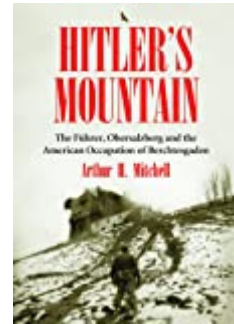


Arthur H. Mitchell. *Hitler's Mountain: The Führer, Obersalzberg and the American Occupation of Berchtesgaden.* Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2010. 224 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4917-0.



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Following the popularity of HBO's 2001 miniseries *Band of Brothers*, every amateur World War II historian became aware of Adolf Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" and the sleepy Bavarian town it overlooked, Berchtesgaden. The stone building, perched atop the Kehlstein peak on Germany's Obersalzberg, has in recent years become a day trip from Munich or Salzburg for tourists who want a glimpse at the ghosts of Nazism's past. Arthur H. Mitchell's *Hitler's Mountain* offers historical context for those who are drawn to Berchtesgaden, and analyzes the role of the Berghof and the Obersalzberg in Hitler's rise and the Third Reich's fall. A professor of history at the University of South Carolina Salkehatchie, Mitchell has broken from thirty years of researching and writing about the history of Ireland and delved into an area unknown to him. He has produced a book about the German leader's personal and political connection to the Bavarian Alps, centering on the important retreat, the Berghof, where the Führer orchestrated the beginning of war in Europe. The work straddles biography, political history, military history, and the role of memory by focusing on the symbolism of the region, Hitler's time there, and the way the Americans dealt with the Nazi legacy until 1995, when the United States returned control of the area to the German government.

Composed of four chapters, Mitchell's work begins with a brief overview of Hitler's life, from his youth as a vagabond artist in Vienna to becoming Führer. It was upon his appointment to chancellor in 1933 that Hitler saw the Obersalzberg as an important political tool, Mitchell argues. Lacking the legitimacy of being born German, Hitler needed "a gimmick, an image, a statement about who he was and what he was about." A great "political actor and one who had plenty of imagination and flair," Hitler settled high in the Bavarian Alps, where he could retreat for refreshment, thought, and planning (p. 6). The average German appreciated a leader who, from their perspective, was just like them: hardworking, modest, and appreciative of nature. While Hitler initially used his mountain retreat as a domestic tool, the Berghof increasingly became important in the years leading up to war. Mitchell argues that the Obersalzberg became not only his retreat to live the bohemian lifestyle he preferred but a clever way to entertain international dignitaries without the pomp and circumstance or news coverage state visits to Berlin garnered. Hitler held forty-one meetings with heads of state or diplomats at his Berghof, using the opportunity to show he was an innocuous leader of Germany, not a threatening dictator. Yet, the Führer also used his imposing mountain chalet

to intimidate, as he did with Austrian prime minister Kurt von Schuschnigg and Poland's Józef Beck.

In the second half of the book, Mitchell's primary focus is on the role of the Obersalzberg during the Second World War and the transition of the area from Hitler's getaway to his fortress. Domestic German propaganda had stressed the centrality of the Bavarian Alps in Hitler's life since 1933, and as a result the U.S. Army and Office of Strategic Services feared a "National Redoubt" at the end of the war—a last-ditch Nazi resistance wherein their leader would lead from the miles of tunnels beneath his mountain. Josef Goebbels emphasized the redoubt in propaganda and false intelligence, seeing an opportunity to derail the Allies' call for an unconditional surrender by promising a bloody last stand. The threat ultimately proved false, but not until after Eisenhower broke off the western Allies' drive to Berlin. Ultimately, Mitchell argues, the mythical connection to the Obersalzberg that Hitler built around himself led Germans and the Allies alike to assume the Führer would die after a "Wagnerian show-down" in the mountains (p. 69).

Following Hitler's death in Berlin, the Obersalzberg could not avoid the shadow that the dictator cast over it. In the closing days of the war, American and French combat troops raced to the town in hopes of being the first to secure the final prize of the war. The United States eventually won complete control of the region, but not before scuffles between the allies occurred, as well as the most thorough souvenir-hunting expedition GIs undertook during the war. Mitchell's analysis of the postwar in the Obersalzberg focuses more on disarmament and denazification in 1945 than the interaction between Germans and the U.S. Army in the decades leading up to 1995. In the eleven pages he devotes to the Cold War era, Mitchell argues that Berchtesgaden returned to its pre-Hitler days as a mountain retreat town, but one that catered to American troops. The region wrestled with shaking its Nazi past, particularly because it still attracted a range of unrepentant followers of the Führer (p. 171). To prevent Hitler devotees from making the Berghof a shrine to the leader, the Bavarian government razed the building in 1952. When the U.S. military was set to leave in 1995, various German political leaders did not relish the prospect of the turnover (p. 178). The German government asked that the Americans remain on the Obersalzberg for another ten years to control the politically sensitive area, but the massive withdrawal of U.S. troops from Germany after the Cold War meant the two sides could not strike a deal. As Mitchell concludes, it was time for Germany to face the legacy of Hitler's

(p. 178). The Bavarian government did just that, opening the Obersalzberg Documentation Center in 1999 on the grounds of Hitler's guesthouse. The Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich-Berlin operates the museum, which is the only permanent exhibition in the world that covers all aspects of the Nazi period.

Mitchell primarily relies on secondary sources, making *Hitler's Mountain* more a consolidation of other authors' tertiary points than a presentation of new evidence and claims. Still, for the reader who wishes to forego sifting through the endless number of books on Hitler to discover one aspect of his life or the war, this work best suits them.^[1] Curiously, there is an uneven distribution of material covered in the book's chapters. Chapter 3, which focuses on the war years, is the bulk of the work, comprising 96 of its 181 pages. This unevenness is best illustrated in Mitchell's analysis of the fifty years the U.S. Army controlled the Obersalzberg. It was here that Mitchell had his best opportunity to implement fresh analysis. He instead relies upon unit histories and soldier memoirs rather than Military Government archival evidence. As a result, the attention paid to this potentially rich subject seems hurried and incomplete. Moreover, there is a disturbing amount of typographical errors, which detracts from the otherwise well-written prose.

Criticisms aside, for Mitchell's first attempt at a subject outside his wheelhouse, he has offered a work that is highly readable and informative. The book builds upon an already large historiography, and finds its niche amongst the more comprehensive examinations of Hitler. Weaving together Hitler's political motivations, the U.S. occupation, and how Germans deal with and remember their past, Mitchell does a good job using the Obersalzberg as a lens through which to view larger issues. The work is probably more at home at the Obersalzberg Center of Documentation's book shop than on an academic's desk, given its shortcomings. Yet, *Hitler's Mountain* still offers amateur historians a look into a disturbing past and a compelling area that continues to attract people today.

Note

[1]. For instance, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960); and John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

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