

CHAPTER XXIII

The Origins of National Socialism

Among the many misfortunes which befell Germany in 1923, probably the most serious was the first appearance on the national scene of Adolf Hitler. The absurd Munich *Putsch* of November was the prologue to a world drama of frightful and frightening dimensions. Few noticed the portent at the time, but among those few was the aged Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who, speaking from the grave of Richard Wagner, recognized in Hitler the messias for whom he had been longing.

Adolf Hitler was born on April 20, 1889, in the village of Braunau-on-the-Inn on the Bavarian frontier of Austria, where his father, Alois Hitler, was a customs official. All members of the Hitler family, as far back as it can be traced, were peasants working the land of Upper Austria near the border of Bohemia. Alois was the first to improve his social status. As a civil servant of the Austrian Empire, he was entitled to wear a uniform and exert his minor authority. Thus his son was born into that lower middle class of which he was to become the prophet.

Adolf and his father were a bad combination. The father wanted to make a civil servant of his son, but as early as his eleventh year Adolf was determined to become an artist. To his father this meant a loss of his hard-earned social status, a descent into uncharted bohemianism. The problem was solved by the death of Alois in 1903, after which the indulgent Clara Hitler supported her son by her own drudgery and permitted him to continue at school in Linz and even to take art lessons. His aim was to enter the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, to which he applied in 1907. He was refused admission on the grounds that the samples he had supplied were unsatisfactory. Hitler would not believe this; he preferred to think that he was the victim of a conspiracy, that some undefined "they" were against him. Soon afterwards he was also refused at the Technical Building School where he hoped to be trained as an architect.

In 1908 Hitler's mother died, and Adolf found himself without family

or financial security. He made his way back to Vienna where he stayed until 1913 earning a precarious living by painting postcard views of the monuments of the city and also shaping his political opinions. These were the decisive formative years.

Vienna was a cosmopolitan city, inhabited by the numberless ethnic groups that composed the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was also a cauldron of raging political controversy. Socialists, racialists, and nationalists of all hues held constant meetings and published endless pamphlets. It was a tailor-made atmosphere for the young wastrel who liked to wander from meeting to meeting.

People who knew Hitler during his Vienna period tell of his way of life. He was usually desperately poor. When he managed to sell a few pictures, he lived in a furnished room; more often he slept in flophouses maintained by the city or charitable institutions for the down-and-out. His clothes were shabby; he did not always have enough to eat. At times when his income was especially poor he took whatever job offered itself in the construction industry. On at least one occasion he was discharged from a building job because he got in many arguments with the other workmen, who were mostly socialists. He read voraciously but apparently at random in order to confirm his own opinions.

In his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, Hitler maintains that his basic political attitudes were formed in Vienna. He writes lyrically of his pride in being a German; his rabid nationalism was fully developed thus early and correspondingly his loathing for "inferior" races, especially if they were in any position of authority over real Germans. This nationalistic bias led Hitler to scorn Marxism with its international creed. For him all men were not brothers; and of all the peoples to whom Hitler refused to be a brother, he felt most virulently about the Jews. To him Jews were an alien malignant growth sapping the roots of Germanism. One looks in vain for any rational ingredient when Hitler writes of the Jews. It is pure emotion and hatred. The Jews were responsible for everything Hitler disliked in art, politics, social life, etc. A psychologist might say that Hitler made the Jews a scapegoat for his own inadequacies.

Hitler grew to hate the city of Vienna and the Austrian state in general. He was infuriated by what he felt was the undue power given to non-German elements in the society. More and more he longed for a purely German state. Accordingly in 1913 he moved across the border to Munich, with which he fell immediately in love. He led more or less the same sort of life in Munich that he had in Vienna; yet this time he was happier, for he was in a completely German atmosphere.

The account in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (New York, 1940, p. 210) of

his reaction to the outbreak of the war in 1914 is instructive. He writes: "I am not ashamed today to say that overwhelmed by passionate enthusiasm, I had fallen on my knees and thanked Heaven out of my overflowing heart that it had granted me the good fortune of being allowed to live in these times." After this prayer Hitler immediately volunteered for the Bavarian army and started his four years of front-line life.

There is no reason to suppose that Hitler was not a good soldier. He was promoted to corporal and was twice awarded the Iron Cross, though it is not clear what acts of heroism led to such decorations. Usually he served as a messenger at the front line, where he was often exposed to fire. He was wounded twice, once in 1916 in the leg, and later in 1918 when he was caught in a gas attack and temporarily lost his sight. He was sent for treatment to Pasewalk near Stettin, and it was there, blind like Samson, that he heard the dread and shameful news of the armistice. He was ashamed for his nation; he was afraid for himself. The war years had provided Hitler with happiness. For the first time he had enjoyed human companionship; the camaraderie of the trenches was his life. Now that was gone, and he would have to face once again the coldness and brutality of the outside world. In his background Hitler was the symbol of the lower middle class; in his war experience he became the symbol of the Free Corpsman.

Hitler soon recovered his sight and made his way, still in uniform, across Germany to his beloved Munich. However, it was a different Munich now, having been racked by revolution and insecurity. Hitler was in Munich for the Communist revolt of the spring and for the brutal repression which followed it. He saw and heard Communists, socialists, nationalists, Bavarian separatists, all making full use of the newly granted freedoms of speech and press. It would have been impossible for him to find any laboratory richer in political viruses.

In mid-1919 Hitler got a job with the army as a sort of political training official to keep the men away from left-wing infection and to investigate new political groups that were spawning. Here he came in contact with the general in command in Bavaria, Major General Ritter von Epp, later to become Hitler's regent (*Statthalter*) in Bavaria; and with Captain Ernst Röhm, one of the most important figures in the early days of the Nazis. Röhm was a swashbuckling freebooter, happy only when fighting or in the company of fighting men, but nevertheless a person of real administrative and organizational ability. As one of his routine duties, Hitler was told in September 1919 to attend and report on a meeting of a new, small party called the German Workers' party.

German
Workers
Party

This little group descended from a circle organized about a year earlier by Anton Drexler, a toolmaker, who had conceived the idea of founding a rigidly nationalist party but on a principle different from existing nationalist groups, which tended to appeal to the upper and middle classes. He had the insight to realize that nationalism needed mass support, and thus he proposed that his party would appeal to the working classes. This was undoubtedly one of the aspects that appealed to Hitler, who had admired the great mass parties in Austria before the war. Drexler's party had affiliations across the Austrian border, where there was a similar group, to which belongs the credit of adopting the swastika as a symbol. Drexler had very little success at first, even when he merged with another circle led by a journalist named Karl Harrer. In 1919 a few interesting persons joined the group. One was Major Roehm; another was Dietrich Eckart, a journalist and poet of extreme nationalist views; still another was Gottfried Feder, an odd economist, who was in thrall to his hatred of big business and the "slavery of interest" and who wanted a world safe for the proprietor of the corner grocery store.

Hitler, angered at a speech favoring Bavarian separatism, arose at the first meeting he attended and delivered himself on the theme of German unity. The party leaders were impressed and invited Hitler to a meeting of their committee soon afterward. In a short time he became member number seven of the committee of the German Workers' party. This was the germ of the future Nazi party.

Within a few months Hitler discovered two gratifying things about himself. One was that he had competent, if unorthodox, organizational ability; the other, that he was an extraordinarily persuasive public speaker. At first he was nervous about facing an audience, but as his audiences grew, he developed the techniques which made him one of the greatest demagogues in history. Endless repetition, short powerful slogans, no concepts inaccessible to the meanest mentality: these were the keys to his oratorical success. His voice was harsh; his German had a strong Austrian accent; but he managed to exercise an almost hypnotic power over his hearers. Soon Hitler quit his job with the army and devoted himself full time to the party.

In early 1920 the party, soon to be renamed the National Socialist German Workers' party (the German initials N.S.D.A.P. or the slang term Nazi were used in abbreviations), issued its twenty-five point program, which remained official until the end. It was drawn up by the early leaders of the party, and though Hitler occasionally paid lip service to it, he certainly never felt bound to it. The first point reads: "We demand the union of all Germans to form a Great Germany on the

basis of the right of self-determination enjoyed by nations." The treaties of 1919 were to be abolished; Germany was to regain her colonies; no Jew was to be a member of the nation. In economic matters the program bore a strong lower middle class tinge: no unearned incomes, limitation of profits from wholesale operations, land reform, nationalization of all trusts, communalization of big department stores, and no land speculation. The program ends by calling for general progressive reforms in such fields as health and education.

Although the Twenty-Five Points were never officially abandoned, a characteristic of Nazism is its lack of positive program. It is easy to say what Hitler opposed; it is almost impossible to give a neat list of the issues he supported. During the twenties in particular, the movement was destructive rather than constructive. The Nazis were against communism, socialism, democracy, liberalism, the Jews, "plutocracy," the Western powers, the treaties of 1919, etc. Those things were clear, but as far as a positive program was concerned, there was nothing but vague mouthings about racial purity, national regeneration, the leadership principle, etc. Both Nazism and its Italian cousin, Fascism, were essentially opportunistic. The genius of Hitler and Mussolini was their ability to take advantage of a given situation using shopworn slogans of easy application. Their failure lay in their increasing belief that they were invincible and their consequent wild overreaching.

Between 1920 and 1923 Hitler hammered out the main bases that were to characterize the party for its entire existence. Less and less is heard of Drexler, Eckart, and Feder. Hitler quickly assumed complete command. He describes in *Mein Kampf* at great length the effort he devoted to what might seem minutiae in party organization. He was an expert psychologist of the classes he was dealing with, and knew the importance of such details as the party uniform, its flags, and its songs. He was giving to an uprooted people a sense of "belongingness" that had been lost with the old traditional society. The arresting character of the swastika emblem; the memories of the old imperial red, black, and white colors; the simplicity of the brown shirt and arm band: these were appreciated by Hitler who labored over them personally. As early as 1920 Hitler decided that the party must have a uniformed group of strong, devoted young men to protect the meetings from violence. They had another use, which was not kept secret: preventing and breaking up meetings of any opposition groups. This was the kernel from which grew the *Sturm Abteilung* (otherwise known as S.A., the fighting wing or "storm troop"), which was composed of ex-Free Corpsmen, veterans, and hoodlums. It took part in all sorts of demonstrations and made the nights hideous with street fighting and bloodshed.

Another important step forward was taken in late 1920 when Roehm persuaded General Ritter von Epp to raise a collection to enable the new party to buy a moribund Munich newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* ("Racial Observer"). Now the party had an organ, at first weekly but soon afterwards daily, which could spread the word beyond the beer halls in which meetings were held. Eckart became the first editor, but not for long. He was succeeded by Alfred Rosenberg.

Some of the men who later became paladins of Nazi Germany joined Hitler in these early years. The most interesting of them was Hermann Goering, born on January 12, 1893, the son of a German consular official. He became a professional soldier, attended the Lichtefelde military academy, and fought for four years in the war. He entered the new flying corps, and by the end of the war was the leading German war ace in command of the famous Richthofen squadron after Richthofen's death. The armistice took him from the heights to the depths. He left Germany for Sweden, became a commercial pilot, contracted the morphine habit, and married a wealthy Swedish noblewoman. The Goerings returned to Germany and settled near Munich, where Hermann heard of the National Socialist party. He joined it and soon found himself at the head of the S.A. A fat, bluff, flamboyant character with an almost pathological love for uniforms and ostentation, Goering possessed considerable personal charm which disguised a brutal and amoral ruthlessness.

The relationship between Hitler and Rudolf Hess was more personal. Like a number of the important Nazis, Hess was not a native German. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt, son of a German merchant there. He was only twenty when the war broke out; he fought throughout it, first as an infantry man and then as a flyer. After the war he spent a little time in a Free Corps and then attended the University of Munich, where he fell under the spell of the geopolitician, Dr. Karl Haushofer, whose thinking he introduced to Hitler. He was even more captivated by Hitler, joined the party as early as 1920, and was never far from Hitler's side. Hess became Hitler's secretary and in the mid-twenties recorded *Mein Kampf* as the leader dictated it. A colorless personality, Hess was content to remain in Hitler's shadow. As deputy leader of the party, he did much of the dirty work. He was like a puppy dog following his master. It must, therefore, have been a personal, as well as a political, shock to Hitler when Hess made his spectacular flight to Scotland in 1941.

Alfred Rosenberg was an even more pitiable case. Born of German stock in the Baltic provinces of Russia, Rosenberg was trained for architecture at Russian schools. He fled from the Russian Revolution with

a passionate hatred for Bolshevism and also for the Jewish people, whom he equated with the Bolsheviks. He was a natural candidate for the new party and soon rose to a high position, succeeding Eckart as editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter*. He took his ideology seriously, even to the point of recommending a return to the worship of the old Nordic Germanic gods. As party ideologist he penned a long, turgid, racialist book called *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which became after *Mein Kampf* the second Nazi bible, although toward the end of his life Hitler himself admitted that he had never read it through.

With these companions and with this preparation, Hitler marched into the turbulent year 1923, a year which was to have great importance for his thinking and for the future of National Socialism. The impact of the French invasion on the nationalistic circles in which Hitler moved was profound. Hatred mounted daily; this hatred was directed in the first place against France, which was once again demonstrating its anti-German virulence. The action of the Berlin government in sponsoring the campaign of passive resistance made even that government look patriotic to the fire-eaters in Bavaria. There was talk of rallying the nationalistic bands—regular army, irregulars, Free Corps, whoever could be depended on—to form a massive and spontaneous movement to drive out the hated invader. Roehm, who always thought as a soldier, was attracted by this sort of talk and wanted to commit the S.A. Hitler, however, was determinedly against it for reasons which must be understood if his actions during the year are to be comprehensible.

To Hitler the enemy was not France; it was the liberal, democratic, Jewish-controlled, socialist-tinged government in Berlin. His aim was to seize control of the central government. To this end the French invasion was a useful tool, for it had aroused the Germans to an orgy of national emotion. The important thing was to control this emotion and prevent it from rallying behind the current government.

The Bavarian nationalists posed another serious problem for Hitler. Many of them nursed as their hearts' desire the restoration of the Wittelsbach family on its throne in Munich; some of them even wanted Bavaria to separate itself from the rest of Germany and to constitute an independent monarchy, or perhaps one united with little Austria as a strong Catholic south German state. This kind of thinking was anathema to Hitler, who was committed to German nationalism and to no particularism and whose platform called for a strong all-German state including his native Austria. Yet the Bavarians were very important to him. His following and prestige all stemmed from Bavaria; only there would he find support in his efforts to overthrow the regime in Berlin. Thus Hitler had to steer a course not simply between two obstacles but among several.

In January 1923 Hitler planned a mass meeting of five thousand S.A. men in Munich. He immediately ran up against the opposition of General von Lossow, in command of the *Reichswehr* in Bavaria. Lossow was suspicious of the wild-eyed young man whose violent views might lead to serious trouble. At first he banned the meeting but finally relented after he had made sure that the regular army would not hesitate to fire on the Nazis if real difficulties developed. He felt this kind of assurance necessary after the army's performance during the Kapp *Putsch*. At the meeting Hitler reviled not the French but the "November criminals" who had sold Germany into the hands of evil.

Hitler's next major effort occurred in the spring when he decided on an armed mass meeting of storm troopers from all over Bavaria to break up the socialist celebrations of May Day. He gave Lossow very little time to consider the matter, and without receiving the army's permission ordered his men to gather. This time he overextended himself. The S.A. men gathered with arms, some of which had been simply commandeered from an army barracks; Hitler, Goering, and others were waiting on the field. Finally Roehm arrived from headquarters with the news that the meeting had to disband; accompanying him were units of the army to enforce the order. The demonstration was a complete fiasco. Hitler, furious at the behavior of the army, capitulated, and for the next several months retired to obscurity.

By the autumn affairs had changed. In Berlin the Stresemann government succeeded Cuno and passive resistance was ended. Now Hitler could shift his ground and attack the government for being unpatriotic and giving in to France. In Bavaria the relationship with the central government became continually worse. Bavaria was in a state of almost open revolt against Berlin. The local government resigned and placed a high commissioner with dictatorial powers in charge of the *Land*. General von Kahr, the commissioner, was a right-wing, monarchist, particularist Bavarian. In these circumstances Hitler reasoned that he might be able to use Bavarian hatred of Prussia as a lever to get control of the Bavarian government and army and then to march on Berlin to assume control of the whole nation. He was encouraged in this belief by his friend Ludendorff, the national hero, who had stood beside him at a demonstration on the anniversary of the battle of Sedan. As October wore on, things became more tense. The relationship between Berlin and Munich reached the point of open hostility. Furthermore, it looked as if Germany's major problems, the occupation of the Ruhr and the great inflation, were on the way to solution. Time therefore became important to Hitler if he were going to strike while passions were still high. An announcement was made of a major political meeting to be held on

the evening of November 8 at one of Munich's large beer halls, the *Bürgerbräu Keller*. Both Kahr and Lossow were to be there. An attack on this meeting seemed feasible; this was the psychological moment.

After the meeting started and Kahr was speaking, Hitler surrounded the building with several hundred armed storm troopers. He himself rushed into the hall, brandishing a pistol. He jumped onto a table, fired the pistol into the air, and shouted that the "national revolution" had begun. No one was to leave the hall. Hitler declared that the government was in his hands. He shunted Kahr, Lossow, and the head of the police into a side room. Here he informed them that they had no alternative but to join him. They seemed to have made no dependable reply, but Hitler ran back into the meeting room and announced a new government for Germany with himself as dictator, Ludendorff (who had no advance knowledge of the plot) as commander of the armed forces, and Kahr and Lossow in important posts. The unfounded implication, of course, was that Kahr and Lossow agreed to all this. About this time Ludendorff appeared, and the conference in the side room recommenced. Kahr and Lossow appear to have succumbed to Hitler's charm and Ludendorff's majesty. How sincere they were remains still a question. In any case the quartet returned to the meeting apparently in a state of warm amity. It was then that Hitler made his principal tactical error. He was called out of the hall and in his absence most of the audience, including Kahr and Lossow, made its escape. Hitler lost control of his key prisoners.

When Lossow returned from the beer hall, he was greeted by a telegram from his commander, Seeckt, in Berlin, ordering him to put down the revolt immediately and threatening that if Lossow failed, he himself would come to Munich and do the necessary work. Lossow spent the rest of the night assuring himself of the support of his troops and preparing them against any attack that might be made either by Hitler and his storm troopers or by a group under Roehm, which had occupied the local army headquarters.

Hitler realized that he had failed. He was undecided about what to do next and spent the night in the beer hall with Ludendorff discussing possibilities of retreat. Ludendorff, conscious of his own position, insisted that no one would fire on him and advised a march across the river into the center of Munich to capture Lossow's headquarters. Hitler agreed to adopt this plan.

The next morning the Nazis and their allies, now numbering well over a thousand, forced the bridge over the Isar and advanced into Munich flying the swastika banner and singing nationalistic songs. They turned into the narrow Residenzstrasse which, at the Feldherrnhalle, a mili-

tary memorial, opens into the wide Odeonsplatz. At this easily defensible spot, the police were waiting. Shots rang out. No one fired at Ludendorff, who simply kept walking straight ahead and presumably went home to breakfast. Sixteen Nazis were killed. Goering was badly wounded in the leg but managed to escape across the border into Austria. Hitler fell or was pushed to the ground, was spirited away in an automobile, hid for two days at the home of friends, but was found and put into prison. The *Putsch* was a miserable failure.

It would be reasonable to imagine that after such a disastrous fiasco the career of Adolf Hitler would have been at an end. The most astonishing aspect of the story is the manner in which Hitler turned failure into success. In fact, the beer hall *Putsch* taught him lessons which he never forgot and which he put to use. One is reminded of the lessons learned by Peter the Great from his defeat at Narva.

Ludendorff, Hitler, and eight others were accused of high treason at a trial that lasted almost a month in February and March 1924. The trial was attended by reporters, both German and foreign. For the first time Hitler had a national audience and a rent-free rostrum from which he could use his remarkable persuasive gifts at such length as he chose. He made full use of the opportunity and became for the first time a national figure. He openly attacked the revolution of 1918 and declared that anyone who fought that aberration was not a traitor but a hero. It was a very shrewd performance. In the end Ludendorff was acquitted, but several of the rest were convicted, Hitler to a term of five years in prison. However, he served a total of only thirteen months including the period of detention before the trial. Weimar Germany was not severe toward its enemies on the right.

Hitler spent his months in prison to good purpose. He devoted much of the time to dictating *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"). He also spent time digesting the lessons of the past few years. He realized several important facts. In the first place, there was no chance to control Germany with only Bavaria as a stronghold; it was imperative to build the shattered party throughout the nation. Secondly, the possibility of assuming power by means of force simply did not exist, particularly in view of the attitude of reserve taken by Seeckt, who refused to permit the army to get involved in domestic politics. The conclusion to these meditations was that when the party started to reorganize itself, it should do so by legal means. The revolution of which Hitler dreamed would take place only after full control of the government had been obtained peacefully. The Nazis should continue to preach their doctrine in season and out of season. They should try to enlarge their following to the highest possible number. They should take part in all elections, trying to achieve

control at municipal, local, provincial, and national levels. The lawless freebooter of the period of struggle now earned the nickname Adolphe Légalité. He had not changed his principles but only his tactics. He was going to have trouble converting his lieutenants to his new policy, but in the end he was going to be able to boast of the accuracy of his analysis.