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HITLER A LA MODE

Alan Bullock

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Robert Payne's is one of the several studies of Hitler that have recently appeared or been announced. This fact, together with the launching of a new film about Hitler's end and all the ballyhoo that accompanies such an event, has led the press first to discover a "sudden revival" of interest in Hitler and then to ask why this should be so. I doubt if there is such a revival, outside newspaper and publisher's offices, but if there is, then (like the insatiable demand for books about the Second World War) it is a matter on which a social psychologist would give a better opinion than a historian.

The question to put to the historian is, obviously, how much does any of these books add to what is already known about Hitler. Apart from the story of a visit by Hitler to Liverpool before 1914 - hitherto unknown to me, and the source for which I should want to know a lot more about before accepting it - the answer, in the case of Robert Payne's book is: Nothing. I do not myself attach too much importance to this as a criticism. Mr. Payne makes no claims to original research. He has set out to provide a Plain Man's Guide to Adolf Hitler, and he is obviously familiar with the material already published.

Of course new evidence will turn up, and some of it may even be important, But the real test of a biography of Hitler will always lie in something else, the ability to make convincing the career of a man who at first sight appears to be the most implausible candidate there has ever been for a historical career superficially comparable with Napoleon's, and arguably without a parallel in the evil and suffering he let loose on the world without any form of compensatory benefit.

Mr. Payne starts well, and the first hundred and fifty pages are as good an account as I have read of the early years of Hitler's life down to the time when he came out of prison after the failure of his Munich putsch. From that point onward, however, the book becomes less and less satisfactory and deteriorates into

The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler  
by Robert Payne  
Praeger

Hitler: The Last Ten Days  
by Gerhard Boldt  
Coward, McCann & Geoghegan

The War Hitler Won: The Fall of Poland  
September 1939  
by Nicholas Bethell  
Holt, Rinehart & Winston

Codeword Barbarossa  
by Barton Whaley  
MIT

a series of disjointed episodes which fail to make a coherent picture. This is disappointing, and it is worth asking what has gone wrong.

Mr. Payne set out with the determination to hold on to Hitler the man without getting lost in the tangle of German and European politics. This is understandable, but in practice the "rounded portrait" which Payne speaks of is beyond anyone's capacity to draw, for Hitler was not a rounded man: his personal life was meager, banal, boring, and (more important) throws little if any light on his place in history. In the early part of Hitler's career there is course little to write about other than his personal life, and Payne's approach works well enough. But once Hitler becomes absorbed in politics it proves to lead nowhere.

Mr. Payne might have found a way out of this difficulty by making Hitler's personal life the basis for examining his psychology. I do not share the scorn that some historians express for psychiatric evidence, but in practice it seems to me extraordinary difficult material to handle, something to be attempted not after a brief survey of the psychological literature but only after years of clinical experience. In Hitler's case the evidence on which to base an opinion is incomplete and much of it is unreliable. The conclusions are correspondingly speculative, and one can hardly blame Mr. Payne if his psychological observations do not go much beyond remarking that Hitler was abnormal.

But if we are to be given an account of Hitler's psychology, then the only reason I can see for writing a life of Hitler at all is an interest in what he did, the political career which dominated first German, then European, and finally world politics for a decade and a half, and which left consequences (the division of Europe, for instance) that have still not worked themselves out. Here at last there is no lack of material on which to draw. Yet it is precisely in writing about politics, the medium in which Hitler found scope for his extraordinary powers and played out his part in history, that Payne is at his weakest.

Let me take only two examples. In a book of 600 pages, no more than seventeen are devoted to Hitler's rise to power, a chapter prefaced by a quotation from Lenin about "the mysteries by which wars begin" and the remark, "Just as strange are the mysteries by which dictators rise to power". This is simply not true. Hitler's psychology may defy explanation but the steps by which he achieved power are not. This is a piece of history <sup>which</sup> has been worked over with the greatest care, and rightly so, for it is one of the keys to understanding the nature of twentieth-century politics. Mr. Payne had only to turn to Karl Dietrich Bracher's account in 'The German Dictatorship' (published in the US by Praeger, as is his own book, but not even mentioned in his bibliography) to find the fruits of twenty years' work summed up in masterly fashion. Instead he perpetuates the exploded but dangerous myth that Hitler came to power by the exercise of dark and inscrutable arts.

Equally unsatisfactory is his account of the so-called Night of the Long Knives in 1934. We are given all the familiar details of Hitler's sudden flight to Munich, the journey to the Tegernsee, the murder of Roehm, and the blood bath which followed. But not once does Mr. Payne attempt to explain what lay behind all this, the question of the "Second Revolution", the issue of the succession of Hindenberg, Hitler's relationship with the army, in short the crisis of the regime which Hitler had to master or to be broken by, and from which he emerged as the master of Germany.

These are not matters that a biographer of Hitler is free to put in or leave out as he chooses: power was the central issue of his career, as Hitler well understood, the theme which alone gives interest and importance to his life. If that is not firmly grasped and made the central theme of any biography, then what Hitler liked to eat, where he lived, and what he did in private are without significance. Mr. Payne has got things the wrong way round, putting the trivialities, the personal details, in the center of his picture and leaving the essentials out.

With Gerhard Boldt's book we are back on familiar ground. "In 'Hitler: The Last Ten Days', we read on the jacket, 'he records with stunning precision the death throes of the Führer's 'thousand-year Reich' and of the intimates who were the architects of Hitler's dark design...' First published in 1947, Boldt's reminiscences of his stay in the Bunker have long been known and used by historians. They are now re-issued for the third time, in what is described as "a complete

and expanded version", to coincide with the appearance of Sir Alec Guinness's new film to which Captain Boldt acted as consultant. If you like your history raw, this (and not Trevor-Roper's classic 'Last Ten Days of Hitler') is evidently the book to get. To quote the blurb again: "Historians from Shirer to Bullock have described the end of the Reich, but their accounts lack the dread fascination of this unforgettable firsthand account." To which I can only add: Amen.

Barton Whaley's book is a very different matter: highly professional, limited to a single event - Hitler's invasion of Russia - and to finding the answer to a single question about that event: Why did Stalin refuse to listen when he was repeatedly warned of Hitler's plan to attack the Soviet Union? But this is very far from being the plodding monograph which such a description suggests. Mr. Whaley writes with wit as well as a sense of style: his chapter headings include quotations from sources as diverse as the plays of Terence ("I am full of leaks, and I let secrets out hither and yon"), the Old and the New Testaments, Stalin and Montgomery. More important, he has chosen a subject that is both of interest in itself and capable, because of the way in which he treats it, of illuminating larger historical questions.

It has often been pointed out that diplomatic historians overlook the importance of Intelligence, just as social historians overlook the role of the police, in both cases, at the risk of making serious mistakes. But to say that intelligence is the missing dimension of diplomatic history is one thing; it is quite another to make good the deficiency in practice. In the half world of espionage, the dividing line between fantasy and fact is even more tenuous than in politics, and the ordinary common-sense criteria of probability on which every historian relies are useless. It is hard to obtain access to the files: if you are fortunate enough to come upon a piece of information that looks reliable, it is unlikely that you will be able to track down its source, estimate the extent to which it remained secret (in 1940-1941, Mr. Whaley tells us, each of the six major powers was reading the secret communications of at least two of the other five), or discover what attention, if any, was paid to it by those responsible for making decisions.

I doubt if any historian can master these difficulties unless he has himself served in the Intelligence, as Barton Whaley did during the Korean War. But Mr. Whaley has done more than draw on his personal experience; he has gone on to



think about the method with which to attack such problems, and this gives his book a much wider interest than the particular case he examines, exciting as this is.

Whaley begins with the disarming admission that he did not select, but stumbled on the puzzle of Barbarossa (the code name for Hitler's plan to invade Russia) and that this was the result of getting a wrong solution to a quite different problem. Once disentangled, the puzzle was easy to state and even, it seemed, to solve. Hitler's attack achieved complete strategic and very nearly complete tactical surprise as well: the Red Army barely survived the initial German onslaught. Yet Stalin was warned what to expect weeks beforehand. Between Christmas, 1940, and the night of June 21/22, 1941, Mr. Whaley lists seventy-eight such reports, the majority of which were received in Moscow. Why then did Stalin, one of the most suspicious men who ever lived, not pay attention to them?

The accepted answer is well known: "Only the monstrous fatuity of a Byzantine dictator and his authoritarian system could explain such blindness." Not at all, says Mr. Whaley: if you look carefully at the evidence, it emerges that this was a general and not an idiosyncratic case of failing to read the portents. With a few exceptions (Churchill is the most striking) most politicians, generals and intelligence services were just as wide of the mark as Stalin. This was not because they lacked the information, any more than Stalin did, or (Whaley's first hypothesis) because the signals were confusing, but because Hitler manipulated the information to create a false expectation and so left Stalin not uncertain and indecisive, but certain, decisive - and wrong.

Mr. Whaley's conclusion is a controversial one which not everyone is going to accept. But that does not affect my admiration for the clear and systematic way in which he has gone about his study, with a running commentary explaining at each stage what he is doing, building up first one, then another hypothesis as he fits the different bits of evidence into place. For this is a way of pursuing historical inquiry that allows mistakes to be corrected and alternative hypotheses considered without invalidating the method, a case study in historical detection which would have delighted the late R.G. Collingwood (compare his chapter on historical evidence in 'The Idea of History') and which gave me great intellectual pleasure to read.

Nicholas Bethell's book lacks the professionalism and the interest in method of Whaley's study, but it is worth reading for several reasons. According to conventional reckoning, the Second World War began on September 1 or September 3, 1939, the first being the date when Hitler attacked Poland, the second the day on which Britain and France announced that a state of war existed between Germany and themselves, about as oblique a declaration of war as anyone could devise. In fact, no serious fighting took place between the Western Allies and Germany until the spring of 1940, and Hitler was perfectly ready to conclude peace - on a victor's terms, of course - after the conquest of Poland, which he insisted was a purely local affair that need not disturb the relations between the Great Powers.

Instead of passing rapidly on to the time when no one could any longer doubt that it was a world war which was being fought, Nicholas Bethell had the idea of stopping the film in October, 1939, and asking us to look more closely at what was happening, what people were saying and thinking before it all came overlaid by the tremendous events that followed.

This record is a painful one. No one, as Hitler had guessed, moved a finger to help the Poles. The British and the French whose guarantee of aid had been given less than six months before were not in a position to do much, and took care not to do even that for fear of starting a war in earnest. Those who had followed a policy of appeasement toward Hitler were still in office and had not overnight become capable of waging war. True, they lacked arms, but they lacked even more the conviction and the courage to use them. They still hoped, somehow, that "the disaster of war" could be avoided, and they were encouraged not only by defeatists on the right who sympathized with Hitler and thought Russia the real enemy, but by the pacifist minded left who looked on war, or capitalism, or imperialism as the enemy and could not visualize what defeat and occupation at the hands of the Nazis might mean.

The record of the rest of the world is not much more inspiring: American isolationists asking "Can we keep out?"; de Valera regretting that the Irish could not take any part because of the wrong of partition; the well-meaning neutrals hurrying to offer their mediation; the Russians making sure of their half of Stalin's bargain with Hitler; and communists throughout the world standing on their heads to proclaim that the real enemy was imperialism, in opposition to which the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany now found common ground.

All this Hitler understood and played up to with the skill of a master. Was Danzig worth a war? Who were the warmongers now - the Führer, who offered peace, now that the problem of Poland had been "solved", or Churchill, who wanted to turn it into a world war? And if Hitler had been content with this and had not himself renewed and extended hostilities at the opening of 1940, he might well not only have won his war of 1939, but have turned it into a peace settlement.

Bethell reinforces the interest of this unusual perspective on the war by making use, for the first time, of the recently released British documents and so illuminating the divided minds of Chamberlain and his advisers. This is fascinating to read, but the way in which Bethell employs his material gives it more than a parochial interest. For, instead of working up our indignation once more against the "guilty men", he is at pains to show that it was as much Chamberlain's virtues as his defects that made him unwilling to face the price of defeating Hitler - his horror of war, his anguish at the thought of destruction, violence, and sacrifice of lives that it would entail. In this he was as representative of the mood of the British in the 1930s as Churchill was in the 1940s. This is a disadvantage which peoples with the civilian outlook of the British are always going to suffer in facing determined and ruthless adversaries, and from which they may not always find a leader with the very different virtues of a Churchill to rescue them in time.

The British were lucky, the Poles were not, and before the year 1939 was over Hitler had already set in operation his plans to destroy them as a nation. In any other case such an expression would be taken as a rhetorical figure of speech: in Hitler's it was quite literally what he meant and came very close to doing. Hitler's "New Order" in Poland, as Mr. Bethell shows, was not improvised nor was it the product of wartime pressures: it was systematic and premeditated, like the extermination of the Jews. Few men have imagined evil on such a scale, fewer still have attempted to translate it into reality, none with so total an indifference to human suffering. Anyone who reflects on the history Mr. Bethell recalls will not be surprised that people are still interested in Hitler, and will not <sup>need to</sup> seek the explanation in some spurious "revival". As long as men remember the history of the twentieth century at all, they will go on asking themselves, "How could it happen?"



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