Untitled Essay, Research Paper

Hitler and the rise of the Nazis

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Account for the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party

The explanation of the rise of Nazism cannot be restricted to one specific time period or one specific event – the source of many Nazi ideologies are found before WW1.Many pre-war conditions(but especially the gradual ‘collapse of liberalism’,of which I will write later) helped to prepare the public psyche for National Socialist policies.Equally,I disagree with Historians who,for their own reasons,disregard specific events perhaps caused by their own social/political groups which inadvertently aided Hitler(I refer to Marxist historians who hold that the brief reign of the communists was an insignificant aid to the middle-class flood to Nazism,since the reactionary right had ‘already decided’ that fascism should be wheeled out to stop the (according to Marx) inevitable,shut-down of Capitalism).

In the days following the November ceasefire,Germany was left without a leader of any description since the Kaiser had fled to Holland.Heavy industrialists like Fritz Thyssen,arrested and subjected to all kinds of humiliation by the communists in the immediate aftermath of the armistice,funded the early National Socialists partly because”the impression which those agitated days have left upon me[Thyssen]were never blotted out”(1).Indeed,many of Germany’s prominent businessmen experienced the same if not worse treatment at the hands of communist ‘policemen’ and,as James Pool reveals (2) ,the friends of those killed were to become some of Hitler’s first major financial backers.

Apart from the personal humiliation which Industrialists had endured,there was also the small matter of rising costs due to the concessions ceded to the workers during the brief reign of the Communists.These included the ‘eight hour day’,the extension of universal sufferage to both sexes,general recognition of union agreements etc.”Every eight hour day is a nail in Germany’s coffin!”was one of their favourite laments.However,industry could not itself carry on the fight against the organised proletariat.This task it confided to the “volunteer corps”or “combat leagues”,armed gangs specializing in ‘bolshevik fighting’.The early National Socialists,being one such armed gang,attracted most of the funds through both their violent ‘resistance’ to the Communists and the fact that a right-wing Totalitarian state would offer the industrialists a near monopoly over their domestic market,since Nazism was blaming the 1923 economic crisis on foreign capitalism and had vowed to cease the flood of importers making a killing out of the German hyper-inflation(e.g the ‘one price stores’,who bought their stock in stable economies,thus being able to sell at a constant and relatively cheap Deutshmark rate).

The Jews were also depicted as the enemy of German Capitalism,since major Jewish leaders (Radek,Levine,Axelrod among others) were eminent participants in the November revolution.The Nazi anitpathy towards Jewish communism was greeted warmly:” These were the men responsible for the riots and murders!”,declared a bitter Thyssen (3).Of course,it was also true that the Jew proved a formidable business opponent – being a cynic, I would suggest that to have all the Jews ostracised for events which involved a minority of them was convenient to say the least!

Hitler then sought to blame the Jews for the multinational capitalism which was threatening the hitherto comfortable existence of the petty bourgeois.It was already widely known,as Jeremy Noakes tells (4),that the Jewish presence in the banks and the international stock exchanges was growing disproportionately strong and the widespread barring of the Jews from the professions had caused them to be increasingly prevalent in the one industry open to them – usury.This left many who were dependent on the Jew and,against this background,stories of a Jewish conspiracy(of the kind crudely insinuated by the notorious Der Sturmer (5) ) to usurp the traditional German Mittelstand(footnote a)could appear tenable to a tradesman who suddenly found himself on the brink of bankruptcy for complex economic reasons which he did not fully understand.The official Nazi Mittelstand department,however,proved themselves more subtle in their linking of Jewry and the theory of collusion.In the following piece of 1932 propaganda it was,of couse,unnecesary to reiterate that Marx was a Jew,since this fact had not exactly been underpublicised by the aforementioned Sturmer and their like.

“Attention!Middle class citizens!Retailers!Tradesmen!

A new blow aimed at your ruin is being prepared and carried out in Hanovre!The present system enables the gigantic concern

WOOLWORTH(America)

to build a new vampire business in the centre of the city.This is the wish and aim of the black-red (footnote b) system as expressed in the following remarks of the Marxist Engels in May 1890:’if capital destroys the small artisan and retailer it does a good thing’.

This is the black-redsystem of today!” (6)

In this way,Hitler yoked together two seemingly conflicting philosophies by giving them a common enemy – Jewry.On reflection,it seems almost absurd to (i)blame the Jews for two contradictory ideals and(ii)to believe it,as millions of middle-class Germans seemed to.But 1923 was not a year immune to absurdities:witness the Mark falling to an incomprehensible exchange rate of 4,200,000,000,000 Marks to the dollar in Novemeber.Many comfortable middle-class livelihoods had been violently obliterated by the crisis – the fixed salary class were now society’s vagabonds and,however much we today would hope to possess enough moral courage to repel the tempting words and scapegoats of Nazism,I suggest that one simply does not know how vulnerable one would be under such an extraodinary economic catastrophe as befell Germany in 1923. Hitler,however,did know.He could sense that the innate human aversion towards such extreme nationalism(an aversion which,as I concede to Hans Mommsen,was already on the wane due to the late 19th century “collapse of liberalism”,to which I will refer later(7)) was further clouded by this destabilising crisis and it was this aptitude in precisely gauging the mood of the people which was to be a central aspect in his ascent to office.

Despite what the Nazis professed,multinational capitalism was not the exclusive confine of the Jew – it was also the domain of one of Hitler’s largest foreign supporters!The trade restrictions set up by the Treaty of Versailles hurt not only Germany,they also hurt foreign businessmen who operated in this,one of the world’s largest economies.Arguably the most high-profile of these was the American,Henry Ford.The early 1920s saw Ford floundering slightly in his domestic markets and Mira Walkins (8) tells of efforts by Ford to find new markets in Europe’s largest economy.The restrictive tariffs placed on the German car industry by Versailles,however,rendered the venture impossible – that year,Ford had sold only three Model T cars and and six tractors in the whole of Germany.The Nazis’ zealous protests against the iniquities of the Diktat were clearly not contrary to Ford’s economic interests and it is asserted,by Suzanne Pool (9) among others,that he was one of the first foreign businessmen who contributed to the Nazi cause in the initial hope that they could rouse enough populist fervour against Versailles so as to overturn its shackles.

We have seen how Hitler succesfully used a minority group as a lightning rod for Germany’s problems but this success could never have occured without the groundwork which took place long before he entered the fray.At the turn of the nineteenth century Germany experienced a modified and resurgent nationalism(eg The Pan German League) – a nationalism that also blamed Germany’s ills on a common enemy which,as it happened,was also Jewry.This pre-war antisemitism appealed to those social and economic groups whose lives were most seriously affected by the rapid industrialisation encouraged by the liberal era of the 1860s – it was the so-called ‘collapse of liberalism’.Liberalism had lost support through their failure to respond adequately to the problems brought about by their new economic system:there were artisans who were folding under increasing competition from the cheap mass produced goods churned out by the new factories;peasant farmers who found it difficult to adapt to the rapid price fluctuations of a full market economy;and small shopkeepers whose traditional niche markets were being colonised by new department and chain stores.These three factions of the petty bourgeois had one common denominator – an increasing reliance on the money lender who was,unfortunately,usually Jewish and hence were susceptible to the offering of a scapegoat for their problems.Dick Geary tells of how,on average,this lower-middle class constituted 19% of the Nazi party membership – a massive over-representation in terms of their size in the country as a whole (10).It is clear therefore that when Hitler set about bringing the German Mittelstand over to his way of thinking,his job was already half-done.

So far,I have neglected to write of any working class support for the Nazis – for the simple reason that there wasn’t much of it,in relation to their size throughout the country as a whole,until well into the depression of the 1930s.When the NSDAP came into being,as a party commited to Socialism as much as Nationalism,popular(ie middle class) support was scant.On his release from prison Hitler decided that to obtain power through democratic means,he had to shed his party’s reputation for being radical and “socialistic” and to this end he sought to forge closer ties with the conservative right and hence middle Germany.In an interview with a ‘left-wing’ member of his party,one Otto Strasser,Hitler was quizzed on why his priorities had changed. If the move to middle Germany meant losing the support of a few workers,then this was regrettable but acceptable since”The mass of the working classes…will never fully understand the meaning of the ideal,and we cannot hope to win them over to it”(11) .In any case,Hitler argued,the important differential was not class,since the present class pyramid would never change.His justification for this prediction?”That is how it has been for thousands of years,and that is how it shall always be”.Such prophesies were music to the ears of the reactionary petty bourgeois.

Unfortunately for the Nazis,the years 1924-1928 were to be Weimar’s strongest period – the Dawes plan was taking effect and the republic had acquired a degree of economic prosperity which did not leave either the conservative right or,as Daniel Guerin asserts, the wealthy industrialists inclined to fill Nazi coffers(12).Such a witholding of support was reflected by the poor Nazi parliamentary showing during this period – winning an average of only 19 seats in each of the 3 elections during that period (13).The resumption of funding when the depression set in – and the corresponding increase in the National Socialist vote – underlines their part in Hitler’s rise to power. Emil Kirdorf,owner of the powerful Gelsenkirchen metal trust,inadvertently betrayed this opportunistic attitude towards the fascist cause when,as an elderly 89 year old,he later declared:”When I think back over my life,I cannot be too thankful to God for giving me a long life…and thus making it possible for me to come to the assistance,at the opportune moment[my italics],of our beloved Fuhrer”(14)

Their heavy financial backing does not,however,mean that the non-contributing youth were any less important to the Nazi accesion.The Nazi appeal to youth proved particularly strong – its dynamic style of politics,its proclaimed aim of breaking down class barriers,its leader-follower relationship,and its distinctly young leadership could almost have been tailored to attract youngsters.In return for the staging of these grand parades and rallies,the Nazis earned the right to call themselves the party of the future – a most favourable description as the failures of Germany’s aristocratic past were having all too tangible consequences for the youth of the day.Many middle class youngsters saw the Nazi movement as a means to destroy both the hidebound conventions and social barriers associated with the older generation and as a national crusade to restore Germany to greatness.The actual policies were not,however,the most important facets of the Nazi party’s appeal to youth.In accordance with the teachings of Gustave Le Bon (15) and other late 19th century anti-rationalists,the charismatic,purely unintellectual element of Hitler would prove to be the element most effective in winning over his subjects who were ruled first and foremost by their emotions.The cynical targetting of youngsters,who are perhaps the most emotional sector of society,is summarised in the lament of one German Protestant school master who declares in an official report to the school governors that his fifth formers were “not really much concerned with the study of Hitler’s thoughts”,it was simply”something irrational,something infectious that makes the blood pulse through one’s veins and conveys the impression that something great is underway”.”If you can’t feel it you will never grasp it”he concludes,neatly encapsulating the phenomenem (16). It is,however,quite possible that this schoolmaster did not want to expose his boys as hardened Nazis and so exaggerated the extent of this mystical ‘phenomenon’.What is harder to discredit is the Potsdam Hitler youth rally of October 1932 to which 80,000 children from all over Germany travelled – some of whom had”been on the road for days through not entirely clement weather,just to listen to the Fuhrer”(17) .His legendary gift for oratory was shown – by such dedication from his young audience – to be one of the Nazis’ most potent weapons in indoctrinating National Socialism.

Despite the tidal wave of support that made the Nazis by far the largest parliamentary party in the early 1930s,they were still some way off achieving the two-thirds majority in the Reichstag necessary to obtain power.National Socialist morale began to waver when President Hindenburg chose the Catholic aristocrat Franz Von Papen and not Hitler for Chancellor after Bruning’s resignation on the 30th of May 1932.After fighting an unrelenting and exhausting propaganda war for almost three years,the entire movement had asssummed they had at last reached their goal.It appeared that Hitler’s policy of obtaining power through democratic means had failed.The infamous Dr. Goebbels,in his diary entrant of that day,gives an invaluable insight into the Nazi frame of mind at this point in time when he comments on Hitler’s failure:”As The Fuhrer now relays the news to the SA leaders,it is hard to know if they will be able to hold their units together.Nothing is harder than to tell a troop with victory already in their grasp that their assignment has come to nothing!” (18)

And yet even at this low ebb the Nazis were aided!Chancellor von Papan was bent on replacing the democratic system of Weimar with his own authoritarian dictatorship as soon as possible.To this end,he dismissed the Prussian government – a coalition of Social Democrats and Catholic Centre and long a target of right-wing hostility.Civil servants with Weimar sympathies were replaced with Nationalists.This casual deposition of the republic’s largest state left whatever credibility Weimar still had virtually destroyed,hence ensuring that Hitler did not have to waste valuable resources in destroying it himself.

Von Papen’s reign as Chancellor lasted barely six months before he was replaced by his defence minster,Kurt von Schleicher.Schleicher was a man to whom the idea of a dictatorship,aristocratic or otherwise,was anathema – he could see that in a modern industrial society it was impossible to rule without some degree of mass support,however it was acquired.To this end,he promised to do what Papen failed to do – bring Hitler,and hence a large section of the country,on board.However,when it became clear that Hitler was unwilling to be a subordinate,the Chancellor at once sought to try and divide the party by offering the leading Nazi Gregor Strasser the post of vice-chancellor – a post he was eager to accept.Unsurprisingly,Hitler did not intend to be undermimed in this way and on the 8th December Strasser promptly resigned from the party,complaining that he had been ‘isolated’by the leadership.Strasser’s reluctance to lead a mutiny against Hitler along with the unfoundering loyalty of the party leadership to Hitler ensured that the problem was not allowed to cause any further divisions.The increasing restlessness of the party’s grassroots continued,however,and Dr.Goebbels again sounded worried when he observed that it “was becoming increasingly difficult to hold the stormtroopers on a straight course.It is high time we attained power and at the moment there is no sign of it” (19).Again,however,the Nazis were helped by the inadvertant actions of others – this time by Chancellor Schleicher’s efforts to promote an atmosphere of ‘co-operation’ with the workers/trade unions(which ,as Business ‘theory’ will tell you,should increase worker efficiency and productiveness – hence ensuring steady profits for Big Business).Big Business was,however,still very much tied to the ‘them and us’ system of management and the old reactionaries were hostile to any change in approach.Also hostile to the Reich Chancellor were the agrarians who were indignant by his seeming to favour the light and export-orientated industries(essential to revive trade links with the rest of the world).Both heavy industrialists and agriculturalists were,at best,suspicious of the wooing of the unions and,in their concern to replace Schleicher,Hitler now appeared a more attractive ally despite a recent ’shift to the left’,of which I will write later.Papen sought to exploit these weaknesses of the Chancellor by resolving to win over the President,whose ear he had,to the idea of a Hitler government of which Papen would be vice-chancellor.Hindenburg was still hesitant to give power to the “Austrian corporal” but an important factor influencing Hindenburg against Schleicher was the pressure from the Nazi-influenced Reichslandbund(footnote c) (20).They raged that the Chancellor was doing all he could to encourage foreign trade and not enough to protect his own country’s tertiary sector,which had suffered heavily during the 1920s.As a minimum,they demanded both a halt to the shackling reparations payments and the introduction of tariffs to be placed on foreign tertiary produce coming into Germany.Schleicher did not acquiesce – indeed he announced a plan to give bankrupt Junker (footnote d)estates to the peasents who lived on them.This proved to be a damaging self-inflicted blow as Hindenburg was always going to be especially receptive to the inevitable uproar from his fellow country squires.Schleicher had,in his manufactured disposition of von Papen,proved himself to be a politically astute man,so it is surprising that he adopted policies hostile to a group who incuded in their number his superior!Such mistakes increased the chance of a way into power for the Nazis through von Papen’s intended return.

And yet,if von Papen had possesed the patience to wait a while,it is probable that the decline in Nazi morale,as Goebbels’ diary has showed,would have done for them.The November 1932 election,the 3rd in two years,had seen a loss of 34 seats.Even more important than the number of seats lost was the fact that they had actually lost seats.The aura of supremacy which came with being the largest party in the Reichstag and which was actually one of their biggest selling points had been broken.The long election campaigns on 1932 had taken their toll on their donors’ pockets which were not,as the party may have thought,bottomless.With hindsight,Hitler himself may have added to this lack of backing through a tactical error commited when,after losing the Chancellorship to von Papen,he had allowed Goebbels to take a more radical line against the reactionary nature of the Papen regime.This radical line had seen its high point during the autumn of 1932,where the Nazis had cooperated with the Communists in support of the Berlin transport workers’ strike,which had broken out in protest against the wages policy of the Government.Whatever the cause of the shortage of funds,the fact was that the movement was running on empty.

And then,in January 1933 von Papen decided to be the unlikely saviour of Nazism.He concocted a cabinet formula that would conceed the Chancellorship to Hitler but would,supposedly,be filled with enough Nationalists in key positions so as to keep Hitler ‘on message’.Colleagues were not as naive and expressed their fears which von Papen allayed with the foolish words “Don’t worry,we’ve hired him” (21).

But Hitler was no-one’s puppet and the Enabling Law of the 24th March 1933 meant he need no longer tolerate the old conservatives as their votes were no longer needed for legislation.During the purges,von Papen was sent into quasi-exile by the man he had ‘hired’ and Hitler laughed at his foolishness – a laughter not shared by those who feared that this man’s folly had done for an awful lot of people.

FOOTNOTES

(a):’Mittelstand’

The German lower-middle class,including artisans,small tradesmen and

small peasent farmers

(b):’Black-red’

Black for the Catholic Centre Party and red for the Social Democrats

(c):’Reichslanbund’

A pressure group concerned with farmers’ subsidies,import tariffs and minimum prices.

(d):’Junker’

Landowning aristocrat typically associated with extreme conservatism, support of the monarchy/military, and protectionist policies for agriculture.

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