To what extent was Adolf Hitler the sole leader of the Third Reich?

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Introduction

Adolf Hitler became the German Chancellor in January 1933, which marked a time of change for the structure and leadership of Germany. Within a year and a half, he became the formal dictator of the Third Reich. Historians through the decades, especially after World War II, have discussed if his dictatorship meant that he was the one sole leader of Germany. The research question is connected to this debate; "To what extent was Adolf Hitler the sole leader of the Third Reich?" and it tries to explore the debate among historians about his role as a leader, eventually leading to Ian Kershaw's latest interpretation. This work seeks to identify the changes of the political structure when Hitler came into power. Then it will present the intentionalist and structuralist debate regarding Hitler's leadership leading to the most recent view by Ian Kershaw and the critique of this view.

Political Structure of the Weimar Republic

The Weimar constitution was outlined in february 1919, at the same time as the National Assembly was established. The proposals for the new constitution were influenced by the democratic ideas of Britain and the USA[1]. However, Germany's circumstances and traditions were not ignored. According to the constitution Germany was now declared a 'democratic state' and a republic[2]. The nation had a federal structure with 17 Länder, or regional states. Every seven years the German people would elect a president[3]. This president had reasonable power, including the right to dissolve the Reichstag, the appointment of the chancellor, was the supreme commander of the Armed Forces, and allowed the position to rule by decree at a time of national emergency[4]. This last case created a complex relationship between the powers of the president and the Reichstag/chancellor. The structure of the Weimar Republic

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[1] Layton, G. p. 21
[2] Layton, G. p 21
[3] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 28
[4] Layton, G. p 21

also included Parliament, which consisted of two houses, the Reichstag and the Reichsrat.

The Reichstag was the main representative assembly and law-making body[5]. It consisted of

deputies elected every four years on the basis of a system of proportional representation[6]. The

Reichsrat was the less important house and was made up of representatives from the 17

Länder governments who held local responsibilities[7]. The new constitution was a great

improvement from the previous authoritarian constitution of Imperial Germany and a large

majority voted in favour of it[8].

The period before the establishment of the Third Reich marked a time when the republic

became more and more authoritarian. One of the key events which impacted the Weimar

Republic was the Depression of 1929 to 1930. With the Wall Street Crash came an increased

economic crisis in Germany which quickly became a political one[9]. Without overseas loans

and with its export trade falling, prices and wages fell and the number of bankruptcies

increased along with unemployment[10]. However, it should be kept in mind that there were

already weaknesses in the German economy before the Wall Street Crash, but it can be seen

as a final push that brought the Weimar economy crashing down[11], not the cause of

Germany's economic crisis. Even before the Depression there were worrying signs for the

parliamentary system. President Hindenburg and his associates were discussing a more

authoritarian system to get rid of the inconvenience of politics[12]. This form of government

would not negotiate with parties in the Reichstag, but instead would rely on using Article 48

to issue decrees and threaten dissolution of the Reichstag if it opposed the government[13].

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[5] Layton, G. p 21
[6] allocated members of parliament from official list of political party candidates
[7] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 28
[8] Layton, G. p. 25
[9] Layton, G. p. 101
[10] Layton, G. p. 101
[11] Layton, G. p. 101
[12] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p 132
[13] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p 132

Which after 1930 it was increasingly used to sustain governments that could not get their legislation through the Reichstag[14].

In 1929, the German government was in hands of Hermann Muller's Grand Coalition, which was formed after the general election of May 1928. When the four major parties of the coalition could not agree on how to tackle the increased unemployment, Muller could no longer maintain a majority and thus his government collapsed[15]. The post of Chancellor was passed on to Heinrich Brüning, who was the parliamentary leader of the ZP at the time, by President Hindenburg. Brüning was surrounded by conservative- nationalists who had no real faith in the democratic process. Brüning's response to the growing economic crisis led to a political constitutional crisis[16]. His economic policy proposed cuts in government expenditure but was rejected by Reschstag. However, Brüning put the proposals into effect by means of the emergency decree, signed by the president according to Article 48[17]. After the Resichstag voted for the decrees withdrawal Brüning asked Hindenburg to dissolve Reichstag and called an election for September 1930[18]. After the 1930 Reichstag election it was clear that the left and right extremes had made gains against the pro-democratic parties which meant it was difficult for a proper democratic parliamentary government to function[19]. Brüning still had the support of Hindenburg and parliamentary democracy turned into 'presidential government'[20]. From 1930 to 1932 Brüning remained chancellor and governed through use of Article 48 through President Hindenburg[21]. He can even be considered to somewhat mirror a semi-dictator from his growing use of presidential decrees.

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[14] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p 132
[15] Layton, G. p. 106
[16] Layton, G. p. 106
[17] Layton, G. p. 106
[18] Layton, G. p. 106
[19] Layton, G. p. 109
[20] Layton, G. p. 109
[21] Layton, G. p. 109

Political Structure of the Third Reich 1933

President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler German Chancellor in January 1933. Hitler was now head of the coalition government and the Nazis were a minority. Franz von Papen and the conservative parties hoped to form a majority cabinet with the NSDAP and thought they would be able to control Hitler and the Nazi. When Hitler became Chancellor he called for new elections. He used his newly gained power to better his odds. The Communist party meetings were banned and election rallies of the Social Democrats were broken up by the SA[22], or the Sturmabteilung[23]. Furthermore, also in February, Göring, Minister of Interior in Prussia, made an unofficial purge list of police officers and government officials, these were replaced by SA leaders[24]. A key event in the establishement of the Nazi dicatorship was the burning of the Reichstag building on 27th of February 1933, whether intentionally executed by Hitler or not. There are quite a few theories regarding who or what started the fire, however it is widely believed to have been contrived by the Nazis to turn public opinion against its opponents and to assume emergency powers[25]. After the Reichstag fire an emergency decree was issued, which meant that if needed the government could take charge of law, order and security, and even order death or imprisonment for political offences[26]. During the election on March 5th, 1933, the NSDAP did not win a majority, however, the party got support from the German National People's Party and together they held a majority of the Reichstag[27]. Since Hitler could not get a majority vote through democratic elections, he started to create the "Enabling Bill", which would later turn into the Enabling Act.

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[22] Layton, G. p. 140
[23] the Nazi Party's original paramilitary wing, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/SA-Nazi-organization
[24] Layton, G. p. 140
[25] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.
[26] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 184
[27] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 184

To understand the political structure of the Third Reich, it is important to understand the Enabling Act. The Enabling Bill would allow Hitler to rule by decree for four years, which in essence would make him dictator for this time[28]. To be able to enact this Enabling Bill he needed a two-thirds majority. His alliance with the DNVP (The German National People's Party) gave him 52% and by intimidating many of the KPD (German Communist Party) deputies from attending the voting meeting he eliminated their 12%[29]. Finally, he offered the Zentrum/BVP (The Bavarian People's Party was the Bavarian branch of the Centre Party) guarantees for the protection of rights of the Catholic Church[30]. The Enabling Act was established with a favour vote of 444 to 94[31]. Hindenburg signed the Bill, meaning the transfer of constitutional powers to the chancellor, Hitler. Hitler with his new powers gradually turned Germany into a one-party state.

Under the Enabling Act, legislative powers were granted to Hitler[32]. The Cabinet still existed but continued to lose its purpose. Decisions were more and more made on an individual level of who had the attention of the Führer, Hitler[33]. Theoretically, the Cabinet did have legislative powers but in reality most laws were passed by Hitler, having been drawn up by the Reich Chancellery[34]. After the Enabling Act, Reich Chancellery roles expanded since most laws and/or degrees were drawn up by Chancellery officials[35]. The head of the Reich Chancellery was Hans Heinrich Lammers and he had extensive control over what information reached Hitler and therefore on policies[36]. The Civil Service became more Nazi and civil servants

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[28] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 185
[29] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 185
[30] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 185
[31] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 185
[32] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 193
[33] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 193
[34] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 193
[35] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 193
[36] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 193

generally enacted Nazi laws[37]. Hitler did not replace the existing legal code but instead new laws that reflected Nazi political views were passed[38].

After the Enabling Act was passed Hitler and the Nazis started their process for domination over Germany, or Gleichschaltung (co-ordination), which was designed to bring the nation under Nazi political control. One aspect of their takeover was the elimination of federal states with the use of two different laws. Firstly, the nazi-dominated state governments enacted legislation without reference to provisional parlaments (landtage)[39]. Secondly, a law created 18 Reichstatthälter (Reich governors), which were often the local party Gauleiters[40], with full powers[41]. This caused the 17 state governments to break up. In January 1934, the Landtage was revoked, thus the federal governments and governors were subordinated to the Ministry of Interior[42]. At this point there no longer existed any federal principle of government. Furthermore, on 14th of July a new law was passed that declared that the NSDAP was the only legal party in Germany[43]. Any separate political activity would result in imprisonment for up to 3 years.

A key event in the timeline after the Enabling Act and before Hitlers official title as dictator is a series of political extrajudicial executions of the SA (Sturmabtreilung). The purge can be seen to be carried out for a variety of reasons. The first one being based on the claim that Ernstt Röhm and SA called for a second more radical revolution against forces of the old German establishment[44]. This plan worried the army. Hitler needed the support of the army

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[37] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 194
[38] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 194
[39] Layton, G. p. 145
[40] a political official governing a district under Nazi rule, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gauleiter
[41] Layton, G. p. 145
[42] Layton, G. p. 145
[43] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 186
[44] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 186

since they were the only institution within the regime which could physically unseat him from his position of power and their military skills were needed for his foregin policy plans[45]. Additionally, it was clear Hindenburg did not have much time left to live, and Hitler wanted a presidency without opposition or elections. By eliminating Röhm and his supporters Hitler was able to gain the army's backing, which was necessary. On June 30th 1934, during the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler eliminated the SA as a political and military force[46]. After the death of Hindenburg in early August of 1934, Hitler merged the offices of Chancellor and President and took the official title of Führer[47]. The army swore an oath of allegiance to him as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and as head of the German state[48]. Nine days after the death of Hindenburg Hitler was given power as absolute dictator at a referendum with majority vote of the people.

The Intensionalist versus Structuralist Debate

Post World War II historians were becoming substantially interested in analysing Hitler's leadership and the Third Reich. The outcome of this interest was the development of the structuralist or intentionalist interpretation. The intentionalists puts more stress on powerful individuals, in this case Hitler, as exercising major influence on historical development[49]. They concentrate on Hitler's personal direction of Nazi foreign policy in the context of a well-defined, well-executed strategy devised months in advance. This viewpoint also holds that Hitler had a detailed strategy and objectives, such as the final solution. Additionally, they urge that Hitler's deliberate desire to develop rivalries and competing authority in order to increase his position as a decision-maker resulted in the chaotic administrative structure[50].

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[45] Gray , B., Perera, S., Aylward, V., & Habibi, M. p. 186
[46] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.
[47] Evans, D., & Jenkins, J, p 149
[48] Evans, D., & Jenkins, J, p 149
[49] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 206
[50] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 206

Intentionalists see Hitler as a strong political leader and in their eyes as the main leader of the Third Reich. The historians Norman Rich and Karl Dietrich Bracher are both historians who have argued in favour of this view. Rich described how "The point cannot be stressed too strongly: Hitler was master in the Third Reich"[51].

In response to the intentionalist interpretation another perspective developed, the structuralist perspective, due to the fact that not all historians agree with the intentionalists. The structuralist interpretation argues that Hitler was a weak political leader. The structuralists put more emphasis on the nature of the Nazi state, its interal political rivalries and its disoriented decision making[52]. Hitler seized opportunities as they came and the radicalizing foreign policies of the Nazi regime came as a response. Furthermore, in contrast to the intentionalists, the structuralists argue that the character of Hitler's charismatic leadership caused administrative chaos; it was not a planned policy[53]. The historian Hans Mommsen strongly supported this view and was a structuralist in regard to the origins of the Holocaust. He saw the Final Solution as a result of the "cumulative radicalization" of the German state contrary to a long-term plan made by Adolf Hitler[54]. Karl Dietrich Bracher and other intentionalist historians have criticized Mommsen for underestimating the importance of Hitler and Nazi ideology.

The Modern Interpretation

The most modern interpretation of the leadership of the Third Reich is looked at through the statement "working towards the Führer". This implies working towards the leader and through this initiatives were launched, pressures were generated, and legislation was enacted,

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[51] Rich, N
[52] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 206
[53] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 206
[54] Menke, Martin. p. 826

all in ways that were seen to be in keeping with Hitler's goals[55]. The concept of the modern

interpretation has been explored by Ian Kershaw in his two volumes *Hitler: 1889-1936*

Hubris and *Hitler 1936-1945:Nemesis.* Kershaw explains Hitlers form of rule as being

personalised, meaning that incentives were invited to be taken as long as they backed Hitlers

overall will and goals[56]. This prompted disorientation amongst administration and

competition within the regime. Furthermore, it evoked survival of the fittest and actions being

taken which sometimes were only presumed to be Hitlers aims[57]. Hitler was often uninvolved

in decisions, but as Kershaw argues, this illustrated his great power and leadership. Hitler was

crucial to provide the image of national unity meaning he could not be seen to take part in

internal day-to-day conflict[58]. His own ideological imperatives were viewed as more

practicable policy options[59]. Since all incentives and directives were made in his name their

success only granted him more popularity[60].

Ian Kershaw discusses the Hitler myth. In this myth Hitler is portrayed as someone who

understands the German people, is the representative of popular justice, defends Germany

against its enemies, responsible for all major successes of the government, etc[61]. The Hitler

myth was a major component in Hitlers image and helped him remain in power as he was[62].

The myth is important to keep in mind when examining the research question since it

conveys how Hitler was supposed to be seen as the sole leader of the Third Reich even

though within the regime he was not as active. Hitler would eventually believe in the myth

himself. Demonstrated by the fact that after Hindenburg's death he became more distant[63]. As

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[55]Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'
[56] Kershaw, Ian, p. 529
[57] Kershaw, Ian. p. 529
[58] Kershaw, Ian. p. 529
[59] Kershaw, Ian. p. 529
[60] Kershaw, Ian. p. 529
[61] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 185
[62] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 185
[63] Kershaw, Ian, p. 531

head of state and a person of standing he kept out of all political discussion that did not outright request his presence[64]. He was at the same time an indispensable part of the regime but detached from formal machinery of government[65]. It can be understood through the memoirs of Otto Dietrich, Hitlers Press Chief, that Hitler was aware of the impact of removing clarity of leadership: "[Hitler] removed from the organization of the state all clarity of leadership...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 despotic tyranny"[66]. The expansion in autonomy of the Führer's authority to a point where it was unrestricted in practise as well as theory by any governmental institutions or alternative organs of power, a stage was reached at the latest by 1938, was undoubtedly a key development[67].

Kershaw explains how 'working towards the Führer', can be taken in a direct or indirect sense. When it comes to the direct sense, it can be considered in reference to party functions. For example, the SS tasks linked with 'working towards the Führer,' provided limitless space for cruel ambitions, and with them expansion, power, prestige, and richness[68]. On the indirect level, this meant that the ideological motivations were secondary, or absent, but the main function of the actions was nonetheless to further the potential for implementation of the goals which Hitler embodied[69]. For example, ordinary citizens settling scores with neighbours by denouncing them to the Gestapo, or individuals seeking material gain through career advancement in the party or state bureaucracy[70]. Some examples of 'working towards the Führer' in the direct, literal sense in practise are as follows.

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[64] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 186
[65] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 186
[66] Dietrich, O., & Moorhouse, R. p. 187
[67] Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'
[68] Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'
[69] Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'
[70] Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'

Hitler's anti-semitism was well known. By 1935 there were strong pressures from within the party, especially Gauleiter reflecting pressures from below, to remove Jews from citizenship which was part of the party's 1920 programme[71]. A wave of SA attacks on Jews occured in the same year. There was pressure for legislation to satisfy two groups, radicals and moderates[72]. This caused Hitler to eventually intervene. He switched his Nuremberg speech from foregin policy to anti-jesiwsh legislation[73]. The laws were written overnight by civil servants and passed by the Reichstag meeting at Nuremberg.

In 1938, there was again growing anti-semitic action on the streets and on November 8th the assasination of a Nazi official in Paris by a Jew was used to extend the action[74]. Goebbels suggested to Hitler, at the Munich Putsch anniversary meeting, that in the wake of such anti-semic demonstrations they should encourage such measures[75]. Hitler approved of this and following the decision there was a wave of anti-jewish violence known as Kirstallnacht.

It would be a mistake to attribute the regime's continued radicalization only or mostly to Hitler's own activities. As seen above, various acts taken by people inside the regime, and in general in the nation, contributed to an inexorable radicalization that saw the eventual formation in concrete form of policy objectives contained in the Führer's 'mission'[76].

When Ian Kershaw released his two-volume biography his ideas were a new way of thinking of Hitler and his leadership. The volumes received both criticism and support.

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[71] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 191
[72] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 191
[73] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 191
[74] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p. 191
[75] Hite, J., & Hinton, C. p 191
[76] Kershaw, Ian. "'Working Towards the Führer.'

Professor David Welch of University of Kent at Canterbury was one who reviewed Kershaw's first volume Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris. In Welch's review he praises Kershaw for being intelligent enough to use secondary sources such as Goebbels' diaries to gain insights into Hitler's thinking and actions[77]. However, Welch also criticizes Kershaw for not devoting more of the volume on Hitler and propaganda since Hitler himself in Mein Kampf dedicates a larger section of the book to propaganda[78]. It is well known that Hitler had a particular interest in propaganda and through the help of Joseph Goebbels was vastly successful in this distinct area. Welch proposes that a textual analysis of Hitlers thoughts on propaganda and the consistency with which he applied these beliefs in practise would have made the volume even better[79]. As an endnote, Welch again praises Kershaw for creating a powerful analysis and calls him a master historian.

A review on Hitler 1938-1945: Nemesis is one by John Lukacs. Lukacs seems to be more critical of Kershaw than the mentioned above, and comments on how Kershaw has painted a rather one-dimensional portrait. The portrait painted of Hitler is one of a single minded individual who was faced with inevitable defeat, voices Lukacs and argues that it was not as simple as that[80]. Furthermore, Lukacs remarks how Kershaw's volume lacks extended knowledge of Hitler's adversaries, foreign policy and how close Hitler came to winning the war, not only in the summer of 1940 but in 1941[81]. Additionally, Lukacs writes how Kershaw's volume lacks mentioning a momentous change in Hitler's strategy and his attempts to divide the Allies. The critique does not end there, Lukacs believes the volume is

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[77] Professor David Welch
[78] Professor David Welch
[79] Professor David Welch
[80] Lukacs, J.
[81] Lukacs, J.

not well written and claims there are many errors of facts and dates, and strange words[82]. The more elaborated on flaw of Nemesis is Lukacs's comment on Kershaw's use of Hitler's statements as his primary source[83]. Since it is well known that Hitler was a master of speech and always spoke with the purpose of influencing his listeners, Lukacs argument does not seem far-fetched. In his review, Lukacs comes to the conclusion that Kershaw is a better historian than he is a biographer.

In *Review of New Perspectives on Hitler*, historian Richard J Evans, includes the volumes of Ian Kershaw. Evans explains how Kershaw takes a different approach on Hitler compared to previous works and how the historian found middle ground within the intentionalist and structuralist debate. Evans describes how Kershaw puts Hitler in his contemporary context and shows with detail how the context acted upon himself as much as he did upon it[84]. In regards to Kershaws decision to divide the volumes in 1936, Evans argues that it might not have been the most convincing time of division. He suggests that 1938 might have been a better year due to the fact that this was when the Third Reich moved into a more radical phase at home and abroad[85]. However, Evans contradicts his own point by stating that in the end it's the thesis that matters. Another point of critique that Evan puts forward is Kershaw's use of Goebbels diaries. By quoting Goebbels extensively Kershaw makes it seem like Goebbels and Hitler were running the Third Reich between them, which was not true[86]. Moreover Evans thinks the volumes are a bit too long and that in the second volume Kershaw devotes too much to foreign policy and war. He develops his point by explaining how Kershaw has not used to full extent the opportunity these volumes gave him to get across a

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[82] Lukacs, J.
[83] Lukacs, J.
[84] Evans, Richard J.
[85] Evans, Richard J.
[86] Evans, Richard J.

wider readership the results of recent research on other aspects of the Third Reich[87]. One aspect of Kershaw's ideas which Evans expresses deep admiration for is his achievement of rectifying the relationship between the two points of view, intentionalist and structuralist. Evan further states how the volumes are overall well written and conveys great detail without ever losing sight of the bigger questions[88]. Evans ends the review on Kershaw by indicating that it will be some time before Kershaw's ideas on Hitler and his relationship with the German people will be replaced.

Conclusion

Even though Kershaws faces some critiques of his volumes his ideas and arguments which found somewhat neutral territory for the views of the internalists and structuralist are still accepted as the most modern interpretation of Hitler's leadership. It is also important to point out that most of the criticism Kershaw faced, based on the examples above, did not actually have to do with his ideas, which can be summed up as "working towards the Führer", but more with the volumes as works, what they lacked, how sources were used, etc. The ideas of Kershaw are currently welcomed as being the most logical and calculated view on Hitler and the Third Reich. However, as Richard J Evans implies this view is relevant for now and will be for sometime but in the future new ideas on Hitler might progress.

It is clear that there was a change in the power structure of Germany both before and after Hitler entered as chancellor. The Weimar republic had lost its title as democratic and Hitler only continued to build on this. However, whether it was him who would be the sole leader of the Third Reich is a well known debate between the intentionalist and the structuralists. Even though Ian Kershaw faces some criticism his interpretation of Hitler's leadership is accepted

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[87] Evans, Richard J.
[88] Evans, Richard J.

as being the current and modern one. By understanding the modern interpretation it can be applied as an answer to the research question; To what extent was Adolf Hitler the sole leader of the Third Reich? However, as more years pass a new interpretation might arise but for now Kershaw offers the best view of the extent of Hitler's leadership of the Third Reich.

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