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# 1 Debates and Themes

A history of nineteenth-century Germany opens with the words 'In the beginning was Napoleon'.<sup>1</sup> The same could be said in relation to the writing of the history of the Third Reich about Hitler. Particularly as regards foreign policy, interpretations were and remain Hitler-centric.<sup>2</sup> But that is not the whole story. In 1961 A. J. P. Taylor stirred up a hornets' nest by arguing that while Hitler may have had some vague notions of expansion to the East he had no clear plans.<sup>3</sup> In Taylor's view he simply seized the opportunities presented to him as any German statesman would have done. That challenged the general consensus among historians that Hitler's aims were both radical and implemented in a logical order. Those who subscribed to that view included Hitler's then leading English biographer, Alan Bullock, and Hugh Trevor Roper and German scholars like Klaus Hildebrand and Andreas Hillgruber.<sup>4</sup> With varying emphases they maintained that Hitler imposed on German foreign policy the specific goals, timing and methods of expansion. He followed, they suggested, a clear programme, from removing the sanctions clauses of Versailles, to expansion in Europe, to living space in the Soviet Union and from there to an – albeit less well-defined – final conflict for world mastery. These historians became loosely lumped together in the discussion as the 'intentionalists' because they stressed Hitler's intentions as the primary part of any explanation. Taylor too was an intentionalist – he simply did not believe that Hitler had any real intentions.

A new challenge of a different kind to the Hitler-centric view arose from historians who worked on particular policy areas in the Third Reich. Some of them came to the conclusion that basic problems of the economy and of the way government was organized, or disorganized, in the Third Reich mattered more than Hitler's intentions. In explaining rearmament, for instance, it was not enough to say what Hitler wanted. It was also necessary to understand what the economy could produce and how rearmament was managed. If Hitler

demanded the impossible and, in addition, responsibility for rearmament was divided between competing authorities, then the outcome would not be what Hitler intended. His intentions therefore would not provide a reliable guide to what happened. Rather one needed to look at how the gap between what he intended and what was possible was filled, a process some suggested of constant ad hoc improvisation or crisis management. Again there were many variants of this approach, grouped together in the discussion under a generic label as the 'structuralists' to contrast with the 'intentionalists'. One of the most distinguished, and the most provocative, was Hans Mommsen with his eye-catching description of Hitler as a 'weak dictator'.<sup>5</sup> Other examples included Tim Mason who from his study of labour problems suggested that Hitler was forced into early expansion by shortages of raw materials, labour and foreign currency which were themselves a result of the initial rearmament programme.<sup>6</sup> The precise way in which economic problems like these are linked to a specific decision for war is difficult to establish and, in addition, another economic historian, Richard Overy, has argued that the economic difficulties in 1939 were not as critical as Mason suggested.<sup>7</sup> The way rearmament was organized has also been the subject of intense research with studies of the competing programmes of the armed forces, the accumulation of power by Göring which Hitler tolerated, the sometimes hesitant co-operation of industry and, on the other side, the real constraints of the economy which despite the huge resources transferred to military expenditure could never satisfy the ever escalating demands placed on it.<sup>8</sup>

From the work of these historians and others a new view of the Third Reich began to take hold. Instead of a monolithic dictatorship ruled by Hitler's will, it began to be seen as an arena where different powerful groups competed for influence, the state bureaucracy, the party and its various agencies, the military, the police and the SS to name only the most obvious. In the area of foreign policy in the period 1933–38 there was competition between (among others) the official Foreign Ministry (the *Auswärtiges Amt*), the party foreign office (*Aussenpolitisches Amt*) under Alfred Rosenberg, a separate party unit (the *Auslandsorganisation*) to stir up unrest among German ethnic minorities abroad (for instance in Poland and Czechoslovakia), and lastly Hitler's personal representative, Joachim von Ribbentrop.<sup>9</sup> The Third Reich was, in a somewhat pretentious word to convey the many elements involved in its government, a 'polycratic' regime. Hitler presided over

its unstable structure but because he disliked administration, he did not give it order – though he sometimes issued orders. He intervened when he had to or in policies (notably foreign policy) that mattered most to him. Otherwise he was content to allow the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest, to prevail. That suited both his political instinct – to allow powerful underlings to compete among themselves without himself getting involved in their conflicts – and his bohemian lifestyle.

Despite this major shift in interpretation from the ‘intentionalists’ to the ‘structuralists’, Hitler did not disappear entirely from the picture. The Third Reich was not shaped simply by warring power groups. It also had a direction – it moved over time towards more radical policies. It moved, in particular, towards war, expansion and racial annihilation. In foreign policy, for instance, as part of a major reorganization in February 1938, Ribbentrop became Foreign Minister and the organization concerned with ethnic Germans abroad was taken over by the SS leaders, Himmler and Heydrich. Was this direction of the regime towards more radical policies simply the result of economic limitations or competition between its leaders? Did it not also reflect a particular ideology and one whose focus was the *führer* himself? And was not his authority – if one could get it – the ultimate currency of power in the Third Reich? And so explanations turned back to Hitler and, in particular, to the insight that what made sense of the Third Reich was the idea of all these powerful groups trying to anticipate the *führer*’s will in everything they did – ‘working towards the *führer*’ as the charismatic leader who inspired and empowered them.<sup>10</sup> That approach offered a resolution of the problem of how to explain both the confusion and the overall direction of the regime. It was in many ways a jungle but with its own particular law of the jungle and Hitler as lawgiver.

The controversies about what kind of state the Third Reich was were mainly concerned with the power structure and how policy was made. They left to one side the question of how much support the regime enjoyed, the degree of consent for its foreign and racial policies. Nevertheless there were clear implications of the different theories. Was it a dictatorship that relied on coercion? Was it an arena in which powerful groups were able to push their own agendas? Did it have the support of a wider public which was indeed won over to the regime by rearmament and success in foreign policy following the humiliations of the previous years? Was the German public cowed and oppressed,

making the best of things, or also working enthusiastically towards the führer?

Recent work suggests, unsurprisingly, that each of these was true to some extent and the difficulty is to draw the balance between them.<sup>11</sup> There was terror and coercion and in this, at least, the state was efficient. There were also ways of adapting, accepting the order the regime provided and living for private goods – work, money, leisure and holidays. There were areas of life that retained some autonomy. Local loyalties in the countryside could afford some protection against harassment by the party. Religious life continued, though the Protestant church was divided with a pro-Nazi wing. In the universities it was possible to deflect the more rabid Nazis into specialist institutes and continue with something approaching the normal routines of academic life. There were also ways of escaping the monotony of the party's control over more and more areas of daily life – the American romance about the Civil War, *Gone with the Wind*, sold well. But there was also genuine enthusiasm and admiration for the regime, particularly for its foreign policy achievements and particularly among the younger generation. Hitler occupied a special place in public esteem. He was seen by many as standing above and separate from the party, as the man who had saved Germany from civil war and was successfully restoring Germany as a great power. It was possible therefore to celebrate 'his' triumphs while criticizing the corruption of party bosses and the shortages of food and consumer goods. The myth that, 'if only the führer knew' he would put things right, helped to maintain support.<sup>12</sup>

Even that support, however, was shaky.<sup>13</sup> There is much evidence that in the summer of 1938 as war loomed over Czechoslovakia, the mood was anxious and sceptical. Provoking a crisis over Czechoslovakia, unlike previous actions such as the reoccupation of the Rhineland and union with Austria – both of which could be justified by the principle of national self-determination – seemed very likely to lead to a European war with France and Britain and possibly the Soviet Union. Apart from convinced Nazis and some young people, there was little appetite for such a war. And though by September 1939, war against Poland was accepted more readily and with a sense of fulfilling a patriotic duty, there was not the enthusiasm that had been part of the experience of July 1914. From then on, morale varied with the fortunes of war, with the Polish campaign and even more the stunning defeat of France in 1940 raising support to new heights, but thereafter

a gradual decline as victory over Britain proved elusive and as the campaign against the Soviet Union ground to a halt outside Moscow in December 1941. Goebbels sensed the changed mood and put a stop to repeated claims of imminent victory, which only increased disillusionment when they proved false. Instead, he shifted the emphasis to the final result saying that was all that mattered and warning of the catastrophe that would result from a victory of Bolshevism. Fear of defeat began to supplant hope of victory as the reason to keep fighting.

The ups and downs in public support for the regime show that the Nazi ideal of a warrior race had not been achieved. This raises an important question. How far did public support extend beyond the traditional goals of restoring Germany as a great power, reversing the defeat of 1918? Did German elites and the wider public also come to accept the more specifically Nazi goals of a racial reconstruction of Europe, involving genocide against Jews, Poles, Russians and others?

Again there is no single or simple answer. The co-operation of elites and the support of a wider public for the traditional goals is clear. There was an almost universal consensus that Versailles should be dismantled as a matter of right. Hitler was assured of popularity when he demanded equality for Germany and played on the differences between the 'have' and 'have not' nations in terms of economic resources – after the experience of the depression that was bound to echo with Germans of all classes. His successful and theatrical coups – leaving the League of Nations, rearmament, the reoccupation of the Rhineland and union with Austria – all helped to establish his reputation as a national statesman who had made Germany count again. He had exposed the weakness of the French and British who reacted only with protests and his success contrasted with the humiliation suffered by the governments of the Weimar Republic.

Conservative elites co-operated enthusiastically in the achievement of these initial goals. The officials of the Foreign Ministry resented the influence of the party, and particularly of Ribbentrop, whom they regarded rightly as an amateur, but with hardly an exception, they put their expertise at the service of the regime. The armed forces were delighted to be given the opportunity to rearm and made the most of it at breakneck speed and with total disregard for the consequences in terms of forcing other nations to rearm. Industrialists, though they had concerns about their growing dependence on government contracts, also co-operated willingly and earned huge profits. Not everyone benefited in the same way. Manufacturers of consumer goods and

those involved in agriculture suffered from shortages of materials and labour which were increasingly directed to armaments industries. The consequences for industrial labour were also mixed. Although economic recovery produced an acute labour shortage by 1938, real wages had only just reached their 1928 level again and the German standard of living remained significantly lower than that of the United States or Britain. In these circumstances, foreign policy success and the way it reflected on Hitler's leadership was arguably the most important common factor in cementing support for the regime across different groups. Crises such as food shortages in 1935–36 or the major changes in the military power structure in February 1938 were overcome partly by the distraction of foreign policy success – the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and union with Austria in March 1938. Other aspects of foreign policy also found support among important elites – for instance the churches, despite their own conflicts with the regime, nevertheless fully endorsed its anti-Communism, particularly during the Spanish Civil War as stories spread of atrocities committed against the church by Spanish Republican forces.

Despite the success of Hitler's foreign policy, fear that it would result in a new European war grew from 1936 and, as we have seen, became widespread in the summer of 1938. The German public did not share the pacifism that was strongly represented in the democracies, nor did they have confidence in the League of Nations as a forum for settling disputes peacefully. Rearmament seems to have been regarded as necessary and right, if only to re-establish German power on the basis of equality with other nations. But there was unsurprisingly also fear, particularly among those who had experienced the world war, of a new European war. So long as Hitler got away with his foreign policy coups peacefully, he was admired. But when the German public sensed that he was taking one risk too many, concern grew. That concern could be found during the Czech crisis at all levels – among the senior officials of the Foreign Ministry, in the highest ranks of the army, even within the Nazi leadership, where Göring did not share Ribbentrop's enthusiasm for war.

How then does one explain the willingness of Germans to fight when the European war finally broke out in September 1939 over Poland, and spread in 1940 to Denmark and Norway, the Low Countries and France, to the air and sea war with Britain, to the invasion in 1941 of Yugoslavia and Greece and to the campaign in North Africa and finally to the invasion of the Soviet Union? How, more

particularly, does one explain the fact that Hitler was able in the East, in Poland and the Soviet Union, to put into practice the racial wars which lay at the heart of his ideology? These involved, as is now well-established, not simply the trained task forces of the SS but regular army units and their officers and thousands of Germans involved in the administration of the occupied areas. In planning the campaign against the Soviet Union, the military's economic staff accepted that to obtain food for the German army and the home front, millions of Russian civilians and prisoners of war would be forced to starve. The military leadership also accepted without demur Hitler's order that Communist Party officials should be shot out of hand. Should one then conclude that the public had come to support not only the traditional goals of restoring Germany as a great power but also the specifically Nazi goals of genocide against races which were seen as inferior?

These questions remain the most difficult to answer and are still the subject of differing interpretations.<sup>14</sup> War had its own imperatives and led to a heightened sense of national solidarity, as well as intensified coercion against dissenters. The war against Poland could be presented as putting right a legitimate grievance from the Versailles Treaty and the intervention of France and Britain as a repeat of their attempt in the First World War to cheat Germany of its rightful place in Europe. The victories of 1939 and 1940 extinguishing the trauma of defeat in 1918 seemed to require no further justification. And once the campaign against the Soviet Union foundered, it became a life and death struggle for survival in which any means was seen as legitimate by both sides.

But what of the racial policies in the east? Put simply, two processes reinforced each other. There was first the influence of inherited attitudes of superiority towards Poles and other Slav peoples and also towards Jews, particularly towards the unassimilated (i.e. retaining their traditional dress and religious customs) Jewish populations of eastern Europe and, among army officers, against 'Jewish-Bolshevik' commissars (Communist party officials) in the Soviet forces. Second, the ideology of race had found receptive minds after the First World War in a generation which all too easily saw history in Social Darwinian terms as the conflict of nations for survival. Such attitudes took hold not only among the crude ideologues who found their natural home in the Nazi party but also among highly educated university students who later made careers in the SS. The power of

racial ideology in this period is difficult to recapture. Yet it alone ultimately explains how otherwise rational people could willingly plan the murder of millions of innocent civilians.

This does not mean that all or even most Germans now supported genocide. But the dividing lines between Nazism and other German traditions had become blurred. There was a spectrum of opinion where inherited attitudes of cultural and political superiority overlapped with beliefs that the future of the German race depended on the deportation and murder of 'inferior' races. There remained some important differences between Hitler's view of the future and that of most Germans. Hitler believed, for instance, that war should be renewed indefinitely to maintain the fighting quality of the race. Most Germans longed for peace. As Goebbels knew by December 1941 morale was starting to flag. Nevertheless, the narrow gap between inherited attitudes of superiority and the Nazi goal of racial reconstruction of the continent was all too easily crossed under wartime conditions. As a result, Hitler was able to find the support he needed not only for a war for German domination of the continent but also for the specific Nazi war for racial mastery.

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