
HOW HUMAN WAS HITLER?

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The fortieth anniversary of the Nazi "seizure of power" was probably as good an opportunity as any to take a new look at the picture of Hitler drawn after the war in the glare of the Nuremberg trials and the shock of Belson and Auschwitz. Reconsideration was certainly overdue, not so much because of the store of new information brought to light in the last 20 years, but rather because Hitler's life story, from birth to death, is so incrustated with myth, falsification, propaganda and sheer tittle-tattle, that almost all the evidence, except his actions and the stenographic reports of his utterances is tainted and suspect.

Hitler's early years are important, Robert Payne tells us, "because the springs of his behaviour....were first manifested during this period". No doubt. But as no one any longer believes Hitler's own account in "Mein Kampf", and those of youthful acquaintances, such as Kubizek or Greiner, are even more highly embellished, where do we begin? And what at the close of his life, is truth and what is not in the highly spiced recollections of the generals, to say nothing of war criminals such as Albert Speer?

This is the problem, technical but fundamental, facing every biographer of Hitler. It overhangs the new books of Maser, Payne and Cross no less than the older ones of Heiden and Bullock; and though all three claim to depict Hitler "as he really was", "as distinct from the legends that have accumulated around him", none has really solved it. Rather they proceed, like the older writers whom Maser so sternly rebukes, by the familiar but unscientific method of taking over what suits their story and discarding the rest.

The most readable and polished of the new biographies is Robert Payne's, not unexpectedly, for Payne is an experienced writer who has already published a formidable list of biographies, extending from Muhammad to Mao. But

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it is also the most conventional. For Payne, Hitler is essentially an arch-conspirator, relentlessly pursuing plans for aggrandisement. Already in 1934 he had drawn up a "blue-print for his coming wars", and Germany- contrary to the impressive evidence produced by Klein and Milward- was "already living in a war economy". Though practically every reputable historian from Bullock onwards, now accepts Tobias' view that the Reichstag fire of 1933 was unpremeditated, Payne still insists that it was "ordered, staged and produced by Hitler himself". More surprising still, he even revives the hoary legend of Hitler's visit to Liverpool in 1912.

All this makes for a consistent portrait, but only by side-stepping problems and difficulties. Werner Maser, never sparing in his strictures on other writers, would probably include Payne among the biographers "whose prime concern is not....to discover historically verifiable facts, but rather to "re-interpret" earlier assumptions which have long since been exposed as false". But Maser, who prides himself on his factuality, is certainly not exempt from the same tendency. His elaborate chapter on Hitler's "intellectual background" is a pastiche of guesses and interferences, far less convincing than Payne's contention that Hitler imbibed his ideas at second hand from the rantings of the nationalist Press, obscure pamphlets and "the lunatic fringe of cosmology".

Maser's positive contribution is his claim to have discovered the key to Hitler's actions in his deteriorating health. There is probably some truth in this, though whether it has the central importance Maser attributes to it is an other question. For the rest, I found this a disappointing book. The questions which apparently interest Maser most- Hitler's relations with women, the puzzles of his parentage, the state of his genitalia, whether he ever contracted syphilis- may be intriguing, but are scarcely of major historical importance. After Walter Langer's psycho-pathological fantasies, it is good to have Maser's assurance that "Hitler led a normal sexual life", but it is not a piece of information which gets us very far in understanding his place in history.

Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most disconcerting, of these three books is that by Colin Cross. The matter-of-fact tone in which he describes the bestialities of Nazism is going to enrage the older generation which

experienced them. So is his picture of Hitler as "a warm, emotional man", who in an "era of personal leadership", simply "followed the trend". According to Cross- the contrast with Payne could hardly be more marked- Hitler had no deep-laid plans. "Mein Kampf" embodied "the daydreams of a political thinker, not the action-programme of a political leader". There were "no detailed, advanced plans" for destroying Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and when war came it "was a result of miscalculation". One thing that is certain, Mr. Cross assures us, is that "Hitler never intended to fight a world-war".

There is much that is persuasive in all this, and yet somehow the total picture does not add up. Cross's express intention is to "de-demonise" Hitler. But what if the essential fact about Hitler -the fact that distinguished him from all his contemporaries- was his demonic quality? Robert Payne believes "there was madness in him almost from the beginning". Perhaps he is right. In any case, though one may agree with Cross that he has come to see Hitler "in the perspective of history", that does not mean standing the Nuremberg verdict on its head.

The last impression however, is a haunting doubt about the adequacy of a purely biographical approach. All these three books have something to contribute, but all present an essentially subjective interpretation, and every reader will take his choice according to his taste. In any case by focusing attention on Hitler the man, they give short shrift to the questions that really matter. In a world overshadowed by monetary chaos and rampant inflation, Hitler's personality and the story of his life are surely less important than the conditions in which he rose to power. As the crisis of neo-capitalism comes to a head, there is still something to be learnt - though nothing very cheerful - from the crisis of capitalism, which turned the "fringe politician" of 1929 into the dictator of 1933.

++- The life and death of Adolf Hitler- by Robert Payne (Cape £ 3.95).

- Hitler- by Werner Maser translated by Peter and Betty Ross
(Allen Lane £ 5).

- Adolf Hitler- by Colin Cross (Hodder and Stoughton £ 3.75).