

Ian Kershaw

## Hitler, the Nazi Regime, and German Society



Born 1943 in Oldham, Lancs., GB. Studied at Liverpool (B.A., 1962), and Oxford (D.Phil., 1969). Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, and Reader at the University of Manchester in Medieval History (1968-74), then Modern History (1974-87), Professor of Modern History at the University of Nottingham (1987-9), and at the University of Sheffield (1989-). Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung (1976-7). Visiting Professor, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 1983-4. Publications include: *Der Hitler-Mythos* (1980); *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich* (1983); *Der NS-Staat* (1988). Address: Department of History, University of Sheffield, GB-Sheffield S10 2TN.

My initial aim while at the Wissenschaftskolleg has to begin the writing of a history of German society during the Third Reich. There has been no attempted synthesis since David Schoenbaum's *Hitler's Social Revolution* was published in 1966. Meanwhile there has been in the past fifteen years a massive outpouring of monographs, accompanied by methodological advances through the developments in 'Alltagsgeschichte', 'Erfahrungsgeschichte', and 'Oral History'. And unlike Schoenbaum, my main interest lay less in attempting to assess levels of social change under Nazism than in exploring forms of behavioural adaption to the Nazi regime's "total claim" upon society.

A description merely of 'reactive' patterns of behaviour and 'experiences' seemed to me, however, inadequate. At any rate, it became ever clearer to me, it was not what I wanted to undertake. The conceptual problem which I faced and which seemed to me insuperable, however, was that in the Third Reich more than in most historical epochs 'society' finds its reference point, character, and definition specifically through the nature of the system of political domination. Even deploying a Weberian tripartite structure of analysis of economy, culture, and political domination, therefore, analysis of the nature of political domination is the indispensable key to providing the essential framework within which

social behaviour can be understood. One is forced back, therefore, on those forms of behaviour which are constituent to the functioning of the system of rule.

And once centrally concerned with the character of domination, there is no escape from the consideration of the role played by Hitler, which historiographically has produced diametrically opposing interpretations (on the one hand emphasising the stage-by-stage fulfilment of his ideological intentions, on the other reducing Hitler himself to little more than a 'function' of Nazi rule). Satisfied with neither of these polarised positions, but stubbornly insistent that a general synthesis of the Nazi dictatorship and German society, with a level of explanatory power at least matching that produced by historians writing on other historical epochs, is indeed possible, I found my main focus during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, therefore, shifting from the receptivity to Nazi rule at the base of society to the question of the radicalising dynamic of the system of domination, and the relative significance of Hitler and of a multiplicity of factors beyond the person of the dictator to that process.

The link with my original project resided largely in the fact that, building in some ways upon the work of the late Martin Broszat and of Hans Mommsen, while placing Hitler in the foreground of my consideration, I approached my analysis of the Nazi structure of domination not biographically or 'Hitler-centrally', but through questions of social motivation and political control. The key question became, therefore, less one of what Hitler did or did not do (not that this is unimportant), but what the social conditions of his actions and the unfolding of his power were. Two critical, interlinked processes lay at the centre of my enquiry: the erosion and disintegration of anything resembling an ordered or 'rational' form of government and administration; and the rapidity of the collapse of norms of 'humane' and 'civilised' behaviour following the removal of constraints upon forms of behaviour and policy initiatives which are conventionally impossible even to contemplate, let alone implement. While the form of domination which Hitler represented is central to these processes, the ideology, intentions, and actions of the dictator are themselves insufficient to explain them. Here, I made use of Max Weber's concept of 'charismatic rule'. This helped, in my view, to conceptualise the Third Reich as a 'system' of domination in which 'charismatic' authority was superimposed on 'bureaucratic' authority, gradually eroding or overriding norms of 'rational' government and leading to a collapse into 'pure', unmediated despotic rule dictated by illusory, and ultimately self-destructive goals.

In conjunction with 'charismatic rule', I made use of a notion, taken from a routine speech by a Nazi functionary, that in the Third Reich it

was the duty of every citizen to 'work towards the Führer'. Whether interpreted (as by Nazi leaders and activists) in a most literal sense, or seen metaphorically and as an objective function of what was undertaken, this notion pointed, it seemed to me, to the ways in which the behaviour and actions of social groups and individuals, operating from widely varying motives, shaped the progressive dynamic of Nazi 'rule by interpreting Hitler's *presumed* wishes without any need for close central direction. At the same time, it allowed the functional importance of Hitler's ideology to be seen less as concrete aims to be implemented than as interpreted, utopian 'directives for action' integrating different forms of social motivation and gradually coming into focus as realisable objectives without the necessity of close steering from the dictator himself.

Hitler is, in this approach, therefore, crucial to an understanding of the disintegration of government and state administration and the replacement of 'politics' by 'will', but the understanding of Hitler's centrality is achieved not through the conventional biographical approach but through assessment of those social forces which 'made Hitler possible' and 'worked towards the Führer'. The personal role of Hitler needs, in other words, to be incorporated into (and in many ways subordinated to) an analysis of the functional role of his position as 'Führer' — the 'enabler' of initiatives mostly taken by others, the indispensable focus of integration, mobilisation, and legitimisation in the 'system' of rule.

The approach seems to accord with one much advocated by scholars in the field. Gerhard Schreiber notes, for instance, that 'an analysis of Hitler which integrates the history of the epoch still needs to be undertaken'; Hans-Ulrich Wehler sees it as necessary to investigate systematically 'the construction of the charisma which did not surround Hitler from the earliest time but which he only gradually developed and with maximum effect exploited'; and Jürgen Kocka adds that, while avoiding short-circuiting personalisation of history, 'every worthwhile explanation of National Socialism will have to deal with the person of Hitler, not reducible just to its structural conditions'. What in some ways still seems required is, paradoxically, then, a type of 'social history of Hitler'. This is what I have found myself 'working towards' while at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

I completed part-way through my stay a preliminary study which will serve in some respects as a basis for the bigger book. This will appear in the spring under the title *Hitler. A Profile in Power* (London: Longman, 1991). I also saw through the press while at the Wissenschaftskolleg an edited volume of essays, *Weimar: Why did German Democracy Fail?* (London: Weidenfeld, 1990), and worked for some time on two essays arising from a subsidiary project on the genesis of the 'Final Solution of

---

the "Jewish Question" in the Warthegau' (a part of Poland annexed to the German Reich in 1939).

While at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had good contact with historians and political scientists at the Berlin universities, and at the Wissenschaftszentrum. I tried wherever possible to decline lecture and conference invitations, in order not to detract from concentrated writing time. However, I did take part in Podiumsdiskussionen on the Nazi era at the Frankfurter Buchmesse and the Ruhrland-Museum Essen, and gave lectures at Bielefeld University and at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, as well as at a conference in Wildbad Kreuth (Bavaria), organised by the Leo Baeck Institute in collaboration with the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, on *Die Juden in Bayern*.

With conditions in English universities becoming in recent years markedly less conducive to research, scholarship, and writing in the arts and social sciences, the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was a marvellous opportunity and experience. To write about Hitler at the very time that his legacy in the shape of the Cold War was finally collapsing was in itself a great stimulus. The intellectual climate in the Wissenschaftskolleg was a vibrant one, and, along with all the other Fellows, I was deeply appreciative of the service provided by the staff, the secretaries, and not least the librarians.