

Laurence REES

Hitler's Charisma: Leading Millions into the Abyss

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Illustrations, notes, and index.

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Accounting for how Adolf Hitler managed to garner the unconditional support of a major portion of the German population is the perennial question that the author and BBC director and producer, Laurence Rees, tackled in "Hitler's Charisma" (published simultaneously in the UK by Ebury Press as "The Charisma of Adolf Hitler"). While researching for the book, Rees did not use extensive archival holdings but instead relied largely on published primary sources and his own numerous interviews with Germans who experienced first hand Hitler's ability to persuade and to command the undying loyalty of his adherents.

As Rees explained in the introduction, he employed Max Weber's ideas about charisma throughout the book; nevertheless, he did not present a concise summary of the model to acquaint readers with Weber's work. Rees posited that Hitler's charisma did not originate with any particular events that had occurred in his youth. Furthermore, he contended that Hitler's intense anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism emerged when he was an adult since the person who had recommended Hitler for the Iron Cross was a Jew and since Hitler had supported the socialist government in Bavaria under Kurt Eisner. Upon entering public life, Hitler began displaying his charismatic traits. In his early years as a politician, it became apparent that Hitler had the knack for telling people what they wanted to hear. For example, he banked on German anti-Semitism to explain that the source of Germany's problems was the corrupt Jewish race. Furthermore, Germans were convinced that Weimar democracy had failed, and Hitler announced that he would eliminate a few dozen political parties and usher in stability. As a hero, he popularized his performance at the front during the First World War, promised to reclaim German territories lost through the Treaty of Versailles, and vowed to rectify the country's betrayal at the hands of the socialists. Later, he refused to compromise on anything less than the chancellor's position when he negotiated to bring Nazis into the cabinet. His role as a prophet and his infallible nature were apparent in various passages of "Mein Kampf", including his explanation that Germany's destiny was the "Lebensraum" to the East.

Once in power, Hitler continued to cultivate his charismatic image and to convince people to carry out his wishes. He reinforced the myth of his infallibility, in part by remaining aloof from the people, and constantly advanced the notion that Providence had charged him with a mission for Germany. Rees noted that Hitler offered his followers redemption (99) and the "thrill of release" to undertake any number of tasks, such as the killing of Jews, that would anticipate Hitler's wishes and allow his followers to "work toward the Führer"

(137). During the war, Hitler's reliance on inspiration, intuition, and inner conviction as tools for decision making, instead of expert advice, demonstrated that he continued to rely on Providence and to believe that he was prophetic (235-236 and 287). He also maintained his infectious optimism (287) and had a way of giving people the impression that he read their thoughts, an ability which the German military staff referred to as "the bug" (275).

At one point in the book, Rees argued that further proof of Hitler's charisma and popularity was that individuals petitioned him, begging his intervention in a wide range of personal matters (101). Although a careful content analysis of these petitions may reveal something about the nature of the requests and the attitudes of the writers, Rees did not undertake such a study. Furthermore, petitioning the king was a long-cherished tradition in Europe, and such letters also arrived on the desks of democratic presidents and prime ministers. In this sense, Hitler hardly was unique.

A measure of the effectiveness of Hitler's charisma was his ability to sway prominent politicians and military figures. A simple tally reveals that, Rees identified 18 individuals—16 Germans and two foreigners—as not finding Hitler magical, charming, and convincing. Curiously, there was a shorter list of 11 individuals—nine Germans and two foreigners—who succumbed to Hitler's charm. There is a problem with the list of those who came under Hitler's sway when it comes to Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and minister of armaments. Rees failed to note that while Speer, at first, was an admirer of Hitler, he later began working against Hitler. In the first part of 1944, Speer began to see through Hitler, but he maintained his administrative posts. Later, Speer even plotted to kill Hitler. When Hitler ordered a scorched earth policy as the war drew to a close, Speer countermanded the orders, thereby risking his life. It is unfortunate that Rees does not address the exceptional case of Speer, especially in the light of the abundant biographical and autobiographical material about him. The case of Speer suggests that Rees could have presented a more nuanced analysis of those who were unable to resist Hitler and those who were.

Rees explained that Hitler's adherents fulfilled his wishes because of "Auftragstaktik" (mission command or mission-type tactics), the military doctrine of giving subordinates the resources to reach a goal, the freedom to plan the means of attaining the goal, and the independence to execute that plan. Rees maintained that "Auftragstaktik" was apparent in "Kristallnacht", mercy killings of the disabled, deportation and murder of Jews, Germanization in Poland, and starving Soviet cities into submission, none of which Hitler actually had ordered. "Auftragstaktik" also applied to military actions, until Hitler began to circumvent his generals. Hitler praised independent action, in Rees's estimation, in order to build his charisma and to dissociate himself from certain controversial measures. Unfortunately, Rees did not link "Auftragstaktik" with the "Führerprinzip", part of which holds that contenders for power must compete professionally or even in a life-and-death struggle to demonstrate their abilities. Those who emerge victoriously win the right to rule. Hitler often employed this principal when he gave more than one individual similar assignments, a practice which accounts for the overlapping competencies as well as bureaucratic conflict and chaos in the Third Reich.

Rees explained that, as the war progressed, Hitler continued to believe in his own infallibility and prophetic abilities, blaming others for disasters that had resulted from his decisions. Rees pointed out that Hitler remained charismatic, even as the military defeats mounted.

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Toward the end of the war, however, his charisma evaporated, aside from the continued devotion of a few dedicated Nazis.

Rees's engaging style of writing makes "Hitler's Charisma" a very readable volume, one of the traits of a popular history. His use of Weber's categories to explain charisma and his extensive sources combine to give the work the character of an academic monograph that presents a viable explanation of how Hitler built and maintained such a dedicated following. The shortcomings in the work do little to detract from the important place it holds in the body of literature devoted to understanding Hitler and the Third Reich.

Daniel E. Miller