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Lance Corporal Adolf Hitler on the Western Front, 1914-1918

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The following is excerpted from the forthcoming *Hitler to Power*, to be published by Houghton Mifflin. The book traces Hitler's early life, with emphasis upon his experiences during the First World War, before detailing his activities from 1919, when he entered political life, until 30 January 1933, when he became chancellor of Germany. The pages immediately before this excerpt deal with his prewar existence in Vienna, during which he lived in public institutions for homeless men while eking out a living as a painter of postcards and illustrations used by framemakers who found that their frames sold more readily when there were pictures in them. The "selective self-instruction" referred to was Hitler's reading during this period, which included much time spent absorbing the contents of the racist sheets and pamphlets so readily available in the Vienna of that era.

I

These six years of institutionalized failure and selective self-instruction led to the cruelest of examinations, the trench warfare of 1914-1918. Its outbreak found Hitler living in Munich, to which he had moved in 1913 to escape conscription into the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an army serving "the Habsburg regime which I so hated," a monarchy that Hitler saw as a "sorry dynasty" reigning over a multilingual "impossible state" that was bent upon "the gradual Slavization of the German element" within it.¹

In contrast to his feelings about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hitler volunteered on the day that Germany declared war on France, petitioning to be allowed to serve in the Bavarian forces although he was an Austrian citizen. He received just eight weeks of training before being sent to the Western Front as a rifleman in
the 16th Bavarian Infantry Reserve Regiment, also known as the Regiment List, for its commander, Colonel Wilhelm von List. Although Hitler, like so many young men on both sides, was greatly enthusiastic about going off to what was at first seen as a noble adventure, his account of his trip to the front in a troop train differs from that of Private Ignaz Westenkirchner, who was destined to spend the war close to him. "Adolf Hitler told his comrades that he was disappointed in the Rhine as a river. The small cities on both sides of the river seemed to be for him unimportant compared with the cities on the Danube in Austria, without the marks of an old culture. He was enthusiastic only when we stopped at Boppard to receive new rations."2

Hitler's version was this:

For the first time I saw the Rhine as we rode westward along its quiet waters to defend it, the German stream of streams, from the old enemy. When through the tender veil of the early morning mist the Niederwald Monument gleamed down upon us in the gentle first rays of the sun, the old "Watch on the Rhine" roared out of the endless transport train into the morning sky, and I felt as though my heart would burst.3

At twenty-five, Private Adolf Hitler was headed for Ypres, a town near the North Sea in the part of Belgium known as West Flanders. The slaughter starting there would in time leave Ypres within a vast ring of forty cemeteries. As for how Hitler might stand the rigors of the front, Hans Mend, an enlisted man who was responsible for some of his brief training, asked himself the first time he saw Private Hitler, "What is this slender man going to do, if he has to carry a pack on active service?" Mend was not the first to have these doubts; when the Austrian military authorities had finally caught up to Hitler six months before the war and ordered him to come from Munich to Salzburg for a physical examination, Hitler was rejected with the notation, "Too weak for armed or auxiliary service, unfit to bear arms."4 His five-foot-nine-inch body was somewhat above the average height within the German army, but he looked frail, and his skin was so sallow that Mend spoke of his "slim yellow face." Other than long and seemingly compulsive walks, Hitler had engaged in neither exercise nor sports in civilian life, and had experienced a number of
illnesses. He did not drink, and no longer smoked even an infrequent cigarette, but for years he had eaten skimpy meals at odd hours; the food was nutritionally poor, and his friend Kubizek had joked about his craving for the sweetest pastries. His sleep habits were worse than his diet. On the other hand, despite its yellow color, Mend was struck by this recruit’s “energetic face,” which at this time had a wide, full moustache, and also by a “dynamic glance” from Hitler’s startling light blue eyes, which he described as having a “lively shine.”

The day after Mend saw Hitler and thought him unlikely to survive a march with full pack, he saw him handling his newly-issued rifle. “He looked at it with delight, as a woman looks at her jewelry, which made me laugh secretly.”

At Ypres, Hitler had the bloodiest possible baptism of fire. At seven o’clock in the morning of 29 October 1914, the Bavarians moved forward through thick fog toward the line held by the British between Gheluvelt and Becelaere, five miles east of Ypres. They had already come under some random fire, but now British machine guns opened up on them. “Suddenly the word went round that Stöwer, our platoon commander, had been hit. Good God, I thought, that’s a fine beginning.”

Something far worse was about to happen. Neither side had yet received steel helmets; while the other German troops were wearing the Pickelhaube, the spiked leather helmet, Hitler’s regiment were in caps that looked like those of the British. In the fog, the German regiments coming through the mists behind the Bavarians, Württembergers on one side of them and Saxons on the other, opened fire at what they thought was a surprise counterattack. Private Ernst Schmidt was lying beside Hitler under a hedge, trying to escape this murderous crossfire, when an officer appeared through the fog. He asked them to volunteer to go back the way they had come, across terrain where other Germans would be shooting at them. They must find regimental headquarters and tell them what was happening.

Realizing that the caps were the problem, Hitler threw his away, and slipped off his pack so that there would be that much more of his field grey uniform visible. He and Schmidt both made it back to headquarters; even then, it took half an hour to get the firing from their own side completely stopped. Private Westenkirchner said of their first hour on the Western Front, “The
losses among the 16th Regiment were enormous.”

Hitler rejoined his company, and by ten in the morning had experienced an eternity of combat. At one point he lay at the edge of a wood, jolted by incoming British artillery shells that he saw "sending up clouds of stones, earth, and sand, tearing enormous trees out by their roots and smothering everything in a ghastly stinking yellow-green smoke." By now his company’s commander, all the lieutenants and all but one sergeant were dead or wounded; the major commanding the battalion appeared through the smoke and led them in a final dash to an enemy trench. Hitler leapt in, wondering why he landed so softly, and realized that under his feet was a carpet of “dead and wounded English soldiers.” At last the German artillery was heard from, smashing a British trench two hundred and fifty meters on their left front until “the blokes began swarming out like ants out of an ant-heap and then we charged. We were across the fields in a flash and after some bloody hand-to-hand fighting we cleared one trench after another. A lot of the enemy put their hands up. Those that didn’t were slaughtered.”

It was still before noon. Hitler’s company had by now lost not only its officers and all the sergeants except one, but most of the corporals as well. The major reappeared, “calmly smoking and cool,” accompanied by his adjutant, a second lieutenant, and told them to prepare to attack again. On their own initiative, Hitler and some others scoured the battlefield, hunting up knots of leaderless soldiers, some from other regiments, and brought them forward as replacements.

When I came back the second time with a group of Württembergers who had been routed, the major was lying on the ground with a gaping hole in his chest. A pile of corpses was around him. Now only one officer was left, his adjutant. We were boiling with rage. “Lead us into the attack, sir!” everybody screamed. . . . Four times we advanced and each time we had to withdraw. Of my whole section only one man remained besides me, and finally he too fell. My right sleeve was ripped off by a bullet but miraculously I remained unwounded. Finally at 2 o’clock we launched our fifth attack and this time occupied the edge of the wood and the farm buildings.”
At the end of this day, regimental headquarters remembered the two men who had gotten back through the fog with the report that the forward elements were under fire from their own side. Hitler and the taciturn Schmidt were unofficially attached to headquarters as runners, messengers who carried dispatches to and from the units of the regiment that were in the front-line trenches, or in the open, moving forward. On his second day in his new job, a few hours after the regimental commander, Colonel von List, had been killed, Hitler was lying on the battlefield close to List’s deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Langloar, when Langloar was seriously wounded. Under heavy fire, Hitler pulled Langloar back to a place where he found a combat medical orderly; then the two of them carried Langloar to a dressing station.

Two days later, the survivors of Hitler’s regiment were pulled off the front to begin three days of rest and reorganization, after which they were put back in the battle at Messines, six miles to the southwest. Hitler, Schmidt, and Westenkirchner were now officially assigned to regimental headquarters as messengers. This meant that they lived in better conditions slightly behind the line, and ate better food, but it was no sinecure: on the first day of their next action, an attack on the French at Wytschaete two miles north of Messines, three of the regimental staff’s eight messengers were killed and a fourth was severely wounded.

North of Wytschaete, in an attack on a woods that the British had nicknamed “Shrewsbury Forest,” the regiment’s second battalion ran into such deadly resistance that it was soon being commanded by a lieutenant, who was to be killed himself before the day was out.8 Trying to get a grip on the situation, the new regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Engelhardt, a man that Hitler said they all “worshiped,” went forward on a personal reconnaissance. He was accompanied by Hitler and another runner, a short, round-faced youth named Bachmann. Arriving at a position from which he could overlook the wooded area through which his men were moving, Engelhardt stepped from behind some bushes to get a better view of the action. Instantly bullets snapped at him from British rifles and machine guns. Hitler and Bachmann pounced on him, shielding him with their bodies and shoving him back into a ditch. As they lay there, both privates lectured their commanding officer to the effect that they did not want to lose him. He silently shook hands with them.

The next day, in the combination of tent and dugout that was
serving as regimental headquarters, Hitler was inside, along with the colonel and the rest of the headquarters staff, while the list was being composed of the first men in the regiment who had been recommended for the Iron Cross. Hitler’s name was on the list. Four company commanders came into the crowded command post to discuss those recommended for the honor; to make room for them Hitler and the other three messengers who had survived Wytschaete went outside. “We had not been out there more than five minutes,” Hitler wrote, “when a shell hit the tent, severely wounding Lt-Col. Engelhardt and either killing or wounding the rest of the headquarters staff.”

On 2 December 1914 Hitler received the Iron Cross, Second Class. He had also been promoted to Gefreiter, a rank equivalent to lance-corporal, or private first class. Hans Mend, who back in Munich thought Hitler too weak for a route march, had this glimpse of him in the forward area: “His rifle in his hand, the helmet crooked on the head, with drooping moustache, he presented the picture of a real foot soldier. As an active serviceman I recognized in him the born soldier.”

Hitler’s comrade Westenkirchner knew him well enough by now to understand what was happening. “He had now found that for which he had been longing for many years, a real home and recognition. The Regiment List had given it to him.” It was at the constant risk of his life, but here was an institution that did not reject you, but instead pinned a medal on your chest. Here was a figure of authority that did not lash you with a stick, but shook hands with you. Writing his landlord back in Munich two days after he received his Iron Cross, Hitler told him, “It was the happiest day of my life.” He was later to say, “I passionately loved soldiering,” and referred to the war as “the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence,” an experience “equivalent to thirty years’ university training in regard to life’s problems.” Another soldier said of him, “The Austrian never relaxes. He always acts as if we’d lose the war if he weren’t on the job every minute.” While the other runners were discussing whose turn it was to take a message forward to a command post under fire, Hitler would put the message into the pouch on his belt and be gone.

Hans Mend had been assigned to headquarters as a mounted courier who rode to and from the rear areas with dispatches. “As
soon as serious firing would begin on the front," he said, "Hitler acted like a race horse before it has to start. He had the habit of walking around restlessly, buckling on his equipment. This often got on the nerves of the others." The situation on 9 May 1915 at Arras in northwestern France was described by Hans Raab, a telephone operator at headquarters during a British smash at the German lines: "Well, it was the day when the Tommy attacked and we no longer had any communications to the front. No telephone functioned, the heavy fire had torn all cables, courier dogs and carrier pigeons no longer returned, everything failed, so Adolf had to dare it and carry a message out in danger of his life. We all said to each other—he won't come back!—but he came back in good condition and could give the regiment important information about everything."

Adolf Hitler was to continue this perilous work until the last weeks of the war, in a regiment that spent forty-five months in the front lines, being shuttled from one sector to another and fighting in thirty-six major battles. During the ghastly fighting along the Somme in which he participated in 1916, the headquarters of German regiments adopted the practice of sending out six runners at a time with identical messages, on the theory that one of them would probably get through.

In 1918, from the end of May to the end of July, Hitler was present at the turning point of the war. Punching a vast hole in the French line between Rheims and Soissons, a German offensive thrust a salient all the way to Chateau-Thierry, less than fifty miles from Paris. Hitler's regiment had thus far fought Englishmen, Scots, Australians, and the French; now Hitler was in the drive that came to a halt when American soldiers held at Chateau-Thierry, with the brigade of United States Marines distinguishing itself at Belleau Wood. In mid-July, Hitler's regiment was part of the final great German offensive on the Marne that tried to exploit this salient. On 17 July, the day this attack spent itself, the commander of 9 Company was severely wounded by an American shell in fighting south of Courthiezy; running through the battlefield as usual, Hitler found him and saved his life by dragging him to the rear and getting him medical attention.14

A total of 3754 men of Hitler's regiment died during the war.15 On one occasion, all twenty-five officers of a battalion were killed or wounded, and a sergeant led the survivors. At another moment,
a medical officer had to take command of the entire regiment.\textsuperscript{16}

Death surrounded Hitler for more than a thousand days, and the ways in which he avoided it were remarkable.

I was eating my dinner in a trench with several comrades. Suddenly a voice seemed to be saying to me, "Get up and go over there." It was so clear and insistent that I obeyed mechanically, as if it had been a military order. I rose at once to my feet and walked twenty yards along the trench, carrying my dinner in its tin-can with me. Then I sat down to go on eating, my mind being once more at rest. Hardly had I done so when a flash and a deafening report came from the part of the trench I had just left. A stray shell had burst over the group in which I had been sitting, and every member of it was killed.\textsuperscript{17}

Hans Mend once said to him, after Hitler reappeared through the smoke of a battlefield where thousands were dying, "Man, for you there is no bullet!" Mend commented that Hitler did not reply: "A grin was his answer."

II

After the first bloody days of combat in 1914, the men at headquarters began to know each other better. Hitler's comrades called him "Adi," and noticed things about him, the peculiarities that men living in close quarters see—the way he walked a bit stooped forward, his head held slightly to the left, and the fact that he had big feet. Westenkirchner saw that Hitler liked to keep his hands in his pockets; the hands themselves were beautifully proportioned, with long, gracefully shaped fingers.

"Hitler was always hungry," said Ernst Schmidt, the silent man who was his closest comrade. "He always had an unbelievable hunger." Hitler liked to load up his mug of tea with the artificial honey issued to the troops, and was famous around headquarters for the amount of marmalade he could pile on a single piece of bread. The slang word for stealing from the food supplies was to "organize" the desired item; Hitler "organized" flour, but his great coup involved a supply of zwiebach, a sweet biscuit. Taking his turn standing guard at night over the staff living quarters, he found nearby a few large boxes which proved to be filled with the
biscuits. He found a way of opening the boxes from the bottom; taking some for himself and the other runners each night he was on guard, he was able to keep the continuing pilferage undetected. When meat ran short late in the war, no one was better than Hitler at finding dogs and cats for the cooking pot, despite his earlier fondness for a pet dog that was stolen from him in 1917; Westenkirchner said that “he liked the meat of the cat better than the dog.” On one occasion when headquarters had neither food nor water, Hitler and Westenkirchner crawled into the midst of a bombardment and found a horse that had been killed not long before. While Westenkirchner cut some meat from the carcass with a knife, Hitler filled an empty gasoline can with water from a shell hole, and they brought these offerings back to the startled headquarters cook.

Although they laughed when he mimicked one of the officers or read aloud in deadpan fashion a singularly stupid housekeeping regulation that had been posted in their dugout, Hitler’s comrades were aware from the outset that here was a man aloof and different from themselves. While they chatted, he would sit among them, lost in thought for long periods; suddenly he would begin speaking in an animated and authoritative fashion. “There is almost no subject,” Westenkirchner said, “about which he did not talk. He mastered each theme and spoke fluently. We simple fellows were very much impressed, and we liked it. His favorite subject was art. He wanted to become a great architect.” When the subject of politics arose, Mend commented that “it was as if we were at the Reichstag,” the German parliament. “Hitler was the spokesman.” As for the effect of all this, Mend’s estimate was that “almost no one could withdraw himself from Adolf Hitler’s strong personality and his opinions were accepted by most of us.” Westenkirchner observed that Hitler did not demand deference within their group, but “such a special position naturally arose by itself.”

Hitler was offered a promotion to corporal, but this would have meant leaving headquarters and returning to his original company. There was no provision for promoting a regimental runner above the rank of Gefreiter; by choosing to remain where he was, Hitler stopped his own advancement, although his lack of formal education and eccentric behavior would in any case have made it virtually impossible for him to have risen past the rank of sergeant to become an officer. He continued as a messenger, and his
dedicated performance on the battlefield was matched by a
singular set of off-duty attitudes. When at Christmas of 1914 there
was discussion about visiting with British soldiers in the no-man's-
land between the opposing trenches during a truce, "Adolf Hitler
was a bitter opponent of such an idea," said Heinrich Lugauer of
headquarters: "Such a thing should not happen during wartime."
On the other hand, Hitler made a point of attending the funerals
of British pilots whose planes crashed within German lines; he
spoke admiringly of the courage of the British airmen he saw in
action, and he approved of full military honors for those who fell.
Mend found him "always extremely thoughtful in his treatment of
wounded prisoners and in his dealings with the civilians who were
within the battle area." Regarding women, Mend had this to say:
"He never approached the French girls and never had any
flirtations. We always called him 'the woman hater.' Sometimes he
looked at me inquiringly, if I talked with a French girl, and I often
had to take some remarks from him about it."

A baptized Catholic, Hitler in his adult civilian life had never
attended church and had no discernible religious faith, but at the
front, despite many opportunities to avoid it, he attended church
parade because it was in the regulations. Other men lived for the
chance to go home on leave; during fifty-two months of wartime
service, Hitler availed himself of only a fraction of the leave time
due him, taking two leaves of fourteen days each. "The trenches
around Fromelles were his world," Mend said, referring to the site
of a terrible battle in the summer of 1915, "and what lay behind
them didn't exist for him."20

This was brought into high relief when Hitler was finally
wounded on the Somme in October of 1916, a shell fragment
slashing his upper left thigh. Men were praying for flesh wounds
like this, injuries that would not cripple them but would keep
them away from the lines for several months. "It isn't so bad,
Lieutenant, right?" Hitler said from his stretcher to his immediate
superior Fritz Wiedemann, the regimental adjutant, as they were
readying him for the ambulance to the field hospital. "I can still
stay with you, I mean, stay with the regiment! Can't I?" Soon
after Hitler was released from a hospital near Berlin and assigned
to the regiment's replacement battalion in Munich, he wrote to
Wiedemann, asking him to expedite his return to the front, and
Wiedemann obliged, sending a telegram requesting the immediate
shipment of Hitler to his unit.21
That was the Hitler his comrades saw. As the cannon blasted and the machine guns chattered, private processes were at work, some of which occasionally became visible. During the first two and a half years of the war, until a leather case containing them was stolen, Hitler kept up some of his sketching and painting, producing pictures of little streets in Belgian and French towns, some ruined, some intact, and a memorable impressionistic watercolor of a sunken lane at Wytschaete along which 192 German soldiers were killed or wounded in a single day. Hans Mend said, “With great talent, he made cartoons of Jewish types in Vienna.” Lieutenant Wiedemann heard no anti-Semitic comments from Hitler, and the same was true of his closest comrade Ernst Schmidt. Westenkirchner said, “When he talked about Vienna, then he also spoke about the great influence of the Jews, but without spitefulness.” Hans Mend had a different experience, in a town behind the German lines.

According to military discipline, Hitler behaved himself correctly in regard to Jewish officers, but he hated them. During a morning in December I met Hitler on the street. While we were talking, we saw our Jewish adjutant G. coming along and because Hitler did not want to salute him he jumped behind a tree. However, the officer had recognized him, and demanded an explanation of why he jumped away, but Hitler just looked at him.

The officer rode off with the threat that he would report Hitler for what was known as a “respect violation,” and Hitler turned to Mend and said, “This Jew I can acknowledge only when he is on the battlefield. Here he can be arrogant, but if he really had to go to the front line, then he would hide himself in a mousehole, and would not worry about a salute.”

This case was a complicated and ironic one. Among the officers of Hitler’s regiment were two Jews who received high decorations for valor, but this lieutenant, assistant adjutant Hugo Gutmann, “was not esteemed or liked among the messengers,” according to Schmidt, because “he was more careful than brave.” The irony was that, later in the war, it was Gutmann who made a special effort in putting through the paperwork that resulted in Hitler’s receiving the highly esteemed Iron Cross, First Class.
"Every free minute he used to read," Heinrich Lugauer said. "Even at his battle station he sat in a corner, his ammunition bag around his middle, rifle in his arms, and read. He once borrowed a book from me, it was Nietzsche, as far as I can remember." Hitler had several books in his military baggage, including a well-worn copy of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea.* His reading was intense, but by his own statement it bore no resemblance to that of those who read for pleasure, or to acquire knowledge for its own sake; reading "should provide the tools and building materials which the individual needs for his life's work," and it should be used to support and strengthen one's *Weltanschauung*, one's view of life. Reading was ammunition; without the right arguments and examples, an advocate of an idea "will find neither grounds for reinforcing his own contentions nor any for confuting those of his adversary." This called for reading selectively, and discarding everything that could not help one in the battle of life. There was more to Nietzsche than his belief that a decadent Western Christian civilization must be swept away in favor of a new type of self-willed heroic superman who would be far above the common herd, far above conventional morality and entitled to rule the world, but for Hitler this meshed with what he chose to extract from the life and ideas of Wagner. Hitler took from Schopenhauer principally the idea of will as force, which was a profound misperception of the man who wished in the last analysis a Buddhistic renunciation of worldly desires and the transformation of the planet into a serene Nirvana, but in Schopenhauer Hitler had found a man who read as he did, noting with approval whatever confirmed his own convictions.

Hitler's Weltanschauung had Hitler at its center, but the foil for all his thought was his imaginary Germany, a superior Nordic race whose march to glory was blocked and threatened by Slavs, Jews, Englishmen, Marxists, and the French. He was by nature suspicious; Hitler was certain that there was more to Germany's suffering than met the eye, but he had yet to draw his final conclusions. In February of 1915, after thirteen weeks at the front, he wrote to an acquaintance in Munich. Using "we" as if he were empowered to speak for every German at the front, he wrote that all the German troops were not only determined to win on the battlefield, "cost what it may," but that they also hoped "that those of us who are lucky enough to see our homeland again will
find it cleaner and more cleansed of foreign elements." The "foreign elements" were not specified. Hitler added:

I often think of Munich and each of us wishes . . . that the sacrifice and suffering caused by the daily loss of hundreds of thousands and the stream of blood which flows day after day in the struggle against an international world of enemies will not merely destroy Germany's enemies abroad, but will also crush our internationalism at home. 25

A line later, he closed by saying, "As for Austria, things will turn out as I've always said they would." Although he did not expand on it here, Westenkirchner had heard his views: "He was convinced, that with the victorious end of the war all Germans in Austria would join a great German Reich."

Hitler did yet another kind of reading, studying the propaganda leaflets that were dropped from British planes. As the Germans captured Allied prisoners and advanced into and remained in Belgian and French territory, he became aware of the propaganda that the Allies were using to motivate their own troops and civilian populations. His conclusion was that "the war propaganda of the English and Americans was psychologically sound. By representing the Germans to their own people as barbarians and Huns, they prepared the individual soldier for the terrors of war, and thus helped to preserve him from disappointments. After this, the most terrible weapon that was used against him seemed only to confirm what his propagandists had told him." 26 By contrast, at the outset of the war, Hitler said, the German newspapers had portrayed the English as "unbelievably cowardly. . . . I remember well my comrades' looks of astonishment when we faced the Tommies in person in Flanders. After the very first days of battle the conviction dawned on each and every one of them that these Scotsmen did not exactly jibe with the pictures they had seen fit to give us in the humor magazines and press dispatches." 27

In broader terms, Hitler had scorn for what he termed "the inner ambiguity" of German propaganda; whereas the British bombarded their own public and the Germans with endless repetition of the idea that Germany was solely responsible for the war, the German line was that Germany might be partly
responsible for the conflagration, but no more than anyone else. The English approach succeeded with the German public: "At first the claims of the propaganda were so impudent that people thought it insane; later, it got on people's nerves; and in the end, it was believed." 28

Quickly convinced of the uncompromising nature of warfare, Hitler studied this psychological weapon as if he were stripping down a machine gun. "Its effect," he decided, "for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect." The target was "the primitive sentiments of the broad masses." Selectivity and repetition were everything: "It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over." Reassembling the machine gun, here is how it would work:

The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan. 29

Hitler occasionally wrote poems, notable for the heights on which he placed himself, protector of his besieged Germany. On a cold autumn night near Arras in 1915, he wrote lines in which the narrator is an ancient Teutonic sorcerer who speaks of "Wotan's oak," "dark powers," and a moon whose light turns trenches and craters into "runic letters." Those men "who are full of impudence during the day" draw their swords by night, but instead of entering the battle, this fate befalls them:

They solidify into stalagmites.
So the false ones part from the real ones—
I reach into a nest of words
And then give to the good and just
With my formula blessings and prosperity. 30

Like his hero Wagner, Lance Corporal Hitler believed in his star, although at times he was moving in broad daylight through powder smoke so thick that he could not see ten meters ahead. Shortly before Christmas of 1915, Hans Mend noted, "he said that
we would hear much about him. We should just wait until his
time had arrived.”

A different side to Hitler was shown in a poem he wrote in the
spring of 1916. In the surviving manuscript there is this
combination of title and note by Hitler: “It was in the Thicket of
the Forest at Artois . . . based on a true event.”

It was in the thick of the Artois Wood.
Deep in the trees, on blood-soaked ground,
Lay stretched a wounded German warrior,
And his cries rang out in the night.
In vain . . . no echo answered his plea . . .
Will he bleed to death like a beast,
That shot in the gut dies alone?

Then suddenly . . .
Heavy steps approach from the right
He hears how they stamp on the forest floor . . .
And new hope springs from his soul.
And now from the left . . .
And now from both sides . . .

Two men approach his miserable bed
A German it is, and a Frenchman.
And each watches the other with distrustful glance,
And threateningly they aim their weapons.
The German warrior asks:
“What do you do here?”
“I was touched by the needy one’s call for help.”
“It’s your enemy!”
“It is a man who suffers.”

And both, wordless, lower their weapons.
Then entwined their hands
And, with muscles tensed, carefully lifted
The wounded warrior, as if on a stretcher,
And carried him through the woods,
’Til they came to the German outposts.
“Now it’s over. He will get good care.”
And the Frenchman turns back toward the woods.
But the German grasps for his hand,
Looks, moved, into sorrow-dimmed eyes
And says to him with earnest foreboding:

"I know not what fate holds for us,
Which inscrutably rules in the stars.
Perhaps I shall fall, a victim of your bullet.
Maybe mine will fell you on the sand—
For indifferent is the chance of battles.
Yet, however it may be and whatever may come:
We lived these sacred hours,
Where man found himself in a man . . .
And now, farewell! And God be with you!"³¹

III

According to Hitler’s comrade Ernst Schmidt, it was not until 1918, when the German military effort began to falter, that Hitler started to talk about politics in a consuming fashion. Even before 1918, when German soldiers were angry they cursed the war as a “swindle,” but now, Schmidt said, the term was used in “bloody seriousness.” The new and earnest defeatist talk at the front infuriated Hitler, and he soon found a focus for his generalized anger. Another division, the 10th Bavarian, had been so badly mauled that it was in effect dissolved, and part of one of its units, the 6th Franconian Infantry Regiment from Nuremberg, was attached to Hitler’s regiment, with some personnel assigned to headquarters. These new men had lost all hope of victory, and openly expressed the view, not long before General Ludendorff reached the same conclusion, that further resistance was pointless. When any of these men ventured such opinions in Hitler’s presence, according to Schmidt, he “became very furious and shouted in a terrible voice about the pacifists and shirkers, who would lose the war.” This led to a fistfight with a corporal from Nuremberg; Hitler took a lot of punches, Schmidt said, “but finally he won. From this day on the new ones did not like him any more, but we old comrades liked him just that much more.”

Gefreiter Hitler went on trying to win the war. Many Allied soldiers of all ranks later spoke with admiration of the tenacity and valor with which many German units and individual soldiers fought to the end; one of these men was Adolf Hitler. The vagrant who had been deloused at public expense at a shelter for the
homeless in Vienna, the failure who had carried travelers’ bags for tips at a train station, was a success, in a way that had always meant a great deal to Germans. His superiors and his fellow runners saw him not only as a brave man of great endurance, but as a soldier who was exceptionally good at transmitting verbal orders. Unlike the other messengers, he studied the headquarters maps, not only learning the safest route to go forward, but making frequently accurate predictions about the course of battles and campaigns. By 1918, this combination of qualities and abilities had made an extraordinary impression upon the professional soldiers who led his regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Engelhardt, the first of his regimental commanders who knew him, called Hitler “an exceptionally brave, effective, and conscientious soldier,” and his last commander, Lieutenant Colonel Maximilian Baligand, spoke of him as a “courageous and outstanding soldier and comrade.” Other regimental commanders and senior officers under whom he served used the terms “exceptional courage,” “shining example,” “admirable unpretentiousness,” “profound love of country,” and “altogether upright and honorable nature.” One lieutenant colonel summed it up: “Hitler never let us down.”

Other than his fighting on the first day of the war, Hitler’s service in combat had not involved face-to-face confrontations with the enemy. Now, carrying a message for a battalion that had broken through the first line of French defenses in one of the final German offensives, he could not find the unit and started walking through a forest, looking for its rear elements. Seeing something that looked like a French helmet at a man’s height within a section of trench, Hitler pulled out the pistol he had been given to replace the rifle that a runner formerly carried. Moving cautiously to the edge of a trench, he found ten or twelve French soldiers in it, still armed but dazed by the German attack that had overrun this forest and cut them off.

Hitler screamed at them, aiming his pistol and ordering them to surrender. Although he had the draw on them, the Frenchmen were reluctant to put down their rifles, until he fired a shot into the trench; then they dropped their weapons and raised their hands. Hitler pointed to the rear with his pistol and marched off behind them.

When his group of French prisoners came to the edge of the forest and realized that they had not yet seen another German, they slowed down and began to discuss ways to overpower Hitler.
Just at this moment he saw some men of the headquarters staff of the battalion for which he had been looking, and hastily called them over. Hitler delivered his message and borrowed a man with a rifle. Together they marched his prisoners back to regimental headquarters, where he personally delivered them to his colonel, who had expected him to return alone as usual. By coincidence, it was only a short time later that he received his Iron Cross, First Class, but it was given him not for this feat, but for his entire performance since 1914. The recommendation for the medal, signed by yet another of his regimental commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Freiherr von Godin, said in part:

As a runner his coolness and dash in both trench and open warfare have been exemplary, and invariably he has shown himself ready to volunteer for tasks in the most difficult situations and at danger to himself. Whenever communications have been disrupted at a critical moment in battle, it has been thanks to Hitler's unflagging and devoted efforts that important messages continued to get through despite every difficulty.34

IV

In October of 1918, Hitler's regiment was back in position on the Ypres battlefield, four miles from where he had first gone into action on a foggy October morning in 1914. Half a million men had died here in the intervening forty-eight months; the British still held Ypres, as on that first day, and the Germans were still to the south and east of it.

On the evening of Sunday, 13 October, the regimental runners who were not on duty, and some of the telephone operators, went to pick up their rations at a field kitchen that had been set up in an unoccupied gun position on a hill near the village of Wervicq. As the food was being handed out, English artillery shells started coming in; before Hitler and the others realized what was happening, shells containing chlorine gas also landed in the area. By the time they got their gas masks on, most of them had breathed in some of it. "As early as midnight," Hitler said, "a number of us passed out, a few of our comrades forever."35 In the next hours some found they could not speak, and could not see. Toward morning Hitler was in pain, and his eyes were ablaze.

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When Hitler wrote about this, he portrayed himself as completing a mission in line of duty, struggling through to headquarters: "I stumbled and tottered back with burning eyes; taking with me my last report of the War." In fact, he, Raab, Lugauer, and others with whom he had served, all joined a line of men who were partly or totally gas-blinded. Raab said, "In order not to get lost we held on to the coattails of the man ahead, and so we went in single file to Linnselle, where we got first aid."

Within a few hours, Hitler's agony was complete: "my eyes had turned into glowing coals; it had grown dark around me." He was sent to a hospital in Pasewalk, in Germany. Hitler's days on the Western Front had come to an end.

NOTES

2This and subsequent quotations from Hitler's comrades, unless otherwise noted, are from post-World War II interviews in the Toland Papers (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York), Series II, Container 48, section entitled Hitler, Adolf, World War I. The papers include material from the collection of the German author Harry Schulze-Wilde, and translations from Hans Mend, Adolf Hitler im Felde, 1914-1918 (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1931).
3Hitler, Mein Kampf, 164. As late as 23 March 1944 Hitler maintained that his first sight of the Rhine moved him deeply (Hitler's Secret Conversations, 1941-1944 [New York: Octagon Books, 1972], 583), but there seems no reason to doubt the account of his comrade Westenkirchner.
6This, and the subsequent account, is from the letter of Hitler to Hepp cited above, Jäckel, Hitler, 67-68.
7Ibid.
8This incident is from the account of Ernst Schmidt in the Toland Papers. Schmidt identifies the locale by calling it "the forest in the form of an axe," which corresponds with British maps of the area. Engelhardt's account of the incident is reported in Robert Payne, The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler (New York: Praeger, 1973), 112.
10 Hitler to Josef Popp, 3 December 1914, Jäckel, Hitler, 61.

11 Hitler’s Secret Conversations, 12.

12 Hitler, Mein Kampf, 163.

13 John Toland, Adolf Hitler (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 68.

14 The incident of 17 July 1918 is from Maser, Hitler, 88.

15 Ibid.


17 Toland, Adolf Hitler, 64.

18 Payne, Life and Death of Hitler, 117.

19 Ibid., 114.

20 Hanser, Putsch!, 33.

21 Toland, Adolf Hitler, 61.

22 Payne, Life and Death of Hitler, 119, gives details of this painting, and includes a reproduction among his illustrations.

23 Maser, Hitler, 124.

24 Hitler, Mein Kampf, 35.

25 Hitler to Ernst Hepp, 5 February 1915, Jäckel, Hitler, 69.

26 Hitler, Mein Kampf, 181.

27 Ibid., 145.

28 Ibid., 180-85.

29 Ibid., 180.

30 The full text of the poem is in Toland, Adolf Hitler, 64.

31 This poem, “Es war im Dickicht des Artoiswaldes,” appears in its German text in Jäckel, Hitler, 74-75. It has been translated for the author by Prof. Sylvia Burkhart of the Department of Foreign Languages at Eastern Kentucky University, and here appears in English for the first time.

32 Heiden, Der Führer, 83.

33 Maser, Hitler, 87-88.

34 Ibid., 88.

35 Hitler, Mein Kampf, 202.

36 Ibid.