

Hitler 1939-45. Nemesis

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In a widely-disseminated and highly-regarded set of 'Observations on Hitler' first published in 1978, the German commentator Sebastian Haffner defined the central problem facing any biographer of the dictator thus: 'Everything is missing from this life, from beginning to end - everything which would normally give a human life depth, warmth and dignity: education, career, love and friendship, marriage, parenthood. It is, leaving politics and political passions aside for one moment, a life devoid of content...'.⁽¹⁾ The decisive feature of Hitler's life, according to Haffner, was its 'one-dimensionality';⁽²⁾ his private life was characterised by 'emptiness and nothingness'.⁽³⁾

As material for a biography, therefore, Hitler's life would appear to be a little unpromising. But as Haffner himself noted, this unusual 'poverty of the personal' was paralleled by an 'exceptional intensity of political life and experience'⁽⁴⁾ which culminated, indeed, in the figure concerned becoming the pivotal figure in a system of personal rule unprecedented in modern industrial society, a system whose inherent destructive impulses were given shape and direction by the visionary, utopian politics which its central figure espoused. Elevated to the position of absolute leader of a society which projected its aspirations for national renewal onto him, and whose social, cultural and ethnic resentments he articulated in extreme, ideologically-defined fashion, Hitler unleashed a world-war which left much of Germany and Europe in ruins, 50 million dead and millions more displaced and uprooted, and above all formed the context in which an act of genocide unprecedented in its scope and fury could take place.

Small wonder, then, that Ian Kershaw has chosen to approach this two-volume study of Hitler less as a study of his personality per se - except insofar as his personal habits and preferences influenced his style of government, as it clearly did - than as a study of charismatic politics and personal rule. In the first volume, published in 1998, Kershaw traced the steps by which the disorientated and highly divided population of a quintessentially modern, but exceptionally crisis-ridden state came to invest its hopes and aspirations for

national renewal and revival in the dynamic Nazi movement and its leader.⁽⁵⁾ While only a minority of Germans had actually voted for Hitler in 1933, by 1936 a fatal combination of seduction and savage brutality had ensured that widespread social consensus behind Hitler's regime had been established and opposition had been more-or-less silenced. The left had been crushed, the coalition with the conservatives cemented; unemployment had been overcome, and the first diplomatic successes had been registered; not only was Hitler's personal authority unquestioned by those who sought his grace and favour, his political wishes were anticipated by those who understood what he wanted, and who knew instinctively to do his bidding without detailed prompt.

It is this same image of a political system driven forwards by individuals 'working towards the Führer', rather than one driven by dictatorial fiat, which Kershaw develops in his second volume, which covers the years between the occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and Hitler's final, ignominious end in April 1945. Drawing out the implications of a phrase in an apparently unremarkable document penned by a mid-ranking agricultural official in 1934 (if nothing else, these two volumes surely represent the longest gobblet answer ever written!), Kershaw paints a by now essentially familiar picture of a regime in which the dictator's satraps competed with each other to be seen to be implementing the 'Führer's wishes', in which rational, bureaucratic government was successively eroded as individuals built empires and pursued initiatives without regard for the niceties of collective decision-making, and in which a regime whose popularity rested on its ability to generate constant success was propelled forwards by the expectations of an impulsive movement eager for progress in the pursuit of its central goals. His adumbration of a system based upon charismatic rule in which individuals 'worked towards the Führer' - a set of arguments he and others have been stating and developing over ten to fifteen years - offers the most persuasive way out of the historiographical impasse which scholarly debate on National Socialism had reached by the late 1980s, at which point the 'structuralist' versus 'intentionalist' debate had started to look a little like a Punch and Judy show.

As the titles of the initial chapters of the second volume make clear, Kershaw sees the regime as having been characterised by a 'ceaseless radicalisation', which propelled a 'drive for expansion'. Kershaw is willing to concede that Hitler was an opportunist, and as his study of the Anschluss with Austria shows, it was sometimes others within the system who made the running at crucial moments, but leaves the reader in no doubt that his visionary politics were driving towards war from the outset, and that military expansion eastwards was the goal all along.

Nowhere was the link between war, 'working towards the Führer' and the translation of vision into reality more clear, of course, than in the pursuit of Nazi racial policy. In foreign policy the refusal of other countries to play the role Hitler had ascribed to them, and the dictator's miscalculation of the diplomatic situation in 1939, had led to him having to fight the war under circumstances somewhat other than those he had envisaged; Britain's refusal to make peace in 1940 meant that attacking the Soviet Union forced Hitler to fight the two-front war he had always wished to avoid. Differences of opinion between Hitler and his senior generals spiralled into a climate of resentment and mistrust in which Hitler took more and more responsibility for operational details in the military sphere. But in the area of Jewish policy it was different. Here, Hitler could trust his deputies, Himmler and Heydrich, to understand him instinctively and to translate his wishes into reality - Hitler himself needed 'scarcely any involvement' (p.317) in detailed discussion of the persecution of the Jews. Having indicated his desire that the newly incorporated formerly Polish territories of the Warthegau and Danzig-West Prussia be ruthlessly 'Germanised', for example, he could trust the rival Gauleiters Arthur Greiser and Albert Forster to compete against one another for the dubious honour of having been the first to ride their patches of Poles and Jews.

If competition governed relations between Hitler's subordinates it was, as Kershaw makes abundantly clear, competition based on a clear shared understanding of the broad policy agenda, and in no area was this more the case than in Jewish policy. Furthermore, while Hitler 'authorised more than initiated' (p.354) the measures in the Soviet Union which led to the transition to systematic extermination, Kershaw emphasises that the 'Final Solution' emerged in an environment in which Heydrich, Himmler, Göring and the other key figures were in constant contact with Hitler - it is inconceivable that Hitler was not consulted at key

moments or on momentous decisions.

The context for the transition to systematic annihilation of European Jewry was, of course, the attack on the Soviet Union. Hitler's numerous statements on the supposed links between the Jews and Bolshevism, together with his clear directives on the manner in which the war in the East was to be conducted - as a war of annihilation - made clear to SS and Wehrmacht leadership alike what, in general terms, was envisaged for the hapless civilian population of the Soviet Union. Yet, as Kershaw argues, all the evidence points against the idea that the decision to murder all of Soviet Jewry was taken before or at the point of the attack on Russia - the fact that the initial membership of the *Einsatzgruppen* was too small to carry out the mass murder of all Soviet Jewry, combined with the clear variation from *Einsatzgruppe* to *Einsatzgruppe* in the rate of escalation of murder suggest strongly that 'no general mandate to exterminate Soviet Jewry in its entirety had been issued before Barbarossa began.'(p.468). It was, in fact, not so much the launching of Operation Barbarossa as its failure that provided the context for the final shift into genocide. Prior to this point, Kershaw argues that Hitler had operated on the assumption that a solution would be implemented only after the (successful conclusion of the) war; it was the recognition that the Soviet Union would not be defeated in 1941 which led to the quasi-genocidal 'territorial solution' being superseded by extermination during the war itself.

In arguments which broadly echo Philippe Burrin's 1989 study of the genesis of the 'Final Solution'⁽⁶⁾ Kershaw emphasises Hitler's own repeated references to his threatening prophesy of January 1939: 'If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!' With the failure of Barbarossa, and above all with the entry of the USA into the war in December, Hitler now found himself fighting that long, drawn-out world war. Over the autumn and winter of 1941, all the National Socialist neuroses concerning the home front came to the surface - in the nationalist imagination, Germany had lost the First World War not because her armies had failed at the front, but because the national 'body' had been undermined by parasitic enemies within - chiefly the Jews. Preventing another 1918 demanded the ruthless eradication of these enemies. In line with most recent work, Kershaw stresses the gradual emergence of the genocide programme rather than the likelihood of there having been a single decision, but in the 'gathering whirlwind'(p.480) of the autumn of 1941 he emphasises the beginnings of the deportations of German and Czech Jews, rather than a possible decision to murder *all* Soviet Jewry, as having been most decisive - 'once the decision to deport the Reich Jews to the east had been taken, things began to move rapidly'(p.483).

The home front did, of course, come under increasing strain - not because of the seditious influence of the Jews, but because of the massive burdens the war of attrition on several fronts placed on German society. Hitler's charismatic power had rested on his constant successes, but these had been welcomed by the population above all because they had initially been achieved without war and without bloodshed. And while the relatively easy military successes of 1939 and 1940 ensured that Hitler's popularity did not wane, the pressures of successive winters of war against the Soviet Union saw it quickly undermined. A system which had not only rested upon consensus and adulation, but had drawn much of its underlying dynamism from that adulation, was rapidly forced to rely upon ever-increasing terror as its hold on the population started to fail.

It was also the failure of the military adventure in the East which saw the conservative resistance to Hitler finally coalesce. As Kershaw outlines, the first rumblings of resistance from within the national-conservative elites began with the crises of 1938-9 over Czechoslovakia. Nothing, however, came of these initial attempts to organise opposition, and Hitler's ongoing diplomatic and military successes between 1938 and 1941 cut the ground from beneath the feet of the small minority of conservative figures who were willing to entertain the idea of engaging in resistance. Even as the atrocities in the Soviet Union mounted, very few generals seriously considered joining the resistance, whatever moral qualms they may have had in private. Codes of honour and loyalty made it difficult for officers to consider disobeying orders, let alone assassinating the head of state; the patriotic values of the military caste made it all the more difficult at a time when the nation was engaged in a struggle of life and death against a powerful array of enemies. As General Manstein

remarked to an invitation to join the opposition in 1944: 'Prussian Field-M Marshals do not mutiny' (p.666). Moreover, the ever-growing tensions over military strategy notwithstanding, there was still much ideological cement binding the National Socialist leadership to the national-conservative elites, who shared Hitler's anti-Bolshevism and were far from immune from his vicious anti-Semitism. The moral gesture of the bombplotters of July 1944 notwithstanding, most officers remained loyal to Hitler to the end.

The failure of the assassination attempt of July 1944 brought not only swift and brutal reprisals against those involved, but a final intensification of the processes which had characterised the internal development of the regime since 1933, and especially since 1939. The estrangement of Hitler from the senior army leadership became complete, and old radicals such as Goebbels and Himmler became ever more powerful. Hitler, who had long since ceased to appear in public, retreated literally and figuratively into his bunker. In a state of radical physical decline he pondered over architectural models of Linz, regaling his dwindling entourage of bodyguards, adjutants and secretaries with tales of former party glories and diatribes against the 'world Bolshevik-Jewish conspiracy', tales which gained nothing from the fact that they had been told a thousand times already. All suggestions of negotiating peace terms in a situation which had long since become hopeless were refused, and even as allied armies poured into Germany from both East and West Hitler insisted in dragging the nation down with him. His regime did not, indeed, survive him, collapsing finally one week after he had committed suicide.

This is a superb piece of scholarship. Eulogising reviews are never the most interesting to read, of course, and one feels under some obligation to find something with which one might take issue. Kershaw's passing reference to Hitler's 'poor diet (even before his cranky vegetarianism set in)' (p.36) was one point at which this herbivorous reviewer wondered whether the author's own prejudices were unwittingly creeping in between his discussion of Hitler's. More seriously, one might ask whether, in his characterisation of the destructive dynamism of regime, Kershaw does not overemphasise slightly the seamlessness of the radicalisation process between 1933 and 1945. The outbreak of war, in particular, marked a very major turning point in the scale and scope of Nazi barbarism, and was paralleled by a radical acceleration of the processes of internal governmental dissolution - as Robert Gellately succinctly put it in a recent general interpretation, the war 'revolutionised the revolution'.⁽⁷⁾ Kershaw does acknowledge this in passing sentences, but overall the image of the regime he presents is one of a fairly continuous process of radicalisation, so that the rupture of 1939 does not quite have the emphasis some might feel that it should. But there is no gainsaying that this is a masterly account. Its broad arguments are wholly persuasive and its individual judgements are similarly authoritative. If there are points at which one senses a slight tension between history and biography, then this is perhaps inherent in the undertaking itself. One hesitates to call it definitive, since it advances interpretations which some will doubtless wish to challenge. But it will be essential reading on the Third Reich for many years to come.

Notes

1. Sebastian Haffner, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1981), p.9.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid., p.8.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid., p.11.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ibid., p.8.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936. Hubris* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Philippe Burrin, *Hitler et les Juifs. Genèse d'un génocide* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler. Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.2.
[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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[2]

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