

“Working Towards the *Führer*”

Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. 1889-1936: Hubris; 1936-1945: Nemesis*, London: Penguin Books 1998 and 2000, vol. I, xxx + 845 pp., illus., vol. II, xxiii + 1115 pp., illus.

Reviewed by

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Two years after the publication of the first volume (1998), Ian Kershaw has now brought his mammoth biography of Adolf Hitler to completion. With nearly 2,000 pages, this voluminous work, more than five decades after Hitler's death, provides us with the first truly comprehensive, rigorously scholarly biography of Hitler.

Kershaw, originally trained as a medievalist, pursues an approach akin to the German “structuralist” school and is well acquainted with the bitter debates that raged in the 1970s and 1980s regarding the character of the German dictatorship. His own previous research interests have centered primarily on popular opinion and the image of Hitler in the German population, as well as the historiographic debates on the key questions of the Nazi regime.¹ The present book attempts to dovetail biographical and structural interpretative approaches in examining the perennial question of the individual's power to shape history as exemplified in one of the recent past's most powerful personalities. His work is also a noteworthy attempt to link German structural history with the British tradition of biography.

Kershaw's methodological point of departure is the Weberian concept of charismatic rule. His interest is thus less in the dictator's personality and more in the complex of social expectations and motivations projected onto Hitler, which accounted for the “power of the *Führer*,” his principal concern. Consequently, the author does not blaze some path-breaking new approach; rather, he tries fruitfully to apply one of the familiar interpretations of the Nazi dictatorship to uncommon terrain. The entire study is thus pervaded by the

¹ Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth'. Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon 1987); idem, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich. Bavaria, 1933-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); idem, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Arnold 1985, 4th ed., 2000).

problematic of presenting the life of an individual whose unparalleled career was primarily attributable to the dynamic impact of external forces.

Kershaw's book is based largely on published sources and the broad evaluation of the secondary literature. The study's unique quality derives from the sovereign detailed knowledge with which the author controls this truly immense body of material and his balanced and sure-footed interpretation - doubtlessly an exemplary synthesis. The work sets standards for a biography of the German dictator that will likely remain valid for decades to come.

One exceptional feature is the breadth of its supporting documentation. Kershaw frequently refers at some length to diverse sources such as Hitler's speeches, minutes on his conversations with foreign heads of government, etc. A trimming and tightening of these passages would doubtless have done little to detract from the book's basic arguments. The book often reads like a general history of National Socialism, though not intended or drafted as such a comprehensive study. Given the very wide aperture of his description of events, the author is not always entirely successful in keeping the focus on his main protagonist.

Hubris

The description of Hitler's origin, childhood, and youth basically confirms the findings of research over several decades and is an excellent summary of the voluminous material. Hitler's family background, rooted in the peasant-petty-bourgeois milieu of provincial Austria and characterized by the incestuously close relation between his parents, his father's illegitimate birth, and a high level of infant mortality in the family (four of Hitler's five siblings died at an early age) has given repeated cause for wide-ranging speculation. Kershaw takes a more cautious tack, always seeking to trace uncertain data about Hitler's family background back to its verifiable core. Thus, for example, he musters persuasive evidence to refute the old chestnut that Hitler had a Jewish grandfather in the family closet. He also dismisses speculation that Hitler's personal suspicions about his Jewish origins may have been a possible stimulus for his virulent hatred of Jews.

Born in 1889, as the fourth child in the third marriage of a middle-level revenue official, Adolf was raised in comfortable middle-class surroundings. His father, Alois, who died in 1903, emerges here as tyrannical, restless, and hot-tempered, with a violent streak. Adolf's mother, Klara, a highly religious and extremely caring parent, was her husband's veritable opposite, and probably the only person with whom Hitler ever developed a lasting, genuine emotional relationship.

After his failure as a pupil at non-classical secondary schools in Linz and Steyr (he left school at sixteen without graduating), Adolf continued to live on for two more years (1905-07) at home with his mother, doted over and spoiled, immersed in a world of dreams and fantasies of a grand career as an artist. But reality proved harsher. In 1907, Adolf made his first unsuccessful application to be admitted to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. Upon the death of his beloved mother, for him a crushing blow, Adolf moved, in 1908, to Vienna, where his application was again rejected by the academy.

Kershaw emphasizes the difficulties inherent in reliably reconstructing these years in Vienna. The only sources available are mainly Hitler's own description in *Mein Kampf* and doubtful reports by companions, such as that of his boyhood friend from Linz, August Kubizec, with whom Hitler lived together for a time in Vienna. Hitler experienced this period in Vienna principally as a time of social decline. Finally, he was back in the men's hostel, evidently still dreaming of an artistic career, but busy reproducing postcards, increasingly filled with resentment against the social forces he believed were responsible for his social decline.

Later, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler chose to describe these leaden years in Vienna as a period of personal deprivation during which he devoted himself to autodidactic studies, a time in which he had already formed a firm and unshakable *Weltanschauung* centering on antisemitism. In contrast with other researchers on Hitler, Kershaw avoids the temptation of following this stylized presentation of self and accepting Hitler's notion of an early antisemitic "awakening." Rather, by means of a critical evaluation of the sources, Kershaw concludes: there is "no reliable contemporary confirmation of Hitler's paranoid antisemitism during the Vienna period" (vol. I, p. 64), an assessment

that contrasts with the main thrust in Brigitte Hamann's study on Hitler's Vienna.² Yet he does consider it possible that Hitler was influenced by the antisemitism then rampant in the Austrian capital, whose central role he describes in a broadly sketched panoramic view of the situation in Vienna at the turn of the century. Even if Hitler was certainly open and receptive to antisemitic and other prejudices, Kershaw (here following research by Anton Joachimsthaler³) assumes that such dispositional biases could only have crystallized into a consistent ideology later on, in Munich, after World War I.

Hitler's 1913-14 stay in Munich, motivated primarily by his desire to avoid induction into the Austrian army, is characterized by Kershaw as "in reality an empty, lonely, and futile period for him" (vol. I, p. 85). The outbreak of World War I rescued Hitler, still earning his living by hawking postcards, from this hopeless situation. As a soldier - as is well known, Hitler enlisted immediately in the Bavarian army and willingly conformed to the discipline and strict regimen of military life - his comrades and superiors showed him respect. For the first time in his life, he appears to have felt he was doing something meaningful. Yet even in service, Hitler remained a loner; his introverted behavior makes it difficult in retrospect to say anything definitive about his political beliefs during this period in uniform.

Kershaw thinks it probable that Hitler's antisemitism was exacerbated during the various furloughs and convalescent leaves he spent in Germany during the years 1916-1918, a period that can "be seen as a vital staging-post in Hitler's ideological development" (vol. I, p. 101). He believes it is impossible to establish what specific role in this development Hitler's stay in the field hospital in Pasewalk played. Hitler was confined there when the war ended. Kershaw correctly interprets Hitler's own claim that it was there he suddenly realized in a kind of flash that the revolution was basically a Jewish plot and that he then decided to go into politics as a subsequent self-mystification. The author suggests Hitler did not develop a fuller-blown ideology until 1919, when the Reichswehr trained him as a political propagandist. He dates Hitler's construction of the image of the "Jewish

² Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Wien. Lehrjahre eines Diktators* (Munich: Piper, 1996).

³ Anton Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur einer Biographie. Adolf Hitler, 1908-1920* (Munich: Herbig, 1989).

Bolshevik,” the *Feindbild*, so fateful for his later politics, to this period. Thus, Hitler’s entry onto the career path of a right-wing radical politician did not spring from some “decision” once made and then consistently followed. Rather, “It had been shaped by circumstance, opportunism, good fortune, and, not least, the backing of the army” (vol. I, p. 128).

Kershaw emphasizes that remaining in the army was initially Hitler’s only real option at the time. So still in uniform, now nearing thirty, he entered the postwar period. Hitler was initially voted spokesman for his unit and served in this function both under the revolutionary Social-Democratic government and the Munich Council Republic. This bespeaks a remarkable readiness to adapt to external circumstances, as Joachimsthaler has already pointed out. After the Munich Soviet was crushed, Hitler was trained in a crash course as a political propagandist and then put to work in an effort to immunize the troops against infectious revolutionary thinking. As is common knowledge, people now started to take note of his rhetorical gifts as a speaker. There are already antisemitic statements by Hitler dating from this period, which, as documented in the famous letter to Gemlich (one of the training-course participants), amounted to the notion that it was necessary to “remove” the Jews.

Kershaw argues that World War I was what made Hitler possible in the first place; that, without the revolution, he would have remained a nobody. Hitler, the frustrated artist, eternal loser and eccentric grumbler, was able to speak to the emotional needs of the many in expressing the deep personal hatred he felt for the anonymous forces he held accountable for his mediocre life. His success as a public speaker must have helped to fill the parched vacuum of his personal relations. Kershaw then proceeds to trace Hitler’s entry into the Nazi party, his rapid rise to the role of leading propagandist in this still-tiny splinter group, finally becoming party leader in 1921, and the growth of the party into the leading right-wing radical formation in Munich.

The author stresses that the cult of the *Führer* was not Hitler’s invention; even before his appearance on the political stage, there had been a powerful sense of anticipation of a *Führer* figure in right-wing radical circles. In 1923, Hitler’s self-perception gradually started to change: if he had seen his role previously mainly as a propagandist, someone who “beat the drum,” now he

began to appropriate the image of “*Führer*,” the German “Mussolini,” a label initially attached to him by his followers. The abortive putsch of November 9, 1923, marked the end of this first stage in his career. Yet Hitler was quick to transform this catastrophe into political success. During incarceration in Landsberg, he decided he was predestined to assume the mantle of leader of the political right.

In Kershaw’s view, there are no important ideas in *Mein Kampf* (whose first volume was written during his detention) that cannot be shown to have existed in Hitler’s thinking even prior to the putsch. According to Kershaw, it can be demonstrated that the amplification of his anti-Bolshevik image of the enemy into the notion that it would be possible to establish a *Lebensraum* empire on the ruins of the soon-to-be-smashed Soviet system was one of Hitler’s ideas as early as 1922, as was Hitler’s identification between “Bolshevism” and “Judaism.” The relevant antisemitic passages in the book “are not the beginning of a one-way track to the ‘Final Solution,’” even if “its inherent genocidal thrust is undeniable.” Already at this juncture, “indistinctly, the connection between destruction of the Jews, war, and national salvation had been forged in Hitler’s mind” (vol. I, p. 244).

Kershaw then describes how Hitler, after his release from prison after serving only a little more than a year, succeeded in transforming the NSDAP into the *Führer* party and in establishing himself as the central figure in right-wing German radicalism. In the 1920s, this was still a totally marginal phenomenon. In Kershaw’s view, unconditional personal loyalty to the “*Führer*” and to a blurred and inchoate “idea” was the price for uniting this highly heterogeneous political movement. He characterizes Hitler’s personal development in this period as a spiral of increasing self-isolation. Capitalizing on his superficial knowledge, the ability to grasp things quickly, endless monologues, and arrogant behavior, he was able to impress those around him. Kershaw categorizes Hitler as a versatile actor whose core personality was in effect hidden from his environment.

The subsequent chapters describe in requisite detail the history of the rapid political rise of the NSDAP during the profound political and economic crisis of the Weimar Republic. Extensive sections here illuminate the various

general conditions within which the party leader acted. Yet the main protagonist sometimes slips from the narrative spotlight, with the result that, over long passages, the book reads less like a biography and more like a general history of Weimar's final phase.

Why the broader canvas? The reason lies in Kershaw's contention that "political miscalculations by those with regular access to the corridors of power rather than any actions on the part of the Nazi leader played a larger role, placing him in the Chancellor's seat" (vol. I, p. 424). Where Hitler did act, he is depicted largely as an exponent of the *Führer*-centric ethos concentrated in the party, a projection screen for the great expectations of his followers.

Kershaw underscores that important elements in Hitler's character - his instinctive tendency to postpone difficult decisions, his chronic hesitation in crisis situations, his penchant for making unusually risky decisions and his refusal to cancel a decision once it had been made - cannot be given some simple psychological explanation, but rather resulted from his role as *Führer*: "Acting out the leader's role could never be halted" (vol. I, p. 344).

It is not surprising that, due to his identifying of the person with the role, Kershaw finds it difficult to discern the private person behind Hitler's public face: from 1919 on, politics increasingly consumed the man. There was an immense gap between his public magnetic power and "the emptiness of what was left of an existence outside politics" (vol. I, p. 340). In his masculine world, women were reduced to mere objects; the only deeper emotional tie he ever experienced remained his bond to his mother, Klara.

Kershaw does not read the 1933 caesura as the result of a "Bonapartist" situation. In his analysis, the "seizure of power" was neither an "inexorable product of a German 'special path'" (vol. I, p. 426) nor an accident. It was made possible, on the one hand, by "important strands of continuity in German political culture," and, on the other, by "the specific and more short-term consequences of the multi-layered crisis that affected Weimar democracy from the start" (vol. I, pp. 434f.). Commenting on Hitler's role in the "seizure of power," Kershaw notes:

Remarkable in the seismic upheavals of 1933-4 was not how much, but how little, the new Chancellor needed to do to bring about the extension and consolidation of his power. Hitler's dictatorship was made as much by others as by himself. As the "representative figure" of the "national renewal" Hitler could for the most part function as activator and enabler of the forces he had unleashed, authorizing and legitimating actions taken by others now rushing to implement what they took to be his wishes (vol. I, pp. 436 f.).

Scarcely any of the transformations of Germany during the spring and summer of 1933 had followed direct orders from the Reich Chancellery. Hitler had rarely been personally involved. But he was the main beneficiary (vol. I, p. 483).

Yet this claim seems questionable. Kershaw himself stresses Hitler's active role during these months, such as the cool and unscrupulous manner in which he exploited the Reichstag fire in order to push radical legislation through the cabinet; namely, the emergency act "On the Protection of the People and State," revoking important constitutional guarantees. The anti-Jewish "boycott" clearly went back to a decision by Hitler, as can be understood from Goebbels' diaries and the minutes of cabinet meetings. Hitler played a leading role in the introduction of the Enabling Law (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*, enacted March 24, 1933), the appointment of Reich Governors (*Reichsstatthalter*) in the provinces, and the enactment of the Civil Service Law (*Berufsbeamtengesetz*, April 7, 1933), which resulted in the removal of civil servants who were politically objectionable and/or Jewish. Kershaw also correctly points out how sovereign Hitler was in the way he ran his cabinet meetings during this period.

Following a detailed description of the consolidation of Hitler's power after June 30, 1934 ("night of the long knives") and Hindenburg's death, a central chapter of the book is devoted to describing the main features of the *Führer* state. Kershaw believes this system took on concrete contours between these watershed events and the Blomberg/Fritsch crisis in early 1938. To

characterize the system of governance, he uses a phrase coined by a Nazi functionary in February 1934, to describe the modus operandi of the *Führer* state: paramount in its mechanics was “working towards the *Führer*” - a characteristic formulation which Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham called attention to several years ago in their collection of documents on the history of National Socialism.⁴

Kershaw turns this catchphrase into a kind of leitmotif in the biography: “Hitler’s personalized form of rule invited radical initiatives from below and offered such initiatives backing, so long as they were in line with his broadly defined goals. This promoted ferocious competition at all levels of the regime” (vol. I, p. 530).

Thus, the subversion of the official governmental bureaucracy, a process abetted by Hitler’s behavior, and the decomposition of the apparatus of governance into competing authorities were the prerequisite for Hitler’s almost absolute power, disencumbered from all institutional limitations. This shift in power went hand in hand with an increasing fixation on ideological goals, a reciprocally reinforcing process, which Kershaw (using Hans Mommsen’s classic formulation) terms “cumulative radicalization.” Yet Kershaw also indicates that this led to a system whose vortex even Hitler himself ultimately was unable to elude. The greater his successes, the more he became a victim of the cult surrounding his own person:

But pressures for action from the party in ideological concerns regarded as central to National Socialism, and the instrumentalization of those concerns through the expanding repressive apparatus of the police, meant that there was no sagging ideological momentum once power had been consolidated.... And as initiatives formulated at different levels, and by different agencies of the regime attempted to accommodate the ideological drive, the “idea” of National Socialism, located in the person of the *Führer*, thus gradually became translated from utopian “vision” into realizable policy objectives (vol. I, p. 542).

⁴ Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945. Vol. 2: State, Economy and Society, 1933-39. A Documentary Reader* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1984).

Kershaw emphasizes that, right from the regime's outset, rearmament was the clear number-one priority in Hitler's policies. Taking issue with authors who view Hitler primarily as a "modernizer," he stresses that "he thought essentially in terms of race, not class, of conquest, not economic modernization" (vol. I, p. 449). With increasing consolidation of power, Hitler kept more and more distant from mundane domestic affairs. As *Führer*, he believed his main task was to embody national unity, in his eyes the prerequisite for the unavoidable military confrontation with Germany's enemies certain to come. The non-aggression pact signed with Poland in 1934, the reintroduction of compulsory military service, the German-British naval accord of 1935, and the remilitarization of the Rhineland the following year were the chief steps in this process of ever-greater emphasis on foreign affairs.

One of the major merits of the book is its running account of the development of Hitler's anti-Jewish policies, a central axis of the study. Kershaw tends here to place emphasis more on Hitler's symbolic rather than personal role in the intensification of persecution. Commenting on the pre-war period, he notes: "Hitler needed to do little to push forward the radicalization of the 'Jewish Question'" (vol. I, p. 573). In regard to the anti-Jewish violence in 1935, and the preparation of the Nuremberg Laws, he views Hitler primarily as a leader acting under pressure from the party's rank-and-file. Yet given the highly active role taken by Hitler in the immediate pre-history of this legislation, that interpretation is quite doubtful.

In 1936, after some fifteen years at the center of a constantly expanding circle of followers who attributed extraordinary powers to their *Führer*, spoiled by his own successes, and thus buoyed by an over-exaggerated sense of self-importance, Hitler was riding on a swelling wave of hubris, "that overweening arrogance which courts disaster" (vol. I, p. 591). This marks the vertex in his personal trajectory, a high point where Kershaw draws the line between volume one and two.

Nemesis

The subsequent chapters, covering the period of 1936-1939, are dominated by preparations for war and expansion abroad. According to Kershaw, power served a double ideological aim for Hitler: the destruction of the Jews; and control over the continent of Europe, and later the world. Four years after the beginning of his regime, "Hitler's own position was untouchable" (vol. II, p. 28).

In his description of the November 1938 pogrom, as in the other decisive stages of the escalation in anti-Jewish policy, Kershaw once more tends to downplay Hitler's personal involvement, though he does not question his general responsibility: "Hitler's role was, therefore, crucial, even if at times indirect" (vol. II, p. 133). However, Kershaw's thesis here that Hitler's role in the pogrom was largely to endorse the initiatives of others, especially of his propaganda minister, Goebbels, is doubtful. While various indications suggest that Hitler played a quite active role in the pogrom from its initiation on the evening of November 9, to its official termination the following day, he was evidently at pains, for the sake of external appearances, to distance himself personally from the atrocities. This was in keeping with the official version of the pogrom as a "spontaneous eruption of popular anger."

Kershaw sees Hitler's transition to a policy of expansion, beginning in 1938, as motivated principally by Hitler's sense that time was running out; it was working against him in the framework of the general European rearmament that he himself had triggered. Coupled with this was the fear he would not live long enough to witness the realization of his imperialist dreams.

Kershaw suggests that Hitler was also in a position to translate his politics into reality because, in the meantime, his ideological fanaticism had been institutionalized in a party bureaucracy and the SS apparatus, which were favorably disposed and willingly "working towards him." Yet in this phase, even ideological aims were, Kershaw stresses, of secondary importance for the *Führer*.

This tack of argumentation is characteristic of the way Kershaw approaches his main character: ideology is not utilized to motivate his protagonist's behavior but is seen mainly in functional terms, as a key element in the system of rule established by Hitler. Only after these ideological basic convictions had taken on solid institutional contours did the *Weltanschauung*

become an operative force. Even then, it did not determine Hitler's specific moves in foreign policy.

Kershaw stresses the caesura in power politics at the beginning of 1938, the Blomberg/Fritsch crisis, and the subsequent reshuffling to the detriment of the conservative leadership personnel. In the spring of 1938, he contends, Hitler's personal power had "freed itself from all institutional constraints and had established unchallenged supremacy over all sections of the 'power cartel'" (vol. II, p. 93).

For all practical purposes, collective political decision-making had now been eliminated, and Hitler hovered high above the power struggles. Indirectly, those confrontations acted to bolster his position as a leader who was unchallengeable. "Any potential limits - external and internal - on his freedom of action instead disappeared" (vol. II, p. 125). Kershaw's account of these events would have been even more convincing, if he had stressed more the specific qualitative change in the regime at this juncture: the old elites, Hitler's partners in 1933, were now finally excluded from the core decision-making process.

The approximately 200 pages devoted to Hitler's policies from early 1938 down to the outbreak of the war present the picture of a forceful dictator, sovereign in his decisions, animated above all else by an unreserved trust in his own ultimate success. In these sections Kershaw's presentation closely resembles the conventional depictions of the regime as the dictatorship of a single, all-powerful autocrat.

In Kershaw's analysis, Hitler, in 1938-1939, did not pursue his risky policies due to certain diverse economic, political, and military constraints that he was under, but rather because he was bent on achieving his ambitious foreign-policy aims in as short a time as possible. To extend Kershaw's reasoning, without an expansionist policy, his regime would undoubtedly have taken on other forms. Most likely, the absolute character of the *Führer* autocracy would have been mitigated. But does this mean that Hitler's expansionist policies sprang by necessity directly from the structures? One could also come to a quite different conclusion: Hitler's ability proactively to exploit existing structures for his own ends.

Another observation can serve to show that Kershaw's prioritizing of structure over the personal factor does not always seem persuasive. Hitler's charisma, the magnetism Kershaw uses to explain the original source of Hitler's power, plays only a subordinate role in his account of this period. He stresses that Hitler pursued his expansionist policies even though there was no strong popular desire for adventurism abroad and the predominant mood was a rejection of a policy aimed at war. Though his popularity reached new heights with the windfall successes in foreign policy, his mass support continued primarily because that success had been achieved without the use of military force.

Kershaw makes it clear that, in his unswerving dedication to fulfilling his historical "mission," Hitler shattered the charismatic basis of his power. The *Führer's* condescending comments on "popular opinion" indicate he believed that, if necessary, mass support for his war policy could also be engineered by manipulation. In any event, he no longer saw mass assent as a source of legitimization for his regime; rather, it was merely a useful instrument for its continuance.

Kershaw sums up the beginning of the war: "Hitler decided. That much is clear. The fracturing of any semblance of collective government over the previous six years left him in the position where he determined alone." This "*Führer* autocracy" was marked by "personalized decision-making" (vol. II, p. 318).

Kershaw thus suggests that Hitler's personal character traits are also salient to the analysis as operative historical factors: his fear that the biological clock might run out, his overestimation of his own abilities, his unwillingness to compromise, his penchant for putting everything at stake. Kershaw concedes that these personality features might be attributable to his personal experience of war and trauma in World War I - a topic, according to him, of possible interest to the psychologist. But Kershaw does not want to psychologize. His field is the structure of the system, radicalized by the war: "In war Nazism came into its own"(vol. II, p.233).

Kershaw then turns to Hitler's war policy, sketching a broad canvas. Foregrounded are the military and political history of the war and the regime's

monumental crimes. This section contains little that is new or surprising, but is exemplary for its precision of detail and broad synthetic grasp of the material. His interpretation remains consistent, following the basic approach: “The continued erosion of any semblance of collective government” augmented Hitler’s personal power; he was anything but a ‘weak dictator’” (vol. II, p. 311).

Radicalization of the National Socialist “programme,” vague as it was, could not possibly subside. The ways different power-groups and important individuals in positions of influence interpreted the ideological imperative represented by Hitler saw to it that the dream of the new society to be created through war, struggle, conquest, and racial purification was kept in full view (vol. II, p. 317).

Sustaining the dynamics of the National Socialist Movement required the continuation of expansion, the conquest of new territories, the setting of new goals, the relentless pursuit of the millennium (vol. II, p. 343).

As important as ideology was in the radicalizing of the system as a whole, Kershaw does not think it provides an immediate key to comprehending Hitler’s policies. He notes repeatedly that, throughout 1940, for example, Hitler paid only minor attention to anti-Jewish policy. In evaluating Hitler’s role in the “Final Solution,” Kershaw accepts the theses of recent research, yet also sticks to the view common in classical functionalist literature that Hitler kept his distance and remained aloof from the actual policy of annihilation. Commenting on preparations for the racist campaign of destruction against the Soviet Union, Kershaw observes: “Hitler had authorized more than initiated. His precise role, as so often, is hidden in the shadows. But he had little need to move into the foreground. His radical views on ‘Jewish-Bolshevism’ were known to all” (vol. II, p. 354).

Kershaw assumes that Hitler’s September 1941 decision to begin with the deportation of the Jews in Central Europe was principally due to the influence of Himmler’s thinking. Yet Kershaw cautions that Hitler’s acceptance of his

proposals was not yet tantamount to a formal “*Führer* decision” on the “Final Solution,” and doubts whether such a comprehensive decision was indeed ever made. Nonetheless, Hitler’s approval of the deportation “opened the door widely to a whole range of new initiatives from numerous local and regional Nazi leaders who seized the opportunity now to rid themselves of their own ‘Jewish problem’” (vol. II, p. 481).

His summary judgment in the autumn of 1941: “The speed and scale of the escalation in killing point to an authorization by Hitler to liquidate the hundreds of thousands of Jews in various parts of the east who were capable of work.” Yet there was “as yet no coordinated, comprehensive programme of total genocide” (vol. II, p. 481).

Kershaw goes on to give a detailed and comprehensive compendium of statements by Hitler in the fall of 1941, and in the following winter that show how he repeatedly returned to the “Jewish question” - whether in private conversation, to a small circle of associates, or in public speeches - announcing radical “solutions” phrased in general formulations whose meaning was anything but ambiguous. Such pronouncements clearly signaled to responsible officials that they should now work out a program for the systematic murder of the European Jews. Though, as Kershaw’s account suggests, without his ever issuing a formal order or giving a final stamp of approval to the blueprints developed.

Kershaw’s presentation remains somewhat conventional in that he provides a detailed description of the interaction between the instigator Hitler and the executing bureaucracy only down to the Wannsee Conference. This creates the impression for the reader that, after Hitler had laid out his ideas, the program of mass murder spurred ahead, almost automatic in its mechanism. Kershaw notes that Hitler’s role “had often been indirect, rather than overt. It had consisted of authorizing more than directing” (vol. II, p. 495). Yet it is impossible to doubt his culpability for the mass genocide. Kershaw concludes: “But without Hitler, and the unique regime he headed, the creation of a programme to bring about the physical extermination of the Jews in Europe would have been unthinkable” (vol. II, p. 495).

Why didn't Hitler speak more clearly and up-front about the murder of European Jewry? Why, in the spring of 1942, when the mass murder was already in high gear, was he still going on about his plans to resettle the Jews out of Europe after the end of the war? Kershaw's points to two factors: Hitler's inveterate obsession with secrecy; and his fear that an open order for mass murder might (as in the case of the "Euthanasia Operation" in 1939) stir up resistance in the bureaucracy. Kershaw speculates further: perhaps there were deep psychological reasons; namely, Hitler's genuine fear of a "Jewish world conspiracy," a cabal he did not wish frivolously to inform about the planned murder of the Jews.

I believe Kershaw has failed here to take two elements into proper account in this description of Hitler's role in the "Final Solution." Though it is correct to consider Hitler's obsession with secrecy in assessing his actions, it is impossible to disregard one fact: precisely during the initial months of 1942, Hitler's public pronouncements on the imminent "destruction" of the Jews assumed the character of an open threat. So his behavior seems to have been marked by a strangely ambivalent mix of secrecy on the one hand and public declaration on the other. Here the author might have broached once more the question of the charismatic basis of Hitler's power: were his public pronouncements on the "destruction" of the Jews an attempt to impress his followers into service as accessories to a crime only intimated in the barest outline? What possible motives geared to shoring up his power base may he have associated with such allusions?

Second, it is correct to note that Hitler catalyzed a general process of radicalization within the bureaucracy by his numerous statements on the "Jewish problem" in the critical period of the autumn of 1941, and the following winter. Yet there is also evidence that, over and beyond this, Hitler repeatedly pressed ahead with the anti-Jewish policy by means of concrete decisions. An obsession with detail was, in fact, also characteristic of him in other spheres of policy.

Kershaw notes the various indications proving that, during the period of 1942-1944, Hitler repeatedly involved himself directly in the policy of the mass murder, making decisions that spelled death for tens and hundreds of

thousands of people. Nonetheless, he generally adheres to the conception of a process of mass murder that Hitler set in motion but which then continued to unfold almost automatically.

His basically productive approach of positing a more drawn-out and complicated decision process, rather than assuming the existence of one single and final “*Führerentscheidung*,” would have been more convincing if he had continued to reconstruct this extended process of decision-making beyond early January 1942. Then it would have become clearer that maintenance and expansion of the mass murder was only possible because Hitler repeatedly called for this policy to be implemented.

In the book’s remaining chapters, Kershaw stresses that, even in the second half of the war, when Hitler’s imperium began to disintegrate, his power within the regime remained untouched, and he always reserved the final decision for himself. His philosophy of life as a struggle, his reduction of all conflict elements to clear-cut, black-and-white alternatives, his gambling nature, and his trust in his own instincts all accelerated the catastrophe in this stage of the regime’s downfall.

Kershaw describes the serious effects that the stress, conditioned by the war and exacerbated by questionable medical treatment, had on Hitler’s health. But he emphasizes that Hitler’s physical problems were primarily due to his way of living. Even if some form of personality disorder or psychological abnormality could be determined, Kershaw emphasizes that Hitler was not in any clinical sense mentally ill. In any event, Kershaw stresses that Hitler’s medical history cannot be used as a key for explaining the situation in which the Nazi regime found itself at the end of the war.

Especially intriguing is Kershaw’s observation that Hitler’s internal power was not limited, even though the bonds between him and the people had been unraveling since the start of the war against the Soviet Union, and the charismatic qualities and afflatus attributed to him seemed to be ebbing. Terror and propaganda, fused with popular fears of a military defeat, were able to stabilize the system right down to its end.

”Working Towards the *Führer*” – Evaluating An Explanatory Model

If we take this impressive work as a whole, our first response must be one of respect for Kershaw's achievement. His approach in presenting Hitler largely as the product of historical determining factors and deriving his actions principally from his function as a charismatic leader proves exceptionally fruitful over broad stretches of the analysis. Yet this approach at points clearly also runs up against the limits of any attempt to explicate the phenomenon of Hitler. In reading Kershaw's account, it becomes clear that he was faced with a basically insoluble dilemma in interpreting his sources: the principle of charismatic leadership entails the notion that all key decisions are made in harmony with the will of the highest authority - indeed in anticipation of that will. Though there are considerable battles among rivals in the internal power struggle within the regime, characteristically they are never directed against the system's supreme authority.

For historians like Kershaw, interested primarily in structures, there is quite naturally a certain danger in the top echelon's system-conditioned concern to present their actions as the product of the will of the highest authority. The abstract, institutional "will of the *Führer*" can be overstressed, while underestimating Hitler's concrete intervention in matters of detail, since the bureaucracy, ever assiduously "working toward the *Führer*," will always present his instructions, orders, and advice as the fruit of its own labors. (There is, of course, the opposite danger for intentionalist historians; namely, the tendency to interpret every reference by a functionary to a "*Führer* order" as proof of the dictator's omnipotence.)

There is a certain rupture between the first and second volume of the book that is striking. If Kershaw was intent in Volume 1 to describe the way in which Hitler's position hinged on the charisma attributed to him by his followers, that approach is clearly less prominent in Volume 2. Why? Because Kershaw recognizes that Hitler's power, from as early as 1936, but most certainly from 1939 on, was for all practical purposes unlimited. Now he was no longer dependent on the demonstrative assent of his followers to legitimate every major political decision, in this way ever-renewing the charismatic nexus. Rather, the charisma was absorbed and institutionalized by his regime. With the help of a huge and comprehensive apparatus of terror and propaganda,

the system of rule was finally in a position itself to generate to a certain degree the charisma necessary for its legitimization and maintenance. The *Führer* state functioned, even if for months on end the people did not get to see or hear their *Führer*.

The fiction emphasized everywhere within the apparatus of rule - namely, that the supreme leader was endowed with extraordinary abilities and was thus the paramount authority in all decisive questions - now had another principal function: to maintain the internal balance within a system of rule riven by power blocs. But that fiction could be upheld only if the entire system were constantly pressing forward, advancing toward the ideological and utopian goals proclaimed by the leader. This constitutes the self-destructive character of the system as a whole. Kershaw's book thus makes clear that the charismatic principle formed the basis for Hitler's power, but after he had consolidated that power, it did not determine a specific set goal for his policies. Kershaw stresses that Hitler was at the center of a destructive dynamic, which he was no longer able (or even wished) to halt. But he was evidently able to decide in large part the direction this ruinous development could take.

In other words, Hitler's position of power was hinged to a dependency that constrained him to press on with the development of the Third Reich in the direction of external expansion and ideological radicalization. Yet within the perimeters of this paradigm, he evidently possessed unlimited powers. However, serious questions surface about the explanatory power of a one-sided structuralist approach if certain monumental and consequential decisions, such as the attack on the Soviet Union or the murder of the European Jews, did not spring by sheer necessity from the historical situation but rather were open options. Then it is clearly more important to explicate the "factor Hitler" that cannot be derived from the configuration of structures.

In this instance, Hitler is not the product of accident; not some non-entity catapulted by chance from the midst of the masses to the pinnacle of power. No, then he must be seen as a person who combined within himself a rare meld of abilities and qualities, an amalgam he was able to utilize very effectively in a specific historical situation. So, ultimately, we are left with an

open question: did Hitler act under constraint, the prisoner of overpowering structures? Or could one not argue the other way around, that he exploited these structures in order to set in motion a machinery of destruction whose roots were psychological, within the recesses of his own personality?

No one will dispute that the phenomenon of Hitler cannot be adequately explicated without resort to the mechanisms of charisma. The impressive strength of Kershaw's book is his ability to present this in vivid clarity. Yet in so doing, he furnishes us with strong reason to conclude that, at the outset of his study, Kershaw underestimated Hitler's personal power. Hitler, one might say, ultimately manages to burst the structural investigative frame that Kershaw constructs. That is undoubtedly one disconcerting aspect for the reader. Still, that very fact, in contrast with the author's original intention, redounds to the credit of his monumental study. The book is eminently transparent, balanced, and pragmatic in its aims and, notwithstanding the methodological approach chosen by the author, refreshingly undogmatic.

Translated from the German by Bill Templer

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