

Hitler

A weak dictator?

After years of propaganda showing Hitler as an all-powerful dictator, the idea that Hitler was really a weak ruler looked intriguing and attractive. But has it been taken too far?

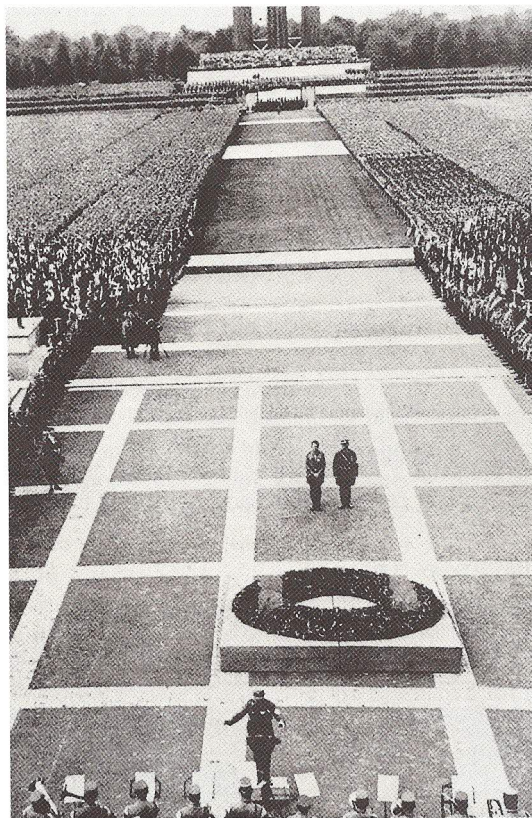
Popular interest in how Hitler ruled Germany dates especially from the publication of Ian Kershaw's *The Nazi Dictatorship* (1985). The title of chapter 4 poses the question: 'Hitler: "Master in the Third Reich" or "Weak Dictator"?' The contrasting phrases were originally coined by Norman Rich (1973) and Hans Mommsen (1971). Examiners have leapt on them eagerly to test students' knowledge about the politics of the Third Reich.

The Nazi dictatorship

Kershaw's discussion provides plenty to think about. For example, it analyses the nature of weakness. Hitler could have been weak if he shirked decision-making or had to take steps to protect his image. His decisions could have been ignored or diluted. His room for manoeuvre could have been restricted by the political structures of the state, or by the demands of society as a whole. But Kershaw's conclusion looks like an exercise in fence-sitting. He quotes Marx as saying, 'Men do make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, nor under conditions of their own choosing, but rather under circumstances which they find before them, under given and imposed conditions.' Ultimately *The Nazi Dictatorship* leaves the interpretation of Hitler's leadership open.

Stereotype: master

The idea that Hitler was an all-powerful leader has a number of very obvious roots. Administrative textbooks written in Germany in the 1930s showed well-organised governmental systems which were structured in rigorous, hierarchical pyramids, culminating in the single figure of the Führer. The tables and diagrams of the Nazi state implied that whenever Hitler gave orders, his organisation implemented them swiftly, efficiently and without question. This impression, incidentally, was reinforced during the war crimes trials of the post-1945 period, in which Nazi **functionaries**



MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

Hitler and Röhm at the Nuremberg rally of 1933.

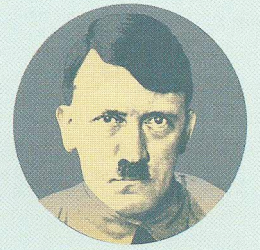
typically pleaded that they had only been 'following orders' when they carried out one evil deed after another.

During the 1930s, **constitutional theorists** queued up to justify Hitler's personal dominance. Helmut Nicolai worked in the interior political department of the **Brown House** between 1931 and 1932. When he drafted a possible constitution for the Third Reich, it specified that the Führer should bear the total power of the state. Hans Frank was the leader of the Nazi Party's legal office and president of the academy for German law. He declared repeatedly that the mission of the state was identical with the will and personality of Adolf Hitler.

functionaries: officials lower down the hierarchy.

constitutional theorists: people who analyse the way governmental systems work.

Brown House: Nazi Party headquarters in Munich.



Martyn Housden

Leni Riefenstahl:

1902–2001, German dancer, actress, photographer and filmmaker.

Better known, and perhaps still influential today, are the images associated with Hitler's cult of leadership. The Führer and his propagandists colluded to make the man look something more than mortal. **Leni Riefenstahl's** film *Triumph of the Will* depicts the course of a Nuremberg rally. Hitler stands on the central podium in the vast party arena. Row upon row of disciplined and uniformed party men stretch before him. Standard bearers listen attentively behind their leader, some craning to get a glimpse of him. The scene is framed by massive mock-Roman monuments. How could Hitler have been less than a 'master of the Third Reich'?

Stereotype: weak dictator

And yet, from the beginning, there were insights about Hitler and Nazism which subverted the notion of complete supremacy. Even Hitler questioned his exact role. In the early 1920s he characterised himself as only a 'drummer' for the *völkisch* movement. He said he was paving the way for a more major figure to follow. In his final **political testament**, written in 1945, Hitler criticised himself for having been too easy on the Germans: he said the war effort might have been more successful if he had made a greater effort to align the officer corps politically.

völkisch: nationalist and racist.

political testament: a political message to be read out after the author's death.

Commentators from the 1930s and 1940s did their best to reveal the more complex reality hidden behind the facade of Nazi Germany. Hermann Rauschning was a senior member of the Nazi movement in Danzig but became disillusioned with it. He left to live in Britain and the USA (1935). His memoirs, *Hitler Speaks*, came out in 1939 and stated that 'Hitler was no dictator'. In a political conflict he only ever joined forces with the stronger side and never ever acted against the interests of his local party bosses, the *Gauleiter*. Franz Neumann was more theoretically-minded and in 1942 he published a path-breaking interpretation of the dynamics of the Hitler state, called *Behemoth*. He argued that Hitler's personal actions were less important than the interplay of the main institutional pillars of political and economic power in the Third Reich, for instance the army, big business and the party.

Two postwar German historians, Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen, firmly established the idea of Hitler as a weak dictator in historical debate. Broszat's book *The Hitler State* came out in 1969. Owing something to Neumann's earlier work, he emphasised the interaction of Germany's institutions in the generation of policy. He developed the idea that Hitler did not so much create policy as give his sanction to whichever of the various competing parts of the state had succeeded in seeing off its rivals. During the next decade, Hans Mommsen developed this line of argument. He maintained that Hitler led the Third Reich through propaganda rather than through **bureaucratic** organisation and command. As a result, his state lacked any real unifying principle between its various power blocs, which ended up clashing time and again. The competition between bureaucrats inevitably led to pressures for the 'cumulative radicalisation' of policy in a way that Hitler had to accept.

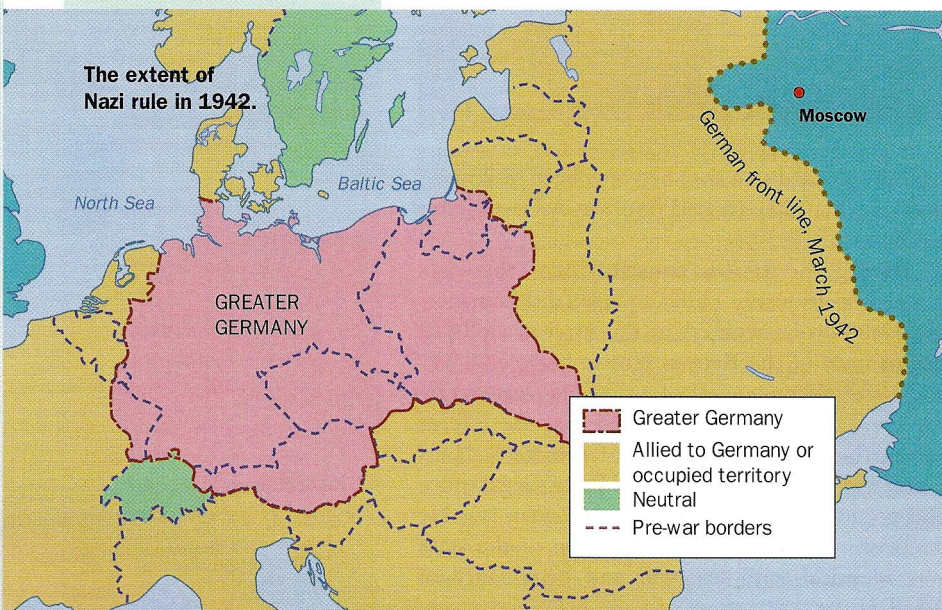
Coming off the fence

So, on which side of the fence should we fall? Admittedly, there is something vulnerable about the image of Adolf Hitler as a person. The image of him retreating to his bunker in central Berlin in the final stages of the war, fantasising over wooden models of hypothetical future buildings for the Thousand Year Reich, makes him seem so remote from reality that the word 'weak' becomes appropriate. But this was not Hitler in his prime.

When the need arose, Hitler had frequently shown the personal qualities necessary to crush opponents. In 1934 he presided over the despatch of his old colleague **Ernst Röhm**. In February 1938, he ranted and raved (quite literally) at Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg until he finally gave in to multiple threats and signed an agreement allowing Austrian Nazis to enter his government. In March 1939 he employed the same tactics against the Czech President Emil Hacha, until he collapsed and lost consciousness. When Britain guaranteed

Hans Frank (1900–46)

- 1923** Joins the NSDAP and participates in the Munich Putsch.
- 1926** Qualifies as a lawyer, practising in Munich.
- 1933–42** Leader of the National Socialist Lawyers' Bund and member of the Reichstag.
- 1939–42** Governor-general of Nazi-occupied Poland.
- 1946** Convicted of various war crimes, including co-responsibility for the Holocaust, and executed.



Key points

Hitler was Master of the Third Reich

✦ Nazi propaganda portrayed him as the head of the governmental structure and stressed imagery of him as a strong leader.

✦ He showed personal strength of character and the capacity for decisive action.

✦ He displayed successful leadership through 6 years of war, overseeing massive German expansion which required a huge Allied coalition to defeat it.

✦ There was a lack of serious opposition to his rule within Germany.

✦ He was free to pursue even quite bizarre ideological policies.

Hitler was a weak dictator

✦ Hitler himself saw his early role as only a 'drummer'.

✦ By the end, he thought he had missed his chances to rule effectively.

✦ According to:

Rauschning — Hitler only ever sided with the most powerful political forces.

Neumann — policy-making was confined and determined by the main pillars of Germany's political and economic structures.

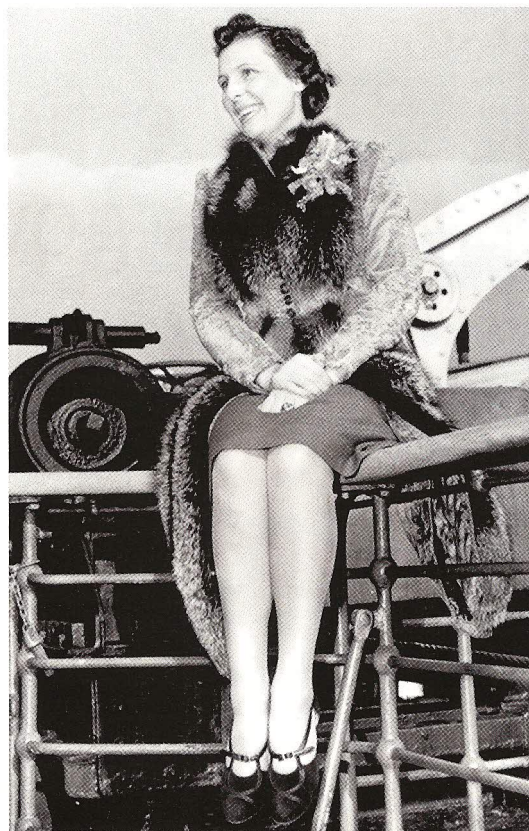
Broszat — Hitler did not create policy himself: he merely supported policies which emerged from the various groups putting pressure on him from below.

Mommsen — The chaos and competition of the Nazi system created pressure for ever more radical policies.

Poland in March 1939, Hitler at once flew into a rage. Within days he had nullified the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and commissioned plans for the invasion of Poland. Were these the actions of a 'weak dictator'?

It might be argued that a really strong person would not have needed to rely on the tactics of a playground bully, but the point can hardly be taken seriously. Nor does it help to say that Hitler was always operating within given institutional circumstances or that his leadership style was propagandistic rather than bureaucratic. Everyone operates with given institutions and has their own way of dealing with them. What matters is the effectiveness of a person's tactics when it comes to getting their own way. In this regard Hitler was astonishingly successful.

Hitler led Germany to a war which lasted for 6 years, during which it occupied Poland, the



TOPHAM

Leni Riefenstahl, propagandist and friend of Hitler, in 1938.

Gauleiter. leading figures within the Nazi Party who were in charge of regions within the Nazi state.

behemoth: a giant monster mentioned in the Bible.

bureaucratic: literally 'government through endless offices' — a highly (and usually unnecessarily) complex system of officials and administrators.

Ukraine, 'White' Russia and parts of Scandinavia, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, the Balkans and north Africa — even part of the UK (the Channel Islands). In June 1941 he launched the invasion of the Soviet Union with almost 4 million Axis troops. His Third Reich was only defeated by a tremendous combination of the strongest forces in the world, not least the British empire, the USA and the Soviet Union. There were few significant attempts to assassinate Hitler by Germans, until the later stages of the war, and no popular uprisings against him even then. He personally favoured bizarre policies, but he persuaded sufficient Germans to go along with them. As a result, most notably, 6 million Jews across Europe fell victim to the Holocaust. This is the historical framework, and the facts alone answer the question posed by the fourth chapter of *The Nazi Dictatorship*.

Hitler was only human: sometimes, and in particular areas, he showed signs of weakness. But these instances were only details in a much 'bigger picture'. If Hitler was not a 'master' of his political environment, who ever could be?

Martyn Housden is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Bradford.

? List Hitler's personal strengths as identified here. How relevant is a reading of his personality to a decision about his effectiveness as a leader?

Ernst Röhm: chief of staff of the paramilitary SA.

Further study

Housden, M. (1998) 'Concepts: Internationalist versus functionalist history: Hitler', *MODERN HISTORY REVIEW* Vol. 10, No.2. A discussion of Hitler and Nazi power politics.

Housden, M. (2000) *Hitler, Study of a Revolutionary*, Routledge.

Kershaw, I. (1985) *The Nazi Dictatorship*, Arnold.

Lukacs, J. (1997) *The Hitler of History*, Knopf.