

## **Kershaw's Hitler: Hubris and Nemesis**

### **I**

**Visiting Carl Gustav Jung at his home in Switzerland in October, 1938, just after the Sudetenland was taken from Czechoslovakia by the Munich Accords, an American reporter asked the famed psychologist for his impressions of Hitler and the other reigning dictators in Europe, Stalin and Mussolini. Some leaders elicit support by virtue of physical strength, Jung noted, while others persuade followers that they possess magic, or "supernatural ability." He described Mussolini as a man of physical strength," while Stalin was a "brute, a shrewd peasant, an instinctive powerful beast." Hitler," suggested Jung, was "entirely different. His body does not suggest strength. The outstanding characteristic of his physiognomy is its dreamy look. There is no question," Jung continued, "but that Hitler belongs in the category of the truly mystic medicine man....There is the look in his eyes of a seer. As somebody commented about him in the last Nurnberg party congress, since the time of Mohammed nothing like it has been seen in this world."**

**I was reminded of Jung's description while reading Professor Ian Kershaw's remarkable two-volume biography of Hitler, subtitled Hubris and Nemesis, which was published in 1999 and 2004; I finished reading the second volume last spring. Volume one covers the years from Hitler's birth in 1889 until Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936, three years after he became Chancellor. Volume two extends from the spring of 1936 until Hitler's bizarre**

marriage to Eva Braun and suicide at the end of the war in 1945. These two volumes entirely supersede the early standard biography of Hitler by Alan Bullock and also appear to eclipse the important studies that came out in the 1970s and 1980s, before scholars had access to archives hidden away in once-communist Eastern Europe. Kershaw has synthesized an enormous amount of material dealing with Hitler's life, the Weimar Republic, the years of the dictatorship, the Holocaust and the war itself, offering readers a description of the man who "has stamped a more profound imprint" on the twentieth century than Mussolini, Mao and Stalin, the other infamous figures of the last century. As terrible as they were, no one represents the horror that overtook the world in the middle decades of the twentieth century more fully than the man who took over a chaotic Germany for a cataclysmic twelve years.

Hitler served bravely in the Great War and was awarded an Iron Cross. When it ended in 1918, he was a mere corporal, hospitalized for injuries from mustard gas. Returning to Munich after his recovery, he engaged in the political education of soldiers who might be tempted by the currents of Bolshevism then sweeping Europe; German Marxists had briefly turned Bavaria into a type of Soviet Republic, *der Ratersrepublik*. Within a year, Hitler had joined a fringe nationalist party, the German Workers Party, and had become one of its leading speakers in open fields and beer halls. By the early twenties, the DAP was renamed the NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers Party, and on January 30th, 1933, Hitler was named Reich's Chancellor of Germany, appointed by and nominally serving under President Paul von Hindenburg.. "We've hired him," said Franz von Papen,

one of the feckless Weimar politicians who helped bring Hitler to power and would shortly join a long list of adversaries who underestimated him. "We're boxing Hitler in," crowed Alfred Hugenberg, a competitor on the far right wing of Germany's nationalist movement who would soon find himself politically dispossessed. In this biography, Kershaw cites both of these reactions to Hitler's appointment, along with a third, perhaps the only intelligent one, from retired General Eric von Ludendorff, a great war hero and a leader of Germany in the last year of the Great War. He had once been a political rival of Hitler's and a participant in the absurd beer hall putsch of 1923 that landed Hitler in prison. He wrote to Hindenburg on the day of Hitler's appointment, saying "I solemnly prophesy that this accursed man will cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery. Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done."

## II

He was not German at all, as many readers know; Hitler was born in Braunau-am-Main, a small Austrian village near the border of Bavaria. His father, Alois Hitler, originally named Shicklgruber was an illegitimate child of uncertain origins whose family used alternatively spellings of Huddler, Hiedler and Hitler, finally settling on Hitler. He married three times, had a pre-marital affair, and in all fathered nine children. A minor if respected customs official in the bureaucratic machinery of Austria-Hungary, Alois Hitler took on a third wife, a much younger woman who had come into his household as a maid. Klara Polzl, actually a second

cousin, became pregnant when Alois Hitler's second wife, Franziska, lay dying of tuberculosis; his first wife had also died prematurely young. Franziska's death opened the door to a third marriage, to Klara, and while her first three children died in infancy, the fourth--Adolph--survived. A father out of the literature of Central Europe, Alois Hitler emerges from pages of history as petty, strict, humorless, proud of his achievements in life, and given to ill-tempered outbursts both at home and at work. Klara Hitler, on the other hand, seems mild, devoted to her family, conventional, submissive, inexpressive, representative of the standards of her day. Hitler lost both of his parents when he was young: the father, apparently of heart failure, when Hitler was 13, and his mother, a few years later, to breast cancer. After his father's death, he was taken care of by his mother but remained a largely indifferent student at school. As a teenager, Hitler lived between Braunau and the provincial capital of Linz and in both towns relished what Kershaw calls "parasitic idleness," a quality that in some ways lasted much of his life. "Systematic preparation and hard work were as foreign to the young Hitler as they would be to the later dictator," Kershaw writes. In the summer of 1907, age eighteen, shortly after his mother died, he moved to Vienna, the capital of Central Europe, failed the rigorous entrance exams to the Academy of Fine Arts, briefly returned to Linz, and then went back to Vienna.

He spent slightly over five years in the capital, from the winter of 1908 to the spring of 1913, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four. In his autobiography, he represents these years as ones of dire poverty, but for a while at least he was living comfortably, in part on his state orphan's pension. Days were spent reading

newspapers in cafes, nights at the opera, for as most know, his passion for architecture was rivaled only by that for music, and above all Wagner. Kershaw reports that he and a friend would wait in line for hours for a standing place at the opera house; he reportedly saw Lohengrin ten times in one season. Verdi and Puccini had a large following in Vienna, but Hitler disliked both and listened almost exclusively to the German masters, including Bruckner, Liszt and Brahms. But Vienna for Hitler was not all operas and *Sachertorte*; when his money ran out, he fell into the abyss of poverty. The quality of his lodgings deteriorated, his savings disappeared, and by the fall of 1909, Hitler hit rockbottom. He was now sleeping outdoors, when the weather permitted, and in the worst possible housing when it did not. He offered to carry luggage for passengers at an area train station, but Kershaw guesses that his appearance encouraged little business; he describes him in December 1909 as "thin and bedraggled, in filthy lice-ridden clothes...Hitler joined the flotsam and jetsam finding their way" to a shelter for the homeless, ironically enough, near the imperial palace of Schonbrunn. At the age of twenty, he had joined "the tramps, winos and down-and-outs in society's basement." Borrowing money from an aunt, Hitler rescued himself from dire poverty and set himself up in business with an acquaintance selling postcards that he painted, mostly imitations of the masters found in the city's museums and scenes from "old Vienna." By February 1910 he had found more attractive lodgings. And then Hitler disappears once more, this time for about two years. Kershaw imagines that he kept his lodgings at the slightly superior Men's Home and continued to churn out hack work for tourists and perhaps residents. He simply "hung around" Vienna, waiting,

**Kershaw surmises, to reach the age of twenty-four--in April, 1913--when he could come into his father's inheritance.**

**There may very well have been another reason to explain his departure for Munich in May of that year--his fear of the Austrian draft. In the fall of 1909 he had failed to register for military service, which would have meant conscription in the Austrian army the following spring. The urge to return to Munich was to benefit from its reputation, well-established by Kandinsky and others, as an international art center. But Hitler had no taste for modern art and continued to peddle pictures and eek out a modest living, surviving on the margins of life with few apparent ambitions. Still, it was a shock for him when, in January 1914, with the Great War seven months off, the Munich police showed up on his doorstep presenting a summons to appear in a Linz court. The venue was shifted to Salzburg, which was closer to Munich than Linz, and a contrite Hitler conceded in court that he should have registered for the army during his early days in Vienna, but explained, with some justice, that he had fallen too far in the social scale to give thought to the subject. A lenient judge--it was not the last he would find--accepted his explanation, and the government in any case found his health too poor for the army. But it was a close thing--failing to register would have meant a fine, deportation to another country, prison. Hitler returned to Munich, in a poor district to the north, near the arts' colony of Schwabing, to his vagrant ways and his picture peddling, experiencing what Kershaw calls "an empty, lonely and futile period."**

There were a few consequences to his five-year stay in Vienna, though not the ones (according to Kershaw) that many scholars attribute to the sojourn. Hitler--as so many historians have asserted--does seem to have picked up casual anti-Semitism from the gutter press in Vienna and from well-established anti-Semitic politicians of the time such as Karl Luger and Georg Ritter von Schornerer. But as Kershaw points out, "There is no reliable contemporary confirmation of Hitler's paranoid anti-Semitism during the Vienna period," nothing like the "intensity of his hatred for the Jews between 1919 and the end of his life." Probably, he speculates, "no single encounter" elicited anything more than a dislike of the Jews, which was part of the air of the city, where anti-Jewish sentiment was virulent. What he did acquire was a hatred of the Austrian Social Democratic Party and of the Hapsburg monarchy as well, because Hitler had by now become a pan-German. The casual acceptance of a polyglot empire consisting of Slavs, Czechs, German-speaking Jews, Hungarians and Austrians was anathema to him.

This "foreign mixture of people" was "corroding" the true German spirit in an international capitol second only to Paris, a world encouraged by a monarchy (the Hapsburgs) intent on squandering the possibilities of German greatness. In fact, though he lived there for years, Hitler detested Vienna, doubtless in part because of his low status and frequent poverty, but also because of the peoples of the empire with whom he had to share it. But all of these sentiments amounted to what Kershaw calls "a personal hatred" and not the comprehensive "world-view" that would emerge four years later, as he lay in a military hospital in Pomerania recovering from an attack of mustard gas in the war.

### III

**"The First World War made Hitler possible," writes Kershaw decisively. "Without the experience of war, the humiliation of defeat, and the upheaval of revolution, the failed artist and social drop-out would not have discovered what to do with his life by entering politics and finding his métier as a propagandist and beerhall demagogue."**

**Hitler may have avoided registering for military service in Austria, but once in Munich, he proved a willing subject of Imperial Germany. After negotiations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary failed and declarations of war rang out in the first week of August 1914, Hitler apparently volunteered to serve in a Bavarian infantry unit. Significantly, his loyalty was to Germany and not to his native country. After a period of training, the twenty-five-year-old was shipped north to Belgium and saw action in the Ypres region of Flanders. That is where he spent about half of his wartime service. In his autobiography, Mein Kampf, Hitler tries to suggest that he spent the war in the trenches, with millions of other fighting men of several nations; the truth is that he was a "dispatch runner" communicating orders and messages between the front and regimental commanders in the rear. This was not easy duty, and many performing it were killed. Identified by his superiors as "committed" rather than "simply conscientious," he was promoted to corporal and gained the respect of other soldiers for his apparent fearlessness. By October 1916, his regiment was engaged in stalemated trench warfare on the Somme, and it is here that Hitler bore the first and apparently most serious of two war-related injuries. A shell exploded in the runners' dugout, killing several; Hitler, severely injured, was**



evacuated to a Red Cross hospital outside of Berlin. He was eager to return to the front, however, and in March 1917 was once again in France. Shortly thereafter, his unit returned to Flanders, evidence of how little geographic progress either side was making in the war, and this was where he stayed until July. He rotated in and out of combat twice over the next year and was nominated for (and later awarded) an Iron Cross by a Jewish officer, Lieutenant Hugo Guttman. The story was later put about that Hitler single-handedly captured fifteen French soldiers, but the truth is that he transmitted a message through heavy fire. In mid-October, 1918, three weeks before the Armistice and once again near Ypres, Hitler was exposed to mustard gas from English troops. He was evacuated out once more, this time to a military hospital in Pasewalk, in Pomerania, the north of Germany. His meditations and condition in Pasewalk, Kershaw believes, proved decisive. The war had ended, the monarchy had fallen, sailors at the Kiel Canal revolted, and revolution spread throughout Germany, as upheavals so often do after a long and unsuccessful war. Race war, imperialism and expansionism began to take hold of his mind. Kershaw describes his month in Pasewalk as a moment of chrysalis, a truly life-changing experience:

**If there is any strength in the suggestion we have put forward that Hitler acquired his deep-seated prejudices, including his anti-Semitism, in Vienna, and had them revitalized in the last two years of the war, if without rationalizing them into a composite ideology, then there is no need to mystify the Pasewalk experience through seeing it as a sudden, dramatic conversion to paranoid anti-Semitism. Rather, Pasewalk might be viewed as the time when, as Hitler lay tormented and seeking an explanation of how his world had been shattered, his own rationalization started to fall into place. Devastated by events unfolding in Munich, Berlin, and other cities, he must have read into them outright confirmation**

**of the views he had always held from the Vienna days on Jews and Social Democrats, on Marxism and internationalism, on pacifism and democracy. Even so, it was still only the beginning of the rationalization.**

**Discharged from Pasewalk in the middle of November, Hitler decided to return to Munich. Nearly penniless, he was able to postpone his demobilization and remained on the army payroll for another sixteen months, until the spring of 1920. By then, the Weimar Republic had been in power for less than a year.**

#### **IV**

**Named after the city where the founding constitutional convention was held, the Weimar Republic was the fatally weakened progeny of war and revolution. The House of Wittelbach, monarchs in Bavaria for seven centuries, collapsed on November 7th, 1918, and two days later, Kaiser Wilhelm II, under intense pressure, was obliged to surrender authority and cross the border into Holland--neither the army nor much of the senior officer corps supported him any longer. (Karl the First, the last Hapsburg, abandoned the throne on November 11.) The SPD, the German Socialist Party of Germany, assumed control of the government, but its power was tenuous, and the KPD, the Communist Party, led the so-called Spartacus Rising in early January 1919. Government troops and that sinister paramilitary group, the Freikorps, suppressed this revolt and were probably responsible as well for the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The split between the KPD and the SPD would prove irreparable, and the failure of the working class movement to unite would later speed the ascent of the Nazi Party in the final years of the Republic. For now, short-lived Soviet-style workers' councils, quickly suppressed,**

took command in Munich and Berlin. In February, "Red Guards" under the authority of socialists and anarchists took over the Wittelbach Palace, and shortly thereafter, the radical left proclaimed a "*Räterepublic*," or Soviet-style government, in Bavaria. A "Red Army," drawn from Munich's largest factories and army garrison and estimated at 20,000, tried to enforce order. The unrest that began with the failure of the Ludendorf Offensive at the end of the war lasted until May, 1919 and opened the door to a threatened but suppressed revolution. More than six hundred were killed in street fighting in Munich in the spring of 1919, and the *Schreckensherrschaft*--Rule of Horror--had a lasting hold on the memory of the conservative, Catholic Bavarian middle class.

But the Weimar Constitution that fell into place later in the year played no more than a modest, transitory role in stabilizing political conditions throughout the country. It enjoyed little authentic support, because Germany had never developed a parliamentary democracy in the first place. The revolutions of 1848 that toppled the monarchy in France were thwarted in Central Europe, leaving authority in the hands of the illiberal military-landowning caste. Bismark, as most readers know, created the country in a series of wars that ended with the rout of Louis Napoleon in 1870. The new Reich was Germany's second--the first was ruled by the medieval Emperor Barbarossa--but was hardly more than an artificial contraption divided by religion, class and region, and vulnerable to serious cultural fissures. There was a parliament, but never one in the sense that emerged in other western democracies, and the Hohenzollern monarchy ruled the country with the support of big landholders, the officer corps of the army (mostly Prussian), senior bureaucrats,

and even a few political parties. Habits of moderation and compromise, an accepted range of political opinion and debate--qualities indispensable to a democracy--never took hold.

The troubles besetting Weimar involved more than political maldevelopment. The cultural setting was hostile as well. A rough translation of *volkish* would be populist, but the American term, with its suggestion of reforming the meat-processing industry and direct election to the U.S. Senate, hardly does justice to the scope of feeling the word implies in German. An off-shoot of the German Romantics, *volkish* sentiment stimulated a complex of feelings. The value of nature was elevated; German "types" and German soil were considered unique, distinguishable from those of other lands; and community--*Gemeinschaft* in German--was considered indispensable for healthy social development, and transcended the wants of the individual, who was to subordinate himself. These swarming sentiments often encouraged the mystical and the irrational, a belief in the value of roots, literal and figurative, because peasant virtues were esteemed while trees were seen as great growths, sacred even, that enter deeply into the soil and rise to the heavens. A member of the *volk* had to live in harmony with cosmic forces binding the celestial with nature and man. The antithesis, to be relentlessly combated and beaten back at every turn, was the debased entertainment of big cities--asphalt culture, as the Nazis later called it--money-dominated economies, the acceleration and dislocations of capitalism, and, inevitably, the Jews, rootless and rapacious desert people who had wandered over Africa and Europe and were now deeply embedded in the unpredictable and pernicious dynamics of money, markets

**and industrialization. This amalgam of fantasy and attempted spirituality would later prove deadly.**

**German nationalism, some strands of which were fed by volkish thinking, also proved inimical to democracy in the years before and after the Great War. "What...Hitler was able most signally to exploit," writes Kershaw, "was the belief that pluralism was somehow unnatural or unhealthy in a society, that it was a sign of weakness, and internal division and disharmony could be suppressed and eliminated, to be replaced by the unity of a national community." But a community so identified is inevitably hostile to dissent, and encourages the exclusion (or worse) of those who do not fit in.**

**He grew into a theatrical character, initially willing to be the "drummer," the proponent who rallies support, later determined to be the Fuhrer. Quite average in height and appearance, entirely inconspicuous, apparently fearless but coarse, Hitler was able and willing to stir up crowds, some friendly, but others hostile and eager to pitch lead mugs at the speaker in the great beer halls of Munich. As he rose in political stature, Hitler learned to parcel out his companionship with care, to fix acquaintances with a firm handshake, meaningfully extended that extra moment, while keeping a firm look in his unwavering blue eyes. Absurd in retrospect, the technique worked--the neophyte or stranger to the great world of publicity and "action" would be mesmerized by a rare chance to meet the Fuhrer. For "civilian types," he wore a tie and jacket, and for the military ones, the more belligerent get-up of brown shirt, black tie, the military-style boots rising to the**

knees. The speeches were theatrical also, and to many people guttural, offensive, and grating, but the silly period gestures of out-stretched arms and clenched fists made an impact. There was an element of attunement in Hitler that allowed him to connect with diverse groups of people while speaking in public. That is how he made his initial mark in the party.

By the end of November, 1918, he was back in Munich, just as the great upheavals of the next eight months were getting underway. Kershaw reports that with no other career prospects, he managed to extend his stay in the army. His own garrison was managed now by Soldiers' Councils, entirely committed to the revolution sweeping German, and Hitler was distinctly unhappy with the breakdown of morale and hierarchy. He was assigned at first to a military prison, guarding mostly Russian prisoners-of-war, and later to the city's Hauptbahnhof, where considerable brutality was reported in the arrest of detainees. Very strangely, Hitler was made a kind of army "representative"--a red army representative--responsible for explaining "educational" material to the troops. "How to interpret this evidence," writes Kershaw with understandable perplexity, referring to the record of his subject's assignment in revolutionary Munich, "is not altogether clear."

There are reports that Hitler was even sympathetic with the SPD. Konrad Heiden, Hitler's first biographer, claims that he engaged in heated arguments with his comrades and supported the socialists against the communists. There is no doubt that he was pleased when the monarchies fell throughout Europe, in Vienna,

Petersburg, Munich and above all Berlin. It is also possible that nothing more than opportunism--a desire to stay in the army--kept him hewing to the official (socialist) line. He certainly played no role in the fighting that suppressed the extreme left over the spring of 1919. But by the summer, after the tide had turned, so apparently had Hitler, who was now giving lectures to a greatly "reformed" army, instilling sentiments which he must have found more attractive--nationalist, anti-Bolshevik, and anti-Semitic as well. In the fall of 1919, still in the army, he was speaking before the DAP, the German Workers' Party, a nationalist and right-wing group that would later become the Nazi Party. And by the following spring, in 1920, Kershaw says that "key basic elements" of Hitler's *Weltanschauung* had come into focus: racially based anti-Semitism and the need to create a nationalist movement designed to combat the deadly, all-pervading power of the Jews. "Hitler's contribution," concludes Kershaw, referring to his years as a "drummer" for the party, "had been confined to an unusual talent for appealing to the gutter instincts of his listeners...."

It is important to distinguish between conventional socialism and National Socialism, which drew on an intellectual compound that could have been found elsewhere in Europe. Kershaw calls it "an amalgam of prejudices, phobias and utopian social expectations" prevalent in the years before the Great War. Marxism and democratic socialism were transnational movements intended to unite believers across the continent. The historian Bertram Wolfe reports that Lenin, in his Swiss exile in 1914, was dumbfounded to read that all 110 German socialists in the Bundestag had voted credits for the Imperial government for the war that had just

broken out. He assumed he was reading a dummy newspaper specifically intended to mislead him; true socialists would never agree to a war against another socialist party. But "National" socialism for the Nazis was a German "program" intended for Germans and nobody else, designed to bind together the nation under a single authority. Kershaw sums it up this way:

**Integral nationalism, anti-Marxist "national socialism," social Darwinism, racism, biological anti-Semitism, eugenics and elitism intermingled in varying strengths to provide a heady brew of irrationalism attractive to some cultural pessimists among the intelligentsia and European bourgeoisies....The appeal here was mainly to the lower-middle classes--traders, craftsmen, small farmers, lower civil servants--and rooted in a combination of anti-Semitism, extreme nationalism, and vehement anti-capitalism (usually interpreted as "Jewish capitalism").**

Germany, in short, in the last years of the war and in the two years following its end, had become radicalized. Ideas formerly marginal were moving into the mainstream. The *volkisch* strand of nationalism--extreme nationalism, racial anti-Semitism, mystical notions of "Germandom"--was merging with more conventional currents of nationalist feeling. The crowds that Hitler attracted were drawn by "simple slogans," writes Kershaw, "kindling the fires of anger, resentment, and hatred that were offered in the Munich beer halls." Disturbingly, the material Hitler exploited was simply a cruder version of ideas that "were in far wider circulation." Munich in particular, already during the war, had become fertile ground for nationalist pan-German agitation, but also for rightist Bavarian separatism. The early National Socialist Party thrived in an atmosphere of calculated antagonism, often drafting posters in red to advertise its star speaker, a technique that drew communists to the beer halls spoiling for a fight. They were not



the only ones to show up. Along with true believers, says Kershaw, "Middle-class citizens rubbed shoulders with workers, soldiers and students."

By 1921, to the larger Munich public, Hitler *was* National Socialism, and in July he assumed leadership of the party. His talent was for propaganda and political mobilization, not organization. Crude slogans quickly understood by large numbers of minimally educated people were the key to what Hitler called "nationalization of the masses." The NSDAP was not yet an important force in German politics, but it certainly was in Bavaria, which was becoming what Kershaw calls "a haven for right-wing extremists from all over Germany." The movement was rapidly gaining members, and recruits came "from all sections of society." Thousands were flocking to join the S.A., or *Sturmabteilung*, the Storm Troops that originally had been formed to provide security for the Nazis in the beer halls, where Hitler carefully provoked his enemies on the left. His taunts often drew scores of beer mugs, but no matter: he was promising not simply talk but "action," and a determination to crush Marxism, democracy, internationalism, parliamentary activity, and the power of the Jews. Indeed, political violence was becoming a conspicuous characteristic of Weimar culture. German society had been brutalized and prepared for it by the war and its aftermath, and its pervasiveness contributed to the success of the Nazis. The German public was becoming morally indifferent.

## V

Domestic and foreign crises fueled the rise of National Socialism. In January 1923, France (with the help of Belgian troops) occupied the Ruhr, the industrial zone of northwest Germany, on the grounds that the country had fallen behind in the payment of reparations. The incursion, designed to insure the delivery of coal, provoked fury throughout Germany. Armed confrontations between French troops and German workers merely fed the reaction, which reached a pitch of feeling in March, when thirteen workers were killed and forty-one wounded at a Krupp factory in Essen. General Ludendorf, the war hero who had returned from Swedish exile in 1919, was becoming a central figure in the paramilitary formations that were gathering on the right. They drew the famous general into contact with Hitler and what Kershaw calls "the world of rabble-rousing politics to which General Ludendorf was ill-attuned." Hitler, the Bavarian Corporal, soon eclipsed Ludendorf in this violent, dangerous world of political rage, and was soon brought into contact with the highest levels of military leadership in Germany. Disastrously, the Reichswehr soon agreed to offer formal military training to the SA.

"Crisis was Hitler's oxygen," says Kershaw. "He needed it to survive." The 'passive resistance' to the French occupation adopted by the government led to the erosion of the currency, and sparked the extraordinary inflation that was one of very lowest points of the Weimar years. Savings and other investments were destroyed, an event that sharply radicalized the left as well as the right. In late October, 1923, members of the KPD in Hamburg, eager to light the fuse of revolution, actually attacked some police stations and drew a quick and effective

reaction by the Reichswehr and the authorities in Berlin, one not evident in their dealings with the extreme right. Indeed, the Reichswehr commander in Bavaria, Otto von Lossow, had himself sanctioned the training of Nazi paramilitaries earlier in the year, and it was only weeks after the flare-up in Hamburg that Hitler and his followers planned their putsch. Gustave Kahr, Minister President of Bavaria and a nationalist, assembled an audience in the Burgerbraukeller to hear an anti-Marxist speech on the fifth anniversary of the November revolution. In the midst of the speech, Hitler and the SA marched in and took over the beer hall, announcing that Kahr, Lossow and others would shortly assume dictatorial powers in Bavaria. But after rousing the crowd, the attempted putsch rapidly fell apart. Despite their success in taking over some police and army facilities, neither the army nor the Bavarian state police would support the "revolt." Hitler, Ludendorff and hundreds of other rank and file spent the night in the beer hall, only partially aware of movement outside, and decided the next day to lead a bellicose march with arms through Munich, hoping to generate support outside the hall. What happened instead was a shoot-out between the putschists and the police, which led to several deaths. Hitler was arrested and sent to Landsberg am Lech, a prison forty miles west of Munich.

If it were not for its hideous consequences, the trial could be considered an unfortunate joke. The judge, a nationalist sympathizer, allowed Hitler to speak for hours without interruption, quite as though he were back in the fields and beer halls lecturing the masses. Ludendorff was arrested but never imprisoned, and arrived at

court in a limousine. The verdicts, read out in April 1924, scandalized even conservative Bavaria. Despite the deaths of the police, the attempted putsch, the destruction of the SPD Munich newspaper offices, and the theft of the paper equivalent of 28,000 Gold Marks from the state treasury, Ludendorff was acquitted while Hitler and other defendants received five years' term in prison. This was the court's response to high treason. "Hitler returned to Landsberg," writes Kershaw, "to begin a light sentence in conditions more akin to those of a hotel than a penitentiary." He adds

Without the dogmatic anti-Berlin stance of the ruling groups in Bavaria, where shrill anti-democratic, anti-socialist, anti-Prussian feeling combined to bracket together otherwise antagonistic forces to the general aim of counterrevolution, Hitler's all-or-nothing gamble in the Burgerbraukeller could never have occurred. The Bavarian Reichswehr had concluded massively in the training and preparation of the forces which had tried to take over the state. And important personages had been implicated in the putsch attempt.

Hitler could have been deported to Austria, the threat disposed of there and then. Instead he was released from Landsberg early, in December 1924, and used his time in prison to compose Mein Kampf. He served only thirteen months.

## VI

The next four years were the golden era of the doomed Republic and passed with few visible successes for the Nazis. The party, which had split into warring factions during Hitler's imprisonment, was rebuilt; writers were hired to improve

his not-always-grammatical German; and Mein Kampf was published. In March 1925, presidential elections were held in Germany, and Ludendorff, testing his popularity on a nation-wide basis, fared very poorly. He gained only one per cent of the vote, and a combination of forces cast Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, another war hero, into office. He was "a pillar of the old order," and until the economic typhoon called the Depression severely disrupted everything, was considered a very reliable choice. Hitler was pleased with Ludendorff's failure; he was happy to see his rival for leadership of the nationalist movement routed. Hitler honed his speaking skills, really his public relations skills more generally; Kershaw calls him "a consummate actor" who knew how to dress and in which style for which audience; how to go on the attack rhetorically, to delay his entry into a hall as his auditors waited eagerly for his appearance. Coarse, ill-educated, but with a quick mind and sarcastic wit, Hitler exerted a fascination even for cultivated, thoughtful, educated people. When the occasion suited him, he had access to reserves of charm and wit. But it was a stage-managed style, easily adjustable, and the outbursts of rage could be summoned as readily as the charm. Hitler maintained no regular working hours and appointments were canceled at will. Instead of regularity, a social-Darwinist inclination led Hitler to foster "ferocious competition" among party members to interpret his will correctly. (This principal was later applied to the state as well when the Nazis took over.) His sex life? He does not seem to have had one, according to Kershaw. The closest experience to sexual ties that ever affected Hitler was his relations with his niece, Angela Raubal, who apparently committed suicide in 1931. The daughter of Hitler's half-sister, also

Angela Raubal, she shared an ample flat in Munich with Hitler. He seems to have exerted psychological pressure on the younger Raubal, but whether they had sexual relations cannot be known. What Kershaw does report is that for the first and only time in his life he became emotionally dependent on a woman (excluding the example of his mother). Angela Raubal seems to have been desperate to free herself of her uncle's attention, and though her death is a mystery, it appears to have been an authentic case of suicide. (She apparently shot herself to death with Hitler's pistol.) A close attachment would have been a very rare experience for Hitler, because outside of politics, which had consumed his life since 1919, he seems to have had none whatever. Kershaw writes that his personal life was quite empty, except perhaps for his love of music and his interest in architecture; but these for the most part were solitary passions that he did not share with others.

While Hitler was grooming himself for political leadership, everyday life in the Republic grew calmer. Germany finally caught up with the prosperous twenties, and its progress allowed an abatement of social and political stress. Officials in the largest German states, including Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria, and Anhalt, had banned Hitler from speaking in public after his release from Landsberg at the end of 1924. These restrictions were lifted over the next few years, when support for his party seemed to fade. Certainly the poor showing of the National Socialists in the Reichstag elections of May 1928, when they polled just 2.6 percent of the vote, a serious decline from the preceding elections, seemed to justify a more relaxed approach. Hitler and his fanatical group, as Kershaw writes, now seemed little more than "a fringe irritant on the political scene." Hitler idolatry within the

party remained unassailable, however, and Kershaw notes that "The establishment of the Fuhrer cult was decisive for the development of the Nazi Party." Romantics, neo-conservatives, proto-Nietzscheans and *volkisch* types were eager for a strong leader, a supremo, someone willing to take on the German establishment and indeed the world. Deep class and religious fissures continued to split the Republic, and endless Nazi propaganda on "asphalt culture" and the Americanization of German popular entertainment, especially in the cities, found an echo outside of the party, among the conservative middleclass. Passably content for the moment, they remained dismayed by post-war dislocations. Jazz, strippers, and American movies were an agreeable diversion for some, but the principal Nazi theme of "racial defilement" and the "bastardization" of culture and morals was effective. ("The German people has its specific value and cannot be set on an equal level to seven million negroes," Hitler said in a representative speech. "Negro music is dominant, but if we put a Beethoven symphony along side a shimmy, victory is clear....") The famous Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter spoke naively in late 1928 of "the growing stability of our social relations," but the Reich foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, was justifiably alarmed by the country's dependence on short-term loans from the U.S., and how withdrawal of the funds would affect the stability of the country. In any case, the deeper insecurities of the Republic were about to be exposed by the economic typhoon unleashed by the stock market crash in New York in October 1929.

The impact on Germany, dependent on U.S. capital markets for loans and the American market for exports, proved immediate and severe. Like the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and the consequent hyperinflation, the crisis showed the feebleness of Weimar's foundations and how susceptible the public was to radicalization. Hindenburg, still the Reich President, appointed Heinrich Brüning Chancellor to replace the socialist Hermann Müller and began to rule by emergency decree, entirely legal under the Weimar Constitution. Brüning, unwilling to negotiate with a sharply divided Reichstag, simply dissolved the parliament in July 1930 and enacted legislation with emergency decrees that allowed for higher taxes and cuts in public spending. The parties had rejected the bill, which was now enacted by fiat. That was a first for the Republic, and Kershaw calls it "a step of doubtful legality." Far worse was the decision to schedule a new round of elections for September 14, 1930, which he calls "a catastrophe." It would bring Hitler's electoral breakthrough.

The NSDAP threw itself into the campaign with enormous energy, and press coverage of its activities, formerly limited, now made the front pages of the country's newspapers. Their program was not day-to-day policies, which never interested Hitler and other senior Nazis, but, as Kershaw calls it, national redemption: Parliamentary government and democracy were bankrupt. The Nazis alone represented the entire German nation. Strength through unity was the rallying cry. It was time-worn material--Kershaw calls it "the ideological baggage of pan-Germanism and neo-conservatism, blended with an amalgam of varying



phobias, resentments and prejudices"--but amidst severe economic upheaval, it seemed like an idealistic vision of a country endowed with a new sense of "community." More than simply a campaign, it was a crusade, one that drew a powerful reaction.

Kershaw terms the results of the balloting "a political earthquake." In one election, the Nazis went from a mere twelve seats to 107. More than six million Germans voted for the party, a popular vote of nearly twenty percent. In one step the Nazis moved from fringe status to a dynamic party at or near the center of power. They could no longer be dismissed or disregarded. They attracted support from nearly all sections of German society, including teachers, civil servants and even Protestant pastors, something none of the other parties, organized along class and religious lines, could claim. On the other hand, leaders of big business, far from enamored of democracy, were not eager to let the Nazis run the country. Two rounds of presidential elections were needed in May 1932, because neither Hitler, Hindenburg nor the SPD and the KPD had swung a majority. Hindenburg won the second round of elections, but the parties of the left declined and the vote for the NSDAP rose to 37 per cent from 30 per cent. In Prussia, the largest state in the country, Hitler polled 36.3 percent, far eclipsing the SPD, which had been the ruling party there since the end of the war.

At the end of May 1932, Hindenburg dismissed Brüning as Chancellor and replaced him with Franz von Papen, a member of the conservative Catholic nobility and the favorite of big business. The level of political violence in Germany rose along with the Nazi vote. There were frequent politically motivated killings

involving the NSDAP and the Communists, and on a single day in July, seventeen people were killed and sixty-four injured in a shootout between the two parties in Altona, near Hamburg. "The latent civil war that had existed throughout the Weimar years was threatening to become an actual civil war," says Kershaw. Events were moving toward a head, toward the disastrous decision to name Hitler as Chancellor, which happened in the following January. Before that could happen, two more ominous developments overcame the Republic--von Papen deposed the government of Prussia and assumed direct control of the state himself; hitherto, it had been run by the Social Democrats and was a bastion of working class strength. And yet another round of parliamentary elections was scheduled for July 31. The Nazi vote rose slightly, along with that of the KPD and the Zentrum (Catholic) Party; but the conventional middle class parties suffered further decline, suggesting the erosion of democratic politics in the Republic. But the biggest prize still eluded Hitler. Hindenburg invited him in mid-August to sit in the cabinet but refused to name him Chancellor. Hitler rejected the offer. The Reichspresident's decision was considered a major political defeat for the coming Fuhrer, but it proved to be no more than a transitory one.

## VII

Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics. Today, not only in peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms. The Pope of Rome broadcasts over the radio about the miraculous transformation of

**water into wine. Movie stars go to mediums. Aviators who pilot miraculous mechanisms created by man's genius wear amulets on their sweaters. What inexhaustible reserves they possess of darkness, ignorance, and savagery! Despair has raised them to their feet, fascism has given them a banner. Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of Nazism.**

**Trotsky, "What is National Socialism?" June, 1933**

**The bearer of charisma holds his authority in virtue of a mission held to be incarnate in his person: this mission need not always or necessarily be of a revolutionary nature, dedicated to the subversion of all hierarchies of value and the overthrow of existing morality, law and tradition; but it certainly has been in its highest form.**

**Max Weber, "The Nature of Charismatic Domination," 1914**

**By the fall of 1932, the Weimar Republic was in an advanced state of decay that mirrored the instability rife in Europe but which also involved characteristics peculiar to Germany. Significant elements of the Reichswehr and the several state governments--the voting public as well--were hostile to the Republic and eager to see it replaced with a leader who would take the country out of the parliamentary desert of squabbling parties. Political violence had become normal, "an everyday occurrence," writes Kershaw. The Hindenburg administration had come to depend on emergency decrees to enact legislation and had assumed direct control of state government. "The attempt to emasculate the Reichstag and dispense with party rule had begun under Brüning as a way of coping with crisis," says Kershaw. "Under Papen, it became the key principal of government." The economic crisis which deepened in the summer of 1932 stimulated support for both the KPD and**

the NSDAP, but enthusiasm for the latter seemed to be much greater. Social democrats were being routed, and Stalin, in a decision with terrible consequences, instructed the KPD leadership to work (at least politically) with other parties to weaken the authority of the SPD. "Social fascists" was the term the Soviet propaganda machine coined for the non-communist left in Central Europe. Mass unemployment fed the ranks of the KPD, but also badly undermined the communist and non-communist left in Germany, eliciting apathy and a conviction that party politics was a dead end--exactly the conclusion pressed by the Nazis. As the authority and status of parliamentary democracy waned, the standing of the Nazis increased, and along with it, the disastrous fantasy of the Establishment that Hitler could be brought to heel, appeased, co-opted. Non-extremist conservatives in Germany were about to discover what western leaders learned after Hitler was named Chancellor--a revolutionary on the right indifferent to political norms and standards and determined to overturn the political order in Europe had taken command. There would be no going back.

The issue of anti-Semitism is more complex. Few voters seem to have bought into the Nazi claim that Jews were behind both the Bolsheviks in Moscow and the "plutocrats" in New York and London. "Most Germans did not go along with such crude images," writes Kershaw, "nor were they like to become involved in, or approve of, physical violence directed at individual Jews." He goes on:

Most people during the Depression years...did not vote for the NSDAP, or even join the party, primarily because of its anti-Semitism. But the widespread latent anti-Semitism in Weimar, Germany--the feeling that Jews were somehow different, 'un-German,' and a harmful influences--did not provide any deterrent to people offering their enthusiastic

**support to Hitler's movement in full cognizance of its hatred of Jews. And since that hatred was central to the ethos of a Movement which was massively expanding its membership...more and more people were becoming exposed ...to the full brutality and viciousness of Nazi anti-Semitism.**

**In August 1932, Hindenburg had refused to offer Hitler the chancellorship but invited him to join the cabinet. Now his political advisers debated two options. The first was a "black-brown" coalition involving the Zentrum (Catholic) Party and the NSDAP, with a Catholic Chancellor, which would have meant retaining von Papen. The Nazis rejected the offer. The second, ultimately selected, was simply to dissolve the Reichstag, since no effective legislation could be passed with the KPD and the NSDAP holding veto authority. To dissolve parliament without scheduling elections would require the support of the army; the Weimar Constitution would have required yet another round of balloting within sixty days. Such a step could be justified only by the claim of a national emergency. In mid-September, the Reichstag met to consider the order of dissolution. In an extremely volatile session, von Papen issued the dissolution directive while the Nazis called for a vote of no-confidence in the government. In effect, both happened. Parliament was dissolved, but not before (nominally) voting down the Hindenburg regime. The no-confidence vote--512 to 42--had no legal significance, but its propaganda value was immense: it established how little support von Papen enjoyed as Chancellor, and perhaps by extension the Republic itself.**

**New elections, the fifth of the year, were set for the first week in November. The German public, fatigued with interminable electioneering, voted in smaller numbers than in the balloting held earlier in the year. In the final vote before Hitler**

came to power, all the established parties lost ground except for the KPD, which gained slightly, and the DNVP, a mainstream nationalist party. The last round of elections, in short, settled nothing. They simply prolonged the deadlock and fed the anxiety of the Hindenburg administration. Although the National Socialist vote had declined slightly, more than thirteen million Germans--"all of them," Kershaw soberly notes, "real or potential devotees of the Fuhrer cult"--had supported the party in July. Some weeks later, on December 1, 1932, after the final round of elections, a senior Reichswehr officer reported to the cabinet that the army doubted it could maintain the defense of Germany's borders and the preservation of internal order if the two extremist parties to become disruptive. Hindenburg, more than ever fearful of civil war, removed von Papen (who favored suspending parliament) as Reich Chancellor, naming Kurt von Schleicher, an army major, as his replacement. It seems likely that army reports on the danger of civil war in the event of proroguing the Reichstag were instigated by Schleicher, a rival of von Papen who was eager to encourage his ouster.

Then an event which otherwise would have had little significance gained unexpected prominence in an atmosphere infected with crisis. Elections in the tiny state of Lippe-Detmold held in mid-January, 1933 proved a success for the National Socialists; the vote total, though small, suggested that public support remained extensive. Hindenburg then began to consider indirect negotiations with Hitler via his son and von Papen, who had been restored as chancellor. Still unwilling to name Hitler chancellor, Hindenburg weighed the alternative--a revived von Papen cabinet and a declaration of a state of emergency that would lead to the suspension of the

**Reichstag. That option also seemed to him unpalatable. Despite everything, the old Prussian Field Marshall dearly wanted to preserve legal government in Germany. Franz von Papen was therefore once again called to renew talks with Hitler during the last days of January. Conservatives polled by the Chancellor showed a willingness to work in a Hitler cabinet with von Papen as Vice-Chancellor. They assumed that Hitler would be "ringed in" by the president, von Papen, and a host of conservatives with various cabinet portfolios. Hindenburg finally agreed, and on the morning of January 30th, 1933, the most infamous date in modern German history, Hitler was named Chancellor.**

**"Democracy was surrendered without a fight," laments Kershaw. The political class, "from right to left of the political spectrum--conservatives, liberals, socialists, communists--underrated his intentions and unscrupulous power instincts at the same time that they scorned his abilities." Hitler might have been stopped at several points in his career, most notably after the Beerhall Putsch of 1923, when he was given a light jail term and later early release. Parliament might have been dissolved with a schedule to return, and though it would have violated the Constitution, the choice would have been preferable to the one that was made. Kershaw faults just about every element of German society, including the larger public, which had never been won over to the idea of democracy. But his chief target remains the political right:**

**It was the blindness of the conservative Right to the dangers which had been so evident, arising from their determination to eliminate democracy and destroy socialism and the consequent governmental stalemate they had allowed to develop,**

**that delivered the power of a nation-state containing all the pent-up aggression of a wounded giant into the hands of the dangerous leaders of a political gangster-mob....During the Depression, democracy was less surrendered than deliberately undermined by elite groups serving their own ends. These were no pre-industrial leftovers, but--however reactionary their aims--modern lobbies working to further their vested interests in an authoritarian system. In the final drama, the agrarians and the army were more influential than big business....But big business, politically myopic and self-serving, had significantly contributed to the undermining of democracy which was the necessary prelude to Hitler's success.**

**The nomination of Hitler confirmed an indisputable reality--the Weimar Republic rested on a foundation of sand.**

**The former vagrant sleeping outdoors in Vienna with too little money to afford lodgings, carrying others' luggage in a train station for nickels, lice-ridden, no more than a corporal in the German Army during the war, was now the Reich Chancellor of Germany. He would soon extinguish all civil liberties and in the process achieve unassailable power over all who had imagined they would control him. Goring was named state minister of police in Prussia, the largest territory and formerly a bastion of working class strength, and unleashed a wave of terror against the regime's opponents. Hitler planned on a new round of elections that would establish the hopeless inability of the parties to solve the country's acute problems and then to invoke the Enabling Act, which would suspend parliament altogether and allow rule by emergency decree. But less than four weeks after Hitler took power, an obscure, impoverished and possibly deranged Dutch immigrant, a former member of the Communist Party, chose what he conceived as a spectacular blow against the oppression of German capitalism--he ignited a fire in the Reichstag that**



he hoped would do the same for the moribund German left. His name was Marinus van der Lubbe.

Van der Lubbe's vandalism failed to elicit a working class revolt but supplied Hitler with the pretext he needed to end civil liberties in Germany. Stirred up by years of anti-communist propaganda, the effectiveness of which had been greatly stimulated by the Depression, the public readily accepted the emergency decree promulgated by Hitler's Interior Minister, Wilhelm Frick. The decree extended the policing powers claimed by the Reich in Prussia to the whole of the country, and authority for enforcing the decree was taken from the Reichswehr and given to the Interior Ministry--that is, to the security services, now under Nazi control. The civil liberties of the Weimar Constitution, including freedom of speech, of association, of the press, and of most forms of communication, were suspended indefinitely. The decree set the stage for a long-planned round-up, often brutally conducted, of socialists, communists, trade unionists and leftists in general, all those considered enemies of the Reich. "The violence and repression," observes Kershaw, "were widely popular." The Nazis went through with the elections, but they were held in a climate of fear and brutality, and despite the repression, the KPD and the SPD were still able to acquire about 30 per cent of the vote; the Nazis gained 44 per cent.

The stage-managed "victory" paved the way to a full seizure of power in Germany. State governments everywhere were pressed to install Nazi officials as head of the police, while SS and SD troops conducted marches in the larger cities, hoisting the swastika banner on town halls. "Spontaneous" acts of violence were conducted by roaming bands of Nazi thugs, and an internment camp was set up at

Dachau, near Munich. On the seventh of March, the Reichstag, entirely controlled by the Nazis, passed the Enabling Act, extending emergency powers to the government indefinitely. To guarantee the necessary two-thirds majority the bill required, Wilhelm Frick simply deducted the number of communist deputies from the total, bringing the essential vote count down to 378 from 432. "It was the beginning of the end for political parties other than the NSDAP," says Kershaw. Hindenburg was still alive and respected as president of the country. But Hitler had taken giant steps in less than two months to consolidate his authority. His success lay to a large degree in persuading much of the peasantry and middle classes that Bolshevism and the NSDAP were the only two possibilities before them, and in the end, it proved a simple choice. The Nazis represented unity, redemption after defeat in the Great War, the end of parliamentary government (now considered pernicious and "un-German"), and a fresh start with a vigorous party. "Gleichschaltung," generally translated as co-ordination, was the order of the day. It meant, in a word, Nazification of the country. Jews were dismissed from civil government. Trade groups, choral societies, patriotic associations and most other forms of organized activity were placed under National Socialist control. There was little resistance to the measures. Civil servants and teachers hastened to join the party. The attempted suppression of the two churches in Germany proved less successful, and probably elicited the only serious public opposition that remained in the country. "Nationalization of the masses"--an essential characteristic of "totalitarian" rule--was now well under way. In July, offering the public its first experiment in racial engineering, the Interior Ministry prepared a law calling for compulsory

sterilization for those burdened with what were termed "hereditary" ailments, mental or physical; the afflictions included alcoholism. The Catholic vice-Chancellor, von Papen, wanted the measure to be voluntary, but his objection was quickly dismissed.

The policy was a modest beginning, but it was evidence of an eagerness to put a racially minded program into effect, an approach that would be extended to the Continent within a few years with horrific consequences already well-known. By 1945, when the Nazis fell from power, about 400,000 Germans had been sterilized. As Hindenburg lay dying in August 1934, Hitler's cabinet initiated a law calling for the merging of the Reich President's office with that of the Chancellor upon the president's death, which happened a day after the bill was introduced. Blomberg and Reichenau, leaders of the Reichswehr, devised an oath of total loyalty of every officer and soldier to the Führer, thereby eliminating the distinction between the state and the Chancellor. Blomberg and Fritsch, senior figures in the Reichswehr, naively imagined they could detach Hitler from the Party and establish the army as the "power center" in German politics. But in the new Germany, in the Führer state, the security services hold executive power, and the army found itself "chained" instead to the destiny of Hitler.

A few years later, in an essay from 1940, after war had broken out, the brilliant historian Louis Namier offered the following comment, as true now as the day it was written:

**German aristocratic Conservatism perished in the debacle of 1918; German middle-class self-sufficiency in the *deroute* of the inflation; while the organized working classes intent on rational progress were a creation, or fiction, of the Radical intelligentsia. Conservatives, Liberals and Socialists**

**did not understand how close they were to each other: children of the same period and civilization, though differing in age, they quarreled in the same language. And they all alike committed the same mistake with Hitler: they thought he could be fitted into their world, taught to speak their language and transact business in their own way....The Nazis made no original contribution to economic or political thought, but there was a new reality in them: the coarse or insane sadism of the mentally, morally and materially dispossessed, which raised violence to the level of principal, and sanctified it by group glorification.**

**After Hitler turned his hand to foreign policy, the powers abroad that might have kept him in check made a similar mistake.**

## **VIII**

**The Treaty of Versailles, erroneously understood as inaugurating the post-war order, was simply the document establishing the terms of Germany's surrender to the Allied powers. By proxy it has come to represent the reorientation of power relations in Europe between the two wars. The international order established by Versailles and other treaties in fact proved a frail, rickety structure that required the relative stability of the 1920s to maintain any balance; by January, 1933, as Kershaw notes, it "had the stability of a house of cards." "Collective security" was the catchphrase of the decade, and it was to be enforced by the League of Nations and various treaties entered into by combinations of states. But the U.S. of course never joined the League, and the Soviet Union was excluded until 1934, which meant that two among the most important powers of the globe were missing. There were even deeper problems. After a loss of one and one-half million men in the war, the French simply lacked the will to fight and lay in acute anxiety for twenty years over the prospect of a second war with Germany. England had been its ally in the**

war and to England it looked for leadership; but figures like Ramsay McDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain failed to provide any. Another problem lay in the revolutionary nature of the post-war world. Democratic leaders born in the nineteenth century had no conception of the great political transformation inaugurated by the Great War, of the way it prepared the ground for pathological extremists like Hitler and Stalin. Raymond Aron, who lived in Germany in the early 1930s, told an interviewer decades after the Second World War that "In 1914, the world entered a period of violence and super-violence that the nineteenth-century men found difficult to understand. The democratic and liberal Europe of the end of the nineteenth century...was dead. The regimes we were fated to confront were radically different from our own."

In the sphere of foreign affairs, Hitler had a number of objectives to pursue, most of which were indispensable to his worldview. The essential goals were the eradication of the Jews in whatever realm the Reich might capture and the acquisition of *Lebensraum*--living space--by expanding to the Slavic east. Senior Nazi leadership was imbued with a number of what might be termed reverse or anti-ideals. The principal one was Social Darwinism and the racial divisions of Europe; one national group could only survive at the expense of another. Stasis, or peaceable relations with neighboring countries, was more than anathema; it was seen as the antithesis of what they understood to be "natural." Conquest and domination were the order of the day. The Jews were the sworn enemies of non-Jews; they were invariably referred to as bacilli, parasites, "racial tuberculosis," language that Kershaw calls implicitly genocidal. He notes Hitler's "all-devouring

manic obsession with the Jews to which all else is subordinated--not observable before 1919, never absent thereafter...." The principal domestic objective, once power was seized, was rearmament, and hand in hand with that, the destruction of the hated treaty (Versailles) that Germany had committed itself to in the suburbs of Paris in 1919.

The payment of reparations had already come to an end in 1932; some historians now argue, J.M. Keynes notwithstanding, that the burden was less severe than many claimed in the decades following World War II. Then there was the rest of Versailles. "The treaty was for Hitler," wrote Louis Namier, "the blackmailer's lucky find--not the real treaty, but the legends surrounding it." The first was the notorious *Dolchstoss*, or stab in the back, according to which powers behind the throne, inevitably Jewish, had arranged the surrender when the war was going reasonably well. This gross absurdity gained currency because the war was almost entirely fought in France, Belgium and Italy; foreign troops had never entered German soil. The second fantasy was that a magnanimous Kaiser had ceased combat operations and had called for an armistice, but at Versailles a cabal of treacherous and unappeasable enemies shifted the terms of peace. The third was the guilty feeling among some on the left in France and England, inspired by Keynes, that the treaty was unduly harsh and abetted Hitler's rise to power.

The Fuhrer eagerly exploited these reactions. In the middle of October, 1933, he removed Germany from a disarmament conference underway in Geneva, and for good measure took his country out of the League of Nations. The next two years were largely occupied by domestic affairs, including the very bloody purge of

**June 30, 1934, when senior leadership of the SA was destroyed to appease the Reichswehr. At the same time, the country began to rearm in secret, and Hitler sought to present himself to the world as a statesman. A non-aggression treaty was signed with Poland in January 1934, which of course had no effect in forestalling the invasion that took place five years later. Of greater significance was the reintroduction of conscription in March 1935. The enlarged army had a goal of 550,000 men, more than five times the 100,000-man limit Germany had been permitted by the treaty. Goring's announcement shortly thereafter that Germany had begun building an air force was an explicit breach of Versailles. Hitler justified these steps by arguing for the need to keep the country on equal footing with other major powers, and his claim drew a euphoric reaction from the German public. The British, from whom the French took their lead, accepted the news complacently and were inclined to see it as a possible method for keeping the Russians at bay. If Hitler stood firm, says Kershaw, "The British would move to accommodate him," and the "seeds of appeasement had been sown."**

**But the most momentous step by far was the remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936, truly decisive in dismantling not simply Versailles but the foundation of the post-1919 security order. The area was Germany's border with France, the Rhine River, and it was supposed to be kept free of (German) troops as a demilitarized zone. "This was," comments Aron, "the last opportunity to stop Hitler without war." But the French offered no resistance. Remilitarization would "have been on the agenda of any German nationalist government," Kershaw notes, but for Hitler it was especially critical. Every fresh and effective assault on the**

Versailles Treaty was proving greatly popular at home, and each success had the inevitable effect of weakening domestic opposition from the Reichswehr and the Foreign Office while spurring Hitler to do more. Most analysts had expected remilitarization, but not until after the 1936 Olympics were out of the way.

Hitler found his chance earlier, in the spring, when Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) drew a sharp reaction from the League of Nations and left the pathetic Italian despot somewhat more dependent on Hitler. The two dictators have been seen historically as natural twins, but until 1936, the danger of a German takeover of Austria--which shares a border with Italy--had kept the two apart. When Mussolini's absurd neo-Roman African adventure antagonized democratic Europe, he switched his allegiance to Hitler, who chose the moment for his long-planned march into the Rhineland. The French overestimated Germany's military strength, but in fact had no taste for combat; a German force of 30,000 soldiers moved into the Rhine territory, with instructions to withdraw immediately in the event of a French military reaction. None was forthcoming.

These repeated successes, which paved the way for bigger ones, had predictable effects. Hitler's standing in Germany rose to god-like status, conservative forces in the government that recommended restraint were discredited, and the Dictator began to feel infallible. His sense of infallibility would undo him when war broke out in the summer of 1939, but for now the disunity and fearfulness of western powers was paving the way to larger and more impressive victories. Although the German public had not been prepared for the magnitude of the changes in the preceding two years, Kershaw says that after success in the



Rhineland, "the mood--at least of the vast majority--rapidly turned to euphoria when it was realized that the western powers would do nothing....Hitler's prestige soared." To careful analysts it was clear that the move into the Rhineland marked a dangerous turning point, a major power-shift in Europe, and that a renascent Germany represented a new and potent force of instability. A threshold had been crossed. "Versailles," Kershaw writes, "was in tatters."

Hitler then turned his attention to larger acquisitions, where he could use the principal of self-determination for dispersed German populations as a wedge for geographic expansion. There were German minorities in Austria, the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia), Memel (Lithuania), Danzig and the Polish Corridor (Poland). In an essay published in January 1940, Louis Namier pointed out the possibilities offered by these scattered groups of Germans, formerly protected by the Habsburgs in Vienna, whose dominion had extended over so much of Central Europe before 1914. Germans once within the Hapsburg empire were now susceptible to control by the local majority. After the Great War, Namier wrote, "There was everywhere a clash of the nationalism of the masses; the leveling, lowering influence of the war had created a void; Hitler stepped into it with his '*Volkstum*,' the '*Volksgemeinschaft*' of all the German '*Volksgenossen*,' wherever they have been born and of whatever state they are citizens--an ominous message for any country harbouring a German minority."

## VIII

The two-year period separating the remilitarization of the Rhineland from the Anschluss with Austria was a relatively quiet one in the international arena. Hitler and senior Nazi leaders were managing domestic events, including a leadership crisis of the Reichswehr and the economy. The myth held by laymen at the time (and maybe even later) was that Hitler and Hjalmar Schacht, his economics minister, reduced unemployment and improved living conditions almost at once through a policy of public works and rebuilding the armed forces. The truth is that domestic comforts and living conditions were restricted by the demands of rearmament. In the summer of 1935, despite a partial recovery, the emphasis on rearmament meant that almost half of the German workforce, reports Kershaw, was living "substantially below the poverty line." Big business was distressed by foreign policy adventures and the economic imbalance fostered by the emphasis on weapons, but was pleased with the suppression of the parties on the left and of the labor movement. By the spring of 1938, Kershaw remarks, 60% of German companies that had been owned by Jews had either been liquidated or taken over by Germans. Hitler's supremacy at home would have satisfied the demands of conventional dictators. But Nazism involved a dynamic of what Kershaw calls "ceaseless radicalization" that drove it to further goals and foreign conquest.

At the end of the winter, 1938, Hitler therefore turned his attention to Austria, which had the gold, foreign currencies and physical labor coveted by German agriculture. In truth, Austria had always played a role for nationalist pan-Germans. After Bismark's unification of Germany in 1870, writers debated a

**Kleindeutschland--which turned into the second Reich--or a Grossdeutschland, which would have incorporated Austria. An Austrian by birth, Hitler now aimed, predictably, for the second objective. Armed with the confidence of consecutive diplomatic victories, free of domestic opposition, allied with Mussolini in the Spanish Civil War, he turned his attention to the south in the winter of 1938, to his native country. There he could work with the volatile Austrian Nazi Party, a reliable and violent fifth column, one that had been wreaking havoc in Austria for years. After Hitler assumed power, Austrian SS felt emboldened in 1934 to assassinate Engelbert Dollfuss, then Austria's prime minister. The Austrian NS was now pushing (with other Austrian pan-Germans) for unification with Germany. Indeed, the Austrian Nazis were only one of many German movements bristling in Danzig, Memel, and the Sudetenland, answering to Hitler's irredentist claims. In February, 1938, the Austrian Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, was threatened with invasion and browbeaten by Hitler in a merciless interview. He agreed to an economic union with Germany and to name Seyss-Inquart, an Austrian Nazi, as Interior Minister (and therefore in charge of the security services). But on March 9, von Schuschnigg threw the agreement into disarray by calling for a referendum on Austrian independence and appealed--with no success--to Britain for support. The Germans, enraged, responded by insisting that Schuschnigg resign as Chancellor, appoint Seyss-Inquart as his successor, and remove all the restrictions on the activities of Austrian Nazis. The Austrian president agreed to the terms, which meant de facto unification with Germany, but thought they held the prospect of preserving a shred of independence. Disregarding the fact that Austria had**

accepted their terms, Germany invaded anyway, eager to have "the Austrian problem" settled without further ado. Nazi mobs began to rampage in Austria's provincial cities; they may have been provoking a pretext for the invasion (the need to restore order) which took place on March 14. The reaction of the Austrian public was more than ecstatic; it was tumultuous. The Archbishop of Vienna ordered church bells to peal throughout the capitol and had swastika banners flown from steeples, a remarkable step given the sharp conflict between the Church and the Reich in Germany. "The intoxication of the crowds," says Kershaw, "made Hitler feel like a god." Not simply rendered a satrap of Germany, the original plan, Austria was now fully absorbed into the Reich, and rightist thugs throughout the country responded with remarkable and unforeseen violence. Kershaw describes matters this way:

The repression [in Austria] was ferocious--worse than it had been in Germany following the Nazi takeover in 1933. The Austrian police records fell immediately into the Gestapo's hands. Supporters of the fallen regime, but especially Socialists, Communists and Jews--rounded up under the aegis of the rising star in the SD's 'Jewish Department,' Adolph Eichmann--were taken in their thousands into 'protective custody.' Many other Jews were manhandled, beaten, and tortured in horrific ordeals by Nazi thugs, looting and rampaging. Individual Jews were robbed on the open streets of their money, jewelry, and fur coats.... 'Hades and opened its gates and released its basest, most detestable, most impure spirits,' was how the esteemed playwright and writer Carl Zuckmayer...described the scene.

A large part of the country's Jewish population tried fleeing to neighboring Czechoslovakia, which soon closed its borders. Even had they been successful, the hegira would have proved no more than a brief respite. Czechoslovakia was the

detested Slav neighbor, an ally of the Soviet Union, once part of the long-defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire that Hitler had loathed as a youth. It also had a population of Germans on Germany's eastern frontier, and they were agitating for unification with their home country. By the spring of 1938, shortly after the Anschluss, the stage was set for Munich.

The crisis over the Sudentland in the summer of 1938 represented a new and dangerous expansion of German aggression. The goals Hitler had attained--the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the expansion of the Reichswehr, and even the Anschluss--might have been understood as falling within the boundaries of conventional German nationalism. Any number of politicians on the right, active in the Weimar Republic, might have sought these objectives. But "For the first time, in the summer of 1938," writes Kershaw, "Hitler's foreign policy went beyond revisionism and national integration, even if the western powers did not grasp this." His goal was nothing less than the destruction of an independent Czechoslovakia. The raucous pan-Germanism of the Sudenten Germans, many doubtless Nazis and inhabiting the western fringe of the country, was merely the available wedge. The country was one of the most economically developed in Central Europe and would prove a bulwark, like Austria, against the Bolshevik threat further east. The ease with which Austria was taken over, the tremendous reception Hitler received when he returned to his home town of Linz and later Vienna--all of this appeared to encourage the Fuhrer in the spring and summer of 1938 to cross the threshold of cold political calculation and practice the adventurism of a leader of doubtful sanity.

**Kershaw quotes the English Ambassador to Germany, Neville Henderson, as saying that Hitler had "become quite mad" and that he "had crossed the borderline of insanity." But no person or group in Berlin would stop him. The Reichswehr, the civil service and the Nazi Party, the centers of power in Germany, all prostrated themselves before Hitler. His authority was absolute. His power to provoke a continental war was virtually unchallenged.**

**Czechoslovakia had formal treaties with France and the Soviet Union. These were among the instruments of "collective security" designed to keep the peace in Central Europe. In fact, they were useless. Not only the French but even the British persuaded themselves that the Sudeten Germans were an oppressed minority, and sadly for the Czechs, Hitler had a second ethnic faction to manipulate besides the regional Germans--the Slovaks, with whom the Czechs had been joined by the treaty in Paris that dismembered Austria-Hungary. As early as May 1938, a brief two months after the Anschluss, German troops were said to be mobilizing on the German side of the border. But a number of fundamentals-- disputes within the German government, spearheaded by Field Marshall Fodor von Beck, evidence that the British and the French would fight if Czechoslovakia were invaded, and an uneasy German public--obliged Hitler to reconsider his strategy.**

**The spring crisis passed--for the moment. A reluctant but disunited German high command represented the only source of potential domestic opposition to Hitler's ambitions. But he believed, correctly, that the western powers would ultimately not risk war to save Czechoslovakia and that the country might be consumed piecemeal. By September, the British government under Neville**

Chamberlain began to press the Czech government to give the Sudeten Germans autonomy while retaining an independent Czechoslovakia. Hitler, reportedly eager for war, turned up the flame in mid-September with a Party Congress speech calling for self-determination for the Sudeten Germans. Chamberlain flew to Germany twice in the second half of September to negotiate a settlement, and both the British and the French applied pressure on the Czechs to accept a diminished national state in exchange for guarantees against an invasion. The discussions seemed to be making progress when Hitler pressed the territorial demands that the Poles and the Hungarians were also presenting to the Czechs. Mussolini then intervened in support of detaching the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia and adding it to Germany. A new set of negotiations began in Munich, and on October 1, the prime ministers of France and England, along with their ambassadors and various legal advisers, proceeded to carve up Czechoslovakia, without any representatives of the Czech government present. The draft agreement that Hitler signed "was meaningless," writes Kershaw, and failed to appease his desire for war.

Munich was no great cause for celebration. He felt cheated of the greater triumph which he was certain would have come from the limited war with the Czechs which had been his aim all summer. Even military action for the more restricted goal of attaining the Sudetenland by force had been denied him....During the Polish crisis the following summer this would make him all the more determined to avoid the possibility of being diverted from war... 'Our enemies are worms,' he would tell his generals in August 1939. 'I saw them in Munich.'

Hitler was as contemptuous of his senior generals as he was of the French and British leadership, Kershaw adds. They had opposed his plans throughout the summer, fearful of a general European war. "How he would have reacted," says

Kershaw, "had he been aware that no less a person than his new Chief of Staff, General Franz Halder, had been involved in plans for a *coup d'etat* in the event of war over Czechoslovakia can be left to the imagination." What remained of rump Czechoslovakia was gone within six months. Encouraged by the Germans, Slovak nationalists pressed the administration in Prague for full independence in March 1939, and when Czech authorities deposed the regional government in Bratislava, the Germans saw their opportunity. Father Jozef Tiso, the deposed prime minister, in fact under intense German pressure, appealed to Hitler for help. Emil Hacha, the aging Czech president, was compelled in a bullying conference with Hitler to accede to the occupation of the Czech lands by German troops. Slovakia was awarded nominal independence. It emerged as a puppet state of the Nazis. Yet German public opinion was muted. There was no German minority to welcome into the Reich this time, and the public correctly feared that an irrevocable, reckless step had been taken that would lead to war. Memel, a small port on the Lithuanian coast, was the final bloodless conquest by the Nazis. It was a small speck of land, and hardly anyone in or out of the Reich cared that it was taken up by the Germans. But the destruction of Czechoslovakia marked a transition in world opinion, and Hitler's next attempted conquest would lead to war.

## IX

The German occupation of Prague marked the end of the policy of appeasement. It was the moment when the French and English public and their feeble political leadership recognized that nothing short of force would stop the



**Germans. Both Britain and France began an intense campaign of rearmament. But at the moment that public opinion turned in the west, Hitler felt more than ever emboldened to press his claims in the east. What lay behind him in the summer of 1939 was six years of unbroken success in effecting a diplomatic revolution, acquiring unassailable authority in Germany, developing a sycophantic following in his inner circle. France and England had given way to every challenge, bending like reeds, and the Reich, on the verge of world war and genocide in that fateful summer, was vastly expanded from the territory it occupied in 1933. The French and English chose stiffened resistance at just the moment Hitler believed they were incapable of offering any.**

**The set of demands he presented to the west in the summer of 1939 was clear--control of Danzig and access routes through the Polish Corridor, the strip of land assigned to the Poles in the post-war treaty that separated East Prussia from Germany proper. But the diplomatic alignment was far more complex than it had been the year before. The Soviet Union was absent from discussions over the Anschluss, with no geographic stake in the disposition of Austria; nor had it played a role in the Munich Agreement, although it had a treaty with Czechoslovakia. Poland was different. It shared a border with Russia, and indeed eastern portions of Poland, once under Russian suzerainty, had been taken away from the country in 1919. A move into Poland would have brought Germany into direct contact with the Soviets, creating an incentive for the Russians to bind themselves to the now-active west--or instead to Germany itself. Indeed, the Russians were already engaged in what Kershaw calls "half-hearted negotiations" with the French and**

English that would lead nowhere. The most effective method of protecting Poland would have been a tripartite pact among the three powers--France, England and Russia--guaranteeing the territorial integrity of the country. But that would have granted Russia grounds for entering the country with troops, something the Poles would never have accepted. The Russians had a long history of occupying and coveting Polish soil; as recently as 1920, the Poles had repulsed Trotsky's bid to carry the revolution to the west. Stalin for his part had reason to doubt the effectiveness of a treaty with countries that had lost so much ground, literally and figuratively, in their struggle with Hitler. He felt the west might actually be pushing Germany to the east, perhaps as a precursor to an attack on Russia itself; the Reichswehr would serve as proxy for France and Britain in a war between capitalism and Bolshevism. Western powers had intervened after all in the post-revolutionary civil war, supporting, Wrangel, Kolchak, and Deniken, the White Russian generals leading the opposition to the Red Army. Collective security, the hope of a post-war world, was now entirely dead; western leadership had never contrived an approach for making it work. Stalin had grounds for doubting its feasibility, while Hitler, unscrupulous and ruthless, might have more to offer than the west in serious talks. So as astounding as it seemed at the time, a treaty linking the two dictators representing the extreme right and the extreme left in world politics, men who had vilified one another for years, was beginning to take shape with appalling logic.

In the spring of 1939, unknown to the rest of the world, the two governments began transmitting feelers to ascertain each other's interest in some kind of

agreement. A key step in the procedure was Stalin's dismissal in May of Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov--Jewish, somewhat pro-west, first Soviet ambassador to the U.S. after Roosevelt established diplomatic ties with the Soviets in 1933; he was also with collective security and the Popular Front. Litvinov was replaced with the sinister Vyacheslav Molotov. Throughout the summer, diplomatic contacts sought to establish grounds for a possible agreement, though the steps were tentative and perpetually susceptible to breakdown. Hitler felt growing pressure for a formal rapprochement. Goebbels was directing a shrill campaign of propaganda in Germany calling for the return of Danzig and access through the Corridor. In April, England and Poland agreed to a treaty of mutual defense that was formalized in August, and France extended a guarantee of Polish security as well. Anticipated autumn rains in Poland would have made a German invasion much harder, perhaps impossible, and throughout the summer Hitler believed he was working against a deadline. By the middle of August, with Ribbentrop pressing more aggressively for a treaty, Stalin cannily withheld approval, pondering the value of an Anglo-French arrangement. But the Germans were an eager suitor, and in the end they had the stronger hand--essentially a willingness to exchange half of Poland and the Baltic Republics for a treaty of non-aggression and an extensive trade agreement. In his introduction to The Great Purge, Robert C. Tucker, the Soviet specialist, argues that Stalin's Orwellian goal involved more than simply self-defense. "What he contemplated," Tucker claims, "was a kind of Moscow-Berlin axis, an active collaboration of the two dictatorships for territorial expansion, the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and even the Middle East."

Tucker goes even further, arguing that the Great Purge of 1936-38 was organized to remove from the Communist Party those who might object to the abandonment of Soviet revolutionary idealism for a "policy of outright imperialistic aggression in collaboration with Nazi Germany."

Whatever the motive, news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact, announced to the world on August 24, was the proverbial bombshell and sealed the destiny of Poland. As most readers know, the treaty contained a secret protocol concerning the territorial concessions each power had made to the other involving Poland and the Baltic countries. Raymond Aron told an interviewer forty years later, "My wife has reminded me that when I heard the news, I repeated for five minutes, 'It can't be possible.' And then I thought about it and realized that, everything considered, it was rational."

Hitler was almost hysterically pleased with his agreement. But he was also entirely out of touch with the newly established resolution of the British. Up to and after the move into Poland, he believed that Britain could be kept out of the war. He conveyed to the English ambassador to Germany various peace offers, but none that met the basic British demand, which was a peaceful settlement of the territorial dispute with Poland. Germany invaded on September 1, and two days later both France and England declared war--and then famously did nothing. Warsaw bore the impact of the terror bombing techniques applied at Guernica, and the Polish army was routed. Kershaw writes, "The war could have been over had the French government been bold enough to send at least the forty divisions it had promised the Poles into action against the far smaller German forces left guarding the western

front in September 1939." In the middle of the month, the Soviets occupied their half of the country, and in June of the following year took over the Baltic states. On November 30, Stalin initiated the war against Finland that lasted nearly two months and cost an unimaginable 200,000 Soviet lives; the incompetence of the Red Army, seriously undermined by Stalin's extensive purge of the office corps, doubtless affected the decision Hitler made in December 1940 to invade Russia. (The number of purged officers cited by Tucker is 35,000; the majority were rehabilitated and restored to command after the German invasion.) The war, which later drew in the U.S. and Japan and also the Soviet Union, was underway. At the moment that Hitler moved into Poland, Chamberlain brought Churchill into his cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty, and in April 1940, when Norway fell to the Germans, Churchill replaced him as Prime Minister. Goebbels for one considered neither piece of news a good omen.

In a sense, according to Kershaw, the timing of the war was accidental. Hitler believed that Great Britain could be induced to accept an armistice and abandon its alliance with the French; all that need be offered to the British was a guarantee of the security of the empire. That fatal misjudgment is responsible for the catastrophe that the war became for Germany. Most amateur students of history, including myself, have assumed that Hitler's critical error was the invasion of Soviet Russia in the spring of 1941 and the creation of a "two-front war." Kershaw claims that the original error came much sooner, when Hitler blundered into an accidental war for which neither the German economy nor the armed forces

were prepared. The Reichswehr in the summer of 1939 were not remotely as optimistic as he about the country's military prospects, but felt incapable of stopping him. "The Wehrmacht," writes Kershaw, "had entered into hostilities in autumn 1939 with no well-laid plans for a major war, and no strategy at all for an offensive in the West. Nothing had been thought through at all." In the middle of October 1939, the head of the army and his Chief of Staff, Franz Halder and Walther von Brauchitsch, respectively, met to air their forebodings over the unfolding (but not-entirely-unexpected) war. Halder's notes indicate three topics to discuss, including the final one, which he identified as "fundamental changes." "The cryptic third possibility," notes Kershaw, "signified no less than the extraordinary fact that in the early stages of a major war the two highest representatives of the army were airing the possibility of a *coup d'etat* involving the removal of Hitler as head of state."

Whatever transpired between the two officers, nothing came of the proposal, despite their acute unease. In mid-December 1940, Hitler signed the formal orders committing the armed forces to an invasion of Russia the following spring, and in the first three months of 1941, operational plans for the offensive were put into place. In the course of the war, numerous small groups of senior officers talked over the possibility of an assassination and a coup, but gauging the reaction of junior staff officers and then the army rank and file was always problematic. (None of this, by the way, remotely absolves the Reichswehr from complicity in the atrocities committed in Poland and Russia.) Hitler in fact seems to have been aware

that, at different moments in the early stages of the war, his general staff, which he mistrusted and considered excessively cautious, had plans for a seizure of power.

France was quickly defeated in the spring of 1940, of course. But the successful evacuation of 340,000 soldiers at Dunkirk and, even more significantly, the English victory in the Battle of Britain that summer, when much of the Luftwaffe was destroyed by determined English fighter pilots, turned the tide. Nearly everything afterwards was simply the unavoidable military action required to bring Germany to its knees. England stayed in the war and refused every offer of an armistice--to simply withdraw and remove itself from combat, in exchange for a guarantee of security of its colonies. According to Kershaw, this drove Germany to the east and the disastrous campaign in Russia. The hope (or fantasy) was that a quick destruction of Russia would leave the English isolated and finally obliged to abandon the conflict. The invasion of Russia, a spectacular gamble, was encouraged by faulty intelligence, a gross misjudgment of Soviet military capability, and of course Hitler's ideological goals. There was already a multi-front war in place well before the Wehrmacht and the SS extended their savage campaign in the east. Germany was actively fighting in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean; the campaigns in Greece and Yugoslavia, initiated in the spring of 1941, were induced by failed Italian operations, and weakened the drive into Russia. As the war got underway, Louis Namier described the sequence of events--Kristallnacht, Munich, the takeover of Czechoslovakia in March 1939--that led up to Hitler's miscalculation. For a miscalculation it was, according to Kershaw; Germany, as we have seen, was simply not prepared for war in September 1939. The country's

diplomatic and military successes were so impressive and consecutive in the period of 1936-1940 that it is easy to misunderstand how dangerous Germany's condition was once the invasion of Poland got underway. Britain failed to give way, which had been previously seen as a precondition for expansion to the east. The German army that invaded Russia, according to Gerhard Weinberg, was hardly larger than the one in place when France had been attacked a little over a year before, and the military requirements then were but a fraction of those required to defeat the Russians. The Luftwaffe was occupied in three, shortly four, theaters of operations. For those with a professional understanding of such matters--Hitler was not among them--the whole experience was emerging as a grotesque gamble with potentially catastrophic results. Despite his apparent omnipotence, Hitler had lost control of the war and was now the captive of the uncontrollable dynamics of expansion and plots germinating among his senior officers. Here are Namier's remarks from an essay he prepared in early 1940:

Hitler had cleverly exploited the weariness, the fears, the scruples, and the regrets of minds and characters much finer and more complex than his own, but he never understood their workings, nor appreciated their motives. The blackmailer did not expect to be brought to court, nor the bully to have to fight. And yet this war is his, and nobody else's. He has forced it upon people who, passionately averse to war, had borne with him far too long, even against their own better judgment.

## X

Most readers familiar with the history of the war have an approximate idea of the events that followed the invasion of Russia on June 22, 1941. Three million



German soldiers entered Russian-occupied Poland and then the Soviet Union. As chance would have it--and it *was* by coincidence, not design--it was on the same date that Napoleon attacked Russia in 1812, and the invasion produced similar results. By October, Army Group B, assigned to capture (and raze) Moscow, was stopped in the capitol's suburbs, and the essential plan of annihilating Russia's army in a single Blitz, the tactic that had worked so effectively elsewhere, failed. (A number of historians claim that by the end of the year, Hitler and Stalin, presumably unaware of the other's thoughts, were both considering an armistice.)

An insoluble conundrum of the war is Stalin's refusal to accept extensive and mounting evidence in the spring of 1941 that an invasion was imminent. Churchill cabled a warning in April, and reports were gathering throughout the spring of a massive German military buildup in the east. The late Dmitri Volkaganov, an officer during the war and one of Stalin's most recent biographers, reports that Zhukov and Timoshenko, senior Soviet generals, accurately interpreted developments on the western side of the frontier, and in April advocated a preemptive strike against Germany. Stalin disregarded their advice and everyone else's. Zhukov's post-war analysis is probably correct: Stalin was so determined to avoid war with Hitler that he ignored the innumerable warnings that would have persuaded anyone else.

Russian resistance set the stage for the immense battles at Moscow, Kursk, and Stalingrad, in the winter of 1942-43, sometimes called the turning point in the war. The U.S. invasion of North Africa in August 1942 helped drive the Germans out of the continent and later up the Italian peninsula. D-Day, the Battle of the

Bulge, the Warsaw Uprising and the Battle of Berlin (this last conducted by the Russians) have been recounted in many excellent volumes, including Gerhard Weinberg's A World at Arms and Max Hastings's Armageddon. I would like to conclude this essay with a description of Kershaw's analysis of the Holocaust, which for him is central to Nazi ideology but which strangely--like the outbreak of the war--was essentially unplanned. The quick and successful assault on Poland and the failure in Russia explain what happened, why millions of innocents of many nationalities perished in the east, but not how.

Genocide and expansion were the central goals of Nazi ideology. It is not entirely clear when these objectives crystallized in Hitler's mind, but Kershaw says the turning point (again) seems to have been his period of recovery in the hospital in Pasewalk at the end of the Great War. Social Darwinism, a conception of inferior races, often cast in biological terms ("bacillus," "parasites"), the inevitable struggle among nations and races, the need for *Lebensraum* (living space), conditions of perpetual war--all of these ingredients took hold in his mind and stimulated the extraordinary events that unfolded in the east between 1939 and 1945. "His ideas often had their roots," writes Kershaw, "in the resentments that still smoldered at the way his own 'talents' had not been recognized or the disadvantages of his own social status compared with the privileges of the high-born and well-to-do." The policy of conquest planned for the Reich was simply the imperialism of the nineteenth century adapted to the radicalism of the twentieth. The Slavic countries to the east would be for Germany what the Indian subcontinent had been for England, but on far more brutal terms. In January 1941, as planning for the war

got underway, Himmler reportedly told "a select group of SS leaders" that he envisioned "a reduction" of the Slavic population of the east of some 30 million in the following twenty-five years.

The annihilation abroad had precursors at home. A sterilization campaign was put into effect, as we have seen, in July 1933, the first year of the Reich, and the "eugenics campaign" (or simply murder) took a giant step forward in the period 1939-41, when as many as 100,000 Germans considered "racially undesirable stock" were put to death, sometimes in gas vans and other times with lethal injections. These would include the mentally disabled or others with untreatable illnesses, such as tuberculosis.

Hitler was a messianic figure, a profoundly disturbed man who promoted himself from being a "drummer" for the movement before his abbreviated stay in Landsberg prison to a "charismatic" leader (in Weberian terms), offering Germany the possibility of recovery after the failed drive for supremacy in the First World War. As Kershaw explains in his collection of essays published last year, Hitler, The Germans, and The Final Solution, "I saw the radical dynamic of the regime rooted in Hitler's embodiment of a utopian vision of national redemption through racial purification with Germany as the platform for imperial conquest through racial extirpation." A dense sentence, but it captures in a nutshell the entire catastrophic experience. The destruction of Jews and Bolshevism, two inextricably linked enemies of Germany, was central to the program. The fact that "Jewish plutocrats" were also held accountable for the "aggression" of England

and the U.S. was not considered a contradiction that called for explanation. They had caused the First World War, Hitler believed, and were ready to plunge the globe into a second.

The Holocaust did not emerge according to a pre-conceived plan involving concentration camps and gas chambers. Much, if not most, of the killing was conducted by the notorious Einsatzgruppen, armed units of the SS that followed the Wehrmacht into Poland and later Russia and executed untold numbers of Russians, Poles and Jews. As improbable as it may seem, the camps were actually--according to Kershaw--something of a late-blooming conception, the product of a dynamic of progressive radicalization, one generated by the failed campaign in Russia and a chaotic system of government producing a Darwinian struggle for power among functionaries in the Nazi empire. Kershaw deploys two central conceptions to describe the functioning of the Nazi state: "cumulative radicalization" stemming from the need "to work toward the Fuhrer" and the cultivation of administrative chaos that served to guarantee Hitler's authority. As other students of Nazi Germany have noted, a functioning central government as conventionally understood disappeared in the Hitler years. Overlapping jurisdictions, duplicated bureaucracies, "special authorities," and plenipotentiaries delegated by Hitler for one assignment or another, an intrusive party bureaucracy and frequent silences of the Fuhrer--all this was the order of the day. The cabinet met infrequently after 1933 and by early 1938 not at all. Collective government as it is practiced in a modern state simply vanished. Hitler's authority in a structurally amorphous environment became more evident year by year. This "organizational

incoherence," as Kershaw describes it, proved one of Hitler's most effective methods for maintaining power, "because every strand of authority was dependent on him." The meaning of this became clearer to Kershaw when he came upon the speech of a long-forgotten functionary in the Prussian Agriculture Ministry given in February 1934, thirteen months after Hitler assumed power. Addressing the *Lander* (state) agriculture ministries, Werner Willikens acknowledged the unorthodox methods Hitler was contriving as Chancellor, including the remoteness of his position, his unwillingness to delineate clear lines of authority, his refusal to issue directives. Willikens suggested that officials throughout the Reich would do well not to wait for any. "Rather...it is the duty of every single person to attempt, in the spirit of the Fuhrer, to work towards him....The one who works correctly towards the Fuhrer along his lines and towards his aim will in future as previously have the finest reward of one day suddenly attaining the legal confirmation of his work." This phenomenon--essentially judging from broad hints what Hitler wanted--engendered a dynamic of "cumulative radicalization" in which key figures throughout the Nazi state struggled to promote themselves and advance their agencies. This is Kershaw's gloss on the subject:

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, among competing agencies, and among individuals within those agencies. In the Darwinist jungle of the Third Reich, the way to power and advancement was through anticipating the 'Fuhrer will,' and without waiting for directives, taking initiatives to promote what were presumed to be Hitler's aims and wishes. For party functionaries and ideologues and for SS 'technocrats of power,' 'working toward the Fuhrer' could have a literal meaning....They were as a consequence

helping drive on an unstoppable radicalization which saw the gradual emergence in concrete shape of policy objectives embodied in the 'mission' of the Fuhrer.

A central document reflecting this phenomenon is a speech Hitler gave to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, the sixth anniversary of his being named Chancellor by Hindenburg. In the address, Hitler presented his notorious "prophecy" concerning the destruction of Jewry in Europe. "I want today to be a prophet again," Hitler declared. "If international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!" The speech essentially announced Hitler's genocidal intentions. At different moments in a critical phase of the Holocaust, 1939-41, Hitler would refer to this "prophecy" but, significantly, "re-date" the speech, Orwell-style, claiming it was made eight months later, at the outset of the war in Poland. It emerged, Kershaw says, as a method of signaling to senior staff and others below them "in the field" that radical methods were acceptable for destroying the enemies of the Reich--Poles, Russians, and Jews. Hence that sinister, passive expression that became common currency in the years of annihilation after war broke out: "*Es ist der Fuhrers Wunsch*"--It is the Fuhrer's wish.

In "orthodox" dictatorships or authoritarian governments, the kind found in Europe and Asia for centuries, the conventional method or instrument of control is the army. In the Nazi state, this duty fell to the SS. Himmler and Heydrich, the principals of the SS, were eager to extend their empire, especially after the seizure of Austria. It is no accident that during the gathering crisis over Poland in the

summer of 1939 and even before, during the showdown at Munich in September 1938, Himmler stood behind Hitler, aggressively pushing a hard line. As Kershaw writes, "In a world after Hitler, with 'final victory' achieved, the SS were determined to be the masters of Germany and Europe."

Before proceeding to the significance of the invasion of Poland and the advent of the Holocaust, it is perhaps necessary to expand one's understanding of the word. Vast numbers, indeed millions, perished in the operations of the camps and the Einsatzgruppen. The Jews were the chief target of Germany's maniacal genocidal intentions, but there were others as well--Poles or Russians who resisted or might resist German domination. Estimates vary, but between four and five million Soviet soldiers died in captivity, through execution, neglect or general maltreatment. Stalin declared in his radio address to the Russian public after the German invasion that partisan (or guerilla) warfare would be among the methods of Soviet defense. Hearing this, Hitler, Goebbles and Heydrich saw an immediate possibility: the claim could serve as grounds for extending the killing activities of the Einsatzgruppen to anyone in the east who appeared to resist the occupation. Writes Kershaw simply, "It had the advantage of allowing the liquidation of anyone who got in the way."

Central to Germany's campaign was the notorious **Kommissarbefehl** (Commissar Order) of May 12, 1941, contrived five weeks before the invasion. The order, issued by the Army High Command, called for the liquidation of all party commissars encountered in Soviet territory. Guerilla fighters were to be shot out of hand, military courts were deprived of key areas of jurisdiction, functionaries of the

Soviet government were to be executed, and entire villages would be punished with collective reprisal if individual perpetrators could not be found. In effect, the order extended to the army the killing program of the SS. Kershaw comments that "the army leadership's rapid compliance in translating Hitler's ideological imperatives into operative decrees was in order to demonstrate its political reliability and to avoid losing ground to the SS." Significantly, at least one senior German general, Fedor von Bock, Field-Marshal of Army Group Center, disregarded the order as a breach of army discipline. Otherwise, notes Kershaw,

The Wehrmacht leadership aligned itself from the start with the ideological aim of combating 'Jewish-Bolshevism.' Cooperation with the SD [Sicherheitsdienst, a security service] and Security Police was extensive, and willingly given. Without it, the Einsatzgruppen could not have functioned as they did.

In the first weeks of the invasion, moreover, Jews were considered by the Wehrmacht as equivalent to partisans or as a key source of their support.

Poland figures centrally in the unfolding of events in the crucial period of 1939-41, and Kershaw employs disturbing language to describe them. In effect, the Germans in Poland gave their barbarism free reign, unchecked by any restraints, willing to adopt whatever methods of destruction entered their minds; the atrocities there were simply a preview of what was to happen in Russia on a larger scale. The country was divided into three pieces. Two territories, so-called Danzig-West Prussia and the Warthegau, were incorporated directly into the Reich. Germans constituted a majority of the population only in Danzig, and annexing the other territories was conquest pure and simple. The third area, the so-called General Government, was kept under German control while the territory was not considered



part of the Reich. Living conditions were expected to remain poor and surviving Poles were simply treated as a source of labor. Poles in all three sections were strictly subordinated to Germans who already lived there or were brought down from Baltic states occupied by the Soviets. Often, Poles were regarded as outright enemies, especially those with education and professional training, as well as those showing resistance to their German masters. "Armies of planners," notes Kershaw, "moved to the east, started to let their imagination run riot in devising megalomaniac schemes for ethnic resettlement and social restructuring."

He adds, "The planners and organizers, the theoreticians of domination, and technocrats of power in the SS leadership, saw Poland as an experimental playground. They were granted *tabula rasa* to undertake more or less what they wanted." And several pages later: "In a most literal sense, Goebbels, Himmler, Heydrich and other leading Nazis were 'working towards the Fuhrer,' whose authority allowed the realization of their own fantasies." What a later generation came to call "ethnic cleansing" was "authorized" by Hitler, Kershaw maintains, but "instigated" by the SS. The SS began to understand early on that its greatest opportunities for extending its authority and power came from the policy of expansion. Restricted to Germany, it would have been a potent but conventional security service. With the incorporation of Austria, new possibilities were presented for extending their power. The Einsatzgruppen, responsible for innumerable slaughters in the east, had been employed there for the first time. They were exploited again when the Sudetenland was taken from Czechoslovakia, and for a third time in the spring of 1939, when the entire state fell under their control.

Poland was next. "Plainly," adds Kershaw, "with the occupation of Poland, the barbarities of the Einsatzgruppen had moved on to a new plane." And later: "In what had once been Poland, the violence was unconstrained, systematic, and on a scale never witnessed before."

On October 7, 1939, five weeks after the invasion, Hitler instructed Himmler to begin building the new ethnographic order in what used to be called Eastern Europe. Himmler named himself Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of the German Nation--the office had the same name--often simply called the RFK. The RFK organized urban planning, banking, population transfers, business development, agriculture planning and related activities. The organization was staffed by an army, several thousand strong, of SS, social workers, architects, accounts, agronomists, and others involved in what today would be called "nation building." The work of this organization, disrupted by war and the invasion of Russia, was only partially achieved. But it did function as an effective planning group in the Reich, issuing decrees that sometimes corresponded with, but often contradicted, the racial guidelines of the Reich. The body, according to Ally Gortz and Susanne Heim (Architects of Annihilation), "was staffed by intellectuals for whom economic considerations invariably took priority over so-called racial policies. And this was plainly how Himmler wanted it."

The agency may sound benevolent, an early version of Jane Jacobs for livable cities, but its goals and methods were anything but. Its task was the development and efficient incorporation of the new lands--the Warthegau and Danzig-West Prussia--into the Reich. This called for the compulsory "transfer" of

large numbers of people from their homes to the General Government, to be replaced by Baltic-Germans brought down from territories to the north occupied by the Russians. The population of western Poland was nine and a half million at the beginning of the war. The intention was not simply to make room for Baltic immigrants, but to reduce population density more generally. Small farms were amalgamated into larger units, to improve their efficiency, which would require fewer farmers. In the Warthegau, for example, this meant removing two Poles or Jews for every ethnic German introduced in the territory; in some regions, even greater numbers were uprooted and expelled further east in what had been Poland. Educated and literate Poles were among the most likely to be expelled as a source of potential resistance; those with simple professional training were more likely to stay. Gortz and Heim report that by the end of 1942, a little more than 800,000 ethnic Germans had been reestablished in Reich-controlled Poland. They were given the assets that formerly belonged to Poles and Jews as compensation for possessions left behind in their homeland. Poles--some of them, anyway--remaining in the Warthegau and Danzig-East Prussia were presented with the option of Germanization. Eligibility, according to a German official writing at the time, depended on "general demeanor, diligence, cleanliness and healthiness...." Especially valued by the RFK was a desire for self-improvement and a willingness to conform. Himmler himself came round to "embrace Germanization as an effective instrument of social restructuring." Gortz and Ally add:

**The social utopia envisaged by the RFK was not dictated primarily by sentimental German nationalism. Its supreme goal was to establish a German-speaking master race on the one hand and on the other hand to eradicate, or at**

least enslave, larger groups of so-called inferior peoples. And through the 'creaming-off' of so-called 'superior elements,' the social fabric of these peoples was to be destroyed. At the time, the demographers of the RFK had it in mind to replace their own 'inferior' population inside the German Reich with these newly acquired 'human resources': after all, plans were already being made to eliminate more than a million 'anti-social elements,' 'misfits,' and 'idlers' from the Reich.

In other words, 'better' Poles could be absorbed into the Reich. Polish children, with or without their parents, were brought to Germany with new names and transformed into "productive and useful members" of the master race. The 'dregs' remaining in Poland would be all the more easily controlled for having been separated from their more exceptional co-nationals.

All of this planning, according to Kershaw, led mainly "by accident" to the Holocaust. If the details of the decisions behind the annihilation were more clearly known, there would be fewer disputes among scholars over how it actually happened. Until they began examining it in detail in the 1990s, when the archives of Eastern Europe were opened up, students of the period made a number of assumptions that have proved inaccurate. The most important was that Hitler made a single decision to build the camps and inaugurate the experience of driving victims into gas chambers and incinerating the corpses. Few seem to believe that anymore. Kershaw reverts to the theory of "cumulative radicalization" to describe the critical steps taken between the summer of 1941 to the spring of 1942 that explain the emergence of the camps. Certainly no set of documents connects Hitler to any concrete step, which is why some historians have gone as far as to say that he was unaware of what happened. "Hitler's preoccupation with secrecy remained

intense," writes Kershaw. "Nowhere is there an explicit indication, even in discussions with adjutants or secretaries, of his knowledge of the extermination of the Jews." Whatever confusion there may be surrounding the issue, Kershaw nevertheless adamantly insists that Hitler knew and approved of the mass destruction of the Jews even as he tried to detach himself from the specific actions leading up to it.

Critical decisions were taken by the senior Nazi leadership in March, July and October of 1941 involving experimental gassings and the construction of the camps. By the spring of 1942, the process was well underway and would come to an end only with the advance of the Red Army in the winter of 1944-45. The worst of the camps were built in the General Government, and well out of view of German civilians--the Baltic Germans-- transferred elsewhere in Poland for development of the land. In November 1941, the first camp was built in Belzec, outside Lublin. The first recorded use of gas (against non-Germans) was at Chelmno, when gas vans were used to execute Russian prisoners of war; the method had been originally used in the drive to eliminate "incurable" or disabled Germans after 1939. At the end of the year, large numbers of Jews from the Reich, which now included Austria and Czechoslovakia as well as Germany, were shipped to Latvia and executed in Kowno. By the spring of 1942, new and expanded camps were operating at Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau; the latter had originally been a detention center for Russian prisoners. By the spring and summer of that year, bricked-up, walled-off ghettos had been constructed in Lodz and Warsaw, and Jews from most of conquered Europe were being "resettled" in the east, that is to say, murdered.

**One original plan called for eliminating Europe's Jewish population by simply dumping it in conquered northern zones of Russia, and even in Madagascar, where it would simply die off. But when the Russian campaign failed, a more drastic and immediate solution was found.**

**Stimulating the infernal machine were external events that encouraged the process of "working towards the Fuhrer." These developments helped radicalize the atmosphere in the Reich by feeding a demand for "revenge." The formal commencement of hostilities between the U.S. and Germany on December 10, 1941 would be one. A second was Stalin's decision to deport from the Volga region to the Soviet Far East hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans that had migrated there in preceding centuries. Another would be the assassination in Prague in June 1942 of Reinhard Heydrich, number two in the SS after Himmler. Himmler himself reportedly told a gathering of SS at Heydrich's funeral that the "migration" of the Jews to the East would be completed within a year, and Kershaw writes that it is "plausible" to see the comment as "the last major escalatory push in establishing a Europe-wide killing program."**

**But Hitler was the "enabler" of the entire operation. Between 1941 and 1945, Kershaw writes, Hitler privately and publicly on at least a dozen occasions referred to his "prophecy" of January 1939 that the next war in Europe would lead to the destruction of its Jews. Kershaw concludes:**

**For Hitler, the 'prophecy' denoted the indelible link in his mind between war and revenge against the Jews. Its repetition also served a wider purpose. Without ever having to use explicit language, the 'prophecy,' beyond propaganda effect to condition the general population against humanitarian sympathy for the Jews, signaled**

**key escalatory shifts, acted as a spur to radical action by conveying the 'wish of the Fuhrer,' and indicated to 'insiders' Hitler's knowledge and approval of the genocide.**

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