PROFILES IN **POWER**

Hitler

'... this short book ought to be read by everybody with any interest, whether general or specialized, in Hitler and the Third Reich.' *History*

Adolf Hitler has left a lasting mark on the twentieth century, as the dictator of Germany and instigator of a genocidal war, culminating in the ruin of much of Europe and the globe.

This innovative best-seller explores the nature and mechanics of Hitler's power, and how he used it.

On the face of it, Adolf Hitler was an unlikely candidate for dictatorial power.

- Why, of all the fanatics in Germany after the First World War, was it Hitler who found such mass appeal?
- How did such an unimpressive figure come to take control of the machinery of a complex modern state?
- Why – contrary to all expectations – was his authority not curtailed by the traditional ruling classes and constitutional constraints?
- What did his personal role in the shaping of policy amount to?
- Was he personally taking the key decisions, right to the very end?

Professor Kershaw answers these questions to provide a lucid introduction to the character and exercise of Hitler's dictatorial power.

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In addition to his publications, he was consultant to the BAFTA-winning BBC-TV series *The Nazis: A Warning from History*, to the BBC2 programme *War of the Century*, to ZDF's *Hitler: eine Bilanz* and to ZDF's series in preparation on the Holocaust.

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27. JK, pp. 176–7.
28. JK, Docs 357, 421.
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Chapter 2

GETTING POWER

In examining how the power of the German state came to be placed at Hitler's disposal, three developments have to be distinguished. The first is how Hitler came to acquire undisputed power in the Nazi Party, which by the late 1920s had incorporated and unified the disparate strands of the *völkisch* Right and had come to adopt as its organisational ethos the leadership principle, deriving from Hitler's perceived historical mission to save Germany. The second is how Hitler was able in the early 1930s to extend his appeal way beyond previous levels of support for the extreme radical *völkisch* Right to more than a third of the voting population, providing him with the claim to power that he alone could 'deliver' the masses. And the third is how non-Nazi elite groups, with distinctly sober views on 'charismatic' missionary claims, but with influence on those wielding power in Weimar Germany, came to take an interest in Hitler, and how the power-brokers themselves, when he looked anything but assured of a triumphant future, became prepared to hoist him into the Chancellor's seat. In these three developments, the personal role played by Hitler is greatly overshadowed by matters and events beyond his control.

The question of how such an unlikely candidate was able to come to power has been posed ever since Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933, and has been answered in many different ways. The Nazis' own answer was the one Hitler himself never tired of providing in his incantation of the 'Party story', which prefaced – at inordinate length – many of his major speeches throughout the Third Reich. According to this version, the rise of Nazism

from its humble beginnings to the 'seizure of power' had been accomplished solely through the 'triumph of the will'. Incessant struggle – this period was always referred to as 'the time of struggle' – against the odds but backed by the fanatical belief of a massively expanding host of followers in a righteous cause had eventually overcome adversity, defeated powerful enemies, and brought about national unity to save Germany from destruction through Bolshevism.

Such a heroic Party legend had purely propaganda value. There was nothing inevitable about Hitler's triumph in January 1933. Five years earlier, the Nazi Party had been a fringe irritant in German politics, but no more. The 1928 election had brought it only 2.6 per cent of the popular vote and twelve seats in the Reichstag. External events – the Young Plan to adjust German reparations payments, the Wall Street Crash, and Brüning's entirely unnecessary decision to have an election in summer 1930 – put the Nazis on the political map. Though democracy had by that date an unpromising future, a Nazi dictatorship seemed far less likely than some other form of authoritarian rule, such as a military dictatorship or even a reversion to a Bismarckian style of government, possibly under a restored monarchy. In bringing Hitler to power, chance events and conservative miscalculation played a larger role than any actions of the Nazi leader himself.

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THE MOVEMENT

Authoritarian movements, as their inter-war and post-war history shows, are from their nature particularly prone to splits, factionalism and inner-party power struggles. The early development of the Nazi Party indicates that it was no exception. As the German Workers' Party, it began life in 1919 as only one of more than seventy foundations of extreme right-wing political sects. Sharing an essentially similar *völkisch* ideology based upon a radical brand of racist nationalism, these sprang up within a year of the end of the First World War and flourished in a stridently counter-revolutionary atmosphere, particularly prevalent in Bavaria.

Rifts about tactics and strategy, disputes over points of ideology, and clashes of personality were part and parcel of the myriad strands of the *völkisch* movement from the very beginning. Within the infant Nazi Party, Hitler himself provoked the first power struggle, in 1921, which resulted in the establishment of his constitutional position as Party leader. After the failure of the Beer Hall Putsch in late 1923, the temporary front of unity reached on the extreme Right collapsed and the Nazi Party itself split into a number of rival groups. Rabid factionalism continued after the refoundation of the Party in 1925, and posed a potentially dangerous challenge to Hitler's pre-eminence, which was headed off with some difficulty in early 1926.

Even after 1930, at a time when Hitler's leadership had been consolidated and the Nazi Movement was going from strength to strength, there were a number of occasions on which the NSDAP was threatened by rebellion from its paramilitary wing, the SA, and it survived the secession of prominent members, notably Otto Strasser in 1930 and, above all, his brother Gregor Strasser, the second most powerful man in the Party, at the end of 1932. Moreover, the Party membership was itself remarkably volatile, with an extremely high turnover of members. The history of the Nazi Party down to 1933 shows plainly that it was a most unstable movement comprising extremely diverse factions and interests, with strong centrifugal and disintegrative tendencies.

'Leadership' was, then, in itself no guarantee of internal unity. But there is every reason to imagine that without the enhancement of Hitler's supreme authority in the Movement, elevated by the unusually strong personality cult which became attached to him, the Party would have been torn apart by factionalism. As it was, Hitler remained the Party's chief asset – its populist magnet and chief vote-winner. With him, most leading Nazis recognised, stood or fell the chances of attaining power. This persuaded factionalists to accept the need for at least an outward show of unity. And it encouraged those at the centre of the Party to work actively to build up and accept the Führer cult, extolling Hitler as beyond criticism, the font of ideological orthodoxy, and the focus of unquestioning obedience. This was done, from the mid 1920s onwards, not only by those, like Hess, who were genuine Hitler-worshippers, but also by leading figures like

Gregor Strasser, prepared, despite reservations about Hitler, to collaborate in the instrumentalisation of the Führer cult. Once established, by the later 1920s, then bolstered by the electoral successes of 1930–32, the Führer cult developed its own relative autonomy, cushioning Hitler's own position by weakening at the outset oppositional attempts, and tying the Party more and more to his 'all or bust' strategy to gain power.

Central to the whole development of Hitler's power base within the Nazi Movement, and of the character and dynamic of the Nazi organisation before 1933, was, then, the leadership cult. 'Charismatic' authority was made into the very organisational base of the Movement itself. This made Hitler's relationship to his Party different from that of any other contemporary party leader. And it provided him with an aura of 'greatness' on which his claim to exclusive loyalty as the embodiment of a messianic mission to build a 'new Germany' was extended from the inner circle to a wider body of the faithful, a greatly enlarged 'charismatic community'. It gave him the legitimacy within the Party which enabled him to counteract the otherwise endemic and disintegratory factionalism which characterised the Movement.

As we have noted, it was as a propagandist, an agitator and an unusually talented demagogue that Hitler first won attention. Within the space of only a few months, he became the star speaker of the infant National Socialist German Workers' Party (which had changed its name from German Workers' Party in February 1920). It was Hitler who announced the Party's programme, which he had partly drafted and edited, on 24 February 1920. During 1920 he spoke more than thirty times before audiences of some several hundred to over two thousand persons. With Hitler as the 'front man', the Party membership reached 2,000 by late 1920 and 3,300 by August 1921[1] – a sharp rise since he himself had joined as the fifty-fifth member in September 1919.[2] Though most of those attracted by Hitler's rantings were from Munich's lower middle classes, some well-heeled and influential figures in the city's social and political circles also showed an interest in the stir he was making.

Through Ernst Röhm, later the SA chief, who had been a member of the German Workers' Party since 1919, Hitler

gained important contacts in radical Right officer and paramilitary circles. Hitler's former commanding officer in the Reichswehr 'education' unit, Hauptmann Karl Mayr, saw to it that the army paid for 3,000 brochures on the Versailles treaty which the Party distributed in 1920, commenting in a letter to the exiled right-wing putschist, Wolfgang Kapp, in September 1920 that he had high hopes of Hitler and his Movement.[3] And Dietrich Eckart, one of Hitler's 'intellectual' mentors, was also valuable in fund-raising and links to wealthy patrons in the *völkisch* camp. It was Eckart's financial sureties, together with a contribution of 60,000 marks from a Reichswehr fund, engineered by Röhm and Mayr, which enabled the Party to purchase its own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, at the beginning of 1921. It can be claimed with some justification, therefore, that these three – Röhm, Eckart and Mayr – were the 'midwives of Hitler's political career'.[4]

By 1921 Hitler greatly overshadowed the Party's first leader (and co-founder) Anton Drexler. A clash was unavoidable, and was prompted by moves to amalgamate with rival branches of the *völkisch* movement. Hitler rejected such notions out of hand. He no doubt feared that a merger would weaken his own hold over the Party and undermine the task he already envisaged for himself – fortified by the impact of his demagogy – as the propagandist 'drummer' of the nationalist Right. When Drexler entered into moves to bring about a merger during his absence, Hitler resigned in rage from the Party, causing a major crisis resolved only when Eckart negotiated the return of the 'prima donna' speaker under conditions which gave him absolute power within the Movement.

Everything indicates that Hitler's actions in the crisis arose from a heated, spontaneous reaction to circumstances he could not control, rather than from a premeditated strategy to acquire dictatorial power. But his indispensability as a propagandist meant that his inflexibility and refusal to contemplate compromise were turned into an advantage which greatly strengthened his own position within the Party.

The Party continued to expand rapidly. By the end of 1922 there were around 20,000 and by the time of the Putsch about 55,000 members, mainly in Bavaria and of predominantly petty-bourgeois background. From 1921 the Party

also had its own paramilitary organisation, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). Even so, down to the Putsch the Nazi Movement remained far from the largest component in the ensemble of 'patriotic' extreme-right Bavarian paramilitary organisations. The continued growth of the Party was in good measure still attributable to Hitler's talent as an agitator and scourge of the Weimar system, as hyper-inflation, Ruhr occupation and governmental instability seemed to point to democracy's imminent overthrow.

To those already predisposed to the appeal of the message, Hitler's speeches were electrifying. One of his early admirers, Kurt Lüdecke, recalling his reactions on hearing Hitler speak in 1922, wrote of his critical faculties being swept away, of being held 'under a hypnotic spell by the sheer force of his conviction', of 'the intense will of the man, the passion of his sincerity' which 'seemed to flow from him into me', and of an experience he could liken only to that of a religious conversion.[5] Such accounts of Hitler's speeches are not uncommon. But although, in the conditions of Bavaria in the early 1920s, Hitler's demagoguery continued to draw crowds from the *völkisch* clientele, without external support and influential contacts he would have remained no more than a beerhall rabble-rouser.

Early well-to-do converts such as Lüdecke and Putzi Hanfstaengl, a Harvard graduate and scion of a well-regarded family of Munich art dealers, helped to provide an entrée into the salon respectability of Munich's upper bourgeoisie. The publishers Julius Lehmann (already long a Party sympathiser) and Hugo Bruckmann, and the piano manufacturer Carl Bechstein were among those offering patronage to the somewhat unlikely guest at their salon soirées. Field Marshal Ludendorff, the most prestigious figure on the extreme Right, also used his influence to recommend Hitler in social circles which would otherwise have been closed to him.

Even more important was the protection Hitler and his Movement received from the Bavarian authorities. The Nazis were able to utilise the nationalist sympathies of the Bavarian police, judiciary and army leadership in a state which saw itself as a bastion of the patriotic Right against rampant socialism in Prussia, Saxony, Thuringia and elsewhere. And as the connection with Ludendorff and with the other paramilitary organisations in Bavaria expanded, with Röhm

playing an important brokerage role, the Nazi Movement was able to profit from the financial contributions flowing to the 'patriotic' Right in its fight against the 'red peril'. In addition, Röhm's access to munitions collected by the Reichswehr from dissolved counter-revolutionary home guard units was vital in enabling him to supply the SA with arms, vehicles and other equipment in 1923. It was Röhm, too, who in September 1923 engineered Hitler's leadership of the *Deutscher Kampfbund* – the merged triad of NSDAP, *Bund Oberland* and *Reichsflagge* which formed the most radical and aggressive of the paramilitary organisations in Bavaria.

Without the patronage, protection and support of the Munich bourgeoisie and political and military authorities, Hitler's passage into a position of prominence in the Bavarian radical Right could scarcely have been made. And though this phase in the Party's history culminated in the débâcle of the Bürgerbräukeller in November 1923, Hitler's upstaging of Ludendorff during his trial in February and March 1924 meant that he had now claim to be regarded as the new figurehead of the *völkisch* movement – even if it seemed, at this juncture, to be a movement with the best of its future behind it. It was fitting that the clincher to his predominance came from yet another virtuoso piece of agitation before his sympathetic judges in Munich.

The disintegration of the banned Nazi Movement during Hitler's imprisonment confirmed the indispensability of his leadership. And the splintered Nazi groups, whatever their differences, shared a veneration of the jailed former leader. Moreover, his performance at the trial had boosted Hitler's reputation among adherents of the radical Right outside Bavaria. Though the factional in-fighting was to continue with notable bitterness and enmity for a year or more after his release from prison and the refoundation of the Party in February 1925, Hitler's position had become greatly strengthened through his own enhanced status and through the post-putsch collapse of the Movement. When a crisis blew up by February 1926 over Party aims and strategy, he was sufficiently powerful through his control of the key Munich nerve-centre of the Party to be able to head it off.

The crisis arose partly over personality clashes dating back to the bitter in-fighting of the post-putsch Party split and the unpopularity of some of the dominant forces in the Party

in its Bavarian heartlands, notably the then propaganda chief Hermann Esser and Julius Streicher, the Nazi boss in Nuremberg. But more significantly, the crisis was provoked by the disenchantment expressed by some leading Party members in northern and western Germany (most prominently Gregor Strasser, who had joined a northern faction at the break-up of the old Party in 1924) at the vagueness of the Party's 1920 programme, the neglect of its 'socialist' claims in the Munich intonation of policy, and at the political strategy which had been adopted. Questions of whether to participate in elections, following Hitler's post-putsch strategy of winning power through the ballot-box, not insurrection, whether to support a left-wing referendum to expropriate the property of the former royal houses, and whether future foreign policy lay in siding with Russia against the west or in conquering it for German 'living space' were all issues in the dispute. But the decisive factor, which forced Hitler to act, was the demand for a new Party programme. The adoption of a new programme would have meant not only the continuing negotiability of Party 'doctrine', but – and this point was crucial – an acceptance that the leader himself was bound by the Party programme. Hitler's power within the Party, deriving not from the programme but from the embodiment of the 'idea' in his 'mission', would have been fundamentally undermined. The 'charismatic' essence of the Party would have been replaced by a paper programme.

Until early 1926, Hitler had been inactive. His characteristic indolence with regard to day-to-day administration had left the Party's management wholly in the hands of others, allowing him time to concentrate on writing the second volume of *Mein Kampf*. He kept aloof from the looming crisis. The actions of the northern Party leaders, who by this time had formed themselves, with Hitler's express permission, into a 'working group', did not amount to a rebellion against Hitler himself. But by early 1926 it was plain that the crisis did amount to a challenge to the basis of his authority as leader.

As usual, Hitler acted only when compelled to do so. At a conference of Party leaders called for 14 February 1926 in Bamberg, his speech ended the prospects of the reform 'faction' (which, in any case, had been divided within itself from the beginning). He reasserted the Party's mission to

smash 'Jewish Bolshevism' (a point which had not appeared in the 1920 programme), with Italy and Britain as Germany's natural allies, rather than work towards an entente with Russia, and he rejected the expropriation of the princes.[6] Most crucially, however, he identified himself utterly with the existing Party programme. The 1920 programme, he proclaimed, 'was the foundation of our religion, our ideology', and to tamper with it would amount to 'treason to those who died believing in our Idea'.[7] Rejection of the programme, it was made plain, amounted to rejection of Hitler, the 'idea', and the memory of the Party's 'martyrs' of the 1923 Putsch.

The appeal to loyalty was triumphant. The 'opposition', which had never as such rejected Hitler or the 'idea' but had arisen from the very vagueness of the 'idea' itself, evaporated. Central Party organisation was tightened. The northern leaders accepted defeat and came back into the fold. Goebbels, dismayed after the Bamberg meeting, was invited to Munich, lionised, and subjected to the Hitler charm treatment. He capitulated. 'Hitler is great,' he wrote in his diary. 'He shakes us all warmly by the hand. Let bygones be bygones! . . . I bow to the greater man, the political genius.'[8] Shortly afterwards, in May 1926, the first Party congress since the Putsch, held in Weimar, provided a public show of loyalty to Hitler in person, and declared the 1920 programme immutable. The crisis was over. Notions of inner-party democracy were banished. All power over decisions relating to ideological and organisational matters, it was accepted, resided in the person of Hitler. The way to the fully fledged 'Führer Party' was paved.

All of this seemed at the time of little relevance within the overall context of German politics. Democracy had come through its baptism by fire in the post-war crisis. Three years after the hyper-inflation of 1923, the currency was stable, the economy picking up, the 'golden years' of Weimar culture were in full swing, the political scene was more settled than at any time since 1918, and the extreme Right were reduced to a tiny rump of electoral support. The future looked promising. And without the onset of the world economic crisis from 1929 it might have remained so.

Precisely this period when the Nazi Party was in the political wilderness in the later 1920s, however, saw the

creation of the organisational framework which enabled the NSDAP to exploit the subsequent Depression crisis far more effectively than the multifarious radical Right movements had handled the inflation crisis of 1922–23. A number of lingering *völkisch* movements gave up their autonomy and were swallowed up by the Nazi Movement. Though its voter potential before 1929 was puny, the activist base of the NSDAP was greatly strengthened, so that when the crisis broke, the Party had over 100,000 members.

And in this period, the Führer cult attached to Hitler became fully institutionalised within the Movement and established the base of the transmission of the cult in the early 1930s to a wider electorate. A significant outward symbol of Hitler's supremacy was the introduction of the 'Heil Hitler' greeting as a compulsory form of address among Party members. Gregor Strasser, the most prominent figure in the 1925–26 'reform' group, now placed himself openly behind the Hitler idolatry, writing in a Party publication of 'an utter devotion to the idea of National Socialism' being combined with 'a deep love of the person of our leader who is the shining hero of the new freedom-fighters'.[9] Goebbels, whose belief in Hitler had for a short time been shaken in 1926, was now effusive in his repeated elaboration of the Führer cult in his newspaper, *Der Angriff*.

What Hitler had striven for was reality: the Party's programme was now wholly subsumed within his own person. This 'programme' did not, however, amount to a number of clearly defined political objectives neatly laid out in a Party manifesto. Nor, except indirectly, did the 'programme' which was cementing the still innately fractious Party together mean the considered acceptance of every aspect of the personalised ideology of Hitler, as expounded in *Mein Kampf*.

Hitler himself had never believed that the homogeneity of the Movement could be sustained through a hard and fast programme. What was required was an unconditional act of faith in a number of loosely defined but rigidly inflexible tenets of doctrine embodied in the person of Hitler: the world as a struggle between weak and strong races, selection of the fittest, the need to make Germany powerful again, get rid of the Jews, strive for 'living space'. Divisive points were played down wherever possible. Hitler combined the fixity of basic points of dogma with maximum pragmatism

in political manoeuvring, keeping wherever possible out of internal disputes. And he retained his distance from the more socially radical forces within the Movement who were more likely to alienate rather than win over the support needed to attain the goal which was the prerequisite for all else: control over the power of the state.

Partly through their own conviction of Hitler's greatness and belief in his 'mission', partly through recognition that their own careerist ambitions depended on Hitler, and partly though acceptance of a degree of dominance of the supreme leader because this excluded all alternative candidates for leadership, the second-rank Nazi bosses – divided among themselves – outdid each other in devotion to the Führer and avowals of faith and loyalty. Personality clashes and disputes over strategy were unavoidable – all the more so as long as political success was evasive. But they invariably ended in a show of loyalty and subservience to Hitler.

A bitter dispute between Goebbels and Gregor Strasser in 1927, for example, brought a public demonstration of unity 'bolstered by the common belief in a lofty, holy mission and by the feeling of loyalty binding them to the common idea and also to the common leader in the person of Adolf Hitler'. The two premisses of the 'coming victory in ideal unity' for Party members were described as 'the authority of the idea and the authority of the Führer', which had 'become one in the person of Adolf Hitler'.[10]

Beneath the apparent unity of the Party, conflict – and sometimes rebellion – continued down to the end of 1932. But Hitler's position was by now far stronger than it had been at the time of the factional dispute of 1925–26. When Otto Strasser challenged his authority in 1930 by positing once again the supremacy of the 'idea' over the 'leader', he was forced out of the Party without repercussions. When trouble brewed in the SA in 1930 and serious revolt broke out in spring 1931, Hitler triumphed through appeals to loyalty to his own person. Finally, in the most serious crisis of all, in December 1932, when the second most powerful man in the Party, Gregor Strasser, resigned following a fundamental split over strategy, he took no one with him, no factional break-off or challenge to Hitler's position ensued, and the appeal to personal loyalty proved once more triumphant. After a meeting where Hitler denounced Strasser, 'those

present' – the senior Gauleiter – 'once more sealed their old bond with him with a handshake'.[11] In the following weeks, declarations of loyalty showered in from all parts of Germany.

The strength of Hitler's position within the Party dates back in the main to the 'wilderness' years of 1925–28. By the time Nazism's electoral surge began in autumn 1929, the nature of the NSDAP as a 'Führer Party', with idea and organisation inseparable from its leader, was firmly established. Not for nothing was it generally known as 'the Hitler Movement'. Hitler's authority within the NSDAP was absolute. The bonds of the wider 'charismatic community', the chief transmission belt of the 'Führer cult' to wider sectors of the electorate who were as yet by no means convinced Hitler supporters, had been forged.

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THE MASSES

The mass appeal of a 'charismatic' leader has only an indirect relation to that leader's actual personality and character attributes. Perceptions are more important than reality. Few of the thirteen million Germans who voted for Hitler by 1932 had met him. The Hitler they had heard about, read about in the press, or seen at election meetings and mass rallies matched an image created and embellished by propaganda. The 'marketing' of the image was vital. But so was the initial predisposition to accept such an image. Most Nazi supporters were probably at least half-converted before they ever encountered Hitler in the flesh or otherwise succumbed to his 'charisma'. Probably for the majority of those coming to vote Nazi (in the absence of opinion polls, we can never know for certain), prosaic 'bread and butter' issues, local concerns, rational considerations of self-interest, or even essentially negative feelings that Hitler could do no worse than the rest and might as well be given a chance, predominated over ideological fervour and impassioned commitment to a 'missionary idea'. In villages and small towns especially, it was often the case that people followed the example of pillars of the community – local worthies and respected members of social clubs and associations – in finding their way to support

the Nazis. After 1929–30, the panoply of interest groups which operated within the Nazi Movement – affiliated organisations to tap the interest of practically every section of society from youth and women, through blue-collar workers, to farmers, traders, students, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, teachers and university lecturers – related the umbrella 'idea' of Nazism to more specific group and material concerns. It was for a whole variety of self-interested reasons, therefore, and not simply or even mainly through Hitler, that people found Nazism an attractive proposition. Nevertheless, once exposed to Nazism, all potential supporters inevitably also became exposed to Hitler's 'charismatic' image.

Not only that, but the Hitler cult, as the embodiment of the whole amalgam of disparate strands of the Nazi 'idea', served as an independent drawing card of the first importance in the variety of motivating causes attracting people to Nazism. In a sample of the main ideological themes preoccupying rank-and-file Nazi members – impressionistically significant, despite the fact that it can make no claim to be statistically representative – the Hitler cult alone predominated in almost a fifth (18.1 per cent) of the 739 cases.[12]

As we have seen, even in the upper echelons of the Party, the 'idea' contained many of its virtues in its very vagueness – the fanatical devotion to a utopian vision of a distant future rather than to specific points of a laid-out programme of action. Hitler was more able than anyone sharing similar views to excite in those who encountered him – and were in some way predisposed to the message – a vision of a heroic future for a regenerated German nation arising from the ashes of the total destruction of the old order. Hitler inspired the millions attracted to him by the conviction that he and he alone, backed by his Party, could end the current misery and lead Germany to new greatness. The vision of the future held the promise of great benefits for all – as long as they were 'racially fit' – while those enemies of the people who had hitherto held them in thrall would be not only banished, but completely extirpated.

For general appeal, variations on this broad central twin theme of national regeneration and elimination of the enemies of the nation sufficed. 'Enemies of the nation' for most Nazi supporters in the early 1930s meant primarily Marxists. Though in Hitler's own world-view Jews and Marxists were

synonymous, his public vilification of Marxism predominated during the rise to power. Even Nazi members at this time, let alone more casual ballot-box supporters, tended to be first and foremost anti-Marxists – though, of course, this could often subsume (as it did with Hitler himself), or coexist with, violent anti-Semitism. Measured by their chief objects of hostility, close on two-thirds of the respondents in the sample of rank-and-file Party members mentioned earlier were above all anti-Marxists of one variety or another.[13] The most dominant ideological themes of the members in the sample reflected the vague 'positive' side of the Nazi appeal – expectations of a unified, solidaristic 'national community' (31.7 per cent of the 739 responses) and the supernationalism (22.5 per cent) associated with a strong, expansionist Germany. Anti-Semitism, pronounced or incidental, predominated in only 13.6 per cent of the responses.[14]

There was nothing specifically Nazi, let alone Hitlerian, about the general thrust of such vague imperatives. They had been a commonplace on the extreme Right before the Nazi Party came to corner the *völkisch* nationalist market. In the building of mass support, it was less an intrinsic Nazi doctrine than the style of articulation and presentation of fears, phobias, and nebulous expectations far more generally prevalent than among the traditional core support for the *völkisch* Right that was decisive. And when it came to presentation, Hitler was peerless.

In the full-scale crisis of the state which the Depression ushered in, with the economy in turmoil and political authority in complete disarray, Hitler's brand of rhetoric came into its own. He was more adept than any other Nazi leader – even Goebbels – at giving voice to grass-roots anger and popular prejudice in the most down-to-earth black and white colours. The force of his expression, the simplicity of the alternatives he posed, the strength and certainty of his convictions, and the grandiose future vision he held out – all combined to provide a compelling message for the already half-persuaded who wanted to hear it. The cold text of his speeches reveals them as a catalogue of banalities and platitudes. But the atmosphere, the staged setting, the mystical aura of messianic greatness which Nazi propaganda had by now wrapped around Hitler – all these made his words electrifying to the mass audiences whose

emotions had already been prepared by a build-up and razzmatazz resembling a religious revivalist rally more than a conventional political meeting.

Some key passages in *Mein Kampf* had been about propaganda. Hitler noted that he had regarded the management of propaganda as by far the most important task in the infant Nazi Party.[15] The task of propaganda, he wrote, was 'to see that an idea wins supporters'; it 'tries to force a doctrine on the whole people'. 'Organisation', on the other hand, had its function in winning members – the active advocates of the cause who 'really make possible the victory of the movement'.[16] He attached the greater significance in leadership to agitation rather than to a theoretical programme. The great theoretician, he wrote, seldom made a great leader. Leadership qualities were more often to be found in the agitator. 'For leading means: being able to move masses.'[17]

Hitler's contempt for theoretical concern with narrow points of ideological doctrine in winning the masses was made categorically plain in a private speech in 1926 to the select audience of the Hamburger Nationalklub. 'Above all,' stated Hitler, 'one has to make short shrift of the attitude that the masses can be satisfied with ideological concepts. Comprehension is a shaky platform for the masses. The only stable emotion is hate.' He added that the masses felt strength more than all else, and that the individual in a mass crowd stood 'like an insignificant worm', feeling only the strength and righteousness of the movement, seeing '200,000 people all of whom fight for an ideal, which he himself cannot even understand, which he does not necessarily have to understand. He has a faith, and this faith is daily reinforced by its visible power.'[18]

As a contemporary commentator, writing in 1931, noted:

> All propaganda, according to Hitler, has to limit its intellectual level to the understanding of the most stupid among his audience. Banal 'Black against White!' rather than intricate thoughts .... The theme must be explosive .... No wisdom from the council table. Stir up anger and passion and stoke the fire until the crowd goes berserk.[19]

One early convert to Nazism, a German–Russian aristocrat, recalled that at the end of the first Hitler speech

he heard, in Mecklenburg in 1926, 'There were tears in my eyes, my throat was all tight from crying. A liberating scream of the purest enthusiasm discharged the unbearable tension as the auditorium rocked with applause.'[20] This type of emotional experience was far from unusual among those ideologically open to the image and the message.

Hitler's propaganda techniques for winning the masses could achieve little success, however, without the external conditions which exposed an electoral 'market' to the Nazi political alternative. Without the Depression, the worsening crisis of government and state, and the disintegration of the bourgeois liberal–conservative parties, this mass 'market' would not have become available and Hitler would have continued to have been an insignificant minority taste on the lunatic fringes of the political system.

Even in the Depression, as we hinted earlier, the 'masses' were won to Nazism usually by more prosaic routes than being swept off their feet at a Hitler rally. For the most part, Hitler was preaching to the converted or half-converted in such rallies. Among the non-committed and merely curious who attended, the impact was often far from charismatic. 'What sort of an impression did he make? Always a crackpot, with his haircut and little moustache,' recalled a then middle-aged housewife, while a sixteen-year-old youth told his parents, after his curiosity had led him into a Munich beer-tent where Hitler was speaking in 1932, that they had no need to worry: 'Nobody will vote for him; such ranting can't convince anybody.'[21]

Support for Hitler was stronger in the predominantly Protestant north and east of Germany than in the mainly Catholic south and west, in the countryside and small towns (except in Catholic regions) than in the big cities, and within the cities in the middle-class suburbs than the proletarian slum districts. The self-employed, farmers, white-collar workers and civil servants were disproportionately inclined to back the NSDAP. But despite the propaganda that he was their 'last hope', most of the unemployed did not turn to Hitler. The Nazi Movement was more 'youthful' than any other political party except the Communist Party. But although the 'macho' image of an overwhelmingly male 'fighting movement', coupled with an emotive idealism, had distinct

appeal to many young Germans, the Hitler Youth remained down to 1933 dwarfed by the size of the socialist, Catholic and bourgeois youth organisations. The Nazis were more successful than any of their rivals in drawing from all classes of society and building a socially heterogeneous following. But there were nevertheless significant deviations in the pattern of support and limitations in penetration.

Above all, of course, the socialist and communist Left and political Catholicism remained relatively immune to Hitler's appeal down to 1933 and beyond. Before 1933, something like two-thirds of the German electorate found Hitler an unattractive proposition. His full conquest of the masses came only after the Nazis had silenced oppositional opinion and had acquired total control of the media.

Nevertheless, the winning of the support of a third of the voting population between 1929 and 1932 was an extraordinary achievement of political mobilisation. As the bandwagon picked up from autumn 1929, rolled through the summer of 1930, and went into full gear after the remarkable triumph in the September election in 1930, the wave of new activist recruits enabled further extensive mobilisation, with success feeding success. Greatly swollen in numbers, the Party faithful could now unleash an extraordinary level of agitation which, through ceaseless meetings, rallies, marches, and not least through the battle for control of the streets in the towns and cities, put the 'Hitler Movement' repeatedly in the headlines, projecting an image of vitality and action.

With the Party propaganda machine centralised in the hands of Goebbels since April 1930, the image was shaped with increasing skill and direction. Campaign slogans, themes, speakers and publicity were centrally orchestrated, but with attention to local or regional emphases. New, striking techniques were deployed, as in the second presidential campaign in spring 1932 when an aeroplane was chartered to carry Hitler to his election rallies under the slogan 'the Führer over Germany'. The image was suggestive of a modern, technological world, though one in which true German values would be restored and would dominate. Above all, the image that Nazi propaganda ceaselessly portrayed was that of power, strength, dynamism and youth – an inexorable march to triumph, a future to be won by belief in the Führer.

By summer 1932 the bandwagon seemed more like an unstoppable juggernaut. By 1932 Hitler stood at the head of a massive Movement of some 800,000 Party members and approaching half a million stormtroopers, far from all of whom were Party members. And by 1932, thirteen million voters were to a greater or lesser extent prepared to place their trust in Hitler.

The mass base for the subsequent 'deification' of Hitler was laid. The acclamatory power at his disposal was to function throughout the Third Reich as the most important bonding agent in the Nazi state. But for now, it provided Hitler with a key to unlocking the door to power: no other Party leader on the Right could offer the conservative elites anything remotely comparable to Hitler's command of the masses.

However, Hitler's mass support was alone insufficient to bring him to power. By the end of July 1932, two presidential campaigns, a set of provincial elections, and then a Reichstag election had brought Hitler his peak level of electoral support, before the 'seizure of power', of 37.3 per cent of the vote. As the leader of by far the largest party in the Reichstag, with 230 seats, Hitler demanded the Chancellorship. At an audience on 13 August 1932, Reich President Hindenburg refused point blank to appoint him. The consequence, during the remaining months of 1932, was a deepening crisis of confidence within the Nazi Movement. Some Party members had had enough and quit. Voters, too, were for the first time turning away from the Party; the November election brought a drop of two million votes for the NSDAP, with a loss of thirty-four seats in the Reichstag. Goebbels had noted in his diary as early as the previous April: 'We must come to power in the foreseeable future. Otherwise, we'll win ourselves to death in elections.'[22] By the end of 1932, with finances at rock bottom and Strasser's departure bringing morale to an all-time low, the future for the Nazi Party did not look rosy. Hitler's gamble of staking all or nothing on the Chancellorship seemed a failure. The Party appeared to be in danger of breaking up. Hitler's mastery over his Party and control of the masses had proved insufficient to gain him power. Help had to come from outside. And at the direst point in the Party's fortunes, help was at hand.

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THE ELITES

The handover of power to Hitler on 30 January 1933 was the worst possible outcome to the irrecoverable crisis of Weimar democracy. It did not have to happen. It was at no stage a foregone conclusion. Electoral success alone could not bring it about. Under the Weimar constitution, there was no compulsion upon the Reich President to appoint as head of government the leader of the party which had won most seats in a general election. As we noted, Hindenburg refused Hitler the Chancellorship in August 1932 with the Nazis on the crest of a wave. Five months later he changed his mind with the Party in crisis following the electoral setback of November 1932 and the Strasser affair. Hitler's appointment was technically constitutional. But the spirit of constitutionality was long since dead.

After Brüning had become Chancellor in March 1930, parliamentary government had increasingly and deliberately been by-passed and replaced by presidential government, with the Reich Chancellor ruling by the issue of 'emergency decrees' under the signature of the Reich President and authorised by Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. Whereas under the first Reich President, Friedrich Ebert, Article 48 had been used to defend democracy against anti-democratic forces of Right and Left, it was now used under Hindenburg to undermine democracy. With the neutering of the Reichstag, which since the electoral gains of the Communists alongside those of the Nazis in the 1930 election had become increasingly unworkable, the position of the Reich President was pivotal. Access to Hindenburg was the key to power. Accordingly, the presidential palace became the focal point of intrigues of power-brokers who, freed from institutional constraints, conspired with guile and initiative in private wheeler-dealings to further their own power ambitions. And behind the maverick power-brokers stood the lobbying of important elite groups, anxious to attain a political solution of the crisis favourable to their interests.

Out of a labyrinth of power struggles, Hitler emerged the victor. Few of the non-Nazi power-brokers or elite groups in industry, commerce, finance, agriculture, the civil service

and the army had Hitler down as their first choice. But by January 1933, with other options apparently exhausted, most – with the big landowners to the fore – were prepared to entertain a Hitler government. Had they opposed it, a Hitler Chancellorship would have been inconceivable. Hitler needed the elites to attain power. But by January 1933, they in turn needed Hitler since he alone could deliver the mass support required to impose a tenable authoritarian solution to Germany's crisis of capitalism and crisis of the state. This was the basis of the deal which brought Hitler to power on 30 January 1933.

Before Nazism acquired its huge mass base and became a force in electoral bargaining which could not be ignored, its relevance to elite interests had been tangential. Certainly, as we saw earlier, Hitler could not have become the 'drummer' of the Right in pre-putsch Bavaria without the patronage and protection of the Munich upper-crust. But, not unnaturally, in Weimar's 'good years' following the currency stabilisation, 'captains of industry', the landholding gentry, and the top brass of the military had little cause to show more than marginal interest in Hitler's party on the outer fringes of the political scene.

There can, of course, be no doubting the authoritarian tendencies and increasingly anti-democratic stance of prominent elite groups even in Weimar's short-lived heyday. And the Nazis did not cease to tout for their backing. Hitler addressed, or met privately with, industrialists on a number of occasions, seeking political and financial support. A few complied. But for the time being they remained exceptions. Quite apart from the off-putting anti-capitalist rhetoric of the NSDAP, there seemed for most leaders of the economy little point in putting their support behind a Party which had no influence and scant chances of power. Most probably shared the view put forward in a confidential report by the Reich Ministry of the Interior in 1927 which spoke of the NSDAP as 'a party that isn't going anywhere', an 'insignificant radical, revolutionary splinter group that is incapable of exerting any noticeable influence on the great mass of the population or on the course of political developments'.[23] It was no wonder, then, that most 'captains of industry' and big landholders put their backing behind the bourgeois liberal and conservative parties.

This continued to be the main pattern even during the Depression crisis. The Nazi Party benefited only on a relatively minor scale from 'big business' funding, which still poured largely into the coffers of its electoral rivals on the conservative Right. The NSDAP's funds came in the main less spectacularly from membership dues, collections at rallies and the like.[24] The bigger the Party became, therefore, the more funding from such sources was obtained. But the finances always remained in a parlous state. Though the Party did have friends and backers who provided financial and other material help (such as the usufruct of their property as SA 'hostels', or the loan of vehicles to ferry stormtroopers around), it did not figure prominently in the power plans of the most dominant sectors of the elites as long as more congenial alternative scenarios were imaginable.

From 1929 onwards, however, the 'Hitler Movement' began to play a more notable role in their political calculations, even if most retained their reservations. The campaign to reject the Young Plan revision of reparations payments in 1929 provided a first opportunity for the Party to link forces with the other nationalist organisations, and to benefit above all from the publicity which they now received in the publications of media magnate Alfred Hugenberg, the leader of the DNVP. The path was now smoothed, too, in furthering contacts with prominent figures in industry and business. A number of local elections held in the autumn showed the NSDAP already substantially increasing their vote, especially in rural areas suffering from mounting difficulties in agriculture. Following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929, the rapid deepening of economic crisis in 1930, and the Nazi electoral triumph of September 1930 – the scale of which took even the Nazi leadership by surprise – the writing was on the wall for the Weimar Republic. By the time of the bank crash of July 1931, democracy was dead and buried. By 1932, reparations were effectively written off and a major shackle of Versailles was removed.

All this time, the deeply anti-democratic German elites had been looking for an authoritarian replacement of the Weimar Republic. Under Brüning there was talk of a restoration of the monarchy and a Bismarck-style system of government. When landowning interests persuaded Hindenburg to dismiss Brüning, von Papen, their own favourite, who would

also have suited many other sectors in the business world, contemplated even risking civil war by deploying the police and military to suppress political parties and impose a new authoritarian constitution. Clear note of his intentions was given in the deposition of the elected Prussian government in July 1932 – a move of the utmost significance since Prussia, by far the largest of the German states and forming almost two-thirds of the Reich, was still controlled by a coalition of Social Democrats and the Centre Party. After intrigues had also brought down von Papen, his successor General von Schleicher tried to find a mass base of support by incorporating the trades unions and the Nazi Movement under Gregor Strasser as his Vice-Chancellor. When this move fell through with Strasser's defeat by Hitler and resignation, von Schleicher's days, too, were numbered.

Hitler's contacts with leaders of business, industry and agriculture had meanwhile deepened without most of them being persuaded that the solution needed was a Nazi dictatorship. In 1931 the links with Hugenberg had been renewed in the 'Harzburg Front', named after a meeting of nationalist organisations at Bad Harzburg in Lower Saxony. Hjalmar Schacht had been one of those from the business world present, though he was by no means a mainstream figure and his enthusiasm for Hitler was unrepresentative of business circles in general. In January 1932 Hitler addressed the influential Düsseldorfer Industrieklub, winning some support but leaving many still unconvinced that he was their man. Through Schacht and Wilhelm Keppler (who had been in the chemicals business and now functioned as Hitler's link man with businessmen) much lobbying was done. Even more important, close ties developed between the Nazi leadership and east German landowners who had the ear of the Reich President, both through von Papen and as a result of Hindenburg's own vested interests as an estate owner. Military contacts, too, had been extended. The attractiveness of a commitment to massive rearmament coupled with the ending of political polarisation by the crushing of the Left without army involvement in a possible civil war was not lost on some of the Reichswehr officer corps. However, as this scenario made evident, the demolition of the Left and the provision of a mass base on the Right was the prerequisite of any form of lasting authoritarian

regime. By January 1933, the prospects of von Schleicher providing the mass base which Brüning and von Papen had lacked had disappeared. Only Hitler had the masses on the political Right at his disposal.

In November 1932 Schacht had been the first signatory of a petition of a group of businessmen to President Hindenburg, requesting him to appoint Hitler to the Chancellorship.[25] Hindenburg still refused to do so. Since the elections had brought an increased communist vote alongside the fall in support for the Nazis, the prospect of interminable domestic strife seemed a real one in such circles. In the weeks that followed, von Schleicher's favouring of state-run work creation schemes and his attempt to involve the trades unions in his brand of authoritarianism deeply worried many leaders of big business, especially in heavy industry, while his plans to resettle farm labourers on the bankrupted estates of eastern Germany fatally alienated the agrarian lobby of the landowners. It was in this context, in January 1933, that the ambitious and self-seeking von Papen was able to act as the key intermediary and power-broker, liaising between the big business group around Schacht (still by no means representative of all the divided industrial and commercial interests), the Nazi leadership, and the camarilla around the Reich President, with its close links with the military and the Prussian landowning caste. Von Papen was now ready to accept a Hitler Chancellorship, though the price he demanded was a heavily nationalist–conservative, non-Nazi cabinet, with himself as Vice-Chancellor, and with only two Nazis apart from Hitler (Frick as Reich Minister of the Interior and Göring as Reich Minister without Portfolio and acting Prussian Minister of the Interior). On this agreed basis, von Papen, still Hindenburg's favourite, was now finally able to persuade the Reich President that Hitler should be made Chancellor.

The fatal miscalculation of the conservative Right was to imagine that Hitler would be 'tamed' by participation in government so that the Nazi bubble would burst. When worries about Hitler's intentions were voiced, they were assuaged by Hugenberg's claim that nothing could happen because 'we're boxing Hitler in', and by von Papen's laconic comment that 'we've hired him'.[26] In such a fashion, after the conservative elites had worked successfully to undermine

Weimar democracy, but when they had proved incapable of providing the authoritarian system with a basis of mass support, they were prepared to lever into the top governmental office in the land a rank outsider to conventional power circles. The assumption was that Hitler would serve their interests for a while. The thought that he might be able to do more than a job for them was one they had not considered.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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13. Merkl, p. 522.
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24. See Henry A. Turner, *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 111–24.
25. The petition is printed in Eberhard Czichon, *Wer verhalf Hitler zur Macht?*, 4th edn, Cologne, 1976, pp. 69–72.
26. Theodor Duesterberg, *Der Stahlhelm und Hitler*, Wolfenbüttel/Hannover, 1949, pp. 38–9; Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk, *Es geschah in Deutschland*, Tübingen/Stuttgart, 1951, p. 147.