

SEBASTIAN HAFFNER

Translated by Ewald Osers

The Meaning of Hitler

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TRANSLATED BY
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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Printed in the United States of America
Originally published in Germany under the title
Anmerkungen zu Hitler, copyright © 1978 by
Kindler Verlag GmbH München
This Harvard University Press paperback
is reprinted by arrangement with Macmillan
Publishing Co., Inc., publishers of the
first American edition, 1979.

Eleventh printing, 1999 Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Haffner, Sebastian.

The meaning of Hitler.

Translation of: Anmerkungen zu Hitler. Reprint. Originally published: New York: Macmillan, 1979.

1. Hitler, Adolf, 1889–1945. 2. Heads of state— Germany—Biography. I. Title. DD247.H5H26513 1983 943.086'092'4 [B] 82-21346 ISBN 0-674-55775-1 (pbk.)

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Life

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DOLF HITLER's father made a success of life. The illegitimate son of a servant girl, he rose to become a state official of administrative rank and died honoured and respected.

His son began by making a mess of his life. He did not finish school, failed his entrance examination at the Vienna Academy of Arts, and spent the time from his eighteenth to his twenty-fifth year in Vienna and then in Munich, doing nothing and aspiring to nothing. His orphan's pension and the occasional lucky sale of a painting kept the young Bohemian afloat. At the outbreak of war in 1914 he volunteered for the Bavarian Army. There followed four years of front-line service, during which courage earned him both classes of the Iron Cross but lack of leadership qualities prevented him from rising above the rank of corporal. After the end of the war, which he witnessed as a gas casualty in a German military hospital, he remained a 'barracks dweller' for a further year. He still had no plans or prospects of a job. He was then thirty.

At that age, in the autumn of 1919, he joined a small radical Right-wing party, in which he soon played a leading role, and that was the beginning of a political career which eventually made him an historic figure.

Hitler lived from 20 April 1889 until 30 April 1945, i.e. almost exactly fifty-six years. The difference between his first thirty and the following twenty-six years seems to be inexplicable. For thirty years he was an obscure failure; then almost overnight a local celebrity and eventually the man around whom the whole of world policy revolved. How does that go together?

Although that difference has provoked numerous explanations it is in fact more apparent than real, not merely because Hitler's political career continued to be disjointed during its first ten years, and Hitler the politician turned out in the final analysis to be a failure, albeit on a supreme scale, but mainly because Hitler's personal life remained poor and stunted even during the second, public, period of his life. By contrast, closer inspection of his inner political life during the first, outwardly uneventful, decades of his

life reveals many unusual features – features which foreshadowed much that followed.

The division which certainly marks Hitler's life does not cut across it but runs through the whole. Not all weakness and failure before 1919, all vigour and achievement after 1920. But before and after an exceptional intensity of political living and feeling alongside an exceptional meagreness of personal experience. The obscure Bohemian of the pre-war years was living and inwardly working on the political scene of his day as though he were a top politician; and the Führer and Reich Chancellor remained, in his personal life, a successful Bohemian. The decisive characteristic of his life is its one-dimensionality.

Many biographies carry as a sub-title under their hero's name: 'His life and times', with the word 'and' dividing rather than uniting. Biographical and historical chapters alternate; the great individual stands, in the round, before a background of two-dimensional contemporary events. He stands out from his time as much as he intervenes in it. A life of Hitler cannot be written in that way. Everything that matters in it blends with history, is history. The young Hitler reflected it; the man of middle years still reflected it but began to influence it; the later Hitler determined it. First he was made by history, then he made history. That is worth looking at. The personal side of Hitler's life consists essentially of non-events – after 1919 as much as before. Let us dispose of them briefly.

His life lacked – 'before' and 'after' – everything that normally lends weight, warmth and dignity to a human life: education, occupation, love and friendship, marriage, parenthood. Apart from politics and political passion, his was an empty life and hence one which, though certainly not happy, was strangely lightweight, and lightly discarded. A continuous readiness for suicide accompanied Hitler throughout his political career. And at its end, almost as a matter of course, stood a real suicide.

Hitler's celibacy and childlessness* are well known. Love

^{*}It has lately been claimed that, as a soldier in France in 1917, Hitler fathered an illegitimate son on a French woman. Even if this is correct, Hitler never knew him. The experience of fatherhood is lacking in Hitler's life.

played an unusually slight part in his life. There were a few women, but he treated them as unimportant and did not make them happy. Eva Braun attempted suicide twice because she felt hurt and neglected ('He only needs me for certain purposes'); her predecessor, Hitler's niece Geli Raubal, actually did commit suicide – probably for the same reasons. Hitler was on an election tour and had not taken her along; her action compelled him, for once – the only time – to interrupt something that was more important to him, for her sake. Hitler mourned her and replaced her. This melancholy story is what comes closest to a great love in Hitler's life.

Hitler had no friends. He enjoyed sitting for hours on end with subordinate staff – drivers, bodyguards, secretaries – but he alone did all the talking. In this 'servants' quarters atmosphere' he unwound. Real friendship he avoided all his life. His relationships with men such as Goering, Goebbels or Himmler always remained cool and remote. Röhm, the only one of his paladins with whom he was on familiar terms from early days, he had shot, principally, no doubt, because he had become politically inconvenient. However, the old intimacy certainly proved no obstacle to his removal. If one reflects on Hitler's general shyness one is almost led to suspect that Röhm's superannuated claim to friendship was, if anything, an additional reason for getting rid of him.

There remain education and occupation. Hitler never enjoyed any systematic education; just a few years of Realschule (a lesser type of school), with poor reports. True, during his years of loafing he read a lot but – on his own admission – absorbed only what he thought he already knew. In the political sphere Hitler had the knowledge of a dedicated reader of newspapers. His only real learning was of military affairs and military technology. Here the practical experience of the front-line soldier enabled him critically to absorb what he read. Strange though it may sound, his front-line experience was probably his only education. For the rest, he remained the typical half-educated man all his life – one who always knew better and tossed about picked-up pieces of half-knowledge and wrong knowledge, preferably before an audience whom he could impress by doing so because it knew nothing at

all. His table talk at his headquarters testifies to his educational gaps in an embarrassing manner.

Hitler never had nor sought an occupation; on the contrary, he positively avoided one. His shyness of occupation is as striking a trait as his shyness of marriage or intimacy. Nor could one call him a professional politician. Politics was his life but never his profession. During his early political career he variously gave his occupation as painter, writer, merchant and propaganda speaker; later he was quite simply the Führer, not answerable to anyone at first only the Führer of the Party but ultimately Der Führer altogether. The first political office he ever held was that of Reich Chancellor; viewed from a professional point of view he was a strange chancellor: he left the capital whenever he chose, read or did not read documents as and when he pleased, held Cabinet meetings only irregularly and after 1938 not at all. His political mode of working was never that of the top public servant but that of an unfettered independent artist waiting for inspiration, seemingly idle for days and weeks on end, and then, when the spirit moved him, throwing himself into a sudden frenzy of activity. Only in the last four years of his life did Hitler, for the first time, practise a regular activity - as military Commander-in-Chief. Then, of course, he could not play truant from the twice-daily staff conferences. And then his inspiration increasingly failed him.

It might be objected that poverty or non-existence of a private life is not unusual in men who dedicate themselves totally to a great goal of their own choosing and who have the ambition to make history. That is not so. There are four men with whom Hitler, in each case for a different reason, calls for comparison, though he does not stand up to it – Napoleon, Bismarck, Lenin and Mao. None of these, not even Napoleon, failed so frightfully as Hitler, which is the main reason why Hitler does not stand comparison with them. But we shall leave this aside for the moment. What we want to point out in the present context is that none of them was a nothing-but-politician like Hitler and a nonentity in all other fields. All four were highly educated and had a profession in which they had proved themselves before

'going into politics' and going down in history: general, diplomat, lawyer, teacher. All four were married; Lenin was the only one without children. All knew great love – Josephine Beauharnais, Katarina Orlov, Inessa Armand, Chiang Ch'ing. That makes those great men human, and without their complete humanity something would be lacking in their greatness. Hitler lacks that something.

He lacks something else that needs mentioning briefly before we come to what is really worth considering in Hitler's life. There is no development, no maturing in Hitler's character and personality. His character was fixed at an early age - perhaps a better word would be arrested - and remains astonishingly consistent; nothing was added to it. It was not an attractive character. All soft, lovable, reconciling traits are missing unless one regards his shyness, which sometimes seems like bashfulness, as a reconciling feature. His positive characteristics - resolution, boldness, courage, perseverance - lie all on the 'hard' side. The negative ones even more so: ruthlessness, vindictiveness, faithlessness and cruelty. Added to these, moreover, from the very start, was a total lack of capacity for self-criticism. Hitler was all his life exceedingly full of himself and from his earliest to his last days tended to selfconceit. Stalin and Mao used the cult of their personality coolly as a political instrument, without letting it turn their heads. With the Hitler cult, Hitler was not only its object but also the earliest, most persistent and most passionate devotee.

Enough said about the person and the unprofitable personal biography of Hitler. Let us now look at what is worth looking at, his political biography which, in contrast to his personal one, is not short of development or intensification. It begins long before his first public appearance and reveals seven stages or leaps:

- 1. His early concentration on politics as a substitute for life.
- 2. His first (still private) political action the emigration from Austria to Germany.
 - 3. His decision to become a politician.
- 4. His discovery of his hypnotic abilities as a mass-audience orator.

- 5. His decision to become Der Führer.
- 6. His decision to adapt his political timetable to his personal expectation of life (this is simultaneously his decision to wage war).
 - 7. His decision to commit suicide.

The last two decisions differ from the preceding ones in that they are solitary decisions. With all the others the subjective and objective sides are inseparable. They may be Hitler's decisions, but in Hitler or through Hitler the spirit of the age or the mood of the day each time acts like a gust of wind filling a sail.

Even the emerging passionate political interest of the eighteenor nineteen-year-old, who had suffered the shipwreck of his artistic ambition but carried ambition as such into his new sphere of interest, was in tune with or indeed sprang from the mood of the day. Europe before the first war was far more political than today. It was a Europe of great imperialist powers - all in permanent rivalry, all jockeying for position, all in permanent readiness for war. That was exciting to everybody. It also was a Europe of class conflicts and of the promised or feared Red Revolution. That too was exciting. In one way or another, politics was the subject at any table of regulars at a middle-class café and in any proletarian tavern. The private lives, not only of the workers but also of the middle classes, were much narrower and poorer than they are today. But in the evening, as a compensation, everyone was, with his country, a Lion or an Eagle, or, with his class, the bannerbearer of a great future. Hitler, who had nothing else to do, was that all day long. Politics was then a substitute for living - for almost everyone to a certain extent, but for the young Hitler wholly and exclusively.

Nationalism and socialism were powerful mass-mobilizing slogans. Imagine the explosive power if one succeeded in somehow uniting them! It is possible, though not certain, that this idea occurred even to the young Hitler. He wrote subsequently that even at the age of twenty, in Vienna about 1910, he had laid 'the granite foundations' of his political ideology – but whether that ideology is justified in calling itself National Socialism is open to argument. The real Hitlerian bedrock, his primal and lowest

layer, which took shape during his Vienna period, is certainly not a fusion of nationalism and socialism but a fusion of nationalism and anti-semitism. Anti-semitism was the primary element, and this Hitler carried with him from the start, like a congenital hump. But his nationalism too, a very special Greater-German nationalism, undoubtedly dates back to his time in Vienna. His socialism, however, is most probably a later addition.

Hitler's anti-semitism is an East European plant. In Western Europe and also in Germany anti-semitism was on the wane about the turn of the century; assimilation and integration of the fews was desired and was in full swing. But in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, where the numerous Jews were living, voluntarily or involuntarily, as a separate nation within the nation, antisemitism was (and is?) endemic and murderous, directed not towards assimilation or integration but towards liquidation and extermination. And this murderous East European anti-semitism, which allowed the Jews no escape, reached as far as Vienna in whose third district, according to Metternich's famous dictum, the Balkans begin. There the youthful Hitler picked it up. How, we do not know. There is no record of any disagreeable personal experience, and he himself never claimed anything of the kind. According to his account in Mein Kampf the observation that Jews were different people was enough for the conclusion, 'Because they are different they have to be removed.' The way in which Hitler later rationalized that conclusion will have to be discussed in a later chapter, and the way he put it into effect in a later chapter still. For the moment that murderous anti-semitism of the East European variety, which penetrated deeply and firmly into the young man, remained without practical consequences even in his own obscure life.

Not so his Greater-German nationalism, the other product of his Vienna years. In 1913 it gave rise to the first political decision of his life – his decision to emigrate to Germany.

Young Hitler was an Austrian who did not feel himself to be an Austrian but a German and, what is more, a disadvantaged German, one left in the lurch, one unjustly excluded from the

Reich at its foundation. In feeling that way he was sharing the sentiments of many German Austrians of his day. With the whole of Germany behind them, Austria's Germans had been able to rule over their multi-national empire for centuries and to impress their stamp on it. Since 1866 they had been excluded from Germany, and thus they had become a minority in their own empire, helpless in the long run against its many nationalities, condemned to practising a hegemony (one then shared with the Hungarians) for which their strength and number were no longer sufficient. From such a precarious situation a great variety of outcomes were possible. The young Hitler, always a great one for drawing conclusions, drew the most radical one. Austria was bound to break up, but in that break-up a Greater German Reich must emerge that would again embrace all German Austrians and which would then, by its weight, again dominate the small countries which were its co-heirs. In spirit he no longer regarded himself as an Austrian Royal and Imperial subject but as a citizen of that Greater German Reich to come. And from this he drew certain conclusions for himself, again the most radical ones: in the spring of 1913 he emigrated.

We know now that Hitler emigrated from Vienna to Munich in order to avoid service in the Austrian Army. That this was not due to draft dodging or cowardice is proved by the fact that, when war broke out in 1914, he immediately volunteered for active service, but in the German and not the Austrian Army. By 1913 war was in the air, and Hitler did not wish to fight for a cause from which he had inwardly dissociated himself, nor for a state which he regarded as doomed. He was still a long way from wishing to become a politician—how indeed could he have become one in the German Empire as a foreigner with no occupation? But he was already acting politically.

During the war Hitler was politically happy. Only his antisemitism remained unsatisfied. If he had had his way the war would have been used to exterminate 'internationalism', which he misspelt and by which he meant the Jews, within the German Empire. But otherwise things all went splendidly for four yearsvictories and more victories. Defeats were suffered only by the Austrians. 'With Austria things will go the way I always said,' he wrote in his know-all manner from the front to acquaintances in Munich.

We now come to Hitler's decision to become a politician - one of many he has described as 'the hardest of my life'. Objectively this was made possible by the revolution of 1918. In Imperial Germany a foreigner of Hitler's social position could not have even begun to develop any political activity, except possibly in the Social Democratic Party, which did not suit Hitler and which, moreover, as far as influence upon real state policy was concerned, was a blind alley. The revolution, however, opened the path to power in the state for the existing political parties and simultaneously so thoroughly upset the traditional party system that even new parties now stood a chance. In 1918 and 1919 numerous new parties were founded. Apart from all this, Hitler's Austrian citizenship was now no longer an obstacle to active participation in German politics. True, the incorporation of 'Deutschösterreich' - the German residual part of the Austrian monarchy - had been forbidden by the victorious powers; however it was passionately desired on both sides of the frontier and it was psychologically anticipated - so much so that an Austrian was virtually no longer regarded as a foreigner in Germany. And after a revolution which had abolished the rule of princes and the privileges of the nobility there were now no social barriers for any German politician.

We emphasize this point because it is always overlooked. Hitler, as is well known, introduced himself into politics as the sworn enemy of the 1918 revolution, the 'November Crime', and therefore we are reluctant to see him as its product. But objectively he was its product, just as Napoleon had been a product of the French Revolution which he too, in a certain sense, overcame. Both men would be inconceivable without the revolutions which preceded them. Neither restored what the revolution had abolished. They were its enemies but they accepted its legacy.

November 1918 – and in this case we may believe Hitler – provided the impetus for his decision to go into politics, even

though he did not actually take this decision until the autumn of 1919. However, November 1918 was the experience that aroused him. 'There must never again be and there will never again be a November 1918 in Germany', was his first political resolution after a great many political ponderings and speculations. It was the first specific objective the young private politician set himself and incidentally the only one he truly accomplished. There was certainly no November 1918 in the Second World War – neither a timely termination of a lost war nor a revolution. Hitler prevented both.

Let us be clear about what this 'never again a November 1018' implied. It implied quite a lot. First of all the determination to make impossible any future revolution in a situation analogous to November 1918. Secondly - since otherwise the first point would be left in the air - the determination to bring about once more a similar situation. And this implied, thirdly, the resumption of the war that was lost or believed to be lost. Fourthly, the war had to be resumed on the basis of a domestic constitution in which there were no potentially revolutionary forces. From here it was not far to the fifth point, the abolition of all Left-wing parties, and indeed why not, while one was about it, of all parties. Since, however, one could not abolish the people behind the Left-wing parties, the workers, they would have to be politically won over to nationalism, and this implied, sixth, that one had to offer them socialism, or at least a kind of socialism, in fact National Socialism. Seventh, their former faith, Marxism, had to be uprooted and that meant-eighth-the physical annihilation of the Marxist politicians and intellectuals who, fortunately, included quite a lot of Jews so that - ninth, and Hitler's oldest wish - one could also, at the same time, exterminate all the Jews.

It will be seen that Hitler's domestic policy programme was almost complete at the moment he entered politics. Between November 1918 and October 1919, when he became a politician, he had of course had sufficient time to clarify and sort everything out in his mind. And one has to concede that he was not lacking in the talent to clarify an idea to himself and draw conclusions. He had not lacked it even during his early years in Vienna, any

more than he had lacked the courage to implement radically in practice the conclusions he had theoretically, and again radically, drawn. It is, of course, worth noting that the entire edifice of his ideas was based on a fallacy – the fallacy that the 1918 revolution had been the cause of defeat. In fact it had been its consequence. But then that was a fallacy which Hitler shared with a great many Germans.

His triggering experience of 1918 did not yet provide him with a foreign policy programme. He only developed that during the following six or seven years, but we will briefly deal with it now. Initially there was only the decision at all costs to resume the war which, in Hitler's opinion, had been prematurely discontinued. Then came the idea of planning the new war not simply as a replay of the old one but under new, more favourable constellations, exploiting the conflicts which had torn asunder the enemy coalition during and after the First World War. We shall omit the phases through which the development of this idea ran and the various possibilities with which Hitler toyed during the years 1920 to 1925; they can be found in other books. The final result, at any rate, as laid down in Mein Kampf, was a plan which envisaged Britain and Italy as allies or benevolent neutrals, the Austro-Hungarian successor states and also Poland as auxiliary nations, France as a secondary enemy to be eliminated at the start, and Russia as the principal enemy to be conquered and permanently subjected, and to be turned into German living space, 'a German India'. That was the plan underlying the Second World War, though it went wrong right from the start when Britain and Poland did not accept the roles intended for them. We shall come back to this point later, as we are now dealing with Hitler's political development.

We are now at the point of Hitler's entry into politics and public life, in the autumn and winter of 1919/20. This was his breakthrough experience following the awakening experience of November 1918. The breakthrough was not so much the fact that he rapidly became the leading figure in the German Workers' Party (which he presently renamed the National Socialist German Workers' Party). That did not require a lot. The party, when