

ORIGINS OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

To what extent, if any, did the rise of Nazi Germany reflect deep-rooted characteristics in Germany?

With the last withdrawal of 500,000 Russian soldiers from Germany at the end of August 1994, the Second World War finally came to an end. Europe is now at a new crossroads. Germany has been re-united, the Soviet Union has collapsed and ethnic tension is raging in the Balkans; while Western Europeans are uncertain as to the direction in which they wish to see the European Union develop. Political extremism in both Germany and Russia has been given new impetus by these rapid changes and uncertainty. Surely though, Europe could never fall back to another 1914 position or, maybe more frighteningly, a return of fascism? Do such fears have any substance? The possibility of the return of European fascism has been a concern since the day Hitler killed himself, the Russians going to enormous lengths to be sure that Hitler was indeed dead and his body destroyed – so that it would not become an icon for a future Nazi movement. Since that day in April 1945 historians have wrestled with the question of how the National Socialist Party gained such widespread support in Germany and whether the party was a reflection of old German traditions or something new and original. Much debate has focussed on the role of Hitler: Did his death mean the end of Nazism or was he more a pawn of powerful interest groups, groups which today may well turn again to an inspirational leader for protection and security during a period of economic instability?

During the Second World War British historians portrayed Nazism as a natural and logical extension of a German tradition dating back more than 100 years. However as Europe emerged from six years of chaos and destruction, interpretations of the Third Reich began to take on new dimensions: the individual role of Hitler, the influence of social elites and the significance of the general moral malaise which swept Europe in the post-First World War period. Marxist interpretations were all built on the one foundation that fascism was quite simply the final stage of western capitalism, which was doomed to inevitable collapse due to its inherent weaknesses. In recent years the search for a deeper understanding of how the Third Reich came about has moved away from political study towards social accounts. These 'human' history studies have focused far more on individuals, whether peasants or women, in an attempt to give a far more 'human' account and explanation of Hitler's rise to power.

Such works fail to tackle the key question, or even enigma, of Nazism. How could it happen in a modern democratic state such as Germany and could it have happened without Hitler? Was there an inevitability about it or was Nazism a unique and original distortion in German history?

Nazi policies

The success of National Socialism in Germany during the 1930s was due to its contradictory nature. Hitler wished to gain support from all sections of society: businessmen, rural communities, military elite, the young, the educated and even the church. National socialism was traditional but revolutionary, it was conservative but innovative, it was ideological but flexible, it was modern but anti-modern.

However there are clear policies which Hitler held firm from the day of his trial in 1924 to moments before his suicide. Hitler had a basic *Weltanschauung* (world view) with three main features, a fanatical anti-Semitism and anti-Marxism, a belief in German superiority and a Darwinian understanding of the struggle of life. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler described the Volkisch arguments of race and blood: 'common blood should belong to a Common Reich'. Such an idea was not new, but a reflection of much of the nationalistic and anti-Semitic attitudes which were very prevalent in turn-of-the-century Vienna.

Much work has been done in this area by Dr. Goodrick-Clarke, whose study *The Occult Roots of Nazism* considers a variety of semi-religious and pagan racist movements active in late nineteenth century Austria-Hungary and Germany, led by characters such as Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874-1954) and Guido von List (1848-1919). Liebenfels argued that history had to be viewed, and could only be understood, from a Darwinian perspective, as a struggle of the fittest over the weak or, in a theological sense, as a struggle between good and evil. He identified the blond haired, blue eyed Aryan as the embodiment of the 'good' principle while Jews and dark races were the 'evil' who, through democratic emancipation, were tearing at not just the stability of central Europe but at its soul. Liebenfels argued that Aryans had a mission to accomplish: to cleanse themselves and restore world order so as to avoid an apocalyptic tragedy waiting to happen. Through his writings, particularly his 1905 text *Theo-Zoology or the Lore of the Sodom-Apelings and the Electron of the Gods* Liebenfels outlined a series of policies that could be adopted to protect the Aryan race and to allow them to develop a strong Volkisch bloodstock; the banning of inter-racial marriages, the extermination of inferior and impure races and even the

proliferation of pure-blooded Germans by means of polygamy. As Goodrick-Clarke argues, the fundamentals of Liebenfels' political thinking were clearly reflected in the actions of Hitler's Third Reich, most tragically the extermination of what he regarded as inferior races, particularly European Jews.

However, despite attempts to make a clear connection (starting as early as the 1930s by lecturers at the University of Vienna), it is important to note that there were significant differences between the two men's political ideologies; Liebenfels idolised the old Hapsburg Empire as an Aryan Christian League of Nations in miniature, not an opinion that Hitler entertained.

Origins of Hitler's ideas

In the mid-1970s the American Robert Waite, in *Adolf Hitler, The Psychopathic God*, wrote, 'It seems very likely that more will be written about Adolf Hitler than about anyone else in history with the exception of Jesus Christ'. Waite outlined clearly the problem historians have in trying to assess Hitler's or Nazism's roots quoting Hitler himself: 'You will never learn what I am thinking. And those who boast that they know my thoughts, to such people I lie even more'. The eternal enigma? Our first source in this puzzle should be Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, often regarded as the Nazi Bible, a rambling text of over a hundred pages in which he set down his Volkisch arguments of blood and race.

The main thrust of the book was that the NSDAP would lead the way to Germany's salvation with Hitler at the helm. Hitler contended that any action had to be assessed in terms of whether it benefited the nation or not, the nation being defined in purely racial terms. This position links Hitler and National Socialism very clearly with the nineteenth-century nationalism that had led to the construction of *Volksgemeinschaft*, Hitler viewing the state of the Hohenzollerns as representing its pure racial state. The call for a renaissance of racial purity, to be achieved by a systematic purging of foreign impurities, would allow the Aryan race to assume their traditional role as the master race. By claiming that the highest purpose of the Volkisch state was a concern for the preservation of those original racial elements which bestowed culture and dignity in the past, Hitler was automatically linking the present struggle to former times which went much further back than just the 1918 Armistice. The Volk would have to be protected by a strong army enthused with German and national sentiment. If any army was to be created to reassert Germany's influence, Hitler declared that there would need to be a revival of Prussian

militarism. In short, Hitler was writing that the NSDAP wished to create a strong and powerful Germany reflecting the Germanic spirit of the nineteenth century.

German interpretations of Hitler

However, interpretations of *Mein Kampf* in this search for continuity need to be viewed with caution. In his memoirs Albert Speer recalled how Hitler said in 1938 that he regretted having set down definite statements of ideology so early on in his career, as if to suggest that his ideas could not, or indeed had not, changed over time. *Mein Kampf* should not be seen as the ideology of National Socialism but more a reflection of Hitler's thinking at a given time and in given circumstances: 1924, in prison after the failure of his political dream. The dream though was eventually realised after a 10-year struggle, Hitler being appointed Chancellor in January 1933. The very name of Hitler's ensuing Reich, the 'Third Reich' suggests a historical continuity with two previous Reichs; the first being the medieval Holy Roman Empire, the second that of Bismarck.

Contemporary German studies of National Socialism focused essentially on the role played by Hitler in Germany's rebirth, such writing helping to build up Hitler's position and the *Führerprinzip* in general. In *Unsterbliches Deutschland* (published 1936) Goltz and Stiefenhofer argued that Hitler's greatest achievement (to that date) had been to unite the German peoples against the alien forces which had diluted the purity of the master race. Attempts had been made in the past, but only Hitler had realised this historical aim. Goltz and Stiefenhofer argued that the lack of national

unity had been the cause of defeat in 1918, adding that if Germany had been more unified then the Allies would not have been able to have imposed such harsh conditions at Versailles. The book concluded with a strong line being drawn between the Germany of the 1930s and that of the nineteenth century, the inspiration for National Socialism coming not just from the frustration of the Weimar years but also from Henry I, Luther, the great Prussian kings, Stein and Bismarck.

Western interpretations of Nazism

Western interpretations, particularly those written during the late 1930s and during the war, portrayed the Germans as an evil race which had caused trouble for centuries and needed to be dealt with once and for all. A study by R. Butler in 1942 on the origins of Nazism had the title *The Roots of National Socialism, 1783-1933*, taking the territorial expansion of Brandenburg-Prussia during the eighteenth century as the blueprint for Hitler's aim of *Lebensraum*.

In this rather simplistic interpretation, National Socialism was explained as the inevitable reappearance of Prussian militarism and terror. The Nazis had combined two strands of nationalist ideology, a revival of a former imperialism complemented by a social, economic and spiritual national revolution leading towards *Volkgemeinschaft*. They were able to manipulate Germany's emotions at a time of deep anxiety and resentment towards the Weimar system. Butler argued that anti-Semitic tendencies could be traced back to Marwitz, while the concept of the totalitarian state dated back to Schelling. The military tradition was linked to Moltke and the phrase 'Might is Right' was portrayed as the

words of Hegel and Haller. By claiming that National Socialism was an extension of the traditional German character, Butler was adding weight to the Allies' argument that Nazism was not a unique phenomenon which would go away, but a deep-rooted reflection of the inner Germany, which had to be totally and unconditionally destroyed.

Such interpretations, while being somewhat understandable during wartime, were in many ways simply echoing the Nazis' own message. The NSDAP took positive steps themselves to foster the concept of historical continuity, most significantly through the education system — which Hitler felt had too often acted to impair the healthy spirit of the nation and national solidarity by not protecting the people from falling prey to democracy or, worse still, Marxism. Rust, the Nazi Minister of Education, ensured that the school curriculum reflected traditional German values and fostered a Volkisch identity among the youth. These concepts were also enhanced through various other Nazi policies. The construction of the *autobahns* was portrayed as a means of binding the German people together by a quick communication network — as well as allowing trips into the countryside and other parts of Germany, so that the Volk could return to its rural heritage and learn about the whole rather than just one's region. Such notions were advanced through the 'Strength through Joy Movement' which helped ordinary Germans to travel throughout the Reich.

Such attempts to create national uniformity formed the basis for Frederick Meinecke's study *The German Catastrophe* published in 1946. Meinecke saw this attempt at uniformity dating back to the Prussian state of Frederick the Great, where a thoughtless subservience to higher authorities caused rational thought and intellectual opposition debate to dry up. Meinecke argued that this pattern ran throughout nineteenth-century German history and had been inherited by the twentieth, firstly through the Kaiser and then Hitler. Meinecke argued that Germany needed to break away from such dogma which had been so prevalent in the past and create a new political framework for the future, embracing the fundamentals of pluralistic western democracies.

Nazi tactics

Many of the political tactics and aims of the National Socialists can easily be traced back in German history. For example, many policies echo the activities of the Pan-German Movement founded by von Schonerer in the late nineteenth century. The Movement had been born out of the discontent of minority German populations outside the Empire. The Austrian move towards industrialisation during the 1880s and 1890s had led to an increasing mixing of the population within the Hapsburg Empire, the minority

German population feeling increasingly that their position was under threat. The flood of newcomers into German cities led to the rise of protests and riots. Schonerer's aim was to see all Protestant Germans within Bismarck's Reich.

Through the development of mass rallies and torch-light parades and the use of emotive phrases in propaganda, von Schonerer was able to gain widespread German nationalist support, especially among the young. Karl Lueger followed this tradition after von Schonerer was arrested for political violence and became Mayor of Vienna. Lueger's main support came from Bohemia, but also extended to such areas as Brannau where, in 1889, Adolf Hitler was born. The young Hitler grew up within the traditions of the Pan-German Movement, an experience reflected on the opening page of *Mein Kampf*. Here he set out the same aim as von Schonerer, namely the uniting of all Germans within the German Reich by all means in his power.

The Nazis' propaganda campaign has often been described as the war Hitler won and it equally has been used to suggest a concept of historical continuity. William Shirer, an American journalist in Berlin during the 1930s, argued that Goebbels' propaganda merely restated the old nineteenth-century German message and concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*, posters continually stressing the message of 'Eine Volk, Eine Reich, Eine Führer!' — while symbols such as the Volkswagen car and the Volksempfänger radio pushed home the notion of one people all working together. Propaganda equally focused on traditional rural images harking back to a mid-nineteenth-century romanticism. In sharp contrast, Gerhard Ritter saw Nazi propaganda not as a repetition of the deeds of German forefathers but an indomitable will for success in the future. Ritter contended that Hitler wished his state to be something completely new, breaking out of the old mould of the past. In *National Socialism and the German Past* (published 1955) Ritter stated that it was an illusion to view Frederick the Great or Wilhelm II as the precursors of Hitler. Ritter argued that while Hitler stressed the traditional linkage in public, in private he was sharply critical of the old archaic institutions associated with hereditary monarchy and wished himself to be seen as not above the people but more the peoples' inspiration, the *Volksführer*.

German supremacy aims

The view that German heritage made Nazism inevitable is a very easy course to follow. Two key aspects of the Third Reich, the antagonism between France and Germany and anti-Semitism, both of which were dominant themes in Nazi Germany, can clearly be traced back to the nineteenth century. In 1871 Edmund Jorg wrote in *Die Reichsgründung* of the irreconcilable hatred that had opened up between Germany and France, predicting a new Iron Age of conflict at some point in the future. In 1873 Lord Russell,

British Ambassador to Berlin, wrote to Lord Lyons, British Ambassador in Paris, warning that Bismarck's aim was for the supremacy of Germany in Europe and of the German race in the world, and for the neutralisation of the influence of the Latin race in France and elsewhere. Bismarck's references to Teutonic masculinity and Kaiser Wilhelm's view that Jews should be excluded from the army and administration and have their artistic and literary activities restricted are both attitudes which found violent expression in the Third Reich. However the debate took on a new turn from the 1960s.

With newly available material, interpretations began to move away from traditional understandings of National Socialism. The traditional Marxist position, established by the Comintern as early as December 1933, that fascism was the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capitalism, came under increasing attack. Kitchen, writing in the 1970s, carried out research into who voted for Hitler, concluding that NSDAP supporters certainly included some capitalists but that the vast majority of Nazi voters were at best petty bourgeoisie if not mainly rural workers.

However it was a German historian, Karl Dietrich Bracher, who most strongly attacked the argument of historical continuity. Bracher's studies concentrated on the role of Hitler, using such terms as 'Hitlerism' as if to suggest that without the individual man German history might have taken an alternative path. In *The German Dictatorship* (published 1970) Bracher contended that the National Socialists' road to power had never been inevitable and that to fully understand it one needed to start with Hitler, writing:

rarely in history has there been such a close interdependence on general and personal factors and the indispensable role of the individual as in the period between 1919 and 1945.

This was the period from the birth of the NSDAP to Hitler's suicide in his Berlin bunker. However there has also been recent German historiography which has again stressed a sense of continuation between the Kaiser's and Hitler's Germany. Andreas Hillgruber has argued that while there were aspects to Hitler's foreign policy programme that were original, 'in the short and middle term there were many features in common with the calculations and aspirations of the Wilhelmine period', especially the need for *Lebensraum*.

New thinking on Hitler

While recent research such as the work of Hans-Ulrich Wehler has argued that both Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler pursued policies of social-imperialism to distract home attention away from increasing domestic hardships, it is very difficult to portray the Third Reich as the legitimate heir of Bismarck's Germany and the Prus-

sia of Frederick the Great; there are important and fundamental differences. Yes, social elites were influential in both, but the Kaiserreich did not attempt to destroy German federalism as the Nazis did. Equally Germans lived under a constitution before the Great War which, while limited, upheld certain basic rights. In contrast the Third Reich was totally arbitrary. Anti-Semitism was certainly a feature of pre-Nazi Germany but nothing touches the scale and horror of the Holocaust. As Mary Fulbrook wrote in the recent *Cambridge Concise History of Germany*:

it is distinctly unwise to adopt too long term a determination of history [for] scholars must be able to account not only for Germany's path into Nazi dictatorship but also for its double transformation into very different, communist and democratic capitalist states in the post-1945 era.

Hitler once said that to understand National Socialism one had to understand Wagner. Certainly it is easy to identify the influence of nineteenth-century romanticism in Hitler's thoughts and speeches, but Nazism cannot be simply explained as an inevitable continuation of a German tradition or 'problem' of political immaturity. National Socialism needs to be set firmly in its historical context, an ideology which rose to power after a humiliating peace treaty. Attempts to overlook this context ignore fully the social, political and economic ramifications of the First World War. Writers like Shirer understandably attempted to give their terrible experiences of life in Nazi Germany a sense of logic by stressing the sense of continuity, but it is essential that current scholarship operates above personal experience.

Many historians prefer to talk of German totalitarianism, as fascism itself is a term used to cover a wide variety of practices, some of which were evident in Hitler's Germany, some not. Rather than assessing just Hitler the individual or a German tradition, study needs to set these two influences against the wider post-1918 European scene. Nazism, or fascism in general, was the response of Germany and other European nations to a wider moral crisis in Europe after 1918, and not simply the result of internal dislocations and traditions. As Germany, now reunified and free from Russian troops, heads towards the new century, the rest of Europe can rest assured that while the European Union exists and moves closer together, the destructive influence of extreme nationalism can be kept in check. As such, torchlight parades in Berlin to mark the departure of Russian troops should be seen for what they are, the celebrations of a nation reunified pulling away from the tragedies of the past, to a future firmly connected with that of the whole of Europe.

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