

# Was Hitler an All-Powerful Dictator?

## A) Hitler's relationship with the German people

### **Source A – Nazi theorist Ernst Huber in 1935**

*The Führer is the bearer of the people's will; he is independent of all groups, associations and interests, but he is bound by laws which are inherent in the nature of his people... In his will the will of the people is realised... He shapes the collective will of the people within himself and he embodies the political unit and entirety of the people in opposition to individual interests.*

### **Source B – Justice Minister Hans Frank in a speech in 1938**

*The Führer is supreme judge of the nation... The Führer is not backed by constitutional clauses, but by outstanding achievements which are based on the combination of a calling and of his devotion to the people. The Führer does not put into effect a constitution according to legal guidelines laid before him but by historic achievements which serve the future of his people... Constitutional law in the Third Reich is the legal formulation of the historical will of the Führer.*

All historians agree that Hitler dominated Germany from 1933 to 1945, though they do not agree on how he exercised such power. After the Enabling Act he was formally able to issue decrees. This gradually became the normal way laws were made, bypassing the Reichstag. But, in addition, his wishes, and even his officials' interpretations of his wishes, served as laws. For Hitler's power was based on his unique relationship with the German people. He alone knew what the Germans wanted and he alone could fulfil their needs. His will was absolute because it was the will of the people. Thus Hitler's power did not rest just on his formal position within a system of government. It was much more elemental. It was based on his mission in history and the will of the Führer as a revelation of the German people's destiny. There should thus be no power overriding this force. There were no institutional restraints on him.

### **ACTIVITY 1**

Decide which of the statements below best summarises the views of the prominent Nazis in Sources A and B:

- a) Hitler is an absolute dictator who is free to do whatever he wants.
- b) Hitler is all powerful because he represents the will of the people.
- c) Hitler has to act according to popular wishes.

## B) The Nature and Effects of the Hitler Myth

This system may seem absurd, but after 14 years of weak, divided government, and economic and international humiliation, many Germans looked for a MESSIAH. The Nazi Party had been built on this FUHRERPRINZIP (leadership principle), and now it was applied to all Germany. Helped by successful policies and a powerful propaganda machine, Hitler built up a peculiar form of charismatic leadership, sustained by a powerful Hitler myth. Ian Kershaw's *The 'Hitler Myth'. Image and Reality in the Third Reich* analyses the powerful position Hitler had in the Third Reich due to the image of Hitler that was portrayed. Kershaw's view is summarised in Chart 1.

↓ Extracts from Kershaw's *The 'Hitler Myth'. Image and Reality in the Third Reich*

### **Source C – The support it gained (p. 171)**

*Although the extremes of the personality cult had probably gripped only a minority of the population... elements of the personality cult had attained far wider resonance and ... affected the vast majority of the population... Hitler stood for at least some things they admired, and for many had become the symbol and embodiment of the national revival which the Third Reich had in many respects been perceived to accomplish. He had evoked in extreme measure and focused upon himself many irrational, but none the less real and strong, feelings of selfless devotion, sacrifice, and passionate commitment to a national idea...*

### **Source D – Its nature and effects (p. 1)**

*The adulation [praise] of Hitler by millions of Germans who might otherwise have been only marginally committed to Nazism meant that the person of the Führer, as the focal point of basic consensus, formed a crucial integratory [bringing together] force in the Nazi system of rule. Without Hitler's massive personal popularity, the high level of plebiscitary acclamation [support in referenda] which the regime could repeatedly call upon – legitimating its actions at home and abroad, defusing opposition, boosting the autonomy of the leadership from the traditional national-conservative elites who had imagined they would keep Hitler in check, and sustaining the frenetic [fevered] and increasingly dangerous momentum of Nazi rule – is unthinkable. Most important of all, Hitler's huge platform of popularity made his own power position ever more unassailable, providing the foundation for the selective radicalisation process in the Third Reich by which his personal ideological obsessions became translated into attainable reality.*

### What was it?

A carefully cultivated image which much evidence suggests was widely believed. Hitler was portrayed as someone who:

- Personified the nation and stood aloof from selfish interests
- Understood the German people
- Was the architect of Germany's economic miracle
- Was the representative of popular justice
- Defended Germany against its enemies, e.g. Jews, Bolsheviks, corrupt SA, extremists
- Was responsible for all the major successes of government.

In foreign affairs, he:

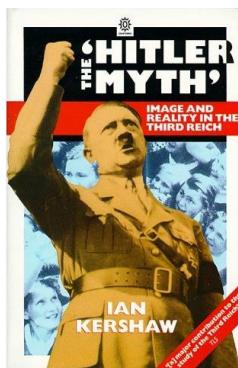
- Was the rebuilder of Germany's strengths.
- Was a mighty bulwark against the nation's enemies.

### Why did the myth develop and gain credence?

Kershaw identifies the following reasons:

- It was a reaction to the divisions and weaknesses of the old Weimar system.
- It satisfied people's emotional need for strong government.
- It reinforced a German tradition of authoritarian leadership.
- It developed from the long-established Führer principle in the Nazi Party.
- It was sustained by Hitler's successes after 1933.
- It was enhanced by propaganda.

## CHART 1: THE HITLER MYTH



### How was it conveyed?

Through the powerful propaganda machinery headed by Goebbels.

### What were its effects?

The myth contributed to Hitler's great personal popularity. By the late 1930s an estimated 90% of Germans admired him. Only a small minority rejected the Hitler myth. It sustained the regime, and brought most Germans together through its strong emotional appeal. It also helped to cover up the regime's inconsistencies and failures. Thus day-to-day failings could be blamed on minor party leaders, not on their great leader.

However, the myth eventually contributed to the decline of the Third Reich. Such a personalised system, without formal constraints, was inherently unstable. Hitler's popularity gave him more freedom from the elites and led to a radical momentum that weakened the regime. Furthermore, in a sense, Hitler became the victim of his own myth; he came to believe himself infallible (never wrong). He thus moved away from being a calculating, OPPORTUNIST politician. As Kershaw comments: 'The day on which Hitler started to believe in his own myth marked in a sense the beginning of the end of the Third Reich.' Moreover, major military failures after 1941 led to declining belief in the myth.

## **ACTIVITY 2**

Read Sources C and D.

1. How did Hitler's obvious popular support strengthen his position at home and abroad?
2. What effect did his popularity have on the overall development of the regime?
3. In Source C, what reasons does Kershaw give for Hitler's popularity?
4. 'Even now millions of Germans draw a distinction between the Führer and the party, refusing their support to the latter while believing in Hitler.' What key aspect of the Hitler myth does this comment by Goebbels in 1941 illustrate?
5. Why do you think most Germans did not see through the myth?

### **C) Hitler's Role in Decision-Making**

A surprising picture emerges when one examines how decisions were actually taken in Nazi Germany. Hitler acted as a kind of absolute monarch, surrounded by officials competing with each other to implement the leader's wishes. Thus Hitler provided the overall vision, which was then interpreted and turned into detailed policies by those around him. Yet he was remarkably uninvolved in actual decision-making and administrative matters. Most decisions in Nazi Germany were not made by Hitler, even though it was his will that was being implemented. The Führer system meant that there was no need for a formal power or decision-making structure; Hitler's will was law.

Hitler's own work style was haphazard, and reflected his unbureaucratic approach. He often watched films well into the night, went to bed at 2.30 a.m. and got up late. He spent far more time making rambling monologues (speeches) to his entourage (attendants/followers) than in discussing detailed policy. Furthermore, he was often away from the capital Berlin, a city he disliked. He preferred his mountain retreat, the Berghof, where he had lived from 1928 onwards. From 1938 he withdrew even more, and concentrated on foreign policy. After 1941, with few successes to announce, Hitler was seen far less in public. The historian Peterson has provided a striking description of how the Third Reich operated at the top:

**Source E** – Edward Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler's Power*, 1969, pp. 432, 446

This view of Hitler – the man who does not decide – would help explain the eternal confusion of the men working for him, a literal anthill of aspiring and fearing people trying to please the ‘great one’ or escape his wrath or to avoid notice altogether, and never quite sure... what he wanted them to do after they said ‘Heil Hitler’... The result was the division of domination into thousands of little empires of ambitious men, domains that were largely unchecked by law [for this] had been replaced by Hitler’s will, which was largely a mirage.

If a minister ordered something to happen it could just be on the basis of Hitler’s will; it was thus obeyed. If, as often happened, there was disagreement amongst the people at the top, then whoever managed actually to get (or to convince the others that he had!) Hitler’s direct approval won. Many of Hitler’s decisions amounted to a quick grunt of approval to a summary recommendation from State Secretary Hans Lammers who then conveyed the decision back to those involved. Much of this was done orally rather than on paper.



← The Berghof, Hitler’s villa on the Obersalzberg, was built with the profits of *Mein Kampf*. Hitler preferred to live here rather than the Chancellery in Berlin. It was destroyed in an Allied air raid in April 1945. The ruins were levelled in 1952 and trees planted on the site. Designed by Hitler, it had huge rooms, five rings of fortifications and was defended by 20,000 troops.



The Chancellery in Berlin illustrates much about how the Third Reich operated. In 1938 Hitler’s massive new building was completed, symbolising power and order. Yet inside there was chaos. At one stage there were five Chancellery offices (Reich Chancellery; Presidential Chancellery under Otto Meissner; Office of Hitler’s personal adjutant under Wilhelm Bruckner; Office of the Führer’s Deputy under Martin Bormann), all claiming to represent Hitler.

Hitler was generally preoccupied with foreign affairs, especially during the war, or with building projects, and left his fellow ministers and PLENIPOTENTIARIES to make decisions. The rivalry of different groups, without formal controls, trying to implement Hitler’s will led to a growing lawlessness and brutality. This radicalisation culminated in the HOLOCAUST.

In his book *Hitler 1889-1936. Hubris* (pp. 529-30), Kershaw describes the development of the ‘System’ between 1934 and 1938 as follows: ‘One feature of this process was the fragmentation of government as Hitler’s form of personalised rule distorted the machinery of administration and called into being a panoply [array] of overlapping and competing agencies dependent in differing ways upon the ‘will of the Führer’. At the same time, the racial and expansionist goals at the heart of Hitler’s own WELTANSCHAUUNG began in these early years gradually to come more sharply into focus, though by no means as a direct consequence of Hitler’s own actions.’ Chart 2 on the next page tries to show these ‘overlapping and competing agencies’ in diagrammatic form.

### ACTIVITY 3

1. What role did Hitler play in decision-making?
2. What were the results of the absence of formal decision-making?
3. What different reasons are given in Source F and H for Hitler’s unwillingness to take decisions?

**Source F** – From *Twelve Years with Hitler*, the memoirs of Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s Press Chief, published in 1955.

*In the 12 years of his rule in Germany Hitler produced the biggest confusion in government that has ever existed in a civilised state. During his period of government, he removed from the organisation of the state all clarity of leadership and produced a completely opaque network of competences. It was not all laziness or an excessive degree of tolerance which led the otherwise so energetic and forceful Hitler to tolerate this real witch’s cauldron of struggles for position and conflicts over competence. It was intentional. With this technique he systematically disorganised the upper echelons [levels] of the Reich leadership in order to develop and further the authority of his own will until it became a despotic tyranny.*

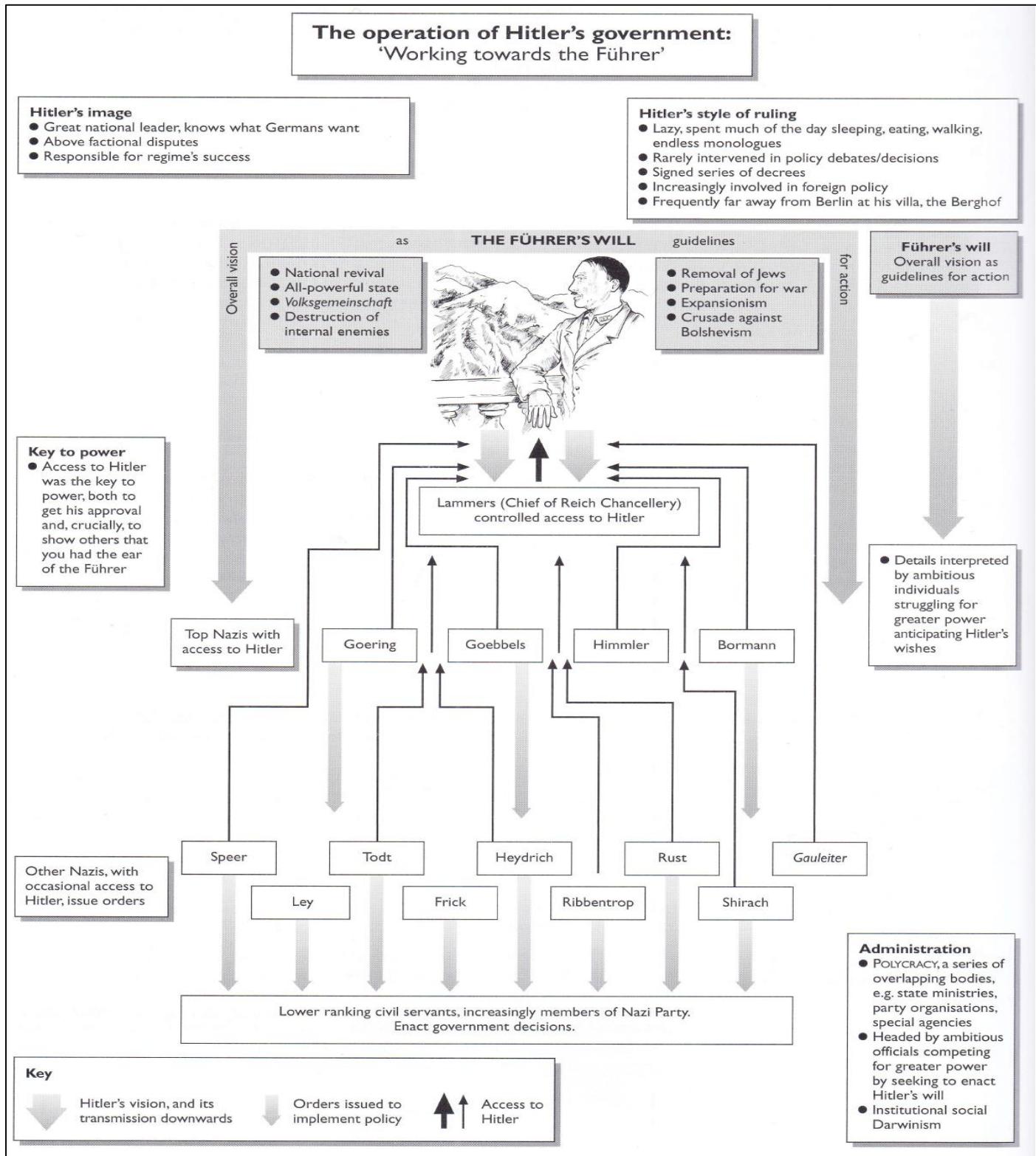
**Source G** – Werner Willikens, State Secretary in the Food Ministry, in a speech in February 1934

Everyone who has the opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can hardly dictate from above everything he intends to realise sooner or later. On the contrary, up till now everyone with a post in the new Germany has worked best when he has, so to speak, worked towards the Führer... in fact, it is the duty of everybody to try to work towards the Führer along the lines he would wish. Anyone who makes mistakes will notice it soon enough. But anyone who really works towards the Führer along his lines and towards his goals will certainly both now and in the future one day have the finest reward in the form of the sudden legal confirmation of his work.

**Source H** – Fritz Wiedemann, one of Hitler's adjutants in *Der Mann, der Feldherr Werden Wollte* (The man the soldier wanted to be), 1964, p. 69

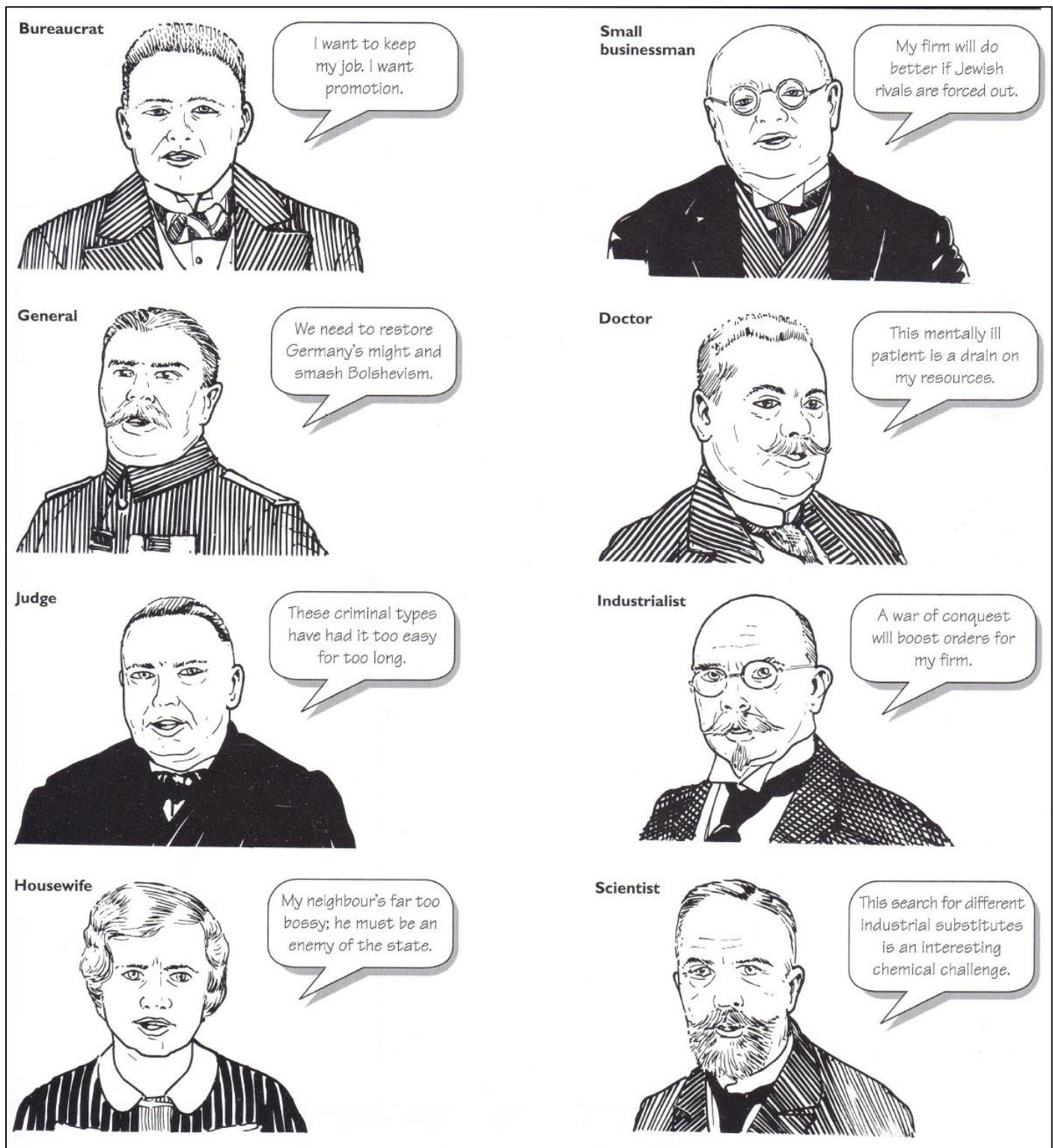
Hitler normally appeared shortly before lunch, quickly read through Reich Press Chief Dietrich's press cuttings, and then went into lunch. So it became more and more difficult for Lammers and Meissner to get him to make decisions which he alone could make as head of state... He disliked the study of documents. I have sometimes secured decisions from him, even ones about important matters, without his ever asking to see the relevant files. He took the view that many things sorted themselves out on their own if one did not interfere.

## CHART 2 – HOW DID THE THIRD REICH ACTUALLY OPERATE?



### **CHART 3 – WHY WERE NAZIS POLICIES ACTUALLY IMPLEMENTED?**

During the Third Reich, most existing officials kept their posts. They implemented Nazi policies for the sort of reasons given in Chart 3:



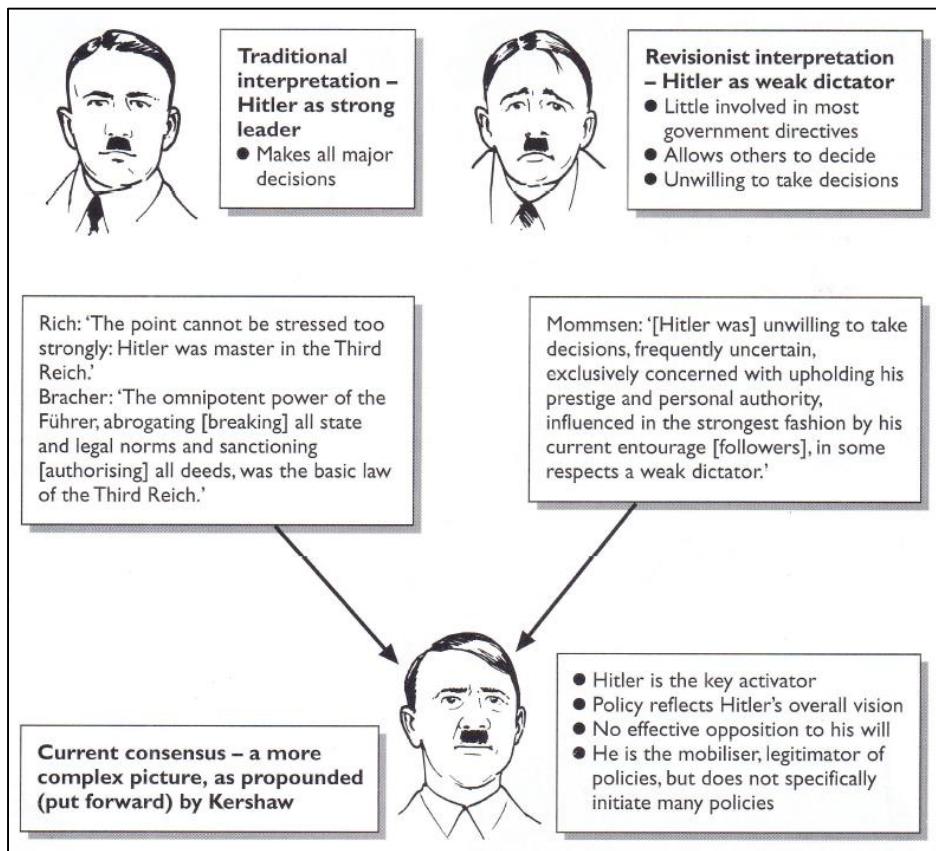
#### **ACTIVITY 4**

Explain why some Germans were prepared to implement Nazi policies.

## Conclusion: Was Hitler an all-powerful dictator?

Chart 4 illustrates a major historical debate that has raged over the Third Reich. Nazi Germany used to be seen, alongside Stalin's USSR, as the classic case of a totalitarian regime. In this view Hitler was an omnipotent dictator; he made a decision, which was smoothly implemented by his disciplined subordinates. Since the 1960s, much detailed study of the actual operation of the Nazi system of government has challenged this view. The Nazi regime has now been compared to a feudal structure, with Hitler as a 'weak dictator'. Thus he frequently did not intervene in many areas. He permitted, and even encouraged, considerable argument amongst his subordinates, and might intervene merely to endorse the decision of whoever emerged as winner.

### CHART 4 – THREE VIEWS OF A DICTATOR



Kershaw has argued that elements of both views are correct; that Hitler was often uninvolved in decisions, but that this illustrates his great power. To maintain his image as the infallible leader, he could not be involved in factional struggles, but just let the strongest official win. All his subordinates worked along the lines the Führer would wish; nothing would have been done without these central ideas. So Hitler was crucial, but he did not need to send out a stream of directives. Whenever he did intervene, his view was unchallenged. For most of the time, his subordinates competed with each other to 'work towards the Führer'.

### **ACTIVITY 5**

- Study the four examples of decision-making on the opposite page and assess what they show about the role of Hitler in the Third Reich. What evidence, if any, do they provide of the following roles for Hitler? Make your own copy of the following table to help complete this question:

Decision-making examples	a) Was he the direct initiator of action?	b) Did he control policies?	c) Was he the overall inspirer of policy?	d) Just responding to others' proposals and actions?	e) Was he opting out of a clear decision?	Judgement: Strong or Weak Dictator – or both?
1. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws						
2. Kristallnacht 1938						
3. Euthanasia						
4. Horse Racing						

- Mini-Essay (800 words max): '**Hitler was an all-powerful dictator who had complete control over Nazi Germany.**' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, making sure you refer to the following three points:
  - His formal position as Führer and his claimed relationship to the German People
  - The nature and effects of the Hitler myth
  - Hitler's role in decision making

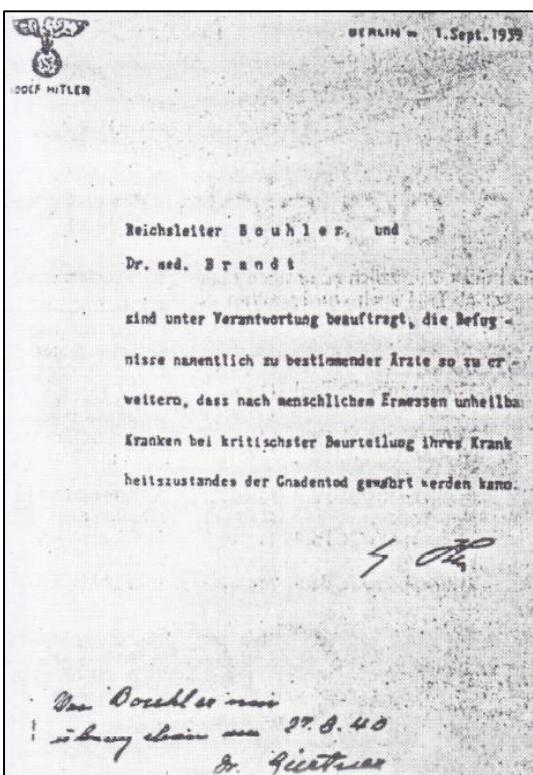
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## DECISION-MAKING IN NAZI GERMANY: FOUR EXAMPLES



↑ Clearing up after *Kristallnacht*

↓ SOURCE I – Hitler's note to Bouhler and Brandt authorising them to carry out 'mercy killings'. It reads: 'Reichsleiter [Reich leader] Bouhler and Dr med. Brandt are charged with the responsibility to extend the powers of specific doctors in such a way that, after the most careful assessment of their condition, those suffering from illness deemed to be incurable may be granted a mercy death.' The note was written in October 1939 but backdated to 1<sup>st</sup> September.



### 1. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws

Hitler's anti-semitism was well known, but apart from some actions in 1933 there had not been many moves against the Jews. By 1935 there were strong pressures from within the party – especially from the *Gauleiter*, reflecting pressure from below – to enact the party's 1920 programme and remove Jews from citizenship. In 1935 there was a wave of SA attacks on Jews. Other leading officials saw this as distasteful, and wanted the situation regularised. Schacht, for example, was worried about the effects of such action on exports. So there was pressure for legislations to satisfy two groups, radicals and moderates. Hitler eventually intervened. At the last minute he switched his Nuremberg speech from foreign policy (mainly about Abyssinia which Fascist Italy had just invaded) to anti-Jewish legislation, leading to the so-called Nuremberg Laws. These were written overnight by civil servants and passed by the Reichstag meeting at Nuremberg. In 1936 there was even worse street violence than in 1935; but Hitler was concerned about the approaching Olympics, and ordered it to be stopped, which it was.

### 2. *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass or Crystal Night)

In 1938 there was again growing anti-semitic action on the streets. Goebbels, in particular, fired it up in Berlin. There was also violence in the towns of Hesse and Magdeburg. On 8<sup>th</sup> November the assassination of a Nazi official in Paris by a Jew was used to extend the action. The next day, at the Munich Putsch anniversary meeting, Goebbels suggested to Hitler that in the wake of such anti-semitic demonstrations they should encourage such measures; Hitler gave his approval, and that night there was the wave of anti-Jewish violence known as *Kristallnacht*.

### 3. Euthanasia

It was fairly widely known that Hitler favoured the removal of what he saw as feeble, inferior people in order to foster the German master race. In 1938 a father wrote to Hitler requesting that his ill son be put out of his misery (killed). This letter was just one of hundreds of personal petitions Germans sent to their leader every week, most of which were dealt with by his subordinates. Chancellery Secretary Philipp Bouhler, seeing the adoption of his proposal as an opportunity to increase his own power, got Hitler's verbal permission. Through the Party Chancellery, Hitler's personal physician, Dr Karl Brandt, sent out a letter to doctors inviting nominations for EUTHANASIA. Without any pressure, 60,000 were nominated. However, doctors asked for clear authorisation. Unusually, Hitler wrote a few lines authorising Bouhler to organise it (see Source I). This is the only existing document signed by Hitler authorising killing, although since it was simply a note the process was still technically illegal because it was not authorised by law. Under the code name 'Aktion T4', 100,000 were killed over the next three years. In 1941, following Bishop Galen's public protest, the programme was formally suspended, but it was soon resumed.

### 4. Horse Racing

In 1943 Goebbels, responding to workers' complaints, sought a directive from Hitler to ban horse racing. Hitler issued a series of conflicting directives, responding to different local situations, and after five months of confusion it was decided to leave the matter to local *Gauleiter*.

