

THE FÜHRER'S FOOD

Complicating all of this, of course, was the fact that Hitler himself was a vegetarian, of sorts. This singular fact assumed striking proportions given the premium put on body and "lifestyle" politics by both Nazis and vegetarians; it has also become something of an embarrassment for non-meat eaters ever since (which I am not, I should confess). Hitler's vegetarianism crops up often in postwar discussions of food and animal rights, but also of antisemitism and much else as well. What were the Führer's eating habits, and what do they tell us about the Nazi movement?

Postwar Russian forensic experts examining body parts from a shallow grave outside Hitler's bunker confirmed that the skull in question—purportedly the Führer's—had the yellow color "typical of a vegetarian."³⁵ Hitler's vegetarianism was remarked on prior even to 1933, however, when the Führer-to-be's personal asceticism was held up as the model Nazi lifestyle. Foreigners eventually took note, recording also some apparent backsliding. Otto D. Tolischus in 1937 in the *New York Times* pointed out that the Führer was a vegetarian who "does not drink or smoke" but who also "occasionally relishes a slice of ham" along with delicacies such as caviar and chocolates.³⁶ Postwar observers have often—and understandably—used this to question whether Hitler was in fact a vegetarian.³⁷

Food was clearly important to the Führer, though. He was intrigued by the possibility of a diet consisting entirely of uncooked fruits, grains, and vegetables, and often raised this topic with friends and subordinates. Shortly after taking office, for example, he arranged a meeting with an eighty-year-old woman from Bad Godesberg ("known up and down the Rhine as the *Seniorin* of vegetarianism, cold-water cures, and herbal healing") to discuss the benefits of a vegetarian diet. That same day, when his Gestapo chief tried to broach with him the need to simplify the party's complicated bureaucratic structure, Hitler responded that there were "far more important things than politics—reforming

the human lifestyle, for example. What this old woman told me this morning is far more important than anything I can do in my life."³⁸

Hitler later claimed that humans had once lived longer than they do today, the change coming not just from the shift to meat but also from the "sterilization" of food through cooking, resulting in "diseases of civilization" (*Kulturkrankheiten*). Cancer was such a disease: "and though we still don't know what causes cancer, it may be that whatever does becomes active only when the body is not properly nourished." Humans in his view had started eating meat only when Ice Age conditions forced them to; cooking had also arisen about this time. The Nazi push for raw fruits and vegetables had begun to reverse this trend, "revolutionizing" eating (*"Die Rohkost war eine Revolution!"*). Hitler doubted that fats derived from coal could ever be as good for you as olive oil; he also worried that the increasing consumption of whale oil was diminishing the population of whales. Germans in the future, he claimed, would be eating more margarines derived from the plant oils of the east.³⁹

We have a pretty good idea of Hitler's daily regimen, faithfully recorded by the acolyte-scribes who hung on his every word. Hitler was indeed, for the most part, a vegetarian—though he did occasionally allow himself a dish of meat. Gestapo chief Rudolf Diels after the war wrote that Hitler would sometimes eat Bavarian liver dumplings (*Leberknödel*), but only when they were prepared by his photographer friend, Heinrich Hoffmann.⁴⁰ The *New York Times* mentioned ham and caviar, but Hitler was also said to have enjoyed squab—a pigeon-like game bird. Several reports attest to the disgust Hitler felt about flesh-eaters. In the 1920s, for example, on a romantic date, the future Führer scolded his female companion for having ordered *Wienerschnitzel*. Clearly bothered by his reaction, she asked if she had done something wrong, to which he replied: "No, go ahead and have it, but I don't understand why you want it. I didn't think you wanted to devour a corpse . . . the flesh of dead animals. Cadavers!" Hitler elsewhere referred to meat broth as "corpse tea."⁴¹