



# The rise and fall of the Hitler myth

Graham Goodlad

They didn't like his party, and they didn't want his war.  
So why did the Germans stick to Hitler for so long?

**Gestapo:** secret state police of Nazi Germany, responsible for detecting and arresting political opponents.

**Social Democrat:** member of one of the main political parties of pre-1933 Germany, which drew its support mainly from the working classes, and was banned by the Nazis.

**plebiscite:** direct vote of the whole population on a single issue.

## Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945)

- Minister of propaganda and enlightenment, 1933–45.
- Controlled the media and had a powerful influence on German culture during the Third Reich.
- Fanatically loyal to Hitler and instrumental in shaping his public image.



PETER NEWARK

It is not easy to be certain what the real state of public opinion was in the Third Reich, because opposition to the regime was illegal, and even mild expressions of disagreement were risky. Nazi Germany was a police state in which the existence of **Gestapo** informers and concentration camps made it hard for people to speak frankly. Propaganda was all-pervasive, with government control of the press, broadcasting, cinema and other media. Internal surveys of opinion conducted by the Nazis' own agents may not be wholly accurate because those responsible for gathering information may have distorted the truth in order to please their superiors. On the other hand reports prepared by members of the underground opposition, such as those smuggled out of Germany for the **Social Democrat** organisation in exile abroad, *Sopade*, may have exaggerated signs of the regime's unpopularity.

Nonetheless the work of several historians, notably Ian Kershaw in his pioneering study, *The Hitler Myth*, has testified to the remarkable popularity of Germany's leader in this period. Kershaw showed how the regime, through the propagandist

efforts of Joseph Goebbels, built up an image of Hitler as a charismatic leader, helping to generate mass support for him as an individual. Indications of support were important to Hitler, who staged a series of **plebiscites** and 'elections', even after the banning of all other political parties in the summer of 1933. It is clear that he enjoyed popular support, even within sections of German society which did not have a strong attraction to Nazi ideology or policies as such. The Nazi Party itself was never well liked. It is striking that widespread belief in the Führer (leader) persisted into the Second World War, long after evidence had begun to mount that he was leading Germany to certain defeat.

In recent years some historians have begun to speak of a 'consensus' in favour of the Nazi regime. It is argued that this was based partly on Hitler's personal popularity and partly on gratitude for his government's positive achievements, especially the ending of mass unemployment and the recovery of national prestige in the mid-1930s. Historian Robert Gellately, for example, has shown that, far from carrying out extensive investigations of their own, the Gestapo were able to rely on ordinary Germans denouncing their fellow citizens to the authorities. The work of another historian, Eric Johnson, author of the 1999 study, *Nazi Terror: the Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans*, suggests that the attentions of the secret police were directed mainly towards minority groups such as Jews, not the bulk of the population.

It is, however, important to recognise that an awareness of the dire consequences of dissent was constantly present in the background. Many Germans retreated into their own private world and into silence, which was not necessarily tantamount to approval of the regime. Many of those who informed on their neighbours did so not for ideological reasons but as a way of settling personal scores. There were groups with established political sub-cultures, into which the Nazis found it very difficult to make inroads: the urban working classes, who mostly supported the Social Democrats or the

Communists; and the Catholics, who had their own Centre Party up to 1933. As this article shows, levels of support fluctuated across the 12 years of the Third Reich, and there were also important regional and class differences in attitudes towards Hitler's rule. It is important to be aware of the dangers of over-generalisation in any exploration of this issue.

### Establishing the Führer state

With the important exception of those who were confirmed enemies of the Nazis, such as the Social Democrats and the Communists, Hitler's accession to power in 1933 was widely welcomed. Support for the Weimar Republic, which had obviously failed to overcome the Great Depression, was weak. In an atmosphere of economic gloom and political uncertainty, the Nazis' message of 'national renewal' was attractive. Kershaw shows how the idea of authoritarian government was seen by many as preferable to the divisiveness and ineffectiveness of the democratic parties. Among uncommitted middle-class voters there was approval of the Nazis for their repression of the Communists. The concept of a 'red danger', highlighted by the **Reichstag Fire** of February 1933, was widely accepted. Skilfully orchestrated propaganda reinforced the appeal of Hitler. The ceremonial of 'Potsdam Day' in March 1933, at which Hitler appeared alongside the traditionalist figure of President Hindenburg, was particularly important in reassuring conservative, property-owning Germans.

Popular support for the Nazis weakened in early 1934 as a result of their inability to deal with economic problems, which disappointed both the working classes and businessmen. Another problem was the unpopularity of many local Nazi bosses, the so-called 'little Hitlers', who were seen as corrupt and self-serving. The SA was widely disliked for its thuggish, bullying character. Yet Hitler personally remained popular with many Germans, who did not connect him with the failings of his subordinates. 'If only the Führer knew' was a common saying when difficulties arose. The massacre of the SA leaders in the Night of the Long Knives (June 1934) was widely praised as strong, decisive action against an unruly, dangerous mob. Hitler won credit as a respectable 'moderate' in contrast with the perceived extremism and immorality of the SA. The purge was welcomed above all in conservative circles, as an indication that the regime was serious about the restoration of order.

### Nothing succeeds like success

Public opinion broadly welcomed Hitler's foreign policy successes, such as his announcement of rearmament in March 1935, which stunned European opinion without provoking effective counter-measures against Germany. Most Germans wanted to see their country assert itself and reject the humiliating Versailles Treaty, but also to keep out of war. Until



The Reichstag destroyed by fire, 27 February 1933.

the **Czech crisis** of summer 1938 there was no real risk of this and so people were generally content, even expressing admiration for Hitler's daring. A *Sopade* observer reported from Munich in March 1935: 'I witnessed the **days of 1914** and can only say that the declaration of war did not make the same impact on me as Hitler's reception... The trust in the political talent and honest will of Hitler becomes greater all the time, as Hitler has again gained extraordinary ground among the people.'

On the other hand, economic difficulties had the capacity to cause serious, if temporary, problems for the regime. The failure of wages to keep up with rising food prices caused unrest in the autumn of 1935 — living costs were 5.4% higher than 2 years earlier. Scarce resources were being spent on importing raw materials for the arms industry rather than on buying food. Shortages hit the urban working class the hardest and underground support for the Communist Party revived. Hitler intervened to bring about a temporary diversion of foreign exchange, so that foodstuffs could be imported. The episode demonstrated his acute sensitivity to public opinion, at least in peacetime. A prolonged period of shortages and price rises could seriously weaken the regime at home and damage his plans for expansion abroad.

Successes in foreign policy could, of course, offset problems in other areas. The timing of the **occupation of the Rhineland** in March 1936 was partly determined by the need to revive the

**Reichstag Fire:** the burning of the German Parliament building in February 1933 was blamed on the Communists. It was used as an excuse to pass a decree giving the government sweeping emergency powers.

**Czech crisis:** international tension generated by Hitler's 1938 demand that the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, should be transferred to Germany.

**days of 1914:** the outbreak of the First World War had been greeted by enthusiastic crowd scenes in Germany.

**occupation of the Rhineland:** the 1919 Versailles Treaty had banned Germany from stationing troops in the Rhineland, which bordered on France. This was reversed by Hitler in March 1936.



**Nazi soldiers discourage Berliners from patronising Jewish-owned stores by means of propaganda, April 1933.**

regime's flagging popularity. In the Reichstag 'elections' held shortly afterwards, the government secured 98.9% of the popular vote, thereby vindicating Hitler's decision to take the diplomatic and military risks involved. It should, however, be noted that no other parties were allowed to stand, and there was manipulation of the voting — in Cologne, for example, there was a result of 103% because too many duplicate ballot papers were issued!

### The dark side of the regime

The old belief that the German people were deliberately kept in ignorance of the repressive side of the Third Reich can no longer be sustained. Robert Gellately shows that, on the contrary, the regime released newspaper images and information about the concentration camps, presenting them as places of wholesome 're-education' and useful work. There is powerful evidence of widespread popular support for the confinement of Communists, habitual criminals, the 'work shy' and other so-called 'asocial' elements in these places, because they were seen as outsiders who deserved their fate.

Attitudes towards the persecution of the Jews have aroused more controversy among historians.

## Key points

- ✘ Hitler enjoyed widespread popular support, even from people who disliked the Nazi Party or some of its policies.
- ✘ The main exceptions to this were working-class people and Catholics, who had pre-existing loyalties to other parties.
- ✘ Hitler's main appeal to the middle classes was as a guarantor of order, after a period of economic depression and unsettled government.
- ✘ There was support for the confinement of Communists and so-called 'asocial' groups in concentration camps.
- ✘ There was also support for measures against Jews, although no general desire for their extermination.
- ✘ Foreign policy successes, provided that they were achieved without war, were very popular.
- ✘ There were fluctuations in Hitler's standing with the people, associated with periods of economic difficulty.
- ✘ Although the outbreak of war in 1939 was not well received, Hitler retained the loyalty of most Germans right through to the country's defeat.
- ✘ In wartime, traditional obedience to authority was supplemented by fear of the country's enemies, especially the Soviet Union.
- ✘ Support for the regime in war was bolstered by an increase in levels of police terror against dissidents.

There was widespread anti-semitism (hatred of Jews) in Germany prior to the Nazi seizure of power, but most historians agree that the fanatical hatred felt by Hitler and hard-core members of the Nazi movement for the Jews was untypical. It is noticeable that explicit references to Jews were toned down by Hitler in his public statements in the early 1930s, as he tried to broaden the support for his party and make it appear 'respectable'. After he gained power, up to 1939, he distanced himself from acts of terror against Jews carried out by rank and file Nazis, and made few public references to Jews. The 1935 **Nuremberg Laws** were an attempt to pacify party radicals, by showing them that something was being done, while reassuring wider public opinion, which disapproved of open violence, but which welcomed measures of racial discrimination.

It seems that popular attitudes hardened against the Jews during the war and that Hitler's explana-

**Nuremberg Laws:** these laws, announced during the 1935 Nazi Party rally, deprived German Jews of citizenship rights and banned marriages between Jews and non-Jews.

tion of the conflict as the product of a global Jewish–Communist conspiracy was widely believed. From 1939 he was prepared to associate himself with the idea of extermination of the Jews, although he avoided all reference to the actual methods used. Kershaw suggests that anti-semitism was not of central importance to most Germans. Other issues were of more immediate concern during the war and there was widespread indifference towards the fate of the Jews.

### Public opinion and war

The outbreak of war in 1939 was received without the enthusiasm of 1914, but people in general accepted participation as a patriotic duty. The relatively easy military successes of 1939–40 were popular, and at this stage people did not have to make significant material sacrifices. Nor was Allied bombing very significant in this period. There was also an expectation that the war would end soon. Just as in peacetime, people made a distinction between Hitler and the Nazi Party. The latter became even less popular as it had to take on responsibility for many everyday organisational matters, which meant that it intruded more into people's lives. For example, it fell to party officials to make decisions about applications for **reserved occupation** status from groups such as farmers.

Kershaw dates the beginning of the decline of the Hitler myth to 1941. There were several reasons for this. Some unease was felt at reports of the gassing of people with incurable medical conditions and mental illnesses. This was stopped, following public condemnation of the programme by the Catholic Bishop Galen of Munster in August 1941. At the same time, anti-Christian activities by some radical Nazis, such as the attempt to remove crucifixes from schools, led to widespread protests in the Catholic south of Germany. More importantly for the standing of the regime, increasing Allied bombing made a nonsense of Nazi propaganda about the invulnerability of the homeland.

Underlying everything was a growing sense of disappointment at Hitler's failure to bring the war to an early and successful conclusion. News of the defeat of the German army by the Soviet Red Army at Stalingrad in January 1943 brought home to ordinary Germans the undeniable truth that they were losing. Propaganda had not prepared the people for this disaster and had in fact deliberately misled the public about the situation on the Eastern Front. It was noted that, as the tide of war began to turn against Germany, Hitler himself retreated from the public gaze. He almost never visited a bombed city, and it was significant that he left Goebbels to make the keynote speech in Berlin calling for a commitment to 'total war' in February 1943.

In spite of the growing evidence of impending defeat, support for the regime persisted to a remarkable degree. This was in part a tribute to the pre-war strength of the Hitler myth. In particular it

## The Nazi regime at the polls

- March 1933** Hitler wins 43.9% of the popular vote in elections to the Reichstag, held after his appointment as chancellor.
- November 1933** The Nazis win 92.1% of the vote in new 'elections' after the banning of all other political parties. A plebiscite following Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations gives an approval rating of 95.1%.
- August 1934** Hitler receives 89.9% of the vote after his appointment as Führer.
- March 1936** Hitler wins 98.9% of the vote in 'elections' held after the occupation of the Rhineland.
- April 1938** An approval rating of 99% is held in the last 'elections' of the Nazi period, following the absorption of Austria into the Reich.

seems that young people, who had been most susceptible to propaganda in peacetime, maintained their support for longer than more sceptical older people. Moreover, in wartime, opposition to a legally constituted government was bound to appear treasonable. This was strikingly illustrated by widespread popular condemnation of the **20 July 1944 bomb plot**. In any case, to most Germans the enemy powers, which had declared that they would be satisfied only by Germany's unconditional surrender, were more hateful than their own government. As the war entered its final phase, fear of occupation by the Soviet army — which Nazi propaganda had portrayed as a terrible barbarian horde — helped to keep people loyal to the regime.

Any analysis of public opinion must also take into account the reality of increasing levels of repression as the external situation worsened. The security apparatus undoubtedly became more ruthless and violent in the final year of the regime. Knowledge of the harsh punishments meted out to those considered guilty of opposition, or of 'defeatist' sentiments, must have played a part in deterring people from openly rejecting the regime. By this stage, with the Red Army seizing swathes of territory in eastern Germany, propaganda had become largely irrelevant as the population braced itself for the worst.

**Dr Graham Goodlad** is Director of Sixth Form at St John's College, Southsea, and author of Philip Allan Updates' *19th and 20th Century British History Essential Word Dictionary*.

### Further study

- Bankier, D. (1992) *The Germans and the Final Solution: Public Opinion under Nazism*, Oxford University Press.
- Burleigh, M. (2000) *The Third Reich: a New History*, Macmillan.
- Gellately, R. (2001) *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, Oxford University Press.
- Kershaw, I. (1987) *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, Oxford University Press.

### reserved occupation:

non-military job, considered essential in wartime, which exempts its holder from conscription into the armed services.

### 20 July 1944 bomb plot:

failed attempt to assassinate Hitler at his wartime headquarters, planned by a group of army officers, using a bomb concealed in a briefcase.

? How important was fear in helping the Nazi regime to maintain its hold over the German people?

? Why was Hitler much more popular than the Nazi Party with the German people?

? How important was foreign policy in the making of the Hitler myth?