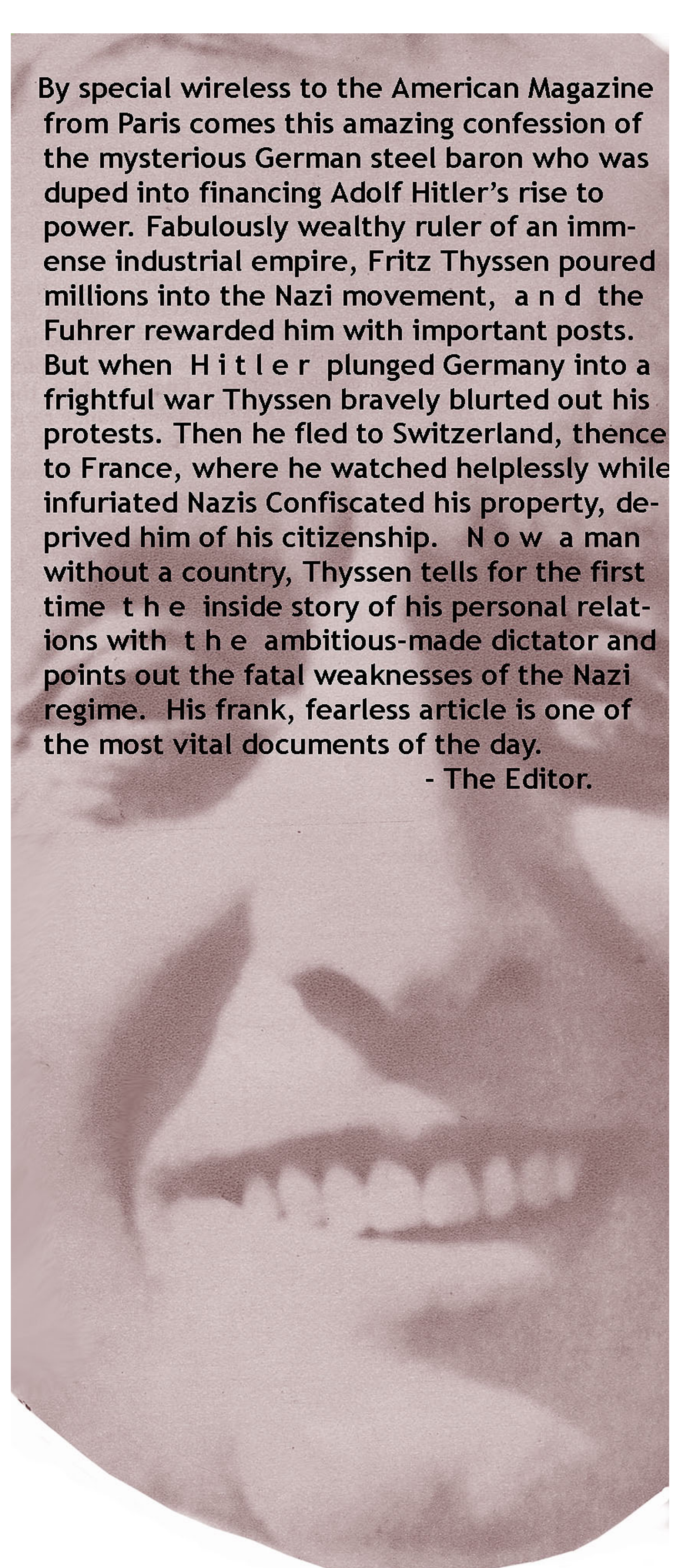




By special wireless to the American Magazine from Paris comes this amazing confession of the mysterious German steel baron who was duped into financing Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Fabulously wealthy ruler of an immense industrial empire, Fritz Thyssen poured millions into the Nazi movement, and the Fuhrer rewarded him with important posts. But when Hitler plunged Germany into a frightful war Thyssen bravely blurted out his protests. Then he fled to Switzerland, thence to France, where he watched helplessly while infuriated Nazis Confiscated his property, deprived him of his citizenship. Now a man without a country, Thyssen tells for the first time the inside story of his personal relations with the ambitious-made dictator and points out the fatal weaknesses of the Nazi regime. His frank, fearless article is one of the most vital documents of the day.

- The Editor.

I MADE A MISTAKE WHEN

**I backed
Hitler**

by Fritz Thyssen

OldMagazineArticles.com



I HELPED Hitler to power. I believed he would do good for Germany. I made a mistake. I am not now crying out my confession or *mea culpa* for the world's sympathy. But I hope there is a lesson to be learned from my experience. America is a great industrial country; American industry is facing many problems. Dictatorship and complete domination of economic life by the state are offered as solutions. Believe me, these are no remedies.

I am not a politician; I am an industrialist, primarily interested in steel. Yet at a certain critical period in Germany I joined others in seeking a strong man.

Hitler has been described as a tool of German industrialists who sought to crush labor in Germany and dominate the world. That was not my aim. As one of the leaders of the German industrialists I wanted a Germany restored to legitimate self-respect and at peace internally and externally. I feared

"Hitler probably will end up by being the greatest Bolshevik of them all"

the spread of Communism. Therefore I helped finance the Nazi movement.

Today Germany has lost the world's respect. Hitler has plunged her into an unjustified war which Germany cannot win. And Hitler is opening the gateway to Bolshevism. I was deceived in the man, as millions of others were deceived. Hitler seldom kept his word. Once the German people understand how they have been betrayed they will do the right thing. They will get rid of him.

I may have seemed a fool to believe Hitler. I thought he was sincere. Perhaps he was temporarily. But he was all things to all men, promising everything on the spur of the moment, seldom remembering his pledges. His air of sincerity impressed me; it fooled even Sir Henri Deterding, perhaps the coldest-blooded businessman in the world, who fell temporarily under his spell.

(Deterding, who died in 1939, was the powerful general director of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company. In 1936 he

"I Backed Hitler"

gave thousands of dollars' worth of cattle and farm products to the Nazi government as a contribution to the war against Communism.)

Hitler has an insistent quality which passes for honesty. But the tragedy of Hitler is in reality the tragedy of one-man rule. Unless there is a check to the powers of a single individual, you not only have dictatorship, but ill-advised action and inefficiency. Hitler did not consult his ministers for the Reichstag about going to war. Therefore he blundered. He did not tolerate the best brains in industry and the economic life of the country. Therefore he has gone to extremes in the social system which is leading to Bolshevism.

I met Hitler for the first time in 1923. I had been leader of the passive resistance to the French occupation of the Ruhr. (*Court-martialed by the French, Thyssen became a national hero for successfully refusing to obey foreign orders.*) When that resistance ended I went to Munich to see Ludendorff, who, in the eyes of many Germans then, was the hero trying to rebuild the nation. (*General Erich F. W. Ludendorff, World War hero who died in 1937, started organizing nationalist and anti-Semitic groups soon after the war.*)

Hitler's movement was just getting under way. The novelty of the Nazis, with their semimilitary formations, parading, and music, were exciting the people; they seemed like a fantastic type of Salvation Army. Hitler as a speaker was amazing. I asked him how he achieved such success addressing people.

"Goering was annoyed with the ex-Kaiser. He did not like the cigars Wilhelm gave him"

He said, "I don't know, but after ten minutes, like a band leader, I usually everything is all right."

Ludendorff arranged my first meeting with Hitler at the home of a mutual friend. What a different character Hitler was then! He was deferential and anxious to learn. You may not believe me, but he had a sense of humor, actually telling many jokes. On this occasion he related a funny story of how he collected arms without paying for them, since he had little money.

“I Backed Hitler”

Those were days of dramatic political intrigue; many soldiers and officers demobilized had retained their arms, and the police were constantly on the search for hidden weapons. Many officers and soldiers went to Hitler to ask him to hide their arms. But when they came back for them Hitler laughed and shook his head. He told me, “I would say to them, ‘Sorry, but they belong to me now,’ and they never dared protest” (obviously), and Hitler roared.

Some time later an appeal was made to me to help the movement. Hitler had just bought the Brown House in Munich (*imposing Nazi party headquarters*) and at the time was in serious financial difficulties over (*Continued on page 87*)

“There is a belief that Hitler is a strong man. He is not... Never was a war so recklessly started”

the mortgage. Hess, who is now Deputy Fuehrer, appealed for assistance. (*Rudolf Hess, early and devoted friend of Hitler, will become German Fuehrer if Hitler and Goering are killed.*) I agreed to finance Hitler, but on the following basis:

Most of the money advanced to him or the party was given in the form of a loan.

This loan was arranged through a bank in a foreign country.

The loan was intended to be repaid through this foreign bank. As a German industrialist I did not want to make a loan available to the Nazis through a German bank. Hitler agreed to this arrangement through the foreign bank. But most of this loan has never been repaid.

When the Nazis came to power I felt I could no longer give money for the party, directly or indirectly. That would be corruption. Little did I realize what corruption existed in the Nazi party after it gripped Germany.

In November, 1923, the abortive Hitler-Ludendorff Putsch took place in Munich; Hitler went to prison (*where he dictated to Hess his explosive autobiography, “Mein Kampf”*) and I did not see him for four years. Hitler later quarreled with Ludendorff as a result of this Putsch, and I sided with Ludendorff, refusing aid to Hitler. But when the Young Plan (*the scheme worked out in 1929 under Owen D. Young to enable Germany to pay war reparations*) was imposed on Germany there was new despair among the people. The Young Plan gave fresh life to the Nazi movement. I believed all nationalist parties should unite to form a strong government. I urged the conservative ele-

“I Backed Hitler”

ments to join Hitler, hoping thereby to curb some of the extremists in the movement.

HITLER became Chancellor (*in January, 1933*). He was head of a coalition government. But he gained full power as a dictator through a fraud. The Nazi claim that the Communists set fire to the Reichstag (*on the night of February 27, 1933*) was the lie which induced the Reichstag and old President Hindenburg to suspend certain prerogatives and give full powers to Hitler. (*General Paul von Hindenburg, World War hero, was president of the German Republic from 1925 until his death in 1934.*)

Undoubtedly the Nazis themselves burned the Reichstag. Goering took my wife and me over the gutted building to show us the damage. He tried to make me believe the fire was the work of a Communist. Now, Goering holds one of the biggest decorations a soldier can hold; therefore I believed him. I know better now. (*Hermann Goering, mammoth No. 2 Nazi, heads the German air ministry, directs industry, will succeed Hitler if the latter dies.*)

When Hitler assumed full powers, he disregarded the German constitution and his promises. Few realize that the constitution of the German Republic has never been formally abolished. (*The Weimar Constitution was the foundation of the Republic which was created out of Kaiser Wilhelm II's empire after the World War.*) Mussolini completed his revolution, establishing a legal basis and procedure for promulgation of new laws. Hitler never did that; he rules by decrees having only the sanction of brute force.

The German constitution still exists. The government succeeding the Nazi regime has only to declare Nazi decrees unconstitutional and find at first hand a legal instrument to carry on the state.

When, as member of the Reichstag, I protested against Hitler's war (*Last fall Thyssen sent letters of protest from Switzerland to both Hitler and Goering on the war against Poland and the Nazi-Soviet alliance. He says that German agents promised him financial security and personal independence if he withdrew his protests—but he refused to abandon his ideals for pay.*) I did so on the grounds that the Reichstag has a right to be consulted. Hitler talked only to a few henchmen around him who dared not oppose his will. Such procedure is more than dictatorship. It is anarchy; it is Nihilism; Hitler is the greatest Nihilist of all times. He is a man who believes in nothing because he remains true to nothing but his whims. That is the danger arising from dictatorship.

ON BECOMING head of the government, Hitler asked me to organize the new Social State. I proposed the establishment of a corporate system. This is a system by which industries are organized and conducted by co-operative rule of three elements: representatives of industrialists or employers,

“I Backed Hitler”

representatives of the workers or organized industrial unions, and representatives of the state. I based my ideas of a Corporate State on the Papal Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, which is a great human document. (*Leo XIII, Pope from 1878 to 1903, is famous for his 1891 encyclical outlining the social rights of labor.*)

Instructing me, Hitler said, “The Political State was born in Munich. The Industrial State will have its birth in Dusseldorf.” It was at Dusseldorf I began my work with some friends. I hoped to inaugurate a great and successful social experiment. But I had difficulties from the start. Some industrialists, of course, wanted to go back to the old days when workers had no say in industry. But there is no turning the clock back. The real trouble began when Hitler yielded to the radical Bolshevik element of the Nazi party under Doctor Ley. (*Most radical of the Nazis, Robert Ley heads the workers’ organizations.*)

Ley favored one big union to dominate all industries together. One big union is an easy device for radicals to take over control, for it is loose and unwieldy, and energetic extremist elements find it easy to take charge, exploiting and holding in line the great masses of workers. Ley’s theories are leading to Bolshevism in Germany. By supporting Ley against previous instructions to create the corporate system, Hitler paved the way to Moscow.

Thus, within a year of taking over power and entrusting to me the framing of a new economic state, Hitler wrecked this work. I realized the danger Germany faced. I did not remain silent. I have never been Hitler’s yes man. My protest against the war was not my first protest, although I now had to be more open in my opposition.

I felt an attack on Poland meant war with England and France.

I believed war against Poland a crime when a solution by compromise was possible. Even Goering favored co-operation with Poland. Only a short while before, he had gone to Poland to offer an alliance against Russia. He suggested Poland and Germany should divide Russia. Unfortunately for Goering and Hitler, Poland was suspicious. For in the background of the Nazi regime is Rosenberg, Nazi’s racial philosopher, who wanted a separate Ukraine under the domination of Germany. (*Alfred Rosenberg, editor of Hitler’s personal newspaper, Volkische Beobachter, directs the so-called Nazi philosophy.*) To establish such a state meant breaking up Poland. How can you trust Hitler, when at one period he wants to ally himself with Poland to divide Russia, and then allies himself with Russia to divide Poland?

The French and British sought an understanding with Germany. But Hitler simply went mad. The Versailles Treaty was wrong; but you cannot right old wrongs by creating new ones. The French, I am certain, would

“I Backed Hitler”

never have willfully attacked Germany.

The French are concerned about their security. I understand that. Hitler's action justified French fears. I informed Goering that Germany was not prepared for war. Never was a war so recklessly started and with less industrial preparation. My protests and objections made no impression.

THERE is a belief Hitler is a strong man. He is not. His weakness regarding his party is the tragedy of the Third Reich. He says that the party should govern the state. But nobody knows who or what the party is. I was a member of the party, but I have never been consulted as such. Every *Gauleiter*—as the District Leader is known—or small official, pretends he is the party, and people in his district are compelled to obey.

Hitler is a great procrastinator. Not only in the economic but in the political field, he allows matters to drift, often delaying decision, frequently reversing his course. Hitler pledged the restoration of the Hohenzollerns. He told me, “I am the peacemaker of the Emperor. I open the way for the Hohenzollerns. I will bring back the monarchy.”

Hitler sent Goering to see the ex-Kaiser at Doorn. (*Wilhelm fled to Holland when the German war machine cracked at the close of the World War.*) The Field Marshal, who spent almost a week with the former emperor, later boasted he was able to saw more wood than Wilhelm could, despite Wilhelm's practice of many years. But the visit produced an amazing hitch. Goering was annoyed with the ex-Kaiser. He did not like the cigars Wilhelm gave him. Wilhelm apparently smoked one special kind and served another brand to his guests. I don't know how they arrange such things in the Imperial household, but that such a trifle could prejudice those in control of a great nation reveals the pettiness of the Nazi leaders.

Hitler then played with the idea of creating a monarchy on British lines, with limited constitutional powers. Such a monarch, we who supported Hitler thought, would be a good thing for the German people. For this, Hitler favored the son of the ex-Kaiser's only daughter. But it was not long before he threw overboard completely the idea of a monarchy. He found his own absolute personal rule too much to his liking to share with anyone but yes men. Hitler is a man who yields to the lowest passions of the Nazi machine, an organization run by *Gauleiters*, or District Leaders.

The Fuehrer himself told me how the *Gauleiters* once complained that Furtwaengler was playing music by Jewish composers. (*A quarrel between Wilhelm Furtwaengler, noted German symphonic and operatic conductor, and the Nazis was patched up in 1935.*)

“I sent for Furtwaengler,” Hitler related. “I informed him of the protests that he occasionally played music by Mendelssohn

“I Backed Hitler”

and other Jewish composers. I said, ‘You are paid by the State. The Nazi party is now the State; you must therefore obey Nazi wishes, especially about the Jews. After all, suppose I fell in love with a Jewish girl, as I might, and wanted to marry her. As the leader of the National Socialist party, I could not. Therefore you must stop playing Jewish music.’”

Even Goering fears the *Gauleiters*.

When the terrible pogrom took place in Germany on November 9, 1938, I protested to Goering. (*Jewish persecution spread through Germany when Herschel Grynszpan, 17, a Polish Jew, fatally wounded Ernst vom Rath in the German embassy in Paris on November 7, 1938.*) I had always opposed the anti-religious and anti-Semitic policy of the Nazis. As a Catholic I will never agree to Catholics again being treated in Germany as they are treated today.

ON THIS shameful November day, I resigned as State Counselor. The disgraceful pillaging and beating up of the Jews was too much for any decent man. I was not going to lend my name behind which such a deed could be hidden, as I would not lend my name behind which Hitler could go to war.

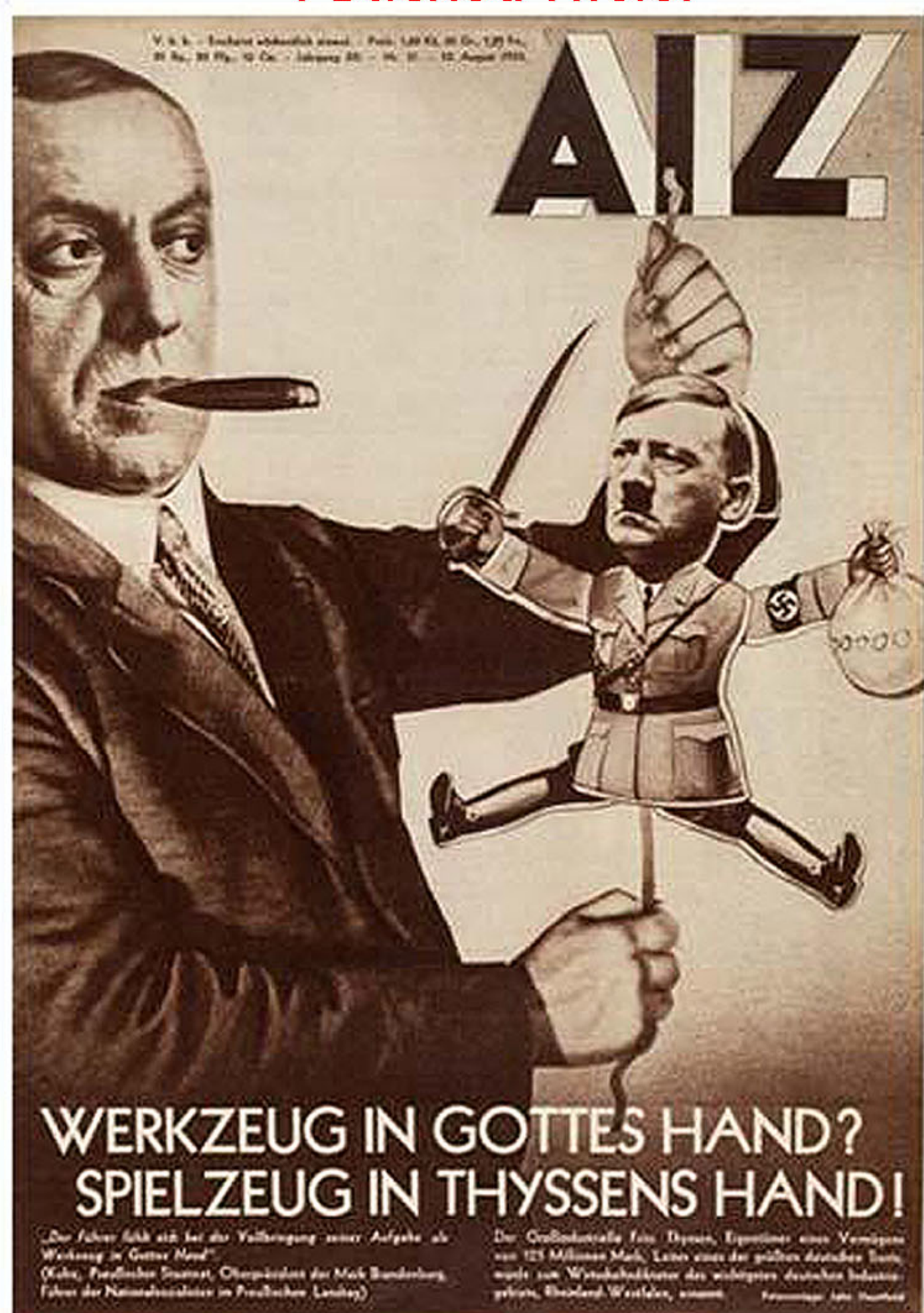
Goering was bitter in his answer to my letter of resignation. Through a member of his entourage sent me as special envoy he said, “Do you think I approve of what has happened? You should know better.” But he added he could do nothing against the *Gauleiters*.

Hitler had been worked up into fury by extremists over the assassination of the German diplomat in Paris by a young Jew. (*Grynszpan’s trial has been postponed until after the war.*) With his usual careless and criminal indifference to details, the Fuehrer shouted that the German government must be strong and ruthless in maintaining order against the Jews. This was the signal for the *Gauleiters* of various provinces—with the exception, as far as I know, of only the Hamburg *Gauleiter*—to instigate the terrible pogrom. And Goering, Hitler’s proclaimed heir to power, was helpless before the extremists, or feigned helplessness.

The full story of Hitler’s rise to power will some day be told. For the moment, I am concerned in lifting only a part of the curtain of the past. After all, I am not anxious to intrude with my personal story, except as it serves as an example. I have no sympathy with certain capitalists who think they can go back to the day of *laissez faire*, of industrial exploitation without regard to the welfare of the people. That age is gone forever. The State must intervene when men think only of their own profits.

But too much interference by the State means interference by men ignorant of economic life. It means dictatorship and the playing into the hands of vicious or ignorant men or extremists. I sought a liberal co-operative system allowing for initiative and

“I Backed Hitler”



“Thyssen Pulls the Strings” by John Hartfield (1930)

operative system allowing for initiative and profit for individuals, whose seeking of profit could be turned to the advantage of all people.

I foolishly believed Hitler would agree to all this. I believed he would follow my idea of industrial self-government, without which no modern society can maintain the essential freedom and rights of the people.

Americans thinking of their own economic and industrial problems should pause before rushing to dictatorship or planned economy, such as Germany or Russia has today. A single man or a few men or a government, ruling by decree, will lead nations and people and the world to disaster. Unless a leader of a government has the countercheck of a parliament or congress, and a high court to protect the rights of men, which is really the greatest and perhaps the best point in the American Constitution, danger is ahead.

American

July, 1940: p. 17