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Ian Kershaw

Despite libraries of books on the Third Reich, the questions posed by the rapid descent, within a few years, of a modern, civilized, economically advanced country into barbarism, war and systematic genocide still demand answers, and will continue to do so.

As research on the mechanisms of Nazi rule intensified during the 1960s and 1970s, and was followed by far-reaching analysis of the behaviour and attitudes of different social groups in the Third Reich, attempts were made to look afresh at the collapse of civilization in Germany. The focus shifted from a heavy concentration on the personality, ideology and actions of Hitler himself – which had sometimes been used to shore up exculpatory or apologetic interpretations of a nation driven to war and catastrophe by 'the will of an individual, of a madman'[1] - to analysis of the functioning of the 'system' of Nazi rule as a whole. Arising from this shift, a concept which has gained increasing recognition as a fruitful way of looking at the development of the Third Reich is that of 'cumulative radicalization', initially devised by Hans Mommsen.[2] It is suggestive of how forces unleashed by the National Socialist takeover of power and the often competing interests and policies of different powerful groups within the regime created a spiral of increasingly radical measures – a dynamic of racist persecution and expansionism culminating in war, genocide and unprecedented destruction. It implies, in addition, the unstoppable process of a regime careering more and more out of control, resorting to ever wilder urges to destroy and plunder, dependent increasingly on raw force as coherent structures of government and administration disintegrated and boats were recklessly burnt in an all-out genocidal war. Since that process ruled out any possibility of a compromise peace, 'cumulative radicalization' meant ultimately, therefore, self-destruction, as well as destruction on a monumental scale.

If the term offers a useful descriptive piece of shorthand for the process leading to the climacteric 'running amok' (as Mommsen calls it) of the Nazi regime,[3] it remains less than self-evident just why, exactly, the highly developed and sophisticated German state should have 'imploded' and capitulated to the irrational drive of 'cumulative radicalization'. Such a tendency does not appear to have been a feature of fascist (or

quasi-fascist) states in general. Neither Mussolini's Italy nor Franco's Spain could be said to have offered similar cases of 'cumulative radicalization'. In a differently structured state, but one frequently compared with the National Socialist regime, that of the Soviet Union, there was certainly a dramatic escalation of terror and repression under Stalin. But that escalation ceased with the dictator's death. It was 'despotic radicalization' related to Stalin's form of dictatorship, rather than 'cumulative radicalization' inherent in the system itself.

The process of 'cumulative radicalization' appears, then, to be peculiar to the Third Reich. How should it be explained? A full answer would have to incorporate at least some of the following: expectations lodged in the vision of national renewal represented by Hitler; the drive of the Nazi movement's followers to implement the diffuse Party Programme; the pressure emanating from the security police to find new ideologically determined victims; the readiness of non-Nazi national-conservative elite groups to participate in the undermining of legality through the growing cancer of the police state, and to find wide areas of affinity with the regime's unfolding racial and expansionist goals; the willingness of much of society to collaborate in discrimination against minorities; the successful propagation among, especially, the younger generation of racist, militarist and extreme chauvinist ideas, all founded in beliefs in cultural superiority; and the self-reinforcing barbarism of the war itself and of complicity in genocidal actions.

Beyond these elements of an answer, it would also be important to consider the impact on government of the highly personalized, 'charismatic' rule of Hitler. Not least, it would also be vital to take account of the personal ideological 'vision' and the actions of Hitler himself. Historiographically, historians who have concentrated on the personal role of Hitler have seldom deployed the concept of 'cumulative radicalization'. Those 'structuralist' (or 'functionalist') historians, on the other hand, who have found the concept useful, have tended, on the whole, to downplay Hitler's personal role and to look instead to the functioning (or dysfunctioning) of the 'system' as a whole. Hans Mommsen, for instance, explicitly excludes Hitler as a causative force of 'cumulative radicalization' with the comment that 'it is a serious mistake to concentrate study of the Nazi tyranny on an analysis of the role which Hitler occupied in it'.[4] It would indeed be hard to argue convincingly that the will, whims, dictates or personality disorder of Hitler were all that mattered in pushing on the 'cumulative radicalization'. But to ignore or underrate the personal contribution of Hitler would surely be equally mistaken. Hitler needs to be fully incorporated in, rather than omitted from, an analysis of 'cumulative radicalization'.

A premiss of what follows is that 'cumulative radicalization' indeed provides a fruitful concept in analysis of the Third Reich. A further starting point is that the Nazi regime was a peculiar type of modern state, and that this peculiarity is closely and specifically related to the impact of Hitler's personal exercise of power upon existing channels of authority. This can be conceptualized – using Max Weber's terminology – as the superimposition of 'charismatic' upon 'bureaucratic' (or 'legal-rational') authority. ('Charismatic authority' is used here as a technical term, implying a sense of 'mission' associated by the 'following' with the perceived extraordinary qualities of the

leader, and a highly personalized form of rule which, because of its dependence upon avoidance of failure or 'routinization', remains acutely unstable.) A further premiss, then, is that Hitler's power was real and immense, that he was neither a 'weak dictator' – a misleading implication[5] – nor a sort of front-man for other forces. The exercise of that level of power and autonomy – extraordinary even among modern dictatorships – had, so my argument runs, a direct and crucial bearing on the process of 'cumulative radicalization'. But – a final premiss – it is taken for granted that Hitler's power was not static, but expanded in consequence of the weakness, miscalculation, tolerance and collaboration of others, both inside and outside Germany.

It is important, therefore, to ask how Hitler came to be in a position to take or shape momentous decisions. This question has to be answered by looking to forces outside Hitler himself, since it is certainly true that dictators, including Hitler, 'are as dependent on the political circumstances which bring them to power as they in turn influence these'.[6] Hitler's role, in other words, has to be seen not simply in personal terms, but also as itself a 'structure' – and the most vital one – in the system of rule subject to the process of 'cumulative radicalization'.

Without the comprehensiveness of the crisis of the Weimar state, the speed and radicality of the collapse of civilization after 1933 would have been unthinkable. From the outset, the Weimar Republic had faced serious problems of legitimacy, both among wide sections of the population and within the very power elites on whom the state was dependent. Under the impact of the crippling depression beginning in late 1929, economic, social and governmental crises blended into an acute and unsustainable multidimensional legitimacy crisis of the state system itself. An authoritarian solution became increasingly inevitable. But the traditional national-conservative power elites were too weak to provide it.

An attack on civil liberties also became more and more likely, whatever the eventual outcome of the crisis. Liberal principles were under strong attack long before Hitler's takeover. One sign was growing paranoia about law and order at a time when, in fact, despite a sharp rise in political violence, actual criminality was far lower than it had been in the early 1920s. Another indicator was the growing pressure in the medical profession, strongly influenced by ideas of eugenics and 'racial hygiene', for legislation for the voluntary sterilization of those suffering from hereditary illnesses. A third example of the changing climate was the increasingly shrill clamour against 'double earners', aiming to hound women out of jobs if their husbands were also employed.

As each profession and social group increasingly felt itself disadvantaged and alienated by Weimar's failure, the attractiveness of a radical new start spread. Again, the links with an assault on human rights, including menacing signs of widening hostility towards Jews, were evident. Owners of shops and small businesses, threatened by consumer cooperatives and big department stores, found it easy to swallow the Nazi line of blaming Jewish ownership of such stores for their troubles. In the countryside, too, economic misery in the impoverished farming community readily translated itself into anger directed at 'inner enemies' and scapegoats – for the most part seen as Marxists and Jews. Many

young Germans were swept into the path of the Nazis not only through misplaced idealism, but also because of poor job prospects. Once subjected to the prevailing ethos in the Hitler Youth or the SA (*Sturmabteilung* or stormtroopers), they could soon find themselves marching through the streets attacking the 'Reds' or singing 'When Jewish blood spurts from the knife'. Students, their career expectations often vanishing before their eyes, were frequently among the most radicalized of the younger generation. Many of those who came to run the Reich Security Head Office during the war, and were most closely implicated in genocidal policies and action, had imbibed *völkisch* ideals in universities during the early years of the Weimar Republic. In the early 1930s, during the depression, the progress made by the Nazis in universities was alarming. A climate hostile to Jews, Marxists, and 'the un-German spirit' in intellectual life increasingly took hold among students, and also among many of their professors who had seen their own careers blighted. Overlaying the interests of different social groups, the polarization of left and right in Weimar's 14-year 'latent civil war',[7] the explosion of political violence in the early 1930s, and the whipped-up anti-Marxist hysteria of a right now in the ascendancy, pointed in the direction of a potential bloodbath if the Nazis were to win power.

The expectations, in other words, of differing sections of society in a national rebirth were massively heightened by Weimar's terminal, comprehensive crisis. And frequently built into such expectations was an assault on liberal values and human rights. The radicalization that burst through after 1933 was, therefore, waiting to happen if a government could be found which was prepared to sanction it and release the pent-up forces.

Such a government, it was increasingly felt outside the ranks of Social Democrats and Communists, had to be a strong, authoritarian force on the right, capable of crushing Germany's internal 'enemies', establishing national unity, and restoring law and order. The more the pluralistic party system of Weimar was seen to have failed, the greater the feeling became that the party system should be done away with altogether and replaced by leadership that put the nation above party interest. The prospect of a restoration of the monarchy which, at least nominally, had represented the whole nation was not universally welcomed. But the two Reich Presidents during the Weimar Republic – the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert and the monarchist war hero Paul von Hindenburg – had both been, in different ways, divisive figures. A new form of national leader capable of embodying the disparate social and political expectations and transcending - at first, it was widely recognized, by force against internal 'enemies' – the divisions, would, given some initial success, have a good chance of building an impressive platform of popular acclaim. That would be even more forthcoming following any success in overcoming the almost universally detested terms of the Versailles Treaty. Since revisionist hopes (of different kinds) were entertained in almost all sections of German society, success in the arena of foreign policy was guaranteed to win not only massive popular acclaim, but also the fervent backing of the national-conservative power elites – not least, in the army leadership. And during the terminal crisis of Weimar, the ending of reparations had opened up the possibility of rebuilding and modernizing the army and the return – at least gradually – to a more assertive foreign policy. This was

all the more possible and likely in the event of a strong German nationalist government, given the self-evident fragility of the post-war settlement. In this, too, the Weimar crisis offered the preconditions for the subsequent rapid radicalization under Hitler.

During the terminal crisis of Weimar, of course, Hitler had increasingly appeared to many to offer the greatest hopes of national redemption. By 1932, over 13 million Germans well over a third of the electorate, a substantial achievement in the Weimar electoral system – wanted a Hitler government. The radical demands for change – including a ruthless showdown with the Marxists and harsh discrimination against Jews which formed central elements of the Nazi platform, were thereby assured of extensive, though far from universal, support. An army of activists in the huge National Socialist Movement party membership numbered 850,000 by January 1933; the SA had by then around 425,000 members ensured that there would never be any shortage of fanatics pressing for the implementation in government policy of the amalgam of phobias and prejudice that served as the Party Programme.

As a movement drawn from the most disparate social groups, with a catch-all appeal and utopian goals of national unity and resurgence, belief in a supreme leader who embodied the 'idea' and 'mission' of National Socialism was vital. Hitler himself, experiencing the fragmentation of the *völkisch* movement during his imprisonment in 1924, had recognized the need for the NSDAP, when it was refounded in 1925, to be built on principles of absolute obedience to the leader. Despite a constant tendency to factionalism and a number of internal crises, the growing prospect of attaining power had kept the movement intact in the following years. After the most serious of such crises, that surrounding the resignation from his party offices of Gregor Strasser in December 1932, Hitler had deliberately dismantled the organizational framework of the party that Strasser had created and once more put the emphasis solely on propaganda objectives focused, beyond the immediate task of getting to power, on vague and visionary goals of national resurgence. The party therefore entered the Third Reich not with a rationally devised organizational structure set to penetrate and take over the state, but purely as a vehicle for Hitler's 'charismatic leadership', incorporating diffuse and often contradictory social expectations of its vast following and demanding outlets for these in actionism directed at target groups for retaliation and discrimination.

Meanwhile, the deliberately and purposefully manufactured Führer cult had been embraced in differing degrees by over a third of the population. Many more, still hesitant at this stage, would be won after 1933 as Hitler's image was converted by saturation propaganda from that of party leader to 'great' national leader. And, at the centre of indescribable adulation and sycophancy, his already outsized ego swelling as success followed success – all attributed by propaganda to his own 'achievements' – not the least of the believers in the cult constructed around him was Hitler himself.

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It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the Führer cult for the working of the regime. The traditional power elites had entered into their 'entente' with Hitler in

Illustration 16.1 Hitler as mass politician. He worked hard on producing the appropriate body language to accompany his speeches: an unusual concern amongst politicians of the pre-television era

January 1933 because he alone controlled the masses on the nationalist right. They had thought they could pen him in. But in reality, his position had been strong from the beginning. Though the conservatives outnumbered the Nazis in the coalition cabinet, Hitler, as Reich Chancellor, Goering, in charge of the Prussian police, and to a lesser extent Frick, as Reich Minister of the Interior, held the key positions. The anti-Communist hysteria – as prevalent among conservatives as among Nazis – played into Hitler's hands following the Reichstag fire in late February 1933, when draconian emergency decrees were promulgated, effectively abolishing civil liberties and setting aside the Weimar constitution. The takeover of power from below in the provinces after the election on 5 March, and, later that month, the passing of the Enabling Act, which empowered the cabinet to introduce legislation and removed thereby the dependence upon the Reichstag and the Reich President's willingness to grant emergency decrees, further bolstered Hitler's position from the outset. Already, the efflorescence of the Führer cult was remarkable. The naming of innumerable town squares and main streets after 'the people's Chancellor' was only one outward sign that no conventional change of government had taken place. The vicious onslaught on the left, bringing the internment of tens of thousands in prisons and makeshift new 'concentration camps' (the first set up at Dachau, outside Munich in March 1933), destroyed within weeks the seemingly powerful Socialist and Communist parties. Within six months of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, the remaining parties had been suppressed or had dissolved themselves, leaving a one-party state. At the same time, institutions, organizations, clubs and associations throughout the country had been going through a process – for the most part voluntary rather than forced – of *Gleichschaltung* (or nazification). By the summer, Hitler's position *vis-à-vis* his conservative partners had already been strengthened inordinately.

Following his initial foreign policy coup – the withdrawal of Germany from the League of Nations in October 1933 – Hitler was for the first time to play the card of plebiscitary acclamation – seeking acclaim by plebiscite for an action already completed and known to be massively popular. Further plebiscites following the death of Reich President Hindenburg in 1934, the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, and the Anschluß of Austria in 1938 brought, whatever the absurdity of the actual results, further demonstration inside and outside Germany of Hitler's unassailable popularity. This plebiscitary acclamation, which he could call upon almost at will, was a crucial basis of Hitler's power – demoralizing opposition, underlining his strength to the conservative elites, and showing the outside world that he had the overwhelming majority of the people behind him. It provided Hitler with a platform that enabled him to gain increasing autonomy from the traditional elites. Within a remarkably short time, their hopes of containing him and using him as a vehicle for the restoration of their own power had been shown to be vain ones.

Still, as long as Reich President Hindenburg, the hero of the First World War, lived, Hitler's power was relatively constrained. Hindenburg represented an alternative source of loyalty; the army owed its allegiance to the Reich President as head of state and supreme commander; and Hitler's position as head of government was dependent on the President's prerogative. The massacre of the SA leadership, an increasingly

disruptive element threatening the consolidation of Nazi rule, at the end of June 1934 – carried out with the backing of the army – and the rapid assumption of the powers of head of state by Hitler at Hindenburg's death on 2 August amounted to a second 'seizure of power'. The position of Führer was now institutionalized, as Hitler's new title of 'Führer and Reich Chancellor' indicated. (The title became simply 'Führer' in 1939.) The army and civil servants swore an oath of loyalty not to an abstract constitution, but to Hitler personally. The Führer state was fully established.

Hitler's power now knew no formal bounds. Prominent constitutional theorists did their best to give legal meaning to his personalized authority. According to one of the foremost experts on constitutional law, Ernst Rudolf Huber, 'the power of the Führer' was 'comprehensive and total, . . . free and independent, exclusive and unlimited'.[8] Hans Frank, the leading Nazi lawyer, claimed that the Führer's will, resting on 'outstanding achievements', had replaced impersonal and abstract precepts as the basis of law.[9]

Forms and structures of collective cabinet government could scarcely remain intact in the face of such claims. Meetings of the cabinet became more and more infrequent following Hindenburg's death. That of 5 February 1938 turned out to be the last during the entire Third Reich. Government increasingly fragmented into separate offices of state, with no central coordination of policy, and with Hans-Heinrich Lammers, head of the Reich Chancellery, serving as the sole link between Hitler and individual government ministers. Legislation followed a laborious and inefficient process of circulation of written drafts to ministers until there was general agreement. Access to Hitler, apart from favoured ministers such as Goebbels, was often difficult, and made even more so because of the dictator's frequent absences from Berlin and his highly unbureaucratic and idiosyncratic style of working.

Usually, Hitler would get up late in the morning, read the press cuttings prepared for him, have a lengthy lunch (normally attended by regulars like Goebbels and Goering, other favoured party big-wigs, adjutants and other members of his immediate entourage, and some invited guests), see diplomats or other important visitors during the afternoon, spend the evening in a less formal meal, followed by a film, and then launch forth into a monologue until the small hours to those stifling their yawns and able to hold out. He seldom read documents and memoranda prepared by the state bureaucracy or submitted by ministers. These were usually summarized verbally by Lammers in his periodic audiences. Some ministers – Agriculture Minister Walther Darré is an example – were effectively barred from seeing Hitler for years. Nor did Hitler send out a regular stream of written missives and directives. 'He took the view that many things sorted themselves out on their own if one did not interfere', remarked one of his former adjutants after the war.[10] He dictated his own speeches, and signed formal laws, but apart from that wrote remarkably little. A less bureaucratic style of leadership from the head of a modern industrialized country would be hard to imagine. Orders were for the most part verbal, and transmitted – in so far as they concerned government ministers – through Lammers. The scope for misunderstanding and confusion was extensive. Significant policy decisions needed Hitler's approval. But for prestige reasons the

Führer could not be dragged into factional in-fighting. The image of infallibility had to be preserved. Alongside his personal temperament, disdain for bureaucracy, and social Darwinist instinct of siding with the stronger in a conflict, this enhanced his detachment from the daily business of government. For the practice of government and administration this meant frequent delay, postponement or sometimes abandonment of proposed legislation which had been the subject of lengthy preparation.

Relations between the apparatus of state government -- central, provincial and local – and the party at the differing levels were left unclarified and undefined. This provided a recipe for unending conflict. Headed by the weak and ineffectual Rudolf Hess, the Party's Political Organization interfered – with varying degrees of success – in policy formation in many areas. It was incapable of providing a coherent influence on rational policy choices. But in certain key areas central to the 'idea' of National Socialism, especially race policy and the persecution of the churches, the party subjected the state bureaucracy to relentless pressure through agitation aimed at putting the 'vision' of the Führer into practice. The concessions made by the government ministries to give legislative voice to such pressures, only to be followed by further agitation demanding new legislation, ensured the continued upward ratcheting of radicalization.

This process was further advanced by entrusting vital areas of policy, directly associated with the ideological goals of the regime, to special organizations outside the normal state administration, and directly subordinate to Hitler. The Office of the Four-Year Plan, for example, established in 1936, was meant to be a small and unbureaucratic unit to overcome the impasse in the economy which had built up. Goering's empire-building ensured that it developed into a huge, sprawling organization functioning alongside (and in practice dominating) the state Economics Ministry. The creation, also in 1936, of a centralized German police, headed by the fanatical and ambitious Heinrich Himmler and his right-hand man, the ruthless, ice-cold Reinhard Heydrich, and merged with the Nazi movement's most committed ideological elite, the SS, also spawned an enormous power-block – the most dynamic and ideologically driven sector of the regime.

The SS police empire stood outside the control of any government ministry. It was dependent solely upon Hitler, and justified itself as an executive agency of the 'will of the Führer'. This enabled it to develop its own agenda, legitimated by recourse to the Führer's 'mission', and to expand its target groups largely as it wished, thereby justifying the demand for still further expansion of its own activities and personnel. Hence, following Hitler's attacks on the homosexual activities of Röhm and other SA leaders in 1934 – actually a device to cover up the power-political reasons behind the liquidation of the SA leadership – the police could expand their persecution of homosexuals. In the wake of the 'church struggle', surveillance was extended even to minute Christian sects which were enthusiastic in their support of the regime. And in the crucial sphere of anti-Jewish policy, Eichmann was able to make his career, starting in an insigificant position (but in a vital policy area) in the SD's (*Sicherheitsdienst* or Security Service) Jewish Department, and ending as the manager of the 'final solution'.

The pressure from the police (in which, in a significant move in 1936, the criminal

police had been blended in with the security police) to widen the net of surveillance and repression, and extend the target groups, was central to the process of 'cumulative radicalization', and took place with little or no direction from Hitler. The plans – already in 1937 when the number of internees had declined to its lowest point since 1933 and the reason for their existence was starting to become questionable – to expand the concentration camps provide a pointer to ways in which the self-feeding radicalization within the police organization operated. The expansion into Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938–9 then brought new groups of victims and enlarged activities for the police. War and conquest from 1939 onwards gave the SS-police apparatus under Himmler and Heydrich unimaginable opportunities for unfolding the wildest, most megalomaniac schemes, resting on a continent-wide network of repression and terror.

The structures – perhaps 'structurelessness' would be a better description – of the Third Reich already briefly outlined provided the framework within which the 'idea' of National Socialism, located in the person of the Führer, became gradually translated from utopian 'vision' into realizable policy objectives. Territorial expansion and 'removal of the Jews', both central features of Hitler's ideology, had by 1938–9 come into the foreground as feasible policy options. In the following years they would escalate into genocidal war.

Illustration 16.2 Propaganda from *Der Stürmer*. 'The Jews are our Misfortune'. Pervasive stereotypes of the Jews were designed to exacerbate anti-Semitism in German society
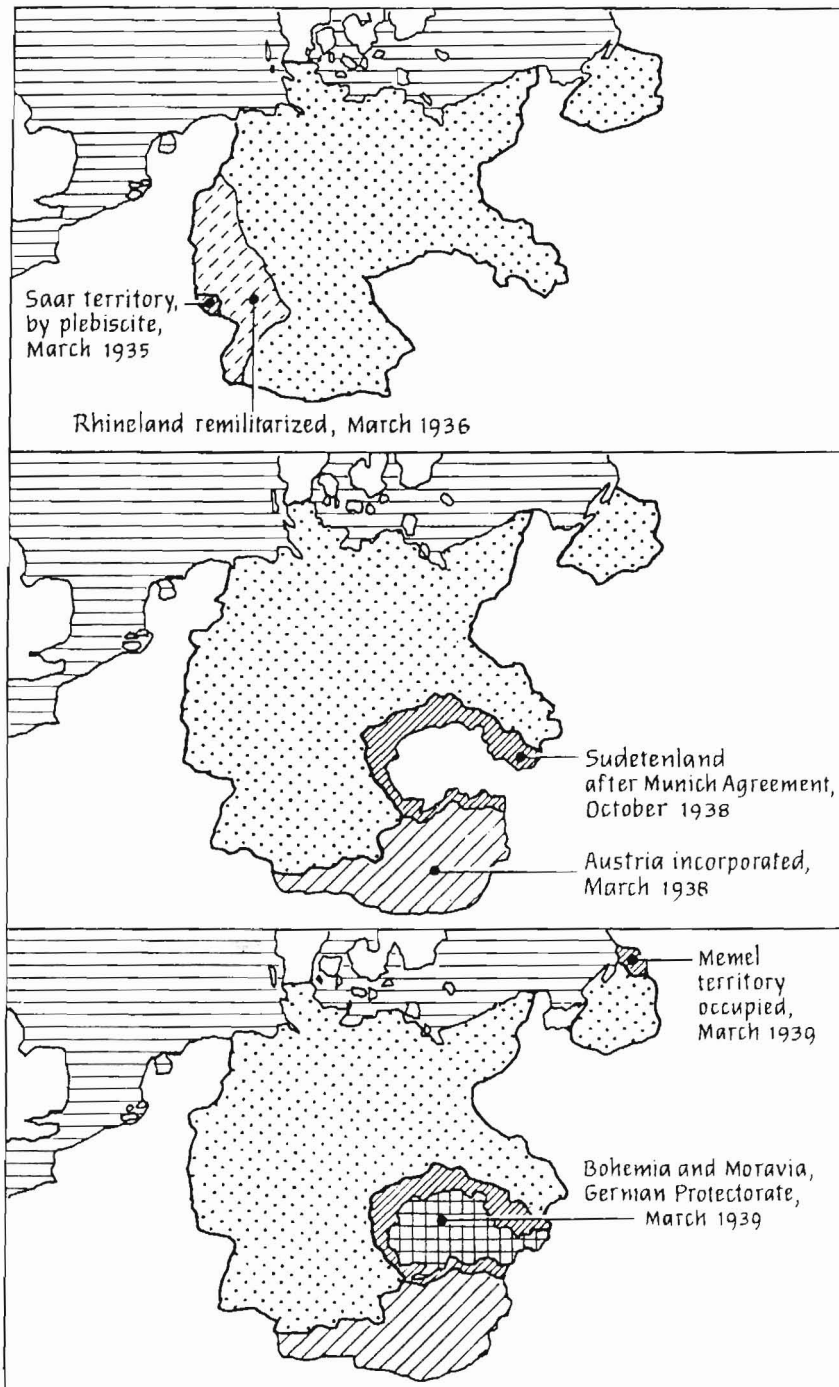
Anti-Jewish policy provides a telling illustration of the way 'cumulative radicalization' operated. There was no central coordination before 1939. But the aim of 'getting rid of the Jews', precisely because of its lack of precise definition, infused every aspect of the activity of the regime. The potential existed, therefore, for the unfolding of ever new discriminatory initiatives from the most diverse directions aimed broadly at the exclusion of Jews from German society and their forced emigration abroad. Hence, boycotts, legislation, 'aryanization' of the economy, physical violence, police measures, and party agitation guaranteed an escalation of the persecution of the Jews. Hitler needed to do little other than indicate his approval (or lack of disapproval) for such actions to gather momentum.

He was involved in 1935, for example, in the promulgation of the notorious Nuremberg Laws only following a summer of violence and agitation stirred up by party organizations. When, chiefly for economic reasons, the party's actions were seen to have become counterproductive, and he was under pressure on the one hand to introduce radical measures against the Jews and on the other to quell the disturbances which had punctuated the spring and summer, Hitler decided at the last minute to introduce legislation during the Nuremberg party rally. Some radicals wanted more draconian measures. But the legislation calmed down the agitation for the time being, while opening up countless further avenues for discrimination and persecution. It had, in other words, an immediate practical function in defusing dysfunctional activism while serving nevertheless as a step on the ladder of 'cumulative radicalisation' in the 'Jewish question'.

The subsequent wave of agitation unleashed from below in 1938, and accompanying the foreign-policy tension in the summer of that year, then had its own culmination in the nationwide pogrom of 9–10 November 1938, instigated by Goebbels but explicitly approved in its most radical form by Hitler. The consequence was not only draconian legislation excluding Jews from the economy, but also the placing of anti-Jewish policy henceforth under the control of the SS.

In foreign policy, Hitler played a much more direct and overt role. But here, too, the process of 'cumulative radicalization' cannot solely be attributed to his intentions and actions. The 'coups' that he pulled off between 1933 and 1936 were wholly in accord with the interests of the traditional power elites. Certainly, Hitler determined the timing and maximized the propaganda effect. But the withdrawal from the League of Nations, the reintroduction of military service and expansion of the army, the bilateral naval treaty with Britain, and the remilitarization of the Rhineland were scarcely moves 'against the grain'. In the most spectacular demonstration of the weakness of the western powers – the remilitarization of the Rhineland - the army leaders certainly evoked Hitler's contempt through their anxiety over the possibility of French and British intervention. But they had nothing but approval for the aim of the Hitler's action. And the danger was in reality minimal – at any rate far lower than Hitler later claimed in order to play up the boldness of his move. As late as November 1937, when Hitler alarmed his top military leaders with his indications of early expansion into Austria and Czechoslovakia, there was no disagreement about the need to attain German hegemony in central Europe. The

Saar territory, by plebiscite, March 1935

Rhineland remilitarized, March 1936

Sudetenland after Munich Agreement, October 1938

Austria incorporated, March 1938

Memel territory occupied, March 1939

Bohemia and Moravia, German Protectorate, March 1939

Map 16.1 Pre-war expansion

worry was solely about the risk of war with the great powers. Pressure, mainly on economic grounds, for the subsumption of Austria within the German orbit had up to then largely come from Goering, rather than Hitler. No section of the German elite differed with Hitler on the need to incorporate Austria in one form or another within the Reich. The Anschluß, when Schuschnigg forced matters to a head by his attempt to stage a plebiscite on Austrian autonomy, was as good as universally welcomed.

The Czechoslovakia crisis of summer 1938 was another matter. But by then Hitler's power had been substantially strengthened in relation to the army by the Blomberg–Fritsch affair, followed by his major triumph in Austria. As regards the prospect of military action against the Czechs, Ribbentrop, the new Foreign Minister, was outrightly hawkish. Himmler and Goebbels also backed Hitler's aggressive course. But otherwise, the worries about an unnecessary risk of war against the western powers prevailed. During the summer, General Beck, the chief of staff of the army, voiced his opposition in increasingly forthright memoranda, even advocating facing Hitler with a 'general strike' in the most literal sense – the collective refusal of the generals to obey an order to invade Czechoslovakia. But Beck was not supported by the commander-in-chief of the army, the weak and servile von Brauchitsch. In truth, the army leadership was divided. It had also been weakened by the Blomberg–Fritsch crisis at the beginning of the year. The resolution of this crisis – in which the War Minister Blomberg had been ousted because of his marriage to a woman with a shady past, and commander-in-chief of the army, Fritsch, had been forced out through trumped up charges (subsequently proved to have been based on mistaken identity) of homosexual practice – had effectively transformed the Wehrmacht leadership, the only powerful force left in the state capable of challenging Hitler, into no more than a functional elite, an executive agency of the Führer. When Beck resigned, no one followed him.

However, his replacement, Halder, found himself, together with the head of the Abwehr, Admiral Canaris, at the centre of the nascent conspiracy to have Hitler deposed in the event of an attack on Czechoslovakia that autumn. Whether the conspiracy would have come to anything is an open question. But it indicated the beginnings of a break with Hitler of a number of individuals who served, or had served, the regime in responsible positions in the Wehrmacht, the Foreign Ministry and elsewhere. In the event, of course, the appeasement policy of the western powers, desperate to avoid war, and the intervention by Mussolini (prompted by Goering – as anxious as any to rule out the prospect of war with Britain) forced Hitler to be content for the time being with a negotiated settlement to give him the Sudetenland rather than the war he wanted with the Czechs to gain the whole of Czechoslovakia at one fell swoop. But the West had shown it was unwilling to fight. Hitler had been correct in what he had claimed throughout the summer. Those who had opposed his line were, as a result of the readiness of the western powers to buy Hitler off, seriously weakened. The following summer, during the crisis over Poland, there was no opposition from the generals. Among ordinary people, too, who had been panic-stricken at the thought of war in summer 1938, the mood was far calmer. The Führer had pulled it off on every occa-
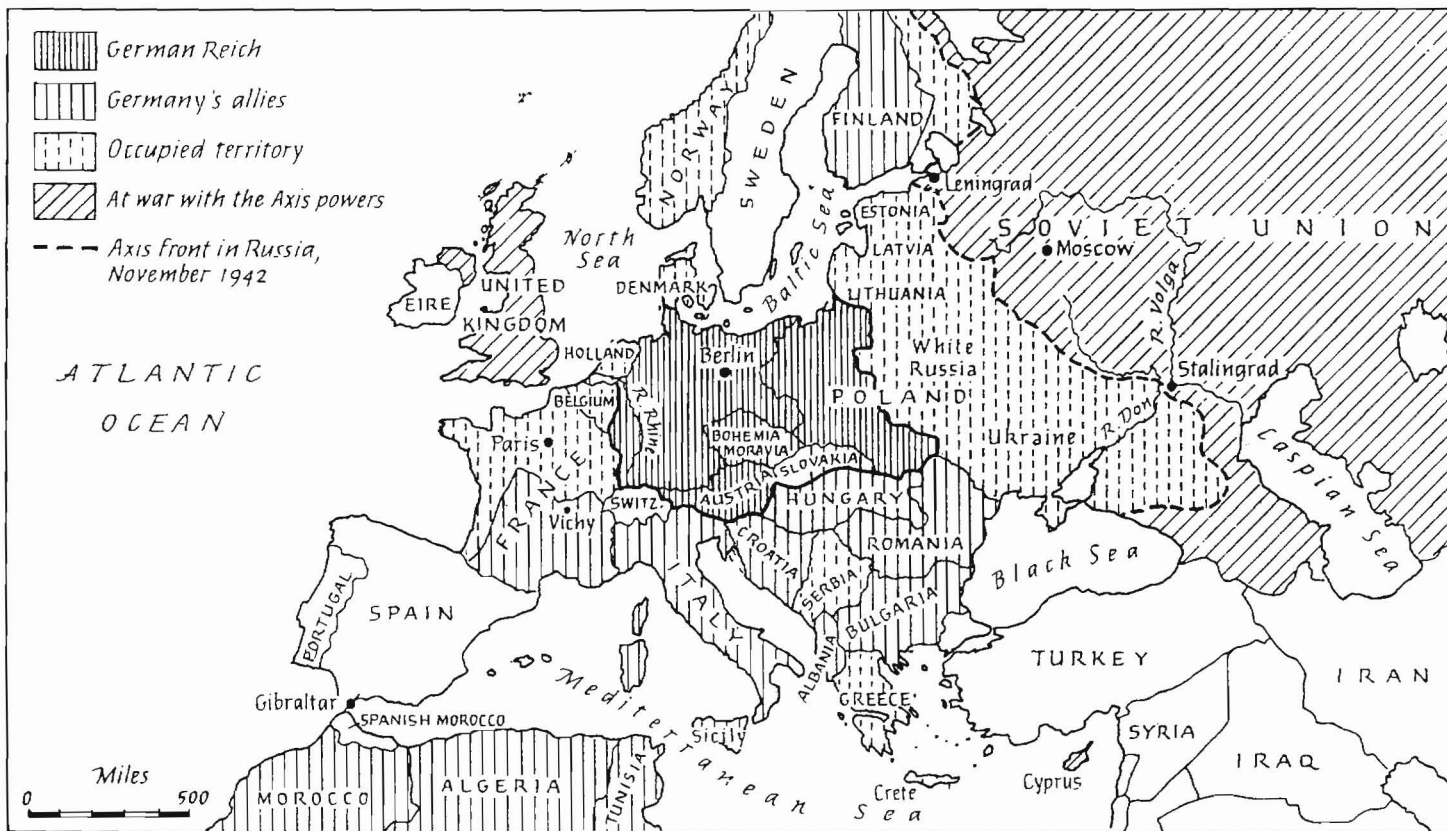
sion before. He would do so again. The western powers had given in over the Sudetenland. They were hardly likely to go to war over Danzig. Hitler had, so he said, seen the western leaders at Munich, and they were no more than 'little worms'.[11] When asked by Goering on the eve of the war why it was necessary to gamble everything, Hitler replied: 'Goering, all my life I have gone for broke.'[12]

The war was, indeed, a gigantic gamble. But from Hitler's point of view, the risk had to be taken. Any delay – a characteristic argument – would merely strengthen the enemy. Time, he asserted, was not on Germany's side. The 'cumulative radicalization' of foreign policy over the previous years, and especially the triumphs of 1938, had gravely weakened those forces, above all in the Wehrmacht, which had pushed so strongly for expansion only to find themselves in the end inextricably bound up with a high-risk policy they had been instrumental in creating.

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During the war, the 'structurelessness' of the regime – reflecting the impact of Hitler's 'charismatic authority' on the governmental system – became hugely magnified. Central government splintered. Lammers was less able to play a coordinating role as his own access to Hitler (now constantly shielded by Bormann) declined. Party interference in government under Bormann as head of the re-named Party Chancellery from 1941 onwards, following Hess's flight to Scotland, intensified. Hitler himself became an increasingly remote figure, spending most of his time in his field headquarters in East Prussia, physically detached from the centre of civil government in Berlin. The greatest chances of influencing him fell, apart from the ubiquitous Bormann, to those few who could always rely upon gaining access, such as Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, Ley and Speer. Not surprisingly, therefore, Hitler's interventions in policy-making, though frequent, were usually sporadic and arbitrary, based on one-sided and piecemeal information. Under the strains of total war from the end of 1942 onwards, the regime ran increasingly out of control. Hitler often seemed detached and out of touch, unable to or uninterested in resolving the overwhelming problems that were building up. It was little wonder that by early 1943 even Goebbels could hint not just at a 'leadership', but at a 'leader crisis'.[13]

During the first years of the war it had been different. The victories over Poland, then, especially, over France drove Hitler's power, standing and popularity to its zenith in the summer of 1940. But the triumphs (and the brutality that followed them) concealed for the time being the fragility of Germany's hold over much of Europe. The reality, acknowledged by Hitler and the German leadership, was that Britain was still undefeated; that intervention at some point by the USA with all its might and resources could not be ruled out; that the USSR – desperately preparing for the invasion it expected around 1942 – was bound to Germany only by the cynical opportunist pact of August 1939; and that the Reich's economic base, unless there were further expansion, was precarious indeed.

Map 16.2 Nazi Germany at its zenith 1942

Legend:
- German Reich
- Germany's allies
- Occupied territory
- At war with the Axis powers
- Axis Front in Russia, November 1942

Labels on map:
ATLANTIC OCEAN, North Sea, EIRE, UNITED KINGDOM, NORWAY, SWEDEN, FINLAND, Baltic Sea, Leningrad, ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA, SOVIET UNION, Moscow, DENMARK, HOLLAND, Berlin, White Russia, R. Volga, BELGIUM, R. Rhine, POLAND, Stalingrad, Paris, FRANCE, BOHEMIA MORAVIA, SLOVAKIA, Ukraine, R. Don, Caspian Sea, Vichy, SWITZ., AUSTRIA, HUNGARY, PORTUGAL, SPAIN, ITALY, CROATIA, SERBIA, ROMANIA, Black Sea, ALBANIA, BULGARIA, TURKEY, IRAN, Gibraltar, Mediterranean Sea, GREECE, SYRIA, SPANISH MOROCCO, Sicily, Crete, Cyprus, IRAQ, Miles, 0 500, MOROCCO, ALGERIA, TUNISIA

Without waiting for victory over Britain, Hitler had already, following the conquest of France, given orders to begin preparations for an attack on the Soviet Union – the ideological arch-enemy. In spring 1941, these preparations took concrete shape. This would be a different war to that in the west, a 'war of annihilation', as Hitler told his generals.[14] The army was complicitous in the orders for the shooting of Soviet commissars, who were not to be treated as comrades but were to be liquidated on capture. The army, brutalized by its experiences of the ruthless inhumanity in occupied Poland, its ranks infected by propaganda about the 'Jewish-Bolshevik world enemy', was also ready to collaborate in the operations of the SD's 'task forces' (*Einsatzgruppen*) to wipe out political enemies and Jews behind the front lines. With the orders to the *Einsatzgruppen*, given in the weeks before the invasion of the USSR, the 'quantum jump' into genocide was taken.[15] Once this jump had been made, the killing could only escalate.

'Operation Barbarossa' – the invasion of the Soviet Union – was meant to be over long before the end of the year. Despite the extraordinary advances initially made after it was launched on 22 June 1941, this was already looking unlikely before the German troops found themselves bogged down in the ice and the mud, condemned to exposure in a Russian winter without adequate clothing or provisions. With the entry of the USA into the war in December 1941, and the certainty of the conflict dragging on into the indefinite future with the balance of resources tipped heavily against Germany, Hitler's gamble was already effectively lost, even if the Wehrmacht continued to fight tooth and nail over every yard of ground and total defeat was still over three years away.

The 'cumulative radicalization' of anti-Jewish policy had meanwhile escalated into all-out systematic genocide. The power-crazed plans of the police and SS under Heydrich and Himmler for the mass removal of Jews in Poland to make way for the resettlement of ethnic Germans from the Baltic and other parts of eastern Europe had proved unrealizable. Ghettos – some, like Lodz and Warsaw, huge in size – had been hastily set up, initially meant as temporary measures, prior to further deportation eastwards to a huge Jewish reservation. The continuation of the war vitiated such schemes (which would doubtless in practice have resulted in a form of genocide, though not necessarily the form which actually emerged). Already in mid-1941 there were suggestions that the Jews in the ghettos should be liquidated rather than fed during the coming winter. By that time, the *Einsatzgruppen* were shooting thousands of Jews in the USSR. And pressure was building up meanwhile from police and party leaders within Germany to have Jews from the Reich deported eastwards – to ghettos already bursting at the seams. By late summer or early autumn 1941, it had been decided that mass extermination was the solution, and that killing by poison gas offered potential 'efficiency' in the plan to annihilate all the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. The first of the extermination camps in the General-Gouvernement was commissioned in September, at Belzec. Its personnel were drawn from those who had acquired expertise in killing by poison gas during the so-called 'euthanasia action' within Germany – the liquidation of around 100,000 mentally ill and incurably sick patients of asylums – which had

been 'officially' ended (after doctors had nominated even more victims than the Nazis had imagined there to be) in August 1941. By December 1941, the first killing installations were in operation at Chelmno in the Warthegau, a part of western Poland annexed to the Reich. The following month, the orchestration of the 'final solution' was worked out at the Wannsee Conference. By spring 1942, the mass killing of Poland's big Jewish population in the extermination camps of what came to be called '*Aktion Reinhard*' -- Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka -- was underway. By then, too, the enormous extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, with its huge capacity for production-line murder, was also in operation.

It is not credible to imagine that the 'final solution' as it emerged in the latter half of 1941 – the attempt to exterminate the entire Jewish population of Europe -- was implemented without the approval, let alone without the knowledge, of Hitler. The barbarous guidelines for the occupation of Poland, then for the invasion of the USSR, had been laid down by Hitler. Pressed for affirmation of his written authorization, in autumn 1939 he had explicitly, on his own headed notepaper, empowered his doctor, Karl Brandt, and the Philipp Bouhler head of the Chancellery of the Führer of the NSDAP, Viktor Brack, to carry out the killing of the mentally sick. Goebbels referred to Hitler in early 1942, as the death camps moved into full operation, as 'the undismayed champion of a radical solution' to the so-called 'Jewish question'.[16] Probably not least because of the difficulties which had arisen from the killing of the mentally sick and incurable, Hitler would have shied away from a written authorization in the case of the extermination of the Jews. But his verbal approval for initiatives in all probability emanating from Heydrich's office in the Reich Security Headquarters would have been necessary and was, as Eichmann later claimed, most likely given a couple of months after the invasion of the Soviet Union.

As military defeats mounted during the second half of the war, and as the bombs rained down ever more heavily on German cities, the popularity of the now distant figure of the Führer, who, without triumphs to announce, no longer wanted to face his once adoring public, went into steep decline. The 'successes' which had been essential to sustaining 'charismatic leadership' were by now a distant memory, the Führer cult a residual and ritualized propaganda product largely devoid of the spontaneous effusions of support which had been so vividly present during the early years of the regime.

Even so, strong reserves of popular support for Hitler remained. More important still: since all the power groups in the now crumbling regime had earlier committed themselves to Hitler, had become implicated in the criminal actions of the regime, and had burnt their boats with the Führer, they now felt no option other than to stick with him. This included most of the generals in the Wehrmacht – the one body capable of deposing Hitler. The minority of courageous officers, and of civilians from different backgrounds and positions, who at great peril joined the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, did so in the recognition that they had to act without the backing of most of their colleagues, and without popular support. The chance of ending the regime from within collapsed with the failure of the attempted coup of 20 July 1944. In the gather-

ing chaos as the war drew towards its finale, the complete fragmentation of authority below Hitler ruled out any alternative to following the dictator to the bitter end. Only in the last days were other leading Nazis prepared to challenge Hitler's authority. But even in these last days, in the unreal world of the bunker, generals awaited Hitler's orders to pass on to no longer existent army divisions.

. . .

A key to explaining the process of 'cumulative radicalization' in the Third Reich, I have suggested, can be found in the workings of the type of 'charismatic authority' embodied in Hitler's dictatorship. As Führer, Hitler was the linchpin of the entire 'system' - which, in reality, was fragmenting ever more under the impact of his leadership. He was the only link with its various, usually competing, parts. But, outside the realm of foreign and military policy, his direct intervention was seldom needed in order to drive forward the escalating radicalization of the regime. All that was required was for him to set the tone, give the green light, provide the broad guidelines for action, and sanction initiatives of others.

Such initiatives usually fell within the process which one leading Nazi described as 'working towards the Führer'.[17] This meant anticipating what Hitler wanted, second-guessing his intentions, doing everything possible to push forward his loosely defined long-term goals, not waiting for instructions before using one's own initiative. Hitler's presumed aims and intentions served, therefore, to activate the activists and to legitimate their actions. At the grass-roots of the party, this could mean, for example, agitation to hound out Jews from the economy and turn them into social pariahs. In the state bureaucracy, it justified ever more radical attempts to turn vicious but open-ended ideological imperatives into specific and concrete discriminatory legislation. Not least, in the ever-expanding SS and police organization, the tasks associated with the Führer's 'mission' offered endless scope for the unfolding of new, inhumane 'projects' (and accompanying power, status and enrichment), especially in the conquered eastern territories.

Among ordinary citizens, far removed from the centres of power, 'working towards the Führer' also had its meaning – if a more metaphorical one. Ideological motives were not necessarily dominant, or even present, when neighbours or workmates were denounced to the Gestapo. But the screw of repression was nonetheless tightened by countless such acts. Doctors looking for more 'modern' ways of creating a 'healthier' society could take a lead in pressing for measures on sterilization and recommend their patients for the 'euthanasia' programme. Or businessmen, anxious to rid themselves of competition, could use anti-Jewish legislation to close down a rival concern. These few examples illustrate how 'working towards the Führer' – unforced collaboration, using the broad ideological aims embodied in Hitler as a legitimation – could contribute to driving on an unstoppable radicalization which saw the gradual conversion of an ideological 'mission' into concrete policy objectives.

The 'idea' personified in the quasi-deified figure of the Führer held together the antagonistic forces within the Nazi movement itself. It also incorporated the distinct but related aims of the national-conservative elites in the economy, state administration, and – not least – army. The lack of definition of the 'idea' was itself an advantage. Building a united, racially homogeneous 'national community', restoring national strength and pride, establishing a 'Greater Germany', bringing ethnic Germans 'home into the Reich': all these aims corresponded with the hopes of millions. War to attain 'living space' (*Lebensraum*) and racial extermination were by no means seen by the mass of Hitler admirers during the rise to power or at the height of his triumphs in the 1930s as implicit in them. But the boundaries were fluid. The 'idea', represented by Hitler, provided a plebiscitary base and underlying consensus for the regime, whose aggressive dynamic was increasingly spiralling out of control.

The 'charismatic' nature of Hitler's position as Führer – a quasi-messianic personalized form of rule that arose from the desire for national rebirth and unity in a country traumatized by national humiliation and paralysed by political collapse – could of its essence not settle into 'normality' or routine, or sag into mere conservative authoritarianism. Visionary goals of national redemption through European domination and racial purification were at the heart of the regime. These meant constant dynamism and self-perpetuating, intensifying radicalism. The longer the regime lasted, the more megalomaniac were its aims, the more boundless its destructiveness. Its gamble for world supremacy meant war against an alliance of extremely powerful allies. It was a gamble against the odds, in which the regime risked its own destruction and that of Germany itself. This was Nazism's essential irrationality. Hitler's 'charismatic' leadership implied, therefore, not just an unprecedented capacity for destruction, but also an inbuilt tendency towards self-destruction. In this sense, the suicide of the German dictator on 30 April 1945 was not merely a welcome, but also a logical, end to the Third Reich.

Notes:

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4. Mommsen, 'Hitlers Stellung', p.70; translated, Hans Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (1991), p. 187.
5. I explore the limitations of this concept at length in *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 3rd edn. (1993), ch. 4.

6. Mommsen, Hans, 'Hitlers Stellung', p. 70; *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, p. 187.
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15. The phrase is that of Christopher Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (1978), p. 8.
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