



Hitler 1889-1936: hubris

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It is a fair bet that Hitler would be on most people's top ten list of twentieth century figures who were 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. Kershaw's excellent first volume of Hitler's life tells us why they'd be right.

Biographers do not have to sympathise with the ambitions or achievements of their subjects. It would be difficult indeed to find a serious scholar today who would do this for Adolf Hitler, whose name has become a byword for evil.

Ian Kershaw makes it plain from the start that he holds no brief for the life's work of the Austrian born German Chancellor of the Third Reich as he charts his rise from provincial obscurity to national demi-god.

But lack of sympathy has not prevented him writing a book that is both a readable, if not innovative, account of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and a fascinating insight into the personality of Hitler himself.

Hitler was a thoroughly unpleasant individual. No surprises there then, except that, monstrous as his crimes against European Jews, Slavs and the working class were, there have been plenty of other reactionary figures this century who could in private be witty, charming and cultured.

Not so Hitler. He was pathologically incapable of forming personal relationships on anything approaching an equal or compassionate basis. Even the few friends from before 1914 that have been interviewed or written memoirs could not testify to anything other than that Hitler was boorish and domineering.

He was a monumental egotist. He never held a conversation, merely lectured or hectored. His loss of temper when challenged cowed all but the steely. He never read for enlightenment but only to confirm a prejudice. His one genuine cultural pastime, opera, was barely more than an obsession with one German composer - Wagner. His heroic and mythical pastiches of Teutonic history set to stirring scores inflamed Hitler's pan-Germanism from his youth onward.

He was a misogynist; generally avoiding female company. Nor could he contemplate them in his political circle. The few he was in any way intimate with (it is a fair bet that he died celibate) were allowed to be near him on condition they purred at the right moments and acted with childlike naiveté. He loved his mother and his dogs and that was about it.

The man was sad and he was also certainly bad. But how did this individual, as opposed to many others, get to such prominence? How did a man who never killed anyone personally come to be directly responsible for the murder of millions in backstreets, battlefronts and deathcamps?

A massive ego helped but what personal skills prepared him for his life as Germany's national führer? It was certainly not his talent for organisation. All the evidence proves that he was the opposite of bureaucratic. Indeed, he was feckless and unreliable, generally indolent outside of frenetic bouts of electoral work. As Chancellor he rarely appeared before noon. He lacked the decisiveness usually associated in the mind with a dictator. He would often prevaricate for a long time over urgent decisions before acting.

However, although these traits were to become increasingly dysfunctional as Germany prepared for and engaged in war with its European rivals, they worked to Hitler's advantage on many occasions. Indeed, although Kershaw attaches no great significance to it, Hitler's frequent refusal to intervene in the internal party strife while the Nazis were still growing into a mass party, played an important part in preparing him for dictatorial power.

All dictators derive their pre-eminent position from balancing over social forces that have fought each other to a standstill. Within the Nazi party, rivalry between various would-be leaders frequently threatened to paralyse activity. Unable to defeat each other, rivals appealed to Hitler for support, only to find that he did nothing. This both prolonged the crisis and emphasised that only a decision from Hitler would settle a dispute. In fact, Hitler often waited simply to see which faction was stronger and then backed it.

Kershaw provides interesting evidence of the stages by which Hitler came to believe that he was himself the saviour of the German folk that he had called for at hundreds of beery meetings in the early twenties. As his conviction grew, so his characteristic vacillation allowed him not only to emphasise his special status but also to see which course of action would work to his own advantage, organisationally or politically. Later, as Chancellor and then Fuhrer, Hitler consciously created overlapping responsibilities throughout the party and state in order to continue this Bonapartist technique.

For Kershaw, Hitler's only real and relevant talent, but an absolutely decisive one, was his ability as a propagandist and orator. To those of us who do not speak German, and were brought up to 'World at War' images on TV with mad Adolf waving his arms around, this may come as a surprise. But Kershaw provides many testimonies of the electrifying effect of being present at a Hitler speech. Of course, the audience had to be predisposed to agreeing to the message; his brand of rhetoric was not designed to persuade the totally unconvinced.

While he was pathologically incapable of social chit chat, he was transformed in front of large crowds. He had that rare, awesome talent - also seen in revolutionary leaders like Trotsky or the French reformist Jaures among the great orators of the pre-electronic age - of fusing with the consciousness of the audience, of articulating, magnifying and then throwing back at the audience the passions, the yearnings of the masses. Of course, in content it was the vilest racist filth, the most unimaginable demagoguery. But it was potent.

Kershaw cites many housewives, politicians, soldiers, unemployed workers, shopkeepers, who were mesmerised by a Hitler speech, roused to action and commitment.

This talent was first unearthed after the First World War. Hitler avoided being demobbed until March 1920, as his four years as an army dispatch messenger at the front was the one thing in his life that had given it meaning. Germany's loss was a bitter pill to swallow.

He was on the verge of returning to obscurity when, in May 1919, he was selected to join a course in the Reichswehr (army) after the short-lived Munich workers' republic was savagely put down. The purpose of the course was to train propagandists to counter 'Bolshevik' sympathies in the army. It was here in Munich that Hitler received his first serious systematic political education that fused all his nationalist and anti-semitic prejudices (common enough in the Austria of the 1890s and early 1900s) into some kind of doctrine.

His talent as a speaker was immediately noticed and marshalled. In the summer of 1919, at a public meeting, he came across the tiny anti-semitic German Workers Party (DAP), one of 73 nationalist organisations at the time, all insignificant and most founded since the war's end. In September, he became member number 555, but the fact that the 'party' began numbering at 500 says a great deal about the world in which Hitler moved. Nonetheless, his talents were recognised and he was soon employed as the 'recruitment officer'. Within three years, his success at this was such that serious figures were comparing him to Italy's fascist ruler, Mussolini.

That Hitler did not get driven to the margins of society again after 1918 was due not to these narrow gifts but rather to the fact that Germany had changed. As Kershaw notes:

'Without the changed conditions, the product of a lost war, revolution and a pervasive sense of national humiliation, Hitler would have remained a nobody.'

Kershaw is professor of modern history at Sheffield University. He is not a Marxist but he has produced an account of Weimar Germany (1918-33) that completely confirms the analysis of the rise and success of German fascism provided by Leon Trotsky at the time.

Trotsky from the first grasped that fascism was, above all, a mass movement of the desolate and dispossessed middle classes and unemployed. Its purpose was to destroy the organised workers' movement - its unions and social democratic and communist parties - and on that basis to 'nationalise' the masses so that Germany could fight against its imperialist rivals in a war of conquest that would revive the fortunes of German capitalism and the German nation.

Having lost the war in 1918, and then been subject to rapacious reparations, loss of colonial possessions, demilitarisation and even annexation of some of its border territories, Germany was thrown into civil war and revolution in 1918/19. Primarily through the conscious betrayal of the reformist social democrats (SPD) and the fatally delayed formation of a Communist Party, this revolution was crushed.

Hitler, too, felt betrayed after the war. He welcomed the downfall of the decrepit Hapsburg monarchy but hated the workers' revolution. He opportunistically, if passively, backed the SPD as a lesser evil than the Communists for a while. But the far right sought other explanations for Germany's ruin than just the weaknesses of the old regime. The DAP and Hitler relentlessly targeted Jews, democracy and Bolshevism as the main culprits for the nation's plight.

In these early years, Hitler trumpeted his anti-semitism much more than his anti-Marxism to drum up recruits for the DAP. It was not this ideology or his reactionary nostrums that distinguished Hitler in these days from a myriad of similar völkische parties. It was, as Kershaw shows, his commitment to building a movement of the masses on the streets through which to energise the reactionary hordes, smash their opponents in the workers' movement and destroy bourgeois democracy.

Hitler had watched - terrified and full of loathing - the big disciplined marches of the SPD and Communist Party both before 1914 and during the revolutionary days of 1919. While he abhorred their internationalism and their defence of class interests, he admired their resoluteness and mass character and determined to ape this in his own search for power.

From his youth in Austria, Hitler had inherited a hatred of democracy. He viewed with contempt the impotent proceedings of the powerless parliaments under the Habsburg monarchy. He saw bourgeois democracy as useless and indecisive and fashioned a world view that dispensed with such a facade and concentrated absolute power within a state-party. Within that party, real power would be placed in the hands of one authoritative and unquestioned leader who would be intolerant of factional feuding and forcibly impose his will upon the competing classes.

The failed 1923 beer hall putsch in Munich, when Hitler's forces launched a futile and adventurist assault on regional government in November, also taught Hitler another lesson. From that moment on, he would seek a constitutional, if not peaceful, path to power and not seek to challenge the army head on for state power. Rather, he determined to build a powerful mass movement that combined electoral work with brutality towards its opponents and, once in office, sought to take over the army from within the state apparatus using his own mass paramilitary formation (SA) as the tool for the job.

The attempted putsch was doomed in advance, so small and without influence was the DAP. But by his action and by his self-promotion inside prison during 1924 (writing *Mein Kampf* made him a millionaire eventually) he sealed his reputation. On release from prison in 1925, he proceeded to refound the NSDAP (as the DAP had become in 1920) using his influence to reorganise and purge it of all opponents. By 1929, the NSDAP was a national, if small, party, well-organised and hegemonic on the nationalist right and Hitler was in unchallenged control of the movement. Factional infighting - once endemic - was largely a thing of the past.

Yet, for all this, in the mid-1920s the 'Nazi Movement was no more than a fringe irritant in German politics. Hitler . . . was confined to the political wilderness.' In 1927, the Interior Ministry reported that the NSDAP was a 'splinter group incapable of exerting any noticeable influence on the great mass of the population.' All this was true, but about to change.

Between the failed 1923 putsch and the Interior Ministry report, Germany's economy had stabilised to a degree. Industrial production and real wages surpassed the pre-war level for the first time in 1927. Hitler's fortunes waned. In

the 1928 national Reichstag elections, the Nazis got a mere 2.6 per cent of the vote.

But the great crash on Wall Street in October 1929 irrevocably switched the points of history. Economic slump engulfed the capitalist world over the next four years. In January 1930, German unemployment reached over 4.5 million; wages, output and prices began a steep fall uninterrupted until mid-1932. Workers were thrown onto the scrap heap; the middle classes were ruined.

The Nazis benefited from the crisis immediately. The masses' disaffection was aimed at the parties of 'democracy' in the Weimar Republic who ruled from 1918 when the monarchy's power was dissolved. Social democracy and the traditional right were blamed for the calamity. The Nazis were untouched by any governmental responsibility; and they campaigned against the increasingly vicious reparations' plan of the Americans and British. They took their mass propaganda machine onto the streets. As early as December 1929 they gained 11 per cent of the vote in regional state elections in Thuringia.

When the government was unexpectedly dissolved in March 1930, Hitler was handed an unexpected gift. Elections would not have been due until mid-1932. Kershaw undoubtedly places too much emphasis upon 'this act of irresponsibility' by the traditional parties for giving Hitler a leg up to power. In fact, Germany's social crisis was too great to be contained by parliamentary solutions and at one point or another it was destined to overwhelm the institutions of bourgeois democracy. Until 1933, Germany was ruled increasingly by decree as the paralysed parliament was sidelined again and again. The Nazis undoubtedly gained from this, but so also did the Communists.

The September 1930 Reichstag elections saw the Nazi's win 18.3 per cent of the vote, gaining over 100 deputies and becoming the second largest party. Again, Hitler turned down all suggestions that he accept a governmental post, demanding instead total power so as to avoid being held responsible for the deepening crisis. But the mass terror on the streets intensified dramatically in the next two years as the SA's mass electoral propaganda was everywhere accompanied by open brutality towards Jews, social democrats and, especially, communists.

Kershaw's book deals with the question of the nature and degree of support Hitler got from the German ruling class. Was the Nazi party a capitalist creation from the start? The answer is clearly no. The NSDAP was a creature of the pan-German middle classes, initially with regional support in the early 1920s in Catholic Bavaria but later after 1929 striking deep roots in the rural Protestant areas of northern and eastern Germany.

But without wealthy backers Hitler could not have built the party. From 1919 until the failed coup of 1923, Hitler was able to come to the fore because he attracted support from rich and influential figures within German ruling circles; publishers, the odd industrialist and several landowners. This support was critical in providing a national structure, organisation and financial backing for the Nazis; but it was often short of funds for campaigning.

However, the majority of the German ruling class did not want to see Hitler come to power, certainly not alone, as late as 1932. The industrial bourgeoisie generally favoured the conservative parties, or at best a government with some Nazi ministers. Not a few thought Hitler a dangerous crank and preferred social order to be maintained by stronger authoritarian measures from the succession of Chancellors relying on the army, not Hitler's hundreds of thousands of political paramilitaries.

The backers of the cabinets of von Papen and von Schleicher in 1930-32 sought desperately to avoid the pressure of the masses on government, even the reactionary hordes of Hitler. This was especially so since the ideological profile of the Nazis was often confusing to the bourgeoisie.

As late as the summer of 1930, the ideological stance of the NSDAP was confused by the existence of a powerful current within it around Otto Strasser who preached the need for a 'social revolution' and consciously aimed to draw upon the support of the working class and mass of unemployed who were attracted to the Communist Party. While this was a chimera, nevertheless, the demands of the Strasserites, if implemented, would have involved significant erosions of the freedom of the capitalist class. Such strivings were naturally anathema to them. The only consistent Nazi

backers, therefore, well into the 1930s, were the German landowners.

Now so close to real power, between mid-1930 and mid-1932 Hitler resolved any lingering ideological vagaries. First, Otto Strasser and his supporters were kicked out; secondly the Ruhr industrialists were assiduously courted; up until then only the steel magnate Thyssen was a Hitler fan.

In mid-1932, Hitler suffered a major crisis. In the July elections, the Nazis received 37 per cent of the vote and were the largest party. Hitler refused to accept anything but the Chancellorship. Gregor Strasser, the second most important figure inside the Nazis, however, wanted Hitler to join a coalition government under von Schleicher, thereby lending it mass support.

In the event, the Reich President, von Hindenburg, refused to even consider giving the Chancellorship to, 'this Bohemian corporal' and Hitler's strategy of mass mobilisation and electoral support appeared to have collapsed. Strasser began to move away from Hitler, manoeuvring with von Schleicher and adding to the sense of demoralisation within the Nazi leadership when he finally broke from Hitler in December.

For Hitler, the whole point of his strategy was not just to 'get into government' but to get the only office that would allow him to destroy all the main parties, including the conservative bourgeois ones, which were part of the 'Weimar system'. Trotsky completely understood this aspect of German fascism when he said that Hitler aimed to 'politically expropriate' the German bourgeoisie (even against its will or better judgement) in order to defend its economic class interests.

Hitler's strategy paid off in January 1933, when he was finally offered the Chancellorship by President Hindenburg. A further election in November 1932, although it saw a decline in the Nazi vote, nonetheless confirmed that the conservative parties could not rule as a minority government. Hitler's bourgeois opponents had run out of ideas; they could no longer rule effectively as a minority without Hitler's support.

Kershaw's book deals in detail with the parliamentary balancing acts and political manoeuvring between the main traditional bourgeois conservative parties in the years 1930-33 as they sought first to marginalise, then to incorporate and, finally, to surrender to Hitler. He is at great pains to establish his case that untimely or foolish decisions by irresponsible politicians were mainly responsible for Hitler's success.

In that Kershaw insists that Hitler's victory was not inevitable and could have been prevented, he is, of course, correct. But he pays scant attention to the real social and political forces that could have stopped Hitler and the Nazis - the working class and their parties the SPD and KPD.

He briefly bemoans their short-sighted dismissal of the threat posed by the Nazis in the 1920s and the sectarian posturing of the Communist Party. But he fails to see that mistaken strategy and tactics by the leaders of the German workers' movement were the main reasons why Hitler was not stopped.

Trotsky condemned the ultra-left madness of the 'Third Period' Stalinist Communist Party which insisted that the social democrats - still the main party of the German workers and largest party in the Reichstag up to 1932, were worse than the Nazis. As a result, all effective practical political co-operation to defeat the Nazi attacks on them was forbidden and the social democratic leaders were able to maintain their hold over their base as a result.

This was crucial because the SPD leaders were committed to maintaining and working within the shambles of the Weimar republic, even tolerating the authoritarian rule of von Papen. By propping up a system that could be seen to be not working, the reformists played into the hands of the Nazis whilst not preparing their own mass support for the violent confrontation with the stormtroopers that alone could have halted their momentum.

What Trotsky argued for was a policy that tactically stressed the need for a united front of the workers against fascism and an anti-capitalist programme that would rally the working class masses to a root and branch destruction of the economic power of German capitalism. At the heart of his programme was the recognition that the fight against the

Nazis could not be limited to a 'defence of democracy' even if that were its starting point. As in Russia in 1917, even democratic demands could only be achieved by the creation of a workers' council republic.

But Kershaw implicitly feels that defence of the 'Weimar system' was a realistic possibility against the menace of fascism. He cannot even envisage its replacement by a revolutionary yet democratic socialist alternative. Weimar Germany was a bastard child of the failed German revolution. It was in terminal crisis after 1929. The only issue was what political system would replace it? The choice was: either Hitler's fascist defence of German capitalism and the quasi-constitutional uprooting of Weimar democracy; or socialist revolution.

The final parts of Kershaw's first volume deal with the destruction visited upon the workers' movement in the aftermath of Hitler's success as a result of the failure of the workers' leaders to unite in opposition to Hitler. The trade unions, the social democrats and communists were the first targets, their leaders arrested, their premises ransacked and closed, their activists murdered and exiled, their publications banned.

By 1934, the plebeian rage of the millions of people who carried out these deeds in the SA had to be checked by Hitler. Prominent bourgeois were being picked off, even ex-Chancellor von Schleicher was murdered.

Meanwhile, many in their ranks had expected some immediate reward for the years of service in 'the fight against Bolshevism' but little was forthcoming. Restlessness and discontent were rising. The army high command, too, was increasingly ranged against Hitler, disturbed by the presence of an armed paramilitary force loyal not to the state but to the Nazi party. Hitler decided finally to act against the SA and its leader Ernst Rohm in 1934.

By a small, but murderous, purge, the SA was demobilised and eventually incorporated and subordinated to the army and the bourgeois state machine, its purpose as shock troops against the workers' movement having been fulfilled. At the same time the army became 'nazified'.

Kershaw's first volume finishes with Hitler's annexation of the demilitarised Rhineland in March 1936, a fact that announced to the imperialist rivals in Europe that war was inevitable. Hitler would not stop at crushing German imperialism's internal enemies. While we await the second volume, everyone should read Kershaw's lively and richly detailed account of these years.

Don't wait for the paperback; it is widely available in hardback at half price, not because it has been remaindered but because, rightly, it has been heavily discounted as a best seller.

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