

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Eugene Davidson.** *The Making of Adolf Hitler: The Birth and Rise of Nazism.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. 419 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8262-1117-0.



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How do I review a book which has been reissued, but not updated, twenty years after its initial publication, and which reviewers in 1977 criticized for a lack of original research and a peculiarly German viewpoint? To be sure, the reissue of this book corresponds to the appearance this year of the follow-up volume, *The Unmaking of Adolf Hitler*. Still, given the rain forests that have disappeared to feed the Nazi/Hitler book industry, another book on Hitler requires justification either as a “classic” work in the field, a significant new contribution to the research, or an accessible popular account.

The book is really about the failure of the Weimar Republic and only very loosely about Hitler. Aspects of Hitler’s life are woven into the broader narrative of German history from Hitler’s birth in 1889 to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Considerable attention is paid to the historical backdrop, and for the casual reader there is a wealth of compelling detail. The first several chapters deal with the *fin-de-siecle* Habsburg Monarchy and the German experience of World War I. The best sections are on the problems faced by the Weimar Republic from the abortive German revolution to the byzantine machinations that culminated in the somewhat unexpected presentation of the chancellorship to Hitler. This provides for an interesting read, but it suffers from the conceptual flaw of depicting Weimar primarily as the

story of the rise of Nazism. The idea of Imperial Germany and Weimar as the antechamber of Nazism has, justifiably, come under considerable criticism in the last twenty years as historians have chosen to examine those eras as multi-dimensional periods that were not predestined to self-destruct. Similarly, keying a discussion of German history to Hitler’s life, although intriguing, minimizes the complexity of German history and exaggerates (a la Goebbels) Hitler’s role in it.

This book is neither a classic nor a significant new contribution to our understanding of Hitler. Presumably it was not intended as such. That it does not carve out a new niche is obvious from the notes and the bibliography which suggest broad, but not deep, research. In itself, being a general book is not inherently a liability, but any book on twentieth-century Germany with an extensive discussion of World War I that was published in 1977 should have made mention, either in the text or in the bibliography, of the important work of Eckhart Kehr, Fritz Fischer, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Despite subsequent criticism, these historians laid out a powerful case for German complicity and guilt for World War I. Failure to incorporate this element in Chapter Three, “The War and the Corporal,” leads to a painfully glaring tendency to cast the Germans as the beleaguered victims.

Davidson appears to take the German point of view—

and a conservative one at that. Weimar's problem, in the author's view, was heavily predicated on the vindictiveness of the French and the onerous economic terms of the Versailles Treaty. Among the resulting conclusions are that the German army from top to bottom did little or no wrong in World War I, the leaders of Germany were prevented from reaching peace with the western Allies in 1917 because of the Allied refusal to negotiate, the reparations (and not the bankrupting of the government to finance the prosecution of the war) were responsible for the economic calamities of the early 1920s, and the French occupation of the Ruhr blocked German economic growth and inclusion in the world's diplomatic community. Without a doubt, many, if not most, Germans perceived events this way and this had a powerful political effect which merits depiction. Much of this, moreover, has a kernel of truth. It is incumbent on the historian, however, to cut through the question of perception and, with the benefit of hindsight, distinguish between the perception and the reality.

This book seems to be a conscious attempt to bring German history and a wider understanding of the context of Adolf Hitler's rise to power to the reading public and ultimately it is as a popular history that it should be critiqued. Leaving aside the somewhat faux questions of profitability and whether success on the free market automatically legitimizes, there remains the knotty problem of what a "popular" history should be. Everyone can probably agree that a popular history should be readable. The problem comes in the discussion of accuracy and interpretation. Is a book inherently unpopular (or scholarly) if it reflects the accumulated judgment of historians, or should it play to the expectations of the readers? To what extent does the author owe readers a balanced, critical, yet readable account?

It is here that this book fails. There is a great deal of accurate detail that is useful to convey to a popular audience, but the weaknesses in interpretation mislead the

reader who is not already familiar with the Third Reich. I have already mentioned several problematic issues, so I will just point out one more example—the discussion of antisemitism in the early chapters. Although Davidson is by no means whitewashing the problem of antisemitism and though he brings out some useful information about Habsburg and German antisemitism, Jews are always discussed as if they constituted a homogeneous block. In part this is just a question of voice, echoing the language of the antisemitic journals of the time, but it would be easy enough to point out the complexity of the Jewish community in Vienna at the turn of the century or the extent of Jewish assimilation in German cities. The characterization of German-Jewish relations is also marred by a failure to examine critically the claims of the contemporary antisemites that small town Jews were "readily identified with the slick, urban exploiters" (p. 38) or that "the Jew" [Davidson's words] was always identifiable no matter how strenuously he or she tried to assimilate (p. 39). When one turns to the bibliography to figure out where this is coming from, there are no works on German or Habsburg Jewry. In the context of the book, this is a small issue; nevertheless it should be incumbent on the author of a popular history not to perpetuate stereotypes inadvertently.

Overall, *The Making of Adolf Hitler* is a readable, well-illustrated, general survey of German history from the 1890s until 1933 organized around the key issues that affected Hitler's life. Its strength lies in the description of Weimar's weaknesses and collapse. The book's weakness lies in its failure to incorporate the interpretive questions that have driven German historiography for the last thirty years.

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