

Hitler's Personal Security: Gaps and Contradictions

by
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INTRODUCTION

The world, certainly Europe, would look very different if in November 1938 the *Führer* and Reich Chancellor of Nazi Germany had been killed. Perhaps people would have regarded him as a "Great German," as a noted colleague has speculated; more important, the suffering, destruction and division resulting from the Second World War might have been avoided. It is well known that attempts to assassinate Hitler were made repeatedly, though it is probably less well known how many such attacks there were. At last count, no fewer than fourteen individuals made at least thirty separate, documented attempts to murder Hitler during the years 1933 to 1945. In the light of so much anti-Hitler energy, it seems reasonable and interesting to look at the circumstances in which Hitler survived all this hostility for so long. The author's interest in those circumstances grew out of a study of anti-Hitler activities, of the German Resistance and their efforts to do away with the Dictator. It soon became clear that the problems of Hitler's personal protection went far beyond those with which modern leaders ordinarily have to live, and that they had far greater implications, for they affected the lives of literally millions of people.

The obvious question was how Hitler survived the many attempts on his life. There were conflicting claims as to how easy or difficult it was for a would-be assassin to get close enough to Hitler for a chance to kill him. Former members of Hitler's staff maintain it was very easy, while survivors of the Resistance say the opposite. A closer look at Hitler's personal security will reveal an unprecedented level of precautions, and yet, at the same time, the very large number of attempts on the *Führer's* life. It will also shed some light on Hitler's character, and on the internal situation in Nazi Germany.

SURVEY OF ATTACKS

Most of the early attempts were made by individuals who took it upon themselves to defend a category of people which the Nazi regime considered enemies: Jews, Communists, political opponents in general. More often than not, a group of conspirators planned the attacks, but none of the plans originated in ordinary political or other non-clandestine organizations that had existed before Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933. The Communist and Socialist parties consistently rejected assassinations as acts of anarchism; they believed in mass action and agitation for bringing about political change. No plans are known to have originated in non-clandestine Jewish orga-

nizations or in one of the two main Christian churches. Individuals, however, did act, at their own discretion, regardless of affiliation with political organizations. A handful of individual Communists in Königsberg, who do not appear to have had the sanction of the Party, were among the first to plan and prepare an assassination attack against Hitler (after his appointment as Chancellor) during the Reichstag election campaign in March 1933. They were soon discovered and arrested. Other reports of assassination plans against Hitler reached the police in every year of Hitler's rule. The assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou on 9 October 1934 seems to have led to a rash of plans, rumors, and reports. In 1936 a Jewish student from Yugoslavia, Felix Frankfurter, who was studying medicine in Switzerland, wanted to kill Hitler, found no opportunity, and instead killed the Nazi *Landesgruppenleiter* in Switzerland, Wilhelm Gustloff. Another Jewish would-be attacker, the student Helmut Hirsch, came from Prague with dark thoughts, and with explosives in his suitcase, but was arrested before he could act. A Swiss Catholic theology student, Maurice Bavaud, stalked Hitler for several days in November 1938, near Hitler's alpine retreat in the Berchtesgaden area, and in Munich where he managed to be on one of the reviewing stands for the annual parade commemorating the 1923 Beerhall Putsch. An unforeseen and minor obstacle prevented his attack. When Hitler and his party approached, the SA men lined up in front of the reviewing stand, raising their arms for the salute, and preventing Bavaud from getting a clear view for a shot. In the same year, Georg Elser, a Swabian cabinet maker, and a Communist sympathizer, reconnoitred the same scene for his 1939 bomb attack in Munich's Burgerbrau beerhall. Conservative opponents of Hitler in high places, in the Foreign Office, in the military intelligence service, and in the Army High Command, soon joined by the Socialists, trade-union leaders and even church leaders, after 1939 also began planning to murder Hitler as the only way to halt his disastrous course. In the short term, however, the Nazi cause appeared glorious rather than disastrous and thus psychological conditions were thought to be unfavourable. Support for attempts to do away with Hitler increased in 1942, but some serious planning can be documented also for 1940 and 1941. A series of abortive attempts in 1943 and 1944 culminated on 20 July 1944.

THE BODYGUARD

From the days of his political beginnings, Hitler was usually accompanied by one or more friends who were both instant private audience and bodyguards. His driver of many years, Emil Maurice was bodyguard and friend on a certain level, and went to jail with Hitler after the 1923 putsch. Another, Ulrich Graf, stopped half-a-dozen bullets aimed at Hitler in the putsch by throwing himself before his leader. Maurice, Graf, Rudolf Hess and others were heroes of many an assembly-hall fight, and on public occasions, Hitler was pro-

tected by additional bodyguards. Still, it would be a mistake to see him as constantly surrounded by strong-arm characters, and shielded against any molesters. There were many occasions when he moved alone into hostile crowds, at times swinging the riding crop he liked to carry, and in one incident he rushed onto the speaker's rostrum to attack an antagonistic speaker. As much as he needed protection, he provoked dangers and attacks by the way he lived and behaved. This contradictory pattern continued throughout his career.

The bodyguard was more formally organized in February, 1932, when power seemed within reach. Eight men were selected from the SS, and two or three more, on appropriate occasions, were always near Hitler, stationing themselves outside his apartment, restaurant, hotel room or wherever he visited, while he was inside. This was continued after 30 January 1933, although from then on a criminal-police detail was assigned to Hitler as to every Chancellor. Hitler at first rejected their services while Lammers (State Secretary in the Reich Chancellery) and Himmler tried to press them on him. But in the course of the first year in power, Hitler gradually accepted these bodyguards, so that there were now two groups competing to protect the *Führer*: the *SS-Begleitkommando*, commanded by Bruno Gesche, and consisting of a growing number of husky SS men, including the valets and personal-staff SS officers (*Ordonnanz*); and, the criminal-police detail, composed mainly of officers from the political-police forces of the provinces, and soon unified administratively under Lammers and Himmler as the *Reichssicherheitsdienst* (RSD), commanded by Captain Rattenhuber. Usually six of each group, *SS-Begleitkommando* and RSD, accompanied Hitler on every outing, be it to the Reichstag, to a railway station, to an opera house, to a cabaret or nightclub, or to a restaurant. All attempts by Hitler's lieutenants, particularly Himmler, to gain control of the security details failed. Consistently, and to the very end, Hitler reserved for himself all decisions on appointments and dismissals, insisting on personally swearing in all new members and intervening even in salary decisions and the like. Personal loyalty and obligation were emphasized by elaborate swearing-in ceremonies, held always during the night of 8/9 November, in front of Munich's *Feldherrnhalle*.

The *SS-Begleitkommando* of 1932 were trusted fighters for the cause. Although new members were not in every case also members of the NSDAP (Nazi Party), their membership in the SS, an organization of the NSDAP, was regarded as sufficient. Most, but not all, RSD officers had NSDAP memberships. Up to 1 May 1937, only about half of some one hundred RSD officers were members. The total number of RSD officers grew from forty-five in 1935 to two hundred in 1939, and about four hundred by the end of 1944. Approximately the same figures hold true for the *SS-Begleitkommando*.

Besides these two groups, a military guard detachment was assigned as Hitler's personal escort for travel during the war: the *Führer-Begleit-Bataillon* (it grew in time to regimental and brigade strength).

Several, less formalized protective groups were in existence as well, such as one in the Reich Chancellery and a construction workers' security group on Obersalzberg. Security seemed abundant.

And yet, the *SS-Begleitkommando* could not even prevent the theft of Hitler's Mercedes car in Munich in 1932 while he was in a cafe. Two of the *SS-Begleitkommando's* commanders were drunkards. Gildisch was removed from command in 1934, and went on to become the murderer of Dr. Klausener during the Röhm massacre. Gesche, Gildisch's successor, managed to hang on until January 1945, with temporary suspensions for drunkenness, indiscipline, and shooting wildly in the *Führer's* Headquarters. Emil Maurice, the driver and bodyguard of the 1920s, turned out, in 1935, to be of Jewish descent. However, because of his services in the early years of the struggle, Hitler ordered that Maurice must not be harmed and must be allowed to remain in the SS, in spite of Himmler's strong objections. He received promotions and survived the war. Another dubious leader, in 1945, of Hitler's personal SS guard was *SS-Brigadeführer* Mohnke who was reported to be a morphinist. Martin Bormann complained vigorously to Hitler that the SS guards were too old, and had achieved ranks too high to be effective as ordinary bodyguards, but Hitler replied he would never let any of them go, never mind effectiveness. The RSD and *Führer-Begleit-Bataillon* were not plagued by individual corruption, and it is fair to say that the RSD did a professional job of preventive detection and protection. Their efforts were often defeated by Hitler himself as he disregarded simple precautions, and certainly during his visits to the fronts he was usually in considerable danger. His military guard could not prevent his motor column from being shot at by snipers in Poland and they were helpless in February 1943 when, while Hitler was in conference with Field-Marshal von Manstein at Saporoshe (Army Group Don), Russian tanks nearly overran the airfield where the *Führer's* Condor was parked. In March 1943, near Smolensk, on a visit to Kluge's Army Group Centre HQ, a plot to shoot Hitler failed only because he refused to take a suggested, prepared, and specially "guarded" path, where the "guards" were to shoot him.

SECURITY AND TRAVEL

Ambiguity of security measures is encountered also when one looks at means of transportation, and at public appearances. Hitler used heavy, armoured Mercedes Benz cars almost exclusively, and they bristled with bodyguards with pistols and machine guns, although the cars were almost always convertibles with the tops down. In the narrow streets of Nürnberg, a bomb or handgrenade might have been hurled into the car. During announced public appearances, the routes were lined with police, Gestapo, SS, SA and other guard units, houses were searched, roofs were manned with observers, parked cars were removed, manholes and sandboxes and construction sites were looked into, while mailboxes, underpasses, sewage tunnels, telephone booths

and public toilets were not forgotten. Still, only the occupation of all buildings and structures along Hitler's route could have provided good security and there is no evidence that this was ever done. Consequently the British Military Attaché in Berlin, who lived at no. 1 Sophienstrasse, could propose in 1939 shooting Hitler while he reviewed a parade from his customary reviewing stand, opposite the Institute of Technology. From the Attaché's bathroom window, one would have had a clear shot but Whitehall turned down the unorthodox proposition.

Spontaneous, unannounced appearances held the advantage that secrecy, always stressed but difficult to enforce, could be maintained. On the other hand, problems with certain factors became worse. Hasty and spotty security checks, or no checks at all, were done and there was always the chance of a concentration of persons with reasons for an attack. In August 1944, Hitler visited Carlshof Field Hospital near "Wolfschanze," where some of those injured in the 20 July bomb attack were dying or recovering. As he drove in and out in his open convertible, several dozen war-wounded, some horribly maimed, crowded against the automobile. Hitler could not avoid contact with military men, and still conduct the war, but this visit exposed him to danger unnecessarily, as if to dare someone to try to kill him.

There were gaps and contradictions in regulations governing rail travel. Elaborate advance security was always necessary when Hitler used his special train. It had to be fitted into the schedule, stations had to be cleared, and barriers had to be lowered at road crossings. Thousands of railway employees had to be informed of the impending passage of the special train, all railway installations had to be guarded closely and, depending on the distance to be travelled, thousands of railway police were deployed. During the war, elements of the *Führer-Begleit-Bataillon* were added to the police contingent. Points of particular sensitivity such as bridges and tunnels were generally occupied an hour before passage of the train. All this necessarily destroyed secrecy, an indispensable element of all security. To preserve the train and its passenger against these odds, the special or duplicate was sent down the line on ghost runs at irregular intervals, requiring all the railroad men and railway police to be at their posts, never knowing whether they protected a train carrying Hitler or his entourage, or an empty facsimile. To aid safety and security, a locomotive carrying the respective regional chiefs of railway operations always preceded the *Führersonderzug* by ten minutes. The train itself included an armoured car with anti-aircraft batteries at the front and rear, although it is not known whether or not Hitler's pullman was armoured; it was blown up by German pioneers in May 1945. When the trains had to stop *en route* (to maintain safe distances to other trains, for example) or when Hitler was recognized while looking out of his window, the public often gathered at stations down the line, after someone telephoned ahead. Such crowds, gathering spontaneously, were impossible to control without considerable advance warning; all stations would have had to be sealed off, or security cordons set up in them—

an almost impossible undertaking over hundreds of kilometres. Photographs taken by the court photographers show Hitler reaching down from his open window to accept flowers in June 1940. A bomb could have been hurled inside, or Hitler might have had his arm twisted out of its socket by an enthusiastic well-wisher.

On the whole, and for long-distance travel, Hitler preferred flying to other modes of transportation. Air travel offered better chances of maintaining secrecy, for in those days very few people had to be informed when a plane was in the air, and there were no crowds, crossings, buildings, nor hundreds of kilometres of railway along which bombs might be planted. Nevertheless, the ordinary risks of air travel were not small. Many times Captain Baur, Hitler's pilot, was not sure he would manage to get the plane safely through fog, darkness, muddy airfields, loss of radio contact and orientation, engine failure, lack of fuel, or other malfunctions. Once a wheel nearly caught fire when the brake accidentally jammed, and only an unusually short runway prevented a fatal accident. During the war, the danger of enemy attack was added, and in fact Baur had a number of close calls though never when Hitler was on board. Hitler's seat contained a parachute that he could put on by slipping into straps in the back support of the seat, and in front of his seat in his Focke Wulf Condor 200 there was a steel trap door which could be dropped by pulling a red lever, so that Hitler could jump out. Aircraft used by Hitler were guarded day and night by special SS and Gestapo details. Before every one of Hitler's flights, his plane was taken up to a certain altitude for a ten-minute test flight to check all functions and to insure that no devices set to detonate *en route* had been planted. The prevailing thinking was that such devices would depend on pressure; still, the test flight was no safeguard against a time bomb like that of Tresckow and Schlabrendorff (13 March 1943).

SERIOUS ATTEMPTS

During the war, most assassination plots with reasonable chances of success were prepared by people who had or could hope for legitimate access to Hitler's personal presence. Security at Hitler's residences and in announced or planned public appearances was so tight that clandestine entry was nearly impossible, except by accident, or under the perfect disguise of legitimate business. In 1942, a colonel got off the train a stop too soon and found himself inside "Wolf-schanze," without being challenged at all; in 1943, a Polish woman wandered all the way from the east-end to the west-end of "Wolf-schanze," and she was stopped only at the west gate. Checkpoints, passes and guards of course could not stop an assassin who was a legitimate "insider" unless and until he uncovered himself. The insider's advantages are obvious; he could stalk his victim inconspicuously. There was one attempt by an outsider, however, in the very first months of the war, that came within a hair's breadth of success. While Stauffenberg offers the best example for an insider's oppor-

tunities, Georg Elser, the Swabian cabinet maker, illustrated the advantages and disadvantages encountered by the outsider.

Elser was successful in defeating security, firstly, because it was lax. It was generally less perfect than it became after his attack, and it had always been particularly poor at the site he chose. The *Bürgerbräukeller* was not guarded and secured according to the comprehensive methods developed in the 1930s for other places of public appearances, such as the building where the Reichstag met, or the Berlin sportpalast. Unlike these and other places, the *Bürgerbräukeller* was not guarded and searched in advance by agents assigned to Hitler's personal-security forces. It was not guarded at all until only hours before an expected appearance by Hitler, and even then it was not thoroughly searched. When the question had been raised in the 1930s, Hitler had declared he needed no special security precautions when he was in the midst of his old fellow fighters to commemorate the 1923 putsch. Local Party roughnecks, veterans of the early battles and of the Röhm massacre, particularly Christian Weber, were in charge of security in Munich, and their performance in security matters was most unprofessional. Rattenhuber did not have control of security at the *Bürgerbräukeller* until the minute Hitler arrived. Elser was thus able to spend as many as thirty-five nights in August, September and October 1939, hidden on the balcony inside the large beerhall, working away at a cavity in the pillar in front of which Hitler always stood for his speech. Night after night, he ate supper in the restaurant downstairs, wandered upstairs and disappeared until closing time. Then he worked, dozed off for an hour or two, and left by the backyard exit, carrying a small suitcase with the debris from inside the pillar. His appearance—he was short, grey, insignificant—helped him. A few days before the event, Elser installed his bomb and two clocks set to detonate about an hour into Hitler's speech which usually lasted over two hours. Elser got this far because security was almost non-existent until hours before the event, and because he worked alone and a one-man conspiracy could hardly be infiltrated. Elser's isolation, a factor in his near-success, was also an important reason for his failure for he could not have known that Hitler wanted to be back in Berlin by the next morning, that the pilot could not guarantee a flight because the heavy fog common at this time of year could not be expected to lift much before noon, and that Hitler had therefore decided to take his special train. The train was scheduled to leave Munich at 21.31 and Hitler had to leave the *Bürgerbräu* about fifteen minutes earlier. He did leave the hall at 21.07, and Elser's bomb went off at 21.20, killing seven people on the spot.

After 8 November 1939, security was vastly increased and not only at the *Bürgerbräukeller*. There was a flurry of orders and recri-minations, and finally, on 9 March 1940, *SS-Gruppenführer* Heydrick as *Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD im RSHA* issued new, comprehensive guidelines. RSD and Gestapo efforts at preventive detection were coordinated (with much greater authority going to Rattenhuber). The *Bürgerbräukeller* and all similar sites were put under year-round

watch, and for weeks before Hitler's expected appearances, they were closely guarded, and searched thoroughly and repeatedly. Hitler continued to appear in public by surprise, and on such occasions an assassin who was prepared and happened to be there could have had an excellent chance, but it was a matter of chance. As Hitler spent most of his days in his military field headquarters or at his Obersalzberg retreat, and since he never followed any set routine (such as Heydrich's daily travels to and from his office in Prague in 1942), an outsider had no chance of preparing an assassination attack methodically. On the other hand, there was no protection against an attack by one of the many high-ranking military officers whom Hitler saw almost every day of the war, unless the wider nets thrown out by the Gestapo and SD hauled him in, penetrating his conspiratorial circle before he was allowed into Hitler's presence.

Claus Graf Stauffenberg, a Colonel in July 1944 and Chief of Staff to *Generaloberst* Fromm, the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army, was a leader of the military and civilian conspiracy against Hitler, and in his official capacity he had access to Hitler, seeing Hitler face to face for the first time in his life in June 1944. Stauffenberg carried a briefcase full of explosives into Hitler's presence on no less than three occasions: 11 July, 15 July, and 20 July 1944. On 6 July 1944 he also had the explosives with him, in Hitler's "Berghof" Headquarters, near Berchtesgaden; at that time he was perhaps still hoping that *Generalmajor* Stieff, Head of the General Staff Organization Section in OKH and a co-conspirator with access, might carry out the attempt. (Much was to be said for someone other than Stauffenberg making the attack: Stauffenberg was an invalid, one-eyed and with only one hand with three fingers. Moreover, for a reasonably swift and smooth *coup d'état*, his presence in Berlin at the moment of attack would have been important, as later events showed.) On 11 July at the "Berghof," Stauffenberg did not set off his bomb because Göring and Himmler were not at the conference with Hitler and the senior conspirators had insisted that these two must be killed at the same time as Hitler. On 15 July, Stauffenberg again attended conferences with Hitler, this time at "Wolfschanze" where the Headquarters had been moved on 14 July, and again the absence of Göring and Himmler was the obstacle. (Much could be said on this point, but in this context, only the security aspect can be considered.) On 20 July, Stauffenberg carried his briefcase full of explosives into Hitler's immediate presence for the third time, entirely unsuspected. This time he had decided to ignite the charge regardless of whether Göring and Himmler were present. His material required that he have a few private moments with his aide just before going to Hitler's conference. Thus, he had to start the ten-minute chemical fuse as he managed, under a pretext, to be alone in a room with his aide just before the crucial conference. Stauffenberg had brought with him two packages, of two pounds each of plastic explosive. Both were fitted with chemical delay fuses, one for a ten minutes' delay, the other for a thirty minutes' delay. If one exploded, the same flash would cause the second package to explode,

and it was assumed this was what Stauffenberg intended for no other use for the second package is conceivable. While he was pressing the acid capsule of the ten minutes' fuse in the one package, an orderly came into the room and said Stauffenberg was to hurry up, the conference had begun. In this moment, Stauffenberg must have thought himself discovered, as the orderly remained standing at the door, looking in. No one knows what went through Stauffenberg's mind; but he did leave behind half of the explosive, the second package, he had brought with him to Hitler's Headquarters, going off with only two pounds of explosive in his briefcase. He had no trouble taking this to the conference room, and leaving it there, under the great map table, while withdrawing on a pretext. The bomb exploded in due course, killing four and wounding Hitler lightly. The police experts of the commission investigating the circumstances of the attack believed everyone in the room would have been killed had four pounds been detonated instead of two. No planned security measures had prevented the success of the attack. In fact, security was so poor at this moment that Stauffenberg, against all odds, managed to pass through the two inner security cordons after the explosion, although in such a situation regulations required that everything be sealed tight. He too had the advantage of his appearance: he looked most impressive and inspired awe and respect, and so was able to bluff his way out.

Security was again increased considerably. Identity checks were intensified. Fewer persons were allowed into the *Führerhauptquartier* and those who came had to leave all weapons outside. Even a physician who came to treat Hitler for ear and throat complaints was forced to empty his satchel and pockets and to leave behind a number of medicine bottles and other items, and the bulb of his otoscope was screwed out and inspected.

For a while SS guards complemented the *Führer-Begleit-Bataillon* in the inner compound. Some of these new measures were soon relaxed, however; after all, the field marshals could hardly be subjected to a search of their persons, and members of the inner circle, such as Albert Speer, were never searched, and could well have brought along plastic explosives, a knife, or even a revolver. X-ray detection devices were discussed but not installed. Visitors from the fronts, or from headquarters departments, only had to allow guards to examine their briefcases, and some visitors stopped carrying them to avoid this indignity. The security gaps continued, but searches revealed bizarre gaps in some cases. A captain in Ribbentrop's staff had taken literally regulations saying that top secret documents must be destroyed when in danger of falling into unauthorized hands, and so he always carried in his briefcase, along with his papers, a bottle of gasoline and a handgrenade. One can well imagine the alarm the discovery caused the guards who, after 20 July 1944, examined the captain's briefcase. He was informed that he must never again take this kind of precaution when coming to the *Führerhauptquartier*.

SUMMARY

In the end, in the Reich Chancellery bunker in Berlin, Hitler directed the final phase of the struggle from this centre of danger, refusing to remove himself to safety. In March 1945, he paid a last visit to the eastern front, now on the Oder river, and on 20 April he received a dozen or so young soldiers who were expected to defend Berlin to the last man. While they were dying in the streets of Berlin, Hitler took his own life down in the bunker.

A great deal of personal security can be offered to a head of government or head of state, but much depends on his own cooperation. Hitler himself believed that he owed his survival through the years to accident, luck and Providence more than to the efforts of those concerned with his security, yet he permitted and caused the constant increase of security precautions. Although he often said there was no real protection against a fanatic, and although he always understood how much he depended upon popular support, he outlined to Albert Speer the plans for a new Reich Chancellery, to be built as a fortress, as protection from "riots" if he was "forced to take unpopular measures." The new Chancellery was also to be flanked by SS barracks, but, on reflection, Hitler decided to have the Army Guard Battalion billeted even closer than the SS Guards. He appeared unsure whom to distrust more, the Army or the SS.

A liberal state in which human life is highest on the scale of values cannot provide the same degree of security measures for its leaders and prominent persons as a dictatorship and police state. But there are startling limits to the security that a police state can offer. In fact, Hitler rightly felt endangered, or conversely, protected only by Providence, which amounted to the same thing. Hitler's dilemma, his indecision whether to rely more on the SS or on the Army for his personal security, and the constant, but useless, intensifications of security point up the most profound gap and contradiction of all, the one of which Hitler was very conscious: he was a destroyer of men, and the number of his enemies and potential assassins could only grow and grow, the more he killed. The quest for greater security also reached limits beyond which security diminished, as when security was required as protection against potential dangers originating from the security forces themselves, and, as when the ruler became so isolated from his people that he lost—in the case of demagogues and tribunes like Hitler—the very basis of his power to rule.

Editorial Note

*This paper is a condensation of material presented by the author in two book-length works, and was originally presented as a paper for the Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War. For references and further explanation please consult the author's *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1977), esp. parts VI-VII; and, *Hitler's Personal Security* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; London: Macmillan Press, 1978), originally published as *Die Sicherheit des Diktators* (Munich, Zurich: Piper & Co., 1975).