Treaty of Versailles signed the following year. The detestation of the Treaty and its perceived unfairness crossed the political spectrum in Germany. The reduction of the army to a mere 100,000 men was the lasting manifestation of national weakness. The bold moves in foreign policy that Hitler undertook to overthrow the shackles of Versailles and reassert Germany's national strength and prestige were, therefore, guaranteed massive popular support as long as they could be accomplished without bloodshed.

Vast Approval for Hitler's Iron Fist

The withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933, the Saar plebiscite in 1935, the re-introduction of compulsory military service and announcement of a big new Wehrmacht the same year, the re-militarization of the Rhineland in 1936 and the "Anschluss" or annexation of Austria two years later were all seen as huge national triumphs, openly demonstrating the weakness of the western powers which had lorded it over Germany since the war, and a feat -- unimaginable only a few years earlier -- solely possible through Hitler's "genius" as a statesman. Even oppositional circles were forced to concede this, as a Sopade report on the reactions to the introduction of the military conscription in March 1935 illustrates:

"Enormous enthusiasm on March 17. All of Munich was out on the streets. You can force a people to sing, but you can't force them to sing with that kind of enthusiasm. I experienced the days of 1914 and I can only say, that the declaration of war didn't make the same impression on me as the reception for Hitler on March 17. ... The trust in Hitler's political talent and honest will is becoming greater, as Hitler has increasingly gained ground amongst the people. He is loved by many."

The Sudetenland crisis in the summer of 1938, as the threat of war loomed ever larger, posed the first significant challenge to the image, which Hitler had earlier sought to cultivate, of the fanatical defender of Germany's rights who had restored his country's standing in the world but had striven to avoid bloodshed. The western powers then, at Munich at the end of September, allowed Hitler one final great triumph in foreign policy -- even if it was one which, inwardly, he resented, since he had been set on war over Czechoslovakia.

The resignation, rather than enthusiasm, that greeted war when it finally arrived in September 1939 again shows that Hitler had extended his popular support during the Third Reich's peacetime years on a false prospectus. Most people wanted the preservation of peace. Hitler had sought war. He effectively admitted the need to mislead the public in a confidential address to representatives of the German press in November 1938, when he remarked:

Unlimited German Conquest

"Circumstances have forced me to almost only speak of peace for decades. It was only through the continued emphasis on the German desire for peace and peaceful intentions that it was possible to give the German people the arms that were always a requirement for the next step."

For the vast majority of Germans, the restoration of national pride and military strength, the overthrowing of the Versailles Treaty and the expansion of the Reich to incorporate ethnic Germans from Austria and the Sudetenland were goals in themselves. Most could not, or would not, comprehend, that for Hitler and the Nazi leadership they were the prelude to a war of unlimited German conquest.

In addition to his presumed achievements in bolstering Germany's external standing, Hitler unquestionably won much support through what was taken to be the restoration of "order" at home. Nazi propaganda had been influential in the last, crisis-ridden years of the Weimar Republic, in instilling in much of the population an exaggerated image of criminality, decadence, social disorder and violence (much of which the Nazis themselves had instigated). Once in power, Hitler had much to gain through seeming to represent "people's justice," and the "wholesome national sensibility." His public image was that of the upholder of public morality who would clamp down, wherever he encountered it, on those posing a threat to law and order.

At the end of June 1934, Hitler took what many thought was ruthless but necessary action to crush the leadership of the SA, an increasingly unpopular sector of his own Movement. In his Reichstag speech of 13 July 1934, Hitler took personal responsibility for the murders that had taken place. What had in reality been a brutal, Machiavellian power-political coup was portrayed as a necessary move to crush an imminent internal threat to the nation and to root out corruption and immorality. Hitler emphasized the homosexuality, loose living and extravagant life-style of Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders. Playing on existing, commonly-held prejudice, he was able to override any adherence to fundamental legal principles by claiming to have acted in the national interest as the highest judge of the German people.

Upswing in Support

Instead of condemnation for his authorization of mass murder, he reaped extensive approval for appearing to have acted ruthlessly to eradicate the evils and misdeeds that endangered the nation. "Through his energetic actions the Führer has hugely won over the broad masses, particularly those who had still reacted hesitantly to the Movement; he is not only admired, he is idolized," was the verdict in one confidential report from within the lower levels of the regime's bureaucracy. Many other reports echoed the same sentiments. Reports filtering out of Social Democrat oppositional circles -- whose main thrust was, naturally, criticism of the regime -- acknowledged the upswing in support for Hitler.

According to one report from Bavaria: "In general, it has unfortunately become clear that the people don't think politically. They think, 'now Hitler has created order, now things will go forward -- the saboteurs who sought to hinder his work have been destroyed.'" A report from Berlin added: "Hitler's authority is strengthened in the widest circles. Increasingly, one hears people saying: 'Hitler is cracking down.'"

The view that Hitler had brought order to Germany was one that persisted well into the postwar era. That, despite "mistakes" (presumably those which had brought his country's ruination through war, and death and destruction to millions) he had "cleaned up" Germany, putting an end to disorder, stamping out criminality, making the streets safe to walk again at night, and improving moral standards, belonged -- together with the credit for eradicating mass unemployment and building the motorways -- to the lasting elements of the Führer Myth.

Alongside economic recovery, rebuilding military strength and restoring "order," Hitler gained support by personifying the "positive" values invested in national unity and the "Volksgemeinschaft" or national community. Propaganda incessantly depicted him as the stern but understanding paterfamilias, prepared to sacrifice normal human contentments and to work day and night for no other end than the good of his people. Whatever the frequent criticism of his underlings and the negative image of the "little Hitlers" -- the Party functionaries whom people daily encountered and often found wanting -- Hitler himself was widely perceived as standing aloof from sectional interests and material concerns, his selflessness contrasting with the greed and corruption of the Party big-wigs.

Goebbels' published ritual incantations to "our Hitler" each year on his birthday, and the popular photographic books mass produced by Heinrich Hoffmann (each selling in huge numbers) which seemingly revealed the "private" Hitler -- "The Hitler Nobody Knows" (1932), "Youth Around Hitler" (1934), "Hitler in his Mountains" (1935) and "Hitler Off Duty" (1937) -- all aimed to highlight the "human" side of the Führer and show that his "heroic" qualities arose from the very fact that he was a "man of the people."

The 'Dynamic Hatred' against Minorities

How many fully swallowed the nauseating personality cult can, of course, never be established. Not a few obviously did. Unctuous letters, doggerel poems and other eulogies, photographs and gifts -- including in one case the offer of a sack of potatoes which the Führer apparently liked -- poured in, to be dealt with by Hitler's adjutants. There was a rise in the early years of the Third Reich in the numbers of parents naming their new-born babies Adolf, even though a decree of 1933 had instructed local registry offices to discourage the practice to protect the Führer's name. Such effusions of the Führer cult were doubtless confined in the main to a fanatical, Nazified minority. But even those able to keep the full excesses of the personality cult at arm's length nevertheless often accepted at least some parts of Hitler's positive image.

The national community gained its very definition from those who were excluded from it. Racial discrimination was inevitably, therefore, an inbuilt part of the Nazi interpretation of the concept. Since measures directed at creating "racial purity," such as the persecution later of homosexuals, Roma and "a-socials," exploited existing prejudice and were allegedly aimed at strengthening a homogeneous ethnic nation, they buttressed Hitler's image as the embodiment of the national community. Even more so, the relentless denunciation of the nation's alleged powerful enemies -- Bolshevism, western "plutocracy," and most prominently the Jews (linked in propaganda with both) -- reinforced Hitler's appeal as the defender of the nation and bulwark against the threats to its survival, whether external or from within.

Though Hitler's anti-Semitic paranoia was not shared by the vast bulk of the population, it plainly did not weigh heavily enough in the scales on the negative side to outweigh the positive attributes that the majority saw in him. The widely prevalent latent dislike of Jews, even before monopolistic Nazi propaganda got to work to drum in the messages of hatred, could offer no barrier to the "dynamic" hatred present in a sizeable minority -- though after 1933 a minority holding power. Much research has illustrated a diversity of attitudes towards the persecution of the Jews (most plainly visible in varied reactions to the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935 and "Kristallnacht" in November 1938). Nevertheless, the Nazis appear to have been successful in establishing, in most people's eyes, that there was a „Jewish Question“, and in deepening the anti-Jewish feeling at the time that the external threat of imminent war was growing.

An Irrelevant Consideration

When the open violence of Kristallnacht proved unpopular, even within Nazi circles, Hitler took care to distance himself publicly from the pogrom which he himself had commissioned. But, despite extensive disapproval of the methods, there was by now a general feeling that Jews no longer had any place in Germany, and Hitler's association of Jews with the growing international danger (which he had done more than anyone to foster) strengthened -- at least did not weaken -- his image as the fanatical defender of his nation's interests.

Materially, too, many had benefited from the exclusion of Jews from German society, their economic dispossession, and their expulsion. The "boycott movement" which had begun as soon as Hitler became Reich Chancellor and, in waves, had effectively driven Jews out of commercial life, eventually ushering in the "aryanization" program of 1938 that robbed Jews of their possession, operated to the profit of large numbers of Germans. Here, too, many felt reason to be grateful to Hitler. The human cost, paid by an unpopular minority, was for them an irrelevant consideration.

The apparently unending run of successes that Hitler could claim during the "peacetime" years of the Third Reich had a further reinforcing by-product. After 1933, affiliations of the NSDAP could spread their tentacles to almost all sectors of society. Millions of Germans were "organized" by the Nazi Movement in some fashion or another, and in each affiliation it was difficult fully to escape the clammy embrace of the Führer cult. Armies of petty apparatchiks and careerists owed

position and advancement to the "system" that Hitler led. The emphasis upon "leadership" and "achievement" invited ruthless competition, played upon everyday ambition and opened up unheard of possibilities, unleashing a vast outpouring of energy in the broad endeavor to promote the vision of national renewal embodied in Hitler himself.

Orally or metaphorically, many individuals at every level of the regime operated along the guidelines laid down by Werner Willikens, state secretary in the Prussian Agriculture Ministry in February 1934 when he declared:

"Everyone who has the opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can hardly dictate from above everything which he intends to eventually accomplish. On the contrary, up till now everyone with a post in the new Germany has worked best when he has, so to speak, cooperated with the Führer."

Willikens added that it was "the duty of everybody to try to cooperate with the Führer"-- a key to how the Third Reich functioned, and to an important bond between "Führer" and society.

Deflated and Isolated

These bonds were not, of course, of uniform strength. Alongside the fanatics were the skeptics and, though they could not express themselves in any meaningful fashion, the dissenters. Nor was it possible to sustain the enthusiasm for Hitler at a constant height. The outpourings of elation at moments of triumph, such as the announcement of the re-militarization of the Rhineland in 1936, were peaks. They subsided again as soon as the gray everyday returned for most people.

Nevertheless, the affective integration which Hitler's mounting popularity during the first years of the dictatorship undoubtedly created was of immeasurable importance. Whether the adulation of Hitler was genuine or contrived (as it doubtless was in many cases), it had the same function. Millions of Germans who might otherwise have been opposed to, doubtful about, or only marginally committed to the regime and Nazi doctrine were publicly seen to give Hitler their backing. This was crucial to the dynamic of Nazi rule.

At the grass roots, the growth of the Führer cult meant that Hitler could detach himself from policy areas which were unpopular and exploit immense reserves of personal support practically at will. The negative impact, for example, of the "Church struggle" was directed away from Hitler and towards subordinate leaders, such as Goebbels and Rosenberg. When popular morale sagged in the spring of 1936, the Rhineland spectacular, focused directly on Hitler's "great achievement," served to re-galvanize support for the regime. The very purpose of the Reichstag "election" of March 29, 1936 was to demonstrate the unity of the people behind Hitler for internal as well as foreign consumption. Not for the last time during the Third Reich, opponents of the regime felt deflated and isolated. And Hitler had the backing he needed for further advancement of his expansionist goals. "The Führer allows the people to demand that he implement the policies he wanted," was the perceptive insight of one Sopade report.

Deposing Him Was Impossible

The plebiscitary acclamation which Hitler could summon on such occasions massively strengthened his own position against the different groupings within the regime's power elite. Among the narrower elite of Nazi leaders, Hitler's immense popularity made him in every respect unchallengeable in his dogmatically held views and in his steering of policy, even when, by 1938-9 some Nazi leaders, including Göring, were having cold feet about the dangers of embroilment in a war with the western powers.

More important still, Hitler's popularity made him untouchable for those groupings within the national-conservative power-elite, above all in the Wehrmacht leadership and parts of the Foreign Ministry, where fears of a future disastrous war were leading by 1938 to the first embryonic signs of opposition to the dangerous course of foreign policy. When the western powers played into Hitler's hands and given him yet another „triumph without bloodshed“, it was plain to the recent oppositional circles at the end of September 1938, that any move to depose him was impossible (a realization which helped to paralyze the conservative resistance throughout the first, victorious phase of the war).

Fatal Narcissism

Hitler's conquest of the masses had the vital consequence, therefore, of extending his autonomy from any possible constraints within other sections of the regime. This helped to ensure that the ideological fixations which Hitler obsessively maintained since the beginning of his political "career" -- the "removal" of the Jews and the pursuit of "living space" -- were by the later 1930s emerging not simply as distant utopian dreams, but as realizable policy objectives. The process had been promoted at all levels of the regime through a readiness to "work towards the Führer." But this in itself was a reflection of the dominance that Hitler had so rapidly established after taking over power, then consolidated and extended, backed at crucial stages by the plebiscitary acclamation which the expansion of his popularity had produced.

Finally, there was the impact of the expanded Führer cult on Hitler himself. Some of those in his close proximity later claimed to have detected a change in Hitler around 1935-6. He became, so it was said, more dismissive than earlier of the slightest criticism, more convinced of his own infallibility. His speeches started to develop a more pronounced messianic tone. He saw himself ever more -- the tendency had been long implanted in his personality, but was now much exaggerated -- as chosen by Providence. When, following the successful Rhineland coup, he remarked, in one of his "election" speeches: "I follow the path assigned to me by Providence with the instinctive sureness of a sleepwalker," it was more than a piece of campaign rhetoric. Hitler truly believed it. He increasingly felt infallible.

By the mid-1930s, at the latest, the narcissistic trait in his own personality, the extreme flattery and sycophancy that surrounded him, and the immense adulation of the masses that repeatedly stimulated him, combined to magnify the belief that Germany's destiny lay in his own hands, and that he alone could guide his country to final victory in the ever closer great conflict. "It depends essentially on me, on my being, on my political skills," he told his generals on the eve of the war. He stressed, as part of this reasoning, "the fact that no one else will ever have the trust of the whole German people as I do. There will never be a man in the future, who has more authority than me. My being is therefore a huge value factor ... No one knows how much longer I will live. Therefore, it is better to have the conflict now."

By this time, August 1939, all sections of the regime, and the masses who had been so jubilant at Hitler's every "success," had ensured that their fate was tied to the decisions of the Führer. So it would remain down to 1945. In the wartime years, as seemingly glorious victory gave way to mounting, inexorable calamity, as defeat on defeat inevitably eroded the charismatic basis of his leadership, and as it became plain that he was leading Germany into the abyss, the fateful bonds with Hitler that had been sealed in the "good years" of the 1930s ensured that there was now no way back. The German people, having supported Hitler's triumphs, were now condemned to suffer the catastrophe into which he had led them.

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