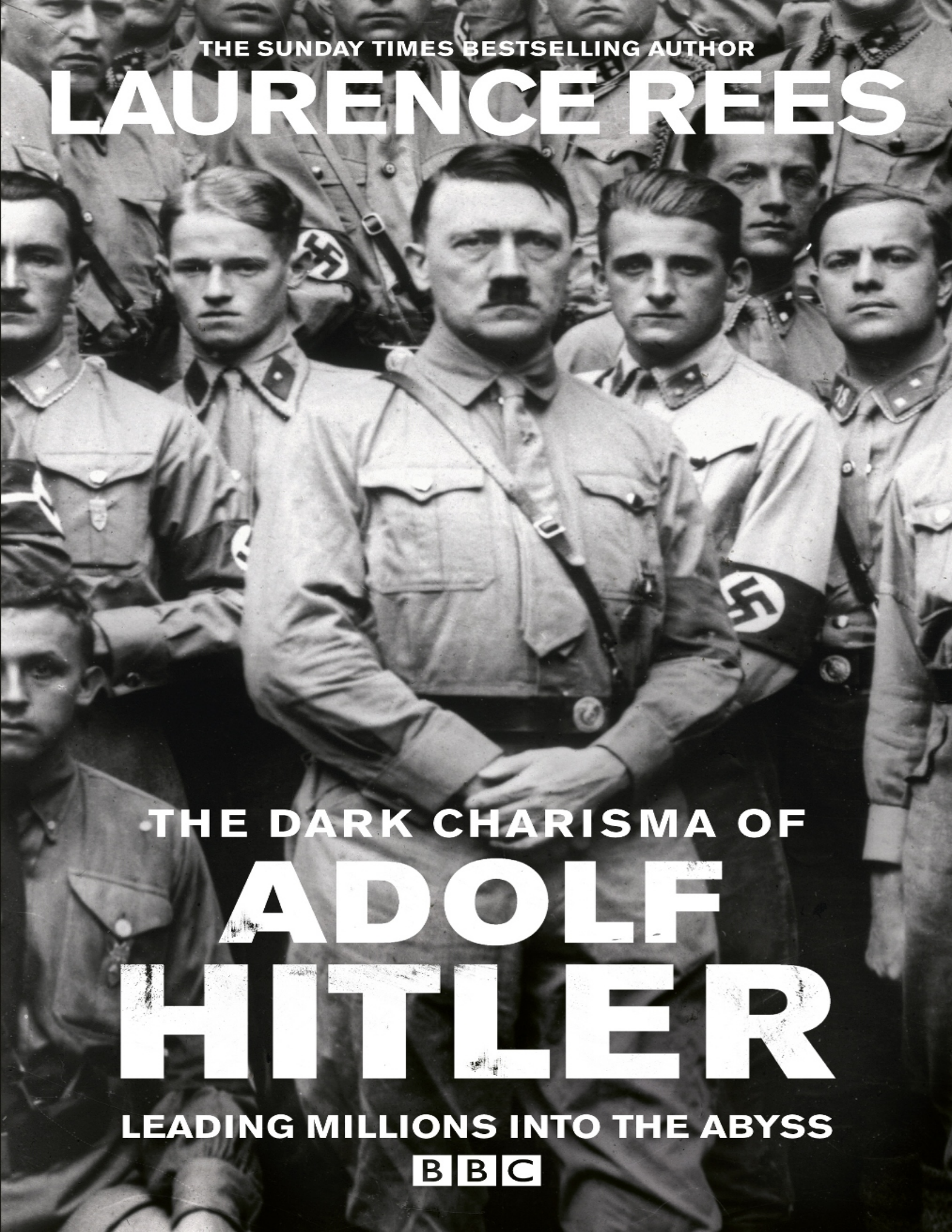

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURENCE REES

THE DARK CHARISMA OF ADOLF HITLER

LEADING MILLIONS INTO THE ABYSS

BBC

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About the Book

Adolf Hitler was an unlikely leader – fuelled by hate, incapable of forming normal human relationships, unwilling to debate political issues – and yet he commanded enormous support. So how was it possible that Hitler became such an attractive figure to millions of people? That is the important question at the core of Laurence Rees' new book.

The Holocaust, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the outbreak of the Second World War – all these cataclysmic events and more can be laid at Hitler's door. Hitler was a war criminal arguably without precedent in the history of the world. Yet, as many who knew him confirm, Hitler was still able to exert a powerful influence over the people who encountered him.

In this fascinating book to accompany his new BBC series, the acclaimed historian and documentary maker Laurence Rees examines the nature of Hitler's appeal, and reveals the role Hitler's supposed 'charisma' played in his success. Rees' previous work has explored the inner workings of the Nazi state in *The Nazis: A Warning from History* and the crimes they committed in *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*. *The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler* is a natural culmination of twenty years of writing and research on the Third Reich, and a remarkable examination of the man and the mind at the heart of it all.

About the Author

Laurence Rees is the writer and producer of the major BBC television documentary series *World War II: Behind Closed Doors*, *War of the Century*, *Horror in the East* and *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*. He won the British Book Award for History Book of the Year in 2006 for his international bestseller *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*.

Rees' career as a writer and filmmaker, focusing on the Nazis and World War II, stretches back nearly 20 years. His body of work has won him several awards, including a BAFTA and a Grierson Award.

Educated at Solihull School and Oxford University, Rees is the former Creative Director of BBC TV History programmes.

Also by Laurence Rees

World War II: Behind Closed Doors
Their Darkest Hour
The Nazis: A Warning from History
Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'
Horror in the East
War of the Century

THE DARK CHARISMA OF ADOLF HITLER

LEADING MILLIONS INTO THE ABYSS

LAURENCE REES

EBURY PRESS

To the memory of my mother and father

Margaret Julia Rees (1927–1977)

and

Alan William Rees (1924–1973)

‘My whole life can be summed up as this ceaseless effort of mine to persuade other people.’[1]

Adolf Hitler

‘That such a man could go so far toward realizing his ambitions and – above all – could find millions of willing tools and helpers; that is a phenomenon the world will ponder for centuries to come.’[2]

Konrad Heiden

INTRODUCTION

My parents had very firm views about Adolf Hitler. Having both experienced the war – with my father's brother killed on the Atlantic convoys – they thought Hitler was the embodiment of all evil. But even as a child I can remember thinking if Hitler was the Devil in human form how did he get so many people to do his bidding? In a way, that's a question I have been thinking about ever since, and one that I attempt to answer in this work.

Adolf Hitler was, at first sight, the most unlikely leader of a sophisticated state at the heart of Europe. He was incapable of normal human friendships, unable to debate intellectually, filled with hatred and prejudice, bereft of any real capacity to love, and 'lonely'.[1] He was, undoubtedly, 'as a human figure, lament able.'[2] Yet he played the most important part in three of the most devastating decisions ever taken: the decision to invade Poland that led to the Second World War, the decision to invade the Soviet Union, and the decision to murder the Jews.

But Hitler did not create all this horror on his own, and alongside his many personal inadequacies he undoubtedly possessed great powers of persuasion. 'My whole life,' he said memorably in 1942, 'can be summed up as this ceaseless effort of mine to persuade other people.'[3] And I've met many people who lived through this period who confirmed that judgement. When pressed on the reason why they found such a strange figure so persuasive they pointed to a myriad of factors, like the circumstances of the time, their fears, their hopes and so on. But many also

described simply the powerful sense of attraction they felt for Hitler – something that a number of people ascribed to his ‘charisma’.

But what exactly is ‘charisma’? The word has Greek roots meaning a grace or favour divinely bestowed, but charisma, as we use the term today, is not a ‘divine’ gift but ‘value neutral’[4] – nasty people can possess it just as much as nice ones. The original meaning also implies that charisma is an absolute quality that exists – or does not exist – in a particular individual. But Adolf Hitler’s charismatic appeal was not universal. It was present only in the space between him and the emotions of his audience. Two people could meet Hitler at the same time and one might find him charismatic and the other might think he was a fool.

Our modern understanding of the concept of ‘charisma’ begins with the work of the German social theorist Max Weber, who famously wrote about ‘charismatic leadership’[5] at the turn of the last century. Even though he was writing long before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, his work is still full of relevance for anyone interested in the study of Nazism in general and Hitler in particular. Crucially, what Weber did was to examine ‘charismatic leadership’ as a particular type of rule – rather than a personal quality that a pop star can possess as much as a politician. For Weber, the ‘charismatic’ leader must possess a strong ‘missionary’ element and is almost a quasi-religious figure. Followers of such a leader are looking for more than just lower taxes or better health care, but seek broader, almost spiritual, goals of redemption and salvation. The charismatic leader cannot exist easily within normal bureaucratic structures and is driven forward by a sense of personal destiny. Hitler, in these terms, is the archetypal ‘charismatic leader’.

In particular, I think it is hard to underestimate the importance of understanding that charisma is created in an interaction between individuals. And in this context my

ability to meet and question people who lived through this extraordinary period has been of enormous benefit. In writing this book I've been fortunate to have access to a unique primary source – the hundreds of interviews with eyewitnesses and perpetrators conducted for my work as a historical filmmaker over the last 20 years. Only a small fraction of this material has ever been published before, and so the vast majority of the testimony that is quoted in this book appears here in print for the first time.

I was hugely privileged to be able to travel the world and meet these people – from those who worked closely with Hitler to those who committed murders in pursuit of his aims, from those who suffered at his hands to those who finally helped destroy him. I was also lucky, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to be one of the first to travel into the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe and record open and honest interviews about Nazism with people who had lived behind the Iron Curtain. What they said was often both shocking and surprising.

I've also benefited from the lengthy discussions I've held with many of the world's greatest academic historians – material I gathered for my educational website WW2History.com – as well as studying information from archival and other more traditional research sources. But it was meeting and questioning people who met Hitler and who lived under his rule that offered me the greatest clues into the nature of his appeal. (One must treat eyewitness testimony with considerable care and I've written elsewhere of the many tests and safeguards we used when gathering this material.[6])

I've also learnt a great deal from studying reel upon reel of archive footage from the period – particularly footage of Hitler's speeches. I had thought, when I started my work on Nazism 20 years ago, that the 'charisma' of Hitler might somehow be visible in the footage. However, it soon became clear – at least for me – that Hitler is decidedly

uncharismatic on film today. But, of course, this is precisely the point. I felt nothing because I am not a person of that time – a person, moreover, already predisposed to accept Hitler's charismatic appeal. I was not hungry; humiliated after the loss of a war; unemployed; frightened of widespread violence on the streets; feeling betrayed by the broken promises of the democratic system I lived in; terrified of my savings vanishing in a bank crash; and wanting to be told that all of this mess was the fault of someone else.

It's also important to state emphatically that people who accept the 'charisma' of a leader are most definitely not 'hypnotised'. They know exactly what is going on and remain completely responsible for their actions. The fact that someone chooses to follow a charismatic leader cannot subsequently be used as an alibi or excuse.

Yet Hitler was not, it has to be said, only a leader with charisma. He also used threat, murder and terror to get his way, and I attempt to show how these aspects fitted into the history of his rise to power and his subsequent rule. There were certainly some people who carried out Hitler's desires only out of fear, just as there were others who never found Hitler charismatic at all.

Finally, whilst this work is entirely about Hitler, I do believe that it has relevance today. The desire to be led by a strong personality in a crisis, the craving for our existence to have some kind of purpose, the quasi worship of 'heroes' and 'celebrities', the longing for salvation and redemption: none of this has changed in the world since the death of Hitler in April 1945.

Human beings are social animals. We want to belong. Life, otherwise, can be a very cold experience indeed. And only by understanding how those who seek power try to influence us, and how we often actively participate in our own manipulation, can we finally understand the dangers

we face if we leave rationality and scepticism aside and, instead, put our faith in a leader with charisma.

PART ONE

THE ROAD TO POWER

CHAPTER ONE
DISCOVERING A MISSION

IN 1913, WHEN Adolf Hitler was 24 years old, nothing about his life marked him out as a future charismatic leader of Germany. Not his profession; he eked out a living as a painter of pictures for tourists in Munich. Not his home; he lived in a small room, rented from Josef Popp, a tailor, on the third floor of a house at 34 Schleissheimer Strasse, north of Munich's main station. Not the clothes he wore; he dressed conservatively, if shabbily, in the conventional bourgeois apparel of the day – black coat and trousers. Not his physical appearance; he was distinctly unprepossessing in looks, with sunken cheeks, discoloured teeth, a straggly moustache, and black hair lying limply across his forehead. Not his emotional life; he found it impossible to sustain any lasting friendship and had never had a girl friend.

His chief distinguishing characteristic was his capacity to hate. 'He was at odds with the world,' wrote August Kubizek who had lodged with him in Austria several years before. 'Wherever he looked, he saw injustice, hate and enmity. Nothing was free from his criticism, nothing found favour in his eyes… Choking with his catalogue of hates, he would pour his fury over everything, against mankind in general who did not understand him, who did not appreciate him and by whom he was persecuted.'[1]

How was it possible for this man, so undistinguished at the age of 24, to become one of the most powerful and infamous figures in the history of the world – a leader, moreover, known for his 'charisma'?

Circumstances, of course, would play a large part in this transformation. But one of the many remarkable aspects of this story is how a number of the key personality traits which Hitler possessed as an oddball painter, trudging the streets of Munich in 1913 – aspects of his character which contributed to his lack of professional and personal success at the time – would not only remain consistently with him for the rest of his life, but subsequently be perceived not as weaknesses but as strengths. Hitler's monumental intolerance, for instance, meant that he found it impossible to debate any issue. He would state his views and then lose his temper if he was systematically questioned or criticised. But what was perceived as ignorant slogan shouting in 1913 would later be seen as certainty of vision. Then there was his massive over-confidence in his own abilities. Back in Vienna, a few years before, he had announced to his mystified roommate that he had decided to write an opera – and the fact he could neither read nor write music properly was no handicap. In years to come, this over-confidence would be perceived as a mark of genius.

By the time he arrived in Munich, Hitler had already experienced years of disappointment. Born on 20 April 1889, at Braunau am Inn in Austria, on the border with Germany, Hitler did not get on with his elderly father, a customs official, who beat him. His father died in January 1903 at the age of 65 and his mother succumbed to cancer four years later in December 1907 when she was just 47 years old. An orphan at the age of 18, Hitler drifted between Linz in Austria and the capital, Vienna, and for some months in 1909 he experienced real destitution before a small financial gift from an aunt allowed him to set up as a painter. He disliked Vienna, believing it to be a seedy, impure city awash with prostitution and corruption. It wasn't until his twenty-fourth birthday, when he received a delayed legacy of just over 800 Kronen from his father's will, that he was able to leave Austria and seek lodgings in

Munich, this ‘German’ city, a place which he later said he was ‘more attached’ to ‘than to any other spot of earth in this world’.[2]

But even though he was living, at last, in a city he loved, Hitler seemed en route to absolute obscurity. Despite the impression he later wanted the world to have – in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, written 11 years later, Hitler tried to convince his readers that during this time he had functioned almost as an embryonic politician[3] – in 1913 Hitler was a socially and emotionally inadequate individual drifting through life without direction. Crucially, what he lacked at 24 – and what many other historical figures perceived as charismatic leaders already possessed by this age – was a sense of personal mission. He only discovered what he passionately believed was his ‘mission’ in life as a result of the First World War and the manner in which it ended. Without these epic events he would almost certainly have remained in Munich and be unknown to history.

Instead, he began his journey into the consciousness of the world on 3 August 1914 when he petitioned – as an Austrian – to join the Bavarian Army. Just two days before, on the first of August, Germany had declared war on Russia. Hitler now passionately wanted to serve the German state he so admired, and his wish was granted when in September 1914 he was sent as an ordinary soldier to the 16th Bavarian Reserve Regiment (also known as the ‘List’ Regiment). The following month he saw action for the first time close to Ypres. He wrote to an acquaintance back in Munich describing the scene, ‘To the left and right the shrapnel were bursting, and in between the English bullets sang. But we paid no attention… Over us the shells were howling and whistling, splintered tree-trunks and branches flew around us. And then again grenades crashed into the wood, hurling up clouds of stones, earth, and stifling everything in a yellowish-green, stinking, sickening vapour… I often think of Munich, and every man of us has

the single wish that the gang out here will have their hash settled once and for all. We want an all-out fight, at any cost…'[4]

These are the words of a man who has found something. Not just – for the first time – a sense of purpose in a communal enterprise with other human beings, but a real insight into the dramatic possibilities of existence. And this conflict would have a similar effect not just on Hitler, but also on many others. 'War, the father of all things, is also our father,' wrote Ernst Jünger, another veteran of the war. 'He hammered us and chiselled us, hardened us into that which we now are. And forever, as long as the wheel of life still turns in us, war will be the axis on which it revolves. He trained us for war, and warriors we will remain as long as we draw the breath of life.'[5]

What Hitler, Jünger, and millions of others experienced on the Western Front was a war unlike any other before. A war in which the power of defensive weapons like the machine gun and barbed wire confined the conflict to narrow, bloody killing grounds. A war in which flame-throwers, high explosives and poison gas wreaked havoc. As a result, for Hitler, the 'romance' of battle was soon 'replaced by horror'.[6]

It's not surprising that Hitler formed the view that life was a constant and brutal struggle. Life for an ordinary soldier in the First World War was exactly that. But it was not only that. There was also – especially for Adolf Hitler – a sense in which the experience of this war was also a test, offering the possibility of acts of heroism. And still, despite recent scholarly work that confirms that Hitler did not live in the trenches but served as dispatch runner based at regimental headquarters just behind the front line,[7] there is no disputing that Adolf Hitler was a courageous soldier. He was wounded in October 1916 at the Battle of the Somme and then, two years later, won the Iron Cross, First Class. He was put forward for this award by a Jewish officer, Hugo

Gutmann, and the official recommendation, by the commander of the regiment, Emmerich von Godin, stated that ‘as a dispatch runner he [ie Hitler] was a model in sangfroid and grit both in static and mobile warfare’, and that he was ‘always prepared to volunteer to deliver messages in the most difficult of situations under great risk to his own life’.[8]

However, despite his bravery, Hitler remained just as unusual a character to his regimental comrades as he had to his acquaintances before the war. As one of his fellow soldiers, Balthasar Brandmayer, later recalled, ‘there was something peculiar about Hitler’.[9] Hitler’s comrades thought it odd that he never wanted to get drunk or have sex with a prostitute; that he spent what leisure time he had reading or drawing, or occasionally haranguing those around him about any subject that took his fancy; that he seemed to have no friends or family and, as a consequence, was a man resolutely alone.[10] As for ‘charisma’ – Hitler seemed to possess none whatsoever.

But he was absolutely committed to the war, and he extrapolated from his own bravery and commitment the belief that almost everyone else at the front line felt the same. It was behind the lines, back in Germany, he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, that the troops were ‘betrayed’ by those who wanted to profit from the sacrifice of the soldiers in combat. This idea of a *Frontgemeinschaft*, a united comradeship of front-line soldiers let down by others away from the battlefield, is a myth – but it was a popular one. By the time Hitler was injured for the last time in battle, in October 1918 close to Ypres, Germany had lost the war for a variety of reasons, none of which was ‘betrayal’ behind the lines. The reality was that the Germans were crushed by the sheer weight of forces ranged against them – not least the Americans whose entry into the war in April 1917 guaranteed the arrival of hundreds of thousands of fresh troops. In addition, a blockade of Germany by Allied naval

vessels had caused widespread food shortages – a bad situation that was made worse by a mass outbreak of influenza in spring 1918.

By that autumn there were plenty of members of the German armed forces who had decided the war was lost. In October, Admiral Franz von Hipper's sailors refused to leave port to fight in one last doomed action against the Allies. A mutiny soon followed in the naval city of Kiel, and spread to Lübeck, Bremen and eventually Hamburg. A widespread German revolution seemed a possibility – one inspired by the successful Bolshevik revolution in Russia the previous year. It was obvious to leading German politicians that an end needed to be made to the war as quickly as possible, and just as obvious – given the demands of the Allies – that whatever Germany's future was, it did not include one in which the Kaiser, the man most closely associated with the decision to go to war in the first place, remained as head of state. General Wilhelm Groener gave the Kaiser this unwelcome news, and on 9 November 1918 Germany became a Republic.

This sudden departure of the head of state caused immense dismay to many German officers. 'At the worst moment of the war we have been stabbed in the back,' wrote Ludwig Beck, then serving with the Army High Command, and later to be Chief of Staff of the German Army. 'Never in my life have I been so upset about something I have personally witnessed as I was on the 9 and 10 November. Such an abyss of meanness, cowardice, lack of character, all of which I had until then considered impossible. In a few hours 500 years of history have been shattered; like a thief the Emperor was deported to Dutch territory. It could not happen fast enough – this to a distinguished, noble and morally upstanding man.'[11]

Among a number of the ordinary soldiers at the front, who were unaware that Germany could scarcely continue to wage this war, there was a similar sense of

bewilderment, not only at the swift removal of the Kaiser but at the immediate declaration of an armistice, which came into effect on 11 November 1918. ‘The front-line troops didn’t feel themselves beaten,’ says Herbert Richter, who fought on the Western Front, ‘and we were wondering why the armistice was happening so quickly, and why we had to vacate all our positions in such a hurry, because we were still standing on enemy territory, and we thought all this was strange… we were angry, because we did not feel that we had come to the end of our strength.’[12]

Germany seemed to be splitting apart – between those like Beck and Richter who believed that the army had somehow been betrayed and those like the mutinous German sailors who had accepted defeat and now wanted the whole social order to be overturned. In Berlin, in January 1919, a General Strike developed into a socialist uprising. Fridolin von Spaun, then a teenager from Bavaria, travelled to the capital to witness these historic events. ‘I was so excited by what was taking place. Because I read in the papers about the revolution in Berlin. And I just had to see for myself how such a revolution is done. I was driven to Berlin by curiosity. And once there I threw myself into the tumult, the city was absolutely mad. Hundreds of thousands of people ran through the streets and were shouting: first on one side, then on the other. There was a very Left-wing faction. And this very Left-wing faction was decisively influenced by one man, called Karl Liebknecht. And fortune, which sometimes does smile on me, granted me seeing him in the flesh… I was in the crowd. And suddenly I heard a shout. And then a truck arrived, the people had left some space for it, like an alley. It drove up, and everyone shouted, “Liebknecht, Liebknecht!” They cheered. I hadn’t even seen him. Because he was so surrounded by a mass of people, by a bodyguard with loaded rifles, all kinds… And [then] this legendary man, Karl Liebknecht, appeared at the upstairs window and

made a rousing speech. It wasn't very long, a quarter of an hour or half an hour, I can't remember any longer. And this speech made such an impression on me, that from that hour onward I was a sworn anti-Bolshevist. Because all the silly phrases which he chucked to the people, and the inflammatory, incredibly inflammatory statements… I noticed that he is not at all interested in creating a paradise for the workers. In fact, it's only a lust for power. And so, completely immune to all temptations from the Left, I left the square an anti-Bolshevist. Fourteen days later this Mr Liebknecht was no longer alive. His opponents had caught him and his accomplice – a woman from Poland, Rosa Luxemburg. They simply killed the both of them. Perhaps it sounds very callous, but I couldn't shed any tears for them. They got their just deserts.'[13]

Fridolin von Spaun was so appalled at what he perceived as Karl Liebknecht's 'lust for power' in Berlin in January 1919 that he subsequently joined a *Freikorps* unit in order to fight back against the Communist revolutionaries. In the wake of the destruction of order at the end of the war, a number of these paramilitary *Freikorps* had been formed in an attempt to suppress the Left-wing revolution. These groups consisted mostly of ex-soldiers who had responded to the call of their old commander. And it was *Freikorps* units – rather than the established German army or police – who played the most important role in suppressing the revolution in Berlin in January 1919 and who then became the initial guarantors of the new German Republic. Many of the figures who were later to become infamous as Nazis – Heinrich Himmler, Rudolf Höss and Gregor Strasser among them – were active in the *Freikorps* around this time. But, significantly, Adolf Hitler was not.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote that as he lay in bed in hospital in Pasewalk in November 1918, temporarily blinded[14] after a gas attack, he was overwhelmed with the feeling that the circumstances of the end of the war

represented ‘the greatest villainy of the century’.[15] As he saw it, an alliance of Marxists and Jews had come together in an attempt to topple the Fatherland. It was this moment, he wrote, that was decisive in his decision to ‘go into politics’.

The attractions of such a dramatic story in the formation of a myth are obvious. The noble soldier from the front line, betrayed by corrupt and self-serving politicians, now decides to devote his life to saving his country. Everything fits. But whilst fictional tales can work like this, life seldom does. And the evidence is that Hitler’s great ‘mission’ was not formed here at all.

Hitler left hospital on 17 November 1918 and returned to Munich. He found the city in the midst of seismic change. Ten days before, on 7 November, a demonstration in Munich’s Theresienwiese park organised by the Socialist politician, Erhard Auer, had led to revolution. The spark had been lit by a journalist and anti-war campaigner called Kurt Eisner. He had incited soldiers who were attending the demonstration to mutiny against their officers and take control of their own barracks. ‘Workers councils’ and ‘Soldiers councils’ were formed to bring order to the revolution, and the hereditary monarchy of Bavaria, the house of Wittelsbach, was deposed. Munich now became a Socialist Republic under the leadership of Kurt Eisner.

Hitler later expressed in *Mein Kampf* his repulsion for the way events had transpired in his beloved Munich; hardly surprising, since Kurt Eisner was both Jewish and a Socialist. However, his actions at the time were very different. Unlike thousands of other Germans like Fridolin von Spaun, who joined paramilitary *Freikorps* units to fight the Communist revolution, Hitler decided to remain in the army. Then, after a brief spell out of Munich guarding a prisoner-of-war camp, he is to be found in early 1919 back in the city serving in his unit at a time when Munich was still under the control of Kurt Eisner.[16] And when the ill-

fated ‘Soviet Republic’ of Bavaria was declared a few weeks later, led by fanatical Communists like Eugen Levine (who, like Eisner, was Jewish), documents show that Hitler was elected as a representative of his battalion[17] – something that would scarcely have been possible if he had opposed the Communist revolution.

There were clear alternative actions available to Hitler at this time – he could have tried to leave the army and join a *Freikorps* or, at the very least, decided to have as little to do with the Communist regime in Munich as possible. Hitler’s failure to do any of this casts severe doubts on his subsequent protestations in *Mein Kampf* that he possessed a fanatical political ‘mission’ in early 1919. Yet only a few months later, in the autumn of that year, when Hitler wrote his first political statement, it dripped with hatred against the Jews and fitted consistently with views that he was to express for the rest of his life.

What changed, between Hitler’s apparent acceptance of the Communist revolution in Munich in April 1919 and the expression of his hatred against the Jews in September, was the political situation. *Freikorps* units entered Munich on 1 May 1919 in order to retake the city. The ‘Soviet Republic’ of Bavaria soon crumbled – but not before the Communists had murdered around twenty hostages. The *Freikorps*’ revenge was bloody and extensive, and at least 1,000 people were killed. The city was traumatised by this experience with Left-wing revolution and would now swiftly embrace the forces of the Right. As did Adolf Hitler. Shortly after the fall of the Communist government in Bavaria, Hitler was part of a new soldiers’ committee investigating if members of his regiment had given practical support to the regime. Hitler’s brief flirtation with the institutions of the Left was over for good.

The relatively recent discovery of this evidence about Hitler’s unlikely relationship with Munich’s Left-wing revolution has resulted, understandably, in a number of

different attempts to explain his actions. Perhaps Hitler was subsequently a 'turncoat',[18] and his actions a sign of an 'extremely confused and uncertain'[19] situation, one which served to illustrate that Hitler's life could still 'have developed in different directions'.[20]

So how can we best understand Hitler's actions during this period? Is it possible that his tacit support for the Socialist revolution in Bavaria was a con? That Hitler was in his heart consistent to previously held extreme Right-wing beliefs, but was just going along with events, perhaps acting as a spy in order to best learn about his opponents? This, no doubt, is the explanation Hitler himself would have given, had he been forced to. He would have felt extremely vulnerable to the charge that this history demonstrates that he was merely like most other human beings, blown about by what happened to happen.

However, there is no persuasive evidence to support the view that Hitler was pursuing some kind of Machiavellian strategy in these months immediately after the end of the war – quite the contrary. Captain Karl Mayr, head of the army's 'Information' department in Munich (tasked with 're-educating' soldiers in the wake of the Socialist revolution) met Hitler in the spring of 1919, and his later recollection was clear: 'At this time Hitler was ready to throw in his lot with anyone who would show him kindness. He never had that "Death or Germany" martyr spirit which later was so much used as a propaganda slogan to boost him. He would have worked for a Jewish or a French employer just as readily as for an Aryan. When I first met him he was like a tired stray dog looking for a master.'[21]

Mayr was an unusual character. He later swung from the extreme Right wing of German politics to become a Social Democrat and a fierce opponent of Hitler. He was eventually to die in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. And while some of his later attacks on Hitler seem exaggerated to the point of fancifulness – he claimed, for instance, that

Hitler was so stupid he could not write his own speeches – there seems little reason to doubt his impressions on first meeting Hitler in May 1919. In fact, they offer the most convincing explanation of Hitler's conduct at the time.

So, Hitler, it appears, was not a cunning political operator in early 1919. He was simply an ordinary soldier, dispirited by a lost war, confused and uncertain as to what fate now had in store for him, and content to stay on as long as he could in the army, the only home and employment he had. Which is not to say that he was a blank canvas. Hitler did already believe in certain political principles – like Pan-Germanism – and his time in pre-war Vienna in particular had exposed him to a variety of virulent anti-Semitic influences. But it was the next few months of tuition as one of Mayr's agents of 're-education' that would allow him to crystallise his thinking.

Hitler's task was to speak to other soldiers about the dangers of Communism and the benefits of nationalism. And in order to be trained to do this Hitler attended a special course at the University of Munich between 5 and 12 June 1919. Here he listened to a variety of lectures, including those on the 'Political History of the War' and 'Our economic situation'[22] all positioned in the 'correct' anti-Bolshevik way. By all accounts Hitler lapped up all this eagerly and then regurgitated it to other German soldiers at a camp near Augsburg in August.

In particular, Hitler gave vent to vicious anti-Semitic views in his speeches, linking the Jews with Bolshevism and the Munich revolution. This was scarcely an original thought – it was common among Right-wing extremists in Germany at the time – and it was this grossly simplistic equation of Judaism with Communism that was the wellspring for much of the anti-Semitic prejudice in the wake of the First World War. 'The people sent to Bavaria to set up a [Communist] councils' regime,' says Fridolin von Spaun, also a convinced anti-Semite, 'were almost all

Jewish. If you look at the names of the people who played a part there. Naturally we also knew from Russia, that the Jews there were in a very influential position… the Marxist theory also originated with a Jew [ie Karl Marx], on which Lenin supposedly built.'[23]

Hitler had previously been exposed to harsh anti-Semitic rhetoric, for instance from the mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger, but contrary to the view Hitler expressed in *Mein Kampf*, there is no compelling contemporary evidence that proves he was a committed anti-Semite before the end of the war. That he was undoubtedly expressing strong anti-Semitic views by August 1919 is clear, but by then, of course, he had attended the lectures organised by Mayr and witnessed the mood of many in Munich in response to the short-lived Soviet republic which had been established in the city.

Nonetheless, there is no sign that Hitler was now play-acting with regard to his anti-Semitism. The power and force with which he expressed his views were those of a full-fledged believer.

Hitler was 30 years old. And it is only at this point, in the summer of 1919, that one can detect in the historical record the first reference to any 'charismatic' quality that he might possess. At the army camp at Augsburg a number of soldiers remarked positively on Hitler's ability as a lecturer. One of them, a gunner called Hans Knoden, wrote that Hitler 'turned out to be a brilliant and spirited speaker who compels the whole audience to follow his exposition. On one occasion he was unable to finish a longer speech [in the time available] and asked the audience if they were interested in listening to his talk after their daily service – immediately everyone agreed. It was obvious that the men's interest was aroused.'[24]

Hitler had always despised debate and only wanted to lecture. However, before the war there had not been a willing audience for his harangues about opera or

architecture. But now there were people who were prepared to listen to his opinions about Germany's immediate post-war predicament. Hitler had always been certain in his judgements and unwilling to listen to argument. And in this crisis many were predisposed to welcome such inflexibility.

Many of Hitler's views were now recognisably those of the future Führer of the German people. On 16 September 1919, for example, Hitler wrote, at the request of Captain Mayr, an anti-Semitic statement that was uncompromisingly nasty. He said that Jews 'produce a racial tuberculosis among nations' and that the aim must be the 'removal of the Jews altogether' from Germany.[25]

Four days before writing this letter, Hitler had attended a political meeting in the Leiber Room of the Sterneckerbräu beer hall in Munich. As part of his work for Captain Mayr, Hitler had been told to observe and report on fringe political parties – and they didn't come much more 'fringe' than this one: the 'German Workers' party'. It was little more than a discussion club, formed in January 1919 by a 35-year-old locksmith called Anton Drexler and a journalist called Karl Harrer. They had decided that they both wanted to push an anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevik, pro-worker agenda of the kind which was already commonplace on the Right. Drexler had previously been a member of the 'Fatherland Party' which had been established by Wolfgang von Kapp two years before, one of countless other similar Right-wing groups around at the time – like the 'German Nationalist Protection and Defiance Federation' and the 'Thule Society'.

Only a couple of dozen people were in the Leiber Room that night, and when Hitler spoke out against the call for Bavaria to declare independence from the rest of Germany he made an immediate impression. Drexler spotted Hitler's rhetorical talents and urged him to join the tiny party. It

was the moment when Adolf Hitler and what was to become the Nazi party came together.

Over the next few weeks, Hitler revealed that he was possessed of a ‘mission’: to proclaim the ways in which Germany could be rebuilt from the ruins of defeat. But he did not yet announce that he himself was the great leader who would personally accomplish this task. Though already, in his 16 September letter attacking the Jews, he had pointed to the need for Germany to become an autocratic state ruled by autocratic individuals: ‘This rebirth will be set in motion not by the political leadership of irresponsible majorities under the influence of party dogmas or of an irresponsible press, nor by catchwords and slogans of international coinage, but only through the ruthless action of personalities with a capacity for national leadership and an inner sense of responsibility.’[26] The man, it seems, had found his mission – but it was not a mission he had been pre-ordained to have.

After his arrival in the Sterneckerbräu, Hitler’s life changed. He had been tossed around tempestuous seas and now he had found a harbour. For the rest of his life he would pretend that he had always been destined to arrive in this place.