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## HITLER'S TWENTY FIVE POINT PROGRAM:

### AN EXERCISE IN PROPAGANDA BEFORE *MEIN KAMPF*

THIRTY YEARS AGO, Kenneth Burke wrote in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" that *Mein Kampf* was "the testament of a man who swung a great people into his wake". Burke suggested that we not only study *Mein Kampf* to discover the political moves of the Nazi dictator, but also "to discover what kind of 'medicine' this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America."<sup>1</sup> Burke then went on to analyze *Mein Kampf*, its symbolism, and its appeals.

Years before the publication of *Mein Kampf*, there was another document presented by Hitler to the German people, a document which, like *Mein Kampf*, had a rhetorical function and which acted as a symbol of persuasion. This rhetorical elixir, the Twenty Five Point Program, was just one more of the devices used by Hitler to lead the German people into the Nazi phantasmagoria; the function of the Program was similar to the persuasive function of the swastika, eagle, fire, blood, marching, heroes, and the numerous other symbols of persuasion integral to Nazi propaganda.

On February 24, 1920, the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* held its first large mass meeting in the Munich Hofbrauhaus Festsaal into which almost two thousand people were crowded. After the principal speaker of the evening completed his address, Adolf Hitler, a six-month member of the Party, took his place on the platform to present his views to the listeners, many of whom had never before seen or heard of him. As he began his speech, Hitler's words were met with a "hail of shouts" and "violent clashes in the hall"; order was restored and "after an hour the applause slowly began to drown out the screaming and shouting." Then Hitler began a point-by-point presentation of his Twenty Five Point Program for the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* which in April, 1920, became the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, the Nazi Party. When he asked his audience to pronounce judgment on each point as he presented it, "one after another was accepted with steadily mounting joy, unanimously and again unanimously and when the last thesis had found its way to the heart

of the masses, there stood before me", wrote Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, "a hall full of people united by a conviction, a new faith, a new will". With this presentation, said Hitler, "a fire was kindled from whose flame one day the sword must come which would regain freedom for the Germanic Siegfried and life for the German nation."<sup>2</sup> The rhetorical function of the Program was recognized by Hitler when he wrote that the Twenty Five Points were devised "to give, primarily to the man of the people, a rough picture of the movement's aims. They are in a sense a political creed, which on the one hand recruits for the movement and on the other is suited to unite and weld together by a commonly recognized obligation those who have been recruited."<sup>2</sup>

On May 22, 1926, the Twenty Five Points were prefaced with the announcement that the leaders of the movement had no intention of ever creating new aims once the announced aims were achieved. The Program was unalterable; come what may, the Twenty Five Point Program was "unshakeable", subject to no discussion or change. The preface to the Twenty Five Points read: "The Programme of the German Workers' Party is a *Zeit-Programme*. The leaders have no intention once the aims announced in it have been achieved, of setting up new ones merely to increase the discontent of the masses artificially and so insure the continued existence of the Party."<sup>3</sup> It was Hitler's contention that even if the Program turned out to be not in keeping with reality it should remain unchanged, "for how shall we fill people with blind faith in the correctness of a doctrine, if we ourselves spread uncertainty and doubt by constant changes in its outward structure?"<sup>2</sup>

To demonstrate the persuasive power and benefits of an "unalterable" Program, Hitler turned to the Catholic Church for illustration. He was impressed with the Church's practice of "rigidly holding to dogmas once established, for it is only such dogmas which lend to the whole body the character of a faith." As Hitler explained it, such dogmatism is necessary in a party program, for as soon as the program is subject to discussion and "as soon as a single point is deprived of its dogmatic, creedlike formulation," it "will not automatically yield a new, better, and above all unified, formulation, but will far sooner lead to endless debates and a general confusion."<sup>2</sup> Many years after he had written the above in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler commented that the "Catholic Church is a model above all in its uncommonly clever tactics and its knowledge of human nature, and in its wise policy of taking account of human weakness in its guidance of the faithful. I have followed it in giving our party program the character of unalterable finality, like the Creed. The Church has never allowed the Creed to be interfered with."<sup>4</sup>

The unalterable character of the Twenty Five Points and the dogmatic nature of the demands in the Program appealed to the *Volk*-crowd mentality which Hitler attempted to create and sustain. As viewed by the Nazis, the German *Volk* was respectful of force, intellectually disinterested, desirous of simplicity, susceptible to emotional contagion, moved by exaggeration, impressed less by knowledge than by fanaticism.<sup>5</sup> The dogmatism, simplicity, and exaggeration of the Twenty Five Points appealed to the mentality which no longer was interested in fine distinctions and intellectually developed rational arguments. To the uncertain, anxiety-ridden German of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Twenty Five Points reflected neither doubt nor uncertainty. The Twenty Five Points were uncompromising and absolute and hence fitted in with the other Nazi symbols of persuasion which were used to create, sustain, and attract the crowd mentality; the "strength" of the Program, its unalterable finality, jibed with the strength of sword and fire, blood and earth, martyrs and marching.

The presentation of the Program to the German people, was, as Hitler indicated, less for doctrinal elaboration and justification than for symbolic impact. The Program was just one more symbol of persuasion around which the German *Volk* could rally and as a symbol the political doctrine and meaning were not really important. The Twenty Five Points, as with many another historical document or program, may have contained principles that were out-moded, promises that may have been contradictory, or declarations that were meaningless. Whether the Twenty Five Points reflected reality was for persuasive purposes irrelevant to the mentality which succumbed to the Nazi persuasion. The persuasive effectiveness of dogma does not lie in its consistency with reality.

The Nazis saw the German *Volk* as a people persuaded and moved by sentimentality, force, fanaticism, anti-intellectualism, and action. "If such is the nature of the common man", Hans Morgenthau has written, "a political philosophy, instead of being a rational system appealing to reason, becomes an instrument, cleverly and unscrupulously managed by the elite, for molding mind and will of the masses. Ideas become truly weapons, that is, weapons of propaganda, and the standard to which they must comply is no longer truth but effectiveness. It, then, is quite irrelevant whether a political idea is true, precise, and consistent with others."<sup>6</sup> What matter if the Twenty Five Point Program was over-simplified? What matter if the Twenty Five Points were not consistent? Charles E. Merriam's observations about the use of stories, history, and heroes as persuasive symbols apply equally to the Nazi Party Pro-

gram: "If it [the story] does not embody the literal truth, it may express the ambitions of the group and its dream picture of itself in its best moments. And this logic may lead us on until criticism of the story becomes an evidence not of intelligence but of unpatriotic attitude."<sup>7</sup> Those non-Nazis or anti-Nazis who attempted to discredit the whole National Socialist Program by pointing out the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the various points were simply adding fuel to the fire. The *Volk*-crowd was not interested in listening to the reasoning and argument of the discredited Weimar parliamentarians and intellectuals who attacked the Nazi Program. What the *Volk* wanted, Hitler observed, was fanaticism and action, not discussion and debate. The Twenty Five Points constituted a fanatic program, an action program. The leaders of the Nazi movement swore that they would "fight ruthlessly for the foregoing demands [of the Program] and defend them, if necessary, with the sacrifice of their lives." Pointing out to the *Volk*-crowd the inconsistencies and over-simplifications of the Program was much like pointing out to them the Nazi lies and distortions. In the words of Henry M. Pachter, "pounding on the irresponsibility of Nazi propaganda, they [the democratic counter-propagandists] overlooked the fact that it was successful exactly because it was irresponsible; trying to give the Nazis the lie, they failed to see that the Nazis never told a lie which their followers did not like to hear. Debunking such lies was like taking a dangerous toy away from a child; it only made the debunker more hateable. . . ."<sup>8</sup> As Grete de Francesco has pointed out so well in *The Power of the Charlatan*, a study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century charlatans, against the alchemists and quacks the sober and learned exposition of scientists and physicians avails little: "The immune do not need it, for even without warnings from the expert they can look behind the mountebank's mask. And the credulous masses of 'believers' are often not convinced by the unveiling of their wonder worker, their 'Eternal Apollo'—his face, even without disguise, appears fascinating. They *want* to believe, and would only hate the argumentative expert who tried to injure the object of their faith."<sup>9</sup>

Like all the other Nazi symbols of persuasion, the Twenty Five Point Program possessed "strength and power". The Program belonged to history, said Hitler, and "if anything should be changed, it's for life to take the initiative."<sup>10</sup> A Program which would not change for life, but demanded that life itself must change to fit the Program appealed, as did the strength of the *Blutfahne*, *der Fuehrer*, the swastika, the *Heil* salute, the goose-stepping, blood, fire, and sword, to a *Volk* who came to believe that this strength would deliver them from humiliation, servitude, and indecision. The Nazi Party Program

did not plead, it did not ask. The Twenty Five Points demanded! "We demand the union of all Germans to form a Great Germany on the basis of the right of self-determination of nations. We demand equality of rights for the German people in its dealings with other nations, and abolition of the Peace Treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain. We demand land and territory for the nourishment of our people and for settling our surplus population. We demand that the State shall make it its first duty to promote the industry and livelihood of citizens of the State. We demand ruthless confiscation of all war profiteering. We demand nationalization of all businesses which have been up to the present time formed into trusts. We demand that the profits from wholesale trade shall be shared out. We demand. . . ."

This Program of strength and action appeared to promise something to the various segments of the German population whose mental condition invited a Program which promised to bring to the German people stability, honour, and power. The attraction to Hitler's Program by so many Germans was akin to the attraction of so many people in earlier centuries to the promises of the charlatans; where the churchmen of earlier centuries failed to bring stability, the politicians of the 1920s and early 1930s failed to answer the economic and psychological needs. The charlatan entered to fill the void. Grete de Francesco has written that "the religious wars in the seventeenth century, following the upheaval of the Reformation, had profoundly shaken the spiritual security of Europe. Scourged by plague as well as war, often driven from hearth and home, the people could not longer pursue old patterns of life; the breakdown of established habits brought a new liability in both ideas and emotions." In such times of need, continues de Francesco, "when men must bear heavy burdens of suffering not caused by obvious faults of their own and therefore incomprehensible to them, they tend to herd together around any leader who promises crumbs of comfort."<sup>9</sup> For the German patriots and nationalists who could not forget their wartime defeats and humiliations (and Hitler would not let them forget) the Twenty Five Points promised honour and pride: the German people will have equal rights with those of other nations; humiliating treaties will be abrogated; only those of German blood could be considered Germans and only Germans can be citizens. For that segment of the population which was suffering economically, the Twenty Five Points appeared to promise security and stability: a sound middle class will be created and maintained and the large stores will be communalized immediately and rented cheaply to small tradespeople; traitors, usurers, and profiteers are to be punished; all unearned incomes will be abolished, breaking the bondage of interest.

To the Germans who might be politically oriented, the Program appeared to promise escape from the feuding and instability of the parliamentary system of government: "We oppose the corrupt Parliamentary custom of the State of filling posts merely with a view to Party considerations and without reference to character and capacity"; Point 25: "That all the foregoing requirements may be realized we demand the creation of a strong central power of the Reich. Unconditional authority of the politically central Parliament over the entire Reich and its organization in general."

The attempt to appeal to all segments of the German population led to some inconsistencies in the Twenty Five Point Program. On the one hand, Hitler seemed to be advocating socialism, yet on the other hand he was espousing free enterprise. Years after the Program was first announced, Otto Strasser declared to Hitler that the Party Program contained direct reference to the "socialization" of businesses and that if he "intended to maintain the capitalist system he had no right to talk of Socialism." Hitler replied to Strasser: "The term Socialism in itself is unfortunate (*schlecht*), but it is essential to realize that it does not mean that these businesses *must* be socialized, it means only that they can be socialized if they offend against the interests of the nation."<sup>11</sup> On the one hand the Program expounded freedom; on the other hand it demanded "the legal prosecution of all tendencies in art and literature of a kind likely to disintegrate our life as a nation. . . ." Hitler had some trouble with Point 17 which read: "We demand a land-reform suitable to our national requirements, the passing of a law for the confiscation without compensation of land for communal purposes, the abolition of interest on mortgages, and prohibition of all speculation in land." On April 13, 1928, Hitler found it necessary to append his "unalterable" Program to "reply to the false interpretations on the part of our opponents of Point 17 of the Programme of the NSDAP. Since the NSDAP admits the principle of private property, it is obvious that the expression 'confiscation without compensation' refers merely to the creation of possible legal means of confiscating, when necessary, land illegally acquired, or not administered in accordance with the national welfare. It is therefore directed in the first instance against the Jewish companies which speculate in land." In regard to the inconsistencies in the Nazi "political philosophy", Hans Morgenthau has stated: "Naziism does not appeal to any social group in particular, but to certain elements in all groups. Since the conditions, interests, and aspirations of these groups are largely contradictory, a political doctrine, which intends to appeal to all of them at the same time, cannot fail to be itself incoherent and contradictory."<sup>6</sup>

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the one-sidedness and contradictions in the Nazi persuasion did not bother the crowd mentality.<sup>5</sup> "In groups", writes Freud, "the most contradictory ideas can exist side by side and tolerate each other, without conflict arising from the logical contradictions between them."<sup>12</sup> Hence, the Jew was portrayed by the Nazis as both a "disgusting democrat" and the "bloodsucking plutocrat." The Jew was condemned for his *rationalismus* and at the same time was portrayed as the most powerful of all the secret-society organizers. On the one hand the Jew takes part in ritualistic murders and on the other hand he is the "bloodless intellectual." According to the "racial philosophers," the Jew's path goes across corpses and yet he is the international pacifist. He is disdained because he adjusts to everything and he is detested because he is so closely tied to his own kind." There appeared in Nazi speeches and literature such strange creatures as "Jewish-Marxist-Capitalists" and "Pacifist-Jewish-Marxists".<sup>13</sup>

As a political document setting forth the aims of the movement, the Twenty Five Point Program lacked the style, intellectuality, and argument found in such documents as the *Communist Manifesto* or *The Declaration of Independence*. Reasoned discourse simply had no place in the system of Nazi persuasion. An intellectualized program supported with rational arguments would have been incongruous amid a persuasion relying on "blood, fire, and sword", on "miracles" and "resurrection", on ritual, ceremony, sentimentality, and force. With Hitler's type of leadership a political program was really beside the point; he promised the German people action, not a political program. As a charismatic leader he needed no codes, statutes, or programs based on an intellectually constructed consistent political philosophy. "The bases for my programme", said Hitler, "are blood, fire, and personality."<sup>11</sup> The Nazi leader's authority and Weltanschauung were not to be found in earthly documents and statutes; his was the will of God. National Socialist Karl Kindt wrote: "God's call seeks our people. And there is amongst us one who listens for us all. He listens to the advice which the World Spirit gives at this moment to the German nation, and he passes it on to the millions who hang on to his every word."<sup>14</sup> It was amid this kind of mumbo-jumbo that the Twenty Five Point Program was placed and the Program was just one more of the various persuasive devices used by the Nazis to lead the German people from their chaotic, honourless, lonely real world into the world of phantasmagoria, making their "escape from freedom".

## NOTES

1. Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'", *The Southern Review*, V (Summer, 1939), p. 1.
2. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, 1962), pp. 369-370, 458, 459.
3. Gottfried Feder, *Das Programm der N.S.D.A.P. und seine weltanschaulichen Grundgedanken* (Muenchen, 1932), pp. 19-22.
4. Hermann Rauschning, *Voice of Destruction* (New York, 1940), p. 239.
5. Haig Bosmajian, "Nazi Persuasion and the Crowd Mentality," *Western Speech*, XXIX (Spring 1965), pp. 69-70, 73.
6. Hans Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 228, 227.
7. Charles E. Merriam, "Political Power", *The Study of Power* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), p. 108.
8. Henry M. Pachter, "National Socialist and Fascist Propaganda for the Conquest of Power", *The Third Reich* (London, 1955), p. 719.
9. Grete de Francesco, *The Power of the Charlatan* (New Haven, 1939), pp. 275, 83.
10. Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Secret Conversations 1941-1944*, trans. and ed. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (New York, 1953), p. 184.
11. Adolf Hitler, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, trans. and ed. Norman H. Baynes (London, 1942), II, 111-112, 1751.
12. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960), p. 15.
13. See Werner Betz, "The National-Socialist Vocabulary", *The Third Reich* (London, 1955); also, Haig Bosmajian, "The Magic Word in Nazi Persuasion," *ETC.* XXIII (March, 1966).
14. Karl Kindt, *Der Fuehrer als Redner* (Hamburg, 1934), p. 5.