

Hitler, Shame and Humiliation: The Intricate Web of Feelings Among the German Population Towards Hitler

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Abstract

This paper addresses the intricate web of feelings among the German population towards Hitler. It is argued that the 'little people' or 'broad masses' were routinely humiliated in the hierarchical structure of German society before and after World War I, and that they were lifted up by Hitler insofar as he gave them a sense of importance and purpose. It was only after the 'Zusammenbruch' after World War II that they slowly and painfully recognised that he had abused their gratitude and loyalty.

The aristocracy on the other hand had initially hoped that Hitler would become their puppet to regain national honour. They underestimated him and were humiliated by the fact that he was much more successful than expected and they had to bow to him.

During the war Hitler was a reason for pride among the 'broad masses' but a source of humiliation for the aristocracy.

However, after World War II, nobody could be proud. Humiliation was not a public phenomenon as it was after World War I, when a proud nation had been brought to its knees. After World War II humiliation was an inner experience felt by individuals. Every follower of Hitler must have felt humiliated by their own adherence to Hitler: the 'little people' for allowing a dangerous and dubious character like Hitler capture their hearts, the aristocracy for letting it happen.

Introduction

I remember an old German woman once saying: 'Wir kleinen Leute haben sowieso nichts zu sagen. Die da oben machen doch was sie wollen!' ['We 'little people' have nothing to say anyhow. Those 'up there' do what they want anyhow!'] With these words the old woman expressed the worldview of many 'little people' in Germany, especially of today's elder generation. Germany was a society in which humiliation was a daily experience for social inferiors. Since at least the eighteenth century, 'Particularly at the smaller and relatively

poorer courts of the German empire it was customary to make social inferiors emphatically aware of their subordinate position' (Elias 1993, 95). The humiliating helplessness of the 'little people' in Germany was 'commonsense,' part of their 'life-world,' or their 'habitus.'¹

How the 'broad masses' saw Hitler

My personal aim has always been to understand the deeper reasons why Hitler could gain so much power, to understand how atrocities like the Holocaust could happen, and mayhem against large parts of Europe could be carried out.² During many decades, on trains, in shops, or in waiting queues, whenever I travelled in Germany, I tried to get a glimpse of the uncensored voice of the 'little people' in Germany. And often I succeeded. Many times I overheard conversations between people who lived during Hitler's regime. I heard so to speak the voice of the 'Volk,' of the 'little people.'

I initially expected that Hitler would be attacked in such conversations as having been part of 'die da oben' ['them up there'] who 'messed it up' terribly. To my great surprise I heard more: Hitler, in such conversations often called 'der Führer,' seemed to be part of the 'little people's' family life. He was talked about like a dead brother or uncle who had gambled away everything, - but who still was a family member. I got the impression that people were somehow ashamed about him, in other words they would not admit to him publicly, but that he still was a family member one had a kind of pity with. Hitler had obviously succeeded in becoming a member of the 'little people' much more than any other leader before or after him. The exclamation 'Wenn das der Führer wüßte!' ['If 'der Führer' knew that!'] illustrates this. 'Wenn das der Führer wüßte!' 'little people' used to say when Hitler still was in power and when something went wrong in the administration or government. They said this because they trusted that he would fix the problem if he knew about it, that he would put 'die da oben' who 'did what they wanted' back in their right place.

To summarise, whatever I overheard showed that Hitler must have managed in an ingenious way to be perceived by the 'little people' as part of them, as being in one boat with them in opposition to 'those up there,' and this while he in fact was leading the country. He managed the impossible, namely escape responsibility for problems in the country while leading it. He not only escaped responsibility, more so, responsibility for problems was ascribed to others and his position was strengthened.

What did Hitler do to achieve this extraordinary result every politician can only dream of?

¹ 'In every society there is an "attitude of everyday life," a life world, which most of its members assume, indeed, take for granted, most of the time. This world goes without saying to the point that it is invisible under most conditions. Elias and Bourdieu referred to it when they spoke of the *habitus*, our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes which each member of a society shares with every other member. The habitus is not the whole culture, but that part which is so taken for granted as to be virtually invisible to its members. As Geertz suggested, ..., for the members of a society, the habitus is just "commonsense"' (Scheff 1997), p. 219.

² My father tried to 'sabotage' Hitler's ideology as a young man and was punished heartlessly for that. Although I was born long after the war, my father's struggle has given direction to my interests.

Hitler and the ‘broad masses’: a love affair

In his *Mein Kampf* Hitler analyses the failure of the Pan-Germanic movement in Vienna. In this context he explains that he thinks that the ‘tough sons of the masses’ are needed if any sincere fight shall be undertaken. He writes on page 94: ‘But for this the sons of the broad masses are required. They alone are determined and tough enough to carry through the fight to its bloody end’ (Hitler 1999). He continues on page 98: ‘... the power which has always started the greatest religious and political avalanches in history rolling has from time immemorial been the magic power of the spoken word, and that alone. Particularly the broad masses of the people can be moved only by the power of speech. And all great movements are popular movements, volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotional sentiments, stirred either by the cruel Goddess of Distress or by the firebrand of the word hurled among the masses; they are not the lemonade-like outpourings of literary aesthetics and drawing-room heroes. Only a storm of hot passion can turn the destinies of peoples, and he alone can arouse passion who bears it within himself.’

And this is what Hitler did: He aroused passions in the ‘broad masses.’³ Hitler was a master in displaying emotions, his repertoire ranged from heroic pathos to passionate tears. With his mass gatherings he employed means that later became the trademark of pop-stars. He was not just a controlled distant authority; in his intense emotionality he was ‘one of the Volk.’ By being like them and at the same time at the top he lifted them up; those who were used to occupy a humiliating lowly place in German society suddenly found themselves at the summit of history alongside him. Hitler did not burden them with complicated programmes (‘... the art of all truly great national leaders at all times consists ... in not dividing the attention of a people, but in concentrating it upon a single foe,’ *Mein Kampf*, 108); he just glorified ‘the Volk’s’ supposed ability to sacrifice for the ‘Endsieg’ (final victory). He offered an easy to understand and exiting elite identity and direction to the ‘little people’ who never before in history had been taken so seriously. Hitler even arranged for symphony orchestra music being played in factories, thus giving the ‘little people’ a sense of greatness.⁴ Hitler ennobled the ‘little people’ by including them into the elite Germanic Aryan race with an important national mission. The ‘broad masses’ might have taken little notice themselves of the details of national humiliations inflicted by the Versailles Treaty after World War I, - they might have been much too occupied with daily survival, - but Hitler ‘explained’ the situation to them and gave them a leading role to play.

Elias writes on page 387: ‘One of Hitler’s greatest talents – and one of the main factors in his success – was his intuitive, emotional understanding of the needs which a leader of the Germans and his crew had to satisfy in a critical situation. His own emotional needs corresponded to those of his followers. He reacted, without much reflection, to their emotional signals, verbal or non-verbal, with the emotional signals which they demanded and expected of a leader if they were to trust that he would be able to save them from an apparently hopeless situation of danger and despair’ (Elias 1996). Also Janka wrote, just recently, impressively about the collective dream, which Hitler amalgamated in his personality (Janka 1997).⁵

³ See Lepsius’ text about charismatic leadership (Lepsius 1993). I owe this reference to Odd-Bjørn Fure.

⁴ I owe this detail to Odd-Bjørn Fure and Jorunn Sem Fure.

⁵ I owe this reference to Jorunn Sem Fure.

‘The Volk’ was so ‘thankful’ for being included and raised up by their ‘Führer’ that they were ready to ‘reciprocate’ with their dedication to what they thought he asked them to want, namely the ‘Endsieg.’ ‘...Hitler, and Hitler alone, seemed in the end to stand in the eyes of many Germans between them and total annihilation’ (Elias 1996, 387). Especially women had been taken by Hitler’s charisma. ‘Women were glued to the radio whenever Hitler spoke,’ this I was told innumerable times during my investigations in Germany. Owings documents this in her recent book about German women (Owings 1995).⁶

‘The Volk’ recognised only too late that the ‘Endsieg’ was an inherently unattainable and suicidal goal. They realised too late that they had in fact not been raised up by Hitler, but ridiculed, abused, instrumentalised. They could have known though, if they had read his *Mein Kampf*, that he did not think highly of the very masses he incited: ‘... the political understanding of the broad masses is far from being highly enough developed to arrive at definite general political views of their own accord and seek out the suitable personalities ...’ (78).

Hitler and the aristocracy: a humiliation

The ‘broad masses’ loved Hitler, and they legitimised him. This must have been infuriating for members of the aristocracy who were used to believing that they were the rightly ordained rulers. To be ruled by a lowly little painter from Austria, who was, furthermore, hiding behind the masses, this must have been the third big humiliation faced by the aristocracy in the time span of only a few decades. The first humiliation was the loss of World War I and the Versailles Treaty. Since the aristocracy were the primary carrier of national sentiment, they, above all, experienced the national humiliation resulting from the Versailles Treaty.

But humiliation did not end there for the aristocracy. The abdication of the emperor, and the founding of the Weimar republic was the next blow. It entailed the destruction of the divinely ‘ordained’ aristocratic order and caused constant humiliation. And thirdly, the rise of Hitler was the most unbelievable humiliation. The aristocracy thought at first, quite falsely, that they could ‘domesticate’ Hitler. For them he was a parvenu who high jacked their dearest theme, national sentiment, and worse, incited ‘the masses,’ making himself irreplaceable as their master. Many aristocrats called Hitler ‘the demon’ (according to a testimonial 3.8.1999 which I received during fieldwork in Germany from members of the aristocracy). For those among the aristocracy who collaborated with Hitler, the need to do so must have been felt as utter humiliation: they were forced to work with the ‘demon,’ because the ‘demon’ had control over the feelings of the nation. What could have been worse?

Hitler was thus both a reason for pride, pride among the ‘broad masses,’ and also a cause of humiliation, humiliation for the aristocracy.

Why the Germans did not get depressed or angry after the ‘Zusammenbruch’

For the aristocracy, at least for those segments who felt marginalized by the Weimar republic and by Hitler’s advancement, the loss of World War II must have been more than a disaster

⁶ I owe this reference to Jorunn Sem Fure.

for Germany: The ‘Zusammenbruch’ [collapse] of Germany must also have been a secret triumph, - a triumph because it represented Hitler’s failure.

On the other side, the ‘broad masses’ who had tried to give their ‘Führer’ what they thought he wanted, namely the ‘Endsieg,’ these ‘broad masses’ must have felt devastated and even deeply ashamed that their sacrifice did not suffice. ‘It is probably true to say that a large part of the German people continued to believe unshakeably in the Führer until he was dead, and perhaps for quite a time afterwards’ (Elias 1996, 387).

Why took Germans to work after the ‘Zusammenbruch’ at the end of the World War II instead of getting depressed or angry? Were not the humiliations after World War II considerable? Large territories were for example lost to Poland, to ‘Slavs,’ and Germans had learned to despise the Slavs as lowly beings.⁷ Why did this humiliation not lead to ‘appropriate’ reactions such as, for example, plans for retaliation?

Was it the ‘Unfähigkeit zu trauern’ [the inability to mourn], described by Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1982, which inhibited the German people? Or was it, as Sem Fure⁸ hypothesises, that Germany was perhaps too destroyed to be able to imagine retaliation? What additional reasons could we find? Could it be that the ‘Zusammenbruch’ triggered too many divergent feelings, too many feelings other than national humiliation? Could it be that the ‘Zusammenbruch’ was felt to be shameful by those who could not offer Hitler the ‘Endsieg,’ and as a triumph by those, especially the aristocracy, who had felt humiliated by Hitler?

Perhaps those who were devastated and ashamed, the ‘broad masses,’ furthermore slowly understood that Hitler had abused them? The ‘broad masses’ had been like Hitler’s children, they had extended to him a kind of absolute faithfulness, as adolescents might thank someone who had talked to them like grown-ups and made them feel important. But, in fact, they had not been mature enough to test their hero’s true intentions. Like children they were seduced. Could it be that they ‘grew up’ after World War II? Could it be that national humiliation was unimportant compared with the shame the ‘broad masses’ felt as soon as they understood that Hitler had abused them?

But these ‘broad masses’ had learned something under Hitler; they had learned that they were important and that their work could make a difference. Perhaps this made them take to work after World War II instead of taking to national honour again? Perhaps they separated out their capacity to sacrifice and work from any ideology, even from national ideology?

And meanwhile the aristocracy had reason to be ashamed, since they had helped discredit national ideology by allowing a ‘mad-man’ to spoil it, without even having had the ‘guts’ to stop him. Their only feeble satisfaction was to say to themselves afterwards: ‘We knew that this Hitler was an incompetent parvenu.’

The ‘broad masses’ had been lured, the aristocracy had let it happen: nobody could be proud after World War II. The humiliation was not a national one like after World War I, when a proud nation had been brought to its knees. Instead, after World War II humiliation was an

⁷ ‘Negative attitudes towards Polish people were indeed present both before, during and after the war in some parts of the eastern German population...’ writes Jorunn Sem Fure in her chapter ‘Controversial memories. Departing historical experience and contexts for memory’ which is part of her not yet published doctoral dissertation.

⁸ Jorunn Sem Fure in a personal note 30.11.1999.

inner experience. Every follower of Hitler must have felt humiliated by his or her own adherence to Hitler. After World War II Germans recognised that they had humiliated themselves by allowing a hazardous character like Hitler to capture their hearts, and they were ashamed. They hid their faces and devoted themselves to work.

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