

## Chapter 1

## POWER OF THE 'IDEA'

Hitler's personality should not be overrated as a factor in his power. Nor, however, should it be ignored. Its greatest impact was upon the circle of the earliest, most fanatically devoted followers, his most committed 'inner circle' of disciples. Looking for a cause and a leader before they 'found' Nazism and Hitler, they formed the core of the 'charismatic community' which saw greatness in Hitler.

The 'charisma' in Hitler's own personality, so influential among his close followers, was rooted in the power which flowed — for those already open to it — from his 'idea', his political credo, together with the remarkable ability he showed from the moment he entered active politics to sway the masses. In this chapter, therefore, we examine the emergence of the 'conviction politician', and the response to the personality and ideas of Hitler of his early followers who became some of the most important personages in the Third Reich.

In physical appearance, Hitler was unprepossessing.<sup>1</sup> He was of medium height and fair complexion. His head seemed to dominate the whole of his body. His high forehead was concealed by the drooping forelock. The centre-point of his face seemed to be his trimmed moustache. He never looked smartly dressed. His teeth were poor and in later years the deterioration in his formerly good eyesight eventually necessitated him wearing reading glasses (though he was anxious not to be seen in public in them). His slightly protruding eyes and unblinking gaze were his most striking feature.

Hitler's personal habits were repetitive, conservative, but at the same time rather quirky. He held as far as poss-

ible to fixed daily routines, was near teetotal and (from the early 1930s onwards) vegetarian, did not smoke or drink coffee, and had a fetish for cleanliness which saw him washing with abnormal frequency. He needed little sleep, read avidly and widely (though unsystematically), and possessed an extraordinary memory for factual detail. He monopolised conversation with opinionated views on a wide range of subjects. On anything connected with history, art and architecture, he considered himself particularly expert. He was also especially interested in medicine and biology. His reliance upon his self-learning went hand in hand with an utter contempt for 'intellectuals' dependent upon a formal education. There is no doubt, however, that, though his knowledge was half-baked, one-sided and dogmatically inflexible, he was intelligent and sharp-witted.

Though, even in his regular entourage, Hitler remained in human terms distant and unapproachable, he could show great consideration in trivial matters, such as what to give his secretaries as birthday presents. He liked the company of women, and was invariably courteous and gracious towards them, especially if they were beautiful. He could make those around him laugh with a cutting humour and a talent for mimicry. And he had a strong sense of loyalty towards those of his comrades who had endured sacrifices to support him from the early days.

These personal characteristics would have been insufficient to single out Hitler for attention had they existed in isolation from his political world view and his ability to sway an audience by the force of his public speaking. Seen in purely personal terms, detached from his political philosophy, Hitler was indeed a mediocrity. But his political creed and the conviction with which he expressed it transformed him into a personality of quite extraordinary dynamism.

It was for long thought after the collapse of the Third Reich that Hitler's message consisted of no more than the empty phrases of the power-thirsty demagogue, that the man behind the message was as devoid of genuine ideas as were the classical tyrants of old. It is now universally recognised, however, that behind the vague missionary appeal lay a set of interrelated ideas — however repulsive and irrational — which congealed by the mid 1920s into a cohesive ideology. While Hitler's fixed ideas, which remained unchanged in

essentials down to his death in 1945, could not individually or in themselves go far towards explaining his mass appeal, or the growth of the NSDAP, they did amount to a personal driving-force of unusual strength. They provided Hitler with the all-encompassing world view which gave him the opportunity exclusivist ideologies offer of ordering every idea within his own comprehensive philosophy and of ruling out as absolutely untenable any alternative proposals. They gave him, too, the 'missionary' zeal of the leader who appears to combine the vision with the certainty that his path is the right one — in fact, the only one which can be taken.

Though he was often indecisive about precise political actions, Hitler never wavered about the certainty of his ideas. To those in his proximity, who shared his general prejudices, the strength and certainty of conviction, extending beyond that of the average bigot or crank into a grandiose and irrevocable formula for a glorious future, was a major factor in establishing his personal supremacy. The simplicity of his dualistic world-view of a Manichean struggle between good and evil in which everything was reduced to absolutes — all or nothing — was matched by the fanatical ferocity and unyielding tenacity with which his views were upheld. Such 'attributes' made him a notable figure in the circles of the *wiltsch* Right in which he mixed in the early 1920s. And the fact that his public appearances rapidly made him the leading propaganda exponent of such views and opened up contacts to leading circles of Munich's moneyed bourgeoisie made him indispensable and assured him of the support of others on the extreme Right.

The essence of Hitler's personal world-view comprised a belief in history as racial struggle, radical anti-Semitism, a conviction that Germany's future could be secured only through conquest of *Lebensraum* ('living space') at the expense of Russia, and the uniting of all these strands in the notion of a life-or-death fight to the finish with Marxism — most concretely embodied in the 'Jewish Bolshevism' of the Soviet Union. These interlocking ideas were significant not only in the sense that they were held to with extraordinary tenacity for over twenty years, but above all in that the ideological aims arising from them came to be put into actual practice during the Second World War. We have to

take them seriously, therefore, in an evaluation of Hitler's power. Before proceeding further we need to look at their formation, development and content.

Exactly when, how and why Hitler's fanatically held ideas took their hold on him is far from clear. But the gradual forging of the various strands of his thinking into a composite ideology was completed by the time of the writing of *Mein Kampf* in 1924, and scarcely wavered thereafter. An important formative period was his time in Linz in 1905–6 after leaving school and especially in Vienna from 1907 to 1913. The experience of war and, quite traumatically, of Germany's defeat was a second, even more vital influence upon Hitler. Finally, the years 1920 to 1924 saw some crucial modifications to his ideas, under the impact, not least, of the Russian civil war.

Hitler's deepest hatred was of the Jews. The roots and causes of his visceral anti-Semitism have been much discussed but can still not be established with absolute certainty. Some theories are outrightly fanciful. The notion that Hitler's anti-Jewish paranoia can be attributable to the fact that he himself was of part-Jewish descent is without foundation.<sup>2</sup> That he feared or believed that his father's father had been Jewish is more plausible, but cannot be proved.<sup>3</sup> Even more speculative is the attempt to link Hitler's pathological hatred of Jews to his hysterical trauma while suffering from mustard gas poisoning at the end of the First World War, which he allegedly associated with the death of his mother in 1907 following a gas anaesthetic delivered by a Jewish doctor.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the fact that Hitler had been grateful enough to the doctor at the time to give him one of his water-colour paintings as a present,<sup>5</sup> this theory ignores the evidence for Hitler's anti-Semitism during his Vienna days.

In fact, we remain in the dark about why Hitler became a manic anti-Semite. Psychological explanations revolving around sexual fantasies and a persecution complex bear differing degrees of plausibility but ultimately amount to no more than guesswork. All that can with some certainty be presumed is that Hitler's personal frustrations at the discrepancy between his own self-esteem and his drop-out existence as a failed artist and social outsider found a focus in an ever stronger negative image which provided both

explanation for his own failure and also 'proof' that history was ultimately on his side.<sup>6</sup>

Hitler's own story, retailed in *Mein Kampf*, tells of his conversion to anti-Semitism after encountering a kaffian-garbed figure with black hair locks in the streets of Vienna.<sup>7</sup> This was probably a dramatisation. Hitler was already reading pan-German anti-Semitic newspapers in his Linz days and was even then an admirer of the Austrian anti-Semite and pan-German leader Georg von Schönerer.<sup>8</sup> But there seems no doubt that whatever views he already had on Jews were inordinately strengthened while he was in Vienna. At this time he became greatly impressed by the vehemently anti-Semitic demagogue Karl Lueger, the mayor of the city, whom he later described, in a rare show of admiration for others, as 'the greatest German mayor of all times'.<sup>9</sup> Though the 'Kaffian Jew' story is probably embellished, it seems likely that it does reflect some telling experience of Hitler during this period, when he was obviously soaking up anti-Semitic literature, confirming and sharpening his embryonic prejudice. At any rate, it seems to have marked the change in him from the conventional anti-Semite of the Linz period to the manic obsessive anti-Semite which he remained to the end of his days. From this time, wrote Hitler, 'wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity'.<sup>10</sup>

The Vienna years were also a formative period in the development of other aspects of Hitler's world-view. According to his own account – plausible in its general tone if not accurate in detail – his own 'drifting' existence among the Viennese underprivileged meant that he tasted the crass social injustices of bourgeois society at first hand, and plunged him thereby into contemplation of the 'social question'. His encounters with Viennese social democracy led to a violent rejection of its class-based, anti-nationalist doctrine. His detestation of the Habsburg monarchy was part of his already pronounced, fanatical German hyper-nationalism which he had soaked up since his attachment to the Schönerer movement in his Linz days.<sup>11</sup> Once his 'recognition' of the Jew as the 'culprit' for all these ills took its place as the dominant ingredient, the essentials of an ideology based on burning revulsion towards existing society

coupled with a utopian vision of a future order to be created by the strong and ruthless authority of an ethnically German national state began to slot into place.

Hitler's world-view was, then, already formed in good measure by the time he served in the trenches. A core element – the social Darwinistic view of history as a struggle between individual races with victory going to the strongest, fittest and most ruthless – seems to have occupied its place at the centre of this world-view by 1914–18 at the latest.<sup>12</sup> His hysterical reaction, while lying blinded in the Pasewalk hospital, at the news of the triumph of the forces he hated with all the fibre of his being appears to have led to an intensification of his already fixed dualistic world-view – above all, his conviction that guilt for the catastrophe which had befallen him and all he believed in lay at the door of the ubiquitous Jew.<sup>13</sup>

Hitler had apparently earlier discussed with one of his comrades at the front whether after the war he would become an architect or a politician.<sup>14</sup> While in the military hospital, he claimed, he took the decision to become a politician.<sup>15</sup> In reality, the 'decision' to involve himself in active politics came less self-consciously and more indirectly. Still in the army, he returned to a Munich scarcely recognisable from the city he had left in 1914. Political conditions were in turmoil. After the revolution, government had been headed by a left-wing socialist, Kurt Eisner, a Jew. The assassination of Eisner in February 1919 by a young right-wing aristocrat led to political chaos and a republic of Soldiers' and Workers' Councils – several of whose leaders were Jewish – being proclaimed in April; and this in turn was within weeks bloodily overthrown by forces of the paramilitary Right.

Hitler refrained from any active involvement. But from his army barracks, he observed what was taking place and read widely in right-wing tracts, which presumably confirmed his own diagnosis of events. During the late spring and summer he attended army indoctrination courses. These introduced him to deeper consideration of the workings of international finance capital – a topic on which he was influenced by the ideas of Gottfried Feder, the economic 'guru' of the early Nazi Party. He also attended lectures and seminars on German history, socialism in theory and practice, the

economic situation and the peace conditions, Russia under Bolshevik rule, price policy, and the question of Bavaria and Reich unity. He became noted for his impassioned and opinionated views.

Hitler's own awareness of the impact he had as a speaker in such circles constituted his own first step into active politics. And when he himself was assigned to work in the army 'educational unit', he was singled out as 'a born popular speaker who through his fanaticism and populist style positively compelled his audience to take note and share his views'.<sup>16</sup> 'All at once,' noted Hitler, 'I was offered an opportunity of speaking before a larger audience; and the thing that I had always presumed from pure feeling without knowing it was now corroborated: I could "speak".'<sup>17</sup> It was above all in autumn 1919, as Hitler came into contact with the newly formed German Workers' Party and began to realise what an impact he could have on an audience, that his way into politics — though only on the beerhall fringes — opened up.

At the time that Hitler began to make his mark as a populist demagogue in the Munich beerhalls, his political views — though held and expressed with extraordinary fanaticism — remained the conventional fare of the extreme Right. There was nothing to distinguish them from those of the pan-Germans or of other vehemently racist-nationalist groups which abounded in Munich at that time. Agitation against the Versailles Treaty dominated his early speeches. He demanded — as did all pan-Germans — the return of the lost colonies, and the uniting of Germany and Austria, France and Britain, not Russia, were seen as the main enemies of Germany. And the Jews were attacked above all as the agents of finance capital. Hitler himself claimed that his world-view had already been decisively built before the war. But vital steps towards the completed ideology still remained to be taken in the early 1920s. In particular, his ideas on the direction of Germany's future foreign policy, on the Jews, and not least on his own future leadership role, underwent significant modification between his entry into politics and the writing of *Mein Kampf*.

Apart from his own voracious — if unsystematic and one-sided — reading, which included influential social-Darwinist and geopolitical tracts, a crucial part in amending Hitler's

thinking in these years was played by the Bavarian poet Dietrich Eckart, and by the Baltic Germans Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter and Alfred Rosenberg. Eckart contributed his own philosophy of struggle to overcome 'soulless Jewishness' as the prerequisite of a genuine revolution — in contrast to the 'false' revolution of 1918 — which would bring forth new leaders and true socialism. Rosenberg and Scheubner-Richter were even more influential in focusing Hitler's mind on the 'Jewishness' of Russian Bolshevism. Both had experienced the Russian Revolution, both were extreme anti-Semites, and both were in touch with violently anti-Bolshevik circles. In the early ideology of the Nazi Party, neither Russia nor Bolshevism had figured prominently. But now, Rosenberg acquainted Hitler with the ideas of a 'Jewish world conspiracy' contained in the forged 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. And the two Bails played a decisive role in cementing in Hitler's mind the notion of the Jewish essence of Bolshevism. This provided the keystone to the edifice of Hitler's ideology. By the time we reach *Mein Kampf*, the extirpation of 'Jewish Bolshevism' has become synonymous with the destruction of the Soviet Union in the German quest for 'living space'.

The shifts in Hitler's world-view between 1919 and 1924 can be followed in his speeches and writings over this period. Under the influence of Rosenberg and Scheubner-Richter, the relationship of anti-Semitism and anti-Marxism in Hitler's thinking underwent a transformation during these years. Though both strands of thought had already long been present in his mind — with anti-Semitism dominant — they became systematically conjoined only in this period through the catalytic image of Bolshevik Russia.

Before the fusion with anti-Marxism, Hitler's vicious anti-Semitism had, in his public speeches, initially focused more intensively upon anti-capitalism. His first noted public comments on the 'Jewish Question' occurred in August 1919 in the context of a 'lecture' on capitalism, while he was employed by the Reichswehr to provide political indoctrination for 'unreliable' soldiers returning from captivity.<sup>18</sup> It was also in this capacity that his superior officer asked him, a few weeks later, to reply to an enquiry on the 'Jewish problem'. In his letter, the earliest surviving text of his statement on the subject, Hitler spoke of the Jews as a race, not a

religious group, and of the need to combat them by rational means, not simply on the basis of emotion. This would necessitate the removal of their legal rights and ultimately the 'removal of the Jews altogether'.<sup>19</sup> Jewish power was seen as the power of money, 'the gleam of gold'. Marxism was not mentioned, though Hitler regarded the Jews as the driving force behind the revolution and social democracy. While the exclusion of legal rights for Jews was prominently expressed in the Nazi Party programme of February 1920, again there was explicit mention neither of Marxism nor of Bolshevism.

The heavy concentration upon Jewish finance capital in Hitler's early speeches was linked to his allegations of the responsibility of the Jews for the war, the defeat and the millions of German dead. So fundamental was this point to his thinking that later, in a notorious passage in *Mein Kampf*, he claimed that the lives of a million Germans killed at the front could have been saved if 'twelve to fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas'.<sup>20</sup> The fury at 'Jewish' war financiers dominated many of his early speeches. There were repeated intense attacks upon usurers, profiteers, racketeers and parasites. Over and again he demanded hanging for Jewish racketeers.<sup>21</sup> Genuine socialism for him, stated Hitler, meant to be an anti-Semite.<sup>22</sup> Under Feder's influence, he distinguished between essentially healthy industrial capital and flourishing 'Jewish finance capital', which constituted the real evil. Once 'Jewish Bolshevism' had been incorporated into this thinking, international capital was seen as working hand in hand with the 'international element in Soviet Russia against German national interests'.<sup>23</sup>

In speech after speech Hitler denounced the Jews in the most vicious terms. He rejected, as he had done in his letter of September 1919, emotional 'pogrom' anti-Semitism as the answer to the problem, but said Germans should be prepared to enter a pact with the devil if necessary in order to extirpate the evil of Jewry.<sup>24</sup> He demanded the basic solution: 'removal of the Jews from our people'.<sup>25</sup> He spoke of the prevention of the 'Jewish undermining of our people' by internment in concentration camps.<sup>26</sup> His language, violent in the extreme, became coloured with biological terminology suggestive of the eradication of germs.

He proclaimed in August 1920:

Don't think that you can combat an illness without killing its causative organ, without destroying the bacillus, and don't think that you can combat racial tuberculosis without seeing to it that the people is freed from the causative organ of racial tuberculosis. The impact of Jewry will never pass away, and the poisoning of the people will not end, as long as the causal agent, the Jew, is not removed from our midst.<sup>27</sup>

In a speech to the SA in February 1922, Hitler stated that in his view only the 'single, total and exclusive' concern with the 'Jewish Question' mattered, and a few months later summed up the entire Party programme in the one point that no Jew could be a people's comrade.<sup>28</sup> But a change of emphasis had taken place in his expressions of anti-Semitism. Under the influence of events in Russia, Hitler's main target switched from the Jews as the exponents of international finance capital – not that he ever forgot or ignored this element of his anti-Semitism – to the Jews as the power behind Marxism, and explicitly behind Marxism's practical political manifestation in Soviet Bolshevism. Either way, as the controller of international capital or as the controller of Bolshevik Marxism, the 'Jewish world conspiracy' presented Hitler with the image of an indomitable foe. But compared with his dismissal of effete bourgeois democracy, Marxism in its Bolshevik manifestation amounted to a *Wellenschaunung* which, in all its ruthless brutality, he could comprehend as a formidable force. It offered him a vision of the future which, in his eyes, only the racial struggle under Germany's leadership could prevent.

By the time of his trial for high treason in spring 1924, following the failed putsch attempt on 8–9 November 1923 when, in the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich, he had proclaimed a national revolution in the hope of overthrowing the Reich government, Hitler was telling the court that what he wanted to be was the breaker of Marxism, and asserting that the Nazi Movement knew only one enemy, the mortal enemy of Marxism.<sup>29</sup> The Jews were not mentioned. When the change in tone was noted by the 'Jewish' press and Hitler was asked about it, he replied in typical fashion that he had indeed changed his stance: while working on *Mein Kampf*, he

had realised that he had hitherto been too mild, and that the 'Jewish Question' was not of concern solely for the German people, but for all peoples, 'for Juda is the world plague'.<sup>30</sup> The struggle would not be victorious, therefore, until the international power of Jewry was completely annihilated.

The connection in Hitler's mind between Bolshevism and Jewry is the crucial additive responsible for the change in intonation. It was in spring and early summer 1920 that he first came to comment on a number of occasions on the catastrophic effect of Bolshevism in Russia and on Russia being destroyed by the Jews. By July 1920 he was explicitly combining the images of Bolshevism, Marxism and Soviet Russia in the picture of the brutal rule of the Jews, for which social democracy was allegedly paving the way in Germany.<sup>31</sup>

The theme of Bolshevik Russia preoccupied Hitler on numerous occasions during the following months. By June 1922 he was envisaging a struggle of two ideologies, the idealistic and the materialistic, representing the mission of the German people in the struggle against Bolshevism with the forces of good united against the mortal enemy of the Jew. The state was merely the means to the end of upholding the race.<sup>32</sup> And by autumn 1922 his conception of the absolutely pivotal relationship of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism had reached the point of development which was to dominate his political mission to the end. In October he wrote of a fight for life and death between two *Welanschauungen* which were incapable of coexistence. In this struggle there could only be victors and the annihilated. The example of Russia had shown what this meant. 'A victory of the Marxist idea signifies the complete extermination of the opponents . . . . The Bolshevisation of Germany . . . means the annihilation of the entire Christian-western culture altogether.' The aim of the Nazi Party could, therefore, be simply stated: 'Annihilation and extermination of the Marxist *Welanschauung*'.<sup>33</sup>

Hitler's changing awareness of the significance of Bolshevik Russia for his racial philosophy had obvious implications for his foreign-policy thinking. It is, therefore, of note that it was precisely around the time, about 1922, when he was coming to conceive of his mission as a life-or-death struggle with 'Jewish Bolshevism' that a shift took place in his concept of Germany's future foreign policy, from a traditional

pan-German concern with colonialism to the notion of a continental expansionism at the expense of Russia. Under the influence of the success of 'Jewish Bolshevism' in the civil war in Russia and the threat of Bolshevisation in Germany, the fusion of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism in Hitler's mind into an obsessive determination to destroy 'Jewish Bolshevism' was a far more powerful determinant than conventional diplomatic considerations in the reordering of foreign policy goals.

In his early speeches, Hitler conveyed little of any future intentions in foreign policy. He repeatedly berated the failures in the post-Bismarck era to ensure peace with Russia instead of siding with Austria-Hungary, and spoke of the inevitably hostile stance of Britain and France. His main target was, of course, the foreign policy of Weimar governments, which he scourged at every opportunity. He remained down to 1922 essentially anti-western in his thinking, though without a clear concept of a future alliance strategy. His attitude towards Russia was ignorant and ambivalent. He continued to harbour a dualistic view — positive towards the 'national' people of Russia, negative towards the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' rulers — and to favour an alliance with a non-Bolshevik Russia against Britain. By late 1922 he was increasingly aware of the essential division of interest between France and Britain. But above all, he was rethinking future policy towards Russia.

By December 1922 the foreign policy goals which were outlined in *Mein Kampf*, and which remained at the heart of Hitler's thinking to the end, were formulated. In a confidential discussion at that time, he turned his back on the old policy of commercial and colonial rivalry with Britain in the interest of winning over Britain for support in a continental policy against Russia.

Germany would have to adapt herself [he stated] to a purely continental policy avoiding harm to English interests. The destruction of Russia with the help of England would have to be attempted. Russia would give Germany sufficient land for German settlers and a wide field of activity for German industry. Then England would not interrupt us in our reckoning with France.<sup>34</sup>

Two years before the writing of *Mein Kampf*, therefore, Hitler's personalised world-view was to all intents and purposes complete. The struggle to destroy the power of international Jewry, the struggle to annihilate Marxism, and the struggle to obtain 'living space' for Germany at the expense of Russia amounted in effect to three forms of expression of the same integral thought. And this was embedded in, and took its justification from, an understanding of history which, turning Karl Marx's belief in the centrality of socio-economic motive forces on its head, dogmatically held to a view of historical development as the unfolding of a constant struggle between races — ethnic, biological peoples. Hitler wrote:

All great cultures of the past perished only because the originally created race died out from blood poisoning . . . . Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of old cultures . . . . All occurrences in world history are only the expression of the races' instinct of self-preservation, in the good or bad sense.<sup>35</sup>

Though for Hitler the Jewish race was the antithesis of the highest racial entity, the Aryan, the instinct of self-preservation was greater than in other peoples, enabling the Jew to thrive 'as a parasite in the body of other nations and states'.<sup>36</sup> Ultimate Jewish dominance would come about through the undermining and destruction of other pure races. The next stage after control of liberal democracy is 'in the organised mass of Marxism', which 'allows him [i.e. the Jew] to subjugate and govern the peoples with a dictatorial and brutal fist'.<sup>37</sup> The culmination is the 'fanatical savagery' and 'inhuman tortures' of 'Jewish Bolshevism'. 'The end is not only the end of the freedom of the peoples oppressed by the Jew, but also the end of this parasite upon the nations. After the death of his victim, the vampire sooner or later dies too'.<sup>38</sup> But before this stage the cataclysmic showdown with the rejuvenated racial force of the German nation would destroy Jewry for ever.

The linkage of this definitive turning-point in world history to German foreign policy is left to one of the last chapters of *Mein Kampf*. The land necessary to support Germany as a world power was to come from Russia. There, 'Jewish Bolshevism' had destroyed and replaced the former

Germanic ruling strata. But, 'as a ferment of decomposition, the Jew had weakened the Russian empire which was now 'ripe for collapse'. 'And the end of Jewish rule in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state'.<sup>39</sup> The mission of the Nazi Movement was to prepare the German people for this task. The rebuilding of the German people to a level of strength capable of accomplishing the destruction of 'Jewish Bolshevism' was the task of a 'Germanic state of the German nation'.<sup>40</sup> The state itself was but the means to attaining this end.<sup>41</sup> But this could be achieved only under leadership of genius attuned to the task. While in prison in the Landsberg fortress in 1924, serving a five-year sentence for high treason from which he was released within nine months, Hitler came to see himself as that great leader for whom the German people was waiting.

Ideas of heroic, quasi-messianic leadership in a new Reich were commonplace on the extreme Right in Germany in the early 1920s. Initially, Hitler had seen his own role solely as that of the propagandist — the 'drummer boy' for the great leader who would arise. The example of Mussolini's success in Italy in 1922 was a stirring one for Hitler. In 1922 and 1923 he spoke more frequently about the importance of personality and heroic leadership, responsible to the people but demanding their unconditional obedience for the historic mission he would carry out. As late as May 1923 Hitler stated that he was still only preparing the path, to give the coming dictator a people ready for him.<sup>42</sup> Two months later, he commented that salvation could be found only in the value of personality, and that as leader of the NSDAP he saw his task 'in accepting responsibility'.<sup>43</sup> By the time of his trial in 1924, in which he turned the putsch fiasco into a personal triumph, his conception of his own role was emerging into the fully-fledged heroic leadership self-image which took shape only after his return to politics in 1925 following his short imprisonment.

By the mid 1920s, then, Hitler had developed a rounded philosophy which offered him a complete view of the world, its ills, and how to overcome them. Its substance never changed down to his death. When, in the 1940s, Hitler's ideas on all subjects under the sun were expounded at length to his cronies in his dinner-table monologues, the self-same underlying tenets of his world-view which he had developed

in the early 1920s were still dominant. In his last recorded monologue before his suicide, Hitler remained, as ever, preoccupied by the showdown with the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' threat. His belief was unchanged that 'in a world which is becoming more and more perverted through the Jewish virus, a people which has remained immune to the virus must in the long run emerge supreme'. And he asserted that 'from this point of view, National Socialism can justly claim the eternal gratitude of the people for having eliminated the Jew from Germany and Central Europe'.<sup>44</sup> Hitler's last words to the German people, in his political testament written on the day before his death, adjured its leaders and their followers 'to scrupulous observance of the laws of race and to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry'.<sup>45</sup>

Hitler saw himself as that rarest of combinations, the 'programmatist' (or 'theoretician') and 'politician' – the executor of the 'idea'.<sup>46</sup> He spoke of the work of the combined 'programmatist' and 'politician' as a struggle 'for aims which only the fewest comprehend'.<sup>47</sup> The 'doctrine' was, then, not simply a matter of passive understanding. His world-view provided an internal dynamic. Hitler spoke repeatedly of his 'mission'; he increasingly saw the hand of 'Providence' in his work; in *Mein Kampf* he invoked God's support for his struggle against the Jew.<sup>48</sup> He saw himself engaged in the preparation of a crusade. When the showdown with 'Jewish Bolshevism' eventually became reality with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, it was for Hitler – and not for him alone – the culmination of this 'crusading' idea.

Hitler's quasi-messianic commitment to an 'idea', a faith which brooked no alternatives, gave him a strength of will-power which in his presence was difficult to resist. The dogmatism of the autodidact who, since his youth, had read voraciously but unsystematically, reinforcing his prejudices rather than subjecting them to searching critique, provided him with an inbuilt dominance over those who met him. His extraordinary memory for detail both impressed those in his presence and also deflated attempts to challenge him. The reduction of all situations to black and white alternatives, one of which could be utterly ridiculed, and the rhetorical force of expression in which complex matters were dismissed contemptuously or simplified along the lines

of incontrovertible 'basic truths', also meant face-to-face opposition stood scant chance of success.

The certainty of his own faith reinforced the more faint-hearted or doubters among Hitler's following, while those who could not share it, were cynical, or rejected it never had a chance of access to the inner sanctum of power. In any case, Hitler stuck with his circle of 'true believers' – his loyal followers, his 'own sort'.

It was the combination of 'prophet' and propagandist which gave Hitler from the early 1920s the advantage over all other potential contenders for leadership in the top elite of the Nazi Party. Other leading Nazis lacked the combination of his demagogical brilliance, his mobilising capability, and the unity and all-encompassing 'explanatory force' of his ideological vision.

Compared with Hitler's talent for vulgar simplification and mass appeal, the ideological preoccupations of early Party 'thinkers' such as Gottfried Feder or Alfred Rosenberg, who were more concerned with the intricacies of ideas than their political effectiveness or organisational potential, were opaque and limited. Feder soon faded into relative insignificance. Rosenberg's leadership weaknesses were blatantly revealed when he was left in charge of Party affairs while Hitler was in prison in 1924.

Of other early leading Nazis, Rudolf Hess was introverted, lacked demagogic talent, and saw himself from the earliest days as a mere disciple of Hitler. Julius Streicher was no more than a vulgar racist demagogue of limited intelligence, incapable of extending his obsessive hatred of Jews into a full-scale ideology. Hermann Göring was a man of action rather than ideas, and after an early spell in charge of the SA left the scene altogether for four years following the putsch disaster, remaining thereafter aloof from Party offices. Ernst Röhm was a military turned paramilitary man, an able organiser but lacking in both ideological vision and rhetorical talent. Gregor Strasser also had organisational skills, but had limited ability to whip up the fervour of the masses. His brother, Otto, was typical of a number of leading early figures in the Movement who became estranged from Hitler through their attempts to detach an abstract 'idea' of Nazism from its embodiment in the Party leader. Joseph Goebbels was an acolyte rather than a high



priest, functioning largely as his master's voice. Heinrich Himmler was a good administrator but, possessed of a cold, inhuman and cranky personality, was devoid of popular appeal. Hans Frank, the Party's chief legal expert, was a weak, vacillating character, emotional and subservient. The differing emphases in ideas and personal ambitions, rivalries and deep animosities of these and other prominent figures in the Movement ruled out each of them as potential claimants for the Party leadership and were reconciled only in the imprecise but incontrovertible future vision embodied in the person of the increasingly eulogised supreme leader, Hitler.

Already in 1922-23, the beginnings of a personality cult around Hitler had become visible. Other prominent figures in the still small Nazi Movement were speaking in public of Hitler in adulatory, 'heroic' terms as Germany's Mussolini, a leader for whom millions were yearning, and the only man who could restore Germany's greatness. Then his assumption of full responsibility for the putsch of November 1923 transformed it from a farcical failure into a publicity triumph for the radical Right, earning Hitler outright pre-eminence in *völkisch* circles. His enforced confinement in Landsberg in 1924 was thereafter turned to optimal effect. Accompanied by two dozen or so members of his bodyguard, with Rudolf Hess acting as his secretary, and being visited frequently by many other followers, Hitler made Landsberg into a Nazi 'think tank'. While writing *Mein Kampf*, he lectured the other inmates each morning on his ideas. Internment became the scene of a Nazi seminar, as his ideas were then discussed at length.

In the inner circle, Hitler's reputation as the 'programmatist' of the Nazi idea was enhanced. One of those present, a non-Bavarian local leader who had been something of a sceptic, was highly impressed by a talk in which Hitler had held forth at length about the distinction between 'programmatists' and 'politicians'. He wrote of his growing certainty as Hitler for the first time spoke of major foreign-policy considerations:

It is my rock solid conviction that Hitler will not move one iota from his National Socialist thinking . . . . And if it nonetheless sometimes looks as if that is the case,

then it is only for the sake of more important goals. For he combines in himself the programmatist and the politician. He knows his goal, but also sees the ways to do it. My stay here has strengthened what I still doubted in Göttingen: the faith in Hitler's political instinct.<sup>49</sup>

Growing belief in Hitler as Germany's coming leader, a secular faith in a political messiah, gripped many of those in his immediate surroundings who came into regular, repeated and lengthy contact with him from at least this time onwards. Though there were those, such as the Strasser brothers, who by no means succumbed to the developing personality cult, they became forced on to the defensive. The inner circle of believers was established. The basis of the 'charismatic community' was laid.

Rudolf Hess, from the earliest times a most fanatical and subservient devotee, spoke of 'the power of personality' radiating 'something that puts those around him under its spell and spreads in ever-widening circles.'<sup>50</sup> It was only during the Landsberg time, he wrote, that he fully grasped the 'mighty significance' of this personality.<sup>51</sup> Alfred Rosenberg admitted while imprisoned in Nuremberg after the war his admiration of Hitler from the earliest days, seeing in him the 'creator' of the Nazi Party and its political philosophy, a leader with 'a firm intellectual basis but at the same time a constantly increasing maturity in dealing with numerous problems', possessed of 'a great belief in his people and his mission', 'creative drive' and a 'will like iron'.<sup>52</sup> Hans Frank recalled feeling, the first time he heard Hitler speak, in January 1920, that he alone was capable of saving Germany.<sup>53</sup> On entering the SA in 1923, he was 'positively spellbound' by Hitler's personality. And when Hitler personally appealed to him in 1929 to give up plans to withdraw to a career in legal scholarship, Frank agreed to embark upon 'the new, strong, radiantly refulgent path in Adolf Hitler's world'.<sup>54</sup> Joseph Goebbels asked after reading *Mein Kampf*: 'Who is this man? half plebeian, half god! Truly Christ, or only St John?' He saw him as a genius, wanted him as a friend, and wrote in his diary on 19 April 1926: 'Adolf Hitler, I love you.'<sup>55</sup> Baldur von Schirach, later the Hitler Youth leader, recalled his fascination at the sound of Hitler's voice when first hearing him speak in public in 1925. It captivated

him and convinced him that Hitler was 'the coming saviour of Germany'.<sup>56</sup> For Göring, later proud of his title 'most faithful paladin of the Führer', full surrender came only on returning to the Party in 1928 after several years abroad following the failed putsch. But his submission thereafter was profoundly subservient. In later years he was at times almost physically ill before audiences with Hitler. He claimed that Hitler had become his conscience. He saw in him 'the rare union . . . between the most acute logical thinker and truly profound philosopher and the iron man of action'.<sup>57</sup>

These top-ranking Nazi leaders all saw Hitler at close quarters, and were in direct and regular contact with him. They all joined the Nazi Movement when it was in the political wilderness, long before it came close to gaining power. Though career and material advantages came their way, political opportunism can scarcely be seen as the prime motive behind their commitment to the Nazi cause. The personalisation of their faith and loyalty in Hitler was crucial, and, as the above selected evidence shows, was vividly present in a period before the institutionalised Führer cult had become widely established. Indeed, they themselves were among both the earliest victims and the chief exponents of the 'Hitler myth'.

Central to this core of the 'charismatic community' was the power of Hitler's personality. And dominant within this personality was the single-mindedness of the zealot, the ardent conviction of the self-styled prophet, the ideological self-certainty of the missionary. To the closest members of his retinue, his proclaimed unity in his own person of the 'programmatist' and 'politician' gave him unchallengeable status as both the embodiment of the 'idea' and its organising genius.

In practical matters and day-to-day decisions, Hitler was often anything but self-certain. And in the urgent matter of building up the Party in the politically barren years of the mid and late 1920s, the details of the arcanum of Hitler's personalised ideology were not important. Indeed, the very flexibility of the individual ideas within an overall interlocking framework was massively advantageous. Even among his close dependants, one specific angle of ideology was often more important than another, and circumstances necessitated placing the emphasis on some parts more than

others. But what was crucial was the belief that the 'future belongs to us', that one day Hitler's 'vision' – whatever interpretation was placed upon it – would become reality. This was the power of Hitler's idea.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The following description relies upon Percy Schramm's introduction (esp. pp. 29–34) to Henry Picker, *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier*, 2nd edn, Stuttgart-Degerloch, 1963, and on Picker's own comments in the 3rd edn of 1976, p. 25.
2. See Werner Maser, *Adolf Hitler. Legende, Mythen, Wirklichkeit*, 3rd edn, Munich, 1976, pp. 16–38, 265.
3. See Fest, pp. 31–2.
4. By Rudolf Binion, *Hitler among the Germans*, New York, 1976. See the pertinent comments of William Carr, *Hitler. A Study in Personality and Politics*, London, 1978, pp. 124–5, 148.
5. Maser, *Hitler*, p. 97.
6. See Fest, *Hitler*, p. 65.
7. MK, p. 59.
8. Maser, *Hitler*, p. 251.
9. MK, 59; trans. MK Watt, p. 51.
10. MK, 60; trans. MK Watt, p. 52.
11. MK, ch. 2.
12. Maser, *Hitler*, p. 166.
13. MK, pp. 221–5.
14. Maser, *Hitler*, p. 149.
15. MK, p. 225.
16. Cit. Maser, *Hitler*, p. 165.
17. MK, p. 235; trans. MK Watt, p. 196.
18. JK, Doc. 60.
19. JK, Doc. 61.
20. MK, p. 772; trans. MK Watt, p. 620.
21. JK, e.g. Docs 87, 109, 138–9 p. 215, no. 184.
22. JK, p. 200.
23. JK, p. 337.
24. JK, pp. 119–20, and pp. 128, 184 for the rejection of 'emotional antisemitism'.
25. JK, p. 201.