'Working Towards the Führer.' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship

IAN KERSHAW

The renewed emphasis, already visible in the mid-1980s, on the intertwined fates of the Soviet Union and Germany, especially in the Stalin and Hitler eras, has become greatly intensified in the wake of the upheavals in Eastern Europe. The sharpened focus on the atrocities of Stalinism has prompted attempts to relativise Nazi barbarism – seen as wicked, but on the whole less wicked, than that of Stalinism (and by implication of communism in general).[1] The brutal Stalinist modernising experiment is used to remove any normative links with humanising, civilising, emancipatory or democratising development from modernisation concepts and thereby to claim that Hitler's regime, too, was – and intentionally so – a 'modernising dictatorship'.[2] Implicit in all this is a reversion, despite the many refinements and criticisms of the concept since the 1960s, to essentially traditional views on 'totalitarianism' and to views of Stalin and Hitler as 'totalitarian dictators'.

There can be no principled objection to comparing the forms of dictatorship in Germany under Hitler and in the Soviet Union under Stalin and, however unedifying the subject matter, the nature and extent of their inhumanity.[3] The totalitarianism concept allows comparative analysis of a number of techniques and instruments of domination, and this, too, must be seen as legitimate in itself.[4] The underlying assumption that both regimes made *total* claims upon society, based upon a monopolistic set of ideological imperatives and resulting in unprecedented levels of repression and attempted indoctrination, manipulation and mobilisation – giving these regimes a dynamic missing from more conventional authoritarian

[1] Ernst Nolte's contributions to the *Historikerstreit* reflect this tendency. See *'Historikerstreit'. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtgung.* (Munich: Piper, 1987), 13–35, 39–47, and his book *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945* (Frankfurt am Main/ Berlin: Proplyäen Verlag, 1987).

[2] See, for instance, the recently published essay collection produced by Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, eds, *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), especially the editors' foreword (vii–xi) and Zitelmann's own essay, 'Die totalitäre Seite der Moderne', 1–20.

[3] See on this the thoughtful comments of Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 71–84.

[4] The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft is currently investigating the structures of differing authoritarian systems in twentieth-century Europe in a major research project, 'Diktaturen im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts: Strukturen, Erfahrung, Überwindung und Vergleich'.

Contemporary European History, 2, 2 (1993), pp. 103–118

regimes – again seems largely incontestable. But the fundamental problem with the term 'totalitarianism' – leaving aside its non-scholarly usage – is that is a descriptive concept, not a theory, and has little or no explanatory power.[5] It presumes that Stalinism and Hitlerism were more like each other than different from each other. But the basis of comparison is a shallow one, largely confined to the apparatus of rule.[6]

My starting point in these reflections is the presumption that, despite superficial similarities in forms of domination, the two regimes were *in essence* more *unlike* than like each other. Though seeing greater potential in comparisons of Nazism with other fascist movements and systems rather than with the Soviet system, I would want to retain an emphasis upon the unique features of the Nazi dictatorship and the need to explain these, alongside those characteristics which could be seen as generic components of European fascism in the era following the First World War, through the specific dominant features of German political culture. (In this I admit to a currently rather unfashionable attachment to notions of a qualified German *Sonderweg*).[7]

Sometimes, however, highlighting contrasts can be more valuable than comparing similarities. In what follows I would like to use what, on an imperfect grasp of some of the recent historiography on Stalinism, I understand to be significant features of Stalin's dictatorship to establish some important contrasts in the Hitler regime. This, I hope, will offer a basis for some reflections on what remains a central problem of interpretation of the Third Reich: what explains the gathering momentum of radicalisation, the dynamic of destruction in the Third Reich? Much of the answer to this question has, I would suggest at the outset, to do with the undermining and collapse of what one might call 'rational' structures of rule, a system of 'ordered' government and administration. But what caused the collapse and, not least, what was Hitler's own role in the process? These questions lie at the centre of my enquiry.

First, however, let me outline a number of what appear to me to be significant points of contrast between the Stalinist and Hitlerist regimes.

- Stalin arose from *within* a system of rule, as a leading exponent of it. He was, as Roland Suny puts it, a committee man, chief oligarch, man of the machine;[8] and, in Moshe Lewin's phrase, 'bureaucracy's anti-Christ', the 'creature of his party',[9] who

[5] I argue this case in chapter 2 of my *Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd edn (London: Edward Arnold, 1993).

[6] The comparison becomes even more shallow where the focus shifts from Stalin's own regime to later 'Stalinist' systems. The revelations of the extent of repression in the German Democratic Republic have, for example, prompted simplistic notions of essential similarities between the Honecker and Hitler regimes. See on this the comments of Eberhard Jäckel, 'Die doppelte Vergangenheit', *Der Spiegel*, 23 Dec. 1991, 39–43.

[7] On the *Sonderweg* debate, see the sensible comments of Jürgen Kocka, 'German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23 (1988), 3–16.

[8] Ronald Suny, 'Proletarian Dictator in a Peasant Land: Stalin as Ruler' (thereafter Suny, Dictator') (unpublished), 10–11.

[9] Moshe Lewin, 'Bureaucracy and the Stalinist State' (unpublished), 26.

became despot by control of the power which lay at the heart of the party, in its secretariat. In a sense, it is tempting to see an analogy in the German context in the position of Bormann rather than Hitler. Is it possible to imagine Stalin echoing Hitler's comment in 1941: 'I've totally lost sight of the organisations of the Party. When I find myself confronted by one or other of these achievements, I say to myself: "By God, how that has developed!"'?[10]

At any rate, a party leader and head of government less bureaucratically inclined, less a committee man or man of the machine, than Hitler is hard to imagine. Before 1933 he was uninvolved in and detached from the Nazi Movement's bureaucracy. After 1933, as head of government he scarcely put pen to paper himself other than to sign legislation put in front of his nose by Lammers. The Four-Year Plan Memorandum of 1936 is a unique example from the years 1933–45 of a major policy document composed by Hitler himself – written in frustration and fury at the stance adopted during the economic crisis of 1935–6 by Schacht and some sectors of business and industry. Strikingly, Hitler only gave copies of his memorandum to two persons, Göring and Blomberg (much later giving a third copy to Speer). The Economics Minister himself was not included in the short distribution list! Business and industrial leaders were not even made aware of the existence of the memorandum.[11]

Hitler's way of operating was scarcely conducive to ordered government. Increasingly, after the first year or two of the dictatorship, he reverted to a lifestyle recognisable not only in the party leader of the 1920s but even in the description of the habits of the indolent youth in Linz and Vienna recorded by his friend Kubizek.[12] According to the post-war testimony of one of his former adjutants:

> Hitler normally appeared shortly before lunch, quickly read through Reich Press Chief Dietrich's press cuttings, and then went into lunch. So it became more and more difficult for Lammers [head of the Reich Chancellory] and Meissner [head of the Presidial Chancellory] to get him to make decisions which he alone could make as head of state. ... When Hitler stayed at Obersalzberg it was even worse. There, he never left his room before 2.00 p.m. Then, he went to lunch. He spent most afternoons taking a walk, in the evening straight after dinner, there were films.... He disliked the study of documents. I have sometimes secured decisions from him, even ones about important matters, without his ever asking to see the relevant files. He took the view that many things sorted themselves out on their own if one did not interfere.[13]

As this comment points out, even Lammers, the only link between Hitler and the ministries of state (whose heads themselves ceased definitively to meet around a table as a cabinet by early 1938), had difficulty at times with gaining access to Hitler and

[10] Werner Jochmann, ed., *Adolf Hitler. Monologe im Führerhauptquartier* (thereafter Jochmann, *Monologe* (Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1980), 158; trans. *Hitler's Table Talk* thereafter *Table Talk*, intro. H. R. Trevor-Roper (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 153.

[11] Dieter Petzina, *Autarkiepolitik im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), 48–53; Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology. IG Farben in the Nazi Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 164–7.

[12] See August Kubizek, *Adolf Hitler, mein Jugendfreund*, 5th edn (Graz/Stuttgart: Leopold Stocker Verlag, 1989).

[13] Fritz Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr werden wollte* (Kettwig: Velbert, 1964), 69; trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds, *Nazism 1919/1945. A Documentary Reader* (thereafter Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*) (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1984), ii. 207–8.

extracting decisions from him. Lammers himself, for example, wrote plaintively to Hitler's adjutant on 21 October 1938 begging for an audience to report to the Führer on a number of urgent matters which needed resolution and which had been building up since the last occasion when he had been able to provide a detailed report, on 4 September![14]

Hitler's increasing aloofness from the State bureaucracy and the major organs of government seems to mark more than a difference of style with Stalin's *modus operandi*. It reflects, in my view, a difference in the essence of the regimes, mirrored in the position of the leader of each, a point to which I will return.

- Stalin was a highly interventionist dictator, sending a stream of letters and directives determining or interfering with policy. He chaired all important committees. His aim appears to have been a monopolisation of all decision-making and its concentration in the Politburo, a centralisation of state power and unity of decision-making which would have eliminated Party–State dualism.[15]

Hitler, by contrast, was on the whole a non-interventionist dictator as far as government administration was concerned. His sporadic directives, when they came, tended to be delphic and to be conveyed verbally, usually by Lammers, the head of the Reich Chancellory, or, in the war years (as far as civilian matters went), increasingly by Bormann.[16] Hitler chaired no formal committees after the first years of the regime, when the Cabinet (which he hated chairing) atrophied into non-existence.[17] He directly undermined the attempts made by Reich Interior Minister Frick to unify and rationalize administration, and did much to sustain and enhance the irreconcilable dualism of Party and State which existed at every level.[18]

Where Stalin appeared deliberately to destabilise government (which offered the possibility of a bureaucratic challenge),[19] Hitler seems to have had no deliberate policy of destabilisation, but rather, as a consequence of his non-bureaucratic

[14] Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich, Nuremberg Document no. NG-5428; trans. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, ii. 245.

[15] Suny, 'Dictator', 11–13, 24, 34–5, 38.

[16] Dieter Rebentisch, *Führerstaat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (thereafter, Rebentisch, *Führerstaat*) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989), has clearly shown that Hitler involved himself in civilian affairs to a far greater extent than was once thought. However, when he intervened it was usually at the prompting of one of the few favoured Nazi leaders graced with regular access to his presence, and providing him with one-sided information on specific issues of concern to them. He remained at all times alert to any extension of their power which could undermine his own. Other than this, there was nothing in his haphazard interventions to indicate any systematic grasp of or clear directives for coherent policy-making. In military matters and armaments production, from the middle of the war onwards, Hitler's involvement was on a wholly different scale. Here, his interventions were frequent – at daily conferences – and direct, though his dilettante, arbitrary and intransigent interference was often disastrously counter-productive. See Helmut Heiber, ed., *Hitlers Lagebesprechungen. Die Protokollfragmente seiner militärischen Konferenzen 1942–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962), and Willi A. Boelcke, ed., *Deutschlands Rüstung im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Hitlers Konferenzen mit Albert Speer 1942–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1969).

[17] See Lothar Gruchmann, 'Die "Reichsregierung" im Führerstaat', in Günther Doecker and Winfried Steffani, eds, *Klassenjustiz und Pluralismus* (Hamburg, Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 1973), 192.

[18] See Peter Diehl-Thiele, *Partei und Staat im Dritten Reich* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1969), 61–9.

[19] Suny, 'Dictator', 28, 32.

leadership position and the inbuilt need to protect his deified leadership position by non-association with political infighting and potentially unpopular policies, to have presided over an inexorable erosion of 'rational' forms of government. And while the metaphor of 'feudal anarchy' might be applied to both systems,[20] it seems more apt as a depiction of the Hitler regime, where bonds of personal loyalty were from the beginning the crucial determinants of power, wholly overriding functional position and status.

● Personalities apart, Hitler's leadership position appears to have been structurally more secure than Stalin's. If I have followed the debates properly, it would seem that there was some rational basis for Stalin's purges even if the dictator's paranoia took them into the realms of fantasy.[21] As the exponent of one party line among several, one set of policies among a number of alternatives, one interpretation of the Marx-Lenin arcanum among others, Stalin remained a dictator open to challenge from within. Kirov, it appears, had the potential to become a genuine rival leader in the early 1930s, when dissatisfaction and discontent with Stalin's rule was widespread.[22] Stalin's exaggerated feeling of insecurity was then to some measure grounded in reality. The purges which he himself instigated, and which in many instances were targeted at those closest to him, were above all intended to head off a bureaucratic challenge to his rule.

Hitler thought Stalin must be mad to carry out the purges.[23] The only faint reflections in the Third Reich were the liquidation of the SA leadership in the 'Night of the Long Knives' in 1934, and the ruthless retaliation for the attempt on Hitler's life in 1944. In the former case, Hitler agreed to the purge only belatedly and reluctantly, after the going had been made by Himmler and Göring, supported by the army leadership. The latter case does bear comparison with the Stalinist technique, though by that time the Hitler regime was plainly in its death-throes. The wild retaliation against those implicated in the assassination attempt was a desperate measure and aimed essentially at genuine opponents, rather than being a basic technique of rule.

Down to the middle of the war, Hitler's position lacked the precariousness which surrounded Stalin's leadership in the 1930s. Where Stalin could not believe in genuine loyalty even among his closest supporters, Hitler built his mastery on a cultivated principle of personal loyalty to which he could always successfully appeal at moments of crisis.[24] He showed a marked reluctance to discard even widely

[20] *Ibid.*, 30; Robert Koehl, 'Feudal Aspects of National Socialism', *American Political Science Review*', Vol. 54 (1960), 921–33.

[21] My main orientation was gleaned from the debates in *The Russian Review*, Vols 45–6 (1986, 1987), as well as from J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges. The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977); and the unpublished papers by Ronald Suny and Moshe Lewin (see above notes 8–9).

[22] Suny, 'Dictator', 20, 27.

[23] Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag, 1987), iii. 198 (entry for 10 July 1937).

[24] A good example was his successful appeal to his old comrades, the *Gauleiter*, to close ranks at the moment of deep crisis following the sudden departure of Gregor Strasser in December 1932. See

disliked and discredited satraps like Streicher, who had in Hitler's eyes earned his support through indispensable loyalty and service in the critical early years of the movement.[25] And he was in the bunker visibly shaken by news of Himmler's treachery – the 'loyal Heinrich' finally stabbing him in the back.[26]

A dangerous challenge to Hitler, especially once Hindenburg was dead, could effectively come only from within the armed forces (in tandem with an emergent disaffected, but unrepresentative, minority among the conservative élites) or from a stray attack by a lone assassin (as came close to killing Hitler in 1939).[27] Even in 1944, the leaders of the attempted coup realised their isolation and the lack of a base of popular support for their action.[28] Hitler, it has to be accepted, was, for most of the years he was in power, outside the repressed and powerless adherents of the former working-class movements, sections of Catholicism, and some individuals among the traditional élites, a highly popular leader both among the ruling groups and with the masses.

And within the Nazi Movement itself, his status was quite different from that of Stalin's position within the Communist Party. There are obvious parallels between the personality cults built up around Stalin and Hitler. But whereas the Stalin cult was superimposed upon the Marxist-Leninist ideology and Communist Party, and both were capable of surviving it, the 'Hitler myth' was structurally indispensable to, in fact the very basis of and scarcely distinguishable from, the Nazi Movement and its *Weltanschauung*.

Since the mid-1920s, ideological orthodoxy was synonymous with adherence to Hitler. 'For us the Idea is the Führer, and each Party member has only to obey the Führer,' Hitler allegedly told Otto Strasser in 1930.[29] The build-up of a 'Führer party' squeezed heterodox positions onto the sidelines, then out of the party. By the time the regime was established and consolidated, there was no tenable position within Nazism compatible with a fundamental challenge to Hitler. His leadership position, as the font of ideological orthodoxy, the very epitome of Nazism itself, was beyond question within the movement. Opposition to Hitler on fundamentals ruled itself out, even among the highest and mightiest in the party. Invoking the Führer's name was the pathway to success and advancement. Countering the ideological prerogatives bound up with Hitler's position was incompatible with clambering up the greasy pole to status and power.

• Stalin's rule, for all its dynamic radicalism in the brutal collectivisation programme, the drive to industrialisation and the paranoid phase of the purges, was

Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, i. 112–14 (based on an unpublished vivid, post-war account by Hinrich Lohse held in the Forschungsstelle für die Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus, Hamburg). I am grateful to Jeremy Noakes for letting me see a photocopy of this document.

[25] See Jochmann, *Monologe*, 158–60; *Table Talk*, 153–6.

[26] H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London: Pan Books, 1973), 202.

[27] See Anton Hoch, 'Das Attentat auf Hitler im Münchner Bürgerbräukeller 1939', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 17 (1969), 383–413; and Lothar Gruchmann, ed., *Autobiographie eines Attentäters. Johann Georg Elser* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970).

[28] See Hans Mommsen, 'Social Views and Constitutional Plans of the Resistance', in Hermann Graml, *et al.*, *The German Resistance to Hitler* (London: Batsford, 1970), 59.

[29] Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, i. 46.

not incompatible with a rational ordering of priorities and attainment of limited and comprehensible goals, even if the methods were barbarous in the extreme and the accompanying inhumanity on a scale defying belief. Whether the methods were the most appropriate to attain the goals in view might still be debated, but the attempt to force industrialisation at breakneck speed on a highly backward economy and to introduce 'socialism in one country' cannot be seen as irrational or limitless aims.

And despite the path to a personalised dictatorship, there was no inexorable 'cumulative radicalisation'[30] in the Soviet Union. Rather, there was even the 'great retreat' from radicalism by the mid-1930s and a reversion towards some forms of social conservativism before the war brought its own compromises with ideological rectitude.[31] Whatever the costs of the personal regiment, and whatever the destructiveness of Stalin in the purges of the party and of the military, the structures of the Soviet system were not completely broken. Stalin had been a product of the system. And the system was capable of withstanding nearly three decades of Stalin and surviving him. It was, in other words, a system capable of self-reproduction, even at the cost of a Stalin.

It would be hard to claim this of Nazism. The goal of national redemption through racial purification and racial empire was chimeric, a utopian vision. The barbarism and destructiveness which were inherent in the vain attempt to realise this goal were infinite in extent, just as the expansionism and extension of aggression to other peoples were boundless. Whereas Stalinism could 'settle down', as it effectively did after Stalin's death, into a static, even conservative, repressive regime, a 'settling down' into the staid authoritarianism of a Francoesque kind, is scarcely conceivable in the case of Nazism. Here, the dynamic was ceaseless, the momentum of radicalisation an accelerating one incapable of having the brakes put on – unless the 'system' itself were to be fundamentally altered.

I have just used the word 'system' of Nazism. But where Soviet communism in the Stalin era, despite the dictator's brutal destabilisation, remained recognisable as a *system* of rule, the Hitler regime was inimical to a rational order of government and administration. Its hallmark was *systemlessness*, administrative and governmental disorder, the erosion of clear patterns of government, however despotic.

This was already plain within Germany in the pre-war years as institutions and structures of government and administration atrophied, were eroded or merely bypassed, and faded into oblivion. It was not simply a matter of the unresolved Party–State dualism. The proliferation of 'special authorities' and plenipotentiaries for specific tasks, delegated by the Führer and responsible directly to him, reflected the predatory character and improvised techniques immanent in Nazi domination.[32] Lack of coherent planning related to attainable middle-range goals;

[30] The term is that of Hans Mommsen. See his article, 'Der Nationalsozialismus: Kumulative Radikalisierung und Selbstzerstörung des Regimes', in *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon*, Vol. 16 (1976), 785–90.

[31] Suny, 'Dictator', 21–2.

[32] See Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers* (thereafter Broszat, *Staat*) (Munich: dtv, 1969), esp. chs. 8–9.

absence of any forum for collective decision-making; the arbitrary exercise of power embedded in the 'leadership principle' at all levels; the Darwinian principle of unchecked struggle and competition until the winner emerged; and the simplistic belief in the 'triumph of the will', whatever the complexities to be overcome: all these reinforced each other and interacted to guarantee a jungle of competing and overlapping agencies of rule.

During the war, the disintegration of anything resembling a state *system* rapidly accelerated.[33] In the occupied territories, the so-called Nazi 'new order' drove the replacement of clearly defined structures of domination by the untramelled and unco-ordinated force of competing power groups to unheard of levels. By the time Goebbels was writing in his diary, in March 1943, of a 'leadership crisis'[34] – and speaking privately of a 'leader crisis'[35] – the 'system' of rule was unrescuable. Hitler's leadership was at the same time absolutely pivotal to the regime but utterly incompatible with either a rational decision-making process or a coherent, unified administration and the attainment of limited goals. Its self-destructive capacity was unmistakeable, its eventual demise certain.

Hitler was irreplaceable in Nazism in a way which did not apply to Stalin in Soviet Communism. His position was, in fact, irreconcilable with the setting up of any structures to elect to select a successor. A framework to provide for the succession to Hitler was never established. The frequently mooted party senate never came about.[36] Hitler remained allergic to any conceivable institutional constraint, and by 1943 the deposition of Mussolini by the Fascist Grand Council ruled out once and for all any expectation of a party body existing quasi-independently of the Leader in Germany. Though Göring had been declared the heir apparent, his succession became increasingly unlikely as the Reich Marshal's star waned visibly during the war. None of the other second-rank Nazi leaders was a serious alternative candidate to succeed Hitler. It is indeed difficult to see who could have taken over, how the personalised rule of Hitler could have become systematised. The regime, one is compelled to suggest, was incapable of reproducing itself.

The objection that, but for a lost war there was nothing to prevent this happening, seems misplaced. The war was not accidental to Nazism. It lay at its very core. The war had to be fought and could not be put off until a more favourable juncture. And by the end of 1941, even though the war dragged on a further three and a half years, the gamble for 'world power' was objectively lost. As such, the dynamism of the regime and its self-destructive essence could be said to have been inseparable.

This brings me back to the questions I posed at the beginning of the paper. If my understanding of some of the recent discussion on Stalinism is not too distorted, and

[33] The internal government of Germany during the war has now been systematically examined by Rebentisch, *Führerstaat* (see n. 16 above).

[34] Louis D. Lochner, ed., *Goebbels Tagebücher aus den Jahren 1942–43* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1948), 241, 274, 296.

[35] Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1969), 271.

[36] See Broszat, *Staat*, 262, 361–2; Rebentisch, *Führerstaat*, 101, 421–2.

if the points of contrast with the Hitler regime I have outlined above have some validity, then it would be fair to conclude that, despite some superficial similarities, the character of the dictatorship, that is, of Stalin's and Hitler's leadership positions within their respective regimes, was fundamentally different. It would surely be a limited explanation, however, to locate these differences merely in the personalities of the dictators. Rather, I would suggest, they should be seen as a reflection of the contrasting social motivations of the followers, the character of the ideological driving force and the corresponding nature of the political vanguard movement upholding each regime. The Nazi Movement, to put the point bluntly, was a classic 'charismatic' leadership movement; the Soviet Communist Party was not. And this has a bearing on the self-reproducing capacity of the two 'systems' of rule.

The main features of 'charismatic authority' as outlined by Max Weber need no embroidering here: the perceptions of a heroic 'mission' and presumed greatness in the leader by his 'following'; the tendency to arise in crisis conditions as an 'emergency' solution; the innate instability under the double constant threat of collapse of 'charisma' through failure to meet expectations and of 'routinisation' into a 'system' capable of reproducing itself only through eliminating, subordinating or subsuming the 'charismatic' essence.[37] In its pure form, the personal domination of 'charismatic authority' represents the contradiction and negation of the impersonal, functional exercise of power which lies at the root of the bureaucratic legal-rational authority of the 'ideal type' modern state system.[38] It cannot, in fact, become 'systematised' without losing its particular 'charismatic' edge. Certainly, Max Weber envisaged possibilities of institutionalised 'charisma', but the compromises with the pure form then become evident.

The relevance of the model of 'charismatic authority' to Hitler seems obvious.[39] In the case of Stalin it is less convincing. The 'mission' in this latter case resides, it could be argued, in the Communist Party as the vehicle of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. For a while, it is true, Stalin hijacked the 'mission' and threatened to expropriate it through his personality cult. But this cult was a gradual and belated product, an excrescence artificially tagged on to Stalin's actual function. In this sense, there was a striking contrast with the personality cult of Hitler, which was inseparable from the 'mission' embodied in his name practically from the beginning, a 'mission' which from the mid-1920s at the latest did not exist as a doctrine independent of the leader.

Weber's model of 'charismatic authority' is an abstraction, a descriptive concept which says nothing in itself of the content of any specific manifestation of 'charismatic authority'. This is determined by the relationship of the leadership claim to the particular circumstances and 'political culture' in which it arises and which give it

[37] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 241–54, 266–71, 1111–57.

[38] See André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 58–9, 62–3.

[39] The model is interestingly deployed by M. Rainer Lepsius, 'Charismatic Leadership: Max Weber's Model and its Applicability to the Rule of Hitler', in Carl Friedrich Graumann and Serge Moscovici, eds, *Changing Conceptions of Leadership* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986). My own attempt to use it is in my recent short study *Hitler. A Profile in Power* (London: Longman, 1991).

shape. The essence of the Hitlerian 'charismatic claim' was the 'mission' to achieve 'national rebirth' through racial purity and racial empire. But this claim was in practice sufficiently vague, adaptable and amorphous to be able to mesh easily with and incorporate more traditionalist blends of nationalism and imperialism, whose pedigree stretched back to the *Kaiserreich*.[40] The trauma of war, defeat and 'national disgrace', then the extreme conditions of a state system in a terminal stage of dissolution and a nation wracked by chasmic internal divisions, offered the potential for the 'charismatic claim' to gain extensive support, stretching way beyond the original 'charismatic community', and for it to provide the basis for an altogether new form of state.

In a modern state, the replacement of functional bureaucracy through personal domination is surely an impossibility. But even the co-existence of 'legal-rational' and 'charismatic' sources of legitimacy can only be a source of tension and conflict, potentially of a seriously dysfunctional kind. What occurred in the Third Reich was not the supplanting of bureaucratic domination by 'charismatic authority', but rather the superimposition of the latter on the former. Where constitutional law could now be interpreted as no more than 'the legal formulation of the historic will of the Führer' – seen as deriving from his 'outstanding achievements'[41] – and where Germany's leading constitutional lawyer could speak of 'state power' being replaced by unrestrained 'Führer power',[42] the result could only be the undermining of the basis of impersonal law on which modern 'legal-rational' state systems rest and the corrosion of 'ordered' forms of government and institutionalised structures of administration through unfettered personal domination whose overriding source of legitimacy was the 'charismatic claim', the 'vision' of national redemption.[43]

The inexorable disintegration into 'systemlessness' was, therefore, not chiefly a matter of 'will'. Certainly, Hitler was allergic to any semblance of a practical or theoretical constraint on his power. But there was no systematic 'divide and rule' policy, no sustained attempt to *create* the administrative anarchy of the Third Reich. It was, indeed, in part a reflection of Hitler's personality and his style of leadership: as already pointed out, he was unbureaucratic in the extreme, remained aloof from the daily business of government and was uninterested in complex matters of detail. But this non-bureaucratic style was itself more than just a personal foible or eccentricity. It was an inescapable product of the deification of the leadership position itself and consequent need to sustain prestige to match the created image. His instinctive Darwinism made him unwilling and unable to take sides in a dispute

[40] For the imperialist traditions on which Nazism could build, see Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The ways in which Nazism could exploit 'mainstream' nationalism are stressed by William Sheridan Allen, 'The Collapse of Nationalism in Nazi Germany', in John Breuilly, ed., *The State of Germany* (London: Longman, 1992), 141–53.

[41] Hans Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens* (Munich/Gräfelfing: Beck Verlag, 1953), 466–7; trans. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, ii. 200.

[42] Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Verfassungsrecht des Großdeutschen Reiches* (Hamburg, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1939), 230; trans. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, ii. 199.

[43] For a compelling analysis of 'national rebirth' as the essence of the fascist doctrine, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991).

till the winner emerged. But the need to protect his infallible image also made him largely incapable of doing so.

It was not in itself simply the undermining of 'rational' structures of government and proliferation of chaotic, 'polycratic' agencies that mattered. It was that this process accompanied and promoted a gradual realisation of ideological aims which were inextricably bound up in the 'mission' of the 'charismatic' Leader as the 'idea' of Nazism, located in the person of the Führer, became translated between 1938 and 1942 from utopian 'vision' into practical reality. There was, in other words, a symbiotic relationship between the structural disorder of the Nazi state and the radicalisation of policy.

The key development was unquestionably the growth in autonomy of the authority of the Führer to a position where it was unrestrained in practice as well as theory by any governmental institutions or alternative organs of power, a stage reached at the latest by 1938.[44] After the Blomberg–Fritsch affair of February 1938 it is difficult to see where the structures or the individuals capable of applying the brakes to Hitler remained. By this date, the pressures unleashed in part by the dictator's own actions, but even more so by diplomatic and economic developments beyond his control, encouraged and even conditioned the high-risk approach which was in any case Hitler's second nature.

Meanwhile, in conjunction with the expansion into Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938, race policy, too, shifted up a gear. The *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom in November, instigated by Goebbels not Hitler – though carried out with the latter's express approval[45] – was the culmination of the radicalisation of the previous year or so, and ended by handing over effective centralised co-ordination of the 'Jewish Question' to Heydrich.

Territorial expansion and 'removal of the Jews', the two central features of Hitler's *Weltanschauung*, had thus come together in 1938 into sharp focus in the foreground of the picture. The shift from utopian 'vision' to practical policy options was taking shape.

It would be mistaken to look exclusively, or even mainly, to Hitler's own actions as the source of the continuing radicalisation of the regime. Hitler was the linchpin of the entire 'system', the only common link between its various component parts. But by and large he was not directly needed to spur on the radicalisation. What seems crucial, therefore, is the way in which 'charismatic authority' functioned in practice to dissolve any framework of 'rational' government which might have acted as a constraint and to stimulate the radicalisation largely brought about by others, without Hitler's clear direction.

The function of Hitler's 'charismatic' Führer position could be said to have been threefold: that of unifier, of activator, and of enabler in the Third Reich.

[44] See Broszat, *Staat*, ch. 8.

[45] The recently discovered, formerly missing, parts of Goebbels' diaries make explicitly clear Hitler's role in approving the most radical measures both as regards to pogrom itself and its aftermath. See the extracts published in *Der Spiegel*, No. 29 (1992), 126–8; an abbreviated version of the diary entry

As *unifier*, the 'idea' incorporated in the quasi-deified Führer figure was sufficiently indistinct but dynamic to act as a bond not only for otherwise warring factions of the Nazi Movement but also, until it was too late to extricate themselves from the fateful development, for non-Nazi national-conservative élites in army, economy and state bureaucracy. It also offered the main prop of popular support for the regime (repeatedly giving Hitler a plebiscitary basis for his actions) and a common denominator around which an underlying consensus in Nazi policy could be focused.[46]

As *activator*, the 'vision' embodied by Hitler served as a stimulant to action in the different agencies of the Nazi Movement itself, where pent-up energies and unfulfilled social expectations could be met by activism carried out in Hitler's name to bring about the aims of Leader and Party. But beyond the movement, it also spurred initiatives within the state bureaucracy, industry and the armed forces, and among the professionals such as teachers, doctors or lawyers where the motif of 'national redemption' could offer an open door to the push for realisation of long-cherished ambitions felt to have been held back or damaged by the Weimar 'system'.[47] In all these ways, the utopian 'vision' bound up with the Führer – undefined and largely undefinable – provided 'guidelines for action'[48] which were given concrete meaning and specific content by the voluntary 'push' of a wide variety of often competing agencies of the regime. The most important, most vigorous and most closely related to Hitler's ideological imperatives of these was, of course, the SS, where the 'idea' or 'vision' offered the scope for ever new initiatives in a ceaseless dynamic of discrimination, repression and persecution.

Perhaps most important of all, as *enabler* Hitler's authority gave implicit backing and sanction to those whose actions, however inhumane, however radical, fell within the general and vague ideological remit of furthering the aims of the Führer. Building a 'national community', preparing for the showdown with Bolshevism, purifying the Reich of its political and biological or racial enemies, and removing Jews from Germany, offered free licence to initiatives which, unless inopportune or counter-productive, were more or less guaranteed sanction from above. The collapse in civilised standards which began in the spring of 1933, and the spiralling radicalisation of discrimination and persecution that followed, were not only unobstructed but invariably found legitimation in the highest authority in the land.

Crucial to this 'progress into barbarism'[49] was the fact that in 1933 the barriers to state-sanctioned measures of gross inhumanity were removed almost overnight.

for 10 Nov. 1938 is available in Ralf Georg Reuth, ed., *Joseph Goebbels. Tagebücher* (Munich: Piper, 1992), iii. 1281–2.

[46] I have attempted to present the evidence in my study *The 'Hitler Myth'. Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[47] For an excellent study of how the medical profession exploited the opportunities offered by National Socialism, see Michael H. Kater, *Doctors under Hitler* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

[48] Martin Broszat, 'Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des Nationalsozialismus', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 18 (1970), 405.

[49] Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State. Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), back cover.

What had previously been unthinkable suddenly became feasible. Opportunities rapidly presented themselves; and they were readily grasped. The Sterilisation Law of July 1933 is an early instance of such a dropping of barriers. Ideas long cherished by proponents of eugenics in biological-social engineering found all at once a climate in which they could be put into practice without the constraints still taken for granted in proposals – in themselves inhumane enough, but still confined to *voluntary* sterilisation – for legislation put forward by the German Doctors' Association just weeks before Hitler's takeover of power.[50]

By 1939 the erosion of civilised values had developed far enough to allow for the possibilities of liquidating as 'useless life' those deemed to be harmful to the propagation of 'healthy comrades of the people'.[51] And, illustrating how far the disintegration of the machinery of government had progressed, when written authorisation was needed, it took the form not of a government law or decree (which Hitler expressly ruled out) but a few lines typed on Hitler's private headed paper.[52] The few lines were enough to seal the fate of over 70,000 mentally ill and physically disabled persons in Germany by mid-1941 in the so-called 'euthanasia action'.

After 1939, in the parts of Poland annexed by Germany and incorporated into the Reich, prompted by Hitler's exhortation to brutal methods in a 'racial struggle' which was not to be confined by legal considerations,[53] the constraints on inhumanity to the Polish population, and of course to the Jewish minority in Poland, disappeared completely. Hitler needed to do nothing to force the pace of the rapidly escalating barbarism. He could leave it to this satraps on the spot. Characteristically, he said he asked no more of his *Gauleiter* in the East than that after ten years they should be able to announce that their territories were completely German.[54] The invitation was in itself sufficient to spark a competition in brutality – though allegedly this was the opposite of what Hitler wanted – between the arch-rival provincial chieftains Albert Forster in West Prussia and Arthur Greiser in the Warthegau to be able to report to the Führer in the shortest time that the 'racial struggle' had been won, that complete Germanisation had been achieved.[55]

The licence which Hitler as 'enabler' offered to such party bosses in the East can be illustrated graphically through the 'initiative' taken by Greiser in May 1942 recommending the liquidation of 35,000 Poles suffering from incurable tuberculosis.[56] In the event, Greiser's suggestion encountered difficulties. Objections were

[50] See Jeremy Noakes, 'Nazism and Eugenics: The Background of the Nazi Sterilisation Law of 14 July 1933', in R. J. Bullen, *et al.*, eds, *Ideas into Politics* (London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), 75–94, esp. 84–5.

[51] See the documentation by Ernst Klee, *'Euthanasie' im NS-Staat. Die 'Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens'* 2nd edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1983).

[52] *Ibid.*, 100–1.

[53] Martin Broszat, *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1965), 11, 25.

[54] *Ibid.*, 200 n. 45.

[55] *Ibid.*, 122.

[56] The correspondence between Greiser and Himmler on the subject, dated between 1 May and 3 Dec. 1942, is in the personal file of Arthur Greisler in the Berlin Document Center (thereafter BDC).

raised that it would be hard to maintain secrecy – reference was made here to the impact of the earlier 'euthanasia programme' in Germany itself – and was likely, therefore, to arouse unrest among the Polish population as well as presenting foreign propaganda with a gift. It was regarded as necessary to consult Hitler himself if the 'action' were to go ahead. Greiser's enlightening response ran: 'I myself do not believe that the Führer needs to be asked again in this matter, especially since at our last discussion with regard to the Jews he told me that I could proceed with these according to my own judgement'.[57] This judgement had already, in fact, been to recommend to Himmler the 'special treatment' (that is, killing), of 100,000 Jews in the Warthegau – the start of the 'final solution' there.[58]

Greiser thought of himself throughout as the direct agent and instrument of the Führer in the crusade to create his 'model Gau'. Any hindrance was met by the claim that his mandate to Germanise the Warthegau rested on plenipotentiary powers bestowed on him personally by the Führer himself.[59]

The relationship between the Führer, serving as a 'symbol' for actionism, and ideological radicalisation, and the drive 'from below' on the part of so many agencies, non-Nazi as well as Nazi, to put the 'vision' or parts of it into operation as practical policy is neatly captured in the sentiments of a routine speech of a Nazi functionary in 1934:

> Everyone who has the opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can hardly dictate from above everything which he intends to realise sooner or later. On the contrary, up till now everyone with a post in the new Germany has worked best when he has, so to speak, worked towards the Führer. Very often and in many spheres it has been the case – in previous years as well – that individuals have simply waited for orders and instructions. Unfortunately, the same will be true in the future; but in fact it is the duty of everybody to try to work towards the Führer along the lines he would wish. Anyone who makes mistakes will notice it soon enough. But anyone who really works towards the Führer along his lines and towards his goal will certainly both now and in the future one day have the finest reward in the form of the sudden legal confirmation of his work.[60]

These comments hint at the way 'charismatic authority' functioned in the Third Reich – anticipation of Hitler's presumed wishes and intentions as 'guidelines for

For a more extended discussion, see my article, 'Improvised Genocide? The Emergence of the "Final Solution" in the "Warthegau"', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, Vol. 2 (1992), 51–78, here 71–3.

[57] BDC, Personal File of Arthur Greiser, Greiser to Himmler, 21 Nov. 1942.

[58] BDC, Personal File of Arthur Greiser, Greiser to Himmler, 1 May 1942.

[59] Examples in the Archive of the Polish War Crimes Commission, Ministry of Justice, Warsaw, Greiser Trial Documents, File 11, fol. 52, File 13, fol. 15. According to the post-war testimony of one of the heads of regional administration in the Warthegau, Greiser never missed an opportunity in his speeches to insist that he was 'persona gratissima' with the Führer (File 36, fol. 463). Another contemporary commented that his gratitude knew no bounds once Hitler had granted him this special plenipotentiary authority. See Carl J. Burckhardt, *Meine Danziger Mission 1937–1939* (Munich: dtv, 1962), 79. I have provided a short pen-picture of Greiser for the forthcoming second volume of Ronald Smelser, *et al.*, eds, *Die braune Elite und ihre Helfer* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993).

[60] Niedersächisches Staatsarchiv, Oldenburg, Best. 131, nr. 303, fol. 131v, speech Werner Willikens, State Secretary in the Ministry of Food, 21 Feb. 1934; trans. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, ii. 207.

action' in the certainty of approval and confirmation for actions which accorded with those wishes and intentions.

'Working towards the Führer' may be taken in a literal, direct sense with reference to party functionaries, in the way it was meant in the extract cited. In the case of the SS, the ideological executive of the 'Führer's will', the tasks associated with 'working towards the Führer' offered endless scope for barbarous initiatives, and with them institutional expansion, power, prestige and enrichment. The career of Adolf Eichmann, rising from a menial role in a key policy area to the manager of the 'Final Solution', offers a classic example.[61]

But the notion of 'working towards the Führer' could be interpreted, too, in a more indirect sense where ideological motivation was secondary, or perhaps even absent altogether, but where the objective function of the actions was nevertheless to further the potential for implementation of the goals which Hitler embodied. Individuals seeking material gain through career advancement in party or state bureaucracy, the small businessman aiming to destroy a competitor through a slur on his 'aryan' credentials, or ordinary citizens settling scores with neighbours by denouncing them to the Gestapo, were all, in a way, 'working towards the Führer'. Doctors rushing to nominate patients of asylums for the 'euthanasia programme' in the interests of a eugenically 'healthier' people; lawyers and judges zealous to co-operate in the dismantling of legal safeguards in order to cleanse society of 'criminal elements' and undesirables; business leaders anxious to profit from preparations for war and, once in war, by the grabbing of booty and exploitation of foreign slave labour; thrusting technocrats and scientists seeking to extend power and influence through jumping on the bandwagon of technological experimentation and modernisation; non-Nazi military leaders keen to build up a modern army and restore Germany's hegemony in central Europe; and old-fashioned conservatives with a distaste for the Nazis but an even greater fear and dislike of the Bolsheviks: all were, through their many and varied forms of collaboration, at least indirectly 'working towards the Führer'. The result was the unstoppable radicalisation of the 'system' and the gradual emergence of policy objectives closely related to the ideological imperatives represented by Hitler.

Time after time, Hitler set the barbaric tone, whether in hate-filled public speeches giving a green light to discriminatory action against Jews and other 'enemies of the state', or in closed addresses to Nazi functionaries or military leaders where he laid down, for example, the brutal guidelines for the occupation of Poland and for 'Operation Barbarossa'. But there was never any shortage of willing helpers, far from being confined to party activists, ready to 'work towards the Führer' to put the mandate into operation. Once the war – intrinsic to Nazism and Hitler's 'vision' – had begun, the barbarism inspired by that 'vision' and now unchecked by any remnants of legal constraint or concern for public sensitivities plumbed unimaginable depths. But there was no prospect, nor could there have been, of the 'New Order' settling into a 'system' of government. Competing

[61] See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

fiefdoms, not structured government, formed the grim face of Nazi rule in the occupied territories. The rapaciousness and destructiveness present from the start within Germany now became hugely magnified and intensified with the conquered peoples rather than the Germans themselves as the main victims.

Through the metaphor of 'working towards the Führer', I have tried to suggest here that the 'vision' embodied in Hitler's leadership claim served to funnel a variety of social motivations, at times contradictory and conflicting, into furthering – intentionally or unwittingly – Nazi aims closely associated with Hitler's own ideological obsessions. The concept of 'charismatic authority' in this interpretation can be taken as useful in helping to depict the bonds with Hitler forged by various social and political forces, enabling the form of personalised power which he represented to free itself from all institutional constraints and to legitimise the destructive dynamic intrinsic to the Nazi gamble for European hegemony through war.

The model of 'charismatic authority', which I have suggested is applicable to the Hitlerian but not to the Stalinist dictatorship, not only helps to characterise the appeal of a quasi-messianic personalised form of rule embodying national unity and rebirth in the context of the collapse of legitimation of the democratic system of Weimar. It also, given the irreconcilable tension between 'charismatic authority' and bureaucratic rule in the Third Reich, offers insights into the inexorable erosion of anything resembling a *system* of domination capable of reproducing itself. Within this 'Behemoth' of governmental disorder,[62] 'working towards the Führer' amounted to a selective push for the radicalisation and implementation of those ideological lines most closely associated with Hitler's known broad aims, which could gradually take shape as policy objectives rather than distant goals.

Above all, the 'charismatic' model fits a form of domination which could never settle down into 'normality' or routine, draw a line under its achievements and come to rest as conservative authoritarianism, but was compelled instead to sustain the dynamism and to push ceaselessly and relentlessly for new attainments in the quest to fulfil its chimeric goal. The longer the Hitler regime lasted, the more megalomaniacal the aims, the more boundless the destructiveness became. But the longer the regime went on, the less it resembled a governmental *system* with the capacity to reproduce itself.

The inherent instability of 'charismatic authority' in this manifestation – where the specific content of the 'charismatic claim' was rooted in the utopian goal of national redemption through racial purification, war and conquest – implied, then, not only destructiveness but also self-destructiveness. Hitler's own suicidal tendencies could in this sense be said to reflect the inbuilt incapacity of his form of authoritarian rule to survive and reproduce itself.

[62] See Franz Neumann, *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1942).