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The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich

By Caitlin Moser

Sir Ian Kershaw is a distinguished 20th-century German historian most celebrated for his works on Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.¹ Kershaw received his BA from the University of Liverpool and his D.Phil from Merton College, Oxford. Originally having studied medieval history, Kershaw transitioned to modern German social history in the 1970s.² In 1975, Kershaw began working with German historian Martin Broszat on his "Bavaria Project", specifically examining how ordinary people viewed Hitler, before and during the Third Reich. This research resulted in Kershaw's first book, *Der Hitler-Mythos, Volksmeinung und Propaganda im Dritten Reich*, which was originally published in German in 1980. Kershaw translated the book into English and republished it in 1987 for several reasons. The translated 1897 edition (*The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*) includes a new Introduction and Conclusion as well as a brand new Chapter titled, 'Hitler's Popular Image and the "Jewish Question"'. The book is organized into three parts: the making of the Hitler myth (1920-1940), the dissolving of it during World War Two (1940-1945), and the myth in relation to genocide.

The first two chapters focus on tracing the development of the 'Führer myth' from its early stages to around 1936. Kershaw notes that the year 1936 can be considered as the start of Hitler overestimating his powers, blinded by the delusions of his own fallibilities. The political

¹ He was bestowed Knighthood for his Services to History in 2002.

² Daniel Snowman, "Ian Kershaw," *History Today*, vol. 51, issue 7, July 2001. 18. This transition was inspired by his travels to Bavaria in 1972. Kershaw met an old man, presumably a former Nazi, who told him, "You English were so foolish. If only you had sided with us. Together we could have defeated Bolshevism and ruled the earth!" He ended with, "The Jew is a louse!"

atmosphere in Germany post-World War I set the stage for Hitler's rise in power.³ Finished with Weimar politics, there was a common belief throughout Germany of a desperate need for heroic leadership. The German people wanted a leader who would be "a figure of outstanding skill and political strength, decisive and bold in resolution, to whom his 'following' could look in admiration and devotion".⁴ This was in the 1920s. However, fifteen years later, those very attributes were identical to those of the Hitler image. With an indifference to the fanatics forming in Bavaria as well as other parts of Germany, there are claims that Hitler appeared to be "preparing the way in order to give the dictator, when he should come, a people ready for him".⁵ Whether it was all a ploy or truly genuine, these years of flattery and worship contributed to his transition to the Führer where Kershaw states, "The 'Führer myth' was a creation of his following before Hitler himself adjusted to the role".⁶

Chapter Two examines how Hitler became the "Symbol of the Nation" through the Nazi Party's dedicated propaganda efforts. Hitler's Propaganda Minister, Josef Goebbels, beautifully fabricated an image of Hitler presenting him as 'the human Hitler', a sad man of simplicity and loneliness who had sacrificed all personal happiness and private life for his people.⁷ Really what Goebbels's merely did was take Hitler's worst personality traits and transform them into admirable qualities. However, despite the best propaganda efforts, support and morale [of

³ Dr. Ryan Johnson, "Lecture notes," (Class lecture, Montgomery County Community College, Pottstown, PA, January, 2010). The *Dolchstoßlegende*, "stab-in-the-back", was a popular conspiracy theory of betrayal that circulated after news of Germany's defeat in World War I. The German population believed Germany did not lose the war, but rather that she was stabbed in the back. Representing the Weimar Republic were the conspirators deemed the "November Criminals" who signed the armistice with the Allies ending the war. As a result, the Treaty of Versailles was drawn up, further adding salt to Germany's wounds and fueling this developing conspiracy theory which led to the extreme distrust and fragmentation of the Weimar Republic.

⁴ Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

Hitler] were decreasing throughout Germany between 1935 and 1936 due to the worsening of Germany's economic crisis. As a cunning distraction, Hitler carried out the march into the Rhineland on March 7th. This was portrayed to the public as Hitler defying the Versailles treaty and only made Goebbels's propaganda efforts easier. Kershaw makes the remarkable claim that "Hitler himself was a convert to the 'Führer myth', himself a 'victim' of Nazi propaganda. [...]" What seems certain is that the day on which Hitler started to believe in his own 'myth' marked in a sense the beginning of the end of the Third Reich".⁸

Concentrating on thus far a new feature of the 'Hitler myth', Chapter Three examines the 'Hitler believers' and their contribution to manufacturing the myth, 'from below'. Kershaw explores popular reactions to the most dramatic events in Germany in 1934: the massacre, on Hitler's orders, of the SA leadership on 30 June 1934 following the so-called 'Röhm Putsch'.⁹ This event that should have horrified the German people and ruined Hitler's popularity, in fact, did the complete opposite. Instead, Hitler was praised, deified, and increased the overall confidence because he radically took action against Röhm and the SA.¹⁰ Analyzing the public's opinion on the Putsch, the *Sopade* concluded three general points: first, the public did not understand the political significance of the event; two, majority of the population praised Hitler for his ruthlessness, and very few were shocked, and third, even the working class had fallen victim to the veneration of Hitler.

Delving into the religious aspect, Chapter Four illustrates the ideological struggle Hitler experienced with the major Christian denominations, primarily Protestant and Catholic, who

⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁹ Ibid., 84. Often referred to as "the Night of the Long Knives", the Röhm Putsch occurred in Germany from June 30 to July 2, 1934, when the Nazi party executed members of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), extrajudicial killing style. In addition to continuing disagreements between Hitler and Röhm, Hitler saw the SA's independence growing and sought to stop it. He feared their ability to remove him from power.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

were very influential to the population. Regarding this ‘Church struggle’, Kershaw concludes, “though stirring up a high level of animosity towards the Party and in a wider sense the Nazi regime, [it] had a far less negative impact on Hitler’s popularity than might be imagined”.¹¹

Hitler was not religious at all, but the façade he efficaciously put on helped maintain his religious image to the Church members of *both* major denominations. Kershaw explains this is why they were frequently able to exclude Hitler from their condemnation of the atheistic Nazi ideology and the anti-Christian party radicals.¹² Up until Chapter Five, Kershaw examined the stark difference between the image of Hitler and that of the Party. Kershaw points out how the Party was perceived as very unpopular because they were involved the most in everyday matters and conflicts whereas the public separated Hitler and viewed him as dealing with the more important issues. Viewed this way, Hitler represented the sunny side of the regime.¹³

It is well known that Hitler’s true intentions and actions to be taken were not matched by the words he spoke to the German people. This is easily seen as he slowly disregarded the Versailles treaty, breaking it down in front of an anxious but supportive audience, not yet ready for a Second World War. His ability to effectively unite Germany and Austria in the *Anschluss* without bloodshed would be the last effortless foreign policy success he would achieve as tensions grew.¹⁴ The Sudetenland crisis in 1938 was the first time Hitler’s popularity was threatened. Hitler recovered popularity in time for the war in 1939. Despite their unmistakable dread of another conflagration, [...], they followed their Führer into a new war without enthusiasm, but also without protest or opposition. And far from going into decline, Hitler’s

¹¹ Ibid., 106.

¹² Ibid., 109.

¹³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴ Ibid., 133.

popularity was by the end of the year, four months into the war, as solidly based as ever.¹⁵

Part Two spans the five years from 1940 to 1945 when the crumbling of the ‘Hitler myth’ began. Chapter Six begins with Hitler’s apogee of popularity from 1940 to 1941 when Germany had the most success in the war as Kershaw states, ‘The Führer’ was like a drug for the people, needed for reassurance whenever doubts, worries, and uncertainties began to mount.¹⁶ Between the disastrous Russian winter campaign when Hitler’s popularity began to dissipate and Germany declaring war on the United States, the morale of the German people was low. It seemed as if there would never be an end to the war which stirred up memories from World War I. As morale drastically plummeted, negative comments regarding Hitler, which had always been dangerous, were now considered treasonous and subject to punishment. However, what is most astonishing about all of this is that devotion to the ‘Hitler myth’ did not collapse sooner which Kershaw seeks to examine why within Chapter Seven.

Commonly accepted among historians is that Stalingrad, not only psychologically but militarily too, was the turning-point in the war. Kershaw includes it as a contributing factor to the further decline of the ‘Führer myth’ and notes this was the first time Hitler was directly implicated in the catastrophe.¹⁷ Concluding Part Two is Chapter Eight which follows the actual collapse of the myth. As the bombing raids against Germany worsened, so did the once fanatical support for Hitler, especially among families with young children. A woman with two young children taking refuge in the air-raid shelter said, “The Führer has it easy. He doesn’t have to look after a family. If the worst comes to the worst in the war, he’ll leave us all in the mess and

¹⁵ Ibid., 143-7. At the end of the chapter, Kershaw concludes that the longer the war lasted, and more the Germans sacrificed, the more the ‘Führer myth’ declined.

¹⁶ Ibid., 158.

¹⁷ Ibid., 193-201. Kershaw notes that Hitler’s earlier successes began to be seen in a new light, and he was now increasingly blamed for policies which had led to the war.

put a bullet through his head!”¹⁸ What the German people once idolized about Hitler, his sacrifice of “normal life”, was now used against him.

Part Three’s Chapter Nine is perhaps the most fascinating Chapter within the entire text, however 23 pages is inadequate for the material in discussion. With much difficulty, Kershaw explores the subject of anti-Semitism in relation to Hitler’s popular image. Hitler’s speeches from 1919 to 1924 maintain a ubiquitous anti-Semitic theme which attracted many of the early Nazi converts to the Party, though around 1922 he changed the theme to one of extreme anti-Marxism. Hitler soon changed the direction of his speeches during his run for Reich President and rarely mentioned the ‘Jewish Question’.¹⁹ It would not be until the Nuremberg Party Rally in 1935 that Hitler addressed the ‘Jewish Question’ publically where he put three anti-Jewish laws in effect. Even after 1935, he would not readdress the ‘Jewish Question’ again in major speeches until 1937. Hitler maintained his public image by separating himself from the anti-Jewish Nazi mobs and instead, staying on the legal side of matters. Kershaw says the year 1941 onwards, especially 1942, is when the ‘Final Solution’ was in full swing; during this time, Hitler began to associate the war with the destruction of the Jews.²⁰ Kershaw makes the fascinating conclusion that “anti-Semitism, despite its pivotal place in Hitler’s ‘world view’, was of only secondary importance in cementing the bonds between Fuhrer and people which provided the Third Reich with its popular legitimation [...]”²¹

Rightfully considered the “father” of Hitler biographies, Kershaw focuses more on the process of building propaganda and the German people’s perception of him. Kershaw’s main

¹⁸ Ibid., 205.

¹⁹ Ibid., 234. Between 1933 and 1934, the ‘Jewish Question’ was not touched upon in a single major public address. Kershaw states it appears hard to argue at this time that Hitler was gaining his widest electoral support that the ‘Jewish Question’ was the decisive element in his growing appeal.

²⁰ Ibid., 243.

²¹ Ibid., 250.

sources are internal confidential reports on opinion and morale which were created regularly by German government officials, police and justice administrations, Nazi Party agencies, and the security service (SD).²² Recognizing how significant the information revealed by these sources is, the notion of legitimacy must still be brought into question as many opponents to Hitler were cautious as to not reflect their true sentiments during these polls. Kershaw addresses this problem and prompts the reader to remember this throughout the course of the book.

Additionally, he addresses the geographical location of study primarily being in Bavaria but in the 1987 edition he includes research from other parts of the Reich. One of Kershaw's most commonly referenced sources throughout *The 'Hitler Myth'* is another one of his works, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, which was published in 1983. The frequent references to *Popular Opinion* aid the reader in grasping a broader sense of Kershaw's material presented and ought to be read as companion texts. Another important source referenced is the *Sopade* Reports which present readers with a bias opposite of the internal reports previously mentioned and reflect the anti-Nazi sentiment felt by Germans.²³ While it almost seems an injustice to devote only one Chapter to that of genocide and the 'Jewish Question' and even more unfair that this Chapter was only added to the revised version of this book, Kershaw defends this action in the Preface by stating that it was an "area which I had deliberately, but mistakenly (I later felt), omitted from the German text".²⁴ Kershaw includes a glossary and list of abbreviations in the back of the book for readers not familiar with the German language. Also, included is an extensive Works Cited encompassing eleven pages, as well as a list of the archival

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Ibid., 6-8. Also known as SoPaDe; the exiled organization of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany. It operated in Prague, then Paris, and ended in London.

²⁴ Ibid., vii. One seeking additional information beyond Chapter Nine can do so with Kershaw's 2008 book, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*.

sources and newspapers he consulted for the research.

The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich is a seminal work, straying away from the conventional approach to the study of Adolf Hitler. Kershaw takes the 'structuralist' approach which means the structure of the Nazi state is far more important to understand than the personality of Adolf Hitler in explaining how Nazi Germany developed. Rejecting the Great Man theory of history, Kershaw fervently argues and criticizes anyone who attempts to explain the Third Reich by means of Hitler only.²⁵ The importance of Hitler is not the person or dictator himself, but how the German people perceived him, which has been comprehensively and efficiently expressed throughout this work.

²⁵ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889 – 1936 Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), xx.

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