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Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris

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David Welch

By any stretch of the imagination Hitler's rise and fall was extraordinary. He was not an intellectual. He produced no great works of philosophy or art. He was not a military leader of genius or insight yet this petit-bourgeois Austrian came to power constitutionally in 1933 and remained in power for 12 years and by 1941 he commanded a European empire not seen since the days of Napoleon. He was also the instigator of a genocidal war of unparalleled scope and brutality. How can the Hitler phenomenon be explained and, does it have any relevance over 50 years after his death?

What is extraordinary is that for someone who has written so widely on Hitler (including two books, *The Hitler Myth?: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (OUP 1987) and *Hitler* (Longman, 1991]) Kershaw remains fascinated enough with the Hitler phenomenon to continue to invest so much of his intellectual vigour. In terms of personality Hitler was a quite unremarkable and unlovely man. As one who has written a modest book on Hitler I emerged from the experience with a sense of detachment and a feeling that I come no closer to understanding the enormous paradoxes associated with Hitler's tortured personality and his inner life. The word most commonly associated with Hitler is 'evil' and commentators have been quick to

emphasize his role and personal responsibility for the undeniable crimes committed by the Nazi regime. Invariably Hitler is seen as a man who achieved power through the exercise of his own demonic will. Albert Speer's view that he was an 'inexplicable demonic figure' that occurs only rarely in history is still widely shared. Indeed many of his biographers have sustained this view. The continuing public obsession with Hitler's personality (and sexuality) has resulted in a widening gap between popular and scholarly views of Hitler.

In his preface, Kershaw admits that he too was a reluctant biographer, arriving at the writing of a biography of Hitler from 'the wrong direction'. Here Kershaw's sympathies for the 'structuralist' approaches to Nazi rule become apparent. 'Structuralists' challenge the 'intentionalist' argument that Hitler can be seen as *the* 'programmatist' implementing systematically his ideological objectives. The 'structuralists' do not deny the centrality of Hitler to Nazism, rather they focus on the 'structural' context of decision making and the role of 'traditional elites' in running the Third Reich and Hitler's inability (or unwillingness) to keep this chaos in check. This shift in emphasis has, inevitably, tended to downgrade the importance of Hitler who, in Hans Mommsen's famous phrase, was in some respects a 'weak dictator'.

These historiographical tensions provide an insight into Kershaw's approach and explains why *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* constitutes a different type biography to the more traditional approach found in Bullock's masterpiece (*Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, 1952; rev. ed., 1964) or Jochim Fest's brilliant analysis of the psychological forces driving Hitler's character (*Hitler*, 1974). Moreover, Kershaw is less interested in the inner psychology or the private life that one finds in recent populist works such as Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler. The Search for the Origins of his Evil* (New York, 1998); mercifully he also pulls back from controversial psychoanalytical speculation that underpinned so many abysmal psychobiographies of the 1970s. Kershaw is more concerned to analyze the nature of Hitler's power; how he gained power and how he used it - or was allowed to use it by those around him. Thus for Kershaw, Hitler provides a vehicle to allow him to write an analysis of the wider social and political forces in Germany. To this end, Kershaw is shrewd enough to look seriously at secondary sources like Goebbels' diaries to glean meaningful insights into Hitler's thinking and his actions.

Familiar tools of analysis such as his thesis of 'working towards the Fuehrer' remain central to Kershaw's methodological framework. This is the notion Kershaw claims was at the very core of the Nazi regime; that galvanized Hitler's followers to translate his broad ideological guidelines into action in the Third Reich. Surprisingly, however, Max Weber's theory of 'charismatic leadership', so prominent in Kershaw's previous work on Hitler, is less conspicuous in this volume (although in his preface Kershaw does acknowledge its influence on his thinking). A disappointing omission from this reviewer's point of view is Kershaw's cursory account of Hitler's views on propaganda. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler devoted two (perceptive) chapters to the study and practice of propaganda - as much time and space therefore as he devotes to Jews, Bolshevism and 'living space' - central planks of his 'world view'. Convinced of the essential role of propaganda for any movement set on obtaining power, Hitler saw propaganda as a vehicle of political salesmanship in a mass market. Hitler made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the masses and what he would do in power. The function of propaganda, Hitler argued, was 'to see that an idea wins supporters' it tries to force a doctrine on the whole people'. Accordingly, propaganda for the masses had to be simple, it had to concentrate on a few points as possible which then had to be repeated many times, concentrating on such emotional elements as love and hatred. 'Persistence' argued Hitler, 'is the first and most important requirement for success.' Although Kershaw tantalisingly refers to Hitler as the 'most talented demagogue of his day?', he also writes of his opportunism. Given that one of the strengths of this book is Kershaw's detailed and perceptive breakdown of Hitler's speeches and writings (see below), I would have welcomed a textual analysis of Hitler's thoughts on propaganda and the consistency (or otherwise) with which Hitler applied these beliefs in practice. Was he the great propagandist or merely a lucky opportunist?

While propaganda remains of peripheral importance (or interest), a central theme that underpins Kershaw's analysis is the account of Hitler's conversion to a paranoid anti-Semitism. In Brigit Hamann's magnificent

work (*Hitlers Wien Lehrjahre eines Diktators*, Munich, 1996; *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship*, OUP, 1998) she claims that when Hitler left Vienna for Munich in 1913 he was not the rabid anti-Semite he later became. Kershaw confirms this view in a painstaking analysis of Hitler's speeches and actions (which, in turn demolish a number of myths). Although Hitler was certainly an anti-Semite before he arrived in Munich, Kershaw convincingly argues that the key period was the Munich period of 1918-19. Hitler's annihilatory anti-Semitism emerged from the shock of military defeat in 1918 and his extraordinary decision to enter politics.

In the press release that accompanies the book it is claimed that 'at the end of the twentieth century it's never been so important that we understand both Hitler and his era'. As someone who is sanguine about over-hyped claims of 'warnings from history' it remains incontestable that Ian Kershaw's *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris*, will offer future generations the most penetrating analysis and revealing insights into Hitler's motives and the nature of power within the Third Reich. This is biographical history at its best by a master historian who has full command of the sources (including 168 pages of footnotes). Volume one ends with the audacious reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936. Hitler's position is unassailable and he firmly believes that his actions are ordained by Providence. According to Kershaw, however, this is the point where nemesis takes over from hubris. Bring on volume two!

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[2]

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