

German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Gert Ueding:

*Objectification of the Opposite*

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 39, No. 1

HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE  
(May 2017), pp30-34

## *Objectification of the Opposite*

GERT UEDING

To this day, dealing with *Mein Kampf* is an obsessive, almost neurotic business, even as pursued by academics. The Bavarian government, until now in possession of the copyright, has prevented any reprints, even partial ones, by every means at its disposal. Anyone who studied the book was soon suspected of radical right-wing sympathies, and the political squabbles surrounding the critical edition put out by the renowned Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) go in the same direction, creating taboos and repression. They have also dominated the first reactions to the new edition: a botched compilation that should have been left locked in the libraries' poison cabinets. The zealous criticism by Jeremy Adler, a literary scholar, was especially treacherous. Published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, his piece culminates in the claim that 'Absolute evil cannot be edited'.<sup>1</sup>

This attitude is only the other side of the 'vision of horror' that is being attacked but in the same breath mythologized, and unwittingly does the author's business for him. Hitler wanted to elevate this to metaphysical heights, while his well-meaning detractors banish it to metaphysical depths: both are anti-enlightened responses.

This hints at the first breakthrough achievement of this new edition: it pulls the ground out from under obscurantism by confronting each sentence with the conditions to which it refers, or exposing its intentions. The attitude that permeates every statement, however, hardly requires unmasking. Nowhere does the author leave it in doubt. *Mein Kampf* is, in a brutal sense, a completely open-hearted book, and precisely for this reason, it is one of the most important 'sources for the reconstruction of the life story of the German dictator'. Probably the most important biographer of Hitler, Ian Kershaw, has bewailed the fact that so few sources remain.

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL). First published as Gert Ueding, 'Versachlichung des Gegenteils', *Der Freitag*, 13 Jan. 2016. Translation published with permission.

<sup>1</sup> See above, Jeremy Adler, 'Absolute Evil', in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*.

*Role Identification*

Even Hitler's obvious distortions, inventions, and errors are highly significant, as almost every correction by the editors shows. When Hitler wrote his 'Reckoning' (the subtitle of the first volume), he was a failure, imprisoned (although quite comfortably) in Landsberg fortress after an unsuccessful putch attempt, and felt the need to justify himself. Contrary to all other accounts, he wrote the book himself between June 1924 and June 1925. What he pounded into the typewriter, however, was not a work of reflection, but a record of the endless soliloquies that he had conducted in his head and occasionally reported to people who shared his views. Thus it was a monologue that sometimes switched abruptly between sentimental memory and furious defence, a programme and plans for the future, a tirade and a factual report, and it all had to be laboriously fitted into chapters. The commentary frequently notes: 'Empty phrases and formulas that were typical of Hitler's speeches.' Like many a failed image, these passages point to the casual, everyday language used by Hitler, with its automatic responses and imprecisions, and to the empty formulas and turgid statements typical of his political language. This also applies to the second volume, which was written in 1925-6.

But the critical comments go far beyond the issue of style. In his written texts, Hitler tried to reproduce some of the lively rhetoric of his spoken language, to which he owed his previous public successes. The techniques he used included vagueness, blurred outlines, and ambiguous reminiscences and explanations. The indistinctness of Hitler as a person noted by Kershaw was a deliberate rhetorical device intended to create an aura of superiority and greatness. If there are no heroes in the eyes of the valet, heroes must remove themselves from the gaze of the valet. How much more this applies to the man who wanted to be the saviour of his people, even of the world!

Neither a psychological diagnosis of megalomania nor popular demonization are convincing, given such systematic role identification. The pragmatic and detailed commentary in the new edition is a good antidote to both. The editors have chosen to base their work on the two-volume first edition of 1925/27 because it is closest to the author's linguistic style, and the few substantive changes in later editions are noted in the commentary, as are stylistic variants. The critical edition, an immense task for the scholars involved, aims for the

ideal of accurate historical reconstruction, and is explicitly oriented by the principles of 'objectification' and 'verifiability', in the full awareness that *Mein Kampf* represents the exact opposite of these principles.

These are important editorial principles which must not be touched. They convey an understanding of the outline of the book and its building blocks, but we still have to work out exactly how it functioned from the evidence presented. Thus the commentary, presenting the common sentiment 'in reality, it was quite different', captures the facts but is out of sync with the text and its intentions.

In order not to be misunderstood: all these corrections are necessary. We need to know how and where Hitler distanced himself from an empirical fact or a historical consensus, what traditions his most abstruse views were based on, and which of the usual prejudices of his time he accepted and which he rejected, whether we are speaking of social Darwinist pamphlets, classical world literature, or antisemitic trash such as the *Elders of Zion*.

But how Hitler's book could ever function as the 'Nazi Bible' that the popular edition suggests it was, becomes ever more puzzling under the enormous weight of the commentary. This is not an objection to the critical edition but a reference to the open questions that it poses, for over long stretches the book reproduces historical developments, political convictions, and a contemporary awareness of crisis quite correctly and appropriately simplified, given the contemporary target audience. In this way the author creates a reserve of credibility on which he can draw when it comes to uncertain or even fraudulent references.

Crucial to the book's success was a text pitched at a level that has little to do with truth, but all the more with archetypes, uneven dreams, and the presentation of the author as a personal witness of the events. Eye witnesses have an a priori credibility in European culture, and in his book and all major speeches, Hitler made good use of it.

*Mein Kampf* is a 'compilation' only in the sense of a tactical fabrication which resembles a montage. The book is not intended to be read as a whole, and everything that we know suggests that it was rarely read from cover to cover. The popular edition of 1930, which brought the breakthrough to bestseller status, contains a technical curiosity: the index is placed at the beginning of the book, even

before the Foreword. This means that the volume was planned from the outset for selective reading. Readers were intended to follow their interests and chart their own course through the book, whether pursuing Hitler's life story, the Party programme, its ideological positions, or the tirades of fury and hatred directed at Jews or Marxists, or both.

### *Selective Reading*

The edition casts light on other features of the text. The use of repetitions, often verbatim and meticulously noted in the comments, is not only a common propaganda technique, but guarantees that even when the book is read selectively, the messages most important to the author are not lost. Similarly, the change of style from pathos to bureaucratic objectivity, from the pretentious use of foreign words to homely German diction, proves to be appropriate to the target readership. From his own rhetorical experience, Hitler knew about the charm of using difficult words and uninhibitedly breaking linguistic taboos.

Potentially the most effective parts of the book are its autobiographical narratives. As in every autobiography, they are constructions, here embedded in the image world of a mythical consciousness that lives on in dreams, artistic fantasies, and religious yearning because desires are unfulfilled in them. One of the few examples that the editors, who otherwise carefully note every biblical quotation and religious reference, missed is the sentence with which Hitler begins his life story. As we discover, he spent a long time honing it: 'Today it seems a happy destiny that fate assigned Braunau am Inn to me as a birthplace.' A 'small border town', he adds, but at the same time the 'symbol of a great task'. Was he aware of Goethe's verses: 'O Weimar! To you fell a special lot! / Like Bethlehem in Judah, small and great'? In the context of Hitler's messianic fantasies, this opening acquires its own flavour.

All in all, the critical edition makes it clear for the first time to what extent Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is a cleverly composed collection of dissimilar content. Regressive impulses build up into a desire for murder; dull remnants of peasant life are submerged in blood-and-soil murmurings; petty bourgeois anxieties and dreams find fulfil-

## OBJECTIFICATION OF THE OPPOSITE

ment in images of women and sexual morality. In addition, there are eschatological memories and a continuing craving for salvation, mingling with similarly unequal hopes of a better life—a truly stunning formula. The critical edition has uncovered its components in great detail so that the literary symbol of National Socialism's power is fully exposed, providing the foundation for any further study of the book.

GERT UEDING is emeritus Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Tübingen.