

H-Net Reviews

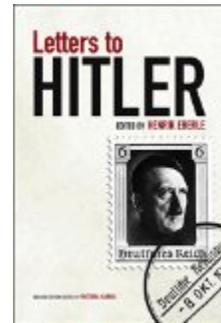
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Henrik Eberle. *Letters to Hitler*. Edited by Victoria Harris. Translated by Steven Rendall. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012. x + 262 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4873-6.

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Among the German government documents confiscated by the Red Army after its conquest of Berlin in 1945 lay a treasure trove of tens of thousands of letters, written by Germans of all classes to Adolf Hitler, most of them during his twelve-year reign. Henrik Eberle, of the University of Halle-Wittenberg, made a selection of these letters, currently housed in a Moscow archive, available to the public in a 2007 collection, which has now been ably abridged and edited by Victoria Harris, a research fellow at Kings College, Cambridge, and translated into English by Steven Rendall.[1]

The editors don't state the total number of letters, and the collection in Moscow is incomplete for some years of the Third Reich. 1934 seems to have been the peak year for letters to Hitler, with over twelve thousand arriving at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin; Eberle notes that the annual total was "still" over ten thousand in 1941, but does not indicate how much the numbers fell off from there, beyond indicating that Hitler received fewer than one hundred birthday greetings in 1945.[2] By a rough count Harris's edition includes just under two hundred letters, most reprinted but some briefly paraphrased by the editors.[3] Some thirty of these letters do not seem terribly relevant to understanding the German people's thinking about Hitler—five are from individuals who were clearly mentally unhinged, while another twenty-five are from people living outside Germany or were written to government officials other than Hitler. Almost eighty of the letters came from high- or mid-ranking public officials, heads of large organizations, or members of the Nazi Party. Slightly fewer than ninety came from people who lacked a stated connection to government or party. The English-language edition follows the same chapter structure as the German original, except that it omits

three chapters which Eberle devoted exclusively to letters and telegrams congratulating Hitler on his birthdays.

Reading many of the letters in the Harris's edition, one is struck by the number of people who seemed to feel that they had a personal connection to the Leader, whom they regarded with affection as a kind of benevolent father figure who shared their private concerns and cared deeply about them. Hitler received a bewildering variety of what Harris has aptly termed "love gifts" (p. 91): saints' pictures, embroidered handkerchiefs, ties, stockings, poems, drawings, woodcarvings, at least one model ship, and embroidered pictures of people's children or their dogs, including a photograph of a family's youngest child, aged ten months, giving the "Heil Hitler" salute, which the child supposedly performed whenever shown a picture of "Uncle Hitler". Many sought a personal connection to the Leader by asking him to be godfather to one of their children; a Nazi Party member made this request in 1933, adding that "[y]our feeling of comradeship, my Leader, is already so great that I believe my request is not inappropriate" (p. 83). (An adjutant, Wilhelm Brückner, responded by saying that because of the large number of such requests, the Leader could serve as godfather only to the seventh son or "ninth living child" of a family.) In 1935 a Berlin family wrote Hitler what was intended to be a humorous letter about their seven-year-old daughter, who hoped to "marry the Leader" when she grew up. Among other motives, the child feared that Hitler was lonely without a wife. "My darling," her father explained, "he is not alone. He has all of us, men, women and children in Germany and far beyond it. We all love him. That is worth more than the love of one person" (p. 147).

Ian Kershaw, in his seminal work on Hitler's public

image, commented on “the legend of the warmth and protectiveness, which Hitler supposedly offered to every member of the ‘people’s community.’” Kershaw concluded that this myth “evidently tapped a vein of pseudo-religious, ‘secular salvation’ emotions forming a not insignificant strand of popular psychology.”[4] And indeed, the letters in this collection offer several examples of Germans deifying Hitler or seeing him as entrusted with a divinely ordained mission. In April 1932, the day after Nazi Party victories in several state elections and about nine months before Hitler took power, a government official in Silesia affirmed that “we have fought and suffered so much, we have done it willingly, with love, warm love for you, our Leader, our popularly developed Savior”; two paragraphs later he declared that “[w]e have waited for our savior for thirteen years,” that is, since the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919 (p. 51). In 1938 a hotel porter named Karl Jorde wrote a letter containing a “National Socialist credo” which he hoped the government would distribute with official sanction, so that Germans everywhere might recite it on a regular basis. It reads, in part: “I believe in God the Father, the almighty creator of heaven and earth, and in Adolf Hitler, his chosen son, whom he has elected in order to deliver his German people from the vipers’ brood (Jews, clerics and dynasties) and centuries-long disunity” (p. 169). Anti-Semitism also emerges as a theme in a number of letters, but is far from pervasive. Another unmistakable theme is the desire for peace, which is hardly surprising given all that we know of the German people’s dread of war during the 1930s. In this connection, it may be significant that Eberle and Harris assert, presumably based on some pattern in the letters, that Hitler reached the peak of his popularity in 1938, in the aftermath of Germany’s annexation of Austria. Kershaw, in contrast, locates the apogee of Hitler-worship in the summer of 1940, following Germany’s swift and seemingly miraculous conquest of France. The abridged version edited by Harris does not include a single letter from the summer of 1940, a remarkable absence of which Harris does not take note. If this gap reflects a comparable paucity in the archived collection, this might serve as a small piece of further evidence that the German people did not want war, even to the extent of rejoicing little in the victory over France. Eberle notes that Hitler received only ninety-eight letters supporting his policies during the anxious six weeks that preceded the war’s outbreak on September 1, 1939; during the following seven weeks of the campaign against Poland, only eighteen people sent approving letters to Hitler’s office in Berlin.[5]

How reliable are these letters as an indication of how the German people viewed Hitler, and as an index of the waxing and waning of his popularity? Harris and Eberle say nothing about the criteria by which these published letters were selected from the tens of thousands sitting in the Moscow archive, beyond Harris’s observation that they come “from each era in his political life ... covering the full range of themes about which the German people wrote to him” (p. 2). Especially frustrating is that the reader gains no sense of whether the large fraction in the Harris collection taken up by letters from public officials and Nazi Party members is comparable to its proportion of the archived letters. Even more significant in this connection is the small size of the Moscow collection. Twelve thousand letters in a year sounds like a lot until one compares this number to the volume of letters received by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose term in office began five weeks after Hitler’s and ended in Roosevelt’s death two weeks before Hitler shot himself. The authors of a study of letters to FDR estimate that somewhere between fifteen and thirty million Americans wrote letters to Roosevelt during his presidency.[6] This great disparity between the German and American cases, far out of proportion to the difference in the size of the two countries’ populations, suggests a conclusion and a hypothesis.

The conclusion is that the Germans who wrote to Adolf Hitler constituted a tiny, self-selected minority. Consequently, their views may not have been at all representative of the larger population. As to why FDR got so much more mail than Hitler, the two politicians and the countries they led differed so much from each other that no easy answer is possible. However, one might argue that both Americans and Germans accurately perceived, if only in an inchoate fashion, the character and personality of the men who led their countries. Just as Americans responded in massive numbers to FDR’s personal warmth and genuine concern for their well-being, perhaps Germans, despite the propaganda images of gentle “Uncle Adolf” surrounded by adoring children, perceived something of the Leader’s emotional coldness, lack of empathy, seething hatreds, and predilection for violence. If the paucity of personal letters to Hitler is any indication, Hitler’s undeniable popularity was even more dependent on his political and military successes—as opposed to personal affection for him—than previously assumed, and perhaps the “Hitler myth” was even more of a myth than we tend to think.

Notes

[1]. Henrik Eberle, ed., *Briefe an Hitler. Ein Volk schreibt seinem Führer. Unbekannte Dokumente aus Moskauer Archiven – zum ersten Mal veröffentlicht* (Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 2007).

[2]. Ibid., 9.

[3]. “Rough” in that I was not completely consistent in counting those letters which were briefly paraphrased by the editors instead of being reprinted whole or in substantial part.

[4]. Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth.’ Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73. See also Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933-1945*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997-2007), vol. 2: *The Years of Extermination*, 657: “We

are hard put to identify the importance of charisma in a modern society functioning along the rules of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic procedures. There remains but one plausible interpretation: Modern society does remain open to—possibly in need of—the ongoing presence of religious or pseudoreligious incentives within a system otherwise dominated by thoroughly different dynamics.”

[5]. Eberle, *Briefe*, 359.

[6]. Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, *The People and the President. America’s Conversation with FDR* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix, xi. The authors also note that some fifteen million letters to FDR are housed in the Roosevelt library, while the National Archives contain “millions more.”

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