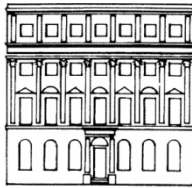


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Götz Aly:

Mein Kampf: A Scholarly Burial

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

HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE
(May 2017), pp24-29

Mein Kampf: A Scholarly Burial

GÖTZ ALY

This large-format two-volume work weighs 5.2 kilograms and is 1,966 pages long. It is bound in linen of a military field grey and the title *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition* is emblazoned on the cover in discreet letters coloured SA brown. With meticulous attention, the scholars involved in preparing this edition have traced tiny textual variants in the many editions which were published between 1925 and 1945, as if we were dealing with Goethe's *Faust*. For example, the German filler word *nun* was often deleted; the word *liebge-wonnen* in the 1939 edition was replaced with *liebge-worden* but in 1944 changed back into *liebge-wonnen*, although they mean much the same thing (to become fond of); and the name of the Wagnersaal, a location in Munich, was sometimes hyphenated, and sometimes not. It would have been better if the editors had dispensed with this meaningless industriousness and concentrated on the few major changes, such as those concerning leadership within the Nazi Party.

Three thousand seven hundred substantive annotations form the core of the academic effort. Hundreds of them are unproductive. For example, Hitler reported about Linz, where he had attended school, that at that time, 'there were very few Jews' in the town, and all of them looked quite 'Europeanized', that is, assimilated. The marginal note, supported by three references to literature, reads: 'The Jewish community in Linz around 1900 numbered no more than 587, and there were almost no Orthodox Jews among them.' It seems that Hitler had described it correctly. Why the lesson?

In the style of a *Bildungsroman* (coming-of-age novel), Hitler continued by saying that at the time, he had reacted to the anti-Jewish animosities of his classmates with 'slight aversion' and 'a feeling of discomfort' because 'denominational squabbles' disgusted him. On this important point, however, the otherwise enthusiastic annotators

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL). First published as Götz Aly, '“Mein Kampf”, wissenschaftlich eingesargt: Die kritische Edition von Hitlers Propagandabuch erstickt im Detail und weicht den zentralen Fragen aus', *Berliner Zeitung*, 11 Jan. 2016 © 2017. Translation published with permission.

are unjustifiably silent. For Hitler's later successes were based in part on the fact that he consistently addressed the theme of Germany's inner turmoil, not only the division between the denominations, but also the split between north and south, west and east, between federalists and those who advocated a unitary central state, and between the social classes. This made him popular. In this way he created the foundations for his new-style national people's party.

In a totally inappropriate place (I/864, no. 5) there is an annotation on the 'social, regional, and denominational openness' of the Nazi Party. The annotators introduce it by observing: 'Interestingly, Hitler here already describes the Nazi Party as a party of protest.' My goodness! This was the essence of his party from the start. And why do they write 'here already', referring to a passage at the end of the first volume of *Mein Kampf*? At this point they should have quoted the political scientist Sigmund Neumann, who characterized the Nazi Party in 1932 as follows: 'Protest against the November Revolution and parliamentarism, protest against the defeat and Versailles, protest against the economic system, and protest against the dominance of rationalism and materialism.'

In their reader-unfriendly way, the editors refer, at the end of the only moderately successful annotation quoted above, to the following annotations: 'ch. II/5, nn. 8, 35'. Having located these notes via the Table of Contents, on pages 1148 and 1164, we find that only note 35 is relevant. It could easily have been amalgamated with its less informative double in an appropriate place. But the reference to 'II/5, n. 8' leads us astray. There we read: 'On the term "financial Jews" cf. ch. II/13, n. 90.' Printing error? Presumably the editors meant the appropriate n. 28. How are interested general readers with some historical knowledge meant to find their way around in this mess?

Hitler enthusiastically advocated a policy that was intended to lead to 'mutual compatibility' between the denominations, and 'gradually to produce a reconciliation in this area'. The academic apparatus that the editors provide for this section does not deal with the fact that many Germans rejected the denominational schools that were still widespread at the time, and that numerous young people were heavily criticized if a Catholic introduced a Protestant bride to his parents, not to mention the brusque reactions of the respective clergy. Instead of looking at the real historical background, the editors refer to 'Hitler's concept of God', the timorous ecumenical activ-

ities of the time, and the anti-Church invective unleashed by the Führer and Chancellor of Germany in 1942, seventeen years after the publication of *Mein Kampf*. In this marginal note, which is questionable anyway, the commentators do not provide the absolutely necessary information that while Hitler called (mainly Catholic) dignitaries 'dung beetles' internally, he never did so in public. In this context the editors say nothing about the *Zentrum* (Centre Party), one of the main pillars supporting the Weimar Republic. It clearly saw itself as Catholic, and those who voted for it were almost exclusively Catholic. This split the Christian, democratic, and conservative middle. Not until 1945 did Konrad Adenauer draw the conclusions from this disaster and establish a supra-denominational political party, the Christian Democratic Union.

The issue of a federal or unitary state had occupied the Germans since 1806. The democratic national movement's tragedy was that in the nineteenth century it had to compete against territorial princes and monarchs, and therefore had to demand a strong central state in a country that historically had a federal structure. Finally, Bismarck achieved national unity in 1871 in an authoritarian and militaristic way. In somewhat stilted style, Hitler described this as follows: 'The Reich was formed not by the free will or equal contributions of the individual states, but by the hegemonic action of one state among them, Prussia.' In the annotations, the editors point out that the later historians Lothar Gall ('absorbed by Prussia') and Hans-Ulrich Wehler ('the creation of a Greater Prussian state') shared this opinion. Nice for Hitler, but less friendly towards Gall and Wehler, one could say. But in reality, things were more complicated. In 1925 the Prussian Landtag and the Prussian government formed a democratic bastion of the Republic. Hitler fused anti-republican and anti-Prussian resentments, and at the same time he energetically countered the Bavarian hatred of Berlin. His protest against the still widespread cult of Prussia gave him the air of an honest newcomer, as did his tirades against 'Habsburg hereditary evil' and 'the shallowness' and notorious 'cowardice' of the 'bourgeois mind'.

Like all radical right-wing parties at the time, whether in Italy, Romania, France, or Germany, the Nazi Party had both national and social aims. Hitler wrote on this: 'The broad masses can only be educated nationally via the detour of a social rise, as this alone can create the general economic preconditions that will permit the indi-

vidual to participate in the cultural goods of the nation.’ In other words, he was promising the German lower classes the chance of social advancement. What do the commentators have to say about this point, which was so crucial for the Nazi Party’s political success? To start with, the usual: ‘On this cf. Hitler’s argument in the chapter “Years of Study and Suffering in Vienna” (I/2), pp. 32–3, and the commentary there.’ In fact, there we find Hitler’s words that the “nationalization” of a people primarily [presupposes] the creation of healthy social conditions’ – but no commentary.

According to Hitler, the social gulf between the Germans could be overcome ‘not by the fall of the higher classes, but through the rise of the lower’ ones: ‘Again, this process cannot be carried out by the upper class, but only by the lower class, fighting for equality.’ The commentators again have nothing to say about this notion, which was so attractive to those with a socialist background. I recommend Friedrich Meinecke. In his book *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (1946) he developed the idea that in the nineteenth century the often initially opposing national and social movements ‘crossed over, affected each other, and ultimately sought to unite somehow’. And Meinecke pointed out that Hitler picked up on this: ‘The great idea lying in the air, the fusion of the national and the socialist movement, without question found in him its most ardent preacher and most determined executor.’

The editors do not list Meinecke in their bibliography. They think they can do without Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), any of her other writings, and Franz Neumann’s *Behemoth* (1942); they find the studies and editions of sources by Joseph Wulf superfluous, as well as Ernst Fraenkel’s *The Dual State* (1941) and H. G. Adler’s *Hitler als Persönlichkeit* (1960) and *Der verwaltete Mensch* (1974). They have probably never heard of Eric Voegelin’s *Rasse und Staat* (1933), or Wilhelm Röpke’s *Der Weg des Unheils* (1931) and *Die deutsche Frage* (1945); Friedrich A. von Hayek’s *Der Weg zur Knechtschaft* (1943 = *The Road to Serfdom*, 1944) and Heinrich York-Steiner’s *Die Kunst als Jude zu leben* (1928) are also missing. I consider the disregard of these authors, selected at random, as very strange. We should be aware that the bibliography of this edition of *Mein Kampf* covers 122 pages and contains more than 3,600 titles, including almost every narrowly focused Ph.D. thesis produced in the last twenty years.

The editors avoid the question of how and why Hitler was able to win over the masses with the programme set out in *Mein Kampf*. Of

course, external circumstances were required: the Versailles peace *Diktat* and the inflation, foreign military intervention, armed uprisings at home, and the Great Depression all paved the way for Hitler. He promised his electorate unconditional anti-liberalism and powerful state capitalism. To those who were racially allegedly equal and eugenically allegedly healthy, he promised the age of national social justice. He placed the totalitarian state above the individual. He transformed the social, religious, and regional differences that existed within German society into external national and racial ones. With this mixture, he succeeded in unleashing monstrously destructive energies.

Industriously, the editors provide a great deal of evidence to show that Hitler was a thoroughly bad criminal liar and a racist. This is true, but it has become commonplace. They claim to have 'deconstructed' *Mein Kampf*. This is not true. What they have deconstructed is history. All historians pose questions from the point of view of the present but they also have to put themselves back to the time in question and in this case explain why so many Germans voted for Hitler in 1932-3 and why, by the beginning of the war, even more were so enthusiastic about his policies. Historians must therefore explain to us not only why today's Germans see Hitler as a criminal, but also why their forebears, who were morally and intellectually no worse equipped, followed him so gladly and what they found so attractive about his crude language.

Hitler did not only produce 'a political party of a completely new type', as Sigmund Neumann has pointed out, but with *Mein Kampf* he also created a new literary genre that is still highly popular today. He was the first person in Germany to develop his political programme out of a stylized, partly invented biography. Before him, politicians had penned memoirs with titles such as *Thoughts and Memories*, or *Events and Figures*. Hitler described his life in approximately the following terms: I was a failure at school, my father beat me mercilessly, I had a bad time in Vienna; I come from the very bottom, I am one of you; I went through the war as a petty Lance Corporal, was wounded, and so on.

Today many politicians write autobiographies which follow this pattern in their formal structure. They publish baby pictures of themselves, confess to being failures at school, report their flight and expulsion and other dramatic youthful experiences. Let us take

Joschka Fischer's book *Mein langer Lauf zu mir selbst* and compare. Two years ago, Joseph Wälzholz, writing in *Die Welt*, did this on my suggestion. In Hitler's book we read, for example: 'For the first time I saw the Rhine. Through the delicate veil of the early morning mist, the mild rays of the early sun allowed the Niederwald monument to shine down on us, and the old (battle song) *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine) sounded out of the endlessly long train, and my chest grew tight.' And in Fischer's book we read: 'The morning mists were coming up from the Rhine and spreading over the government quarter in Bonn as I set out jogging for the first time. But after only a hundred metres, I began to wheeze.' Fischer complains: 'The alternative life of the 1970s was materially austere, at that time I had a paltry amount of money.' Hitler describes the 'uncertainty of earning my daily bread; the orphan's benefits I received were not enough to live on'. This struck a completely new tone in the political life of the young Weimar Republic. It conferred credibility and authenticity on Hitler. And as marginal note 132 in the Introduction shows, the editors remain unaware of this too.

Naturally, in addition to inappropriate and redundant annotations, the editors have also composed some very good ones, such as those about Hitler's violent, choleric father, for example. But as this critical edition of *Mein Kampf* stands, it can at best serve as a dictionary for experts. It surrounds the text with annotations, as if it were necessary to erect a cordon sanitaire. Possibly this represents a necessary break on the disturbing path by which the monstrous German past is constantly addressed anew. Perhaps a good, readable, shorter version can now be produced on the basis of this current edition. An abridged version could explain, classify, and invite questions and reflection, rather than automatic resistance, by reproducing long passages. Seen in this way, all this work would have been worthwhile.

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