

Hitler and His Choice



THE FÜHRER

It is not possible to form a just judgment of a public figure who has attained the enormous dimensions of Adolf Hitler¹ until his life work as a whole is before us. Although no subsequent political action can condone wrong deeds, history is replete with examples of men who have risen to power by employing stern, grim, and even frightful methods, but who, nevertheless, when their life is revealed as a whole, have been regarded as great figures whose lives have enriched the story of mankind. So may it be with Hitler.

Such a final view is not vouchsafed to us to-day.* We cannot tell whether Hitler will be the man who will once again let loose upon the world another war in which civilization will irretrievably succumb, or whether he will go down in history as the man who restored honour and peace of mind to the great Germanic nation and brought it back serene, helpful and strong, to the forefront of the European family circle. It is on this mystery of the future that history will pronounce. It is enough to say that both possibilities are open at the present moment. If, because the story is unfinished, because, indeed, its most fateful chapters have yet to be written, we are forced to dwell upon the darker side of his work and creed, we must never forget nor cease to hope for the bright alternative.

Adolf Hitler was the child of the rage and grief of a mighty empire and race which had suffered overwhelming defeat in war. He it was who

1. Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) was born at Braunau-am-Inn, in what was then Austria-Hungary, a border village seventy miles east of the German city of Munich. His father, Alois Hitler (1837–1903), a customs official, was an illegitimate child who until he was thirty-nine years old had borne the surname of his unmarried mother, Schicklgruber. Adolf Hitler's mother was Klara Pörtl (1860–1907), who married Alois Hitler in 1885.

* Written in 1935.

as ruthless as [266] he. It is probable that, when he overthrew the existing constitutional Government of Germany, he did not know how far they had prepared the ground for his action; certainly he has never done them the justice to recognize their contribution to his success.

The fact remains that all he and Goering¹⁶ had to do was to give the signal for the most gigantic process of secret re-armament that has ever taken place. He had long proclaimed that, if he came into power, he would do two things that no one else could do for Germany but himself. First, he would restore Germany to the height of her power in Europe, and secondly, he would cure the cruel unemployment that afflicted the people. His methods are now apparent. Germany was to recover her place in Europe by rearming, and the Germans were to be largely freed from the curse of unemployment by being set to work on making the armaments and other military preparations. Thus from the year 1933 onwards the whole available energies of Germany were directed to preparations for war, not only in the factories, in the barracks, and on the aviation grounds, but in the schools, the colleges, and almost in the nursery, by every resource of State power and modern propaganda; and the preparation and education of the whole people for war-readiness was undertaken.

It was not till 1935 that the full terror of this revelation broke upon the careless and imprudent world, and Hitler, casting aside concealment, sprang forward armed to the teeth, with his munition factories roaring night and day, his aeroplane squadrons forming in ceaseless succession, his submarine crews exercising in the Baltic, and his armed hosts tramping the barrack squares from one end of the broad Reich to the other. That is where we are to-day, and the achievement by which the tables have been completely turned upon the complacent, feckless, and purblind victors deserves to be reckoned a prodigy in the history of the world, and a prodigy which is inseparable from the personal exertions and life-thrust of a single man. [267]

It is certainly not strange that everyone should want to know 'the truth about Hitler.' What will he do with the tremendous powers already in his grasp and perfecting themselves week by week? If, as I have said, we look only at the past, which is all we have to judge by, we must indeed feel anxious. Hitherto, Hitler's triumphant career has been borne onwards, not only by a passionate love of Germany, but by currents of hatred so intense as to sear the souls of those who swim upon them. Hatred of the French is the

first of these currents, and we have only to read Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*,¹⁷ to see that the French are not the only foreign nation against whom the anger of rearmed Germany may be turned.

But the internal stresses are even more striking. The Jews, supposed to have contributed, by a disloyal and pacifist influence, to the collapse of Germany at the end of the Great War, were also deemed to be the main prop of communism and the authors of defeatist doctrines in every form. Therefore, the Jews of Germany, a community numbered by many hundreds of thousands, were to be stripped of all power, driven from every position in public and social life, expelled from the professions, silenced in the Press, and declared a foul and odious race. The twentieth century has witnessed with surprise, not merely the promulgation of these ferocious doctrines, but their enforcement with brutal vigour by the Government and by the populace. No past services, no proved patriotism, even wounds sustained in war, could procure immunity for persons whose only crime was that their parents had brought them into the world. Every kind of persecution, grave or petty, upon the world-famous scientists, writers, and composers at the top down to the wretched little Jewish children in the national schools, was practised, was glorified, and is still being practised and glorified.

A similar proscription fell upon socialists and communists of every hue. The Trade Unionists and liberal intelligentsia are equally smitten. The slightest criticism is an [268] offence against the State. The courts of justice, though allowed to function in ordinary cases, are superseded for every form of political offence by so-called people's courts composed of ardent Nazis. Side by side with the training grounds of the new armies and the great aerodromes, the concentration camps pock-mark the German soil. In these thousands of Germans are coerced and cowed into submission to the irresistible power of the Totalitarian State. The hatred of the Jews led by a logical transition to an attack upon the historical basis of Christianity. Thus the conflict broadened swiftly, and Catholic priests and Protestant pastors fell under the ban of what is becoming the new religion of the German peoples, namely, the worship of Germany under the symbols of the old gods of Nordic paganism. Here also is where we stand to-day.

What manner of man is this grim figure who has performed these superb toils and loosed these frightful evils? Does he still share the passions he has evoked? Does he, in the full sunlight of worldly triumph, at the head of the

16. Hermann Wilhelm Göring (1893–1946), a leading member of the Nazi Party, joined the cabinet after Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933. An ace fighter pilot during the First World War, he nurtured the embryo Luftwaffe (German air force) in the years when its existence was prohibited under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles; Göring became its overt commander in 1935.

17. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 2 vols. (Munich: Verlag Franz Eher, 1925–26). The book, whose German title means "my struggle," was largely written while Hitler was in Landsberg prison in 1924; the work reveals the author's political aims in detail, including his view of a Greater Germany and his future plans for the Jews.

explored innumerable schemes for reducing the armaments of the Allies, none of which was pursued with any sincerity by any country [264] except Great Britain. The United States, while preaching disarmament, continued to make enormous developments in her army, navy and air force. France, deprived of the promised United States guarantee and confronted with the gradual revival of Germany with its tremendous military population, naturally refused to reduce her defences below the danger-point. Italy, for other reasons, increased her armaments.¹¹ Only England cut her defences by land and sea far below the safety level, and appeared quite unconscious of the new peril which was developing in the air.

Meanwhile the Germans, principally under the Brüning Government, began their great plans to regain their armed power. These were pressed forward by every channel. Air-sport and commercial aviation became a mere cloak behind which a tremendous organization for the purposes of air war was spread over every part of Germany. The German General Staff, forbidden by the treaty, grew year by year to an enormous size under the guise of the State guidance of industry. All the factories of Germany were prepared in incredible detail to be turned to war production. These preparations, although assiduously concealed, were nevertheless known to the intelligence departments both of France and Great Britain. But nowhere in either of these governments was there the commanding power either to call Germany to a halt or to endeavour to revise the treaties, or better still both. The first course would have been quite safe and easy, at any rate until the end of 1931, but at that time Mr. MacDonald¹² and his colleagues were still contenting themselves with uttering high-sounding platitudes upon the blessings of peace and gaining the applause of well-meaning but ill-informed majorities throughout our island. Even as late as 1932 the greatest pressure was put by the British Government upon France to reduce her armed strength, when at the same time the French knew that immense preparations were going forward in all parts of Germany. I explained and exposed the follies of this process repeatedly and in detail in the House of Commons. [265] Eventually, all that came out of the Disarmament conferences was the Re-armament of Germany.

conference in 1932, attended by fifty-nine nations, fell apart because of disparate aims among the major powers, and because of German demands for equality of armaments with everybody else. Germany left the League of Nations in 1935.

11. The Italians, under Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, were preparing to invade and occupy Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia), which they did in October 1935.

12. Ramsay MacDonald had resigned as prime minister in August 1931, overwhelmed by the Great Depression, but the king immediately reappointed him to head a national government, most of whose members were Conservatives. The Labour Party expelled MacDonald, but his premiership continued until 1935.

While all these formidable transformations were occurring in Europe, Corporal Hitler was fighting his long, wearing battle for the German heart. The story of that struggle cannot be read without admiration for the courage, the perseverance, and the vital force which enabled him to challenge, defy, conciliate, or overcome, all the authorities or resistances which barred his path. He, and the ever-increasing legions who worked with him, certainly showed at this time, in their patriotic ardour and love of country, that there was nothing they would not do or dare, no sacrifice of life, limb or liberty that they would not make themselves or inflict upon their opponents. The main episodes of the story are well known. The riotous meetings, the fusillade at Munich,¹³ Hitler's imprisonment,¹⁴ his various arrests and trials, his conflict with Hindenburg, his electoral campaign, von Papen's tergiversation, Hitler's conquest of Hindenburg,¹⁵ Hindenburg's desertion of Brüning—all these were the milestones upon that indomitable march which carried the Austrian-born corporal to the life-dictatorship of the entire German nation of nearly seventy million souls, constituting the most industrious, tractable, fierce and martial race in the world.

Hitler arrived at supreme power in Germany at the head of a National Socialist movement which wiped out all the states and old kingdoms of Germany and fused them into one whole. At the same time, Nazidom suppressed and obliterated by force, wherever necessary, all other parties in the State. At this very moment he found that the secret organization of German industry and aviation which the German general staff and latterly the Brüning Government had built up, was in fact absolutely ready to be put into operation. So far, no one had dared to take this step. Fear that the Allies would intervene, and nip everything in the bud, had restrained them. But Hitler had risen by violence and passion; he was surrounded by men

13. On November 8–9, 1923, Hitler and his followers in the nascent Nazi Party tried to foment a revolution in Munich, the so-called Beer Hall Putsch. An exchange of shots between the Nazis and the police resulted in the deaths of four policemen and sixteen Nazis; the putsch failed.

14. Following the failed Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler was tried for high treason and on April 1, 1924, sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Including time on remand, he served little more than a year in prison, being pardoned and released on December 20, 1924.

15. In January 1933, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor, believing that the government's coalition of conservative ministers would be able to check his excesses. Hitler, however, persuaded Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag (parliament) and hold a further election on March 6. The Nazis won the election, held the week after the Reichstag building was destroyed by fire; the Reichstag fire, almost certainly staged by the Nazis, enabled Hitler to suppress the Communists, whom he blamed, and other groups. Though Hitler was again obliged to govern in a coalition, his political maneuvering enabled him to secure approval, on March 21, of an act that effectively gave him full powers in a legal dictatorship. On July 14, the Nazis became the only legal party in Germany. When President Hindenburg died on August 2, no consequent presidential election took place. Hitler became de facto head of state and was known as the Führer (leader).

exorcized the spirit of despair from the German mind by substituting the not less baleful (262) but far less morbid spirit of revenge. When the terrible German armies, which had held half Europe in their grip, recoiled on every front, and sought armistice from those upon whose lands even then they still stood as invaders; when the pride and will-power of the Prussian race broke into surrender and revolution behind the fighting lines;² when that Imperial Government, which had been for more than fifty fearful months the terror of almost all nations, collapsed ignominiously,³ leaving its loyal faithful subjects defenceless and disarmed before the wrath of the sorely-wounded, victorious Allies; then it was that one corporal, a former Austrian house-painter, set out to regain all.

In the fifteen years that have followed this resolve he has succeeded in restoring Germany to the most powerful position in Europe, and not only has he restored the position of his country, but he has even, to a very large extent, reversed the results of the Great War. Sir John Simon⁴ said at Berlin⁵ that, as Foreign Secretary, he made no distinction between victors and vanquished. Such distinctions, indeed, still exist, but the vanquished are in process of becoming the victors, and the victors the vanquished. When Hitler began, Germany lay prostrate at the feet of the Allies. He may yet see the day when what is left of Europe will be prostrate at the feet of Germany. Whatever else may be thought about these exploits, they are certainly among the most remarkable in the whole history of the world.

Hitler's success, and, indeed, his survival, as a political force, would not have been possible but for the lethargy and folly of the French and British Governments since the War, and especially in the last three years.* No sincere attempt was made to come to terms with the various moderate governments⁶ of Germany which existed under a parliamentary system. For a

2. On October 29, 1918, sailors at Kiel refused to obey orders to engage the Royal Navy; by November 6, this disaffection had spread to the Western Front and to major cities and ports in Germany.

3. Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated on November 9, 1918, and went into exile in the Netherlands. A new government, led by the Social Democrats, took over and called for an armistice, which duly took effect on November 11, 1918.

4. Sir John Allsebrook Simon (1873–1954), 1st Viscount Simon, 1940; he served as foreign secretary, 1931–35. Later he was lord chancellor in Churchill's wartime coalition government.

5. In March 1935.

6. Between the collapse of the empire in 1918 and the accession of Hitler in 1933, Germany had thirteen different chancellors, whose tenures of office varied from two months to two years. The German regime in this era was known as the Weimar Republic, after the city where a constitutional assembly took place in 1919.

* 1932–35.

long time the French pursued the absurd delusion that they could extract vast indemnities (263) from the Germans in order to compensate them for the devastation of the War. Figures of reparation payments were adopted, not only by the French but by the British, which had no relation whatever to any process which exists, or could ever be devised, of transferring wealth from one community to another. To enforce submission to these senseless demands, French armies actually reoccupied the Ruhr in 1923.⁷ To recover even a tenth of what was originally demanded, an inter-allied board, presided over by an able American,⁸ supervised the internal finances of Germany for several years, thus renewing and perpetuating the utmost bitterness in the minds of the defeated nation. In fact, nothing was gained at the cost of all this friction; for, although the Allies extracted about one thousand million pounds' worth of assets from the Germans, the United States, and to a lesser extent Great Britain, lent Germany at the same time over two thousand millions. Yet, while the Allies poured their wealth into Germany to build her up and revive her life and industry, the only results were an increasing resentment and the loss of their money. Even while Germany was receiving great benefits by the loans which were made to her, Hitler's movement gained each week life and force from irritation at Allied interference.

I have always laid down the doctrine that the redress of the grievances of the vanquished should precede the disarmament of the victors. Little was done to redress the grievances of the treaties of Versailles and Trianon.⁹ Hitler in his campaign could point continually to a number of minor anomalies and racial injustices in the territorial arrangements of Europe, which fed the fires on which he lived. At the same time, the English pacifists, aided from a safe distance by their American prototypes, forced the process of disarmament into the utmost prominence. Year after year, without the slightest regard to the realities of the world, the Disarmament Commission¹⁰

7. In 1923, in response to the failure of the Weimar Republic to pay the reparations imposed after the First World War, French and Belgian forces occupied the Ruhr, the center of Germany's coal, iron, and steel industries; the occupation ended in 1925.

8. Charles Gates Dawes (1865–1951), a banker who was vice president of the United States, 1925–29. Dawes was U.S. ambassador in London, 1932–39, during which period this essay was written and *Great Contemporaries* was published, which may account for his not being mentioned by name.

9. Germans objected to the Treaty of Versailles on the grounds that it imposed harsh reparations that ruined the German economy, severely limited the size of the German army, demilitarized the Rhineland (which Hitler reoccupied in 1936, the first of his bold and illegal initiatives ultimately leading to war in 1939), took about 13 percent of German national territory in Europe, and excluded Germany from the League of Nations, though Germany eventually did join the League in 1926. The Treaty of Trianon, negotiated alongside the Treaty of Versailles, was the peace agreement between the Allies and Hungary, as the rump of the former Austria-Hungary.

10. The Disarmament Commission was established by the League of Nations in 1926; a disarmament

great nation he has raised from the dust, still feel racked by the hatreds and antagonisms of his desperate struggle; or will they be discarded like the armour and the cruel weapons of strife under the mellowing influences of success? Evidently a burning question for men of all nations! Those who have met Herr Hitler face to face in public business or on social terms have found a highly competent, cool, well-informed functionary with an agreeable manner, a disarming smile, and few have been unaffected by a subtle personal magnetism. Nor is this impression merely the dazzle of power. He exerted it on his companions at every stage in his struggle, even when his fortunes were in the lowest depths. Thus the world lives on hopes that the worst is over, and that we may yet live to see Hitler a gentler figure in a happier age.

Meanwhile, he makes speeches to the nations, which are sometimes characterized by candour and moderation. Recently he has offered many words of reassurance, eagerly (269) lapped up by those who have been so tragically wrong about Germany in the past.¹⁸ Only time can show, but, meanwhile, the great wheels revolve; the rifles, the cannon, the tanks, the shot and shell, the air-bombs, the poison-gas cylinders, the aeroplanes, the submarines, and now the beginnings of a fleet flow in ever-broadening streams from the already largely war-mobilized arsenals and factories of Germany.

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18. For instance, in his May 21, 1935, speech to the Reichstag, Hitler gave assurances that he had no territorial interests in Europe. He also called for raising the Versailles Treaty's limit on the size of the German navy. Four weeks later, the British government reached an agreement with Hitler providing exactly what he asked for, allowing Germany's naval tonnage to increase to 35 percent of Britain's. Hitler renounced the agreement in April 1939.