

ACTIVITY

- 1 What role did Hitler play in decision-making?
- 2 What were the results of the absence of formal decision-making?
- 3 What different reasons are given in Sources 11.7 and 11.9 for Hitler's unwillingness to take decisions?

How were decisions taken in Nazi Germany?

A surprising picture emerges when one examines how decisions were actually taken in Nazi Germany. Hitler acted as a kind of absolute monarch, surrounded by officials competing with each other to implement the leader's wishes. Thus Hitler provided the overall vision, which was then interpreted and turned into detailed policies by those around him. Yet he was remarkably uninvolved in actual decision-making and administrative matters. Most decisions in Nazi Germany were not made by Hitler, even though it was his will that was being implemented. The Führer system meant that there was no need for a formal power or decision-making structure; Hitler's will was law.

Hitler's own work style was haphazard, and reflected his unbureaucratic approach. He often watched films well into the night, went to bed at 2.50 a.m. and got up late. He spent far more time making rambling monologues (speeches) to his entourage (attendants/followers) than in discussing detailed policy. Furthermore, he was often away from the capital Berlin, a city he disliked. He preferred his mountain retreat, the Berghof, where he had lived from 1928 onwards. From 1938 he withdrew even more, and concentrated on foreign policy. After 1941, with few successes to announce, Hitler was seen far less in public.

The historian Peterson has provided a striking description of how the Third Reich operated at the top:

SOURCE 11.6 Edward Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler's Power*, 1969, pp. 432, 446

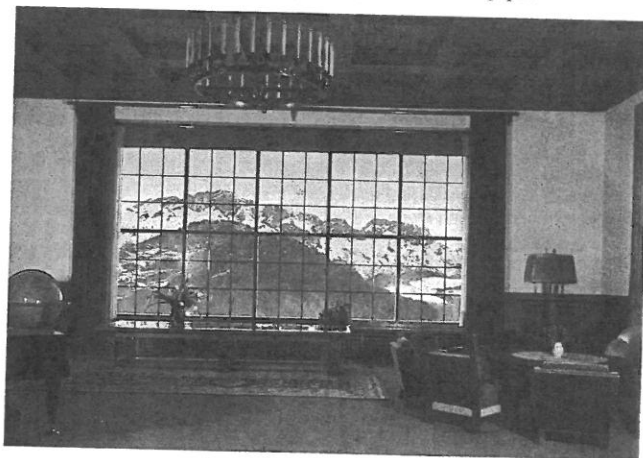
This view of Hitler – the man who does not decide – would help explain the eternal confusion of the men working for him, a literal anthill of aspiring and fearing people trying to please the 'great one' or escape his wrath or to avoid notice altogether, and never quite sure ... what he wanted them to do after they had said 'Heil Hitler' ... The result was the division of domination into thousands of little empires of ambitious men, domains that were largely unchecked by law [for this] had been replaced by Hitler's will, which was largely a mirage.

If a minister ordered something to happen it could just be on the basis of Hitler's will; it was thus obeyed. If, as often happened, there was disagreement amongst the people at the top, then whoever managed actually to get (or to convince the others that he had!) Hitler's direct approval won. Many of Hitler's decisions amounted to a quick grunt of approval to a summary recommendation from State Secretary Hans Lammers who then conveyed the decision back to those involved. Much of this was done orally rather than on paper.

The Berghof, Hitler's villa on the Obersalzberg, was built with the profits of *Mein Kampf*. After the Nazis came to power, it was developed into an elaborate complex, with twelve underground storeys and one above ground. Designed by Hitler, it reflected his passion for huge rooms, and was built by slave labour. It had five rings of fortifications, and was defended by 20,000 troops.

Hitler preferred to live at the Berghof, rather than the Chancellery in Berlin. Important conferences were held there, including his meeting with Chancellor Schuschnigg of Austria in February 1938 (see pages 387–9) and with Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, in September 1938 (see page 391).

The Berghof was destroyed in an Allied air raid in April 1945. The ruins were levelled in 1952 and trees planted on the site. Today, a lift cut into the rock face takes visitors to Hitler's mountain-top retreat, the 'Eagle's Nest', which is now a teahouse



The Chancellery in Berlin illustrates much about how the Third Reich operated. In 1938 Hitler's massive new building was completed, symbolising power and order. Yet inside there was chaos. At one stage there were five Chancellery offices (Reich Chancellery under Hans Lammers; Chancellery of the Führer under Philipp Bouhler; Presidential Chancellery under Otto Meissner; Office of Hitler's personal adjutant under Wilhelm Brückner; Office of the Führer's Deputy under Martin Bormann), all claiming to represent Hitler.

Hitler was generally preoccupied with foreign affairs, especially during the war, or with building projects, and left his fellow ministers and plenipotentiaries to make decisions. The rivalry of different groups, without formal controls, trying to implement Hitler's will led to a growing lawlessness and brutality. This radicalisation culminated in the Holocaust.

In his book *Hitler 1889–1936. Hubris* (pp. 529–30), Kershaw describes the development of the 'System' between 1934 and 1938 as follows: 'One feature of this process was the fragmentation of government as Hitler's form of personalised rule distorted the machinery of administration and called into being a panoply [array] of overlapping and competing agencies dependent in differing ways upon the "will of the Führer". At the same time, the racial and expansionist goals at the heart of Hitler's own WELTANSCHAUNG began in these early years gradually to come more sharply into focus, though by no means as a direct consequence of Hitler's own actions.' Chart 11B on page 188 tries to show these 'overlapping and competing agencies' in diagrammatic form.

SOURCE 11.7 From *Twelve Years with Hitler*, the memoirs of Otto Dietrich, Hitler's Press Chief, published in 1955

In the twelve years of his rule in Germany Hitler produced the biggest confusion in government that has ever existed in a civilised state. During his period of government, he removed from the organisation of the state all clarity of leadership and produced a completely opaque network of competences. It was not all laziness or an excessive degree of tolerance which led the otherwise so energetic and forceful Hitler to tolerate this real witch's cauldron of struggles for position and conflicts over competence. It was intentional. With this technique he systematically disorganised the upper echelons [levels] of the Reich leadership in order to develop and further the authority of his own will until it became a despotic tyranny.

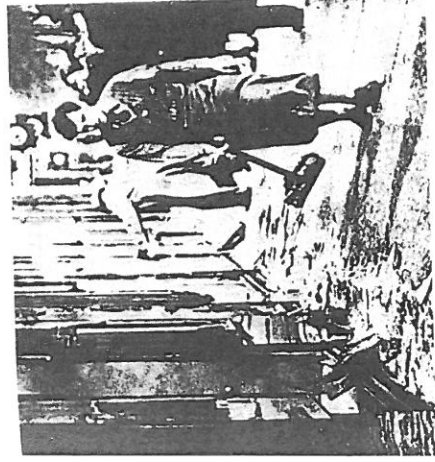
SOURCE 11.8 Werner Willikens, State Secretary in the Food Ministry, in a speech in February 1934

Everyone who has the opportunity to observe it knows that the Führer can hardly dictate from above everything he intends to realise sooner or later. On the contrary, up till now everyone with a post in the new Germany has worked best when he has, so to speak, worked towards the Führer ... in fact, it is the duty of everybody to try to work towards the Führer along the lines he would wish. Anyone who makes mistakes will notice it soon enough.

But anyone who really works towards the Führer along his lines and towards his goals will certainly both now and in the future one day have the finest reward in the form of the sudden legal confirmation of his work.

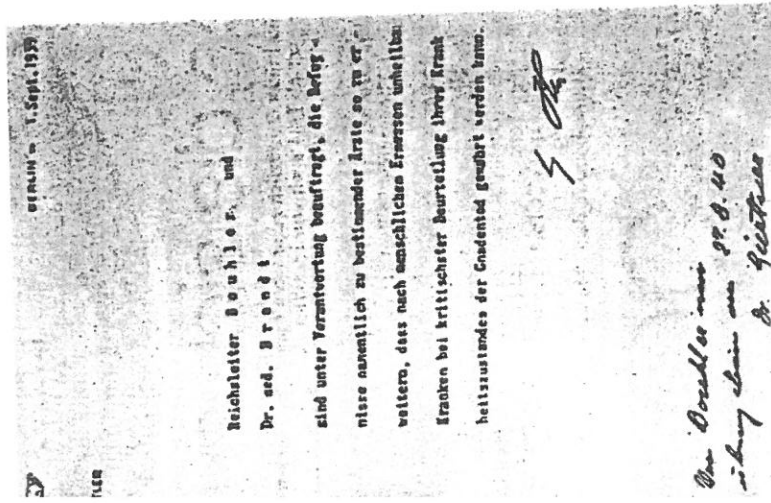
SOURCE 11.9 Fritz Wiedemann, one of Hitler's adjutants in *Der Mann, der Feldherr Werden Wolte* (The man the soldier wanted to be), 1964, p. 69

Hitler normally appeared shortly before lunch, quickly read through Reich Press Chief Dietrich's press cuttings, and then went into lunch. So it became more and more difficult for Lammers and Meissner to get him to make decisions which he alone could make as head of state ... He disliked the study of documents. I have sometimes secured decisions from him, even ones about important matters, without his ever asking to see the relevant files. He took the view that many things sorted themselves out on their own if one did not interfere.



3 up after Kristallnacht

CE 11.10 Hitler's note to Bouhler and Brandt sing them to carry out 'mercy killings'. The note Reichsleiter [Reich leader] Bouhler and Dr med. are charged with the responsibility to extend vers of specific doctors in such a way that, after st careful assessment of their condition, those g from illness deemed to be incurable may be l a mercy death.' The note was written in ar 1939 but backdated to 1 September



Decision-making in Nazi Germany: four examples

1 The 1935 Nuremberg Laws (see also Chapter 18) Hitler's anti-semitism was well known, but apart from some actions in 1935 there had not been many moves against the Jews. By 1935 there were strong pressures from within the party – especially from the *Gauleiter*, reflecting pressure from below – to enact the party's 1920 programme and remove Jews from citizenship. In 1935 there was a wave of SA attacks on Jews. Other leading officials saw this as distasteful, and wanted the situation regularised. Schacht, for example, was worried about the effects of such action on exports. So there was pressure for legislation to satisfy two groups, radicals and moderates. Hitler eventually intervened. At the last minute he switched his Nuremberg speech from foreign policy (mainly about Abyssinia) to anti-Jewish legislation, leading to the so-called Nuremberg Laws (see pages 342–5). These were written overnight by civil servants and passed by the Reichstag meeting at Nuremberg. In 1936 there was even worse street violence than in 1935; but Hitler was concerned about the approaching Olympics, and ordered it to be stopped, which it was.

2 Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass or Crystal Night) 1938

In 1938 there was again growing anti-semitic action on the streets. Goebbels, in particular, fired it up in Berlin. There was also violence in Hesse and Magdeburg. On 8 November the assassination of a Nazi official in Paris by a Jew was used to extend the action. The next day, at the Munich Putsch anniversary meeting, Goebbels suggested to Hitler that in the wake of such anti-semitic demonstrations they should encourage such measures; Hitler gave his approval, and that night there was the wave of anti-Jewish violence known as *Kristallnacht*. See page 342 and Chapter 18 for Hitler's role in the Final Solution.

3 Euthanasia (see also Chapter 18)

It was fairly widely known that Hitler favoured the removal of what he saw as feeble, inferior people in order to foster the German master race. In 1938 a father wrote to Hitler requesting that his ill son be put out of his misery. This letter was just one of hundreds of personal petitions Germans sent to their leader every week, most of which were dealt with by his subordinates. Chancellery Secretary Philipp Bouhler, seeing the adoption of this proposal as an opportunity to increase his own power, got Hitler's verbal permission. Through the Party Chancellery, Hitler's personal physician, Dr Karl Brandt, sent out a letter to doctors inviting nominations for *EUTHANASIA*. Without any pressure, 60,000 were nominated. However, doctors asked for clear authorisation. Unusually, Hitler wrote a few lines authorising Bouhler to organise it (see Source 11.10). This is the only existing document signed by Hitler authorising killing, although since it was simply a note the process was still technically illegal because it was not authorised in a law. Under the code name 'Aktion T4', 100,000 were killed over the next three years. In 1941, following Bishop Galen's public protest (see page 538), the programme was formally suspended, but it was soon resumed.

4 Horse racing

In 1943 Goebbels, responding to workers' complaints, sought a directive from Hitler to ban horse racing. Hitler issued a series of conflicting directives, responding to different local situations, and after five months of confusion it was decided to leave the matter to local *Gauleiter*.