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# THE "HITLER MYTH"

## Image and reality in the Third Reich

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*The Nazi* Volksgemeinschaft *promised not so much an impossible return to the pre-industrial past, as a society free of the contradictions and "irritations" of everyday life in the industrial age. But beneath the ideological representations of the smoothly functioning, monolithic* Volksgemeinschaft, *the real contradictions of modern industrial society remained. Frustration and disappointment with the realities of everyday life under National Socialism led ordinary Germans to grumble and complain, but seldom to engage in behavior that can be appropriately termed "resistance." Why? Organized terror played a central role. But the most important mechanism of social integration in Nazi Germany was Hitler's charismatic leadership. The "Hitler myth" secured the loyalty to the regime of even those who opposed the Nazi movement itself. Millions of ordinary Germans believed that the Führer would certainly right all wrongs in Nazi Germany (especially those committed by his lieutenants, the so-called "little Führers'), if only these abuses could be brought to Hitler's personal attention. Hitler's foreign policy and military successes also convinced ordinary Germans (at least until Stalingrad) that the Führer was a brilliant, indeed infallible, statesman and general who was leading Germany to world power. The "Hitler myth" was not just a cunning triumph of Goebbels' propaganda machine; mass belief in the charismatic leader was the inevitable corollary of the disappointments of quotidian existence in the Third Reich. In the "Hitler myth," ordinary Germans found compensation for the tensions, anxieties and frustrations of everyday life under National Socialism. By the time the Allied bombing raids and German defeats in Russia had begun to deflate this myth, the Führer was already the prisoner of his own propaganda image. Convinced of his own infallibility, Hitler plunged Germany into absolute defeat and collapse.*

*In this brief excerpt, Ian Kershaw summarizes the main components of the "Hitler myth," its significance for the Nazi regime, and the reasons why even the total devastation of Germany did not completely dispel all vestiges of the "Hitler myth" in the years after 1945.*

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We have explored the main components of the popular image of Hitler and their blending into a leadership "myth" of remarkable potency and resilience. The gulf between the fictive figure, manufactured by propaganda on the foundations of pre-existing "heroic" leadership ideals, and the genuine Hitler is striking. Difficult though it is to evaluate, the evidence of the receptivity to the portrayal of Hitler's image which we have examined has pointed to seven significant bases of the "Hitler myth." In each case the contrast between image and reality is stark, the "mythical" content unmistakable.

Firstly, Hitler was regarded as a personification of the nation and the unity of the "national community," aloof from the selfish sectional interests and material concerns which marked the normality of "everyday life" and created the damaging divisions in society and politics – the selfless exponent of the national interest, whose incorruption and unselfish motives were detachable from the scandalous greed and hypocrisy of the Party functionaries. Secondly, he was accepted as the single-handed architect and creator of Germany's "economic miracle" of the 1930s, eliminating the scourge of mass unemployment which continued to plague other European nations, revitalizing the economy, providing improved living standards, and offering a new basis of lasting prosperity. Thirdly, as shown most clearly in the popular reactions to the massacre of the SA leadership in 1934, Hitler was seen as the representative of "popular justice," the voice of the "healthy sentiment of the people," the upholder of public morality, the embodiment of strong, if necessarily ruthless, action against the "enemies of the people" to enforce "law and order." Fourthly, as the example of the "Church Struggle" showed, Hitler was widely viewed – even by prominent Church leaders with a reputation for hostility to Nazism – as personally sincere, and in matters affecting established traditions and institutions as a "moderate" opposed to the radical and extreme elements in the Nazi Movement, but largely kept in the dark

about what was actually going on. Fifthly, in the arena of foreign affairs, Hitler was commonly regarded as an upholder and a fanatical defender of Germany's just rights, a rebuilder of the nation's strength, a statesman of genius, and for the most part, it seems, not as a racial imperialist warmonger working towards a "war of annihilation" and limitless German conquest. Sixthly, in the first half of the war Hitler appeared to be the incomparable military leader who, nevertheless, as a former Front soldier and one distinguished for bravery knew and understood the "psychology" of the ordinary soldier. Even after the war turned sour he continued to be seen by many as the epitome of Germany's unwavering will to certain victory. Finally, there was Hitler's image as the bulwark against the nation's perceived powerful ideological enemies – Marxism/Bolshevism and, above all, the Jews. This image presumably registered most strongly among those sections of the population whose exposure to ideological "schooling" was greatest – particularly, therefore, among committed members of the Party and its affiliates. Fear of Bolshevism and the prevalent anti-Marxism in the German middle classes, made even more acute through the shrill tones of Nazi propaganda, unquestionably formed a wide negative base of Hitler's popularity. But, strikingly, Hitler's personal preoccupation with "the struggle against the Jews" does not appear to have figured as a leading component of his image for the bulk of the population.

That the crass inversion of reality caricatured in these aspects of the popular image of Hitler was in large measure a product of the deliberate distortions of Nazi propaganda has been made abundantly clear in the preceding chapters. Even though at best only partial success was attained in "imposing" this image on the still unbroken socialist/communist and catholic subcultures, where there were strong ideological counters to acceptance of the "Hitler myth," and on sections of the upper classes whose status-conscious elitism provided a continuing barrier to the appeal of populist leadership images, there can be no doubt that the penetration of the propagated "Hitler myth" was deep, especially, but by no means only, among the German middle classes. After 1933, Nazi propaganda, largely uncontested now that opponents within Germany had been silenced, could almost deify Hitler. Goebbels, as we saw, ranked his creation of the public Hitler image as his greatest propaganda triumph. Yet, cynical though its

"manufacture" was, the excesses of the Führer cult after 1933, and the extent of its penetration, are inconceivable without the realization that, in the crisis conditions of the early 1930s, it had touched upon and articulated (even if in extreme and distorted fashion) long-standing and pervasive elements of the bourgeois political culture in Germany.

Of these, the most crucial arose from the disparities between the superficial attainment of national unity and the internal divisions of the German nation-state since its creation in 1871, and the gulf between the immense world-power aspirations and the modesty of Germany's actual achievements in international relations. From Bismarck's time onwards, "national unity" in the new nation-state not only received exaggerated emphasis, but was focused on the rejection of internal "enemies of the Reich" (Catholics, socialists, ethnic minorities) and, increasingly under Wilhelm II, was linked to varying notions of German expansionism. The internal divisions grew more rather than less apparent, however, enhanced by the populist politics from the 1890s onwards, and the imperialist ambitions, though more and more strident, were gravely disappointed. The ideological basis was there for the fundamental divides which the war, defeat, and revolution openly exposed, and which provided the Weimar Republic from its inception with an extremely weak base of legitimation, especially among the bourgeoisie and elites. The extensified fragmentation of Weimar politics and eventual decline into little more than interest politics[1] in the face of mounting internal crisis, entirely delegitimized the State system itself, wholly discredited pluralist politics, and paved the way for a full acceptance – already by 1932 of around 13 million Germans – of a new basis of unity represented in an entirely novel political form personalized in Hitler's "charismatic" leadership.

In such conditions as prevailed in the last phase of the Weimar Republic, of the total discrediting of a State system based upon pluralist politics, the "functional" leadership of the bureaucrat and the Party politician as the representatives of the impersonal "rational-legal" form of political domination, imposing laws and carrying out functions for which they are not personally responsible and with which they are not identifiable, lost credibility. Salvation could only be sought with a leader who possessed *personal* power and was prepared

to take *personal* responsibility, sweeping away the causes of the misery and the faceless politicians and bureaucrats who prevail over it, and seeming to impose his own personal power upon the force of history itself.[2] In reality, of course, the fascist variant of "charismatic leadership" – there are obvious parallels in the Mussolini cult – was not only superimposed on existing bureaucratic power, but created new, extensive apparatuses of bureaucratic administration, and led not to diminished but to massively increased bureaucratic interference in all spheres of daily life. In this paradox, we see the essence of the heightened detestation of the new breed of Party "functionaries," the agents – along with the traditionally disliked State civil servants – of this bureaucratized control, and the popularity of the Führer, whose personal power was idealized and elevated to a plane where it seemed to be executed outside the realms of "everyday life."

An extract from a speech to the Reichstag in April 1939 illustrates well the personalized claims Hitler made for "his" great "achievements" and how far these rested on "national" rather than specifically Nazi ideals and aspirations. These "achievements" provided the basis on which Hitler, more than any politician before him, had been able to integrate not only the German middle classes, but the vast majority of the population who, on particular aspects of policy, could often reveal heated antagonism to the specific manifestations of Nazi rule affecting their daily lives. In his speech, on 28 April 1939, Hitler provided the following catalogue of achievements which, in the view of most ordinary Germans, could only be taken as a breathtaking list of personal successes:

> I have overcome the chaos in Germany, restored order, massively raised production in all areas of our national economy. . . . I have succeeded in completely bringing back into useful production the seven million unemployed who were so dear to all our own hearts, in keeping the German peasant on his soil despite all difficulties and in rescuing it for him, in attaining the renewed flourishing of German trade, and in tremendously promoting transportation. I have not only politically united the German people, but also militarily rearmed them, and I have further attempted to tear up

> page for page that Treaty, which contained in its 448 articles the most base violations ever accorded to nations and human beings. I have given back to the Reich the provinces stolen from us in 1919. I have led back into the homeland the millions of deeply unhappy Germans who had been torn away from us. I have recreated the thousand-year historic unity of the German living-space, and I have attempted to do all this without spilling blood and without inflicting on my people or on others the suffering of war. I have managed this from my own strength, as one who twenty-one years ago was an unknown worker and soldier of my people.[3]

For the great mass of Hitler's audience, the political and economic recovery of Germany, which he was trumpeting as his own personal achievement, was a goal in itself. For Hitler and the Nazi leadership, it provided only the base for racial-imperialist conquest and a war of annihilation. It remains for us to ask how the popular Hitler image we have examined contributed towards the growing strength of the regime and towards making possible this war, which, from what we have seen, most Germans – though prepared to fight if necessary – had been only too anxious to avoid.

The "Hitler myth" can be seen as providing the central motor for integration, mobilization, and legitimation within the Nazi system of rule. Its functional significance has to be examined in the context of its importance for the "non-organized" masses, whose image of Hitler has been the central concern of this work, for the Party faithful, and for the Nazi and non-Nazi elites.

No one was more aware of the functional significance of his popularity in binding the masses to him, and hence to the regime, than Hitler himself. He pointed out that the strength of the regime could not depend on "the laws [!] of the Gestapo alone," and that "the broad mass [of the population] needs an idol."[4] On another occasion, he commented that the ruler who was dependent only upon executive power without finding "the way to the people" was destined to failure.[5] His well-documented fear of loss of personal popularity and the corresponding growth in instability of the regime[6] is further

testimony of his awareness of the centrality of the integratory force of his role as Führer. This integration was largely affective, for the most part forging psychological or emotional rather than material bonds. But its reality can scarcely be doubted. And at moments of internal crisis – such as in June 1934 – the regime was stabilized and its leadership given extended room for manoeuvrability through the surge in Hitler's popularity and the strengthening of bonds of identity between people and Führer. In his portrayed public image, Hitler was able to offer a positive pole in the Third Reich, transcending sectional interests and grievances through the overriding ideal of national unity, made possible through his necessary aloofness from the "conflict sphere" of daily politics, separating him from the more unpopular aspects of Nazism.

Hitler recognized that enthusiasm and willingness for self-sacrifice could not be conserved, and were bound to fade when confronted with "the grey daily routine and the convenience of life."[7] He saw, therefore, that the masses could be bound to him only through constant psychological mobilization, demanding ever recurring successes. Until the middle of the war, the successes came, and spectacularly so, especially in the arena of foreign policy and military affairs, bringing many Germans who were far from Nazis into close identification with Hitler, revamping sagging morale, forcing open acclaim, prompting active participation – if shallow and largely ritualized – in support of "his" achievements, disarming potential opponents, making objections to Nazi policy difficult to formulate. This was, for example, undoubtedly the effect of the plebiscites staged in 1933, 1934, 1936, and 1938, in which the massive acclamation, though the product of intense propaganda and coercion and obviously in no sense a true reflection of the state of opinion, nevertheless reflected genuine widespread approval and admiration for Hitler's accomplishments and persuaded waverers to fall in line.[8]

The plebiscitary acclamation which could always be mobilized by Hitler provided him with an unassailable base of popularity, and as such offered the regime legitimation both within Germany and in the eyes of foreign powers, allowing the scope for further mobilization and a gathering momentum of Nazi policy. The massive popularity of Hitler, recognized even by enemies of the regime, formed therefore a decisive element

in the structure of Nazi rule in Germany. It goes far towards helping to account not only for the high and growing degree of relative autonomy from non-Nazi elites enjoyed by Hitler and the Nazi leadership, but also – as the counterweight to terror, repression, and intimidation – for the weakness of resistance to the regime. The "Hitler myth" and terror were in this sense two indispensable sides of the same coin, ensuring political control and mobilization behind the regime. It is no coincidence, therefore, that terroristic repression escalated wildly in the final phase of the waning regime as the binding force of Hitler's popularity weakened and collapsed.

For the mass of "non-organized" Germans, the "Hitler myth" functioned through the stimulation of popular acclaim – recurrent but always temporary – for *faits accomplis*, for coups which had been brought about, successes already attained, rather than for a clear set of policies in train. One main role of the Party was to ensure that the appropriate degree of acclamation was produced. But for the activists in the Party and its affiliates, the integratory and mobilizing functions of the "Hitler myth" were not confined to support for current attainments, but rested on the incorporation in Hitler of the "idea" of Nazism itself, determining future utopias to be won as well as past glories achieved. The centrifugal forces of the Nazi Movement were held together in great measure by the ideals embodied in the image of the Führer; social disappointments and disillusionment could be transcended and overcome by participation in the Führer's great "struggle" and ultimate satisfaction in the brave new world to come. For the activist and "committed" core of the Movement, especially for the younger element, the perceived Führer image stood symbolically for ideological precepts – preparing for a show-down with Bolshevism, acquisition of *Lebensraum*, "removal of Jews" – which were "directions for action"[9] long before they were realizable objectives. Without such ideological precepts bound up in the "representative figure" of the Führer, the dynamism built into the permanent mobilization of the Party and its affiliates is largely unthinkable. Not detailed plans of a Party programme, but his role as the embodiment of a cosmic struggle against irreconcilable internal and external enemies of immense power and magnitude ultimately bound the Party faithful to Hitler.

And where the coming mortal conflict with Bolshevism sharpened among Nazi activists the preparedness and taste for uncompromising and brutal struggle, the idea of *Lebensraum* and limitless German expansionism provided a future panacea for all national ills and current personal dissatisfactions, the "removal of Jews" offered a current, exising target to be attained, even if the road to the goal was unclear. Based as it was on principles of race, with the figure of the Jew as the focal point of all hatred, and with the Führer as its ideological and organizational fulcrum, the Nazi Movement needed no regular orders or directions from Hitler to step up the pace of anti-Jewish actions and discrimination, pushing the government and the State bureaucracy into action, and always therefore increasing the radicalizing momentum of racial policy.

In such ways, the Führer image functioned, in integrating the potentially disintegrative forces within the Nazi Movement on a different plane among the Party "faithful" than among the broad mass of "non-organized" Germans, in mobilizing the boundless energy and misplaced idealism of the fanatics and activists through orientation towards long-term "cosmic" and "utopian" goals, and through offering legitimation for action undertaken against ideological and racial "enemies of the State."

The significance of the "Hitler myth" has to be seen, finally, on a third level which preceding chapters have not sought to explore systematically; that of its function for the elites – both the non-Nazi "national-conservative" elites and the power-groups within the Movement itself.

For non-Nazi, "national-conservative" power-elites in the economy and in the army, Hitler's "charisma" had in itself never been a decisive factor, even though by the early 1930s it seems clear that substantial sectors of especially the "intellectual elite" had succumbed in varying degrees to the Führer cult.[10] For the traditional elites, it was not charisma but pragmatic power considerations which aligned them with Hitler. The erosion of their political and social "basis of legitimation," stretching deep into the pre-war era, had reached a critical level during the Weimar Republic.[11] Hitler was able to offer them a new mass base for the apparent consolidation of their leadership positions within the framework of an authoritarian system, together with the prospect of Germany attaining a position of hegemony within

Europe and even world power status. For his part, Hitler needed their support to gain and consolidate power. This was the well-known basis of the *entente* between the dominant forces of the traditional "power-elite" and the Nazi leadership in January 1933.[12]

However little "charisma" had come into these considerations in 1933, there seems no doubt that the "Hitler myth" – or significant elements of it – played an important role in shaping the behaviour of the conservative elites in the following years in at least two ways. Firstly, misplaced conceptions within the elites of Hitler as a man whom they could trust and "work with," in contrast to the Party radicals, integrated the disparate sectors of the elites and mobilized their support behind the Nazi leadership in the critical early years at the same time that Hitler's popularity provided the mass base of legitimation for the presumed reassertion of their own spheres of domination. Important figures from within the "national-conservative" elites who later played prominent roles in resistance to Nazism – such as Ernst von Weizsäcker in the bureaucracy, Carl Goerdeler in the economy, and Henning von Tresckow in the military – were all prepared to distance Hitler in the early years from their mounting criticism of the radicals in the Movement.[13] Their path into fundamental opposition was, partly for this reason, a hesitant one, and their objections to the regime for long less than fundamental.[14]

Secondly, their underrating of the "caesaristic" elements of Hitler's mass charismatic base meant that, far from providing a new foundation for the power of the traditional elites, as they had hoped, the plebiscitary acclamation for the Führer enabled Hitler's own power to detach itself from its likely shackles and develop a high degree of relative autonomy, at the same time reducing former dominant groups like the army to "power-elites" proper to merely "functional élites,"[15] unable to check Hitler himself and the "wild men" of the Nazi Movement, even when wishing to do so. In cementing the basis of the Führer's pivotal position, the "Hitler myth" had been instrumental in establishing a situation in which the traditional elites could become outflanked by the specifically Nazi elites. Unlike the position in classic "Bonapartist" theory, therefore, the Dictator and his entourage could not be edged aside by the traditional "ruling class" once the economy had been stabilized. The dynamic driving-force of the "Hitler myth" allowed, in fact, no

stabilization or "normalization," but rather conditioned circumstances in which the traditional "ruling class" became ever more subsumed in and dependent upon the "behemoth"[16] of the Nazi State which it was no longer able to control in its mad rush to destruction.

From the early 1920s onwards, Hitler had built up his power base in the Party above all on the strength of the bonds of personal loyalty with his "paladins," the second-rank Nazi leaders and *Gauleiter*. Hitler's personal magnetism, his unique demagogic talents, his strength of will, apparent self-confidence and certainty of action, and his indispensability to the Movement (which had fractured without his leadership following the ill-fated Putsch of 1923), all provided the foundations of charismatic authority of extraordinary strength within his own entourage, resting upon bonds of personal loyalty. For his part, Hitler always felt most at home in the company of his closest group of "fellow fighters" from the "time of struggle." He realized that their loyalty was the firmest basis of his own personal power, that he needed them as they needed him. His hatred for those who crossed him having once shared the bond of mutual loyalty was unbounded, but equally he never forgot old services performed, and, apart from the "Night of the Long Knives" in June 1934, he did not resort to purges within the Party.[17]

The institutionalization of Hitler's charismatic leadership, first of all within the Party during the 1920s and then within the State after 1933, served a crucial function in sealing the bonds between Hitler and the subordinate Party leadership. The integrative function was the decisive one here. The fragmentation of the Nazi "elite" groupings had shown itself plainly in 1924, and the inner-Party factionalism and opposition in the early 1930s had been countered only through the strength of Hitler's personal position. After 1933, too, the ferocious personal enmities and political conflicts within the Nazi elite, which otherwise would have torn the system apart, were resolved only in Hitler's own charismatic authority – in his indisputable position as the base of Nazism's popular legitimacy and the embodiment of Nazism's "idea."

These Party leaders were of course closer to the real Hitler than were the mass of ordinary Germans or even the mass of Party activists. What is striking, therefore, and of importance for the drive and dynamism of the regime, is that the undiluted

"Hitler myth" – the fully-fledged cult of the "superman" Leader in all its glorification – embraced the Nazi elite almost in its entirety, and was not simply regarded cynically as a functional propaganda manufacture. If the glorifying speeches and writings of subleaders during the Third Reich itself[18] are no proof of this, the behaviour of Nazi leaders arraigned at Nuremberg and post-war memoirs (for all their obvious apologetics) demonstrate it conclusively.[19]

Even after the war and the revelations of Nuremberg, Alfred Rosenberg called Hitler the "driving force and untiring motor of the great achievements of the National Socialist State."[20] For Hans Frank, the Führer had been "a sort of superman" in whom he had believed "without reservation" and whom he regarded as being right "in all decisive matters."[21] Albert Speer, the ambitious, calculating, and rational power technician who had climbed to the top of the ladder, and who distanced himself most clearly from Hitler at Nuremberg and in his memoirs, admitted that he had seen in the Führer something approaching "a hero of an ancient saga" and, after the victory in France, as "one of the greatest figures in German history."[22] And the former head of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach, who retained even at Nuremberg a naive attachment to Hitler, indicated in his memoirs the effect on Hitler himself of the constant toadying and sycophancy which surrounded him, shielding him from rational criticism or genuine debate, and bolstering his increasing detachment from reality. Von Schirach pointed out that "this unlimited, almost religious veneration, to which I contributed as did Goebbels, Göring, Heß, Ley, and countless others, strengthened in Hitler himself the belief that he was in league with Providence."[23]

As these memoirs (in which the element of self-defence based upon complete submission to the Führer does not contradict the apologists' genuine belief in his power and the extreme personal devotion to him) clearly suggest, Hitler's own person gradually became inseparable from the "Führer myth." Hitler had to live out more and more the constructed image of omnipotence and omniscience. And the more he succumbed to the allure of his own Führer cult and came to believe in his own myth, the more his judgement became impaired by faith in his own infallibility,[24] losing his grip on what could and could not be achieved solely through the strength of his "will." Hitler's capacity for self-

deception had been profound ever since the mid-1920s, if not earlier, and was vital in order to carry conviction among his immediate entourage about the greatness of his cause and the righteousness of his path towards attaining it. But as his success within the Movement, within the German State, and on the international stage grew until it knew no bounds, so the self-deception of the "conviction" ideologist magnified to the extent that it ultimately consumed all traces of the calculating and opportunist politician, leaving in its place only a voracious appetite for destruction – and ultimately self-destruction. In this sense, the "Hitler myth" was a fundamental component of the underlying instability of the Nazi regime and its untrammelled dynamic of destruction.

It would have been expecting too much to imagine that the once-mighty "Hitler myth" might disappear overnight in 1945, disintegrating along with the mortal remains of the Führer himself and being scattered with the ashes of the Third Reich. Not only had its hold been too strong for that among considerable sections of the population, but the conditions of the immediate post-war era were miserable enough for many to compare them unfavourably with the peacetime era under Nazism.

An early post-war opinion survey undertaken by the United States occupying forces in October 1945 among a representative sample of the population of Darmstadt suggested differences in attitudes towards Nazism among those under nineteen years of age and older Germans. As many as 42 per cent of the youth, compared with 22 per cent of the adults, thought the reconstruction of Germany could best be carried out by "a strong new Führer." According to the report, ". . . a considerable difference appeared in the attitude towards Hitler, the majority of the youth offering an opinion being ready to excuse Hitler as a good man with bad advisers, while the majority of the older people condemned Hitler as an evil individual."[25] The Nuremberg Trials lifted the scales from the eyes of many Germans, and later OMGUS surveys reported that only one in eight (12 per cent) of those questioned in the American Zone recalled trusting Hitler as Leader up to the end of the war, while 35 per cent claimed never to have trusted him and a further 16 per cent to have kept faith in him only until the outbreak of

war.[26] Nevertheless, around one in two Germans in both the American and the British Zones – and a percentage on the increase – thought that National Socialism had basically been a good idea, badly carried out, and were far more favourably disposed to it than to communism.[27] Good social conditions, good living conditions, full employment, unified State and government, and order and security were the attributes, in that order, picked out as the best thing about National Socialism.[28] As late as 1950, 10 per cent of a nation-wide opinion survey sample in West Germany regarded Hitler as the statesman who had achieved most for Germany – second only to Bismarck.[29] In summer 1952, around a quarter of the population had a "good opinion" of Hitler.[30] A tenth of those questioned thought that Hitler was the greatest statesman of the century, whose true greatness would only be recognized at a later date, and a further 22 per cent thought that, while he had made "some mistakes" he had nevertheless been an excellent head of State.[31] Around a third of those questioned still opposed the attack on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944.[32] In 1953, Some 14 per cent still voiced their willingness to vote again for a man such as Hitler.[33]

A sample of youth in north Germany interviewed in the late 1950s still revealed significant traces of the "Hitler myth": he had done much good in abolishing unemployment, punishing sexual criminals, constructing the motorways, introducing cheap radio sets, establishing the Labour Service, and reinstating Germany in the esteem of the world. He had been an idealist with many good ideas at first, only later making errors, turning out to be basically evil, and becoming insane and a mass murderer.[34]

The decisive drop in the level of Hitler's posthumous popularity came during the era of the "economic miracle" under Adenauer and Erhard. By the mid-1960s, only 4 per cent were reporting that they might be willing once again to vote for someone like Hitler.[35] By this date, only about 2 or 3 per cent thought Hitler has achieved more than any other leader for Germany. (Adenauer had, by now, far outstripped Bismarck as the favourite in these stakes.)[36] Even so, the number of those who believe that Hitler would have been one of the greatest German statesmen of all time had it not been for the war remained relatively high, though this figure too had fallen sharply (from 48 per cent in 1955 to 32 per cent by 1967).[37]

By the mid-1960s, admiration for Hitler was almost entirely confined to the residual extreme radical Right, the neo-Nazis. During the first years of the Federal Republic, from 1949 to 1953, when the Right was staging something of a recovery, attempts had been made to distinguish between "insane Hitlerism" and the positive aspects of National Socialism.[38] But as this phase of radical Right optimism died away from 1953, it was replaced in the hard-core by professed adherence to the Nazi past and outright glorification of Hitler.[39] The basic tenor of the publications of the extreme Right has scarcely altered since that date. The short-lived revitalization of the neo-Nazi Right which saw the temporary rise to prominence of the NPD [National Democratic Party] between 1966 and 1968 brought a very minor revival of positive views about Hitler and Nazism. In 1968, 6 per cent of the West German population (compared with 4 per cent in 1965 and 1967) reported their willingness to vote again for a man such as Hitler.[40] The "Hitler Wave" of publications during the 1970s appears to have contributed to renewed and open glorification of Hitler on the extreme Right.[41] Hitler is still today regarded there in "heroic" terms as a "great statesman" and "significant personality," whose foreign policy achieved German power and autonomy, while his failure and the loss of the war are put down to sabotage from within, and the war itself attributed not to Hitler but to the meddling of the western powers in a German-Polish conflict.[42] Systematic sampling of West German voters carred out in 1979–80 indicated that 13 per cent of all voters in the Federal Republic had a consolidated extreme rightist "world view"; 14 per cent responded positively to the statement that "we should again have a Leader who would rule Germany with a strong hand for the good of all,"[43]

Though these figures shock, they need to be put into perspective. Since 1945, West Germany has become a "normal" liberal democracy, with close affinities to the political systems of other western countries. These countries, too, have their unreconstructed fascists and Nazis, their residual lunatic right-wing fringe, and their broader bands of sympathizers with various aspects of rightist thinking. And apart from the peculiarities of the relationship with the German Democratic Republic, the structural problems of the West German State are in the main those common to most (and less acute than in many) advanced capitalist industrial societies of the present: problems

of social equality and distribution of wealth, and of maintaining in an era of world-wide recession the economic growth so central to the legitimacy of post-war liberal democracies; problems of the exploitation (and often ruination) of limited natural resources in the interests of the economy; problems of national defence in a nuclear age; and the corresponding problems of containing and absorbing often justified social and political protest without destroying civil liberties and undermining the very essence of the liberal democratic state.

The socio-economic problems in West Germany as elsewhere have given rise to an inevitable resurgence of hostility towards ethnic and other minorities, and have put some pressure on the political system itself (reflected in the emergence of the part ecological, part anti-nuclear, part general social protest "Green Party"). But the specific features and structural characteristics of the German socio-political culture in the short-lived and ill-fated nation-state, which conditioned the manufacture and appeal of the extraordinary "Hitler myth," were largely swept away in the whirlpool of change arising from total defeat, and were completely banished in the process of long-term change deriving from post-war reconstruction. Unlike the 1920s and 1930s, the current socio-economic problems, acute though they are, have not seen a marked upswing in the political fortunes of the extreme Right. Crucially, they have not produced, nor do they appear likely to do so, a damaging crisis of legitimacy for the State.

Only such a crisis, of almost inconceivably devastating proportions – such as might follow a major war – could so undermine and destroy the existing pluralist political structures that a new form of fascist-style charismatic leadership might appear to sizeable proportions of the population to be a viable and attractive solution. Without wanting to appear too sanguine, and without trivializing the persistent phenomenon of right-wing extremism and the need to maintain vigilance against it, the full realization of the responsibility which Hitler bears for the untold agonies suffered by millions has so discredited everything he stood for in the eyes of sane persons everywhere that, except in circumstances beyond the scope of our realistic imagination, it is difficult to see that there could be a resurrection or a new variant of the once-mighty "Hitler myth," with its power to capture the imagination of millions.

Old myths are, however, replaced by new as the combination of modern technology and advanced marketing techniques produce ever more elaborate and sophisticated examples of political image-building around minor personality cults, even in western democracies, aimed at obfuscating reality among the ignorant and gullible. The price for abdicating democratic responsibilities and placing uncritical trust in the "firm leadership" of seemingly well-intentioned political authority was paid dearly by Germans between 1933 and 1945. Even if a collapse into new forms of fascism is inherently unlikely in any western democracy, the massive extension of the power of the modern State over its citizens is in itself more than sufficient cause to develop the highest level possible of educated cynicism and critical awareness as the only protection against the marketed images of present-day and future claimants to political "leadership."

## NOTES

Reprinted from Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth." Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 253–69.

1 See T. Childers, "Interest and Ideology: Anti-System Politics in the Era of Stabilization 1924–1928" in G. Feldman (ed.), *Die Nachwirkungen der Inflation auf die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich, 1985), pp. 1–20.
2 See A. Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London, 1982), pp. 58–9, 62–3.
3 M. Domarus (ed.), *Hitler, Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945* (Weisbaden, 1973), p. 1178; S. Haffner, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* (Munich, 1978), p. 44.
4 H. Picker, *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier 1941 bis 1942* (Stuttgart, 1963), p. 248; H. von Kotze and H. Krausnick, "Es *spricht der Führer*", *7 exemplarische Hitler-Reden* (Gutersloh, 1966), p. 46.
5 von Kotze and Krausnick, "*Es spricht der Führer,*" p. 46.
6 See A. Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin, 1969), p. 229; and also T. W. Mason, "The Legacy of 1918 for National Socialism" in A. Nicholls and E. Matthias (eds), *German Democracy and the Triumph of Hitler* (London, 1971), pp. 215–39.
7 *Lagebesprechungen im Führerhauptquartier*, ed. H. Heiber (Berlin, 1962), p. 287.
8 See A. Schweitzer, *The Age of Charisma* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 86–7.
9 M. Broszat, "Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des National-

sozialismus," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. XVIII, 1970, p. 405. The following reflections owe much to this stimulating article.

10 See W. Struve, *Elites against Democracy. Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890–1933* (Princeton, 1973), p. 433; F. Weinstein, *The Dynamics of Nazism. Leadership, Ideology and the Holocaust* (New York, 1980), pp. 66–7; H. Mommsen, "Zur Verschränkung traditioneller und faschistischer Führungsgruppen in Deutschland beim Übergang von der Bewegungs- zur Systemphase" in W. Schieder (ed.), *Faschismus als soziale Bewegung* (Hamburg, 1976), p. 165; and H. Mommsen, "Der Mythos des nationalen Aufbruchs und die Haltung der deutschen Intellektuellen und funktionalen Eliten" in 1933 *in Gesellschaft und Wissenschaft*, ed. Pressestelle der Universität Hamburg (Hamburg, 1983), p. 134.

11 K.-J. Müller, "Nationalkonservative Eliten zwischen Kooperation und Widerstand" in J. Schmädeke and P. Steinbach (eds), *Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1985), pp. 25–6; R. Baum, *The Holocaust and the German Elite* (London, 1981), pp. 52–3, 178ff., 183ff.

12 See K.-J. Müller, "Nationalkonservative Eliten zwischen Kooperation und Widerstand" in Schmädeke and Steinbach (eds), *Der Widerstand*, pp. 25–6.

13 Ibid., pp. 28–30.

14 The ways in which conservative opposition groups, even when actively conspiring to destroy the regime, could accommodate – without, of course, identifying with them – central parts of Nazi ideology in their "world view" has recently been shown with regard to the "Jewish Question." See C. Dipper, "The German resistance and the Jews," *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. XVI, 1984, pp. 51–93.

15 See K.-J. Müller, *Armee, Politik und Gesellschaft in Deutschland 1933–1945* (Paderborn, 1979), pp. 39–47.

16 See F. Neumann, Behemoth, *The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London, 1942).

17 See M. Kater, "Hitler in a Social Context," *Central European History*, Vol. XIV, 1981, pp. 257–60; Schweitzer, *The Age of Charisma*, p. 66f.

18 See Schweitzer, *The Age of Charisma*, p. 82.

19 See, e.g., G. M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (London, 1948), pp. 186–96; and D. Jahr, "Die Einstellung der engeren NS-Elite zur Persönlichkeit und politischen Strategic Adolf Hitlers," RuhrUniversität Bochum Magisterarbeit, 1984.

20 A. Rosenberg, *Letzte Aufzeichnungen, Ideale und Idole der nationalsozialistischen Revolution* (Göttingen, 1955), p. 328.

21 H. Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens* (Munich, 1953), pp. 139, 322.

22 Speer, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 177, 184.

23 B. von Schirach, *Ich glaubte an Hitler* (Hamburg, 1967), p. 160.

24 According to Otto Dietrich, Hitler began around 1935–6 "to hate objections to his views and doubts in his infallibility," wanting "to speak but not to listen" – O. Dietrich, *Zwölf Jahre mit Hitler* (Cologne/Munich, n.d. [1955]), pp. 44–5. And Fritz Wiedemann claimed it had been impossible to contradict a leader "who immediately became

aggressive if the facts did not fit into his conception" – F. Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr werden wollte* (Velbert/Kettwig, 1964), p. 90, and see also pp. 73–4, 89.

25 IfZ, OMGUS-Akten, 5/234–2/2. 13 Oct. 1945.

26 A. J. and R. L. Merritt (eds), *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Survey, 1945–1949* (Urbana, 1970), pp. 30–1.

27 Ibid., pp. 32–3; A. J. and R. L. Merritt (eds), *Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany. The HICOG Surveys, 1949–1955* (Urbana, 1980), p. 7; IfZ OMGUS-Akten, 5/233–3/2, reports from 11 June 1948; 5 Jan. 1949; 11 Feb. 1949 from the British Zone Public Opinion Research Office, Bielefeld.

28 IfZ, OMGUS-Akten 5/233–3/2. 11 Feb. 1949.

29 *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung, 1947–1955*, ed. E. Noelle and E. P. Neumann (Allensbach, 1956), p. 132. K. D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 589, states that as many as 32 per cent of West Germans in 1953 thought that Hitler had been possibly the greatest statesman of this century, but this seems to be a misreading of the figure in the opinion polls given for Bismarck, not Hitler.

30 *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1947–1955*, p. 135.

31 Ibid., p. 136.

32 Ibid., p. 138.

33 Merritt and Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany*, p. 62, n. 17.

34 W. Jaide, "Not interested in politics?" in W. Stahl (ed.), *The Politics of Postwar Germany* (New York, 1963), pp. 368–9.

35 Merritt and Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany*, p. 62, n. 17.

36 *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1965–1967*, ed. E. Noelle and E. P. Neumann (Allensbach, 1974), p. 201.

37 Ibid., p. 144.

38 H.-H. Knuetter, "Ideologies of Extreme Rightists in Postwar Germany," in Stahl (ed.), *The Politics of Postwar Germany*, p. 224.

39 Ibid., pp. 244–6.

40 Merritt and Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany*, p. 62. Presumably for mainly tactical reasons, only a third of the NPD adherents questioned admitted their readiness to vote again for a man such as Hitler.

41 For the commercial "marketing" of Hitler during the 1970s, see C. H. Meyer, "Die Veredelung Hitlers. Das Dritte Reich als Markenartikel" in W. Benz (ed.), *Rechtsextremismus in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 45–67.

42 *5 Millionen Deutsche: "Wir sollten wieder einen Führer haben. .." Die SINUS-Studie über rechtsextremistische Einstellungen bei den Deutschen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981), pp. 54–5.

43 Ibid., pp. 78–9.