

H-Net Reviews

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Eugene Davidson. *The Unmaking of Adolf Hitler*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. ix + 519 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1045-6.

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Over the course of many decades, a small number of general and biographical works have stood out as lasting achievements among the many studies on Nazism and the Third Reich on the one hand and on Hitler himself on the other. Most notable among these works are Karl-Dietrich Bracher's *The German Dictatorship* in the former category and Sir Alan Bullock's masterly *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* in the latter. Now comes Eugene Davidson, President Emeritus of the Conference on European History and the former President of the Foundation for Foreign Affairs, with the long-delayed sequel to his own contribution to the literature. The present book has been, according to the author, twenty years in the making, and has evidently been published as part of a sort of package by the University of Missouri Press, which this year has issued a paperback edition of Davidson's 1977 book, *The Making of Adolf Hitler*, and in September will release a paperback of Davidson's *The Trial of the Germans: An Account of the Twenty-two Defendants before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg*, which first appeared in 1966. In a time of renewed genocide and a revival of the concept of war crimes tribunals, the subject of the last of these promises to hold the most compelling contemporary interest.

The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of the work under consideration here. While Davidson merits praise for demonstrating the physical and intellectual endurance to complete his study of Hitler and Nazi Germany—a work completed when Davidson was well past ninety years of age—there is little to recommend it to a scholarly audience. Source citations, even for relatively obscure information, are sparse. Davidson has relied, with one exception, on published secondary and memoir literature, and has taken almost no cognizance of the most recent fifteen to twenty years of scholarship on the Third Reich. Moreover, the book has no organizing theme or focus.

Even the title is misleading in several ways. First, this study is not a biography in any meaningful sense of the

term. The book fails to live up to the promise of the dust jacket that it “covers literally every aspect of Hitler's life from his success after he came to power in 1933 to his self-destruction.” There is hardly a word about Hitler's personal life, the nature of his relationships with other Nazis, and nothing at all about the complexity of the interaction between Hitler and the German people. What drove this man? How might one explain certain actions or account for his successes and failures? Davidson neither asks nor answers such questions. Furthermore, this particular Hitler is little more than a talking head. The author devotes long sections to recapitulations (a mixture of summaries and direct quotations of long passages) of Hitler's speeches (see, e.g., pp. 287-92, 307-10, 369-75), but never sets them in much context while doing little to attempt an interpretation.

A second problem is that the book concentrates so heavily on the years between 1933-39 (fourteen chapters) while cramming too much into too little space toward the end (the final chapter covers everything from November 1940 to May 1945). The author thus gives the reader little basis to understand how or why Hitler was “unmade.” Through those first fourteen chapters, Hitler goes from triumph to success to triumph; nothing goes wrong—he evidently made no errors. In the latter portion, his errors are either ignored or are mentioned without comment. His army was not prepared with clothing and equipment for the bitter winter of 1941-42 on the Russian front, we are told (p. 437), because Hitler never expected the war to last even to that point, but the author never says why this was the case. Hitler's declaration of war against the United States, certainly a major factor in his “unmaking,” earns four sentences but not even a word of speculation as to why he took such a step, nor any explanation of how critical this was in undermining him.

None of this is to say that the book is entirely without merit. Apart from some disjointed organization in places—an occasional problem in the early sections, and a serious impediment to the efficacy of the final

chapter—this moderately priced book reads smoothly, and is loaded with detailed storytelling of sometimes obscure, sometimes well-known incidents and encounters in Hitler's life as Fuehrer. There is no real rhyme or reason to their inclusion, except for the fact that Davidson delights in their retelling and does a fine job of capturing detail, even if he often fails to explicate the significance of the story or even why he chose to include it.

The Unmaking of Adolf Hitler is a straight narrative, focused largely on diplomatic affairs of the years 1933-1940, that scarcely pauses for critical comment, inter-

pretation or speculation. Clearly the work was written for a general rather than academic audience. However, the flaws mentioned above, particularly the imbalance in the focus of the work, and the lack of interpretation, seriously compromise its likely utility even to the casual reader.

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