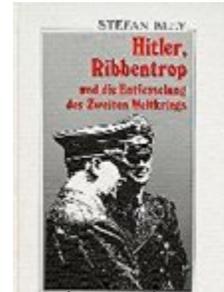


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stefan Kley. *Hitler, Ribbentrop und die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkriegs*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 1996. 359 pp. DM 68,- (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-77496-5.

Reviewed by Gerhard L. Weinberg (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
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This Stuttgart University doctoral dissertation reviews the respective roles of Joachim von Ribbentrop and Adolf Hitler in the immediate origins of World War II, concentrating on their relationship during the time Ribbentrop served as Foreign Minister. The work briefly reviews Ribbentrop's rise to the Foreign Ministry and then traces his participation—or lack thereof—in the diplomacy of 1938 and 1939. The book is based on a careful reading of the published diplomatic documents, some German archival materials, and a canvass of published works on the diplomacy of the late 1930s.

While some readers may find a detailed recital of the diplomatic crises of those years somewhat tedious in view of the existence of other accounts, the careful look Kley gives to the interactions of key figures is both a major strength and one of the weaknesses of the book. Exacting scrutiny undergirds Kley's major theses: that Hitler was at all times the major driving force; that Ribbentrop, far from pushing the dictator forward, was merely a tool of Hitler—and often an uninformed and deliberately misled tool at that; and that the Fuehrer played his associates off against one other while keeping his aims from them because he recognized that most of them were *not* in agreement with his willingness to go to war with the Western Powers in 1938 and 1939. Explicated in considerable detail in the concluding section of the book, this view of the way foreign policy was designed and implemented in the years before Germany initiated World War II runs like a consistent thread through the whole volume. It will surely require those who have argued that some internal dynamic or economic problem drove an unknowing and unintended Hitler to war to take another look at the evidence.

This reviewer can see in Kley's work primarily a con-

firmation of his own account of the years in question, especially in the author's insistence that Hitler in the winter of 1938-39 decided to go to war with England and France in the near future with the attack on Poland as a necessary prerequisite to keep the eastern border quiet during war with the West. The concentration on purely diplomatic matters, however, also constitutes the major weakness of Kley's book. Like so many, he has fallen for the fairy tales about the Anglo-German naval agreement of 1935; he completely neglects the realities of German naval construction programs, which included the breaking of that same agreement, planned before the agreement was signed and implemented later in the same year. The whole thrust of German rearmament in the 1930s, always aimed at the West, simply vanishes from Kley's account. Careful reading of diplomatic documents is surely needed, but the product cannot stand by itself.

At times the author is not careful enough, following memoirs and later testimony rather than the contemporary record. This is most obvious in the case of Ribbentrop's main assistant during the period under review: State Secretary Ernst von Weizsaecker. Kley correctly characterizes Weizsaecker as originally enthusiastic about the destruction of Czechoslovakia and a war against Poland, but he has missed the key document on Weizsaecker's original appointment to his position. Almost fifty years ago, the project for the publication of German diplomatic documents printed in the first volume it issued (*Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1939*, Series D, No. 100) Weizsaecker's note of January 13, 1938, which expressed full agreement with Ribbentrop's conclusions in a lengthy report calling for the assumption that there would be war with England. Could it not be that Weizsaecker's expressed belief that there was nothing to be said against Ribbentrop's conclusions had

something to do with his appointment as State Secretary soon thereafter?

Kley's discussion of the crises triggered by Germany's determination to destroy Czechoslovakia is generally sound, but on the Polish issue, Kley has missed key aspects. He is surely correct in stressing Hitler's early decision to go to war, but he has overlooked major factors in his analysis of the position of the two states in the arguments of 1939. The major symbolic role for the German leadership of Poland's adherence to the Anti-Comintern Pact does not receive the attention it deserves. A look at Germany's simultaneous pressure on Hungary and Spain on this same issue might have enlightened the author. Surely the governments of those three countries in 1939 were about as anti-Communist as anyone could have hoped; German insistence, therefore, has to be understood as a demand for formal and symbolic obeisance. That this was something that the rulers of the revived Poland were not about to accept under any circumstances should be seen as the converse of the other aspect that Kley completely ignores: Polish willingness to consider concessions on every *other* demand Germany put forward at the time, including a project for the partition of the Free City of Danzig.

Kley's picture of Ribbentrop makes that figure less of an actor than many thought at the time and since. Instead he becomes one of a large number whom Hitler cleverly manipulated—but who wanted to be manipulated because they adored their Fuehrer, thought him always right, and enjoyed the favors, both material and psychological, that he bestowed on them. In the case of Ribbentrop as in so many others, huge secret bribes were a part of this process. In this regard, the book provides useful insights into the workings of the Nazi regime as a whole. It will be interesting to see whether the view that Hitler deliberately misled many of his associates because he realized that they did not share his extreme plans for war leads to new work on the policy process in the Third Reich. Kley is, however, clear on the enthusiasm of the misled for following their leader wherever he might have wished to lead them. Only when Hitler did not include Ribbentrop as Foreign Minister in his political testament, which listed the members of the government that was to follow, did the man who had by then held the office for more than seven years express shock.

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