Myros Shiamilis

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The Hitler Myth as a Reaction to Weimar

In 1936, David Lloyd George, the liberal prime minister of Great Britain, returned from a visit to Germany in 1936. He was enthralled with the "famous German Leader" who had achieved such "a marvelous transformation in the spirit of the people, in their attitude towards each other, and in their social and economic outlook." A Germany full of hope and confidence would be no threat to Europe, he announced; "the establishment of a German hegemony, which was the aim and dream of the old pre-war militarism is not even on the horizon of Nazism." Here, Lloyd George proclaimed, was the "George Washington of Germany – the man who won for his country independence from all her oppressors."[1] This man – the "George Washington of Germany" – was Adolf Hitler, a man who had convinced not only the German populace but evidently foreign leaders of his charismatic leadership and good intentions in restoring Germany's glory on the world stage. Unknowingly, David Lloyd George had fallen completely for what historians would later call the "Hitler myth."

The "Hitler myth" was a tool consciously devised by Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels for the purpose of manufacturing and sustaining consensus around the ideological aims and worldview of National Socialism. It centered on the exceptionally popular *image* of Adolf Hitler as Fuhrer, not the person.[2] The Hitler myth, as the historian Ian Kershaw argues, served two integrative functions. First, it coordinated and subordinated the competing centers of power in the polycratic Nazi state under the figurehead of the Fuhrer. Second, it established a popular

[1] David Lloyd George, "I Talked to Hitler," in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, edited by Anson Rabinbach and Gilman Sander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 77-78.
[2] Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2.

consensus around the aims and policies associated with the Fuhrer, which could be detached from criticism directed toward the Nazi party.[3] As propaganda, the image of Hitler, was based on the "heroic" leadership ideal of the *Fuhrerprinzip*, a mythical leader who embodies and actualizes the will of the *Volk* – the racialized people or nation – in his personality. [4]

One striking feature of the Hitler myth was its remarkable amorphousness and flexibility in combining attitudes and beliefs already popular within German culture. Its one defining characteristic was the perceived inseparability between the leader and the led, the Fuhrer and the people, which left open the specific qualities which could be attributed to the Fuhrer. Hitler could thus be represented with seemingly antithetical qualities and characteristics capable of capturing the public's favor: for example, as a friend of children, a worker and artist of modest origins, a father figure and comrade to his people, but equally as an exceptional superhuman - a "Man of Destiny" - and a wise statesman who would restore Germany's glory and world power.[5] The Hitler myth was therefore remarkably adaptable to the circumstances for which it was put to use in legitimating state action and maintaining public support.

The generality and adaptability of the Hitler myth elucidates something important, which was that its defining value was not found in the specific content of the Hitler image itself, which differed depending on the purposes of Nazi propaganda. Rather, as propaganda, its value was judged, not by its content or subject matter, but wholly by the effect this content could produce upon its intended audience. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and

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[3] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, 4.
[4] David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83.
[5] Ernst K. Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda 1925-1945* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1965), 206-208.

Propaganda, insisted, "[propaganda] is always a means to an end."[6] Thus, what matters to propaganda is "*what* it is used for and what it practically brings into the world of appearances."[7] And the end of propaganda, as Goebbels makes clear, is ultimately to consolidate and preserve political power and control in the state.[8] As propaganda, the Hitler myth was therefore a device which aimed to produce a certain effect, an emotional response – or more broadly a disposition or mentality – within the German populace which was favorable to the preservation of political power in the hands of the National Socialist State.

The Hitler myth was incredibly successful in consolidating Hitler's power and popular support. Hitler enjoyed immense personal popularity throughout most of his political rule, despite or even because of the Nazi Party's loss of popularity.[9] What made the Hitler myth so effective? And how did the myth affect and shape public perception, especially during moments of crisis?

Historians generally agree that the effectiveness of the myth depended upon reinforcing preexisting beliefs and attitudes in German culture which were useful for sustaining Nazi aims and ideology. However, historians differ about the extent to which propaganda was effective or not in altering public perception. According to the historian David Welch, the continuance of competing centers of power, values, and social classes, concepts such as the *Volksgemeinschaft* and the *Fuhrerprinzip* played an important role in heightening national awareness, which assured

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[6] Joseph Goebbels. "Knowledge and Propaganda," edited and translated by Randall L. Bytwerk, in German Propaganda Archive. Accessed November 11, 2024. https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb54.htm
[7] Joseph Goebbels, "On the Concept of Propaganda (1936)," in German History in Documents and Images. Accessed November 4, 2024. https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5149
[8] Joseph Goebbels, "Knowledge and Propaganda." https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb54.htm
[9] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 10.

the regime a considerable degree of stability and social integration.[10] In contrast, the historian Ian Kershaw, although agreeing that propaganda was a useful means for maintaining political coordination (*Gleischaltung*) and – to differing degrees – of building public consensus around certain Nazi policies which reinforced preexisting fears and perceptions, is more reserved in his assessment about the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda, arguing that terroristic repression was overall more important than propaganda.[11] While Welch and Kershaw analyze propaganda from a largely functionalist perspective (i.e., as in what role propaganda played in sustaining the political regime), older historiography was more prone to analyze propaganda from an intentionalist perspective (i.e., through the intentions and goals of the chief Nazi propagandists). For example, Ernst Bramsted views propaganda as a means for enforcing social conformity through totalitarian power, whose implementation was entirely controlled by Joseph Goebbels and enforced by the threat of murder and terror by the Gestapo.[12] On a different level, Jay W. Baird views Goebbels' propaganda as motivated by the destructive pursuit of a mythical worldview and ideology with no basis in verifiable reality.[13] Thus, unlike Welch and Kershaw, Baird and Bramsted generally overemphasize the intentions of Joseph Goebbels and overstate the regime's power for enforcing these intentions while failing to consider the functional interplay of propaganda in prompting public opinion and perception in support of the regime.

I would like to adopt a different perspective in examining the significance of propaganda as a means for consolidating power in the Nazi state. What I am interested in is neither purely the function of propaganda nor simply the mythology and worldview that may have motivated Hitler

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[10] Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda,* 58.
[11] Ian Kershaw, "How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?" edited by David Welch, in *Nazi Propaganda: the Power and the Limitations* (Totowa: Croom Helm, 1983), 201.
[12] Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda,* 453.
[13] Jay W. Baird, *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), 4-5.

and Goebbels to act a certain way or implement a certain agenda. Rather, I am interested in how specifically the Hitler myth drew its existence and commanding authority from the public's perception, just as much as by how Goebbels and the Propaganda Ministry chose to manufacture and present the Hitler myth to the public.

I have previously referred to the affective response or mentality that propaganda intends to produce in an audience. This response, as Kershaw notes by referring to the sociologist Max Weber, is what is perceived as the heroic, "charismatic" authority of the leader, which is a "quality determined by the subjective perception of the followers."[14] The perception of charisma conveyed the impression of a leader endowed with exceptional, superhuman capabilities who could succeed and overcome all crises: Hitler's absolute authority was justified by virtue of his image of infallibility and perfection. Yet at the same time this charisma could be sustained only through a revolutionary and transitory sort of rule, which depended upon the sense of threat, instability, and fear within the German population.[15] This essay argues that the success of the Hitler myth as a binding force could only have emerged in contrast to and as a solution to the crises of the Weimar period and the sense of victimhood created by the conditions of the Versailles Treaty in German life, when the sense of fear and uncertainty were at their highest. As J.P. Stern astutely notes:

> In this situation, when almost anything seemed possible and almost any alternative preferable, the call for a self-determining charismatic personality…took on, almost overnight, the aspect of practical and practicable politics.[16]

Section II – Origins of the Hitler Myth

[14] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 8.
[15] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 9.
[16] J.P. Stern, *Hitler: The Fuhrer and the People,* 47.

The Hitler myth was rooted in the *volkisch* nationalism of nineteenth century Europe, which developed from a tradition of romanticism and militaristic imperialism. This was especially exemplified in the mythologized unification of Germany under Otto von Bismark and Kaiser Wilhelm I. This nationalism mixed the ideas of victory, valor, and heroism into a cult of the nation which began with the "German" victory over Napoleon in 1813 after the Battle of the Peoples in Leipzig.[17] With the unification of Germany, the cult of the nation soon gained an important functional role in uniting the populace around the symbols of the new German State. With the rise of Wilhelm II, the new Kaiser took on a highly personalized, demagogic role by representing himself as the expression and product of German history and the nation. The *volkisch* cult was not limited to Wilhelm II but extended to the retired chancellor Otto von Bismark: with Germans' disillusionment in the Kaiser, pilgrimages were undertaken for the chancellor, which put in full display the development of a national religion surrounding German statesmen and national figureheads.[18] With the rise of constitutionalism, industrialism, and imperialism, these nationalist currents were transformed and combined with a new populism, in which the growing Protestant middle-classes and the lower middle-classes (the *Mittelstand*) projected their hopes onto the idea of a People's Kaiser, a leader who not only ruled but expressed the will of the people.[19]

Following Germany's defeat in World War I and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919, the Allied powers blamed Germany for the war and forced the country to pay enormous reparations which crippled the country's economy. The newly established Weimar Republic – a western-style parliamentary democracy – became, within right-wing nationalist

[17] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 14.
[18] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,*14-15.
[19] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 16.

circles, the symbol of national embarrassment and foreign rule by western powers. The *volkisch* (racial nationalist) movements in Germany, including the Nazi Party, sprang up in reaction to the fragmented party politics and economic disorder of the Weimar period, which these movements contrasted to the strong authoritarian leadership of a romanticized and idealized German past. Ironically, however, the democratic politics of the Weimar Republic also allowed the subject-monarch relationship, which had formed the basis of racial nationalist ideology, to be reinterpreted in a more populist manner as a relation between leader and led. This leadership ideal presented by the *volkisch* movements was counterposed to the so-called "leaderless democracy" of the Weimar Republic and offered as an alternative for ending the disorder in the Weimar period.[20] Weimar, indeed, was internally very fragmented, since early compromises with the right-wing monarchist military had impeded the implementation of social democratic reforms in the political and economic system.[21] The perceived dysfunction within the Weimar political system, the economic disparities during this period, heightened later by the crisis of the Great Depression whose effects were already being felt in 1928, provided the Nazis with grist to use against Weimar republicanism.[22]

When Hitler joined the Nazi Party (then called the German Workers' Party) in 1919, the Hitler myth was nonexistent; Hitler did not yet see himself as leader of a movement. But by August of 1921, Hitler, with his rhetorical ability, had established himself as the leader of the Party, which was renamed the National Socialist German Worker's Party (the NSDAP) to appeal to the working classes and thus appear as a "people's" party and movement. What is important to observe, however, is how Hitler, while initially seeing himself as leader of the Party, soon came

[20] Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth,* 19.
[21] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 20.
[22] Swett and Wiesen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, Politics,* 42-43.

to represent himself as leader of a movement and eventually as the representative leader of the German *volk*. The development of the Hitler myth then arose in mutual relation with the development of the Party and its growing aspirations to seize power and dominate the German public's perception.[23]

The Hitler myth, as it grew, gave the Party a religious tinge, which both developed and rationalized the most fanatical elements from within the Nazi movement. The sheer conviction with which Hitler spoke, combined with the general discontent and resentment in the crowds which he spoke to, produced the powerful perception of charisma in the speaker. For example, Kurt Ludecke, one of Hitler's early associates, who heard Hitler speak in 1922, emphasized how the conviction in Hitler's speech gave it a strong element of religiosity:

> His appeal to German manhood was like a call to arms; the gospel he preached, a sacred truth. He seemed another Luther…Of Course I was ripe for this experience. I was a man of thirty-two, weary with disgust and disillusionment, a wanderer seeking a cause…a yearner after the heroic without a heroic. The intense will of the man, the passion of his sincerity, seemed to flow from him into me. I experienced an exaltation that could be likened only to religious conversion.[24]

Notice how Ludecke's description specifically relates Hitler's charisma to his own condition as one who was "weary with disgust and disillusionment"; it was this condition which allowed the "sheer force of Hitler's conviction" to move Ludecke as it did with an exaltation similar to religious conversion.[25] This sense of decay and despair which had become characteristic of

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[23] Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 43-44.
[24] Kurt Ludecke, "Hitler as a public speaker," edited and translated by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, in *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 42.
[25] Kurt Ludecke, "Hitler as a public speaker," 42.

Weimar-era politics would be fully exploited by Nazi propaganda in the coming years: Hitler would be set forth as a leader who would save the German people from their disillusionment.

The failure of the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 and Hitler's imprisonment for the next nine months marked a new period in Weimar democracy. The stabilization of economic and political life between 1924-1928 within the Republic meant that the Nazi Party had to use parliamentary means to grow its power.[26] This made the use of propaganda imperative for developing a broad base for the Party and legitimating it to the public. The Nazi propagandists at the time, Joseph Goebbels and Gregor Strasser, recognized immediately that the development of the Party depended upon highlighting the existing social tensions which dominated Weimar, while offering the Fuhrer myth and the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a solution to the crisis. Specifically, Strasser and Goebbels aimed to appeal to the worker, and so leaned into the "socialist" element of the National Socialist Party, which Hitler would later abandon.

Not only was the Fuhrer myth vital for garnering public perception, it was – and also started – as the vital principle of organization within the Nazi Party. The importance of the idea of the leadership principle is indicated by a paper Gregor Strasser wrote in his newspaper in 1927:

> "Duke and vassal!" In this ancient German relationship of leader and follower, fully comprehensible only to the German mentality and spirit, lies the essence of structure of the NSDAP, the driving force of this aggressive power, the conviction of victory.[27]

With the analogy to medievalism, Strasser conveys the sort of relationship the members of the Party must hold to the leader: one of absolute authority, which is racialized as a specifically "German mentality and spirit." Thus, while Gregor Strasser was by no means a complete devotee

[26] Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, 19.
[27] Gregor Strasser, "Heil Hitler," in *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, edited and translated by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 84-85.

of the Hitler myth, he nonetheless recognized its vital importance for maintaining cohesion within the Party.

The functional importance of the Hitler myth was fully understood by Joseph Goebbels who joined the Party in 1924, becoming the Gauleiter of Berlin in 1926 and then Reich Propaganda Minister upon the Party's ascension to power in 1933. Unlike Strasser, he fully believed in the Hitler myth he promulgated. As early as 1925, Goebbels spoke of Hitler in religious language, writing of Hitler, "You personify the faith," "it suffices to your true modesty to be the first servant of the people."[28] Equal to his idolization of Hitler as a religious leader, Goebbels also repeatedly emphasized the victimization of the German people by the "Eastern Jewish profiteer" and western capitalism. For example, in his Berlin Nazi newspaper, *Der Angriff*, published July 25, 1927, Goebbels wrote, "international capital allows us to fill its money sacks with interest payments. That and only that is the result of a centuries-long history of heroism. Have we deserved it? No, and no again!"[29] While the Nazis would later pivot away from their anti-capitalist rhetoric in favor of the middle class, Goebbels' rhetoric purposefully played into the victimization of the "heroic" Germans at the hands of outsiders and "Jewish" profiteers. The Fuhrer would be presented as the solution.

Section III – The Shift to an Appeal to the Middle-Classes in Nazi Propaganda

Perhaps the most momentous and important shift in early Nazi propaganda tactics was to move away from an emphasis on the German working classes toward an emphasis on the middle classes. This shift coincided with the aforementioned economic and political stability that the

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[28] Joseph Goebbels, quoted in Ernst K. Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda 1925-1945* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1965), 199.
[29] Joseph Goebbels, "We Demand," edited and translated by Randall Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, accessed November 18, 2024, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif05.htm

Weimar Republic experienced in the period between 1924 and 1928. This relative stability posed a problem for Nazism, which depended for its success on continual crises which the party could exploit to gain favor with the masses. Additionally, the Party had failed to gain the favor of the working class, which remained loyal to the traditional Socialist and Communist Parties, and which continued to remain suspicious of the "Socialist" label in National Socialism.[30] The lack of popularity with the working classes required a shift in Nazi propaganda tactics: moving away from their attempts to appeal to the working class, the Nazis started to build their base by appealing to lower-middle-class Protestants who worked as craftsmen, shopkeepers, and small business owners.[31] These groups were, on the whole, hostile to left-wing politics and could be appealed to through their notions of petit-bourgeois morality. With the impact of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Nazis found their opportunity to build their support, which was reflected in their 1932 electoral campaign.

As the Hitler myth developed in this later period, propaganda integrated themes and ideas intended to appeal to the lower-middle-classes (the *Mittelstand*) most of all. As Lothar Kettenacker perceptively notes in "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class,"

> The collective mentality of the lower middle class was more the product of German political culture in general…open to political and ideological manipulation and at the same time was narrowly defined by a petit bourgeois code of moral respectability.[32]

In other words, Kettenacker argues, the Hitler myth largely played into the notion of moral respectability which the lower middle classes valued, while attacking the class tensions in the Weimar system which were an easy target for abuse. Hitler, as Kettenacker notes, although

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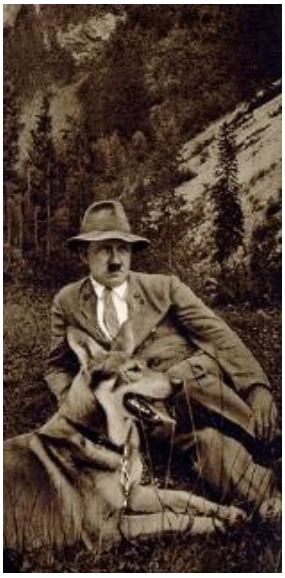
[30] Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, 89-90.
[31] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics,* 39.
[32] Lothar Kettenacker, "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class," in *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and Limitations*, ed. David Welch (Totowa: Croom Helm, 1983), 24-25.

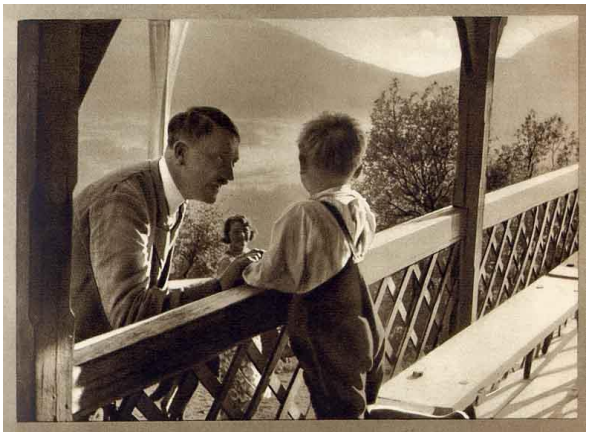
referring to the petit bourgeois derogatorily was himself the "representative individual" of a lower middle-class ethics and lifestyle, which in rhetoric opposed class snobbery *and* class conflict. These petit bourgeois, like the self-employed artisans, resented the intrusion of government bureaucracy, which they felt opposed their interests; and those who were employed by local or central government authorities did not feel spiritually uplifted or convinced that employment alone was the answer to their grievances.[33] This opened an opportunity for the Nazis to exploit the discontent of the middle-classes.

The propaganda campaign for Hitler leading to the Weimar parliamentary elections of July 31, 1932, reflected the Nazi Party's conscious attempts to appeal to the support of the middle class. For example, a 1932 picture book, *The Hitler No One Knows: 100 Pictures of the Life of the Fuhrer* by Heinrich Hoffman, leaned into the depiction of Hitler as a personable individual despite his prophetic mission to save Germany. Appealing to middle class sensibilities, the picture book was filled with depictions of Hitler represented as an affectionate, caring, lovable leader and person, whose character was quite unlike the caricatures his "enemies" had presented. For example, one picture presents Hitler dressed in a suit, tie, and hat with his dog sitting in the "natural" countryside with the subtitle, "When evil men wanted to hurt him deeply, they poisoned his favorite dog. That is how evil fights a good person."[34] This dog-loving "good person" is shown in another picture in his country home with a child, "a small wooden house that his sister purchased," in which he goes to find "the inner strength for new tasks." In yet another

[33] Lothar Kettenacker, "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class," 19.
[34] Heinrich Hoffman, "The Hitler No One Knows," edited and translated by Randall L. Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, accessed November 21, 2024, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hitler2.htm

picture, Hitler is shown with the SA men in the Brown House in Munich: “How their eyes glow when the Fuhrer is with them!” reads the subtitle.





The emphasis on the private bourgeois morality of the “good person” fighting “evil,” the peaceful idleness and sentimentality of the natural settings in which Hitler was presented, and the personable affection of the SA men for their Fuhrer made Hitler into a relatable person for a middle class that would likely have shared the same interests and psychological sensibilities.

On the political level, the mass pamphlets and articles the Nazis circulated during the 1932 presidential elections when Hitler was running against the incumbent president of the Republic, Paul von Hindenburg, expressed a desire for national unity and the end of social divisions which would also have appealed to the middle classes. On the eve of the first round of the 1932 presidential elections (March 7, 1932), Joseph Goebbels published an article in his Berlin Gau newspaper, *Der Angriff*, titled “We are Voting for Adolf Hitler!”[35] In this article, Goebbels portrayed Hitler as the national representative of the German people: “Adolf Hitler’s goal is the union of all Germans.” Hitler was presented as “Hitler, the Great German,” “Hitler,

[35] Joseph Goebbels, “We are Voting for Hitler!” edited and translated by Randall L. Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, accessed November 21, 2024, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif12.htm.

the Fuhrer," "Hitler, the Prophet," and "Hitler, the Fighter." By presenting Hitler as a superhuman savior of Germany, Goebbels constructed a new "political faith" composed of unity and the end of uncomfortable class conflict which the middle class most desired. For example, under "Hitler the Prophet," Goebbels writes, "In the National Socialist movement, the farmer stands beside the worker, the prince beside the worker, the student next to the front soldier." By contrasting the prospect of national classless unity provided by National Socialism to the financial "anarchy," class conflict, and hopelessness of the Weimar "System" at the height of the Great Depression, Goebbels offered Hitler as the only possible solution for the "millions and millions of German workers, farmers and the middle class [who] are the victims of this fateful course." Thus, Goebbels could end his article by saying, "He who opposes class struggle and fraternal murder, who is looking for the way out of chaos and confusion, this man will vote for Adolf Hitler!" Goebbels thereby transformed Hitler into a symbol that stood against the heightened political, economic, and social conflict associated with Weimar Germany. Hitler provided a way out of Weimar toward the desired national unity which Weimar seemed antithetical to: Goebbels was clearly saying, "He who opposes [the chaos of Weimar], this man will vote for Adolf Hitler!"

Indeed, leading up to the elections, Hitler's campaign speeches, like his speech on July 15, 1932, directly ridiculed the decision-making process of the Weimar Republic, stating, "All these efforts to divide the nation into classes, estates, professions and denominations and to lead them to economic prosperity bit by bit can now be said to have *utterly failed*."[36] The effectiveness of the Hitler myth was then, to a large degree, dependent upon the perceived failure of the Weimar Republic and the large-scale disaffection and discontent within the German

[36] Adolf Hitler, quoted in Lothar Kettenacker, "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class," 20 (emphasis added).

populace, and especially the middle class, which fed into this perceived failure. Hitler himself was consciously aware that his success and the success of the Party were due to this discontent which had been intentionally exploited and magnified:

> And who will deny that, in a time when everything in Germany is falling apart and degenerating, when everything in the business world and political life is reaching a standstill or coming to an end, a single organization [the NSDAP] has experienced an enormous and miraculous upturn![37]

This "miraculous upturn" was not entirely an exaggeration. Compared with other parties, the support the NSDAP gained from the lower middle classes during the last years of Weimar made it the closest thing to a people's party, representing most sections of society.[38]

That Goebbels' and Hitler's propaganda was especially effective in garnering the support of a disaffected middle class is indicated through the Hitler myth's successful appeal to middle class women, like the Hamburg woman, Frau Luise Solmitz. On April 23, 1932, Frau Solmitz, as if directly imbibing Joseph Goebbels' propaganda, wrote in her diary about her impressions of a Hitler rally in Hamburg:

> How many look up to him [Adolf Hitler] with touching faith! as their helper, their saviour, their deliverer from unbearable distress – to him who rescues the Prussian prince, the scholar, the clergyman, the farmer, the worker, the unemployed, who rescues them from the parties back into the nation.[39]

Solmitz made clear that the appeal of Hitler was found in his national and classless appeal: Hitler represented the nation, Hitler was an escape from the class conflict of Weimar, and Hitler was a way out toward an imagined national rebirth of Germany.

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[37] Adolf Hitler, "Speech on July 15, 1932" in *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, ed. Max Domarus and trans. Mary Fran Gilbert (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), vol. I, 144.
[38] Lothar Kettenacker, "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class," 20.
[39] Frau Luise Solmitz, "A Hitler meeting in Hamburg, 23 April 1932," in *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, edited and translated by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 104-105.

Section IV- The Hitler Myth in Power and the "National Uprising"

In 1932, the NSDAP saw a surge of popularity that propelled it into the limelight of German public life. Although Hitler lost his election to Hindenburg on April 10, 1932, he succeeded in winning 36.8 percent of the vote compared to the next candidate on the list, Ernst Thalmann in the KPD (the Communist Party), who won only 10 percent of the vote. In the July 1932 federal elections, the NSDAP similarly took 37.4 percent of the vote, becoming the largest bloc in the Reichstag.[40] Not surprisingly, the success of the NSDAP came at the height of the Great Depression, with 6.2 million Germans unemployed in early 1932. Large scale unemployment led to a feeling of despair and betrayal, which often translated into political radicalism;[41] this sense of desperation was harnessed by Nazi propaganda for the advantage and success of the Nazi movement. Support from the lower middle class and the conservative establishment was now joined with broader support from the educated middle classes, farmers, and even workers. The Nazis aimed to heighten this discontent with propaganda that was almost entirely negative: the NSDAP attacked the Young Plan, a payment schedule for reparations of World War I, and the Versailles Treaty, which blamed Germany for World War I, as well as the "Weimar System" itself. While sustaining this critique, the party hosted thousands of rallies to build enthusiasm, which gave the impression of a dynamic and powerful movement. The youthful uniformed SA that served in these rallies promised an "awakening" of the nation, a new way out of the broken system, which vitalized people to come to the polls.[42]

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[40] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics*, 48.
[41] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics*, 42.
[42] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics,* 45.

Already during this period in 1932 – with the rallies, the visual displays of dynamism in the movement, and the propaganda to enforce the movement – there was an attempt to project Hitler as both a moderate who would reinstitute Germany's old glory under the Bismarckian regime, as well as a man of the people representing a dynamic movement of a fundamentally different nature than what had come before. Hitler had to appear tolerable to the German population at large as well as to the specific interests of the conservative elite and the bourgeois which, in the crisis of the 1930s, had come to reassert their dominance over Weimar's political system. It was then the task of propaganda to create the impression that Hitler stood above the factional interests which had characterized Weimar. For example, in a mass pamphlet issued in the 1932 presidential campaign, Hitler was mythologized and likened to the heroes of German history, such as Otto von Bismark and Frederick the Great. While identifying Hitler with the nation at large, the heroic imagery also served to give Hitler a "halo of infallibility" and his movement a theological undertone, which left his authority unquestioned:

> He who has once looked in Hitler's eyes will never forget it. His eyes resemble the famous eyes of Frederick the Great. His expression can be hard as steel one moment, but radiate goodness the next. When he reviews his S.A. men, his gaze seems to penetrate to the deepest depths of each.[43]

While propaganda, such as that above, transformed Hitler into a mythologized superhuman who alone could save Germany from its plight, he was at once also depicted as a "German Worker and Front Soldier" and a "Leader of the People." In other words, it was not enough for Hitler to simply embody the heroic leaders of the past; he also had to typify the lived experiences of the German people as a whole: here was a leader of the people, who, as rising from the people, could not betray the interests of the people. Similarly, in another pamphlet, titled "Facts and Lies about

[43] Dagobert Durr, "Adolf Hitler: German Worker and Front Soldier," edited and translated by Randall L. Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, accessed November 23, 2024, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/adolfhitler-frontsoldat.htm.

Hitler," issued during the second round of the 1932 presidential elections, Hitler was presented as a moderate who would support the German people by leading them to the stability they were seeking, as well as one who would provide a new path forward for Germany. For example, the pamphlet states that Hitler's goals are to achieve "freedom for the German people," to achieve "its [the German people's] proper place among other peoples," and to build the "foundations for its ability to survive." These goals the pamphlet goes on to state, "can be gained through entirely peaceful means."[44]

This peaceable man with seemingly reasonable goals was at the same time depicted as someone who was "led by fate" to rescue Germany from its "greatest need."[45] To this extent, propaganda needed to make Hitler and his movement – the so-called *Hitlerbewegung*[46] - appear as an exceptional, fundamental break from the past. For example, the same pamphlet began by distinguishing Hitler, who represents a "New Germany," from Hindenburg, who upheld the broken Weimar "System":

> Behind one of them [Paul von Hindenburg] are the defeated parties of the System [the Nazi name for the Weimar Republic] and special interests who are trying to extend their 14 years of rule for several more years by exploiting the halo of the venerable army leader, behind the other [Adolf Hitler] is the **New Germany's army of millions**, who are not only demanding a reckoning, but control of the state itself.[47]

The message was clear: Hitler, while reasonable in his goals, would also be the mythical savior of Germany that would lead the way out of Weimar. The Nazi movement would enact a fundamental change that would break from the past.

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[44] "Facts and Lies about Hitler" edited and translated by Randall L. Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, accessed November 23, 2024, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/tatsachenundluegen.htm.
[45] "Facts and Lies about Hitler," German Propaganda Archive.
[46] See Lothar Kettenacker, "Hitler's Impact on the Lower Middle Class," 10.
[47] "Facts and Lies about Hitler," German Propaganda Archive; bolding in original.

With his rising popularity, Hitler, in an uneasy alliance with the conservatives in power, was appointed Chancellor by Hindenburg, the President of the Reichstag, on January 30, 1933.[48] Consistent with the message of the recent elections, the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda – established in March of 1933 – elevated Hitler as a protector of the people: Hitler was a symbol that would safeguard the interests of the nation, and especially the interests of the middle class, over the sectarian interests of class, party politics, and foreign powers. In the meantime, the most pernicious and unpopular elements of Nazism were carefully kept out of the public's vision: the militaristic ambitions of Hitler were entirely absent from the public's perception, and the pernicious antisemitism, which was unpopular with the German public even in 1933, was downplayed as insignificant to the movement. The line of attack was rather drawn against the supposed "enemies of the people" – the Left: the socialists and communists – internal and external, which the regime claimed as responsible for the "anarchy" of Weimar. In this, the Nazi regime faced little opposition, as the complacent middle class and the conservative elite were all too willing to see the Marxists arrested, even killed, and the Republic dismantled. In its place, they desired a more authoritarian nationalist regime. For example, the upper middle-class woman Frau Solmitz commented ecstatically at the torchlit procession she witnessed in front of the Reich Chancellery the night Hitler was appointed Chancellor. While expressing her relief that the "Socialists and Reds [the Communists] will inevitably have to give in now," she commented approvingly on the alliance of the Nationalists and Nazis: "On each one of them depends part of Germany's hopes. National Socialist drive, German National reason, the non-political Stalhelm, not to forget Papen. It is so incredibly marvelous…"[49] In fact, Frau Solmitz was so delighted by

[48] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics,* 50.
[49] Frau Luise Solmitz, "A Middle-class reaction to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor," in *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 160.

the spectacle of "nationhood" she witnessed that she wanted her friend's children to also savior the spectacle with her: "So far the impressions they [the children] had had of politics had been so deplorable that they should now have a really strong impression of nationhood, as we had once, and store it in their memories. And so they did."[50] She ended her entry by saying, "What must Hitler feel when he sees the hundred thousand people whom he summoned, to whom he gave a national soul, people who are ready to die for him."[51] Frau Solmitz had been utterly convinced that Hitler would restore the nation and rid her of the much-hated era of Weimar politics.

A day after Hitler assumed power, he made an "Appeal to the German People" to perpetuate the myth of the "national uprising," which he claimed to represent in himself. Hitler described the previous era as one of "unmitigated disaster," offering his *volkisch* "National Government" as the solution to a "nation disintegrating in a welter of egoistical political opinions, economic interests, and ideological conflicts." Catering to middle class sentiment, Hitler claimed that the Communists – who were equated with the fourteen years of Weimar democracy – were the greatest threat to Germany. These Communists, according to Hitler, had uprooted the nation, betrayed it to foreign powers, and diluted its racial composition and spirit. This "negative, totally destructive ideology," Hitler claimed, was a threat to all the "notions of honour and loyalty, nation and fatherland, even the eternal foundations of our morals and our faith."[52] In contrast, Hitler represented his National Government as the typification of the bourgeois "morals" and "faith" which would restore the sense of normalcy and unity most desired by this class of people:

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[50] Frau Solmitz, "A Middle-class reaction to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor," 161.
[51] Frau Solmitz, "A Middle-class reaction to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor," 162.
[52] Adolf Hitler, "Appeal to the German People," *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945,* ed. and trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 163.

> The National Government will therefore regard it as its first and supreme task to restore to the German people unity of mind and will. It will preserve and defend the foundations on which the strength of our nation rests. It will take under its firm protection Christianity as the basis of our morality, and the family as the nucleus of our nation and our state. Standing above estates and classes, it will bring back to our people the national consciousness of its racial and political unity and the obligations arising therefrom.[53]

Notice how Hitler's vague generalities in this speech serve two purposes. First, as Pridham and Noakes note, Hitler avoided specific commitments that could alienate parts of the German populace and dispel the illusion of the Hitler myth. But second, and even more importantly, Hitler's speech directly catered to the sensibilities of the bourgeois, which was indicated in his emphasis on "morality," the "family," and "Christianity." Hence, Hitler argued that his leadership represented a national "regeneration" and an end to the "heartbreaking disunity" and the "turbulent instincts" which had governed the Weimar Republic and offended the middle class most of all. Once again, Hitler presented himself as the way out of Weimar, and judging by the complacent and even enthusiastic responses he received from the public, his rhetoric was effective.

When Adolf Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933, few people, including his middle class supporters, predicted that he would establish a dictatorship.[54] This opportunity soon arrived when the Reichstag building went up in flames on February 27, 1933. The following day Adolf Hitler passed the Reichstag Fire Decree, the so-called "Decree for the Protection of People and State."[55] By perpetuating the myth of the national uprising, Hitler successfully nullified the civil protections in the Weimar constitution, including freedom of speech, without eliciting a negative reaction from the public. The decree began: "By the authority of Section 48 (2) of the German Constitution the following is decreed as a defensive measure against Communist acts of violence

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[53] Adolf Hitler, "Appeal to the German People," 164.
[54] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics*, 54.
[55] Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics*, 55-56.

endangering the State." In other words, Hitler portrayed himself as a protector of the people, who would save the people from the evil communist threat. Some middle class individuals who were hostile to the Left were thrilled by Hitler's decisiveness. For example, Frau Solmitz stated thrillingly in response to the decree, "all of the thoughts and feelings of most Germans are devoted to Hitler…His glory reaches to the stars."[56]

Section V – The Rohm Putsch and Hitler as the Representative Individual

Following Hitler's consolidation of power with the 23 March 1933 Enabling Act and the synchronization of the state under Nazi policies in the period between 1933 and 1934, a notable and revealing event occurred. This event was the Night of the Long Knives, or as Hitler would refer to it, the Rohm "putsch" or "affair." The Night of the Long Knives – which began on June 30, 1934 – specifically referred to the purging of Ernst Rohm – the SA (paramilitary) leader – and other SA members whose revolutionary leanings posed a threat to Hitler's further consolidation of power over the state. Altogether, the Rohm 'putsch' that Hitler orchestrated resulted in the murder of over eighty-five people in two weeks and gained considerable publicity.

What is noteworthy about the murder of Rohm and his associates is how positively this act was perceived by the German public, who knew Hitler was behind the murder of Rohm. For example, reporting on the popular reaction toward the "putsch," the Gestapo wrote:

> The measures proceeded smoothly in this area…Among the population at large, confidence in the Fuhrer has been consolidated by his energetic action. There are, however, requests for further energetic measures to be taken in the various Party organizations right down to the lowest levels, and in particular there are demands for liberation from 'the local Mussolinis.'[57]

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[56] Frau Luise Solmitz, quoted in Pamela Swett and Jonathan Weisen, *Nazi Germany: Society, Culture, and Politics*, 56.

[57] "The Gestapo reports popular reaction to the Rohm 'putsch,' 5 July 1934," Documents on Nazism 1919-1945, ed. and trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 221.

Notice how the Gestapo report affirmed the public's favorable perception of the Fuhrer, which was founded on his perceived "energetic action" in dealing with the SA's unrest and disturbances. By contrast, on the local governmental level, the report implied that the Party was unpopular among Germans, since it was filled with "local Mussolinis" (i.e., party officials who do not obey the Fuhrer). This reveals a central and rather puzzling feature of the Hitler myth, which relates back to the thesis of this paper, which views the myth as a reaction to Weimar culture and politics. For one thing, Ian Kershaw observes something similar of Hitler once in power. Kershaw argues that Hitler's popularity, which was based on charisma and energetic action, depended and grew in direct disjunction to the unpopularity of the Party – that is, the more unpopular the Party, the more popular and superhuman did Hitler appear.[58] The reason for this popularity was, in the first case, due to Hitler's image as protector of public order and justice. But as Ian Kershaw adds, it also had to do with the perception of Hitler as an upholder of public – specifically bourgeois – morality:[59]

> …the propaganda portrayal of Hitler as the upholder of moral standards corresponded closely with commonly-held social values and prejudices in its condemnation of venal corruption and homosexuality. In a total inversion of reality, Hitler was widely perceived as signaling a triumph for values associated with 'normality', acting as the true representative of the 'common man'…[60]

In other words, for Hitler to appeal to the common person of the middle class, he first had to be typical of such persons. Paradoxically, it was then this typicality represented in the Hitler Myth which gave it its power. The Hitler myth represented the people and their morals so that it could at the same time justify acts of brutality and terror in the name of protecting the "people" or the *volk* from its enemies.

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[58] See Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, 83-85.
[59] Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, 91.
[60] Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, 92.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Hitler myth was effective to the extent that it was a reaction to the Weimar Republic and could draw on reactive sentiments. The Hitler myth did more than provide a way out of Weimar for the middle classes who wished to return to a state of national unity: it responded directly to their discontent, their sensibilities, and their morals and offered them a return to a fictitious normalcy. The case of the Rohm putsch perfectly exemplifies how Hitler had to appropriate the typical values of the common man in order to justify his authority as the Fuhrer.

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