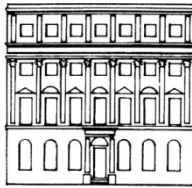


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HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE
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Hitler, Mein Kampf: A Critical Edition

ANDREAS WIRSCHING

Hitler's *Mein Kampf* has always been highly controversial. Written in two volumes, the first in 1924 while Hitler was imprisoned in the Landsberg fortress and the second in 1926 while he was at his mountain retreat in Obersalzberg, it was originally published by Eher Verlag, the Nazi Party's regular publisher.¹ After the end of the Second World War the USA as occupying power transferred this publisher's assets and copyrights to the Free State of Bavaria, specifically, to its Ministry of Finance. With reference to this legal situation, the state of Bavaria banned any republication of *Mein Kampf* in Germany. This was no problem for as long as the copyright was in force, that is, for seventy years after the author's death. In the case of Hitler, the copyright will expire at the end of 2015; from 1 January 2016 *Mein Kampf* will be in the public domain.

The fact that this material is highly political with foreign policy relevance is undisputed. And it is by no means a new realization. This becomes clear when we look at Hitler's 'second book', in which the later dictator gave a detailed explanation of his long-term objective of taking *Lebensraum* in the East by force. The manuscript, written by Hitler in 1928, remained unpublished at the time and was rediscovered by Gerhard Weinberg in the USA in 1958. With the explicit consent of the state of Bavaria, the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) published it, 'essentially guided by the idea of prevent-

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL). First published as Andreas Wirsching, 'Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 43–45 (2015), 9–16. Translation published with the permission of *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*.

¹ For a detailed account of the history of its writing and reception see Othmar Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches: Adolf Hitlers 'Mein Kampf' 1922–1945* (Munich, 2006), and the Introduction to Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, ed. for the Institut für Zeitgeschichte by Christian Hartmann, Thomas Vordermayer, Othmar Plöckinger, and Roman Töppel, 2 vols. (Munich, 2016). The original page numbers of *Mein Kampf*, which are reproduced in this edition, will be cited here.

ing any public misuse by producing an academic, critical edition'.² However, when the question arose of whether it was opportune to publish an official English-language edition authorized by the German side, the German Foreign Office expressed concerns. Any impression of official German involvement in a publication in the USA was to be avoided because of the danger 'of creating the impression among parts of the American public that Germany was officially supporting the dissemination of Hitler's manuscript, which might lead to misunderstandings'.³ Hitler's 'second book' was therefore initially published in the USA as an unauthorized edition. In 1995 the state of Bavaria gave its consent for an annotated version to be republished in Germany in the context of a large edition of Hitler's *Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen 1925–1933*, prepared by the IfZ. This time the title *Hitlers Zweites Buch* was considered to be politically problematic and therefore could not be used.⁴

This episode seems to anticipate the current discussion of *Mein Kampf*, but with the difference that copyright is no longer an issue. Against this background, the questions of the meaning and purpose, outcome and problems of a critical edition of *Mein Kampf* are all the more pressing. The IfZ had long been working on this edition of *Mein Kampf*, and it will be published in January 2016. This article will look first at the objective need for such an edition, and secondly at its aims and what it does. Finally, it will address a number of specific problems in the context of the public debate around this project.

² Martin Broszat to Auswärtiges Amt, 9 Nov. 1961, in *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1962*, vol. i: 1. Januar bis 31. März 1962, ed. for the Institut für Zeitgeschichte by Horst Möller, Klaus Hildebrand, and Gregor Schöllgen (Munich, 2010), doc. 76, p. 399, n. 2. The book was published as Gerhard L. Weinberg (ed.), *Hitlers Zweites Buch: Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1928* (Stuttgart, 1961).

³ Ministerialdirektor von Haefthen to Bayerisches Staatsministerium der Finanzen, 15 Feb. 1962, in *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1962*, doc. 76, p. 400.

⁴ It was published as *Außenpolitische Standortbestimmung nach der Reichstagswahl Juni–Juli 1928*, introd. Gerhard L. Weinberg, ed. and annotated Gerhard L. Weinberg, Christian Hartmann, and Klaus A. Lankheit (Munich, 1995).

Objective Need

The objective need for a comprehensively annotated new, critical edition of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* arises mainly from its relevance as a source. At first glance this seems to contradict the widespread opinion that the book is boring, confused, muddled, badly written, almost mad. Even contemporary critics, such as Andreas Andernach, author of *Hitler ohne Maske*, had relatively little to say about the actual contents of *Mein Kampf*. Instead they indulged in polemics against the 'dead boring and endlessly repetitive' 'Salvation Army sermons'.⁵ The opinion that Otto Straßer, Hitler's political opponent on the extreme right, expressed in 1940 has become widely influential: 'All of it was written in the style of a sixth grader, a dreadful chaos of platitudes, schoolboy reminiscences, subjective judgements, personal venom.'⁶ And if we take both descriptions together—on the one hand a boring book with confused contents, and on the other, one that hardly anyone could bring themselves to read—then we could wonder what all the fuss is about.

But to hold this view would be recklessly to perpetuate a situation described years ago by the historian Karl Dietrich Bracher in words that have been widely quoted since. He said that the history of Hitler was the history of Hitler being notoriously underestimated. In any case, to take a blasé attitude that regards any investigation of Hitler's writings as an intellectual imposition and beneath one's educated dignity is to make the same disastrous mistake as the contemporary Weimar elites. To start with, they did not take him seriously, then they tried to make use of his propaganda successes, and in the end they were exploited, repudiated, and thrown out by him.

In fact, *Mein Kampf* must be taken seriously to the extent that it provides the most important access both to Hitler's thinking and to his biography. In countless passages Hitler reveals his cynical, inhumane ideology, which provided the basis for the shockingly perverted, criminal rationality that was to become an essential condition for the Nazi regime. This is what we have to deal with, even if the message is conveyed in limited language and its thought processes

⁵ Andreas Andernach, *Hitler ohne Maske* (Munich, 1932), 23–6, at 23.

⁶ Otto Straßer, *Hitler und ich* (Buenos Aires, 1940), 59.

are not always straightforward. In the following, three examples will be discussed.

Hitler begins the chapter that holds the key to his ideology, 'Nation and Race', with a whimsical twist: 'There are hundreds of thousands of Columbus's eggs lying around, but the Columbuses are harder to find.'⁷ We hardly need to ridicule this sentence. After all, does it not confirm the widely held view of Hitler's work as badly written and confused? But if we read on, the picture changes. After a number of sentences that are not worth discussing in terms of style – 'the tit goes to the tit, the finch to the finch, the stork to the stork, the field mouse to the field mouse, the house mouse to the house mouse, the wolf to the wolf etc.'⁸ – we soon find out what is driving him. He speaks of 'nature', an 'iron law' that is inherent in it, and the natural 'exclusiveness of species'.⁹ Hitler also speaks of nature sanctioning any infringement of its 'iron law' by depriving those who offend in this way of 'resistance to diseases or hostile attacks'.¹⁰

In his way Hitler is drawing on the science, or rather, the popular science or pseudo science of his day. And he does something that social Darwinists of all stripes do, namely, he applies natural laws, or what he considers to be natural laws, to humans, human history, and human society. It is already clear, from the quoted passages, where this is leading. The chapter that begins with the 'eggs of Columbus' moves from the house mouse and how it is distinct from the field mouse to the contrast between the 'races', in particular, 'Aryans' and Jews, and their 'eternal' struggle in history, dictated by the 'iron law of nature'. Those who violate this law will lose their resistance to hostile attacks or their own illnesses. This argument culminates in the Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood of 1935 (*Blutschutzgesetz*) and the crime of 'racial shame' (*Rassenschande*) that it defined. This means that the 'eggs of Columbus' reveal a crucial feature of the ideological core of National Socialism. After 1933 Hitler's ideas about nature and its iron laws became the programme of the state with all its brutal consequences.

⁷ Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, vol. i [p. 300].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

My second example relates to Hitler's demand that it be made 'impossible for defective human beings to reproduce and produce equally defective offspring'.¹¹ Hitler saw implementing this demand as 'mankind's most humane deed', which would 'save millions of unhappy people from undeserved suffering', thus tapping into the international debate on eugenics at the time. Hitler here clearly placed himself on the side of those who advocated the forced sterilization of physically and mentally disabled people. After 1933 these measures were implemented in the Third Reich, and their consequences are well known. Euthanasia and the 'destruction of life unworthy of living' are further examples which demonstrate similar continuities. Here Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was only one voice among many, but it resulted in the introduction of inhumane and murderous practices during the Nazi regime.¹²

A third and final example arises out of Hitler's damning criticism of imperial Germany's foreign policy, which he placed under the heading of 'Germanization'. In particular, he opposed the long-held view that non-German populations could be won over for German *Volkstum* through an active language policy. It is in the rejection of these cultural attempts at 'Germanization', familiar from imperial Germany, that Hitler's racially ideological thinking is revealed. The attempt at a cultural 'Germanization', he argued, was 'the beginning of a bastardization and thus, in our case, not a Germanization, but the destruction of the Germanic element'. One had to be clear, he went on, 'that only the *soil* can be *Germanized*, not the *people*'.¹³

This notion of the 'Germanization' of the land formed an integral part of the social Darwinist idea of *Lebensraum* which, according to Hitler, the Germans had the right to take by force in the East. Hitler consistently maintained this until well into the Second World War. On 3 February 1933, soon after his appointment as German Chancellor, he declaimed that 'the expansion of the *Lebensraum* of the German *Volk* will also be achieved by force of arms.—The target will probably be the East. But it will be impossible to Germanize the pop-

¹¹ Ibid. [p. 270].

¹² See the 'classic', Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens: Ihr Maß und ihre Form* (Leipzig, 1920). Cf. Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, vol. i, ch. 4, n. 48.

¹³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, vol. ii [p. 19]. Original emphases.

ulation of the annexed or conquered territories. Only the soil can be Germanized.¹⁴ In future, too, the objective of ‘Germanization’ through the extensive expulsion or destruction of the local population was to remain a constant and consistent motif in Hitler’s preserved utterances. In talks he held with his military leadership on 5 November 1937, known from the Hoßbach Memorandum, Hitler stated that Germany’s future would be defined ‘solely by the solution of the need for space’. It was ‘a matter of gaining not people, but usable agricultural land’.¹⁵ At the beginning of the Second World War Hitler called for a ‘broad belt’ of Polish territory beyond Germany’s existing borders to be ‘Germanized and colonized’.¹⁶ And in his well-known address to his commanders-in-chief of 23 November 1939, Hitler laid out his aims clearly with a distant echo of *Mein Kampf*: ‘The increasing number of people require more living space. It was my aim to establish a sensible relationship between the number of people and the amount of space. . . . Maintaining a balance between the number of Germans and the space available for them is an eternal problem. Securing the necessary space. No cunning helps here, the only solution is the sword. A people that does not have the strength to fight must give up.’¹⁷

These examples show that Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is a central historical source and should not be declared irrelevant. This applies especially to the connection between ideological thinking, the exercise of power, and later practices during the Second World War. Nowhere in the Nazi regime is Hitler’s personal role, his personal imprint as a dictator, more clearly recognizable than in the will to wage a war which he forced on Germany and Europe. In a mixture of ideological delusion, perverted and criminal rationality, and brutal unscrupulousness, he developed a ‘programme’ and stuck to

¹⁴ Quoted from Andreas Wirsching, ‘Man kann nur Boden germanisieren’: Eine neue Quelle zu Hitlers Reden vor den Spitzen der Reichswehr am 3. Februar 1933’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 49 (2001), 517–50, at 547.

¹⁵ *IMT. Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof: Nürnberg 14. November 1945 bis 1. Oktober 1946* (Nuremberg, 1947–49), vol. xxv. 406.

¹⁶ Alfred Rosenberg, *Die Tagebücher von 1934 bis 1944*, ed. and annotated Jürgen Matthäus and Frank Bajohr (Frankfurt am Main, 2015), 291 (29 Sept. 1939).

¹⁷ *IMT*, vol. xxvi. 329.

it until he died. The most important source for this obsession with war is *Mein Kampf*. In it, Hitler adopted the *völkisch* thinking that was already virulent in central Europe before 1914, adapted it in a specific way, and worked it into a new intellectual synthesis. Racial ideological maxims such as the superiority of the 'Aryan race', might is right, and the social Darwinist idea that the law of movement in world history prescribed ceaseless struggle and war between the peoples and 'races' shaped Hitler's conviction that the war to expand *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe was not only a necessary objective but, going beyond all legal traditions, a legitimate one.

Aims of the Edition

The claim of this edition of *Mein Kampf* to be 'critical' is based mainly on the commentary it provides, which serves a number of purposes. Wherever possible, it reveals the sources of Hitler's thinking, pointing not only to an abundance of anonymous brochures and pamphlets, but also to well-known authors on the *völkisch*-nationalistic spectrum. It is not unusual to find direct borrowings from these works in the text of *Mein Kampf*. But the commentary also does more, something of at least equal importance, namely, it shows which of the topics that Hitler seized on long predated him, and had existed without him as common property in the *völkisch* milieu. Whether it was the alleged 'softening and emasculation' of society in Imperial Germany,¹⁸ the tirades against 'miscegenation' and 'racial shame',¹⁹ brutal anti-Semitism or much else: Hitler absorbed all available *völkisch*-racist figures of thought and made them serve his ideas. By documenting this related stock of ideas and explaining central ideological concepts and their tradition, the commentary can regularly show that the National Socialism inspired by Hitler was deeply rooted in German society and culture. National Socialism was a parasitic movement; it did not come over German history from outside. On the contrary, it integrated essential elements of German political culture, exaggerated them, and then radicalized them for its own purposes. *Mein Kampf* is perhaps the single most important document for showing this.

¹⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, vol. i [p. 297].

¹⁹ *Ibid.* [p. 263].

Hitler's writing is interspersed with outright lies, more often with half-truths, enemy constructions, and unadorned hate propaganda, but also with subtle allusions. The task of a critical commentary, therefore, is not only to rectify misrepresentations and mistakes, but also to provide additional information, explain allusions, and correct one-sided accounts. And, finally, the IfZ's edition also looks at the consequences of Hitler's thinking. By repeatedly pointing out which of the ideologemes that had only been abstractly thought and formulated in 1924/26 were put into practice after 1933, it underlines the connection between cynical, inhumane ideology and criminal act.

And there is more. As well as revealing ideological thought patterns, the first part of *Mein Kampf* also contains the most comprehensive biographical information about Hitler that we possess. To be sure, it is a highly stylized autobiography, anything but a faithful, 'objective' account of his life. Once again, the need for a commentary becomes clear. If there were no other information about Hitler's life than *Mein Kampf*, today's readers would be totally at the mercy of this book, for good or ill. They would have to believe what was in it, without being able to make any critical cross checks.

Hitler's life embodied social bankruptcy. The lifetime achievements of his father, a social climber, had secured Hitler the chance of a proper start in life. He did not take advantage of it, and instead got to know pre-First World War Vienna from below. By 1909 Hitler's cash resources were gradually running out; inflation and housing shortages added to his personal plight. Contrary to the account in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler did not have enough regular work even to keep his head above water. Poor relief and soup kitchens, and shelters for the homeless were the consequence, contrasting sharply with the petty bourgeois security of his parents' home. This was not the glittering Vienna of the avant-garde, but the 'Vienna of immigrants, those who were down on their luck, and the inhabitants of men's hostels'.²⁰

Hitler dealt with this experience of coming down in the world in the same way that most people would. He stylized it to himself and others, wrapping it in a cocoon of self-righteousness and self-pity. Vienna in 1909, he wrote to the mayor of the City of Linz in January 1914, had been 'an infinitely bitter time' for him. 'I was a young, inex-

²⁰ Brigitte Hamann, *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators* (Munich, 1996), 7.

perienced man without any financial support and too proud to accept help from anyone, let alone to ask for it. . . . For two years I had no friends other than worry and need, no companion other than constant, insatiable hunger. I never knew the beautiful word youth.²¹ Four of the six statements in this report are demonstrably false. Hitler had received financial support, both from his family and from public funds as an orphan; he was certainly not too proud to accept financial assistance; and he had asked his aunt for money. And, finally, Hitler had enjoyed a youth free of material cares, which had offered him years of idleness and opportunities. He had outlived the former, and did not grasp the latter.

What Hitler had communicated as a purely personal matter to the mayor of Linz in 1914, he repeated ten years later in *Mein Kampf*. Vienna, he wrote, had been the saddest time of his life, holding 'five years of desolation and misery' for him. 'Five years, during which I had to earn my bread first as a labourer, and then as a minor painter, my meagre bread that never satisfied even an ordinary hunger. Hunger was my loyal attendant at that time, the only one who almost never left me.'²² In fact, Hitler had enough money from his orphan's benefits, an inheritance from his mother, and the interest on his inheritance from his father, which was paid out later, to live without seeking regular work.²³ Aware of how he had rewritten his biography, Hitler always sought to preserve and cultivate the anonymity from which he came. When his half-nephew, William Patrick Hitler, tried to capitalize on their common name in 1930, it is said that Hitler flew into a rage and declared: 'People must not know who I am. They must not know where I come from and what family I am from.'²⁴ And as far as he could, Hitler had any traces of his first thirty years of life systematically obscured.

We can see, therefore, that a critical engagement with *Mein Kampf* is indispensable in order to reveal Hitler's manipulation of his life-story, and to allow us to recognize the forces driving him, forces

²¹ Hitler to Magistrat der Stadt Linz, 21 Jan. 1914, in Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn (eds.), *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924* (Stuttgart, 1980), no. 20, p. 55.

²² Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, vol. i [p. 19].

²³ Cf. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1945* (Munich, 2009), 37.

²⁴ Quoted from Hamann, *Hitlers Wien*, 76.

which in the end changed the world. On the other hand, the repeated assertion that politically aware readers do not need a critical commentary because they can get the picture by themselves, or because the text corrects itself, is naive. Without a commentary, readers are at the mercy of what Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*. In order to approach the text critically, they need a great deal of additional information that only a scholar who has specialized in the subject can provide. There is probably no other historical document as significant as *Mein Kampf* of which it is claimed that historical-critical annotations are superfluous.

The Public Debate

The reason for this is that in the discussion of *Mein Kampf*, academic, political, and moral arguments are superimposed on each other, which does not always make for clarity. This brings us to the political and cultural problems that the project of producing a critical edition of *Mein Kampf* inevitably touches on in the public sphere, and which have generated an intense, long-term discussion. It should be mentioned, however, that the regularly recurring public debate has been conducted in a remarkably factual way. A number of differentiated, enlightening, and reasonably argued contributions have appeared in the press and on the radio. The well-known methods of gaining public attention—exaggeration, polarization, emotionalization, and scandalization—have largely been avoided. But the discussion also points to a number of worrying trends in the public approach to Hitler in Germany. Often, these are shaped by two opposing extremes, both of which hinder rather than help a critical and rational debate.

One extreme arises out of the continuing fear of acting morally incorrectly or making political errors in dealing with Hitler's legacy. It is true that this topic demands heightened historical and political sensitivity, but the discussion around a 'ban' on *Mein Kampf* shows that these fears can produce a new, ominous tendency to create taboos. As explained, the book is a central source for the history of National Socialism. To try to prevent any sort of critical engagement with it would be tantamount to a short-sighted cover-up. It could give the (re)mystification of Hitler a dangerous boost, and might cre-

ate the impression that even after death, Hitler exerts a sort of demonic power. It would prevent any historical classification, contextualization, and explanation of his impact. To make a taboo of it is therefore the opposite of having a mature debate.

The other extreme can be found in the excessive concentration on Hitler (and *Mein Kampf*) in popular entertainment and satire. These regularly reinforce each other through the banal realization that 'Hitler sells'. Their suitability and impact, however, are problematic. In fact, National Socialism in general and Hitler's behaviour in particular often displayed a scurrility in real life that was almost satirical, and Hitler suffered numerous slip-ups. His pronouncements on the 'eggs of Columbus' referred to above are one example. But such oddities were inextricably connected with violence, terror, and the demand for annihilation. It is easy, of course, to separate the scurrilous from the violent, and to make it the object of satire. Hitler's moustache and German Shepherd, his pronunciation and appearance provide rich pickings for those wanting to poke fun. But when cabaret artists, writers, and film makers achieve great media success, this increases the risk of trivialization through banalization. All too quickly, a satirical and superficially amusing treatment of Hitler threatens to replace an intellectually more rigorous approach.

It would, of course, be presumptuous to suggest that there is only one, 'correct' way of dealing with Hitler in the German public debate. But a certain degree of enlightened seriousness can and should be expected. To do otherwise would be to underestimate Hitler once again. In order to avoid any suggestion that Hitler possesses post-mortem powers, his demagogy must be deciphered. His successes need to be explained, and the social and cultural motives behind them studied. This is a long-term task for Germans in academia, the media, and politics. This is the prerequisite for dealing with Hitler's disastrous legacy in a mature way and, at the same time, the strongest political and moral argument for the publication of a critical edition.

This argument stands even in the most difficult case, in relation to the victims of National Socialism. The feelings of the victims play a significant part. It could be difficult to persuade a Holocaust survivor that a new edition of *Mein Kampf*, albeit with a critical commentary, needs to be published in Germany. Among this group of the most affected, however, there are different and contradictory positions. Even possibly insurmountable indignation about plans to republish

Mein Kampf in any form is understandable and must be respected. In view of the legal situation, however, which is based solely on the expiring copyright, it is necessary to explain the circumstances and, in the end, to present the reasons that speak for transparency and openness.

There is no such thing as a dichotomy between empathy with the victims on the one hand and a 'cold' academic approach on the other. Historical and critical enlightenment can never be unethical. This sort of accusation, sometimes heard in public, directed against any scholarly work on *Mein Kampf* promotes the irrationality of the debate. To cast light on the history of National Socialism and its crimes also does a service for the victims and, in its way, serves to maintain their dignity. This is also true of work on *Mein Kampf*.

This needs to be emphasized all the more because *Mein Kampf*, as has already been said hundreds of times, is freely available outside Germany, on the internet, and in second-hand bookshops, and will continue to be so. Under no circumstances is the dissemination of the book to be prevented. And just because Hitler's inflammatory work, regardless of copyright, has long been out in the world, uncontrolled, and will, in future, continue to be so, the production of a serious edition taking a clearly critical standpoint is the order of the day. It is arranged in such a way that readers will not be able to take in a single page of Hitler's writing without being aware of the editors' critical commentary at the same time.

In conclusion, this may be seen as a plea to read the book. The recommendation for a critical reading suggests itself in the face of the never-ending and mutually reinforcing presence of Hitler and National Socialism in the media. Those who are interested can escape this cycle of the new and the eternally recurring only by returning to the source. That *Mein Kampf* is of value as a source for the history of evil is, as may have become clear, indisputable. And meticulous academic work provides the basis on which the criminal record of National Socialism can be better understood, intellectually and cognitively.

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