

## The Hitler Myth

Historic attachments to heroic leadership combined with a mastery of propaganda techniques to mesmerise Germany into acceptance of the charismatic authority offered by the Nazi 'Führer'.



Hitler miming gestures to a record of his speeches; one of an extraordinary series of photographs he commissioned in 1925 to aid self-analysis and improve his hold over an audience. For almost a decade after 1933, Hitler enjoyed a remarkable degree of popularity among the great majority of the German people. However dramatic and spectacular his political career, concentration on Hitler's character and personality – in some respects bizarre, in others downright mediocre and wholly unpleasant – can nevertheless do little to explain the magnetism of his popular appeal. Nor can his extraordinary impact on the German people in these years be accounted for satisfactorily by seeing in Hitler's personal *Weltanschauung* (notably in his obsessions with the 'Jewish Question' and with *Lebensraum*) a mirror image of the motivation of Nazism's mass following. Recent research has done much to qualify such assumptions, suggesting too that even deep into the period of the dictatorship itself Hitler's own ideological fixations had more of a symbolic than concrete meaning for most Nazi supporters.

What seems necessary, therefore, is an examination not of Hitler's personality, but of his popular image – how the German people saw their leader: the 'Hitler Myth'. The 'Hitler Myth' was a double-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, it was a masterly achievement in image-building by the exponents of the new techniques of propaganda, building upon notions of 'heroic' leadership widespread in right-wing circles long before Hitler's rise to prominence. On the other hand, it has to be seen as a reflection of 'mentalities', value-systems, and socio-political structures which conditioned the acceptance of a 'Superman' image of political leadership. Both the active manufacture of Hitler's public image and the receptivity to it by the German people need, therefore, to be explored.

Images of 'heroic' leadership were already gaining ground in populist-nationalist circles of the German Right in the late nineteenth century. Their inclusion as a growing force in the political culture of the Right in the Kaiser's Germany (and there are parallels in pre-fascist Italy, which later gave rise to the cult of the Duce) was largely shaped by three interlinked factors: the social and political disruption accompanying a simultaneous transition to nation-state, constitutional government (if strongly authoritarian in character), and industrialised society; the deep fragmentation of the political system (reflecting fundamental social cleavages); and, not least, the spread of a chauvinistic imperialist ideology clamouring for a rightful 'place in the sun' for Germany, a 'have-not' nation.

Growing disappointment on the populist Right with Wilhelm II promoted notions of a 'People's Kaiser' who, embodying strength and vitality would crush Germany's internal enemies and, at the expense of inferior peoples, would provide the new nation with greatness and would win an empire for 'a people without living space'.

The extreme glorification of military values before and especially during the First World War, and the Right's shock and trauma at defeat, revolution, and the victory of the hated Social Democrats, promoted the extension and partial transformation of 'heroic' leadership images in the 1920s. Following the abdication of the Kaiser and the end of the old political order, ideal leadership was envisaged as being embodied in a man from the people whose qualities would reflect struggle, conflict and the values of the trenches. Hard, ruthless, resolute, uncompromising, and radical, he would destroy the old privilege and class-ridden society and bring about a new beginning, uniting the people in an ethnically pure and socially harmonious 'national community'. The extreme fragmentation of Weimar politics kept such visions alive on the nationalist and volkisch Right. And by the early 1930s, perceptions of the total failure of Weimar democracy and mortal crisis of the entire political system allowed the image to move from the wings of politics to centre stage. By then, one man in particular was making a claim – accepted by increasing numbers of people – that he alone could re-awaken Germany and restore the country's greatness. This was Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazis.

Within the Nazi Party, the beginnings of a personality cult around Hitler go back to 1922-3, when some party members were already comparing him with Napoleon or describing him as Germany's Mussolini. Of course, Hitler only gradually established an unchallengeable authority within the party, initially having to contend with some powerful factions of opposition. And although his own concept of leadership was already becoming more 'heroic' in the year before his Putsch attempt, it was only during imprisonment following its failure that he came to believe that he himself was Germany's predestined great leader. During the following years in which the Nazis were little more than a minor irritant in German politics, the 'Hitler Myth' was consciously built up within the Movement as a device to integrate the party, to fend off leadership challenges, and to win new members. The introduction in 1926 of a compulsory 'Heil Hitler' fascist-style greeting and salute among party members was an outward sign of their bonds with their leader. Pseudo-religious imagery and fanciful rhetoric so ludicrous that it even occasionally embarrassed Hitler became commonplace in references to the leader in party publications.

Before 1930, the nascent *Fuhrer* cult around Hitler found an echo among at most a few hundred thousand followers. But with the Nazi Party's breakthrough in the 1930 election (which brought it 18.3 per cent of the vote), the *Fuhrer* cult ceased to be merely the property of a fanatical fringe party. The potential was there for its massive extension, as more and more Germans saw in Nazism – symbolised by its leader – the only hope for a way out of gathering crisis. Those now surging to join the Nazi party were often already willing victims of the 'Hitler Myth'. Not untypical was the new party member who wrote that after hearing Hitler speak for the first time, 'there was only one thing for me, either to win with Adolf Hitler or to die for him. The personality of the *Fuhrer* had me totally in its spell'. Even for the vast majority of the German people who did not share such sentiments, there was the growing feeling – encouraged by Hitler's profile even in the non-Nazi press – that Hitler was not just another politician, that he was a party leader extraordinary, a man towards whom one could not remain neutral. He polarised feelings between bitter hatred and ecstatic devotion, but he could no longer be ignored, or shrugged off as a political nonentity.

For the thirteen million Germans who voted Nazi in 1932, Hitler symbolised – chameleon-like – the various facets of Nazism which they found appealing. In his public portrayal, he was a man of the people, his humble origins emphasising the rejection of privilege and the sterile old order in favour of a new, vigorous, upwardly-mobile society built upon strength, merit, and achievement. He was seen as strong, uncompromising, ruthless. He embodied the triumph of true Germanic virtues – courage, manliness, integrity, loyalty, devotion to the cause – over the effete decadence, corruption, and effeminate weakness of Weimar society. Above all, he represented

'struggle' – as the title of his book *Mein Kampf* advertised: struggle of the 'little man' against society's 'big battalions', and mortal struggle against Germany's powerful internal and external enemies to assure the nation's future. More prosaically, for the many still less convinced, he headed a huge mass movement which, given the weak and divided Weimar parties, seemed to offer the only way out of all-embracing crisis.

Still, not one German in two cast a vote for Hitler's party in the March election of 1933 – held five weeks after Hitler had been appointed Chancellor in an atmosphere of national euphoria coupled with terroristic repression of the Left. Most Germans remained either hostile to, or unconvinced by, their new 'people's Chancellor', as the Nazi press dubbed him. Within the diehard ranks of the persecuted socialist and Communist left, of course, the hatred of Hitler and all he stood for – which in many respects was accurately foreseen – was implacable. In Catholic quarters, deep suspicions lingered about the anti-Christian tendencies of Nazism – though there was already a growing readiness to distance Hitler himself from the 'dangerous elements' in his movement. And bourgeois circles continued to see in Hitler the social upstart and vulgar demagogue, mouthpiece of the hysterical masses, the head of a party containing some wild and threatening elements – but a man, with all his faults, who could have his uses for a time. Attitudes towards Hitler in early 1933 varied greatly, therefore, and were often heatedly negative.

Three factors at least have to be taken into account in explaining how, nevertheless, the *Fuhrer* cult could, within a strikingly short time, extend its hold to wide sections of the population, and eventually to the overwhelming majority of Germans. Of crucial significance was the widespread feeling that the Weimar political system and leadership was utterly bankrupt. In such conditions, the image of a dynamic, energetic, 'youthful' leader offering a decisive change of direction and backed by an army of fanatical followers was not altogether unattractive. Many with grave doubts were prepared to give Hitler a chance. And compared with the pathetic helplessness of his predecessors as Chancellor, the apparent drive and tempo of government activity in the months after he took office seemed impressive.

Secondly, the gross underestimation of Hitler again paved the way for at first reluctant or condescending, and then wholehearted, enthusiasm for the way he apparently mastered within such a short time the internal political situation which had seemed beyond the capabilities of an upstart rabble-rouser. Thirdly, and most importantly, Hitler embodied an already well-established, extensive ideological consensus which also embraced most of those, except the Left, who had still not given him their vote in March 1933. Its chief elements were virulent anti-Marxism and the perceived need for a powerful counter to the forces of the Left; deep hostility towards the failed democratic system and a belief that strong, authoritarian leadership was necessary for any recovery; and a widespread feeling, even extending to parts of the Left, that Germany had been badly wronged at Versailles, and was threatened by enemies on all sides. This pre-existing wide consensus offered the potential for strong support for a national leader who could appear to offer absolute commitment, personal sacrifice, and selfless striving in the cause of inner unity and outward strength.

By 1933, Nazi propaganda had been highly successful in establishing 'charismatic authority' as the organisational premise of the Nazi Party, and then in portraying Hitler to Nazi sympathisers as not just another party leader, but as the Leader for whom the nation had been waiting – a man of incomparably different stature to contemptible party politicians. The most important propaganda step now remained to be taken: the conversion, for the 'majority of the majority' that had still not supported Hitler in March 1933, of his image from that of leader of the Nazi Movement to that of national leader.

Given the fact that Nazi propaganda now enjoyed a virtual monopoly within Germany, and that those taking a less than favourable view of Hitler's qualities were now incarcerated or silenced by fear and repression, the scene was set for the rapid establishment by the end of 1934 of the full-blown *Fuhrer* cult of an almost deified national leader. No doubt many Germans found the extremes of the now omnipresent Hitler cult nauseating. But they were for the most part coming to accept that Hitler was no ordinary head of government. Above all, one could not ignore his 'achievements': 'order' had been restored; unemployment was falling rapidly; the economy was picking up strongly; Germany was beginning to stand up for itself again in the world. The record seemed to speak for itself.

By 1935, Hitler could be hailed in the Nazi press – and there was by now hardly any other press to speak of inside Germany – as the 'Symbol of the Nation' who, having struggled as an 'ordinary worker' to establish Germany's 'social freedom', had now, as a one-time ordinary 'Front soldier', re-established Germany's 'national freedom' – a

reference to the recent reassertion of German military sovereignty. The message being conveyed was that people and nation found their identity, their 'incarnation', as it was put, in the person of the *Fuhrer*. To this weight placed upon Hitler's 'achievements', Goebbels added the pathos of the human qualities of the *Fuhrer*: his simplicity and modesty, toil and endeavour for his people, mastery of all problems facing the nation, toughness and severity, unshakable determination though flexibility of method in the pursuit of far-sighted goals. With all this went the intense loneliness and sadness of a man who had sacrificed all personal happiness and private life for his people. This extraordinary catalogue of personal virtues – making the 'human' Hitler almost inhuman in the degree of his perfection – was set alongside the political genius of the *Fuhrer* as a human counterpart to the image of the lofty, distant statesman. It amounted to almost a mirror of contemporary bourgeois values – characteristics with which almost everyone could find some point of association.

Difficult though it is to evaluate, evidence of the receptivity to this image – drawn both from sources from within the regime and those hostile to the Nazi system – lends strong support to Goebbels' claim in 1941 that the creation of the 'Hitler Myth' had been his greatest propaganda achievement. The powerfully integrative force of Hitler's massive popularity seems undeniable. Goebbels might have added, however, that the way had been paved for him by the constant exposure to rabid chauvinist-imperialist values pumped into the population for decades by a stridently nationalist press (excepting the publications of the Left) and by a variety of forms of 'socialisation' in schools, the bourgeois youth movement, the army, and an entire panoply of 'patriotic' clubs, leagues, and associations.

Of course, the political culture was far from a unitary one, and not all Germans were affected. As is well known, the socialist subculture remained relatively immune. Those 'schooled' in the traditions of the Socialist and Communist parties continued throughout the Third Reich to be the least susceptible to the appeal of the 'Hitler Myth'. To a lesser extent, the Catholic subculture was also resistant to the full extremes of the *Fuhrer* cult, though strong traditions of authoritarianism and especially endemic anti-Marxism allowed for substantial inroads. Clearly, therefore, Hitler's popularity was far from complete, the *Fuhrer* cult far from uniform in its impact. However, detailed examination of an extensive mass of sources relating to the formation of popular opinion and attitudes in the Third Reich suggests at least seven significant bases of the 'Hitler Myth' which can be singled out.

Firstly, Hitler was seen as the embodiment of strong and, where necessary, ruthless enforcement of 'law and order' – the representative of 'popular justice', the voice of the 'healthy sentiment of the people'. An example can be seen in the great gains in popularity which accrued to him in spring 1933 as a result of the brutal Nazi onslaught on the Left, 'clearing away' the Socialist and Communist 'enemies of the state'. Even more spectacular as an illustration is the extraordinary boost to Hitler's popularity following the ruthless massacre of members of his own Movement – the leaders of the highly unpopular SA – in June 1934. In reality, the purge of the SA leadership served to crush a destabilising element in the regime and further the power-political ambitions of the army and the SS. But none of this was reflected in Hitler's image following the purge. As even opponents of the regime acknowledged, Hitler's blood-letting was hugely popular, welcomed as a blow struck for law and order – 'popular justice' eradicating corruption and immorality within the Movement. The propagated image of a leader upholding public morality corresponded closely with commonly-held values and prejudices – for instance, in the condemnation of rowdiness and disorder, venal corruption and homosexuality. In what was a complete inversion of reality, Hitler was seen to be signalling a triumph for values associated with 'normality'.

Secondly, Hitler was seen as representing the national interest, putting the nation first before any particularist cause and wholly detached from any personal, material, or selfish motives. Crucial to this image was the way, after 1933, in which propaganda succeeded in isolating Hitler from the growing unpopularity of the Nazi Party itself. The wholly positive resonance of the portrayal of Hitler, the national leader, contrasted vividly with the sullied reputation of party functionaries, the 'little Hitlers', whose corruption and greed, jumped-up arrogance and highhandedness, pettiness and hypocrisy, were a daily scandal. And whereas the local party officials bore the brunt of extensive and real daily discontent, Hitler's popularity was cushioned by the myth that he was being kept in the dark about the misdeeds of his underlings and was unaware of the just complaints of his people.

Without at least the prospect of an improved living standard, the extent of the effective integration produced by the 'Hitler Myth' would have been difficult to achieve. A third, extremely important, component of the perceived *Fuhrer* image was, therefore, that of the architect and creator of Germany's 'economic miracle' of the 1930s. Part of the

apologetic of the post-war era was, of course, that despite his 'mistakes', Hitler had revamped the economy, rid Germany of unemployment, and built the motorways. This is itself testimony to the penetrating and enduring features of this aspect of the contemporary Hitler image. Certainly, by 1939 it was difficult to deny that economic conditions in Germany, for whatever reasons, had improved dramatically since the Depression era. However, more than in any other sphere, perceptions of Hitler's image in the context of economic and social policy were determined by experiences which were divided, for the most part, along class lines.

The working class remained the social grouping least impressed by the 'economic miracle' and relatively immune to the image of Hitler as the creator of Germany's striking new prosperity. After all, with their own standard of living pinned down to Depression levels in the years 1933-36, most industrial workers saw no particular reason to offer marked signs of gratitude to the *Fuhrer*. Through repression and intimidation, low wages, and longer hours, the 'economic miracle', as most realised, was being carried out on their own backs. Nevertheless, as the underground worker resistance was forced to admit, Hitler undoubtedly did gain some popularity among workers for 'his' work creation and the economic recovery which 'he' had brought about. And in the first years of the Third Reich in particular, the 'socialist' aspect of the Hitler image also struck a chord among many of the poorer Germans who were recipients of the 'Winter Aid'. Even so, on the whole it appears that the image of the economic miracle-worker, the restorer of Germany's prosperity, had its greatest appeal among those sectors of the population who benefited most from the economic boom of the rearmament period: the middle class, who, despite their unceasing grumbling, continued to provide the main base of support for the regime and devotion to Hitler until at least the middle of the war.

Fourthly, in matters affecting established institutions and traditions, Hitler was seen as a 'moderate', opposed to the radical and extreme elements in the Movement. An obvious example is the 'church struggle'. Whenever fundamental institutions or basic traditional props of both major Christian denominations were under attack – as in the Nazi attempt in 1934 to abolish surviving Protestant bishoprics with a firm tradition of independence, or to remove crucifixes, the symbol of Christianity itself, from Catholic schoolrooms in 1936 and again in 1941, Hitler was looked to as the defence against the 'wild elements' in the party.

His apparent non-involvement in, or aloofness from, the bitter conflicts, before finally intervening to end the disturbance – put down to party radicals and the 'new heathenism' associated above all with Rosenberg – and 'restore order', left Hitler's standing among churchgoers relatively unscathed, despite the slump in popularity of the party. Grotesque as it seems, Hitler himself continued to be widely regarded as a God-fearing and deeply religious man. Even church leaders with a reputation for hostility to Nazism were persuaded of his sincerity, belief in God, and acceptance of the role of Christianity and the churches. Their public avowals of obedience to the *Fuhrer* and recognition of his leadership and achievements played no small part in helping to give legitimation to the 'Hitler Myth'.

Fanatical commitment to uncompromising and ruthless action against the 'enemies of the people' was a fifth crucial component of Hitler's image. But he was regarded as condoning only lawful, 'rational' action, not the crude violence and public brutalities of the party's distasteful 'gutter' elements. No one could have been left in any doubt, for instance, of Hitler's fanatical anti-Semitism and determination to exclude Jews from German society. And at the beginning of his career, anti-Semitism had been a keynote of almost all his speeches and must have been a dominant component of his popular image among early converts to Nazism. However, during the period of the party's major electoral successes, anti-Semitism appears to have featured less prominently in Hitler's public addresses, and was less important as an electoral drawing card than has often been presumed – tending mainly to function as a general touchstone for other propaganda themes.

After 1933, Hitler was extremely careful to avoid public association with the generally unpopular pogrom-type anti-Semitic outrages, particularly of course following the nation-wide 'Crystal Night' pogrom in November 1938. In the years when his popularity was soaring to dizzy heights, moreover, Hitler's public pronouncements on the 'Jewish Question' were less numerous than might be imagined, and, while certainly hate-filled, were usually couched in abstract generalities in association with western plutocracy or Bolshevism. In these terms, bolstering the passive anti-Semitism already widespread among the German people and lending support to 'legal' measures – for the most part popular – excluding Jews from German society and the economy, Hitler's hatred of the Jews was certainly an acceptable component of his popular image, even if it was an element 'taken on board' rather than

forming a centrally important motivating factor for most Germans. Even during the war, when his vitriolic public onslaughts on the Jews came far more frequently and contained dire allusions to their physical extermination, the signs are that this was not a centrally formative factor shaping attitudes towards Hitler among the German people.

Sixthly, Hitler's public profile in the arena of foreign affairs stood in stark contrast to reality. He was commonly seen here as a fanatical upholder of the nation's just rights to territory 'robbed' from Germany in the peace settlement after the First World War, a rebuilder of Germany's strength, and a statesman of genius – to which his astounding run of diplomatic coups seemed to offer ample testimony. Amid the widespread, deep fears of another war, he was also, astonishingly, seen by many as a 'man of peace' who 'would do everything he could to settle things peacefully' (as one then youthful observer later came to describe her feelings at the time) – a defender of German rights, not a racial-imperialist warmonger working towards a 'war of annihilation' and limitless German conquest. Hitler's imposing series of 'triumphs without bloodshed' directed at 'peace with honour' – tearing up the Versailles settlement, winning back the Saar, restoring 'military sovereignty', recovering the Rhineland, uniting Austria with Germany, and bringing the Sudetenland 'home into the Reich' – won him support in all sections of the German people and unparalleled popularity, prestige, and acclaim.

Finally, there is Hitler's image, when war came, as the military strategist of genius, outwitting Germany's enemies in an unbelievable run of Blitzkrieg victories, culminating in the taking of France within four weeks when a generation earlier four years had not been enough. Even after the war started to turn sour for Germany in the winter of 1941-2, the unpopularity of the party and its despised representatives at home continued for a time to stand in stark contrast to the image of the *Fuhrer's* devotion to duty in standing with his soldiers at the Front. However, according to Max Weber's model, 'charismatic leadership' could not survive lack of success. And indeed, as 'his' astonishing run of victories turned gradually but inexorably into calamitous defeat, the tide of Hitler's popularity first waned rather slowly, then ebbed sharply. The decline accelerated decisively following the catastrophe of Stalingrad, a defeat for which Hitler's personal responsibility was widely recognised.

The 'Hitler Myth' was now fatally flawed. In the face of defeats, personal losses, misery, and sacrifice, the earlier successes began to be seen in a new light. Hitler was now increasingly blamed for policies which had led to war. His much vaunted strong will, resolution, unshakeable determination, and absolute fanaticism were regarded more and more not as attributes but as the main stumbling blocks to the longed-for peace. With no more successes to proclaim, Hitler was now reluctant even to speak to the German people. The new image put out by Goebbels of Hitler as a latterday Frederick the Great – distant majesty finally triumphant in the face of extreme adversity – symbolised the growing gulf.

Important reserves of popularity remained to the end. Hatred of the Allies prompted by terror bombing campaigns partially benefited Hitler and the regime for a while; some temporary vain hopes were placed in the *Fuhrer's* promises of new weapons which would accomplish the desired 'retaliation'; a short-lived upsurge of support and proclamation of loyalty followed the attempt on his life in July 1944 – an indication that a successful coup might have encountered a new version of the 'stab-in-the-back' legend; and surprisingly large numbers of prisoners-of-war in the west continued till the end to avow their belief in Hitler. But the potency of the 'Hitler Myth' had vanished. Eloquent commentary on this is a report on a remembrance ceremony at the war memorial in the little Bavarian alpine town of Markt Schellenberg on March 11th, 1945:

*When the leader of the Wehrmacht unit at the end of his speech for the remembrance called for a 'Sieg-Heil' for the Fuhrer, it was returned neither by the Wehrmacht present, nor by the Volkssturm, nor by the spectators of the civilian population who had turned up. This silence of the masses had a depressing effect, and probably reflects better than anything the attitudes of the people.*

Unquestionably, the adulation of Hitler by millions of Germans who may otherwise have been only marginally committed to the Nazi ideology, or party, was a crucial element of political integration in the Third Reich. Without this mass base of support, the high level of plebiscitary acclamation, which the regime could repeatedly call upon to legitimise its actions and to take the wind out of the sails of the opposition, is unthinkable. It also enabled the specifically Nazi elite to free itself from dependence upon the support of traditional conservative ruling groups,

thereby boosting the autonomy of the 'wild men' in the Movement. Without the degree of popular backing which Hitler was able to command, the drive, dynamism, and momentum of Nazi rule could hardly have been sustained.

The *Fuhrer* cult necessarily influenced the relations of the Nazi leadership itself with Hitler, as well as those of the traditional ruling elites. Inevitably, it surrounded Hitler with toadies, flatterers, and sycophants, shielding him from rational criticism or genuine debate, and bolstered increasing detachment from reality. Nor could Hitler himself remain impervious to the extraordinary cult which had been created around him and which came to envelop him. His own person gradually became inseparable from the myth.

Hitler had to live out more and more the constructed image of omnipotence and omniscience. And the more he succumbed to the allure of his own *Fuhrer* cult and came to believe in his own myth, the more his judgement became impaired by faith in his own infallibility and guidance 'by providence', enabling him to 'go his way with the certainty of a sleepwalker'. His room for manoeuvre now became restricted by his own need to protect the 'Hitler Myth' and sustain his prestige, aware as he was that if Nazism lost its forward momentum and stagnation set in, Hitler's own popularity and the mass base of the regime's support would be fatally undermined. To this extent, it has been claimed with some justification, that 'Hitler well understood his own function, the role which he had to act out as "Leader" of the Third Reich', that he 'transformed himself into a function, the function of *Fuhrer*'.

Further reading:

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- Michael H. Kater, 'Hitler in a Social Context', *Central European History*, 14 (1981)
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- Joseph Nyomarkay, *Charisma and Factionalism in the Nazi party* (Minneapolis, 1967)
- J.P. Stern, *Hitler* (Collins, 1975).