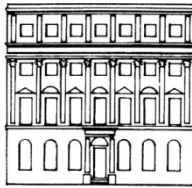


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Andreas Gestrich and Michael Schaich:

Preface

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

HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE

(May 2017), pp3-6

Preface

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The decision by the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich and Berlin (IfZ) to publish a critical edition of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* has sparked a fierce debate about the rights and wrongs of such an undertaking and the scholarly merits of the editorial work. The discussion started well before the edition was released. In the run-up to the publication date the necessity and legitimacy of making such a text available again was publicly debated, leading the Free State of Bavaria to withdraw the funding initially pledged to the project. The publication of the critical edition on 8 January 2016, however, marked a crucial step, and in the process exposed the finished work to intense scrutiny in the global media and the academic community.

Political and scholarly controversies about how to deal with the National Socialist past have their own history in Germany. Unlike in the *Historikerstreit* of the second half of the 1980s, when Ernst Nolte argued that 'Auschwitz . . . was above all a reaction born out of the annihilating occurrences of the Russian Revolution' and 'not a first act or an original', the present discussion is no longer about the causes of the Holocaust.¹ Nor is it, as Hans-Ulrich Wehler famously put it, about attempts to 'dispose of' this specific German past.² On the contrary, it is about the way in which this poisonous text should in future become part of Germany's problematic 'heritage'. In what format, if at all, will *Mein Kampf* in future be found in bookcases and libraries in Germany? The fact that this new edition of *Mein Kampf* was the cause of so much controversy even before it was published shows that what it shares with the previous controversy is the high

¹ Ernst Nolte, 'Between Historical Legend and Revisionism? The Third Reich in the Perspective of the 1980', in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1993), 1-15, at 13-14.

² Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Entsorgung der Vergangenheit? Ein polemischer Essay zum 'Historikerstreit'* (Munich, 1988).

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symbolic importance of the answer to this question and the immensely political nature of the debate.

Taking stock of the debate one year later, we can see that the discussions revolved mainly around four partly intertwined core issues, which come up in various ways in most of the reviews. The first concerns the fundamental question raised by Jeremy Adler about whether 'absolute evil' should be 'honoured' with a critical edition and thus, albeit involuntarily, given the status of a classical text. Adler fundamentally rejects this, while others maintain that *Mein Kampf* is a core historical source of the twentieth century and therefore requires exactly that, namely, a scholarly edition.

The second issue is that even if one concedes the political need for a scholarly critical edition of *Mein Kampf* as the adequate way to transmit this evil document in future, it could be asked whether there is an inherent tension between a scholarly enterprise of this sort and the wider public as a target audience. Neo-Nazis, so the argument runs, are more likely to read *Mein Kampf* on a right-wing website, where it has long been available anyway, than to buy and plough their way through two massive and expensive tomes. Critics see the edition, therefore, as a counter-productive effort to silence Hitler. Others maintain that this is not really the point and that it would be much worse if this were really the only form in which the text was available.

A third issue concerns the methodological problems of tracing the sources of Hitler's ideas and ideology. Hitler was a self-confessed unsystematic reader and it is very hard to prove what books he read at all. This has led several critics to question the scholarly usefulness of this massive research effort and to suggest that a more general contextualization of the text in the tradition of Anglophone intellectual history might have been more appropriate. Supporters of the edition respond to this charge primarily on a political level, arguing that it is exactly this detailed referencing of even hypothetical sources that reveals Hitler as a deeply unoriginal author and partly even as a plagiarizer. They insist that this takes away some of the aura which this text might have.

Finally, some critics think that the editors overestimate the contemporary political importance of *Mein Kampf* and, in consequence, its importance as a historical source. The editors themselves admit that Hitler's political success at the time was based on his speeches

rather than his writings. Again, some critics use this to argue against the usefulness of this undertaking, whereas others suggest that the scholarly effort should be extended to a critical edition of Hitler's speeches which, surprisingly, we still lack. As far as the political intention of the project is concerned, critics suggest that neo-Nazis do not read *Mein Kampf* and will not, in large numbers, turn to the text as their primary ideological inspiration, as they have not done in the past. There is, however, very little research on this, so that one of the positive effects of the controversy might be that more attention will be given to the present-day reception of *Mein Kampf* in right-wing circles.

All in all, the debate is an important example of how scholarly and political arguments are intertwined in this attempt to find the right way of transmitting a poisonous text now that its proliferation has finally become 'uncontrollable'. Although the debate was conducted with an international audience in mind, many of the reviews and articles were published in German newspapers and journals. To make them available to a wider, English-speaking public is the purpose of this special issue of the *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, which brings together thirteen texts that have been crucial in shaping the debate.

Countless articles and reviews of the edition have, of course, been published over the last year and it is not the aim of this special issue to provide a comprehensive coverage of the debate. Rather, we have selected what we considered the most important contributions to the discussion. Although we were not able to secure the rights for all articles that we intended to reprint, we are confident that the texts assembled in this special issue will go a long way towards conveying the main points of contention in the debate.

The texts are organized chronologically by date of publication. The special issue begins with an article by Andreas Wirsching published before the release of the critical edition, which sets out the remit and aims of the project. It is followed by a number of reviews that appeared mainly in newspapers and cultural journals in the first few weeks and months after the publication, representing the immediate reaction to the edition. The second half of this special issue contains two longer texts, by Wolfgang Schieder and Moshe Zimmermann, written for academic journals and published towards the end of 2016, followed by an exchange of opinions between Jeremy Adler and Alan Steinweis on the first anniversary of the publication. This

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special issue concludes with the only text not previously published, an essay by Neil Gregor which places the controversy in the wider context of recent developments in European (and global) politics. We thank all contributors and original publications for allowing us to reprint the texts.

The texts that have been translated have been reprinted without updating them, although in individual cases the odd typographical error or mistake in the original publication was rectified by the authors. In addition, in Jeremy Adler's second article and Alan Steinweis's response, passages which the newspapers in which they originally appeared cut for reasons of space have been reinstated.

This special issue is intended to provide a reliable record of a wide-ranging and important academic and political debate roughly one year on from the original publication of the critical edition. The debate will doubtless continue and more reviews are bound to appear, but some of the main arguments seem to have been exchanged. This special issue thus allows a first stocktaking and may perhaps serve as a basis for further discussion.