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**Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism**

There was something distinctive about nazism, even compared with other brutal dictatorships. That much seems clear. A regime responsible for the most destructive war in history, leaving upwards of 40 million people dead, that perpetrated, on behalf of the most modern, economically advanced, and culturally developed country on the continent of Europe, the worst genocide yet known to mankind, has an obvious claim to singularity. But where did the uniqueness lie? Historians, political scientists and, not least, the countless victims of the nazi regime have puzzled over this question since 1945.

One set of answers came quickly, and quite naturally, after the war to those who had fought against the nazi menace. The German militaristic, Herrenmensch culture that for centuries had sought dominance in central and eastern Europe was taken to be the key in this approach. A.J.P. Taylor’s *The Course of German History*, written in 1944, might be seen as characteristic of its genre. Its crudity was, in the circumstances, perhaps understandable. But as an explanation, it led nowhere (as could also be said of the most modern variant of the ‘peculiarity of German character’ interpretation in Daniel Goldhagen’s controversial book, emphasizing a unique and longstanding German desire to eliminate the Jews). From the German side came, unsurprisingly, a diametrically opposed position, represented in different ways by Friedrich Meinecke and Gerhard Ritter: that Germany’s healthy course of development had been blown completely off track by the first world war, opening the way for the type of demagogic politics that let Hitler into power. The interpretation saw...
nazism as part of a European problem of the degradation of politics. However, this in turn left open what was unique to Germany in producing such a radical strain of inhumane politics. Stirred by Fritz Fischer’s analysis of Germany’s ‘quest for world power’ in 1914, locating the blame for the first world war in the expansionist aims of Germany’s élites,4 and by Ralf Dahrendorf’s emphasis on the essence of the ‘German problem’ as social and political backwardness in tandem with a rapidly advancing capitalist and industrial economy,5 a new generation of German historians, led by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, now turned the spotlight on a ‘special path’ (Sonderweg) to modernity.6 Defence of privilege by threatened but entrenched social and political élites provided the focus for this interpretation of the German peculiarities which saw a line of continuity running from Bismarck to Hitler. By the 1980s, however, this interpretation was itself running into a wall of criticism, beginning with the attack on ‘German peculiarities’ launched by Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, who undermined much of the case that had been made for the continued dominance of pre-industrial élites and stressed instead the common features which Germany shared with other modern, capitalist economies at the time.7 Oddly, interpretations have since that time tended to shift back in emphasis to what, if in completely different fashion, Meinecke and Ritter had been claiming so much earlier: that the first world war and its aftermath, rather than deeper continuities with Imperial Germany, explain the nazi phenomenon. Detlev Peukert, for instance, in a superb short study of the Weimar Republic, expressly rejected the Sonderweg argument as an explanation of nazism, stressing instead a ‘crisis of classical modernity’ during the first German democracy.8 Perhaps, it may be thought, this just reformulates the problem of German uniqueness. Perhaps, the thought lingers, the Sonderweg argument, or at least a strand or two of it, has been thrown out too abruptly.9 My concern here, in any case, is not directly the Sonderweg debate, but the uniqueness of nazism itself, and of the dictatorship it spawned. Unavoidably, nevertheless, this raises questions about mentalities, prompting some reconsideration about what was special about Germany that led it to produce nazism.

To demonstrate uniqueness, comparison is necessary. That ought to be

4 Fritz Fischer, Griff nach der Weltmacht (Düsseldorf 1961).
5 Ralf Dahrendorf, Society and Democracy in Germany (London 1968).
obvious, but seems often not to be so. Alongside those theories that looked no further than German development to explain nazism, ran, from the start, attempts to locate it in new types of political movement and organization, dating from the turmoil produced by the first world war: whether as a German form of the European-wide phenomenon of fascism, or as the German manifestation of something also found only after 1918, the growth of totalitarianism. To consider all the variants of these theories and approaches would take us far out of our way here, and would in any case not be altogether profitable.¹⁰ So let me begin to make my position clear at this point. Both ‘fascism’ and ‘totalitarianism’ are difficult concepts to use, and have attracted much criticism, some of it justified. In addition, going back to their usage in the Cold War, they have usually been seen as opposed rather than complementary concepts. However, I see no problem in seeing nazism as a form of each of them, as long as we are looking for common features, not identity. It is not hard to find features that nazism had in common with fascist movements in other parts of Europe and elements of its rule shared with regimes generally seen as totalitarian. The forms of organization and the methods and function of mass mobilization of the NSDAP, for example, bear much resemblance to those of the Italian Fascist Party and of other fascist movements in Europe. In the case of totalitarianism, superficial similarities, at least, with the Soviet regime under Stalin can be seen in the nazi regime’s revolutionary élan, its repressive apparatus, its monopolistic ideology, and its ‘total claim’ on the ruled. So I have no difficulty in describing German National Socialism both as a specific form of fascism and as a particular expression of totalitarianism.

Even so, comparison reveals obvious and significant differences. Race, for example, plays only a secondary role in Italian fascism. In nazism it is, of course, absolutely central. As regards totalitarianism, anything beyond the most superficial glance reveals that the structures of the one-party state, the leadership cult and, not least, the economic base of the nazi and Soviet systems are quite different. The typology is, in each case, markedly weakened. It can, of course, still be useful, depending upon the art and skill of the political

scientist, historian, or sociologist involved, and can prompt valuable empirical comparative work of the kind too rarely undertaken. But when it comes to explaining the essence of the nazi phenomenon, it is less than satisfying. Whether seen as fascism, totalitarianism, or both, there is still something lacking. Martin Broszat hinted at this in the introduction to his masterpiece, Der Staat Hitlers, in 1969, when he indicated the difficulty of placing naziism in any typology of rule. Ultimately, the singular, the unique in naziism, remains more important, if more elusive, than what it has in common with other movements or regimes.

In the eyes of the non-specialist, the ordinary layman, naziism’s historic — perhaps metaphistoric — significance can be summed up in two words: war and genocide. It takes us back to the self-evident initial claim to singularity with which this article began. By war, we naturally mean here the war of unparalleled barbarity that the nazis launched, especially in eastern Europe. And by genocide, we think primarily of the destruction of the European Jews, but also of the wider-ranging genocidal intent to restructure racially the whole of the European continent. Both words, war and genocide — or perhaps better: world war and murder of the Jews — automatically evoke direct association with Hitler. After all, they lay at the heart of his Weltanschauung, his worldview; they were in essence what he stood for. This is the obvious reason why one significant strand of historical interpretation has remained insistent that there is no need to look any further in the search for naziism’s uniqueness than the personality and ideas of its leader. ‘It was indeed Hitler’s “Weltanschauung” and nothing else that mattered in the end’, Karl-Dietrich Bracher summed up, many years ago. Nazism’s uniqueness was Hitler, no more and no less. Nazism was Hitlerism, pure and simple.

There was a certain easy attractiveness to the argument. At first sight, it seemed compelling. But, put at its most forthright, as so often, by Klaus Hildebrand, the thesis was bound to raise the hackles of those, prominent among them Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen, who sought more complex reasons for the calamity wrought on Germany and Europe and found them in the internal structures and workings of nazi rule, in which Hitler’s hand was often none too evident. So was born the long-running, everyday story of historical folk: the debate between the ‘intentionalists’, who looked no further than Hitler’s clear, ideological programme, systematically and logically followed through, and the ‘structuralists’ or ‘functionalists’, who pointed to an

11 Martin Broszat, Der Staat Hitlers (Munich 1969), 9.
administratively chaotic regime, lacking clear planning, and stumbling from crisis to crisis in its own dynamic spiral of self-destructiveness.

The ‘Hitlerism’ argument will not go away. In fact, there are some signs, amid the current preoccupation with sexuality in history (as in everything else), that the old psycho-historical interpretations are making a comeback, and in equally reductionist fashion. Hence, we have recent attempts to reduce the disaster of nazism to Hitler’s alleged homosexuality, or supposed syphilis. In each case, one or two bits of dubious hearsay evidence are surrounded by much inference, speculation and guesswork to come up with a case for world history shaped fatedly and decisively by Hitler’s ‘dark secret’. Reduced to absurdity, a rent-boy in Munich or a prostitute in Vienna thereby carries ultimate responsibility for the evils of nazism.

However, the ‘structural-functionalist’ argument is also weak at its core. In reducing Hitler to a ‘weak dictator’, at times coming close, it often seemed, to underestimating him grossly, even to writing him out of the script, and in downplaying ideology into no more than a tool of propagandistic mobilization, this line of interpretation left the central driving-force of nazism ultimately a mystery; the cause of the (ultimately unprovable) self-destructive dynamism hard to explain. My own work on the Third Reich since the mid-1980s, culminating in my Hitler biography, was prompted by the need to overcome this deep divide in interpretation, which was by no means as sterile as is sometimes claimed. The short analysis of Hitler’s power which I wrote in 1990, and even more so the biography that followed, were attempts to reassert Hitler’s absolute centrality while at the same time placing the actions of even such a powerful dictator in the context of the forces, internal and external, which shaped the exercise of his power. Writing these books clarified in certain ways how I would understand the uniqueness of nazism. I will return shortly to Hitler’s own role in that uniqueness.

Let us meanwhile go back to war and genocide as the hallmarks of nazism. Surprisingly, they played remarkably little part, except on the fringes, in the ‘intentionalist-structuralist’ debates before the 1980s. Only since then, and in good measure via the belated take-off of ‘history from below’ (as it was frequently called), have the war, in which nazism came of its own, and the murder of the Jews, that emanated from it, become the focus of sustained and

14 Lothar Machtan, *The Hidden Hitler* (London 2001), for the argument, which has encountered widespread criticism, that Hitler was a homosexual. The syphilis argument, outrightly rejected by those who have most thoroughly explored Hitler’s medical history, notably Fritz Redlich, *Hitler. Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet* (New York/Oxford 1999), and Ernst Günther Schenck, *Patient Hitler. Eine medizinische Biographie* (Düsseldorf 1989), has recently resurfaced in an investigation — the most thorough imaginable of this topic — by Deborah Hayden, to whom I am grateful for a preview of this, as yet, unpublished work.

15 A formulation which has become famous, coined by Hans Mommsen and first stated in a footnote to his *Beamtentum im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart 1966), 98, note 26. The debate ensuing from the term is explored in my *Nazi Dictatorship*, op. cit., chap. 4.

systematic research and fully integrated into the history of the nazi regime. This research, given a massive boost through the opening of archives in the former Soviet bloc after 1990, has not simply cast much new light on decision-making processes and the escalatory genocidal phases within such a brutal war, but has also revealed ever more plainly how far the complicity and participation in the direst forms of gross inhumanity stretched.17 This is, of course, not sufficient in itself to claim uniqueness. But it does suggest that Hitler alone, however important his role, is not enough to explain the extraordinary lurch of a society, relatively non-violent before 1914, into ever more radical brutality and such a frenzy of destruction.

The development of the nazi regime had at least two characteristics which were unusual, even in comparison with other dictatorships. One was what Hans Mommsen has dubbed 'cumulative radicalization'.18 Normally, after the initial bloody phase following a dictator’s takeover of power when there is a showdown with former opponents, the revolutionary dynamic sags. In Italy, this ‘normalizing’ phase begins in 1925; in Spain, not too long after the end of the Civil War. In Russia, under quite different conditions, there was a second, unbelievably awful, phase of radicalization under Stalin, after the first wave during the revolutionary turmoil then the extraordinarily violent civil war had subsided in the 1920s. But the regime’s radical ideological drive gave way to boosting more conventional patriotism during the fight against the German invader, before disappearing almost entirely after Stalin’s death. Radicalization, in other words, was temporary and fluctuating, rather than an intrinsic feature of the system itself. So the ‘cumulative radicalization’ so central to nazism is left needing an explanation.

Linked to this is the capacity for destruction — again extraordinary even for dictatorships. This destructive capacity, though present from the outset, developed over time and in phases; against internal political, then increasingly, ‘racial’ enemies in spring 1933, across the spring and summer of 1935, and during the summer and autumn of 1938; following this, the qualitative leap in its extension to the Poles from autumn 1939 onwards; and the unleashing of its full might in the wake of the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The unceasing radicalization of the regime, and the different stages in the unfolding of its destructive capacity cannot, however, as has come to be generally recognized, be explained by Hitler’s commands and actions alone. Rather, they followed countless initiatives from below, at many different levels of the regime. Invariably, these occurred within a broad ideological framework associated with Hitler’s wishes and intentions. But those initiating the actions were

17 For a summary of the advances in research, see Ulrich Herbert (ed.), Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945 (Frankfurt am Main 1998), 9–66. Much of the new research is incorporated in the excellent survey by Peter Longerich, Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung (Munich/Zurich 1998).
seldom — except in the realms of foreign policy and war strategy — following direct orders from Hitler and were by no means always ideologically motivated. A whole panoply of motives was involved. What motivated the individual — ideological conviction, career advancement, power-lust, sadism and other factors — is, in fact, of secondary importance. Of primary significance is that, whatever the motivation, the actions had the function of working towards the accomplishment of the visionary goals of the regime, embodied in the person of the Führer.

We are getting closer to what we might begin to see as the unique character of nazism, and to Hitler’s part in that uniqueness. A set of counter-factual propositions will underline how I see Hitler’s indispensability. Let me put them this way. No Hitler: no SS-police state, untrammelled by the rule of law, and with such massive accretions of power, commencing in 1933. No Hitler: no general European war by the late 1930s. No Hitler: an alternative war strategy and no attack on the Soviet Union. No Hitler: no Holocaust, no state policy aimed at wiping out the Jews of Europe. And yet: the forces that led to the undermining of law, to expansionism and war, to the ‘teutonic fury’ that descended upon the Soviet Union in 1941 and to the quest for ever more radical solutions to the ‘Jewish Question’, were not personal creations of Hitler. Hitler’s personality was, of course, a crucial component of any singularity of nazism. Who would seriously deny it? But decisive for the unending radicalism and unlimited destructive capacity of nazism was something in addition to this: the leadership position of Hitler and the type of leadership he embodied.

The bonds between Hitler and his ‘following’ (at different levels of regime and society) are vital here. A constant theme of my writing on Hitler and National Socialism has been to suggest that they are best grasped through Max Weber’s quasi-religious concept of ‘charismatic authority’, in which irrational hopes and expectations of salvation are projected onto an individual, who is thereby invested with heroic qualities. Hitler’s ‘charismatic leadership’ offered the prospect of national salvation — redemption brought about by

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purging the impure and pernicious evil within — to rapidly expanding numbers of Germans experiencing a comprehensive crisis of social and cultural values as well as a total crisis of state and economy. Of course, manifestations of ‘charismatic leadership’ were far from confined to Germany in the interwar period. But Hitler’s was both different in character and more far-reaching in impact than the charismatic forms seen anywhere else — something to which I will briefly return.

There was another big difference. Hitler’s ‘charismatic power’, resting on the invocation of the politics of national salvation, was superimposed after 1933 upon the instruments of the most modern state on the European continent — upon an advanced economy (if currently crisis-ridden); upon a well-developed and efficient system of enforcement and repression (if for the time being weakened through political crisis); upon a sophisticated apparatus of state administration (if at the time its exponents were demoralized by perceived undermining of authority in a disputed and crisis-wrecked democracy); and, not least, upon a modernized, professional army (if temporarily enfeebled) which was thirsting for a return to its glory days, for a chance to kick over the traces of the ignominy summed up by the name ‘Versailles’ and for future expansion to acquire European hegemony. Hitler’s ‘charismatic authority’ and the promise of national salvation fitted, if not perfectly, then nevertheless extremely well, the need to unite the expectations of these varying strands of the political elite. Hitler was, we might say, the intersection point of a number of ideological traits which cumulatively, if not singly, made up the unique political culture of which these elites were a product, and which extended beyond class confines to extensive sections of German society. This political culture was not in itself nazi. But it provided the fertile ground within which nazism could flourish. Among its components were: an understanding of nationality that rested upon ethnicity (and was hence open to notions of restoration of national strength through ‘ethnic cleansing’); an imperialist idea that looked not in the main to overseas colonies, but to German dominance in the ethnic mélange of eastern Europe, at the expense of the Slav population; a presumption of Germany’s rightful position as a great power, accompanied by deep resentment at the country’s treatment since the war and its national weakness and humiliation; and a visceral detestation of bolshevism coupled with the sense that Germany was the last bulwark in the defence of western civilization. Not the least of Hitler’s contributions to the spiralling radicalism of the nazi regime after 1933 was to unleash the pent-up social and ideological forces embraced by this short catalogue of ideological traits; to open up hitherto unimaginable opportunities; to make the unthinkable seem realizable. His ‘charismatic authority’ set the guidelines; the bureaucracy of a modern state was there to implement them. But ‘charismatic authority’ sits uneasily with the rules and regulations of bureaucracy. The tension between the two could neither subside nor turn into a stable and permanent form of state. Allied to the underlying ideological thrust and the varied social forces which Hitler represented, this created a dynamism — intrinsically self-destructive since the charismatic
regime was unable to reproduce itself — which constitutes an important component of nazism’s uniqueness.

If this explosive mixture of the ‘charismatic’ politics of national salvation and the apparatus of a highly modern state was central to nazism’s uniqueness, then it ought to be possible to distinguish the unholy combination from the differing preconditions of other dictatorships. This, however briefly and superficially, I shall try to do.

The quest for national rebirth lay, of course, at the heart of all fascist movements. But only in Germany did the striving for national renewal adopt such strongly pseudo-religious tones. Even if we count the Spanish dictatorship as outrightly fascist, its national ‘redemptive’ element, if important, was nonetheless far weaker than that in Germany, amounting to little more than the quest for the ‘true Spain’ and the restoration of the values of reactionary Catholicism, together with the utter rejection of all that was modern and smacked of association with godless socialism and bolshevism. In Italy, pseudo-religious notions of national ‘salvation’ or ‘redemption’ were even weaker than in Spain, and certainly possessed little or nothing of the apocalyptic sense of being the last bulwark of western, Christian culture against the atheistic threat of Asiatic (and Jewish) bolshevism that was prevalent in Germany. Mussolini’s external ambitions, too, like Franco’s, were purely traditional, even if dressed in new clothes. War and imperialist expansion in Africa were intended to restore lost colonies, revenge the ignominy of Italian humiliation in 1896 at the hands of the Ethiopians, and thereby establish Italy’s glory and its place in the sun as a world power, with the useful side-effect of bolstering the dictatorship within Italy through the prestige of external victories and acquisition of empire. But nothing much resembled the depth of hope placed in national salvation in Germany.

Though it is often played down in historiography these days, the extraordinarily strong fears of a threat to German culture, a profound cultural pessimism in Germany’s unusually broad-based intelligentsia, widespread already before the first world war, formed one of the roots of such susceptibility. Oswald Spengler’s widely-read and influential tract on the downfall of western culture, the first volume of which was published a month before the end of the war in 1918, embodied feelings which, in cruder form, had been spread by a multiplicity of patriotic organizations long before the nazis appeared on the scene. In the polarized society of the Weimar Republic, the antagonism of the perceived threat of modernity to what were portrayed as traditional and true German values — a threat focused on socialism, capitalism and, not least, the representative scapegoat figure for both: the Jew — spread both at elite and popular levels. Shored up by the trauma of a lost war, a trauma arguably greater in Germany than in any other land — in a country where the hated

20 Griffin, in particular, has made this the focal point of his interpretation of fascism. See his *Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 26, 32ff.
21 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Vienna/ Munich 1918–22).
socialism had come to power through revolution and where established religion seemed to be losing its hold — an appeal to hopes of national salvation held substantial political potential. Though other countries were also traumatized by the war, the cultural crisis, even in Italy, ran nowhere near so deep as in Germany and, in consequence, was less formative for the nature of the dictatorship. In addition, the length of the crisis and the size of the mass movement before the takeover of power were significant.

Only in Italy, apart from Germany, did home-grown fascism develop into a genuine mass movement before the takeover of power. By the time Mussolini was made prime minister in 1922, in the wake of Italy’s postwar crisis, the Italian Fascist Party had some 322,000 members, whereas in Spain, amid quite different conditions of the mid-1930s, before the Spanish Civil War, the Falange could only muster around 10,000 members in a country of 26 million inhabitants. If these figures are a deceptive guide to the potential backing for politics of national salvation in those countries, the activist base was in both cases, quite extremely so in Spain, far more limited than it was in Germany. There, the hard core of believers in a party leader who promised national salvation as the heart of his message was already massive, with 850,000 party members and 427,000 SA men (often not members of the party itself), even before Hitler took power.

And, as elsewhere, the first world war had left, as part of its legacy, the readiness to resort to extreme violence to attain political aims. The crusading idea of national salvation, redeeming Germany from its humiliation, purging it of the enemies — political and racial — seen to be threatening its life-blood, championing the cultural fight against the threat of Slavdom, evoking notions of racial struggle to win back lost territories in eastern Europe, heralding an ultimate showdown with godless, ‘Asiatic’ bolshevism, tapped brilliantly into this new climate of violence. And whereas there was only a three-year period before Italian fascism gained power, after which its elan rapidly waned, the 14 years of ‘latent civil war’22 that preceded Hitler’s takeover allowed the prospect of violently-accomplished national salvation to fester and spread, massively so in conditions of the complete collapse of legitimation of the Weimar Republic after 1930.

Not only the street-fighters and beer-hall brawlers in the nazi movement were attracted by the idea of violently-attained national salvation. As much recent research has shown, a new generation of intelligent, middle-class students at German universities in the early 1920s soaked up völkisch ideas, those of extreme racist nationalism, intrinsic to the ideas of national regeneration.23 In this way, ‘national salvation’ found intellectualized form among groups which would constitute a coming elite, groups whose doctorates in law

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22 For the term, see Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford 1993), 262.
23 See, for this, especially Ulrich Herbert, “‘Generation der Sachlichkeit’: Die völkische Studentenbewegung der frühen zwanziger Jahre in Deutschland’ in Frank Bajohr, Werner Johe and Uwe Lohalm (eds), *Zivilisation und Barbarei. Die widersprüchlichen Potentiale der Moderne* (Hamburg 1991), 115–44.
combined with a rationalized ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ (or ‘new objectivity’) type of approach to the ‘cleansing’ of the nation: the excision of its ‘life-threatening diseases’. Such mentalities were carried with them, 10 or 15 years after studying, into the upper echelons of the SS and Security Police, as well as into state and party planning offices and ‘think tanks’. By the early 1940s, some of these ‘intellectuals’ had their hands covered in blood as they led the Einsatzgruppen into the Soviet Union, while others were laying down plans for the racial ‘cleansing’ of the occupied territories of the east and the new ethnic order to be established there.

That ‘national salvation’ involved not just internal regeneration, but a ‘new order’ based on the ethnic cleansing of the entire continent of Europe, also singles out National Socialism from all other forms of fascism. No small part of its uniqueness, in other words, was the combination of racial nationalism and imperialism directed not abroad, but at Europe itself. And, as already indicated, though nazism amounted to the most extreme expression of such ideas, the politics of national salvation had every prospect of blending into the cultural pessimism of neo-conservatives and the anti-democratic and revisionist-expansionist currents that prevailed among the national-conservative élites.

It is not just the force in themselves of the ideas of national rebirth that Hitler came to embody, but the fact that they arose in such a highly modern state system, which was decisive for their uniquely destructive quality. Other interwar European dictatorships, both fascist and communist, emerged in societies with less advanced economies, less sophisticated apparatus of state administration, and less modernized armies. And, apart from the Soviet Union (where policies directed at creating a sphere of influence in the Baltic and Balkans to provide a ‘cordon sanitaire’ against the looming German threat took concrete form only by the end of the 1930s), geopolitical aims in Europe generally stretched no further than localized irredentism. In other words: not only did the expectations of ‘national salvation’ invested in Hitler enjoy a mass basis — 13 million nazi voters already in free elections in 1932, countless further millions to join them over the following years; not only did such ideas correspond to more ‘intellectualized’ notions of the defence of western culture among the upper social classes and political élites; not only did ‘national salvation’ involve the reconstruction on racial lines of the whole of Europe; but — something present in no other dictatorship — a highly modern state apparatus, increasingly infected by such notions, existed in Germany and was capable of turning visionary, utopian goals into practical, administrative reality.

Let us return at this point to Hitler and to the implementation of the politics of national salvation after 1933. I have been suggesting that a modern state system directed by ‘charismatic authority’, based on ideas, frequently used by Hitler, of a ‘mission’ (Sendung) to bring about ‘salvation’ (Rettung) or

24 See the fine study by Michael Wildt, Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes (Hamburg 2002).
‘redemption’ (*Erlösung*) — all, of course, terms tapping religious or quasi-religious emotions — was unique. (I should, perhaps, add that, in my view, this populistic exploitation of naïve ‘messianic’ hopes and illusions among members of a society plunged into comprehensive crisis does not mean that nazism has claim to be regarded as a ‘political religion’, a currently voguish revamping of an age-old notion, though no less convincing for being repeated so persistently.) The singularity of the nazi form of rule was, thus, undeniably bound up with the singularity of Hitler’s position of power. Though familiar enough, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the essence of this power.

During the course of the early 1920s, Hitler developed a pronounced sense of his ‘national mission’ — ‘messianic allures’, as one ironic remark had it at the time. The ‘mission’ can be summed up as follows: nationalize the masses; take over the state, destroy the enemy within — the ‘November criminals’ (meaning Jews and Marxists, much the same in his eyes); build up defences; then undertake expansion ‘by the sword’ to secure Germany’s future in overcoming the ‘shortage of land’ (*Raumnot*) and acquiring new territory in the east of Europe. Towards the end of 1922, a small but growing band of fanatical followers — the initial ‘charismatic community’ — inspired by Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’, began to project their own desire for a ‘heroic’ national leader onto Hitler. (As early as 1920, such desires were expressed by neo-conservatives, not nazis, as the longing for a leader who, in contrast to the contemptible ‘politicians’ of the new Republic, would be a statesman with the qualities of the ‘ruler, warrior, and high priest’ rolled into one.) Innumerable letters eulogizing Hitler as a national hero poured into the Landsberg fortress, where in 1924 he spent a comfortable few months of internment after his trial for high treason at Munich, which had given him new prominence and standing on the racist-nationalist Right. A book published that year waxed lyrical (and mystical) about the new hero:

25 The perception of nazism as a form of political religion, advanced as long ago as 1938 by the émigré Eric Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen* (Vienna 1938), has recently gained a new lease of life. Among others who have found the notion attractive, Michael Burleigh adopted it, alongside ‘totalitarianism’, as a major conceptual prop of his interpretation in *The Third Reich, A New History* (London 2000). See also Burleigh’s essay, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion’ in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 1, 2* (2000), 1–26. It has also been deployed for fascist Italy by Emilio Gentile, ‘Fascism as Political Religion’, *Journal of Contemporary History, 25, 2–3* (May–June 1990), 229–51, and idem, *The Sacralisation of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, MA 1996). See also Gentile’s ‘The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism’ in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 1, 1* (2000), 18–55. For sharp criticism of its application to nazism, see Michael Rißmann, *Hitlers Gott. Vorsehungsglaube und Sendungsbewußtsein des deutschen Diktators* (Zurich/Munich 2001), 191–7; and Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 30–2. Griffin, once critical, has, however, changed his mind and now favours the use of the concept, as can be seen in his ‘Nazism’s “Cleansing Hurricane” and the Metamorphosis of Fascist Studies’ in W. Loh (ed.), ‘Faschismus’ kontrovers (Paderborn 2002).

26 Cited in Albrecht Tyrell, *Vom ’Trommler’ zum ’Führer’* (Munich 1975), 163.

The secret of his personality resides in the fact that in it the deepest of what lies dormant in the soul of the German people has taken shape in full living features... That has appeared in Adolf Hitler: the living incarnation of the nation's yearning.\textsuperscript{21}

Hitler believed this bilge. He used his time in Landsberg to describe his 'mission' in the first volume of \textit{Mein Kampf} (which, with scant regard for catchy, publishers' titles, he had wanted to call 'Four and a Half Years of Struggle against Lies, Stupidity, and Cowardice'). He also learnt lessons from the failure of his movement in 1923. One important lesson was that a re-founded nazi movement had, in contrast to the pre-\textit{Putsch} era, to be exclusively a 'Leader Party'. From 1925 onwards, the NSDAP was gradually transformed into precisely this 'Leader Party'. Hitler became not just the organizational fulcrum of the movement, but also the sole fount of doctrinal orthodoxy. Leader and Idea (however vague the latter remained) blended into one, and by the end of the 1920s, the NSDAP had swallowed all strands of the former diverse \textit{völkisch} movement and now possessed a monopoly on the racist-nationalist Right. In conditions of the terminal crisis of Weimar, Hitler, backed by a much more solid organization than had been the case before 1923, was in a position to stake a claim for ever-growing numbers of Germans to be the coming national 'saviour', a redeemer figure.

It is necessary to underline this development, however well-known it is in general, since, despite leadership cults elsewhere, there was actually nothing similar in the genesis of other dictatorships. The Duce cult before the 'March on Rome' had not been remotely so important or powerful within Italian fascism as had the Führer cult to the growth of German National Socialism. Mussolini was at that stage still essentially first among equals among the regional fascist leaders. The full efflorescence of the cult only came later, after 1925.\textsuperscript{29} In Spain, the Caudillo cult attached to Franco was even more of an artificial creation, the claim to being a great national leader, apeing the Italian and German models, coming long after he had made his name and career through the army.\textsuperscript{30} An obvious point of comparison in totalitarian theory, linking dictatorships of Left and Right, appears to be that of the Führer cult

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\item[\textsuperscript{28}] Georg Schott, \textit{Das Volksbuch vom Hitler} (Munich 1924), 18.
\end{itemize}
with the Stalin cult. Certainly, there was more than a casual pseudo-religious strain to the Stalin cult. Russian peasants plainly saw in ‘the boss’ some sort of substitute for ‘father Tsar’. Nonetheless, the Stalin cult was in essence a late accretion to the position which had gained Stalin his power, that of Party General Secretary in prime position to inherit Lenin’s mantle. Unlike nazism, the personality cult was not intrinsic to the form of rule, as its denunciation and effective abolition after Stalin’s death demonstrated. Later rulers in the Soviet Union did not try to revamp it; the term ‘charismatic leadership’ does not readily trip off the lips when we think of Brezhnev or Chernenko. In contrast, the Führer cult was the indispensable basis, the irreplaceable essence and the dynamic motor of a nazi regime unthinkable without it. The ‘Führer myth’ was the platform for the massive expansion of Hitler’s own power once the style of leadership in the party had been transferred to the running of a modern, sophisticated state. It served to integrate the party, determine the ideological goals, to drive on the radicalization, to maintain the ideological momentum, and, not least, to legitimize the initiatives of others ‘working towards the Führer’.

The core points of Hitler’s ideology were few, and visionary rather than specific. But they were unchanging and unnegotiable: ‘removal of the Jews’ (meaning different things to different party and state agencies at different times); attaining ‘living space’ to secure Germany’s future (a notion vague enough to encompass different strands of expansionism); race as the explanation of world history, and eternal struggle as the basic law of human existence. For Hitler personally, this was a vision demanding war to bring about national salvation through expunging the shame of the capitulation of 1918 and destroying those responsible for it (who were in his eyes the Jews). Few Germans saw things in the way that Hitler did. But mobilization of the masses brought them closer to doing so. Here, Hitler remained the supreme motivator. Mass mobilization was never, however, as he realized from the outset, going to suffice. He needed the power of the state, the co-option of its instruments of rule, and the support of the élites who traditionally controlled them. Naturally, the conservative élites were not true believers. They did not, in the main, swallow the excesses of the Führer cult, and could even be privately contemptuous or condescending about Hitler and his movement. Beyond that, they were often disappointed with the realities of National Socialism. Even so, Hitler’s new form of leadership offered them the chance, as they saw it, of sustaining their own power. Their weakness was Hitler’s strength, before and after 1933. And, as we have seen, there were plenty of ideological overlaps even without complete identity. Gradually, a state administration run, like

32 For the term, see Kershaw, Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris, op. cit., 529.
that of all modern states, on the basis of ‘expedient rationality’, succumbed to
the irrational goals of the politics of national salvation, embodied by Hitler —
a process culminating in the bureaucratically-organized and industrially-
executed genocide against the Jews, premised on irrational notions of national
redemption.
Not only the complicity of the old élites was needed for this process of
subordination of rational principles of government and administration to the
irrational goals of ‘charismatic leadership’. New élites, as has already been
suggested, were only too ready to exploit the unheard of opportunities offered
to them in the Führer state to build up unimaginable power accretions, free of
any legal or administrative shackles. The new ‘technocrats of power’, of the
type exemplified by Reinhard Heydrich, combined ideological fanaticism with
cold, ruthless, depersonified efficiency and organizational skills. They could
find rationality in irrationality; could turn into practical reality the goals asso-
ciated with Hitler, needing no further legitimation than recourse to the ‘wish
of the Führer’.33 This was no ‘banality of evil’.34 This was the working of an
ideologically-motivated élite coldly prepared to plan for the eradication of 11
million Jews (the figure laid down at the Wannsee Conference of January
1942), and for the ‘resettlement’ to the Siberian wastes, plainly genocidal in
intent, of over 30 million, mainly Slavs, over the following 25 years. That, in
such a system, they would find countless ‘willing executioners’ prepared to do
their bit, whatever the individual motivation of those involved, goes without
saying. This was, however, not on account of national character, or some
long-existent, specifically German desire to eliminate the Jews. Rather, it was
that the idea of racial cleansing, the core of the notion of national salvation,
had become, via Hitler’s leadership position, institutionalized in all aspects of
organized life in the nazi state. That was decisive.
Unquestionably, Hitler was a unique historical personality. But the unique-
ness of the nazi dictatorship cannot be reduced to that. It is explained less by
Hitler’s character, extraordinary as it was, than by the specific form of rule
which he embodied and its corrupting effect on the instruments and mecha-
nisms of the most advanced state in Europe. Both the broad acceptance of the
‘project’ of ‘national salvation’, seen as personified in Hitler, and the internal-
ization of the ideological goals by a new, modern power-élite, operating along-
side weakened old élites through the bureaucratic sophistication of a modern
state, were necessary prerequisites for the world-historical catastrophe of the
Third Reich.

33 Gerald Fleming, Hitler und die Endlösung. ‘Es ist des Führers Wunsch’ (Wiesbaden/Munich
1982), shows how frequently the phrase was invoked by those involved in the extermination of
the Jews.
34 The memorable, though nonetheless misleading, concept was coined by Hannah Arendt,
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