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Flight from Reality: *Hitler as Party Leader and Dictator in the Third Reich*

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ANY HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION of the past is on the one hand a tremendous reduction of the overwhelming variety of singular events. On the other hand historiography relies on constant generalization of concrete historical evidence. In the case of the history of the Third Reich, the complex variety of political and social interaction generally is reduced to the predominant role of its indisputable leader, Adolf Hitler. Hence, historians and journalists frequently refer to the Third Reich by introducing the term "Hitler's Germany" or by using the term "Hitlerism" to signify the specific ideological pattern of the Nazi political system. From such a viewpoint, the history of Germany between 1933 and 1945 appears to be essentially the life story of its dictator and his deeds or, following the interpretation of Joachim C. Fest's outstanding biography, Hitler's "political career."

Actually, Joachim Fest, as many historians before him, has tried to take Hitler's personal biography as the focus for describing the rather amorphous chain of events leading from the Nazi seizure of power to the military and political destruction of the German Reich in May 1945. Fest has justified his approach by attributing "historical greatness" to Hitler, although in a purely negative sense, and by maintaining that the concept of "historical greatness," as originally formulated by the famous Swiss historian Carl Jacob Burckhardt, came to its very end with Hitler. The criminal and inhuman character of his rule, however, makes it difficult to accept such a frame of reference and proves that it is inadequate to interpret the history of the Third Reich from a basically idealistic historiographical approach. In conjunction with this, it is worthwhile to recollect Burckhardt's distinction between great personalities in history and those who appear to act as pure destroyers, such as Genghis Khan and others.

Nevertheless, the Hitler-centric interpretation of the Nazi regime still prevails in the historical profession. Recently, the West German

historian Eberhard Jaeckel, whose booklet on “Hitler’s Weltanschauung” has found extensive interest (available also in an English translation under the significant title “Blueprint for Power”), published a small survey on Hitler’s rule with the subtitle “Implementation of the Weltanschauung.” Jaeckel argues that the German dictator had completed his future political program already in the mid-twenties in his two-volume book, *Mein Kampf*. He maintains that Hitler’s so-called “Weltanschauung” was not a vague collection of ideological pretensions and indefinite political targets, but a consistent political philosophy that already contained the basic elements of the political course he followed after gaining the chancellorship in 1933. Consequently, Jaeckel depicts the development of the Nazi political system, its foreign policy, and its war policy as the consistent implementation of Hitler’s goals already formulated in 1924.

Although Jaeckel is the foremost defender of a Hitler-centric interpretation, he is by no means alone. The theory of totalitarian dictatorship, originally to depict the conditions in Stalinist Russia, was applied to Nazi Germany by outstanding scholars like Wheeler-Bennett or Trevor-Roper and subsequently found broad acceptance among historians, mainly by the West German school, which has been characterized by Timothy Mason as “intentionalist.” Karl Dietrich Bracher and a group of historians who were working mainly in the field of Nazi foreign policy argued along similar lines, maintaining that basically the Nazi regime pursued a political strategy whose main elements and essential targets were already fixed in Hitler’s mind, although he did not disclose his real political targets even to his most intimate followers until the time was ripe. Simultaneously, Hitler, according to this interpretation, provided his subleaders only with partial information, thereby hiding his *arcana dominationis* and securing his indisputable political leadership. The similarity of this interpretation with the conspiracy theory that guided the prosecution in the Nuremberg military trials is evident, except that here the conspiracy does not include all of the German leading elites but is restricted to Hitler alone.

Related to this general historiographical approach is the assumption presented by Andreas Hillgruber and his school that Hitler pursued a long-term foreign policy that was to be realized in three stages: the first to restore the German freedom to act and destroy the Treaty of Versailles, the second to gain preponderance on the European continent and conquer living space in the east, and the third to acquire world domination. Most historians agree that Hitler pursued a deliberate strategy of waging war against the rival European powers, while they admit that Hitler had to change parts of his design because of tactical deliberations. The tendency to draw a direct line from Hitler’s programmatic considerations in *Mein Kampf* to his later foreign policy is also familiar among American historians, especially in the case of Norman Rich and his book on Hitler’s war aims; Gerhard Weinberg, who is a leading expert in the field of German foreign policy during this period, puts the weight rather on Hitler’s expansionism in general, although he is convinced that the German dictator acted according to a deliberate and fairly rational concept.

The intentionalist school would not raise the question of why Hitler decided to take the next step and what political pressures might be responsible for the remarkable acceleration of his time schedules, especially with regard to the immediate preparation for war. Many biographers refer to psychological reasons that made Hitler feel that time ran against him without analyzing the domestic political conditions that possibly made him feel that way. Alternatively, psychohistorians like Robert Waite and Rudolf Binion presented additional explanations for what can be called an accelerating radicalization of the methods and targets of Nazi policy. But even a comprehensive and, by the way, noncontroversial knowledge of Hitler's psyche and personal motivations will not help much to identify the link between the announcement of mainly ideological goals and their actual implementation. A closer analysis of the internal political process within the Third Reich and of considerably important moves in foreign policy shows that a great many initiatives that necessarily implied a higher degree of political militancy were not inaugurated by Hitler himself, although they were tolerated and frequently indirectly favored by the dictator. The often-articulated argument that no political move of relevance could have been started without the expressed consent of Hitler cannot relieve the historian from the necessity of analyzing the circumstances under which Hitler's more or less imaginary political concepts were actually implemented.

ANY COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS of the Third Reich that uses Hitler's personality as the key for explaining what actually happened meets the difficulty that the dictator simply did not possess the extraordinary qualifications that would have been necessary to control and instigate the political events as suggested by the intentionalist school. Even Joachim Fest referred to him as a "non-person," and Peter Stern, who wrote an extremely interesting biographical analysis of Hitler, called him a "Mr. Nobody." In fact, Hitler's private life, his ideas, his lifestyle, his intellectual interests would not deserve any mention if it were not for the fatal destructive repercussions of the man's political career. Myriads of biographers and specialists have described his private life, his interests in films, operas, city planning, and architecture, as well as his reading and other influences upon him. But all this does not reveal anything original in the sense that it distinguishes Hitler's personality from other völkisch postwar sectarians (besides his paranoiac psychology). Apart from his propaganda speeches or political acts, Hitler appeared to be a shy, reluctant, and noncommunicative individual. He needed mass audiences as a medium, and even in the inner circle around him he would not relax, except for his sometimes submissive behavior toward chauffeurs, secretaries, and members of his bodyguard. Even his photographic postures with his dogs, with Eva Braun, and with children and visitors at the Obersalzberg were staged. Actually, the man was characterized by a complete absence of any human contact, sexual relations included.

The poverty of Hitler as an individual makes it extremely difficult

to explain his immense political success. The clue to overcoming this contradiction has been brilliantly pointed out by Peter Stern, who makes it quite clear that Hitler achieved a personality by entering public life. Only his public role gave to his individual existence any significant meaning. Hence, he was psychologically disposed to act as mediator between the resentments of relevant sections of German society and the political process. There exist many descriptions of how Hitler managed to achieve contact with varying audiences, always trying to adapt his arguments to the prevailing mood and to the sweeping resentments of his listeners. In this almost inconceivable capability to articulate the sociopsychological needs and political resentments of a generation who had gone through the traumatic experiences of the First World War and was deeply affected by the postwar economic conditions (especially the inflation and hyperinflation that impaired the social status primarily of the lower middle class and the small peasants) lay the key to his success as a public speaker.

The basic phenomenon that is to be explained is the obvious success of Hitler as propaganda speaker in the Munich area through the early 1920s. The counterrevolutionary climate in the Bavarian capital was greatly intensified by the abortive Soviet republic in Munich, but it originated in the extensive activities of the emerging völkisch and nationalistic movement there, which after 1919 exploited the deep anti-Prussian resentments for their struggle against the allegedly communist-influenced Weimar Republic. Hitler, who formed his political concepts during the early postwar period, more than from reminiscences of his Viennese period, learned to represent the needs of those social strata who despised politics as such and blamed the republic for their personal misfortune. Actually, Hitler's personal prejudices, as well as his status insecurity, corresponded to the characteristics of the core of his later followers. But one should not overestimate Hitler's demagogic popularity during the twenties. Men like Gregor Straßer had a greater impact on public opinion than Hitler, whose plebiscitary appeal became predominant only in the early thirties.

It is quite significant that Hitler launched his first seizure of power, within the early Nazi party, not as a member of the party apparatus but as a relatively independent, but also indispensable, propaganda speaker. With the support of a considerably small clique of close admirers within the Munich local organization of the Nazi party, Hitler was able to remodel the party after his ideas and, simultaneously, after his personal inclinations. He claimed unlimited loyalty on the part of the subleaders while ceding to them complete freedom of action, except for programmatical issues, whose treatment remained his unrestricted prerogative. His function as unchallenged party leader (he prudently managed that Ludendorff was eliminated as a potential rival in 1925) relied on an extreme degree of personalization of politics. The complete personal dependency of each subsequent leader upon his superior was a remarkably simple and effective principle as long as the movement remained basically a huge propaganda organization without the need of serious political proposals or objective political obligations.

Except for the period between 1921 and 1923, Hitler neglected rou-

tine business in the party leadership and spent most of his time in the Munich coffeehouses and the salons of several sympathetic upper-class women. He did not show any interest in organizational issues. The establishment of an efficient and increasingly bureaucratic party apparatus was not his work but that of Gregor Straßer, Heinrich Himmler, and after 1930, Josef Goebbels. It is symptomatic of his distrust in any bureaucratic hierarchy in the party that Hitler dissolved the central party agencies that had been built up by Straßer to control the local and regional organizations and to lay the foundations for participation in government. He justified this decision with the argument that the party had to be first of all the bearer of the National Socialist idea and had the main task of spreading it throughout the country, and that bureaucratic organization and control were obstacles to its basically propagandistic tasks.

Hitler's spontaneous order to dissolve the greater part of the central party machinery (which was designed to prepare the party for the expected takeover of power) proves his particularly propagandistic understanding of politics and his inclination to reduce politics to a never-ending fanaticization of the masses and to a buildup of a sworn-in body of subleaders, which was signified by unrestricted loyalty to the "Fuehrer." The leadership cult, not the party program and its ideology, secured the unity of the movement that otherwise contained heterogeneous elements and diverging political viewpoints, ranging from left-wing groups to procapitalist and even promonarchistic elements. The establishment of the Hitler myth was the work of his Munich fellow travelers in order to stabilize Hitler's control over the party and thereby to secure predominant influence for themselves. But Hitler adapted himself rapidly to the role designed by the leadership cult that paid lip service to the expectations of the masses that Germany's misery could be overcome by a strong authoritarian leadership.

In spite of the extensive biographical studies of Hitler's political career, we do not know very much of his techniques to control the work of his subordinates. He usually gave them a free hand in preparing the election campaigns and the organizational buildup. Without the rather independent work by Gregor Straßer, the NSDAP never would have achieved the breakthrough to the formation of a mass movement after 1929. Hitler would reserve the more spectacular public activities for himself, as, for example, the negotiations with the bourgeois right-wing parties in Thuringia or Saxony to form a coalition government. Otherwise, even during the crucial period in 1931–32 he stayed in the background except for his role as the top party speaker. Hitler hesitated to run in the presidential elections in April 1932, and he accepted the candidature at the very last moment under the pressure of the party membership, which would not have understood a nomination of Wilhelm Frick or some other leading party functionary. The negotiations with Franz von Papen that eventually led to Hitler's chancellorship were neither started by Hitler nor did he engage himself personally before a definite agreement was in sight. Hence, in the field of party negotiations he acted rather cautiously and reluctantly, fearing a loss of personal prestige in the event of failure. During the crucial

period before the seizure of power he pursued a policy of avoiding definite options, believing in the ultimate strength of the National Socialist idea and the final victory of his movement despite the accumulating signs of intraparty crisis and imminent decay. Almost none of Hitler's close followers thought his all-or-nothing policy line had the slightest chance of succeeding. But it did, due to the miscalculations of his conservative partners.

It is against this background that Hitler's role as German dictator has to be perceived. Once in power he did not change his style of life, his habits, or his political perspectives, which still were devoted more to the anti-Semitic and nationalistic inheritance of the Wilhelmine period than to the ideas prevailing in the twenties. Hitler disliked regular work; only during the short period after the formation of the government of the national concentration did he show up in the Reich chancellory in order to perform routine business, and he did this only as long as the Reich's president, von Hindenburg, stayed in Berlin. He hated to preside over cabinet meetings, where he feared appearing less well informed than the professionalized cabinet members and their staff personnel. Hence, he preferred to instruct the leading members of the government indirectly, talking only to a small body of personally loyal advisers. As in the twenties, he did not feel comfortable in Berlin, and he despised bureaucratic procedures, regarding the civil service as a necessary evil at best. Hence, he used to fly to Munich and the Obersalzberg and communicated only indirectly with the top personnel of his government.

The conservative camarilla that was responsible for Hitler's chancellorship expected that Hitler would curb his radicalism when he entered the office, being convinced that the extremist elements of his propaganda were designed to hold the radical groups within the NSDAP in line. To some extent they were justified, because the new chancellor presented himself at first in a rather moderate image, at least in his frequent public appearances. The more radicalized elements of the party were disappointed that Hitler did not abrogate the formal constitutional framework, although there were considerable changes in the actual institutional structure even before the passing of the enabling law in March 1933. By nominating Rudolf Hess as the virtual party leader under the title of the Deputy of the Fuehrer, Hitler did not fulfill the party's expectation that it would take over the government directly, as he had promised in *Mein Kampf*. Only under very strong pressures by Hermann Göring did Hitler accept the latter's demand to become invested with the Prussian minister presidentship. Even in 1935, Hitler outrightly rejected the proposition by the minister of interior, Wilhelm Frick, to introduce a new constitution for the Great German Reich and instead preferred to use the Enablement Act as the legal foundation for his rule.

By propagating the leadership cult, Goebbels successfully portrayed the Third Reich as a monolithic structure pursuing in every respect Hitler's expressed will. The reality, however, was far more complex. What arose was a political system that was described by a high civil servant in the Reich chancellory (which nominally was in charge of po-

litical coordination between the different ministries and party agencies) as "up to now well organized chaos." In fact, Hitler's apprehension to cooperate either with the cabinet or with an informal staff of party functionaries produced a constellation in which no agency, whether it belonged to the state or the party, could be sure that its competencies were not usurped by a competing power group and in which effective political influence was dependent upon personal relations and not institutional patterns. Hence, the political decision-making process depended completely upon the degree to which Hitler would utilize his steering power. But in the case of many political issues that did not arouse his interest he just left his subordinates alone and was inclined to postpone even decisions that were overdue.

MANY BIOGRAPHERS HAVE FAILED to deal with the question of the role Hitler performed in the day-to-day governmental process. In general he restricted his interference in the governmental system by outlining the short- and long-term goals of the regime in public speeches, but rarely in internal meetings of party leaders and government officials. Mostly his directives were rather vague and immediately elicited diverging interpretations by the competing subsystems, which proliferated because of Hitler's habit of constantly creating new agencies to solve immediate problems, thereby duplicating institutions. He adhered to the questionable principle that it was sufficient to put the right person in charge, without coordinating the latter's task with already existing agencies. Consequently, the Nazi regime was marked by the lack of any systematic coordination or even communication at the top. This was the main principle of running the Nazi party before 1933; now it recurred as a basic governmental guideline. Additionally, Hitler ruled predominantly on the basis of oral negotiations with quite a few ministers, among them the chief of the Reich chancellery and some influential party leaders, but preferring to prepare political moves within a very small circle of advisers. He would deliver his orders on the basis of mainly oral information. Except for outstanding diplomatic issues Hitler avoided studying files, and there are few instances of his handwriting in government files. This is one of the most striking differences between Hitler and Mussolini, who used to read all relevant documents carefully. Moreover, the memoranda presented to Hitler (in the typical extralarge typewritten letters, because Hitler hesitated to wear glasses when he met visitors) are fairly exceptional, and it is not even certain that he read them at all. If the files of the party chancellery had survived (the Institute for Zeitgeschichte in Munich recently published the first volume of a secondary reconstruction of the party chancellory files), one would not find much relevant material concerning Hitler's policy making.

These experiences make it fairly improbable that Hitler persistently pursued a well-planned and sophistically staged political course. During the first years of his dictatorship he interfered in the actions of the ministerial departments only occasionally. Recent studies have shown that except for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the German for-

eign minister, Baron von Neurath, acted rather independently from, although in principal accordance with, Hitler. Decisive actions in foreign and domestic policy were not inaugurated by Hitler himself. The impression of many contemporaries that it was crucial which advisers influenced Hitler proved to be correct in many respects. Actually Hitler hesitated to identify himself with any political proposition that had uncertain outcomes, and his main motivation lay in the fear that he could be compelled to withdraw a former order, which might give the impression that he acted contradictorily. Out of the same deliberation he rarely was ready to dismiss leading officials even when he regarded them as no longer efficient. He postponed the replacement of Frick for more than two years, and he hesitated to call in a new minister of justice after the death of Gürtner (who took that office already in 1932).

HENCE, THE CRUCIAL QUESTION is to what extent Hitler himself was the source of the escalating radicalization of foreign and domestic policies that characterized the Nazi regime. Hitler's rule relied upon a mixture of his visionary concepts on the one hand and upon a rather instinctive sense for preserving his function as mediator between competing power alliances on the other. While he delivered the most ardent anti-Semitic speeches, he frequently pursued a rather moderate line in cases of conflict among the subleaders, certainly from the perspective that any provisional compromise might be superseded by a final solution, a term that is not at all restricted to the so-called "Jewish question," but familiar in almost every field of politics. From the viewpoint of achieving in the long run the dream of a thousand-year Reich, provisional solutions appeared only as tactical devices. This explains the high degree of tactical flexibility that characterized Nazi propaganda as well as the implementation of its goals in the Third Reich.

Hitler's role within the continual strife between rival power groups, which pursued diverging political targets without any lasting coordination, was crucial insofar as in almost all cases, he would defend even criminal activities by radicalized party functionaries and withdrew any legal sanctions against them. Thus he supported illegal actions by party agencies that seemed to fulfill the targets of the party's program. This certainly is but a partial solution to the problem of how the revolutionary vision held by Hitler and his fellow ideologues within the movement was in many respects actually implemented, or why Weltanschauung and reality merged. Martin Broszat, one of the leading West German experts in this field, provided a preliminary answer by arguing that Hitler was taken at his own word, i.e., utterances by Hitler that stood in a primarily propagandistic context were taken by the party radicals at face value. What was meant metaphorically thereby became actual policy. This approach toward to more satisfactory explanation of the process of cumulative radicalization (instead of the assumption that Hitler concealed his far-reaching goals while having them constantly in mind in a more or less rational perception) has as its precondition that Hitler as chancellor remained primarily an ideo-

logical demagogue informed by a highly selective perception of the real conditions of the surrounding world.

It is the fate of many authoritarian politicians to ultimately become victims of their own illusions, because they increasingly lose the ability and the readiness to face any information that contradicts their views and refutes their intentions. From the very start of his political career, Hitler tended to repress inconvenient truths that ran opposite to his imaginary vision of restoring the German nation and its political unity as well as its racial homogeneity. A good part of his personal impact relied on this phenomenon, which Peter Stern described in terms of Hitler's philosophy of the will. Actually, the politics of the party leader and the later dictator were based on the assumption that any obstacle in the surrounding political world could be overcome by fanatical resolve. At the end of the Second World War Hitler based his confidence in a final German victory more on the fanaticism of the German soldier than on the availability of new weapons, which were announced by the unremitting propaganda of Joseph Goebbels.

The conservative partners of Hitler were convinced that political responsibility would force Hitler into a greater understanding of political realities. But his indisputable political achievements in domestic as well as in foreign policy had the opposite effect. Hitler, who always behaved like a gambler, became increasingly convinced that his missionary role as the savior of Germany was correct and that he did not need the support either of trained political advisers or of professional civil servants. What he undertook was an escalating flight from reality, and he did not take sufficient notice of the available resources for the world historical power play he set in motion. Even his closest followers doubted whether Hitler's ambitious expansionist policy would be successful. In September 1939, almost all members of the inner circle feared a Second World War, which Germany was not sufficiently prepared to wage.

A different question is why traditional leaders did not express opposition to Hitler; or why their views could be so easily dismissed by him as lack of confidence in the Fuehrer and his historical mission. To explain this, we have to analyze the political system and the underlying social and economic interests. (This, however, cannot be the task of this essay.) There were many cases in which Hitler refrained from his objectives under immediate political pressure, although he always tended to overcome opposition by deviousness. Keeping this in mind, we cannot overlook the responsibility of the elites, including Hitler's national-conservative allies. Hitler always needed perpetrators who implemented the usually obscure intentions of the dictator and who were motivated by a mixture of obedience and adoration for Hitler's genius.