H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

A. N. Wilson. *Hitler.* New York: Basic Books, 2012. 215 pp. $24.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03128-3.

Reviewed by Nicholas J. Schlosser (Marine Corps University)
Published on H-Empire (September, 2012)
Commissioned by Charles V. Reed

Is there room in the already crowded field of literature on the history of Nazi Germany for yet another biography of Adolf Hitler? With excellent biographies already written on this subject by Ian Kershaw (*Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* [1998] and *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis* [2000]) and Alan Bullock (*A Study in Tyranny* [1962]), not to mention the vast corpus of works examining specific elements of Hitler's ideology, the Third Reich, and their place within the broader context of German history, do we need yet another book on this particular topic?

The answer, of course, is yes. There is always room for new works on any historical topic, provided they bring something new to the table. There are always new documents to uncover, new interpretative approaches to take, and ultimately new conclusions to be made by specialists and nonspecialists alike. Therefore, the question we must ask with regard to newly published works, such as A. N. Wilson's biography, *Hitler*, is whether those books achieve any of these goals? Unfortunately, Wilson's work does not provide much that has not been written about before. In this brief, highly interpretive account of Hitler's life, Wilson asks questions that have been asked before and examines sources that have been examined before, and ultimately presents conclusions that are highly conjectural, speculative, and unsubstantiated by a careful reading of the available evidence and historical literature.

Much ink has already been spilled over this work.[1] After its publication, British historian Richard J. Evans wrote a critical review of it for *New Statesman* in which he pointed out numerous factual errors, criticized the work's broad generalities, and noted that the author made little effort to examine and consider the majority of works that have already been written on this particular subject.[2] Wilson's response focused on the supposed defensiveness of academic historians and specialists when nonspecialists write about their subjects of expertise. Evans was clear to note that this was not the case, writing that "I am cross with him not because I think only specialists should write about Hitler–I explicitly noted the contributions made by novelists and literary scholars–but because he has simply ignored 99.9 per cent of the work on the subject done by historians, and as a result has written a book that is absolutely valueless as well as full of errors, many of them not minor at all."[3]

On the whole, this reviewer has found Evans's assessment to be correct. Wilson's work is filled with inaccuracies. As Evans notes in his initial review, Bavaria was not an independent state separate from the rest of Germany in 1918 (as Wilson writes on page 17) and Heinrich Brüning was not the leader of the Catholic Center Party (p. 67). There were only two German parliamentary elections in 1932, not five (p. 80). The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact did not divide Poland along ethnic lines, granting the Nazis only the German-speaking regions and Joseph Stalin the Slavic-speaking ones (p. 119). Indeed, Nazi Gauleiters carried out brutal campaigns of ethnic cleansing as they sought to Germanize those areas of Poland annexed directly to the Reich in 1939.[4]

We can add to these errors that the Catholic Center Party was not outlawed in 1933, but in fact dissolved itself (p. 91). Hitler's first reaction to the burning of the Reichstag was not to glibly declare "Good riddance to that trashy old shack" (p. 93). In fact, as historian Ian Kershaw recounts, he became gripped by the fear that the Communists were attempting to launch a revolution against his regime, and subsequently ordered a violent crackdown to insure that a repeat of the November 1918 revolution could not occur.[5] The book's account of World War II is further riddled with mistakes. Denmark did not fall two months after Norway fell in April 1940 (p. 133). Erwin Rommel was not the primary innovator of Blitzkrieg and it is certainly problematic to claim that he was "the most esteemed general, of whatever country, during the entire war" (p. 158). It would have been remarkable if he was, considering he never won a campaign. George S. Patton commanded only one of five U.S. field armies fighting in the European Theater of Operations, and was

consequently not the overall commander of all U.S. forces as Wilson claims (pp. 169, 174). Winston Churchill also did not introduce the strategy of bombing civilian targets in August 1940 when he ordered the Royal Air Force to target Berlin (p. 137). The Luftwaffe had already leveled Warsaw and Rotterdam before then, and Luftwaffe units helped level the town of Guernica during the Spanish civil war in 1937.

The book is plagued by broad generalities. Far too often readers are expected to accept Wilson's word with regard to what historians have declared in the past about Hitler. For example, he writes that "much is sometimes made of the Roman Catholic upbringing of both Hitler and Goebbels," but does not cite, either in text or in an endnote, just who has been making so much of this issue (p. 71). He declares that "it is a baffling fact that so many historians of Hitler continue to speak belittlingly of *My Struggle* as a key text explaining his later intentions" (p. 48). Unfortunately, the author does not indicate who all these historians are. Kershaw in his two biographies of Hitler; Karl Dietrich Bracher (*The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism* [1970]); Eberhard Jäckel (*Hitler's Worldview: A Blueprint for Power* [1981]); Gerhard Weinberg (*Germany, Hitler, and World War II* [1995]); and Jeffrey Herf (*The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* [2006]) are just a few of the many historians who have all stressed the fundamental place *Mein Kampf* holds as the key explanatory text of National Socialist ideology. As the historian Francois Furet noted, "it is obvious that from the first two years–between the terrorized parliament's vote to endow him with total power and the Night of Long Knives–the Hitler in power was the same Hitler who had written *Mein Kampf*."[6]

The book also often argues that surface similarities between National Socialism and other political and religious institutions are far deeper and more fundamental than they really are. For example, Wilson argues that Hitler was appointed chancellor by a normal and democratic process. Hitler "became the Chancellor of Germany just as many others have done since in milder and more democratic times, by a series of telephone calls and a succession of compromises" (p. 82). Certainly, on first glance, the assembly of the Conservative-National Socialist cabinet by Paul von Hindenburg and Franz von Papen in 1933 had the veil of a democratic process. But is it accurate to call the creation of a coalition of minority parties, by a president who was contemptuous of the Weimar constitution and had been governing for three years using emergency decrees, as democratic? The appointment of Hitler as chancellor, the final death knell of Weimar democracy, was rung by men dedicated to seeing that republic destroyed.[7] In another example, the author argues that Hitler's reliance on spectacle and grandiose speeches demonstrates that he "belonged to the oral future, the future which contained Walt Disney, television and cinema" (p. 26). Wilson's assertion that Hitler broke with the "world of the text" ignores National Socialism's heavy reliance on textual material for its propaganda, such as its use of highly detailed (and verbose) "Wall Newspapers" to transmit its propaganda.[8]

The book's treatment of the Enlightenment and the issue of modernity is a good example of how Wilson's focus on only the most basic similarities obscures fundamental differences. Wilson writes that "Hitler was the Enlightenment's cloven hoof" and that "Hitler's crude belief in science fed his unhesitating belief in modernity" (pp. 181, 186). Such an assertion is not new, and the argument linking National Socialism to the Enlightenment was made before World War II even ended by the Frankfurt school intellectuals Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944]). However, scholarship produced since has demonstrated that Hitler's ideology actually constituted a fundamental break with the principles of the Enlightenment, political liberalism, and modernity as a whole. As historians George L. Mosse and Fritz R. Stern respectively argued in *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964) and *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the German Ideology* (1961), the basic building blocks of National Socialism can be traced back to conservative *völkish* intellectuals writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These *völkish* ideologues condemned the Enlightenment for its overarching stress on reason over emotion, *zivilization* over *kultur*, rationality over spiritualism, and individual human rights over the national, organic will.

Indeed, these right-wing intellectuals soon developed a "reactionary modernism" that embraced technology and science but condemned and eschewed the political and social principles of the Enlightenment and political liberalism.[9] This reactionary iteration of modernity was fully embraced by Hitler and the National Socialists, and their ideological worldview thus constituted a fundamental rejection of the Enlightenment and political and economic modernity. The Nazis certainly embraced modern technology, utilizing means of mass communication to spread their message and building highways to better unify the German nation. But this was not done to make men more reasonable, as Wilson's book contends, but to create a stronger, more organic racial state. Similar means do not mean similar objectives. In only the most

superficial sense was Hitler's wish to provide a typewriter for every German student similar to the British prime minister's, Tony Blair, quest to provide a computer for every British student (p. 186). Claiming this example demonstrates continuity between Hitler and modern liberal-democratic politics completely ignores the fact that these two leaders had diametrically opposed and radically divergent conceptions of what kind of state and society should be created with such education and technology.

Part of what has been so welcome about Kershaw's biographies of Hitler; Evans's three-volume history of the Third Reich (*The Coming of the Third Reich* [2004], *The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939* [2005], and *The Third Reich at War* [2009]); and Saul Friedländer's two-volume history *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (*The Years of Persecution 1933-1939* [1997] and *The Years of Extermination, 1939-1945* [2007]) is that they represent the culminating points of decades of scholarship on their respective subjects by numerous historians and other scholars who preceded them. The bibliographies in all of these works stand as a testament to the wealth of detailed research, analysis, and sound historical scholarship that has been written over the past decades on Hitler, the Third Reich, and the Final Solution.[10]

What is frustrating about Wilson's biography then is that many of the questions he claims have not been answered have been addressed by these works. The author declares that "Hitler is a mystery who cannot be plumbed, whether you use the tool of the economist, the political analyst or the psychiatrist" (p. 184). Notably, Wilson does not mention the tools of the historian as a potential means for finding answers. Careful and close analysis of the relationship between time and place grounded in a rigorous analysis of available evidence (in short, the approach taken by all historians as they seek to reconstruct and explain the past) have already provided answers that Wilson claims cannot be found.

There is certainly room on the shelves of historians and general readers alike for a short and focused biography of Hitler, and this historian would never argue that this particular subject is somehow tapped out and that there are no new avenues of research. Unfortunately, Wilson's biography provides brevity without the careful treatment of evidence and past scholarship that is necessary for any book on the subject of Hitler and the Third Reich. It simply makes too many assertions without citing evidence and is too riddled with basic errors. It provides scholars and general readers alike little that is new or innovative.

Notes

[1]. Anita Singh, "The Hitler Biography That Started a War," *The Telegraph*, April 5, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9189569/The-Hitler-biography-that-started-a-war.html.

[2]. Richard J. Evans, "Hitler: A Short Biography," review of *Hitler*, by A. N. Wilson, *New Statesman*, March 12, 2012, http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2012/03/hitler-wilson-german-british.

[3]. The exchange is summarized in Jonathon Derbyshire, "The Hitler Wars: Richard J. Evans vs. A. N. Wilson," *New Statesman*, April 4, 2012, http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2012/04/hitler-wars.

[4]. Evans summarizes these errors in Evans, "Hitler."

[5]. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 458.

[6]. Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34.

[7]. See Henry Ashby Turner, *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power: January 1933* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1996) for a detailed account of the events surrounding Hitler's appointment as chancellor.

[8]. See Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 128-130.

[9]. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[10]. While there is not space here to list all of the works that have contributed to our understanding of Hitler, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust, some of the key ones, alongside those already cited in this review, are William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945* (New York: F. Watts, 1984); Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State: The Foundations and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich* (New York: Longman, 1981); Norbert Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany: The Führer State 1933-1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of the Final Solution: Euthanasia and the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961);

Michael Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Geoffrey Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Timothy Mason, *Nazism, Fascism, and the Working Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Hans Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Kurt Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy toward German Jews* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Nicholas J. Schlosser. Review of Wilson, A. N., *Hitler*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36876

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.