Hitler was a lazy, ill-disciplined man, and his henchmen were inefficient. So just how did the Nazis create the world’s mightiest military machine?

by IAN KERSHAW

In the 1930s, hospitals in the Obersalzberg had to work overtime to cope with the needs of the Führer and his entourage. In January 1933, when Hitler took power, there was a shortage of medical staff. The Reichstag building in Berlin was the scene of a power struggle between Hitler and his opponents. But in the end, the Nazis emerged victorious, and the new government was able to implement its policies. The Red Army was dissolved, and the SA and SS were established. The SS soon became the most feared and hated part of the Nazi regime. The war against the Soviet Union was launched in June 1941, and the Red Army suffered heavy losses. The war ended with the surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945. The post-war decades saw a period of reconstruction and economic growth. But the memory of the war remained a shadow over German society.
Keeping in our royal history

THIS time she was still being patted, but the crowd in the Royal Room was mostly made up of the usual suspects. There were a few famous faces, but the majority of the crowd was made up of royal fans who had waited for hours to catch a glimpse of the Queen. She had a warm smile, and it was clear that she was enjoying herself. She took the time to speak to several of the fans, and it was clear that she was genuinely interested in what they had to say.

The Queen was in high spirits, and she seemed to be enjoying the attention. She was wearing a beautiful dress, and she held a bouquet of flowers in her hand. She was accompanied by a group of security guards, but she seemed to be in good hands.

As the Queen made her way through the crowd, she stopped to chat with a few of the fans. She was generous with her time, and it was clear that she was a people person.

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THE NAZI POLITICAL SYSTEM

1. Background

The political system of the Third Reich was determined above all by two main features,
a) a 'personal dictatorship' under a charismatic leadership, with authority derived not from
tradition but through Hitler's personal gifts, seen first by the Nazi Party and then the
German people. Hitler was not totally free to act as he wished but had a major influence on
what happened.
b) the creation of a 'one-party state' where the Nazis claimed political authority in almost every
sphere. The emphasis must be on 'claimed' as power was dependent upon both period and
circumstance, however the Nazis again had the major impact.

2. The Fuhrer

Although Hitler had unlimited power in theory, no one man could control everything.
He was thus dependent upon excellent channels of information from subordinates. This meant
the less he wanted to do the more reliant he became upon others to select what was relevant.
Once the decision had been made it also passed out of his hands as it became the task of the
administration to make it work. Historians have found it infamously difficult to chart the
channels through which information came and power flowed from the Fuhrer. Hitler hated
paperwork and most contact came face to face with the officials concerned and little was
documented. Therefore, in a personal dictatorship the key to maintaining power became the
ability to persuade others that one was acting with Hitler's support. Access became the central
issue. Trevor-Roper pointed out that Hitler's government was more akin to the Court of a
medieval king than to a 20th century cabinet.

In post-war reflections on Hitler's regime [Doc 157] content such as Schmitt and
Weizsacker make extravagant claims about Hitler's power. Schmitt believed "Hitler's personal
position of power involved not only an immense claim to omniscience but also the claim to
omniscience." The Fuhrer's power over the Reich Ministers could be reduced in
importance by almost anyone who had Hitler's ear. The Reich Cabinet as the official organ to
issue instructions did not meet after 1937 [Schmitt was wrong in fact February 1938] and
increasingly all kinds of intermediate authorities developed with their own staffs, etc.
Weizsacker points to an even more haphazard system due to Hitler's preference for
Berchtesgaden (the Berghof) over Berlin. It was thus possible that Ministers could not speak to
Hitler for months, even years. As early as 1938 a Supreme Headquarters developed where
inter-departmental disputes were settled or from which the Head of the Chancellery took them
to Hitler, even then many were left 'pending'. If a Minister or official received an answer, no
matter how casual, it then went out as a 'Fuhrer Order'. Thus to keep abreast of opinion a
Minister or official needed a representative on Hitler's personal staff. Ribbentrop posted a man
in this role and followed the Supreme Headquarters around and his later influence can be seen
as a reward for making the handling of Hitler a special study. However, many ministers gave
up hope of getting an answer.

The nature of Nazi rule had in fact been conditioned by the style of leadership in the
Party prior to 1933, a peculiar combination of charisma and bureaucracy. At first the
charismatic nature of Hitler's leadership was the key but the party bureaucracy was forced to
grow rapidly after 1930 to make the most of the election successes and ever growing
membership. Hitler's personal charisma and not his office remained the driving force. The
party hierarchy was needed to make this charisma count and thus organisation was based on

In 1933, Party Bureaucracy was fighting the state
bureaucracy, however the party won in the end
due to Hitler's power in the state
Hitler also believed to be a charismatic leader you had to avoid day to day dreaminess and have the nimbus of Führer. This suited his theatrical nature. However, running a dictatorship does not really allow for this and in Hitler's case it led to a vacuum developing at the very heart of the government.

"The vacuum was filled by confusion and dissension which could not be resolved by the sporadic and arbitrary interventions of the Führer." [Pridham and Noakes]

However, Hitler was not prepared to let anyone fill this necessary role, least of all an efficient bureaucracy. Although he retained the Reich Chancellery from Weimar days to supervise routine legislation and run the day to day administration, he constantly undermined it by relying on individuals and bypassing it on important issues. Coherent planning was virtually impossible, competing interests were not defined and there was no team spirit. It increasing led to paranoia, censorship and a police state mentality, "a fetish was made of secrecy". There was a 'tendency towards disintegration' and this was added to by the creation of new Reich Agencies, 11 by 1942. The most infamous example being that of the For Year Plan which had 17 subordinate agencies, each equally uncoordinated. As Pridham and Noakes state "...the whole system came to resemble the delta system of a very large river."

Historians have long wondered how this 'authoritarian anarchy' [Petway 1946] was able to achieve such remarkable feats? Most importantly it was due to Hitler's exceptional skill in gauging and exploiting the weaknesses of his opponents. However, in no small measure it was also due to the traditional elites continuing their work, the Army, Industry, Civil Service and the Universities all carried on as normal. Basically they supported the Nazis because they feared Bolshevism more. The Nazis were good at mobilisation and the offices of energy. However, the dynamic was ultimately bound to be self-destructive. Without a defined administrative structure the regime could not build. Hitler's inability to balance an armaments programme for example, led to a damaging war between the three branches of the armed services. This dynamic helped to pull Germany into a war for which she was inadequately prepared. Hitler probably entered a new administration could weaken the basic Nazi dynamic. Seeing the importance of the problem he simply chose to do nothing. [Weare?]

Yet, the final bank up by Nazism was just not the product of the clash of the irrational goals of Nazism with the realities of the international situation. It was also encouraged by the defects of the apparatus of government itself; defects deriving both from Hitler's own limitations as dictator and from the kind of movement and regime which he had created." [Pridham and Noakes]  
*Quote
"His purely political way of life"—Furthermore, "National Socialism can indeed be called Hitleanism"... This man and his intentions and actions will always be in the very centre of Nazi history.

However, Fest rightly addresses the question of role of the individual within the historical-political process. The epithet "Master of the Third Reich" suggests a kind of dominance and singular responsibility for a whole regime's development which is likely to be far fetched. F. raises the question of whether the characterization of H. as a 'demon', or as 'master of the Third Reich' is designed to hide German responsibility for Nazism and WW2. Even if it isn't designed for that purpose, is this its effect?

Noakes & Pridham develop this line by analyzing the Nazi political system. They immediately raise the question of whether any singular individual could ever have more than marginal responsibility for the majority of decisions made in a Czoth state. One would have to be a super-human to control everything. Could anyone, let alone H. do this?

No point to several points of doubt:

1. It was not H.'s style to be involved in the ultimate details of political decision making. He was concerned with the big questions of politics - the grand projects, visions, high-profile actions rather than the mundanities of daily admin. He simply didn't have the
relatively easy to assemble. Consider economic policy – refusal to arbitrate between Darre and Schacht, the delegation of power to Göring for the T.P.

- In conclusion it seems that the ideological view of leadership, as promoted by propaganda was at odds with the real qualities required by a 'Master' of a regime. The ideology & propaganda promoted the 'cult' of leadership - remote, distant, the misunderstood politics but fully embracing the most important questions (nation, race, survival, diplomacy etc.). Yet a 'Master' of a regime must understand all that goes on underneath him - thus would require a 'hands on', popular approach to administration. He could not do this - he was not a politician in order to submerge himself in bureaucracy. The dislike rationality, seeing politics as a game of instinct he was attracted to politics for romantic, egotistical reasons, he lacked practical understanding of interest.

- His image as 'Master' is not undeserved totally - his personal stamp was clear, his cult well established. But this is only image, or little more than image. When it comes to real political decision making H. had limited control.