

Chapter 9: Hitler's role in the Nazi state

Study of Hitler's role in the Nazi state has resulted in a series of wide-ranging interpretations.

View No 1:

Hitler was the absolute centre of the entire Nazi system. Nothing happened without his consent, no policies were acted upon without reference to his thinking; the successes and eventual failures of the regime can be placed at his door. His personality was so strong that it would be accurate to state that 'Hitler was Nazism, and Nazism was Hitler'.

This is very much the view that was presented in the early historical works about the Third Reich. One of the best examples of this approach is Alan Bullock's "Hitler: A Study in Tyranny". Bullock's work has been superseded by more analytical studies in more recent years, but it still makes for fascinating reading in trying to understand 'Hitler the man'. Chapter 7 in Bullock's book, 'The Dictator', is well worth reading in isolation.

This Hitler-centred view of Germany in the 1930s sees the Fuhrer as a skilled political player and a man well in control. Bullock refers to Hitler's abilities in a variety of areas:

- Hitler's understanding of specific situations allowed him to seize opportunities when they arose.
- He understood the feelings of the masses and knew how to play on their grievances.
- He later understood the western allies' fears of communism and was able to play on this as he began Germany's territorial expansion.
- Use of legal measures to gain and consolidate power allowed him to sideline, and then eliminate his opposition.
- Hitler was able to destroy the independence of the army and bring it under his sway.
- He understood the importance of linking propaganda and terror, and furthermore knew how to use modern technology to promote both.
- The strength of his personality allowed him to overcome very able men of the likes of Admiral Doenitz and General Blomberg.

Hitler was not an original thinker. All his ideas he had absorbed from the anti-semitic and pan-German newspaper and pamphlets that were common in Germany before 1914. Bullock argues that Hitler's skill lay in what he did with these ideas.

*"...Hitler's originality lay not in his ideas, but in the terrifying literal way in which he set to work to translate these ideas into reality, and his unequalled grasp of the means by which to do this."*¹

View No 2:

The Nazi regime was a chaotic, inefficient system with a confused overlapping structure. This was the deliberate aim of Hitler who encouraged his subordinates to compete. This fitted in with his idea 'survival of the fittest'. It also meant his position was always secure as he would always have the final say on any issue. Historians who argue this line are often referred to as 'intentionalists'.

This line of thinking came about in the 1960s and 1970s when researchers began to more fully understand the chaotic nature of the Nazi regime. The stereotype often presented of all things German is of cold efficiency: German cars do not break down, German trains run on time. However, examination of the Third Reich showed that in fact Germany in the 1930s was not a picture of cool efficiency.

- Nazi Germany was inefficiently run with many overlapping authorities.
 - There were state bodies and party bodies
 - There was rivalry between the various Nazi leaders
 - Gauleiters sought to maintain their regional power
 - The economy had no consistent direction at all. There was Schacht at the Central Bank, a Ministry of Economics, Goering and the Four Year Plan, and then Todt (and later Speer) at the Armaments Ministry.
 - Himmler's SS organisation was also growing independently.
- Historians like the German, Karl Bracher, have argued that this was Hitler's deliberate intention.
 - Bracher would argue that by allowing such chaos below him, and by encouraging such intra-party rivalry, Hitler was able to stand above the fray, almost god-like.
 - This would secure his position as undisputed leader and help develop the almost mystical notion of Hitler as the 'Führer'.

For all the chaos that was Germany, Bracher points out how essential Hitler was to the functioning of the regime.

*"...It was indeed Hitler's Weltanschauung (world view) and nothing else that mattered in the end, as is seen from the terrible consequences of his racist anti-Semitism in the planned murder of the Jews."*²

View No 3:

Hitler was a weak dictator, averse to making definite decisions, lazy, unwilling and unable to organise. He hated paperwork, avoided the minutiae of day to day administration and preferred to spend his time listening to opera, eating cakes or staying at Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps.

- This line of argument suggests that Nazi Germany's chaos was the result of Hitler's weakness not his strength.
- The regime was indeed chaotic and confused, but this was not the result of Hitler's intention. It was in fact an indication of Hitler's weakness as a leader. Hitler was often fearful of making decisions, never committed anything to paper if it could be avoided and allowed issues to drag on.
 - It is suggested he behaved this way for fear of weakening his prestige if errors were made.
 - The regime, in other words, spiralled out of control and this accounts for the increasing radical nature of the regime as time went on.
- Historians who argue this line are often referred to as structuralists. The best known example is Martin Broszat's 'The Hitler State' written in 1969.

View No 4:

The perception of Hitler as a weak dictator is a difficult one to grasp. Though he may well have been lazy and avoided day to day routine, and though he read little and wrote even less, there was

never any doubt that his 'will' drove Nazi Germany forward. When Hitler failed to provide specific direction or specific policies, it became the goal of his subordinates to interpret what the Fuhrer wanted. This became known as 'working towards the Fuhrer'.

- Hitler would often not make a decision and allows issues to float. This became frustrating for those working under him.
 - In order to have a policy or a program accepted it became necessary to prove that the ideas contained in the program fitted in with Hitler's thinking.
- The central elements of Hitler's thinking – ridding Germany of Jews, dealing with the Bolshevik menace, and creating a pure Aryan community – could be attached to a policy.
 - Such behaviour had the effect of radicalising the regime as various groups and individuals sought to outdo each other in their closeness to the thinking of the Fuhrer. Everyone was keen to show that they were 'working towards the Fuhrer'.
- This argument of 'working towards the Fuhrer' has been presented by the British Historian Ian Kershaw.

During his career, Hitler was certainly an opportunist, willing to adapt his policies, even go against long-held beliefs, if such action suited his purpose:

- attacking the conservative elites, doing secret deals with them
- extolling the virtues of loyal, brave SA, massacring them when they were no longer needed;
- promising the destruction of communism, signing a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union (see chapter 16).

However, Hitler always kept in view the long-term goals of the regime. From the days of the 25 Point Program, to Mein Kampf to the time he gained power, the aims of Nazism retained a certain consistency:

- Aryan racial purity;
- anti-semitism;
- the creation of a people's community – volksgemeinschaft – a classless society in which Germans could share as a result of their Aryan blood;
- the pursuit of German national power;
- the ultimate achievement of lebensraum in the east for the future 250 million Aryans who 'by right' would control these lands and rule the inferior Slavs who were already there;
- the attempt to destroy the Jewish race during the war may not have been a definite goal established back in the 1920s, but Hitler's persistent emphasis on 'dealing with the Jews' ultimately places the holocaust clearly on his shoulders (not his alone, of course)

Hitler never set out these goals in government documents and he never had clear set plans meticulously worked out in advance. However, his aims and beliefs became what the regime worked towards.

"...Working towards the Fuhrer in this way pushed policy along, without close direction from above but operating in a mutually reinforcing fashion with the interests of the policy-makers and wholly eliminating the possibility of any contrary lines of policy development." ³

Hitler's ability to be above the day to day business of government had another major impact on the functioning of the regime. Goebbels used to boast that one of his greatest achievements was the development of the 'Fuhrer myth' or the 'Fuhrer cult'. This will be examined more fully in Chapter 11.

However, the lifting of Hitler to god-like status by the propaganda machine was a key part in the power structure of the Nazi regime.

- The positive achievements of the Nazi regime were always put down to the genius of the Fuhrer, or at least that is how it was presented to ordinary German people.
 - Hitler gained the credit for ending the depression, smashing the communists, ending the influence of the thuggish SA and restoring law and order.
 - It was Hitler who tore up the hated Treaty of Versailles.
- Germans had lots of petty gripes during the 1930s – as Gestapo records have shown – but there was little opposition to the general direction of the regime and this found its representation in Hitler's image.
 - When things went wrong, people believed that this was the price one paid when the nation was being rebuilt.
 - Hitler did not know: "If only the Fuhrer knew what was going on, he'd put a stop to it."
 - It was one of the great paradoxes of the Nazi period that many ordinary Germans might despise the Nazis, but love Hitler.

Exercise 9.1

Carefully re-read this chapter. Select three keys elements from each of the interpretations which have been discussed and write in the spaces provided below. Part of this exercise has already been done for you.

The Hitler-centred view:

- the view argued soon after the war by historians like _____
- Hitler the absolute centre of the regime
- _____
- _____

The intentionalist view:

- This view argued in the 1960s and 1970s by historians like _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

The structuralist view:

- This view argued in the 1960s and 1970s by historians like _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

The 'working towards the Fuhrer' view:

- This view argued by historians like _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

1 Bullock, A, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1952, p 408

2 Bracher, KD, 'The role of Hitler: Perspectives and Interpretations' in W Lacquer (ed), *Fascism*, Penguin, 1979, p 201

3 Kershaw, I, *Hitler*, Longman, Harlow, 1991, p 104