HITLER: PHENOMENON AND PORTENT

By Paul Scheffer

The National Socialist Party came into being in Germany eleven years ago, founded by a group of seven men. Adolf Hitler was the seventh to join. He was soon, however, “the man” in the group; and so he is today in the party numbering millions of adherents which is often designated by his name. There may be cleverer, better educated, more energetic individuals in the party than he. All the same, “the Nazis” and “Hitler’s Party” are synonymous terms. The party, such as it is, exists because there has been a man like Hitler for it to gather around, a man of a definite driving force that is powerful and contagious; an electric person whose appeal is irresistible.

I have used the word party as the term readiest to hand. It is not, however, a case of Hitler’s having added just one more parliamentary machine to the many — the far too many — which figure in German political life. Here is a movement nourished on a variety of social, moral and economic forces and which has hardly reached the political stage in its evolution. For this very reason Hitler’s party is as intolerant as any young movement can be. It has as yet no definite program, nor as yet any definite support which it can use to bargain with other parties and measure its pretensions with reference to what it can actually obtain. In a word, the Hitler movement has not yet assumed its rational physiognomy. The currents of feeling which it expresses lie deep down in German life. They have still to come to practical expression.

As always happens in such cases, there is no way of knowing whether the party can ever take on full status as a party. We do not know whether its leaders feel certain that it can. We are not even sure whether Hitler in his secret heart is free from doubts, whether, out of the inner aspirations, the chemically pure ideals, which his following shares with him — out of so much still fluid metal — he can forge a weapon of steel adapted to practical politics. We do not know whether at bottom he is a “strong man.”

It is difficult for traditional democracies to picture embryonic political movements of the Hitler type in their beginnings. But no less idealistic, no less utopian, were the beginnings of the Communist movement in Russia. That movement, too, started
with a few individuals of glowing convictions and extremist aims. Did not Italian Fascism likewise begin with a few persons of strong but vague aspirations—vague so far as any application of them to practical life was concerned? And did not those petty groups enlarge suddenly into big organizations? As late as 1927 the Fascist Minister of Justice, Signor Rocco, remarked to the author of this article that the theory and the general program of Fascism would have to evolve out of an actual struggle with realities; that the Fascist movement did not derive from a program, nor was it being guided by one; that the program would be supplied by the march of events. In Fascism, accordingly, the prime factor has been something altogether subjective, a driving force that does not know precisely where it is headed, but which, wherever it is, will be sure of itself. Mussolini has been a statesman and not merely a stirrer of emotions. The dynamic elements which he crystallized, he soon pressed into the service of very definite aims—and that was the case with Lenin, too. The leaders of the National Socialists in Germany admit, in thoughtful moments, that for "ten years or so" they will make mistakes, even bad ones. But the success of their Bolshevist and Fascist predecessors inclines them to view that prospect with calm. Those who consider the Hitler movement from a detached standpoint—independently, maybe, or even with sympathy or hostility—should not beguile themselves with the consideration that it is "utopian," or that "it has no fixed program," or that its concrete demands are "nonsensical." In the party's present stage of development its demands are more safely to be regarded as symbols, as signboards indicating a general direction, but saying nothing as to what will be found at the end of the road. It is true, of course, that these symbols represent in large part real things, existing institutions, other facts, against which National Socialism is making radical protest. The danger lurking in the situation is therefore enormous. Irreparable havoc may be wrought in Germany if the movement grows in power without maturing correspondingly in its thought. Soviet Russia has been through just that experience—and its leaders as well. It is all the more important, therefore, to appraise the Hitler movement as the thing that it really is today, and to understand its true meaning.

Hitler is the most successful orator that Germany has ever possessed. It is a striking fact that the spoken word should be
exerting such a strong influence at the present moment in Ger-
man history. The Germans are a people of books, not of audi-
toriums. It is an interesting and a stirring experience to listen to
Hitler — his bitterest enemies have often fallen under his spell.
And it is very instructive to examine his audiences. The hall where
he is to speak often closes its doors an hour before the meeting is
scheduled to begin because it is already filled to overflowing.
One always sees a clean, neatly-dressed crowd with faces that
betray intellectual pursuits of one kind or another: clerks, pro-
fessors, engineers, school teachers, students, civil service em-
ployees. These audiences are preoccupied, chary of words, quiet.
Their faces are tense, often drawn. The only bustle in the room
will come from the "hall guards," a typical product of these new
times — rough young fellows — the Sturm Abteilungen, or "shock
troops." The predominant element in the picture is what is so
aptly described in Germany as the "de-classed" middle class:
creatures visibly down at the heel, spiritually crushed in the
struggle with everyday reality, distraught under a perpetual
worry about the indispensable necessaries of life. One notes
many young people among them. All in all, it is an exceedingly
variegated mixture of types from the past, from the present, and
one might almost say from the future of Germany: it is that
famous "brew" into which Germany, once so stably articulated
in her classes and callings, has dissolved during these past ten
years as a result of economic disaster, unemployment and shifts
in power. They are all people who have had conceptions of life,
and conceptions of their personal rôles in life, with which their
present situation stands in violent contrast. Often they are people
who have been pushed aside, people who have not been admitted
to German life under present-day conditions. The proletariat,
the working man, has on the whole bettered his financial situ-
aton under the Republic; whereas the middle strata of society have
had to lower their standard of living to an incredible minimum.

Even if the observer had never heard of Hitler's program he
might guess what this depressing assemblage of people is waiting
for. It is waiting for a gospel, a message, a Word that will release
it from the pinch of want, something that will compensate for the
unbearable limitations of its present mode of existence. It wants to
get hold of an ideal that will guide it forth from the quagmire
where it finds itself. It wants to hear an assurance that it is en-
titled to a place in this new world. The man who can lift these
people from their depression of spirit even for the space of an hour can win them to himself and to the cause that he tells them represents the substance of "liberation." A situation for a great orator! A great situation for an orator!

Hitler’s adversaries are right in charging that such an audience can easily be misused. Hitler’s utterances on the subject of propaganda, both from the platform and in print, show in fact that he is willing to use any means which he judges serviceable in winning adherents to his cause. He fans the flames of hatred just as unscrupulously as he arouses the most exaggerated hopes.

However, let us keep to his audiences. What is it that stirs them? What keys can Hitler strike with such effect that he can drag millions of people whithersoever he chooses?

Fundamentally it is a question of the hard times which have settled over Germany ever since the war. Great fortunes have come into being, though they are probably more apparent than real. Meantime, statistics show that as regards the middle classes, which used to be Germany’s backbone, the standard of living is far below the pre-war level. Since 1929 it has sunk to unprecedented depths. Hitler turns his guns against those people who have increased their fortunes disproportionately to the general average of wealth accumulation in Germany, and especially against the anonymous wealth of the trusts — “coupon slavery.” He attacks reparations which are sapping the life-blood of Germany. All this is well known abroad.

Hitler berates “Marxism,” denounces and vilifies it. In this lies a very instructive portion of his propaganda and of his fanaticism. Unquestionably it is his most emphatic theme. The people before him are Germans. Can they, as Germans, consent that a large number of their fellow-citizens, the industrial workers, should be taught that in the last analysis they are more closely bound up with the working classes in other lands than with their own countrymen who do not happen to be “proletarians?” The people who are sitting in front of Hitler have, for the most part, sunk below the standard of living of a German workingman with a job. As for some of the others, there is only a slight difference between their income and the wages of a workingman. For all that, they do not think of themselves as proletarians. That they do is one of Moscow’s illusions. Quite the contrary! On that very account they insist that they prefer to live in a state that is not governed by workpeople, a state that knows no discriminations
of class— not a state according to the ideals which Marx set up for his state of workingmen, where the proletariat hold the power and set the tone. On just such grounds they want to be "national." From just such feelings nationalism has taken on a new meaning and impetus, not only in Germany, but in Italy and other countries.

To the same extent these people feel strangers to the "forces of wealth." They have nothing—just as the working classes have nothing. Hence the surprising mixture of concepts apparent in the baroque expression, "National Socialism." The effects of the capitalist system also weigh down upon them. They hate "the plutocrats." Their battle cry is about what they call the "Jewish financial tyranny," an artificial scarecrow, devised ad hoc, and aimed at one individual or another. Propaganda requires such things.

Hitler proclaims that a German today cannot properly say "we Germans." The "we" has no meaning. Marxism says "we," but it knows a different kind of "we." And is not capitalism international, after its fashion? Germany must become one again. Germany needs to become one again in order to be "free" again. She will be "free" again when she is again respected abroad! All this, as is apparent, is held together by very simple stress on German homogeneity, on things that seem self-evident. But in the impoverished and "enslaved" Germany of the present "the program" must prevail absolutely, actively, as the highest expression of the country's life.

In this clamor for unity, for unification, there is something that is never put clearly into words but which is nevertheless playing an important part. It is a problem of German "culture." Hitler storms at the "intellectuals." He is forever crying alarm against their conception of the world. The best educated people in Germany are indifferent to the national interest—and the word for "interest"—"belange"—is a new German term taken over to replace the Latin word. They have an international outlook. They do not "think German."

In Germany, as everywhere else, there are great differences in degrees of popular education; but such differences have greater social significance in Germany than in other countries. They create sharper distinctions between one individual and another. Hitler is against all that. He is fighting for the right of the half-educated to their own picture of the world, to a culture which is
illumined by love of country. He shouts at the university students that they are not worthy of pursuing their scholarly studies if they cannot find a common ground with the mechanic who is intent on serving his country. Hitler takes into account the reaction of the moderately educated but thinking person to the superiority of those who are highly educated, a reaction that is not without its resentments. Hitler himself is a self-educated person, a thorough-going “autodidact,” and he has read in many directions. In his eyes the essential thing is not high intellectual finish, but active love of country and mutual understanding among all. Germany, with a huge intellectual proletariat, which in many cases does not come up to the older standards of education, really finds herself in an educational crisis. Hitler’s idea is to give the people a common meeting ground of convictions which abolish all distinctions and in which all share. Cultural differences must yield to patriotic sentiments, not result in divisions between individuals and classes. This expresses itself in attacks on the intellectuals whom the plain man least understands.

What unites all of Hitler’s listeners is a feeling of humiliation, of injured self-respect. This comes into play in many directions, economic, social, cultural. And even diplomatic! For it is a quite natural thing that all these feelings of hurt should gather and precipitate about the rôle which Germany has been playing in the world since Versailles. While, with some undulations, the international position of Germany has been improving, this relative increase in her prestige has made no great impression on the German masses. Discriminations against Germany within the world of nations have, on the other hand, been generally noticed by the plain people. By dint of careful nursing, the notion of reparations has been transmuted into the notion of “payments of tribute,” and economic distress has found in reparations an explanation that is clear and convincing to everybody. The same is true of social unrest. The people who sit before Hitler have in their minds a very clear picture of the forces that are determining their present situation, and it is not difficult to carry them on to the corollaries. Hitler can lay hold on them in their innermost sensibilities when he raises his cry for unity, promises them the “respect” of the world as the fruit of unity, and tells them that Germany can have no foreign policy — on this theme he harps in every conceivable connection — until she has made herself one. No party in Germany has a formula so simple. No
party has gone to the trouble of understanding this particular class of people as Hitler has done. That is why he has succeeded in leading such an astonishing following whithersoever he will.

The foregoing will perhaps help one to understand the simple primitive impulses on which Hitler continually plays in order to draw the masses to him. One may find them understandable, and even see in them much that is constructive for the preservation of Germany. But a person may well be shocked at the expression which Hitler and his people have given to the forces which they have mobilized, and wince at the anti-Semitism and the chauvinism which he is ever stirring up with such reckless skill.

It is important here to distinguish between the propagandist aspect of the Hitler movement and its realistic political aspect. On the one side it is devoted wholly to the acquisition of power, and so drives unscrupulously ahead as all such movements do. On the other side it has to consider the exercise of power, or at least preparations for such exercise. What National Socialism, once in power, will become under the pressure of adverse conditions, under the influence of the German temperament which is by nature disinclined to extremes, is the real question — a question not answerable today, but which the student of foreign affairs must consider quite apart from watchwords of the moment.

It is evident that Hitler himself is impressed by the fact that his movement is predominantly of an emotional character and is held together by sentiment. His movement lives in opposition and on opposition. How will it act when it is called upon to deal with the tremendously difficult concrete problems which confront Germany both at home and abroad? Can the movement be carried over into practical politics?

It is striking, in this connection, that recently Hitler and his entourage have declared that members of the National Socialist Party are to occupy no public offices in “the Third Reich.” In “the Third Reich,” the party would be just a power station for driving the state machine. In “the Brown House” in Munich, the headquarters of the party, many specialists of varying political complexions are at work on ways and means for dealing with concrete economic problems, and other sorts of questions. Hitler, furthermore, has recently been making connections with individuals of importance in the business world. The cabinet in
“the Third Reich” is to be a cabinet of experts. Inside the party, meantime, there is not a little quiet criticism of many deputies who were most unexpectedly swept into the Reichstag by the surprising triumph at the last elections. They now are not experienced, not competent, enough. They were good enough to run, but not good enough to be elected! The party leaders are well aware of all this. In Russia and Italy “the party” stands as a general directorate behind the administration, but it has also taken over high positions in the state. Hitler will have none of that. Efficiency is to be rewarded with tolerance. Even a Jewish minister of finance — the thing has actually been said — is not beyond the range of possibility. As regards anti-Semitism, there are proofs that in matters political Hitler recognizes not only the absolute, but also the relative! In practical terms, trouble will be made only for the “immigrant Jew” who has not “fitted himself in.”

Little by little, too, it will be made clear to the masses standing behind Hitler that the movement cannot become active in foreign policy until it has attained its domestic goals. Hitler’s emissaries went to Geneva with instructions to state to the French that Hitler “afterwards as now” will “regard a rapprochement between France and Germany as absolutely essential.” That shows a point which this article set out to show: how plastic the notions of the National Socialist leadership can be. On January 26, behind closed doors but watched attentively by all the nation, Hitler made a speech before representatives of the Manufacturers’ Club at Düsseldorf. The audience, made up of people who were eager for a glance at the dangerous demagogue, was in large part hostile. But he enjoyed a complete success. He was in a position to say things which worked just as effectively upon that select audience as upon the crowds of six thousand that flock to the Tennis Hall in Berlin. And that shows how elastic are the possibilities of the movement in its present stage of development. One may add, also, that it shows its political vagueness. But there is nothing vague about the millions of followers. They are formidable real; and it would hardly be sound statesmanship to ignore them.

Chancellor Brüning has had three interviews with Hitler since September 1930. The last took place in the full limelight of public attention and public curiosity. Dr. Brüning is one of the most significant statesmen that Germany has had in the last hundred years. He is no less a patriot than Hitler; and he has
an iron nerve with which Hitler is far from being blessed. He has a crystal-clear picture of the German life about him. It is inconceivable that the significance of such a movement as Hitler’s has escaped Dr. Brüning. The contacts with Hitler did not lead to any common understanding — on good grounds, so far as Brüning is concerned: he is responsible for the stability of a most complex Germany, a Germany that is rapidly nearing a new economic crisis and is holding her balance only with the greatest effort. National Socialism is not, as the French say, “ministrable.” It has not worked itself up to the point where it can be given a diploma in politics. It is torn within by conflicting currents. It has a half-Communist wing; it is quarreling over the question of participation in parliament, and over the question of the national Presidency; its leaders are not sure of their following, nor are they in agreement among themselves — their common basis is propaganda, rather than anything else. Hitler and his associates are striving to give a body to this young and obstreperous soul. That is Hitler’s problem in particular; and to such an extent that many say he is afraid to assume power.

But to get hold of the energies that are expressed in National Socialism, and to use them, is also the problem of the men who are keeping Germany alive today — business leaders, the Government, everyone, in short, who represents tradition in German achievement. The surprising triumph of National Socialism at the polls has slowly awakened the routine parties to the issue. It has revealed to them a grand political task, on the performance of which the very existence of Germany may depend.

Let us imagine that the millions of German citizens who are today following Hitler prove to be disappointed. In that case no patriotic movement could have any chance in Germany for a long time. Economic distress and social unrest would then destroy the foundations of present-day Germany. The bourgeois Germany of moderate views — and the Social Democracy must stand with that Germany — is confronted with a technical problem. It has a gasoline tank before it. The tank may explode, with disastrous effects upon the whole country. But the tank also contains riches which may be cleverly used to drive many a profitable machine. Such is the alternative which the patriotic movement, born of unprecedented conditions, sets before the German people.