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HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE

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## *'Jews': See 'Poison Gas'*

WOLFGANG BENZ

In 2012 the Bavarian state government came to the conclusion that, given the imminent expiry of the copyright on *Mein Kampf*, it was necessary to act. As the author's legal successor, the state of Bavaria could ban the publication of new editions until the end of 2015 (except, of course, abroad, on the internet, and in pirated versions). The ministers responsible recognized the danger and commissioned the edition under review here. The Minister of Culture justified the project, subsidized to the tune of half a million euros, as follows: 'We need not only an academic commentary on this work, but also strategies for interpreting and dealing with it which go beyond the purely scholarly editing of the book.' The Finance Minister agreed, saying that it must not fall 'into the wrong hands', as neo-Nazis liked to use the original source.

Two years later, these laudable moral impulses on the part of the authorities took a different direction when the Bavarian Minister President, Horst Seehofer, changed his mind while on a trip to Israel. Charlotte Knobloch, leader of the Jewish religious community in Munich and Upper Bavaria, persuaded him to reconsider, and the cabinet resolved that *Mein Kampf* was a 'slandorous work that caused the victims of National Socialism and their relatives great pain'. This also applied to the commission that had been granted by the state, and the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) was venturing onto thin ice when, rightly undeterred by political and media excitement, it continued working on the edition.

Those who can read will recognize the shadowy invocations in the introductions to the edition in which the editorial team justify their attempt to demystify Hitler's text, while sitting under the Sword of Damocles that Bavaria's sudden change of policy represented. The historical source is seen as a possible armoury for mad-

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ness and a clandestine symbol of evil. From a professional point of view, this is an unusual description of the aims and intentions of an academic project.

The method and structure of the edition, as well as its graphic design, are explained in detail in the forewords. The right-hand pages of the book contain the original text along with variations, which are clearly printed in the margins. The left-hand pages are reserved for the numerous annotations, references to literature, and the whole scholarly apparatus. The design problems which result from the sheer volumes of text in different typefaces are brilliantly resolved. Outwardly, this gives the edition something of the character of a valuable Bible, but after a period of adjustment, it makes the edition manageable.

Nonetheless, researching the text remains tedious, partly because of the material (the original editions of *Mein Kampf* were, with good reason, equipped with extensive indexes, with whose help interested Nazi Party members and *Volksgenossen* could navigate through Hitler's bombast), and partly because of the amount of scholarship invested in it. Readers have to know that the reference is quoted using the original pagination. Thus they cannot refer to the edition's page numbers, but have to look for the original page number given in square brackets next to the column titles, and they must not confuse volume 1 and volume 2.

With some practice, even older scholars can manage this. The younger generation, brought up on computers, possibly finds it more difficult. For example, anyone looking for the famous passage which is often cited as evidence for Hitler's genocidal fantasies and as an announcement of the Holocaust, has a long struggle finding their way through the jungle that is the index. The term 'poison gas' refers the reader to 'World War, First' and from there to a sub-entry 'chemical weapons'. This takes us to three passages, but not to the quotation we are seeking. In a second attempt, under the term 'Antisemitism' the reader finds a reference to 'Racial Antisemitism', but this is essentially a circular reference that leads back to 'Antisemitism', where we started. The reference to 'Jews', however, is helpful because it contains a sub-entry 'poison gas', which eventually, after some physical exertion moving the weighty tomes around, produces the desired result: 'If, at the beginning of the war and during it, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the

people had been subjected to poison gas like the hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers from all classes and professions, who had to endure it in the field, then the sacrifice of millions at the Front would not have been in vain.'

Our research efforts are now richly rewarded in the form of a footnote that not only provides information about the text, but counteracts misinterpretations: it leads the reader to further examples of radical anti-Jewish rhetoric, and to Himmler's reaction to this passage. Reflecting the state of research, a clear differentiation is made: despite rampant and ritualized hostility towards the Jews, in the mid 1920s there was no plan to exterminate the Jews that could be suggested by the term 'poison gas'. And in its early years, the Jewish policy of the National Socialists, once they had come to power, aimed to exclude the Jews from German society and expel them, but not at their physical annihilation. The genocidal intent developed only gradually after the occupation of Poland and intensified with the attack on the Soviet Union. The stations of the murder of the Jews are mentioned, and finally, the number of victims.

The annotations have a didactic intention beyond providing information. Concerning Hitler's praise for the part played by Protestant and Catholic clergy in strengthening the will of the Germans on the front and at home to hold out during the First World War, there is an annotation (no. 235 on p. 342) which gives detailed information about the history, organization, and extent of military pastoral care, including that dispensed by Jewish rabbis in the field. The last reference explicitly addresses the antisemitic stereotype of the 'Jewish shirker', without reference to Hitler's text. In many cases the annotations expand into a compendium, especially in relation to terms such as 'degeneracy', '*Volksgenosse*', '*Volkskörper*', '*Volksgemeinschaft*', and 'Marxism'. Rarely are the annotations as brief as the one that explains the term 'vitriol' used by Hitler as 'sulphuric acid'. Others are simply unnecessary: Hitler wrote '*gewitzig*', which is explained as 'made wise by (bad) experience or harm'. Information about and corrections to the author's biography and explanations about things that are not easily accessible are useful. The numerous cross-references, however, often create confusion rather than clarity.

The commentary is based on the results of decades of international research, rather than on deep, untapped resources. After all, the function of a scholarly edition is to explain the text, make it compre-

hensible if necessary, place it in its historical context, to trace its roots and background, and, finally, to document the written tradition and variants. It is not the task of an edition to fill gaps in the research. Therefore the statement that there is nothing so far unknown to report about Hitler's intentions, their origins, and development, and nothing new about the 'movement's' programme and ideology, or even about the genesis of the murder of the Jews, is not a condemnation. The edition can safely disappoint the needs of the media and the expectations of a public fixated on 'the new'.

What is decisive is something else, anyway. By embedding the text in its historical context, the editors contribute to demystifying and historicizing *Mein Kampf*. To this extent the edition is an enlightened endeavour. But who is it addressed to? Who will actually read its 2,000 pages? Hardly the radical right. Not only because they are unlikely to buy themselves an edition with a critical commentary, but because *Mein Kampf* plays only a subordinate part in today's right-wing extremist scene.

For general readers with an interest in history, the high cost of the edition is unreasonable and in the end it offers them little more—apart from the complete original text, of course—than what can be found much more comfortably in the relevant secondary literature on *Mein Kampf* or a biography of Hitler. The masses will probably not spend their evenings reading this edition, despite the media frenzy that has driven sales up to unlikely heights (15,000 advance orders, and the first edition of 4,000 copies was sold out on the first morning).

This edition is really interesting only for historians, although it does not present a source that has not been available before. *Mein Kampf* was never banned in Germany; only reprints were not allowed. Anyone who wanted to read the authentic text could turn to the many copies in libraries and private ownership. And for professional readers, most of this will be nothing new. The detailed information will be welcomed by the experts, both for reference and as a starting point for new research. Thus the scholarship that is reflected in the thousands of text-critical annotations is to be praised, even where it goes too far.

The didactic hopes which have been vested in the work since the Free State of Bavaria commissioned it, however, are naive. The idea that school students will, in future, interpret *Mein Kampf* with the help of this two-volume work is already absurd given the marginal-

ization of history as a subject. In classroom practice, the large-scale use of *Mein Kampf* would amount to a reduction of the whole complex of National Socialism to Hitler's slanderous work. This would be to revert to the postwar period, when the Führer was demonized as someone people had to succumb to, even against their will.

The evil antisemitism that Hitler spread was his own obsession, put together from common stereotypes and clichés. Antisemitism as a misanthropic phenomenon cannot be explained by studying *Mein Kampf*; at most, this book can illustrate its effects on one man who became a dictator and then had the power to implement his hatred of the Jews in a genocide of unique proportions. And this is the real question for the history of National Socialism: how could the Germans (and Austrians) be so infatuated by this figure? Why did they throw themselves into Hitler's arms so enthusiastically? Why did they offer so little resistance as he transformed Germany into a dictatorship and Europe into an inferno? Why did they follow him to the bitter end? Even this critical edition of *Mein Kampf* provides no answers, perhaps because the Germans were more intoxicated with the rhetoric of Hitler the orator than with the intolerable prose of this egomaniac.

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