

THE PROBLEM WITH HITLER. THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS

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Resumen: We know so much about Adolf Hitler. We probably have more information—facts, details, and minutiae—about this man’s life than any other major figure of modern times. Nonetheless, we still feel that we do not know the man. His life is one of the greatest mysteries in human history. Why is it that Hitler, about whom more facts and details are known than perhaps any other figure in modern history (perhaps in *all* history), remains such a mystery? Hitler frustrated his opponents, amazed neutral observers, and delighted his supporters by pulling off the seemingly “impossible”. He never would have made it into power except by accomplishing these five “impossibilities”; and it was this, more than anything else, that bound his supporters to him, gave him an aura of exceptionality, and catapulted this otherwise ugly little man into power. This article will illustrate that five “impossibilities” and their influence on Hitler’s personality: The Early Years: 1919-1923; The Putsch Trial; The Refounding of the Party; The Political Earthquake of 1930 and his ascense to the power.

Palabras Clave: Germany, historiography, Hitler, nazism, Putsch.

We know so much about Adolf Hitler. We certainly know who he was: the mad German dictator with the ridiculous Charlie Chaplin moustache who founded the Nazi Party, took power in Germany in 1933, imposed a terrible tyranny, persecuted the Jews, started the Second World War, and presided over the Holocaust. We know that he was a tyrant condemned at Nuremberg as one of the worst criminals in history, and a terrible conqueror in the same category as Attila the Hun, Ghenghiz Khan, and Tamurlane. We also know much about his personal life, far more

than is known about most other lives. We know, for example, his eating habits, and just about every illness and every medication he ever took. We know he was psychotic, sociopathic, paranoid, a bit schizophrenic, definitely a manic-depressive, who often talked of suicide—and eventually died with a pistol in his mouth and a cyanide capsule clenched between his teeth. We know, too, about the women with whom he had affairs; we suspect that he was homosexually inclined, and perhaps even active. We even know how he felt about his dogs. We know that he considered himself an artist—we have many of his drawings and paintings—and that he frequently spoke about his idea of art. We know that he had an astonishing gift for oratory, and we have copies of just about every speech he ever made. We have his own writings—the two books he published, the one he never published, and just about all of his correspondence—from the earliest postcards he wrote from Vienna, to his last will and testament. We know what he talked about when he relaxed in the bunker; his evening conversations over a period of years were recorded verbatim. We know that he revealed himself, his goals, and his intentions in speeches, writings, and conversations, more accurately than perhaps, any other world leader in history. We have volumes of memoirs and reminiscences about him, from the earliest friend of his youth, to those who knew him in the First World War, to the multitudes of people who followed, opposed, or simply watched him during his rise to power, as well as those who observed him at the height of his power and then under the stresses of war and defeat. We probably have more information—facts, details, and minutiae—about this man’s life than any other major figure of modern times.

Nonetheless, we still feel that we do not know the man. His life is one of the greatest mysteries in human history. To his biographers, he is unlike any man who ever lived. His most respected biographer, Joachim Fest, calls him an “unperson”¹, and writes that “History knows no phenomenon like him”². His most recent scholarly biographer borrows Winston Churchill’s phrase about the Soviet Union to describe him: “He has proved,” writes Ian Kershaw, “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”³. Ron Rosenbaum, an American journalist who set out to investigate the story of the historians’ bafflement at the mystery of Hitler, concludes that, despite all the efforts of a multitude of historians over the half century since Hitler’s death, “He remains a figure that in some profound ways *nobody knows*”⁴. In a way unlike that of any other historical personage, writes Rosenbaum, “Hitler has somehow escaped *explanation*”⁵.

Why is it that Hitler, about whom more facts and details are known than perhaps any other figure in modern history (perhaps in *all* history), remains such a mystery?

The answer is simple: no one can figure out *how he did it?* And this *how-did-he-do-it?* question is quite specific. It refers to five “accomplishments” on his way to power that apparently could not, and certainly should not, have happened—but nevertheless did. Time after time, Hitler frustrated his opponents, amazed neutral observers, and delighted his supporters by pulling off the seemingly “impossible”. He never would have made it into power except by accomplishing these five “impossibilities”; and it was this, more than anything else, that bound his supporters to him, gave him an aura of exceptionality, and catapulted this otherwise ugly little man into power.

After he assumed power, he worked many “miracles,” too. In only a few months, he abolished all other parties, and took total power. He worked an “economic miracle” putting Germans back to work; began rearming; spat in the face of the League of Nations, built roads that would have impressed Roman Emperors; and instilled in his people a confidence that they had not felt for decades. Yet each of these was not really a surprise. They stemmed from the movement he had created on his way to power. Sebastian Haffner describes it:

“The NSDAP of the late twenties was wholly and entirely Hitler’s creation; as an organization it was already superior to any other party even before, in the early thirties, it began to rally the mass vote behind it. It far outstripped the famous old party organization of the Social Democratic Party of Germany; even more than that party during the Imperial period, the NSDAP was already a state within a state, an alternative state on a small scale. And in contrast to the Social Democratic Party, which had become ponderous and self-sufficient, Hitler’s NSDAP possessed an uncanny dynamism from the start”⁶.

Haffner calls this a “masterly psychological achievement”⁷. Let us now briefly review Hitler’s five major, still unexplained, “accomplishments” on his way to power that astonished observers, amazed his supporters, and caused his opponents to constantly complain that they had “underestimated” him.

1. HITLER’S FIVE IMPOSSIBLE “ACCOMPLISHMENTS”

1.1. The Early Years: 1919-1923

By everything known about Adolf Hitler up to the time he entered politics at the age of thirty in 1919, he was the most improbable would-be politician imaginable. No reasonable person would have expected this high school dropout, this vagabond from Vienna, this dutiful soldier who through four years of war showed no sign of leadership capacity, this immigrant who was unqualified to hold office or even vote, to ever become a major force in German politics.

When he began, there were more than fifty political parties formed in Munich alone, and 178 throughout the rest of Germany, containing hundreds, if not thousands, of beer hall orators and politicians, many of whom had a much better family background and education, and much better political experience, contacts, and resources. There were also many excellent orators among these. Even within his own party, Hermann Esser was initially considered a better orator than Hitler. Hitler was, indeed, but a very small fish in a sea of sharks.

Yet, Hitler’s fledging NSDAP “possessed an uncanny dynamism from the start”⁸. Within a few years, this vagabond took a tiny party that was no more than a “*Stammtisch*,” imposed his iron will upon it, and convinced its members

that he was the future “savior” of Germany. He then turned it in less than four years—to the astonishment of everyone—into the most powerful political movement in Bavaria, securing the leadership of all the political forces of the Right. Historians recount the facts that led to this, but they have so far not been able to explain it. They have not been able to explain convincingly, for example, what there was about this man that enabled him to do it; what he had that the others did not; and what distinguished him from all the other politicians and beer hall orators.

In prospect it seemed, and retrospect it still seems, that what Hitler “achieved” in those first four years was impossible. Nevertheless, almost all contemporaries—except Hitler’s rabid followers—have been content to describe it as a “fluke”. Hitler, they say, was nothing more than a piece of flotsam and jetsam tossed up by the turbulence of the times. His rabid followers, of course, described it as a “miracle”. But describing something as a “fluke”, a “product of the times”, or a “miracle” does not constitute explanation.

Nobody has explained what this ne’er-do-well had that enabled him to perceive the possibilities of the situation better than all the other politicians of the time. No one has explained what enabled him, and him alone, to exploit these possibilities. Nor has anyone explained what he had that attracted thousands of dedicated supporters to choose him as their leader over hundreds of rivals, and what there was about him that convinced them that he was *Der Führer* sent by Providence to rescue Germany from its travails.

His enemies and even neutral observers said that his appeal was “irrational”, which was merely another way of saying that they could not explain it. Thus it appeared to be “impossible”. But there he was, commandeering trains, marching into Coburg, confounding the authorities, and becoming a legend right before their astonished eyes. Hitler’s success in building up a dynamic political force out of almost nothing at all upon his initial entry into politics is the first unexplained mystery.

1. 2. The Putsch Trial

Then, in November 1923, came the abortive Putsch. The attempt to take over the government in a beer hall appeared so ridiculous, and the

results so disastrous, that his enemies had a field day ridiculing it. Hitler himself was so despondent that he stopped eating and threatened to kill himself. The party that he had built up was declared illegal, its assets seized, and most of its leaders imprisoned or in exile. It seemed to be the end.

But then Hitler did the impossible again. He took his trial, which should have been a “set-piece” conviction after an open and shut case, and turned it into a public relations victory right in front of the eyes of his stupefied prosecutors and the world press. Once again, no one expected it and no one knew quite how he did it. The idea that there could be a method to his madness did not occur to many and, in any event, no method was discernible.

Contemporary observers and subsequent historians were content to treat it as just another “fluke”—explainable, if at all, only by the “confusion of the times.” Besides, Hitler’s public relations *coup* did not seem important; in the end he was convicted of treason and sentenced to imprisonment. It seemed clear that any further political role for this man was unthinkable. In the eyes of all reasonable observers, including the most experienced politicians in Germany, Hitler was washed up, through, finished, a spent force who could not possibly arise again to play any significant role in politics. While in prison, he allowed the remaining followers of his now illegal movement to fall into disarray, bicker among themselves, join other parties, follow other leaders, and scatter. When the time came for his parole, his opponents—who had refused to join the Putsch; who had, indeed, crushed it; and who were personally familiar with his lies and gutter politics—therefore granted it, in the firm belief that he could pose no future threat. That they still did not see that this man was capable of accomplishing the impossible and rising even from the ashes of defeat is a mystery to this day.

What is perhaps even more remarkable during this period, however, is that, while Hitler was in prison, no comparable leader stepped forward to take this ugly little man’s place. This is all the more remarkable because, though his party was banned, the movement it championed grew—receiving more than a million votes while Hitler was in prison. Nonetheless, whatever he had seems to have been irreplaceable. Though he sat in prison, his stature, though now a convicted traitor, grew.

While he was in prison, he could, of course, make no speeches; his powerful oratorical skills, upon which many rely to “explain” Hitler’s success, cannot account for this. Similarly, the same pre-prison speeches, which his opponents described as consisting of little more than crude and ugly tirades of hate against the Jews, should have been easily duplicable by other would-be leaders eager to take his place. Yet, strangely, though Hitler was safely in prison, no one appeared who could duplicate them.

Historians and biographers have looked everywhere but at Hitler to try to explain this phenomenon. Many contemporaries believed, and just about all subsequent historians still believe, that “if it had not been Hitler, someone else would have arisen”. But the fact is that when Hitler was out of the way in prison, no one else arose. The mystery is: why did the theory not work while Hitler was in prison? Why did “someone else” *not* “arise”? What was there about Adolf Hitler’s shoes that no one else could fill them?

This comes back to the same essential question: *how did he do it?* In other words, how did he achieve this effect, even after leading his followers into defeat, disaster, humiliation, and imprisonment? What was there about this man that was different? Why did they look to him, even when he was a convicted traitor lying in prison, as their future leader? By everything we know about this man, and by all logic, this could not and should not have happened. It is impossible for us to conceive, even today, fifty years after his death, how this could have happened. This is the second mystery of Hitler’s rise to power that is still unexplained.

1.3. The Refounding of the Party

For a third time, however, he performed the impossible. Within two months of his release, he re-established his party under the same name, gathered up the scattered remnants, and once again imposed his own absolute will upon them. This alone seemed a miracle in light of the destruction into which he had led his Party less than sixteen months earlier. But he pulled it off.

By the end of the 1925, he had one of the largest membership political parties in all Germany, with 27,000 dues-paying members. Within three more years, by the end of 1928, he had 108,000 fanatically committed, hard working, dues-

paying members all over the country⁹. What is especially remarkable about this is that he was under an official ban on public speaking that prevented him from employing his well-known oratory to attract followers until 1927 in Bavaria, and until 1928 throughout most of the rest of Germany¹⁰. During these years, from 1925 to 1927 or 1928, when Hitler could not speak in public almost anywhere in Germany, the road was wide open for any other leader to take his place. Anyone, theoretically, could have founded a party and done what he did. Many tried, but none succeeded. The mystery, therefore, is: what did he have that was so irreplaceable? It certainly cannot have been his oratory, since he was forbidden to speak in public. What else could it have been?

What is equally remarkable is that, among the many outstanding orators in his own Party during this period, such as, for example, Hermann Esser or Gregor Strasser, no one challenged Hitler’s primacy. Rather, they stood in awe of him¹¹. Even one of the greatest propagandists in history, Joseph Göbbels, was converted by Hitler in a single meeting—as though he had just found the greatest product a salesman could ever find. What did they see in him that subsequent historians and biographers cannot see? At this stage, it could not have been effect of his oratory on the masses—he was forbidden to speak in public for over two years after he came out of prison. What, then, was it?

No one expected that, once muzzled, he could rise from the dead. Nonetheless, he accomplished this impossibility even though he and his followers were considered nothing but a collection of misfits, malcontents, and radicals, a group on the extreme fringe of both German society and politics with no apparent possibility of ever becoming part of the mainstream. Nonetheless, between 1925 and 1928, Hitler built up the best-organized, most tightly disciplined, political organization in German history.

This is remarkable enough, but what is even more astonishing is that it was not held together by any programmatic cause, except the advancement of the career of this one man. Throughout all these years, he offered no new programs, no solutions to problems. Indeed, contrary to all the principles of political science, he seems to have been strengthened by the absence of a program. Consider the mystery involved in the following description by one of

the most astute contemporary observers, Konrad Heiden, of the party that Hitler built:

“Every kind of political theory, from the most reactionary monarchism to pure anarchy, from unrestricted individualism to the most impersonal and rigid Socialism, finds representation within the Nazi Party. The Party has a welcome for each and every form of political theory. Each Nazi is left under the illusion that the Party’s only aim is to realize his own pet theory. Hitler makes a single categorical demand of his followers in return for this liberty—unconditional submission to his personal leadership. It thus has become possible for every German—time-server and idealist alike—to see in the Nazi Party *the* Party specially created for his purpose, and in Hitler *the* leader specially summoned to realize his own particular theory. The Nazi Party resembles a vast army of individualists on the march, each of whom is moving towards his own objective”¹².

If one accepts the accuracy of Heiden’s description, then Hitler’s accomplishment in this period is one of the most outstanding political mysteries of the twentieth century. How did Hitler bring about the union in a single organization of the most extreme ideological opposites, in a highly ideological period, and make his followers believe that they could fulfill their widely divergent and contradictory goals through him?

It is sometimes said that he made different promises to different audiences. But this cannot be true, for in this period he made no public speeches; and in any event spent most of his time at Berchtesgaden writing articles that were being published in the *Volkischer Beobachter*, and the second volume of *Mein Kampf*, all of which were available for everyone to read. It is, therefore, still a mystery how he attracted such a following.

Even more mysterious: how did he get such disparate elements to combine with the greatest collection of grumblers, misfits, perverts, starry-eyed idealists, and adventurers the world has ever seen? Still yet more mysterious, why did they all follow *him*, of all people?

Even if Hitler had died in 1929, without ever achieving electoral success, his “achievement” during this period alone would rank as among the strangest political phenomena of the century.

It not only appeared to have been impossible to do at the time, it seems impossible to conceive even now. Yet, the record is there, and no one has yet explained it.

1. 4. The Political Earthquake of 1930

But Hitler did not die in 1929. Instead, he went on to prove that his political organization could not only exist but also produce results, contrary to all logic and expectations. By 1930, the Great Depression had already set in, and millions were unemployed. It was a time of despair for the German people, but a time of hope and opportunity for a multitude of politicians, many of them much more experienced than Hitler, to take advantage of the situation.

In the Reichstag elections of that year, there were twenty-eight parties on the ballot: five “established” parties, and twenty-three “fringe” parties—all of the latter hoping to make great gains because of the failure of the established parties to deal with the nation’s plight. But Hitler pulled off the impossible a fourth time. In the six weeks prior to the election, his little band of fanatics waged the most intensive, best-organized political campaign in German history, holding over 6,000 mass meetings across the Reich. Before the election, no one dreamed that such a blitz campaign was possible. Nor did anyone believe that Hitler would come out to it as *the* major force in German political life. But Hitler was, by this time, used to doing the impossible. On September 15, 1930, the German public woke up to the astonishing news that this extremist, this fringe leader, this freak, this immigrant who was not even qualified to hold office or vote, had emerged as the leader of the *largest mass movement in German history, and the second largest political party in Germany*. Impossible!

And he did this without anything that could be considered a “program”—except for an absolute belief that he was the future “savior” of Germany. Hitler stood by the same Party Program that had been adopted in 1920, refusing to adjust it to new conditions—largely playing down or ignoring what it said. Nevertheless, the leaders of all of the other twenty-two fringe parties, each of whom believed that he had the program to which the voters would turn to rescue Germany in its distress, were left in the dust. Hitler not only stole their thunder, taking away their voters and their hopes, but also cut

heavily into the vote of many of the established parties.

What is even more remarkable about this is that Hitler accomplished this without an economic program. In fact, he boasted during the campaign that he was the only candidate *without* an economic program! How does a candidate in the midst of an economic depression gain votes without offering an economic program? Hitler somehow presented *himself* as stronger and more important than the strongest economic forces of the century. His strategy was to ignore economics and to offer no economic solutions to the problems—and it worked! “The life and career of Hitler,” writes John Lukacs, “are living refutations of the economic interpretation of history—indeed, of the whole notion of Economic Man”¹³. How could one uneducated man explode a theory held by millions, including the majority of scholars and intellectuals on the planet, and rise to power in the face of it? Impossible! It seemed utterly irrational at the time, and it still seems inexplicable today. Once again the question arises: *how did he do it?* No one could explain it then, and no one can explain it now.

What is equally remarkable is that even his own Party disappeared under his aura; the name of the *Nationalsozialistisches Deutsches Arbeiter Partei* did not appear on the ballot. It was replaced by “his” name alone, and simply called “*Die Hitler Bewegung*”. It is impossible to imagine that this ugly little man, by his personality alone—which his biographers describe as “empty,” a “void,” and a “black hole”—could have caused such a political earthquake. But that is what happened. How did this irrational man with so little personality accomplish so many rational impossibilities?

1. 5. He is catapulted into power

But, of course, he had no possibility of ever getting into power. He had “stupidly”—so it was thought—maneuvered himself into an impossible situation: the capitalists thought he was a socialist, and the socialists considered him a tool of the capitalists. His followers fought both the police and the communists for the control of the streets. He was mistrusted as a weird misfit by all the other political parties, and hated by the establishment press. President Hindenburg estimated him as of no more worth than a postal clerk. It was impossible to imagine that this man could ever become chancellor. He

never received more than a third of the total votes. Yet, within twenty-eight months he did the impossible a fifth time. On January 30, 1933, he was sworn in as chancellor.

Of these five mysterious events, only this last one has been satisfactorily explained. In *Hitler’s Thirty Days to Power*, Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., has dug into the tangled facts to reconstruct the secret machinations that led to President Hindenburg’s surprise appointment of Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933¹⁴. The facts are that Hitler was appointed chancellor because he had positioned himself as the leader of the largest mass movement in German history; Hindenburg appointed him chancellor after the secret machinations of his staff and despite many misgivings. Like a detective who followed all the clues, Turner has solved the mystery of how this happened, by revealing the hidden motives and the sequence of events that preceded and led to the “crime”.

But the first four of Hitler’s “accomplishments” remain as surprising, unexplained, and mysterious today as they were when they happened. And it is upon these that the mystery of Hitler rests; for if he had not achieved each of the first four “miracles,” he would never have been in the running for chancellor at all. Everything that we now know Hitler to be, every crime that the world endured because of him, is traceable to these four mysteries.

2. THE DEPTHS OF THE MYSTERY

It is not “politically correct”, nor even considered good taste, to speak of these events as “accomplishments” or “political miracles”. It is not even pleasant to recall them. But it is precisely these events—these seemingly impossible “accomplishments”—that constitute the mystery of Hitler, and make everything else that we know about him seem insufficient or irrelevant, because everything else suggests that this ugly little man could never have done what he did. Fritz Stern well summarizes the mystery of it all: “The facts of the case—chief among them the metamorphosis of the Nobody of Vienna into the Leader of Greater Germany—are so extraordinary that when they are left to ‘tell their own story’ they hardly make any sense at all”¹⁵.

In order to understand the depths of this mystery, let us begin with some contemporary accounts of the surprise and mystery Hitler

generated in his time. We shall turn first to his enemies, for it is a fair assumption that when they express astonishment regarding the accomplishments of Hitler it is sincere. Karl Radek was among the first to voice his amazement at Hitler's surprising emergence in the 1930 election.

"Nothing is more characteristic than to note that neither the bourgeois literature nor the socialist literature has said anything about this party, which ranks second in German politics. It is a party without a history, which has suddenly risen up in the political life of Germany, like an island that emerges in the middle of the ocean through the effect of volcanic forces"¹⁶.

Radek speaks for many who saw Hitler's emergence as mysterious—unanticipated, unexpected, unpredicted, and unannounced. According to the Marxist doctrine of materialism, Hitler's emergence had to be the result of historical conditions; but no one, either among the bourgeois or the socialists, had perceived in advance the forces Hitler had risen upon. Hitler alone had perceived them. But, why did he alone perceive them?

By 1933, Leon Trotsky was suggesting that the secret did not lay in "anonymous" historical forces, but that "The controversy over Hitler's personality becomes the sharper the more the secret of his success is sought in himself"¹⁷. For, writes Trotsky, "another political figure would be difficult to find" who had perceived the available forces more clearly than Hitler. Trotsky saw this as the first mystery: how had everybody "missed" the forces that Hitler saw and mobilized? The second, "sharper," mystery, however, was: why was it this one man Hitler, *and he alone*, who was able not only to perceive them but to employ them so successfully?

It was not only in Germany that the mystery of Hitler's rise was pondered. In England, too, there was also a man who understood Hitler better than any other politician of the day; who knew, as early as 1930, that Hitler coming to power meant war; and who was to become Hitler's most determined enemy. I refer, of course, to Winston Churchill. Though Churchill was never under any illusions as to the evil of Hitler's intentions, he wrote of his rise to power with a sense of wonderment at—and not a little admiration for—this singular man who could pull off the seemingly impossible. In the following passage, written in 1935, Churchill

employs every ounce of his famous eloquence to dramatize the remarkable role of this "one corporal" who first imagined, then inspired, organized and led a seemingly miraculous revival of German fortunes.

"When the terrible German armies, which had held half of Europe in their grip, recoiled on every front, and sought armistice from those upon whose lands even then they still held as invaders; when the pride and will-power of the Prussian race broke into surrender and revolution behind the fighting lines; when that Imperial Government, which had been for more than fifty fearful months the terror of almost all nations, collapsed ignominiously, leaving its faithful subjects defenceless and disarmed before the wrath of the sorely-wounded, victorious Allies; then it was that one corporal, a former Austrian house-painter, set to regain all"¹⁸.

The entire paragraph, consisting of 106 words, is designed to emphasize the singular import of last line: "*then it was that one corporal...set out to regain all.*" Hitler's achievement of this goal thus becomes the motif of Churchill's chapter on Hitler, and the reason for his inclusion among the men Churchill considers *Great Contemporaries*.

Churchill goes on to tell the story of Hitler's "long, wearing battle for the German heart", which, Churchill writes, "cannot be read without admiration". He recounts Hitler's successes, and adds with astonishment, "Whatever else may be said about these exploits, they are certainly among the most remarkable in the world". To Churchill, the rise of the Nazis, and Hitler's role in it, "deserves to be reckoned a prodigy in the history of the world, and a prodigy, which is inseparable from the personal exertions and life-thrust of a single man". In choosing the word "prodigy"—and repeating it twice—to describe Hitler's achievement, Churchill is being more than circumspect, for the word is defined with three meanings, all of which Churchill certainly intends: "1) an extraordinary happening ...; 2) a marvel; person, thing, or act so extraordinary as to inspire wonder ...; and 3) something monstrous"¹⁹.

Churchill does not ignore the monstrous nature of Hitler, nor the evil that his rise to power portends. But he takes pains to point out that this horror is accompanied by a sense of wonder—in the sense of surprise, amazement,

and astonishment; some bewilderment and perplexity; and even a touch of awe. The point of quoting Churchill here, therefore, is to focus upon the “wondrousness” of Hitler’s rise to power, not in the sense of it being “good”, but in the sense of provoking wonder at its inexplicable, seemingly impossible, historically unprecedented, and “awe-ful” nature. Thus Churchill writes of Hitler’s exploits as “among the most remarkable in the world”, and of Hitler himself as a “prodigy in the history of the world”, not to praise Hitler, but to give the devil his due.

If his enemies on both the Right and the Left saw him this way, it was also how Hitler saw himself. “Truly a miracle”, is how he characterizes, in 1935 (the same year in which Churchill is writing), his early career. “History will record it as one of the most wonderful, one of the most remarkable happenings in the history of the world. It will seek for comparisons and analogies, but it will hardly find a parallel”, he tells his supporters. Indeed, he goes on, it is so miraculous that, “To posterity it will appear as a fairy-tale”²⁰.

At the center of this “miracle,” this “fairy-tale”, lies the mystery of *how-did-he-do-it?* It is a “miracle” precisely because it is an inexplicable event. It is a “fairy tale” because it is a marvel—an extraordinary happening that provokes wonder. It thrills his supporters: “There is no romance in world-history more wonderful than the development of our Party”, Hitler tells them, “It is a miracle that has been wrought upon the German people”²¹.

Precisely the mystery involved in this question—*how-did-he-do-it?*—constitutes the gist of the challenge to future historians made by Hermann Göring in the same year. Boasting of the hidden dimension of mystery in Hitler’s rise to power, Göring predicted: “In later times, the historians will not know how to depict it. For the first time in world history the historians will conclude: that did not happen by the normal process”²².

Sadly, seven decades later, Göring’s boast still stands. Historians are unanimous that Hitler did not come to power by ordinary means. Saul Friedländer writes that the rise of Hitler “defies all customary interpretation and can never be explained coherently within the framework of a historiography in which political, social, or economic explanations predominate”²³. H. R.

Trevor-Roper suggests that “there is something irrational at the heart of Hitler’s appeal, something not explicable by the ordinary tools and methods of rational historical and psychological analysis”²⁴. Emil Fackenheim argues that “The systems of explanation, historical and psychological, that we employ to explain ordinary human behavior, however extreme, cannot explain Hitler”²⁵. For Fackenheim, Hitler is “beyond the continuum, off the grid, not explicable by reference to any previous version of human nature”²⁶. Surveying Hitler’s career, especially the twelve years of his struggle for power from 1919 to 1930, followed by another twelve years of uncanny success after 1930, Sebastian Haffner writes, “No matter how long one searches, one will never find anything comparable in history”²⁷.

Since the end of the Second World War, this sense of wonder at the rise of Hitler is often forgotten amidst the images of Auschwitz and bombed out cities. The horror tends to predominate. But it is this oft-forgotten wonder that keeps alive the sense of mystery that still attaches to Hitler’s name. Thus we are sometimes jarred by passages in biographies of Hitler and histories of the period. For example, when Joachim Fest writes that, in Hitler “an individual once again demonstrated the stupendous power of a solitary person over the historical process”²⁸, we are taken aback. When Ian Kershaw writes that Hitler “is one of the few individuals of whom it can be said with certainty: without him, the course of history would have been different”²⁹, it provokes a sense of uncomfortable wonder and awe at the man.

If one takes Fest and Kershaw seriously, Adolf Hitler is one of the supreme examples of individuality in history—a seeming paragon of the highest ideals and personal goals of Western Civilization, i.e., “to be an ourselves”, “to be an individual”, and “to make a difference”. To be one of the one of the “few individuals” who has changed the course of history, or to prove the “power of a solitary person over the historical process”, are not trifling matters.

It is difficult not to find in reading Hitler’s biographers, this sense of wonder seep through the condemnations of his political beliefs. For example, John Toland in his biography, *Adolf Hitler*, calls him “the greatest mover and shaker of the twentieth century” on the first page of the *Foreward*, and “the most extraordinary figure in

the history of the twentieth century” on the last page of the book³⁰. John Lukacs, in *The Hitler of History*, repeats the latter encomium word for word³¹, and adds several more: “the peak figure of the twentieth century”³², “the greatest revolutionary of the twentieth century”³³, and, not to be outdone, “the most popular revolutionary in the history of the world”³⁴. William L. Shirer, who observed Hitler close-up and wrote one of the great exposures of Hitler’s tyranny³⁵, describes him as “the last of the great adventurer-conquerors in the tradition of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon”³⁶, while John Lukacs, again writes that “more than” Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon, Hitler was “able to energize the majority of a great people, in his lifetime the most educated in the world, convincing them to follow his leadership to astonishing achievements and extraordinary efforts”. Or, take Harold J. Gordon, Jr.’s, description of Hitler in *Hitler and the Beer Hall Putsch* as: “one of the three great ‘common men’” in the “century of the common man”; “an incomparable asset to any political organization”; and a man who united in his person “the talents and characteristics of Demosthenes, Ferdinand of Aragon, and Robert the Bruce”³⁷.

Hitler, Demosthenes? Now, whom are we talking about here—the butcher of the “Night of the Long Knives”? The incendiary of the book burnings? The author of the Nuremberg racial laws? The inciter of *Kristalnacht*? The monster of Auschwitz? Surely not. Gordon is talking about the Hitler of the rise to power—a man whose talents and skills made him a worker of political miracles.

Once in power, political scientists pretty well understand how Hitler put Germans back to work, re-militarized the country, and set out on a course of conquest. This is the Hitler the world knows all too well—the Hitler of tyranny, oppression, war, and destruction. But how a man like him ever rose to power, and kept rising out of the ashes like a Phoenix time and time again along the way—that is the Hitler of mystery. It is precisely this Hitler that historians have been unable to explain, and still continues to haunt us. This is the *Hitler nobody knows*.

At this point I risk a danger—the danger of suggesting that there was something about Hitler that may have been *appeared* to be admirable or even attractive. Obviously there was *something* attractive about the man: by 1933, his tiny party

had grown from a handful to almost four out of every ten German voters, and by 1935, to more than nine out of every ten. But, from all of my almost two decades of research, I have not found anything attractive about his character. Instead, what I have found is the most amazing capacity in history for creating an image. Yet, how he did that was a complete mystery to his contemporaries and opponents, and remains a mystery to this day. There is something about Hitler that we still do not know, and something about him that, therefore, continues to fascinate both the public and scholars alike.

If I were a detective, I would say that the secret lies not in the character of the man, but in his method. In tackling this mystery, I would, therefore, look for his method; as Sherlock Holmes says: “Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore, it is upon the logic rather than the crime that you should dwell”³⁸. This is the real secret of “the Hitler nobody knows”—it is a *method* that nobody knows.

NOTES

¹ Fest, Joachim C., *Hitler*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974, 8. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler 1889-1936 Hubris*. New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1999, xxv.

⁴ Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. New York, Random House, 1998, xvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶ Haffner, Sebastian, *The Meaning of Hitler*. New York, Macmillan, 1979, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ This is an astonishingly remarkable fact, which I have not noted even one historian or political scientist to remark. Party membership in Germany at that time (and even today) is not the same as in the United States. In the United States, a citizen must register to vote, and at the same time register for a party. In Germany, all citizens are automatically registered, and it requires a special trip to the party headquarters to join a party by filing an application, and waiting for approval. In the case of the Nazi Party, it also entailed paying substantial dues and becoming obligated carry out onerous duties, such as leaflet distribution, attendance at all meetings, etc. Some of the major parties in Germany had in this period only a few hundred “registered” members. Thus the Nazi party’s membership, by normal standards, even as early as 1925, was unusual; its membership by the end of 1928, was astronomical.

¹⁰ Hitler was able to give only one public speech, on February 27, 1925, between November 1923 and

April 1927, when the ban on public speaking in Bavaria was lifted. This was a period of three and a half years in which any other rival could have replaced him. But no one else was able to take his place. The ban on Hitler's public speaking remained in effect in Prussia and throughout all the rest of Germany (except Thuringia) until September 1928, an additional seventeen months. But still no other leader or demagogue appeared to take his place, though the field was wide open. It is astonishing that during this period, when Hitler was unable to employ his demagogic speaking skills, his Party, his stature, and his personal political power continued to grow. No one has explained what there was about this man that enabled him to supplant his rivals "even when he was in prison or under a ban on public speaking that lasted for four years".

¹¹ "The most notable thing about the period from 1925 until 1928 was that Hitler imposed his leadership on those Nazis who might have challenged it". Stone, Norman, *Hitler*. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1980, 18.

¹² Heiden, Konrad, *The History of National Socialism*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1935. Translated from the German by Ralph Mannheim. I am quoting from a reprint edition. New York, Octagon, Ferrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971, xvi.

¹³ Lukacs, John, *The Hitler of History*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 40. Lukacs adds: "And the widely accepted idea (propagated not only by Marxist historians), according to which history was—and continues to be—made not by individual persons but by great underlying social conditions and economic forces, has obviously been disproved and is especially inapplicable to Hitler". *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ Ashby Turner, Henry Jr., *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power*. Reading, Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1996.

¹⁵ Stern, Fritz, *The Führer and the People*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, 12.

¹⁶ Quoted by Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Nazi Question: An Essay on the Interpretations of National Socialism 1922-1975*. New York, Pantheon, 1981, 3. Translated by Robert Hurley. Originally published in France (Editions de Seuil, 1979).

¹⁷ Trotsky, Leon, "What Is National Socialism?" (10 June 1933). In *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany*. New York, Pathfinder Press, 1971, 399.

¹⁸ Churchill, Winston S., *Great Contemporaries*. London, Macmillan, 1937, from the Chapter, "Hitler and His Choice", 233-250, which is noted to have been written in 1935. Subsequent quotations in the text are from the same source.

¹⁹ *Webster's New World Dictionary*. New York, World Publishing Company, 1962.

²⁰ Speech of 8 November 1935. In Baynes, Norman H., *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*. New York, Gordon Press, 1981, 138.

²¹ Speech of 19 March 1934. *Ibid.*, 210.

²² Quoted by Cecil, Robert, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology*. New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972, 96. Citing K. Heyer,

Wenn die Götter den Tempel verlassen. Freiburg, 1947, 105.

²³ Friedländer, Saul, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. New York, Harper & Row, 1984, 120.

²⁴ Quoted by Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining...*, op. cit., 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁷ Haffner, Sebastian, *The Meaning...*, op. cit., 50. Translated by Ewald Osers.

²⁸ Fest, Joachim, *Hitler...*, op. cit., 7. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston.

²⁹ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler...*, op. cit., xx.

³⁰ Toland, John, *Adolf Hitler*. Garden City, Doubleday, 1976, ix and 1012, respectively.

³¹ Lukacs, John, *The Hitler...*, op. cit., xi.

³² *Ibid.*, 251.

³³ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵ Shirer, William L., *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1943.

³⁶ Id., *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1960, xii.

³⁷ Gordon, Harold J. Jr., *Hitler and the Beer Hall Putsch*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972, 50.

³⁸ COPP 317.