

Notes taken from an A level conference

I. KERSHAW, "HITLER'S PERSONAL ROLE"

Today the name "Hitler" is so synonymous with Nazism that his leadership is naturally assumed to be at once both omnipotent and omniscient, a consummate dictatorship. Yet an analysis of Hitler's twelve years in power reveals a more complex reality. Hitler deliberately fostered the creation of a personality cult to act as a symbolic unifying force for the nation. As a living incarnation of Nazi ideology, Hitler provided both the symbolic focus and leadership for the Nazi state. If none can deny that it was Hitler who controlled foreign policy, led Germany into war, and ordered the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe, it would equally be wrong to assume that Hitler exercised omniscient control over the Nazi state. Only in the field of foreign affairs did Hitler persistently intervene. Elsewhere, he deliberately chose to remain aloof, avoiding the tedium of a daily administrative routine and refusing to commit himself to major decisions. Though this allowed Hitler to control the competing factions within the party and state, it ultimately meant that the Nazi state lacked central planning. More significantly, since Nazi propaganda had successfully inculcated the message that it was the duty of all Nazis to fulfil Hitler's aims, the Fuhrer's hesitation and lack of commitment allowed competing institutions and factions to determine what they thought the Fuhrer wanted. By this means, he could select and favour and often set at odds competing groups. Though this undoubtedly enhanced his power, it prevented any rational planning in the state. For Kershaw, therefore Hitler's personal role performed three functions:

1. Integration fostering national unity through the symbolic "Fuhrer"
2. Mobilization as an embodiment of Nazi ideology, Hitler's persona encouraged radical activity justified through reference to his stated aims eg. Kristallnacht.

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3. Legitimization Ensuring that the actions of radical party activists are justified by retrospective legislation because they believed they had acted in accordance with the Fuhrer's will.

For Kershaw, there are four distinct processes where Hitler's personal role proved vital in the 1930s:

1. The collapse of international order.

The economic chaos engendered by the Depression created diplomatic disunity among the Great Powers which enabled Hitler to seize his opportunities. Hitler's personal unpredictability was crucial to the success of his foreign policy. The disarray of Britain and France after 1936 coincided with Hitler's subordination of the German elites in 1937–8.

As Europe grew weaker, Hitler grew stronger.

2. Disintegration of a rational state.

Hitler's lack of firm direction and leadership led to administrative chaos. He hated state administration and refused to call Cabinet meetings after 1938 because he resented being pressurised into making decisions. The Nazi party hierarchy were infuriated by Hitler's lack of central directives and its resulting duplication, waste, and bureaucracy. Yet this was deliberate and an important component of Hitler's personal rule.

3. Growth of an ideological executive force.

For Kershaw, this proved vital. By amalgamating the party SS and police under Himmler in 1936, Hitler created a powerful centralised party agency dedicated to implementing the Fuhrer's will. As Germany acquired Austria and Czechoslovakia 1938-

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9, the functions of the police bureaucracy expanded creating a powerful instrument of terror dedicated to fulfilling the decrees of the Fuhrer. Himmler's fanatical devotion ensured the dominance of Hitler's will, despite the increasingly indeterminable nature of that will. That Hitler sanctioned the establishment of a powerful executive force to impose his will reveals the importance of his personal role in the growing radicalisation of the Nazi state.

4. Dropping of civilized restraints.

Kershaw chooses two examples to reveal Hitler's personal propensity for barbarity. First, the compulsory sterilization programme 1933—40 by which some 400,000 mentally and physically handicapped patients were sterilized. Note that proposals to undertake such a programme had been suggested in Prussia in 1932, but no liberal—democratic state would implement such an inhuman policy. However, a Nazi state with a racist—imperialist creed and a crude, quasi-scientific philosophy of eugenics was not only prepared to implement it, but found Nazi doctors willing to obey their Fuhrer. Similarly, with the "Euthanasia" programme 1939—41, the compulsory murder of between 70,000—100,000 patients far exceeded the numbers originally planned as Nazi doctors sought to reveal their devotion to the Fuhrer by fanatically fulfilling their orders. The personality cult of the Fuhrer together with Nazi ideology and propaganda had created the conditions whereby blind devotion to the will of the Fuhrer legitimized inhuman behaviour.

Kershaw proceeds to briefly examine Hitler's personal role in relation to Nazi anti—semitism carefully distancing himself from radical revisionists. However, in examining Hitler's involvement in the anti—semitic policies of the 1930s it is important to remember his reluctance to direct initiatives. Thus all the actions taken against the Jews during the 1930s were initiated by radicals within the party and not by Adolf Hitler. Though he immediately approved such actions, Hitler's concern over foreign reaction led him to restrain the ideological fanatics within the party and to distance himself from unpopular actions such as the Kristallnacht. With the outbreak of war,

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Hitler entrusted all policy towards the Jews to the SS and only after the invasion of Russia in 1941 with over 8 million Jews to control did Himmler and Heydrich propose genocide. Though Hitler subsequently legitimized their proposals and actions, he did not personally plan their fate since his preoccupation with the war kept him aloof from "emigration" policy. That Hitler was prepared to sanction such barbaric acts reveals his concurrence with the fanatics. Yet it is also a testimony to the powerful process of integration, mobilization, and legitimization that provided the ideological justification for genocide by purporting to fulfil the will of the Fuhrer irrespective of his personal directive.