High Politics at World's End: the Wagnerian nightmare of Trevor-Roper's The Last Days of Hitler

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In the summer of 1945, Hugh Trevor-Roper – later one of the world's leading historians, but at this point working for British Intelligence in the smouldering ruins of post-war Germany – was tasked with investigating the fate of Adolf Hitler. The widespread belief was that the Fuhrer had died as the Red Army closed in on the Reich Chancellery. But there was an obvious imperative to uncover the precise sequence of events. Partly this was to allay fears that Hitler might have escaped; that he could yet return; that the nightmare was, perhaps, not quite over.

The report, submitted in November 1945, concluded that Hitler was indeed deceased. Based on his research into the final agonies of the Nazi court, in 1947 Trevor-Roper published The Last Days of Hitler, a book which has gone through seven editions and never been out of print. His work stands as an enduring reminder of the bestial things that Man can do. It is a masterpiece of historical literature and easily one of the finest history books of the twentieth-century due largely to Trevor-Roper's vivid and evocative prose – which, it has often been remarked, carries echoes of the eighteenth-century historians Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle. Meanwhile his subject matter is reminiscent of The Histories, the famous account of 69 A.D. – the Year of the Four Emperors – by Tacitus. And in its atmospherics, the book is utterly Wagnerian. If this is lofty company, Trevor-Roper's book warrants it. With his mastery of prose, Trevor-Roper transports the reader to a distinctly Germanic world – dangerous; exhilarating; and claustrophobic.

Moreover it is a wonderful account of politics 'at the top', in its very rawest form. I have a long-standing interest in this kind of historical work, and Trevor-Roper's is a towering achievement. The spring of 1945 saw the collapse of the Thousand Year Reich into charred rubble, the failure of the dream to remake the world, and, for many of its leaders, death. Yet, even in these death throes, the manoeuvring and posturing of Hitler's acolytes continued unabated. They knew the war was lost. But they schemed and plotted against one another – to discredit and murder their colleagues, perhaps even the Fuhrer himself – in a surreal, insular bubble, imagining themselves to have a political future! There was apparently much to play for in post-war Germany: the prize of succeeding Hitler as Fuhrer, and of negotiating an alliance with the West to renew the war against the Slavic hordes, driving them back to the Asiatic Steppe. The Nazi leaders reserved their most dramatic – and eccentric – performances for the very end.

Despite constituting a 'vast system of bestial Nordic nonsense', the Nazi state was not, judges Trevor-Roper, a genuinely totalitarian state. Rather than being directed from one central hub, it was a mass of 'private empires' with each senior Nazi left to his own devices: utilising those

parts of the state apparatus under his control to advertise his virtues, underline his credentials, and discredit rivals. As such, Nazi politics became 'the politics of feudal anarchy', not a government but an old-fashioned 'court'; more, with an 'incalculable capacity for intrigue'. Its members laboured in constant fear of being eliminated by their colleagues, compelling 'every man ... [to] protect himself ... by reserving ... whatever power he has managed to acquire'. From late 1944 onwards, these tendencies within the Nazi state became ever more acute.

In the book, Hitler appears as something between a medieval king and a Nordic demi-god: remote, ill, and failing, yet still possessed of unchallengeable power by mere force of personality. Surrounded by scheming flatterers and rival factions, Hitler sat above politics and focused on making Berlin his own funeral pyre – one which the German nation would be forced to share. In contrast, some in the SS dreamed of fleeing to the south, to the spiritual home of National Socialism in the hills of Bavaria. There they would construct a fortress from which – so their reasoning went – the Allies could be held off indefinitely. But this was not what the Fuhrer wanted; not at all. His dream of World Power or Ruin at its end, Hitler contributed only nihilistic megalomania. While fancying himself as a modern-day Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun, he ate his cream buns, sucked his pastilles, and trusted only Blondi the Alsatian and that oddity Eva Braun. He still occasionally foamed at the mouth, of course, when ranting about the latest betrayal of his genius. But the Fuhrer was now a physical wreck, even though many of his ailments were of either 'hysterical origin' or due to the 'quack doctors' who used him as a human guinea pig for bizarre cocktails of drugs.

One reason that the Fuhrer's intention to destroy Germany was not stopped was that others were so jealous of the prize of replacing Hitler that they dare not make an overt move against their master, lest the stain of disloyalty ruin their chances. As Albert Speer himself put it, 'Relations between the various high leaders can only be understood if their aspirations are interpreted as a struggle for the succession'. What boggles the mind is that these men believed there would still be tangible power to inherit once Hitler passed from the scene.

And so Germany edged ever closer to the abyss, while her leaders concentrated on slaking their own ambitions. The Tacitean feel of the Nazi court heightens as the various actors are revealed; and describing them is where Trevor-Roper is at his best. Herman Goering was the ostensible heir apparent, but had earned Hitler's ire by his perceived cowardice. The head of the Luftwaffe was a decadent figure, strutting around in ludicrous garments and carrying a bejewelled baton of gold and ivory, more interested in looting the art of Europe than attending to his duties. Then there was Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda. An intellectual from West Germany and not, like most other senior Nazis, a ranting, 'frothblowing' Southern German, Goebbels appears, in his own way, as decadent as Goering. For he measured success not by progress in the war but his ability to manipulate and, in modern terminology, 'spin'. The worse the military defeat suffered by German arms, the greater the opportunity for Goebbels to depict it as a glorious victory. He judged himself by the ability to persuade people that 'black was white'.

Martin Bormann was quite different to the rest. Described by Trevor-Roper was a 'mole-like creature', he was a classic fixer: a bureaucrat, even an 'unobtrusive secretary', Bormann gradually made himself indispensable to Hitler and rarely left his side. Whispering disparaging

words into the Fuhrer's ear about other senior Nazis, slowly he discredited rivals and removed them from the court. Bormann had little desire for the trappings and formalities of authority – apparently he knew that a bureaucrat such as himself could not formally become Fuhrer – yet was 'insatiable' in his appetite for the reality of supreme power. Someone else could wear the crown, so long as he ran the show. Burrowed away within the warrens of the Nazi Party, every step Bormann took strengthened his position. This 'evil genius' became Hitler's most trusted official. His powerbase was the Nazi Party itself, and over time he came to control it.

Heinrich Himmler, meanwhile, was a lunatic if ever there was one. He emerges as the most terrible figure of the lot. Unlike Bormann, Himmler did lust after the position of Fuhrer, and as head of the SS – bearing the title of Reichsfuhrer – he was Bormann's principal rival. Once the war to win land in the East was launched the SS grew exponentially in authority, eventually becoming a state-within-a-state. With it, Himmler's power increased, even – in the view of Trevor-Roper – coming to rival that of Hitler himself. Himmler calmly ordered the extermination of millions with the stroke of a pen; yet he saw his work as a matter of mere administration, loved animals, and hated Goering for hunting them. He fancied himself as the man to arrange a surrender to the Western allies in order to continue the war against the Asiatics. Fanatical in his adherence to the Nordic occult mysticism of the SS (Hitler, in contrast, used Nazi doctrine principally as a weapon and privately ridiculed the Reichsfuhrer and the SS as crackpots), Himmler was an exhibitionist; and, like all exhibitionists – then and now – to be proven wrong was not an option. Himmler searched relentlessly for Aryan truth: the SS worked to isolate 'pure' blood; debated the occult significance of top hats worn at Eton in England; an expedition to Tibet searched for evidence that the original Aryans had gone to live in the Himalayas; and Himmler tried to prove that the Japanese were Aryans (!) by linking medieval Nordic runes to Japanese ideograms. One is tempted to howl with laughter at the insanity of it all, but to Himmler – 'the high-priest' of the SS – it was no joke.

The struggle between Himmler and Bormann is at the core of Trevor-Roper's account. One is transported to 69 A.D. In essence, it was the Party versus the SS. After the 'General's Plot' to assassinate the Fuhrer in 1944, Bormann tried to persuade Hitler that Himmler must have known about it. In a bureaucratic masterstroke, in late 1944 he got Hitler to send the head of the SS away from Berlin by kicking him upstairs, as head of Army Group Vistula. Meanwhile Walter Schellenberg, a young SS general and fanatically loyal to the Reichsfuhrer, worked behind the scenes to persuade Himmler to move against Hitler and negotiate peace with the West. Schellenberg asked Himmler to arrest the Fuhrer, but his master ducked the issue. Himmler was obsessed with taking over, but could not quite bring himself to act. Schellenberg pressed again following the death of Roosevelt in April 1945, claiming that 'Historical Necessity and Justice' ensured that a break between the Allies was imminent; American Catholics, or the Pope, or perhaps the Red Cross, could yet demand peace and bring it off successfully! But Himmler was less ruthless than Bormann – quite remarkable given his willingness to annihilate entire races – and still could not summon up the resolve to act. To the end, he felt personally bound to the man he sought to succeed.

And then there was Albert Speer. An architect by training, he turned out to be the best technocrat in Germany and was eventually put in charge of armaments and industry. That he was a personal friend of Hitler shielded him from the intrigues of the court. The Fuhrer would not

hear a word said against him. Anyway Speer had little interest in the politicking of Bormann, Himmler, Goering, and Goebbels. He was concerned only with wielding executive power, and concentrated his energies on his work.

But just as for Bormann and Himmler, Speer's loyalty to Hitler was ambiguous. Convinced that the war was lost, when the Fuhrer ordered a scorched earth policy to raze the Reich itself – a dramatic 'Wagnerian Twilight' – Speer began to turn against him. To destroy the infrastructure of Germany – the towns, factories, dams, bridges, and railways – was to wreck the nation's future. Speer thus began to conspire against Hitler; not the man himself, to be sure, but the execution of his orders. On his own authority, Speer waged a campaign to countermand instructions from Hitler's headquarters. He quietly persuaded local people to surrender facilities to the Allies intact, rather than destroy them. Speer protected the factories of Belgium and France, the canals of Holland, and the oilfields of Hungary. And when Germany herself was breached, he did the same work with even more vigour. Speer deliberately reduced production of high explosives – and hid as much of the existing stocks as he could find – in order to deny them to Hitler.

By early 1945, Speer had resolved upon the assassination of 'the entire political directorate of the Reich'. Hitler, Goebbels, Bormann – the lot. Only the erection of a new, taller chimney in the gardens of the Chancellery foiled his plot to introduce poison gas into Hitler's bunker via the ventilation system. In April, he recorded a radio broadcast in which he asked the German people to hand over all industrial plant and infrastructure intact to the Allies. Speer even tried to persuade Wehrmacht generals to the east of Berlin to flee to the north or south, leaving the capital undefended and ensuring a relatively bloodless conquest by the Red Army.

This drama then began to take on the quality of a black comedy. Hitler cheered himself up when it was decided that a detailed horoscope of his life, drawn up in 1933, apparently predicted a German military revival in April 1945 followed by peace in the summer. Such were the considerations that enlivened war policy! Meanwhile Himmler still felt the tug of loyalty to the Fuhrer. Rather than act, he contented himself with the knowledge that Hitler would soon be dead, and spent his days dreaming up the name of a new political party which he would lead while waging war against the Soviet Union. And even Speer – who had actually planned to kill Hitler – retained a similar fondness for his friend the Fuhrer. He could not bring himself to broadcast his treasonable speech, and, guilt-ridden, Speer went to the bunker and confessed his disobedience to Hitler. Despite Bormann's protests, Hitler – most bizarrely of all – did not shoot or arrest his old chum, but simply told him to leave. Changing tack, Bormann (who had no desire to die in Berlin) tried to persuade Speer to ask Hitler to head south. Speer refused and counselled Hitler to meet his fate in the capital. One can imagine Bormann's reaction to that piece of advice.

When Goering – still on paper the heir apparent – began pressing for peace negotiations, Bormann had more luck and persuaded Hitler that Goering was trying to usurp him – true enough, of course, but bear in mind that Bormann was himself busy seeking to usurp Goering. Hitler sacked Goering on the spot. Next, the press somehow got wind of Himmler's own hopes of negotiating peace with the West, and Hitler again started foaming at the mouth, imagining an SS plot to assassinate him. The SS chieftain was swiftly booted out of the Nazi Party. Hitler

designated Admiral Doenitz as his successor, with Bormann as Party Chancellor – an arrangement with which Bormann was happy.

The final act saw Hitler blow his own brains out. Goebbels swiftly followed suit, via poison. In a sense, Bormann was the last man standing. He imagined that Doenitz, a military man rather than a politician, could be useful to him. Alas, Bormann was hardly likely to be taken seriously in a post-Hitler world, for Doenitz intended to simply dismiss most senior Nazis from office. But Bormann never got to find out quite how impotent he was without Hitler around; he was killed by a Russian tank whilst finally fleeing Berlin. Himmler's fate likewise lacked drama. Doenitz dissolved the SS, and Himmler was forced to go on the run. Two weeks into the peace, his dreams shattered, Himmler walked up to a British military position and bit down on a cyanide capsule.

In contrast, Speer was made an unofficial member of Doenitz's government and his message to the German people was finally broadcast. Trevor-Roper labels Speer as 'the real criminal' of Nazi Germany; at least the other Nazis believed in what they were doing, whether it was mysticism or old-fashioned conquest. But Speer saw through them, felt contempt for them, and yet, Trevor-Roper contends, did nothing until it was too late.

It is quite a story. But what does it all mean? And what is its significance as the second decade of the twenty-first century unfolds? On the most obvious level, the book highlights the depravity of dictatorships and the recurrent potential for madmen to get into power. Hitler and Himmler, especially, were not just vicious but outright fruitcakes. There is no basis for confidence that similar men, who seek ecstasy in destruction, will not rise again in the future. However, far more important than that, Trevor-Roper underscores the primacy of the individual will in human affairs. In the case of the Nazis, to be sure, their will was terrible. But human willpower almost achieved what logic would suggest could never be achieved. Considering the depraved state of humanity – demonstrated with tragic regularity, from the dawn of time to the present – that too is hardly a comforting thought.