

Interpretations of Hitler's Dictatorship: Where did power lie in the Third Reich?

By August 1934 Hitler had consolidated his position and had begun to construct a totalitarian regime. Many people have an image of such regimes as extremely efficient. When this is combined with the stereotypical images of supposed German efficiency it is easy to see how the popular view of the extremely efficient Third Reich has developed. This indeed was the image the Third Reich portrayed of itself. However, we need to examine critically such views and look beyond the Nazi propaganda to see how the system actually operated.

In the last 30 years historical analysis of the nature of the Nazi state has been radically transformed. The traditional image of a smoothly efficient totalitarian regime, dominated by Hitler, has been considerably modified. A mass of detailed studies of Nazi rule, at local level and in central government agencies, has produced a more complex view. The Nazi machinery of government was a maze of overlapping bodies, and has been described as polycratic, feudal and even chaotic. All these terms have their merits:

- **Polycratic** means there were many different bodies. Overlapping the existing ministries were Nazi bodies. If a problem emerged, Hitler often set up a new body: for example, the Office of the Four-Year Plan to fulfil the autarkic aims of the regime.
- **Feudal** has been used to describe the dominance of Nazi leaders at the head of their agencies, a role similar to that of medieval barons in charge of their followers. Just as the barons owed ultimate loyalty to the king, so the Nazi leaders did to the Fuhrer. Hitler saw loyalty in personal not institutional terms, so he did not mind Goering or Himmler building up great power, as he was convinced of their superior loyalty to him. Of course, this did not stop the 'barons' quarrelling, something which, it has been said, please Hitler, since it neutralised any potential threats to him.
- **Chaotic** is used because the overlapping of bodies meant it was unclear where responsibility lay. The confusion was resolved only when Hitler intervened, which he rarely did. The chaos stemmed from the charismatic nature of Hitler's leadership: that is to say, everyone relying on the leader, with no clear power structure. Access to Hitler seemed to be the secret of success, and all the top Nazis had to make regular trips to his residences to keep in with Hitler.

SOURCE A – I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 1993 (3rd ed.), p. 74

... the dissolution of the government into a multiplicity of competing and non-coordinated ministries, party offices, and hybrid [combined] agencies all claiming to interpret the Fuhrer's will. Hand in hand with this development went the growing autonomy of the Fuhrer authority itself, detaching itself and isolating itself from any framework of corporate government and correspondingly subject to increasing delusions of grandeur and diminishing sense of reality.

The overall structure of government was reduced to a shambles of constantly shifting power bases or warring factions.

Conflicting interpretations: intentionalist v Structuralist

Now that the polycratic view of the Third Reich has won the argument against the totalitarian view, debate has moved to the reasons for this chaotic structure. This has become part of the major debate about the Third Reich between INTENTIONALISTS and STRUCTURALISTS.

This is a reflection of a broader debate about the nature of history. Some historians put more stress on powerful individuals as exercising a major influence on historical development. In this view what major leaders, like Hitler, Stalin and Mao, wanted is very important in explaining events, as they were in a position to enact their aims. Other historians tend to put more stress on broader historical developments, especially the economic structure of society, political factors, etc. They do not deny the influence of people, either leaders or the masses, but see their actions as determined more by the conditions in which they operated than by their own wishes. These two approaches have played a major part in debates about the nature of the Third Reich.

SOURCE B – The historian Stanley Payne has summarised the views in *History of Fascism 1914-45*, 1995, p. 206

The intentionalists hold that Hitler had clear goals from the start and was firmly in charge of all major decisions... structuralist interpretations assert that the course of events and the major decisions were influenced much more by the structure of.

TALKING POINT

Most historians would argue that history is determined by a combination of the actions of people and broader historical developments; the degree of influence can vary. Karl Marx, who is often assumed, misleadingly, to be a crude economic determinist, once wrote: 'Men make their own history but they make it in conditions determined by their past.' Do you agree with this point?

ACTIVITY 1

Identify which statement in each pair reflects an **intentionalist** and which a **structuralist** position and enter them in your own copy of the table below.

Aspect	Intentionalist position	Structuralist position
a) Hitler's vision		
b) Hitler's power		
c) Reasons for chaotic nature of Third Reich		
d) The Holocaust		
e) Second World War		
f) Nature of Nazism		

A – Hitler's Vision

- i. Hitler had a distinct *Weltanschauung* (world view). He had clear aims, especially anti-semitism, anti-Bolshevism and *Lebensraum*. The key to the Third Reich is Hitler's aims.
- ii. Hitler's ideas were not very coherent. He was an opportunist who wanted power.

B – Hitler's Power

- i. Hitler's position within the Third Reich was quite weak; he was wary of potential opposition, and was not able to dominate events.
- ii. Hitler had great power, and deliberately fostered rivalries.

C – Reasons for the chaotic nature of the Third Reich

- i. The administrative confusion arose from the nature of Hitler's charismatic leadership and was not deliberate policy.
- ii. The chaotic administrative system was a product of the deliberate intention of Hitler to foster rivalries and competing authorities in order to enhance his own power as the decision-maker.

D – The Holocaust

- i. Hitler aimed to exterminate the Jews and was eventually able to do so.
- ii. The Holocaust developed from a process of radicalisation in the regime and the influence of other events, especially the war.

E – The Second World War

- i. Hitler aimed at world war, and this desire was the prime determinant of German foreign policy.
- ii. Although Hitler had broad overall aims in foreign policy, he had no blueprint for world war.

F – Nature of Nazism

- i. Nazism should be seen more in the light of the general interwar phenomenon of Fascism.
- ii. Nazism can be seen as Hitlerism, dependent upon Hitler's vision, power and decisions.

Activity 1 identifies broad trends in interpretations but it is a simplification. Few historians would agree with all of the statements in either of the columns in the table. Intentionalism and structuralism should be seen as broad perspectives that may influence historians, rather than distinct SCHOOLS to which historians belong. Some historians call themselves Marxist (though there is considerable variety of opinion within this group), but most historians do not label themselves. Whether their approaches then towards the EMPIRICAL or the THEORETICAL, they would claim to be studying history to establish as near to the truth as possible, not searching for confirmation of the correctness of a school of interpretation. As a student, you need to be aware of different perspectives but be wary of making simplified statements about historians' views being the result of the school to which they supposedly belong.

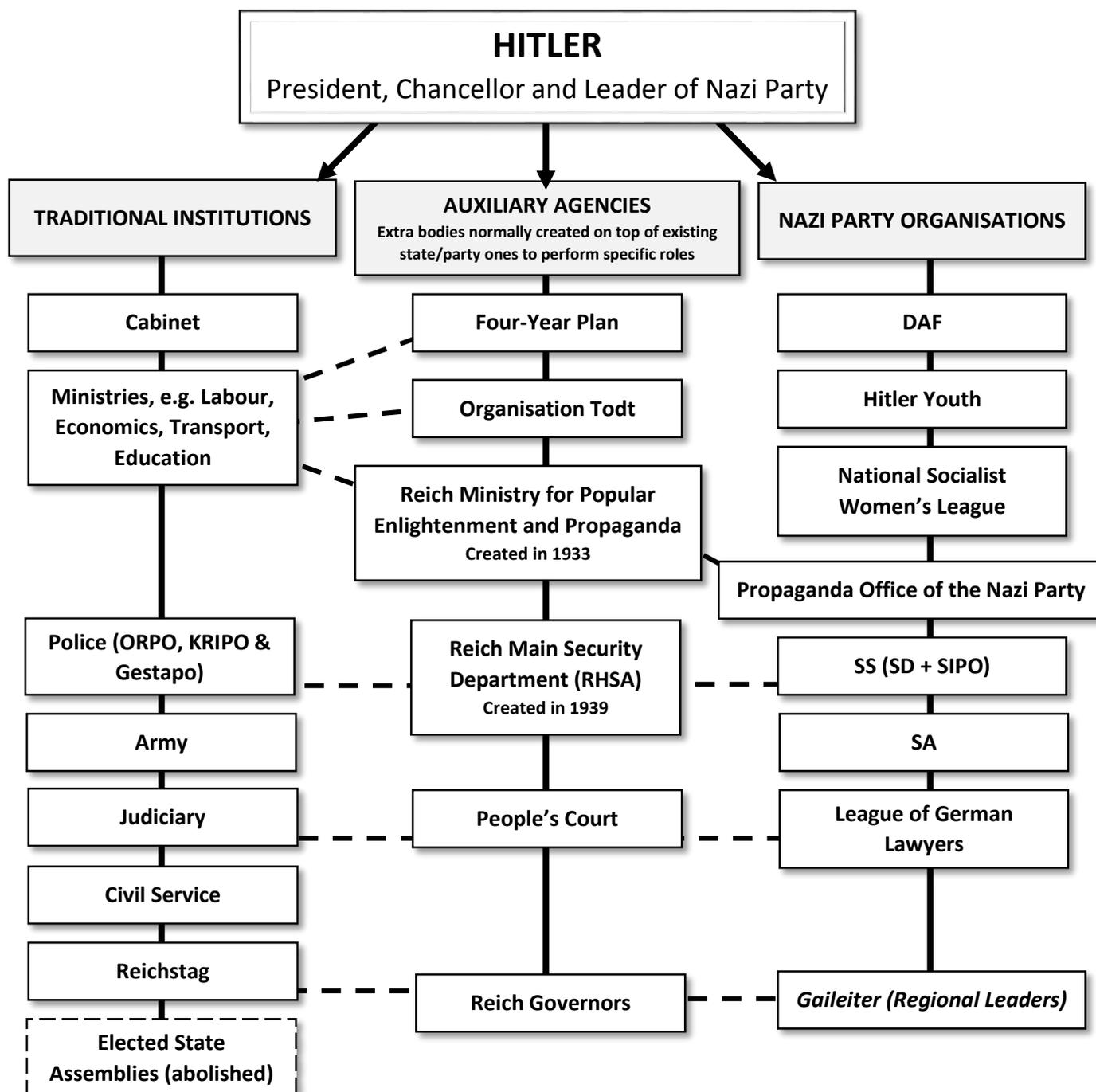
How was such an allegedly chaotic system so successful?

As you were reading the description of the chaos of the Third Reich, you might have been asking yourself, 'Well, if it was so chaotic, how on earth did it survive for 12 years? Surely, the fact that there was no real threat to the regime from within Germany, that it conquered most of Europe between 1939 and 1941, and that it was only brought down by the combined might of the USSR, the USA and the British Empire shows how strong and efficient it was.'

This is a good case, but also consider that initially the effects of the inefficiencies of the system were not apparent because:

- The internal rivalries generated a degree of effectiveness.
- The extensive police machine and the popularity of Hitler's policies made opposition difficult.
- Hitler inherited a well-established administrative and industrial structure which he did not disrupt, and which continued to function well. Many of Germany's achievements were despite the regime, not because of it.
- Germany's opponents, especially France, Poland and the USSR, were initially weak.
- The USA did not enter the war to begin with.

Chart 1 - Structures within the Nazi state



ACTIVITY 2

Historians have been reluctant to represent the chaotic Nazi government system diagrammatically, but we have tried to do this in Chart 1 on the previous page. It attempts to illustrate the polycratic nature of the regime.

1. Explain in your own words the key points that emerge from Chart 1.
2. In 1997, in the BBC TV series *The Nazis. A Warning from History*, for which Ian Kershaw acted as a consultant, there was one programme on the nature of the Nazi state and the role of the Gestapo that was called 'Chaos and Consent – the Nazi Rule of Germany'. How appropriate do you consider this title?
3. Look back at Source B. Define what is meant by: a) Intentionalist b) Structuralist?
4. In your opinion, which position better describes the nature of the Third Reich? Why?
5. The historian Sax has usefully described the power structure as a 'systemless system'. Explain what he meant.