

## Key Texts

# Mein Kampf – The Text, its Themes and Hitler's Vision

**Robert Carr dissects a book frequently referred to but seldom read.**

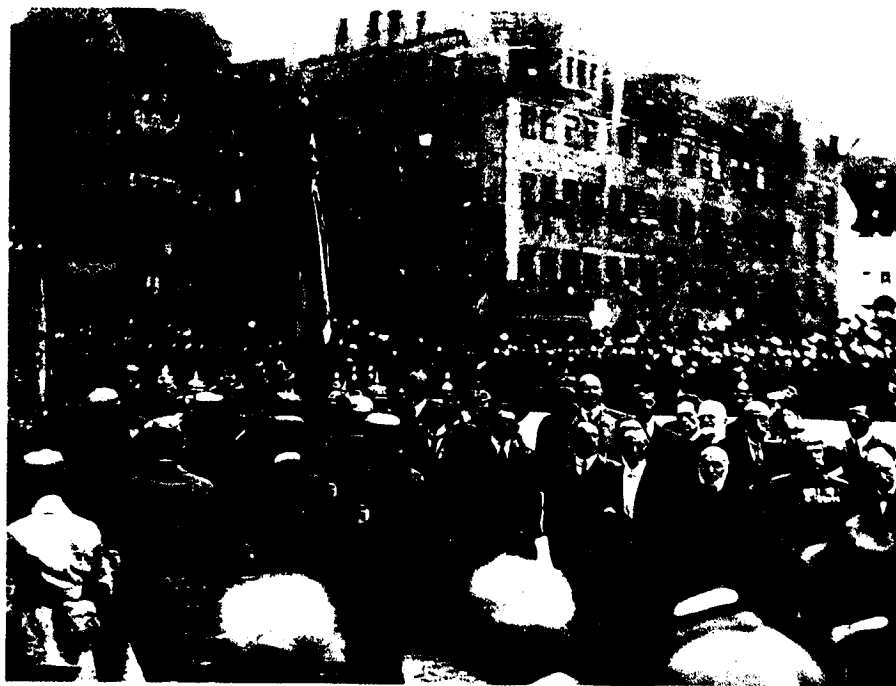
*Mein Kampf* is two volumes and 500-odd pages of repetitive, ranting, dull diatribe. There is, however, some consistency of thought. Ideas that came to serve as both electioneering messages and, once Hitler was in power, as chilling reality were his anti-Versailles, anti-Weimar, anti-Communist and anti-Semitic agenda. This article will examine such *anti*-ideas as well as others presented in *Mein Kampf*, including notions of *Volksgemeinschaft* and racial superiority.

### Autobiography and Outlook

Besides presenting the essence of Nazism, *Mein Kampf* offers interesting asides and throws some light on the mindset of the twentieth century's most reviled dictator, including his amazing confidence. In order to have become dictator of a neighbouring country, Adolf the Austrian clearly had no shortage of self-belief.

*Mein Kampf* certainly exhibits Hitler's arrogance. At school, he wrote, he was doubly gifted, with 'an inborn talent for speaking ... [and] obvious talent for drawing'. Moreover, he had 'become a juvenile ringleader who learned well and easily at school.' The truth, however, is that Hitler left school at 16 with no qualifications. Yet perhaps he displays some modesty with the claim that 'every great movement on this earth owes its growth to great speakers and not to great writers.' Without doubt, Hitler is no great writer.

How, though, did the book come to be written? Hitler's attempted coup in Munich, in November 1923, ended in failure and incarceration. Ironically, this Beer Hall Putsch considerably advantaged the Nazi leader. Hitler came to be seen as a man of action: the event gave him a national profile



**Hitler at a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, September 1923, shortly before his attempted Putsch in Munich.**

and brought him to the attention of elites, who did little more than slap him on the wrist, with a five-year prison sentence, of which he served only 9 months. For his revolutionary efforts he became something of a nascent figurehead or spokesperson for Germany's political right. Certainly Hitler tapped into conservative and nationalist hostility towards Germany's postwar Weimar Republic.

The translator of a 1939 edition, James Murphy, indicates that Hitler 'wrote under the emotional stress caused by the historical happenings of the time'. Murphy alludes to the peculiar circumstances afflicting Germany in 1923, with hyperinflation, reparation difficulties, the Ruhr occupation and Bavaria's intention to form a breakaway independent Catholic state.

Despite the failure of Hitler's coup,

imprisonment afforded him the time and space to write – or dictate his ideas at least. His incarceration meant it was 'now possible to begin a work so many had asked for and which I myself felt would be profitable to the movement'. It was fellow Nazi and inmate of Landsberg prison, Rudolf Hess, who wrote down Hitler's utterances. How much assistance he provided no one knows. Hitler dedicated *Mein Kampf* to the 18 martyrs or 'fallen heroes' of the uprising, while volume II (entitled 'The National Socialist Movement') was written in memory of his close friend Dietrich Eckart.

*Mein Kampf* traces Hitler's youth in Lambach, his coffee house days in Vienna and his World War experiences. Between 1907 and 1913 Hitler achieves nothing in Vienna except, perhaps, becoming a spiteful

Not only could Adolf hold a tune, he could hold a grudge too.

political observer. During his six years there he observed the proceedings of the Austrian Parliament, the *Reichsrath*, and is critical of the use of Slav dialects by deputies, critical of the apparent chaos and critical of all the 'huckstering and bargaining'.

It is the war, however, that sets his world alight. Indeed, he informs his readers that on the outbreak of war: 'I urgently requested to serve in a Bavarian regiment.' Here Hitler indicates he would rather serve Germany than the multi-ethnic, rickety Austrian empire he was born into.

Amid the autobiography and apparent anger, Hitler presents some consistent thoughts and themes. 'A man must first acquire a fund of general ideas and fit them together so as to form an organic structure of personal thought or outlook on life – a *Weltanschauung*.' It is this worldview, then, that *Mein Kampf* explores and presents. Hitler's is a realist's perspective: he draws on acquired nineteenth-century ideas such as Social Darwinism, eugenics and *antisemitismus* – an expression for Jew hatred derived from Wilhelm Marr.

As a Social Darwinist, Hitler regarded life (and national existence) as an evolutionary struggle. Rather than focusing on struggle between classes, as his Marxist rivals did, Hitler focuses on conflict between races. He believed that nations and races were inevitably in competition and that only the fittest would survive. Interestingly, he summed up his work as 'Four and a Half Years of Struggle against Lies, Stupidity and Cowardice'. It was his publisher, Max Amann, who adopted the much simpler *Mein Kampf – My Struggle* – title. Ultimately, Amann was disappointed with the lack of autobiographical detail provided.

The book promotes Hitler's ardent and muddled nationalism which seeks to reinvent Germanic myths: *Mein Kampf* is the work of a convinced anti-Semite who managed to weave his Jew-hatred into his views on the postwar peace treaty of 1919, the



**Adolf Hitler poses for the camera, Landsberg Fortress. His cell, according to one visitor, 'looked like a delicatessen'. Here he not only dictated *Mein Kampf* but decided on new tactics for the Nazis: 'We must hold our noses and enter the Reichstag'.**

Weimar Republic and Marxism. In this way, it can be seen that *Mein Kampf* feeds, if not forms, the basis of the Nazis' electoral messages. Besides such positions of reaction, Hitler offers his racial-nationalist perspective.

Hitler's brand of nationalism is evidenced by one of *Mein Kampf's*

more interesting revelations - his utter obsession with the *Deutschland über Alles* anthem. He reveals how the song was bellowed in the trenches by himself and comrades, at every NSDAP meeting and at any given opportunity, to produce high spirits. No doubt, Adolf excelled at such singing; after

Hitler perceives Brest-Litovsk as 'immensely humane', and contrasts it with the Treaty of Versailles, 'an act of highway robbery against our people.'



A portrait of Max Schmeling by George Grosz from 1926. The boxer, who was world heavyweight champion in 1930-32, seemed to embody Hitler's views about Aryan superiority, but he disassociated himself from the Nazis. During *Kristallnacht* he protected two teenage Jewish boys in his Berlin hotel room, later helping to smuggle them out of Germany.

all, he had been a Benedictine choirboy.

Not only could Adolf hold a tune, he could hold a grudge too. The idea that Germany's striking workers (during the revolutionary unrest of autumn 1918) and the surrendering government ensured Allied victory became entrenched among many returning soldiers and nationalists.

*Mein Kampf* presents this 'stab in the back' myth but, in doing so, unwittingly reveals Hitler's ignorance of wartime shortages and conditions back in influenza-ridden Germany. Not only was Germany's war effort unsustainable but, if the Weimar government had not surrendered, Germany would have been invaded and occupied.

### Anti-Versailles

Germany's surrender and subsequent peace terms are a focus of *Mein Kampf*. In the very opening paragraph Hitler advocates overcoming Versailles' constraints and asserts that *Anschluss* with Austria (or a Greater Germany) 'is a task to which we should devote our lives'. Then he goes further:

When the territories of the Reich embrace all the Germans and finds itself unable to assure them a livelihood, only then can the moral right arise, from the need of the people, to acquire foreign territory. The plough is then the sword; and the tears of war will produce the daily bread for the generations to come.

The book urges breaking international law, specifically overcoming the terms and losses of Versailles: to do this, Hitler advocates using 'the might of the sword'. Yet Hitler wanted more than restitution. First he wanted *Anschluss* but then 'living space' or *lebensraum*: 'In order to become a World Power it [Germany] needs that territorial magnitude which gives it the necessary importance today and ensures the existence of its citizens.' Hitler believed such security had been provided by the peace terms achieved in March 1918 with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This treaty, concluded with defeated Russia, stripped the latter of its western territories – all the way from the Baltic down to the southerly Caucasus – comprising half of Russia's industrial and arable production base.

Strangely, Hitler perceives Brest-Litovsk as 'immensely humane', and contrasts it with the Treaty of Versailles, 'an act of highway robbery against our people.' No doubt the territorial losses, reparations and war guilt clause were harsh, but certainly no more so than the German 'peace' imposed on defeated Russia.

Hitler goes on to compare

Germany's territorial size unfavourably with the 'British World Empire', with Russia, China and America. *Mein Kampf* makes no secret of the Nazi leader's quest for war and conquest. Indeed he puts his ambitions in the public domain. Arguably such candour should have undermined Allied appeasement in the 1930s.

### Anti-Weimar

Postwar Germany was tied into a parliamentary constitution and electoral system based on proportional representation. It marked a clean break from the Imperial Germany of the Kaiser. Hitler regarded such a system with disdain: 'Democracy, as practised in Western Europe today, is the forerunner of Marxism.' More than this, he did not credit the electorate with much sense: 'The public is mostly stupid and has a very short memory.'

He is no less inclined to be critical of the Weimar Republic, calling the Reichstag a 'House of Puppets'. Without doubt Weimar democracy had teething problems and its series of short-lived, fragile coalitions did little to strengthen democracy. But Hitler begrudges the very system itself: 'The majority [i.e. the electorate] represents not only ignorance but also cowardice'

Hitler favoured a firm, authoritarian leader – a Nietzschean Superman perhaps – 'one man of wisdom ... moral strength and fortitude'. Somehow Hitler saw himself in such a light, even in 1924.

### Anti-Communism

Fears of the chaos and bloodshed of 1917's Russian Revolution drove another component of Hitler's agenda, implacable anti-communism and anti-socialism. Hitler lamented the removal of the Tsarist regime, whose ruling elite he regarded as 'Germanic'. The new Bolshevik regime, on the other hand, was simply a manifestation of, and platform for, Jewish aggression. He believed the Communists 'overran a great State,

degraded and extirpated millions of educated people out of sheer bloodlust, and that now for nearly ten years they have ruled with such a savage tyranny as was never known before.' Given the worker unrest which Hitler blamed for Germany's surrender in 1918, and the subsequent socialist unrest, he strongly believed 'Germany is the next battlefield for Russian Bolshevism'.

Hitler resented the shirkers, deserters and hooligans who avoided the 'battlefields of Flanders' and, instead, precipitated the German Revolution of late 1918. 'Out of such Marxist machinations, the Social Democratic Party wedded themselves to the new Republic, helped to subjugate radicals (Independent Socialists and Spartacists) and effectively took over the new Weimar Republic as their own.'

Hitler not only saw Russia as the seat of Communism, he perceived it as the home of influential Jews and, crucially, of almost limitless resources and land. 'When we speak of new territory in Europe today we must principally think of Russia and the border states subject to her.' He continued, writing that 'The Russia of today, deprived of its Germanic ruling class, is not a possible ally ... The struggle against the Jewish Bolshevisation of the world demands that we should declare our position towards Soviet Russia.' That position was one of total hostility. For Hitler, nothing changed between the writing of *Mein Kampf* and the 1941 invasion of Soviet Russia. It was pragmatism alone which led to the short-term and cynical Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939.

### The *Volksgemeinschaft*

In contrast to working-class oriented, international Bolshevism, Hitler advocated cross-sectional German nationalism. The idea of a 'folk'-oriented community, or *Volksgemeinschaft*, was derived from the bonding of war-time, when the military experience of soldiers seemed

to represent a unified Germany for the first time. 'We soldiers who were at the front and in the trenches did not ask a wounded comrade, "Are you a Bavarian or a Prussian? Catholic or Protestant?" We experienced the *Volksgemeinschaft* in the trenches.'

Just as returning Italian soldiers were ready to don black shirts as Nationalists or Fascists in opposition to corrupt post-war government, so German soldiers swelled the ranks of the *Freikorps* and, some, the SA.

Arguably envious of the historic, seemingly romantic, empires of Britain and France, German nationalists came to rely on nineteenth-century German

**'The public is mostly stupid and has a very short memory.'**

writer-philosophers who re-moulded heroic legends of the past. Germany was somehow a community set apart from the rest of Europe with its own Special Path (*Sonderweg*). Certainly Hitler was convinced of his nation's link with the Holy Roman Empire, with Frederick the Great and Bismarck's Germany. Ideas of German distinctness were evident, one way or another, in the works of Goethe, Hegel and Nietzsche. German soul-searching and identity were even put to music by composer Richard Wagner, whom Hitler idolised.

Ideas about a *Volksgemeinschaft* and German distinctness were not altogether uncommon. Hitler, however, pushes nationalism into something more radical and racial – Aryanism. Hitler maintained that Germany was an integral part of a superior Aryan culture and race. From his prison cell, Hitler's perspective was

**'Every manifestation of human culture, every product of art, science and technical skill, which we see before our eyes today, is almost exclusively the product of the Aryan.'**



A photograph of Dietrich Eckart, to whom Hitler dedicated the second volume of *Mein Kampf*. One of the founder members of the German Workers' Party, Eckart took part in the Beer Hall Putsch and was briefly imprisoned with Hitler in Landsberg. He died of a heart-attack on 26 December 1923. His last words are said to be: 'Follow Hitler! He will dance but it is I who have called the tune'. He may well have recommended the Swastika as a symbol of the Nazi movement.

that: 'Every manifestation of human culture, every product of art, science and technical skill, which we see before our eyes today, is almost exclusively the product of the Aryan.' Having thus identified such apparent Aryan qualities, he urged their preservation: 'The State is only a means to an end ... Above all, it must preserve the existence of the race.'

Hitler championed outdated and unscientific ideas about racial purity. He feared the diluting of Germany's Aryan qualities and drew a parallel with the animal world: 'Each animal mates only with one of its own species. The titmouse cohabits only

with the titmouse'! Hitler warned that France was compromising its strength through its colonial and social policies which were 'likely to remove all traces of French blood ... in the formation of Euro-African Mulatto State.'

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler identified another society's respect for apparent racial qualities: 'What has made the Greek ideal of beauty immortal is the wonderful union of a splendid physical beauty with nobility of mind and spirit.'

Hitler advocated two hours of physical activity for schoolchildren per day. 'There is one kind of sport which should be specially encouraged ... and that is boxing ... There is no other sport which equals this in developing the militant spirit.' Despite Hitler's admiration for boxing and its practitioners, however, Germany's world heavyweight champion of the early 1930s, Max Schmeling, carefully avoided becoming either an Aryan icon or even a NSDAP member. Instead, Schmeling continued to be trained by a Jewish coach and, later, gave shelter to Jews.

What is clear is that Hitler's racialised nationalism and his aspiration for a *Volksgemeinschaft* overlap with spurious Aryan superiority. Germany was to be a pure national community based on idealised images of Aryanism. It is in the interests of the nation, he wrote, that 'those who have a beautiful physique should be brought into the foreground'.

Later, images of blond, healthy children and families were widely used to promote Nazi policies and institutions such as the Hitler Youth and *KdF*. Hitler's regime even promoted selective breeding: schoolchildren studied Eugenics and young women were to follow the 'Ten Commandments for the Choice of a Spouse'. Healthy women who did not have partners were encouraged to use *lebensborn* sex clinics in order to produce the next Aryan generation.

### Anti-Semitism

More than anything, Hitler's idealised notions of Germanness or Aryanism can best be defined as that which is in opposition to his caricature of Jewry. He returns to the 'Jewish Question' repeatedly throughout *Mein Kampf*. It is almost an obsession with him.

On the one hand, Hitler identified the Jews as slum dwellers of Vienna who were 'water-shy ... [with an] ignoble exterior.' On the other hand, he identified both Social Democrats and the press as Jews. Moreover they were Marxists seeking to destroy national economies and trying to 'establish a central organisation for their international swindling and cheating'.

Rather clumsily, Hitler portrays Jews as leaders in politics and banking, both groups seeking to strengthen their cause, Zionism, to ensure Jewish domination. From his Social Darwinist perspective, Hitler perceived a racial war as inevitable and he sought to halt the 'Jewish drive towards world conquest'. In this way he attributes Jews with his own nefarious aims.

Ominously, and prophetically, Hitler suggests that 'If twelve or fifteen thousand of these Jews who were corrupting the nation had been forced to submit to poison gas ... then the millions of sacrifices made at the front would not have been in vain.' In this way *Mein Kampf* indicated a potential solution to the supposed Jewish Question.

### Conclusion

In contrast to the grand sweeping designs of conquest and superiority delineated in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler also included mundane details, and in some ways these are the most interesting in the book. Hitler mentions the dates, attendance figures and even the weather at NSDAP meetings. He cites his ability to counter all opposing arguments at large-scale meetings or in coffee houses. He also throws light on Nazi

images: 'We chose red for our posters, our intention being to irritate the Left so as to arouse their attention and tempt them to come to our meetings.'

Nevertheless, by presenting fundamental opposition to Versailles, Weimar and Communism and by anticipating struggle with the Soviet Union and Jewry, *Mein Kampf* sets out Nazi electoral messages (evidenced in slogans such as 'Smash the Chains of Versailles' and 'Away with feeble Weimar democracy') and anticipates his domestic and foreign policy agenda in the 1930s. Admittedly, he later attempted to play down the

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ideas he had revealed. As Chancellor, he even insisted that *Mein Kampf* represented merely 'fantasies from behind bars'. Similarly, for an international audience, he weakly attempted to move away from his more radical and aggressive ideas: this can be seen with the Polish Pact of 1934 as well as the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.

In 1939, translator Murphy informed English readers of *Mein Kampf* that 'Hitler has declared that his acts and public statements constitute a partial revision of his book and are to be taken as such.'

The problem with such optimism is that, by this time, Hitler had already instigated the widespread use of concentration camps, approved the blood-letting of *Kristallnacht*, marched into the Rhineland, militarily supported Franco's Fascists, invaded

Austria and acquired the Sudetenland. Without doubt, Hitler anticipated a major war. As Alan Bullock maintains: 'The aim of his foreign policy never changed, from its first definition in *Mein Kampf* in the 1920s to the attack on Russia in 1941: German expansion towards the East.'

With *Mein Kampf* Hitler's 'blueprint' for the Third Reich was very much in the public domain. Shortly before his death, in his Last Will and Testament, Hitler stuck fast to the themes presented in his text of 1924. As Berlin collapsed around him, Adolf asserted: 'Out of the ruins of our towns and monuments hatred will grow against those finally responsible for everything, International Jewry.'

The true significance of *Mein Kampf* did not end with the death of Hitler, for all too often the evil that men do lives on. Nowadays *Mein Kampf* is largely banned in continental Europe and, perhaps as a consequence, it has become an underground and illegal cult classic amongst Neo-Nazi groups in contemporary Germany and Austria.

Britain's own home-bred racist, John Tyndall, was reared on Hitler's word. Tyndall was chairman of the National Front before founding the British National Party: unashamedly he declared that '*Mein Kampf* is my bible'. He advocated removing immigrants from the UK and urged Nazi-style 'Racial Laws' forbidding marriage between Britons and non-Aryans: medical measures will be taken to prevent procreation on the part of all those who have hereditary defects.' Only belatedly was Tyndall charged with race hate offences shortly before his death in July 2005.

The Arab world's anti-Israel agenda has sometimes strayed into anti-Semitism; hence the popularity of Hitler's text. At the turn of 2005, over 100,000 copies of *Mein Kampf* were sold in a matter of weeks in Turkey, while in the Palestinian territories Hitler's diatribe has long made the bestseller lists. Earlier, Egyptian

President Nasser had attempted to lead the Arab world against the Jewish state of Israel, seeking to motivate army officers with a gift of a pocket-sized Arabic translation of *Mein Kampf*. Whether such owners actually read Hitler's turgid prose is another matter entirely!

Further afield, in 1979, when Tanzanian armed forces succeeded in repelling aggressive Ugandan forces, they found a copy of *Mein Kampf* sitting on dictator Idi Amin's office desk. Besides being a notorious African trouble-maker, Uganda's dictator was an arch-critic of Britain's empire. He even declared himself King of Scotland! That *Mein Kampf* may have influenced such a figure as Idi Amin speaks volumes for the book and the nature of its post-Third Reich readership.

#### Further Reading

Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (translated by James Murphy, Hutchinson, 1939)  
K.D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (Penguin, 1970)  
Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Penguin, 1990) and *Hitler & Stalin: Parallel Lives* (Fontana, 1998)  
Nigel Jones, *Hitler's Heralds: The Story of the Freikorps 1918-23* (Barnes & Noble, 1995)

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