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Dark Apostles – Hitler’s Oligarchs: Göring, Goebbels, Himmler, Heydrich and Revolutionary Totalitarian Oligarchy in the Third Reich

By Athahn Steinback

Abstract: In popular memory, the Third Reich and the Nazi party are all too often misremembered as a homogenous entity, entirely shaped and led by the figure of Adolf Hitler. This paper challenges the widely held misconception of a homogenous Nazi ideology and critically re-examines the governance of Nazi Germany by arguing that the Third Reich was not a generic totalitarian dictatorship, but rather, a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy. The unique roles and revolutionary agendas of Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich, provide case studies to demonstrate the nature of this revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy. The role of Hitler as the chief oligarch of Nazi Germany remains critical to the entire system of governance. However, the unique roles played by his subordinate oligarchs must be explored in order to properly understand the function, radicalization and unprecedented destruction wrought by the Third Reich.

Adolf Hitler – the mere mention of the name conjures a toxic witch’s brew that still sears the psyche of modern Western Civilization. From World War II to the Holocaust, there is virtually no aspect of contemporary society left unscathed by the collective memory of Hitler and the Nazi party. The staggering power of his legacy makes it easy to take the NSDAP’s slogan of ‘*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*’ at face value and consequently fail to recognize the true nature of the Nazi state edifice upon which he stood.¹ To properly understand Hitler, the Third Reich, and the Nazi movement, it is critical that we not ignore the formative role played by others – the oligarchs who carved out personal empires

¹ The *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Worker’s Party) or Nazi party. The party’s slogan, *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*, translates to, “one people, one state, one leader.”

within the Byzantine bureaucracy of the Third Reich and dispensed their power based on Führer principle,² just as Hitler himself did. The Third Reich was in reality a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy, ruled by many lesser führers all beholden to the one dominant Führer – Adolf Hitler.

The popular, and simplistic, view of Hitler as sole architect of the Third Reich - the singular all-powerful dictator directing every aspect of the state - has long since been banished from serious discourse by historical giants such as Hugh Trevor-Roper, Martin Broszat, and Ian Kershaw. In reality, Hitler derived the greatest extent of his power through his indispensable role as the chief arbitrator in the internecine struggles of his squabbling oligarchs. Yet, the question remains, what was the nature of this “confusion of private empires”³ or “shapeless ‘system’ of governance?”⁴ Much of Hitler’s power was indeed derived from his role as the supreme Führer, holding sway over the numerous miniature empires of his lieutenants. Kershaw’s concept of working towards the Führer continues to provide the most effective mechanism for explaining the ceaseless radicalization of the Third Reich, yet to call the system “shapeless” is somewhat misleading. To clearly understand the Third Reich and normalize its role in the greater fabric of European history, it is imperative that it be identified for what it was – a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy.

The Third Reich was revolutionary in that it desired to completely re-order the social, political and economic structure of society in a manner no less ambitious than its Marxist rivals. It was totalitarian in that it required not only the loyalty of its subjects but also their total ideological commitment to the movement. Simultaneously, the numerous and conflicting personal empires of the greatest power brokers within the NSDAP guaranteed that the Reich's governance was inherently oligarchic from its inception. These three characteristics defined the National Socialist system and paved the way for the explosive expansion of NSDAP dominion over the German political scene. Fueled by revolutionary

² *Führerprinzip* or Leader (Führer) Principle in English, is the concept that final authority in any given system or situation always rest in the hands of a single, decisive leader and that subordinates should give their total, unconditional loyalty to their Führer.

³ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler*, 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 54.

⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 573.

aspirations, enforced by the iron fist of totalitarian repression and served by numerous, expansionist internal empires, the NSDAP stood poised to carve up Germany and Europe itself to feed the insatiable need of the movement to ceaselessly expand, lest the very same revolutionary oligarchs who engineered the National Socialist state turn their ambitions upon one another.

National Socialism was an inherently revolutionary ideology, bent on radically restructuring society along the lines of the *völkisch* state⁵ and replacing bourgeois society with a biocracy based upon an ascending racial hierarchy that placed Germanic “Aryans” at the very pinnacle. As was also the case with its splintered Marxist opponent, the perception of this revolution varied widely amongst National Socialists. Hermann Göring sought to gradually subvert the German economy from within, leading to its systematic incorporation into the party’s revolutionary mission. Ernst Röhm⁶ called for a “brown revolution” to sweep away bourgeois society and replace it with a new, wholly National Socialist order. While, Heinrich Himmler sought to completely re-imagine society along the lines of blood, soil, and a racially pure SS warrior community. In each case, National Socialism's revolutionary zeitgeist was evident. However, these and other numerous competing visions of the movement’s mission produced fractious and often competing policies. As a result, governance of the Third Reich is best recognized as a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy in which several oligarchs controlled their own administrative kingdoms and pursued their own unique visions of National Socialism within their respective spheres. It would not be too much to call these oligarchic personal empires franchises of the revolution, wherein each oligarch, be it

⁵ The precise conceptualization of the *völkisch* state differed from oligarch to oligarch. However, themes of a collectivist state based upon racial purity and the Führer Principle were common to all leading National Socialists.

⁶ Ernst Julius Günther Röhm (1887-1934) was a leading National Socialist revolutionary, long time personal friend of Hitler, head of the powerful Sturmabteilung (SA) and vocal leader within the party’s left wing. Following the NSDAP’s rise to power in 1933, Röhm agitated for the immediate, forceful nationalization of industry, elimination of aristocratic estates, and, most critically, incorporation of the armed forces into Röhm’s significantly larger paramilitary SA. Ultimately, Röhm’s significant power base and left wing agenda drew him into conflict with the party establishment and he was purged, along with his allies, during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934.

Göring, Goebbels, Himmler, or Heydrich, pursued the objectives of the National Socialist mission as they personally envisioned it.

When viewed through this lens the Nazi state becomes infinitely easier to understand. Bureaucrats at all levels within the Nazi hierarchy ceaselessly toiled to make the movement's objectives a reality, and while some were motivated by cynical self-aggrandizement, many more labored under a genuine belief in National Socialism as a revolutionary mission – the dawn of a new chapter in world history. At the head of this revolution, Hitler established himself as a new messiah, while the most influential of his oligarchs desired to become his greatest apostles, each in turn dictating their own twisted gospel to their followers. Although Hitler's would-be apostles were numerous, four, Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, stand out above the others as singularly powerful men within the revolution and the Nazi state. Each possessed great ambition, power, revolutionary zeal, and the will to acquire vast personal empires; and in doing so, they became far more than mere functionaries of Hitler's will. They enjoyed political agency of their own accord and actively, even enthusiastically, endeavored to further the National Socialist revolution through any means at their disposal. Who were these men? What power did they wield? What great bureaucratic kingdoms did they lord over and what motivated their actions? These are the questions I seek to address.

Hermann Göring – The Consummate Fascist Politician

Only he who emphasizes German socialism is truly national. He who refuses to speak of socialism, who believes in socialism only in the Marxist sense, or to whom the word “socialism” has an unpleasant ring, has not understood the deepest meaning of nationalism. He has not understood that one can only be a nationalist when one sees social problems openly and clearly. And on the other hand, one can only be a socialist when he clearly sees that nationalism must triumph to protect the living space of a people from outside forces. – Hermann Göring,

speech to the National Socialist Factory Cell Organization, April 9, 1933.⁷

We must strive with the greatest energy for autarky in all spheres in which it is technically possible.
– Hermann Göring, cabinet meeting on the economy, September 4, 1936.⁸

Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. – Hermann Göring, interview at Nuremberg, April 18, 1946.⁹

Hermann Göring is too often dismissed as a brash amateur politician, or failed Air Marshal possessing little political flare or administrative acumen. Indeed, Göring's taste for ostentatious uniforms, decadent banquets, art theft, and habit of attaching his name to everything he laid his hands on – from his famous Reichswerke to a Panzer Division - makes the Reichsmarschall an easy mark to be readily disregarded as just another insufferably narcissistic oligarch. While Göring's narcissism was well documented, and the man's failures numerous, to dismiss him out-of-hand misses his significant contribution to securing Nazi control over Germany. The failure to comprehend Göring's decisive contribution to the Nazification of the German economy is to fundamentally misunderstand the Third Reich. It is in the field of the economy as Plenipotentiary of the Second Four-Year Plan that Göring exerted his greatest influence and left an indelible mark on the evolution of Nazi Germany. His future career as Reichsmarschall at the head of the Luftwaffe was significant but paled in comparison to his role in the Second Four-Year Plan.

⁷ Hermann Göring, "Nationalism and Socialism" (speech, Berlin, April 9, 1933), trans. Randall Bytwerk, Calvin College, German Propaganda Archive, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goering1.htm>.

⁸ Hermann Göring to the Reich Cabinet, September 4, 1936, in *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 409.

⁹ Hermann Göring, qtd. in Gustave M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995), 278-279.

To begin to properly understand Göring's political empire and contributions to the Third Reich, it is essential to understand his character and motivations. Like his colleagues, Goebbels, Himmler, and Heydrich, Göring was driven by great ambition. He saw himself as a man in both worlds – simultaneously emulating the trappings of a decadent elite of an age then-past whilst actively engineering a new National Socialist system to sweep away the old. This dichotomy stands at the core of Göring's character and underlies the primary obstacle in lucidly appraising his actions and ambitions.

Göring's agenda simultaneously reflected the views of revolutionary National Socialists and late Weimar era imperial-revisionists.¹⁰ He himself hailed from the lower spectrum of the bourgeoisie, and was molded by pre-Great War perceptions of idealized Prussian virtues of duty and loyalty to the state; a state that had fallen in 1918, and had been replaced by something entirely alien to his authoritarian worldview – democracy. In some respects, Göring differed little from mainstream imperial-revisionists of his time; his foreign policy opinions sought the creation of a German sphere of influence in East and Southeastern Europe through the formation of an anti-Bolshevik alliance, secured by the bulwark of a friendly Polish state between Germany and its Soviet rival.¹¹ It was an alliance that would serve as a protective shield against communism – a force that Göring emphatically feared – while simultaneously securing a potent continental economic bloc that could expand both the Reich's and Göring's economic reach far beyond the borders of the empire.¹²

In this regard, he took his cues from traditional Bismarckian statecraft, favoring a traditional balance of power and alliances built to protect the interests of Germany – like any mainstream imperial revisionist.¹³ Consequently, in foreign policy Göring actively swam against the current of Hitlerian National Socialism and the concept of *lebensraum* that increasingly

¹⁰ Imperial-revisionists hoped to re-establish the power of the Pre-World War One German Empire.

¹¹ Alfred Kube, "Hermann Goering: Second Man in the Third Reich," in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 66.

¹² Kube, "Hermann Goering: Second Man in the Third Reich," 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

dominated Nazi ideology.¹⁴ Yet, despite this, Göring had no interest nor desire in confronting Hitler's expansionist worldview. He was, as his economic policies clearly demonstrated, very much a fascist at heart. However, like most Nazi oligarchs, the future Reichsmarschall was a creature of ambition who actively pursued whatever strategy combined the extension of his personal empire with the goals of the National Socialist revolution. His foreign policy endeavors had simply been one tactic in a broad effort to spread his influence into another pillar of the state. When Hitler rejected this traditionalist approach in favor of Ribbentrop's¹⁵ aggressive expansionism, Göring simply turned his attention to other matters – it was of no pressing concern to him.

In stark contrast to his imperial-revisionist foreign policy, Göring aggressively pursued the Nazification of the economy as Plenipotentiary of the Four-Year Plan. His fascist economic policies were perfectly captured in a 1938 speech before the German Labor Front; “Just as I will be resolved to ignore the fate of individuals, if the well-being of the community demands it, I shall not show weakness in placing the interests of the *Volk* above the interests of individual businesses.”¹⁶ These were neither hollow words, nor an idle threat. Göring was prepared to fight Germany's traditional economic elite for unfettered control of the economy. They could either join him, or he would destroy them. While Göring did not espouse the utopian collectivist views of his fellow oligarch and head of the German Labor Front, Robert Ley,¹⁷ his

¹⁴ *Lebensraum* or living space in English, was the concept that the German people needed to conquer land (usually in the Soviet east) in order to survive and prosper. The local populations would either be annihilated, enslaved or driven out after the conquest to make way for German settlers.

¹⁵ Ulrich Friedrich Wilhelm Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893-1946) served as the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany, from 1938 to 1945. He was most famous for his key role in brokering an alliance with Fascist Italy in 1939 as well as a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union the same year.

¹⁶ Hermann Göring, qtd. in Richard Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 51.

¹⁷ Robert Ley (1890-1945) was a minor oligarch at the head of the German Labor Front (DAF), an organization that served as the party replacement for the forcibly dissolved trade unions. His career was marked by an endless – and unsuccessful – quest to transform the DAF into an omnipresent party bureaucracy with a self-appointed mission to rid society of internal conflict by assimilating it entirely into a *volkisch* collective based on racial purity. His utopian ambitions would unsurprisingly fail as a consequence of his own wanton

economic objectives were nothing short of revolutionary. He viewed his revolution as “systematic.”¹⁸ There would be no worker occupation of factories, no collectivization of industry. The nation's industrial base would be delivered step by step, piece by piece into the hands of the Fuhrer, as tools belonging to the state, anyone brave or foolish enough to stand in his way would be destroyed.

Within a year of his appointment as Plenipotentiary of the Second Four-Year Plan in 1936, Göring had successfully crushed or co-opted Germany's traditional economic elite. Despite fierce opposition from the Ruhr steel magnates, led by then Minister of Finance Hjalmar Schacht,¹⁹ who opposed rearmament and the nationalization of industry as poor economic policy.²⁰ His tactics in this war on big business were essentially the same as every other major campaign of civic subversion in the Third Reich. If the senior executives in private corporations opposed the NSDAP's agenda, then politically reliable, mid-level management was systematically encouraged to marginalize defiant bosses and usurp their positions.²¹ Those who joined the party were rewarded, while those who continued to resist were gradually swept into obscurity by the swelling ranks of their National Socialist co-workers. Simultaneously, Göring transformed his office into a shadow ministry and usurped much of Schacht's official powers for himself – not because he legally had any right to do so or because he held special qualification, but rather because he could and his goals were in alignment with Hitler's wishes. The Führer subsequently dismissed Schacht's protests out of hand, and Göring was free to remake economic policy in the Reich as he saw fit.²²

Consequently, Göring increasingly asserted direct control over the entire German economy, but particularly renitent hold

corruption, alcoholism, mental instability, conflict with opposing oligarchs and the outbreak of the Second World War.

¹⁸ Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 27.

¹⁹ Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht (1877-1970) was a wealthy conservative economist and banker who threw his support behind – but never joined – the Nazi party in the last years of the Weimar Republic in an abortive attempt to reclaim Germany's place on the world stage. After the party's rise to power, he spent the next four years futilely attempting to stymie the autarkic, anti-free-market economic policies of the NSDAP.

²⁰ Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 47, 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

outs – like Schacht and his fellow Ruhr steel magnates – remained troublesome. In June of 1937, Göring responded to their continued defiance by declaring his intention to establish his very own Reichswerke as a state-owned corporation under his control.²³ He was simultaneously challenging the Ruhr magnates on their own turf and firmly establishing an outpost of his empire in the most important industry in Germany – steel. Despite their traditional privileged position in German politics, even the Ruhr magnates found themselves completely helpless to protect their own corporations from Göring’s burgeoning economic dominion.

Two months later, the steel magnates prepared their last act of resistance – the “Dusseldorf Memorandum,” a document that roundly excoriated Göring and the Nazi party’s autarkic economic planning. For his part, Göring remained informed about his opponent’s every move through his personal nationwide wiretapping service, the so-called “Forschungsamt.” Aware of his opponents’ intentions, Göring struck before any coherent resistance could be mounted by immediately ordering each of the magnates be arrested, although he was subsequently convinced by a subordinate to avoid a national incident and chose to blackmail them individually instead. In the end, they could either sign the memorandum and be regarded as saboteurs or abandon their resistance and fall in line.²⁴ With the capitulation of the steel magnates, the Nazification of the economy and the concurrent establishment of Göring’s personal economic empire were confirmed. In November, following Schacht’s resignation as Minister of Economics, Göring briefly occupied the office and made it his first priority to call Schacht and exclaim, “I am now sitting in your chair!”²⁵

In modern political parlance, Hermann Göring had become what we might now call an “Economic Tsar.” His complete lack of economic expertise was irrelevant to the National Socialist mission so long as he continued to carry out Hitler’s wishes – to fund rearmament. More pressingly, from Göring’s point of view he had carved an entire piece of the Reich out for himself. All roads in the economy led to his office and he avoided delegating his authority to underlings as much as possible – he simply applied the Führer principle to his own office where he ruled as the master of his own

²³ Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁵ Hermann Göring, qtd. in Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 68.

miniature Reich. His eponymous Reichswerke continued to expand steadily, first in Germany and then benefiting from his political largesse to acquire the majority of captured factories in the newly invested territories – particularly those in Austria and Czechoslovakia.²⁶ While it is true, as Richard Overy contends, that contrary to popular belief, Göring saw little personal profit from his sprawling Reichswerke (at its height the largest corporation in Europe, if not the world) and remained firmly detached from its day-to-day operations.²⁷ Göring *did* gain was an incalculable political asset. To take a page from Karl Marx, through the Reichswerke, Göring wrestled control over the means of production for the German war machine and placed himself in position to benefit from the captured assets of conquered nations in a way that no other oligarch could remotely dream. The establishment of the Reichswerke, and his special relationship to it, was a master-stroke political maneuver for his personal empire, as well as a critical flaw in the long-term health of the Reich. The Reichswerke continued to serve as one of the fundamental linchpins of the Göring empire until 1942, when its bloated size, gross inefficiency, and Germany's declining fortunes in the war finally compelled him to release the Reichswerke's weapon and munitions factories to the Ministry of Armaments.²⁸

Göring repeated his efforts to consolidate the growing power of the National Socialist state with a concurrent expansion of his personal power in the Luftwaffe. His acquisition of the Aviation Ministry in 1933 was an early political victory for the future Reichsmarschall, but a comparatively minor one at a time when the nation's air forces were still technically subordinate to the Supreme Commander of the military and Minister of Defense – then General Werner von Blomberg. Undeterred, from 1933 to 1938, Göring gradually worked to bring the revolution into the highest ranks of the Luftwaffe by appointing dedicated Nazis like Erhard Milch and Albert Kesselring to positions of power at the expense of established army air specialists with dubious commitment to the party.²⁹

²⁶ Richard Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 114.

²⁷ Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 65.

²⁸ Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich*, 164.

²⁹ Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 33-34.

Slowly but surely, Göring established his personal presence in the most sacred pillar of the German state – the armed forces. The evolving Luftwaffe was hollowed out and re-purposed as a shell for Göring’s emergent petty kingdom and after 1937, strengthened by his uncontested power within the economy. He placed himself in a perfect position to favor the Luftwaffe during rearmament – controlling both the military budget and the Luftwaffe. Ever the opportunist, it would be only a matter of time before he challenged the army’s preeminence over the entire military establishment. In 1938, with his nascent Reichswerke extending its tendrils throughout German industry and the Luftwaffe booming amidst general rearmament, Göring seized the opportunity to attempt to definitively establish himself as the unassailable second most powerful man in the Reich – by intriguing to usurp General von Blomberg’s office as Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

What path Göring might have chosen to assert the Luftwaffe’s total independence of the army, or attempt to establish his own dominance over the armed services, we will never know – because random chance struck in his favor in January of 1938. General von Blomberg, a widower since the death of his wife in 1932, had fallen madly in love with a twenty-six-year-old typist, Margarethe Gruhn, and asked for her hand in marriage. The witnesses at the wedding? None other than Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring.³⁰ While it is worth noting that there is no evidence to suggest that Göring arranged the entire affair, his ambitious and opportunistic mind was the first to realize the potential for blackmail the moment a scandal erupted. Blomberg’s new wife had once officially been registered as a prostitute by the Berlin Police, and pornographic photos taken when she was eighteen had recently passed into the hands of authorities. Photos taken by her then roommate – who happened to be a Czech-Jewish photographer.³¹ Von Blomberg had inadvertently brought the full weight of the Nazi’s anti-Semitic zeitgeist down upon his head and not even his personal relationship with Hitler could save him from the firestorm of outrage that stood poised to destroy both his career and the remaining shreds of the army’s independence.

Göring’s motivations for attempting to destroy Blomberg were two-fold. The first was purely political, as Blomberg’s

³⁰ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

demise potentially opened doors for the ultimate expansion of Göring's empire to encompass the entire military establishment. The second was rather more personal; Blomberg had previously led a charge in alliance with Schacht to dismantle Göring's economic empire. He proposed that the War Ministry should enjoy exclusive control of rearmament policy and the maintenance of the war economy in February of 1937, a proposal that went so far as to suggest the complete elimination of Göring's office in the event of war.³² Thus the elimination of General von Blomberg represented a victory across the board for Göring and he intrigued with Himmler to present the scandal to Hitler, in order to usurp General Blomberg's office and establish himself as the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Even if it meant trading away control of the Four-Year Plan in exchange. Himmler for his part – an equally ambitious schemer at heart – held onto a fantasy that he would be able to seize the office and fold the army into his (then) miniscule Schutzstaffel.³³ Ultimately, Hitler was in no mood for these machinations. Göring's narcissistic ambition to expand his political empire was blatantly obvious and Himmler's designs on the position amounted to little more than an infantile delusion. Hitler shot down both and instead opted to increase his own power exponentially by taking the office for himself.³⁴

Göring had failed to seize control of the military; but in the process, he had inadvertently dealt a fatal blow to the independence of the armed forces and significantly weakened the hand of the traditional army conservatives. Ironically, while he had personally lost the battle, he had simultaneously strengthened the National Socialist revolution by crippling the military's traditional political neutrality in the long term.³⁵ It should be noted that there is little evidence of any significant forethought on his part in this gambit. It was an opportunistic event, and he simply groped blindly in the dark through the Blomberg-Fritsch affair like everyone else involved – Hitler included. Not to be discouraged by his failure to achieve his personal goal, Göring set about to slowly manufacture his own parallel military establishment over the next four years, integrated within the Luftwaffe command structure and independent of the army. In time, Hermann Göring created his own

³² Overy, *Goering The 'Iron Man'*, 53.

³³ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

private army composed of twenty-one infantry divisions and a panzer division, which he characteristically named after himself, for a total of a quarter million men under arms.³⁶ In September of 1943, considering exceptionally poor performance of his Luftwaffe Field Divisions, Hitler finally compelled Göring to turn his private forces over to the army's operational control – though it remained a somewhat separate organization until the end of the war and Göring never ceased expanding it.

Joseph Goebbels – The Nationalist and Socialist Demagogue

Germany gives in and sells out to the capitalist West. A horrible prospect: Germany's sons will bleed to death on the battlefields of Europe as mercenaries of capitalism. Perhaps, probably in a "holy war against Moscow!" – Joseph Goebbels, personal diary, 1926.³⁷

We shall win. We must win, and quickly. The public mood is one of slight depression. The nation wants peace, though not at the price of defeat, but every new theatre of operations brings worry and concern. – Joseph Goebbels, personal diary, June 23, 1941 – one day after the invasion of the Soviet Union.³⁸

I ask you: Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want war more total and radical than anything you can even imagine today? – Joseph Goebbels, Sportpalast speech, February 18, 1943.³⁹

³⁶ Werner Haupt, *Die deutschen Luftwaffen - Felddivisionen 1941-1945* (Eggolsheim: Dörfler Zeitgeschichte, 2005), 19.

³⁷ Joseph Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, ed. Helmut Heiber, trans. Oliver Watson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1962), 42.

³⁸ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1939-1941*, trans. and ed. by Fred Taylor (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), 426.

³⁹ Joseph Goebbels, "Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose" (speech, Berlin, February 18, 1943), trans. Randall Bytwerk, Calvin College, German Propaganda Archive, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm>.

While Göring was still struggling to carve out a solid political foothold, Joseph Goebbels was already hard at work engineering his own miniature empire and doggedly pursuing the ideological mission of the NSDAP as the architect of the party's propaganda machine and "conqueror" of "Red Berlin" during the late 1920s and early '30s. Within the hierarchy of National Socialist oligarchs, Goebbels forged his own personal empire to dominate propaganda in the Reich and establish himself as the chief political evangelist between party and nation. To properly understand the true role and influence of the Reich's most potent propagandist, it is essential that we peel away the shroud of lies and half-truths with which Goebbels clothed himself and identify the revolutionary oligarch within. The task of the historian in this case is to draw out the demagogue and trace his ideological evolution from his political awakening, to his final days in the Führer bunker.

For all his unbridled narcissism and talent for cynical manipulation, Goebbels was not merely riding the coattails of the revolution for his own political gain. While he was a deeply ambitious, backstabbing opportunist, as we will soon see, in the warped mind of Joseph Goebbels it was essential that he be exalted as a great ideologue standing at the heart of a sweeping revolution. His unchecked lust for praise and distinction demanded that he be remembered as the man who wove the discordant voices of National Socialism into one, coherent narrative united behind the figure of his idol – Adolf Hitler.

Consequently, Joseph Goebbels devoted the first half of his career to selling Nazism and the Führer cult to the German people, and the latter half crusading to save the revolution. At his heart, he was driven by racial theories, virulent anti-Semitism, and an apocalyptic worldview. Ideologically speaking, Goebbels was the perfect person to construct a National Socialist media empire; a true believer, a skilled orator, and one of the most talented manipulators within the NSDAP. Yet, even with the benefit of seventy-years of hindsight, Goebbels is often remembered solely for his tightly choreographed speeches and nigh unmatched rhetorical prowess as head of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. His political agency and prime position within the Third Reich's oligarchy has all too often been distilled into a simplistic caricature of the man as Hitler's mouthpiece.

All oligarchs of the Third Reich were heavily dependent on Adolf Hitler as their political messiah and guarantor of their personal empires. However, none were as personally reliant on Hitler as Goebbels. As Peter Longerich has ably observed, Goebbels was pathologically obsessed with both demonstrating his own indispensability to the NSDAP movement *and* proving his unconditional devotion to the Führer. In his mind, the two objectives were indistinguishable from one another, and he went so far as to consider his family to be Hitler's family as well.⁴⁰ Goebbels's total reliance on Hitler was arguably the most crucial aspect of his personality and the most decisive influence upon his career. However, by focusing too closely on his relationship to Hitler, it is easy to lose sight of his own political agency as an oligarch and his self-appointed crusade to preserve the revolution.

Much like his colleague Heinrich Himmler, Goebbels casts a conflicted shadow across the historical stage. A talented orator and brilliant propagandist, gifted with a sharp intellect on one hand and a depressive, unstable narcissist never to be satisfied by any amount of adulation or accolade on the other.

For Goebbels, the world truly was not enough. No amount of praise could ever satisfy his narcissistic cravings. From his earliest days of political awakening in 1924, Goebbels was fully aware that he was a “demagogue of the worst sort,” but he did not care.⁴¹ His chaotic personality demanded political agency and constant reaffirmation of his own brilliance – both of which he would later gain as the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. The only anchors amidst the hurricane within his mind were the revolutionary mission of National Socialism and his own self-enslavement to the will of his messiah.⁴²

To grasp the contradictions and actions of Dr. Goebbels, it is essential to understand that like his fellow oligarchs, Goebbels saw himself as an indispensable component of the National Socialist revolution. The decisive difference between Goebbels and his colleagues lay in his peculiar relationship with Hitler. While his rivals exalted Hitler as the founder of their political creed, each

⁴⁰ Peter Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, trans. Alan Bance, Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharpe (New York: Random House, 2015), XIV.

⁴¹ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Elke Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 50.

⁴² Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 58.

endeavored to carve out a domain within the Reich that was uniquely his own. Goebbels on the other hand, sought to mix his own godlike adoration for Hitler with his exceptional talents for demagoguery and propaganda into a potent machine for statewide indoctrination. Other oligarchs built their empires as franchises of the revolution, Goebbels built his power base on selling Hitler to the German people.

At the heart of Goebbels ideology lay a fanatical commitment to the precepts of National Socialist revolution. Despite his zealous attachment to the personality of Hitler during his tenure as an oligarch, it should be noted that he came to National Socialism through the left wing of the party under the tutelage of Gregor Strasser – and originally shared his erstwhile mentor’s disdain for the (more conservative) Munich branch dominated by Hitler. Indeed, the early political beliefs of the then National Socialist neophyte Joseph Goebbels were neatly encapsulated by a party slogan he purposed in 1925, “First salvation through socialism, followed like a whirlwind by national liberation.”⁴³ Nor should this be regarded as particularly surprising; Goebbels hailed from a lower-class family and during his political awakening avidly read the works of Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, and SPD⁴⁴ co-founder August Bebel.⁴⁵

Given his predilection for socialist causes, complimented by exceptional natural talent for oratory and manipulation, Goebbels rapidly developed into the most potent attack dog of the party’s left wing. Advocating confiscation of landed estates, denigrating western capitalism, exalting socialism, and lionizing the Soviet Union as a natural revolutionary role model for the emerging NSDAP.⁴⁶ Goebbels even went so far as to suggest that Germany and Russia should join together as allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie order, else Germany’s only future would be as “...mercenaries against Russia on the battlefields of capitalism...in the last analysis better go down with Bolshevism than live in eternal capitalist servitude.”⁴⁷ Thus it followed, “That

⁴³ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 61.

⁴⁴ Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or Social Democratic Party of Germany in English.

⁴⁵ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

⁴⁷ Joseph Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, ed. Helmut Heiber, trans. Oliver Watson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1962), 44.

is why we place ourselves alongside Russia as equal partners in the struggle for this freedom which means everything to us.”⁴⁸

As far as the embryonic form of the Reich's future propaganda minister was concerned, the Red Revolution in Russia represented a natural precursor to the evolving National Socialist movement in Germany. In Goebbels' analysis, the critical flaw of his Russian role model was their failure to address the “the Jewish question” that he believed had derailed their industrial reforms and hitherto retarded the development of a “truly nationalist and socialist Russia.”⁴⁹ Goebbels' aggressive anti-Semitism had clearly become intrinsically linked with his personal ideology and permeated his judgment, long before his defection to the Munich wing of the party.

Moreover, while Goebbels served the left wing of the NSDAP and ideologically found himself at odds with much of Hitler's less aggressively revolutionary agenda, he rapidly became enamored with the seemingly larger than life figure of Hitler. Especially as the future Führer lavished him with praise and gifts for his efforts to spread the party's political creed.⁵⁰ Easily swayed by the approval of such a powerful man, the insatiably narcissistic character of Goebbels increasingly explained away his doctrinal disagreements as the work of the coterie of Munich ideologues surrounding his newfound idol. Nor did he immediately realize that Hitler was courting him for the Munich faction and actively attempting to cleave him away from the Strassers – thus striking a powerful blow against his primary opponents within the party. Even on the eve of the fateful Bamberg party conference,⁵¹ Goebbels still genuinely believed that he could convert Hitler to the Strasser's worldview. “Our, i.e. the socialist, spirit is on the march in all towns. Not a soul has faith in Munich. Elberfeld must become the Mecca of German socialism.”⁵² The concept that his political idol might genuinely hold very different opinions escaped

⁴⁸ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62, 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵¹ Convened in Bamberg on February 14, 1926 by Hitler in a successful effort to reign in dissenting opinions within the party, re-assert the primacy of the Führer Principle and decisively (albeit diplomatically) crush the Strasser led left wing of the NSDAP. The left wing of the party survived until the Night of the Long Knives purge in 1934, but the supremacy of Hitler and by extension the Munich branch of the party was firmly established.

⁵² Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, 66.

him entirely, and he continued to believe that he could convert Hitler to the left wing of the party despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

Thus, when the crushing weight of reality finally descended upon his shoulders on February 14, 1926, at the Bamberg Conference, he was utterly unprepared for Hitler's frank exercise of total dominion over the direction of the party. Hitler systematically deconstructed the left-wing party platform – denouncing Russia, calling for the destruction of Bolshevism, advocating *lebensraum*, asserting his protection over landed estates, and, in classic National Socialist style, attacked Bolshevism as a Jewish plot. The assault left Goebbels shocked, appalled, and lost without a political compass. For a man so certain that the Munich wing was finished a mere week before, reality as he knew it had just been called into question – and by a figure he personally idolized no less. “Hitler speaks for two hours...What kind of Hitler? A reactionary? Amazingly clumsy and uncertain...Probably one of my greatest disappointments. I can no longer believe in Hitler absolutely...I lost my inner support.”⁵³ Never one to let reality deter him, Goebbels continued to delude himself that the problem could not possibly be that Hitler’s worldview differed so dramatically from his own, but rather it must be the work of the treacherous Munich branch – “Kaufmann, Strasser and I go to Hitler to impress on him: he must not allow those rogues down there to tie him hand and foot.”⁵⁴

As events unfolded, however, it was Goebbels, not Hitler, who would experience a dramatic political conversion. Within just two months, Goebbels brought his revolutionary socialism in line with Hitler’s *volkish* collectivism. In reality, however, the shift was not as dramatic as it may appear. Goebbels’ and Hitler’s revolutionary objectives were quite similar at their core, both sought total renovation of society and social leveling based upon the concept of racial *volks-gemeinschaft*.⁵⁵ It was simply their

⁵³ Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, 67.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Volks-gemeinschaft*, or people’s community in English, was the concept that class divisions could be dissolved between racially pure Germans in order to create a racially homogenous, classless society, bound together by a mystical common identity based on blood and soil. A further evolution of the concept of the *volkish* state. Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 43-44.

proposed paths to this revolutionary objective that had differed so radically.

Social question. Quite new perspectives. He has thought it all out. His ideal: Blend of collectivism and individualism. The land: all that is on it and below it for the people. Production, individualistic for those who create. Combines, trusts, production of finished articles, transport, etc. I am reassured all round...With this sparkling mind he can be my leader.⁵⁶

Goebbels had now fallen in line with the Munich faction, yet his revolutionary aspirations remained entirely undimmed as his ideology began to morph into the persona of the fanatical propagandist that has left an indelible mark on the history of both the Reich, and of the world. As Goebbels' idolization evolved, he grew increasingly incapable of separating the person of Hitler from the National Socialist revolution. In his mind, the two became one in the same. With the zealous passion of a fresh convert, he set about to proselytize his adoration for Hitler to the masses and set in motion a series of events that would ultimately establish him as the Reich's most prolific propagandist. Likewise, as the nation entered the perpetual crisis of the Second World War, Goebbels' revolutionary ideology continued to ceaselessly radicalize – as did all things in the Reich. In the absence of the sweeping social revolution that he and many other National Socialists had envisioned, the chaos and destruction of war itself became his engine of revolution. As the Reich burned to ashes around him, Goebbels continued to press for more radical and revolutionary solutions, including stricter control of the press, women in industry, longer work hours, draconian conscription, and harsh restrictions of public life – all with the goal of insuring that the German people could never forget that they were “fighting for our lives.”⁵⁷ All of these proposals simultaneously expanded the scope of Goebbels power by inserting himself into other pillars of the state, while also contributing to the perpetual radicalization of the Reich. Goebbels actively sought – and in many ways succeeded – in establishing himself as one of the chief masterminds of wartime

⁵⁶ Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, 78.

⁵⁷ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 646.

ideology in the Reich. He was a man who never hesitated to propose a more radical solution and never failed to capitalize on the political benefits.

However, in 1930, long before the crisis of the Second World War, Goebbels had already begun to establish himself as the NSDAP's chief intercessor between Hitler, and the nation-at-large, as the Gauleiter of Berlin.⁵⁸ His aggressive campaign of mob rallies, beer-hall brawls, and blatant agitation captured the imagination of Berliners and the nation. Though many disapproved of his firebrand agitation, Goebbels fully understood that any publicity was good publicity.⁵⁹ His efforts to keep both his own name and the party's ideology in the press achieved results analogous to the triumph of social media in our own contemporary politics. In essence, Joseph Goebbels asserted himself as the most diabolically talented fake-newsperson of his era. As Hugh Trevor-Roper so pithily observed, Goebbels narratives were "utterly unscrupulous in substance, and quite indifferent to truth."⁶⁰ Truly, Goebbels would have reveled in Trevor-Roper's assessment as his chosen motto for his Berlin based *Der Angriff* newspaper was "no information, just agitation."⁶¹

Though he was still far from the apogee of his power, Goebbels had firmly ensconced himself at the head of a burgeoning private empire as Gauleiter of Berlin, chief of the party's national election campaign and master of its rapidly evolving propaganda machine.⁶² The unification of the party's propaganda outlets in his hands served to bridge the gap between the movement's opposing middle and working class power bases. On one hand, he pandered to the paranoia of political instability and liquid times haunting the imagination of the middle classes and, on the other, drew on his socialist background to formulate aggressive attacks on the western capitalist system and bourgeois society that he so despised. He unified these divergent narratives in

⁵⁸ Gauleiter was an administrative paramilitary rank within the NSDAP. Before the party's rise to power, Gauleiters were responsible for organizing regional branches of the party and energizing its base during election campaigns. After 1933, Gauleiters became the de-facto Nazi party governors of their respective regions and managed, or more often mismanaged, virtually unchecked.

⁵⁹ Fröhlich, "Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist," 52.

⁶⁰ Hugh Trevor-Roper, introduction to *Final Entries 1945*, by Joseph Goebbels (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1978), XV.

⁶¹ Fröhlich, "Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist," 52.

⁶² Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 133.

the person of Hitler, whom he portrayed as a decisive, omnipotent father figure sent to save the German *volk*. Although, in his portrayal of Hitler, Goebbels was not particularly original – the NSDAP had been built as a Führer party and he merely was innovating pre-existing tactics.⁶³ Furthermore, he catered to a common Weimar-era yearning for a second Bismarck to deliver the nation from insecurity. Even though the message was not original, he rapidly established himself as the premier innovator of Führer cult propaganda, in no small part because he believed the essence of his own message. Goebbels saw Hitler as a messianic savior or, to use his own words, “Half Plebian, half god!”⁶⁴ He had long since harbored a desire for a larger-than-life Bismarckian statesman to lead the nation to salvation “O’ lord, give your German people a miracle! A miracle!! A man!!! Bismarck, arise!”⁶⁵ Hitler was at the epicenter of his entire universe, and Goebbels set about to create an all-encompassing propaganda narrative to grant his veneration of Hitler center stage in the emerging Reich.

Following the NSDAP’s 1933 electoral victory, Goebbels found himself in a position of tremendous importance within the Reich and beset by numerous enemies within the party who regarded him – for good reason – as an ambitious and dangerous schemer. However, with his ascension to head of the Ministry for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment in March of 1933, followed by the creation of the Reich Chamber of Culture under his direction in September, he was suddenly and uniquely positioned amongst the NSDAP’s budding oligarchs to influence the population at large.

As he confided to his diary in August of 1932, “The national education of the German people is being put in my hands. I will master it.”⁶⁶ And master it, he did. Goebbels’ efforts at the head of the Propaganda Ministry pursued three broad objectives: to transform domestic discourse in the Reich into an echo chamber of his propaganda machine, to create the appearance of overwhelming popular support for the movement through mass rallies as well as ‘spontaneous’ outrage against the enemies of the NSDAP and finally to force intellectual opposition underground. He had created

⁶³ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 691.

⁶⁴ Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries: 1925-1926*, 42.

⁶⁵ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 42.

⁶⁶ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 56.

a closed system, wherein the clear majority of domestically consumed information flowed forth from his labyrinthine propaganda empire. Care should be taken, however, to avoid implying that Goebbels thoroughly planned his takeover of the media in advance. Rather, his media empire and construction of a closed system naturally evolved from a combination of the party's Führer principle, his own insatiable need for constant gratification, and the ever-present influence of working towards the Führer. Nor was his control of the media entirely uncontested, as he consistently faced competition from rival ministries and fellow party ideologues, ranging from the Scutzstaffel's own newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, to the Wehrmacht propaganda corps, Foreign Ministry, Reich Ministry of Science, Education and Culture, and others.⁶⁷ Consequently, Goebbels' Ministry brought him into constant conflict with numerous competing propaganda narratives within the state. However, none enjoyed the Reich spanning breadth of Goebbels' media empire and despite the competition, he remained the chief spokesman of the party.

In his endeavors to ensconce his particularly potent form of propaganda in daily civil discourse, Goebbels was wildly successful. His national propaganda tactics relied heavily on arousing a sense of national pride in the raw power and illusory unity of the National Socialist movement, while animating primal anger against those identified as enemies of the Reich, especially Jews and communists. Yet, Goebbels was not concerned with instilling a new, National Socialist moral compass on the German *volk*, that remained the territory of Heinrich Himmler – as we shall later see. Rather, he sought to mobilize basic emotions among the population and use them to either reinforce popular support for the regime or direct their anger against “outsiders” - who were in many cases, their fellow citizens.⁶⁸

In truth, Goebbels had simply enlarged the same successful tactics he had employed in his “conquest” of Berlin to a national scale, and the results were much the same. However, in his capacity as the Reich's propaganda oligarch, he also enjoyed unprecedented agency to harass and silence his political opponents. Empowered by his new office, Goebbels was free to fabricate violent outbursts and then appear to act in response to popular

⁶⁷ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 693, 695; Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 58.

⁶⁸ Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 56.

demand. Thus lending his actions a false air of popular legitimacy. This strategy would evolve into his signature political maneuver, most infamously demonstrated during the massive attacks on Germany's Jewish populations during *Reichskristallnacht* in 1938. Goebbels portrayed these attacks as "spontaneous" popular reactions to the assassination of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris by a disaffected Jewish exile, when in fact the pogroms of *Reichskristallnacht* had been orchestrated or encouraged at his behest by the NSDAP.

Mass violence was not the only tool of intellectual repression in his arsenal. In his complimentary role at the head of the Reich Chamber of Culture, Goebbels was ideally positioned to firmly wrap the realm of culture in the tendrils of his expanding personal empire by establishing himself as the chief censor in the Reich. With regards cultural censorship, Goebbels's aspirations reached far beyond agitation and pursued a far more actively revolutionary goal, as demonstrated during his speech at the 1933 burning of the books at the Opernplatz in Berlin where he declared:

The era of exaggerated Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The Triumph of the German revolution has cleared a path for the German way...entrust to the flames the intellectual garbage of the past. It is a strong, great and symbolic undertaking...which shall prove to all the world that the intellectual basis of the November Republic is here overturned.⁶⁹

As the burning of the books in 1933 quite clearly demonstrated, Goebbels was willing and able to blend his penchant for hate mongering with his revolutionary zeal. The burning of the books accomplished three goals simultaneously. It conflated all unorthodox intellectual thought with the NSDAP's favorite scapegoat – the mythical 'Jewish conspiracy.' It reminded Germans that the era of Weimar liberalism and the Republic itself was dead – replaced by the new revolutionary order of National Socialism and served to publicly confirm his status as the chief

⁶⁹ Joseph Goebbels, "Speech to the Students of Berlin at the Opernplatz" (speech, Berlin, May 10, 1933), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_fi.php?ModuleId=10005852&MediaId=158.

ensor. Goebbels followed up his aggressive censorship of ‘un-German’ literature with a similar attack on unorthodox art during the Degenerate Art Exhibition in September of 1937 and the Degenerate Music Exhibition in 1938. Exhibitions that – like so much of Goebbels’ career served several purposes at once – to please Hitler above all else, but also to attack the Weimar period as culturally degenerate in contrast to the supposed masculinity and perfection of the new revolutionary order and finally to strike blows against his competitors within the party.⁷⁰ Each exhibition served to solidify his political empire, whilst simultaneously pursuing the goals of the revolution.

This layering of revolutionary zeal and narcissistic goals lays at the very bedrock of Goebbels' success as an oligarch. Though it was true as his longtime rival Rosenberg observed in 1939 “Dr. G. has no friends, no comrades,”⁷¹ Goebbels proved himself perpetually incapable of completely falling from grace, his fanatical personal devotion to Hitler and zealous commitment to the revolutionary mission of National Socialism combined with his innate predilection for intrigue guaranteed his survival – and prosperity – as the Third Reich continued its relentless march into the bottomless abyss of radicalization. As the strategic outlook of the Reich grew bleak, Goebbels’ personal power continued to grow exponentially.

The coming of the Second World War necessitated a dramatic shift – and opportunity – for Goebbels as well as his propaganda empire. In the aftermath of the swift triumphs over the Western allies from September of 1939 to the end of Operation Barbarossa in winter of 1941, the newly forged continental empire seemed invincible. Yet, as the winter crisis of 1941 demonstrated, the war with Russia was devolving into a protracted, bloody affair with no swift end in sight. Nor had the United Kingdom capitulated as hoped and the entry of the United States into the war, when it came, added to the future uncertainty of the Reich’s strategic situation. Though German defeat was by no means guaranteed, it had become clear within Germany that the Second World War – win or lose – would not end as quickly as it had begun.

Consequently, Goebbels transitioned into the final stage of his career – the preservation of the revolution by setting about to

⁷⁰ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 349, 351.

⁷¹ Alfred Rosenberg, qtd. in Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 58.

painstakingly regulate morale and war weariness within the empire. Nothing was to be left to chance, optimistic reports that could create delusions of a quick war were redacted and suppressed alongside pessimistic “grumblers” who questioned the capability of NSDAP leadership or the wisdom of the war effort itself. Any action or statement that diverged from party sanctioned morale standard could be interpreted as an existential threat to the state by Goebbels’ expansive propaganda apparatus.⁷² His goal became one of fostering a sense of apocalyptic desperation in the German people – not simply to sew fear, but to create a feeling that defeat in war amounted to the end of the German people. There could be no 1918 style capitulation, no 1919 revolution, the defeat of the Reich would mean “our national life would be completely and totally destroyed.”⁷³ After all, Goebbels was clearly privy to the evolution of the Final Solution and confided to his journal in March of 1943 that, “On the Jewish question, especially, we have taken a position from which there is no escape. That is a good thing. Experience teaches that a movement and a people who have burned their bridges fight with much greater determination than those who are still able to retreat.”⁷⁴ The stakes were simply too high to fail; thus, in order to preserve the revolution, Goebbels made it his mission to manage the wartime attitude of the German public by spoon feeding them his own positive spin on the direction of the war effort and by resorting to exponentially more radical and totalitarian means to maintain the dominion of the NSDAP.

Such calculated manipulation of the home front was merely the first step in Goebbels’ path to endless radicalization throughout the war. When Göring began his meteoric decline in the aftermath of his inability to bomb the United Kingdom out of the war or defend the skies over Germany, and Hitler grew to detest the nation’s traditional military leadership as inherently bourgeois, Goebbels was ideally suited to fill the creeping power vacuum in the Reich. His hands were ‘clean’ of the military reversals of 1942 and 1943. As the military situation grew bleak and Hitler withdrew from the public eye to become absorbed with micromanaging military matters, Goebbels increasingly stepped in to fill the public

⁷² Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 502-503.

⁷³ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 505.

⁷⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, trans. and ed. by Louis P. Lochner (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 266.

void left behind by the Führer's growing domestic absence.⁷⁵ As he accurately identified – there was a “leadership crisis” within the Reich and “the Führer is sometimes somewhat vacillating in his decisions. He also doesn't always react correctly to people. A bit of help is needed there.”⁷⁶ Naturally, Goebbels viewed himself as the ideal man to bridge this gap between Führer and *volk*, the man to breathe new life in the revolution at its darkest hour and deliver it from certain destruction through sheer force of will and persuasion alone.⁷⁷ With his customary talent for intrigue, Goebbels combined his assumption of greater responsibility with a complimentary expansion of his political empire to new heights.

His power would not remain relegated entirely to the somewhat intangible world of propaganda. Starting in 1943, he endeavored to form a political clique in alliance with Göring, Speer, Ley, and Funk⁷⁸ – with the objective of resurrecting the Ministerial Council to free Hitler up for management of military affairs. With Hitler free to micromanage the war effort, Goebbels and his cohorts purposed to administer the daily governance of the Reich through the Ministerial Council, chaired by Göring with Goebbels serving as his deputy.⁷⁹ Goebbels reasoned that “The men who helped the Fuhrer win the revolution will now have to help him win the war. They were not bureaucrats then; they must not be bureaucrats today.”⁸⁰ The critical flaw – among several – in Goebbels' planning, was that much like 1927, when he believed he could “liberate” Hitler from the Munich branch of the NSDAP, he assumed the heart of the problem lay in those around Hitler, the bureaucracy in this case, and not in the person of Hitler himself. Indeed, his messianic devotion to Hitler precluded him from lucidly assessing that the leadership crisis in the Reich stemmed from Hitler's divide and rule leadership style that created a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy and enabled his lieutenants to carve the Reich into so many rival internal empires. Hitler proved

⁷⁵ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 571.

⁷⁶ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Kershaw, *Hitler*, 571.

⁷⁷ Fröhlich, “Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist,” 60.

⁷⁸ Albert Speer (1905-1981) an architect by training, he achieved early prominence within the Reich as Hitler's chief architect. During World War Two he obtained tremendous power as an oligarch as the Minister of Armaments and War Production 1942-1945. Walther Funk (1890-1960) was Reichsminister of Economics (1938-1945) and president of the Reichsbank (1939-1945).

⁷⁹ Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, 264, 268.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 264, 269.

categorically opposed to real reform, as any significant change in the power structure of the Reich posed a potential threat to the reliance of all his subservient oligarchs on his personal blessing.⁸¹ Ironically, the same leadership style that allowed for the existence of powerful miniature-führers like Goebbels in the first place had become just as existential a threat to the state as the myriad of foreign armies arrayed against it.

Regardless, the clique's plans proved dead on arrival. Hitler's continued feud with Göring over the Luftwaffe's inability to defeat the overwhelming aerial campaign underway against the Reich rendered any possibility of resurrecting the Ministerial Council under his direction a moot point. The intrigue was completely dead by September of 1943.⁸² Undeterred, Goebbels continued to attempt to shift the weight of the leadership crisis onto his shoulders and a subsequent effort by him to usurp the foreign office and attempts to persuade Hitler to pursue a separate peace with the Reich's opponents also met with failure.⁸³ It was only in the aftermath of the July 20 assassination attempt that Goebbels was finally able to tangibly expand his empire beyond the realm of propaganda and culture following his appointment as Plenipotentiary For Total War.

Ostensibly, the office of Plenipotentiary For Total War granted Goebbels sweeping power to cut through bureaucratic red tape and maximize available manpower reserves in a last-ditch effort to reverse the increasingly hopeless military situation.⁸⁴ Yet, in reality, Goebbels' newfound power was far less omnipotent than he hoped; and, though he hailed his newly won office as "probably the greatest success of my life,"⁸⁵ he would soon fall afoul of the same bureaucratic inertia and inherent party resistance to significant reform that had catastrophically derailed all attempts to rationalize the National Socialist state. Still, Goebbels fully intended to use his new office to renovate governance of the Reich according to his own conceptualization of the NSDAP's revolutionary mission as a means to combat the empire's declining fortunes.

⁸¹ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 573.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Fröhlich, "Joseph Goebbels: The Propagandist," 59; Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 609.

⁸⁴ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 643.

⁸⁵ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 644.

At Goebbels' direction, formerly conscription-exempt manpower reserves wrapped up in the nation's industrial base were heavily raided, and the female conscription age for labor was raised to fifty.⁸⁶ Bureaucracies, and institutions deemed non-critical to the war effort, ranging from newspapers to technical schools were summarily pruned or disbanded. Likewise, social infrastructure, including the national postal, rail, taxation as well as social security systems were streamlined – all in the name of freeing up manpower for the war effort. Characteristically, Goebbels was unable to resist proposing more radical solutions, including the suspension of candy and beer production, as well as the suspension of the delivery of private postal packages and telegrams in an effort to combat the growing personnel deficiency in the armed services.⁸⁷ Each of these proposals was in turn shot down by Hitler, meanwhile his efforts to use his new powers to eliminate opposing forces within the bureaucracy – including the office of the Prussian Prime Minister and the entire Reich's Economics Ministry, unsurprisingly foundered on the rocks of bureaucratic resistance.⁸⁸

As the war dragged on through the balance of 1944 and into the early months of 1945, it became increasingly obvious that no amount of revolutionary zeal, no infusion of National Socialist thought could right the sinking ship. Although, Goebbels assumed the role of Plenipotentiary for Total War with high hopes and great confidence in his own ability to preserve the revolution through sheer force of will, the icy reality of conscription shortfalls and the impending collapse of the National Socialist order loomed large on the horizon. Goebbels' personal empire had reached the zenith of its breadth and power, but in light of the collapsing strategic situation of the Reich, it seemed like a hollow achievement indeed. His crusade to preserve the movement failed in no uncertain terms.

Never one to let the crushing weight of reality block his path, the Reich's most senior propagandist prepared his exit in a manner that would live on through history. In the warped mind of Goebbels, if his idol was to take his life in the Führer bunker on April 30, 1945, then Goebbels would follow the lead of his messiah into the grave – even as his fellow oligarchs fled or surrendered. Given Goebbels' peculiar brand of narcissism, his

⁸⁶ Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, 646.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 647.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

decision to (in his own eyes) martyr himself alongside his Führer is entirely unsurprising. It would not be too much to contend that Goebbels viewed himself as Peter to Hitler's Jesus, the apostle closest to his messiah who could provide counsel and guidance to his ailing leader. In so doing, he believed he could help guide his chosen prophet – and the movement itself to salvation, a salvation that was toxic, destructive and utterly intolerant of opposing world views.

Heinrich Himmler - The High Priest

Shall we, by filtering out the valuable blood through a process of selection, once again succeed in training and breeding a nation on a grand scale, a Nordic nation?...We are called upon to establish foundations so that the next generation can make history, and if we create the right foundations it will be a great one. – Heinrich Himmler, speech to SS leaders on “The Purposes and Aims of the SS, the Relationship between the SS, the SA and the Political Formations,” June 13, 1931.⁸⁹

By rooting our people in a deep ideological awareness of ancestors and grandchildren we must once more persuade them that they must have sons. We can do a very great deal. But everything we do must be justifiable vis-à-vis the clan, our ancestors. If we do not secure this moral foundation which is the deepest and best because [it is] the most natural, we will not be able to overcome Christianity on this plane and create the Germanic Reich which will be a blessing for the earth. – Heinrich Himmler, Address at the Funeral of Reinhard Heydrich, June 9, 1942.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, trans. Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123.

⁹⁰ Heinrich Himmler, “Memorial Speech for Reinhard Heydrich” (speech, Berlin, June 9, 1942), ed. Richard Breitman, trans. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, German Historical Institute, German History in Documents and Images, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1573.

The guideline for us in our struggle is neither the Old or the New Testament in the Bible, but the political testament of Adolf Hitler. – Heinrich Himmler, 1943.⁹¹

In contrast to the brash extravagance and bombastic personality of Göring or the fiery rhetoric of Goebbels, the frail, timid, and socially awkward Heinrich Himmler represented something of an enigma both to colleagues and historians. Even senior NSDAP officials found themselves perplexed as to how such a seemingly apprehensive man had maneuvered into a position of great power, and Armament Minister Albert Speer characterized him as “a completely insignificant person, who in some inexplicable way has risen to a prominent position.”⁹² Nor did his constant need to expound (often tactlessly) on his racial theories win him many friends, or, in the words of Hamburg NSDAP functionary Albert Krebs, “such political rubbish served up in such a concentrated form and that from a man who had been to university and who was professionally engaged in politics.”⁹³ Even his closest associates, Heydrich and Hitler himself, often found themselves at wit’s end with the whimsical fantasies that occupied Himmler’s mind.

In truth, Himmler represented a sort of sphinx amongst the ranks of the Nazi oligarchs. A man possessed of sharp intellect, and yet, simultaneously firmly detached from any semblance of reality; a cunning mind for intrigue and diplomatic manipulation on one hand, but truly socially inept on the other. Taken at face value these contradictions have rendered Himmler entirely impotent in the eyes of history, an irrelevant figurehead on the sidelines of real power, but this view is wholly inaccurate. To penetrate the smoke screen surrounding the Third Reich's most enigmatic oligarch, it is essential to understand both his motivations and warped personal ideology.

Heinrich Himmler was driven by absolute determination to remake German society according to his vision of the “ideal” Aryan *volk* and reorder the entire world along the lines of the National Socialist biocracy. In his mind, his role was that of the

⁹¹ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler: Reichsführer - SS” in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 106.

⁹² Albert Speer, qtd. in Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler,” 99.

⁹³ Albert Krebs, qtd. in Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 138.

master teacher and high priest of the National Socialist Revolution, the man who would imbue future generations with the movement's revolutionary ideology and a new moral code, thereby insuring the survival of the thousand-year Reich.

At the very core of Himmler's world view and power, lay the intertwined concepts of racial hierarchy, impending apocalypse, and "blood and soil" Teutonic mysticism – a phrase coined by his colleague Richard Darré.⁹⁴ Himmler combined these concepts to form the essential guiding principles of Schutzstaffel indoctrination and the basis of his social engineering efforts. In June of 1931 (two years after his ascension to Reichsführer-SS), Himmler laid out his long-term objectives for the SS in a speech to his senior officers: "The SS must become a force that includes the best human material that we still possess in Germany. The SS must be held together by a shared community of blood."⁹⁵ In Himmler's mind, the purpose of this shared community – bound by blood – was to prepare Germany for the final battle between the Nordic peoples and the nebulous forces of Bolshevism that haunted his imagination. To Himmler, Bolshevism represented a worldwide conspiracy against the German people, a plot by the enemies of the Reich to destroy Nordic civilization as he understood it – as he continued in his 1931 speech "But if Bolshevism is victorious then this will mean the extermination of the Nordic race, of the last valuable Nordic blood, and the devastation would mean the end of the earth."⁹⁶

Himmler was preparing for a sort of National Socialist Ragnarök, in which he would personally play a critical role by laying the foundation for the final victory of the "Nordic" races through the creation of a racially pure military community:⁹⁷

We have been given the greatest and most magnificent task that a nation can be faced with. As

⁹⁴ Richard Darré (1895-1953) was an early Nazi ideologue, agricultural romantic and intellectual of sorts best remembered as the chief advocate of blood and soil aristocracy as well as his fervent hatred for industrialization and exaltation of traditional agricultural society. He served as the head of the SS Race and Resettlement Main Office (RuSHA) (1931-1938) and as Reichsminister of Food and Agriculture (1933-1942). Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 128.

⁹⁵ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 122.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁷ Ragnarök, the ancient Nordic pagan concept of the apocalypse wherein the world will be consumed in a final cataclysmic battle between the gods.

far as the value of our blood and the numbers of our population are concerned, we are dying out. We are called upon to establish foundations so that the next generation can make history, and if we create the right foundations it will be a great one.⁹⁸

It is precisely because of this psychotic whining that Himmler has been so difficult for both historians and his contemporaries to take seriously. However, the fact that Himmler perceived the world in terms of racial hierarchies and truly believed in an impending apocalypse represented the overriding guiding principle for his entire career. Thusly, guided by insanity, fear and unbridled ambition, Heinrich Himmler set off on a path that ultimately enabled him to carve out the largest private empire of any oligarch within the Third Reich – his very own Schutzstaffel state. An organization so elaborate that before the end of the war, it had inserted itself into every significant function of government, from the battlefield to the maternity ward, owing to its colossal size and special relationship to Hitler.

Throughout his career, Himmler consistently pursued his vision of a race-based SS community to lay the aforementioned ‘right foundations’ for the coming apocalyptic struggle. New SS applicants were examined for racial purity from the beginning, and in 1931, examinations were extended to their wives and families by the infamous “Engagement and Marriage Order.” Walther Darré was brought in at the head of the SS Racial Office (the future Race and Resettlement Main Office) to endlessly expound on the ideals of blood and soil aristocracy, the necessity resettlement of German populations eastwards and the future use of breeding wardens to maintain Aryan purity in conquered lands, for all time to come.⁹⁹

Despite widespread derision, Himmler remained unswayed from his campaign to assemble an SS community and in 1935 created the Lebensborn program in order to provide a human production line for future generations of racially pure SS soldiers. As Himmler explained in 1936, he anticipated “200-300 children per year from every battalion of the Verfügungstruppe...and make them soldiers and officers or, alternatively superior wives of our

⁹⁸ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 123.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

nation”¹⁰⁰ It was a truly ambitious eugenics program by any stretch of the imagination. Young women within the program were boarded at SS owned facilities, cared for to the fullest capacity of the state, and any child born at a Lebensborn facility could become a ward of the program, a measure designed to be particularly enticing to single mothers to whom traditional stigmas surrounding unwed motherhood could prove devastating. However, as tempting as it may be to disregard the Lebensborn program a system of state sponsored brothels, any such assertion is a sensationalist overstatement. Above all else, Lebensborn existed as the ultimate expression of Himmler’s vision of the SS as a community, and its services extended to provide welfare for the married spouses of SS personnel and an adoption service for unwanted children from the general public – provided the parents were judged racially pure.¹⁰¹

However, Himmler’s ambitions were not limited to merely ensuring future racial purity. He also entertained a deep-seated desire to excise what he saw as the un-German cultural influence of Christianity by replacing it with a new religious order based upon National Socialism. “The guideline for us in our struggle is neither the Old or the New Testament in the Bible, but the political testament of Adolf Hitler.”¹⁰² Himmler saw the principles of Christianity as a stifling foreign influence that would ultimately have to be eradicated to make way for “proper religion and morality” based on ancestral folk heroes and the modern Führer principle, a truly schizophrenic combination. However, despite Himmler’s attempts to instill a new National Socialist creed on German society through his intercessionaries within the SS, his “messiah” remained unimpressed:

What nonsense! We have finally arrived in an era which has dispensed with all mysticism, and now he’s starting at the beginning again. We might as well have stayed with the church. To think I might one day be made an SS saint. Just imagine it! I would turn over in my grave.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 371.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 371, 372.

¹⁰² Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler: Reichsführer - SS,” 105.

¹⁰³ Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler,” 107.

Despite his frenzied rhetoric and grandiose designs, in 1931 Himmler and his SS were in no position to dictate anything to anyone. He was for all practical intents and purposes, the head of a glorified bodyguard service tasked with ensuring the safety of leading NSDAP officials; moreover, the microscopic SS existed only as a subordinate wing of the SA. But opportunity lay just around the corner and Himmler was not one to miss it, he had already begun to distinguish the SS as an “elite” organization within the SA, committed to discipline, racial/moral purity, and unquestioning loyalty to Hitler.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile as the Nazi Party began its final ascent to power after the arduous setbacks of 1932, the party establishment found it increasingly difficult to control the behavior of Ernst Röhm's Sturmabteilung (SA).¹⁰⁵ The use of street terror had served to remind the populace that the NSDAP was a serious political organization, but the SA's small regard for Hitler's legal approach to destroy democracy from within by mobilizing its own tools against it was now a problem. The SA demanded immediate revolution to overthrow the state and remake the entire nation in the image of National Socialism and even after Hitler ascended to the chancellery, Ernst Röhm and his associates continued to agitate for a “second revolution.”¹⁰⁶ As tensions between the party and the SA continued to simmer, Himmler stood to gain a great deal from the ensuing chaos. Party officials across the country lived in fear of the SA – especially recently established NSDAP state governors who felt particularly vulnerable. Himmler found himself in a unique position to provide an insurance policy against the SA's revolutionary ambition, for he was solidifying a monopoly on the most potent weapon in the Reich – repression.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 118-121.

¹⁰⁵ The *Sturmabteilung* or SA was the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party. The organization was simultaneously renowned and infamous in party circles for its brutality, revolutionary zeal, rebellious nature and penchant for random acts of violence – both sanctioned and unsanctioned. The SA's extraordinary size – some several million members composed of numerous, often loosely controlled regional commands – made the organization notoriously difficult to control. Ultimately, the SA was decapitated and reduced to political insignificance during the 1934 Night of the Long Knives purge. Conan Fischer, “Ernst Julius Röhm: Chief of Staff of the SA and Indispensable Outsider,” in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 178.

¹⁰⁶ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 156.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 156, 158.

As early as the summer of 1931, Himmler had already begun to ensconce the SS in the world of internal security with the formation of an independent SS Intelligence agency that eventually evolved into the dreaded Sicherheitsdienst (SD) under the highly efficient (and brutal) leadership of fellow oligarch Reinhard Heydrich.¹⁰⁸ However, Himmler's power was still restricted to internal security within the party and his subordination to the SA limited his capacity for independent action. Himmler, the burgeoning oligarch, needed to be able to assert his power in an entirely separate domain, apart from the gargantuan SA and ultimately his great break would come in Bavaria after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. On March 9, 1933, Himmler was appointed as Chief of the Munich Police with Heydrich acting as his right-hand man at the head of Department VI – the political police.¹⁰⁹ This gave Himmler an opportunity to successfully assert his independence. Small as his new post may seem in retrospect, he was no longer merely the head of a glorified bodyguard service, sporting an awkwardly bolted on intelligence wing. He was now a political actor possessing very real agency, and nothing could have prepared the nation for the cold and calculated apparatus of terror he was about to engineer.

Himmler acted quickly and decisively to secure his new position; Communist party members, non-Nazi paramilitaries and trade unionists were arrested en-masse under the fig leaf of “protective custody.” Dissidence within Munich was quelled instantaneously and his efficiency was swiftly rewarded. On April 1st, he was promoted to Commander of the Bavarian Political Police, placing him at the helm of both Bavaria's statewide political police and its growing array of concentration camps.¹¹⁰ Himmler wasted no time in subordinating both to his SS hierarchy. Within months, the Schutzstaffel became synonymous with protective custody, sadistic punishment, and systematic terror carried to the German people through Himmler's sinister emissary – Dachau.¹¹¹

Himmler was no mere regional police chief; he had become the head of the thought police, and he wanted everyone to know it

¹⁰⁸ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 125; Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: the Life of Heydrich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 51.

¹⁰⁹ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 149.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹¹ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 155.

– “We are brave enough to be unpopular, we are brave enough to be hard-hearted and unfeeling!”¹¹² The means of repression were gradually falling into the Reichsführer’s hands. Within one year the political police of every German state – save Prussia – had fallen under Himmler’s control, and armed SS detachments had been permanently garrisoned across the nation as political dissent quick reaction detachments.¹¹³ Himmler had been unleashed. He would soon be in a position to act on his apocalyptic fantasies and attempt to make his visions of “German samurai” and an SS community based on blood a terrifying reality.¹¹⁴ The Schutzstaffel empire took flight.

Meanwhile, as Himmler extended the tendrils of the SS across Germany, the clock was ticking for Röhm and his SA. Göring grew suspicious of Röhm’s revolutionary ambitions and Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick (still futilely attempting to moderate the excesses of the NSDAP) – tired of their random acts of violence. The German people lived in fear of their wrath and Himmler saw an opportunity to usurp the power of his friend and former mentor, Ernst Röhm. Thus, the elimination of Röhm and the consequent emasculation of SA leadership opened numerous doors for the up and coming Reichsführer. First and foremost, it lent Himmler an opportunity to prove his unconditional loyalty to Hitler while simultaneously establishing the Schutzstaffel’s formal independence from the SA. Furthermore, Röhm’s demise at the hands of SS executioners served as a grim reminder to the Nazi hierarchy that if they incurred Hitler’s wrath, they would answer to the SS. There would be no tolerance for dissent, no matter how senior or popular the dissenter – no one was ever beyond the reach of the Schutzstaffel’s reign of terror. If the SS could liquidate Röhm without repercussion, they could liquidate anyone so long as the Führer sanctioned it.

Most pressingly, Himmler’s personal empire was no longer fettered by any external authority – save Hitler, to whom he remained sycophantically loyal until the very end. Himmler acted quickly to expand his power base; in the immediate aftermath of the Night of the Long Knives, pre-existing SS bodyguard detachments were gradually organized into front line military formations under the banner of the SS-VT (SS-Verfügungstruppe,

¹¹² Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler: Reichsführer - SS,” 105.

¹¹³ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 160.

¹¹⁴ Ackermann, “Heinrich Himmler: Reichsführer - SS,” 108.

later Waffen-SS). Likewise, the concentration camp guards were invested into the SS-TV (SS-Totenkopfverbände), which ultimately evolved into the umbrella organization for all concentration and extermination camp guards within the Reich.¹¹⁵ Though both organizations were still in their infancy, Himmler had laid the groundwork both for his private army and for continued monopoly over the camps, the Reich's most potent instrument of repression.

However, much like Göring's future efforts to establish an independent Luftwaffe army, Himmler met immediate resistance from Germany's traditional military establishment who saw the emerging SS-TV as yet another threat to the armed forces role as the nation's sole bearer of arms and a mere re-run of Röhm's threats to replace the army with a "people's militia." In this regard the army elites were absolutely correct, the difference was that unlike Röhm, Himmler enjoyed Hitler's support and the nascent Verfügungstruppe continued to expand its ranks, equipment and officer corps, despite army opposition. In 1938, following the decisive defeat of the army's independence in the aftermath of the Blomberg-Fritsch affair, Hitler finally interceded to end the SS-Wehrmacht feud. The Allgemeine-SS (General SS) was restricted to internal policing and party activities during peacetime. However, a critical caveat was created through which Himmler engineered the Waffen-SS, the Verfügungstruppe was affirmed as "neither a part of the Wehrmacht nor part of the Police. It is a standing armed unit exclusively at my disposal"¹¹⁶

The outbreak of World War II opened the door to a virtually unlimited expansion of both the Schutzstaffel and Himmler's personal power base. Right up until the surrender of the Third Reich, Himmler's grip expanded on all fronts. The massive expansion of the SS repression system over conquered territories by the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) under Heydrich spread the National Socialist reign of terror to the furthest corners of the continent. While the swelling ranks of the SS-Totenkopfverbände ultimately made the expansion of the concentration camp system eastwards and subsequent creation of the death camps possible. However, the most direct expansion of SS power manifest itself within the Waffen-SS, formed out of the SS-Verfügungstruppe in

¹¹⁵ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 174.

¹¹⁶ Adolf Hitler, qtd. in George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 21.

1940. By the war's end, the Waffen-SS had grown from an initial establishment of roughly 28,000 men to a breathtaking size of thirty-eight divisions and just over a million men had served in its ranks.¹¹⁷ By the beginning of 1944, despite its entire size equating to a mere five percent of the Wehrmacht, the Waffen-SS controlled roughly twenty-five percent of the nation's armored divisions and thirty-three percent of its mechanized divisions and received the newest equipment before the vast majority of the army.¹¹⁸ The Waffen-SS had established military prominence far beyond its comparative size. Furthermore, all major combatant foreign military formations in the Reich were either controlled by or transferred to Waffen-SS command, and Waffen-SS personnel were drawn from *volksdeutsche* from every corner of the Germanic world, Holland, Norway, Finland, France, Hungary and the Baltic states just to name a handful.

Additional auxiliary SS units were raised from non-Aryan populations. Himmler acquired personnel from nearly every occupied region and subject population within the Reich, ranging from Bosnian Muslims to Ukrainians.¹¹⁹ The conditions of service and willing participation of these so-called "Hiwis" (volunteers) from non-German populations was always suspect, and Himmler went to great lengths to differentiate foreign soldiers from their German superiors; the "term SS man, which means so much to us and which we regard so highly" did not apply to "the numerous members of alien ethnic groups which we are now organizing under command of the SS."¹²⁰ Himmler clearly did not envision his "alien" personnel as his equals; indeed, their employment echoes of the SS-TV's parallel use of foreign populations in the execution of the Final Solution. They were merely intended to serve as the serf-soldiers of the coming thousand-year Reich and nothing more.

By the fall of the Third Reich in May of 1945, Himmler's empire had reached truly fevered heights. What had begun as a party bodyguard agency of no exceptional note when Himmler assumed control of the SS in 1929, had evolved into the single most defining institution of the Third Reich. As the war dragged on and the worldview of German leadership became increasingly

¹¹⁷ Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 137, 281.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹¹⁹ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 675, 679.

¹²⁰ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 679.

detached from the situation at the front and descended further and further into a self-radicalizing tailspin, the power of Himmler and the SS grew exponentially. On the battlefield, every defeat suffered at the hands of Germany's enemies caused Hitler and the Nazi leadership around him to increasingly despise the traditional army elites upon whom the prosecution of the NSDAP's war largely rested. Instead of considering the leadership failures of the Führer and others that had created such an untenable strategic situation, Hitler and his cohorts simply entertained increasingly deranged conspiracy theories and admonished the traditional Wehrmacht for lacking proper revolutionary National Socialist consciousness:

In the absence of an elite as we envisaged it, we had to make do with the human material to hand. And this is the result! Because the intellectual concept could not be wedded to a practical and practicable implementation of the idea, the war policy of a revolutionary state like the Third Reich necessarily became the policy of reactionary bourgeois.¹²¹

In the midst of it all, there was one man who promised Hitler both an “elite as we envisaged” and total devotion to the revolutionary principles of the NSDAP – and that man was Heinrich Himmler. Paradoxically, much like his colleague Goebbels, the Reich's decline was the key to Himmler's success in transforming the SS from a glorified bodyguard service into a continent spanning internal empire. As the political life of the Third Reich – and particularly the political outlook of Hitler himself ran further off the rails of the remotest sense of normality and reality – Himmler's power grew incalculably. His central role in the direction of policy and ideology within the Third Reich has often been overlooked, relegated to the sidelines of history and dismissed as the ravings of a madman. Mad as he may have been, it is nigh impossible to imagine the Third Reich without the SS, the SS that Himmler built. The only individual in the entire Reich with a more dramatic impact than Heinrich Himmler was Hitler himself.

¹²¹ Adolf Hitler, qtd. by Rainer Zitelmann, “Adolf Hitler: The Führer” in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 127.

Reinhard Heydrich - The Revolutionary Purifier

Ideological enemies can only be subjugated in a spiritual battle of world-views. After the first months of the revolutionary conquest of state power, co-ordination began to be undertaken. When some of our fellow combatants did not endorse the importance of this change in the form and means of battle, the term ‘from revolution to evolution’ was coined, i.e. from external seizure of power to the spiritual and ideological conquest of everybody. – Reinhard Heydrich, *Transformations in Our Struggle*, 1935.¹²²

It is almost too hard for one person, but we have to be as hard as granite, otherwise the work of our Führer will be destroyed. In the distant future, they will thank us for what we have taken upon ourselves. – Reinhard Heydrich, speaking to a League of Nations Commissioner, 1937.¹²³

Educate our children to become firm believers in the Führer and Germany; to be true to the ideas of the Nazi movement. [Make sure] that they strictly adhere to the eternal laws of the SS, that they are hard toward themselves, kind and generous towards our own people and Germany and merciless towards all internal and external enemies of the Reich. – Reinhard Heydrich, letter to his wife to be delivered in the event of his death, September 1, 1939.¹²⁴

Though Himmler’s empire building achievements were numerous, he had by no means done it alone. He had, like all other Nazi

¹²² Reinhard Heydrich, “Transformations in Our Struggle,” (Berlin & Munich: *Das Schwarze Korps*, 1935), accessed August 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203352.pdf, 1.

¹²³ Reinhard Heydrich, qtd. in Günther Deschner, “Reinhard Heydrich: Security Technocrat” in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 90.

¹²⁴ Reinhard Heydrich, qtd. in Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman*, 139.

oligarchs, relied heavily on the Führer, but most pressingly he also enjoyed the cooperation of the man destined to become the most feared official in the Reich – Reinhard Heydrich. The character of Heydrich – much like Himmler, has been the subject of a great degree of historical hyperbole. Wild claims about his mythical Jewish heritage or supposed efforts to assassinate Hitler were accepted as canonical for many decades, and efforts to seriously decode the man’s motivations and worldview have been clouded by such sensational claims. As usual, reality is far more complex. The character of Reinhard Heydrich has been ably described by German historian Günther Deschner, “If National Socialism had looked into a mirror, Reinhard Heydrich would have looked back out of it.”¹²⁵ Deschner’s observation is absolutely correct. Heydrich was not merely a two-dimensional careerist driven by ambition alone, nor was he driven by a fractured and self-loathing personality to pursue greater and greater power.¹²⁶ Great ambition certainly helped Heydrich along his path, and the loss of his kriegsmarine career did push him firmly into the National Socialist camp, but Heydrich’s conversion to the National Socialism was genuine and his devotion to Himmler’s Schutzstaffel worldview, absolute. Reinhard Heydrich was to become the ideological “purifier” for the National Socialist revolution, a man who truly believed in the aims of the NSDAP and prepared to take any and all steps he deemed necessary in pursuit of its goals. Heydrich was the malevolent Lancelot to Hitler/Himmler’s King Arthur.

To properly grasp Heydrich’s role within the state as chief security oligarch, it is important to understand the nature of his relationship to his titular superior – Himmler. The two men possessed radically different personalities. Himmler viewed himself as the ideological architect of a new world order and Heydrich as the cold, rational hammer with which his new order would be forged. To those around them, it often seemed as though the pair were in a constant state of disagreement, when Heydrich poured scorn on Himmler’s flights of fantasy Himmler in turn retaliated like a helpless schoolmaster berated by his student; “You...and your logic. We never hear about anything but your

¹²⁵ Deschner, “Reinhard Heydrich: Security Technocrat,” 87.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

logic. Everything I propose you batter down with your logic. I'm fed up with you and your cold rational criticism.”¹²⁷

Arguments such as this have often been used as evidence for some kind of irreconcilable rift between the Heydrich and Himmler, but this is merely misreading of the relationship. Indeed, Heydrich was not impressed by Himmler's flights of fancy, but it did not represent an insurmountable stumbling block between them. Heydrich valued practicality and efficiency above all else and part of his role as Himmler's de-facto second man was to provide cold, hard logic as a counterbalance to Himmler's mystical delusions. Until Heydrich's death, the pair enjoyed a collaborative relationship as two powerful oligarchs in pursuit of a common goal – the realization of the SS state and the fabrication of a National Socialist world order.¹²⁸ From the day Heydrich joined the SS, on July 14, 1931, until his death in June of 1942, Himmler remained Heydrich's ideological mentor and chief ally within the Nazi party, two sides of the same coin at the very heart of National Socialism.¹²⁹

Heydrich's primary roles within the Third Reich were two-fold. His official role as the head of party intelligence – later expanded to the empire-wide Reich Main Security Office – and his self-appointed role as the purifier of the revolution, to be discussed in greater detail later. Heydrich's ascent within the SS security apparatus began by historical happenstance, in 1931, when Himmler formed the *Ic-Dienst* (future SD) – he had been mistakenly informed that Heydrich had been an intelligence officer. In reality, Heydrich had merely been a communication officer. Regardless, armed with his intellect, an understanding of spy craft from espionage novels and twenty minutes, Heydrich had fleshed out a convincing sketch for the future structure of a party intelligence agency – at least, convincing enough for Himmler to hire him on the spot.¹³⁰

Initially, Heydrich's new role was nothing particularly glamorous. The SD was not yet feared – though it would be soon – and the SS state that it would serve did not yet exist. In 1931, the SS was, as has already been mentioned, little more than a

¹²⁷ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Charles Wighton, *Hitler's Most Evil Henchmen* (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1962), 81.

¹²⁸ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 52.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 51.

bodyguard service headed by an unusually ambitious Reichsführer. Regardless, Heydrich devoted himself completely to his new post despite crippling material and personnel shortages. During its formative years between 1931 and 1934, Heydrich's SD benefited greatly from general paranoia and fear of ideological opponents within the movement – especially real and imagined links between the SA and disgraced Strasser brothers.¹³¹ Yet, despite accusations in the press that he was founding “a Fascist Cheka” as early as 1931,¹³² Heydrich's nascent SD remained miniscule, overworked, and lacking respect within the party. In 1932, the SD consisted of paltry thirty-three full-time employees to cover the entire NSDAP establishment.¹³³ Nonetheless, Heydrich forged ahead and when Himmler was finally gained real power in Munich in 1933, Heydrich's meteoric rise followed that of his mentor. As Himmler consolidated his SS grip on political police across the Reich, Heydrich integrated the newly acquired political police forces into his SD, assembling a nationwide information network that constantly fed intelligence from every corner of the Reich directly to his office.¹³⁴ Heydrich's ascendancy as the Third Reich's dreaded security oligarch was about to begin.

Unsurprisingly, the rise of Heydrich's personal empire was – just like the rest of the SS – closely tied to the decline of the SA. For many years, Himmler, Heydrich, and Röhm had been close friends, fellow National Socialists, and true believers; Röhm was even the godfather to Heydrich's eldest son.¹³⁵ Yet, ambition and the oligarchic nature of the newly established National Socialist regime had begun to seriously undermine relations between Himmler/Heydrich and Röhm as the NSDAP finally obtained real power in the aftermath of their 1933 electoral victory. Röhm openly called for a second revolution, while party leadership entrenched around Hitler clearly understood that their hold on the nation was far too tenuous and their “legal approach” far too successful to be gambled away on a whim.

Röhm's dissent posed both a serious threat and an irresistible opportunity. With the SS rapidly gaining control over the nation's political police, the random acts of violence and

¹³¹ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 46, 47.

¹³² Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 57.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

retribution perpetrated by individual SA members simply could no longer be tolerated by the Himmler/Heydrich duo. The tools of state repression *belonged* to them, and they could brook no competition. Moreover, Röhm's ambition to replace the army with a National Socialist people's militia posed a direct challenge to Himmler's long term objectives for the SS. However, of more immediate concern, Röhm's bellicose rhetoric directly challenged the Führer's will.¹³⁶ Open dissent would not be tolerated – especially from the head of the SA that had been so critical to the success of the revolution. The board was set for a show down between the SA and the party establishment, Heydrich and Himmler were quick to realize that their interests would be well served by disposing of their old friend.

Heydrich's role in the suppression of the SA and destruction of Röhm was complex. He was both the party's executioner, responsible for eliminating Röhm and his confederates and, simultaneously manager of the whisper campaign to justify his elimination.¹³⁷ Röhm had already placed himself in a precarious position, but he was still shielded by his impeccable National Socialist credentials and by the immense size of his SA. But as the master of party intelligence, Heydrich was well positioned to weave the narrative of a putsch plot between Röhm, former Chancellor von Schleicher, Gregor Strasser, and the French Republic.¹³⁸ A mere three days before the purge, Heydrich informed his subordinates about the imminent danger of "Röhm's connections to France and the involvement of other forces hostile to the state" including "the communists" and "reactionary circles."¹³⁹ It was a convenient conspiracy, including Heydrich's least favorite things – foreigners, communists, and reactionary bourgeoisie. Whether Heydrich cynically fabricated this narrative to meet the needs of his superiors, or contorted his mind into believing that Röhm presented an imminent threat to the National Socialist state remains hotly debated. It is certainly easy to see Heydrich as the master blackmailer and forger that he was, fabricating the narrative for the elimination of his opponents.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is just as easy to see Heydrich, the paranoid

¹³⁶ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 77.

¹³⁷ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 68.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹³⁹ Reinhard Heydrich, qtd. in Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 79.

¹⁴⁰ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 68.

xenophobe finding conspiracies where, indeed there were none. Regardless of Heydrich's agency in planning the purge, his primacy as the instrument of purification is beyond question. The National Socialist Lancelot was in his element.

When the order to liquidate Röhm and his compatriots came down from Hitler on June 30, 1934, Heydrich acted swiftly and efficiently. The SD had been elevated to the sole party intelligence agency on June 6th by Hitler himself, and all party officials had been required by secret decree to supply the SD with any and all information it deemed necessary.¹⁴¹ By the beginning of the Night of the Long Knives, the SD had already prepared lists of political opponents earmarked for elimination, including conservative politicians and in classic Heydrich style, he also used the opportunity to employ his recently acquired Gestapo against personal opponents as well – particularly from the politically activist Catholic right that he so emphatically despised.¹⁴²

The purge not only consolidated the regime's grip on the state, it also served as a particularly potent warning to every citizen of the Reich that the new prince of terror was both willing and able to execute political dissidents out of hand, although, unbeknownst to the general public – Hitler berated Heydrich's Gestapo for the unnecessarily public ways in which some of the victims had been disposed of.¹⁴³ Hitler's public relations objections aside, Heydrich's role as the sword of fate in the Röhm purge firmly cemented his position as a senior oligarch in the NSDAP hierarchy. Within a month, he had already begun a whisper campaign alleging among other things that General von Fritsch was planning a putsch against Hitler and collecting the baseless accusations of a notorious male Berlin prostitute and blackmailer targeting the General. Though the Führer would have none of it and ordered the Fritsch files destroyed – an order that Heydrich conveniently neglected to carry out – it returned to haunt von Fritsch four years later amidst the Blomberg-Fritsch affair.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Heydrich had spread his wings as the unchallenged security oligarch and like the other great men of the National Socialist state, immediately set about to insert himself uninvited into all other aspects of the state.

¹⁴¹ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 69.

¹⁴² Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 80.

¹⁴³ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 79.

¹⁴⁴ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 116; Kershaw, *Hitler*, 54.

Following the Röhm purge in 1934, Heydrich's power exploded, both in conjunction with Himmler and on his own accord. Heydrich expanded the scope of SD operations far beyond the borders of Germany and began to actively recruit personnel for foreign deployments. This new expansion of the SD program was in direct contravention of his pre-existing "Ten Commandments" agreement with *Abwehr* (military intelligence) limiting the SD to internal intelligence and leaving foreign affairs firmly in the domain of Admiral Canaris and *Abwehr*, not that Heydrich particularly cared.¹⁴⁵ He was just taking a standard page from his fellow oligarchs by building a National Socialist clone of an established institution and gradually usurping its role entirely, the same strategy used by Göring against the Finance Ministry and the same strategy Himmler was already planning for his SS-Verfügungstruppe against the venerable German army.

In July of the same year, Himmler and Heydrich jointly conspired to use SS-Standarte 89 (based in Vienna) to mount a putsch in the Austrian capital, decapitate the fascist Vaterländische Front government and achieve Anschluss in 1934.¹⁴⁶ The plot rapidly morphed into a catastrophe, the putsch failed, Mussolini – then a close ally of Austria – was enraged, the international press was mortified by the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor and Hitler was forced to disown the Austrian National Socialists to avoid a public relations nightmare. For his part, Heydrich was not discouraged by this setback and continued to methodically expand his intelligence apparatus both inside the Reich and beyond its borders for the duration of his lifetime.

In late September 1939, a little under a month after the outbreak of World War Two, Heydrich rose to the head of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA); a security apparatus rivaled in the Herculean scope of its mission only by Stalin's NKVD. As the head of the RSHA Heydrich played a critical dual role, both as an oligarch at the head of his own security empire based upon the National Socialist Führer principle and as the decisive wing of Himmler's SS-state.¹⁴⁷ Without Heydrich's RSHA, Himmler's plans for his racially pure SS-community could not be exported beyond the borders of the Reich and his dreams of a blood and soil

¹⁴⁵ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 86.

¹⁴⁶ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 178.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Brozsat, *The Hitler State*, trans. John W. Hiden (New York: Longman, 1981), 270.

aristocracy could not be realized without the cold, efficient engine of terror that Heydrich had manufactured for him. Heydrich made it possible to export the Aryan worldview – by coercion – across the entire continent and in so doing, laid the groundwork for the most infamous atrocities of the Nazi regime, including the brutal suppression of conquered nations, the mass deportation of Jewish populations, the *Einsatzgruppen*, and finally, the systematic extermination of millions.

The twisted talents and achievements of Reinhard Heydrich have been well documented and assessed over the years, yet the question remains. What motivated Heydrich to develop such an extensive and potent security apparatus and to so doggedly pursue all enemies of the Reich – both real and imagined? Was it insatiable ambition? Unbridled paranoia or a shattered, restless personality? The truth, of course, is far more complex than a single generalized character trait. To properly understand the motivations and actions of Reinhard Heydrich, it is necessary to revisit the principle of the National Socialist Lancelot, the man who embodied the “manifestation of the SS state like no other”¹⁴⁸

Like other leading Nazis, Heydrich viewed National Socialism as a revolutionary mission, however, unlike most Nazis, he fit its portrait for “perfection” flawlessly and viewed himself as the self-appointed purifier of the NSDAP’s revolutionary mission. Heydrich was tall, blonde, blue-eyed, viewed the world through racial hierarchies and preferred a technocratic approach to solving problems.¹⁴⁹ Moral quandaries did not trouble him and like his ideological mentor Himmler, he viewed ethical qualms as a sign of weakness to be brushed aside in pursuit of a higher goal. Heydrich’s worldview was best summed up in his comments regarding the early concentration camps to Swiss diplomat Carl Jacob Burkhardt in the late 1930s – “It is almost too hard for one person, but we have to be as hard as granite, otherwise the work of our Führer will be destroyed. In the distant future, they will thank us for what we have taken upon ourselves.”¹⁵⁰ And thus he took it upon himself to cleanse the National Socialist Revolution of all impurities, both racial and practical, to ensure that the revolutionary mission would go on so that the promised thousand-year Reich could be born. In Heydrich’s mind, his actions would

¹⁴⁸ Deschner, “Reinhard Heydrich: Security Technocrat,” 85.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 87, 88.

¹⁵⁰ Deschner, “Reinhard Heydrich, 90.

ensure a “link between the illustrious cultural past of our people and the coming thousands of years of German national history.”¹⁵¹ Heydrich was adamant from his earliest days in the movement – at least after his appointment to the nascent SD – that National Socialism was beset on all sides by amorphous conspiracies, plots and enemies disguised in all corners of society.¹⁵² Jews, Freemasons, Catholics, Marxists – anything with the remotest hint of internationalism or affinity for foreign culture was fair game for Heydrich’s labyrinthine conspiracy theories. They were all to be surveilled, subdued, and if necessary, eliminated.

In Heydrich’s worldview, it was *essential* that he be granted total independence from established law and categorically dismissed the concept of inviolable rights in pursuit of the enemies (*reichsfiende*) that threatened the coming thousand-year Reich.

In order to preserve our people, we must be harsh in the face of our enemy, even at the cost of hurting an individual or being condemned as rabble-rousers...Should we not fulfill our historical role as National Socialists because we have been too humane and objective, there will be no mitigating circumstances when our conduct is being evaluated. It will merely be said: they have not fulfilled their role when facing history.¹⁵³

To students of history familiar with purges in revolutionary Leninist and later Stalinist Russia, this language might strike the reader as chillingly familiar. It is the language of a revolutionary executioner, a latter-day Robespierre.¹⁵⁴ Heydrich’s agency in the Röhm purge was by far the most visible episode of his ideological crusade within the movement, but it was far from the only one. In 1935, as his personal empire branched out across the Reich,

¹⁵¹ Reinhard Heydrich, “Transformations in Our Struggle,” (Berlin & Munich: *Das Schwarze Korps*, 1935), accessed August 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203352.pdf, 2.

¹⁵² Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman*, 57.

¹⁵³ Reinhard Heydrich, “Transformations in Our Struggle,” *Das Schwarze Korps* (1935), 1.

¹⁵⁴ Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) played a key role in engineering the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. He was renowned for both his brutality and his single minded dedication to the ideological objectives of the revolution.

Heydrich furnished himself with a bully pulpit from which to bludgeon his political enemies – at home and abroad. He proposed to Himmler that the SS should possess its own tabloid inspired by the lurid success of Julius Streicher’s *Der Stürmer*.¹⁵⁵ Unlike Streicher, Heydrich’s goal was not merely to provoke outrage and mobilize the party’s radical base against the enemies of National Socialism. Instead, he viewed it as a precise tool of political indoctrination, purification, and his own personal soap-box from which to lambast his fellow National Socialists and ideological opponents alike. Thus, *Das Schwarze Korps* was born and no one, save Himmler and Hitler, was safe from Heydrich’s scathing attacks, even the master of the presses himself – fellow oligarch Joseph Goebbels occasionally wandered into the sights of *Das Schwarze Korps*.

Unsurprisingly, Heydrich used *Das Schwarze Korps* to attack all of his favorite targets, the church in particular, going so far as to combine his role as the editor in chief of *Das Schwarze Korps* with his position as head of the Gestapo by alleging church scandals in *Das Schwarze Korps* and then using those self-same “journalistic” articles as evidence in his judgments as head of the Gestapo to pack stubborn churchmen off to concentration camps.¹⁵⁶ Even Mussolini came under a withering assault from Heydrich’s personal attack dogs as *Das Schwarze Korps* mercilessly assailed the 1936 Italian military campaign against Abyssinia in direct opposition to Goebbels’ pro-Italian line.¹⁵⁷

His attacks were also directed at fellow party members whom he saw as deviating from the proper course of National Socialism. *Das Schwarze Korps* routinely attacked bourgeois culture, reactionary conservatism, and the infamous corruption of the party’s numerous Gauleiters. Likewise, big business was regularly assaulted, and Heydrich did everything he could to conflate the public image of international business with the Zionist conspiracy theories that so pervaded National Socialism.¹⁵⁸ Nor did Heydrich have any sympathy for armchair Nazis who enjoyed titular party membership but did not actively devote themselves to its ideological mission, or whom spoke much of their commitment but were not prepared to take tangible action in support of the

¹⁵⁵ Wighton, *Heydrich*, 102.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 110, 111.

revolution – “A party card is not a meal ticket” and “One cannot live by catchwords and gimmicks – history is made by individuals who perform deeds and not those who make speeches.”¹⁵⁹ Though the latter comment, a scathing attack directed at Goebbels, sorely undervalued just how much the Propaganda Minister’s speeches, gimmicks, and Führer cult underpinned the entire National Socialist system.

In addition to its role as a Heydrich’s personal bully pulpit, *Das Schwarze Korps* also served as a highly effective medium to bring the latest ideological radicalization from the dual minds of Himmler and Heydrich directly to the rank and file SS. Like everything else in the SS-state it helped to establish firm roots for the growing SS community and Heydrich used it as an aggressive implement of indoctrination:

What does this new form of struggle demand from us, the SS? We have to improve ourselves. We have to discipline ourselves, to deepen and follow the principles of our worldview, given to us by the Führer. We have to ideologically co-ordinate ourselves so that all of us think alike of our enemies and fundamentally exclude them, without making any personal selfish or compassionate exceptions.¹⁶⁰

Heydrich’s message in *Das Schwarze Korps* perfectly encapsulated the ideological mission of the SS state – itself by far the most assiduously totalitarian wing of the National Socialist revolution. He ceaselessly exhorted his comrades to harden themselves, to disregard personal motives and human compassion in pursuit of a higher goal. To shed whatever vestigial remains of liberal bourgeois society might still cling to their consciousness and embrace the National Socialist mission unconditionally as he already had. Armed with this worldview, Heydrich helped open the door to endless radicalization within the SS and the Third Reich in general. He was not the genesis of Nazi ideological radicalization. The lion’s share of that responsibility rested first with Hitler then Himmler and Goebbels, but Heydrich played a paramount role in the creation of an all-encompassing system of ideological

¹⁵⁹ Reinhard Heydrich, qtd. in Wighton, *Heydrich*, 110, 111.

¹⁶⁰ Reinhard Heydrich, “Transformations in Our Struggle,” *Das Schwarze Korps* (1935), 1.

repression to crush dissent in the name of the revolution. All the while, he played a crucial role as both the guardian of both the movement's revolutionary consciousness and as an adroit conduit of radicalization to the black uniformed masses. Heydrich was, as Admiral Wilhelm Canaris so aptly characterized him, “the cleverest brute of them all.”¹⁶¹ Considering Heydrich’s talent for repression, indifference to murder, and boundless paranoia, it is hardly surprising that he – and the security apparatus he engineered – became the chief architect of mass population expulsions and the largest genocide in human history. In the twisted character of Reinhard Heydrich, National Socialism had truly found its Knight-Errant, the “man with an iron heart.”¹⁶²

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the unique and pivotal roles played by each of the Third Reich’s most prominent oligarchs, it becomes virtually impossible to envision the Reich without them. Could the German economy have been so totally transformed from the civilian economy of the Weimar Republic to the war economy of the Third Reich without the systematic Nazification of industry and disarmament of the traditional bourgeois economic elite undertaken by Göring? As Hitler withdrew from the public eye, could Goebbels’ role as the spokesman of the crumbling Reich have been adequately filled by another? Could the Final Solution have been executed without the existence of the Schutzstaffel and its undisputed hegemony over the tools of state repression, including its infamous SS-VT that sprang from the apocalyptic philosophy of Heinrich Himmler? What form might the Nazi reign of terror in occupied Europe have taken – especially in the east – without the cold, yet pragmatic mind of the National Socialist ideological crusader, Reinhard Heydrich?

We will never truly know the answer to any of these questions. Yet, in the final analysis, it remains obvious that the rise and maintenance of the National Socialist state did not reside with Hitler alone. While it is important – nay, crucial – that the Third Reich be viewed as a revolutionary totalitarian oligarchy, and not

¹⁶¹ Wilhelm Canaris, qtd. in Wighton, *Heydrich*, 95.

¹⁶² Adolf Hitler, qtd. in Wighton, *Heydrich*, 277.

as a generic totalitarian dictatorship, it is equally essential that this premise not be abused for the goals of historical apologists. It would be a mistake to contend that Hitler was a weak Führer unable to control his subordinates, or that he was somehow unaware of the actions of his oligarchs. Such assertions miss the significance of Hitler's leadership style. The dynamic relationship between Hitler and the actions of his oligarchs was best described in Himmler's statements in favor of extramarital affairs (as part of his preparations for the Lebensborn program) to the Expert Advisory Panel on Population and Racial Policy in June of 1937 – "I am certainly not alone, but am acting with the Führer's approval, for I have had repeated conversations with him on the subject."¹⁶³ Or Goebbels statements on solving the Berlin's "Jewish Question" to Police Chief von Helldorf in April of 1938, "Then we put it to the Führer. He agrees, but only after his trip to Italy."¹⁶⁴

Hitler had no need to rule as an absolute dictator, his chosen system of totalitarian oligarchy served both his and the National Socialist revolution's goals perfectly. The German state was jealously divided between party functionaries, each pursuing the movement's revolutionary agenda according to their own vision, each feeding the spiral of radicalization in a ceaseless effort to curry favor with the Führer. Thus, each oligarch, regardless of his power base or personal influence, remained utterly dependent on Hitler as the ultimate source of legitimacy, authority and arbitration, the veritable messiah of the National Socialist movement. Hitler for his part remained secure in the knowledge that as long as his oligarchs remained dependent on his blessing, he was free to micromanage whatever aspect of the state interested him at the time – be it diplomacy, armaments production or military strategy. He could rule the rest of the Reich through his intercessionaries without needing to overtly involve himself in all aspects of state at all times, his oligarchs saw to that of their own accord. Despite its relentless propaganda to the contrary, leader cult and Führer principle, National Socialism was never a one-man show. It was an ensemble project; a revolution and oligarchy built upon the twisted talents, obsessions, and peccadilloes of numerous men with Hitler positioned at its apex – but by no means ruling alone.

¹⁶³ Heinrich Himmler, qtd. in Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 368.

¹⁶⁴ Joseph Goebbels, qtd. in Kershaw, *Hitler*, 133-134.

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