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7. The dynamics of violence

The Nazi "Machtergreifung" (seizure of power)

Barely a year after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany, the French ambassador to Berlin, André François-Poncet, wrote of the situation in Germany: "By the end of 1933, National Socialist Germany is a *fait accompli*, with its customs, institutions and terminology, its new salute, its slogans, fashion, art, laws and festivals. Nothing is lacking. The Nuremberg Party Congress or 'Rally of Victory' in early September shows a Germany that is complete, whole, triumphant." Now the ambassador's insights were no doubt limited to the political life of the state and party elites, and the fascination of the new regime's mass rallies and propaganda clearly also had a part to play. But François-Poncet, an old-school National Liberal, was a hard-headed observer with good connections to all political camps in the German capital. Nor did he overlook the "government's violence towards the churches and the Jews", or the "rioting of their militias", even if such excesses came as no surprise to him given the radical change of direction in German politics. Indeed, "the astonishing thing about this revolution is the rapidity, and moreover the ease with which it took hold everywhere, the lack of resistance it encountered."¹

That the new regime under Hitler had managed in less than a year to bring about a complete system change that bore all the marks of a revolution, and that this policy was regarded as remarkably successful by the evident majority of the population, was a phenomenon of such enormous impact and emotional intensity that it was already perceived by contemporaries in Germany and abroad as a *caesura*, a dramatic break with the past.

The central concept of the program launched by Hitler's new government on February 1, 1933 was that of *Volksgemeinschaft* or "ethnic community". The term itself had resonances beyond the political camps, having been a buzzword among critics of modernism for the past fifty years. Contained within it was a criticism both of the class-driven nature of industrial society that was tearing apart the social fabric and of the antagonism between religious denominations, combined with a rejection of parties and parliamentarianism based on disunity and conflicts of interest. Wilhelm II's famous declaration of August 1, 1914, "I no longer recognize any parties or confessions; today we are all German brothers", had given expression to this criticism and the consequent longing for unity. This phenomenon was not unique to Germany. Social unrest had proliferated all over Europe following the war. Strikes and revolutionary uprisings on one hand and ethnic conflicts in the newly created nation states on the other had spawned authoritarian regimes proposing an end to this internal division and the achievement of national unity, which they promised to enforce with violence if necessary. This was the case in Spain and also in Italy, Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, along with Greece and Bulgaria. Here, as in the metropolises of the western democracies, the internal strife between the classes was

deplored as an unnatural state, and the utopias of the radical left likewise sought to end class struggles through revolution and bring about a state of conflict-free equality. In Germany, however, these lines of conflict were particularly marked, and had been thrown into stark relief by the country's defeat in the war and its national and social divides.

This was the starting point for National Socialist agitation. In his government declaration, Hitler began by summing up the legacy of the democratic era. The previous administrations of the "November parties" had brought down the nation leaving a trail of destruction, ruined the "peasantry", created an army of millions of unemployed and contributed to a "spiritual, political and cultural nihilism". The supreme task of the government was, therefore, "standing above estates and classes", to "restore to our people unity of mind and will". According to Hitler, the key political tasks were to overcome mass unemployment and the agricultural crisis; reform the relationship between the Reich, Länder and local authorities; push ahead with welfare reform and restore Germany to an equal footing in foreign affairs. This depended, however, on "overcoming the demoralization of Germany by the Communists" and with it the "class madness and class struggle".²

This program, couched in the pathos and religious hyperbole of the time, was very much in the tradition of earlier government manifestos. Schleicher and von Papen had likewise announced the "reform of the Reich", the defeat of the party system and parliamentary democracy, the fight against the Communists, the re-emergence of Germany as a world power, rearmament and an end to the economic crisis. Internally, however, Hitler formulated his ambitions far more clearly and brutally, as recorded in notes on his speech of February 3 to the Reichswehr commanders: "Complete reversal of the present domestic situation in Germany"; "Extermination of Marxism root and branch"; "Those who will not be converted must be broken"; "strengthening of the will to fight with all means"; "Tightest authoritarian state leadership. Removal of the cancer of democracy!"; "Building up of the armed forces: most important prerequisite for achieving the goal of regaining political power." The elimination of internal enemies, the establishment of an authoritarian regime, rearmament and the restoration of Germany's influence in foreign affairs with the option of war in the near term – such were the key objectives unveiled by Hitler in this speech. But even these differed at most in style from the publicly declared aims of the National-Conservative Reich reformers.³

The crucial difference by comparison with previous governments was rather that Hitler's policies were supported and promoted by a mass movement as radical as it was hungry for action, and which saw Hitler's appointment as Chancellor not as the beginning of another presidential government, but as the seizure of power by the National Socialist party under its Führer. The dynamic created by this relationship between leader and followers had already emerged in the preceding years as the evident difference between the NS movement and other radical right-wing groups. Now it was continuing at the level of governmental power, bringing about a steady acceleration of the political upheaval and a blurring of its boundaries.

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References:

- 1 "Der französische Botschafter in Berlin Francois-Poncet über die Haltung der deutschen Bevölkerung zum Nationalsozialismus, 1933", in Michalka (ed.), Deutsche Geschichte, p.36f., here p.36; see Jean-Marc Dreyfus: "'Und dann wählten 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/Strupp (Ed.), Fremde Blicke, pp. 138-162.
- 2 "Aufruf der Reichsregierung an das deutsche Volk", 1.2.1933, in Michalka (ed.), Deutsche Geschichte, No. I, pp.13-16; on the text that follows see Frei, Führerstaat, pp. 43-95; Herbst, Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland, p. 59-89; Broszat, Staat Hitlers, pp. 82-325; Bracher, Deutsche Diktatur, pp. 251-312; Evans, The Third Reich, Vol. I, p. 417-512; Thamer, Verführung, pp. 231-336; Wendt, Deutschland, pp. 67-200.
- 3 "Hitler vor den Befehlshabern des Heeres und der Marine über seine politischen Ziele ('Liebmann-Aufzeichnungen')", 3.2.1933, in Michalka (ed.), Deutsche Geschichte, No. 3, p.17f., here p. 17