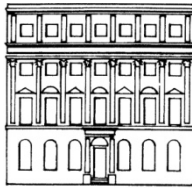


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Response to Jeremy Adler

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Response to Jeremy Adler

ALAN E. STEINWEIS

'Absolute evil' is not an especially useful analytical concept for a scholar attempting to understand and explain National Socialism and the Holocaust. Through its vagueness and its externalization of human motivation onto an abstract metaphysical plane, it explains nothing, and in fact inhibits explanation by diverting attention away from empirical inquiry. But this is the concept at the heart of Jeremy Adler's recent broadside against the critical edition of *Mein Kampf* published at the beginning of 2016 by the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ). Adler not only accuses the editors of the edition of incompetence when it comes to questions of Jewish culture and anti-semitism, but goes further, arguing that Hitler's text—the absolute evil—is by its very nature impervious to critical scholarly analysis. He claims that the published work bears out his earlier warnings about the futility of the Institute's *Mein Kampf* project. More ominously, he concludes that the publication 'will darken the image of Jews in Germany among many readers'. I cannot disagree more strongly with Adler's contention that the publication, and by extension the IfZ, have legitimized antisemitic stereotypes and thereby done damage to the Jews of Germany.

First some full disclosure: like Professor Adler, I am a scholar of Jewish background. I am a member of the Academic Advisory Board of the IfZ, and an associate editor of its journal, the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*. In 2013–14, during a visiting professorship at the Institute for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich, I made a small contribution to the *Mein Kampf* project in the form of a memorandum in which I set out my understanding of Hitler's views on Jews and race. As a historian, I see Hitler as a politician of world-historical significance whose ideas and writings can be, in fact must be, analysed in terms of their intellectual genealogy, veracity, and rhetorical strategies. I count among the many Jewish scholars working in many countries who recognize the intellectual legitimacy of

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the IfZ's *Mein Kampf* project, and who appreciate the anti-antisemitic spirit that animated it. Readers of Professor Adler's essay should not form the impression that his opinions reflect some kind of 'Jewish view' of the subject.

Professor Adler's essay reads less like a scholarly encounter with an ambitious publication than it does like the summation of a prosecutor arguing a weak case by magnifying the significance of isolated and marginal pieces of evidence. The most egregious example of this is Adler's assertion that the IfZ has made itself complicit in the 'aestheticization of fascism' by binding the volumes between grey covers with brown lettering, colours associated with the *Wehrmacht* and the Nazi Party, respectively. Having been present at a meeting in December 2014 at which the graphic designer commissioned for the project by the IfZ presented his design concept to an international team of scholars, many of whom hail from countries that had been overrun or occupied by the *Wehrmacht* and suffered tremendously under the yoke of the 'Brown Dictatorship', I can report that we all regarded the austere colour scheme as appropriate to the project. Obviously, it is important to avoid the unintentional reproduction of Nazi symbols, but our caution should not give way to paranoia. Do we avoid the colour blue because it was the colour of *Luftwaffe* uniforms, or green because it was the colour worn by the German police? Is the fact that the volumes are printed in black ink on white paper further proof of its 'aestheticization of fascism' because these were two of the three colours on the Nazi flag?

The main part of Adler's essay is an enumeration of antisemitic passages in Hitler's text that, as Adler sees it, remain unchallenged by the editors. While the editors included a great number of footnotes refuting or contextualizing Hitler's assertions about Jews, they did not do so for every single one. According to Adler's tortured argument, these omissions will be interpreted by readers as validations of Hitler's statements. So, to cite two examples, the editors did not annotate Hitler's reference to the Jews (quoting Artur Dinter) as 'the chosen people of the devil', nor did they insert a footnote to comment on the statement that the Jews pursue the 'looting of their fellow human beings'. In Adler's view, the editors, in not expressly refuting such statements, legitimize them. This argument is highly problematic in a couple of respects. First, the editors provide voluminous commentary to challenge antisemitic statements that Hitler present-

ed as fact. But general expressions of hatred, for example, that an entire people consists of 'children of the devil', are not scientifically falsifiable. Adler holds that *none* of Hitler's antisemitic statements ought to be refuted because *not all* of them can be. From a scholarly perspective, I consider this view to be an intellectual capitulation. Second, Adler's argument implies an exceedingly low opinion of the readers of the publication, as though in the absence of specific guidance from the editors they would not be capable of recognizing self-evident expressions of fanatical bigotry when they see them. I seriously doubt that such people will be represented in large numbers among the users of these two formidable volumes.

Early in his essay, Adler admonishes the editors of violating Schleiermacher's dictum about exegesis: 'Every interpretation must take the entire context into account.' But in fact, it is Adler himself who violates this dictum by cherry-picking ostensibly problematic passages while failing to recognize the profoundly anti-antisemitic nature of the two volumes.

I am certainly not suggesting that the edition does not contain errors, nor even that each and every criticism levelled by Professor Adler is entirely without merit. But the content and especially the tone of his essay treat the project, its sponsoring institution, and especially its editors with the greatest of unfairness. They deserve better.

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