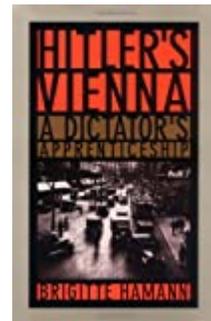




Brigitte Hamann. *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship.* New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xx + 482. \$ 35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-512537-5.



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Brigitte Hamann is an independent scholar and recognized specialist in nineteenth and twentieth century Austrian history who became widely known for her work on Empress Elisabeth of Austria[1]. In this volume on the Viennese years of Adolf Hitler, she presents an empirically rich account of the cultural and social history of Austro-Hungary's imperial city in the last years before World War I, as well as its impact upon Hitler. Her basic objective is to provide an interpretative frame of the sources of the racist, anti-Semitic, and totalitarian dimension of Hitler's personality and politics.

The monograph deals with Hitler's early development in three main parts. The first part outlines his childhood and family background in the Austrian province of Upper Austria and its capital, Linz, where Hitler attended high school. Aside from the portrayal of complicated family relations, characterized by a caring mother and a harsh father demanding absolute obedience, Hamann sketches the cultural and political climate of turn-of-the-century Linz. Linz was heavily influenced by the political tensions and the ongoing disintegration of the late multinational Habsburg empire which resulted in severe conflicts between "clericalists" and Habsburg loyalists on one side, libertines and German nationalists on the other. As in other parts of imperial Austria, German nationalists forcefully turned against non-German folk

groups, particularly Czechs, who represented the majority of migrant workers seeking employment and better life chances because of the gradual decline of the agricultural sector in the countryside.

The second, much larger part, is devoted to Vienna as the center of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and its social and cultural fabric in the years before the Great War. In three chapters Hamann attempts to summarize the main features of the imperial city by showing its rather unique context of monarchic rule and politics, the prevailing tradition of baroque culture, and its ambivalent attitudes towards modernity and modernism. Most of what Hamann compiles here is already well known historical knowledge about Fin de Siecle Vienna, which became a major research topic for cultural and social historians in the aftermath of Carl E. Schorske's pioneering work [2]. Her own contributions are, firstly, new findings about Hitler's engagements and activities in Vienna, his bad fate as artist, male and human eccentric; and secondly, a sober and careful analysis and presentation of those theoreticians of race and ethnicity, who echoed the crisis of liberalism and early mass democracy much more severely than in other (Western) capitals of Europe. Obscure writers and heralds of world explanation such as Guido von List, Joerg Lanz von Liebenfels and Carl Ritter von Schoenerer launched violent ideolo-

gies of Germanic world rule, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-Slavic racism by naming the 'Aryan master race' superior and others 'lower races' or 'slave people'.

"The zeitgeist was saturated with terms like 'master race' and 'inferior race.' In order to corroborate race theories scientifically, many 'researchers' went haywire, measuring and comparing skulls and extremities, establishing alleged racial differences in the blood, in the electric resistance, and in the breath, which was supposed to express some kind of primal personal power. Racial hierarchies were constructed. Everything, even differences in the evolutionary levels of the Austro-Hungary's various nationalities, were explained by way of 'race'. (...) All race theoreticians rejected the fundamental principles of legal equality and democracy: the 'slave peoples' were not considered worthy of the same rights as the 'master peoples'." [3] Hamann presents ample evidence that Hitler not only knew these products of paranoid "Weltanschauung" but has also studied them with interest and great dedication.

Another innovative dimension of Hamann's perspective on Vienna in 1900 is the attention she devotes to the emergence of new political role models which gave birth to the rise of populism and authoritarian styles of mass politics. Karl Lueger, lord mayor of Vienna between 1897 - 1911, is a key figure in this. In combining both anti-egalitarian and patronizing motifs in a political rhetoric which resonated collective feelings and prejudices of xenophobia and ethnic exclusion of non-Germans, and by setting up a system of 'municipal socialism' that counterbalanced the most disastrous effects of accelerated industrialization and market capitalism, he was able to base an anti-liberal rule of the city on a solid majority of petite bourgeoisie and lower middle classes clientele. Lueger's populism framed the city's political space as an 'imagined community' by excluding and denouncing the 'others', in particular Jews and Slaves, for the sake of ethnic unity and cultural homogeneity. Lueger's mesmerism in transferring ideas and emotions onto others in 'an almost supernatural way', as contemporary observers reported, made him a perfect model of the modern people's tribune, who frequently recalls pre-democratic rules of the past, while nevertheless being a forceful agent of structural change and technological modernization.

The third part of Hamann's study encompasses Hitler's immediate encounters with the city, his misfortune at making an educational and professional career as an artist, and his miserable life in the gray army of

migrants, casual laborers, and migrants who desperately fought for a minimal income to meet the basic needs of food and housing. She also investigates Hitler's attitudes towards Jews, which seem to have lacked any of the brutish anti-Semitism that Hitler became notorious for later on. To the contrary Hitler had mainly Jewish friends when he was a resident of the men's hostel in 1909, and he profited from Jewish social institutions in many ways, from public 'Waermestuben' to soup kitchens and Jewish citizens' donations to homeless shelters and men's hostels.

What is astonishing about Hamann's *Hitler's Vienna* is the almost entire disappearance of "Hitler" as political phenomenon within the huge bulk of information about the city's troublesome course through modernity and modernization before 1914. Though Hamann is able to draw a vivid picture of a city caught up in seemingly endless ruptures and contradictions of political crisis, cultural avant-garde and social conflict, she is hardly able to contextualize the genealogy of Hitler's monstrosity as fascist dictator without mercy within the specific setting of Fin de Siecle Vienna. Though she presents evidence that Vienna's socio-political climate and some of its ideological and political key figures from the Right had a formative influence on Hitler's later career as politician, it never becomes distinctly clear which specific trajectories caused Hitler's transformation from mediocre and physically weak young man with no special talent or predisposition toward crime and the demonic to his charismatic stage as mesmerizing leader of the German masses in the 1930s who seduced the "little man", laborers, academics, and middle classes alike. Though she admits this missing dimension by saying that "Hitler's career cannot be derived, let alone understood, from his situation in Vienna" and that this "Austrian had a career only in the Weimar Republic," [4] it has to be stated that the explanatory apparatus of her study remains largely unsatisfying.

This critique might not only appeal to Hamann's *Hitler's Vienna* alone but to a whole series of biographically inspired studies. According to Jochen Koehler, who reviewed a variety of recent publications [5], it seems to be very difficult to ultimately anchor Hitler's murderous ideology and totalitarian impetus in the peculiarities of his early (Viennese, Munich, Landshut etc) years. Koehler favors an explanatory model which analyses Hitler's monstrous career as the result of a socio-pathological interaction between a leader and a specifically conditioned "Volksgemeinschaft" (folk community) which was urgently yearning for political and even spiritual relief from the disastrous and impoverished living

conditions in the Weimar Republic, doomed by economic crisis, high unemployment, and a rapid self-erosion of democratic rule and culture. Nevertheless, this interpretation, which can among others refer to Hitler's enthusiasm for Gustave le Bon's *Psychology of the Masses*, still leaves unanswered some disturbing questions about his tremendous success. Why did so many Germans and Austrians freely, enthusiastically and without any hierarchical pressure follow Hitler's politics of totalitarianism, war, and genocide? Why did they happily accede to the destruction of democracy, civil rights and individual liberty? Why could such a mediocre person without any qualities and qualifications become a mighty catalyst of political turmoil and change? Was it a mere accident that Hitler became the key actor of an apocalyptic scenario which turned Europe into a nightmare? Was it just by chance that Hitler spent his formative years in Vienna which during the Nazi regime became such a singular brutish and notorious place of violent anti-Semitism and racial hatred? Many more questions asking for the sources and reasons of Hitler's unique impact on a highly developed and culturally well-differentiated society can be put forward. But in spite of all reserva-

tion and criticism Hamann's book, which offers a lot of until recently unknown information about Hitler's youth and early adulthood, can be recommended to anyone interested in Hitler's biography and the history of German Nazism.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Brigitte Hamann, *Elisabeth: Kaiserin wider Willen* (Wien: Amalthea Verlag, 1982).

[2]. Carl E. Schorske. *Fin de Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publisher, 1980).

[3]. Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, 204.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 404.

[5]. Jochen Koehler, *Das Charisma des Erfolges. Aufstieg und Fall des FÄ¼hrers Adolf Hitler aus heutiger Sicht in Lettre International* (Heft 44, 1999).

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