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7. The Dynamic of Violence “Machtergreifung”: The Nazi Seizure of Power

Less than a year after Hitler’s appointment as Reich Chancellor, the French ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, noted the following about the situation in Germany: “At the end of the year 1933, National Socialist Germany is up and running, complete with its customs, its institutions, its vocabulary, its new salutes, its slogans, its fashion, its art, its laws and its celebrations. Nothing is missing. The Nuremberg Rally – the ‘Rally of Victory’ – of early September shows it accomplished, complete, triumphant.” Granted, the ambassador’s insights were limited to the upper echelons of state and party politics, as well as reflecting a sense of fascination with the mass rallies and the propaganda of the new regime. But François-Poncet, a politician in the French liberal Republican tradition, was a level-headed observer who had good ties across the political spectrum in the German capital. He did not fail to notice the “violence of the government towards the churches and the Jews” and the “excesses of its militia,” even if he was not surprised by these extremes in view of the seismic shift that had occurred in the German political landscape. “The surprising thing about this revolution,” he said, “is the speed at which it took place, but also the effortlessness with which it was completed everywhere, the minimal resistance it met with.”¹

The fact that, under Hitler, the new regime had managed in less than a year to bring about a complete transformation of the political system, which had all the hallmarks of a revolution and which appeared to be regarded by the majority of the population as extremely successful, was a change so momentous and emotionally intense that it was viewed even then by contemporaries both within and outside Germany as a watershed moment, signaling the start of a new epoch.

Central to the political agenda the new Hitler regime presented on 1 February 1933 was the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* (“people’s community”). In the previous fifty years, this had been a key term in the critique of modernity across the political spectrum. The term brought together criticism of the class conflict in industrial society – with its corrosive impact on social cohesion – and of the antagonism between the different denominations with the rejection of the party system and parliamentarianism, which were seen as stemming from discord and opposing interests. Wilhelm II’s famous words on 1 August 1914 – “I know neither parties nor religions anymore. As of today we are all German brothers” – had given voice to these criticisms, and the longing for unity that lay at the heart of them. This phenomenon was not unique to Germany. All over Europe there had been a significant increase in social unrest in the aftermath of the First World War. Strikes and revolutionary uprisings, along with conflicts between ethnic groups within the newly-established nation-states, had led to the rise of authoritarian regimes in Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece and

Bulgaria. These regimes promised to overcome internal rifts and create national unity, by means of violence if necessary. Here, as in the major cities of the Western democracies, class conflict was decried and seen as an unnatural state of affairs. Even in the utopian visions of the radical left, class struggle was to be brought to an end by revolution, resulting in a state of equality without conflict. In Germany, however, these fault lines ran particularly deep, and the loss of the First World War had greatly exacerbated national and social contradictions.

The agitation by the National Socialists played into these sentiments. Hitler opened his governmental declaration by summarizing the legacy of the democratic era. The governments of the “November parties,” he said, had destroyed the nation and left behind a heap of ruins, ruined the “German agricultural class,” created an army of millions of unemployed and contributed to “spiritual, political and cultural nihilism.” Therefore the first and foremost task of the government was to look “beyond ranks and classes” to “restore the spiritual and political unity of our people.” Hitler cited as policy priorities overcoming mass unemployment and the agricultural crisis; the reform of the relationship between the Reich, the federal states and the communes; the continuation of welfare policy and the restoration of Germany’s right to equal treatment on the international stage. However, this political and economic revival required “the overcoming of the destroying menace of communism,” and by extension “of class madness and class struggle.”²

This program, delivered in the popular rhetoric of the time – full of pathos and exalted religious sentiment – followed in the tradition of previous government programs. After all, Schleicher and von Papen, too, had committed to the “reform of the Reich,” the abolition of the party system and parliamentary democracy, the fight against communism, Germany’s resurgence on the international stage, rearmament and recovery from the economic crisis. At an internal level, however, Hitler phrased his aims with a clarity and harshness that was markedly different from his precursors, for example in his speech to the commanders of the armed forces on 3 February: “complete reversal of the present domestic political situation in Germany”; “extermination of Marxism root and branch”; “those who cannot be converted must be broken”; “strengthening of the will to fight by all means”; “tightest authoritarian state leadership. Elimination of the cancer of democracy!”; “Building up of the armed forces [is the] most important prerequisite for achieving the goal of regaining political power.” The suppression of internal dissent, the establishment of an authoritarian regime, rearmament and the restoration of Germany’s international strength, with the option of an imminent war – these were the fundamental objectives that Hitler revealed here. But these, too, differed only in style from the goals publicly professed by the national conservative champions of Reich reform.³

The crucial difference from the previous governments lay much more in the fact that Hitler’s politics were supported and spurred on by a mass movement that was as radical as it was hungry for action, and which did not consider Hitler’s appointment as Reich Chancellor to be marking the beginning of a new presidential government, but rather saw it as the “seizure of power” by the National Socialist Party under its Führer. The dynamic resulting from this relationship between the Führer and his following was also what had clearly set the Nazi movement apart from other radical right-wing groups in the preceding years. Now, it continued at the government level, lending ongoing momentum to a political sea change which was able to proceed unhindered.

Footnotes:

1. François-Poncet, the French ambassador in Berlin in 1933, commenting on the German population's attitude towards National Socialism in: Michalka, W. (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichte*, p. 36 ff., quoted here: p. 36. Cf. Jean-Marc Dreyfus: "... und dann wählen sie Männer wie Hitler zum Werkzeug ihrer Katastrophe aus". Die Berichterstattung Botschafter André François-Poncets und der französischen Konsuln aus dem deutschen Reich bis 1939," in: Bajohr, F. and Strupp, C. (eds.), *Fremde Blicke auf das 'Dritte Reich'*, pp. 138-162.
2. Proclamation of the Reich Government to the German People, 1 February 1933, in Michalka, W. (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 1, pp.13-16; cf. Frei, N., *Der Führerstaat: Nationalsozialistische Herrschaft 1933 bis 1945* (translated as *National Socialist Rule in Germany: the Führer State 1933-1945*), pp. 43-95; Herbst, L., *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945*, pp. 59-89; Broszat, M., *Der Staat Hitlers: Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (translated as *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich*), pp. 82-325; Bracher, K.D., *Die deutsche Diktatur: Entstehung, Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus* (translated as *The German Dictatorship: Origins, Structure and Consequences of National Socialism*), pp. 251-312; Evans, R.J., *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 417-512 (page numbers refer to the German translation, DVA, Munich, 2004); Thamer, H., *Verführung und Gewalt*, pp. 231-336; Wendt, B.J., *Deutschland 1933-1945. Das 'Dritte Reich'*, pp. 67-200.
3. Hitler to the commanders of the army and navy about his political goals (quoted from the notes of General Liebmann), 3 February 1933, in Michalka, W. (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 3, p. 17 ff., quoted here: p. 17.