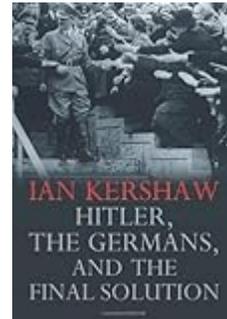




Ian Kershaw. *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 400 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-12427-9.



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Autobiography Meets Historiography

When I teach the history of the Holocaust, I am always surprised when students ask me why I made the study of perpetrators the focus of my research. When I think about it though, the question makes perfect sense. Understanding the genesis of historical questions is important because knowing where a question came from aids comprehension of a subject's historiography. Simply put: historians and their interests ultimately determine the path that historiography takes. One of the most important path-breakers of German history and the history of the Final Solution is Ian Kershaw, whose latest book might be described as an autobiography of a historian's historiography—a mouthful that requires explanation. *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, contains no new research, nor is it simply a random collection of essays. Each of the book's fourteen selections—divided into four themes—has been published elsewhere. Carefully selected and organized thematically, each grouping of essays represents a point in Kershaw's career when he was writing about a particular issue in German history. Accompanying the essays is a highly personal introduc-

tion to the book that explains and illuminates Kershaw's evolving intellectual interests and career path, revealing a lot about him and his intellectual journey in the process. The book, then, is an autobiography of sorts. Scholars can use this collection as a companion to the historiography of Nazi Germany, a field in which Ian Kershaw features as one of the most important scholars.

Kershaw's personal geography seems to have led to a lifelong passion for social history. As a young man growing up in postwar Britain, he became interested in German history; living in a democracy made him wonder why otherwise rational people would support a dictatorial regime that led them and the world into war and genocide. His growing proficiency in the German language and a developing relationship with Martin Brozat at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte sealed his professional fate. While working in Munich in the mid-1970s, he focused his research on German society and popular attitudes toward the Nazi regime. During this phase of his career, he was especially interested in how German society functioned and why ordinary Germans supported

Adolf Hitler's dictatorship. His answers to these questions were published in German in *Der Hitler-Mythos* (1980), and later in English as *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (1987). This facet of Kershaw's work is reflected in the first section of the book, entitled "Hitler and the Final Solution," which contains four essays that span Kershaw's career. Two deal with the role of propaganda and the Hitler myth's function in the regime, while two others focus more pointedly on Hitler and his role in the Final Solution, a subject Kershaw became interested in later in his career, when Holocaust studies transformed the historiography of the field. As a group, these essays reflect the progression of Kershaw's research regarding Hitler, the changing emphasis in German historiography on the regime and how it operated, and the Final Solution's evolution. Of course, Kershaw is probably most well known for his two-volume contextual biography of Hitler (*Hubris* [1999] and *Nemesis*[2000]), which is not excerpted in this collection of essays, but which is discussed in the introduction in terms of his intellectual development.

Kershaw's work with Broszat led to a second book on German opposition to Hitler, published in 1983 as *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent: Bavaria 1933-1945*. It was in this book that Kershaw first posited the idea of German indifference to the Jews as a partial explanation for the Final Solution. Once immersed in the question of German attitudes toward the Jews, Kershaw refined and developed his ideas, leading to his oft-quoted maxim that "the road to Auschwitz was paved with indifference." Section 2 of *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* presents five essays about German public opinion and, like the first section of the book, illustrates quite clearly how Kershaw's ideas on this subject have evolved over time. By the end of the 1980s, he felt as if he had gone as far as he could in treating the subject of German attitudes toward Jews, and thus returned to the issue that had interested him initially: Hitler and his place within the Nazi system, a question he felt was not yet sufficiently answered.

It was in the context of exploring Hitler's role in the power structures of the Third Reich that Kershaw first ventured into the realm of historiography, publishing the first edition of *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Per-*

spectives of Interpretation (1985). Since its initial publication, Kershaw has prepared three further editions of the book, and in each one, he includes essays that deal with the most up-to-date historical debates, so that the book is exceptionally useful for teaching the historiography of the Third Reich. Section 3 of *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* reprints three historiographical essays from this work. The first, "Hitler and the Holocaust," was added to the third edition. The second, "'Normality' and Genocide: The Problem of 'Historicization,'" concerns the historians' debate of the second half of the 1980s, in which German historians debated (and disputed) the place of the Holocaust in German history. Reflecting on this episode, Kershaw concludes that the debate was ephemeral, having left no real mark on the way people write about the history of the Nazi era. The final essay in this section of the book examines new trends that have developed in German history since reunification.

Fittingly, the fourth and final section of the book under review, entitled "The Uniqueness of Nazism," includes two reflective essays that return Kershaw to his original interest about Nazism in German history. As it turns out, Kershaw's career trajectory coincided with major historiographical trends that brought him into contact with some of the most important and influential historians of twentieth-century Germany. He talks about his encounters with these people and how they influenced his ideas.

Readers seldom have the opportunity to hear historians reflect on historiographical debates and trends that they themselves participated in, as Kershaw does for each phase of his career, which makes for rewarding reading. Ultimately though, what is so valuable about this collection of essays—despite their familiarity—is that it houses the work of one of the most important scholars of National Socialist Germany; each essay was also carefully selected by Kershaw, and the collection is framed with the author's perspectives and reflections of his research. It is a complete package. As my students remind me, understanding the perspective of the historian is integral to understanding the questions we grapple with. For this reason, Kershaw's book will be of tremendous use in the classroom, for advanced undergraduates and graduates alike.

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