

Hitler

A Study in Tyranny

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Of all the actors on the world scene during the 20th century, Hitler may very well have been the most influential, in the sense of his actions having had the most far-reaching consequences, not necessarily for the good as we all know. As such he adheres to the myth of the strong man, who single-handedly directs history being singled out for that purpose by Providence. A myth Hitler strove to create with single-minded purposefulness, and in whose efforts he turned out to be singularly successful. The supreme irony is that a Myth that becomes established also becomes True by default. A Lie repeated often enough in the end becomes the Truth, to paraphrase one of his more talented lieutenants. This Myth is more or less taken at face value by the author, who at first had been skeptical about those exaggerated claims of his supremacy, but who had eventually decided to accept the various testimonies given at Nuremberg all of them putting the blame at the feet of Hitler, that devilish demon, who had seduced a whole country and dragged it into defeat and destruction. This raises two fundamental questions. First, how could such a character, literally coming from the gutter, rise to power and exercise it with such impunity? Secondly, how could an advanced, industrialized nation, representing the pinnacle of European culture and science, allow itself to be taken over by such a putative madman? It is the first question that engages Bullock, and he gives scant attention to the second, more fundamental. Thus the book is primarily and ostensibly a study of the psychology of Hitler, while in its execution it reduces to a chronological account of the rise, triumph and eventual nemesis of Hitler, through a fairly straightforward presentation of external events, which from the early 30's became mid-century European history. This is perhaps fitting, because Hitler did not have much of a private inner life, at least not one to which we have any privileged access; his life was external and public, once he had reached that position, in which daydreams and reality eventually fused to the detriment to both. From an abstract point of view one may see it as a Greek Tragedy, something which no doubt would have gratified its protagonist, but when viewed in its concrete details becomes singularly sordid. Bullock presents the story as a story, thus emphasizing the structure of the plot, and of the book's 800 odd pages, only a page, if even that, is devoted to the extermination of the Jews, and another page or two to the exploitation of slave labor. This is, however, symptomatic of the times. The book was first published in 1952, just a few years after the trials at Nuremberg and during which the full extent of the Nazi atrocities were becoming revealed. Then there were latter editions in the early 60's, which however did not change the basic premises and emphasis. The trial of Eichmann in the early 60's set about a change in attitude, away from a preoccupation of the military theater to that of the moral. In the 50's the image of the Third Reich was one of a world conqueror, the ambitions of which had through an heroic effort been derailed. Thus Germany was looked

at with a certain awe and admiration, of course as a foe, with which no reconciliation was possible, but nevertheless with respect. In the early 50's the Americans could still make a movie starring Manson presenting Rommel if not as a hero, worthy of emulation, but as one deserving of respect. And in the war-movies of the times, the struggle with the Germans were in the nature of a sporting event. In the decades to come this would change, and the regime would be seen less for its grand visions than for its petty details. What once had been seen as a sideshow, however, deplorable, now took center stage. Hitler, would of course have seen that as the invidious consequences of the machinations of the Jews, and for once he may have had a point¹, the paranoid inevitably hits the target. Bullocks was a pioneering study (excepting the best-selling sketch provided by Trover-Roper about the last Day of Hitler, on which the author draws at the very end) of Hitler, and I guess that it still remains authoritative, and the revisions and embellishments, which later studies have contributed, does not really challenge the basic picture, only providing more details than one necessarily wants or needs to know. A sustained study of Nazism and its various antics becomes a form of historical pornography, more inclined to titillate than to illuminate. The basic question, more sociological than psychological, and hence of less compelling attraction, remains the second, on which Bullock has very little to say.

I recall seeing the book in the early sixties in the book store in my hometown Motala, and being somewhat repelled by the subtitle - a study in tyranny. Hitler was a bad guy, why belabor an obvious point? It created in me the suspicion that to write on Nazism was to indulge in private fascination under the cloak of displaying moral superiority, which given the context, was not very hard to come by. Thus I long resisted dipping into the book. Also to read a biography on Hitler is somewhat shameful, you feel tainted in the way you would not feel if reading about Stalin or Mao. I have Kershaw's biography in my book case since many years, and the prominently displayed title - Hitler - stands out conspicuously and causes a blush. To idolize Stalin or Mao, has been socially acceptable, to idolize Hitler on the other hand, is at best a sign of mental derangement. If you are cynically inclined, you may wonder what the case would have been had he won the war. Nothing convinces as much as success.

The big mystery is how someone with such inauspicious beginnings could rise to such eminence. We tend to believe that position of power and influence is only granted those that deserve it, that indeed there is a struggle to get on top, and only the best and strongest have a chance. The idea of promotion because of merit was first introduced in the institution of the army (admittedly rising in the grades was not just a question of merit but also of blood, thus the nobility had the edge and indeed its members were considered uniquely qualified, which can be seen as blood by itself was a merit) and then also into the civil service, in the Prussian tradition and taken up by Napoleon. Hitler came from an obscure family, socially of the lower middle class, and thus he was not given

¹ Although the repulsion for the extermination is universal, it is understandable that the urgency to reveal and condemn the crimes, was more pressing among those whom had been targeted, than those who would not have been directly affected. In particular antisemitism became to be seen as an exceptionally virulent form of racism, although strictly speaking there is no such thing as a Jewish race; in fact as far as there is any racial unity, as opposed to a cultural, that is indistinguishable from the Arabic of which it is but a part.

any head start. Furthermore he was a petulant and indolent fellow, who failed at school, and became a vagrant in Vienna, peddling third rate painted post cards and with vague artistic leanings². Bullock concedes that Hitler might have had an artistic temperament, but he lacked the discipline to apply himself to his chosen vocation. The First World War, enthusiastically greeted all over Europe, was a godsend to him. He served faithfully and was promoted to a corporal, hardly a sign of distinction in performance, although receiving a minor decoration. The loss of the war to the Germans was unexpected after apparent progress after the eastern front had been sealed and caused a widespread trauma in general and ostensibly marked Hitler for life. It was a severe blow to so called Prussian militarism, and the legend of the stab in the back by a defeatist government was born. The aftermath of the war was a turbulent time ripe with revolution and revolutionary ambitions, and above all the proliferation of paramilitary units such as the notorious Freicorps. The new constitution introduced after the abolition of the monarchy established for the first time in Germany a modern democracy, the so called Weimar Republic (the denotation no doubt chosen to play down the Prussian element in favor of the cultural one represented by Goethe and Schiller), the regimes of which were only able to muddle through during the first years with rampant inflation (eventually checked by the economist Schacht). The regime was never popular and hence did not enjoy a solid and unquestioned support, on the contrary there was open opposition to it and threats of its violent overthrow, and in Bavaria even temporary suspension of state control. The mood among the authorities were right-wing, meaning that right-wing political activity was treated with indulgence. It was in this setting Hitler came to political maturity. There were many right-wing political parties, and the National Socialists were just one of many and at the time so insignificant that Hitler was able to exercise influence. In a more established setting this veritable bum would hardly had a chance. He was an inveterate reader, but as Bullock notes, he did not read extensively to enlarge his mind, but selectively (as he boasted) in order to confirm his views, which he was not shy of presenting in long monologues haranguing his listeners. Such people are not that exceptional, before the extension of formal education they were known as autodidacts and may at the most have earned a local appreciation. But Hitler possessed one talent, that of a public speaker, a talent that must have been unsuspected until it was put to the test (actually the first test, according to Bullock, was a failure). This talent was based on two things, first an ability to sense the mood of his audience, the second to exploit it and to express it back, which required great rhetorical skills coupled with the abilities of an actor. At that time and place, mass meetings were the most efficient means of getting political messages across, later on the radio would enable orators to reach even wider audiences, but there is a difference between being physically present or not, and the charismatic orator comes across most forcefully in the first case.

Now at this stage it might be appropriate to compare the right wing parties of the Weimar Republic (not to say that there were not virulent right wing parties in other countries, the militarism of the French was clearly on par with that of Prussia, be it not as successful after Napoleon) with those of today, and in particular of the nascent National Socialists and the neo-Nazi parties of today. As to the latter we can make short shrift,

² One may compare the artistic efforts of a Hitler with that of an enthusiastic amateur such as Churchill, Hitler may have been the more accomplished.

history does not repeat itself, at least not literally. The explicit references to a discredited past, no matter how offensive, only deprives the political message of much of its appeal and hence power. While the policy of the original National Socialist party was much more vague. Sure it was right wing in its emphasis on nationalism, and concomitant military glory, as well as the stock-in-trade antisemitism which were part of the right wing rhetoric of the time³. When it came to political ideas, Hitler was not in any way original, he certainly could not have been if he wanted to be in tune with the masses. But in the original NSAD there was, as the name indicates, a socialist component, meaning an open anti-capitalist stand and a call for the abolishing of class differences. It would certainly be absurd to call Hitler a socialist, but he himself was not adverse to the label. The strong element of resentment that permeates much of anti-capitalist baiting and class hatred, found in Hitler ready resonance, as resentment was a dominant feature of his psychology. Also he was impressed by the collective mass movement of the Social Democrats, incidentally along with the Center Party providing one of the pillars of the Weimar Republic, and the romantic idea of revolution. He wanted a revolution, meaning an overthrow of the Weimar constitution. Yet at the time his party played a rather modest part, and to the extent he was known, it was only in Munich. But an important part was that played by Roehm and his S.A. drawn from the ranks of the disgruntled. This was a paramilitary force soon to rival the regular army, which by the Versailles treaty, was limited to 100'000 men. Roehm's ambition was to integrate it in the Army, while Hitler saw its political potential, and the muscle that the party would slowly develop was due to its support. In modern Western democracies, there are no strong paramilitary forces and without them extremist parties have little chance of success. Thus the context of today is so much more different than that of the 1920's.

Then in 1923, the strange little agitator Hitler, tried to overthrow the regime, counting on the support of the army. He was even able to enlist the legendary Ludendorf, who must have had nothing but scorn for that little corporal but consented to march with him. The whole thing ended in a fiasco, when the police fired, Hitler took immediate cover, but Ludendorf marched on. He really cut a sorry figure, but this does not seem to have mattered. In the subsequent trial he showed himself very adept, instead of trying to evade responsibility he embraced it, while implicating a larger entourage. He was given a mild sentence of five years, which we later commuted to just nine months. During his imprisonment, in which he enjoyed great comfort (putting on weight) and liberty, he wrote his 'Mein Kampf' in the hope of establishing his credentials as an intellectual. The result was disappointing. A splendid and inspired public speaker, his thoughts on paper do not survive scrutiny⁴. The book is tedious to read and had been even more so if it had not been edited by abler hands, and did not sell well at all. It contains nothing of interest, save for the light it shows on Hitlers personality and thought processes, and thus, according

³ The Viennese mayor Karl Lueger was notorious in this regard earning the censure of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, but according to Stefan Zweig, his antisemitism was merely instrumental and not personal. Hitler was very much impressed by him, and it seems rather clear that in his case he genuinely believed in it, Bullock stresses this repeatedly.

⁴ One is reminded of Cicero, who pointed out that the point of an oration in a court is to move the jury, not to stand up to closer inspection the next morning.

to Bullock, invaluable as source material. Hitler did at least learn an important question. Namely that overthrowing for its own sake is not enough, a new structure cannot be built from scratch, but has to be prepared beforehand. He would have almost a decade to do so.

During his imprisonment he was able to keep control over the party, by sowing dissension among his potential rivals. He preferred to surround himself with people literally from the gutter. For obvious reasons he felt at home with them, and was saved the humiliation of his own inferiority as uneducated and of humble origins. And perhaps most importantly, he could dominate them. As Bullock remarks, there were very few men of any real ability in the inner circle of the party, apart from Hitler maybe only Goebbels and possibly Gring. True there were the Strasser brothers Gregor and Otto and Roehm of course, who would form the left-wing section of the party⁵. Otto would defect, while the more loyal brother and Roehm would come, as we will see, to an untimely end. The party was, at least until the membership swelled, to a large extent dominated by people of petty criminals.

Hitler had great success at the polls, which would have been impossible had he not suppressed the anti-capitalists tendencies⁶ instead he looked for as wide an appeal as possible. To this contributed a masterly organization of campaigning, enlisting modern technology, such as airplanes, to impress the electorate. At its height Hitler captured about a third of the vote in 1932, riding on the discontent caused by the Wall Street crash. But it seems that this was the limit, and that he would never be able to carry enough voters to secure a parliamentary majority. This might have been the end of the story, and if so there hardly would have been any biographies of Hitler, and the world would have never known what it had been saved from. But the parliamentary situation was at a crisis, no government was able to form a workable majority. Brüning the leader of the Center party had to step down. More and more power were in the hands of Hindenburg, the old war hero, who had, to the relief of many, proved himself a stout supporter of the Constitution, through executive decrees overcoming the parliamentary deadlock. Hindenburg had no high regards for Hitler, that upstart, and resisted any efforts to appoint him. There were complicated backstage maneuvers due to the unworkable parliamentary situation, and in the end, through conspiracies and dirty deals, van Papen came up with the idea of having Hitler appointed as Chancellor, and he himself as vice-Chancellor and also in charge of the Prussian government. He figured that in this way he could control Hitler easily, and that the radical party would be tamed once in office and being forced to take responsibility. This was a great mistake, as in retrospect it did not turn out that way. von Papen and his entourage were no match for Hitler and his political cunning enforced by his utterly unscrupulous methods. It did not take many weeks after his ascension to the Chancellorship on January 1933 before power were in his hands. He came to power through luck and through a formally democratic route, although it is important to remember that he never had a constituency; he would not have been able to come to power through a Putsch, much of his success was due to his playing the game, presenting himself as

⁵ Which did not prevent them from taking an anti-Marxist stand, thus preventing any fusion with the Communists.

⁶ to which Goebbels initially had been congenial being an erstwhile ally of the Strasser brothers until wooed over by Hitler

fully committed to legal means. But once in power, it is tempting to conclude that what happened from now on was a foregone conclusion. In a sense it is all mapped out in 'Mein Kampf' for anyone bothering to read it and take it seriously. Few people read the book, and even fewer took it seriously. For the next six years he would consolidate power, use his supreme political intuition as well as his willingness to take risks (over which he apparently vacillated and brooded). He ameliorated the hardships of unemployment by rearmament, gained the trust and support of a very competent Civil Service, without which a country cannot be run, including that of the economist Schacht who loyally made his rearmament program possible, until he thought it was carried too far and resigned. But most visibly of all, he did secure a solid popularity, far in excess of the electorate support he had previously had, or which he would have hoped to maintain. How this was possible is of course a very interesting question. But what Hitler had given the population was a new faith in themselves as well as an improvement in material circumstances. The latter should not be discounted, and cynics may claim that this is the only thing that matters, but I suspect that the psychological element was the crucial one. As noted before Hitler's success was based on his ability to read and express the mood of his audience. Now with all the financial resources of the State behind him, the party propaganda could be given full force, the entire political theater with mass rallies, torched processions, flapping swastikas, could be unleashed. Success breeds success, and von Papen, who initially had disdained the upstart, was now more than willing to serve him in the most humble positions. With power one does not argue, but submits, this being the prerogative of power itself. Any organized opposition did not exist, that had been taken care of in the first few weeks, and as to serious political rivals, both Roehm and Strasser had simply been murdered, Hitler having no scruples at all. The regime was criminal at the core, but this did not matter. Most people supported the regime, not out of fear, but voluntarily often with enthusiasm. As to the steady erosion of Jewish rights Bullock does not mention at all. Maybe it did not affect the large picture at all⁷. Not that the Germans necessarily were virulent antisemites, which has sometimes been claimed, but that they preferred to look the other way. This is human, but not everything human is commendable. Instead Bullock concentrates on the triumphs scored by Hitler on the international scene, how he upped the ante at every successful gamble. The rearmament, the repossession of the demilitarized zone west of the Rhine, the plebiscite that brought Saar back, then the Anschluss of Austria, the concessions made by Czechoslovakia, which soon meant the dismemberment of that hated Slavic state. In all those cases Hitler showed daring and skill, outwitting many an eminent statesman. What can be learned from this? That pursuit of statecraft can as well be conducted by an ignorant upstart as one supposedly far more sophisticated? Or simply that he had no scruples, he did not play by the rules, which of course in any kind of game, as long as you can hide it, gives you great advantages. Thus maybe his skill as an international politician consisted in his ability to hide his machinations, to have no compunctions about betraying trust. Bullock can nevertheless not refrain from expressing admiration. He probably has a point, it took more than duplicity to carry things through. By 1939 he was at the pinnacle of his international standing, having achieved with no significant bloodshed, territorial

⁷ On the other hand this is a biography of Hitler, not an account of the rise of Nazism and how it affected everyday life in Germany. But of course it is not so easy to draw the line of demarcation.

advances making good the putative indignities suffered by the Versailles treaty. He could have stopped, but why should he? The mere administration of a state bored him, all his interests were taken up by military matters and international policies of a dynamic character. This was what excited him, this was what he could do best, in fact in a sense this was the only thing he could do. And there were no one to stop him, the only potential brakes were that of the military, and this becomes the subject of the last third of the biography. Carrying on international diplomacy by other means.

In the final part of the biography the author presents in his unraveling of the unraveling of Hitler's psyche a clear, and hence to me a very helpful summary of the Second World War as it concerns the European theater. The whole thing started with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which struck the world as a thunderbolt, after all Bolshevism had been one of the most important targets of Hitler's attacks, and no doubt had engendered more sympathy and subsequent electoral success than the stock-in-trade antisemitism. The western powers had made some tentative efforts to bring about an alliance with Stalin, but negotiations had been slow and hampered by mutual distrust as well as a deep-seated moral reluctance on the part of the western powers to strike a deal with Bolsheviks. Not that there was not mutual distrust between the Soviets and the Germans. But when it comes to coming to a quick consensus, nothing beats a dictatorship. Hitler had as well no compunctions and moral issues did not enter. The whole thing was quickly arranged, and he knew that no one would be able to interfere with his invasion of Poland, once the Soviets had been mollified, the threats of war issued by France and England was only so much talk with no substance. Stalin was not shy of taking advantage of the treaty, in fact it may be argued that it was more to his advantage than the Germans, who had been so eager to get it. Not only did Stalin effect a fourth partition of Poland, he also made sure that no, not even nominally, free Poland would remain. But this was only the beginning, to the chagrin of the Germans he also occupied the Baltic States, claiming those to be inside the sphere of Soviet influence, as Finland. Thus in effect reclaiming, like the Germans, most of the territory lost after the First World War. The Germans were incensed, especially about the Baltic states, traditional under German influence⁸. They were not happy with the attempt at Finland, which, however, resisted valiantly⁹. But Hitler swallowed it all figuring that the temporary advantages were valuable enough to postpone dealing with the disadvantages. One thing to keep in mind is that when German and Soviet forces entered Poland, people did not necessarily think of this as the start of the Second World War, at the time the war of 1914-1918 was not thought of as the World War but as the Great War. In the spring followed the occupation of Norway and Denmark, solely for strategic reasons to forestall the western powers to get a stronghold on western Scandinavia and thereby dominating the North Sea and hence land locking the Germans, in particular depriving

⁸ One thinks of the Teutonic Knights (Deutsche Ritter) whose power in Poland was broken at the battle of Grunwald 1410. In German the battle is referred to as the first battle of Tannenberg, the second battle being the one Hindenburg fought in the First World War giving a redress to the slight suffered by the Germans half a millennium before.

⁹ There were plans by the western alliance to come to the support of the Finns, but the logistics was formidable and the will to do so weak. Had that happened, Swedish territory may very well have been ravaged.

it of Swedish ore¹⁰. The Danes put up no martial resistance, the Norwegians some token but large German forces were held down there for the remainder of the war, forces which could have been put to much more effective use elsewhere. And then came the most spectacular triumph of the Germans, namely the military crushing of the French, that proud militaristic country, which saw itself being disposed of as easily as Poland. Rather than following the conventional attack on France and risking a repeat of the stalemate of the First World War, a plan of surprise was thought up by a German general and adopted by Hitler and pushed through against the remonstrances of the military establishment. The success was formidable the gamble had paid itself off handsomely and it reinforced in Hitler the belief in his own superior military intuition and confirmed his contempt of the generals as not sufficiently daring and imbued with the Nazi spirit. A contempt initially born out of a sense of social inferiority. The advantage was not pushed to the limit, the army halted temporarily allowing the lions part of British Expeditionary force to be evacuated at Dunkirk. The logical part would now be to invade England and then with the back free deal with the Soviet Union, after all the war aims, clearly stated in 'Mein Kampf', were to obtain Lenbensraum on the eastern steppes, just as the English had found Lebensraum on the western steppes of North America¹¹. But Hitler realized that an invasion was out of the question as long as Britain dominated the seas. What could be done, however, as a starter, would to conquer the skies. Hence the legendary battle of Britain, where the Germans at one point were close to success, but the British slipped through more or less fortuitously, and that was the end of that adventure. Much to his frustration, the British persevered in their defiance, when they ought to have seen reason and sued for peace, or better still formed an alliance realizing common interests. With the final mopping-up operation occupying Holland and Belgium, the western front ceased to be active, although the British had not been pacified. The war in the West was very different from that in the East, in comparison a veritable tea party (to paraphrase Lenin). The actual losses in life were negligible compared to the first, and material destruction rather modest. Civilian life could go on relatively undisturbed afterwards. The French make much of their resistance but its recorded activity was mostly retroactive. The Germans could administer the country with a minimum of personnel, which indicates a high degree of collaboration, which is not necessarily bad as far as it can minimize bloodshed. Nominal independence was granted, and hence the spectacle of the Vichy regime, a steady source of national embarrassment and shame in the years to come. Of course being a Jew in occupied or dependent territories was not advisable, but they constituted a minority not affecting the life of the majority. This observation maybe offensively cynical, but such an attitude of detachment is seldom incompatible with truth. The simple truth is that people of the West were not considered 'Untermenschen', and that had consequences.

The Second World War is basically one of Nazi-Germany pitted against the Soviet Union. The Pacific theater had nothing to do with it, and when the States entered the war

¹⁰ In fact the Allies had established some presence in Norway, partly to assist the Finns, and also maybe to seize the Swedish iron mines. The invasion of Norway was hence not as gratuitous an act of belligerence, as I had come to understand as a child.

¹¹ Hitler, like many boys of his generation had been a fan of the books by Karl May a genre of literature still popular into the 1960's but now I think defunct.

against Germany in earnest by the invasion of Normandy, it was already over. Of course one should not discount the efforts of the Western allies, which must have shortened the war with a few years, but the brunt was taken by the Russians. From the Russian point of view the Great Patriotic War lasted from 1941 to 1945, discounting the first years as mere preliminaries. I remember how our teacher at elementary school talked, with understandable glee, about the great mistake Hitler made by attacking Russia. It was not a mistake because the decision taken was not tactical but the entire point of the war. Had Hitler not had ambitions from the start, attacking France and England would have been pointless. After recovering the territories lost after Versailles and more (including the German territories of the Hapsburg empire) he could simply have consolidated his gains, and that would have been it¹². But the war also included other subsidiary activities, such as war in North Africa, and intrusion into the Balkans, activities which have always puzzled me, and for which Bullock gives some explanations.

To strike at the British Empire would require control over the Mediterranean. The commander of the Navy - Raeder - very much urged for such a course of action instead of attacking the Soviet Union, but Hitler was understandably not interested and only gave it lukewarm attention, and missed doing some essential things like securing Malta. However, he tried hard to extend the war by involving Franco's Spain and the Italy of the 'Duce'. Franco remained aloof and saw no advantages to such adventures and Hitler was unable to woe him. With Mussolini it was different, with the two there had developed a relation of trust and appreciation, and Mussolini had from the start entertained fantasies about extending his territory, involving early forages onto the Horn of Africa, as well as across the sea to Libya. Between the two the notorious pact of iron had been formed, with Mussolini more and more being the junior partner. Hitler counted on him and maintained his loyalty to him throughout life, but as an ally he was exasperating. 'Il Duce' feeling snubbed not having been let in on the plans of Hitler was rattled and attacked Greece without informing him. This was a blunder and put Hitler in an embarrassing situation and the German army had to improvise military action to rectify the situation bungled by the Italian Army, which never was up to par. The Balkans was important to Hitler in his drive eastwards. He had reliable allies in Slovakia (a puppet state created after the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia), Hungary and Romania. Furthermore he could count on the support of Bulgaria, and he also thought of Yugoslavia, but this turned out not to be the case, necessitating military operations there as well. Finally we have the puzzling war in North Africa, a 'clean' war set in the desert and thus involving few civilians, and thus ideal for being the subject of entertaining films. It was here that Rommel made his reputation and invited the admiration of his foes. War as pure game. The point seems to have been to take control over Egypt and the Suez canal and exercise decisive influence in the Middle East. But in the end all of this were only side shows, adding to the spectacle without being central to the plot.

While the wars in the West had been 'civilized' as noted, respecting the Geneva conventions, the war in the East would be of a totally different nature Hitler had decided. It should be waged with utmost ruthlessness, pulling no punches, respecting no traditional

¹² One may somewhat fancifully argue that he willfully overextended himself, that he was in fact aiming for a National suicide, and destruction was his overriding aim

conventions of warfare, but essentially be one of extermination. In war everything is permissible, as long as you get away with it, and that Hitler intended to exploit to the hilt. The Wehrmacht seems to have acceded to the new directions without too many qualms, the details of which are understandably only briefly touched upon by Bullock, who observes that in many ways this policy of scorching was counterproductive, as indeed remarked by some of the hardcore Nazi ideologists such as Rosenberg. Especially in the Ukraine there was a lot of resentment against the Communist regime, and the initial onslaught by the Germans was actually welcomed by the local population, until they realized what was up. The operation Barbarossa was the largest operation unleashed by Hitler, and the initial success was indeed spectacular, the Russians far from planning any counterattack were taken by surprise. According to Bullock, Stalin and his entourage put great value on the alliance with Germany and protested friendship to the very end, which of course the Germans did as well, to maintain the illusion. The German army had allies, the Hungarians, the Romanians, and the Italians, as Mussolini reluctantly put his divisions to the service of Hitler. In the north the Finns entered the fray eager to repay what they had suffered at the hands of the Russian two years earlier¹³. But as we all know, it stalled after a few months, and the Russians were able to take a stand and check the invincible and thereby attaining a huge moral advantage. The Germans, or at least Hitler, had been overly optimistic and not even supplied the army with winter clothing. There might have been a disaster even then and there, if Hitler had no issued orders for the army to hold its position no matter what. They managed to do so, and the struggle would keep on for more than three years. During this time Hitlers ascendancy over his generals became even more entrenched, and as a result he was refusing their council, which led to many unnecessary setbacks. For one thing he refused to focus his forces, but tried to do too much at the same time. As the situation became more and more desperate, his belief in his own powers, only became more and more intransigent. First ensconced in a garrison in East Prussia, then later in the Berlin Bunker, he became more and more estranged from reality, leading a life of constant stress under the most ascetic of circumstances, taking a heavy toll on his health, mental and physical. The miracle is that neither fully collapsed. Surely close to insanity, he never really crossed the line in any clinical sense, but still enjoyed the support of his generals. The mystery is how this entourage of supposedly highly professionals, in fact according to post-war opinion, when given a level playing field, the German forces were always superior. What wore them inexorably down was the greater resources in terms of manpower and material the opponents could muster, even the Soviet Union by itself, let alone the almost inexhaustible supplies of the Americans. One theory is that the middle lever commanders were given a wide latitude of action, while in the case of the Allies, the command structure was more hierarchical and inflexible. This ties in with the assumption that real competence is never to be found at the top, nor at the bottom, but in the middle level¹⁴.

¹³ The Finnish participation has since then proved a detriment to its moral reputation, mostly by people who have not fully appreciated the complete context.

¹⁴ One may compare with Trevor-Ropers assessment of Hitler as a military master, to the effect that he was great on general abstract theory, and showed a mastery of petty details, with which he tended to be preoccupied, but paid no attention to the middle ground, where real competence is to be found.

Yet of course, not every general could stay loyal, there was at the end one serious attempt at assassination, which foundered on unpredictable causes. It almost worked, at least to the effect of killing Hitler, quite another thing would have been a successful follow-up. Bullock devotes a significant portion of his book to elucidate the plot, although this has little if any relevance to the main theme of the book - the elucidation of Hitler's psyche. The plot has retroactively enjoyed a lot of attention, probably because it is seen as a vindication of internal pride and decency. The plotters were of course nationalists loyal to German war aims, but saw Hitler, and rightly so, as leading the country to disaster and destruction by his refusal to look reality in the eye and draw the necessary conclusions. Thus their aim was not capitulation but to come to some understanding with the Western powers and to keep most of the military gains, at least in the East. How successful such a bid would have been, we will never know, most likely not, the West would probably not have seen the plotters as fundamentally different from Hitler and also responsible for the war and viewed with great suspicion. Among the plotters one found high profile generals such as Rommel, who, when the whole thing unraveled was persuaded, for the sake of his family, to commit suicide¹⁵. Rommel was a national war hero, and clearly his defection might have a bad effect on the general moral.

We all know how it ended. By 1942 a foregone conclusion, it only being a matter of time. And Hitler, until the very end hoping against hope, finding consolation in the desperate fate of Fredrick the Great during the end of the Seven Years War and who in the end was rescued by the death of the Czarina Elisabeth. Could not the same thing happen to Hitler when Roosevelt died¹⁶? The irony of the whole story is of course that someone with the grandiose ambitions of a Hitler could identify himself so clearly with a petty 18th century ruler with only regional importance? One may understand Napoleon, Djingis Kahn, Alexander the Great, or any other mythological figure, but Fredrick the Great! This leads to the final question, which is not really addressed by Bullock, at least not in any direct way. Was Hitler a normal human being? Did he have normal human feelings, or was he the incarnation of Evil, as he is most commonly seen, and that he ought to have been strangled at birth, as his monstrosity clearly would have been manifest already then¹⁷. Hitler the private man seems rather conventional. A love of dogs, which there is no reason to doubt was sincere, his love of a younger niece, whose suicide and concomitant grief it produced in him, he never overcame. His cordial relations with Eva Braun, by all accounts a healthy, uncomplicated girl with simple tastes, which he seems to have shared. Could this be another instance of the banality of evil. Or that such seemingly human sides really do not count for much, that they just make up a shell that surrounds nothing but

¹⁵ This is of course in the old Roman tradition.

¹⁶ The time of Hitler as Chancellor, then supreme Fuehrer, coincided almost completely with that of Roosevelt as a President

¹⁷ Counterfactual speculations are tricky. Would there have been no Second World War, had Hitler never been allowed to exist? It certainly would not have been spearheaded by Hitler, but that does not exclude the possibility that it might have taken some other form. The crucial point is that had this happened, we would never have had any inkling of what we had escaped. In life we only now what we could have missed, not what we really missed, although here is much more of the latter than of the former, actuality being a much smaller realm than potentiality.

emptiness, which constitutes the soul of men? Everyone harbors in their empty interiors, more or less explicit, fantasies of grandeur coupled with complete selfishness, leading deep down solipsistic lives, and it is just a matter of external circumstances whether they can impose on the outside world the barrenness of their daydreams. But of course vouched in such general terms, the speculations become rather vacuous, and disperse under any sustained scrutiny.

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