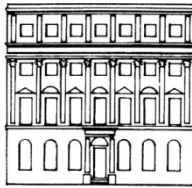


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'Mein Kampf': Some Afterthoughts

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'Mein Kampf': Some Afterthoughts

NEIL GREGOR

Was it right to republish *Mein Kampf*? Two or three years ago, as the world's media first started to discuss in earnest the implications of the then impending lapse of copyright on Hitler's notorious book, the answer seemed relatively clear. The acknowledged stability of German democracy; the recognition that Germany has done more than any other modern nation-state to wrestle with the moral challenges that came with the history of genocidal dictatorship; the sense that the growing temporal distance to the crimes of the Third Reich now facilitated calmer, more reasoned reflection on a period of history whose capacity to inspire imitation was, if anything, fading; and the ongoing presence of a committed programme of civic pedagogy that placed rejection of extremist ideologies at the heart of its mission—all of these made the principled argument for supporting republication obvious.

Pragmatism, moreover, pointed in the same direction. With various publishing houses lining up to re-issue the book, for reasons either of commercial expediency or ideological sympathy, the presence of an authoritative scholarly edition would strengthen the hand of those needing to apply the provisions of the German Criminal Code relating to the distribution of hate literature. The availability of a scholarly edition would, amongst other things, make it much easier to refute the spurious defence of far-right publishing houses that they were reprinting the book solely for study purposes, and to demonstrate that the agendas of such companies were most likely to be pernicious. There were, of course, dissenting voices, and those who counselled caution, both inside and outside Germany; there were occasional moments of political tension in the background as the editing work proceeded. Yet given the near-limitless capacity of the world's media to sensationalize anything to do with Nazism, its propensity to magnify minor differences of opinion on the topic into major points of alleged scandal, and its insistence on reducing complex, sensitive issues to crudely polarized, simplistic polemic, what is most striking about the discussion of the last few years is that this

uniquely symbolic moment has been the subject of so little meaningful dispute.

This is not to say that the scholarly edition was universally praised when it eventually appeared. A survey of the initial critical reaction can only conclude that the reaction has been very mixed. Some, most notably the literature scholar Jeremy Adler,¹ have rejected in principle the idea of applying the practices of philology – with all their tacit endorsement of the intellectual substance and cultural value of that upon which they are being brought to bear – to a text so horrendous that it negates all the traditions of education, cultivation, and reflection in which that discipline is anchored. Others, embracing the (equally ‘enlightened’) position that one should always ‘dare to know’, have been far more accepting of the idea in principle, but somewhat critical of the end result. For some there are too many footnotes, for some: too few. For some, such as Götz Aly,² those notes are too dully factual, while for others, Jeremy Adler among them, those notes compound the insult of the original text by re-inscribing the same ideological positions, vicious antisemitism included, of Hitler’s rhetoric into the scholarly apparatus.

For Götz Aly, the emphasis in the edition on the intertextual connections of Hitler’s words to the world of ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries crowds out the necessary work of explaining how Hitler’s thought connected with the desires, fantasies, and hatreds of his supporters in the 1920s and 1930s. For others, the connections made between Hitler’s words and those of his intellectual and ideological precursors are not intertextual enough, because they register general rhetorical affinities rather than specific, verifiable instances of inspiration or appropriation and thus fail to meet the exacting standards of the philological tradition. Some critiques are anchored in slightly different disciplinary assumptions concerning what the work of editing entails; in some cases, the robust performance of democratic citizenship seems to make it a matter of honour to argue the point, whatever; with others, one suspects, the element of institutionalized rivalry and zero-sum competition in the economy of scholarly prestige – a particular characteristic of the German academ-

¹ See above, Jeremy Adler’s articles ‘Absolute Evil’ and ‘Absolute Evil Cannot be Neutralized’ in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*.

² See above, Götz Aly, ‘Mein Kampf: A Scholarly Burial’, in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*.

ic habitus, and one never to be underestimated — is somewhere in the mix too.

If these diverse layers of critique have their origins in a single underlying issue, this surely lies in the fact that the editors of the volume — as they were also fully aware — were walking something of a tightrope act throughout. The peculiar challenge of this project, which reflected its location at the ambivalent interstices of scholarship, politics, pedagogy, and ethics, lay in the inherent tension between the scholarly imperative to show how the text works and the political necessity of preventing it from speaking. The greatest achievements of the project lie, first, in the connections it enables readers to draw between Hitler's own voice and those of the thought worlds in which he was socialized, and, secondly, in documenting the many often obscure allusions to the politics of the 1920s into which his writings were an intervention. In showing so clearly how Hitler's thought was anchored in elements of the mainstream European intellectual tradition — and thus how thoroughly familiar, and correspondingly comprehensible, the rhetoric will have felt to contemporaries — the volume furnishes a key to understanding the sense of authenticity that cleaved to Hitler's voice, and thus some of the reason for his widespread appeal. At the same time, however, the editors have been obliged to try to neutralize the prose, hence the apparatus of footnotes seeking to dismantle the tissue of lies, inaccuracies, and clichés and expose them for the ideological filth that they are. The edition thus reveals an underlying tension between a claim of scholarly authority that rests on the illusion of dispassionate academic editing in the service of the academy on the one hand, and the pursuit of an agenda of didacticism and political pedagogy aimed at a wider citizenry on the other.

But arguably this is only making manifest the gap between the positivist pretence of objectivity and the reality of subjective positioning that is always there in such editorial work. The difference is that usually the world of scholarship is rather happier to conspire in maintaining the illusion. For all that one acknowledges the ambivalences, judged against the conventional standards of scholarly inspection it was entirely right to pursue the project. The edition represents a major scholarly achievement, a tool that will, if used intelligently, sensitively, and critically, serve expert historians, students, teachers, and other interested lay people alike.

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

Yet as the foregoing has implied, the conventional standards of scholarly inspection are not the only framework in which to judge the issue. In the brief period of time between the conceptualization of the project and its completion much in the world has changed, and it has done so in a manner that reminds us forcefully that the expert judgments of the academy could never be the only criteria for answering the question. For the edition has appeared at a time when the stability of western democracy, taken almost entirely for granted until very recently, has come under substantial threat.

In Germany, widespread resentment at the government's response to the refugee crisis has been accompanied by considerable levels of violence, most notably in attacks on refugee accommodation that recalled the notorious racist hate crime wave of the immediate post-reunification period. The political corollary of this has been the insurgency of the far Right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a movement notable not only for its aggressively nationalist attitudes towards immigration but also, increasingly, for its willingness to challenge openly the deep-seated consensus regarding the centrality of Holocaust memory to the political culture of the Federal Republic. Particularly pertinent in the context of a discussion of the republication of *Mein Kampf*, the AfD has repeatedly tested the limits of permitted speech in Germany, seeking the rehabilitation of political vocabularies deemed until very recently to be toxic as part of a sustained programme of normalizing radical nationalist ideology under the ever-seductive banner of 'common sense' once more.

Such a phenomenon is hardly confined to Germany, and is all the more worrying precisely because it is but one manifestation of a profound resurgence of radical, aggressive nationalism across the western world that until recently seemed to exist only on the margins. Each country has its variants, each of which presents itself in a slightly different form, as one would only expect, since each is the product of slightly different circumstances. Brexit, Trumpism, the Front National in France, the near-triumph of the far Right in Austria's recent presidential elections, or the Kaczyński regime in Poland are products of their own peculiar contexts, and it can sometimes be too easy to make the argumentative move from one to another. Yet the successful forging of a broad coalition of overtly fascist politics, conservative nationalism, post-colonial nostalgia, social protectionism, and anti-establishment protest is broadly familiar across the western

world; the organization of that ideological coalition into political movements that are highly disruptive to party systems undergoing long-term processes of disintegration is similarly recognizable in many places; the context of an economic crisis that is both structural (the transition from industrial to post-industrial society) and cyclical (the long-lasting effects of the 2008 financial crisis) also provides a recognizably common background.

Moreover, the renaturalization of the discourse of the far Right across western polities has been accompanied by sustained attacks on democratic constitutions, most notably in Poland, that have sensitized us anew to the fragility of democratic politics. While deficits in democratic culture visible in eastern Europe can perhaps be explained in part by the still fledgling nature of post-Communist constitutions, just as striking is the openness with which nationalist and conservative politicians seek to undermine democratic settlements in western countries – witness the issue of voter registration in both the USA and Britain. The nationalist electoral revolt of 2016 has revealed the weakness of the democratic reflexes in some of the supposedly most stable and long-standing democracies in the world, levels of ignorance and indifference regarding basic constitutional proprieties that are shocking, and a capacity to listen to the siren voices of ‘post-truth’ politics that leave those accustomed to living by the customary rules of reasoned, evidence-based argument in a state of considerable, ongoing disorientation. The early days of the Trump administration are the clearest, but far from the only, measure of this.

Suddenly those more than 3,500 scholarly footnotes that dissect *Mein Kampf* so thoroughly, that layout that works so hard to contain the ideological filth the text purveys, the apparatus that offers such excellent starting points for teaching about the book and its contents – all appear less like the incisive tools of a robustly confident civic pedagogy, and more and more like the thin blue line that stands, in all its fragility, between an ugly message and a newly receptive mass audience for populist far Right politics across the western world. In this context it seems not only reasonable but necessary to ask again: was it right to re-publish *Mein Kampf*?

How one answers this depends not only on acknowledging the threats posed by the resurgence of ultra-nationalism, but also, ultimately, on how straight, short, and bold a line one is inclined to draw between the extremist politics represented by Hitler and the mani-

festations of far-Right extremism that are affecting Germany and elsewhere now. There is no gainsaying that the underlying mental structures of contemporary racism have their origins in far older forms of it, and that all such ideologies have a clear archaeology that stretches back a very long way; there are also overtly neo-Nazi strands of the Alternative für Deutschland that can trace their organizational ancestry back through the Deutsche Volkunion, the Republikaner, the NPD, and thus to networks of former members of the NSDAP. In this sense, a degree of caution is certainly in order. However, the same points about political and ideological archaeologies can be made of other far Right formations in Europe. It is clear, for example, that UKIP has absorbed the constituency of the British National Party which, in turn, incorporated much of the remnants of the National Front of the 1970s and 1980s; there were clear personnel links stretching back from the National Front through the League of Empire Loyalists to the British Union of Fascists. The element of colonial nostalgia that animates the British far Right is, unsurprisingly, a significant part of the ideology. Yet it makes far more sense to explain UKIP in terms of its inchoate protest against structural and cyclical economic problems, widening income inequalities, the failings of welfare states in retreat, resentments over globalization and migration, all glued together with a strong dose of Islamophobia that provides the explanatory and emotional cement for its constituency. Most of this has comparatively little to do with memories of the 1930s.

Similarly, it makes more sense to understand the AfD as a German manifestation of a widespread contemporary European phenomenon than it does to foreground its Nazi mental archaeologies, and to place it in the context of UKIP, the Front National in France, or the Dutch Party for Freedom rather than that of the Third Reich. Even if one focuses directly on the resurgence of antisemitism in Europe in recent years it is too easy to draw the conclusion that overtly neo-Nazi politics are in operation, and that this should have implications for the republication of *Mein Kampf*. For many years, the ebb and flow of antisemitic attitudes in Europe has had far more to do with the vicissitudes of the Arab-Israeli conflict, of which it functions as a reliable barometer, and comparatively little to do with Christian nationalist supremacist traditions, though these are still there too. Above all, the patterns of antisemitic abuse do not map onto the pub-

lishing geographies of *Mein Kampf* in any meaningful sense. Indeed, some of the liveliest and ugliest traditions of antisemitism are to be found in the places where the book is most heavily proscribed.

If anything, the political and cultural shifts of the past few years remind us forcefully that the toxic blend of racism and nationalism that *Mein Kampf* embodies is impossible to quarantine simply by seeking to police the circulation of an individual text. Refraining from publishing a scholarly edition of *Mein Kampf* would not stop the endless rhetorical associations of foreigners with crime, of foreigners with disease, of foreigners with predatory sexual behaviour, or any other of the deep-seated racist tropes that are so central to western political and popular culture. In showing just how anchored in so many strands of very mainstream nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought *Mein Kampf* was—most of which are far less peculiar to Germany than the Anglophone world sometimes wishes to imagine—the great achievement of the edition is to show that this language was not just Hitler's. At the same time, of course, it stands as the paradigmatic symbol of what such language can be used to legitimate and where that language can lead. In that sense, for all the nervousness that the contemporary political moment causes for liberal observers, the edition should be seen and used not just as a tool for research, but also as the starting point for renewing our thinking about what a democratically committed historical pedagogy might look like.

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