

Hitler's Chilling Words on Means and Ends

It's no coincidence that Hitler's philosophy led to the deaths of millions of people.

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The first biography of Adolf Hitler I ever read was John Toland's 1976 work, [Adolf Hitler](#), which I picked up in college.

Though I've read stuff here and there on Hitler and the Nazis since then, I never really felt the need to seriously study the subject matter again because Toland's book was so penetrating and expansive. (And let's face it: the topic is pretty ugly and dark.)



Recently, however, I received Dr. Rainer Zitelmann's new book *Hitler's National Socialism*, and despite myself, I've once again found myself digging into the mind of Hitler. It's a chilling place to be, to be sure; but one of the advantages of Zitelmann's book is that it gives an incredibly insightful analysis of Hitler's *ideas*.

While I'm not yet completely through the book—2022 has been a rather busy year—I'm already giving it two thumbs up.

While tens of thousands of books have been written on Hitler, few of them seem to seriously probe the Fuhrer's ideas. Authors tend to focus more on his personality, speeches, and psychology; the battles he fought, the mistakes he made, the characteristics that allowed him to seduce a nation on his rise to power.

All of these things are worthy of examination, of course. But it has always seemed to me that the ideas that shaped and drove Hitler have received short shrift from historians. That's not the case in Zitelmann's book.

Zitelmann received his doctorate in philosophy more than 35 years ago after completing his thesis on the Fuhrer—*Hitler: The Policies of Seduction*—and it shows. Readers learn what Hitler thought about key historical events, the writers who influenced him, and—most importantly—the philosophy that emerged out of them.

Historians will continue to argue over [whether Hitler was truly](#) a “socialist” (even though the word “socialist” literally appears in the moniker of the Nazis). That's fine. What's undeniable is that Hitler was a collectivist who saw the rights of the individual as subordinate to the state. This is a stark contrast to the American/classical liberal tradition, which holds that the state exists for the sole purpose of protecting the rights of individuals.

While this observation is hardly new, it's one that comes through again and again in Zitelmann's book, which thoroughly explores Hitler's *Weltanschauung* (essentially, the German word for worldview or

philosophy).

One of the best examples of Hitler's *Weltanschauung* can be found in his view of means and ends. During a talk with Joseph Goebbels on February 23, 1937 Hitler bragged about his "great achievement."

"I have taught the world to again differentiate between the means and the end," Hitler told the Nazi propaganda minister.

The end, Hitler said, was the life of the nation, "everything else is only a means."

It's no coincidence that Hitler's philosophy led to the deaths of millions of people. A worldview that subordinates the rights of individuals to the interests of the collective is a recipe for disaster, even if the ends appear virtuous, noble, or upright.

In his 1969 book [*Let Freedom Reign*](#), FEE founder Leonard Read also discussed ends and means. A classical liberal/libertarian, Read reached a conclusion opposite to that of Hitler, pointing out that means cannot justify ends.

"Ends, goals, aims are but the hope for things to come...They are not a part of the reality... from which may safely be taken the standards for right conduct. They are no more to be trusted as bench marks than are day [*dreams*](#) or flights of fancy. Many of the most monstrous deeds in human history have been perpetrated in the name of doing good—in pursuit of some 'noble' goal. They illustrate the fallacy that the end justifies the means."

I have no reason to believe Read ever saw Hitler's quote, but he understood that we should beware those who would use unjust means—force, threats, coercion—to achieve their ends.

The frightening part is that Hitler may have been right in his boast.

The world does seem to operate increasingly on *ends*, not means. We've grown comfortable with the state's monopoly on force and extraction of wealth presumably because we believe it serves some greater end (less poverty, lives saved, more order, a more educated populace, etc).

Leonard Read would tell you this is not the way, and he might even point you to some [words of wisdom](#) from the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he greatly admired.

“Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed.”



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