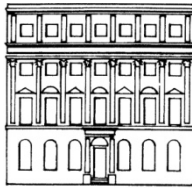


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Only the Spoken Word had a Mass Impact

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Only the Spoken Word had a Mass Impact

WOLFRAM PYTA

Mein Kampf is a work loaded with significance that does not stand up under close scrutiny, mainly because the book has become a cipher for crimes for which its author is blamed. This makes it seem like a confession, in which the author gives free rein to a boundless contempt for humanity and his brutal will for extermination. And this leads to the view that even seventy years after Hitler's death, it would be irresponsible to give him a forum in which to preach the extermination of the Jews.

For decades, well-known historians have pointed out that too much is being asked of *Mein Kampf*: anyone who seeks a 'master plan' for the extermination of the Jews in this work will not find it there since the author was careful not to announce his intentions. Hitler was preparing his political comeback while in prison, and for this reason, it seemed advisable to write a book that would also allow him to be taken seriously as a theoretician of the *völkisch* movement.

He therefore had to keep his intentions regarding extermination under wraps, although he had openly discussed them in a small circle. It annoyed him that during the time he was imprisoned, a book was published whose author, Georg Schott, to whom Hitler had exposed his political intentions unfiltered, revealed in more than one place what Hitler had in store for his political opponents.

In public, *Mein Kampf* is often presented as a key document that puts all other sources in the shade and shows the dictator's true face; even some historians who like to explain the world in terms of a text, declare that in *Mein Kampf* they have found this sort of source. But in his book Hitler did not write a life story that was true to the facts. Rather, he made up an autobiography and organized it according to considerations of political expediency.

He thus devoted many pages to narrating how he had become a convinced antisemite during his stay in Vienna between 1908 and

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1913, and claimed that his book contained the fruits of almost fifteen years of studying of the 'Jewish question' as an autodidact. By doing this, Hitler wanted to distract attention from a circumstance which could give rise to uncomfortable questions, namely, that he had not politically committed himself in public until the autumn of 1919. Nobody could take offence at his political passivity in the steamy atmosphere of Munich during the turbulent period from November 1918 to May 1919 if his account of himself was believed, namely, that by this time he had long since matured into a convinced antisemite, and that all he was lacking was an adequate field for his political activities. This striking example illustrates why expertise in textual analysis is necessary to decode the author's narrative strategy and distinguish between works of the imagination and of truth. This requires a historical-critical edition that subjects the text to meticulous source criticism.

The Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) in Munich is well prepared to tackle this demanding task, among other things because in Christian Hartmann, head of the editorial team, it has an expert on the history of National Socialism who specializes in foreign policy and the conduct of war, both of which take up a great deal of space in *Mein Kampf*. Over almost 2,000 pages, this two-volume edition demonstrates the virtues of sober philology. It also deserves appreciation because it does not adopt a text-centred interpretation of Hitler. In their Introduction, the editors leave no doubt that the real Hitler can only be found in the spoken word.

Thus it is no coincidence that the only large text which Hitler wrote himself, the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, was created in an exceptional situation, namely, in prison, where there was no chance to talk. The editors rightly point out that in *Mein Kampf* Hitler repeatedly emphasized the advantages of the spoken word over the written one, thus relativizing the significance of his own text. From Hitler's point of view, the spoken word was not only vastly superior to the written word because of its impact on the masses. Hitler did not entrust the unvarnished communication of his intention to murder the Jews living in his sphere of power to the written word, but shouted it out on 30 January 1939, speaking to the Reichstag and thus to the world. And Hitler also initiated the implementation of this crime through the spoken word. To look for a written instruction from Hitler himself is to misunderstand the nature of his style of leadership.

This does not relativize the significance of *Mein Kampf*. Rather, Hitler's work is placed into the context of its origins, and thus demythologized. The academic value of this edition is measured by whether it provides background information that illuminates contexts for users. In this respect, the editorial team's achievement is superlative. The number of annotations alone, far more than 3,000, suggests very thorough textual work. And they are not tucked away at the end of the book, or printed in small type at the bottom of the page, where they would address a small circle of insiders only. Rather, the edition places the annotations, many of which resemble a dictionary entry in terms of length and content, right next to Hitler's original text. In this way, readers have a compendium that does not omit any topic covered in *Mein Kampf*. Thus, for example, we find out a great deal about Hitler's political home, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. And the murky depths of the *völkisch* movement of the early 1920s are illuminated. The annotations on the early history of the Nazi Party will enrich research because they are based on archival materials that have not often been used so far.

The editors faced a particular challenge in tracing the references that Hitler used in preparing his text. The original manuscript of *Mein Kampf* no longer exists, and very few pages of drafts have survived. On top of this is the fact that Hitler systematically wiped out traces in cases where he wanted to present ideas as his own, while he liked to lay false trails claiming to have gained political inspiration from people who could no longer defend themselves against such appropriation. Hitler seems to have incorporated the work of third parties into his own in such a sophisticated way that it is almost impossible to identify the authors and passages that he used. Thus the edition painstakingly documents passages that display striking similarities, but only in a few cases is it possible to demonstrate that Hitler actually cannibalized these works for *Mein Kampf*.

The edition sometimes goes too far, for example, when it implicitly suggests, on the basis of textual similarities alone, that the leader of the Pan-German League, Heinrich Claß, was one of the most important sources of ideas for Hitler, although they had a strained relationship. In this case the editors might have got further if they had systematically searched for intertextual allusions to predecessor texts, a method commonly used in literary studies.

The annotations, however, are not only the scholarly crux of the

edition. They also shield the whole editorial project from accusations of being too close to Hitler's text. Even if the criminal nature of Hitler's policies comes out more clearly in *Mein Kampf* than in other sources, an edition of this book must take care not to be transformed into an unwilling mouthpiece for Hitler. To this extent, the annotations are intended to be an antidote that neutralizes the original text. This is why the editors have placed them around three sides of the text, and in the same typeface. The reader cannot avoid them. They work as instructions which cannot be ignored if readers want to ingest a dose of *Mein Kampf*. Yet however justified the editors' intention to address not only experts interested in gaining deeper knowledge but also readers without much prior knowledge, and however striking their solution, namely, to cover the page with battalions of annotations, one cannot help but see a certain over-eagerness here and there, and this can upset the balance.

In general, the editors accept that Hitler's statements about his life must be seen as forming part of his constructed life story. But occasionally they take his assertions at face value, unchecked, and then have to work at unmasking them. This applies, for example, to Hitler's statement that while in Vienna, he was politically shaped by the city's mayor, Karl Lueger, and Georg von Schönerer, veteran of the Pan-German League. But why should Hitler have chosen to tell the truth here, when he had already fabricated a life story that perfectly matched his political self-image? If Hitler wanted *Mein Kampf* to seal his success as the most important theoretician of antisemitism in the *völkisch* camp, then he could only mention the political teachers that people unacquainted with conditions in Vienna would expect. And here Lueger and Schönerer were figures who, because they were so well known, seemed to be possible mentors for Hitler.

By mentioning these names, Hitler was diverting attention away from the fact that at the time when he was in Vienna, Schönerer had long since become a marginal political figure, while Lueger, whose Catholicism was alien to Hitler, was soon to die. And he also spared himself uncomfortable questions about why he had not allied himself with the forerunner of a National Socialist movement in Vienna, the lawyer Walter Riehl, while he was there if he had really become an antisemitic National Socialist before the war as he claimed.

Naturally, the excellent Introduction to the edition strongly refutes the view that everything essential has already been said about Hitler's

programmatic work, and about his career as a politician. Thus this edition provides more than just a few building blocks towards getting to the bottom of the talking culture in the political hothouse that was Munich at the time. It also demonstrates that a literary history approach to *Mein Kampf*, examining the various types of text it contains, including autobiography, coming-of-age novel, and ideological tract, is long overdue.

If historians cannot make any really reliable statements about the genesis of the ideas expressed in *Mein Kampf*, literary scholars will find enough evidence in the narrative structure and style of language to draw conclusions about Hitler's political self-understanding. Thus they will notice that Hitler almost always speaks of 'theses' when referring to the twenty-five 'points' which the later Nazi Party presented as its programme at its first mass public rally on 14 February 1920.

This is no trifling matter because Hitler was thereby sending out two political messages. He was indirectly claiming to have shaken up the world, like Luther, by proclaiming 'theses'. And he was underlining that his authority was not that of a scribe, but of a political preacher. Whereas Luther, according to the knowledge of the time, had nailed his theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg as a text, Hitler had stood up in the banqueting hall of the Munich Hofbräuhaus as someone who disseminated his theses among the people in the form of the spoken word. Hitler presented himself in *Mein Kampf* not as the sole author of these twenty-five theses, but as their authoritative preacher.

The present edition will provide an indispensable source for research on Hitler and National Socialism. Should it not encourage us to consider making available to scholars a historical-critical annotated edition of the speeches Hitler delivered when in power? As the Hitler who spoke was always at the same time a power who acted, a project of this sort would be a logical follow-up to complement the edition of *Mein Kampf*. To academia and the public alike, it would present Hitler in ruling mode.

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