

By 1936 there was a growing economic crisis, causing political tensions. The Minister of Economics, Hjalmar Schacht, wanted to scale down the escalating costs; but Hitler was unwilling either to abandon plans for rapid rearmament or to risk consumer dissatisfaction. This led directly to the break with orthodox economic planning, and the creation of Goering's new Four-Year-Plan office. This was a typical illustration of the polycentric character of the regime, where if Hitler was not satisfied with one quarter, he simply empowered someone else to deal with the issue. It also meant radically increased state intervention in the economy. From 1936 onwards, preparation for 'war within four years' meant attempting to square the economic circle: to combine a high standard of living with the demands of rapid arms production.

By 1938–9, rearmament expenditure had risen by 70 per cent above the level of the previous two years. The focus was now on autarky (self-sufficiency) rather than reliance on imports from abroad. In part this required the enhanced production of synthetics, or substitutes for raw materials which could no longer be obtained from elsewhere. In part it also entailed a shift to exploitation of the resources of other countries, including Austria after the Anschluss, and Czechoslovakia following the invasion, as well as bilateral agreements with other countries such as Romania, an important supplier of oil. Consumption as a percentage of national income declined from 71 per cent in 1928 to 59 per cent in 1938, although domestic unrest was not as great as might have been expected under a democratic regime. Certain sections of business were adversely affected by the shift to autarky and increased state intervention, although it operated to the advantage of sectors engaged in the production of synthetics, such as I. G. Farben.

Economic developments had implications for the timing and character of the war. According to the opinions of some historians, from 1936 onwards the economy became increasingly 'unhinged'. They argue that it entailed going to war sooner rather than later, and shaped the nature of the war that could be fought. In principle, the economy could in future only be sustained by a successful war of conquest, acquiring and exploiting further territories as the need arose, as Hitler himself believed. However, because of the speed and type of rearmament, Germany would not be ready for major war until the mid-1940s. Until then, all Germany could prepare for were 'lightning strikes' or a *Blitzkrieg* style of warfare evident in the early months of the war. By contrast, both Britain and France would be militarily prepared for war by 1939.

These developments also had major implications for German society. Germans in the concentration camps were deployed as slave labour, working in appalling conditions such as in the quarries of Mauthausen, or in the growing empire of SS industrial enterprises. Despite Nazi ideology on the role of women, who supposedly belonged in the spheres of 'children, kitchen, church', by 1939 52 per cent of women of working age were in employment. Increasingly, foreign labour was brought into Germany to assist in production. All these trends developed massively during the war itself.

#### What difference, then, did Hitler make?

Many foreign policy developments of the 1930s might have come about under any conservative nationalist and revisionist government. Rearmament and the revision of Germany's boundaries as defined in the Treaty of Versailles were shared very widely. Yet it was Hitler's interference in, and radicalisation of, foreign policy which made a crucial difference in several respects.

Hitler's foreign policy goals were a top priority for him, driving alterations to the domestic power structure. His determination to press on with rearmament at all costs, altered the balance between the Nazi party, the state and the Army. It also greatly increased state intervention in a changing economy. The rearmament programme affected the timing and character of the war which Germany ultimately fought. It hence conditioned, although it did not necessarily predetermine, the outcome of the war.

In terms of the involvement of particular combatants, Hitler failed to gain an alliance with Britain. He turned a war against Russia into one of extraordinary ideological aggression and racial hatred. He also brought the previously isolationist USA into European affairs in a way which was to be of major long-term significance for twentieth-century European and world history. Finally, it was in the midst of this conflagration that the Holocaust was unleashed.

#### 6.16 Historical interpretation: Was Hitler a weak dictator?

The question of whether Hitler was a 'weak dictator' matters massively. Answers to this question have not been purely academic, but have been of enormous personal and political significance. The debates have taken many forms over the last sixty years, but underlying all the twists and turns of the historical controversies lies a common moral thread. A 'strong dictator' capable of realising his intentions and imposing his own will would leave little space for alternatives. On the other hand, if Hitler were a 'weak dictator', far wider circles would be implicated in questions of guilt and complicity. Debates over whether Hitler was a 'weak dictator' are thus tangled up with wider debates over collaboration and opposition, racial policy and foreign policy. In short, the question of how to evaluate Hitler's role as dictator is central to understanding the Third Reich.

Some historical controversies concern specific hypotheses which can be resolved by further empirical research and new evidence. Other historical controversies are harder to resolve because they hinge on completely different interpretations of what is essentially the same evidence. This is the case in relation to many aspects of the debates over Hitler's role in the Nazi state.

##### The development of the historical debates

Debates over Hitler's role began already during the Third Reich. Much of Nazi propaganda was devoted to portraying the regime as a streamlined state, with a pyramid of power culminating in the figure of the *Führer* at its peak. Yet some contemporary observers recognised that the structures of power in the Third Reich were not quite this simple, and the 'duality' of the old state structures which continued to operate alongside new Party organisations led Ernst Fraenkel, for example, to develop notions of a 'Dual State' (1941), while Franz Neumann presented the image of a many-headed monster in his *Behemoth* (1942).

*Totalitarian theories in the 1950s and 1960s*  
In the immediate post-war period, however, the focus on Hitler himself remained predominant. Presented as a positive image while Hitler was in power, Hitler's supremacy was simply given a negative shading after 1945. For many Germans agonising over their recent past, condemnation of Hitler as a kind of magician who had blinded the masses with his charisma and led innocent Germans astray was highly appealing. It seemed both to exonerate them from blame, and to account for Hitler's undoubted mass

appeal. So too did a focus on power and oppression, and the notion that there was no alternative to carrying out *Führer-Befehl* (Hitler's orders).

The older notion of totalitarianism was revived in the 1950s and 1960s. In Hannah Arendt's use of this term in her seminal analysis *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), the emphasis was on the dynamism of the movement, and on the mobilisation of the masses by a demonic leader, drawing attention to dictatorships of left and right, Nazism and Stalinism. The similarities between fascist and Communist dictatorships were identified rather differently in the work of Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956), who defined totalitarianism in terms of a formal list of attributes: a state with one party and one official ideology, capable of dominating the population through a monopoly of the means of propaganda (the media) and coercion (police and army) as well as control of the economy. Later critics of the concept were quick to note that these definitions were very different from one another, leading to quite different conclusions about whether Nazism or Stalinism was 'more' or 'less' totalitarian; but as a label of political critique, making a sharp distinction between democracy and dictatorship, the term had its uses.

The effective equation of Nazism and Communism under the more general concept of totalitarianism was politically convenient as a 'bridging' ideology in the West in the Cold War (Meanwhile, in Communist East Germany a rather different notion of Nazism as a form of fascism rooted in monopoly capitalism was being developed; this too, by shifting blame to the 'capitalist-imperialists' and large land-owning classes, managed conveniently to exonerate the allegedly innocent German 'workers and peasants' from any blame.) According to widely held views in West Germany, many crimes had been perpetrated 'in the name of the Germans' – who allegedly had 'known nothing about it' – by 'Hitler and his henchmen'. A focus on Hitler as the almost archetypal 'strong dictator' has pervaded images of Hitler ever since, present in innumerable popular films and documentaries, as well as presenting a continuing thread in the historiography.

#### The emergence of notions of Hitler as 'weak dictator'

Yet, particularly from the later 1960s onwards, Western historians began to register increasing unease about this representation of Hitler's role. Historians providing evidence for the war crimes trials of the 1960s, including the famous Auschwitz trial, began to realise that the system of terror was not sustained by 'Hitler's orders' alone (Buchheim et al., *Anatomy of the SS – State* (1967)). A number of studies began to demonstrate that the structures of power in the Third Reich were far more complex than had previously been realised.

The notion of Hitler as strong dictator was explicitly challenged by Edward N. Peterson in his path-breaking book, *The Limits of Hitler's Power* (1969). In this detailed exploration of central and regional government, Peterson painted a picture of confusion, competition and rivalry. There were rivalries not merely between the old state apparatus and the new party institutions, but also splits and tensions within each of these, and cross-cutting tensions with and within other groups such as the Army and different sections of big business. In effect, Peterson's work amounted to a revolution in conceptions of Hitler: far from being the strong dictator of official imagery and popular imagination, Hitler was in fact a weak dictator.

#### The debate between structuralists (functionalists) and intentionalists

Hans Mommsen, who first started developing the notion of weak dictator in his 1960s work on civil servants in the Third Reich, also emphasised Hitler's personal insecurity, his unwillingness to take decisions, his over-dependence on popularity and willingness to agree with the last powerful

Monopoly capitalism: A phrase used by Marxists for a particular stage of advanced capitalism, in which capital is increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

Auschwitz: The largest of the Nazi concentration camps, including the infamous extermination centre at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as Auschwitz I, where Josef Mengele carried out his notorious 'medical' experiments, and subsidiary camps where slave labourers were worked to death for major German industrial enterprises. At the height of the killings in the summer of 1944, over 9000 people could be killed within 24 hours in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

person who had talked to him. Historians such as Martin Broszat began to explore the complex, ever more chaotic structures of power, in what they termed a 'polycratic state' – a state with multiple, competing and overlapping, centres of power. This became known as the 'structuralist' approach, in which the explanatory focus was shifted to the ways the institutional structure functioned; hence, it is also sometimes termed a 'functionalist' interpretation.

Such an approach contrasts strongly with the interpretation presented by those who emphasise Hitler's intentions and 'world view' (as explored by Eberhard Jäckel in his book *Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power*, 1972), in Karl Dietrich Bracher's detailed analysis (*The German Dictatorship*, 1969) Hitler's 'programme' and ultimate goals presented the driving force in what – despite Bracher's recognition of conflicts among different power groups – remained for Bracher essentially a 'totalitarian' state. For 'Hitler-centric' historians such as Andreas Hillgruber or Klaus Hildebrand (*The Third Reich*, 1984), the policies of world conquest and racial extermination must be explained primarily in terms of Hitler's intentions. For intentionalist historians, then, Hitler remains a strong dictator.

These controversies between structuralists and intentionalists were analysed in a key contribution by Tim Mason at a conference in 1979, where the political and moral implications of different historical interpretations gave rise to a particularly heated debate. This controversy exploded in the 1980s into an extended debate on the origins of the Holocaust. There are a number of ways of evaluating these conflicting interpretations, including: changing structures of power; Hitler's leadership style; and the implementation of policies.

#### How did political structures develop in the process of 'cumulative radicalisation'?

##### The real 'seizure of power'? *Gleichschaltung* or co-ordination (1933–4)

The first 18 months of Hitler's rule saw the ruthless establishment of a dictatorial one-party state. This involved the systematic dismantling of the liberal-democratic constitution, the destruction of federalism and the imposition of Nazi rule in the localities, and the destruction of the organisational bases for political opposition, independent association and freedom of speech. The real *Machtergreifung* ('seizure of power') after his constitutional appointment as Chancellor does indeed initially seem to lend support to the view of Hitler as strong dictator.

Despite the political capital the Nazis made out of the Reichstag Fire of 27 February, using it to declare a state of emergency and to persecute Communists and socialists, the NSDAP failed to gain an absolute majority in the Election of 5 March 1933, polling just under 44 per cent of the vote. Nevertheless, the Enabling Act of March 1933 (the necessary two-thirds majority having been cobbled together by a combination of coercion and persuasion) allowed Hitler to change the constitution at will and to pass any legislation he wanted.

The first concentration camp for political opponents, Dachau, was opened in March. The 'Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service' of April 1933 purged the professions of Jews, socialists and other potential opponents of the regime. The dismantling of local government autonomy also began with the imposition of *Reichsstatthalter* ('Reich Governors') in the *Länder* ('provinces') in the spring of 1933, and was finalised with a 'Law for the Reconstruction of the Reich' abolishing their constitutional role in January 1934. After the celebration of the traditional day of labour on 1 May 1933, on 2 May independent trade unions were

abolished and labour was rapidly incorporated in Robert Ley's 'German Labour Front' (DAF). Following the ban on the Social Democratic Party in June, the other political parties dissolved themselves, and the role of the NSDAP as the only legally permitted party was enshrined in the 'Law against the Formation of New Parties' of 14 July 1933. Within six months of coming to power, Hitler appeared to have control not only over the political system and the means of coercion, but also over many aspects of social and cultural life.

The first stage of the construction of the dictatorship culminated in August 1934. Following President Hindenburg's death on 2 August, Hitler combined the roles of President and Chancellor into that of *Führer*, thus uniting the roles of head of state and head of government. In light of the beheading of the SA, including its leader, Ernst Röhm, in the Night of the Long Knives a month earlier, the Army swore a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler.

All of this makes it look like a simple case of a single-party state in which the leader of the party, Adolf Hitler, held absolute power – although, it should be noted, power sustained by compromising some of his own party's more radical interests with those of traditional authorities such as the Army. Yet – as just indicated – the realities were rather more complex. Since Hitler had come to power entirely by legal, constitutional means, he inherited the structures of a modern bureaucratic state. There was, moreover, much in this system which was essential for the running of an advanced industrial economy, and most importantly, for the preparation for war. Thus Hitler had to reach certain compromises with key traditional elites – particularly conservative nationalists in the civil service and the Army – and with powerful economic interests in order to pursue his ultimate, overriding objectives.

#### *An unstable 'congruence of aims'? The 'dual state' (1934–7)*

In the apparently 'stable' middle years, such compromises worked – but only up to a point. While the Army and the conservative nationalists had a real interest in rearmament and revision of the Treaty of Versailles, and industrialists had an interest in the suppression of the rights of labour and the return to a stable economy, there were other elements in this rather volatile equation.

On the one hand, there was repeated pressure from party activists for radical change, dynamism, continual revolution – an echo, particularly among older party members, of the pre-1933 dynamism of the party as a mobilising force. There was at the same time the continual concern of Hitler himself with his own image and popularity among the majority of the German people, requiring him to keep a constant eye on public opinion. He had no wish to be associated with the less popular actions of, for example, the Nazi *Gauleiter* in the provinces, or with unpopular policy decisions on particular issues which affected people's day-to-day lives. Hitler's key policies remained vague and essentially negative: to rid Germany of a range of 'community aliens' (defined in racist and biological terms), to attack socialists and Communists, to acquire 'living space' and make Germany great again on the international stage. He had little interest in the nitty-gritty of the day-to-day details of running a modern state and economy. Such a combination was hardly likely to produce stability for long.

In the event, what developed was a curious hybrid: an ever-changing set of Nazi party institutions and practices was superimposed on old bureaucratic administrative structures, creating growing complexity and rivalry between party and state organisations. There were personal rivalries within the party, with its essentially feudal structures, personal loyalties and indi-

vidual feuds. Similar rivalries were increasingly characteristic of civil service organisations too. Given Hitler's distrust of ministers meeting to confer informally with one another – the only way they could even seek to coordinate policies, as normal practices of cabinet government were discontinued – there was a lack of cooperation among the state ministries, and a lack of coordination of policy. Competition and rivalry was further exacerbated by the creation of new, hybrid institutions, and by Hitler's habit of appointing 'plenipotentiaries' (people with an almost unlimited and ill-defined brief) for particular purposes. All this seemed to lead to 'government without administration', in many respects without direction, apparently out of control.

Often Nazi institutions competed with state institutions over the same ground: for example, Goebbels' empire controlling 'Propaganda and Enlightenment' challenged the state's responsibility for Science, Education and Popular Education; while Robert Ley's German Labour Front (DAF) sought to outweigh the Ministry of Labour. In other cases, aspects of pre-1933 Nazi ideology were abandoned in favour of other goals, as with conflicting demands for social revolution and the economic needs of rearmament, creating further rivalries. Powerful personal empires could be built up through combinations of party and state offices, as in 1936 when Heinrich Himmler was appointed *Reichsführer SS* and Chief of the German Police in the Ministry of the Interior, controlling both the regular police force and the security police (under Reinhard Heydrich).

#### *'Cumulative radicalisation'? 1938–45*

This essentially unstable situation tipped over into a more radical phase in the winter of 1937–8. Following Hitler's lengthy speech in November 1937 to the Army leadership outlining megalomaniac plans for eventual world domination – a speech captured in the 'memorandum' penned by one of those present, Hossbach – increasing disquiet was registered by military leaders. In the spring of 1938, control over military matters and foreign affairs was distinctly 'Nazified': the War Minister, Werner von Blomberg, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Werner von Fritsch, were dismissed (involving personal scandals and smears on the private lives of each). Following some institutional reorganisation, they were replaced by Generals Wilhelm Keitel and Walther von Brauchitsch; Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath resigned and was replaced by Joachim von Ribbentrop; and Hitler himself took over general command of the Army. In 1938–9 the regime entered a distinctly more radical phase in both foreign and racial policies, including: the annexation of Austria in the *Anschluss* of March 1938; the Sudeten crisis culminating in the Munich Agreement of September 1938; and the stepping-up of discrimination and violence against Jews, the seizure of Jewish property and businesses, pressures for emigration, and the pogrom known as the *Reichskristallnacht* of 9 November 1938.

The process of radicalisation became ever more apparent after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 provoked war in Europe. Hitler's personal control of military strategy could, with luck, produce breathtaking successes, as in the *Blitzkrieg* of the early months; but in the longer term his ideologically driven decisions were suicidal. The unprecedented brutality following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the hubris of declaration of war on the USA following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the unleashing of the murderous 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' – all these raise fundamental questions as to the role of Hitler's own intentions in what has variously been described as the 'twisted road to Auschwitz' and the 'German catastrophe'.

**Reichskristallnacht.** Literally, 'crystal night': a night of organized violence against Jewish property, including arson attacks on synagogues and the smashing of windows in Jewish department stores, followed by the arrests and imprisonment of many Jews and the demand that they foot the bill for the damage caused.

**'Final solution of the Jewish question.'** The Nazi euphemism for the Holocaust: the fact that, in order to 'remove' Jews from Europe, Jews were being systematically murdered in very large numbers.

**Does Hitler's leadership style provide evidence of strength or weakness?**

*Images of power*

What then was Hitler's own role in this changing situation? At first glance, Hitler's style of leadership appears almost self-evidently to be that of a strong dictator. His own position within the party was unique, even in the 1920s: from his re-entry into politics in 1925 onwards, he embodied the Movement, and his 'Will' was frequently decisive. Once in power, the appearance of strength was massively reinforced. The presentation of Hitler's image in Nazi propaganda, such as Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally, *Triumph of the Will*, is that of the supreme dictator, capable of uniting the Volk, attracting the adulation of the masses, and confidently leading the German people towards their glorious destiny as 'master race'. Hitler appeared personally to embody the slogan 'Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!' ('One People, one Empire, one Leader!').

The orchestration of ceremonial displays of power – serrated ranks of the SA or the SS, the Hitler Youth organisation (*Hitlerjugend*) or the League of German Maidens (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*) – added to the image of a well-organised, stream-lined state with Hitler at its head. So too, in a very different way, did state-sponsored terror and violence right from the outset in 1933: the rounding-up and incarceration of Communists and socialists, the exclusion of Jews and political opponents from professional occupations, the enforced sterilisation of those thought to carry hereditary diseases, the suppression of independent organisations and civil rights. It is little wonder that an image of Hitler as 'strong dictator' was readily associated with a murderous regime in which, in the six peace-time years alone, as many as 12 000 Germans were convicted of high treason.

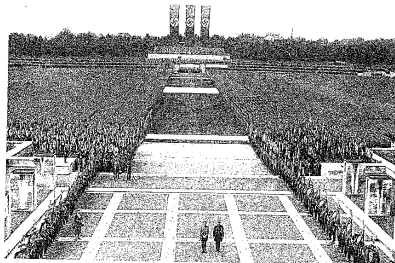
*Hitler's lifestyle and the practice of government*

Yet on closer inspection, the realities appear more complex. Hitler had little interest in or patience with the details of policy or the bureaucratic processes of modern government. Once the Enabling Act was passed in March 1933, there was no longer any need either for parliamentary support in the Reichstag or a presidential decree for any legislation to be approved. While Hindenburg was still alive, Hitler made some effort to go through the motions of 'normal government', he held as many as 72 formal meetings of the cabinet in 1933. But by 1937 the number of cabinet meet-

Movement. Emphasised the dynamism of the Nazi party in contrast to other parties at this time. Hitler's image was projected as that of the saviour who would lift Germany out of the abyss.

Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003): Film-maker, photographer and actress. Best known for her propaganda films.

Nuremberg Nazi Party rally, September 1936. These formal displays of power created an image of a powerful and well-ordered state with Hitler at its head.



**Hermann Goering (1893–1946)**

At ease in high society and fond of a luxurious life-style people with traditional hunting pastimes and costumes to match, Goering – who had joined the NSDAP and the SA in 1922, and had taken part in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 – facilitated Hitler's acceptance by conservative and business elites in the later Weimar years. Alongside other offices, Goering became Prussian Minister of the Interior following Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933. He collaborated with Himmler and Heydrich in setting up the network of concentration camps and terror in the Third Reich, playing a key role in exploiting the Reichstag Fire of February 1933, the Night of the Long Knives against the SA in June 1934, and the maltreatment of Jews after Kristallnacht in 1938. In 1936, Goering was appointed to take charge of the Four Year Plan Office preparing Germany for war within four years. His increasingly powerful industrial empire brought him personally large profits. In control of the Luftwaffe (Air Force) during the Second World War, Goering mismanaged the attack on Britain, and began to lose Hitler's favour. Sentenced to death by hanging following the Nuremberg trial, Goering managed to commit suicide by taking a poison capsule.

ings had declined to a mere six; in 1938 there was only one such meeting, which turned out to be his last. Hitler's own lifestyle added to the problems of efficient government: he tended to rise late, and enjoyed watching films, talking with friends, indulging in architectural planning and dreaming. He disliked the German capital, Berlin, and preferred to spend as much time as possible in his Bavarian mountain retreat at Obersalzberg, with its spectacular views across the breathtaking Alpine landscape above Berchtesgaden. Thus the routine business of government was left largely to others, often having to operate without much clear guidance on specifics.

Hitler had a contempt for the life of minor officials and civil servants (harking right back to his contempt for his own father's aspirations for him which he had rejected as a young man); he had a low regard for the law, and preferred giving oral rather than written commands. He tended to side with the last person he had spoken to, and also greatly disliked taking decisions on particular policy issues. These habits often gave rise to considerable confusion, and well-founded debates between those charged with the formation and execution of contradictory policies. Hitler then often left his underlings to fight it out among themselves, taking the view – perhaps rooted in social Darwinist notions of the 'survival of the fittest' – that the strongest would inevitably win. Routine access to Hitler became ever less possible, such that eventually whoever was fortunate enough to be able to 'catch his ear' – particularly if Hitler happened to be in a good mood at the time – and could gain Hitler's personal approval for a particular proposal was able to come out claiming it was 'Hitler's will'.

*Interpretations of Hitler's leadership style in political context*

How then is one to interpret this leadership style? Those who argue that Hitler was a strong dictator suggest that rivalry among underlings is evidence of a policy of divide and rule. People were ultimately dependent on Hitler's personal approval for realising their plans, they had no independent institutional basis for authority, other than Hitler's will. Thus Hitler's intentions alone were decisive. When he did not get what he wanted from one quarter, he would simply instruct someone else to carry out his orders.

Those who see Hitler rather as a weak dictator have a different interpretation. They agree that, if Hitler failed to get his way by one institutional channel, he had a tendency simply to set up a rival organisation, or appoint an ad hoc plenipotentiary to deal with that particular area of policy. But in Hans Mommsen's view, this meant that Hitler was ultimately a weak dictator, at the mercy of those below. Some individuals, such as Hermann Goering or Heinrich Himmler, were able to build up immense personal power bases; others argued their corners far less successfully, but were engaged in a constant struggle for position. Hitler's hesitance in reaching decisions, and his tendency to wait to side with whoever was emerging as a winner, meant – on this view – that he was often more of a final rubber stamp than the person in the driving seat.

Recently historians have sought to combine a renewed focus on Hitler's own power with a recognition of the complexity of power structures which the structuralists rightly identified. Ian Kershaw, in a series of seminal works, suggests that Hitler's position as 'charismatic leader' was, paradoxically, in large part a product of the increasingly chaotic structures of power. With the competing, overlapping centres of power there was simply no other ultimate source of decision-making, and the 'Hitler order' was the only final authority that could be cited. Moreover, Hitler had a constant eye on his popularity with the population at large, and thus consciously sought to distance himself from day-to-day decision-making processes. At the

same time, the notion of 'working towards the Führer' (a phrase taken from a contemporary source) encapsulates the way in which Hitler's undoubted personal power and extraordinary hold over his close followers stimulated actions 'from below' that did not always require specific orders from above. Thus, in Kershaw's interpretation, Hitler's own prejudices set the tone and ultimate aims of the regime, while underlings competed for his favour. It is possible in this way to synthesise the notion of the polycratic state, riddled by internal rivalries, with that of Hitler's supreme role at the centre, shaping the parameters and ultimate goals of the regime.

#### How far can policies be explained in terms of Hitler's 'programme'?

It is easy enough to write the history of the Third Reich in terms of Hitler's 'world view', expounded in virulent form as early as *Mein Kampf*. On the intentionalist view, once in power Hitler's prejudices could simply be translated into hideous reality once conditions were right. Yet on closer inspection this seems an oversimplification. While Hitler's ultimate goals mattered more than some of the more radical proponents of the 'weak dictator' thesis might like to concede, Hitler's own intentions are merely a necessary but not a sufficient explanation of the way in which policies were actually formed and effected in the Third Reich.

Policy outcomes were always a result of a combination of different pressures and forces, the balance of which constantly changed. Pressures on Hitler from party radicals and activists; restraints proposed by party moderates, conservative nationalists, or civil servants; the aspirations of different economic interest groups or sections of the Army; wider public opinion, including in the peace-time years reactions abroad as well as at home – all these played a significant role in processes of policy formation. Such pressures might affect timing or details of policy – but not, where it mattered to Hitler, the overall direction and ultimate goals.

When the areas which were closest to Hitler's heart – expansionist foreign policy goals and aggressive racial policies – are examined, it is clear that Hitler never compromised in the pursuit of his ultimate aims, however much he trimmed the details of the route according to circumstances and constraints. Yet at the same time, the circles of those implicated in the realisation of these policies must be spread far wider than the intentionalist case would suggest.

#### Conclusion: a strong leader in a polycratic state?

The realities are more complex than either side of what has been a very polarised debate would suggest. But it now seems possible in some respects to combine aspects of both sides of the earlier debates. It seems ever more clear that the structure of the Nazi state was indeed polycratic, with many competing centres of power, and not the streamlined dictatorship suggested by the notion of totalitarianism. Yet this very complexity was in part a product of the way in which Hitler operated – appointing people to new positions, creating ad hoc posts with ill-defined powers, constantly changing the structure of the system. And, almost paradoxically, Hitler's own role as a 'charismatic leader' was itself in part a product of this increasingly chaotic power structure, since his 'will' alone remained the only decisive factor. Moreover, his undoubted wider popularity remained a key integrative factor for the regime.

Through this complex structure Hitler was in large measure able to have his own way as far as his ultimate 'negative' goals with respect to racial and foreign policy were concerned – though a devastating war of total destruction and absolute defeat hardly corresponded to Hitler's dreams of a Thousand-year Reich. To explain how such a situation devel-

oped thus implicates far wider circles, not only in the Nazi party (as in the 'Hitler and his henchmen' focus) but also in the civil service, the Army, and among the economic elites; in other words, among those who not merely helped Hitler into power in 1933 but who also thought that they could continue to negotiate compromises with Nazism in the pursuit of their own interests.

## 6.17 What was the impact of the Second World War upon civilian life in Germany?

### How was Germany governed during the war years?

In general, the Second World War served to aggravate the divisions and confusions that existed before 1939 in the government of the Third Reich. One of the most striking features of wartime government was the steady withdrawal of Adolf Hitler, for so long the public inspiration of the Nazi movement, from the public eye. From November 1941 he assumed direct responsibility for all military operations, and was only rarely seen in public after that date. Such important matters as war production and law and order were left in the hands of the various agencies that competed for influence in Nazi Germany.

In particular, the SS under Heinrich Himmler and the Party Chancellery under Martin Bormann extended their influence, at the expense of the traditional ministries of the state. The SS played an increasingly important role in the economic organisation of the state, largely through the creation of an extensive group of companies involved in war production (*Deutsche Wirtschaftsbetriebe*). It also became involved in a complex range of strategic economic activities, including mining, armament manufacture and the production of foodstuffs. In addition, the SS had at its disposal the enormous slave-labour resources of the concentration camps. It has been suggested by Alan Milward, a leading expert on the economic history of the war, that in building this economic 'empire' Himmler envisaged such a degree of control over the German economy as would ultimately undermine conventional German capitalism. At the same time, control over the Gestapo and the security service (SD) gave Himmler an unrivalled degree of influence within German society. The rapid expansion of the *Waffen SS* also extended this influence into the heart of the German army.

Although Martin Bormann could not seriously rival so extensive an 'empire', he had the advantage of working in close proximity to the Führer himself. Between 1943, when he was appointed as Hitler's personal secretary, and 1945, he was able to ensure that the Party Chancellery steadily eliminated the influence of the Reichs Chancellery, the body by which government business had traditionally been forwarded to the head of state. The influence of traditional administrative bodies was steadily eroded. Local administration, for instance, came increasingly under the control of the Party as the powers of the *Gauleiters* were extended. Appointed Reich Defence Commissioners (September 1939), they assumed responsibility for military matters within their *Gau*, and in 1943 were given overall control of all local civil administration. From September 1944, the *Gauleiters* were also responsible for the activities of the *Volkssturm*. Similarly, education, the judiciary and the civil service came under even tighter Party control. Wartime measures provided for the removal of teachers who were considered to be insufficiently loyal to the party (September 1941) and for a purge of leading officials in the Ministry of Justice (April 1942).

*Volkssturm*: A party militia established to form a last line of resistance against invading allied forces.

### How effective was the German economy during the war years?

Traditionally, historians have assumed that in 1939 the Nazi state envisaged a war made up of short, sharp conflicts, interspersed with periods of temporary peace in which the economy could recover and consolidate. Only in 1942, when it became clear that the Reich was locked into a more profound conflict, did this 'Blitzkrieg mentality' give way to a state of 'total war', in which the economic resources of the state were exploited to the full. Such an interpretation was challenged by Richard Overy, in *War and the German Economy: a Reinterpretation* (1982). In his view, Germany's leaders had been anticipating a prolonged state of 'total war' since the mid-1930s, and the German economy had been geared to meet such demands since the establishment of the Four-Year Plan in 1936. The German economy was better prepared for the pressure of prolonged warfare than historians have usually imagined. Nevertheless, the government was taken by surprise by the Franco-British declaration of war in 1939, and became involved in an extensive conflict earlier than expected.

It was for this reason, Richard Overy argues, that the German war economy quickly encountered serious difficulties. Also, its organisation was confused and inefficient. Gordon Craig adds, in *Germany 1866–1945* (1978), that the Nazi government remembered very clearly the collapse of civilian morale in the last years of the First World War, and did not wish to risk a similar collapse by mobilising the economy too rigorously in 1940. Overy's reinterpretation identified a range of problems that included shortage of raw materials, shortage of manpower, and characteristic disputes about the control and the priorities of production. The provision of more workers was one of the major achievements of the German war economy. It was brought about by three distinct strategies.

- One was the comprehensive redeployment of the existing German workforce, which meant that by 1943 61% of all German labour was employed in war production, compared with 21% in 1939.
- The second was an enormous increase in the female workforce, amounting to half the female population by the beginning of 1944.
- Lastly, the Nazi authorities in occupied territories were able to recruit or to conscript enormous numbers of foreign workers (a total of 8 million by 1944) to aid war production in the Reich.

Greater problems existed over the co-ordination of resources and production. These were addressed by Hitler's 'Rationalisation Decree' (December 1941), which sought to streamline war production and to restructure control of the economy. The architects of this restructuring were Fritz Todt, who was appointed Minister for Armaments and Munitions in March 1940, and Albert Speer who succeeded him upon his death in February 1942. His main institution was the Central Planning Board set up in April 1942. Speer's memoirs (*Inside the Third Reich*, 1970) make it clear that, while his personal friendship with Hitler was of great value, and endowed the minister with considerable authority, his efforts were still liable to be resisted at every turn by other vested interests, such as those of the *Gauleiters* or of the SS.

#### How much did Todt and Speer achieve?

It could be argued that Todt and Speer were remarkably successful in maintaining high levels of war production under the most difficult circumstances. The statistics for military production between 1942 and 1944 are impressive, with weapon production trebled despite the fact that the funds allocated to such production only increased by 50%. Even so, statistics suggest that the German economy was under enormous stress from 1943

onwards. In that year allied bombing forced the diversion of two million men and 50,000 pieces of artillery into anti-aircraft service. By the following year, according to Speer himself, aircraft production was 31% below target, and tank production 35% below. In the final year of the war, it has been estimated, absenteeism in German factories ran at a daily average of 25%, due to illness, stress and the dislocation caused by enemy action.

### What was the impact of war upon the civilian population?

The war placed a considerable strain upon the German population from the outset. Strict rationing came into force at the start of the war, and between 1939 and 1941 German workers were considerably less well fed than their British counterparts. Consumption declined by 25%, compared with only 12% in Britain. Research suggests that German civilians derived little benefit from the additional food resources that were made available by German military victories, the vast bulk of them being directed towards military consumption. Other commodities, such as clothing, also became more difficult to obtain as production was geared increasingly towards the requirements of the war effort. As early as 1941, 40% of all textile output and 44% of all manufactured clothing was earmarked for use by the armed forces.

The civilian population within the Reich remained relatively sheltered from enemy action until 1942. In that year, the British and American air forces abandoned their policy of avoiding areas of heavy civilian population. The first of a series of 'thousand bomber raids' was launched against Cologne in May 1942, and in August of the following year another such raid killed 40,000 civilians in Hamburg. From mid-1944, Germany's enemies enjoyed almost total aerial superiority, and the vulnerability of German towns to devastating aerial attack became ever greater. The final official statistics for the damage caused to Germany by aerial bombardment alone are staggering. In the years immediately after the war, the Federal Statistical Office in Wiesbaden established that 593,000 German civilians had been killed by this means, and that 3,370,000 buildings had been destroyed, including 600,000 in Berlin alone.

There is much evidence to suggest that Nazi propaganda had been so effective that public confidence in Hitler's leadership remained high, even when Germany was on the verge of defeat. Historians have agreed no explanation of this, but have drawn attention to a range of factors. Goebbels worked incessantly in the Ministry of Propaganda. He pursued clever tactics in stressing to Germans what the consequences of defeat might be: pillage and rape at the hands of vengeful and barbaric Russians, for instance; or the destruction of the nation's industrial wealth by the terms of the Morgenthau Plan. Public faith in Hitler's personal infallibility also remained high until the very last stages of the war. Albert Speer's anecdote from the last weeks of the war probably captured a mood that was relatively familiar.

'In Westphalia, in March 1945, I stood unrecognised in a farmyard talking to the farmers. The faith in Hitler that had been hammered into their minds all these years was still strong. Hitler could never lose the war, they declared. Even among members of the government I still encountered this naive faith in deliberately withheld secret weapons that at the last moment would annihilate an enemy recklessly advancing into the country.'

**Morgenthau Plan:** A plan devised between 1943 and 1945 by Henry Morgenthau, Secretary to the US Treasury, for the reorganisation of the German economy at the end of the war. His intention was that defeated Germany should be divided once more into a number of minor states, that the industrial bases of these states should be dismantled, and that their economies should be primarily agricultural.

**1. In what different ways did the Nazi Party further extend its influence over German political and economic life in the years 1939–45?**

**2. By what means did the German economy meet the demands of 'total war'?**

**3. How much justification is there for the claim that 'the Nazi government organised its war effort efficiently and met the demands of total war with considerable success'?**

## Source-based questions: Conformity and resistance in Nazi Germany

## SOURCE 1

From Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, published in 1974

The peculiar babble of voices presumably speaking for the German opposition, should make it clear that it was not a bloc. To treat it as if it were a single concept is inaccurate; it was a loose assemblage of many groups objectively and personally antagonistic and united only in antipathy for the regime. Three of these groups emerge with somewhat sharper contours. (1) The Kresau Circle, called after Count Helmuth James von Moltke's Silesian estate. This was chiefly a discussion group of high-minded friends imbued with ideas both of Christianity and socialist reform. (2) Then there was the group of conservative and nationalist notables gathered around Carl Goerdeler, the former mayor of Leipzig, and General Ludwig Beck, the former army chief of staff. These men, not yet understanding the meaning of Hitler's policies, were still claiming a leading role for a Greater Germany within Europe. So strong was their leaning towards an authoritarian state, that they have been called a continuation of the anti-democratic opposition in the Weimar Republic. (3) Finally, there was a group of younger military men such as von Stauffenberg, with no pronounced ideological affiliations, although for the most part they sought ties with the Left.

In terms of background, a strikingly large number of the conspirators belonged to the Old Prussian nobility. There were also members of the clergy, the academic professions, and high-ranking civil servants. On the whole, those oppositionists who were now beginning to urge action were people originally from the conservative or liberal camp, with a sprinkling of Social Democrats. The Left was still suffering from the effects of the persecution, but it too, with characteristic ideological rigidity, feared any alliance with army officers as a 'pact with the devil'. Among the many participants in the opposition there was, significantly, not a single representative of the Weimar Republic; that republic did not survive even in the Resistance. But members of the lower middle class were also conspicuously absent, and also businessmen. The latter remained fixated upon the traditional German alliance between industrial interests and power politics. Business always came to heel when the state whistled.

## SOURCE 2

From T.W. Mason, *Worker Opposition in National Socialist Germany*, published in 1981

I would like to start by drawing a distinction between the political resistance of the working class under National Socialism and that which I want to call Worker opposition. To political resistance belong only the politically conscious actions of members of persecuted organisations, which strove to weaken or overthrow the dictatorship in the name of social democracy, communism or trade unionism. That is to say, political activity which was characterised by a rejection and challenging of National Socialism based on political principle. But this heroic, tragic battle in the underground in no way exhausts the role of the working class in the Third Reich. Alongside the dogged propaganda work of the illegal groups, from 1936 onwards, economic class conflict was revived once more in industry on a broad front. What is more this battle about the fundamental economic interests of the working class does not even seem to have been organised in any way. It expressed itself in spontaneous walkouts, in collective pressure on employers and on National Socialist institutions, in go-slows, staying off work, taking sick leave, etc.

This refusal of the working classes to subordinate itself fully to the National Socialist system of dictatorship can be called opposition: it made use of the contradictions within the capitalist economic order and of the dictatorship, and sharpened these contradictions. This distinction between 'Opposition' and 'Resistance' is based upon the actual historical experiences of the working class, which are of central importance for an analysis of this entire theme, for the factual separation of the illegal resistance groups from their class was a decisive success of the state-political terror in the Third Reich.

## Source-based questions: Conformity and resistance in Nazi Germany

## SOURCE 3

From Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, published in 1993

As institutions the Churches offered something less than fundamental resistance to Nazism. Their considerable efforts and energies in opposing Nazi interference with traditional practices were not matched by equally vigorous denunciation of Nazi inhumanity and barbarism – with the notable exception of [Cardinal] Galen's open attack on the 'euthanasia' programme in August 1941. In defence of humanitarian rights and civil liberties, the response of both churches was muted.

The detestation of Nazism was overwhelming within the Catholic Church and grew more extensive within the Evangelical Church. But defiant opposition in the sphere of the 'Church struggle' was compatible in both major denominations with approval of key areas of the regime's policies, above all where Nazism blended into 'mainstream' national aspirations: support for 'patriotic' foreign policy and war aims; obedience towards state authority (except where it was regarded as contravening divine law); approval for the destruction of 'atheistic' Marxism; and readiness to accept discrimination against Jews. In all of these areas the Churches as institutions felt on uncertain ground – a reflection of the fact that popular backing could not be guaranteed, and that such issues fell outside what was regarded as the legitimate sphere of Church opposition, which was correspondingly limited, fragmented and largely individual.

## SOURCE 4

Statement issued by Catholic Bishops in Bavaria, December 1936

After the deplorable fight carried on by Communists, Free Thinkers and Freemasons against Christianity, we welcomed with gratitude the National Socialist profession of positive Christianity. Our Führer in a most impressive speech acknowledged the importance to the state of the two Christian Churches and promised them his protection.

Notwithstanding the Concordat of July 1933, there has developed an ever-growing struggle against the Papacy. Catholic organisations and societies were promised protection for their continued existence. In reality, their continuation has gradually become impossible. The clergy are regularly insulted in speeches, writings, broadcasts

and cartoons, yet the perpetrators go unpunished. It is not our intention to renounce the present form of government or its policy. The Führer can be certain that we will give all our moral support to his struggle against Bolshevism, but we do ask that our Church is permitted to enjoy her God-given rights and freedoms.

## SOURCE 5

Part of a report secretly compiled by the underground organisation of the SPD, Autumn 1938

Although the anti-Bolshevik agitation is making a deep and powerful impact, the National Socialist mood has not penetrated very deeply. However, Hitler has understood how to appeal to nationalist instincts and emotional needs, which were already there. He stands outside the line of fire and criticism of the Government, whereas Goebbels is almost universally loathed, even among Nazis. The reduction in unemployment, and the drive it shows in its foreign policy are the big points in favour of Hitler's policy. He knows how to handle the popular mood and continually to win over the masses. No previous Reich Chancellor had understood anything of that.

Answer both questions (a) and (b).

(a) Using your own knowledge and the evidence of Sources 1, 3 and 4, what do you consider to have been the main reasons for which German conservatives entered into opposition to the Nazi regime in the period 1933–45?

[10 marks]

(b) Using your own knowledge and the evidence of all five sources, how far do you agree with the judgement that 'Nazism failed to convince many Germans of its ideology, yet was never seriously threatened after 1933 by political or social opposition from within Germany'?

[20 marks]

**Source-based questions: The condition of the workers in the Third Reich**

Study the four sources and then answer ALL of the sub-questions.

(a) Study Source C.

From the Source and your own knowledge, explain the reference to 'the time of inflation'. [20 marks]

(b) Study Sources A and B.

Compare the judgements expressed in these Sources on the social projects launched by the Nazi state. [40 marks]

(c) Study all of the Sources.

Using all of these Sources and your own knowledge, explain how far you agree with the judgement that the German working classes derived no genuine benefits from Nazi rule in Germany between 1933 and 1939. [60 marks]

**SOURCE A**

A Nazi writer explains how the 'Strength Through Joy' movement represents the beginnings of a new society

The comradesly experience of work and the equally comradesly experience of leisure time belong together. In them lies the idea of social life itself. The 'Strength Through Joy' land and sea trips mean far more than social travel in the normal sense: their value lies neither in the type of transport nor in the destination of the journey, but solely in the community experience. It is the great experience of nature which provides the best prerequisite for comradeship, so that one can say that these trips undertaken together represent the beginnings of a transformation of social life. A new type of culture is in the process of being born.

Willi Müller, *Social Life in the New Germany*, published in Berlin in 1938

**SOURCE B**

Opponents of the Nazis argue that their social projects have hidden motives

For a large number of Germans the announcement of the People's Car came as a pleasant surprise. For a long time the Volkswagen was a big talking point among all classes of the population. With the Volkswagen the leadership of the Third Reich has killed several birds with one stone. In the first place, it removes for a period of several years money from the German consumer which he would otherwise spend on goods that cannot be supplied. Secondly, and this is the most important thing, they have achieved a clever

diversionary tactic in the sphere of domestic politics. This car obsession, which has been cleverly induced by the Propaganda Ministry, keeps the masses from becoming preoccupied with a depressing situation.

A report by underground SPD agents from the Rhineland, April 1939

**SOURCE C**

The Deputy Führer explains why German workers should accept wage-restraint

The Führer has repeatedly stated that under the present circumstances wage increases must lead to price increases. This in turn will lead to the endless vicious circle familiar to the German people from the time of inflation. Wage increases, therefore, can only be damaging rather than beneficial to the general public and to the individual, and so must be avoided at all costs. The fact that the economic position of large sections of our people is not what we would want it to be is the fault of the political, economic and trade union leadership of the post-war years. One must not overlook the importance of the fact that the virtual elimination of unemployment at the present time is due solely to the Führer and his movement.

A speech by Rudolf Hess, October 1937

**SOURCE D**

An official Nazi report gives details of working conditions in the revised German economy

The discrepancy between the available labour force and the number of orders has in general led to a considerable increase in the number of hours worked. Fifty-eight to 65 hours a week are no longer exceptional. And some factories continue overtime, even when there is a reduction in orders, because they are afraid of losing workers. The extraordinary demands made upon the German workers, particularly during the period of tension [caused by the crisis over Czechoslovakia], have on the whole been met without any difficulties. Thus the Reich Trustee of Labour for the Saar-Palatinate region reports that it is not uncommon for railway workers, for example, to work up to 16 hours a day.

Report of the Reich Trustee of Labour, Autumn 1938

**Further Reading****Texts designed for AS and A2 Level students**

*The Weimar Republic* by John Hiden (Longman, Seminar Studies series, 1974)  
*The Third Reich* by David Williamson (Longman, Seminar Studies series, 1995)  
*From Bismarck to Hitler: Germany 1890–1933* by Geoff Layton (Hodder & Stoughton, Access to History series, 1996)  
*Germany: The Third Reich, 1933–45* by Geoff Layton (Hodder & Stoughton, Access to History series, 2000)  
*Hitler and Nazism* by Jane Jenkins (Longman, History in Depth series, 1998)

**More advanced reading**

A vast literature exists on the history of Nazi Germany, and new works appear constantly. What follows can only be a selection of lasting, classic works.  
*The German Dictatorship* by K.D. Bracher (Penguin, 1978)  
*The Hitler State* by Martin Broszat (Longman, 1981)  
*A Social History of the Third Reich* by R. Grunberger (Penguin, 1974)  
*The War against the Jews, 1933–45* by Lucy Davidowitz (Pelican, 1975)  
*The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* by Ian Kershaw (Arnold, 1993) and  
*Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870–1945* edited by Gordon Martel (Routledge, 1992) both provide good surveys of recent research and debate on Nazi Germany.  
*Weimar Germany* by Paul Bookbinder (Manchester University Press, 1996)  
*The Rise of the Nazis* by Conan Fischer (Manchester University Press, 1995)  
 Many biographies of Hitler have been published, of which the best are probably:  
*Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* by Alan Bullock (Penguin, 1962)  
*Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* by Alan Bullock (HarperCollins, 1991)  
*Hitler* by Joachim Fest (Penguin, 1973)  
*Hitler* by Ian Kershaw (Arnold, 1991)  
*Hitler: Reichsführer SS* by Peter Padfield (Macmillan, 1990) provides the same service for another prominent member of the Nazi leadership.  
*Nazism 1919–1945: a Documentary Reader* edited by J. Noakes and G. Pridham (Exeter University, 1983) provides an excellent range of contemporary documents on Nazi Germany.