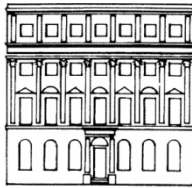


German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Jeremy Adler:

*Absolute Evil Cannot be Neutralized*

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

HITLER, MEIN KAMPF: A CRITICAL EDITION – THE DEBATE  
(May 2017), pp94-101

## *Absolute Evil Cannot be Neutralized*

JEREMY ADLER

It is a year since the new edition of *Mein Kampf* prepared by the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) was published in Germany. Johanna Wanka, Germany's Federal Minister for Science and Education, gave the work state legitimation by calling for it to be used in schools. Eighty-five thousand copies of the work have been sold, and the sixth edition will be published at the end of January. It is time to take stock.

The condition for a reprint was that it had to be scholarly, what the title calls a 'critical edition'. At first glance, however, it can be seen that this is anything but. The manuscripts and an important preliminary stage, an essay, have been left out—documents that are indispensable for a critical edition. And no attempt has been made to produce a 'critical text', that is, a good, corrected, possibly definitive version. What has been reprinted is merely the first edition of the two volumes dating from 1925 and 1926, with selected variants. Similarly, it lacks a systematic textual history, something that is considered standard for an edition of this sort. This makes it look amateurish; as a scholarly text, it has little value.

We are thus dealing with an 'annotated edition', but the commentary is also problematic. The intention of the editors is to distinguish between truths, half-truths, and outright lies in *Mein Kampf*. But this contravenes the principles of exegesis that Friedrich Schleiermacher, the founder of modern hermeneutics, laid down in 1809. Every interpretation must take the whole context into account. There is no 'truth' to be read out of *Mein Kampf* because in this decoction, every word is in the service of lies. By disregarding this principle, the editors make a number of bad mistakes.

Editing texts, the field which specializes in producing 'critical editions', is among the most difficult branches of philology. Germany has a well-developed infrastructure for this field, with around eight

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL). A slightly shorter version was first published as Jeremy Adler, 'Das absolut Böse lässt sich nicht neutralisieren', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5–6 Jan. 2017, 11. Translation published with permission.

institutions dedicated to it, such as the Zentrum für Textedition und Kommentierung in Münster and the Institut für Textkritik in Heidelberg. In Frankfurt, the Freie Deutsche Hochstift is responsible for this discipline, while there are also experts in Berlin and Wuppertal. And since 2008 there has been the Zentrum für Editions-wissenschaft in Munich, of which the IfZ is a founding member. The aim of this organization is to support the work of producing editions in all forms – organizationally, methodologically, technically. Its statutes explicitly state that it aims to guarantee and improve the quality of scholarly editions. Here, under one roof, we find a number of outstanding achievements, such as, for example, H. W. Gabler's (controversial) edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*. But not *Mein Kampf*. It seems that the difficult task of editing *Mein Kampf* was undertaken without being embedded in this 'institutional framework' that was created explicitly to 'bring together all the editorial projects in Munich and enable effective, interdisciplinary cooperation'. On 2 June 2008, a few years before beginning its editorial work, the IfZ had signed a cooperation agreement with the Zentrum für Editions-wissenschaft. For inexplicable reasons, however, this cooperation did not happen in the case of *Mein Kampf*, with serious consequences.

The aim of a traditional 'critical' edition is to study all the elements of the text in order to produce a definitive version. It is usual to start with any manuscripts that are available, but the editors have inexplicably left out the sparse material for *Mein Kampf*. And even if these are published elsewhere, a 'critical edition' should contain them for the sake of completeness. Twenty-three typewritten pages of text, the first five pages, and eighteen pages of drafts with notes are all omitted. Any major variations should, in principle, be found in a 'critical edition'. Another preliminary work (1924) is also missing. These sources should have been included for the sake of completeness, not least because they contain information which the commentary mentions only very vaguely. This undermines any claim to scholarlyness.

The next stage, that of evaluating printed versions, is pursued here in an equally arbitrary fashion. Without any attempt to produce a 'critical text', the editors merely reproduce the text of the first editions of volume one (1925) and volume two (1926). The apparatus contains variants from a number of editions which appeared between 1930 and 1944. This selection is unsystematic and cannot claim to be

'critical'. Even worse, the variants are not analysed in any way and the various changes are indiscriminately listed without investigating whether they are due to printing errors, the style of a particular compositor, or the intervention of an editor. The editors proudly point out that they invented a new computer programme to compare versions, as though we have not long had the venerable Hinman Collator (since around 1940) to do this. Here again we see the naivety and professional isolation that characterizes this new edition.

The luxurious presentation of the work is equally questionable. One historian described it as 'scandalous' because it confers a new 'aura' on the work. A curious decision was made to bind the book in fine, grey linen, reminiscent of the field grey of German military uniforms, and to print the cover in brown letters, the Nazis' identifying colour. This amounts to an aestheticization of fascism as practised by Leni Riefenstahl and Albert Speer at the time, and against which Walter Benjamin issued such serious warnings.

Today's buyers get a Nazi totem, the classic of annihilation, for their money. Its inner structure merges seamlessly with this image. The layout is deliberately modelled on that of the Hebrew Bible, here disrespectfully dismissed as the 'Jewish' Bible, and the Babylonian Talmud. There is no such thing as a 'Jewish' Bible; only a 'Hebrew' Bible. Small illustrations underline the similarities. It is perverse indeed to take the Jewish scriptures as a model for the design of the book that preaches the total extermination of the Jews. This expresses nothing but symbolic disdain for Judaism.

In this sort of work, the editors have a duty to correct all lies and passages that offend against the norms of civilization. But countless examples remain in this edition, creating the impression that the editors endorse these calumnies. This results in severe distortions. But the editors also make a number of mistakes. Marxism, for example, is incorrectly described as a party rather than an ideology, and the definition of shrapnel given leaves out two of its main components, the detonating agent and the fuse. Without them, the grenade could not explode. If we cannot even rely on such simple data, the apparatus loses even more of its scholarly credibility.

The saddest aspect of this edition is its treatment of the Jews. This goes so far that an antisemitic perspective creeps into the commentary, especially where the editors reproduce lists of embarrassing statements without any critical reflection. The footnote that seeming-

ly provides a definition of Jewishness contains forty-four lines of antisemitic slander with no disavowal. These citations confirm the lies and distortions in the main text.

The sentence in *Mein Kampf* which claims that the Jews 'exploit their fellow human beings' remains without comment, as though this were really the case. Where it says that 'the Jew' is driven by 'nothing but obdurate egoism', no correction is made, although charity is the highest commandment in Jewish ethics, from the second book of Moses to the Talmudic tract from the Sayings of the Fathers, to Philo, Lazarus, and Martin Buber.

Where *Mein Kampf* asserts that the Jews stole their ideas, this slander is substantiated by a list of the alleged booty, for example, a monotheistic God, thus only increasing the damage. Similarly, this crass sentence is simply reproduced: 'The Jews were always a people with specific racial characteristics and never a religion.' Yet it is generally known that religion is the pillar of Judaism. Since no correction is forthcoming, this grotesque denigration continues to stand. In order to prove that *Mein Kampf* is really lying, however, one would have to go back to the essence of Judaism.

Thus we find all sorts of basic lies. The Jews cultivate their language with reverence, as it is so important for their reading of the Bible and their prayers. Spinoza, no less, composed a Hebrew grammar that anticipated modern 'universal' grammar. Yet the editors leave unchallenged the claim in *Mein Kampf* that the Jews 'attached very little importance' to 'preserving their language'. This adopts the author's view and implicitly negates the central role of the Hebrew language for the Jewish people.

The editors also reproduce a quotation claiming that the Jews are 'a Mediterranean-Mongoloid mixed breed', without exposing the nonsense that this is based on. When the text defames the Jews by calling them 'devils', the apparatus provides the evidence, as though the accusation were justified. Artur Dinter's claim that the Jews are 'not the chosen people of God, but the chosen people of the devil' is not contradicted. The scurrilous observation that 'the Jew always remains the same' is similarly uncontested.

Elsewhere, the editors offer a brief, abstruse description of the Talmud without explaining that this is the canonical work which, providing multi-layered instructions for living, belongs next to the Bible itself and presents the Jewish laws in their full complexity. It is

a 'literary work', they say, followed by a few antisemitic quotations which have little to do with the passage. This meagre note cannot get the better of the evil in *Mein Kampf*, claiming that 'the Talmud' is 'a book that does not prepare one for the hereafter, but for a practical and tolerable life'. This could easily be refuted.

A note on the resurrection is similarly uninformed, as the editors jumble up the different historical layers—the Bible, the Talmud, Maimonides. The editors lack any tact towards a people who have already suffered so much through this particular book.

Too often, a really simple, helpful annotation is missing. When the main text claims that the Jews are incapable of founding a 'state', the note provides evidence in the form of Heinrich Claß' taunt: 'Nowhere is the Jew creative—in what one is accustomed to call politics, he is unconditionally and totally negative.' Should they not point instead to the achievements of great politicians such as Simson or Rathenau here? Rather, the prejudices, half-truths, and imprecision mount up.

History and culture fare no better. The editors seem seriously to believe that between the destruction of the Second Temple and the founding of the state of Israel, no Jews lived in Palestine. This error strengthens the stereotype of the rootless Jew. Instead of refuting this prejudice, the editors cite works which reinforce it.

The editors negate the central question of whether the Jews have an independent culture in an extraordinary sentence. Where the main text claims that 'the Jew' had never 'possessed his own culture', they strengthen the attack by describing this view as 'self-evident'. In doing so, they ignore the specifics by which the existence of a great, independent Jewish culture can be demonstrated. In fact, by every criterion, the Jews have a distinctive way of life: identity, religion, laws, social structure, language, calendar, festive days, rituals, customs, houses of worship, schools, cult objects, agriculture, trade, clothing, hairstyles, medicine, dietary prescriptions, cuisine, mysticism, philosophy, legends, literature, music, painting.

Elsewhere, the editors go so far as to write that in the Diaspora, the Jews were interested only in 'religion' and 'social structures', whatever that may mean. This strange observation is refuted by Maimonides's work as a medical doctor alone. And how does the career of the Jewish boxer, Daniel Mendoza, fit in with this prejudice on the part of the editors? Mendoza founded modern, 'scientific' box-

ing, and was the author of the standard work on the subject, *The Art of Boxing* (1789). A list of achievements of this sort would be impressive.

The account of the modern period is similarly strange. The treatment of Moses Mendelssohn, the leading figure of the Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment, rings alarm bells. He is presented as though he advocated assimilation, whereas in reality he distanced himself from it in old age. In addition, Mendelssohn's influence on emancipation is limited solely to Christian Wilhelm Dohm's problematic book, *Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews* (1781). This makes it seem as if only the Prussian state supported the emancipation of the Jews, ignoring the efforts, years earlier, of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in works such as *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise*, and especially of the Jews themselves and, from 1781, of the Habsburg Monarchy. Ultimately, Dohm's reforming ideas went back to his encounter with Mendelssohn.

The contribution made by Jewish thinkers to modernity is not mentioned. *Mein Kampf* derides their support for ideals such as 'enlightenment', 'progress', and 'freedom'. In order to demonstrate that the Jews did enrich German culture after all, the editors cite two random examples, Heine and Einstein. Given the profound participation of the Jews in German intellectual life from Rahel to Bloch, this seems like a cheap cliché or a distortion.

Finally, the editors fall into the trap set by *Mein Kampf* of denouncing the allegedly excessive role of the Jews in the press. By listing the numbers of journalists and providing meticulous percentages, they merely perpetuate the wrong and thereby confirm the prejudice. Particularly confusing is the sentence in which the editors say that the nineteenth-century rabbis were interested only in the 'ethnographic unity' of the people. Perhaps they meant 'ethnic'. But even that makes no sense.

The presentation of the worst stereotype of all, that of the Jews and money, is extremely questionable. No commentary is offered on sentences such as 'of course he', meaning 'the Jew', 'ever more thoroughly destroys the foundations of an economy that truly serves the people'. The following sentence about 'the Jew' similarly stands uncontradicted: 'Whatever this costs him', he 'recoups in a few years by charging interest and compound interest. A true bloodsucker.' Also uncontradicted is the lie that 'financial services and trade' have

become 'entirely' a Jewish 'monopoly'. The old caricature endures, also in details such as, for example, when the offensive term 'financial Jew' (*Finanzjude*) is merely called 'pejorative'.

In many sensitive cases, the repeated claim that the original will be 'framed' by corrections remains unfulfilled. Thus on the one hand, words such as 'monster', 'foreign merchants', 'sucked out blood', 'world Jew', 'God's scourge', 'devilish intentions', 'bloodsucking tyranny', 'mental pestilence', 'parasite on the people', and many more are printed unthinkingly and without the usual distancing and denials. And on the other, prejudices and lies are designated incorrectly as 'myths' and 'topoi', which confers an undue dignity on them.

Naively confusing the categories of language and reality, the editors condescendingly cite the loanword 'moloch' as 'eloquent semantic evidence for the fact that the Jews were no strangers to hard physical labour'. Are we really meant to take this seriously? It might be thought that many of these details are taken out of context, but this is not the case. For example, in a long footnote on the topic of 'work', we find three mistakes in six lines on Exodus; an error rate of 50 per cent. The constant, sarcastic use of 'the Jew' in the original, instead of 'the Jews', is never corrected. What is missing is the constant deconstruction of this incendiary rhetoric by a linguist who could expose the horrific language on which most of *Mein Kampf* is based. Without this unmasking, the impression is created that in innumerable cases, the edition might approve of the author's paranoid bombast. His seditious strategy remains intact, unchallenged, effective. The editors use the racist term 'mixed marriage' (*Mischehe*), and go so far as to use the phrase 'Jewish blood' themselves (although admittedly, it is placed in inverted commas).

The caricature of the Jews as 'parasites' and 'vermin' is only weakly countered. The existence of a 'Jewish politics', invention of antisemites, is accepted uncritically. Although the slanderous pamphlet *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) is exposed for what it is in a footnote, elsewhere the view that the alleged Jewish plot to take over the world was based on 'promises in the Old Testament and in the Talmud' is adopted without contradiction or documentation. This motif should have been handled with the utmost caution, not least because it is at the forefront of anti-Jewish propaganda today. But the editors treat it without any understanding. The statements in Isaiah,



for example, can only be understood in their original mythical context. They have nothing to do with the present age. They are not about the power of the Jews, but an appeal to all the peoples of the earth to serve one God. The editors, however, unreservedly express their opinion that the Bible favours global domination. This and many other examples accumulate to produce an unacceptable overall picture.

Some historians and the IfZ celebrate this edition as the marking the end of a 'myth'. But this 'myth' never existed, as every sensible person could see from the start what *Mein Kampf* was about. Others praise the breaking of a 'taboo'. Social anthropologists are more careful. At the latest since the fundamental work of F. B. Steiner, living in exile in Oxford, we know that taboos are necessary for banishing social dangers, including slanderous works. In a state ruled by law, where inciting the people is illegal, this edition should be withdrawn.

Anyone who wants to read the original can do so easily. Further, the IfZ should perhaps reconsider its position. Thanks to a negligent education policy this bizarre product will continue to have an impact, and it is to be feared that it will darken the image of the Jews in Germany among many readers, for example, young people.

*Mein Kampf* is so infamous, the evil attacks so numerous, that even a team of scholars cannot keep this shocking product in check. It is methodologically impossible to neutralize the contents of a book. The result resembles what Aristotle called a 'monster'. The four editors have worked with diligence and care to do the impossible, but as I argued a year ago in these pages,<sup>1</sup> and now sadly see confirmed in this failed attempt, absolute evil cannot be edited. It endangers everything that is good.

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

JEREMY ADLER is emeritus Professor and Senior Research Fellow at King's College London.