

# Adolf Hitler's account of the 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'

Written by John Cai Benjamin Weaver

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Adolf Hitler is a name that, when spoken, images of the Holocaust, gas chambers, the Nazi Party and World War 2 spring to mind. He was one of the more interesting of the right-wing nationalist leaders of the Twentieth Century. Yet how Hitler imagined and conceived the nation is a question that is rarely asked; therefore this essay will focus on Adolf Hitler's conceptualisation of the Nation and who, in Hitler's thinking comprises the nation. Adolf Hitler left a legacy the world has not forgotten; whilst it was far from a positive one, he was a very charismatic and energetic individual, who had a very strong impact on the course of the twentieth century.

Due to the constraints of the word limit, this essay will focus on Adolf Hitler's account of the Nation and who comprises it. It will be based on the speeches that he gave before the Munich Court in 1924 and the work that he produced in his subsequent incarceration, which became 'Mein Kampf'. This essay will not focus on anything after 1933 when he became Chancellor of the Weimar Republic, nor will it discuss the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Anthony Smith's work in the field of Ethnic nationalism and the approach of Ethnosymbolism to nationalism will be used to analyse Hitler's nationalist discourse within these key texts.

*What makes a people or, to be more correct, a race is not language, but blood'.[1]*

Anthony Smith alleges the existence of an Ethnie, which is a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among the elites[2]. In Hitler's conception of the Nation, the Ethnie is the German *Volk*: 'the emotive force of which is inadequately conveyed by translation as 'culture', 'force' or 'race'. '[3] The core of the *volk* was the Aryan nuclei that represented the pure breed of the German people. This term *volk*, with its mystic overtones of primeval forests and dark tribal instincts, combines ethnocentric, national and racial connotations[4]. The word is repeated throughout "Mein Kampf" and his early speeches, it is the core of his nationalist discourse especially within his book "Mein Kampf", where his view is of a rigid closed ethnic nation formed around an ethnic core[5], in order to unite the nation against internal and external threats.

*'The state is only a means to an end. Its end and its purpose is to preserve and promote a community of human beings who are physically as well as spiritually kindred. Above all, it must preserve the existence of the race'.[6]*

Hitler had a very clear idea about the ethnic makeup of the nation; for him 'The state, however, is not an economic organisation; it is a '*volkic*' organism'[7], that is it is the state which is there to safeguard the 'conservation of the racial characteristics of mankind'[8]. Based on this principle, Hitler believed that the *volkisch* concept separated mankind into races of superior and inferior quality. It was based on this racial hierarchy that Hitler created a discourse of 'us and them', which was incredibly important in Ethnic nationalism. This form of nationalism was based upon bloodlines and race, and is therefore seen as exclusive when contrasted to an inclusive form of civic nationalism that bases membership upon common values and beliefs.

Hitler spoke out against the civic nationalism of the Weimar Republic; 'it is almost inconceivable how such a mistake

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could be made as to think that a Nigger or a Chinaman will become a German because he has learned the German language and is willing to speak German for the future and even to cast his vote for a German political party[9]. One of the striking differences between Civic and Ethnic nationalism is the lack of a specific territory that they can associate with; Hitler's discourse is one of blood, race and unity without referring to a specific territory. 'Hitler had the belief in the primacy of foreign over domestic policies which was the traditional view of German history, by taking this view he could attract support and secure a place in the political game'[10]. Hitler speaks of acquiring *Lebensraum* from the Slavic nations in the East and of a union of all pure Germans within one Reich. It is with this that he refers to *Anschluss* with Austria and the incorporation of the Germans within the Sudetenland and any other land on which the German *Volk* reside.

*'If the Jews were the only people in the world, they would be wallowing in filth and mire and would exploit one another and try to exterminate another in a bitter struggle.'*[11]

As Thomson argues,[12] Hitler believed in an 'iron law of nature' that each beast mated only with a companion of the same species. All of Germany's ills sprang from inattention to the natural laws of racial inequality and purity, and especially from subservience to the Jews whom he held responsible for the degeneration of Germany in the twentieth century. In "Mein Kampf", Hitler starts a process of redefinition of the nation that is stereotypical of Ethnic Nationalist thinking. As Smith[13] states, the process of redefinition is one that sharpens the boundaries between 'them and us', and by doing this it creates a boundary that is exclusive and divisive. Hitler states 'even if all the outstanding and visible differences between the various peoples could be bridged over and finally wiped out by the use of a common language that would produce a bastardization which in this case would not signify Germanization; but the annihilation of the German element.'[14]

*'The state is only the vessel and the race is what it contains. The vessel can only have meaning if it preserves and safeguards the contents ... The supreme purpose of the ethical state is to guard and preserve those racial elements'*[15]

Hitler offers a very clear and effective redefinition of the other, namely in this instance the Jewish other; 'the revolting feature was that beneath their unclean exterior one suddenly perceived the moral mildew of the chosen race'[16]. Hitler links the Jewish race to the moral and biological decay of the German *Volk* and to the weak government of the Weimar Republic; 'the Jews were the leaders of Social Democracy'[17]. Hitler had created this mythical anti-type, the Jew who stood for everything un-German, cosmopolitan, rootless, and materialist[18]. In *Mein Kampf* and through the Nazi party, Hitler sought to re-educate the genuine *volk* of the pure culture of their race. After redefinition and re-education, Hitler hoped that the nation would be regenerated through the process, as Smith argues, of rediscovering its primordial elements, selecting the genuine components and rejecting extraneous accretions. [19]

Hitler was very clear in the need to purify the German nation of alien elements, and only then would the pure ethnic form the core of the German Nation once all other ethnicities were forced out, 'the Fuhrer, who embodies the inner will of the master-race and, as the supreme warrior-hero, expresses its ideals and real nature. Beneath him, and submissive to his will, come the racially pure, the selected specimens of the German race, who are endowed with superior blood, physique and blonde appearance; they are the natural rightful lords of mankind.'[20] "The only thing that will ensure a people its freedom of existence", he wrote in "Mein Kampf" 'is sufficient space on this earth' and that entailed a perpetual war of siege and annihilation against all inferior races who threatened the life-force of the German race as it was embodied in the Aryan racial nuclei.'[21]

His task was to assert and ensure for a thousand years the domination of the Aryan race, the natural 'Master Race' of history. This task required a monolithic state resting on the mystical union of 'Blood and Soil' (*Blut und Erde*) and the totalitarian principles of 'One People, One State, One Leader' (*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer*). It required therefore, bringing all German minorities within the borders of the state and, at the same time, claiming 'living-space' (*Lebensraum*) for all the German people; purifying German blood by exterminating all the Jews; and establishing the hegemony of this nation-state in Europe and, eventually, the world[22].

*It was a filthy crime against the German People, a stab in the back of the German Nation.*[23]

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Hitler propagated the view that the German defeat in 1918 and the creation of the Weimar republic was a 'stab in the back', and this led to the notion that Germany was lost, reinforced the idea of Victimhood and fuelled the negative view of neighbouring nations, and in doing so strengthened German nationalism. The target of his rhetoric at his trial in Munich in 1924 was France when he stated 'the supreme aim of the French is the annihilation of Germany, the extermination of twenty million Germans, and the dissolution of Germany into separate states.'<sup>[24]</sup> In the simplest form, this was another attempt by Hitler to redefine the 'other', this time externally.

*France's aim was not merely to weaken Germany, to keep her from obtaining supremacy, but to break her up into small states so that she [France] would be able to hold the Rhine frontier. After all the Government's reiterations of our weakness, we knew that on top of the Saar and Upper Silesia, we would lose our third coal region, the Ruhr; each loss brought on the next one.<sup>[25]</sup>*

Hitler was also appealing to a wounded sense of national pride because Germany had lost the First World War and had had a harsh settlement imposed on its people by the ruling powers. They had lost territory and could potentially lose more since the Weimar Republic seemed to be doing an inadequate job of restoring German glory. Thus, by concentrating on the failures of the Weimar Republic, Hitler was able to instil a strong fear that the German Nation was in decline and needed a strong leader, as well as an enthusiasm to save it and bring about a new age, with all ethnic Germans within a strong German Reich. Hitler's discourse was attempting to reawaken the nationalist sentiment of the German People. His nationalist sentiment at the Munich trial was one of a legitimate German claim against the injustices of Versailles, which created impossible social conditions in Germany<sup>[26]</sup>. Gurian states that true German democracy was identified with Hitler's leadership principle and with the acceptance of orders by a leader who formulated the true will of the people. This nationalism appeared as the solution to social problems. The worker was regarded as a member of the 'people's community'.<sup>[27]</sup> Hitler appealed to apparently traditional values, that of the nation, the people's community, a social order threatened by Jews, Communists and the capitalist powers of Versailles.<sup>[28]</sup>

Hitler's grand idea about the German Reich with complete hegemony over Europe that would last a thousand years needed to be passed on to the younger generations through the medium of education. Very few would dispute that mass education is vital to sustain national consciousness and socialise new generations of loyal citizens.<sup>[29]</sup> Hitler thought that the spirit of Nationalism and a feeling for social justice must be fused into one sentiment in the hearts of the German youth; 'then a day would come when a nation of citizens would arise which would be welded together through a common love and a common pride that would be invincible and indestructible forever.'<sup>[30]</sup> No boy or girl should leave school without having attained a clear insight into the meaning of racial purity and the importance of maintaining the racial blood unadulterated.<sup>[31]</sup>

The Nation was able to act as a 'coat hanger' for Hitler, around which he was able to 'hang' the rest of his ideological features, namely fascism, Social Darwinism and Nativism. This was the idea that States should be inhabited exclusively by members of the German *volk* and that all non-native elements, including deviant members of their own native race, such as homosexuals, needed to be purged so that the nation-state was pure and homogenous. Translated into political terms, the *volkisch* ideology glorified war and renewal by destruction over internationalism and pacifism, the exaltation of national power and national unity over individual freedom, of the authoritarian state and elitism over parliamentary democracy and egalitarianism.<sup>[32]</sup>

Hitler imagined the nation in purely ethnic terms, the ethnies that he conceived of was the German *Volk* with the Aryan core at the top of the genetic pool. Hitler's definition of 'us and them' formed an integral part of his nationalistic discourse. By utilising this fear of an 'other' that was corrupting the potential of the Aryan Race, the 'other' that was responsible for the harsh social conditions in the Weimar Republic, and the 'other' that had imposed the Weimar Democracy onto the German people, he was able to win support amongst the masses. Because of the exclusivity of Ethnic Nationalism, the holocaust was in fact the logical conclusion of Hitler's goal of a pure Nation-State. This purified state would be the vessel that would incorporate the whole of the German *Volk*, whilst using the 'lesser races' such as the Slavs to the East as slaves and securing their land to ensure the German Nation had sufficient *Lebensraum* that would enable German hegemony over the entire continent of Europe. Anthony Smith's Ethnosymbolist approach to Nationalism has been the 'lens' that this essay has viewed Hitler through, although due

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to the nature of nationalism, it is impossible to encapsulate everything with one overarching theory. *Mein Kampf* is laced with the language of glory of the German Nation, nationalism, race and ethnicity; however, nationalism is too 'thin an ideology to be Hitler's only political thinking' and he uses the ideas of Social Darwinism, fascism and militarisation to thicken out his personal ideology.

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