



TITLE:

To What Extent Did Hitler Create a Totalitarian System of Government?

Table of contents:

Identification and evaluation of sources:p. 2

Investigation:p. 4

Reflection:p. 7

Appendix:

NAME:

CANDIDATE NUMBER:

TOTAL WORD COUNT:

IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUTATION OF SOURCES

The focus of this investigation will be “To what extent did Hitler create a totalitarian government?” and will analyse the degree to which the main aspects of a totalitarian government were expressed in the Nazi governmental system. The issue of totalitarianism is of course much wider and encompasses all areas of the state, but for the purposes of this investigation it will focus solely on the governmental system of the Nazi party as it is from this which all other areas of the state extend. Thus, *Twelve years with Hitler*, the memoirs of Otto Dietrich and *The Limits of Hitler’s Power* by Edward Peterson are sources of particular value to this investigation, due to the insight they give into the inner workings of Nazi government either through first-hand experience or through academic focus the area, aiding our understanding of the nature of Nazi government and, further to this, whether it can be classed as totalitarian.

Source: Extract from *Twelve years with Hitler*, the memoirs of Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s press chief, published in 1955.

This source could be of particular value to historians looking at the question of whether Hitler created a totalitarian government as it originates from Otto Dietrich who, as Hitler’s press chief, was part of the high ranks of the Nazi government. This means he would have had direct experience of the confusion and thus would be able to make an informed judgement on where it stemmed from and also what it was intended to create.

However this source also has limitations that affect its usefulness. One limitation is the fact that it may give a one-sided interpretation of the confusion due to historiographical tradition and lack of hindsight. Published in the 1955, this was right in the middle of the period where the trend was to focus on Hitler with an Intentionalist perspective; thus when Dietrich proclaims this confusion as a ‘technique’ of Hitler, his conception may be biased toward the Intentionalist perspective and thus is unable to give historians a holistic perspective on the nature of Nazi government. Similarly, it also may not be able to do this as, although it comes from someone high in the ranks of Nazi government, that person is only from one section of Nazi government- the press- and therefore is unlikely to be able to reflect fully on the confusion and whether the confusion in this department was representative of the confusion in the system as a whole.

It may also carry limitations due to its origin and purpose in conjunction. Written relatively soon after World War II and the holocaust and also from a Nazi official its purpose may be to seek to shift the blame, therefore causing Dietrich to desire to paint Hitler as an omnipotent force within Nazi government to explain the actions of many subordinates.

Source: *The Limits of Hitler's Power* by Edward Peterson, 1969

This source also has significant values in terms of its ability to enable historians to evaluate Nazi governmental system. This predominantly comes from the fact that it was published in 1969 by Edward Peterson, a historian external to the Nazi regime. This means that when assessing the Nazi government he would have had further hindsight and more information available to him, thus able to see a wider and more complete picture of Hitler's government and therefore able to come to a more well informed judgement in some respects .

However it too has limitations concerning historiographical tradition, as during this time the Structuralist approach was predominant and there was a tendency to paint Hitler as a "weak" dictator. This is alongside the fact that Peterson would have not had close experience of the Nazi system like Dietrich, and therefore would have had to rely on secondary sources in order to come to a judgement about the nature of the chaos, something which could have skewed the conclusion he came to.

INVESTIGATION

Hitler officially became the undisputed leader of the party in 1933 after the law concerning the head of the state of the German Reich merged the positions of the president and the chancellor¹. This, however, did not eradicate his reliance on subordinates to enact his “will”, and it is within this is where the notorious confusion in Nazi government lies, giving rise to the debate over the extent to which Hitler succeeded in creating a totalitarian government in that he exercised absolute control over all state institutions, subordinating all others to his authority². The historiography of this area is characterised by the debate between Intentionalists, who hold that the confusion within government was a tool of control used by Hitler, and Structuralists, who conversely hold that the governmental system evolved out of various functional pressures which are in fact reflective of the limits on Hitler’s power. Both of these views must each be explored further in order to discern whether Hitler had absolute control of government and therefore the extent to which he had created a totalitarian system of government. Through analysis of these it becomes apparent that a synthesis of the two sides, championed by Ian Kershaw, provides the best explanation of Nazi government, in that it acknowledges that the confusion within government was not always under Hitler’s direct control, but also recognises the totalitarian nature of Hitler’s personal power, in that it created an environment in which even independent decisions of Nazi officials would naturally reflect in some way the will of Hitler.

As mentioned, Intentionalist historians acknowledge this confusion and hold that Hitler created and manipulated it consciously to his advantage in a divide and rule strategy that created an environment in which no one could amass enough power to oppose him, very much supporting the idea that Hitler had created a totalitarian system of government³. A source of particular value to this study is the source from Otto Dietrich’s memoirs which suggests that the confusion was indeed part of this strategy as a “technique” he employed to create disorganisation in the upper levels of the government “in order to develop and further the authority of his own until it became a “despotic tyranny”⁴, allowing Hitler to be placed above party politics, confirming his absolute control of Nazi Germany. Hitler, as argued by this school of thought, was also careful where and to whom he delegated power. This is exemplified by the fact that he gave huge power bases to the men he trusted, namely Himmler, Ley, Goring and Bormann while conversely refusing to support Frick’s attempt to establish central control over the governors and the Gauleiter, suggesting that Hitler was conscious of where and to whom he was distributing power, doing so intentionally⁵. The chaos therefore was not allowed to get out of control and remained at a level which could be manipulated by Hitler to confirm and enhance his totalitarian control of government. Stemming from this control, Intentionalist’s go on to suggest that Hitler’s “will” was the controlling factor of Nazi government and subsequent effects

¹ Layton, Geoff, *Germany; the Third Reich* (London, 2000) p.99

² “Totalitarian” defined in <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/totalitarian>

³ Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (London, 1993) p. 80

⁴ Dietrich, Otto, Extract from *Twelve Years with Hitler* quoted in Hite and Hinton *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London, 2000) p.187

⁵ Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (London, 1993) p.116-17

on German society. This could be inferred by the fact that the major policies that were adopted by the German state, from Lebensraum to the extermination of the Jews, seem to stem from clear objectives of Hitler's that go as far back as those detailed in "Mein Kampf", underlining the control he exerted on Nazi government, adding to the overall impression that it was indeed a totalitarian system⁶.

However, this impression of totalitarian control through chaos is viewed by Structuralist historians as merely superficial. Structuralist's hold that the Nazi regime and its policies evolved from functional pressures, interpreting the confusion of the Nazi Governmental system, not as a tool for control, but as a reflection of the limits on Hitler's power due to influence from other sources⁷. The SS provides a strong example of the fact that Hitler was not in control of the apparatus of the Nazi state. By 1939 it numbered 250,000 effectively developing into a state within a state under Himmler, giving him massive amounts of power within the Nazi system⁸. Structuralist historians also assert that Hitler's style of rule was incongruent with totalitarian government, Hitler being said to have had a "pronounced distaste for bureaucratic procedures and conventional administrative work routines"⁹. In the source from Edward Peterson's "the limits of Hitler's power" (1969, pp.432, 446) he dubs Hitler as "the man who does not decide" and attributes the "literal anthill" of Nazi government to being a product of this characteristic rather than a calculated policy of "divide and rule", clearly calling into question the level of control Hitler was able to exert and thus the supposed totalitarian nature of Nazi government¹⁰.

With ample evidence to support both perspectives, a synthesis of the two is in fact able to give a better explanation of the nature of Nazi government as totalitarian, as it is sensitive to its finer details. Historians such as Ian Kershaw have neither sided with Intentionalist's or Structuralist's but rather proposed a synthesis of these two approaches. Kershaw agrees that in no way did Hitler create a monolithic state and rather refers to the governmental structure as "a shambles of constantly shifting power bases and warring factions"¹¹. Although Kershaw recognises that measures such as those taken towards the holocaust were enacted by lower ranking officials without the authorisation of Hitler, he also recognises that much of Hitler's power came from the way other people in government and the German people perceived him, not solely on his abilities as a dictator, in the form of "charismatic rule"¹². Hitler, in Kershaw's view, was indeed above party politics and ruthlessly pursued objectives which were clarified by those below him, but nevertheless he was structurally conditioned to sustain the successes on which his 'charismatic' power rested¹³. This helps us to explain the level of control Hitler was able to exercise despite not being able to directly control all elements of government.

⁶ Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (London, 1993) p.143

⁷ Layton, Geoff, *Germany; the third Reich 1933-45* (London, 2000) p. 101

⁸ Broszat, Martin, *The Hitler State* (London, 1981) p.273

⁹ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler* (London, 2000) p.111

¹⁰ Peterson, Edward, *The Limits of Hitler's Power* (1969) quoted in Hite and Hinton *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London, 2000) p.186

¹¹ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler* (London, 2000) p.194

¹² Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler* (London, 2000) p.195

¹³ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler* (New York, 1991) p.195

It is clear to see that both the Intentionalist and Structuralist approaches provide justifiable explanations for parts of the governmental system. There is evidence to suggest that there was a vision that Hitler sought to pursue from early on and equally that he had a motive when letting the governmental system disintegrate as it allowed him to be placed above party politics, creating a totalitarian system. However there is also ample evidence from the Structuralist approach to suggest he was only one part of a poly-cratic system that happened to work in his favour at times; he was not exempt from the functional pressures within the system and was therefore limited by them. However neither approach has given a definitive answer that justifies how Hitler maintained power, pursuing many areas of his policy, amongst the undeniable chaos of the governmental system. A synthesis of approaches explains how Hitler was able to pursue objectives without rational government, as a unifying purpose was clarified by subordinates. Nevertheless this charismatic rule rested on limiting structural pressures due to Hitler's need to sanction these in order to continue this style of leadership. Thus, in itself, Nazi government was not totalitarian in the sense that Hitler had tangible control of all of its aspects; however the cumulative loyalty generated due to the charismatic style of rule effectively created one, eliminating almost all pressures on Hitler, giving him uncompromised power from the perspective of almost every facet of government.

REFLECTION

The process of this investigation has certainly allowed me to use a variety of research methods and thus experience some of the challenges that face historians. Firstly, through my use of primary sources, notably that of the memories of Otto Dietrich, I came to appreciate the difficulty of gaining accurate historical knowledge. Although primary sources are useful for bringing us closer to the past, we must nevertheless rely on inferences from them in order to suggest how and why things were at this time, calling into question how accurate historical knowledge can be. This challenge was made explicit to me through the examination of Dietrich's extract, as it contained within it biases, such as the desire to shift blame away from Nazi officials, which may have distorted the true picture of events, thus distorting the accuracy of our knowledge of them.

The sheer amount of research into Nazi Germany has made a wealth of information available, both helping and challenging historians. This challenge comes in the form of fact selection. Whilst trying to accurately represent the nature of Nazi government and thus expose whether it was totalitarian or not, I questioned the extent to which a historian can construct an objective history. Indeed, certain facts appeal to us more than others, whilst others are ignored, and historians are constantly challenged to select the one's which best explain the period. I was aware of this in my own investigation and selected facts based on how they confirmed each other to create a coherent picture of Nazi government.

Finally, in building an argument from the chosen sources and facts, I was prompted to consider the problem of interpretation that faces the historian. As highlighted by my analysis, examinations of Nazi government have been dominated by Structuralist and Intentionalist theories, posing a distinct challenge in avoiding being over-influenced by their research; instead new angles should be considered, as Ian Kershaw did when proposing a synthesis of the two schools, something which I tried to explore further in my own work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brosznat, Martin, *The Hitler State* (London, 1981)

Cesarani, David, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/radicalisation_01.shtml By Professor Last updated: 2011/02/17 (Accessed: 26/06/12)

Dietrich, Otto, *Twelve Years with Hitler* quoted in Hite & Hinton, *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London, 2000)

Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler* (New York, 1991)

Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (London, 1993)

Layton, Geoff, *Germany: the Third Reich 1933-45* (London, 2000)

Peterson, Edward, *The Limits of Hitler's Power* (1969) quoted in Hite & Hinton, *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London, 2000)

“Totalitarian” in <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/totalitarian>

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Extract from *Twelve Years with Hitler* by Otto Dietrich, quoted in Hite and Hinton *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London, 2000) p.187

In the twelve years of his rule in Germany Hitler produced the biggest confusion in government that has ever existed in a civilized state. During his period of government he removed from the organization of the state all clarity of leadership and produced an opaque network of competencies. It was not laxness or an excessive degree of tolerance which led the otherwise so energetic and forceful Hitler to tolerate this real witch's cauldron of struggles for position and conflicts over competence. It was intentional. With this technique he systematically disorganized the upper echelons of the Reich leadership in order to develop and further the authority of his own will until it became a despotic tyranny

Appendix B: Extract from *The Limits of Hitler's Power* by Edward Peterson (1969), quoted in Hite and Hinton, *Weimar and Nazi Germany* (London 2000) p.186

This view of Hitler – the man who does not decide – would help explain the eternal confusion of the men working for him, a literal anthill of aspiring and fearing people trying to please the ‘great one’... The result was the division of domination into thousands of little empires of ambitious men... Hitler's will [was] largely a mirage