



THE HITLER OF HISTORY

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"Surprising, even shocking...."

Mr. Lukacs arrives at [his conclusions] with painstaking, exhaustive logic that is hard to resist." —*The New York Times*

survived the sudden unification of Germany in 1989. (Incidentally, that was something that none of the historians of the *Historikerstreit* had foreseen; indeed, they had deemed it to be impossible in any foreseeable future.)

What remained constant was the tendency to separate the history of the Third Reich (and, indirectly, the German people) from Hitler. Then, in 1987, there appeared an important study of Hitler by Rainer Zitelmann (1957–):* a significant contribution to and at least a partial revision of the portrait of Hitler after many years. As early as 1982, at the age of twenty-four, this brilliant young historian had already published a most competent bibliographical essay about Hitler studies: *Hitlers Erfolg: Erklärungsversuche in der Hitler-Forschung* (Hitler's Success: Explanatory Attempts in Hitler Research),† the very title of which suggested the thrust of Zitelmann's forthcoming works: Why—and how—was Hitler successful? In ZIT/A, Zitelmann made at least two, if not three, undeniable contributions.‡ First, that Hitler was truly a revolutionary, and that, consequently, his aspirations and visions were *modern* (no matter how deeply rooted in some traditional German attitudes); and so were his ideas and plans about the remaking of German society (an argument seldom proposed cogently before Zitelmann, except by the American historian David Schoenbaum). This also meant that, contrary to accepted opinion, Hitler was neither ignorant of nor indifferent to economics. All of this was illustrated and buttressed by Zitelmann's extensive reading of papers and other documents, many of them of the 1928–32 period, during which—again contrary to generally accepted views—Hitler not only spoke but wrote and dictated much. Perhaps the only shortcoming of ZIT/A was the brevity of the space that Zitelmann devoted to Hitler's statesmanship. There again, he emphasized Hitler's revolutionary character, but

*ZIT/A, unfortunately, was not translated and published in Britain or the United States.

†In NPL (1982), pp. 47–69, citing, among others, Jäckel: “the confusing multiplicity of serious explanations.” Zitelmann: “One could easily fill a book with their list.”

‡An excellent and praiseworthy summary of Zitelmann's theses was made by Jost Dülffer in FAZ, 7 July 1987.

perhaps without sufficiently recognizing Hitler's conscious duality (his different and sometimes entirely contradictory views and expressions concerning foreign statesmen and political forces).

Two years after the publication of ZIT/A, this young historian published a no less remarkable shorter book about Hitler.* No less remarkable for our purposes, because while ZIT/A was principally an analytical study of Hitler's ideas, ZIT/B was a biography. In his preface, Zitelmann posed the question: Why yet another biography, when Bullock, Fest, and Toland exist? "Some of these biographies," he wrote, "were excellent for their time, but today they must be seen as superseded in many ways."† In his research, Zitelmann depended much on the finally completed edition of the Goebbels diaries as well as on a few until then largely unexplored sources, including a new series of notes of Hitler's wartime table conversations. But the significance of Zitelmann's Hitler biography lay not so much in its author's research as in his determined convictions. Here is his own summation of his achievement: "The picture drawn here of Hitler differs from [others] very substantially. He appears here as a politician, whose thinking and actions were essentially much more rational than hitherto accepted." Also: ". . . in some fields research about National Socialism is still in its beginnings. . . . In the end the picture of Hitler appears as essentially more complex, differentiated, and uncertain." A strong, perhaps exaggerated, statement by a young historian, but not without substance. "Soberness is also needed in the language. That is far from the truth in all of the biographies of Hitler [including Fest's]."‡

*Rainer Zitelmann, *Adolf Hitler: Eine politische Biographie*, Göttingen, 1989 (hereafter: ZIT/B).

†ZIT/B, p. 7. Also p. 8: "Biographies such as Joachim Fest's, whose study was undoubtedly a milestone in the understanding of a dictator, have used questionable or falsified sources *uncritically*."

‡ZIT/B, pp. 9-11. His repeated and nervous exhortation for "soberness": "Perhaps 15 years ago, when Fest's pioneering work was published, it was not yet possible to write a Hitler biography differently." (Why not?) At the conclusion of his preface, Zitelmann voices a renewed insistence on "soberness of language" in order "to understand, rather than to evaluate." (Fair enough; but can "understanding" be separated from "evaluation"? Allow me to repeat: The choice of every word is not only a technical or stylistic but a moral choice.)