

Veröffentlichungen
des Deutschen Historischen Instituts London

Band 8

Publications
of the German Historical Institute London

Volume 8

Der „Führerstaat“:
Mythos und Realität

Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches

The “Führer State”:
Myth and Reality

Studies on the Structure and Politics of the Third Reich

Herausgegeben von Gerhard Hirschfeld
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mit einer Einleitung von Wolfgang J. Mommsen

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The “Führer State”: myth and reality /
Hrsg. von Gerhard Hirschfeld u. Lothar Kettenacker.
Mit e. Einl. von Wolfgang J. Mommsen. —
1. Aufl. — Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981.
(Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts London; Bd. 8)
ISBN 3-12-915350-0
NE: Hirschfeld, Gerhard [Hrsg.]; PT: Deutsches
Historisches Institut (London);
Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen . . .

1. Auflage 1981
Alle Rechte vorbehalten
Fotochemische Wiedergabe nur mit Genehmigung des Verlages
Verlagsgemeinschaft Ernst Klett — J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung
Nachfolger GmbH Stuttgart
© Ernst Klett, Stuttgart 1981
Printed in Germany
Satz: Alwin Maisch, Gerlingen
Druck: Verlagsdruck Gerlingen

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Tim Mason

Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy
about the Interpretation of National Socialism *

For the past eleven years or so a subterranean debate has been going on among German historians of National Socialism. It has been growing increasingly bitter, and yet it has not really come out into the open, as a debate with a clear literary form. One has to trace its erratic public progress through a series of book reviews and odd passages within articles in journals and anthologies. The debate has reached such a pitch of intensity that some historians are now accusing other historians of "trivializing" National Socialism in their work, of implicitly, unwittingly, furnishing an apologia for the nazi regime¹. This is perhaps the most serious charge which can be made against serious historians of the subject. Since the historians so accused have not the least sympathy for fascist causes, past or present, but are on the contrary progressive in their political positions, the debate is not a political slanging match (although in a strange way it is that too) — it raises in an acute and bitter form fundamental questions about modes of historical understanding and methods of interpretation, and fundamental questions about the moral and political responsibility of the historian.

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to this partly hidden debate; to put forward in the form of theses (rather than of extended and documented historical arguments) a critique of both positions in the controversy; and to suggest that the terms of debate can be and should be transcended. It is not an easy subject to write about. The issues concerned are both abstract and highly emotive, at once theoretical and personal, scholarly in one form and the engine of harsh professional in-fighting in another. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an historical account of the origins and development of the controversy and the purposes which it has served: although it is a somewhat artificial procedure, the positions adopted and the arguments deployed will be abstracted from their context of the pressures within (and acting upon) the German historical profession. This does not make for good intellectual history but it does guide *our* concern away from the purely polemical uses to which the charge

* I am deeply grateful to Jane Caplan and Wolfgang J. Mommsen for their detailed advice and criticism in the revision of this paper.

¹ Thus among others, *Karl Dietrich Bracher*, *Tradition und Revolution im Nationalsozialismus*, in: *Manfred Funke* (ed.), *Hitler, Deutschland und die Mächte*, Düsseldorf 1977, p. 18. The customary German term is „Verharmlosung“.

of "trivializing" National Socialism has been put, and towards the central theoretical conflicts — the argument is worth confronting at its most serious and difficult level, which should not be lost sight of amid the grape-shot and the imprecations. It is still going on and the issues are not closed.

Unlike the debates of the the 1960s on theories of fascism, debates in which marxist concepts were the main focal point, this more recent German debate is not in any straightforward sense political or ideological in character. We have to do with two different schools of *liberal* thought about historical work and about the responsibility of the historian, rather than with a confrontation between two antagonistic views of history which entail or grow out of totally opposed political commitments. And yet the differences are fierce, sometimes also sharp. Although the debate about "trivialization" is different in kind from and owes no overt intellectual or political debts to the preceding controversies over marxist theories, in both cases the role of impersonal forces in historical development, the role of collective processes as opposed to self-conscious decisions in determining political outcomes, is at the centre of the argument. If for no other reason than this, marxists cannot afford to ignore the current dispute among liberal historians.

The historians under attack for offering an unwriting apology for National Socialism have been called functionalists². The label is not strictly appropriate since, unlike the schematic writings of self-consciously functionalist authors, those of Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat do not pass over human agency in politics and do not assign historical and moral responsibility for nazi policies to blind forces and pressures³. However, the label is worth retaining as a rough form of shorthand: it indicates the emphasis which these historians have placed on the machinery of government and its effect upon decision-making in the Third Reich, on the dynamic interaction of the different component institutions of the regime and of the different forms of political power on the structure of nazi politics. The "cumulative radicalization" of nazi policies which ended in total war and genocide, the progressive selection for implementation of only the destructive elements within the regime's *Weltdanschauung*, are portrayed not as the work of a deliberate dictatorial will, but rather as the consequences of the way in which the nazi leadership conceived of political power and of the way in which political power was organised in the Third Reich: the dominant tendency was a striving towards "politics without administration", or towards

² See the contribution of *Klaus Hildebrand* to this column.

³ Contrast on this point the emphasis which *Martin Broszat* does allow to agency in: *Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des Nationalsozialismus*, in: *VjhZG* 18 (1970), pp. 329—65, with the full-blown functionalism of *Ludolf Herbst*, (Die Krise des nationalsozialistischen Regimes am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges und die forcierte Aufüstung, in: *VjhZG* 26 (1978), pp. 347—92) in which the sub-systems have taken over from the people.

the substitution of propaganda for administration⁴. The traits of systematization, regularity, calculability inherent in the construction of a comprehensive administrative base for the dictatorship, were perceived, particularly by Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels, as limiting factors, as constraints, actual or potential, on their power as they understood it. The regime thus characteristically produced both non-policies or evasions which were of great political consequence at a later date (civil service policy; economic policy in the late 1930s; treatment of the Jews 1939—40), or sudden and drastic decisions which had not been prepared in the governmental machine and thus both disrupted existing policies and practices and had quite unforeseen administrative and political results, which latter in turn called for further ill-considered decisions (Reichskristallnacht, occupation policies in Poland). These characteristics of the political system were enhanced in the late 1930s by the consequences of earlier decisions to establish special new agencies and jurisdictions directly responsible to Hitler, whenever political tasks of especial urgency or interest arose (Himmler's career to 1936, DAF, Ribbentrop's Office, Todt: Autobahns, Four Year Plan, Speer: cities). This trend was symptomatic of the disintegration of government into an aggregation of increasingly ill-co-ordinated special task-forces; it also reinforced the fragmentation of decision-making processes, since lines of political responsibility became increasingly blurred as ministerial and party jurisdictions expanded, were fractured, eroded and contested. That ministers learned of important decisions from the newspapers is significant less of their personal (or collective) dispensability, than of fundamental changes which were taking place in the processes and procedures of government and administration. There was less and less co-ordination.

It is argued by those suspected of "trivializing" Nazism that Hitler was the beneficiary rather than the architect of the increased powers which necessarily devolved upon the institution/person of the Führer in step with these changes. Hitler certainly did not encourage his subordinates to collaborate politically with each other (unless it was a case of them resolving a disagreement which he did not wish to adjudicate); he personally had a decisive preference for creating new organs of state to carry out specific projects, for choosing "the right man for the job" and giving him powers to carry it out, regardless; and there is no doubt that he carefully sought out men who were loyal to/dependent upon him for all top positions in the regime. But it does not follow from this that his power grew out of consistent application of the maxim "divide and rule". The relevant political and institutional divisions needed no nurturing — they had been present in the nazi movement before 1933 and had been greatly augmented by the "legal" seizure of power. Within the regime they took the form

⁴ These points have been repeatedly emphasised by *Hans Mommsen*, *National Socialism — Continuity and Change*, in: *Walter Laqueur* (ed.), *Fascism. A Reader's Guide*, London 1976, p. 179—210.

of conflicts for particular powers, in which Hitler was generally recognised as arbiter, a role which he more often found tiresome or awkward than profitable. Göring became convinced that he wished to take as few decisions of this kind as possible.

More important as a source of power was his personal popularity, but while this shielded him against ultimate contradiction by ministers and generals, it was not much help in the practical business of selecting goals, reaching decisions and making policy. It may on the contrary have been a real obstacle to policy making: Hitler's sense of dependence upon his own popularity was so great and the possibility that that popularity might be sharply diminished by specific decisions was so difficult to assess in advance, that the cult of the Führer may well have been conducive to governmental inaction in internal affairs: Hitler was certainly careful not to associate himself with any measure which he thought might be unpopular, and to prevent the enactment of many such proposals, put forward by government agencies.⁵ In this sense Hitler can be said to have been a "weak dictator"⁶; dependence upon his personal popularity for the political integration of German society under the dictatorship circumscribed the regime's freedom of action.

His power to co-ordinate policy in an effective manner was further limited by his characteristic deference to the senior leaders of the Nazi movement. It was not just that he enjoyed their company and trusted their political instincts: he continued to consider himself an agent of the movement, and, in that sense, dependent upon/beholden to it. The dissolution of governmental policy-making procedures marked out a political space around Hitler which the movement's leaders were able individually to occupy — their advice was usually taken seriously, and their requests for the extension of their own particular jurisdictions or for specific policy initiatives were frequently granted, quite regardless of their (usually problematic) relationship to existing institutional arrangements or policies. It is of decisive importance in this connection that the leaders of the movement were in no way united among themselves; they were neither an organised group with regular functions, nor were they pursuing practical common goals. Their policy concerns were limited to their own jurisdictions, and they were frequently in competition with each other. In no sense did they furnish a possible basis for general policy-making. They were agreed only on the desirability of making Germany, in particular the country's government and administration, "more national socialist".

This latter goal was intrinsically and irreducibly vague; in practice it could at best be defined negatively in the persecution of the designated enemies of the

⁵ I have pointed to some of the evidence for this in: *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich*, Opladen 1977, ch. VI.

⁶ Hans Mommsen first used this term in: *MGM 1* (1970), in a review essay which helped to start the present controversy.

cause. More important, the anti-practical nature of the *Weltpanschung* meant that the most radical steps on any issue were always those which could be presented as "most national socialist" — there was no practical yardstick for judgement. Thus *radicalism*, and, in society at large, continual political *mobilität*, became ends in themselves, substitutes of a kind for policy goals. While Hitler was clearly not antipathetic to this trend, he was not, it is argued, its self-conscious or purposeful author. The decay of policy-making institutions combined with the specific contentlessness of the ideology to generate a larger historical process, which, once firmly in motion, was not fully in the control of those who held power — not, because the (dis-)organisation of political power, the manner in which decisions were reached and the normative power of the demand for the most radical solutions all limited the effective range of choice. In the absence of policies, political improvisation, especially in occupied Eastern Europe, rested upon the deployment of extreme physical violence, which handicapped the prosecution of the war. There were no coherent war aims, only a number of mutually contradictory ones (race war/military conquest). There was no way within the regime to resolve the contradictions.

The central point in this "functionalist" position is an insistence upon the fact that the way in which decisions are reached in modern politics is vital to their specific outcomes, and thus vital to the historian for an understanding of their meaning. Only in retrospect and without consideration of decision-making do policies appear to *unfold* over the years with a necessity which is *coherent*. Nor, given the high degree of interdependence between all sectors of public life, can this be a matter of individual decisions to be taken a "case studies" or "models": uncoordinated, unprepared, and arbitrary decisions, decisions taken with regard only to a single project or goal (e.g. the Siegfried Line 1938; the battle fleet 1939) and without reference either to side-effects or to their impact upon other imperative projects, always further fragmented the processes of policy-making, making them cumulatively more arbitrary in their character, more violent and radical in their implementation, more conducive to competitive struggle among the executive organs of the regime. Policy-making on this analysis is simply not comprehensible as the enforcement of consistent acts of dictatorial will — the view that it can be so comprehended is superficial and does not do justice to the available evidence on the conduct of politics in the Third Reich.

"Intentionalism" is the name which has been given by "functionalists" to the position of those historians who regard the consistent dictatorial will as being of the essence of national socialist rule.⁷ The difference between the two schools of thought was first and most clearly exemplified by the controversy over responsibility for the Reichstag Fire, a controversy which has engaged an enormous amount of time and energy, although the significance and con-

⁷ See *Hans Mommsen*, in: *Funkel* (ed.), p. 33.

sequences of the event are not a matter of dispute. In the absence of conclusive evidence about the identity of the arsonist(s), two different hypotheses have been constructed which rest upon and reinforce two fundamentally different interpretations of nazi politics. For intentionalist historians (who on this issue, as on others, are a politically most heterogeneous group) the Reichstag Fire is a part (a very important part) of the deliberate erection of a bestial dictatorship, a necessary preparation for war and for crimes against humanity: it is in alleged conformity with these later acts that the arsonists should have been nazis. There is thus a presumption of intention and responsibility on their part. To deny this is to under-rate the capacity of nazi leaders for pre-meditated evil and to run the risk of making the regime appear less monstrous than it was. If, on the other hand, the opposite inference is drawn from the inconclusive evidence, if there was no nazi arsonist, the fire and its consequences stand in alleged conformity with that swift and ruthless opportunism, with that capacity for violent improvisation and for seizing the main chance regardless of wider consequences, which, it is argued, was the hallmark of all later nazi decision making. And it is these traits, not calculated intention, which offer the key to the cumulative radicalization of the regime towards world war and genocide. This particular controversy is thus about fundamentals.

The "intentionalist" position appears to be less difficult to summarize than that of the "functionalists", if only because these historians have been less explicit about their methods. They are in essence those of classical liberal and conservative historiography. Intentionalist writers are far from rejecting all of modern political science, but in this controversy it is the most basic elements of their historical understanding which are at stake. In their recent essays Karl Dietrich Bracher and Klaus Hildebrand are largely concerned with the intentional actions of Hitler, which, they believe, followed with some degree of necessity from his political ideas.⁸ They formulate the question: why did the Third Reich launch a murderous war of genocide and the destruction of human life on a hitherto unprecedented scale? They come in the end to the conclusion that the leaders of the Third Reich, above all Hitler, did this because they wanted to do it. This can be demonstrated by studying early manifestations of their *Weltanschauung*, which are wholly comparable with the worst atrocities which actually occurred in the years 1938—1945. The goal of the Third Reich was genocidal war, and, in the end, that is what National Socialism was all about. From this it seems to follow that the regime is "unique", "totalitarian", "revolutionary", "utopian", devoted to an utterly novel principle for the public order, scientific racism. The leaders, in particular Hitler, demonstrably wanted

⁸ See Bracher's essay in the volumes edited by Funke and Laqueur, cited above; Hildebrand's essay in Oswald Hanzer (ed.) *Welpolitik II*, Göttingen 1975, and in the volume edited by Funke.

all this, and it is thus, as Hildebrand has recently suggested, wrong to talk of National Socialism; we should talk of Hitlerism.

This approach does not lead its advocates to concentrate narrowly upon nazi race and occupation policies, nor upon Hitler himself. They range widely in their writing, but the above point is their central point of reference. And having identified the problem in this way, intentionalist historians then appear to stand back from their subject and to meditate on the enormity of the regime's crimes, on the enormity of the destruction of human life. This entails trying to *understand* National Socialism, for an intentionalist historian *must* understand (in the German sense of *verstehen*). In this case understanding is possible only through an empathy born of hatred. This probably yields a less sure type of understanding than does an empathy born of respect or admiration, but given the historical personages concerned, there is no choice but to take those risks. They then invite their readers to hate and abhor too. This is where the political and moral responsibility of the historian comes in: it is clearly implied that it is the historian's public duty to write in this way. Faced with genocidal war, historians should not emphasise decision-making procedures, administrative structures or the dynamics of organisational rivalries. These things were at best secondary. To make them a vital part of a general interpretation of National Socialism is to trivialize the subject, to write morally incompetent history. What really matters is the distinctive murderous will of the nazi leadership.

Since the historians who write from this vantage point have, in a tactical sense, taken the offensive in the controversy, their position should be subjected to a critique first. Two general comments seem to be called for, and then a number of specific criticisms will be raised.

First, the intentionalist attack on the incorporation of functionalist types of explanation into our understanding of National Socialism proposes, implicitly but clearly, a retreat by the historical profession to the methods and the stance of Burckhardt. On the evidence above all of his "Reflections on World History" (a book which greatly impressed anxious conservatives when it was re-issued in the late 1930s) Burckhardt saw the historian's task as to investigate, to classify and to order, to hate and to love and to warn — but *not*, except upon the smallest of scales, to explain. This approach had almost no explanatory power at all. The attempt at explanation in any and all of the various different traditions of rationalist historiography seems to be put on one side in intentionalist writing on National Socialism. The view that Hitler's ideas, intentions and actions were decisive, for example, is not presented in these works as an argument, but rather as something which is both a premise and a conclusion. It can perhaps be said that historians have a public duty to attempt to explain, and that informed explanatory reasoning about the past (however indirect or surprising its routes may be) has its own moral purpose and power. This is not generally questioned with respect to other topics in modern history, however much argument there may be about specific types of explanation.

The second methodological point concerns the role of individualism in ethics and the social sciences. Following the arguments of Steven Lukes, methodological individualism simply cannot work as a way of giving a coherent account of social, economic and political change.⁹ Marx, Weber, Durkheim and their successors buried this approach with a variety of different funeral rites, and still it lives on, on borrowed time — a commodity with which historians are especially generous. Unless virtually the whole of modern social science constitutes an epochal blind alley, “Hitler” cannot be a full or adequate explanation, not even of himself. To dismiss methodological individualism is *not*, of course, to abolish the category of individual moral responsibility in private or public life: explanation is one thing, responsibility something else. As Isaiah Berlin points out, even advocates of determinism continue to *behave* as if individuals were fully free and responsible agents: it is a necessary assumption for human interaction.¹⁰ But it is an impossible *basic* assumption for the writing of history, for it would require us to concentrate upon the actions of individual free agents in such a way as to elevate them to the status of prime cause, and to deny that we can in some respects better understand the significance of the actions of people in the past than they themselves could. Such a history would banish all processes of change and constitute the subject as “one damn choice after another”.

Thus to argue that the dynamic of nazi barbarism was primarily institutional and/or economic does not entail any denial that Hitler was a morally responsible political leader who made choices which were inspired by distinctive malevolent intentions — it is only to insist that his will cannot carry the main burden of explanation. And by the same token, to insist in detail upon the unique character of his political will and intentions does not of itself establish an argument about the importance of these attributes in an account of National Socialism. That requires a comprehensive social, economic and institutional history.

In addition to these general observations there are a number of specific objections to the intentionalist position. The first is both technical and obvious, but it must be continually re-stated. The hypothesis that Hitler was the sole author of all the crimes of the Third Reich cannot be proved in the most mundane sense — the source materials are inadequate both in quantity and in quality to prove it. At this elementary level we know less about Hitler's control over German policy, much less about his motives and calculations, than we know about the conduct of most other nineteenth- or twentieth-century political leaders. For this reason alone, an analysis of his choices and of his influence is exceptionally difficult to execute. Caution is always called for, areas of inescapable ignorance emerge everywhere. It is particularly difficult to assess how far subordinates were able to bring influence to bear upon him, how

suggestible or complaisant to insistent requests or proposals he was. The inadequacy of the sources in this sphere (which is of vital concern to an intentionalist interpretation) is a direct consequence of the fragmented and informal character of the decision-making procedures referred to above, as well as of Hitler's personal aversion to the written word: motives were rarely formulated, reasons rarely given, policy options rarely recorded as such, the origins of policy initiatives rarely disclosed. Concerted policy-making would have produced more and better records of calculations and intentions.

Second, even before radically different methods of interpretation are considered, it must be pointed out that, at a very simple level, the sources which we do possess on Hitler's goals and intentions can be read in very different ways, depending upon the different kinds of other historical knowledge which is brought to bear upon these texts. To come to the very few good records of Hitler's policy statements between 1936 and 1941 from the papers of the Ministries of Labour and Economics and of the War Economy Staff is a very different intellectual experience from coming to the same texts from the papers of the Foreign Office or of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial. Ideally one ought to come at the texts from all of these angles, and more, but in the meantime there are legitimate grounds for provisional disagreement about the meaning of the evidence concerning what Hitler thought he was doing. There are different, sometimes contradictory emphases in the evidence. Disagreements on these points will be clarified by further contextual research (why did Hitler make the speech to the press in November 1938? why did his Reichstag speech of 30 January 1939 take that particular form?), rather than by further philosophical research. Meanwhile these sources can be interpreted in different ways, even if one confines oneself to a literal reading.

There is however, third, no reason why sources should be read *solely* in a literal manner. Intentionalist historians tend to do so — they identify the goals and choices of their historical actors by reading the words on the page in the archive and assuming that they can only mean what they appear to mean on a common-sense reading. Intentions are established by taking the relevant sources at their face value (at least wherever a literal reading yields internally coherent sense). This is one of the reasons why Martin Broszat's designation of *Lebensraum* as an ideological metaphor has aroused such indignation¹¹. (Insofar as he is thought to be belittling what happened in German-occupied Russia, he was simply been misunderstood.) He was attempting a partly functional analysis of Hitler's stated intentions, arguing that the full political significance of his words on this subject is of a different order from their literal meaning: that the goal of *Lebensraum* served as a focus for boundless political mobilization. Broszat may or may not have clinched this particular argument, but that type of approach to the interpretation of ideas and sources is not only legitimate;

⁹ Steven Lukes, *Individualism*, Oxford 1973, esp. ch. 17.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London 1969, pp. ix—lviii.

¹¹ Broszat, *Soziale Motivation*, p. 407.

it is essential. Notions of symbolic meaning are commonplace in psychology and literary criticism, and a variety of efforts have been made in order to systematize techniques for eliciting symbolic or hidden meaning — and thus for redefining the ‘intentions’ being studied. While work of this kind is not easy and seldom yields indisputable conclusions, it can, as Klaus Theweleit has shown, greatly enlarge our understanding of motivation and human agency.¹² And it is precisely the exceptional quality of nazi politics, the compulsive re-putiveness and the extremes of violence, which make non-literal interpretations seem so urgently necessary and literal readings so unsatisfactory, simplistic. What *were* Hitler’s intentions in his hate-filled outbursts against ‘the Jews’? Various suggestions have been made of motives and meanings which perhaps lay behind or went beyond the anti-semitic words on the page, but which do comprehend these words.¹³ To deny in principle or to disregard the possibility of analyzing evidence of intentions in a complex manner and of thus identifying intentions which are not explicit in the sources, to say, that is, that Hitler ordered the extermination of the Jews and instigated other racial policies because he wanted to, is a form of intellectual surrender. Intention is an indispensable concept for historians, whether they are determinists or not, but we do not have to take people in the past at their own word concerning their intentions. The realm of their self-consciousness as presented in historical sources is not trivial, but it does not define the limits of our understanding. It is a starting-point; it constitutes a problem, not an answer.

This point can perhaps best be illustrated from that branch of historical enquiry which has hitherto been the pre-eminent stronghold of intentionalist research and writing — the study of foreign policy. Klaus Hildebrand’s book, ‘Vom Reich zum Weltreich’, is in parts sensitive to the effects of pressure-groups on policy-making, but it concentrates very strongly upon the evolution of Hitler’s intentions and it eschews functional analysis of foreign policy. Hitler is presented as an uneasy amalgam of two character-types: the ruthless, aggressively calculating strategist, and the obsessive doctrinaire ideologue. This dual personality hovers during the decisive stage of nazi foreign policy, 1938—1941, between two quite different paths of conquest. Why? I cannot find in Hildebrand’s work a satisfactory answer to this question. My failure to find explanations may well be due to my own short-comings as a reader, but for the moment the extended re-enactment of Hitler’s restless strategic intentions in these years does not make sense. Alternative goals and tactics crowd in on each other; means and ends change places at bewildering speed; and all changes in

policy can be comprehensively rationalised. In the course of a single day, 21 May 1940, for example, Hitler is recorded as making two completely different statements about fundamental strategic priorities to two different military leaders; the inconsistency is allowed to pass without comment by the historian¹⁴. Elsewhere Hildebrand suggests the possibility of knowing Hitler’s mind almost on a week-to-week basis. There are, it seems, in principle reasons for everything the Führer does or says (or omits to do); reasons which are usually reconstructed in the interrogative mode by an elaborate process of intuitive/empathic speculation. But one is very little the wiser. There are many reasons why Hitler is and is not interested in overseas colonies... The outcome is a detailed picture of confusion.

A literal reading of the sources on Hitler’s strategic intentions leaves several dimensions and questions out of account. It lacks insight into the real anxieties, confusions and uncertainties of Hitler himself. (Would this detract from his responsibility?) By treating every recorded utterance as though it were carved in marble it makes his foreign policy seem more confusing than it would if at least some utterances were read as *evidence of confusion* (and not of intention). A literal reading also lacks insight into Hitler’s habitual, though not universal, deference to the interests and views of his immediate advisers and subordinates while he was talking to them. For this reason alone he was unlikely to hold out the same strategic prospects to both Halder and Raeder in their separate discussions on 21 May 1940. This pervasive and evasive complaisance was, for all that it was non-committal and revokable, an important part of policy-making in the Third Reich. That is, Hitler’s latent, as opposed to manifest, intention in making many pronouncements was probably to avert dissension within the regime, to encourage or mollify his subordinates. Last, an intentionalist diplomatic history skirts around the question of the basic expansionist dynamics of the regime — economic and military dynamics, the dynamics of political mobilization, forces which made it impossible for the Third Reich to stop anywhere short of total defeat. While it is possible to identify the decisions and the reasoning behind them which originally set these dynamics in motion (1933—1936), one must ask whether they did not later emancipate themselves from their creators. If it is true, or even only a useful hypothesis, that the process of nazi territorial expansion created its own momentum, and that this momentum could at best be guided but not held under control by the leadership, then the relative importance of Hitler’s musings on alternative goals, strategies and power constellations is diminished. While it was clearly not a matter of indifference which territory and which people the Third Reich at any one point in time devoured next, the history of the years 1938—1942 strongly suggests that there *had* to be a next victim. Perhaps the ambivalences of Hitler’s foreign policy and strategy in these years, the changes in emphasis and direction, the

¹² Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols., Frankfurt a. M. 1977.

¹³ The suggestions which seem most helpful and most capable of further development detect strong elements of self-hatred in Hitler’s anti-semitism. See *Norman Cohn, Warrant for Genocide*, London 1967, pp. 251—268. The weakness of much other psychological work does *not* invalidate this approach to the texts.

¹⁴ Klaus Hildebrand, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich*, München 1969, p. 643.

promiscuity of aggressive intentions can be seen as a product of, or response to this expansionist imperative. The appearance of control and of historic choice may be in large part appearance, the practised posture of the dictator. This loosely functionalist approach suggests that much of the source material, which in the intentionalist account is presented as reasoning prior to action, is better understood as symptom of the internal and external pressures for further aggression and conquest. If none of the above criticisms have any weight, it is difficult to see how historians of World War II can talk about the causes of developments, as well as about the reasons for policy decisions.

The fourth criticism of intentionalist writing concerns decision-making processes and the power structure. It seems to me simply wrong, mistaken, contrary to the evidence to argue that enquiries in this field shed little light on the great facts about the Third Reich. The methodological principle that it is essential to study policy-making processes in order to understand any specific outcome or decision, has been brilliantly stated and illustrated by Hans Mommsen; and its value has been demonstrated beyond doubt and in a wealth of detail by Wilhelm Deist and Manfred Messerschmidt in their new study of re-armament and foreign policy, a study un-touched by functionalist theory but full of general implications for our understanding of the power structure¹⁵. It is true that there are pitfalls in this type of analysis: in the study of decision-making processes it is possible to get entrapped within the fascination of that subject, and to fail to place the results in a wider context of interpretation; and, more important, if the debate about polycracy is reduced to a discussion of how polycratic or monocratic the Third Reich was, if polycracy is understood as a *static* concept which will help only to produce a cross-section of the complex layer-cake of power structures, then this concept will indeed be of little use to historians. But the work to those attacked for trivializing National Socialism has *not* fallen into these pits. Hans Mommsen has moved the discussion about polycracy into its proper dynamic political context. He has shown, though not yet in an extended historical account, how this discussion illuminates the formulation of policy and the selection of goals in the Third Reich — and not just the regime's secondary goals.

If this point is correct, it must be concluded that the study of institutions and decision-making processes and enquiry into the polycratic nature of national socialist rule form an essential part of a liberal/moral history of the regime and its crimes. They are not in themselves alien considerations or factors, nor are they morally neutral. To introduce them into a moral historical enquiry is simply to insist that the responsibility of political leaders needs to be and can be more widely defined than reference to their policy intentions alone will

allow, defined to include the workings of institutions. From this it follows that the moral responsibility of the historian can be more widely defined too. The monstrous will and administrative dilettantism were, at the very least, necessary to each other. It seems trivial to resist this line of enquiry.

Finally there is one immanent argument against the intentionalist case. Hitler can be demonstrated to have known that a great deal depended for the nazi regime upon his own capacity to exaggerate his personal domination: his capacity to exaggerate it *both* to the elite in the closed meetings where policy was announced or debated, *and* also to his popular audience. Hitler well understood his own function, the role which he *had* to act out as "Leader" of the Third Reich. He was good at the street theatre of dictatorship; it is arguable that he transformed himself into a function, the *function of Führer*. Several aspects of his behaviour in this respect are well documented: his aversion to identifying himself in public with any specific policies (other than the major foreign policy decisions); his reluctance to refuse requests or reject suggestions from the old guard of the party leadership; his calculated use of his own personal popularity in conflicts within the regime; his evasiveness when faced with conflicts which were hard to arbitrate. He always appeared more ruthless, more cold-blooded, more certain than he actually was. This role-playing aspect of Hitler's power, his instrumental attitude to his own person, is not, of course, the whole Hitler-story. But it is a very important part of it. However one may read his intentions, there is no doubt that Hitler was *also* a "good functionalist". And this is, at the level of "Verstehen", an important fact about the personality to whom intentionalist historians would attach such overriding importance: that personality was in large measure a self-consciously constructed role, the nature of which was conditioned by the nature of the regime.

The present weaknesses of the "functionalist" position are not, I believe, those held up for disapprobation by intentionalist critics. They are quite different. The first is a vulnerability rather than a weakness. We do not yet have a full-length historical study along these lines. Aside from Martin Broszat's "Der Saac Hitlers" (which, because it could touch only lightly on foreign and military affairs, does not fully meet the points now raised by Brähler and Hildebrand), the position has been worked out in essays and articles. An unambiguous demonstration of the fruitfulness of the approach will be achieved by a large-scale study. But this is an extremely difficult intellectual undertaking, much more difficult than to give an account of this or that policy in its development and implementation. It requires a sustained analysis of the (shifting) relation of interdependence between the human agents and their power structures, a relation of a peculiarly complex kind. Aside from conceptual precision, aside from source materials the significance of which is often overlooked in conventional studies, this work also needs a language which is capable of conveying clearly the complexity of its findings — it cannot get by with the vocabulary of intention, calculation and consequence, and the mechanistic vocabulary of functionalist

¹⁵ *Wilhelm Deist et al., Ursachen und Voraussetzungen der deutschen Kriegspolitik, vol. 1 of the series: Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, ed. by Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Stuttgart 1979.

sociology is positively unhelpful¹⁶. Thus the promise may take some time to be fulfilled.

Second, and more important, there are ambiguities and difficulties in the formulation of the liberal functionalist position. Hans Mommsen writes, for example, of the dynamic expansive power of the Third Reich:

The root of these forces lay in the movement's own apolitical and millennial dynamics and also in the antagonistic interests among the various groups in the National Socialist leadership.

While this is a suggestive sentence, it is not an analytically clear statement of a hierarchy of determining causes, nor does it specify a non-causal relationship between the two "roots". A passage on the bases of Hitler's position as Führer raises similar difficulties:

Playing off rival power blocks against one another was not so much a matter of securing his own omnipotence, but rather done for the satisfaction of an instinctive need to reward all and any fanatical pursuit of an end, no matter whether institutionally fixed competences were ignored or whether, an advantage having been gained, its bureaucratic safeguards were sacrificed to over-dynamics¹⁷.

There are, so to speak, too many things going on in that sentence for one to be quite sure what importance the author is attributing to the different factors. What was the relationship between the existence of the rival power blocks and Hitler's "instinctive need"? — Were the rival power blocks a condition for the articulation of the instinctive need? Had the need contributed decisively to their creation in the first place? Or can the two in the end not be distinguished in this way? Indistinctness of this kind grow out of real difficulties of historical interpretation, but they also point to a continuing uncertainty about the explanatory power of the approach. If the presentation is not *analytically* clear it tends to become just a description of a particular mode or style of the exercise of dictatorial power.

Third, the so-called "functionalists" have written rather little about the German economy, and have not integrated this theme into their overall schema. Given their concern with the dynamics of dictatorial power and expansion, this is, to say the least, surprising.

As indicated at the start, marxist historians and political theorists seem to have paid little attention to this debate between two schools of liberal historians; they have also written rather little about nazi genocide, the subject which raises the question of agency and cause in its most acute form. There is no compelling reason for this. Marxism offers a dynamic theory of the development of all modern industrial capitalisms, which incorporates, or rests upon, a structural

(some would argue "functional") analysis of these systems. The dynamic element introduces human agency, and human agency is central to Marx's writings:

Men do make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, not under conditions of their own choosing; but rather under circumstances which they find before them, under given and imposed conditions. (18th Brumaire)

This sentence ought to introduce all biographical studies of Hitler! It formally encapsulates intentions and structures, and suggests the necessity of relating the two in historical writing. However, if intentionalist writers all too often ignore or misunderstand the "given and imposed conditions", marxists have paid too little attention to "men do make their own history" when they have been concerned with the ruling class and the holders of power. This deficiency in giving an account of intentions and actions is a weakness in marxist work on fascism; but the weakness is not inherent in the theory as such, for the challenge can be met by further research along the lines of the various non-literal ways of reading sources referred to above¹⁸. It is an urgent task, for studies which exhaust themselves with the conditions which "permitted" certain developments, or made certain policies "possible" or "necessary" fall short of historical explanation; they cut off before reaching those human actions which actually require explanation — mass murder. But it is the stopping short which is mistaken, not the original effort.

What was permitted by conditions, or was possible, must be analysed, and it is here that marxism offers a more comprehensive framework than an approach which concentrates heavily upon political institutions and decision-making processes. We need to understand how it is decided what the available options are, which political leaders can choose among. Which alternative possibilities in the Third Reich were never even entertained as such by the leadership? Which got lost in the lower ranks of the bureaucracy or party and were thus never presented as policy options?¹⁹ These non-decisions are an important part of any system of power. They define the parameters of possible intentions at the top of the system, which are almost always narrow at that level. It is in this analytically difficult area that the economy and the state need to be taken as a whole in the study of the Third Reich, for the dynamic of economic development played a primary role in the filtering out of impossible options, in determining what it was that could be decided in terms of policy.

I cannot develop this argument in detail here, either in the form of a specific historical analysis or in that of a theoretical discussion. A few historiographical remarks must suffice. A marxist approach, which attaches pre-eminent weight to the processes of capital accumulation and class conflict is neither outflanked

¹⁸ See above, p. 31 f.

¹⁹ *Jochim Radkau*, *Entscheidungsprozesse und Entscheidungsdelfizite in der deutschen Außenwirtschaftspolitik 1933—1940*, GG 2 (1976/1), pp. 33—65, makes a first, stimulating but empirically unsatisfactory attempt to ask questions of this kind.

nor contradicted by some of the more important conclusions of liberal functionalist writing. It can on the contrary broaden their scope by identifying background economic determinants and conditions of state action. David Schoenbaum, for example, has developed an influential argument around the contradictions between the provisional achievements of the regime and many of the movement's original declared aims and policies²⁰: in the late 1930s autobahns, Salzgitter, intensive technological innovation, concentration in industry and rapid urbanisation stood as consequences of a programme which had included the corporate state, rural settlement, some degree of de-urbanisation and, at a political level, notions of the liberation of a nationalist citizenry among its serious goals. It must be insisted upon that the points which were not achieved (were filtered out) ran strongly counter to the most elementary processes of capitalist accumulation. And these processes should not be reduced to the formula "requirements of re-armament". In this instance the workings of the economic system can be seen in a broadly determinant role, which can be exemplified in part by the activities of the heads of leading industrial concerns. With respect to the "selection of negative goals", to the emergence of the race war as a dominant part of nazi political practice, it is a question rather of economic conditions and constraints than of determination. The genocidal tendency in the original programme was one of the few which the regime did pursue with extreme logical rigour. It was also probably less disruptive of the capitalist system than, for example, a fully fledged attempt to 'return' to a small-scale artisan/peasant economy would have been. This is *not* to argue that genocide was enacted for that reason, nor to imply that there is little more to be said about it. It is to make a suggestion concerning the background processes of the selection of negative goals, of the practical definition of what was and what was not possible. The mass destruction of life in the extermination camps and in occupied Poland and Russia does not seem to have had really serious negative effects upon the German economy in the short term. Would it all have been different if there had been large numbers of skilled engineering workers and technicians among the Jews of Germany? Questions of this kind are necessary in order to identify limiting conditions as precisely as possible.

At one level the argument concerning nazi foreign policy can be put less tentatively than the above remarks. In anticipating and accounting for the war of expansion in the late 1930s, the explanatory power of pressures which in their origin were economic was apparent to many actors and observers. Thus

²⁰ David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution*, London 1967. In anticipation of the present controversy, this book was immediately attacked in exactly the same way that the work of Mommsen and Broszat is now being attacked. See the superficial, moralizing review by Heinz Lubasz, *New York Review of Books* [vol. XI no. 11] who failed to understand that one can attempt to explain mass murder without actually writing about it at length.

the argument that the decisive dynamic towards expansion was economic does not in the first instance depend upon the imposition of alien analytical categories on a recalcitrant body of evidence, nor in the first instance upon the theoretical construction of connections between "the economy" and "politics". For the years 1938—1939 a very wide variety of different types of source materials discuss explicitly and at length the growing economic crisis in Germany, and many of the authors of these memoranda, books and articles could see the need to speculate then about the relationship between this crisis and the likelihood of war. The view that this was a major urgent problem was common to many top military and political leaders in Germany, to top officials in Britain, to some German industrialists and civil servants, to German exiles and members of the conservative resistance, and to non-German bankers and academics. The nature of the relationship between economic crisis and war is not easy to specify precisely. I do not for the moment see a need to modify my own view that the timing, tactics and hence also the strategic confusion of Hitler's war of expansion were decisively influenced by the politico-economic need for plunder, a need which was enhanced by the very wars necessary to satisfy it²¹. This appears to me to have been the basic logic of Hitler's foreign policy and strategy in the decisive period 1938—41; without a firm conception of it, the institutional dynamics of the regime and the various specific intentions of Hitler remain less than comprehensible. This is, of course, *not* to argue that Hitler was "forced to go to war" in the sense of not wanting to, but rather that the wars which the Third Reich actually fought bore very little relation to the wars which he appears to have wanted to fight: and that this was so, because of domestic pressures and constraints which were economic in origin and also expressed themselves in acute social and political tensions. Human agency is defined or located, not abolished or absolved by the effort to identify the unchosen conditions.

But then the will and the intention still have to be specified. It may be helpful here if we can find ordering concepts for the analysis of National Socialism, which *both* capture objective processes (capital accumulation, institutional darwinism, expansionism) *and* also relate clearly to the self-consciousness of the political actors. One such bridging concept is "struggle", which incorporates notions of both competition and war. Competition and struggle were of the essence of economic and institutional processes, and they furnished one context of social life in general — the individual struggle for advancement and advantage, social mobility. In war too struggle appeared as an inextinguishable process. Struggle was also for the nazi leaders a basic intention, the title of Hitler's book.

²¹ See Mason, *Sozialpolitik*, ch. VI. I understand *Josef Dillinger's* criticism as, rightly, adding a further dimension (the arms race) to this analysis, not as offering a substitute interpretation: *Der Beginn des Krieges 1939*. Hitler, die innere Krise und das Mächtesystem, in: GG 2 (1976/4), pp. 443—470.

Struggle was, in a distinctive and extreme manner, what their politics was all about, struggle against certain enemies but not struggle for any clearly perceived ends. Politics is struggle, as Hitler says in "Mein Kampf". That one remark *does* perhaps have to be taken literally. But from this distance in time it can legitimately be, must be, related back to wider contexts than its author had in mind — to the highly competitive economic, social and institutional order over which he came to preside and which went under his leadership to destruction.

It might be suggested that just beneath the surface the nazi leadership sensed that their particular struggle was a hopeless one. The enemies were too numerous, and, in the case of "the Jews," they were by Hitler's definition too clever and too powerful *ever* to be beaten, even by the Third Reich. The crucial problem for national socialist politics was to destroy as many enemies as possible while going down fighting to the very bitter end. Genocide was the most distinctively nazi, the most terrible part of an over-arching politics of struggle. And these were the politics of a whole capitalist epoch.

This suggests in conclusion the need for a materialist history of Social Darwinism, a history which sees that subject in terms of economic forces and institutional power, in terms of social and economic practice and individual behaviour (intentions), and not just as a peculiar set of ideas which were influential around the turn of the century. It was that too, but it was also capitalist economic competition, economic and territorial competition between states, ethnic, national and cultural conflict, the struggle for eugenic improvement, the struggle on a group and individual basis for material advantage, respectability, virtue and God's grace. Only then in Germany did it become struggle as war and race war. In this broader sense of an interlocking pattern of structures, forces, ideologies and motives Social Darwinism was, of course, not peculiar to Germany. There are British, American and French versions; liberal conservative, fascist and nazi versions. May be there is the framework for an enquiry here which is both structural and dynamic, and within which the specifically distinctive features and force of the national socialist political will can be precisely identified.

The precision of the identification matters. Contrary to the implication in the charge that "functionalists" or marxists trivialize National Socialism, it is logically and morally possible to hold a system responsible for terrible crimes, as well as those persons who exercised power within the system. While systems of domination and exploitation cannot be represented as individual moral actors can, it can be demonstrated that they generate barbarism. The demonstration of exactly how they have done so is often complex, but complex historical arguments are not indifferent to moral issues just because they are complex. If historians do have a public responsibility, if having is part of their method and warning part of their task, it is necessary that they should have precisely.

Zusammenfassung

In letzter Zeit ist die Auseinandersetzung über den Capitalismus durch einen höchst polemisch ausgetragenen Zeichner, dem nicht primär politisch-ideologische Gegensätze Widerprüche hinsichtlich der dem Gegenstand angetragene Methode zugrundeliegen. Doch strebt nicht geringeres auf ethisch-moralische Verantwortung des Historikers, da eine Unterschätzung, wenn nicht sogar Verharmlosung des Nationalismus wirft. Die Kontroverse dreht sich um die Frage, ob dasjenige Bedingungen, d. h. auf Grund sozialer und ökonomischer Untergründe entgegengerichtet, oder ob hierfür die Absichten eines Mannes an der Spitze dieses Systems letztlich ausschlaggebend zeichnen die Vertreter beider Richtungen als *Functionalisten*. Einer Darstellung beider Interpretationsmethoden folgt ein Versuch, der den Versuch unternimmt, mit Hilfe eines unorthodoxen Satzes zu einer überzeugenderen Erklärung des Nationalismus zu gelangen.

Die Analyse der funktionalistischen Methode stützt sich auf die Arbeiten von Hans Mommsen, die davon ausgehen, daß die Nationalisten im Dritten Reich in weit höherem Maße durch die jeweiligen Prozesse als durch die ihnen zugrundeliegenden Motive oder die Absichten der Führer bestimmt wurden. Unter der im Grunde entscheidungswilligen Führung der Nationalisten in einem Zustand fortschreitender Radikalisierung nahmen sie an, immer mehr in den Sog selbstinduzierter Revolutionen zu geraten. Die zunehmende Mobilisierung aller Reserven und die näher definierten Führerrollen orientierte Radikalisierung des Nationalismus, sondern die von den Impulsen eines naiven Progressivismus und im weiteren Verlauf von den Umständen geleitete Entwicklung. Die Intentionalisten betrachten dagegen gerade die Absichten der Nationalisten als entscheidend. Auf die Absichten der Nationalisten in den mörderischsten aller Kriege verweisen die Nationalisten (namentlich Karl Dietrich Bracher und andere) auf die Verantwortung der Nationalisten für die Verbrechen der Nationalisten: weil Hitler es so wollte, weil sich alle Absichten der Nationalisten belegen läßt. Um das nationalsozialistische Verbrechen zu verstehen, ist es unerlässlich, Hitler, seine Weltanschauung und sein Verhalten zu verstehen. Den Nationalismus mit den Verbrechen des 19. Jahrhunderts erklären zu wollen, ist aber nach Ansicht des Verfassers hoffnungslos unterfangen. Indem die Nationalisten danken, Absichten und Taten Hitlers zum Maßstab ihrer