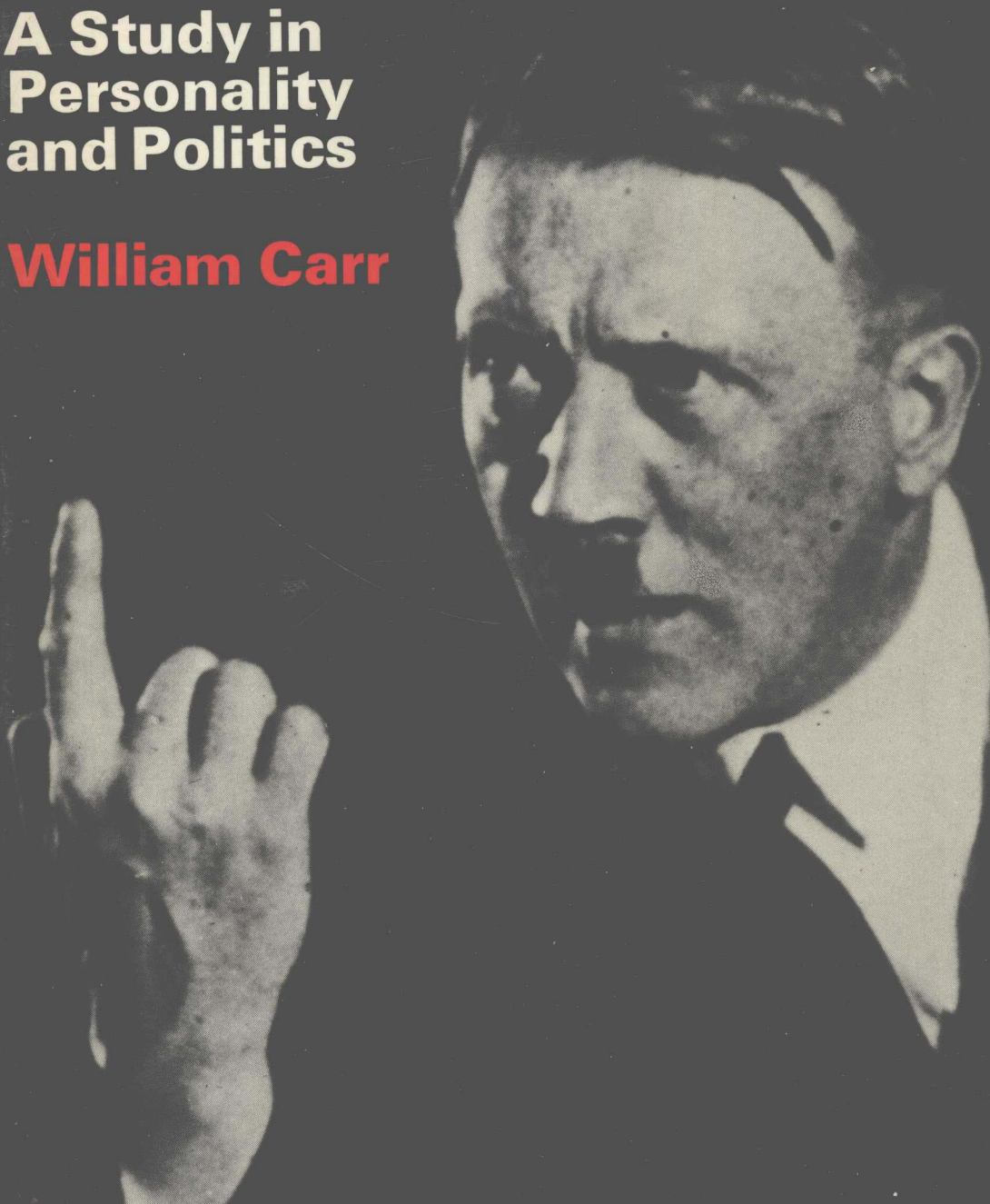


Hitler

**A Study in
Personality
and Politics**

William Carr



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Edward Arnold

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The German catastrophe was not only caused by what Hitler made of us, but by what we made of Hitler. Hitler did not come from outside; he was not, as many see him today, a demoniacal beast who seized power by himself. He was the man the German people wanted and the man we made master of our own destiny by our unrestrained glorification of him. For a Hitler only appears in a people which has the desire and the will to have a Hitler. It is a collective failing in us Germans that we give honour to men of extraordinary talents—and no one can deny that Hitler had these talents—and arouse in them the feeling that they are infallible supermen.

Baldur von Schirach, *Ich glaubte an Hitler*.

But it is a horrible and ghastly sight when a great people emasculates itself in favour of a 'great man'; when ideals count for nothing compared with the iron foot on their necks But one would think there was a very simple and efficacious remedy against this particular form of spiritual debasement: the experience, confirmed on every page of history, that peoples have always to pay very dearly for the actions of the 'great man' For it is a permanent characteristic of the 'great men' that when the infallible spirit leaves them, they reach out in sheer delight for the more infallible [weapon of] force.

F. Mehring, *Gesammelte Schriften*.

Preface

Another book about Hitler? The question is a very natural one likely to occur to anyone who has watched with growing apprehension the never-ending stream of literature on Hitler pouring forth from the presses in several lands. Hardly a month goes by without some work on Nazi Germany appearing, whether it be a biography of Hitler or some other Nazi leader, a collection of documents or a learned monograph on some aspect of the Third Reich, to say nothing of films and television plays about this period.

It is therefore incumbent upon a writer who persists in entering this highly competitive field, despite the warning notices, to state at the outset what his intentions are. Even though my book ranges pretty widely over Hitler's life from his childhood to his death and touches upon most aspects of his career, let me say at once that it is not intended to be a biographical study. Rather I prefer to describe it as a contribution to the continuing debate about the historical role of Hitler in the National Socialist era.

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought on the subject of personality in history. There are those who believe in what might be termed 'the primacy of personality'. For them history is primarily the history of great men and their deeds and the economic and social dimension is never of more than marginal significance in the historical process. Though the traumatic effect of the Second World War and the growth of the social sciences have made serious inroads into this traditionalist position, some of the new Hitler biographies still lay what appears to me to be undue emphasis on the personality of one man in explaining the Nazi phenomenon. Those psychohistorians who have concentrated almost exclusively in their researches on the minutiae of Hitler's idiosyncrasies and on his alleged physical defect also belong in the traditionalist camp—which is not to deny the importance of this new branch of historical study now that it is moving away from its preoccupation with individual pathology and turning more and more to the study of collective phenomena.

Diametrically opposed to the traditionalists are the Marxist historians who believe in what might be termed 'the primacy of impersonal forces'. In their writing Hitler is depicted as a shadowy figure, the helpless puppet of monopoly capitalism, jobbed into power by reactionary forces out to destroy parliamentary democracy and the free trade union movement and prepare Germany for wars of aggression in the interest of the possessing classes. True, there is an

element of inconsistency here for, while these historians completely reject the traditionalist explanation of German fascism in terms of the personal power of a malevolent individual who seduced the German people from the paths of righteousness, they are perfectly willing to attribute the fascist phenomenon in large measure to the sinister machinations of a handful of politically-motivated industrialists and landowners. Admittedly, there is an element of distortion in my description of both schools of thought. The most successful biographers have never neglected to place their subjects firmly in the context of their times. And the unhistorical Marxism, which has been reluctant to give proper recognition to the crucial role fascist leaders—like any other group of leaders—play as the executants of the historical process, shows signs of dissolving in the thaw which is moving East and West away from the worst excesses of the Cold War. It may not be too long now before we have at last a biography of Hitler written from a Marxist standpoint.

In this book I have attempted to present Hitler in the light of modern historical science which embraces the totality of historical experience—political, social, economic and cultural history, the investigation of individual pathology and, what is more significant for the historian, the study of the collective psychology of peoples. My concern, in a sentence, is with the interrelationship between the personality of Hitler and those social forces which made National Socialism possible. To the objection that this is not, after all, so far removed from the practice of the best biographers, I would reply that what is implicit in their work is explicit in mine by virtue of the fact that I have concentrated on the specific problem of personality and politics to the exclusion of much that must perforce be included in a biography.

At times it has been difficult not to resist the feeling that I had embarked on a voyage uncertain of my destination and, worse still, in a leaking craft with a faulty compass to guide me and constantly in peril of running aground. This basically for two reasons. In the first place, as this work progressed I have become increasingly conscious of the need for an up-to-date definition of personality. Psychologists have, of course, their (several) definitions. But historians urgently require a definition which will enable them to relate historical personalities in a meaningful fashion to the totality of historical experience in industrialized societies, where the techniques of modern communications and the demands of mass democracy have transformed the functional relationship between leaders and led.¹ Secondly, my terms of reference have obliged me to interest myself in virtually every aspect of life in the Third Reich. And since no one can hope to master the published material or the massive archival deposits in their entirety, I write in the sure and certain knowledge that my book can be no more than a contribution to the continuing debate about Hitler's role in the events of the second quarter of our century.

A word about the structure of the chapters. I commence my examination of Hitler's personality with an analysis of his oratorical gifts, and hopefully set the pattern for the rest of the book by relating his messianic oratory to a specific historical and psychological situation. Later in the first chapter I assess the

extent to which other personal qualities helped or hindered his rise to power by studying specific points in his career between 1919 and 1933. In the second chapter, instead of a chronological treatment of Hitler in power, I prefer to concentrate on foreign policy (1933 to 1939), economic policy and the fate of the Jews as three areas for close analysis, in the hope of establishing Hitler's influence on events and, equally important, the extent to which factors external to the man moulded the contours of Nazi policies.

If the first two chapters emphasize on the whole (with significant qualifications in the case of foreign policy) the importance of external factors in shaping the policies of the Third Reich, in the third chapter on Hitler the military leader it may be that I lean too far in the opposite direction. If so, the fault is mine for not stressing strongly enough the political and economic restraints on a supreme commander in wartime. However, I would still defend my view that, within these limits, Hitler did exert major influence on the course of the war. No doubt the Nazi 'new order' would have shared the fate of all tyrannies in the fullness of time. What Hitler did by his personal intervention in the conduct of the war—notably when he resolved to attack Russia before defeating Britain—was hasten the inevitable collapse of the Third Reich.

In chapter 4 Hitler's philosophy of life, his religious opinions and his interest in architecture and Wagner are examined systematically both in order to clarify the concepts and to try to ascertain the relationship between his ideas and his political practice. That the chapter ends with many questions and supplies few answers is a healthy sign in the present state of research and infinitely preferable to the reverse situation. Nor does the final chapter on Hitler's health pretend to solve the riddle. Clarification of his physical and mental state is a major objective in this chapter. But towards the end I am again concerned to emphasize what is for me the crucial point in this book—namely, that the individual pathology of the Führer must be related to the collective psychology of the German people if sense is to be made of the Nazi phenomenon. That this kind of investigation has a wider significance and more immediate relevancy is suggested by the persistence of neo-fascist movements since the last war, slight though their chances of political power may seem to be at this point in time.²

Finally, it is a great pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to many colleagues who have helped me with this book. I am especially grateful to Dr Wolfgang Michalka of the Historisches Seminar at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt who read the book in manuscript form and discussed it with me at great length. The final draft has benefited enormously from his constructive criticism and stimulating comments. I am also indebted to Professor David Milner, Head of the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Sheffield, Emeritus Professor John Pemberton, formerly Head of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at the Queen's University of Belfast, and Professor Helm Stierlin, Head of the Abteilung für psychoanalytische Grundlagenforschung und Familientherapie at the University of Heidelberg, all of whom read the chapter on Hitler's health and by their

comments saved me from several blunders; and to Dr Terry Rick of the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield for his expert assistance in identifying several of the many drugs Hitler took. I would like, too, to express my gratitude to Herr Albert Speer who, at short notice, gave generously of his time to discuss Hitler's personality with me.

A word of sincere thanks is due to the many archivists who assisted me over the years: at the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz; the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg; the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Freiburg; the Hauptstaatsarchiv, Geheimes Staatsarchiv and the Stadtarchiv Munich; the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich; the National Archives, Washington; and the University of Pennsylvania Library, Philadelphia. And a special word of thanks to Mrs G. Johnson, Miss J. Langmaid and Mrs C. Wichmann who preside so graciously over the reading room at the Wiener Library, London, where I spent many hours working on this unique collection of material on the Nazi period. The patience of the publishers in waiting for the manuscript should not go unmentioned either. I am also pleased to acknowledge my thanks to the Research Fund of the University of Sheffield for several grants, to the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* for a research scholarship in 1973, and to the British Academy for one grant in 1975. And most of all, I wish to record my deep sense of gratitude to my wife for the unfailing patience and tolerance she has displayed during the long periods when I have neglected her for this book. Without her constant support it would have taken much longer to write and its completion would have given me immeasurably less satisfaction.

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The politician, 1919–33

More than thirty years after Adolf Hitler's death in the Berlin bunker, historians still find difficulty in writing dispassionately about a man whose deeds were written in blood across the face of wartime Europe from the Atlantic coastline to the Russian steppes. The crimes for which he and his associates were rightly held responsible still deserve dishonourable mention today in a world grown daily more accustomed to violence and untimely death. All the same, while no one would seek to minimize the enormity of these crimes against humanity, many of those who lived through this tumultuous period will continue to remember Hitler not primarily as the main instigator of the mass murders at the death camps of Maidanek, Sobibor and Treblinka—which still seems highly likely despite recent attempts at rehabilitation¹—but first and foremost as the popularist orator and firebrand who cast a spell over millions of Germans desperately seeking reassurance at a time of unprecedented crisis, a spell which for many of them was not broken until enemy armies swept into the Third Reich in 1945.

(By any objective standard Hitler must rank as one of the great orators of history, perhaps the greatest in the twentieth century. Others have surpassed him by the brilliance of their verbal dialectics, many by the originality of their arguments, and nearly all by the broad humanity of their message. Yet surely no one ever mastered the art of public speaking so thoroughly or exploited the shifting moods of audiences with greater skill than Hitler. As this was, perhaps, the most obvious expression of the man, it would seem an appropriate point at which to commence an examination of Hitler's personality.)

At the very outset we are confronted by a dense thicket of mythology which has grown up around the person of Adolf Hitler. The popular image familiar to millions through the media of the cinema and television is of a ranting mob orator, a demoniacal figure carried away by the elemental power of his own oratory and utterly incapable of controlling his own emotions. Film extracts from the 1930s have contributed to this false picture by showing Hitler—invariably for a few seconds only—shouting at the top of his voice, gesticulating, head thrown back, eyes raised to heaven, features distorted, sweat pouring down his face and back, his raucous tones reverberating round the hall while a brown-shirted rally responds ecstatically to his unrestrained outpourings. From this picture one is left to infer either that Germans are peculiarly vulnerable to hysterical oratory, or else that Hitler was an unsophis-

ticated rabble-rouser who relied on unusually strong lungs to captivate an audience—or possibly a combination of both.

Almost exactly the reverse is the truth. Sophistication in the use of the techniques of public speaking and care in the preparation of speeches were the hallmarks of his oratory. No one worked harder or in a more calculating manner to win the hearts of an audience. In public he spoke always by design and rarely by accident. His speeches, like those of his great antagonist, Winston Churchill, were always well-structured and thought out in considerable detail. But unlike the generality of German politicians before and after the Third Reich, Hitler did not read out his speeches word for word, or at any rate not in the early years. He was far too astute a psychologist not to appreciate the debilitating effect written perorations have on the rapport between speaker and audience. Having an exceptionally retentive memory, he could convey an impression of spontaneity and freshness however long he spoke, and with no more than a few notes on the rostrum containing key phrases to remind him of the sequence of his argument.

One should remember, too, that Hitler's earliest oratorical triumphs were achieved with a minimum of pageantry. In the early days when he was struggling for recognition, a table top in a beer hall was his only platform, his dress not the ill-fitting brown uniform, ungainly jack boots and unflattering peak cap of later years but the modest nondescript garb of the man in the street—dark suit, white shirt and black tie. In the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the rowdy Munich beer kellers he proved his mettle as an orator without the pomp and circumstance of later years. He did not rant and rave all the time—a physical impossibility for a man who spoke normally two hours and more—but addressed his audiences in quiet tones at first, even hesitantly, developing his chosen theme with occasional shafts of humour and invariably with lucidity and skill. Unlike many public speakers of those days he could deal expertly with hecklers. During the discussion periods—which in the early days invariably followed his speech—he stood with folded arms listening to opponents before dispatching them with a few well-chosen and sometimes humorous words.² Only later did the Brown shirts save him the trouble, though from the start Hitler's audiences were never particularly tolerant and often shouted opponents down.

Hitler took immense pains over the minutiae of his oratory. Take, for example, the extravagant and theatrical gestures at which he excelled—the clenched fists, the admonitory forefinger pointing now at the audience, now heavenwards, and the outstretched arms. Histrionic gestures of this kind were something of a novelty for German audiences; political speakers either did not gesticulate or, if they did, gave little or no thought to the effect of awkward gestures on their audiences. Hitler went to endless trouble over such details. He is said to have studied the technique of Ferdl Weiss, a popular Munich comedian, for capturing the attention of noisy beer-hall crowds before commencing his act. According to Heiden, an early biographer of Hitler, he practised his gestures diligently in front of a mirror in his shabby room in

Munich's Thierschstrasse.³ He also had the party photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, snap him in action so that he could study each gesture minutely. Only those passing the most severe scrutiny were employed on public platforms. It was equally characteristic that he studied in great detail the acoustics of the major beer halls in Munich and adjusted the pitch of his voice to suit each one. Once the party grew in size and Hitler was firmly established as leader, he paid much attention to the external trappings of meetings as part of a calculated attempt to heighten the emotional experience and to lower the mental resistance of the audience.

A typical example of the changing style of Hitler's oratory was the Zirkus Krone meeting in March 1927, where he addressed his first public gathering since the removal of the ban on public speaking imposed on him in 1923.⁴ As usual he was billed to speak at 8 o'clock in the evening. It was never his practice to appear punctually. Instead he remained in his room pacing up and down going over his speech (usually composed a few hours before). By telephone he kept in touch with the meeting, ringing at frequent intervals to ascertain the size and political complexion of the crowd. By 8.00 the Zirkus Krone was half-full. On the swastika-draped platform a military band was playing the old familiar tunes setting the feet tapping while a sprinkling of uniformed Brownshirts chatted to friends in the audience. At 8.30 Hitler strode in, having delayed long enough to arouse expectancy but not long enough to arouse hostility towards the unpunctual speaker. Greeted with rapturous applause by a crowd of some 8,000, he walked briskly to the platform surrounded by his henchmen. A trumpet sounded and a hush fell on the crowd. Through the hall marched the Brown shirts, preceded by two rows of drummers and by the 'blood flag'—the banner carried in the march to Munich's Feldherrnhalle during the abortive putsch of 1923 and stained with the blood of fallen comrades. The audience greeted the flag with shouts of *Heil* while Hitler stood arm outstretched (a salute he picked up from the Italian fascists) at the rostrum until all were seated. The stage was set; the audience, reassured by the parade of party strength, their emotions aroused by the banners and uniforms, listened to the Führer full of expectancy. With the party firmly established, if only on a local base, Hitler avoided anything likely to fracture the rapport between perspiring orator and ecstatic audience. Discussion time had gone for good, partly because of the intrinsic difficulty of organizing discussion at a mass meeting, but primarily because the Hitler of the late 1920s was consciously cultivating a different public image—that of the Führer rallying the faithful for the long haul ahead, not the agitator goading the masses into rebellion. At the end of the speech, which usually ended in a great emotional crescendo, Hitler strode out theatrically into the night to the thunderous applause of the audience brought to its feet as the band struck up the *Deutschlandlied*.

Once the Nazis were in power the pageantry grew more impressive and ostentatious, culminating in the great party rallies at Nuremberg, the old imperial city and home of Dürer and the Meistersinger. For eight days each year the high drama of the party rally was enacted against the magnificent

setting of a medieval town with all the sophisticated paraphernalia of mass propaganda at the organizers' disposal. The meeting of the *Gauleiter* or regional party leaders in the middle of rally week was an excellent example of brilliant staging. Tens of thousands of party members gathered in the evening in the Zeppelinwiese to await the Führer. To the roar of applause and illuminated by a circle of one hundred hidden searchlights, the Führer entered the vast arena. At the head of a procession of high party officials he walked slowly down the steps and up to the tribune to the accompaniment of thunderous applause. When silence fell at last on the arena, thousands of Nazi banners moved forward through the serried ranks while searchlights picked out the golden eagles on the red standards, a superbly impressive setting for the speech that followed.

Yet, when all is said and done, oratory has a gossamer-like magic about it that defies precise analysis. Skilful techniques and a receptive audience are essential ingredients of success but the indispensable element is the personal magnetism of the speaker. Though Hitler clearly experienced great difficulty with ordinary human relationships, was rarely completely at ease outside the immediate circle of party cronies and established few if any intimate relationships, on public occasions and in front of an audience private inhibitions rolled away and he became literally a man transformed. A Hitler speech was superb theatre—at any rate for those who liked old-fashioned melodrama. Hitler was his own script writer, choreographer and actor-manager rolled into one. With uncanny skill he exploited the whole register of human emotions. Contrary to popular belief he did not lack a certain sense of humour either in public or in private; some of the speeches in the late 1920s and early 1930s attacking republican politicians still make entertaining reading provided that one does not lose patience with a speaker whose mordant wit was always at the expense of opponents and never at his own.⁵ And however preposterous his premises seem to rational men, it has to be admitted that he could argue a case cleverly and on occasions persuasively.

It would, however, be grossly misleading to suppose that Hitler's speeches were designed primarily to appeal to the intelligence or good humour of his audiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hitler's aim in the early years was quite simply to arouse and mobilize the emotions of his audience—the noble and the ignoble alike—as a means of bringing the Nazi Party to power.⁶ Whether or not he ever read Gustav Le Bon, there is no doubt that he had a firm grasp of the principles of mass psychology.⁷ More than most politicians he was acutely aware that civilization is only skin deep, that primitive emotions lie very close to the surface of ordinary people, and that these instincts can be most effectively manipulated at mass meetings held in the evening when mental resistance is low. As he remarked with revealing candour in a well-known passage in *Mein Kampf*:

When from his little workshop or big factory in which he [the individual] feels very small, he steps for the first time into a mass meeting and has thousands and thousands of people of the same opinion around him . . . he

is swept away by three or four thousand others into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxication and enthusiasm, when the visible success and agreement of thousands confirm to him the rightness of the new doctrine and for the first time arouse doubt in the truth of his previous conviction—then he himself has succumbed to the magic influence of mass . . . suggestion. The will, the longing, and also the power of thousands are accumulated in every individual. The man who enters such a meeting doubting and wavering leaves it inwardly reinforced: he has become a link in the community.⁸

Hitler's blend of dogmatic assertion, repetition, biting sarcasm and emotional appeal usually did the trick. By the time he reached the end of the two hours' speech, the audience was applauding frequently. Applause, as a contemporary recalled, seemed to inspire a veritable torrent of words in him and his voice rose to a crescendo.⁹ Yet always he remained 'ice cold', never carried away by the enthusiasm he engendered. He waved applause down and continued quietly never losing his place, continuing to build up his arguments pyramid-like before the eyes of his audience as his voice moved from *pianissimo* through *fortissimo* to *furioso*. To that extent his speeches were always contrived and never spontaneous. But what really counted was his remarkable ability to persuade an audience that he was in deadly earnest. So when the spellbinder released them, the people streamed homewards—or occasionally marched shoulder to shoulder into the centre of Munich singing patriotic songs and shouting anti-semitic slogans—their prejudices confirmed, their hopes rekindled by a man who identified himself with their fears and aspirations and in masterful fashion promised to realize their deepest desires. As Otto Strasser said of him: 'His words go like an arrow to their target, he touches each private wound on the raw, liberating the unconscious, exposing its innermost aspirations, telling it what it most wants to hear.'¹⁰

It is surely no accident that Hitler's meetings bore at least a superficial resemblance to revivalist gatherings of the old-fashioned bible-thumping variety, full of fire and brimstone, immortalized in Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*. There was the same infectious enthusiasm, the same electrically charged atmosphere, the same extraordinary credulity and the same intensity of feeling welding speaker and audience together in a mystical union.¹¹ There is much force in the contention that Nazism is only properly intelligible in terms of a pseudo-religion.¹² In an age when faith in transcendental religion was faltering, political creeds were able to mobilize the religious sentiment in man for purely secular goals. In this way nineteenth-century nationalists often made a religion out of their love of the fatherland. In the twentieth century fascists were able to do the same with the concepts of race and war. The elaborate ritual of the Nazi movement, the love of pageantry, the cult of fallen heroes, and the emphasis on the virtue of sacrifice were evidence of the pseudo-religious strain in Nazism which its organizers consciously exploited.¹³ When Hitler's speeches are seen in this light, much of what at first seems empty gibberish assumes a new significance. Hitler did not demand of his followers

intellectual assent to his propositions but quite simply blind faith in the Führer and readiness to follow him to the bitter end, much as the leader of a chiliastic sect guarantees final victory to all who believe in him regardless of the overwhelming odds against them. Thus, writing of the uphill task facing the party in 1922, Hitler observed: 'If it is impossible then we will attempt it and be defeated; but if it is essential and true then we must believe that it is possible and this faith we do have.'¹⁴ A clearer statement of the belief that faith can move mountains one could not hope for. And this mentality lay at the very heart of Hitler's doctrine. What he invited his audiences to do was reject the reality of the external world, disregard the proof of their own eyes and immerse themselves totally in a dream world which would one day become reality through their faith in him and their own will to victory.¹⁵ For Hitler politics, like Wagnerian opera, was essentially a systematization of illusion to capture the total allegiance of the audience.

What kind of people did Hitler's messianic politics appeal to? Detailed investigation of the composition of the party in the early days is difficult as few membership lists have survived. Such evidence as we possess is somewhat inconclusive and much depends on the social classification one applies. According to the most reliable analysis—based on a fragment of the 1923 membership list—31 per cent of a total of 4,800 members were lower middle class; 13.6 per cent were small businessmen and shopkeepers; 11.1 per cent were clerks; and 6.2 per cent were minor officials. Another 25 per cent might be classified as skilled working class; in this group, craftsmen (*Handwerker*) formed 20 per cent and specialist workers 8.5 per cent. Only 9.5 per cent were unskilled working class.¹⁶ And as yet the party made virtually no impact on the farming community. Clearly the centre of gravity of the Nazi Party on the eve of the 1923 putsch lay fairly and squarely in the lower middle and upper working classes.

These classes are often regarded as the 'natural standard bearers of fascism'. It is argued that after the First World War small businessmen, craftsmen and white-collar workers all over Europe were fearful for their economic future and social status. Poised precariously between proletariat on the one hand and affluent upper middle class on the other, they were in imminent danger—or so they believed—of being ground out of existence between powerful unions and massive industrial combines. Recent research has, however, emphasized the continuing importance of these classes in the 1920s and 1930s in defiance of all Marxist prophecies of their imminent extinction.¹⁷ In 1933 there were still over three million small businessmen in Germany each employing under fifty men and representing a total working force of nine millions. These people, with their economic grievances and their nostalgia for the golden age of prosperity at home and greatness abroad in the days of William II, were potentially a reservoir of support for fascism. Hitler, the son of a minor official sprung from farming stock in Upper Austria, was well placed to articulate the hopes and fears of the lower middle class. That a significant proportion of

party activists, among them Goebbels, Himmler, Koch and Bormann, came from this social milieu seems to lend further credence to this argument.

However, one should probably treat with reserve any explanation of fascism which tries to pin down Hitler's followers like butterflies easily identifiable by their bright social and economic markings. For one thing, the vast majority of lower middle-class voters did not support the Nazis but the more respectable right-wing German Nationalists and smaller middle-of-the-road parties throughout the 1920s. Only the Depression made Nazism an attractive proposition for these people. The true complexity of the situation is revealed in Peter Merkl's recent analysis of party attitudes.¹⁸ The sober fact is that a wide spectrum of discontent and frustration—of which economic grievance formed only a relatively small part—attracted people to the party. The lower middle class was not a sharply defined social group whose members reacted uniformly to the same external stimuli but a collection of individuals in a state of social flux. Civil servants and military types, members of the old middle class, white-collar workers and urban craftsmen, each had their own reasons for joining the party. Whether a man was moving up or down the social ladder was another important variable modifying attitudes. Merkl's pioneering analysis is significant in another respect. It reveals that only a minority of the original sample of party members was attracted to the party by Hitler's personal charisma, and that only one third of them joined after attending a party meeting—a timely warning, of which more later, that one should not exaggerate the personal influence of Hitler in explaining the growth of the party.¹⁹

An exception would have to be made here in respect of the influx of young men into the party in the early 1920s. Some were ex-soldiers embittered by defeat and resentful of a world they could not—or would not—understand. Many found temporary employment in the Free Corps fighting the Russians and the Poles but as the situation stabilized found themselves once more at a loose end. Other new members were too young to have fought in the war. But they had been militarized through youth movements during the war, and hoped to find in street brawling the excitement they supposed they had missed in the mud and blood of Flanders.²⁰ It was Hitler, and also Captain Ernst Roehm, both typical examples of the disoriented ex-soldier, who attracted many of these young men to the Nazi Party where they quickly outnumbered the older members and gave it a youthful profile, bringing the average age down to twenty-eight. As these men were 'used to removing obstacles with hand grenades and pistols',²¹ they soon changed the party's image; by 1922 hooliganism and physical attacks on opponents became the distinctive feature of the party with the whole-hearted approval of the leader.²² These emotionally insecure and paranoid young men were more vulnerable than most to Hitler's personal magnetism and his reckless oratory—especially that not inconsiderable group which had no front-line experience at all. Hitler offered these people a naively simple explanation of their discontents, a spiritual haven in a hostile world and every encouragement to vent their frustration on Jews,

Marxists, 'November traitors' and other enemies of the fatherland. In innumerable cases these young men repaid him with dog-like devotion for the next twenty years.

It is more difficult to generalize about the audiences Hitler attracted in the early 1930s when the party broke through into national politics. Much work has still to be done on electoral behaviour, and generalizations must remain tentative until we possess a more sensitive picture of regional variations.²³ Still, the broad pattern is clear enough. At no time before or after 1930 did the Nazis make any appreciable inroads into the working-class electorate.²⁴ Once economic conditions began to deteriorate, the party gained support not in the great cities, generally speaking, but in the countryside and in the small towns. What in the early 1920s had been essentially a cry for help from a small group of frustrated and *déraciné* people on the fringes of the middle class, unable to adjust to military defeat and political change, suddenly became a mass movement as a result of the near collapse of the capitalist system. It is not going too far to say that the farming community and the urban middle class were in the throes of an identity crisis in the early 1930s. Heavy tax burdens, an inability to meet mortgage repayments on farms, shops and small businesses, and the plight of their children no longer able to slip easily into comfortable bourgeois occupations, brought the crisis to flash-point. Economic grievances, though obviously important, were only the ostensible cause of middle-class alienation from the republic. At a deeper level economic grumbles merely sharpened middle-class awareness of the decline in their status since 1914, deepened their resentment at working-class gains since 1918, and made them turn away impatiently from the middle-of-the-road parties and, to a lesser degree, from the German Nationalists, all of whom—as they saw matters—had failed to protect the middle classes. Instead, they threw themselves into the arms of the Nazis who, with their eye on the main chance, were promising to stop the rot and restore the 'backbone of the nation'.²⁵

What was it that drew middle-class audiences to Hitler? Certainly not the content of his speeches, full of vague and woolly phraseology and markedly deficient in detailed, let alone credible, policies. Denunciation of the Versailles treaty, rhetorical talk about Germany's future glory, promises of tax reductions and measures to promote agricultural self-sufficiency—all this was commonplace stuff at any right-wing meeting. Hitler made no attempt to explain how an unarmed Germany could achieve any more than Stresemann had already achieved as foreign minister. Hitler's audiences could hear from other right-wing speakers the same vituperation against parliamentary democracy and the same bombastic appeal for a revival of the spirit of 1914, when all classes allegedly closed ranks and became a truly united nation. What was compelling about Hitler and what distinguished his party from other right-wing parties were not only the external trappings—the feverish activity, the endless marching, the mass rallies and the ceaseless propaganda drives—important though these were in gathering in the votes, but above all the ruthless will to victory and the fanatical sense of commitment emanating