

**Hitler: Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs.** By Rainer Zitelmann.  
Hamburg and New York: Berg Publishers, 1987. Pp. vi + 485.

Many biographies have been written about Adolf Hitler, but Rainer Zitelmann's book on Hitler is not just another biography. He has taken the trouble to collate and evaluate all of Hitler's utterances and writings and has thus cleared the ground for a fuller understanding of Hitler's self-image, the nature of his ideology, his objectives, and his policies.

Zitelmann wants his book to be understood within the context of the debate on the so-called historization of National Socialism, and among all the contributions to this debate, his is one of the sanest. The "demonization" of Hitler has not helped our historical and political understanding of Nazism, which is crucial to explaining to younger generations why it came about. This means that the historian must have the courage to part with the easy but misleading stereotype of the "monster" Hitler and probe into the more prosaic elements in Hitler's program which elicited such an overwhelmingly positive response among the German masses in the 1930s.

Lest there be a misunderstanding: this is not a "revisionist" book. It does not question the criminality of Hitler. The author argues, however, that it would be an "underestimation" of Hitler to dismiss him as a mere *Blut und Boden* romantic bent on establishing an agrarian utopia. A careful scrutiny of Hitler's works would, according to Zitelmann, defy even those scholars—like David Schoenbaum, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Henry A. Turner—who have identified modernization as an unintended fruit of National Socialism. In this book Adolf Hitler emerges, then, as a modernizer determined to industrialize Germany so as to make it competitive with the United States of America.

According to Zitelmann, it would also be an underestimation of Hitler to identify him merely with the quest for *Lebensraum* and with the elimination of the Jews. These objectives alone, the unleashing of a world war and genocide, were not the kind of issues with which Hitler could expect to mobilize the German electorate; indeed during the very years of his rise on the German political scene (1930–32), they did not figure prominently in his speeches. The main thesis of this book, then, is that Hitler was neither a mere somnambulist nor a mere opportunist in search of power, but that he had distinct, rational objectives.

First and foremost, Hitler's message was revolutionary. Despite all traditionalist trimmings of National Socialism and despite its compulsive adherence to formal legality in the seizure of power of January 1933, it was a movement with a distinctly revolutionary thrust. This is the criterion which distinguished the New Right, so to speak, from the Old Right. The latter was essentially restorative, whereas the former conjured up the vision of a new synthesis of nationalism and socialism. In a speech in November 1920 Hitler declared that his party fought against neither the Right nor the Left, but that it extracted from both what was most valuable. As a matter of fact, Hitler, we learn, was by no means altogether negative in his assessment of the tradition

of the French Revolution, of Napoleon, of 1848, of the November revolution of 1918, or indeed of Stalin's statesmanship. But he sought to deprive the Left of its monopoly on revolution and juxtaposed to it his own, the national and socialist one. He was a tribune of the people who conjured up the vision of equal opportunity for all within the *Volksgemeinschaft* and of the lifting of all barriers based on social status, wealth, education, and income. Barriers in turn were erected against the world foe, as represented by the Jew. In any case, there is a striking parallel between Zitelmann's Hitler and Renzo De Felice's Mussolini, both of whom seem to be closer to the tradition of 1789 than has been hitherto acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> This perception adds a new dimension to our understanding of European fascism.

Furthermore, Zitelmann takes it upon himself to upgrade the place of the national economy in Hitler's thinking. The assumption that Hitler had no understanding of economics he dismisses as fallacious. While concurring with Tim Mason's thesis that Hitler subordinated economics to the "primacy of politics,"<sup>2</sup> Zitelmann attributes to Hitler a rational perception of a national economy which was to advance industry and agriculture in the Third Reich. While in the early years Hitler was still enamored of the theories of Gottfried Feder that were designed to "break the interest slavery" of international capitalism, he eventually came to distinguish between industrial and speculative capital and arrived at a formula for a planned economy which was to strike a balance between private property and social concerns.

In the course of Zitelmann's analysis Hitler's conduct of foreign affairs also acquires a distinct rationality. His supreme objective was not war but rather the safeguarding of the *Volk* by means of giving it much needed *Lebensraum*. This concept was more than an ill-defined slogan; it was predicated upon definite economic considerations. Along with this argument goes the author's challenge to the traditional interpretation of Hitler as subscribing to the primacy of foreign over domestic policy. The latter was not designed to serve the former but, rather, the reverse. Foreign policy and war, like social and economic policies, were to be subordinated to the interest of the *Volk*, which was at the center of Hitler's concerns.

This is a revolutionary book on a revolutionary topic. Hitler's "self-image" seems to entitle Rainer Zitelmann to emerge with a profile of the German dictator, who brought so much unhappiness to the world, much more carefully constructed and rational than the one hitherto assumed by historians. Zitelmann's story is, perhaps too one-sidedly, about the rationality of evil. As such it is no less frightening than the traditional profile of Hitler—if anything, it is even more so. Thus Zitelmann has provided a model for a responsible historization of National Socialism, as originally proposed by Martin Broszat.<sup>3</sup> Instead of leading to the much dreaded trivialization of Hitler it adds to our full grasp of his iniquity, and it will help those who teach the history of that awful period to make it credible.

The book under review limits its focus to Hitler's self-image and perceptions; it deliberately excludes analysis of the social and economic realities of the Third Reich. Inadvertently, then, Zitelmann is, for the moment at least, arguing the case of the so-called intentionalists who stress the decisive part of Hitler in shaping the affairs of the Third Reich.

For good measure Zitelmann owes us another volume about the structural realities of Nazi Germany, which might turn out to have been somewhat at odds with the plans of the führer. Certainly the "anti-industrial yearnings" (Geoffrey Barraclough) which permeated German society in the early twentieth century did find expression, if not in Adolf Hitler himself, in the *Blut und Boden* ethos of the Third Reich.

It might be added here that a passing remark (p. 414) to the effect that the German Resistance marked no advance on the road toward freedom (based on Ralf Dahrendorf's thesis)<sup>4</sup> should be reconsidered in the light of better evidence to the contrary: the example of the Kreisau Circle comes to mind. But this is an altogether different subject—except that the historization of National Socialism should also call for a historization of the Resistance. What historization cannot and should not do for National Socialism, it might do for the Resistance—namely, vindicate it.

Rainer Zitelmann has resolved to abstain from moral judgments (p. 19); but his meticulous and responsible scholarship speaks all the louder. His book constitutes a milestone in our understanding of Adolf Hitler.

<sup>1</sup> See Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: Gli anni del consenso, 1929–1936* (Turin, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Mason, "The Primacy of Politics—Politics and Economics in National Socialist Germany," in *Nazism and the Third Reich*, ed. Henry A. Turner (New York, 1972), pp. 175–200.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Broszat, "Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," *Merkur* 39 (May 1985): 373–85.