

## **“The Political System of the Third Reich”- by Professor Gerhard Rempel (Professor of History at Western New England College, Springfield, Massachusetts)**

There are as many different interpretations of the political system advanced and practiced by the Nazi Party as there are systems of political theory and views of German culture and history. Over the years the notion has been introduced that Nazism was: a salvage operation of bourgeois capitalism; a victory for conservative, racist and militaristic nationalism; the triumph of amoral, bureaucratic technocracy; a revolution of lower, middle-class resentment and avarice; an unprecedented, collective explosion of the diseased, racist German psyche; an expression of anarchic mass democracy in a postindustrial mass society; a modern experiment in totalitarian rule along with fascism and communism.

I leave it for you to decide which of these interpretations has prevailing merit. I also leave it for you to decide what my interpretation is and how much validity it contains in the light of your own knowledge and understanding. I suspect that one's assessment of the Nazi movement and regime depends on whether one takes a philosophical, historical, social or more traditional political approach to the problem.

### **I. Ministerial Bureaucracy**

The ministerial bureaucracy was considerably increased under Hitler. He followed the basic bureaucratic principle that you never eliminate any position or program but simply add new offices and positions to effect change, which becomes thereby less and less likely. There was a real social antagonism between the academic and non-academic sections of the ministerial bureaucracy under Hitler as well as under the Weimar Republic. The upper civil servants regarded the state as a business undertaking, to be run efficiently and expeditiously. Success was of greater value than right or social justice. Efficient and incorruptible in the ordinary sense, the ministerial bureaucracy was the center of every anti-democratic movement in Weimar Germany.

In the Nazi ministries most of the same old bureaucrats were still there, since Hitler could not run the state without them and since many of them had helped him come to power. Only one Secretary of State, Ronald Freisler, was new. Meissner, Lammers and others were holdovers from the old regime. Meissner, in fact, had served Ebert, Hindenburg and Hitler with equal neutrality. There was a complete change in the Economics Ministry, in terms of personnel, but this did not really mean a substantial change in policy. A comparison of the the bureaucracy of 1931 and 1936 shows a remarkable continuity: from the academic bureaucracy to the heads of provincial and local finance organizations, to members of provincial and local financial tribunals, to civil and criminal advocates and a large percentage of the domestic administrative staffs. Among the many exceptions to this general rule was the province of Prussia, where considerable personnel changes took place.

The ministerial bureaucracy was a closed caste, particularly in Germany, with its long history of bureaucratic efficiency, dating back to Frederick the Great. This much respected social elite had never shown any peculiar tendency towards social reform. As the socialists would say, it never tried to betray capitalism. It was the most important agency in the formation of policy, especially as it related to economic financial, social and agricultural matters.

However, this bureaucracy was not unlimited. It had to respond to Hitler's wishes, since he had popular support. And it had to compete with three civil bureaucracies, those of the party, the Army and industry. In a sense, you could say that the Nazi system was an intricate maze of competing, multiple bureaucracies, which had a tendency to overlap, conflict and occasionally cancel each other out, thus inhibiting the Führer's wishes and directives. The system was much less totalitarian than has usually been assumed. It was much less a Führer-state than the Nazis said it was and naive observers believed it to be.

### **II. Party Hierarchy**

The ruling group consisted of Hitler, his deputy Bormann, the Reichsleiter, Goering, the Gauleiter, cabinet ministers and the secretaries of state. The influence of the Reichsleiter in most instances was the decisive one.

The 33 district leaders, or Gauleiter, were assuming more and more influence in the late thirties, although during the war their influence declined. During the war men like Himmler, Goebbels and Speer, along with the central bureaucracy, assumed more and more power.

Before the war, a party hierarchy of about 120 men composed the core of the ruling group. The central administration was in Munich, although a special center in Berlin, under Bormann, exercised a decisive lever on party policy. Rudolf Hess lost his power and influence long before the war and the quixotic flight to England. Attached to the Berlin Party Center were a series of offices which maintained close contact with the state ministries. These offices were usually headed by ministerial bureaucrats or other ranking civil servants. For instance, foreign policy matters were handled by Bohle, who was also a secretary of state in the foreign office. Technology was under Fritz Todt, largely responsible for the building of the Autobahn.

The dualism of party and government had a double function: the bureaucracy was not disturbed and remained fully responsible for the administration. The influence of the party was secured through the liaison officers, holding positions in both party and state. The official propaganda made a big deal about these dual positions, calling them a kind of "melting station" (Schmelzstelle) of party and state. This mystical, largely inexplicable conception was to demonstrate the unique quality of the Nazi system, believed to be a mystical yet practical political expression of the dynamic, organic state.

But the party hierarchy really was not very well integrated. Cabals and intrigue inevitably produced in a closed, hierarchic group, clustered around a leader, prevented that kind of homogeneity which is the prerequisite of popular rule. Strangely enough, that infighting and conflict also prevented the formation of a solid, monolithic, totalitarian structure which the Nazis wanted to create.

### **III. Civil Service and Party**

It may come as a surprise to you that teachers in Germany have always been civil servants. Under Hitler the elementary teachers organization was completely under Nazi control. Some 160,000 party political functionaries, in 1936-1937, came from the teaching profession, mostly those engaged in elementary education. This meant that some 22% of 700,000 political leaders came from the teaching profession. Their participation in the National Socialist regime demonstrated the complete deterioration of German philosophical idealism, as officially taught. It symbolized a decline of Kant's legal and political philosophy. By banishing the idea of law into the sphere of transcendence, Kant left actual law and actual morals at the mercy of empiricism and the blind forces of tradition.

The elementary teachers were separated from high school teachers, with their university education, by a deep social gulf. Their income was low and their social status close to that of the proletariat. Under the Empire they used Army service as a means of social elevation. But under the pacifist Weimar Republic they were "forced" to join the SS and SA to get some recognition. The pseudo-equality of National Socialism, and its private Army of paramilitary troops, thus provided an outlet for massive resentments accumulated during the Weimar years.

Beside the teachers, the party used three methods of infiltrating the traditional civil service: the revolutionary act of 1933, which expelled non-Aryans and untrustworthy in the service; the systematic indoctrination of the existing personnel; and the party monopolization of new openings. By using these methods effectively the new civil service moved in two directions: social differences were destroyed to some extent and a new elite was gradually formed within the civil service. But it was false democratization, since status and power remained completely unchanged even in the lower ranks of the civil service.

As we have seen, the upper civil service or ministerial bureaucracy, remained largely free from old party members. It related to the Nazi regime via liaison officers or by the assignment of state tasks directly to party officials. A good example of the latter process are the police (under Himmler's SS), the youth (under Schirach's Hitler-Jugend) and propaganda (under Goebbels).

In the middle and lower civil service hierarchies, key positions were held by party men, while the non-party majority was terrorized and indoctrinated through party cells. The submergence of the civil service in the party was in full swing by the beginning of the war, since promotions and new positions were in party control. However, this process was somewhat reversed during the war, when military demands depleted the civil service and allowed the older bureaucrats to reassert their authority.

#### **IV. Army and Party**

The Army alone knew how to keep itself organizationally free from party interference. Its complicity in Hitler's appointment as chancellor gave it greater independence vis-a-vis the party than other institutions. This independence was further enhanced in 1934, when the Army literally forced Hitler to eliminate the SA as a rival military group, in order to buy further Army support. Since Hitler's foreign policy could not possibly be achieved without the support of the old professionals in the Army, he always treated the Army with unusual deference. It is noteworthy that among all the various segments in society only the Army made serious attempts to depose Hitler, particularly in 1938 and 1944.

For that matter, the Army essentially agreed with Hitler that the frontiers of 1914 should be restored and colonies should be re-acquired. Close contacts with industry tended to make the German Army the most powerful arm of imperialist expansion. Thus, despite its organizational independence, the Army kowtowed to Hitler like it never did to the Weimar Republic. But the Army was also out to preserve its existence, its social and political status within society. Only total defeat finally removed the Army as the predominant force in German society. So Hitler, finally, did by accident what the Revolution of 1918 failed to do by intent.

#### **VII. The Führerprinzip or Principle of Leadership**

At the top of the political pyramid stood the living embodiment of Weber's charismatic leadership-Adolf Hitler. He was really more than a classical tyrant or a traditional dictator. The Nazis themselves called their system a Führer-state. The implication of this statement was that the ramshackle structure really would not survive the life of the current leader. He alone gave it life and breath. This is the way it turned out. It is doubtful that the system could have been perpetuated, even if the war had not been lost under a Goering, Goebbels or Himmler. None of them possessed the kind of magnetic appeal that Hitler had.

The essential medium of Hitler's power over audiences-and his own temperament-was speech. Words and facts were only devices for the manipulation of emotions. He hated intellectuals and practitioners of reason and argument, while revealing an instinctive sensitivity to the moods of the crowd. He made an extraordinary impression of force, an immediacy of passion, an intensity of fury, and conveyed menace by the sound of his voice. His was the magnetism of a hypnotist, combined with the role of the visionary and the prophet. He wanted to breed a new biological elite by reducing whole nations to slavery in order to form an empire. Hitler was always close to the irrational. As long as he deliberately exploited the irrational side of human nature, he was brilliantly successful. It was when he began to believe in his own magic, and accepted the myth of himself as true, that his flair faltered. He was essentially a mixture of calculation and fanaticism.

His capacity for self-dramatization revealed itself particularly in the device of always putting himself on the defensive, making himself into a kind of political martyr. Yet at the same time he gave the impression of concentrated will power and superhuman intelligence. He was a consummate actor, a great politician who saw the weaknesses of his opponents. He had a keen sense of opportunity and timing. He knew how to wait for the right moment, as in 1932. Surprise was a favorite gambit of his. Above all, he was the master of mass emotion. No regime in history has ever paid such careful attention to psychological factors in politics. He used a method of intoxication with himself and his audiences. Universal distrust characterized his every move, which was always devoid of any scruples or inhibitions. All was the result of cold calculation. Divide and rule-the dualism of party and state-were all deliberate devices to maintain his power. He particularly distrusted the experts, and acted on the assumption that force and threat of force would solve all problems.

He had a deep craving to dominate and hence a constant need for praise. His cynicism finally stopped with his own person. "I go where Providence dictates with the assurance of a sleepwalker," he said. But repeated success was fatal—he came to believe in his own infallibility. So, failure came from the same gift for self-dramatization that brought earlier success. Hitler was a modern example, perhaps even a modern perversion, of what the Greeks used to call hubris, overweening pride. Among the few things he liked was baroque architecture, which led him to hate all art from the impressionists to modern art.

He knew few pleasures and predicted a vegetarian future. He was only impressed by power. Consequently, he liked the organization of the Roman Catholic Church, but had nothing but contempt for the Protestant clergy. In religion, he was a rationalist and materialist, although he opposed the establishment of pagan rites and made fun of Himmler's silly moves to surround the SS with primitive pagan symbolism. In practice, he was somewhat restrained in his anticlericalism for political reasons and even allowed the formation of a Protestant counter-church, the so-called German Christians. He had a naive 19th century faith in science, but no understanding of the spiritual and profoundly emotional side of human nature. Emotion was only the raw material of power. Perhaps a symptom of his underworld origins, was his persistent distrust of those who came from the bourgeois world.

His whole cast of mind was historical and his sense of mission derived from his sense of history. He was dogmatic and intolerant in his simplistic beliefs. There was an innate vulgarity and coarseness of spirit that constituted the essential Hitler. A crude belief in Darwinism compelled him to interpret struggle as the father of all things. This is the key to his racist mania, since virtue was to be found only in blood and leadership. With this principle in mind, even in Germany, only part of the population could be considered to be purely Aryan. Since race justified everything, it was more important than equality. The superior claims of the racially pure Volk, in Hitler's view, had prevail over personal liberty. Hence, inferior races and ethnic groups were disposable, as so much human waste material.

Hitler saw the state as an instrument of power, in which the qualities to be valued were discipline, unity and sacrifice. His was a plebiscitary and popular dictatorship, a democratic Caesarism. In fact, his state was based on popular support to a degree that few people care to admit, particularly today, when the horrors of the Nazi regime recede into the oblivion of universal historical myopia. The Führerprinzip, the role of the elites, the personality in history, these were the simplistic constants of his political theory. The Kampfzeit, or time of struggle, was a process of natural selection, which created the elite of the party. That party was held in reserve, to safeguard the Volk, if the state should fail. The party was the link between Führer and Volk, an agent for the education of the people in the Nazi Weltanschauung. He had contempt for liberalism but hostility to Marxism, because it was a viable rival. His antisemitism was the one most consistent theme of his career.

There was nothing original in Hitler's political system, or in his basic ideas. There was, however, something quite new in Hitler's literal translation of these ideas into reality, and in his grasp of the means to do so.