

Ian Kershaw. *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. xxx + 845 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-04671-7.



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More than a half-century after the collapse of the Third Reich, the logic of Adolf Hitler's career remains almost incomprehensible. In this latest and painstakingly scholarly attempt to explain what may never be fully explained, Ian Kershaw tells us that until he was thirty, Germany's future leader failed at everything he tried except soldiering, and in that line of work he never progressed beyond lance corporal. Kershaw further tells us that when Hitler left an army hospital in Passau, where he had been invalided during the last weeks of World War I, his savings totalled just 15 Marks 30 Pfennige in a Munich account, and he had no prospects of employment. When he joined the German Workers' Party in October 1919, it was just one of some seventy-three *voelkisch* groups in Germany, some fifteen of them active in Munich, in 1920. That year, Hitler renamed the group, National Socialist German Workers' Party, but he had no socialist programs to offer a country whose economy had been devastated by a war between capitalist powers. His economic views had been molded largely by Gottfried Feder, a Munich Far Right guru who suggested to Berlin dur-

ing World War I that ocean-going vessels be built of concrete.

From this absurd beginning as a politician, Hitler bullied, manipulated, cajoled, threatened, lied, deceived, and stage-managed his way to become the last chancellor of the Weimar Republic, in January 1932. Within eight years of Hitler's taking office, field marshals dutifully followed his orders on when and where armies should move, intellectuals collectively sanctioned whatever insane doctrines he articulated, industrialists hailed him as the savior of capitalism (in a "Socialist" state), and he very nearly won World War II. But less than four years after reaching a height of power matched only by the greatest conquerors in history, his domain shrank to a bunker beneath Berlin's Reich chancellery, an architectural monstrosity designed by Albert Speer, whom Hitler had chosen as Reich Minister for Armaments and Production, in 1942.

And that is just part of the Hitler story. When he committed suicide, the "nobody from Vienna" had finished off a Satanic assignment to devastate and demoralize Europe. Gone, possibly forever,

was the optimism of the early 1900s. In just twelve years, four months, and eight days, the life span of the Third Reich, Hitler had eradicated not only optimism but what many of the greatest minds in history had struggled over centuries to create, including those who lived and worked in Eastern Europe's eminent centers of Jewish learning.

Kershaw acknowledges his intellectual debts to earlier Hitler biographies, especially Alan Bullock's path-breaking *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952), and explains in his preface that "Hitler's own position within [the National Socialist] system (if 'system' it can be called) pushed me inexorably to increased reflection on the man who was the indispensable fulcrum and inspiration of what took place, Hitler himself."

In a sense, the statement is a disservice to Kershaw, because the book is far more than Hitler portrayed against a backdrop of his voyage from nothingness to absolute power. (Volume two will take readers from absolute power to utter catastrophe.) Kershaw asks and answers in detail critical questions about Hitler's relationship to Germans, their relationship to him, relationships between Germans and Jews, and Hitler's relationship to Jews.

For example, Was Hitler a congenital anti-Semite or was his anti-Semitism a political ploy? In his detailed response, Kershaw ponders when and under what circumstances Hitler first expressed anti-Semitism. His conclusion is that the seeds were always there, within Hitler--after all, anti-Semitism was endemic in that part of Austria in which he was born--but that his full-blown Jew-hatred did not emerge until after World War I, when Hitler blamed Jews for Germany's defeat. Above all, Kershaw thinks Hitler would not have been the Hitler we know had he not deeply, sincerely, unquestioningly believed everything he said, especially about Jews.

It did not affect his audiences that Hitler was banal, totally indifferent to the sufferings of oth-

ers except as their sufferings reflected badly on his leadership, a non-stop talker in private whose adjutants feared that a casual comment by a guest could lead to an all-night lecture, and a political leader who deliberately pitted subordinates against each other to thwart possible united action against himself. To the contrary, the masses warmed to his hysteria but, surprisingly, not initially to his anti-Semitism.

Kershaw bases his conclusions mainly on documents that have been available, some of them for decades. This is hardly surprising. Barring startling findings in documents removed from Berlin to Moscow after the war and gradually emerging from Russian archives, new details are unlikely to loom large. What we need today is what Kershaw offers--a knowledgeable and readable interpretation of what is known, what is not known, what is important to know, why what should be known has not been known, and what may eventually be known.

Hopefully, Kershaw will write more in his second volume about what attracted Germans to Hitler at the height of the Third Reich. If anti-Semitism was not a major interest among the population before Hitler came to power--despite his constant harping on the subject--why did it become so?

Meanwhile, it remains fashionable among historians of the Holocaust to write that the acquisition of Jewish assets was theoretically secondary to ideology--or, bluntly put, murder came before robbery.

But if that is true, how is it that no Jews were murdered until all their assets had been seized (gold teeth pulled from the mouths of the dead was the exception), and that Hitler was always concerned that Germany's home front should benefit sufficiently from war not to revolt, as did the citizenry in November 1918? And, as it developed, Germans of the Third Reich *never* revolted against the regime.

Immediately after the war, Germans of Allied-occupied Germany were still anti-Semitic. Reparations and restitutions eventually paid Jews were financed through tax receipts. Had attempts been made to obtain financing through confiscation of goods and property stolen from Jews, a civil war might have broken out. As Kershaw suggests, Hitler knew more about the workings of the mind of the man on the street than the man on the street knew about the workings of Hitler's mind.

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