

The role of anti-capitalism in Hitler's world view

Rainer Zitelmann

Independent scholar

Correspondence

Email: Office-zitelmann@web.de

Abstract

Anti-capitalism played a more important role in Hitler's world view than is generally assumed. Hitler was sceptical about nationalising all means of production because, as a Social Darwinist, he feared that this would override natural selection in the economic sphere. From the mid-1930s, however, he became increasingly convinced that a planned economy was far superior to a market economy and, with time, came to increasingly admire the Soviet system.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Was Hitler really 'right wing'? The German–British publicist Sebastian Haffner, who wrote one of the most notable essays on Hitler, has pointed out that the only opposition which could really have threatened Hitler came from the right: "From its point of view, Hitler stood on the Left. That should give one pause. Hitler can by no means be placed so readily on the extreme Right in the political spectrum as many people nowadays are fond of doing" (Haffner, 1979, p. 60).

Indeed, the only effective opposition to Hitler was represented by conservative and in part also pro-monarchist forces such as Ludwig Beck, Franz Halder, Hans Oster, Erwin von Witzleben, Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, Johannes Popitz, Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and

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Ulrich von Hassell; and it stood to Hitler's right. The German–British sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf pointed out the dilemma of German resistance to Hitler, which, while certainly highly moral, still did not mark a step forward on the road of German society to a constitution of liberty: “Worse still, it was Hitler who effected those transformations of German society that make the constitution of liberty possible, while the resistance against his regime acted in the name of a social tradition that could provide a basis only for authoritarian rule” (Dahrendorf, 1967, p. 391).

Similarities between National Socialists and communists speak against an all-too-simple localisation of Hitler and National Socialism as ‘right wing’, a fact noted by Friedrich August Hayek in his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*. He highlighted the similarities between National Socialism and communism, which he saw above all in their fundamental socialist convictions. It was, he observed, far from a coincidence that many of the leaders and the supporters of the National Socialist and fascist parties were frequently former socialists:

Everyone who has watched the growth of these movements in Italy or in Germany has been struck by the number of leading men, from Mussolini downward (and not excluding Laval and Quisling), who began as socialists and ended as Fascists or Nazis. And what is true of the leaders is even more true of the rank and file of the movement. The relative ease with which a young communist could be converted into a Nazi or vice versa was generally known in Germany, best of all to the propagandists of the two parties. (Hayek, 2007, pp. 80–1)

Of course, Hayek addressed the frequently voiced objection that in Germany before 1933, and in Italy before 1922, Communists, National Socialists and Fascists clashed more frequently with each other than they did with other parties. Hayek's explanation:

They competed for the support of the same type of mind and reserved for each other the hatred of the heretic. But their practice showed how closely they are related. To both, the real enemy, the man with whom they had nothing in common and whom they could not hope to convince, is the liberal of the old type. (Hayek, 2007, p. 81)

2 | WAS HITLER REALLY ‘RIGHT WING’?

Before joining the German Workers' Party (later the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP), Hitler was on the left of the political spectrum, as we know today. From the very beginning of his political activities Hitler had to contend with the accusation from the right that he was a ‘Bolshevist’ or communist, just as he had to contend with the accusation from the left that he was a lackey of monopoly capitalism. In a programmatic speech which Hitler gave on 13 August 1920, he took exception to the accusation that he was a communist. On the one hand, he complained, people were saying: “If you advocate what is in your program, you are a Communist”; on the other hand, he was being denounced as an “arch reactionary” and a “militarily completely contaminated retrograde” (Hitler, 1980a, p. 204).

Hitler never described himself as being a right-wing politician, but always criticised both left-wing and right-wing political movements and parties to the same degree. The following passages from a report on a speech on 26 October 1920, for example, are typical:



Now Hitler turned to the right and left. The national right lacked a social concept, the social left a national one. He admonished the right-wing parties: if you want to be national, then you need to come down to your people's level and do away with all this class conceit! To the left he called: you who have declared your solidarity with the whole world, first show your solidarity with your own national comrades, become Germans first!... You who are truly revolutionaries; come over to us and fight with us for our whole nation! Your place is not over there as drovers for international capital, but with us, with your nation! (Hitler, 1980a, p. 250)

In a letter written on 6 September 1921 to the leader of the Hanover district group of the NSDAP, Hitler declared that the party was not being built up by mergers with other national-popular groupings but by gaining the forces of the extreme left and extreme right: "What we need is to attract powerful masses, preferably from the extreme left and extreme right wing" (Hitler, 1980a, p. 470).

When in his monologues he was recalling the time of struggle to his inner circle on 30 November 1941, he said: "My party at the time consisted of ninety per cent of people from the left. I could only use people who had fought" (Hitler, 1980b, p. 146). This was certainly an exaggeration, but we know from recent analyses of the NSDAP membership lists by political scientist Jürgen W. Falter that 40 per cent of the National Socialist Workers' Party's members were indeed workers. The same is true for the party's voters (Falter, 2020).

Hitler did not regard himself as being either on the left or on the right, but wanted to overcome both extremes – not in the 'middle', however, but with a new extreme in which both left and right were abolished. On 26 May 1944 he said:

In those days the definitions of both terms were diametrically opposed to each other. Then one was on the right side of the barricade and the other on the left, and I went right in between these two fighters, in other words climbed up on the barricade itself, and therefore was naturally shot at by both. I attempted to define a new term under the motto that in the end, nationalism and socialism are the same under one condition, namely that the nation moves into the center of all desire ... In those days I had heavy battles both from the left as well as from the right. (Wilhelm, 1976, p. 155)

We know, however, that Hitler did not proceed against the right in the same way as he did against the left. Some dedicated monarchists were also delivered into the concentration camps, and some conservative bourgeois forces, such as Herbert von Bose and Edgar Julius Jung, both associates of Franz von Papen, Vice Chancellor of Germany under Adolf Hitler from 1933 to 1934, were shot just like the leaders of the SA, the NSDAP Storm Troopers, on 30 June 1934. On balance, however, it is incontestable that the Communists and the Social Democrats had to bear the greater sacrifices.

This has nothing to do with Hitler's preference for the right, however – quite the opposite. He regarded the right-wing and bourgeois forces as being cowardly, weak, without energy and incapable of any resistance, whereas he assumed the left to have the brave, courageous, determined and therefore dangerous forces (see Zitelmann, 2022, pp. 183–312). And for him these were more appealing than the conservative elements he despised and basically no longer took seriously as opponents.



This ideologically mistaken assessment was to avenge itself, however, because it was not the Communists who became a danger for him. He had won over many of them, who had become fervent adherents of National Socialism. Others offered resistance, but they never posed a threat to Hitler's rule. The actual dangers came from conservative men such as Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, from Ulrich von Hassell and Johannes Popitz, who can only be described as extreme reactionaries, and from monarchists like Hans Oster and Wilhelm Canaris (Hoffmann, 1974). At least from 1938 onwards, these forces engaged in a systematic conspiracy and opposition, which was not at all doomed to failure from the beginning.

It was only towards the end of his life, when he appreciated the total and irreversible failure of the Third Reich, that Hitler recognised that it had been a mistake to proceed so one-sidedly against the forces on the left and to spare those on the right. At a conference of the *Gau* (regional) leaders on 24 February 1945 he said, as his adjutant Nicolaus von Below reports, "We liquidated the left-wing class fighters, but unfortunately we forgot in the meantime to also launch the blow against the right. That is our great sin of omission" (von Below, 1980, p. 403).

In view of his failure, Hitler searched for an explanation for his defeat and recognised that his alliance with the bourgeois and right-wing forces was irreconcilable in the long run with the radical revolutionary policies he had conceived. And he had not 'forgotten' to launch 'the blow against the right', but, based on his ideological premises, had simply not believed it to be necessary – at least until the assassination attempt of 20 July 1944 – to proceed against his opponents on the right. In view of the war plans Hitler was pursuing, proceeding against the right, which played an important role in business, the military and the civil service, would moreover hardly have been possible, particularly since he would thereby have provoked a dangerous 'war on two fronts' in domestic politics.

Resignedly, he stated in his political testament:

Since we lacked the élite we had envisaged, we had to make do with the human material to hand. The results are what you would expect! Because the mental concept did not agree with the practical possibilities of implementing it, the war policy of a revolutionary state such as the Third Reich necessarily became the *policy of reactionary petit bourgeois*. (Hitler, 1981, p. 73)

3 | NATIONAL SOCIALISM AS A FORM OF RULE BY CAPITAL?

For the political left and most theorists close to it, of course, Hitler was always the extreme right-wing agent of capital. Max Horkheimer, the leading philosopher of the Frankfurt School, famously coined a phrase that is still quoted today: "But whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism" (Horkheimer, 1989, p. 78). With his use of the term 'fascism', Horkheimer was referring to National Socialism. Leftist theorists avoid the term 'National Socialism' and prefer to speak of 'fascism' because they believe that the socialism contained in National Socialism discredits the 'good,' 'real' kind of socialism. "Fascism", according to the classic definition offered in 1935 by Georgi Dimitrov, General Secretary of the Communist International, was "the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital" (Dimitrov, 1972, p. 8). In the Marxists' view, capitalists sought to secure their rule by the means of 'fascist dictatorship'.



That fascism was a form of rule by capital and that Hitler was allegedly brought to power by big business was originally a Marxist thesis, but has since become established as conventional wisdom – even though it has long since been refuted by historical research (Turner, 1985).

But some economists recognised the nature of National Socialism better already in the early 1940s. I would like to illustrate this with two very clear-sighted findings by economists from 1941 and 1942. Politically, these two economists were very far apart: a libertarian, decidedly pro-capitalist economist and a left-wing economist from the Frankfurt School.

The economist and sociologist Friedrich Pollock had earned his doctorate with a dissertation on Karl Marx's theory of money, and was a co-founder of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main and a close friend of Max Horkheimer – but disagreed with him on National Socialism. Ludwig von Mises was known to be, together with von Hayek, the most important representative of the Austrian School of National Economics, and as early as 1922, in his epochal work *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, he demonstrated why a socialist planned economy could not work. Both Pollock and von Mises were staunch opponents of National Socialism and emigrated to the United States.

In an article on the economic system of National Socialism published in 1941, Pollock (1981, p. 113) pointed out the following:

I agree that the legal institution of private ownership was maintained, and that many attributes characteristic for National Socialism begin to manifest themselves, albeit still vaguely, in non-totalitarian countries. But does this mean that the function of private ownership did not change? Is the 'increase of power of a few groups' really the most important result of the change which took place? I believe it reaches far more deeply and should be described as the destruction of all the essential traits of private ownership, saving one exception. Even the mightiest concerns were denied the right to set up new fields of business in areas where the highest profits were to be expected, or to interrupt a production where it became unprofitable. These rights were transferred in their entirety to the ruling groups. The compromise between the groups in power initially determined the extent and direction of the production process. Faced with such a decision, the title of ownership is powerless, even if it is derived from the possession of the overwhelming majority of the share capital, let alone when it only owns a minority.

This is one of the most lucid analyses of the economic structure of National Socialism, and it corresponds with what Ludwig von Mises wrote in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* that appeared on 21 June 1942:

The German pattern of socialism (*Zwangswirtschaft*) is characterized by the fact that it maintains, although only nominally, some institutions of capitalism. Labor is, of course, no longer a 'commodity'; the labor market has been solemnly abolished; the government fixes wage rates and assigns every worker the place where he must work. Private ownership has been nominally untouched. In fact, however, the former entrepreneurs have been reduced to the status of shop managers (*Betriebsführer*). The government tells them what and how to produce, at what prices and from whom to buy, at what prices and to whom to sell. Business may remonstrate against inexpedient injunctions, but the final decision rests with the authorities. ... Market exchange and entrepreneurship are thus only a sham.



The government, not the consumers' demands, directs production; the government, not the market, fixes every individual's income and expenditure. This is socialism with the outward appearance of capitalism – all-round planning and total control of all economic activities by the government. Some of the labels of capitalistic market economy are retained, but they signify something entirely different from what they mean in a genuine market economy.¹

The subject of the present article, however, is not an analysis of the National Socialist economic system, but an analysis of Adolf Hitler's economic policy ideas – based on a broad range of sources.

4 | EVIDENCE OF HITLER'S *WELTANSCHAUNG*

The primary sources for my book *Hitler's National Socialism* are Hitler's two books, *Mein Kampf* (1925) and his *Second Book* (which he wrote in 1928 but which remained unpublished during his lifetime), as well as his countless speeches, newspaper articles (e.g. in the *Illustrierter Beobachter*) and notes of his monologues at the Führer headquarters and his discussions with confidants (e.g. as recorded in the diaries of Joseph Goebbels, the National Socialists' chief propagandist).

With Hitler's speeches, the question keeps surfacing as to when we can take him at his word or when – and to what extent – the immediate reason and purpose of the speech, but particularly the addressee, need to be of primary consideration. Hitler's public speeches, articles and so forth were written and presented with regard to a specific effect, with the intent to achieve a specific objective. Sometimes he concealed his true objectives. This is particularly true of Hitler's foreign policy speeches between 1933 and 1939, which disclosed little of his actual objectives and almost exclusively served to deceive world public opinion. In contrast to this, however, in his early speeches and articles, as well as in his two books, Hitler spoke about his long-term domestic and foreign policy objectives with an astonishing degree of candour. Ahead of everything else, our investigation confirms what Joachim Fest already demonstrated in his biography of Hitler (Fest, 1973, p. 457), namely that the commonly held opinion that Hitler had 'promised everybody everything' in his speeches was untenable in this form.

Nevertheless, it is still quite justified always to keep an eye on the addressee: it goes without saying that Hitler spoke differently at a 1 May rally from the way he did before a group of industrialists. In this he was a master of demagogy and often succeeded in deceiving both his supporters and his opponents about his real views and intentions.

Since Hitler believed that the masses were stupid and incapable of differentiated thinking, his speeches are also composed according to the 'black/white' and 'good/bad' pattern, even if his own thinking about various topics was far more differentiated. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the positive remarks about the Social Democrats and the Communists which he made within his inner circle, as well as by his never publicly expressed criticism of Italian Fascism and the reactionary Franco regime in Spain (Zitelmann, 2022, pp. 496–522).

In many instances, an analysis of the historical record itself shows whether Hitler's statements were only tactically motivated or are to be taken seriously. Otherwise, I apply a threefold grid in order to separate only tactically intended statements (or such that are obviously intended only as propaganda) from 'programmatically' and seriously meant statements.

First, I compare the 'internal' statements which Hitler made relatively free of tactical and propaganda considerations (e.g. the 'monologues at the Führer headquarters' or the 'table talks')



with his public pronouncements. The internal statements, including his remarks to his immediate associates, which I frequently draw on, can in many instances be used as a sort of pattern against which we can assess the question of the given nature of a public Hitler statement.

Second, I calculate the frequency with which specific Hitler statements are repeated, and the consistency and continuity with which he expounded a certain opinion,

Third, I assess the inner conclusiveness of specific statements by Hitler. As a point of departure we are able to take certain fundamental axioms which throughout his life served Hitler as the fixed points from which he derived his opinions on concrete individual problems. If a statement by Hitler can be logically and stringently deduced from the basic principles he developed, then we have a *prima facie* assumption that we are dealing with a part of his *Weltanschauung* that we may take seriously, and not merely with a statement designed for propaganda effect or only meant as a tactical ploy. The most important of these fundamental axioms was Hitler's concept of the 'eternal fight' which for him was grounded in Social Darwinism. "I regard fighting as being the fate of all creatures. Nobody can escape fighting if he does not wish to go under", Hitler said in a speech on 23 November 1939 (Domarus, 1973, p. 1422). On 30 May 1942, he remarked in a secret speech:

A highly serious statement by a great military philosopher says that fighting, and therefore warfare, is the father of all things. If you take a look at nature as it actually is, you will find this statement confirmed for all forms of life and all developments, not only on this earth but probably far beyond it. The whole universe appears to be ruled by only this one thought, that there is an eternal selection process going on in which in the end the stronger keeps his life and his right to live, while the weaker falls. Some say therefore that nature is cruel and without pity, while others will come to realize that nature is only obeying an iron law of logic. Naturally, the one affected will always have to suffer, but with his suffering and his personal view he will not be able to remove this law from this world as it is given to us. The law will remain. (Quoted in Picker, 1983, p. 491)

5 | HITLER'S VIEWS ON MARKET AND PLANNED ECONOMY

The American historian Henry A. Turner proposed the thesis that Hitler had "taken the liberal principle of competition as the foundation for his views of domestic business matters". According to Turner, Hitler had regarded free enterprise as being a special case of the fundamental Social Darwinist principle, according to which life is a constant battle in which the more competent and the more capable survive (Turner, 1976, p. 95).

The Israeli historian Avraham Barkai disagreed with Turner's interpretation and advocated the theory that the most outstanding characteristic of Hitler's concept was his "extreme anti-liberalism, the fundamental rejection of the *laissez faire* principle of the unrestricted free market economy initiative of the entrepreneur". Hitler had not rejected competition as a matter of principle, but he wanted, suggested Barkai, to "unconditionally subject the individual free play of forces in the economy to the authority of the 'national community' and the state". The attempt to reconcile these two opposites was one of the most outstanding traits of the National Socialist economic concept (Barkai, 1977, pp. 408–12).

While I agree with Barkai's thesis, this does not mean that Turner's interpretation is completely wrong, because he expressly referred only to Hitler's position on the economy and



society *before* 1933. In fact, to a certain extent we can only speculate on Hitler's true position before 1933, because Hitler kept his plans strictly secret, primarily in order not to offend the businessmen. In his talks with Otto Wagener, the chief of the economic policy section of the NSDAP, Hitler underlined time and again the importance of keeping his economic plans secret. In September 1931, for example, he said:

The conclusion from this is what I have said all along, that this idea is not to become a subject for propaganda, or even for any sort of discussion, except within the innermost study group. It can only be implemented in any case when we hold political power in our hands. And even then we will have as opponents, besides the Jews, all of private industry, particularly heavy industry, as well as the medium and large landholders, and naturally the banks. (Wagener, 1978, p. 321)

In speeches to industrialists before 1933, Hitler presented himself as a supporter of private ownership; in other speeches, he sharply attacked capitalism – often tactical considerations played a role, and sometimes he was saying only what he knew his audience wanted to hear. One thing is certain, however: Hitler's main intention was obviously to reconcile the advantages of the principles of competition and selection (in the Social Darwinist sense) with the advantages of a state-controlled economy. While the state was to direct the economy according to the principle '*Gemeinwohl vor Eigenwohl*' ('common interest before self-interest') and to set the objectives, within this framework the principle of competition was not to be abolished, because in Hitler's view it was an important mainspring for economic development and technical progress. What was important, however, was that Hitler did not share the beliefs of economic liberalism, according to which the common good would come about as a result of the play of the various self-interests. In a speech given on 13 November 1930 he said:

In all of business, in all of life in fact, we will have to do away with the concept that the benefit to the individual is what is most important, and that from the self-interest of the individual the benefit to the whole is built up, therefore that it is the benefit to the individual which only makes up the benefit to the community at all. The opposite is true. The benefit to the community determines the benefit to the individual. The profit of the individual is only weighed out from the profit of the community.... If this principle is not accepted, then an egoism must necessarily develop which will destroy the community.²

From the mid-1930s, Hitler's reservations against state planning of the economy diminished. How important Hitler considered the question of state-controlled planning of the economy to be can be seen from the fact that in August 1936 he personally wrote a 'Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan 1936'. In this memorandum his admiration and fear of the Soviet system of planned economy were expressed: "The German economy, however, will learn to understand the new economic tasks, or it will prove itself to be incapable of continuing to survive in these modern times in which the Soviet state sets up a gigantic plan" (Hitler, 1955, p. 209).

Hitler was convinced of the superiority of the Soviet planned economy system to the capitalist economic system. This must be regarded as an essential reason why he so vehemently demanded and enforced the extension of state control of the economy in Germany as well. From 1940 at the latest, Hitler increasingly became a proponent of the state planned economy – partly because he was convinced of the superiority of the Soviet Union and its economic system.



In his monologues to his inner circle (known as ‘table talks’) on 27/28 July 1941 Hitler said that “A sensible employment of the powers of a nation can only be achieved with a planned economy from above” (Hitler, 1980b, p. 50). About two weeks later he said: “As far as the planning of the economy is concerned, we *are still very much at the beginning* and I imagine it will be something wonderfully nice to build up an encompassing German and European economic order” (Hitler, 1980b, p. 56; emphasis added). The claim to be still at the very beginning of the planning of the economy is important because it shows that Hitler was not thinking at all of a reduction of state intervention – not even for the time after the war – but, on the contrary, intended to expand the instruments of state control of the economy even further.

On 5 July 1942 Hitler expressed the opinion that if the German economy had been able so far to deal with innumerable problems

... this was also due in the end to the fact that the direction of the economy had gradually become more controlled by the state. Only thus had it been possible to enforce the overall national objective against the interests of individual groups. *Even after the war we would not be able to renounce state control of the economy*, because then every interest group would think exclusively of the fulfilment of its wishes. (Picker, 1983, p. 419; emphasis in original)

Hitler's view of the Soviet economic system also changed from scepticism to admiration. In a table talk on 22 July 1942, Hitler vehemently defended the Soviet economic system and even the so-called Stakhanov System, which it was “exceedingly stupid” to ridicule:

One has to have unqualified respect for Stalin. In his way, the guy is quite a genius! His ideals such as Genghis Khan and so forth he knows very well, and his economic planning is so all-encompassing that it is only exceeded by our own Four-Year Plan. I have no doubts whatsoever that there have been no unemployed in the USSR, as opposed to capitalist countries such as the USA. (Picker, 1983, p. 452)

Hitler's admiration for the Soviet system is also confirmed in the notes of Wilhelm Scheidt, who, as adjutant to Hitler's ‘representative for military history’ Walther Scherff and a member of the *Führer* Headquarters group, had close contact with Hitler and sometimes even took part in the ‘briefings’. In his post-war notes³ Scheidt observes that Hitler underwent a “conversion to Bolshevism”. From Hitler's remarks, he says, the following reactions could be derived: “Firstly, Hitler was enough of a materialist to be the first to recognize the enormous armament achievements of the USSR in the context of her strong, generous and all-encompassing economic organization.”

Scheidt writes that in view of such impressions Hitler had recognised and expressed “the inner relationship of his system with the so heatedly opposed Bolshevism”, whereby he had had to admit that “this system of the enemy was developed far more completely and straightforwardly. His enemy became his secret example.” The “experience of Communist Russia”, particularly the impression of the alleged superiority of the Soviet economic system, had produced a strong reaction in Hitler and the circle of his faithful: “The other economic systems appeared not to be competitive in comparison.” About the impression of the rational organisation of farming in the USSR and the “gigantic industrial plants which gave eloquent testimony despite their destruction”, Hitler, says Scheidt, had been “enthusiastic”.

The German dictator admitted during a conversation with Benito Mussolini on 22 April 1944 that he had become convinced: “Capitalism too had run its course, the nations were no



longer willing to stand for it. The victors to survive would be Fascism, and National Socialism – maybe Bolshevism in the East” (Hillgruber, 1967, pp. 422 ff.).

Hitler himself was convinced, as he emphasised in his last radio address on 30 January 1945, “that the age of unrestricted economic liberalism had outlived itself” (Domarus, 1973, p. 2196). These statements of Hitler’s in 1935–45, but particularly from the beginning of the 1940s on, show that he had become a vehement critic of the system of free enterprise and a confirmed adherent of the system of a planned, state-controlled economy.

6 | HITLER ON PRIVATE OWNERSHIP AND NATIONALISATION

But what was Hitler’s position on private property and the question of nationalisation?

The answer appears to be fairly simple. It is generally accepted that Hitler recognised private ownership of the means of production and rejected nationalisation. To leave it at that, as is generally done, would be superficial because this statement is far too undifferentiated and leaves too many questions unanswered.

As we know, Hitler’s method rarely consisted of simply radically removing an institution or organisation but rather of continuing to erode its inner substance until there was virtually nothing left of its original function or original content. For the sake of analogy only, we should note that Germany’s Weimar Constitution of 1919 was never repealed either, but that its substance and intention were eroded little by little and thereby abolished in practice.

In his early speeches Hitler advocated the nationalisation of land but in principle still came out in favour of private ownership. As becomes clear from Otto Wagener’s notes, Hitler’s sceptical position on nationalisation had to do with his Social Darwinist convictions:

As far as this goes, the whole concept of nationalisation in the form in which it has been attempted and demanded so far appears to me to be wrong, and I come to the same conclusion as Herr Wagener. We have to bring a process of selection into the matter in some way, if we want to come to a natural, healthy and also satisfying solution of the problem, a process of selection for those who should be entitled – and be at all permitted – to have a claim and the right to property and the ownership of companies. (Wagener, 1978, p. 107)

On the other hand, Hitler frequently and emphatically stated that the disposal of his property was in no way the private affair of the industrialist. On 9 October 1934, for example, he declared:

Therefore wealth in particular does not only have greater possibilities for enjoyment, but above all greater obligations. The view that the utilisation of a fortune no matter of what size is solely the private affair of the individual requires to be corrected all the more in the National Socialist state, because without the contribution of the community no individual would have been able to enjoy such an advantage. (Hitler, 1936, pp. 7 ff.)

For Hitler the formal maintenance of private ownership was not important. When the state has the unrestricted right to determine the decisions of the owners of the means of production,



then the formal legal institution of private ownership no longer means very much. This is what Pollock, who I cited before, is saying when he establishes a “destruction of all of the essential traits of private ownership, saving one exception” (Pollock, 1981, p. 113). The moment the owners of the means of production can no longer freely decide about the content, timing and size of their investments, essential characteristics of private ownership have been abolished, even if the formal guarantee of private ownership still remains.

In his table talk on 3 September 1942, Hitler said that land was “national property, and in the end only given to the individual as a loan” (Hitler, 1980b, p. 385). Hitler recognised private ownership only insofar as it is used according to the principle ‘common benefit ahead of private benefit’, which means, concretely, insofar as it is used within the framework of the objectives set by the state. For Hitler the principle of ‘*Gemeinwohl vor Eigenwohl*’ means that, if it is necessary in the common interest, the state has the right at all times to decide on the way, the extent and the time private ownership is used, and the common interest is, of course, defined by the state.

In May 1937 Hitler declared:

I tell German industry for example, ‘You have to produce such and such now’. I then return to this in the Four-Year Plan. If German industry were to answer me, ‘We are not able to’, then I would say to it, ‘Fine, then I will take that over myself, but it must be done’. But if industry tells me, ‘We will do that’, then I am very glad that I do not need to take that on. (von Kotze & Krausnick, 1966, pp. 199 ff.)

That such statements by Hitler were not empty threats became clear to the industrialists no later than on 23 July 1937, when the leading National Socialist Hermann Göring announced the formation of the Ore Mining and Iron Smelting Company Hermann Göring. The development, which had begun with Hitler’s and Göring’s repeated threats, finally led to the creation of the *Reichswerke Hermann Göring*, which by 1940 employed 600,000 people. The plant in Salzgitter eventually became the largest in Europe. With this, the National Socialist state had shown that its oft-proclaimed ‘primacy of politics’ was deadly serious, and that it would not hesitate to become active itself and to build up state-controlled enterprises in areas where private industry resisted the execution of state directives. On the occasion of a conversation on 14 February 1942 with Joseph Goebbels about the problem of increasing production, Hitler said: “... here we have to proceed rigorously, that the whole production process has to be re-examined, and that the industrialists who do not want to submit to the directives we issue, will have to lose their plants without any regard to whether they will then be ruined economically” (Goebbels, 1948, p. 86).

The National Socialists intended to expand the planned economy for the period after the war, as we know from many of Hitler’s remarks. As already mentioned, Hitler increasingly admired the Soviet economic system. And this did not fail to affect his views on the question of private property. “If Stalin had continued to work for another ten to fifteen years”, Hitler said in a monologue in the Führer headquarters in August 1942,

Soviet Russia would have become the most powerful nation on earth, 150, 200, 300 years may go by, that is such a unique phenomenon! That the general standard of living rose, there can be no doubt. The people did not suffer from hunger. Taking everything together we have to say: They built factories here where two years ago there was nothing but forgotten villages, factories which are as big as the Hermann Göring Works. (Hitler, 1980b, p. 366)

On several occasions the dictator mentioned to his closest associates that it was necessary to nationalise the large joint-stock companies, the energy industry and all other branches of the economy that produced ‘essential raw materials’ (e.g. the iron industry). Of course, the war was not the right environment in which to implement such radical nationalisations. Hitler and the National Socialists were well aware of this, and in any case they had been making every effort to allay the nationalisation fears of the country’s business community. Thus, a memo from Heinrich Himmler, head of the National Socialist *Schutzstaffel* (SS) in October 1942 states that “during the war” a fundamental change of Germany’s capitalistic economy would not be possible. Anyone who “fought” against this would provoke a “witch-hunt” against himself (Himmler, cited in Georg, 1963, p. 146). In a report prepared by an SS *Hauptsturmführer* in July 1944, the question “Why does the SS engage in business activities?” was answered as follows:

This question was raised specifically by circles who think purely in terms of capitalism and who do not like to see companies developing which are public, or at least of a public character. The age of the liberal system of business demanded the primacy of business, in other words business comes first, and then the state. As opposed to this, National Socialism takes the position: the state directs the economy, the state is not there for business, business is there for the state. (Cited in Georg, 1963, p. 145)

This was how Hitler and the National Socialists saw the very essence of the economic system they had established, but it was also how astute observers such as Friedrich Pollock and Ludwig von Mises saw it.

NOTES

This article is largely based on the findings of my dissertation on the same subject, an expanded edition of which was published in 2022 under the title *Hitler’s National Socialism*. Quotations from Hitler’s speeches and notes have been translated from the original German into English by Helmut Bogler. In an effort to retain the flavour of Hitler’s original words, the translator has stayed as close to them as possible, including Hitler’s sometimes questionable grammar and terminology.

¹ The letter is included in the *New York Times* online archive at https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1942/06/21/105170808.html?pdf_redirect=true&site=false

² Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL Streicher 126, Blatt 16.

³ Wilhelm Scheidt, Nachkriegsaufzeichnungen und Aufsätze, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich.

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