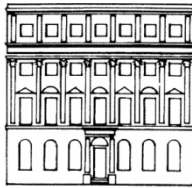


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Jeremy Adler:

*Absolute Evil*

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HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE

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## *Absolute Evil*

JEREMY ADLER

Any attempt to produce a ‘critical edition’ of *Mein Kampf* is destined to fail from the start. Editions of this sort are generally reserved for great works, for the classics and other cultural property. The purpose of this sort of edition is to locate the original version, to produce the best text, and cast light on difficult passages. Here the opposite is the case. The work is to be exposed for what it is. The project of printing a book because one rejects it goes against the whole tradition of textual criticism since late Antiquity and the Jewish Middle Ages. Scholarly editions by definition serve the author’s intentions. Textual criticism does not have the means to neutralize statements. The author has his say, but now with pretensions to being a classic. On Friday this new edition will be published by the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ).

Now, merely because the copyright has expired, a miserable, bungled piece of work will be granted the same dignity as Homer and Plato, the Bible and the Talmud. These are texts that should be read, that are part of our culture. The main purpose of critical editions is to preserve an original for all time. This new edition may have been produced with the best will in the world, but the reprinting of any questionable text can have only one outcome: to disseminate the author’s views. No editor can determine whether these will meet with public approval or rejection—and responsible editors must not direct their readers. As soon as they do this they are being polemical and forfeit their independence; they compromise their position as researchers. There is no way out of this moral dilemma.

It is worth reflecting on what this scandal is about, because by enthroning injustice as the principle of rule, this diatribe violates every law of reason: it offends against natural law as formulated by John Locke around 1690 by undermining human equality; it gives the lie to the American Constitution of 1787; it breaks with the reforms of the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which reverberated internationally and

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL). First published as Jeremy Adler, ‘Das absolut Böse’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7 Jan. 2016, 9. Translation published with permission.

gave every citizen the same rights; it firmly discards the Frankfurt constitution of 1848, for instance, art. v, para. 144, which establishes religious freedom; it mocks the principles of the Weimar constitution of 1919 in force at the time; it violates the first article in the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which imposes an obligation to act in the spirit of fraternity; it contradicts the first article of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Basic Law of 1949, not only the opening sentence, but also the following one: 'To respect and protect it [human dignity] shall be the duty of all state authority.'

While this may not be sedition in today's legal terms as this book was written before the founding of the republic, we cannot help but recognize the rebellious intentions behind it. The trend is beyond question. No other work has ever incited crime so clearly while violating every legal norm. The legislator in no way envisaged the dissemination of inflammatory works of this sort; their printing was simply prohibited. To edit such a book, therefore, for whatever reason, is an affront to the state.

Absolute evil cannot be edited. When an author denigrates a whole people as scum, parasites, drones, a gang of infighting rats, a harmful germ, or even just apes, advocates their sterilization, and unmistakably calls for their extermination, psychiatrists may be able to reach a diagnosis, and a judge may be able to make a judgment. But an edition – unlike the disciplines of linguistics or historiography – is helpless before the horror. The state is undermined; the seizure of power is planned; world war is prepared. Faced with this monstrosity of madness and murder, any attempt to comment is silenced. Any reprinting means only one thing: repeating the infamy. Other methods must be resorted to in order to educate. The argument that similar texts have been edited does not get to the crux of the matter. This is the work that went into the world as a call to genocide; willy-nilly, as a last taboo, it has gained both iconic and factual significance.

Thus an observer can only look on in bewilderment as a country in which Holocaust denial is illegal republishes the book that shares much of the responsibility for instigating the Holocaust in the first place. The law makes no exception for offenders, and prescribes a punishment of between three months and five years imprisonment. It should be noted that the new edition is intended neither for professional historians nor the republic of letters, both of whom could claim special reasons, but as an aid to public enlightenment. How do they

imagine this working? Do they intend to limit the impact of a work that today still circulates in European prisons as an illegal photocopy, praised by the inmates, by releasing a new edition? Education requires very different methods. And who is the 'public' that is to be enlightened? The newsagent? The train driver? The greengrocer? Will they reach for this text? They deserve to be treated with more respect than to be encumbered with a book in two volumes.

This insoluble conflict between public education and scholarship is a dilemma produced by the new edition. For extremists, however, the sheer weight of the copies that will be pirated from the internet will provide the evidence they seek. They will find new sources for their prejudices in the edition's apparatus. Soon these references and the worst passages from *Mein Kampf* will be circulating on the internet. How can misuse of this edition be prevented? It is dubious, not to say dangerous, to warn of dangers by listing them in great detail.

It is argued that we need an edition of *Mein Kampf* because it is an important historical document. This is mistaken reasoning. Historical texts such as *The Republic*, *Magna Carta*, and the *Rights of Man* take their place in the human intellectual landscape because of their meaning, without reference to the personality of their authors. Such works give the world priceless gifts. *Mein Kampf* is the opposite case. The aim of this book is to destroy culture, even society as such, and to replace it with a fanatical 'mass'. The only reason it remains interesting is because the author and his cronies succeeded in doing this for a short, terrible period, and especially because he was the greatest mass murderer of all time. But this is no justification for editing his work, and this treatment will not make his text into a great document. It was and remains a demented diatribe, tied to the author's politics and terrorism, and can only be understood in connection with all his crimes. The text is not worthless; it represents an inverted value. In order for it to find its proper place, studies are needed such as the monographs and biographies recently produced by Ian Kershaw and Peter Longerich. An edition is by no means indispensable, and it can never achieve what is required here. Do we really want to test the limits of ethics?

Only an expert can produce an edition. The team of editors working on the new edition of *Mein Kampf* consists of four historians. This sounds promising. But if we look more closely, we notice that among the editors, who could naturally draw on advice from other experts, there is no-one with psychiatric expertise, no legal historian, no lin-

guist, no sociologist, and, above all, no proven text editor. This is hard to believe. How can an edition be produced without a single professional editor? The discipline of text editing is among the most difficult branches of philology. If an edition of a work as questionable as *Mein Kampf*, which was published in a number of different versions, is to have any claim to validity, the project has to be safeguarded by using the best possible techniques. Those who commissioned the work and its editors at the IfZ call their work a 'critical edition'. This raises the bar very high indeed. Not even the most significant edition of the last fifty years, Albrecht Schöne's *Faust* (1994), presumed to call itself 'critical'. And indeed, in their explanations, the new editors of *Mein Kampf* thoroughly confuse the traditional three forms of edition, demonstrating that they do not even know what a 'critical' edition is. According to them, they intend to produce: (1) a critical edition which will serve only to compile a text; (2) an annotated text containing detailed explanations; and (3) a reading edition which, according to the IfZ, will 'deliberately adopt a form and style . . . that will speak to a wide circle of readers'. These three aims cannot all be achieved at the same time in one edition. If they are combined in one work, either its readability, annotations, or academic credentials will suffer. There are of course critical editions with annotations. But these are always distanced from the text, unlike here. Any edition based on three competing principles will be an absurdity.

In fact, the editors have chosen not to reprint all existing textual variants because 'they do not add much in terms of content', thus violating the principle of completeness on which every true critical edition is based. And there is little trace of the feeling for tradition which is essential to anyone embarking on a project of this sort. The editors want to 'frame' the original, but seem unaware of how deeply offensive it is to see an editorial technique developed for the Talmud being used in *Mein Kampf*. And if the commentary engages with the author's lies — there can, of course, be no question of 'half truths' here — by providing counter-arguments, as one of the examples given by the editors confirms, then the whole project operates on the same dubious level as the original. A genuine 'critical edition' acquires a high ethical value through the skilled perfection and craftsmanship with which it guarantees the truth of its text. Such an edition works according to the strictest standards as the custodian of culture. If its principles are questionable, then so is the edition itself.

We also have to ask about the social embedding of this edition, its structural framework, as this is a national matter. After all, the breaking of a taboo should not result in a scandal. We often hear the voices of historians, who have an understandable interest in editing the text. But what about the philosophers, the poets, the intellectuals? Where did the debate take place before this plan was realized? If we take the new French edition as a comparison, we find a number of differences. First, an independent publisher, L'Éditeur Fayard, vouches for the book; secondly, the translation is by Olivier Mannoni, a highly respected scholar who has worked for many publishers, has translated several voices of the Shoah, and, very importantly, is associated with an independent public institution, the Centre National du Livre; thirdly, the work is supervised by an independent Academic Advisory Board especially convened for this purpose which is, again importantly, international; and finally, French law, which is different from the German law, unambiguously allows for a publication of this sort.

In the IfZ, by contrast, everything is done in house. The Institut's Academic Advisory Board supervises the project; the director monitors it; four employees carry it out; and it is self-published by the IfZ. The guarantees that are expected for all major editions, the independent bodies with a right to object, and sponsors who ensure that techniques are rigorous and standards kept up—why is the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft not behind this edition, as would be expected?—all this seems to be missing in this highly sensitive case. And there is more. When a government agency withdrew promised funding of 500,000 euros because of possible illegality, the IfZ continued blithely on its way. It seems highly surprising, if not irresponsible, to force a project through against the unambiguous warnings of the Bavarian justice minister when, as he stressed, the legal position has yet to be clarified.

Finally, the IfZ sees its work as paying homage to the victims. But this is pure mockery: they are calling on the defenceless dead to justify their own work. What next? Bavaria's justice minister has said: 'The whole world is watching closely what we do with this cynical and inhumane work.' While I write this, without having seen the new text, the jury is still out.

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