



The focus of attention

Hitler speaks and the people listen at the Brown House, Munich, c1930. "His calculations about... how to best manipulate the emotions of ordinary Germans were extremely sophisticated," says Laurence Rees

“ I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the Earth’s surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the Earth ”

Leni Riefenstahl, director of the propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, describes hearing Hitler speak

THE DARK CHARISMA OF ADOLF HITLER

Adolf Hitler was far more than the frenzied madman of popular perception, argues **Laurence Rees**. Here was a charismatic politician, brilliant at articulating the fears and desires of the people

STOP FOR a moment and imagine Adolf Hitler. Picture him in your mind. Who do you see? I imagine you see a figure not unlike the portrayal of Hitler in the film *Downfall*. A shouting, aggressive, unhinged character. Bruno Ganz, who played Hitler in *Downfall*, shook and screamed so much that one key scene from the movie has become an internet phenomenon, with comical subtitles on a host of subjects being set to Ganz's incredible ranting.

But while it's true that in his last days Hitler was at times scarcely rational, it's not representative of the whole history. Moreover, the trouble is that this image plays into a deep desire I think most of us secretly possess. We want Hitler to have been a lunatic from start to finish. We want Hitler to be mad because it makes the monstrous crimes he committed – particularly during the Second World War – easy to explain.

It's simple, we can tell ourselves comfortably, Hitler was a madman who somehow hypnotised millions of ordinary Germans to do things against



“ I had never seen the man before, and there I sat, an unknown among unknowns. I saw this man shortly before midnight, after he had spoken for three hours, drenched in perspiration, radiant. My neighbour said he thought he saw a halo around his head, and I experienced something which transcended the commonplace ”

Julius Streicher, publisher of the anti-Semitic magazine *Der Stürmer*, who heard Hitler speak in the early 1920s. He was executed for war crimes in 1946



Hitler in 1921. He didn't hypnotise the German people, says Laurence Rees – millions of them shared his views



their better judgment. Well, he wasn't a madman, and he hypnotised no one.

Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933 by democratic means. A large number of the German elite – sharp, clever people – decided to back him. Why would they support a lunatic? And the way Hitler conducted himself between 1930 and 1933 demonstrated that he was an astute – but wholly unscrupulous – politician. His calculations about where power really lay in Germany and how to best manipulate the emotions of ordinary Germans were extremely sophisticated.

Democratic gains

In addition, Hitler generated enormous – and genuine – support. His views very often matched those of huge numbers of the German population. That's something incomprehensible if we take at face value the portrayal of Hitler as a screaming nightmare.

I've been making documentary films and writing books about the Nazis and the Second World War for 20 years now and have met hundreds of people who lived through this period – including many who dealt personally with Adolf Hitler. And the picture they paint of the

führer is a much more complex and nuanced one than the dribbling lunatic of *Downfall*. In particular, many talk of the incredible 'charisma' that they felt Hitler possessed.

Fridolin von Spaun, for example, met Hitler at a dinner for Nazi supporters in the early 1930s. As Spaun saw Hitler staring at him he felt as if Hitler's eyes looked directly into his innermost thoughts. And when Hitler held on to the back of von Spaun's chair, Spaun felt "a trembling from his fingers penetrating me. I actually felt it. But not a nervous trembling. Rather I felt: this man, this body, is only the tool for implementing a big, all-powerful will here on Earth. That's a miracle in my view." As for Emil Klein, who heard Hitler speak at a beer hall in Munich in the 1920s, he believes that Hitler "gave off such a charisma that people believed whatever he said".

What we learn from eye-witnesses like von Spaun and Klein is that charisma is first and foremost about making a connection between people. No one can be charismatic alone on a desert island. Charisma is formed in a relationship. As Sir Neville Henderson, British ambassador to Berlin in the 1930s, wrote, Hitler "owed his success in



The great orator

On the day of the Reichstag elections of 1930 Hitler speaks to a Nazi party rally backed by a military band

the struggle for power to the fact that he was the reflection of their [ie his supporters'] subconscious mind, and his ability to express in words what that subconscious mind felt that it wanted."

It's a view confirmed by Konrad Heiden, who heard Hitler speak many times in the 1920s: "His speeches are daydreams of this mass soul... The speeches begin always with deep pessimism and end in overjoyed redemption, a triumphant happy ending; often they can be refuted by reason, but they follow the far mightier logic of the subconscious, which no refutation can touch... Hitler has given speech to the speechless terror of the modern mass..."

People like von Spaun and Emil Klein were predisposed to find Hitler charismatic because they already believed in large amounts of the policies that Hitler advocated. So did Albert Speer, who first attended a Hitler meeting in the early 1930s: "I was carried away on the wave of the enthusiasm which, one could almost feel this physically, bore the speaker along from sentence to sentence... Finally, Hitler no longer seemed to be speaking to convince; rather, he seemed to feel that he was expressing what the

audience, by now transformed into a single mass, expected of him."

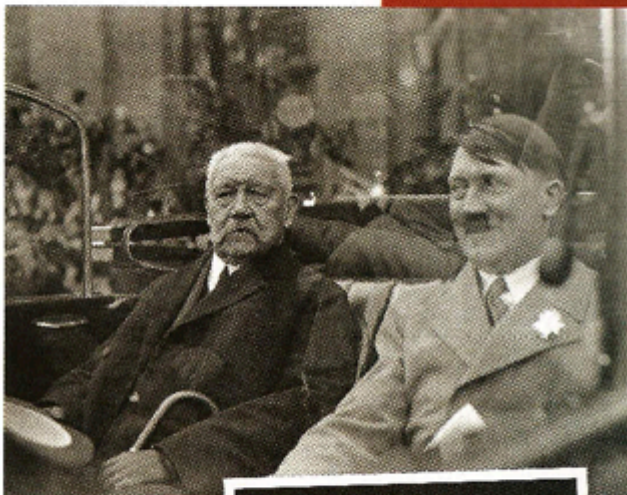
But if you didn't believe in the policies Hitler proselytised then he exercised no charismatic power at all. Josef Felder, for instance, was appalled when he listened to Hitler's outpouring of hatred against the Jews: "When I left that meeting, we would get together and talk in groups. And I said to my friend, 'After that speech, my impression is, that this man, Hitler will hopefully never come to political power'. We were agreed on that then." And Herbert Richter, a veteran of the First World War, came across Hitler in a café in Munich and "immediately disliked him" because of his "scratchy voice" and his tendency to "shout" out "really, really simple" political ideas. Richter also thought Hitler's appearance "rather comical, with his funny little moustache" and that he was "creepy" and "wasn't quite normal".

However, if Hitler did make a connection with his audience, then he built on that bond in a number of other ways to consolidate this charismatic link. Crucially, Hitler was always certain in his judgements. He never expressed doubt about anything to his audience. He knew the problems Germany faced and he said he knew the solutions. In addition he presented himself as a heroic figure – a simple, brave soldier from the First World War – who wanted his supporters to have 'faith' in him. As a result, some Nazi supporters even drew blasphemous comparisons between Hitler and Jesus – both had been 30 when they started 'preaching' and both sought the 'salvation' of their people.

Going nowhere

But in 1928, nine years after Hitler first became involved with the German Workers' Party – subsequently the National Socialist German Workers' party, or Nazis for short – and seven years after he became party leader, it seemed as if the Nazi party was going nowhere in German politics. In the 1928 election the Nazis polled just 2.6 per cent of the vote – so more than 97 per cent of the German electorate rejected any charismatic power Hitler may have possessed. It was clear that unless Hitler could make a connection with the mass of Germans, then he could not succeed.

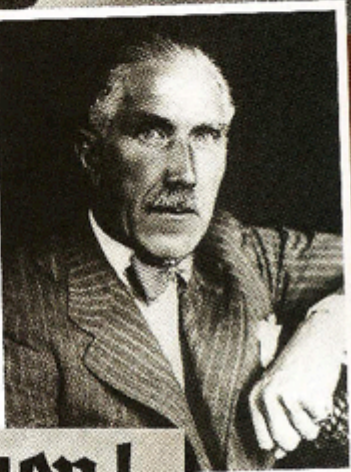
It took the Wall Street Crash and the dire economic crisis of the early 1930s to make millions of Germans



Pursuing power

ABOVE: Hitler became chancellor under President Paul von Hindenburg (pictured left) in 1933

RIGHT: Franz von Papen, a former chancellor himself, believed that the Nazi leader could be controlled if made chancellor



An election poster from 1932 which states: "Women! Millions of men out of work. Millions of children without future. Save the German family – vote for Adolf Hitler!"



Meeting the workers Hitler does the classic politician's 'press the flesh' in Berlin on 10 November 1933. Political parties had been banned earlier that year and trade unions abolished

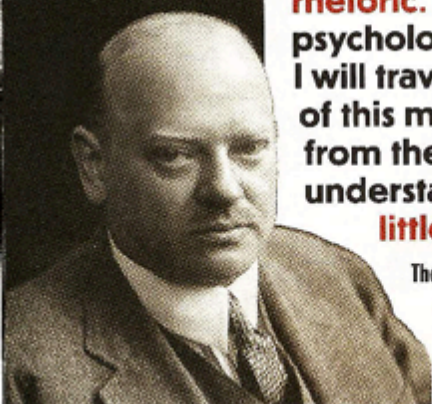
responsive to Hitler's appeal. Suddenly, to people like student Jutta Ruediger, Hitler's call for a national resurgence made him seem like "the bringer of salvation". So much so that by 1932 the Nazis were suddenly the biggest political party in Germany. But then Hitler and the Nazis seemed to hit a

brick wall – in the shape of President Hindenburg. State Secretary Otto Meissner reported that Hindenburg said to Hitler on 13 August 1932: "He [ie Hindenburg] could not justify before God, before his conscience or before the Fatherland, the transfer of the whole authority of government to a

“I was often together with Stresemann, the foreign minister at the time. A liberal, a right-wing liberal. I remember very well. It was Whitsun 1929. One evening Stresemann started talking about Hitler and said, ‘He is the most dangerous man in Germany. He possesses a devilish rhetoric. He has an instinct for mass psychology like no one else. When I retire, I will travel through Germany and get rid of this man’. There were also a few men from the foreign office there. We didn't understand Stresemann. We said, ‘This little party? Let the guy shout.’”

Theodor Eschenburg, German writer. Stresemann died in October 1929, just days before the Wall Street Crash

Gustav Stresemann, who, when German chancellor, refused to deal with Hitler and the Nazi party



single party, especially to a party that was biased against people who had different views from their own.”

In this crucial period between Hindenburg's rejection of Hitler's bid for the chancellorship of Germany, and his final appointment as chancellor in January 1933, two different perceptions of Hitler's charisma came together – and in the process revealed a very different side to Hitler the politician than the slaving incompetent of *Downfall*. Hitler, during these months, had never been more impressive to devoted followers like Joseph Goebbels. On 13 August 1932, Hitler discussed the consequences of Hindenburg's rejection with his Nazi colleagues. "Hitler holds his nerve," recorded Goebbels in his diary. "He stands above the machinations. So I love him." Hitler exuded confidence that all would come right, saying in December 1932 that he still intended to wait until he was offered the chancellorship. He promised, "that day will come – it is probably nearer than we think". Success depended on "our unity and on our unshakable faith in victory; it depends on our leadership".

Mystical messiah

But while Hitler's followers continued to bask in his magnetism, the chancellor of Germany, Franz von Papen, found it hard to see what all the fuss was about. Von Papen recognised in a statement he made in Munich in October 1932 that Hitler was not like a "normal" politician, and the Nazi movement not a "normal" political party. He referred to the Nazi party as "a political religion" whose followers professed a "mystical messiah faith" in Hitler. But while von Papen acknowledged that millions of Germans now recognised Hitler as a "mystical messiah", he himself was immune to Hitler's charisma. When he first met Hitler, in the summer of 1932, he found him "curiously unimpressive". Hitler was not from the "officer" class, and seemed to von Papen to be the "complete petit bourgeois" with his "little moustache and curious hair style". Equally dismissive was President Hindenburg, who referred to Hitler as a "Bohemian corporal".

Then, in the November 1932 election the Nazis saw their share of the vote drop by 4 per cent to 33 per cent while the Communist party increased its share by two million votes. It looked like support for the Nazis had peaked.

But the German elite were more concerned about the dangers of communism than Nazism. Without the Nazis participating in some way in an authoritarian government that would willingly deal with the dangers of Communism there would be no popular mandate for change.

President Hindenburg still found Hitler unimpressive, yet he now began to think of him as a possible chancellor. And the reasons why he started to change his mind were purely pragmatic. The most important was von Papen's offer to be vice chancellor. He offered to serve as vice chancellor to Hitler's chancellor in a cabinet in which only a minority of posts were to be given to Nazis. Then there was Hindenburg's age – he was 85 in December 1932 (and would die 18 months later). "He felt his age," said Josef Felder, who was elected as a Socialist member of the Reichstag in 1932. "And he realised that he was becoming physically weaker, very much weaker. He could barely carry his marshal's baton any more."

Hindenburg's son, Oskar, also supported the idea of Hitler as chancellor and Von Papen as vice-chancellor, and he certainly influenced

“He showed a way, the only way left to all ruined peoples in history, that of the grim new beginning from the most profound depths through courage, faith, readiness for action, hard work, and devotion, a great, shining, common goal....”

Hans Frank, who heard Hitler speak in 1920 and later became a leading Nazi. He was executed for war crimes in 1946

his father. Then came Hitler's masterstroke. Almost more than anyone, he understood the importance of timing in all political decisions, and he now ordered the Nazis to commit a vast – seemingly disproportionate – effort in state elections to be held in the tiny district of Lippe-Deimold on 15 January 1933. The tactic worked. When the results were announced, the Nazi vote had increased by around 20 per cent – from 33,000 to 39,000. The Nazis, it appeared, were still capable of increasing their support.

On the afternoon of Sunday, 29 January 1933, Hindenburg agreed to appoint Hitler as chancellor, with von

Papen as vice chancellor, and both assumed office the next day. Joseph Felder remembered that “we believed we could still control him [ie Hitler] through parliament – total lunacy”.

As for Hitler supporters like Reinhard Spitzky, this moment signalled the end of democracy in Germany. Something that he was pleased to see. “I have never myself been a democrat,” said Spitzky. “I believe a country should be ruled like a big company. That means a certain council of specialists and so on, but I didn't believe in the role of parliament. When we had such a terrible crisis, like an economic crisis, and hunger and unemployment, and in such a moment, we were longing for >

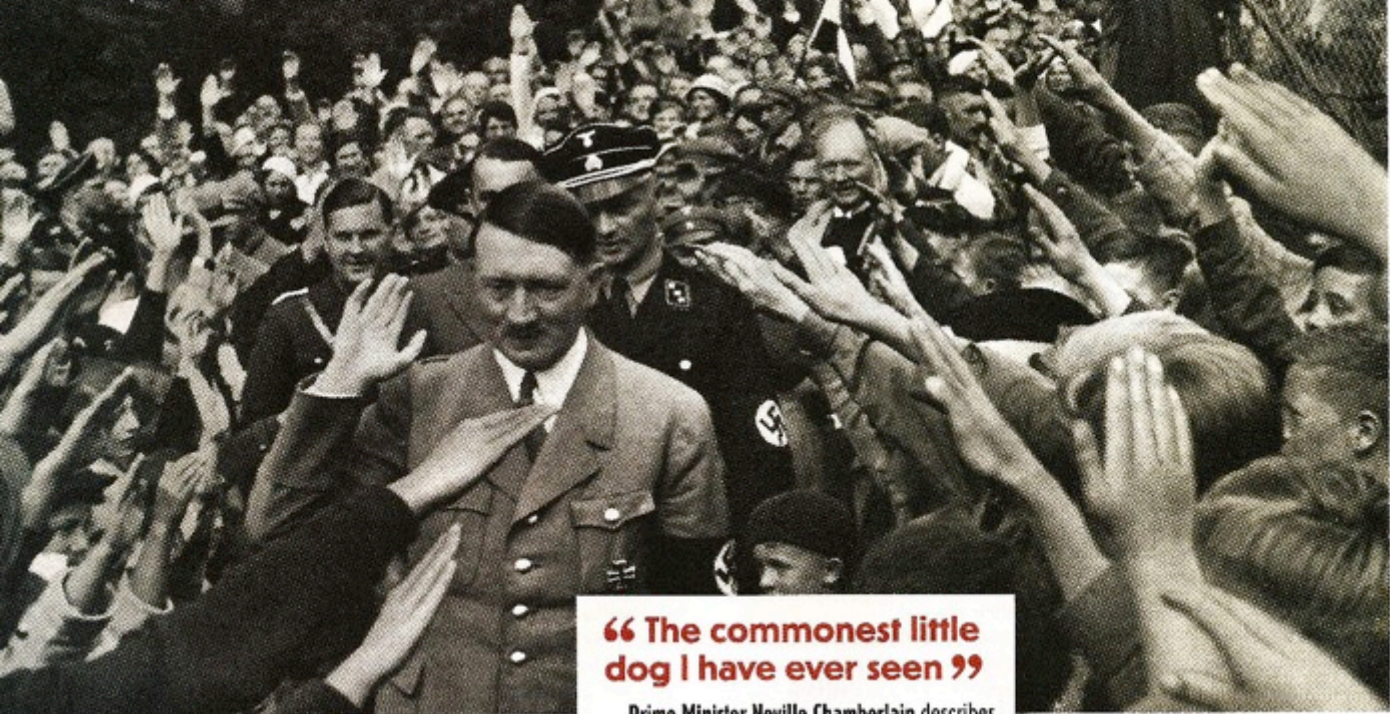
Concentration camps

The brutal and repressive nature of Hitler's policies was clear from the first. These political prisoners were imprisoned in one of Germany's first concentration camps in 1933. These camps were violent in the extreme and a number of prisoners were murdered – though the mass extermination of the Holocaust was still to come



Man of the people

Hitler pictured at his mountain retreat of Obersalzberg in 1935. Such was his popularity that some supporters compared him to Jesus



“The commonest little dog I have ever seen”

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain describes Hitler in a letter to his sister, 1938

a new general director, like what happens in a big company. You find a man, and he has to bring the whole thing in order.”

For Hitler's supporters this was the strongest proof yet of his power as a charismatic leader. When it had looked impossible that he would become chancellor he had asked them to have faith. And now he was chancellor. In the future, when they might doubt him, many would look back to this moment and remember that he had been right

and they had been wrong. They trusted him now. When he asked them to have faith once again, then they would listen. As for von Papen, he would shortly discover that he had made one of the most spectacular political misjudgments in history. (After being marginalised, he resigned his post and was made ambassador to Austria).

We learn a number of important things, I think, from the story of Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany in January 1933. We discover that Hitler could be an instinctive and extremely powerful politician – light years away from the broken and crazed man portrayed in *Downfall*. Above all, we can see the power of the situation to change perception. Hitler was dismissed as a peripheral figure in 1928, yet lauded by millions in 1933. What changed was not Hitler but the situation. Economic catastrophe made huge numbers of Germans seek a charismatic 'saviour'.

As we see economic events unfold in Europe today, it's scarcely possible to imagine a greater warning from history than that. **H**

Laurence Rees is an acclaimed historian and filmmaker. In 2006 he won the British Book Award for history book of the year for *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*. His television awards include a BAFTA and a Broadcasting Press Guild Award. His latest BBC TV series and book is *The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler*

JOURNEYS

Books

► **The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler: Leading Millions into the Abyss** by Laurence Rees (Ebury Press, 2012)

Website

► Visit Laurence Rees's award-winning multimedia website WW2History.com

TV

► **The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler** by Laurence Rees is due to be shown on BBC Two in the autumn



Hitler or Churchill: Who Had More Charisma?

Laurence Rees and Ashley Jackson will be discussing this question as part of the *BBC History Magazine* Lecture series. For more details, turn to page 85

Bruno Ganz's performance as a ranting, unhinged Hitler in *Downfall* would eventually create a comedy internet meme



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