

Have the Roles of Hitler and Stalin been Exaggerated?*

AS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY DRAWS TO ITS END, TWO MEN, Hitler and Stalin, appear to stand out even in its violent history for the scale of the suffering and destruction which they inflicted on millions of innocent people. But at once, the question arises: how far have the roles of Hitler and Stalin been exaggerated? Is it any longer possible, in the twentieth century, to hold individuals responsible for events on this scale? Should the responsibility rest not with these men but with the movements and regimes with which they are identified? This is the question which I want to discuss.

There was nothing at all in their early lives – as there was for example in the case of Peter the Great or Napoleon – to suggest the powers they were to display later. Nor did Stalin or Hitler contribute to creating the circumstances of which they were able to take advantage. Until his fortieth year Hitler remained on the margin of German politics and was not taken seriously by most Germans. Until *his* fortieth year Stalin was an unknown exile in Siberia.

Nor was there anything inevitable about the rise of either man; neither would have succeeded without an unpredictable stroke of luck. What gave Stalin his chance was the unexpected death of Lenin in 1924, opening the way to a struggle for the succession. In Hitler's case, it was the unexpected chance offered by the economic depression which started with the Wall Street crash of October 1929 and hit Germany with such force that it allowed Hitler to convert his vote of 800,000 in the election of 1928 to over 6 million in 1930 and double that

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again to more than 13 million in July 1932. Even then, he lost 2 million votes in the November elections of 1932 and was only rescued by von Papen's unexpected and ill-judged offer to form a coalition with the conservatives.

HOW HITLER AND STALIN CAME TO POWER

The motivation of both men was a passion to dominate, a need to dominate, which they combined with a belief about themselves that they were men of destiny, destined to play a great role in the world. This not only hardened their wills in face of difficulties but armoured them against any feeling of remorse or guilt over the appalling cost in human suffering for which they were responsible.

Stalin rationalized his sense of mission from an identification with the creed of Marxism-Leninism, a creed he believed had uncovered the laws of historical development of which he was to be the agent. At the same time, once in control, he began to see himself as the heir of the Tsars, particularly Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, who had understood as he had that Russia was only to be ruled by force. Hitler too saw his destiny as a part of history. He spoke of himself confidently as a man called by Providence to raise Germany from the humiliation of defeat in 1918, restoring her to her natural position as the most powerful state in Europe – the first stage to creating a new racist empire in the east of Europe, at the expense of Russia.

Hitler's great gift was as a speaker, a gift which he really discovered for the first time on 22 February 1920 when talking to a crowd of over 2,000 in Munich. It was a fateful discovery. No one has described the charismatic attraction Hitler could exercise on an audience better than Nietzsche in a passage written in 1875, eleven years before Hitler was born:

Men believe in the truth of all that is seen to be strongly believed . . . In all great deceivers a remarkable process is at work to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations, the dreadful voice, the expressions, the gestures, they are overcome by their belief in themselves and it is this belief which then speaks so persuasively, so miracle-like to the audience.

And Nietzsche adds: 'Not only does he communicate that to the audience but the audience returns it to him and strengthens the belief.'

This interaction created 'the Hitler image', the belief shared by a large number of people in Germany that Hitler was something more than a politician, that he was a saviour offering not political or economic solutions but something more, the salvation of Germany. Before taking any step Hitler took great care to consider its likely effect on his 'image' and kept a close watch on public opinion, on which he received regular reports from right across the country. His manipulation of his image was a very important part of his skill as a politician — *but* he also believed in it, and it was his combination of calculation and the belief that he was a saviour, a man with a mission, that made him so effective a popular leader.

Stalin presents an entirely different picture. At some stage he formed the same conviction as Hitler that he was destined to play a great role in history. Unlike Hitler, however, he had to keep this belief to himself. The Bolshevik Party was deeply hostile to anything like a cult of personality, claiming like good Marxists to make their decisions on the basis of a scientific analysis of objective impersonal factors. Practice fell short of theory, but Stalin was well aware that to allow any hint to appear of his conviction that he had an historic personal role to play would be fatal to his advancement. He had been carried into office by the October Revolution of 1917, but did not make a breakthrough until Lenin made him General Secretary of the Party in April 1922. The following month Lenin suffered his first stroke and by January 1924 was dead at the early age of 54, just when he realized that he had made a mistake and was planning to revoke Stalin's appointment.

The least fancied of the contestants for the succession, Stalin displayed none of Hitler's charismatic gifts. They would have been counter-productive with the audience he had to win, the closed world of the central bodies of the Soviet Communist Party. Declaring that no one could take Lenin's place, he called for a collective leadership, in which he succeeded in establishing his own claim to be, not Lenin's successor, but the guardian of his legacy. In Stalin's hands this

was enough to enable him to outmanoeuvre his rivals (above all Trotsky) by accusing them of abandoning Leninist principles, branding them as guilty of factionalism and of dividing the Party in pursuit of personal ambition. At the same time he used his position as General Secretary of the Party to manipulate appointments to the nomenklatura, the 5,500 leading Party office-holders – such as regional secretaries – who effectively governed the huge country. By this means, during the 1920s, Stalin built up a body of clients (to borrow a term from Roman history) who knew very well on whom they depended for preferment and what was expected of them in return. They provided Stalin with a reliable body of supporters with whom he was able by the late 1920s to isolate rivals, opponents or critics and threaten them with expulsion from the Party – and, in Trotsky's case, exile and finally assassination.

By the end of 1939 each man had achieved a unique position which admitted no rivals and no opposition. The revolution which Stalin had imposed on the Russian peoples between his fiftieth and his sixtieth year (1929–39) had completed the work left incomplete when Lenin died, by turning Russia from a peasant society into an industrialized society. But whereas Lenin had seen the original revolution of 1917 as a violent break with Russia's past, Stalin was already coming to see his revolution as a continuation of the historic tradition of the Tsarist state. He himself was in the process of moving from being *primus inter pares* in a collective leadership to as autocratic a position as any Tsarist predecessor. But in laying claim to be the successor to Peter the Great, he refused to abandon the revolutionary succession to Lenin as well. It was the combination of these two traditions, the Marxist-Leninist-ideological, with the Russian-nationalist, both refracted through the medium of Stalin's own personality, which characterized the Stalinist state.

In 1939 Hitler, ten years younger, had still to complete his revolution but he had taken a decisive step towards it by freeing himself of dependence on the traditional German elites who had helped him into power, by restoring Germany's dominant position in Central Europe, and by breaking through the barrier between peace and war.

PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OR THE PRODUCT OF SOCIO-HISTORICAL FORCES?

But how far were these personal achievements? Were they not more likely to have been the product of socio-historical forces which both in Russia and in Germany would have produced the same result, whoever was nominally in command? It is obvious that neither series of changes would have been possible without the commitment and active participation of a great number of other men. No individual, however gifted, could have carried them out by himself. In the process had Stalin and Hitler not become prisoners of the systems and bureaucracies it had been necessary to create; were they any more than figureheads, whose continuation in office depended upon their continuing to satisfy the expectations of their supporters? How could it be otherwise? In the modern world with its huge populations and complex organization, surely no individual can exert an influence upon the course of history comparable with that exercised by rulers in earlier times – for example the Tsar Peter the Great and the Prussian King Frederick the Great, with whom Stalin and Hitler identified – when the scale of events and the forces engaged were so much smaller.

As a general proposition, in the settled societies in which we live, yes; who could disagree with it? But let us look a little more closely at the nature of the power Stalin and Hitler exercised.

There was, of course, a great difference in *style* between them. Stalin was the more reserved, Hitler the more flamboyant; Stalin operated in the shadows, Hitler performed best in the limelight. Stalin was more the calculator, Hitler the gambler. The Georgian was the experienced administrator, disciplining himself to regular work; the Austrian still the artist-politician, hating routine.

The style was different but the nature of the power they exercised was the same, personal power inherent in the man not the office. The only office Stalin held until 1941 was General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. It was the fact that Stalin held it, that made this the most important office in the Soviet Union. Only with the war did he become

formally head of government and Supreme Commander.

Stalin's power was not only personal, but also concealed. The Stalin cult increasingly projected him as of more than human stature, but it was part of the fiction that this was presented as the spontaneous tribute of the Russian people, embarrassing to a man, sprung from the people, who asked no more than to serve them and the Party as its General Secretary. The formula employed for any decision was impersonal, 'the highest Soviet authorities have decided'; the secret was all the more powerful because everyone in office knew that this meant Stalin, but that it must never be mentioned in public.

At first sight Hitler's position was exactly the opposite: head of state, head of government, head of party and supreme commander, all combined in the unique title of Führer of the German People. But it was the fact that Adolf Hitler was the Führer that gave the office its authority, just as it was the fact that Stalin held it that made the office of General Secretary of the Party the most important in the Soviet Union. The only difference was that this was concealed in Stalin's case, but openly acknowledged in Hitler's.

The fact that Hitler's and Stalin's power was personal in character was no guarantee, however, that it was effective, was real not formal power. We have still to go on and ask, what was the relationship between the two individual leaders and the massive bureaucracies which were characteristic of both Communist Russia and Nazi Germany?

Having created a unique position of authority for himself, Hitler was determined not to see it institutionalized or defined. The Weimar constitution was never formally replaced: the constitutional rights of the citizen were only 'suspended' by emergency decree, never repealed. The sole constitutional basis of the Nazi regime was a single law, the Enabling Act, passed by the Reichstag in March 1933, giving the Cabinet the power to enact laws. As the Cabinet met less and less frequently, and not at all after February 1938, this meant Hitler; in fact laws were soon replaced by decrees.

But Hitler was not interested in the day-to-day business of government, and more and more withdrew from it, concentrating his interest on his *long-term* interests of foreign

policy, rearmament and war. To a degree unthinkable in the case of Stalin, he left the more powerful of the Nazi leaders – Goering, Himmler, Goebbels, Ley – free not only to build up rival empires but to feud with each other and with the established ministries in a continuing fight to take over parts of one another's territory. The result has been variously described as 'authoritarian anarchy', 'permanent improvisation', 'administrative chaos' – very different from the outside world's picture of a monolithic totalitarian state.

But this does not prove that Hitler was a 'weak' dictator. On the contrary, such a state of affairs suited Hitler very well, allowing him to make arbitrary interventions, whenever he chose to, so keeping the civil service unsure of his intentions. At the same time Hitler outflanked it by setting up special agencies for tasks he regarded as urgent, in effect, the makings of an alternative state. The two most powerful of these agencies were, first, the Four Year Plan headed by Goering – which absorbed an increasing share of the German economy and eventually the economies of the occupied countries as well, with the priority for rearmament that Hitler demanded – and, secondly, the fusion of the police and the Gestapo (secret police) with Himmler's SS – so removing the police function and the power of coercion from the state and placing it in the hands of a body unknown to the constitution and responsible only to Hitler himself.

Unlike Hitler, who detested administration and absented himself from his Chancellery for long periods, Stalin rarely left the Kremlin and demanded that his secretariat keep him informed of everything. But like Hitler he was determined not to let his power be defined or regularized. For him, too, power to be effective had to be arbitrary and intervention unpredictable – at any level he chose, from top to bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy. This is the key to the extraordinary series of purges and show trials launched by Stalin in 1936–39.

Hitler had made his own revolution and until the end was confident he could rely on his Nazi satraps. The Röhm purge of 1934 does not invalidate this; Hitler acted with great reluctance and only purged the Brownshirt SA to keep the support of the army and so secure the succession to

Hindenburg as President and Commander-in-Chief.

It was Lenin, however, not Stalin, who had made the Russian Revolution; it took six years for Stalin to defeat his rivals for the succession. On the pretext of defending the Party and the Leninist tradition, Stalin went on to wipe out the generation of Communist leaders — his own generation, the Old Bolsheviks — who had known and served with Lenin. Accusing them of betraying the cause to which they had devoted their lives, he replaced them with a rising younger generation — Krushchev's and Brezhnev's generation — who had never known Lenin or any other leader than Stalin and derived their knowledge of what Marx and Lenin had said, and of the history of the Soviet Union, entirely from Stalin's rewritten version of both.

Stalin extended the purges to the Red Army and Navy, the state ministries, the nationalized industries, and the cultural establishment as well as the Party hierarchy. To carry out the arrests, fabricate the plots, organize the executions and the Gulag labour camps, he relied not on the Party, which was his principal target, but on the security police, the NKVD or KGB. This provided Stalin, as the Gestapo-SS provided Hitler, with an instrument, responsible solely to him personally, operating outside the law and licensed to use any degree of force necessary, including torture and death. And with a twist characteristic of Stalin, the security police itself was subject to the purge: those who carried out the interrogations and secured confessions by torture knew that next time they might be cast in the role of victim, not executioner. Yagoda, the head of the security police, was arrested, tried and executed in 1938. His successor, Yezhov, is reported to have spent his first six months in liquidating 3,000 of Yagoda's men, only to be sacrificed in his turn when Stalin found it politic to provide a scapegoat for regrettable 'excesses' which had occurred in rooting out conspiracy and treason. Yezhov knew all too well what awaited him when he was replaced as head of the security police by Beria. But Stalin was in no hurry; there was a cruel streak in his character which enjoyed leaving a victim to wait and sweat with anxiety. So now he moved Yezhov to be commissar for water transport. Occasionally the former all-powerful head of the security police would attend

meetings of his new commissariat but never said anything. He occupied himself with making paper aeroplanes and birds, tossing them into the air and then crawling under the table to recover them. It was in the middle of a meeting of his commissariat that the security police finally appeared. He stood up, threw his gun on the table and said 'I have been waiting for this a long time'. He was led away and never seen again.

All told the number of those arrested in 1937 and 1938 was of the order of 7–8 million, of whom around a million were executed and another two million died in the camps. The intensity of the purges in the late 1930s could not be maintained: with a high proportion of the Soviet elites already among the victims, including half the officer corps of the Red Army and a much higher proportion of its leading commanders, even Stalin had to recognize that there were limits, if the Soviet Union was not to be dangerously weakened. But the purge was not abandoned; instead of an emergency measure, he made it, together with a universal system of informers to spy upon each other, into a permanent feature of Soviet life.

POWER INHERENT IN THE MAN, NOT THE OFFICE

Let me try to draw together the threads of my argument. I have sought to show that, once they came to power, neither Stalin nor Hitler had any intention of letting themselves become prisoners of a system. What they made sure of was that their power remained inherent in the man not the office. This does not mean that they decided everything – that would have been impossible in a modern state – but that they were free to decide anything which they chose, and that they could do this, without warning, without consulting or requiring the agreement of anyone else. Of course, Stalin and Hitler do not bear the sole responsibility for the actions, crimes and mistakes committed during these years. The number of men and women involved in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and of collaborators in the occupied countries, runs into millions. From the operations on the ground, responsibility reached up through the bureaucratic hierarchies, where the thousands of

'little Hitlers' and 'little Stalins' abused their power without waiting for orders from above, until it reached Hitler's and Stalin's closest associates, the Goerings and Himmlers and the Molotovs and Berias.

I have no wish to relieve these of their share of the responsibility. Nonetheless, I believe that Hitler's and Stalin's responsibility was of a different kind from that of anyone else. I shall illustrate my argument from half a dozen examples.

The first is the collectivization of Russian agriculture. Russia was overwhelmingly a peasant country: 80 per cent of its population, 120 million people, lived in 600,000 villages. At some stage, if the communist programme was to be carried out, the land had to be taken out of peasant ownership and nationalized. Stalin won support in the Party because he argued that this could not be put off, but no one ever supposed that he would actually attempt to carry it out and collectivize the 25 million peasant holdings in one or at most two years — a social upheaval on a scale for which there is no parallel in history except Mao's Great Leap Forward in China, which was modelled on it. Stalin's revolution from above could only be accomplished by force. The human cost is estimated at 15 million either killed or perishing after being turned out or sent to the labour camps; five million of that total of fifteen was due to a man-made famine which Stalin deliberately imposed on the Ukraine in order to break peasant resistance. The whole Communist Party as well as the security forces and the army were involved, but the driving force behind collectivization, the *will* actually to complete it in four years, whatever the cost, was Stalin's — and Russian agriculture has never recovered from the methods he used.

My second example follows on from the first. Although muted, there was criticism of Stalin's methods in the Party, and when Stalin demanded the death penalty for the critics, a majority of the Politburo refused and there was a move at the 1934 Party Congress — the details of which remain obscure — to replace him with Kirov, the popular regional secretary for Leningrad. The move failed and an open split was avoided. But Stalin did not forget. In December 1934 Kirov was assassinated (almost certainly with the connivance of Stalin) and over the next two years Stalin made his prepara-

tions for the series of purges and trials which I have already described. Stalin, like Hitler in the Holocaust, took care to conceal his role, but even the evidence we already have leaves no doubt that Stalin organized and directed the purges. Amongst the evidence are 383 lists of names – in all, 40,000, the majority of them leading members of the Communist Party – whose execution required and received Stalin's personal approval.

The fact that Hitler suppressed the radical wing of the Nazi Party in 1934 when it called for a 'second revolution' misled many at the time – and some historians since – into believing that he was not to be taken seriously as a revolutionary. Hitler meant to have his revolution all right, but instead of turning aggression inwards and setting one class against another, he meant to turn the energies and tension of the German people outwards and create a racist empire in the east at the expense of the Slav *Untermenschen* ('sub-humans'), with the psychological satisfaction as well as the material advantages of a *Herrenvolk* ('master-race'). This programme was plainly set out in *Mein Kampf* published in the mid-1920s. Until he could carry out the rearmament to which he gave overriding priority, he had to lull suspicions abroad and keep the support of the conservative-nationalist forces in Germany. There was no timetable or blueprint of aggression; Hitler was both a gambler and an opportunist, but he never lost sight of his ultimate objective. By the winter of 1937–38 he had made sufficient progress to change the terms of the game and raise the stakes. Dismissing Schacht as Minister of Economics and the conservative leaders of the foreign ministry and the army, he went over to the offensive with the annexation of Austria and the destruction of the Czechoslovak state. The first was an improvisation, the second so alarmed the German army that a plot was mounted to arrest Hitler and only called off when Chamberlain offered to fly to Munich. Six months later Hitler entered Prague without a gun being fired.

THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT

Hitler's object, however, was not to avoid war: he believed war was essential if he was to rearm the German people psychologically for the conquest of empire. The key was to isolate those powers which opposed him and defeat them one at a time in a series of single *blitzkrieg* campaigns. The diplomatic coup of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, relieving him of any threat of Soviet intervention in case of war, was not only the outstanding example of such a strategy but provides the clearest possible illustration of the two men's personal authority. For only leaders completely confident of their hold on power and free to act without consultation could take the risk of openly reversing the policies with which they were identified at home and abroad — Hitler's defence of European civilization against communism, Stalin's leadership of the anti-fascist crusade.

The gain for Stalin was the partition of Poland and the annexation of territory in Eastern Europe larger than France; for Hitler it was a free hand in defeating first the Poles, then the French, carrying the German people, still mindful of their defeat in 1918, over the psychological barrier between peace and war. The defeat of France and the eviction of Britain from the continent in 1940 raised him to a peak of personal success which no German leader before him had equalled. In achieving this, Hitler had acted against the advice of the General Staff, had scrapped their plan for the campaign in favour of one which they had rejected — and had then gone on in six weeks at the cost of 27,000 lives to achieve a victory which had eluded the Kaiser's armies in 1914 for over four years.

The effect was to convince Hitler of the infallibility of his judgment in war as in politics. On 31 July 1940 he ordered the army to prepare plans for an attack on Russia the following May which would destroy the Soviet state in a campaign of five months. Hitler had never wanted a war with the British whom he admired for their success in creating an empire; all he asked was that they should give up any pretension to interfere in Europe. When the British refused — and the defeat of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain convinced him that invasion would be a risky gamble — he decided to ignore them and go

ahead with his real objective from the beginning, the attack on Russia, to which, he wrote in *Mein Kampf* in the mid-1920s, 'Destiny itself seems to point the way for us'.

THE INVASION OF RUSSIA

While Hitler became more and more irked by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Stalin did all in his power to prolong it by increasing Soviet supplies of raw materials and food to Germany to levels which Russia could ill afford to spare. In the face of a flood of evidence that the Germans were concentrating their forces for an invasion of Russia, Stalin persisted in believing that Hitler would not attack before 1942-43, and that the Western Powers were trying to trick him into provoking Hitler by counter-measures. Nothing the Russian generals could say had any influence even when the Luftwaffe carried out reconnaissance flights over all the airfields in Western Russia. Soviet planes and guns were forbidden to interfere, and the Russian commanders were not allowed to order defensive preparations right up to and including the night of 21-22 June 1941. That night, the largest army ever assembled for a single campaign, 3,200,000 German troops broke across the frontiers, driving to the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow, overrunning the Ukraine and by February 1942 capturing four million prisoners of whom almost three million were so badly treated that they died. This was the price of Stalin's obstinacy, compounding the unprecedented blows he had dealt to the Soviet military leadership during the purges.

Hitler left it to the German army to organize the attack on Russia, and they managed it with characteristic efficiency. But the decision to launch such an attack was Hitler's alone, taken without consultation or discussion. Hitler's gamble was that the Soviet state was so much weakened by Stalin's purges that it would collapse — as the French had done — if subjected to a series of violent blows compressed into a single campaigning season of five months. It is possible that the gamble might have come off, if he had not rejected the army plan to continue the advance on Moscow after the capture of Smolensk in mid-July, insisting that they should first complete

the overrunning of the Ukraine. As a result the drive on Moscow was not resumed until 2 October at the beginning of autumn, instead of in the summer weather of August. Certainly, it was in the middle of October that the Soviet resistance came nearest to cracking. But, once Hitler's original gamble failed to come off – and with the terrible winter and the Russian counter-offensive of 5 December, this was certain – the odds against a German success became longer and longer. By an extraordinary effort of will-power, Hitler mastered the crisis, halted any German retreat and stabilized the front still deep in Russian territory. But the lesson he drew from it – that so long as his will remained unbroken, he would still prevail – his refusal to listen to advice, his conviction of his mission, which would never allow him to be defeated – all these which had combined to produce one success after another – now combined to produce one defeat after another.

Doubling the stakes by gratuitously declaring war on the USA and renewing the offensive on the Eastern Front instead of going over to the defensive, he compounded his difficulties by brutal occupation policies, refusing to play the role of liberator from Stalin's oppression – for example in the Ukraine – or alternatively to seek a compromise peace with Stalin which could have left him master of Europe, including the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Baltic States. Unlike Mussolini, who capitulated, Hitler instead forced the German army, for nearly two-and-a-half years after the defeat at Stalingrad, to fight step by step all the way back from the Volga to Berlin, a distance of 1,000 miles, with total disregard of the cost in human lives and of the consequences for Germany and Europe. The end result of Hitler's defence of European civilization against communism was to leave half Europe and half Germany under Soviet occupation and communist rule for more than forty years.

'THE FINAL SOLUTION OF THE JEWISH PROBLEM'

The attack on Russia enabled Hitler to bring together into a common focus his strategic, political and ideological objectives – the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the east, the defeat

of egalitarian Marxism, the enslavement of the Slav *Untermenschen* and the 'Final Solution of the Jewish problem'. Moscow was the capital and symbol of the Slav, Marxist and Jewish threat to the Aryan race. Anti-Semitism was one of the strongest bonds between Hitler and the *Alte Kämpfer*, the veterans of the Nazi Party. Persecution of the Jews had begun on the night Hitler became Chancellor. Until the war, however, its object was to strip German Jews of their possessions, deprive them of all rights and force them to emigrate. The war put an end to overseas emigration, and the occupation of Poland opened new possibilities. The remaining German Jews and the much larger number of Polish Jews were herded by the SS into ghettos established in Polish cities. But what was to happen to them there?

The turning-point was the decision to invade Russia. Hitler insisted to the German army, as well as to the SS, that this was no ordinary clash of arms, but a conflict of two ideologies in which the treatment of prisoners and the civilian population would not be governed by the conventions of war. This was a war of extermination, he told a gathering of senior army officers. That meant that the last inhibitions had also been abandoned in the treatment of the Jews. But 'the total solution of the Jewish question' which the SS was directed to carry out, was aimed at more than the Jewish population of Poland and Russia – at nothing less than the extermination of the whole Jewish population of Europe, estimated by the Nazis at around 10.5 million.

Hitler left it to Himmler and Heydrich and the SS to build the death camps and organize the transport to them of Jews from all over Europe; but I submit there was only one man among the Nazi leaders who had the imagination – however twisted – to come up with so grandiose and bizarre a plan, not Himmler or Goering but Hitler. And if there was one year in which Hitler was capable of making the leap from imagining such a 'solution' as fantasy to imagining it as fact, it was 1941. This was the year in which he had shown the same unique gift for translating into literal fact another fantasy, that of *Lebensraum* and the empire in the east, to be achieved by the invasion of Russia. He left the operational side of that to the army's General Staff, just as he left the organization of the

Final Solution of the Jewish question to the SS. But if there had not been a Hitler to conceive of such projects and to convince others that they could actually take place, I believe neither would have happened.

Hitler died by his own hand, defeated but unrepentant, still convinced of his sense of mission, regretting only that he had not had the time to carry it out. Stalin emerged victorious, but saw no more reason than Hitler to change his mind. He still believed that the Russian people could only be ruled by force and fear — and that he was the only man who knew how to do this. No other people had suffered anything like the Russian losses in the war — including civilians between 20 and 25 million. The Germans lost 3.9 million soldiers, most of them on the Eastern Front, and a similar number of civilians. (For comparison, British losses on all fronts were 388,000 and American 295,000.) After such losses the Russian people sought hope in the widespread and passionate belief that life after the war would now be different, that the repressive regime under which they had lived would now be relaxed, after all the efforts and sacrifices they had made. Stalin soon disillusioned them. This was no time for relaxation, he declared in February 1946. How could there be a lasting peace when capitalism and imperialism were still powerful and threatened the Soviet Union? If the war was over the emergency was not. All the vigilance of the security police was still needed to protect the state (for which, read Stalin) against its enemies within and without. The officers and men who had fought their way half-way across Europe, and the prisoners who had survived their brutal treatment by the Germans, found themselves on their return received not with gratitude but with suspicion. Hundreds of thousands of them were sent to the camps. The same treatment was meted out to the millions who had lived under German occupation or been deported to the Reich as slave labour. At the time of Stalin's death, 12 million are estimated to have been held in the camps, and Stalin had already launched yet another purge with the discovery of the so-called 'Doctors' Plot'.

Defeat cost the Germans a terrible price but at least spared them — and the world — the perpetuation of the Nazi regime. Victory cost the Soviet peoples an even greater price but did

not liberate them. Nor did Stalin's death. The system he had imposed on them, although modified over time, lasted for nearly another forty years, leaving them economically so crippled and politically divided that they face an unpredictable future.

CONCLUSION

The dominant trend in the post-war study of history has been the rise of social and economic history, of history 'seen from below' challenging the traditional concentration on political history, history seen 'from above'. Social and economic historians, like social scientists, have found it natural to seek historical explanations in terms of such impersonal factors as demographic changes, movements of population, the impact on society of industrialization and technological innovation, and to concern themselves with human beings collectively as members of groups in which individual characteristics are submerged in the average. I have no quarrel with such an approach which has revolutionized historical studies and is well-suited to countries like the United States, Britain and France, whose political institutions, despite their shortcomings, are democratic, countries where despite the rapidity of change, there is sufficient stability and prosperity to preserve a framework of normality, and where pretensions to inspired leadership are unlikely to survive exposure by a sceptical media and press.

But a different situation arises when war, defeat, civil war, revolution or some other violent upheaval disrupt normality and continuity, as happened in Russia in 1917 and in Germany with the combination of an unexpected defeat in 1918, the disastrous inflation and the Great Depression. In such a situation, I believe it is possible for an individual to exert a powerful, even a decisive, influence on the way events develop and the policies which are followed. Such occasions are not common. Not at all. There are many more situations where, for lack of leadership, a crisis is never resolved and the opportunity for a decisive turn goes begging. The moment more often than not fails to find the man, as it did in Russia

in 1905 and as, so far, it still does today. Where a leader does emerge, however, he can establish a position which allows his personality, his individual gifts and his views to assume an importance out of all proportion to normal experience. This happened for good, for example, with Gandhi in India, with Attaturk in Turkey. On other occasions it happens for evil and I believe Hitler and Stalin to have been two such cases.

I said earlier that neither man created the circumstances which gave them their opportunity. But I do not believe that circumstances by themselves in some mysterious way produce the man; I am not convinced that if Hitler and Stalin had failed to seize the opportunity, someone else would and the result would have been much the same. Certainly neither man could have achieved power or success without the active support of many other people. Looking at the cast of alternative leaders, however, the Goerings, the Goebbels and the Himmlers, I find it difficult to visualize, under any other of the German leaders available, the electoral successes of a right-wing radical party like the Nazis between 1930 and 1933; the foreign policy and military successes of 1936-41; the attack on Russia, the attempt to found a new slave empire in the east, and the racist massacres to which this led, culminating in the attempt to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe.

In the case of the Soviet Union, yes, there was a possible alternative as Lenin's successor in Trotsky. Whether he would have found an alternative policy, or been prepared to use the same ruthless measures as Stalin, no one can say. Stalin did not give him the chance and the fact that Trotsky allowed Stalin, first to defeat, then to destroy him, suggests that he would not. As for the others, I find it as difficult as in the case of Hitler to imagine under any other Soviet leader than Stalin the Great Leap Forward of the forced collectivization of agriculture, imposed without regard to the appalling cost in human lives, the destruction of Lenin's original party, the purge of the Red Army, the creation of the Gulag empire and the combination of Marxism-Leninism with Tsarist autocracy in the Stalinist state.

Let me leave you with a final provocative question. In any mental hospital you may expect to find patients who suffer

from the delusion that they are called upon to play a great historic role in some form or another – and are completely incapacitated by it. Why in Stalin's and Hitler's case did the same belief provide so exceptional a psychological drive as to carry them to such peaks of success that it would be hard to omit them from any list, however short, of individuals who have had the greatest impact on the history of the twentieth century?