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The Hitler Virus Probed Clinically

By Robert H. Estabrook

ST. LEGIER, Switzerland—Within the next few months will occur several anniversaries of unusual interest to persons concerned with understanding the Nazi phenomenon in Germany. June 30 will be the 30th anniversary of the distorted putsch that helped put Adolf Hitler (who would have been 75 years old this April 20) into virtually absolute power. July 20 will be the 20th anniversary of the last attempt of the German generals to redeem their honor in the unsuccessful plot against Hitler.

A man uniquely qualified to relate these events is Hans-Bernd Gisevius, who has just published a monumental definitive biography of Hitler. Gisevius, who was the contact in German secret intelligence with Allen Dulles and the American Office of Strategic Services during World War II, claims to be the sole surviving witness of both the 1934 and 1944 plots from the inside. Now 59, he lives here quietly with his wife.

Somewhat to Gisevius' surprise, the biography has been an instant success in Germany, with many favorable reviews. Seemingly it enables some readers for the first time to look at the Fuehrer and the Nazi nightmare with detachment—possibly because earlier works such as those by William L. Shirer and J. W. Wheeler-Bennett were of foreign origin. The book is to be published in England shortly and in the United States later this year.

WHAT Gisevius aimed to do was to let Hitler tell his own story, and thereby break down the mythology about super-human attributes. He shows Hitler as a master opportunist, by no means an ignoramus in science and allied fields, but principally a genius at creating turbulence. Hitler then capitalized on chaos, often without predetermined strategy but with strange intuition.

Part of the reason why Hitler was able to hypnotize the German people, Gisevius says, was that he wrapped every evil project in an apparently good explanation. Thus persons who otherwise might have contested him would remark of Hitler's condemnation of the Versailles Treaty or some such gesture:

"On that point he's right." Gisevius recalls the pathetic comment of the ailing President Paul von Hindenburg after Hitler became chancellor: "We hired him."

Another reason for Hitler's success, according to Gisevius, is that neither German nor world opposition to him could unite in time. There was an opportunity in 1934. The army detested Hitler but was seduced by his offer to let it displace the rowdy brownshirts of Ernst Roehm. After Hitler used Roehm's alleged plot against him to catapult himself into the presidency, army officers were manacled by their oath of allegiance which many followed with absurd obedience to the ghastly finale.

Gisevius himself is as fascinating a study as his book. He completed his education just as Hitler was consolidating power. Concluding that only the army or the secret police could overthrow Hitler, he explains, he decided to combat the evil from the inside. So he joined the secret police and gradually became a confidant of the intelligence chief, Admiral Canaris.

A GREAT hulk of a man nearly 6 feet 5, Gisevius understood that disguise was impossible in his double-agent's role. So he deliberately cultivated the reputation of being a bit of an oddball with unorthodox views. His pose as a secret Gestapo protege of Heinrich Himmler helped him to establish contact with Dulles in Switzerland in 1941.

After the 1944 plot against Hitler Gisevius was in extreme danger. He hid for six months in Berlin, escaping finally to Switzerland with a forged passport which OSS helped him obtain. Later he was a witness at the Nuremberg trials, wrote a book, *To the Bitter End*, and spent some time in the United States before returning to Berlin.

For 10 years, Gisevius says, he lived in a sort of purgatory because many Germans doubted his role and resented his giving so much information in his post-war book and at Nuremberg. Thus the acclaim of the Hitler biography is doubly satisfying to him because it is a personal vindication as well as evidence that the Nazi disease can be discussed clinically.

The lesson, certainly, is the old one of the cancerous effect of mere passive response to evil. Potential Hitlers still infest the world, and the German experience with the virus is instructive for others. Perhaps the book also will help provide a release for those Germans whose efforts to become good democrats have been haunted by guilt about the past.

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