
RECONSIDERATIONS

Hitler's Politics & Psychopathology

An Interpretation—By DAVID ABERBACH



HITLER CAME TO power through an extraordinary concatenation of political and economic crisis and personal psychopathology. The historical circumstances which paved the way for Hitler have been studied exhaustively, and Hitler's family background has been explored as far as the meagre documentation allows. Yet the undoubted vital interconnection between the historical facts and Hitler's inner world remains obscure.

It is generally agreed by historians that Germany's defeat in the First World War, the unprecedented, futile suffering and death, the uncertainty, frustration and rage, the blow to national pride, led to Hitler's entry to politics. Germany's traditional problems—*Lebensraum* and unity—became national obsessions after the war, especially as the Russian Revolution threatened to spill over into Germany. Amid panic, disunity, and political and economic upheaval, Hitler took his first steps to power. The Wall Street crash of 1929, and the panic and depression which followed, precipitated his ascent to the Chancellorship. In the 1928 elections, Hitler received 811,000 votes (about 100,000 less than in 1924); in 1930, 6.3 million Germans voted for him.

Hitler came to power in 1933 through democratic means, with the support of the masses. He was welcomed by intellectuals as well as workers, by industrialists and artists, farmers and philosophers, generals and housewives. Many considered him to be a charming, intelligent, perceptive, highly competent and many-sided leader—a born politician. His achievements until the War were not inconsiderable. He eliminated unemployment through a massive rearmament programme (there were six million unemployed when he came to power), stabilised the currency, provided effective social legislation, and gave Germany for the first time since 1914 a sense of unity and optimism.

Despite the purges of the SA in 1934 and the Nuremberg

Laws of 1935, David Lloyd George could describe Hitler as "the George Washington of Germany"; and Churchill regarded Hitler's accomplishments until 1937 as "among the most remarkable in the whole history of the world." And, in the 1930s, the German people willingly, even joyfully, pledged their loyalty not merely to Hitler the politician but to Hitler the myth, the semi-deity, the Messiah, the embodiment of the national will. Never in history has one man wielded such power over a people.

Political and economic conditions aside, how can Hitler's hold on the German people be explained?¹

PART OF THE ANSWER lies in Alan Bullock's observation that no political leader has ever shown greater understanding of the irrational and emotional factors in politics, or exploited them more masterfully. Hitler's instinct for the theatrical (Chaplin once described him as "the greatest actor of us all"), his fanatically sincere oratory, his use of his hands and eyes (for which he received professional training), hypnotised his audiences and brought about their complete identification with him.

Hitler, in addition, was the first master of the mass media, of radio and the newsreel (sound came in just as his career was about to take off), and of the modern election campaign. The newness of it all gave his presence and voice in mass rallies and on radio and film an almost apocalyptic quality. His propaganda was planned and carried out with utmost effectiveness. Such forces seem to have overwhelmed the German masses, raised in a highly authoritarian family structure, social hierarchy, educational system and military tradition. Tens of thousands of ex-servicemen who had not found a place in post-War German society were magnetised by Hitler; he was, after all, one of them, and he offered them a uniform, a group identity and an outlet for their frustrations. Their resistance lowered by the terror of political and economic chaos, by a lingering sense of inferiority, betrayal and hate, Germans were on the whole willing to throw their lot in with Hitler and ignore the possibility of disastrous long-term consequences.

The short-term gains were considerable. Hitler's violent assumption of dictatorial power in 1933-34 gave Germany unity; his persecution of the Jews and the Nuremberg Laws assuaged German inferiority; the repudiation of the terms of the Versailles Treaty and the military build-up alleviated

¹ See, in general, among the many biographies of Hitler, Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952), and Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (1974).

German shame at being defeated; the remilitarisation of the Rhineland (1936), the “bloodless conquests” of Austria and the Sudetenland (1938) and Czechoslovakia (1939) reinforced Germany’s new-found sense of power and vitality.

The price that the world paid in the end was over 30 million dead; and the price paid by Germany was defeat and the stigma of having dehumanised itself by criminally dehumanising and murdering countless victims.²

Who was Hitler? What were the sources of his hatred, of the Jews in particular?

THE FULLEST ACCOUNT of Hitler’s early life appears in John Toland’s biography.³ Hitler’s father was an Austrian customs official who never knew his father (who might have been a Jew) and who lost his mother in childhood. He was a brutal, tyrannous man and led a stormy marital life. A niece whom he first adopted and later married (after the deaths of his first two wives) became Hitler’s mother. After losing three children, she gave birth to Hitler in 1889. The bond between mother and son was unusually intense and protective as she was fearful of losing him as she had lost her other children, and also because of her husband’s harsh character and the age difference between them—she was 23 years younger than he.

The mother’s loving tenderness contrasting with the father’s cruelty and rages (he frequently beat his son) might be reflected in the split between Hitler’s later idealisation of Germany in *Mein Kampf* as the “faithful mother” and his condemnation of Austria as a traitorous father-figure, guilty, among other things, of sexual immorality, incestuous and Jewish. (Hitler’s father, on the other hand, was proud of being Austrian and regarded being called *ein Deutsche*, a German, as an insult.)

Even if Hitler’s father was not part-Jewish, Hitler apparently came to suspect that he was, and the intensity of his later anti-Semitism might, therefore, have originated partly in his hatred of—and identification with—what he perceived his father as being. Also, the loss of his older siblings and of a younger brother who died when he was about 11 might have predisposed him to a later feeling of being chosen, infallible and invincible. It may be that Hitler’s monorchism—the Russian autopsy report revealed that one of his testicles had not descended—intensified the pathological tendencies created by tensions within his family.

Other characteristics of Hitler in later life might also be related to his family structure: his mother’s overly-close, anxious attachment to him might have contributed to his later aversion to normal heterosexual relations (he said that

he was “married” to Germany) and the repudiation of his “feminine” softness, weakness and fear (he suffered from innumerable phobias) in favour of an extreme masculine ideal of toughness and brutality. His relationship to the German masses, as he saw it, was one of man to woman, and it might have involved a displaced incestuous attachment to his mother.

Leaving such conjectures aside, the deaths of Hitler’s parents when he was in his teens were doubtless crucial in the growth of his psychopathology. His reaction to his father’s sudden death in 1903 is unknown, but apart from grief, it might have included an element of relief at being rid of a tyrant and guilt at having wanted his death. The death of his mother, however, was perhaps the greatest blow in his life. She died slowly of cancer in 1907, and Hitler nursed her during her last two months. Her doctor was a Jew. Eduard Bloch, who used the primitive, largely ineffectual, evil-smelling treatments then available.

WAS THE DOCTOR’S JEWISHNESS a factor in Hitler’s later anti-Semitism? In his speeches, he frequently referred to the Jews as a stench-ridden cancer which had to be cut out if mother-Germany was to be saved. Also, he joined an anti-Semitic society several months after his mother’s death. It is believed by some psychologists, including John Bowlby,⁴ that the pathological nature of Hitler’s anti-Semitism might be linked with the hatred which the bereaved often feels towards the doctors of the lost person. In Hitler’s case, this hatred would have been exaggerated by his close dependence upon his mother and by other factors, personal as well as social. At any rate, Dr Bloch recalled thirty years later: “In all my career I have never seen anyone so prostrate with grief as Adolf Hitler. . . .” Hitler’s periodic depressions in later life, during which he would contemplate or even threaten suicide, alternating with violent rages, might ultimately be traced, in part at least, to the effects of his mother’s death.

Hitler’s failure to gain admission to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, which he later blamed on Jewish influence, was a further severe blow; and he spent the next few years as a down-and-out in Vienna hostels, earning a meagre livelihood from his paintings, sketches, and posters. This existence seems to have resulted less from the lack of prospects than from his broken emotional state after his mother’s death.

Hitler’s inability at this time and for the rest of his life to establish a loving relationship with a woman was brought about partly by his grief-ridden attachment to his mother. His relations with women were always tortured—six of the women with whom he was closely associated in later life either committed suicide or attempted to do so. According to Walter Langer’s wartime report on Hitler for the American Secret Service,⁵ several informants reported that Hitler had a sexual perversion known as coprophilia: he gained sexual pleasure by having women defecate or urinate on him. In clinical cases, Robert Waite has pointed out in his study of Hitler, *The Psychopathic God*, this condition is invariably found in those with overwhelming feelings of inferiority, guilt and masochism, all of which played a vital part in Hitler’s

² Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1975); J. L. Talmon, “European History and the Seedbed of the Holocaust”, in *Jewish Perspectives: 25 Years of Modern Jewish Writing* (ed. Sonntag, 1980).

³ John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (1976).

⁴ John Bowlby, *Loss: Sadness and Depression*, Vol. 3 of *Attachment and Loss* (1980).

⁵ Walter Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report* (1972).

psychology and in the emergence within him of his opposite—the omnipotent, brutally unprincipled *Führer*.⁶

IN PRE-WAR VIENNA, however, this persona had not yet formed, and those who knew Hitler at the time remembered that he looked more like a stereotype of a Jew than like an Aryan “Superman.” He was an impoverished, shabby youth, in poor physical condition, insecure and excitable, living in his own world of fantasy, not lacking in intelligence and charm, and he had clearly been through a lot in life.

The hostels in which Hitler lived were supported by Jewish charities, and it may be that the humiliation of having to undergo shower and disinfectant before entering was associated in Hitler’s mind with the Jews and became part of

the imagery of his later lust for revenge. At this time, however, he apparently did not use the Jews as an outlet for his aggressions and frustrations, though he read popular anti-Semitic literature.

The outbreak of war in 1914 was a tremendous relief to him. He joined the German (not the Austro-Hungarian) army and was, by all accounts, obedient, loyal and brave under fire. In the fight for Germany, Hitler’s apathy and depression seem to have vanished and were replaced by a sense of pride, security and belonging, as well as by an aim in life.

If there was a single point in Hitler’s life when the “psychopathic god” was born in him, when his relatively conventional problems, drives and prejudices crossed the border into dangerous insanity, that point was reached when Germany lost the War. At the time of Germany’s surrender, Hitler was particularly susceptible to a psychotic reaction. In a mustard-gas attack in October 1918, he was blinded. For several weeks he lay in hospital recovering his sight. When news came of Germany’s unexpected surrender, he went blind again.

The hysterical nature of this blindness might be explained in psychological terms. For example, that as Germany was equated in Hitler’s mind with the “faithful mother”, her defeat might have revived the terrible grief which he felt on losing his mother; or that this defeat called up Hitler’s alleged rage at his father for maltreating, perhaps sexually abusing, his mother. Whatever happened, a transformation took place inside Hitler: he heard visionary voices summoning him to liberate Germany and lead her to greatness. At this point, he claimed, his sight returned and he vowed to enter politics.

Hitler’s full-blown anti-Semitism apparently emerged at this time, when “international Jewry” was not infrequently blamed for Germany’s defeat, for the Russian Revolution and the Communist threat. Lucy Dawidowicz, in *The War against the Jews 1933-45*, has shown how completely Hitler was a product of his environment:

“People living in an anti-Semitic milieu—as Hitler did—already viewed Jews as diseased and filthy creatures, degenerate and corrupting, outsiders beyond fraternity and compassion. Since the society had already branded the Jews as loathsome pariahs, the Jews could then serve the symbolic and pathological needs of the obsessed and the guilt-ridden.”

Germany, in short, could be considered ripe for a psychopathic anti-Semitic ruler. The Church had always legitimised hatred of the Jews as the killers of Christ; German political leaders since Bismarck had used anti-Semitism as a political tool to gain power; popular German literature was full of virulently racist ideas which Hitler drew upon. When in 1920 the anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appeared in German, it sold 120,000 copies by the end of the year. Amid the insecurities and weak government of the post-War years, Germany looked for a strong leader and a scapegoat.

⁶ Robert Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (1977).

⁷ See, especially, Charles Osborne, *Wagner and His World* (1977).

Hitler . . . & Samuel Johnson

“To revenge reasonable incredulity by refusing evidence is a degree of insolence with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt.”



THIS was not quite how the judge summed up yesterday’s conviction of the men involved with the “Hitler Diaries.” But the German judiciary has never been particularly renowned for a happy turn of phrase when the occasion demands it.

Samuel Johnson, as we know, was different, and the question of fraud was known to provoke his most eloquent wrath. His attack on MacPherson’s forgeries of “Ossian”, while the rest of the literary world swooned with romantic delusions, is a special testimony to the long tradition of English common sense.

“I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a ruffian. You want me to retract? What shall I retract? I thought your book an imposture from the beginning, I think it upon yet surer reasons an imposture still.”

This is not to say that forgery itself does not have a proud indigenous heritage. The 18th century saw, for example, the emergence of several previously obscure mediaeval monks, one of whom, Thomas Rowley (really a teenager called Thomas Chatterton), gained a significant following on the Continent. There is a curious point when the art of fraud gains a certain cachet, when its artistic merits, if combined with a certain romantic appeal, can outweigh any of its criminal underpinnings. It reaches the level of the refined practical joke.

This was hardly the case with the “Hitler Diaries”, which showed none of the roguish panache of the huge practical joke, and precious little literary imagination. They committed the clever, but fatal crime of being extremely boring. Perhaps it was this which particularly attracted the “experts” from the salubrious recesses of Fleet Street and the ancient universities, eager to prove that interminable tedium was not their sole prerogative. Even megalomaniacs can be dull, we were asked to believe.

If only Johnson were still able to respond.

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TO A LARGE EXTENT, too, 19th-century thinkers prepared the ground for Hitler and provided intellectual justification for his *Weltanschauung*. Apart from Richard Wagner, whose pathological hatred of the Jews⁷ had the utmost influence upon Hitler and the rise of Nazism, other influences included Schopenhauer and his concept of the "triumph of the will", and Nietzsche with his emphasis upon the will-to-power and upon violence as a cleansing force. Perhaps most important of all, however, was Darwin's doctrine of natural selection, which was taken to justify racism and the idea that might makes right, and which, as one historian, the late Jacob Talmon, wrote, "brought down one of the strongest barriers protecting 'Thou shalt not kill'. . . ."

In Hitler's hands, the political, social and ideological norms were systematically pushed to their logical extremes, with the Jews as the main victims. "Anti-Semitism", Lucy Dawidowicz has emphasised, "was the core of Hitler's system of beliefs and the central motivation for his policies." Traditional suspicion, contempt and hatred of the Jews were turned by Hitler into mass paranoid psychosis.

TO READ HITLER'S ACCOUNT of the Jews in *Mein Kampf*, Alan Bullock has observed, is to enter the world of the insane. Yet, Hitler's dual image of the Jews as vermin to be exterminated and as a diabolical adversary was not uncommon in anti-Semitic literature. What was unusual was the sheer intensity of Hitler's hatred of the Jews. When he described the Jews as an "emasculating germ . . . a parasite . . . bacillus . . . leech . . . vampire . . . fungus . . . cancer . . . tuberculosis"—he meant it. "Only when we have eliminated the Jews", he wrote, "will we regain our health."

Emotionally crippled and perverse himself, surrounded by cripples, misfits and perverts, Hitler projected his self-image onto the Jews. The Jews, to Hitler, were symbolic of "the enemy within", of all that was both despicably weak and evilly omnipotent in him, and which threatened to engulf himself, Germany, and the world.⁸

Hitler must have genuinely believed that "the Jews", sexually perverse and diseased, morally corrupt and pernicious, were to blame for Germany's lack of unity and *Lebensraum*, that they, in fact, had lost the war for Germany and, symbolically, had "raped" the motherland. Communists, Socialists, Marxists, Democrats, Capitalists, and all his other enemies—including, in the end, Germany itself—were indiscriminately lumped together by Hitler under the single rubric "the Jews." His "holy mission" against the Jews, as he claimed in *Mein Kampf*, was "in accordance with

the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord. . . ."

Hitler gained the support of the German masses not because of his anti-Semitism as much as because he offered what was regarded as firm leadership in a severe crisis. Yet, once he became Chancellor, the German people were, for the most part, willing to embrace or acquiesce in his anti-Semitic policies.

HOW DID HITLER'S PATHOLOGY correspond with the state of post-War Germany to the point that he became virtually identified with Germany?

The answer may lie in the transformation which he underwent in his speeches. He would usually begin nervously, uncertain and indecisive—the epitome of the German self-image in the wake of the 1914-18 débâcle and the 1929 crash. In the course of his speeches, he would become transformed into his opposite: hard, brutal, all-powerful, capable of sadistic mass-murder, heedless of conscience and guilt—*der Führer*. This transformation, which had an unmistakable sexual element, seems to have hypnotised his audiences and provoked in them an almost orgasmic reaction, for it expressed, in an extreme form, their own secret desire to be transformed, to be omnipotent and victorious.

However, in order to convince himself that *der Führer* was real, Hitler continually had to suppress his natural uncertainties and indecisiveness, and to deny all weakness in him. In so doing, he committed himself and Germany to an increasingly radical path from which there was no retreat. It is significant, perhaps, that the implementation of the "Final Solution" began in earnest in 1942, shortly after Hitler's first military reverses, when the image of the *Führer*'s invincibility had begun to fade. By this time it was apparent that Hitler was not primarily the enemy of the Jews, but of all mankind, including Germany.

Forty years after Hitler's death and the end of World War II, the question remains: to what extent did Hitler create a National-Socialist Germany in his image, and to what extent was it the other way round? No doubt Hitler was at least partly mad. Who could conceive of monstrous Auschwitz unless, psychologically, Auschwitz was within him? Among the known factors, Hitler's background—the loss of several siblings, the distortions in his family life, the deaths of both parents when he was young—may well have predisposed him to pathological behaviour. The First World War did the rest. Yet, even in his obsessive hatred of the Jews, Hitler appeared to be the epitome of sanity to a great many Germans. Violent, unstable, self-destructive, Hitler was a creation and concave mirror-image of his country; and he came to power through the forceful correlation of his personal pathology with political crisis.

⁸ See Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1974); William Carr, *Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics* (1978).

LETTERS

Stove's Popper

SIR KARL POPPER has had a paradoxical success. He is widely considered, among an educated public, as the greatest living philosopher, though he is treated amongst professional philosophers with cool enthusiasm. While there are courses for students to learn the wildest sociological fantasies about scientific knowledge, there are none which teach the commonsense approach of Popper to science (least of all where you would expect to find it, in the department he founded, which has gone Lakatosian, as I can testify from personal experience).

But why? I believe, after reading D. C. Stove's recent article, I can understand the cause of Popper's unpopularity.

Only a few students have the articulate intelligence to even consider becoming philosophers. For such students to become philosophers involves an active choice not to use that intelligence in having a successful career outside philosophy. Philosophers are peculiar people in having decided the non-financial rewards of spending a life trying to answer abstract questions as to the nature of things outweigh the large financial rewards they could easily have earned in a career in the outside world. But what is this non-financial reward they find in philosophy?

Popper has noted a basic characteristic of the human mind. It does not like too much uncertainty. People are mentally unprepared for the changeability of the modern world, after being evolved to live in the unchanging closed world of the primitive tribe. As a consequence, in the modern world, they feel insecure. To find a new source of security, many turn to ideas. This offers them the hope they may alleviate their sense of insecurity by finding, in the intellectual world of ideas, something certain and unchanging. This hope, I suggest, is the non-financial reward which makes students decide to become philosophers.

As a consequence, the profession of philosophy is biased to view its activity as the finding of intellectual certainties. Of course, Popper's ideas are anathema to such people. He has revolutionised the way we understand the problems underlying intellectual activity, particularly in science, in showing them to be open, possessing no definite solutions. Any solution proposed is

uncertain, since tomorrow a better and previously unthought-of solution may come along and sweep our present ideas away.

Such an interpretation of the nature of intellectual activity denies certainty and so the non-financial reward which originally persuaded students to become philosophers. No wonder they are cool towards such views. And that occasionally, as in Stove's emotional *ad hominem* article, contempt is shown.

JOHN R. SKOYLES

London

WHAT AN extraordinary article in June's ENCOUNTER ("Karl Popper and the Jazz Age" by D. C. Stove) which contrived to simultaneously enrich the language of debate and impoverish its substance!

In seeing Popperism as a British fad of the 1930s the author seems to be blinding himself to a number of points:

(1) The wide currency among scientists of the theory of science expounded in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* can be ascribed to two factors. Firstly there is the success of the theory in distinguishing non-science from science and providing a sound framework for science. Secondly, there is the need (in 1985 as much as in 1935) felt by scientists for such a framework in view of uncertainty within science, especially theoretical physics since 1887, and threats from outside science exemplified by the pretension to scientific authority of Marxists, Freudians, and others.

(2) Whether the invention by Popper of his theory was sparked off by an aphorism of Nietzsche, a song by Cole Porter, or Samuel Butler's book has no bearing on the validity of the theory itself.

(3) Again, if a later generation of philosophers have borrowed some of the basic ideas of Popper's theory and got themselves into murky water, does this invalidate the theory?

(4) Surely no one will credit that such simple sloganising as equating "irrefutable" and "unfalsifiable" would bring success, particularly among scientists (who are notoriously insensitive to subtleties of language) to an otherwise empty theory. Indeed the author himself appears to be sloganising in claiming Popper taught that "we cannot learn anything about the actual universe even by experience" or in claiming that "Almost any drongo can do normal science."

It is my view that the gradual development of the scientific method is one of the great achievements of Western culture, and that Popper's encapsulation of it deserves still greater currency among scientists, technologists, economists, and especially

the intellectual slum-dwellers who stand to benefit most of all.

STEVEN R. WRAY

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Reply by D. C. Stove

MR JOHN R. SKOYLES sets out, at least, from some known facts: namely that Popper's philosophy is well-regarded by many non-philosophers, but by few philosophers. The former fact certainly calls for some special explanation, and my own attempts to explain it were given in my article. Mr Skoyles, however, thinks that the latter fact is even more in need of explanation, and he offers a theory of his own, about the psychology of philosophers, in order to explain it.

But this is carrying coals to Newcastle: there is no need whatever for Mr Skoyles's theory, or for any theory, on this matter. The poor opinion which many philosophers have of Karl Popper's philosophy is sufficiently explained by two facts which are notorious among professional philosophers.

The first fact is that Popper's philosophy entails that "*There are DNA molecules*" (and countless other scientific assertions of existence) is non-scientific; that "*The half-life of radium is 1600 years*" (and countless other scientific generalisations of a probabilistic kind) is non-scientific; that Newton's physics, Darwin's theory of evolution, and indeed any typical scientific theory, are non-scientific. Now could anyone devise, even if he set his mind deliberately to it, a conception of scientific statements which had consequences more ludicrously false than these?

The second fact is that Popper's philosophy entails that there can never be a good reason to believe any scientific theory whatever. Nor is this a conclusion which Popper arrives at with reluctance. On the contrary, he exults in it, and even dismisses, out of hand and quite generally, the very idea of rational belief. (See, for example, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. Schilpp, p. 69, p. 1043.) Now, against the members of my profession, much may be said with plausibility, and almost as much with truth. But give philosophers their due, hardly any of them are outright lunatics. So if a person tells them (whether that person be Pyrrho, or Sextus Empiricus, or Hume, or Popper) that there is no good reason to believe that their blood circulates, no good reason to believe that nuclear explosions can damage your health, and so on—well then, philosophers very naturally and rationally treat the sayings of this person with diminishing respect.

As to the popularity of Popper's philosophy among scientists, Mr Steven R. Wray supposes this to be explained