PART II

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CAMPAIGN POLITICS AND THE INVENTION OF THE PRIVATE HITLER

It was in the spring of 1932, in the midst of presidential elections, that the National Socialists discovered the publicity value of Hitler’s private life. The electoral campaign pitted Hitler, then the leader of the second-largest political party in the Reich, against Paul von Hindenburg, the elderly incumbent revered by Germans as the war hero of Tannenberg, and the Communist leader Ernst Thälmann. On March 13, German voters returned a strong lead of over seven million votes for Hindenburg, throwing the National Socialists, who had expected Hitler to be swept into the presidency, into despair.1 Hindenburg’s failure to win an absolute majority, however, led to a runoff election the following month, and it was in the period between the two presidential elections that the Nazis seized on a new representational strategy.2 Although Hitler would lose the next round, the campaign, along with the worsening economic crisis, increased his support among the German people by over two million votes, to a third of the electorate.3 Having proved its broad appeal, the image of the private Führer would become a staple of National Socialist propaganda for years to come.

The coming out of the Führer’s personal life marked a distinct departure from earlier National Socialist publicity, which had focused on Hitler’s role as agitator of the masses and leader of a militant political movement. In the 1932 runoff election, the need to cast a wider net pushed Nazi propaganda toward a celebration of the personal attributes of their candidate. Hitler’s youth and dynamism, epitomized by his much-advertised campaign flights across Germany, became an important selling point. Against the aristocratic honor and dignity that accrued to the remote, eighty-four-year-old Hindenburg, the Nazis offered the modernity and glamor of a candidate who took to the skies to meet face-to-face with the German people. Perhaps most daringly, Nazi publicists brought Hitler’s private life into the limelight in order to emphasize his moral and human character and thereby win over the bourgeois voters and women who had overwhelmingly supported Hindenburg on the first ballot.4

Given the circumstances of Hitler’s private life, this was truly an audacious move. He was a middle-aged bachelor with few family ties and no known romantic relationships. Unsavory rumors about his domestic life and sexuality had flared in September 1931 after his niece, Geli Raubal, shot herself in her uncle’s Munich apartment. Indeed, until the turnabout in 1932, National Socialist publicists had diverted attention away from or suppressed stories about Hitler’s personal life. While the Nazis continued to fight reports that could harm Hitler’s reputation, they began to construct for public consumption their own version of the private individual. The image of “Hitler as private man” would now be reconfigured into an asset rather than a liability.

The title of Heinrich Hoffmann’s photo album, The Hitler Nobody Knows (Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt, 1932), announced the shift in the Führer’s image. The book appeared in mid-March, shortly after the first presidential election. While conceived earlier and perhaps independently, it nonetheless served as an effective tool in the National Socialists’ new campaign to appeal to a broader public through the recently discovered “private Hitler.”5 Hoffmann, as Hitler’s official photographer, had extensive access to the German leader, and from the thousands of images at his disposal, he selected one hundred to encapsulate the Führer’s personal life.

On the cover of the book, Hitler was shown in a Bavarian jacket and floppy-brimmed hat, reclining in the grass in the mountains with one of his dogs by his side (see fig. 3). The image, together with the book’s title, signaled to the reader that the camera lens would reveal a different Hitler and thus fulfill, as the dust jacket text stated, the “yearning” of his “countless millions of followers” to know more about his personal life and his “wide-ranging interests and aptitudes.” The text also claimed the “documentary truth” of Hoffmann’s work, a statement intended not only to instill confidence in his presentation of the private Hitler, but also to refute the less-flattering accounts published by his critics. In fact, and as Germans were to learn after the war, Hoffmann’s distorted and highly edited vision of Hitler’s personal life bore little resemblance to reality; Eva Braun, for example, would be banished from such portrayals during the Third Reich, despite becoming a fixture of his inner circle by 1936.

The dust jacket text further suggested that the book would serve as a visual complement to Hitler’s Mein Kampf, and the book did begin biographically, like a family album, with photographs of Hitler as a baby (with a birth announcement “pasted” in the corner), the house where he was born, his parents, his school and army days, and his rise as an orator and politician. In documenting his contemporary life, Hoffmann included an assortment of photographs that mostly appeared to be candid shots of Hitler engaged in activities either of a private nature or at the peripheries of his political duties—for example, stopping for a quick picnic lunch on the way to give a speech or chatting with a worker who approached his car. Relatively few of the images revealed an urban landscape; instead, Hitler’s so-called private life played out mostly on a pastoral stage. A number of the images of Hitler at leisure focused on the Obersalzberg, although Haus Wachenfeld, while described, was not visually depicted. Hitler was shown in the mountains with his dogs, reading outdoors, walking, talking with a neighbor’s child, and dressed in casual clothes, including lederhosen. Here, the caption text stated, away from the “noise and restlessness” of the cities, Hitler could relax and recover from the “stresses and strains” of his political struggle. Yet despite the pretext of being personal, these images of a relaxed and often smiling Hitler were by no means apolitical. Thus, a photograph of Hitler sitting in the grass reading the newspaper and grinning broadly was accompanied by a caption indicating that he was amused by the “fables” printed about him by a hostile press: “champagne feasts, Jewish girlfriends, a luxury villa, French money . . .”6 The viewer, at whom Hitler gazes, is invited to share in this intimate moment and laugh along with him.

On a deeper level, the book as a whole served a political purpose: to recast Hitler, through the vehicle of his private life, as a “good” man. The foreword by Baldur von Schirach, head of the Hitler Youth organization and Hoffmann’s son-in-law, made that intention clear. The German people, Schirach wrote, demanded of their chosen leader the same lofty moral values in his private life as in his public work. Hitler’s embodiment of this synthesis, Schirach claimed, put him in the same class as Germany’s most revered men, including Goethe and Frederick the Great. “I would like to denote two characteristics that for me are the most striking traits of Adolf Hitler’s nature: <sc>strength and goodness</sc>. And it is these very qualities that are apparent in the pictures of this book.” Schirach hoped that the images, which offered glimpses of Hitler’s “personal experiences,” would find an audience far beyond National Socialist circles, and would convey the sentiment felt by those who had worked under Hitler for years “and thereby learned to adore and love him.” In pseudo-religious terms, Schirach promised that Hitler’s “secret” would be revealed to “whoever reads these images as confessions with an open heart”—namely, “here is manifest not only a rousing leader, but also a great and good man.”7

Germans knew that Hitler was an extreme anti-Semite, convicted traitor, and leader of a paramilitary force of violent street brawlers. How, then, did Schirach and Hoffmann redefine him as a “good man”? In short, they did so by making an appeal to values rather than to ideology. To begin, Hitler was described as a man of Spartan habits and great self-discipline: “It is hardly known that Hitler is a <sc>non-drinker, non-smoker</sc>, and <sc>vegetarian</sc>,” Schirach exclaimed in the foreword. “Without imposing his ways in the slightest on others, including those in his immediate circle, he adheres strictly to his own rules for living.”8 Schirach reinforced this and other messages in the captions he wrote for the book’s illustrations. “This is how the ‘fat cat’ lives!” a caption declared sarcastically under an image of Hitler, looking tired, at the end of a seemingly modest meal. “Marxist liars,” it continued, “tell workers that Hitler revels in champagne and beautiful women. In reality, Hitler does not drink a drop of alcohol! (Hitler is also a nonsmoker.)”9

Hitler’s self-discipline, Schirach further noted, was also evident in his enormous industriousness and capacity for work. Not only was he responsible for leading the party, but he also undertook “the most arduous trips” to speak “today in Königsberg, tomorrow in Berlin, the next day in Munich, all of this with a minimum of sleep, for the Führer usually works until the early hours of the morning.”10 Schirach’s words found visual expression in the many photographs showing Hitler on the road, being greeted by supporters, sometimes stopping for a quick rest, and, in one instance, slumped over asleep in the car beside his driver, “exhausted from the efforts of a huge rally.”11 This combination of on-the-road images was undoubtedly meant to provoke both admiration for his work ethic and compassion for its toll on the private individual. And like the campaign by air that was to follow, it reinforced Hitler’s personal and direct bond with the German people.

From the topic of work, Schirach turned to Hitler’s private hobbies, saying these needed to be discussed because of the gossip and lies spread about them. “His greatest pleasure is his library of about 6,000 volumes, all of which he has not just leafed through, but also read. Architecture and history are the most strongly represented in this library. Hitler is also an unassailable authority in both these domains. Art, and especially music, is for him a life necessity. His statement, ‘If the artists could guess what I will do for German art, I would not have an opponent among them,’ indicates the depth of his intention to cultural action.”12 A photograph taken at a medieval cloister and titled Hitler, the Architect caught the Führer demonstrating his architectural expertise to an attentive audience of SA men.13 The book also included two images of Hitler’s watercolors done as a soldier in World War I, which the caption claimed displayed his “great talent” for architecture. Although he had been unable to pursue professional study, “he became the architect of a new Volk”—the past tense here suggesting it had already happened.14

The passage on Hitler’s hobbies, with its specific listing of the number of books in his library and the peculiar insistence that he had read all of them, reveals the desire to present him as an educated and cultured man, despite his having left school at the age of sixteen. Bildung and self-improvement, together with self-discipline, a strong work ethic, and modesty, formed the core moral values of the German middle classes. The components of the “good” Hitler were thus assembled in part with an eye to appealing to this constituency of voters, who the National Socialists hoped could be persuaded to abandon their allegiance to Hindenburg.

Other qualities ascribed to Hitler in the book were meant to appeal across social and political divides. Commenting on a photograph that showed Hitler at a window overlooking the mountains, Schirach wrote of his “great yearning for nature,” which he could fulfill only rarely, for “his life is struggle and work.” Associating Hitler with Alpine scenery and activities made him seem vibrant and tapped into the tremendous popularity of nature sports in Germany. Such a stance, moreover, seemed (wrongly) to be as far removed from his controversial ideological platform as one could imagine—while many voters found Hitler’s racism distasteful and talk of revolution frightening, it was difficult to be against hiking or nature. Likewise, photographs of Hitler with his dogs conveyed his love of animals, made explicit in the following caption by Schirach: “He loves them almost as much as they love him.” (“A subtle distinction,” a critic later racily quipped, “that safeguards the distance between master and creature, despite the intimacy.”15) In an attempt to solicit the reader’s compassion, Schirach wrote that “when evil people wanted to hurt him to the quick, they poisoned his favorite dog. That’s how the curs fight against a good man.”16 After 1933, Hoffmann would develop the theme of “Hitler as animal lover” into a highly popular motif in the iconography of the private man. The message such images conveyed about the Führer’s goodness resided not only in his tender care of animals, but also, and importantly, in the trust the animals placed in him.

Similarly, Hitler’s fondness of children, which would also become an iconic theme in Hoffmann’s hands, conveyed the Führer’s goodness both in his apparent affection and concern for them, as well as in their trust of him. “The young love him,” read the caption to an image of Hitler surrounded by young boys. “Everywhere children crowd around him to bring him flowers.” Below a photograph of Hitler talking with two members of the Hitler Youth, one of whom was a small boy from the “Pimpf” (cub) division, Schirach’s caption claimed that “even the youngest are his fighters.”17 The loyalty of Hitler Youth members, in their innocence as children, suggested that they, like the animals, were drawn instinctively to a trustworthy man. While Hitler was not the first politician to tug on voters’ heartstrings by posing with children, together with Hoffmann, he would raise this public relations ploy to a new level of exploitation. Being seen in the company of adoring children was especially useful for a bachelor politician needing to appeal to female voters and to soften the aggressive masculine image of his party.

On April 4, 1932, the first official day of campaigning for the runoff election, Joseph Goebbels published an article in the National Socialist newspaper Der Angriff (The Attack) that exemplified the new campaign tactics promoting the private Hitler as a good man. The major points of his argument repeated and reinforced the themes introduced in Hoffmann’s illustrated book. The real Hitler, he claimed, was artistically gifted, but had renounced architecture and painting to lead the German people out of their misery. “Adolf Hitler is by nature a good man. It is known that he has a particular fondness for children, to whom he is always a best friend and fatherly comrade.” Indeed, Goebbels claimed that the welfare of German children had spurred Hitler to political action, out of his desire to give them a better life than that of their parents. Goebbels also lauded Hitler’s comradely bond with and understanding for his colleagues as well as his intellectual taste, artistic sensitivity, simple lifestyle, modesty, and enormous dedication to work. “This is Adolf Hitler as he really looks. A man who enjoys the highest love and devotion from all those who know him not only as a politician, but also as a person.”18 In Goebbels’s testimonial account, then, Hitler’s goodness was not only proven by his character, but also by the love of those near him, who knew the “authentic” man.

The left-leaning press countered the personal and sentimental appeal of the National Socialists’ campaign with the distancing power of sarcasm. On March 19, 1932, Vorwärts (Forward), the central organ of the Social Democratic Party, republished in full the advertisement for Hoffmann’s book that had appeared in Der Angriff the previous day. As in the book’s dust jacket text, the advertisement promised to satisfy the yearnings of “Hitler’s countless millions of followers” for a glimpse of his personal life, drawing on the “many thousands of pictures” taken by Hoffmann in the past ten years at Hitler’s side. Beneath the original advertisement, Vorwärts rewrote the promotional text:

Listen up, millions, your longing is satisfied! You see the great Adolf of the Morning in pajamas and of the Evening in tails, you see him painting his nails, you see him pomading his side part, you see him eating, drinking, speaking, writing! For the last ten years—that is, since he turned thirty-three—the great Adolf has spent the better part of his life having his picture taken, and so in less than four thousand days “many thousands of pictures” have been produced, thus, evidently, several each day.

This is how Adolf has worked quietly for his people and satisfied their desire. Though they have not eaten their fill in a long time, they can now glut themselves looking at Adolf Hitler! Heil!19

It was a biting critique, ripping a hole in the representation of Hitler as a modest, humble man. In his foreword to Hoffmann’s book, Schirach had foreseen the criticism and attempted to deflect it with a long statement about how Hitler hated being photographed and did so only for the good of the party—indeed, much of the foreword, ironically, was devoted to framing Hitler as the photographer’s unwilling subject.20 By doing the math, however, Vorwärts made a case for Hitler as a vain and self-obsessed man who lived for the camera and offered nothing but its empty illusions to his followers.

Writing at the end of May 1932 in the Berlin weekly Das Tagebuch (The Daily Journal), Kurt Reinhold similarly employed sarcasm to critique the contradictions, exaggerations, and dissimulations in Hoffmann’s “documentary” book. To Schirach’s statement that Hitler’s enemies had killed his dog, he responded, “And is it any wonder that National Socialists resort to revolvers, knives, and brass knuckles?” Describing a photograph of Hitler that Schirach had labeled “The Unassuming Man,” Reinhold wrote: “Hitler sits in the countryside, a travel blanket under his bum (or whatever the correct term may be for a Führer), and peels an apple. Hoffmann pleads, ‘As modest as possible, please!’ and everybody realizes that he doesn’t mean the still life, but rather the Kaiserhof bills.” (The month before Reinhold’s article appeared, the liberal Berlin weekly Die Welt am Monntag [The World on Monday], had printed Hitler’s hotel bill for the Kaiserhof, a luxury hotel that served as his residence and headquarters in Berlin before 1933, which exposed the exorbitant amounts spent on his and his entourage’s accommodations and meals.21) Reinhold doubted the spontaneity of Hoffmann’s candid photography, detecting instead Hitler’s “cold-blooded” calculations in procuring images that caught him at just the right moment. Reinhold thus attempted to puncture the book’s illusion of transparency and claim to offer a window onto the private man. Reinhold saw here nothing but the same impenetrable “Führer masks,” which he believed had only grown thicker with the passage of time.22

Despite such criticisms, The Hitler Nobody Knows sold and sold: over four hundred thousand copies in multiple printings by 1942. Its success, combined with Hitler’s need to solidify his support among the German population in the early years of his rule, ensured that Hoffmann would return to this popular format. After Hitler’s rise to power, he published three more books that focused on the Führer’s private life: Youth around Hitler (Jugend um Hitler, 1934), Hitler in His Mountains (Hitler in seinen Bergen, 1935; fig. 41), and Hitler Away from It All (Hitler abseits vom Alltag, 1937; fig. 42). Each of these sold over two hundred thousand copies, testifying to the unwavering interest of German audiences.23 To the books, Hoffmann added a brisk business in Hitler postcards with off-duty motifs, and sold such images to the German and foreign press (fig. 43). In 1937, for example, Life magazine published a three-page feature on Hoffmann’s photographs of Hitler with children, admitting that the images were propaganda, but reproducing them, complete with sentimental captions, nonetheless.24 As historian Toni McDaniel has argued, the American media’s preoccupation before 1938 with maintaining “balanced” coverage of Nazi Germany resulted in a confusing image of Hitler, particularly in the “sugar-coated” stories regularly printed in newspapers and magazines about the private man, a subject that fascinated the American public.25 But the immense popularity of Hoffmann’s images goes beyond editorial choices to suggest how audiences in Germany and abroad wanted to see Hitler in the early years of the regime. A 1934 article in the Deutsche Presse (German Press), the journal of the National German Press Association, on national and foreign markets for German photojournalism reported that “photos that depict the Führer as a friend of children or playing with his two German shepherds at Haus Wachenfeld are the most popular.” Even American newspapers preferred to buy Hitler pictures with a “human interest” angle, such as the Führer snapped “as he caresses a child.”26 By 1934, then, the most sought-after images of Hitler were not of the new leader giving speeches or reviewing his troops, but rather those that purported to show his softer side. The private Hitler invented for the 1932 presidential elections had become a global celebrity.

While The Hitler Nobody Knows established the main characteristics of the Führer’s private persona, after 1933, the site of its performance focused predominantly on Haus Wachenfeld on the Obersalzberg. The house in the mountains, as envisioned by Hoffmann and other National Socialist promoters, became a space of projected desires for the good life promised to the German people by the Nazi Party. Here in the expansive Lebensraum and pure air of the mountains, where the sun always seemed to shine and blond children frolicked, the Nazis envisioned and propagated a domestic “utopia” that stood for the nation as a whole. Through officially sanctioned representations on postcards and in magazines, books, and exhibitions, and even in the “spontaneous” pilgrimages to the Obersalzberg tolerated for many years, Germans were encouraged to consume in their imaginations the little house that symbolized the larger reward to come. Not unlike the witch’s house in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, it was an alluring and dangerous lie.